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INTRODUCTION.
TEMPORAL CROSSROADS: EDITORIAL REFLECTIONS ON THE GRAMMAR OF TIME

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Time represents one of the most universal dimensions characterising human experience. Meanwhile, it is a culturally differentiated phenomenon. Every civilization, religious tradition, philosophical system, and social order develop their own understanding of binary phenomena relating to time and interpreting it – continuity and change, memory and anticipation, cyclical return and historical progression. These differing temporal frameworks form the grounds that enable the cultures to organize their individual experiences, as well as collective life.

This special issue of *Cultural Crossroads*, *The Grammar of Time: Ontologies and Practices Across Cultures* contains articles by scholars representing diverse intellectual traditions and geographical contexts. Here, they explore the ways how time is conceptualized, experienced, represented, narrated, and regulated across cultures. These contributions approach temporality from a wide spectrum of views that encompasses philosophy, religious studies, linguistics, literary criticism, media studies, political thought, anthropology, and visual culture.

On the whole, the articles demonstrate that time cannot be viewed solely as a chronological measurement – temporality emerges as a complex cultural and intellectual structure formed by historical experience, language, ritual practice, social organization, political imagination, and aesthetic representation. Time appears as a neutral framework within which events take place; moreover, it is revealed as an active principle whereby reality itself is interpreted and organized.

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At the outset, philosophical and ontological approaches to temporality are offered, as the authors examine conceptualisation of the nature of time, change, and relationality in different intellectual traditions. The contributions range across Marxist philosophy and critical theory, Daoist and Buddhist thought, ecological perspectives, social acceleration theory, neuroscience, and reflections inspired by contemporary physics. Simultaneously, they are united in critique of linear and substantialist models of time, favouring processual, relational, and historically situated understandings.

Next, religious and sacred temporalities are addressed, where ritual, eschatology, liturgical structures, and sacred narratives are shown to yield definite modes of temporal experience diverging from secular chronology. Across Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, and Caucasian religious traditions, time is organized through repetition, moral orientation, remembrance, and transcendence, whereas linguistic analysis of sacred texts reveals encoding of culturally specific temporal logics achieved by grammatical structures themselves.

Subsequently, temporality is considered in relation to modernity and cultural transformation, where processes of modernization, globalization, technological change, migration, and political conflict are recognised as producing overlapping and frequently competing temporal systems. In these contexts, inherited cultural rhythms persist alongside accelerated forms of contemporary life, giving rise to complex negotiations encompassing identity, historical memory, and cultural continuity.

This analysis is followed by literary and media temporalities. Poetry, cinema, science fiction, webtoons, and existential literature are explored as sites wherein time is not merely represented but actively recomposed. Melancholy, historical trauma, queer temporality, emotional memory, technological futures, and alienation are shown as themes that explain the ways how narrative and artistic forms transfigure temporal perception, as well as noncognitive experience led by emotions.

Likewise, this issue explores visuality and historical representation, emphasizing and explaining participation of visual media such as photography and pictorial traditions in the construction of historical consciousness and cultural memory. Here, time reveals itself as embedded in seeing, recording, preserving, and interpreting, rather than existing as an external framework of representation.

The final themes addressed in the current issue comprise historical and institutional temporalities, highlighting collective temporal order being forged by language, legal systems, administrative structures, and political discourse. Temporal concepts are viewed as profoundly embedded in daily communication, social hierarchy, as well as governance. Here, temporality is brought to light as both a symbolic and materially institutionalized dimension of social life.

Altogether, it is suggested that the grammar of time is neither universal nor fixed. Instead, it is composed through cultural interpretation, historical conditions, and social practice – over and over again. Different societies navigate the relationship between past, present, and future in diverse and evolving ways. The study of temporality becomes crucial for understanding both cultural diversity and global interconnectedness in a world that is characterised by stimulation, acceleration, fluctuation, and rival historical narratives,

Methodologically, the issue is aimed at showing the necessity of interdisciplinary approach, since no single discipline can fully capture the complexity of temporal phenomena. Instead, the study of time requires exchange and discussion involving theoretical reflection and historically grounded cultural analysis, as well as manifold epistemological and cultural traditions.

To conclude, the current issue does not propose a unified theory of temporality. Instead, the authors venture to create a comparative space, wherein diverse approaches to time can engage in fruitful conversation. Thereby, *Culture Crossroads* sustains the commitment to cross-cultural scholarship, inviting reflection on human societies and their comprehension of change, continuity, memory, as well as historical existence, since to study time ultimately means to study the ways how humans understand themselves.

I. TIME ONTOLOGIES, PHILOSOPHY, AND CRITICAL THEORY

TIME WITHOUT TIME: RELATIONAL ONTOLOGIES IN CONTEMPORARY PHYSICS, DIALECTICAL CRITIQUE OF THEIR PHILOSOPHICAL GENERALIZATIONS, AND PARALLELS WITH DAOISM AND MADHYAMAKA BUDDHISM

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Abstract

Recent work in physics challenges the idea that time is a fundamental, self-standing entity. In quantum gravity, relational quantum mechanics (henceforth – RQM), and process-based ontologies, time does not exist on its own. Rather, what we call time emerges from relations, event connections, and how we partition reality. Our sense of time arises from patterns and correlations, not from a separate, absolute dimension [Barbour 1999; Rovelli 2017]. This paper examines how these contemporary physical theories align methodologically with two ancient Asian philosophical traditions: Daoism and Madhyamaka Buddhism, which remain highly relevant today. According to the view presented in this article, these traditions did not anticipate modern physics nor did they serve as proto-scientific theories. Rather, they offer ways of thinking which resist rigid conceptions of time and keep inquiry sharp when no fixed timeline is available [Garfield 1995; Robson 2018]. The central claim is that modern physics, Daoism, and Madhyamaka all reject time as something substantial. Events do not exist independently; they occur within shifting relations, not as stable, unchanging bits of reality. Daoism presents a process-oriented outlook that discourages conceptual fixation, while Madhyamaka articulates a relational ontology grounded in dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*), denying inherent (*svabhāva*) existence.

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This paper highlights methodological parallels, showing how both traditions oppose the notion of time as a fixed, independently existing phenomenon. The discussion is supplemented by drawing on the European dialectical tradition, which offers tools for addressing change, contradiction, and relationality without reducing them to simple formulas.

Keywords: *relational ontology, quantum gravity, Daoism, Madhyamaka Buddhism, time, events, perception, dialectics, entanglement.*

Introduction

Few ideas seem as intuitively clear, and yet as theoretically unstable, as time. In everyday discourse, time is treated as a simple stage for events, a uniform flow that sequences experience. Modern physics, however, has increasingly placed pressure on this assumption. While classical physics treated time as a steady parameter for all motion, quantum theory and later – quantum gravity have introduced timeless or relationally emergent conceptions of time [Rovelli 2017; Barbour 1999]. Cross-cultural discussions of time often slip into metaphor or romanticized appeals to "Eastern wisdom" [Robson 2018]. This paper avoids such pitfalls, instead of examining the question whether Daoism or Madhyamaka "agree" with physics, exploring the ways how their methodological dispositions – non-reification, process-thinking, and relational analysis – parallel the conceptual moves required when time is no longer treated as fundamental. The central claim is that all three endeavours share a refusal to treat time, events, or entities as self-existing substances. The European dialectical tradition, with its focus on contradiction, change, and mutual constitution, provides a useful meta-framework for understanding this intersection [Adorno 1973; Dafermos 2014].

1. Physics without time

1.1. Foundational shift

Classical physics used time as a steady ruler for all motion. Then quantum theory arrived in the 20th century, built by Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg, Dirac and others, and turned this view upside down. In quantum mechanics, there is no time operator that we can measure directly. What we can measure in experiments are change and correlation, not time itself [Rovelli 2017]. Carlo Rovelli argues that in relational quantum mechanics, time does not exist fundamentally. Each physical system has its own time, set by local interactions and the gravitational field around it. Time is not a thing; it emerges from the relations among events. Without these relations, there is no temporal structure: "We must not think of time as if there were a great cosmic clock that marks the life in the universe. Every object in the universe has its own time, running at a pace determined by the local gravitational field. Things change only in relation to one another. At a fundamental level, there is no time." This implies that our feeling of the flow of time is only a rough approximation that works at our large scale, arising from the fact that we perceive the world in a coarse-grained way [Rovelli 2017].

In contemporary quantum information theory, Vlatko Vedral takes this idea even further, arguing more radically that time and space are not actually real things that exist out there in the universe. They do not have their own independent existence. They are merely tools we have devised to help us describe what is going on. According to him, the only things that truly exist are fields. Matter is held together by fields – like the electromagnetic field, which binds atoms, molecules, clocks, and measuring sticks. Gravity does not bend space or time themselves; instead, it acts directly on these fields and dictates their behaviour. So when clocks tick slower or rulers change length, it is actually the fields inside them responding to gravity, not time itself stretching or space itself warping. Vedral admits that talking about spacetime as if it were real makes calculations easier, but if one goes down to the most fundamental level, there is no space, no time, and no particles in the usual sense. There are only quantum quantities – what physicists call *q-numbers*. Those are the actual building blocks of reality. Time, just like space, only emerges from the way these quantum fields relate to each other. Time does not flow, space is not a "thing", and gravity is just another quantum field among many. Time is not fundamental – it is something we invent to make sense of change [Vedral 2025]. As he stated earlier, without interaction, there are no facts, and without facts, temporal structure has no physical meaning [Vedral 2010]. Time is not treated as a dimension in contemporary physics, but as the following phenomena:

- A network of events
- Relations between events
- Constraints on possible relations

Time becomes a useful shorthand rather than an ontological constituent [Barbour 1999; Rovelli 2017]. Quantum entanglement shows how temporal relations are less important than the relationships between things, thus challenging the idea that things are separate. From one perspective, quantum entanglement is not a miracle that creates reality; it is a physical condition arising from interaction and a common origin. When two particles become entangled, quantum entanglement joins them into a whole quantum state. According to this approach, what exists first is a state; later, we describe the shared state as parts. From this viewpoint, one might indeed get the impression that entanglement does not decide whether reality exists at all. Entangled particles do not have their own properties until we interact with them. This suggests that the order we perceive in time may be a result of how things become real, not a hidden temporal container. In theory, the process never stops. The wave function keeps changing the correlations; interactions keep happening. What disappears when there are no relations or no observations is our access to time. For Rovelli, time is relational and local: the world does not have a single present; it only has events and the relations between events. This view is powerful, and, of course, it can slide toward the idea that facts exist only in relation. However, from a philosophical standpoint, this position risks sliding from an epistemic clarification into an ontological claim. The fact that time is not directly measurable and appears only through relations does not entail that reality itself consists only of relations. Such a move would conflate conditions of access (how we describe and measure phenomena) with conditions of being (what exists independently of those descriptions). In this sense, certain interpretations of RQM may inadvertently collapse ontology into operational description. We must take into account that relations, correlations, and informational quantities are mediations within theory and experiment, not self-subsisting ontological entities. The elevation of such formal structures to ontological primacy represents a shift from substance metaphysics to what may be called relational or formal absolutism. Interpreting RQM philosophically, it may therefore be better to say not that "time does not exist" in an absolute sense, but that time is not a fundamental substance. It is better understood as a relational and operational concept derived from physical processes. The statement "time does not exist" is therefore misleading if taken ontologically; it is more accurately interpreted as a critique of time as an independent, flowing entity. Quantum entanglement, for example, challenges the view that all physical properties are intrinsic and locally instantiated; meanwhile, it does not thereby license a broader philosophical generalization of the sort our authors tend to make – that reality is wholly reducible to relations.

In this light, contemporary physics reveals a shift: from time as an independent parameter to time as an emergent, relational descriptor of processes. Notably, this shift should be interpreted epistemologically, and not as a definitive ontological reduction.

1.2. What replaces "time"?

- Events – interactions or correlations between physical systems; events do not occupy an independent "moment" [Rovelli 2016].
- Order (Not Flow) – causal relations define sequences without invoking a global temporal flow.
- Intervals (Not Duration) – so-called "duration" is a comparison of counts of physical processes (such as caesium atomic transitions) [Barbour 1999].

- Motion Without Time – motion is a sequence of spatial-relational events; velocity is event-density along a path.
- Dynamics Without Time-Based Equations – laws describe allowed transitions between configurations, not evolution in time.
- Entropy Without a Time Arrow – apparent direction emerges statistically from configuration probabilities.
- Relativity Without Simultaneity – events not causally linked cannot be compared as "simultaneous" [Barbour 1999].

Core proposition: Time does not exist fundamentally; only events and their possible relations exist [Rovelli 2017].

These replacements suggest that time is not a primitive component of physical theory. However, a crucial philosophical clarification is required. The elimination of time as a fundamental variable does not imply the elimination of temporal structure altogether. Rather, temporal concepts reappear at higher levels as necessary tools for organizing experience, measurement, and theory. Time, in this sense, is not ontologically fundamental but epistemically indispensable. From a dialectical standpoint, the key error to avoid is the absolutization of these replacements. Events, relations, and informational structures should not be treated as ontological primitives that fully exhaust reality. Such a move would merely replace one abstraction (time as substance) with another (relations as substance). A more precise formulation would therefore be that time is not a fundamental entity, but rather a relational and emergent structure arising from the interaction of systems, which nonetheless remains indispensable for the organization of physical description. This preserves the insights of contemporary physics while avoiding the collapse of ontology into epistemology.

2. Dialectical perspective on events and relations

The European dialectical tradition rejects the notion of fixed, ahistorical essences, while equally resisting a reduction of reality to mere relations, instead conceiving entities as dynamically constituted through their relations and processes. Dialectics is a way to think about change and opposites. It holds that contradictions are not problems but steps in development [Hegel 1812/2010], and that reality is always more complex than our ideas about it [Adorno 1973]. Manolis Dafermos rightly emphasizes that dialectics is a method for thinking, not a formal tool [Dafermos 2014]. Dialectics offered European science a way to explore change and relationships, rather than focusing solely on static objects. This perspective allowed disciplines such as modern physics, biology, and the social sciences to move beyond strictly mechanistic ways of understanding the world. Unlike the attempts of quantum mechanical theorists to philosophically explain reality by absolutizing the specific relativistic conclusions of empirical science, a dialectical approach, in my view, could offer a different perspective. For example:

- Events have potential. Without events, relations cannot arise. An event is a locus where possible interaction and determination happen.
- Relations give a fixed reality. Without relations, events cannot be defined, measured, or placed in an order. Relations make the potential of events become real.
- Mutual dependency, without reduction. Mutual dependency shows a unity of opposites that stay together. Events are abstractions that arise from material processes. Interaction reveals relations and makes them empirically accessible. One cannot reduce events to relations; events and relations together co-constitute reality.

The dialectical approach can guard against reducing the study of existence merely to relationships or to separate things, because it insists that processes have a reality that does not depend on measurement. In this context, the dialectical view acknowledges that our knowledge and the way we order those processes in time are always relational. Furthermore, by examining the approaches of Western empirical science (quantum mechanics) and philosophy (dialectics) together, we can already compare them with ancient Asian teachings – Daoism or Madhyamaka Buddhism – to understand the analogies more clearly, while also being aware of the differences.

3. Daoism: Thinking without reification

Daoism is not a physics theory. It is a way of thought that consistently rejects treating temporal patterns as solid things. Probably the value of Daoism today lies in its provision of a way of knowing – flexibility, open-mindedness, and focus on process – that helps to change intuition and to lower resistance to new ways of describing reality [Robson 2018; Kohn 2019]. Classical Daoist texts, particularly the *Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*) and the *Zhuangzi*, present reality as a continuous, unbroken process (*huà* 化) rather than a collection of discrete entities in time.

3.1. Processuality without substrate

The Dao (道) is called the Way or the process. Fixed ideas cannot hold the Dao. As the first chapter of the *Daodejing* states, “The Way that can be told is not the constant Way; the name that can be named is not the constant name” (*dào kě dào, fēi cháng dào; míng kě míng, fēi cháng míng*) [Laozi, trans. Lau 1963: 5]. This line indicates that the Dao is beyond any fixed idea, beyond how we label time. The Dao operates through naturalness or self-so-ness (*zìrán* 自然). It manifests an unfolding that has no outside cause and no set time frame [Slingerland 2003]. In that sense, the Dao aligns well with process ontologies in physics that lack a background spacetime.

In *Zhuangzi*, for example, we find the butterfly dream passage. In this passage, Zhuangzi questions whether the reality of time sequence and fixed identity is real. He says, "Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I was a man" [Zhuangzi, trans. Watson 2013: 18]. This doubt about what we know reaches into certainty about time. It suggests that the order of time and the lasting self may be context-dependent, relationally constituted, and, like a dream, not absolute [Møllgaard 2007]. This mode of thinking emphasizes that there is no fixed "now" and no permanent "I".

3.2. *Wu wei* as non-intervention

The concept of *wu wei* (無為) is often translated as "non-action". Actually, it means non-coercive action that follows natural flows, minimizing the imposition of rigid conceptual frameworks, including temporal ones. This concept embodies a stance that tries to keep human conceptual structures away from forcing reality. As Chapter 37 of the *Daodejing* states: "The Way never acts yet nothing is left undone" (*Dao chang wu wei er wu bu wei*) [Laozi, trans. Lau 1963: 47]. This matches the view of relational quantum mechanics where the observer is part of the system. Minimal interference allows relational structures to show up, without being forced by fixed classical containers such as a universal time parameter [Kohn 2019].

3.3. Temporal fluidity in Daoist practice

Daoist meditation practices like "sitting in forgetfulness" (*zuowang* 坐忘) and "fasting of the mind" (*xinzhai* 心齋) aim to dissolve conceptual and temporal fixations. They try to break the patterns of thought that keep us stuck in past and future. Zhuangzi describes a state of listening where "past and present are not separate" (*gu jin bu er*) [Zhuangzi, trans. Watson 2013: 32], suggesting that time is a constructed idea, not a fact [Komjathy 2013]. This phenomenological discipline aims at de-temporalization and offers a counterpart to the theoretical breakdown of time in physics. A limitation is that Daoism offers no mathematics, experiments, or predictive models. Its contribution is epistemological and attitudinal: non-reductionism, tolerance of complementarity, and observer humility.

4. Madhyamaka Buddhism: Relational ontology and the deconstruction of time

Madhyamaka, founded by Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250 CE), analyses time as a dependent construct through *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent arising). It presents an idea that things exist only in relation, which in some ways aligns with contemporary physics.

4.1. *Śūnyatā* and the non-substantiality of time

Śūnyatā (Skt. शून्यता) is often mistaken for nihilism. Actually, it means the lack of any fixed, inherent identity (*svabhāva*, Skt. स्वभाव). In his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Skt. मूलमध्यमककारिका, *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*), Nāgārjuna deconstructs all categories, including the concept of time. Chapter 19, the examination of time (*kāla-parīkṣā*, Skt. काल-परीक्षा), demonstrates that past, present, and future all depend on each other and cannot exist independently. As he states, "If the present and the future depend on the past, then the present and the future would have existed in the past" (19.1) [Nāgārjuna, trans. Garfield 1995: 243].

4.2. *Pratītyasamutpāda* and temporal emergence

According to the principle of dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*, Skt. प्रतीत्यसमुत्पाद), temporal moments arise only in dependence on conditions – a view analogous to relational physics. The *Madhyamakāvatāra* (Skt. माध्यमकावतार, *Entering the Middle Way*), by Candrakīrti (c. 600–650 CE), expands this idea. It shows how temporal distinctions arise from ignorance (*avidyā*, Skt. अविद्या), which makes fluid and connected phenomena appear solid. In this context, temporal experience is conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*, Skt. संवृति-सत्य) and not ultimate reality (*paramārtha-satya*, Skt. परमार्थसत्य) [Huntington 1989].

4.3. The two truths and temporal experience

According to Madhyamaka doctrine, conventional time (*saṃvṛti-satya*, Skt. संवृति-सत्य) functions for daily life and science, but ultimate analysis (*paramārtha-satya*, Skt. परमार्थ-सत्य) reveals time's emptiness. This idea resonates with the quantum distinction between measurable time used to track change and the fundamental timelessness appearing in underlying equations [Westerhoff 2009]. Madhyamaka does not predict physics but deconstructs substantialist assumptions, offering conceptual tools for critiquing reified notions of time.

5. Critical section: The mystification of "Eastern wisdom"

5.1. Category error: Wisdom as explanation

Daoism and Madhyamaka are sometimes presented as if they were meant to explain physical reality. The claim that Buddhism anticipated quantum mechanics commits a category mistake. Daoism and Madhyamaka focus on how the mind clings to ideas, how this shapes experience, and (in Buddhism) how it creates suffering. They do not aim to predict or measure things in the way natural science does.

5.2. Metaphor smuggled as ontology

Daoist and Buddhist texts use metaphor, negation, and paradox to disrupt habitual thinking. In simplistic scientific readings, these literary devices are often taken literally. For example, the Daoist concept of *wu* (無, non-being) is sometimes compared to the quantum vacuum, and the Buddhist concept of *śūnyatā* (Skt. शून्यता) is likened to quantum indeterminacy. Such comparisons miss the primary function of these concepts: to stop treating ideas as things and to prevent the mind from reifying concepts [Ziporyn 2012].

5.3. Romanticization of anti-mathematical insight

There is a myth that Eastern philosophies provide a superior intuition-based way to perceive reality, compensating for the cold abstraction of Western mathematics. Unfortunately, this myth ignores the fact that modern physics derives its power from formal rules, consistency, and empirical testing. It also overlooks the logical formalism that exists within traditions like Madhyamaka.

5.4. A productive boundary

If physics is responsible for constructing formal models constrained by empirical adequacy and predictive power, then Daoism and Madhyamaka are conceptual and phenomenological disciplines aimed at dismantling absolutist assumptions and attaining wisdom or liberation. The fruitful intersection does not require synthesis or direct mapping. It can be found in a shared methodological refusal to treat time, events, or entities as if they exist by themselves. Both traditions analysed in this article, in their own ways, discipline thought to overcome the limits of substance-based metaphysics.

6. Integrating approaches: Methodological parallels

Aspect	Physics (QM & QG)	Daoism	Madhyamaka Buddhism
Fundamental Units	Events, quantum correlations, relational interactions [Rovelli 2017; Vedral 2025]	Process (*Dao*), transformation (*huà* 化), virtuosic power (*de* 德)	Dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*, Skt. प्रतीत्यसमुत्पाद), emptiness (*śūnyatā*, Skt. शून्यता)
Temporal Status	Emergent from relations; no time operator in QM; timeless formulations in QG	Non-reified flow, temporal fluidity, "past & present not separate"	Conventionally real only (*saṃvṛti-satya*, Skt. संवृति-सत्य), empty of inherent existence (*svabhāva-śūnyatā*, Skt. स्वभाव-शून्यता); moments are mutually dependent
Epistemic Approach	Discretization via measurement; time as informational/ operational tool	*Wu wei* (無為) as non-intervention; *zuowang* (坐忘) as de-temporalization	Two truths doctrine: conventional (*saṃvṛti-satya*, Skt. संवृति-सत्य) vs. ultimate reality (*paramārtha-satya*, Skt. परमार्थ-सत्य) of time
Predictive Power	Yes (formal, mathematical, empirical)	No	No
Conceptual Utility	Structural clarity, mathematical modelling of relational structures	Method of thought, phenomenological discipline, flexibility, tolerance of paradox	Relational ontological insight, logical deconstruction of reification

7. Limits and boundaries

Daoism and Madhyamaka do not replace physics but offer complementary epistemic disciplines that resist reification [Robson 2018; Garfield 1995]. Physics, in turn, can benefit from philosophical critique of its implicit metaphysical assumptions (e.g., "flowing time"). The intersection is methodological instead of explanatory, and gains value from a shared critique of absolutism. The value of dialogue is that it allows each side to illuminate the other.

Conclusion

This paper distinguishes a methodological resonance – not an explanatory one – between three distinct intellectual endeavours:

1. Physics without time, which treats time as emergent from events and their relations.
2. Daoist non-reifying process-thinking, which cultivates a mind attuned to change and avoids conceptual fixation.
3. Madhyamaka relational ontology, which deconstructs inherent existence and shows all phenomena (including time) as dependently arisen.

The comparative approach reveals how different traditions arrive at resonant ideas through different methods. Physics uses mathematics and experiments. Daoism uses practice and metaphor. Madhyamaka uses reasoning and epistemological analysis. The modern dialectical approach, which began in the 19th century and developed further in both Western and Asian philosophies, deepens this view by highlighting how events and relations mutually shape one another without being reduced to a single explanatory level. Each tradition points toward a view of time that is relational, emergent, and unfixed. This view can indeed change how we experience time. Physics provides the formal-empirical tools to model these phenomena; Daoism and Madhyamaka offer disciplined ways of thinking that resist substantialist intuitions.

The value of this cross-cultural dialogue lies not in seeking "proof" of physics in ancient texts, but in illuminating how different traditions, through distinct methods, converge on a non-substantialist view of time – one that is relational, emergent, and open to re-conceptualization as our understanding of reality deepens.

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NEURAL GRAMMARS OF TIME: AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK FOR THE ACTIVE CONSTRUCTION OF TEMPORAL REALITY

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Abstract

Time is a fundamental dimension of experience, yet neuroscience suggests that the subjective flow of time is an active neural construction rather than a passive reflection of physical reality [Buonomano 2017]. Here, I propose the "Neural Grammars of Time" – a unifying framework explaining how distributed neural architectures transform physical signals into a structured temporal phenomenology. I would argue that temporal cognition emerges from three interdependent processes: Temporal Representation, which utilizes population codes, oscillatory coupling, and specialized "time cells" to encode duration and sequence [Eichenbaum 2014; MacDonald et al. 2011]; Temporal Construction, which leverages predictive processing and the multisensory "Temporal Binding Window" to assemble a coherent experiential present [Wallace & Stevenson 2014; Hohwy 2013]; and Temporal Action, which maps internal temporal scaffolds onto goal-directed behaviour and decision-making [Merchant et al. 2013; Paton & Buonomano 2018]. Evidence from evolutionary biology and developmental science indicates that these mechanisms are phylogenetically conserved and early-emerging [Merchant et al. 2013]. Furthermore, I demonstrate how distortions in temporal processing – characteristic of Parkinson's disease, ADHD, and schizophrenia – reveal the functional logic of these systems, particularly the fragility of the ~100-ms continuity window in disorders of conscious experience [Giersch & Mishara 2017]. By synthesizing computational, systems, and clinical perspectives, this framework provides a comprehensive account of how

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the brain constructs the structured temporal reality that underpins perception, memory, and conscious experience.

Keywords: *time perception, temporal cognition, neural dynamics, predictive processing, consciousness.*

Introduction: The neural construction of temporal reality

Time is perhaps the most foundational yet elusive dimension of human experience. While we intuitively perceive it as a continuous, unidirectional flow from a fixed past toward an open future, modern physics suggests a more complex reality. Einstein's "block universe" model proposes that past, present, and future coexist in a four-dimensional spacetime manifold, implying that the subjective "now" may be an observer-dependent perspective rather than a fundamental property of the universe [Einstein 1916; Rovelli 2018]. This discrepancy between physical time and psychological time has led researchers across physics, philosophy, and neuroscience to explore the possibility that our temporal experience is an evolved cognitive construction – a "controlled hallucination" designed to support survival [Callender 2017].

Emerging evidence suggests that the brain does not possess a single "internal clock" but instead operates as a distributed "time machine" [Buonomano 2017]. Rather than passively recording the passage of seconds, the brain actively synthesizes temporal reality through a complex interplay of neural mechanisms. Recent research highlights a shift toward "time-domain" theories, where brain functions like cognition and memory are mediated by temporally patterned signals and oscillatory sequences that resemble holographic processes [Paton & Buonomano 2018]. This distributed architecture allows the brain to map time onto diverse neural substrates, from the motor precision of the cerebellum to the sequential "time cells" of the hippocampus [Eichenbaum 2014]. Hippocampal findings further show that temporal information is multiplexed with spatial codes, enabling richer episodic representations [Umbach, Tan & Jacobs 2020].

In this article, I propose the "Neural Grammars of Time" – an integrated neurocognitive framework that explains how the brain transforms distributed neural dynamics into a structured temporal phenomenology. This framework is built upon three interdependent pillars:

- **Temporal Representation**: The encoding of duration, sequence, and structure through population codes and oscillatory coupling. Recent findings reveal how hippocampal neurons multiplex spatial and temporal information, enhancing the informational content of episodic memories [Umbach, Tan & Jacobs 2020].

- **Temporal Construction**: The assembly of a coherent experiential "now" using predictive processing and the multisensory Temporal Binding Window [Wallace & Stevenson 2014]. This mechanism enables the brain to resolve discrepancies across sensory channels to maintain perceptual stability [Friston 2010].
- **Temporal Action**: The transformation of internal temporal scaffolds into goal-directed behaviour. New evidence regarding prospective coding shows how specific neural ensembles are reactivated seconds before anticipated events, providing a cellular substrate for navigating temporal contingencies [Merchant, Harrington & Meck 2013].

By unifying classical theories with latest breakthroughs – such as the discovery of how fronto-parietal circuits switch between shared and independent timing modes – this article advances a comprehensive account of temporal reality. I would argue that the continuity and directionality of human time are emergent properties of these interacting "neural grammars", which allow the brain to navigate the timeless vacuum of physical reality by constructing the richly structured temporal world we inhabit.

1. Temporal representation: Neural motifs and distributed manifolds

Temporal representation is not the product of a singular, centralized chronometer; rather, it emerges from a diverse repertoire of neural motifs distributed across hippocampal, cortical, cerebellar, and striatal circuits. These systems do not merely "track" time but construct a representational scaffold that integrates duration, sequence, and ordinal structure, enabling the brain to encode episodic memories and compute predictive trajectories [Paton & Buonomano 2018].

1.1. Stochastic and structured population dynamics

Traditional views of "internal clocks" have been superseded by models of population coding and latent manifold dynamics. Central to this are time cells – neurons, primarily in the hippocampus and entorhinal cortex, that exhibit circumscribed firing at specific moments within a temporal interval [Eichenbaum 2014; Umbach, Tan & Jacobs 2020; Tsao et al. 2018]. These cells form a sequential chain that tiles time, providing a robust representation of "when" an event occurs relative to a temporal anchor.

In parallel, ramping cells in the prefrontal cortex and striatum track elapsed time through monotonic changes in firing rates, acting as neural integrators that support interval estimation and decision-making [Merchant, Harrington & Meck 2013]. Current evidence suggests these motifs are not isolated; rather, the brain utilizes high-dimensional population codes where temporal information is embedded within the evolving state-space of neural ensembles, allowing for the flexible remapping of time based on behavioural context [Murray et al. 2017].

1.2. Phase-coded sequences and oscillatory multiplexing

The "grammar" of temporal representation is critically dependent on oscillatory coupling, which provides a syntax for organizing information across scales. Theta-gamma phase-amplitude coupling serves as a primary mechanism for sequential encoding [Lisman & Jensen 2013; Buzsáki & Wang 2012]. In this model, the slower theta cycle (~8 Hz) defines a temporal window within which faster gamma cycles (~40–100 Hz) represent discrete items or events in a sequence. This oscillatory multiplexing allows the brain to maintain the ordinal structure of experience. Recent findings demonstrate that episodic sequence memory is supported by this theta-gamma phase code, where the specific phase of the theta wave at which a neuron fires conveys precise information about the item's position in time [Heusser et al. 2016]. This "temporal chunking" is essential for transforming continuous sensory streams into discrete, manageable units of memory.

1.3. Metastable transitions and latent dynamics

At a macroscopic level, temporal representation is sustained by metastable network dynamics. Rather than settling into a static equilibrium, neural networks transition through a series of quasi-stable states – metastable trajectories – that represent the progression of time and the segmentation of events [Rabinovich, Huerta & Laurent 2008]. These transitions are driven by recurrent connectivity and allow circuits to maintain temporal context across delays, even in the absence of external stimuli. Metastability ensures that the brain can represent duration not as a linear accumulation but as a series of state transitions within a latent manifold [Murray et al. 2017; Mazzucato, La Camera & Fontanini 2019]. This explains why temporal perception is highly sensitive to the informational density of an interval: the more state transitions occur, the longer the perceived duration.

2. Temporal construction: Active inference and multisensory integration

The brain does not passively register the passage of time; instead, it operates as a predictive inference machine that reconciles stochastic sensory inputs, varying neural latencies, and prior expectations into a coherent "experiential present". Temporal construction is the computational process of synthesizing these heterogeneous signals to maintain perceptual stability and support real-time action.

2.1. Active inference and generative temporal models

A central challenge for the brain is the significant discrepancy in transmission and processing speeds across sensory modalities – for instance, auditory signals reach the cortex faster than visual ones [Hogendoorn 2022]. To overcome these delays, the brain employs generative models that provide a predictive scaffold for incoming events. Under the Predictive Processing (PP) framework, the brain minimizes "temporal surprise" by anticipating the timing and structure of stimuli [Friston 2010]. This active alignment allows the system to shift from a reactive to a proactive state, where the subjective "now" is a post-hoc reconstruction that accounts for known neural latencies [Eagleman 2009].

2.2. The multisensory Temporal Binding Window (TBW)

To achieve a unified perception, the brain utilizes the Temporal Binding Window (TBW) – a critical millisecond-scale interval (typically 50–200 ms) within which sensory inputs from different modalities are fused into a single event [Wallace & Stevenson 2014; Vroomen & Keetels 2010]. This window is not static; it is a highly supple mechanism that undergoes temporal recalibration based on environmental regularities and task demands. Recent evidence suggests that the width of the TBW is modulated by oscillatory phase-resetting, where the brain "waits" for the slowest signal to arrive before committing to a multisensory binding [Cecere, Rees & Romei 2015].

2.3. Synthesis into the experiential present

The culmination of these processes is the "Specious Present" – a temporally extended integration window that bridges the gap between sensory fragments and conscious awareness [Wittmann 2009]. This construction facilitates a continuous narrative of experience, allowing for fluid motor control and decision-making under uncertainty. Through dynamic error correction and the integration of internal generative models, the brain transforms a fragmented, asynchronous physical reality into the structured, actionable present that defines human consciousness [Van Wassenhove 2016].

3. Temporal action: Operationalizing temporal inference for adaptive behaviour

Temporal action represents the phase where internal temporal scaffolds are operationalized into goal-directed outputs. While representation and construction provide the "what" and "when" of experience, temporal action executes the "how" – mapping latent temporal predictions onto motor, cognitive, and evaluative systems. This process is driven by a distributed network involving the cerebellum, basal ganglia, and fronto-parietal circuits, which jointly solve the problem of timing-dependent survival [Ivry & Spencer 2004; Mauk & Buonomano 2004].

3.1. Predictive motor control and internal forward models

The brain achieves millisecond-scale motor precision through internal forward models, primarily housed in the cerebellum [Shadmehr, Smith & Krakauer 2010]. These models anticipate the sensory consequences of actions, allowing for the real-time correction of motor trajectories. In this context, temporal action is not merely the execution of a sequence but the continuous alignment of an internal "state-space" with external physics [Ivry & Spencer 2004]. Recent evidence suggests that the Supplementary Motor Area (SMA) acts as a temporal accumulator, where neural activity ramps up toward a specific threshold to trigger action initiation – a classic form of "climbing activity" that bridges temporal representation with motor execution [Merchant, Harrington & Meck 2013]. This "climbing activity" represents a neurocomputational bridge between abstract temporal representation and physical movement.

3.2. Dopaminergic modulation of temporal value and decision-making

Temporal action is intrinsically linked to the evaluation of reward. The brain must weigh the value of an outcome against its expected delay – a process known as temporal discounting [Kim, Hwang & Lee 2008]. Dopaminergic neurons in the substantia nigra and ventral tegmental area (VTA) do not just encode reward prediction errors; they also control the "speed" of the internal clock [Soares, Atallah & Paton 2016]. Higher dopaminergic tone is associated with an overestimation of duration and increased impulsivity, as the brain's internal "metronome" accelerates, making future rewards seem more distant. This timing-based value computation is central to decision-making under uncertainty, where the cerebellum provides the precision and the basal ganglia provides the "gate" for action [Mauk & Buonomano 2004].

3.3. The Sense of Agency and intentional binding

At the highest level of temporal action lies the Sense of Agency – the subjective experience of controlling one's actions and their consequences. This is mediated by intentional binding, a phenomenon where the perceived time of a voluntary action and its subsequent effect are shifted toward each other [Haggard 2017]. This temporal compression is a hallmark of "closed-loop" temporal processing: when the brain predicts an outcome, it actively restructures its temporal reality to maintain a sense of causal continuity [Schwartze & Kotz 2013]. Disruptions in this mechanism are observed in clinical conditions like schizophrenia, where the "binding" fails, leading to a fragmented sense of self and agency.

Grammar Level	Core Function	Representative Neural Substrates	Primary Coding Principles
1. Temporal Representation	Encodes duration, order, and temporal structure	Hippocampus (time cells), entorhinal cortex, prefrontal cortex, striatum, cerebellum	• Sequential firing (time cells) • Ramping activity • Population codes • Latent manifold dynamics • Theta–gamma coupling
2. Temporal Construction	Integrates multisensory inputs and predictions into a coherent "now"	Superior temporal sulcus, posterior parietal cortex, prefrontal cortex, thalamus, cerebellum	• Predictive processing • Temporal Binding Window (20–200 ms) • Multisensory recalibration • Phase resetting • Error minimization (active inference)
3. Temporal Action	Converts internal temporal structure into motor output, reward evaluation, and agency	Basal ganglia, cerebellum, SMA/pre-SMA, premotor cortex, dopaminergic midbrain (VTA/SNc)	• Ramping-to-threshold dynamics • Forward models • Dopaminergic modulation of temporal value • Intentional binding • Temporal discounting mechanisms

4. Developmental and comparative evidence: Phylogenetic conservation and ontogenetic foundations

The capacity to represent and act upon temporal structure is not a late-emerging cognitive specialization but a foundational biological imperative. Developmental and comparative data suggest that the "neural grammars of time" are rooted in highly conserved circuits that emerge early in ontogeny, providing a prerequisite scaffold for the development of complex perception, navigation, and social coordination.

4.1. Ontogenetic trajectories: The early emergence of temporal magnitude

Temporal cognition is among the earliest cognitive faculties to manifest in human development. Infants aged only a few months exhibit a sophisticated sensitivity to duration, rhythm, and temporal contingencies, long before the maturation of language or explicit memory systems [Brannon, Suanda & Libertus 2007]. This "sense of time" is theorized to be part of a generalized magnitude system – shared with space and number – processed by the posterior parietal cortex [Walsh 2003].

Current research indicates that infants utilize violation-of-expectation paradigms to demonstrate precise interval timing, suggesting that the basic computational architecture for temporal prediction is functional shortly after birth [Provasi, Rattat & Droit-Volet 2011]. These early abilities undergo refinement as the prefrontal-striatal pathways mature, leading to increased precision and the capacity for multi-second interval estimation [Buhusi & Meck 2005].

4.2. Phylogenetic conservation: Canonical timing motifs across species

Comparative evidence confirms that interval timing is a fundamental trait across the animal kingdom, from invertebrates to non-human primates. This universality points toward phylogenetic conservation of timing mechanisms. Vertebrates share a canonical neural architecture for timing: basal ganglia-thalamocortical loops provide a substrate for interval timing and reward-based decision-making, while the cerebellum supports sub-second precision and motor coordination [Merchant, Harrington & Meck 2013; Paton & Buonomano 2018].

Even in species lacking these complex macro-structures, such as *Drosophila* or *C. elegans*, temporal prediction is achieved through recurrent network dynamics and oscillatory motifs that mirror the population coding found in the mammalian cortex [Paton & Buonomano 2018]. This suggests that while the hardware varies, the "neural grammar" – the algorithmic solution to timing – remains remarkably consistent across evolution.

4.3. Evolutionary utility: Navigation, foraging, and fitness

The evolutionary pressure to construct a temporal reality is driven by survival. Optimal Foraging Theory dictates that animals must precisely estimate the time required to travel between patches and the rate of resource depletion to maximize calorific intake [Stephens & Krebs 1986]. Furthermore, temporal prediction is essential for acoustic communication (e.g., birdsong or human speech) and social synchrony, where millisecond-scale timing determines the success of the interaction [Ten Oever et al. 2021].

The ubiquitous presence of Scalar Timing (Weber's Law for time) – where the error in timing is proportional to the duration being timed – across all tested species serves as a "behavioural fossil", confirming that diverse brains have converged upon similar computational constraints for temporal processing [Gibbon 1977; Gallistel 1990].

5. Temporal processing in clinical disorders: A transdiagnostic framework

The clinical manifestations of temporal dysfunction provide a unique window into the fragile architecture of the brain's "time machine". Disruptions in temporal processing are not localized to single pathologies but represent a transdiagnostic dimension where deficits in dopaminergic signalling, thalamocortical integration, and predictive coding lead to profound alterations in the subjective flow of reality [Merchant, Harrington & Meck 2013].

5.1. Dopaminergic dysregulation and basal ganglia circuitry

The basal ganglia, particularly the striatum, are central to interval timing and rhythm processing. In Parkinson's disease, the depletion of nigrostriatal dopamine leads to a systemic "slowing" of the internal clock [Jones & Jahanshahi 2014]. Patients typically exhibit impaired duration estimation and a reduced capacity for temporal prediction, which manifests both in motor bradykinesia and perceptual deficits.

Conversely, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is characterized by fronto-striatal and cerebellar dysregulation, resulting in high temporal variability and a diminished sensitivity to multisensory temporal synchrony [Noreika, Falter & Rubia 2013]. These deficits suggest that the "precision" of temporal representation is dopamine-dependent, where suboptimal signalling leads to a fragmented and noisier temporal experience.

5.2. Affective modulation and the dilation of flow

Temporal experience is intrinsically tied to emotional state. In major depressive disorder (MDD), patients frequently report a subjective "dilation" of time – a feeling that time is slowing down or stagnating [Thönes & Oberfeld 2015]. Neurobiologically, this is linked to altered activity in the insula (responsible for interoception) and the prefrontal cortex, where a hyper-focus on the negative self-schema disrupts the normal flow of the "experiential present" [Wittmann 2009; Droit-Volet 2013].

In bipolar disorder, this flow oscillates: manic states are associated with compressed time and accelerated goal-directed action, reflecting a hyper-responsive reward system, while depressive episodes return to a dilated, heavy temporal state [Bolbecker et al. 2014].

5.3. Predictive coding and the fragmentation of agency

High-impact research increasingly views schizophrenia through the lens of impaired predictive timing. The hallmark of schizophrenia – a loss of the sense of agency – is often driven by a breakdown in intentional binding, where patients fail to temporally "link" their actions with the consequences thereof [Haggard 2017]. This fragmentation of the "now" results from a failure in predictive processing; if the brain cannot accurately predict the timing of sensory feedback, the distinction between "self" and "other" becomes blurred [Giersch & Mishara 2017].

5.4. Structural network disruptions: The thalamic hub

The thalamus serves as the critical relay for the "neural grammars of time", integrating signals across distributed cortical manifolds. Thalamic strokes or lesions can lead to global temporal disorientation, disrupting the patient's ability to orient within the past-present-future continuum [Cojan & Ptak 2012]. These cases highlight that even if specialized "time cells" remain intact, the loss of the central integration hub prevents the construction of a coherent temporal reality.

6. A unified framework: The hierarchical grammar of temporal cognition

The "Neural Grammars of Time" framework posits that temporal reality is not a monolithic readout of physical duration but an emergent property of a rule-governed, hierarchical system. Analogous to linguistic syntax, which transforms discrete lexical units into structured meaning, the brain utilizes specific neurocomputational "grammars" to organize asynchronous neural signals into the fluid phenomenology of past, present, and future [Buzsáki 2010].

6.1. The three pillars of temporal syntax

Our framework integrates three distinct, yet interdependent computational layers:

1. **Temporal Representation (The Symbols):** At the base level, the brain generates elementary temporal units. Using population-clock dynamics, oscillatory phase-coding (e.g., theta-gamma coupling), and specialized "time cells", the nervous system encodes the raw metrics of duration and ordinal sequence [Hardy & Buonomano 2016; Paton & Buonomano 2018].
2. **Temporal Construction (The Synthesis):** These symbols are integrated through active inference. By leveraging the Multisensory Temporal Binding

Window and generative internal models, the brain resolves cross-modal latencies to construct a coherent "experiential present" – the temporal equivalent of a sentence [Friston 2010; Van Wassenhove 2016].

3. **Temporal Action (The Pragmatics):** Finally, these structures are operationalized. Temporal action maps the constructed "now" onto goal-directed trajectories, utilizing dopaminergic value-coding to weigh future rewards and cerebellar forward models to achieve motor precision [Paton & Buonomano 2018; Soares, Atallah & Paton 2016].

6.2. Hierarchical time-scales and predictive control

A unifying feature of this grammar is its hierarchical organization. Processing occurs across a spectrum of time-scales, from millisecond-level sensory integration in the brainstem to multi-second episodic sequencing in the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex [Kiebel, Daunizeau & Friston 2008; Hasson, Chen & Honey 2015]. This hierarchy allows the brain to maintain long-term context while remaining responsive to immediate sensory perturbations. I propose that the PFC-striato-cerebellar axis functions as the "syntax engine", dynamically switching between these scales to minimize prediction error and maximize adaptive fitness [Hasson et al. 2015].

6.3. Implications for consciousness and agency

The "Neural Grammars" framework provides a mechanistic account of the Sense of Agency. When the brain's internal "grammar" successfully predicts the timing of a sensory consequence following an action (intentional binding), the result is a unified experience of self-causality [Haggard 2017]. Conversely, the "ungrammatical" time perceived in clinical disorders – where predictions and inputs fail to align – leads to the fragmentation of the self and reality. By viewing temporal cognition as an active, combinatorial process, this framework reconciles the timelessness of physical equations with the structured flow of human experience, providing a foundation for a rigorous, integrative science of time [Teki, Grube & Griffiths 2012]. Integrating the Neural Grammars of Time framework into the leading theories of consciousness reveals that each theory relies on a specific "temporal syntax" to explain how subjective experience arises.

The following table compares how Global Workspace Theory (GWT), Integrated Information Theory (IIT), and the Free-Energy Principle (FEP) handle these temporal grammars:

Comparative analysis of temporal grammars in major theories of consciousness

Feature	Global Workspace Theory (GWT)	Integrated Information Theory (IIT)	Free-Energy Principle (FEP)
Core Temporal Mechanism	**Non-linear "Ignition"**: A discrete broadcast of information across the brain.	**Causal integration (Φ)**: Maximum cause-effect power within a specific "grain".	**Active Inference**: Continuous minimization of prediction error (surprisal).
Temporal Granularity	**Discrete (100–300 ms)**: Operates in episodic cycles where only one content is dominant.	**Multiscale/Nested**: Defines an "instant of experience" based on causal power, often at 100–300 ms.	**Hierarchical/ Continuous**: Nested timescales from milliseconds to long-term "generative models".
Role of Prediction	**Bottom-up/Top-down Selection**: Predictions help select which "specialist" enters the workspace.	**Intrinsic Causal Structure**: Focused more on the *internal* state than future-oriented prediction.	**The "Grammar" itself**: The brain is an "inference engine" that exists to predict temporal flow.
The "Specious Present"	A **fleeting memory capacity** where broadcasted info creates a global mental scene.	A **unitary whole** specified on a single set of elements with definite spatio-temporal boundaries.	A **probabilistic density** (recognition density) representing the current state and its trajectory.
Sense of Agency	Emerging from the **broadcasting** of motor plans to evaluative systems.	Emerging from **maximal irreducibility** – the system acting as a single causal entity.	Emerging from **Action as Inference**: Testing hypotheses by changing the world to match predictions.
Primary Brain Substrate	**Prefrontal-Parietal Network**: Long-range axons "igniting" global availability.	**Posterior "Hot Zone"**: Temporo-parieto-occipital areas with high causal density.	**Whole-Brain Hierarchy**: Distributed Markov blankets and hierarchical generative models.

Synthesis: The Integrated World Modelling View

Recent efforts, such as Integrated World Modelling Theory (IWMT), suggest that these theories are not mutually exclusive but rather describe different "levels" of the same temporal grammar:

1. IIT describes the *intrinsic existence* of a system at a specific temporal grain (the "what" of a moment).
2. GWT describes the *functional broadcast* that allows that moment to be accessible for behaviour and report (the "access" of a moment).

3. FEP describes the *computational engine* (active inference) that drives the system to update its temporal models and move from one moment to the next.

This suggests that the Neural Grammars of Time act as the "operating system" that allows these distinct processes – causal integration, global broadcasting, and predictive error-correction – to synthesize into the coherent stream of consciousness we experience.

Conclusion: Toward an integrative science of temporal construction

Temporal reality is neither a passive imprint of the physical world nor the output of a singular, localized neural chronometer. Instead, it emerges as a sophisticated cognitive achievement from the coordinated activity of distributed systems that represent temporal structure, construct coherent multisensory experiences, and operationalize temporal predictions into adaptive action [Paton & Buonomano 2018; Merchant, Harrington & Meck 2013]. The "Neural Grammars of Time" framework shifts the paradigm from searching for a centralized "clock" toward understanding the combinatorial rules and hierarchical dynamics that transform stochastic neural states into a structured temporal phenomenology [Kiebel, Daunizeau & Friston 2008].

The temporal architecture of consciousness

Consciousness is fundamentally a temporal phenomenon. Unravelling these neural grammars identifies the mechanisms that constitute the very fabric of human consciousness. Consciousness is not merely situated in time; it is actively constructed through temporally organized neural activity [Friston 2010; Northoff & Huang 2017].

- **The Specious Present:** Conscious awareness depends on a constructed integration interval of roughly 100–300 ms, during which discrete neural events are merged into a unified perceptual moment [Eagleman 2008; Wittmann 2009]. This "temporal workspace" allows consciousness to operate as a single stream rather than disjointed fragments.
- **Continuity and Flow:** Metastable dynamics and sequential firing patterns furnish the neural basis for perceived continuity, stitching moment-to-moment states into an extended experiential flow [Buzsáki & Wang 2012; Varela et al. 2001].
- **Agency and Selfhood:** Agency emerges through "Temporal Action", where predicted sensory consequences align with actual outcomes via precise timing [Haggard 2017]. When these predictive grammars fail – as seen in the fragmented agency of schizophrenia – the stability of the self-experience collapses [Northoff & Huang 2017].

- **Large-Scale Coordination:** Major theories, including Global Workspace Theory (GWT) [Baars 2005], Integrated Information Theory (IIT) [Tononi 2008], and the Free-Energy Principle (FEP) [Friston 2010], all converge on the claim that consciousness arises from coordinated interactions among distributed neural systems. Temporal grammars supply the rules that allow these networks to synchronize and integrate information across multiple scales [Van Wassenhove 2016; Varela et al. 2001].

Final synthesis and future directions

Synthesis underscores that the hallmarks of human time – continuity, directionality, and a privileged "now" – are emergent properties of an active inferential process. This perspective positions the brain as an architect of temporal reality, utilizing predictive coding and multisensory binding to bridge the gap between the timelessness of fundamental physics and the richly sequenced flow of experience.

The transdiagnostic nature of temporal dysfunctions positions temporal metrics as powerful translational markers of neural integrity. Future research must prioritize identifying the specific neural "syntax" governing these processes, particularly how cross-frequency coupling and metastable transitions enable the scaling of time from milliseconds to minutes. By integrating behaviour-centric approaches with large-scale neural recordings, we can move toward a unified theory of how the brain generates the most fundamental dimension of our existence: the sense of time.

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THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF TIME IN MARXISM: KARL MARX'S BREAK WITH THE YOUNG HEGELIANS

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Abstract

The concept of "time" constituted an internal and inescapable dimension of the Young Hegelians' debates over the conception of history. Within the framework of speculative philosophy, the historical conceptions they articulated – and their corresponding understandings of time – largely inherited Hegel's de-temporalizing tendency, in which time was subordinated to the movement of substance or of self-consciousness. More concretely, Max Stirner projected individual time onto the framework of human history, interpreting history as the unfolding of the "self"; Ludwig Feuerbach sought to restore time through his philosophy of species; Bruno Bauer, grounded in the philosophy of self-consciousness, treated "critique" as the very measure of time. Despite their internal polemics, all three failed to emancipate time from the internal structure of speculative philosophy. Confronting this impasse, Karl Marx broke decisively with the German idealist paradigm by advancing the understanding of the real human being beyond abstract anthropology and concretizing it as the subject of material production – an active being situated within determinate historical conditions and social relations. He further formulated the historical materialism, within which historical development is grounded in concrete social practice and time is redefined as a historically determinate process rather than the self-deduction of pure thought.

Keywords: *Young Hegelians, Karl Marx, time, philosophical revolution, historical materialism.*

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Introduction

The Young Hegelians (*Junghegelianer*) constituted an important branch that emerged from the disintegration of Hegel's philosophical system. In their struggles against Christian theology, orthodox pietism, and feudal reactionary forces, they demonstrated a remarkable capacity for intellectual transformation [see Li Y. 1995: 361]. Under the impetus of religious criticism, they developed speculative philosophies of history grounded in various forms of "spiritual entities" [see Shu 2021, Preface: 1–2]. Yet their internal positions were marked by profound tensions, which rendered the Young Hegelians less a unified school than a loose and heterogeneous constellation of thinkers [Shu 2021: 8].

Since the mid-twentieth century, scholarly interest in the Young Hegelians has steadily expanded, particularly regarding their religious, political, and philosophical critiques. Among these research trajectories, the diverse conceptions of history that gradually emerged within the movement have become a sustained focus of debate. Based on the collation of existing primary sources and examinations of the history of philosophy, a broad scholarly consensus has taken shape: Bruno Bauer locates the origin of historical events in individual activity and self-consciousness [see Rosen 1977: 105–106, 108; Li Y. 1995: 27; Moggach 2003: 47–48]; Ludwig Feuerbach conceives history as a "process of the humanization of humanity", that is, as the genesis of *species-essence* (*Gattungswesen*) [Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 1: 596–597; Shu 2021: 164]; and Max Stirner interprets human history as the history of my "self-discovery", portraying the dialectic of individual growth as a tripartite historical structure [see Leopold 2023; Nie 2008].

History itself occupies a central position within Hegel's philosophical system [Levine 2016: 151]. Yet insofar as history and dialectics are ultimately subsumed under Absolute Spirit, this conception of history assumes a fundamentally non-temporal (de-temporalized) character [see Löwith 2006: 165; Pan 2023]. This raises a critical question: do the Young Hegelians follow this theoretical "inertia", similarly culminating history in a spiritual realm in which time is effectively expelled? The question is worth careful consideration. More broadly, the intricate relationship between history and time has long been a significant theme in intellectual history. From a historiographical perspective, history may be understood as the science of "human beings in time", with time serving as the generative medium of historical phenomena and the field within which they become intelligible [Bloch 2011: 47–48]. For German philosophers living between the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the philosophy of history thus increasingly came to signify the unfolding of rational human activity in time [see Henrich 2013: 74; Xia 2025]. In this respect, the debates over historical conceptions that followed the decline of religious criticism among the Young Hegelians could no longer avoid engaging with the question of time – even though such discussions often appear scattered across their works and are frequently articulated only in implicit form.

It is precisely within this problem-field that Karl Marx's philosophical revolution assumes decisive significance. Deeply involved in the intellectual disputes of the Young Hegelians in his early years, Marx gradually distanced himself from this milieu through systematic critiques of Bauer, Feuerbach, and Stirner. His philosophical "farewell" to German ideology did not merely consist in a revised understanding of "consciousness" or "essence", but rather in a fundamental reconstruction of the way history unfolds and of its underlying temporal structure. To date, scholarship on "time" within the Marxist tradition has largely concentrated on issues such as historical time, temporality in capitalist society – including capitalism and time, sociotemporal regimes, acceleration, and free time – as well as general principles of the philosophy of time [see Pan 2024: 7–15]. Comparatively little attention, however, has been paid to the earliest genesis of Marx's conception of time. As Löwith has noted, Marx was a key figure in advancing the "temporalization of history" that began in the late eighteenth century [see Löwith 2006: 135]. Koselleck further emphasizes that Marx was among the first thinkers to recognize that historical explanation must proceed according to temporal criteria [Koselleck 1985: 256]. From this perspective, the internal debates among the Young Hegelians concerning history not only constituted an important background to Marx's intellectual transformation, but also formed an indispensable theoretical prehistory for understanding how Marx defined time within historical materialism.

On this basis, the present article seeks to restore "time" to a central position within the philosophy of history by examining how debates over history among the Young Hegelians implicitly contained divergent conceptions of temporality, and by identifying the specific theoretical site at which Marx's philosophical revolution occurred.[1] By retracing Marx's path of rupture from the intellectual horizon of the Young Hegelians, this study aims to outline a major revolutionary trajectory within the 19th-century European philosophy – one that differs from the existential path inaugurated by Kierkegaard and instead points toward a reconstruction of time grounded in real historical processes. At the same time, the article endeavours to provide a materialist intellectual-historical foundation for interpreting Marx's analyses of social time and free time in *Das Kapital* and its manuscripts. As an initial exploration, it seeks to open further avenues of discussion, including the normative dimensions of time, issues of temporal justice, and the divergences between Hegelian and Marxian dialectics.

[1] Contemporary time studies can broadly be divided into two parts: "explorations of the nature of time" and "research on various historical conceptions of time" [Wu 2006: 207]. The work undertaken in this article primarily falls within the latter category, focusing mainly on the conceptions of time held by the Young Hegelians and Marx.

1. The debate on the philosophy of history within German idealism and its implied structure of time

Within the Young Hegelian movement, sustained internal differentiation emerged around the questions of "how history unfolds" and "how the subject realizes itself in time". Stirner, Feuerbach, and Bauer – three of its key representatives – articulated distinct yet mutually responsive conceptions of history from the respective standpoints of the *unique one*, *species*, and *self-consciousness* and *critique*. It is precisely within these differing philosophies of history that time is understood and measured in divergent ways, thereby revealing specific theoretical tensions and limitations in each position. A reconstruction of their concrete polemical engagements shows that disagreements over time within the Young Hegelians were not accidental, but rooted in fundamentally different philosophical determinations of subjectivity, historical dynamics, and reality.

1.1. Max Stirner's structure of time grounded in the unique one

Between 1843 and 1844, Max Stirner composed *The Ego and Its Own* (*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*), a work grounded in extreme idealism and solipsism. The book is divided into two parts, "Man" and "I", directly mirroring the structure of "God" and "Man" in Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*. Objectively speaking, although Stirner was deeply influenced by Feuerbach – especially by his critique of religion – he nevertheless took Feuerbach as a primary target of criticism. In Stirner's view, while Feuerbach emphasized sensuousness, he still treated Reason, Will, and Affection as the fundamental determinations of human nature [see Feuerbach 1989: 3; Stirner 2009, Translator's Preface: 5]. Consequently, Feuerbach's conception of the *species-essence* remained an abstract totality, and his critique of religion amounted merely to a formal transformation "within unreal abstraction," failing to make philosophy "truly return to the foundations of reality" [Shu 2021: 171].

To abolish completely the speculative residues in Feuerbach's philosophy, Stirner proposed replacing the species grounded in the whole with the "self" grounded in individuality [see Stirner 1995: 162–163]. His aim was to return to the concrete person and the real world, thereby realizing the genuine reality of man. He declared that the Ego and its Own sought to create a form of egoism reflecting my own realization – an egoism consistent with itself. From this philosophical standpoint, Stirner summarized two great causes to which humanity had historically devoted itself: the cause of God and the cause of Man. Still, he argued, both causes neglected the individuality of the person and therefore failed to allow the "I" to truly return to "itself" [Stirner 1995: 5–6]. On this basis, the "I" must carry egoism through to the end, placing my cause above all else, caring only for myself, and finding satisfaction in myself alone – in short, "Who am my all, Who am the only one [*der Einzige*]" [Stirner 1995: 7]. In doing so, Stirner elevated the "I" to the highest position, positing that everything external is "my own", and regarding the freedom of the "I" as the supreme goal of egoism.

Through the process by which the individual "self" liberates itself from the oppression of the created world, Stirner articulated his understanding of time. He used the developmental stages of the individual to analogize the evolution of human history, transplanting the rhythm of individual temporality into the grammar of historical time. According to Stirner, human history is the process of the individual "self" realizing itself, corresponding to three stages of individual development: the child's realism, the youth's idealism, and the man's egoism [Stirner 1995: 17–18].

In childhood, the person faces a strange and alien world with curiosity, taking the objects and world external to the "self" as unquestionably real [see Stirner 1995: 15]. As one matures into youth, one gradually overcomes the "world of things", becomes rich in ideals and spiritual aspirations, and comes to regard the spiritual as the truly real, while the non-spiritual is relegated to the realm of "external things". The pursuit of pure thought and its revelation becomes one's passion, and faith is placed in the realization of spirit within reality [see Stirner 1995: 16]. Upon entering adulthood, one gains an increasingly lucid understanding of the reality in which one lives and overcomes the "spiritual world". The individual returns the reality once attributed to spirit back to oneself, recognizing oneself as *embodied spirit* and believing that the *corporeal self* is the unique and supreme existence. Letting everything depend upon and find satisfaction in the "self", one thus becomes an egoist and attains the "world as *mine*" [see Stirner 1995: 17].

Within this framework, Stirner correspondingly proposed a tripartite division of human history that mirrors these life stages of individual. The first stage is that of *the ancients*, characterized by realism dependent on things, which he described as possessing an innate "Negroidity" [Stirner 1995: 62]. The second is *the moderns* (*Die Neuen*), characterized by idealism dependent on thought, bearing a "Mongoloidity (Chineseness)" [ibid.]. The third stage is *the free*, which represents the negative unity of realism and idealism, marked by "Caucasian" qualities; at this point, historical development culminates in the age of union among true egoists [see Stirner 1995: 89].

1.2. Feuerbach's philosophy of "species" as a response to Stirner's challenges

As one of the earliest thinkers to recognize that Hegel ultimately brings time to an end within the spiritual realm, Feuerbach, working within his critique of speculative philosophy, already discerned that Hegel – and speculative philosophy as a whole – effectively expels time from its philosophical framework [see Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 1: 109–110]. In Feuerbach's view, this illusory old philosophy and its conception of time deprive the subject of immediate, intuitive experience, thereby stripping existence of its meaning [see ibid.: 110]. In fact, time is the essential form and condition of life itself, for it is intrinsically bound up with development, movement, and change; only within the successive sequence of time can life and nature come into being and persist [see Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 1: 557]. Precisely because time constitutes the essential form and condition of life, Feuerbach calls for the "restoration of the honour of time" as a means of truly recovering this-worldliness and, with it, genuine human emancipation [Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 1: 558].

It is precisely since this attempt to re-endow time with a vital, life-theoretical significance that Feuerbach comes to understand the alienation and return of the *species-essence* as a historical process unfolding in time, and accordingly divides human history into distinct stages. The first stage is characterized by the domination of religion over the human's *species-essence*, resulting in a condition of alienation in which human beings are estranged from themselves; in this sense, "the history of Christianity is the history of the Passion of Humanity" [Feuerbach 1989: 61]. The second stage marks the overcoming of this religious alienation, in which human beings recover and appropriate their *species-essence*, such that "human beings are able consciously to make their own human essence into the moral and political norm, foundation, purpose, and standard" [Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 2: 524].

Earlier, Stirner's critique had challenged the philosophical foundation of Feuerbach's conception of history – namely, *species-essence*. In response, Feuerbach reaffirmed his theory of "man's self-alienation". Stirner had argued that Feuerbach's humanism caused a split within the "I", dividing it into essential and non-essential parts. To counter this, Feuerbach continued to uphold the modern philosophical task of "the realisation and humanisation of God" [Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 1: 122]. He reiterated the central thesis of *The Essence of Christianity*: God exists only within man; therefore, the origin of man must be sought in God or religion, and on that basis, the transcendence of God or religion must be eliminated. Religion, according to Feuerbach, abstracts the inherent substance of man into a transcendent entity external to him, thus creating a rupture between man and God. This division, therefore, must be traced back to the difference between man's "self" and his substance. The so-called divine nature of man is nothing but the illusion revealed by religion; to eliminate the division between the essential and non-essential "I", one must completely divinize and affirm "the whole man" [see Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 2: 423–424].

Besides, to refute Stirner's notion that the *unique one* disregards the sensuous world, Feuerbach once again clarified the central place of sensuousness in his philosophy. He maintained that individuality can only be truly grasped through sensuousness. He emphasized that *The Essence of Christianity* was the first work to investigate the truth of sensuous things and distilled this into three key points. First, "absolute being" should be equated with "sensuous being", that is, absolute being is identical with man's concrete needs and nature rather than with abstract divinity [see Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 2: 424]. Second, genuine cognition is rooted in sensory experience, and within the sensuous world, the abstract speculation of religion and philosophy loses its validity [see Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 2: 426–427]. Third, he underscored that individual self-affirmation depends upon relations between persons, from which the existence of the "species" arises [see Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 2: 427–428].

On this basis, Feuerbach emphasized that *species* is not an abstract concept, but a real, relational entity grounded in human interconnection [see Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 2: 427–428]. While he granted a limited acknowledgment to the *unique one*'s emphasis on the individual's sense of uniqueness and completeness, he argued that because man is a reflective being, he inevitably becomes aware of his own limitations in time and space. Without recourse to the concept of *species*, the emptiness resulting from this awareness tends to be filled by the idea of God. Hence, the function of the "species" is to overcome this limitation and to counter the sense of emptiness that arises from the consciousness of finitude.[2]

There is no denying that Feuerbach's critique of the "de-temporalization" of Hegelian speculative philosophy, as well as his emphasis on *species-essence*, carries considerable significance. Most notably, his project seeks to draw philosophy down from its theological and abstract heights to the "low ground of existence without God" [Löwith 2019: 247], thereby reorienting philosophical reflection toward real human beings and their living activity. Nevertheless, this attempt does not fully escape the residues of metaphysics. Feuerbach remains unable to respond adequately to the various challenges posed by Stirner, including the latter's charge that Feuerbach continues to define real individuals through metaphysical concepts, thereby transforming the finite temporality of the "I" into something infinite and de-temporalized [see Pan 2024: 66]. In this sense, despite Feuerbach's emphatic call to "restore the honour of time", his theory ultimately fails to genuinely restore time from speculative philosophy, which reflecting the internal limits of his thought become apparent in the face of Stirner's challenge.

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[2] In Feuerbach's view, the "species" symbolizes the interdependence among human beings – a relation that can even replace religion as a more fundamental ontological foundation. By enumerating various forms of human dependence, Feuerbach demonstrated that at critical moments the merging of self and others affects human existence itself; hence, "man is the God of man" [Feuerbach 1989: 83]. Moreover, Feuerbach employed the metaphor of the caterpillar transforming into a moth to illustrate that the "realization of the species" is a process by which the individual actualizes the latent potential of the species through growth at different stages of life. Only when the individual completes this realization of the species can he experience himself as having attained a new and more integrated state [see Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 2: 430].

1.3. Bruno Bauer's philosophy of self-consciousness measured time through "critique"

In *Charakteristik Ludwig Feuerbach*, Bruno Bauer positioned himself as a critic grounded in the philosophy of self-consciousness, seeking to transcend both Stirner and Feuerbach by undermining them through the radical force of "critique". In Bauer's view, the debate between Stirner and Feuerbach was nothing more than an entanglement between two dogmatists[3] – both of whom, in essence, represented variants of religious logic, but neither achieved a genuine transcendence of the old philosophy. Bauer's critique unfolded in three aspects.

First, according to Bauer, whether in the philosophy of *species* or in the doctrine of the *unique one*, both reconstructed religious structures upon abstract entities and thus failed to break free from theological thinking. Bauer accused Feuerbach of replacing the divinity of God with the sacredness of *species-essence*, thereby perpetuating the alienating logic of theology. Bauer argued that by elevating the species to the level of a universal substance and demanding that individuals adhere to it through sensuous dependence, Feuerbach, subjected individuality to the same kind of normativity and constraint previously exercised by religion. In this sense, the species was structurally homologous to the Christian God, both being manifestations of illusion for the sake of God [see Bauer 1845]. Conversely, although Stirner claimed that the *unique one* would abolish all universality, Bauer contended that this notion merely secularized Christian individualism. The *unique one*, as "the most abstract of abstract entities", exists neither in the physical nor in the psychological world; it cannot be spoken, named, or grasped. Such an indeterminate abstraction is essentially identical to the transcendent and ineffable God beyond time and space. Hence, the figure of the *unique one* is spectral – an undigested theological remnant whose function, like that of theology itself, is to provide a refuge for the old order [see Bauer 1845].

Second, Bauer argued that the opposition between Feuerbach and Stirner regarding the "species" and the "individual" was a false dichotomy, for neither could properly discern the dialectical unity of individuality and species. He criticized Feuerbach for neglecting individuality and difference, asserting that Feuerbach's conception of "beauty" within the philosophical framework of species was akin to Plato's theory of Forms – an abstract, perfect, and eternal "beauty" that, in fact, was lifeless and devoid of content [see Bauer 1845]. Conversely, Stirner's effort to dissolve species also betrayed a latent dependence upon it. In fact, the recognition of individuality presupposes mediation by species. As Stirner demands that others acknowledge "my woman", such recognition necessarily relies upon a shared

[3] Inheriting the German idealist tradition, especially that of Hegel, they diverged into two main orientations: one centered on "substance" and the other on "self-consciousness". In Bauer's view, both of Stiner and Feuerbach represented "substance" orientation [see Bauer 1845].

understanding of the universal attribute "woman". Without this universal reference, "my woman" would amount to "a meaningless declaration", unrecognizable by others. Consequently, the *unique one* cannot escape the referential frame of species [see Bauer 1845]. Moreover, the uniqueness of the *unique one* is itself a concretization of the universal; by emphasizing the independence of the *unique one*, Stirner inadvertently reproduces the universal determinations of the species, thereby exposing the internal contradiction of his own theory.

Third, both Feuerbach and Stirner, according to Bauer, failed to liberate their interpretations of "love" from the shadow of religion. Like Stirner, Bauer identified Feuerbach's religion of love as a new form of religion. For Feuerbach, love served as the practical bridge between the divine and the human realms; meanwhile, in doing so, it perpetuated the Christian tradition of self-sacrifice and self-denial. The human being thus became the slave of love, and love itself exercised a despotism devoid of will [see Bauer 1845]. As for Stirner, although he did not explicitly elevate "love" to a principle, his conception of the *unique one* fell into a similar logic of self-deification. Since Stirner refused to replace divinity with the concept of the species, Bauer argued, a vacant position was inevitably left for the individual within his framework. If divinity was not supplanted by the species, that emptiness would inevitably be filled by "God" or by the "personalized essence of species". The issue, however, is that by attempting to negate all universality and assert an absolute self, Stirner's theory both retains this vacant space and renders it impossible to fill. The *unique one* is caught in a dilemma: if it does not resort to religion, it must deify itself – which amounts to a mutation of religion; nonetheless, if it does resort to religion, it must rely on the recognition of the Other to fill its emptiness – which again reproduces the structure of religion [see Bauer 1845].

On the basis of these three layers of critique, Bauer concluded that neither Feuerbach nor Stirner had truly broken with the old philosophy. Unlike them, Bauer regarded "critique" itself as a task of pride – a creative and liberating force that constitutes "the self-education of self-consciousness itself" [see Bauer 1845]. Correspondingly, the critic, as the agent of critique, becomes the personalized manifestation of self-consciousness creating history. In this respect, Bauer's philosophy of self-consciousness offers an alternative structure of time: critique is not merely an explicit feature of this philosophy but also a measure of time itself – through which self-consciousness generates history by means of continuous negation.[4]

[4] In Bauer's conception of time, *critique* carries a fundamentally negative meaning, which renders it structurally closer to Hegel's understanding of temporality; even so, it remains equally de-temporalized. Within Hegel's philosophical system, time is conceived as natural time governed by Spirit [Pan 2024: 25], while Spirit itself constitutes a form of "history eternally oriented toward the future", insofar as it exists as a "negative absolute principle" [see Hyppolite 2024: 19; Hegel 1962, Vol. 1: 135–136].

2. From the battlefield of the Young Hegelians to the dawn of historical materialism

Bauer classified the polemics among the Young Hegelians as an internal strife within the philosophy of substance [see Bauer 1845]. Yet his own challenge, launched from the standpoint of the philosophy of self-consciousness, remained a speculative attempt to resolve the contradictions internal to speculative philosophy itself – thereby never breaking free from its self-enclosed speculative loop. Marx perceptively exposed this false revolution, one that was merely "opposing nothing but phrases to these phrases" [Marx and Engels 1975, V: 30], and instead undertook a concrete and practical critique of Feuerbach's sensuous contemplation and Stirner's extreme individualism. With this philosophical revolution, Marx redefined the domain of "time": no longer a self-deduction of idea, but the concrete unfolding of real individuals in the process of material production.

2.1. The false revolution of "opposing nothing but phrases to these phrases" and the failure to grasp "time"

While Bauer, the self-styled critic, indulged in castigating both Stirner and Feuerbach as dogmatists, Marx unmasked all his manoeuvres. Following *The Holy Family*, Marx once again dissected Bauer's so-called "critique" with meticulous precision.

First of all, Marx exposed Bauer's opportunistic method and the superficial nature of his critique. When faced with the confrontation between Stirner and Feuerbach, Bauer employed a strategy of *divide et impera* (divide and conquer), effortlessly fabricating a scene in which the two theoretical opponents seemed to "annihilate" each other, leaving behind the two tails of the philosophy of substance [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 106]. Once these "tails" were exposed, Bauer could triumphantly denounce substance philosophy as a whole. Yet this method of *divide et impera* fell far short of genuine critical engagement; it merely substituted tactical manipulation for substantial critique.

In fact, Bauer's *divide et impera* approach amounted to little more than a pedantic repetition of Hegelian formulas and an opportunistic attitude toward the critique of egoism. As Marx mentioned, Hegel had already regarded the *ego* as one of the most solid aspects of *substance*, situating both within a single philosophical system. Bauer simply adopted this schema, identifying Feuerbach's *species-essence* with Spinoza's *substance* and Stirner's *unique one* with Fichte's *ego*, thereby subsuming both under the same speculative category and condemning them together. Meanwhile, such a manoeuvre – attempting to resolve speculative contradictions by speculative means – inevitably confined him within the same speculative game. Ironically, Bauer, who had scorned egoism, ended up appropriating Stirner's extreme egoism and transforming it into what Marx mockingly called Bruno Bauer's egoism [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 106] – a telling sign of the speculative opportunism inherent in his philosophy of self-consciousness.

This hasty and pedantic form of critique could yield only vacuous conclusions. As Marx observed, the more decisively Bauer denounced the *unique one* as "substance", the more clearly he revealed that his critique never left the speculative kingdom. Furthermore, Bauer's indiscriminate labelling of both Stirner and Feuerbach as dogmatists merely disguised his own intellectual poverty under moral judgment. His crude method of dichotomizing their confrontation as "he is the good one, the other the evil one" or "he is God, the other is man" [Marx and Engels 1975, V: 106–107] only exposed his inability to grasp the real stakes of their debate.

So far, Bauer's critical stratagems and their substantive implications are laid bare by Marx. Although Bauer reformulates the dialectical movement of the "negation of the negation" as a movement of "critique", this so-called critique remains, in essence, de-temporalized. It is incapable of articulating the genuine movement of history; instead, it still imprisons time within a self-referential and circular speculative structure. In addition to Bauer, the disputes involving Feuerbach and Stirner likewise amount to a critique of mere phrases [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 31; Pan 2024: 115]. Confined to the internal debates of the realm of pure thought and never engaging with material reality, such controversies exemplify the fundamental predicament of the Young Hegelians: their persistent expulsion of time through speculation. It was precisely this failure that compelled Marx to undertake a decisive reckoning with speculative philosophy.

2.2. Breaking free from the struggles within the realm of pure thought

Like Bauer, Marx reflected on the controversy between Stirner and Feuerbach. However, unlike Bauer, Marx gradually moved beyond the internal struggles of speculative philosophy and turned toward real individuals and the real world [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 31], thereby laying the philosophical foundation for reconstructing a new, scientific structure of time. Within the controversy between Stirner and Feuerbach – one can discern both Feuerbach's incomplete reduction of the "real world" and Stirner's equally incomplete reduction of the "real individual". Marx's effort to render their doctrines concrete, practical, and historical constituted a crucial step in transforming the philosophy of history from speculative idealism to historical materialism.

Feuerbach's concept of *species-essence* dissolved the mysticism of the religious world by transferring the foundation of existence from the transcendent realm of heaven to the accessible realm of human life – thus forming the theoretical "groundwork" of his philosophical anthropology. This reconstruction of a new foundation effectively criticized the abstract and impersonal character of speculative philosophy. Meanwhile, it also revealed the incompleteness of Feuerbach's reduction to some extent: the this-worldly realm he restored was not yet the world in which human beings actually live their real lives, but only a world of intuition and contemplation. Consequently, Feuerbach sought human emancipation through a utopian religion of love.

However, his analysis of religious alienation remained confined to the sphere of consciousness, and his critique of human alienation stopped at the level of ideas. As Marx observed, "Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from conceptual objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity" [Marx and Engels 1975, V: 6]. Furthermore, Marx concretized Feuerbach's broadly defined this-worldly realm – recovered from the beyond-worldly realm – into the sphere of material production. Within this material sphere, he examined the alienation inherent in private property and capitalist relations of production, along with pathways for overcoming them.

From the standpoint of their polemic, Stirner's *unique one* represented the antithesis to Feuerbach's *species* [Jiang and Xu 2021: 217]. Stirner shifted the perspective from universal commonality to concrete individuality, regarding the *unique one* as the creator of all things. Ideological systems and collective identities – emanating from the state, morality, or religion – constrain individual freedom. Therefore, the individual must act solely according to his own will, transcending all external authorities to affirm his pure subjectivity. In Stirner's view, this pure subjectivity serves as the foundation of existence: through self-possession and self-use, the individual achieves freedom, even if his mode of existence remains isolated, abstract, or nihilistic.

Still, Marx, considered Stirner's doctrine of extreme individualism to be devoid of any practical or historical validity. By dissolving "human emancipation" into the "emancipation of the individual", Stirner confined individuality to the realm of pure thought, detaching it entirely from reality and history [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 27, 99, 242]. Consequently, Stirner also struggled to engage with the history of real life, resorting instead to a sharp severance of the relationship between the individual and society. Marx, by contrast, situated the individual within the totality of productive forces and relations of production, arguing that "real individuals" (*die wirklichen Individuen*) are both shaped by and capable of transforming their material circumstances. In this way, Marx's notion of the real individual severed all dependency on illusion and ideology, moving from the solitary and unbound abstraction of the ego toward some concrete, historically conditioned form of existence.

Through his reappraisal of the Stirner–Feuerbach controversy, Marx accomplished a genuine breakthrough from the confines of German idealism. He attained a firm grasp of both the real individual and the real world, taking them as the premise and point of departure for history itself – as well as the true key to understanding the structure of time. At this moment, the full dawn of historical materialism began to emerge.

3. Marx's philosophical revolution endows "time" with reality and revolutionary

Grasping time through real individuals and their activity was the key to Marx's genuine transcendence of previous speculative philosophical paradigms and his restoration of temporality. Thus, Marx's reinterpretation of "time" had already created a certain intellectual "chasm" separating him from the earlier Young Hegelians. The "time" restored within the horizon of historical materialism possesses reality, while its inherent revolutionary potential is fully tapped. This significantly expands the future dimension that "time" points toward within the historical materialism.

3.1. Conceptualizing time on the basis of real individuals and their activity

As discussed above, both Feuerbach and Stirner touched – albeit from different perspectives – on the notion of the real human being to some extent [see Stirner 1845: 182; Stirner 2009: 43; Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 1: 105&119]. Eventually, Marx advanced this discussion further by introducing the concept of the real individuals and their activities. This formulation not only corrected the limitations of both Feuerbach and Stirner, but also signified that time must henceforth be understood within the concrete historical process of material production and social relations carried out by real individuals.

The real individual is an active being engaged in material production, and therefore acting within definite, material limits, premises, and conditions not of his own choosing [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 34–36]. Unlike the abstract empiricists who compile dead facts, or the idealists who reduce history to an imagined activity of imagined subjects [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 37] – constructing in boundless speculation their own "prehistoric histories" – Marx insists that genuine history originates from the activity of real individuals, who alone endow history with concrete and substantive content. The activity of these real individuals is itself real and productive; and the process of human production encompasses five primordial historical relations.

The first is the production of material life itself. "The first premise of all human existence, and therefore of all history," is that men must be able to live in order to be able to "make history" [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 41]. Hence, the first historical act is the production of the means necessary to satisfy basic needs – food, drink, clothing, shelter, and the material conditions of life.

The second is the production of new needs and of the means to satisfy them. Once primary needs have been fulfilled, new needs emerge under the stimulus of the first need itself, of the activity that satisfied it, and of the tools created for its satisfaction [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 42]. In meeting these new needs, humanity enters the process of reproduction.

The third is reproduction of population, which is intrinsic to the historical process and constitutes its third relation. Humanity, constantly reproducing its own life, simultaneously engenders new life [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 43]. In the earliest stage, biological reproduction gives rise to the family, which functions as both the most primitive and the sole social relation. The family, by sustaining the interaction between individuals, becomes the basic unit of social structure.

The fourth is the production of social relations. Whether the production of one's own life (through labour) or that of others (through production of fresh life), the production of life immediately appears as a twofold relation – both natural and social. It is, in essence, a form of the co-operation of several individuals. The mode of this co-operation activity, the productive forces, is embodied in a definite mode of production or industrial stage. Consequently, the history of human beings is profoundly linked to the history of industry and exchange. The material connections that individuals form in the process of production are as old as humanity itself, and, as these connections continually evolve, they reveal the historicity of the material relations that bind them [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 43].

The fifth is the production of consciousness. "After having considered four moments, four aspects of primary historical relations, do we find that man also possesses consciousness" [Marx and Engels 1975, V: 43]. Yet this consciousness, Marx notes, is itself conditioned by man's "corporeal organization". Consciousness has a dual character. On the one hand, it is determined: consciousness, language, and the realm of the spirit are from the outset social products, arising as mediations from the need for human intercourse [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 44]. Unlike the self-caused consciousness of German Idealism, consciousness in Marx's view derives its content from and evolves with the changing forms and content of human intercourse – that is, with the transformation of social relations of production. On the other hand, consciousness is also active. This becomes evident with the separation of mental and material labour, whereby consciousness acquires the capacity for independent imagination. It can now not only reflect reality but also "emancipate itself from the world and proceed to the formation of 'pure' theory, theology, philosophy, morality, etc." [Marx and Engels 1975, V: 45]. This active quality of consciousness endows it with the ability to transcend immediate material conditions, to reflect upon, and even to critique, social relations and historical processes. Nevertheless, this activity of consciousness remains conditioned by the level of productive forces and relations of production; its autonomy cannot be understood apart from the concrete stage of historical development.

As can be seen from the above, Marx identifies "real individuals" as active beings situated within concrete historical conditions, who make their own history through material production and social intercourse. Real individuals and their activity manifest historically in five fundamental dimensions: material production, the expansion of needs, the reproduction of population, the mode of production and social relations, and the production of consciousness. These dimensions constitute the concrete forms of human sensuous activity. Through such sensuous activity, human beings appear as historical and temporal beings, while time itself is transformed into a form of "humanized and socialized time" [Liu 2022]. In this way, time acquires a historical content determined by real production and social relations, embodying both the generative force of objective historical conditions and human agency. It is precisely in this sense that Marx overcomes the de-temporalizing impasse of speculative philosophy.

3.2. The immanent reality and revolutionary character of time in the horizon of historical materialism

Marx probes more deeply into the existential conditions of real individuals and the course of their historical development, thereby redefining the fundamental domain of social existence. Within this horizon, time touches upon the nature of human activity genuinely and runs through the three basic forms of social being. These forms encompass:

Material production, which constitutes the real existence of human beings and serves as the foundation for social development and historical evolution. As material beings, humans must engage in productive activity to satisfy basic needs and secure the necessary conditions of life – food, clothing, shelter, and other material means. Material production is also the fundamental and determining factor of social transformation. Each historical stage is grounded in a specific mode of production, and changes in that mode directly propel shifts in social structures and institutions. Thus, "the material production of life itself" is not only the real premise of human history, but also the starting point for "comprehending the form of intercourse connected with and created by this mode of production" [Marx and Engels 1975, V: 53].

Social relations constitute the relational existence of human beings. Individuals never exist in isolation but affirm themselves through interaction with others. Social relations are generated and continually reorganized in the process of production; they include family relations, class relations, and state relations. As the mode of production evolves, the content and structure of these relations also change, thereby setting into motion the dynamics of social history.

Mental consciousness, which constitutes the self-aware existence of human beings. It enables individuals to reflect upon themselves, understand the world, and anticipate the future. Yet its development remains conditioned by material production and social relations. From the perspective of a generational history of consciousness – religion, philosophy, morality – do not arise out of thin air, nor do they represent "holy ideas" standing above society. Rather, they are the ideological reflections of the economic relations of civil society. To understand the various theoretical products and forms of consciousness, one must trace their historical roots and analyse how they change with transformations of civil society. Likewise, the transformation of ideas must "be effected by altered circumstances, not by theoretical deductions" [Marx and Engels 1975, V: 56].

Within the interplay of these three forms of social existence, human sensuous activity unfolds and "takes on different temporal forms under different social formations" [Liu 2022]. Under capitalist production, temporal forms can be divided into labour time, non-labour time, socially necessary labour time, surplus labour time, employed time, and leisure time [ibid.]. In this context, time becomes the concrete expression of labour power (a kind of commodity), and acquires the invisible quality of an asset. Correspondingly, "relative value, measured by labour time" indicates the extent to which workers experience modern forms of enslavement [see Marx and Engels, VI: 125]. The temporal forms individuals occupy thus reflect their social position and class affiliation. Through this analysis, Marx reveals a distinctive historical structure of capitalist society – one in which human sensuous activity, lifetime, and labour processes are tightly bound to the logic of capital accumulation. However, Marx's critique of time does not stop there. Its deeper theoretical thrust lies in liberating human time, freeing individuals from alienated rhythms of life and production. Discussions on this topic remain as relevant today as ever in the age of flourishing digital capitalism.

From the standpoint of historical materialism, time ceases to be an "ideal" or purely conceptual category; it is endowed with concrete historical content and thereby carries possibilities oriented toward the future and social transformation. This realistic and revolutionary understanding of time fundamentally differs from the moralistic imagination and utopian narratives of traditional philosophy concerning communism. Overall, the historical materialism Marx constructed – surpassing the Young Hegelians – provides both the concrete and revolutionary coordinates for his later critique of time, grounding history not in abstract speculation but in the real, social processes of production.

Conclusion

Hegel introduced the concept of temporality into the domain of theoretical spirit [see Levine 2016: 152]. Although the major figures of the Young Hegelians did not all follow Hegel's philosophy step by step, the conceptions of history they articulated within the framework of speculative philosophy – and their corresponding understandings of time – largely inherited Hegel's de-temporalizing tendency. Time was thus subordinated to the movement of ideal entities or of self-consciousness itself. Even where certain Young Hegelians attempted to foreground the negativity and developmental character of time, the temporal dimension was never genuinely emancipated from the internal structure of speculative philosophy.

Marx's ability to move beyond the struggles internal to the "realm of pure thought" and to overcome the de-temporalizing tendency of German Idealism was not determined merely by his adoption of a more radical position along the extended line of Young Hegelians' religious criticism. Rather, it rested decisively on the materialist transformation he effected in the conception of history itself. Although debates over historical conceptions within the Young Hegelians often took the form of intense intellectual confrontation, they remained confined to revolutions of phrases and concepts, incapable of reaching the real foundations of history – let alone grasping the essential determinations of time. Unlike Bauer, who became entangled in the false revolution of "opposing phrases with phrases", Marx, within the intellectual context shaped by the controversy between Stirner and Feuerbach, further advanced the understanding of the *real human being*. He no longer confined this notion to an abstract anthropological level, but instead concretized it as the subject of material production – an active being situated within determinate historical conditions and social relations.

In this way, the fundamental divergence between Marx and the Young Hegelians no longer appears merely as a contrast between historical interpretations grounded on the side of "substance" or that of "self-consciousness". Rather, it crystallizes around the question of whether time is acknowledged as possessing a historical content determined by real production and social relations. Correspondingly, Marx fundamentally transformed the philosophical foundations for understanding time through his philosophical revolution by identifying five primordial historical relations and basic forms of social being. Within the horizon of historical materialism, time is embedded in the real, generative processes of material production and social relations. It is precisely in this sense that time simultaneously manifests both the constraining force of objective historical conditions and the agency inherent in human practical activity, thus becoming a key dimension for understanding historical movement, social transformation, and even future possibilities.

In this respect, time functions as a prism through which Marx's philosophical revolution is refracted, clearly illuminating his reckoning with – and departure from – the speculative philosophy of the Young Hegelians. Situating time at the point of theoretical break between Marx and the Young Hegelians not only deepens our understanding of Marx's early philosophical revolution, but also provides an intellectual foundation for critiquing temporal issues within the context of digital capitalism – such as the acceleration of social time, the flexibilization of labour time, and the colonization of life time [see Dai and Liu, 2025]. In a word, time in Marx's thought is not a concept that has been "completed", but an open problem – one that persistently points toward real critique and future emancipation.

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ARE ANIMISTIC TEMPORAL ONTOLOGIES A SOLUTION TO THE CLIMATE CRISIS?[1]

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Abstract

The article examines whether "animistic" and so-called "indigenous ontologies" – particularly alternative conceptions of nature and time – can meaningfully contribute to addressing the climate crisis. It argues against treating animism or indigenous knowledge as coherent, ready-made ecological solutions opposed to modern science, showing instead that such approaches often rely on cultural essentialism and problematic binaries. Drawing on anthropology, philosophy of science, and environmental humanities, the article offers analysis of debates on nature and temporality, demonstrating that both scientific and non-scientific knowledge are socially embedded yet materially constrained. Focusing on anthropological theories of time, it critiques simplistic distinctions between different temporalities as systems and argues that time is produced through social practice and power relations. It is concluded that contemporary societies already inhabit multiple, overlapping temporal regimes which structure ecological action. Addressing climate change therefore requires a practice-centred rethinking of agency, nature, and time, rather than adopting "animistic ontologies" as ethical prescriptions.

Keywords: *animism, indigenous knowledge, climate crisis, nature, temporality.*

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Introduction

Humanity faces an immediate and escalating danger, and time is rapidly running out. The natural sciences have clearly identified the problem, yet they operate within the political and social structures that systematically prevent effective solutions. With the rise of environmental and ecological awareness, and the realisation that industrial modernity lies at the heart of the crisis, many have called in recent decades for alternative ways of knowing. Societies that supposedly understand and relate to nature differently – often identified as "animistic societies"[2] – are increasingly presented as offering answers to this predicament. However, rejecting science entirely and placing sole hope in so-called "indigenous knowledge" is not, in my view, a viable response, not least because indigenous knowledge systems were not developed to address a crisis produced by global capitalism. Moreover, indigenous knowledge is not something people possess simply by virtue of being non-European or living outside the global North; these so-called indigenous communities also exist within the capitalist world-system, and their perspectives are shaped by their positions within it – mostly, of course, as its victims.

I propose that the solution is not to replace one epistemology with another, nor to treat alternative "ontologies" as ready-made answers to the crisis. Rather, engaging seriously with different ways of knowing is essential for expanding our understanding of existence as a whole, encompassing the natural world and our political and social structures that define it. However, this kind of engagement across conceptual paradigms is far easier to articulate than to realise. There is a risk of quickly falling into the trap of essentialising so-called "alternative ontologies", construing them negatively in opposition to a perceived objectivist and positivist conception of "scientific knowledge".

I do not yet have a satisfactory method or conceptual framework capable of bringing about this shift in perspective while avoiding the pitfalls identified above. For now, I can only provide a critical assessment of the approaches currently available. In this paper, I discuss the concepts of "nature" and "time" as examples of how alternative "ontologies" do not lend themselves to easy essentialisation. I argue that we should resist essentialising distinct "temporal ontologies" and attributing specific forms of action to communities supposedly governed by them. So-called "animistic societies", as well as those of us living in the global North at the core of consumerist and highly polluting societies, already inhabit multiple temporalities simultaneously.

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[2] In the Introduction and at their first occurrence thereafter, certain terms and concepts are placed in quotation marks to indicate their tentative use and to signal that they may be epistemologically problematic and require reconceptualisation within a broader paradigmatic shift. To avoid excessive use of quotation marks, these are omitted in subsequent references.

In our everyday practices of consumption and disposal, we behave as if time were an endlessly recurring cycle, while in climate discourse we invoke time as a linear arrow, along which we may already have passed a point of no return and are rapidly running out of time to act.

Indigenous knowledge and nature

Postmodernism successfully exposed blind spots in scientific notions of objectivity by emphasising the social construction of knowledge. The fact that knowledge is indeed socially constructed should not really be objectionable. No human knowledge comes to us unmediated; all knowledge is appropriated through the medium of language and social practice [Wood 1997: 5]. However, as Wood rightly cautions, postmodernist epistemology seems to have gone too far in its relativisation by claiming that science (often problematically termed "Western science"), founded on the conviction that nature is governed by certain universal, immutable, mathematical laws, is merely an expression of the imperialistic and oppressive principles on which Western society is based. This has led postmodernists to conflate forms of knowledge with their objects, resulting in an epistemological position that holds not only that science is a historical construct, but that ultimately the laws of nature themselves are culturally constructed and historically contingent [Wood 1997: 5].

Adopting such a relativist epistemological position would mean assuming that human knowledge is confined to specific languages, cultures and interests. Consequently, science could not hope to apprehend a common external reality [Wood 1997: 6]. However, it is not necessary to abandon entirely any standard of scientific "truth" inherent in the natural world to think beyond the paradigm of modern science towards possible alternative ways of "knowing".

By discussing science as a form of knowledge inseparable from its specific socio-historical context it is necessary to clarify what this cultural context or culturally constructed understanding of science entails. The point is that scientific facts are produced, and exist, within a historical and social matrix of *meaning* [Marks 2009: 13]. We don't need science to *know* we will die falling off a tall building, we do not have to discover "falling", but there are various ways in which we can *think* about falling [Marks 2009: 13], one of them being scientific explanation of the interaction, called gravity – the force of attraction between two bodies that have mass. Scientific facts are thus produced through practices – experiments, measurements, funding priorities, institutional norms, and accepted methods – that are shaped by a particular time and place.

What questions are asked, which phenomena are investigated, and which methods are considered legitimate depend on historical circumstances, cultural values, political interests, and available technologies. Once facts are established, they acquire importance only through interpretation and use. A fact such as rising atmospheric CO_2 levels, for example, carries different meanings in different contexts: it may be framed as an economic challenge, a moral responsibility, a technological problem, or an existential threat. These interpretations are shaped by particular social structures, specific power relations, and accompanying worldviews. Saying that scientific facts are *socially constructed* does not imply that they are arbitrary or fictional in the sense of being disconnected from reality. Rather, it means that even objective knowledge about the natural world is mediated by human practices and embedded in social life. Scientific facts remain constrained by the world they describe, but their production, validation, and significance are inseparable from the historical and social conditions under which they arise.

It has long been established in anthropology that "nature" is a cultural construction and that different societies conceptualize it in distinct ways. Anthropological scholarship has consistently critiqued the "Western notion of nature", emphasizing, first, that nature as understood in the so-called "Western modernity" is not a universal category but a culturally specific one; and second, that many non-Western societies do not draw the rigid boundary between "nature" and "culture" that supposedly dominates the so-called "Western thought"[3].

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the term Anthropocene has been increasingly used in scientific and public discourse to designate a proposed geological epoch following the Holocene, one in which humanity has become a planetary force for change. In this context, reflections on nature have intensified, accompanied by growing recognition that the industrial revolution, grounded in modern scientific rationality, has been directly responsible for unprecedented levels of pollution, environmental degradation, and ecological imbalance. This realisation has stimulated a wave of critical scholarship examining the presumed dichotomy between "Western" and "indigenous" worldviews regarding nature, which supposedly differ on the ontological level of conceptualising our existence in the world.

But what are "indigenous ontologies"? Given the industrial world's failure to address environmental destruction, scholarly and broader attention has increasingly turned to alternative ways of relating to and interacting with the environment. As Lanzano [2013: 3] observes, the concept of "indigenous knowledge" was first adopted

[3] One of the most problematic notions in discussions of different modes of thought, or of cultural difference more broadly, is the essentialising idea of "the West" and its supposed opposite, "the East". In a complex and interconnected world, the assumption of a simple division into two spheres – often framed within the equally problematic concept of "modernity" – is difficult to sustain, and the continued unreflective use of these terms is hard to justify. Nevertheless, as "the West" functions as a working term in much of the literature discussed in this paper, I retain its use while asking the reader to understand it as implicitly placed in quotation marks throughout.

within cognitive anthropology and ethnoscience, which built on earlier reflections about other systems of knowledge and the challenges they pose to Western science. A group of anthropologists introduced this concept to establish a basis for recognising cultural difference and alternative forms of knowledge within development aid practices.

The expression then became popular among scholars interested in environmental issues and the relationship between culturally driven behaviour and ecological balance. For many authors, the concept served as a tool to critique Eurocentrism in the natural sciences and to recognise the value of non-Western technical knowledge [Lanzano 2013: 3]. However, removing it from its contextual grounding and repackaging it for ecological purposes risks oversimplifying and disconnecting indigenous knowledge from its cultural roots.

The most prominent example of such oversimplification is the assumption that indigenous knowledge is inherently "ecological" or oriented towards environmental conservation. What is often overlooked is how environmental care or conservation is itself understood. Conservation presupposes a particular concept of "nature" – a concept criticised as a Western, instrumentalist construct when applied to practices of sacralisation within the framework of indigenous knowledge. Critics of the so-called "cultural" or "religious turn" in conservation practices argue that there are no precise or universally applicable criteria to justify interpreting sacred sites as institutions explicitly oriented towards biodiversity preservation. They contend that the absence of intentionality necessarily undermines any comparison between sacralisation practices and modern, results-oriented forms of conservation [Lanzano 2013: 14].

Lanzano himself notes in his research that the ritual practices and prohibitions associated with sacred sites are not primarily intended for biodiversity conservation. By using "conservation", defined by criteria rooted in modern scientific thought, as the standard for evaluating indigenous cultural practices, we risk encouraging the selective incorporation of elements of "other" knowledge into frameworks dominated by mainstream technoscience [Lanzano 2013: 14].

A similar observation is made by Aike Rots and Nhung Lu Rots [Rots and Rots 2023] in their analysis of whale worship in Vietnam. They argue that there is no evidence suggesting that this particular animistic belief system has led to environmentalist action, let alone generated systemic change. While they recognise that animistic ontologies undoubtedly possess ethical dimensions and may offer ways for communities to make sense of and cope with Anthropocene crises, this does not imply that they provide practical guidance for sustainable action [Rots and Rots 2023: 8]. As the authors pointedly ask: "Why do animists who worship deities residing in nature pollute the very environment that they – according to the academic theory, at least – should perceive as sacred?" [Rots and Rots 2023: 11].

In this sense, Lesley Green [2014] argues that, rather than asking whether indigenous knowledge is "valid" or how it compares to science, we should question the very terms of the debate, which are themselves flawed and confined within Western philosophical frameworks. She contends that controversies surrounding indigenous knowledge – particularly the polarised opposition between science and tradition – are rooted in the limitations of dominant modernist and postmodernist epistemologies. These frameworks tend to reduce indigenous knowledge either to a static cultural inheritance to be preserved or commercialised, or to an irrational belief system that must be judged and validated by science [Green 2014: 38–41].

Green therefore calls for a rethinking of the canon of knowledge itself. Rather than defending or rejecting indigenous knowledge within the dominant scientific paradigm, she urges scholars to engage in more open, responsible, and reflexive dialogues about how knowledge is produced, governed, valued, and lived. In her view, the aim should not be to replace science but to expand intellectual horizons and avoid repeating the mistakes of past "knowledge wars". This requires more than simply extracting ideas from "wise" indigenous people; it involves seeking different intellectual resources and engaging seriously with diverse ways of thinking in the world [Green 2014: 48].

Let us consider another example. Aikenhead and Ogawa address debates about indigenous knowledge and science by critically rejecting the binary that presents them as parallel, equivalent systems [Aikenhead and Ogawa 2007: 552]. Instead, they propose a pluralist, postcolonial framework that recognises multiple, culturally grounded ways of knowing and relating to nature. Within a Eurocentric worldview, they argue, knowledge is typically conceived as an abstract entity existing separately from the knower, detached from lived experience and social relations, whereas indigenous knowledge can be relational, overcoming the divide between the subject and external knowledge [Aikenhead and Ogawa 2007: 553].

I agree with this assessment and the critique of "objectivity", that is, the separation of *knowledge as object* from the *knowing subject*. I support the attempt to incorporate other possible ways of seeing into our culturally conditioned conceptualisation of the world by shifting the emphasis from comparison to relational understanding, thereby opening space for dialogue without assimilation or epistemic hierarchy. However, I ultimately contend that Aikenhead and Ogawa fail in this attempt. They are fully aware that what they understand as "non-Western" societies, such as Japan or much of the Islamic world, which exist under modern industrial conditions rather than as hunter-gatherer societies, cannot be meaningfully or accurately characterised as "animistic" or "indigenous". Thus, they introduce an idea of "neo-indigenous" ways of knowing nature to describe supposedly long-standing, non-Eurocentric mainstream cultures that have deep historical ties to place but were not colonized to the same extent as indigenous peoples in settler-colonial contexts [Aikenhead and Ogawa 2007: 566]. As a result, although "neo-indigenous peoples" admittedly occupy relatively privileged political and epistemic positions, their ways of "knowing nature" nonetheless remain fundamentally non-Eurocentric [Aikenhead & Ogawa 2007: 566].

We are once again confronted with the ideological categories of an imagined "West", depicted as embodying an exploitative and mechanistic understanding of nature, opposed by its inverse, the imagined "East", with its ontologically different approach to nature. In this way, industrialised and heavily polluting nations such as Japan are assumed – by virtue of being non-European – to operate according to fundamentally distinct, non-Eurocentric systems of knowledge about nature. As the authors explicitly claim, "These non-Eurocentric knowledge systems are characterized by a long standing, intimate, ecological, knowledge of nature" [Aikenhead Ogawa 2007: 555]. Unlike indigenous peoples in settler-colonial contexts, Japan maintained cultural sovereignty, selectively incorporated Western science and technology, and adapted external forms of knowledge without undergoing full epistemic assimilation. One may accept as a working idea that people possess embodied forms of knowledge, or "a culture-dependent collective rational perceiving of reality" [Aikenhead and Ogawa 2007: 578]. However, this applies equally to all collectives and therefore cannot serve as a defining criterion for "indigenous knowledge".

This does not invalidate the author's broader argument: that understanding science and indigenous – or "neo-indigenous" – ways of engaging with nature requires attention not only to what is known, but also to how knowing itself is lived, sustained, and practiced. However, the explanation for why Japan was able to absorb Western science without undergoing full epistemic assimilation is unconvincing. The claim that Japan's resistance to epistemic colonisation stems from a verb-oriented language resistant to noun-based abstraction, a complex writing system combining *kanji*, *hiragana*, and *katakana* that marks foreign concepts as foreign, and a long-standing tradition of selective adaptation rather than wholesale replacement [Aikenhead and Ogawa 2007: 568], ultimately collapses into a form of *nihonjinron* 日本人論 – that is, essentialist theories of Japanese cultural uniqueness. While some of these factors may have influenced the localisation of scientific knowledge, they do not sufficiently account for the claim that Japan developed a fundamentally "Japanised" version of Eurocentric science without subordinating its epistemological foundations to it.

To describe this Japanese "ontology", authors propose the concept of *seigyō* 生業, often translated as subsistence, to synthesize their idea of "Japanese Ways of Knowing Nature" (JWKN). They define *seigyō* as living through mutual regulation between humans and their environment, emphasizing ethical restraint rather than exploitation. Knowledge, in this sense, is embedded in the daily practices of farming, fishing, and community life [Aikenhead and Ogawa 2007: 574–578]. According to their argument, a connotative aspect of *seigyō* is that it does not distinguish between "nature" (*shizen* 自然) and "culture" (*bunka* 文化) [Aikenhead and Ogawa 2007: 575].

This essentialising contrast between "Western" and "Eastern" conceptions of nature – and the associated claim that the latter do not differentiate between culture and nature – has a long intellectual history. In the context of ecological discourse, one of the foundational texts is probably Lynn White Jr.'s [1967] essay, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, in which White traces the origins of the modern ecological crisis to medieval Christian thought. Drawing on the Genesis creation narrative, he argues that Judeo-Christian theology established a model of human dominion over nature, grounded in a sharp distinction between humanity, created in God's image, and the rest of creation, which was cast as soulless and therefore inferior. According to White this fostered an enduring indifference toward the natural world in the western thought [White 1967].

His thesis was quickly adopted by scholars, particularly those from non-Western backgrounds, who sought to challenge the cultural assumptions underlying Western conceptions of nature. In one case, in the same journal, *Science*, in the mid-1970s, Watanabe Masao [1974] published an article titled *The Conception of Nature in Japanese Culture*, which offered a typical response in this genre. He begins by illustrating how Japanese aesthetics – from *ikebana* 生花 (flower arrangement) and *chanoyu* 茶の湯 (tea ceremony) to *haiku* poetry and *bonsai* 盆栽, the hallmarks of Japanese cultural stereotypes – reflect a deeply ingrained love and reverence for nature. His argument, again, is that, for the Japanese, nature is not an object of exploitation or rational study, but a living context in which humans participate harmoniously [Watanabe 1974: 279].

Watanabe contrasted Western and Japanese worldviews of nature using historical, cultural, and philosophical examples, showing that in Japanese thought, nature is not regarded as an external object to be dominated but as a continuous field of relations in which humans participate. This argument became a staple of *nihonjinron* discussions about attitudes towards "nature" or *shizenkan* 自然観. Saitō Yuriko begins her paper with, "One of the characteristics of Japanese culture is often said to be the close and harmonious relationship between man and nature" [Saito 1985: 239]. She focuses on the aesthetic realm as evidence of this distinctive or unique attitude towards nature.

There are other similar examples. Masaki [1996: 97–98] also uses poetry, gardens, tea ceremonies, and cuisine to illustrate a harmonious aesthetic of coexistence, in contrast to Western tendencies towards control and order. According to this hypothesis, Japanese environmental degradation stems from adopting Western mechanistic ideology along with the new concept of nature (*shizen* 自然) introduced during the Meiji period.

Yoshida Kikuko [2011] writes in the aftermath of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Fukushima nuclear disaster, framing the catastrophe not merely as a technical or policy failure but as a fundamentally philosophical problem. She asks how modern scientific–technological civilisation shapes human relations with nature, and how this worldview differs from traditional Japanese conceptions of nature. According to her the Fukushima disaster exposed a fundamental difference between Western modern technological civilisation, which treats nature as controllable, exploitable resources, and traditional Japanese views of nature [Yoshida 2011: 162].

Like Masaki and White, Yoshida reiterates familiar themes: Western modernity, developing from Plato through Christianity to Descartes and Francis Bacon, has tended to place human beings above nature and to justify the control and exploitation of the natural world. In contrast, Japanese traditions have understood nature as *living* (自然は生きており), *generative* (自然自体のもつ生命力によって生成する) and *sacred* (霊峰富士), not as something subordinate to human purposes. Despite modernization, this sensibility has persisted in Japan, as seen in enduring forms of reverence for mountains, forests, and the rhythms of seasonal change [Yoshida 2011: 152–147]. With the Meiji Restoration, Japan rapidly adopted Western science and technology, along with a dualistic, anthropocentric worldview. Nature came to be seen as an object of domination rather than reverence, used to serve industrial, economic, and technological goals. Yoshida critiques this shift as a loss of ontological and ethical depth, resulting in environmental degradation and spiritual nihilism [Yoshida 2011].

In his short paper, Kano Kei [2025] also examines the integration of the Japanese view of nature with Western science and explores their similarities and differences. He reviews the history of adopting Western technologies such as firearms, anatomy, telegraphs, and steamships or steam locomotives, referencing the well-known Meiji period slogan "Japanese spirit, Western skills" (*wakon yōsai* 和魂洋才) [Kano 2025]. He identifies certain similarities between the Japanese view of nature and Western science, including their foundations in experience and observation, pattern recognition, inference, prediction, and verification. The differences include the Japanese tendency to perceive things holistically, to view humans and nature harmoniously, to blur the distinction between subject and object, to see the boundary between artificial and natural as ambiguous, and to perceive nature as impermanent [Kano 2025: 98]. He maintains that the integration of the Japanese view of nature with Western science is expected to lead to new discoveries and, therefore, in science education, it is necessary to consider how to incorporate the Japanese view of nature into the curriculum [Kano 2025: 98].

Returning to White's framework, what is often presented as the Japanese view of nature – whether described as *seigyō*, a "Japanese way of knowing nature", or through similar formulations – is typically contrasted with a Eurocentric, "Judeo-Christian" conception of nature and instead aligned with *shintō* 神道, which is characterised as a Japanese form of animism. Conventionally, this Japanese sense of nature is depicted as both unique and internally homogeneous: it is portrayed as holistic and fundamentally different from the "Western" concept of nature [Martinez 2005: 185].

Within this narrative, Shinto – also framed as the indigenous religion of Japan – is frequently identified as the cultural foundation enabling a mode of coexistence with nature rather than an impulse to dominate it. However, despite claims that certain people in various parts of the world are able to live "closer" to nature while others are alienated from it, the fact remains that whatever the natural world is, it is always experienced by human beings as part of the social [Martinez 2005: 187]. Martinez emphasises that attitudes towards nature in Japan have changed over time and vary by class, region, and historical context [Martinez 2005: 186]. Therefore, what is often presented as timeless or inherent is actually contingent and variable.

The essentialist cultural theories discussed so far risk reiterating politically charged dogmas rooted in nationalist ideology, particularly claims about supposedly unique cultural attitudes towards nature. One reason why an ideological discourse of "love of nature" can be sustained, despite clearly environmentally destructive practices, is the lack of any fixed meaning attached to the idea of "nature", which functions as a floating signifier. Its semantic vagueness allows it to be mobilised across various ideological contexts. As Kawasaki [1990] argues in his discussion of the concept of *shizen* 自然 – translated as "nature" – the term carries multiple, often overlapping meanings within Japanese science education. On this basis, he argues that science education must explicitly address epistemology as a tool to reflect on how knowledge is constructed, enabling students to distinguish between nature understood as an objective entity and nature as a lived, culturally embedded experience. Kawasaki assigns to epistemology a mediating role between scientific universality and culturally embedded conceptions of nature [Kawasaki 1990: 77]. The question then is: does that imply that there are two coexisting attitudes and practices regarding nature in Japanese society – one scientific and one animistic?

What about animism?

In her *Animism in the Anthropocene*, Arianne Conty [2022] argues that reviving an animistic worldview – one that attributes personhood, relationality, and agency to all beings – can provide a crucial paradigm shift for addressing the ecological crises of the Anthropocene. Conty, like many others discussed previously, contends that modern Western dualisms separating nature and culture, subject and object, and human and non-human have contributed to ecological destruction and moral alienation.

> *Although today anthropologists speak of 'indigenous modernities' to reflect the fact that indigenous communities have adapted to modern tools, nation state sovereignty and capitalist economies in multifaceted ways, they continue to reject modern capitalist resource extraction and the placing of profit over shared kinship values intrinsic to animism.* [Conty 2022: 131]

From this perspective, "animism" – long dismissed as a "primitive" form of religion – is rearticulated as a philosophically viable ontology capable of repairing the fractured relationship between humans and the more-than-human world in a way she defines as "machinic animism" [Conty 2022: 138]. Conty presents this "machinic animism" as a necessary philosophy for the future: a means of "re-becoming indigenous" to the Earth and dissolving the anthropocentric hierarchies that underpin ecological collapse. She suggests that embracing such an animistic relational ontology, which privileges solidarity over technological manipulation through the practice of ontological boundary crossing, would enable the development of a post-anthropocentric ethics adequate for life in the Anthropocene [Conty 2022: 147].

Yet this raises a critical question: can animism function as a conceptual tool that genuinely helps to overcome a mechanistic understanding of nature as external and inert, and realign human sensibilities towards less harmful forms of environmental engagement? Wilkinson [2016] cautions against an uncritical embrace of this "new animism", arguing that its contemporary resurgence relates more to academic intellectual and moral preoccupations with the current environmental crisis than to genuine engagement with indigenous ontologies [Wilkinson 2016: 292]. In his view, the appeal of animism lies less in its descriptive accuracy of non-Western worldviews than in its value as an analytical metaphor for Western scholars to critique their own modernity [Wilkinson 2016: 289]. As Wilkinson states, "although much new animist scholarship claims to be an engagement with indigenous ontological frameworks, it is perhaps better seen as a selective commitment to indigeneity only insofar as it speaks to the twenty-first-century environmental crisis" [Wilkinson 297–298].

Reconsidering inherited epistemic foundations by challenging entrenched binaries such as nature/culture, subject/object, and belief/knowledge is a critical task within the humanities and social sciences. However, as Wilkinson argues, adopting conceptual categories such as animism is not a productive way forward:

> *For my part, however, to invoke animism seems a better beginning point for any analysis, rather than its conclusion. "Animism" does not help us understand indigenous practices; rather it illustrates how much we do not yet understand them, and thereby highlights where our work ought to begin.* [Wilkinson 2016: 307]

Nature, Time and Agency

So far, I have examined "nature" as the concept most commonly invoked to exemplify animist ontology *par excellence*. Another concept that has long featured prominently in anthropological thought since its early history is *time* – specifically, differing conceptions of temporality. One of the earliest anthropological examples to explicitly address indigenous conceptions of time is probably E. E. Evans-Pritchard's [1939] *Nuer Time-Reckoning*, in which he proposed that this pastoralist society in Sudan conceptualised time not through linear, abstract metrics such as clocks or calendars, but through social and ecological rhythms, including cattle cycles, seasons, and kinship events. Just as nature is supposedly not a fixed or universal category but is shaped by culturally specific ways of knowing, time is often understood in anthropology as a social and conceptual construction rather than an objective or neutral framework.

Meanwhile, similarly to nature, time can be considered from multiple disciplinary perspectives. In physics, it is treated as a real dimension analogous to space; in the theory of relativity, time is inseparably interwoven with space as spacetime, subject to dilation and variation depending on motion and gravity. In thermodynamics, time acquires directionality through the increase of entropy, giving rise to the notion of the "arrow of time". These scientific accounts underscore that even within ostensibly objective frameworks, time is neither simple nor uniform. Taken together, they allow for the recognition that temporal understandings – like conceptions of nature – are plural, contingent, and deeply entangled with epistemological and cultural assumptions.

Alfred Gell [1992] argues in *The Anthropology of Time* that, while humans perceive change, rhythm, and movement, "time" itself is not directly apprehended but is culturally conditioned through social practices, rituals, technologies, and shared expectations that structure our experience of it. He notes that we have no dedicated sense-organ for measuring elapsed time, as we do for sound or light [Gell 1992: 93]. For Gell, time is not a metaphysical essence but a practical achievement – a means by which people coordinate activities, distribute power, and manage obligations. This perspective is crucial because it challenges the persistent tendency in the humanities and social sciences to essentialise cultural "ontologies" of time by treating them as static or internally homogeneous. Gell cautions against assuming that some societies simply "live in cyclical time" while others inhabit "linear time", insisting instead that temporalities are embedded in the everyday *practices* through which social life is enacted.

Time, once again, emerges as a product of social practice. However, as Nancy Munn [1992: 93] observes, although time permeates social life, it has rarely been treated as a central analytic problem in anthropology and has instead remained a "handmaiden" to other anthropological frameworks and issues: "When time is a focus, it may be subject to oversimplified, single-stranded descriptions or typifications, rather than to a theoretical examination of basic sociocultural processes through which temporality is constructed" [Munn 1992: 93]. Anthropological studies have tended to fragment temporality across domains such as political structures, descent, ritual, work, narrative, history, cosmology, and so on, without addressing how time itself is socially constituted [Munn 1992: 93].

Munn reviews the discipline's inheritance from Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Bronisław Malinowski, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, and others, showing how their approaches generally render time as symbolic representation, formalised into a static category and thus detached from lived activity. In the case of Durkheim, she notes that time occupies an ambiguous position in his theory: although he conceptualises it as an abstract social category, he simultaneously tries to connect it to social practice. Durkheim argues that time is neither an individual nor a natural experience but a collective representation – a social category produced through group life [Munn 1992: 94–95]. Time in his theory is therefore qualitatively heterogeneous rather than a single, homogeneous continuum, comprising distinct modalities such as sacred and profane time, ritual cycles, and agricultural seasons [Munn 1992: 95]. Yet, even as Durkheim grounds time in collective life, linked to activity, he ultimately reifies it as a system of collective representations or "categories" (days, seasons, etc.) rather than analysing it as "becoming" or "motion" – that is, the dynamic social processes through which temporal experience is actively produced [Munn 1992: 95–96]. Although these collective concepts remain linked to activity and motion, suggesting time as lived rhythm rather than pure abstraction, Durkheim stops short of theorising temporality as an ongoing, emergent practice.

In Malinowskian functionalism, time concepts appear as forms of "time-reckoning", emphasising time as a measure of motion rather than as an existential or symbolic dimension of life. In his functionalist anthropology, Malinowski examined the Trobriand Islanders' temporal ideas primarily as a means of "coordinating activities", that is, their practical systems of measurement. In this framework, time functions as a tool for organising collective action rather than as a constitutive aspect of human experience. It represents the pragmatic side of culture, distinct from the qualitative temporality that Durkheim emphasised or, as Munn observes, "Time puts on mundane, empiricist clothing, instead of the 'qualitative', myth-ritual dress of Durkheimian representations" [Munn 1992: 96]. Malinowski thus grounded temporal experience in empirical activity but failed to recognise how such activity itself might create time as a symbolic and lived process.

In Munn's view, Evans-Pritchard, who introduced the concept of "oecological time", serves as a bridge between earlier Durkheimian sociology and later functionalist-structuralist anthropology [Munn 1992: 96]. From Durkheim, Evans-Pritchard inherited the idea that time is socially constructed – arising from collective rhythms and categories – while from Malinowski's functionalism, he inherited an interest in how time is practically reckoned, through cycles of work, movement, or ritual. As Munn states, he "crystallizes the unresolvable ambiguities of the Functionalist and Durkheimian versions of the locus of time" [Munn 1992: 96]. For her, the ambiguity lies in this "locus", that is, in the question of "where" time resides: is it in social representations and concepts, or in the rhythmic unfolding of activity? She identifies two loci of time in Evans-Pritchard's theory: oecological time – derived from the daily and seasonal rhythms of pastoral life (cattle movements, rains, migrations, etc.) – and structural time, derived from social structures such as lineages and age sets. However, when he turned to the notion of "structural time", Evans-Pritchard's focus shifted decisively from lived activity to abstract conceptual relations – to "relations between groups of persons" conceived genealogically [Munn 1992: 96–97].

With the concept of "oecological time", Evans-Pritchard acknowledges that time emerges in practice – in the patterned repetition of activities embedded in the environment. However, he still treats "oecological time" as a representational system. He "takes time's passage to be 'perceived' [...] through a lens of cultural concepts referring to activities (i.e. via the time-reckoning 'system'), rather than experienced through immersion in the activities" [Munn 1992: 96]. In this model, temporality is understood as a geometric framework of kinship positions, generating only an "illusion of temporal movement". Time becomes spatialised and immobilised, detached from the concrete rhythms of lived experience. Munn calls this the anthropological "synoptic illusion" in Bourdieu's sense: the illusion of total vision that freezes life into a static, external system [Munn 1992: 97].

When considering temporality, rather than reducing time to local typologies (cyclical, linear, ritual, historical), or treating it merely as a background condition for other processes (ritual, kinship, myth), we should focus on how temporal experience is socially constructed through practice. Time is not simply perceived or measured; it is actively produced through practices such as work, exchange, waiting, planning, remembering, and strategising. Thus, control over time is also a medium of hierarchical power and governance [Munn 1992: 109].

If we take anything from Munn's analysis, it is the understanding that thinking about time should be approached through a practice-centred, spatiotemporal framework that conceptualises temporality as a symbolic, political, and experiential process generated through social action. Rather than asking how cultures "represent" time, anthropology should consider how people actively temporalise both the world and themselves through meaningful practice.

Conclusion

What, then, might animistic temporalities contribute to our understanding of the climate crisis? One crucial point of convergence between conceptions of nature and time lies in the question of agency. Michelle Bastian [2009] discusses time and human agency in the classic Western anthropological typology of time as "timeless", "cyclical" or "linear", where the difference between systems of time is not their differing understandings of how time "flows", but rather how change is thought to occur, that is, how the power of agency is distributed among possible human or non-human actors [Bastian 2009: 101]. Western understandings of agency are deeply shaped by a dominant conception of linear time and its basis in the modification of present moments, where an idealisation of "presence" underlies the idealisation of the individual and its capacity for rational decision making [Bastian 2009: 101–102]. This temporal framework, she suggests, frames "nature" as "timeless" and constrains our capacity to recognise nature as an active, creative agent, particularly in the context of ecological breakdown [Bastian 2009: 102–103].

This view of nature as timeless, passive, and mechanistic enables the denial of nature's agency and legitimises its exploitation. From this perspective, recognising nature's agency cannot be achieved simply by inserting "nature" into existing conceptual schemes; it requires rethinking temporality itself, moving away from linear, predictable, progress-driven models towards temporalities that allow for relationality and agency.

In conclusion, let me quote a longer paragraph by Barbara Adam [1998], from her book *Timescapes of Modernity*. She states:

> *… steeped in the thought traditions of the industrialised West, we learn about and relate knowledgeably to a multidimensional space, but our understanding of the temporal dimension of socio-environmental life is pretty much exhausted with knowledge about the time of calendars and clocks. Nature, the environment and sustainability, however, are not merely matters of space but fundamentally temporal realms, processes and concepts. Their temporality, furthermore, is far from simple and singular. It is multi-dimensional, a multiplex aspect of earthly existence. Without a deep knowledge of this temporal complexity, I suggest, environmental action and policy is bound to run aground, unable to lift itself from the spatial dead-end of its own making.* [Adam 1998: 8]

Adam introduces the notion of "timescapes", which she defines as the embodiment of practiced approaches to time [Adam 1998: 10]. Timescapes, in this sense, express how different societies and institutions live, structure, and materialise temporal relations. For instance, the linear perspective of clock time, historically linked to Newtonian physics, assumes linear causality, reversibility, abstraction, rationalisation, and objectivity [Adam 1998: 8]. These temporal assumptions are not merely conceptual; they have material and ecological consequences that conflict with the contextual, irreversible temporalities of lived experience and the multiple, interwoven rhythms of the natural world [Adam 1998: 8]. According to Adam [1998: 8], this conflict operates on two levels. First, industrial time with its emphasis on control, standardisation, and acceleration is a central driver of environmental degradation and risk, while the same temporal framework is reapplied as a supposed solution, thereby deepening the crisis it seeks to resolve. As she writes:

> *Industrial time, in other words, is both part of the problem and applied as a solution. As long as time is taken for granted as the mere framework within which action takes place and is used in a preconscious, pre-theoretical way, I consequently argue, it will continue to form a central part of the deep structure of environmental damage wrought by the industrial way of life.* [Adam 1998: 8–9]

Environmental harm unfolds through temporal processes: it is cumulative, delayed, often invisible, and dispersed across generations. A genuine understanding of ecological risk therefore requires rethinking both nature and time. Understanding where agency and power lie, and expanding our perspectives beyond objective, scientific, static, measurable categories and systems, allows us to reflect on our conceptualisations of nature and time through our practices, and thus to understand those practices as well. We do not live solely in linear or cyclical time. In everyday life, our practices can be understood as structured by cyclical, ritual, or other forms of time. In our consumer practices of consumption and waste management, we operate within a framework I call contemporary "green rituals": recycling routines, carbon offset purchases, or the consumption of environmentally branded products. On one hand, such practices operate cyclically, symbolically cleansing consumption and restoring a sense of moral equilibrium reminiscent of purification rituals. On the other hand, they are embedded within a linear narrative of crisis mitigation, where each small action is framed as a step towards averting future catastrophe. Everyday ecological behaviour simultaneously draws on ritual cycles, capitalist consumption rhythms, and linear scientific futures.

From this perspective, time does not pre-exist social relations but emerges through them – through relations between consumers and commodities, humans and ecosystems, environmental policies and lived experience. Temporalities are not attributes that cultures "possess". The analytical question, then, is not whether particular cultures operate with cyclical or linear notions of time, but how specific temporal practices arise through the entanglement of ritual, ecology, capitalism, science and everyday life. This shifts the focus from ontological typologies regarding nature or temporality to understanding that social structures are not merely external constraints but are continually reproduced and transformed through practice. Recognising that the reproduction of time systems occurs through the embodied, routinised practices of agents acting within historically specific fields, space opens for the possibility of our practices. Rather than treating these as incompatible ontologies, they can be understood as intertwined temporal practices that shape both how ecological futures are imagined and how action in the present becomes possible.

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THE TEMPORAL PREDICAMENT OF FREEDOM IN SOCIAL ACCELERATION: AN INQUIRY BASED ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF TIME AND CRITICAL THEORY

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Abstract

Under the combined pressure of technological innovation and capitalist logic, contemporary societies are marked by social acceleration: technological change and everyday life continually speed up. While productivity gains and the shortening of necessary labour time seem to create more "free time", the cult of efficiency, the attention economy and algorithmic governance colonise this time and weaken the conditions for substantive freedom. Drawing on Marx's theory of free time, Hartmut Rosa's account of social acceleration and Erich Fromm's diagnosis of the "escape from freedom", and placing them in dialogue with Chinese reflections on *ziruo* (composed self-possession) and *daofa ziran* (following the way of nature), the article examines how temporal structures constrain or enable freedom in the age of digital capitalism. It shows how capitalist temporal colonisation extends from labour into leisure and cognitive time, and how information overload and AI-driven filtering undermine subjectivity and make temporal sovereignty increasingly fragile. On this basis, the article outlines a pathway of civilisational breakthrough that rethinks temporal norms, cultivates slow and resonant practices and calls for institutions that protect temporal rights. It is argued that improving the qualitative dimension of free time, rather than merely expanding its quantity, is crucial if

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modern civilisation is to move beyond its temporal impasses and promote the free development of human beings.

Keywords: *social acceleration, freedom, temporal predicament, civilisational breakthrough.*

Introduction

Driven by a new wave of technological revolution represented by the internet, artificial intelligence and digital platforms, contemporary forms of production and everyday life have undergone dramatic change. On the one hand, automation and digitalisation have significantly reduced the intensity of physical labour and expanded the amount of disposable time available to individuals. The brutal deprivation of time experienced by workers in the age of the industrial revolution, as described by Marx and Engels, seems to have receded to some extent. On the other hand, technological progress, in the form of social acceleration, has far exceeded the natural rhythms and psychological bearing capacity of human beings, placing subjects in a state of being chased by time and filled up by tasks. In a statistical sense, the quantity of free time has increased, yet under the penetration of efficiency worship, the attention economy and algorithmic governance its qualitative dimension slides towards colonisation and alienation. A striking paradox thus emerges: in an era that possesses more time, individuals commonly feel that they have less; within a technological system that claims to unleash freedom, freedom is compressed and blocked in new ways.

In terms of existing research, both Chinese and international scholarship have produced rich discussions around such themes as freedom, time and modernity. Much of this work, however, remains at the level of empirical description of the accelerated pace and fragmentation of modern life, or focuses on the temporal management mechanisms of a specific technology or industrial sector. Against this background, the present article centres on one core question: under conditions of social acceleration driven jointly by technology and capital, in what kinds of temporal structures does human freedom appear, and how might it be reconstructed within a time order that is being accelerated and colonised? Unlike studies that primarily describe the acceleration of everyday rhythms or analyse time management in particular technical domains, this article seeks to build a cross-civilisational dialogue among Marx's theory of free time, Hartmut Rosa's critical theory of social acceleration, Erich Fromm's analysis of the escape from freedom and Chinese time wisdom concerning *ziruo* [Chen 2013: 718] (composed self-possession) and *daofa ziran* [Tang & Wang 2014: 95] (the Dao following nature). On this basis, it constructs a programme of temporal reconstruction oriented towards "civilisational breakthrough", exploring how to rebuild temporal sovereignty and substantive freedom under accelerated social conditions at the levels of ideas, practice and institutions.

In this article, "free time" primarily denotes the amount of time in which individuals are released from compulsory labour and can dispose of their activities autonomously. The "temporality of freedom" emphasises whether the temporal structure itself allows subjects to construct a coherent life narrative and realise themselves; it is the temporal condition and experiential form in which freedom unfolds. "Temporal colonisation" refers to the process through which capital and technology, via the logic of efficiency and the attention economy, re-incorporate time that ostensibly belongs to the subject back into the production–consumption cycle, so that individuals nominally possess more leisure but are in practice unable to attain substantive freedom. "Civilisational breakthrough" denotes the attempt, in an era of social acceleration and temporal colonisation, to challenge a time order centred on capitalist efficiency and to reconstruct a civilisational configuration oriented toward the free development of human beings through the re-articulation of ideas, practices and institutions.

1. Social acceleration and the temporal paradox of constrained freedom

The essence of freedom has a distinctly social dimension. It is generated and realised within networks of interaction between individuals and others, and between individuals and society. It manifests as a web of interdependence and mutual support and inherently involves the dialectical unity of choices and environments, rights and obligations, responsibilities and consequences. From an ontological point of view, human beings, as free beings, conduct their core life-activities by making choices under the guidance of their own will. Such choices, however, are neither capricious nor unconditional. Subjects must take into account environmental constraints, the demands of others and social norms, and they must assume responsibility for the consequences of their actions. This requires that the process of choice carefully considers the conditions of success, real possibilities and the capacity to bear risks. The contemporary process of social acceleration is profoundly rewriting this basic logic of how freedom is realised, drawing freedom into a temporal paradox in which the expansion of space–time is accompanied by a shrinking of capacities.

German sociologist Hartmut Rosa argues that contemporary modernity has entered a new stage of "social acceleration" in which the technological acceleration of society, the acceleration of social change and the acceleration of the pace of life mutually reinforce one another to form a self-propelling loop of acceleration. Among these three dimensions, technological acceleration is "the most obvious and also the most readily measurable form of acceleration"; in essence, it changes the "space–time regime" of society by transforming how space and time are perceived and organised in social life [Rosa 2018: 13–14]. The acceleration of social change manifests itself in the fact that attitudes and values, fashions and lifestyles, social relations and obligations, and the forms of groups, classes, milieus, discourses, practices and habitus are all undergoing change at an ever-increasing rate [Rosa 2018: 16]. It is the combined resonance of these three types of acceleration that shifts the core feature of modern society from "more and more" to "faster and faster".

The core driving force of this social acceleration lies precisely in the widespread application of innovations such as the internet, artificial intelligence, 5G technologies and automation. At the level of temporality, these innovations both empower and constrain human freedom. From the perspective of empowerment, technological innovation follows the logic of technological acceleration and opens up new spatio-temporal possibilities for freedom. It greatly improves the efficiency of social practice by compressing spatial and temporal distances in transportation and communication, and by dramatically enhancing the capacity to produce, transmit, store, retrieve and recombine knowledge and information. Through high-speed, precise and low-consumption production processes it multiplies the effectiveness of mental and physical labour by hundreds or thousands of times, massively liberating and compressing the labour time required for specific products. Such changes in the space–time regime not only provide individuals with more disposable time, but also propel social subjects to master natural and social laws in deeper and broader ways, increasing the necessity content of freedom and pushing society further towards the "realm of freedom" [自由王国] [Marx, *Capital, vol. III,* 1894/2009a: 928] envisioned by Engels in *Capital Volume III*. In this sense, Rosa's critical theory of social acceleration can be seen as a deepening of Marx's analysis of free time: the liberation of labour time brought about by technological empowerment appears as the preliminary realisation of Marx's ideal of free time in the contemporary world.

In lived reality, however, the alienated side of technological acceleration pushes freedom into deeper predicaments. This is precisely the "speed alienation" [Rosa 2018: 139] diagnosed by Rosa. What is alarming is that the time saved by technological progress has not been transformed into leisure and contemplation, but has instead been filled with more tasks and more intensive rhythms, leaving subjects in a constant state of time scarcity. This is the radicalisation and generalisation of what Marx criticised as the colonisation of time in contemporary society: not only labour time but also non-labour time is thoroughly penetrated by the principle of efficiency, so that free time is functionally alienated and becomes a mere extension of the production process. Rosa vividly describes this situation: "our moments of experience grow ever richer, but our life experience becomes ever poorer; time seems to meet a double fate in that it rushes past ever more quickly yet leaves ever fewer traces in our memory.

The time we experience and the time we spend on experiences both become alien to us, resulting in severe self-alienation." [Rosa 2018: 139]

In the new technological environment, the coercion of time is particularly salient and forms a core manifestation of speed alienation. Artificial intelligence and similar algorithmic systems can store, output and recombine massive amounts of information, yet they also require subjects to make rapid judgements and choices in an ocean of data, placing them in continual states of urgency. The modular way in which AI processes information forces subjects to "choose without choice" and frames patterns of attention allocation and mental predispositions in highly standardised ways. Algorithmic recommendation systems thereby constrain or even strip away the subject's freedom of choice, producing "temporal hijacking" and the enclosure of consciousness. Under conditions of high-speed operation this leads to a collapse of freedom. Moreover, the pervasive use of digital technologies strips events and problems of their lived context and filters out the multiple variables and possibilities that arise in conditions of contingency and chaos, producing a form of digital control that devours the responsiveness and creativity of subjects. Whilst, social and economic platforms use data monopolies to establish digital despotism, turning users into data points or "digital labourers" governed by an overarching system, simultaneously information processing and intelligent surveillance systems exercise comprehensive control in the name of security, eroding privacy and hollowing out human freedom in the utopian narratives of technology. In this way, time is no longer a neutral backdrop, but becomes a core mechanism through which the freedom of subjects is reshaped and constrained.

2. Temporal colonisation under capitalist logic

The foregoing analysis of social acceleration and the predicaments of freedom reveals that capitalist logic is the deep structural driving force behind the deformation of temporal structures. Capital does not merely intensify labour time; through the expansion of an efficiency-centred culture and consumerism it carries out a systematic colonisation of human lifetime. This temporal colonisation provides the basic background against which freedom is constrained in today's accelerated society.

Within the classical Marxist framework, freedom is not an abstract mental state but a concrete capacity and form of life embedded in specific historical and social relations. In his 1878 work *Anti-Dühring*, Engels famously defines the essence of freedom as follows: "freedom does not consist in any dreamt-of independence from natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws and the possibility of making them work towards definite ends" [Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 1878/2009b: 120]. Extending this insight into the temporal dimension, Marxism regards time that is at one's own disposal in accordance with one's will as the core vehicle of freedom. In *Capital, Volume III* (1894), Marx writes: "the realm of freedom begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends" [Marx, *Capital,* Vol. III, 1894/2009a: 928]. In *Wages, Price and Profit* (1865) he further stresses that "time is the room of human development. A man who has no free time at his disposal, whose whole lifetime, apart from the mere physical interruptions by sleep, meals, and so forth, is absorbed by his labour for the capitalist, is less than a beast of burden" [Marx, *Value, Price and Profit*, 1865/2009c: 70]. From this perspective, time is not a neutral, natural dimension but a historical category constantly formatted by capitalist logic and social structures. Who possesses time, who allocates time and to what ends time is directed constitute the basic dividing line between freedom and unfreedom in modern society.

On this basis, Marx reveals, in his analysis of the reproduction of surplus value, the inner temporal logic of capital accumulation: surplus value arises from surplus labour time beyond the necessary labour time of workers. In contemporary capitalism, capital accumulation is pursued mainly by raising labour productivity through technological innovation, thereby compressing necessary labour time and extending surplus labour time. As the advancement of civilisation makes the crude and open devouring of free time less tolerable, capital turns to more subtle and structural means, quietly transforming workers' free time into auxiliary labour time for the production of surplus value. Under this logic, free time is largely alienated into two forms: time for consumption and time for reproduction, trapping individuals in the illusion of a false freedom.

More concretely, temporal colonisation unfolds through at least three mechanisms. First, consumerism and digital technologies conspire to reconstruct free time as a field of capital accumulation. Algorithms and capital jointly inject a constant stream of consumption symbols and instant stimuli into leisure time through short videos, social media feeds, targeted advertising and other forms of the attention economy. Free time is unconsciously dissipated, and the soil that ought to nourish self-realisation degenerates into a passive space for the reproduction of desire. Second, the logic of efficiency that underpins modernity enables the disciplinary inertia of work time to spill over into the entire sphere of life. Invisible working hours silently invade the time beyond the formal workday as skills training, professional networking and online tasks fill what should be periods of rest and creativity. Free time is transformed into a self-management project within a performance-oriented society. Third, the de-territorialising power of internet technologies fundamentally reconfigures experiences and boundaries of space and time. Mobile work dissolves the physical separation between workplace and home; online education smudges the line between classroom and private space; cloud laboratories enable research to run around the clock; and e-commerce makes transactions real-time and de-contextualised. While such compression of space–time brings convenience, it also entangles the whole of life in a permanent online state of acceleration, weaving free time invisibly into a 24-hour production–consumption cycle and stripping it of its buffering and liberating significance.

As Rosa emphasises, under the sway of capitalist logic technological acceleration not only fails to deliver on its promise of liberation but further "workifies" and objectifies free time, turning it into hidden labour time. The efficiency culture driven by capital forces individuals into a condition of haste in which lifetime is devoured by acceleration and human existence is subjected to an all-encompassing temporal colonisation in the name of efficiency. The consequences are twofold. On the one hand, modes of production operate strictly according to the imperatives of capital, systematically constraining the space for individuals' creativity and personal development. On the other hand, capital, through technological applications, continuously manufactures premature consumption and false needs, drawing subjects into a pursuit of external recognition that causes them to lose sight of their authentic interests and value commitments and even to throw themselves willingly into practices of self-alienation. As incisively observed by Erich Fromm, in modern capitalist society "the idea of efficiency becomes one of the highest virtues. At the same time, the pursuit of wealth and material success becomes the all-absorbing passion" [Fromm 2018: 39]. Once human beings and their lifetime are thoroughly objectified and capitalised, freedom is left without both an inner foundation and an external space of realisation.

Engels already pointed out in his 1880 work *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* that "only through social production can society secure for all its members an ample and steadily increasing provision of the necessities of life and at the same time guarantee them the fullest freedom for the development and exercise of their physical and intellectual capacities" [Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, 1880/2009d, 563–564]. This statement not only affirms the fundamental role of the development of productive forces, but also underscores the fact that the realisation of human freedom is deeply conditioned by social relations, institutional arrangements and the superstructure.

In the contemporary context, a re-examination of Marx's theory of free time reveals at least three implications of direct relevance. Firstly, free time is the basic condition for escaping compelled labour and for developing individuality and creativity; it is a necessary precondition for the free development of human beings. Secondly, the social distribution of free time vividly reflects a society's class structure and power relations, serving as a key yardstick by which to gauge its level of civilisation. Thirdly, the meaning of free time does not lie in pure idleness but in whether subjects can autonomously plan, endow and practise it, turning time into a living field of self-realisation and social participation. To challenge the cult of efficiency and temporal colonisation, we must return to this essence of free time and, through individual awareness, cultural reflection and the transformation of social structures, reclaim the right to define and govern time so that it once again becomes a space in which life meaning can grow rather than a mere abstract metric of capital accumulation.

3. Information overload, AI algorithms and the dissolution of ziruo

If the previous section showed how capitalist logic colonizes human lifetime through efficiency culture and consumerism, then in the phase of digital capitalism this temporal colonization increasingly takes the form of occupying cognitive time and mental space, with information overload and AI algorithms as its key media. To understand this new mechanism of erosion, it is illuminating to revisit the ancient ideal of *ziruo* – composed self-possession – as a norm of subjectivity.

In the Discourses of the States (*Guoyu*), we read: "If one can dwell in self-possession (*ziruo*), one can thereby measure all under heaven, correct what comes, and decide according to what the time requires" [Chen 2013: 718]. This ancient wisdom highlights the importance of an inner steadiness that allows the subject, amid incessant change, to maintain composure, survey the situation as a whole, assess right and wrong and make timely decisions. In today's accelerated society driven by high-technology, with torrents of information, rapidly shifting historical narratives and ever-emerging novel phenomena, the core question of human freedom increasingly concerns the survival and rebuilding of this capacity for *ziruo*. If subjects cannot keep a mental anchor in the rolling waves of information – cannot take in the larger picture, distinguish truth from falsehood and act according to what the times require, their freedom will inevitably be lost in the current.

The tradition of critical theory offers a powerful lens for grasping this predicament. Fromm's classic *Escape from Freedom* already analysed temporal alienation as a key thread linking individual psychological distress to structural social domination and exposed the modern paradox of freedom in ways that foreshadow the contemporary erosion of *ziruo*. For Fromm, the modern process of individuation is intrinsically double-edged: it is "a process of increasing strength and integration, of growing mastery over nature, and of growing capacity for reason and love", yet at the same time it means "growing isolation and insecurity, increased doubt concerning one's role in the universe, and an intensification of the feeling of one's own insignificance and powerlessness" [Fromm 2018: 18]. Individuals gain formal freedom of choice by freeing themselves from the bonds of traditional communities, but are simultaneously cast into a state of rootlessness. Information overload does not occur in a vacuum;

it exacerbates and radicalizes this condition. Once individuals are separated from the knowledge-filtering and meaning-providing systems of traditional communities, they are confronted with an infinite universe of information that is hard to verify and replete with conflicting opinions.

As observers of digital society have noted, the internet, AI technologies and information explosions "immerse users in the opinions of thousands, even millions, of others and deprive them of the solitude necessary for sustained thought" [Kissinger et al. 2023: 61]. The deprivation of solitude is far more than a simple distraction of attention. It amounts to the collapse of the psychological time and mental space needed for introspection, for integrating experience and for forming independent judgements. Individuals are thrown into a never-ending cacophony of information and sink into the sense of isolation, anxiety and powerlessness that Fromm described. The coherence of self-consciousness, the firmness of free will and the capacity to understand the world actively are all subjected to ongoing erosion.

The problem lies not only in the volume of information but also in the way its quality and structure reshape patterns of cognition. AI-based technologies, as mediators of information processing, create a new kind of cognitive dependence. While they can, in certain respects, enhance the efficiency of information retrieval and pattern recognition, they tend to place human beings in a reactive cognitive position. The subject relies on algorithms to classify, distil and evaluate knowledge, and his or her thinking process is easily guided by pre-set question-and-answer frameworks. More crucially, recommendation systems based on users' past behaviours and preferences tend to feedback and reinforce existing views, building up dense "information cocoons". These cocoons appear to provide a comfortable cognitive environment but in fact systematically block encounters with heterogeneous viewpoints and deprive critical, plural and creative thinking of the friction it requires. This mechanism parallels the psychology of escaping freedom analysed by Fromm: when independently confronting complex information and making judgements entails huge cognitive burdens and existential anxiety, individuals may voluntarily or semi-voluntarily relinquish their autonomy and entrust decision-making to the simplified narratives and ready-made consensuses that algorithms offer, in exchange for certainty and a sense of security.

The cost of such reliance is high. Fromm warned that "pseudo-activity takes the place of original thinking, feeling and willing, and in the end the pseudo-self takes the place of the original self" [Fromm 2018: 135]. At the level of cognition, this means that "pseudo-knowing" – seemingly constant exposure to information that is in fact spoon-fed according to pre-existing preferences – replaces genuine thinking grounded in first-hand materials and critical reflection. Over time, the capacity for innovation and the spiritual freedom of subjects are bound to wither.

The deep involvement of AI further undermines the foundations of subjectivity. AI systems do not merely change how we acquire information; they also reshape the basic relations through which we interact with the world and, by extension, subtly alter how we understand our place and role in it. When algorithms can predict our preferences, make choices on our behalf and even simulate human emotions and creativity, a fundamental confusion arises: to what extent are my thoughts and desires really my own, and to what extent are they products of data traces and optimising algorithms? This uncertainty about the authenticity of the self constitutes one of the deepest forms of alienation in the information age. If industrial capitalism once objectified time as a calculable unit of efficiency, digital capitalism extends this logic into the innermost realms of cognition and consciousness. The time and process of thinking are disciplined by the logic of efficiency; slow contemplation is perceived as waste, whereas instant reaction is celebrated as a virtue. In such an environment subjectivity becomes blurred, and people fall into an existential wavering over whether their thoughts and actions arise from genuine free will or from the invisible calibration of a digital system.

In this context, *ziruo* is no longer merely a classical ideal of self-cultivation but an urgent practice related to the very survival of freedom. It requires subjects not only to manage chronological time but also to defend the integrity and sovereignty of their cognitive and spiritual space. This does not mean withdrawing into a pre-digital isolation. Rather, it calls for the forging of inner steadiness and filtering mechanisms while being fully connected to global information networks – an advanced capacity to remain "at ease in oneself" and to decide in accordance with what the time requires. Without such foundations of *ziruo*, so-called free choice degenerates into passively selecting among pre-set options, and emancipation is lost in the informational labyrinth that we ourselves have created yet by which we are in turn dominated.

4. Practically reconstructing the temporality of freedom

The most visible manifestation of the temporal alienation generated by social acceleration is the widespread anxiety that pervades contemporary society. Its root lies in the dislocation of subjectivity caused by being chased by time: individuals become slaves of time and find it difficult to establish stable connections with the world in fragmented spatio-temporal fields. In response to this predicament, Rosa proposes his theory of resonance as a core strategy for countering social acceleration. The reconstruction of the temporality of freedom is, in effect, a central pathway for building such resonant relations. The first task of this reconstruction is to transform fundamental temporal concepts and behavioural models.

More specifically, we need to break through the "arboreal" temporal structure of modernity, which is rooted in linear causality and singular narratives, and move towards a "rhizomatic" or network-like conception of time. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor of the rhizome, this means advancing towards a multi-centred, multidirectional and non-linear understanding of temporality [Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 3]. Such a transformation is not a mere formal adjustment. By means of temporal strategies that spread in multiple directions and create systemic connections, it dissolves the rigid disciplinary mechanism of a prison-like timetable, activates the boundaries of time and the constraints of space, and enables subjects to break free from stereotyped constraints through creative and autonomous practices.

Within the fragmented time of modernity, subjects can, by forging multiple connections, capture what might be called "Benjaminian moments of aura" – epiphanies of creativity and openings of innovation that are often neglected by mainstream narratives – and reconstruct the meaning of freedom within these non-continuous "temporal fissures". The key to escaping temporal colonisation is to build a plural system of life meanings and value goals: to break the single narrative of "acceleration equals progress", to excavate the intrinsic worth of non-accelerated practices such as contemplation, wandering and artistic creation, and to promote a "slow living" wisdom centred on *daofa ziran*, the Dao following the rhythms of nature [Tang & Wang 2014: 95]. Through such efforts, time can be transformed from an external, objective framework into an existential dimension that carries subjective value, and subjects can autonomously legislate its meaning. In practical terms, reconstructing the temporality of freedom requires a threefold process of transformation in ideas, everyday practices and institutions to rebuild the autonomy of subjects.

At the level of ideas, a dialectical awakening of temporal consciousness is needed. We must revise our cognitive paradigm of time, move beyond the constraints of the arboreal temporal structure and establish a rhizomatic framework of multiple times. This implies constructing a plural system of life meanings and value goals, breaking the single narrative in which acceleration equals progress and efficiency equals truth, and highlighting the value of non-accelerated activities such as contemplation, travel and interpersonal communion. In this way, we can oppose the logic of time is money that has dominated since the rise of industrial civilisation and realise a subjective self-legislation of temporal meaning. Time then reverts from an external metric of efficiency to a dimension of existence that carries subjective significance.

At the level of everyday practice, the focus falls on cultivating the capacity for *ziruo* and reshaping modes of interaction between subjects and the world. First of all, "slow experiences" can be employed to rebuild authentic connections: by strengthening bodily perception and action – through reading, handicrafts, fieldwork, face-to-face conversation and other forms of first-hand experience – we can counteract the alienating fast logic of technology and avoid having subjectivity masked by virtual worlds. Second, dependence on digital technologies must be reduced in order to reclaim temporal sovereignty. Within the tight temporal order of contemporary society, this means cutting the "digital umbilical cord" by switching off unnecessary notifications, reducing routine screen time and creating ritualised breaks from online life, thereby restoring the rhythms of real life. Third, "inner anchors" must be cultivated to stabilise subjectivity. By preserving carriers of memory, practising seasonal alternations between fast and slow living, engaging in personalised creativity and reflection, and recovering sensitivity to the fine texture of daily life, subjects can maintain inner balance in an accelerated world and consolidate self-knowledge – the questions of who I am, what I live for and where I am going.

From an ontological perspective, the for-itself existence of human beings consists in consciously becoming aware of one's lifetime, autonomously choosing life goals, shaping one's lifestyle and organising one's practical activities. Although individual lifetime unfolds within the conventional rhythms of society, the decisive moments of breakthrough always depend on the subject's capacity for reflection, deliberation and resolute action. Only by transcending a pre-programmed life timetable can subjects set their own goals and achieve self-realisation. The authentic meaning of freedom lies in a mode of existence characterised by choosing rather than obeying, creating rather than conforming and striving rather than fleeing.

At the level of institutions, a framework of systemic guarantees must be constructed to support the reconstruction of temporality. This includes implementing flexible working systems and linking working hours more precisely to the value of time in order to prevent unpaid overtime and the normalisation of invisible labour time; tying income more rigorously to time input; formulating cultural norms for technological research and development and introducing a digital human rights charter to regulate the boundaries of technological applications and protect individuals' temporal sovereignty and personal dignity in digital space. Such institutional innovations can provide stable and effective guarantees for the process of temporal reconstruction.

In essence, the reconstruction of the temporality of freedom calls us back to the original meaning of life freedom: a stance of existence that privileges choosing over obedience, creativity over conformity and engagement over escape. Through the joint efforts of conceptual renewal, practical transformation and institutional support, we can break the fetters of objectified and instrumentalised time and reverse the social property of time that has, since the rise of industrial civilisation, been standardised as a calculable unit of efficiency under the logic that time is money. In a dynamically balanced state where fast and slow, inner and outer, self and others are integrated, we can achieve a dialectical unity between the social disciplining of time and the free will of subjects. From the perspectives of ontology, consciousness, plural value and autonomous construction, we may then reshape the relationship between time and humanity, overcome both physical and social constraints and realise genuine autonomy over lifetime so that freedom is transformed from an abstract theoretical concept into a concrete mode of existence.

Conclusion

The analysis above shows that the temporal structure of an accelerated society is no longer a neutral technological environment but a core mechanism that deeply shapes and constrains subjectivity and freedom. The acceleration logic driven by technological iteration, the efficiency cult under capital, the penetration of the attention economy and the proliferation of algorithmic governance together constitute the temporal order of contemporary society. Although the overall quantity of free time seems to have increased formally, its qualitative dimension is increasingly characterised by deprivation, colonisation and alienation. The cognitive burdens generated by information explosions and the existential confusion of meaning experienced by subjects intensify temporal oppression from both psychological and ontological perspectives, leading modern individuals into states of anxiety, isolation and powerlessness – in short, into the predicament of escaping freedom.

For this reason, the central task of a "civilizational breakthrough" lies in reconstructing the temporality of freedom. We must both establish temporal sovereignty for subjects – rectifying alienated time values and co-constructing a harmonious spatio-temporal order – and enhance the humanistic dimension of technological development, thereby achieving a dynamic balance between instrumental and value rationality and unifying the quantitative expansion and qualitative improvement of free time. At the level of values and ideas, it is necessary to transcend the single narrative in which acceleration equals progress and to excavate the core significance of non-accelerated practices such as contemplation, creativity and emotional connection. At the level of institutional safeguards, flexible working systems, strict regulation of working time and digital rights protections should be designed in order to reserve temporal spaces for autonomous self-development and to curb the unlimited encroachment of capital and technology into the sphere of life. At the level of everyday practice, concrete strategies such as slow experiences, offline rituals and the cultivation of inner anchors are needed to rebuild genuine connections between self, others and world.

Only when free time is transformed from merely formal possession into substantively autonomous use, and only when human beings can control their own temporal structures rather than being swept along by the waves of social acceleration, can modern civilization complete a deep self-reflection and creatively transcend itself. From this perspective, the reconstruction of the temporality of freedom is not only a core issue that contemporary social theory must urgently address; it is also the necessary path by which modern civilisation may move towards a more human-centred and creative new form.

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ESCHATOLOGICAL AND SECULAR TIME IN POLITICS: RUSSIA, THE WEST, AND CHRONOPOLITICAL INCOMMENSURABILITY

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Abstract

The conflict between Russia and the West is not only a clash of interests or values but a clash of times. Western diplomacy privileges secular-linear temporality, while Russia gives preference to eschatological continuity. Unless this chronopolitical incommensurability is recognized, diplomatic engagement will continue to falter.

Keywords: *temporal plurality, clash of times, chronopolitical understanding, Messianic temporalities.*

Introduction

The problem of temporality has long haunted both philosophy and political thought. Time is not only a medium of human existence but also a structuring principle of collective life, shaping institutions, rituals, and modes of legitimacy. Modern scholarship, from anthropology to intellectual history, has repeatedly demonstrated that different civilizations live within different temporal regimes, and that these regimes profoundly influence their understanding of power, history, and authority. European modernity has emphasized linear, digital time – a measurable, secularized temporal order that governs labour, governance, and diplomacy [Thompson 1967]. India, Bali, and Mesoamerica historically elaborated cyclical or permutational models of time, embedding political authority within repeating cosmological rhythms [Geertz 1973: 389–391]. African and Indigenous traditions

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often grounded time in ecology and events rather than abstract measurement [Evans-Pritchard 1940]. Religions, across traditions, imposed ritual and eschatological temporalities that oriented societies toward a sacred telos.

Ernst H. Kantorowicz's classic study *The King's Two Bodies* demonstrated that the medieval European political order was not secular in its foundation but rather deeply structured by religious hierarchies and eschatological temporality [Kantorowicz 1997]. Kingship embodied not merely secular authority but a sacred role in the unfolding of divine history. Such insights raise the question of whether modern politics still contains traces of theological time. This question becomes especially pressing when considering the divergence between Western (U.S./EU) political rationality and the Russian state's temporal imagination.

This essay argues that contemporary political conflict between Russia and the West cannot be fully understood without attending to chronopolitical dissonance. The United States and European Union largely frame political bargaining within secular, digital-linear time: treaties, security guarantees, and measurable arrangements grounded in rational calculation. Russia, however, frames its state ideology within a religious-eschatological temporality: the idea of Russia as a messianic polity with historical rights, sacred geography, and the destiny of uniting its Slavic brothers into a millenarian community. Ukraine is thus not "just" a territorial issue but an eschatological necessity. Western leaders, operating within secular-progressive temporality, reject this reasoning as irrational or illegitimate; yet for Russia, it is constitutive of its political theology.

Political theology and eschatological time

The study of political theology – articulated by Karl Schmitt – begins from the premise that modern political concepts are secularized theological concepts. He suggested the following:

> *All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts.* [Schmitt 2005: 36]

Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies* represents a milestone in demonstrating how medieval political order was literally constituted by theology. Medieval kingship was not merely a pragmatic form of governance but a symbolic and sacramental office. The king embodied two bodies: his body natural, mortal and corruptible, and his body politic, eternal and perfect, symbolizing the continuity of the realm [Kantorowicz

1997]. This doctrine located political authority within a sacred framework: the king was a living intersection between divine order and temporal governance.

Kantorowicz situates this duality within religiously sanctioned hierarchies. In the medieval imagination, society itself was understood as a cosmic hierarchy ordained by God. The chain of being – from angels to kings to peasants – was not a contingent social order but a reflection of divine will. Authority flowed from God through the Church and into the secular ruler, who thus ruled as both sovereign and sacred symbol. He explores this sort of vision through practical case of the Duchy of Lancaster. The judges of the time created their legal arguments relying on theological grounds:

> *Although he [the king] has, or takes, the land in his natural Body, yet to his natural Body is conjoined his Body politic, which contains his royal Estate and Dignity; and the Body politic includes the body natural, but the Body natural is the lesser, and with this the Body politic is consolidated. So that he has a Body natural, adorned and invested with the Estate and Dignity royal; and he has not a Body natural distinct and divided by itself from the Office and dignity royal, but a body natural and a Body politic together indivisible; and these two Bodies are incorporated in one Person …* [Kantorowicz 1997: 9]

As a result, time also was experienced eschatologically: political authority was part of the salvation history. The temporal life of kingdoms was set within the horizon of the eternal kingdom of God. Thus, eschatological temporality gave medieval politics a profoundly different orientation than modern secular politics. The legitimacy of the king did not rest upon rational consent, contracts, or pragmatic security, but on participation in a sacred drama moving toward ultimate fulfilment. Coronation rituals, liturgies, and festivals were not mere ceremonies but enactments of sacred time within political life. The very durability of the polity – the body politic – was imagined as transcending the mortality of its rulers, echoing the eternity of divine order [Kantorowicz 1997].

Kantorowicz's point is not antiquarian but theoretical: political orders cannot be understood apart from their temporal frameworks. In the Middle Ages, this framework was eschatological. Authority was grounded not in calculations of power but in alignment with the divine narrative of history [Kantorowicz 1997: 499–502]. This insight provides the foundation for understanding how Russia, in its contemporary ideology, continues to anchor its political reasoning in religious and eschatological time, despite existing within a modern global order shaped by secular, linear temporality.

Modernity and the secularization of time

The transition from medieval to modern conceptions of politics was inseparable from the transformation of time itself. If the medieval polity was grounded in eschatological temporality, modernity arose through the secularization and rationalization of time. This shift did not simply alter calendrical systems or timekeeping devices; it reorganized how political authority, history, and progress were understood. Reinhart Koselleck's classic work *Futures Past* describes this transformation as the temporalization of history (*Verzeitlichung der Geschichte*): history was no longer embedded within a sacred cosmic order but became an autonomous field unfolding according to its own logic [Koselleck 2004].

Enlightenment is frequently identified as the epoch of this temporal revolution. Eschatological frameworks – orienting history toward salvation and the eternal kingdom – were displaced by linear-progressive narratives of human development. In this new order, time itself became measurable, divisible, and abstract. No longer oriented toward eternity, it was directed toward a future conceived as open and improvable. As Koselleck observes, modern historical consciousness is distinguished by a widening gap between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation [Koselleck 2004].

This can be explained semantically: concepts drenched with reality presuppose as categories alternatives; meanings that they exclude. They thereby constitute more closely defined and concrete semantic fields, even if these remain related to one another. The category of work thus refers to leisure, war to peace and vice versa, a frontier to an interior and an exterior space, a political generation to another or to its biological correlate, productive forces to production relations, democracy to monarchy, and so forth. The conceptual couple "experience" and "expectation" is clearly of a different nature. The couple is redoubled upon itself; it presupposes no alternatives; the one is not to be had without the other. No expectation without experience, no experience without expectation. [Koselleck 2004: 257].

The secularization of time was not merely philosophical but profoundly material. E. P. Thompson's seminal essay *Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism* demonstrates how the mechanical clock transformed European society [Thompson 1967: 60–65]. In agrarian economies, time was primarily event-based. With the rise of industrial capitalism, time became abstracted into uniform units, measurable in hours and minutes, producing what Thompson famously termed "time-discipline" [Thompson 1967: 80–85].

This transformation reshaped political philosophy. Thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke grounded sovereignty and rights not in sacred order but in contracts made in linear time, presupposing durable promises and predictable futures [Hobbes 1996:

chs. 14–15; Locke 1988: II, §§95–122]. Although theological residues remained, modern legitimacy increasingly rested on procedural rationality rather than divine eternity. Schmitt argues that "Democracy is the expression of a political relativism and a scientific orientation that are liberated from miracles and dogmas and based on human understanding and critical doubt" [Schmitt 2005: 42].

Western diplomacy, especially in the post-Enlightenment and modern era, has been fundamentally shaped by this secular temporality. Treaties are time-bound; negotiations are evaluated by deadlines and deliverables; security is defined in terms of calculable risks projected into the future. Even when invoking history, Western political reasoning tends to treat it as background context, not as an eschatological narrative with binding obligations. This linear-progressive temporality profoundly structures U.S. and EU approaches to global politics.

It is precisely here that the divergence with Russia becomes stark. While the West conceives political time in measurable, secular units, Russia often appeals to a sacred historical temporality where past, present, and future are bound in eschatological continuity. This divergence produces a chronopolitical incommensurability: Western leaders assume rational calculation in linear time, while Russian leaders appeal to sacred continuity in eschatological time.

Russia's political theology and messianic temporalities

Where Western modernity secularized political time, Russia followed a different trajectory in which religious eschatology and political identity remained entangled. After the fall of Constantinople, Muscovite clerics articulated the doctrine of Moscow as the "Third Rome", locating the Russian state within an eschatological horizon of final guardianship of Orthodoxy [Obolensky 1971]. Philotheus's declaration "Two Romes have fallen, the third stands" captured this temporal logic [Meyendorff 1981: 378].

When Western Europe underwent the influences of the French Revolution conquered by Napoleon, Russia considered itself the main fortress against re the all-embracing military plans of Napoleon. Alexander, who defeated the unconquerable Napoleon, was hailed as God's anointed one.

Despite a deep-seated sense that Russia was self-sufficient and had a mission in the world, right alongside this sense omission there was a craving and longing to the West. This became more and more noticeable during the middle of the century. The Russian intelligentsia liked to spend some time abroad to be exposed to culture and German philosophers. Two schools of thought originated thereof: the Western school considered Russia a backward country which had to learn from the West, whereas the other school of thought emphasized the unique Russian or Slavic character and the mission of Russian nation and the Orthodox Church. They were willing to listen with one ear, to the West, whilst above all they were listening to the Russian soul, aiming to discover its genius and make it meaningful. They found the Russian soul among the Russian people [*narod*] and became known as *narodniki* ("populists") [Krahn 1963: 211].

Russian identity was further shaped by the notion of "Holy Rus", a sacred geography uniting East Slavic peoples within a single spiritual organism. Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia were not regarded as separate polities but as branches of a common spiritual organism. This conception of unity was not only cultural but theological [Hosking 1997: 42–44]. This conception persists to this day. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 was justified not only strategically but as a return of a holy site: the baptism of Prince Vladimir in Chersonesus, regarded as the founding moment of Russian Christianity. Putin himself invoked this symbolism, declaring Crimea "the spiritual source of Russian nationhood" [Putin 2014]. Russian thinkers reinforced this messianic temporality across centuries. The Slavophiles of the 19th century argued that Russia had a special destiny to embody Christian community in contrast to the individualism of the West. Dostoevsky envisioned Russia as the bearer of universal salvation [Dostoevsky 1994].

The Slavophiles absorbed the Hegelian idea of the predestined role of the nation in history. The preferred role which Hegel applied to German nation, the Slavophiles applied to the Russians. Aksakov even claimed that the Russian people had a special vocation for understanding the philosophy of Hegel. They believed that the culture of the West was exhausted and senile. Motors of social life had lost its force. Russians on the contrary were considered full of youthful force and having a great mission to fulfil. They believed that the future victory of Russians are already written on the tablets of victory praising science, art and faith which await them on the ruins of tottering Europe [Krahn 1963: 212].

These statements were part of timeless continuity of sacral identity of Russia. M. A. Pogodin, a Slavophile, was overawed by the greatness of the Russian empire after its victory over Napoleon. He wrote:

> *My heart trembles with joy, oh Russia, oh my Fatherland! Is it not you? Oh, if it were only you! You, you are chosen to consummate, to crown the development of humanity, to embody all the various human achievements (which hitherto have been accomplished only separately) in one great synthesis, to bring to harmony the ancient and modern civilizations, to reconcile heart with reason, to establish true justice and peace. You alone can prove not only that science, liberty, art, knowledge, industry, and wealth are the goal of mankind, but that there is something higher than scholarship, trade and education, freedom and riches – true enlightenment in the spirit of Christianity, The Divine Word, which alone can impart to Man earthly and heavenly happiness...* [Quoted in Krahn 1963: 213]

Soviet ideology preserved a secularized eschatology, casting the USSR as humanity's vanguard toward historical fulfilment [Kotkin 1995: 25–30]. In the post-Soviet era, this logic has re-emerged in explicitly religious form, with Patriarch Kirill and Putin portraying Russia as the defender of Christian civilization against Western secularism [Kirill 2013; Laruelle 2018].

Temporal incommensurability in geopolitical bargaining

The eschatological temporality explains why Russia appeals to historical rights in its foreign policy. Within this framework Ukraine is not merely a sovereign state but part of a sacred historical body, rendering compromise structurally difficult [Neumann 1996: 105–110]. The safety of Russia, in this framework, is defined not by pragmatic calculations but by the preservation of a millenarian community. Western interlocutors regard this reasoning as irrational; Russia regards it as essential.

The divergence between Western secular-linear temporality and Russian eschatological temporality has profound consequences for diplomacy. It creates what might be called a chronopolitical incommensurability: the two sides negotiate not only with different interests but within different conceptions of time itself.

Western diplomacy operates within linear-progressive temporality, relying on treaties, deadlines, and calculable risks [Ikenberry 2001]. Russia, by contrast, frames diplomacy through sacred continuity, rejecting the notion that such issues can be settled purely by contract [Neumann 1996]. These divergent temporalities help explain repeated diplomatic failures, from Crimea to NATO expansion [Putin 2014; Laruelle 2018: 155–160]. Thus, the legitimacy of Russia's claim is rooted not in measurable commitments but in participation in a divine narrative. As Sarah Sharma argues, temporality structures power relations themselves [Sharma 2014: 9–12]. When one side treats everything as negotiable, whilst the other treats certain issues as sacred, compromise becomes nearly impossible.

This temporal asymmetry also shapes expectations about victory, loss, and endurance. Western policymakers often assume that material costs, sanctions, or battlefield attrition will eventually compel recalibration. Such assumptions presuppose a time horizon in which actors seek optimization within finite intervals. By contrast, eschatological temporality is inherently patient: sacrifice in the present is rendered meaningful by its inscription into a transhistorical arc. Losses do not necessarily delegitimize policy; they may instead be reinterpreted as trials that confirm the righteousness of the cause. This further weakens the coercive logic of deterrence, which relies on the anticipation of unacceptable future outcomes.

Moreover, chronopolitical incommensurability distorts signalling. Actions intended by Western actors as provisional or reversible – temporary deployments, conditional sanctions, or incremental alliance enlargement – are perceived within the Russian frame as irreversible violations of sacred order. What appears negotiable in linear time, appears ontologically fixed in sacred time. Misinterpretation is therefore not accidental but structural, embedded in incompatible temporal grammar.

This mismatch also complicates mediation efforts. Diplomatic formats premised on sequencing – confidence-building measures, phased withdrawals, or sunset clauses – implicitly assume that time heals or at least neutralizes conflict. Eschatological narratives deny this premise: time does not dilute meaning but accumulates it. Each moment adds weight to historical obligation rather than opening space for forgetting or compromise.

Recognizing this temporal divide does not imply endorsing either worldview. Rather, it underscores the limits of diplomacy conducted as if all actors inhabited the same temporal universe. Without an explicit reckoning with chronopolitical difference, negotiations risk becoming ritualized exchanges in which neither side can truly hear the other. In such conditions, bargaining fails not because of insufficient incentives, but because the very medium of negotiation – time itself – is contested.

Postcolonial and postmodern perspectives on temporal hybridity

Postcolonial and postmodern scholarship challenges the simplistic dichotomy of Western linear time versus non-Western cyclical or sacred time. Muhammad A. Z. Mughal notes that anthropology once relied heavily on this dichotomy, but globalization and critical theory now emphasize temporal plurality [Mughal 2023].

Bhabha's concept of hybridity is instructive [Bhabha 1994: 36–39]. Russia is neither purely modern nor purely eschatological; it is a hybrid formation where modern institutions coexist with sacred narratives. Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to provincialize Europe underscores the same point: the secular-linear temporality of the West is not universal, but one among many [Chakrabarty 2000]. Paul Rabinow adds that the contemporary is not a single time but a moving ratio of pasts, presents, and futures [Rabinow 2008: 3–7]. Russia exemplifies this: it assembles Orthodox eschatology, Soviet legacies, and global capitalism into a single chronopolitical formation.

Conclusion

The failure of diplomacy lies in the West's assumption of universality. Recognizing temporal hybridity does not legitimize Russian expansionism, but it reveals why Russia and the West talk past one another: they weight temporalities differently within their hybrid chronopolitical orders.

The conflict between Russia and the West is not only a clash of interests or values but a clash of times. Western diplomacy privileges secular-linear temporality, while Russia grants precedence to eschatological continuity. Unless this chronopolitical incommensurability is recognized, diplomatic engagement will continue to falter. Politics, ultimately, is always temporal.

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II. RELIGIOUS ONTOLOGIES AND SACRED TEMPORALITIES

THE CONCEPT OF ISLAMIC TEMPORALITY IN THE QUR'ĀN: DIVINE, EXISTENTIAL, AND LIVED DIMENSIONS OF TIME

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Abstract

In this article, a multi-layered model of Islamic temporality is developed and structured across three interrelated levels: divine, existential, and lived time, noting a distinction between divine and human temporality as asymmetrically related structures. It is argued that Islamic temporality functions as a stratified semiotic system in which metaphysical order, human life-course, and embodied practice are not separate domains but mutually constitutive layers of meaning production. At the divine level, time is conceptualized as created and bounded within a transcendent order, where temporal succession acquires intelligibility only through divine determination and eschatological structuring. At the existential level, human temporality unfolds as a directional trajectory from worldly life through death and intermediate existence (*barzakh*) toward final judgment, embedding temporal passage within a framework of moral accountability. At the level of lived practice, this structure is re-inscribed through ritual segmentation, cyclical obligation, and life-course regulation, through which abstract temporal order is translated into embodied and socially stabilized forms. This study treats the Qur'ān as the primary source text, focusing on explicit Qur'ānic temporal references and limiting the use of classical *tafsīr* to cases where it systematizes clearly discernible textual patterns. The analysis is informed by Eco's Model Reader and cultural semiotics (Eco, Lotman), treating temporality as a meaning-producing structure that emerges through the interaction

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between text and reader as a system of signification. Within this interpretive configuration, Islamic temporality is approached as a recursive system of culturally encoded meaning in which time functions simultaneously as ontological principle, existential horizon, and ethically enacted order.

Keywords: *Islamic temporality, The Qur'ān, layered temporality, divine time, ritual temporality, eschatology, cultural semiotics.*

Introduction: The structure of Islamic temporality

The concept of time appears in the Qur'ān as the main axis, the base of the divine order, which governs and structures the unseen world (*ghayb*), the material world, and, in particular, the human experience [Qur'ān 6:96; 10:5; 21:33]. Time in Islamic contexts is often described as an organizing principle that links cosmological order, ritual obligation, and social practice [Gökalp & Baş 2024]. However, according to the Qur'ān, time flows and functions differently across different ontological and experiential domains, from creation narratives to eschatology, from the level of divine order and decree to prescriptions governing ritual practice [Qur'ān 6:96; 2:183–185; 50:38; 101:1–5]. It is by no means a single neutral chronological framework, measurable sequence or a calendrical organization, but rather several interwoven layers, each with its own structure, characteristics, and importance, each charged with religious meaning and contributing to the Qur'ānic image of Islamic spacetime. In one layer, that of human experience, time is primarily felt and understood as an irreversible flow of events, and especially important is the earthly life as a finite segment of existence, choices are made that accounted for within the divine record of deeds, and determine the afterlife [Qur'ān 103:1–3; 17:13–14], and in particular, as core Islamic obligations are explicitly time-bound, temporality is therefore not external to religious life [Qur'ān 4:103; 2:185]. In contrast, for objects and entities that are not sentient and not bound to the observance of religious law, including even the human body itself as a material entity within physical processes, time appears as a governing and structuring framework without any moral connotations, simply as a neutral continuum of change in physical processes, causal relations, as well as structuring of periodic and cyclical processes [Qur'ān 36:37–40; 55:5]. And, finally, the divine time is represented as a different, supreme order of existence, not fully comprehensible to the human mind, as the encompassing framework of the universe, in which and through which the will of the Creator is manifested [Qur'ān 70:4; 22:47].

Therefore, Islamic temporality might be perceived as a multi-layered construct, distinguishing between divine, existential and human dimensions, which together form a coherent metaphysical and practical framework. This study treats the Qur'ān[1] as the primary source text, with the analysis limited to the most explicit Qur'ānic temporal references, without excluding their broader interpretive contexts where relevant, but with the analytical focus placed on meaning production as activated in the reading process by a contemporary reader, with the classical *tafsīr* (e.g. Ibn Katheer) mentioned only insofar as it systematizes already clearly discernible textual patterns. Accordingly, temporality is analysed as it emerges from the text itself during the reading process understood as a meaning-producing process between text and reader, while remaining attentive to established exegetical frames that inform reception histories of the Qur'ān. This approach is informed by Umberto Eco's concept of the "Model Reader" [Eco 1979]. The constructs of temporality are examined within the theoretical framework of cultural semiotics [Eco 1976; Lotman 1990] according to which temporal meanings are understood as products of structured sign systems that organize collective models of reality. Classical *tafsīr* often systematizes these temporal structures, emphasizing their fundamental role in Islamic spacetime, while sources like Ibn al-Qayyim's *Madārij al-Sālikīn* provide an internal Islamic view on temporality as graded, ethically structured progression of spiritual states. Similarly, contemporary studies emphasize that time occupies a foundational role in Islamic religious life, structuring both ritual practice and broader patterns of social organization [e.g., Gökalp & Baş 2024].

Divine temporality in the Qur'ān: Creation, governance and eschatology

Time in Islam is understood, at the most fundamental level, as created and governed by Allah, so it is fully subject to divine will. Moreover, time is the very basis of a broader cosmological system established by Allah, "It is He who created night and day, the sun and the moon, each floating in its orbit" [Qur'ān 21:33]. Furthermore, the Qur'ān stresses that the celestial cycles are established by Allah purposefully, and they serve to organize human activities: "He makes the dawn break; He makes the night for rest; and He made the sun and the moon to a precise measure. That is the design of the Almighty, the All Knowing" [Qur'ān 6:96]. It is explicitly stated that the movement of the Sun and the Moon was designed as an instrument for measurement of time for humans:

> *It is He who made the sun a shining radiance and the moon a light, determining phases for it so that you might know the number of years and how to calculate time. God did not create all these without a true purpose; He explains His signs to those who understand.* [Qur'ān 10:5]

[1] In Arabic. The English translation of the Qur'ān by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (2004) is used for quotations presented in this study.

However, in the Qur'ānic sense, "accounting/calculation" (*ḥisāb*) operates not merely as numerical accounting but as a temporal ontology of accountability, in which time itself becomes the medium through which moral actions are rendered legible and ultimately evaluated.

Therefore, according to the Islamic worldview, time is neither autonomous nor self-subsisting, but rather created and governed by divine ordinance, and, in this aspect, it also becomes inseparable from cosmology. The celestial movement in general, and, particularly in its aspects with most immediate relevance to human life, such as the alternation of day and night or the waxing and waning of the Moon, are presented as signs (*āyāt*) pointing to an underlying divine order, discernible to those who are able to perceive divine greatness and magnificence, and, therefore, it may be inferred that they should submit and obey Allah's will out of awe and admiration. The tradition of classical *tafsīr*, exemplified by Ibn Kathīr, interprets these cosmological references as *āyāt*, or divine signs, emphasizing that celestial motion and temporality are not autonomous natural processes, but rather aspects of a divinely established order. In more contemporary interpretations of Islamic cosmology, time is similarly understood as integrated within a divinely ordered structure of the universe, in which temporal processes are subject to Allah's will and part of His creation [Nasr 2003]. Thus, within Islamic metaphysical discourse, reality is fundamentally structured by Allah's will rather than by autonomous, natural temporality [Al-Attas, 1995]. Therefore, in Islam, time is experienced as an aspect of Allah's greatness and part of His design in creation, and this awareness contributes to building a coherent metaphysical system, with its theoretical and practical sides.

At the same time, in the Qur'ānic perspective, there is a crucial distinction between divine and human temporality. For human beings, time is finite, sequential, irreversible; moreover, they experience time as a rigid framework, a flow which carries them as helpless creatures [Qur'ān 103:1–3; 7:34], as an instance and aspect of their being subjected to a supreme will:

> *Say [Prophet], 'I cannot control any harm or benefit that comes to me, except as God wills. There is an appointed term for every community, and when it is reached they can neither delay nor hasten it, even for a moment.* [Qur'ān 10:49]

This pathway is determined by Allah, from birth to death, to Resurrection and reckoning: "Every soul will taste death, then it is to Us that you will be returned" [29:57]. At the same time, the divine temporality operates on a fundamentally different scale that exceeds human comprehension. In the Qur'ān, descriptions of Allah's perception and command of time are contrasted with the human dimension, thus constructing a set of interconnected binary oppositions. Allah is the origin of the temporal order, the regulator of it, the one who is not controlled by the flow of time, but is outside it and in control of it. Therefore, the power asymmetry between Allah and human beings is illustrated and emphasized by the relationship with temporal processes and their positional relation to them. While humans are short-lived, Allah is eternal and has a different perception of time: "... a Day with your Lord is like a thousand years by your reckoning" [Qur'ān 22:47]. Moreover, He is outside the temporal sequence, not controlled by time: "He is the First and the Last;" "the Outer and the Inner; He has knowledge of all things" [Qur'ān 57:3].

The Qur'ānic divine temporality appears manifold. First of all, it is a creative temporality, in which time is brought into existence as part of the creation of the universe:

> *Your Lord is God, who created the heavens and earth in six Days, then established Himself on the throne; He makes the night cover the day in swift pursuit; He created the sun, moon, and stars to be subservient to His command; all creation and command belong to Him. Exalted be God, Lord of all the worlds!*
> [Qur'ān 7:54]

Directly connected to creation as establishment of divinely ordained temporality is the governing aspect, in which processes in the heaven and on earth unfold precisely according to Allah's will and are continuously supervised by Him:

> *It is God who raised up the heavens with no visible supports and then established Himself on the throne; He has subjected the sun and the moon each to pursue its course for an appointed time; He regulates all things, and makes the revelations clear so that you may be certain of meeting your Lord.* [Qur'ān 13:2]

The Qur'ān emphasizes that celestial bodies follow paths established by Allah: "The sun, too, runs its determined course laid down for it by the Almighty, the All Knowing." [Qur'ān 36:38], and the movement of each is clearly determined, orderly and precise: "The sun cannot overtake the moon, nor can the night outrun the day: each floats in [its own] orbit" [Qur'ān 36:40]. According to Ibn Kathīr, these cosmological indicators function as signs of divinely instituted order, of which temporality is only one aspect, however crucial, and thus time is understood as created and regulated rather than naturally originated and autonomous.

The eschatological temporality logically follows the sequence started from creation of the universe, as the end of the temporal order is already integral to its structure and oriented toward divine judgment:

> *On that Day, We shall roll up the skies as a writer rolls up [his] scrolls. We shall reproduce creation just as We produced it the first time: this is Our binding promise. We shall certainly do all these things.* [Qur'ān 21:104]

The "Day" of Reckoning is described as the inevitable end of regular physical processes, the endpoint of the trajectory of human life, the final destination [Qur'ān 75:6–13; 99:1–2; 101:1–5], within which humans experience the transition to divine time in the afterlife: "He runs everything, from the heavens to the earth, and everything will ascend to Him in the end, on a Day that will measure a thousand years in your reckoning" [Qur'ān 32:5]. Thus, divine time is not represented as duration comparable to human experience, but as a framework of higher order that enables the existence of human time itself. The flow of time is unidirectional, with clear start and ending points, which are also meaningfully connected to the concept of human destiny as preordained by Allah, and to humans' role and duty in the earthly life or *dunya*.

The divine temporality in the Qur'ān appears not only as related to celestial movement, but also to processes of provisioning, which occur in temporal cycles and sequences [Qur'ān 30:48–50]: "It is God who sends out the winds; they stir up the clouds; He spreads them over the skies as He pleases; He makes them break up and you see the rain falling from them..." [Qur'ān 30:48] and "It is He who sends down water for you from the sky, from which comes a drink for you, and the shrubs that you feed to your animals" [Qur'ān 16:10]. Thus, the processes in nature that provide sustenance to all living beings including humans are presented in the Qur'ān as distribution of *rizq*, directly governed and guaranteed by Allah, rather than purely natural or resulting from random chains of cause and effect [Qur'ān 36:33–36; 11:6]. As the result, Islamic temporality appears as constant manifestation of the will of the Maker on all levels, from cosmology to rainfall, from the scale of universe to the scale of specks of dust, and the Qur'ān emphasizes that humans should always be aware of it:

> *In the creation of the heavens and earth; in the alternation of night and day; in the ships that sail the seas with goods for people; in the water which God sends down from the sky to give life to the earth when it has been barren, scattering all kinds of creatures over it; in the changing of the winds and clouds that run their appointed courses between the sky and earth: there are signs in all these for those who use their minds.* [Qur'ān 2:164]

Human temporality in the Qur'ān: Intervals, cycles, and ritual practice

At the level of lived practice, Islamic temporality manifests itself through a structured segmentation of time within which existential continuity is differentiated into temporal units, some of which are recurring or cyclical, and related to patterned human action [e.g., Qur'ān 62:10; 4:103]. In this way, the metaphysical structure of time permeates and directly affects every moment of human awareness, which, according to the Islamic worldview, should be dedicated to Allah in thought and deed:

> *who remember God standing, sitting, and lying down, who reflect on the creation of the heavens and earth: 'Our Lord! You have not created all this without purpose – You are far above that! – so protect us from the torment of the Fire.* [Qur'ān 3:191]

Late Ottoman and early modern Islamic societies offer a historically documented case of such temporal organization, in which prayer-time coordination, seasonal cycles, and emerging clock-based temporal regimes coexist within a gradual process of synchronization [Cantemir 2004; Wishnitzer 2015]. Gökalp and Baş (2024) similarly emphasize that the Qur'ān provides a framework in which temporal markers are structurally embedded in religious practice, including the regulation of worship, fasting, and calendrical calculation. General introductions to Islam likewise underline the centrality of temporally structured practices such as prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage within Islamic religious life [Esposito 2011].

According to the Islamic outlook, the most immediate level of temporal structuring in human life is the daily cycle, divided into fixed temporal intervals by the five daily prayers – *salāh* (صلاة). This division produces a rhythmic interruption of mundane activity by segments of time dedicated to Allah [Qur'ān 4:103; 11:114; 17:78]. The Qur'ān emphasizes that prayer is a mandatory, time-bound duty: "for prayer is obligatory for the believers at prescribed times" [Qur'ān 4:103]. These times are explicitly stated, which confirms their great importance in Islamic temporality: "[Prophet], keep up the prayer at both ends of the day, and during parts of the night... [Qur'ān 11:114] as well as "So perform the regular prayers in the period from the time the sun is past its zenith till the darkness of the night, and [recite] the Quran at dawn..." [Qur'ān 17:78]. Thus, remembrance of Allah is embedded in in ordinary life and structures it, so that time is not experienced as a homogeneous continuum but rather as two parallel and sometimes interwoven layers: the continuous flow of earthly life with its pursuit of sustenance, joys, and sorrows, and, at the same time, a recurrent re-orientation toward divine presence, which situates human existence within a broader framework of destiny and the unfolding order of the Islamic universe. It implies, furthermore, that ritual temporality operates on the individual level not only as external structuring of time, but also as an internal, subjective redirection of attention and consciousness from autonomous existence and continuity of mundane life towards periodic, and in the ideal case, continuous, awareness of divine presence and one's own accountability. In this configuration, continuity is not abolished but subordinated to interruption, such that uninterrupted flow of worldly activity functions as a background condition, while ritual segmentation operates as the structuring principle of experiential hierarchy.

The next level of Islamic temporal structuring in human life is represented by annual temporal cycles, as decreed by Allah, "God decrees that there are twelve months – ordained in God's Book on the Day when He created the heavens and earth – four months of which are sacred: this is the correct calculation..." [Qur'ān 9:36], related to two obligations of Islam, fasting and pilgrimage, and marked with two great celebrations, Eid al Fitr and Eid al Adha. These cyclical obligations, while individual in many aspects, construct the collective temporal experience of Islamic society, providing, similarly to the obligatory prayers, disruption of ordinary activities by religious duties and rituals. For instance, the month of Ramadan introduces a temporally bounded period of fasting, in which the entire rhythm of daily life is restructured according to a shared sacred interval: "You who believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may be mindful of God" [Qur'ān 2:183]. The total duration of fasting is clearly determined, "for a specific number of days" [Qur'ān 2:184], and tied to the lunar cycle:

> *It was in the month of Ramadan that the Qur'an was revealed as guidance for mankind, clear messages giving guidance and distinguishing between right and wrong. So any one of you who is present that month should fast, and anyone who is ill or on a journey should make up for the lost days by fasting on other days later. God wants ease for you, not hardship. He wants you to complete the prescribed period and to glorify Him for having guided you, so that you may be thankful.* [Qur'ān 2:185]

Similarly, the timing of fast during each day is specified according to the diurnal cycle: "... eat and drink until the white thread of dawn becomes distinct from the black. Then fast until nightfall [Qur'ān 2:187]. Thus, the entire rhythm of daily life of the Islamic community is restructured according to a shared sacred interval, which heightens the awareness of submission to divine command and creates the feeling of unity. Similarly, pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) functions as a fixed temporal convergence point, organizing movement, ritual, and collective presence within a strictly determined temporal window, reinforcing the cyclical but non-arbitrary nature of sacred time. And again, the time devoted to Allah is marked by abstaining from certain practices, performing rituals, and, most importantly, stepping outside the flow of mundane life:

> *The pilgrimage takes place during the prescribed months. There should be no indecent speech, misbehaviour, or quarrelling for anyone undertaking the pilgrimage – whatever good you do, God is well aware of it. Provide well for yourselves: the best provision is to be mindful of God – always be mindful of Me, you who have understanding.* [Qur'ān 2:197]

In this sense, ritual temporality functions as a systematic suspension of temporal autonomy, in which human time is repeatedly re-situated within a framework that negates self-contained duration and reasserts dependence on divine ordination.

Zakat further extends this annual structuring into economic temporality, embedding redistribution within regulated temporal recurrence rather than spontaneous moral action. While it is not stated explicitly in the Qur'ān, that *zakat* should be given in specified time intervals, it appears as a form of regulated redistribution that functions within a broader system of recurrent obligation and structured practice. This might be implied by the fact that *zakat* is mentioned repeatedly alongside *salāh* [e.g., Qur'ān 9:71; 2:110]; therefore, it is a similarly recurring regular obligation of a Muslim (who is considered to be wealthy enough to pay it): "Keep up the prayer and pay the prescribed alms. Whatever good you store up for yourselves, you will find it with God: He sees everything you do" [Qur'ān 2:110]. In addition, giving *zakat* is defined as ordained action by Allah with clearly defined categories of recipients [Qur'ān 9:60], which shows that it is meant as a recurring action. Some classical moral-legal interpretations (e.g., Ibn al-Qayyim) further emphasize the ethical function of regulated redistribution as a means of disciplining attachment to wealth within temporally bounded cycles of obligation. Here, temporality functions not only as a scheduling mechanism but as principle of value regulation, where wealth acquires ethical meaning only through periodic temporal interruption of accumulation and its re-inscription into socially mandated circulation.

At the level of life-cycle temporality, the Qur'ān discerns two layers, drawing a full existential arc of birth, life, death and return [Qur'ān 29:57; 2:156; 22:66; 40:67]. The primary layer is the course of human life within the spiritual pathway towards afterlife, including birth, experience of earthly life, death, *barzakh* and judgment; so that the human being should always remember that the origin is from Allah and return is to Allah: "those who say, when afflicted with a calamity, 'We belong to God and to Him we shall return.'" [Qur'ān 2:156]. The secondary layer is the bodily existence, including biological processes and social role; the Qur'ān repeatedly describes [30:54; 22:5] the staged life progression of a human and temporal segmentation of existence according to age:

> *People, [remember,] if you doubt the Resurrection, that We created you from dust, then a drop of fluid, then a clinging form, then a lump of flesh, both shaped and unshaped: We mean to make Our power clear to you. Whatever We choose We cause to remain in the womb for an appointed time, then We bring you forth as infants and then you grow and reach maturity. Some die young and some are left to live on to such an age that they forget all they once knew. You sometimes see*

> *the earth lifeless, yet when We send down water it stirs and swells and produces every kind of joyous growth: 6 this is because God is the Truth; He brings the dead back to life; He has power over everything.* [Qur'ān 22:5]

This division into life stages thus functions as a link between existential temporality and embodied life, converting metaphysical sequence (life–death–judgment) into socially and biologically regulated durations, and, accordingly, the Islamic law introduces temporal thresholds that regulate human existence across these stages. Some intervals are very clearly specified quantitatively in the Qur'ān, as, for instance, *'idda* (waiting period after divorce) [Qur'ān 2:228; 65:4], and breastfeeding duration [Qur'ān 2:233]. These temporal intervals do not merely describe biological processes but reconfigure them as ethically and socially regulated durations, thereby embedding the human body itself within a temporal order established by Allah.

Thus, across the three levels of human temporality in Islam, that is, daily, annual, and life-cycle, the lived time appears as embedded within a divinely established framework which regulates individual and collective activities. The linear structure of human existence is structured by recurring patterns of segmentation imposed by Allah's command, directly expressed in the Qur'ān. In this sense, ritual time is not separated from existential time, but rather they form one interconnected flow which is, by insertion of segments dedicated to Allah, linked to the divine time, divine will, and divine view of human destiny [Qur'ān 103:1–3]. In this manner, Islamic ritual life is consistently organized through structured temporal intervals that shape daily, annual, and life-cycle practices [Gökalp & Baş 2024]. A comparable internal articulation of temporally structured ethical progression can be found in Ibn al-Qayyim's *Madārij al-Sālikīn*, where spiritual life is organized as a sequence of graded stations (*manāzil*), each requiring specific forms of disciplined practice and sustained awareness. However, the Qur'ānic configuration differs in that temporal obligation remains explicitly oriented toward continual remembrance and devotion to Allah, rather than being rearticulated as an autonomous principle of productivity or economic valuation. Time is not "spent" but repeatedly re-attuned to a transcendent order rather than an instrumental calculus of utility or output [Qur'ān 2:183–185; 62:9–10].

In comparative perspective, this form of temporally structured discipline may be compared and contrasted with Max Weber's analysis of Protestant asceticism. On the one hand, structuring of time as created and governed by God, and the idea that humans are morally accountable for the use of it, resonates with Max Weber's account of the Protestant ethic, where temporal discipline is likewise grounded in a divinely instituted framework, later transforming into a rationalized form of worldly conduct [Weber 1930: 47–48; 155–162]. However, within the Protestant ethic, disciplined time-use becomes oriented toward continuous worldly productivity [Weber 1930: 47–48; 157–159], whereas Islamic temporal discipline is focused on periodic suspension of worldly activities and intensified ritual remembrance rather than economic rationalization. This differentiation appears in historical studies of time organization in the late Ottoman context, where calendrical and clock-based systems, based on so-called "Western" principles [cf. Weber 1930] coexisted with prayer-based and cyclical temporal frameworks, each having its own priorities and forming together a heterogeneous temporal framework [Cantemir 2004; Wishnitzer 2015].

Conclusion

The analysis has demonstrated that Islamic temporality operates as a stratified and internally coherent system in which divine, existential, and lived dimensions of time are mutually constitutive rather than separable analytical domains. It should be emphasized that this model is not intended as a chronological reconstruction of Qur'ānic doctrine, but as a semiotic and interpretive mapping of temporality as it emerges from the text through reading.

At the highest level, divine temporality functions as the ontological ground of time itself, in which temporal succession is created, ordered, and rendered meaningful only within the framework of divine will and eschatological determination. Time is therefore not an autonomous continuum but a structured metaphysical medium through which creation, governance, and final judgment are articulated, establishing both cosmological order and conditions of accountability. This level is treated primarily as a textual-theological horizon rather than an ontological claim about divine temporality as such.

At the level of human existence, temporality unfolds as a finite and directional trajectory from worldly life (*dunyā*) through death and *barzakh* toward eschatological return and judgment, embedding human life within a linear but non-secular horizon in which temporal passage acquires ethical weight through its retrospective and future-oriented accountability. This existential structuring is inferred from Qur'ānic narrative patterns rather than systematized as an explicit doctrine within the text.

At the level of lived practice, this structure is continuously operationalized through recursive temporal segmentation, including daily ritual interruption, annual cyclical obligations, and life-course regulation, which collectively embed divine order into embodied and social time. Importantly, these practices do not merely reflect an already given temporality but actively reproduce and stabilize it, functioning as mechanisms of temporal recalibration through which metaphysical order is periodically re-inscribed into everyday life, while simultaneously aligning individual attention, collective rhythms, and material circulation with a unified but stratified temporal system. In this sense, ritual temporality functions as a mediating layer between metaphysical structure and lived cognition rather than a separate temporal regime.

Taken together, Islamic temporality is thus best understood not as a singular chronological framework but as a recursive multi-layered system of meaning production in which time operates simultaneously as ontology, existential horizon, and embodied ethical order. The model proposed here therefore contributes a layered semiotic reading of Qur'ānic temporality that integrates metaphysical structure with practice without reducing either to the other. In doing so, it offers a controlled analytical model that remains grounded in Qur'ānic textual patterns while remaining explicitly interpretive rather than doctrinal.

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RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF PRE-MODERN OTTOMAN TEMPORALITY VIEWED THROUGH OTTOMAN ISLAMIC MANUSCRIPTS

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Abstract

The Ottoman Empire is considered pre-modern prior to the 19th century reforms, which aimed at reshaping, modernizing and optimizing the society and state. The reformists shared the pre-existing Western view that the Ottoman society is lazy and inefficient. In the pre-modern Ottoman Empire, time was measured using seasonal hours, which later became the *gurubi* system (the *Alaturka* Hour System). Islamic prayer times played a central role in dividing the day into convenient segments, shaping the people's daily routines and temporality, which led to a characteristic lack of punctuality. The Ottomans encouraged and valued acts of worship, charity, and working for one's hereafter over work for profit, which created a clear contrast with the Western understanding of work and efficient use of time for profit. The *ulema* and Sufi luminaries who held important state positions in the pre-modern empire produced morality books and religious manuscripts that affected the morality and temporality of the people. Islamic Ottoman manuscripts serve as an authentic window into the pre-modern Muslim Ottoman mentality which perceived life and time with a central focus on religion. This paper discusses the religious influences on Ottoman temporality and provides examples from pre-modern Ottoman Islamic manuscripts located at the National Library of Latvia.

Keywords: *Ottoman Empire, temporality, religious manuscripts, Islam, Sufism.*

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Introduction

Traditionally, the Ottoman society is labelled as "pre-modern" for the period before the start of the Tanzimat reforms in the 19th century [Sariyannis 2017: 231]. From the Western point of view, the pre-modern Ottomans were observed to lead slow-paced unhurried lives; they often found time to lounge, drink coffee, and smoke, and they did not show ambition in their trade ventures, preferring to suffice themselves with earning their keep rather than expanding business [Hafez 2022: 17; 118; 141]. European travellers in the 17th and 18th centuries often described the Ottomans as "idle", "lazy" [Sariyannis 2017: 235] or "indifferent of time" [Wishnitzer 2015: 121]. However, this description does not necessarily have an ideological basis but is rather based in a fundamental difference between the two cultures in measuring time, defining the ideal state of being, and prioritizing the activities that constitute the best use of a person's time.

The mean time system did not enter the Ottoman society until the middle of the 19th century, and even then, was used in parallel with the previous hour system called the *gurubi* system or *alaturka saat* [Wishnitzer 2010: 47]. In contrast with the consistent and precise mean time system used in the West, the *gurubi* system had variables that changed from day to day, making precise timekeeping a difficult task to achieve [Wishnitzer 2010: 47]. Instead, Ottoman people relied on the daily Islamic prayer cycle which was in tune with the natural cycle of the sun to divide their days into segments which organized their daily activities [Wishnitzer 2010: 49; 50]. This method of timekeeping resulted in "approximate time" and contributed to the lack of punctuality and uniformity in the Ottoman society.

In addition to the effect of the time-keeping system on Ottoman temporality, Ottomans did not share the Western understanding of the concept of work and thus had different priorities when it came to utilizing their time. While the West understood work for profit as a pillar of civilization, the Ottomans placed that value on acts of worship and morality based in their faith. The Islamic framework not only governed the daily activities and routines of the population but also defined their understanding of the concept of work. In contrast with the Western understanding that time equals money, where the value of time lies in using it effectively to work and earn profit, the Ottomans attributed a different value to time focused on using it for acts of worship and good deeds, thus resulting in a different meaning attributed to the concepts of work and laziness [Hafez 2022: 54].

In this paper, Ottoman temporality is viewed as shaped by their timekeeping system, their definition of the ideal state of being, and their understanding of the concept of work, centring the Islamic influence on these aspects. Furthermore, the paper offers quotes from two Islamic Ottoman manuscripts from the pre-modern

Ottoman period to show direct examples of the Islamic framework that shaped the understanding of these concepts.

Information about the selected manuscripts

The two Ottoman manuscripts quoted in this paper can be found in the Rare Books collection at the National Library of Latvia, Riga. The first manuscript (RXA222S,6) is a copy of *En'am-i şerif* prayer book (*islāmticīga rokasgrāmata*) estimated to be from the 18th century[1]. The second manuscript (RXA222S,24) is titled *Prayer book* (*lūgšanu grāmata*), and the time of its writing is unknown, however, it matches the pre-reform Ottoman Islamic copied manuscripts in layout and content. Both manuscripts contain a compilation of Quranic chapters followed by a selection of various *du'a* and *evrad* among other components related to Islamic and Sufi practices.

Although the Ottoman Muslim identity was a Sunni Hanafi identity, there was a substantial Sufi influence on the Islam practiced within the empire [Al-Tikriti 2021: 62; Pfeifer 2021: 41]. Most of the morality book writers which shaped the population's understanding of various concepts before the 19th century were members of the *ulema*[2] and Sufi luminaries; they had extensive Islamic knowledge and addressed their books to the "virtuous Muslim" (usually assumed to be a male from the elite) who inhabited a "moral space shared by all who are together bound to God" [Hafez 2022: 41; 49; 54]. In addition to morality books, Sufi scholars and their students often occupied themselves with creating and copying religious manuscripts for pay or for educational purposes [Ahmad 2021: 374]. Although initially the manuscripts were intended for the use of the educated elite, some of the copied manuscripts, such as *En'am-i şerif*, which contained a collection of Quranic chapters, verses, *du'a*, *evrad*, and other religious texts and illustrations, were donated to libraries to be used by religious commonfolk [Bain 1999: 132]. Most of these copied religious manuscripts were produced from the 17th to the 19th century, with simpler versions produced in the sixteenth century, and although they changed over time, the changes primarily affected the quantity and variety of religious texts and illustrations included, while the texts themselves saw little change over time [Bain 1999: ii; 13; 64; 69; 75; 78]. Thus, these copied Islamic Ottoman manuscripts provide a direct view into the religious framework that the Muslim Ottoman mentality was shaped by during pre-modern times.

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1 The manuscript was estimated to be written in the 18th century. See: Hašaba, S. (2024). *Research Analysis of Theoretical and Practical Aspects of the Ottoman Manuscript "Islamic Handbook"*. Master's thesis. University of Latvia, https://dspace.lu.lv/items/e6aadf18-5e60-4946-a2e8-e003158d45a1

2 Islamic scholars.

It is important to note that the quotes extracted from the selected Ottoman manuscripts in this paper are in Arabic, as Islamic Ottoman manuscripts were often written in both Arabic and Ottoman Turkish [Bain 1999, 16]. Arabic language was used especially for Islamic texts and prayers in Ottoman manuscripts as Arabic is the language of Islam, and Ottoman calligraphers were well-versed in it [Faroqhi 1999: 27].

Keeping time in the pre-modern Ottoman Empire

Prior to the 19th century reforms, the Ottomans were characteristically unpunctual even in governmental and commercial structures [Wishnitzer 2010: 50]. This can be attributed to the frequently changing nature of the indigenous timekeeping system which was kept in use even after the introduction of mean time into the empire and was only abolished in 1926 with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey [Wishnitzer 2010: 47]. In addition, the convenience and habit of relying on the Islamic daily prayer cycle to tell time played a large role in delaying the necessity for precise mechanical timekeeping.

The Ottoman timekeeping system is based on the ancient scheme of seasonal or temporal hours where the day and night are each divided into twelve equal units. The daytime hours were counted from sunrise, while the nighttime hours were counted from sunset, which meant the length of the daytime hours was usually different than the length of the night hours [Wishnitzer 2015: 125]. However, for the Ottoman commoners, clocks were generally only interesting as a technological product of a foreign culture until the Tanzimat reforms [Wishnitzer 2015: 122]. The 16th, 17th and early 18th-century Ottoman historians seldom used hour precision, despite mechanical clocks already being known to the elites in the empire [Sariyannis 2017: 245]. In the 18th century, the use of mechanical clocks was more common in state decrees and chronicles but remained exclusive to the government until the second half of the 19th century [Wishnitzer 2015: 126]. The use of mechanical clocks for state affairs in the 18th century did not result in punctuality in state institutions, as the timekeeping system was inherently inconsistent and necessitated that all clocks are set to 12:00 at sunset every day to roughly indicate the seasonal hours [Wishnitzer 2015: 126]. Moreover, adjusting the clocks daily to 12:00 at every sunset wore down their mechanisms frequently and resulted in slight variations between different timepieces [Wishnitzer 2015: 127]. Since seasonal hours were non-uniform, and the time of sunset also varied on a daily basis, the clocks would show an approximate time [Wishnitzer 2015: 126]. Even in the 19th century, when time was referred to by the hour alone, time was still approximate. For example, in 1851, the schedule of a regular ferry states that it would depart "at approximately eleven o'clock, just before nightfall" [Wishnitzer 2015: 121]. The issue was not exactly in the availability and widespread use of mechanical clocks, as the construction of clock towers and the expansion of private watches did not result in change in the social organization of labour and did not influence to the philosophical view of society, compared to the way this change affected pre-Enlightenment Europe [Sariyannis 2017: 251]. This was not viewed as an issue by the Ottomans, as they were used to organizing their days according to the Islamic prayer cycle in accordance with the sun cycle rather than exact mechanical time.

Nevertheless, Ottomans were not completely foreign to precise timekeeping, but only when it came to religious practice. Since it was important to determine exact time for daily prayers and fasting purposes, Muslim astronomers developed the science of determining time called *'ilm al-miqāt* based on astronomic observations and mathematic calculations [Wishnitzer 2015: 128]. The *muvakkits*, or scholars versed in *'ilm al-miqāt* were responsible for setting the times of daily prayers including the time of the sunset [Wishnitzer 2015: 128, 129]. The Ottoman tradition starting from the fifteenth century was to measure time in twelve equal hours, where the sunset is considered the start of a day cycle and marked as twelve o'clock, however, this system of equal hours was limited to astronomers and *muvakkits* until much later [Wishnitzer 2010: 48]. In the 19th century, this equal-hour system became known as the *gurubi* system or *alaturka saat*, and the day was counted from one sunset to the next, dividing the day into twelve equal hours [Wishnitzer 2015: 127]. The Islamic day was considered to start at sunset since the months begin at the appearance of the new moon, which is first seen shortly after sunset [King 1993: 249].

According to Wishnitzer, pre-modern Ottoman temporality in various studies is often reduced to its religious dimension [Wishnitzer 2015: 122], as the Islamic daily prayer cycle was used to express time and keep schedules by commonfolk and by the state alike. The five daily Islamic prayers are dependent on the position of the sun in the sky and are thus defined in terms of astronomical phenomena [King 1993: 249]. The day began with the sunset prayer (*maghrib* – مَغْرِب), followed by the evening prayer at nightfall (*'isha* – عِشاء), then the dawn prayer at daybreak (*fajr* – فَجْر), and the two remaining prayers are the noon prayer shortly after astronomical midday (*zuhr* – ظُهْر) and the afternoon prayer determined by the length of shadows (*'asr* – عَصْر) [King, 1993: 250]. Early Muslims found it easy to determine the times of prayer using seasonal hours based on the hours of daytime passed, and precise measurements of when these prayers should begin were provided when the *muvakkits* appeared starting from the thirteenth century [King, 1993: 250, 251].

For the Ottomans, relying on the prayer cycle for temporal orientation was instinctive, as it made perfect sense with the ancient seasonal hour system and the natural cycle of the sun. The first found description of a workday in the Ottoman Empire dates back to 1678, where a charter of a library stated it would be open "three days a week from sunrise until the afternoon prayers" [Sariyannis 2017: 247]. In the late 18th century, when the use of hours was more common, it was still relative to prayer times. For example, in 1789, an imperial degree to the chief of financial services ordered that all clerks "come to the office in the third hour after the morning prayers and return home at half past ten after the afternoon prayers" [Sariyannis 2017: 248]. The shift away from using daily prayers to tell time happened at different times depending on region and industry, and some industries maintained defining time in terms of daily prayers until the end of the 19th century, such as the Anatolian silk and cotton industries [Sariyannis 2017: 250]. The prayer times were deeply interconnected with the Ottoman *alaturka* hour system, to the point where attempts made to replace the *alaturka* system with mean time faced opposition which claimed that "to abolish our clock is to abolish the prayer" [Wishnitzer 2010: 68].

To the Ottoman Muslim, religion and its rituals were the centre of life. The daily prayer is the second pillar of Islam and a stable, mandatory component of daily routine for every believer. Centring prayer in a Muslim's routine is a way of centring God in their daily life, and a reminder that all time belongs to God and must be used in His service. Ottoman religious manuscripts before the 19th century include texts that express this as a fact from the Islamic point of view.

In the Ottoman religious prayer book, manuscript RXA222S,24, located at the National Library of Latvia, there are several quotations that support this statement. On page 74 there is an example from a Sufi *evrad* stating "الليل والنّهار لله" (night and day are for Allah). This can be interpreted with a double meaning: night and day belong to Allah and should be spent for Allah. On page 78, the text of a *zikr* states "اللهم بك أصبحنا وبك أوجينا وبك نحيا وبك نموت" (O Allah, by You we have reached morning and by You we have reached the culmination [of the day] and by You we live and by You we die". This prayer is still repeated in modern times, however, "وبك أوجينا" (and by You we have reached the culmination [of the day]) is replaced by "وبك أمْسَيْنا" (and with You we have reached the evening), which has a similar meaning and is based on a hadith narrated by Al-Bukhari, instructing that this *zikr* should be repeated in the mornings [*Al-Adab al-Mufrad*, 573–1199]. Another example can be found in the text of a *zikr* on page 86 "اللهم هذا ادبار اليك وادبار النهارك". The text, however, contains grammatical and spelling mistakes (which are not uncommon in Ottoman manuscripts, as Arabic was often not their native language), and one verb is miswritten. Since the prayer is still used nowadays and can be found in Islamic prayer and hadith books, the quote can be corrected to "اللهم هذا إقبال ليلك وإدبار نهارك", a *zikr* that should be repeated at sunset from a hadith narrated by Al-Albani, and it translates to "O Allah, this is the coming of Your night and the retirement [end] of Your day" [*Da'if al-Jami' al-Saghir wa Ziyadatuhu al-Fath al-Kabir* 774–4123].

The second Ottoman religious manuscript, a copy of an *En'am-i şerif* prayer book, RXA222S,6, located at the National Library of Latvia, contains similar expressions. On page 80, a quote from a *du'a* titled "دعاء قربان" (supplication; prayer as an offering) states "إن صلاتي ونسكي ومحياي ومماتي لله رب العالمين", which is a sentence taken from verse 162 from the sixth Quranic chapter "Cattle" (*al-An'ām* – الأنعام). M. Khattab translated this text as "Surely my prayer, my worship, my life, and my death are all for Allah – Lord of all worlds" [Khattab 2015: 142]. Page 115 contains a *du'a* that should be recited in the morning to gain protection throughout the day, and it states "اللهم صباحنا صباحك" (O Allah, our morning is Your morning). These quotes reiterate that all time belongs to Allah and must be used in His service.

Although time was generally relative to the Islamic daily prayer times, setting a meeting "after the afternoon prayer", for example, referred to a rather loosely defined range of time. Ottoman Muslims usually performed prayers at the same time when the *azan*3 sounded, however, the duration of performing daily prayers could vary from person to person. In addition to the mandatory daily prayers observed by all Muslims, there are also non-obligatory recommended prayers that the more pious performed with regularity, while others performed on occasion. Moreover, a believer could choose to read daily recitations such as *du'a* or *zikr* before or after the obligatory prayer, lengthening the duration spent in worship. A. Bain mentions several examples of such prayers from Ottoman religious manuscripts that included the instruction "Read every morning and evening" in accordance with daily prayer times [Bain 1999: 66; 67; 252].

All Islamic actions are based on one's intention (*niyat*), where the believer often sets their intention verbally before the action [Bain 1999: 1]. The setting of intention can be performed before ritual ablution (*wudu'*) or before an obligatory or non-obligatory prayer [Bain 1999: 1]. Manuscripts RXA222S,24 and RXA222S,6 from the National Library of Latvia both contain a list of expressions to set intention before each daily prayer, mentioning the formulation for the obligatory and the additional non-obligatory prayers. These texts can provide an insight into the daily prayers performed by Ottomans before the 19th century.

Manuscript RXA222S,24 formulates the setting of intention for the obligatory daily prayers on pages 87–89, as follows: "نويت أن أصلي فريضة الصلواة الفجر ركعتين متوجهاً الى جهة الكعبة خالصاً لله تعالى الله أكبر" (I intend to pray the obligatory dawn prayer, two *rak'as*, facing the direction of the Kaaba, purely for the sake of Allah Almighty, Allah is the Greatest). Similar intention statements are repeated for each of the obligatory noon prayer (فريضة الصلواة الظهر), the obligatory afternoon prayer (فريضة الصلواة العصر), the obligatory sunset prayer (فريضة الصلواة المغرب),

3 *Azan* or *adhan* (أذان) – daily call to prayers.

and the obligatory evening prayer (فريضة الصلواة العشاء). The number of *rakʿas* is also mentioned for each, where the noon, afternoon, and evening prayers are four *rakʿas,* while the sunset obligatory prayer is three *rakʿas.* In addition, the manuscript lists the intention formulations for optional daily (recommended) prayers that are to be performed before or after the obligatory ones (depending on the prayer). The formulation of the intention is the same, however, the optional prayers are called *sunna* prayers (Arabic: سُنّة, spelling in the manuscript: سُنّت – Prophetic practice or tradition) instead of *farīḍa* (فريضة – obligation). The manuscript mentions the following non-obligatory prayers: the dawn *sunna* prayer (صلواة سنّت الفجر) – two *rakʿas*, the noon *sunna* prayers (سنّت الظهر) – one is four *rakʿas* and one is two, the sunset *sunna* prayer (صلواة سنّت المغرب) – two *rakʿas*, and the evening *sunna* prayer (سنّت العشاء) – two *rakʿas*.

Manuscript RXA222S,6 does not list the intention formulations for all daily mandatory prayers but provides some examples of setting intentions before prayers on page 106. The manuscript includes the statement used for the obligatory Friday prayers: "نويت أن أصلى فريضة هذا الجمعة مستقبلًا بالقبلة مقتديًا بهذا الايمام اداءً لله تعالى اللّٰه أكبر"[4] (I intend to perform the obligatory Friday prayer facing the *qiblah*[5], following this imam[6], in devotion to Allah Almighty, Allah is the Greatest). For the non-obligatory Friday prayer, the formulation is as follows: "نويت أن اصلّى سنّة الجمعة مستقبلًا بالقبلة اداءً لله تعالى اللّٰه اكبر" (I intend to perform the *sunna* Friday prayer facing the *qiblah*, in devotion to Allah Almighty, Allah is the Greatest). This manuscript also makes a distinction between the *farīḍa* prayers and the *sunna* prayers. In addition, it mentions an intention statement for a non-obligatory Friday prayer that is not tied to a specific time: "نويت أن أصلى سنّة المطلق هذه الجمعة مستقبلًا بالقبلة اداءً لله تعالى اللّٰه أكبر" (I intend to perform the *sunna al-muṭlaq* [unrestricted] prayer this Friday, facing the *qiblah*, in devotion to Allah Almighty, Allah is the Greatest). This manuscript shows that there were cases where the obligatory noon prayer was not prayed right away but rather delayed to the end of its allocated timeframe and performed shortly before the afternoon prayer. The intention set in this case is, as follows: "نويت ان اصلّى هذه الظهر الأخيرة مستقبلًا بالقبلة اداءً لله تعالى اللّٰه أكبر" (I intend to pray this last noon prayer facing the *qiblah*, in devotion to Allah Almighty, Allah is the Greatest.). The manuscript also indicates that sometimes the obligatory noon prayer is delayed too long and its timeframe is missed, in which case the believer would set their intention slightly differently: "نويت ان اصلّى اخر الظهر ادركت وقته ولم

4 The sentence contains some spelling mistakes and can be corrected to: "نويت أن أصلى فريضة هذه الجمعة مستقبلًا بالقبلة مقتديًا بهذا الإمام اداءً لله تعالى اللّٰه أكبر"

5 The direction of the Kaaba to which Muslims turn during prayer.

6 The person who leads the prayer in a mosque.

اصلّی بعد الله اکبر" (I intend to pray the last noon prayer, I realized its time had passed [or: I reached the end of its time] and I have not prayed yet, Allah is the Greatest).

These examples show that duration of performing daily prayers may vary from person to person depending on whether they are performing only the obligatory prayers or also adding the non-obligatory ones to their daily practice. This could be one of the reasons that contributed to events being scheduled for a non-specific range of time rather than a precise point in time. In addition, the last example from manuscript RXA222S,6 shows that even in the most important and routine daily practices, delays would still occur, although potential reasons were not specified.

The Ottoman pre-modern concept of work

1. Relying on God

Not only did the Islamic prayer times divide the day and organize daily activities, but the entire temporal space of the Ottomans was also governed by religion; it even defined the ideal state of being. From the perspective of the Ottomans, according to E. Glassen (1987), the ideal mental state for a person is *huzur,* translated as "peace of soul, ease", emphasizing that a person's main need is tranquillity or *rahat* [Sariyannis 2017: 235–236]. According to M. Hafez (2022), the pre-modern Ottomans strived to live in a state of contentment or *kanaat*, which was viewed by the later reformists of the 19th century as laziness and hedonism as it often presented as passivity [Hafez 2022: 40, 69]. When existing in this state, a person would fully resign and rely on God, trusting him to manage and arrange of all their worldly affairs (Ottoman Turkish: *tevekkül,* Arabic: *tawakkul*) [Hafez 2022: 36].

Tevekkül is an important concept in Islamic religious terminology that had a profound significance in Sufism and in the Ottoman Empire, meaning to entrust one's worldly affairs to God and rely on him [Lewisohn 2012]. The full reliance on God in Islam means to believe that there is no power and no cause to anything except in God, and results in the believer gaining a sense of reassurance and tranquillity which helps him on his worldly journey and is meant to be the source of his strength and effectiveness [Al-Shamarti 2021: 296]. Muslims believe that *Tevekkül* can be reached only by true believers, as they are able to fully surrender to God, trusting that nothing can happen without his will and all that he wills is for the believer's greater benefit [Al-Sharmati 2021: 303]. The concept of *tevekkül* is mentioned frequently in the Quran and is part of the ideal mental state that a believer should base their decisions and reactions on when dealing with worldly affairs. Due to its importance, it is also frequently mentioned in various forms of Islamic and Sufi texts such as *du'a* and *evrad*.

In the Ottoman religious prayer book, manuscript RXA222S,24, several such examples can be found. On page 69, a clear example comes forth in the following prayer: "حسبنا الله ونعم الوكيل، يا مُدبّرًا بلا وزير سهّل علينا وعلى والدينا كلّ عسيرة، الى الله تصير الأمور فالله خير حافظاً" (Allah is sufficient for us and he is the best disposer of affairs. Oh *mudabbir* [manager, arranger, orchestrator] without a minister, make every difficulty easier for us and for our parents. All matters are in Allah's hands, and Allah is the best of guardians). The first part of this prayer is still globally repeated by Muslims whenever faced with difficulty or tragedy (حسبنا الله ونعم الوكيل), and it is a reminder that nothing happens outside of God's will, and nobody can aid a person except God. The last word in this sentence "وكيل" (*wakīl*), often translated in this context as "disposer of affairs" is defined as a person chosen as a procurator to look after one's business and govern and dispose on one's behalf [Lewisohn 2012]. On page 71, another example is present: "لا اله إلّا الله عليه توكّلت" (There is no God but Allah, on him I rely [in Him I trust]), it uses the verb "توكّل/يَتَوَكَّلُ" (*tawakkala/yatawakkalu* – to rely on or trust in), and it signifies complete trust in Allah and reliance on Him as an expression of one's monotheistic belief in Allah. Another prayer on page 79 contains the sentence "اللهم يسّر أمورنا" (Allah, make our affairs easy), which can be used in a broader sense for any circumstance that created some difficulty or complication in daily life, or as a pre-emptive measure when such obstacles are expected. A quote from page 83 also expresses the concept that only God can cause someone to gain or lose in worldly affairs, whether materially or in terms of status and reputation: "تعزّ من تشاء وتذلّ من تشاء" (You exalt [give honour to] whom You will and You disgrace [humiliate] whom You will).

The second Ottoman religious manuscript, a copy of an *En'am-i şerif* prayer book, RXA222S,6, contains similar expressions on the importance of *tevekkül* for the believer. On pages 84 and 85, the manuscript included some *ayat şerif*, which are specific Quranic verses isolated and read for particular benefits that can be drawn from them or used by Sufis in Ottoman times in their amulets and talismans [Bain 1999: 64]. The first of these verses written in the manuscript is a verse (*'āya* – آية) about *tevekkül,* and it is verse 51 from the ninth Quranic chapter "Repentance" (*at-Tawbah* – التّوبة): "قل لن يصيبنا الا ما كتب الله لنا هو مولىٰنا وعلى الله فليتوكل المؤمنون". M. Khattab translated this verse as follows: "Say, 'Nothing will ever befall us except what Allah has destined for us. He is our Protector.' So, in Allah let the believers put their trust" [Khattab 2015: 175]. The fourth of the five *ayat şerif* selected in this manuscript was also about *tevekkül*, and it is the 56th verse from the eleventh Quranic chapter "Hûd" (هود): "إنّي توكلت على الله ربي وربكم ما من دابةٍ إلا هو آخذ بناصيتها إنّ ربّي علىٰ صراط مستقيم". M. Khattab translated this verse: "I have put my trust in Allah—my Lord and your Lord. There is no living creature that is not completely under His control. Surely my Lord's Way is perfect justice" [Khattab 2015: 201]. In both of these verses, Khattab translated "فليتوكل" (*fal-jatawakkal*) and "توكّلتُ" (*tawakkaltu*), both forms of the Arabic verb "توكّل/يَتَوَكَّلُ" (*tawakkala/yatawakkalu*), as "putting trust" in Allah. On page 88 in this manuscript, a *du'a* includes the sentence "عليك توكّلت وانت رب العرش العظيم" (in You I put my trust [on You I rely] and You are the God [Lord] of the Mighty Throne). This part of the prayer references the 129th verse of the ninth Quranic chapter "Repentance" (*at-Tawbah*), where the text is slightly different, "عليه توكّلتُ وهو ربّ العرش العظيم", translated by M. Khattab as "In Him I put my trust. And He is the Lord of the Mighty Throne" [Khattab 2015: 184].

The concept of *tevekkül* is essential to Muslim believers to maintain the correct state of mind in dealing with worldly affairs. This concept is frequently mentioned in the Quran, some of those verses were emphasized as *ayat şerif*, and the concept is also mentioned in the texts of various prayers included in Ottoman religious manuscripts to serve as daily reminders to their users. *Tevekkül* as a constant state of being played an important part in the creation of the framework on which Ottoman temporality was based, as the ideal state of being was a state of calmness, contentment, and complete reliance on God. This meant that worrying about wealth or working diligently to accumulate it indicated a lack of reliance on God, thus made the effort in this aspect unnecessary, and excessive effort frowned upon.

2. Working for the Hereafter

The West considered efficient, organized hard work as a pillar for civilization. On the other hand, the Ottoman language in the 19th century did not yet have a direct translation for the word civilization, rather translating it to various words including *ahlak* (morality), *edep* (proper manners, conduct, or civility), *terbiye* (education/breeding), *talim* (learning), among others [Benesch et al. 2015: 107]. These translations show that the Ottomans considered morality, rather than work for profit, to be the foundation of their societal order and the main influence on their worldview and priorities.

Generally, work and the effective use of time was understood through the lens of ethical practice of faith, where performing activities to attain a perfection of one's character was a virtue, whereas failing to do so due to laziness was a vice [Hafez, 2022: 54]. For the educated Ottoman elite, aside from acts of worship, work was primarily defined as attaining knowledge or giving charity [Sariyannis 2017: 236]. Moralist Ottoman writers of the 18th century, such as Nâbî, also encouraged their readers to work, however, the word work or *sa'y* (Arabic: سَعي) was defined as attaining knowledge such as sciences and literature [Sariyannis 2017: 235].

Before the mid-19th century, and as early as the eighth or ninth centuries, early Muslim moralists appropriated the Aristotelian virtue ethics method to shape the "Islamic" ethics tradition which remained the main approach until the reform period [Hafez 2022: 54]. Ottoman Islamic morality books organized the information based on the concepts of virtues and vices, and work was never viewed as an obligation or duty for the common folk until the late 19th century [Hafez 2022: 51]. Rather than a duty (*farīḍa* – فريضة), working for one's livelihood was considered a right (*ḥaqq* – حقّ) [Hafez 2022: 57]. The reasoning for this was also based in Islam, as Al-Sarakhsi explains that if one does not work and earn their keep, they will not have the circumstances necessary to perform their religious obligations [Hafez 2022: 57].

In contrast, laziness was seen as a deficiency in desire that restricted the person's willingness and ability to perform actions ranging from religious obligations to acts permissible by religion, including but not limited to working for their livelihood [Hafez 2022: 55]. Laziness regarding work and worldly affairs was also understood as a separate notion to laziness that hinders a person from their religious duties. When it comes to worldly affairs, it was sufficient to earn one's livelihood and not strive for more profit, as being too involved in chasing profit can be considered greed, and it furthermore limits the time the person has left for religious matters [Hafez 2022: 58]. Laziness that affects the person's ability to perform their religious duties, on the other hand, was viewed as far more compromising of a person's character and more condemnable, as it costs a person their eternal happiness [Hafez 2022: 57, 58].

Thus, work in a context of performing religious rites and good deeds was seen as more valuable and important than work for profit, creating an alternative understanding of the concept of work as working for one's Hereafter. Ottoman religious manuscripts RXA222S,24 and RXA222S,6 provide some examples where words related to work were used in a context of performing religious actions for benefits in the Hereafter.

Manuscript RXA222S,24 contains several examples of this. A quote from pages 76–77 states "اللهم اجعلنا مشغولين بأمرك" (O Allah, make us preoccupied [busy] with Your cause [with what You ordered]), where "مَشْغول" (*mašġūl*, pl. *mašġūlūn* – مشغولون) means "busy" or "occupied". On the same pages, the text continues to say "مُبغضين للدّنيا محبّين للآخرة" (despising *dunya* [life, the material world], loving the Hereafter), emphasizing that actions of a person should be focused on religious reward rather than worldly rewards. On page 81, a prayer includes a part of verse 286 from the Quranic chapter "The Cow" (*al-Baqarah* – البقرة) "لا يكلّف الله نفساً إلّا وسعها لها ما كسبت وعليها ما اكتسبت", translated by M. Khattab as "Allah does not require of any soul more than what it can afford. All good [it earns] will be for its own benefit, and all evil [it acquired] will be to its own loss" [Khattab 2015: 67]. The verbs used in this verse are "كَسَبَ/يَكسبُ" (to earn) and "اكْتَسَبَ/يَكْتَسِبُ" (to earn, gain, or acquire) are associated with work and earning, in this context used for gaining or losing benefits in the Hereafter based on a person's actions. On page 93, the verb "سعى/يَسْعى" (to strive, seek, or work) is used in the sentence "اليك نسعى" (we strive for/to You). Page 94 contains the sentence "اللهم انّي أسألك فعل الخيرات

وترك المنكرات" (O Allah, I ask You to enable me to do good deeds and to refrain from evil deeds), framing actions of a person through the religious ethics of vices and virtues. Finally, on pages 94-95, the text continues to this statement "اسئلك حبّك وحبّ من يحبّك وحبّ عملٍ يقرّبني الى حبّك" (I ask You for Your love, the love of those who love You, and the love of work [actions] that draw me closer to Your love). The word used here is "عَمَل" which directly translates to "work" and is usually used to mean labour, profession, or action.

Manuscript RXA222S,6 contains less direct use of terms associated with work in the Islamic context, however, page 114 contains a prayer that shows the priorities of a Muslim Ottoman man: "اللهم ارزقنا رزقاً حلالاً طيّباً طاهِراً وزوجة صالحة وولداً مؤمناً وعلماً نافعاً وعملاً مقبولاً" (O Allah, provide us with [grant us] *halal,* good, and pure sustenance, a righteous wife, a believing child, beneficial knowledge, and accepted work". The word used to refer to work accepted by God is "عَمَل", similar to the last quote from manuscript RXA222S,24, here used to refer to work, actions, or good deeds. Moreover, this quote asks Allah to provide sustenance using a verb and noun from the root ر-ز-ق (r-z-q). The word *rizq* (رِزق) translates to "something granted by someone to someone else as a benefit" and is usually used to mean sustenance, indicating that sustenance is granted by Allah rather than as an outcome of one's toil [Bosworth and McAuliffe 2012].

Muslim Ottomans believed that it was sufficient to work just enough to make ends meet and spend the rest of one's time in worship, as God was considered the provider. It was commendable to rely on God to manage one's worldly affairs, as He is the only one who can provide sustenance. Both Ottoman manuscripts contain frequent mentions of Allah as the provider of riches and sustenance, emphasizing His generosity.

The Ottoman religious prayer book, manuscript RXA222S,24, offers various examples. On page 63, a prayer includes the text "لا اله إلّا اللّه خير الرّازقين" (There is no God but Allah, the best of providers). On page 83, a prayer states "ترزق من تشاء بغير حساب اللهم ارزقنا بغير حساب" (You provide for whomever you will [wish] without measure, O Allah, provide for us without measure). These examples use *rāziq* (رازِق) to mean "provider" and the verb "رَزَقَ/يَرْزُقُ" (to provide) to refer to Allah as the provider. At times, the verb can also be used to express that God can provide in a non-material sense as well, for example, the text on page 78: "أرنا الباطل باطلاً وارزقنا اجتنابه" (show us falsehood as falsehood [for what it is] and provide us with the ability to avoid it). In addition to God being the provider of material wealth and righteousness, texts emphasize the generosity of Allah, such as the quote from page 70, "لم يزل ربّنا رحيماً ولا يزال كريماً" (our God has always been merciful and is still generous), and another from page 71: "سبحان اللّه ما أكرم اللّه" (glory be to Allah, how generous Allah is!).

Ottoman manuscript RXA222S,6 also contains some examples on material *rizq*, as on page 85, where selected *ayat şerif* include verse 60 from the Quranic chapter 29 "The Spider" (*al-'ankabūt* – العنكبوت): "وكأين من دابة لا تحمل رزقها الله يرزقها وإياكم وهو السميع العليم". M. Khattab translates this verse as follows: "How many are the creatures that cannot secure their provisions! It is Allah Who provides for them and you as well. He is indeed the All-Hearing, All-Knowing." [M. Khattab 2015: 350]. On page 111, a text states "الحمد لله الذي أطعمنا وسقينا" (praise be to Allah who has fed us and given us drink), and on page 105 a text contains the phrase "بسم الله الكافي" (in the name of Allah, the Sufficient). In a non-material sense, on page 79, the verb "رَزَقَ/يَرْزُقُ" (to provide) is also used to ask Allah to grant or provide forgiveness "ارزقنا عفوا". These quotes show a strong belief that Allah is the sole provider of material or immaterial gains.

Moreover, both manuscripts refer to Allah's Most Beautiful Names (*Al-Asmā' al-Ḥusnā* – الأسماء الحُسنى), which include names describing Allah's capability to provide and his generous nature. These names of Allah were extracted from the Quran and hadiths by pious Muslims. They may vary in number but are usually ninety-nine, called the Most Beautiful (*al-ḥusnā* – الحُسنى), and are not only used to refer to Allah, but also often memorized and repeated with the use of a rosary to gain benefits [K. Fleet, G. Krämer, et. al. 2007: 713]. The names selected from each manuscript are the ones that refer to Allah as a provider of sustenance and riches. In manuscript RXA222S,24, on pages 66-68, the manuscript mentions the following names of Allah: "يا رزّاق")O Provider), "يا مُنعِمْ" (O Benefactor, Giver, Granter), "يا غنيّ" (O Rich One, Wealthy One), "يا مُغني" (O Enricher), "يا مُعطي" (O Giver), and "يا نافِع" (O One who Benefits [others]). In manuscript RXA222S,6, on pages 67-68, the following names of Allah are mentioned: "الوهّاب" (the Bestower), "الرزّاق" (the Provider), "المُقيت" (the Nourisher), "الكريم" (the Generous), "الواجد" (the Resourceful), "المقتدر" (the All-Determiner), "ذو الجلال والاكرام" (the Lord of Majesty and Generosity), "الغني" (the Rich), "المغني" (the Enricher), and "النّافع" (He Who Benefits [others]).

The examples provided above, whether taken from Quranic verses, prayer texts, or the names of Allah, show a strong belief in the nature of Allah as a provider of wealth, sustenance, and the ability to do good deeds. Thus, the sustenance of a believer is provided by Allah, but so is his good moral character. With this context, the Ottoman Muslim would define work as religious worship and good deeds, prioritizing perfecting his moral character through prayer and worship, and gaining benefit in the Hereafter over worldly gains which he trusts God to provide.

Conclusion

In the pre-modern Ottoman Empire before the reforms of the 19th century, the Ottomans lived slow-paced lives. The delay in the introduction of precise mechanical timekeeping in their society did not pose a problem, as they were used to approximate time in reference to the position of the sun and the daily Islamic prayer times. The five obligatory Islamic prayer times were of utmost importance to the routines of the Ottoman Muslims and served as a way to conveniently partition the day and arrange their schedules. In contrast with the West, work for profit was not viewed as an obligation, as that, for the Ottomans, was replaced in importance with working for the Hereafter.

Ottoman Islamic manuscripts from the pre-modern period, RXA222S,24 and RXA222S,6, contained within their texts ample evidence that painted a clear picture of the religious framework that shaped the temporality of the Ottoman Muslim. Regarding the Ottoman understanding of time, the manuscripts pointed to an ingrained belief that all time in this world belongs to God and must be spent in His service, rather than chasing worldly gains. The statements used to set intention for obligatory and non-obligatory prayers found in the manuscript show that aside from the five daily prayers (*farīḍa*), there are non-obligatory prayers (*sunna*) that may be performed by some Muslims, which can lengthen the time they spend in worship. Since the prayer times were used to set schedules, the variations in time spent in prayers may have further contributed to the lack of sense of punctuality. The ideal state of being for an Ottoman Muslim is to be in a state of *huzur* (peace of soul) which leads a person to fully resign their worldly affairs to God (*tevekkül*). Quotes extracted from the Quranic and non-Quranic texts in both selected manuscripts evidence a belief that God is the only disposer of all affairs and must be relied on, as he has agency over everything. Thus, wealth and well-being can only come from God, so one has no need to exert excessive effort or place too much importance on working for worldly profit. Since time belongs to God and He must be relied on to manage worldly affairs, the Ottoman Muslim placed importance on spending their time in worship and good deeds based on Islamic ethics. The selected manuscripts contain texts that show that a person must focus on gaining religious rewards earned through their actions. Various words related to work were used in a religious context, rather than work for profit. Moreover, the manuscripts showed various references to God as the sole provider of sustenance, wealth, and ability to do good deeds, emphasizing His ultimate generosity.

In conclusion, the pre-modern Ottoman Muslim's temporality was religion centric. This was displayed by the importance of daily Islamic prayer in daily routines, scheduling, and orientating in time. The ideal state of being for an Ottoman Muslim was based in a calmness obtained through full reliance on God and letting go of chasing worldly gains. Full reliance on God in this context meant to focus instead on improving one's character in an Islamic understanding, believing that worship and good deeds are primary, while the worldly affairs and sustenance will be managed and provided by God.

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SACRED TIME AND ORDINARY TIME: CAUCASIAN ALBANIAN AND MOUNTAIN JEWISH TEMPORAL CONCEPTS IN THE RELIGIOUS CULTURE OF AZERBAIJAN

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Abstract

Azerbaijan, as a multi-confessional space at the crossroads of East and West, has preserved distinct religious perspectives over time, as evidenced by the practices of both indigenous Christian (Albanian) and Jewish (Mountain Jewish) communities. In contemporary scholarship on the region's religious history, the question of time – its sacralization, cyclicality, linearity, and ritual function – is largely overlooked. Understanding how different religious tradition's structure sacred and profane time can help us gain a better understanding of Azerbaijani culture, identity, and interreligious interaction.

The purpose of this article is to analyse and compare the religious concepts of time among Albanian Christian descendants (particularly within the Udi community) and Azerbaijan's Mountain Jewish community. The goal is to reveal how differences and similarities in temporal frameworks influence ritual practices and liturgical calendars; religious education and tradition transmission; social and religious communication; and interaction with state-imposed temporal structures.

Special attention is paid to the boundary between "sacred time" and "ordinary time", as well as the mechanisms of transition between these temporal regimes in the context of local religious cultures. The study seeks to reconstruct the specific "grammars of time" in the religious lives of these two communities and demonstrate how sacred time contributes to stable models of collective identity and social order.

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The research is based on a comparative religious studies approach, combining historical-analytical methods (study of religious calendars, community statutes, oral traditions), ethnographic fieldwork (participant observation of rituals), and elements of the phenomenology of religion (time as religious experience).

Keywords: *sacred time, profane time, Caucasian Albanians, Mountain Jews, identity, rituals.*

Introduction

Time, in religious studies, is never merely a neutral chronological framework. It is a symbolic architecture, a tool for ordering the world and legitimizing identities. The distinction between sacred time and ordinary time, articulated by scholars, helps us understand how communities create rhythms of meaning, collective memory, and ritual life.

The religious culture of Azerbaijan is a unique tapestry woven from centuries of coexistence between various ethnic and confessional groups, where the intersection of sacred and ordinary time has shaped a distinct national identity. Azerbaijan's religious culture feels like a patchwork quilt stitched together over centuries by all kinds of people living side by side. It has always been a place where different faiths meet. Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, and Muslims all crossed paths here, mixing old pagan beliefs, fire-worship, and the big monotheistic traditions. You can see this blend everywhere [Pashayeva 2018].

People marked time in two different ways. Sacred time followed the rhythm of rituals and religious festivals. That's what held communities together. Day-to-day life ran on a different clock, one set by farming, trading, and the rise and fall of ancient states like Caucasian Albania [Pashayeva 2016].

This article delves into the ways how two groups (the Caucasian Albanians and Mountain Jews) thought about sacred time, considering their calendars, their rituals, and how these traditions have survived or changed, especially now that Azerbaijan champions multiculturalism. In Azerbaijan, a region characterized by exceptional multicultural continuity, we find noteworthy examples of how temporal concepts function as markers of identity and as instruments of cultural resilience. Understanding how different religious tradition's structure sacred and profane time can provide a better understanding of Azerbaijani culture, identity, and interreligious interaction.

1. Methodology

The research is based on a comparative religious studies approach, combining historical-analytical methods, ethnographic fieldwork, and elements of the phenomenology of religion. The study seeks to reconstruct the specific "grammars of time" in the religious lives of these two communities and demonstrate how sacred time contributes to stable models of collective identity and social order.

2. Case studies

2.1 Caucasian Albanian tradition

The conceptions of holy and ordinary time in the culture of Caucasian Albania were intricately entwined, reflecting the shift from pagan astral cults to institutional Christianity, as well as the intricacies of its economic system. The sacred time of the Albanians was determined by liturgical cycles, astral cults, and rituals that connected the community with the divine world [Ozdashli 2016]. Astral worship, in which the sacred calendar was determined by the motions of celestial bodies, was the source of Caucasian Albania's temporal conceptions. Albanians mainly worshipped the Moon (Selena), the Sun (Helios), and the Sky (Zeus), according to ancient sources, most notably Strabo [Bekirova 2021; Kirzioghlu 1994]. To be closer to the heavens, human and animal sacrifices were made on high mountains during sacred times in pre-Christian times. In the "sacred region" of Sheki, where high priests were second only to the king, the worship of the Moon was especially important [Mamedova 2005; Gipper 2023]. The time of death was perceived as a transition to another world, requiring the burial of the person with all their belongings and the sacrifice of animals (sheep, horses) to ensure the soul's sustenance [Kirzioghlu 1994]. A syncretic sacred tradition involved the worship of the sky god Tanri-han. Rituals included sacrificing horses to tall oaks and hanging the skins and heads of animals from branches to ensure divine favour. The Udi tradition has preserved the *patorah* (funeral) ritual, which has its roots in the Albanian period [Bekirova 2021]. Profane time for many was synchronized with the arrival of international caravans. Goods from India and Central Asia travelled through Albania via the Kura River toward the Black Sea [Afandiyev 2019]. For many Albanians, daily life was tied to cycles of international trade. Life in the foothills was governed by the cycles of livestock migrations to summer and winter pastures [Pashayeva 2018]. An ordinary custom that significantly impacted social welfare was the practice of burying the deceased with all their material property. This often leaves heirs in a state of poverty, stripping them of inherited wealth.

Albanian sacred time changed to a liturgical framework with the introduction of Christianity by St. Elishe (Yeqishe) in the first century AD and its subsequent adoption as the state religion in the fourth century [Akhundov 1986; Gipper 2023; Pashayeva 2022]. A new ritual cycle centred on churches like Kish, which was constructed on the site of an old pagan temple, was introduced with the founding of the Albanian Autocephalous Church. By building 365 churches (one for every day of the year) and codifying religious laws at the Council of Aguen to govern social and spiritual behaviour, separating them from worldly affairs [Velikhanli 2007]. King Vachagan III further institutionalized this holy period in the fifth century (488 BCE) [Kalankatuklu 2006; Ozdashli 2016; Jafarov 2025]. According to Strabo, vineyards had a harvest every two years; everyday time was based on practical demands like ploughing with wooden ploughs and the ripening cycles of the grapes.

Archaic aspects of everyday life, like agricultural sacrifices and the worship of holy trees, continued as syncretic customs among the local populace despite Christianization.

A Christian culture that flourished in the eastern Caucasus until the Middle Ages, traces of which survive today in the liturgical practices and community memory of the Udi people, especially in Nij and Oghuz [Pashayeva 2016; Velikhanli 2007]. Although the institutional Albanian Church disappeared under later political and religious transformations, its temporal structures left a durable imprint [Schulze 2015; Afandiyev 2109]. Albanian Christianity preserved a strongly agricultural interpretation of sacred time. Festive cycles were synchronized with agricultural seasons, linking Christian celebrations, such as the Nativity or the Feast of the Cross, with older patterns of seasonal renewal [Gipper 2023].

Landscapes (mountains, springs, and groves) were imbued with ritual significance. Sacred time unfolded not only in churches but also in natural sites, where memory and myth fused with the rhythm of the year. Patronal feasts, village-based celebrations, and remembrance days connected temporal identity to local lineage and territory. Thus, sacred time anchored community cohesion even under cultural pressure. In the modern era, Udi communities maintain a layered perception of time: the Christian liturgical cycle coexists with post-Soviet secular calendars and with traditional seasonal customs that trace their origin to the Albanian past.

For the Albanians, holy time was like the design of their temples, unchanging, oriented toward heaven and eternity. In contrast, ordinary time mirrored the flow of the Kura River, which fluctuated with the seasons, political winds, and the needs of field irrigation [Gipper 2023; Pashayeva 2022].

2.2. Mountain Jewish (Juhuro) tradition

Here, one encounters a markedly different temporal model, text-centered, historically conscious, and legally codified. Jewish sacred time is structured around collective historical memory: The Exodus, the destruction of the Temples, exile, and redemption. Time becomes a carrier of theological meaning, linking the present to foundational events. The Mountain Jews (Juhuro) of Azerbaijan, who claim ancestry from the Ten Lost Tribes or the Babylonian exiles, have a temporal paradigm that is closely linked to their ancient roots in the Middle East [Anisimov 2002; Dimshits 1999].

Although their conception of sacred time is heavily influenced by centuries of life in the Caucasus, it is strictly governed by the Hebrew calendar. Their spiritual life is based on major holidays like Nisonu (Pesach), Omunu (Purim), Aaselte (Shavuot) and Kupur (Yom Kippur). Nisonu was traditionally observed as a six-day celebration in the Juhuro tradition; the customary seven-day celebration was later adopted. Festivals such as Shabbat, Passover, and Sukkot function according to strict ritual prescriptions [Gilalov 2018]. Holy Saturday: In the popular mind, this time was considered dangerous – they believed that the spirit of Jesus could harm the Jews, so they lit fires for protection. The daily life of a woman in labour was surrounded by magical prohibitions, such as covering the door with a white cloth to protect against evil spirits (Shegadu) [Anisimov 2002]. Sacred time is not merely commemorative; it is ritualized through law. For Mountain Jews, halakhic time becomes a powerful mechanism of cultural continuity [Penkowska 2022].

For the Juhuro, sacred time does not solely concern religious rituals; it is also linked with local traditions and folk beliefs. These customs in a way blur the line between monotheism and the world around them. For instance, the night of Aravo, at the end of Sukkot. People see it as this powerful moment when fate is decided. They even say that, just for a heartbeat, the rivers foam and stop flowing. During the festival of Aravo (Oshana Rabba), the Juhuro believe that human destinies are finalized for the coming year. A folk belief held that at exactly midnight, river waters stop flowing and begin to foam, marking a sacred intersection with nature. Everyday life ran on its own clock; the "Madder crisis" or the tobacco season marked time for the Mountain Jews. The community's everyday existence has traditionally been defined by the production of madder (a 3–4-year cycle to make dye) and tobacco growing. But even then, religion shaped things [Shabtaev, etc. 2026]. No matter how urgent the work, whether in the fields or in the factories of Baku, they would not break Sabbath rules. Mountain Jews would not work in factories, even if they were going to lose their pay, since observing the Sabbath was essential to them. On Friday evening, the woman of the house always lights the sacred candles. In times of drought, a sacred ritual called Gudil was performed where a youth was dressed in rags and led through the village while neighbours poured water over him to invoke rain. Profane time often involved collective labour. The community gathered for *Bulka* to help neighbours with tasks like building houses, processing meat for winter (*sugum*), or harvesting tobacco. In rural ordinary life, women practiced *Vehre*, where they would take turns pooling their daily milk production so that one family at a time would have enough volume to produce large quantities of cheese or butter.

Through all of this, the Juhuri language (Judeo-Tat) held everything together. The use of the Judeo-Tat language served as an ordinary vessel for communal identity, distinguishing their daily internal life from the languages used for trade and external interactions [Shabtaev, etc. 2026; Penkowska 2022]. It was not just how they spoke, but the means for setting apart sacred moments from everyday business, keeping their world distinct from the wider region [Anisimov 2002].

Thus, in both traditions, sacred time served to deepen the connection with the divine and ethnic consolidation, while ordinary time represented adaptation to the landscape, economy, and social interaction in the Caucasus. For centuries, Mountain Jewish communities in Azerbaijan maintained a rhythm of life that balanced local adaptation with trans-local Jewish temporal structures. Their calendar created an internal cohesion across different settlements from Girmizy Gasaba in Guba (Red Village) to Baku. This model of temporal consciousness places strong emphasis on memory as identity, reinforcing communal boundaries while enabling coexistence within the multicultural space of Azerbaijan.

3. Results and discussion: Contemporary transformations

The 19th and 20th centuries profoundly challenged the old rhythms of life. In 1836, the Russian Empire shut down the Albanian Autocephalous Church. That move pushed Albanians out of their own faith community and into other religious groups, stripping away a big part of their identity [Gadjiyeva 2004; Hasanov, etc. 2023].

In modern Azerbaijan, especially after the 1990s, both traditions have experienced revitalization: the restoration of Udi Churches and renewed interest in the Albanian cultural legacy have allowed the rearticulation of traditional temporal practices within a national framework that values multicultural heritage [Schulze 2015]. For Christian Albanians like the Udis, keeping their sacred traditions alive meant hiding them at home, just to avoid getting swallowed up by the outside world. Then came the Soviet era, which altered the circumstances even further. The state cracked down on religious calendars and replaced them with its own schedules, and people stopped passing down religious knowledge the way they used to. The old ways started to fade [Bekker 2000; Maisak 2023].

After the Soviet Union collapsed, Azerbaijan started bringing back its old sacred traditions, part of its advocacy of what it calls “multiculturalism”. The country has spent a lot of energy restoring historic sites like the Kish temple and synagogues in Baku, Guba, and Oghuz, making them visible again and, honestly, hard to ignore. For Mountain Jews, rebuilding the synagogue in Red Village (Girmizy Gasaba) is not just about bricks and mortar; it concerns reviving a sense of sacred time for the whole community [Norkina, etc. 2024; Afandiyev 2019]. These days, people in these groups live with a kind of double identity. They are part of the larger Azerbaijani story, whilst keeping the unique rhythms and rituals handed down by their ancestors [Gilalov 2018; Kolesov 2024]. Revival of Jewish community life, construction of new synagogues, and reestablishment of educational institutions have strengthened ritual observance and reinforced the temporal rhythms of Jewish sacred life [Dimshits 1999].

A comparison of the Albanian-Christian and Mountain-Jewish temporal frameworks reveals several analytical points:

1) **Coexistence without homogenization.** The two models have historically coexisted in Azerbaijan without conflict or forced syncretism, despite their stark differences (cyclical vs. linear, nature-based vs. text-centered). This reflects the pluralistic culture of the area.
2) **Mutual influence at the level of everyday time.** Sacred calendars might have stayed separate, but daily life, like farming routines, working together, and how people welcomed each other, brought everyone into the same rhythm. Living side by side, folks found ways to understand each other, even when their faiths set them apart.
3) **Temporal identity as a marker of cultural resilience.**

Both groups leaned on sacred time just to get by: Albanian-related communities held onto who they were through rituals tied to the land and the seasons; Mountain Jews kept their identity alive through stories, texts, and a strict ritual calendar. So, even though their sense of time looked different, both groups used it the same way, to keep going and hold onto their roots in a place full of different cultures.

This results in a dynamic interplay where sacred time becomes part of Azerbaijan's cultural pluralism, not as isolated traditions but as living temporal systems that contribute to the national mosaic. From a religious studies standpoint, the case of Azerbaijan demonstrates that: Temporal pluralism can serve as a foundation for peaceful coexistence. Sacred time does not necessarily seek dominance; it can remain particular while contributing to a shared civic space. The interplay of cyclical and linear temporalities challenges simplified models of cultural interaction, showing how communities negotiate identity without erasing difference.

Conclusion

The investigation of temporal concepts within the religious culture of Azerbaijan reveals a profound ontological architecture where sacred and ordinary time are not merely chronological markers but foundational elements of ethnic survival and national integration. The dualistic perception of time, one rooted in the eternal, ritualistic, and divine (sacred), and the other in the pragmatic, socio-economic, and historical (ordinary) – serves as a primary lens through which the resilience of the Caucasian Albanian and Mountain Jewish (Juhuro) communities can be understood. In the modern era, these temporal paradigms have been seamlessly woven into the Republic of Azerbaijan's state policy of multiculturalism, transforming ancestral rhythms into a shared national heritage.

For the Caucasian Albanians, sacred time was originally defined by the celestial and the astral. Even after the institutional abolition of the Church in 1836 by the Russian Empire, the "sacred time" of the Albanians survived through the Udi people, who preserved their faith as a "domestic religion" [Afandiyev 2019; Hasanov etc. 2023]. Their ordinary time, once governed by the Silk Road trade and the irrigation of the Gabala plains, became a period of quiet cultural preservation, where rituals like *patorakh* (commemoration) served as anchors of identity against the pressures of Gregorianization and assimilation [Ganenkov 2015].

Similarly, the Mountain Jews (Juhuro) of Azerbaijan maintained a sacred calendar – Nisonu, Kupur, and Aravo – that stood in sharp contrast to the ordinary time of the surrounding empires. Their sacred time was characterized by the strict observance of the Sabbath, a temporal boundary so rigid that members of the community historically refused industrial labour in Baku even at great personal cost [Dimshits 1999]. Ordinary, profane time for the Juhuro was defined by the cycles of the Caucasus: the cultivation of madder and tobacco, and the seasonal migrations between mountain auls and lowland settlements. The survival of the Juhuri language served as the linguistic vessel for this temporal identity, allowing the community to operate within the "ordinary" multilingual reality of the region while maintaining a "sacred" communal interior [Bram 2009].

The way people in Azerbaijan think about time dates far back into history. It is revealed in the ways how ancient spiritual cycles still shape their religious traditions. The Albanians blended lunar and solar calendars, and the Juhuro stuck to a calendar that is strict but still replete with folk customs. For centuries, these sacred rhythms have helped protect different groups from getting swept up in whatever politics or trends come along. Even now, Azerbaijan invests real effort into keeping these traditions alive. Instead of letting global routines dilute everything, the country holds on to the old ways, making sure they keep adding to its cultural richness [Pashayeva 2016].

The contemporary position of these communities in Azerbaijan reflects a successful model of integration without assimilation. The Mountain Jews today are an integral part of the Azerbaijani national project. Today, the Juhuro community benefits from state-supported educational programmes and religious freedom, ensuring that their unique traditions are not lost to the globalized secular world [Kolesov 2024]. For the Alban-Udi community, the post-Soviet period has been one of "renaissance" [Ganenkov 2015]. The establishment of the Albanian-Udi Christian community and the revival of their autocephalous aspirations represent a rectification of 19th-century historical injustices. The Udis of Nij and Oghuz have maintained their distinct linguistic and cultural features, with the state providing a platform for their "sacred" traditions to be recognized as part of the broader "spiritual culture of Azerbaijan" [Mobili 2011; Maisak 2023]. Their participation in international conferences and the restoration of their temples have transitioned them from an "invisible" minority to a cornerstone of Azerbaijan's claim to being a multi-confessional bridge between East and West.

Ultimately, the religious culture of Azerbaijan is characterized by a "harmony in difference". The sacred time of the Albanian and the Jew provides the spiritual depth and historical continuity necessary for the preservation of ethnic identity, while the ordinary time of the modern Azerbaijani state provides the inclusive, secular framework for their peaceful coexistence. The state does not seek to homogenize these temporal experiences but rather to curate them as a "national-spiritual value".

In the end, Azerbaijan's religious culture shows how sacred and everyday time shape who people are together. The way different groups like Albanian Christians and Mountain Jews mark time still adds new layers to the country's culture. Studying how these groups think about time does not just promote understanding of old traditions. It also provides a better sense of how communities build meaning, remember their past, and find ways to live together.

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CHAN-BUDDHIST CONCEPTIONS OF TIME IN *THE GATELESS GATE* (*WUMEN GUAN* 無門關)

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Abstract

This article examines the conception of time articulated in *The Gateless Gate* 無門關 (*Wumen Guan*, 1228), a 13th-century Chan Buddhist *gōng'àn* ("spiritual riddle") collection compiled by the Chinese Master Wumen Huikai (無門慧開, 1183–1260). Although the text is rarely approached from the perspective of temporality, its characteristic emphasis on immediacy, paradox, and sudden awakening provides a distinctive framework for rethinking temporal experience. Through close readings of selected cases and Wumen's commentaries, the study argues that *The Gateless Gate* articulates a practical, non-theoretical understanding of time structured around three interrelated dimensions: suddenness, non-conceptuality, and present-moment awareness. Rather than offering a systematic doctrine of time, the text employs pedagogical disruption to destabilize linear, conceptual temporality and to reorient the practitioner toward direct realization. By examining such examples, this paper argues that *The Gateless Gate* expresses a distinctive Chan-Buddhist "grammar" of time: a non-linear, non-dual temporality in which the ordinary moment embodies eternity.

Keywords: *Chan Buddhism, Wumen Guan, temporality, non-linear time, gōng'àn.*

Introduction

The Gateless Gate (*Wumen Guan* 無門關), is a collection of forty-eight cases (*gōng'àn* 公案) compiled in 1228 by the Chan Master Wumen Huikai, occupies

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a central position in the Chan Buddhist canon and later became foundational within Japanese Zen traditions.

The Gateless Gate is distinguished by its unique combination of sharp, paradoxical dialogues and Wumen's own concise commentaries. The text emphasizes direct experience over doctrinal explanation, and it consistently points toward the possibility of sudden awakening – an insight that arises not through gradual cultivation, but in a single transformative moment.

In Chan Buddhism, *gōng'àn* practice involves working with brief teaching cases that are used to challenge habitual patterns of thought. Its purpose is not to provide doctrinal answers but to provoke direct insight by disrupting conceptual and temporal assumptions.

Scholarly discussions of the text have generally focused on its aims related to awakening, its rhetorical strategies, and the pedagogical role of *gōng'àn* practice. Time itself, however, has seldom been examined as an independent view of analysis, despite the text's persistent emphasis on immediacy, sudden awakening, and non-gradual realization.

This article offers an insight into a view that *The Gateless Gate* presents a specifically Chan understanding of time that is expressed through practice rather than formulated as a theory. Through paradoxical dialogues and abrupt teaching encounters, Wumen repeatedly challenges ordinary assumptions about linear time and directs the practitioner toward an experience of awakening that does not depend on temporal progression. By examining the ways how time is expressed, implied, and deliberately destabilized in selected cases, this study shows that temporality plays a central role in Chan pedagogy.

The Gateless Gate consists of forty-eight *gōng'àn*, literally "public cases". Chan masters borrowed this legal term to describe dialogues with their students used as key teaching cases.

Although the Japanese-derived term *kōan* is commonly used in English-language scholarship, the present study employs the Chinese term *gōng'àn* to emphasize the text's historical and cultural origins within Chinese Chan Buddhism.

Chan Buddhism developed in China around the sixth century, while Zen emerged as its Japanese continuation from the twelfth century. Although shaped by different cultural contexts, both traditions pursue the realization of enlightenment through practice.

So, while *kōan* is the familiar term, *The Gateless Gate* is in fact a Chinese collection of *gōng'àn*. Calling them "spiritual riddles" is rather metaphorical, but may be more accessible for the reader. It will therefore be used in the present article for ease of reference.

Each case in *The Gateless Gate* is typically composed of a short exchange between a Chan master and a student, followed by Wumen Huikai's brief prose commentary and a verse. Rather than offering doctrinal explanations, the collection consistently emphasizes direct experience and points toward the possibility of sudden awakening (*dùnwù* 頓悟). Awakening is presented not as the result of gradual accumulation over time, but as an immediate break with habitual conceptual understanding.

This approach to awakening is grounded in several fundamental Buddhist ideas that shape the treatment of time in the text. The doctrine of impermanence *wúcháng* 無常 (Skt. *anitya*) presents reality as a continuous process of arising and passing away, thereby undermining the notion of stable or enduring entities. Buddhist theories of momentariness, often expressed through the concept of the *chànà* 剎那 (Skt. *kṣaṇa*), further challenge the idea of time as a smooth, continuous flow by describing experience as a succession of discrete moments. Chan Buddhism radicalizes these perspectives by rejecting conceptual distinctions altogether – including those between past, present, and future – and by emphasizing direct realization beyond discursive thought.

Scholarly research dedicated to *The Gateless Gate* has mainly focused on its aims related to liberation and enlightenment, its literary features, and its pedagogical role within the Chan and Zen traditions. Both East Asian and Western studies have highlighted the collection's importance for the formation of gōng'àn practice, paying particular attention to its use of paradox, concise dialogue, and deliberate shock as means of disrupting conceptual thinking [McRae 2003]. Within this line of interpretation, Wumen Huikai is often understood as a teacher who employs negation as a pedagogical strategy: his brief and pointed commentaries are intended not to convey doctrinal explanations but to prevent interpretive fixation and conceptual closure [Faure 2020].

Within this body of scholarship, spiritual riddles are commonly understood as pedagogical tools intended to bring about a fundamental shift in the practitioner's way of thinking [Heine 2014]. Scholars have shown that these cases work by frustrating logical reasoning, destabilizing ordinary language, and directing the practitioner toward forms of understanding that are embodied and non-discursive rather than conceptual. While such studies have been essential for clarifying the performative and dialogical character of Chan practice, they have generally left unexamined the temporal assumptions that structure these pedagogical techniques.

Studies of time in Buddhist thought, by contrast, have mostly focused on doctrinal and philosophical traditions outside the Chan corpus (Nattier 1992). Abhidharma[1] texts are typically discussed in terms of their detailed analyses of

[1] Abhidharma refers to a body of early Buddhist scholastic literature that offers systematic analyses of reality, including detailed accounts of mental processes, causation, and momentary time.

momentariness, causation, and temporal sequence, while Madhyamaka[2] philosophy approaches time by questioning the reification of temporal and ontological categories through the doctrine of emptiness (Skt. *śūnyatā*). Although these traditions offer important conceptual tools for understanding time, their treatments are largely theoretical and descriptive in nature.

More recent scholarship has increasingly focused on practice-oriented and phenomenological approaches to Buddhist texts, paying closer attention to embodied experience, affect, and immediacy in religious life [Faure 2020]. In Chan and Zen studies, this shift has encouraged greater interest in meditation practice, ritual activity, and concrete pedagogical encounters. Even so, time is usually addressed only indirectly in these discussions and is often treated as a neutral background condition, rather than as something actively shaped by textual form and teaching strategies [Shibayama 1975].

The present study addresses this gap by examining temporality as an active element of *The Gateless Gate*. Instead of reconstructing an abstract theory of time, it focuses on how Wumen Huikai uses suddenness, paradox, and immediacy to transform the practitioner's lived experience of time. By bringing together perspectives from Chan studies, Buddhist philosophy, and theories of temporality, the article offers a clearer account of how time operates within Chan practice.

This study uses close reading to analyse selected spiritual riddles and their commentaries in *The Gateless Gate*. Instead of reconstructing a systematic Chan doctrine of time, it examines how temporality is enacted in concrete pedagogical encounters. *Gōng'àn* are treated not as symbolic narratives to be interpreted, but as instructional tools intended to provoke changes in perception and understanding.

Any discussion of time in Chan Buddhism requires careful use of terminology. A key concept is *chànà* 刹那, usually translated as "instant" or "moment". In Abhidharma texts, *chànà* refers to a precisely defined analytical unit of time used to describe the momentary arising and cessation of dharmas[3]. In Chan contexts, however, the term is no longer used in this technical sense and instead points to a form of experiential immediacy that cannot be precisely measured [Dumoulin 1988].

A related distinction concerns different models of awakening. Chan discourse commonly contrasts sudden awakening (*dùnwù*頓悟) with gradual awakening

[2] Madhyamaka, by contrast, is a Mahāyāna philosophical tradition that critically examines all conceptual categories, including time, by arguing that they lack inherent existence and are empty (*śūnya*) of fixed essence.

[3] Dharmas are the basic elements of experience or reality in Buddhist philosophy. They are momentary phenomena – mental or physical – that arise and pass away according to causes and conditions.

(*jiànwù* 漸悟). Although this opposition has generated extensive doctrinal debate, *The Gateless Gate* clearly emphasizes sudden awakening as a way of understanding realization in time. Awakening is not presented as the final result of a step-by-step process, but as an event that breaks with ordinary temporal progression and brings about an immediate shift in experience.

Finally, the "present moment" in Chan texts does not simply refer to the current point in a linear timeline. Chan practice does not treat the present as one segment opposed to past and future, but instead aims to dissolve this temporal framework altogether. In this sense, the present moment is the point at which distinctions between past, present, and future cease to function.

Suddenness and the instant of awakening

One of the most salient temporal features of *The Gateless Gate* is its emphasis on suddenness. Awakening is repeatedly presented not as a process unfolding over time but as a decisive event occurring in a single instant. A paradigmatic example appears in **Case 1**, *Zhàozhōu's Dog.*

> 一 趙州狗子 ***Zhàozhōu gǒuzi***
> 趙州和尚、因僧問、狗子還有佛性也無。州云、無。

A monk asked Chan Master Zhaozhou, "Does even a dog have Buddha-Nature?" Master Zhaozhou answered, "Wu." (No!)

This exchange takes less than a second. The teaching occurs in the impact of the answer, not in any subsequent explanation. The temporal structure of insight is compressed into a single moment – a moment without duration.

The pedagogical force of this exchange lies in its immediacy: insight is neither prepared nor explained but delivered as a temporal rupture that collapses conceptual continuity.

Wumen's commentary emphasizes that even a single word can overturn deeply ingrained patterns of thinking. Suddenness here does not mean speed, but a break in ordinary, linear time. The expectation of gradual progress is disrupted, and the practitioner is drawn directly into immediate experience.

Time as non-conceptual – "Beyond before and after"

The second temporal dimension is non-conceptuality – the dissolution of temporal categories such as before, after, past, and future.

The text actively destabilizes these categories. A central example comes from **Case 2**, *Baizhang's fox*, offers one of the most explicit engagements with temporality in *The Gateless Gate*, precisely because it centres on the problem of causality. Cause and effect ordinarily presuppose temporal succession: actions precede consequences, and past conditions determine present outcomes. The riddle, however, refuses to stabilize this sequence.

二 百丈野狐 ***Bǎizhàng yěhú***
百丈和尚。凡參次有一老人。常隨眾聽法。

While Chan Master Baizhang[4] was giving a certain series of dharma talks, an old man always followed the monks to the main hall and listened to him.

眾人退老人亦退。

When the monks left the hall, the old man would also leave.

忽一日不退。師遂問。面前立者復是何人。

One day, however, he stayed behind, and Master Baizhang asked him, "Who are you, standing here before me?"

老人云。諾某甲非人也。

The old man replied. "I am not a human being."

於過去迦葉佛時。曾住此山。

In the distant past, I was the Master, living here on this mountain.

因學人問。大修行底人還落因果。也無。

One day a student asked me, "**Does an enlightened person fall into the realm of cause and effect** (samsara)[5]?"

某甲對云。不落因果。

I answered, "**No, they are not subject to cause and effect.**"

五百生墮野狐身。

Because of this answer, I have been reborn as a fox[6] for five hundred generations.

今請和尚。代一轉語貴。脫野狐。

"I implore you now to give a turning word and release me from this foxes' body."

4 Baizhang Huaihai (720–814) was a Chinese Chan Master during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE).

5 Samsara is the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, marked by suffering and driven by ignorance, desire, and karma (the law of action and result).

6 The fox in Chinese mythology is representative of the Western image of a "black cat". It is considered sneaky and represents bad omens for the common population.

遂問、大修行底人還落因果。也無。

Finally, the old monk asked Baizhang "**Does an enlightened man fall into the realm of cause and effect?**"

師云。不昧因果。老人於言下大悟。

Baizhang answered, "**Cause and effect are clear**." No sooner had the old man heard these words than he was enlightened.

Cause and effect imply temporal sequence. But the riddle paradoxically affirms and denies this sequence at the same time, making it impossible to rely on chronological reasoning. When the student tries to grasp what comes "before" and what comes "after", the concept collapses.

From a temporal perspective, the case challenges linear causality by keeping affirmation and negation unresolved. Awakening does not occur through correcting a past mistake or working toward a future goal, but at the moment when reliance on chronological thinking is abandoned. The fox is released instantly, showing that liberation is not a gradual process in time but the collapse of fixation on cause and sequence. Time is not rejected, but it no longer functions as a guiding conceptual framework.

Temporal disruption reaches an extreme form in **Case 14**, *Nanquan Kills a Cat*.

十四 南泉斬猫 *Nánquán zhǎn māo*
南泉和尚因東西堂爭猫兒。

Once the monks of the Eastern and Western halls quarrelling about the ownership of a cat.

泉乃提起云、大衆道得即救、道不得即斬却也。

Nanquan[7] Chan Master took the cat and while holding it up in front of the assembly said, "You! If you can give me one word of Chan, you will save the cat. If you cannot, I will kill it."

衆無對。泉遂斬之。

No one could answer, and Nanquan cut the cat in two.

晩趙州外歸。泉擧似州。

That evening when Zhaozhou[8] returned from a trip outside of the temple, Nanquan told him of the incident.

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7 Nanquan Puyan 南泉普願 (748–835)

8 Zhaozhou Congshen 趙州從諗 (778–897)

州乃脫履。安頭上而出。

Zhaozhou took off his sandal, placed it on his head[9], and walked away.

泉云、子若在即救得猫兒。

"If you had been there, you would have saved the cat," Nanquan remarked.

Nanquan's demand – "If you had been there, you would have saved the cat,"– allows no temporal extension whatsoever. There is no space for reflection, moral deliberation, or narrative sequencing. The situation is structured such that any attempt to think in terms of before and after, right and wrong, or consequence and responsibility arrives too late.

In both examples, riddles remove the possibility of stepping back into linear time. The practitioner must respond from a place before thinking, where temporal distinctions do not apply.

Thus, time becomes something to be seen through, not understood: a conceptual grid that must dissolve for insight to arise.

The third aspect of temporality in the text concerns practice, especially the cultivation of the present-moment mind.

This is beautifully illustrated in **Case 7,** *Zhaozhou's "Washing the Bowl"*, articulates Chan temporality through radical simplicity. After confirming that a monk has finished eating, Zhaozhou instructs him to wash his bowl. The exchange contains no doctrinal explanation and no reference to future realization. The teaching unfolds entirely within an ordinary, present-moment activity.

趙州洗鉢 ***Zhàozhōu xǐ bō***
趙州、因僧問、某甲乍入叢林。乞師指示。

A monk said to Chan Master Zhaozhou, "I have just entered this monastery. Please teach me, Master."

州云、喫粥了也未。

"Have you had breakfast?" asked Venerable Zhaozhou.

僧云、喫粥了也。

"Yes, I have," replied the monk.

州云、洗鉢盂去。其僧有省。

[9] The act of placing one's shoes on one's head in Asian culture is like the action of wearing black to a funeral.

"Then," said Master Zhaozhou, "go and better wash your bowl." The monk was enlightened.

Here there is no doctrinal instruction, no projected future moment when understanding will arrive. The teaching is embedded directly in an ordinary action. Wumen's comment emphasizes that awakening is realized precisely in immediate activity, when the mind is fully present.

Across this spiritual riddle, Wumen repeatedly brings the practitioner back to this moment, the only place where awakening can occur. Temporal fragmentation – dividing time into past, present, and future – becomes a hindrance. When the mind remains fully present, time is experienced as immediacy.

Thus, *The Gateless Gate* treats time not as an abstract idea but as a discipline of practice. The moment of action and the moment of realization coincide.

Taken together, these four cases articulate complementary dimensions of Chan temporality in *The Gateless Gate* – destabilize causal and chronological time; eliminate the possibility of delay; and demonstrate the complete coincidence of practice and realization in the present moment. Rather than advancing a theoretical account of time, Wumen Huikai employs *gōng'àn* practice to reconfigure how time is lived and experienced in practice.

Taken together, these three dimensions of temporality – suddenness, non-conceptuality, and present-moment awareness – reveal that *The Gateless Gate* presents a **practical** understanding of time. Unlike philosophical treatises that analyse temporal categories, Wumen uses riddles to reshape the practitioner's lived experience of time.

What distinguishes Wumen's approach is that temporality becomes part of the pedagogy itself. Suddenness interrupts linear thinking; non-conceptuality dissolves temporal distinctions; and present-moment awareness anchors the practitioner in direct experience. In this sense, Wumen is not offering a theory about time but rather demonstrating how time functions in the process of awakening.

Compared with broader Buddhist discussions of impermanence or momentariness, Chan Buddhism – and Wumen Huikai in particular – shifts the focus to **immediacy of practice**. Time is not something to be understood conceptually; it is something to be recognized, transcended, or dissolved in the very act of confronting a spiritual riddle.

Awakening is framed as an event that disrupts ordinary temporal flow rather than as the outcome of disciplined repetition over time.

When the *gōng'àn* tradition was transmitted to Japan and developed within Zen lineages, especially Rinzai and Sōtō[10], its understanding of time shifted. Rinzai Zen

[10] Rinzai and Sōtō are two major schools of Japanese Zen Buddhism.

continued to emphasize sudden breakthrough, but *gōng'àn* practice became part of long and structured training programs. In Sōtō Zen, the focus on *shikantaza*[11] further reshaped temporality by emphasizing sustained practice and repetition rather than sudden moments of rupture [Dumoulin 1988].

From this comparative perspective, *The Gateless Gate* presents a highly compressed view of time. The immediacy central to Wumen Huikai's teaching resists later forms of institutionalization and ritualization. Time does not function as a medium for gradual cultivation, but as a point of tension in which awakening either happens immediately or does not occur at all. This contrast underscores the historical specificity of Chan views of time and cautions against reading later Zen interpretations back into Song-dynasty[12] Chan texts [Schlütter 2008].

Conclusion

This article has shown that *The Gateless Gate* presents a distinctive Chan Buddhist way of understanding time, not through abstract theory, but through teaching practice. By closely examining selected spiritual riddles and Wumen Huikai's commentaries, the study has identified three closely connected aspects of Chan temporality: suddenness, the rejection of conceptual time, and attention to the present moment.

First, the emphasis on sudden awakening (*dùnwù*) highlights the power of a single moment. Awakening is not described as something that develops gradually over time, but as an immediate shift that breaks with ordinary, linear ideas of progress. Second, the text shows that common temporal distinctions – such as past, present, and future – can become obstacles to realization when they are treated as fixed or meaningful in themselves. Third, the focus on the present moment demonstrates that practice and awakening are not separate stages in time, but occur together in direct, immediate activity.

By treating time as an active element of Chan teaching, rather than as a neutral background, this study contributes to broader discussions in Chan and Buddhist studies about lived religious practice. It suggests that time in Chan Buddhism is not primarily something to be analysed philosophically, but something that is challenged, disrupted, or even set aside in the moment of awakening.

[11] *Shikantaza*, meaning "just sitting" or "nothing but just sitting," is a core practice in the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism, emphasizing effortless, non-judgmental awareness, where one sits without focusing on any particular object (like breath or kōans) but simply experiences the present moment, allowing thoughts and sensations to arise and pass without engagement.

[12] The Song dynasty in China spanned the period from 960 to 1279 CE.

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FUTURE TENSE AND MODALITY IN CLASSICAL TIBETAN OF BUDDHIST SCRIPTURES

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Abstract

People from the East have a completely different perception of time compared with Europeans. One of the best ways to understand the mentality of people and the grammar of time in each culture is through the study of languages, where abstract ideas and notions are expressed in concrete terms. Therefore, three languages have been selected for comparison. Tibetan is treated as a representative of the Eastern civilization, English – as a representative of the Western civilization. Sanskrit belongs to the Indo-European language family. However, geographically it has a closer connection to Asian (Indian) culture; therefore, it forms a conceptual bridge between the two traditions.

The research is mainly based on a close-to-text grammatical analyses of the *Introduction to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* (or *Bodhicaryāvatāra*) by Śāntideva. Specific features of Tibetan verbs and auxiliary constructions referring to the future tense are examined in comparison with Sanskrit and English text versions. Conclusions offer insightful and practically relevant observations on modes of expression in Classical Tibetan, which are shaped by distinct cultural characteristics and spiritual attitudes. By comparing the Tibetan text with its Sanskrit and English counterparts, the author contributes to a clearer understanding of Tibetan verbal forms and proposes several approaches to their translation into English.

Keywords: *Buddhism, comparative grammar, TAM in Tibetan, English, and Sanskrit.*

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Objects and reasons of the research

The chosen text *Introduction to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* (in Sanskrit: *Bodhicaryāvatāra;* in Tibetan: *Byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa*) belongs to the most outstanding compositions of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India and is also one of the most extensively studied religious texts within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. It has been described as "a gem that adorns the diamond crown of Buddhism" [Śāntideva 1995: 6] and can be considered a major representative of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy.

The treatise was composed in Sanskrit during the 8th century and is attributed to the Indian Buddhist Master Śāntideva, who was a renowned poet and philosopher at the monastic university of Nālandā. He placed particular emphasis on the cultivation of moral awareness, presenting it as the most important aspect of self-cultivation on the path to liberation [Goodman 2016]. This is one of the few Mahāyāna Buddhist texts that has been fully preserved in Sanskrit; however, the surviving Sanskrit manuscript, discovered in Nepal, is of a comparatively late date – the 14th century [Brassard 2012: 6].

The first translation into Tibetan was carried out as early as the 8th century; the text was translated again in the 10th century. This later version was revised and improved in the 11th century and included in the Tengyur section of the Tibetan Buddhist canon [Melis 2005: 210]. Recently, another Tibetan translation has been discovered among manuscripts buried in Dunhuang at the end of the 10th century [Shantideva 2005: 5]. It may therefore be concluded that Tibetan translations available today are of an earlier origin than the extant Sanskrit original text, and this fact confers a particular scholarly value upon the Tibetan versions.[1]

The first translations of the text into European languages were produced by Louis de la Vallée Poussin between 1892 and 1907 in French, and by Barnett Lionel David in 1909 in English. Since then, numerous translations from both Sanskrit and Tibetan have been published. Luis Oscar Gómez, Professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of Michigan, lists more than 28 translations into various modern languages (including English, Danish, Hindi, Newari, Chinese, Norwegian, Spanish, German, and others) published during the 20th century [Gómez 1999: 333–335].

For this research, the Tibetan canonical version from Sanskrit-Tibetan parallel edition published by Bhattacharya [1960] will be used, along with the three English translations of the Tibetan text (highlighted in bold below). These include texts by the Scottish Buddhist teacher and researcher Stephen Batchelor, by translators of the Padmakara Translation Group (Helena Blankleder and Wulstan Fletcher), as well as the most recent version by the American Buddhist translator, scholar,

[1] Detailed overview about Sanskrit and Tibetan editions see Baltgalve, A. (2025). Buddhas epitetu atveide latviešu valodā. *Reliģiski-filozofiski raksti,* XXXVI, pp. 361–383.

and practitioner Alexander Berzin. Further there is a chronological list of the main English language versions and their translators:

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Tibetan is a major language for Buddhist teachings in the Western world, used extensively in both oral and written contexts. It is taught within Tibetan communities in India, through online platforms, and at European and American universities, and there is a substantial number of Tibetan grammar manuals and scholarly research on the Tibetan language in general. However, the verbal system of Classical Tibetan is seldom addressed and remains insufficiently explained. Numerous Buddhist texts are preserved in parallel English, Tibetan, and Sanskrit versions, providing rich material for morphological and semantic comparison. Yet comprehensive grammatical analyses systematically relating all three languages (which are of particular relevance to translators and linguists) are few and difficult to find.

Śāntideva's text is a didactic treatise in which the author offers guidance on the conduct of Bodhisattvas. Consequently, a wide range of verbal forms expressing aspiration, necessity, and obligation is employed. In Tibetan, the future tense conveys not only temporal meaning but also aspectual and modal values. Consequently, from the perspective of time, the distinction between the future tense and modes expressing possibility, necessity, imperative, desiderative, and obligation is inherently ambiguous. This problematic issue has also been identified by the Tibetologist Nicolas Tournadre, who observes that "plurifonctionality and polysemy of grammatical morphemes or markers conveying a tense, aspect or modality, still constitute a real issue for contemporary linguistic theory" [Tournadre 2017: 625].

Overview of TAM in English, Sanskrit, and Tibetan

Structures and divisions of tense, aspect, and modality (TAM) systems differ across languages, and even within a single language each TAM morpheme may simultaneously encode temporal, aspectual, and modal values. This constitutes a major challenge for understanding and accurately interpreting the authentic meaning of Buddhist teachings for Western audiences. From a notional, psychological and physical point of view, the concept of the future is also rather uncertain, because the future tense may be associated with various kinds of modality and aspectual oppositions [Tournadre 2017: 625–626].

In Classical Sanskrit, TAM is expressed through verbal inflection and related morphological categories. A specific future stem exists in Classical Tibetan and Old Tibetan for a number of verbs, but English and also some Tibetan future forms are constructed by adding separate auxiliaries, morphologically derived from motion verbs, modal verbs and copulas with desiderative or deontic meaning [Tournadre 2017: 628–629].

English has three tenses (past, present, and future), that can be specified with two main aspects – progressive and perfect [Kolln 2012: 75–76]. Besides, there are six present-form modal auxiliaries (*will, shall, can, may, must,* and *ought to*) and four past-form auxiliaries (*would, should, could, might*), that can be used to express future-oriented possibility, including both indicative and conditional nuances [Kolln 2012: 70–71].

In Sanskrit there are six tenses (present, imperfect, perfect, aorist, first future or simple future and second future or periphrastic future) and four moods (imperative, potential or optative, conditional and benedictive) [Bāpat 1886: 1]. As observed by Franklin Edgerton, Sanskrit professor from the Yale University, the second or periphrastic future occurs less often in Buddhistic Sanskrit, as do the future optative, the future imperative, and the conditional mood. In contrast, the simple future is frequent and can sometimes be used with a conditional meaning [Edgerton 1985: 152]. In addition, different types of participles, such as the *parasmaipada* and *ātmanepada* future participles and potential participles, can serve to indicate the future possibility [Bāpat 1886: 95–96, 98–99]. Since Sanskrit often allows the missing copula (the verb *to be*) in nominal sentences, predicates expressed by nouns or adjectives lack visible tense marking and may imply future TAM.

In Classical Tibetan, the predicate (including the copular verb) is obligatory and forms the main part of the sentence. Verbs may take four stems: past, present, and future tenses, and the imperative mood [Collet-Cassart 2011: 29]. Thus, the future can be indicated by the verbal stem alone. However, not all verbs distinguish four stems; some have only three, two, or even a single one. Although certain scholars[2] have compiled verb tables listing these forms, there is still no complete and united set of rules to determine systematically the different tense forms [Collet-Cassart 2011: 29]. Besides, an auxiliary verb can be joined to the main verb to clarify tense or mood, but it is not always the case, and sometimes the tense must be determined from the context [Collet-Cassart 2011: 31]. Furthermore, in Tibetan there are many auxiliary constructions that assign verbal forms specific aspects (e.g., completive, incompletive, perfective, imperfective, aoristic) or modalities (e.g., realis, irrealis, epistemic). The auxiliary is often preceded by a nominalizer or a connective [Tournadre 2017: 626].

Comparative analyses of examples from five text versions

In this analyses, predicates indicating future tense in the Tibetan canonical text are compared with their equivalents from the Sanskrit text and the three English translations cited above. Examples are drawn from the first three chapters of Śāntideva's text, as the later chapters mostly exhibit similar usages and translation approaches.

Tibetologist Tournadre [2017: 630–631] in his article *The future tenses in the Tibetic languages* identifies two primary forms of the future in Classical Tibetan: predicates formed solely by the verb stem and predicates composed of the verb combined with an auxiliary. However, in the text of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, there are no verses in which a distinct future stem signals an actual future event. Instead, one often encounters auxiliary constructions, which predominantly convey moral obligation or a change in mental attitude.

The most common auxiliary is formed from the future stem *bya* of the word ***byed*** (*to do*), e.g., verse 1.8.

Sanskrit	Tibetan	Berzin	Padmakara	Batchelor
vimocyam विमोच्यम् (ntr. sg.ger.or fut.pass.part.) *shoud not be abandoned, released*	**gtang bya** གཏང་བྱ་ (fut.V+ pres./fut. neg.+ fut.aux.)	**will give up** (fut.aux+V)	**should turn away** (past.aux+V)	**should forsake** (past.aux.+V)

[2] E.g., the American historical linguist and Tibetologist Nathan Wayne Hill [2010].

The example shows that Sanskrit future passive particle which indicates necessity in the future, is translated in Tibetan with the help of an auxiliary that can indicate either future or obligation. However, in English there is no single form that can express both connotations, so different translators choose different approaches: Berzin translates with the future auxiliary (*will*), but Padmakara and Batchelor use past auxiliary (*should*), indicating moral obligation or potentiality.

Another example (verse 2.46), where the same auxiliary form *bya* occurs in the Tibetan text, likewise demonstrates differing approaches among English translators: Berzin employs the present auxiliary (*can*), while Padmakara and Batchelor propose a more suitable solution by using the future auxiliary (*shall*), which additionally conveys obligation and necessity.

Sanskrit	Tibetan	Berzin	Padmakara	Batchelor
ko bhaviSyati को भविष्यति (QW+3.sg.fut.V) *who will become [my protector]*	**bdag gis ji ltar bya** བདག་གིས་ཇི་ལྟར་བྱ་ (1.sg.pron.+ erg.+ QW+fut.aux.)	**what can I do?** (QW+ pres. aux.+ 1.sg. pron.+V)	**what shall I do?** (QW+ 1.pers.fut. aux.+ 1.sg. pron.+V)	**what shall I be able to do?** (QW+ 1.pers.fut. aux.+ 1.sg.pron.+ periph.mod.+V)

Yet this verse reveals another problem. In Sanskrit, the subject of the sentence is in the third person, whereas in Tibetan the same verse is formulated from a first person perspective. Consequently, all English translations based on the Tibetan renderings also adopt the first person. This suggests that the Tibetan translation may have been made from a different Sanskrit original.

Another issue, that poses a difficulty for translators from Classical Tibetan into European languages, is the omission of personal pronouns. Tibetan verbs are not conditioned by the subject; they are impersonal and therefore lack grammatical person distinctions. [Jäschke 1883: 40]. In English, the subject and predicate are essential components of a sentence and generally cannot be omitted, with minor exceptions in imperative or elliptical constructions. Consequently, when a Tibetan sentence lacks an explicit subject, it is difficult to determine which person should be used in English. In such cases, the only guide is the contextual meaning.

For example, the verse 3.10 is translated by Berzin and others in the first person singular (I give, my body), and first person singular is used also in Sanskrit:

> *To fulfil the aims of all limited beings,*
> ***I give**, without sense of a loss,*
> ***My** body and likewise my pleasures,*
> *And all my positive forces of the three times.* [Berzin 2005: 24]

However, the Tibetan version does not indicate the subject, so it could refer to any person (e.g., *you give, one gives, we give*). In the case of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, the first person is mentioned most frequently; therefore, for the sake of consistency, it is advisable to use it here as well. Furthermore, Tibetan nouns do not obligatorily indicate singular or plural forms, so the first person plural is also a possible option. However, according to the content, the Bodhisattva's practice refers to individual persons, and each should perform it by oneself. For this reason, the most probable and logical form is the first person singular. Moreover, as pointed out by Tournadre, "benefactive, 'intentional', and 'autolalic' futures are restricted to the first persons (agents)", which could plausibly be the case in this example [Tournadre 2017: 639].

In the verse 3.10, two Tibetan verbs *gtong* and *byed* occur in their future forms (*gtang* and *bya*). Therefore, the above-cited second line should more precisely be translated using a future-oriented construction that expresses necessity or obligation (e.g., *I should give, I will give*). Benjamin Collet-Cassart [2011: 97] in his *Classical Tibetan Grammar Handbook* states that "the future auxiliary bya actually conveys the sense of a (future) necessity and is most of the times translated by "must", "should", "have to", etc." The same statement is made also by the German missionary, translator and Tibetologist Heinrich August Jäschke [1883: 51].

Furthermore, Jäschke also states that *byed* and its honorific forms *bgyid* and *mdzad* (all meaning *to do* or *to make*) are active and transitive verbs, in contrast to the auxiliary *'gyur*, which can be considered as intransitive or passive [Jäschke 1883: 51–52]. The word ***'gyur*** (*to become, to transform into, to change into*) is frequently used in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* to express a future reference. However, this verb does not have a distinct future stem; consequently, its present form can also convey future meaning. Tibetan scholars in the translations of the text by Śāntideva have used it mostly in rhetorical questions and conditional sentences.

One of final interrogative phrases often encountered in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is *ga la 'gyur*. English translators mostly render it with future verb forms, e.g., in the verse 1.4.

Sanskrit	Tibetan	Berzin	Padmakara	Batchelor
kutaH कुतः (QW) *from where? how? whence? why?*	**ga la 'gyur** ག་ལ་འགྱུར་ (QW+ pres./fut.V)	**when will come?** (QW+ fut.aux.+V)	**how could be?** (QW+ past aux.+V)	**how will come?** (QW+ fut.aux.+V)

In Sanskrit original this construction corresponds to a nominal sentence, in which the question word also implies the copula (*to be*). Since the verb is not specified in the original, but is necessary in Tibetan and English languages, different translators solve the problem employing different auxiliaries (*will, can*) and different verbs (*to become, to come, to be*). Sanskrit question word *kutaH* literally means "from where", but it can also imply other meanings, so translations differ here, too (Tibetan: *where?*, Berzin: *when?*, Padmakara and Batchelor: *how?*).

The Tibetan auxiliary *'gyur* can indicate also a future possibility, as in the verse 1.6.

Sanskrit	Tibetan	Berzin	Padmakara	Batchelor
jIyate syAt जीयते स्यात् (pres.ind.3.sg. ātmanep.+ 3 sg.opt.) *could conquer*	**zil gyis gnon par 'gyur** ཟིལ་གྱིས་གནོན་པར་འགྱུར་ (N+erg.+ pres.V+ co.+pres.aux.)	**can outshine** (pres.aux.+V)	**can lay low** (pres.aux.+V+ res.com.)	**will be overcome** (fut.aux+ pres.aux.+ past part.)

In this example neither Sanskrit, nor Tibetan use future forms, but in English the possibility is translated twice with the modal verb *can* and once with the future auxiliary "will". Another difference arises from the Tibetan insertion of the word *zil* (*brightness, splendour, brilliancy, glory*) that is combined with the verb *gnon* (*to suppress*) by Berzin and translated as *outshine.*[3] Two other English versions omit this word and translate barely the verb *gnon* (*to lay low, to be overcome*).

The word *'gyur* also frequently occurs in conditional sentences, which can be rendered in English with the future tense. A good example is the verse 1.9.

Sanskrit	Tibetan	Berzin	Padmakara	Batchelor
vandanIyo bhavati वन्दनीयो भवति (masc.nom. sg.adj.+ pres.3.sg. ind.V) *becomes worthy of veneration*	**phyag byar 'gyur** ཕྱག་བྱར་འགྱུར་ (obl.N+ pres./fut.V)	**become** [figures] **to be honoured** (V+infin.aux.+ past part.)	**revered** (past part.)	**will be revered** (fut.aux+ aux.+ past part.)

[3] It appears that Tibetan translators, as well as Alexander Berzin, have taken advantage of the multiple meanings of the word *bodhicitta*, the central term of the treatise, which is also mentioned in this verse. Francis Brassard states in his dissertation: "The expression *bodhicitta* has usually been translated as *thought of enlightenment* or *desire of enlightenment*. Sometimes the word *enlightenment* is substituted by *awakening*" (Brassard 1996: 1). The first part of the Sanskrit word *bodhi* can imply the idea of light in its extended sense; therefore, the final goal of Buddhism is often rendered as *enlightenment* in English. However, this is primarily a metaphorical translation and does not fully convey the meaning of the concept. In the *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* by Monier-Williams [1899/2020], a more precise meaning is given: *perfect knowledge or wisdom (by which a man becomes a Buddha), the illuminated or enlightened intellect; learned, wise*. In the context of Buddhism, the wisdom refers to the perfect knowledge of the truth, that liberates one from suffering and from all forms of existence.

Grammatical structures and implied meanings in Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Berzin's English translation are quite similar. Padmakara simplifies the matter by using a single past participle (*revered*), whereas Batchelor employs a future form, emphasizing that the change has not yet occurred. Moreover, the Tibetan text and all three English translations use the plural, whereas the Sanskrit text clearly indicates third person singular. [4]

There is another Tibetan verb that has one stem for the present and future *'byung* (*to arise, to emerge, to occur, to appear*) and is frequently used with reference to future actions, as exemplified in the verse 2.58.

Sanskrit	Tibetan	Berzin	Padmakara	Batchelor
eti एति (3.sg.pres.V) *[time] comes*	**'byung** འབྱུང་ (pres./fut.V)	**will come** (fut.aux.+ V)	**will come** (fut.aux.+ V)	**will come** (fut.aux.+ V)

One can observe, that the Sanskrit original and the Tibetan translation do not explicitly indicate a future structure, yet all English translators employ the future auxiliary *will*. This usage is based on two other verbs appearing earlier in the verse: *'chi* (*to die*) and *'gyur* (*to become*). In Tibetan, neither of them distinguishes between present and future stems. Below both verbs are compared in all five text versions.

Sanskrit	Tibetan	Berzin	Padmakara	Batchelor
bhaviSyAmi भविष्यामि (1.sg.fut.V) *[I] will become*	**'gyur** འགྱུར་ (pres./fut.V)	**shall be** (1.pers.fut. aux.+V)	**≈ my dissolution** (1.pron.gen.+N)	**shall become** (1.pers.fut. aux.+V)
eti एति (3.sg.pres.V) *[death] comes*	**'chi** འཆི་ (pres./fut.V)	**shall die** (1.pers.fut. aux.+V)	**shall die** (1.pers.fut. aux.+V)	**shall die** (1.pers.fut. aux.+V)

According to the context, the entire verse refers to a possible future event (i.e., *when I will die one day*). In Sanskrit, however, the present tense can also indicate future possibility, whereas in English all translators employ future auxiliaries. The Tibetan language is flexible and open to interpretation in the case of these three verbs, which imply both present and future (as in Sanskrit), but it does not specify the tense of each word (unlike Sanskrit).

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[4] In Tibetan, the subject is marked with the plural particle *rnam*, but all English translators use the pronoun *they*.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy to observe, how the three English translations treat the subject of the second part of the verse 2.58:

Berzin:
Without a doubt ***that time*** *will come*
When I shall be no more. [Shantideva 2005: 20]

Padmakara:
My dissolution and my hour of death
Will come to me, of this there is no doubt. [Shāntideva 2011: 43]

Batchelor:
Inevitably ***the time*** *will come*
When I shall become nothing [Śāntideva 1979: 21].

In the Tibetan text, it is said: *bdag ni med par 'gyur ba'i dus / de ni gdon mi za bar 'byung* (literally: "*the time when I become non-existent, that undoubtedly occurs*") [Śāntideva 1960: 28]. Renderings of Berzin and Batchelor are more or less precise, whereas Padmakara group translators replace the dependent clause with two nominalized phrases, repeating the personal pronoun "my". On the one hand, this corresponds to the Tibetan sentence structure; on the other hand, Berzin's and Batchelor's lexical choices more closely reflect the Tibetan lexicon.

The final future auxiliary to be analysed is the active verb ***bgyid*** (to do, perform, make, act). According to the Pellegrini dictionary, it has four different stems: *bgyi* (future), *bgyid* (present), *bgyis* (past), and *gyis* (imperative). However, its usage in the text is somewhat ambiguous. In the verse 2.8. it is used twice – in the second and in the fourth line of the Tibetan text, a comparative overview of translations follows below.

Sanskrit	Tibetan	Berzin	Padmakara	Batchelor
dadAmi ददामि (1.sg.pres.V) *I give*	**bdag [..] bgyi** བདག་ [..] བགྱི་ (1.pron.+fut.V)	**I offer** (1.sg.pron. nom.+ V)	**I offer** (1.sg.pron. nom.+ V)	**I shall offer** (1.sg.pron. nom.+ 1.sg.aux. fut.+V)
upaimi उपैमि (1.sg.pres.V) *I enter, assume [servitude]*	**bdag [..] bgyi** བདག་ [..] བགྱི་ (1.pron.+fut.V)	**I shall serve** (1.sg.pron. nom.+ 1.sg.aux. fut.+V)	**I will be** (1.sg.pron. nom.+ aux. fut.+V)	**I shall be** (1.sg.pron. nom.+ 1.sg.aux. fut.+V)

Sanskrit grammarian, mathematician, and Vedic priest Kātyāyana explained that in Sanskrit the present tense "is to be used where an action has been started but not come to an end" [Panda 1998: 33], and this is clearly the case here. Tibetan translators, however, have employed the future form, whereas English translations approach the matter differently. Batchelor uses the future, as in Tibetan, but Berzin and Padmakara use the present in the first instance and the future in the second. This difference may be due to the adjective *gtan-du* (always), which appears in the first sentence and most naturally aligns with the present tense in English.

Another example where the same auxiliary is applied, is the verse 2.9. Here it is repeated three times, Tibetan translators have always used present tense *bgyid*, just as in Sanskrit original. However, all English translation apply future. This choice may be related to the conditional form, that is expressed here. Padmakara translation is the closest to the Tibetan original, therefore it is cited below:

> *For if you will accept me, **I will** be*
> *Undaunted by samsara and **will** act for beings' sake.*
> ***I'll** leave behind the evils of my past,*
> *And ever after turn my face from them.* [Shāntideva 2011: 38]

The only difference between the Tibetan and English versions with regard to the tense occurs in the first verb, where the Tibetan text uses the past stem *bzung* (from the verb *'dzin*), while the English translation employs a future form (*will accept*). In fact, in English it would also be possible to use the past tense (*would*), with the modal verb expressing a conditional state. Comparing Tibetan verb forms in verses 2.8 and 2.9, the use of two different tenses (future and present) of the same verb has neither a logical nor a grammatical explanation. Therefore, one may assume that there is probably a spelling error. The same inconsistency can also be observed in verses 2.12, 2.13, 2.64 and 2.65. The Sanskrit original does not employ future forms, and the logic of the narration provides no reason for a shift in time, especially since the context relates to an actual visualization practice and English translations mostly use the present tense rather than the future. Only the last sentence of the second chapter could imply a wish or an obligation in the future; therefore, it is worth analysing the word *bgyid* in verse 2.65.

Sanskrit	Tibetan	Berzin	Padmakara	Batchelor
karttavyam कर्त्तव्यम् (ntr.sg.ger.or part.) *should be done*	**bgyid** བགྱིད། (pres.V)	**shall do** (1.pers.fut. aux.+V)	**will do** (fut.aux.+V)	**shall do** (1.pers.fut. aux.+V)

Solely the Tibetan version gives the present form; therefore, referring to the previous observations, another possible explanation for the ambiguous use of the present and future of the verb *bgyid* is that, in ancient times, *bgyi* and *bgyid* were parallel forms, which could be used to express either present or future notion.

Conclusion

A theoretical overview of the grammar of Tibetan, Sanskrit, and English shows seemingly similar tenses (e.g., all three languages have a simple future); however, their usage differs. According to Śāntideva, future forms in Classical Tibetan convey a range of meanings, including evidential, epistemic, didactic, and pragmatic nuances. They may also encode factual, assumptive, intentional, benefactive, inferential, preventive, and deontic categories. Furthermore, a single morpheme may simultaneously imply temporal, aspectual, and modal values. In the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, future aspectual particles predominantly indicate moral obligation or a shift in mental attitude.

In Buddhistic Sanskrit, the simple future is the most frequent form and can also be used with a conditional meaning (which is not the case in English). Moreover, the optative, imperative, and conditional moods, as well as potential participles, may also indicate future activities and happenings. Sanskrit often allows the omission of the copula in nominal sentences; in Classical Tibetan, however, the predicate (including the copular verb) forms the main part of the sentence and is obligatory. Meanwhile, the subject can be omitted, which poses a significant difficulty for translators into European languages, because here the subject is an essential component of a sentence and generally cannot be missing.

In Tibetan, there are theoretically four verbal stems; however, many words have only a single stem for both future and present. Consequently, the tense is frequently indeterminate on grammatical grounds and has to be inferred from context. In the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, the verbal stem alone is used very seldom; most often, an auxiliary verb is added to the main word. A wide range of auxiliary constructions exists, which presents a significant challenge for understanding and accurately interpreting the authentic meaning of the text.

Within the scope of this research, four main future auxiliaries *byed, 'bgyid, 'gyur*, and *'byung* and were analysed. The most common auxiliary is derived from the future stem *bya* of the verb *byed*, which most often corresponds to the Sanskrit simple future or the future passive particle. It can indicate factual or actual change and is most frequently translated into English using the auxiliaries *will, shall, can* or *to be able.* However, it can also convey a sense of necessity and is typically rendered as *should, will be,* or *have to.*

Similarly to *byed*, another auxiliary that conveys a strong intention and activity on the part of the subject is the verb *bgyid*. According to the present Tibetan verb tables, it has distinct stems for the present (*bgyid*) and the future (*bgyi*). In the examples analysed, the Sanskrit text contains no future forms, yet Tibetan translators employ both the present and future stems without an apparent grammatical or contextual justification. English translators, by contrast, generally prefer future forms. These inconsistencies may result from expressions in the conditional mood or from other factors, such as variations in Tibetan verb stems across time. They could also be due to a scribal or spelling error in the Tibetan text.

Passive and intransitive actions are typically expressed using the auxiliaries *'gyur* and *'byung*. The former is translated into English with auxiliaries such as *can* and *will*, as well as verbs like *to become, to come* or *to be*. The auxiliary *'gyur* also frequently appears in conditional sentences, which are rendered in English either with the future tense or with past modals (*could, would, should,* etc.). The auxiliary *'byung* has a single stem for both the present and the future, in this case making the Tibetan text flexible and open to interpretation. Consequently, there are instances in which the Sanskrit and Tibetan languages do not explicitly indicate future structures, yet all English translators, guided by context, employ future auxiliaries to convey the future possibility.

Most Classical Tibetan future auxiliaries originate from verbs and can, in fact, be translated into English as independent words (e.g., *to be, to come, to become, to change, to turn into, to do,* etc.). In the text, they may also retain this basic meaning, even when added after the main verb. However, they most frequently function as auxiliaries, expressing modality (e.g., *will, shall, can, might, must*), and while analogues for ordinary verbs can often be found relatively easily, finding equivalents for modal verbs and future auxiliaries in Tibetan and other languages is rarely possible.

List of abbreviations

ātmanep. (ātmanepada)
aux. (auxiliary)
co. (connective)
erg. (ergative marker)
fut. (future)
ger. (gerundive)
ind. (indicative)
infin. (infinitive)
N (noun)
neg. (negation)
ntr. (neuter)
opt. (optative)
part. (participle)
pass. (passive)
periph.mod. (periphrastic modal)
pers. (person)

pl. (plural)
pres. (present)
QW (question word)
sg. (singular)
TAM (tense, aspect, modality)
V (verb)

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THE IDEA OF TIME IN EARLY MODERN HINDI POETRY: LOVE, MORALITY AND DECAY IN KABIR'S KALIYUGA

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Abstract

This paper is dedicated to examining the idea of time in early modern Hindi poetry through the figure of Kaliyuga in the poetry of Kabir. While classical traditions describe Kaliyuga as an age of degeneration, ritual corruption, and the weakening of Dharma, Kabir transforms it into a rhetorical and ethical device through which he critiques social hierarchies, empty ritualism, institutional religion, and the illusion of deferred salvation. The paper demonstrates that Kabir's engagement with time operates on three interconnected levels. First, he inherits the traditional discourse of Kaliyuga yet radicalizes it into a critique of Brahmanical authority, ritual practices, and the structures of religious mediation. Second, he uses time to foreground the urgency of human existence, emphasizing remembrance (*sumiran*), inner devotion, and ethical awakening over ritual observance. Third, Kabir reimagines death not as a fearful culmination within the cycle of rebirth but as a transformative moment of union with the divine, often articulated through intimate and gendered metaphors. In doing so, Kabir shifts the discourse of time from abstract cosmology to embodied human experience. The paper also draws attention to the fact that rejecting the postponement of liberation to an afterlife or future birth, Kabir privileges lived experience over scriptural authority and democratizes spiritual realization by locating truth within individual consciousness. Through this intervention, Kabir not only redefines Bhakti but also offers a profound critique of religious and social structures in early modern India. Ultimately, it is suggested that Kabir transforms Kaliyuga from a symbol of despair into a site of ethical confrontation, poetic resistance, and spiritual immediacy.

Keywords: *Kabir, Kaliyuga, Temporality, early modern Hindi poetry, Bhakti.*

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Introduction

The idea of time in Indian philosophical and religious tradition is not linear. Time does not end in a final day of judgment rather keeps on circulating like a cosmos wheel. The cycle of birth and rebirth, the noblest goal of a human thus to become enlightened and break the cycle of birth and rebirth. The paradox is that time in this circular motion also becomes the measuring tool of morality and human attribute. This circular motion of time keeps on flowing, giving time an indefinite circle. The Indian religious and philosophical traditions divide time in four epochs – Satyuga, Tretayuga, Dwaparyuga and Kaliyuga. With each yuga, the morality and human values decline ever further. Kaliyuga becomes the epitome of immorality, decline of Dharma and truth. Early modern Hindi poets inherited this concept of time and carried it forward. Most of them strengthened or repeated the notions of time. Among these poets, Kabir stands apart. He reconfigures time not merely as a cosmological category but also as a framework for rethinking Bhakti, the devotion and human existence. He destabilizes inherited notions of temporality and relocates time within lived human experience.

Rather than treating Kaliyuga merely as an epoch of degeneration of values, truth and Dharma, Kabir transforms it into a diagnostic and rhetorical device. Time, in his poetry, becomes the medium through which false religiosity is exposed, ethical urgency is intensified, and devotion is stripped of ritual postponement. Kabir's insistence is clear: What you get is here and now, there is no thereafter. Promises of karma playing out the amassed consequences in another life, another age, or another form is nothing but illusion.

It is argued here that Kabir's discourse of time operates on three interconnected levels. First, he inherits classical yuga theory and radicalizes it into a critique of social and religious authority. Second, he uses time to foreground the wasting of human life and the necessity of inner love over ritual action. Third, he refigures death not as an end or reward but as a pedagogical force that exposes the truth of the present. Through these moves, Kabir collapses cosmology into ethics and metaphysics into effect.

Time in classical tradition

The concept of time as a circular cosmos wheel appears first in the ancient text Rigveda, also credited as the oldest text of the Indian subcontinent. Later, Mahabharata, the grand narrative defines time as a wheel with spokes-

A single cosmic wheel turns, fitted with its twelve spokes.
Three hubs hold it together – yet who truly understands it?
Within that wheel are set the seven hidden forms,
and in it rests the single, unageing principle.

[Griffith 1896, Rigveda, 1.164.11–13]

This idea of time as wheel first appeared in Rigveda. Rigveda likewise defines time as a wheel.

> *The twelve-spoked wheel, of the true (sun) revolves round the heavens, and never (tends) to decay; seven hundred and twenty children in pairs, Agni, abide in it.*[1] [Griffith 1896, Rigveda, 1.164.11]

The time as having four yugas (Chaturyuga) is introduced by the Puranic tradition. Vishnu Puran depicts the Chaturyuga, the four ages. In Vishnu Puran, the depiction of Kaliyuga is manifested in detail. The concept of Kaliyuga comes with Purans. Vaishnav tradition holds that Kaliyuga comes after Krishna's departure. Kaliyuga is seen and described as the worst of times where values get deteriorated, humans degrade. Vishnu Puran goes in detail and describes this time when fake Gurus, Oppressive rulers will be there. There will be so much materialism and immorality in society. People will have a short lifespan. The Vedic learning will be lost. Amid all this, Vishnu will incarnate as Kalki and save the world. Mahabharat tells us –

> *In the Treta Yuga, anger begins to arise; in the Dvapara it increases still more. But in the Kali Yuga [...] it is desire alone that dominates mankind.*
> [Van Buitenen 1979]

Non-Sanskrit tradition and Kaliyuga

This tradition of Kaliyuga also reaches non-Sanskrit traditions. In Ram Charit Manas of the 16th century, Tulsi Das describes the effects of Kaliyuga which are characterised by the house of sins, people consistently lying and are indulging in heinous acts.

Besides all its decaying nature, Kaliyuga offers an opportunity to be free – Tulsi describes Kaliyuga as an opportunity. He says that in Kaliyuga it is very easy to get out of the birth and rebirth cycle. He says just remembering and repeating the name of God is enough. Here Tulsi as is resonating with the Sanskrit tradition. This focus on remembrance of the name or *sumiran* also becomes the key point in *nirgun*[2] poets. The difference is when we look at the *nirgun* poetry including that of Kabir, this Sumiran becomes the tool to reject the rituals and dogmas of current religious tradition. Poets like Raidas emphasized the purity of the heart rather the rituals. Tulsi said the same thing, but he was not challenging the ritualistic traditions or

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1 द्वादशारं॒ नहि॒ तज्जराय॒ वर्वर्ति॑ चक्रं॒ परि॒ द्यामृ॒तस्य॑ । आ पु॒त्रा अ॑ग्ने मिथु॒नासो॒ अत्र॑ स॒प्त श॒तानि॑ विं॒श॒तिश्च॑ तस्थुः ॥
द्वादशारं नहि तज्जराय वर्वर्ति चक्रं परि द्यामृतस्य । आ पुत्रा अग्ने मिथुनासो अत्र सप्त शतानि विंशतिश्च तस्थुः ॥

2 Nirgun poets/saints are those poets who believed that God is formless and can be called by any name.

rejecting them entirely. Regardless of all the differences, both these traditions and Vishnu Puran tend to agree on one aspect – Bhakti or devotion.

While observing Tulsi, Anant Das of the 16th century must be considered, as well. Anant Das gives credit to Namdev for bringing Bhakti to Kaliyuga. Interestingly, while the Sanskrit tradition is lamenting over the loss of Bhakti, this tradition (even though agreeing with the Vaishnav tradition) perceives hope and talks about Saint/Poets as the reformers of Bhakti. Anant Das writes that a 13th-century poet Namdev also had Krishna under his control. This significantly emphasises the aspect that Anant Das believes – the Vaishnav tradition was under control of the Nirguna tradition. The reference to Kaliyuga does not stop here. Born in 1425, King Peepa Das a minor ruler in Rajasthan, India, was a Nirgun saint poet. He aspired to express his gratitude to Kabir, a saint poet. In expression of his gratitude Peepa wrote,

> जै कलि नाम कबीर न होते।
> तौ लोक बेद अरू कलिजुग मिलि करि भगति रसातलि देते॥
> *Had there been no Name (of God) and no Kabir in this Kaliyuga,*
> *then ordinary people, the Vedas, and the dark age of Kali – all together –*
> *would have sunk devotion (bhakti) straight to the bottom of the ocean*
> [Sharma Lalit 2012]

Here, Kaliyuga becomes the time where poets like Namdev and Kabir emerge and save Bhakti, which in Kaliyuga is the only way out.

Who was Kabir?

Kabir was born in Varanasi in a Muslim family. Though there are difference of opinion about his birth and death, but Anant Das decides his birth between 1500 and 1525. The popular legend is that he was born of a brahmin widow and she left him in the Ganga River, where a Muslim couple Neema and Neeru found him. Purushottam Agrawal (2009) debunked this legend and ensured that this story was later added to Kabir's biographies. It is important to note that Kabir was born and raised in a Muslim family but was deeply rooted in the Indian philosophic and religious traditions.

Raised in a Muslim family in Banaras, Kabir was familiar with both the traditions of time in two different religious paradigms. Whilst the was sematic tradition was at home ,the hematic tradition was all around in the city of Varanasi. Kabir's idea of time confronts both concepts. He examines and questions the idea of time in these traditions, re-interprets it and uses these concepts as a tool to analyse his own times. Kabir is constantly in dialogue with the traditions of his times and he uses the idea of time to reject notions which had almost acquired the status of universal truths. He is not arguing to fix a few things rather he is in favour of completely rejecting the idea of institutional religion. He comes as an iconoclast who believes that spirituality can be experienced without any religion.

The perception of Kabir varies for different people. He is seen as a saint in northern India, in 1997, when Maghar, the place of his demise, was created as a new district, it was named Sant Kabir Nagar. However, the Hindi books for school curricula name him a saint poet. Kabir Panth, a sect after his name, sees him as "Great Saint" or "*Parmatama* Kabir Sahib". Scholars have viewed him differently at different times. Hidayutllah (1977) regarded him as an Apostle of Hindu Muslim Unity, Vaudeville (1957) saw him as a master of language, Hess (1983) viewed him as a poet, Robert Bly (2004) saw Kabir as an unapologetic poet. Bly calls him a mouthy weaver who is not afraid of any institution and depicts the truth of his times as it is. The initial scholarship of Ramchandra Shukla did not accept Kabir as a poet, but later critics like Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, Barthwal underlined the strength enshrined in his poetry.

The textual traditions

Kabir's works predominantly were preserved in oral tradition. There were so many different verses in his name that some thought that Kabir was a generic name and not the name of a single poet. However, there are two major traditions of his texts – Eastern tradition represented by manuscripts of Bijak – a collection and holy book of Kabir panth, whereas Western tradition texts comprise the manuscripts found in Rajasthan and other parts. Kabir Granthawali is the major representative of this tradition of the texts. Bijak in this context had been out of academic scene for a very long time as its manuscripts found were not that old. The academic tradition relied heavily on authentic and ancient manuscripts to decide the authenticity of poems found under the name of Kabir. Bijak couldn't fit the criteria as the common practice in Kabir panth was to copy the Bijak and wash off the old copy in a river. This is the reason that available copies of Bijak didn't date long back in time. In this context, Shyam Sundar Das's Granthawali became one of the major sources as the one of the manuscripts it was based on was from 1504.

Kabir Panth believes that Bijak is the most authentic work of Kabir though it was first published in 1950, although Charlotte Vaudeville who translated Kabir's poems into French in 1957 asserts that Bijak contains many corrupt verses with references to the beliefs of Kabir panth. This is the reason she chose to translate from Shyam Sundar Das's Granthawali rather than Bijak of Kabir.

The differences between the texts of these two traditions are not only within their source location but also of the language. The Eastern tradition texts are written in Bhojpuri with a touch of Awadhi, while the language of Western tradition texts is mixed with Rajasthani and Panjabi, which Acharya Ramchandra Shukla called *Sadhukkadi* – an unpolished language of Sadhus. Today, it is difficult to precisely determine Kabir's language, as his poetry was recorded by various people who brought their own modifications, even though Kabir himself says in one of his couplets that his language is eastern, i.e. the language of northern India.

Besides all these manuscripts, there are numerous poems in his name, which are present in public sphere but could not be found in any authentic manuscripts. It is difficult to determine whether they are authored by Kabir or not, as India has a long oral tradition of knowledge and it does not seem prudent to reject any poem which is not contained in manuscripts, if it has the characteristic of the poet. Even if they are not by Kabir but appear close in character of his poems, this should be seen as influence and strength of his poetry that many wrote poems in his influence and gave it his name long after he was gone.

Kaliyuga in Kabir's poetry appears in various shapes and sizes. Kabir describes Kaliyuga as the moral inversion of his times, meanwhile, he uses Kaliyuga as a tool to emphasize and challenge many beliefs.

Remembering is the key

Kabir's poetry foregrounds remembrance (*sumiran*) as an ethical and existential practice rather than merely a ritual act. He describes remembering as the very essence of life, and besides this everything in the world is just a hassle to human life. Kabir uses the device of *Sumiran* not only as a way to salvation which is the way practiced by the tradition, rather, he employs it to reject the existing religious dogma. He uses this device to make people aware that there is no point to forfeit the life to sleep. Addressing his audience, Kabir's poetic voice assumes the role of ethical awakening. For him, resonating the tradition, the very idea of human life is to "awaken" from the sleep in which humans slumber. The time spent in the world in Kabir's poetry resonates with sleepwalking, and he is calling upon people to wake up and face the reality and time around themselves. Kabir does not necessarily see this world as *Maya,* but instead as a time where being awake will enable one to see and examine the time critically. Remembrance become a device for awakening oneself. The idea proposed by him holds that remembering is the key in Kaliyuga, resonating the tradition. While stressing the importance of remembrance in Kaliyuga, Kabir's poetry simultaneously resists the transformation of remembrance into another form of ritual practice. He very clearly asserts that *Sumiran* or remembrance should be held within and not found on praying beads. He voices satire that world is constantly rolling the prayer beads but does not roll away the inner malice. It is time to leave the beads and foster the change within.

कर सेती माला जपै, हिरदे बहे डंडूल
पग ते पाला मैं गिल्या, भाजण लागी सूल
The hand keeps on rolling the beads, the heart is filled with greed and turmoil
The feet are melting away, the end is near it stings the heart.
[Das Shyamsundar 1874, Bhesh ko anag, 1]

While Kabir agrees that remembrance is the only way ahead to break out of the birth and rebirth cycle, he also uses this concept to expose and ridicule the practices of the time he lives in. Remembrance serves a dual purpose, – besides remembering the name of one's *God*, it also recalls the very world which is caught up in the practices of slapping sandal paste on forehead and spending time on prayer beads. Kabir points out that Kaliyuga is here, but he also wants to make sure that in the endeavours of surpassing the Kaliyuga we would not create a dogmatic Kaliyuga within ourselves.

Kaliyuga is here

Indian philosophical tradition had been discussing Kaliyuga as time where everything moral decays. Instead of abstract lamenting of the decay in values, Kabir's Kaliyuga is rather expressed with imagery of contemporary realities. For Kabir, Kaliyuga comes as a greedy money lender who lends money but keeps the borrower's mind chained and continues registering it in his ledger. This imagery proposed by Kabir not only describes Kaliyuga but also makes his audiences look at the social realties of his time where there are traps sprung by money lender and piling of compound interest.

कलि का स्वामी लोभिया,मनसा धरी बधाई
देहीं पैसा ब्याज काऊँ ,लेखा करताँ जाई
The king of Kaliyuga is Greed itself, says Kabir –
it keeps your mind chained
Not a single paisa will it lend without interest,
and right then it begins writing the ledger of debt.
[Das Shyamsunadr 1874, Chaanak ko ang doha, 7]

In Kabir's poetry, Kaliyuga functions as a framework for rendering social realities visible. Thereby, he rejects the idea that whatever is happening with one is not the result of karma amassed during his previous life, but rather a grim reality of the time which is seen as a metaphor of Kaliyuga. In Kaliyuga, the agencies of Dharma are not believed, people rush to brahmins as if they would help them to get closer to the One. His verses challenge the notion that suffering is merely the result of past-life karma. He calls the brahmins slack butchers who have no mercy in their hearts. Kabir's time falls within the period when sacrificing animals was a part of the ritual in *Shakt* tradition (it is practiced to this day). On the other hand, there is *Vaishnav* tradition, which holds that one had to be initiated by taking *Diksha* or should listen to the *Katha*, sermon, to help themselves in the scorching Kaliyuga. His poetry critiques both ritual sacrifice and mediated religious authority, as he believes that no agency is required to meet the One. Everyone needs to find its own path instead of trusting the brahmins, as they are phony in Kaliyuga.

> संतों पांडे निपुण कसाई
> ....
> गाय बधै सो तुरक कहावै, यह क्या इनसे छोटे।
> कहैं कबीर सुनो भाई साधो, कलि में बाम्हन खोटे॥
> *Sanits! These brahmins are expert butchers*
> ...
> *If you kill a cow, you are called a Muslim,*
> *But are these brahmins any less than them?*
> *Listen, people! Says Kabir in Kaliyuga, these brahmins are phony.*
> [Hess and Singh 1983, Shabd, 11]

The text diverges from earlier Puranic interpretations of Kaliyuga, as Kabir does not attribute all the problems to Kaliyuga. For him, Kaliyuga is a device which he has borrowed from the Puranic tradition. The Puranic tradition blames everything to Kaliyuga, and consequently reenforces the notion that people are losing their moral values. Humanity is getting corrupted, human values are in decay. While all this is happening the tradition believes that it is a cosmic cycle where everyone is doing their part. The life ends and one goes to rebirth. The cycle keeps on moving. In this cycle we should realize this world as *maya*. This notion turns the attention away from the realities of time. We believe that one will attain salvation hereafter. Kabir rejects the idea of this "hereafter", and formulates the problem of the institutions, drawing the attention of his audience to this aspect. Furthermore, he does not invariably blame Kaliyuga for this. For him, the time is very real and grounded as the world in front of him. He observes that people who have a few disciples around them call themselves *Mahnat,* head of an Ashram. Similarly, he notes that people are rushing to take a dip in the Ganga, the holy river, believing that immersing will wash away their sins. He is against this ritualism and does not believe that a dip in a river can wash off sins of a human. Kabir does not mention Kaliyuga at this point, as he already has the ears of the audience and can voice the thoughts he wanted to express. He sees that the woman who has drowned her family's values is on her way to take a dip in the Ganga. He warns her that she should meet a true guru to show her the path, or else her liberation is going to perish. Kabir here talks about the very reality of time that one who have not uphold the values of family thinks that following a ritual of taking a dip in Ganga will wash away the sins.

> चली कुलबोरनी गंगा नहाय।
> ....
> कहत कबीर हेतु करु गुरु से, नहिं तोर मुक्ती जाइ नसाय।।
> *The one who have drowned the family honour*
> *is on her way to take a dip in Ganga*
> *Says Kabir, meet a Guru or your salvation is set to perish*
> [Kabir 1922, Kabir Saheb Ki Shabdawali, Part-1]

Time here becomes the world around Kabir, where he observes that the cleric is screaming like a rooster from the top of a mosque as if Allah were deaf, where people observe fasting all day and butcher a cow in the night. This is the world where a yogi colours his cloths but not his inner self, brahmins fight with others but do not grasp the very essence of being. The world around Kabir is full of these absurd realities, he uses time to put theses absurdities forward. He does not attribute these to Kaliyuga only to make people believe in destiny, he presents these observations as they are to his audience. Amid all this, his verses repeatedly advance to foreground the absurdities of ritualistic society.

The faithful wife

Puranic tradition of Indian philosophy discusses the concept that Kaliyuga is the time to be characterised by predominant emphasis on materialism. The morality of society will be slipping away. Men and women will act according to their wishes; fidelity will weaken thus resulting a decay in society. Other Bhakti tradition poets also underline this as an attribute to Kaliyuga. Tulsi Das evolves the character of Rama in Manas as a faithful husband. He is depicted as *Maryada Purushottam*, the best of men, who holds the values above everything. Kabir sees this as a marker of his times, as well, but he changes this into a metaphor to express one's devotion to the One. In his poetry, the discourse of moral decline is transformed into a metaphor for devotional fidelity. Temporal decline becomes the condition through which mystical union is articulated. This is the juncture where Kabir uses the simile of a woman who is longing for her husband, one who is sad, as the husband is not with her, while the husband becomes a simile for Kabir's Ram. Kabir says that Ram is within him and he is longing to meet him, Kabir cannot meet him, using a simile of a fish who is thirsty although living in water. On the one hand, Kabir calls women *Maya,* fire of the hell, whereas on the other hand, he himself speaks from a woman's position to tell us about his agony and pain. Kabir is resonating the tradition where women become metaphor for *Maya* [Hawley 2005] but simultaneously this time also becomes an agent for him to transcend the tradition and speak as a woman, since he can see that there is no better way to express his longing than in a female voice. The tradition pulls him in one direction, but the sensitivity of a poet pulls him in another. His poetry reflects the tension between the inherited patriarchal symbolism and the embodied devotional subjectivity. The time wherein Kabir resides, the Kaliyuga, where all the morality is decaying, becomes the showcase of his inner struggle, the fight between *Samskara* and *Samvedana*, sensitivity [Agrawal 2000]. Kaliyuga no longer remains a Purani concept, which one can only lament, or hope that the society would return to its moral high ground. Rather, with Kabir it becomes an arena where the realities of time are at play, and where Kabir, the poet, also comes to us with all his inner struggles and his dialogue with time. In all this chaos of Kaliyuga, Kabir's verses ultimately place in the foreground fidelity and singular devotion amid social fragmentation. This can be seen as the One omnipresent, but it is also deeply rooted in Kabir's times, where Kabir tells his audience that one needs to be faithful.

कबीर कलिजुग आई करि, किये बहुतज मीत। जिन दिल बंधी एक सूँ ते सुख सोवे नचींत॥

The age of Kaliyuga is here, and people have many friends / lovers
The one whose heart is connected to one sleep peacefully

[Das Shyamsundar 1874, Nihakarmi pativrat ko ang Doha, 13]

Songs to death

In Indian philosophical traditions, death is not perceived as the culmination; it is the gateway to rebirth. The cycle keeps on turning and the human life tries its best to get out of the cycle and attain *Moksha,* the salvation. Death becomes the reality no one can escape, and the biggest surprise of human life. Traditional understanding has been using death as wakeup call to let everyone know that nothing in life is permanent, and hence, substantial. In Kabir's poetry, death comes in two forms. He uses death to make his audience aware that all the glamour, the colours one sees will not last forever, and at the end one will go empty-handed like a gambler from the casino table. Death depicts the vainness of any pride fostered by a person. Here his poetry initially resonates with classical traditions of detachment. For Kabir, the world becomes a market to which there is no return for anyone. In saying this, Kabir is also profoundly rejecting the idea of rebirth or the chance to return to this world once again. His poetry subtly destabilizes the cyclical notions of return and rebirth. He uses the same vocabulary, but between the lines he tells his audience that death will take away everything.

कबीर नौबत आपणी, दिन दस लहू बजाय। ए पुर पटन ए गली बहुरि न देखे आई

Beat this drum of yours for only ten or twelve days (i.e., this human life is extremely short). This city these streets and lanes – once you leave, will never return to see them again. [Das Shyamsunadr, 1874 Chitavani ko ang doha, 1]

Death becomes a reality, as Kabir strives to tell people that if one does not have the word of *Hari* or Ram, the death will hunt them down. While drawing upon established philosophical motifs, the poetry simultaneously transforms death into a visual and affective metaphor. In this metaphor, Kabir becomes a woman who is calling for her husband to take her to his country. Kabir in this simile had been waiting for him and now is the time that Kabir should go to his place. Suddenly it is clear that death is transformed into a chance to be as one with one's husband. The grim notion around the death is that Yam, the god of death, will put the life in chains and take it away, is transformed into the festivity of a wedding. Death is reconfigured as a moment of ecstatic union rather than existential closure.

अब मोहि ले चलु ननद के बीर अपने देसा
इन पंचन मिली लूटी हूँ , संग संग, अहि विदेसा
Now take me to your home my beloved husband!
in this foreign land, these 'Five' [vices] have gathered together,
and completely robbed me [Dwivedi Hazari Prasad 1942]

Thus, death is not solely rendered as an ultimate truth in Kabir's poetry. Rather, it creates an occasion where time is not simply ending but marks a new beginning in form of meeting the metaphorical husband. For Kabir, death marks a joyous occasion, where he sets off on his journey to meet the One. This is the first time where it can be observed that death can be created in a visual shape of a woman who is all set to embark on her journey with her *Sindhora*[3], vermilion pot, to meet her husband. The imagery of *sati* becomes a metaphor for ecstatic spiritual union. *Sati* is all set to go on the pyre with her husband, and Kabir tells us that here the time is to be one with the Husband and there is no space for the fickleness of mind. The loop of time reaches its point but does not embark upon another loop according to Kabir, he sees this as a transcendental embarkment upon the goal of human life – to meet the Ram.

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[3] *Sindhora* सिंधोरा is a box where married Hindu women keep the *Sindur,* a red powder like vermillion. This marks the married life, in many rituals besides wedding, women carry it with them.

डगमग छाड़ि दै मन बौरा।
अब तौ जरें बरें बनि आवै, लीन्हों हाथ सिंधौरा
होइ निसंक मगन ह्वै नाचौ, लोभ मोह भ्रम छाड़ौ
O mind! Drop this fickleness of yours!
Now is the time to be burnt, taking the vermilion pot in hands
Leave all the worry and dance! Leave greed, attachments and delusion
[Das Shyamsundar 1874, Pad, 21]

In Kabir's poetry, the spiritual journey is so firmly rooted in his time that he chooses the metaphor of *Sati*[4], a practice of his times to turn the eyes of the audience to their very time while he is talking about spiritual journey. Time plays a dual role here; on the one hand, it marks the spiritual journey, whilst on the other hand it is a kaleidoscope of the time which is happening now and is very real in its essence.

It is here and now

Both sematic and hematic traditions see life as not the final or real time. The life becomes a waiting period for the final or judgment day. Indian philosophic traditions view this as an endless loop of life and death, making the time motion circular in contrast to a linear one. Indian tradition believes that this human life is very fortunate, and it has been granted to one because of the good karma accrued in previous lives. This human life is a window whereby one can use their consciousness and once for all break out of the life and death cycle. The human life here becomes a chance to attain *Moksha*, the salvation. In both cases, the human life is a journey, a device or tool to attain something bigger and noble. The human life is not to be seen as an objective or reality. This is the paradox that only time and space we see and feel through our senses becomes unreal or a preparation for something beyond, which one has not seen or felt yet. Time shifts shape from something real and earthly to something abstract, a hereafter. The poetry destabilizes notions of deferred salvation and privileges immediacy over metaphysical postponement. For Kabir, spiritual realization must occur within lived experience rather than in a deferred afterlife. When Kabir is rejecting the idea, he is also interrogating the deterministic interpretations of karma. One of the Kaliyuga's traits discussed in the tradition is that in Kaliyuga one must pay for their sins in their lifetime. Kaliyuga is used as a scarecrow to make people embark upon the path of morality and live their human lives in compliance with essential values. Kabir is against the idea of using Kaliyuga as a scarecrow or telling his audience that *Moksha* or salvation will come afterwards as a reward of one's good

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[4] *Sati* सती was a historical custom in north India. In this custom, Hindu widow immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre. This was abolished in 1829 by a British law with efforts of social reformers like Raja Mohan Rai.

actions. Kabir's renunciation of this concept also stands with the human experience that everything we see around us is real, and some abstract time, a hereafter, does not exist. He persistently asserts that the tradition is telling people what is written in books and scriptures, while he imparts what he has seen with his own eyes. His poetry repeatedly privileges lived experience over scriptural abstraction The poetry of Kabir puts out human experience as the truth and not what the books and scriptures might say. Kabir, here by doing so, relocates the human experience to the centre of spiritual realization. One does not require a book or scriptures to start the journey – Kabir here somewhat echoes the words of Buddha that one must be their own light. Kabir is telling his audience – if you do not become free now then there is no hereafter:

Friend! hope for the Guest while you are alive.
Jump into experience while you are alive!
Think... and think... while you are alive.
What you call "salvation"
belongs to the time before death.
If you don't break your ropes while you're alive,
do you think ghosts will do it after?
The idea that the soul will join with the ecstatic
just because the body is rotten –
that is all fantasy.
What is found now is found then.
If you find nothing now,
you will simply end up in the City of Death.

[Bly, Robert 2004]

Conclusion

The idea of time in Kabir's poetry cannot be reduced merely to the inherited framework of cyclical cosmology found in the Puranic and Bhakti traditions. While Kabir draws from the established discourse of Kaliyuga as an age of decline, he simultaneously destabilizes and reinterprets that discourse. Kabir's poetry marks a significant shift in the understanding of temporality in Hindi literature of early modern period. Instead of merely lamenting moral decay, he uses the language of Kaliyuga to expose the contradictions of his society and to challenge the structures that sustain them. The critique of Brahmins, ritual practices, false asceticism, and performative religiosity becomes the reality of his time. Kabir transforms time into a deeply personal and affective experience.

Most importantly, his poetry resists the postponement of truth to an abstract afterlife. Against both cyclical and linear notions of salvation that defer fulfilment to another birth or another world, Kabir insists on the immediacy of realization. Salvation must occur within lived time, within the present body, and within human consciousness itself. This insistence on the "here and now" gives Kabir's poetry its radical force and enduring relevance.

Thus, Kabir's engagement with time is not merely theological or philosophical; it is poetic, existential, and transformative. By collapsing cosmology into ethics and metaphysics into lived experience, Kabir reshapes the meaning of Kaliyuga and offers a vision of human life rooted in awareness, resistance, and inner awakening.

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III. TIME, MODERNITY, AND CULTURAL PERCEPTION

CYCLICAL–SITUATIONAL TEMPORALITY IN THE TURKISH UNDERSTANDING OF TIME AND MODERNITY

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Abstract

The article offers analysis of the relationship between the Turkish people's understanding of Time and their philosophy of social self-organization and state-building. In this context, "modernity" is interpreted as a reality shaped in every historical period through the Turks' attainment of harmony with the world.

It is emphasized here that the Turks were historically able to optimize the ratio between temporal cyclicity and dynamic situational temporality. This is tied to the Turks' preference for living according to the formula society–nature–world. Hence, modernity for the Turks is a reality shaped in the triad of past–present–future within the harmony of the world. Turkish societies have preserved these characteristics into the 21st century.

Here, a synergetic methodology is applied in the historical context of Time, prioritizing the methodological principles of synergetic social formation and dynamic integration. System analysis is used as the primary method.

The main conclusion is, as follows: Since ancient times, the Turks have possessed a unique understanding of Time. As a society, they have formed within this framework. Their philosophy of state-building developed in accordance with this

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reality. Harmony between social formation and the philosophy of state-building was established on the basis of the interplay between cyclical temporality and situational temporality.

Keywords: *socio-cultural self-organization, temporal cyclicity, synergetic approach, dynamic integration, "Turkic cultural milieu".*

Introduction

In contemporary scholarship, examining the history, law, and philosophically aesthetic thought of the Turkic peoples within modern scientific approaches has become increasingly relevant. Within this scope, understanding the place and role of the Turkish concept of Time in collective consciousness and lifestyle is of particular philosophical importance. Naturally, the study of cyclical–situational temporality in the Turkish understanding of Time within the context of modernity is necessary and unquestioned. Here, several philosophical aspects of the Turkish notion of Time are analysed in this regard.

Before proceeding, we should provide an explanation – the term "cyclicity of time" in this article refers to the preservation of substantive and functional characteristics of collectively accepted values within a particular temporal segment of society. "Situational temporality", on the other hand, expresses the processual manifestation of socio-cultural dynamics in specific situations within local time – i.e., the uninterrupted dynamic rhythm of processes in a synergistic sense.

To date, many studies have explored the formation of Turkic ethnoculture, statehood, and society. These explore the formation history, law, cultural traits, public life, state-building culture, and self-formation processes of the Turkic ethnos from various perspectives. Among these, important contributions from A. Toynbee, J. Hamilton, G. Clauson, J. P. Roux, W. Radloff, and the Vienna School (R. Grebner, B. Ankermann, O. Menghin, and others) can be noted. Turkish scholars such as S. M. Arsal, I. Kafesoğlu, A. Tutar, İ. Altaylı, F. Erdemgil, M. Kaşkarlı, H. Z. Ulkən, H. Cin, A. Akgunduz, O. Bağdatlı, O. Turan, A. Pamir, and many others have also made valuable contributions.

In Azerbaijan, essential works dedicated to Turkish history, culture, and state-building have been produced by scholars such as F. Ağasıoğlu, A. Rahimoğlu, N. Nasibli, F. Mustafa, Y. Oğuz, R. Rzayeva, F. Alakbarli, among others. In Southern Azerbaijan (Iran), Cavad Heyat's research is especially notable.

However, neither Western, Turkish nor Azerbaijani scholars have sufficiently examined the philosophical dimensions of Turkish societal thought, communal living, and state-building as a unified phenomenon. In particular, there is no thorough philosophical analysis of Turkish thought and life organization within the continuum of time and space.

This article attempts to fill that gap by proposing a philosophical perspective on the mutual relationship between the Turkish people's self-organization and their state-building culture through the lens of Time. The approach is interdisciplinary. Self-organization and state-building are analysed within the historical context of Time through synergetic methodology, using system analysis as a method.

Theoretical basis and method

The theoretical basis of the article consists of three aspects. First, it includes ideas proposed by Western researchers regarding the Turks. Specifically, the approaches of J. Hamilton [1993], G. Clauson [1972], J. P. Roux [2007], W. Radloff [1999], R. Grebner [1905], B. Ankermann [1905], and O. Menghin [1929] are considered. Additionally, a thesis from the Vienna School – the concept of "warrior shepherds" (*Hirtenkrieger*) [see: Kafesoğlu 1997: 220] – is included in the theoretical framework. The general features common to these Western researchers form the foundation of this aspect. The shared ideas in the works of J. Hamilton, G. Clauson, J. P. Roux, W. Radloff, and the Vienna School (especially O. Menghin) may be summarized, as follows:

- The Turks are an ancient people with a unique method of social formation.
- Their development from family to tribe, clan, people, and nation followed clearly defined social, cultural, legal, and demographic self-formation processes.
- Three types of law have always played a central role in Turkic history: the law of the ruler, the law of the council (*Divan*/Parliament), and customary law (*Yosun*).
- The culture of "warrior shepherds" played a significant role in the Turkish philosophy of self-organization and state-building.

It should be noted that some scholars have not always clearly understood the role of law in Turkish self-organization and state-building. In some cases, they even ignore it. For example, W. Radloff describes the Turkish state as an "empire devoid of legal rules" [Radloff 1999]. We will address this point in the section of this article below dedicated to discussions. What matters here is that Western scholars acknowledge the Turks' distinctive process of social formation and development.

The second aspect of the theoretical basis includes ideas from Turkish, Iranian, and Azerbaijani scholars concerning Turkic communities. The works of I. Kafesoğlu [1997], H. Cin [2024], A. Akgunduz [2024], F. Erdemgil [2015], O. Bağdatlı [2007], A. Pamir [2019], O. Turan [2014], A. Tutar [2002] from Turkey; F. Ağasıoğlu [2014], A. Rahimoğlu [2022], N. Nasibli [2022], F. Mustafa [2025], Y. Oğuz [2009] from

Azerbaijan; and Cavad Heyat [2011] from Iran are consulted for their insights into the socio-cultural, historical, political, moral-ideological, and psychological characteristics of Turkic peoples.

The third aspect involves the use of synergetics – one of the modern philosophical-scientific forms for studying the ways how societies form, acquire unique qualities, and self-organize. The main theoretical premise here is that society is a complex, open, nonlinear self-organizing system with numerous elements, characterized by transitions from chaos to order and from one level of order to another via "gestalt processual transitions" [Qurbanov 2023: 109–143].

Based on these three theoretical pillars, the methodological principles of the article are defined. The principle of synergetic social formation expresses the philosophical-scientific understanding of society's self-organization in each historical stage. The principle of dynamic integration allows us to determine the synergetic mechanisms that ensure society's wholeness as a complete, open, nonlinear system.

Accordingly, the method used in the article is system analysis.

Discussions

The study of the Turks as an ethnos and society encompasses various aspects. Sources indicate that Turkic communities possessed unique socio-cultural structures, economic practices, and systems of communication. However, scholarly assessments of this uniqueness have differed, leading to long-standing debates.

Some researchers describe the development of the Turkic ethnos as a continuous process of expansion from simple to complex, where the basic family model broadened consistently without contradiction.

Others argue that despite historical continuity, Turkic communities exhibited different social structures and demographic growth depending on the geographical regions in which they settled. Debates between these two viewpoints continue to this day.

For example, J. Hamilton claims that the transformation of Turkic communal life can be conceptualized as "family → union of families → tribe → confederation ('el')." These stages represent evolving forms of social structuring, communal functionality, and modes of communication [Hamilton 1993]. Researchers sharing this view consider the entire process to be a gradual expansion and increasing complexity of the Turkic family model [Kafesoğlu 1997].

Within this approach, cyclical temporality is seen as a process renewed at each stage of social evolution. Situational temporality corresponds to the rhythm of changes within each stage. However, other studies show that even within a single analytical framework, conceptual differences may arise between cyclicity and situationality. This is especially true when evaluating the relationship between social self-organization and the philosophy of state-building.

Nevertheless, an "underlying line of evolution" is widely accepted: Turkish history shows no deviation from its fundamental trajectory. Thus, cyclical temporality may be regarded as the optimal ratio between social self-organization and state-building. Examples from research support this thesis.

For instance, let us examine the approach of the "Vienna School." Turkish scholar İ. Kafesoğlu writes that the Vienna School does not rely on simplistic or baseless assumptions; rather, its foundation lies in *ethnographic factors* [Kafesoğlu 1997: 37]. The scientific value of this approach becomes evident as the discussion proceeds further, for it clarifies several issues that have historically hindered an accurate understanding of Turkish self-organization and state-building.

According to the Vienna School, the Turks possess a distinct "cultural ecology" (cultural system, cultural environment, cultural domain). Within this cultural ecology, the Turks not only have developed themselves as a society but also influenced the surrounding regions in a structured, organized manner – rather than as a dispersed nomadic mass.

The "cultural ecology" used by the Vienna School effectively refers to the *cyclical temporality* of Turkish socio-cultural evolution. Situational temporality, meanwhile, corresponds to the local, context-specific rhythmic changes arising from geography, politics, economy, ideology, and other factors.

Other researchers from this school adopted similar perspectives. As examples, consider the following:

Beginning in the late 19th century, F. Grebner (director of the Cologne Museum) and B. Ankermann (from the Berlin Ethnographic Museum) developed the idea of "cultural ecology", eventually formalizing it in 1905 [Grebner 1905; Ankermann 1905]. The central principle of this view is the existence of "cultural centres" from which cultural movements and systems expand into surrounding regions. This idea was later elaborated by W. Schmidt and U. Korösi, and further developed by O. Menghin and F. Flor, giving rise to the Vienna School [Kafesoğlu 1997].

In the 1940s, U. Korösi emphasized that terms like "Turkicness" or "early Turkicness" carry a meaning that is broader than their ordinary usage [Korösi 1941]. From here, he transitions into the historical, ethnological, and cultural significance of the concept of "warrior shepherds", tracing its roots to Ural–Altai culture.

O. Menghin, a prominent figure of the Vienna School, systematized these ideas further. He argued that world history contains *twelve cultural zones*, one of which is the "warrior–pastoral" cultural milieu, observed among the Turks. According to Menghin, this cultural type originated around the Ural–Altai region and spread outward [Menghin 1941].

Other European scholars support this classification. For instance, French scholar G. Gontandon identifies a "pastoral cultural cycle" as one of the major cultural environments. Slovak researcher J. Darkó emphasizes that the features, diffusion routes, and influence zones of the "Turan cultural environment" have become "well clarified".

Thus, European researchers conceptualize the Turkic cultural milieu as a well-structured, stable, and continuous process. This indicates that both cyclical temporality and situational temporality are relevant to Turkish self-organization and state-building. Cyclical temporality is rooted in Turkish geography, demographics, and cultural–political space, while situational temporality expresses the concrete manifestations of Turkic evolution in specific time–space contexts.

Philosophically, an important point arises: The geographic environment inhabited by the Turks shaped temporal perception as an interplay of "mountain–steppe" (vertical–horizontal) unity at every situational moment.

Most Turkish scholars accept this viewpoint, including the notable representatives – İ. Altaylı, F. Erdemgil, A. Tutar, Ö. Turan, A. Pamir, and others.

İ. Altaylı stresses that, although Turks created history, it was often written by others, causing contradictions. Therefore, he argues that Turks must now write their own history [Altaylı 2019]. He acknowledges the existence of a uniquely Turkish cultural system that continuously improves itself.

Fethiye Erdemgil writes that the Turks have long distinguished between their physical and spiritual-moral existence. Throughout history, they maintained certain modes of communal life and built states. They left a mark as "true warriors", possessing a 12 000-year-old character [Erdemgil 2015]. This character forms a strong unifying factor in social cohesion.

Adem Tutar, relying on Mahmud al-Kashgari's explanations of justice, law, order, and custom, argues that although specific laws change, the *society endures*: "il kalır, törü kalmaz" ("the state remains, customs may change") [Tutar, 2002]. Thus, he emphasizes the continuity of the Turkic cultural milieu.

Western scholars have also noted this phenomenon. For example, Clauson says that the "kagan is the independent ruler of a community" [Clauson 1972]. He implies that justice, sacred mandate (*Kut*), and custom (*Töre*) together represent the criteria of governance.

Osman Turan argues that Turkish society evolved within precise moral and legal boundaries. He identifies a tripartite formula in Turkish state thought: "el = state = peace." He states that order (*nizam*) has three levels:

- Internal order (personal discipline and responsibility)
- Social order (law, security within the state)
- Cosmic order (establishing divine harmony on earth)

If a ruler failed to maintain these, he would lose his divine mandate (*Kut*).

Hilmi Ziya Ulken also stresses that harmony and peace are essential to Turkish communal philosophy. Without harmony, "the world collapses". Thus, ensuring unity within society and peace among peoples was a key requirement of Turkish statecraft [Ülken 2018].

Accordingly, Turkish self-organization and state-building always rested on clear moral, ideological, and legal foundations: the Law of the Ruler, the Law of the Council, and the Law of Custom, which together uphold Order, Peace, and Justice.

Another approach also appears in discussions on this topic. Some researchers trace its origins to Plato's classification of "passionate shepherds" as "wild family groups." Later, Ibn Khaldun in his sociology expanded this image by portraying nomadic tribes – including the Turks – as culturally primitive communities distant from civilization. This perspective later influenced scholars such as A. Toynbee.

Toynbee classified global history into 20 "developed civilizations". Outside these, he placed a separate category: the "nomad". According to Toynbee, nomads are unable to build advanced civilizations. Ibn Khaldun had at least acknowledged the possibility that nomads could establish cities; Toynbee, however, entirely rejects this possibility. He refers to the nomadic community as a "horde", a cultureless "herd", implying an unstructured mass of people.

Toynbee adds that although nomads can raise animals – a sign of willpower – this does not mean they are capable of building historically enduring societies. Any group labelled "nomadic", in his opinion, is without true history. Thus, he calls these peoples representatives of "interregnum", meaning eras of "lawlessness" [Toynbee 1962: 50, 55–57].

As mentioned earlier, W. Radloff also could not escape the negative "nomad" stereotype when discussing Turkish self-organization and state-building. As a result, he presents the socio-historical development of the Turks in the following distorted manner: "large family → communal property → leader emerging without election ('ağa') → oppressive force → family dominion → rule by privileged class → plunder → empire devoid of legal principles" Radloff [1891].

Radloff makes these statements while discussing *Kutadgu Bilig*, which is an extraordinary misinterpretation. Anyone familiar with this work can clearly see the profound legal, ethical, and governance principles of the Turks – how tradition (töre), justice, law, and social harmony are articulated with philosophical sophistication [see Bağdatlı 2007].

Among Western researchers holding such views, J. P. Roux is particularly notable. Although he is recognized as a prominent authority on Turkic studies, his conclusions regarding Turkish social self-organization and state-building are highly inaccurate. According to Roux:

- The Turks are "traditionally nomadic" [Roux 2007: 46].
- Their culture lacks a stable historical continuity.
- They oscillated between sedentary and nomadic lifestyles.

He bases these claims on speculative interpretations of certain Turkish words, as well as shifts from linguistics to history without methodological grounding. Ultimately, Roux concludes that although the Turks constitute a distinct people, it is difficult to assert that they possess a continuous social and state tradition [Roux 2007: 46–48].

Summary of the discussions

The discussions above permit to draw several conclusions in the context of the Turkish understanding of Time: Philosophical aspects of the issue have been largely neglected. The existing studies often analyse the topic within narrow disciplines, resulting in limited conclusions.

There is little philosophical analysis of Turkish self-organization and state-building within the continuum of Time.

Despite differing views, the overall scholarly consensus points to a dynamic, continuous, and distinctive Turkish process of social formation and state-building. This process consistently evolved within the triad of:

- Law of the Ruler (*Hökmdar Qanunu*)
- Law of the Council / *Divan* (*Divan Qanunu*)
- Law of Custom / Tradition (*Yosun Qanunu*)

Western researchers, especially the Vienna School, conceptualized this through the idea of "warrior shepherds". Another important point arises from S. M. Arsal's writings: Arsal states that the foundation of Turkish social formation is *töre*, meaning "rules of social regulation". Thus, he argues that Turks possessed clearly defined laws forming the basis of justice:

- Popular/Customary Law (*Yosun*)
- Council/Parliamentary Law (*Divan*)
- Ruler's Law (*Hökmdar*) [Arsal 2014: 283]

These were precise and functioning systems regulating political, cultural, and social life.

Interestingly, many European scholars have analysed similar forms of customary law in their own societies:

Italians – *Consuetudo*
French – *Droit coutumier*
Germans – *Gewohnheitsrecht*

German scholar G. F. Puchta concludes that the internal character of a community gives rise to its customary law, which in turn influences all other branches of law [Puchta 1828].

This fact thoroughly refutes the negative Western claims that Turkish societies lacked legal systems. Ancient Turkic states clearly demonstrate this. For example, the Göktürk inscriptions (of the 6th century) reveal: explicit legal structures, judicial terminology, and references to the three legal systems.

Uyghur state law was even more developed. All three categories of law were institutionalized according to the needs of their time. Social, cultural, and legal life was regulated by detailed legal statutes.

Conclusion

From the conducted analysis, we have derived several philosophically significant conclusions. First, let us emphasize that since ancient times, the Turks have possessed a distinct understanding of Time and corresponding principles of self-organization. These principles were regulated within the framework of three laws – the Law of the Ruler, the Law of the Council (*Divan*), and the Law of Custom (*Yosun*).

In the formation of Turkish identity and the philosophy of state-building, the application of these laws not individually but in unity played a special role. Understanding the philosophy of this unity in the interplay between cyclical Time and situational temporality is extremely important. For each of these laws defined the dynamics of Time in shaping various aspects of the relationship between the individual and society among the Turks.

The Law of the Ruler regulated the situational temporality of Time within the boundaries of cyclical Time in terms of creating harmony between the self-organization of society and the governance of the state. That is, innovations were introduced into governance so that social, political, demographic, economic, moral-ethical, and cultural changes in Turkish society would not exceed the boundaries defined by divine order (*törü*). These innovations were usually of social, political, and legal nature. However, under all circumstances, legal innovations could not contradict the moral-ethical values of Turkish society.

Throughout history, the Turks preserved this "legal triangle". This was made possible by their ontological view of Time. The Turks' "ontologization" of Time emerged from the reciprocal relationship between living within Time and "carrying Time within themselves".

This approach to Time allowed the Turks to optimize, in every historical period, the proportion between cyclical Time and dynamic situational temporality. This was reflected in their aspiration to live in harmony with nature and the world. One of the clearest manifestations of this was the Turks' continuous pursuit, as a community, of unity among nature, humanity, and the Turkic tribe in every historical period.

The establishment of relations between historicity and modernity within the dynamics of Time among the Turks was realized against the background of this emphasis. In this sense, modernity for the Turks is a reality shaped within the triad of past-present-future in harmony with the world. Through this, the Turks achieved a remarkably interesting synthesis of tradition and modernity within the time-space continuum. In this context, Turkish modernization represents the renewal of state identity within the boundaries of cyclical Time through harmony between the self-organization (formation) of society and state governance.

Why specifically state identity? Because for the Turks, state-building has historically been the primary condition for free existence and communal evolution. However, with one enduring condition: at every stage, the identity of the state must be founded upon the identity of the people!

The main peculiarity of the Turkish concept of Time is that the thesis "first the self-organization of society, then the governance of the state" was not the guiding principle. For the Turks, development followed the principle that "based on the self-creation of society, the governance of the state must always align with societal interests" – in synergetic terms, a "gestalt processuality".

A clear example of this final conclusion is the grounding of the Turkish states on popular sovereignty. In the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the issue of sovereignty is classified precisely within this context. Therefore, in the 21st century, the proportion between the cyclical nature of Time and the pace of situational change continues in the Turkish states.

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DIFFERENCES IN THE PERCEPTION OF TIME BETWEEN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE WEST AS DEPICTED IN AMEEN RIHANI'S ANGLOPHONE WORKS

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Abstract

The bilingual and bicultural Arab emigration writer Ameen Rihani believed that his lifelong mission was cultural mediation between the Orient and the Occident, with the aim of reconciling, bringing together, and ideally merging the two entities, which he perceived as complementary, though traditionally opposed. Rihani used his extensive knowledge of the Western cultural canon to subvert prevailing stereotypes about Arabs and to negotiate his own competence as an expert on the Orient, thus presenting his ethnicity in a favourable, authoritative light. Accordingly, his Anglophone works contain examples of cultural translation of the Orient for American readers. The writer operates within the framework of existing preconceptions about Oriental societies, reformulating them in a more positive light and adjusting the interpretation of perceived facts to the attitudes of his intended audience. According to Rihani, one of the aspects in which the Orient and the Occident differ most is the perception of time and history as related to lifestyle and mentality. Thus, Rihani vividly describes the unhurried, deeply spiritual life in the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire in the shade of millennia of Middle Eastern history, comparing it to the hectic, rushed life of New York, which he portrays as the epitome of Western materialistic modernity driven by the lust for gain. A close analysis of Rihani's Anglophone texts shows his deep understanding of the two culture-specific temporal frameworks, which appear as an integral part of the Orient and the Occident as distinct macro-constructs forming a binary opposition.

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Introduction: Rihani and cultural mediation

The Lebanese-American writer Ameen Rihani (1876–1940) is recognized as a leading thinker of the Arab Renaissance whose prolific work helped shape modern Arabic literature [Imangulieva 2009; Hajjar 2010]. His collected Arabic works span twelve volumes and include poetry, short stories, essays, literary criticism, travel memoirs, and several books on Arab history [Hassan 2014]. At the same time, he is celebrated as the "father of Arab American literature" [Abinader 2000],[1] having pioneered the Anglophone literary tradition with the poetry collection *Myrtle and Myrrh* (1905), the novel *The Book of Khalid* (1911), and the play *Wajdah* (1909), each representing a first of its kind authored by an Arab immigrant in English within the United States [Hassan 2014: 38]. Rihani also became the first Arab to translate Arabic poetry into English [Hassan 2016: 369] and helped inspire the foundation of Al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya (the Pen League or Bond of the Pen), a literary society dedicated to the renewal of Arabic literature [Badawi 1975: 182]. In addition to being a writer, critic, translator, philosopher, and traveller, Rihani was also a charismatic political activist committed to promoting peace, tolerance, and cultural exchange between East and West [Traboulsi 1995; Hajjar 2010]. One of Rihani's chief ambitions, as W. Hassan phrases it, was "an overarching project of cultural translation that ambitiously aimed to reinterpret the "East" and the "West" to each other and bring about a civilizational synthesis" [Hassan 2014: 39]. Within this framework, Rihani explored the origins and potential of globalization as well as cultural and religious hybridization in both the Arab world and the West. His ideas, carefully adapted for Anglophone readers, are most fully expressed in *The Book of Khalid* (1911) and the essay collection *The Path of Vision: Pocket Essays of East and West* (1921).

Rihani's "dual Arab-American identity" and particular lifestyle which involved frequent travel between his two homelands [Hajjar 2010: xi], as well as writing for both Arab and Anglophone readers, required constant negotiation and cultural translation, which gradually shaped his concept of himself as a "cultural ambassador and mediator" [Bushrui 2012: xi]. Moreover, as W. Hassan explains, life between two cultures involved a growing awareness of the prejudices and limitations of each, and Rihani appears to have believed that these deficiencies could be ameliorated by replacing the corresponding better traits and values from the other culture. In short,

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[1] See also: *Ameen Rihani: The Founding Father of Arab-American Literature.* Ameen Rihani Organization. https://ameenrihani.org/?srsltid=AfmBOors1jPA8n0dRFbTsbcRoXDsLncIMUbsQxih5Nla1-9UD4KZTOxB

"Heir to two literary and cultural traditions, Rihani not only contributed to both but also tried to fuse them together" [Hassan 2014: 40]. This idea is explored in-depth in *The Book of Khalid,* where many of Rihani's theoretical insights are ostensibly playfully presented, masking their serious intent. In general, the novel appears to be a largely autobiographical work, paralleling many events of Rihani's life and reflecting, often ironically, the author's thoughts, aspirations, and failures. It must be noted that the novel contains a direct explanation by the Editor, stating that the perceived playfulness is only a method to present serious ideas to readers of his time: "no matter how important or trivial these, he who would give utterance to them must do so in cap and bells, if he would be heard nowadays" [Rihani 1911: 5]. From this point of view, *The Book of Khalid* might be regarded as Rihani's retrospection on his own naivety, illusions, and daydreams of youth, which he later developed into notable achievements in politics and literature. As explained by the narrator of the novel, "the principal aim of Khalid" was "to graft the strenuosity of Europe and America upon the ease of the Orient, the materialism of the West upon the spirituality of the East" [Rihani 1911: 248]. The fusion of these opposites was seen by Rihani as a positive process both for nations and for individuals; furthermore, he believed that such composite beings would combine the best qualities of each while mitigating their respective weaknesses. As Khalid argued, "My Brothers, the most highly developed being is neither European nor Oriental; rather, he who partakes of the finer qualities of both the European genius and the Asiatic prophet" [Rihani 1911: 246]. The serious intent of the writer is confirmed by the fact that he expressed the same ideas concisely as his own reflections in the little essay collection *The Path of Vision* (1921). In short, in his Anglophone works, Rihani articulated a vision of intellectual and spiritual exchange between the Orient and the Occident, which he perceived as necessary at the time of increasing migration, fast technological progress, rapid worldwide change, and early globalization.

Temporal frameworks in Rihani's East–West binary opposition

While critical literature has primarily focused on Rihani's cosmopolitanism and culture mediation [e.g., Hassan 2014; Hajjar 2010; Imangulieva 2009; Abinader 2000; Traboulsi 1995], there has been significantly less attention to the structural mechanisms through which his texts encode cultural differences, in particular, temporal perceptions. However, it is possible to argue that Rihani constructs the Orient and the Occident as geographical and civilizational contrasts, at the foundational layer characterized by different perceptions of time, which appear as a part of lifestyle, and a set of embedded civilizational values, and therefore, part of the cultural code. Through recurring binary oppositions, such as spirituality and materialism, contemplation and productivity, continuity and progress, he encodes distinct temporal models that shape experiences of representatives of these different cultures. For instance, in *The Book of Khalid*, Rihani vividly describes the unhurried, spiritual rhythms of life in the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire as "such picturesque languid stream" [Rihani 1911: 16; cf. 126], contrasting them with the frenzied, accelerated pace of New York, the epitome of the Western materialistic world [e.g., Rihani 1911: 34–35]. These two dissimilar models are neither mutually exclusive nor hierarchically ordered; rather, they function as complementary temporal dimensions of human civilization. Rihani presents them as belonging to two different mindsets, both available to the hybrid consciousness of the bicultural person who may inhabit any of these temporal regimes as a native, or mediate understanding of them to the Other. In doing so, Rihani strategically manipulates prevailing Orientalist stereotypes [Hassan 2014: 42], such as the mysticism, passivity, or "loafing" of the East, to assert the intellectual and spiritual robustness of Arab culture, demonstrating to his American readers that perceived vices may accompany profound mental and ethical labour [e.g., Rihani 1911: 10]. Thus, in Rihani's Anglophone texts, the perception of time constitutes the very foundational layer of cultural code, which determines lifestyle and value differences. However, this aspect is not overtly positioned as such, and it might be deduced that the argumentation is rather intuitive and pragmatic. Instead of building theory on temporal experience as the foundational layer of cultural code, signalling lifestyle and value differences, Rihani uses specific examples of divergent temporal perception, related to negative stereotypes, to re-explain them in a more favourable light.

Culture-specific temporal models, in general, can be interpreted as the least obvious yet pervasive layer of reality, expressed through language and potentially shaping habitual worldviews and social practices. As Sapir famously observed, "the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group" [Sapir 1929: 207]. According to cognitive linguists, language used to describe time influences habitual conceptualizations of time and temporal schemata [e.g., Sapir 1921; Whorf 1956; Lucy 1992; Boroditsky 2001]. Similarly, anthropologists tend to treat the perception of time as culturally constructed rather than universal, that is, based on collective memory and social logic of a particular community [cf. Gell 2001]. For instance, Hall emphasizes that time perception is socially and culturally encoded, specifying how that cultural groups organize, perceive, and use time differently, for example, linear, schedule-driven "monochronic" systems versus relational, flexible "polychronic" temporalities [Hall 1983]. The discussed frameworks suggest that linguistic and anthropological approaches converge in viewing temporal perception as culturally mediated, with the differences being that linguists emphasize the role of language [Sapir 1921; 1929; Whorf 1956; Lucy 1992], anthropologists focus on embedded value systems [Gell 2001; Hall 1983]. Likewise, culture semiotics treats culture as a system of codes shaping the very experience of reality [Eco 1976; Lotman 1990], and thus may provide a methodological basis for understanding temporal experience as well. The position of Eco who treats culture codes as mechanisms that structure perception and meaning [Eco 1976: 66–68; 130–135; 151–155], is compatible with the approach of Lotman who defines culture as a semiotic mechanism organizing collective memory and continuity [Lotman 1990: 40–43; 272–276]. Thus, within this framework, temporal perception may be understood not as a neutral dimension but as a culturally encoded mode of experience.

Binary constructs in Rihani's Anglophone texts: Layers and levels

Rihani's Anglophone texts, *The Book of Khalid* and *The Path of Vision*, systematically portray the Orient and the Occident as distinct macro-constructs forming a binary opposition. Each construct, on a micro-scale, consists of elements of culture code, much of which is arranged in binary oppositions, with each functioning as a positive or negative pole within the corresponding level. At the most granular level, these pairs of opposing qualities contribute cumulatively to the larger worldview, portraying Orient and Occident as distinct, dissimilar yet complementary entities. The dual identity and bicultural affiliation of the writer underpin this structure and are positioned as foundational to his being. Thus, in the novel, Khalid, as Rihani's mouthpiece, emphasizes, "the West for me means ambition, the East, contentment: my heart is ever in the one, my soul, in the other" [Rihani 1911: 241]. He further characterizes both entities metaphorically as "The Orient and Occident, the male and female of the Spirit, the two great streams in which the body and soul of man are refreshed, invigorated, purified" [Rihani 1911: 245]. Similarly, in *The Path of Vision* Rihani, now speaking in his own authorial voice, reflects: "America too is the land of my birth, my second birth, so to speak, which is more significant, to myself at least, than the first" [Rihani 1921: 125]. Rihani describes both constructs in detail, paying particular attention to negative stereotypes associated with each, and seeks to dispel them by translating and reframing them in terms comprehensible to the Other. In his Anglophone texts, the Other is primarily the American audience; accordingly, he focuses on prevalent stereotypes about Orientals, negotiating, redefining, and re-explaining them within a Western conceptual framework. The perception of time functions as a central axis, as the structuring principle of civilizational difference, deeply embedded in the constructs of Orient and Occident through these paired binary oppositions in semiotic code. It is, however, primarily implicit, revealing itself only upon careful analysis. Thus, the East, also called the Orient and Asia by Rihani, is presented not only as a geographical space but also as an abstractly imagined counterpart to the materialistic West.

Western-progressive temporality (The Occident)

In Rihani's works, the West appears primarily as the United States, in particular, New York, and it is linked to a fast-paced, future-oriented, rationalized temporal regime, in which the main goals are productivity, organization, and material progress. The Occident is repeatedly described as the land of "organisation and power, where Science and Freedom reign supreme," and as the home of material abundance symbolized by "the American millions" [Rihani 1911: 34–35; 246; 301]. For instance, the description of an emigrant's first encounter with New York Harbor emphasizes the imagery of monumental human construction, such as "these giant structures tickling heaven's sides" and "these cable bridges, spanning rivers," combined with mentions of industrial dynamism, hectic rhythm and result-oriented activities:

> *What manifestations of industrial strength, what monstrosities of wealth and power, are here! These vessels proudly putting to sea; these tenders scurrying to meet the Atlantic greyhound which is majestically moving up the bay; these barges loading and unloading schooners from every strand, distant and near; these huge lighters carrying even railroads over the water; these fire-boats scudding through the harbour shrilling their sirens; these careworn, grim, strenuous multitudes ferried across from one enchanted shore to another.* [Rihani 1911: 34–35]

Within this framework, time is measurable and primarily linked to efficiency and productivity, and diligence is positively valued [Rihani 1911: 34–35]. Yet this progressive temporality is ambivalent. The hectic life leads also to haste and restlessness, and it has no space for contemplative leisure [Rihani 1911: 35]. The disciplined movement toward the future, while being dynamic, expansionist, and progressive, is threatened by its own excesses of acceleration and commodification. The technological achievement and civic order [Rihani 1911: 246] is accompanied by spiritual depletion, as the West worships "false and unspeakable divinities," namely, "the gods of wealth, of egoism, of alcohol, of fornication" [Rihani 1911: 288], and the "lust of gain" appears as a social plague [Rihani 1911: 197]. In this rendering, Western time privileges ambition over contentment [Rihani 1911: 241], and tends toward moral decline and decadence [Rihani 1911: 317–318]. Furthermore, Rihani conceptually links Western time, with its positive and negative aspects alike, to the cult of success as the base of American modernity:

> *O Success, our lords of power to-day are thy slaves, thy helots, our kings of wealth. Every one grinds for thee, every one for thee lives and dies [...] Thy palaces of silver and gold are reared on the souls of men. Thy throne is mortised with their bones, cemented with their blood. [...] O Success, what an infernal litany*

> *thy votaries and high-priests are chanting to thee [...] Thou ruthless Gorgon, what crimes thou art committing, and what crimes are being committed in thy name!*
> [Rihani1911: 77]

In such a representation, diligence, material ambition, and industriousness, as traits conventionally extolled within Western self-perception, are recoded as being at the same time potentially morally destructive. However, by destabilizing the presumed superiority of Western productivity, Rihani prepares the ground for the reversal of one of the most persistent Orientalist stereotypes: the association of the East with laziness and indolence. As a result, Rihani attempts to modify the self-perception of Westerners, pointing out their imperfections, and softening the message by embedded criticism of the Easterners at the same time. The following excerpt exemplifies his rhetoric of recoding Western attitudes to the Orient from within the stereotypic Western outlook and value system:

> *Weak and oppressed nations are fundamentally spiritual; strong nations are, as a rule, chiefly materialistic. The one, cherishing religious ideals, soars to certain spiritual heights and now and then produces a seer to justify its languor and indolence; the other, seeking material things, bores into the earth for its treasures and keeps going down, down till its dynamic forces reach an impenetrable sterility and explode in a sudden, terrible reaction. The life of such a nation is symptomatic of a diseased state of the soul. The life of the other undermines, to say the least, its physical strength. The dwarfing tendency is equally potent in both. But a nation without a soul is more grotesque, more hideous than a nation of ascetics.*
> [Rihani 1921: 9]

Oriental-contemplative temporality (The Orient)

The Orient in Rihani's Anglophone texts appears multifaceted. The very beginning of *The Book of Khalid* attracts the readers' attention with Oriental imagery: the Khedivial library of Cairo, mysterious manuscripts, copies of Koran, drawings of dervishes and arcane symbolism [Rihani 1911: v]. It further unfolds as the scenery of Lebanon, at that time part of the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire: from the eclectic historical past, represented by multi-layered ruins and temples of Baalbek [Rihani 1911: 15–20] to the detailed depiction of the reality of life and a romantic love story in a Christian community in Bekaa valley [Rihani 1911: 143–166], from the majestic scenery of Mount Lebanon [Rihani 1911: 182–191; Rihani 1921: 112] to Damascus as a thoroughly Ottoman city at the time of growing unrest [Rihani 1911: 311–316]. The real Orient is closely linked with the imaginary land with a "divine message", as the origin of spirituality and cradle of religions:

> *Syria the land of roses, Syria the cradle and the tomb of the gods! When Byblos adored Tammuz, when Baalbek worshipped Jupiter-Ammon, when Galilee conquered Judea, when Arabia overcame Galilee, thou wert then a Fountain of the Spirit toward which turned a thirsty world. Thy temple was the temple of the universe, thy voice was the voice of God.* [Rihani 1921: 132–133]

The mentioned descriptions of the Orient emphasize continuity-oriented, spiritually structured temporality grounded in ritual rhythm, contemplation, and historical depth, which is continuously contrasted with the forward-driven, profit-oriented temporality of the West. Thus, in *The Book of Khalid*, Oriental city life is depicted as "one such picturesque languid stream," where shopkeepers sit "counting their beads" and sellers intone devotional refrains [Rihani 1911: 16–17]. Time here is not measured and quantified, nor converted into a monetary equivalent, but experienced as embedded in prayer, repetition, poetic utterance, and communal presence. This temporality privileges spiritual light and moral interiority [Rihani 1911: 141–142; 246; Rihani 1921: 174], religious consciousness [Rihani 1911: 17], mystic wisdom [Rihani 1911: 55], and ascetic simplicity [Rihani 1911: 63]. At the same time, Rihani appears to be aware of negative perceptions of idleness, particularly as a stereotype about Orientals in Western discourse, as demonstrated by his describing Khalid's tendency to outward indolence "gradually reverting to the Oriental instinct" [Rihani 1911: 55] and commenting, apparently sarcastically, "And where, if not in the Lebanon hills, "in which it seemed always afternoon," can he rejoin the Lotus-Eaters of the East?" [Rihani 1911: 11]. Thus, being aware that within the Western framework, "loafing" is often coded negatively, Rihani reinterprets it as intense intellectual and spiritual labour, in this instance, the creation of a book:

> *And Khalid once said to me, 'In loafing here, I work as hard as did the masons and hod-carriers who laboured on these pyramids.' And I believe him. For is not a book greater than a pyramid? [...] A man who conceives and writes a great book, my friend, has done more work than all the helots that laboured on these pyramidal futilities. That is why I find no exaggeration in Khalid's words. For when he loafs, he does so in good earnest. Not like the camel-driver there or the camel, but after the manner of the great thinkers and mystics: like Al-Fared and Jelal'ud-Deen Rumy, like Socrates and St. Francis of Assisi, Khalid loaf.* [Rihani 1911: 10; cf. 55]

In this manner, the image of Orient is constructed as the counterpart of the materialistic Occident. The East is characterized as the "land of origination, where Light and Spirit first arose" [Rihani 1911: 246], preserving a sacred historical memory and metaphysical depth [Rihani 1911: 55; Rihani 1921: 174], with a tinge of asceticism [Rihani 1911: 63], and a tendency to daydreaming and mysticism [Rihani

1911: i; 14; 125]. Rihani also depicts the more negative aspects of the contemplative, slow temporality which appear as reduced to absurd versions of the positive ones. Thus, contemplation may develop into general neglect of worldly matters and stagnation [Rihani 1911: 55], spirituality may turn into irrationality [Rihani 1921: 174], asceticism into poverty [Rihani 1911: 301], and spontaneity into repressions and violence, chaos and disorder [Rihani 1911: 17; 330]. Nevertheless, within the Oriental temporal framework, a coherent cultural logic is apparent, according to which slowness is linked to depth rather than indolence, and to stability rather than backwardness. Thus, if the Western time is quantified and linked to fast-forward progress, the Eastern time is intuitive and connected to eternal spiritual values.

As a backdrop to the described outwardly slow, contemplative temporality, Rihani constructs the Orient as a monumental-temporal landscape, in which history is spatialized and duration represented by architecture, myth, and epic scenery. Time is not merely experienced but materialized, and it gains a cyclical continuity aspect. For instance, the ruins of Baalbek and Palmyra are perceived as symbols of civilizational epochs likened to seasons of the year: “For right behind Mt. Sanneen is the Acropolis of Baalbek, and farther East are the ruins of Palmyra. The one is a monument to the Spring, the other to the Summer of my country’s past” [Rihani 1921: 118–119]. The sheer magnitude of historical events and long timeline is contrasted with the slow motion of seasons in the vast, impressive but static scenery of Mount Lebanon. Thus, historical time is simultaneously transformed into a visible panorama, a “cyclorama of all the seasons,” where “The seasons come and go, but the mark of their footsteps on my native horizon are ineffaceable. Here Time has erected eternal monuments to his departing children” [Rihani 1921: 112]. Rather than erasure or progress, temporality here produces sediment and permanence. The East appears “vast, static and majestic,” staged as “the Theatre of the Ancient World” [Rihani 1921: 110], a space where antiquity remains theatrically present. Even natural cycles follow one another “with the precision of marching regiments,” never hurried nor delayed [Rihani 1921: 109–110], suggesting not chaos but cosmically regulated recurrence. Simultaneously, geographic space becomes overlaid with mythic-historical simultaneity: Seth, Noah, Solomon, Nimrod, and the Tower of Babel coexist within the narrative space of Baalbek [Rihani 1911: 20]. The Orient thus emerges as a civilizational archive, in which mythical, sacred, and historical temporalities coexist in layered density; so “Lethean breezes blowing from the East” [Rihani 1921: 116] make the busy Occidentals pause and contemplate their own place in history. Thus, in contrast to the forward acceleration of the Western time, the Eastern time appears slow and cyclical; and where the Western fast, fleeting time appears ephemeral, the Eastern time is represented by the visible, solid strata within landscape and memory.

Reference temporal models: Western-progressive vs. Oriental-contemplative time

From the previous analysis, it may be deduced that, in Rihani's works, two distinct temporal models are presented, contrasted, and made intelligible for an Anglophone audience of the early 20th century. Namely, the contrast between Western modern temporality and the temporal rhythms of the late Ottoman Levant provides a key interpretive framework for understanding Rihani's cultural mediation. In this section, both models, which were described as poles of the binary opposition Orient-Occident (East-West), encoded through characteristic qualities arranged in binary pairs, are compared to two main frameworks of temporality coexisting in Rihani's timespace. Within this context, the Anglophone writings of Rihani may be read as presenting two historically formed, culture-specific temporal models: the accelerated, progress-oriented time of Western modernity, as contrasted to the contemplative, continuity-oriented temporality of the Ottoman-Levantine world. However, this duality should not be interpreted as an essentialist claim about fixed civilizational identities, but rather as an analytic model exposing the two reference frameworks used by Rihani.

Thus, it may be argued that Rihani's depiction of Western temporality and modernity can be interpreted through Max Weber's theoretical framework, adopted as a historical and conceptual anchor. This choice is justified not only by Weber's foundational analysis of modern Western rationalization but also by the geographical and cultural context of Rihani's life, as the writer spent significant periods in Boston and New York, within the Arab-American Mahjar environment and the wider Anglo-American cultural sphere [Bushrui & Jenkins 1998]. Most important, this environment was permeated by Anglo-American Protestant atmosphere that Weber identifies as formative for the emergence of the 'spirit of capitalism,' characterized by disciplined labour, rational conduct, and the moralization of time [Weber 1930]. Weber's approach thus offers a historically grounded and culturally resonant means of interpreting the temporal contrasts that are central to Rihani's cultural mediation project. In addition, Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) and *Economy and Society* (published in expanded form 1922) appeared almost at the same time as Rihani's Anglophone works – *The Book of Khalid* (1911) and *The Path of Vision* (1921). This allows one to argue that Weber and Rihani witnessed comparable processes in the society and described similar attitudes to work, time, leisure, and productivity.

Conceptually, Weber provides a rigorous framework for understanding Western modernity as structured around rationalization, disciplined use of time, and economic orientation. In Rihani's texts, the depiction of New York and Western life as accelerated, efficiency-driven, and future-oriented, though excessively so, and therefore criticized by the writer [Rihani 1911: 34–35; 77; 130], corresponds to Weber's characterization of capitalist temporal regimes, in which the waste of time, that is, the failure to devote the maximum possible hours per day to diligent work, is "the first and in principle the deadliest of sins" [Weber 1930: 157; cf. 47–49; 53–54; 158–159]. Weber's analysis further traces this disciplined, productivity-oriented conception of time to the earlier Protestant moral philosophy, exposing the underlying logic and value system. In *The Protestant Ethic*, he widely cites Benjamin Franklin's practical maxims related to the attitudes towards time and leisure [Weber 1930: 157–159], referring to *Advice to a Young Tradesman* (1748), where Franklin famously admonishes readers to "remember that time is money" and urges them to "Waste neither Time nor Money, but make the best use of both" [Weber 1930: 158]. Thus, Weber demonstrates how time not only was conceptualized as measurable, economically productive, and subject to rational governance, but also, most importantly, directly quantified and monetized, making punctuality and productivity a moral duty. Weber also analyses how this concept of time developed within a strictly religious framework, replacing the earlier, more contemplative attitudes and, finally, forming the ethos of modern capitalist societies [Weber 1930: 40; 81; 187]. In short, there are clearly visible parallels between the Western attitudes to time as described by Weber and by Rihani, in particular, with respect to the material progress, industriousness, and profit, which allows to conclude that both authors refer to the same model of rationalized temporal ethic as a historically grounded framework for understanding the Western temporal regime.

Correspondingly, it may be assumed that the Levantine-Ottoman cultural context of the period may be adopted as the primary referential framework for Rihani's representation of Oriental temporality, as it was prevalent in the region where the writer was born and which he visited in the beginning of the 20th century. Historical studies of the late Ottoman Empire demonstrate that time was not universally regulated by mechanical clocks, but it was organized around prayer cycles, seasonal rhythms, and communal routines. This system was often referred to as *alaturka* time, which coexisted with and only gradually gave way to Western *alafranga* clock-time during the modernization reforms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries [Wishnitzer 2015; Cantemir 2004]. And exactly this traditional local perception of time is regarded as the stereotypical Oriental loafing in the West, as it stands in a sharp contrast to the capitalist models of clock discipline, characterized by punctuality, industriousness and rationalization [cf. Weber 1930; Thompson 1967]. However, the traditional Ottoman temporal organization reflected a sociocultural logic which prioritized religious observance, spiritual orientation, and social interaction in the context of a strong feeling of historical continuity; thus, unhurried everyday life was not equalled with passivity, indolence, or stagnation [Wishnitzer 2015]. This temporality remained culturally significant for a long time and existed as a parallel trend in Ottoman-Levantine society even during the transition to Westernized temporal organization [Cantemir 2004]. Possibly, the coexistence of these two temporal frameworks in the late Ottoman empire might have provided Rihani with deeper insights regarding the status and validity of different perceptions of time as the core concepts of cultural identity [cf. Wishnitzer 2015], illuminating his broader project of mediating between two culturally grounded yet potentially reconcilable experiences of time. Rihani's texts repeatedly position the hybrid intellectual subject as capable of inhabiting and mediating between these distinct experiences of time, reflecting different attitudes to life – materialistic and spiritual.

The hybrid subject as "The Most Highly Developed Being"

The key element of Rihani's binary system is the construction of the hybrid subject who is able not only to inhabit both temporal frameworks as a native, but also observe them as a supra-cultural mediator and efficiently perform cultural translation, integrating cultural codes of both civilizations. This figure appears as the protagonist of *The Book of Khalid*, and, apparently, also as the authorial persona in *The Path of Vision*. As explained by the narrator of the novel, "the principal aim of Khalid" was "to graft the strenuosity of Europe and America upon the ease of the Orient, the materialism of the West upon the spirituality of the East" [Rihani 1911: 238]. In this passage, the wording directly points to the already discussed specificities of Oriental and Occidental time, placed as poles of a binary opposition: Eastern "ease" combined with "spirituality" versus Western "strenuosity" combined with "materialism". The fusion of the two opposites was seen by Rihani as a positive process for both nations and individuals alike, as he believed that such compound beings would possess the best qualities of both, while the worst qualities would balance each other. As Khalid argued, "My Brothers, the most highly developed being is neither European nor Oriental; but rather he who partakes of the finer qualities of both the European genius and the Asiatic prophet" [Rihani 1911: 246]. Khalid also contrasts this figure with Nietzsche's Superman, a concept fashionable at the time: "Ay, in this New World, the higher Superman shall rise. And he shall not be of the tribe of Overmen of the present age, of the beautiful blond beast of Zarathustra [...] In him shall be reincarnated the Asiatic spirit of origination, of Poesy and Prophecy, and the European spirit of Art, and the American spirit of Invention" [Rihani 1911: 113]. It appears that, in positioning this hybrid subject as the Superman of the "New World", Rihani asserts a cultural and social niche in American society for himself and other multicultural subjects.

Such a move was necessary for integration in American society, as being an Arab emigrant in the early twentieth century meant continuous struggle against prejudice, especially since they were often seen as racially ambiguous or inferior within U.S. classificatory schemes, that is, "not quite white" [Gualtieri 2009; Samhan 1999]. At the same time, Orientals provoked fascination, as they represented the imaginary Orient constructed by Western culture, a mythical, enigmatic, charming, exotic place teeming with sages, disguised princes, supernatural beings, and mystics, and in exceptional cases, if of noble birth, great wealth, or notable talent, might be regarded as roughly equal in standing to the Anglophone majority [Raine 1998]. Thus, as pointed out by W. Hassan, the first generation of Arab-American writers negotiated roles that were available for Orientals within the pre-existing ideological framework: the first option was to adapt to circulating stereotypes, such as mystic, prophet, or nobleman, and the second was to demonstrate to Western audiences their cultural and professional competence in an established role, for instance, as a writer, expert, or even clergyman [Hassan 2014: 41]. However, taking into account the great interest in Eastern spiritual teachings at that time [Bushrui & Jenkins 1998: 3], the most rewarding role appeared to be that of an Oriental sage. In this context, it appears that Rihani learned to use these preconceptions to negotiate his own position in American literary and artistic circles; in particular, he mobilized the stock image of a spiritual teacher from the East, so his multiculturalism appeared as an asset, not a deficiency. This "most highly developed being" [Rihani 1911: 246] who inhabits both worlds but to whom neither can fully lay claim, is used to demonstrate that integration across temporal and civilizational codes is both possible and ethically desirable.

Conclusion

Rihani's Anglophone works demonstrate that temporal perception can function as a fundamental but less immediately visible layer of cultural code in the East–West binary opposition, which influences worldview, moral orientation, decisions and daily activities. They also show that it is possible to envision a hybrid consciousness that is able to comprehend and inhabit both worlds as a native and perform cultural translation, expressing one framework in terms of the other. The writer presents two distinct models of time as expressions of social values, ethical priorities, and civilizational outlooks by encoding spirituality, contemplation, and cyclical temporality as the basic qualities of the Orient as a cultural construct, and linking them to their opposite poles as integral traits of the Occident, namely, to materialism, increasing productivity, and linear progress. However, in Rihani's view, these oppositions are neither morally hierarchical nor absolute: spiritual depth coexists with inertia, just as material achievement coexists with moral and spiritual limitation. The models exist separately but are also constantly juxtaposed, compared, reinterpreted and re-narrated; however, the differences in value systems are revealed without enforcing synthesis or reconciliation. Thus, Rihani does not seek to merge the temporal frameworks of East and West; rather, he presents each as internally coherent and applicable in its own cultural context, while recoding them for a Western audience. The result is an interlinked system of values, internalized by the hybrid being, and parallelly interpreted in terms of the Oriental and Occidental mindsets, so both interpretations exist simultaneously and it is possible to see them from different angles in their pure form or juxtaposed to different extent. For instance, the hybrid consciousness may inhabit one of the two temporal frameworks, seeing it from both aspects; or combine them according to own wishes and needs. The merge occurs from within the bicultural mind rather than by hybridization of two cultural spaces, two dissimilar worlds, two complementary constructs – the Orient and the Occident – which at all times are described as distinct reference points, with potential of modification existent in the hybrid in-between space. The result is a flexible, nondiscriminatory stance which honours historically formed patterns and traditional cultural structures. Such an approach might prove to be optimal for contemporary globalized world as well, as it allows to preserve local cultural diversity, at the same time, introducing the concept of the hybrid personality as the keeper of both cultural canons and intercultural mediator.

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OTHERNESS THROUGH TIME IN KOREA: CASE STUDY OF ZAINICHI KOREAN RETURNEES[1]

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of the concept of the "Other" in Korean society and its reshaping of the experiences of Zainichi Korean returnees from Japan. The study aims to trace the historical and cultural construction of otherness, analyse how temporal frameworks mediate identity negotiations and ground these dynamics in a case study of Seoul in 2019. Drawing on literature analysis, policy review, and ethnographic data from interviews and participant observation, the research reveals that returnees navigate hybrid identities within intersecting temporal grammars – ritual, linear, networked, and existential. These frameworks influence institutional perceptions and self-fashioning, producing moments of dialogue and tension between tradition and modernity. The findings show that Korean society's encounter with global interconnectedness fosters both the convergence and divergence of temporalities, reframing the "Other" as a dynamic relationship rather than a fixed category. This highlights how identities can change over time and how societal acceptance can evolve across generations.

Keywords: *Otherness in Korea, temporal frameworks, diaspora, Zainichi Koreans.*

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Introduction

This article examines how the concept of the "Other" (*taja*, 타자) evolves in Korean society through the lived experiences of Zainichi Korean returnees from Japan. Their identities – Korean, Japanese, or hybrid – are negotiated amid shifting historical, cultural, and temporal frames. These negotiations are situated and are part of a long-term pattern defined by three things: Confucian hierarchy, the break with colonial times and the rise of ethnic nationalism (*minjok*, 민족) in the aftermath of liberation. These three elements have shaped the boundaries of what it means to be the same or different from the Joseon dynasty to the present day [Em 1999: 298–301; Seth 2020: 45–49]. In parallel, recent scholarship on diasporic return and border politics in South Korea demonstrates how Zainichi mobility since the 1990s intersects with citizenship regimes and co-ethnic hierarchies in the "homeland", thereby complicating essentialist notions of national belonging [Tsuda and Song 2019: 99–117].

The article has three goals. Firstly, it integrates historical, philosophical and cultural perspectives on alterity, from Confucian social ordering to colonial and postcolonial identity politics, to understand how the "Other" is produced and reproduced in Korea [Capener 2021: 130–33]. Secondly, it shows how temporal frameworks mediate these processes by shaping institutional perceptions and self-reform among returnees. Thirdly, it situates these discussions within the context of a 2019 Seoul case study of Zainichi returnees, emphasising how various "grammars of time" (recurring/ritual, linear/goal-oriented, emergent/networked, and existential/situational) influence everyday practices and communication as well as governance [Kim Wachutka 2023: 372–376].

Research on diasporic return emphasises the diversity of co-ethnics and the stratifications that returnees encounter within South Korea's legal and social systems. It also documents the development of transnational and hybrid identities that challenge the concept of a singular "Korean" subjectivity [Tsuda and Song 2019: 101–105; González Lario 2017: 56–59]. Concurrently, the state's discourse of multiculturalism (*tamunhwa*, 다문화), which is often centred on "multicultural families", has been criticised for categorising difference in a narrow and uneven manner, thereby leaving certain migrants and returnees outside of its protective umbrella [Webster 2024: 14–16; Choi 2019: 850–852]. These contemporary debates are inseparable from the colonial legacy, including dual social structures and a difficult heritage, that continues to shape national narratives and institutional practice [Park 2010: 72–75; Lee 2019: 33–36].

Methodologically, the study combines a literature analysis on Zainichi return, *minjok* nationalism, Confucian sociality, and *tamunhwa* policy, with a threemonth field study (June–August 2019)[2] in Seoul, employing twenty semistructured interviews[3] with adult Zainichi returnees (ages 20s–50s) and participant observation in community settings, as well as a discursive analysis of policy and media framing. Sampling was purposive, diversifying factors such as age, gender, education, and citizenship histories (e.g. *chosen seki*[4] and KR nationality), with snowball referrals.

Combining a temporal analysis with ethnographic evidence, the article demonstrates that multiple, coexisting temporalities – ritual, linear, networked, existential – converge and diverge across the life course, at times fostering intercultural dialogue and at others sharpening tensions between tradition and modernity. In doing so, it reframes the "Other" not as an external category but as a dynamic relation constantly (re)made at the intersection of history, policy, and lived time.

1. Temporal frameworks: towards polychronous lives

Using a temporal lens, the concept of othering and (re)belonging was reinterpreted, proposing that Zainichi returnees inhabit polychronous lives – coexisting and overlapping temporalities that shape identity.

- Recurrence/ritual time. Aligned with Confucian self-cultivation, ancestral continuity and seasonal practices (e.g. memorial rites), recurrence provides a cyclical moral framework against which returnees can narrate "coming home" as the recommencement of obligations and kinship roles [Chung 2015: 88–91; Seth 2020: 46–48].
- Linear/goal-oriented time. Reflecting modern developmentalism and externally regulated institutions (such as schools, the military and labour markets), linear time becomes the metric for "catching up" in terms of language proficiency, credentials or corporate seniority [Em 1999: 300–301; Tsuda and Song 2019: 104–105].
- Emergent/networked time: Technologically mediated rhythms (e.g. messaging platforms, flexible project cycles and transborder gigs) enable synchronous ties with Japan and Korea. This produces polychronicity in everyday life that defies a single national clock [Hall 1959: 90; Candidatu and Ponzanesi 2022: 263–65].

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[2] The research was funded by Korean Foundation in 2019.

[3] Participants were interviewed in Japanese, recorded with permission and anonymized through use of pseudonyms. Transcripts were thematically coded based on open coding (with an iterative approach informed by narrative and temporal analysis). We complied with the standard ethical guidelines (voluntary participation, right to withdraw, secure storing of data).

[4] *Chosen-seki* 朝鮮籍 is a legal status assigned by the Japanese government to ethnic Koreans in Japan who neither have Japanese nor Korean nationality [see more in Visočnik 2019].

- Existential/situational time: Experiential, contingent horizons – moments of dissonance or recognition – allow returnees to replot life stories outside state calendars, sometimes embracing hybrid or post-national identities [Chapman 2004: 38–40; Kim Wachutka 2023: 380–83].

In his seminal work, *The Silent Language* (1959), Edward T. Hall introduced the distinction between monochronic and polychronic time orientations as cultural frameworks that shape behaviour and identity. Monochronic time is linear, segmented and scarce, prioritising schedules, punctuality and sequential task completion. In contrast, polychronic time is relational and fluid, with multiple activities occurring simultaneously and interpersonal relationships often taking precedence over rigid timetables [Hall 1959: 178].

Hall argued that these orientations are not merely practical, but are also deeply embedded in cultural values. Polychronicity emphasises contextual flexibility, where time is experienced as socially constructed rather than an abstract commodity. This insight has profound implications for migration and diaspora studies. Rather than inhabiting a single temporal regime, migrants and returnees navigate polychronous lives, synchronising institutional calendars, ancestral cycles, and digital networks.

For Zainichi Korean returnees in Seoul, for example, this means juggling national/institutional time (school schedules and bureaucratic deadlines), ancestral/ritual time (Confucian memorial rites) and networked time (real-time digital communication with Japan). These overlapping temporalities create hybrid identities that resist assimilation into a single national narrative. Rather than aligning with one "clock", returnees exercise temporal agency by selectively prioritising different rhythms in order to maintain ties and negotiate belonging.

Hall's framework thus illuminates why diaspora identities are inherently multi-temporal; they are shaped by simultaneity and relationality rather than linear progression. In a globalised, digitally mediated world, polychronicity becomes a structural condition of transnational life, producing flexible, layered and context-dependent identities [Candidatu and Ponzanesi 2022: 263–65].

2. Historical analysis of "Other"

The concept of the "Other" in Korean society – the individuals or groups deemed different from prevailing norms – has emerged and persisted across political eras, moral orders and temporal regimes. From the formation of the early state and the adoption of Confucianism to the era of colonial modernity, the rise of ethnic nationalism (*minjok*) and the recent discourse on multiculturalism (*tamunhwa*), Koreans have negotiated their identity within the hierarchies of the peninsula and in opposition to external powers. Two historical structuring grammars stand out: (1) Confucian relational ethics, which ranked persons and roles according to the five relationships and three bonds; and (2) *Sadae* diplomacy, which inscribed Korea's subordination within a Sinocentric order while differentiating between non-Confucian "others". These grammars have persisted in modern institutions and etiquette, shaping the categories by which difference is recognised or stigmatised [Chung 2015: 284–296; Seth 2020: 27–52].

Below, we trace how alterity has been articulated over time, from ancient polities to the present day. We also provide a detailed explanation of *Sadae* ideology, including its moral logic, practices and legacies.

Origins of the concept (before 10th c.)

From the Three Kingdoms era (57 BCE–668 CE), Korean elites engaged with Chinese civilization as a prestigious model while asserting political distinctiveness. As Seth notes, "Korea's early states were deeply influenced by Chinese civilization, which they regarded as superior, even as they asserted their own distinctiveness" [Seth 2020: 33]. Early Confucian texts and academies [e.g., Goguryo Taehak[5], ca. 372] were primarily elite and administrative; they did not immediately supplant indigenous beliefs or social practices [Chung 2015: 284–287; Deuchler 2021: 28–29]. This dual optic, admiration and differentiation, created an enduring pattern of locating Korea between Sinitic "civilization" and local autonomy [Seth 2020: 33–35; Cartwright 2016].

At this stage, otherness was inter-polity: distinction from China and Japan, and boundary-making against steppe polities. These terms were political and ritual, not yet articulated as philosophical *taja*. The modern philosophical vocabulary of alterity arrived later via translation, as Lee Haeng Hoon's conceptual history of "philosophy" shows: pre-modern terms such as *gyeokchi*[6], *gungni*[7], and *seongn*[8] were gradually refracted into modern academic categories in the early twentieth century [Lee 2011: 6–12].

Confucianism and the construction of "Other" in Goryeo and Early Joseon: Institutional Confucianisation (10th–15th c.)

Confucianism was introduced to Korea during the Three Kingdoms period and was institutionalised as the state ideology during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897). It profoundly shaped Korean perceptions of identity and difference. At its core, Confucian thought emphasises hierarchical relationships (*oryun*, 오륜) – ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder-younger, and friend-friend – which structured

[5] National Confucian Academy.

[6] "the investigation of things and the extension of knowledge".

[7] "the exhaustive search for the principle".

[8] "human nature and natural law".

Korean society into rigid social strata. This hierarchical worldview created internal forms of otherness, where individuals outside the yangban elite were considered socially inferior. Women, for instance, were confined to domestic roles, thereby reinforcing gendered otherness within the family system [Deuchler 2021: 7].

During Goryeo, Confucianism gained a foothold in state administration, including civil examinations and ritual reforms. However, it did not fully displace Buddhist and customary orders [Chung 2015: 287–289]. Following the establishment of the Joseon dynasty, Neo-Confucianism became the ideological basis for legislation, rites, family life, inheritance and gender roles. Deuchler's seminal analysis shows how the "Confucian transformation" reorganised society into agnatic lineages centred on ancestor worship and mourning rites, thereby establishing patriliny and codifying gendered subordination in law and ritual [Deuchler 2021: 89–128, 129–202, 203–230, 231–281].

> *The Confucian transformation of Korea restructured society into rigid hierarchies, embedding status distinctions into law, ritual, and everyday life.*
> [Deuchler 2021: 7; cf. 231–281]

To disseminate relational ethics, the Joseon dynasty produced didactic compilations such as *Oryun haengsilto*[9] (1797), which are illustrated tales of the five moral relationships (parent-child, husband-wife, elder-younger, ruler-subject, and friend-friend). These tales were used to provide common instruction [Hoh 2018]. By the 18th century, Korea had largely become a "Confucian normative society", in which hierarchy and ritual propriety permeated daily life [Chung 2015: 291–295; Cawley 2021].

Internally, Confucian relational ethics in Joseon Korea mapped rank onto domestic and social spaces. This restricted women's roles, replacing the matrilocal marriage norms of the Goryeo period with patrilocal ones, and codifying separate spheres for elite women. The concept of gendered otherness deepened within the lineage society through practices such as widow chastity, inheritance exclusions and ritual obligations, creating a moral-ritual stratification – an internal "other" within households and status groups [Deuchler 2021: 231–281; Koh 2003: 60–73]. Externally, Joseon diplomacy adopted the *sadae*[10] ideology, positioning Korea as

[9] 五倫行實圖 (*Illustrated Guide to the Five Relationships*). This Confucian text reflects the profound influence of Confucian ethics on Korean society, especially during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), and across East Asian cultures shaped by Confucius's teachings [Hoh 2018].

[10] *Sadae* (사대, meaning "serving the great") was the foreign policy of the Joseon dynasty towards China. It was based on a moral-ritual hierarchy rooted in Confucian cosmology. According to this hierarchy, the Son of Heaven governed an ordered realm, while peripheral

a loyal vassal state of China and viewing nomadic tribes and Japan as culturally "barbaric". This civilised (Confucian) versus uncivilised (non-Confucian) binary framed outsiders as moral and cultural "others", thereby legitimising deference to the Chinese imperial order and distinguishing themselves from neighbouring peoples [Seth 2020: 33–35; Koh 2003: 60–65]. Pettid notes that the elites "saw themselves as guardians of Confucian civilisation", contrasting ritual purity with the perceived disorder of their neighbours [Pettid 2023: 288].

These norms persisted into modernity, influencing collectivist attitudes and resistance to diversity.

Colonial rule and the transformation of Korean identity

The Japanese colonial period (1910–1945) was a significant turning point in the formation of Korea's identity and its concept of otherness. During this period, Koreans were marginalised within their own land and subjected to assimilation policies (*hwang-gugsinminhwa*, 황국신화 or "becoming loyal subjects of the empire") aimed at erasing their language, culture, and traditions. These strategies included the imposition of Japanese names, the suppression of Korean education and the enforcement of Shinto practices, all with the aim of transforming Koreans into loyal imperial subjects [Seth 2020: 211]. Colonial governance produced a "dual society", with Koreans and Japanese being stratified across residence, health, education and law. This embedded racialised hierarchies into urban space and administration [Park 2010: 72–85; Lee 2019: 1–3].

In response, Korean intellectuals mobilised the concept of *minjok* (ethnic nation) as a counter-discourse. Em [1999: 336] argues that *minjok* was not an ancient essence, but rather a modern construct that was appropriated from Japanese and European thought and then used to rewrite history as the story of a single ethnic nation – a democratic imaginary that resisted colonial domination. This narrative unified Koreans under the umbrella of blood and culture, de-othering internal status groups while simultaneously hardening external boundaries and framing Japan and outsiders as threats to "Koreanness" [Em 1999: 353].

Minjok discourse served three functions: (1) unifying the colonised by asserting a shared ethnic identity; (2) opposing the coloniser by presenting Koreanness as morally superior to Japanese domination; and (3) ethnicising the belonging by

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states displayed virtue through tribute, investiture requests, calendar adoption and literary norms. For Joseon elites, *sadae* affirmed Korea's identity as a civilised Confucian polity, while defining non-Confucian peoples as "barbaric" [Seth 2020: 33–35; Koh 2003: 60–65]. Its grammar of *li* and ritual order legitimised vertical relations and civilised status. Although *sadae* collapsed in the 19th century, it left behind enduring hierarchies and honorific practices that continue to shape nationalist discourse to this day [Chung 2015: 292–296].

linking nationhood to bloodline and culture [Em 1999: 345]. The experience of enforced otherness fostered ethnic nationalism (*dan-il minjog juui*, 단일민족주의) as a form of resistance. Figures such as Yi Gwangsu emphasised cultural purity and unity, while the March First Movement (1919) catalysed nationalist discourse and reinforced the binary of "us" versus "them" [Shin 2018: 56].

Colonial modernity also introduced Western philosophical ideas, including existentialism and alterity, into Korean intellectual circles. These ideas influenced literature and philosophy, explicitly addressing the concept of "the Other" [Yi 2019: 4]. Ironically, however, modernisation under Japanese rule created a paradox: Korea adopted modern infrastructure and education, yet these were entwined with imperial domination, producing a hybrid identity; modern, yet colonised. After liberation, this legacy persisted as cultural trauma and an enduring emphasis on ethnic homogeneity, shaping Korea's ambivalent stance towards globalisation and multiculturalism in the late 20th century [Park 2010: 72].

Post1945 nationhood: Homogeneity and multicultural turns

Following its liberation in 1945, South Korea adopted a monoethnic national identity as a foundation for state-building and modernisation. This emphasis on blood-based belonging was reinforced by nationality law (*jus sanguinis*) and popular narratives of the "single-blood nation" (*tan'il minjok*, 단일민족), becoming deeply embedded in education, the media and everyday discourse [Seth 2020: 45–49; Em 1999: 347]. During the period of rapid economic growth from the 1960s to the 1980s, developmental nationalism further reinforced the notion that cultural and ethnic homogeneity were vital for achieving economic success and social cohesion [Park 2010: 72–75].

From the early 2000s onwards, however, state discourse shifted towards multiculturalism (*tamunhwa*), in response to rising immigration and international norms. However, policy frameworks largely targeted "multicultural families" – typically Korean men married to foreign women and their children – while leaving other migrants and even diaspora returnees outside formal support systems [Webster 2024: 14–16; Lie 2014: 2–4]. This selective inclusion has produced what Webster terms "administrative recognition without cultural acceptance", thereby maintaining Koreanness as the normative core [Webster 2024: 15].

Studies of education and social policy confirm that the norm of Koreanness – blood, language and culture – persists, reproducing symbolic hierarchies in which recognised "multicultural subjects" remain socially marginalised [Kim 2020: 77–80]. Park's research on North Korean resettlers illustrates competing frames: "multicultural citizen" versus "global citizen", which re-categorise certain migrants while re-inscribing ethnic nationalism [Park 2020: 124–129]. The tensions between administrative inclusion and cultural othering mirror earlier systems of order and difference, such as Confucian hierarchies and ethnic nationalism, revealing a continuity beneath the rhetoric of diversity [Webster 2024: 14–16; Kim 2020: 76].

3. Time as a medium of Otherness: Polychrony in contemporary Korea

To understand the concept of the "Other" in Korean society, it is necessary to examine the temporal frameworks that shape identity and alterity. Time is not a neutral backdrop, but rather a cultural grammar that organises social relations, historical consciousness and moral expectations. The negotiation of otherness in Korean society, particularly for Zainichi Korean returnees, occurs within multiple temporal paradigms that converge and diverge across historical epochs. These paradigms include traditional cyclical notions rooted in Confucian ethics; modern linear-progressive models tied to industrialisation; and emergent hybrid temporalities shaped by globalisation and digital acceleration [Riotto 2024: 2]. Policies on multiculturalism and integration encode temporal assumptions, either privileging rapid adaptation to modern norms or gradual assimilation into Confucian hierarchies. For returnees, belonging means aligning with these temporal frameworks while sustaining ancestral continuity and global mobility. Inclusion is thus profoundly temporal; to belong is to share a society's sense of time [Riotto 2024: 3; Cawley 2021].

Historically, Korean temporal frameworks were shaped by Confucian philosophy, which viewed time as a cyclical moral continuum rather than a linear trajectory towards material progress. Confucian ethics emphasised moral cultivation (*suyang*, 수양) and filial piety, orienting life towards ethical refinement that unfolded gradually across generations [Chung 2015: 42–45; Deuchler 2021: 7–10]. Seasonal ceremonies and ancestral rites (*jesa*, 제사) structured the year, binding the living to the dead and reaffirming social order through *sasije* and *gije* memorials[11] [Chung 2015: 118–119]. Each ritual cycle demanded renewed moral engagement, reinforcing hierarchical relationships and ethical propriety (*ye/li*, 예) as being essential to self-cultivation [Chung 2015: 120]. Within this framework, otherness was relational; foreigners or those who were not morally aligned were judged by their ability to conform to Confucian time, rituals, loyalty and moral improvement, rather than by their inherent differences [Chung 2015: 45; Deuchler 2021: 7–10].

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries introduced a rupture in Korean temporal consciousness. During the period of Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), a modernist conception of time – linear, goal-oriented and externally regulated – was

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[11] *Gije* (기제, also called *gijesa*) – household rites held the night before or morning of an ancestor's death anniversary (기일). *Sije* (시제, also called *sasije*) – ritual perform for up to seventh generation ancestor yearly as per lunar calendar.

imposed through bureaucratic governance, standardised education and industrial labour regimes. This displaced Confucian cyclical frameworks [Lie 2008: 33–36]. Time became commodified and measured by factory shifts and school timetables, thereby aligning Korea with Japan's imperial modernisation project. Following liberation in 1945, ethnic nationalism further entrenched this linear perception of time, framing development as a project with a predetermined end goal of "catching up" with the West [Shin 2019: 112–115]. Economic growth plans such as the Five-Year Development Programmes of the 1960s equated progress with industrial output and technological advancement. The past became something to be overcome, and the future became the ultimate horizon of aspiration. Zainichi Koreans who returned after decades in Japan found themselves in a society obsessed with modernisation, where a sense of belonging was determined by one's participation in national progress – education, urban employment and linguistic assimilation. Their hybrid identities, formed within Japan's modernist environment, often seemed temporally "out of sync" with South Korea's developmentalist ethos, further solidifying their position as outsiders [Lie 2008: 33–36; Shin 2019: 116].

Contemporary Korea navigates a plural temporal landscape where Confucian rhythms and modern linear frameworks intersect with global and digital grammars. Globalisation introduces flexible, networked conceptions of time through transnational migration, multicultural policies and the global circulation of Korean popular culture (Hallyu), thereby decentring the nation-state as the sole temporal reference point [Kim 2019: 1072–1075]. For Zainichi returnees, this hybrid order creates opportunities and tensions: discourses of multicultural inclusion coexist with Confucian hierarchies and nationalist legacies, producing ambivalent experiences of integration. Returnees must navigate competing expectations between cosmopolitan flexibility and developmentalist urgency, while their identities remain marked as temporally "different" [Kang 2021b: 120–123]. Digital technologies accelerate temporal experience, compressing horizons and fostering immediacy and simultaneity. Social media and algorithmic culture destabilise the gradual self-cultivation that is central to Confucian ethics, replacing it with fragmented, accelerated cycles that contrast sharply with the ritualised temporality and linear progress narratives of the past [Kim 2019: 1075; Kang 2021a: 8]. Korea thus embodies temporal hybridity, where Confucian continuity, nationalist linearity and global digital acceleration coexist in tension and shape new forms of belonging and otherness.

4. Zainichi Koreans and temporal negotiation

The lived experiences of Zainichi Koreans vividly illustrate the negotiation of multiple temporalities – ancestral continuity, linear modernisation and global digital acceleration; through which identity is formed and contested. Their narratives shift between Korean ethnocultural heritage and Japanese civic norms, revealing paradoxical temporal positions. South Korea is imagined as both homeland and foreign land, a tension arising from the clash between linear nationalist time and diaspora-based, non-linear belonging. Interview accounts reveal that second-generation Zainichi Koreans feel "early" in the ritual calendar yet "late" in institutional milestones, highlighting that time, rather than space, mediates recognition and belonging [Hyun 2025: 101–104; Kweon 2019: 110–113; Lie 2008: 33–36].

Historically, Confucianism organised Korean life around cyclical renewal, such as seasonal rhythms and ancestral rites, binding individuals to lineage and moral continuity [Chung 2015: 88–91]. However, modernisation and nationalism have reoriented time towards linear progress, imposing standardised schedules through schooling, employment and bureaucratic governance [Shin 2019: 112–115; Lie 2008: 33–36]. Globalisation and digital media have introduced a third dimension – networked simultaneity – compressing horizons and enabling transnational, real-time connections that undermine the notion of gradual self-cultivation [Kim 2019: 1079; Kang 2021b: 120–123]. Across these regimes, being properly Korean often means inhabiting the right temporal rhythm: advancing on institutional timetables, participating in national development and aligning ritual practice with family continuity [Chung 2015: 90; Shin 2019: 112].

The case of the Zainichi – ethnic Koreans who migrated to Japan during the colonial period and their descendants – exposes how otherness can persist even within an ethnic homeland. After 1945, approximately 2.3 million Koreans lived in Japan, of whom around 600,000 remained, forming the Zainichi community. Their identities evolved amid assimilationist pressures and discrimination, resulting in a hybrid orientation that is neither fully Korean nor Japanese [Chapman 2007: 23; Lie 2008: 33–36] and the returnees come to think of themselves as "foreigners with legal nationality" in their homeland, or *chaeilgyop'o* (在日僑胞: overseas ethnic Koreans in Japan) who do not belong to the category of Korean [Kweon 2019: 100]. Interview narratives from Seoul (2019) confirm this hybridity. Kana, born in Osaka and raised in Korean weekend schools, explained:

> *In Korea, I'm asked to be more Korean than in Japan – yet my Korean is not native, and my school habits are Japanese. They are asking me, why I don't speak Korean if I am a Korean.*

From the late 1950s onwards, some Zainichi Koreans sought to "return" to South Korea, inspired by ethnic nationalism and the promise of belonging. Upon arrival, many were met with ambivalence: despite their legal nationality, they lacked fluency in Korean and had been deeply assimilated into Japanese institutions. South Korea's one-blood ideology (*dan-ilminjogjuui*, 단일민족주의) often translates into expectations of cultural conformity, and returnees who fail to meet these expectations are treated as outsiders [Hyun 2025: 88; Shin 2019: 110]. Jae Ho (32), who moved from Kobe to Seoul in 2018, recounted how he struggled to find white-collar work due to issues with credential recognition and language pragmatics: "My Japanese company record didn't map neatly onto Korean HR cycles. It felt like I kept missing application windows – like I was out of sync with recruitment seasons". The theme of double exclusion recurs: in Japan, Zainichi Koreans are seen as perpetual foreigners, while in South Korea, they are often viewed as "Japanese" or culturally diluted Koreans. Haru (28), a second-generation returnee, described downplaying her Osaka upbringing during job interviews, while emphasising it when applying to creative industries: "In agencies, my Japan network works in real time; elsewhere, it raises flags".

Cold War politics exacerbated the situation. Some returnees were suspected of having ties to Chongryun (조총련), the pro-North Korean organisation in Japan. This triggered surveillance and discrimination under South Korea's National Security Law. Even highly skilled Zainichi academics, scientists and engineers who migrated in the 1960s and later were met with mistrust; their contributions were overshadowed by ideological suspicion [Lie 2008: 33–36]. Cho Su-gi (35) is now a professor at the University in Seoul but she had problems with visa as her citizenship was North Koreans, even though her relatives were living in South Korea:

> *It was hard for me to find a job as a Zainichi even though I studied in Korea. As I came from family with a North Korean citizenship, as they opted for it for ideological reasons, I am constantly monitored by the South Korean Government not to be a spy. They call me in time to time and ask me some questions.*

Globalisation has softened certain prejudices, yet ethnonationalism remains influential. Studies and interviews reveal persistent discrimination in the housing, employment and marriage markets, showing that shared ancestry does not guarantee equal acceptance [Kweon 2019: 115]. Soo Jin (40) recounted landlords requesting a Korean guarantor despite her citizenship and salary: "My Japanese schooling made them hesitate and they ask for a Korean to vouch for me even though I have Korean nationality." Institutional legibility hinges on compliance with linear time – degrees earned within the Korean education system and service records within national systems – rather than blood alone [Tsuda and Song 2019: 35].

Following Hall's concept of polychronicity, diasporic identities are multi-temporal; migrants and returnees seldom inhabit a single clock. Zainichi returnees navigate four intersecting temporal registers: national/institutional time (e.g. school calendars and career milestones) [Hall 1959: 177; Chung 2015: 88–91]; digital, networked time (e.g. real-time messaging and workflows) [Candidatu and Ponzanesi 2022: 263–265]; ancestral/ritual time (e.g. memorial rites and seasonal traditions);

and existential/situational time (e.g. moments of discrimination or acceptance. These overlapping clocks grant temporal agency – the ability to prioritise one frame over another – allowing counter-narratives to institutional legibility and resistance to mononational assimilation [Kim 2019: 1071].

Globalisation and digital acceleration further entrench hybrid temporalities. Hallyu industries recruit across transnational timelines, with collaborative work occurring across time zones and family obligations being managed via encrypted chats and shared calendars. These practices challenge ethnonational narratives by situating Korean identity within global flows, while also exposing persistent hierarchies at home [Kim 2019: 1078; Kang 2021: 125]. However, tensions persist as employers and universities often adhere to rigid schedules, favouring "local" credentials over transnational experience [Kweon 2019; Shin 2019]. This paradox – flexibility in global networks and rigidity in national institutions – keeps Zainichi returnees negotiating their identity across incongruent clocks, revealing the temporal politics of recognition [Tsuda and Song 2019: 37; Lie 2008: 36]. Interpreting these narratives reframes otherness as a time-sensitive relationship rather than a fixed attribute, demonstrating that identity is fluid and responsive, interwoven with ritual memory, digital immediacy and institutional timelines [Visočnik 2019]. This could be confirmed by Stuart Hall's [1990: 225] argument:

> *Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.*

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that, in Korean society, the concept of the "Other" is not a static label, but rather a dynamic relationship structured through the grammar of time. Temporal frameworks – Confucian cycles, nationalist linearity and global digital acceleration; function as cultural grammars that organise social life, institutional expectations and moral hierarchies. Historically, belonging in Korea has meant synchronising with these dominant grammars, such as observing ritual calendars and advancing along developmental milestones. Now, it also means adapting to the immediacy of digital networks. These temporal codes shape identity as much as language or space, defining who is considered "on time" with national narratives and who remains "out of sync".

The case of Zainichi Korean returnees vividly illustrates this. Their experiences reveal that identity negotiations unfold across polychronous lives where multiple clocks coexist and rarely align. Ritual time sustains ancestral continuity and Confucian ideals of self-cultivation, while linear time governs institutional legibility through school calendars, career trajectories and bureaucratic deadlines. Networked time enables transnational ties and real-time collaboration, and existential time reframes identity through contingent encounters of recognition or exclusion. These overlapping registers create hybrid subjectivities that resist assimilation into a single national rhythm. For returnees, identity becomes a temporal balancing act; an ongoing negotiation between competing frameworks rather than a fixed essence.

This insight redefines otherness as a time-sensitive relationship. It demonstrates that integration policies based on linear adaptation, such as credential recognition or standardised recruitment cycles, overlook the layered temporality of diasporic lives. Institutional norms privilege monochronic schedules, measuring belonging through punctuality and sequential progress while ignoring relational and polychronic orientations that value simultaneity and flexibility. The result is a structural mismatch: returnees may excel in global networks and maintain ritual obligations, yet still be considered "late" by national standards. This temporal dissonance can reinforce their marginality, even when their legal status or ethnic heritage suggests inclusion.

Identity therefore emerges not as a singular narrative, but as a temporal assemblage. Zainichi Koreans construct a sense of belonging by selectively aligning with different temporal frameworks – foregrounding ritual proficiency within family settings, leveraging networked immediacy within professional environments, and navigating institutional calendars to ensure survival. This temporal agency enables them to create counter-narratives to the dominant scripts of Koreanness and challenges the assumption that national identity is linear, homogeneous and bounded. Instead, identity becomes fluid, layered and context-dependent; a polychronous construct shaped by the interplay of historical continuity, developmental urgency and digital simultaneity.

These findings have broader implications for migration and multicultural policy. Firstly, they emphasise that inclusion cannot be reduced to spatial relocation or linguistic proficiency; it requires the recognition of temporal diversity and the accommodation of multiple time regimes. Secondly, they encourage us to reconsider multicultural frameworks that assume uniform adjustment trajectories, overlooking the complexity of polychronic lives. Finally, they necessitate a conceptual shift in how we understand otherness; not as fixed cultural differences, but as relational positions produced through temporal grammars.

In summary, the evolution of otherness in Korea is inextricably linked to the evolution of time. From Confucian cycles to industrial schedules and algorithmic acceleration, temporal frameworks have determined who belongs and who remains marginalised. Zainichi Korean returnees, with their polychronous lives, expose the fragility of homogeneity myths and the limitations of nationalist clocks. Their stories remind us that belonging is not simply determined by place or blood, but is negotiated across multiple temporal horizons; a negotiation that will continue to redefine identity and otherness in the twenty-first century.

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LITERATURE AS CULTURAL PEDAGOGY: EXPLORING HAN IN KOREAN LANGUAGE EDUCATION[1]

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Abstract

This paper explores the pedagogical role of literature in teaching culturally embedded philosophical concepts in Korean language education, with a particular focus on the concept of *han*. While cultural instruction in Korean as a Foreign Language (KFL) classrooms often relies on textbook definitions or communicative explanations, such approaches are insufficient for conveying the historical depth, emotional complexity, and symbolic dimensions of *han*. This study argues that literature uniquely enables learners to access cultural philosophy by situating *han* within narrative, historical, and affective contexts. Drawing on theoretical discussions of *han* and analyses of Korean literary texts, particularly division literature and Korean War narratives, the paper demonstrates how literary narratives embody and transmit this sentiment. In addition, the study proposes concrete classroom strategies for teaching *han* through literary texts, illustrating how guided reading, contextual discussion, and interpretive activities can be incorporated into language instruction. A close examination of Yun Heung-gil's *Jangma / Rainy season* serves as a pedagogical example, showing how narrative structure, symbolism, and character perspective allow learners to encounter *han* as a lived and interpretive process rather than a fixed definition. The paper concludes that literature is an indispensable medium for

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teaching cultural philosophy in Korean language education, fostering deeper cultural understanding, intercultural empathy, and more meaningful communication.

Keywords: *Korean language education, literature-based pedagogy, cultural instruction, han, intercultural learning.*

Introduction

Culture education is a vital component of language learning because it provides the context, values, beliefs, and philosophies that shape how a language functions in everyday life. Mastery of grammar and vocabulary alone is not sufficient, as meaningful communication depends on understanding cultural norms, idiomatic expressions, politeness strategies, and nonverbal cues that differ across societies. Learning the underlying philosophy of a culture its views on respect, individuality, community, time, and human relationships allows learners to grasp the deeper meanings behind words and behaviours. Such cultural and philosophical insight not only helps prevent misunderstandings but also enables learners to become more confident, empathetic, and effective communicators. For this reason, integrating culture with language education is widely recognized as essential, and literature has been identified as an important medium for conveying cultural dimensions that are otherwise difficult to access.

A crucial but often underemphasized aspect of cultural education is engagement with cultural philosophy: the underlying systems of values, worldviews, and emotional logics that shape how people interpret experience and interact with others. Philosophy influences the ways how societies understand concepts such as hierarchy, harmony, freedom, individuality, and relational responsibility. For example, Confucian principles in East Asian cultures emphasize social harmony, moral hierarchy, and collective responsibility, shaping indirect communication styles and expectations of restraint and respect. In contrast, many Western philosophical traditions prioritize individual autonomy, self-expression, and directness. When language learners understand the philosophical foundations of cultural behaviour, they are better equipped to interpret not only what is said but why it is said in a particular way. This enables responses grounded not merely in linguistic accuracy but in cultural empathy and interpretive depth.

While existing research has emphasized the importance of culture in language education and the pedagogical usefulness of literature, this paper advances a more specific claim: literature does not simply transmit cultural information but uniquely enables access to cultural philosophy particularly culturally embedded emotional structures through narrative, symbolism, and historical context. Certain cultural concepts cannot be adequately taught through communicative practice or textbook explanation alone because they are rooted in collective memory, emotional experience, and philosophical worldviews. This study adopts a conceptual and pedagogical approach rather than an empirical research design. Drawing on existing theoretical discussions of *han* and scholarship on literature-based language education, it examines how literary narratives can function as a pedagogical medium for conveying culturally embedded philosophical concepts. The analysis of Yun Heung-gil's *Rainy Season* (장마/*Jangma)* is intended as an illustrative case that demonstrates how *han* is narratively embodied and can be pedagogically activated, rather than as evidence derived from classroom experimentation or learner data.

1. Definitions and characteristics of han

Han has been variously defined across Korean studies and cultural scholarship, reflecting both its conceptual complexity and its centrality in Korean emotional life. The *Encyclopedia of Korean Culture* characterizes *han* as

> a *folk term referring to a complex state in which the frustration of desire or will, the collapse of one's life that follows, and the resulting tense, obsessive, and compulsive mental attitude become intertwined with wounds both conscious and unconscious, a knot of emotion; an emotional coagulation*.

This definition emphasizes *han* as an accumulated emotional condition formed through lived experience rather than a discrete or momentary feeling.

Kim's theory of Hanism interprets *han* not simply as an emotion but as a foundational Korean worldview embedded in ancient linguistic and cultural formations [Kim 1986]. Kim defines *han* as a core identity-term whose semantic field oneness, wholeness, brightness, and inclusiveness reflects a nondualistic, nonorientable structure that resists fixed boundaries [Kim 1986: 17–18, 23]. By tracing *han* to the prehistoric term *gadanagan*, Kim positions it as an enduring cosmological principle within Korean intellectual history [Kim 1986: 20], one that shaped Buddhism and Confucianism through its nondualistic logic while distinguishing Korean thought from Chinese dualistic frameworks [Kim 1986: 24–25]. Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that *han* cannot be reduced to a single emotional definition. Rather, it emerges as both a culturally embedded emotional complex and a philosophical principle that functions as an interpretive key to Korean identity, social experience, and intellectual tradition [Kim 1986: 33–34].

Recently, in Contrast Park similarly defines *han* as resentment, suffering, identifying it as one of the core components of Korean emotional culture alongside *heung* and *jeong* [Park 2021: 244–45]. He conceptualizes *han* as a deep wound of the heart produced by injustice and oppression [Park: 2021: 245], one that manifests in diverse emotional and social forms throughout Korean life [Park 2021: 245).

Importantly, Park also highlights *han*'s potential for transformation, noting that it can convert into communal exhilaration and solidarity in moments of collective movement [Park 2021: 247–248]. Within traditional emotional theory, *han* resonates with Confucian affective classifications, particularly *ae* (哀), the category of grief within the Seven Emotions [Park: 254], situating *han* within a broader East Asian philosophical framework of emotion.

More recent theoretical approaches interrogate and expand these understandings. Sam Han critically examines *han* as an essentialized identity construct [Han 2021: 1–2], tracing its modern formulation to colonial discourse and its subsequent entanglement with ethnonationalism [Han 2021: 2–3]. By reframing *han* through the lens of *ressentiment* [Han 2021: 3–4] and emotional epistemology [Han 2021: 4–5], he situates the concept within structures of historical injury, power, and collective memory, emphasizing its political and discursive dimensions rather than treating it as a timeless national essence.

2. Literature for cultural education

Literature has long been recognized as pedagogically valuable in language education. Researchers [Hadaway et al. 2002] identify three key benefits: literature contextualizes language through authentic use, reflects social factors across genres, and provides natural, meaningful language through imagery and description [Hadaway 2002]. Lovrović likewise notes that literature is well suited to the language classroom because it frequently addresses diverse cultural issues [Lovrović 2021]. In more recent research, Lah argues that literature plays a crucial role in foreign language education by offering learners authentic language input, opportunities for interpretation and meaning-making, and access to intercultural and pluricultural dimensions that textbooks alone cannot provide [Lah 2022: 162–163]. In Korean language education, sustained scholarly discussion has led to broad agreement on the role of literature in cultural instruction [Shin 2006: 3], and literary works and films containing Korean cultural elements are now among the most widely used resources for integrating culture with functional language learning [Cho 2005: 288].

In the past, literary texts were the central materials of language education that emphasized foreign-language reading and intellectual training [Hwang 2007: 7]. Literature reflects both specialized and popular values and knowledge of the target-language society; therefore, through literature learners can understand not only the target society but also the pluralization of values and knowledge and the problem of communication in modern society [Hwang 2007: 8]. Thus, literature is crucial for holistic education, helping learners understand society, values, and communication beyond technical language skills. Also, teaching literature in Korean language classrooms supports learners' understanding of both Korean culture and their own, fostering pluralistic and comparative perspectives. [Hwang 2005: 298–300]. The literary text should be introduced even to intermediate level of learners and literary education should contribute to learners' deeper understanding of Korean society and culture while strengthening their communicative competence in Korean [Yoon 2003: 137]. Thus, for literature in KFL, instructional goal is not literary expertise but the development of vocabulary, communicative ability, and sociocultural competence, with culture-related components at the core of the curriculum [Hwang 2005: 278]. Learners themselves identify cultural understanding, insight into Korean ways of thinking, and language development as central aims of literary education [Hwang 2007: 7]. Accordingly, Korean literature education is positioned as a central component of Korean cultural education, integrating language, culture, and literature [Jeong et al. 2011:4]; [Shin, 2006:3].

2.1. Literature in KFL: Case of han

The pedagogical role of literature becomes especially significant when addressing culturally embedded emotions such as *han*, which cannot be adequately conveyed through linguistic explanation alone. Literature functions as a vital medium for cultivating cultural literacy, without which both every day and specialized communication are prone to breakdown [Yang et al. 2010: 111]. Textbook explanations of *han* are inherently limited because they reduce a lived, historically grounded emotional experience to brief definitions detached from cultural context.

Scholarship consistently emphasizes that *han* encompasses layered emotions, including sorrow, resentment, powerlessness, and unresolved injustice, as well as unconscious wounds, inherited affective patterns, and culturally specific modes of expressing and transforming suffering. These experiential and historical dimensions resist reduction to definitional summaries. As Kim demonstrates, a simple "insert-the-concept" approach is pedagogically insufficient for conveying *han* [Kim 2019: 64–65]. Similarly, Ryu argues that philosophical terminology must be understood within the broader contextual and historical background of the text in which it appears [Ryu 2017: 293]. Han is embedded in Korea's historical conditions and articulated through folk songs, pansori, humour, ritual practices, and everyday storytelling, functioning as a dynamic process rather than a fixed concept. For this reason, surface-level textbook explanations cannot capture the depth, variability, or emotional resonance that constitute *han*.

Because *han* is formed through historical experience, emotional accumulation, and cultural memory, literary texts play a crucial pedagogical role in Korean language education. As Jeong notes, even in language-centred classes, cultural and literary elements inevitably enter instruction, while linguistic elements cannot be excluded from culture-centred classes [Jeong 2011: 3]. This interdependence underscores that access to *han* requires immersion in emotional, social, and historical contexts rather than isolated explanation.

Textbooks are therefore limited in their capacity to transmit *han*, whereas literature conveys it through narrative structure, imagery, and representations of lived experience. As Shin emphasizes, literary works provide discourse contexts and patterns that Korean language textbooks cannot adequately supply [Shin 2006: 4]. Literary engagement also prompts active participation in meaning-making; as Shin observes, literary texts encourage readers to reconstruct meaning through interpretation [Shin 2006: 4–5]. Through this process, learners internalize cultural emotions rather than merely recognizing them at a conceptual level.

In this way, literature enables a form of emotional understanding that supports deeper cultural communication. As Shin concludes, literature in Korean language teaching aims to help learners understand Korean emotions so that they can understand and communicate with Korean people more deeply [Shin 2006: 6]. By situating *han* within narrative and aesthetic experience, literature allows learners to encounter its emotional and philosophical dimensions as culturally lived realities rather than as abstract cultural knowledge.

2.2. Examples from partition literature and Korean war narratives

Partition literature and Korean War narratives provide especially powerful sites for engaging with *han* because they depict historical experiences such as separation, war, displacement, and collective trauma, that constitute its modern emotional foundations. Through these narratives, learners encounter forms of suffering and resilience that challenge their own cultural assumptions. As Shin notes, the language of literary activity is characterized by its use of fiction and symbolism. It uses language not merely in a literal, referential sense but in layers of meaning [Shin 2006: 5]. These layers enable readers to perceive emotional and historical realities that expository texts cannot fully convey.

Literary representations of division and war make visible the lived reality of collective Korean trauma, including colonization, national partition, family separation, and the devastation of the Korean War experiences widely recognized as fundamental sources of *han*. Because literature engages imagination and invites interpretive participation, it enables learners to internalize the emotional weight of these historical conditions. As Hall argues, Literary texts, in their representations of people, events and cultures, offer possibilities for engaging with identities, values and ideologies beyond learners' own [Hall 2005: 194–195]. Partition fiction and war narratives thus create spaces in which learners can witness how ordinary individuals navigate extreme historical circumstances, fostering deeper cultural empathy.

Hall further emphasizes that literature, for some, is a way of representing and preserving the collective experience of a community or nation [Hall 2005: 13]. Korean narratives of division and war function in precisely this way, serving as repositories of collective emotional memory. They preserve not only historical events but also the embodied pain, longing, unresolved grief, and perseverance that shape the emotional landscape of *han*. Through sustained engagement with these texts, learners gain access to the intergenerational and communal dimensions of Korean suffering, dimensions that cannot be understood through definition or explanation alone.

Accordingly, partition literature and Korean War narratives play a crucial pedagogical role by offering learners experiential entry into the emotional and historical roots of *han*, enabling engagement with Korean identity, memory, and cultural philosophy at a depth unattainable through non-literary approaches.

3. Selecting appropriate texts

Having established that literature uniquely enables access to *han* as a cultural-philosophical structure rather than a lexical concept, this section focuses on the principles for selecting such literature for pedagogical use in KFL classrooms. Prior research emphasizes that instructional texts must align with learners' proficiency levels while clearly revealing Korean cultural characteristics. Yoon argues that instructional materials should both match learners' proficiency and interests and foreground cultural features, recommending modern essays, novels, and poetry [Yoon 2002: 59]. Similarly, Yoon proposes progression according to proficiency, moving from contemporary prose to poetry and classical or modern literature, and emphasizes the pedagogical value of serious literature over popular texts [Yoon 2011: 436]. Shin further notes that novels are particularly suitable due to their narrative familiarity [Shin 2012: 231].

Building on these insights, this paper offers a contention that two considerations are especially critical when selecting literary texts for teaching cultural philosophy in KFL classrooms: learners' Korean language proficiency and their capacity for cultural interpretation.

3.1. Criteria for choosing texts across proficiency levels

As discussed in Section 2 above, *han* is a culturally embedded emotional structure expressed indirectly through narrative, imagery, and character psychology. For this reason, literary text selection plays a decisive role in determining how effectively learners can access and interpret this sentiment. Pedagogically effective materials are therefore modern literary works written in accessible contemporary Korean that reflect Korean society and culture while fostering learner engagement through narrative depth and literary significance [Hong Myeong-hi 2020: 219]. However, the very richness that makes literature effective also necessitates a staged approach aligned with learners' linguistic and interpretive development.

Language proficiency significantly shapes learners' ability to access cultural meaning, particularly when engaging with emotionally nuanced concepts such as *han*. Research notes that understanding Korean literary works depends primarily on learners' Korean proficiency. As learners' language ability increases, more cultural and literary elements can be incorporated [Jeong et al. 2011]. Beginner learners typically lack the linguistic foundation needed to process metaphor, symbolic language, or historically embedded emotional references. At this stage, translated texts whether in English or learners' mother tongues are pedagogically appropriate, as they allow learners to encounter narratives embodying *han* without the cognitive burden of decoding unfamiliar grammar and vocabulary.

This approach aligns with findings that view Korean proficiency as important but not absolute for cultural learning. For such education to be successful, learners need basic Korean comprehension… Yet in cultural education, Korean language itself is not an absolute requirement [Yang et al. 2010: 124]. Even at lower proficiency levels, learners can access *han* through narrative atmosphere, emotional resonance, and character experience rather than linguistic precision alone.

At the intermediate level, learners possess sufficient proficiency to begin reading Korean originals, though translation support remains beneficial. A dual-text approach enables learners to encounter the linguistic texture of *han* while maintaining comprehension. At this stage, learners begin to recognize how Korean expressions of sorrow, restraint, endurance, and regret differ from those in other languages. As noted, to understand spiritual or deeper aspects of culture, a certain level of Korean proficiency is necessary [Yang et al. 2010: 112]. Intermediate learners are also better equipped to interpret indirect communication, silence, ambiguity, and symbolic natural imagery features frequently associated with *han*, such as the emotional heaviness of monsoon rain in *Rainy Season* (장마/ *Jangma*).

At the advanced level, learners can engage fully with original Korean literary texts that express historically shaped emotions. Literature addressing colonial history, war trauma, family separation, class inequality, or generational suffering becomes pedagogically appropriate. As Jeong and Shin states, at the advanced level, works that express Korean people's unique emotions shaped by historical and cultural differences should be selected [Jeong et al. 2011: 12]. Advanced learners are capable of interpreting unresolved endings, moral ambiguity, and philosophical reflection and dimensions of *han* that cannot be conveyed through language instruction alone but require sustained narrative engagement.

3.2. Cultural relevance and pedagogical considerations

Beyond proficiency, cultural relevance is essential in selecting texts for teaching *han*. Because *han* is inseparable from Korea's collective memory and historical experience, selected works must meaningfully reflect Korean values, emotional resilience, and social relationships. This aligns with the principle that understanding culture is closely connected to the aims of literature education, so cultural elements must be treated as important when selecting literary work*s* [Jeong et al. 2011: 11]. Selection cannot be based solely on linguistic simplicity or genre; rather, it must account for how texts represent historical trauma, emotional endurance, and relational suffering.

As emphasized earlier, at the advanced level, works that express Korean people's unique emotions shaped by historical and cultural differences should be selected [Jeong et al. 2011: 12]. However, selection cannot follow rigid or reductive criteria. As Jeong and Shin note, it is not appropriate to classify literary works using simple principles; their selection requires consideration of multiple elements. [Jeong et al. 2011: 4]. Effective selection requires attention to narrative style, symbolic structure, emotional depth, and pedagogical goals. Literature expressing *han* often communicates meaning through restraint, silence, inherited sorrow, and unresolved grief, features that demand careful and multidimensional consideration.

Balancing linguistic accessibility with cultural depth is therefore essential. Beginners benefit from translated narratives that introduce emotional tension and endurance; intermediate learners can engage with dual-text formats; advanced learners can explore the full cultural and linguistic complexity of Korean literary expressions of *han*. Through such calibrated selection, literature becomes an indispensable medium for cultural-philosophical education.

4. Sample types of texts suitable for teaching han

A representative literary text suitable for teaching *han* is Yun Heung-gil's short story *Rainy Season* (장마/ *Jangma*), which encapsulates the emotional and historical conditions that give rise to this sentiment. Heung Myeong-hi notes that *Rainy Season* (장마/ *Jangma*) can be used to teach *han* as well as other advanced-level affective concepts such as *eong*, *sinmyeong*, and son preference. The narrative centres on Kim Dong-man's family during the Korean War and depicts ideological and familial conflict between maternal and paternal grandmothers whose sons fight on opposing sides.

The narrative follows the young protagonist Kim Dong-man's family during the Korean War and centres on the fraught relationship between his maternal and paternal grandmothers. Their ideological and familial tensions emerge from the fact that their sons serve on opposite sides of the conflict: one as a South Korean officer and the other as a partisan fighter. Although the families initially coexist peacefully, wartime losses gradually intensify mutual suspicion, grief, and resentment. The maternal uncle's death deepens the maternal grandmother's anguish, leading her to pronounce a curse against partisans. This provocation enrages the paternal grandmother, rupturing whatever fragile harmony had existed between them. Further conflict arises when the paternal uncle briefly returns home but is forced to flee after a misunderstanding, and the protagonist accidentally reveals his visit to the authorities. The consequences of this disclosure exacerbate the emotional strain within the household. As the war continues, both sides of the family assume the paternal uncle has been killed, yet the paternal grandmother clings to a fortune-teller's prediction that he will return. The story reaches its symbolic climax when a wounded snake enters the home. Interpreting the snake through shamanistic belief as the reincarnation of someone who died bearing deep resentment, the maternal grandmother performs a ritual-like intervention to calm the creature and guide it away. This ritual moment signifies the release or temporary easing of accumulated sorrow, allowing the two grandmothers to achieve a brief reconciliation grounded in shared suffering. Shortly afterward, the paternal grandmother dies, and the monsoon finally recedes, marking the end of a period of grief, ideological strife, and emotional turbulence.

Rainy Season (장마/ *Jangma*) is exemplary for *han* instruction because it intertwines personal grief, intergenerational conflict, historical trauma, and symbolic release. Its layered representation of war, familial rupture, and ritual reconciliation offers learners an experiential entry point into *han*'s narrative, emotional, and cultural dimensions.

5. Classroom strategies

Having established criteria for selecting texts that embody *han*, this section demonstrates how literary narratives such as *Rainy Season* (장마/ *Jangma*) can be pedagogically activated in the KFL classroom to facilitate experiential and interpretive learning.

5.1. Guided reading, discussion, and contextual support

Yun Heung-gil's *Rainy Season* (장마/ *Jangma*) functions as an effective pedagogical resource because it allows learners to encounter *han* within a layered narrative rather than through abstract definition. Through guided reading and structured discussion, learners observe how *han* forms, accumulates, and transforms over time.

First, the story foregrounds unresolved sorrow rooted in both personal and historical tragedy. The maternal grandmother's grief over her son's death in the Korean War and the paternal grandmother's desperate hope for her missing son depict sorrow that cannot be resolved or released. These portrayals help learners understand *han* as an emotion that accumulates over time rather than a momentary feeling.

Second, ideological division shapes familial conflict and reveals the social and historical origins of *han*. The breakdown of kinship ties caused by opposing political allegiances illustrates how national trauma intrudes into intimate family relationships, leaving enduring emotional wounds [Kim 2008]. This allows learners to recognize *han* as a product of collective historical experience rather than individual psychology alone.

Third, resentment intertwined with love emerges as a key emotional pattern. The maternal grandmother's curse against partisans and the paternal grandmother's anger reveal how grief transforms into layered resentment, illustrating the complex emotional structure central to *han*.

Fourth, shamanistic symbolism introduces the metaphysical dimension of *han*. The Rainy Season presents shamanism and the irrational worldview associated with it as a force capable of resisting ideology [Bae 2011]. The appearance of the wounded snake, possibly embodying a wronged ancestor, reflects the belief that unresolved suffering persists beyond death. This scene offers a culturally grounded way to discuss *han* as an emotion tied to ritual, belief, and the afterlife.

Fifth, much of the story's emotional force is conveyed through silence and restraint rather than explicit expression. Suppressed gestures and unspoken pain reflect the internalized nature of *han* and provide learners with insight into culturally specific modes of emotional expression.

Sixth, the calming of the snake symbolizes ritualistic release and the possibility of transformation. This moment initiates reconciliation between the two grandmothers and demonstrates how *han* may be acknowledged and gradually transformed through compassion rather than confrontation.

These elements can be reinforced through contextual support: historical grounding in the Korean War situates *han* within collective trauma; symbolic analysis highlights cultural embeddedness; interpersonal conflict reveals how *han* circulates within families. Literary immersion enables learners to experience *han*'s emotional atmosphere directly, aligning with research suggesting that cultural concepts are most effectively learned through narrative engagement.

5.2. Activities for interpreting emotional and cultural layers

To deepen engagement with *han* as a cultural-philosophical framework, classroom activities should emphasize interpretation, symbolism, and contextual awareness rather than memorization.

First, emotion mapping encourages learners to identify both explicit and implicit emotions in selected scenes, helping them conceptualize *han* as a layered emotional structure rather than a single feeling.

Second, perspective rewriting tasks ask learners to rewrite a short passage from another character's viewpoint, focusing on unspoken or suppressed emotions. This activity highlights the inward and restrained nature of *han*.

Third, symbolism identification involves analysing elements such as rain, snakes, and seasonal imagery to uncover their cultural meanings, reinforcing the symbolic expression of *han* [Eom 2014].

Fourth, comparative translation analysis allows intermediate and advanced learners to compare Korean expressions with their translated equivalents, drawing attention to emotional nuances that may be lost or altered in translation.

Finally, guided discussion using instructor-led questions directs learners' attention to emotional subtext, ideological conflict, and evolving relationships between characters, fostering critical reflection on how *han* operates within the narrative.

Together, these strategies position *han* not as a vocabulary item but as an emotionally and philosophically embedded cultural system, one that literature is uniquely equipped to convey in the KFL classroom.

5.3. Cross-cultural reflection

Cross-cultural reflection is a core principle of Korean culture education within the KFL classroom. Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence emphasizes that language learners must develop not only linguistic proficiency but also critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*) in order to engage meaningfully with other cultures [Byram 1997: 50–53]. Similarly, the Council of Europe underscores the importance of incorporating an intercultural dimension into language teaching so that learners can reflect on both their own cultural identities and those of the target culture [Byram 2001: 10–11]. Within this framework, literature occupies a particularly effective pedagogical position because it enables reflective engagement that goes beyond surface-level cultural information.

Literary narratives are especially well suited to teaching *han* in an intercultural context because they allow learners to situate Korean emotional traditions within a broader human framework while critically examining their own cultural assumptions. As Shin suggests, asking learners to find poems from their own cultures that express death and compare them [Shin, 2006: 15/16] encourages learners to connect Korean expressions of sorrow with emotional structures embedded in their own literary and cultural traditions. Empirical research supports the value of such guided reflection, showing that although educators recognize the importance of culture in language education, it often remains underdeveloped without structured opportunities for critical comparison [Nemati et al. 2014: 8–12].

Literature facilitates this reflective process by exposing learners to alternative worldviews and inviting reassessment of their own cultural norms [Hall 2005: 195].

Engagement with Korean literary texts, particularly narratives of war, national division, and generational suffering introduces learners to emotional modes characterized by endurance, restraint, and reconciliation through shared suffering. These modes may contrast sharply with expressive conventions in other cultures, prompting learners to interrogate culturally specific assumptions about emotion, suffering, and resolution.

Through guided comparison, learners can relate *han* to emotional concepts in their own cultural frameworks while also recognizing its distinctive historical and ideological grounding in Korean experience. Such reflection prevents *han* from being perceived as an exotic or isolated phenomenon and instead positions it as a culturally shaped emotional system that both resonates with and diverges from learners' own traditions. Ultimately, integrating literature into Korean culture education enables learners to develop intercultural literacy, empathy, and critical awareness, thereby supporting more meaningful engagement with Korean culture and more effective intercultural communication.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that literature functions as an essential pedagogical bridge for teaching culturally embedded philosophical concepts in Korean language education, particularly the emotionally complex notion of *han*. While language textbooks and communicative explanations often reduce cultural concepts to simplified definitions, such approaches cannot capture the historical depth, symbolic density, and layered emotional structure that characterize *han*. Literary narratives, by contrast, situate these dimensions within lived and imagined experience, enabling learners to encounter *han* not as an abstract term but as an interpretive process shaped by trauma, memory, ideology, and interpersonal relationships.

By examining major definitions of *han*, its historical and philosophical foundations, and its representation in Korean literary traditions, especially partition literature and Korean War narratives, this study has shown that literature provides a uniquely effective space for accessing the emotional atmosphere and cultural logic underlying the concept. The analysis of *Rainy Season* (장마/ *Jangma*) illustrated how narrative structure, symbolism, and character relationships render visible the tensions, accumulated sorrows, and moments of reconciliation that define *han*, offering rich material for contextualized interpretation and discussion.

From a pedagogical perspective, the paper emphasized the importance of a graduated approach to text selection, aligning literary and cultural complexity with learners' language proficiency. Classroom strategies such as guided reading, emotional mapping, symbolism analysis, and comparative translation tasks enable learners to engage deeply with cultural meaning while supporting linguistic development. In addition, cross-cultural reflection allows learners to situate *han* within broader comparative frameworks, fostering intercultural empathy and critical awareness of their own emotional and cultural assumptions.

Overall, this study offers an argument that literature is not merely a supplementary resource but an indispensable medium for teaching cultural philosophy in Korean language education. By providing access to the emotional, historical, and symbolic dimensions of *han*, literary texts enable learners to develop a more nuanced, reflective, and empathetic understanding of Korean culture, an understanding that is essential for meaningful communication and genuine intercultural competence.

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STUDY ON THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF *XIANSHENG* IN MODERN TIMES

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Abstract

The concept of *Xiansheng* underwent profound semantic evolution in China's modern period (1840–1949). Prior to this period, the term had already developed a relatively stable meaning. Knowledge and moral reputation constituted the core elements of the concept of *Xiansheng*. The introduction of *Mister* took time. And the contents of the dictionaries reflected the gradual formation of the corresponding relationship between *Mister* and *Xiansheng*. The reform of appellation and the rise of egalitarian ideas contributed to changes in the meaning of *Xiansheng*. Around the May Fourth period, the term further generalized with no restrictions on age, occupation, status, knowledge. After 1949, *Xiansheng* experienced a brief decline and revival, becoming more closely associated with men. Entering the 21st century, the term *Xiansheng* once again sparked heated discussions. From a female perspective, *Xiansheng* reflects the transformation from limited gender inclusiveness in traditional China to gender segregation since modern times. The concept of *Xiansheng* was reshaped, embodying both the collision and negotiation of tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Xiansheng, *conceptual evolution, appellation.*

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Introduction

The term *Xiansheng* (先生, "teacher" or "gentleman") as a social appellation has rich connotations throughout Chinese history. The concept of *Xiansheng* underwent long-term semantic evolution, changing while retaining its basic meanings. Renewals in linguistic signs reflected corresponding changes in social ideology. This article, from the perspectives of conceptual history and appellation examination, reveals the changes in the meanings and usages of the *Xiansheng* within specific historical periods.

1. *Xiansheng* in historical tradition

Xiansheng has existed in Chinese since ancient times and has been widely used as an appellation for a long time. *Erya*, *"Shiqin"* states:

> *Among a father's brothers,* Xiansheng *refers to the elder brother, and Housheng* (后生, the later born) *to the younger brother. Among males,* Xiansheng *denotes an elder brother, while* Housheng *denotes a younger brother. When a man addresses a female relative,* Xiansheng *indicates an elder sister, and* Housheng *a younger sister.* [Guan 2014]

Xiansheng here refers to elder uncles, elder brothers, or elder sisters. It is not used as one word, but a combination of the two characters *Xian* (先, earlier) and *Sheng* (生, born), meaning "born before me". As time passed, *Xian* and *Sheng*, the two characters combined to form the word *Xiansheng*, which developed multiple meanings from its original sense. By the pre-modern period, the meanings of the word had largely stabilized. The traditional senses of *Xiansheng* can be categorized into the two types further explored below – *Xiansheng* as a kinship term and *Xiansheng* as a social appellation.

1.1. *Xiansheng* as a kinship term

The concept of *Xiansheng* was initially used as a kinship term, referring to one's father, elder siblings, firstborn child, or husband. This usage is significantly different from contemporary practice. The applications referring to fathers, elder siblings, or the first-born child gradually faded over time. Using it to address a husband was rare in ancient times but becomes more common in later periods. Some scholars have provided detailed summaries of *Xiansheng* as a kinship term, which are valuable for reference. For example, Wang Gonglong (1985) analysed classical texts:

Analects, *Wei Zheng* (论语·为政), states: "When there is wine and food, Xiansheng is served first." Here, *Xiansheng* refers to fathers or elder brothers.

Yi Li, *You Si Che* (仪礼·有司彻) records "the *Zheng*[1] for *Xiansheng*". In this context, *Xiansheng* refers to the eldest brother.

Analects: Translation and Annotation (论语译注), Yang Bojun notes that *Xiansheng* can also refer to the firstborn child [Wang 1985].

Zhang Xiaoqian (2007) further observed that although the usage of *Xiansheng* for husband was rare, examples exist. For instance, in *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (列女传·楚于陵妻), the concubine says, "I fear that Xiansheng may be in danger." Here, *Xiansheng* refers to a husband [Zhang 2007].

It is worth mentioning that *Xiansheng* could refer to both males and females. Unlike modern appellations which have clear gender distinctions, some ancient appellations could be considered gender-neutral. For example, terms such as *Xiong* (兄, elder brother), *Jun* (君, gentleman), *Zi* (子, son), and *Gongzi* (公子, noble son) could also be applied to females.

The term *Xiongdi* (兄弟, brothers) could refer to sisters. In some cases, elder sisters were called female elder brothers, younger sisters female younger brothers, or even simply brothers. For example, *Mencius, Wan Zhang I* (孟子·万章上) notes, "Mizi's wife and Zilu's wife were considered Xiongdi".

The title *Jun* was used as an honorific for adults. In households with multiple wives or concubines, a concubine might refer to the legal wife as *female Jun*, and to her husband as *Jun* or *male Jun* [Yuan 2007].

Zi though mainly means son nowadays refers to son and daughter in the past. In Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring* (桃花源记), "led their wife, Zi, and fellow villagers to this place isolated from the outside world." Here, *Zi* refers collectively to both sons and daughters. Accordingly, *Gongzi* could refer to both male and female children of nobles.

In contrast to the instances above, the terms *father* and *husband* carried clear gender distinctions. Hierarchy and ethics were long emphasized in ancient Chinese society. Ethical principles like "the ruler guides the subject, the father guides the son, and the husband guides the wife" were regarded as fundamental truths. Therefore, although some appellations could be used for both genders, men and women also had distinct forms of address. *Xiansheng* could either specifically denote males or more broadly serve as a common appellation applicable to both genders.

[1] *Zheng* (脀): a wooden ritual table or platform used to hold offerings, especially sacrificial animals.

1.2. *Xiansheng* as a social appellation

The core connotation of *Xiansheng* was knowledge. Centred on knowledge, its semantic scope continuously expanded, coming to address the educated group in a broad sense. As a kinship term, *Xiansheng* meant "one born before me", while in social contexts it focuses on mastering a skill or knowledge precedingly. The elements *Xian* and *Sheng* could extend from chronological priority to superiority in knowledge, prestige, experience, status, and skill, generally carrying a respectful meaning. During its long evolution, because it encompassed a wide range of ages, professions, and statuses, *Xiansheng* could be regarded as a quasi-general term of social address.

The social usage of *Xiansheng* included several denotations:

a. **Elderly and learned person.** For example, *Mencius* notes: "An older scholar, hence called Xiansheng." [Liang 1996)] In *Strategies of the Warring States, Wei Ce* (战国策.卫策), it is written: "Then he met the Wuxia Xiansheng." Gao You notes: "Xiansheng is a title for elders of virtue." [Wang 1985] Age was an important factor in this conception. In Chinese ancient society under a natural economy, knowledge and learning were often associated with accumulated experience. In premodern agrarian society, agricultural knowledge couldn't be fully recorded in written form but transmitted orally. Elders thus embodied rich long-term practical experience, representing the living storage of production techniques.

b. **Teacher.** Teachers are naturally linked to imparting knowledge, and using *Xiansheng* to refer to teachers became one of the most common usages. In *Li, Qu Li I* (礼·曲礼上), it is stated, "Follow the Xiansheng" with the annotation "Xiansheng means an elder who teaches learners." *Bian Shi Ming* (辨释名) states, "In antiquity, teachers were called Xiansheng." *Han Shi Wai Zhuan* (韩诗外传) notes, "In ancient times, those who understood the Way were called Xian – for they awakened earlier than others."

c. **Retired official.** Knowledge served as cultural capital for entering officialdom, and authority was underpinned by learning. Retired officials, inseparable from their accumulated knowledge, were accordingly addressed as *Xiansheng*. *Yi Li, Shi Xiang Jian Li*(仪礼·士相见礼) , it is stated, "Xiansheng with a rank superior to the host" with the annotation "Xiansheng, a retired official." *Yi Li, Shi Guan Li* (仪礼·士冠礼) states: "Xiansheng refers to local elders in the village, specifically retired ministers and officials."

d. **Self-reference by literati and scholars.** For instance, Tao Yuanming styled himself Five Willows *Xiansheng* (五柳先生).

e. **Specialized professionals.** The term was also applied to Taoist priests, courtesans, fortune-tellers, diviners, singers, physicians, geomancers, clerks, and managers. Examples include expressions such as *feng shui Xiansheng* (风水先生, geomancer), *fortune-telling Xiansheng*, and *storytelling Xiansheng.*

The common basis for the above usages was the mastery of specialized knowledge and the respect it commanded. Elderly and learned figures were esteemed for their experience and seniority. Teachers were respected for their knowledge. The ancient Chinese official selection system emphasized appointing virtuous and capable individuals. In the Qin State, military ranks were granted based on military merits. During the early Han dynasty, the recommendation system selected prominent individuals with both good moral character and academic excellence. The imperial examination system selected talents. Even under the hereditary aristocracy system, where social status was determined by birth, nobles who held official positions, regardless of their rank, had to receive education at the national academy and learn relevant etiquette knowledge before taking up their posts. Literati and scholars possessed certain literary cultivation and knowledge. Taoist priests, courtesans, fortune-tellers, diviners, singers, doctors, geomancers, clerks, and managers were all relied on specialized skills or expertise. Courtesans, in particular, often demonstrated cultural sophistication and were skilled in music and singing [Jiang and Dorji 2004].

2. Early 19th to early 20th century: Introduction of *Mister*

Xiansheng became a more widely used general social appellation. However, this change involved significant semantic tensions. While *Xiansheng* referred to multiple groups, its various meanings emphasized intellectual ability rather than biological gender. Beginning in the late Qing dynasty, the Western term *Mister* gradually became associated with *Xiansheng*. *Xiansheng* gradually acquired the sense of *Mister*, a term that inherently refers to adult males in the West.

2.1. How *Mister* grafted onto the *Xiansheng*

Dictionaries are useful resources for studying the translational relationship between *Mister* and *Xiansheng*. By searching the keywords "*Mister*" and "*Xiansheng*" in *Database of English-Chinese Dictionaries* [Academia Sinica], a comparison table can be constructed. The Chinese translations of *Mister* and the English words whose Chinese renderings include "*Xiansheng*" were collected. Similar entries were then merged and categorized under the column "Entries Translated with '*Xiansheng*'", as shown in Table below.

Table. Translation of *Mister* and *Xiansheng* in Chinese-English dictionaries from the early 19th to early 20th century

<table>
<tr><th>Dictionary</th><th>Writer</th><th>Chinese Translation of Mister</th><th>Entries Translated with Xiansheng</th></tr>
<tr><td>A Dictionary of the Chinese Language in Three Parts. Part The Third, English and Chinese</td><td>Morrison Robert</td><td></td><td rowspan="12">a. teacher:
teacher; schoolmaster; tutor; preceptor; writing master; venerable teacher; mistress
b. non-teaching personnel with professional technical knowledge:
mineralogist; prophet; fortune-teller; astrologer; geomancer; enchanter; chooser of days; physiognomist; interpreter of dreams; physician; surgeon; herbalist; apothecary; oculist; charlatan; portrait-painter; commentator; clerk of accounts; receiver of money; pawn broker; minister of religion; chaplain
c. honorifics and general terms:
Mr.; sir; master; gentleman; senior; you
d. other:
the first born</td></tr>
<tr><td>An English and Chinese Vocabulary, in the Court Dialect</td><td>Williams Samuel Wells</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>English and Chinese Dictionary</td><td>Medhurst Walter Henry</td><td>Xiansheng; Xianggong (相公, minister); Gong (公, lord); Gua n(官, official)</td></tr>
<tr><td>A Dictionary of the Chinese Language</td><td>Morrison Robert</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>English and Chinese Dictionary with the Punti and Mandarin Pronunciation</td><td>Lobscheid Wilhelm</td><td>Xiansheng; Xianggong; Gong; Laoshi (老师, teacher); Shiye(师爷, learned official)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Vocabulary and Hand-book of the Chinese Language</td><td>Doolittle Justus</td><td>Xiansheng; Xianggong</td></tr>
<tr><td>An English and Chinese Dictionary</td><td>Original work by Lobscheid Wilhelm, revised and augmented by Inoue Tetsujiro</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>An English and Chinese Dictionary</td><td>Kwang Ki-Chaou</td><td>Xiansheng; Xiongtai (兄台, peer-aged honorific)</td></tr>
<tr><td>An English and Chinese Standard Dictionary</td><td>Yen Wei-Ching Williams</td><td>the general term Xiansheng; Xianggong; Gong; Weng (翁, old man); Laoshi; Shiye</td></tr>
<tr><td>A Chinese-English Dictionary</td><td>Giles Herbert Allen</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>English and Chinese Pronouncing Condensed Dictionary</td><td>Translation and Compilation Institute of the Commercial Press</td><td>Xiansheng; Laoshi</td></tr>
<tr><td>English-Chinese Dictionary of the Standard Chinese Spoken Language and Handbook for Translators</td><td>Hemeling Karl Ernst Georg</td><td>Xiansheng; Gong; Jun</td></tr>
</table>

Missionaries played a crucial role in early modern English education in China. The books they compiled and the newspapers they founded provided essential materials for the insightful individuals beginning to learn English and translation. Their legal residence in China allowed missionaries to conduct relatively accurate translations, despite the substantial differences between Chinese and Western concepts. The scientific works they translated were studied by the Chinese intellectuals and became an important part of the Self-Strengthening Movement [Zhao 2012]. The notion of mutually translating *Xiansheng* and *Mister* entered the dictionaries compiled by the Chinese people and began to circulate widely in daily usage in an unabashedly open manner [Pan 2024]. In these dictionaries, *Xiansheng* was listed as one of the translations for *Mister* (see Table above for detailed overview).

Various Chinese translations of *Mister* existed. For instance, *Xiongtai* was an honorific for a man of similar age; *Gong* was a common ancient honorific whose usage broadened over time; *Xianggong* was a widely used honorific for men; *Guan*, originally meaning "official", extended to honorific usage; *Jun* was one of the most common honorifics; and *Weng* referred to an elderly man or father. In Lobscheid' s *English and Chinese Dictionary with the Punti and Mandarin Pronunciation*, the translations for *Mister* include *Laoshi* and *Shiye*. He emphasized that these two terms are the most respectful terms for *Mister*. From the English words excluding *"Mister"* that were translated with the characters "*Xiansheng*", the usage of *Xiansheng* was summarized comprehensively, encompassing teachers, various professionals, honorifics or general terms. This indicates that the understanding of *Xiansheng* was relatively accurate and broad.

Dictionary compilers glimpsed the inherent compatibility between *Mister* and *Xiansheng* but also recognized their differences in specific usages. Some missionaries, influenced by the social background where women were secluded in inner chambers and not widely noticed and by the predominantly male usage of *Xiansheng*, may have overlooked certain translational mismatches.

Notably, Lobscheid was among the first to explicitly connect mistress with *Nü Xiansheng* (女先生, female teacher) [Lobscheid 1866–1869], a usage also documented by Inoue Tetsujirō and Yan Huiqing. Here, *Xiansheng* means "teacher", while *Nü Xiansheng* specifies a female teacher. In English, male teachers are commonly addressed as "Mr. + Last Name" and female teachers as "Mrs./Miss + Last Name," but these forms are general honorifics unrelated to the teaching profession. Meaning "teacher" is one of *Xiansheng*'s most common usages, which *Mister* cannot fully convey. Moreover, *Xiansheng* could be applied to both men and women, which is completely different from *Mister*, a general English term for males. The former carries a stronger connotation of respect than the latter. Since the authors noticed that the two words are not in a one-to-one correspondence, why did they still use it as the translation for *Mister*?

2.2. Why *Xiansheng* was chosen to translate *Mister*

The translation of *Mister* was not limited to *Xiansheng*. *Xiansheng* outcompeted other archaic or traditional Chinese honorifics mentioned in Table above, such as *Gong*, *Jun* and *Xianggong*, and had also prevailed over many transliterated versions of *Mister*.

The concept of *Xiansheng* gradually showed characteristics of cross-class universality in the late Qing period. [Pan 2024] After the Tang dynasty, its original meaning as "elderly person" gradually receded, and the social status of its referents declined [Yu 2003]. Consequently, it shifted from an honorific title to a more general form of address. Although other appellations also showed a tendency towards generalization in their development, their referents were not as universal as *Xiansheng*. Titles such as *Gong*, *Jun* and *Xianggong* were more closely linked to official position, status, and class. In contrast, *Xiansheng* penetrated into various ordinary occupations in society, such as *fengshui Xiansheng* and *Kanxiang Xiansheng* (看相先生, fortune-teller). It was almost universally applicable to scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants – a rarity in a feudal society that emphasized hierarchical order. In this respect, the concept of *Xiansheng* overlapped to a large extent with that of *Mister*.

Free translation took root more easily than transliteration. On the one hand, free translation conformed to Chinese linguistic conventions. Federico Masini pointed out that there is a semantic connection between the sound and form of Chinese characters, and Chinese tends to create new words through free translation. Pure transliteration, by contrast, lacks the ideographic function that allow meaning to be inferred from the characters themselves, and it could even lead to misinterpretations due to the form of the characters used. Moreover, the unification of Mandarin in the late Qing dynasty was an arduous and long process, and the pronunciation of a single word, corresponding to numerous dialects, gave rise to an overwhelming number of equivalent Chinese characters. Against this backdrop, *Xiansheng* replaced transliterations like *Weishida* or *Misite* (both old transliterations of *Mister*). Subjectively, missionaries found that adopting familiar Chinese terms made it easier for people in Han Chinese society to understand and accept new concepts, thereby facilitating the smooth progress of their missionary work.

On the other hand, long adhering to the concept of the Celestial Empire, the Qing dynasty rulers resisted transliterated words. As one scholar observed, "Chinese people, considering themselves orthodox, always preferred to name everything according to their own habits." Even the establishment of the *Tongwen Guan* (the first modern foreign-language institute in Qing China) implicitly carried the intention of assimilating foreign languages into the framework of Chinese characters [Kong 2020]. The signing of a series of unequal treaties made the ruling class acutely aware of the urgency of translation. The guiding principle of the Self-Strengthening Movement, "Chinese learning as the foundation, Western learning for practical use", was reflected in the translation practice that adopted free translation wherever possible.

3. Around the May Fourth Period: Generalization and contraction

Since the advent of modern times, Chinese society has witnessed an intensifying process of cultural interaction and conflict between China and the West. Ideas such as democracy and equality were increasingly promoted. Addressing others as *Xiansheng* in daily interactions became a widespread social habit. Yet beneath this seemly inclusive usage lay an unresolved gender dilemma, which made the contradictions between *Xiansheng* and *Mister* increasingly prominent.

3.1. The generalization and contraction of the concept of *Xiansheng*

The traditional term *Xiansheng* gradually evolved and generalized, with relatively loose restrictions on gender and age. However, the ethical and moral system of feudal society was, in essence, a set of unequal hierarchical concepts. Forms of address in daily communication were also regulated by this structure, profoundly reflecting the principle of hierarchy [Li 2004]. Around the May Fourth Movement, the strong social demand for equality erupted and began to reshape forms of address.

3.2. The popularity of *Xiansheng*

The reform of address terms provided policy support for the expansion and popularization of the concept of *Xiansheng*. Before this reform, in practical use, *Xiansheng* still mostly used to address elderly people. Constrained by its core association with knowledge, it could not be applied equally to those lacking knowledge or skills. Although it could occasionally refer to women, such usage was limited and rare. In 1912, the Nanjing Provisional Government issued the *Provisional President's Decree to the Ministry of the Interior: Instructing All Government Agencies to Abolish the Addresses Used in the Official Offices of the Former Qing Dynasty*. In this decree, Sun Yat-sen demanded the abolition of derogatory titles such as *Daren* (大人, Lord) and *Laoye* (老爷, Master) and their replacement with two address terms: *Xiansheng* and *Jun* [Pan 2024]. In 1934, the Ministry of Interior of Nanjing National Government issued a general order. Building on the previous document, it further stipulated that *Xiansheng* should be used as a universal address for all people without official positions. Additionally, it abolished additional traditional titles, including *Taitai* (太太, Madame), *Shaoye* (少爷, Young Master), and

Xiaojie (小姐, Young Lady), and clarified that *Xiansheng* could be used regardless of age, gender, or status. Thus, the semantic extension of *Xiansheng* was explicitly reinforced through official documents.

3.3. The masculinization of *Xiansheng*

The semantic narrowing of *Xiansheng*, which came to refer exclusively to males, gradually eclipsed its original traditional meanings. Even though the circular issued by the Ministry of the Interior of the Nanjing National Government in 1934 sought to preserve its traditional connotations, Western discourse had already assumed dominance in the contest for linguistic and cultural authority between China and the West. Consequently, *Mister* inevitably gained ascendancy. The more widely *Xiansheng* was used, the more prominently the profound contradictions inherent in its concept became.

The practice of free translation contributed to the association between X*iansheng* and *Mister*. In translation theory, free translation represents a process of domestication, while transliteration reflects foreignization. Yet, over long periods of linguistic evolution, these two processes may yield paradoxical results: transliterated terms become assimilated into the host language, while freely translated terms can induce semantic displacement within native words. [Kong 2020] The reciprocal translation of *Xiansheng* and *Mister* was initially intended to facilitate comprehension and acceptance among Chinese speakers; however, this accommodation ultimately resulted in the homogenization of two culturally distinct concepts. Consequently, *Mister* gradually became one of the fixed meanings of *Xiansheng*.

The proposal of *Sai Xiansheng* (赛先生, Mr. Science) and *De Xiansheng* (德先生, Mr. Democracy) during the May Fourth period brought the term *Xiansheng* into broader public view in China. In these expressions, *Xiansheng* represents a hybridization of the traditional *Xiansheng* and the *Mister*. On one level, *Xiansheng* embodies the meanings of "teacher" and "respect", personifying science and democracy as ideological mentors from the West. This kind of title directly echoed the victory of the Allied Powers at the end of World War I at that time, indicating that the two *Xiansheng* would lead China out of darkness. On another level, both *Sai Xiansheng* and *De Xiansheng* carried an obvious gender inclination. It cannot be inferred from their literal form that they were exclusive to males – even though *Mister* became prevalent around the May Fourth Movement, the use of *Xiansheng* as a gender-neutral honorific did not decline completely. However, even if there was no explicit gender attribution when these two *Xiansheng* were proposed, the subsequent introduction of *Mu Guniang* (穆姑娘, Miss Morality) invalidated this assumption. The New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement liberated the minds of young people from constraints of feudal ideology, yet they broke down the old ethical order without establishing a new and coherent moral framework. As Lu Ping (2006) noted,

> *Most young people admired traditional morality and nationalism: they advocated that women should remain loyal to one husband for life, uphold chastity, and even die for it [...]. At the same time, however, they also paid respect for ideas such as women's liberation, gender equality, cosmopolitanism, and socialism, not daring to offend these ideals.* [Lu 2006]

Their thoughts either stagnated or became more radical than that of the West. Against this backdrop, the figure of *Mu Guniang* emerged as symbolic response, representing moral virtue. Since *Guniang* referred to young women, *Xiansheng* naturally became corresponding to men by the contrast.

3.4. Manifestations of contradictions in the concept of *Xiansheng*

The simultaneous expansion and contraction of the meaning of *Xiansheng* generated internal contradictions, and often clashing with its previous connotations. The entrenched stability of its traditional usages, rooted in hierarchical social structures, could not be dismantled overnight. By examining literary instances of the phrase retrieved from the *Cultural Database of the Total Database of Modern Chinese Literature* [Jingdian Guji Database], one can trace the linguistic shifts in the usage of *Xiansheng* in everyday discourse, and thereby gain insights into the evolution of social history.

The work *Wasting Effort* illustrates the tension between the original sense of *Xiansheng* as "teacher" and its broader usage as a general term of respect. In Wang Chenglian's *Moonlit Night on the Spring River* describes, the concept of *Xiansheng* breaks through traditional identity boundaries – using *Xiansheng* to address the so-called vulgar soldiers, which to a certain extent creates a subtle sense of distortion and incongruity. At the policy level, attempts were made to reshape it into a universal honorific that transcends class and occupation through institutionalized discipline. However, this effort was always constrained by the deep-rooted resistance of cultural inertia, and *Xiansheng* continued to carry its association with intellectual authority. Excerpts from the texts are provided below.

> *"Remember, from now on, you must focus on proper pursuits and stop performing in operas. In your spare time, discuss and exchange ideas about knowledge with Gao Xiansheng (Mr. Gao)."*
>
> *"Dad, look at you – you keep calling him Xiansheng all the time. What kind of Xiansheng is he? He's not my Xiansheng, nor yours! How could he be a Xiansheng to us? He's just a clerk in an office."*

"This is absurd – you even refuse to acknowledge him as Xiansheng. If teachers are not respected, how can knowledge itself be valued? No wonder each generation grows worse than the last."

"But he doesn't actually teach us anything."

"Even so, we still have to address him as Xiansheng, it's a matter of etiquette.

"I'll keep calling him Gao Jingxiang."

"And I'll keep insisting you call him Gao Xiansheng." [Shi 1941]

– Shi Ling, *Wasting Effort*

"My name is Shouzhong, and I currently serve as a battalion commander."

"So, you are Battalion Commander Ding!"

"I merely told you my role, not that you should use my title," said Ding Shouzhong bluntly and displeased, "A battalion commander is a minor officer, not deserving of formal titles."

"According to common practice, we either use official titles or else call someone Xiansheng. Shall I call you Ding Xiansheng?"

"That won't do. I am a simple soldier—how could I possibly be a Xiansheng? Just call me by my name."

"I wouldn't dare." [Wang 1947]

– Wang Chenglian, *Spring River Flower Moon Night*

Overall, the meanings of *Xiansheng* showed a dual tendency: while it became increasingly generalized in social scope, it simultaneously narrowed in terms of gender. In the novel *After the Rain, Withered Buds*, Mrs. Wang equates *Xiansheng* with *Mister*, using it as a general term for men. Traditionally, the term *Xiansheng* signified hierarchical order rather than gender distinction. In modern usage, however, this hierarchy–gender relationship underwent a reversal: *Xiansheng* came to highlight gender while simultaneously serving as a marker of social equality. This incomplete transformation was closely tied to the inconsistent implementation of address-term reforms during the Republican period, as well as to the dominance of Western discursive power, which eventually undermined the state-sanctioned linguistic order.

"Mrs. Wang! Was that new sick Xiansheng able to sleep soundly?"

"Last night I didn't hear a thing. It's likely that sleep was uninterrupted. But that one isn't a Xiansheng."

"If not a Xiansheng, then what is he?"

[...]

"Oh, I get it! That's right – they' re all university students. But we should definitely call them Xiansheng – that's the proper way!" Old Fourth slaps his knee with his right hand, thinking Mrs. Wang is deliberately playing a riddle with him.

"I knew you wouldn't guess correctly."

"What? Still wrong? Then tell me! Haha! Mrs. Wang, are you also playing a trick on me now?"

"Who's playing a trick on you? You need to understand—that one isn't a man!"

"Not a man, then a woman. Men and women are both human beings. The only difference between you and me is just that you, Mrs. Wang, have one more twisted bun on your head. Now female students don't even twist their hair into buns anymore—they all cut their hair short. So, where's the difference between men and women? If men are called Xiansheng, then women can certainly be called Xiansheng too." [Li 1935]

– Li Zhengfu, *After the Rain, Withered Buds* (*Yu Hou Can Lei*)

Language itself possesses a self-purifying capacity: when accommodating new forms that facilitate effective communication, it also eliminates excessive or ambiguous variants that impede clarity to correct itself [Masini 1997]. Through this ongoing process of conflict and assimilation, *Xiansheng* was not completely displaced by the imported *Mister*, yet it's original meaning gradually diminished in this contest for usage.

4. Post-1949 developments

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, under the guidance of political ideology, *Tongzhi* (同志, comrade) emerged as the mainstream social honorific, emphasizing class equality and eliminating gender distinctions. The use of *Xiansheng* was restricted to specific groups and primarily appeared in the context of united front work. Following the Reform and Opening-up period, the concept of *Xiansheng* was revitalized once again. Stimulated by both globalization and the market economy, it re-entered social circulation. Influenced by the linguistic cultures of Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan as well as international exchanges, *Xiansheng* rapidly developed into a general honorific for ordinary men, thereby deeply solidifying its status as an honorific exclusive to men. The traditional usage of "Nü *Xiansheng*" was squeezed to the margins.

5. From a female perspective

The forceful imposition of the Western honorific *Mister* and the current decline of the traditional *Xiansheng* are also the process of *Xiansheng* becoming gendered: shifting from the limited gender inclusivity in traditional China to gender differentiation in the modern era.

5.1. Implicit exclusion in the traditional context

In traditional Chinese context, women could only be addressed as *Xiansheng* to a limited extent, and such usage never gained widespread social recognition.

In ancient China, men and women occupied distinct spheres – men in the public domain and women in the domestic one [Pan 2024]. In the concept of traditional *Xiansheng*, when women in ancient times were addressed as *Xiansheng*, it mostly referred to female teachers. Owing to the rarity of this application, the character *Nü* (女, female) was often added before *Xiansheng* for emphasis. According to Markedness Theory, *Nü Xiansheng* specifically denotes women, whereas *Xiansheng* alone cannot confirm whether the reference is female. Conversely, *Nan Xiansheng* (男先生, male *Xiansheng*) is so commonly used that the gender marker becomes redundant. Based on the principle of linguistic economy, in most cases, it is sufficient to address *Nan Xiansheng* simply as *Xiansheng*. Consequently, a title that was originally intended to be gender-neutral became implicitly biased toward men. Linguistic markedness has played an indelible role in shaping gender stereotypes, while the accumulation of gender stereotypes over time has in turn reinforced markedness itself [Li 2016]. The more the gendered prefix “female” is emphasized in *Nü Xiansheng*, the more the association of *Xiansheng* with women is erased.

Around the time of the May Fourth Movement, with official endorsement from the government, the practice of addressing women as *Xiansheng* became more widespread than in pre-modern society. The 1934 official regulations on forms of address stipulated that both *Taitai* and *Xiaojie* could be addressed as *Xiansheng*. Gender specification was deemed unnecessary. The shift from marked to unmarked reflected the pursuit of equality and the awakening of women’s consciousness. Even though this government-granted permission failed to entirely counteract the influence of Western discourse, the awakening of women’s consciousness still advanced, accompanied by the reform of honorifics and the broader trend of social equality. During this period, women’s organizations, newspapers and educational institutions flourished, and the practice of addressing women as *Xiansheng* increasingly common.

5.2. The implantation of Western gender logic

An inherent gender controversy exists between the Chinese term *Xiansheng* and the English *Mister*. The obvious gender indication of *Mister* consequently narrowed the gender space available to women within the semantic domain of *Xiansheng*. Compared with *Mister*, the gender reference of *Xiansheng* was considerably weaker. However, it should still be noted that in China’s feudal society, where the husband was considered the head of the wife and women were largely confined to domestic roles, women were unlikely to have been included in the initial scope of those addressed as *Xiansheng* as an honorific. Even though *Xiansheng* could be applied to both men and women in theory, in the subsequent use, since the number of women addressed as *Xiansheng* was extremely small and the marked term *Nü Xiansheng* was frequently used, the male subjectivity of *Xiansheng* strengthened. This perhaps functioned as a buffer that allowed *Mister* and *Xiansheng* to maintain superficial compatibility despite their intrinsic semantic contradictions.

The emergence of universally accepted honorifics in society is an inevitable manifestation of the further development of the awareness of equality. In modern Chinese society, where social mobility and social complexity increased dramatically, the existence of such universal honorifics was indispensable. However, modern China not only failed to prevent the semantic equivalence between *Xiansheng* and *Mister*, but also failed to develop new universal honorifics that cross class boundaries, resulting in women being further excluded from the system of respectful titles. In traditional China, mainstream respectful titles for women were often associated with marital status, age, or chastity. Titles such as *Xiaojie*, *Furen* (夫人, Lady), *Taitai*, *Lao Furen* (老夫人, elder Madam), and *Lienü* (烈女, Chaste Woman) underscored women's dependent social status as appendages to men. *Xiansheng* was one of the rare respectful titles occasionally applied to women in professional or intellectual fields. The Chinese term *Xiansheng*, once encompassing multiple social identities and naturally associated with intellectual prestige, has gradually been reduced to a single reference meaning: "adult male". Under such explicit marginalization, the already limited repertoire of respectful titles for women gradually disappeared from public discourse.

The coexistence of *Xiansheng* and *Mister* has produced a dilemma of gender erasure, particularly when addressing distinguished women with the title *Xiansheng*. The 21st century witnessed the full eruption of semantic tension within the concept of *Xiansheng* amidst the rising tide of gender equality discourse. On one hand, exceptional women such as Chi Zijian and Ye Jiaying are honoured with the title *Xiansheng*, continuing the traditional respect for knowledge and learning. On the other hand, this practice reveals implicit gender inequality: while men receive this honorific by default, women must demonstrate exceptional achievements to merit the same recognition. The use of *Xiansheng* to honour outstanding individuals was originally a manifestation of cultural self-strengthening in response to Western influence. However, under the premise that *Xiansheng* is widely used as a generic honorific for men, the respectful connotation conveyed by this title was gradually diluted. When used to address outstanding women, it further neutralizes their female identity, implying that feminine identity is incompatible with intellectual authority. *Xiansheng* has already largely become an honorific exclusive to men, making the restoration of its gender neutrality increasingly difficult in contemporary Chinese society. Given the current situation, addressing distinguished women as *Xiansheng* occupies an ambiguous and problematic position.

Conclusion

Within the framework of traditional Chinese society, the concept of *Xiansheng* carried the Confucian ethical order's reverence for intellectual authority and the hierarchical relations between elders and juniors. With the powerful influx of modern Western cultural forces, the establishment of an equivalence between *Mister* and *Xiansheng* unfolded gradually. However, the integration of *Mister* as a new semantic item actually signified the penetration and expansion of Western discursive power in the social and cultural fields of modern China. From a gendered perspective, the honorific use of *Xiansheng* for women in traditional China reflected the limited degree of gender inclusivity. The introduction of the Western honorific system gradually dissipated the originally latent gender-neutral traits of *Xiansheng*. This transformation demonstrates the complex interaction between gender ideology and the contestation of Sino-Western discursive power throughout China's modern transformation.

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THE EXPRESSION OF LOCAL TEMPORAL ORDER IN THE VAGUE TIME OF CHINESE DIALECTS: A CASE STUDY OF HUBEI DIALECTS

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Abstract

In the context of globalization, standardized, linear clock time is increasingly becoming the dominant temporal system. However, this process has not eradicated the diverse "temporal syntax" deeply ingrained in local cultures. This study takes the prevalent temporal expressions in Hubei dialects as an entry point, aiming to explore how language, as a social practice, participates in constructing and sustaining a local temporal order that differs from mainstream precise practices. It is argued here that dialectal temporal terms reflect a temporal philosophy that emphasizes harmony with natural rhythms and cyclical social activities, thereby fostering a more flexible and human-centred rhythm of life within local communities.

Keywords: *temporal order, Chinese dialects, ambiguity, local knowledge.*

Research background

In an era of globalization increasingly dominated by precise clock time, rediscovering and examining the diverse "temporal syntax" rooted in local knowledge [Zhou 2021] holds significant academic value and practical relevance. Time is not merely a physical constant but a category profoundly shaped by human cognition, language, and culture. Chinese dialects, as dynamic carriers of local culture, offer a crucial window into the rhythms of life, cognitive patterns, and cultural logic of different societies through their rich and unique temporal expressions – particularly the prevalent vague temporal terms.

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Academic attention to temporal terms has a long history. They can be classified along two dimensions: semantics and grammatical function [Lü 1982; Ding 1961; Zhu 1982; Zhao 1979]. Semantically, temporal terms refer to words or phrases denoting time; grammatically, they can function as objects following prepositions like "在" (at) or "到" (to) and can be referred to by phrases like "这个时候" (this time) or "那个时候" (that time). Xing [1996] classified temporal terms into time points and time periods. Vague temporal terms constitute a special subclass characterized by unclear and imprecise temporal boundaries, possessing subjectivity and context-dependency. For instance, the boundary between "清晨" (early morning) and "早晨" (morning) is ambiguous; different age groups may perceive "深夜" (late night) differently – young people might consider it to be after 1 a.m., while the elderly might define it as after 11 p.m.

Scholars such as Jiang [1992] and Wu [1999] laid the groundwork for fuzzy linguistics by systematically analysing the manifestations and causes of fuzziness in temporal terms from a synchronic perspective. They broadly categorized vague temporal terms into four types based on core semantics:

1) Vague time points or periods indicating positions or ranges with unclear boundaries, e.g., "清晨" (early morning), "深夜" (late night);
2) Vague temporal quantities, e.g., "一会儿" (a while), "片刻" (a moment);
3) Vague temporal frequency, e.g., "经常" (often), "常常" (frequently), describing imprecise occurrence rates;
4) Vague temporal sequence words, e.g., "不久以后" (not long after), "过一阵子" (after a while).

In Fuzzy Linguistics, Wu [1999] specifically analysed the fuzziness of terms like "past, present, future, morning, evening". Li [2001] pointed out that time itself is a fuzzy concept; initial timekeeping relied on natural or biological cycles like the Sun's position or crowing of rooster, and the degree of this reliance and the method of segmentation were closely tied to the production and life practices of specific communities. Wang [2004] noted that ancient people recorded time through "events with strong regularity and temporality", creating temporal expressions in three main ways: combining temporal terms with other morphemes, e.g., "中午" (noon), "次日" (the next day), "去年" (last year); concatenating temporal terms, e.g., "今昼" (today daytime), "夜晚" (night); and utilizing extended meanings of temporal terms. Fu [2006] identified three modes of temporal segmentation in Chinese: natural patterns, instrument measurement, and relative standards, touching upon the subjective and objective dimensions of temporal cognition. Regarding the morphological features of temporal terms, Zhang [2004] argued that to comprehend time, the Han people often map spatial schemas like "up-down" and "front-back" onto the abstract concept of time via metaphor. Of course, since modern times, temporal terms have also been influenced by foreign cultures, e.g. “点钟” (o’clock), “小时” (hour) [Liu, 2024]. Starting from the concept of “fuzziness”, Tian [2015] defined vague temporal terms as words or phrases denoting time whose duration and boundaries lack precise definition, meaning there are no strict start or end points.

Beyond studies dedicated to temporal terms in the common language, some scholars have also explored the characteristics and origins of vague time in dialects. For example, Wei [2018] noted that ancestors “worked at sunrise and rested at sunset”; before clocks entered daily life, people in rural areas relied on observing the sunrise and sunset processes to enrich understanding and discern patterns, using bodily references for temporal expression – “drawing analogies from the human body for immediate concepts and from external objects for distant ones”. Li and Wang [2023] took Mandarin terms like “今年” (this year), “这个月” (this month), “这个星期” (this week), “今天” (today), “正晌午” (high noon), and “现在” (now) as starting points, extending forward or backward to form a relatively complete temporal chain, analysing the features of temporal nouns and providing cognitive explanations.

Hubei dialects are primarily divided into three major areas: Southwestern Mandarin, Jianghuai Mandarin, and Gan dialect. Temporal nouns in these dialects exhibit some typical variations. Which temporal terms in Hubei dialects possess typically vague semantics? What are the underlying reasons? In what other contexts are dialectal temporal terms used, and what roles do they play? This paper aims to explore how local temporal order is concretely embodied in the vague temporal expressions of dialects. Focusing on temporal terms in Hubei dialects, it will compare similarities and differences across dialect areas and analyse their application scenarios and practical significance in people’s daily lives.

Categorization of temporal terms in Hubei dialects

In current research on Chinese dialect vocabulary, the classification of temporal terms often references the framework established by *A Brief Table for the Investigation of Chinese Dialects* [Ding and Li 1956] and *the Great Dictionary of Modern Chinese Dialects* [Li 2002], typically categorizing them into terms for seasons, festivals, years, months, days, etc. This paper conducts a systematic review and comparison of temporal terms in Hubei dialects based on field survey materials included in the Collection of Chinese Language Resources: Hubei [Wang 2023. This ten-volume collection covers four dimensions – phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, and oral culture – and contains linguistic data from 50 cities and counties in Hubei Province, encompassing Southwestern Mandarin, Jianghuai Mandarin, and Gan dialects. Additionally, the corpus sources for this paper incorporate Hubei dialect survey books authored by local scholars renowned for their work in dialect investigation and research [Zhu and Zhang 2021].

Comparative analysis of specific entries reveals minor differences in terms for festivals and seasons, while slightly greater variation exists in terms for years, months, and days. Although the word formation of temporal terms in Hubei dialects is largely influenced by Mandarin, resulting in largely consistent expressions for many entries. Examples include: "时候 (*shíhòu*, time), 什么时候 (*shénme shíhòu*, when), 现在 (*xiànzài*, now), 以前 (*yǐqián*, before), 以后 (*yǐhòu*, after), 一辈子 (*yībèizi*, a lifetime), 今年 (*jīnnián*, this year), 明年 (*míngnián*, next year), 后年 (*hòunián*, the year after next), 去年 (*qùnián*, last year), 前年 (*qiánnián*, the year before last), 往年 (*wǎngnián*, former years), 今天 (*jīntiān*, today), 明天 (*míngtiān*, tomorrow), 大后天 (*dàhòutiān*, three days from now), 昨天 (*zuótiān*, yesterday), 前天 (*qiántiān*, the day before yesterday), 整天 (*zhěngtiān*, all day), 下午 (*xiàwǔ*, afternoon), 白天 (*báitiān*, daytime), 半夜 (*bànyè*, midnight), 正月 (*zhēngyuè*, first lunar month), 元宵节 (*yuánxiāojié*, Lantern Festival), 清明 (*qīngmíng*, Qingming Festival), 端午 (*duānwǔ*, Dragon Boat Festival), 七月十五 (*qīyuè shíwǔ*, Ghost Festival), 中秋 (*zhōngqiū*, Mid-Autumn Festival), 冬至 (*dōngzhì*, Winter Solstice), 腊月 (*làyuè*, twelfth lunar month), 除夕 (*chūxī*, New Year's Eve), 历书 (*lìshū*, calendar), 阴历 (*yīnlì*, lunar calendar), 阳历 (*yánglì*, solar calendar), 星期天 (*xīngqītiān*, Sunday)."

However, a rich array of localized expressions also exists, with dialectal forms exhibiting distinctive characteristics. The most pronounced variations are concentrated in vague time-period concepts such as "清早 (*qīngzǎo*, early morning)", "上午 (*shàngwǔ*, morning)", "中午 (*zhōngwǔ*, noon)", "下午 (*xiàwǔ*, afternoon)", "傍晚 (*bàngwǎn*, dusk)", and "夜晚 (*yèwǎn*, night)". Among these, terms for "早晨 (*zǎochen*, morning)", "中午 (noon)", and "傍晚 (dusk)" display particularly diverse expressions due to their fuzzy temporal boundaries. For instance, "清早 (early morning)" might be expressed as "一擦黑 (*yī cāhēi*, as soon as it darkens)" or "天蒙亮 (*tiān méngliàng*, sky getting dimly bright)"; while "傍晚 (dusk)" has numerous local variants such as "天快黑了 (*tiān kuài hēi le*, sky is about to turn dark)", "打黑影子了 (*dǎ hēiyǐngzi le*, casting dark shadows)", "煞了黑 (*shàle hēi*, darkness sets in)", "暗些 (*àn xiē*, getting darker)", "打麻影儿 (*dǎ máyǐngr*, when shadows become blurred)", "黄昏黑 (*huánghūn hēi*, dusk darkness)", "麻糊些儿 (*máhú xiēr*, getting murky)", and "下昼边 (*xiàzhòu biān*, edge of the late afternoon)". These expressions reflect a naive word-formation logic based on visual imagery or natural phenomena.

Table. Comparison of dialect vocabulary

Dialect Region	Early Morning	Morning (Forenoon)	Noon	Afternoon	Dusk / Evening	Night
Xianning (Gan Dialect Area)	早晨 (*zǎochen*)	上昼 (*shàngzhòu*)	中时 (*zhōngshí*)	下昼 (*xiàzhòu*)	下昼边 (*xiàzhòu biān*) / 天煞黑 (*tiān shà hēi*)	半夜 (*bànyè*) / 夜嘞 (yè lei)
Xiaogan (Jianghuai Mandarin)	方亮 (*fāngliàng*) / 麻麻亮 (*mámaliàng*) / 粉明儿 (*fěnmíngr*)	上半天 (*shàngbàntiān*) / 晏昼儿 (*yànzhòur*)	中时 (*zhōngshí*) / 正中时 (*zhèngzhōngshí*)	下半天 (*xiàbàntiān*) / 下昼儿 (*xiàzhòur*)	天擦黑 (*tiān cāhēi*) / 一霎黑 (*yī shà hēi*)	晚寻 (*wǎnxún*) / 黑了 (*hēi le*)
Jingzhou (Southwestern Mandarin)	清晨 (*qīngchén*) / 麻麻亮 (*mámaliàng*) / 乌漆八早 (*wūqībāzǎo*) / 乌早八早 (*wūzǎobāzǎo*)	上午 (*shàngwǔ*)	转中 (*zhuǎnzhōng*) (can refer to noon or midnight, 12 o'clock)	下午 (*xiàwǔ*)	挨黑 (*āi hēi*) / 煞黑 (*shà hēi*) / 擦黑 (*cā hēi*)	夜晚 (*yèwǎn*)

Taking "dusk" as a specific example for analysis, one category emphasizes the degree of "darkness". For instance, expressions like "煞黑 (*shàhēi*)" and "挨黑 (*āihēi*)" in the Jingzhou dialect, and the progression from "一擦黑 (*yī cāhēi*)" to "夜里 (*yèlǐ*)" in the Huanggang dialect, all use the gradual deepening of darkness to distinguish time periods, vividly depicting the process of the sky turning dark. Another category relies on the appearance of "shadows" in visual perception. Examples include "打麻影儿 (*dǎ máyǐngr*)" in the Fangxian dialect, along with expressions like "打夜影儿 (*dǎ yèyǐngr*)," "打麻子眼 (*dǎ mázǐ yǎn*)," and "打乌央 (*dǎ wūyāng*)." These all start from the natural phenomenon of "shadows appearing" to describe the characteristic of dusk. Additionally, terms for "morning" often incorporate concepts of brightness in their word formation. Examples are "麻风亮 (*máfēngliàng*)" in the Zhongxiang dialect and expressions like "麻粉粉亮 (*má fěn fěn liàng*)" or "麻麻亮 (*mámaliàng*)" in other dialects.

Furthermore, differences in some temporal terms across dialects are also reflected in the choice of morphemes for word formation. "Beginning of the year" can be expressed as "年头 (*niántóu*)" or "开年 (*kāinián*)", while "end of the year" might be expressed as "年尾 (*niánwěi*)" or "年根 (*niángēn*)". "Day after tomorrow" has forms like "老后天 (*lǎohòutiān*)", "外后儿 (*wàihòur*)", "大后儿 (*dàhòur*)", "万后儿 (*wànhòur*)", and "挨后儿 (*āihòur*)". "Three days ago" might be expressed as "上前日 (*shàngqiánrì*)", "向前日 (*xiàngqiánrì*)", or "先前日 (*xiānqiánrì*)". Temporal terms also frequently combine with pronouns and locatives to form more complex temporal systems. For example, "上半天 (*shàngbàntiān*)" and "下半天 (*xiàbàntiān*)" divide the daytime period, while "向前年 (*xiàngqiánnián*)" and "大前年 (*dàqiánnián*)" construct annual sequences. Phrases like "入秋 (*rùqiū*)" and "秋上 (*qiūshang*)" describe the gradual onset of autumn. "入梅 (*rùméi*)", "出梅 (*chūméi*)", and "黄梅 (*huángméi*)" refer to entering the rainy season, leaving the rainy season, and the rainy season itself, respectively.

On the semantic level, dialectal temporal terms exhibit metaphorical characteristics. They employ vague expressions for time periods, such as "一眨眼 (*yī zhǎyǎn*, a blink of an eye)", "一口气 (*yīkǒuqì*, in one breath)," "一哈哈儿 (*yī hāhār*, a very short while)", and "转个脑壳 (*zhuǎn gè nǎoké*, turn one's head)", using concrete actions to metaphorize the passage of time. This reflects the elasticity of the time concept. They also utilize spatial metaphors and entity metaphors. For example, "外后儿 (*wàihòur*)" means "the day after tomorrow," and "年尾 (*niánwěi*)" or "年根 (*niángēn*)" refers to "the end of the year". If a local dialect has an exceptionally rich vocabulary of temporal terms, it may suggest that the residents lead diverse lives and have more nuanced experiences of time.

Causes of vague semantics in temporal terms of Hubei dialects

Vagueness is a significant semantic feature of temporal terms. In Fuzzy Linguistics, Wu [1999] points out that the cognitive boundaries of temporal terms are influenced by multiple factors including era, ethnicity, social status, occupation, education level, political-economic environment, educational background, language habits, and gender. These factors collectively cause shifts in the boundaries of their intension and extension. Specifically for Hubei dialects, the emergence of vague semantics in their temporal terms primarily stems from the following three reasons:

(1) Natural reference points and cognitive differences

Traditional Chinese temporal terms relied on natural celestial phenomena such as "sunrise and sunset" as cognitive reference points, a pattern particularly evident in dialects. Temporal expressions based on celestial phenomena inherently possess perceptual fluidity, leading to significant variations in understanding among different individuals. Especially during transitional periods like dawn and dusk, where natural light gradually changes and activities shift, the related temporal terms are not only abundant in number but also demonstrate greater elasticity and interpretive space in their semantics. Surveys show that the time spans corresponding to temporals terms perceived based on sunrise and sunset vary among different respondents, clearly reflecting the fuzziness of their semantic boundaries. In contrast, cognitive deviation for temporal terms using clocks as mechanical reference points is significantly reduced [Tian 2015]. This cognitive difference is closely related to the user's living environment and language habits: those still living in rural areas, especially those retaining dialect habits, mostly continue to use a temporal expression system referencing natural phenomena and agricultural rhythms; whereas non-dialect users living in cities, regulated by modern schedules and management systems, have generally shifted to relying on clocks to establish precise, unified temporal cognition.

(2) Agricultural life and event-based timekeeping

In long-term agrarian societies, time was closely linked to life events and seasonal farming activities, forming a cognitive tradition of "marking time by events". Hubei dialects not only possess rich terms for segmenting time – such as "月半 (mid-month)", "月头 (beginning of the month)", "月底 (end of the month)", "月末 (month's end)", dividing months by the lunar cycle; and "春生 (spring growth), 夏长 (summer flourishing), 秋收 (autumn harvest), 冬藏 (winter storage)" integrating natural laws with agricultural rhythms – but also continue to use "月令 (monthly ordinances)", phenological changes, and farming proverbs to mark time. These are often preserved in local agricultural proverbs, forming a set of temporal discourse using nature and farming as coordinates.

The ancient *Yueling* chapter of *the Book of Rites* represents a temporal order, an order summarizing people's daily production and life experiences according to different months [Legge 1885]. *Simin Yueling Yin Nongyu* is a collection of folk agricultural proverbs from an Eastern Han dynasty classic [Hsu 1980]. It narrates the agricultural arrangements of large manors from the first to the twelfth lunar month, particularly detailing the planting seasons for grains, melons, vegetables, and cash crops by month. Hubei's unique agricultural products, such as "菜薹 (*Cai Tai*)", aquatic vegetables like lotus roots from the Jianghan Plain, potatoes and navel oranges from the high-altitude areas of western Hubei, all have their planting times recorded in many local farming proverbs. For example, "七蔸八蒜，九油十麦，寒露种菜薹。(Plant scallions in the seventh [lunar] month, garlic in the eighth, rapeseed in the ninth, wheat in the tenth, plant Cai Tai at Cold Dew)". "三月三，藕发苫。 (On the third day of the third lunar month, lotus roots sprout)". "春分早，谷雨迟，清明种薯正当时。 (Spring Equinox is early, Grain Rain is late, Qingming is just the right time to plant potatoes)". "正月栽竹，二月栽木，三月栽橙正时足。 (Plant bamboo in the first lunar month, trees in the second, oranges in the third is perfectly timely)", etc. People associated time with their perception of surrounding things and specific social activities, even anchoring and transmitting time through "events" in forms like festival rituals and dietary customs. This cognitive method of integrating time into concrete events and customs strengthens the elasticity and context-dependency of its semantics, forming the lived foundation for vague meaning. Therefore, temporal terms not only contain life philosophy but also carry collective memory and cultural identity.

(3) Intergenerational change and social transformation

With urban-rural changes and the modernization of lifestyles, the temporal reference system has undergone significant differentiation. A portion of the population still engaged in agricultural activities, especially the elderly (approximately 60 years of age and older), maintains the tradition of recording time through events and the lunar calendar in daily communication via dialect vocabulary. They have mostly experienced a complete agrarian life and are accustomed to using lunar months like "腊月 (*La Yue*, twelfth lunar month)" and "冬月 (*Dong Yue*, eleventh lunar month)", as well as expressions based on solar terms and phenology, to organize their life narratives. In contrast, the younger generation is not only gradually forgetting dialectal temporal terms but also, influenced by globalization and urban culture, more commonly adopts the Gregorian calendar and clock time, celebrating solar calendar birthdays and living by schedules. As many dialectal temporal terms are increasingly disappearing from the speech of young people, a temporal order and cognitive mode linked to traditional agrarian civilization is also gradually receding. This intergenerational difference not only accelerates the demise of some vague temporal terms but also reflects the fading of the traditional temporal order in modern society, making vague semantics a pragmatic feature of specific groups and lifestyles.

Today, clock time has gradually become the primary method of timekeeping for institutionalized activities like work and study, emphasizing precision and synchronization. However, in daily life, interpersonal interactions, and festive activities, people still rely to a certain extent on vague, event- and social-habit-oriented traditional timekeeping methods. This coexistence and distinction between "institutional time" and "lived time" also embodies, in a sense, the cultural adaptation and dual logic in the Chinese cognition and practice of time.

The social practice of Hubei dialect temporal terms in daily life

The temporal expression system in dialects not only reflects people's cognitive modes of time but also carries rich regional culture and life experiences, being intricately linked to natural rhythms and cyclical social activities.

Connection to natural rhythms

Agricultural activities are a significant source for the formation of dialectal temporal terms. Many temporal terms in Hubei dialects appear in idioms and proverbs, expressions often closely tied to the growth cycles of crops. The Hubei region experiences four distinct seasons, with summer and winter being slightly longer, and frequently witnesses special weather phenomena such as "倒春寒 (late spring cold)" and "秋老虎 (Indian summer)". Wuhan dialect thus includes sayings like "四月八，冻煞鸭 (On the eighth of April, even ducks freeze to death)", "三月八，冻煞鸭 (On the eighth of March, even ducks freeze to death)", and "二四八月乱穿衣 (In the second, fourth, and eighth lunar months, wear clothes haphazardly)", vividly reflecting the characteristic temperature fluctuations during seasonal transitions. As spring and autumn are relatively brief, a series of farming proverbs have developed around crops like peanuts, rice, and rapeseed. For example, "清明前后，种瓜点豆，花生点就 (Around *Qingming* [around April 5th], plant melons and beans; sow peanuts right then)" points to Qingming as a crucial period for spring sowing; "立秋摘花椒，白露打核桃，霜降刨花生 (Pick Sichuan peppercorns at the Start of Autumn, knock down walnuts at White Dew, dig up peanuts at Frost's Descent)" precisely marks the harvest times for different crops in autumn and winter. Furthermore, the proverb "七月花生，八月的苕 (Peanuts in July, sweet potatoes in August)" circulated in the mountainous areas of western and northern Hubei also reflects the habit of judging time based on the ripening stages of crops.

Climatic conditions also play a notable role in the formation of dialectal temporal terms. For instance, "二四八月" broadly refers to spring and autumn, "十冬腊月" specifically indicates winter, and "五黄六月" corresponds to summer. These terms not only demarcate seasons but also incorporate people's perception of the natural environment. Relevant examples can be found in regional proverbs, such as the rain-related proverb from Tongshan: "五月落连阴，遍地是草筋；六月落连阴，遍地是黄金。(If continuous rain falls in the fifth lunar month, grass roots are everywhere; if continuous rain falls in the sixth lunar month, gold is everywhere [i.e., a good harvest])". From Xiaogan, there is: "头八无雨二八休，三八无雨到寒秋 (If there's no rain on the first 'eight' [likely the 8th, 18th, or 28th of a month], the second 'eight' will be idle; if there's no rain on the third 'eight', it will last until the cold autumn)." And "七落八不落，九的似瓢泼；七晴八不晴，九的放光明。(If it rains on the seventh [day], it won't on the eighth; on the ninth, it's like pouring from a ladle. If it's clear on the seventh, it won't be on the eighth; on the ninth, it shines brightly)".

Furthermore, the widespread circulation of the "九九歌 (Nine-Nine Song)" across Hubei also demonstrates the richness of dialectal temporal terms, though its specific content shows regional variation. For example, the Wuhan version goes: "头九二九，家里搓手；三九四九，沿河插柳；五九六九，牵牛走走；七九八九，田头放火；九九百花开，老牛下天来。(First and second nine-nine, warm hands at home; third and fourth nine-nine, plant willows along the river; fifth and sixth nine-nine, lead the ox for a walk; seventh and eighth nine-nine, set fire in the fields; ninth nine-nine, flowers bloom everywhere, the old ox descends from heaven)". Another version is: "夏至入头九，雨伞握在手；二九一十八，脱褂着罗纱；三九二十七，出门汗直滴；四九三十六，卷席露天宿；五九四十五，严秋是老虎；六九五十四，乘凉进庙寺；七九六十三，床头窝被里；八九七十二，子夜寻棉被；九九八十一，开柜拿棉衣。(Summer Solstice enters the first nine, umbrella in hand; second nine is eighteen, remove tunic and wear gauze; third nine is twenty-seven, stepping out sweat drips straight; fourth nine is thirty-six, roll mat and sleep outdoors; fifth nine is forty-five, severe autumn is a tiger; sixth nine is fifty-four, seek coolness entering temple; seventh nine is sixty-three, huddle under quilt by bedside; eighth nine is seventy-two, search for quilt at midnight; ninth nine is eighty-one, open cabinet to get padded clothes)".

The term "双抢 (*shuāngqiǎng*)", once widely used in rural areas of the middle and lower Yangtze River region, refers to "rushing to harvest early rice and rushing to plant late rice", specifically denoting the scorching dog days from mid-to-late July to early August each year. For rural residents born before the 1990s, "双抢" carries a profound collective memory. With the advancement of agricultural mechanization and adjustments in planting structures, the frequency of this term's use has gradually declined. Other expressions like "一日三秋 (One day feels like three autumns – missing someone dearly)", "陈谷子烂芝麻的事情 (old grains and rotten sesame – trivial matters of the distant past)", and "鸡上笼 (chickens going to roost – dusk)" all reflect metaphorical connections between time and behaviour or states. This further corroborates the deep influence of agrarian life on the conceptual segmentation of time.

Connection to cyclical social activities

Regarding temporal terms related to diet, expressions such as "过早 (*guò zǎo*, eating breakfast)", "过中 (*guò zhōng*, eating lunch)", "过晏 (*guò yàn*, eating around 10 AM)", "过午 (*guò wǔ*, eating lunch)", and "过夜 (*guò yè*, eating dinner)" reflect variations in local temporal order. Among these, "过晏" is currently found only in a few areas like Xishui, Hubei, referring to a light meal eaten around 10 AM, between breakfast and lunch. The character "晏" here is pronounced "àn", retaining its ancient meaning of "late/delayed", as in "你来晏了 (You've come late)". This phenomenon might be related to the habit in agricultural times of working early in the morning due to the heat and eating closer to noon, or it may stem from a tradition of two meals a day. In contrast, "过早" is commonly used throughout Hubei; "过夜" still refers to dinner in places like Ezhou, Xianning, and Macheng; "过中" in the Jianghan Plain refers to a simple lunch. These expressions reflect the dietary custom in rural areas that centres on dinner, whereas contemporary health concepts more often advocate a pattern of "eating a full lunch", showcasing the evolution of temporal customs. In the Wuxue area of Hubei, the midday light meal is called "喝茶 (drinking tea)", and "茶么时 (chá me shí)" refers to lunchtime. According to records, in rural Tianmen, Mianyang, and Hanchuan areas of Hubei during the 1970s and 1980s, when daylight was shorter in autumn and winter, two meals a day were typically followed (breakfast at 10 AM, dinner at 5 PM); during the longer days and busy farming seasons of spring and summer, "过中" (around 1 PM) was added as a half-meal, forming a "two-and-a-half meals" dietary structure. Traditional Chinese Medicine theory also contains numerous time-related expressions, especially terms associated with "午 (noon)", such as "午枕 (noon nap)", "午牌 (noon watch/time)", "午炮 (noon cannon)", and the health-preserving concept of "过午不食 (no food after noon)", all embodying the connection between time and human biological rhythms.

Some traditional festival customs have been well-preserved across Hubei, exhibiting regional diversity. Customs such as the Flower Festival in the second lunar month, the "小端阳 (Little Dragon Boat Festival)" on the fifth day of the fifth month, the "大端阳 (Great Dragon Boat Festival)" on the fifteenth day of the fifth month, and the "末端阳 (Final Dragon Boat Festival)" on the twenty-fifth day of the fifth month continue in some regions. On the sixth day of the sixth lunar month, there is the custom of "晒红绿 (suns their colourful clothes)". As this coincides with the intense summer heat, a folk tradition of "晒伏 (drying during the dog days)" emerged, also known as the "晒衣节 (Clothes' Drying Festival)". Traces of festival customs are also visible in proverbs, such as "三十夜的火，除夕夜的灯 (The fire on the 30th night, the lamps on New Year's Eve)" depicting New Year's scenes; during the Ghost Festival on the 15th of the seventh month, there is a widespread folk taboo against going near water; and "三月三，吃鸡蛋 (On the third day of the third month, eat eggs)" is a seasonal food custom circulating in Hubei.

New Year customs in many parts of Hubei are still passed down through children's rhymes, such as the "《过年歌》 (New Year Song)": "二十四，打扬尘；二十五，打伢们；二十六，割年肉；二十七，去赶集；二十八，打糍粑；二十九，样样有；三十的夜，桃花谢；三十的晚上熬一夜；初一早，年拜了，腰一勾，手一摊；京果麻糖都归我。(On the 24th, sweep away dust; on the 25th, [prepare for] children's activities; on the 26th, buy New Year meat; on the 27th, go to the market; on the 28th, make glutinous rice cakes; on the 29th, everything is ready; on the 30th night, peach blossoms fade; stay up all night on the 30th; early on the 1st, New Year greetings done, bow from the waist, stretch out hands; all the Beijing fruits and sesame candy belong to me)". These lyrics systematically record the New Year preparations and celebrations from the 24th of the twelfth lunar month to the 1st day of the first lunar month.

In important activities in rural areas, traditional temporal expressions are still employed. For instance, the timing for the bride's entry during weddings, or for breaking ground and capping the roof in house construction, often uses the twelve two-hour periods (时辰, shíchen) method for timekeeping; searching for lost items may also involve calculating dates and directions through specific methods, reflecting the continuity of traditional temporal cognition in contemporary life. The ancient perception of time was inherently vague. Although later tools like sundials and water clocks achieved a certain degree of precision, creating multiple time nodes, in practical application, these temporal concepts retained overlapping and boundary-blurring characteristics.

Furthermore, proverbs also contain descriptions of the relationship between time and health. For example, Xianning's "扇风歌" (Fanning Song)": "扇风歌，扇尔风，扇尔凉，扇尔六月打脾寒。扇尔七月伤寒病，扇尔八月睏上床，扇尔九月抬上山，扇尔十月呜哩哇啦。(Fanning song, fan your wind, fan your cool, fan you into getting malaria in June. Fan you into typhoid fever in July, fan you into staying in bed in August, fan you into being carried up the mountain in September, fan you into wailing in October)". This rhyme uses vivid language to remind people to pay attention to disease prevention and health maintenance in different months, reflecting folk wisdom about the connection between time cognition and bodily care.

Case analysis: The vague semantics of "Zhongshi" and its encounter with modern temporal order

The term "中午 (noon)" in Mandarin itself possesses vague semantics. Wu (1999) pointed out that the word "中午" is a composite of vague and precise concepts. It can refer specifically to 12:00 noon, but it can also serve as a vague boundary between "morning (上午)" and "afternoon (下午)". In cognitive linguistics, the "figure-ground" theory posits that within a cognitive scene, which elements are perceived as "figure" and which as "background" depend on multiple factors such as attention allocation, viewing angle, object position, colour, and contrast in motion vs. stillness. In the temporal cognition of people in Hong'an, the entire period from breakfast to lunch – due to its crucial importance in agrarian life – is highlighted as the "figure" requiring a specific name. Specific clock times within this period, like 10 o'clock or 11 o'clock, recede into the "background". The term "中时 (zhōngshí)" in the Hong'an dialect is precisely the linguistic manifestation of this cognitive structure. Unlike "中午" in Mandarin, which typically refers to "around 12:00 noon," "中时" in the Hong'an dialect broadly refers to the entire forenoon from after breakfast until before lunch. Its time span is wide, and its semantic boundaries are distinctly vague.

This unique usage of "中时" is the linguistic crystallization of the local temporal order formed through long-term agricultural practice in Hong'an society. Its vague semantics are deeply rooted in culture and lived experience. Etymologically, "中时" has existed since ancient times, appearing in texts like "后汉书 (Fan Ye's Book of Later Han)" [Fan 2014] and "抱朴子 (Baopuzi)" [Ge 1966], originally meaning "the noon hour". While preserving the term, the Hong'an dialect has seen its meaning shift and expand, reflecting the diachronic accumulation of language evolution. More importantly, as an agricultural county, Hong'an's traditional production model followed the rhythm of "working at sunrise". Farmers would go to the fields after their morning meal and work until the sun was high before returning home for lunch. During this continuous labour process, there was no practical need to further subdivide the "forenoon". Thus, "中时" became a comprehensive temporal term covering this entire work unit. This method of segmenting time based on farming activities constitutes an "event-time" system, contrasting with the "clock-time" system prevalent in modern society.

The vague temporal order represented by "中时" in the Hong'an dialect does not exist in isolation. When it encounters the modern mainstream temporal framework – such as school schedules and administrative operations based on precise clock times – significant tension arises between the two. Modern institutions require a unified and clear understanding of nodes like "8:00 AM" or "12:00 noon". However, Hong'an people accustomed to using the vague term "中时", especially school-age children and youths frequently interacting with the outside world, often face cognitive adaptation challenges. This situation also drives new understandings and usages of local dialectal temporal terms. This tension reveals the predicament of local temporal orders in the process of modernization. On the one hand, the life wisdom embedded in "中时" –synchronicity with nature and flexibility – provides cultural resources for reflecting on the "time anxiety" brought by modernity. On the other hand, under the pressure of standardized time, this term is also in flux. The younger generation tends to use Mandarin terms like "上午 (forenoon)" and "中午 (noon)", or their understanding of "中时" gradually gravitates towards precision. This dynamic process vividly reflects how different "temporal grammars" collide, adapt, and evolve in the context of globalization.

Through the case analysis of "中时" in the Hong'an dialect, it becomes evident that local temporal orders are deeply imprinted in the vague temporal expressions of dialects. The vagueness of "中时" is not linguistic imprecision, but rather a projection of the production rhythms and life patterns of Hong'an's traditional agrarian society onto language – it is a knowledge system adapted to local practices. It embodies a time-cognition mode centred on events and closely connected to natural cycles, providing a typical example for understanding the interactive relationship between language, cognition, and culture.

Conclusion

This paper is dedicated to research of the vague temporal terms in Hubei dialects, systematically exploring the concrete manifestations and cultural connotations of local temporal orders within language. The study reveals that the vagueness of dialectal temporal terms is not a cognitive limitation or an expressive flaw, but rather a form of knowledge rooted in local practice. Through deep integration with natural rhythms, agricultural activities, and daily customs, it constructs a temporal order characterized by elasticity, contextualization, and humanistic care. Under the impact of globalization and standardized temporal systems, this order faces the risk of marginalization, yet it also provides valuable local wisdom for reflecting upon modern conceptions of time.

In Hubei dialects, expressions such as "中时 (*zhōngshí*)", "煞黑 (*shàhēi*)", and "过宴 (*guò yàn*)" not only carry rich regional cultural memory but also embody the dynamic interaction among language, cognition, and environment. The semantic vagueness and flexibility of these temporal terms meet the contextualized needs for time in traditional agrarian societies and reflect a harmonious symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. However, with the acceleration of modern life rhythms and the widespread adoption of standardized time, the contexts for using dialectal temporal terms are gradually shrinking, and the cognitive patterns behind them are facing reconstruction. This change represents not merely a loss at the linguistic level but a decline of an entire local knowledge system.

Future research could further employ methods from sociolinguistics and cognitive semantics to deeply investigate the variations in the use of dialectal temporal terms across different generations, urban-rural environments, and social groups. It should focus on their trajectories of change and mechanisms of adaptation within the modernization process. Simultaneously, the value of dialectal temporal terms as intangible cultural heritage for preservation and transmission should be emphasized, exploring their positive role in local cultural identity and ecological civilization construction. By understanding the "temporal grammar" within dialects, we can grasp the diversity of the Chinese language more comprehensively and, moreover, rediscover the humanistic significance of time and the diverse rhythms of life within the rapidly evolving modern society.

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IV. LITERARY AND MEDIA TEMPORALITIES

MODERNITY AND FEAR IN *BURNING* (2018): A FOCUS ON WALTER BENJAMIN'S URBAN EXPERIENCE[1]

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Abstract

This article examines Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* (2018) through Walter Benjamin's reflections on modernity, focusing on the film's characters and the ways in which they are narratively and spatially constructed. Rather than offering a clear distinction between truth and falsehood, Burning adopts the form of mystery to suspend causal explanation and destabilise judgement. In doing so, the film addresses the anger of the younger generation in contemporary Korea without reducing it to individual psychology or explicit social critique.

Drawing on Benjamin's concepts of allegory, montage, and the dialectics at a standstill, this study argues that Burning presents Korean modernity as a simultaneity of non-synchronicity, in which multiple historical temporalities coexist within a single present. Through the contrasting environments surrounding the characters, from rural Paju to urban Seoul, the film foregrounds the contradictions of a modernity shaped by industrialisation, militarisation, and middle-class fantasy. The characters of Jong-su, Hae-mi, and Ben are analysed not as autonomous individuals, but as differentiated manifestations of a fragmented subjectivity produced under capitalism.

Ultimately, the article suggests that *Burning* does not seek to resolve the question of "what is real", but instead renders the familiar landscape of Korean modernity strange.

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By doing so, the film reconfigures realism as a critical mode that reveals how anxiety and anger emerge from unresolved historical and structural conditions in the present.

Keywords: Burning*, Walter Benjamin, modernity, Korean modernity.*

Introduction

Lee Chang-dong, a South Korean novelist, filmmaker, and producer, has developed a body of work that engages with a wide range of themes and materials. His narratives span everyday life in contemporary South Korea as well as major historical events, including the Gwangju Uprising and the Sewol ferry disaster. Rather than foregrounding heroic figures or exceptional individuals, Lee consistently centres his films on ordinary people and their actions within contemporary social conditions. More specifically, his works attend to the anxiety and latent fear that emerge as individuals are pushed aside by historical forces beyond their control. This focus on the vulnerability of everyday life constitutes a defining feature of Lee's cinematic worldview. His major films include *Green Fish*, *Oasis*, *Poetry*, and *Burning*.

Lee Chang-dong's sustained focus on anonymous figures living ordinary lives in modern society can be read as resonating with Walter Benjamin's analysis of modernity. Benjamin conceptualises the emergence of capitalism and the formation of urban life through the notion of spectacle, not merely as a domain of striking appearances but as a historically structured mode of perception. In his analysis of the urban spectacle, Benjamin does not remain at the level of impressionistic critique; instead, he approaches spectacle allegorically. By treating the city itself as a text to be read, Benjamin proposes allegory as a methodological device through which the fragmented and transient experiences of modern urban life can be interpreted [Benjamin 2002: 37–38].

Through allegory, Benjamin understands the spectacle of the modern city as an effect of the commodity fetish and, on this basis, analyses the alienation of the subject experienced by modern urban dwellers. In this context, the primary object of Benjamin's allegorical attention is not the spectacle that shines brightly in the present, but the antique, objects that once embodied novelty and brilliance yet now appear obsolete and forgotten within the contemporary urban landscape [Benjamin 2002: 41]. By reading traces of past time from such antiquated objects, Benjamin simultaneously discerns the anticipated future of what appears new in the present. In other words, contemporary commodities and fashionable novelties are revealed as repetitions of the old, leading Benjamin to approach the form of subjectivity under capitalism and modern urban life through the notion of spectrality.

Burning addresses Korean modernity as its central thematic concern. As the director has noted in interviews, the film foregrounds the anger of the younger generation as a defining affect of contemporary Korean modernity [Na 2018]. Significantly, this anger is not depicted in a direct or realist manner; instead, as the director himself emphasises, it is mediated through the structure of mystery. By deliberately adopting the mystery genre, *Burning* approaches the contradictions and paradoxes of Korean modernity in an oblique yet multilayered way. The narrative unfolds around the disappearance of Hae-mi, who occupies the centre of the film's mystery. Her absence becomes the focal point through which tensions and conflicts among Hae-mi, Jong-su, and Ben are organised. In this configuration, the film allegorically stages the contradictions of Korean modernity through the relations among these three figures.

Accordingly, this article examines Korean modernity as articulated in Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* through the lens of Walter Benjamin's analysis of modernity. It first outlines Benjamin's discussion of the modern city, focusing on his conceptualisation of urban experience and allegorical reading practices. Building on this theoretical framework, the article then offers analysis of how *Burning* renders Korean modernity through its narrative and formal strategies. Particular attention is given to the film's use of the mystery genre, through which it constructs a distinctive form of realism that articulates the contradictions of Korean modernity. Finally, drawing together these discussions, the article considers how *Burning* reflects on Korean modernity as an unfinished and unresolved historical condition.

1. The passage as allegory

Benjamin defines modernity not as the designation of a historical period but as a new phenomenon that is clearly differentiated from the past. This conception becomes more explicit in his distinction between first technology and second technology. The criterion that separates these two forms of technology lies in the opposition between cult value and exhibition value [Benjamin 2002: 105–106]. Whereas the first technology originates in religion, ritual, and magic, and is oriented toward the domination of what may be called the "old nature", the second technology emerges alongside the Industrial Revolution and refers to a fundamentally different technological relation to reality. Characterised by technological development and reproducibility, the second technology is marked above all by repetition. What Benjamin seeks to articulate through this distinction is not simply technological progress, but the transformed relationship between human beings and nature as a new reality, which he conceptualises as the "new nature". In other words, Benjamin investigates the human condition under the age of technological reproducibility, identifying repetition as the decisive feature that distinguishes it from the old nature [Benjamin 2002: 110]. More concretely, he analyses the decline of first technology, defined by singularity, narrative continuity, and aura within religious and mythic frameworks, alongside the emergence of new art forms such as photography and cinema enabled by mass production. Through this analysis, Benjamin explores the ambivalent character of urban modernity brought about by second technology. In sum, he argues that the rise of urban phenomena fundamentally transforms modes of human experience, which he characterises through the loss of aura and the dominance of repetition and transience [Buck-Morss 1989: 80–81].

Benjamin's concept of technology serves to account for what he understands as the "new nature", a reality that is fundamentally transformed in comparison to the past. More precisely, Benjamin does not analyse the emergence of urban modernity solely at the level of conscious perception or visible phenomena. Instead, drawing on Marxian concepts, he traces changes in the mode of production through the differentiated relation between base and superstructure. At the same time, however, Benjamin does not simply follow Marx. Distancing himself from the view that treats the superstructure as a mere reflection of the economic base or as ideology, Benjamin argues that the superstructure articulates the economic foundation with a relative autonomy of its own [Benjamin 1999: 503–504]. Consequently, his analysis of the superstructure does not remain at the level of impressionistic criticism. Rather, Benjamin seeks to disclose the unconscious conditions that structure visual representation and shape the perceptual experience of modern urban life.

In this context, Benjamin understands the emergence of a new mode of experience as urban modernity and emphasises its constitutive ambivalence. This ambivalence does not appear as a simple opposition between two poles; rather, Benjamin conceives it as something that manifests in a montage-like form. On the one hand, technological development and the new modes of experience it produces draw subjects into what Benjamin describes as a "new sleep" of capitalism, characterised by the dazzling spectacle of the modern city. On the other hand, within this very spectacle, Benjamin identifies the appearance of genuine wish-images that hold the potential to interrupt and reconfigure dominant perceptions. Central to this configuration is the mechanism that produces spectacle itself: the commodity fetish. Commodities fill the urban streets with brilliance, and this very visibility becomes fetishised, transforming images into autonomous forces. Benjamin conceptualises this fetishised spectacle as phantasmagoria, in which material abundance, overproduced commodities, and phenomena such as world exhibitions are rendered as a mythology of error or as a new, secular mythology generated by industrial capitalism. Benjamin further argues that individual life is itself drawn into this process of fetishisation and incorporated into spectacle. Just as commodities are abstracted from use-value and subsumed under the capitalist spectacle of progress, individual lives become entangled with capitalist fantasy, absorbed into the luminous urban spectacle, and fetishised in the form of consumers.

Accordingly, the site from which Benjamin reads commodity fetishism and capitalism as a "new sleep" is the Paris arcades, spaces whose period of splendour has passed and the obsolete commodities that have been reduced to antiques. Benjamin approaches these time-worn objects allegorically, arguing that what appears today as the brilliance of the department store already contains its own future as an "aged past", a future prefigured by the arcades themselves. Yet Benjamin does not regard the glittering present, exemplified by department stores and world exhibitions, merely as a repetition of a ruined past. Rather, he reads from within it the emergence of wish-images that interrupt the continuity of spectacle. To this end, Benjamin interprets figures marginalised by the urban spectacle, such as bohemians, boredom, fashion, prostitution, ragpickers, and gamblers, as allegorical constellations through which wish-images circulate from obsolete commodities [Benjamin 2002: 33–34]. In particular, the gambler, who persists in repetitive wagering while concealing repeated failure, becomes emblematic of capitalist phantasmagoria, which sustains desire precisely by masking its impossibility. More precisely, Benjamin simultaneously reads the myth of modernity that conceals desire and the fundamental desires that nonetheless seep out through antiques and the refuse of the street. In sum, by treating the modern city as an allegory, Benjamin identifies stains that disrupt the apparent coherence of spectacular images and links them to wish-images, or what he calls "dialectical images" [Benjamin 2002: 40].

Through allegorical reading and montage-like techniques, Benjamin develops what he terms a dialectics at a standstill [Benjamin 1996: 341]. The wish-images he discovers in antiquated objects do not point toward a return to a complete or harmonious past; rather, Benjamin argues that dreams of the future are invented in the forms of the past [Benjamin 1999: 470]. In this sense, the dialectics at a standstill does not operate at the level of individual intention or subjective will. Instead, it articulates desire at a structural level, what may be understood as a fundamental desire for emancipation which, Benjamin paradoxically suggests, appears under capitalism in a distorted, ruined, and failed form, against the background of capitalism as a dream-world. Drawing on Proust, Benjamin conceptualises these sudden and disruptive montage-images as instances of "involuntary memory" and emphasises that the dialectical image does not belong to a fully recoverable past but to the concept of the "now-time", or the present as a charged moment of interruption [Benjamin 2002: 141].

2. The realism depicted in *Burning*

Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* is loosely based on Haruki Murakami's short story *Barn Burning*. Rather than reproducing the narrative of the original text, however, the film appropriates only the motif of barn burning and reconstructs it into an almost entirely new narrative configuration. The film centres on Jong-su, a young man working part-time at a distribution company, who reunites with Hae-mi, a childhood acquaintance from his neighbourhood. After returning from a trip to Africa, Hae-mi introduces Jong-su to Ben, whom she met abroad, and the story unfolds around the interactions among these three characters. The central conflict emerges when Hae-mi suddenly disappears and Jong-su becomes convinced that Ben is responsible, prompting him to pursue Ben in an increasingly obsessive manner.

The narrative of *Burning* unfolds around the disappearance of Hae-mi and concentrates on the tensions that arise among the three central characters. The film's primary focus is on Jong-su, Hae-mi, and Ben. Rather than foregrounding a series of directly observable events or framing conflict in terms of interpersonal psychology, however, the film persistently displaces attention toward the social and material conditions that shape each character's position. By presenting these backgrounds indirectly, *Burning* renders the source of conflict ambiguous and unsettles the viewer's attempt to locate clear causal relations or moral certainty.

In other words, while the disappearance of Hae-mi constitutes the film's surface-level conflict, *Burning* consistently redirects attention toward the conditions within which its characters are embedded, thereby obstructing straightforward identification or emotional alignment on the part of the viewer. Although the film foregrounds Hae-mi's mysterious disappearance, it ultimately compels the audience to reflect on what kind of tension is released by this absence and what it signifies. In doing so, the film deliberately blurs what initially appears to be clear, drawing viewers into a state of sustained uncertainty characteristic of the mystery form. For this reason, *Burning* refrains from presenting its characters through explicit dialogue or psychologically explanatory events that would function as conventional narrative anchors. Instead, the film offers fragmentary information by situating the characters within their surrounding environments or by filtering their presence through the voices and perspectives of others. Consequently, what demands attention is not simply who these characters are, but how they are introduced specifically, through the backgrounds and social spaces that are captured alongside them.

Turning first to Jong-su, the film presents him as an aspiring writer who once studied creative writing at university but failed to achieve literary recognition and now works as a delivery driver. As noted earlier, *Burning* avoids conveying Jong-su's position through direct self-expression, voice-over narration, or explicit psychological exposition. Instead, the film mediates his situation through a series of concrete images that surround him. Most notably, Jong-su's family home in Paju vividly registers both his material circumstances and his affective state. After his father is put on trial for assault, the family house in Paju is left vacant, prompting Jong-su, who had been living on his own, to return there. His mother left the family long ago, and his sister lives separately after marriage. When Jong-su arrives at the house, only a single calf remains in what was once his father's livestock farm, standing as a solitary presence within an otherwise emptied domestic space.

The neighbourhood in which Jong-su's family home is located is rendered through images of darkness and deterioration. The house itself appears worn and dilapidated, filled with various old and discarded objects that evoke the sense of time having already passed. Significantly, this is also the site where Hae-mi performs her final dance before disappearing. One of the most defining features of Jong-su's neighbourhood, however, is not primarily visual but auditory: as indicated in Figure 1 (b), the sounds of North Korean propaganda broadcasts continue to resonate across the area, permeating the space despite remaining unseen. This persistent sonic presence situates Jong-su's domestic environment within a broader geopolitical and historical tension that exceeds the characters' immediate awareness.

a) b)

Figure 1 (a–b). Jong-su's family house in Paju
(a) The deteriorated neighbourhood surrounding Jong-su's family house
(b) The family house in Paju, accompanied by the distant sound of North Korean propaganda broadcasts

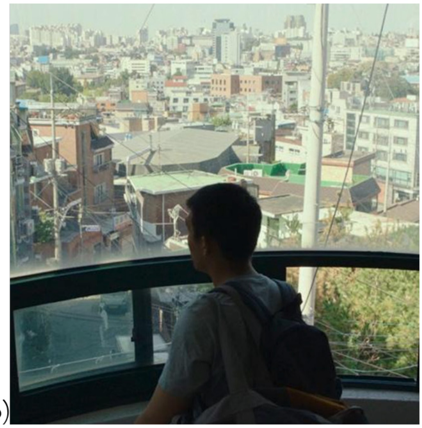
a)  b) 

Figure 2 (a–b). Hae-mi's residence in Huam-dong
(a) The rooftop studio where Hae-mi lives
(b) Huam-dong as a space where past and present overlap

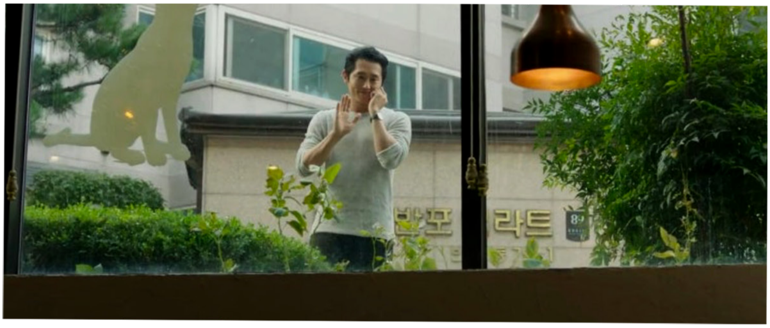
Hae-mi, Jong-su's former neighbourhood acquaintance, survives through various part-time jobs, including promotional work and other short-term employment. From her first appearance, she is marked by an aura of mystery. When Jong-su and Hae-mi encounter each other by chance, she immediately recognises him, while he barely remembers her. Hae-mi explains his failure to recognise her by referring to cosmetic surgery, suggesting that her face has changed. Yet Jong-su knows very little about who Hae-mi is, and this lack of knowledge extends equally to the viewer. The film deliberately withholds clear information about her identity. Details such as Hae-mi's declaration, during a drinking session with Jong-su, that her dream is to travel to Africa in search of the "great hunger", or the existence of her cat that Jong-su never once sees serve to deepen the enigma surrounding her presence.

Rather than presenting Hae-mi through direct exposition or psychological explanation, the film introduces her by foregrounding the spaces she inhabits, inviting the viewer to imagine her circumstances and inner life through her surroundings. As indicated in Figure 2 (a), Hae-mi lives in Huam-dong, an older neighbourhood in Seoul, in a small rooftop studio from which Namsan Tower can be seen in the distance. As the less visible "backside" of the city, Huam-dong can be read as a palimpsest that resonates with Hae-mi's enigmatic presence. In the film, the area is depicted through a disordered juxtaposition of aging low-rise buildings and towering high-rises, set against the distant landmark of Namsan Tower. This overlapping of Seoul's past and present renders Huam-dong a space in which temporal coordinates remain unstable and difficult to fix as shown in Figure 2 (b). The neighbourhood is further associated with the allegory of the cat whose existence cannot be definitively confirmed, thereby intensifying the sense of mystery that surrounds Hae-mi.

Ben is likewise presented as a mysterious figure within the film. Having met Hae-mi during her trip to Africa, Ben is implied to be a Korean American. Jong-su describes him as suspiciously wealthy for someone of such a young age. When Jong-su asks about his occupation, Ben responds casually that he "just plays", a remark that further obscures the source of his affluence. Shortly before Hae-mi's disappearance, during a private conversation with Jong-su, Ben cryptically reveals that his hobby is "burning greenhouses". Although Ben consistently displays a polite, friendly, and courteous demeanour, this surface civility stands in sharp contrast to his obscure background, unexplained wealth, and secretive pastime, rendering him simultaneously alien and threatening. This unsettling quality is further intensified by the film's presentation of Ben's living environment: a sleek, modern luxury apartment complex that serves as a visual extension of his opacity and detachment.

As shown in Figure 3 (a–b), Ben lives in a luxury apartment complex located in Dongjak-gu, Seoul, and is surrounded by affluent friends. This environment stands in stark contrast to the neighbourhoods associated with Jong-su and Hae-mi, which are depicted as markedly different from Ben's area, characterised by modern high-end apartments and fashionable cafés. Such spatial contrast intensifies Ben's mystery, rendering him increasingly alien and threatening, and provides the basis for Jong-su's suspicion that Ben may be responsible for Hae-mi's disappearance. Yet although the sense of dissonance and Jong-su's suspicion continue to deepen, this tension never erupts into a direct confrontation by the end of the film. Instead, as illustrated in Figure 3 (c–d), the film offers only encounters and scenes that indirectly suggest Ben's possible guilt. A particularly significant moment appears in Figure 3 (d), where Jong-su encounters a cat that responds to the name "Boil", the name of Hae-mi's cat, in the underground parking garage of Ben's apartment. The scene does not provide definitive confirmation that the cat is indeed Hae-mi's; it merely presents an animal that reacts to the name "Boil" within Ben's private space. Whether the cat truly belongs to Hae-mi remains unresolved until the end of the film. Nevertheless, it is precisely through this unresolved ambiguity that Jong-su's suspicion hardens into certainty.

Although the film's conflict appears, on the surface, to revolve around the three figures of Jong-su, Hae-mi, and Ben, overt confrontation or explicit emotional outbursts are largely absent until the film's final moments. Rather than staging conflict through direct clashes between characters, *Burning* sustains its internal tension through their repeated encounters alone. In this way, the film generates tension not from visible collisions on screen, but from a pervasive sense of uncertainty in which neither the characters nor the viewers can arrive at definitive conclusions. This strategy operates through what the film deliberately leaves unsaid, compelling the audience to speculate, infer, and fill in gaps on the basis of incomplete information.

a) 

b) 

c) 

d) 

Figure 3 (a–d). Ben's neighbourhood in a high-end apartment complex in Dongjak-gu
(a) The luxury apartment complex where Ben resides
(b) Ben's affluent-looking acquaintances
(c) A suspicious trace discovered inside Ben's apartment
(d) A cat encountered in the underground parking lot

a) b)

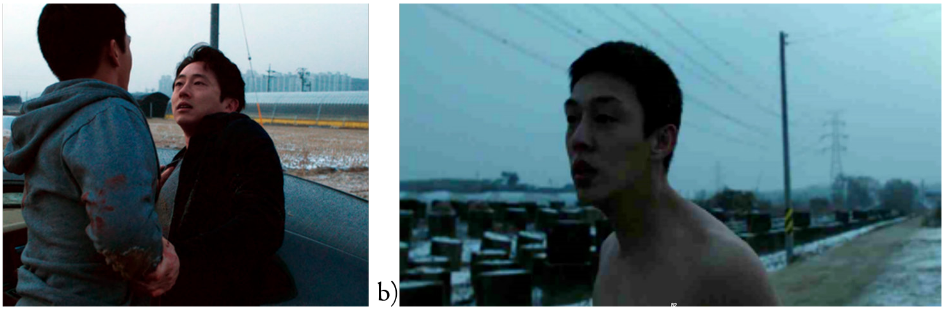


Figure 4 (a–b). Jong-su killing Ben and fleeing the scene
(a) Jong-su killing Ben
(b) Jong-su burning Ben's body along with his own clothes before fleeing

As shown in Figure 4 (a–b), the only moment that can be described as a direct conflict in the film is the final scene in which Jong-su kills Ben and flees the scene. Yet this moment functions less as a driving force of the narrative than as its outcome: rather than propelling the story forward, it retrospectively gathers and closes the tensions that have accumulated throughout the film. In other words, *Burning* does not organise its narrative conflict through decisive diegetic events or explicit confrontations between characters. Instead, it presents a series of diegetic conditions and situations, leaving the task of organising narrative conflict to the viewer who interprets them. For this reason, the conflict in *Burning* does not originate primarily in the emotional states of the three characters. Rather, it emerges from the act of spectatorship itself, as viewers are compelled to examine the conditions under which the characters exist. From this perspective, the fundamental source of narrative tension lies with the viewer who interprets the spatial environments presented by the film. Given that these spaces intersect with Korea's modern and contemporary historical formations, close attention must therefore be paid to the cinematic spaces through which *Burning* articulates its vision of Korean modernity.

The narrative tension of *Burning* is generated through the effectively dismantled family situations of Jong-su and Hae-mi, together with Ben's enigmatic behaviour. At the centre of this tension lies Jong-su's sense of inferiority toward Ben. Jong-su explicitly characterises Ben as a "Gatsby", a figure defined by an obscure identity yet marked by conspicuous wealth. For Jong-su, Ben thus becomes an object of envy and resentment. While traces of this envy occasionally surface in Jong-su's words and actions, the film primarily produces tension through the superimposition of three characters and three distinct spaces. In this sense, what the film ultimately foregrounds is the simultaneity of non-synchronicity: the coexistence of multiple temporalities within a single present, articulated through spaces that traverse Korea's modern and contemporary history [Kim 2000: 25]. Situated between the film's surface reality and the spatial reality apprehended by the viewer, *Burning* deliberately raises the question of what is real, compelling the audience to confront the instability of perception itself.

3. The unfinished Korean modernity

The film's fundamental question, "What is real?" is closely linked to a broader interrogation of Korean modernity. Korean modernity was shaped by a persistent desire for national normalisation, grounded in the belief that a transition toward a "proper" or "normal" order of the state was both necessary and achievable [Lee 2011: 157–158]. This desire for a normalised nation-state is expressed with particular clarity in the notion of realism imagined and cultivated within Korean cinema itself. In this context, Korea has historically positioned the West as its implicit rival, a gesture that can be understood as a form of internalised Orientalism in which Korea is reinvented through the gaze of an imagined Western observer [Ju 2013: 31]. Put differently, within this imagined Western gaze, Korea identifies its own sense of lack and seeks to compensate for it by imitating and supplementing that lack through Western-style spectacle [Kim 2025: 258–260]. The most decisive force shaping this process was the military dictatorship that consolidated power after the Korean War by defining anti-communism and economic development as the foundations of a distinctly Korean form of democracy [Moon 2007: 46–47].

What emerges from this historical process is a specifically Korean desire oriented toward the middle class [Lee 2012: 21–22]. In the Korean context, the middle class has been imagined primarily as a Western-style nuclear family. More concretely, the desired image of the middle class has been articulated through a highly standardised model: a father employed in a salaried white-collar position in Seoul; a mother who manages the household as a devoted homemaker; and children who either pursue higher education or enter modern professions, such as typists in earlier periods. This concrete image of the family, or what may be described as a form of "standardised realism," has persisted as a normative ideal and an object of desire in Korean society, not only during its formative period but continuing into the present [Kim 2025: 234–235]. In short, the Korean middle-class fantasy is inseparably linked to the image of a Seoul-based household organised around a male breadwinner working in the city, replacing extended family structures with a Western-style nuclear family centred on the father [Kim 2025: 259–260].

Burning can be understood as a film that poses a direct challenge to this middle-class fantasy. This challenge unfolds through the formal framework of mystery. In interviews, Lee Chang-dong has offered two reasons for choosing the mystery genre: first, his belief that certain aspects of life ultimately resist explanation, and second, his intention to prevent viewers from approaching the film within the confines of a fixed genre expectation [Kim 2018]. Lee has also described *Burning* as a film that addresses the anger of the younger generation [Na 2018]. Read together, these remarks suggest that the film engages anger not at the level of individual psychology, but as a structural condition. Desire and the frustration of desire are thus presented not as personal failures, but as effects produced within broader social arrangements, revealing how the affect of anger manifests in the lives of individuals living in the present.

From this perspective, what demands attention in *Burning* is not merely the surface conflict among the three protagonists, but the brief yet significant appearance of Jong-su's father in the early part of the film. His presence gestures toward another fundamental question that underlies the entire narrative. Alongside the film's persistent inquiry into "what is real", Jong-su's father occupies the centre of a more unsettling and unspoken question: who initiated this story in the first place? Positioned at the origin of the characters' diffuse tensions and ambiguities, this figure marks the point at which the film's conflict exceeds what can be openly articulated, entering the realm of what remains structurally obscene and unsayable.

Jong-su's father appears only briefly in the film, during the courtroom scenes in which he stands trial. Notably, the film offers no direct conversation or physical interaction between father and son. Jong-su deliberately avoids his father's gaze, and the film renders this avoidance through a restrained visual composition that emphasises the physical distance between the defendant and Jong-su seated in the public gallery of the courtroom. Jong-su's father is on trial for assaulting a civil servant from the Paju city office. His defence is taken up by an old acquaintance, a friend of his father, who summarises the father's life to Jong-su in a matter-of-fact manner: he graduated from high school, endured harsh labour in the Middle East to earn money, ignored advice to invest in an apartment in Gangnam, and instead returned to his hometown to pursue livestock farming, only to fail. As described by his friend, Jong-su's father once embodied the ideal figure of the model citizen promoted during the period of industrialisation and military dictatorship, a subject who symbolised discipline, labour, and national development. At the same time, however, he is presented as a profoundly realistic figure who has failed to adapt to contemporary South Korean society in the aftermath of industrialisation. The very qualities that once aligned him with the promises of modernisation now mark him as a residual and maladjusted presence within the present, revealing the historical disjunction between past ideals and current social realities.

In this context, the dilapidated and collapsing family home in Paju functions as a postwar relic, an antiquated object from an earlier era whose former significance can now be imagined only faintly through the background sound of ongoing anti-North Korean broadcasts. As Figure 5 (a–b) illustrates, the film's nostalgic framing of Jong-su's family house operates precisely in this sense. The house does not function as a site of personal memory alone; rather, it accumulates objects and traces that once carried value and promise but now persist as exhausted remnants, stored like unsold inventory. It is this suspension between past significance and present worthlessness that generates the film's particular mode of nostalgia. In a similar manner, the neighbourhood in which Hae-mi lives offers a montage-like image of Korean modernity itself. With Namsan Tower positioned at the apex as a symbol of successful modernisation, the juxtaposition of towering high-rise buildings and deteriorating low-rise structures, unnatural yet unmistakably real, visually registers the layered temporality of Korean modernity, articulated as a simultaneity of non-synchronicity in which heterogeneous historical times overlap within the same present.

a)

b)

Figure 5 (a–b). Jong-su's family house in Paju at dusk
(a) Jong-su's house framed in a nostalgic tone
(b) The father's antiques piled up like unsold inventory, stripped of their former value

However, *Burning* does not stop at merely exposing these contradictions. The film moves one step further by offering a fundamental response to how such a narrative becomes possible, articulated through Hae-mi's remark: "You just have to forget that it doesn't exist." After Hae-mi's disappearance, Jong-su begins to suspect Ben and attempts to trace her whereabouts. What he encounters, however, is not confirmation of the Hae-mi he once knew, but a series of testimonies suggesting that she may never have been who he believed her to be. As Jong-su's investigation deepens and the film progresses toward its final stages, uncertainty intensifies: distinctions between truth and falsehood increasingly collapse, and nothing remains fully verifiable. The film culminates in Jong-su's act of killing Ben, after which he strips off the clothes he is wearing, burns them together with Ben's body, and flees the scene.

Ben, figured as a Gatsby-like presence, can be understood as the object of Jong-su's desire. Alongside Jong-su's father, Ben functions as an obscene symptom of desire, an embodiment of what cannot be directly articulated. As noted earlier, Ben remains persistently ambiguous, and this ambiguity extends to rumours and suspicions surrounding his sexuality or possible perversion. The film occasionally hints at the possibility that Ben may even harbour an interest in Jong-su himself. Yet for Jong-su, such implications are experienced not as recognition but as revulsion. In this sense, Ben materialises the frustrated desires of the older generation and the subsequent desires of the younger generation in the form of a mysterious figure who is wealthy, elusive, and Korean American. When Jong-su comes to realise that "becoming Ben" is fundamentally impossible, his actions escalate toward violence. At this point, the film draws the viewer even deeper into mystery. As Jong-su strips naked and escapes like a ghost, *Burning* destabilises even the most minimal assumptions on which the viewer has relied, transforming questions such as "Did Ben really exist?" into the more unsettling doubt of whether Jong-su himself ever fully existed within the narrative.

In sum, *Burning* does not articulate a clear distinction between truth and falsehood against the background of Korean modernity. Instead, the film destabilises all such boundaries, foregrounding an affective condition in which anger and fear emerge from the impossibility of knowing what is real or of making decisive choices. This condition may be understood in terms of what Benjamin describes as modern subjectivity under capitalism, characterised by the disappearance or erosion of the subject itself. In *Burning*, this disappearance is variously represented through Jong-su's father, who appears in the courtroom as an "old future" that has failed to arrive; through Ben, who embodies desire as an opaque and unattainable object; and through Hae-mi, whose disappearance literalises absence itself. In this sense, the three characters do not represent separate psychological individuals, but rather different manifestations of the same subject as it is fractured and displaced within capitalism.

The scene that most symptomatically crystallises this condition is the moment in which the characters gather at Jong-su's family home to smoke marijuana, a moment in which the boundaries between presence and absence, agency and passivity, briefly collapse.

Figure 6 (a–b) depicts the scene in Paju where the three characters smoke marijuana and watch the setting sun together. The film frames this moment through a seemingly nostalgic atmosphere: wine is shared, marijuana is smoked, and the fading light of the countryside is contemplated in silence. This tableau can be read as a crystallisation of the desires of the younger generation discussed above, a fleeting moment of suspension in which historical burdens appear temporarily softened. Yet this tranquillity remains fragile and provisional. Figure 6 (c–d), which shows Hae-mi performing her "Great Hunger" dance, further sharpens this tension. The dance unfolds to "Générique" by Miles Davis, famously featured in *Elevator to the Gallows*, but the scene is symptomatic precisely because this music does not exist in isolation.

a) b) c) d)

Figure 6 (a–d). Korean modernity as depicted in *Burning*
(a) The three characters gazing at the dusk in Paju
(b) The old house in Paju, marijuana and wine
(c) Hae-mi's dance
(d) The coexistence of North Korean propaganda broadcasts and the "Great Hunger" dance

While Miles Davis's score initially dominates the soundscape, the North Korean propaganda broadcast gradually returns, reclaiming its place as the background sound by the end of Hae-mi's dance. In this auditory transition, the film stages a collision between an imagined, liberated desire and the inescapable persistence of historical and geopolitical reality, revealing how moments of longing are continually overwritten by the unresolved conditions of Korean modernity.

Conclusion

This study has examined Walter Benjamin's reflections on modernity in order to analyse Lee Chang-dong's *Burning*, with particular attention to its characters and the manner in which they are narratively constructed. For Benjamin, modernity was not merely a continuation of the past but a fundamentally new phenomenon that marked a decisive break from earlier historical formations. Technologies of reproduction transformed modes of production, and these shifts, in turn, altered the conditions and forms of everyday life. From these transformed conditions, Benjamin sought to read not only the contradictions of capitalism but also the emergence of wish-images embedded within them. To do so, he approached the Paris arcades, spaces whose former splendour had faded, as allegorical sites through which the "aged future" awaiting the present could be deciphered. In this sense, Benjamin turned to film as an artistic form and a mode of mass culture uniquely attuned to new technological conditions. His emphasis, however, lay not in emotional immersion or identification, but in a Brechtian logic of distancing and defamiliarisation, through which cinema could disrupt habitual perception rather than reinforce it.

Burning addresses the anger experienced by younger generations in contemporary Korea. Rather than diagnosing the cause or substance of this anger, however, the film refrains from offering explanatory clarity. Instead, by adopting the formal framework of mystery, it suspends causal certainty and renders all elements unstable, compelling viewers to hesitate in their judgments. Direct confrontation appears only once, near the end of the film, and even this moment functions not as a causal event that drives the narrative forward, but as its terminal point. This reversal further disorients the viewer, transforming what had seemed self-evident into something questionable. In doing so, the film redirects attention away from individual psychology and toward the environments surrounding the characters – spaces that are inseparably intertwined with Korea's modern and contemporary historical conditions.

Burning does not seek to reconstruct how these spaces once existed in the past; rather, it shows how they are layered and reappear in the present through montage, articulated as a simultaneity of non-synchronicity. Put differently, instead of resolving the conflicts among the three characters through direct explanation, the film situates them within heterogeneous environments, allowing the resulting strangeness of these landscapes and the tensions they generate to come into view. In this way, *Burning* links the anger of the younger generation to the structural conditions of Korean society. Rather than attributing this anger solely to social injustice or assigning blame in a straightforward manner, the film situates it within the constructed narrative of Korean modernity itself, revealing how this anger manifests in the present. By calling into question the axioms that are commonly taken as natural and self-evident, *Burning* renders the familiar landscape of modernity strange. From this defamiliarisation emerge experiences of mismatch, disorientation, and denial, affective responses that ultimately crystallise as anxiety and anger.

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QUEER TEMPORALITY IN KIM-JHO KWANG-SOO'S *TWO WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL*[1]

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between queer cinema and temporality through an analysis of Kim-Jho Kwang-soo's *Two Weddings and a Funeral* (두 번의 결혼식과 한 번의 장례식, 2012), a landmark work in Korean queer cinema. Drawing on queer temporal theory – particularly Elizabeth Freeman's concept of chrononormativity and J. Jack Halberstam's formulation of queer time – the article argues that the film articulates a mode of queer temporality shaped by South Korea's specific socio-cultural context. The narrative subverts the heteronormative temporal logic of the romantic comedy through a sham marriage between a gay man and a lesbian woman, exposing the dissonance between socially mandated life timelines and queer lived experience. Incorporating Judy Han's concept of *sigisangjo* (시기상조), which frames queer existence as "premature" or "out of time", the article demonstrates how the film renders visible strategies of concealment, improvisation, and both quiet endurance and collective resistance. Ultimately, *Two Weddings and a Funeral* aims toward a queer futurity that resists assimilation while affirming alternative modes of kinship, intimacy, and belonging.

Keywords: *Korean queer cinema, queer time, queer temporality, Korean cinema,* Two Weddings and a Funeral.

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Introduction

The relationship between queer[2] cinema and temporality is a critical site of inquiry in queer theory, as cinematic representations frequently challenge normative temporal structures that organize life around heterosexual milestones, such as marriage, reproduction, and inheritance. Elizabeth Freeman refers to this as *chrononormativity* and argues that queer temporality is a disruptor of chrononormativity [Freeman, 2010: 3]. In extension, queer cinema – by foregrounding characters who live outside of sanctioned timelines – exposes the pressure and exclusions embedded in the chrononormative temporal regimes.

Building on these theoretical insights and by addressing the conceptual categories of temporality and queer time, this article examines how Kim-Jho Kwang-soo's *Two Weddings and a Funeral* (두 번의 결혼식과 한 번의 장례식, 2012), a landmark of Korean Queer cinema, employs a mode of queer time that is specific to its Korean context. Rather than merely depicting queer characters within an otherwise normative narrative framework, the film uses time itself as a tool to reveal the tensions between social expectation and queer lived experience, illuminating how queer subjects navigate, manipulate, and at times resist dominant temporal structures. This article will first outline the key theoretical frameworks of temporality and queer time, also employing the Korean linguistic context. After situating *Two Weddings and a Funeral* within the history and politics of Korean queer cinema, the reading of the film serves as a demonstration of how Korean chrononormativity and queer temporal practices intersect, collide, and ultimately gesture toward alternative queer futures in the Korean context.

Temporality and queer time

Temporality is not merely a neutral measure of chronological succession but a social and political structure that organizes lives, bodies, and institutions. As Dustin Goltz defines it, temporality is "a term that speaks to questions that interrogate the functions and logics of time, opening time up for reflection, examination, and analysis" [Goltz 2002]. Concepts of temporality and time often default to a heteronormative frame of thought; it is the notion of queer time that veers away from heteronormative notions of temporality and, with it, deviates from heteronormative life course expectations.

The intimate link between heteronormativity and temporality is explored by Lee Edeman in *No Future*. Edelman examines what he perceives as "reproductive futurism", arguing that by structuring modern political discourse in the USA

[2] In this article, the term "queer" denotes non-normative and non-binary approaches to identity and experience, encompassing both gender and sexuality.

(though this same line of thought can be found on a global scale) around the figure of the Child – which must be protected and prioritized – reproductive heterosexuality effectively becomes the only choice, while heteronormativity preserves its "absolute privilege" [Edelman 2004: 2–3].

Heteronormativity as such is already inseparable from general temporal structures. What might be described as "straight time" functions as the default temporal framework through which social life is organized, with linear progression through childhood, education, marriage, reproduction, childrearing, death, and even inheritance. Michel Foucault has referred to this process of biopolitics in his work *The History of Sexuality* [Foucault 1978], and Dana Luciano expanded on this notion, terming it "chronobiopolitics". These temporal politics are embedded not only in cultural narratives but also in legal systems, labour structures, kinship models, and moral discourses. Elizabeth Freeman conceptualizes this regulatory force, a combination of Luciano's understanding of chronobiopolitics and heteronormativity, as *chrononormativity*, which she defines as "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity" within capitalism and heteropatriarchy [Freeman 2010: 3]. Chrononormativity thus naturalizes a life course oriented toward stability, futurity, and reproductive continuity.

Where the notions of temporality and time default to a heteronormative frame of thought, queer theory and its notion of *queer time* veer away from heteronormative notions of temporality, and with it, deviate from heteronormative life course expectations. Where reproductive futurism is advocated in the present, queerness is cast as an opposing force not based on sexuality alone, but also because queer timelines disrupt this temporal logic. J. Jack Halberstam defines queer time as "a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge [...] once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" [Halberstam 2005]. According to Halberstam, queer time is not simply a refusal of linearity but a lived response to conditions in which queer subjects are structurally excluded from normative life schedules. As Halberstam emphasizes, queer time arises from practices of survival, delay, improvisation, and alternative forms of intimacy that fall outside chrononormative rhythms of life [Halberstam 2005].

Elizabeth Freeman builds on this and notes that queer time "emerged from within, alongside, and beyond this heterosexually gendered double-time of stasis and progress, intimacy and genealogy" [Freeman 2010: 53]. Freeman perceives queer time as a notion that disturbs and/or disobeys the rules set out by chrononormativity. In this sense, queer time disturbs the synchronization of bodies to normative schedules, revealing time itself as a site of power.

Judy Han approaches the notion of queer time in the Korean context. "No other expression describes the dismissal and postponement of LGBTQ+ rights better than *sigisangjo*," she states. *Sigisangjo* (시기상조) is a Korean idiom that denotes prematurity of an action, or, in the words of Han, it can be interpreted as something "ahead of time" or "too early for that". She considers *sigisangjo* as a "part of a constellation of aspirational temporalities in contemporary queer political throughlines" [Han 2025: 133]. She perceives *sigisangjo* as "an idiom of denialism", and states that the "denialist logic of *sigisangjo* operates in three important ways: as a diagnosis of an aberration, as an assertion of chrononormativity, and as a foreclosure of futurity." In other words, according to Han, this idiom represents that South Korea is "not yet ready" for the type of social change that would allow for the LGBTQ+ community to exist in the here and now – the LGBTQ+ community exists outside of the "right time" [Han 2025: 135].

Han notes that while "Korean heteropatriarchal nationalism and male-dominated nation time" and "queer time" (and even "feminist time") seem to be mutually exclusive, the latter actually poses a challenge to the former and has historically proved to be more productive than "normative temporality" in challenging dominant social orders, including beyond the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights [Han, 2025: 138–139].

While Han demonstrates how queer existence in South Korea is repeatedly deferred through the chrononormative logic of *sigisangjo*, José Esteban Muñoz offers a way of thinking beyond this foreclosure by conceptualizing queer futurity as a horizon that is "not yet here" and "not yet conscious" within the present [Muñoz 2009: 1]. For Muñoz, queerness is thus oriented toward a mode of possibility that exceeds the constraints of the "here and now," sustaining an anticipatory vision of alternative social, affective, and temporal arrangements even when queer lives are rendered premature or untimely by dominant temporal regimes [Muñoz 2009].

Cinema, itself both a subject and a tool of temporal politics, has become a particularly effective site for articulating the tension between chrononormative frameworks and queer realities; much more so in the fold of Korean cinema, where queer cinema as an industry took the front stage in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights. It is within this theoretical framework that *Two Weddings and a Funeral* can be understood as staging a conflict between straight time as default time and queer temporal practices that emerge from lives lived out of sync with dominant rhythms.

Korean queer cinema

The term "queer cinema" is derived from the notion of "new queer cinema", a term coined by B. Ruby Rich. She describes queer cinema as a new mode of filmmaking characterized by stylistic and political innovation. She emphasizes the political orientation and refusal of normative storytelling and states that queer films challenge heteronormative ideology through their style, subjects, and narrative disruptions [Rich 2013].

There are several strategies for how queer stories are presented in South Korean cinema. In one of them, looking at the visibility of queer characters as a criterion, Kim and Singer propose to divide the history of Korean queer cinema into three eras: the invisible era, the camouflage era, and the blockbuster era (post-2005) [Kim and Singer 2011]. However, when queer characters finally achieved a visible presence in the South Korean mediascape, their fantasy-driven nature clashed with the reality of the LGBTQ+ community and, as such, was not perceived as "true" LGBTQ+ cinema by the Korean LGBTQ+ community itself [Kim and Singer 2011: 127–129]. In terms of mainstream Korean cinema, despite using queerness and queer characters on an increasingly regular basis, queerness has been applied and approached with a distance from Koreanness (i.e. it has been perceived as something Western, something essentially not Korean), or at least with a distance from the Korean (LGBTQ+) reality (queer subjects treated with a distance, historical or fictitious, from what Korean LGBT+ community perceives as their own reality).

In 2006, the film that was hailed as the "first real Korean gay feature" [Bertolin 2007] was released: *No Regret* (후회하지 않아, 2006, Lee-Song Hee-il). The director was an out gay man, and the central relationship of the film is a love story between two men. Moreover, the producer of the film was Kim-jho Kwang-soo, himself an out gay film director and activist. Unlike the commercial films of this era that featured queer characters, *No Regret* did not establish a distance between Korean reality and queer characters; instead, it deliberately normalized queerness, which was a novel approach for Korean filmmakers.

Following *No Regret*, a clear division was formed, at the industry level, in terms of how queerness is approached in South Korean cinema – one is the utilization of queer aesthetics and characters in the mainstream industry, and the other is LGBTQ+-community-produced cinema: the Korean queer cinema.

In his study of another Korean queer film, *The Bacchus Lady* (죽여주는 여자, 2016, E J-yong), Ungsan Kim argues that Korean queer cinema as a whole, as an industry, challenges national, familial, and heteronormative structures that are particular to South Korea. He draws a distinction between Korean queer films of validation, or films that "center on romantic relationships between same-sex couples or express sympathetic attitudes toward the portrayal of queer characters, thus allowing for the cultural and social recognition of sexual minorities," and films that "celebrate the radical potential of queerness." Kim places *Two Weddings and a Funeral* (두번의결혼식과한번의장례식, 2012), directed by Kim-Jho Kwang-soo, in the former category [Kim 2018: 93].

Two Weddings and a Funeral is the first Korean gay romantic comedy-melodrama and Kim-Jho Kwang-soo's feature debut. Even with a limited mainstream release, this film remains the most commercially successful queer film produced by the members of the Korean LGBTQ+ community. Its use of humour, melodrama, and romance allowed it to engage a broad audience while still offering a sustained critique of Korean chrononormative expectations through the use of queer time as a tool of subversion.

Korean chrononormativity and queer time in *Two Weddings and a Funeral*

"Korean chrononormativity" in *Two Weddings and a Funeral* operates as a framework of socially mandated, linear timelines that regulate adulthood, family obligations, and societal success. These timelines are deeply informed by Confucian and Christian values, where the heteronormative family is positioned as the cornerstone of moral and social order.

In their paper on homosexuality in ancient and modern Korea, Kim Young-gwan and Hahn Sook-ja reiterate Confucianism's importance for modern Korea's social structures. It is the Confucianist social system that places a hetero-patriarchal family at the core, making it a "key social and ethical norm in Korea", where family is the basic unit upon which social harmony is built and society is constructed through "heterosexual marriage and birth" [Kim and Hahn 2006: 60].

Besides Confucianism, Christianity has a profound influence on the Korean system of morals. Christianity became widespread in Korea after the end of World War II, when it was mass-imported by American troops. One of the few elements shared by Confucianism and Christianity is that homosexuality, along with other queer lifestyles, is perceived as deviant. Both systems contributed to the notion that in Korea, the queer community is something "other", something essentially "not Korean".

Two Weddings and a Funeral challenges both the notions of Korean chrononormativity and queerness as a "non-Korean other" head-on. At the genre level, the film is a melodrama, blended with elements of romantic comedy, where even heavy-hitting moments are juxtaposed with scenes of almost jubilant chaos.

The film starts with a wedding: the main character, Min-soo, marries Hyo-jin, a fellow doctor, and it fast becomes clear that the picture-perfect heteronormative union is really a sham marriage between a gay man and a lesbian; he wants to deflect parental and societal pressure, and she and her lover want to adopt a child, which is only possible for a heterosexual couple. To keep the ruse going, Min-soo and Hyo-jin arrange for neighbouring apartments – one where Min-soo resides alone, and the other where Hyo-jin lives with her partner. Aside from their living arrangement – with Hyo-jin's clothes displayed in Min-soo's apartment to keep his intrusive mother's suspicions at bay – there are also many occasions where they have to "perform their heterosexuality" to coworkers, friends not in the know, and their own families. This is juxtaposed with their queer relationships – especially for Min-soo, who has a tight-knit group of gay friends, and his attempts at having a stable love life while still in the proverbial closet. Given the precarious position the sham couple gets themselves into, comedy makes way for tragedy and a revelation of limits to a strategy of faux assimilation in a society that allows for structural violence.

For Min-soo, the pressures of these normative temporal expectations are intense: he must simultaneously meet the demands of filial duty, demonstrate professional stability, and maintain the illusion of heterosexual conformity. His dual existence – one on the chrononormative, linear path and one on a queer, non-linear trajectory – highlights the tension between performing societal expectations and sustaining an authentic queer life.

In effect, time becomes a resource to be manipulated: Min-soo must preserve appearances long enough to arrange for a move abroad to start a new life. At the same time, Hyo-jin must navigate legal and procedural temporalities involved with the adoption procedure for a baby boy in her care at her workplace in the hospital, which depends on performing heterosexuality.

The film illustrates this tension through the characters' sham marriage; a strategy designed to synchronize with the dominant Korean timeline and mitigate societal pressures.

Chrononormativity also plays a role in the two feeling like they exist outside of the right timeline, resorting to a sham marriage to create an illusion of being "on time" and not "outside of the right time", which aligns with the notion of *sigisangjo* (시기상조).

By entering a socially legible marital arrangement, Min-soo and Hyo-jin temporarily align themselves with Korean chrononormativity, creating the illusion of progress along the prescribed temporal trajectory. Yet this alignment is fragile, highlighting how normative timelines are socially constructed and maintained through surveillance, expectation, and coercion.

In parallel, the film constructs spaces and practices that embody queer time, offering alternative modes of living outside dominant societal expectations. Min-soo's group of friends forms its own temporal logic: rehearsals for the G-voice choir, a private gathering at a rented swimming pool so they can freely express themselves in their own time, and nightlife spaces operate on a timetable dictated by desire, common ground, and genuine affection rather than obligation. These moments of collective queer life demonstrate Halberstam's assertion that queer time emerges once one steps outside the temporal frames of "once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" [Halberstam 2005: 2]. In this film, laughter, care, and emotional intimacy in queer spaces and queer time contrast sharply with the pressures and constraints of chrononormative Korean society.

Queer characters like Tina, who maintain dual identities – shopkeeper by day, flamboyant performer by night – further exemplify the performative negotiation of time, revealing how queer individuals must manage both normative expectations and self-determined temporalities. This character also serves as a catalyst for the final arc of the story, enabling Min-soo to relinquish his attempts to conform to a chrononormative existence and publicly embrace his queer identity.

The film's ending crystallizes the interaction between Korean temporality and queer time. Departing from strategies of assimilation, it envisions a future beyond the constraints of *sigisangjo* (시기상조), aligning with queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz's notion of queer futurity as a temporal horizon oriented toward possibility rather than the "here and now" [Muñoz 2009: 1].

The dream-like final sequence of Min-soo's imagined future does not depict integration into heteronormative timelines; instead, it gestures toward an aspirational queer future in which emotional authenticity, chosen family, and acceptance by biological family are central. By doing so, the film emphasizes that queer temporality is not merely a deferral of normative life stages but an active mode of imagining alternative social and emotional arrangements. *Two Weddings and a Funeral* thus both critiques the rigidity of Korean chrononormativity and constructs cinematic spaces where queer temporalities can flourish, offering a vision of life organized around desire, care, and community rather than obligation and social compliance.

Conclusion

Two Weddings and a Funeral demonstrates how Korean queer cinema can both expose and creatively rework the normative timelines that structure social life in South Korea. Through its narrative of a sham heterosexual marriage, the film foregrounds the force of Korean chrononormativity that regulates adulthood through obligations to marry, reproduce, and integrate into heteronormative kinship structures. The pressures faced by Min-soo and Hyo-jin illustrate how Korean temporality, marked by the convergence of Confucian familism, Christian moral frameworks, and national-developmental expectations, produces a sense of being perpetually "outside of time". Han's notion of *sigisangjo*, the idiom that declares queer existence "too early" or "outside of the right time", becomes visible not only in the obstacles the characters face but also in the very strategies they employ to appear "on time". Their sham marriage performs compliance with normative temporality while revealing its fragility and unreality.

At the same time, *Two Weddings and a Funeral* envisions the possibilities of queer time. The spaces inhabited by Min-soo's friendship circle – gay bars, choir practice, after-hours gatherings – constitute temporal havens that resist the forward-marching linearity of Korean heteropatriarchal society. These moments gesture toward alternative modes of belonging and existence, untethered from the chrononormative rules of existence. The film's final sequence extends this gesture into the realm of queer futurity. Its dream-like orientation resonates with Muñoz's conception of queerness as a "then and there" – a horizon of future possibility that refuses the constraints of the present. Rather than resolving the tensions between queer life and Korean chrononormativity, the ending suspends them, imagining a future in which queer existence is not deferred, denied, or made premature, but instead fully liveable. In doing so, *Two Weddings and a Funeral* serves as an example for how Korean queer cinema can critique dominant temporal regimes while offering both existing and imagined temporal alternatives, grounded in community, resistance, and hope.

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TIME, CRYONICS, AND CULTURAL IMAGINATION IN KOREAN AND AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *THE PERFECT SOCIETY* AND *THE DOOR INTO SUMMER*[1]

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Abstract

This article is an undertaking of a comparative analysis of two representative science fiction works from Korea and the United States, Mun Yun-seong (문윤성)'s *The Perfect Society* (완전사회) and Robert Heinlein's *The Door into Summer*, with a particular focus on cryonic narratives and their treatment of time. Drawing on Darko Suvin's concepts of cognitive estrangement and novum, alongside Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, the study examines how differing cultural values shape narrative structures, character motivations, and imagined futures. The analysis demonstrates that while both novels employ cryonic preservation as a shared novum, they assign it distinct meanings that reflect contrasting cultural orientations, particularly in terms of collectivism versus individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and temporal orientation. The findings suggest that Korean science fiction articulates time and human existence through a collective and future oriented framework, whereas American science fiction foregrounds individual agency and personal fulfilment. The article concludes that integrating cultural theory with science fiction studies offers a productive framework for understanding East-West differences in science fiction and provides a valuable foundation for further comparative research on Korean science fiction within global literary discourse.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Authors and temporal imagination in Korean and American science fiction

This study comparatively examines the works of two foundational figures in Korean and American science fiction, Mun Yun-seong and Robert Heinlein, with particular attention to how each author imagines time through speculative narrative. While both writers employ the motif of cryonic preservation, they do so within markedly different cultural and historical frameworks, producing contrasting visions of the future and divergent understandings of human existence across time. This chapter outlines their literary backgrounds and genre practices, focusing on how their science fiction articulates distinct models of temporal imagination.

1.2. Mun Yun-seong and historical time

Mun Yun-seong (1916–2000) is widely regarded as the author of the first full-length science fiction novel in Korea. Born in Gangwon Province, he experienced a turbulent youth during the Japanese colonial period, including expulsion from Gyeongseong Second High School after resisting a Japanese teacher. Although he published the short story *Cheek* in 1946, his sustained engagement with literary production emerged relatively late [Mun 2018].

At the age of fifty one, Mun Yun-seong won the first prize in the inaugural mystery fiction contest with *The Perfect Society*, which was published as a novel in 1967. Often recognised as Korea's first full length science fiction novel, the work exerted a decisive influence on the formation of Korean science fiction as a literary genre. Mun Yun-seong consistently advocated the fusion of mystery and science fiction, emphasising what he termed the scientification of mystery fiction. His narratives are characterised by careful scientific design and logically structured plots. His representative short stories include *An Incident in Denver* and *World Cup Special Operation* [Mun 2021], while longer works include the novel *Judgment on Japan* [Mun 2019].

Crucially, Mun Yun-seong's science fiction approaches the future as an extension of historical time rather than a rupture from it. In *The Perfect Society*, cryonic preservation functions not merely as a technological device but as a means of projecting a human subject across a long historical continuum. The protagonist's suspended body becomes a vehicle for observing the transformation of society over an extended duration, foregrounding questions of collective survival, social order, and historical responsibility. Mun Yun-seong's temporal imagination thus emphasises continuity, sacrifice, and the weight of history in shaping future human existence.

1.3. Robert Heinlein and biographical time

Robert A. Heinlein (1907 to 1988) is a central figure in twentieth century American science fiction, known for expanding the genre's thematic range and popular appeal. A graduate of the United States Naval Academy, Heinlein frequently incorporated his military experience into narratives that explore political systems, social organisation, and individual freedom through speculative frameworks.

His major works include *Starship Troopers* (1959), which examines citizenship and militarised society, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), which interrogates social norms and religion, and *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966), which depicts revolutionary struggle in a lunar colony. Across these works, Heinlein repeatedly foregrounds individual agency, autonomy, and rational choice as defining features of human progress.

In *The Door into Summer* (1957), which incorporates the motif of cryonic preservation, Heinlein presents a markedly different temporal imagination from that found in Mun Yun-seong's work. Cryonics operates as a mechanism for reclaiming personal time rather than preserving collective history. The protagonist's movement into the future is motivated by individual loss and recovery, and the narrative treats time as a resource that can be strategically navigated in order to restore disrupted personal trajectories. Heinlein's future is thus closely aligned with biographical time, privileging personal fulfilment, romantic resolution, and technological optimism.

Taken together, these two authors exemplify contrasting temporal imaginations within science fiction. Mun Yun-seong frames the future through long historical duration and collective responsibility, whereas Heinlein conceives of the future as an extension of individual biography and personal agency. These divergent approaches to time provide a critical foundation for the comparative analysis of cryonic narratives developed in the following sections.

2. Cryonic protagonists and the ethics of time

Building on the discussion of historical and biographical time in the previous chapter, this section examines how cryonic preservation functions as an ethical and experiential model of time in the two novels. Rather than treating cryonics as a neutral technological device, this chapter conceptualises it as a form of time ethics, that is, a narrative framework through which the future, responsibility, and human existence are morally organised.

The cryonic protagonists, Wu Seon-gu in *The Perfect Society* and Dan in *The Door into Summer*, undergo temporal suspension and subsequent temporal displacement, yet their experiences diverge sharply along three analytical axes: purpose, temporal experience, and ethical orientation.

2.1. Wu Seon-gu and cryonics as collective time ethics

The protagonist of *The Perfect Society*, Wu Seon-gu, is selected by the United Nations to undergo cryonic preservation before the outbreak of World War III and IV. His temporal suspension, lasting 161 years, is undertaken voluntarily and explicitly framed as a sacrifice for the future of humanity. Cryonics here functions as an ethical commitment to a collective future rather than a strategy for personal survival or advantage.

Upon awakening, Wu Seon-gu enters a future society in which men no longer exist and social order is maintained through advanced technology and strict collectivist regulation. Individual freedom and personal desire are subordinated to systemic stability. Wu Seon-gu's temporally displaced body thus becomes a witness to long term historical transformation, positioning him not as an active agent seeking restoration of his former life, but as an observer embedded within an unfamiliar social order.

From the perspective of time ethics, Wu Seon-gu's experience is characterised by historical observation rather than biographical restoration. His suspended body bridges past and future, enabling reflection on the consequences of collective choices across extended duration. The ethical dimension of his cryonic state lies in sacrifice, endurance, and responsibility toward humanity as a whole. Cryonics in this context organises time as a shared historical continuum, within which individual identity is reshaped by collective survival and social continuity.

2.2. Dan and cryonics as personal time recovery

In contrast, the protagonist of *The Door into Summer*, Dan, undergoes cryonic preservation for explicitly personal reasons. An inventor and entrepreneur in 1970s America, Dan chooses temporal suspension after experiencing betrayal and dispossession. His cryonic state lasts approximately thirty years and is motivated by the desire to reclaim a disrupted personal trajectory rather than to contribute to a collective future.

Dan's temporal displacement into the future functions as a mechanism for biographical restoration. Time is treated as a resource that can be strategically navigated in order to recover lost opportunities, relationships, and personal autonomy. Unlike Wu Seon-gu, Dan does not experience cryonics as ethical sacrifice, but as a means of regaining control over his own life. His actions after awakening are oriented toward resolving personal grievances and restoring emotional fulfilment.

Within this framework, cryonics embodies an individual centred time ethics grounded in self-realisation, autonomy, and technological optimism. Temporal suspension allows Dan to bypass an unfavourable present and re-enter history at a more advantageous moment, reinforcing a conception of time as flexible, instrumental, and subject to individual agency.

2.3. Comparative perspective: Purpose, experience, and ethics

Although both protagonists undergo temporal suspension and re-emerge in future societies, their cryonic experiences articulate fundamentally different ethical models of time. Wu Seon-gu's cryonics is oriented toward a collective future, structured around long duration, historical observation, and sacrifice. Dan's cryonics, by contrast, is oriented toward personal recovery, privileging short term displacement, biographical continuity, and self-realisation.

These differences are not merely narrative variations but reflect deeper cultural imaginations of time. In *The Perfect Society*, time is conceived as a collective horizon that demands ethical responsibility beyond individual lifespan. In *The Door into Summer*, time is framed as a personal asset that can be reclaimed and reorganised in service of individual fulfilment.

This contrast establishes cryonic narratives as a crucial site where cultural values concerning time, agency, and ethics are made visible, preparing the ground for the theoretical analyses developed in the following sections.

3. Cryonics, novum, and temporal reorganisation in science fiction

3.1. Cognitive estrangement, novum, and time

Darko Suvin defines science fiction through the twin concepts of cognitive estrangement and novum. Cognitive estrangement refers to the intellectual distance created when readers encounter a world that differs from empirical reality while remaining governed by rational and coherent principles. This estrangement does not aim at escapism, but rather at critical reflection, allowing readers to perceive familiar reality from an altered perspective [Suvin 2016].

The novum is the structural core of this process. It denotes a scientifically or technologically grounded innovation that differentiates the fictional world from the reader's own and organises the narrative according to a new logic. Importantly, the novum is not merely a speculative invention or a decorative motif. It is the element through which science fiction reorganises perception, prompting readers to question established assumptions about society, history, and human existence [Suvin 2016: 79–101].

Although Suvin's concept of the novum has often been applied to technological artefacts or futuristic settings, this study emphasises that the novum can operate at a more fundamental level: the level of temporal organisation. From this perspective, cognitive estrangement arises not simply from unfamiliar machines or devices, but from altered experiences of time that disrupt conventional understandings of duration, continuity, and historical progression.

3.2. Cryonics as novum: From technology to temporal reorganisation

Both *The Perfect Society* and *The Door into Summer* employ cryonic preservation as their central novum. At a technological level, cryonics functions as a scientifically plausible mechanism that suspends biological ageing and enables human survival across extended temporal intervals. This aspect fulfils Suvin's requirement of rational plausibility and situates both narratives firmly within the tradition of science fiction.

However, the estranging force of cryonics in these works does not primarily stem from its technological novelty. Cryonic preservation has long been a familiar motif in science fiction, and for experienced readers it no longer constitutes a radically new invention. Its significance instead lies in how it reorganises time, reshaping the relationship between past, present, and future, and redefining the ethical position of the human subject within temporal continuity.

In *The Perfect Society*, cryonics produces cognitive estrangement by displacing the protagonist into an extended historical duration. Wu Seon-gu's temporal suspension does not enable the recovery of a previous life, but rather positions him as an observer of large scale social transformation. Time is organised as a collective historical continuum, within which individual biography loses priority. The estrangement experienced by the reader emerges from encountering a future structured by unfamiliar temporal ethics, where survival, responsibility, and identity are defined in relation to collective history rather than personal continuity.

By contrast, *The Door into Summer* reorganises time at the level of individual biography. Dan's temporal suspension allows him to bypass an unfavourable present and re-enter the future at a moment aligned with his personal goals. Time is treated as a flexible and instrumental resource that can be paused, resumed, and optimised through technological intervention. Cognitive estrangement here arises from the redefinition of personal time as something that can be strategically managed in order to restore disrupted life trajectories.

These contrasting uses of the same novum demonstrate that cryonics functions less as a technological spectacle than as a narrative device that reshapes temporal experience. In Suvinian terms, cryonics produces cognitive estrangement not primarily through technology, but through altered experiences of time. The novum operates by reorganising temporal perception, whether by extending history beyond individual lifespan or by rendering biography recoverable through technological mediation.

3.3. Temporal estrangement and cultural imagination

Viewed through Suvin's theoretical framework, both works can be regarded as coherent and effective examples of science fiction. Yet their shared novum generates distinct forms of cognitive estrangement because it is embedded within different cultural imaginations of time. *The Perfect Society* mobilises cryonics to interrogate collective history, long term survival, and ethical responsibility beyond the individual. *The Door into Summer*, on the other hand, employs the same novum to explore personal freedom, emotional fulfilment, and the continuity of individual life.

Suvin's concepts thus provide a critical bridge between the technological premise of cryonics and the culturally differentiated temporal structures identified in the previous chapters. By focusing on temporal reorganisation rather than technological novelty, this chapter demonstrates how cryonic narratives function as sites where time itself becomes estranged, opening space for reflection on the ethical and cultural dimensions of human existence in imagined futures.

4. Cultural dimensions and the organisation of time

4.1. Hofstede's cultural dimensions as a narrative framework

To further examine articulation rendered by cryonic narratives to culturally differentiated experiences of time, this chapter draws on Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory [Hofstede 2001]. While Hofstede's model was originally developed within the field of social psychology to analyse value patterns across societies, this study does not treat it as a description of fixed national character. Instead, Hofstede's dimensions are employed heuristically, as a framework for reading how cultural values are narratively constructed and embedded in fictional worlds.

In this context, Hofstede's theory serves as an interpretive lens rather than a deterministic model. The analysis focuses on how selected cultural dimensions are translated into narrative structures, character motivations, and, most importantly, conceptions of time within science fiction. Among Hofstede's dimensions, two are particularly central to the present discussion: individualism versus collectivism, and long term versus short term orientation. These dimensions directly shape how future time is imagined, owned, and ethically organised in cryonic narratives.

4.2. Cultural dimensions and temporal imagination in the two works

When applied to *The Perfect Society* and The *Door into Summer*, Hofstede's framework illuminates how cultural values are mapped onto distinct temporal orders rather than merely onto social behaviour.

4.2.1. Individualism versus collectivism and the ownership of future time

In *The Door into Summer*, the narrative is grounded in an individualistic temporal imagination. Dan's decision to undergo cryonic preservation reflects a conception of future time as personally owned and recoverable. The future functions as a space into which the individual can strategically re-enter in order to restore disrupted life trajectories. Time is treated as a resource subject to personal choice, management, and optimisation, reinforcing an ethic of individual agency and self-realisation.

By contrast, *The Perfect Society* constructs a collectivist temporal order in which future time is not owned by the individual but by society as a whole. Wu Seon-gu's cryonic suspension is undertaken for the sake of humanity's survival, and his awakened existence is subordinated to collective continuity rather than personal fulfilment. The future here is a shared historical horizon, ethically organised around sacrifice and responsibility. Individual biography is absorbed into collective time, and personal desire is suppressed in favour of long term social stability.

4.2.2. Long term versus short term orientation and temporal duration

The contrast between long term and short term orientation is most clearly reflected in the duration and meaning of cryonic suspension. In *The Perfect Society*, Wu Seon-gu remains in temporal suspension for 161 years, a duration that symbolically aligns with a long term oriented worldview. Time is conceived as extended, cumulative, and oriented toward sustainability and historical continuity. Cryonics thus becomes a mechanism for enduring history rather than escaping it.

In *The Door into Summer*, Dan's cryonic suspension lasts approximately thirty years and serves a fundamentally different function. The relatively short duration reflects a short term oriented temporal imagination, in which time displacement is used to solve immediate personal problems rather than to secure collective futures. The future is not a distant historical project but a near horizon that promises rapid restoration of individual satisfaction.

4.2.3. Power, uncertainty, and temporal control

Differences in power distance and uncertainty avoidance further reinforce these contrasting temporal structures. *The Perfect Society* depicts a future society governed by strict regulation and hierarchical control, reflecting a preference for predictability and stability over temporal openness. Time is tightly regulated, and deviation from established order is minimised to preserve systemic continuity.

Conversely, *The Door into Summer* presents a more flexible temporal environment in which uncertainty is embraced as an opportunity for innovation and personal reinvention. Dan's navigation of the future demonstrates a willingness to engage with temporal uncertainty, treating change not as a threat but as a condition for individual freedom.

4.2.4. Gender order and temporal ethics

Finally, the gendered structure of time is explicitly foregrounded in *The Perfect Society*, which imagines a female only society and stages a crisis of traditional masculinity. Wu Seon-gu's temporal displacement exposes the instability of gender roles across historical duration, linking masculinity to questions of continuity, reproduction, and cultural memory. In contrast, *The Door into Summer* does not foreground gender as a central temporal problem, focusing instead on universalised themes of romantic fulfilment and personal agency.

Conclusion

This study has examined the ways how cryonic narratives in Korean and American science fiction articulate culturally differentiated experiences of time. Through a comparative analysis of Mun Yun-seong's *The Perfect Society* and Robert Heinlein's *The Door into Summer*, the article has demonstrated that cryonic preservation operates not merely as a speculative technological device, but as a narrative mechanism through which time is ethically organised, culturally imagined, and differentially owned.

This study shows that cryonic narratives function as cultural models of time rather than merely speculative technologies.

In both works, cryonics reorganises the relationship between past, present, and future, thereby revealing how cultural values shape temporal experience and human agency.

Three principal findings emerge from this analysis.

First, the two novels construct fundamentally different temporal orientations through the same novum. *The Perfect Society* situates cryonics within a framework of long historical duration and collective responsibility, whereas *The Door into Summer* mobilises cryonics to restore individual biography and personal continuity.

Second, the cognitive estrangement produced by cryonic preservation arises not primarily from unfamiliar technology, but from the reorganisation of temporal experience itself. Estrangement emerges from contrasting temporal ethics, namely, whether time is conceived as a collective historical burden or as an individual resource to be managed and reclaimed.

Third, cultural values such as collectivism and individualism, as well as long-term and short-term orientation, are translated into narrative structures that determine who owns the future, how far responsibility extends across time, and which forms of life are valued within conditions of temporal displacement.

The article makes two theoretical contributions.

First, by rereading Darko Suvin's concept of the novum through the lens of temporal reorganisation, it shifts the analytical focus of science fiction studies from technological novelty to altered experiences of time.

Second, by applying Hofstede's cultural dimensions as a heuristic framework for analysing narrative constructions of cultural values rather than as a model of national character, the study demonstrates how cultural theory can illuminate the ethical organisation of time in speculative fiction without resorting to cultural determinism.

This study is necessarily limited by its focus on two works and a selective theoretical framework. It does not seek to exhaust the diversity of Korean or American science fiction, nor does it suggest that cultural values correspond neatly to national boundaries. Future research would benefit from extending this temporal approach to a broader corpus of science fiction, including contemporary texts, other cultural contexts, and additional theoretical perspectives such as narrative temporality and reader response studies.

At the same time, it is important to note that science fiction in East Asia, including China, Korea, and Japan, has developed rapidly since the 2010s, demonstrating sustained literary innovation as well as growing popular influence. In this context, comparative studies that examine Eastern and Western science fiction through multiple analytical lenses, such as time, ethics, culture, and narrative structure, acquire particular scholarly significance. This article represents one such attempt, using cryonic narratives as a site through which different cultures imagine and organise time. Although based on a limited set of texts and theoretical tools, it is hoped that this approach will serve as a modest foundation for further advances in comparative science fiction studies, particularly those engaging with East Asian science fiction within a global framework.

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MELANCHOLIA AND NIHILISM IN POST-KOREAN WAR LITERATURE (1950S–1960S): EXISTENTIAL-ANALYTIC APPROACH AND THEOLOGICAL POSSIBILITY

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Abstract

This paper offers an existential-analytic approach to interpreting 1950s–1960s Korean literature (*Obaltan* by Beom-seon Lee, *The Square* by Choe Inhun, and *A Respite* by Oh Sangwon), employing postcolonial melancholia as an interpretative tool for discerning their theologico-political and ontological-ethical valences. Drawing on Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia and Heidegger's existential analytic, postcolonial melancholia is theorised as an existential attunement toward a world wherein the hope for redemption is grieved over as a loss. This melancholia confronts nothingness, revealing the absence of moral grounding in postcolonial liberation. Here, it is further contended that Walter Benjamin's organized pessimism and Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilism offer resources for theological reflection in a world where hope is no longer viable for a melancholic subjectivity – one to whom hope appears nebulous, meaningless, and therefore undesirable. By engaging Benjamin and Nietzsche, it is argued that theological reflection in a postcolonial world need not repeat the exhausted rhetoric of hope tied to liberationist paradigms; rather, it may seek to articulate the dense and resonant rhythms of human life as it moves within a world approaching the end of all things.

Keywords: *melancholia, postcolonial theology, Korean literature, nihilism, pessimism, theology and literature.*

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Introduction

Drawing on Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia and Heidegger's existential-analytic, I theorize postcolonial melancholia as an existential attunement toward a world wherein the hope for redemption (from socio-political oppression, alienation, or death) is itself grieved over as a loss. This melancholia confronts nothingness, revealing the absence of moral grounding in postcolonial liberation. Nietzsche's nihilism and Benjamin's pessimism illustrate this condition, indicating that theologies of postcolonial existence must centre their discourse on the courage *to be* and *to endure* when romanticized visions of redemption appear nebulous, meaningless, and thus undesirable.

This paper focuses on *Obaltan* (Beom-seon Lee), *The Square* (Choe Inhun), and *A Respite* (Oh Sangwon). While the title refers to "postcolonial" melancholia, these works more specifically belong to the body of postwar literature. What they share in common is that they were written when the memory of Japanese occupation (1910–1945) and the Korean War (1950–1953) remained vivid for the authors, readers, and even for the characters within the stories. It will be a separate claim – and perhaps require a separate paper – but I understand Korean postwar literature as inseparable from the memory of colonial occupation. I contend that postcolonial melancholia can serve as an interpretative framework through which these novels may be understood as sharing a coherent thematic concern, and that Nietzsche and Benjamin offer resources for theological reflection that foreground the articulation of suffering as an experience that is constantly *passing away*, rather than one that repeats liberationist paradigms. This framework proposes postcolonial melancholia as a lens for examining the existential conditions of postcolonial subjectivity in postcolonial world literature.

Postcolonial melancholia

In Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*, the first part of the film narrates the story of a bride, Justine, whose marriage unravels through a series of events on her wedding night. Her behaviour appears "nonsensical" and resists comprehension within the culturally conventional framework of the wedding ritual. She and her husband arrive at the venue two hours late; upon arrival, she visits her horse instead of proceeding directly to the reception hall, takes a long bath while the guests wait for her, and eventually has sex with one of them. Justine's "irrational" and apathetic behaviour illustrates the moment at which emotional regulation and the very sense of meaning collapse, thereby visualizing her estrangement from the culturally sanctioned rite of passage. It could be said that she chooses "a path of failure and self-destruction" to provoke others to hate her. Some commentators have argued that

Justine's culturally delinquent behaviour is not a purposeful act, but rather an act of lethargy arising from the confusion of not knowing what to do. On the other hand, some argue that such behaviour can be analysed as an act of self-destruction or self-punishment coming from the sense of guilt [Kim 2023: 17–18]. I contend that the second argument that interprets Justine's behaviour as self-destruction- and self-punishment-oriented act is more plausible to examine such a form of lethargic behaviour within the notion of melancholia.

This cinematic portrayal of melancholia takes a dramatic turn in the second part of the film, where the narrative juxtaposes Justine, her sister Claire, and an apocalyptic anticipation of the world's destruction. As death becomes imminent and the end of the world approaches, Justine remains calm and apathetic, whereas Claire, who initially appeared mentally healthy and stable, becomes increasingly anxious and unstable. This contrast helps illuminate a key dimension of melancholia: the subject identifies with the lost object of affection and becomes thing-like (*das Ding*), emotionally numb and indifferent [Kim 2023: 21–22].

Von Trier's film provides a tangible visualization of Sigmund Freud's essay, *Morning and Melancholia*. Freud distinguishes mourning from melancholia, as follows: in mourning, a person grieves the loss of a specific love object, whereas in melancholia, a loss is grieved but cannot be fully comprehended or identified [Freud 1917: 243, 245]. Mourning is, according to Freud, a "healthy" response to loss, whereas melancholia is neurotic, pathological. Mourning is a finite process that transforms pain into something that can ultimately be accepted, even though the object is grieved as a loss. Melancholia, on the other hand, is a persistent state located within the unconscious. What characterizes melancholia is the internalization of pain, which damages the griever's sense of self. In this internalization process, however, the loss remains inarticulable and inexplicable. Melancholia is a reaction to the real loss of a loved object, but it is "marked by a determinant which is absent in normal mourning or which [...] transforms [normal mourning] into pathological mourning" [Freud 1917: 250]. Although the pain of loss shapes the griever beneath the conscious surface of awareness, the object that induces the pain cannot be specified. Object loss signifies that the self's internal connection with the object is faced with something catastrophic, thus it concerns the self's sense of well-being, as well as the sense of cohesion within its ego – the danger of object loss belongs to the person's sense of self, which depends on the sense of an ongoing internal attachment to the love object [Roth 2018: 48–49].[1] Freud notes that the loss in melancholia is so unbearable that it is relegated to the unconscious, thereby disabling the possibility of processing

[1] There is a narcissistic dimension in melancholia; the hatred of the object in melancholia is sometimes engendered by the object's separateness from the self [Roth 2018: 54–55].

grief in the conscious mind. The impossibility of consciously objectifying pain leads the self to turn that pain inward. Building on Freud, Anne Anlin Cheng notes that melancholia is "a structural, identificatory formation predicated on the loss of self as legitimacy" [Cheng 2000: 20]. As Cheng demonstrates in her psychoanalytic examination of American histories of exclusion, imperialism, and colonialism, melancholia can serve as a helpful interpretative tool for investigating social and political forms of grief and their psychical impact on subjectivity. William James, too, accounts for religious melancholy in Lev Tolstoy and John Bunyan, whose writings are deeply concerned with religious themes and ideas. Tolstoy expresses a feeling of "absolute disenchantment with ordinary life," from which it becomes impossible to return to ordinary happiness [James 1985: 116–120]. If such a person is fortunate, James argues, he or she arrives at a new place where natural evil is "swallowed up in supernatural good" [James 1985: 120]. John Bunyan's melancholy, by contrast, is described as a different kind: he perceives the wrongness as lying within himself, rather than in the outside world [James 1985: 120–121]. James interprets Bunyan's case as an example of someone with a psychopathic temperament – sensitive to the point of pathology.

The trio of Korean postcolonial and postwar literary works illustrates this melancholic dimension of existence through their depictions of characters' inward movement between memory, interpretation, action, and inaction. *Obaltan* by Beom-seon Lee is set in postwar Korean society. As a side note, I have chosen to use the transliterated title *Obaltan* instead of its English translation because, when the novel was adapted into a film, the title *Obaltan* was retained rather than translated as *Aimless Bullet*. The film adaptation popularized the novel among a wider audience when it was released in 1961. Long before the globalization of Korean cinema and the recent worldwide recognition of the Korean film industry, exemplified by Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* (2019) winning the Oscars, *Obaltan* was considered the greatest Korean film ever made for decades [Min, Joo, Kwak 2003: 46]. The social-critical dimensions of the novel (especially its focus on unemployment and poverty) became even more pronounced in the film, which ultimately led to its ban by the newly established military government [Min, Joo, Kwak 2003: 41, 46–47]. The protagonist, Cheolho, is a working-class man struggling to support his family. Cheolho suffers from a severe toothache but delays visiting the dentist because he knows that other members of his family are also suffering in different ways. Although he works diligently, postwar social conditions prevent his family from escaping poverty. His mother suffers from dementia, and his wife, exhausted by economic hardship, becomes physically ill. His brother, unable to secure stable employment due to wartime trauma, ends up imprisoned for burglary. His sister becomes a prostitute at a U.S. military base. Throughout the story, Cheolho's mother, in her dementia, repeatedly exclaims, "let's go, let's go!" – but nobody knows where she wants to go or where they are supposed to go. Near the end of the story, Cheolho's wife dies in childbirth. Instead of mourning her death or processing his grief, Cheolho goes to the dentist to have his wisdom teeth removed and faints from excessive bleeding on the taxi ride home. The title *Obaltan*, meaning "aimless bullet", refers to each character, wandering and no longer knowing where to go or what to become in a chaotic society.

The Square by Choe Inhun explores the conflict between ideological division and an individual's search for identity and freedom in a society fractured by war. The protagonist, Lee Myong-jun, is a prisoner of war who must choose between the two Koreas as the war ends. He rejects both, insisting on being sent to a neutral country: the freedom promoted by capitalist South Korea appears to him as an illusion marked by corruption, while the equality promised by North Korean communism appears oppressive and surveillant. After boarding a ship bound for a neutral country, he realizes that human freedom is always elusive – and that he would never truly be free anywhere. He throws himself into the sea to end his life.

In Oh Sangwon's *A Respite*, the protagonist is a second lieutenant in the South Korean army who loses all the members of his platoon on the battlefield. The novel depicts the moment just before he is executed at a North Korean outpost. There is no conventional "story"; instead, the narrative presents what unfolds in the protagonist's mind as he faces imminent death. Despite the North Korean soldiers' attempts to persuade him to defect, his dejection and withdrawal from the external world led him to accept his death.

All three literary works can be read as portraying the very aspects of melancholia Freud describes. Their protagonists recognize that there is no escape, no further redemption from their situations. Upon this realization, they experience "profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings," which ultimately leads them either to end their lives or to accept their imminent deaths [Freud 1917: 244].

An existential-analytic approach to melancholia

Just as Martin Heidegger develops an existential-analytic approach as the method and framework for investigating the meaning of Being (*Sein*), an existential-analytic approach is helpful for studying how these post-Korean War novels may be understood as sharing a thematic concern.[2] The existential-analytic approach examines

[2] The starting point for Heidegger's existential-analytic approach is that the "essence" of *Dasein* lies in its existence. This means who *Dasein* is is not determined by an immutable nature but by how *Dasein* lives and projects itself into possibilities.

the ontological structures that make human existence possible. Heidegger's analysis discloses fundamental existential structures such as attunement (*Befindlichkeit*), understanding (*Verstehen*), care (*Sorge*), and discourse (*Rede)* [Heidegger 1973: 172–179]. The notion of attunement deserves more systemic attention in the study of these postwar literary works. *Befindlichkeit* signifies "attunement" both in the ordinary emotional sense and in the fundamental sense that describes the way *Dasein* finds itself in, and relates itself to, the world – the *how* of its being-there, *Da-Sein*. Attunement is the fundamental existential condition without which there is no "there" (*Da*) of *Dasein* [Heidegger 1973: 174]. In Heidegger's words, *Dasein* is "always brought before itself, and has always found itself, not [...] by perceiving itself, but in the sense of finding itself in the mood it has." In Heidegger's words, "a state-of-mind [or attunement] makes manifest 'how one is' [*wie einem ist*]" [Heidegger 1973: 175].[3]

Heidegger calls anxiety (*Angst*) a fundamental attunement (*Grundstimmung*), a special kind of attunement that reveals Being-in-the-world through an uncanny encounter with the nothingness of significance – the withdrawal of the world as meaningful, not nonbeing in an ontic or metaphysical sense. *Befindlichkeit* is attunement in general, whereas *Grundstimmung* is a mode of *Befindlichkeit*. All fundamental attunements are *Befindlichkeiten*, but not all *Befindlichkeiten* are fundamental attunements [Heidegger 1973: 232, 233–235]. Anxiety does not concern any "definite kind of Being for *Dasein*", nor "a definite possibility for it"; rather, the threat it discloses is "indefinite" and "certain" [Heidegger 1973: 232; Blattner 2012: 169]. The indefiniteness of anxiety is precisely that through which *Dasein* feels "uncanny" (*unheimlich*). The "uncanniness" of this fundamental attunement deserves particular attention because, for Heidegger, it also signifies "not-being-at-home" (*das Nicht-zuhause-sein*), or more literally in English, "unhomelike" [Heidegger 1973: 233]. In anxiety, the world offers no possibility for *Dasein* to understand (*Verstehen*) itself [Blattner 2012: 167]. This feeling of "un-home-like-ness" in anxiety, I argue, has Freudian resonances.

With necessary methodological caution, I interpret Freudian melancholia as a kind of attunement through which the world is perceived, understood, and related to in particular modes of being. This interpretation should be pursued when other elements of Freud's larger psychological framework (e.g., libido, ego and superego, etc.) are bracketed. I examine melancholia phenomenologically, not clinically. Melancholia, as a pathological relation to the lost object in the form of internalization, is not a simple emotional response but an attunement through

[3] See Heidegger 1973, 233 and the original German version. Through this pre-reflective, world-disclosive attunement, *Dasein* discovers itself always-already situated in a meaningful world in the way that the world "affects" and "matters" to the being of *Dasein*.

which the worlds of Being-with-others, Being-in-the-world, and Being-oneself are encountered in oppressive and alienating ways.

Beyond the uncanniness experienced in melancholia, it also possesses a revelatory function, much like Heideggerian anxiety, in that the world is disclosed as a space of loss, non-belonging, and self-estrangement. Heideggerian anxiety and Freudian melancholia are two distinct existential phenomena, yet a connection can be drawn because both concern an encounter with nothingness through which the world becomes manifest.[4] Yet again, this is not Heidegger's "nothing" but a *phenomenological analogue*: the world appears emptied, voided, and deprived of meaning. Just as anxiety differs from fear in that it concerns the indefiniteness of the object toward which one's consciousness is directed, so too the lost object in melancholia remains indefinite, whereas it can be identified as definite in mourning. As an affective revelation of the world as lost, melancholia discloses nothingness as loss – a temporal and memorial void that is not known because it cannot be known.

It must also be noted that whereas Heidegger's anxiety reveals "the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there (*das Nicht-mehr-dasein-konnens*)", melancholia manifests the reality of "no-longer-being-able-to-hope". Employing an existential-analytic approach can help us understand melancholia not as a pathology but as an attunement in which the world appears precisely in, or after, the moment when meaning is no longer present. Meaning often takes the form of hope for redemption in the pre-melancholic stage. It is not redemption that endows hope with meaning; rather, hope itself provides the meaning-structure for the idea of redemption, signalling that there is *something* to be desired and anticipated instead of *nothing*. In the three novels, each character's final moments of action appear apathetic and lethargic, much like Justine in *Melancholia*. They do not long for redemption, nor do they find any sense of meaning, because they inhabit a state of no-longer-being-able-to-hope. The melancholic dimension of their being allows us to understand them as beings who are "no-longer-able-to-hope".

I interpret the postcolonial melancholia found in post-Korean War literature as an encounter with nothingness, in the sense that it compels postcolonial subjectivity to recognize that liberation, as experienced in the postcolonial present, has no moral grounding in itself. The characters in these novels realize that their experience of freedom in the present is parasitic upon the constant reconstruction/deconstruction, re-narrativization/denarrativization, and reconceptualization/unknowing of the past and its psychical imprints. What these works share is the realization that redemption

[4] However, Heidegger is using "nothing" in the sense of the collapse of significance, whereas Freud's loss is the lost object (love-object).

is *nothing*, and their melancholic attunement arises from confronting a post-liberation world in which hope is no longer a viable force for orienting and sustaining one's life.

Organized pessimism and nihilistic affirmation of vitality

In what direction might theological reflection proceed on the basis of this interpretation of the literary works through the lens of melancholia? As noted earlier, the characters in these novels express the meaninglessness of continuing their lives. Their realization that there is no moral grounding – articulated through their words crafted by the authors writing in the historical period of liberation – resonates with Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilism. Nietzsche's engagement with Christianity centres on his critique of its morality, which, he argues, fosters weakness-affirming values such as humility, self-denial, and pity [Nietzsche 2005: §7, 6].[5] This critique is explicit in *The Anti-Christ*: in his view, Christianity undermines "the good", which is "everything that enhances people's feeling of power, will to power, power itself" [Nietzsche 2005: §2, 4]. Slave morality in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Nietzsche argues, is driven by resentment toward the powerful and strong and is coupled with the moralization of the condition of the violated and the oppressed [Nietzsche 1994: §260, 154–157]. The death of God underpins Nietzsche's metaphysical framework of the will to power [Reginster 2008: 104]. Nietzsche's nihilism is a deliberate process aimed at disclosing the groundlessness of metaphysical – especially Christian – beliefs and their valuations of good and evil. The postwar literary works depict the absence of moral grounding. However, the nihilism depicted in these postwar literary works is not chosen but endured – an irresistible encounter with the absence of moral grounding.

Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin, although not self-identified religious or theological thinkers, provide important trajectories upon which further theological reflection may build. In his very short text *Theologico-Political Fragment*, Benjamin reflects on the Messiah and asserts that the Kingdom of God cannot serve as the ultimate goal of history, since the fulfilment of Messianic time through the coming of the Kingdom of God in this world would signify the completion – the end – of history [Benjamin 2006: 305–306]. History is impotent in itself because it cannot directly relate to the Messianic; only the Messiah can redeem history. Benjamin's philosophy of history is pessimistic, emphasizing the impotence of human agency in bringing about redemption. As Michael Löwy notes, Benjamin was not concerned with the "principle of hope" in the way Ernst Bloch was. Instead of

[5] "Christianity is called the religion of pity. Pity is the opposite of the tonic affects that heighten the energy of vital feelings: pity has a depressive effect. You lose strength when you pity."

focusing on "radiant future", Benjamin prioritized *organizing pessimism* – perceiving and interpreting imminent dangers [Löwy 2005: 112].

Although not as explicit as in his writings on German Baroque drama (*Trauerspiel*), *Theologico-Political Fragment* carries a melancholic tone. Benjamin's pessimism is expressed through a form of revolutionary melancholia. His pessimism is theological rather than psychological. His philosophy of history, which envisions a time of redemption and affirms the weak (*schwache*) messianic power, is not rooted in any optimistic trust in the power of the "masses" or in an emancipatory future. Rather, it is grounded in a melancholic recognition of the powerlessness of life and of the eternal postponement of redemption in this world. His pessimistic view of history and redemption, which nonetheless affirms the possibility of struggle for emancipation, can thus be understood as a melancholic *wager* in the Pascalian sense [Löwy 2005: 11–12]. For Benjamin, it is pessimism that enables action, not an optimistic vision of final emancipation or a belief in the possibility of self-redemptive human effort.

From this perspective, *On the Concept of History* can be read as a creative integration of pessimism and messianism. Although Benjamin speaks of the conditions of possibility for revolutionary action, undertaken by means of the redemptive power of remembering the past in the messianic *now*, the full redemption – the possibility of full citability – remains suspended until the coming of the Messiah. *Theologico-Political Fragment* affirms this idea at its outset: "Only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic" [Benjamin 2006: 305]. Benjamin's integration of pessimism with messianism focuses on now-time (*Jetztzeit*), a liminal moment endowed with more power to enact revolutionary praxis desired by the oppressed, even though there remains a sense of "not-yet", as the oppressed are remembered (or "cited") only in images and fragments. The messianic power of now-time is weak, too weak to redeem, complete, or create history, yet it remains present. The redemptive significance of this messianic power emerges when remembrance of the struggles of the oppressed constellates with present struggles against oppression.

Benjamin understands nihilism as a method and proposes strategically using nihilism *against* nihilism itself [Benjamin 2006: 306].[6] To employ nihilism methodologically is to accept the impermanent, transient, and ever-passing nature of worldly structures of existence while organizing this acceptance toward their dissolution in anticipation of the Messianic – the end that is not a goal. The theologico-

[6] This suggestion appears in the final sentence of *Theologico-Political Fragment*, requiring interpretation to uncover its contextual significance.

political force of postcolonial melancholia can thus be located in its willingness to inhabit the rhythms of a world that is continually *passing away*.

Nietzsche does not directly anticipate Benjamin, but both deploy nihilism methodologically. Nietzsche uses nihilism in the service of revaluation, and Benjamin in the service of messianic interruption. Nietzsche employs nihilism as a method of deconstruction to create a vacuum of meaning within inherited (Christian) moral frameworks (*Umwertung aller Werte*: "revaluation" or "transvaluation" of all values). The aim of this deconstructive nihilism may be interpreted as producing "a change in the element from which the value of values derives" [Deleuze 1983: 171]. Nietzsche's methodological use of nihilism culminates in the claim that the world is nothing other than will to power [Reginster 2008: 104]. Whether or not one follows Nietzsche or Benjamin in their specific conclusions, their work discloses a theological possibility: that reflection need not repeat the exhausted rhetoric of hope attached to liberationist paradigms. Instead, it may seek to articulate the dense and resonant rhythms of human life as it moves within a world approaching the end of all things. In other words, for melancholic subjectivity, to whom hope is inconceivable, theological reflection can take the form of articulating that the experience of suffering is itself constantly *passing away* and will eventually come to an end. This certainty of the end may offer a stronger consolation than the hollow invocations of hope.

Literature of han? Global significance of Korean postcolonial melancholia

It may be tempting to read these works as literature of *han*. As many prominent *minjung* theologians such as Ahn Byung-Mu and Kim Yong Bock have argued, constructing a social biography of the people's lives and emotions around a central theme like *han* can appear appealing when theologizing the sentiments expressed by a particular generation of literary works. Listening to the actual people's "suffering, crying, and longing", rather than analysing "cold data", has been understood as a primary task for *minjung* theologians [Chung 1990: 104].[7] *Minjung* theologians may thus read this trio of texts as a valuable source for constructing a social biography through which the history of *minjung* can be further clarified. Indeed, *han* and *minjung* have often been grouped as in "*Han* of *Minjung*", as seen in *minjung* readings of literary works of Kim Chi Ha and other writers [Kim 1980: 318]. *Han* can possibly be understood as an attunement – as a fundamental horizon of

[7] Chung Hyun Kyung writes, "Listeners of socio-biography hear not cold data but actual people's suffering, crying, and longing. [...] When Korean women theologians, [...], hear a poor, old Korean woman's life story, they hear the recent history of Korea. Through her story they learn what it means to be colonized and sexually abused by the Japanese, and what it means to lose a husband during the Korean war [...]."

consciousness. However, although Andrew Sung Park identifies both conscious and unconscious levels of *han*, it nevertheless has a definite object and is intrinsically relational, grounded in the power dynamics between oppressor and oppressed [Park 1993: 31–42]. Moreover, *han* is often interpreted in a collective sense, as the "root experience" or the collective immemorial consciousness of the Korean people. This understanding does not adequately describe the existential, intransposible, and individualizing mood depicted in these novels.

Reading these three novels as literature of *han* may have global significance in its own right, but an existential-analytic approach to postcolonial melancholia may better illuminate the structure of consciousness involved in confronting inarticulable grief in postcolonial world literature – including, for example, Ngugi wa Thiongo'o's *Weep Not, Child* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In *Weep Not, Child*, Njoroge attempts suicide in a moment of profound shame and hopelessness. His mother intervenes before he hangs himself, but the attempt itself reveals Njoroge's existential condition – one in which hope for a better future has become impossible. Okonkwo's life in *Things Fall Apart* likewise culminates in suicide, when he realizes that his people will not continue their resistance against the colonizers. The overwhelming sense of hopelessness extinguishes his desire to struggle further for the independence of his tribe. The colonial dynamic is presented more directly, though also more complexly, in *Things Fall Apart* than in the implicitly rendered postwar realities of the Korean literary works discussed in this paper. Yet the melancholic dimension of Okonkwo's final moment can still be analysed through the existential-analytic framework developed here. An intercultural exploration of the melancholic existence among postcolonial subjects may enable postcolonial theology to locate its relevance for individuals or communities for whom hope no longer appears as a viable horizon for the cultivation and discipline of the self.

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"LA MUERTE ME ESTÁ BUSCANDO; JUNTO A TI VIDA SERÍA": THE CLOCKWORK OF TEMPORALITY IN THE BALLAD *EL ENAMORADO Y LA MUERTE*

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Abstract

This research examines how the temporal configuration in Menéndez Pidal's version of *El enamorado y la muerte* redefines its meaning. Time generates narrative and symbolic meaning through heterochrony, specifically the coexistence and conflict of temporalities (*Chronos*, *Aion*, and variants of *Kairos*) that compose a treatise on the phenomenology of time. Through a semiotic-comparative analysis of this version and its virtual program, the analysis suggests a framework based on liminality, ambiguity, and temporal reterritorialization, which determines the architecture of time. Ultimately, heterochrony may emerge as a generative principle, rooted in premodern versions and later crystallized in the modern imaginary.

Keywords: *heterochrony, Chronos, Aion, Kairos, Balladry, temporal liminality.*

Introduction

Recent discussions on heterochrony and plural temporality question the idea of time as a single, linear dimension and emphasize the coexistence of multiple temporalities. Most of these studies focus on modern narratives, while oral and premodern forms remain comparatively neglected. The current article addresses this gap by examining the tradition of the Spanish ballad *El enamorado y la muerte* (The Lover and Death) as a site of heterochronic tension, based on the version of Menéndez Pidal. A semiotic-comparative reading of the ballad suggests that

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the ballad constructs a structured conflict between temporalities in a symbolic dimension. From this approach, Spanish Balladry thus becomes relevant to current debates on temporal plurality.

1. Theoretical frame and methodology

Our corpus is mainly based on *Flor nueva de romances viejos* (New flower of old ballads) by Menéndez Pidal [Menéndez Pidal 1928], *Pan-Hispanic Ballad Project* by Suzanne Petersen and *Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews* by Samuel Armistead [Armistead n. d.].

As for our methodology, among the approaches commonly employed in the study of Spanish Balladry[1], we have opted for a close reading, semiotic and comparative analysis. Within this frame, we will focus on Mercedes Díaz Roig's theory of the marvellous, which lies in the expulsion from "novelized reality in order to immerse ourselves in a marvellous atmosphere where the narrated events break the laws of the real world" [Díaz Roig 1977: 47]. With regard to the semiotic analysis of the text, we take as our point of departure Diego Catalán's studies on symbolism. To this end, we draw on the general reflections developed in *Arte poética del Romancero Oral* (The poetics of the oral balladry) by Catalán [1997, 1998] and refer specifically to the chapters "Semiotic analysis of open structures: The 'Ballad' model" [Catalán 1997: 143–157] and "Symbolic meanings" [Catalán 1998: 174–184].

We will also focus on the actantial and functional structure of the ballad. The former structure, according to Catalán, is made up of "more general and abstract structures [...] [in which the characters are] identified merely with the major roles of the 'grammar of narrative'" [Catalán et al. 1984: 25]. The latter structure, on the other hand, determines the "functional structure", "in which the roles of the *dramatis personae* and the actions of the characters are integrated to offer the receiver a unified message" [Catalán 1997: 153].

Our terminological framework primarily follows Catalán's proposals [Catalán et al. 1984; Catalán 1997]. We define a "version" as "each of the recitations of a ballad collected from the oral tradition" [Catalán 1997: 1]. Each "tradition" of a ballad consists of a set of versions characteristic of a specific geographical region. The *dramatis personae*, "while initially lacking individuality, typify categories of human beings, semantically definable through a bundle of distinctive traits" [Catalán 1997: 150]. The "virtual program" of a ballad refers to the set – latent in each version – of variations present in all versions of a ballad; that is, all

[1] Those approaches are: formalist analysis (which has led to electronic approaches), quantitative, synchronic, diachronic, semiotic, comparative, dynamic models, historicist, categorical unconscious, and the sociological-anthropological approach.

its expressive possibilities. This proposes a "decoding" of the text, relying on the reader's capacity to unveil the indexical dimension of ballad elements inserted into the collective memory, making them intelligible to the receiver. Therefore, the ultimate and deep meaning of the text is considered the "deep grammar" of the ballad.

With regard to the analysis of time, heterochrony can be defined as the coexistence of distinct temporalities within a single historical moment or text. Besides, we employ notions drawn from *Filosofías del tiempo: un recorrido por la historia de la filosofía* (Philosophies of time: A journey through the history of philosophy) by A. Alonso Enguita [Alonso Enguita 2021]. Specifically, we work with a temporal architecture primarily based on the temporal concepts of *Chronos*, *Aion*, Christian *Kairos*, Greek *Kairo*, Christian Eternity, Providence, and *Moira*. The philosophical categories function as hermeneutic and analytical frameworks. Consequently, the present reading should be understood not as an attempt to reconstruct a fixed or original meaning, but as an interpretive model aimed at rendering legible the heterochronic structures activated by the ballad. Accordingly, other interpretive configurations remain possible within the openness of the ballad tradition.

With regard to language and translation, for the sake of editorial consistency and to ensure accessibility, the manuscript has been mostly standardized in English. Consequently, all citations from non-English sources are presented here in English, except the original text in Spanish of the ballad.

2. Contextualization of the ballad

The popular ballad *El enamorado y la muerte* is an old and rare ballad from the Spanish ballad tradition. As demonstrated by Catalán [Catalán 1970], the origins of the ballad are located in the erudite Juan de la Enzina's poem *Yo me estaba reposando* [I was resting] found in *Cancionero de las obras de Juan del Enzina* [Songbook of the works of Juan del Enzina] (1496). The collective voice inserted and adapted the ballad – making relative adjustments and changes – into the popular tradition of northeastern Spain (Asturias, León, Zamora, and mainly Catalonia). Besides this, the ballad was also sung among the Sephardic communities of Greece.

Menéndez Pidal's composite version recovers the ballad, combining two popular versions as a model: the 1910 *Sanabresa* version and the Catalan version recorded by Milá y Fontanals [Catalán 1970: 53]. Menéndez Pidal's version was published in his work *Flor nueva de romances viejos* [Menéndez Pidal 1928]. This composite reinterpretation re-entered the oral tradition and became widespread as the reference version in Spanish America.

Menéndez Pidal's ballad reads as follows [Menéndez Pidal 1928]:

Un sueño soñaba anoche, soñito del alma mía,
soñaba con mis amores, que en mis brazos los tenía.
Vi entrar señora tan blanca, muy más que la nieve fría.
—¿Por dónde has entrado, amor? ¿Cómo has entrado, mi vida?
Las puertas están cerradas, ventanas y celosías.
—No soy el amor, amante: la Muerte que Dios te envía.
—¡Ay, Muerte tan rigurosa, déjame vivir un día!
—Un día no puede ser, una hora tienes de vida.
Muy deprisa se calzaba, más deprisa se vestía;
ya se va para la calle, en donde su amor vivía.
—¡Ábreme la puerta, blanca, ábreme la puerta, niña!
—¿Cómo te podré yo abrir si la ocasión no es venida?
Mi padre no fue al palacio, mi madre no está dormida.
—Si no me abres esta noche, ya no me abrirás, querida;
la Muerte me está buscando, junto a ti vida sería.
—Vete bajo la ventana donde labraba y cosía,
te écharé cordón de seda para que subas arriba,
y si el cordón no alcanzare mis trenzas añadiría.
La fina seda se rompe; la Muerte que allí venía:
—Vamos, el enamorado, que la hora ya está cumplida.

According to Catalán [1970: 53, 54], the differences not endorsed by tradition but introduced by the scholar are as follows. On one hand, the verse "next to you, it would be life" replaces "perhaps she wouldn't find me". He is also inspired by the presence of hair in the oral tradition for the introduction of "braids". Likewise, "the fine silk breaks; / Death who was coming there" replaces the Catalan verses "if the silk were thin, / the cord would break." Furthermore, he concludes the ballad at the moment of the Lover's death, without including the episode of the hermit, which is typical of most Peninsular versions. These additions and modifications will be essential for the analysis of the ballad.

3. "Un sueño soñaba anoche, soñito del alma mía": The temporal frame – liminality, ambiguity, and temporal reactualization

In the analysis of the poem's different traditions, interests vary. In general terms, the old branches emphasize the following: the Sephardic tradition highlights gender differences [Catalán 1970: 49]; Juan de la Enzina's ballad focuses on troubadour codes and the inner feelings of the lover; and popular Peninsular tradition links the troubadour tradition with religious reflection[2].

By contrast, the modern branches focus on the following: Pidal's version emphasizes the race against Death; the Mexican versions assume this latter approach but evolve in a particular line, associated with cultural features.

Amidst the variety of paths taken by the different traditions of the ballad, the expression of time is especially highlighted in the composite version. The ballad emphasizes movement and temporality, drawing attention to the actions of the Lover through the continuous presence and relevance of time. Specifically:

- In the temporal space of the dream and the night: "I dreamt a dream last night"
- Regarding the temporal deadline, his request: "Oh, Death so rigorous, let me live one day," the concession: "one hour of life you have," and its fulfilment: "for the hour is fulfilled"
- The haste: "Very quickly he put on his shoes, even faster he dressed"
- The temporal inadequacy: "if the occasion has not come," or the temporal adequacy: "Let's go, lover, for the hour is fulfilled"
- The legibility of the Lover's remaining time though the omen of the lover's destiny
- The symbolic representation of times in the *dramatis personae*
- And, in short, the temporal composition through verb tenses

However, these elements occupy different spaces and functions in the poem as they are organized on different levels, as we will analyse throughout our work.

3.1. Liminality

In both popular and composite versions, while it is understood that the poetic self is a common man belonging to the natural world, the ballad establishes its foundations in the realm of the marvellous. For instance, the temporal location of the night and the dream, "I dreamt a *dream* last *night*," introduces the listener to spaces associated with the marvellous, inscribing it within a vast tradition of magical

[2] Although time is also depicted in the popular tradition of northeastern Spain – inspired by Juan de la Enzina's ballad – the primary focus remains on the troubadour motif. This is evident, firstly, in the troubadour question: *He who dies for love – is his soul lost?* Secondly, the poem draws inspiration from the ballad *La pregunta a un ermitaño*. Moreover, the version from Sanabresa conclude with the ballads *El alma peregrina y el caballero piadoso* and *La penitencia de Don Rodrigo*, highlighting the ethical resolution of the troubadour question. Few versions in the popular tradition place significant emphasis on urgency or temporality; instead, they develop an alternative ending involving a hermit.

discourse. Thus, the setting itself places the listener in a liminality, in a human and real world where the irruption of the marvellous becomes perceptible.

Likewise, all the objects in the text exist in a state of threshold tension, always between their limitation and their transgression. The Lover's bedroom is closed: "the doors are locked, / windows and lattices" but Death breaks into it. The guarded room of the Beloved is also closed: "How can I open for you / If the occasion has not come?", yet the Lover still attempts to enter it.

Similarly, the starting point of the ballad – the Lover's recollection of the night – consolidates itself as another threshold. This may create a paradox, as the ballad is narrated by the Lover *after* the night: "I dreamt a dream *last night*", and yet, it concludes with the Lover's death on that very same night. In this way, the listener would not know if the narrator is alive or dead by the end of the ballad. This leads the listener to conceive time as fluid and indefinite; the experience of the ballad leads them to confusion. It is unclear if the dream continues throughout the poem or stops when Death first enters the Lover's bedroom. Thus, the Lover finds himself temporally immersed in the night and the dream, without knowing with certainty if these begin or end, in a spatio-temporal limbo.

Consequently, the position of the Lover in memory imposes greater distance and amplifies the liminality in the event, since "Remembrance, on the contrary, like fantasy, offers us a mere evocation that re-presents" [Husserl 2002: [41], 63][3]. The way Deleuze interprets the past as a new territorialization is of interest here, as "the past, this is the key, is not fixed, it is under constant revision. Deleuze would speak of a new territorialization [...] it is a virtual past, it is a past that is written virtually, that changes its syntax after the event, after each of them" [Alonso Enguita 2021: 136]. This position of the ballad on the threshold grants it a spectral character, where time occurs and does not occur, and all time is nothing more than a ghost of its own possibilities.

3.2. Ambiguity

This is not the only resource through which the listener and the reciter are prevented from situating themselves in a secure position where they can foresee the ballad's development. On the contrary, the ballad uses another paradox to destabilize them and put them in the narrator's shoes: the paradoxical ending of Pidal's creation: "The fine *silk breaks*, / *Death* who was coming *there*."

At the same moment that the silk cord breaks (an element whose symbolism can belong to both the human and the marvellous world, the symbolic meaning of which we will see later), Death arrives (marvellous personification), fulfilling *a fortiori* the prophecy of Death. Although a large part of the references in the ballad point to

[3] For further detail, see the chapter *Fantasy* [Alonso Enguita 2021: 164–169].

the idea of the inexorability of Death, it remains unclear to the listener which reason the Lover's death obeys: a terrestrial accident or the supernaturally ordained death.

The limits of a primary dialectic posed by the ballad between the human world and the marvellous are blurred, creating a truly brilliant diffuse interplay between possible readings within the symbol, which will unfold carefully in the ballad. In this ambiguity lies the key position of the listener regarding the ballad, unstable between the marvellous-divine reading and the human one. The former explains the Lover's death through divine decree, the latter through his own fall. Both readings are functional in the ballad, but they situate the listener in two different dimensions, reconciled in the text.

3.3. Temporal reactualization: The reciter, the listener, and the autodiegetic narrator

Both previous points place us before a crucial question we have already been hinting at: how do liminality and ambiguity affect the listener and the reciter? That is, what temporal projection exists in the process of production and reception of the ballad? Thus, it is interesting to recover the concept of territorialization, applying it to the temporalities generated through performance. The potential possibilities for reactualization are multiple, limited by the referential reality of the poem.

Initially, the autodiegetic "I" invites both the reciter and the listener to inhabit the Lover's temporality. From this position, they may opt for one of the temporal reading possibilities the text proposes, assume them, or resolve them. Thus, the possibilities of human time, marvellous time, or the maintenance of coincident temporal ambiguity unfold. Here, the external subject decides the temporality of the text and interprets it. The reciter does this, for example, through tone, musicality, voice modulation, intentional communication...; the listener does so through their gesture while listening, the audience's cognitive processing of the ballad, the formation of a framework of expectations while the text unfolds, etc.

Thus, they themselves are carriers and generators of temporal meaning, since the "I is traversed, divided by time, prior to it as its support and mediated by it as a phenomenon" [Alonso Enguita 2021: 269]. The same logic applies to the autodiegetic narrator, as he is definitely divided between various times. We are facing a functioning of the text's temporal logic that transcends its own textual limits, which intensifies the blurring of the Lover and entails a greater identification of the listener and the reciter with the autodiegetic narrator.

From a broad panorama, such individual recitations construct communal ones or the macro-context, that is, the historical traditions of the ballad, which are divergent in their interpretation of temporality from other traditions.

To summarize, on a double plane of enunciation, both inner and the external characters engage in temporal reactualization and propose temporal reterritorializations. The Lover, cognitively structures time from memory and dream, meaning from fantasy. In contrast, the external subject – in this case, the listener and the reciter – appropriates the voice of the internal subject and reactualizes his temporality.

In conclusion, in the composite version, the temporal marks start composing a temporality framework in which time is initially conceived as liminal and ambiguous. The Lover remains trapped in the liminality between life and death. He is neither dead nor alive, and yet he is simultaneously dead and alive. Furthermore, liminality is accentuated by the ambiguity covering the ballad, as the external subject stands halfway between paradoxes and different readings. Now, how is temporality defined within the framework?

4. "Un día no puede ser, una hora tienes de vida". The nature of temporality in the ballad: *Chronos* and *Aion*

For the analysis, let us follow the textual narration. First, the Lover is suspended in the daydream of his love, in a state of temporal suspension: "dreaming of my loves / that I held them in my arms". Let us remember here that the bedroom often symbolizes the soul and the inner state. We are, therefore, in full amorous evocation, withdrawal from time, and inner recollection. Likewise, the specific evocation and daydream of the beloved, the fantasy, introduces us to a time that is the "qualitative and immeasurable time of duration" [Alonso Enguita 2021: 88], into a temporal dynamic characterized as *Aion*.

During this time, the transfiguration of the figure of his sweetheart into Death, "I saw a woman enter, so pale / much paler than cold snow" who breaks into the Lover's inner state, sinks the temporary gravity of the poem, and forces the Lover to consciousness. Firstly, the Lover's destiny becomes intelligible and his Chronos advances inexorably, which we understand as "objective, measurable, and homogeneous time" [Alonso Enguita 2021: 88], and "it is present, but finite, relative present" [ibid.: 89]. Secondly, by waking him from the daydream, Death also reveals to the Lover that the *Aion* he was dreaming of was a virtual and unreal temporality, merely a phantasmagoria. It is an *Aion* projected in fantasy and not belonging to the Lover's reality, "a mere evocation that re-presents" [Husserl 2002: [41], 63].

At this point, the first thing the Lover does is turn to time. The ballad continues with the request for a deadline of one day of life:

> "Oh, Death so rigorous, *let me live one day*."

Among others, in our version Death refuses:

> "One day it cannot be: *one hour of life you have*."

This destined time must be understood within the logic of the inexorability of Death, which leads the poem towards a divine, juridical, and sacred temporality. Thus, when the Lover asks for more human time than he is allowed, she denies it: "One day *it cannot be*", since it is impossible to alter the divine decree.

So, how is the concession of the deadline by Death explained? To understand it in depth, we must turn to the virtual program of the ballad. We follow Catalán here, who reminds us that variants offer valuable information in the interpretation of motifs [Catalán 1998: 174–184]. Let us look at the poetic structure of the popular versions. In them, the appearance of Death is linked to the scene immediately preceding, in which the Lover evokes his loves ("I dreamt of my loves, / that I held them in my arms"). In the troubadour context, this implied a troubadour question about the Lover's state of sin: "He who dies for love – is his soul lost?".

Thus, Death grants him only one hour, whose purpose is to offer a moral time for "Extreme Unction", that is, repentance for his sin before the imminence of his death (Galende version 1910)[4]:

By God I ask you, Death, / leave me another day,
for I want to confess, / to repent if I could.

Death offers him a deadline of one hour, which he must use to achieve Christian eternity. Thus, we interpret that, ultimately, it is a Christian *Kairos*. He is offered the opportune moment for his salvation, which is "God himself acting [...] it is the moment that must be seized and used, and this will be our responsibility" [Alonso Enguita 2021: 125]. In this way, *Kairos* becomes "an exercise of divine will" [ibid.: 126].

However, in the Pidal ballad, the Lover rejects this Christian *Kairos* and, instead, goes to his beloved. Thus, the symbolic autonomy of the poem dispenses with limiting itself to the troubadour and moral question and opens up into a broader dialogue with deeper symbolic meanings.

The poetic structure of the Sephardic versions gives us another interpretive key that will enrich the analysis. In these versions, the temporal deadline is substituted by a bet with Death [Catalán 1970: 49]:

So may you live, Death, / that you grant me life,
when for a moment I go / to see a friend I had.
If the friend speaks to me, / you will grant me life,
if the friend does not speak to me, / do with me what you wanted

[4] Galende Version (Mun. Galende, formerly Puebla de Sanabria, Jud. Dist. Puebla de Sanabria, *Comarca* of Sanabria, Zamora, Spain). Recited by a woman. Collected by Tomás Navarro Tomás, 00/00/1910 (Archive: ARMPG; Coll.: Navarro Tomás, T.). Published in Catalán 1970b, pp. 41–42. 80 hemistichs. Music recorded.

This branch of the tradition may indicate that the temporal deadline can be replaced; merely a functional element articulated around relation to the deep grammar of the ballad. Therefore the Lover may not be willing to assume the logic and the divine decree. It may be an act of rebellion by the human being against the divine being. This conflict between the marvellous and the human dimensions contributes again to the blurring of time and the threshold space.

Further on, the consciousness of *Chronos* temporality becomes inverted and regressive: a "countdown". Therefore, haste presses: "*Very quickly* he put on his shoes, / *even faster* he dressed" and time seems to concentrate on the character's action and not on divine time, which persists as a present threat. In this way, the Lover, driven by the pressure of his *Chronos*, goes to the house of his sweetheart:

> "Open the door for me, white one, / open the door for me, girl"

And she refuses to receive him:

> "How can I open for you / if the occasion has not come?"

This refusal is posed as a social impossibility: "My father did not go to the palace, / my mother is not asleep", but it resolves as a temporal impossibility: "If you don't open for me *tonight*, / you will *never* open for me, dear". That precise night is established as the only possible scenario for the amorous encounter.

Despite the fact that the majority of Peninsular versions in the virtual program choose the solution of religious burden, one version makes both episodes coincide, placing both motifs on the same level. In this one, the Lover promises Death the Extreme Unction and asks to enjoy the company of his beloved for the last time [Catalán 1970: 27][5]:

> "Oh Death so rigorous / give me one [more] day of life
> *to confess and take communion / and to see my dear one"*.

Critics have explained this solution by qualifying the Lover as a hypocrite [Catalán 1970: 27]. However, this interpretation may be enriched with a deeper motivation on the part of the Lover: instead of entering the logic of *Chronos* and saving his soul, perhaps the Lover also intends, just as in the Sephardic versions, to bet his life on other terms. In this case, perhaps he attempts to alter the temporal logic in which he finds himself, by suspending chronological time and constructing an amorous *Aion*. Let us see how.

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5 0081:1 El enamorado y la Muerte (í-a) (Entry no.: 7961) Sant Gervasi Version (*Comarca* of Garraf, Barcelona, Auton. Comm. of Catalonia, Spain). Documented in or before 1882. (Coll.: Milà i Fontanals, M.). Published in Milà 1882, no. 240, pp. 211–213. 58 hemistichs. Music not recorded.

The Lover only convinces his sweetheart when he makes the death omen explicit: "Death *is looking for me*, / next to you *life would be*." He makes his destiny and his *Chronos* perceptible to her. At the same time, the Lover opposes the vital time shared with his beloved ("life would be") against death ("Death is looking for me"). This follows the logic of the troubadour tradition, for if romantic disillusionment is a metaphorical death, the amorous encounter may be a giver of life. In this opposition, it makes sense to locate *Aion*, since we understand said time as a qualitative time that symbolizes the "god of life [...] it closes in on itself, is infinite present, is constant return and repetition" [Alonso Enguita 2021: 89]. Within this framework, *Aion* thus would appear as a vital temporality, just as the poem acknowledges. Likewise, it is also the victor over *Chronos* and Death, since *Aion* is "son of Zeus, that is, he is the son of the one who dethrones *Kronos*, god of time" [ibid.: 115].

Therefore, to reach *Aion*, the Lover tries to create an event[6], an impossible *Kairos*. The Greek *Kairos*, in opposition to the Christian one, is the opportunity that demands precise measure and exactly in its recognition man decides his destiny [Alonso Enguita 2021: 117, 118]. As discussed below, the symbolic network of the ballad – particularly the thread of life, destiny, and the figures associated with the Moirai – makes a Greek reading of *Kairos* hermeneutically plausible. The beloved warns him that "the *occasion* has not come". In this way, the *Kairos* is defined in the ballad as an impossible time for the Lover, which he tries to open by force, but which is not truly inscribed in the divine destiny. In opposition, the Christian *Kairos* is an "opportunity for salvation that the Greek *Kairos* did not offer. This is perhaps the great distance between both worlds" [ibid.: 128]. As discussed below, the symbolic network of the ballad – particularly the thread of life, destiny, and the figures associated with the Moirai – makes a Greek reading of Kairos hermeneutically plausible.

Moreover, following Alonso Enguita in "Comprendiendo el amor: Filosofía del acontecimiento" (Understanding love: Philosophy of the event) [Alonso Enguita 2019], love is drawn as an evental time that stops chronological time and is built as a space of refuge and temporal freedom. This same vision of refuge is already sketched in the last popular version mentioned[7]:

> "Death is looking for me, / *perhaps she wouldn't find me*".

[6] In this context, it is pertinent to incorporate the notion of the Event – extensively examined by Deleuze and Žižek – as it assumes the characteristics of *Kairos* actualized within contemporaneity.

[7] 0081:1 El enamorado y la Muerte (í-a) (ficha no.: 7961) Version of Sant Gervasi (comc. Garraf, *Barcelona*, auton. Catalunya, España). Documented in or before 1882. (Colec.: Milà i Fontanals, M.). Published in Milà 1882, No. 240, pp. 211–213. 058 hemist. Music not registered.

Finally, in the pidalian ballad, the Lover's attempt to suspend his destiny in *Kairos* is frustrated: "The fine silk breaks, / Death who was coming there: / 'Let's go, lover, / for the hour is fulfilled". At this point in the discourse, the paradox considering the divine or human cause of the Lover's death is irrelevant because a convergent image is used: the Lover's fall. Mortal fall by mundane causality, divine by the fulfilled hour. Both causes may converge and are expressed through a single representation: eternity, both Christian and Greek, since "Christian eternity is simultaneity. And thus, we see, it refers to Aionic time where the goddess, the muse, viewed the movement from inside the circle [...]. Here lies, if you will, the connecting point between Greek eternity and Christian eternity" [Alonso Enguita 2021: 313]. The Lover dies, in this way, in a superimposition of temporalities, so that *Moira* and providence are fulfilled.

Therefore, the temporal structure of the poem is closed and centres on the Lover's endeavour to construct an *Aion* together with the beloved. He thus fights against an implacable divine time, which permeates the background of the ballad without leaving cracks. These temporal tensions, however, are inscribed in a broader discourse, with deeper structural significations.

5. "No soy el amor, amante, la Muerte que Dios te envía". The *Eros* and *Thanatos* dialectic

As proposed earlier, this first scenario possesses broader readings in connection with the tradition of motifs. We recover for the analysis of this section "Symbolic meanings" [Catalán 1998: 174–184]. Furthermore, it must be remembered that the dimension of the marvellous is not affected by space-time, so the deep grammar of the ballad may be rooted into an archetypal imaginary of an anachronistic nature. This is manifest in the presence of the cord and the braid, in the human tendency to rebel against destiny, in the force of destiny, or in the *Eros-Thanatos* dialectic, of long and ancient trajectory.

Note that the main temporal dynamics that formed part of the narrative scheme, *Chronos* and the amorous *Aion*, are animated through the marvellous dimension and are personified in the figures of Death and the Beloved, respectively. In this way, they may not only act as temporal variables but also as the archetypal images of *Thanatos* and *Eros*. In their symbolism, the role they fulfil within functional and actantial levels changes the parameters of analysis of the ballad.

Death is introduced literally as "[I am] *Death* whom God sends to you." Therefore, Death may be *Thanatos*, a force or impulse that drives the subject toward Death. Secondly, Love may be *Eros*, literally expressed in "where his *love* lived". The figure of the sweetheart is accompanied by three main symbolic elements, the *cord*, the *window*, and the *braids*:

"Go under the *window* Where I was *embroidering and sewing*,
I will throw you a silk *cord* For you to climb up,
And if the thread is not enough I would add my *braids*."

On the one hand, the cord symbolizes life and *Aion*, for it brings connection to the biblical life cord and the tradition of thread as life in the Greco-Roman world, as the Fates [Gericke 1998: 281]. On the other hand, the hair as a stairway is a deeply embedded motif in the international context of the popular tale [ibid.: 282] and the braid links with the symbol of the virgin bride. The image of the window, in which the woman embroiders and sews, aligns her with female functions, and therefore in her quality as beloved, being a frequent amorous *topos* in both the Balladry and popular Spanish lyric.

The appellatives with which the beloved is qualified, so typical of the *Romancero*: "Open the door for me, *white one*, / open the door for me, *girl*" could situate the beloved as both a maiden and a lover. In her semantic construction coexists a contradiction, which is nothing more than another expression of liminality. Despite this, masculine desire remains clear and the Beloved is located in the ballad in the position of *Eros*.

In this line of the ambiguity of *Eros*, the confusion of the Lover between Love and Death does not occur by chance. The Lover confuses them because of another element available in the semantics of the lover of the *Balladry*: the whiteness of the woman. This signals her virginity, since dark skin "is only produced after the approach of the lover, who has undermined her previous state of whiteness and purity" [Terradas 2007: 212]: "I saw a very *white* lady enter, / much whiter than the cold snow".

Nevertheless, not only Death acquires erotic traits, *Eros* also possesses mortuary traits, such as the possession of the cord, linked with the Greek tradition and representing *Atropos*, the Moira who cuts the thread of life. There is no confusion of signs between *Eros* and *Thanatos*, but a coexistence in a common symbol. Within a wider traditional symbolic repertoire, encompassing the Hispanic tradition, occasionally *Eros* and *Thanatos* converge; both give and remove life.

In a dissertation on the relationship between *Eros* and *Thanatos* in Western discourse, Pujante (2011) examines the role of the Sumerian goddess Inanna-Ishtar, a precedent of the Mediterranean goddesses, and includes the following reference:

> *Incarnates the cyclical aspect of time, both in the quality of goddess of life and death and in her facet as goddess of fertility. She is alternatively creator virgin and suffering mother or wife, alternatively the one who brings life and the one who brings death. [...] In the early times of Sumer, just as in old Europe, there was no distinct and individualized image of a 'terrible' goddess of death and destruction. Life and death were interwoven like the strands of a rope, two aspects of a whole.*
> [Baring and Cashford 2004: 227–228, 237]

Pujante also comments that "for the Greeks, the act of death could fuse with the act of love, it could function as an act of love" [Pujante 2011: 215]. As in the ballad, *Eros* and *Thanatos* are traditionally represented as two sides of the same coin.

Finally, we find unified the two main visions of the Lover as Death that structure Spanish lyric, following Fernández Alonso (1971). The ballad depicts, on one hand, the archetype of the beloved as Seductive Death: "the idealized vision of death, figured as a beautiful woman, attractive in her mystery and treated as a beloved, symbolizes or signifies the desire for death as liberation" [Fernández Alonso 1971: 435]. On the other hand, her macabre vision: "the macabre vision corresponds in general to an attitude of rebellion against death" [ibid.]. It is not surprising, in short, that *Eros* and *Thanatos* are psychic projections of the Lover – and of the human being – that have survived, with their divergences and convergences, as foundational psychological conflicts in an intertwined discourse.

Conclusion

This research set out to analyse the temporal configuration of Menéndez Pidal's ballad *El enamorado y la Muerte*, with the aim of determining how heterochrony articulates its narrative and symbolic meaning. Temporal mechanisms (the coexistence in tension between *Chronos, Aion*, and *Kairos*, liminality, temporal ambiguity, and temporal reterritorialization) simultaneously suggest (1) the semantic ambiguity of the text, (2) the deep grammar of the ballad and (3) the interweaving of systems of thought.

The study's contributions are situated within the fields of Temporal Studies, Romance Studies and ballad scholarship, as well as Folklore Studies.

From the perspective of Temporal Studies, the article contributes to current discussions on heterochrony by incorporating premodern materials into contemporary debates on plural and overlapping temporalities. Its main contribution to this field lies in indicating that heterochrony does not appear solely as a narrative technique, but also as a principle of symbolic production that articulates different cultural conceptions of time. In this sense, the article argues that heterochrony constitutes in our analysis one of the structural cores of the ballad's narrative and symbolic meaning, while simultaneously functioning as a phenomenology of time – that is, as a mode of temporal experience.

Regarding its contributions to Romance Studies and ballad studies, the article offers an analysis of the ballad tradition from premodern to modern forms, taking temporality as the central axis that reorganizes poetic meaning. It proposes a transferable methodological framework that may be relevant for the broader study of ballad scholarship.

From the perspective of Folklore Studies, the heterochronic structure enables the ballad to negotiate different dialectics – particularly those of humanity/divinity and Eros/Thanatos – while opening new symbolic interpretations of the encounter between the Lover and Death. This negotiation allows the ballad to engage with broader symbolic, historiographical, and cultural discourses already embedded within the folkloric tradition.

In conclusion, the analysis of *El enamorado y la Muerte* proposes that time acts as an actant whose intervention determines the progression of the ballad. The heterochronic configuration of the text creates a liminal space in which the boundaries between desire and death, destiny and individual will, and the human and the divine are continuously negotiated. In this regard, in our reading of the ballad, the poem may be understood as a laboratory of temporalities.

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WEBTOONS AND THE SPIRIT OF THEIR TIME: READER RESPONSES TO WORKING MOTHERHOOD IN *MISAENG*[1]

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Abstract

This article offers analysis of reader comments on selected episodes of the Yoon Tae-ho's webtoon *Misaeng* (2012–2013, first season) that focus on the story of a working mother, Seon. By examining both, best comments and a sample of regular comments, the study explores how readers understood work–family conflict and gender inequality at a specific historical moment, before the rise of large-scale feminist activism in South Korea. The findings show that readers expressed strong emotional reactions, particularly feelings of guilt, moral pressure, and frustration toward unequal domestic expectations placed on working women. Although some comments offered structural critiques of workplace culture, most focused on individual responsibility, especially maternal sacrifice. A smaller group of readers presented resistant views that questioned traditional gender roles. The study argues that webtoon comment sections capture readers' social attitudes and concerns as they existed at the time of publication. In this way, *Misaeng* functions as a cultural record of the early 2010s, revealing how gender issues were experienced and interpreted before they became central to public debate.

Keywords: *webtoon,* Misaeng*, reader response, work-family conflict, gender inequality.*

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Introduction

The term *webtoon* is a Korean coined word formed from "website" and "cartoon", and it refers to comics published online. Webtoons first appeared in Korea in the late 1990s or early 2000s alongside the development of digital technologies. Today, they are an established form of popular culture that extends beyond Korea and is part of the Korean Wave. Webtoons are multi-semiotic texts, meaning that language is their main mode of communication, but it is combined with other semiotic elements such as images and sound. Like newspapers and magazines, webtoons combine text with visual content. However, in webtoons, text and images are more closely integrated. Text is often embedded directly into the image rather than separated as captions. In some cases, text represents sound effects through onomatopoeia, while in others, meaning depends on visual context, such as facial expressions or body language that convey sarcasm or emotion.

With the development of digital platforms, webtoons have added features such as background music, sound effects, and interactive elements like vibration effects to enhance the reading experience. Like printed comics, webtoons belong to the category of sequential art. Eisner [1985: 8] defines comics as "a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols" that form a visual language with its own "grammar of sequential art." This means that linguistic and visual elements are organized into sequences to create a coherent narrative. Although comics are usually divided into separate panels, these panels are contextually connected and should be analysed in terms of narrative flow.

This approach is especially useful for webtoons, which differ structurally from traditional comics. Advances in online platforms, internet speed, and mobile devices have allowed creators to experiment with new storytelling formats. Webtoons are designed for digital reading and are usually consumed through vertical or horizontal scrolling on mobile devices. Continuous scrolling often blurs the boundaries between panels, making it difficult to identify clear divisions. As a result, spatial and temporal flow becomes more flexible, and meaning emerges through the interaction of images and text across the scrolling sequence rather than within fixed frames. The narrative structure of webtoons is therefore adapted to online consumption, creating a new mode of storytelling that reflects the possibilities of the digital environment.

Due to the digital environment and easy access to online platforms, rapid production and rapid consumption are key characteristics of webtoons. Unlike films or television series, which require significant time and financial resources, a webtoon episode can be produced and published within hours. This allows creators to respond quickly to social issues, natural disasters, and political events. In addition, most webtoon platforms allow readers to interact through comments and ratings. This creates direct communication between creators and readers, as well as among readers themselves. Readers are therefore not only consumers but also active participants in shaping a webtoon's development. Their engagement can increase the visibility of lesser-known works, support amateur artists, and sometimes influence storylines. When creators respond to feedback and encourage interaction, loyal fan communities often emerge.

Webtoons should therefore be understood as a living cultural form that combines narrative, visual art, and social interaction. They continuously evolve in response to social change and technological development. Unlike traditional printed comics, which offered little access to reader reactions, webtoons exist in an interactive digital space where each episode receives immediate feedback. Readers play an important role in meaning-making, and webtoons provide valuable material for studying contemporary reader behaviour, social emotions, and cultural trends. Furthermore, many webtoons deal with social issues such as gender inequality, domestic violence, and workplace or school bullying, often criticizing structural problems in Korean society. According to Ryu [2021], social media and webtoons provide spaces where marginalized individuals can share their experiences, express hopes for social change, and receive empathy from readers. Webtoons therefore function not only as entertainment but also as a medium that raises social awareness and shapes public discourse in certain period of time.

This article examines gender conflict in Korean society through the first season of Yoon Tae-ho's webtoon *Misaeng* [Yoon 2012–2013], a cultural text that reflects social attitudes of the early 2010s. In the mid-2010s, public debate increasingly focused on women's roles, marriage, careers, and Korea's low birth rate, often leading to criticism of women in everyday discourse. Because webtoons respond to contemporary social concerns, *Misaeng* offers insight into how such issues were represented and received just before gender conflict became more visible. The study focuses on the portrayal of a working mother and analyses reader comments to examine how audiences at the time perceived the challenges faced by working women. These responses provide a snapshot of public attitudes during this period and help contextualize later developments in Korea's gender conflict discourse.

1. Position of a woman in Korean society

This section provides an overview of the position of women in Korean society before the early 2010s. Such a discussion is essential for understanding readers' responses in the comment section of *Misaeng*, as it sheds light on the traditional roles assigned to women and the factors that rendered these roles increasingly problematic.

The roots of the patriarchal system that still exists in Korea today can be traced back to the late Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), when Neo-Confucian ideas began to spread across the Korean Peninsula. After the fall of the Goryeo dynasty, the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910) was established, and Korean society underwent major changes due to the growing influence of Neo-Confucianism. This ideology emphasized social harmony through five key relationships: ruler and subject (based on justice), father and son (based on parental authority), husband and wife (based on division of roles), elder and younger brothers (based on birth order), and friends (based on loyalty) [Deuchler 1977: 2].

Within this system, each person was expected to have a fixed position and role in society. In the family, the wife was considered formally equal to the husband, but her responsibilities were clearly defined. These included caring for the household and managing family affairs. In the 15th century, Queen Sohye wrote a book titled *Naehun*, which had a strong influence on Korean society. The book was often given to newly married women as a guide for proper behaviour within the family and the home [Deuchler 2003: 149]. For example, the introduction states:

> *Although a wife is equal to her husband, a husband is a wife's heaven. She must respect and serve him as she served her father, she must be humble and speak softly, she must not worship him falsely, she must only know obedience and she should not oppose it.* [Queen Sohye 2011: 155]

In this social structure, the husband was responsible for public and external matters, while the wife focused on the household and childcare. This division allowed the husband to devote himself fully to his duties outside the home. Sons were especially valued because they inherited the family property and continued the family line. As a result, families often felt strong pressure to produce at least one male heir.

The patriarchal system began to weaken to some extent with the emergence of women's movements in the early 20th century. At that time, Korea was under Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), and women's movements were closely connected to independence movements. After liberation and the end of World War II, a civil war broke out between North and South Korea. This was followed by a period of authoritarian rule under Park Chung-hee (박정희) and later under Chun Doo-hwan (전두환). Their governments focused on economic development and industrial growth while suppressing political opposition.

During the 1970s and 1980s, several labour and student protests took place, and these gradually developed into movements for women's rights. In 1983, the Women's Society for Justice and Equality (여성평우회) was established, with a focus on the working conditions of women and issues of gender equality. Around the same time, professors of sociology and anthropology founded the group Alternative Culture (또하나의문화). Through lectures, publications, and public events, the group aimed to raise awareness of gender inequality [Jung 2014: 10]. In the late 1980s, several smaller organizations joined together to form the Korean Women's Association

United (한국여성단체연합). Its main members included labour activists, women's rights activists, and intellectuals [ibid.: 14].

The women's movement gained greater recognition during the presidency of Kim Dae-jung (김대중, 1998–2003) and his successor, Roh Moo-hyun (노무현, 2003–2007). Their administrations were often described as "women-friendly governments" because they supported women's rights and related legal reforms. One of the most important reforms was the abolition of the *hojuje* (호주제), the family headship system that legally defined the father as the head of the household. This system originated during the Joseon dynasty but became more firmly established during the Japanese occupation, when Japan introduced a family system based on male-line inheritance [Kim & Kim 2014: 66–68].

The *hojuje* system caused several social problems. When a family did not have a son, responsibility was often placed on the woman, and this contributed to the abortion of female foetuses. The system also created difficulties in international marriages. If the husband was a foreign national, the child inherited his citizenship even when born in Korea. Single mothers faced legal disadvantages as well, since the father was officially recognized as the child's guardian. The system was declared unconstitutional in 2005 and was fully abolished in 2008.

Support for women's movements decreased under the administration of President Lee Myung-bak (이명박). This period marked the end of the so-called "women-friendly government". Financial support for women's organizations was reduced, and their public influence declined in the years that followed.

2. Webtoon *Misaeng*

This article examines the webtoon *Misaeng*, created by Yoon Tae-ho and published on the *Daum* portal, later known as Kakao Webtoon. The first season was released from January 2012 to July 2013. The second season began in November 2015 and was completed in February 2024. The webtoon achieved great popularity and, according to the platform, has accumulated approximately 1.28 billion views.

The first season, in particular, is recognized as one of the most successful webtoons of the early 2010s. Due to its popularity, a television drama adaptation was produced in Korea in 2014. In addition, the story was adapted into a Japanese drama titled *Hope: Kitai Zero no Shinnyu Shain* (*HOPE*~期待ゼロの新入社員~), released in 2016, and a Chinese drama titled *The Ordinary Glory* (平凡的荣耀), which aired in 2020.

3.1. *Misaeng* storyline

Webtoon *Misaeng* is set in a large Korean trading company, One International, and follows the story of Jang Geu-rae (장그래), an intern hired through personal connections. Before entering the company, Jang aspired to become a professional *baduk* player and trained from a young age. However, after failing to obtain professional status, he abandoned this career path.

Jang comes from a disadvantaged social background. His father is deceased, and he lives with his elderly mother, who has limited ability to work. As the main financial provider, Jang must support both himself and his mother. Because he devoted most of his youth to *baduk*, he could not complete higher education and lacks formal qualifications. At the suggestion of his former mentor, he applies for an internship at *One International*, passes the presentation test, and receives a two-year contract.

The title *Misaeng* (未生), meaning "an incomplete life", originates from the *baduk* term *misaengma* (미생마), which refers to a group of stones whose survival on the board has not yet been determined. These stones remain in an unstable state, neither secure nor fully threatened. This concept serves as a metaphor for individuals in modern society. The author presents the characters as players on a *baduk* board, where daily life resembles an ongoing game shaped by uncertainty and competition.

In this context, all characters exist in a state of *misaeng*. As a contract worker, Jang occupies a particularly precarious position, facing constant job insecurity and limited opportunities for advancement. The narrative also reveals that even senior executives are vulnerable to dismissal if they make critical mistakes. Through these portrayals, *Misaeng* depicts the struggles of company workers within a rigid hierarchical corporate system.

3.2. The representation of working motherhood in *Misaeng*

Yoon Tae-ho constructs the narrative of *Misaeng* through a range of characters, each representing a different social group in Korean society of the early 2010s. Jang Geu-rae reflects the situation of contract workers, Manager Oh Sang-sik (오상식 과장) represents a leader who prioritizes moral values over personal promotion, and Jang Baek-gi (장백기) embodies the struggles of a "perfect" new employee with strong academic and professional qualifications. Han Seok-yul (한석율), whose father is a factory worker, represents those familiar with the realities of industrial labour.

Female characters appear rarely in the webtoon, suggesting the limited presence of women in corporate workplaces at the time. Social expectations often encouraged women to leave their jobs after childbirth. One notable exception is Deputy Department Head Seon (선 차장), a female manager at *One International*. Introduced in episode 21, Seon appears in only a small number of episodes. However, episodes 21, 22, and 121–123 focus specifically on her experiences as a working mother.

Seon is portrayed as a serious, professional, and hardworking employee who has earned respect within the company. At the same time, she is the mother of a young daughter, Somi, who attends kindergarten. Seon struggles to balance her demanding work responsibilities with childcare. Her husband is also employed, and their family faces difficulties due to long working hours and the lack of time for parenting. In episodes 21 and 22, Seon argues with her husband because he is unable to pick up their daughter from kindergarten by 6 p.m. due to work obligations. Seon herself is also unable to leave the office on time. As a result, two interns, Jang Geu-rae and An Yeongi, offer to pick up Somi. Although Seon is initially hesitant to involve colleagues in her private life, she has no alternative.

At the kindergarten, Jang and An meet other children who are still waiting for their parents to arrive after work. The small number of such children suggests that dual-income families were not common, reflecting broader social patterns in Korea at the time. The interns stay with the children until their parents arrive. Seon arrives last, after dark, when Somi has already fallen asleep.

The next scene takes place in Seon's home, where she and her husband are doing housework together. Seon is folding laundry, while her husband is washing the dishes. During this moment, Seon finds a drawing made by their daughter. In the picture, her husband is shown sleeping on the sofa, and Seon is drawn without a face. This image suggests emotional distance within the family. Both parents realize that they spend too little time with their daughter, which may explain why Somi could not clearly represent them in her drawing.

The following morning, Seon takes Somi to kindergarten. On the way, she receives a phone call from work and leaves in a hurry. Somi tries to bow to her mother to say goodbye, but Seon has already rushed away. After noticing that she did not properly say goodbye, Seon realizes her mistake. She pauses the call, returns to her daughter, and greets her. This moment highlights Seon's awareness that her work-focused lifestyle has caused her to neglect her daughter's emotional needs.

Seon's family story reappears approximately 100 episodes later, in episode 121. At home, Seon and her husband discuss his possible promotion. Seon is again doing housework, while her husband is sitting on the sofa reading. He asks her to quit her job and focus on raising their daughter. Seon explains that leaving her job would be emotionally difficult, as she has worked hard for over a decade, and that it would also cause financial problems for the family. The discussion turns into a conflict, and her husband leaves the room, while Seon continues the housework alone.

After her husband is promoted, he repeats his request for Seon to quit her job. He also makes her feel guilty by suggesting that she is not properly raising their daughter. Seon becomes increasingly frustrated because her husband does not understand the importance of her work or her personal fulfilment. In the end, she decides to continue working. She believes that being a busy but satisfied mother is better than becoming an unhappy mother who has given up her career.

3. Comments section analysis

Episodes 22 and 121, which focus on Seon's story, were among the ten most commented episodes of the first season. Episode 22 ranked ninth with 1,376 comments, while episode 121 ranked fifth with 1,481 comments (data collected on 6 July 2025). However, episode 121 was particularly notable for its unusually high number of *best comments* (Figure 1). It received 694 best comments, which is exceptional compared to the overall average of 62.8 best comments per episode.

Although episodes 122 and 123, which also centre on Seon's story, did not rank among the fifteen most commented episodes, their number of best comments was also higher than in other episodes. Episode 122 received 1129 comments and 201 best comments, while episode 123 received in total 838 comments and among those, 190 were marked as best comments. These figures indicate that Seon's storyline generated a strong response, even when the total number of comments was relatively lower.

Best comments are important because they reflect active reader interaction. Readers do not only post comments but also read, like, dislike, and reply to other users' responses. This indicates that episode 121 generated particularly strong engagement, with readers actively exchanging opinions and personal reflections. Best comments are also usually longer than general comments and often include personal experiences and testimonies.

For this analysis, a sample of all best comments and a randomly selected 10% sample of regular comments posted under episodes 22 and 121 were examined. The aim was to understand how readers interpreted the storyline of Deputy Department Head Seon and why the story of a working mother attracted such strong attention.

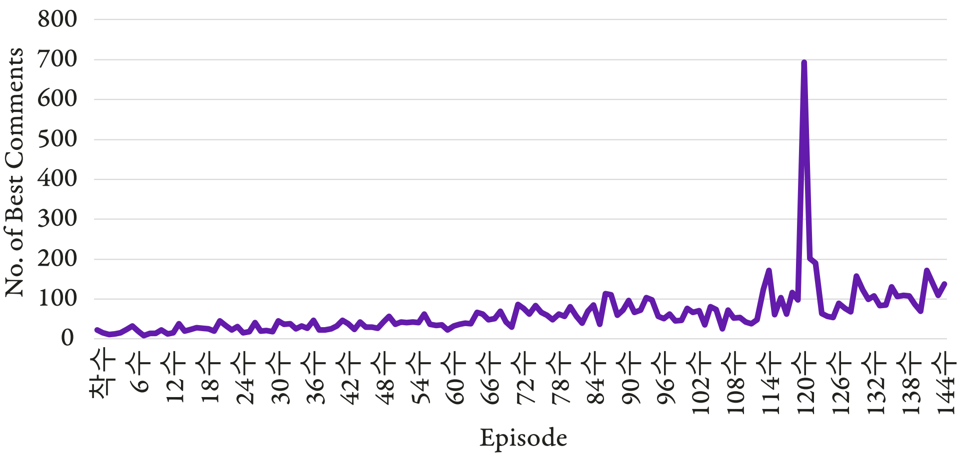

Figure 1. Number of Best Comments, *Misaeng*, Season 1

In episode 22, many readers focused on the children of working parents. Commenters either shared their own experiences of balancing work and childcare with limited time or reflected on their childhoods in dual-income households. In contrast, comments on episode 121 shifted toward discussions of working mothers, parental roles, and gender inequality. The main themes included expressions of guilt, withdrawal from work, criticism of men, criticism of the social system, and resistance to traditional gender expectations. Relevant comment excerpts are presented at the beginning of each thematic section.

3.1. Guilt

- *"Tears are welling up in my eyes. My child is now a high school freshman. She is very used to dual-income couples. [...] Now, she is used to preparing and buying meals by herself because her parents are always late. [...] My wife must be very heartbroken, because she is our only daughter."*
- *"Ah.. I'm looking at your work on the subway. My hands are shaking a little bit as I write comments. I wonder if my children feel the same way? I'm so sorry.."*
- *"Ah! I'm crying. I'm crying because of the hardships of working parents and the guilt I feel toward my children!"*
- *"[...] My beloved daughter!!! I'm sorry I couldn't play with you more."*
- *"Instead of trying to comfort my daughter who was crying and saying she didn't want to go to daycare, I threatened her to leave her home alone [...] She's only three years old now... As a mother, I'm so sorry."*

Guilt appears as the most dominant emotional response in the comment section of episode 22. Readers do not remain distant observers of the story. Instead, they strongly identify with the narrative and relate it to their own parenting experiences. The episode functions as a mirror through which readers reflect on their everyday practices as parents, especially in relation to time spent with their children. This indicates a high level of identification with the character of Deputy Department Head Seon.

Importantly, guilt is expressed mainly in relation to motherhood. Although the story presents a dual-income household, readers rarely assign responsibility equally to both parents. Emotional absence is instead interpreted as a personal moral failure of the mother. This pattern suggests that in Korean society, working women continue to be judged according to emotional expectations that are not significantly altered by their participation in paid labour. While employment is socially accepted, guilt operates as a mechanism of self-discipline, encouraging women to monitor their own behaviour and internalize responsibility for family care.

3.2. Withdrawal from work

- *"In the end, I quit my job. Because I'm a woman, because I'm a mother… because my child is more precious."*
- *"I quit my job […] I still haven't been able to buy my own house, but I don't regret it."*
- *"I wish I had the guts to quit and take care of my child's emotional needs."*
- *"I quit my job, stay home, do housework, and raise my children. After a few years, my husband might do the same. I have to prepare for retirement now. My children are all grown up and don't need my mother's care as much.. "*
- *"…when I gave up a more career-advancing job and moved to a place with strict, on-time commuting hours, my mother-in-law said, 'I was worried that you'd only chase your own ambitions and put the kids second… but this is a relief.' Because of* Misaeng*, on this rainy day, tears are falling inside my heart, too."*

Withdrawal from paid work appears in the comments as a morally accepted solution to work–family conflict. Following feelings of guilt, quitting a job is often presented as a natural and appropriate response for working women. Some readers describe leaving employment not as a personal loss, but as a confirmation of proper priorities, emphasizing childcare and moral responsibility toward children.

This does not suggest that Korean society openly discourages women from working. Instead, it creates emotional conditions in which continued employment becomes difficult, while withdrawal from work is socially understandable and even praised. The narrative of quitting therefore reveals an indirect form of discouragement. Women's participation in the labour market is weakened not through formal restrictions, but through moral expectations and emotional pressure.

3.3. Critique of men and gendered division of labour

- *"Housework isn't about helping, it's about sharing. […] I hope there are no people who think that the man is helping."*
- *"Does the woman raise the child alone? Sigh… Even though they both work, only the woman does the cleaning, laundry, and childcare… Husbands, you don't help with housework, it's your job as well."*
- *"If the wife earned more money and told the husband to quit his job… how would the husband feel?"*
- *"The saying that you need your mom more than your dad is a cowardly excuse."*
- *"My mom quit her job to raise me like this. […] When I got a bit older and my mom tried to go back to work, my dad stopped her, saying it would be embarrassing for him if his wife worked."*

Comments under episode 121 show a clear shift toward explicit criticism of men and gendered domestic norms. Readers question the idea that men "help" with housework, pointing out that this language use hides unequal divisions of labour. These responses reflect growing awareness that women's participation in paid work does not reduce their domestic responsibilities, while men's roles remain largely unchanged.

The comments express frustration with a social structure in which women take on multiple roles, such as worker, mother, wife, and daughter-in-law, while men are rarely expected to redefine their responsibilities within the family. In this context, women are discouraged from expecting fairness in the sharing of care and household labour.

3.4. Structural critique

- *"Neither mom nor dad did anything wrong. The problem is the excessive workload that prevents mom and dad from seeing their children, the useless company dinner culture, and the social atmosphere where working on weekends is considered a virtue."*
- *"Low birth rate? Isn't that obvious? [...] If you have three kids, you're either stupid or rich."*
- *"...Some people say that women's rights are higher these days... It may vary from person to person, but it's true that women are inferior when it comes to careers, childcare, and housework. I wish the Ministry of Gender Equality would stop worrying about useless things and just eliminate this kind of inequality."*
- *"...What mothers need is not 'bonus points for moms', nor a few tens of thousands of won per child. What we want is for Korea's corporate culture to change – a culture where we can't even take maternity leave until our bellies are about to burst, where we have to return to work without proper postpartum recovery, and where we are forced to work overtime even while worrying about our children. We want a life with evenings. A life with family."*

Although less common than emotional or interpersonal critiques, structural commentary plays an important role in shifting responsibility away from individual families. These comments focus on workplace culture, labour hierarchies, and economic insecurity rather than personal choices. They represent a negotiated reading that challenges purely moral interpretations of the narrative.

However, the limited number of such comments is significant. Most readers rely on individualized explanations, such as guilt, sacrifice, or quitting work. This suggests that structural critique exists but is not dominant. This imbalance reflects a broader social condition in Korea, where long working hours and rigid corporate norms are widely experienced but are less often identified as legitimate sources of responsibility. As a result, working women continue to carry the emotional burden of structural constraints.

3.5. Resistance and reinterpretation

- *"I didn't need a 'mother' back then. I needed an 'adult' to take care of me."*
- *"I'm a 20-something daughter who is used to working parents. [...] I leave this message to my parents [...] there's nothing for you to be sorry about. You are the parents I am most proud of in the world."*
- *"I am a private academy instructor [...] My wife is an elementary school teacher, so she works in the morning, and I take care of childcare... And in the afternoon, I work and my wife takes care of childcare [...] Work life is much more enjoyable than childcare."*
- *"...I want to have a child, a family, but if my husband is like that and is an indifferent person to the family, it would be much easier for me to adopt and raise the child alone."*
- *"I won't encourage my daughter to get married."*
- *"Seeing her [a working-mum coworker] live like that for a month... I called off the marriage... I don't think I could live like that."*

The final thematic cluster reflects moments of resistance, in which readers reinterpret dominant social norms instead of accepting them. Adult children from dual-income households offer alternative narratives that turn childhood loneliness into feelings of gratitude. In doing so, they challenge the idea that maternal guilt is unavoidable. Other comments question marriage, childbirth, and traditional family structures more broadly, showing a refusal to accept these arrangements as natural or necessary.

These responses can be understood as oppositional or transformative readings. Readers use the webtoon as a resource to imagine alternative ways of living. Although such comments do not dominate the discussion, their presence suggests that Korean society is not unified in its evaluation of working women. Rather, it is a contested space in which traditional expectations exist alongside emerging challenges and new interpretations.

Across these five themes, reader responses to the *Misaeng* episodes show that working women in Korean society hold a deeply ambivalent position. They are economically necessary and increasingly visible, yet they remain emotionally judged and structurally constrained. Society neither clearly encourages nor discourages women's employment. Instead, it allows paid work while maintaining caregiving expectations that make long-term participation difficult.

Women respond to these pressures through guilt, self-discipline, withdrawal, critique, and, in some cases, resistance. The comment sections function as a shared interpretive space in which these coping strategies are expressed, supported, and debated. In this way, webtoon reception provides insight into how social norms related to work, gender, and family were both reinforced and questioned within everyday digital culture in the early 2010s.

4. The rise of feminist discourse

Misaeng was published in 2012–2013, just before the major rise of the contemporary feminist movement in Korea, which began around 2015. This period marked the start of broader public discussion of women's issues and an intensification of gender-related conflicts. In 2015, a controversial incident drew national attention when an 18-year-old boy, rumoured to be joining ISIS, posted the message "I hate feminists" on social media before disappearing [Bak 2016]. Shortly afterward, columnist Kim Tae-hoon published an article in *Grazia magazine* (Issue 48, 2 February 2015) titled "Stupid feminism is more dangerous than ISIS" [Seo & Choi 2020: 380]. This statement triggered strong online reactions. In response, the hashtag *#IAmAFeminist* (#나는페미니스트입니다) spread widely as a form of solidarity and resistance. This moment gave feminist discourse greater public visibility in Korea [ibid.].

Around the same time, the online community *Megalia* emerged in 2015 on the *MERS Gallery* of the *DC Inside* forum. Female users reacted against misogynistic attacks on women during the MERS outbreak, particularly the blaming of female patients. They created a separate space called *Megalia*, combining MERS with a reference to the feminist novel *Egalia's Daughters*. The platform aimed to claim an online space for women, promote gender equality, and expose everyday misogyny. Users employed a strategy known as mirroring, which repeated sexist language while reversing gender roles in order to highlight discriminatory speech and provoke reflection among male users [Song et al. 2024: 51–52].

Public engagement with feminism in South Korea intensified after the 2016 Gangnam Station murder, when a man killed a woman and stated that he did so because she was a woman. The case led to nationwide protests. Many women expressed fear for their safety by leaving messages and sticky notes near the station, often using the phrase *#Survived* (#살아남았다) [Park, Park, & Lee 2016]. At the same time, online debates became more hostile. For example, at Korea University, a KakaoTalk group created to report misogynistic comments was quickly taken over by anti-feminist hate speech and was eventually shut down [KBS News 2018].

Feminist discussions were further strengthened through cultural works. Cho Nam-joo's novel *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* (2016) depicted a woman's lifelong experience of gender discrimination, especially in relation to work and motherhood. Although the novel became a bestseller, it also caused public backlash. For example, the K-pop singer Irene from the band *Red Velvet* faced online harassment after stating that she had read the book [Lee 2018]. Similarly, the webtoon *Myeoneuragi* (2017–2018) portrayed the unequal expectations placed on daughters-in-law in Korean families. It gained wide popularity, with more than 410 000 followers, and its printed version sold over 20 000 copies [Jung 2018].

From 2017 onward, public attention increasingly focused on digital sex crimes, including hidden-camera filming and online sexual exploitation. The *#MeToo movement* organized protests using slogans such as “I am not your porn” (난 너의 야동이 아니야), demanding stronger protection for women [Bak 2018]. High-profile cases, such as the *Burning Sun scandal* involving Seungri and Jung Joon-young, exposed widespread abuse and illegal filming in the entertainment industry. The later *N^th^ Room Case* revealed a large Telegram network that exploited and blackmailed women and minors, with at least 103 victims identified [Kim 2020].

Together, these events brought national attention to misogyny, digital sexual violence, and gender inequality. They also strengthened feminist movements’ demands for social and legal change in South Korea.

Conclusion

This study aimed to show that the comment sections of the webtoon *Misaeng* function as important spaces for social reflection. Because the webtoon was published in 2012–2013, the comments provide a snapshot of how readers understood and experienced social issues at that specific historical moment. The analysis of *Misaeng* and its comment sections demonstrates that readers were particularly sensitive to certain topics, especially gender inequality, as represented through the story of the working mother Seon. This sensitivity appeared even before the rise of large-scale feminist activism in the following years.

When later developments in Korean society are considered, including the intensification of gender conflicts that have not yet reached a clear resolution, it becomes evident that webtoons can serve as meaningful spaces for social debate. Even before some social issues became widely discussed in public discourse, readers already responded strongly to themes connected to their everyday lives and personal concerns. In this sense, *Misaeng* can be understood as a cultural portrayal of its time.

Therefore, webtoons should not be analysed only as forms of popular culture or literary production. They can also offer valuable insight into Korean society, especially when examined together with their comment sections. These comments reveal readers’ sincere thoughts, emotions, and personal experiences. In this way, *Misaeng* functions not only as entertainment, but also as a platform for collective emotional processing and social critique, as well as a meaningful record of the social atmosphere of the early 2010s.

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EDGAR KATTAI'S *UNDER THE FLAGS OF TEN NATIONS*: THE LITERARY RECEPTION IN LATVIA'S CULTURAL SPACE

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Abstract

Under the Flags of Ten Nations (2000) is examined as a work of life-writing that articulates the biography of Edgar Kattai across shifting historical, political, and cultural contexts. The motif of "ten flags" functions as an organizing metaphor for multiple and intersecting national and transnational affiliations, destabilizing assumptions of coherent identity. Through reflexive narration, spatial metaphors, and the alignment of private experience with public history, the autobiography converts personal memory into a form of cultural mapping. This approach enables comparative analysis linking individual life trajectories to broader social and historical processes, positioning the text within debates on cultural memory and transnational autobiography. In the Latvian cultural context, Kattai's work contributes to discussions of history and identity, expanding the literary canon and offering analytical frameworks for examining the relationship between personal narrative and collective memory.

Keywords: *Edgar Kattai, life-writing, Latvian literature, collective memory, historical narrative, transnationalism.*

Introduction

According to an expert in Chinese history and philosophy, Dr. Kaspars Eihmanis in his short essay *Edgar Kattai: Bibliography* (2023) mentioned that Edgar Kattai comes from a multinational family background [Sadovska 2004: 7], however, when

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recounting the story of his father, Karl Kattai (*Kārlis Katajs*), Edgar Kattai reflected that during the Russian Tsarist period and later, his surname was always written with a slight hint of Estonian linguistic influence [Eihmanis 2003: 4].

Having spent over three decades in Manchuria, an era marked by successive periods of Chinese, Japanese, and Soviet hegemony, he authored a comprehensive work of cultural history in 2000. Published by *Jumava*, the work *Under the Flags of Ten Nations* delineates not merely the significant biography of Edgar Kattai, but also the wider historical and social dynamics connected to occurrences. [Lagzdiņa 2000: 8] The text offers clear political and cultural critiques that reflect Latvia's shared historical experience and the development of national identity in relation to the Far East. In the concluding remarks, Edgar Kattai appears to anticipate possible criticism and therefore states that:

> *Upon finishing the last page of my Chinese chronicle, I am already confronted with accusations that the author has 'omitted this detail and neglected to portray that aspect. My intention, however, was never to compose a definitive account of China and its people. I have simply narrated the quotidian trajectory of my own life, which I lived shoulder-to-shoulder with Chinese, Russians, Japanese, Koreans, Jews, Tatars, Poles, and, inevitably, fellow Latvians—all of whom fate had conglomerated in an extraordinary, and now vanished, segment of the world known as Manchuria.* [Katajs 2000: 239]

When examining Edgar Kattai's identity, it is important to remember that Latvia's cultural self-identity is a multifaceted phenomenon, shaped by the interplay of historical and socio-cultural factors [Burima 2013: 24]. Kattai's life in the Far East strongly shaped his personal and cultural identity. The region's diverse historical and cultural environment, where different traditions and value systems interact, encourages the reinterpretation of meanings and concepts. This process reshapes models of identity and helps explain how individuals such as Kattai integrate global and local cultural influences into their self-understanding [Šķilters 2010: 3]. Regarding Edgar Kattai's national affiliation, he personally commented on the course of his life in an interview for the journal *University Newspaper No. 9*:

> *Until 1945, I was an inhabitant of the state of Manchukuo, but I was never a citizen of either China or Manchukuo. I possessed a Latvian passport; however, in 1946, I exchanged it for a Soviet one because there was no other alternative.*
> [Sadovska 2004: 7]

An article entitled Latvians in China (1 April 1990) discloses a significant detail about Latvian citizenships, which are residents in China:

> *In the beginning of August 1919, the Chinese government declared that, based on a newly passed mandate, it would regard the Latvians residing in its lands not as Russians, but as nationals of a separate country, one with which China had no formal agreement.* [Fišere 1990: 63]

However, by 1923, the situation had shifted. Peter Mezhak (*Pēteris Mežaks*, 1858–1941), an officer and a leading figure in Harbin's Latvian community, conveyed that China did not grant official status to Latvian passports. Consequently, Latvians living in China found themselves obliged to obtain Chinese passports. For any community members who planned to depart from their autonomous communities, the requirement was to swap their original national passport for a specific travel document for departure [Fišere 1990: 63].

Methodology and genre of *Under the Flags of Ten Nations*

This study employs the technique of concept mapping to analyse each chapter of the work by Edgar Kattai *Under the Flags of Ten Nations* with the aim of uncovering how the creation of literary maps can both validate meaning and challenge prevailing critical assumptions. According to Frances Slack, a researcher at Sheffield Hallam University, concept mapping is a valuable method for identifying fundamental ideas within a collection of documents or a specific research area. She further suggests that concept maps can serve as a useful tool for generating additional search terms during the literature review process, clarifying the structural organization of the review, and enhancing understanding of theoretical frameworks, key concepts, and the relationships among them [Alias & Suradi 2008]. This methodology also is connected directly with the principles of narrative cartography. In other words, narrative cartography is the graphic representation of the spatial world of a text, a world built from an author's memory, cultural tradition, and invention [Ryan 2020: 1].

Before analysing Edgar Kattai's *Under the Flags of Ten Nations*, it is important to identify its genre. At first glance, it appears autobiographical, as Kattai writes about his own life and personal experiences. However, it is closer to a memoir because it focuses on a specific period rather than his entire life. Julia Novak, a research fellow at the University of Vienna, notes in *Experiments in Life-Writing* (2017) that modern life-writing often blends fact and invention, challenging traditional distinctions between the real person, the storyteller, and the character [Novak 2017: 2–3]. According to Robert MacDougall, a history professor at Western University, a memoirist acts as a witness, focusing on events that most shaped their awareness rather than cataloguing personal thoughts. This approach creates a connection between writer and reader through shared reflection [Cooper 1910: 344]. Similarly, American novelist Anna Roberson Brown Burr (1873–1941) distinguished memoirs from autobiographies, noting that memoirs offer intimate accounts of specific periods rather than complete life stories [Burr 1909: 21]. In *Under the Flags of Ten Nations*, Edgar Kattai explains that his goal was to introduce Latvian readers to China and its culture. Drawing on personal experience and oral accounts from friends, students, and colleagues in Harbin, he documented historical events from his life there up to 1955 [Katajs 2000: 238].

Living under ten flags: Political power and personal identity in Kattai's memoir

In Edgar Kattai's memoir the used term "ten flags" represent not only the succession of different political powers and regimes under which Kattai lived, but also the different life stages, -from childhood till adulthood. Therefore, using the concept of mapping, we can visualize his life's journey as a timeline overlaid onto a map of Manchuria, with each flag symbolizing a shift in sovereignty, authority, and the political atmosphere Edgar Kattai experienced firsthand.

In the opening chapter of his book *Under the Flags of Ten Nations*, which details his parents' arrival in China and the formation of a Latvian identity abroad, Edgar Kattai describes the inception of the Chinese Eastern Railway. Drawing from Kattai's account, in the late 19th century, the Russian Foreign Minister, Count Sergei Witte (*Сергей Юльевич Витте*, 1849–1915), successfully persuaded the senior Chinese statesman Li Hongzhang (李鸿章, 1823–1901) to grant the Russian Empire permission to construct a major railway across Manchuria. This line was to extend to Vladivostok, with a branch leading to the naval port of Port Arthur [Katajs 2000: 7–9]. Conversely, according to the November 1925 edition of the journal *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Li Hongzhang, who served as a special envoy for the Qing dynasty (1636–1912) government, was officially dispatched to St. Petersburg. His mission was to meet with Tsar Nicholas II (*Николай II Александрович*, 1868–1918) of Russia to negotiate the railway construction plan and discuss China's involvement throughout the project. As a result of Li Hongzhang's significant efforts, the private Chinese commercial enterprise known as the *Chinese Eastern Railway Company* was established on Russian soil. This private corporation was primarily utilized for commercial and cultural purposes, rather than serving as a strategic route [Wang 1925: 58–59].

The five colors and the Chinese trio

The Republic of China (1912–1928) represents Edgar Kattai's early childhood. According to Lane J. Harris (2008), the five colors of the Republic of China flag symbolized the country's five primary national groups: Han, Manchu, Mongol, Hui (Muslim), and Tibetan. Harris argues that when a state is formed before a shared national identity exists, political elites use flags to promote unity by presenting the population as a single group and minimizing ethnic differences. Drawing on Alfred North Whitehead's (1861–1947) concept of fallible symbolism, Harris shows that the early Republican flag reflected ongoing struggles over national identity and the emergence of an inclusive, Han-led nationalism [Hariss 2008: 82–83]. Therefore, this theoretical framework is applied to a Latvian narrative, where a close reading reveals the local population depicted as dependent on a self-sufficient Chinese labour trio. The essay argues that the same processes of symbolic negotiation that define national emblems are at work in structuring hierarchical relationships within literary accounts of cross-cultural encounters.

From postal flags to the second flag: State-making and individual identity in East Asia

Scholars have often overlooked institutional flags, viewing them as symbols of limited interests rather than tools of state-building. This study argues that in the early twentieth century, Chinese postal flags played an important role in state formation due to unstable political conditions. According to Nicholay Ryabchenko (*Николай Павлович Рябченко*) Sun Yat-sen (孙中山, 1886–1925) believed that Japan could support China's future if it abandoned imperialism and helped end unequal treaties, thereby promoting Sino-Japanese cooperation and Asian solidarity [Рябченко 2016: 14–15]. Latvian independent researcher Aldis Bergmanis in his article *Latvians in the Far East: Return to Homeland in 1920–1930* (2010) had mentioned that most of historians often assumed that the Far Eastern Republic, which was referred to Chita Republic and ruled by communists, was created to stop Soviet Russian forces from fighting the Japanese army in the Vladivostok area [Bergmanis 2010: 73].

In book *Under The Flags of Ten Nations*, Edgar Kattai gave a statement that his identity Latvian is not completely gone and forgotten, but it was hidden beneath a "second", imposed identity necessary for survival:

> *Not only did the flags change, but also the surnames of some people. Documents show that on April 2, 1927, Pastor Kastlers married Kārlis Kattai to Anna Ozoliņa, who had abandoned the thought of returning to Latvia and had gradually grown accustomed to the new living conditions, which at first had sometimes seemed strange to her, but not entirely undeserved. Only little Edgar still, as instructed, called her "aunt".* [Katajs 2000: 15–16]

In the book *Fascism in Manchuria: The Soviet-China in the 1930s* (2017), postdoctoral researcher of history at Heidelberg University Susanne Hohler has described that the legal predicament of Russian émigrés in Harbin intensified when China ceased recognizing passports of Russian Empire, rendering them stateless.

The 1924 Sino-Soviet Agreement,[1] which restricted railway employment to Chinese and Soviet citizens, forced difficult choices: some acquired Soviet citizenship, others became outwardly Soviet, but inwardly opposed, and many who remained stateless lost their jobs [Holer 2017: 23].

The concept of the second flag encapsulates the complex interplay of state formation and layered identity in early 20th-century in East Asia. While scholarly work often overlooks institutional flags, they functioned as crucial tools of state-making in volatile contexts, as seen in the flags of the Republic of China. This period of geopolitical struggle, exemplified by the partitioned Far Eastern Republic, forced individuals into a stateless condition. As vividly illustrated in Edgar Kattai's memoir, this meant living under a different flag – an imposed political reality that demanded pragmatic adaptation for survival, while one's true Latvian identity was suppressed, not forgotten, beneath the surface of daily life and administrative changes.

Beyond political decrees: National identity through domestic cultural practice

This chapter of Edgar Kattai's life did not represent a governing power over Harbin, but rather the cultural and national identity of his family:

> *Aunt Anna tried, as much as possible, to maintain a Latvian spirit in our family. This was reflected not only in the placement of the Latvian flag – the third in my life – on the chest of drawers. We also subscribed to the newspapers "Jaunākās Ziņas" and "Atpūta", a few records with Latvian folk songs and Reiter's choir played at home, I had a Latvian alphabet, a book of Latvian folk tales, and the unforgettable "Zuzīte" by Poruks, for which I received more than one good slap from the nervous Aunt Anna. Those old letters simply wouldn't stick in my head! I breathed a sigh of relief when Latvia switched to the new orthography. My home-school teacher had worked for several years as a governess in Moscow and Ukraine before the First World War [...] She had a good command of the Russian language and made sure that I not only chattered in Russian – which I had been doing since early childhood, as we were surrounded by Russians – but that I also learned to read and write in Russian, alongside the Latvian language [...] Adopting to the Russian lifestyle, for the Orthodox Christmas and Easter, Aunt Anna would set the table with various delicacies, including pork ham, Riga sprats and smelts, various sausages, salads, and, of course, high-quality Russian vodka, bought from the Greek Antipas, and wines from the Georgian Havtasi.* [Katajs 2000: 25–26]

[1] The 1924 Sino-Soviet Agreement was an agreement between the Republic of China and the Soviet Union that aimed to improve relations after the tensions caused by the Russian Revolution.

Edgar Kattai's narrative demonstrates that the Latvian cultural practice was not maintained by political decrees alone, but through the daily, often arduous, efforts of individuals like Aunt Anna – via subscriptions to Latvian periodicals, folk music, and writing. This personal and intergenerational struggle cultivate a national spirit amidst a dominant Russian linguistic environment, which is presented from a microhistorically counterpart to macro-political projects. Edgar Kattai's transnational life exposes the limitations of nation-centred life writing and represents a new life-writing approach that studies identity formed through border-crossing, multilingualism, and migration.

Two flags, two worlds: Education, identity, and geopolitics in republican-era Harbin

Edgar Kattai was fortunate enough to receive proper Western education in the international Harbin gymnasium, which was ruled by Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). It is worth noting, YMCA pupils embraced Western education yet emerged with a stronger Russian identity. Therefore, this Edgar Kattai's life stage was surrounded by two different words – USA and Russia. According to researcher Tomas Tlusty (*Tomáš Tlustý*), the YMCA, founded in London in 1844 by George Williams, is a global youth organization with a religious foundation. It was not only focused on sports but promoted holistic development, combining physical, mental, and spiritual growth. This idea is symbolized by the red triangle in the YMCA emblem. Therefore, physical education in the YMCA must be understood as part of its broader educational and moral goals [Tlustý 2015: 27–28]. From Edgar Kattai's perspective, the YMCA was a normal school with strict rules of dress and behaviour. As Susanne Hohler notes, although organizations like the YMCA promoted cross-ethnic cooperation in Harbin, their influence was limited, and ethnic identity remained stronger than any shared civic identity [Hohler 2017: 74]. Edgar Kattai's description of elite school in Harbin reflects a deliberate, institutional form of integration – embodied by the YMCA's universalist ideals – that stood in contrast to the city's broader ethnic segregation. While such environments fostered a temporary, cosmopolitan identity, they remained exceptional spaces, ultimately overshadowed by the stronger pull of ethnic and communal affiliations outside the school walls. As Edgar Kattai began his studies in YMCA, at that point in his life he had witnessed two new flags:

> *With the start of the school year, my life entered under two flags. Above the school building flew the flag of the USA, but at various school events and celebrations, the old Russia's white-blue-red flag was also invariably raised...*
>
> [Katajs 2000: 26–27]

After the 1924 Sino-Soviet agreement, control of the Chinese Eastern Railway was shared between Soviet and Chinese authorities. While Soviets managed the railway, Harbin's social and cultural life remained influenced by anti-Bolshevik Russian emigrants, creating two separate worlds: pre-revolutionary Russian culture and growing Soviet influence. This division prevented a unified Russian community in the city [Chiasson 2010: 6]. Under the Bureau of Russian Émigré Affairs in Manchukuo administration, all adult Russian émigrés[2] were compelled to register to obtain legal status and essential documents. Failure to comply resulted in the denial of employment and education. These coercive measures pressured many Soviets, including former Chinese Eastern Railway staff and merchants, to assume émigré status out of necessity [Moustafine 2013: 151]. Even though the Soviet administration controlled the Chinese Eastern Railway, some areas of northern Manchuria resisted Soviet influence. As historian Erwin Oberländer notes, the Russian Fascist Party, an anti-Bolshevik émigré group, adopted Italian Fascism as a model to challenge the Soviet regime. Rejecting the White movement's failures, they promoted fascism as an alternative to communism and sought international alliances, especially with Japan. The chief-editor of the party's journal *Nash Put'* (*Наш Путь*) Konstantin Rodzaevsky (*Константин Владимирович Родзаевский*, 1907–1946) gained influence in Manchuria after Japan established Manchukuo in 1932 [Oberländer 2013: 159–162]. Edgar Kattai recalled how Japanese aggression, encouraged by the Russian Fascist Party, caused chaos in Harbin. According to his account, the party played a provocative role in 1932, collaborating with Japanese forces while the Kuomintang and Chinese military offered little resistance. This allowed the party to gain influence among émigrés through foreign support rather than popular backing [Katajs 2000: 28].

The rising Sun over Harbin

During his later schooling at YMCA, Edgar Kattai experienced the introduction of the Japanese (Rising Sun) and Manchukuo flags. Those two flags covered the main events that happened in Harbin from 1932 till 1945: the Japanese direct military occupation of Manchuria in 1932, the Soviet Union's sale of the Chinse Eastern Railway to Japan government in 1935 and being Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo till August 1945. Being a young child, at the age 9, Edgar Kattai really recalled the moment that had changed his life and forced him further to hide his true national spirit and identity to survive:

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2 During the later occupation of Manchuria registered individuals were issued identification badges – first in Tsarist flag colors (initially striped in white, blue, and red), later as numbered aluminum discs, derisively called "dog tags".

I saw Japanese troops for the first time on 5 February 1932, when they marched into Harbin. The overseas soldiers were not very tall but broad-shouldered, dressed in warm overcoats with earflaps on their caps trimmed with Zakka braid. Nearly everyone had a wristwatch and a fountain pen in his pocket. They smiled and honoured children with candies. But over the city unfurled the symbol of Japan – a war flag with a red sun-disc on a white background. Thus, I found myself already under the sixth flag of my life. [Katajs 2000: 29]

This passage presents life writing as a way of mapping experience, linking personal memory with political authority. The narrator contrasts friendly gestures, such as giving candy, with the presence of a powerful national flag. The Rising Sun represents another forced identity, showing how large political events become part of an individual's everyday life.

Latvians in Harbin feared for their consul, Peteris Mezhak (*Pēteris Mežaks,* 1858–1941), due to his past role in the Russo-Japanese War, but the Japanese took no action against him*:*

*The Latvians of Harbin, for their part, were worried about the fate of the Latvian consul, Peteris Mezhak because he, having been a general in the Russian army, during the Russo-Japanese War had presided over a court-martial that sentenced two Japanese spies [...]–to death; the Japanese later erected a monument to them on the outskirts of Harbin. However, no reprisals were taken against our grey-haired consul. The Japanese know how to honour even their adversarie*s.

[Katajs 2000: 29]

This moment shows Harbin's divided loyalties and the Japanese use of calculated restraint. After 1 March 1932, Harbin became part of Manchukuo, which introduced a new flag symbolizing the solidarity of five ethnic groups[3] [Katajs 2000: 29]. For Edgar Kattai, this period meant living under another imposed authority, the seventh "flag" of his life. Despite the creation of Manchukuo and economic hardship, his daily life changed little, and his school experiences fostered cultural adaptability, though the Japanese occupation left a lasting impact.

Continuing analyzing "flags" as metaphorical mapping, Edgar Kattai's identity in the below mentioned quotation is marked as a rootless observer, defined by loss and displacement. While others celebrate a return to a homeland, his world fragments – symbolized by the replacement of quality European goods with inferior substitutes –

[3] The five colours of the flag were meant to represent the "solidarity of five ethnic groups", with each colour standing for a different group: Manchus, Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, and Mongols.

marking his unstable position between collapsing empires and eroding cultural touchstones:

> *The year 1935 arrived, marked by a sensational event – the Soviet Union sold its share of the Chinese Eastern Railway to the Manchukuo government. The compensation was laughable—only 140 million yen, of which the Japanese paid a meagre 23 million. Consequently, the railway workers who were Soviet citizens, along with their family members, began to depart for the USSR.*
> [Katajs 2000: 42–43]

Kattai shows himself as a careful observer of political falsehood. While obeying official rules, he reveals everyday disrespect for the emperor, exposing the regime's lack of real legitimacy:

> *Once, at a Latvian gathering, I learned from a stamp collector that there was a philatelic society in Riga that published a philately magazine called "Baltica". Soon, my name, fields of interest, and address appeared in the pages of this publication. I acquired quite a few correspondents who supplied me with Latvian stamps, first-day covers, and magazines. My parents grumbled a little that I was spending a lot of money on postage stamps for letters and, again, spending less time with my schoolbooks, but they eventually got used to it. As a result, I more frequently visited the nearest post office to affix envelopes with stamps featuring the image of Pu Yi, the Emperor of Manchukuo. Those stamps were highly valued in philatelic circles at the time. If there were no witnesses at the post office now of mailing the letter, the postmaster would slap the postmark, mutter "bu yao", and vigorously stamp it right over the emperor's face. Thus was manifested the "loyal subjects'" love for their pitiable emperor – a marionette in the hands of the Japanese occupiers.* [Katajs 2000: 67]

Kattai's experience under the sixth and seventh "flags" reflects adaptation to occupation, everyday resistance, and the quiet preservation of his Latvian identity.

From Harbin to Soviet Latvia: The final journey

In the final chapters of *Under Flags of Ten Nations*, Edgar Kattai's life reflects a journey from statelessness toward a complex, uncertain homeland. Kattai kept his Latvian passport until 1945, even though it was practically invalid, as Latvia had been forcibly absorbed into the USSR in 1940 following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact [Prikulis & Abene 2017: 10]. Yet, Edgar Kattai carried passport "always". This act is profoundly significant from a tangible Link to a "lost world". In other words, the passport was a physical relic of an independent Latvia and his identity as its citizen. It represented a national identity that existed before Soviet domination:

Major Koziks had a conversation with me, asked about my background, and looked through my Latvian passport, which I always carried with me. Koziks dismissed my remark that this document no longer had any significance, and that it was time to throw it out. "Do not be hasty to do anything rash. Soon a decree from the USSR government will be published regarding the granting of citizenship to Russian emigrants and Baltic Germans living abroad. Then this passport will still be very useful to you. I see that you will use it." [Katajs 2000: 131]

Kattai can be seen as stateless. His Latvian passport existed, but Latvia's sovereignty had been erased by the Soviet Union. It gave him no real protection and made him vulnerable to assimilation. Caught between a lost past and an imposed future, he fully belonged to neither, which sharpened his ability to observe and understand his world.

After Chairman Mao Zedong proclaimed the founding of People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949, in Tiananmen Square in Beijing [Zhang & Zhai 2019: 419], the new chapter of Edgar Kattai's life began. During that initial period in Harbin, Edgar Kattai was incorporated into the state's framework as a public servant. This status, justified by the official doctrine of working for the collective good, came with specific material benefits, including freedom from income taxes. His situation demonstrated a clear divide: while he enjoyed the advantages of being part of the new system, other segments of society, such as private landlords, were burdened with fiscal duties:

On the other hand, after working a full ten years in Red China, I did not have to pay a single cent of income tax into the state treasury. [Katajs 2000: 189]

Kattai's memoir critiques Soviet withdrawal from Northeast China, showing its social and cultural impact. The 1952 transfer of territories revealed Soviet weakness and undermined the local Soviet population's status, marking the end of Soviet extraterritorial authority:

On 31 December 1952, the USSR government presented the People's Republic of China with an invaluable and mind-boggling New Year's gift. It was announced that the Soviet Union would transfer the ownership rights of the Chinese Changchun Railway to China without any compensation and would renounce the use of the naval base in Port Arthur. Subsequent developments proved that this was a prudent solution, but at the time, such a decision dealt a monumental blow to the local Soviet citizens' self-esteem. We understood that our era here had ended; we just didn't know in what specific way the finale would manifest itself. This soon became clear. The seconded Soviet railway workers began to return to their homeland, and the administration of the Chinese Eastern Railway, which

> *had now gone from semi-legitimate to fully legitimate, gradually also dismissed the local Soviet employees.* [Katajs 2000: 217–218]

The most unexpected and perhaps happiest moment of Edgar Kattai's life took place after 1 May 1954, when Orthodox Eastern celebrations were taken place:

> *It was announced in various places that the USSR government had decided to involve Soviet citizens permanently living in China in the cultivation of Russia's untouched and virgin lands. [...] All Soviet citizens could go to the USSR, as well as non-citizens from mixed families (a small number of Chinese), and non-citizen Europeans who, for some reason, did not have a passport from their own country (a few Poles, Czechs, Serbs, Greeks, etc.). They would receive passports upon arrival in Soviet land.* [Katajs 2000: 224–225]

On 20 May 1955, Edgar Kattai's departure symbolized an existential transition, because his gesture of waving farewell to an empty landscape represented a deliberate closure with his personal history in China. This act of leave-taking marked a definitive break from his past, as he moved toward an uncertain future under the symbolic authority of Soviet Latvia:

> *My request was fulfilled. As we passed through the settlement, I stood by the window and waved... To whom? Neither Veismanis, nor Bērziņš, nor other acquaintances were there anymore – they had all already left. Perhaps to the house where I was born, or to my mother's and grandmother's long-demolished graves? With these waves of the hand, I was probably settling all accounts with Buhedu, Harbin, Manchuria, and the whole of China in general, because ahead of me awaited the tenth symbol of my life – the flag of Soviet Latvia.*
> [Katajs 2000: 237–238]

The literary reception: Mapping the critique and cultural impact

It is important to note that Edgar Kattai was proficient in both Chinese and Japanese. In analysing the article *Our Language* by Latvian linguist Janis Kushkis (*Jānis Kušķis*, 1930–2022), Edgars Vimba, a lecturer and biologist at the University of Latvia, particularly highlighted a phrase included in the book by Edgar Kattai's *Under the Flags of Ten Nations*: "*Arrived on the 6th day of the 12th month of the 9th year of the Kangde era (1942)*" [Katajs 2000: 101]. Comparing this with examples mentioned in the article *The Inertia of the Soviet Era?* published on 19 October 2000, in Journal No. 42 *Literature and Art in Latvia*, such as Zenta Mauriņa's *Collected Works* (1939–1940) and Vilnis Reguts' work *Constellations Visible in Latvia* (1998), Edgars Vimba points out the enduring influence of the Soviet mindset on the language development of citizens in free Latvia. Edgars Vimba notes that when examining historical events in Latvia during the 1920s–1930s, time was often divided similarly to BC and AD. Events were dated by referencing specific historical benchmarks that had acquired symbolic significance. Returning to the phrase, – *arrived on the 6th day of the 12th month of the 9th year of the Kangde era (1942)*", Edgars Vimba indicates that the formulation used by Edgar Kattai does not conform to the chronological frameworks imposed during the Soviet era [Vimba 2000: 14]. Based on the Japanese chronological dating tradition, the system of era names was adopted not only among the Han people but also in other East Asian societies influenced by Chinese culture. Japan is the only country where this tradition has been preserved to the present day. The era's name denotes the period of a ruler's reign, and the authority to determine it belongs solely to the ruler; it was used both by his subjects and by subordinate dynasties [Saito 2022: 64].

However, by analysing carefully Edgar Kattai's work *Under The Flags of Ten Nations*, we could find that the author had used the Japanese chronological dating tradition twice during the "seventh flag" period. The first time it was used what the founding of Manchukuo was found:

> *On 1 March 1934, Manchukuo – the Empire of Manchuria – was proclaimed, and the Supreme Leader of Manchukuo was transformed into an emperor. A new calendar system began, and on all official documents, the previous era of "Datong" (Great Unity) was replaced by the "Kangde" era (Tranquil Virtue). Thus, January-February of 1934 was considered the 2nd year of the Datong era, but in March of the same year, the 1st year of the Kangde era began. Such actions, of course, did not inspire enthusiasm among the masses of Chinese inhabitants, but the ever-merry Russian emigrants began singing a cheerful little song with an ironic refrain: "Harbin is a beautiful place, Harbin is a good thing, in this far-off Manchukuo, and now Manchudikuo[4]!"* [Katajs 2000: 36]

It may be believed that Edgar Kattai refused to retroactively apply Soviet or Western chronological frameworks to an East Asian context. This corrected the historical record and forced the Latvian reader to engage with the event on its own terms. For sure, we can tell that Edgar Kattai did not just study Chinese culture, he lived in that culture. This lived experience allowed him to grasp the cultural subtleties, traditions, and social norms that are essential for both precise historiography and authentic translation.

[4] Manchukuo (often misspelled as *Manchudikuo*) was a Japanese-controlled puppet state in Manchuria, created in 1932 after Japan's invasion of the region.

According to PhD researcher Diāna Komava in her doctoral thesis *Edgar Kattai's translation of modern Chinese literature and its influence in Latvia* (2024), the translation of Chinese literary works into Latvian represents a highly specialized endeavour demanding substantial temporal resources, skilled labour, and professional expertise. Beyond mere linguistic competence, success in this field requires a deep immersion into the associated cultural and historical subtleties, as well as societal practices and conventions. These considerations indicate that Edgar Kattai has attained notable distinction in this domain. His prolific output of Chinese and Latvian translations is complemented by his extensive residence in China, which provided him with exceptional access to cultural understanding that fundamentally supports his translational achievements [Komova 2024: 35]. On 8 September 2005, in an interview titled *China and Latvia in Cultural Contac*t published in *The Official Newspaper of the Republic of Latvia* (*Latvijas Vēstnesis*) Edgar Kattai, who was then an Honorary Doctor of the Latvian Academy of Sciences, told journalist Aina Rezeniece: "a stop must be put to translating Chinese books from English, because these translations differ from the original as much as heaven from earth" [Rozeniece 2005].

Conclusion

This study examines Edgar Kattai's memoir *Under the Flags of Ten Nations* as a work that connects personal life with major historical and cultural changes in twentieth-century Manchuria. The memoir serves as an example of how different political regimes shaped Kattai's identity and everyday experiences. By combining personal memories with historical events, Kattai constructs a chronological narrative of his Harbin years that helps readers understand how national identity can change when a person moves across borders, languages, and cultures. His story also reveals how Latvian communities lived abroad and how they kept their cultural roots.

Through his memoir, Edgar Kattai acts as a pivotal bridge between Latvia and China, leveraging his profound, experience-based knowledge of East Asia to correct Soviet-era misconceptions. He achieves this by deliberately using based on personal experience historical terms, explaining local customs, and portraying the complex rivalries between the Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and Soviet factions in Harbin. Kattai's principled approach to language and context means his contribution extends far beyond translation; he is a cultural interpreter who successfully shifted Latvian literary views on China by directly confronting the lingering influence of Soviet thought.

Overall, *Under the Flags of Ten Nations* plays an important role in Latvian literary reception. It expands the understanding of Latvian life-writing, encourages readers to look beyond national borders, and offers new ways to study how identity is formed in multicultural and politically unstable environments.

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V. VISUALITY, ART, AND HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION

SESSHŪ'S APPROACH TO TIME IN HIS INK LANDSCAPE PAINTING *LONG LANDSCAPE SCROLL IN FOUR SEASONS* (1486)

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the issue of time as reflected in Sesshū Tōyō (雪舟東洋1420–1503) a Zen monk and one of Japan's greatest masters of ink painting masterpiece the *Long Landscape Scroll in Four Seasons* (四季山水長巻*Shiki Sansui chōkan*, c. 1486, Mori Museum collection). *Long Landscape Scroll* expresses the quintessence of his religious, world views performed in brilliant ink painting techniques. Sesshu implies varied techniques in the description of time and there is little previous research focused on this aspect in this painting.

Keywords: *time, ink landscape painting, Sesshū.*

Introduction

The treatment of time in East Asian cultures differs from Western views. While in Western culture influenced by Christianity time is conceived as a linear phenomenon, in East Asian cultures we find evidences of viewing time as cyclic rhythm. Very often the movement of time around the circle is expressed through the alternation of four seasons that found their visual reflection in various kinds of Japanese culture starting from painting, poetry, architecture, tea ceremony, stage arts, garden culture, textile art, traditional kitchen, and so on. In ink landscape painting, that entered Japan from China with already established archetypes, four seasons became one of the most beloved motifs in expressing the traditional view of time as a cycle.

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Chinese painters often expressed time through mist rising, rain clearing, or seasonal transitions. Guo Xi's *Early Spring* (1072) shows time as seasonal awakening, with layered mist revealing the slow shift from winter to spring [Cahill 1988:112].

This article will observe the techniques of rendering time and the underlying ideas in ink painting, focusing on Sesshu and his masterpiece. Sesshū's *Long Landscape Scroll* is a horizontal ink landscape scroll more than 15 meters in length and incorporates multiple techniques of approach towards time beyond the cyclic rhythm created by the change of four seasons.

The scroll depicts the Four Seasons in sequence, but it also incorporates various motifs drawn from Chinese traditions, including scenes inspired by the celebrated West Lake and the poetic cycle of the *Eight Views of Xiao and Xiang*, as well as elements derived from Sesshū's sketches done during his travel in China and other motifs [Haijima 2009: 130–133].

While the four seasons provide the macro-cycle of time, the Xiao and Xiang motifs (such as *Evening Bell from a Mist-Shrouded Temple*, *Returning Sails off a Distant Shore*, *Autumn Market Scene*, and *Evening Glow on the Fishing Village*) punctuate the scroll with micro-cycles of daily, social, and atmospheric temporality.

Besides, time is expressed also with technical means such as brushwork, composition and colour.

Sesshū effectively uses blank spaces in the scroll: to separate compositional units in the scroll, but blank paper spaces also function as pauses, creating rhythm and silence. These gaps embody temporal suspension, akin to pauses in Zen meditation. These empty spaces are called *ma* (間) and hold a philosophical meaning: they function also as a temporal space and provide interval that gives rhythm and meaning.

The character *ma* 間 combines "gate" (門) and "sun" (日), symbolizing sunlight streaming through a doorway [Japan House Los Angeles: 2020].

With *ma* the space between words, sounds and actions takes on clarity and distinctiveness. *Ma* is about emptiness between things, about the silence between the sound, the respite between activity, and the pause between thoughts. *Ma* is typically Zen, and thus a very Japanese way of thinking about space and time [Japan Expert Insights: 2026].

Sesshū uses mist, rivers, and blank expanses to create breathing spaces between episodes. These pauses function like temporal ellipses: the viewer moves from one scene to another as if walking through time. In Zen aesthetics, *ma* is both spatial and temporal, embodying silence, pause, and impermanence.

The long horizontal scroll format – different than typical Western painting, makes the viewer actively involve into the opening process and gradually discover new scenes. According to Fong, as the viewer moves through shifting terrain – village, river, mountains – time becomes embodied in the act of viewing [Fong 1992: 67].

The scroll invites to a travel in time.

Time in Sesshū's *Landscape Scroll in Four Seasons*

In the the opening scene of the scroll that features a master and his disciple starting a journey along a path winding upwards through a craggy mountain range towards the houses partly obscured by mountains and evening mist – the season is spring. It is possible to view the scroll online at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Landscapes_of_the_Four_Seasons_by_Sesshu_(Mori_Museum).jpg

Spring is the season when nature wakes up from a winter sleep to start a new cycle of activities. Sesshū links this period of time in the year with the initialization of his own picturesque story. In East Asia it is traditionally the time when a new farming season starts and is the beginning of a new year. Lush green trees growing on the rocks bring the the feeling of spring suggesting that the power of life in this season is so strong that even on almost bare rocks the trees have grown a dense foliage. The time of the day is early morning when the two main characters – the master and his disciple start their journey. It is the beginning of a new activity. The road leads upward the mountain – possibly adding a philosophical meaning – this new activity – the road started, has a religious objective – to lead to the enlightenment. As the eye follows the mountain path, the viewer finds out that the goal of the first day journey is a temple hidden behind the cliffs, only the roofs are visible. This kind of composition has old historical roots in Chinese painting: it belongs to the topic of one of the *Eight Views of Xiao and Xiang* developed in China by poet and painter Song Di (宋迪, 11th century) and is called *Evening Bell from a Mist-Shrouded Temple*.

Song Di, the Northern Song official credited with creating the *Eight Views*, originally conceived *Evening Bell from a Mist-Shrouded Temple* as a poetic image of exile and melancholy [Murck 1996: 113–144]. His interpretation emphasized the resonance of the temple bell through mist at twilight, a sound that symbolized both distance from home and the passage of time. The bell's echo, fading into obscurity, became a metaphor for impermanence and longing [Murck 2000:111–115].

The original poems by Song Di have been lost, but later poets in East Asia interpreted this topic in different times, varied ways, giving slightly different interpretations.

Chan Buddhists interpreted the scene from a religious point of view.

Juefan Huihong's poem *Evening Bell from a Mist-Shrouded Temple*:

Light mist covers the evening, twilight comes on,
Soronous distant bell carries to a remote village;
Small bridge spans a stream, signs of men are gone,
A barely visible flag flutters at the foot of the mountain. [Murck 2000: 286]

Yang Wanli's (1127–1206), one of the "Four Masters" of Southern Song poetry, interpretation seem to fit best for Sesshū's painting. Sesshū being a painter and also a Zen monk was well informed on the traditions of the Song and later period

Chinese poetry. Yang Wanli's version of *Evening Bell from a Mist-Shrouded Temple* emphasizes sound dissolving into emptiness that could resemble Sesshū's message:

> *Through mist the temple roofs are hidden,*
> *Evening bell resounds across the valley.*
> *The echo lingers, then fades into silence,*
> *Time itself vanishes with the sound.* [Yang 2000]

Yang Wanli's Chan Buddhist sensibility turns the bell into a meditation on emptiness. The poem links auditory experience to the dissolution of time.

Sesshū interprets twilight as a spiritual threshold. Mist and fading sound embody impermanence. Time is experienced as dissolution, aligning with Zen meditation.

After dawn, evening bells and rest at the misty temple comes a new day and the travel continues. A stretch of mist symbolizes the passage of time, the change of circumstances. This blank space also suggests openness and potential, echoing the pause before a new phase of development.

The next set of the composition is a group of lush green pine trees and a plum tree growing on almost bare rocks – another symbol of spring and the renewal of the cycle. Pine trees and the plum are growing on the almost bare rocks – a scene rarely found in the nature might symbolize nature's power of renewal even in difficult conditions, meanwhile the composition becomes a meditative pause in the journey. The act of viewing the picture becomes a meditation.

In Chinese Song painting the depiction of trees had meanings beyond their natural looks. M. Powers quoting Guo Ruoxu – Chinese 11th century Master of Landscape naturalism, wrote:

> *Their bleak, weathered landscapes portray not only the ravages of frost, wind, and drought but, metaphorically, the depredations of unjust government. Their tall pines, trunks stripped of bark by ill winds, were metaphors for men of integrity who defied the attacks of powerful adversaries. It was these masters-men like Li Cheng, Fan Kuan, and Guo Zhongshu, who studied the imprint of weather and time on trees, rocks, and soil, as well as the effects of light and mist. They did so, not to mirror God's truth, but to convey even more poignantly their social message.*
> [Powers 2017: 58]

Throughout the picture, Sesshū inserts motifs of gnarled trees growing on bare rocks or mystically attached to the almost vertical bare rocks. Despite unwelcome growing conditions these trees have green leaves but their wind torn trunks and branches speak of numerous difficulties they have experienced. Sesshū lived in times of unrest. He painted the *Landscape Scroll of Four Seasons* in Yamaguchi – far away from the capital, where he had found a retreat from warfare that has ravaged the capital Kyoto. Like Song traditions in painting these motifs could suggest political and military storms going on in his country.

Another cluster of buildings and a winding path in the mountains leading in the depts of the picture, creates the feeling of vast space behind the frontal compositions. After a while in the mist, in the distance we see the roofs of another village. Sesshū often depicts time-worn humble cottages that reflects his sympathy towards ordinary people, their activities and uneasy life.

It is another evening and we imagine that the travellers will take a rest. This element suggests a miniature pause after which probably on a new day – Sesshū continues the composition with the master and his disciple crossing a bridge over a mountain stream – the travel continues. Another set of flat bare rocks crossing each other with fir trees mystically growing on them erupts the composition – thus reminding the viewer about the ascetism, discipline, rigidity, patience, endurance despite harsh conditions and other Zen Buddhist values as well as possibly suggesting social unrest in the country. The sceneries that Sesshū depicted pleased the eye of a person admiring mountain hermits' life and in Zen temples the monks and their disciples often viewed similar pictures to replace actual walks in the mountains. The scenes have little reminiscence of the usual worries and troubles of the human life – rather, it is a distancing from the worldly matters, taking a meditative pause.

Behind the craggy mountain slabs unwinds the path – Sesshū invites to the continuation of the journey – the viewer arrives to the village on the banks of some river or lake. Light green willow trees suggest that the season has changed to the end of spring – beginning of the summer. The windows of the houses are widely open; the clothes are hung out for drying. Warm and bright sunrays reflect on the water; the sky is clear. Tiny human figures are seen inside the house and boats. Sesshū creates an impression that it is a rather hot early summer day full of human activity. After meditative stretches of pure nature as a contrast Sesshū inserts a scene full of human activity, yet the human figures are extremely tiny and distanced as if just a background observed during the journey.

After a dense scene with multiple details as a contrast next comes a vast stretch of water that suggests the passage of time and change in the daytime and the season. Time is experienced as intensity, yet Sesshū's pauses remind us that fullness is temporary. These vast intervals of emptiness invite to a pause and meditation. He leads the eye to the tiny boats returning to a distant shore – scarlet red tints in the sky suggest evening. The flow of time slows down.

Literati painters often expressed time by suspending it. Empty pavilions, still water, and distant peaks evoke a sense of timeless continuity, the long duration of nature beyond human life [Clunas 1997: 54].

Boats returning to a distant shore in the evening glow – this set of elements belongs to the scene *Returning Sails off a Distant Shore* – one of the topics of the *Eight scenes of Xiao and Xiang*. Numerous poets in East Asia have dedicated their verses to this scene and artists have created their variations of visual sceneries.

The motif of *Returning Sails* was one of the most evocative in the *Eight Views* cycle, symbolizing the end of labour, the return home, and the passage of time marked by evening light.

According to A.Murck, Southern Song poetry often emphasized the melancholy of exile and the beauty of dusk [Murck 2000: 82–84]. Fan Chengda (1126–1193) wrote:

> 「遠浦歸帆暮色中，斷雲疏雨幾家東。客心已逐孤篷去，目送潮平一片空。」
> *Returning sails at the distant shore in the dusk;*
> *Broken clouds and scattered rain drift eastward over a few riverside homes.*
> *My traveller's heart has already followed the lone sail;*
> *I watch until the tide levels and all becomes empty.* [Fan 1983: 412]

Another poem by Fan Chengda:

> 「遠浦歸帆帶夕陽，亂山深處起微茫。孤篷漸入瀟湘雨，萬里行人夢亦長。」[Fan 1983: 427]
> *A returning sail at the distant shore carries the setting sun;*
> *From deep among tangled hills a faint mist rises.*
> *A lone boat drifts slowly into XiaoXiang's rain,*
> *And the traveller's long journey stretches on into dreams.* ([Author's translation]

Here, the waning light and boats fading into distance mark time as both atmospheric and narrative. This verse emphasizes impermanence and the cyclical rhythm of departure and return.

Ming dynasty elaborations developed the theme with more social and communal imagery:

Wu Kuan (1435–1504):

> 「浦口歸舟帶夕煙，漁歌斷續過汀邊。網收水闊魚聲亂，隔岸人家火正然。」[Wu 1987:259]
> *A returning boat at the river mouth carries the evening mist;*
> *Fishermen's songs rise and fall as they pass the shoal.*
> *Nets drawn in, the wide water stirs with splashing fish;*
> *Across the bank, household fires burn bright.* [Author's translation]

Here, time is communal – the day's labour ends in shared relief and joy.

Bihaedang's Joseon album (16th century) also includes verses describing sails furled at dusk, underscoring the ritual of return as a daily temporal marker [Park 2016: 121].

In the *Long Landscape Scroll*, Sesshū translates these poetic atmospheres into ink:

Boats gliding across misty expanses are depicted with minimal strokes, emphasizing emptiness (*ma*) around them. The sails are simplified forms, often half-furled, suggesting the slowing of movement and the day's closure. Time is expressed through transition: the boats move from clustered dwellings toward open water, embodying the shift from labour to rest.

Unlike the poets, who emphasize sound and communal voices, Sesshū emphasizes silence and space – the boats dissolve into mist, their return marked by absence rather than presence. Examples in both poetry and painting emphasize impermanence and cyclical return, but Sesshū's ink painting shifts the focus from human sound to natural silence, aligning with Zen aesthetics. *Returning Sails* scene embodies time as both narrative and atmospheric: poets emphasize sound and communal return, while Sesshū emphasizes silence, emptiness, and spatial rhythm.

After open riverbanks, Sesshū invites to a new shore – a mountain landscape with tiny figures escaping heat in a cooling cay, engaged in meditation. The entrance of the cave is covered by trees adding more shade. The scene suggests that outside temperatures are high and it is the middle of summer. Behind the cave in the misty valley there are visible roofs of the building and a pagoda nearby. After which come flat rocks with gnarly trees growing on them, another cluster of buildings, vertical rocks with buildings on the top and on the side of the mountain, a wide terrace with a pavilion overlooking another misty water scenery. The pavilion offers a pleasant shade for travelers in the summer season. In the pavilion the passage of time stops for a while, the meditative wide water scenery stretching in the depts of the picture invites you to pause and reflect. The almost blank and misty scenery is a device to suggest the passage of time and the change of the season on the next shore when the travelers come to a fishing village. The harvested rice suggests that the season is autumn. Fishing boats peacefully rest on the shore – the day activities have finished; it is time to rest. This scene belongs to another topic from *Eight Views of Xiao and Xiang – Evening Glow on the Fishing Village*.

The *Evening Glow* motif in the *Eight Views* cycle captures the fleeting beauty of sunset, a liminal moment between day and night. Southern Song poets and later Ming literati elaborated on this theme to emphasize impermanence, melancholy, and the rhythm of daily closure.

Southern Song poet Fan Chengda (1126–1193) wrote:

江浦夕陽帶水紅，漁舟歸棹過蘆叢。潮平兩岸無人語，一笛風來月影中。
At the river inlet the setting sun reddens the water;
Fishing boats return, their oars brushing through the reeds.
With the tide level, both banks fall silent;
A single flute note drifts on the wind beneath the rising moon. [Fan 1983: 462]

Here, time is atmospheric – the glow marks the day's end.

A poem attributed to Yujian on *Fishing Village in Evening Glow:*

Red sun in clear sky suffuses a sandy spit,
Having sold the fish, half sobered up from wine.
Straw hat, rain cape not yet dry, elm boards quiet,
A sound of horizontal bamboo flute, many peaks are dark. [Murck 2000: 287]

Here the moment is late afternoon moving toward dusk. Time is shown through light spreading and thinning, not through a clock. The sun's redness signals the day's decline, and the sandy spit becomes a surface that records this transition. Time is depicted as waning brightness. Besides, time is embodied in the rhythm of labour and rest, not in hours. Time is portrayed as daily routine. In the next lines time is shown through residue, the way objects remember what humans forget.

Ming dynasty poet and painter Shen Zhou (1427–1509) in both poetry and painting depicted evening glow as a moment of contemplative beauty, where "the red light lingers on the water, dissolving into mist" [Zhou 1988]. His work emphasizes emptiness and transition.

Another Ming dynasty poet Wu Kuan (1435–1504) wrote:

「漁舟一葉下寒潮，網重歸來語笑饒。隔岸炊煙生樹杪，斜陽深處水迢迢。」
A single fishing boat rides down the cold tide;
With heavy nets they return, voices bright with laughter.
Across the bank, cooking smoke rises to the treetops;
In the slanting sun, the river stretches far and deep. [Wu Vol. 5 1987: 173]

Here, time moves through the poem as a quiet sequence of transitions, each marked not by clocks or explicit hours but by light, labour, sound, and distance. The poem expresses time as something felt, not measured.

Southern Song painters often depicted evening glow with subtle ink washes and faint colour, emphasizing atmosphere over detail. The glow was suggested through tonal gradation rather than explicit depiction [Cahill 1994].

In Ming painting Literati painters like Shen Zhou used red washes and expansive skies to highlight the transience of sunset, often pairing poems with images to reinforce impermanence [Zhou 1988].

Sesshū uses layered washes to suggest fading light, with mountains and water dissolving into mist. Unlike Ming painters who used red, Sesshū relies on monochrome ink, emphasizing emptiness *(ma)* and tonal rhythm. The scene embodies impermanence – the glow is not depicted directly but implied through atmosphere, inviting the viewer to imagine the transition creating temporal rhythm. Whereas poets emphasize sound (songs fading, laughter rising) and colour (red glow), Sesshū emphasizes silence and emptiness, aligning with Zen aesthetics.

To summarize the above mentioned, the poets used sensory detail – sound, colour, communal activity – to mark sunset's temporality. The painters (Southern Song and Ming) suggested glow through tonal gradation or colour washes, emphasizing atmosphere. Sesshū distils the motif into ink emptiness, rendering evening glow as a visual pause – a moment of silence and impermanence. Together, they show evening glow as both communal and contemplative, a fleeting beauty that dissolves into emptiness.

After an evening in the fisherman's village the master and his disciple continue the travel. They cross a bridge over the river coming from the harvested fields – another seasonal marker of the autumn. Next comes a lively mountain market scene. The marketplace is full of colourful figures, one of the buildings is a pub with open door. The trees on the surrounding rocks have red fruit – the symbol of autumn and abundance. Just behind the market there is an entrance to the cave. Through the openings in the vertical rock, we can partly see that the cave has a road leading upwards with bigger and smaller rooms for contemplation. Sesshū draws a stunning contrast between the worldly affairs symbolized by the market and the sacred area, the hermit's road – the cave. These contrasting worlds co-exist close to each other.

This topic again belongs to one of the scenes of the *Eight Views of Xiao and Xiang – The Mountain Market, Clearing Mist* scene.

Traditionally in Chinese poetry The *Mountain Market Scene* in the *Eight Views* cycle emphasized the rhythms of human life within seasonal change. Southern Song poets and later Ming literati elaborated on this motif to highlight the bustle of trade, the atmosphere of harvest, and the melancholy of autumn.

Fan Chengda (1126–1193), a Southern Song poet is known for his pastoral poems. He wrote verses describing autumn markets as

> 「山市晴嵐曉色開，遠峰初霽帶青來。漁樵往返煙中路，一片人家市井隈」。 [Fan Vol. 27 1983: 413]
>
> *At the mountain market the clearing mist opens into morning light;*

Distant peaks, newly washed by rain, return in shades of blue.
Fishermen and woodcutters come and go along paths veiled in haze;
A cluster of homes lies tucked within the market's bend.

In this poem time moves through the poem as a gradual unfolding of morning, revealed through light, movement, and the slow reemergence of the world after rain. Nothing states the hour directly; instead, time is expressed through transitions – from mist to clarity, from stillness to activity, from obscurity to visibility.

Another Song poet Lu You (1125–1210) often used market imagery to evoke the social rhythms of rural life:

山市朝晴雲氣收，遠峰新洗帶青浮。行人踏徑煙中出，小店柴門犬自吠。 [Lu Vol. 29 1979: 447]
At the mountain market the morning clears as clouds withdraw;
Distant peaks, newly washed, rise in drifting blue.
Travelers step from misted paths as they emerge;
At a small shop's brushwood gate a dog barks on its own. [Author's translation]

Here, time appears as a gradual morning emergence, revealed through changes in light, atmosphere, movement, and sound. Nothing states the hour directly; instead, time is felt through transitions from obscurity to clarity and from stillness to activity.

Ming dynasty poet Wu Kuan (1435–1504) described autumn markets as places of communal gathering:

「山市朝來霽色新，行人語笑滿前津。柴扉小店炊煙起，樵客肩薪過渡頻。」 [Wu Vol. 8 1987: 214]
At the mountain market the morning clears with freshened light;
Travelers' voices and laughter fill the ford ahead.
From a small shop's brushwood gate cooking smoke rises;
Woodcutters, bundles on their shoulders, cross the ferry again and again.
[Author's translation]

Time unfolds in the poem as a morning gradually taking shape, revealed through shifts in light, sound, movement, and repeated human activity. Nothing marks the hour explicitly; instead, time is sensed through transitions that show the world waking, his poetry emphasizes time as social experience.

Another Ming poet Shen Zhou (1427–1509), in painting and poetry, often depicted rustic markets with figures dwarfed by landscape, reinforcing the humility of human activity within nature's cycles. One of his poems on this topic reads:

山市朝來霽色新，微雲散盡見諸鄰。樵夫踏露行山徑，小店柴門犬自頻。 [Zhou Vol. 4 1981: 212]

At the mountain market the morning clears with newly brightened light;
Thin clouds disperse, revealing the neighbouring homes.
Woodcutters tread the dew as they walk the mountain path;
At a small shop's brushwood gate a dog barks repeatedly. [Author's translation]

In Southern Song painting handscrolls of the *Eight Views* often depicted market scenes with clusters of figures, stalls, and boats, framed by misty expanses. The emphasis was on temporal atmosphere – markets as fleeting gatherings within the larger rhythm of nature.

Ming painting has examples where literati scrolls expanded the motif with more detailed depictions of human interaction but always subordinated to landscape. The market was a temporal punctuation in the scroll's unfolding journey.

Sesshū's interpretation in the *Long Landscape Scroll* is slightly different. While Sesshū integrates the *Autumn Market Scene* into his seasonal progression, small human figures and market stalls appear, but they are dwarfed by mountains and rivers. Large blank expanses of mist or *ma* around the mountain scenery separate clusters of activity, emphasizing the intervals of silence around human bustle.

Sesshū creates temporal rhythm: the market scene marks autumn as a social season, but Sesshū renders it with restraint – activity dissolves into emptiness, suggesting impermanence.

In comparison to poetry, whereas poets emphasize sound (voices, laughter) and sensory detail (smoke, grain), Sesshū emphasizes visual emptiness and spatial rhythm. The market becomes a fleeting punctuation in the scroll's meditative journey through time.

To summarize the above mentioned, poets highlighted sound, smell, and communal exchange to mark autumn's temporality. Painters (Southern Song and Ming): depicted markets as clusters of activity within misty landscapes, emphasizing atmosphere. Sesshū uses *ma* and ink wash to render the market as a subdued, transient moment – human life dwarfed by nature's cycles. Together, they show autumn as both communal and impermanent, a season of gathering that dissolves into silence and emptiness.

After the lively Mountain market scene comes an interval formed by the group of fir trees growing on the rocks, compressed in the lower part of the picture while most of the space is filled by the depiction of sky. This almost empty part of the composition suggests the passage of time. Sharp and rounded brushstrokes in the sky suggest that a storm has come, weather conditions have changed. Immediately after that starts a new scenery with solitary, massive city wall, dark sky and snow-covered mountains – the season is winter.

The scroll ends with a composition of a plum tree and a pine in the mountains – a symbol of a new beginning, another cycle of four seasons and the passage of time around a circle.

Brushstroke rhythm, calligraphy, and temporal tension

Sesshū's brushwork itself conveys time. In his painting angular strokes contrast with soft washes, creating tension between immediacy and timelessness.

This gestural quality links Sesshū's painting to Zen calligraphy (*shodō*). Each brushstroke is a temporal event – a record of the artist's embodied movement in the present moment. The stroke cannot be erased or repeated; it is both instantaneous and permanent. Sesshū's landscapes inherit this philosophy: his brushwork is not merely descriptive but temporal, capturing the rhythm of lived time.

Dense, calligraphic passages accelerate perception; soft washes and dispersed ink slow it. By alternating these modes across *Eight View* episodes and seasonal transitions, Sesshū sculpts a viewing tempo that mirrors natural cycles.

Conclusion: Time, *ma*, and thepoetic landscape in Sesshū's scroll

Sesshū's *Long Landscape Scroll* is a meditation on time and impermanence, deeply rooted in Chinese poetic traditions and Zen aesthetics.

Four Seasons provide the macro-cycle of time – emergence, fullness, decline, stillness – each expressed through *ma* as openness, compression, separation, and emptiness.

Xiao and Xiang motifs provide micro-cycles – daily rhythms (morning, evening), social rhythms (market, return), atmospheric transitions (mist, glow).

Sesshū's innovation is that by combining seasonal cycles with poetic episodes, Sesshū creates a layered temporality where emptiness (*ma*) becomes the medium of time.

Sesshū's scroll embodies *impermanence (mujō* 無常) and *emptiness (mu* 無). By translating poetic sound and colour into visual silence and space, he creates a contemplative journey where the viewer experiences time as both cyclical and ephemeral.

Epilogue: Contemporary resonances

Sesshū's aesthetics are evident in Japanese culture today. The principles of *wabi-sabi* and *yūgen* are found in the tea ceremony (*chanoyu* 茶の湯), where silence, pauses, and seasonal awareness embody *ma* and impermanence. In Japanese architecture, minimalist spaces emphasize emptiness and rhythm, echoing Sesshū's use of blank paper. Contemporary designers such as Tadao Ando have drawn on Zen aesthetics, using light, shadow, and void to create temporal experiences in concrete and glass.

Similarly, Japanese minimalism in design and lifestyle reflects Sesshū's vision: impermanence, simplicity, and subtlety are celebrated as sources of beauty. Just as Sesshū's brushstrokes dissolve into emptiness, modern interiors embrace uncluttered spaces where time and silence can be felt. His ink landscapes thus remain a living philosophy, shaping not only art but the very way Japanese culture experiences time.

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PHOTOGRAPHY IN CHINA AS A DOCUMENTARY OF HISTORY – AN APPROACH OF VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY, 1842–1860

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Abstract

Since the advent of photography in 1839, the image has become a very important documentary witness. After it reached China during the first Opium War (1839–1842), the world could witness a more authentic representation of its society, culture and history. The present research will focus on analyzing the images of Milton Miller and Felice Beato with the help of Barrett's *Construct for Interpreting Photographs* and the three steps to analyse their images: description, reflection, and formal analysis. The results of the present research show that Milton and Beato used different approaches to represent their photo subjects. Milton's images can be classified as interpretations and aesthetic evaluations. However, Beato's images are descriptions and explanations. Based on the eyewitness accounts on their personal details and their subjects' representation in these images, it can be concluded that each of them tried to represent China as truthfully as possible, however; their knowledge about the subjects still presented a deficiency in understanding. In addition, the distance with their subjects and the culture they were a part of represents another important stumbling block for analyzing these images.

Keywords: *photography, Milton Miller, Felice Beato, Second Opium War, visual ethnography.*

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CULTURE CROSSROADS

Introduction

The years 1839–1842 and 1856–1860 were very tumultuous periods in China's history known for the first and second Opium War. During this period, China was subjugated to a multitude of foreign military campaigns and unequal treaties, such as the Tianjin Treaty. Even though foreign influence seemed mostly detrimental but the advent of photography in 1839 and its arrival to China presented a more profound overview when it comes to historical evidence. In 1839, when the French scientist Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre (1787–1851) invented the daguerreotype – a process of recording light images through a lens on a silver compound, it served as an important medium of art, a witness of history and a crucial element that shaped photo journalism. Before long, two British army officers – Dr Richard Woosnam and Major George Alexander Malcolm – brought this technology to China at the end of the First Opium War (1839–1842). Only a diary entry by then 14-year-old English boy Harry Parkes remains,

> *Major Malcolm and Dr Woosnam took a sketch of the place to-day on their daguerreotype. I cannot understand it at all: but on exposing a highly polished steel plate to the sun by the aid of some glass or other it takes the scene before you onto the plate and by some solution it will stay on the plate for years.* [Wu 2016: 7]

During these 20 years, China saw a significant influx of foreigners – military personnel, diplomats, business people, missionaries, and photographers. Starting from 1842, treaty ports of Tianjin, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Guangzhou were opened up to foreigners, where many of them established their own photo studios. George West, Hugh Mackay, Robert Sillar and William Vacher, just to name a few, were among the first to document China on daguerreotypes. Even though there were many foreign photographers in China, but for the most part, not many of their daguerreotypes have been preserved until the present day. The earliest surviving daguerreotypes were taken in 1844 by the French photographer; customs officer at the French embassy in China Jules Alphonse Eugène Itier (1802–1877). During his stay in Guangdong, he produced 32 known daguerreotypes of panoramas, portraits, which is the largest amount during his stay in a single location [Massot 2015: 330].

Undeniably, the early daguerreotypes possess an immense value in terms of photographic evidence by adding a lot of missing details to the course of history. The image usually embodies artist's personal experience, viewpoint, emotions, or the process of exploring aesthetic issues. However, E. Hall argues that it does not convey any new information but activates the meaning that is already held by the viewer [Hall, 1966, cited in Schwartz, D. 1988: 120].

Taking into account that the advent of photography began during the colonialism period, which could be described by hegemonic efforts to extend the foreign influence to "less developed" nations. Stereotyping and commodifying one's culture by a means of various media including photography was a very common occurrence. The mixture of superficial glamorizing of the exotic and cultural superiority was prevalent in the mindset of the colonizers; thus, E. Hall's argument serves as the main hypothesis for this research. This article will focus on two photographers: Milton Miller (1830–1899) and Felice Beato (1832–1909). Each photographer was chosen according to their areas of expertise – portraiture and photo journalism and the analysis of their work would provide a deeper insight in how the foreign powers represented China and its society from 1842–1860. The present research will employ the following three steps to analyse their images: description, reflection, and formal analysis.

Theoretical construct for interpreting photographs

The article published by a prominent photography scholar Terry Barrett in 1986 – *Theoretical Construct for Interpreting Photographs* is one of the most detailed systems that adds to the value to the current research of art criticism. The article emphasizes the importance of theoretical constructs and recommended practices for teaching about photography in art education and their changes from 1930s until 1986 [Barrett 1986: 52].

Barrett's new system includes six categories of images:

1) Descriptions – visual recordings of empirical qualities and quantities, which are meant to be interpretively and evaluatively neutral.
2) Explanations – photographers attempt being objective in explaining how thigs are.
3) Interpretations – this type of images asserts photographer's subjective understanding of phenomena and generally point out the worldviews they have.
4) Ethical evaluations – imply moral judgements by depicting how things should or should not be.
5) Aesthetic evaluations – the photographer deems that some people, places or objects are worthy of aesthetic admiration.
6) Theoretical photographs – they are generally made to address the issues about photography in a form of art commentary or visual art criticism [Ibid. 55–58].

However, there are still some problems in categorizing the images taken during the colonial period because of the photographers' subjective attitude towards the colonized, which was dominated by hegemonic mindset as described in Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

This was, of course, because Orientals were almost everywhere nearly the same. The Oriental is depicted as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison), something one illustrates (as in a zoological manual).

[Said 2019: 38–40]

Additional difficulty in completing the above-mentioned task is answering the question of how these images, the process of taking them, their captions, commentaries, and reports on the personal details on photographers themselves are depicted in various documentary sources: eyewitness reports and journal articles.

Milton Miller

In 1859, American photographer Milton M. Miller (1830–1899) from San Francisco travelled to China and formed a partnership with Charles Leander Weed in the newly-established Weed and Howard Photographic Gallery in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, where he pioneered in Chinese portraiture mostly focusing on the portraits of Chinese officials, businessmen and women [Wu 2016: 19–20].

Milton's most notable feature is the full body photographs of his subjects where he followed the Chinese artistic tradition of ancestor paintings[1]. He strictly observes this tradition where the subjects wear official clothing, accessories, imperial insignias, and hats, even the furniture – a round-backed chair with footrest, standing screen and table in the photo studio tries to imitate the elements typically present in these paintings. However, there are some inconsistencies, depicted in the following subchapters. To conduct a detailed analysis, the author of this research will use the three steps of description, reflection, and formal analysis to further investigate these images in detail.

Clothing, accessories, and the wearer's status

It is very difficult to determine the authenticity of the photos and whether the subject actually is a part of a "photo project" and not even the make-believe captions could shed light on their identities. This can also be related to Miller's personal attitude towards his photo subjects, for he never actually noted down their

[1] The ancestor painting always depicts the subject in a rigidly frontal and symmetrical pose seated in a chair while wearing a highly formal and decorated robe, hat and accessories. The emotionless expression of the ancestor is the main aspect of the portrait.

names and titles precisely[2]. In addition, there exists an eyewitness account about his rude attitude towards hired labourers[3].

The present article will use several images taken by Miller to show some of the most noticeable elements in clothing, accessories and insignias that cast doubt on the veracity of the subjects' social class represented in these images and their captions. The pioneering work on debunking the veracity of these images was done by Professor Wu Hung in his work *Zooming in Histories of Photography in China* (2016). Meanwhile, not much attention has been paid to the actual details of clothing and accessories worn by the subjects in photographs.

Figure 1. Miller, Milton, *The First Wife of the Tartar General,* 1861–1863, image, 11 1/8 × 8 3/4 in. (28.3 × 22.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art

[2] In different captions of different images that still contain the same photo subjects, their identity is dissimilar (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).

[3] In Guangdong, Miller hired fourteen coolies to move his equipment but when they refused his offer of dollar to each, he shot one of them in the thigh and was given a four-hundred-dollar bond, however, the wound proved to be slight and, after having paid a seventy-five-dollar fine, he was released.

This image (Figure 1) was taken during the time when Milton worked in Guangdong, it has several captions *The First Wife of the Tartar General* and *Mandarin's Wife.* There is still a lot of mystery surrounding this image; one of the biggest breakthroughs happened in 2006 during the exhibition *Photography of China*: *Ti* and *Yong*, *Essence and Innovation*, which took place at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 11–12 December, 2006, when some of Miller's images were scrutinized and it was found out that the elderly female photo subject was also a part of other images. In his famous work, Professor Wu mentions some inconsistencies in clothing and accessories that appear in these photos, such as wearing officials' attire combined with inappropriate overcoats, insignias that do not correspond to the photo subject's official rank, sharing of the same clothes by different photo subjects, and even combining Manchu and Han style clothing [Wu 2016].

Even though Miller based his photography on imitating ancestral portraits as much as possible, there is an additional difficulty posed by the dubious authenticity of the ancestors' portraits, even before photography reached China. Stuart and Rawski have noted that ancestors' portraits have been considered as a valuable documentary source of the Chinese material world, however; painters often created court costumes without having appropriate prior knowledge[4] [Stuart 2001: 111]. The above comment could also be relevant when determining the authenticity of Miller's images. As regards the sumptuary laws in China's imperial history, Qu [Qu 1965: 154] accentuates that the sumptuary laws issued by the central government were supposed to be upheld. Nevertheless, the population tended to ignore them. As a result, the fact that Miller, who could not have been familiar with the Qing sumptuary laws and some of his photo subjects who possibly ignored them, could add to the difficulty in ascertaining their identities.

Regarding the first image (Figure 1) as an example, the author has found several more inconsistencies. The first caption *The First Wife of the Tartar General* seems to be misleading, owing to the fact that the photo subject wears a crane insignia signifying the first rank of a civil official, even though the caption states she is a general's wife. According to Schuyler Camann [1944: 71], the research of mandarin squares lacks scholarship and reliable information, there exists a considerable body of inaccurate folklore based on dealer's assumptions.

This exact problem can be seen in the present image, where the female wears a crane insignia, which is usually worn by civil officials. According to Stuart and Rawski [2001: 137], Qing military officials had 9 types of military badges (補子, *buzi*):

[4] There are two concerns about the accuracy of the costume: the first one is whether the costume actually corresponds to the dynastic time period and the second concern is whether the status markers in the painting actually represent one's social identity.

qilin, lion, leopard, tiger, bear, panther, rhinoceros, another interpretation of rhinoceros (after 1759)[5], and a sea horse[6].

In addition, high-ranking military officials were more faithful to the sumptuary laws than humble citizens. The style and colour of women's court dress was also strongly regulated and included detailed particulars as regards ornaments and symbols. Furthermore, husband's rank was extended to his wife, where she had to wear an identical badge that should be positioned symmetrically facing the husband's badge [Stuart 2001: 112, 135].

Here, the elderly woman is clearly wearing a fourth-rank official's badge portraying a wild goose facing right, which adds to another inconsistency regarding her identity stated by the photographer. Supposedly if the photo female subject was the wife of a general, the position of the rank badge would still be incorrect. As stated by Garrett and Stuart and Rawski [2007: 78; 2001: 112], for a civil official, the animal's head should face the wearer's right; for his wife the badge should face left. However, for a military official the animal's head should face left and for his wife, the badge should face right.

Furthermore, images by other photographers also had subjects wearing accessories and clothing with imperial insignias that have been added on later, while they clearly had no connection with the Qing Imperial Court. Several photos of Zhan Shichai (詹世釵) (Chang the Chinese Giant) taken at the end of the 19th century at the famous *A-Fong* studio is another clear example [see Bennett 2014: 85].

Here it clearly shows that Milton did not pay attention to neither of his photo subjects and their identities. The image with the elderly female photo subject also poses additional questions about her true identity largely because of the absence of her husband. Even though his rank is mentioned in one of the captions, similarly to the custom of ancestral paintings, both husband and wife should be photographed together as a couple sitting side by side. In addition, none of the available Milton's images show the elderly female photographed with her husband, only on one instance she can be seen with two other males that could be her two sons in *Mandarin with Family.*

Another important detail is the accessories: the earrings worn by the female photo subject. According to the Machu court customs, high-ranking women should wear three separate earrings in each earlobe, however, the female photo subject had one large gold earring in each ear also in several other images, where she was wearing civilian's clothing.

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[5] Rhinoceros badges are extremely hard to find nowadays, because once the dynasty fell in 1911, soldiers were ordered to destroy them.

[6] The sea horse should not be confused with the sea creature. Here the badge depicts a mythical horse galloping under the sea.

In addition, the image clearly shows that the photo subject has bound feet, which was a cultural practice common for the Han women. There is a lot of room for research when it comes to the identity of the elderly female photo subject with bound feet. To reiterate the captions *The First Wife of the Tartar General* and *Mandarin's Wife* is important because there are several additional inconsistencies.

Firstly, according to Elliott and Smith [2001: 246; 2015: 59], Tartar and Manchu women usually wore boots and rode horses like men and even took part in men's hunting parties. In addition, during the late 1700s, George Staunton – a member of the Macartney embassy, also observed that it was uncommon for these women to conform to this habit.

Secondly, it can be seen from the shape of the footwear that the female photo subject is wearing lotus shoes instead of the Manchu platform shoes which only emulated the gait of the women with bound feet.

Taking this information into account, the author can deduct that she cannot be the first wife of a Tartar general, because Manchu males exclusively took Manchu women as their primary wives, while Chinese banner or Han civilian women were usually their secondary wives or even concubines [Elliott 2001: 254].

Thus, the author holds a firm belief that the elderly female photo subject is likely of Han descent and her title in the captions is misleading. Although several sources mention her as the possible spouse of the Governor of the Guangdong Province Huang Zantang (黄赞汤) (1805–1869) but no credible evidence has yet been found [Wu 2013: 30]. Yet the question still remains why is he not present in any of these images while still being alive?

Another set of images (Figure 2, Figure 3) contain a young man. However, his social status in both versos differs from one image to another, for instance, the young man in the centre (Figure 2) is described as a mandarin, however, the verso of the second image (Figure 3) presents him as a wealthy merchant, which is a more plausible explanation.

This can be explained with the absence of the imperial badge in front of the robe and the inconsistent donning of accessories, namely, the hat, which should always be accompanied with the robe. In addition, if the male photo subject wanted to accentuate his mandarin background, he would be very familiar with the strict sumptuary regulations. Another plausible explanation behind the different *merchant* and *mandarin* versos and the peculiar way of dressing could be the common practice of selling official posts and studentships during the Qing dynasty in times of need – floods, famine, and wars. According to McNicholas [2013: 109], these sales proved to be an integral part of the Qing finance and society which continued until the end of the dynastic period. Another more simplified explanation to the discrepant use of titles in versos and captions simply lies within the photographer's reliance on translators and distance from his subjects.

Figure 2. Miller, Milton, *A Mandarin and Friends,* 1861–1864, image, 20 × 15.4 cm (7 7/8 × 6 1/16 in.), J. Paul Getty Museum

Figure 3. Miller, Milton, *Wealthy Merchant of Canton,* 1865, image, 20 × 15.4 cm (7 7/8 × 6 1/16 in.), J. Paul Getty Museum

From the perspective of Barrett's framework of interpreting photographs, Miller's images accommodate to the categories of aesthetic evaluation and interpretation. Miller's attempt to adapt the style of ancestor paintings in his images shows the amalgamation of his unique artistic approach and the longevity of Chinese cultural tradition. The distinguishing feature of Miller's images is that he is not only trying to show his subjects as mere exhibits or commodity for the foreign market but he displays every sitter's inner character – a feature rarely seen in the Chinese visual art.

Felice Beato

Felice Beato (1832–1909) can be considered the first-ever war photographer. Starting from the second half of the 19th century, Beato dedicated his life to photography and he was in the epicentre of major historical events: the Crimean War (1856), the aftermath of the Indian Rebellion (1858), the Second Opium War (1860), Shimonoseki Campaign (1864), the Korean-American War (1871), the Mahdist Uprising (1885) and the Burmese Mutiny (1886). After leaving Calcutta on February 26, 1860 Beato arrived in China, Hong Kong on March 13, of the same year [Bennett 2009: 141–147].

What gave Beato's images their immense documentary value was the fact that Beato was a member of the British expedition army and he followed everywhere until it entered Beijing.

According to Wu [2016: 54], Beato's China series consists of two subseries *From Hong Kong to Pekin* and *From Pekin to Canton*. Each group relates to specific period with a particular theme:

1) The build-up of the British expeditionary army in Hong Kong (March and June 1860);
2) Architecture and the urban environment of Guangzhou (April 1860);
3) The northbound expedition of the Allied forces (July to September 1860);
4) Views of Beijing (October 1860);
5) Portraits of two British and Chinese officials (November 1860)

Beato's portfolio of China images consists of 38 photographs in total. The present research will focus on the second subseries of images – the northbound expedition of the Allied forces.

Photo narration of the northbound expedition of the Allied forces

On 8 April 1860, China rejected the unequal Treaty of Tianjin designed by the Anglo-French allied forces, as a result, the Second Opium War resumed with a full force. In addition, the humiliating defeat by the Qing forces lead by the Qing

Imperial Commissioner Sengge Rinchen (1811–1865) in 1859 was the decisive moment when the Anglo-French army gathered their naval forces in Hong Kong to retaliate. In the early 1860 Lieutenant-General James Hope Grant arrived from India with Felice Beato on board. Beato's main task was to document the British military presence. *Panorama of Hong Kong, taken from Happy Valley* – a 180-degree panorama of five separate images was the first image that Beato documented in his northbound expedition series. According to Wu and Lacoste (2016: 70; 2010: 9), Beato's unique narrative approach to documenting British military campaigns against China served as a celebration of Allied forces' victorious advance to Peking.

The present research will concentrate on several images that Beato took during the occupation of *Tanggu* (塘沽口炮台) and *Dagu* fort (大沽口炮台) from 1 August to 21 August 1860. According to Wu [2016: 67], Beato took 32 images during his China sojourn – three at the Dalian Bay, seven at Beitang, two at Tanggu, twelve at Dagu and eight in Tongzhou area.

Major-General George Allgood in his book *China War, 1860: Letters and Journal* meticulously describes the campaign against China during and after the major battles. The first image in the sub-series was taken in 1 August 1860, when 4000 troops landed at the town of Beitang and seized two forts near the river. Beato's photograph shows the fort taken over by the Allied forces flying the British flag and soldiers' tents on the top of the fort. Beato's photographic narrative usually begins with an image of the outside of the fort after it's capture and the respective entrances of French and British armies. The process of taking over the city by the British and French forces is also described in Allgood's letters to General Henry Eyre dated 6 August 1860,

> *The town and fort were evidently abandoned as not a shot was fired. The next morning, we occupied the town, the French occupying one half, the English the other.* [Allgood 1901: 43]

Beato's photographic narrative closely coincides with Allgood's correspondence to his mother and general Eyre, because the images taken in and outside the Beitang fort (北塘口炮台) from 2–12 August only show the buildings and weapons captured without any Chinese war casualties.

However, on 21 August, when the Allied forces conquered the Dagu fort, which was the crucial waypoint for advancing to Tianjin and later to Beijing, Beato's photographs contained more explicit images – corpses of Chinese soldiers, fort walls and interior ruined by cannonades (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Beato, Felice, *Interior of the North Fort Taken by Storm,* 21 August 1860, image, 25.1 × 30.8 cm (9 7/8 × 12 1/8 in.), J. Paul Getty Museum

There also exist several eyewitness accounts about Beato's zealous, sometimes even morbid, actions when documenting the carnage. According to J. Allgood's report,

> *Beato the famous photographer has got several views of the fort with heaps of dead.* [Allgood 1901: 45]

Another eyewitness account states that Beato did not allow any intervention when it came to ruining the photo composition,

> *I walked around the ramparts on the west side. They were thickly strewed with death – in the north-west angle thirteen were lying in one group around a gun. Signor Beato was here in great excitement, characterizing the group as 'beautiful', and begging that it might not be interfered with until perpetuated by his photographic apparatus, which was done a few minutes afterwards.*
> [Rennie 1864: 112]

There is a lot of speculation behind Beato's motives for his battlefield images. One of the dominant ideas is the colonialist narrative. According to Lacoste [2010: 5], even though Beato tried to create vivid images of the local people, his photographs also supported the colonialist discourse. Beato's images from Burma – one of the British colonies – represented its people as passive. However, in the images of Japan, which preserved its hegemony, the people are represented as confident and sometimes even defiant.

Even though this is a very reassuring argument, however; it only favours the visible aspects represented in an image as such by completely disregarding people's cultural background, worldview and values aligning with the theoretical frameworks of Geert Hofstede and Shalom Shwartz, that would require additional research.

According to Cody and Terpak [2010: 52], another motive behind Beato's battlefield images was to make financial profit with the aim to catch British officers' attention who might buy these photographs as a memento. In addition, for the European audience that was already accustomed to a fixed representation of China in exported works of art, Beato's imagery evoked a powerful and realistic representation.

There are several sources that portray Beato's individual characteristics that provide a more holistic view to the motives behind his images. One of these sources is *Spunyarn from the strands of a sailor's life afloat and ashore* (1924) – a memoir by Admiral Sir Henry Woods, where he writes about an encounter in 1861 with a photographer named Beat[o] in Japan[7]. He seems to have made some fortune from the spoils of war after the looting of *Yuanmingyuan* (圆明园) by selling them in Constantinople. Further on, he describes Beat[o] as an opportunist who sold portraits and albums of views as a "side-line" [Woods 1924: 194].

According to Lieutenant-Colonel Gother Frederick Mann (1817–1881), Beato told him:

> *he [had] very numerous applicants [for his photographs] and [would] probably sell some thousands between Off[ice]rs of the force & Hong Kong people.*
>
> [Wu 2016: 69]

There is a lot of colonialist discourse in the modern academia, when it comes to the representation of Asia during the colonial era. It cannot be denied that the commodification of cultures and catering to the current social beliefs, values, and norms for the sake of artist's fame or financial gain is another important element that requires additional research. This was evident almost in every eyewitness account

7 Beato's work in Japan concentrates more on the social and occupational elements instead of battlefields and war.

when it came to interaction with Beato, thus it can be concluded that Beato's leading motive was financial gain. Furthermore, there is a lack of eyewitness accounts about his interaction with his native photo subjects, that could only mean he kept distance between him and his subjects.

In contrast to Milton's approach of aesthetic evaluation and interpretation, Beato's images can be categorized as descriptions and explanations, especially the images from the subgroup of the northbound expedition of the Allied forces, which strictly follows a narrative sequence. Even though Beato's professional approach at times was perceived as cold and calculating, his images and their captions hold immense documentary value.

Conclusion

According to Bonnell [1988: 39], since 1853 the documentary value of photography has become equivalent to that of eyewitness accounts or chronicles. This was also the case for Milton M. Miller and Felice Beato – their images were the first actual photographic proof that the West had of China. Each photographer had a different approach and motivation behind their art but there was one thing in common – an attempt to establish a connection between two cultures.

Milton's photography focused on the portraits of Chinese officials and businessmen. Many of his portraits depict his photo subjects wearing official's attire but sometimes there are some inconsistencies when it comes to the style of the clothing and accessories. In addition, some of the photo subjects appear in other images with different captions. This can have two explanations:

1) Milton did not pay special attention to his subjects' identities;
2) the photos that he took during his sojourn in Guangzhou was his art project.

From Barrett's theoretical framework of photo analysis, Milton's images can be defined as an aesthetic evaluation and artist's own interpretation of China. Even though Milton tried to imitate ancestors' portraits and their aesthetic as much as possible without being culturally biased, there were some accounts of ridicule of the Chinese photographic peculiarities. One of them was the caricature and a fictitious interview by another photographer John Thomson [Wu 2016: 34]. In addition, Milton's unfamiliarity with the sumptuary laws at the time could serve as another reason.

However, his contribution to portraiture in China is undeniable and has had a great influence on future generations.

As regards Beato, he was not as focused on aesthetic evaluation and interpretation, but instead placed emphasis on description and explanation. Beato focused on narrative exposure of an important historical event, in this case it was the battle of Dagu Forts, entering the capital and all the subsequent events at the end of the Second Opium War, which culminated with the signing of Treaty of Peking on 16 October 1860. Beato can be considered as the first western photojournalist and war correspondent who documented explicit images of war casualties that added to the realism and created a sensation and novelty in Europe. The motivation behind Beato's wide selection of images was financial profit, which he made through various channels – selling his battlefield images to the British officers and the cooperation with Henry Herring – a London-based commercial portrait photographer, who sold Beato's images to the Western public.

Even though both photographers came to China lead by different motives with conflicting eyewitness accounts about their actions throughout their sojourn there, it is undeniable that their images are credible documentary witnesses of the time that still pose many challenges and need to be researched further.

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VI. HISTORICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL TEMPORALITIES

WILLIAM LAUD'S REFORM OF ECCLESIASTICAL LAND TENURES: THE TRANSITION FROM LIVES TO YEARS

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Abstract

In the post-Reformation Church of England, bishops, together with the dean and chapter, bore responsibility for both spiritual leadership and the management of ecclesiastical estates. Following the statutes of 1571, it became standard practice to lease church lands either on fixed 21-year terms or, more traditionally, on "three-lives leases". By the early 17th century, however, rising life expectancy and sustained inflation rendered the latter increasingly impractical and financially disadvantageous to the Church. In response, Archbishop William Laud, with the support of Charles I, sought to standardize leasing practices across English dioceses by enforcing 21-year terms. This policy took little account of local variations and, as a result, provoked disputes over the redistribution of church wealth and the reconfiguration of local power relations. These conflicts deepened clerical – lay tensions and ultimately contributed to the wider institutional fragility that preceded the outbreak of the English Civil War.

Keywords: *William Laud, church lands, three-lives lease, 21-year lease.*

In early 17th-century England, disputes over the management of church lands exposed deep tensions between clerical landlords and lay occupiers. These conflicts reflected not only local economic pressures but also broader debates about the nature of ecclesiastical authority and property. To understand these conflicts, historians have examined the broader structures of English landholding and the long-term evolution of its tenurial arrangements. Earlier economic historians such as R. H. Tawney and

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Joan Thirsk established the broad contours of English land tenures in the 16th and 17th centuries. Their analyses, together with Eric Kerridge's work, demonstrate that English landholding in this period was characterized by considerable regional and economic diversity, and that landlords' strategies reflected local conditions rather than a single, uniform model. These regional and economic variations formed the background against which the Church's own land management evolved [Tawney 1912; Thirsk 1967; Kerridge 1953: 16–34; for a general synthesis, see also Clay 1981: 83–96].

Subsequent historiography shifted its focus from these broad economic frameworks to the Church's administration. Christopher Hill's 1956 study portrayed the laity as the chief beneficiaries of ecclesiastical dispossession, emphasizing the economic impact of property confiscation. Later historians, such as A. T. Brown, highlighted the varied systems of estate management within episcopal and capitular lands, showing how institutional structures shaped long-term financial outcomes. Felicity Heal and Rosemary O'Day further redirected attention from external loss to the Church's internal economy, examining its fiscal organization and social functions [Hill 1956; Brown 2014: 699–719; O'Day and Heal 1981]. Scholars such as Anthony Milton, Peter Lake, and Kevin Sharpe have examined various dimensions of the Laudian programme, particularly its administrative and fiscal discipline. Yet even in these studies, Laud's practical efforts to regularize the Church's material administration have attracted little detailed discussion [Milton 2021; Lake 1993: 161–185; Sharpe 1992].

Overall, while existing scholarship has largely elucidated the economic and institutional frameworks of the post-Reformation Church, the dynamics of ecclesiastical land management during the early Stuart period remain relatively neglected. In particular, little attention has been paid to the transition from life leases to 21-year leases initiated under Archbishop William Laud, and to its adverse effects on relations between the Church and its tenants. Nor has sufficient attention been given to how the resulting tensions related to contemporary debates on episcopacy during the Long Parliament and influenced the political climate of the late 1630s and early 1640s. In light of this, the present study takes church land leasing in the decade preceding the Civil War as its starting point, and demonstrates how Laud's reform, as an institutional intervention, intensified clerical–lay tensions, shaped political opinion, and contributed to the broader instability that ultimately culminated in the Civil War.

The three-lives lease and the Church's economic challenges

In 1535, at the beginning of the English Reformation, the Church, as one of the kingdom's principal landowners, derived a net annual income of nearly £ 400 000, whereas the crown's lands yielded only about £ 40 000. This striking disparity in wealth led Henry VIII, seeking to augment royal revenues and relieve fiscal difficulties, to enact the *Suppression of Religious Houses Acts* of 1536 and 1539.

These acts resulted in the transfer to the crown of roughly 60% of the Church's lands that were mainly monastic in origin, while at the same time the estates of the secular clergy remained untouched [Hoskins 1976: 121–122]. On the estimates of J. P. Cooper and others, the secular clergy in the early sixteenth century held at least four million acres of land (between 8 and 13% of the total area of England), which, after the upheaval, continued to form the material foundation for the Church's spiritual and administrative functions and was managed primarily by archbishops, bishops, and deans and chapters [Cooper 1967: 419–440; Elton 1955: 142; Hoskins 1978: 121].

These senior clergy, in managing the demesne that formed part of these ecclesiastical estates, did not directly cultivate the land; instead, they customarily leased their manors as separate units. Many of these tracts were granted to laymen under long leases of eighty or ninety-nine years, under which tenants, benefiting from low rents and highly favourable terms, could readily realize substantial profits by subletting the land at market rates. [Hill 1963: 14–18] Therefore, after Henry VIII's reforms, successive Tudor monarchs, exercising royal supremacy over the Church of England (with the exception of Queen Mary), often granted long leases of these lands to courtiers and other laymen, either as rewards or in exchange for political support. Such leases, however, often carried extremely favourable terms, causing a substantial depletion of church resources.

This practice of alienating church resources developed rapidly under Edward VI's reign; by the reign of Elizabeth I, bishops' lands functioned in practice as what monastic lands had been in her father's reign, namely "the fund from which pensions were paid and favours dispensed" [Hill 1956: 29]. The Act of 1559 (1 Eliz., c. 19) centralized the authority over episcopal estates in the crown, stipulating that "all grants by archbishops and bishops [...] other than for the term of one and twenty years or three lives from the making, or without reserving the usual rent, shall be void." However, leases with the Crown were specifically exempted from this restriction, so that bishops remained barred from granting long leases to lay lessees while still being allowed to conclude such agreements with the Crown. Accordingly, any bishop who wished to maintain the practice of long leasing was compelled to lease his estates to the Crown in the first instance. By this mechanism, the queen secured formal control over large portions of episcopal property, which she could then retain for her own use or redistribute to courtiers under long leases. In 1571, Parliament passed another Act (13 Eliz., c. 10), extending the leasing restrictions on bishops to virtually all clergy and ecclesiastical institutions, including deans and chapters, colleges, and charitable hospitals. The Act further strengthened the Crown's control over Church lands throughout England, enabling it systematically to acquire and redistribute Church resources for the benefit of secular elites [Hembry 1967: 1–3; Blackstone 1768: 320–321]. Such use of Church lands to support secular interests not only brought substantial economic gains to the lay landowning class but also gradually fostered a political culture that viewed Church estates as resources freely disposable by the state and the secular elite [Hill 1961: 87]. In turn, this development came at the expense of the Church's control over its own economic assets and further undermined its independence in both religious and social spheres.

By the closing years of Elizabeth I's reign, contemporaries had begun to recognise that, if the large-scale alienation of church lands were to continue, the Church would struggle to fulfil its religious and social responsibilities. Even the Queen found herself compelled to adjust her policy and to display a measure of moderation in the face of warnings that "there would hardly be a Cathedrall Church found in good repaire within England" [Harington 1653: 66–67]. Under James I, with foreign wars at an end and domestic tensions coming to the fore, the importance of the Church in maintaining the established order and consolidating the position of the ruling elite became increasingly apparent once more. Archbishop Richard Bancroft, in a sermon, observed that the interests of the Church and of the upper classes were aligned, that they shared common enemies, and that, through the pulpit, the Church could sustain the existing social order. The elites, therefore, were expected to respect the Church's wealth and dignity [Bancroft 1588: 24–27]. The King supported this idea by declaring at Hampton Court: "No bishops, no king, no nobility," underscoring the central role of the church (particularly the episcopacy) in maintaining social hierarchy and royal authority [Brewer 1839: 421]. He went further in 1604 by abolishing the exemptions reserved for the Crown in the aforementioned statute of Queen Elizabeth [Blackstone 1768: 320]. From that point onward, all newly granted ecclesiastical leases were meant to be subject to the statutory limit of twenty-one years or three lives, a provision that signalled the Crown's intended adjustment in the mode of exercising control over Church resources.

However, even though James I professed an intention to curb the further erosion of ecclesiastical estates, the vast system of *Patronage and Bounty* that he actively fostered posed a serious obstacle to this goal. To maintain the system, the king was obliged to continue granting church lands as rewards to loyal nobles and dependents; otherwise, he would have had to draw upon the already overburdened royal treasury. This structural tension was already visible in practice less than a month before the 1604 statute was formally enacted, when James secured in Parliament for his favourite, Robert Carr, a 99-year lease of the manor of Great Bedwin, then belonging to the Dean and Canons of Windsor [Hill 1963: 33–34].[1] This transaction suggests

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[1] Patronage and Bounty: Linda Peck has pointed out that early Stuart England was governed as a personal monarchy, a form of rule grounded in hierarchy and systems of patronage. The King maintained his political control over both the centre and the localities by granting land, offices, or other privileges as forms of patronage, thereby consolidating his relations with nobles, courtiers, and the upper ranks of society [cf. Peck 1990: 4; Peck 1986: 31–61].

that, by the early 17th century, the political deployment of ecclesiastical estates had become an established feature of royal governance, one that restrictive legislation could not easily dislodge.

The consequences of such encroachment were severe: by the reign of Charles I, approximately six-sevenths of the revenues from church estates were being appropriated by lessees [Bruce 1845: 76]. For example, the Sherston & Aldrington Rectory in Wiltshire had been leased for ninety years since the reign of Edward VI; by the time of the Long Parliament's inquiry into church property, its annual rent still stood at £ 8, whereas its actual annual valuation had risen to £ 140, so that the lessee's profit accounted for more than 94% [Bodington 1920: 1–39]. Similarly, the Rectorie de Meere was leased in 1593 for eighty years at an annual rent of £ 46; by the time of the parliamentary survey of 1649, its total valuation had reached £ 308, with the lessee's net profit amounting to about 85% [Ibid.: 105–124].

At the time, the Church was not merely an institution for the dissemination of the sacred word. Instead, its social functions formed an essential foundation upon which royal authority rested. In an age lacking modern media such as newspapers or television, the Church exercised a profound influence over the political, economic, and moral outlook of the population through the pulpit. Beyond the pulpit, the publication of books was subject to episcopal licensing; education lay almost entirely under ecclesiastical control; and academic posts at Oxford and Cambridge were awarded largely to members of the clergy. The Church thus occupied a central position in sustaining social order and political obedience. As Sir John Eliot once observed, "Religion it is that keeps the subject in obedience" [Hill 1961: 77]. The effective performance of these social functions depended in no small measure on the material resources of the higher clergy. Land had long served as the principal form of wealth in England. By the late 1620s, however, bishops and other senior clergy had experienced a severe erosion of their estate revenues, and their capacity to fulfil social responsibilities within society had been correspondingly weakened. As tensions with Parliament intensified and culminated in its dissolution in 1629, Charles I increasingly emphasised the Church's role in the maintenance of social and political order. He acknowledged that "people are governed by the pulpit more than the sword in times of peace" [Petrie 1968: 200]. Within this framework, the restoration of the landed interests of bishops and other senior clergy, and the preservation of the Church's relative economic independence, emerged as a strategy through which Charles sought to reinforce royal authority and sustain political order during a period of acute strain.

This implied an urgent need for further reform of the leasing practices on church lands. At this juncture, in addition to enforcing more strictly the statutes prohibiting long leases, Charles I was compelled to address another form of tenure whose defects were becoming increasingly apparent – the three-lives leases. Since the enactment of

Elizabeth I's restrictive legislation, newly contracted leases on ecclesiastical estates had, in general, taken the form of 21-year terms or leases for three lives. The 21-year lease, as a fixed-term arrangement, needs little elaboration; however, the three-lives lease was a life-contingent form of tenure, its duration determined by the survival of three designated individuals named in the contract. The most common combinations included the lessee himself, his spouse, and his eldest son, or alternatively the lessee and two of his children; as long as any one of the three remained alive, the lease continued in force. Such leases required the lessee to pay an entry fine at the time of agreement, in addition to the annual rent thereafter.

In earlier practice, a lease for three lives was regarded as roughly equivalent to a 21-year lease. This perception derived from a statute of Henry VIII (32 Hen. VIII. c. 28), which permitted certain lands to be leased either for twenty-one years *or* for three lives. Subsequently, in land management and economic valuation, a three-lives lease came to be treated as broadly equivalent in value to a 21-year lease. This equivalence was based on an empirical calculation that assumed the remaining life expectancy at each succession to be about seven years, producing an aggregate term of approximately 21 years. Such an approach facilitated uniform treatment in financial transactions and in the valuation of renewals [Bellhouse 2017: 8–23; Blackstone 1768: 318–319].[2] The principal distinction between the two forms lay in the mode of rent payment. A 21-year lease typically required the lessee to pay a relatively small entry fine upon signing, followed by the payment of full rack-rents based on the land's actual value. By contrast, a three-lives lease required the lessee to pay a much higher initial entry fine, but thereafter only a nominal reserved rent, which was far below the real value of the land. Compared with the 21-year lease, the advantage of the three-lives lease for the leaseholder was that it secured lifetime tenure for himself and his immediate family; for the landowner, such a lease yielded a substantial lump-sum income in the short term, while virtually relieving him of the burden of rent collection in the future [Clay 1981: 83–96]. It was precisely on the basis of this historical practice and background that Elizabethan legislation placed the two lease forms on an equal footing, enabling ecclesiastical landlords to choose whichever suited their needs and providing lessees with different forms of tenure security.

[2] Treating a "three-lives" lease as equivalent to a 21-year term was a simplification derived from the practical needs of tax administration, valuation, and rent setting. In essence, it was an estimate based on average life expectancy, and did not mean that the combined remaining lifespans of the three persons named in the lease amounted to only 21 years. The "lives" specified in the lease had to be individuals already living at the time; unborn or future children could not be included. Given the high rate of infant mortality, there was little advantage in naming very young children, and therefore most of those named were adults [See "lease": Oxford Reference, n. d.].

However, the social and economic transformations of the late 16th and early 17th centuries gradually reduced the appeal of three-lives leases in the land market. As average life expectancy increased, it became increasingly evident that the actual duration of a three-lives lease often exceeded that of a 21-year term. A manual published in 1663 noted that such leases were then commonly equivalent to at least 27 years, and in some cases could extend to as much as 33 years [Clay 1981: 83–96]. This meant that landowners had to endure lower rental income over a longer period, with the actual duration of such leases remaining unpredictable and thereby increasing uncertainty in revenue. More critically, the Price Revolution had led to a general rise in prices, imposing significant economic pressure on landowners who relied on fixed rents. As inflation intensified, the real purchasing power of rents fell sharply, and their income declined in relative terms. In addition, the continuous rise in land values encouraged owners to raise rents to reflect market values; yet the long-term fixed rent structure of the three-lives lease prevented them from effectively profiting from the appreciation of land. Consequently, the earlier assumption of equivalence between the three-lives lease and the 21-year lease had become increasingly detached from the realities of the land market.

Although the three-lives lease had by then lost much of its appeal in the land market, some ecclesiastical landlords, constrained by their institutional position, still preferred to adopt this form of tenure. Unlike Catholic clergy, the clergy of the Established Church after the Reformation were allowed to marry and thus often had legitimate families to maintain. At the same time, ecclesiastical office was held for life; thus church property could be used only during an incumbent's tenure and could not be transmitted to descendants. Under these conditions, the three-lives lease functioned as a practical means of reconciling clerical tenure with familial provision. As noted above, such leases required the payment of a substantial entry fine upon agreement, which ecclesiastical landlords could appropriate in practice to augment their personal and familial wealth. More importantly, the entry fine was not treated as taxable personal income, making it an attractive means for the avoidance of taxation.[3] For these reasons, many senior clergymen resorted to life leases to provide future financial security for their widows and children [Cardwell 1839: 195–196].

Nevertheless, a high entry fine was often accompanied by low, fixed, long-term rents, which in effect created a hidden risk of reducing the disposable income available to ecclesiastical successors. Ecclesiastics typically attained senior offices at

[3] For example, when clergy were assessed for first-fruits or subsidies, the entry fine was normally not included in the calculation of their taxable income. *First-fruits* referred to the payment of a portion of a clergyman's first year's income to the Crown upon taking office; *subsidies* were taxes levied by the Crown in times of financial strain or to fund specific national undertakings, such as wars or royal expenditures.

an advanced age, and therefore the turnover of incumbents was relatively frequent. In the diocese of Winchester, for example, three bishops succeeded one another between 1594 and 1597. Such frequent changes meant that if one bishop let out his property under a three-lives lease, his successor would be left for the whole of his tenure with nothing more than a meagre rent. In periods of stable prices or slow inflation, such low, fixed rents could just about cover the basic expenses of successors; but from the late 16th century onward, the sustained price increases triggered by the Price Revolution gradually brought about a real decline in their income. In the estates of Lichfield Cathedral, the Flixton property was leased for lives in 1620 for an annual rent of £ 16; eight years later, the Brewood estate was similarly leased for £ 30. By the time of the parliamentary survey in 1649, however, these two properties were assessed at £ 122 and £ 185 respectively, figures that far exceeded the annual rents fixed under the life leases [Baugh et al. 1970]. Although at the time of agreement the low annual rent may have been offset by the payment of a substantial entry fine, from the successor's perspective, the long-term stagnation of rent levels meant that his disposable income failed to increase in line with inflation. In other words, the fixed annual rents of leases for lives increasingly diverged from market value in the context of inflation, posing a continuous and severe challenge to the financial management of ecclesiastical successors.

The financial constraints of successors affected both their personal living conditions and their capacity to manage church resources and fulfil their pastoral duties. As William Roberts, Bishop of Bangor, once complained to Laud, his predecessors leased out all the property of the diocese, even the corn mills, on lives leases, and the resulting poverty meant that "all clergymen of hope and worth [in his diocese] seek preferment elsewhere" [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 5: 359]. Such complaints were by no means exceptional: once the Church was unable to provide a basic livelihood or clerical dignity, the loss of clerical manpower became inevitable, and with it the pastoral function at the parochial level was thereby weakened. It may thus be said that although the three-lives lease provided a substantial one-time income for the incumbent ecclesiastical landlord, it did so at the expense of the long-term interests of the Church. This practice of "mortgaging the future" appeared all the more precarious in an age of soaring prices and thus became a major obstacle to the sustainable development of ecclesiastical finance.

Conception and implementation of Laud's reform

Based on the foregoing, the chief beneficiaries of three-lives leases were often the secular leaseholders of church lands. Laud also noted that in his time "the laity have the benefit, by the leases which they hold, of more than five parts of all the bishops', deans and chapters', and college revenues in England" [Scott and Bliss

1847–1860, 4: 192].[4] In his view, these revenues, originally dedicated to maintain and uphold the service of God, had long been diverted into secular hands, which seriously undermined both the authority of the Church and the Church's capacity to fulfil its religious responsibilities [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 6: 179].

As mentioned earlier, against the backdrop of a monarchy that increasingly emphasized order and unity, Charles I sought to consolidate his rule through the strengthening of the Church. As the King's most trusted Privy Councillor and Archbishop of Canterbury, Laud was keenly aware of the urgency of the King's concern. In his sermons, he repeatedly affirmed the inseparable relationship between Church and State, pointing out that "the Church cannot dwell but in the State [...] And the Commonwealth cannot flourish without the Church." Furthermore, the episcopacy was presented as an important force in maintaining the unity of the Church and the cohesion of the State [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 1: 64, 82–83]. In this way, Laud skilfully aligned his anxiety over the Church's economic plight and the waning authority of the episcopate with the monarch's need to strengthen his regime, thereby securing the King's support for his reform. On this basis, Laud proposed a systematic reform scheme, advocating shorter, fixed-term leases and a reduced entry fine, coupled with higher rents, with the aim of enabling the Church to share more effectively in the gains from rising land values. The 21-year lease appeared to fit this design particularly well, for it was expected to ensure a measure of control over tenure while allowing ecclesiastical landlords to adjust rents within a relatively short cycle and to collect entry fines at regular intervals [Heylyn 1671: 300]. Therefore, replacing the three-lives lease with a 21-year lease was almost inevitable.

It is worth noting that this line of reform did not arise suddenly but stemmed from Laud's long experience in the administration of ecclesiastical property. In fact, as early as 1626–1628, during his tenure as Bishop of Bath and Wells, Laud had already shown a strong concern for the management of church estates. In 1626, he drafted a document addressing the powers of episcopal stewards in dealing with the lands of their sees. It laid down that any lease for lives or for years granted by a steward during a vacancy, unless confirmed by the succeeding bishop, was invalid in law. More fundamentally, while bishops, as the owners of their lands during their incumbency, were entitled to administer them in accordance with the law, their authority was nonetheless circumscribed by common law, and even bishops could not grant leases

[4] "More than five parts" is an early modern expression used to denote an overwhelming proportion, often understood as something like well over four-fifths, rather than a precise fractional calculation.

for longer than three lives without the confirmation of the dean and chapter[5] [State Papers Online 1626; Hembry 1967: 221]. It can be seen that at this stage Laud had already begun to pay close attention to the issue of leases within the system of church lands and was inclined to strengthen their regulation through legal means.

In 1629, with the support of King Charles, Laud, then Bishop of London, took part in drafting and promulgating a set of *Royal Instructions* for the entire Church of England. Article 9 explicitly stipulated that any bishop nominated for translation to another diocese was, from the date of such nomination, not permitted to sign any three-lives lease, 21-year lease, or concurrent lease, and further characterised leases that "should almost undo the successor" of the bishopric as especially "hateful" [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 5: 308]. While this Article did not formally prohibit the use of three-lives leases, some scholars have pointed out that these provisions reflect the Crown's growing disapproval of life leases and suggest that official support for this form of tenure was beginning to wane [O'Day and Heal 1981: 145].[6]

By March 1634, when Laud was now Archbishop of Canterbury, his position had become increasingly unequivocal: he resolved to prohibit altogether the practice of leasing church lands on a life-term basis [Trevor-Roper 1988: 149, note 3]. Thus, in June, Laud conveyed his intentions through two Royal Letters, addressed respectively to the deans and chapters, and to the bishops and archbishops. The letters stated that, although the statutes of Elizabeth I had permitted bishops, and deans and chapters, to let church lands either on three-lives lease or on 21-year lease, "time and experience have made it apparent, that there is a great deal of difference between them, especially in church leases, where men are commonly in great years before they come to those places." In this context, it was warned that the conversion of term leases into life leases tended to produce a pattern in which the higher clergy would "put a great fine into his own purse to enrich himself, his wife, and children, and leave his successors [...] and the church destitute of the growing means which would come in to help them." If this practice continued, "scarce any bishop would be able to live and keep house, according to his place and calling." The letters therefore ordered that these higher clergy were not to convert church leases into life leases at their own discretion; instead, they were to seek, whenever possible, the conversion of existing life leases into leases reckoned by years [Bruce 1864: 88; Cardwell 1839: 195–196]. This prohibition, initially directed at the higher clergy, was gradually extended to the lower clergy

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[5] The bishop's steward was a principal officer responsible for administering the bishop's manors and estates, presiding over manorial courts, and managing the secular and legal affairs connected with church lands.

[6] According to Julian Davies, the directive required the conversion of life leases into leases for terms of years (clause 9), a provision most likely proposed by Laud [See Davies 1992: 29].

as well. For example, in 1634, the vicars of the diocese of Lichfield received a royal order requiring them to cease the granting of life-tenure leases [Baugh et al. 1970].

In August that same year, Laud issued further measures to supplement and extend the above directives. The new order required the bishops and deans and chapters to conduct a fresh survey and detailed registration of the lands under their jurisdiction, covering such information as acreage, location, names of tenants, leasing history, and the condition of the properties. They were also required to summon the lessees to verify the basis of their rents and to clarify the exact amounts due, together with any associated rights or obligations. If it was discovered that the lessee held land beyond the scope of his declaration, the bishops and deans and chapters were expected to report the situation to the King in order to "prevent the concealment of the church's land, and to discover such as go about to conceal the same" [Cardwell 1839: 197–198]. To encourage compliance with this order, Laud also rewarded clergy who distinguished themselves in its execution. For example, he promoted the Archdeacon of Anglesey to the bishopric of Bangor after he had uncovered church lands in the area worth £ 1000 that had previously been concealed [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 6: 390].

However, some deans and prebendaries of their chapters deliberately misinterpreted the King's Letter, claiming that the restriction applied only to leases signed jointly by the dean and chapter, while individual members of the cathedral body, including deans, archdeacons, and prebendaries, could continue to grant life leases in their own names. To close this loophole, the King issued another Royal Letter in October of the same year, explicitly reiterating that the leasehold restrictions set out in the earlier letters applied not only to the dean and chapter as a whole, but also to every individual member of the cathedral body [Wilkins 1737: 494]. Accordingly, in January of the following year Laud secured the issuance of a new set of Royal Instructions, requiring bishops to submit an Annual Report to their metropolitan confirming that they had strictly observed the letters "prohibiting them to change any leases from years into lives." The instructions further obliged bishops to report any breaches of the letters' provisions committed by other church members within their dioceses [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 5: 313].

This series of directives prompted several senior churchmen to respond actively and to begin rectifying the management of ecclesiastical estates. For example, William Piers, Bishop of Bath and Wells, conducted a detailed survey of the lands within his diocese, systematically recording lease types, tenants, and rents, with the aim of gaining a comprehensive understanding of the estate situation and laying the groundwork for subsequent adjustments to the leasehold system. Matthew Wren, Bishop of Hereford, in 1635 refused the request of Mr. Geeres to extend his life lease, for which the bishop was commended by the King as "an honest Church-man" [Wren 1750: 51].

John Bridgeman, Bishop of Chester, went further: for ten years he consistently refused to accept the large renewal fines offered by tenants, in order to ensure that his successors would receive a more stable and reasonable rental income. Moreover, fearing that his successor might deviate from this principle out of self-interest, he petitioned the King for a formal instrument confirming his practice [Bridgeman 1888: 447–448]. Bishop Roger Manwaring of St. David's, when faced with competing lease applications from three tenants, ultimately selected the applicant who offered no entry fine but was prepared to pay a reasonable annual rent and to respect the church and improve the affairs of the diocese. In his view, a truly trustworthy lessee was not one who "comes to ensnare me with great overtures for my self," but one who "treats with me upon fair proposals for the Church" [Lloyd 1668: 275].

Furthermore, when dealing with existing leases, bishops were particularly attentive to using legal means to correct abuses. In his time as Bishop of Chichester, Richard Montagu, upon discovering that the transfer of the Manor of Selsey might involve legal defects, brought an action in the Court of Common Pleas to recover it [Bruce 1864, 7: 206]. After his translation to the Diocese of Norwich, he expressed concern in his Annual Report for 1638 about the financial difficulties facing his see, recommending that the King issue an order establishing minimum rents for diocesan manors and lands to alleviate its financial distress.[7] Bishop Piers, having completed the land survey, found himself constrained by life leases that had not yet expired. In 1638 he brought a suit in the Court of Chancery against a secular tenant, Richard Harvey, accusing him of unlawfully occupying the church estate of Compton Dando and refusing to produce the alleged three-lives lease on which he claimed title [State Papers Online 1638; State Papers Online 1640]. Overall, under the combined impetus of the King and Laud, a number of church leaders actively responded to the reform and sought to adjust the three-lives leases in the old leasing system. Even if their readiness to act owed much to their close political or religious connections with Laud, their actions nonetheless provided practical illustrations of the reform.

Resistance to Laud's reform

In practice, not all senior churchmen supported this policy. Some even displayed a distinctly negative attitude toward Laud's reform. Among them, Richard Neile, Archbishop of York, argued with Laud on many occasions, insisting that there was no need to alter the existing pattern of church land leases. Thus, even though the *Royal*

7 "Account by Richard Montagu, or Richard Montague, Bishop of Norwich, of the State of His Diocese [for the year 1638], Submitted to Laud in accordance with the King's Instructions" [Lambeth Palace Library 1638: 619–630].

Instructions of 1629 had reflected the King's increasingly cautious stance toward life leases, he nevertheless continued to grant them [Ornsby 1872: 240; O'Day and Heal 1981: 145]. John Cosin, later Bishop of Durham, likewise maintained that three-lives leases did not prejudice the interests of the diocese [Ornsby 1872: 240]. Other cases further illustrate this resistance. The Dean of Winchester was reprimanded by his Chapter for failing to comply with the prohibition [Goodman 1928: 139–141], while Robert Wright, Bishop of Bristol, was criticized by his successor for granting a manor on a three-lives lease [Bruce 1864: 315–316, 351–352]. Meanwhile, members of the Chapter of Winchester were ordered by Laud to rectify their neglect in converting expired three-lives leases into 21-year terms [Stephens and Madge 1897: 20].

Apart from personal interests, the reluctance of these senior churchmen to respond positively to the reform also reflected the particular circumstances of their dioceses. In the case of Winchester, for example, the practice of letting church lands on a life-tenure basis had long since been established. *The Winchester Lease-books* show that, although most holdings in the diocese were still based on 21-year leases in the middle of Elizabeth's reign, highly attractive properties such as Downton had gradually begun to shift to life terms. In 1594, Bishop Thomas Cooper went further by converting the manor of North Waltham from a fixed term to a life tenure, marking a milestone in the transformation of local leasing practices. His successor, Thomas Bilson, accelerated this process, so that by the time he left office in 1616, the majority of newly concluded leases were already for lives. By the time of Laud's reform, life tenure had long been an established practice in Winchester. Other dioceses, such as Ely and Chichester, underwent similar changes [O'Day and Heal 1981: 141–145]. This tradition generated a degree of institutional inertia within the diocese, which shaped clerical attitudes and posed a substantial obstacle to Laud's reform. Some clergy depended heavily on existing arrangements and believed that grants for lives offered greater economic advantages. This persistence of custom was further illustrated by a 1640 petition from the Bishop of Bath and Wells, who asked the King to be allowed to let small parcels of land in the diocese on three-lives terms, on the grounds that such leases were not only more beneficial to diocesan revenues but also "the custom of the see" [Hamilton 1882, 17: 340].

In addition, these higher clergy also had to maintain good relations with the local gentry as part of their social and political responsibilities. Gentry families held considerable status and prestige within local society and, from the 16th century onward, came to dominate the increasingly complex county administration through their control of key offices such as sheriffs and justices of the peace. Their loyalty and cooperation were therefore crucial to the Church's functioning and influence. As Peter Clark has observed, if the authority of the Church was to be maintained and the Reformation advanced, no bishop could afford to neglect relations with the local community [Clark 1977: ch. 5 and 10]. In practice, the leasing of church lands formed one of the principal means by which bishops sustained and managed these relationships. Lancelot Andrewes provides a revealing example. Although he twice declined bishoprics offered by Elizabeth I out of reluctance to compromise church interests,[8] once Bishop of Winchester he nevertheless granted Adderbury in Oxfordshire on a life lease to Sir Arthur Wilmot, a prominent local political figure. This decision illustrates the delicate balance Andrewes sought to strike between safeguarding church interests and securing secular support [O'Day and Heal 1981: 145]. Similarly, John Whitgift, Laud's predecessor as Archbishop, implemented a policy of lease renewals which ensured a steady increase in archiepiscopal revenues while also preserving close ties between landowners and tenants [O'Day and Heal 1981: 137].

In sharp contrast, during the 1630s, Laud compelled Sir Ralph Aston to surrender the manor of Whalley Rectory, previously held on a three-lives lease, and to renew it on a 21-year term. The new arrangement not only raised the annual rent by £ 60 but also imposed an additional entry fine of £ 1600 [O'Day and Heal 1981: 140–141].[9] This intervention had enduring repercussions for Laud's relationship with the local gentry. At his trial before the Long Parliament, Sir Ralph's son accused Laud of abusing episcopal authority and the jurisdiction of the High Commission by unlawfully forcing the surrender of the Whalley Rectory lease [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 4: 147; see Hamilton 1887, 18: 536]. As Peter Heylyn observed, it was Laud's failure to secure the loyalty of the local gentry that prompted the Kentish members of Parliament to take the lead in attacking him [Heylyn 1671: 505]. Between influential local neighbours and a distant archbishop, maintaining good relations with the nearby gentry was often the more prudent course [Trevor-Roper 1988: 173].

As major leaseholders of church lands and among the chief beneficiaries of three-lives leases, the nobility and local gentry were bound to view Laud's reform with deep resentment. For many years, rents on church estates had been set at low levels, allowing leaseholders to secure returns far in excess of prevailing market rates. In Wiltshire, for example, before 1642 the total rent from forty estates amounted to £ 1193 4s. 5d., whereas according to the Long Parliament's valuation, the market value of these lands was no less than £ 8967 18s. 3d. A comparable disparity is evident

[8] Because acceptance of these bishoprics was conditional upon making concessions to the Queen at the expense of the diocese.

[9] Before the Reformation, the Whalley Rectory was administered by the monastery of Whalley in Lancashire. With the progress of the Reformation, the estate was transferred in August 1547 to the See of Canterbury, and thus came into the possession of the Archbishop of Canterbury, by the time of William Laud.

in the case of the eight properties under the Dean and Canons of Windsor, which yielded an annual rent of only £ 264 14s. 8d., far below the Parliamentary valuation of £ 1639 18s. 4d. [Hill 1963 7–8].[10] On this calculation, the church received barely 13.3% of the total value of its lands, while as much as 86.7% of the profit was absorbed by the lessees; in effect, nearly nine-tenths of the income generated by church lands accrued to them.

At the level of individual estates, such arrangements could likewise yield substantial returns. For example, under three-lives leases, the Wokingham estate was valued at £ 200, yet after deducting rent the leaseholder retained an annual net return of £ 173. The Heytesbury & Knook Rectory, similarly held for lives, was valued at £ 310 and yielded a net income of £ 270. Most striking was the case of the Westbury Rectory, which, though assessed at £ 481, produced as much as £ 411 a year in net income after rent had been deducted. [Bodington 1919: 253–272; 1920 a: 1–39; 1920 b: 105–124] When set against the average incomes of knights and gentry in England, the economic significance of such returns becomes more readily apparent. In the early 17th century, knights in England generally possessed annual incomes ranging between £ 1000 and £ 2000, while gentry typically derived between £ 500 and £ 1000. In the northern and more remote parts of England, "a gentleman of good reputacion may be content with £ 300 and £ 400 yerly" [Fisher 1936: 23–24]. It follows that the income from even a single church estate was a significant component of the local elite's economic resources. Any attempt by the Church to review leases, raise rents, or reclaim revenues was therefore likely to touch directly upon the core economic interests of these leaseholders.

More importantly, under the traditional three-lives lease, when one of the named lives died, the tenant could usually negotiate with the landowner to add a new life in return for the payment of a renewal fine, thereby preserving the integrity of the three-lives structure.[11] In practice, landowners rarely refused such requests, which allowed these leases to be indefinitely renewed and, in effect, to confer long-term control of the land upon the leaseholding family. Over time, this continuity came to resemble a quasi-hereditary form that in some cases even obscured the very notion of ownership itself: the leaseholding family was regarded as the true proprietor of the estate, while the name of the actual owner was known only to lawyers and stewards [Hoskins 1959: 91–92]. In contrast, a 21-year lease had a fixed term, and upon its expiry the lessee had to renegotiate the terms with the landowner, facing

[10] It should be noted that this statistic includes, alongside "three-lives" leases, long leases (such as 80- or 99-year terms) as well as occasional 21-year leases.

[11] Typically, the new entrant was a relative or heir of the tenant, ensuring the family's continued control over the land. Upon payment of a "renewal fine", the original lease would be converted into a new "three-lives" lease, thereby extending the lessee's right of use.

the risk of increased rents or even the loss of the property altogether. Therefore, the transition from lives to years under Laud's reform effectively undermined tenants' control of ecclesiastical land, disrupted the stability of existing arrangements, and naturally prompted resistance on the part of those affected.

Therefore, in the Diocese of Winchester, some tenants and church landlords gradually developed a more flexible practice in the operation of three-lives leases in order to address the problems of the indeterminate terms and long renewal intervals. Under a typical three-lives arrangement, the tenant paid a renewal fine and nominated a new life only when one of the named lives died. However, in the Diocese of Winchester, tenants sometimes sought renewals on surrender even when there was no evident need for change. In 1634, Lord Wilmot requested a renewal of his lease of Adderbury in order to clarify some confusion in the earlier agreement and to add a new nominee; it was renewed again only five years later, in 1639. The lease of the Downton estate held by the Herbert family was renewed at least four times between 1610 and the outbreak of the Civil War. Two of these renewals were occasioned by the death of a life, while the others were made to add new lives [O'Day and Heal 1981: 146–147]. This pattern of frequent renewals meant that the timing of renewal was not solely dependent on the lifespan of individual nominees, thereby increasing the flexibility of the arrangement. It provided ecclesiastical landlords with a more reliable stream of income, making the practical effect of the three-lives lease approximate that of the 21-year lease promoted by Laud, while at the same time ensuring that leaseholding families continued to exercise long-term control over church lands.

Some tenants actively mounted counterattacks on the legal and political front. For example, in a petition submitted to the King in July 1634, Thomas, Lord Arundel of Wardour, reported that the current Bishop of Durham alleged defects in the lease of the Carterthorne coal mines, previously granted by his predecessor to Lord Eure, and sought to have it annulled by expediting the legal process. As one of the beneficiaries of the lease, Arundel requested that the King instruct the northern circuit to postpone the hearing to allow him time to prepare a defence. His request was granted, and he finally thwarted the bishop's attempt to cancel the lease [State Papers Online 1634 a; State Papers Online 1634 b]. Conflicts of this kind between the church and secular interests foreshadowed the broader social and political upheavals that would follow later in the century.

The failure of Laud's reform

Between 1540 and 1640, England witnessed a massive transfer of wealth, most visibly through the redistribution of land. Traditional landowners, as well as the rising groups of lawyers, government officials, and merchants, acquired substantial estates by purchasing or leasing properties that had formerly belonged to the Church and the Crown. This accumulation of land enabled these gentry to achieve not only a rise in social and economic status but also a solid foundation for their political power. In most constituencies, parliamentary candidates were in practice drawn almost exclusively from gentlemen who possessed a substantial amount of landed property, and, as might be expected, they were elected largely by voters whose own political influence rested upon landed interests. Consequently, an increasing number of newly risen gentry, whose position was grounded in landholding, entered the Commons as representatives of their respective counties or boroughs [Stone 1972: 80–84; Hill 1961: 17; Hill 1940: 17].

As previously noted, during Charles I's Personal Rule, the bishops' reform of church land leases encroached upon the landed interests of the gentry. Even if not all members of the gentry were directly affected by these reforms, in an age when land was closely tied to political power, any intervention in the established order of property was enough to provoke widespread unease. Furthermore, given that Laud and the King had already advanced the *Scottish Act of Revocation* – an attempt to recover all crown and church lands and leases that had been alienated to nobles and gentry since the early 1540s – this policy direction, although not implemented in England, could not fail to arouse concern among the English nobility and gentry [James 2017: 506–525]. Thus, when Parliament was reconvened in 1640, those MPs whose social standing and political influence were grounded in landholding naturally inclined toward resisting the Church's increasing assertion of control over its landed property.

As the chief architect of the reform, Laud consequently became the primary target of attack. During the Long Parliament, he was accused of having "made a statute against letting leases into three lives." This general charge was exemplified by the case of Whalley Rectory, in which Parliament further alleged that he had been guilty of "undue taking of gifts". Although Laud insisted that his actions were legal and necessary, the abolition of the three-lives lease, together with the imposition of fixed-term leases and the demand for high entry fines, were nevertheless cited in Parliament as evidence of his abuse of office for personal gain. To his critics, such practices were held to be evidence that economic exactions and the consolidation of authority could be pursued under the guise of reform [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 4: 141–149, 192]. Similar criticisms were also directed at other senior clergy. The MP Falkland accused "some Bishops and their adherents" of encouraging the clergy "to suites, and to have brought all suites to the Councel Table", thereby prompting them to demand more than their rightful income and respect [Nalson 1682: 769]. Pym likewise publicly condemned the greed and corruption of the clergy, identifying it as one of the four principal causes of the people's suffering [Kenyon 1966: 204].

Anger gradually spread from Parliament to the broader social sphere, and public hostility toward episcopacy mounted steadily. In December 1640, the citizens of London presented the famous *Root and Branch Petition* to the House of Commons, demanding the complete abolition of episcopacy. Among the numerous accusations made in the petition was that "the government of archbishops and lord bishops, deans, and archdeacons, &c., with their courts" served the personal interests of the clergy and was the "main cause and occasion of many foul evils, pressures and grievances… unto his majesty's subjects" [Gee and Hardy 1896: 537–545]. Shortly thereafter, in January 1641, the inhabitants of Kent submitted a similar petition, claiming that the episcopacy was "very dangerous both to the Church and Commonwealth" and "the occasion of manifold grievances to the subjects, their consciences, liberties, and estates" [Shaw 1900: 21].

Under this growing public pressure, Parliament gradually adopted more radical measures. On 1 March 1641, Laud was committed to the Tower of London. In November of the same year, the *Grand Remonstrance* was passed, condemning the King's policies and the role of bishops in both church and state affairs, and calling for the expulsion of all bishops from Parliament. Building on this momentum, Parliament soon moved to curb episcopal influence in the House of Lords by introducing the *Bishops' Exclusion Bill*, which sought to deprive them of their right to sit and vote in that House. The bill was passed in early 1642, and the King was forced to give his assent, thereby ending the bishops' presence in the House of Lords. Shortly thereafter, Parliament moved to strip the bishops of control over church lands through a series of ordinances. In March 1643, fourteen bishops, denounced as "notorious delinquents", were formally deprived of their ecclesiastical estates through sequestration [Kenyon 1966: 228–230; Shaw 1900: 204–205; Gentles 1980: 573–596]. In fact, expelling bishops from the House of Lords and sequestering their estates were essentially complementary political measures: land was not only the economic basis of episcopal power, but also a crucial foundation of the political authority they exercised as Lords Spiritual. Once their estates were seized, they lost both their material base as ecclesiastical landholders and, in due course, their effective place in Parliament.

The loss of episcopal power symbolized the decline of ecclesiastical authority and at the same time undermined one of the principal pillars of royal power. Expelling bishops from the House of Lords meant that the King lost a crucial ally in Parliament, and sequestering their estates deprived the Crown of one of its financial channels. In 17th-century England, apart from taxation and grants approved by Parliament, the clergy also provided financial support to the King through subsidies or benevolences voted in Convocation. Such financial cooperation between the bishops and the Crown could, on occasion, enable the King to secure essential resources even in the absence of parliamentary funding. For example, in 1640, when the Short Parliament refused to provide Charles I with funds, the Convocation nevertheless resolved to grant him six subsidies, payable over six years, amounting to as much as £ 120 000 [Scott and Bliss 1847–1860, 3: 284–286].[12] For this reason, once the bishops' seats and estates were stripped away, a crucial pillar of royal power was fatally weakened. Although the King had already left London, this institutional blow signified the collapse of the structural foundations upon which the monarchy had rested, further driving him toward armed confrontation with Parliament.

Laud's reform of church land leases was almost doomed to failure. First, he seriously underestimated the determination of secular tenants to defend their vested interests. The long-standing three-lives leases had enabled leaseholding families to hold church estates in a quasi-hereditary manner and reap over 80% of the profits. This deep economic reliance on the ecclesiastical estate, together with the social standing and political influence it conferred, made it impossible for them to relinquish their advantages in landholding with ease. Legal or administrative measures alone were therefore unlikely to bring about meaningful reform. Second, Laud placed his hopes for reform entirely on the support of royal authority and a handful of ecclesiastical allies, and his neglect of the political weight of his opponents prevented him from cultivating relations with the local gentry. Yet under Charles I's personal rule, the increasingly powerful gentry had already grown resentful of the Crown and the Church over arbitrary policies. Therefore, they seized upon Parliament in 1640 as a legitimate arena to express their protest and unite in action. Laud, having actively participated in the previous royal rule, became the primary target of Parliament's efforts to rectify the King's abuses, causing the reforms to lose their political footing.

Furthermore, the reform itself suffered from significant shortcomings, particularly a lack of flexibility and an excessive rigidity in its methods. Laud failed to take adequate account of the diverse leasing practices that had developed over time across different dioceses, implementing the reform almost simultaneously throughout England and leaving no scope for local adaptation or pilot schemes, a uniform approach that was particularly likely to provoke resentment. In the case of three-lives leases that were still valid, some bishops, eager to recover lands, did not wait for the leases to expire naturally but instead initiated lawsuits, attempting to reclaim property in advance on the grounds of technical flaws or defective title. This practice could easily be perceived by lessees as a violation of the equitable expectations

[12] The "subsidy" required parliamentary approval, whereas the "benevolence" did not. Whether the clerical subsidy granted by the Convocation in 1640 had received parliamentary approval was a matter of dispute. Laud maintained that it had been approved, but Parliament denied this claim, which became another charge brought against him.

attached to the lease and inevitably exacerbated their distrust and resistance to the reform.

Finally, the gentry, who commanded substantial economic resources, gained political skills and a growing sensitivity through their involvement in local governance. Supported by the burgeoning world of print, they began to wrest discursive authority in the public sphere from traditional elites, and their demand for a greater voice in affairs of state thus emerged as one of the defining trends of 17th-century English history. Laud's leasehold reform, however, sought to strengthen the authority of the Crown by bolstering the power of the Church and the episcopacy, which ran counter to the gentry's resistance to abuses of royal prerogative and their pursuit of parliamentary ascendancy. In this sense, the failure of his reform may, to some extent, be regarded as historically inevitable.

Conclusion

After Henry VIII's Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries, substantial lands remained in the hands of the secular clergy. From the later 16th century onward, however, these lands were persistently exposed to encroachments from both the Crown and lay elites. Although Elizabeth I sought to curb the most damaging forms of alienation by prohibiting excessively long leases and by establishing the three-lives lease and the twenty-one-year lease as the principal forms of ecclesiastical tenure, this settlement itself revealed new structural weaknesses by the late 16th and early 17th centuries: three-lives leases in particular contributed to a sustained decline in church revenues, as the greater share of profits accrued to secular leaseholders in this period. It was in response to this long-term erosion of ecclesiastical interests, and in an effort to reinforce the Church's role as a pillar of royal authority, that Laud, with the support of Charles I, advanced a programme of leasehold reform aimed at replacing life leases with leases for years, in the hope that the latter might offer a more effective means of restoring ecclesiastical income.

Yet, although Laud's reform promised in principle to increase ecclesiastical revenues, its implementation in practice proved far more complex than anticipated. Senior clergy, when leasing out their estates, had to balance personal and familial interests, long-established leasing arrangements, and the need to maintain good relations with the local gentry. This meant that leasing practices already varied considerably across different regions, rendering Laud's uniform model structurally ill-suited to local realities. More importantly, the reform generated significant resentment among lay tenants whose economic interests and political influence depended on their control of church lands. Such grievances helped to draw sections of the landed elite into parliamentary opposition in 1640, where the higher clergy were increasingly portrayed as corrupt and self-serving. As Christopher Hill observes, the conflict between Laud and Sir Ralph Aston had all but predetermined that this family, long regarded as important to the Church, would ultimately align itself with the parliamentary cause [Hill 1956: 329].

In historical terms, the redistribution of land and wealth has often entailed shifts in established power structures, and attempts to recalibrate such balances were bound to provoke resistance from vested interests, frequently serving as a catalyst for wider political conflict. Although Laud's lease reform did, in the short term, increase the incomes of some clergy and bring tangible economic gains to the Church, in the longer term it disrupted existing arrangements between ecclesiastical landlords and secular elites. Over time, disputes rooted in economic interests were increasingly reframed as political attacks on the episcopal system itself, contributing to the erosion of its authority. These developments, in turn, formed part of the broader process that deepened the King's political isolation in London and propelled the kingdom further along the trajectory toward civil war.

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