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Introduction

Jirayudh Sinthuphan

The four articles collected in this issue of *Asian Review* examine Asia not as a fixed cultural or geopolitical category, but as a dynamic field of negotiation in which power, identity, embodiment, and knowledge are continuously reconfigured. Spanning historical inquiry, anthropology, ethnomusicology, and communication theory, the contributions traverse Thailand, Nepal, North India, and Sri Lanka to illuminate how Asian societies respond creatively to structures of governance, modernization, religious practice, and epistemological dominance. Despite their disciplinary diversity, the articles are united by a shared concern with forms of tension and mediation: between state and community, intervention and refusal, technique and embodiment, and Western and Asian paradigms of knowledge.

The opening article by Qiyu ZHANG revisits the anti-Chinese policies of the Phibun era in Thailand through the lens of state capacity and nationalism. Challenging conventional interpretations that frame these policies merely as exclusionary nationalism, Zhang demonstrates the contradictions embedded within the Thai state's modernization project. While nationalist rhetoric and symbolic repression targeted Chinese institutions and identities, the state remained materially dependent upon Chinese commercial networks and expertise. This dual structure of "surface repression and substantive compromise" reveals the pragmatic limits of ideological governance and offers a nuanced interpretation of Thailand's comparatively low-conflict path to modernization. By situating anti-Chinese policies within broader debates on state formation and imagined communities, the article contributes to comparative discussions of nationalism in Southeast Asia.

Questions of intervention, negotiation, and agency continue in Yuko TAKAMACHI's study of dhaka weaving in eastern Nepal. Through an ethnographic examination of development assistance projects and local handicraft production, Takamachi argues that local communities do not passively absorb externally introduced models of modernization. Instead, artisans engage in selective adaptation and creative refusal, reshaping development interventions according to locally valued practices and aesthetic principles. The article thus reframes craft production not as a residue of tradition threatened by modernization, but as an active site where communities critically negotiate the meanings of labor, authenticity, and cultural continuity. Particularly compelling is the author's emphasis on refusal not as resistance alone, but as a productive and creative act through which local knowledge and identity are sustained.

Haruo INOUE's contribution similarly foregrounds friction and embodiment, though within the domain of music and religious practice in North India. Examining the relationship between *tablā* and *jorī* traditions, Inoue challenges harmonious notions of cultural entanglement by emphasizing the material and embodied resistances that emerge when musical systems intersect. The article demonstrates how bodily technique, sonic orientation, and religious experience are shaped through processes of interference and incompatibility as much as through continuity or exchange. In doing so, the study advances an important methodological intervention in ethnomusicology and religious studies: it shifts attention from abstract histories of influence toward the lived and corporeal dimensions of musical practice. Instruments here are not passive objects but active agents participating in the formation of religious subjectivity and temporal experience.

The issue concludes with Sugath SENARATH's theoretical exploration of communication through the framework of the Buddhist Eightfold Noble Path. At a moment when the social sciences and humanities remain deeply shaped by Western theoretical paradigms, Senarath advocates a more balanced epistemological approach that draws seriously upon Asian philosophical traditions. His proposed model of mindful communication reinterprets Buddhist concepts such as Right Speech, Right Mindfulness, and Right Understanding

as principles for addressing contemporary communicative crises. Importantly, the article does not position Asian knowledge in opposition to Western thought; rather, it argues for dialogue and coexistence between intellectual traditions. In this respect, the paper resonates strongly with broader efforts across Asian studies to provincialize dominant epistemologies while constructing frameworks rooted in local philosophical resources.

Taken together, the articles in this issue demonstrate that Asia cannot be understood solely through binaries of tradition and modernity, local and global, or resistance and accommodation. Instead, they reveal complex processes of entanglement in which compromise, friction, selective adaptation, and epistemological negotiation become central modes of social life. Whether examining nationalist statecraft in Thailand, craft-making in Nepal, devotional soundscapes in Punjab, or Buddhist communication theory in Sri Lanka, each contribution foregrounds the agency of individuals and communities navigating larger structures of power and knowledge.

At a broader level, this issue also reflects the continuing vitality of interdisciplinary Asian studies. By bringing together political history, anthropology, performance studies, religious studies, and communication theory, the contributors collectively demonstrate the importance of crossing disciplinary and regional boundaries in order to understand the contemporary and historical complexities of Asia. Their works remind us that Asia is not merely an object of study but also a source of theoretical insight capable of reshaping how we think about modernity, identity, embodiment, and communication in an interconnected world.

Surface Repression, Substantive Compromise: State Capacity, Anti-Chinese Policies, and Thailand's Low- Cost Path to Modernization under Phibun

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ABSTRACT—This paper examines Thailand's anti-Chinese policies during the period of Phibun Songkhram (1938–1944; 1948–1957), exploring why they exhibited a highly contradictory pattern of “initially hardline but ultimately compromising.” It further analyzes how this policy model objectively propelled Thailand's modernization process. The article argues that while the Phibun government implemented radical anti-Chinese measures at the levels of nationalist mobilization and symbolic politics—such as closing Chinese schools, restricting Chinese-language media, imposing occupational exclusion, and promoting nationalist propaganda—it remained economically and organizationally dependent on Chinese capital, commercial networks, and professional expertise. This created a dual-track policy structure of “surface suppression and core concession.”

Theoretically, this paper integrates Skocpol and Finegol's state capacity theory (1982) with Anderson's conception of “nation” (1991), arguing that anti-Chinese policies stem not solely from nationalist ideology but are profoundly shaped by structural constraints on state capacity. Through systematic analysis of administrative fragmentation, deficiencies in professional bureaucracy and policy instruments, and Thailand's long-established tradition of political learning, this paper reveals the fundamental reasons why the Phibun government could not implement deep interventions in the core of the Chinese economy.

From a comparative perspective, this study argues that unlike Indonesia and the Philippines, which adopted high-cost exclusionary approaches to

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address Chinese issues, Thailand, constrained by limited state capacity, chose a low-cost modernization path by integrating the Chinese into the “Thai imagined community.” This choice not only avoided capital flight and severe social conflict but also facilitated the structural transformation of the Chinese into “Sino-Thais,” making them crucial collaborators in state-building and economic development. This paper thus argues that the historical significance of the anti-Chinese movement during the Phibun era lies not in its exclusionary nature per se, but in the complex interplay it reveals between state capacity, nationalism, and modernization.

Keywords: Thai Modernization; Sino-Thai; Oversea Chinese; State Capacity; Nationalism; Ethnic Assimilation

Introduction

Chinese immigration to Thailand has deep historical roots. By 1932, ethnic Chinese constituted more than 12.2 percent of the population (Stuart-Fox, 2003), and their presence permeated Thai society both vertically and horizontally. Vertically, Chinese migrants were distributed across every social stratum—from coolies, shopkeepers, and brokers to provincial governors and royal commercial agents—shaping Thailand’s political economy at multiple levels (Skinner, 1957; Le May, 1930). Horizontally, their activities spanned major economic sectors including rice milling, coastal shipping, tin mining, finance, and retail trade; they were also embedded across urban centers and provincial port towns, contributing to the growth of a multiethnic, commercially oriented society (Cushman, 1981; Campbell, 2023).

These deep-rooted vertical and horizontal connections meant that by the time Phibun assumed the premiership in 1938, the Chinese community was no longer an external minority group that could be easily expelled or economically isolated. Instead, it had become an indispensable component of Thailand’s economic infrastructure and social organization. This structural entanglement placed Phibun’s government in a profound dilemma: while nationalist sentiment and wartime conditions fueled anti-Chinese rhetoric and restrictive measures, the state simultaneously depended on Sino-Thai capital, commercial networks,

and administrative expertise to maintain economic stability.

It is against this historical backdrop that the central puzzle of this paper emerges: Why did Phibun's anti-Chinese campaign combine harsh symbolic repression with substantial practical compromises? While existing research points to the flexibility or pragmatism of Thai national policies, it has failed systematically to explain how Thailand's unique social structure constrained state action and how these constraints shaped the outcomes of modernization.

This study thus proposes that Phibun's anti-Chinese policies exhibited a contradiction between appearance and substance: the "appearance" manifested in symbolic restrictive measures—school closures, press censorship, registration fees, and nationalist propaganda—while the "substance" involved compromising with the already established Chinese-Thai elite group. This dual-track strategy not only failed to impede modernization but enabled Thailand to achieve nationalist objectives without undermining the economic foundations essential for state-building and wartime survival.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The period of Phibun's rule (1938 to 1944 and 1948 to 1957) is widely recognized as a pivotal stage in Thailand's modernization process. Scholars of modern Thai history have conducted in-depth research on this era, focusing particularly on the evolution of Thailand's international relations with China and Japan, adjustments to ethnic policies, and the dynamic development of assimilation policies. Relevant studies indicate that anti-Chinese movements across Southeast Asia generally exhibited violent xenophobic characteristics (Elly 2013; Akashi, 1970). While Thailand's movement under Phibun remained highly discriminatory, it was comparatively more moderate than those in neighboring countries. Despite these observations, existing research has yet to provide a systematic analytical framework explaining why Thailand's cultural revolution produced such contradictory and ambiguous anti-Chinese policies, which simultaneously embodied intense symbolic nationalism and significant practical concessions.

Moreover, existing historical research provides important empirical evidence for this study. *The Problem of the Chinese in Thailand* (Landon, 1940) analyzed in a comprehensive manner, focusing on the economic discrimination against the Chinese during the Phibun period. The case of the Thai Rice Company in this book provides a good sample for this research, which illustrates the selective and uneven implementation of exclusionary policies. *Chinese Assimilation and Thai Politics* (Skinner, 1957) is a seminal work, which focuses on the assimilation process of Thailand's Chinese community and the Thai government's political strategies for addressing Chinese-related issues, and further points out that Phibun's anti-Chinese campaign sought to limit the social and political influence of the Chinese through exclusionary laws, while simultaneously having to rely on their economic contributions due to their dominant role in Thailand's economy. In contrast, Bulsaratanapan (1995) challenges Skinner's optimistic assessment of the assimilation process, noting that the Chinese community has consistently maintained significant autonomy and economic resilience. Despite differing interpretations, all studies highlight the resilience and contradictions inherent in Thailand's anti-Chinese policies. However, none of these studies systematically elucidates the structural roots of these contradictions—a theoretical gap this research endeavors to address.

Anti-Chinese movements in Southeast Asia during Phibun's rule were not unique to Thailand. However, Thailand's anti-Chinese movement possessed unique characteristics compared to similar movements in neighboring Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. In studies of Chinese migration within the modern history of Southeast Asia from World War II to the Cold War, most research has focused on the historical context of overseas Chinese migration to Southeast Asia, the policies of host governments toward China, issues of assimilation among immigrant Chinese, ideologies, and the development and influence of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia (Unger, 1944; Skinner, 1957; Villacorta, 1976). However, comparative studies on the history of anti-Chinese sentiment in the region remain scarce. Existing works addressing Phibun's cultural revolution tend to focus primarily on nationalism and ethnic assimilation, without offering a structural explanation for why Thailand's anti-Chinese movement diverged from more violent regional trajectories (Chaloemtiarana 2018; Skinner 1957;

Burusatanaphand 1995).

Theoretical Framework

To address these gaps and to analyze Thailand's unique characteristics, this study integrates nationalism theory (Anderson 1991) and state-capacity theory (Skocpol & Finegol, 1982) to develop a structural explanation. Through a systematic analysis of anti-Chinese movements in Thailand, this study aims to reveal the structural roots underlying the "substantive compromise" behind Phibun's anti-Chinese campaign, thereby filling the research gap mentioned earlier.

Anderson's (1991) perspective offers an explanation for their commonality. He conceptualizes nations as "imagined communities," emphasizing that national identity is constructed through shared narratives and symbolic boundaries. In Southeast Asia, these boundaries often delineate Chinese immigrants—portrayed as culturally distinct, economically dominant, and politically resistant to assimilation (Suryadinata, 1987). Consequently, anti-Chinese sentiment became a convenient tool for elites to consolidate national unity, while also gaining widespread popularity among Southeast Asian populaces.

Although Thailand also implemented a cultural revolution under Phibun's leadership, promoting the supremacy of central Thais and discriminating against Chinese communities, its actual implementation diverged from Phibun's populist intentions, ultimately leading to compromises with Thailand's Chinese population. To analyze Thailand's unique characteristics, this study applies Skocpol and Finegol's (1982) observations on the state's capacity for economic intervention during the early New Deal period to Thailand under Phibun's rule.

In explaining the disparity between the early agricultural interventions of the New Deal (Agricultural Adjustment Administration, AAA) and industrial interventions (National Recovery Administration, NRA) in achieving policy institutionalization, Skocpol and Finegol argue that state capacity is a more significant independent explanatory factor than social determinism. They analyze three key dimensions of

state capacity—administrative structure, professional talent development, and the tradition of “political learning”—ultimately concluding that state capacity determined the success or failure of early New Deal interventions.

Kasetsiri and Stowe (2004) offer a detailed study of Phibun’s anti-Chinese movement, revealing parallels between Thailand and one of Skocpol and Finegol’s subjects—the National Recovery Administration (NRA). First, Skocpol and Finegol’s research focused on the NRA and AAA as newly established institutions. The NRA was established under the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), which Congress passed in the spring of 1933 during the intensive legislative period known as the “Hundred Days” following President Roosevelt’s inauguration. Similarly, in Thailand (then Siam), less than a decade elapsed between the overthrow of the absolute monarchy and the rise of Phibun Songkhram to power. Second, the legislation underpinning the NRA and its establishment reflected a strong desire for administrative intervention. However, lacking the necessary administrative tools, expertise, and historical experience, the NRA’s goal of deeply restructuring the complex economic fabric proved unattainable. Phibun similarly harbored a strong political will to weaken Chinese influence and advance “Thai-ization.” Yet, he ultimately had to compromise with the Thai Chinese community, particularly its political and economic elites—a point to be analyzed in detail later.

Therefore, this paper views the anti-Chinese campaign during Phibun’s era as an ambitious yet highly constrained state intervention project. Although the campaign exhibited strong populist characteristics in its political mobilization and adopted radical anti-foreign nationalist posturing at the symbolic level, Thailand’s structural deficiencies in state capacity—including a fragmented administrative system, a lack of professional bureaucracy and policy tools, and a historically ingrained political learning tradition dependent on the Chinese economy—prevented this intervention from penetrating the economic and organizational core. Ultimately, the anti-Chinese campaign manifested as a policy form characterized by superficial suppression alongside substantive compromise.

An Anti-Chinese Campaign Inconsistent between its Surface and Core Caused by State Capacity

Administrative fragmentation

Skocpol and Finegol (1982) define administrative structure as the government's administrative organization. They argue that for a state to undertake deep interventions at the economic or social level, it requires a unified, vertically penetrating (can be implemented at the local level and enforced) administrative system. Therefore, administrative structure is crucial for implementing policies that demand increased government intervention.

As mentioned earlier, when Phibun assumed office as Siam's third Prime Minister in 1938, it had been only six years since the 1932 coup that established the constitutional monarchy. Prior to this constitutional system, Siam's four most critical departments—Defense, Home Affairs, Finance, and Foreign Affairs—were all controlled by close relatives of the King (Hom Ronran, 1949). In 1932, Western-educated emerging elites, dissatisfied with the royal family and its relatives monopolizing key government positions, staged a coup to advance their own interests and secure greater opportunities for advancement. The 1932 coup did not bring political stability to Siam; rather, it marked the beginning of a struggle for political power between old and new interest groups. After 1932, political struggles between the emerging power groups and the old aristocracy persisted, sometimes escalating to extreme measures like assassinations and poisonings (Thian Pratbipasen, as cited in Charnvit Kasetsiri, 1974, pp. 50-51, 74, 80-81, 84). Following the Boworadet counter-coup, King Rama VII departed Siam for Britain and abdicated in 1935. He was succeeded by the young Rama VIII, who was residing in Switzerland at the time.

Beyond the conflicts between old and new interest groups, tensions between the central government and local administrations were equally persistent. The first general election in November 1933 provided local politicians their inaugural opportunity to voice opinions at the national level. However, the Siamese government at that time was predominantly composed of the "Bangkok faction," and the

demands of local elites were often perceived as a threat to the central government (Kasetsiri, 1974). Consequently, when Phibun assumed power, he faced an administrative system that was neither unified nor vertically integrated.

Before Phibun came to power, Siam had already adopted a relatively negative stance toward Chinese immigrants, and tensions between Thais and Chinese had begun to surface. King Rama VI (reigned 1910-1925) once described the Chinese in Southeast Asia as akin to the Jews of the Orient (Thai: ยิวแห่งบูรพาทิศ, 1914). First, concerns arose over the creation of a “state within a state.” According to UNHCR (2018), by the early 20th century, Chinese immigrants had flooded into Siam, potentially constituting over half the immigrant population in the capital (Bangkok). Second, beyond the sheer size of the Chinese population, their economic dominance also fueled deep resentment. In 1932, the government encouraged Siamese nationals to replace Chinese workers in numerous commercial sectors, raising immigration fees by over 59%—a move that triggered general strikes by Chinese laborers (Crosby, 1944). Consequently, the Chinese immigrant issue became one of the most critical challenges Phibun faced upon assuming power.

These existing tensions did not themselves contribute to a coherent anti-Chinese policy; rather, they exposed the Siamese state’s limited administrative capacity to transform social grievances into sustained institutional interventions. After Phibun came to power, he swiftly purged his opponents with thunderous force, particularly royalists and the old aristocracy (Pratbipasen, as cited in Charnvit Kasetsiri, 1974, pp. 673-681). Although these purges effectively eliminated political opponents, existing academic research indicates that they primarily served to reorganize among elite factions rather than establish a unified and professional administrative system (Riggs, 1966; Kasetsiri, 1974; Thak, 2018).

Similarly, after Phibun came to power, although the Provincial Council Act of 1938 was enacted to promote decentralization and enhance local autonomy, existing research (Nagai & Kagoya, 1997; Grichawat & Crumpton, 2019) indicates that during this period, the management of local affairs continued the theme of centraliza-

tion under the absolute monarchy and remained under the control of the Ministry of the Interior (MOI). Within this centralized model, policy, budget, and personnel decisions were formulated in Bangkok and implemented through the MOI's provincial and district offices. Here, this study emphasizes a crucial distinction: high administrative centralization does not equate to vertical administrative capacity. The former refers to hierarchical power structures and appointment authority, while the latter requires a professional bureaucracy, standardized policy tools, reliable information channels, and effective local implementation mechanisms. Local administrative organizations have long lacked independent financial resources, policy-making authority, and professional capacity. Even when permitted to exist symbolically, their administrative execution remains dependent on centrally dispatched bureaucrats and normative directives rather than genuine local governance autonomy (Khianthongkul, 2015).

Moreover, the tense international relations between China and Japan at that time (1938) led Thai Chinese merchants strongly to boycott Japanese goods, severely impacting Siamese-Japanese trade relations and Phibun's desire to align with Japan. Compounded by the Chinese community's dominant role in Thailand's economy, Phibun launched a fierce offensive against the Chinese. In his first year in power, Phibun enacted a series of laws aimed at forcing Chinese out of the commercial sphere. Discriminatory policies were imposed on traditional Chinese commercial sectors such as rice milling, salt production, fisheries, and retail. In 1942, Twenty-seven occupations were restricted to Siamese citizens only. Chinese schools and newspapers faced limitations, with numerous institutions ultimately shut down. Chinese were barred from purchasing land and prohibited from residing in areas deemed strategically important by the government (Skinner, 1957). Evidently, Phibun was both determined and ambitious in launching his anti-Chinese campaign.

As for the consequences of implementing discriminatory anti-China policies, a new act enacted by Phibun himself in 1949 provides a telling illustration. While the original draft listed numerous other professions, the government ultimately decided to remove most of them from the final list incorporated into the statute, considering the capabili-

ties and experience of the Thai populace (Liberty; Siam Nikorn, 1949). Moreover, Japan's defeat plunged pro-Japanese Thai domestic and foreign policy into chaos, allowing Chinese schools to revive. By 1946, their numbers had grown to 450. Even as Thailand's domestic situation stabilized and Chinese schools faced renewed restrictions, 154 institutions remained operational (Coughlin, 1952)—a significant improvement compared to the complete shutdown of all Chinese schools in 1941. Coughlin (1952) also noted in his research that a racially segregated bill was proposed in late 1951, requiring foreigners to be “expelled” from restricted zones within 60 days of its passage. Given that ethnic Chinese constituted Thailand's largest foreign community, they would clearly become the primary victims of this legislation. Amid the chaos of the November 1951 government “coup” that dissolved the National Assembly, the bill was forgotten. Most analyses of the reasons behind these compromises focus on the assimilation of the Chinese community, the inadequacies of the Thai elite, the ruling class's own Chinese ancestry, and the unshakable economic dominance of the Chinese (Coughlin, 1952; Skinner, 1957; Bulsaratanapan, 1995; Kasetsiri and Stowe, 2004; Wongsurawat, 2016). While these factors were indeed significant, this study further suggests that Thailand's administrative fragmentation also played a crucial role in the series of compromises.

Whether it was the struggle between the emerging elite and the royalists before Phibun's rise to power, the contest for influence between local factions and the “Bangkok faction,” the coup of 1951, or even the period during World War II when Phibun's power was relatively concentrated, the Siamese government remained divided among different factions. Civilian officials and the military alike agreed that Japanese forces should be permitted passage, but they resented Phibun's willingness to make further hasty concessions. Civilian leader Pridi was deeply concerned by the fact that certain military ministers had already strongly supported establishing a military alliance with Japan. After Phibun purged his opponents, he achieved his goal of deepening the alliance with Japan. However, this move actually led to further fragmentation of the administrative system—the exiled high-ranking officials went to China, where they briefly contemplated establishing a new Siamese government-in-exile. Meanwhile, civilians within the country launched the Free Siamese Movement (Kasetsiri, 1974).

As Skocpol and Finegold (1982) observed, the NRA under the prestigious General Johnson initially operated in “swirling chaos.” Though he attempted rapidly to bring major industries under regulation through personal authority, the agency ultimately became increasingly bloated, conflict-ridden, and uncertain about its fundamental objectives and means of implementation, ultimately failing to achieve successful institutionalization. Phibun was indeed a strongman leader with authoritarian tendencies. At first glance, his authoritarian rule seemed to forge a unified and powerful state apparatus. However, political centralization should not be conflated with state governance capacity. Despite Phibun’s success in concentrating decision-making power and suppressing political opposition, Thailand’s administrative system remained decentralized and institutionally weak. Thus, while Phibun’s authoritarian rule strengthened coercive power, it failed to fundamentally overcome the structural limitations of Thailand’s state capacity.

Lack of Professional Bureaucrats and Policy Tools

Skocpol and Finegold (1982) further noted that the NRA’s failure stemmed in part from a lack of professional talent cultivation/training—specifically, the absence of pathways and mechanisms to develop administrators and experts with specialized knowledge for government administration and policy formulation. Admittedly, the emerging elite class and royalists within Thailand’s government during the Phibun era were largely well-educated. The former group had largely received state-sponsored education abroad, acquiring advanced Western training, much like Phibun himself. The latter group, as members of the hereditary ruling class, also generally enjoyed good education (Kasetsiri, 1974). However, the lack of professional bureaucrats and policy tools highlighted in this study cannot be sufficiently addressed by “well-educated” elites. The deficiency in state capacity lies not in a lack of professionals or elites, but in the absence of a professional bureaucratic system capable of continuously producing policy knowledge, understanding industrial chains, and designing, modifying, or substituting market mechanisms.

As mentioned earlier, one objective of Phibun’s anti-Chinese

campaign was to transfer economic dominance, previously firmly held by the Chinese community, back to the Thai people. To achieve this goal and cultivate a national bourgeoisie, the government undertook various initiatives. Among the most notable was the establishment of the Thai Rice Company by the government.

The Thai Rice Company received substantial support from the Thai government, such as urging prisons, hospitals, legions, and other government departments to purchase rice from the company. Additionally, the government-managed railways provided significant cooperation, acting as intermediaries without charging extra fees beyond transportation profits and offering preferential freight rates; simultaneously, they paid producers fifty percent of the market price upon purchase. Within just a few months of its establishment, the Thai Rice Company achieved favorable results. By March 1939, the company had secured substantial orders from Japan and Europe, including 300,000 bags of rice purchased by Germany (Landon, 1940). While the nationalization and Thai-ization of the rice industry showed initial promise—with the government even considering credit cooperatives to free farmers from debts to Chinese middlemen—farmers remained compelled to sell their rice to Chinese merchants who controlled the export market. Therefore, the government was determined to provide comprehensive support from seedling cultivation to the final buyer, enabling growers to break free from the control of foreign (Chinese) entities. While existing records lack detailed documentation on the subsequent development of the Thai Rice Company, this study reveals that Mr. Suchart Settiwan (คุณสุชาติ เศรษฐมาลินี), founder of Thailand's largest rice trader STC Group, remains an ethnic Chinese Thai. Settiwan, whose ancestral roots trace back to Chaoyang, Guangdong, China (now part of Chaonan District, Shantou City), is a prominent Thai-Chinese community leader and Thailand's top rice exporter, earning him the title of Thailand's "Rice King" (Thaicn.net, 2025). Judging at least by the current state of Thailand's rice industry, even if the Phibun government briefly secured a foothold for Thais in the rice trade at the time, it failed to teach farmers how to enter international markets, establish a long-term credit system for domestic capital, or build commercial networks connecting to global markets. These shortcomings reflect the state's lack of technical governance tools.

Returning to the anti-Chinese campaigns of the Phibun era, where did the Chinese who withdrew from the rice industry due to state intervention go? At that time, factions within the Thai government secretly negotiated deals with Chinese merchants, such as General Phao's relationship with numerous overseas Chinese businessmen like Chin Sophanpanic (Wiriyananthidkul, 1987). The government thus encouraged Chinese capital to expand from rice trading into the financial sector (banking). The banking system provided financial backing to the government, exemplified by institutions like Bangkok Bank (Chin Sophanpanic) and the Agricultural Bank (Suriyon Riwa). Both banks contributed funds to Phibun's political party, the Seri Manungkasila Party. In return, the Chin and Suriyon families secured insurance monopolies and agricultural export rights. They simultaneously invested in agriculture—a sector that has remained a vital source of capital and a dominant force in Thailand's economic landscape since that time. Subsequently, during the 1947-1957 era of bureaucratic capitalism, the Chin family rose as the most influential Chinese business group, the "Big Four Group" (Suehiro, 1998).

Despite the Phibun government's attempts to cultivate a "Thai national bourgeoisie" through anti-Chinese policies and economic intervention, the state's lack of a bureaucracy equipped with specialized expertise and corresponding policy tools prevented it from systematically providing domestic farmers and the emerging bourgeoisie with alternative mechanisms for capital, technology, and market access. Ultimately, this nation-building project backfired in practice.

Thailand's Unique Tradition of Political Study

Skocpol and Finegol (1982) define the tradition of political learning as a process of determining "what can be done" and "what cannot be done" based on governance experience, particularly long-term exposure to policy trials and failures. Thailand's political learning experience regarding Chinese immigrants is relatively unique, as even over half of the Chakri royal lineage traces its ancestry to Chinese origins (Skinner, 1957). The complex attitude toward the Chinese community during the Phibun era illustrates that, based on Thailand's (or Siam's) historical experience, the Chinese undoubtedly held significant importance in Thai

society. However, shifts in power dynamics—such as election outcomes, party alternation, or the mobilization of new interest groups—can serve as triggers, fostering a widespread conviction that “something must be done” (Skocpol and Finegol, 1982). Thailand faced exceptionally tense international relations at the time—first during World War II, and then into the Cold War era following the war’s conclusion, shaped by ideological conflict. Although Phibun, a staunch pro-Japanese figure, resigned as prime minister after Japan’s defeat in WWII, the shifting international landscape and the onset of the Cold War brought him back to the center of power. This chapter will analyze in detail the tension between Thailand’s historical political experiences regarding Chinese immigrants and the triggering factors of anti-Chinese movements.

The history of Chinese immigrants integrating into Thailand’s political elite and attaining official positions and noble titles dates back as early as 1480. Similar instances occurred in the 17th century, when Thai monarchs appointed dozens of Chinese to high-ranking positions and offices. For example, during King Narai’s reign (1657–88), the monarch’s chief maritime official, Phra Siwipot, and chief justice, Phraya Yommarat, were both of Chinese descent (Kaempfer, 1906). There are also records (Vilet, 1910) of Chinese integration into Thailand’s merchant class. From the 17th to the 19th century, Thai kings actively participated in regional trade. During this period, Thai elites frequently collaborated with Chinese merchants due to the latter’s mastery of sophisticated business and maritime technologies. After 1630, nearly all personnel aboard Thai royal merchant ships—from accountants and warehouse managers to sailors—were Chinese. Reginald le May (1930), serving as an adviser to Thailand’s Ministry of Commerce and Communications, also observed through participatory observation the vertical integration of Chinese immigrants across all strata of Thai society. Examining Thailand’s rice trade at the time, he noted that rice merchants were Chinese, as were millers and all their laborers. This pattern extended to other sectors such as shipbuilding, agriculture, and fisheries. Even old tin can recyclers and street vendors followed suit—Chinese immigrants permeated every level of the workforce. In short, Chinese laborers dominated nearly all physically demanding occupations. Many industries that Thai people were unwilling to engage in at the time were also filled by Chinese immigrants.

The lessons drawn from this tradition of political study were also reflected in Phibun's anti-Chinese campaign. Burusratanaphand (1995) found that "Chinese entrepreneurs who were not from established tycoon families like the Lumsums or Wanglees were compelled, under discriminatory policies suppressing Chinese influence and promoting Thai interests, to pay enormous sums in an attempt to establish connections with the authorities." This very point reveals the Thai government's compromise toward Chinese immigrants, at least toward Chinese tycoons. Government policies did not affect tycoons who had already amassed considerable influence, power, and wealth. Among those Chinese who established connections with the authorities through substantial funds, many—like the Chin family mentioned earlier—went on to become new tycoons by leveraging their relationships with the regime.

Before Phibun came to power, Thailand's political elite had long recognized through governance practices the structural role of Chinese capital and labor within the nation's fiscal and economic systems. However, amid the unique international context of World War II and the early Cold War, nationalism and anti-communist rhetoric provided Thailand with a trigger—a crucial factor in understanding the emergence of Phibun's anti-Chinese policies.

Chinese immigrants in Thailand have maintained their cultural traditions and identity. They preserved their language, marriage and funeral customs, values, and even their sense of identity (Skinner, 1957; Kasetsiri, 1974; Burusratanaphand, 1995). Thus, when Japan invaded China during World War II, Thai Chinese immigrants erupted in intense anti-Japanese sentiment, with many overseas Chinese sending financial and material support to China (Reynolds, 1997). However, aligning with Japan served Thailand's national interests at the time, as it sought territorial expansion through pro-Japanese cooperation. This marked the emergence of the first trigger. Subsequently, the Phibun government exploited the anti-Chinese movement as a tool to advance Thai-Japanese collaboration.

The second trigger was the outbreak of the Cold War. Phibun was not particularly concerned about the communist threat within Thailand. He personally believed that as a Buddhist nation, Thailand was inher-

ently immune to the appeal of communism's materialist ideology. In November 1947, Phibun staged a military coup to regain power. His extreme anti-Chinese stance, coupled with Thailand's insufficient state capacity as previously analyzed, meant national policies were heavily influenced by his dictatorial leadership. Consequently, anti-Chinese campaigns resurfaced. Overseas Chinese schools bore the brunt of this. On June 15, 1948, Thai authorities dispatched large numbers of police to surround institutions like the Thai Overseas Chinese Education Association and Nanyang Middle School. Fifty-three individuals were arrested on charges of "secret association and illegal fundraising." Among those arrested were members of both the Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang (Shangguan, 2025). Compared to Communist issues, Phibunsongkhram was more concerned with securing external aid, particularly military assistance. This was especially crucial for a leader who had risen to power through coups. On February 28, 1950, Phibun disregarded internal opposition and aligned Thailand with the U.S.-led Western anti-communist bloc. Beyond following America's lead in refusing to recognize the People's Republic of China, Thailand actively participated in the Korean War at U.S. request and consistently supported the United States while opposing China in various international forums. Phibun's clear stance soon yielded tangible rewards. On October 17, 1950, the U.S.-Thailand Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement was signed in Bangkok, formally designating Thailand as a recipient of U.S. military aid (Liu, 2022). This anti-Chinese movement thus shares striking parallels with those during World War II—both serving as political tools to pledge allegiance to a stronger power.

Thailand in Comparative Perspective: Imagined Communities and Low-Cost Path to Modernization

Chang (1973) attributes the fundamental plight of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia after World War II to Southeast Asian nations' national security concerns over China's 1949 regime change and their pursuit of economic self-control. Furthermore, he contends that despite being law-abiding and industrious, discriminatory policies against the Chinese were implemented in various forms. This stemmed from their

exceptional competitiveness in commerce, racial barriers, and deep-rooted preferences for Chinese culture and education, which intensified suspicion and misunderstanding. Meanwhile, Chang (1973) also observed that differences in the size, distribution, and religious practices of Chinese communities across various countries have shaped divergent attitudes and policies toward Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asian nations. This study will draw upon Anderson's (1991) definitions of "nation" and 'nationalism' to explore how Thailand, through an "imagination" distinct from other Southeast Asian nations, has assimilated Chinese immigrants, reshaped national boundaries and composition, and thereby pursued a divergent path of modernization.

Imagined Communities and the Politics of Inclusion

Anderson (1991) offers a profoundly subversive interpretation of "nation" and 'nationalism' in his work *Imagined Communities: The Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. He defines the nation as an "imagined political community." This community called the "nation" encompasses four dimensions: First, it is imagined. Its members can never know most of their fellow citizens, yet each person holds an image of interconnectedness and shared belonging. Second, it is limited. Even the largest nation has boundaries (national borders), and beyond it lie other nations. Third, it is sovereign. Born in the era when the Enlightenment and revolutions dismantled divine right rule, the nation strives to establish sovereign, free states. Finally, the nation is called a community because, despite internal inequalities, it is always imagined as embodying a "profound, equal comradeship"—an emotion strong enough to inspire people to sacrifice for it.

Therefore, a nation's categorization of "the other" is not a fixed and unchanging boundary. Precisely because the community is imagined, when Chinese immigrants entered Thai society, they could be classified as the other or incorporated into the community, depending on political choices and historical experiences. Thailand differs significantly from other Southeast Asian nations in that its ruling class itself possesses Chinese ancestry. Whether it be the royal family of the Chakri Dynasty, the old aristocratic royalists, or the emerging elite class (Wongsurawat, 2016)—including Phibun himself—all have Chinese heritage. During

the Cold War, while other Southeast Asian nations feared collusion between their immigrants and communism, Thailand, grounded in its Buddhist values, trusted the loyalty of its Chinese immigrants to the state (Pongsapich, 1995). Although the preceding analysis details how Thailand's state capacity at the time was insufficient for a complete anti-Chinese campaign, ultimately resulting in a compromise that partially accommodated Chinese immigrants, the anti-Chinese movement did not leave Thailand entirely unscathed. The discriminatory policies of the era required Chinese immigrants to abandon their traditional Chinese surnames and adopt Thai ones, mandated the learning of Thai language, and imposed Thai language examinations (Landon, 1940; Skinner, 1957). The former blurred the boundaries between Chinese and Thai, facilitating the integration of Chinese immigrants into the "imagined community of Thailand." The latter enabled Chinese immigrants to acquire the language and script of the host nation (Thailand), enhancing shared characteristics with the Thai ethnic group and further aiding their incorporation into the Thai narrative. These assimilation measures were not entirely aimed at exclusion, but rather functioned as mechanisms for blurring boundaries, enabling Chinese immigrants to be reimagined as members of the Thai nation.

In Thailand, Chinese immigrants can be old aristocrats, emerging elites, tycoons, or members of many influential classes. In contrast, consider Indonesia. Chang's (1973) research, based on interviews with multiple Indonesian scholars, experts, and professionals who are themselves Chinese immigrants, reached a common conclusion: "Because Chinese immigrants did not enter Indonesia's ruling class, the plight of Chinese immigrants is entirely dependent on government policies. They themselves lack the power to resist. Due to frequent robberies and violent incidents targeting Chinese individuals, many Chinese professionals have relocated to the Netherlands, the United States, Singapore, or Hong Kong for safety reasons. Some have sent their children to Chinese schools in other regions. Wealthy Chinese businesspeople have moved their families overseas and shifted some investments to other parts of Southeast Asia." In Anderson's terms, the Indonesian Chinese have consistently been imagined as existing outside the national community, lacking both symbolic inclusion and institutional access to state power. Consequently, their fate remains highly vulnerable to shifts in

government policy and popular discontent.

In the Philippines, Chinese immigrants face a different set of circumstances. Chang (1973) argues that the “scapegoat theory” effectively explains anti-Chinese sentiment in the Philippines. He contends that the Philippines suffers from an extremely corrupt government, with its economy controlled by Americans running large corporations and corrupt Filipino bureaucrats. These groups profit by sacrificing the interests of the already impoverished Filipino people. However, the former are few in number and thus less noticeable, while the latter remain distant from ordinary Filipinos. Meanwhile, the business-savvy Chinese community amassed greater wealth than ordinary Filipinos. Yet they never achieved sufficient success to become isolated from Filipinos, making them targets for attacks and outlets for the pent-up resentment of impoverished Filipinos.

A Low-Cost Path to Modernization of Thailand

Aligning with state capacity was not only a key factor in the Agricultural Adjustment Agency's (AAA) success but also the fundamental reason for its starkly different fate compared to the National Reconstruction Agency (NRA) (Skocpol and Finegol, 1982). The AAA leveraged existing networks by aligning with the federal-local cooperation system long established by the Ministry of Agriculture. For Thailand at that time, the integration of Chinese immigrants across its social classes and industries constituted such an existing network. Thus, the compromise with the Chinese community represented a structural choice by the state. This compromise was not only a capacity-constrained strategy of governance, but also a wise choice after rational thinking. Unlike Indonesia, where violent anti-Chinese campaigns ultimately led to the exodus of Chinese nationals and their assets, Thailand assimilated its Chinese population and retained their capital domestically.

Rational choice theory posits that individual behavior arises from the interaction between structural constraints and personal preferences. Within these constraints, individuals face multiple feasible courses of action, with the ultimately chosen path resulting from rational deliberation (Hechter, 1986). Thailand's fortunate circumstance lies in the

fact that both Chinese immigrants and the Thai government ultimately made rational choices. Even these “rational choices” were made under structural constraints, with limited options available to both parties. Thailand offered Chinese immigrants the opportunity to choose whether to become “Thai” (Kasetsiri, 1974), while Chinese immigrants actively participated in market competition as Thai government policies gradually relaxed, helping Thailand expand into international markets. Taking the rice industry—repeatedly referenced in this study—as an example, Chinese immigrants collaborated with Thai elites and officials. Together, they established rice conglomerates that actively engaged in international trade while also gaining the favor of rice farmers in central Thailand (Pongsapich, 1995). Leveraging their expertise in business, they helped establish Thailand’s position as a major rice exporter today.

Szanton (1980) observed that the collaborative relationship between Chinese immigrants and Thai elites enabled the former to rapidly emerge as a new bourgeoisie. While this deepened the social divide between Thais and Chinese, it also facilitated the transformation of Chinese immigrants from ethnic Chinese to Sino-Thai. Part of Phibun’s motivation for launching anti-Chinese campaigns was to cultivate a native bourgeoisie. As Chinese immigrants assimilated into Sino-Thai identity, the void in the native bourgeoisie seemed to be filled in an unexpected way, meeting the government’s demands for industrial development. Pongsapich (1995) demonstrates that during their settlement in Thailand, Chinese immigrants became indispensable partners to Thais. When the government sought contributions from the private sector for national development, these Sino-Thai—active in private enterprises, banks, import-export firms, real estate, and other sectors—willingly responded. When the government invited the private sector to participate in national development planning as experts or advisors, they were among the first to engage. This also reflects a rational choice by both parties: the Thai government opted to utilize rather than exclude Chinese immigrants, while the Chinese immigrants themselves chose cooperation over resistance with the Thai government. This outcome demonstrates that Thailand’s modernization was not built upon the exclusion of diversity, but rather achieved a relatively low-cost, low-disruption path of transformation by incorporating existing social forces.

Conclusion

This paper reexamines the relationship between nationalist policies, state capacity, and modernization pathways by focusing on Thailand's anti-China movements during the period of Phibun Songkhram (1938–1944; 1948–1957). Research reveals that anti-China policies during Phibun's rule were not a coherent and thorough violent xenophobic project, but rather a limited state intervention practice—highly mobilized by nationalist discourse yet consistently constrained by the structure of state capacity. It is precisely within this structural tension that anti-China policies exhibited contradictory characteristics of “superficial suppression” and “core compromise.”

From the perspective of state capacity, the fragmentation of the administrative system, the lack of specialized bureaucracy and policy instruments, and long-established political learning experiences collectively constrained the Thai state's ability to fully suppress or expel the Chinese from their dominant economic position. Although the Phibun regime achieved high political centralization and suppressed opposition forces through authoritarian means, political dictatorship did not equate to effective governance capacity. Consequently, despite its ambitious and determined beginnings, the anti-Chinese movement failed to undermine the structural position of Chinese capital within the financial, trade, and agricultural systems.

Simultaneously, viewed through the lens of the “imagined community,” Thailand did not permanently exclude Chinese nationals from its national identity. Through surname changes, linguistic assimilation, and institutional integration, Chinese individuals were formally reimagined as “Thais.” This approach of maintaining ambiguous boundaries preserved crucial economic and social resources for the nation during its modernization process. Compared to other Southeast Asian nations that pursued costly paths of radical anti-Chinese sentiment—leading to capital flight and social fragmentation—Thailand chose a low-conflict modernization route characterized by compromise and absorption.

Therefore, this paper argues that the historical significance of the anti-Chinese movement during the Phibun era lies not in its nationalist

radicalism, but in revealing a rational governance choice made under constrained state capacity. Thailand's modernization was not built on the exclusion of diversity, but rather advanced through the reintegration of existing social forces within structural constraints. This experience not only deepens our understanding of Thai nationalism and nation-building, but also provides important insights for rethinking the modernization paths of developing countries in the context of ethnic diversity.

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Creative Refusal and Freedom in Craft Making: The Case Study of *Dhaka* Weaving and the Development Assistance in Eastern Nepal

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ABSTRACT—This study explores the conflict between local handicraft production and development assistance interventions through the case of *dhaka*, a hand-woven cloth produced in the eastern hilly region of Nepal. Drawing on studies of development assistance in Nepal and the perspective of “culture as creative refusal,” this paper argues that the characteristics of *dhaka* cloth and its production practices have been shaped through local people’s conscious rejection and selective adoption of elements introduced by various development programs implemented in the region. Since the 1980s, the KHARDEP program in Town M has served as a catalyst for the implementation of numerous development assistance projects and government policies related to *dhaka* production. These interventions created opportunities for local people to reflect on their own practices of making *dhaka*—practices that had not previously been self-consciously articulated—by comparing them with methods introduced through development initiatives and industrial production. Through this process, people came to recognize their own modes of production, reconsider what they regarded as important in making *dhaka*, and either reject or selectively adopt externally introduced approaches. Based on case studies of development interventions related to local handicraft production, this study examines how people in the research area responded to such interventions and how their acts of refusal and selective acceptance became connected to the features now regarded as characteristic of *dhaka* cloth and its production practices. **Keywords:** *dhaka* cloth, development assistance, handicrafts, creative refusal, material culture, craft studies, Nepal

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Introduction

This study explores the conflict between local handicraft-making and development assistance interventions, focusing on the case of *dhaka*, a hand-woven cloth produced in the eastern hilly region of Nepal. Drawing on David Graeber's [2013a] concept of "culture as creative refusal," I argue that the distinctive characteristics of the *dhaka* cloth and its production practices have emerged through the conscious choices and refusals of local people in response to development programs. *Dhaka* cloth produced in eastern Nepal has been the focus of numerous development programs initiated by both foreign and domestic organizations. These efforts were first catalyzed by the Kosi Hills Area Rural Development Programme (KHARDEP) launched at the end of the 1970s by the United Kingdom (UK) government. Following this program, various technical and institutional interventions were implemented in the study area. More recently, technical training programs have been implemented by the regional branches of the Department of Cottage and Small Industries (commonly known as the *Gharelu*) as well as by local municipalities and wards under the Government of Nepal (GoN). In addition, the Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT) has established a system for the technical certification of *dhaka*.

Although numerous development programs related to *dhaka* have been implemented, the steps introduced through these initiatives have not been widely adopted in local *dhaka* production. Consequently, the outcomes of these programs often diverge significantly from their original goals and expectations. These unintended consequences have often been perceived to have occurred because of "low levels of education," "a lack of understanding," or rigid views of tradition based on caste and ethnic classifications, in previous studies and books written by craft practitioners. In this paper, however, I propose an alternative perspective to view these outcomes as the conscious creative refusals and choices of local people in response to external interventions.

After the 1950s, numerous international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) entered Nepal, a country that had previously remained isolated from the international community by avoiding contact with foreign nations. Nepal appeared to foreign aid

administrators and social scientists as providing an ideal laboratory for the ideas and agencies of the project of development [Fujikura 2001: 301]. Within this context, a discourse emerged that linked poverty with a lack of education. In an article published in 1992, Pigg observes that, in the development discourse in Nepal, the villagers are regarded as “‘people who do not understand’ (*kura bujhdeinan*) and as in need of pedagogic intervention” [Pigg 1992: 507; Fujikura 2001: 298]. These views were not simply imposed on rural people from the outside, but there were ‘cosmopolitan villagers’ who called other villagers “people who do not understand”. In Pigg’s interpretation, cosmopolitan villagers seek to differentiate their consciousness from that of others by asserting their ability to recognize the characteristic of the “generic villager,” thereby aligning themselves on the side of *bikas* (development) [Pigg 1992: 511; Fujikura 2001: 298]².

Local people also have been seen as “people who do not understand” in the studies on Nepali handicrafts. Compared with the body of research on handicrafts in other parts of South Asia, studies on Nepali handicrafts remain relatively limited, and existing research often reflects certain biases in its frameworks and perspectives. One major issue in the study of Nepali handicrafts is the overemphasis on development and fair-trade frameworks. While some studies approach the topic from alternative perspectives—such as an analysis of the expansion of the fair-trade market within Nepal [Doherty et al. 2015] and a historical account of a particular fair-trade organization [Biggs and Lewis

2 Pigg claims that Nepalis at all levels, who are keenly aware of the technoscience’s claim to universal truth, hang on to its vocabulary in their effort to escape being defined as “marginal,” that is, “to be positioned as the exception, the deviate, the parochial, the remnant, or the merely local in the face of the universal” [Pigg 1992: 510; Fujikura 2001: 299]. In response to Pigg’s perspective, Fujikura says that he could not support his way of perceiving if all such utterances need to be interpreted as a strategic move in the “politics of identity” and claims that development is not only about asymmetrical differentiation of people and places into categories [Fujikura 2001: 300]. Fujikura also points out that it addresses the changing dynamics of stratification and mobility but not the constitution of the subject itself in the scope of Pigg’s analytic framework [Fujikura 2001: 301]. For example, the utterance of people who say, “I did not know anything before the NGO people came,” “but at least now I know I must learn. I am trying to learn whatever I can and trying whatever small things that I can do, to improve our condition” remain unexamined [Fujikura 2001: 301]. Fujikura argues that such a statement, in itself, has nothing to do with “positioning” or upward mobility. Rather, we need to take her seriously, and see her as indeed trying to communicate her new sense of freedom she gained through a new awareness, an awareness that has enabled her to consciously educate herself, to mold herself in an improving direction [Fujikura 2001: 301].

2009]—most studies focus primarily on empowerment, particularly whether handicraft production economically benefits local producers [e.g., Dunsmore 1998a; Dunsmore 1998b; Rich-Zendel 2013]. In such studies, where empowerment is framed primarily in terms of economic gains, there is often a lack of attention to how local people perceive and negotiate the interventions of development assistance in handicraft production. Those who do not conform to the development assistance framework are frequently trivialized and portrayed as “backward” or as individuals who “do not understand³.” In addition to that, handicrafts are often presented as symbols or expressions of ethnic identity in such studies, although people from various castes and ethnicities are involved in their production⁴.

Against these views of previous research on Nepali handicrafts, I present a different perspective in this study. The conscious refusal of the intervention of development assistance has created the unique weaving culture of *dhaka* in eastern Nepal. Here, I use David Graeber’s discussion of culture as creative refusal [Graeber 2013a]. It explains culture as an act of self-conscious rejection or as formed through a schizogenic process of mutual definition against the values of neighboring societies, based on the Mauss’ concept of culture as conscious refusal [Graeber 2013a]. Mauss noted dramatic examples of non-diffusion of even extremely practical technologies by neighboring people, based on his rather extreme position in the now-antiquated debates about diffusionism. Algonkians in Alaska refuse to adopt Inuit kayaks, which are more suited to the environment than their own boats; similarly, Inuits refuse to adopt Algonkian snowshoes. He concludes that cultures or civilizations are based on conscious refusal [Mauss 2006; Graeber 2013a: 2]. Based on Mauss’ idea of culture, Graeber addresses the degree to which cultures are not just conceptions of what the world is like, not just ways of being and acting worldwide but also active political projects, which

3 Notably, even in books for the general public and practical manuals, Nepali people are often portrayed as individuals who “do not understand” or “fail to comprehend.” Although many previous studies have emphasized that the failure of development programs often stems from a lack of understanding of local conditions, many actors on the side of development remain unaware of their own ignorance.

4 For example, eastern *dhaka* is frequently described as a traditional textile of the Limbu or Rai peoples, an indigenous community of eastern Nepal [Banem 2009; Dunsmore 1993: 90].

often operate by explicitly rejecting other ones [Graeber 2013a: 1]. In craft studies as well, there are studies that address craft in relation to refusal and freedom. For Britton, the value of the crafts exists in their refusal to be completely one thing or another and in their ability for subtle subversions of our expectations [Britton 1991: 15; Niedderer and Townsend: 2014]. Margetts sees craft as a “free radical spirit which at the moment gives the work and its makers their remarkable quality” [Margetts 1991: 8; Niedderer and Townsend: 2014]. Graeber’s focus on interactions between societies, and the tension between development assistance and local craft-making might appear to be situated at a somewhat different level. However, I believe that it is still useful in understanding how the distinctive character of *dhaka* weaving has taken shape during the schizogony process between the values promoted by development assistance and those in local craft-making⁵. This approach provides a different perspective from previous studies on Nepali handicrafts, such as villagers’ discourse. It also allows us to focus on the creativity and ingenuity of people sparked by development assistance, without reducing them to the above mentioned rigid views of tradition, economic rationalism, or environmental determinism. Most importantly, this perspective sheds light on what people truly value in their craft-making by examining the parts rejected during and after the intervention of development programs.

In this study, I aim to explore how people responded to the development assistance intervention in the research area and how their acts of refusal or selective acceptance are connected to the elements now regarded as characteristic features of *dhaka* cloth and its production practices. Through this inquiry, I seek to demonstrate that the conscious choices and refusals made by the local people in response to development assistance have played a significant role in shaping the distinctive

5 Given that Graeber describes “society” as the audience [Graeber 2013b; 2001], I consider it appropriate to apply his idea in this context. He wrote about society as arena for the realization of value as follows: “Insofar as value is social, it is always a comparison; value can only be realized in other people’s eyes. Another way to put this is that there must always be an audience. It is not just a question of being recognized as just, or honorable, or a good provider, not even a matter of being able to establish that one is more just, or more honorable, or a better provider than someone else, but also, whose assessment one takes seriously (and of course, by the same token, whose views it never even occurs to one to think about at all). For most of those involved in pursuing a particular form of value, that’s what ‘society’ is: that audience” [Graeber 2013b: 226].

weaving culture of *dhaka* in the study area.

This study is based on fieldwork conducted intermittently between 2015 and 2025. The primary research site is Town M, located in the hilly region of eastern Nepal. This area was one of the locations where the KHARDEP launched for local handicraft production at the end of the 1970s. According to the census, the population of Town M is approximately 19,000 [CBS 2021].

Expansion of *Dhaka* in Eastern Nepal

Here, I briefly explain how *dhaka* production has been formed and spread in eastern Nepal. In Nepal, handicraft skills are ubiquitous in many regions [Rich-Zendel 2013: 309; Dunsmore 1993]. Dunsmore described Nepali crafts as follows: “The natural beauty of Nepal and the art treasures, architecture, sculptures, and paintings of the Kathmandu Valley have gained admiration throughout the world. Overshadowed by such perfection, domestic crafts were hardly noticed or mentioned: yet the remarkable range of such crafts, especially textiles, which reflect the diversity and ingenuity of the people throughout the whole of Nepal, achieved equal perfection” [Dunsmore 1993: 9].

In the previous studies on *dhaka* of Nepal, Rich-Zendel, who conducted her research on *dhaka* in Palpa in western Nepal, explains, “hand-woven *dhaka* cloth is an important cultural symbol all over Nepal, most recognizable as the fabric used to make the Nepali *topi*, or hat, that is often worn by government officials and was popularized by the royal family” [Rich-Zendel 2013: 310]. Dunsmore, who studied *dhaka* in eastern Nepal, writes that “the most conspicuous Nepalese textile is the colourful inlay-patterned *dhaka* cloth which is used for men’s caps, *topi*, and also for women’s blouses and shawls” [Dunsmore 1998: 53]. In eastern Nepal, there is a growing assertion that *dhaka* is a tradition of the indigenous Limbu people. This has become more prominent with the recent rise of identity politics. In addition to the two main production areas of *dhaka*—Palpa in western Nepal and a wide area in the east—there are several other production centers, such as Bhaktapur near the capital. Weaving techniques and looms slightly differ across

these various production sites.

The characteristic feature of *dhaka* cloth in eastern Nepal is its complex patterns, which are produced through a time-consuming weaving process. According to Dunsmore, “the best-known method of *dhaka*-cloth weaving is a plain ground weave with a supplementary weft of a different colour laid alongside the ground weft in the regular sheds in selected areas to create a pattern” [Dunsmore 1993: 100]. These technical aspects of *dhaka* are locally referred to as “hand-woven (*haatle buneko*)” and are distinguished from “machine-woven (*machinele buneko*).” The key differences between these two techniques lie in the uniqueness of the patterns and the time required for weaving. Machine-woven *dhaka* can reproduce identical patterns repeatedly, whereas in hand-woven *dhaka*, each pattern differs in size and shape, even when the motif is the same⁶. Furthermore, hand-weaving requires significantly more time than machine production. The more intricate the pattern, the more time and skill are required. As noted in a previous study on *dhaka*, “each has its own individual pattern, reflecting the creativity and skill of weaver” [Dunsmore 1993: 90]. Narratives such as “It takes a lot of time to weave *dhaka* in eastern Nepal because it is woven by hand, not by machine,” and “Each *dhaka* has a different pattern (*eota eota farak cha*),” were frequently heard in the research area⁷. In Eastern Nepal, most of the *dhaka* currently produced is intended for the local market, and handwoven *dhaka* with irregular patterns is traded at significantly higher prices than machine-woven *dhaka* imported from other regions⁸.

How did *dhaka* develop across Nepal, particularly in the eastern region? Multiple theories exist regarding its origin⁹, and each produc-

6 The image of “machine-woven” as described by people covers a wide range. The term may refer to power looms used in the Tarai plains near the Indian border, jacquard looms commonly found in Palpa, or looms equipped with flying shuttles.

7 Some studies argue that the lack of a fixed pattern and labor-intensive temporality are key characteristics and values of craft [Britton 1991: 15; Pajczkowska 2010].

8 In Western Nepal and other regions, handwoven *dhaka* is generally more expensive than machine-woven *dhaka*. However, because these regions have come to be associated with machine-woven *dhaka*, even handwoven products are traded at lower prices than those from Eastern Nepal.

9 Dunsmore wrote several theories about the origin of *dhaka*: “One story goes that the colourful *topi* was introduced by a minister who returned with the idea from Dhaka (Bangladesh); others believe that the name was given to the cloth simply because many items came to Nepal from or through Dhaka or because Dhaka muslin resembled the fine Nepalese weaving.

tion site has a distinct historical background. For instance, in Palpa, located in western Nepal, *dhaka* is said to have developed primarily with the support of the Department of Cottage and Village Industries [Darlamī 2001; Dunsmore 1993: 115]. In eastern Nepal, according to oral accounts gathered during fieldwork, several weavers said that they had been weaving plain cloth prior to the 1960s and began producing *dhaka* around that time¹⁰. The term *dhaka* does not appear in a regional monograph published in 1976, while descriptions of weaving exist [Jones and Jones 1976]. In contrast, Dunsmore [1993] uses the term. This does not necessarily imply that the fabric, now referred to as *dhaka*, was absent in eastern Nepal when Jones and Jones conducted their research. Their book includes a photograph of a weaver working on a textile that appears similar to contemporary *dhaka*, although the image is not sufficiently clear to confirm this with certainty [Jones and Jones 1976: 26]. The reason why *dhaka* is produced in two geographically distant and mountainous regions—both of which were not easily accessible by modern transportation—remains unclear [e.g., Dunsmore 1993: 90]. This ambiguous history has contributed to tensions among different production sites regarding claims to its origin. While *dhaka* is now widely recognized as a culturally significant textile for the Nepali nation, it has begun to be produced relatively recently in each of these regions. Its promotion in foreign markets, and subsequent rise to national and international recognition, occurred in the 1980s, coinciding with the implementation of KHARDEP in eastern Nepal¹¹.

[...] It also possible that Hindu weavers, fleeing from Dhaka at the time of the Muslim invasion, settled in or near Nepal and influenced Nepalese weavers" [Dunsmore 1993: 90]. Some argue that the method of "hand-woven" *dhaka* seen in eastern Nepal and several workshops in Palpa is common with Jamdani weaving known in Bangladesh and India. Dunsmore said that Jamdani differs considerably from the practiced by Nepali weavers and wrote the difference in detail [Dunsmore 1993: 90, 104–106].

10 Several individuals mentioned a connection between the Nepali royal family and the origins of *dhaka*. A Limbu woman in her 60s from Town M recounted that she had learned *dhaka* weaving from another woman who was said to have started making patterned *topi* (caps) around the time King Mahendra visited Town M. According to her, because there was nothing suitable to present to the king, the patterned *topi* was created as a gift. This event reportedly took place in 1964, and she added that she has continued to enjoy weaving *dhaka* ever since [Field notes, August 12, 2023].

11 As mentioned above, in Palpa, the development of *dhaka* was not driven by foreign development programs but rather led by the Department of Cottage and Village Industries, to promote local industries [Darlamī 2001; Dunsmore 1993: 115]. Among workshops and shops in Tansen, Palpa, the name of Dunsmore—who was also a supporter of KHARDEP—was well

Prior to the 1980s—before KHARDEP was introduced—there existed a local structure in which the Limbu and Rai people wove *dhaka*, and higher-caste Hindu groups such as Bahun and Chhetri purchased it in eastern Nepal.

Let us briefly examine KHARDEP, which paved the way for many subsequent development programs in the research area. KHARDEP started in mid 1977 with a data collection and planning phase, and project implementation has been under way since 1979 [KHARDEP Coordinator's Office 1982: 1]. KHARDEP included several programs targeting the hill regions of eastern Nepal [Dunsmore 1993: 106; Dunsmore 1998a; Dunsmore 1998b; KHARDEP Coordinator's Office 1982: 12]. The main objective of the program was to generate additional off-season income for households without sufficient farmland that could not achieve food self-sufficiency; its primary beneficiaries were farmers in difficult economic circumstances [Dunsmore 1993: 106; KHARDEP Coordinator's Office 1982: vii, 1]. KHARDEP comprised numerous projects concerned with many different aspects of rural development such as agricultural extension, livestock development, and construction of irrigation schemes, roads and bridges [KHARDEP Coordinator's Office 1982: 1]. The targets of the handicraft-related programs included not only *dhaka* but also *allo* (nettle), bamboo basketry, and embroidery [Dunsmore 1998a: 22].

KHARDEP played a significant role in raising the visibility of *dhaka* beyond the local context and across other regions of Nepal¹². Consequently, individuals from various castes and ethnic backgrounds—beyond the original Limbu and Rai weavers—began to participate in

known. Some individuals expressed the view that, because of KHARDEP, *dhaka* from eastern Nepal became more prominent in foreign markets and among international audiences than that of Palpa

12 The following are the activities undertaken by KHARDEP to support weavers: “(1) establishing a Cottage Industry Emporium shop in Terhathum to supply a wide range of yarn and equipment, act as a channel for others and sales, and become the centre for discussions on product development, pricing, equality standards and marketing, initially this being supported by vso (Voluntary Service Overseas); (2) supplying labour-saving devices such as warping mills and roller shuttles; (3) arranging exhibitions and publicity material, establishing contacts between weavers and buyers; (4) assisting the Women's Training Centre, Dhankuta, with workshops which covered such subjects as weaving, health care and functional literacy as well as undertaking periodic visits” [Dunsmore 1993: 106–110].

its production. The areas of *dhaka* production subsequently expanded, not only within the eastern hill regions and existing centers but also into new regions where *dhaka* had not previously been produced. This expansion was facilitated through frequent technical training programs conducted by domestic and international organizations, government agencies, and local authorities.

Case Studies of the Development Assistance Interventions

From here, we will see the case studies of the development assistance intervention and people's narratives about the programs and the production practices after the programs ended. This section presents and examines, in detail, four cases introduced through the development programs. Although these four cases of intervention are organically interconnected, it is difficult to simplify or schematize the relationships among them. In particular, craft production in the research area lacks a single center and is highly diverse; any attempt to fit it into a single framework inevitably produces numerous exceptions. Therefore, rather than attempting to artificially map out the connections among the four cases, this section examines each case individually. By focusing on these seemingly disparate cases from the perspective of rejection, this paper seeks to identify tendencies in how local people attach importance to *dhaka* weaving and to demonstrate how these tendencies are connected to the present characteristics of *dhaka*.

Case 1: Functional Looms

The first example comprises functional looms, specifically looms with flying shuttles and Jacquard looms. As mentioned above, current *dhaka* are characteristically “hand-woven” and have “unique patterns” and seem to be more colorful. To date, many attempts have nevertheless been made to introduce functional looms in Town M that would lead *dhaka* in a direction different from its current characteristics.

In a typical frame loom, the weaver would sit with the newly woven cloth before them, using treadles or ropes at the feet to raise and lower the heddles, which opened the shed in the warp threads. They,

then, had to reach forward while holding the shuttle in one hand and pass it through the shed. The flying shuttle employs a board, called the “race,” which runs parallel, along the front of the beater, forming a track on which the shuttle runs. This allows the weft thread to be passed through more quickly, thereby reducing weaving time. Flying shuttles were introduced in the study area by KHARDEP in 1980s [Dunsmore 1993: 110]¹³. According to a woman guide at KHARDEP, the supporter brought looms with a flying shuttle from the UK, but the local weavers did not use it [Field notes, February 23, 2013]. This story was also repeated by a Chhetri man who was a *dhaka* workshop owner. A loom with a flying shuttle was displayed outside his workshop, and only he used it. In contrast, these looms are widely used in Palpa, Western Nepal.

The same situation applies to Jacquard looms as with flying shuttles. The Jacquard loom uses punched cards, where each row of holes corresponds to one warp and weft thread. The machine pulls up only the warp threads indicated by the holes and passes the weft thread through, weaving a pattern according to the pattern on the card. This not only makes it much easier to weave complex patterns but also allows weavers to repeatedly weave identical patterns without remembering them. Jacquard looms were introduced in almost all *dhaka* workshops in Palpa. They were also used by domestic weavers. In eastern Nepal, the officer of *Gharelu* said that they planned to introduce them for the effective production of *dhaka*. A report on the Micro-Enterprise Development Programme (MEDEP), which was implemented by the GoN and the UNDP in the research area from 1998 to 2018 following the end of KHARDEP, also mentioned the Jacquard loom. Under the “Constraints” and “Possible solution” columns in the table, it says, “Inadequate knowledge on repair and maintenance of Jacquard looms” and “Provision for training in operation, repair and maintenance of Jacquard looms,” respectively [MEDEP 2010]. However, I have never seen a Jacquard loom in my research area, and local people also said that it is not widely used there, just like the flying shuttle. Even if Jacquard looms were not introduced in the study area and the eastern hilly areas,

13 In a booklet published by local *Gharelu* Office, there was a photo of a loom with a flying shuttle with the caption “an improved *dhaka* loom” [घरेलु तथा साना उद्योग कार्यालय, तेह्रथुम BS 2078/79:40]. These descriptions suggest that *Gharelu* have attempted to promote the use of these looms, but in reality, they have not become widely used.

their spread caused the demand for eastern *dhaka* to decrease. A Limbu woman in her 60s said, “We caused a loss by the spread of Jacquard across Nepal. Foreigners did not like to buy *dhaka* woven with Jacquard. Our hand-woven *dhaka* were also thought to be woven with Jacquard by them” [Field notes, February 13, 2023]. In recent years, almost all *dhaka* produced in Eastern Nepal has been destined for the local market, and even in local transactions, whether it is handwoven is frequently asked, and considered important. A Limbu woman in her 60s said, “Jacquard looms are used in many places such as Pokhara and Palpa and so on, but not here. Many people say that we should use them, but we have our own familiar looms. It is fine that they are used in other places, but Jacquard is not needed here” [Field notes, February 15, 2023]. Some weavers expressed the view that hand weaving is easier for them.

In Case 1, although functional looms that are widely used in other regions of Nepal were also introduced to Eastern Nepal through development assistance programs, and mentioned in government plans, they have seen almost no diffusion to date. Instead, narratives rejecting the introduction of functional looms were frequently voiced by weavers and others involved in production. The reasons why functional looms did not spread are likely to be complex and multifaceted. These include economic factors such as the investment risks associated with introducing such high-cost looms, transportation and maintenance difficulties, and the fact that hand weaving is more profitable. Yet when asked why such looms had not become widespread, respondents rarely referred to economic considerations; instead, most responses took the form of statements such as “*Dhaka* from Terhathum is handwoven; it is not machine-woven,” as noted above. In shops selling *dhaka*, the characteristics of handwoven products were frequently emphasized, particularly the time required for weaving and the uniqueness of each pattern. In the case of Jacquard looms, the process of weaving patterns—traditionally carried out by the weaver—is divided at minimum into two stages: the preparation of punch cards and the actual weaving of the patterns, which involves repetitive hand movements following the cards and the continuous pulling of cords to operate the flying shuttle. In this process, the weaver’s freedom for creative improvisation is, quite naturally, appropriated prior to the act of weaving itself by a design process already completed by someone else. By rejecting more

functional looms introduced through development programs and government plans, people in the research area have sustained production without rendering previously acquired bodily techniques obsolete or separating the acts of designing and weaving. As a result, the temporality of weaving *dhaka*—that it requires a long time—and the uniqueness of its patterns—that each piece differs subtly from the others—are reflected in price as a form of value. Consequently, *dhaka* produced in Eastern Nepal is traded at much higher prices than that from other regions, even though both are available in local shops.¹⁴

Case 2: Design with Grid Paper

Various development programs have trained people how to design with grid paper in Town M¹⁵. In 2016, a design training program was held in collaboration with an organization of India, a local NGO, and Nepali and foreign Funds¹⁶. During the training program, a designer from India in her 20s taught how to design and weave *dhaka* using grid paper. The participants were weavers who had already learned how to weave *dhaka*. Approximately 10 women from the nearby village and town joined. The trainer first had the weavers draw motifs from everyday objects such as grains of rice or *tongba* (local alcohol made from finger millet) containers and then trace them onto colored paper. She, then, had them make multiple copies of the motif, line them up in a row on paper, and trace them onto grid paper with 5 mm², colored with a pen. The weavers, then, wove *dhaka* while carefully measuring the size of the patterns on the fabric against those drawn on the grid paper in a *dhaka* workshop owned by a Chhetri man.

In most workshops in Town M, the length and width of the *dhaka*

14 For example, in the case of the *topi*, a cap that represents a symbolic use of *dhaka* cloth, Jacquard-woven *topis* brought in from other parts of Nepal are priced at approximately 250 to 400 rupees, whereas *topis* from the research site range from 750 to as much as 6,000 rupees, as of 2026.

15 According to a Sherpa woman in her 60s, who was the guide for KHARDEP, people were not taught to create designs using grid paper in KHARDEP. The supporter pointed to the cloth while discussing the design with local weavers, saying, “And then, and then, and then.” On the other hand, some local weavers said that the use of grid paper for designing was taught in KHARDEP. They showed me patterns on grid paper and design catalogs featuring photos of *dhaka* produced in KHARDEP.

16 The participants did not have to pay any participation fees, and each participant was provided with 30,000 rupees for accommodation and other necessities.

textiles were roughly standardized for each product, but the size of the patterns was not fixed, and individual designs were not systematically recorded. In contrast, this training program instructed weavers on how to document their own pattern ideas and accurately reproduce them on the woven cloth. According to the women instructor from India, such precision in pattern replication is essential for distributing *dhaka* to foreign markets. For weavers who had long relied on experiential and embodied knowledge, however, weaving *dhaka* by precisely measuring with a tape measure proved quite challenging. After the training program, I visited Town M several times but did not observe any weavers using grid paper to create or record their designs. A woman Sherpa guide at the time of KHARDEP discussed this training as follows:

“Many people in Nepal can teach *dhaka* without inviting a designer from India. (...) As you weave patterns, new designs will emerge on their own (*Butta bundaigarda afai nayan design nikalne*)”.

[Field notes, February 23, 2023]

Grid paper was used by certain weavers under specific conditions—namely, when they were working with foreign organizations. The following narrative is from a Limbu woman in her 60s, who was from Town M and moved to the Tarai Plain.

“When I worked with the Japanese company P, we were required to weave patterns for a pale pink cherry blossom *dhaka*. Only 6 out of 60 people could weave it, and they were called Japani. It had to be woven exactly to match the size of the paper. [...] Not everyone can weave the exact patterns from the paper.”

[Field notes, February 13, 2023]

Local weavers’ experience with weaving patterns of the exact size following the grid paper design differs from those with body knowledge. In addition to these technical difficulties, the weavers felt that the act of weaving according to grid paper was difficult because it contained a sense of deception and meaninglessness. The following story is told by the same weaver:

“I also have been working with the German organization N for 15 years, and they give me orders with the zigzag patterns of exact sizes. They even specify the length of the fringes. However, the patterns also need to be a little uneven so that they look hand-woven.”

[Field notes, February 13, 2023]

Here, weavers must weave *dhaka*, answering the conflicting demands of meeting the “authenticity of handicraft” in foreign markets by weaving in exact sizes while also subtly changing the size of each pattern. The weaver quoted above occasionally works with foreign organizations, finding it pointless.

Then, how is the pattern of *dhaka* woven for the domestic market? There are two production forms in *dhaka* industry, factory production and domestic production in the eastern part of Nepal. In the case of factory production, the factory owner decides the design of *dhaka* by showing the cloth with the pattern or by providing verbal instructions for the name of the pattern and color. Here, grid paper seems seldom to be used; at least, I have never seen it. Regarding the size of the pattern, there are almost no specifications down to millimeters in local markets. In domestic production, which is now expanding in Town M, weavers weave specific pieces of cloth in patterns that they like. Some weave the pattern they have seen in *dhaka* shops, whereas others search for patterns on their phones. Then, they bring the clothes to stores or individual customers. Customers sometimes specify the pattern in advance. In such cases, they often hand over an actual item or send a photo of the pattern; however, they rarely specify its exact size. I heard the following narratives from several weavers: “I do not need grid paper. The pattern is present in my heart and memory,” and “We can weave *dhaka* without drawing it on grid paper.”

In Case 2, it is shown that the practice of designing on grid paper, introduced by instructors through multiple development assistance programs, has seen little diffusion in the research area. Although designs drawn on grid paper produced during KHARDEP in the 1980s have been carefully preserved in one or two workshops, they are rarely used when giving instructions to weavers in the local workshops. Instead,

actual samples are shown, and weaving is carried out based on an approximate sense of scale. Furthermore, observations from the training program discussed in this case, as well as narratives from weavers who engage in trade with overseas partners, suggest that weaving patterns according to millimeter-level specifications on grid paper requires a set of skills different from those involved in weaving approximate-sized patterns based on bodily senses—such as the fingers and eyes—acquired through experience. It was also evident that even highly skilled weavers are not necessarily able smoothly to weave designs based on grid paper. Moreover, weaving in strict accordance with such millimeter-level instructions is not something demanded in the local market. Weavers with actual experience of trading with foreign organizations also suggested that such practices are of limited significance and are not viewed favorably.

Case 3: Institutional Framework

In addition to the technical interventions described above, development assistance through handicrafts often introduces production and distribution frameworks that differ from those traditionally developed in the local context, along with institutional structures such as skill certification systems. Some individuals have welcomed the economic empowerment and positive changes brought about by these new frameworks. However, others have experienced them as unfamiliar or even alienating. For example, a woman I met in Village B—where support was provided in the 1980s through KHARDEP using cloth made from a plant called *allo*—shared her experience. She had participated in a sewing training program held in Kathmandu by an Indian organization S. She described the experience as follows:

“I learned sewing twice. Once, I learned it with the Indian organization S. When I asked a tailor to sew cloth in my village, he left it unfinished after I paid him. Then, I thought it would be better if I could sew clothes myself, and I participated in the training in Kathmandu. The factory of S is far from its store. It is a four-storey building. The managers are at the top. The factory’s work was not like what we did, where the same person cut and sewed. The cutter only cuts the whole time, and the sewer sews the entire time. We

were not allowed to see the different sections.”

[Field notes, March 3, 2023]

Various development programs have performed institutional intervention in the study area. For example, Dunsmore [1998] wrote about the problems that arose between supporters and producers when new distribution methods were introduced at KHARDEP:

“[...] local scale of goods is usually undertaken for cash or exchange; the transaction is completed at once. Where craftspeople come together to form a marketing group and the items are sold in urban centres, it is often difficult for participants to understand the reasons for delay in payments to them and the need to allow for the cost involved in dispatching goods and allowing for the possibility of them being lost or left unsold. There is unfortunately therefore much opportunity for misunderstandings and disagreement.”

[Dunsmore 1998a: 25]

The trouble above occurred in another project area of KHARDEP; however, the managers of *dhaka* workshops in Town M also said that “payment was delayed in KHARDEP.” When the KHARDEP supporters regularly visited the program site and coordinated among the intermediaries or support organizations and the local producers, transactions could be concluded. However, the physical distance, customary differences, and problems caused by them led to the suspension of *dhaka* production for foreign markets after KHARDEP ended. This inadvertently prompted a shift in the primary market for *dhaka* to be produced for the local market¹⁷.

¹⁷ Most *dhaka* produced in Town M today is intended for the domestic market. After KHARDEP, demand from outside Nepal increased, and *dhaka* production in Town M shifted primarily toward foreign markets. Following democratization in 1990, a trend emerged in which ethnic and local cultures were increasingly incorporated into national identity. Consequently, *dhaka* came to be recognized as part of Nepal's national tradition. At the same time, *dhaka* in Eastern Nepal became linked to cultural symbols and the ethnic identity of indigenous people there, particularly amid the rise of ethnic movements in the post-democratization period. In addition to these sociocultural dynamics, rising demand for *dhaka* has been fueled by labor migration. One contributing factor is the economic improvement and the emergence of a Nepali middle class capable of purchasing expensive hand-woven *dhaka*. Another factor is the growing demand for *dhaka* as gifts or ritual garments used in cultural programs and ceremonies held by

KHARDEP is thought to have emphasized preventing the disruption of local production practices and the lifestyle in which weaving was embedded. The Sherpa guide from KHARDEP said, “We went to see if weavers were weaving in their spare time and if they were doing household work. We did not let in people who only weaved and did not do household work” [Field notes, February 24, 2023]. However, MEDEP, implemented after the end of KHARDEP, is considered to have introduced more fundamental technical and institutional reforms. The aim of the MEDEP was to cater to the needs of socially excluded groups living below the poverty line by promoting off-farm employment. It focused on creating systems, structures, and an enabling environment for the sustainable development of the micro-enterprise sector [UNDP online]. According to a MEDEP report, the program was actively trying to incorporate new actors into the value chain and export *dhaka* to foreign countries rather than relying on the local network of *dhaka* production and distribution. For example, there were attempts to integrate micro entrepreneurs into the supply chains of Fair Trade Organizations and introduce logos for identity and quality assurance. Furthermore, a lack of association among *dhaka* entrepreneurs at the national level was pointed out as a problem. This suggested that MEDEP was not aimed at utilizing existing systems but rather at integrating *dhaka* production into frameworks that the aid agencies considered effective [MEDEP 2010].

However, while some people have benefited individually from MEDEP (e.g., the Kathmandu Post online), the institutional framework that it attempted to establish does not appear to have functioned very well in the study area. In this particular area, the local *dhaka* industry developed organically, not under the centralized control. Currently, both factory and cottage productions coexist, but neither of them has adopted an “efficient” production system or supply chain as introduced by development assistance¹⁸. In the case of cottage production, in particular, weaving is often done without a decision being made regarding whether it will be a commodity or a gift, or even if it will eventually become a commodity, to whom it will be sold. In other words, it is not

Nepali migrant communities abroad. Given these developments, most *dhaka* produced in Town M today is no longer circulated in Western markets, as was the case during the KHARDEP era but, instead, is consumed within the domestic Nepali market or among Nepali diaspora communities living overseas.

18 See Takamichi [2022] for the *dhaka* production practice in details.

purposeful production there, as in “modern factories”¹⁹.

As for the institutional framework, not only the programs by foreign and domestic aid but also the training programs by the GoN institutions should be mentioned. In Nepal, the Cottage Skill Awareness Office (*Gharelu Ilam Prachar Adda*) was established in 1940 (B.S. 1996). In 1974, the Department of Cottage and Small Industries was established under the Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Supplies to promote and foster various kinds of cottage and small industries to enhance their industrial productivity increment, along with creating a congenial environment for industrial investment in accordance with policy execution for contributing to the national economy [The Cottage and Small Industry online].

To date, a number of technical training programs have been conducted by the *Gharelu* Offices in each region as well as by local governments such as municipalities and wards in Nepal, which are quite similar to those by *Gharelu* Offices in terms of content²⁰. In recent years, there has been an increase in cases where technical qualifications in the respective handicrafts are required to be dispatched as trainers for the technical training of the *Gharelu* Office and the local government, as mentioned above. The CTEVT in Nepal grants these qualifications. I once participated in a training session for the qualification exam in Town M. During the session, the following instructions were explained by two owners of *dhaka* workshops: “shape the warp from the specified yarns to a suitable width of 32 inches and length of 2 meters for a size 40 loom and a No. 60 reed (60 minutes)” and “Set the warp threads on the beam of the weaving machine (30 minutes).”

19 For example, one weaver spoke about an exchange that did not involve money. When someone cultivating chayote squash (*iskus*) needed a *dhaka topi* for the *Tihar* festival, and the weaver wanted squash, over the six months leading up to *Tihar*, the weaver would continue receiving squash, and once the *dhaka* fabric was woven, it would be given in return.

20 This kind of technical training may be evaluated to a certain extent from the perspective of economic empowerment, especially for poor households in urban areas, or the spread of handicrafts in Nepal. However, there are many cases where local handicrafts are transferred and diffused to other areas without considering the context, which often deals a blow to the area where the handicrafts were originally produced, such as a decline in demand and a rise in the cost of materials. If we consider only economic benefits and convenience, it is more efficient to produce commodities in urban areas than in mountainous areas. Therefore, the GoN's technical training has led not only to the transfer of handicraft skills but also to a shift of production to urban areas gradually.

In the *dhaka* workshops in the research area, certificates of qualification and completion of training programs are usually displayed. For new weavers, such qualifications represent an opportunity quickly to become trainers. Once they become trainers, they are sent to various parts of Nepal, earning an attractive monthly income of approximately 20,000 rupees. However, many experienced weavers expressed the following thoughts regarding the certification system:

“I thought the CTEVT started out like an NGO, but I am not really sure. Perhaps it was like an NGO in the beginning, but I do not know what it is like now or what its relationship is with the *Gharelu* Office. To obtain a CTEVT certificate, you must pay 4,500 rupees: Of that, 500 to the ward office, 1,000 to the municipality and 1,500 to the provincial office. I do not get it. Why should we pay only for the certification to be allowed to teach? (...) I do not want to receive certification from those who I taught my skills to long ago.”

[Field notes, August 12, 2023]

The woman quoted above is a skilled weaver who has been weaving *dhaka* for nearly 60 years. According to a former Sherpa guide, “No one could weave as well as she could, and she was also an excellent trainer during the training programs.” She reportedly worked as a trainer in programs run by the government and both domestic and international aid organizations. She stated the following:

“The CTEVT issues licenses for *dhaka* weaving, but there are no schools or universities for *dhaka*. I have even traveled as far as Bagmati Province to teach *dhaka*. Once in Gorkha District, someone asked me if I had a license. I told them that there is no such thing because the government has not created any schools for it.”

[Field notes, February 13, 2023]

Another domestic weaver in her 40s, who was Limbu, also stated the following:

“In the past, I could go to an exhibition without a certification.

We can weave *dhaka* without drawing it on grid paper.”

[Field notes, January 22, 2019]

Many of the skilled individuals that I met during my fieldwork did not have formal qualifications. In some cases, this was because they lacked access to certification information or could not afford the associated costs. Consequently, some could not obtain qualifications even if they wanted to. However, especially among the experienced weavers, there was often a sense of resistance—not that they could not get certified but that they did not want to. The narratives above show that many of them view the certification system as something that stifles weavers’ creativity and rigidifies the organically developed *dhaka* industry into a framework defined solely by official credentials. Those who do not conform to this model are effectively marginalized. Thus, their rejection of certification can be understood as a form of opposition to such systemic constraints.

In Case 3, I examined weavers’ responses to various institutional frameworks introduced by the government and development assistance programs in the research area and its surrounding regions. These responses reveal negative reactions among producers and weavers toward the division of labor in production, the increasing complexity of transactions, and certification schemes related to *dhaka* weaving. Situations in which producers are no longer able to remain directly involved with their own products, as well as rigid and inflexible systems of complex production and trade, are viewed negatively, and such institutional arrangements have not been adopted in local production. Production in the research area is characterized by highly flexible methods in terms of both time and volume. In workshop-based production, a piece-rate payment system is employed, while in household production, weavers sell the cloth they have woven directly to individuals or shops. With regard to the government’s efforts to certify *dhaka* production, examinations for obtaining such certifications have, in fact, been implemented. However, as noted above, these certifications do not reflect actual levels of skill and can be obtained simply by paying a fee. Such government-led certification initiatives have elicited particularly rejection-oriented responses among highly skilled weavers. While newcomers tend to

seek these certificates, many experienced weavers in the region do not possess them²¹.

Case 4: Colorful Threads

The three cases discussed above showed that many of the initiatives introduced through development assistance were not accepted in local production. There is also a case in which a new initiative introduced by the development program was partially accepted and further developed locally. KHARDEP has introduced the use of colorful threads, which are still in the local practice. Before KHARDEP, the colors of *dhaka* were limited to black, white, red, and orange, and only white was used for warping [Dunsmore 1993: 90]. Dunsmore depicts the sense of conflict felt by development supporters during the introduction of new colored threads as well as the responses of the weavers, accompanied by a photograph of a *dhaka* shawl woven in vibrant multicolored yarns.

“But could this be done without harm to traditional designs and skills? It was the weavers who provided the answer to this concern and made the decisions. A group of four carried out trials on the initial proposals in their own homes and adopting traditional methods and patterns but widening the range of inlay colours used they employed for the first time a black mercerized cotton warp. One of the great surprises and delights for the weavers was seeing how their traditional patterns appeared in a new light and seemed to glow on a dark background.”

[Dunsmore 1993: 106]

Dunsmore concluded these trials as “Design development received a stimulus, enriching rather than harming tradition” [Dunsmore 1993: 106]. The Sherpa guide in KHARDEP said, “At first, some people were reluctant to use black warp threads. They were used to weaving with white and found it difficult” [Field notes, February 23, 2023]. However, the weavers accepted the use of the colorful threads and color

21 At present, the impact of certification remains limited, affecting mainly the requirements for participation in government training programs, and it has had little influence on commercial transactions in the region. On the other hand, the government's dispatch of trainers to various parts of Nepal is considered to have led, to some extent, to the outflow of technical skills.

combinations recommended by the development program. Based on the photos and publications from that period, what were often referred to as “British pastel colors” appear to have been commonly used. People in the research area still use the English term “color combination” when discussing color choices, suggesting that external advisers played a significant role in shaping the *dhaka* color schemes.

After KHARDEP ended, *dhaka* production for foreign markets declined in the research area. Pastel-colored *dhaka* also faded from prominence, and textiles featuring vivid color combinations such as green and red began to be produced. These color combinations are not considered traditional *dhaka* colors. A Limbu woman in her 60s, who runs a weaving workshop in Town M and had previously worked in KHARDEP, explained: “Foreigners do not like vivid colors. When I started selling *dhaka* in the local market, I changed the colors to brighter ones” [Field notes, February 13, 2023]. The introduction of colorful threads by KHARDEP led to regional variations in *dhaka* color schemes across Nepal. *Dhaka* produced in eastern Nepal tends to be more colorful than that produced in other regions where warm tones, such as orange, are more common. Additionally, the number of colors used in a single piece of fabric is typically higher in the eastern region than at other production sites.

Case 4 presents an example in which the introduction of colored yarns through the KHARDEP program became widely adopted in the region. Unlike the other cases brought about by development assistance programs, this initiative was not rejected; instead, local people accepted the introduction of colored yarns, and the practice has continued to the present day. Why was this the case? One possible explanation is that the introduction of colored yarns did not invalidate or constrain weavers’ previously acquired bodily practices but rather expanded the scope for creative experimentation. Notably, in the research area, *dhaka* was initially produced mainly in color combinations preferred in the British market, commonly referred to as “British pastel colors.” However, as production for the local market increased over time, weavers came to favor vividly colored *dhaka* that featured neither the orange hues traditionally associated with *dhaka* nor pastel tones, but instead striking combinations of complementary colors. This preference has persisted

to the present. These developments suggest that local producers do not indiscriminately reject all externally introduced elements associated with development; rather, they evaluate and selectively adopt them in ways that enhance their own practices of making. These cases indicate that local practices of *dhaka* weaving are not fixed, but flexible and subject to change.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examines the tensions between external development assistance and local handicraft-making in the case of *dhaka* weaving in eastern Nepal. Drawing on previous studies of development assistance in Nepal and Graeber's perspective of "culture as creative refusal," it argues that the distinctive characteristics of *dhaka* cloth and its production practices have been shaped through local people's conscious acts of rejection and selective adoption of elements introduced through development programs. Graeber states that "many of the cultural forms we still, at least tacitly, treat as primordial could equally well be seen, in their origins and to a large degree in their maintenance, as self-conscious political projects" [Graeber 2013: 2]. In Town M, since the 1980s, the KHARDEP program has served as a catalyst for the implementation of numerous development assistance programs and government policies related to *dhaka* production. These programs and policies can be understood as having created opportunities for local people to reflect on their own practices of making *dhaka*—practices that had previously not been engaged in self-consciously—by comparing them with the methods introduced through development and industrial production. In this process, people came to recognize their own modes of production, to consider what they regarded as important in making *dhaka*, and to either reject or selectively adopt externally introduced approaches. Of course, development assistance programs and government policies are diverse, and the values shared within them cannot be easily schematized. Yet, examining the four development intervention cases discussed in this paper and their outcomes allows us to identify which externally introduced institutions were rejected, which were valued locally, and how these local values shape the current characteristics of *dhaka*.

In cases involving the introduction of Jacquard looms and flying shuttles, what was rejected included the invalidation of weavers' bodily movements, the reduction of weavers to mere sources of power, the separation of designing from weaving that deprives weavers of opportunities for creative improvisation, and the necessity of relying on external sources to procure or repair essential tools. Similarly, in the case of the introduction of grid paper, practices were avoided because they rendered the embodied tactile sense involved in weaving patterns ineffective, demanded extreme precision at the level of several millimeters and uniformity of patterns, and likewise separated the acts of designing and weaving. Regarding the introduction of various institutional frameworks, what was rejected included cases where power was concentrated in a single organization, the reduction of skill evaluation through certificates to mere formalities, and rigid modes of commerce that fostered constant dependence on external institutions. Here, what has been rejected in the region appears to be closely related to the characteristics currently observed in *dhaka* production. Local people rejected rigid, bureaucratic systems characterized by excessive systematization, division of labor, and standardization in the name of efficiency, and instead favored production systems that ensure creativity and flexibility and that can be operated independently without reliance on external structures.

The widespread acceptance of colored yarns can also be understood in this light, as their introduction did not threaten weavers' creative freedom but rather encouraged experimentation and ingenuity. These characteristics of *dhaka* production resonate with qualities such as "freedom" and resistance to rigid bureaucratic control that have been identified in previous studies as defining features of craft [Britton 1991; Margetts 1991].

Of course, a variety of other contextual factors are also at play. However, what I wish to emphasize here is that the failure of certain development interventions to take root does not stem from a lack of understanding on the part of local people. Nor does it mean that, even when development initiatives did spread, they were accepted unquestioningly. Furthermore, these dynamics cannot be explained solely through ethnic identity or fixed notions of tradition, as has often been emphasized in studies of handicrafts in Nepal, nor can they be reduced to

purely economic factors. This study examines local responses to external interventions through both narratives and current practices, demonstrating that the uniqueness of *dhaka* in the study area of eastern Nepal has been formed by people's conscious choices and acts of rejection. There, people's awareness of improving their own practices of making—or the forms of life in which those practices are embedded—has been at work, and through such conscious acts of rejection and selection, a distinctive culture characterized by freedom, flexibility, and creativity continues to be generated. I hope that the perspective developed in this article provides a critical lens for rethinking development assistance in the field of craft. In this field, design decisions and creative agency are often regarded as the exclusive domain of development actors, while local creativity tends to be overlooked in the process. Furthermore, development actors are not always fully aware of the controlling influence they may seek to exercise over local creativity.

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Entangled Drum Histories: Friction, Embodiment, and the Making of Religious Sound in North India

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ABSTRACT—This paper examines the historical and performative entanglements between *tablā*, the dominant percussion instrument of North India, and *jorī*, a paired drum preserved within the *Nāmdhārī* Sikh community of Punjab. While previous studies have treated these instruments in terms of their historical origins or musical functions, this study argues that their relationship is best understood through forms of frictional entanglement, in which bodily technique, material conditions, aesthetic orientations, and religious practice do not align but actively interfere with one another.

Drawing on long-term engagement as a performer, ethnographic fieldwork among *Nāmdhārī* musicians, and historical analysis, the paper demonstrates that the transition between *tablā* and *jorī* is not seamless but structured by multiple forms of resistance. Techniques cultivated in one tradition do not transfer smoothly to the other, revealing the limits of embodied musical knowledge. More broadly, the differences between these instruments produce distinct sonic and temporal orientations that shape divergent modes of musical and religious experience.

By foregrounding these layered forms of friction, the article reconceptualizes entanglement, not as harmonious interconnectedness but as a dynamic process of constraint, interference, and transformation. Rather than treating percussion instruments as passive tools, this

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paper argues that they actively shape religious subjectivity and sonic worlds in North India.

Keywords: *Tablā*, *Jorī*, *Nāmdhārī* Sikhs, Hybrid Musical Cultures, North Indian Percussion, Embodied Practice

Introduction

In contemporary Sikh devotional practice, the choice between *tablā* and *jorī* is never a neutral musical decision. While *tablā* has become the standardized accompaniment in mainstream gurdwara kīrtan, *jorī* continues to index claims to authenticity, continuity, and embodied discipline within the Nāmdhārī Sikh community. The divergence between these instruments cannot be reduced to organological or technical differences alone; rather, it constitutes distinct modes through which religious subjectivity is enacted, negotiated, and sustained in performance.

This article pursues two interrelated objectives. First, it traces the historical and performative relations between *tablā* and *jorī*, situating their divergence within the nineteenth- and twentieth-century reconfiguration of Sikh devotional space, under colonial modernity and institutional reform. Second, it develops a theoretical framework to account for how these relations are not merely historical but actively reproduced through embodied musical practice and material engagement. To address these objectives, the study advances a framework based on three modes of entanglement: historical, organological, and embodied.

In recent years, the concept of “entanglement” has gained traction in ethnomusicology to capture the dynamic relationships through which multiple elements—such as the materiality of instruments, the performer’s body, sonic resonance, historical memory, and religious ethos—become inseparably intertwined, not by simply symbiotically coexisting, but by shaping, constraining and transforming one another in musical practice. For example, in the edited volume *Intimate Entanglements in the Ethnography of Performance: Race, Gender, Vulnerability* (Lawrence and Kisliuk 2023), Carol A. Muller explores the formation of intimacy and subjectivity in ethnomusicological fieldwork through the notion of “intimate entanglements,” framing deep listening as a form

of erotics—a sensual and transformative engagement that entangles sound, body, and researcher.

The notion of “entangled drum histories” employed in this paper similarly refers to the process by which *tablā* and *jorī* are not merely coexisting or influencing each other, but are deeply entangled within historical contexts, material forms, bodily techniques, and religious practices, thereby mutually shaping one another.

By foregrounding three modes, the article argues that the *tablā*–*jorī* distinction is not a simple binary of “classical versus devotional” or “mainstream versus marginalized” but a dynamic site where religious identity, material agency, and historical memory are continuously constituted and transformed. In doing so, the study repositions North Indian percussion traditions as polyphonic histories shaped by religious sensibilities and embodied epistemologies.

Analytical Framework and Scope

Building on this conceptualization, the study treats entanglement not as a descriptive metaphor but as an analytical framework through which the relations between *tablā* and *jorī* can systematically be examined. Each of the three modes of entanglement operates as a distinct yet interconnected lens, enabling a multi-layered analysis of musical practice across historical, material, bodily, and historiographical dimensions.

Historical entanglement functions as a vertical axis of analysis, tracing how colonial modernity, reform movements, and institutional standardization reorganized Sikh devotional practice. Rather than presenting a linear narrative of instrumental evolution, this perspective highlights the contingent and uneven processes through which *tablā* became dominant in mainstream *kīrtan* while *jorī* was retained within specific communities.

Organological and embodied entanglements together constitute a horizontal axis that examines how material transformations reconfigure musical practice. Changes in instrument morphology, tuning systems,

and preparation techniques are approached as processes that reshape not only sonic output but also bodily technique, gesture, temporality, and forms of discipline. In this sense, instruments are understood as structuring conditions of action that actively delimit and generate possibilities of performance.

By combining these analytical elements, this study seeks to illuminate the polyphonic historiography of North Indian percussion music, revealing the complex, overlapping histories that have shaped the contemporary soundscape of Sikh *kīrtan* and beyond.

Historical Entanglement

Singh Sabha Reformation and Gurmat Sangit Movement

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked a decisive historical reconfiguration of Sikh devotional practice, particularly in the performance of *kīrtan*. As Bob van der Linden has shown, Singh Sabha Reformation played a central role in this process. Faced with colonial modernity and the need to articulate a distinct Sikh identity vis-à-vis assertive Hindu, Muslim, and Christian communities, Singh Sabha reformers pursued a project of rationalization and canonization. They standardized the *Guru Granth Sahib*, institutionalized *kīrtan* training through SGPC²-affiliated colleges and missionary schools, marginalized the long-standing participation of Muslim *rabābī* musicians, and promoted harmonium as the standard accompanying instrument. These changes produced what Van der Linden terms a Singh Sabha “moral language” that aligned with the British civilizing mission while distancing Sikh practice from shared Punjabi popular culture³.

This reformist impulse extended into more specified musical

2 The Siromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) began training ragis at the Shahid Sikh Missionary College in Amritsar from 1927 onwards. By the end of the twentieth century, six similar Sikh music educational institutions existed in northern India. [Van der Linden 2025: 36]

3 Linden’s notion of “moral languages” denotes the modern moral vocabulary and ethical framework produced by Singh Sabha reformation. This concept offers an analytical lens that transcends the reductive nineteenth-century opposition between “religion” and “secularity.”

reformation such as the Gurmat Sangīt movement, which emerged in the early twentieth century as a direct continuation of Singh Sabha ideology. Initially focused on restoring a “pure” form of kīrtan based strictly on the rāgas of the Guru Granth Sahib, the movement gradually developed a stronger revivalist character. While the harmonium–tablā combination became the mainstream standard, several scholars and practitioners began to argue for the revival of older, more traditional instruments such as taus (bowed string instrument) and jorī. Prominent among them was Dr. Gurnam Singh (1959-), who advocated the reintroduction of these instruments as part of an authentic Gurmat performance practice. Later figures such as Bhai Baldeep Singh (1969-) further advanced this revivalist strand.

However, as Van der Linden rightly points out, these revivalist efforts often amount to an act of “reverse Orientalism” — a romanticized reconstruction of a lost past that reflects modern concerns more than historical continuity.

Divergent Instrumental Genealogies

While the emergence and development of tablā have been extensively discussed in the context of North Indian classical music, by the nineteenth century it had become closely associated with processes of urbanization, pedagogical systematization, and aesthetic refinement within Hindustani music [Kippen 2010, 470–476]. Its consolidation in major centres such as Delhi, Lucknow, Bombay and Banaras was accompanied by the formalization of repertoire, the codification of technique, and the gradual emergence of clearly defined gharānā styles. In this sense, tablā came to embody a particular configuration of musical knowledge—one oriented toward standardization, transmissibility, and alignment with courtly and later institutional frameworks.

By contrast, jorī developed along a markedly different trajectory. While drawing on the broader pakhāwaj lineage, it remained embedded in regional and devotional contexts in Punjab, where it was shaped by local patronage networks and performative practices.

One of the earliest books on Hindustani music, written by A. H. Fox Strangways, includes a photograph of this instrument [Fox

Strangways 1914: Plate12].



Figure 1 One of the earliest published photographs of jorī (early twentieth century). From Fox Strangways (1914).

The man identified as Bhai Santu in Amritsar is clearly playing jorī in these images. However, the author mistakenly identified the instrument as tablā. This misunderstanding suggests that the distinction between the two instruments was still quite vague at the time.

Rather than undergoing the same degree of codification and institutionalization seen in tablā tradition, jorī continued to be transmitted primarily through oral, apprenticeship-based modes of learning. These were closely tied to specific lineages such as Baksh family and to the liturgical settings of Sikh devotional music. This relative emphasis on embodied transmission enabled jorī to sustain a distinct relationship between instrument, performer, and community [Jasdeep Singh 2020: 3–4, 6].

In the early eighteenth-century Lala Bhawani Das (c.1700–1768) taught the hybrid *dukkar baaj* style—the direct precursor of *jorī*—to Miyan Qadar Baksh 1st (c.1700) in Lahore (Jasdeep Singh 2020: 4). His descendants, notably Miyan Faqīr Baksh (1850–1906) and Miyan Qadar Baksh 2nd (1902–1960), became the chief exponents and transmitters of the instrument (Jasdeep Singh 2020:6). Crucially, members of the Baksh Lineage trained numerous *rabābī* performers who carried the tradition into Sikh devotional contexts. The pivotal link was Bhai Nasira (1902–1964), who first learned *jorī* from his uncle Bhai Chirag and later received advanced training directly from Miyan Qadar Baksh 2nd (Jasdeep Singh 2020:13). This lineage found its institutional channel into the *Nāmdhārī* community through a deliberate act of patronage: Satguru Pratap Singh (1882–1959), the fourteenth spiritual leader of the *Nāmdhārī* Sikhs, established the *Namdhari Sangeet Vidyalaya* at Bhaini Sahib in 1928. In a significant departure from earlier practice, in which *rabābī* musicians had been engaged solely as performers, Satguru Pratap Singh invited Bhai Nasira and Bhai Taba—two of Amritsar’s most celebrated *rabābī* musicians—to serve as resident teachers of both vocal and instrumental music. This institutional arrangement transformed *jorī* from an externally patronised art into an internally cultivated discipline within the *Nāmdhārī* tradition.

In the *Nāmdhārī* Sikh community, *jorī* tradition found a particularly congenial home. Rather than aligning with the Singh Sabha movement’s emphasis on standardization, the *Nāmdhārī* tradition continued to recognise living human Gurus and preserved a more flexible, embodied approach to devotional music. It functioned not merely as an accompanying instrument but as a medium of devotional expression and spiritual discipline closely tied to the living Guru. Satguru Jagjit Singh (1920–2012) actively nurtured this tradition throughout his life.



Figure 2 Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji playing the jori. From Jayagovind (2017).

He maintained daily Asa di Vaar kīrtan combined with nām simran as a fixed part of the routine, insisted on the exclusive use of tanti saaj (stringed instruments), demanded correct pronunciation of Gurbānī, and ensured that love, devotion, and bairāg (renunciation) remained visible in every performance. He also composed Gurbani bandishes in classical style and patronised the training of young musicians, thereby preserving jori's distinctive place within Nāmdhārī kīrtan even as broader classical music moved toward greater standardisation [Sharada Jayagovind 2017: 5–7; Jasdeep Singh 2020: 17].

Organological Entanglement

Structural and Material Entanglement between *Tablā* and *Jorī*

The structural difference between *tablā* and *jorī* reflects a significant divergence in their acoustic intentions and performance techniques. While *tablā* set comprises a smaller, higher-pitched *dāyān* (right drum, typically 5½ to 6 inches in head diameter) and a larger *bāyān* (bass/left drum) designed for sharp articulation, tonal modulation, and rapid interplay, *jorī* consists of a significantly larger pair of drums with a deeper, rounder sound. *Dāyān* of *jorī* is usually 7 inches or more in head diameter. *Dhāmā* (bass/left drum) of *jorī* has a head diameter like that of *tablā* *bāyān*, but its body is markedly straighter and more cylindrical, in contrast to the distinctly bulbous, rounded body of the *tablā* *bāyān*.

This morphological difference produces a striking contrast in the onset and sustain of the sound. When struck with controlled wrist pressure from the left hand, *tablā* *bāyān* exhibits a clear temporal modulation: the pitch bend, creating a characteristic “talking” or gliding effect. By comparison, the *jorī* *dhāmā* delivers a more immediate and sustained pitch with less modulation, giving the impression of a single, stable tone that lingers.

Thus, while *tablā* offers a clear, articulate tone and rich, evolving bass modulation that adds dynamic colour and interplay, *jorī* produces a deep, resonant sound whose onset remains remarkably stable providing a continuous, unchanging foundation that is especially well suited to the meditative and vocal-centered aesthetics of *kīrtan*.

These acoustic distinctions lie in the preparation and manipulation of the bass drum's tone. Unlike the *tablā*, which employs concentric *syāhī* (black paste on membrane) permanently affixed to the drumhead to produce elegant resonance, *jorī*—like the *pakhāwaj*—does not have a fixed *syāhī* on *dhāmā*. Instead, players use a paste of *ātā* (wheat flour mixed with water), applied during performance to the membrane. The quantity and distribution of *ātā* can be modified in real time, enabling the performer to craft a desired depth and resonance: a generous application results in a deeper bass, while its removal yields a lighter tone. This allows *jorī* players to create dynamic soundscapes that are both

physically engaged and sonically expressive.

This on-the-spot adjustability of timbre and resonance is a distinctive feature of jorī. Acoustically and timbrally, jorī offers a far more fluid and malleable sonic character. This flexibility also produces significant differences in the embodied dimension of performance, shaping distinct bodily techniques, gestures, and tactile relationships between the player and the instrument.



Figure 3 ātā (tuning paste for adjusting bass resonance)



Figure 4 Application of ātā to the dhāmā for adjusting bass resonance.



Figure 5 Increasing the amount of ātā enhances the bass resonance.



Figure 6 A jori drum set fully prepared for performance.

This material asymmetry is not a neutral technical difference, but a generative site of entanglement. The fixed *syāhī* of the *tablā* can be seen as a crystallization of the very standardization and precision that *jorī* deliberately resists through its on-the-spot *ātā* practice. Conversely, the expressive potential of *jorī*'s adjustable timbre gains its full salience precisely against the backdrop of the *tablā*'s more fixed and elegant resonance. In this way, the organological identity of each instrument is not self-contained; Rather than existing as isolated forms, the two instruments are better understood as mutually informing traditions within a shared but differentiated field of practice.

Embodied Entanglement

Fundamental Features of Strokes

In terms of playing technique, *tablā* and *jorī* also differ markedly. The most fundamental and apparent distinction lies in their primary strokes. For *tablā*, the characteristic *nā* (or *tā*) stroke is produced by placing the finger on *syāhī* to dampen the fundamental frequency while striking the outermost edge of the drumhead—known as the *kinār* or *chānti*—with the index finger⁴. In contrast, the representative stroke on *jorī* is known as *thāp*. This is executed by aligning the fingers and striking the drumhead slightly in front of *syāhī* using a chopping motion with the side of the hand. Because *jorī* uses the entire side of the palm, the resulting sound is significantly larger, more expansive, and fuller-bodied than *tablā*'s *nā*⁵.

Importantly, the execution of *thāp* is much more subtle than *nā* stroke on *tablā*. Since the player does not place their fingers on the drumhead in advance, they must use the wrist to bring the side of the hand into contact with the *syāhī* at a precise angle. By snapping the hand in this way and carefully damping the unwanted fundamental tone, the performer produces a sharply articulated yet rounded, full-bodied sound characteristic of the *jorī*. However, mastering this technique is

⁴ For a detailed analysis of *tablā* acoustics, see Roda (2013: 262–266).

⁵ Figure 1 is described by the author as illustrating the *nā* (or *tā*) stroke of *tablā*; however, judging from the hand position, it clearly corresponds to the *thāp* stroke of *jorī*.

extremely difficult, and incorporating the thāp stroke fluidly within fast passages is an even greater challenge.

The playing technique of bass drum also indicates a fundamental divergence. As mentioned earlier, tablā players frequently press and slide the wrist along the rim of bāyān to achieve gliding pitch modulations, which are essential in generating groove and melodic fluidity. In contrast, jorī employs a binary approach of open and closed strokes on dhamā, relying more on rhythmic phrasing than on melodic inflection. This results in a style that is less about pitch modulation and more about alternating between sustained bass tones and muted articulations. Whereas tablā foregrounds tonal character, jorī emphasizes metrical character.

In both cases, the instrument is not a passive tool, but an active participant that co-determines the performer's physicality, the perceived temporality, the dynamic intensity, and the very way sonic space is produced and experienced in performance.

Movement of the playing style

The gestures and physicality of playing tablā and jorī differ in ways that reflect broader cultural and performative logics. Tablā players typically adopt an upright posture, with fingers curled and strikes executed through precise, rapid fingertip movements. By contrast, jorī is traditionally played with a flatter hand position, broader arm arcs, and higher elbow lift, resulting in more sweeping and flowing gestures. These distinctions are not merely ergonomic; they carry symbolic weight. Tablā's controlled posture aligns with courtly precision and dance accompaniment, whereas jorī's open, expansive bodily engagement often conveys a meditative or communal ethos, especially in gurdwara kīrtan settings. The wider movements also shape phrasing, producing a more fluid, less staccato rhythmic delivery.



*Figure 7 Playing technique of the jorī using the full palm.
Photo courtesy of Gian.*



*Figure 8 Gian Singh performing on the pakhāwaj.
Photo courtesy of Gian.*

Rather than focusing on abstract theories of bodily knowledge transmission, the following anecdote shared by Gian Singh offers a vivid illustration. According to him, the term *pakhāwaj* does not merely denote the instrument's structure but refers to a distinctive way of playing. In Punjabi usage, *jorī* is sometimes called *jorī pakhāwaj* because, as he described, “when someone plays the *jorī*, their elbows rise higher than in *tablā* playing, and it looks as if a bird is spreading its wings.” This folk etymology, which prioritizes the visual impression of bodily movement over conventional derivations (such as *pakkā awāj* meaning “refined sound”), underscores how performance practice itself becomes a source of naming and meaning. Such bodily distinctions not only shape sonic output but also influence how performers and listeners inhabit the musical and spiritual space.

Comparison of Repertoires, Lineages, and Embodied Practices

The vocabulary of *tablā* and *jorī* performance is structured around

bol—onomatopoeic syllables that encode specific strokes and timbres. In solo performance, these bols are organized into certain structures. The following comparison is based on Gian Singh's response regarding what constitutes a complete solo repertoire for *tablā* and *jorī*. It should be noted that this list represents an idealized framework rather than a fixed performance sequence. In actual recitals, a selection of these elements is typically emphasized, depending on the context and the musician's interpretive choices⁶.

Comparing the solo structures of Punjab *gharāna* *tablā* and *jorī*, several key differences and shared features emerge. Both traditions begin with foundational elements such as *uthān*⁷ and *tiḥāi*⁸. However, *jorī* repertoire places a distinct emphasis on phrases categorized as *thā de bol*, *ek arse de bol*, and *do arse de bol*. These bols, which are organized around single-beat (*ek arse*) or two-beat (*do arse*) units, form a rhythmic vocabulary that is particularly characteristic of *jorī* tradition within Sikh devotional performance. Whereas *tablā* solos in Punjab *gharānā* are rooted in well-established Hindustani idioms such as *peshkāṛ*, *kāyda*, *gat-kāyda*, and *rela*, *jorī* vocabulary also includes unique improvisatory categories such as *pakkī dugun de bol*, and *shand ang*. The latter refers to a distinctive aesthetic and expressive sensibility unique to the *jorī* tradition.

Furthermore, *jorī* repertoire incorporates distinctly religious and devotional elements that are rarely found in classical *tablā* solos. These include structurally rich motifs such as *singhā avlokan* and *madhubār shand*, as well as compositions inspired by verses from the *Guru Granth Sahib* and the *Dasam Granth*. Such elements reflect the deep integration of Sikh devotional literature and aesthetics into *jorī* performance practice. The inclusion of *stutī* (devotional praise) as an optional opening or interlude further demonstrates *jorī*'s embeddedness within Sikh

6 The following analysis is primarily based on knowledge transmitted through the author's teacher, Gian Singh. While it reflects a particular lineage-specific perspective, a broader comparative examination of this repertoire remains an important area for future research.

7 The *uthān* is often described as a repertoire element characteristic of the Varanasi *gharānā* in *tablā* performance. In this sense, it is noteworthy that Gian Singh's repertoire begins with *uthān*. Some studies have suggested a close historical relationship between the Punjab and Varanasi *gharānās* (see Kippen 2010: 468).

8 The *tiḥāi* is a cadential figure widely found in both *tablā* and *jorī* repertoires, consisting of the repetition of a phrase three times to articulate structural closure.

liturgical performance. In this way, *jorī* solo structure does not merely replicate Hindustani classical forms but actively entextualizes Sikh devotional themes, transforming abstract rhythmic patterns into vehicles for religious expression and communal memory.

Despite these divergences, both instruments share common formal elements such as *tihāi*, *chakradār*, and *layakāri*-based variations. However, the terminology and expressive logic often differ, suggesting distinct orientations in performance: *tablā* toward more abstract rhythmic structuring, and *jorī* toward more layered and contextually embedded forms of rhythmic expression.

	<i>Tablā</i> solo repertoire	<i>Jorī</i> solo repertoire
1	<i>uthān, mukhrā, mohrā, tihāi</i>	<i>uthān, paran, laykāri of thekā, moharā</i>
2	<i>peshkār</i>	<i>thā de bol, ek arse de bol, do arse de bol</i>
3	<i>kāyda in barābar ki laya & other laya (laykāri)</i>	<i>sheran tihāi and paran rachnā</i>
4	<i>gat kāyda</i>	<i>dugun de bol, tihāi and paran rachnā</i>
5	<i>chala, chalan, rau rela (angustāna), bhānt, farshband</i>	<i>pakkī dugun de bol</i>
6	<i>anāgat & aūt concept</i>	<i>barat, prastār, vistār, chalan, chalā, shand rela with layakāri</i>
7	<i>gopuchā yāti, pipplika yāti, mrdanga yāti</i>	<i>layakāri de bol – ār di laya, ti gun di laya, chou gun di laya, koad di laya, beād di laya</i>
8	<i>bandish (tukra, gat, paran, farmaisi, kamali nauhakā, chakardār, chakardār gat, dopali, tripali, choupali, toda, parmelu, baraiyān ke bol)</i>	<i>shand ang tihāiyān and rachnā improvisation</i>
9	<i>laggī, laran and larī</i>	<i>chowkrī, shikdī</i>
10	<i>swar jawāb, salami paran classical kathak</i>	<i>rela tipallī, choupallī, do mohim gat</i>
11	<i>jugalbandi - padant is mandatory for some of the bandish & other bols</i>	<i>ek ashri shand, singha avlokan shand, chachar shand, madhubar shand</i>
12		<i>nauhakā, kamali chakardār, farmaishi chakardār</i>
13		<i>stuti (beginning or middle)</i>

Table 1 Comparative Table of Solo Repertoires for tablā and jorī

Such phrases should not be understood as pre-existing formal units; rather, they emerge through processes of entanglement. Within the broader orientation of Hindustani music—often associated with courtly refinement and the technical elaboration of phrases—*jorī* does not simply reproduce *tablā*-based idioms. Instead, its repertoire takes shape through the interaction of the instrument's expansive and resonant

sonic character, the ethos of devotional community, and the embodied practices of individual performers. It is through this interplay that such phrases are not merely transmitted but actively constituted as repertoire.

These processes of entanglement become particularly evident at the level of embodied practice. Having trained extensively in *tablā* before taking up *jorī*, the author encountered a form of somatic interference in which previously acquired techniques actively disrupted the execution of *jorī* strokes. Fine-grained fingertip precision cultivated in *tablā* practice resisted broader and more forceful motions required for *jorī*, producing unintended dampening and loss of resonance.

Such moments of interference reveal that the relationship between *tablā* and *jorī* is not one of smooth continuity, but of friction. It is precisely this proximity-in-difference that constitutes their entanglement—not as harmonious integration, but as productive tension in which bodily knowledge is simultaneously activated and destabilized.

Conclusion

The historiography of *tablā* has long oscillated between myth and method. Popular narratives trace its origin to Amir Khusrau Dehlavi or to the Mughal-era bifurcation of the *pakhāwaj*⁹, yet these genealogies remain largely speculative and symbolically overdetermined. What is consistently omitted are the complex, intersecting circuits of influence that shaped the instrument — from *naqqārā* traditions in Islamic ceremonial contexts to older regional drum practices that predate its classical canonization¹⁰. Colonial ethnomusicological frameworks further reinforced *tablā*'s elevation to “classical” status while marginalizing other percussive voices.

9 A popular folk narrative recounts that *tablā* originated when a defeated *pakhāwaj* player, enraged after losing in a *dangal* (a musical contest or duel), broke instrument in frustration, thereby producing two separate drums. While clearly apocryphal, such accounts illustrate broader tendency to explain origin of *tablā* through dramatic, personalized events rather than through historically verifiable processes.

10 For a discussion of the musical relationship between *naqqārā* and *tablā*, see Stewart (1974). Connections between regional ritual drums and classical traditions are briefly addressed in Wolf (2017).

In this regard, *jorī* serves as a critical counterpoint. Rather than a mere historical remnant, it reveals an active process of recontextualization: rhythmic knowledge that was once embedded in *pakhāwaj* traditions was detached and negotiated in Sikh religious reform movements and finally re-embedded into *Nāmdhārī* devotional practice. This entanglement allows *jorī* to carry distinctly Sikh religious motifs and embodied sensibilities while remaining open to new performative and social contexts.

A reimagined history of North Indian drumming must therefore be polyphonic — embracing plurality, tension, and contradiction rather than privileging a singular, centralized *tablā*-centric narrative. Such a polyphonic approach attends to the many percussive voices that have contributed to a vibrant, contested field of rhythmic practice, challenging the classical/folk, sacred/secular, and urban/rural binaries.

In the end, the title *Entangled Drum Histories* is more than a convenient label. It points toward a methodological and ontological orientation in which percussion instruments, performing bodies, sonic textures, collective memories, and religious subjectivities are understood as deeply intertwined. Musical practice, in this view, is not a passive reflection of pre-existing cultural or religious forms, but an active and constitutive element in the ongoing shaping of religious life in South Asia.

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Appendix A

Pakkī Dugun de Bol (Jorī Solo Repertoire) transcribed by the author.

□

dha--dhi--ma-dhetTa-kttk Ta-dhe Tak-n dhaget Tak-n dhaget
Taknedhe ttkradhe tetkat gadigena

□

Kat tettetTakey tkttkTa- Kay tkttak Take-na dhagetet Take-na dhagetet

Takenadhe tetkradhe tetkat gadhigena

□

dhetitTakenadhet dhettTa- Kay tkttk Tak-n dhagetet Tak-n dhagetete
Takendhe tetkradhet tetkat gadhigena

□

dha dhun-Ta dha dhun-Ta nattTa key tktetak take-na dhagetet take-
na dhagetet
takenadhe tetkradhe tkt gadhigena

□

dhetdhettake-n dhedhet take-n dhetetake-n dhetetake-n dhetdhet
takendhe tkradhe tkt gadhigena

□

dhetadheta kradhetet dhetkradhetet dhet kradhe tete kradhetet dhet-
dhet kradhetet
takendhe tkradhe tkt gadhigena

□ tihāi

dhetadheta kradhetet dhetkradhetet katgadhigena dha- gadhigena dha-
gadhigena dha- □

kradhetet dhetkradhetet katgadhigena dha- gadhigena dha- gadhigena
dha- □

kradhetet dhetkradhetet katgadhigena dha- gadhigena dha- gadhigena
dha-

Performance Video

A performance of the *pakkī dugun de bāol* by the author is available
on Instagram.

Scan the QR code below (*This video is intended as a supplemental aural illustration to the notated transcription.*)



Glossary

Āsā dī Vār kīrtan — A morning hymn from the Guru Granth Sahib, traditionally performed in a specific melodic mode (*rāga Āsā*); a central liturgical practice in Sikh devotional life.

Bairāg — A devotional disposition of renunciation, longing, and detachment; considered an essential emotional quality in Sikh musical performance.

Dukkar bāj — A hybrid drumming style that served as the direct precursor to *joṛī*, combining elements of multiple percussive traditions in Punjab.

Gurbāñī bandish — A composed piece or melodic–rhythmic setting based on verses from the Guru Granth Sahib or other Sikh sacred texts, performed in classical style.

Gurmat Sangīt — Literally “music according to Gurmat (Guru’s teaching)”; a term used to denote a normative, reform-oriented approach to Sikh devotional music emphasizing *rāga*-based performance.

Harmonium — A hand-pumped reed organ introduced during the colonial period that became the standard accompanying instru-

ment in mainstream Sikh kīrtan following Singh Sabha reform.

Kīrtan — The devotional practice of singing sacred hymns (Gurbāṇī) from the Guru Granth Sahib; the central musical and spiritual practice in Sikh worship.

Nām simran — The meditative repetition of the divine name; a core spiritual discipline in Sikh practice, often performed in conjunction with kīrtan.

Rabābī — Muslim hereditary musicians who traditionally performed kīrtan in Sikh gurdwaras; gradually marginalized following Singh Sabha reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Rāgī — A Sikh musician trained to perform kīrtan using the *rāga* system; the primary role in liturgical Sikh music-making.

Satguru Jagjit Singh (1920–2012) — The sixteenth spiritual leader of the *Nāmdhārī* Sikh community; a key patron of *jorī* and traditional *kīrtan* practice, who actively preserved *tanti saaj* performance and composed *Gurbāṇī bandishes* in classical style.

Amir Khusrau Dehlavi (c.1253–1325) — A celebrated Sufi poet, musician, and scholar of the Delhi Sultanate period, popularly credited in legend with the invention of *tablā*, though this attribution remains historically unverified.

Singh Sabha — A Sikh reform movement originating in the 1870s that sought to define and standardize Sikh religious identity and practice in response to colonial modernity and competing religious communities.

Taus — A peacock-shaped bowed string instrument associated with Sikh devotional music; revived by figures such as Bhai Baldeep Singh as part of the Gurmat Sangīt movement

The Eightfold Noble Path Wheel Model of Communication

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ABSTRACT—Middle Path (*Majjima Patipada*), based on the Eightfold Noble Path (*Ariya Atthangika Magga*) Mindful Communication model is an effort to address contemporary world issues from an Asian perspective. Asian knowledge is based on Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Islamic philosophical and traditional knowledge. In the fields of social sciences and humanities, theories are still mostly Western centric. It is doubtful whether Asian scholars are well versed in Asian philosophical and traditional knowledge in social sciences and humanities. It is better to introduce Asian theories and concepts in order to address Asian issues and problems rather than blindly apply Western centric theories and concepts. This does not mean rejecting or de-westernizing western theories and concepts. It is a balancing of the Eastern and the Western theories and concepts on Mass Communication. The Eight-Fold Noble Path of Buddhism can be a remedy for contemporary issues and problems. The Buddhist Middle Path based on Eight-Fold Path is transcending of two extremes. The Four-Fold Noble Truths in Buddhism consist of: the noble truths of suffering (*dukkha*), the origin of suffering (*dukkha-samudaya*), the cessation of suffering (*dukkha-nirodha*), and the path that leads to the end of suffering (*magga or dukkhanirodhagamini-patipada-magga*). The Eightfold Noble Path represents the means to achieve the cessation of suffering, fulfilling the fourth truth. Even though the Eight-fold Noble-Path-based mindful communication model is based on Buddhism, it is not limited to Buddhists but can be practiced by the people of other religious backgrounds as well. This mindful communication model, grounded in the Eight-Fold Noble Path, is represented as a wheel with spokes. Each spoke symbolizes one

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of the eight principles: Right View (*Samma Ditthi*), Right Intention (*Samma Sankappa*), Right Speech (*Samma Vaca*), Right Action (*Samma Kammanta*), Right Livelihood (*Samma Ajiva*), Right Effort (*Samma Vayama*), Right Mindfulness (*Samma Sati*), and Right Concentration (*Samma Samadhi*). Each of these is connected to the other and can be started at any point but preferably from Right Understanding (*Samma Ditthi*). This paper examines a mindful communication model based on the Buddhist Eight-fold Noble Path

Keywords: Noble Eightfold Path, Mindful Communication Model, Asian communication, Kalyanamitta

Introduction

Mass media has become an integral part of our lives today, sparking ongoing debates about its impact on people. The effects of mass media can vary significantly, influenced by factors such as individual differences, educational background, media exposure, past experiences, and more. The diverse range of these factors contributes to the complex and nuanced nature of the impact that mass media can have on individuals. We can see that the study of Mass Communication rapidly spread around the world in the past three decades and this expansion can be seen in Asia since the mid-1990s (Seneviratne 2018). Similar to other fields in social sciences and humanities, mass communication theories exhibit a Western-centric perspective.

As Kalinga Seneviratne (2018, 8) has observed:

“...most of the textbooks used in the Asian mass communication programs are mainly written by American scholars, and Asian scholars uncritically pass this knowledge and perspectives to their students, irrespective of whether it is relevant or not. Some see this as necessary in order to achieve higher international rankings for their universities/programs. Thus, inevitably, young Asians are being indoctrinated with the idea that anything worthwhile learning about mass communication, freedom, and justice comes from the West”.

Yoshitaka Miike shows two major problems of Eurocentric scholarship:

“First, the Eurocentric paradigm often proclaims itself the human paradigm without recognizing and incorporating non-Eurocentric counterparts. The crux of the issue here is not its theoretical propositions themselves, but its one-sidedly presumed universality and totalizing tendency” (Miike 2010, 3). According to Miike the second is, “the Eurocentric paradigm favors some phenomena over others due to their cultural origins and orientations. Consequently, it disregards, downplays, or overshadows certain values and elements that have been historically embraced in non -Western cultures” (Miike 2010, 3).

Many Asian scholars predominantly utilize methods developed in the West, aligning with Western social, cultural, philosophical, political, and economic frameworks. The majority of indexed journals exhibit a Western-centric perspective, imposing specific guidelines that researchers must adhere to if they wish to publish their research papers in those journals. The colonial mindset among Asian scholars further compounds the issue, as they often uncritically embrace ideas from the West, considering them universally applicable to their own contexts. This situation may be described at times as a lingering form of academic authoritarianism or imperialism. The time has come to develop Asian research theories and concepts. Mindful communication is a phenomenological approach based on Buddhism (Gunaratne 2015), but it is not limited to Buddhism; it can apply to all religious, cultural, social, economic, and political contexts. It emphasizes respect for humanity, peace, and harmony.

Gunaratne, Pearson and Senarath (2015), espouse a “Mindful Journalism” path based on Buddhist principles to overcome contemporary problems. In their book *“Mindful Journalism and News Ethics in the Digital Age”*, Gunaratne, Pearson and Senarath (2015, 18) described the theory of mindful journalism based on the Buddhist Four Noble Truths thus:

“Mindful Journalism requires the journalist to understand the reasons for sorrow/unhappiness, and to desist from using his/her craft

to increase desire (tanha) and clinging (upadana). We extracted this principle from the first and the second truths. The mindful journalist must distinguish between pleasure and happiness to understand the reality that cyclic existence (samsara) means suffering (dukkha) that one can avoid only by attaining Nibbana or enlightenment. Pleasure is physical and short-lived whereas happiness is mental and long lasting.”

As Yoshitaka Miike (2010, 5) pointed out:

“the Asia centric turn in Asian communication studies de-westernize and revolutionize current theory and research in five interrelated respects. Asia centrality 1) generates theoretical knowledge that corresponds to Asian communication discourse, 2) focuses on the multiplicity and complexity of Asian communicative experiences, 3) reflexively constitutes and critically transforms Asian communication discourse, 4) theorizes how universal aspects of humanity are expressed and understood in Asian cultural particularities, and 5) critiques Eurocentric biases in theory and research and helps Asian research overcome academic dependency.

Vijay Menon (1988, ix) highlights a growing concern among Asian communication scholars regarding the need critically to re-examine Western communication theories in relation to Asian cultures and traditions. He further argues that communication curricula in Asian universities have been heavily shaped by Western, particularly American, theoretical frameworks, which has contributed to the uncritical acceptance of Western models and the relative neglect of indigenous Asian concepts and perspectives. In this context, it remains an ongoing question to what extent Asian scholarship has been able to move beyond this dependency and develop a more balanced and culturally grounded approach to communication studies.

Wimal Dissanayake (1988, 8) discussed the need to develop Asian theories of communication that would enable Asian communication scholars to engage in more productive research and to lend greater depth to discussions of human interaction. To accomplish this, he argues, “Firstly, we need to examine the classical treatises on philosophy, rhetoric,

linguistics, poetry, etc..., with a view to extracting certain principles and postulates of communication. Secondly, we need to examine various rituals, folk dramas, etc., which have been passed down from generation to generation, and which deal with symbolic communication, with the intention of finding out what is uniquely culture-specific about them. Thirdly, we need to explore the communicative behavior characteristic of different societies from an intercultural perspective so as to acquire a set of principles or axioms that guides communicative behavior”.

The search for an Asian perspective does not imply the outright rejection of Western theories (Menon .1988). The discourse surrounding the “de-westernizing” of these theories is ongoing. Blindly dismissing Western theories and concepts is not advisable. Instead, a more constructive approach involves achieving a balance between Eastern and Western theories and concepts, rather than outright de-westernization.

Eight-Fold Noble Path and Communication

The Buddhist Four Noble Truths are the noble truth of the suffering (dukkha), the truth of the cause of suffering the truth of the cessation of the suffering and truth of the path that leads to the cessation of the suffering. The Eight-fold Noble Truth is solution consisting of the fourth one (truth of the path that leads to the cessation of the suffering). The Eight-Fold Noble Path helps us to overcome our self-centeredness and to live in harmony with the world around us. It also leads to eliminating the suffering we experience every day in our life (Bodhi 1994).

‘The first truth explains that all vicissitudes of life and life itself are characterized by suffering. The second suggests craving as the most palpable cause of this suffering. The Third shows the possibility of removable of this cause, and the fourth lays down a practice constituted of eight factors which, if developed properly, would lead to the total eradication of suffering. These eight factors are right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration’ (Tilakaratne 2020a, 315).

What is the model of Mindful Communication based on Eight-Fold Noble Path?

Another name for the Eight-Fold Path is the Middle Path. It is so named because this path is meant to avoid two extremes, namely sensual pleasure and self-mortification.

'The Fourth Noble Truth is that of the way leading to the cessation of Dukkha (Dukkhanirodhagaminipatipada-ariyasacca). This is known as the 'Middle Path'(Majjhima Patipada), because it avoids two extremes: one extreme being the search for happiness the pleasures of the senses, which is 'low, common, unprofitable and the way of the ordinary people' - the other being the search for happiness through self-mortification in different forms of asceticism, which is 'painful, unworthy and unprofitable'(Rahula 1996, 45).

The First Discourse of the Buddha, the *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta*, summarizes the complete meaning, content, and aim of the Middle Path. We should note that while this Middle Path or Middle Way exists by avoiding the two extremes, this does not simply mean remaining in the middle of any two extremes or taking a position of compromise in between two incorrect notions: the extreme of sensual indulgence or extreme hedonism (*kāmasukhallikānuyoga*); and the extreme of self-mortification or extreme asceticism (*attakilamathānuyoga*).

The wheel of the noble eightfold path model is presented with eight rays depicting the eight principles listed earlier. Aforesaid eight path factors can also be divided into three groups as follows, 1) the moral discipline group (*silakkhandha/Sila*), made up of right speech, right action and right livelihood; 2) the concentration group (*samādhikkhandha/Samādhi*), made up of right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration; and 3) the wisdom group (*paññakkhandha/Praṇa*), made up of right view and right intention (Bodhi 1994). The metaphor of a wheel is used here not because it functions like a wheel and can be started at any point, but because the Buddha used the simile of turning of the wheel of Dhamma forward. The eight factors of the Noble Eight-Fold Path (NEP) are not considered as to be followed as sequence and they are interconnected with each other like a wheel (Bodhi 1994).

What this could mean is that the eight factors are not to be followed one after the other. The eight factors of the NEP are incorporated into Sila (*Morality*), Samadhi (*Mental Culture*), and Panna (*Wisdom*), which should be practiced sequentially. The practice begins with Sila, then progresses to Samadhi while maintaining Sila, and finally culminates in Panna together with both Sila and Samadhi. Sila consists of Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. Samadhi includes Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration, while Panna comprises Right Understanding and Right Thought (Sri Dhammananda 1998).

“To follow the Noble Eightfold Path is a matter of practice rather than intellectual knowledge, but to apply the path correctly it has to be properly understood. In fact, right understanding of the path is itself a part of the practice” (Bodhi 1994, V).

The eight factors of the path can be described in the following manner.

Right View (*samma ditthi*)

The Right View or understanding is the first path of the NEP. However, it's important to note that the eight factors of the NEP are not meant to be followed in strict sequence. In this model, they are interconnected and considered equal. Right View holds particular significance as the initial and fundamental step on the path, as it requires us to comprehend the truth of the Four Noble Truths.

Right Understanding is the understanding of things as they are, and it is the Four Noble Truths that explain things as they really are. Right Understanding is therefore ultimately reduced to the understanding of the Four Noble Truths (Rahula 1996, 49).

Right Thought (*samma sankappa*)

The second factor of the NEP is “right thought” including right intentions” (*Samma sankappa*). *“Right Thought denotes the thoughts of selfless renunciation or detachment, thoughts of love and thoughts of non-violence, which are extended to all beings”* (Rahula 1996, 49).

Today, mass media is highly commercialized and often falls short of addressing contemporary issues in a fair manner. For example, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict cannot be narrowed down to a war between two neighboring countries. It is a global issue encompassing political, social, and economic crises, representing a fundamental challenge for humanity in the 21st century. Unfortunately, much of the worldwide media covers this conflict from a capitalistic perspective. They perceive the solution for Ukraine and Russia not at the negotiation table, but rather in providing state-of-the-art weapons. A verse of Dhammapada of the Khuddaka Nikaya, a Pali Cannon of Teravada Buddhism says;

“Na hi verena verani, Sammantidha kudacanam, Averaṇa ca sammanti, Esa dhammo sanantano” (Dhammapada, Chapter 1, Verse 5).

The meaning is;
“Never here by enmity
Are those with enmity allayed,
They are allayed by amity,
This is a timeless Truth”.

The principal revealed in the above Dhammapada verse is clear. “Quarrels can never come to an end by quarelling. War can never end wars through further wars. Enmity never ends by returning enmity for enmity. Only by giving up anger, enmity, quarelling and wars that these evils can be stopped. It is through friendliness, forgiving and forgetting that enmity ceases” (Sarada Maha Thero 2020).

According to the Buddhist understanding of human psychology all beings like happiness and dislike unhappiness. Buddhism talks about happiness as “encompassing both material and inner aspects of human life” (Tilakaratne 2020a, 177).

In this regard the journalist should be a “*kalyanamitta*” (good friend) to people and responsibly use media for the sustainable development of the world. He/She should cultivate Right view (*Samma ditthi*); Right Thoughts (*samma sankappa*), Right Speech (*samma vaca*); Right Livelihood (*samma kammantha*); Right Effort (*samma vayama*); Right Mindfulness (*samma sati*); and Right Concentration (*samma samadhi*).

As Asian communication scholar Kalinga Seneviratne (2018: xii) explains that *“to achieve the SDG, the media has to play an important role in facilitating and promoting the reporting of development issues as interdependent. This may also need a new look at aspects of training journalists to look at issues with less emphasis on conflicts. There needs to be new thinking on how to report on economic, business, environment, and development issues, where Asia’s needs, its priorities and its historical experiences are taken into account. This is where developing mindful communication methodologies that take into account the region’s cultural and social norms and traditions will come into play”*.

However, the reality is that international, regional, and local media have become highly commercialized. They are often politically biased and predominantly Western-oriented, creating narratives that favor Western interests and perspectives. When reporting issues related to the Global South, media organizations tend to focus mainly on political conflicts, wars, crimes, and disasters, thereby portraying a largely negative image of these countries. Moreover, much of the reporting remains superficial rather than deeply investigative. Limited attention is given to examining the root causes of poverty, political instability, and underdevelopment, including the historical and contemporary role of Western powers in shaping these conditions.

Right speech (*Samma Vaca*).

The third path factor of the NEP is right speech. The next three path factors; right speech, right action, and right livelihood can be treated as the first of the three divisions of the path, the division of moral discipline (*silakkhandha*).

The Buddha divides right speech into four components: abstaining from false speech (*musavada veramani*), abstaining from slanderous speech (*pisuna vaca veramani*), abstaining from harsh speech (*pharusa vaca veramani*), and abstaining from idle chatter (*samphappalapa veramani*) (Rahula 1996).

Western media has often maintained an upper hand in shaping international public opinion, using its influence to promote narratives that favor Western interests and values while marginalizing non-Western

perspectives; although claiming to uphold objective reporting, some outlets have been criticized for practicing selective blindness and deliberate smearing, particularly against countries perceived as threats to Western dominance (Global Times 2025).

Today, we live in a daily news cycle that roams the world from one conflict to another. Every issue is seen as a security threat of a military nature, with smaller and vulnerable nations called upon to ally with one global power or another for their economic survival. Development aid is labelled as a “debt trap” when it is not coming from “traditional” donors. We are asked to join forces to protect a “rules-based order” “when these rules are broken by the very people who say they are protecting it (Seneviratne 2025, 221).

Right Action (*Samma Kammanā*)

“Right Actions aims at promoting moral, honorable and peaceful conduct” (Rahula 1996, 47). According to the Buddha, it involves three key components: refraining from taking life (*panatipata veramani*), refraining from taking what is not freely given (*adinnadana veramani*), and refraining from engaging in sexual misconduct (*kamesu micchacara veramani*).

It is important for the media to contribute to the development of the world. This responsibility is not limited to humans but also extends to animals and the environment. Today, we can observe that a large proportion of humans are also marginalized. Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow, the former Director-General of UNESCO, in the foreword to *Many Voices, One World*, also known as the MacBride Report (1980), pointed out that “the information media can contribute to commanding respect in all quarters for human beings as individuals, with all the manifold differences they display, and to winning acceptance of the aspirations common to all peoples in place of self-centered nationalism. They can also foster uninterrupted dialogue between communities, cultures and individuals, in a bid to promote equality of opportunities and two-way exchanges. This presupposes, first, that information in all fields should go unfettered. But we shall never cease to affirm that such freedom cannot be fully effective until it becomes a reality for

everybody” (MacBride 1980, xiv).

Right Livelihood (*Samma Ajiva*)

Right livelihood is concerned with ensuring that one earns one’s living in a righteous way. *“Right Livelihood means that one should abstain from making one’s living through a profession that brings harm to others, such as trading in arms and lethal weapons, intoxicating drinks, poisons, killing animals, cheating etc., and should live by a profession which is honorable, blameless and innocent of harm to others”* (Rahula 1996, 47).

Right Effort (*Samma Vayama*)

“Right Effort is the energetic will (1) to prevent evil and unwholesome states of mind from arising, and (2) to get rid of such evil and unwholesome states that have already arisen in mind, (3) to produce, to cause to arise, good and wholesome states of mind not yet arisen, and (4) to develop and bring to perfection the good and wholesome states of mind already present in mind” (Rahula 1996, 48).

Right Mindfulness (*Samma Sati*)

The faculty that sharpens our field of experience and opens it to deeper understanding is known in Pali as *sati*, commonly translated as “mindfulness.” Mindfulness refers to a focused presence of mind, attentiveness, or awareness. However, the awareness cultivated through mindfulness is fundamentally different from the ordinary awareness we typically experience in everyday consciousness.

Right Mindfulness is developed through a practice known as “the Four Foundations of Mindfulness” (*cattāro satipaṭṭhānā*), which involves the attentive observation of four key areas: the body, feelings, states of mind, and mental phenomena. These are: (1) Contemplation of the Body (*kāyānupassanā*), (2) Contemplation of Feelings (*vedanānupassanā*), (3) Contemplation of the Mind (*cittānupassanā*), and (4) Contemplation of Mental Objects or Phenomena (*dhammānupassanā*).

Right Cconcentration (*Samma Samadhi*)

The eighth factor of the NEP is Right Concentration (*sammā samādhi*), which refers to the deepening and intensification of a mental quality inherent in all states of consciousness.

As previously mentioned, the Eightfold Path forms the most comprehensive ethical framework in Buddhism. The journey begins with Right Understanding (*sammā diṭṭhi*), which serves as the foundation for all other aspects of the path. Right Understanding is essential before one can achieve Right Concentration, as it guides and informs the progression through the remaining factors. Each component of the path builds upon and reinforces the others, but it is Right Understanding that opens the way to the rest. Therefore, cultivating Right Understanding is of paramount importance.

“Right Mindfulness (or Attentiveness) is to be diligently aware, mindful and attentive with regard to (1) the activities of the body (*kaya*), (2) sensations of feelings (*vedana*), (3) the activities of the mind (*citta*) and (4) ideas, thoughts, conceptions and things (*dhamma*)” (Rahula 1996, 48).

Buddhism does not reject the basic need of four requisites for all living beings for their sustenance. All beings depend on food (*ahara*).

However, the Buddhist definition of “food” is not confined to material food. It also includes the following: 1) the food of contact, which signifies the coming together of internal sensory organ, the external object and the resultant consciousness; 2) the food of consciousness (*vinna*), which is conditioned by the six sensory objects, viz, form, sound etc., and 3) the food of mental volitions (*mano-sancetana*) without which mind cannot exist. The inclusion of these three types of food, in addition to edible food, shows that Buddhism acknowledges the need for ‘food’ not merely physically, but also psychologically and emotionally (Tilakaratne 2020, 221).

Kalama Sutta – Buddhist Charter of Free Inquiry

Buddhism values freedom of expression, and the Buddha has provided criteria for discerning between good and bad. The Kālāma-sutta, found in the Anguttara-nikāya, offers a framework to assess actions as

either positive or negative. In this sutta, a group of people approached the Buddha with concerns about conflicting teachings from various instructors, making it challenging for them to determine the right path. In response, the Buddha advised them to set aside external influences and presented specific criteria for self-evaluation based on their own genuine feelings and understanding, as stated below:

‘It is proper for you, Kalamas, to doubt, to be uncertain; uncertainty has arisen in you about what is doubtful. Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias toward a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another’s seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, ‘The monk is our teacher.’ Kalamas, when you yourselves know: ‘These things are bad; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill,’ abandon them’ (Soma Thera 1994).

He dismissed the ten criteria mentioned earlier as unhelpful and introduced two alternative criteria for analysis. He pointed out that actions disapproved by the wise are inherently undesirable. Additionally, if an action is detrimental to both oneself and others, causing suffering, it should be considered wrong.

Conclusion

The attitude of religions towards one another has become a crucial factor for the peaceful coexistence of contemporary society and throughout the long-recorded history of humankind, religions have existed almost from the beginning (Tilakaratne 2020b). It is common among religions to assert that each one alone possesses the truth about the world and human existence (Tilakaratne 2020b). Such a claim within any religion serves on the one hand, as an assertion of its own position, and on the other, as a criticism and rejection of the religions that preceded it (Tilakaratne 2020b). Even though the NEP-based mindful communication model is based on Buddhism, it is not limited to Buddhism but also can be applied for the other religious backgrounds as well.

Today, more than ever, we seek metta for all. The Pali term metta is rich in meaning, encompassing qualities such as loving-kindness, goodwill, benevolence, harmony, friendliness, harmlessness, and non-violence. (Buddharakkhita 1995), “What is lacking in the world today is loving-kindness or goodwill” (Sri Dhammananda 1998, 165). Human beings are constantly driven to pursue material gain, and when they fail to achieve it, they often experience suffering, unhappiness, and a loss of inner peace. In the contemporary world, this desire for wealth, power, and resources has even led to the invasion of other countries, causing immense human suffering, destruction, and loss of life. In this regard, the development of loving-kindness must be free from selfishness and self-centeredness (Sri Dhammananda 1998).

The NEP consists of correct view, which involves accurately understanding the nature of things, particularly the Four Noble Truths - suffering (Dukkha), the origin of suffering (Samudaya), the cessation of suffering (Nirodha), and the path to its cessation (Magga). It leads to correct intention, which entails avoiding attachment, harmful efforts, and hatred, while working for the well-being of the world; correct speech, which requires refraining from lying, harsh speech, and divisive speech; correct action, which involves abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, falsehood, and intoxication; correct livelihood, which means avoiding trades that directly or indirectly harm others and making ethical decisions; correct effort, which focuses on abandoning unwholesome states and cultivating wholesome ones; correct mindfulness, which emphasizes awareness of the body, feelings, mind, Dhamma (phenomena); and correct concentration, which fosters single-minded focus and meditative absorption.

The wheel (*Chakra*) model represents these eight aspects as spokes connected to the rim, with each spoke interlinked at the hub, symbolizing their equal importance and interdependence. The movement of the wheel signifies positive transformation, not only for the individual but also for the world.

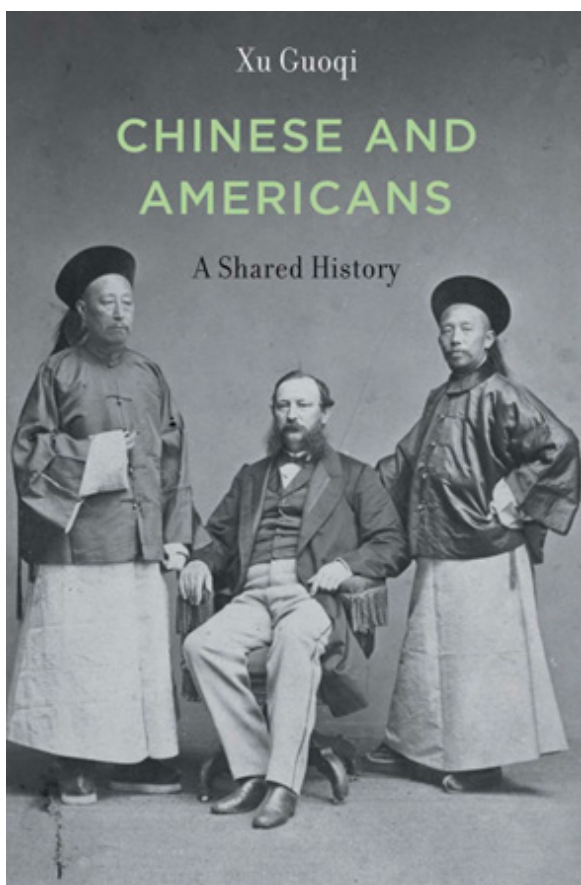
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Xu Guoqi. Chinese and Americans: A Shared History.
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The book, *Chinese and Americans: A Shared History*, presents recounts of vivid cross-cultural exchanges between Chinese and Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at a more individual level, and intends to reveal a transnational history jointly shaped by people on the two sides of the Pacific. This history, as the book shows, becomes their “shared traditions,” which could foster a positive future of Sino-American relations (Xu 2014, 21).

The study is predicated on the theoretical framework of Akira Iriye’s “cultural internationalism,” which refers to “efforts that attempt to build and foster cultural understanding, cooperation, and a sense of shared values across national borders” (Xu 2014, 3). The book emphasizes the importance of common values and mutual understanding in Sino-American relations. Chapter 1 features the efforts of Anson Burlingame (蒲安臣, 1820-1870) in securing a “cooperative policy” between treaty powers and the Qing government to allow for China’s restoration and development in the mid-nineteenth century. Burlingame not only assisted in the dissolution of the Lay-Osborne flotilla and helped settle the dispute between Britain and China, but also served in a leading role on the first Chinese diplomatic mission to America and Europe. Chapter 2 concentrates on the Chinese Education Mission (1872-1881, hereafter referred to as CEM), which was China’s first proactive official scheme to arrange Chinese youths to learn from the West through studying in the United States, as doors were opened owing to the Burlingame Treaty. The Chinese students’ performance and achievements reduced Americans’ prejudice against China and contributed to China’s modernization and diplomatic strengths. Chapter 3 tells the story of Ge Kunhua (戈鲲化, 1838-1882), the first Chinese language teacher at Harvard University who educated American students in Chinese language, poetry and culture and made early contributions to the collection of books in the Harvard-Yenching Library. His success and active involvement in local communities testifies to the friendship between Chinese and Americans when an anti-Chinese sentiment was brewing and spreading in the United States around the 1880s. Chapter 4 introduces Frank Goodnow (1859-1939), also known as the “father of American administration” (Xu 2014, 140), and his advisory role in the making of China’s first constitution as well as Yuan Shikai’s (袁世凱, 1859-1916) restoration of monarchy. The chapter explicates Goodnow’s belief of China’s lack of foundation and

readiness for instituting a parliamentary government, informs readers of “Yuan’s conviction that a strong center was required for modernization, national strengthening, and maintaining order” (Xu 2014, 190) in China’s circumstances with foreign aggression, but questions China’s sustenance of authoritarian domestic governance. Chapter 5 focuses on the American educator, John Dewey (1859-1952), who came to lecture in China when the New Culture Movement was in progress and the Chinese wanted to create a new national identity of science and democracy after World War I. The chapter features Dewey’s sympathy with China’s pursuit for territorial integrity and equality in diplomatic relations in the May Fourth Movement, his endeavors in promoting mutual understanding between Chinese and Americans through lectures and articles, and the revival of his pragmatism in China’s reforms in the late 1970s. Chapter 6 turns to international sports games, the Olympics, narrating China’s Ping-Pong Diplomacy in the early 1970s and discussing the Sino-American cooperation in the tensions of the cold war underlying the sports games. The concluding chapter reemphasizes the shared history and interests between China and the United States. It expresses disapproval of America’s “engagement-and-containment” approach for treating Sino-American relations in the face of China’s rise. Instead, it claims, “Embracing a willingness to emphasize shared interests and a shared journey might be a better and wiser choice for both countries since in many ways they are in the same boat and their fates remain interconnected” (Xu 2014, 263-264).

This book has prominent strengths that have enhanced its value. Primarily, as informed in the introductory chapter, the book explores history of nations from an interconnected and cross-boundary perspective and illuminates the dynamic international interactions between Chinese and Americans in the formation of each other’s national history. This awareness of “otherness” in historiography is conducive to the perception of cultural fusion and external contributions in a nation’s achievements. It promotes a sense of humbleness, which makes room for constructive communication and mutual understanding.

Secondly, the book adopts a bottom-up and more microscopic approach for exploring transnational history. Unlike conventional narratives that give weight to “the roles of government, politicians, and the economy,” this book zooms in on individuals who were “active in shaping

and pushing their ideas to work toward a better mutual understanding and better bilateral relations” (Xu 2014, 2). This approach may prevent overlooking individuals’ voices, experiences and contributions in history, complement mainstream historical accounts, and draw historiography closer to past social reality.

Moreover, in terms of writing style, this book transitions from chapter 1 to chapter 5 smoothly by drawing connections among the figures under discussion. Anson Burlingame’s efforts on China’s treaty with the United States laid the foundation for the CEM. Like the CEM students, Ge Kunhua strengthened friendship between Chinese and Americans in a period with tense Sino-American relations, and Ge also taught Ding Chongji (丁崇吉, 1860-1942), one of the CEM students, at Harvard. Charles Williams Eliot, as Harvard’s new president in 1869, had met Anson Burlingame who was then a Chinese envoy, appointed Ge Kunhua as the first Chinese language teacher at Harvard, and urged the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to find a professor to assist China to draft its Republican constitution, for which Frank Goodnow was finally appointed. Similar to Goodnow who believed Young China was lacking in democratic citizens, John Dewey was more proactive in lecturing in China on the meaning of democracy and the relationship between democracy and education. Arranging the chapters this way allows readers to visualize interpersonal connections that drive history forward and reinforces the textual cohesion of the book as well.

On the other hand, some limitations of the book need to be considered as well. First of all, chapter 1 of the book considers the Burlingame Treaty in 1868 “the first equal treaty between the two countries” (Xu 2014, 58). However, Zhao (2020, 256) contends that some stipulations of the treaty only appear to be reciprocal but “ultimately serve the interests of the United States”. Chapter 1 also affirms, “American interests were still paramount” (Xu 2014, 35). As Zhao further explains, the provision of the Burlingame Treaty on education was not for meeting the demands of the Qing government, which did not express much zeal in sending students overseas in the mid-nineteenth century. Instead, the provision was “intended to materialize the plan for building an interpreter-training school to fill American consulates with qualified interpreters and consuls in China” (Zhao 2020, 260). Also, Zhao explains that the Treaty fulfilled

the need of the United States for labor force in the 1860s for constructing its transcontinental railway. Burlingame's contributions to China's diplomacy deserve recognition, yet it is worth noting that the Treaty may not be as equal as it seems.

In addition, chapter 6 of the book seems to endorse that the Chinese becoming the "sick man of East Asia" in the late Qing period was mainly owing to China's loss of its "fighting spirit" (Xu 2014, 235-237). Nevertheless, one principal reason for the Chinese's increasing weakness in modern Chinese history is the opium trade that had sickened the country until the twentieth century when Tang Guo'an (唐國安, 1858-1913, one of the CEM students) spoke for China at the first International Opium Commission held in Shanghai in 1909 for terminating the trade (Hamrin n.d.; Ziyuan Association 2013) and when the State Council of the Central People's Government of China issued a decree strictly to prohibit opium and other drugs, on February 24, 1950 (People's Government of Guangdong Province n.d.). The book mentions the opium trade or wars that resulted from it in other chapters but somehow overlooks it in chapter 6.

Furthermore, as a case of less official contact between Chinese and Americans, the story of Edgar Snow (1905-1972) is likewise noteworthy in history. Snow is perhaps the first journalist from America to be a close observer of the Long March in China and wrote first-hand reports of it. As an icon of his friendship with China, a tomb with part of his remains is situated in the campus of Peking University. Chapter 6 of the book briefly mentions that Mao Zedong (毛澤東, 1893-1976) had told Snow "his expectation that the Chinese and American people could be friends" (Xu 2014, 242), but it does not render much detailed narration regarding Snow.

On the whole, while these limitations merit readers' attention, the book still presents notable cases of shared history co-constructed by Chinese and Americans. The two peoples have developed a tradition of friendship and accumulated a rich experience of cooperation over time despite that they display a different pattern for their respective development. Seeking common ground while managing differences would still be their path forward. Readers who are willing to explore the topic of the book further may also be interested in the book, *Ghosts of Gold Mountain*:

The Epic Story of the Chinese Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad, which gives a clear voice and image to numerous silent Chinese laborers who risked their lives behind the curtains and made massive contributions to the construction of America's transcontinental railway and ensuing national economic development. Additionally, readers may look into the story of Claire Lee Chennault (1890-1958). Chennault helped train the Chinese air force and supported China's self-defense in World War II by leading the American Volunteer Group (also known as the Flying Tigers) that he assisted in forming in 1941. For details, see Chennault's memoir, *Way of a Fighter*. Future research on the topic of the book may align with the microscopic approach and survey more stories of ordinary people and illustrate how they have cultivated and maintained friendship amidst the ebb and flow of the times.

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