

The Hundred River Review



Image Credit: "Photo Output" by Ari Harris

Volume 9 | 2024-2025
The Writing Program
NYU Shanghai

海纳百川 有容乃大

**The sea receives all rivers;
Its greatness lies in its capacity to accept.**

The Hundred River Review is a journal of excellent student writing produced in our core writing courses here at NYU Shanghai. We celebrate essays that challenge our thinking, present us with new ways of seeing texts, build great arguments, and model the writing goals of our core courses.

We believe that students want to share their writing and read the work of their peers, and *The Hundred River Review* provides a space for this exchange.

All works cited as in the original text.

© 2025 The Hundred River Review.

The Hundred River Review

Volume 9

The Editorial Board

Peter Weise
Sarah Hakimzadeh
Jingsi Shen

Managing Editor

Jonah Dunch

Contributing Faculty

Mark Brantner
Jay Ludowyke
Kyle Muntz
David Perry
Jingsi Shen

Developmental Editors

Jarita Chen
Jonah Dunch
Maya Nanteza Muwanga
Colby Porter
Grace Shieh
Shengli Wen
Yifei Wu
Alison Zhang

Production and Design

Jingsi Shen

Letter from the Editors

We are pleased to bring you the ninth volume of *The Hundred River Review*. Published since 2017, the HRR showcases outstanding student work from Writing as Inquiry and Perspectives on the Humanities, the core courses of the Writing Program at NYU Shanghai. The variety of topics and depth of critical engagement of this work attest to the global mindset and academic excellence of our student community.

This year is no different. The essays published in Volume 9 range across times, places, and genres. Some essays take us far afield, to the Polynesian Islands and to the Vietnamese countryside, while others reveal our local campus environment in a new light, focusing on market dynamics in Shanghai and in China at large. Some turn to the past, such as to the early days of cinema, while others focus on the present, such as on the semiotics of contemporary film trailers, and still others look to the future, to the transformative potential of AI. Through textual analysis, interviews, and review of primary and secondary sources, our student authors shed light on issues in history, film and performance studies, and business.

The first essay in the volume, Red Wertheimer's "Polynesian Star Stories: Unifying the Scattered Islands of the Pacific," retells the sidereal mythology of the wayfinders of traditional Polynesia. Drawing on a range of popular and

scholarly sources, Wertheimer details how the wayfinders used myths associated with different constellations to preserve navigational knowledge and orient themselves on the seas.

The second essay, Yatharth Banerjee Singh's "The Dangerous Allure of the Joker: A Multimodal Film Trailer Analysis," analyzes the teaser trailer for the 2019 *Joker* film. Citing elements including its cinematography, music, and narrative framing, Singh argues that the trailer contributed to the controversy and buzz around the movie by creating a feeling of "danger."

Our next two essays consider the intertwining themes of gender and queerness. In "Tales of the Lô Tô Troupes: The Uniquely Vietnamese Resistance Against Homonormativity," Addie Dung Manh Nguyen discusses the history of Lô Tô, a Vietnamese performance tradition associated with queer men and transgender women, in connection with the 2014 documentary *Madam Phung's Last Journey*. Drawing on extensive background research and resources from queer theory, Nguyen argues that Lô Tô provides a refuge for transgender women from both the heteronormative demands of traditional Vietnamese culture and the homonormative demands of mainstream Vietnamese queer culture. In "Trans* and Transcendence: Crip Theory in *Bride of Frankenstein*," Jiasheng Li (Jason) likewise discusses the social treatment of people with nonstandard bodies—in this case, the Monster as depicted in the 1935 film *Bride of Frankenstein*. Bringing concepts from queer

theory and crip theory to bear on his analysis of the film, Li examines how the Monster is treated in comparison with other characters with divergent physical features and abilities.

In “Will AI Translation Replace the Translation Profession? — How Do University Students Properly Use and View AI Translation Tools in the Context of AI,” Yutong Liu turns our attention from nonstandard bodies to nonstandard minds—or quasi-minds. In taking up the titular question, Liu attends to the demands of translation as a profession and a practice while assessing the capabilities of this new technology reaching into so many areas of our lives.

The last two essays diagnose the reasons for success or failure of different businesses in the local or national market. In “The Failure of Amazon China,” Yutong Zhao sheds light on the cultural and infrastructural gaps which led to the failure of that American e-commerce giant to compete with its Chinese counterparts. Our final essay, Catherine Chandra’s “Brewing Identity: Developing Marketing and Product Differentiation Strategies for Shanghai’s Small Coffee Shops Against China’s and the U.S.’s Major Chains,” provides a comprehensive overview of the market factors influencing the success of coffee shops in Shanghai, focusing on the business strategies that local shops employ to compete with higher-capacity chains.

Although these essays were originally written for class, each author worked further with a faculty mentor and a Global Writing and Speaking Fellow to revise their

work for publication. The final products are therefore the outcome of sustained and careful work spanning multiple years of these student authors' development as writers, scholars, and thinkers. We invite you to read on and enjoy for yourself the fruits of this development, and to join us in celebrating the critical acumen and wide-ranging curiosity fostered in the halls and classrooms of NYU Shanghai.

Sincerely,

Peter Weise, Sarah Hakimzadeh, Jingsi Shen, and Jonah Dunch

The Hundred River Review Editorial Board

Table of Contents

Polynesian Star Stories: Unifying the Scattered Islands of the Pacific 5
Red Wertheimer

The Dangerous Allure of the Joker: A Multimodal Film Trailer Analysis 24
Yatharth Banerjee Singh

Tales of the Lô Tô Troupes: The Uniquely Vietnamese Resistance Against Homonormativity 38
Addie Dung Manh Nguyen

Trans* and Transcendence: Crip Theory in *Bride of Frankenstein* 67
Jiasheng Li (Jason)

Will AI Translation Replace the Translator Profession ? — How Do University Students Properly Use and View AI Translation Tools in the Context of AI 84
Yutong Liu

The Failure of Amazon China 100

Yutong Zhao

**Brewing Identity: Developing
Marketing and Product Differentiation
Strategies for Shanghai’s Small Coffee
Shops Against China’s and the U.S.’s
Major Chains 112**

Catherine Chandra

An abstract painting featuring a rich palette of colors including deep reds, oranges, greens, and blues. The brushstrokes are thick and expressive, creating a sense of movement and depth. The composition is layered, with darker tones in the foreground and lighter, more ethereal tones in the background.

**Polynesian Star Stories: Unifying
the Scattered Islands of the Pacific**

Red Wertheimer

Faculty Introduction

The night sky has long fascinated humanity, and that preoccupation sparkles in Red Wertheimer’s “Polynesian Star Stories: Unifying the Scattered Islands of the Pacific.” The essay was written for my Fall 2023 Perspectives on the Humanities course, which examined cultural astronomy and its expressions in art and literature, and it was during the inevitable first-week icebreakers that I had an early inkling of Red’s deep connection to the natural world. She shared an experience that left probably all of us there present a touch envious—three months spent exploring the wild Rockies, sleeping beneath a vast, open sky with endless stars. In our windowless basement classroom over the following semester, even as we examined the supernova rendered in Giotto’s *Adoration of the Magi* with its conflation of religion and cosmology or the existential dissonance this provokes in Clarke’s “The Star,” for those who have never seen a jewelled night sky—something the bright lights of Shanghai, though not without their own beauty, preclude—that kind of lived, reverent familiarity exists just beyond reach.

But, as Red so ably demonstrates, it was precisely the lived familiarity of ancient Polynesians that led to the embedding of star knowledge within cultural mythology. In examining the myths of the Mānaiakalani constellation (Scorpius) and the Makali’i/Matariki star cluster (Pleiades) across different Polynesian cultures, specifically Māori and

Hawaiian, she traces both convergences and divergences, ultimately positing a connection between celestial mythology and wayfaring that underpins both the extent of the Polynesian diaspora and the unifying hallmarks of these myths across oceans. It is that proposition, something I witnessed evolve through outlines and drafts and conferences, that delights me so much about her essay. Although the connection has been noted in academia, I was wholly satisfied and impressed at the ability of a sophomore to engage deeply with Hawaiian and Māori celestial traditions, to examine them through an animistic and historico-cultural lens, and to persuasively argue their influence on Polynesian navigation. Her conclusion was independently developed, her research thorough—spanning oral tradition, literature, and scholarship—and her voice articulate in its intellectual inquiry.

Ultimately, Red’s essay invites us to consider more deeply the practical ways that stellar mythology manifests within ancient cultures, and in so doing, inevitably asks us to reflect on our own relationship with the natural world. To think about the connections that time and city lights have dimmed and to brave the wild, the darkness and the wide, open oceans of the unknown.

Jay Ludowyke
Clinical Assistant Professor in the Writing Program

Polynesian Star Stories: Unifying the Scattered Islands of the Pacific

Red Wertheimer

The night sky has long been a canvas for cultures to tell meaningful stories (Aveni ix). The ancient Polynesians not only gazed up at the cosmos to grapple with their place in the universe but also attached stories to the constellations and used the stars as a guide to travel the Pacific Ocean. Polynesia, a cultural subregion of Oceania, encompasses a large triangular area of the Pacific Ocean. The term is derived from Greek, with *poly* meaning “many” and *nēsoi* “islands” (Kahn and Suggs). The island groups of Hawaii mark the northernmost point of the triangle, flanked by Aotearoa (New Zealand) to the west, and Rapa Nui (Easter Island) to the east. Within this “Polynesian Triangle” is a collection of over 1,000 islands (“Polynesia”). Scholars have described the ancient Polynesians’ extraordinary circumnavigation skills as “among the greatest acts of voyage and discovery in world history” (O’Malley, qtd. in Williams 31) and have compared them to “modern space travel” (Sharp, qtd. in Williams 31). They displayed a scientific understanding of the sea and sky’s behavior, allowing them, in the last 3,000 years, to settle in the scattered islands dispersed throughout the Pacific (“Polynesia”). Yet despite the vast distances between the many islands, the

region shares a remarkably homogeneous religious and mythological system due to the Pacific Islanders' ability to interpret the ocean and starscape. Hawaiian and Maori celestial legends, including Maui's Fish Hook, Chief Makali'i, and Matiriki, reveal the cyclical pattern of Polynesian folklore, capable of influencing open-water voyages, spreading Polynesian culture, and unifying the diverse islands as one. Thus, in addition to the practical methods of star navigation, Polynesian celestial mythology was foundational in enabling the ancient Polynesians to voyage across the Pacific Ocean successfully.

As is well established through works of scholarship such as David Lewis's "Polynesian Navigational Methods" and Madi Williams's *Polynesia, 900–1600*, Polynesian wayfinding culture involved a practical application of knowledge based on clues provided by the natural world. Scholars believe that celestial voyages began as early as approximately 1500 BC, when the ancestors of the Polynesians left Southeast Asia to eventually settle across an expansive area of islands spanning over 40 million square kilometers (Tamayose and De Silva 00:49-01:06). The success of these dangerous expeditions relied heavily on well-built double-hulled canoes and, most importantly, the skills of the navigators. As there are no landmarks in the open ocean, Polynesians needed to be extremely well-acquainted with the Pacific Ocean and have a heightened sense of awareness for the natural elements of their environment. They examined "the ocean surface as we might look at a road map" (Evans, qtd. in Williams 43); signs were appar-

ent to the *trained* eye.

During the day, some useful wayfinding techniques included detecting ocean swells and cloud patterns (Lewis 364). Navigators were not only incredibly familiar with “trade wind-generated ocean swells” (Tamayose and De Silva 1:57-2:02) but often referred to the movement and color of clouds to help indicate potential land masses (Tamayose and De Silva 3:39-43).¹ According to the Kiribati navigator Teeta, birds were also “the navigator’s very best friends,” signaling the nearing of land (Finney and Low, qtd. in Williams 43). Additionally, wayfinders would look for clues such as seaweed and different types of fish to determine their proximity to land (Lewis 365). The sun, another crucial orientation clue, also served as their compass by day (Finney 446). Its dependable rising and setting allowed the Polynesians to easily determine east and west during sunrise and sunset (Kawaharada). However, when the reliability of the sun inevitably surrendered to the blackness of night, steering by the stars became Pacific voyagers’ most accurate and trustworthy strategy. Navigators carefully observed and memorized the positions and movements of approximately 220 stars (Kawaharada). Knowing by heart where these stars rose and set at different times of the year was critical to their successful open-sea travels.

¹ Traditional navigators used the pigment of clouds to detect shallow waters and even potential land from afar. Lagoons of Pacific atolls are reflected on the underside of clouds, and “high masses of clouds can indicate mountainous islands” (Tamayose and De Silva 03:44-57).

Wayfinders did not exclusively depend on the tangible elements of their natural surroundings to smoothly traverse the unpredictable seas. In addition to a necessary foundation in geography, navigation, and astronomy (Aveni 106), mythology played the most fundamental role in seafaring across the Pacific. As a culture that had no written language (Westervelt vii), and with a lifestyle that left little archaeological evidence, ancient Polynesians relied on a large body of indigenous navigational knowledge passed through oral tradition. The oral storytelling of celestial myths and legends was a critical aid in circumnavigation that enabled Pacific voyagers to memorize the locations of the stars. Fragments of these star stories became somewhat unique to the lands they arrived in, yet still shared overarching themes that united the scattered inhabitants of the Polynesian triangle. The myth immortalized in the constellation of Scorpius is one such example.

Located in the southern sky, Scorpius is commonly described as a curving chain of stars (“Scorpius”). In Polynesian mythology, it is called Mānaiakalani, also known as either the “Chief’s Fishline” or “The Fishhook of Maui” (Fig. 1). The legend surrounding this constellation is possibly the most widespread throughout the Polynesian islands.



Figure 1: Depiction of the constellation Mānaiakalani. Scorpius, *Star Walk 2*, version 2.16.2.3, Vito Technology Inc., 20 March 2025.

In Hawaiian folklore, the mother of the demi-god Maui wanted him to catch the incredibly elusive Ulua fish² for dinner (“Maui and the Creation” 0:23-0:40). Unfortunately, the trickster demi-god was not a good fisherman and was

² Also known as the Giant Trevally, the fish is native to the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific Ocean. It is considered one of the toughest kinds of fish to catch.

constantly ridiculed by his brothers. One day, yielding to his desperate pleas, Maui's brothers finally allowed him to join them at sea. Secretly, mischievous deity that he was, Maui stole a magical family heirloom—a sacred bone called the Mānaiakalani, which he had “secured from his ancestors in the under-world”—for the next day of fishing (Westervelt 15). Immediately after the demi-god cast his great hook, the ocean floor began to rumble and massive waves started rocking the brothers' boat (Westervelt 20). In a panic, Maui instructed his siblings to paddle hard and fast and under no circumstance to look back, otherwise the “fish would be lost” (Westervelt 20). Exhausted, however, one brother looked behind and saw that Maui had dragged a chain of islands from the depths of the sea to the surface (Westervelt 20). This is the creation story of the eight Hawaiian Islands.³

Similarly, Maui is responsible for New Zealand's existence in Maori mythology. According to the Maori tale, Maui loved fishing, but his brothers always refused to take him. One day, Maui snuck away during the night, hiding at the bottom of their canoe (Winter, “The Great Fish of Māui” 00:30-00:58), and waited until they were far out to sea before revealing himself. Unimpressed, his brothers decided to punish Maui by withholding their fishing bait. Maui, true to his cunning nature, punched himself in the nose and smeared the magic jawbone hook with his blood (Winter,

³ Hawai'i, Maui, Kaho'olawe, Lāna'i, Moloka'i, O'ahu, Kaua'i, and Ni'ihau

“The Great Fish of Māui” 01:37-47). After launching his hook far out to sea, the scent of his blood attracted a great fish, or in some versions, a stingray (Westervelt 21). Hook in its jaw, the mighty creature dragged their canoe down. Unwilling to surrender the hook, Maui commanded his brothers to help him pull, and, eventually, the animal was hauled up to the ocean’s surface. Before leaving to retrieve the hook, Maui ordered his brothers to leave the fish alone to avoid damaging its smooth, flat appearance. However, upon his return, Maui discovered that his unruly brothers had disobeyed his instructions and already hacked into the great creature. It ultimately became a ragged, mountainous region (Gossage 03:00-4:50). This land, known as “the great fish of Maui,” is what we now recognize as New Zealand’s north island (Gossage 04:51-05:13). The south island represents Maui’s canoe, and Stewart Island is depicted as the anchor (Winter, “The Great Fish of Māui” 04:00-04:11).

Apart from a few minor variations, the Hawaiian and Maori legends about Maui’s fish hook share the same plot. In both tales, Maui goes out to sea with his brothers and uses his magical fish hook, resulting in the creation of the islands. The two stories connect Polynesians to their origins: the creation story of the islands they call home. In a broader sense, these myths symbolize the undeniable connection between the sea and its island inhabitants, regardless of where in the Pacific they reside. Maui’s inadvertent, yet greatest catch reveals the Polynesians’ profound understanding and appreciation for the environment. Despite

the points of divergence between the two myths, in both the islands of Hawaii and New Zealand, respectively, come from the sea and are depicted as living beings. These tales demonstrate that the Polynesians did not see their land as an inanimate object but rather as a living creature with a spiritual consciousness.

The Pleiades, an “open cluster of young stars” in the Taurus constellation (“Pleiades”), are another prominent star group that illuminated the path for navigators (Fig. 2). Ancient Hawaiians referred to this group of stars as “Makali’i,” meaning “tiny eyes” (“Star Stories 4” 01:11-01:15). The term is a euphemism for greedy eyes (“Star Stories 4” 01:16-19). Connected to this star cluster is the story of Hawaiian Chief Makali’i. As the legend goes, the chief, for unknown reasons, desired to bring destruction to all of the Hawaiian Islands. He took all the food in the land, including roots, so there was virtually nothing to eat or grow. He collected all the islands’ resources in a carrying net, and, once full, tossed it into the starry heavens. The net got tangled and hung on a cluster of stars, the Pleiades (“*Star Stories 4*” 01:34-02:15). As the Hawaiian people were on the brink of starvation, a tiny iole (the Hawaiian word for mouse or rat) scampered up the arm of the evil chief and jumped into the sky. He leapt from star to star until finally reaching the net. The iole began to nibble on the ropes until eventually, all “the food, the plants, and the roots inside the net fell like rain all over the land” (“Star Stories 4” 02:41-03:33). In Hawaii, during Ho’oilo (winter season) from November to April, the Makali’i constellation is high in the night sky.

The rising of these stars signaled a seasonal change to winter and the ancient Hawaiian New Year festival known as Makahiki.⁴ This was a sacred time for native Hawaiians to rest, feast, dance, and partake in religious festivities (“Makahiki”).



Figure 2: Depiction of the Pleiades constellation (small central cluster of stars). Pleiades, *Star Walk 2*, version 2.16.2.3, Vito Technology Inc., 20 March 2025.

⁴ The Makahiki season is the ancient Hawaiian New Year festival dedicated to Lono, god of fertility, agriculture, rainfall, music and peace. (“Makahiki”).

The Maoris, on the other hand, call this group of stars “Matariki,” translating to the “Little Eyes” (Aveni 113). As legend has it, for all eternity Papatuanuku and Ranginui (the Earth Mother and Sky Father in Maori tradition) remained in a tight embrace with their many children living in the darkness between them. Restricted and unable to move, all but one of their children—Tāwhirimātea, the god of wind—wanted to break free. Tāne, the god of forests and birds, used the mighty strength of his legs to separate his parents’ seemingly unbreakable bond, thrusting Ranginui above and Papatuanuku below (Winter, “The Stars of Matariki” 00:31-00:53). Tāwhirimātea was furious. In his anger, he gouged out his own eyes, crushed them, and cast them into the galaxies. They landed on the chest of his father, making up the cluster we know today as the Pleiades (Winter, “The Stars of Matariki” 00:56-01:11). Every year, this star cluster appears in the night sky in late June or early July, New Zealand’s mid-winter months (Neilson-Jones). Similar to the ancient Hawaiian legend, the rise of Matariki symbolized the Maori New Year. Maoris took this time to thank the gods for the harvest and to feast with family and friends. Additionally, they believed the brightness of the Matariki stars signaled “how abundant the next year’s harvest would be” (Neilson-Jones). To welcome the new year, Maoris reflected on the past, honored the dead, and looked ahead to the future (“What is Matariki”). The Matariki festival is still celebrated today and remains an important part of Maori culture.

While the Hawaiian and Maori myths of the Pleia-

des constellation appear virtually unrelated, what they symbolize remains the same: the arrival of the changing seasons. The appearance of the Pleiades marked a time for reflection and growth, reinforcing the cycle of life and death. Hawaiians and Maoris alike took this time to honor those who had passed, celebrate the present with family and friends, and look forward to the promise of a new year (Neilson-Jones; cf. “Star Stories 4” 04:05-04:23). It is possible that, based on the Pleiades’ symbolism of rebirth and revival, this seasonal constellation manifested in a desire to begin new voyages across the sea. The emergence of this significant calendar constellation may have stimulated wayfarers to embark on nautical expeditions, leading to the widespread dispersal of Polynesian people and culture across the Pacific.

Ultimately, without the star lore of Maui’s Fish Hook, Chief Makali’i, and Matariki preserved in the starry heavens, Polynesian voyagers would not have been able to easily identify the Scorpius or Pleiades constellations. Both these constellations served as significant signposts during long and dangerous voyages. According to Hamacher and Guedes, spotting the hook of Maui was a helpful tool for orientational purposes, indicating “southeasterly travel.” As for the Chief Makali’i or Matariki cluster of stars, sources such as Finney’s *Nautical Cartography and Traditional Navigation in Oceania* as well as Elsdon’s “The Use of Stars in Navigation” do not specifically state which direction the Pleiades was used to navigate; however, these works do indicate that the Pleiades were among the “fa-

favorite guiding stars” of ancient Polynesian sailors (Elsdon 30).

For thousands of years, the Pacific people have migrated thousands of miles across temperamental waters with nothing more than double-hulled canoes and a profound mastery of their natural environment. To a certain extent, traversing the Pacific Ocean was undoubtedly only possible with a heightened awareness of physical surroundings, requiring an exhaustive survey of wind, clouds, sun, and sea conditions. Their most important navigational tool, however, was their ability to understand the language of the stars. Their expertise regarding the cosmos was due to the power of Polynesian celestial mythology. Maui’s twinkling hook, depicted in the Scorpius constellation, as well as the iridescent cluster of “tiny eyes,” depicted in the Pleiades cluster, are two examples of star mythology’s critical role in Polynesian circumnavigation. These stories, and other such myths inscribed in the stars, enabled countless risky journeys across an expanse of untrodden and perpetually black sea. These tales, forever etched in the starry heavens, are responsible for not only the eventual far-flung settlement of Polynesia but also the emergence of unique and shared cultural identities across the Pacific islands, ultimately “bind[ing] the scattered inhabitants of the Pacific into one nation” (Westervelt vii). Samoan poet Albert Wendt beautifully captures the astonishing spread of Polynesian culture in “Towards a New Oceania”: “So vast, so fabulously varied a scatter of islands, nations, cultures, mythologies and myths, so dazzling a creature [...]” (202).

It is truly remarkable to imagine how ancient Polynesian navigators relied primarily on their knowledge of the stars to traverse large bodies of water and discover new land, and how the celestial myths immortalized in the constellations of Scorpius and the Pleiades illuminated a route over treacherous open ocean, ultimately resulting in the widespread settlement of a culturally unified Pacific island region.

Works Cited

- Aveni, Anthony. *Star Stories: Constellations and People*. Yale University Press, 2019. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvqc6h0v>.
- Best, Elsdon. *Astronomical Knowledge of the Maori*. Dominion Museum Monograph No. 3, 1922. *The Knowledge Basket*, www.knowledge-basket.co.nz/kete/taonga/contents/taonga/text/dm/dm3.html. Accessed 3 Nov. 2023.
- Finney, Ben. "Nautical Cartography and Traditional Navigation in Oceania." *The History of Cartography, Volume 2, Book 3: Cartography in the Traditional African, American, Arctic, Australian, and Pacific Societies*, edited by David Woodward and G. Malcolm Lewis, University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 443–492. https://press.uchicago.edu/books/hoc/HOC_V2_B3/HOC_VOLUME2_Book3_chapter13.pdf. Accessed 3 Nov. 2023.
- Gossage, Peter. "The Fish of Maui." *YouTube*, uploaded by on3Three, 4 April 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-b9Y99KQG1k.
- Hamacher, Duane W. and Guedes, Carla Bento. "How Far They'll Go: Moana Shows the Power of Polynesian Celestial Navigation." *UNSW Newsroom*, 15 Feb. 2017, <https://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/social-affairs/how-far-they%E2%80%99ll-go-moana-shows-power-polynesian-celestial-navigation>. Accessed 18 Nov. 2023.

Kawaharada, Dennis. "Wayfinding, or Non-Instrument Navigation." Polynesian Voyaging Society, <https://archive.hokulea.com/navigate/navigate.html>. Accessed 8 Nov. 2023.

Khan, Miriam and Suggs, Robert Carl. "Polynesian Culture." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. www.britannica.com/place/Polynesia. Accessed 18 Nov. 2023.

Lewis, David. "Polynesian Navigational Methods." *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, vol. 73, no. 4, 1964, pp. 364–74. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20704228>

"Makahiki." *Haleakalā National Park (U.S. National Park Service)*, www.nps.gov/hale/learn/historyculture/makahiki.htm. Accessed 12 Nov. 2023.

"Maui and the Creation of the Islands." *PBS Learning-Media*, <https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/echo07.lan.stories.maui/maui-and-the-creation-of-the-islands/>. Accessed 1 May 2025.

Neilson-Jones, Kat. "What Is Matariki and Why Is It Important?" *All About Whitianga*, 4 July 2023, www.allabout-whitianga.co.nz/mercury-bay-news/events/what-is-matariki-and-why-is-it-important. Accessed 9 Nov. 2023.

"Pleiades." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 20 Oct. 2023, www.britannica.com/place/Pleiades-astronomy. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023

“Polynesia.” *New World Encyclopedia*. www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Polynesia. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

“Scorpius.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. www.britannica.com/place/Scorpius. Accessed 18 Nov. 2023.

“Star Stories 4 - The Legend of Chief Makali’i.” Produced by Center for Aerospace Education at Windward Community College, 2021. *YouTube*, uploaded by Hoku-lani Imaginarium, 22 Sep. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=froFeW3IHoc.

Star Walk 2, version 2.16.2.3, Vito Technology Inc., 20 Mar. 2025.

Tamayose, Alan and De Silva, Shantell. “How Did Polynesian Wayfinders Navigate the Pacific Ocean?” TED-Ed, 2017. *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8bD-CaPhOek.

Wendt, Albert. “Towards a New Oceania.” *Writers in East-West Encounter*, edited by Guy Amirthanayagam, Palgrave Macmillan, 1982, pp. 202–215. *Springer*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-04943-1_12.

Westervelt, W.D. “Legends of Ma-Ui, a Demi-God of Polynesia: And of His Mother Hina.” *Hawaiian Gazette, 1910. HathiTrust*, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo1.ark:/13960/t5bc4jp3m>. Accessed 9 Nov. 2023.

“What is Matariki?” *Museum of New Zealand (Te Papa*

Tongarewa). <https://tepapa.govt.nz/discover-collections/read-watch-play/matariki-maori-new-year/what-and-who-matariki/what-matariki>. Accessed 2 May 2025.

Williams, Madi. *Polynesia, 900–1600*. ARC Humanities Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781641892155>.

Winter, Marcus. “The Stars of Matariki - Ngā Whetu o Matariki (English).” *YouTube*, uploaded by Marcus Winter The Sandman, 15 July 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=30V9_BUPt50.

Winter, Marcus. “Te Ika a Maui - The Great Fish of Māui - and how Aotearoa got its shape. (In Sand).” *YouTube*, uploaded by Marcus Winter The Sandman, 11 March 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHspwLb3w3Q.

Zhang-Czirakova, Daniela. “Maui: Polynesian Culture Hero, Variations of Motifs in Maui’s Mythological Cycle in East and West Polynesia.” *Journal of Sino-Western Communications*, vol. 5, no. 2, Dec. 2013, pp. 148–52. *ProQuest*. Accessed 8 May 2025. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1511433536/abstract/8307F8098831422EPQ/1>



The Dangerous Allure of the Joker: A Multimodal Film Trailer Analysis

Yatharth Banerjee Singh

Faculty Introduction

This rhetorical analysis of a multi-modal text has many strengths. It has a focused, arguable, and sophisticated thesis. Its paragraphs offer relevant evidence; its analysis pushes readers' interpretations; and its secondary sources support it all. But what makes this essay stand out is its "So What?"—the argument's significance. Arguments need to be more than right; they need to be significant. They need to push us to rethink our ideas about their subjects. Because this was his final project in WAI, I pushed Yath to develop a clearer "So What?" In his final version, he had not only included a "So What?," he had revised the entire paper in order to highlight it. The final draft isn't just another analysis of a film advertisement, his analysis makes us rethink how film trailers—as a genre—work. Of course, he puts it best: "Ultimately, the teaser's success lies in its ability to unsettle and captivate, proving that even in its brevity that lure of danger is just as powerful as the promise of entertainment."

Mark Brantner
Clinical Associate Professor in the Writing Program

The Dangerous Allure of the Joker: A Multimodal Film Trailer Analysis

Yatharth Banerjee Singh

Abstract

Since the start of the millennium, film trailers have become a constant presence in the public eye, appearing across platforms from television to the internet. Many scholars view trailers or teasers as mere advertisements for films, which may account for the limited research on their significance beyond commercial purposes. By contrast, in this paper I look in-depth at the genre of trailers through a multimodal analysis of a prominent teaser released on April 3rd, 2019, for the psychological thriller film *Joker*. I analyze the teaser as an object, focusing on its use of visual, auditory, and verbal modalities. By contrasting these elements with the conventions typical of comic book entertainment films, I demonstrate how the teaser for *Joker* embraces controversy to engage audiences. Through this analysis, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the role of trailers in the superhero genre, highlighting how they shape audience perceptions and expectations beyond their immediate commercial function.

It's fair to assume that most people have seen at least one film trailer. With modern film releases routinely grossing upwards of \$500 million, film trailers have become an integral part of a film's success, particularly within the superhero genre. Superhero movie trailers, typically one to three minutes long, are renowned for their meticulously curated action montages, epic one-liners, and sweeping cinematic shots designed to build anticipation for new releases. One trailer that stood out in its ability to captivate audiences was the teaser trailer for Todd Philips's *Joker*. Despite initial skepticism about the film's necessity—given the character's numerous on-screen appearances and enduring mystique—the teaser, released on April 3rd, 2019, generated a distinctive hype for the movie. Instead of adhering to the conventions of superhero film teasers, this unusually long teaser employed raw, gritty visuals, an intricately layered psychological soundscape, and dialogue focused on character-driven depth to craft the impression of a film grounded in reality—rendering it far more “dangerous” than conventional comic book films. By unapologetically presenting the film as “dangerous,” the teaser accomplished what very few films of its genre are capable of doing—using negative attention as a tool to garner box office success.

In its brief runtime, the teaser for *Joker* boldly diverges from genre conventions by presenting a gritty portrayal of Gotham that deliberately parallels contemporary society. Unlike the glossy and sanitized depiction of cities often seen in Marvel trailers, the teaser employs a drab, grainy

color palette throughout to show a lifeless Gotham. Gotham, although fictional, is shown in a period of widespread urban decay, eerily reminiscent of New York City during the economic recession of the early 1980s. As M. Keith Booker observes, “the general atmosphere of Gotham City in *Joker* evokes a particularly difficult time in the history of New York City” (127), and the teaser’s visuals depicting run-down buildings, overflowing trash cans, and disillusioned citizens support this claim. This parallel adds depth to the teaser. By associating itself with real-world circumstances that many members of the film’s audience might even remember, the teaser comes across as a more grounded and socially resonant account of the city and by extension, our society.

This focus on a gritty, relatable setting aligns with Christian R. Hoffman’s argument that a teaser’s “primary function is to arouse the interest of the viewing audience and evoke the general ‘feel,’ mood or ambience or [sic] the feature film being promoted” (2). However, in this instance, the teaser goes beyond mere mood-setting; its visual depictions create a disquieting sense of realism that piques the audience’s curiosity. By showing polarizing visuals such as the underclass rising up against the rich, set against a backdrop that feels uncomfortably close to our own reality, the teaser elevates itself not only generating interest but also sparking meaningful discourse. Consequently, numerous publications labeled the film as “dangerous” to society due to its supposed socialist undertones. The teaser, though, embraces this feeling of danger as

a conduit to delve deeper into its core themes of societal neglect and mental illness.

Transitioning from its realist version of Gotham, the teaser embraces its societal danger by leveraging its fast-paced nature to present the film's genre as a psychological thriller that is both a "cautionary tale" and "gritty character study" (Warner Bros., qtd. in McNary). Unlike trailers that rely on large-scale action set pieces, the teaser uses close-up shots of Arthur Fleck (the character who ultimately transforms into the Joker) in scenes with minimal movement. The fear of him as a character is generated oddly enough by his physical weakness. In the teaser, we witness a hunched over, frail Arthur—a stark contrast to the physically imposing portrayal of supervillains in typical comic book film trailers (Warner Bros. 00:00:39-00:00:44). The fact that the teaser cuts almost suddenly on multiple occasions to show a bare-bodied Arthur whose frail body contorts disturbingly can be interpreted as a visceral representation of the trauma he has faced from society, especially given the teaser's placement of these scenes immediately after those depicting Arthur's physical abuse.

The fact that the teaser doesn't adhere to the chronological order shown in the film, opting instead for a non-linear approach, intensifies suspense and the sense of "danger" among the audience, who remain unaware of Arthur's journey and mental illness. How he will react to those who have done wrong is unclear from the teaser, and this lack of clarity compels viewers to want to know more about

Arthur's story and the events that push him over the edge towards violence. However, beyond simply generating intrigue for the film, the teaser maintains its "dangerous" tone by intentionally withholding information, leaving much to the imagination. In contrast to the film, where Arthur's story is contextualized, the teaser deliberately omits crucial aspects to enable the misinterpretation that the film glorifies incel culture in order to spark outrage. Severson argues that "[m]ore than anything, the Joker's nihilism echoes that of hate groups in our own society, not unlike Gotham City's," and the teaser deliberately accentuates these parallels to real-world instances of individuals adopting the Joker persona. In doing so, it stokes controversy, compelling audiences to venture into theaters to discern whether the film is truly as "dangerous" as it is made out to be.

While the teaser's visual elements undoubtedly contribute to setting the film's tone, it's the auditory components that truly amplify its sense of "danger." Morten Thomsen and Lene Heiselberg, commenting on the importance of music, believed that as trailers build up anticipation, "[r]hythm and music are thus among the defining characteristics of the trailer" (46). This emphasis on music as a reinforcement of the visuals is shown in the teaser as it uses a remastered version of the song "Smile," originally written by Charlie Chaplin for his film *Modern Times*, to elevate itself beyond just a regular film teaser. Beyond a brief glimpse of a *Modern Times* poster in the teaser, the song's ironic reflection of Arthur Fleck's fragmented mental state serves the teaser's goal of building negative hype around

the film. By deliberately referencing *Modern Times*, a film known for its critique of capitalist modes of production, the teaser further enhances its associations with supposedly “dangerous” messages in American society. A more nuanced interpretation of the song’s hollow optimism reveals the paradox inherent in its lyrics, where the singer is telling the listener to cheer up and that there is always a bright tomorrow, just as long as they smile. In this way, the teaser manipulates the critique embedded in *Modern Times* to further stir controversy and propel the film’s provocative allure.

Furthermore, the song is also strategically used to invoke some kind of sympathy (pathos) for the protagonist, a dangerous idea in itself. The song’s main verse, “[s]mile though your heart is aching,” plays over a pivotal scene (Warner Bros. 00:01:08-00:01:12) where Arthur sits in front of the mirror trying to force himself to smile with a tear rolling down his eye as he struggles to do so. Instead of the quippy dialogues seen in usual Marvel trailers, the audience is forced to interpret Joker’s emotions and motivations based on the song and his expressions, almost as if they are sympathizing momentarily with a real person. This portrayal of Arthur as both a victim and a villain, with a focus on his victimhood in the teaser as he isn’t shown committing any crimes in the teaser, contributes to the aura of “danger” surrounding the film. The deliberate lack of action on his part is supplanted by the teaser’s clever manipulation of verbal elements, furthering the notion that the film is one that warrants cautionary attention.

The *Joker* teaser complements its striking visuals and music with powerful character-driven voiceover dialogue, heightening the film's allure. Jörg Finsterwalder et al. note how, for most viewers, "the quality of the dialogue revealed in the trailer is indicative of the quality of the dialogue in the film and thus influences their expectations of the film" (592-593). Throughout the teaser, there is no scene in which the Joker speaks directly to the camera; instead, all of his lines are delivered in voiceover. Joker's pivotal line "[i]s it just me, or is it getting crazier out there?" (Warner Bros. 00:00:39-00:00:42) is delivered in voiceover, imbued with an unsettling ambiguity. By relying solely on voiceover, the teaser keeps the audience locked inside Arthur's head. We hear his observations and thoughts, but we don't necessarily see the world through his eyes. This disconnect, coupled with the ambiguity surrounding his mental state and motivations, fuels the film's reputation as "dangerous." Raising concerns about the glorification of violence and mental illness, the teaser avoids depicting Arthur's wrongdoings almost entirely. Instead, it culminates in a final scene that evokes fear of a monster like the Joker emerging from a society akin to ours in its craziest form.

While the teaser uses gritty visuals, melancholic music, and weighty dialogues throughout, it is the final scene that unequivocally cements the film's "dangerous" nature. Contrasting Arthur's earlier walk up the stairs as a broken man with the final confident embodiment of the Joker feels almost hypnotic. His shift in posture and movement isn't a typical supervillain transformation sequence with spe-

cial effects. Instead, it's a subtle yet unsettling shift where Joker defiantly declares, "I used to think that my life was a tragedy, but now I realize it's a comedy" (Warner Bros. 00:01:49-00:02:03). Accompanied by ominous music, this moment marks a pivotal shift in perception, from viewing hardships as overwhelming tragedies to embracing the absurdity of existence. The dissonance between Joker's newfound perspective and the audience's interpretation reflects the teaser's ability to unsettle and captivate, leaving viewers to ponder the consequences of sympathizing with such a realistic psychopath.

To conclude, rather than shying away from the label of being a divisive and "dangerous" film, the teaser uses its short duration to boldly embrace this label by tapping into existing controversial ideas in society to generate hype. The chaotic nature of the teaser which flip-flops between ideas is thus amalgamated by its modalities which coalesce to fulfill its central aim to make us feel that by watching the film we are, in some way, posing a threat to the establishment. Through its gritty cityscapes, non-linear narrative, and melancholic score, the teaser deliberately taps into socio-political undercurrents in American society to evoke both a pervasive sense of fear yet intrigue. A comment on YouTube encapsulates this contrasting sentiment perfectly: "My siblings: Why do you still watch this trailer after watching the movie? Me: You wouldn't get it" (comment under Warner Bros. 2019). This remark, referencing a line from the film, shows how the teaser served not only as a promotional tool that made audiences scared

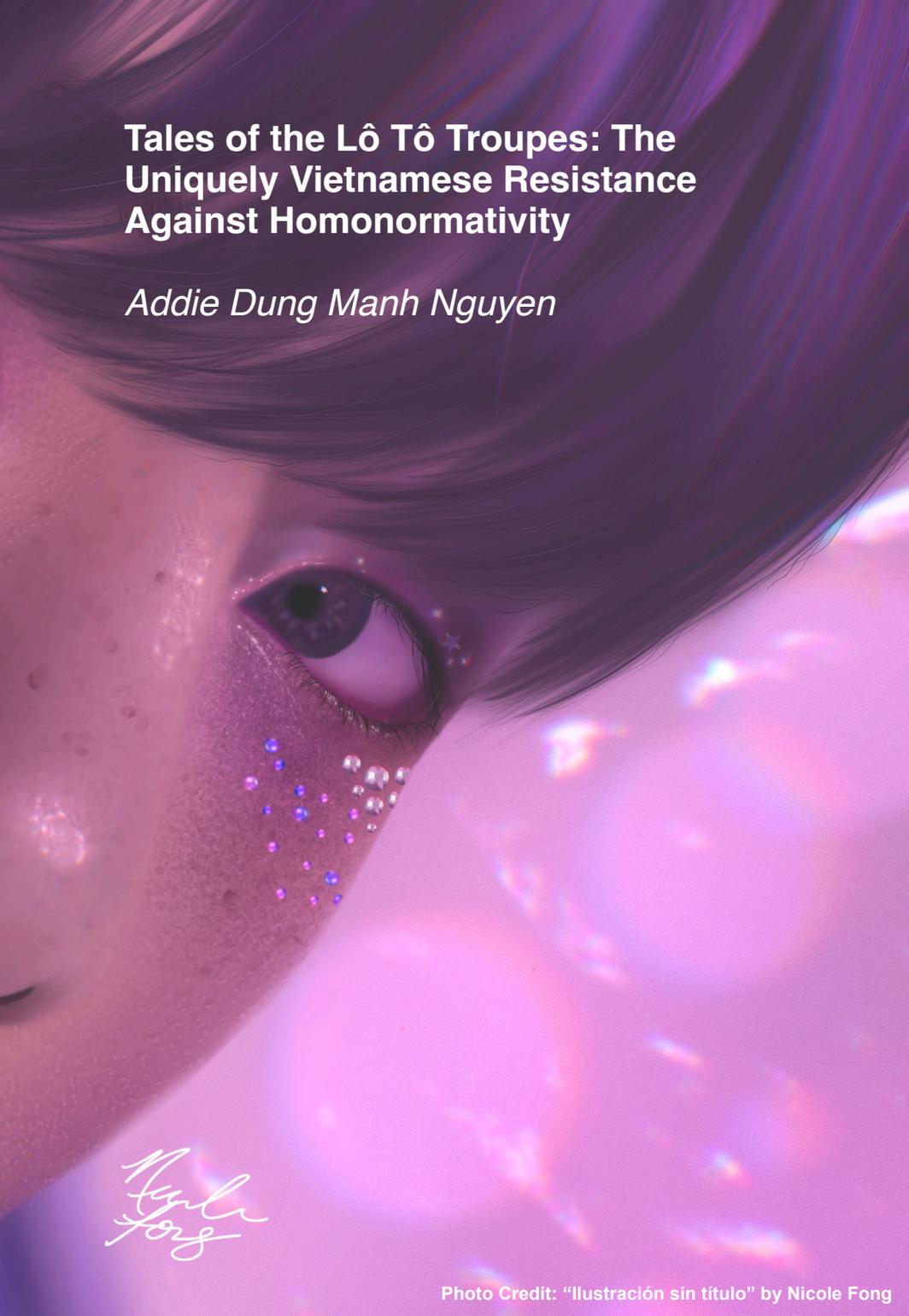
yet hooked, but also as a piece of standalone entertainment. Moving forward, further research could explore how other teasers employ similar tactics to sensationalize or even intentionally mislead audiences. What are the implications of such strategies, particularly in an era where shorter content often amplifies controversy and cultural upheaval? Ultimately, the teaser's success lies in its ability to unsettle and captivate, proving that even in its brevity that allure of danger is just as powerful as the promise of entertainment.

Works Cited

- Booker, M. Keith. *No Joke: Todd Phillips's Joker and American Culture*. Liverpool University Press, 2023.
- Finsterwalder, Jörg, et al. "The effects of film trailers on shaping consumer expectations in the entertainment industry—a qualitative analysis." *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, vol. 19, no. 6, Nov. 2012, pp. 589–595, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2012.07.004>.
- Hoffmann, Christian R. "Cut to the Chase – How Multimodal Cohesion Secures Narrative Orientation in Film Trailers." *Discourse, Context & Media*, vol. 44, Dec. 2021, p. 100539, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2021.100539>.
- McNary, Dave. "Joaquin Phoenix's 'Joker' Movie Gets Release Date." *Variety*, 18 July 2018, [variety.com/2018/film/news/joaquin-phoenix-joker-movie-release-date-1202877605/](https://www.variety.com/2018/film/news/joaquin-phoenix-joker-movie-release-date-1202877605/).
- Severson, Ken. "Is 'Joker' Dangerous? The Joker Movie Controversy, Explained." StudioBinder, 14 June 2020, www.studiobinder.com/blog/joker-movie-controversy/.
- Thomsen, Morten, and Lene Heiselberg. "Arousing the Audience: The Two-Peak Structure of Drama Film Trailers." *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*, vol. 10, no. 1, Mar. 2020, pp. 45–65, https://doi.org/10.1386/jasca_00013_1.

Warner Bros. Pictures. "Joker - Teaser Trailer - Now Playing in Theaters." YouTube, 3 Apr. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=t433PEQGErc.



A close-up, artistic photograph of a person's face, focusing on their eye and cheek. The person has dark, wavy hair. Their eye is looking slightly to the right. The cheek is adorned with numerous small, multi-colored glitter particles in shades of purple, blue, and silver. The background is a soft, out-of-focus purple and pink light, creating a dreamy atmosphere.

**Tales of the Lô Tô Troupes: The
Uniquely Vietnamese Resistance
Against Homonormativity**

Addie Dung Manh Nguyen

Nicole Fong

Faculty Introduction

To perform is to defy: to represent a unique identity in the face of a larger culture which may or may not condone the existence of the performer. For Addie Dung Manh Nguyen, in this essay, a uniquely Vietnamese brand of performing art becomes representative of the struggles of Vietnam's LGBTQ+ population as a whole. Dung follows a vivid analysis of the film *Madam Phung's Last Journey* with a history of Lô Tô troupes, who have been "frequently associated with transgender women and queer men." Fascinatingly, Dung's ambition goes far beyond pitting the existence of these troupes against mainstream heteronormative values, instead emphasizing the role of western powers in Vietnam and the lingering influence of Confucianism. Along the way, Dung displays an impressive flare for description; ambitious, well-constructed paragraphs; and a broad range of well-chosen and cleverly integrated research. While this paper was submitted for WAI, the university's intro-level writing course, it reads like work by a student with an extensive background in critical and gender theory, and I'm very glad to see it published in *The Hundred River Review*.

Kyle Muntz

Clinical Assistant Professor in the Writing Program

Tales of the Lô Tô Troupes: The Uniquely Vietnamese Resistance Against Homonormativity

Addie Dung Manh Nguyen

Blinding lights flickered, and darkness was on all sides. The truck slowed down as it wiggled through the tiny alleys lined with bustling street vendors. It was only 4 in the morning, and the sun had barely risen on the horizon. In fact, it was hardly a sunny day in April. Amidst the honking of the truck's horn and the suffocating hustle and bustle of the market, *Madam Phung's Last Journey*, the premier work by the Vietnamese amateur director Tham Nguyen, began unfolding. As the troupe, men and women and young and old, arrived at an abandoned stadium and descended from the vehicle, their hands held firmly onto steel bars, tarp sheets, and raffle cages. On another truck piled bags of colorful costumes—cocktail dresses, feather coats, and embellished gowns—the kind bought from Chinese factories and not the luxury ateliers. By then, one could already tell that the troupe members were no ordinary entertainers. After an entire day of drenching in the ricocheting rain to assemble the carnival houses, the ground finally parched, and colorful flags finally waved in the blinding lights. In the blaring sound of Little Ut promoting the variety show about to begin in the neighborhood, Madam Phung

and her best disciple, Little Phung, rushed to zip up their best gowns and meticulously add the finishing touches to their heavy makeup, already three shades lighter than their bronze skins. The music was on, and, with the crowd gradually filling up the stadium, began the duo's performance—a quirky mix of Cai Luong (Southern Vietnamese folk opera), Cuban bolero, and disco rock. While the two Phungs lived their ecstatic moments in the flickering stage lights, their sisters passed on to the galvanized audience their lottery tickets, a black-and-white pamphlet-sized ticket with random numbers, as random as the list of songs in today's line-up. Their choice of music and lighting was so wild and explosive as if it was revolting against the darkness and silence that had long besieged the village. Elsewhere, other women in their sequined dresses hosted merry-go-rounds for the kids and hamster races for gamblers. As Madam Phung wound down and receded from the stage, her best friend, Madam Hang, rocked the stage with her one-of-a-kind lottery drawing, announcing random numbers she had drawn somewhere in her improv lyrics. "What is the number? What is the number?" she continuously sang while the cages spun at the speed of light upon the audience's anticipation. Hours passed, and her acts eventually ended with an empty audience beneath and her breathless voice; the troupe was already dismantling the entire carnival for their next day on the road to the next city. It was Madam Phung's last journey in the invisible shadow across Vietnam: fast came, fast went, without a trace by the next morning.

This was the reality of Madam Phung’s troupe and another handful of Lô Tô troupes across Vietnam. Through the lens of Director Tham Nguyen, the Vietnamese public caught a glimpse into the ephemeral glamour of these Lô Tô troupes, and, to many, it was a bitter pill to swallow, given that Vietnam was fast becoming one of the most LGBTQ-friendly nations in Asia. Frequently associated with transgender women and queer men, Lô Tô troupes have long operated in an environment shrouded by obscurity and uncertainty, bouncing between the Southern provinces (whose political culture has been more inclusive than that of their deeply conservative Northern counterparts) outside of any legal protections in a nation that has yet to fully recognize the complex identities inside these troupes. Upon examining the dynamics within the LGBTQ+ community in Vietnam, a 2017 ethnographic research by scholar Yen Mai adopted the term “homonormativity” to account for the disparity in the perceived acceptance of various identities. In Mai’s study and this essay, homonormativity is defined as the expected course of action and code of social conduct that individuals within the LGBTQ+ community should follow, whereas heteronormativity applies to cisgender heterosexual individuals. Taking into account entries in Mai’s interviews and the harsh reality depicted in “The Last Journey of Madam Phung,” transgender women have been at the bottom of a hierarchy of normativity that has subjected them to inescapable poverty and further discrimination (“Constructing Queerness” 401–402). Upon deeper analysis by Mai, however, this homonormativity

revealed itself to be an extension of the heteronormative Chinese, Western, and Socialist ideologies that have long implied the importance of gender stereotypes and socially constructed (acquired) morality in queer identities within Vietnamese society (407). By extrapolating the established Chinese, Western, and Socialist notions of heteronormativity and modern homonormativity in Vietnam to the underrepresentation of transgender women in *Lô Tô*, this essay seeks to frame *Lô Tô* as a symbol of resistance against the foreign appropriation of Vietnamese folk culture worthy of formal recognition and preservation. As Vietnam strides toward a more socially progressive political culture, such recognition could advance and integrate critical discourses on LGBTQ+ rights as a long-standing tradition (not an imported concept from Western nations) into Vietnamese civil society beyond the mere societal tolerance at present.

To fully grasp the cultural and historical significance of *Lô Tô*, it is essential to trace its origins. Like many aspects of Vietnamese folk culture, *Lô Tô* had its humble beginning in colonial roots, specifically in the Italian game *Lotto* during the French colonial rule (Vu), yet it has since evolved into a vibrant mosaic of both Western and Vietnamese cultural elements. Throughout the early 20th century, with the French colonialist government's crackdown on traditional performance arts, the original European game ultimately merged with Vietnamese opera and folk singing. By the 1960s, under the gigantic American influence in the South, *Lô Tô* had incorporated components of the Western carnival culture to form its modern version

dissected in “The Last Journey of Madam Phung” (Vu).

With this constant evolution came a new social function for Lô Tô. Starting from the 1950s onward, troupes of Lô Tô became a haven for queer men and transgender women as the emblem of free self-expression. For once, the legal status of Lô Tô was ambiguous in South Vietnam during the 1960s. In an excerpt from 1960 from the *Hợp-tác và Nông-tín* internal magazine (affiliated with the South Vietnamese government), Lô Tô was viewed as gambling yet “should not be regulated by law” since it was an “established tradition during Tet” (Vietnamese New Year) (*Quốc Gia Nông Tín Cuộc*). This created the perfect environment for Lô Tô to establish itself outside conventional cultural mediums as an outcast. Its unique position was further corroborated for much of its existence during the 20th century as it contributed to the preservation of the more formal traditional heritages, such as *Bài Chòi* (Vietnamese cards played in a bamboo hut) and *Cải Lương* (Vietnamese folk opera), under the disguise of propagating modern-styled entertainment when political attitudes toward traditional Vietnamese culture reached their hostility climax.

The exclusion of Lô Tô from conventional mediums persisted into the post-colonial era. Once colonialism was no longer holding Vietnam hostage, socialism weaved itself into the Vietnamese political culture. After the country’s reunification under one socialist government, Lô Tô was listed as a form of gambling in light of the post-war cultural revolution. Its association with homosexuality and trans-

genderism made it a thorn in the eyes of authorities, thus excluding it from the defined sets of Vietnamese cultural heritages. Although there was no official ban on Lô Tô, troupes constantly had to evade the authorities' inspections and raids against the so-called "social evils" (a concept this essay will later delve into). Yet, this period of heavy persecution was also Lô Tô's golden era (Danh). With its extra-legal status, Lô Tô avoided the excessive surveillance and censorship that tightly gripped other established traditions: for once, people took joy in the jubilant Lô Tô carnivals, the kind of intangible joy untouched by any national political agendas. Lô Tô eventually struck permanent roots in Southern Vietnam, especially in the Southwest, where the flatlands and intricate river systems in the Mekong Delta catered to the troupes' escape from the endless bounty hunts of the local government. From here, Lô Tô was tied to the image of constant elusion between the makeshift ferry slips along the rivers of the Southwest, only to appear in the glorious extravaganza costumes amidst the blinding lights of the stages. This image would last almost until the late 2010s when regulations on Lô Tô troupes loosened. As Lô Tô stepped into the limelight, troupes like Madam Phung's began their tours across the country on paved roads, not rivers. Nevertheless, as her troupe traversed through Southern Vietnam, they were met with a lukewarm and occasionally hostile reception from the local community and the authorities, who, upon every arrival, would request a stay permit for the nomadic group as the typical bureaucratic "torture" welcoming them. Tham Nguyen—the

film's director—took careful note of this in an interview with Vice News as she accompanied the troupe, “From what I witnessed, every time the troupe went to a new area...they were always teased and people touched them, children threw stones at them” (Osborne). Her frames stacked the dimly lit darkness in the rural villages and the potential hostility emerging from it onto the desperation drowning the troupe's morale. No one knew what would happen to the troupe once they arrived in a new place, and no one with a rational mind would honestly expect peaceful days ahead for the troupe.

This extralegal (and, in some cases, informally illegal) status of Lô Tô intertwines with the ambiguity in the self-identification of Vietnamese transgender women as a whole. In their pioneering report on the Vietnamese transgender community in 2012, Pham et al. noted the confusion that transgender people face in determining their authentic identities (22). “As the transgender concept is quite new in Vietnam and used to be understood to include only those who have had sex reassignment surgery (like famous celebrities Cindy Thai Tai, Cat Tuyen, etc.), it is common for transgender people to think that they are homosexual based on the gender of the ones they love, i.e. being *les* (if born with a female body and attracted to women), or *gay* (born with male body but attracted to men)” (Pham et al. 22). The researchers then advance, “Self-identification, therefore, significantly depends on a person's knowledge and their endeavours to acquire knowledge on self-identification” (Pham et al. 22). In the

movie, the Bich Phung troupe themselves featured a mix of queer men and transgender women, where the differentiation between accurate labels for their gender identities and sexual orientations was blurry and obsolete. All non-heterosexual sexualities in the troupe were referred to under the umbrella terms “bóng (gió)” (“shadow/spirit in the wind”) or “bê đê” (originated from the French *pédérastie*, equivalent to “fag”).

One signature commonality between these Lô Tô entertainers and most transgender women in Vietnam in this era was the embracing of a hyperfeminine appearance in order to align with physical and mental perceptions of femininity in their consciousness. Various scenes in the documentary closely dissect the stereotypical figure of transgender women with hyperbolic features that radiate femininity: overfilled lips, extravagant sizes of breast implants, cut-out cocktail dresses, and curly wigs. Nevertheless, throughout the movie, scattered snapshots of masculinity underneath the thick makeup layers show these brave trans women brawling with outsiders, mostly hostile and male, to protect the troupe. It is ironic even to witness how, without the makeup and breast pads, they managed to chase after the vandals and crush their motorbikes in half, to the police’s surprise (T. Nguyen 25:40–27:00). These bursts of physical strength, however, were far from being unexpected occurrences: perhaps they were a natural response to the constant vandalization and discrimination sanctioned by outsiders and the authorities. Elsewhere, the game stalls were erected entirely from the

younger women's collective effort, while Madam Phung was seen soaking in the rain, rolling around, and doing a somersault (T. Nguyen 32:16–32:33), all of which arguably feminine women (in the purest Vietnamese sense of the word) rarely do. Nonetheless, intolerance against transgender women, especially within these Lô Tô troupes, perhaps stemmed from this disparity between the enhanced perception of femininity above and the existence of masculinity found in their inner selves. In the excerpts from Mai's interviews with gay individuals, they "found [trans women's] bodies appalling and not entitled to be visible." "[Female transgender] bodies are depicted as 'unnatural' and worthy of contempt, and are constantly subjected to contestations from gay men" because the stereotypical figure conjures a sense of incoherence (Mai, "Constructing Queerness" 401). One could argue that such prejudice would be more reinforced in the case of trans women in the Lô Tô troupes, within whom the discrepancy between the hyperfeminine code of conduct and a masculine inner-self is inevitably wider.

This partially explains why, although the LGBTQ+ community in Vietnam has achieved significant milestones for greater equality in recent years, transgender women, especially in Lô Tô troupes, remained at the bottom of this homonormative hierarchy (Mai 401). In a comprehensive survey of LGBTQ+ groups across Vietnam, researchers and activists Huy T. Luong (the first openly queer man running for office in the Vietnamese National Assembly) and Phuong Q. Pham reported that out of all the groups

surveyed, transgender women had the highest likelihood of being disowned by their families, experiencing physical assault, and, in a uniquely Vietnamese sense of transphobia, being forced to go through rituals (45). In schools and workplaces, transgender women are more likely to drop out and be denied occupational opportunities, social security benefits, and promotional prospects (Luong and Pham 51, 56). With challenges on all sides and without practical legal protection, queer and transgender teenagers have been exercising agency over their lives in non-conforming ways to resist heteronormativity (Mai, “Expressions of Agency” 56–57). This justifies why many, such as in the case of the Bich Phung troupe, saw Madam Phung’s Lô Tô business as their sole livelihood and a haven for their performative passions. Zoom out, and it is no surprise that Lô Tô has continued to exist as a sanctuary for transgender women in a nation that denies them the right to free expression without being censored.

We have so far established that modern homonormativity in Vietnam excludes transgender women in Lô Tô from the rest of the LGBTQ+ community and important discourses that affect their day-to-day livelihoods. However, the history behind this established homonormativity can be traced back to multiple ideologies that had historically overarched the Vietnamese political culture for decades, if not centuries. One of which is Chinese Confucianism, one of the “three teachings” (tam giáo) in the traditional East Asian culture. For a millennium of Chinese colonialism, from 111 BCE–939 CE, the Vietnamese judicial and soci-

etal modes were significantly modified to accommodate Confucian values up until the 1910s (Gardner 9), constructing the primitive version of Vietnamese heteronormativity. As Confucianism interacted with existing Vietnamese cultural values, Confucian heteronormativity gradually encompassed the moral prospects of aligning oneself with family values and preserving the lineage while fulfilling their social-familial role in their biological sex, all of which transgender women could hardly satisfy. In their analysis of the impact that Confucianism had on perceptions of non-heterosexuality in Modern Vietnam, authors Tam Nguyen and Holly Angelique noted the Confucian monopoly on the interpretation of family in Vietnam, “It describes family in strict heterosexual terms and gives the concept of family the utmost importance in defining one’s self-worth and dictating one’s position in community life. There could be no worse fate than to bring shame upon one’s family” (1618). In this Confucian interpretation, within the patrilineal kinship system, men are elevated as active participants in maintaining it, while women are relegated to subordinate positions, unable to attain equal status (Nguyen and Angelique 1618).

This societal framework arguably imposed a dual burden on transgender women, devaluing their status upon their transition and burdening them with the invisible expectation of extending the patriarchal lineage. As such, in the movie, there was a scene where Madam Phung, born as her family’s sole son, recounted her son’s adoption, a decision made so that her parents would finally have a

“cháu nội” (paternal grandchild) (T. Nguyen 22:46–23:17). She did not adopt a daughter, and her son did not call her parents maternal grannies, all in the name of the patrilineal kinship. Moreover, Confucianism’s emphasis on acquired morality marginalized transgender individuals as they struggled to adhere to societal virtues deeply ingrained in Confucian thought. Biologically, most transgender women, upon their transition and hormone treatment, became sterile. In Vietnam, that sterility translates to “impiety, disappointing parents, disrupting family lineage, and bringing shame upon one’s family” (Nguyen and Angelique 1620), forming a vicious cycle in which the acquired morality of transgender women has been perpetually diminished. Seeking redemption for their perceived moral shortcomings, many transgender women turned to religion, as exemplified by Madam Phung’s brief stint as a Buddhist monk prior to assuming leadership of the troupe. Aside from Madam Phung’s story, Buddhist statues would occasionally appear next to the women’s beds or in the corners of the carnival stalls. Behind the screen of cigarette smoke, they yielded themselves to the statues while the Buddhist Dharma blasted through the loudspeaker, praying to the non-judgmental Buddha above that their hard days would finally pass. Most catastrophic of all, however, the absence of non-heterosexual representations within Confucian philosophy and other ideologies in the “three teachings” (including Buddhism, the religion that many Lô Tô women adhered to) perpetuated the notion that non-heteronormative identities are foreign imports, alien to Vietnamese

cultural heritage (Blanc 663–664). The women, hence, became aliens in their own country and in the language that they spoke. Thus, there was no room for them in the words they used referring to their identities and no room for them in the legal system, in the family structure, and in the culture that nourished them: their struggles were a foreign disease, and as other diseases, it must be quarantined from the rest of the society.

As the independence of feudalist Vietnam came to a halt, Confucianism soon assumed a lackluster position and was later substituted with Western-Christian colonialism. Christianity reached the coast of Vietnam by the beginning of the 17th century with the arrival of Jesuit traders in Central Vietnam. Following suit, French colonialist forces arrived as early as the mid-19th century, along with French Catholicism, which incorporated itself into the colonial legal system (A. Tran). During this two-century era of colonial rule in Vietnam, the French indoctrinated the Vietnamese public with the notions of French and Eurocentric masculinity and sexual dimorphism, through whose lens Indochinese men were viewed as effeminate and native practices of homosexuality and other sexual “delinquencies” were discouraged (Blanc 669). This form of cultural imperialism, based on Christian values, was so powerful that its influence did not cease after Vietnam had gained independence from France. Notably, the American-friendly South Vietnamese government relayed its legacies in which homosexuality “was disapproved of and condemned in the South” on the basis of Christian-Western standards (UNDP

13). At the same time, there was little information on the communist North Vietnamese government's attitudes toward homosexuality as a whole.

Then, as Vietnam transitioned to a unified nation, the socialist government, through its systemic policies to construct the new modern socialist state, perpetuated the image of a model citizen, focusing on modern family values, active engagement with the Socialist educational system, and continuing participation in the labor force while pushing back against the “social evils” of the American neo-colonialism (Blanc 662). The dilemma was that trans women and the LGBTQ+ community at large, facing these discriminatory acts as they entered the workforce (which was no fault of the Socialist government), had to trade in their right to self-expression for stable employment, especially in a time when international sanctions wreaked havoc on the entire Vietnamese economy. Many chose to abandon formal jobs to enter unconventional and, in many cases, illegal fields, often entailing artistic or religious elements (UNDP 14). As such, without formal education, most ended up working for *lô tô* troupes, sex brothels, or spiritual entities (a particular case that will be discussed later on) (UNDP 14). Yet, through the government's lens, these queer and transgender individuals were incriminating themselves in the “social evils” that the government sought to eliminate: *lô tô* troupes were deemed a form of informal gambling, sex brothels were considered an American relic of moral corruption, and religious entities were manifestations of superstition (Mai, “Constructing Queerness” 400).

This negative reputation of Lô Tô troupes through the government's lens was pronounced in a chaotic scene in the aftermath of the brawl with the vandals. One of Madam Phung's closest assistants shouted to the troupe's younger members, "If you are fighting outside of this fair, you are fighting outside of the law's protection, and you will never win. If three or four of you attacked the brats, and they pretended that their bones fractured, you will have to compensate those little brats. But even if you get your nose bridge fractured or your lips bleeding, you will never be compensated for the injuries." (T. Nguyen 29:15–29:45). It was evident in her bitter tone that no matter where the troupe wandered, the Socialist government's refusal to offer protection and stigmatization against the Lô Tô troupes was a ubiquitous unwritten rule.

Nonetheless, considering transgender women in these Lô Tô troupes as the victims of underrepresentation within a solely sociopolitical and legal framework would be a misguided act, given the pervasiveness of state propaganda under the Vietnamese socialist government. Going back to Mai's article on homonormativity in Vietnam, one would discover that previous governmental propaganda framed transgenderism and non-heterosexuality in general as a social disease, equivalent to prostitution, drug use, and gambling (Mai, "Constructing Queerness" 395). In other words, state-sanctioned media propaganda was an extrapolation and extension of the sociopolitical framework in Vietnam. Therefore, it would do more justice to transgender women as a whole to also view them as victims of the

systematically discriminatory media industry. Mai included details where presumed “medical experts” claimed on television and leading newspapers that homosexuality (as the umbrella term for any sexual deviations from heterosexuality) was a mental disorder, suggesting that it might be curable through therapy, education, and social integration (396). In 2005, one specific article by *Nguoi Lao Dong* (The Laborman)—a state-sponsored newspaper—even referred to transgender entertainers in *Lô Tô* troupes as “*đào*” (a euphemism for “sex workers”), mocking their failed rhinoplasties and “superficially” hyperbolic femininity (H. Nguyen). In this sense, the state-run media apparatus perpetuated a more extreme form of heteronormativity-based discrimination that roamed freely beyond the government’s ambiguous official position. The legacy of this era of intensive anti-LGBTQ+ propaganda remains visible in modern-day Vietnam: many movies featuring queer characters, especially transgender women, stigmatized them as being sexually promiscuous and, in some cases, sexual perverts (Mai 406).

This is not to say that the media landscape in Vietnam has been static, but as development is sequential, the propaganda of the past helped solidify the negative caricatures of the *Lô Tô* transgender entertainer while deflecting the public away from the root issues that have relentlessly tormented these women’s lives. In this way, much of Vietnamese media coverage on the topic in the 2010s obscured from readers the deeper, systemic causes of the *Lô Tô* troupes’ struggles by framing them as victims

of personal misfortunes. For example, an article by VnExpress—one of the leading newspapers in Vietnam—praised the film for its striking depiction of “the troupe’s poverty” and “the sadness inside the transgender women’s eyes” (Ha). The article also mentioned the troupe’s respect for the laws in every location they traveled to, yet not a single mention of how the laws had failed them in the first place. The article, like many Vietnamese, could only marginally empathize with these trans women. For them, it was as if fate had arranged for them to be trapped in this miserable and impoverished life when, in fact, the sociopolitical superstructure and the discriminatory media industry had evicted them from the stable life and opportunities that they deserved. This pseudo-empathetic narrative reduced their experiences to mere “misfortunes,” and because of underrepresentation, most people would never comprehend the complexities of the Lô Tô women’s plights beyond the word “misfortunes.”

By now, it is clear that the framework for modern Vietnamese homonormativity has been gradually constructed within the national psyche by multiple entities throughout the entire Vietnamese history. With such intricacy, the framework itself can not be invalidated wholly and swiftly through a revolutionary movement of sorts, but rather a top-down approach that starts with the modern Socialist government. Looking back on Vietnamese history, the government has all the incentives it needs to incorporate Lô Tô back into the official national culture. In fact, the government already has a track record of advocating for

the reclamation of Vietnamese folk culture that intertwined with indigenous queer and transgender culture before any colonialist influence. That record was Vietnam's lobbying campaign for Đạo Mẫu (the worshipping ritual of mother goddesses) to be recognized as an intangible cultural heritage of humankind by UNESCO. Đạo Mẫu, involving the transvestite figure of "bóng cái" (literally translated to "female shadows") or "cô đồng" as a manifestation of the Mother Goddess, was widely practiced in Vietnam as a folk religion despite legal sanctions and social stigma until the modern Socialist government banned it on the basis of pushing back against superstition. In Đạo Mẫu, "Bóng cái" individuals have been revered as divine entities, and Đạo Mẫu traditions embraced the femininity of these queer and transgender figures as a precious attachment to their biologically male bodies (Endres et al. 54-56), thus becoming a shelter for sexual minorities in Vietnam. Đạo Mẫu, at its core, celebrated matriarchal power, hence the Motherly God, standing as a contrast against the patriarchal traditions imported into the country from China and the West. Matriarchy, in turn, is argued to be one of the defining features of Vietnamese folk culture, in which folk Vietnamese culture traditionally leans more toward yin (female elements) than yang (male elements) (Pham and Eipper 53). In an effort to rebuild a distinctive Vietnamese cultural identity that it claimed to have existed along with its Sinicized and Westernized counterparts, Đạo Mẫu stood out as one of the few non-Sinicized and non-Westernized traditions that set Vietnam apart from its Northern neighbor

(Salemink 161). That was why, after lifting the ban on Đạo Mẫu in 1987, Vietnam acted swiftly to gain UNESCO's recognition as an emblem of Vietnam's reclamation of national identity. Consequently, Đạo Mẫu was revived after decades of neglect and became one of the most widely practiced rituals nationwide (Tham and Springer). With that track record, one could only imagine that if Lô Tô were to receive a similar tier of formal recognition, its transgender entertainers would be freed from the confines of homonormativity and regain their rights to equal employment opportunities, societal acceptance, and cultural representation. Indeed, as transgender visibility and rights have expanded in Vietnam in recent years, Lô Tô has, too, emerged from the shadows and into the mainstream cultural sphere, albeit rather slowly: the shows have attracted tens of thousands of audiences in Southern provinces, and leading Lô Tô stars have appeared on Vietnamese Shark Tank to pitch for funding for Lô Tô to become a permanent Vietnamese staple for entertainment.

In this essay, we have witnessed how homonormativity formed under foreign interference in the Vietnamese culture and how it has confined the transgender women of Lô Tô troupes to underrepresentation and discrimination by all measurable standards. If there was one message constantly propagating throughout the film, it would be that the troupe members themselves craved representation. In her intimate confession to the director, Madam Phung's ultimate aspiration was for the entire troupe to sing on national television. Madam Phung remarked, "If we got on

national television, the nation would finally understand. They would witness our daily lives and how miserable it is to live this shadowy life” (T. Nguyen 35:58–36:09). The underrepresentation of Lô Tô earned it an inferior status as a campy performative art, and that perceived inferiority plunged Madam Phung’s troupe into a sea of fire as the film concluded (T. Nguyen 1:16:24–1:16:43). Underrepresentation equals a failed opportunity to gain understanding, and without understanding comes fear and discrimination. Representation, thus, has brought Lô Tô ever closer into the limelight, slowly turning Madam Phung’s dreams into reality; what remains an obstacle in its way is a formal recognition that translates to real progress in achieving LGBTQ+ equality.

In light of this, advocacy for disadvantaged transgender individuals in Vietnam may well start with a quest for the normalization of Lô Tô and the transgender community as a whole, calling for a better understanding of them before further judgments and legal amendments. Elaborating on this concept of normalization, Madam Phung sarcastically joked, “There are all sorts of [non-heterosexuals]: some good, some bad, some demon-like, and some ghost-like. [Heterosexuals] have those sorts too” (T. Nguyen 36:11–36:20). With that understanding, this essay advances a view through which Lô Tô entertainers are not revered, but rather normalized and given adequate credit for their contributions to Vietnam’s cultural vibrance. As we reconcile with the extraordinarily burdensome legacies of heteronormativity and homonormativity of foreign ide-

ologies in Vietnam, we come to the realization that integration and acceptance of these transgender individuals extend beyond the celebrated Western trajectory toward LGBTQ+ equality through advocacy and legal debates, and the homonormative ideals will perhaps take years for the Vietnamese society to unlearn. With Vietnam seeking to establish its novel identity independent from foreign influences, recognizing Lô Tô and the transgender culture it has nurtured could be a milestone for the replenishment of the historically rich Vietnamese folk culture and a great stride toward greater equity for all.

Works Cited

- Blanc, Marie-Eve. "Social Construction of Male Homosexualities in Vietnam. Some Keys to Understanding Discrimination and Implications for HIV Prevention Strategy." *International Social Science Journal*, vol. 57, no. 186, Dec. 2005, pp. 661–673, doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2451.2005.583.x.
- Danh, Tuan Minh. "Chơi lô tô có gì mà nên trải nghiệm ít nhất một lần trong đời?" Thanh Niên, 4 Feb. 2022, thanhnien.vn/choi-lo-to-co-gi-ma-nen-trai-nghiem-it-nhat-mot-lan-trong-doi-1851426817.htm . Accessed Apr. 2025.
- Endres, Kirsten W. et al. "Alternative Intimate Spheres for Women in Vietnam." Kyoto University, 2012, http://gcoe-intimacy.bun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/images/library/File/working_paper/New%20WP/WP_NextGenerationResearch_71_KATO_s.pdf.
- Gardner, Daniel K., "Confucius (551–479 bce) and His Legacy: An Introduction", *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford UP, 2014, pp. 1-15, doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780195398915.003.0001.
- Ha, Thoai. "'Chuyến Đi Cuối Cùng Của Chị Phụng' - Kiếp Sống Của Người Chuyển Giới." *VnExpress*, 15 Dec. 2014, vnexpress.net/chuyen-di-cuoi-cung-cua-chi-phung-kiep-song-cua-nguoi-chuyen-gioi-3120376.html. Accessed Apr. 2024.

- Luong, Huy The, and Quynh Phuong Pham. *Is it because I am LGBT?: Discriminations on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Vietnam*. The Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment, 2015.
- Mai, Yên. “Constructing Queerness in Vietnam: Essentialism, Homonormativity, and Social Hierarchy.” *Sociologia*, vol. 54, no. 4, 2017, pp. 393–409.
- Mai, Yên. “Vietnamese LGBTQ Youth’s Transition to Adulthood: Expressions of Agency.” *YOUNG*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2024, pp. 40–60, doi.org/10.1177/11033088231205155.
- Nguyen, Hiep Thanh. “Phận ‘Đào’ Hội Chợ Lô Tô.” *Người Lao Động*, 21 June 2005, nld.com.vn/phap-luat/phan-dao-hoi-cho-lo-to-120915.htm. Accessed Apr. 2024.
- Nguyen, Tam L.N., and Holly Angelique. “Internalized Homonegativity, Confucianism, and Self-Esteem at the Emergence of an LGBTQ Identity in Modern Vietnam.” *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 64, no. 12, 2017, pp. 1617–1631, doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1345231.
- Nguyen, Tham Thi, director. *The Last Journey of Madam Phung*. Ateliers Varan, 2014.
- Orwell, George. “Boy’s Weeklies.” *Horizon*, no. 3, 1940. (Classroom edition: non-standard pagination). docs.google.com/document/d/1m-vpWREUe8H5hN1YDTu6v3y_jwD_flKXL/edit?usp=sharing&oid=112863597765402861401&rt-pof=true&sd=true.

Osborne, Zoe. “For Vietnam’s LGBTQ Community, Life With a Drag Queen Troupe Can Mean Acceptance.” *Vice News*, 28 May 2019, www.vice.com/en/article/ywyny5/for-vietnams-lgbtq-community-life-with-a-drag-queen-lotto-group-troupe-can-mean-acceptance. Accessed Apr. 2024.

Pham, Phuong Quynh, et al. *Aspiration to be Myself: Transgender People in Vietnam: Realities and Legal Aspects*. The Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment, 2012.

Pham, Phuong Quynh, and Chris Eipper. “Mothering and Fathering the Vietnamese: Religion, Gender, and National Identity.” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2009, pp. 49–83, doi.org/10.1525/vs.2009.4.1.49.

Quốc Gia Nông Tín Cuộc. *Nội San Nông Tín và Hợp Tác*. Quốc Gia Nông Tín Cuộc, 1958, https://books.google.com.hk/books?id=e_AIAAAAMAAJ.

Salemink, Oscar. “Appropriating Culture: The Politics of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Vietnam.” *State, Society and the Market in Contemporary Vietnam: Property, Power and Values*, edited by Hue-Tam Ho Tai and Mark Sidel, Routledge, 2013, pp. 158–180. doi.org/10.4324/9780203098318.

Tham, Dan, and Kate Springer. “The UNESCO-Listed Religion That Worships Women.” *CNN*, 3 July 2018,

edition.cnn.com/travel/article/mother-goddess-worship-hanoi/index.html. Accessed Apr. 2024.

Tran, Anh. “The Historiography of the Jesuits in Vietnam: 1615–1773 and 1957–2007.” *Jesuit Historiography Online*, edited by R. A. Maryks. Brill, 2018. doi. org/10.1163/2468-7723_jho_COM_210470

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *Being LGBT in Asia: Viet Nam Country Report: A Participatory Review and Analysis of the Legal and Social Environment for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Persons and Civil Society*. UNDP United Nations Development Programme, 2014, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/asia_pacific_rbap/rbap-hhd-2014-blia-viet-nam-country-report.pdf.

Vu, Khanh. “Feeling Lucky? Try This Vietnamese Traditional Game Called Lô Tô.” *Vietcetera*, 22 Mar. 2024, vietcetera.com/en/feeling-lucky-try-this-vietnamese-traditional-game-called-lo-to. Accessed Apr. 2024.



The image features a dark blue background. On the left side, there is a detailed, golden-brown sculpture of a muscular, humanoid creature with a bird-like head, possibly a phoenix or a similar mythical being. On the right side, there are two human hands, also rendered in a golden-brown, painterly style. The hands are positioned as if they are reaching towards each other or towards the creature on the left. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures and musculature of the figures.

**Trans* and Transcendence: Crip
Theory in *Bride of Frankenstein***

Jiasheng Li (Jason)

Faculty Introduction

Li Jiasheng's essay "Trans* and Transcendence: Crip Theory in *Bride of Frankenstein*" was written for my Fall 2023 Perspectives on the Humanities course. The class focused on cultural representations of animals and automations: sci-fi films, speculative fiction, and theoretical work in animal studies and multispecies intersectionality that use non-human others to situate and unsettle our very notion of "the human."

For the final research project, Jiasheng began with a deceptively simple question: Why do the villagers in James Whale's films pity the blind hermit yet hunt Frankenstein's Creature, while both live with disability? From that point of departure, the essay builds an argument of impressive breadth and rigor. Drawing on Robert McRuer's concept of "compulsory able-bodied heteronormativity," it threads disability studies and queer theory into classic horror cinema, showing how the *Frankenstein* cycle both reflects and resists anxieties about the body, gender, and normalcy. The piece balances close textual analysis with a commanding grasp of theoretical frameworks. What impresses me most, however, is its critical capaciousness. Rather than simply labeling the Creature as a metaphor for disability or queerness, Jiasheng demonstrates how the figure collapses the very binaries (able/disabled, male/female, life/death, human/other) that shore up those categories in the first place. For its lucid prose, interdisciplinary ambition,

and its commitment to questioning the sedimented norms that structure our cultural narratives, Jiasheng's essay represents exemplary undergraduate scholarship.

Jingsi Shen
Clinical Assistant Professor in the Writing Program

Trans* and Transcendence: Crip Theory in *Bride of Frankenstein*

Jiasheng Li (Jason)

In the 1935 film *Bride of Frankenstein*, the sequel to the 1931 film *Frankenstein*, the Creature, an entity composed of dead bodies by scientist Henry Frankenstein, encounters an elderly, blind male hermit in a hut on the hill (00:34:55-00:44:34). He befriends the Creature and teaches the Creature English (*Bride* 00:36:40-00:43:15). When lost villagers come to the hut, however, they recognize the Creature as the monster in the country (*Bride* 00:43:15-00:43:57). Eventually, they shoot the Creature, burn the hut down, and purportedly save the blind man from the Creature's keep (*Bride* 00:43:59-00:44:34). Why do able-bodied people in this sequence treat the blind hermit man with kindness and pity while they disrespect and hunt the disabled Creature—mute, scarred with stitches, and possessing an abnormal brain? This essay analyzes the representation of disabilities and queerness in horror films, utilizing research about the novel *Frankenstein* and its film series, and introducing crip theory, an intersection of disability studies and queer theory. Through the lens of crip theory, I argue that the Creature and the blind hermit man are treated differently because they fall into two different stereotypical narratives that respectively link disability with inner depravity and angelic morality, and the Creature's

non-binary identity in terms of gender and other categories challenges heteronormativity.

In *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Robert McRuer introduces crip theory, which connects disability studies and queer theory with the shared pathologized history and the unspoken categories of normality in both cases, ability and heterosexuality (McRuer 1). The unspoken categories interweave with each other, generating the compulsory able-bodied heteronormativity (McRuer 1). Able-bodiedness, “the opposite of disability” in the dictionary, refers to a compulsory concept “in the emergent industrial capitalist system” that considers one’s flexibility in work as a norm (McRuer 7-8, 16). Heteronormativity refers to the compulsory assumption that “nearly everyone” should be in the so-called “*normal* relations of the sexes” that require consistency in sex and gender, known as cisgender, and the pursuit of the opposite sex, known as heterosexual (McRuer 8-9). In this essay, queer/queerness is used as an umbrella word that refers to all identities, communities and concepts that are not heterosexual or cisgender. As a result of these compulsory norms, able-bodiedness and heteronormativity do not simply produce disability and queerness as separate categories; rather, they intersect and reinforce each other. From the perspective of crip theory, therefore, the Creature is disabled and non-binary, disrupting the able cis-hetero norms in every facet.

Through makeup design and the narrative, the Crea-

ture is represented as disabled in various respects such as cognitive disability, skin disorders, and muteness. In the first film, the brain is literally labeled as “abnormal” for its degeneration causing the original owner’s violent brutality according to the medical professor (*Frankenstein* 00:07:19-00:07:45). In “Frankenflicks: Medical Monsters in Classic Horror Films,” Stephaine Brown Clark points out that the makeup design of the Creature’s scar on the skull visually cues people to the abnormal brain inside, the pieced-together body and their disability (Clark 136-137). The Creature’s stitched-togetherness furthers visible physical disabilities (Clark 137).¹ When the blind feels the stitches as he invites the Creature into the hut through physical interactions, he states, “You are hurt, my friend,” acknowledging the Creature’s skin deformity (*Bride* 00:37:28-00:37:35). Additionally, the Creature’s muteness is another sign of disability. After the physical interactions, the hermit asks about the Creature’s name only to receive noises rather than utterances in reply (*Bride* 00:38:00-00:38:12). He sighs, “Perhaps you are afflicted too. I cannot see and you cannot speak,” implying that muteness is similar to blindness in disability (*Bride* 00:38:15-00:38:23).

The blind man’s resonance with the Creature, in dialogue as well as *mise-en-scène*, proposes the Creature’s disability in a general sense, particularly through the unifying sentiment of isolation and their shared invisibility. In “Avenging the Body: Disability in the Horror Film,” Media Arts scholar Travis Sutton identifies one of the common stereotypical representations of disabled people as iso-

lated from able-bodied people and each other in both narrative and frame (76). The sequence starts with a long shot of the Creature climbing up the hill to approach the hut where the diegetic music comes from (*Bride* 00:35:15-00:35:30). The mise-en-scène underscores the distance of the uncultivated hill where the hut is located, revealing the isolation of the two from able-bodied people. The desolation is directly stressed in the film credits where the elderly blind man is dubbed the uniquely fitting title of “Hermit,” and in his line: “It’s very lonely here, and it’s been a long time since any human being came into this hut” (*Bride* 00:39:09-00:39:15, 01:14:14). In another long shot, the blind man inside plays the violin alone while the Creature looks through the window to observe the hut’s interior (*Bride* 00:35:26). The Creature’s head is positioned solely in the tiny window frame. With one inside and the other outside, the scene depicts the two disabled characters separated from each other, whereas the able-bodied villagers debut as a pair (*Bride* 00:43:15). Hence the hermit thanks God for bringing “lonely children together,” again implying their shared disability (*Bride* 00:39:52-00:40:15). Disability further signifies (in)visibility, as is commonly seen in crip theory. To think about the non-normative identity, one must think in line with the politics of visibility (McRuer 2). The man and the Creature are socially rendered undesirable, and therefore invisible, literally alone in the woods.

Although both the Creature and the hermit are portrayed as lonely disabled characters, they fall into two different stereotypes—one linking disability to inner depravity

and the other to angelic morality—which result in their contrasting treatments in the film. The Creature’s disability is associated with inner depravity. In the film, the professor in the medical school teaches Frankenstein that “only evil can come from” a criminal’s abnormal brain (*Frankenstein* 00:29:56-00:29:58). From the professor’s institutionally-sanctioned scientific judgment, the brain is abnormal, so a creature with that brain will be evil. The underlying meaning of this claim is the equivalence of the psyche and brain, failing to distinguish their independence from each other (Clark 135). Furthermore, the monster’s pieced-together body is deployed to infer that the monster’s soul lacks “the unity of composition that marks it as beautiful” (Clark 137). On the other hand, the blind elder is prominently shown as a Sainly Sage. Sainly Sage is usually an old character whose disability, mostly blindness, “allegedly grants this character access to higher levels of wisdom, foresight, and morality” (Sutton 78). In the film, blindness prevents him from seeing the monstrosity of the Creature, contributing to his realization of their communal loneliness, so he feels for, accommodates, and makes friends with the Creature (Sutton 78-79). These stereotypes are presented to the audience as well as to the villagers. The villagers are surprised that the hermit introduces the Creature as his friend, exclaiming, “Friend? This is the fiend that’s been murdering half the countryside. Good heavens, man, can’t you see? Oh, he’s blind” (*Bride* 00:43:45-00:43:52). At last, they perceive the man’s visual impairment directly, indirectly acknowledging the Creature’s disability yet without

the vocabulary to articulate it and in effect monstrifying it. The able-bodied people admit the disability of the Creature and the hermit while segregating them from each other by stereotypical narratives.

Despite the seemingly preferential treatment towards the blind man compared to the Creature, all disability stereotypes should be criticized because they objectify disabled people and deny their full moral agency. The distance and isolation are stereotypically exhibited due to the discomfort and intrigue of able-bodied people when they encounter disability (Sutton 76). Specifically, for the intrigue, it leads to able-bodied people's objectification of disability as spectacles (Sutton 76). Viewed as innocent sages, the characters are denied any desires other than the hope of collective support within the disabled community and protection from able-bodied people (Sutton 78). In the film, the blind hermit is simply portrayed as a giver to the Creature craving for a companion and an inferior rescued by the able-bodied villagers. On the other hand, if viewed as monsters, their morality and souls are constrained by their appearance. In other words, their souls are cracked and trapped in their broken bodies. In the films, able-bodied people monstrify the Creature based on their appearance, namely stitches, and cognitive disability. In this comparison, disabled people are superficially ranked for different types of disability. In plain words, they are either extremely good because of their physical disability or extremely bad on account of their mental and cognitive disability. Characterized as one of two moral

extremes, they are objectified by virtue of their divergence to normativity and denied the complexity of character and the character arc permitted of able-bodied individuals.

Besides the transgression in the able/disabled binary, the Creature blurs the boundaries between gender, life/death, and human/non-human. American academic Jack Halberstam introduces the term trans* in *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* “unfolding categories of being organized around but not confined to forms of gender variance” (4). The “asterisk modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity” (Halberstam 4). Concerning gender, for instance, it means that being trans* rejects a transition that aims to end up in the existing male/female gender model. Trans* is used as an umbrella word that covers all non-cisgender identities, including but not limited to transgender and non-binary (Halberstam 1, 5).² Along the “non-telic definitional lines” of Halberstam’s trans*, Chris Washington, associate professor of English at Francis Marion University, contends the non-binary identity of the Creature in “Non-Binary Frankenstein?” (71).³ Especially, the ontology of the Creature’s identity is trans* that escalates and is escalating without “any telos or desire for telos” (Washington 71). Thus, it is improper to impose a binary on the non-binary with(out) a meta-dichotomy of binary/non-binary. It is not just non-binary; it questions the very premise of classifying identity in binary terms at all.

Many seemingly paradoxical lines in the films insinuate the concession of the human characters on the Creature's non-binary identity. In *Frankenstein* (1931), the scientist recommends his experiment as the "brain of a *dead* man to *live again*" in the body he made from corpses while he affirms that the "body is *not dead*" given that "it has *never lived*" (00:16:11-00:16:18, 00:22:09-00:22:13). The underlying meaning of the two lines is that the Creature is not simply a living collage of dead tissues. To put it another way, the goal of the experiment then blurs the border in bilateral life-death relations. Moreover, the argument that the body made from cadavers is not dead for the absence of living beforehand illustrates Frankenstein's non-binary recognition of life/death in his project. As Washington analyzes, the Creature is "created from bits and pieces of the living and the dead and the human and nonhuman, merging what cannot be merged into a blurring of non-binaristic boundaries" (69). In the sequel, the scientist revisits his plan "to create a *man*" remarking that he "could have bred a [*new*] *race*" (*Bride* 00:13:34-00:13:51). A *race* commonly refers to a species that is other than the human form, which *man* refers to. The retrospective commentary also suggests that Frankenstein senses the Creature outsteps the human/non-human binary. Reintroducing the lines of the villagers, "he *isn't human*. Frankenstein made him out of *dead bodies*," we can draw a similar inference (*Bride* 00:43:53-00:43:57). They realize that the Creature is a presence that transcends binary logic. Therefore, the Creature is ontologically ambiguous without an end, considering

that the cis-hetero normative framework is insufficient for it.

The Creature is non-binary in both sex and gender, concepts dictated to them by human society because the Creature does not fit into the ideology of the heteronormative society by birth. Resulting in “a species of one,” the origin of the Creature is not a result of a two-sex union but one male instead, which already challenges the cis-hetero fantasy (Washington 68, 80). In “Non-Binary Frankenstein?,” the author again contends the Creature as a monster, according to its very (no)name, has no gender, has no name, and is simply something unfathomable, a namelessness that can never be named since naming it would mean it was no longer a monster but something more recognizably like a person complete with a gender identity normatively implied by whatever signifying name it takes. (Washington 66)

This statement on the Creature’s lack of identity ontologically supplements the non-binary gender identity without a telos with the absence of an arche, an originary point. By arguing this, Washington alludes to the deficit of a starting point, namely sex, to the Creature’s sex/gender. It is parallel to the trans* rejection of an established gender “destination” within the Creature covered in the previous context (Halberstam 4; Washington 71). That is, *transgender*, conventionally referring to people whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex, should have a (binary) sex allocated *first* to be deviant *from*, but the Creature being “a species of one” is a creature without an assigned

sex, a species of androgyny. Therefore, the Creature disrupts the sex-gender dualism. As an epicene species without a designated sex to begin with, the Creature's next request for a female companion appropriates the civilized two-sex norm and gender identity in human society.

The divergence between humans and the Creature in the intentions to create a *bride* demonstrates the conflicts between the Creature's non-binary identity and socially structured heteronormativity.⁴ Doctor Pretorius articulates that his potential innovation of a feminine creature "follow[s] the lead of *nature*" of the male-female norm to "multiply" and completes the dream of "a man-made race" that is "only half realized" (*Bride* 00:24:50-00:25:08). In the doctor's heteronormative assertion, the presence of a female is to fulfill the reproduction function of a species. However, the Creature's demand for a female is for the sake of companionship. Acculturated by the blind hermit, the Creature enunciates word by word, "Alone. Bad. Friend. Good" (*Bride* 00:42:00-00:42:10). Later, learning that Doctor Pretorius makes "woman, a friend of [the Creature]," the Creature says "Woman? Friend. Yes. I want friend. Like me" (*Bride* 00:50:05-00:50:24). The creature wishes for a woman to resemble the friendship he once had. It is a pursuit for companionship not for the reproductive norm in heteronormativity.

The Creature unites disability with queerness as crip theory does. In the films, the Creature's disabled body stitched up with dead tissues causes the non-binary identi-

ty to transpire. Inversely, the non-binary identity, especially life/death with the dead criminal's abnormal brain, also influences the disability of the Creature. Rather, the villagers' saying "Good heavens, *man*, *can't you see?*" in a dismissive tone is ramified by the compulsory able-bodied heteronormativity for the presumption that the hermit is male and he should be able to see (*Bride* 00:43:48-00:43:50). However, the Creature outgrows the ideology of normalcy constitutionally.

By criticizing the norms, crip theory extends beyond the bounds of the disabled and queer community, engaging everyone in all periods and regions, as the Creature does. For instance, McRuer reminds people that "everyone is virtually disabled, both in the sense that able-bodied norms are 'intrinsically impossible to embody' fully and in the sense that able-bodied status is always temporary, disability being the one identity category that all people will embody if they live long enough" (McRuer 30). In other terms, crip theory advocates that we are all disabled to a certain degree both in the manner that we could never fulfill the abled-bodied ideal fully and disability could befall anyone anywhere at any time. The Creature deepens the doubt on normative standards. Being a non-binary disabled figure, it transgressively queers everyone. For example, since fear usually relates to femininity, the visually-abled cishet-men's fright as they meet the Creature contends with their manhood, shedding light on their womanhood. It reveals the co-existence of masculinity and femininity in everyone like the co-existence of androgen and estrogen.

There is always a part of us that is not manly or womanly. On that account, able-bodied heteronormativity is a myth that no one can achieve completely. Given the oxymoron of impossible perfection, is everyone then disabled and queer to some extent?

Notes

¹ Even though Clark states that it was Kenneth Branagh who emphasized the creature's skin in his film *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1996) as opposed to the emphasis on the skull in the 1930s series, the stitches in *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein* as part of the makeup design are recognizable visually even if that is not the main focus of the makeup design (Clark 137). Therefore, the analysis of the stitches in the 1996 version could be translated to the 1930s series.

² This essay acknowledges that there are differences between transgender and non-binary identities. While arguing the Creature transcends all kinds of sex and gender norms, for the purpose of this essay, the terms can be used interchangeably.

³ The article focused on the body in Mary Shelley's novel instead of the film series and engaged it with transgender and trans* theory. The analysis is mostly concentrated on how the creature is created and exists. Since the origin story of the Creature in the films is similar to that in the

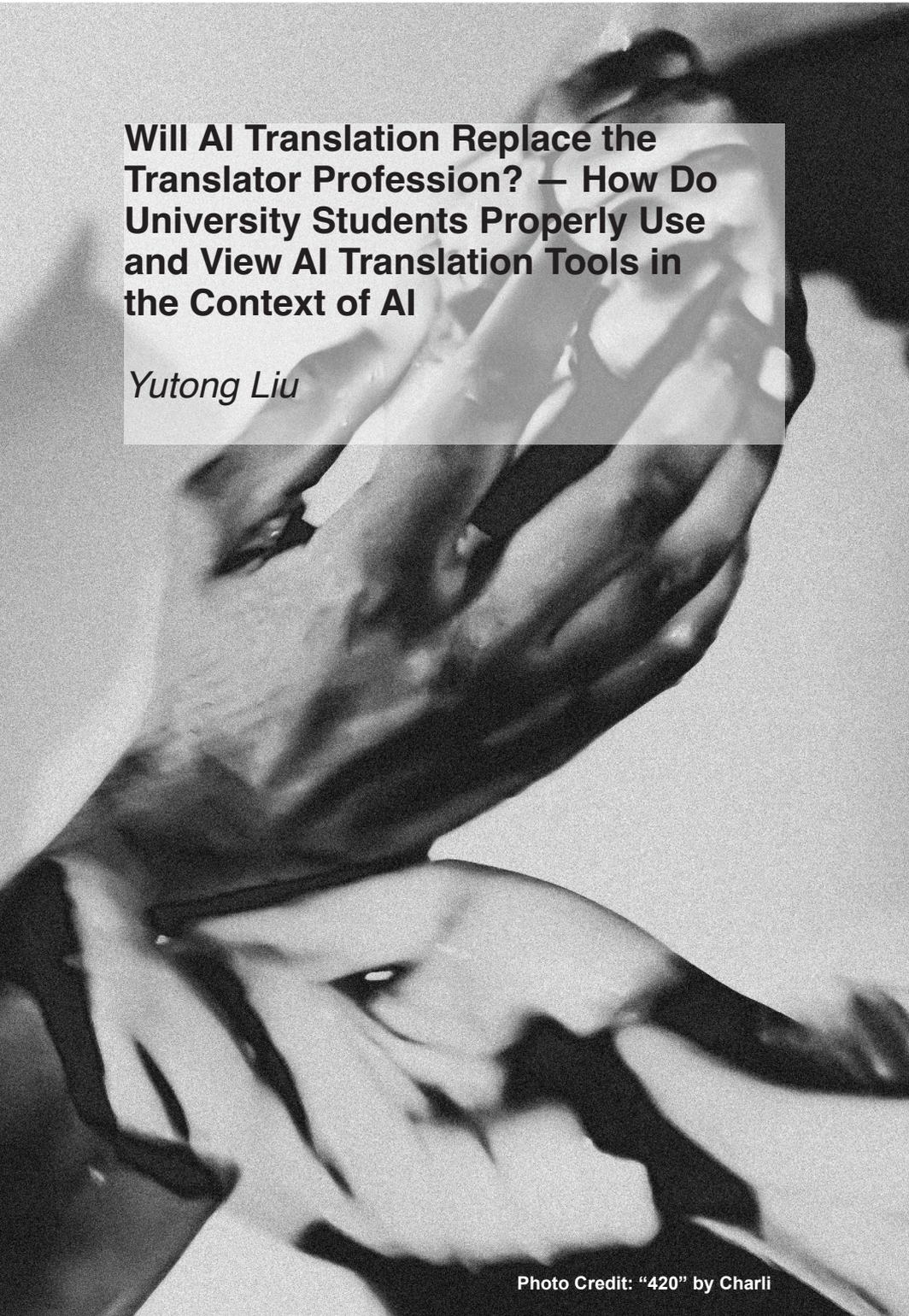
novel, the analysis could be appropriated with the shared setting of “a monster created from cadavers out of rifled graves” (*Bride* 00:03:20-00:03:23).

⁴ The assumption that only cisgender males can have a *bride* is an obvious example of heteronormativity— assuming people’s gender by the partner— as anyone with any gender identity can have a bride as long as their partner’s gender is female. Identity is not, or at least not only, constructed by others’ perceptions or assumptions. It should take the self-awareness of the subject into account. Not to mention that it is dubious to treat the creature’s bride as female, similar to identifying the creature as male.

Works Cited

- Bride of Frankenstein*. Directed by James Whale, performances by Boris Karloff, Colin Clive, Valerie Hobson, Elsa Lanchester, and Ernest Thesiger, Universal Pictures, 1935.
- Clark, Stephanie Brown. "Frankenflicks: Medical Monsters in Classic Horror Films." *Cultural Sutures: Medicine and Media*, edited by Lester D. Friedman, Duke University Press, 2004, pp. 129-148, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822385530-009>.
- Frankenstein*. Directed by James Whale, performances by Colin Clive, Mae Clarke, John Boles, Boris Karloff, and Dwight Frye, Universal Pictures, 1931.
- Halberstam, Jack. *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, University of California Press, 2018.
- McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, New York University Press, 2006.
- Sutton, Travis. "Avenging the Body: Disability in the Horror Film." *A Companion to the Horror Film*, edited by Harry M. Benshoff, John Wiley & Sons, 2014, pp. 73-89, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118883648.ch5>.
- Washington, Chris. "Non-Binary Frankenstein?" *Frankenstein in Theory: A Critical Anatomy*, edited by Orrin N. C. Wang, Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2021, pp. 65-83, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501360824>.

ch-004.



**Will AI Translation Replace the
Translator Profession? — How Do
University Students Properly Use
and View AI Translation Tools in
the Context of AI**

Yutong Liu

Editorial Board Introduction

Large-language models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT and DeepSeek, have made many tasks much easier to complete, but they also threaten to replace various kinds of human activities. In her research essay developed in *Writing as Inquiry*, Yutong Liu considers whether LLMs can replace the profession of translation. Her essay stood out to the editorial board, not only in addressing this timely question, but more importantly, by developing a response for the specific readership of her fellow students and by synthesizing a range of materials, including her own experiences as a translator of Chinese and English, a discussion of research on the advantages and disadvantages of LLMs, and the close analysis of the nature of certain uses of language, such as poetry, that question the feasibility of current technological mechanisms for translation. Her argumentative development is an excellent example of comparing how a range of evidence can avoid generalizations in favor of qualified interventions in important questions. As she writes in her conclusion, “though AI has lots of advantages in translation, AI cannot replace human translators due to its current limitations. However, AI holds promising applications and potential value when utilized as an effective tool and aid in the translation process.”

Will AI Translation Replace the Translator Profession ? — How Do University Students Properly Use and View AI Translation Tools in the Context of AI

Yutong Liu

Abstract

This paper first analyzes the advantages and limitations of AI translation compared to human translation. Then it explores the foreground of the translation profession and discusses the reason why human translators could not be replaced. Finally, based on the advantages and disadvantages of AI translation, this essay highlights the essential skills that university students need to enhance in order to utilize AI tools correctly during their learning process, aiming to provide valuable insights and guidance for further emphasizing the university students' learning.

Introduction

“Can you please help me revise this interview? It is translated by ChatGPT, you just need to change it to make it sound more natural in Chinese.” This kind of request was

frequently given to me when I worked as a student worker in the Center for Career Development (CCD). At some point, people have started to rely on AI for the initial translation, and then make adjustments to the output before finalizing the translation.

Back in the early 2000s, Google Translate was first launched. The way people translate and learn a different language has evolved from consulting dictionaries to searching the internet and utilizing translation tools. Since then, many people enthusiastically envisioned a bright future where machines would replace human translators. However, the translation generated by a machine translator was so stiff and simple that it was far from being a threat to human translators at that time.

In 2023, when ChatGPT and other AI tools emerged all of a sudden, the machine translation skill has progressed significantly, since the large language module has a huge database and enormous language source that it could analyze the text based on the context (Annie). Additionally, AI can adjust translations based on specific human instructions, improve quality, or meet certain special requirements for the style of the translated text. Therefore, there exists an ongoing discussion about whether the translation profession can be replaced by machines.

Before discussing the answer to this issue, let's first return back to my work task in CCD that I mentioned in the beginning. I originally thought that the task of revising the translated text is really easy for a native Chinese

speaker and I would only need to make adjustments to some sentences that I found unnatural. Nevertheless, it is much more difficult when I actually do it. When assessing the translation abilities of artificial intelligence, conducting experiments with random sentences or paragraphs might give the impression of good performance. However, the true challenge lies in long-text translation, which is a complex and comprehensive task. ChatGPT can exhibit inconsistent performance, sometimes resulting in translations with lots of hidden mistakes and inconsistencies. Finally, I found that even with the assistance of intelligent translation tools like ChatGPT, translators still need to exert considerable mental effort and time.

Based on my observation, the use of AI translation also commonly appears in students' daily study, especially for those whose native language is different from the required language. When writing an assignment in English, I found lots of my classmates at NYUSH first wrote the essay in their native language. Then, students translate the whole essay into English and make some adjustments to form the final version of their assignment. What's more, some even wrote their transcripts of presentations in their own native language and then translated it into English to present.¹ With the help of generative AI, it seems that the barrier between languages has become smaller. But is this really the case?

¹ I am not here to discuss whether this behavior is beneficial or harmful. This is just an example of students using AI as a tool in study.

From my point of view, AI cannot fully replace human translators; however, it holds promising applications and potential value when utilized as an effective tool and aid in the translation process. I will illustrate this argument later in this article.

Advantages of AI in Translation

There is no doubt that AI is a really good tool when it comes to translation. AI has lots of advantages compared to human translators:

Firstly, one of the most notable benefits of AI translation is its speed. Studies have shown that AI translation systems can process and translate text at remarkable rates, significantly outperforming human translators in terms of efficiency and quantity. For instance, AI models like ChatGPT can translate thousands of words per minute, making them ideal for handling large volumes of content swiftly and accurately. A human might take a day or more to translate 5,000 words. AI, the future of localization, can deliver a full translation almost instantaneously (Crangasu).

In addition to speed, AI translation systems excel in multilingual capabilities. Whether it's traditional machine translation like Google Translate or large language models like ChatGPT, these systems can translate between dozens or even hundreds of languages. In contrast, human translators are typically proficient in translating only between their native language and one foreign language, with

only a few capable of handling translations across multiple languages. Additionally, it takes way more time for a human to be proficient in a certain language than AI tools.

Furthermore, AI translation benefits from rapid knowledge accumulation and continuous improvement. Developers constantly refine and update the knowledge base of AI engines based on real-world usage, resulting in enhanced accuracy and functionality over time. This iterative process ensures that AI translation systems remain adaptive and effective in diverse linguistic contexts.

Moreover, AI translation accessibility facilitates cultural exchange and dissemination. With AI translation tools readily available, individuals can explore content in other languages independently, gaining insights into different cultures and technological developments. This approach allows users to identify areas of interest before seeking professional translation services for more accurate and detailed information. Previously, such tasks were labor-intensive and costly when handled manually.

Limitations of AI translation Compared to Human Translation

Despite the advantages above, we have to admit that there still exist some limitations of AI translation. Moving to the limitations of AI, this section will mainly focus on the translation between Chinese and English. Through discussing the limitations of translating these two languages, we can get some inspiration for using AI to translate vari-

ous languages in the world. By analyzing and comparing the advantages and limitations of AI translation, it is helpful for us to conclude if AI can replace human translation or not.

The first limitation was widely discussed through the decades, which is the translation of literature and poems. One significant feature of literature is the use of literary devices, which is hard for AI to replicate. About ten years ago in the field of translation, there was a saying that “literary translation is the final fortress of human translation” (Yuan). At that time, many believed that AI was incapable of effectively translating literature. Nowadays, AI tools started to show their capability of translating literature by spreading the English version of online novels out of China. According to Shuyin Zhang, a translation professor of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen, the Chinese collection at the British Library now includes 16 works of Chinese online literature. In particular, genres like fantasy martial arts novels and urban romance novels are especially well-suited for AI-assisted translation. In fantasy martial arts novels, terms such as weapons, martial arts sects, and levels can be standardized, making them ideal for machine translation based on learned data and terminology. Similarly, urban romance novels, which are rooted in human emotional patterns, can also benefit from machine translation.

However, AI is not currently suitable in the translation of classical literature and poetry, and I believe that it will never be capable of translating these works. I will illustrate

it through this following example. There is a very famous Chinese poem by Qingzhao Li that says, “寻寻觅觅，冷冷清清，凄凄惨惨戚戚。” This line alternates between flat and oblique tones, creating a rhythmic and melodious effect, conveying deep and intense emotions. When I input it to AI tools, it gave me a really stiff translation: “Searching, cold, sad and miserable.” This translation did not convey the beauty of this poem at all. Here is the version translated by a famous translator Yuanchong Xu (许渊冲):

I look for what I miss,
I know not what it is,
I feel so sad, so drear,
So lonely, without cheer.

This version, while staying faithful to the original text, introduces a protagonist named “I.” Not only does it achieve perfect rhyme, it also vividly conveys the author’s feelings of melancholy and sorrow.

The second limitation of AI translation is that it struggles to capture human sentiments and lacks the ability to adapt to them in real-time. In translation, there may not always be a definitive or standard answer. A correct answer is often based on a specific situation and cares about the emotion and the actual need of the reader. For example, when translating 滴滴 to foreigners who may not be familiar with this app, translators can describe its technical nature by translating it as “DiDi, a Chinese ride-hailing app”

or “Chinese Uber” in order to fit readers’ habits and needs. Therefore, the “correct” English translation of 滴滴 depends on the audience. It hinges on whether the audience understands Chinese and is familiar with Pinyin pronunciation. Translators should adjust the pronunciation accordingly based on the audience’s background and knowledge.

No matter how much we train AI, one thing that is certain by now is that current AI cannot create emotions like humans. Meanwhile, a key attribute of human translators is their ability to empathize. Translators need to consider the audiences’ needs, which AI cannot fulfill if we simply provide it with the text that needs to be translated. If we can provide AI tools enough information about the audience, AI may perform well and appropriately. But when we take the time and actual case into consideration, the good performance of AI is still hard to achieve and remains a limitation of AI translation.

Another challenge is that AI translation lacks the ability to engage in social interactions. When I traveled to a foreign country, one thing that I really enjoyed was to speak to the native in English and get a closer feeling of the country’s culture. Even though my English was not that good, I always received some good communications if the people spoke English. However, when I traveled to a country that does not speak English, all of my communication relied on translation apps on smartphones. There’s virtually no opportunity to engage in casual conversation with strangers.

The Future of Translation

Now we analyzed the advantages and limitations of AI translation. It is obvious that the appearance of AI has a big impact on the translation profession. The following paragraphs will discuss the future prospects of translation.

I really like a metaphor published in the *Financial Times Chinese*: Human translation can be likened to a gourmet chef, while AI translation resembles a sophisticated combination of McDonald's and pre-packaged ingredients with automated cooking machines (Yuan). McDonald's provides convenient and affordable food which is a good option when you're in a hurry and not concerned about food quality or nutrition. However, whether it's McDonald's or using pre-packaged ingredients with automated cooking machines, they cannot cause other restaurants to shut down. In this case, highly skilled human translators are like Michelin three-star chefs, offering "luxury services" for clients with exceptionally high standards for translation quality (Yuan).

Therefore, highly skilled translators are scarce and remain their own value in translating high standards text. And for newcomers or translators with average skills, there are two options for them in the future: aim for the top-tier market by excelling in their craft, or combine translation with other skills to innovate and explore new specialized areas, such as developing prompts to assist AI in refining translations.

In the context of AI, we do not need to compete with AI translation in terms of speed or quantity, nor should we blindly trust it. As human translators, we should understand the characteristics of AI translation and develop a keen sense of appreciation and discernment for the domains it translates. This underscores the importance of translators' post-editing skills, which involve proofreading and editing text to ensure accuracy and quality. Ultimately, humans must continue learning and fostering creativity to remain masters of machines.

Lessons for College Students in the Era of Artificial Intelligence

As a college student, AI has a big impact on our daily lives and studies. It is really important to us to know how to better use AI tools. In terms of using AI translation, as is mentioned in the previous text, AI is fast and convenient in translations which could help us a lot when we are learning a new language and reading essays written in a different language. However, if we over rely on the translation of AI, we might lose our ability to learn and think in a new language. In this circumstance, we should use AI tools properly and keep learning in order to enhance our overall language ability.

AI also has a big impact on fields other than translation. In the past year, several Silicon Valley high-tech companies, including Google, have downsized thousands of engineering and technical staff partially because of ChatGPT and other AI tools. Similar to translators replaced by AI,

these coders often perform standardized technical tasks that can be automated. Therefore, as college students, we should consider these influences of AI when we are learning knowledge to be better prepared for our future career.

When it comes to learning, it's essential to go beyond textbook knowledge and explore various fields. This approach helps cultivate a diverse skill set, allowing for better fit in career jobs. Furthermore, it is crucial to begin early career planning and apply specialized knowledge in practical ways. United Nations and European Union conference interpreter Maha El-Metwally said that:

When I deliver lectures and training sessions at universities, I see my students as future colleagues. They receive interpreter training at university, and my role is to share practical experience with them. Therefore, my lectures focus on aspects beyond classroom learning, such as essential business skills required before entering the profession. I also cover the practical skills needed in the interpreting field, such as terminology management, pre-translation preparation, and remote interpreting technology.

This quote means that there remains some difference between the knowledge used in a career and the knowledge taught in school. The improvement of one's professional ability is the way to survive in the AI era.

Conclusion: Collaboration of AI and Human Translator

Overall, this essay mainly focuses on AI translation and begins by analyzing the advantages of AI in translation. AI excels in its fast speed, multilingual capabilities, rapid knowledge accumulation and continuous improvement, and its role of facilitating cultural exchange and dissemination. Then, the essay discusses the limitations of AI translation compared to human translators. Based on my research, AI translation has the following limitations: First, it is not suitable for classical literature and poem translation. Second, AI struggles to capture humanistic sentiments and lacks the ability to adapt in real-time. Third, AI lacks the ability to engage in social interactions. The paper then analyzes the future of translation in the era of artificial intelligence. This paper concludes with the lessons for college students in the terms of using AI and preparing for their future career in the era of AI.

The main point of this essay is that though AI has lots of advantages in translation, AI cannot replace human translators due to its current limitations. However, AI holds promising applications and potential value when utilized as an effective tool and aid in the translation process.

Works Cited

- Crangasu, Adrian. "AI Translation vs. Human Translation: Pros and Cons." Localization Services by BLEND, 11 Sept. 2023, www.getblend.com/blog/ai-translation-vs-human-translation-pros-and-cons/.
- Duh, Kevin, et al. "Adaptation data selection using neural language models: Experiments in machine translation." Proceedings of the 51st Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics Volume 2: Short Papers. 2013.
- Lucs-Cuesta, J.M., et al. "On the Dynamic Adaptation of Language Models Based on Dialogue Information." *Expert Systems with Applications*, vol. 40, no. 4, Mar. 2013, pp. 1069–1085.
- Manjavacas, Enrique, and Lauren Fonteyn. "Adapting vs. Pre-Training Language Models for Historical Languages." *Journal of Data Mining & Digital Humanities*, vol. NLP4DH, no. Digital humanities in..., 2022.
- Nicholas, Gabriel, and Aliya Bhatia. "Lost in Translation: Large Language Models in Non-English Content Analysis." *Center for Democracy and Technology*, 7 July 2023, cdt.org/insights/lost-in-translation-large-language-models-in-non-english-content-analysis/. Accessed 18 Apr. 2024.
- Pardo, Melissa. "Using Large Language Models and AI to Bridge Linguistic Differences." Appen, 21 Feb. 2024,

www.appen.com/blog/pulse-of-language-evolution.
Accessed 18 Apr. 2024.

Syed, Bakhtiyar, et al. "Adapting Language Models for Non-Parallel Author-Stylized Rewriting." *Proceedings of the AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence*, vol. 34, no. 05, 3 Apr. 2020, pp. 9008–9015.

Weng, Rong. "AI Translation Is Difficult to Reflect Humanistic Feelings." *Chinese Social Science Net*, 23 Jan. 2024, www.cssn.cn/skgz/bwyc/202401/t20240123_5730228.shtml.

Yuan, Yilin. "Translation Profession Is Dying in the Era of AI?" *FT Chinese*, 5 Mar. 2024, mp.weixin.qq.com/s/pogR3PowC4N_M199bW4xdQ.

Zhao, Xiao. "Xu Bin: Can AI translation eliminate cross-language communication barriers?." *Chinanews*, 8 Mar. 2024, www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2024/03-08/10176936.shtml.

The Failure of Amazon China

Yutong Zhao



Photo Credit: "Untitled" by Zhang Cheng

Faculty Introduction

In America, the Amazon company is an immense, pseudo-governmental force whose fingers reach deep into areas of society many would never imagine possible. In my WAI course, we read an excerpt from *Monopolized: Life in the Age of Corporate Power* by David Dayen, which provides an in-depth look at Amazon, its treatment of sellers, and the damage it has done to small businesses in America. In Dayen's recounting, Amazon seems unstoppable, monolithic—but in China, Amazon seems like it has evaporated into thin air. Its attempts to penetrate the market have been largely rebuffed with many services withdrawn and their presence reduced to almost nothing. But why?

In this essay, Yutong Zhao tells a clear, compelling story of Amazon's failed venture in China, emphasizing its inability to connect with Chinese consumers and its inflexibility in adapting to the unique conditions of China—fatal missteps, with hungry competition such as Taobao and Jingdong already dominating the market. Her paper is clear and meticulous, but it also incorporates well-chosen sources and arguments, providing a fascinating glimpse of one of the few places in the world where the tendrils of this American business have been unable to reach.

Kyle Muntz

Clinical Assistant Professor in the Writing Program

The Failure of Amazon China

Yutong Zhao

When you walk around on a street in New York, you can always see some busy bees with blue uniforms shuttling through the city. They are the delivery workers from Amazon. Hundreds of thousands of them run between warehouses and consumers' homes, maintaining the daily necessities of people's lives. Amazon has become an indispensable part of American life. Whether it's furniture, books, or appliances, with just a few taps on the keyboard and clicks of the mouse on Amazon's website, Amazon Blue Warriors will deliver the goods to your hands in just a few days. But in China, with its huge population and vast market, you won't see any trace of Amazon. How could a giant company like Amazon not try to tap into the massive Chinese market? In fact, Amazon did try, but it failed. For most Chinese people, Amazon is like a distant relative—a familiar name but rarely visited. In June 2019, Amazon announced that it was closing its domestic e-commerce business in China. Instead of buying products sold locally by Amazon and its marketplace of Chinese suppliers, shoppers at Amazon will only be able to buy imported products, which also signifies the failure of Amazon China (Weise). What led to the failure of the business giant Amazon in China? Apart from the reasons related to Chinese government policies, the root of its failure is its lack of localization.

Amazon's business model helped it become a giant in America. In the book *Monopolized Life in the Age of Corporate Power*, David Dayen writes about the prime strategies used by Amazon to attract customers and gain the market. Amazon Prime members can enjoy free two-day delivery services, which greatly attracts American consumers facing the expensive cost of human delivery in the United States. Dayen writes that "Amazon knows that capturing customers in its Prime netting encourages them to buy more, to make the \$119 annual fee worthwhile" (193). This shows that Amazon's goal is to use its delivery services to attract customers to pay for this Prime membership, and then make use of consumers' desire to recoup their membership fees to encourage them to purchase more products on the Amazon website. To facilitate fast delivery, Amazon has also built many large warehouses across the country to store its products (Dayen 194). These strategies have helped Amazon succeed in countries like the United States and other nations with similar consumer habits, such as European countries and Japan. However, they became the root cause of its failure in China.

"Think global, act local." This is a well-known mantra, but Amazon only did the first half of the sentence in the Chinese market, and the last half is the key to its failure. Ker Zheng, the marketing specialist at Shenzhen-based e-commerce consultancy Azoya, pointed out in an interview with DW.com that "Amazon didn't really localize its product enough because its [Chinese] user interface had to align with the company's other global platforms" (Martin).

This clearly points out the flaws in Amazon's approach to the Chinese market. The Chinese market has the characteristics of high efficiency, no matter for the delivery service or for the customer hotline service. This is due to their massive population and abundant labor supply. Moreover, unlike the Japanese markets at that time, the level of Westernization in the Chinese market was not that deep, and customers still had strong preferences for local cultural elements (Weise). However, in pursuit of a uniform global market chain, Amazon did not customize its operating model according to the characteristics of the Chinese market. As a result, it ultimately lost the Chinese market. After further research, the lack of localization of Amazon in the Chinese market can be divided into three aspects: operating model, customer service, and cultural adaptation.

To begin with, Amazon's operating model in China didn't adapt to local customers' payment habits and also didn't make use of local delivery service. Just like in the US market, Amazon spent billions building 15 warehouses in China and built its own domestic delivery infrastructure to store and distribute goods (Tullman). However, it overlooked the existence of third-party delivery services in China, which are well-developed and already have a vast market. In contrast, Amazon's competitor, Jing Dong, not only has its own JD delivery but also collaborates with other small delivery companies such as Cai Niao and Yun Da (Weise). This not only saves the cost of building warehouses but also makes the delivery service more convenient and efficient because these small delivery companies have

distribution sites scattered all over the place, which makes them quickly complete delivery tasks nearby. Moreover, when Amazon entered the Chinese market, Alibaba had already launched Alipay. As a domestic payment software in China, Alipay has connected the consumption lives of Chinese consumers into a convenient payment chain. Chinese consumers gradually became accustomed to using Alipay for any consumption (Cebeci). However, shopping on the Amazon website still requires linking a bank card or Apple Pay, which contradicts the consumption and payment habits that many Chinese consumers have already formed. As a result, Amazon has lost a large number of Chinese consumers.

Furthermore, Amazon's customer service can't meet Chinese customers' standards. Amazon's Prime service offers free two-day delivery, but other Chinese domestic e-commerce platforms such as Jing Dong and Tao Bao provide free same-day delivery without requiring consumers to register for Prime (Keyes). This not only diminishes the attractiveness of Amazon's prime strategy but also puts its delivery speed at a disadvantage compared to other Chinese e-commerce platforms. In addition, Amazon's customer service has been heavily criticized. Compared to platforms like Taobao and JD.com, which offer customer service almost around the clock, Amazon's customer service is often described by consumers as slow and of poor quality (Tullman). Sometimes it's difficult to reach the customer service hotline, and even when you do, the speed of problem resolution is unsatisfactory (Keyes). "The

customer service rep of Amazon was just copying and pasting answers on the chat, trying to rush you out of the chat or the phone, they don't care about the particulars of your issues at all," one customer told DW in the interview (Martin). These shortcomings have caused Amazon to lose its competitive edge in an era where online shopping service expectations are rising in Chinese customers' hearts, leading to a loss of consumer favor.

Last but not least, Amazon didn't match Chinese customer's cultural preferences. Amazon's website design has received widespread criticism in China. The pictures below are the web pages of Amazon and Jing Dong, from which we can see a clear difference between their design styles (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Webpage of Amazon.



Fig. 2. Webpage of Taobao.

Amazon has always maintained its minimalist and simple webpage design style. From the first picture, we can see that Amazon's interface typically displays product images

and prices clearly, without too many flashy advertisements. In contrast, the second image of JD.com uses a vibrant and colorful interface design, with each functional model represented by corresponding graphics. The images and prices in the advertisements are also more attractive. The blueberries in the picture look very fresh and enticing, and the caption below reads “Delivered in as fast as 30 minutes.” “American consumers prefer a more simple, minimalist design, but Chinese consumers prefer more vibrant designs,” said Ker Zheng (Martin). Amazon also did not leverage the unique Double Eleven shopping festival in the Chinese market but continued its tradition of Prime Day promotions (Cebeci). The Double Eleven shopping festival is not just an opportunity for Chinese e-commerce platforms to sell products; it’s also a chance for them to engage consumers and foster goodwill towards their platforms. Consumers compare the consumption activities launched by various platforms during the Double Eleven shopping festival, influencing their choice of long-term consumption platforms (Sarris 24). However, Amazon did not adapt to the trend of Chinese online shopping culture. As a result, it was gradually engulfed by the rise of Chinese e-commerce and eventually forgotten and abandoned by Chinese consumers.

In conclusion, the fundamental reason for Amazon’s failure in the Chinese market is its failure to adapt to the preferences of local consumers. For example, it did not adapt to Chinese customers’ preference for more elaborate website designs and the habit of using Alipay for payments.

Additionally, it did not effectively leverage some of the business partnerships available in the Chinese market, such as third-party delivery services. In the burgeoning wave of the Chinese e-commerce industry, consumer demands dictate the direction of businesses. However, Amazon didn't meet the tastes of Chinese consumers and persisted with its traditional approach of attracting consumers through Prime and supporting logistics with large warehouses. It fought a lone battle in China, ultimately experiencing the bitter taste of failure due to its lack of localization efforts, which can also serve as a lesson for other foreign companies looking to enter the Chinese market.

Works Cited

- Cebeci, Dila. "Why Amazon Failed in China - the One That Got Away." *Transport Intelligence*, 18 Feb. 2020, www.ti-insight.com/briefs/why-amazon-failed-in-china-the-one-that-got-away/. Accessed 24 Apr. 2024
- Dayen, David. Chapter 8. *Monopolized: Life in the Age of Corporate Power*, The New Press, New York, 2020, pp. 191–214, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5837095>. Accessed 24 Apr. 2024.
- Keyes, Daniel. "Amazon Is Struggling to Find Its Place China." *Business Insider*, 30 Aug. 2017, www.businessinsider.com/amazon-is-struggling-to-find-its-place-china-2017-8. Accessed 24 Apr. 2024
- Martin, Nik. "Why Amazon Struggled to Beat Alibaba in China – DW – 04/19/2019." *Dw.Com*, Deutsche Welle, 19 Apr. 2019, www.dw.com/en/why-amazon-struggled-to-beat-alibaba-online-in-china/a-48403733. Accessed 24 Apr. 2024
- Sarris, Nick. "Amazon and Alibaba: How Cultural Misunderstandings Precede Failure in International Markets." Undergraduate Thesis, University of Virginia, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.18130/v3-f220-v772>. Accessed 24 Apr. 2024.
- Tullman, Howard. "Amazon's Amazing Failure in China." *Inc.*, 30 Apr. 2019, www.inc.com/howard-tullman/chi-

nas-amazing-failure-in-china.html. Accessed 24 Apr. 2024

Weise, Karen. "Amazon Gives up on Chinese Domestic Shopping Business." *The New York Times*, 18 Apr. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/04/18/technology/amazon-china.html. Accessed 24 Apr. 2024

"Jingdong – zhengpin dijia, pinzhi baozhang, peisong jishi, qingsong..." 京东 – 正品低价、品质保障、配送及时、轻松... [JD.com – Authentic Products at Low Prices, Quality Assurance, Timely Delivery, and Ease]. *JD.com*. Accessed 25 Apr. 2024.

Brewing Identity: Developing Marketing and Product Differentiation Strategies for Shanghai's Small Coffee Shops Against China's and the U.S.'s Major Chains

Catherine Chandra



Faculty Introduction

Catherine Chandra's essay combines original field work, interviews, and market research with academic research in the fields of food studies, urban studies, and business studies. Taking a cue from our collaboration with Paul Salopek, whose *National Geographic* "Out of Eden Walk" and "City Walks" projects inspired our "Walking as Inquiry" course design, Catherine explored areas of Shanghai with the goal of discovering and defining a research and writing project rooted in Shanghai's dynamic and layered cityscape. This approach invites students to research their own areas of academic interest, and Catherine's focus on business and marketing, refracted through the lens of our WAI readings, discussions and activities, led her to see both an opportunity for scholarly research and analysis as well as a chance to advance ambitions in both the study and practice of business, economics, and marketing. Her argument that, in a landscape dominated by large coffee chains, entrepreneurs should consider seeking to define and fill niches in the Shanghai coffee market by distinguishing their businesses largely in cultural terms, sheds light not only on the business side of things, but also reflects Shanghai's unique cosmopolitan identity. Consider reading Catherine's essay in a favorite Shanghai café or coffee shop over an expertly brewed cup, and enjoy! But enjoy *critically*, of course :-)

David Perry

Clinical Professor in the Writing Program

Brewing Identity: Developing Marketing and Product Differentiation Strategies for Shanghai's Small Coffee Shops Against China's and the U.S.'s Major Chains

Catherine Chandra

The rise of coffee culture in China is as rich as its flavor, and nowhere is this more evident than in Shanghai, where local coffee shops strive to enhance their market presence. The city is experiencing a shift from traditional tea consumption to a growing coffee culture, reflecting both global trends and China's rapid urban development (Zhu 199). These shifts are causing a growing consumer market for coffee, complementary to Shanghai's urban lifestyle, as shown by its 9,553 coffee shops as of 2023, the most coffee shops for a city globally (He).

A key factor in the success of businesses in a competitive market is the Unique Selling Proposition (USP)—a distinct characteristic or value that differentiates a business from its competitors. For local coffee shops, a well-defined USP allows them to stand out against major chains by offering specialized products, personalized experiences, or culturally resonant themes that appeal to niche consumer segments. Developing a strong USP is particularly crucial

in Shanghai's saturated coffee market, where large brands like Luckin, Manner, and Starbucks dominate with economies of scale, aggressive pricing, and widespread brand recognition.

This essay explores strategic marketing and product differentiation as tools that can empower local coffee shops to enhance their market attractiveness. A case study of Lake Roast Café (湖水焙煎室 Húshuǐ bèijiānshì) illustrates how an independent coffee shop can leverage its USP by integrating both Japanese and Chinese cultural elements into its branding and product offerings. Through a market analysis and an exploration of marketing tools like the 4Ps framework (product, price, place, and promotion), this research examines how independent coffee shops can strengthen their position and cultivate consumer loyalty in Shanghai's competitive coffee market.

In Shanghai's competitive market, local independent coffee shops can enhance their appeal by adopting clear USPs that focus on strategic marketing strategies and product differentiation, emphasizing local flavors, personalized customer experiences, and innovative branding approaches.

Market Analysis: China's and the U.S.'s Major Coffee Chains in Shanghai

Shanghai's coffee market is part of a broader national trend in China, where coffee consumption is expected to see a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR)—a mea-

sure of the average annual growth rate over a specified period, accounting for compounding effects—of approximately 1.90% from 2024 to 2029 (“China Coffee”). By 2024, the coffee industry in China is estimated to have a market volume of \$2.1 billion, with a forecast to reach \$2.3 billion by 2029 (Wood). This steady growth trajectory is seen in cities like Shanghai, where the adoption of Western lifestyles and increased disposable income have fueled rising coffee consumption.

The market is heavily dominated by major chains such as Starbucks, Luckin Coffee, and Manner Coffee, which use their economies of scale to maintain a strong market presence. Starbucks, with over 1000 outlets in Shanghai alone, controls roughly 13.6% of the market share in the city’s coffee chain sector (Blazyte). This dominance is supported by its global brand recognition and efficient supply chain management, which allows them to maintain reduced per-unit costs and a strong negotiating stance with suppliers, thus enhancing its profitability and market reach (Meilani 76–78).

Luckin Coffee, a major local chain known for its aggressive expansion strategy, has significantly boosted its sales through coffee delivery and mobile ordering in China, operating over 13,273 stores nationwide (Neate). By integrating AI-powered dynamic pricing and user behavior analytics, Luckin tailors promotions and discounts to individual customers, further driving sales and customer retention. This approach caters to China’s fast-paced, digital-first

consumer culture, enabling the company to rapidly gain market share. The scale of Luckin's operations also allows for significant reductions in operational costs, reinforcing its competitive pricing strategy (Shang 108).

Similarly, Manner Coffee, although smaller in scale compared to Starbucks and Luckin, uses its strategic placement in high-traffic areas to attract customers. Since its founding as a single store in 2015, Manner has expanded to over 300 locations across China, with more than 150 of these in Shanghai alone (Chu 276). This rapid growth reflects its effective marketing strategies and streamlined service model. The chain's ability to maintain low operational costs, combined with target collaboration through an online and offline promotion, allows it to thrive in the competitive Shanghai market (Chu 276-278).

Marketing Strategies: Building Brand Loyalty in a Competitive Market

Local coffee shops can develop a competitive advantage by focusing on the 4Ps of marketing: Product, Price, Place, and Promotion, incorporating from both local successes and international strategies.

Product Strategy: Innovating to Meet Local Tastes and Preferences

The history of coffee culture in Shanghai reflects a shift towards a wide range of coffee experiences, from traditional to innovative, locally-inspired beverages. Luckin Coffee's

innovative approach to product offerings are their lattes like raw coconut latte, velvet latte and thick milk latte. These products have played a significant role in Luckin Coffee's rapid growth by appealing to consumer preferences for unique, customizable, and trend-driven beverages. This suggests that local coffee shops should focus on specific product innovations to cater to the varied tastes of Shanghai's consumers (Shang 107–108). For instance, incorporating unique local flavors can create a niche market based on USP, as seen with the popularity of localized coffee flavors like Moutai coffee and black sesame latte (Global Times).

Price Strategy: Balancing Cost and Quality

Affordability can play a crucial role in attracting a broad customer base. Manner Coffee's strategy of providing high-quality coffee at accessible prices has proven successful, illustrating that competitive pricing can attract price-sensitive segments of the market without compromising on quality (Chu 276). Local shops can adopt similar pricing strategies by understanding and adapting to their specific customer base. Additionally, they can explore innovative pricing models, such as bundle deals or subscription services, to incentivize repeat purchases and foster customer loyalty (Kucher). By striking the right balance between affordability and perceived value, local coffee shops can effectively position themselves as accessible alternatives to premium chains without compromising on quality.

Place Strategy: Strategic Store Locations in Shanghai

For local coffee shops in Shanghai, replicating Starbucks' strategic placement of outlets in prime locations might pose challenges, especially regarding capital requirements. Finding a prime location in Shanghai's neighborhoods or commercial districts often comes with an expensive rent, which may be discouraging for small, independent coffee shops with limited resources. In such cases, these coffee shops can consider alternative strategies for their place strategy. A possible approach is to focus on identifying areas that, while not in the center of prime districts, still offer convenience and accessibility to customers. These areas could be emerging neighborhoods with growing residential or commercial developments, where rental costs might be relatively lower compared to established prime locations (Greene). By targeting these areas, coffee shops can access a customer base that seeks convenience and quality without necessarily demanding a premium location.

Moreover, distance to public transportation is important for customers. Local coffee shops can prioritize locations that are close to metro stations, bus stops, or major transportation nodes, making it convenient for commuters and residents to visit them. This approach not only enhances accessibility but also reduces the reliance on prime locations, thereby mitigating the financial burden associated with high rental costs. In cases where securing capital for renting a prime location is challenging, local coffee shops

can explore alternative financing options, such as seeking investment from private investors or leveraging crowdfunding platforms. Furthermore, they can consider borrowing from banks or financial institutions, provided they have a solid business plan and credit worthiness to support their loan applications.

Promotion Strategy: Battle for a Market Presence

In developing an effective promotion strategy for local coffee shops in Shanghai, it's essential to recognize the preferences of Shanghai consumers, who often prioritize aesthetics and ambiance when selecting cafes (Jiang). Utilizing social media platforms such as Douyin (抖音), Dazhong Dianping (大众点评), and Xiaohongshu (小红书) can also significantly increase a cafe's visibility and appeal to potential customers. To maximize on this trend, cafe owners can focus on creating a distinct concept or theme for their coffee shop that connects with their target audience. By offering a unique ambiance that is aesthetically pleasing and inviting, cafes can naturally attract more visitors, both online and offline (Suren).

With an aesthetic concept or theme that aligns with their brand identity and target audience preferences, coffee shops can effectively differentiate themselves from competitors and generate their own USP through user-generated content on social media platforms. As customers share photos and videos of their café experience online, they inadvertently promote the café within their social networks, driving organic digital marketing and attracting more foot

traffic.

Product Differentiation Strategy: Crafting Unique Experiences for Consumers

Local coffee shops in Shanghai can use product differentiation strategies similar to Starbucks, but adapt them to suit their smaller scale and resources. While they may not have the same economies of scale as major chains, they can still differentiate themselves by focusing on quality, uniqueness, customer experience, and creativity (Zhang). An approach local coffee shops can take is to prioritize the sourcing of high-quality coffee beans from reputable suppliers, despite being on a smaller scale. Instead of sourcing different types of beans from various regions around the world like Starbucks, they can focus on a few types of beans while establishing partnerships with local or regional coffee growers. By emphasizing the quality and unique characteristics of locally sourced beans, they can offer customers a distinct coffee experience that highlights the flavors and profiles of the region (Pocono Dessert Co.).

Furthermore, as Shanghai-based food writer Jiang Yaling explains in a 2021 article for *Sixth Tone*, a digital media outlet known for its in-depth reporting on Chinese society and culture, local coffee shops can differentiate themselves by creating a cozy and inviting ambiance that resonates with Shanghai consumers. While they may not have the resources to invest in elaborate store designs or extensive amenities, they can focus on simple yet thoughtful touches that enhance the customer experience (Jiang). By paying

attention to details such as decor, lighting, and music, they can create a welcoming atmosphere that encourages customers to stay and enjoy their coffee.

Additionally, local coffee shops can differentiate their products through creativity and innovation, even within the constraints of a smaller scale operation. While they may not be able to offer the same level of menu variety as Starbucks, they can focus on developing signature drinks or specialty blends that showcase their unique identity. By experimenting with locally-sourced ingredients, seasonal flavors, and cultural influences, they can create a menu that stands out from larger chains and appeals to local tastes. Paul Smith, a writer and blogger who explores Shanghai's evolving café culture, says: "In Shanghai, I was finding an approach to signature drinks that were balanced and that complemented rather than overpowered the coffee."

Moreover, local coffee shops can differentiate themselves by emphasizing personalized customer service and community engagement. Although they may not have the same resources for extensive training programs, they can build strong relationships with their customers through genuine interactions and personalized recommendations. Hosting coffee-tasting events or workshops can also be a possibility to build a loyal customer base and differentiate themselves from major chain stores (PJ's Coffee).

The flexibility and adaptability of local coffee shops also serve as advantages in a competitive market environment. Unlike major chains, these local coffee shops can respond

quickly to changing consumer preferences and market trends. By staying agile and responsive to customer feedback, local coffee shops can tailor their offerings and marketing strategies to meet evolving demands, thereby enhancing their relevance and appeal. Additionally, authenticity emerges as a powerful differentiator for local coffee shops. Embracing local ingredients, supporting sustainable practices, and highlighting cultural influences can connect with consumers seeking genuine experiences, distinguishing local coffee shops from mass-produced chain stores (Duggan).

Case Study: Lake Roast Café (湖水焙煎室)

In an interview with Mr. David Liu, the owner of Lake Roast Café (湖水焙煎室), he mentioned that the core concept of the café is a harmonious blend of Japanese and Chinese culture. This fusion is evident in both the ambience and the coffee experience. Upon entering the café, customers are immersed in an atmosphere that seamlessly combines Japanese aesthetics and Chinese design elements—from Japanese script adorning the walls to Chinese motifs in carefully-chosen furnishings such as curtains, doors, and even coffee cups. “I wanted to create something that was renowned for its specialty in filter coffee and unique blends like dirty sea, osmanthus fermented rice with coffee, apple coffee with cinnamon,” said Mr. Liu, a Shanghainese who studied in Japan. His time there inspired him to incorporate Japanese brewing techniques, particularly hand-filtered methods, into the café’s opera-

tions while using locally-sourced Chinese coffee beans, particularly from Yunnan. This strategy not only highlights traditional craftsmanship but also caters to Shanghai's growing demand for high-quality, artisanal coffee.

His café's product differentiation is characterized by its fusion menu, which integrates Japanese brewing precision with Chinese coffee culture and ingredients. Unlike many cafés that rely on mass-market coffee blends, it prioritizes handcrafted, small-batch brews that reflect the nuanced flavors of Yunnan and Ethiopian coffee beans. This focus on sourcing high-quality beans while maintaining accessible pricing (ranging from 18 to 40RMB) ensures that the café attracts a broad range of customers—both those who value affordability and those who seek specialty coffee experiences.

Beyond its product offerings, the café's location strategy plays a crucial role in its appeal. Situated near Metro lines 1 and 14, it remains highly accessible while avoiding the premium costs of city-center locations. This decision reflects an effective place strategy, capturing high foot traffic without the burden of excessive rent. Additionally, Lake Roast Café's promotion strategy aligns with its thematic concept. The Chinese-Japanese aesthetic not only enhances the in-store experience but also creates a visually striking atmosphere that appeals to social media users. Many customers share photos of the café's carefully curated interior and unique beverages, resulting in organic digital promotion that enhances its market presence.

“The marketing approach of my coffee has been to create a brand that tells a story, one that connects with consumers seeking not just a cup of coffee, but an immersive cultural experience,” said Mr. Liu. This approach appeals to a diverse demographic, attracting both young consumers drawn to specialty coffee and older consumers who appreciate craftsmanship and cultural heritage. To further build a loyal customer base, he also hosts regular events focused on coffee appreciation and education.

Through Mr. Liu’s vision and execution, the cafe has crafted a USP to enhance its market attractiveness in comparison to major chains like Luckin, Manner, and Starbucks. Looking ahead, Lake Roast Café plans to keep up with trends, and look for opportunities to expand and open at other locations throughout the city.

Conclusion: Developing a Unique Identity with Effective Strategies

The inquiry into the strategies that local independent coffee shops in Shanghai can employ to distinguish themselves in a market dominated by major chains reveals an approach to achieving competitive advantage. The importance of the marketing and product differentiation strategies that have been illustrated in this research is summarized by the examination of local flavor integration, distinctive ambiances, and strategic positioning that appeal to both local and international tastes of Shanghai’s diverse population. The significance of using the 4Ps of marketing—Product, Price, Place, and Promotion—has

been evident in the context of Shanghai's coffee market. The development of unique products that synthesize local and international tastes, as observed with Lake Roast Café's offerings, serves as an example to the effectiveness of such differentiation. By introducing inventive drinks and employing culturally resonant themes, local cafes can create a compelling alternative to the major presence of large chains.

In pricing strategies, the discussion highlighted the importance of setting price points that reflect the value proposition of local cafes while remaining accessible to a broad customer base. Regarding place, the strategic location of independent coffee shops near transportation hubs and outside of premium-priced city centers can offer competitive advantages. Promotion strategies that capitalize on the visual and cultural appeal of the coffee shops, particularly in an era where social media is a huge factor, have demonstrated their importance. Through this research, it is evident that local independent coffee shops in Shanghai have the opportunity to enhance their market attractiveness through deliberate marketing strategies and product differentiation. By emphasizing local flavors, personalized customer experiences, and adopting a USP, these coffee shops can not only compete but also stand out despite the saturation of major chains.

The case study of Lake Roast Café provides valuable insights into the marketing and product differentiation strategies of a single local coffee shop in Shanghai. However,

the study's focus on just one cafe limits the generalizability and applicability of the findings across the diverse landscape of independent coffee shops in the region. Future research should expand the scope by including a broader range of coffee shops, varying in size, location, and target demographic. Conducting interviews with multiple cafe shop owners would provide a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the different strategies employed to compete against major chains like Luckin, Manner, and Starbucks.

Future research should focus on the dynamic consumer behaviors in Shanghai's coffee market, particularly how local preferences evolve in response to global coffee trends. This could offer invaluable insights into how local shops might continuously adapt their marketing strategies to sustain relevance and competitiveness. Further investigation into the impacts of international coffee culture on local markets could also provide strategies for integrating global influences without sacrificing the unique local identity of Shanghai's coffee shops.

Thus, for local coffee shops in Shanghai to thrive in a competitive market, an effective application of differentiated marketing strategies tailored to their unique strengths and local consumer preferences is essential. By focusing on innovative product offerings, strategic pricing, optimal placement, and compelling promotion, these local coffee shops can enhance their market position and ensure sustainable growth in a highly competitive market.

Works Cited

Blazyte, Agne. "Market Share of Leading Café/Bar Brands in China 2016-2022." *Statista*, 15 Feb. 2024, www.statista.com/statistics/429972/market-share-of-leading-cafe-bar-brands-in-china/. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

"China Coffee Market Exhibits Steady Growth with Projected CAGR of 1.90% from 2024 to 2029." *GlobeNewswire*, 28 Mar. 2024, www.globenewswire.com/en/news-release/2024/03/28/2854548/28124/en/China-Coffee-Market-Exhibits-Steady-Growth-with-Projected-CAGR-of-1-90-from-2024-to-2029.html. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Chu, Yungchi. "Manner Coffee's Marketing Strategies: A Review." *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Business and Policy Studies*, vol. 8, 2023, pp. 275-279, doi:10.54254/2754-1169/8/20230325. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Duggan, Jennifer. "Spilling the Beans on China's Booming Coffee Culture." *Guardian*, 18 May 2015, www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/may/18/spilling-the-beans-chinas-growing-coffee-culture. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Dwyer, Chris. "Shanghai's Reserve Roastery: What's it like in world's biggest Starbucks?" *CNN, Cable News Network*, 5 Dec. 2017, www.cnn.com/travel/article/worlds-biggest-starbucks-shanghai/index.html. Ac-

cessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Global Times. "Shanghai becomes 'coffee capital of the world' with 7,857 shops in the city." *Global Times*, 30 Jul. 2022, www.globaltimes.cn. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Greene, Haley. "From City to Small Town: How to Find the Ideal Location for Your Café." *Fresh Cup*, 10 Mar. 2023, freshcup.com/from-city-to-small-town-how-to-find-the-ideal-location-for-your-cafe/. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

He, Qi. "Shanghai Coffee Culture Festival Celebrates Local Coffee Culture." *China Daily*, 19 Apr. 2024, www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202404/19/WS66227f1fa31082fc-043c2f9c.html. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Jiang, Yaling. "Shanghai's Coffee Culture Is All About Boutique Cafés and Big Chains." *Sixth Tone*, 1 Oct. 2021, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1008637>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Kucher, Simon. "How and When to Use Bundle Pricing as Part of Your Strategy." Simon-Kucher & Partners, 21 Feb. 2023, www.simon-kucher.com/en/insights/how-and-when-use-bundle-pricing-part-your-strategy. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Liu, David. Personal Interview. 21 April 2023.

Meilani, Tresia, and Lena Ellitan. "Supply Chain Management Processes and Competitive Advantage: The Case of Starbucks." *International Journal of Multidisciplinary*

Research and Publications, vol.6, no.8, 2024, pp.76-78. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Neate, Rupert. "China Overtakes US as Branded Coffee Shop Capital of theWorld." *The Guardian*, 12 Dec. 2023, www.theguardian.com/business/2023/dec/12/china-us-branded-coffee-shop. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

PJ's Coffee. "How Hosting Events at Your Coffee Shop Can Boost Sales." PJ's Coffee, 24 May 2021, www.pjs-franchise.com/blogs/category/about-pjs-coffee/how-hosting-events-at-your-coffee-shop-can-boost/. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Pocono Dessert Co. "Why Your Local Coffee Shop is WAY Better than Any Coffee Chain." *Medium*, Pocono Dessert Co., 11 May 2023, medium.com/pocono-dessert-co/why-your-local-coffee-shop-is-way-better-than-any-coffee-chain-d3054f4126a6. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Shang, Zilin. "Analysis of Luckin Coffee Marketing Strategy Based on the 4P Theory." *Highlights in Business, Economics and Management*, vol.13, 2023. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Smith, Paul. "Exploring Shanghai's Cafe Culture: The Future of Coffee?" *Medium*, 8 Nov. 2023, medium.com. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Suren, Bispendra. "The Art of Designing Instagrammable Dessert Shops or Restaurants." *Medium*, 12 Mar. 2024,

medium.com/@bispendra1.suren/the-art-of-designing-in-stagrammable-dessert-shops-or-restaurants-0e0f-6b23072e. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Victor's Travels. "Coffee Culture in China: Is Coffee Becoming China's Cup of Tea?" Victor's Travels, <https://www.victorstravels.com/china/coffee-culture-in-china-is-coffee-becoming-chinas-cup-of-tea/>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Wood, Laura. "Coffee is Blooming: A Special Scene in Shanghai" Cafes, *Culture*, 26 Mar. Illustrated by Gigi Chang, coffeeteaimagazine.com. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Zhang, Zhoe. "The Perfect Blend: Exploring Shanghai's Experimental Coffee Culture." *Suitcase Magazine*, 25 Jan. 2023, suitcasemag.com. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Zhu, Tianxun."Research on the Current Situation and Development of China'sCoffee Market." *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Financial Technology and Business Analysis*, vol. 54, 2023, pp. 197-201. DOI:10.54254/2754-1169/54/20230922.



HUNDRED RIVER