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## Table of Contents

<b>From the Editor</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Notes on Contributors</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The Culture of Qalandar Pakhivas Community of Lahore: A Case of Marginalisation</b> Naeema Arch'ad	<b>9</b>
<b>Traditional Productions and Neo-Liberal Market Challenges for Cultural Identities: A study of Manipuri Indigenous Weavers in Bangladesh</b> Rajmoni Singha	<b>37</b>
<b>Memorialisation and Identity in Mahé, India: Revealing French Colonial Legacies</b> Sayant Vijay Anupama Nayar	<b>59</b>
<b>Gender, Identity and Conflict: Militant Women and Feminist Assertion in In the Shadow of a Sword: The Memoir of a Woman Leader in the LTTE by Thamizhini</b> T. Jenisha P. Boopathi	<b>79</b>
<b>Product Placement in Films: A Comparative Study of American and Chinese Consumers' Attitudes</b> Yi Zhou	<b>93</b>





## From the Editor

Ever since the end of Covid, the hope of the world for a return to an allegedly stable pre-Covid-19 time has been thwarted. Most of the world continues to be mesmerized by the horrible wars continuing in the Ukraine, in Sudan, and in Gaza. As the carnage continues unabated, one might be tempted to dismiss any and all attempts at cultural interventions as misguided and useless. With many, an uneasy assessment of priorities has taken place, especially so in the face of Russian aggression, and has created an atmosphere where pacifism or non-engagement have become “bad” words. And if such long-held beliefs are being radically challenged, one might ask, what can lowly culture do to change things?

This is not a new question; it has existed ever since art has begun to flourish. The point has also been discussed by earlier cultural theorists and practitioners. For instance, Theodor Adorno believed, at least for a short while, that to write poetry after the Holocaust was barbaric. In the face of all this human-made suffering and death, can/should one really still believe in the power of cultural approaches?

While Adorno uttered this sentence at a time of deep depression, he would then go to qualify his earlier statement by producing his magnum opus, the *Aesthetic Theory*, published posthumously in 1970. Therein, he reiterated and qualified his belief in the power of the production, dissemination and reception of cultural artefacts as necessary building blocks for a meaningful life. He would stipulate that art is necessary, but not as a product subsumable by political ideologies, but, rather, as a *broken promise*, as the understanding that it always promises things without ever being able to deliver. But it is the gesture that counts and that makes life (after all, another broken promise in the end) bearable.

However, Adorno would not allow any old art into his toolkit for survival at the edge of the modernist/post-modernist world. Most famous is his statement about Jazz in this context, in which he rejected it, because it was neither good nor revolutionary enough. This point is easy to criticise, as it must be, if one only contextualises Jazz’s roots and its powerful (political) rejuvenation by such artists as Pharoah Sanders, Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, or Sun Ra, all active during the last decade of Adorno’s life. On the other hand, though, his rejection of l’art-pour-l’art thinking does come closer to a more enlightened kind of view on art, even if perhaps only in hindsight, as it incisively charts the dangers of such an approach which attempts to exclude and expunge any and all social context from the artwork. Thus, for Adorno, political commitment in art is of tantamount importance, a commitment that is found inherent in any art worthy of its name. In his 1962 essay "Commitment", he had already discussed the role of political commitment in art and literature, and engaged with Bertold Brecht and also Jean-Paul Sartre. There he contrasts Brecht's more didactic approach to art with his own thinking on the autonomy of art in which art furnishes the brackets for any political discussions and not the other way around. Commenting further on Jean-Paul Sartre’s insistence on (politically) committed literature in his 1948 *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*, he privileges his negative dialectics in which the formal aspects of art as coagulated content are already seen as providing an artwork’s political message. Moreover, art in its autonomy is seen as the only consolation in the face of general disintegration. In his *Minima Moralia* (1944), surprisingly his most hopeful work, as it was written under the most dreadful global conditions, he would

say the following: “Even the blossoming tree lies at that moment, in which its blossoming is seen without the shadow of deprivation. even the innocent How Beautiful becomes an excuse for the ignominy of an existence, which is different, and there is no beauty no consolation except in the gaze, that falls on the horror, withstands it and in the unmitigated awareness of the negativity continues to believe in the possibility of the better.” (“Noch der Baum, der blüht lügt in dem Augenblick, in welchem man sein Blühen ohne den Schatten des Entsetzens wahrnimmt; noch das unschuldige Wie schön wird zur Ausrede für die Schmach des Daseins, das anders ist, und es ist keine Schönheit und kein Trost mehr außer in dem Blick, der aufs Grauen geht, ihm standhält und im ungemilderten Bewusstsein der Negativität die Möglichkeit des Besseren festhält” (Minima Moralia, 1969, p. 144)).

Despite their differences, Brecht would see things very similarly. In his “To those who follow in our wake” (An die Nachgeborenen), written probably in 1939, again under difficult circumstances, Brecht would write: “Truly, I live in dark times! /.../ What times are these, in which / A talk about trees is all but a crime / For it implies we remain silent about so many other atrocities.” (Wirklich, ich lebe in finsternen Zeiten! / [...] / Was sind das für Zeiten, wo / Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist / Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten einschließt!) Here Brecht acknowledges the difficult times and grapples with the impotence of art, even calling it criminal, as it takes our gaze away from more important things. However, he insists on talking about art, even inscribing it into/as a poem, thereby allowing it to continue.

Thus, we also dare to continue to speak about artistic and cultural themes here in the pages of the *IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies*. We are aware of the hard times facing many humans on our planet today, we think of them with empathy and acknowledge their plight. We do not know what good the following texts will do, but we know that they should be published, seen and thought about as they, among the many other cultural and artistic interventions made, represent, despite everything, an important way in which to change the world.

The issue at hand is a decidedly Asian issue, with articles covering Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and China. While encompassing a huge landmass, with billions of people from different cultures, it is interesting to see how people in Asia are struggling with similar issues in their lives – post-colonisation, exclusion for mainstream society, issues of war and peace, and of globalisation. Their voices are voices from the subaltern, and it is high time that more of these can be heard.

Naeema Arch’ad’s article “The Culture of Qalandar Pakhivas Community of Lahore: A Case of Marginalisation” discusses artistic production and cultural heritage conservation efforts among a minority in Pakistan, the Qalandar Pakhivas, a subgroup of a larger ethnic minority in Pakistan and India. They grapple with their own, oftentimes rigid understanding of their heritage and practice, at times at odds with the surrounding majority of Pakistanis, at times at odds with changing moral codes at large.

A similar situation exists in Rajmoni Singha’s “Traditional productions and neo-liberal market challenges for cultural identities: A study of Manipuri Indigenous weavers in Bangladesh”. Once again, it is a minority, this time in Bangladesh, which is caught out by the intensifying industrialisation of weaving and cloth making, something that had been a Manipuri cultural

mainstay and an important tool for differentiating themselves from others synchronically and diachronically. This difference is now being severely challenged, also leading up to communal self-doubt. Singha charts these movements and provides suggestions for keeping their cultural heritage alive by creating multiple perspectives for the survival of this minority.

Staying in South Asia, Sayant Vijay and Anupama Nayar’s “Memorialisation and Identity in Mahé, India: Revealing French Colonial Legacies” looks at the spectres of French post-colonialism in Mahé, India. In interviews with French-Indians living in the part of India that had been a French colony until the early 1950s, they find a surprising amount of praise for the erstwhile colonisers. Many of the rituals belonging to French culture, such as the structuring of the calendar through religious festivals and a melange of cultural festivals, have continued to keep French culture alive. If much of this praise is associated with advantages gained from their French Connection – such as French citizenship – it is nevertheless astounding how in many citizens’ imagination and nostalgia, the more sinister facets of colonialism have been swept under the rug, so to speak.

Moving on to Sri Lanka, T. Jenisha and P. Boopathi discuss the continuing fallout of the civil war having raged for several decades. Recently, the horrors of this war have already received an amazing voice in Sri Lankan author Shehan Karunatilaka’s furious tour-de-force *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022) which deservedly won the Booker Prize of the same year. Now, T. Jenisha and P. Boopathi discuss the war via the memoir *In the Shadow of a Sword* by Thamizhini, a female LTTE fighter. Their article, entitled “Gender, Identity and Conflict: Militant Women and Feminist Assertion in *In the Shadow of a Sword: The Memoir of a Woman Leader in the LTTE* by Thamizhini” discusses the war fallout experienced by one of its female fighters from the losing side. It makes it clear that far from being an egalitarian struggle, women were suppressed by the LTTE and mostly marginalised. What is worse, this suppression continues today, after the war has ended, and it continues to haunt not only Sri Lankan society at large, but many individual women’s lives under the conditions of “peace”.

Lastly, Yi Zhou’s ‘Product Placement in Films: A Comparative Study of American and Chinese Consumers’ Attitudes’ moves the discussion to China. In here text, she compares US and Chinese attitudes toward product placement in films. Using interviews, she is able to identify two very different ways of reacting to product placements: on the one hand, a North American laissez-faire one, and another that (still) rejects most of the attempts to manipulate consumer behaviour via entertainment film and TV shows. Given that Chinese TV history has been a much shorter than their US’s counterpart, one wonders whether this rejection of an enforced consumer culture is something that will disappear in the future or whether it is here to stay?

Do enjoy this issue!

Holger Briel  
Zhuhai  
May 2024

This editorial/introduction is the view of the Editor-in-Chief and had not been subject to peer review. <https://iafor.org/journal/iafor-journal-of-cultural-studies/publication-ethics/>

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## Notes on Contributors

### Article 1

#### **The Culture of Qalandar Pakhivas Community of Lahore: A Case of Marginalisation**

##### **Naeema Arch'ad**

Naeema Arshad is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Media Studies, Art and Design, at the Lahore School of Economics. Lahore, Pakistan. She has an MPhil in Cultural Studies, an MSc in Mass Communication (Film & Television Productions) and a BCS in Computer Sciences and Journalism. At the Lahore School, she teaches courses in New Media Practices, Cultural Studies, Video Production and Management Information Systems. She is an active researcher and has presented her research internationally and is also involved in documentary production on local cultural heritage in Pakistan. Documentary topics include the traditional music of the Wakhi people, the stone carvers of Gandhara as well as women in digital spaces. She is presently completing a book on the historical forts of Potohar, tracing their pre-Islamic history, culture, and construction all the way to the present. It discusses the varied maintenance and preservation techniques employed, the social, cultural, and political significance of these forts, and their current state and conservation efforts. Before joining Lahore School, she worked for the UNDP as a cultural researcher. She is also a regular contributor to the top Pakistani newspaper and a well-known blogger.

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### Article 2

#### **Traditional Productions and Neo-Liberal Market Challenges for Cultural Identities: A study of Manipuri Indigenous Weavers in Bangladesh**

##### **Dr Rajmoni Singha**

Rajmoni Singha is working as an Assistant Professor of Political Science and Sociology at North South University (NSU) in Dhaka. Before joining NSU, Dr Singha taught Anthropology and Development Studies at Independent University, Bangladesh and Brac University in Dhaka. He obtained an MPhil in Social Anthropology from the University of Bergen, Norway, and a Master of Development Practice (MDP) focusing on “Environmental Management” from James Cook University, Australia. More recently, he received a PhD focusing on Indigenous knowledge of Anthropology from Charles Darwin University, Australia. Rajmoni Singha’s research area focuses on indigenous communities inside and outside of Bangladesh. He also has experience in interdisciplinary studies in research and teaching, focusing on cross-cultural studies, ethnographic research, indigenous knowledge, indigenous issues in the social sciences, climate change, land and environmental management, and development issues.

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### Article 3

#### **Memorialisation and Identity in Mahé, India: Revealing French Colonial Legacies**

##### **Sayant Vijay**

Sayant Vijay is a research scholar in the Department of English at CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore, India. His academic pursuits are predominantly situated within the

interdisciplinary domain of Cultural Studies, Linguistics, English Language Teaching (ELT), Postcolonial Studies, Social Policies, Political Economy, and Green Marketing. His scholarly endeavours reflect a multifaceted engagement with the intricate intersections of language, literature, and socio-economic frameworks. He has published research papers in linguistics, literature, and environmental studies.

### **Dr Anupama Nayar**

Anupama Nayar is an Associate Professor within the Department of English and Cultural Studies at CHRIST (Deemed to be University) Bangalore, India. Her research focuses Postcolonial Studies, Precarity Studies, and Pedagogy. Her work aims to dissect contemporary socio-cultural complexities, including the enduring legacies of colonialism and socio-economic precarity, while also exploring innovative pedagogical methodologies.

Article 4

### **Gender, Identity and Conflict: Militant Women and Feminist Assertion in *In the Shadow of a Sword: The Memoir of a Woman Leader in the LTTE* by Thamizhini**

#### **T. Jenisha**

T. Jenisha is a PhD research scholar at the Department of English Studies, School of Social Sciences and Humanities at the Central University of Tamil Nadu, Thiruvarur. For her PhD research, she is focusing on the life narratives of Sri Lankan refugees, and she has presented research papers at conferences both inside and outside India in her area of research. She has published articles in journals that are of national reputation. Her research interests include life narratives, refugee literature, border studies, and forced migration studies.

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P. Boopathi is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English Studies, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Central University of Tamil Nadu, Thiruvarur. His research interests include Disability Studies, Palestine and West Asian Literature, Refugee Literature, and Life Writing Studies. For his Doctoral Research completed at EFL University, Hyderabad, he studied the identity construction of Palestinians in the life narratives written by Palestinian refugees. He has published articles in journals, edited books, and presented research papers at conferences both inside and outside India in his areas of research. He has been funded by the New Literary Observer, Moscow, and European University at St. Petersburg, and the German Historical Institute, Warsaw, Poland to present his research papers at their conferences. His research works have been published by publishers like Peter Lang, Routledge, and Routledge Journal of Life Writing.

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## Article 5

**Product Placement in Films: A Comparative Study of American and Chinese Consumers' Attitudes****Yi Zhou**

Yi Zhou holds a Bachelor's Degree in Broadcasting and Hosting from Hohai University, PRC, and a Master's Degree in Mass Communication from the University of Leicester. With a profound interest in Social Media and Media Psychology, she dedicates her research efforts to unravelling the societal implications arising from individuals' psychological experiences following their engagement with social media platforms. Her exploration encompasses a thorough investigation of identity construction, emotional ramifications, motivations, and objectification within the dynamic sphere of online interactions. Currently, Zhou Yi is immersed in a project investigating the resilience strategies adopted by Chinese female victims as they confront the challenges posed by social media manipulation tactics employed by narcissistic partners.

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## **The Culture of Qalandar Pakhivas Community of Lahore: A Case of Marginalisation**

Naeema Arch'ad  
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### Abstract

The *Qalandar Pakhivas*, a native ethnic minority from central Punjab, Pakistan, is one of Lahore's sixteen remaining Pakhivas (gypsy) communities. They are now confronted with discrimination from more affluent neighbourhoods and the urban authorities. However, the community has rejected any outside change with equal or even greater vigour. They are attempting to safeguard their identity and preserve their autonomy by upholding their traditional historical values. This study sought to investigate why the Qalandar Pakhivas community is commonly represented as one of the most reviled and marginalised ethnic minorities in contemporary Pakistani culture. Although various studies have documented their lives, most have concentrated on collecting demographic, statistical, or census-related information. In Pakistan, analysing their exclusion and marginalisation within multimodal frames has received less attention. This study employed a qualitative approach to research. Primary data was obtained through ethnographic methodologies, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and interviews with key informants.

*Keywords:* Qalandar, gypsy, marginalisation, Pakistan, ethnography

Qalandar Pakhivas, traditionally known as a gypsy clan, is an indigenous ethnic minority native to central Punjab, Pakistan. As a nomadic community, they face severe challenges due to rapid urbanisation. The Qalandar Pakhivas community in Lahore has been persistently marginalised and deprived of essential resources such as food, shelter, clean water, education, and healthcare – fundamental human rights in a modern welfare society. They are frequently misunderstood, chastised, and ridiculed for their impoverished status in Pakistani society. Common stereotypes portray them as thieves, child abductors, tricksters, drug addicts, filthy, and lowlives. Similarly, the identity of female members is often unjustly reduced to that of sex workers. These negative perceptions highlight the deep-rooted cultural and economic discrimination against the community, historically native to the lands that now constitute present-day Punjab, Pakistan.

In the second largest city of Pakistan, Lahore, minimising cultural conflicts for marginalised communities like Qalandar Pakhivas is complicated. Geographic settings are unpredictable and inexact, with fast-tracking urban progress, growing crime, an ill-managed public sector, and fierce battles for depleted resources all happening with their traditional settlement areas. Qalandar Pakhivas' cultural and economic survival is becoming more and more challenging in their day-to-day struggles under harsh life conditions while attempting to maintain ethnic differentiation as a community. Generally, Pakhivas workers are not protected from labour laws since they are not granted or are reluctant to take up registration with Pakistan's National Database and Registration Authority.

Regarding their social capital, they are not the most welcomed either: they are often publicly harassed, ridiculed and rejected from receiving any patronage. As one social work activist stated, the Qalandar Pakhivas community has no representation at any level, facing unsafe situations due to rapid urbanisation, increasing crime, and unequal administration of public resources (Sana Khan, Social work activist, personal communication, September 2019, Lahore). The community grapples with various social, cultural, and economic problems, from social rights to earning opportunities, because illiteracy affects their overall progress and prosperity (Ali, 2015). The ruling elites have exploited, displaced, neglected, ignored, and excluded these. The dominant ideologies reflected in state policies, services, and development processes directly threaten their livelihoods, identity, and dignity (Bhattachan et al., 2009).

This research aims to investigate the socio-economic challenges faced by the Qalandar Pakhivas community in Lahore, Pakistan, amidst rapid urbanisation. It examines the cultural discrimination and stereotypes against the Qalandar Pakhivas community and their impact on their access to resources and rights. Additionally, the research explores the implications of policy, governance, and societal attitudes on the marginalisation and deprivation experienced by the Qalandar Pakhivas community.

Lee's (2000) work *We Borrow the Earth: An Intimate Portrait of the Gypsy Folk Tradition and Culture* provides an intimate look at Gypsy folk traditions and their struggle to preserve cultural heritage in modernisation. This perspective is instrumental in understanding how the Qalandar Pakhivas balance cultural preservation with socio-economic adaptation. For example, just as the Roma have had to adapt their traditional lifestyles to fit into modern European societies, how are the Qalandar Pakhivas finding ways to maintain their nomadic heritage while engaging

with the urban and multicultural environment of cities like Lahore? Lee's documentation of Roma's adaptive strategies offers a comparative framework for analysing the Qalandar Pakhivas' efforts to sustain their cultural practices amidst external pressures.

The research seeks to answer the following questions: How do cultural stereotypes and discrimination affect the access of the Qalandar Pakhivas community to essential resources such as food, shelter, education, and healthcare? What factors contribute to the lack of representation and protection for the Qalandar Pakhivas community under labour and citizenship laws? How do public policies and governance practices contribute to the marginalisation and exclusion of the Qalandar Pakhivas community from societal benefits and opportunities? What interventions or policy changes are needed to address the socio-economic inequalities and discrimination faced by the Qalandar Pakhivas community in Lahore?

### **Historical Background**

To fully understand the current circumstances of the Pakhivas community and underscore the importance of this study, it is essential to delve into their historical background. In the central regions of Punjab, particularly in Lahore and its surrounding areas, 16 clans of the Pakhivas exist. Their name is derived from the Urdu language – Pakistan's national language – where "Pakhi" refers to a "makeshift tent" and "vas" translates to "resident". Thus, the term "Pakhivas" connotes the idea of people residing in temporary shelters, often moving from one location to another. This nomadic lifestyle aligns with the broader definitions of "gypsy" and is synonymous with terms like Khanabodush, nomad, travellers, and drifters, reflecting their transient way of life. The term gypsy<sup>1</sup> is an umbrella term, a conventional idea that fuses different ethnic communities.

The Qalandar Pakhivas community has faced historical misrepresentation and negative stereotypes, often perpetuated by dominant groups like colonial authors who labelled them as thieves, beggars, and swindlers (Burton, 2006). These harmful narratives, rooted in prejudice and ignorance, contribute to the marginalisation of the community and their classification as "the other" in their host and dominated societies.

The lack of legal protections for minority ethnic groups and limited opportunities for participation in decision-making processes exacerbate their vulnerability to discrimination and bias. This systemic inequality creates significant challenges for the community in asserting their rights and navigating a society that often deems them incompatible with its norms. The Pakhivas community has actively preserved its close-knit social structures and traditional values in response to these challenges. These practices serve as a source of strength and

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<sup>1</sup> It is essential to acknowledge that the use of the term "gypsy" in my research or other contexts can be a sensitive issue, particularly when referring to specific ethnic or nomadic communities like the Qalandar Pakhivas. I approach and use this terminology with awareness, sensitivity, and respect. I do this by contextualising my use of the term "gypsy" within my research and engaging thoughtfully with the community I am studying, like navigating this complex terrain while honouring the dignity and identity of the Qalandar Pakhivas community. No disrespect was meant at any time during this research when approaching the community.

identity, offering a sense of belonging and purpose in facing external pressures. However, this cultural preservation can also lead to tensions with other communities who perceive their traditions as incompatible (Jalil, 2017).

According to the theoretical approach, the marginalisation of the Qalandar Pakhivas gypsy community in Pakistan is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. This research required a better understanding of the subject through a thorough study of several theoretical lenses like colonialism and post-colonialism (Williams, 2021), (Turner, n.d.), intersectionality (Mcbride & Mazur, 2008), social exclusion theory (Taket et al., 2009), critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), mobility studies (Fortier, 2013), cultural studies (Grossberg, 1991), feminist theory (Mcbride & Mazur, 2008), disability studies (Goodley, 2013), and environmental justice (Figueroa, 2022). Drawing upon these various theoretical approaches, this research outlined the complex and multidimensional process of marginalisation faced by the Qalandar Pakhivas gypsy community in Pakistan. The insights gained from these theoretical frameworks informed the development of effective policies and interventions to promote their inclusion and address their specific needs and challenges.

In Pakistan's central Punjab area, sixteen Pakhivas (gypsy) clans live separately, divided by their trade, skills and the shape of their Pakhis (tents). Commonly, Pakhivas are small, scattered groups but tightly knitted. Some of the standard terms used to refer to them are Kenghar (Making Mud Toys), Qalandar (Singing and Dancing), Jogy (Snake Charmer), Changharr (Garbage Collectors / Beggars), Musali (Labor Beggars), Nut (Acrobats), Chingarr (Bangle Sellers), Bhatu (Begging), Bazigar (Acrobats), Marasi (Singing Dancing), Begging), Lalli Marasi (Hunting/Begging), Koray (Begging), Gurajmar (Begging), Behrupia (Drama), Gugray (Cane-Maker / Begging), and Ouddh (Labor).

Among the sixteen clans, Qalandar Pakhivas' roots are somewhat distinguishable due to their spiritual lineage; Qalandar Pakhivas are devotees of the Sufi saint Bu Ali Shah Qalandar (1209-1324 CE)<sup>2</sup>, who is buried in Panipat, India. Initially, these devotees belonged to the Sufi order of the *Qalandariyah Faqirs*. The Qalandar of present-day Pakistan began migrating in small-sized groups to Punjab by the mid-15th century. At the time of Independence in 1947, the Muslim Qalandar of East Punjab, which included Panipat and Karnal sub-groups, moved to Pakistan as religious refugees and settled with already established Qalandar Pakhivas clans (Berland, n.d.).

There is no official estimate of the total Pakhivas population living in Pakistan, as most of their demographics are not registered with the National Database and Registration Authority. However, the Grass-Root Organisation for Human Development (GOHD), an affiliate of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), has estimated that all sixteen Pakhivas clans in Lahore have about 0.4 million members. Concerning the Qalandar Pakhivas gypsy

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<sup>2</sup> Shaikh Sharafuddeen Bu Ali Qalandar Panipati (1209-1324 CE, born at Panipat, India). He was a Sufi saint of the Chishtī order who lived and taught in India. His shrine or *dargah* (mausoleum) is in the city of Panipat in India and is a place of pilgrimage.

clan, the best estimate can be their annual (Mela)<sup>3</sup> at the several holy shrines of central Punjab, where almost all the population of Qalandar Pakhivas dutifully participate. According to their clan leaders, about 4,000 to 6,000 Qalandar Pakhivas are usually present at those gatherings.

Qalandar Pakhivas' historical presence is shrouded in mystery, but their socio-cultural and physical similarity with other gypsy' clans of the sub-continent locate their ancestral roots in the Domba community in India. Domba or Doma is a term used across historic Indian Hindu and Buddhist texts to refer to an isolated group of individuals with a shared ethnicity that, for centuries have lived under subjugated rule (Channa, 1981). Their historical connection seems to lie with the North Indian Domba caste, which occupied the lowest position within the rigid hierarchy of the Indian caste system and its members were treated as social outcasts. Qalandar Pakhivas clan elders believe that some 700 years ago, these clans were converted to Islam by Shaykh Sharfuddin Bu Ali Shah Qalandar Panipati, also known as Bu Ali Qalandar, while living in India. The Qalandar Pakhivas believe that before conversion to Islam, they belonged to the Doma caste in the Hindu caste system.

The word “gypsy” and its first-ever recorded proof have their origin in India. It has been first associated with the old Indian Domba ethnic community that has native roots (Mayrhofer, 1952). The Domba or Dom (Sanskrit Doma) is an ethnic group spread throughout the Subcontinent. In North India, the favoured terminology is Dom, Domba,<sup>4</sup> while Doma and Dumba are used in Kashmiri Sanskrit writings.

According to Kalhana, a renowned scholar of Indian history and an author of *Rajatarangitii* ('Chronicle of Kings') written in 1148, the Domba clans later divided into many branches, and their presence was particularly prominent in Kashmir and surrounding areas the 10th and 11th centuries (Stein, 2009). He attributed the Domba presence to the two hundred years of occasional migration that had taken place into the region. Moreover, he was fascinated by the Dardic dialects spoken in the Domba community, spoken in Kashmir, its western frontier, and Qalandar Pakhivas, which are widely used among them. Similarly, hints of their dialect are traceable in the language spoken by European gypsy communities, especially those that converse in Roman (Gatlif, 1993).

### **Methodology**

This research adopts a qualitative approach, employing primary and secondary data collection methods and ethnography techniques. The primary research focuses on three key areas:

1. Participant Observation: The daily activities of Qalandar Pakhivas individuals and families were observed and documented in their living spaces (Pakhis) across five

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<sup>3</sup> An annual spiritual fair serves not only as a religious or cultural event but also as a significant social occasion that reinforces community bonds, fosters spiritual connection, and preserves traditions passed down through generations.

<sup>4</sup> Prakrati dialects of Middle Indo-Aryan languages used in India from around the 3rd century BCE to the 8th century CE.

major encampment sites in Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan: Shahadra, Khokar Pind, Thokar Niaz Beg, Ravi Bridge, Bedian Road, and Raiwind through participant observation.

2. In-Depth Interviews: Unstructured interviews were conducted in the privacy of participants' homes (Pakhis) to ensure comfort and confidentiality. This allowed for in-depth exploration of individual experiences, perspectives, and insights into the marginalisation process faced by the Qalandar Pakhivas community.
3. Focus Group Discussions: As an additional method, focus group discussions were conducted with members of the Qalandar Pakhivas community to facilitate collective dialogue and explore shared experiences, challenges, and perspectives related to marginalisation.

Secondary data supplemented the qualitative data collected through these methods.

The sample group for this research was carefully selected to ensure the Qalandar Pakhivas community in Lahore. It included:

- Community members: This group consisted of individuals from various backgrounds within the community, including artisans, performers, students, women, and others.
- Community leaders: This group included representatives from the Panchayat (community council), *Mukhia* (clan heads), *Numberdar* (area heads), *Bari Ma* (clan's eldest woman and central council from women), and field officers and project managers from NGOs working with the Qalandar Pakhivas community, such as UNICEF and GODH.

### **Traditional Livelihood of Qalandar Pakhivas**

The traditional livelihood practices of the Qalandar Pakhivas community encompasses a rich array of street performances that play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge across generations. Among these performances, the Qalandar Pakhivas are mainly known for their skilfully crafted skits with animals like monkeys, goats, dogs and bears. These performances are a source of entertainment and reflect societal roles and relationships. Before their conversion to Islam, in ancient North India, the Qalandar Pakhivas were renowned as animal tamers, especially bear hunters. A senior Qalandari performer expressed pride in the fact that bear taming for public events has been their hallmark skill for centuries (M. Hameed, personal communication, May 23, 2021, Lahore).

Being a bhaluwala (bear keeper) requires incredible strength, cunning, and knowledge about an individual animal, and, consequently, bears are worked and trained almost exclusively by mature, experienced, and healthy men. Although bear training is prohibited today, and rightly so, some members of the Qalandar Pakhivas community continue to train bears and organise private bear act events to entertain a niche audience and keep the tradition alive, but typically not in big cities. Women often train experienced bears when their husbands are away, tired, or sick, but only if mature children or other camp members are present. Indeed, there are several ethical concerns surrounding such practices. Bear trapping and keeping these animals in captivity for entertainment, such as training them to perform in bear dancing events, raises

significant ethical concerns. From an animal liberation standpoint, these practices are deeply troubling as they often involve significant cruelty and deprive the animals of their natural behaviours and environments. Advocates argue for respecting the intrinsic rights of all animals to live free from exploitation and harm, emphasising the importance of transitioning away from traditions that involve animal cruelty towards more humane and sustainable cultural practices.

Thus, despite its deep cultural roots, the Qalandar Pakhivas community's practice of capturing and training bears for entertainment raises serious ethical and animal welfare concerns. Research and advocacy in animal welfare, such as those highlighted by Peter Singer in "Animal Liberation" (1975), have long condemned such practices for inflicting cruelty and denying animals their natural behaviours and habitats. Captive bears, often subjected to harsh training and poor living conditions, are deprived of essential well-being. Studies by Damania et al. (2008) in "The Impact of Conservation on the Status of the World's Vertebrates" further illustrate the adverse effects on wildlife populations, emphasising that exploitation for economic benefits significantly contributes to species decline. Moreover, enforcing laws against bear dancing in India and Pakistan reflects a growing recognition of these issues and brings direct community conflict with the law.

Not surprisingly, then, the Qalandar Pakhivas' traditional livelihood faced a severe challenge in the 1970s when both India and Pakistan declared bear hunting and kept them in captivity illegal. To this day, there has been a persistent effort by animal rights activists across the world to condemn and discourage the traditional occupation of bear fighting, which was another one of their trademarks. Before state implementation, approximately 15% of the Qalandar Pakhivas kept Kashmiri black bears (Ullah et al., 2023); these bears were known by the white V etched on their skin near the chest area (see Figure 2). Some even owned brown bears, which are typically more dangerous and difficult to control. Both black and brown bear species were kept in miserable conditions and were not fit to undertake long journeys from village to village or town to town, especially in a humid climate. While the prohibition of bear handling is a welcome change in animal subjugation practices, it posed serious problems to the Qalandar Pakhivas community.

### Figure 1

*Qalandar Pakhivas are Expert Animal Tamers. (Courtesy: Aown Ali and Amir Qureshi)*





Beyond these animal-based performances, the Qalandars are adept in various other street arts, including juggling, acrobatics, magic, impersonation, and begging. Each skill contributes to their unique cultural footprint and survival strategy.

The Qalandar Pakhivas use a small, hourglass-shaped two-headed drum called a Damru (Dugdugi in Urdu) as a central prop in traditional show events. They train their animals to climb and follow directions for dancing and acrobatics to their beat. The Qalandar Pakhivas proudly claim to have invented the Damru, which is portable due to its compact size and lightweight design. This drum remains a key musical instrument in their street performances, providing the rhythm and background music that enhance their acts.

### Figure 2

*Hourglass-Shaped Two-Headed Drum called a Damru (Author's Photograph)*



In their musical performances, the Pakhivas are best when the performance is either related to specific folk tales or general spirituality. In addition to their musical talents, the Qalandar Pakhivas are celebrated for their skills as *Behrupiya* (impressionists) and *Razdarya*. Behrupiya are master impressionists, adept at transforming their appearance and mannerisms to mimic various characters. Razdarya, on the other hand, specialises in transferring secrets through staged acts that combine singing and acting. These performances are intricately designed to convey hidden messages or cultural stories, blending entertainment with the art of subtle communication. The Razdarya's unique ability to weave secrets into their acts makes them a distinctive and respected part of the Qalandar Pakhivas' cultural heritage. Internally, as a community, the Qalandar Pakhivas take immense pride in their culture and heritage. Since 95 percent (*GODH Charity*, n.d.) of the Qalandar Pakhivas are considered to be illiterate, they believe music and other forms of artistic communication play a significant role in narrating a community's history, culture, and traditions.

**Figure 3**

*Qalandar Pakhivas Participation and Displaying their Dance at Gypsy Mela around Pakistan.  
(Courtesy: Nazeer Ahmad, GODH Charity)*



Qalandar Pakhivas children learn to sing and dance at a very young age. Their songs and dances have three discrete styles: traditional Qalandar Pakhivas style, traditional village and regional style, and popular and contemporary music style, often related to motion picture themes and preferred by the more modern scientists, especially the urban dwellers. Singing and dancing performances are not regular sources of income, and only prepubescent children and older males dance before an audience; Qalandar Pakhivas consider it shameful for women to dance outside the camp milieu. Young, attractive, light and clear-complexioned boys between six and eleven are often selected and trained by their mothers and other female dancers. Their dance routines are very stylised, demanding coordination and control.

Children are actively involved in all spheres of economic activity and decision-making. Skills which are limited to one's gender are berupia (imposter), for males only, and sexual joking, for females only. In tents with bhaluwalas (bear keepers) and bandarwalas (monkey keepers), men are generally the exclusive animal performers before a public, although women commonly assist in the daily training of bears and monkeys. When a man is not working with his monkeys, his wife often takes the opportunity to instruct their children in basic bandarwala skills formally.

Another important, but also problematic practice among the community is begging. Qalandar Pakhivas discuss the skills of successful begging at length and teaches them to their children as separate economic strategies. Children learn how to dress and make up their faces to enhance a hungry or sick look and practice walking with a limp or on a crude crutch. Mothers beg with infants, and older siblings beg with baby brothers and sisters. Qalandar Pakhivas have learned through generations of experience that very young children, women, and older people are much more successful as beggars than older children and men. The Qalandar Pakhivas community, along with others in comparable socio-economic circumstances, may justify the practices of

strategic begging and adopting disguises to gain sympathy through various intertwined factors, including economic necessity, cultural traditions, community socialisation, moral rationalisations, and sheer desperation due to lack of alternatives.

A rich historical and cultural backdrop informs these practices and is often vital for survival. To fully appreciate the reasons behind such behaviours, it is important to understand the broader socio-economic context in which these communities exist. Furthermore, approaching this topic requires sensitivity towards marginalised groups' challenges. Balancing critical analysis with empathy and understanding the complexities underpinning these survival strategies is crucial.

The practice of child begging within the Qalandar Pakhivas community raises profound ethical questions and illustrates the intersection of poverty, tradition, and exploitation. The deliberate training of children to appear more vulnerable, such as dressing to look malnourished or using props to feign physical disabilities, is a survival tactic born from desperation but does not escape moral scrutiny. This form of begging exploits societal compassion and perpetuates the children's role as economic assets rather than allowing them opportunities for education and healthier development.

Research studies like those of Embleton et al. (2012) in their work "The Long-term Impact of Child Begging: Implications for Social Justice and Public Health Policy", published in the *Journal of Public Health Policy*, document the negative long-term psychological and physical impact of begging on children. These include trauma, social stigmatisation, and hindered cognitive development. The study argues that while the immediate economic benefit is apparent, the long-term welfare of these children is severely compromised. Jones and Subramanian's comparative analysis in their 2018 study "Child Begging as a Dynamic of Social Exclusion: Findings from an Urban Economic Locale" in the *Journal of Urban Economics* highlights how such practices, while culturally ingrained, reinforce cycles of poverty and social exclusion, making it challenging for communities to escape marginalisation.

### **Forms of Marginalisation: An Epic View of Qalandar Pakhivas**

This following investigates the origins and evolution of the Qalandar Pakhivas community, tracing their journey to Punjab and their efforts to preserve a distinct cultural identity among 16 other Pakhivas groups. It explores the lasting impact of their nomadic heritage on their contemporary practices and lifestyle, particularly in the multicultural city of Lahore. The analysis sheds light on how their social integration has influenced their livelihood strategies, deeply rooted in their centuries-old itinerant traditions across the subcontinent. This representation offers a comprehensive understanding of their adaptive strategies and cultural resilience by situating the Qalandar Pakhivas within the broader historical context of regional nomadic communities.

The author conducted extensive field research by visiting Qalandar Pakhivas residing in various parts of Lahore, including Shahadra, Khokar Pind near Thokar Niaz Beg's open and remote fields, Ravi Bridge, Bedian Road, and Raiwind. Over four months in 2023, the author

utilised multiple interaction methods, including in-depth interviews, to gather insights. This fieldwork revealed that the Qalandar Pakhivas typically maintain a degree of separation from the adjacent communities, establishing significant socio-cultural barriers that impede cultural integration.

### **Socio-Cultural Marginalisation**

The marginalisation of the Qalandar Pakhivas community is deeply intertwined with their historical connections to the North Indian Domba caste, traditionally regarded as social outcasts in Hindu and Buddhist texts (J. P. Singh & Khan, 1999). The label “Domba” (or Doma) encapsulates a legacy of social exclusion that persists across the subcontinent. Members of Domba clans continue to face systemic marginalisation in both India and Pakistan, affected by the enduring caste systems within Hinduism and the strict socio-religious hierarchies prevalent in Islamic communities. This historical backdrop is crucial for understanding the contemporary challenges the Qalandar Pakhivas face, as it highlights the broader socio-cultural dynamics that contribute to their ongoing struggles with social integration and equality.

One of the interviewees, the head of *Qalandar Panchayat*,<sup>5</sup> explained his views on how his background and identity as Pakhivas influence people’s behaviour towards their community: “No matter how long we might have lived among the non-nomadic society, our status or race would remain subject to biases” (*Chacha Shafi - Uncle Shafi -*, personal communication, May 06, 2020, Lahore).

During this research, a survey<sup>6</sup> was conducted to assess local non-Pakhivas’ attitudes towards the *Pakhivas* community at four different localities in Lahore, Pakistan, including the Anarkali area, Shadman, Gulberg, and DHA. Out of 100 participants (40 females and 60 males), 11 called them frauds, 11 junkies, 12 filthy, 26 beggars, 31 thieves, 8 lowlives, 33 corrupt females, and only 5 called them good people. The terms like “fraud,” “junkies,” “filthy,” “beggars,” “thieves,” “lowlives,” “corrupt females,” and “good people” used by participants in the survey likely stem from a combination of personal experiences, societal perceptions, stereotypes, and media portrayals. Participants may not have consciously chosen these specific terms; instead, they reflect deep-rooted biases and societal attitudes expressed spontaneously during such surveys. These labels indicate the need for broader societal education and integration efforts to address and rectify these misconceptions and biases.

The high percentage assertion of “Corrupt Females” in the survey provides a standpoint that the depiction of Qalandar Pakhivas women mirrors the stigmatisation faced by gypsy women across various countries. Matthews (2018) explores the portrayal of Gypsy women in literature and visual culture, highlighting how these representations contribute to stereotypes and societal

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<sup>5</sup> “Qalandar Panchayat” refers to a community council or governing body specific to the Qalandar community. Panchayats traditionally serve as local self-governing institutions in many parts of India and Pakistan, dealing with various community issues, from dispute resolution to managing shared resources. In the context of the Qalandar community, a Qalandar Panchayat likely functions as a cultural and administrative body that helps manage the community’s affairs, uphold traditions, resolve conflicts, and represent the interests of its members.

<sup>6</sup> Survey file attached below after the Bibliography

perceptions of European gypsy women, particularly Roma women. This is particularly relevant for understanding the portrayal of Qalandar Pakhivas women, who face similar societal biases and stereotyping.

The societal perceptions against the Qalandar Pakhivas are historically deep-rooted. During the British Raj, William Crooke (1848-1923), a British civil servant, orientalist, and key figure in the study and documentation of Anglo-Indian folklore, listed nomadic tribes as groups that posed a “threat” to sedentary people (Crooke, 1896). In 1871, he introduced the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA), a legislative measure that labelled 200 nomadic communities, including the Qalandar Pakhivas, criminals. Unfortunately, this stigmatisation persists until today. The survey found that the Qalandar Pakhivas are still widely regarded as criminals, facing discrimination and being labelled as thieves, beggars, lazy, and swindlers. Little has changed over time.

### **Educational Marginalisation**

Another critical factor contributing to the marginalisation of the Qalandar Pakhivas community is their limited access to education. A standardised education system has yet to be implemented within the community, significantly hindering their educational advancement. Consequently, only some Qalandar Pakhivas attain high school diplomas. Those who complete their education often express frustration and bitterness over the lack of recognition and acceptance in society. This educational disparity isolates the Qalandar Pakhivas and limits their opportunities for socioeconomic mobility and integration into broader society.

One such member of Qalandar Pakhivas, a college student, states: “During my college admission interview, the administrative officers, exhibiting a disdainful attitude, posed several negative questions about my Pakhivas background and our culture. They seemed more focused on probing the alleged negative aspects of being Pakhivas rather than discussing my educational achievements and qualifications. But again, this was not new to me, as I had also experienced similar attitudes in my school days. My class fellows and even my teachers bullied me, ridiculed me, called me names, asked me about my sisters and used shameful words for them” (R. Ali, a college student, personal communication, July 02, 2020, Lahore).

### **Participatory Marginalisation**

A significant contributor to the marginalisation of the Qalandar Pakhivas is their exclusion from participatory processes in the policymaking decisions of government, non-governmental organisations, and external development partners. This exclusion is evident in their lack of access to fundamental human rights across state, private sector, and civil society spheres, leaving them susceptible to unfair treatment by various policymakers (Pretty & Ward, 2001). Despite international frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities, which mandates that marginalised communities should have the right to participate in decision-making processes that impact them, this principle is often overlooked in Pakistan. Article 9 of the Declaration explicitly calls for protecting these communities’ identities and preventing discrimination. However,

adherence to these stipulations still needs to be improved, further entrenching the vulnerabilities faced by the Qalandar Pakhivas.

Also due to the lack of representation of these communities in any state, private sector, and civil society fora, the Qalandar Pakhivas have been denounced through the continuous process of *slanting*, which includes having others' ideas projected onto one's identity, terms that are simply the product of the oppressor's imagination just like it was the case in colonial times, authors terming them "thieves, beggars, lazy, swindling rascals" (Burton, 2006). These ideas then coagulate and take the form of cultural stereotypes, thus downgrading the status of such communities.

### **Citizenship and Electoral System Marginalisation**

According to a 2022 survey by The Grassroot Organization for Human Development, Pakistan is home to approximately 7 million gypsies, with 2 million in Baluchistan and 1.1 million in Punjab (*GODH Charity*, n.d.). Despite this significant presence of gypsies, clans like the Qalandar Pakhivas community in Pakistan remain largely invisible and neglected by the state, even though many have transitioned to a sedentary lifestyle over the decades. The state policies, services, and development processes, shaped by ruling elites and dominant ideologies, have often overlooked, displaced, or excluded these nomadic communities, severely impacting their livelihoods and cultural identity (Berland, 1986).

This gap is further reflected in academic circles, where there is a noticeable lack of comprehensive research addressing gypsy cultures' anthropological, historical, and sociological aspects. This scarcity of scholarly attention contributes to the ongoing marginalisation and misunderstanding of communities like the Qalandar Pakhivas, hindering effective advocacy and support for their rights and integration into broader societal frameworks.

### **Qalandar Pakhivas beyond the Stereotypes**

#### **Qalandar Pakhivas Standpoint**

Despite facing discrimination in Lahore and other areas, the Qalandar Pakhivas community demonstrates a resilient determination to preserve their identity and autonomy. However, addressing their plight often requires more attention to their agency and involvement. Civil society organisations and official institutions frequently undertake initiatives on their behalf without consulting or including them. For instance, local and regional representatives and counsellors devise socio-economic strategies for the community without seeking their input. Moreover, the recent population census in Pakistan from 2023 conspicuously excludes any mention of the Pakhivas and other nomadic tribes, further marginalising their presence and needs.

While many Qalandar Pakhivas have accepted their evident stigmatisation through stereotyping of their character and identity by outsiders as their fate, this also creates spaces

for resistance. Living in a state of marginality, the Qalandar Pakhivas have adopted radical perspectives to observe, imagine, and create alternatives for their community. To them, marginality has become a central production location for counter-hegemonic discourse, as it nourishes their capacity to resist (hooks, 2000). Such groups develop ideas and speech to challenge dominant philosophy, beliefs and established behavioural patterns (Langan, 2014). Counter-hegemonic perspectives argue the importance and necessity of acknowledging and amplifying diverse viewpoints and experiences from marginalised positions. By doing so, it can uncover new avenues for innovation and creativity. For example, incorporating indigenous knowledge into environmental management can lead to more sustainable practices, while involving minority groups in technology development can result in more inclusive and accessible products. These diverse contributions can lead to unexpected breakthroughs and beneficial outcomes across various fields.

In a group interview conducted with members of the Qalandar Pakhivas community, it became apparent that their current societal situation is difficult due to their social non-acceptance. For instance, according to a Qalandary entertainer from the Ravi Riverbank Pakhivas slum: “We cannot survive outside our world, they do not understand us, and we cannot adapt to their lifestyle” (S. Ali, personal communication, July 9, 2019, Lahore). This comment illustrates the existence of possible counter-hegemonic discourses by giving voice to the experiences and challenges faced by the Qalandar Pakhivas community. It brings to light their perspective on social non-acceptance and the difficulties of cultural integration, challenging the dominant societal narratives that often ignore or misunderstand such communities. Furthermore, it demonstrates how a counter-hegemonic discourse can emerge from marginalised groups advocating for recognition, inclusion, and change in mainstream societal structures.

### **Qalandar Pakhivas Customs**

Adherence to ancestral customs and cultural norms is deeply ingrained within the Qalandar Pakhivas community, with each member accountable for upholding these traditions.

Qalandar clans have multiple small sub-communities where the same rituals and traditional structures are observed. Each sub-community has its own *Derra* (camp, settlement) leader, called the Numberdar. *Derra* members closely watch the Qalandar Pakhivas to ensure that no erroneous decisions are made that may weaken community ties. One Numberdar explains that the Qalandar Pakhivas believe in collective punishment, which means sin or an act of injustice committed by one community member will implicate the rest of the community members (family, friends, relatives) in reparation (N. Hussain, personal communication, May 11, 2019, Lahore).

The idea of collective punishment has echoed in the moral framework laid down by their ancient *Qalandar Dharma* (moral code), a moral obligation to abide by traditional values and customary standards regulating individual conduct and *Patlag* (interpersonal activities). The victim decides if the family should receive the same punishment as the accused or be let off the hook. These values emphasise that individuals should behave appropriately to ensure the

upkeep of *izzat* (honour, integrity, respect, truth) and avoid *sharm* (shameful or dishonourable act) (Berland, 1986).

This could be a fear-based response to the strict implementation of the didactic community laws. A Qalandar found in violation of the principle of secrecy, for example, would bring shame and dishonour to their family for generations. It would harm the Qalandary freedom (*Azadi*) and well-being (*Bhalla*). The most unforgivable sin would be if a Qalandar Pakhivas enlists the help of an outsider (*Paraya*), whether a law enforcement agency or another mediator, to resolve an internal issue. In the *Qalandary* court of law, evidence is unnecessary to prosecute the guilty. An accusation can sometimes be considered enough to punish the alleged individual for their victimless (or not) crime. The punishment usually is ex-communication (*huqqa-pani bund* in Urdu), translating into a total social boycott from the Qalandar community.

These deeply rooted traditions and moral codes highlight the Qalandar Pakhivas' dedication to preserving their cultural identity and social structure despite external pressures and discrimination. Their strict adherence to collective norms and values reflects a strong sense of community cohesion and resilience, enabling them to maintain their unique way of life across generations.

It is often erroneously believed that gypsies inherently possess wanderlust, are carefree souls, and live without rules or regulations. This depiction is also mentioned in Habiba Hadziavdic's study, 'Gypsies as "Marginal Man" in works by Georg Simmel and Robert Park'. However, following an extensive four-month engagement with the community during my research, I found that these are largely misconceptions. I observed that strict beliefs, traditions, and cultural norms deeply govern the community. During the study, it was noticed for instance that they firmly believe that one cannot become a gypsy, as one must be born into a gypsy community. They live in very tightly-knit communities and are highly suspicious of outsiders and wary of people they interact with who are not from their community.

Many of the Qalandar Pakhivas are transient in nature and take pride in their distinct identity, which unites them with other nomadic communities. They see themselves as being true and honest in their dealings with their clients and make agreements beforehand on all details linked to their scheduled performances. Qalandar Pakhivas do their best to keep a low profile, which helps them assume a non-threatening and non-intrusive profile when navigating new locales and searching for a place for their next temporary encampment.

Weyrauch's (2001) edited volume on Romani legal traditions examines the internal legal systems and cultural norms that govern Romani communities. This is significant for understanding the Qalandar Pakhivas' own legal and social structures. For instance, both communities have traditional laws and practices distinct from their respective countries' mainstream legal systems. By studying Romani legal traditions, we can gain insights into how the Qalandar Pakhivas navigate their legal autonomy and the challenges they face in maintaining their cultural identity while complying with national laws.



## Qalandar Pakhivas Pakhi (Tent) as a Social Unit

Each Pakhi (tent) functions as a nuclear family unit, housing the typical members: mother, father, and offspring. Within each Pakhi, a Sarbarra (dominant male) adheres to community traditions and holds membership in the Derra (a social unit consisting of three Pakhis). Every Derra appoints a Numberdar to foster peace and brotherly relations among its residents. The Numberdar assumes responsibility for settling internal disputes related to divorce or inheritance, arranging marriages, and determining a Bovar (bride price) for females. Once the Numberdar issues a verdict, it is seldom contested.

To establish a Derra, there must be at least three Pakhis present. Upon marriage, children are no longer permitted to reside in their childhood Pakhi, shared with their parents. The Pakhi is utilised primarily during travel or in critical circumstances such as threats from other communities, illness, death, or family celebrations. Marriage or divorce necessitates the construction of a new Pakhi.

One Numberdar clarified that according to the inheritance laws of the Pakhivas community, possessions left behind by the deceased are distributed amongst the rest of the Pakhi occupants. If the deceased owed money, his debt would be repaid by selling off his possessions (N. Hussain, personal communication, May 11, 2019, Lahore). There is no concept of a single Pakhi in the Qalandar community. Each Pakhi has to fall within the jurisdiction of a Derra (encampment) due to the added security and kinship ties.<sup>7</sup>

### Figure 4

*A Qalandar Pakhivas Derra, With at Least Three Pakhis Presents. (Courtesy: Aown Ali)*



<sup>7</sup> Transcribed from a personal interview: “Policemen come and take away our possession, livestock and especially young girls for their sexual pleasures, and we cannot do anything, but when they see a big *Derra*, they seldom come” said Baba Javaid, 58, Numberdar at Shahadra *Qalandar* encampment, interviewed on July 9, 2019.

In case of a divorce, it is the woman who decides whether to keep the *Pakhi* or burn it and build a new one.<sup>8</sup> Setting fire to a *Pakhi* means that once the ritual is complete, nobody owes anyone anything; the couple is subsequently free from any future obligations to one another or each other's families. The mother decides to keep the children or hand them to their father. One common reason for separation is the family's self-interest in receiving a higher Bovar, predominantly if the man has expressed interest in marrying for the second time to someone in another commitment or even to his wife's close relative, for instance, a sister. Qalandar Pakhivas is a polygamist community.

If the husband has passed away, it is up to the widow to decide whether she wants to live with her brothers or her married children. A woman widowed at a young age is cared for by her father or brother. She lives in the same *Pakhi* as them until her remarriage, and Bovar is paid again to her guardian. One senior female clan member clarified that marriage is sometimes used amongst the Qalandars to establish alliances and secure financial loans. In the case of a divorce, women's resources, such as gold and livestock, are asked to be returned; this can of course be a strong reason for conflict among the divorcing parties (Noori, personal communication, July 9, 2019, Lahore).

### **The Bovar (Bride Price) Tradition**

The tradition of Bovar is highly important among all Pakhivas clans in Punjab and is deeply rooted in their cultural heritage. Bovar is a centuries-old Hindu tradition (Khan, 2021), and the word "Bovar" is derived from Sanskrit and ancient Pali languages. Bovar is determined by the father, older brother, or another male guardian of the woman, following rules established within the Qalandar Pakhivas community. Negotiations regarding Bovar often involve the presence of the Derra's Nambardar (Head).

Several factors influence the Bovar amount, including the age gap between the bride and groom, the groom's marital history, and whether the bride is married outside the family lineage. Many Qalandars practice cousin marriage to preserve their bloodlines' purity, reflecting their commitment to ancestral customs.

Within the Pakhivas community, extramarital sex is strictly prohibited, aligning with their moral principles. Marrying or forming romantic attachments outside the ethnic boundary is considered a severe transgression, punishable by death or permanent expulsion from the community. As explained by one Numberdar of Qalandar Pakhivas, any extra-marital sexual involvement with fellow Pakhivas community members brings disgrace upon one's Derra, often resulting in swift and severe consequences (N. Hussain, personal communication, May 11, 2019, Lahore).

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<sup>8</sup> Recorded by the author during a field visit to an encampment site near Thokar Niaz: the protagonist Amna divorced her husband and burnt the *Pakhi* she had once shared with him because she found out he was seeing another woman.

While deeply rooted culturally, the Bovar tradition among the Pakhivas clans of Punjab presents serious ethical and social issues highlighted in anthropological and sociological research. Studies like Anderson's (2018) and Bhat and Halli's (2016) discuss how the bride price set by male guardians commodifies women, reinforcing gender inequalities by valuing them based on age or marital history. Moreover, McKenzie (2017) notes that higher bride prices for inter-ethnic marriages discourage cross-cultural alliances, promoting social isolation and hindering socio-economic integration. Patel (2019) further explores how stringent norms around marriage and sexuality can lead to adverse mental health outcomes and violence. These findings advocate for a critical reassessment of the tradition, suggesting reforms that uphold human rights, gender equity, and personal freedoms.

### **Azadi (Freedom) and Jhagarah (Quarrelsome Individuals)**

Qalandar Pakhivas are also called “quarrelsome” by some of the outsiders interviewed.<sup>9</sup> This view was also corroborated on multiple occasions during field visits to their different encampment sites. One senior female Qalandar interviewee, states: “We are Qalandar, and if we do not fight with each other, we cannot live with each other” (A. Bibi, personal communication, July 9, 2020, Lahore), thereby demonstrating once again how the community has accepted the outside world's stereotype. The Pakhivas believe it is not in their nature to stay calm as that sort of attitude only applies to farmers or permanent home settlers. From their perspective, the freedom to express their grievances without any restrictions is tremendously important to their lives as wandering performers. According to them, *Azadi* (freedom) to express their feelings, even if it leads to a dispute, is essential to gain wisdom and a certain social status amongst their ranks.

### **The Roles of Women**

Whilst Qalandar Pakhivas generally prefers sons, girls and women are recognised as greater economic “assets” in a tent's daily maintenance and subsistence, especially in the Bovar (bride price) tradition. The Bovar is considered recompense for the economic loss incurred by the bride's tent. After marriage, the couple's parents try to cooperate in their newly formed alliance, but this tent cluster can seldom stay together for long because children are supposed to serve their parents first.

Women are considered to be a somewhat elusive part of Qalandar Pakhivas culture. Community members show concern and search for a child or man who has not returned to camp within a few hours after dark. However, if a married woman does not return, there is hesitancy to discuss her absence and a reluctance to search for her. A women's rights activist shared her experience: “It is alleged that women often have to provide sexual favours to zamindars (landlords) or village overseers in exchange for animal feed or food for the family. These encounters are not discussed between spouses or within the family, highlighting severe

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<sup>9</sup> A common expression in the Punjabi language is: چنگڑاں کی طرح ہر ویلے لڑتے رہنا (like Pakhivas, ever ready to fight). The Qalandar Pakhivas' pride in their readiness to fight likely reflects a multifaceted relationship between their cultural heritage, spiritual beliefs, social responsibilities, and their intrinsic value of unity and resilience.

exploitation and abuse” (S. Chaudry, personal communication, May 20, 2022, Lahore). The coercion of women into providing sexual favours for necessities starkly violates their rights and dignity, reinforcing systemic gender inequalities and perpetuating a cycle of poverty and dependency. Having discussions on this silenced in the community, adds to the plight of the women.

Women often are not sure whether they are pregnant until the end of the first trimester of pregnancy, although they suspect pregnancy once they have missed their first period. When a woman is sure that she is pregnant, she immediately informs her husband and other camp members. This is to protect the pregnant women from the *parchhanwa* (shadow), the evil shadow of a woman who has recently had a miscarriage or stillbirth. If the *parchhanwa* falls on a pregnant woman, according to their belief it will cause miscarriage or stillbirth. Pregnant and *parchhanwa* women avoid each other so that the latter will not be in the former’s shadow. Besides the avoidance of *parchhanwa*, the two most essential restrictions during pregnancy relate to dietary restrictions and abstinence from sexual intercourse.

My field research with the Qalandar Pakhivas communities in Lahore offered a detailed look into their cultural practices related to childbirth, infant care, and the spiritual beliefs that shape their daily existence. Below is a concise summary derived from the data collected across various community campsites in the city. During the last month of pregnancy, a woman tends to stay closer to camp and often restricts her daily activities to shorter periods of begging, grass cutting, and/or wood gathering. If an older, experienced midwife is unavailable, word is sent to another camp for a midwife. A pregnant woman often camps with or near her mother, who can also act as a midwife. During labour and birth, the woman is confined in a comfortable position within her tent, accompanied by her mother and the midwife. Her husband and children (if any) squat in front of the sealed tent, and the women inside report on the progress of the birth through the tent flaps. When the infant is born, the husband announces its gender and general condition to the camp.

Infants are fed frequently, and a breast or milk bottle is always given on demand. Because of poor diet related to food restrictions during and immediately after childbirth, a mother frequently has insufficient breast milk. Consequently, mother’s milk is often supplemented with goat or buffalo milk purchased from Gujjars (nomadic goat or buffalo herders) or tea shops. At approximately two or three months of age, the infant is given tea (rich in sugar and milk) and introduced to solid food, most often dal (lentils) and rice mixed with milk. Since a newborn baby is believed to be particularly susceptible to spirits and ghosts (*jinns*, *bhuts*, *cherar*) and the evil eye (*buri nazar*), many charms and amulets (*tabiz*) are placed on him or her for protection. Also, beads, bells, pacifiers, and the like are tied around the infant’s neck.

There is no shame attached to having the baby’s genitals out in the open, with both sexes frequently exploring each other. Women frequently draw an analogy between a young boy’s ineptitude in intercourse and their husband’s; for example, “No matter how still I lie, he can do nothing!” Sexual joking is typical and uninhibited in front of children. Its importance in Qalandar’s life is reflected in the saying, “Everyone follows his stomach, and when the stomach

is full, they follow their genitals” (Women talk during the field research at several Qalandar encampments in Lahore, personal communication from 2020 to 2023).

### **Conclusion**

The study of the Qalandar Pakhivas community in Pakistan exposes a complex pattern of marginalisation and self-marginalisation shaped by historical, social, and cultural elements. The community’s historical connections to the North-Indian Domba caste have led to a persistent social stigma that continues to influence their treatment and societal perception today. Understanding this historical context is essential for grasping the depth of their marginalisation across the subcontinent.

A major obstacle facing the Qalandar Pakhivas is their limited access to standardised education. The lack of educational facilities not only impedes their socioeconomic progress but also curtails their integration into the wider society, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and exclusion. Additionally, the community is significantly underrepresented in both government and non-government policymaking processes, an issue that becomes more pronounced given the inadequate enforcement of international guidelines like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities in Pakistan.

Traditional practices such as street performances and animal handling have been crucial for their economic survival but now face ethical scrutiny, particularly concerning animal rights and the exploitation of children and women in begging. These activities raise moral dilemmas and highlight the conflict between economic survival and evolving ethical standards. There is also a notable need for more academic research on the anthropological, historical, and sociological dimensions of nomadic cultures like the Qalandar Pakhivas, which hinders a comprehensive understanding and effective response to their challenges.

Despite some Qalandar Pakhivas adopting a more settled lifestyle, they continue to be marginalised, with mainstream society primarily overlooking their cultural practices and economic contributions. However, their potential to contribute significantly to society remains untapped. The prevailing state ideologies and policies often neglect, displace, or exclude these communities, further deepening their marginalisation.

This research highlights the pressing need for more inclusive policies involving marginalised communities such as the Qalandar Pakhivas. These policies are not just about enhancing their integration and quality of life, but also about rectifying the ongoing gaps in policy execution and educational and academic neglect. They call for a holistic strategy to tackle these systemic shortcomings. Looking ahead, it is crucial that interventions recognise and truly support and empower the Qalandar Pakhivas through education, legal rights, and meaningful participation in governance.

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**Traditional Productions and Neo-Liberal Market Challenges for Cultural Identities: A study of Manipuri Indigenous Weavers in Bangladesh**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates how the Manipuri weaving community in Bangladesh strives to maintain their livelihoods and ethnic identity while preserving their traditional handloom weaving customs. The community's main professions are agriculture and weaving. The Manipuri, an ethnic group residing in the Greater Sylhet region of Bangladesh, produces handloom products that are deeply intertwined with their culture and identity. This paper explores how Manipuri weaving processes and products embody their cultural values and contribute to the community's identity in Bangladesh. Weaving holds significant cultural importance within Manipuri society, particularly for women, and later becomes a crucial aspect of their daily livelihoods in Bangladesh. The paper analyses the practical constraints that bind the Manipuri weaving practices and the preservation of their identity in Bangladesh. The study reveals that many weavers lack literacy and connections with government agencies. Additionally, modern textile factories mass-produce counterfeit "Manipuri" handloom items, distorting the authentic cloth motifs and patterns that hold historical, identity, and cultural significance. Consequently, Manipuri weavers face many challenges in dealing with these imitation products. A qualitative approach was employed in this study.

*Keywords:* handloom, Manipuri, cloth, identity, culture, modern markets

The Manipuri are one of the ethnic groups residing in the northeastern region of Bangladesh. Racially, Manipuri belong to the Mongoloid stock. The Manipuri language belongs to the Kuki-Chin group of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Manipuri speak Manipuri or Meeteilon. “Manipuri” and “Meetei” are synonymous terms and comprise seven clans. In this paper, both the Manipuri and Meetei designations are used, in accordance with the self-identification of the respondents. The latest survey data from 2008 suggests that the Manipuri population in Bangladesh is less than eight thousand (Dhiren, 2008); no updated population survey is available from the community’s or the government’s side.

This study highlights how handloom weaving became an integral part of Manipuri womanhood and culture. The handloom profession holds immense significance in the lives of Manipuri women as per their cultural norms. The acquisition of weaving skills brings respect within the community, enhancing a woman’s standing, and potentially making her a more desirable bride. Moreover, weaving skills contribute to possible financial improvement, as the handloom occupation is deeply rooted in the daily socio-economic fabric of the Manipuri community. Weaving is intricately connected to various factors such as customs, festivals, and belief systems, which continue to influence the weaving profession. Over time, the weaving profession has become intertwined with the economic sector and market, while retaining its cultural significance.

Weaving holds significant historical and cultural importance in Manipuri society. Manipuri weavers produce textiles for personal use as well as cultural events. Additionally, the community follows different dress codes for various cultural and religious occasions. This weaving occupation and the cloth items created have become an integral part of the local economy. However, the proliferation of imitation Manipuri cloth items poses challenges for Manipuri weavers. These imitations undermine the cultural values of the Manipuri community, as the motifs on their fabrics represent their identity and culture. In this paper, I mention non-Meetei weavers, predominantly referring to power-loom users who extensively replicate Manipuri cloths and motifs without adhering to local cultural sensitivities, protocols, or norms.

The objective of this study is to explore the interconnections between Manipuri weaving and cultural identity. It also highlights the challenges faced in maintaining identity and cloth production while continuing the weaving occupation in Bangladesh.

### **Literature Review**

This following provides the reader with an understanding of the state of current literature as it relates to handloom products among the indigenous Meetei community of Bangladesh. It shows that handloom products are part of traditional textile handicrafts partly because they are produced via manual techniques. Handicraft refers to handmade products such as cloth, shawls, metal and brass items, clay pots, bamboo, and cane items. Handicraft items are created by physical labor, with manual techniques, and without using modern technology (Liebl & Roy, 2003, p. 5366, & Ghouse, 2012, p. 1183), but are yet knowledge- and skill-based.

Dhamija (1975, p. 460) argues that women are the upholders of crafts in many countries. For example, handicrafts are an important part of the Meetei culture. Handicraft requires low capital investment for the products and locally available raw materials. The design of the product reflects local culture and skills. This knowledge of craft is typically transferred from mother to daughter. Crafts are connected with folk rituals and festivals. Craft item knowledge has been handed down over centuries, without compromising the original traditional quality.

Handicrafts are a part of the culture of a nation or ethnic group and represent a key component of socio-economic life, even if handicraft activities are not fully included in national accounts. (Richard, 2007, p. 5)

Handicrafts thus not only embody aesthetic and social aspects, but also reflect the socio-economic features of societies (cf. Richard, 2007, p. 5). The Meetei handloom profession has socio-cultural, historical, and religious facets and it often generates the primary income for the family. For example, the Meetei produce different types of cloths for different cultural functions and rituals throughout the year. Handloom weaving is thus a reply to a cultural demand (Kshetrimayum, 2016, p. 6), with costumes expressing various facets of history, cultural identity, social structure, and gender responsibilities.

For the longest time, the handloom profession was the key income source for the Meetei. However, as noted above, this handloom profession is under threat due to the market penetration of industrialized producers, cheaply made Meetei handloom products, and fake cloth items (Ahmmed & Singh, 2007, p. 12). The following statement indicates how the Meetei weavers are neglected in Bangladesh:

We have already lost some indigenous cultures, their traditions and languages from this earth. As a developing populace country (Bangladesh), we are not much concern about the protection and nurture of our indigenous cultures. We earn lots of foreign currency from garments sector but our economists or entrepreneurs are not seemed much concerned about Manipuri garments, though it is a potential sector. A few number of Manipuri people is trying to protect this industry by their traditional handlooms. (Azad et al., 2017, p. 176)

The lack of proper opportunity for Meetei weavers makes them nearly unemployable in the market:

It is unfortunate in Manipuri community that the number of occupied women is decreasing significantly due to lack of better employment opportunity and lack of better facilities for their traditional weaving profession. (Islam et al., 2016, p. 138)

This subject has probably also been neglected because it is about indigenous people, “lowly” weaving traditions and indigenous knowledge. For instance, Chakma and Zaman (2010) do provide an overview of waist-loom weavers and weaving in Bangladesh. They cover most of the indigenous communities of Bangladesh that were involved with handlooms and weaving.



The writers emphasized traditional weaving in Bangladesh, but they did not discuss the challenges faced by any specific indigenous community and their handloom professions.

When it comes to theoretical considerations of cultural permanence and transference, according to Appadurai (2016), there are five “Scapes” of globalization: Ethnoscapes, Technoscapes, Ideoscapes, Financescapes, and Mediascapes. Each scape is one kind of a global flow, and in turn these flows become global ideas and knowledge. As they circulate the globe, some of them become dominant, depending on capitalism’s needs, while others, carrying local culture and knowledge, wane. The Meetei weavers of Bangladesh belong to the latter disadvantaged group. The weavers still use locally made wooden weaving machine instead of modern technology and are therefore unable to keep up with less tradition based modes of production.

Furthermore, in his theory of cultural capital, Bourdieu (2018, pp. 19–20) divides cultural capital into three sections: The embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalized state. Meetei weaving knowledge and skills can be compared to Bourdieu’s viewpoints. The weavers use locally made weaving instruments to conduct the weaving occupation. The weavers carry this intangible weaving knowledge across the generations products acquiring the status of cultural capital. In a second step, these cultural weaving items can then transform into economic capital because they are produced for self-consumption and the markets.

So far, little research has been conducted in this research area. As already mentioned above, previous weaving studies have had a limited focus on the Bangladeshi indigenous handloom industry. For example, Ahmmed & Singh (2007, p. 12) conducted a study on the Manipuri, but they paid little attention to the more acute challenges of the Manipuri weavers. They were also outsiders to the community, limiting their access to local customs. The study at hand, however, was conducted by an indigenous researcher, giving an indigenous voice to the Bangladeshi Meetei community.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts an ethnographic approach, utilizing qualitative methods to collect data that aligns with the nature of the research. The role of a social participant and descriptive observer enabled the researcher to examine social phenomena from a variety of perspectives. The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, event participation, and open-ended discussions. An effort was made to comprehend the significance of local language and images used while actively engaging in events relevant to this research. Participant observation played a crucial role, as the researcher immersed himself in the daily lives of the community and attended local festivals. Research participants included women weavers, local elders, and younger generations. Key female weavers were chosen from the common female weavers. However, it is important to acknowledge that the study’s limitation also included the fact that as a male, access to the majority of women weavers was limited due to the strict adherence to local norms and cultural sensitivity issues.

For this study, the researcher selected two villages, Noapattan and Tetaigaon, both located within the Moulvibazar district of Bangladesh. The total number of households in these villages

was 111. The research conducted interviews with ten key respondents, consisting of women weavers, local elders, and youths. The respondents were chosen who are directly and indirectly involved in the weaving occupation. The researcher operated as both an insider and an outsider, attempting to gain a comprehensive understanding of the community's dynamics. The fieldwork took place in 2016 and 2017, with informed consent obtained from all participants while strictly adhering to local cultural norms. A table provides an understanding of the key respondents' profiles.

**Table 1**  
*Socio-Economic Profiles of Respondents*

SI	Name of respondents	Age	Sex	Education	Profession	Economic status	Location
1	Bahadur	65	Male	Graduate	Crafts collector	Middle income	Dhaka
2	Laru	55	Male	Undergraduate	Involved with weaving	Lower income	Sylhet
3	Suro	70	Male	Undergraduate	Involved with weaving	Lower income	Sylhet
4	Sanou	50	Male	Graduate	NGO worker	Lower income	Sylhet
5	Bangou	55	Male	Eighth Form passed	Trader	Middle income	Kamalganj
6	Ranjita	50	Female	Eighth Form passed	Trader	Middle income	Kamalganj
7	Suchana	25	Female	Graduate	Weaver	Lower income	Kamalganj
8	Goura	56	Male	Undergraduate	Trader	Middle income	Kamalganj
9	Budha	64	Male	High school	Trader	Middle income	Kamalganj
10	Kunjo	53	Male	High school	Trader	Lower income	Kamalganj

## Findings and Discussion

The findings of this ethnographic study are split up into the following five sections, each focusing on a specific aspect: (i) the connection of weaving and Manipuri, (ii) cloths and identity, (iii) challenges of cloth production, (iv) imitation of Manipuri handloom products, (v) weavers and the state, and (vi) retaining techniques of Manipuri cloth production.

### The Connection of Weaving and the Manipuri

Meetei weaving holds a profound connection to history, beliefs, and culture, shaping the essence of Meetei identity. This following will detail how weaving contributes to the Meetei culture based on the insights provided by respondent Bahadur. Bahadur emphasizes the intricate relationship between Meetei handlooms and their historical and cultural significance. He sheds light on handloom designs, motifs, and their association with Meetei identity and belief systems. Furthermore, Bahadur provides comprehensive information about the various types of handlooms employed in Meetei weaving.

Bahadur, a sixty-five-year-old male respondent with a college degree, is an expert in traditional Meetei handlooms and other crafts. He is recognized as one of the leading authorities on Meetei textiles in Bangladesh and India. Recently, he authored a book dedicated to the art of textiles, focusing specifically on Meetei textiles in Bangladesh and Myanmar. Bahadur frequently travels to Bangladesh, Myanmar, and other regions where Meetei communities reside. The interview with Bahadur took place in a hotel in Dhaka, with the respondent's permission and according to his schedule. The interview followed a *warileeba* (story-telling) format, akin to oral history, and lasted approximately one hour.

According to Bahadur, Meetei handloom weaving is not merely a craft, but deeply intertwined with culture, history, and geographical connections. He provided several examples of handloom products and their origins, highlighting the involvement of specific designers and their locations. For instance, the Wangkhei *phidup*, a cloth from the Wangkhei area of Manipur, is attributed to the people of Wangkhei who designed its motifs. This cloth was historically produced for the Royal Kingdom of Manipur. Another example is the *Moirangphi*, a cloth with motifs introduced by the people of Moirang, a suburb in Manipur. The *Moirangphi* is created using extra weft with the Moirang *mayek* (motif). Moirang *mayek* gained acceptance during the reign of King Loyumba of Kangleipak (present-day Manipur) (1074 to 1122 CE). Presently, there are six or seven types of Moirang *mayek* available in the market.

Another significant design originated from the Moirang area known as *yarong mayek*, which represents the teeth of Pakhangba. This motif is derived from the tooth of Iputhou Pakhangba, an important deity revered by the Meetei people. The Pakhangba is intricately linked to Meetei origin and history, as the Meetei claim to be descendants of Pakhangba, who is a younger brother of Sanamahi.

Many Meetei follow the Sanamahi religion, which is one of the most ancient religions in the world. According to Sanatomba (2012, p. 1), the Sanamahi religion is one of the ancient

religions in South-east Asia. Every Meetei household has a symbol of the Sanamahi, where all family members pray and respect this god from time to time. A particular space is allocated for the Sanamahi in the south-western side of the house. The Sanamahi is the supreme god for the Meetei community because the Sanamahi is the head of all the gods and goddesses (Nilbir 2012, pp. 1–2). As a result, many of the Meetei strictly follow the Sanamahi religion. The Meetei never surrendered their earlier Sanamahi religion, though they partially adopted Hinduism in the 18th century. As a result, Hinduism could not fully penetrate the Meetei mind (Sanajaoba 1991, p. 22).

Bahadur further mentions that the *koyet* (turban) symbolizes Pakhangba and serves as a representation of him. Moreover, the *pung cholom* dance, accompanied by drumming, follows the steps of Meetei *Thang Ta* (martial arts) and is closely associated with the coiled body of Pakhangba, known as *Paphal*, with its diverse shapes and sizes. During the *pung cholom* dance (folk dance using a hand-beaten drum), artists utilize the *koyet* to symbolize Pakhangba. Additionally, Bahadur asserts that the *koyet* is also worn for protective purposes, safeguarding the head against injuries and enemies.

Narrative of identity typically begins with mythical roots of origin, legends that link the past with the present to establish a distinct people and ensure its continuity over time. Ancestral myths may often include stories of gods and heroes who personify cultural ideals and values. Cultural identities are not just collections of myths and stories, but scripts that are expressed in the ritual performances that sustain solidarity and affirm distinctive roles and identities. (Langman, 2004, p. 28)

Langman (2004) further argues that narrative identity and cultural identity lead to the creation of an ethnic identity. For example, mythical origin plays an important role in claiming an ethnic identity if this can be proven with current elements and evidence. In fact, it requires a real connection between the past and present. For example, Manipuri cloths' motifs are, among others, related to the serpent god Pakhangba. Meetei clothing designs have their origins rooted in the symbolism of Pakhangba. Unfortunately, modern cloth-making agencies in Bangladesh have copied this motif without understanding its true meaning. This practice is deeply regrettable, as it demonstrates a lack of awareness and an infringement on cultural traditions, if not intellectual property rights. The motifs are often replicated from Indian and Bangladeshi Meetei *saris* and other Meetei cloths due to their popularity across Bangladesh.

Controlling the production and distribution of piracy products is challenging in today's open and expansive market. However, imitators of Manipuri cloth should acknowledge the source of the design and obtain prior permission from the rightful owners of these motifs. Alternatively, they should refrain from producing cheap, counterfeit products that infringe on the cultural heritage of the Meetei community. Such actions are not only unethical but also illegal from the standpoint of international trade and the protection of individuals' original designs on their cloths. Bahadur argues that crafts and cloths are connected to a Geographical Indicator (GI), and the unlawful imitations in Bangladesh have placed Meetei handloom weavers in a socio-economic crisis. The designs belong to the Meetei community, as they are

deeply entwined with their culture, history, and GI protection. GI claims and identifies a good originating from a particular place and it tries to protect the intellectual property.

Material items hold immense importance for indigenous religious believers, serving as significant symbols within their communities. For instance, specific cloth items are utilized in the Sanamahi temple by the Manipuri community, representing their rich history and religious beliefs. However, these cloths may not hold the same significance for other communities with different religious beliefs. Various communities possess diverse perceptions regarding images or objects, and certain images can potentially lead to social tensions in certain areas. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the specific images and their roles and uses within particular cultural contexts:

Social relations are determined by what people expect from each other, by the norms and values that are normally met, and by practices and rituals that sustain and recreate these expectations. (Liere and Erik, 2022, p. 16)

Material research focuses on the study of objects and physical structures, such as images, clothing, and architecture (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 4). Objects hold significance within the context of the body, often triggering feelings of anxiety. They symbolize the social body and are intertwined with religious practices, requiring community approval and involvement in human and social institutions (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 4). Belief operates as a system connecting various components. Therefore, understanding the materiality of religion is crucial to avoid overlooking the embodiment of belief and the principles that unite communities (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 4).

In relation to Manipuri weaving, respondent Bahadur emphasizes its connection to traditional Manipuri housing design, highlighting the significance of the *ningol-ka* (a designated room for girls/women) within Meetei households. According to traditional Meetei housing structures, a specific room is dedicated solely to women (Singha, 2015). This room is utilized by both married and unmarried women and serves as a vocational institution for girls and young women. Bahadur emphasizes that the *ningol-ka* acts as a gathering space where all women, regardless of marital status, come together to share their weaving techniques, knowledge, and experiences. Trained women bring their spinning equipment, known as *Tareng*, to impart indigenous knowledge to the younger generations. Additionally, they discuss social issues and the learning process amongst themselves. This knowledge-sharing tradition has persisted since before recorded Meetei history. The designated room serves as a social hub and meeting place for women, enabling them to transmit and preserve weaving knowledge. It is within this space that women voice their contemporary concerns and contribute to the weaving community. Thus, traditional Manipuri housing design plays a pivotal role in maintaining and leading the handloom profession and preserving cultural identity. Figure 1 shows the entangled body and diverse shapes of Pakhangba.

**Figure 1**

*Pakhangba paphal (Heraldic figure of Pakhangba)*

*“Malem Paphal art exhibition Manipur” at Imphal on May 27, 2015 (Goshwami, 2018)*



### **Cloths and Identity**

Weaving is of significant importance in Meetei culture and is deeply intertwined with their identity. According to respondent Tombi, the handloom holds great significance for Meetei women as weaving is a mandatory occupation practiced by their ancestors for generations. Weaving knowledge provides dignity, identity, and pride to a Meetei woman. She cannot pass on this knowledge to her daughter unless she herself practices this profession, as dictated by Meetei cultural norms. The possession of weaving knowledge is considered an additional credit and achievement for a Meetei woman, enhancing her prospects of finding a suitable husband. Weaving is not just a mere occupation; it is deeply embedded in the community's culture. Weaving signifies cultural capital for Meetei community because it represents their identity. Moreover, the weaving products transform into economic capital. The cultural capital is embodied in material objects such as paintings, writing, and instruments (Bourdieu, 2018, p. 19). Tombi further emphasizes that sari-making continues to be a profitable profession compared to other occupations at the village level. The handloom industry brings substantial financial benefits to the community. It should not be regarded as a simple art, as some may perceive it, but rather as a sector that encompasses the Meetei community's identity, history, culture, and livelihoods. A parallel can be drawn with the decoration of boomerangs among the Aboriginal people in Australia. The decorations on boomerangs express local history, culture, heritage, and a connection to the land (Gretchen, 2020b, p. 132).

Respondent Laru claims that traditional Meetei products play a vital role in locating the Meetei community, especially when they are outside their own area. He recounts an incident from 1990 when he visited Dhaka to meet his uncle, who was from the same Meetei area. Without

internet or mobile facilities available at that time, it was challenging for him to find his uncle's residence in the vast city of Dhaka. However, he used the strategy of looking for Meetei traditional dresses, such as saris (upper body wrappers for women), *phaneks* (lower body wrappers for women), *phidups*, *inaphis* (shawls) or *khudais*. After an extensive search, he noticed a house with a few Meetei cloths hanging in the *mangol* (veranda). He went directly to that house and knocked on the door, successfully finding his uncle. This story illustrates how Meetei traditional dress served as a means of identifying a Meetei house in a large city like Dhaka. Laru emphasizes that clothing helps them identify their community and is an integral part of their identity. They cannot give up wearing these traditional dresses, as they are required for their daily lives.

Respondent Suro shares a similar experience. When he visited a Meetei village to attend a cultural function, he got lost in Naldori (Robi Bazar) of Moulvibazar District. As it was getting dark, he began searching for Meetei traditional dresses in order to locate the village. Finally, he spotted a Meetei dress from a distance, and luckily, it helped him identify the Meetei village. This experience reinforced his belief in the importance of Meetei dress for the community. He strongly believes that Meetei handloom products not only help the community survive but also serve as a distinctive symbol of their ethnic identity in Bangladesh.

Respondent Sanou, who works for BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), shared his childhood experience of staying with a weaving family. Sanou, a male participant with a Bachelor's degree, is actively involved in running BRAC's Education program, which requires him to travel extensively between villages. He expresses pride in the Meetei traditional dress because it has helped him in locating Meetei villages within larger Bengali-dominated areas. He used to work in a nearby Meetei village in the Moulvibazar District, where Meetei communities are scattered, including areas like Kularura, Juri, Barolekha, Kamalganj, and Srimangal.

Sanou acknowledges the significance of the Meetei traditional dress in sustaining the Meetei society. He recognizes that someone needs to continue making these dresses to ensure the community's cultural practices and traditions are upheld. However, he also acknowledges that as literacy rates increase, there may be changing attitudes and perceptions towards handlooms. Nevertheless, he strongly advocates for the protection of traditional handlooms, cloths, and the indigenous knowledge associated with them, as wearing these traditional dresses is an integral part of Meetei's daily life.

Weaving plays a crucial role in preserving the Manipuri identity and maintaining cultural boundaries when interacting with other communities. To better understand the concept of ethnic boundaries, one may refer to Barth's work. Ethnic boundaries are maintained through the persistence of cultural units and differences. In the case of Manipuri weaving products, they form part of the cultural unit that distinguishes Manipuri culture from other ethnic groups. These continuous cultural differences contribute to the formation of ethnic groups by shaping their distinct behaviors (Barth, 1994, pp. 15–16). Barth (1994, p. 38) further argues that ethnic boundaries are maintained through a limited set of cultural features.

In the context of Manipuri society, the Manipuri community resides amidst a predominantly Muslim population, alongside other smaller ethnic groups. Despite constant social and economic interactions between the two groups, the Manipuri people strive to maintain their ethnic boundaries through cultural and religious practices. Ethnicity refers to regular social interactions between groups while recognizing their unique ethnic and cultural perspectives (Eriksen, 2001, p. 12). Therefore, social boundaries play a crucial role in preserving ethnic boundaries within the Manipuri community.

Cultural festivals also contribute to the weaving tradition among the Meetei. For instance, during the *Lai haraoba*, a festival of appeasing the gods, a specific dance called *Phisarol jagoi* (a dance of weaving techniques) is performed as an offering to the local deity. Female priests showcase various weaving techniques through their dance, demonstrating the processes of seedling, cotton plantation, production, and harvesting. This dance serves as a means of transmitting the knowledge of cloth-making procedures to the community. Additionally, many motifs found in Meetei cloths hold symbolic significance, representing the connection to the deity Pakhangba and depicting his body (Apanthoi, 2018).

Another significant aspect of the Manipuri weaving tradition is the role of Thoibi, a renowned figure in Manipuri history and folklore. In fact, Khamba and Thoibi is a legendary epic of Meetei history and culture. Thoibi, a celebrated heroine in the well-known romance of “Khamba and Thoibi” in Manipur, was also skilled in weaving. She was known for adorning herself in traditional Manipuri attire. Folktales even describe her using weaving techniques to create fishing nets for fishing in the Loktak Lake of Manipur (Hodson, 1991). Hence, the handloom holds a significant place in Manipuri culture and identity. Pakhangba teeth motifs are seen in Figure 2 & 3.

## Figure 2

*Local Motifs Related to the Serpent God Pakhangba (Photo: Author)*





**Figure 3**

*Original Manipuri Sari and Wangkhei Cloth (Longer Scarf). The Symbolic Teeth of the God Pakhangba Designs are Seen on the Border of the Cloth. (Photo Author)*



### **Challenges for Cloth Production**

In regards to the challenges faced by Meetei weavers in the modern fake products market and how they employ traditional techniques to overcome these challenges, Bangou, a 55-year-old male respondent from Noapattan village, served as a significant source of insight. The interview was conducted while he was engaged in the drying process of sari cloths, the traditional upper garments for South Asian women.

Being a local resident, Bangou has actively participated in the Meetei sari trade for several years. His wife also practices sari-making at home, and he supports her indirectly throughout the process. With comprehensive knowledge of the ups and downs of the sari industry, he holds a respected position in the Meetei community as an honest individual and a successful trader. Bangou's responsibilities entail collecting saris from various weavers and distributing them in both local and national markets, extending beyond his immediate vicinity.

According to Bangou, there has been a decline in the interest of Meetei women in weaving. However, the demand for original Meetei saris in the market remains high. He strongly believes that the primary reason for this decline is the lack of capital, which has led to a loss of interest in sari-making among Meetei women. Occasionally, Meetei weavers request advance payment from him before delivering the final product. Bangou attributes this practice to poverty among the weavers. He mentions that when Meetei women marry individuals from outside the sari-making region, they often choose not to continue the weaving profession. Furthermore, Bangou emphasizes that if Meetei weavers cease producing saris for commercial purposes, it would

have a detrimental impact on the socio-economic sector. There are certain areas with low Meetei populations, such as Chunarughat in Habiganj District and Kulaura, Juri, and Borolekha upazilas (sub-districts) in Moulvibazar District, where Meetei weavers do not engage in professional sari-making due to poor infrastructure, remote location, and limited market opportunities. However, Meetei individuals in these regions continue practicing handloom weaving for self-consumption, including clothing for themselves, their relatives, and for ritual purposes. Consequently, married Meetei women in these areas do not pursue weaving as a profession.

Bangou points out that non-Meetei weavers often produce low-quality saris, posing a challenge for the original Meetei sari producers. These non-Meetei weavers, primarily power-loom users, prioritize quick delivery over quality. Bangou claims that these weavers prioritize quantity over quality, leading to confusion among customers. These neighboring weavers have learned the weaving techniques from local Meetei women, sometimes working as assistants on a part-time basis. The term “Technoscape” applies to the flow of technology, according to Appadurai (1996). oftentimes, such flow of technology such as power-loom affects the traditional Meetei weavers in Bangladesh. In contrast, modern power-loom contributes to other large-scale investors though they use imitate Meetei cloths and motifs in Bangladesh.

Respondent Ranjita also expressed a similar view during her interview. Ordinary Meetei handloom weavers do not hire those neighboring women using power looms, but it is the Meetei handloom traders who employ them to produce saris on a larger scale. This distinction highlights the difference between these two weaving communities. The wealthier traders do not exert control over local weavers, and they do not possess the same level of mastery as Indian handloom weavers. Master artisans, who have multiple weavers under their supervision, possess advanced weaving skills and innovative knowledge in the field.

The quality of Meetei saris has declined even among the original Meetei sari weavers. Meetei women face a constant struggle to maintain market presence for their saris. Additionally, Bangou highlights the presence of Indian Meetei saris in the market, which are not as satisfactory and enter Bangladesh illegally, bypassing formal import-export procedures. Especially the Greater Sylhet Division, which shares an international border with the northeastern part of India, contributes to the deterioration of the local sari market. The occupation of Meetei handloom weaving is being gradually taken over by neighboring communities, and cheaply made imitations of Meetei products are flooding the local market.

The social stigma associated with sari-making poses a barrier to Manipuri weaving, particularly for men. The weaving occupation is culturally designed only for men. Bangou suggests that there should be no social classification or stigma attached to any occupation, including sari-making. Moreover, he emphasizes that Meetei men can also engage in sari-making, and there should be no belittlement of any profession. In fact, currently, no Meetei man is involved in sari-making. Bangou believes that Meetei men should view this profession as an integral part of their culture instead of remaining idle at home. He asserts that sari-making can be more profitable than agriculture and should be embraced as a profession by every Meetei in order to

prevent it from being completely overtaken by neighboring communities or the pirate market. Failing to do so would result in a reputational crisis for the Meetei community.

During data collection, the researcher also enquired about the weavers' current challenges in the modern market and the proliferation of imitated Manipuri handloom products. During an interview with respondent Suchana, the researcher inquired about the payment system in the cultural complex where she worked. It is located in the heart of Tetaigaon village, chosen for its suitability in terms of women's status, family considerations, safety, and security. In a male-dominated society like that in Bangladesh, women's movements are often controlled by their husbands and families. Suchana benefits from coming to the complex every day and selling her products directly to customers. However, there is a third party involved in her case, which is the local buyer. The complex authority encourages her to utilize the space to create and sell her handloom products. Additionally, she has to manage her family responsibilities at home, effectively juggling multiple roles just like many other Meetei women are forced to do.

According to Suchana, traditional Meetei handloom products are not comparable to modern handloom items due to the latter's lower quality and the ability of Western handlooms to produce saris at a faster rate. She expresses concern about the potential replacement of their traditional handloom occupation by non-Meetei weavers and/or modern technology. Suchana worries about the sustainability of her market and emphasizes the importance of preserving traditional handloom designs and techniques under the control of Meetei weavers. She believes that the motifs and intricate designs on the cloths hold significant meaning and language specific to the Meetei culture, which non-Meetei weavers may not feel strongly about. For instance, the Moirang design on the sari is closely connected to Manipur, the ancestral homeland of the Meetei people.

Suchana also highlights the superior quality of traditionally made Meetei saris. She points out that it takes between three and four days to complete a Meetei sari, whereas non-Meetei weavers can produce a sari within a single day. However, the quality of their saris is poorer and lacks perfection. These non-Meetei weavers do not prioritize maintaining the high quality of sari production. Consequently, they sell their saris at lower prices in the market. For instance, a non-Meetei sari maker may make a profit of BDT 250 to BDT 300 (US \$ 3) per sari. In contrast, original Meetei sari makers are unwilling to compromise on either price or quality. They aim to make a profit of BDT 500 to BDT 600 per sari (US \$ 5/6). Furthermore, Suchana mentions that Meetei sari makers typically use cotton yarn in their production process. Other weavers use inferior linen yarn and other mixed yarns.

### **Imitation of Manipuri Handloom Products**

Respondent Laru also expresses his deep concern about the growing penetration of imitation Meetei handloom products in the local market, which poses a significant threat to the livelihoods of the community. He highlights that this is a recent strategy aimed at displacing their traditional products from the market. These imitation products originate from major clothing factories located in the Narsingdi and Tangail Districts, known for their large-scale cloth production. The primary imitation products include khudai (men's attire), Meetei saris,

phanek (lower body wrapper), and scarves, which are in high demand in the Bangladeshi market.

Laru emphasizes that these imitation products are printed, whereas authentic Meetei products are not. Authentic Meetei products maintain their authenticity and quality, and are entirely handcrafted using indigenous techniques and knowledge. He expresses his concern that the rapid proliferation of cheaply made machine-produced imitation products has created confusion among consumers. It has become increasingly difficult for them to distinguish between authentic Meetei cloths and imitation ones.

Another interviewee, Goura, appears to show less concern about these pirated products. However, this might not be surprising, as the researcher observed imitation Meetei saris in his shop and at his private residence in Dhaka. While he does not have clear knowledge of who produces these imitation goods in Bangladesh, he acknowledges that they have an impact on ordinary Meetei weavers in the country. Goura himself frequently visits Tangail to collect saris and has connections with large-scale sari traders, such as his friend Basak, who primarily deals with Tangail saris. These Tangail saris are widely available across Bangladesh, and Goura has also attempted to sell them alongside Meetei saris.

Goura mentions that Meetei weavers have expressed concerns about the influence of Indian Meetei saris in their market. This Indian sari business is predominantly operated by the Panggal community, which resides in significant numbers near the Bangladesh-India border areas, enabling them to monopolize the sari business in Bangladesh. As already stated above, this Indian Meetei sari trade has had a negative impact on domestic Meetei sari weavers. Indian Meetei weavers have shifted to modern machines at a lower scale, particularly in Manipur. As a result, Bangladeshi Meetei weavers struggle to compete with the attractiveness of Indian saris, which are more expensive compared to the locally crafted Meetei saris made using traditional wooden technology. Still, hand-made weaving products have more longevity than machine-made products.

Respondent Budha emphasizes the importance of maintaining the quality of Meetei saris as it plays a crucial role in the market. Meetei weavers never compromise on quality, but there is a possibility for buyers to confuse the original saris with imitations. However, regular buyers can usually discern the difference between the two sources of products. Budha also mentions that Meetei individuals today are less inclined to engage in agricultural work. He mentions reducing the work culture among the communities. The interview with Budha took place at night during a cultural performance of the *Thabal Chongba* dance or *Ougri Hangen Chongba*. *Thabal Chongba* is a moonlight dance performed by young adults. It is connected to the *Lai Harauba* festival and the movements of the serpent god Pakhangba. It provides an opportunity to select potential life partners and signifies the creation of generations and the importance of self-respect and care.

When inquiring about the Meetei weaving association, Budha mentioned that he had never heard of such an association among Meetei weavers in Bangladesh. There seems to be a lack

of motivation among Meetei weavers to establish a weaving association, and Budha is unsure if one exists.

Respondent Ranjita is a female handloom trader specializing in Meetei handloom products. She is an adult respondent who completed primary school and studied up to standard eighth form. The interview was conducted in both Dhaka and Tetai Gaon village. Ranjita expressed concern about the proliferation of piracy products in the Meetei handloom industry. She firmly believes that these imitation products cannot be compared to the original Meetei saris. While modern pirated saris only have designs on the surface, the original Meetei sari requires intricate designs on both sides, which can only be accomplished through manual finger-work. The border motifs, in particular, cannot be replicated easily by machines. It demands extensive knowledge, skill, and experience to work on the intricate designs of Meetei cloth.

One of the challenges faced by Meetei weavers is the transfer of handloom-making techniques to non-Meetei weavers such as the Bengali. These non-Meetei weavers do not possess the same cultural and professional weaving background. Some members of neighboring communities have learned the craft from Meetei weavers while working as assistants. Sometimes, the weavers do not find manpower or supporting persons. That compels to hire local Bengali assistants who become new competitors in the local market. At the initial stages of Meetei sari production, two persons are typically involved. The issue lies in maintaining product quality and adhering to cultural protocols, as these aspects are deeply intertwined with Meetei weaving and culture. As Gretchen (2020a, p. 125) argues, “value is how artists see their artworks as a tool for communicating their heritage and cultural knowledge.”

Ranjita emphasized that finding a weaving assistant from the Meetei community is not an easy task. Nowadays, young girls are focused on their education and are attending schools and colleges. They only have the opportunity to learn weaving on a part-time basis from family members during their free time. However, they are under pressure to learn this skill as part of their cultural heritage.

Ranjita further claims that the quality of saris made by non-Meetei weavers is not satisfactory. Their products do not meet the expected standards, and their craftsmanship does not reflect the artistry and passion that Meetei weavers possess. Non-Meetei weavers lack the innate connection and deep understanding of this art form. These unethical practices have led to a rapid decline in the production of high-quality Meetei products. When a Meetei woman creates a sari, she invests her best efforts to ensure its perfection and exceptional quality. For Meetei weavers, the products they create hold deep cultural significance. They are not merely items of clothing; they are an embodiment of their history, beliefs, and myths.

Ranjita stated that she had to close down some of her sari businesses in Dhaka, arguably also due to the imitation sari competition, even though they had been profitable for several years. She goes on to explain the significance of phanek and khudai, which are everyday garments worn by the Meetei community. These items are even easier to copy for both trained handloom weavers and machines compared to the intricate traditional Meetei sari-making process and further narrow the market for their traditional counterparts.

Additionally, Ranjita asserts that Meetei sari still holds value for customers. She maintains that she still possesses the ability to distinguish between different qualities and can identify whether weavers have maintained the expected level of quality during the production stage. Additionally, Meetei weavers use organic materials in the sari-making process, which is their secret, and they refrain from using any chemical substances. According to Ranjita, Meetei saris are still in demand in the market.

However, there have been instances where Ranjita could not meet the demand for Meetei saris. But she believes that these times have past, based on her recent experience at the Dhaka International Trade Fair. The Meetei sari has been a major attraction at the trade fair in Dhaka since its inception. Ranjita has been attending the fair regularly for the past 10 years and has even received recognition from the government as one of the best indigenous women entrepreneurs in the country. The sales volume of Meetei saris has always been impressive. However, recently she observed a significant decline in the interest in and attractiveness of Meetei saris among customers. Despite selling other handloom cloth items alongside Meetei saris at the fair, she could not pinpoint the exact reason behind this sudden drop in purchases, which had never before occurred in her 15 years of business with Meetei saris.

Respondent Kunjo highlights the presence of outsider retail sellers in Meetei villages, who bring imitation Meetei handloom products such as saris, *khudai* (men's dress), and *phanek*. This is an unfamiliar experience for the Meetei community. The prices of these counterfeit products are significantly lower compared to the original Meetei garments. For instance, a fabricated *khudai* is sold for BDT 80 (US \$ 1), while an authentic Meetei *khudai* is priced between BDT 300 and BDT 400 (US\$ 3/4) in the market. Similarly, a traditional Meetei *phanek* costs approximately BDT 500 to BDT 800 (US\$ 5/6), whereas a fabricated *phanek* is sold between BDT 200 and BDT 250 (US\$ 2).

This influx of imitation Meetei handloom products into the market is gradually causing the Meetei community to lose their market share and business. The Meetei have become aware of these fabricated Meetei cloths being available in towns and cities. However, what surprises and confuses them the most is the sight of retailers entering their rural communities to sell imitation Meetei handloom products. It is as if there is a deliberate attempt to invade their territory and displace the original Meetei products from the market. The Meetei community is deeply concerned about this situation and the impact it has on their livelihoods and cultural heritage.

### **Weavers and the State**

The lack of connections between Meetei weavers and the relevant government departments, particularly the Bangladesh Handloom Board, is a significant issue raised by respondent Goura. He highlights that the Meetei weavers are unaware of how to establish contact with the weaving board and other related agencies of the Bangladesh government. Additionally, they lack knowledge about the facilities and projects offered by the local government for the handloom sector. Goura suggests that the Meetei community needs to establish stronger connections with the Bangladesh government and its relevant departments. He emphasizes the importance of networking and connections in achieving success in Bangladesh.

Moreover, Goura mentions that most Meetei weavers are not even aware that a weaving board exists in Bangladesh. For instance, the Bangladesh Handloom Board allocated a shop for Meetei weavers in Sylhet, but the weavers have no knowledge of this opportunity. Unfortunately, this results in the misuse of the allocated shop by non-weaving communities, while the Meetei weavers miss out on potential benefits, contributing to the decline in demand for Meetei handloom products in recent years.

Goura also expresses concerns about the socio-economic condition of the Meetei community, stating that it finds itself in a highly disadvantaged economic position among indigenous communities in Bangladesh. He worries about the future of the Bangladeshi Meetei and the handloom industry, considering the lack of strategic planning and support. Lastly, Goura, who had once been a pioneer in introducing the sari business in Dhaka, stated that he had closed down his sari shop in the heart of the city. Previously, he used to collect various Meetei saris from local weavers and display them in his shop. However, he has now stopped collecting saris from the local Meetei weavers because he is not running his business anymore, which is a deeply troubling development for the weavers in the village. This change may have a negative impact on local weavers, potentially resulting in unemployment for some of them.

### **Retaining Techniques of Manipuri Cloths Manufacture**

The *Ningol chak-kouba* (women's annual festival) contributes to the weaving occupation. There is a strong connection between the gift-giving culture and the *Ningol chak-kouba* festival in Meetei society. Traditional cloth items are given as gifts during the festival. The Meetei women come to the festival attired in traditional Meetei dresses. Each woman, married or unmarried, receives a *phanek* (lower body wrapper) as a gift during the festival. The *phanek* is a daily item of dress for Meetei women. Sometimes, the program organizer provides traditional *inaphi* (upper body wrapper of the woman) and *khudai* (lower body wrapper of the men). It is a festival and gathering and tries to preserve age-old Meetei culture through this cloth-giving ceremony. Women are encouraged to wear their traditional dress to advertise their Meetei identity in Bangladesh. The hidden message is to encourage women to wear their traditional attire and protect it from the temptations of the modern market in Bangladesh. This is one of the strategies used to safeguard traditional handloom cloths in Bangladesh. Thus, the traditional clothes of the Meetei play a crucial role in maintaining the Meetei identity in Bangladesh.

### **Conclusion**

The research presented here focused on several key factors related to the Manipuri weaving community. First and foremost, weaving holds great significance for Manipuri women, reaching deeply into their identity and culture. Traditional cloth motifs are highly valued as they are deeply rooted in the community's cultural beliefs and identity. However, weavers face various constraints in the present context. They continue using traditional wooden looms but lack connections with the modern market and relevant stakeholders. Low literacy rates and the absence of knowledge of the weaving association further exacerbate their vulnerability. The weavers can form an active association so that they can make a market niche in Bangladesh. The lack of master weavers or change agents who can update motifs and products and understand

market trends also hampers the community's progress. Despite these challenges, weavers employ indigenous coping strategies to safeguard their authentic cloth production from the pressures of the current market, which brings both challenges and changes to the community.

The research also highlighted the prevalence of machine-produced imitations of Manipuri handloom items in Bangladesh. Additionally, local neighbors who produce Meetei cloth products using power-looms contribute to market saturation. However, these imitations and non-Meetei products lack the quality and authenticity of traditional Manipuri weaving. This influx of mass-produced items negatively impacts the viability of authentic Manipuri products. Nevertheless, weaving remains integral to Manipuri identity, intricately intertwined with their culture and beliefs. Thus, the community faces the challenge of sustaining the weaving occupation amidst the pressures of the modern market economy, which can lead to unemployment for the weavers. Ultimately, the modern market's influence affects local Manipuri livelihoods, culture, and identity.

The weavers of Manipuri handloom products employ local natural materials during the cloth processing, following the techniques inherited from their elders. The community also upholds the tradition of gifting cloths during local festivals, emphasizing the importance of retaining their cultural events and traditions. Weavers incorporate local motifs into their handloom products, further connecting them to their culture. Although producing handloom products is a time-consuming and labor-intensive process, weavers prioritize maintaining product quality, even if the production rate is lower. Each item they create is unique and holds cultural significance. As a result, authentic Manipuri handloom products continue to be in some demand in the market, contributing to the preservation and transmission of weaving techniques and knowledge across generations, predominantly passed down from female to female.

A number of suggestion might be made here. For one, the research findings highlight the necessity for state support in combating the proliferation of at least imitation products that negatively impact Manipuri identity and culture in Bangladesh. The country has a Copyrights Department under the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Law that can take appropriate actions against producers of counterfeit cloth using the existing laws of the land. Additionally, the Copyrights Department could play a vital role in safeguarding the intellectual property of Manipuri weaving products and their cultural motifs from being imitated in the market. Moreover, Manipuri weaving can sustain itself in the competitive market by maintaining product quality, utilizing an indelible product seal, and selling their items through a community weaving association. This way, they can ensure the authenticity and value of their products while protecting their cultural heritage.

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## **Memorialisation and Identity in Mahé, India: Revealing French Colonial Legacies**

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### Abstract

Mahé, nestled in the Mahé district of the Puducherry Union Territory in India, holds profound historical ties to French colonial India. Unlike the broader Indian subcontinent, which witnessed fervent anti-colonial movements against British rule leading to political decolonisation in 1947, Mahé experienced a belated political awakening, reluctantly integrating into the Indian Union in 1954. Despite the withdrawal of the French, the enduring legacy of French colonial ideology and culture continued to shape the ethos of Mahé. In contemporary times, a significant presence of French nationals in India, particularly in Pondicherry, Karaikal, and Mahé, has fostered the evolution of a unique linguistic identity known as Indian French. Within Mahé, landmarks such as St. Teresa's Shrine, the Statue of Marianne in Tagore Park at Cherukallayi, remnants of St. George Fort, and sculptures inspired by M. Mukundan's novel "On the Banks of the Mayyazhi" stand as tangible vestiges of the erstwhile French presence. Serving as repositories of bygone French culture, these sites emerge as dynamic arenas of memory production. Notably, Tagore Park in Mahé, adorned with fictional documentation through sculptures, assumes a pivotal role as a space that harmonizes memory and history, functioning as a reservoir for collective memory concerning French colonial rule. Mahé's deliberate urban planning reflects a nuanced approach, embodying the concept of a living testament to French colonialism rather than a conventional museum. This architectural strategy underscores the deliberate preservation and commemoration of Mahé's historical past. Through interviews with French nationals residing in Mahé, this research explores how these landmarks have become pivotal in the production of memories and the construction of identities for the French community in India and Mahé. Leveraging Maurice Halbwachs' theoretical framework, the study unveils the intricate interplay between collective memory and present-day identity formation, shedding light on the transformation of personal memory into historical memory and its subsequent amalgamation into collective memory. With close to 50 French families residing in and around Mahé still, the study involves interviews with ten families, focusing on landmarks like St. Teresa's Shrine, the Statue of Marianne, the ruins of St. George Fort, and sculptures based on one of M. Mukundan's novels. So, through interviews of the French citizens of Mahé, this paper highlights how the cultural artefacts and popular landmarks of Mahé become sites of memory of the French colonisation.

*Keywords:* Mahé, French colonialism, memorialisation, diffused museum, collective memory

Mahé, a town nestled in the Mahé district of the Puducherry Union Territory in India, holds a captivating historical significance deeply entwined with the era of French colonial India. Amidst the fervent anti-colonial struggles that swept the Indian subcontinent against British rule, ultimately culminating in political decolonization in 1947, Mahé only witnessed a delayed awakening of political consciousness at a later date.

In the early 18th century, the French East India Company strategically established a trading post in Mahé on the Malabar Coast, marking the inception of French influence in the region. Over the years, this presence led to the development of a thriving trading hub and the establishment of colonial administration. While the rest of India actively participated in anti-colonial movements, the people of Mahé remained relatively aloof. It was only after India gained independence from British rule that the residents of Mahé began to experience a political awakening. Despite the changing political landscape in the subcontinent, the French continued to control Mahé until 1954. Following extensive negotiations and diplomatic discussions, Mahé reluctantly joined the Indian Union. As the people embraced their newfound Indian identity, they had to come to terms with the departure of the French colonial administration that had influenced their lives for generations. The 1956 Treaty of Cession between France and India stipulated that Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahé, and Yanam would form a single administrative entity based on their historical ties with France, pending the populations' decision otherwise. The union territory status of Pondicherry implies central administration by New Delhi, resulting in substantial subsidies and greater prosperity for the territories compared to adjoining areas in their respective states (Rai, 2008).

Even after the French withdrawal from Mahé, the enduring legacy of French colonial ideology and culture continues to wield a profound influence on the town's inhabitants. This influence manifests itself in various facets of daily life, encompassing architecture, cuisine, language, and customs. Streets in the town still bear French names, and remnants of colonial-era buildings persist, serving as tangible reminders of Mahé's distinctive historical connection. This French influence extends beyond the physical realm, permeating the cultural fabric of the community. Mahé's residents have preserved elements of French culture, including culinary traditions, music, and art forms. Festivals and events hosted in the town celebrate this shared cultural heritage, fostering a sense of pride and belonging among its people. The historical link between Mahé and French colonial India persists in shaping the town's identity, serving as a testament to the enduring impact of colonialism and the intricate interplay of diverse cultures and histories. Mahé stands as a living testament to the cultural diversity and richness arising from the convergence of different influences, making it a distinctive and appealing destination for both visitors and historians.

Today, Mahé reveals a noteworthy presence of French nationals, particularly in Pondicherry, Karaikal, and Mahé itself. These individuals have embraced a French-Indian dialect, a linguistic development stemming from the historical French influence in the region. Additionally, Mahé, with its substantial historical connection to French colonial India, boasts landmarks that vividly recall the erstwhile French presence.

These landmarks play a pivotal role in preserving and promoting French culture in the region. St. Teresa's Shrine, established in 1736, not only holds religious significance but also stands as a testament to the deep-rooted French Catholic heritage in Mahé. The shrine's architecture showcases a fusion of French and Indian influences, exemplifying the cultural amalgamation during the colonial period. Another notable landmark is the Statue of Marianne in Tagore Park at Cherukallayi, symbolizing the French Republic's ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Remnants of Fort St. George, constructed by the French in the 18th century, stand as a significant historical landmark, offering tangible reminders of Mahé's colonial past. Although only fragments remain, they contribute to the narrative of French influence in the region. Additionally, Mahé features sculptures inspired by M. Mukundan's novel *On the Banks of the Mayyazhi*, a novel thematising the history of French colonialism and its aftermath in Mahé.

The setting of the novel *On the Banks of the Mayyazhi* is Mahé/ Mayyazhi, a former French colony in India. As with RK Narayan or Thomas Hardy, who wrote *Malgudy Days* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, novels based in and on specific locales, Mayyazhi is crucial in understanding Mukundan's fiction. The characters are moored in the history and politics of Mayyazhi, and the main protagonist of the novel is Dasan. Through Dasan, the past and present of Mayyazhi are unravelled, and the ambivalence of the people of Mayyazhi in challenging French colonial rule is evident. Though the people were campaigning for independence from colonial rule under Gandhian Kanaran who was the popular freedom fighter of Mayyazhi, the majority of the people did not hate the French. There were two groups of people in the town, one which romanticized the colonial rule and became compradors (intermediaries) and the other group who cherished the concept of freedom more and fought for it. The novel problematizes this bifurcation that existed in society and how people from both groups looked at the French presence of Mayyazhi.

The year 1954 marked a significant turning point in Mahé's history, and the evolution taking place then was not entirely peaceful. While there were undoubtedly peaceful aspects, tensions had been simmering for years leading up to the French withdrawal. The perception of the French colonisation by the local communities in Mahé varied. While some may have viewed them positively, particularly those who benefited from their presence economically or socially, others harboured resentment or felt marginalized by colonial policies. On the one hand, there was the older generation of people who romanticised colonial rule; and the young generation on the other, who valued freedom more. This created tension in the local community. It often stemmed from disparities in wealth, power, and the understanding of the concept of freedom, as well as cultural and political differences between the colonizers and the local population. Additionally, movements for independence and self-determination gained momentum during this period, further exacerbating these tensions.

This research will focus on how the cultural artifacts and popular landmarks of Mahé become sites of memory of French colonization, through interviews with French citizens of Mahé. The interviewees are individuals who obtained French citizenship and served in France, enjoying the facilities of citizenship by working in the French army or other companies. After retiring, they returned to their native place or place of origin as retired French Malayalis. Although they

are free citizens of the Republic of India, this is a small group of people' allegiance remains with the French government.

This research will also ask the following questions: How do monuments serve as a site for producing historical memory for the French citizens of Mahé? How is a fictional work legalised as an official history of Mahé? How do the sculptures inspired by M. Mukundan's novel *On the Banks of the Mayyazhi* emerge as powerful sites of memory production?

### Figures 1, 2, & 3

*Images of Sculptures Located in Tagore Park, Representing Chapters from the Novel "On the Banks of the Mayyazhi".*



### Figure 4

*The Statue of Marianne is the Symbol of French Revolution. The Slogan "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" Are Inscribed on the Statue, in French.*



**Figure 6**

*The Monument of Freedom Struggle. Build in Honour of the Anti-Colonial Freedom Fighters.*



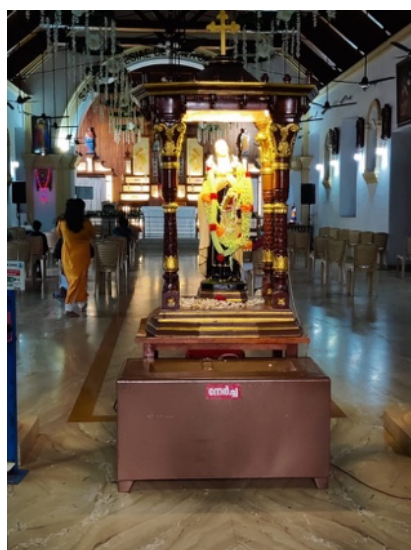
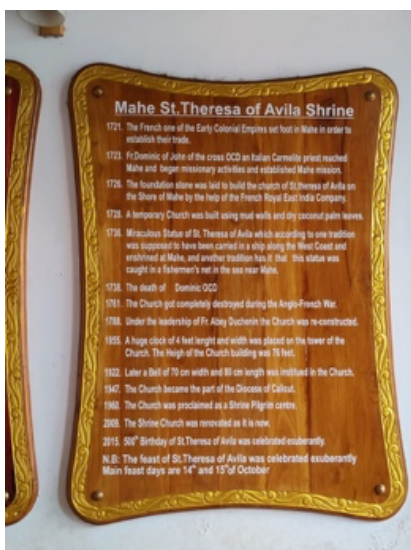
**Figure 7**

*Government Museum of Mahé. It Houses a Wide Collection of French Artefacts.*



**Figures 8, & 9**

*Pictures from the Church and the Wooden Plaque Inside, Displaying the History of French in Mahé.*





Today, the sculptures and monuments, depicting scenes and characters from the novel, found throughout Mahé contribute significantly to the creation of a unique cultural landscape. These artistic representations play a crucial role in shaping the local identity, fostering a sense of pride and nostalgia among the present-day French nationals living in India, and particularly in Mahé. Each landmark in Mahé, with its distinct historical and cultural significance, becomes a repository of the once-prevailing colonial French culture, and yet preserving and promoting its heritage against the challenges of time and change.

These sites are not merely physical artefacts; they serve as symbolic connections for French nationals in Mahé, allowing them to reconnect with their ancestral roots, reaffirm their cultural identity, and cultivate a sense of belonging within the Indian context. One of the interviewees for this study, Mr Balan, noted this scenario and said how the artefacts, especially the ones in Tagore Park, are places where people with French citizenship gather twice a year and celebrate the French national day. When they French citizens of Mahé come together at these places they are reminded of their days in France and how they lived their life under the French authority (Interview with Balan, 2022). Beyond personal connections, these popular landmarks in Mahé also act as sites of memory production and identity construction for French nationals living in India. They manifest the historical and cultural connections between France and Mahé, perpetuating a shared heritage and providing a sense of cultural continuity in a dynamic world.

In the domain of memory studies, scholars such as Tim Woods and Peter Middleton emphasize the role of memory in overcoming human limitations, making the past reappear in the present, and articulating the complex relationship between past, present, and future in human consciousness. (Home, 2002). Memory, they argue, plays a pivotal role in establishing a sense of identity. Further exploring the multifaceted nature of memory, researchers such as Warnock distinguish between “habit memory” and “conscious memory.” Habit memory pertains to learned skills or modes of behaviour, while conscious memory involves recalling past experiences, a defining factor that separates humans from non-humans (Home, 2002).

We claim that the prominent landmarks in Mahé, upholding the rich French culture, become active sites in the production of memories and the construction of identity for French nationals living in India. Personal memories thus transform into historical and, ultimately, collective memories among the French citizens of Mahé. The fictional documentation through sculptures in Tagore Park becomes a crucial site for memory production, serving as a nuanced intersection of memory and history. This place acts as a historical or collective memory of the French colonial rule in Mahé. The research also delves into the postcolonial experiences of those who have taken up French citizenship, examining the motivations behind the ongoing trend and exploring why some individuals continue to romanticize colonial rule in Mahé.

### **Memory Studies**

Memory holds the power to create the illusion of momentarily returning to a lost past, functioning as a mechanism that articulates the intricate relationship between past, present, and future within human consciousness. The crucial role of memory in shaping one’s sense of identity cannot be overstated. Dorothee Birke points out that, when grappling with the age-old

question of “Who am I?”, individuals often turn to their past, crafting narratives that juxtapose their present selves with remembered versions. This temporal self-comparison is integral to our sense of self (Birke, 2008).

Beyond being a foundation for identity, memory also plays a pivotal role in social interactions, as past details are used to validate conveyed images. Recognizing the social significance of memory, Kenneth Gergen characterizes it as a “form of social skill” (Gergen, 101). Sites in Mahé have evolved into crucial places of memory production. In the context of post-colonialism and political decolonization, the new middle class, shaped by colonial modernity, sought to preserve traditions, challenging the binary framework that opposed culture to modernity. This approach acknowledges that the conflict between tradition and modernity is nuanced, with overlapping elements present in both realms (Sreejith, 43).

In the early 1980s, Raymond Williams introduced the term “Cultural Materialism,” a theoretical movement aligning with new historicism. Williams posits that culture is a productive process, with literature, painting, and architecture serving as cultural materials that narrate the political struggles, economic structures, and social systems of a society. In Foucauldian terms, cultural materialism is crucial for unearthing alternative narratives that challenge dominant genealogical histories.

A distinctive aspect of post-colonialism in Mahé lies in the fact that, during political decolonization, Mayyazhi did not become an independent, sovereign state or remain part of France. Instead, it was ceded to another sovereign state, India. This situation precluded the development of an independent national identity rooted in their history or a reaffirmation of ties with France, its language, and its culture. Instead, the people of Mahé became absorbed into the Indian Union (Rai, 2008).

French Indians in Mahé undergo a multifaceted process of identity formation and personal memory construction. Various factors contribute to this intricate tapestry, shaping the experiences and sense of self within the community. This rich cultural heritage and historical significance, stemming from a combination of elements, creates a collective memory that defines the French Indian community in Mahé even today.

Mahé’s unique visual environment, which unites native and French architectural styles, is a result of architectural fusion. These architectural elements serve as reminders of the town’s historical ties to French colonialism, evoking nostalgia and cultural pride. They become touchstones, connecting French Indians to one part of their ancestral roots and reinforcing their sense of belonging. In general, efforts to recover and preserve historical memory are increasingly prevalent, especially in regions emerging from violent conflict. The importance of including victims’ voices in narratives of past suffering is acknowledged in memory studies. However, historical memory work faces challenges, notably the tension between history and memory (Kraft, 2022).

The Indian-French dialect spoken in Mahé is a testament to the linguistic and cultural exchange during the colonial era. This unique language variety, influenced by French and Indian

languages, serves as a marker of identity and community. Festivals in Mahé, blending French and local traditions, provide occasions for the community to showcase their cultural heritage. Especially the feast of St. Teresa's shrine and the festival of the Puthalam temple are celebrated by the people of Mahé irrespective of their caste or religion. These celebrations contribute to the transmission of traditions, sharing of stories, and reinforcement of cultural ties, forming a significant part of collective memory.

The interplay between places, architecture, dialect, festivals, and landmarks intertwines with individual narratives, creating a complex web of memories, cultural connections, and a distinct sense of self among the French Indian community in Mahé. Personal experiences and family histories, combined with these elements, contribute to the ongoing identity formation and personal memory construction within the community. Through this intricate interweaving, the French Indians in Mahé maintain a unique identity that reflects their hybrid heritage, historical legacy, and continued cultural contributions to the town and the broader region.

### **Theoretical framework and Research Design**

In exploring the connection between the French community members in Mahé and their historical memory, Olick and Robbins's social memory studies theory emerges as a valuable framework. This theory underscores the dynamic nature of memory, highlighting its role in shaping individual and collective identities. It emphasizes that memory is not a fixed record but a constructed and contested process influenced by social, cultural, and political factors.

According to Olick and Robbin, the social memory refers to the collective recollection and preservation of the past within a society. It encompasses the various ways in which individuals and groups remember and commemorate historical events, traditions, and identities. Social memory is not limited to personal or individual memory but extends to a community or society's shared and constructed memory. It is shaped by cultural, social, and historical factors and is influenced by practices such as commemoration, monument building, tradition, myth, and identity. The concept of social memory has been studied across disciplines such as sociology, history, literary criticism, anthropology, psychology, art history, and political science, and it is considered a non-paradigmatic, transdisciplinary, and centreless field of study. The understanding of social memory has been shaped by historical, cultural, and technological developments, and it has been influenced by significant events such as wars, genocides, and the rise of nationalism (Olick et al. 1998).

Complementing this, Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory provides insights into how individuals use present mental images to reconstruct their past. Halbwachs argued that individuals draw upon collective memory, which refers to the shared memories, values, and interpretations of a group or society, to reconstruct their own personal memories. This means that individual memories are influenced by the memories of the groups to which we belong, such as our family, community, or culture. Halbwachs argued further that collective memory is not static but is constantly evolving and being reshaped through social processes. As society changes, so too do the collective memories associated with it. This process of collective memory formation and reconstruction is essential for maintaining a sense of identity,

continuity, and belonging within a group or society (PLÉH, 2000, p. 435). Applied to the French community in Mahé, Halbwachs' theory reveals how their collective memory of the French colonial era influences present-day identity formation.

The semi-structured interviews with Mahé's French community members delved into their memories, experiences, and perspectives. The flexible format allowed participants to share memories of the past, connections to specific places, and how these memories shape their identity. Topics such as cultural practices, festivals, personal stories, and the significance of landmarks associated with the French colonial era were also explored. Oral history interviews with older community members offer insights into the transmission of collective memory across generations. Recording and documenting narratives through interviews reveal how memories are passed down, change over time, and contribute to the construction of French Indian identity. As part of the research, such semi-structured and recorded interviews were conducted at the houses of French citizens who lived in Mahé, with their permission. A questionnaire was used during the interview, and the Research Ethics Board of Christ the Redeemer University granted the project ethical clearance.

Documentary evidence, including historical documents and archival materials, provides the contextual framework for understanding Mahé's history and its impact on the French community. Official records, letters, photographs, maps, and artefacts shed light on the social, cultural, and political aspects of the colonial era.

### **Figures 10, & 11**

*French Artefacts Left Behind, Now Kept in the Mahé Museum*



**Figure 12**

*Framed Image of Mayyazhi River and Market during the Nineteenth Century.*



**Figure 13**

*Exchanging the Instrument of Ratification by the Representatives of India and France*



**Figure 14**

*French School of Mahé*



Engaging in overt observation of the French community in Mahé allowed researchers to document cultural practices, festivals, and events contributing to collective memory and identity. Immersing themselves in the community provided first-hand insights into how memory is performed, shared, and celebrated in daily life, adding depth to the understanding of the French community's historical memory. It emerged that the impact of popular landmarks in Mahé on the production of memories and the construction of identity among French nationals in India is profound. These landmarks act as tangible reminders of the town's colonial past and catalysts for the formation of personal, historical, and collective memory within the French community. Evoking personal memories among French nationals and locals alike, these sites become crucial in shaping (continued) individual and collective identities.

### Interviews

Interviews with members of Mahé's Indian-French community were undertaken in 2021 and 2022. It emerged that especially visiting landmarks such as St. Teresa's Shrine or witnessing the Statue of Marianne triggers specific memories of religious practices, cultural traditions, and encounters with French architecture and art. These personal memories contribute to individuals' sense of self and identity, fostering a deep connection with the French heritage and culture. According to interviewee Prameela, a French-Indian from Mahé, her identity is intricately linked to French citizenship and her profound connection with the town's French heritage. She holds a French passport and travelled to France multiple times with her family. The passport, along with a citizenship card, was issued to her by the Indian embassy of France. According to her, the St. Teresa's Shrine, the government guest house, the municipal office, and the Mahé Museum play a pivotal role in transporting her to the past, her cherished childhood days, and recalls the French colonial rule of Mahé. For Prameela, these sites hold memories that define her identity as a French-Indian, emphasizing the importance of citizenship in shaping her life in France without discrimination. "It is very rare that I get to go out to the town or to Tagore Park these days, but when I travel through those roads it feels like travelling through a memory lane as even the smallest shops that you see next to the Tagore park now has something to do with my childhood and my memory of the old Mahé. These places and artefacts are very close to my heart as it evokes a sense of personal memory for me".

Individual personal memories gradually transform into historical memory within the French community of Mahé. As personal experiences related to landmarks and the French colonial period are recounted and shared, these memories contribute to a broader historical narrative. Personal stories, anecdotes, and perspectives merge to form a collective understanding of the town's history. Historical memory, in turn, evolves into collective memory within the French citizens of Mahé. Shaped by social interactions, cultural practices, and collective experiences, this dynamic collective memory encapsulates shared interpretations, values, and narratives of the French colonial era. The interplay of personal recollections, historical accounts, and cultural practices continually shapes and enriches this collective memory.

Balan, who was already mentioned above, is a resident of Mahé with a 30-year service history in the French army, emphasizes the profound connection between the town and its landmarks and his French identity. Opting for French citizenship during a pivotal moment when the people

of Mahé had to choose between French citizenship or becoming Indian citizens, Balan's French-Indian identity is deeply intertwined with the town's landmarks. Celebrating the French National Day holds special significance for him, as he and fellow French citizens in Mahé gather on 14 July at their Association Building annually for this occasion. Before Covid-19, the celebration included a visit to St. Teresa's shrine and was followed by storytelling sessions, recalling memories of their past in Mahé and France. According to Balan, this ritual fosters a sense of attachment, allowing them to share personal memories, singing French songs, and enjoying wine and food – a day that reaffirms their French Indian identity and brings back sweet memories of their time in France.

Furthermore, the active participation of the community in the transmission of collective memory from one generation to another is evident through social interactions and shared experiences. Memories are transmitted through storytelling, family traditions, and community celebrations. As custodians of collective memory, the older generation, preserves and transmits narratives and experiences associated with the French rule, contributing to a dynamic and evolving process. Interviewee Pushpadas stated that “it is a festival like feeling when all of us get together at the *La Française*, which is next to Tagore Park, once in a while only we all meet there, but when we meet it is the time when people share their stories about travelling to France, their experiences of living in France and also a day when we all sing and dance together” (Pushpadas). The park is named after Rabindranath Tagore, a renowned poet and freedom fighter who played a significant role in India's fight for independence. It is a popular site for people to gather and reminisce about their past, as there are several monuments of French heritage located here. In India, many landmarks are named after nationalistic and freedom-fighting figures, and you can find a Tagore Park or Tagore Road in almost every state of the country.

The transmission of collective memory is not static; it undergoes reinterpretation and reshaping by successive generations. The younger generation, influenced by contemporary perspectives and societal changes, may romanticize French rule and express nostalgia for that period. This idealized perception can be attributed to a longing for perceived prestige and cultural sophistication associated with the French colonial era, as well as a response to the globalization of culture where individuals seek to assert distinct identities within a globalized world. The interview example of Pushpadas stands as an example of how the younger generation also gets influenced by contemporary perspectives. “Along with all the historical implication, my decision to take up the French citizenship came very recently; to be more precise, it was three years back I took the citizenship, and until then, I held Indian citizenship. There are many reasons for that, one being the historical past of Mayyazhi. The other important reason is the opportunity that it could provide; I hope one day I will also travel to France; if not, my daughter will get an opportunity to study there” (Pushpadas, 2022).

The decision of the younger generation to pursue French citizenship is an expression of their desire to reclaim and preserve their cultural heritage. By acquiring French citizenship, they establish a tangible link to their colonial past, solidifying their identity as French Indians. They feel a strong connection to both French and Indian cultures, appreciating the food, traditions, languages, and art of both backgrounds. On the one hand, they were born into the Indian culture

and participated in it throughout their childhood until they took French citizenship. On the other, they try to embrace the French culture, which they are now part of either by relocating to France or by interacting with other people who have taken up French citizenship. Halbwachs' theory of collective memory can be applied here to understand how the French community in Mahé uses present mental images to reconstruct the past and create their identities, with memories, shaped by social interactions and shared experiences passed down through generations. Social memory studies theory underscores that memory is embedded within social and cultural contexts, emphasizing that the collective memory of the French community in Mahé is influenced by the broader context of the neighbouring state of Kerala and interactions with local communities.

Halbwachs' theory also highlights power dynamics in shaping collective memory, acknowledging that memory can be selectively constructed and manipulated to serve specific interests. For the French community in Mahé, factors such as nationalism, cultural preservation, and the desire to maintain a distinct identity within the broader Indian context may influence the memory of the past. Applying social memory studies theory allows for an exploration of how the memory of the French colonial past shapes present-day experiences and identities, examining the construction, transmission, and contestation of memory within the community and its impact on social interactions, cultural practices, and a sense of belonging.

The sculptures inspired by *On the Banks of the Mayyazhi* emerge as powerful sites of memory production. In a striking juxtaposition of memory and history, these sculptures stand as tangible representations of the collective memory of the French colonial rule in Mahé. Each sculpture in Tagore Park narrates a story, capturing pivotal moments or characters from the novel that mirror the experiences and struggles of the people during the colonial era. The first few parts of the wall sculpture depict the French invasion of Mahé and the reaction of the people to the invasion. The second part of the sculpture depicts major events from the novel regarding French rule. These events portray how people from different generations and classes of society viewed French rule, mostly with respect and admiration. The sculptures stories continue until the point of the anti-colonial movement of Mahé and the division that arose among the people regarding their citizenship. They serve as visual reminders, preserving and commemorating the cultural heritage and historical legacy of French colonial rule. They offer a physical manifestation of collective memory, inviting individuals to engage with the past and participate in a meaningful dialogue about history and identity. Rama Das is a regular visitor to Tagore Park and believes that the sculptures are not just a reminder of Mayyazhi's history, but also living images that provoke visitors to think about Mahé's uniqueness and how its people viewed colonization and the concept of freedom. According to him the sculptures serve as a thought-provoking symbol of Mahé's past and present (Ram Das, 2022).

The significance of these sculptures is emphasized by the Authority Commissioner, who is the head of the Municipal office; he highlights their approval based on the novel's historiographic significance in detailing the history and freedom struggle of Mahé. The sculptures, therefore, not only serve as artistic expressions but also as accurate historical representations, providing a comprehensive understanding of the place's history, encompassing both the French rule and the freedom struggle (Authority Commissioner, 2022).



Tagore Park's sculptures become sites of historical memory and collective memory. Beyond their immediate impact, these sculptures play a crucial role in transmitting memory to future generations. The sculptures stand as potent symbols, encapsulating the lived experiences, struggles, and triumphs of the community during the French colonial era. Their preservation and showcasing underscore Mahé's commitment to acknowledging and safeguarding its historical legacy. By ensuring that the memory of the French colonial rule remains integral to its collective consciousness, Mahé guarantees the endurance of its unique identity and cultural pride through the passage of time.

Interviews also highlighted how the French community in India, particularly those settled in Mahé, benefitted from welfare schemes provided by the French government. Employment opportunities were made available, and financial support, including pensions and monthly allowances, was extended to French citizens in Mahé, including during the challenging times of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Pushpadas, who acquired French citizenship on January 8, 2022, attests to the manifold benefits of being a French citizen while residing in India. French citizenship, he asserts, opens doors to various opportunities. During the pandemic, Pushpadas received financial assistance upon request from the embassy. The embassy actively monitored his health and requirements, providing not only financial support but also ensuring the well-being of his daughter. Pushpadas expressed his intention to have his daughter take up French citizenship in the future, underscoring the belief that France and the French governance of Mahé play a pivotal role in shaping their collective identity (Pushpadas, 2022). This testimony reinforces the multifaceted role of French citizenship, not just as a legal status but as a crucial factor in the identity formation and well-being of the French community in Mahé.

Usha, who has lived in France for an extended period and currently resides in Mahé, reminisces about her life in France and contrasts it with her experiences in Mahé. She describes her life in France as a realization of her lifelong dream, characterized by a blend of social, political, and cultural changes. In France, she feels welcomed and embraced by the local community, experiencing a sense of unity akin to being part of a family. Everything from the fashion to the cuisine is distinct from surrounding Indian culture, prompting her to reflect on the French influence in Mahé and imagine how people must have lived during the colonial era.

The French government's support for the education of Indian children in France opened doors to employment opportunities, as revealed in the data collection and interviews. Notably, the French citizens of India encountered no caste, class, or racial discrimination while studying or residing in France. Mahé is viewed as a pensioner's retreat, however, and becomes a focal point for the community in their later years.

According to Halbwachs, collective memory can also be influenced by external sources such as media, education, and public discourse. It is a dynamic and evolving concept that plays a significant role in shaping group identity, social cohesion, and historical understanding (Russell, 2002). Today, cultural gatherings take place at Tagore Park and various other locations in Mayyazhi, where people come together to sing the French national anthem during

National Day celebrations and reflect on the town's colonial history. Additionally, the French Consulate organizes numerous seminars and activities, primarily held in Pondicherry, aimed at promoting research on the French heritage of Pondicherry, Mahé, and other French colonies. These initiatives offer opportunities for individuals to delve into the rich cultural and historical legacy of these regions.

In addition to its construction and transmission, Mahé's French colonial memory undergoes ongoing negotiation within the community. Discussions, debates, and reinterpretations of the past contribute to diverse narratives and understandings of this historical memory among individuals. As a tightly-knit community, Mahé's French citizens maintain strong connections through various means. They elect a local president for their group to represent them, rotating leadership after each term. This leader plays a pivotal role in organizing community events and gatherings, ensuring that the needs of the people are addressed. Through these organized exchanges and interactions, differing perspectives and ideas are freely shared among community members. This active engagement fosters the development of a range of narratives and interpretations regarding the colonial past within Mahé, enriching the collective understanding of their shared history. Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, inherently linked to Social Memory Studies, aligns with the idea that memory is not an isolated, individual process but a dynamic, socially constructed entity. Both theories underscore the influence of shared experiences, social interactions, and cultural contexts on the creation and maintenance of memory.

The French community in Mahé vividly illustrates the social nature of memory, as their collective recollections of shared experiences with the colonial legacy contribute to a tightly woven tapestry of identity formation. This collective memory, comprising tangible elements such as architecture and cultural practices, alongside intangible aspects like stories and narratives, actively moulds their self-perception in connection to their historical past and their engagement with the global community.

Through the interviews conducted, it became evident that the community's collective memory is not passive recollection but a dynamic force in constructing both personal and communal identities. According to Balan, "rather than being a mere passive recollection of the past, the shared memory of our past actively shapes both individual and communal identities. It is with these memories and identities that we come together as a community. This reflects on their heritage and shapes the sense of belonging in the present-day context" (Balan). This active agent intertwines the threads of their past with the fabric of the present, influencing how the community perceives its unique identity as bearers of a rich colonial history and post-colonial present.

Surprisingly, the French colonization in Mahé was perceived as benevolent by the natives, as there was little negativity felt among them, unlike the rest of India's sentiments towards British colonialism. Interestingly, the majority of French citizens in Mahé are not Christians but Hindus, who have not converted to Christianity. This continuation of Hindu traditions among future generations does not reflect the glorification of the French therefore, but rather a quality

of acceptance and inclusivity experienced by the community. They warmly and affectionately speak about their experiences in this regard.

The memory of Mahé's French colonial past significantly shapes the present experiences and identities of its French community. It plays a crucial role in how they view themselves in the context of the town's history and in relation to neighbouring communities. This historical memory serves as a key element in defining their collective identity, setting them apart as a community with a distinctive historical heritage. Moreover, it guides their interactions with visitors and tourists drawn to Mahé's rich history, functioning as a tool for cultural preservation, a source of pride, and a lens through which the French community engages with the broader world.

### **Conclusion**

The research conducted for this article uncovered a distinctive aspect of French colonialism in Mahé, setting it apart from other regions and emphasizing its unique historical context. This uniqueness stems from various factors, including the romanticized perception of the benevolent colonial rule by many, the significant number of individuals acquiring French citizenship, and the intricate interplay between memory and history. The unique aspect of French colonization in Mahé was also in the minimal bloodshed, with official records documenting only two martyrs. These aspects collectively contribute to the unparalleled legacy of French colonialism in Mahé. This insight proves instrumental in understanding the profound impact on memory and identity formation, particularly among the French citizens residing in Mahé. A key focus of the research was the exploration of how prominent landmarks in Mahé evolved into sites of memory production, serving as physical embodiments of the town's colonial past and preserving the memory of French presence and cultural heritage.

An integral finding was the deep intertwining of the identity of Mahé's residents with the ruins and monuments from the French colonial period. These physical remnants act as poignant reminders of the town's history and cultural heritage, actively shaping the collective identity of the community. Mahé, as revealed through the research, effectively functions as a diffused museum of French colonialism, where these structures serve as artefacts preserving and transmitting the memory of the past. The ruins and monuments transcend their physical existence, carrying symbolic and emotional weight that represents the enduring influence of French culture in Mahé. They not only contribute to the town's narrative but also foster a deep sense of pride and connection to historical roots among its inhabitants, despite and in contrast to the horrors colonialization wreaked upon the colonised.

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**Gender, Identity and Conflict: Militant Women and Feminist Assertion in  
*In the Shadow of a Sword: The Memoir of a Woman Leader in the LTTE* by  
Thamizhini**

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### Abstract

This article attempts to study the condition of militant women in conflict zones by exploring how Sri Lankan militant women who actively engaged themselves in the Sri Lankan civil war for more than two decades, were reifying their radical feminist self, amidst the adversities of war and its strenuous terrain. Further, the article attempts to study the life narrative *In the Shadow of a Sword: The Memoir of a Woman Leader in the LTTE* by Thamizhini, translated by Nedra Rodrigo, which depicts a realistic way of dealing with the struggles of war, with Thamizhini focusing primarily on the feminist aspects of the movement, including how female cadres evolved into formidable women over the course of the struggle, and how it all fell apart at the end of the war. It also tries to look into the militant identity that the Sri Lankan Tamil women built during the course of the war and the identity crisis that they have gone through in the aftermath of the war. It examines the positionality of female soldiers in conflict, peace negotiations, and national politics, by foregrounding how female combatants in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) transition from a female to a feminist phase during the conflict, and how this transition inverses in the aftermath. Furthermore, the article intends to investigate Thamizhini's past experiences and memories and how she came to terms with her past. This article aims to analyse the development of female soldiers' identities inside the LTTE, from their initial identification as “female” with feminine traits to their acceptance of a more “feminist” stance within the movement and throughout the course of the war by drawing on Toril Moi (1989) conceptions of female, feminine, and feminist identities. This framework further sheds light on the complex processes of constructing identities and agency among these women, extending the relevance of Moi's idea beyond the confines of women's literature and comprehending how the genre of life narrative represents and negotiates varied aspects of subdued gender identities.

*Keywords:* female competence, identity crisis, Militant woman, Sri Lankan civil war



This article examines the memoir *In the Shadow of a Sword* (2020) written by former LTTE chief Thamizhini, in which the author reflects on her experiences as a combatant, administrative officer, propagandist, and political chief in the LTTE. At the age of nineteen, Thamizhini joined the LTTE and spent nearly eighteen years serving in various units within the organisation. She regrets engaging in an armed struggle rather than seeking harmony through nonviolent means. She laments the status of her people, who have been pushed back 200 years, as well as the lives lost during the three-decade war. The sequence of events and traumatic episodes recounted by Thamizhini are examined using an autobiographical method in this study.

There have been numerous non-fiction and outsider accounts written about Sri Lankan wars that have focused on both sides of the conflict, Sinhalese and Tamil, such as Samanth Subramaniam (2014) *This Divided Island: Stories from the Sri Lankan War* and novels such as Nayomi Munaweer (2012) *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, which have depicted the turbulent experiences of both Sinhalese and Tamil citizens caught in the middle of the conflict. Only a few works, including Niromi de Soyzas *Tamil Tigress* (2011), narrate the autobiographical story of a former child soldier, and have depicted an insiders view of the battle. *In the Shadow of a Sword* depicts a more realistic way of dealing with the war struggle, with Thamizhini focusing primarily on the feminist aspects of the movement, including how female cadres evolved into formidable women over the course of the struggle, and how it all fell apart at the end of the war. This chronology of events from the beginning to the end of the LTTE movement depicts the LTTE womens development along the movement, making the narrative relevant to the research objectives of the study.

*In the Shadow of a Sword* can be perceived as a military memoir, as opposed to an individualistic memoir. A military memoir is heavily reliant on accurate data and authenticity. Authors of military memoirs are prohibited from disclosing particular details. They are caught between partial and full disclosure possibilities. According to Woodward and Jenkins (2018), the two goals of military memoirs are to present narratives that prioritize the individuals lived experience of military participation that claim authenticity on the basis of having witnessed the events, and to tell stories that are grounded in factual information about military participation. Harari (2007) says that to define military memoirs as a distinct literary genre is problematic: “Are retrospective attempts by combatants to construct a meaningful narrative of their wars-from diaries, letters, and other eyewitness accounts, which are written in the midst of war with very different intentions” (p. 290). The military memoirs written by the junior rank officers or the subordinates challenged the metanarrative of the war. Although the LTTE is no longer active, Thamizhini has kept her information at a minimum. This genre aids readers and academics in comprehending military history, warfare, conflict impulses, national and international politics, military agenda, and soldiers psychological state.

This article examines the positionality of female soldiers in conflict, peace negotiations, and national politics, as well as how female combatants in the LTTE transition from a female to a feminist phase during the conflict and how this transition reverses in the aftermath. It also intends to investigate Thamizhinis past experiences and memories, as well as how she came to terms with her past. This paper further attempts to look into the experiences of an author who

constructs or invents her “self” in the process of writing. To comply with the particular conceptions of identity, certain elements or experiences tend to have been omitted and the narrator constructs a semi-fictional reality or multiple identities. The demarcation between the narrator I and the narrated I and multiple narrated Is in the narration, relationship between the individual and the collective, connection of the individual to history and time are analysed through the Autobiographical method. The narratives coherence is assessed, as well as the digressions, omissions, contradictions, gaps, and silences left in the narrative are brought forth to determine whether they were done deliberately or unconsciously by the narrator. “Writing back” is a strategy used by the narrators to gain agency. They perpetuate certain cultural identity codes by contradicting or interrupting the normative. This paper lastly addresses the experiences of Thamizhini when constructing or inventing herself in the process of writing. This latter development is not surprising. In his book *Fictions of Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*, Paul John Eakin (2016) for instance argues that autobiographical writing is a form of self-invention that constitutes the self (p. 140).

Historically, women have been the victims of all kinds of violence committed during a conflict, along with children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and members of the LGBTQIA community. However, women suffer the most and are more vulnerable to sexual assault as a result of military atrocities and state-sponsored terrorism. They are excluded from participation as equal stakeholders and denied access to basic necessities in areas affected by war. In the Rwanda Genocide that took place in 1994, between 100,000 and 250,000 women were raped during the three months of the state-sponsored violence and Rwandan women faced brutal acts of sexual violence: individual rape, gang rape, rape with objects, sexual slavery or forced marriage, and sexual mutilation (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Similarly, systemic collective violence against women occurred during the 1995 war in Bosnia. Between 10,000 and 50,000 women are believed to have been raped throughout the war, according to UNHCR estimates. As Singh (2010) writes: “Rape is one among these brutal and deliberate manifestations of systematic domination of women. And yet, it remains a largely unquestioned weapon of war” (p. 1). Domestic abuse and sexual violence become a daily occurrence in women's life, and are frequently devalued in the conflict zones. Most of the countries from the Global South become the centre for political, religious and ethnic conflict.

Women become both victims and perpetrators of violence according to the conditions in which they take lethal action, whether to defend their nations or themselves from violence. Even though men make up most militant and terrorist organisations, several militant organisations have primarily recruited women for various reasons. Boko Haram, a terrorist organization based in north-eastern Nigeria, employs a large number of young women and girls as suicide bombers (Darden, 2019). In comparison to women in the Global North, numerous women in the Global South join militant organisations. While many women fight for their countries and peoples liberation, others strive to end patriarchal tyranny, sexual assault, and other forms of domestic cruelty. Women have also been recruited for strategic reasons by groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the German Red Army Faction, the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Naxalite-Maoist and Al-Shabaab. De Mel (2002) challenges the idea that nearly all women join militant organizations in the delusional notion that they may exact revenge on those who have sexually assaulted them (p. 103). However, a large number of

women enlisted in militant groups to fight for national liberation, change the social status of women and achieve collective emancipation. In addition, they have worked to truly empower women by fostering environments that allow them to take charge of their own lives and by developing crucial frameworks and interventions in their neighbourhood using a gender-inclusive perspective. For instance, the Naga Mothers Association (NMA) in Nagaland has worked to improve the community and restore peace following the conflict.

The LTTE began as an ethnic separatist organisation fighting the authoritarian Sinhalese army in 1976. The ensuing civil war lasted from 1983 to 2009. The three-decade conflict was termed one of the worst wars of the twenty-first century. In the north-east of the island, the LTTE sought to establish Tamil Eelam, an independent Tamil state. Since the post-independent period, many Tamils had been persecuted. The ethnic strife between the Sinhala government and the Tamils was ignited by the Standardisation Act of 1972, the destruction of the Jaffna Public Library in 1981, and the 1983 anti-Tamil riots. During the 1970s, many Tamil nationalist organisations arose, but the LTTE emerged as the most rigorous armed guerrilla movement.

The war has subjected Sri Lankan Tamil women to unfathomable human rights violations. The Sri Lankan army, police, and pro-government Tamil paramilitary groups often engaged in rapes, and numerous women have been subjected to torture. According to a 2013 report by Human Rights Watch: “there appears to be no category of Tamil who, once taken into custody, is immune from rape and other sexual violence” (p. 36). Sri Lankan Tamil women began joining militant groups to defend themselves from sexual violence, exact revenge for the deaths of their family members, and fight for a greater cause – the liberation of Tamils from Sinhalese domination. As Jordan and Denov (2007) writes: “...factors such as nationalistic beliefs, the experience of rape and sexual violence by Sri Lankan government officials, the search for security, and the loss of loved ones provide women with particular incentives to join the LTTE” (p. 53).

Adele Ann Balasingham (1993) in her book *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers* writes: “With such a horrendous history of genocidal destruction forming part of their consciousness Tamil women cannot be anything other than fiercely patriotic” (p. 32). The pervasive social constraints that existed in the Tamil community as well as the masculinization of militant nationalism (Jani, 2022, p. 198) were shattered by the participation of Sri Lankan Tamil women in the struggle. The female combatants occupied 15–20 percent to one-third of their core combat strength (Alison, 2003, p. 39). Men and women received equal combat training from the LTTE. Many women served in the Black Tigers and Sea Tigers, special fighting squads that worked closely with the leader and were also trained to perform suicide attacks: “Out of 23 suicide attacks conducted by the LTTE that aimed for high-value targets (politicians and top-ranking officials) and security establishments around the country, 15 were perpetrated by female cadres” (Dissanayake, 2009, p. 4–5). When women first entered combat, they had to prove their mettle by engaging in equal combat with males and using weapons. Scholars have criticized the female warriors for trying to attain liberation by violence, however, the mobilization of female fighters brought about a new identity and gender reconstruction in the Tamil community.

The LTTE had the following objectives for Eelam: They were to eliminate all forms of discrimination against Tamil women to achieve social, political, and economic equality; to ensure that Tamil women have control over their own lives; and to ensure that women are protected from sexual harassment, rape, and domestic violence through legal means. The LTTE used feminist propaganda to entice Tamil women to join their cause. Those who joined voluntarily were all drawn in by the LTTEs feminist objectives (Alexander, 2014, p. 23). The LTTE also implemented numerous womens welfare programmes to improve the condition of Tamil women to promote their active involvement in the movement. Thamizhini recalls being given the task of supervising ten women who were responsible for running a brush factory on their own. The goal of this endeavour was to provide work possibilities for Tamil women. The project turned out well under the guidance of Thamizhinis and the womens dedication. She writes: “Though it could only garner them about 3000 rupees a month in income, in those circumstances that project was a huge help to them” (p. 51). In the conflict zone, the LTTE women also demonstrated exceptional leadership qualities and survival tactics. The LTTE leader had established an ideal society for women in Tamil Eelam, where none of the LTTE men had the courage to abuse their women. Even the LTTE males have shown themselves to be great protectors who were likewise concerned about the safety of Sinhala women.

In her book, *The Island of Blood*, Anita Pratap (2001) describes her trip to Sri Lanka to meet the LTTE leader. She claims that the LTTE chief had reared his boys (male soldiers) in a disciplined manner since she never felt threatened in their presence for being a woman. Women martyrs were also honoured, and their commitment to the cause was recognised alongside male martyrs. Malathi, who died in a fight with the IPKF in 1987, was an idol of the movement. Her death was commemorated with a statue, and her death anniversary was proclaimed “Womens Awakening Day.” The LTTE chief bestowed various responsibilities onto the women. Thamizhini was in charge of three Womens Fronts: the education division, the “Birds of Freedom,” and the Political Science division, in addition to her propaganda duties in other places. The LTTEs female combatants were caught between three ideas that drove them to join the struggle. The first is their admiration for their leader, the second is their desire for Eelam, and the third is their dream of empowerment and liberation. A fourth one, the desire for weapons, could also be added here. The second and third ideas echo the positive affirmation of feminism, where on the one hand they fight for their people and on the other, they seek empowerment, but having a great admiration for a patriarch and love for weapons is the polar opposite of the other two, and most of the LTTE women who joined as young recruits seem to fall into the first and fourth category, which can be seen as negative affirmations. However, others who joined merely to escape a traumatic occurrence left the organisation as soon as they joined because the oppression and monotony that they encountered within the movement did not provide them with the independence they desired.

### **Locating Thamizhinis Memoir in the Context of LTTEs Militancy and Civil War**

Following the civil wars end, the militant women lost their political stature. Their lives were reduced to a “bare life”, as defined by Agamben (1995) in his book *Homo Sacer*, where he claims that the “bare life” is composed of exclusion from the polis and inclusion in the form of exclusion, while also simultaneously exposing the lives to unfettered violence. In the years

following the war, this “inclusive exclusion” state persisted in the lives of the militant women. The marginal status that female militants hold in society is made obvious by the romanticization of female militants during the war and the total obliteration of their existence after the war. While female militants are perceived as the oppressors or the perpetrators of violence during the pre- and post-war periods in Sri Lanka, their identities as political actors of the state are erased during the post-war period, and they are compelled to accept their former identities as victims. Even though LTTE female militants actively participated in the civil war and assisted the movement in achieving its many goals, they were not viewed as equivalent to the male militants, which limited the prospects for women to receive reintegration support after the conflict.

Many women were captivated by the LTTE women warriors, who could break down all traditional barriers, from dress code to political knowledge. Alison (2003) describes an LTTE woman named Sumathi and her motivation to join the fight. She became inspired by observing the LTTE women “doing everything” (p. 44) during her childhood and aspired to follow in their footsteps. In her text, *The orders were to rape you*, Meena Kandasamy (2021) expresses her admiration for LTTE women who defied gender norms and could build an independent identity for themselves. One of the respondents in Jordan and Denovs (2007) article states: “At home, you are just another pretty face... whereas once you go into the movement, you are now important for the motherland; you have done something for the liberation, something important, as opposed to just being another person” (p. 55).

Women in the LTTE found themselves liberated within the movement, and they saw themselves as equals to the male soldiers. They even subconsciously identified themselves as male cadres. However, others such as Thamizhini, constructed a “feminist self” during the movement. Although the women in the LTTE were given the same combat training as the men, fought on the front lines, and were the direct instigators of some of the worst attacks, they could still exercise their freedom to a certain extent, within the parameters set by the LTTE command and other male leaders. A military or militant group always followed a chain of command, and women were always at the bottom of the hierarchy. Only a few women were chosen for the positions of brigadier and chiefs, and even then, they had to report to a male commander, thus replicating the patriarchal model of the Tamil society. The majority of the economically underprivileged women were compelled to join the LTTE as a result of the dreadful circumstances, while the economically secure women fled to other nations. They were discouraged from taking part in peace discussions or discussing political strategies because many of them only had a rudimentary education, and some of them did not even have that. Very few female militants, like Thamizhini, were “allowed” to be “present” in the peace discussions; this privilege was not extended to other women. As Jordan and Denov (2007) writes: “The LTTE military infrastructure is modelled closely to Tamil society whereby conventional standards of Tamil culture are adopted and implicitly reproduced in the insurgents groups system of values and customs.... moral restriction on pre-marital sexual relationships, and the need to request permission to leave the movement, is highly reminiscent of traditional (and gendered) Tamil culture” (p. 58).

The Tamil community perceived the LTTE women soldiers as a substitute for male militants, not as individuals who had shed their feminine selves and adhered to a new female self that they had fashioned for themselves, devoid of almost any gender conformity. The militant women defied gender conventions and achieved the traits of masculinity, and over time, they unintentionally built a sense of self that is free from any masculine suppression. During the battle, they developed an ambivalent identity, trapped between the experiences of performing one gender identity and transgressing into another, something Senanayake (2001) calls “ambivalent empowerment” (p. 111). Meegaswatta (2019) calls this position as “transgressive gender fluidity” (p. 38). Women in the LTTE were both empowered and victimized. The women of the LTTE fantasised about a utopian world where they could live with peace and security. They were unaware, however, that they were being made to perceive Eelam through a patriarchal ideology set for the future nation. The women of the LTTE regarded the commander as a father figure, a patriarch who would ultimately approve or disapprove each of their decisions. The LTTE women were ignorant of the fact that the very factor that gave them empowerment was also what depriving them of it. This is what caused the crystallisation of a feminist self to disintegrate. Dissanayake (2009) criticises the movement and how women’s status was supposedly elevated, but simultaneously exploited for strategic and tactical advantages (p. 1).

As told in the memoir, the women brigadiers in Mullaitivu were unable to make independent choices until the last day of the conflict. They couldn't even choose whether to live or die; they had to wait for their male superiors' command. Women were primarily recruited by the LTTE for the self-detonation scheme because officials believed that women could more readily deceive the army, which considered them vulnerable targets. Within the movement, women were excluded from decision-making, political discussions, and command. The Black Tigers and Sea Tigers were members of the LTTE's top cadre, which included the majority of women, and their primary mission was to self-detonate and complete the task assigned to them. “Within the Movement, criticizing the Leaders' decisions, or questioning them, was considered almost a religious taboo. The growth of this practice, which eventually erased any criticism or debate within the Movement, also paved the way for its utter destruction” (p.114). Jordan and Denov (2007) note that, “alongside discipline, loyalty appears to carry a significant meaning for women at every stage of military involvement” (p. 50). It proved relatively simple for the female militants to conform to the same structure that existed in the movement since the role of women in Tamil culture is symbolized by a conjugal allegiance to the family, especially to the men in their community.

Although they were members of the highest cadre, there is no record of their taking part in decision-making. Radhika Coomaraswamy (1997) has spoken of LTTE women who “are not initiators of ideas, they are only implementers of policy made by someone else, by men... They become cogs in the wheel of someone else's designs and plans... They are the consumers, not the producers of the grand political project” (p. 47). Thamizhini had suspected that the LTTE officials were stringent in even trivial situations and that they lacked political expertise, but she had never had the thought or the guts to speak about it. She writes: “It was beyond even our dreams to distinguish between right and wrong in the actions and decisions of the Movement or to subject them to any kind of intense scrutiny” (p. 59). When recalling the last stages of the

battle, Thamizhini emerges as an outspoken feminist. She employs an anti-patriarchal strategy while criticising the movements silences, gaps, and digressions. Though she sensed patriarchal oppression initially, she struggled to overcome it, and in the subsequent chapters of the memoir, she emerges as a conspicuous feminist. In Chapter 7, “A False Peace and Disrupted Civilian Life,” she criticises the leader for his rigorous behaviour, which for her ultimately led to the breakdown of peace negotiations.

At the end of the battle, the LTTE women were regarded with awe and respect. Both the Tamil and Sinhala communities held them in high regard due to their camouflage outfit and weaponry. There was a clear distinction between how LTTE women carried themselves and how other women did, but the LTTEs feminist projects long-term viability was hampered by their defeat in the conflict. In Tamil society, women who are raped are seen as a social disgrace. Several LTTE fighters were raped and killed as the Sinhala army attacked them during the last stages of the war. Survivors of the struggle were shunned, and many were severely traumatised by the fact that they could not freely reveal their true identity to others. Many women regretted joining the movement as they lost their femininity as a result. Thamizhini writes: “they see me, or they sneer at me. I hear voices behind my back, These ones could have bitten the cyanide (capsule) rather than come back alive. Like a dud coin, I have no value.” (p. 75).

The LTTE women veterans, both abled and disabled, were labelled as unmarriageable. The abled were ignored because they were suspected of having been raped or subjected to other forms of abuse, while the disabled were ostracised for suffering from incapacity. The LTTE women were exposed to a brutal visage in Sri Lankas post-war environment. Thamizhini understands the position of Tamil women in general and her location within the community in particular. In her self-reflection, she clearly understands and criticises the oppressive structure of the movement. She writes: “Just as we were raised to be docile in the family, so we were raised to be obedient female fighters of the Movement, with rigorous military training” (p. 77). Thamizhini uses self-reflection as a means of critiquing and deciphering her past experiences. Her past twenty-year lifespan had been spent in the movement and therefore deconstructing her past experiences can help one to understand the movements virtues and flaws, as well as its feminist policies. In the course of writing, she acknowledges that the movement had no long-term principles or strategies for women’s liberation. Thamizhini engages in an autobiographical discourse to “renegotiate her cultural marginality” (Smith & Watson, 2013, p. 141) that she had experienced within the movement and also in Tamil society at large.

### **Resilience, Gender Role, and Identity Reconciliation of Sri Lankan Tamil Militant Women in Post-War Society**

Thamizhini reconstructs the normative and gains agency by narrating both her accomplishments and failures within and outside the movement. She discusses her and other LTTE womens various military operations, such as bomb attacks, suicide strikes, and other exploits, in an attempt to reclaim the Tamil community’s lost respect for their women. She regrets having committed innumerable acts of violence and causing terrible loss and despair to her own people but emerges as a formidable personality capable of repairing her own identity and the lives of her people. In the final chapter, where she describes her experience at the

rehabilitation centre, she sensibly analyses each criticism she hears rather than being devastated by it. She mends her shattered psyche. She writes: “I began to feel determined that just as the eagle renewed itself and arose to fly with new strength, I too would strengthen myself” (p. 185). Nonetheless, she could not forget the war's tragic last phases. She writes: “The sea of Mullaitivu and the many faces I cannot forget moved as a procession through my heart” (p.188). She laments the loss of her femininity after the war, which validates the supposition of the pseudo-feminist agenda of the movement. After the conflict, her militant identity was annihilated by the duties and obligations that came with being a woman in the traditional Tamil culture. She writes: “I had dashed my mother's hopes and brought her a lot of grief, and had been no use as a woman, even up to now” (p. 156). Thamizhini discovers her role in the war-torn society and is able to grasp its realities for the first time. She claims that when she first saw the children who were thrown into the trucks as IDPs, her heart began to burn and she was unable to even look at their faces. Thamizhini, who had become accustomed to the movements practice of forcibly enlisting young children as soldiers, could not bear to see children being loaded onto trucks after the battle. This shows how aspects of her suppressed feminine identity were exposed in the face of the conflict. When her other fellow cadres concealed their identities and fled, Thamizhini faced reality and confronted the Sinhala officials. This demonstrates that she had begun the process of embracing reality. She openly confronts and contemplates her past. She speculates about the movements objective and her position in it. She admits that she is a perpetrator of violence. She writes: “But I too have been a cause of destruction and the loss of lives in the name of liberation” (p. 165).

Thamizhini's strength and bravery were replaced by dread and humiliation in the aftermath of the war. She suffers extreme disgrace since society has forced the female militants to believe that every woman who has participated in the conflict has lost her virginity. The irony and prejudice of the patriarchal society has been highlighted by the fact that the rape victims, who were praised after joining the movement and whose predicament was used for political gain, were treated with the utmost contempt after the war. She writes: “The society that is content to benefit from that sacrifice during the war, looks askance at her life after the war. The bodies of sexually assaulted women are displayed for political gains” (p. 167). Thamizhini had undergone numerous psychological torments that would have prevented her from surviving, but she has managed to successfully reintegrate into society by merging her feminine and feminist identities. The powerful military image she presents, in the beginning, is overthrown by a woman who is brimming with compassion. But this does not imply that Thamizhini had lost her feminist identity; rather, she had truly found emancipation in the rehabilitation centre where she got the opportunity to meet Sinhalese and Tamil women and children. She also rejects the belief in the institution of marriage in the Tamil societal structure. She says: “I didn't know if I could bow to pressure and accept the role of a wife, sweep the house, cook a variety of dishes, wash clothes, go to the temple and observe fasts and live my life as a doll” (p. 191–92). However, she concludes her memoir with a story about her marriage, which is diametrically opposed to her former personality, but also represents her coming to grips with her past and constructing a new identity. Here the work of Toril Moi is helpful, as she (1989) writes: “I will suggest that we distinguish between feminism as a political position, femaleness as a matter of biology and femininity as a set of culturally defined characteristics” (p. 117). Thamizhini's reversion to society's expectations demonstrates that she has transitioned from a



political to a biological position, but she has acquired a unified identity because of witnessing the movements failed pseudo-feminist agenda, prison experience, and rehabilitation program. She works on her inner peace by confronting her past experiences, which aids her in developing an identity largely devoid of gender stereotypes.

This fractured identity also works itself into the structure of her memoir. As Smith and Watson (2013) write: “The photo at once gives flesh to the narrator, embodying her for the reader, and creates a phantom narrator, thereby dematerializing her” (p. 170). In their article titled “The Role of visual imagery in autobiographical memory”, Greenberg and Knowlton (2014) argue: “Visual imagery was correlated with the feeling that they were reliving their memories” (p. 922). Further, they contend that autobiographical memories rely substantially on specific sensory–perceptual data, with visual imagery being the most basic form of this data (p. 923). Through the visual images, she presents in her autobiography the idea of reliving in her memory. It begins with a photograph of her as a toddler and culminates with a photograph of her as a married woman. In between, she offers several photographs shot in her military uniform with senior LTTE officials and key foreign delegates. Her garments, gestures, and attitude have all changed dramatically, indicating her empowerment within the traditional Tamil culture. Her feminist persona is portrayed through her camouflaged outfit, handgun-carrying belt, and cyanide necklace. She solidifies her militant status with the photographs, demonstrating that she is not trying to disguise the fact that she partook in several violent acts. She exhibits a picture from one of her visits to a rehabilitation centre in Galle in 2013, where she was greeted by Sinhalese mothers when she arrived. Her image here is a sharp contrast to her former self, displaying humaneness in the manner she converses with the Sinhalese woman. This image demonstrates that she has only partially reconciled with her past and is still rebuilding her life and psyche. She writes: “I overcame the guilt that often incapacitated me, and gathered the courage to face the challenges of the world once again” (p. 192). Her picture as a married woman, on the other hand, demonstrates that she has reverted to conventional norms, but her self-assurance is intact. Her fortitude and determination, which she displayed earlier, are still perceptible in her wedding photo. She is on an equal footing with her partner, which showcases her truly emancipated self.

## Conclusion

The LTTE women found themselves contending with the repercussions of the three-decade war after having being exploited by both sides during the war. Though some gave in to the conflicts residual effects, other female militants mustered the fortitude to survive despite the hostility they experienced in the post-war period. Authors of memoirs and autobiographies demonstrate both bravery and vulnerability. The LTTE women, who were heavily exploited by both sides during the conflict, went through a lot even after the war had ended. Autobiographies have been used as a form of therapy for military members who have used them to break free from their rigid selves and reveal their flaws. Thamizhini is unafraid to talk about the ebbs and flows of her life. Her status as a militant woman questions society's gender stereotype. Her feminist views are well-documented in her memoir. Her text also exemplifies her political transition from an individual woman to a militant feminist subject. In the research on female militants that has been conducted thus far, there continues to exist an appalling lack of representation of these women's situations in post-war society and the challenges they confront in reintegrating into society. In Thamizhini's case, the life narrative genre gives militant women a platform for articulating their experiences during the movement and in the aftermath of the conflict, thereby enhancing their sense of agency and empowerment in their society.

This article has made an effort to highlight the challenges that militant women encounter in post-war Sri Lankan society where patriarchal structures continue to dominate and how they resist these male-centred narratives to forge their own identities by restoring their subjectivity. Furthermore, the article placed Thamizhini's experience into perspective within the broader field of women's writing in war zones. The complex interactions between gender, conflict, and subjectivity in conflict zones have been delineated by foregrounding Thamizhini's experiences during the war, her activities in the movement retaining various positions, and her encounters with fellow citizens in the post-war society. This article also emphasized militant women's determination to navigate the complex landscape of post-war society and their unwavering resolve to forge their own distinctive identities and claim their agency to reshape their lives in the aftermath of the war. Finally, this article analysed female militia members' contributions to peace-building efforts and post-war reconciliations through the lens of Thamizhini's personal account.

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**Product Placement in Films: A Comparative Study of American and Chinese Consumers' Attitudes**

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### **Abstract**

This study delves into the differing attitudes of Chinese and American students regarding product placement (PPL) in major motion films. It employs a theoretical framework comprising three key aspects of PPL: its historical evolution, brand integration, and past perceptions. The research employs two primary research methods, questionnaires and focus group interviews, in order to gather insights and opinions from consumers on their views and attitudes toward PPL. Drawing upon the findings from the questionnaires and insights obtained through interviews with Chinese and American consumers, it reveals two distinct sets of attitudes: Chinese participants predominantly express strong reservations about PPL, while a majority of American respondents present diverse arguments in support of its efficacy in the American media ecology in general and in films in particular. While data collection for this study was undertaken already in 2015, this data is nevertheless worth analyzing, both for historic reasons as well as for revealing continuing differing trends in different cultures regarding their media awareness.

*Keywords:* American students, Chinese students, cognition and attitude, consumer attitudes, product placement, survey

Since the 1980s, PPL has gained significant attention and become an integral part of daily media life in China. In other parts of the world, most notably in the USA, such PPLs reach back to the beginning of films around the turn of the 19th century and early television in the 1950s. The following literature review covers the historical development of such PPL, but also related phenomena such as brand placement, and individual attitudes towards early brand placement. In a second step, this study examines the contrasting attitudes of Chinese and American students towards PPL in films, using prior scholarly work to inform the research.

The existence and accumulation of ever more expansive PPL in films begs the following questions: How do consumers and audiences view such placements. Are they satisfied with them? Do they accept them? Do they care? Are there regional or national differences? In order to answer these, the study at hand employed qualitative surveys, focus group and KPI interviews. Additionally, a quantitative survey was conducted with 30 Chinese and 30 American participants to provide crucial samples for analysis. The data analysis phase focused on ten key questions answered by both Chinese and American participants, using ten charts and diagrams to visualize the responses. Important questionnaire items included participants' film-viewing habits, the perceived impact of PPL on their lives, and the reasons for their (qualified) acceptance or rejection of it. Lastly, six in-depth conversations with students from two universities took place, three in the USA and three in the UK, providing unique insights into participants' attitudes towards PPL and offering specific reasons for their communicated preferences.

## Literature Review

### Historical Evolution of PPL

PPL in movies is defined as strategically featuring products in films or TV shows to influence viewers. It has grown significantly in recent years (Balasubramanian, 1994). This practice, involving the inclusion of consumer products in major Hollywood studio films for fees or promotional exposure, already in 2000 came at an estimated annual cost of approximately \$1 billion for films alone (Mueller, 2001).

PPLs' roots reach back to the late 19th century when the Lumière brothers featured Lever's Sunlight Soap in their early film experiments (Suang & Gregorio, 2008). The 1930s saw the U.S. tobacco industry engaging movie stars for brand promotion (McKechnie & Zhou, 2003). Branded products began to appear conspicuously in Hollywood films from 1945 onward, as exemplified by Joan Crawford endorsing Jack Daniels bourbon whiskey in "Mildred Pierce" (Reed, 1989). PPL seems to work, as the following example demonstrates: The success of "E.T." in 1982 with "Reese's Pieces" candy placement led to a remarkable 66% sales increase of the product in just three months (Reed, 1989), signaling the value of this strategy (McGill, 1989). PPL has transcended films and extended its reach to various media forms, including television, games, and music. It has the potential to reach a broad audience, with a typical film reaching over one hundred million viewers (Vollmers & Mizerski, 1994). This form of advertising is appreciated globally by advertisers for its creativity and endurance (Read, 1999). Studios like Disney's Buena Vista Pictures actively seek suitable PPLs for their films (Schlosberg, 1990).

Although PPL has a long-standing history, it has become more organized and standardized in recent years (Suang & Gregorio, 2008).

Thus, the emergence of PPLs in films has garnered increasing attention. PPLs are not solely confined to films and television programs; they are also widespread in popular music (Craig et al., 2017), music videos (Davtyan et al., 2020), and video games (Martí-Parreño et al., 2017). In 2019, the latest statistics reveal a decade-long streak of expansion in worldwide earnings from PPL and brand integration. According to Media (2020), the cumulative value soared to \$20.57 billion, representing a substantial surge of 14.5% compared to 2009.

### **Brand Placement: A Transformative Advertising Strategy**

Brand placement, as opposed to PPL, is defined as the compensated inclusion of brands in mass media programming, and also holds significant sway in both advertising and the entertainment industry (Karrh, 1998). Brand placement also made its debut in Lumière films during the 1890s, as documented by Newell and colleagues (2006). Fast forward over a century, and it has become ubiquitous across all forms of media, as noted by Van Reijmersdal and colleagues (2007). While initial placements were somewhat random and possibly limited to brief background elements, contemporary branded placements in films often adopt a more seamless yet significant role, sometimes even becoming an essential component of films (Yang & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2007). By doing so, brand placements facilitate the development of a deeper emotional bond between consumers and the brand (D.S., 2023). Just like PPL, brand placement not only exists in films but also extends across various media forms, such as newspapers, magazines, games, and broadcasting (Karrh et al., 2001). Combined product and brand placement expenditure surged from \$44 million in 1993 to \$102.9 million in 2003 (Sung & Gregorio, 2008). By 2022, the combined expenditures for product and brand placement in the United States surpassed 14 billion U.S. dollars (Navarro, 2023).

The strategic placement of brands holds much appeal, particularly for advertisers, assuring increasing profits and enhanced audience engagement, as highlighted by Suang and Gregorio (2008). In contemporary times, brands are not only visible in cinemas but also extend their presence to video platforms, DVDs, network television, and cable channels. Nevertheless, when juxtaposed with the film sector, television regulation appears notably more stringent. The US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) plays a pivotal role in enforcing regulations, specifically addressing PPLs within television shows (Karrh et al., 2001). With viewers paying more attention to brand placements in media programs, partly due to DVR technology enabling ad-skipping, this advertising approach faces increased scrutiny. Brand placement's impact extends globally, exemplified for instance by strong brand integration in Brazilian soap operas (Miller, 1990).

Brand placement not only enhances brand prestige but also significantly impacts the economy and product pricing (Evangelista, 1999). Almost two decades ago, a remarkable brand placement success unfolded, showcasing BMW's strategic collaboration beginning with the James Bond franchise film "GoldenEye" (1995) In this very successful global franchise, BMW allocated the substantial investment of nearly \$20 million to prominently showcase their Z3



car model in the film, its trailers, and TV advertisements (Eisenstein, 1998). This undertaking proved to be so exceptionally fruitful that it propelled BMW to continue featuring its cars in subsequent films such as *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997) and *The World is Not Enough* (1999).

### **Diverse Attitudes Towards Brand Placement**

To complicate matters, though, consumers from different countries exhibit differing perspectives on brand placement in films, and these attitudes often stem from their cultural backgrounds (Nelson & Devanathan, 2006). One early research study by Nebenzahl and Secunda (1993) surveyed 171 American students, with over 70% expressing no objections to brand placement, while only 25% believed it should be banned or strictly regulated. In an examination of the attitudes of young adults from the United States, Austria, and France, Gould and colleagues (2000) discovered that participants from all three nations regarded products with ethical implications, such as cigarettes and alcohol, as less suitable for placement in films. Nevertheless, it was observed that American respondents generally expressed a more favorable overall perspective on the inclusion of brands in movies compared to their Austrian and French counterparts (David Lee et al., 2011). In a different comparative investigation conducted by Karrh and colleagues (2001), it was observed that both American and Singaporean young adults exhibited a tendency to contemplate purchasing brands featured in movies and television shows. However, in contrast to their American counterparts, respondents in Singapore tended to hold a less favorable view of PPL and were more cautious about potential negative repercussions (David Lee et al., 2011). Additionally, regarding other Asian countries such as South Korea, the acceptance of PPL in films by the audience does not seem promising. As highlighted by Jung and Sung (2008), the overt presence of a brand in entertainment media, particularly on television, is frowned upon by the Korean public.

Also, critics, such as Hornick (2006), argue that incorporating products into films threatens cinema's artistic integrity, often going unnoticed as a form of explicit advertising. Miller (1990) suggests that brand placement acts as a "subliminal" inducement due to its seamless integration into movies. On the other hand, supporters see brand placement as a narrative aid and cost-saving tool for studios. Director John Badham, for instance, views it as a means to reduce movie budgets while maintaining profitability. Companies and studios increasingly recognize movies as an alternative advertising and promotional medium, leading to more promotional tie-ins. Consumer attitudes towards brand placement can vary based on the type of products involved, with items like cigarettes, alcohol, and firearms receiving less acceptance. Regional factors also play a role, with Chinese respondents, as we shall see, often exhibiting more negative attitudes compared to consumers in other countries.

Brand placement in films has split opinions among consumers, critics, and industry professionals. As seen above, the acceptability of brand placement is influenced by product types and regional factors, making it an ongoing subject of debate within the film industry.

## **Chinese Consumer Study on PPL in Films**

The evolution of cinematic PPL has been influenced by the commercialization of both the American and Chinese film industries. While the American film industry has experienced notable changes due to intensified commercialization, a similar yet distinct transformation occurred also in China. In contrast to the gradual process in the United States, the Chinese film industry underwent significant commercial advancement in a relatively short period, particularly from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. During this time of rapid commercialization, the Chinese film industry witnessed internal resistance to too much product placement. This resistance, emanating from within the industry, but also supported by members of the government, emphasized the importance of artistic integrity in the face of growing business interests. Consequently, Chinese film professionals initially opposed, then cautiously explored, and only later on ultimately accepted the concept of PPL during this era (Ai and Dong, 2023). Building upon the methodology established by Gupta and Gould in their 1997 study, in the following this study aims to draw a comparative analysis between recent attitudes of Chinese audiences and their American counterparts regarding PPL. This study marks the first comprehensive investigation into the attitudes and behaviors of Chinese consumers with respect to PPL in films.

### **The Significance of the Chinese Market for Advertisers**

In 2021 the Chinese population had grown to nearly 1.41 billion people and thus comprises a substantial segment of the global population (McKechnie & Zhou, 2003). Since embracing globalization in 1978, China has undergone remarkable economic growth, transitioning from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented one (McKechnie & Zhou, 2003). This transformation has not only spurred economic prosperity but has also ushered in a new era of political and social stability.

China is often referred to as the ultimate super consumer market (Murray, 1994), as evidenced by the significant surge in television and VCR ownership in urban areas (Green, 2001). The Chinese advertising industry has experienced two major booms: one in the 1920s-1930s and another in the 1990s, both influenced by global consumer culture (Wang, 1997).

Already in 1997 Cushman and colleagues proposed that China had the potential to become the world's eighth-largest advertising market. Indeed, according to Xiao (2014), the total expenditure in the Chinese advertising market has skyrocketed over the past 35 years from \$2.2 million in 1980 to \$73.82 billion in 2013 and even higher since. Consequently, the overall scale of the Chinese advertising market has ascended to become the second largest in the world. Madisonboom (2023) data affirms that today China maintains its status as the world's second-largest advertising market, closely trailing the United States.

### **Research Questions on Consumer Attitudes Toward PPL in Films**

Previous literature has extensively covered consumers' attitudes towards cinema commercials in theaters (Austin, 1986; Johnson, 1981). Building upon this background, the major research

questions for this study revolve around the similarities and differences in the attitudes of audiences in the United States and the People's Republic of China regarding the permissibility of PPL in films. Here, Gupta and Gould's (1997) research as a benchmark for the current study, comparing the findings of Chinese consumers with those of consumers in the U.S. However, it is notable that even today, limited academic research has been conducted on audience attitudes towards PPL in Chinese movies, highlighting the need for further research.

In this study, the primary objective is to investigate the diverse attitudes of consumers towards PPL and explore whether Americans find PPL in movies more acceptable than Chinese audiences. Additionally, the study aims to determine what proportion of consumers would like to prohibit PPL in movies. Based on these objectives, it addresses the following specific research questions:

***RQ1: What are the attitudes of Chinese and American consumers toward PPL in movies?***

This research question is crucial for understanding the topic at hand. As Gupta and Gould (1997) demonstrated, consumers' movie-watching frequency and their viewpoints and attitudes towards PPL are significant factors. Therefore, assessing the differing attitudes of both Chinese and American consumers is a vital aspect of this investigation.

***RQ2: What proportion of consumers would like to prohibit PPL in movies?***

While some consumers support PPL in films, others strongly dislike it. This research question aims to determine the number of people who are inclined to prohibit PPL in movies.

***RQ3: Do Americans find PPL in films more acceptable than Chinese audiences? If so, what are the reasons?***

Acknowledging the rigorous advertising regulations in China, the Tobacco Advertising Management Regulations of 1995 explicitly forbade the promotion of tobacco products in waiting rooms, theaters, meeting halls, sports stadiums, and other public spaces. Furthermore, dating back to 1991, both the Tobacco Products Monopoly Law and the 1994 Advertisement Law imposed bans on tobacco advertising during movies, on radio, and on television, underscoring the historical strictness of these regulations (Zeng et al., 2013).

At this juncture, it becomes evident that Chinese audiences do not universally embrace all forms of PPL. In contrast, despite the voluntary ban on paid cigarette product placement in the United States established by The US Cigarette Advertising and Promotion Code around 1991, and the subsequent ban on the practice in the US enforced by the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement, cigarettes continue to appear in American films (King & Siegel, 2001). One can see different approaches at work here and as a result, we posit that Americans may still perceive product placement in movies as more acceptable compared to their Chinese counterparts.

## Methodology

In this study, students were chosen as the primary respondents for several reasons:

- a. *Target Audience Relevance*: Students are a pivotal target audience for PPL in movies. Advertisers often direct their efforts towards this demographic, recognizing students' potential as consumers and influencers across various markets.
- b. *Media Consumption Patterns*: Students are recognized for their media consumption habits, including regular movie watching. Examining their attitudes towards PPL provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of this advertising strategy within a demographic that actively engages with visual content.
- c. *Accessibility*: Within a university setting, students are generally more accessible for research purposes. Their typical willingness to participate in surveys and interviews enhances the feasibility of collecting both quantitative and qualitative data.

It is essential to emphasize that the participants in this research are not typical Chinese students, but rather Chinese students studying in the U.K. Their attitudes may significantly differ from those of Chinese students in China due to exposure to distinct cultural influences, diverse educational environments, and varied experiences in foreign countries. This differentiation somewhat limits the research's scope (overseas Chinese students), while nevertheless facilitating a more nuanced understanding of attitudes toward PPL within the distinct contexts of Chinese students studying abroad at the University of Leicester and American students at Lehigh University.

## Sample

For a study examining American and Chinese university students' attitudes toward movie PPL, a stratified random sampling approach, which divides the population into sub-groups based on relevant characteristics, was deemed the most accurate method (Statistics Canada, 2017). This study involved sixty participants overall, thirty at Leicester and thirty at Lehigh, while ensuring equal gender representation and diversity in majors, academic cohorts, and ages (18 to 34) among Chinese overseas students at the University of Leicester and American students at Lehigh University (Fink, 1995b; Hansen and Machin, 2013a).

## Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire used in this research draws primarily on the study by Gupta and Gould (1997), encompassing PPL topics from both academic and non-academic literature. It comprises interconnected items designed to effectively address the research questions. The questionnaire is divided into two sections, one for Chinese consumers and another for American consumers, predominantly featuring multiple-choice questions, with a few open-ended ones. This design ensures that participants' responses align with the research objectives. For example, participants are asked, "Do you think PPL in movies is a good idea?" Their

responses trigger follow-up questions probing deeper into their perspectives. If they answer “YES,” they are prompted to select the most important reason from options, while a “NO” response leads to choosing the most fitting viewpoint. Other questions explore aspects of attitudes toward PPL, including the acceptability of specific product categories, placement duration, and overall sentiment toward the practice. For instance, participants were asked to identify the most acceptable PPLs in movies from options such as cigarettes and alcohol, soft drinks and fatty foods, sunglasses and health-related products, and guns and stereo equipment.

While the questionnaire was tailored to address the research questions, it is important to acknowledge potential limitations and the need for further exploration. The questionnaire, included here as an attachment, serves as a comprehensive tool for gathering responses. To ensure clarity and user-friendliness, the questionnaire employs a variety of response formats, including closed and open-ended questions. Participants were also encouraged to provide their own opinions, and the logical arrangement of questions was carefully considered to extend to open questions eliciting in-depth attitudes (Bourque & Fielder, 2003).

### **Data Collection**

The online semi-structured questionnaire was administered to participants from both the University of Leicester and Lehigh University. Data collection occurred between May 18th and June 4th, 2015. A total of 60 participants, evenly split between the University of Leicester and Lehigh University (30 from each institution), were invited to participate in the study. Given the international scope of this research, utilizing online questionnaires proved to be a convenient and efficient method for achieving a high response rate. Each questionnaire required approximately 20 minutes to complete. This study attained a response rate of 100%, indicating that all 60 questionnaires distributed during the specified timeframe were completed and returned. Following questionnaire completion, subsequent steps involved the collection and coding of participant data, both integral processes in quantitative research methodology.

### **Participants**

Additionally, two focus groups were set up. Recruiting participants for focus group interviews is a crucial step in gathering valuable data. As Axelrod (1975) underscores, qualitative research’s limited scope emphasizes the importance of focusing on population segments that offer meaningful information. Simultaneously, Stewart and colleagues (2007) stress the need for participants to be capable of providing desired information and representing the target population. Selecting participants with similar characteristics or majors is advisable, as it fosters a more comfortable environment and open discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2015a). Therefore, postgraduate students from the University of Leicester and Lehigh University, were deemed well-suited for this research. Gender, as suggested by Axelrod (1975), can also influence qualitative research findings and data authenticity. To ensure precision, participants were divided into two groups based both on gender and nationality.

Given the available student pool, two focus groups were chosen, each comprising three participants: one group with two female Chinese students and one male Chinese student, and

the other with one female American student and two male American students, thus representing both nationalities. For interview locations, video calls on We Chat or Face Time were used instead of participants' homes or public places, ensuring a comfortable and convenient atmosphere.

The table below provides the profiles of the participants in this study, including their age, gender, school/country of residence, and majors. Throughout, pseudonyms were used for participant names to ensure privacy and data security.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Demographics Table*

Name (Pseudonyms)	Age	Gender	School/ Nationality	Major
Alex	25	Male	Lehigh University/U.S	Computer Science
Bood	31	Male	Lehigh University/U.S	Tourism Management
Vicky	32	Female	Lehigh University/U.S	Psychology
Winnie	23	Female	University of Leicester/China	Mass Communication
Sarah	25	Female	University of Leicester/China	Public Relations
Jack	24	Male	University of Leicester/China	Chemistry

### Interview Guide

The interview guide for the focus group was semi-structured, designed to facilitate spontaneous and in-depth discussions in line with the survey study's research questions. It acted as a "menu" introducing research problems, areas, topics, objectives, and primary questions. A brief introduction about the researcher and the interview's purpose, along with a thank you, preceded the interview. The interviews began with background questions such as nationality and movie-watching habits. Warm-up questions, like "What are your thoughts on PPL in movies?" and "Do you often notice PPLs in films?" aimed to relax participants and encourage open sharing. Subsequently, more in-depth, open-ended questions were asked to allow participants to freely express their opinions (Berger, 2000, p. 113). Probing techniques, including verbal probes like "Is there anything else you would like to add?" and non-verbal cues like maintaining eye contact or nodding, were used to elicit more detailed responses and provide participants with confidence (Gilbert, 2008, p. 250; Kvale, 1996, pp. 131-135).

### Data Collection and Transcription

Interviews were held between June 19th and July 19th, 2015, involving two three-hour discussion groups after ensuring participants' consent. Additionally, six participants from the

University of Leicester and Lehigh University respectively were individually interviewed via video call platforms WeChat and FaceTime, facilitating efficiency. Following Berger (2000) and Gilbert (2008), the subsequent stages of qualitative research emphasized data transcription and coding (Berger, 2000, p. 125; Gilbert, 2008, pp. 256-259). These steps are crucial for maintaining the reliability and utility of interviewee perspectives, despite their time-intensive nature. Translation was unnecessary, as all interviews were conducted in English, streamlining the process.

The next phase involved original coding, primarily using data from interview transcripts. Techniques like note-taking and highlighting key vocabulary and sentences proved instrumental in identifying central themes and ideas, with common words and phrases offering valuable insights.

Regarding the relevance of this research today, it remains highly significant. The study explores PPL attitudes among students, a demographic that continues to be a lucrative target for advertisers. In the ever-evolving landscape of media consumption habits and the emergence of new platforms, understanding contemporary perspectives and trends on PPL attitudes is crucial for marketers, but also for intercultural media researchers.

Furthermore, over the years societal and cultural shifts may have influenced how PPL is perceived. The ongoing globalization of media and the prevalence of digital platforms have altered attitudes and expectations regarding advertising in movies. Exploring whether these changes have impacted the effectiveness or reception of PPL is a pertinent aspect of their contemporary relevance.

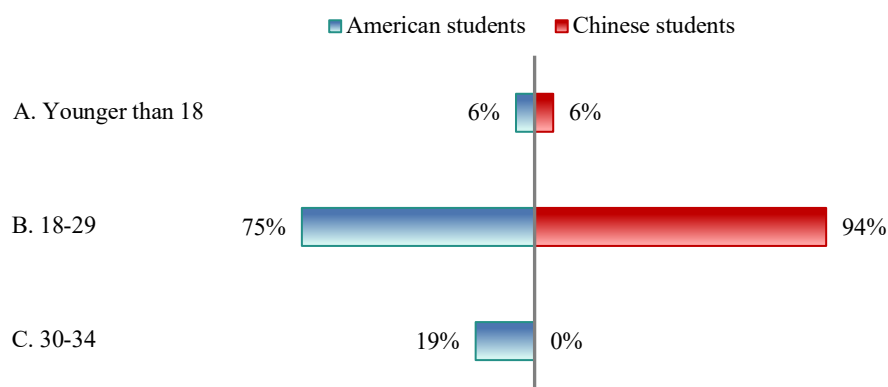
This research then not only aimed to provide insights into the dynamics of PPL attitudes among students, a demographic of enduring importance for advertisers, but it also addresses shifts in perspectives over time and the impact of evolving national media landscapes. The exploration of these factors enhances the research's contemporary significance and its applicability to the current advertising and media environment.

## **Data Analysis and Findings**

### **Questionnaire**

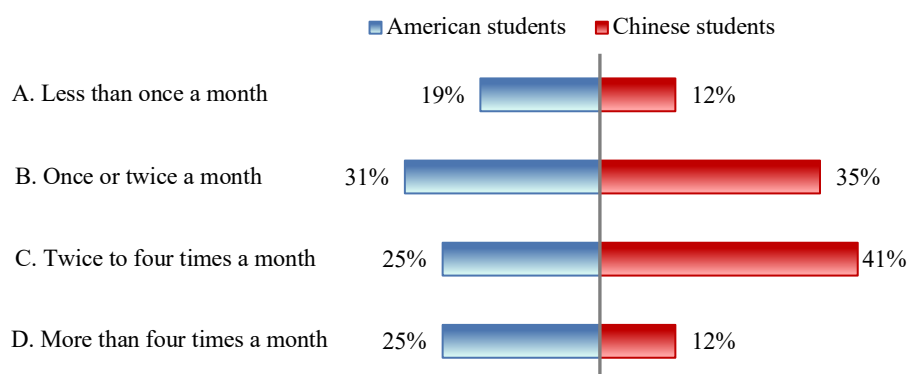
As mentioned above already, the questionnaires asked for participants' age, movie-watching frequency, the impact of PPL on their lives, varying attitudes toward PPL, and the acceptable duration of PPL in films. It consisted of ten single-choice questions, with all 30 Chinese students and 30 American students providing answers without objections. Our analysis of each question aims to yield precise statistics addressing the primary research questions identified in the literature review.

**Figure 1.**  
*Age Distribution of Participants*



Out of the 60 participants, half were Chinese students and half were American students. Notably, the age distribution was significantly different between the two groups. Chinese participants were predominantly between 18 and 29 years old (94%), with a small minority (6%) being postgraduates under 18 years of age. In contrast, American students displayed a wider age range, with 75% falling into the 18 and 29 years old age bracket, 19% were between 30 and 34, and 6% were under 18 years old. This age diversity among participants can offer a broader range of perspectives and enrich the analysis of PPL.

**Figure 2**  
*Frequency of Film Viewing Among Participants*



When it comes to the film-viewing habits of Chinese and American students, 12% of Chinese students watch movies in cinemas less than once a month, while 19% of American students have a similar similarly low frequency of film viewing. A substantial proportion of both Chinese (35%) and American (31%) students watch movies once or twice a month. However, a significant difference emerges in those who watch movies more than four times a month, with only 12% of Chinese students compared to 25% of American students displaying heavy usership. This disparity serves to underscore existing cultural differences in film-viewing habits in the two groups.



**Figure 3**  
*Participant Awareness of PPL in Films*

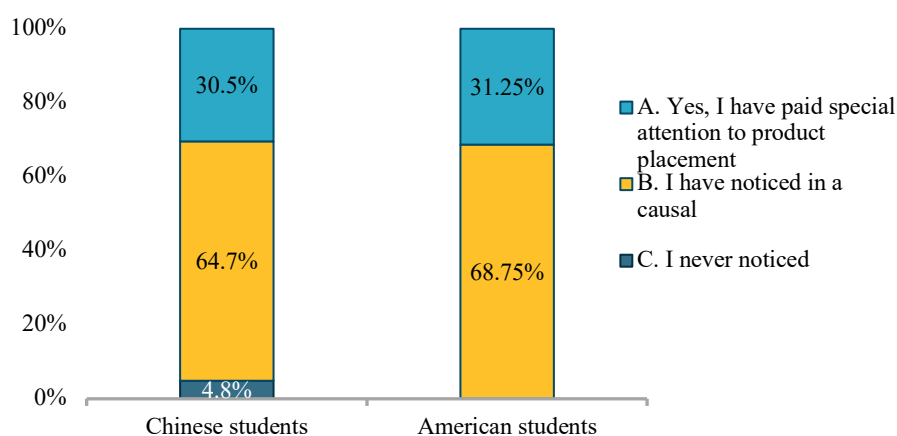


Chart 3 assesses awareness of PPL in films among U.S. and Chinese students. Notably, 30.5% of Chinese students and 31.25% of American students pay special attention to PPL, indicating a slightly higher American percentage. Furthermore, 64.7% of Chinese students casually notice PPL, whereas approximately 69% of American students do the same. In contrast, 4.8% of Chinese students have never noticed PPL. In summary, American audiences exhibit greater awareness of and interest in PPL in films, with higher percentages of them paying special attention and casual noticing.

**Figure 4**  
*Participant Perceptions of Movie Genres with Prominent PPL*

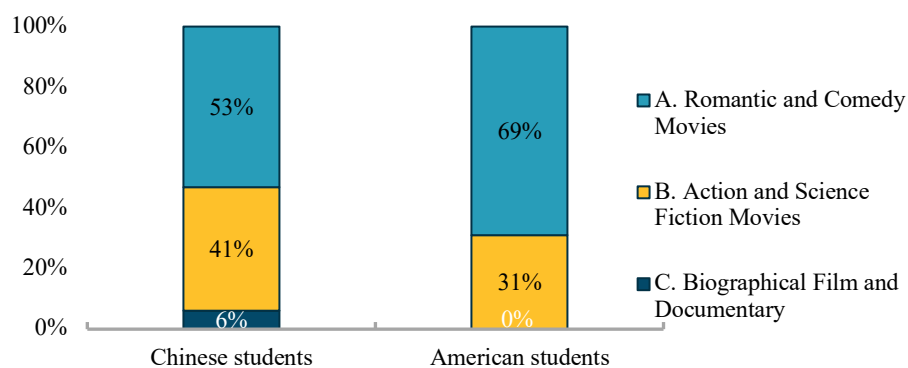


Figure 4 displays the percentages of American and Chinese audiences for the types of films they consume. Over 50% of Chinese respondents (53%) noted PPLs in romantic and comedy movies, with 41% mentioning action and science fiction films, and 6% biographical and documentary films. American participants shared similar views, with 69% mentioning PPL in romantic and comedy films and nearly 30% in action and science fiction movies. In summary, both groups agree that PPL is most prevalent in romantic and comedy movies, while they noticed it less frequently in action and science fiction films. While this might objectively not be the case, it is interesting to note that the quicker the plot develops and the films offer up VFX in high dosages, PPL is less noticed, thereby making it even more insidious in these instances.

**Figure 5**  
*Participant Acceptance of Duration for PPL in Movies*

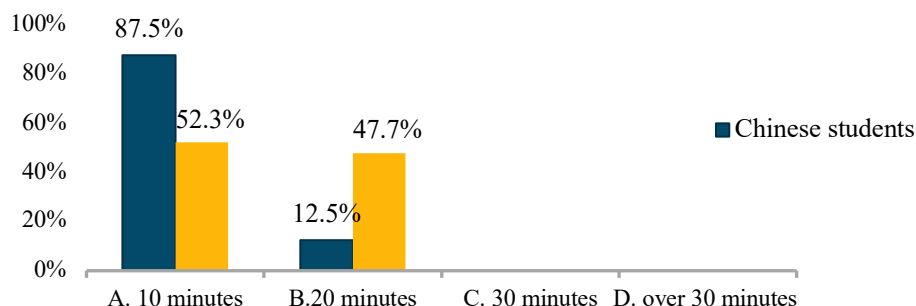


Figure 5 explores the acceptable duration of PPL in movies for American and Chinese audiences. The data highlights distinct attitudes between the two groups. In China, 87.5% find 10 minutes acceptable, with only 12.5% willing to tolerate 20 minutes or more. In the United States, around 48% consider 20 minutes acceptable, while the majority (approximately 52.3%) find 10 minutes sufficient. In summary, American audiences are more accepting of longer PPL durations in movies compared to Chinese audiences. This would correspond to the longer commercial breaks to which American audiences are exposed, arguably making them more accepting when it comes to longer PPLs.

**Figure 6**  
*Participant Opinions on the Viability of PPL in Movies*

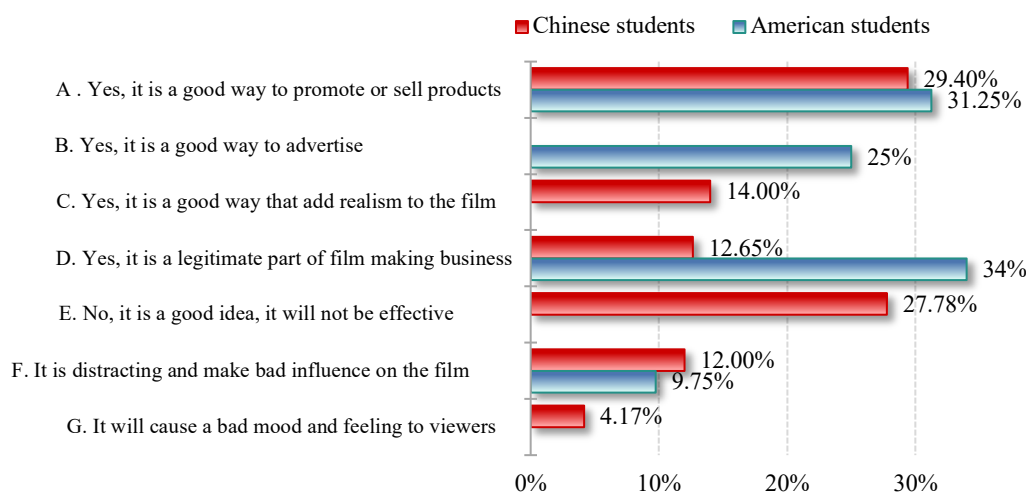


Figure 6 examines people’s attitudes towards PPL, presenting eight different perspectives, encompassing both optimistic and negative views. The optimistic attitudes consist of four options:

- a. Yes, it is an effective means to promote or sell products.
- b. Yes, it serves as an effective advertising method.
- c. Yes, it enhances the realism of the film.

- d. Yes, it is a legitimate component of the filmmaking industry.

On the negative side, there are also four options:

- No, it is not an effective idea.
- It is distracting and has a detrimental impact on the film.
- It negatively affects viewers' mood and emotions.
- It can mislead the audience.

Regarding the optimistic perspectives, data reveals that 31.25% of Americans see PPL in films as an effective way to promote or sell products, while 25% believe it is a successful advertising method. Furthermore, 34% of American respondents regard PPL as an integral part of the filmmaking business. Only 9.75% of Americans express a negative view, believing that PPL is distracting and negatively affects the quality of films.

In contrast, the Chinese perspective differs significantly. Approximately 43.95% of Chinese respondents hold negative attitudes towards PPL. Specifically, 12% of Chinese believe that PPL negatively influences the quality of the film, 4.17% think it can negatively impact viewers' mood, and 27.78% consider it ineffective. However, a portion of Chinese participants also acknowledges at least some advantages of PPL. For example, 29.4% share the same positive views as Americans, especially in terms of using PPL to promote goods. Additionally, 14% of Chinese respondents selected option C, stating that PPL adds realism to films, and 12.65% chose option D, indicating that it plays a pivotal role in the film industry.

In summary, only 9.75% of Americans express disagreement with the presence of PPL in films, while the majority of Chinese audiences (almost 44.71%) hold predominantly negative views. Consequently, it is evident that a larger proportion of American students are accepting of PPL in films compared to their Chinese counterparts.

**Figure 7**

*Participant Views on the Banning of PPL*

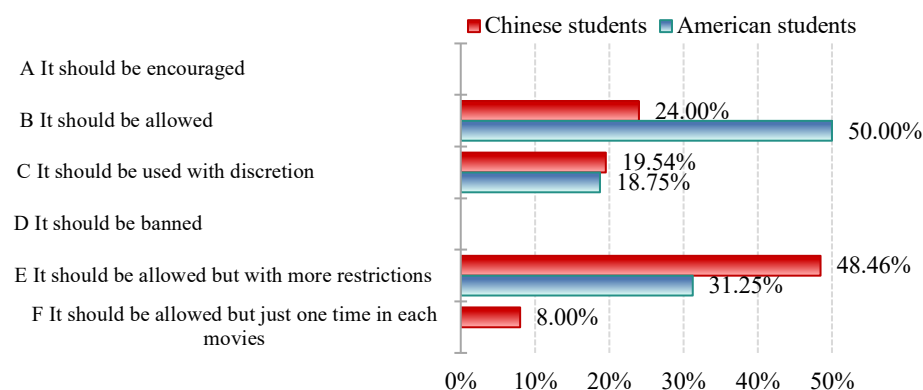
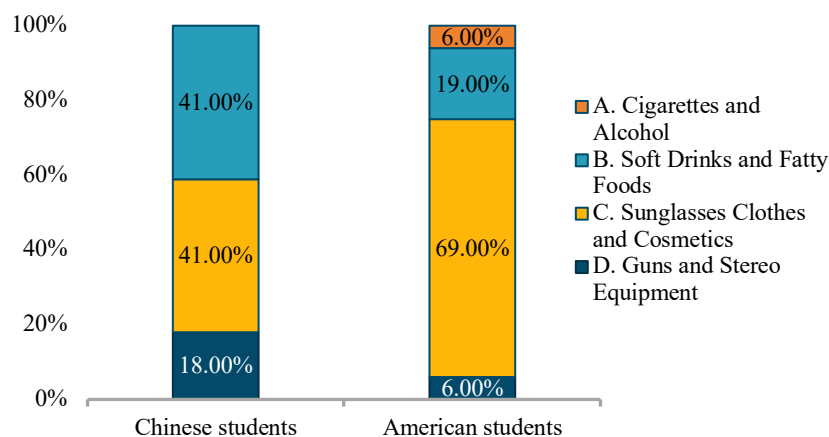


Figure 7 compares Chinese and American views on PPL in films. Both groups generally support it, but with varying degrees. 50% of Americans favor it, while only 24% of Chinese students do. Approximately 19% of both groups find it acceptable with discretion. The most significant difference is that 48.46% of Chinese postgraduates advocate stricter restrictions, while only 31.25% of American postgraduates do. Some Chinese students suggest limiting PPL to once per movie, a view not shared by any Americans. One can also notice here that more differentiated views are offered, with neither group opting for outright banning of PPL or, on the other end of the pole, requesting more of it.

In summary, Americans are more accepting of PPL in films than Chinese respondents.

**Figure 8**

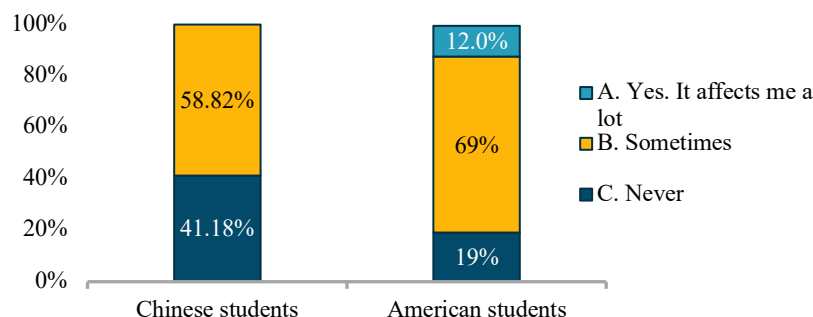
*Preferred Types of PPL in Movies According to Participants*



Analyzing preferred PPL in films reveals further differences in American and Chinese attitudes. Four main categories are prominent here: (1) cigarettes/alcohol; (2) soft drinks and “fatty” foods; (3) sunglasses, clothes, and cosmetics; and (4) guns and stereo equipment. Among Americans, sunglasses, clothes, cosmetics are the top choice (69%), followed by soft drinks and fatty foods (19%), and guns and stereo equipment (6%). Chinese consumers favor sunglasses, clothes, soft drinks, and fatty foods (41%), followed by guns and stereo equipment (18%), but show little interest in cigarettes and alcohol. These findings underscore distinct preferences in PPL for American and Chinese audiences.

**Figure 9**

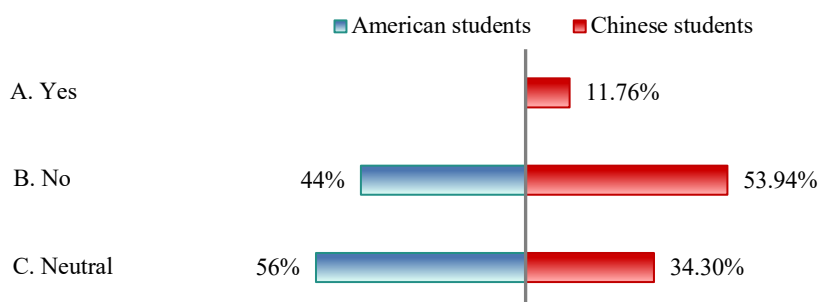
*Impact of Movie PPL on Participants' Daily Life, Including Shopping Habits*



Three options ranging from weak impact to strong impact were used to gauge the participants' attitudes. Firstly, there were two attitudes that Chinese audiences could choose: 'PPL sometimes affects me' and 'PPL never affects me.' Among the Chinese respondents, 58.82% indicated that PPL occasionally influenced them, while 41.18% stated that PPL had no impact on their actions. In contrast, American participants had three options to express their attitudes. A small portion, 12% of Americans, reported that they were significantly influenced by PPL. A majority, 69% of people in the U.S., admitted to being occasionally influenced by PPL. A very small percentage (19%) of Americans claimed that PPL had no influence on their daily lives. In summary, it appears that Americans are more likely to be influenced by PPL compared to the Chinese audience.

**Figure 10**

*Participant Perceptions of Movie Quality Based on PPL Influence*



To evaluate whether a film is considered to be of high quality, Chinese consumers offered three distinct attitudes. 11.76% of Chinese respondents regarded PPL as an essential element that influences the overall quality of a film. A majority, comprising 53.94% of Chinese participants, stated that they neither considered a film good nor bad due to PPL. The remaining 34.3% of Chinese individuals maintained a fairly neutral stance regarding the impact of PPL in films. Conversely, among the U.S. respondents, 44% of Americans expressed that PPL was not a decisive factor in determining whether a film is either good or bad. A significant majority, amounting to 56% of American participants, adopted a neutral attitude when it came to PPL in movies. In summary, it is apparent that a considerable number of both Chinese and American viewers remain neutral or do not consider PPL as a or the primary determinant for a film's quality.

## Focus Group Interviews

As can be deduced from the data above, at least to some extent both Chinese participants and American participants have the same viewpoints towards PPL. However, the most noteworthy finding is based on the differing perceptions, as the data gleaned from the discussions with the six participants demonstrates.

### American Attitudes Towards PPL in Films

During the focus group interviews, US participants displayed overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards PPL in films, even more so than in the survey. Here some of their comments:

Vicky, a 32-year-old postgraduate student at Lehigh University, explained that PPL is distinct from traditional TV ads, as it “seamlessly” integrates into daily life. Using the film “Transformers” (2007) as an example, she highlighted how brands like Metersbonwe, Lenovo, and TCL were integrated into the storyline and characters’ lives, making them feel natural and relatable. She noted that TCL’s PPL, where their TV transformed like the characters, was particularly well-received. Vicky emphasized that the relatability of common products enhanced viewer interest and acceptance during the movie, creating a connection to their own lives.

Alex, a 25-year-old postgraduate student at Lehigh University, shared Vicky’s positive views of PPL in films. He particularly appreciated product categories like alcohol and cars. As a “traditional” male viewer, he is drawn to alcohol and car product placements in movies, citing examples like the Audi R8 in “Iron Man III” and the Chevrolet Camaro in “Transformers: Age of Extinction.” Alex sees American brands’ prominent placement in films as effective advertising. He also mentions his fondness for the Aston Martin DB5 in James Bond’s “Goldfinger” and sees car and alcohol PPLs as common and accepted, especially among male audiences. Alex enjoys discovering alcohol brands in films, like *Jian Nan Chun* in “Aftershock” and “The Amazing Spider-Man 2,” which he views as indicative of globalization’s impact on cinema.

Testimonials from Vicky and Alex underscore the positive reception of PPL among American audiences. They value the integration of familiar products into the film narrative, as it enhances their viewing experience and creates a sense of connection between the on-screen world and their everyday lives. In Alex’s discussion, he referenced the concept of ‘globalization,’ which aligns with the ideas presented by Archibugi and Iammarino (2002), who explore the concept of the globalization of innovation, which runs parallel to the globalization of finance, production, culture, and information (Archibugi & Iammarino, 2002, p. 98). A notable illustration of this is the impact of the already mentioned *Jian Nan Chun*, a Chinese domestic alcohol brand, on American daily life and its integration into the U.S. film industry, exemplifying a clear case of globalization.

Bood, 31, an American postgraduate student studying Tourism Management, shared his perspective on PPL in films, emphasizing its impact on tourism:

I am highly motivated to invest my time in studying PPLs within films, given my academic focus on tourism management. I have observed that numerous tourist attractions are featured in films, and I believe that acquiring more information about scenic spots in different countries will undoubtedly enhance my potential as a tour conductor in the future. Consequently, I have particularly concentrated on movies that showcase beautiful scenic locations. For instance, in the film ‘The Lord of the Rings,’ New Zealand, a stunning country, appears several times with its natural beauty, mountains, rivers, and national parks, captivating the attention of everyone. I have even envisioned it as a dream of mine to become a tour guide there one day. After the movie’s promotion, I distinctly recall a significant increase in tourists visiting New Zealand due to this film. This is a positive signal that not only bolsters tourism development but also stimulates local economic growth in New Zealand. Furthermore, it enriches the lives of audiences by providing them with more information about New Zealand, broadening their horizons. (Bood, Lehigh University)

Bood’s viewpoint demonstrates the profound impact of films on the promotion of tourism, economic development, and cultural enrichment, highlighting the beneficial outcomes of such cinematic portrayals.

At Lehigh University, the three participants – Vicky, Alex, and Bood – expressed their resolute support for PPL in films, each offering unique perspectives. Vicky believes that PPL integrates products into real-life experiences, citing the excitement of recognizing familiar products on the big screen. Alex, representing a traditional male perspective, appreciates the placement of cars and alcohol in action and science fiction films, seeing it as appealing to a significant male audience and promoting local and global products. Bood, with a background in Tourism Management, values PPL for showcasing scenic spots, considering it crucial to his future career as a tour guide. These diverse viewpoints highlight the multifaceted nature of support for PPL in movies.

### **Chinese Attitudes Towards PPL in films**

Winnie is a 23-year-old Chinese student from the University of Leicester. In her response, she shares her experience and perspective on PPL in films:

For a long time, dating back to my junior college days, I have been captivated by PPLs in movies, particularly those featuring sunglasses, cosmetics, and luxury goods. The allure of collecting luxury items has always fascinated me. As a young girl, it is only natural to be drawn to cosmetics, bags, and stylish clothing. I vividly recall the movie that first introduced me to this world of opulence, ‘The Devil Wears Prada.’ Anne Hathaway’s character in the film had a passion for high-end brands like Prada, Vivienne Westwood, and CK, among others, and I found myself strangely enamored by these luxurious items. At the time, I began purchasing many luxury items, often asking my parents for them without considering their hard work. Reflecting on this now, I feel deeply embarrassed and remorseful for my actions. I realized that I could not continue to burden my parents with such requests, knowing how diligently they

worked. Consequently, I made the choice to avoid watching films that prominently featured PPLs like luxury items and bags. (Winnie, Leicester)

Winnie candidly reflects on her past behavior and her evolving attitude toward PPL in films, specifically luxury items and their impact on her life and family. Winnie's strong feelings of guilt stem from her inability to control her impulse to buy luxury items that are featured in films. She recognizes the inappropriateness of this behavior, especially for college students. Winnie expresses a firm stance and strongly advises young girls not to purchase luxuries solely due to the influence of PPL in movies.

In contrast, Jack, a devoted movie enthusiast and chemistry major, vehemently opposes the presence of PPLs in films. He explains his choice:

Despite my busy schedule as a chemistry major, I find great joy in watching films during my free time. I deeply appreciate the entire cinematic experience, from the evocative background music to the intricacies of the plot and the stellar performances by actors. However, I have a strong aversion to any form of PPL in movies.

One particular negative experience stands out from when I was watching the romantic film 'Eternal Moment.' In the midst of the movie, a PPL for the Renren social networking website, similar to Facebook, abruptly appeared and persisted for a full 5 seconds. This felt entirely out of place within the movie's context. To my dismay, the film was subsequently inundated with PPLs for brands such as BMW, Bosnia sunglasses, 'I Do,' and others, making me feel like I was watching an extended advertisement rather than enjoying a genuine cinematic work of art. This experience left me agitated and quite angry. I hold a firm belief that a movie is a form of art and should remain untarnished by advertising and marketing activities, irrespective of its artistic merits." (Jack, Leicester)

Here, Jack articulates his strong aversion to PPL in films, emphasizing his belief that movies are a medium for artistic expression rather than commercial promotion.

While Jack strongly opposes PPL in films, Sarah, 25, holds an opposing view and presents three specific reasons for her support of the PPL practice:

First and foremost, when I go to the cinema, my primary objective is to watch movies, and I have paid for my tickets for that precise reason. My desire is to immerse myself in the films themselves, not to be bombarded with PPLs. However, when PPLs are rigidly and inflexibly integrated into movies, I am left with no choice but to accept them, which I find both unjust and dissatisfying. This practice deviates from the purpose of my cinema visit, ultimately making me feel like my time and money are being wasted. Furthermore, I am concerned that the pervasive use of PPLs can lead to misperceptions among the audience. Excessive focus on advertising effects often overshadows the actual functionality of products. This skewed emphasis on a product's appearance or aesthetics can lead individuals to overlook their practical uses. In the long run, this can



potentially result in financial problems for families, as they may prioritize style over substance when making purchasing decisions.” (Sarah, Leicester)

Sarah here emphasizes the importance of maintaining the primary focus on the movie itself and the potential for PPL to create misleading perceptions among audiences, particularly when it comes to the functionality of the products being promoted.

### **Summary of the Data Analysis**

In summary, the study at hand addressed the primary research question about American and Chinese students' attitudes toward PPLs in movies, revealing that Americans had more positive attitudes towards PPL, while Chinese participants displayed more negative ones. The second research question regarding support for a ban on PPL showed that most favored limitations, but not complete bans. Different attitudes toward specific types of PPL were observed, with Americans being generally more accepting. The impact of PPL on consumers varied, and Americans did not associate a movie's quality with PPL, unlike Chinese respondents. A focus group interview provided further insight, with the three Chinese participants opposing PPL and three American students supporting it, offering distinct viewpoints. Overall, these findings contribute to our understanding of the differing attitudes of American and Chinese students toward PPL in movies.

## **Conclusion**

### **Key Findings of the Study**

This study aimed to investigate the differing attitudes of Chinese and American respondents toward PPL in films with surveys and interviews. Beginning with the analysis of sixty questionnaires, several key findings emerged:

In the survey, three data points are particularly significant as they represent the distinct attitudes of students from the two countries towards embedded advertising. These were illustrated in Figure 3, Figure 5, and Figure 7. Figure 3 provides an initial observation that nearly every student in the survey paid attention to the occurrence of PPL in movies. However, a notable percentage of Chinese students (4.8%) indicated that they have never noticed PPL. This suggests a potentially higher awareness level of the issue among American students compared to their Chinese counterparts. To speculate, this might have to do with the PPLs needing to be individually listed in the end credits of Chinese films, a requirement not existing in US films. This practice might heighten Chinese film goers' attention to such PPLs.

Regarding the duration of PPL in movies, only 12.5% of Chinese students believe that PPL should not last for longer than 20 minutes. In contrast, 47.7% of American students, almost half of the total, believe that PPL can exceed a 20-minute duration. Clearly, the acceptance level among American students is higher than that among Chinese students. This trend is further emphasized by Figure 7, which illustrates participant views on the banning of PPL, once again highlighting the greater tolerance of American students towards PPL.

To summarize:

**US student attitudes:** The study revealed that the majority of American respondents pay close attention to PPL and are more receptive to extended placements in films. American students emphasized several advantages of PPL, considering it an effective tool for product promotion and a legitimate part of the film industry. However, some acknowledged drawbacks, such as potential distraction and adverse effects on film quality. They also noted instances where PPLs influenced their consumer choices, especially in shopping. American respondents exhibited a higher acceptance for various product categories in films, including cigarettes, alcohol, soft drinks, fatty foods, sunglasses, clothing, cosmetics, guns, and stereo equipment. While they vehemently rejected an outright ban of PPLs, they did prefer stricter regulations.

**Chinese student attitudes:** In contrast, Chinese participants expressed distinctly more negative attitudes toward PPL in films. Most of them did not favor longer PPLs, primarily due to perceived substantial disadvantages, including ineffectiveness, distraction, and a perceived negative impact on film quality. Chinese participants also suggested that excessive PPL could lead to unfavorable emotional reactions among viewers. Despite their stronger reservations about PPL, Chinese respondents did not advocate for a complete ban either, but, instead, proposed strict controls, including limiting PPLs to a single occurrence in each film. Regarding specific product categories, Chinese students were willing to accept soft drinks, fatty foods, sunglasses, clothing, and cosmetics as suitable for placement in films. However, they strongly disapproved of the inclusion of cigarettes and alcohol in this context.

The findings from this study make an important point: Rather than seeing the invisibility of products placed as a more advanced linear technique of watching onscreen phenomena, it is instead a regression, as it cooperates with those trying to access viewers' sub-consciousnesses through such 'normalization' of viewing habits. It is a case of Coleridge's 'suspension of disbelief' having turned into unquestioned belief. If a certain product is made to appear on screen as the 'normal' example of a product category (drink, detergent, car) over and over again, in the end viewers lose their ability to imagine other products taking its place. This finding neatly fits into a general trend of being at least wary of such kind of product advertising. Vance Packard's study of the early advertising industry in his famous *The Hidden Persuaders* (1958) had already back then garnered broad interest with viewers and demonstrated that he had hit a nerve. It is unfortunate that much of his writing has been forgotten. At the moment, Chinese viewers then have a clear advantage over their US-American counterparts as it seems that many of the latter have lost their ability to critically assess what they see on the screen. Rather than being aware of the complete constructedness of the on-screen world they engage with, and this fake world then also taking over their off-screen lives in a smooth and frictionless way, their Chinese counterparts still consciously perceive of such PPLs as stumbling blocks. Perhaps it is time to re-learn viewing engagements from them and also insist on them continuing to keep their more distanced and critical view of the system film.

### Limitations of Research

The current research has notable limitations that warrant acknowledgment. Two key limitations are as follows:

- a. *Sample Size*: The research's sample size was relatively limited due to time constraints, with only sixty participants completing the questionnaires, evenly split between Lehigh University and the University of Leicester. This sample size may not fully represent the broader population, potentially impacting the generalizability of the findings. The participation of only six students in focus group interviews may result in a somewhat one-sided representation of their views, given the limited number. Moreover, the gender balance within the focus groups may not capture the full diversity of opinions in the target population. Given more time and resources, a larger and more diverse sample size could have improved result precision and robustness. Also, as stated before, the data was collected already in 2015, and viewer understanding of these issues might have moved.
- b. *Language Barriers*: A limitation arises from language barriers, particularly in accurately recording the opinions of Chinese students on PPL. Expressing ideas in English might have been challenging for Chinese students at the University of Leicester, potentially affecting the accuracy of their viewpoints. Additionally, the use of slang by some American students during focus group interviews could have posed comprehension difficulties for non-native English speakers, potentially impacting the precision of recorded responses. Enhanced language proficiency among both researchers and participants could have yielded more accurate and nuanced results.

### Directions for Future Research

For future research endeavors, there are several areas to explore, building upon the findings and limitations of this study, aimed at enhancing our understanding of attitudes towards PPL in films. The following suggestions provide guidance for these future studies:

- a. *Diverse Age Groups*: Future research can expand its scope to include a wider range of consumer age groups, conducting comprehensive investigations spanning from young to older participants. This approach can offer valuable insights into variations in attitudes toward PPL in films across different age demographics, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of people's genuine perspectives.
- b. *In-Depth Analysis of Differing Attitudes*: A more thorough analysis of the underlying reasons for the differing attitudes of Chinese and American consumers toward PPL in films would be beneficial. Exploring the cultural, social, and psychological factors contributing to these disparities can yield valuable insights, shedding light on the drivers of these attitudes and potentially informing more effective PPL strategies in diverse markets.

- c. *Expanding the Participant Pool*: Expanding the number of participants engaging in both focus group interviews and questionnaires is essential. A larger and more diverse sample size would enhance the study's representativeness and reliability. Inclusion of a broader and more varied participant pool can capture a wider spectrum of perspectives, thus bolstering the study's findings.

### **PPL in Movies: Speculating on Today's Results and Varied Attitudes of American and Chinese Consumers**

With the rapid development of the economy, the global dissemination of culture, and advancements in technology, Chinese consumers today may exhibit a more favorable attitude toward PPL in movies than in the past, but their unique preferences still exist. Here are two major aspects:

- a. *Digital Ecosystem Expectations*: Given China's unique digital ecosystem dominated by platforms like WeChat, Weibo, and short-form video apps, Chinese consumers might expect (and accept) innovative and interactive PPLs that align with their digital habits.
- b. *Patriotism and National Pride*: Chinese consumers may respond more positively to PPLs that evoke a sense of national pride and actively showcase Chinese culture. Brands that successfully integrate and reflect Chinese cultural values may receive favorable reviews.

While American students are likely to be savvy consumers of advertising, given the pervasive nature of marketing in their daily lives, they might be critical of overt PPLs and prefer subtler integrations that contribute to the storyline. Simultaneously, they also place a high value on authenticity, considering it crucial. American students may appreciate PPLs that feel genuine and align with the characters and narrative rather than ones that are perceived to be forced or interruptive. Additionally, students, especially in diverse university settings, might be particularly conscious of cultural diversity. They may respond positively to PPLs that showcase inclusivity and representation.

### **Acknowledgments**

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