

**UNIVERSITY
OF WARWICK**



SOCIETY AND CULTURE SPOTLIGHT PUBLICATIONS 2026





Society & Culture Spotlight PGR and ECR Writing Competition 2026

Foreword

Society & Culture Spotlight PGR and ECR Writing Competition 2026

On Monday 22 June 2026, Spotlight colleagues, including the PGR/ECR network, hosted its annual celebration event to mark the year's achievements and to announce the winners of the third annual writing competition.

The event brought together around 20 researchers from across the University for a morning of creative engagement, reflection and community-building at the Oculus Building.

Opening remarks and presentations were delivered by the Spotlight team, highlighting a range of activities and outcomes from this year and looking forward to next year's programme of work too. This was followed by a fantastic creative writing workshop led by Cindy Smith, a Geneva-based professional writer

with extensive experience of working with international organisations, including the UN and WHO. The workshop was both engaging and thought-provoking, focusing on two core themes: finding one's authentic inner voice, free from filters and self-censorship, and the use of fictional storytelling tools to enrich non-fiction writing. The session generated lively discussion and left participants with practical tools to bring to their own writing practice.

The event culminated in the announcement of the writing competition winners. This year, for the first time, the judges awarded a joint first prize, reflecting the exceptional standard of entries received.

The winners were:

- **Joint 1st Prize** - Md Saimul Islam (WMS), "When Minds Carry Borders"
- **Joint 1st Prize** - Pranshu Mundada (Applied Health), "The Distance Between Decisions and Lives"
- **2nd Prize** - Aishee Bhattacharya (Applied Linguistics), "Accent Across the Border: A Sociolinguistic Journey Through Crisis, Cinema, and Memory"
- **Runner Up** - Natsumi Shiino (PAIS), "When Crisis Becomes Noise: The Erosion of Strategic Narratives"
- **Runner Up** - David Nicol (Engineering), "FAILUREMODE: Modelling Crisis as a Predictable System Failure"

Congratulations to all our winners and to everyone who submitted an entry.

This year's competition included entries from across the University, including Applied Linguistics, Warwick Medical School, Global Sustainable Development, School of Modern Languages and Cultures, WMG, School of Engineering, PAIS, Applied Health, and CIM. Topics ranged from ecological crisis and indigenous knowledge to health equity and AI in medicine, mental health and patient autonomy, language and identity, crisis communication, systems failure modelling, and hope and resilience. We felt that the diversity of disciplines and perspectives represented really reflected the interdisciplinary spirit of the Society and Culture Spotlight, and the richness that early career researchers bring to questions of society, culture and human experience.

CONTENTS



06

**Advanced Journalism, Statistics
Robots, and Mixed Methods: Will I
Ever Become a Good PhD?**

by Khoa Do



14

**When Crisis Becomes Noise:
The Erosion of Strategic Narratives**

by Natsumi Shiino



22

**The Distance Between Decisions
and Lives**

by Pranshu Mundada



32

When minds carry borders

by Md Saimul Islam



40

**Reaping what we sow: Cultivations
of hope in times of crisis**

by Virginia Thomas-Pickles



50

**When Nature Cannot Be Translated:
Crisis, language, and Indigenous ecology
in *The Last Quarter of the Moon***

by Xiaoyan Tan

KHOA DO



KHOA DO

Khoa Do is a first year PhD student in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics at University of Warwick. He was awarded the Chancellor's International Scholarship for his PhD here at Warwick. Before that, he was a lecturer at the National College of Education, Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam).

Khoa believes deeply in the importance of communities and encouraging reflective dialogue among teachers. He is the founder of a 21,000 member community named People of TESOL in Vietnam and the leader of the Non-judgmental Dialogues project.

Advanced Journalism, Statistics Robots, and Mixed Methods: Will I Ever Become a Good PhD?

Overture

I still remember, with a mixture of clarity and mild bewilderment, how I ended up here in Coventry, pursuing a PhD in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics.

For context, I had worked for nine years as a lecturer at a teacher-training college in Vietnam, armed with a Master's degree and a reasonably steady sense of professional purpose. Then, quite suddenly, the atmosphere began to change. There was a certain tension in the air. New expectations around university teaching meant that holding only a Master's degree no longer felt quite enough. Those of us in this position began to hear, with increasing frequency, conversations about being moved into teaching-assistant roles, or about the need to obtain a doctorate if we wished to remain where we were.

And so, here I am: in a country approximately fifteen degrees colder than the one my body was designed for, trying to develop into a scholar while eating Tesco's cold sandwiches as part of the £3.85 meal deal.

Somewhere between the library, the grey skies, and the sandwich aisle, I find myself asking a rather inconvenient question: will I ever become a good PhD? Will my PhD become useful to anyone beyond myself?



Claycroft 2 - Photo taken by me

Paradoxes

There are two paradoxes at the centre of my doctoral life. The first concerns how social sciences are perceived in Vietnam and the UK. The second concerns the importance of language education, the very field in which I claim some expertise.

In the UK, there is said to be a “quantitative crisis” in the social sciences (Williams et al., 2022), with researchers moving away from quantitative work and towards more human, qualitative forms of inquiry. I have seen this in our first-year PhD seminars. Whenever a professor asks whether anyone is doing quantitative research, almost no one in my cohort raises a hand. The silence is not dramatic; it is simply the silence of people who have no urgent desire to reopen SPSS.

In some (but not all) universities in Vietnam, however, quantitative expertise still carries the glow of the gold standard. Survey research remains especially popular among undergraduate students. At times, it feels as though every BA student must pass through the sacred gate of the Google Form before graduation. As a future supervisor, I am expected to know SPSS, distinguish between a t-test and an ANOVA, and guide students through statistical significance. Otherwise, the supervisory meeting becomes a small theatre of mutual politeness, where my student and I smile awkwardly before me telling the students to consult ChatGPT for help. Since I am much more at home with qualitative research, I can only hope that, when I return to Vietnam, at least one qualitative student will be kindly assigned to me.

The second paradox lies in language education itself. Vietnam still cherishes language learning. In the evenings, parents wait on their motorbikes outside language centres while their children prepare for another English class. Language testing has become a vast industry; we even have a television programme devoted to IELTS on national television, where viewers are offered, alongside examination tips, the bizarre concept of viewers watching people, often celebrities, take a language test on screen.

The UK, meanwhile, appears to be witnessing the decline of modern languages. According to the HEPI Report (2024), only 2.97% of A-level entries in 2024 were for Modern Foreign Languages, Classical Subjects, Welsh as a Second Language, and Irish (Bowers, 2024). Universities such as Nottingham, Cardiff, Bangor, and Aberdeen have all faced concerns over language provision. I remember signing at least two online petitions to help save language departments from being quietly removed from the university map.

Doing a PhD between Vietnam and the UK, while carrying these two professional identities, can therefore feel like a fever dream. I stand somewhere between numbers and conversations; between a thriving language industry full of language factories and the slow collapse of the Tower of Babel; between the desire to be scholarly and the need to be useful. This, I suspect, is what cognitive dissonance feels like when it is wearing a university lanyard (I just lost my lanyard several months ago by the way).

Doing qualitative research is rather enjoyable. In fact, I enjoy it far more than quantitative research, which may already reveal more about my character than I would like. Qualitative work allows me to enter, slowly and carefully, into another person's lived experience. It can involve hours of interviews, long periods of fieldwork, pages of fieldnotes, and the slightly obsessive act of replaying a recording for the twentieth time in the hope that a hidden layer of meaning will finally reveal itself. Everyday conversations, by contrast, are often too fleeting. We exchange hellos and how-are-yous, but much of what matters disappears before we have had the chance to notice it.

Through interviews, member-checking, and fieldnotes, qualitative research can help us build a richer picture of who someone is and how they make sense of their world. In one study on dialogic reflection, I interviewed a former student of mine and was startled to encounter a version of him I had never fully recognised when I taught him: mature, thoughtful, and carrying concerns that were far more deeply considered than I had expected. He seemed, almost, like a different person. After that qualitative process, I promised myself never to say "I know you well" about anyone quite so easily again. Qualitative research, in that sense, did not only make me a better researcher. It made me a fuller person.

...and then I looked at mainstream newspapers and magazines. There they were, confidently reporting quantitative findings from experimental studies. Left-handed people are more talented. Students learn vocabulary better after encountering a word sixteen times. People are more likely to fall in love after crossing a shaky bridge together. These studies look useful. Many of them are INDEED useful. In language teacher education, we often rely on studies that attempt to identify causal links between variables. Such work has shaped the backbone of much educational methodology.

So I began to wonder: am I still being useful if I do not run experiments?

At this point, a rather unkind question entered my mind: is qualitative research just advanced journalism? After all, the process can look suspiciously similar from a distance. We interview people, select parts of what they say, and write a paper about it. Of course, qualitative research is more rigorous than journalism in important ways. We are not supposed to cherry-pick the most sensational lines or choose only what will please an audience. We proceed more systematically, with a concern for context, interpretation, reflexivity, and ethics. Still, the doubt remained. Are we simply giving academic names to things journalists have always done?

I know, intellectually, that research cannot be defined only by the traditions of the natural sciences. Yet the natural-scientific image of research remains deeply lodged in my mind. Even as I defend qualitative inquiry in theory, some quiet and inconvenient part of me still asks whether what I am doing truly deserves to be called research.

Statistic Robots

I suspect that many (if not all!) research novices in education begin with the same innocent ambition: to find "the effective way" to make students learn better. That was certainly what I hoped for when I first encountered the idea of research. Even now, despite my qualitative loyalties, I admire those who can go fully quantitative without looking as though they have accidentally wandered into a mathematics department.

I have, in fact, been chasing quantitative competence for years. I have taken at least five research methodology courses, online, during my MA and PhD, and through summer schools, largely so that I can distinguish a t-test from an ANOVA without needing to lie down afterwards. Yet it never quite feels sufficient. Each course is necessarily limited. One covers descriptive statistics, another surveys, another experimental design. None seems to cover the whole terrain, especially when qualitative methods must also be squeezed into the timetable. As a first-year PhD student grounded in qualitative research, I still have not done much quantitative work. At the time of writing this essay, I am voluntarily joining a survey research project simply to learn, by standing close to the machinery, how quantitative research is actually done.

As I mentioned earlier, quantitative research often feels more like "research" in the traditional sense. It seeks relationships between A and B, tests hypotheses, produces conclusions, and sometimes offers the possibility of generalisation. There is something reassuring about numbers. They look disciplined. They sit neatly in tables. They do not pause in an interview and say, "That is an interesting question," before telling you their life story. Yet quantitative research is not without its problems. Two, in particular, trouble me. I think of them as the (1) the perception/perspective curse and the (2) illusion of effectiveness.

The perceptions curse refers to the tendency, especially in small-scale studies, to survey what people think and then stop there. This is not to say that perceptions are unimportant. They are often a useful starting point. But in some areas, they have become almost a genre of their own. Guangwei Hu, editor of the Journal of English for Academic Purposes, recently criticised the excessive number of "perspectives" studies on GenAI:

Another popular genre involves surveying perceptions and challenges of GenAI among every possible demographic: teachers, students, males, females, novices, experts, and, I suspect, even the family pet. While understanding perceptions and challenges is important, we have reached a saturation point. The field does not need another study telling us that students welcome but often misuse GenAI, or that teachers are cautiously optimistic but feel challenged at the same time. What we need now are actionable insights, innovative applications, and research that move beyond the obvious. In short, enough with the perceptions; let's see some action!

(Hu, 2026, p. 1)

The second problem is the illusion of effectiveness. Even in experimental designs, can we ever be entirely sure that an intervention has caused the improvement we observe? Suppose a teacher applies an innovative teaching approach and students perform better afterwards. How do we know the improvement is not simply due to repeated exposure to tests, private tutoring at home, increased motivation, or a hundred other small factors quietly working in the background? Educational research rarely takes place in a sealed laboratory. Students have parents, friends, exam pressure, YouTube, part-time jobs, emotional lives, and, occasionally,

a mysterious ability to improve for reasons no researcher has successfully controlled.

There is also something unsettling about reducing human learning to large numbers and clean generalisations. Are studies of human beings really comparable to studies of a new machine? Can social science generalisations ever be as stable as we hope? Perhaps not. Tyner et al. (2026), for example, suggest that nearly half of social science findings cannot be replicated. This does not mean quantitative research is useless. Far from it. But it does remind me that numbers, however elegant, are not immune to uncertainty.

A Better Way Forward



So what is the solution to my cognitive dissonance then?

Mixed methods may be one answer. At its best, it mediates between the two worlds: it can offer the breadth and generalisability that qualitative research may lack, while also preserving the layers of meaning that quantitative research may overlook. It promises, rather temptingly, the best of both worlds. Yet this promise also requires caution. Without careful design, mixed methods can encourage a dangerous “anything goes as long as you mix them” mentality (Dörnyei, 2007). Combining methods does not automatically produce better research. Sometimes, it simply produces more research for the already tired PhD student to do.

Photo taken by me

Another answer, at least for me as a qualitative-inclined researcher, is to accept the accusation of “advanced journalism” with slightly more confidence. Yes, qualitative research has something journalistic about it. And perhaps that is not entirely a weakness. Journalism, at its best, has changed public conversations. Newspapers have shaped opinion; songs have moved people; even a short lyric can sometimes disturb the conscience of a large institution. *Making Plans for Nigel*, for example, reportedly led British Steel to reflect on questions of job satisfaction. If songs and newspapers can matter, then perhaps qualitative research should not be ashamed of wanting to be read beyond the seminar room.

The task, then, is not to make qualitative research less human in order to make it appear more scientific. The task may be to make it more carefully written, more ethically grounded, and most importantly, more accessible to a wider audience. At present, too much qualitative research is read mainly by other academics. Works such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes’s *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics* remind us that ethnographic research can be rigorous, humane, and readable at the same time.

But perhaps there are other solutions I have not yet discovered. I am, after all, only a first-year PhD student. At the time of writing, I have not even passed my Upgrade. There are still questions I am unable to answer. The existential academic crisis is therefore still very much ongoing, though I like to think it has become better dressed.

A good PhD, I am beginning to suspect, is not someone who has resolved every paradox, but someone who has learned to live with them honestly, critically, and with a sustained commitment to understanding them.

Perhaps, if I am fortunate enough to earn the title of Doctor in the next 3 years, I will return to this piece and see what has changed.

Bowler, M. (2025). The languages crisis: Arresting decline. Higher Education Policy Institute

<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/the-languages-crisis-arresting-decline/>

Dörnyei, Z. (2007). Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies. Oxford University Press.

Hu, G. (2026). GenAI! GenAI? GenAI... Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 80, Article 101650. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2026.101650>

Scheper-Hughes, N. (2001). Saints, scholars, and schizophrenics: Mental illness in rural Ireland (20th anniversary ed.). University of California Press. Original work published 1979.

Tyner, A. H., Abatayo, A. L., Daley, M., Hanel, P. H. P., Jolles, D., Juanchich, M., Sirota, M., & et al. (2026). Investigating the replicability of the social and behavioural sciences. Nature, 652(8108), 143–150. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-025-10078-y>

Williams, M., Sloan, L., & Brookfield, C. (2019). The quantitative crisis in UK sociology. In J. Evans, S. Ruane, & H. Southall (Eds.), Data in society: Challenging statistics in an age of globalisation. Bristol University Press.

NATSUMI SHIINO



NATSUMI SHIINO

Natsumi Shiino is a PhD candidate at the University of Warwick, Politics and International Studies. Her research interests include Security in East Asia, Japan's National Security, Japan-Sino relationship, and Strategic Communications. She has been serving as a civilian employee at the Japanese Ministry of Defence since 2012.

When Crisis Becomes Noise: The Erosion of Strategic Narratives

Prologue

This is a random note scribbled by a government speechwriter.

I noticed that a particular phrase suddenly arose in Japanese political speech around Spring 2022. "Today's Ukraine could be tomorrow's East Asia." (Original Japanese:今日のウクライナは明日の東アジア) It claims that what is happening in Ukraine, an unlawful invasion, might take place anytime soon in East Asia. My initial impression was not that negative. I thought it was striking and powerful, serving as a warning call for immediate action. But over time, its momentum grew dimmer, and it became a familiar refrain, slipping into the background noise of everyday discourse.

This memo traces the path of this phrase and discusses how a strategic narrative loses its momentum: a "narrative crisis." As a speechwriter, I am primarily interested in how the reception of crisis narratives evolves from empathy to scepticism and ultimately to indifference. I do not intend to explore the erasure of the crisis itself. Rather, for my own

understanding, it highlights the particular moment when the narrative deployed to communicate a crisis loses its persuasive force. In doing so, it asks important questions about what constitutes a crisis and how such recognition is shaped by narrative.

A note of Context

The phrase has been adopted in Japanese political discourse on East Asian security since the start of the War in Ukraine in 2022.

The Emergence of the Phrase

I still remember the day I first heard this phrase in early 2022 from Prime Minister Kishida’s mouth. It immediately produced a strong empathy and concern among Japanese citizens. It seemed like a strong warning that would someday fall upon the Japanese people, and I was reminded of a future that should not have been.

“Today’s Ukraine could be tomorrow’s East Asia” agitates a sense of crisis by connecting the ongoing war in Ukraine to the East Asian context.

The phrase emerged at the intersection of multiple purposes, mainly towards domestic audiences: to convey urgency, to make a distant war feel relevant, to justify financial support to Ukraine, and to explain Japan’s evolving security posture, all within the constraints¹ that limited more direct forms of involvement.

This expression, however, did not remain singular. It was used on different occasions, by different narrators, over and over. It became so common that we saw the phrase elsewhere: during TV shows, in politicians’ remarks, and in online news outlets. The repetition seemed to reinforce its importance, which would continue to grow.

However, a change came at some point.

As the circulation grew, people started to tune out on the word. This same term, once used to think of, became a cliché, eventually fading into an almost anonymous crisis story. People’s reception was even fatigued and resigned.

This note starts with this minor but important turning point. What, then, counts as a crisis, and how should it be recognised? By tracing the trajectory of a single phrase, it focuses not on the crisis as a physical event but on how it is narrated and how its power gradually fades.

Crisis as Projection

The phrase has been repeatedly used in Japan’s political discourse since the outbreak of the War in Ukraine in February 2022². It linked the war to an East Asian context, despite its geographical and historical distance, effectively relocating the crisis into the audience’s own horizon. The feature lies in its logic to reframe ongoing events as “future possibilities,” shifting them from something observed to something anticipated.

By doing so, the audience was drawn in to envision what could have happened to them, even if the crisis was not in their vicinity. That is, this phrase has served to “shorten” time, place and the sense of crisis.

At the same time, this phrase could be understood as part of Japan’s strategic communication efforts. Strategic communication refers to the deliberate use of communication by political actors to shape how target audiences perceive and interpret reality³. In this sense, this phrase can be viewed as a linguistic practice intended to shape a sense of crisis through specific messages and influence the recipient’s understanding and attitudes.

Indeed, this phrase is deeply correlated to the security environment surrounding Japan. The rise in regional tension, from potential

Taiwan contingency to North Korea’s missile development and launches, reinforced the case for growing tension. Amid this situation, the phrase highlights the common logic of “change of the status quo by force,” providing a framework that stitches together geographically distinct events into a single, continuous crisis narrative.

For this reason, the phrase went beyond metaphor, functioning as a strategic message with political implications. It is, in fact, a linguistic narrative device to reiterate the urgency of the crisis, reinforcing and normalising the perceived necessity of national security policies.

At the initial stage, the phrase was at least working as intended and gained traction as a warning. However, although the war was still ongoing, the impact of this phrase began to fade. The shift becomes evident when we trace how it was used and received by the mass audience.

Repetition and Saturation

The narrative remained consistent throughout the period, projecting a possible future crisis in East Asia through various outlets, including newspaper articles, TV reports, academic debates, and online posts. This repetition contributed to strengthening the convincing power to a certain extent. At the same time, however, it also brought about a repetition without any updates or deeds.

This repetitive accumulation gradually influenced the public’s reception. The initial impact was diluted, and it even failed to be

recognised as a warning message. Gradually, the same message came to be perceived as a well-known pattern, rather than new information. That is to say, it transformed from being an object to be comprehended to an object to be identified.

At this stage, the phrase lost much of its significance. Instead, it appeared as a predictable pattern in people’s eyes. When the same phrase is repeatedly presented, the receptor dismisses the message, immediately judging, “Here we go again,” and letting it pass without deep involvement (known as message saturation). The phrase still circulated, but it was no longer delivering a critical message. This is how a phrase becomes dull, gradually undermining one’s own persuasiveness.

Shifting Reception

In so doing, several questions about the specific meaning and the underlying assumptions gradually arise. Is it really valid to compare Ukraine and East Asia on the same level, given their different historical backgrounds and geopolitical contexts? ⁴ Isn’t the government overstating the threat?

More fundamentally, there was a certain gap between the metaphor and deeds. If someone repeats the same statement without concrete policies and proportionate substantive involvement, the recipient eventually begins to take the statement with a grain of salt. Despite its massive financial aid, exceeding 1.5 trillion yen (roughly 12 billion USD⁵, the Japanese Government’s support for Ukraine remained

¹ Japan cannot export arms to other countries due to its peace-oriented constitution and the three principles on arms exports, which hinder direct involvement in the war.
² Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2025). Japan-Ukraine Foreign Ministers’ Meeting. 12/11/2025. https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/seb/ua/pageite_000001_00008.html
³ Zerfass, A. *et al.* (2018) ‘Strategic Communication: Defining the Field and its Contribution to Research and Practice’, *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4), pp. 487–505. doi: 10.1080/1553118X.2018.1493485.

⁴ Shinoda, H. (2025). Kyou no Ukuraina wa Asuno Higashi Ajia: Ukuraina Ouendan ga ou setumei sekinin. [“Today’s Ukraine could be East Asia tomorrow”: The accountability of pro-Ukraine advocates]. *Agora*, 20 December 2025. <https://agora-web.jp/archives/251209135628.html>
⁵ According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, it has committed more than \$12 billion in assistance to Ukraine since 2022. 100684189.pdf

largely indirect, with only limited operational, humanitarian, and logistical engagement. That is to say, the reliability of the phrase itself was eroded silently without sufficient corresponding actions being taken.

The words without specific actions are a mere pattern, a familiar one. It will be judged as a worn-out phrase without substance. These doubts and frustrations also surfaced in media reports and online discourse.

Against this backdrop, Japanese audiences took a straightforward but critical position- “In the end, I don’t understand what it means,” “I am no longer paying attention to this,” or “Is this really the priority given the current domestic situation (amid a difficult domestic financial situation)?” Online discussions were filled with these comments, not necessarily denying support for Ukraine but also suggesting a decline in attentiveness⁶. The phrase has shifted from a warning message to an object whose validity and effectiveness are questioned, or just ignored⁷.

This process continues for a period, after which it proceeds to another stage. With the mounting doubts and criticisms, the phrase elicits fewer responses. Ultimately, it may not necessarily even provoke criticism. It is ingested without the listener’s focus, as though it has been heard too many times.

These dynamics can be viewed as an emotional continuum from anxiety, empathy, scepticism, to indifference. Importantly, it does not necessarily mean that there is no longer concern regarding

the crisis itself. Instead, as the repetitive phrase loses its influence, it reflects a transformation in how the crisis is recognised and processed. With repeated use of words that are hard to hear and clearly warn of a crisis, trust in those words inevitably wanes, and so do their warning powers.

Thus, repetition can have the opposite effect of building its credibility. It is not an absence of crisis, but a malfunction in the communicative circuit through which crisis is shared.

Narrative Crisis

I personally call this narrative malfunction a “narrative crisis”. The focus is not on the actual crisis; rather, it is on how and when the language used to understand and communicate it to others becomes ineffective. In this context, a crisis does not exist by itself. It is socially constructed by being recognised as given meaning. The incoherence in the government’s actions, coupled with excessive repetition, gradually erodes its reliability. As a result, even though the crisis remains, it becomes difficult to recognise it as a “crisis” in the first place.

This type of narrative crisis points to a broader issue in the inconsistency between words and actions in the contemporary world. In an information-overload environment, people seek catchier, stimulating, and eye-popping phrases (as a speechwriter, I agree on this point to a certain extent). But without tangible action, the more frequently those spicy words are used to call attention to a crisis, the more their impact

is diluted, making it easier for recipients to process them as part of an indistinguishable stream of information. Japan’s case indicates how a crisis narrative may lose its force amid the flood of information.

Here, a crisis cannot be objectively determined depending on the gravity of the situation. Rather, it is a product of how the audience perceives and interprets it (as in constructivist approaches to security and discourse). That means when the narrative malfunctions, the very perception of the crisis is destabilised.

This is not just a one-off scenario; it is not even specific to a particular phrase or a region. Then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s famous quote, “A situation in Taiwan is a situation for Japan”,⁸ uses similar logic to alert to the existential threat.⁹

The typical analogy even goes beyond Japan. For instance, in the context of China–Taiwan relations, the phrase “Ukraine today, Taiwan tomorrow” has been used to highlight the potential risk of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.¹⁰ While perceptions may differ, a similar dynamic can be observed here. The initial impact and its persuasive force may decline over time if not accompanied by tangible actions.

They change in meaning, intensity and believability. Even in a different context, excessive use of the phrase, coupled with the inconsistency between words and actions, may trigger narrative fatigue and deteriorated credibility.

What is at stake, therefore, is not the disappearance of crisis itself, but the erosion of the narrative frameworks through which crisis is recognised and shared.

⁶ See, for example, FNN Prime Online (26 February 2024), which reports public reactions such as: “If there is that much money, I would rather it be used domestically.” <https://www.fnn.jp/articles/-/662513>

⁷ Public opinion surveys (a joint Japan–US survey) suggest that support for Ukraine in Japan is conditional. For example, while 44.7% supported continued assistance even at domestic cost, a larger share, 55.3%, preferred to avoid economic burdens at home. https://www.jiia.or.jp/pdf/research/R04_US/01-05.pdf

⁸ Asahi Shinbun. (2021). Taiwan yuujī wa Nihon yuujī: Abe motoshushō ga Taiwan no shinpode onrain kouen. [“A Taiwan contingency is a Japan contingency”: Former Prime Minister Abe speaks at a Taiwan symposium]. 1/12/2021. <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASPD15JM0PD1UHB101K.html?msckid=11e73fc11abd617b265a2ac61bbb60b8>

⁹ Yet it was delivered after he had left his office and gained limited domestic traction.

¹⁰ A similar set of phrases was used in Taiwan. See also Taiwan Policy Centre, May 2022, Ukraine Today, Taiwan Tomorrow? <https://www.economist.com/international/2025/02/17/will-it-be-ukraine-today-taiwan-tomorrow>

Epilogue - When Crisis Loses Its Language

The fact that I need to prepare another draft for the speech for next week’s event remains.

I may have to include this phrase about Taiwan. Yet it may no longer make people pause as it once did. It will creep into our ears, unnoticed, as an everyday conversation.

My random thoughts in this memo show that a particular phrase loses its effectiveness over time. It is not a matter of rhetoric. When the repetition, which is supposed to bolster the message, instead weakens it, the issue lies not only in perception but in the growing gap between words and the realities they are expected to signal.

This poses a more fundamental question: what constitutes a crisis? It is not about the seriousness or gravity of the issue itself. Rather, a crisis begins to lose its force when the language used to describe it is no longer supported by corresponding action or consequence.

It does not matter how the story ends; there may be a crisis that continues. Yet when narratives fail to materialise into tangible change, they slowly lose their urgency.

When repeated warnings eventually fade into background noise, like a familiar phrase lingering in the air but no longer fully heard. Beyond that, there may be a blankness of perception.

In such a condition, the problem is no longer whether a crisis exists, but whether its articulation still carries enough weight to be taken seriously.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and not those of the Ministry of Defence or the Government of Japan.

References

Asahi Shinbun. (2021). Taiwan yuuji wa Nihon yuuji: Abe motoshushou ga Taiwan no shinpode onrain kouen. ["A Taiwan contingency is a Japan contingency": Former Prime Minister Abe speaks at a Taiwan symposium]. 1/12/2021.
<https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASPD15JM0PD1UHBIO1K.html?msockid=11e73fc11abd617b265a2ac61bbb60b8>

Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024). Japan-Ukraine Support and Cooperation Accord [It has committed more than \$12 billion in assistance to Ukraine since 2022]. 100684189.pdf

Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2025). Japan-Ukraine Foreign Ministers' Meeting. 12/11/2025. https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/seb/ua/pageite_000001_00008.html

Shinoda, H. (2025). Kyou no Ukuraina wa Asuno Higashi Ajia: Ukuraina Ouendan ga ou setumei sekinin. ["Today's Ukraine could be East Asia tomorrow": The accountability of pro-Ukraine advocates]. Agora, December 20, 2025. <https://agora-web.jp/archives/251209135628.html>

Zerfass, A. et al. (2018) 'Strategic Communication: Defining the Field and its Contribution to Research and Practice', International Journal of Strategic Communication, 12(4), pp. 487–505. doi: 10.1080/1553118X.2018.1493485.

PRANSHU MUNDADA



PRANSHU MUNDADA

Pranshu Mundada is a PhD student in Health Economics at Warwick Medical School, funded through the ESRC Midlands Graduate School Doctoral Training Partnership in collaboration with the UK National Screening Committee. Her doctoral research explores how health economic models are communicated and understood in screening decision-making, with a focus on making complex evidence more accessible to non-economist decision-makers. Before moving into health economics, Pranshu trained and practised as a dentist in India, an experience that continues to shape her interest in healthcare access, inequality, and the human consequences of resource allocation. Her broader research interests include public health decision-making, screening policy, evidence communication, and the role of economic modelling in shaping fair and transparent healthcare choices.

The Distance Between Decisions and Lives

I. A Government Dental Hospital Before Dawn in India

India spends roughly 1.9% of its GDP on public healthcare, short of its own target of 2.5% [1]. The consequences are not abstract. They are visible government hospital corridors in the country: understaffed wards, waiting areas that overflow before the doors open, and patients who travel for hours from rural villages only to be told that the clinic has already run out of appointments for the day. For many, the choice is stark. Pay what you cannot afford at a private clinic or wait.

I trained as a dentist in one of these hospitals. Treatment was free, which is why the queues started before dawn. By the time I arrived for my shift, the corridor outside our department was already full. Patients sat on the floor, leaned against the walls; children slept in their mothers' laps. India has roughly one government dentist for every 10,000 people, against a World Health Organization recommendation of one to 7,500 [2,3]. The arithmetic was simple. More people arrived than we could possibly treat. Some waited all day and went home without being seen. They came back the next morning, and the morning after that, joining the queue before dawn again, because the nearest private clinic cost more than a week's wages and because pain does not observe opening hours. I learnt to recognise the faces of the repeat visitors: the ones who had been turned away the day before and had come back with the same swelling, the same broken tooth, the same quiet determination to be seen.

The first thing they teach you in dental school is proximity. You learn to lean over a patient's chest, close enough to share their breath, and to work within their discomfort with steadiness. You learn how much trust is contained in a person opening their mouth when you ask them to. Care begins before treatment does, in the moment someone decides you are safe enough to let close. There was a woman who came in with a swelling that had started three months earlier. She had treated it with turmeric paste and prayer. By the time she sat in my chair, her left cheek was hot to the touch and the eye on that side was beginning to close. I drained the abscess. While I worked, she gripped my forearm as though anchoring herself while the world tilted. She did not cry. When it was done, she looked at me and said: "Doctor, I should have come earlier. But it costs so much to come." She did not mean the cost of the treatment. The treatment was free. She meant the bus fare, the day's wages, the hours spent waiting, and the small exhausting courage required to walk into a building she did not fully understand and place herself in someone else's hands. The infection had nearly reached her brain. The cost on my prescription pad was almost nothing. The cost in her life had been everything she had.

I think also about a boy who came in with his grandmother. He was perhaps eight years old. His grandmother had brought him only because the pain had started keeping him awake. She apologised for not having come sooner, the way people in that hospital always apologised: not for inconveniencing me, but for the condition of their own lives. I gave the boy local anaesthetic and extracted three teeth. He did not flinch. His grandmother held his hand and looked away, the discipline of a woman who had learnt to contain her fear in front of a child, because the child was already holding enough for both.

My dental curriculum included a module on public health, but it was thin and hurried. What the textbook could not teach me; the hospital corridor did: that every clinical decision had an immediate human register. If something went wrong, I knew it at once. A change in breathing. A tightening of the hand. The smallest withdrawal of trust. The cause and the effect lived in the same room.

I left clinical practice because I wanted to understand the system that produced those corridors. Not only how to treat a person in pain, but how to design something that might reach them before the pain began. What I did not anticipate was how far from the patient I would have to travel to do so. The journey began with a new language: one that turned pain into measure.

II. When Pain Became a Number: Learning the Language of Health Economics

When I began studying health economics during my master's in the UK, I felt I had crossed into a country that spoke a different language about the same things. Pain was still there, but it was called something else. The discipline had found a way to convert what a person feels, their capacity to walk, sleep, and live without fear, into a single number. And then it placed that number on a scale beside other numbers, from other patients with other conditions, and asked: which intervention buys the most health for the least money?

That question is the engine of health economics. And it is not a cynical question. In a world where every health system has finite resources and infinite need, someone must decide how to allocate what is available. Should we fund a new cancer drug or expand mental health services? Should we screen an entire population for a disease or target only those at highest risk? These are not merely technical questions. They are moral ones, and they carry consequences that land on specific people, in specific waiting rooms, on specific days.

In the United Kingdom, these decisions are shaped by bodies like the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) and the UK National Screening Committee (UK NSC), which use health economic evidence to determine which treatments and programmes are worth funding [4]. When NICE says yes,

the NHS funds the treatment. When it says no, it does not. When the UK NSC recommends a screening programme, millions of people receive an invitation through their letterbox. When it declines to recommend one, they do not. The human consequences of these recommendations are vast, yet the process that produces them is almost entirely invisible to the public. For 26 years, the benchmark was a threshold: if an intervention cost less than £20,000 to £30,000 for each additional year of healthy life it produced, it was generally considered cost-effective. In April 2026, that threshold rose for the first time since NICE was established, to £25,000 to £35,000 [5]. On paper, it was a technical adjustment. In practice, it changed the language of value. An intervention that had been borderline was now clearly worth funding. Another sat less securely than before.

What struck me was not the mathematics but the silence around it. The people whose lives will eventually be shaped by those shifts, the ones who will or will not receive a letter, who will or will not be invited for a test, have no idea that the line moved. Or that a line existed at all. The decisions live in offices and spreadsheets. The patients live in waiting rooms. Between the two, there is a distance which has, by now, the shape of a discipline. That distant policy language soon became my daily practice.

III. The Model That Decides Who Gets Screened

I work on a model that simulates the lives of 100,000 fictional women.

They have ages, risk factors, and family histories drawn from population data. They develop breast cancer at rates calibrated to UK registries. They are screened, or they are not, depending on the strategy I am testing. They survive, or they do not, according to probabilities extracted from clinical trials in which real women once participated, and from which their outcomes were averaged and smoothed into curves that now live inside my laptop.

I run the model. It takes under 5 minutes. At the end, it reports how many of the 100,000 women died, how many years of life were lived, and at what cost. I adjust a parameter. I run it again. The parameter might be the age at which screening begins, the interval between invitations, or the rate at which women are called back for further tests. Each adjustment changes the balance between cancers caught early and biopsies performed unnecessarily, between lives extended and anxiety inflicted. The model weighs these against each other. It produces a recommendation. The recommendation may, in time, become policy.

This is not an abstraction. In May 2026, the UK NSC confirmed its first ever recommendation on prostate cancer screening, a decision shaped directly by a modelling study commissioned from the University of Sheffield [6,7]. The committee's models weighed multiple strategies: screening all men, screening those with a family history, screening Black men, and screening only those with a confirmed BRCA2 gene mutation. The evidence showed that only the last group, men aged 45 to 61 with a known BRCA2 variant, would clearly benefit more from screening than they would be harmed by it. The government accepted the recommendation in June 2026 [8]. It means most men will not be invited for prostate screening. It also means Black men, who face higher prostate cancer rates and later diagnosis [9], were not included. The committee acknowledged this uncertainty, calling for ongoing research, but the decision has provoked concern about deepening health inequalities [10].



This is what a model does. It weighs, it balances, it recommends. And someone falls on the other side of the line. Not because the model is careless, but because it must choose. That is its function. That is also its cost.

I tell myself, often, that this is what I wanted: to work at the level of the system, to shape the conditions rather than the wounds. And I believe this. The model is an instrument of fairness. Without it, decisions about screening would rest on intuition, prestige, or whoever spoke loudest in a committee room. But I notice a thing happening to me that I want to write down before I lose the ability to see it. When I run the model, I

no longer picture the women. There was a time when I would look at the output, deaths averted: 47, and pause, and think about 47 women. 47 faces I could not see. Now I think about the next parameter to adjust. The 47 have receded into the number. The number is what I send to committees. The number is what the committees discuss, approve, and turn into policy. I am not proud of this. I am not even sure it is a failing; it may simply be what the work requires. But I notice it, and I do not want to stop noticing.

And yet.

IV. Week Nine: Two Women in a Waiting Room

In a hospital outpatients department somewhere in England, a woman called Mary is sitting next to her mother, Rose.

They have been there for two hours and twenty minutes. The appointment was for 10:15 am. The receptionist has apologised twice. There is a clinic running over, she says, and she is so sorry. Mary has said it is fine, although it is becoming less fine with each quarter-hour that passes.

Rose is 68. She retired three years ago from a primary school where she had worked as a teaching assistant for two decades. She has not said much since they sat down. She is the kind of person who does not complain about discomfort. She has spent most of her adult life looking after other people: her children, her husband before he died, her own mother in the last years. She has learnt that waiting is what you do when you are not the kind of person whose time is considered valuable. She has brought a paperback but has not opened it.

The television in the corner is showing the news with the sound turned off. The man two seats away has a cough that has been going for forty minutes.

The reason they are here today is unrelated to the reason that frightens them. Rose is being seen for a shoulder problem, an old injury that has flared in the cold. The other matter, the one that has been in the room of their lives since November, is a lump that Rose found while showering and did not mention for six weeks. When she did finally mention it, to Mary rather than to the GP, her voice was so steady that Mary almost missed it. The way Rose always delivers difficult news: wrapped in the ordinary rhythm of the day, as though it were nothing more than an observation about the weather. Mary took her mother's hand and said, we must call them. They called the GP. Rose was examined and referred urgently.

The breast clinic appointment came 2 weeks later. By the time she is seen, almost 9 weeks will have passed since she first found the lump.

Rose has not spoken about the lump since the GP appointment. Mary has spoken about it, with her husband and with her sister, every night. She does not know how to ask her mother whether she is frightened. She suspects that she is, but that Rose considers fear something to be held privately. Close, and quiet, and out of sight. The man with the cough is called in. He stands up slowly and walks through a door. The door closes behind him.

Mary checks her phone. She thinks, without quite forming the thought, about the fact that her mother was never invited for breast cancer screening. The NHS Breast Screening Programme invites women aged 50 to 70 every three years [11]. Rose is within the age range, but she moved house four years ago, and somewhere in the system the letter did not arrive or was lost in post. Mary does not know this. She knows only that her mother is sitting beside her, and that they have been waiting and that the lump in her mother's breast is now nine weeks closer to whatever it is going to be.

Somewhere, in a building Mary will never visit, a model was once run that helped determine who gets invited for screening and how often. The model weighed harms against benefits, benefits against costs. It produced a recommendation that was adopted into national policy [12]. The model could not see Mary's mother. It saw 100,000 simulated women, of whom some would benefit from being screened, some would be harmed, and some would fall, statistically, through whichever net was finally chosen.

The model did not lose Rose's letter. Nobody chose her. Nobody intended her. But policy becomes real through systems, and systems have edges.

Rose is standing at one of them. She fell.

V. The Distance Between Decisions and Lives

I have never met Mary or Rose. I do not know whether the lump is benign or whether it will be the thing that takes Rose from her daughter. I have invented them. But I have not invented the conditions of their lives, which are shaped, in part, by the kind of work I do.

This is the crisis I have wanted to write about. Not the crisis of budgets or waiting lists, though those crises are real. The crisis I want to name is quieter. It is the crisis of distance: the space between the person who models and the person who waits, between the spreadsheet and the body, between the recommendation that serves the many and the individual it was never designed to see.

We built this distance for good reasons. You cannot decide screening policy for 67 million people by knocking on every door. You must abstract. You must model. You must let the 47 women become a number, so that the number can do its work. And yet the women remain. They sit in waiting rooms and they hold the hands of their grandchildren and they do not know that there exists, somewhere, a spreadsheet in which they were a row, and that the row was summed with other rows, and that the sum was sent to a committee, and that the committee approved a policy, and that the policy is the reason their letter did not arrive.

I will not stop running the models. They are the best instruments we have for distributing limited care across vast populations. To abandon them would be to return to crueller and more arbitrary ways of choosing. But what I can do, perhaps, is hold the distance in my mind while I work. Refuse to let the 47 dissolve entirely into the number. Remember that abstraction is a tool, not a state of grace. Sit, occasionally, in real waiting rooms. Not to pretend I am still a clinician, which I am not, but to remember what time feels like inside them, and what hope looks like when it has nowhere left to go.

When I was a dentist, the woman with the abscess held my forearm while I worked. She trusted me to do something specific, in a specific moment, in the small space between us. I cannot give that back to her now, or to the many people who sit in the world's waiting rooms, people whose names I will never know, whose faces I will never see, whose suffering my spreadsheets can weigh but cannot witness. But I can refuse to forget that the space existed. I can refuse to let the distance grow so large that I lose the capacity to see across it.

The crisis is not that we must make choices. We must, and we will. The crisis is that we have learnt, almost without noticing, how to make them without weight. It costs so much to come.

References

1. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India. National Health Accounts Estimates for India 2020-21. New Delhi: MoHFW; 2024.
2. Yadav R, Rai R. Dental education: Do we really have too many graduates? British Dental Journal. 2016 Jun;220(11):558–8.
3. Singh A, Purohit BM. Addressing oral health disparities, inequity in access and workforce issues in a developing country. International Dental Journal. 2013 May;n/a-n/a.
4. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. NICE health technology evaluations: the manual. London: NICE; 2022.
5. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Cost-effectiveness threshold update: from £20,000-£30,000 to £25,000-£35,000 per QALY gained, effective April 2026. London: NICE; 2025.
6. Sheffield Centre for Health and Related Research (SCHARR). Updated prostate cancer screening modelling study. Sheffield: University of Sheffield; 2025. Commissioned by the UK National Screening Committee.
7. UK National Screening Committee. Minutes of UK NSC meeting, March 2026: updated prostate cancer screening recommendation. GOV.UK; 2026. Available from: <https://nationalscreening.blog.gov.uk/2026/05/28/>
8. Cancer Research UK. UK NSC recommends targeted prostate cancer screening for men with a BRCA2 gene change and family history of cancer. Cancer Research UK News. 2026 May 28.
9. National Prostate Cancer Audit. Annual Report 2025: patterns of diagnosis and treatment by ethnicity and deprivation. London: NPCA; 2025.
10. Langley S, Chinegwundoh F. Screening every man for prostate cancer isn't as helpful as it sounds [letter]. The Times. 2025 Dec 20.
11. NHS England. NHS Breast Screening Programme: helping you decide. London: NHS England; 2024.
12. Marmot MG, Altman DG, Cameron DA, Dewar JA, Thompson SG, Wilcox M. The benefits and harms of breast cancer screening: an independent review. Br J Cancer. 2013;108(11):2205-40.

When minds carry borders



MD SAIMUL ISLAM

Md Saimul Islam is a second-year PhD student at the Warwick Medical School, University of Warwick. He is a recipient of the prestigious Chancellor's International Scholarship. His research focuses on mental health and well-being among older adults in the Southeast Asian region. Over the years, Saimul has gained experience in designing national surveys, implementing community-based trials, participating in multi-country research collaborations, and publishing research in peer-reviewed journals. As an international PhD student, he emphasizes the importance of positive well-being, cultural understanding, and institutional support in helping international students cope with challenges and thrive in a new environment.

There is a particular kind of loneliness that international PhD student experience. It is not about staying in an empty room though that comes too. It is the solitude of standing in the middle of Coventry City Centre on a Tuesday afternoon, watching people move through their familiar lives and realizing that you are both here and nowhere at all. You are six thousand miles away from Dhaka, five months into your PhD and the person you were before feels like an old draft of a thesis you no longer use.

I came to the University of Warwick in October 2024 to study mental health among older adults. I spend my days reading about loneliness, social isolation, cognitive decline, and emotional resilience in ageing populations and then I close my laptop and confront versions of those very experiences in my own life — scaled differently, shaped differently, but unmistakably present. This is the quiet crisis I want to write about the mental health of the PhD student, an issue that lives in the margins of the institution, discussed in whispers at kitchen tables in postgraduate accommodation but rarely given the gravity it deserves.

Arriving: The Myth of the Fresh Start

When I left Bangladesh, people told me I was lucky. A funded PhD at a Russell Group university. A chance to build something. My family and friends gathered at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka, full of anxiety because I was leaving as their only child and full of prayers that I would return transformed as a researcher and someone who had made the journey worthwhile. I carried their hopes in my hand luggage alongside a battered copy of my wife's love letter and a zip-lock bag of my mother's dry food, because she insisted I would not find the right time to eat on the long journey to England.

The first weeks were exciting in the way that exhaustion can masquerade as excitement. I found a flat in City Centre, a small studio near the Belgrade Theatre. I learned to navigate the bus routes to campus. I attended induction events where smiling staff handed me leaflets about well-being services, research integrity training and others process. Everything was new and newness is its own anesthetic. It numbs you to the deeper questions: Where do I belong now? Who am I without the people who know me?

By November, the anesthetic had worn off. The clocks had gone back and darkness arrived at four in the afternoon like an uninvited guest who would not leave until April. My flat, which had felt cosy in September, now felt like a container. I would sit at my desk reading journal articles about geriatric depression and realise that I had not spoken to another human being, in person, for three days. I began to understand, not as an abstraction but as a felt experience, what my future research participants might mean when they described feeling invisible.

The architecture of a PhD crisis

Mental health difficulties among doctoral researchers are not subjective. They are structural. A landmark study by Levecque et al. (2017), published in Research Policy, found that one in three PhD students is at risk of developing a common psychiatric disorder, a rate significantly higher than among similarly educated peers in the general population. The causes are systemic: financial precarity, uncertain career prospects, the isolation of highly specialised work, supervisory power imbalances and a culture that conflates suffering with seriousness.

For international students, these structural pressures are compounded by additional layers of vulnerability. Immigration anxiety is constant and low-grade, like a hum you stop noticing until someone points it out. Visa conditions dictate how many hours you can work, whether your family can join you and what happens if your funding runs dry. Cultural adjustment that polite rewording for the daily work of translating yourself into a language and social code that is not your own requires a kind of cognitive labor that is never acknowledged, let alone compensated.

I want to be careful here. I do not want to paint the picture of the suffering international student as a figure deserving only pity. That narrative, too, is a cage. The truth is more complicated. I chose this. I wanted this. I am privileged to be here and I know it. But privilege and pain are not mutually exclusive and the expectation that they should be that gratitude should somehow neutralize distress is itself part of the crisis.

The Coventry in-between

Coventry is a city that understands reinvention. Bombed almost to rubble in 1940, it rebuilt itself in concrete and ambition, erecting a new cathedral beside the skeleton of the old one. There is something in that duality the ruin and the renewal standing side by side that speaks to the PhD experience. You are always constructing something new while the bits and pieces of your former self remain visible, unresolved.

I walk through the City Centre most days. Past the market stalls selling plantains and scotch bonnet peppers and the fabrics that remind me of the vibe of village market in my home town in Bangladesh. Past the coffee shops where students hunch over laptops, earphones in, eyes glazed. Past the statue of Lady Godiva, that most Coventrian of rebels, riding bare through the streets because the authorities would not listen any other way. I have thought more than once, that there is something Godiva-like about the act of writing honestly about PhD mental health: a stripping away of pretense, a refusal to be silent, an exposure that feels both necessary and terrifying.

Coventry's population is remarkably diverse. Nearly a third of its residents were born outside the United Kingdom. It is a city of arrivals, of people who have come from elsewhere and are in the process of figuring out what here means. In that sense, it is the right city for this story. My neighbors are from Sudan, Poland, India, Nigeria, China. We share hallways and bin days and the particular British ritual of complaining about the weather. We rarely share our interior weather the moods and fears and unravelling thoughts that constitute our private climates.



PHOTO: COVENTRY CITY CENTRE (SOURCE: VISITCOVENTRY.CO.UK)

The particular shape of a Bangladeshi silence

In Bangladesh, mental health carries a stigma so heavy it is often easier to carry the illness itself. Depression is frequently understood not as a medical condition but as a failure of faith, willpower or family. When I was growing up in Northern part of Bangladesh, the phrase “মনরোগ” (moner rog) — illness of the mind was spoken in the same hushed, faintly disgusted tone reserved for scandals. To be mentally unwell was to be weak and weakness was a luxury that families struggling for respectability could not afford.

This cultural inheritance does not disappear at the immigration. I brought it with me to Coventry along with my two luggage. When I feel overwhelmed by my research, when imposter syndrome wraps its cold hands around my throat and squeezes, my first instinct is not to seek help. It is to perform competence. To send cheerful WhatsApp messages to my family. To smile at my supervisor and say, “Yes, everything is on track.” To maintain, at all costs, the illusion that the boy who left Dhaka with garlands around his neck is thriving.

This performance is exhausting. It is also, I have come to understand, dangerous. The distance between what I present and what I feel widens with each passing month and in that gap, something essential erodes.

Call it authenticity. Call it self-knowledge. Call it the basic human need to be seen as you actually are, not as you believe you should be.

The Institutional Silence

Universities are not innocent bystanders in this crisis. The modern research university is built on a model of productivity that treats the doctoral student as both learner and laborer producing teaching, producing publications, producing data while offering, in return, a stipend that hard to cover rent and a title that may or may not lead to employment. Well-being services exist, certainly. Warwick has counsellors, mental health advisors, peer support networks and an institutional commitment to student welfare that is genuine and well-resourced compared to many universities. I do not doubt the sincerity of these efforts.

But there is a difference between providing services and transforming cultures. The services address symptoms. The culture produces them. The culture says: your PhD should be your life. The culture says: if you are struggling, you are not cut out for this. The culture says: look at your peers — they are managing. The culture says nothing at all about the peers who left, quietly, in the middle of their second year and whose absence is noted only as a statistical blip in completion rates.

What would it mean to take the mental health crisis in doctoral education seriously — not as a welfare issue to be managed, but as a structural problem to be confronted? It would mean, I think, rethinking the very conditions under which PhDs are undertaken. It would mean realistic funding that ease to get access appropriate training and improve confidence. It would mean supervisory relationships built on transparency and mutual respect rather than hierarchy and dependency. It would mean acknowledging that a PhD is not a vocation that demands total self-sacrifice, but a significant, intellectually demanding, often beautiful job that should be compatible with a full human life.

Between crisis and craft

I do not want this essay to end in despair, because despair is not what I feel. What I feel is something more textured: a braiding together of difficulty and purpose, isolation and discovery, homesickness and a growing, tentative sense of home. The crisis is real. It is also, in some strange way, generative.

My PhD research on mental health among older adults has given me a language for my own experience that I did not have before. Reading about resilience theory, about the ways in which older people construct meaning after loss, about the protective role of social connection and narrative identity, I find myself not only developing an academic framework but quietly, privately, applying it to my own life.

I thought about the friends I had made here the fellow PhD student from Saudi Arabia or Nigeria who shared my love of strong tea, the senior postdoc mentor who always asked how the writing was going, the older woman at the Coventry market where I was a regular, who called me beta and talked to me for a few extra minutes because it made her feel good. These connections, small and imperfect, were the architecture of survival.

There is a concept in Bangla “কষ্ট (koshto)” that translates roughly as suffering, but carries within it a connotation of depth, of meaningful struggle. It is related to the idea that certain kinds of difficulty are not obstacles to growth but conditions for it. Not all suffering is meaningful; much of it is simply unnecessary and should be prevented. But there is something in the idea of koshto that resonates with the PhD experience: the sense that you are being reshaped by the work, that the difficulty is not incidental to the process but integral to it.

Toward a different conversation

What I am calling for, ultimately, is a different kind of conversation one that refuses to treat doctoral mental health as a private failing or a logistical problem and instead recognizes it as a cultural and structural crisis that reflects the values of the institutions we inhabit. This conversation must include the voices of international students, who navigate additional layers of displacement, cultural dissonance and systemic precarity that are too often invisible in mainstream discussions of postgraduate well-being.

It must also include the voices of those from cultures like Bangladesh where mental health itself remains a contested, stigmatized concept. We cannot address the crisis if we do not first acknowledge that for many of us, the very act of naming our distress is a transgression against the norms we were raised with. The courage required is not only institutional but deeply personal.

I write this from my flat in Coventry City Centre, in the blue light of a January evening, the sound of traffic on the ring road a kind of lullaby I have learned to sleep to. On my desk are three open browser tabs: a systematic review on late-life depression, an email from my supervisor with comments on my literature review and a WhatsApp message from my mother asking whether I am eating properly. I am, in this moment, all of my selves at once: the researcher, the student, the son, the immigrant, the person who is sometimes fine and sometimes not, the person who is learning, slowly, to stop performing and start speaking.

The crisis is not that PhD students struggle. Struggle, to some degree, is inherent in any endeavor that asks you to push the boundaries of what is known. The crisis is that we struggle in silence, that the silence is mistaken for strength and that the institutions that shape our lives are too often structured to maintain that silence rather than to break it.

I came to Coventry to study mental health. I am learning that the subject begins closer to home than I ever expected.

References

Levecque, Katia, et al. "Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students." *Research policy* 46.4 (2017): 868-879.

Cuthbert, Denise, and Tebeje Molla. "PhD crisis discourse: A critical approach to the framing of the problem and some Australian 'solutions'." *Higher Education* 69.1 (2015): 33-53.

Photo source: <https://visitcoventry.co.uk/listing/lower-precinct-shopping-centre/166863101/>

VIRGINIA THOMAS-PICKLES

VIRGINIA THOMAS-PICKLES



Virginia is a PhD candidate funded by the TRANSFORM Doctoral Programme, in the department of Global Sustainable Development. Her transdisciplinary research centres on alternative approaches to (re) naturing cities. Specifically, Virginia explores the potential of social-ecological justice to address green deprivation, using the mixed-method case study of Coventry. This interconnects with her work on Green for All, a nearly £1 million initiative led by Coventry City Council and funded through The National Lottery Heritage Fund, aiming to transform understanding of green and blue spaces in the city. Within this, the University of Warwick are co-producing understandings of these spaces with local communities based on their experiences, priorities, and future visions.

Reaping what we sow: Cultivations of hope in times of crisis

Researching and residing at the intersection of crisis

I spend a – probably excessive – amount of time contemplating crisis. Crisis talk is kaleidoscopic and inescapable. Rather than deliberating what is a crisis, it often feels more relevant as a later-stage PhD researcher and 21st Century earth dweller to ask: what is not a crisis? The list can seem endless. From the individualised and isolating challenges associated with research, to the uncertainties of life post-PhD, to the precarity of Higher Education, to broader pressures from climate change through to geopolitical affairs. Not forgetting how our hyperconnected age makes us more aware of crises today than any society has ever been before.

Admittedly, my contemplations of crisis are in part thanks to an undergraduate module I took on ‘Surviving the Apocalypse’. I vividly remember how learning about apocalypse was unexpectedly freeing, introducing a discourse that unlocked subconscious thoughts I had never been able to articulate. One prominent piece of knowledge from this module still shapes my research and broader worldview today: apocalypse can be simultaneously collective and universal yet individual and relative, unequally experienced due to varied privilege.¹ As the metaphor goes, while we may sail on the same sea we each have a different boat.

Like many researchers, my work sits at the intersection of crises. By background, I am an interdisciplinary social scientist advocating for social-ecological justice when (re) naturing cities. I spend my days researching socio-

spatial injustice, engaging with biodiversity decline, austerity governance, climate change, and the local-level challenges experienced by diverse communities. While developing this extensive knowledge can be a blessing it can also feel like a curse, something heavy to carry around. From conversations with others, I know this experience is shared. Questions then emerge of how do we as researchers each contribute to work on crisis when residing in the context of crises? How can we engage in a way that leaves us feeling empowered and hopeful, rather than powerless and hopeless?

For myself, much of the answer lies in the garden. The garden is a literal and figurative crisis management tool where hope can be cultivated. The garden – and nature in all its forms – has everything to do with crisis. Food insecurity, biodiversity loss, poor health and wellbeing, climate change, to name but a few all translate to the garden scale. This piece explores the importance of the garden as a response to crisis. How it can be a site of rebellion; a political statement against contemporary society. Plus, why engaging with the natural world enables mainstream knowledge (re)production to be challenged. Along the way, I share moments of hope from my own garden, scatter quotes from nature writing, and grapple with some of the concerns that occupy my mind. I finish by exploring what we can all do, garden or not, to cultivate hope in times of crisis.

¹ See Jessica Hurley and Dan Sinykin, “Apocalypse: Introduction,” ASAP/Journal 3, no. 3 (2018): 451-466, doi:10.1353/asa.2018.0034.

Welcome to 'my' garden



“I truly believe our gardens and green spaces have the answer to the very root of the problem that’s plaguing the modern world right now: our disconnect from nature and the consequent acceptance of living in a dying world”.²

To an outsider, my garden is nothing special. A relatively small, unassuming space that does not conform to traditional aesthetic ideals of manicured lawns and ‘weed’ free beds. To those interested in wildlife, there is a too much lawn, not enough height, and a greater diversity of plants needed. To me, this work in progress is a site of significant potential. My desk sits parallel to the garden, and it provides a welcome source of distraction from screens and socially constructed pressures. In moments of pause or frustration I hear the ramblings of the sparrows or watch the squabbling squirrels. This space grounds me.

I would not call myself a gardener. I am a mere marveller. I try to be a helping hand to nature, although inevitably I am sometimes a clumsy hindrance. For context, I became the custodian of this garden in 2024. It lies in the leafy suburbs of a Warwickshire town where gardens are by-products of decades of development. They are the result of fencing the commons – the bounding of once expansive greenspace – which has reduced not only biodiversity benefit but eroded the social potential of shared resources for harvest and exploration.

In all honesty, the garden was not high on our priority list when viewing the house. It was another thing to renovate. Very quickly, however, the endless possibilities of this garden drew me in. Let me briefly return to the boat analogy. As boats go, mine is on the larger and better built side than so many others. I am aware of the privilege that comes with being the custodian of a garden, of having the time and resources to dedicate to it. Even more so when I initially perceived it to be a time-consuming inconvenience that came with the house. I feel guilty that others are not as fortunate as me. It makes me angry that access to nature is not universal. This is interwoven with my research on green deprivation, exploring how these disparities can be addressed to ensure everyone has access to these essential, life sustaining spaces and the benefits they bring.

² Kate Bradbury, *One Garden Against the World: In Search of Hope in a Changing Climate* (London: Bloomsbury Wildlife, 2024), 16.

Rooted in rebellion: The garden as a political space

“When we garden, we change how a small part of the world works. The decisions we make – whether to spray our lawns, or not; whether to garden for the ecosystem, or not – have impact. Of course our gardens are political spaces.”³

I truly believe that gardens are political. The garden is the physical embodiment of my decisions, of what I choose to grow and not grow. These are broader reflections about my values on sustainability and human-nature coexistence. This re-politicisation is key in a post-political world where crises continue because reactive measures conveniently avoid addressing root causes and gloss over responsibility.⁴ Furthermore, gardening has long been associated with ‘women’s work’, another form of unpaid reproductive labour. By politicising the garden and my work within it, I can cultivate care, autonomy, and expression. Collectively, this provides strength and liberation; a quiet defiance and rebellion against the system.



My first rebellious act was ripping up the artificial grass that smothered life and possibilities. Admittedly, the grass seed that superseded the plastic carpet is not ideal for wildlife either. In hindsight, I would certainly do things differently. Overtime I will continually tweak the layout. The borders will increasingly encroach into the lawn to increase the range of plants. But that is all part of the learning process, the beauty of the experimentation that comes with growing (both physically in the garden, and on a personal level as I continue to learn). There is always more to do. We all have to start somewhere.

A key part of my rebellion centres on nature. Gardening for nature means working with it. I can draw many similarities between working with nature and co-creation. Multiple disciplines increasingly work with communities to co-create solutions. Why don’t we view the garden in the same way? Like co-creation, working with nature can steer projects in new

directions and raise unexpected outcomes. Letting other-than-human dwellers exert their agency. Welcoming unexpected visitors, both plants and animals. Accepting the mess of wildflowers and resisting the urge to tidy them during dreary winter months to retain homes for insects. My growing endeavours certainly do not always go as planned. Last year, radishes were ravaged by caterpillars. The squirrel squirreled away the sunflower heads before they even bloomed. This has come comically full circle now that long-forgotten winter stores of sunflower seeds hidden around the garden are emerging in unexpected places. This same squirrel has already helped themselves to the lettuce seeds I sowed last month. While a source of slight frustration at times, it signifies our interconnection with the natural world. We are part of something bigger and better. Many other species utilise and shape the garden and have as much right to it as I do.

³ Alice Vincent, *Why Women Grow* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2024), 136.

⁴ For more on “apocalypse forever”, see Erik Swyngedouw, “Apocalypse forever?,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 2-3 (2010): 213-232, doi:10.1177/0263276409358728.

The responsibility and pressure I feel for the garden and the endless possibilities it brings is both exciting and overwhelming:

“A lot of people think that rewilding your garden is an all-or-nothing thing: that you have to rewild completely or not at all. But not so – for many people a hybrid cultivated/wilded space will be ideal. And for others just letting part of a lawn go its own natural way is enough.”⁵

In moments of self-criticism, I must remind myself that there are always compromises and changing priorities, and of the value of small-scale interventions as a response to crisis. This action – in whatever form – is itself empowering. No longer sitting on my hands but plunging them into the soil for change. Making a difference and seeing benefits for some of the most marginalised inhabitants of this planet. The collective mosaic of individual efforts has significant impact.

I would love my next rebellious act to be a pond. A wildlife hotspot amongst a row of rather dry gardens. But with ponds comes greater responsibility. I worry about its longevity when we move. What happens if its next custodians fill it in? Is it better to provide short-term benefits for wildlife than not, or should I wait until I can create a pond for long-term good? This echoes broader worries I carry surrounding gardens. I mourn when neighbours turn to artificial grass or paving. I worry that others do not worry about the severity of biodiversity and climate crises. I nudge them to leave the ‘weeds’ for pollinators. I do what I can, channelling the worry into small-scale actions within my control.

⁵ Gerry Maguire Thompson, *Rewilding an Urban Garden: An Illustrated Diary of Nature's Year* (Brighton: WildBooks, 2023), 11.

“Gardening can feel like a huge and overwhelming topic full of rules and sometimes contradictory information about how to do things. I am very much of the ‘get stuck in and give it a go’ school of thought”.⁶

I had long convinced myself that growing was not for people like me. I lacked the knowledge and skills; I felt like an outsider. This all changed when growing content entered my social media feed.⁷ Importantly, this content gave visibility to smaller gardens, windowsills, and community growing spaces. It was accessible and relatable, shattering the engrained perceptions I held. In contrast, gardening programmes on the television often feature vast gardens with greenhouses, seemingly limitless access to expensive plants, and countless concoctions of composts and tools that I certainly could not afford or store. These privileges tend to go unacknowledged and can depict growing as an exclusive space. This is further compounded by limited representation of the diversity of growers, growing spaces, and types of growing. In practice, there is such variation in the growing world, in why people choose to grow, where they do it, and the methods they use.

Since my first exposure to gardening, I have submerged myself in nature writing and podcasts. This re-education is more than a hobby. It is another rebellion. My nature awakening has left me frustrated that we are not better taught such life sustaining knowledge in school. Many of us cannot identify a bird from its song or plant from its leaf. Western society has seemingly forgotten about our innate interdependency with nature:

“So-called archaic English words which describe our environment – like acorn, beech, bluebell, bramble and buttercup – have been taken out of the Oxford Junior English Dictionary to make way for words like attachment, block graph, blog, broadband and bullet point. There is less and less room for land-based nuggets of knowing passed generation to generation and so what’s not valued erodes”.⁸

This says a lot about crisis. What if knowledge – and its limited access – is situated in and (re) produces crisis? Much mainstream growing knowledge has emerged from Western epistemologies with set methods and ideas, and often limited inclusion of alternative understandings. How this knowledge is disseminated is itself exclusionary, including by using Latin names for plants. While this may be the norm, it is inaccessible to so many of us. There is so much more we can learn. Especially from alternative forms of knowledge. From indigenous ways of life through to the experiences of local growers. Alongside from nature itself, which can teach us so much if only we listen.

⁶ Martha Swales, *Give it a Grow* (London: Penguin Life, 2025), 3.

⁷ Some of my favourite growers include Jamie Walton (@nettlesandpetals), Martha Swales (@marfskitchengarden), and Helen Hutchings Cox (@helenlikesplants).

⁸ Poppy Okotcha, *A Wilder Way: How Gardens Grow Us* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025), 190.



In response, and spurred on by alternative knowledges, I increasingly stray from established ways of growing. The garden is a big experiment. Even more so with prolonged summer heat and wetter winters evident from climate change, which challenges me to find better adapted plants. Things go wrong but that is part of the fun, especially when learning new skills. This mindset has given me a newfound confidence in my approach to growing. It made me unstoppable in seed sowing this spring. My kitchen windowsill was bursting with seedlings that signified sustenance for wild neighbours and myself for the summer. I cannot express the joy of a seedling emerging from the soil and later being planted out, knowing 'I grew that!'. And it is so much more affordable than buying fully grown plants.

Dabbling in food growing has been a huge learning curve. What the vegetable patch lacks in aesthetics and yield, it makes up for in ambition. It signifies a small-scale defiance against international food systems premised on chemical-drenched monocultures. For context, the varieties they grow are chosen for high, uniform yields. I instead choose a wildlife friendly approach that prioritises heritage (or heirloom) varieties. These varieties have a

longer history and often better flavours or an unusual appearance. What you lose in yield you gain in interest. Plus, you can save the seeds to grow them again next year. By consistently saving seeds, you get plants that are better adapted to the conditions of your own garden – how great is that? Growing my own gives me the power and agency to control the chemicals used. Instead of insecticides I use natural alternatives such as companion planting to gently deter insects. For example, the scent of the onions and garlic in the raised bed helps disguise the carrots interspersed in these rows.

The vegetable patch also provides a stark reminder of my privilege. What can be a hobby and source of relaxation for some is sustenance for others. A failed harvest for me means admitting defeat and buying a bag of salad. For others it can mean an empty plate. Even at the small-scale, growing food gives an awareness and appreciation of the labour and uncertainty involved in sustenance, even more so now unpredictable weather means each seedling is not a guaranteed meal. More than reconnecting with nature, growing my own gives me an empathy for those relying on their crops, a deeper awareness of what a harvest really means.

Concluding thoughts: Cultivating your own hope

There are so many ways to interweave nature into your life.

Go on local walks throughout the seasons. Get your head out of your phone and look around. Notice what nature is present in nearby streets and parks and how it changes overtime. You could also get involved with a community garden or allotment (there's one on campus!). Read about nature in all its forms and written by people from different backgrounds. Give friends and family the gift of nature. Where possible, I now gift nature books, seeds, and other life sustaining items.

In my previous – gardenless – flat, I put a bird feeder up in a nearby tree for the winter and marvelled at how quickly it was discovered by blue tits and sparrows. I started a house plant collection. If a friend or family member has a plant you have your eye on, ask if you can have a cutting or if they plan on dividing it anytime soon. Car boot sales are also a great source of budget-friendly (indoor and outdoor) plants. Both approaches

avoid engagement with resource-intensive, commercially grown plants – it's a win-win!

If you do have a garden or window box and are looking for places to start, start small. Buy a packet of wildflower seeds, scatter them with excitement, and wait with anticipation. They will bring as much joy to the pollinators as they will to you. For dabbling with growing your own, radishes are a nice introduction. If you are looking for heirloom varieties of vegetables and flowers, *She Grows Veg* is a great option. If you just want to give growing a go, seeds from the garden centre or supermarket also do the job.

Engaging with nature is truly empowering in times of crisis. Any form of engagement is action that can bring an abundance of benefits for yourself and wildlife. Why not try cultivating your own hope?

References

- Bradbury, Kate. *One Garden Against the World: In Search of Hope in a Changing Climate*. London: Bloomsbury Wildlife, 2024.
- Hurley, Jessica, and Dan Sinykin. "Apocalypse: Introduction." *ASAP/Journal* 3, no. 3 (2018): 451-466. doi:10.1353/asa.2018.0034.
- Okotcha, Poppy. *A Wilder Way: How Gardens Grow Us*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025.
- Swales, Martha. *Give it a Grow*. London: Penguin Life, 2025.
- Swyngedouw, Erik. "Apocalypse forever?." *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 2-3 (2010): 213-232. doi:10.1177/0263276409358728.
- Thompson, Gerry Maguire. *Rewilding an Urban Garden: An Illustrated Diary of Nature's Year*. Brighton: WildBooks, 2023.
- Vincent, Alice. *Why Women Grow*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2024.

XIAOYAN TAN



XIAOYAN TAN

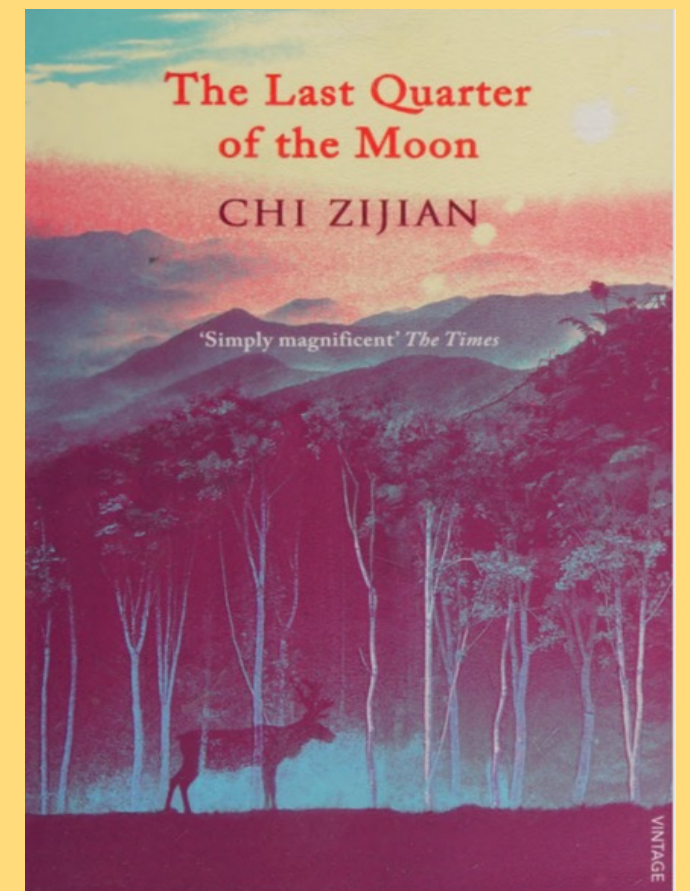
Xiaoyan Tan is a third-year PhD candidate in School of Modern Languages and Cultures, working on the translation and publication of contemporary Chinese female writings by Chinese government-backed publishers and Anglophone publishing houses. She is also interested in how AI technologies are transforming the translation industry and bringing interdisciplinary insights to translation studies. She has several papers published in translation and linguistics-related journals, such as *Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice*, *Babel: International Journal of Translation*, *Social Semiotics*, *Target International Journal of Translation Studies* (forthcoming) and *Meta: Translators' Journal* (forthcoming). She obtained Translation Certificate of Advanced Level and has been working as a part-time translator for about 6 years, awarded as an "Excellent Translator". She also used to work on translating documents for an Chinese official government website.

When Nature Cannot Be Translated: Crisis, language, and Indigenous ecology in *The Last Quarter of the Moon*

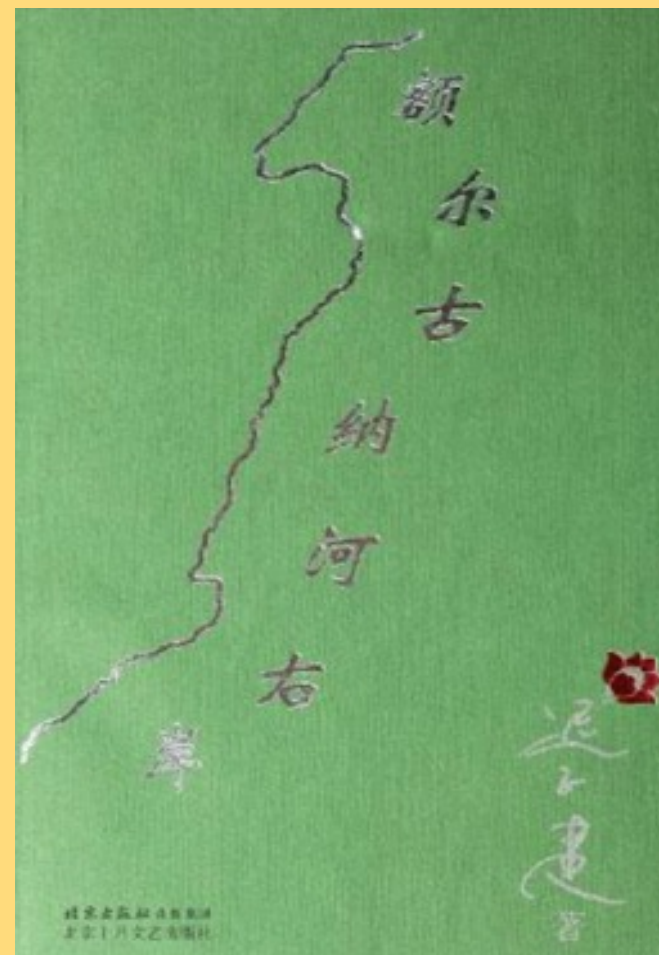
**"Are you willing to go and live
outside the mountains?"**

**"You'd best ask the reindeer:
are you willing to leave the
mountains?"**

— (Chi 2013, 246)



Will the local community leave the mountains? Should they accept the promise of a modern life? But the reply sends the question elsewhere. Ask the reindeer. If the reindeer will not leave, the people will not leave either. That is the animistic relationality highlighted in *The Last Quarter of the Moon* (额尔古纳河右岸). Written in 2005 by Chinese prominent novelist Chi Zijian and translated into English by Bruce Holmes in 2013, this novel narrates the lifeways and ecological worldview of the Evenki, an Indigenous nomadic hunting people of the Greater Khingan Range near the Sino-Russian border. Told in the first person by an unnamed elderly Evenki woman,



the narrative reconstructs a disappearing world shaped by reindeer herding, animist cosmology, and seasonal migration. Through her life story, the text depicts the gradual erosion of Evenki cultural autonomy under pressures of Japanese and Russian incursions, industrial exploitation, and modern resource extraction. The Evenki “cannot avoid being dragged into the brutal conflict, which marks the first step towards the end of their isolation” (Chi 2013). Military expansion, logging, and settlement policies encroach upon Evenki territory, leaving the community powerless to resist the transformation of both their ecological environment and social fabric.

However, most of them refuse to leave, as the narrator says:

I won't sleep in a room where I can't see the stars. All my life I've passed the night in their company. If I see a pitch-dark ceiling when I awake from my dreams, my eyes will go blind. My reindeer have committed no crime, and I don't want to see them imprisoned either. If I can't hear those reindeer bells ringing like rippling water, I'll certainly go deaf. My legs and feet are accustomed to the jagged mountain paths, and if I have to walk the narrow, flat walkways of the town, my legs will become so flabby that they'll no longer support my weight, and I'll become a cripple. I've always breathed the fresh air of the mountain wilderness, and if I have to inhale the farts emitted by the cars in Busu, I'll suffocate. My body was bestowed by the Spirits, and I shall remain in the mountains to return it to the Spirits.

– (Chi 2013, 4-5)

In the Evenki community, people fade; animals reign. A decision about leaving the mountains must pass through the reindeer. Why ask animals about human settlement? To a modern reader, this may sound unusual. Yet this small exchange opens the world of the novel. A world where reindeer must be asked is a world that modern crisis has almost forgotten how to hear. It is a world where reindeer are not scenery, tools, or meat on legs. They are companions. They belong to the same living system as humans, forests, rivers, spirits, and the dead. They are part of how the community moves, remembers, and survives. Yet industrial exploitation and external colonisation have pushed this Indigenous community, and the world it inhabits, into crisis. This is not only a crisis of climate change, deforestation, or cultural loss. It is also a crisis of translation. Their world is worn down by many translations.

A forest becomes timber. A river becomes a border. A homeland becomes a zone to be managed. A reindeer becomes livestock. A people become a minority population to be moved. This essay is about that crisis. Not only ecological crisis, although the trees are cut and the animals suffer. Not only cultural crisis, although songs, routes, rituals, and memories begin to vanish. It is also a crisis in how we understand and translate the world. The question, then, is how to speak of a living world without reducing it. How do we translate a world where humans are not at the centre? How do we carry across a way of living that modern language often reduces to “resources”, “development”, “protection”, or “relocation”? And what kind of listening might begin if, before justifying human agenda, we first asked the reindeer?

1. A decision that begins with animals

The exchange about the reindeer unsettles the human-centred decision-making. In most modern political language, humans decide and animals adapt. Planners draw lines; governments create policies; development arrives with measurements. Animals are usually treated as objects within those plans. They may be bred or sacrificed, but rarely imagined as equal beings whose voices should be heard.

Chi Zijian gives us a different perspective. The Evenki movement depends on the animals with whom they live. If the reindeer cannot live below the mountain, then the local community cannot truly live there either. For the Evenki people, animals are not objects, but equal living beings. Their bodies hold knowledge. Their habits reveal whether a place can sustain life. Their presence shapes the limits of human choice. That is why “ask the reindeer” matters. It opens up a path that many crisis narratives lack. Ecological crisis is often told through large

numbers: rising temperatures, shrinking forests, vanishing species, displaced populations. These numbers, though seemingly eye-catching, risk flattening what they measure. The novel begins somewhere more specific and intimate: whether animals can bear the choice and change human made. The scene also exposes the danger of a human-centred narrative that uproots Indigenous life in the name of progress. Settlement appears as improvement: fixed houses, easier access, a life closer to the state and its services. But for the Evenki, leaving the mountain means losing their home. A modern house can shelter a body, but it cannot connect a heart or bridge a communication. The industrial exploitation and forced migration unsettles the community by which people, animals, and spirits have long lived together. Ironically, such crisis is often undermined and ignored. The modern promise says: you will live better. The Evenki replies: not here, not like this.

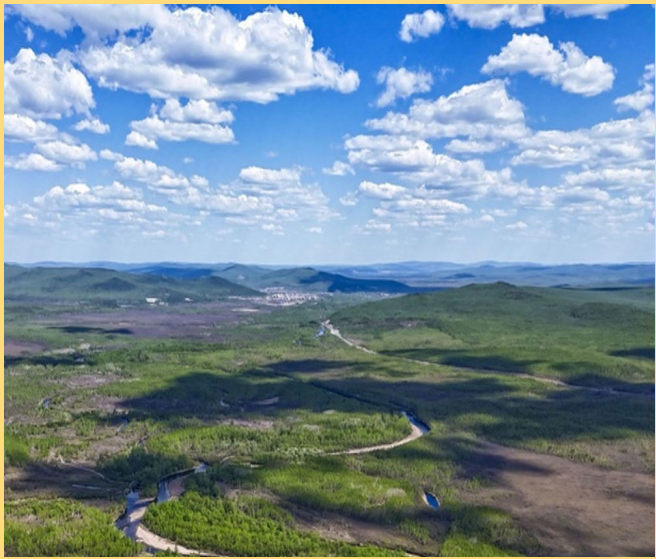


THE EVENKI PEOPLE AND REINDEERS

(https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202102/27/WS6039b3d6a31024ad0baab820_5.html)

2. When the forest is renamed

Like animals, the forest should also be seen and heard. Violence does not always begin with the axe. It often begins with a word. Before the tree falls, it has already been called timber. Before a community is displaced, its home has already been called remote, backward, and hence, in need of management. In the novel, the Evenki's ancestral territory is invaded, exploited, and reorganised. With more trees were cut down, they were forced to move from the left to right bank of the Greater Khingan Range. But that is not an end. Later, Russian soldiers entered with war and theft. Policymakers came with their so-called environmental protection and national development. Different in tone they maybe, similar agendas they must have. For them, the forest is an object for exploitation. For the Evenki, trees are families. When they are alive, they live together. When they are dead, they burn together, translating themselves back into nature. The forest is where people are borne, where they learn how to walk, where they bury the dead, and where the boundary between human and more-than-human life remains porous. When trees fall, more than wood is lost: animal tracks, camps, graves, seasonal routes, and family histories fall with them.



THE GREATER KHINGAN RANGE

(<https://en.people.cn/n3/2024/0617/c90000-20181947.html>)

However, such rich relations and meanings are often overshadowed by modern languages and exploiters who often translate forest into mere resource for extraction. The harmonious relations are translated into rigid categories. The danger of such translation is that it can make damage sound orderly. “Relocation” is tidier than exile. “Development” is brighter than dispossession. “Protection” is softer than removal. The words do not merely describe the crisis. They help produce it. As the Evenki people defend: “

Secretary Gu said that if we left the mountains with our reindeer, it would also be a way of protecting the forest...I really wanted to tell him that our reindeer have always kissed the forest. Compared to the loggers who number in the tens of thousands, we and our animals are just a handful of dragonflies skimming the water's surface.

– (Chi 2013, 309)

Chi Zijian's novel resists this by restoring weight to what these words erase. When the forest is wounded, it is not a scenic loss. When reindeer disappear, it is not a livestock reduction. When people leave the mountain, it is not a humane policy. The novel asks readers to feel how much life is hidden inside the places modern language makes simple.



3. Leaving without arriving

The crisis of the Evenki community is often staged as well-intentioned movement: moving down the mountain, moving into houses, moving towards modern life. However, this is a forced relocation for the Evenki. The people move because the forest is being cut, the reindeer are dwindling, and the world around them is being remade. As the local community sates: “If the trees in the mountains continue to be chopped down like this, sooner or later — even if we aren’t willing — we’ll have to leave” (Chi 2013, 247). Behind such a calm tone, one can only imagine how much reluctance, unwillingness, and nostalgia are being held back. Leaving the mountain means more than leaving a location. It means leaving a rhythm of life. The Evenki world is built through movement with reindeer, through seasonal knowledge, through reading snow, trees, and rivers. To relocate is therefore is to retranslate the relation between body and world. A modern house may be warmer, but it will not bring the same sense of belonging. This is the double edge of crisis we should notice: what is offered as rescue may also carry loss.

Of course, the novel does not ask us to reject any change or turn Indigenous ecology into paradise. The nomadic life also contains pain, illness, hunger, and danger. What is instead highlighted is why modern solutions so often break relations. Why must protection detach people from the forest? Why must improvement begin by declaring an original harmonious world destructive? The community’s departure may be promoted a good deed, but the body knows it as a serious loss. This is the crisis of living in-between. It does not always look like crisis. There is no flood, no fire, no city in ruins. Nothing dramatic enough for a headline. Instead, crisis settles quietly into the gap between people and the world they are told to inhabit. The house stands, but the settlers are restless. The map says resettlement, but the body feels exile.

4. Bodies, spirits, and the cost of relation

The novel’s world is not divided neatly between nature and culture, body and spirit, human and animal. A human head can be a place where spirits live. Illness can be connected to unseen forces. Shamans move between worlds. They translate pain and illness across bodies. Such rituals maybe easy to misread as mere folklore, separated from the “real” crisis of land, state, and ecology. Yet for Chi Zijian, they are central to how crisis is felt. For shamans, a crisis is not only what happens to land. It happens to bodies. It enters through hunger, fever, fear, mourning, and the unbearable task of saving others. Shamans translates between the community and spirits, but this act also wounds them. Nihao’s rituals save lives, but her own family suffers devastating losses. Nidu’s power transfers life between animal and human, yet she herself dies after saving the forest from a human-caused fire. This is what the novel’s animistic world keeps telling us: everything has a cost. Our exploitation of nature will ultimately make us pay the price. To be connected is to be exposed. A life can save but can also wound.

This is also the novel’s warning to a human-centred world. We may call nature a resource. We may cut, move, build, and burn as if the debt will never come due. But relation does not disappear because we refuse to see it. Destroy the forest, and the cost will return. Not always at once. Not always to the person who caused it. But it will return, only a matter of time. In a time of crisis, it is everyone’s responsibility to respect, connect and act. The Evenki recognises that life is shared before it is individual. The body is not a private possession sealed against the world. It is touched by weather, animals, spirits, hunger, and grief. Modern crisis often begins by denying this connection and vulnerability. It imagines humans as separate managers of the earth, able to stand outside the relations they organise. The novel refuses that fantasy. No one stands outside. We all live through what we depend on.



THE SHAMAN DANCE OF THE
EVENKI PEOPLE
(<https://baike.baidu.com/en/item/Ewenki%20Shaman%20Dance/110178>)

5. What translation can and cannot do

Translation, of course, remains important, but not as a technical question of word choice alone. Chi writes and translates across memory, ethnicity, history, and imagination. Humes then carries that writing into English. His translation carries the Evenki world to readers who may know little about their unique life and ecological narrative. The Evenki world itself is also translating, changing, remembering, and narrating. Translation can carry a world, but it can also reduce one. The same process that allows stories to travel can also turn living relations into stereotype. If readers meet the Evenki only as a nomadic people, and see their homeland only as remote and exotic, they miss the harder truth: this is also a place of conflict, illness, violence, and loss. The hardest task, then, is not to make the forest easy to understand. It is to let its difficulty remain. A good translation of crisis should not clean the wound. It should allow the reader to feel hesitation, friction, and unease. It should make familiar words feel less safe.

The novel does this by troubling the terms through which modern life explains itself. Progress no longer sounds innocent. Protection no longer sounds kind. Settlement no longer sounds settled. The more carefully we read, the more these words begin to shake. Translation, in this broader sense, is not only what happens between Chinese and English. It is what happens whenever one world is carried into the language of another. Governments translate forests into policy. Markets translate animals into profit. Readers translate unfamiliar world into imagination. With each movement, something opens. Something also slips away. This is how crisis and translation links one to another. Crisis is not only the moment when a world breaks. It is also the moment when the words used to describe that world become suspect. Who named the nature, forest and animals? Who benefits from that name? What relations vanished when the name became official?

It also happens when the wrong words become ordinary. When they are repeated often enough, they begin to sound natural. A living forest can then be cut without being mourned. A people can be moved without the violence being named. Against this, *The Last Quarter of the Moon* offers another beginning. It does not begin with a policy, a statistic, or a solution. It begins with a question carried towards animals:

Ask the reindeer.

Not because they will save us. Not because they speak in human language. But because the act of asking changes the human mindset and position. It lowers the voice. It slows the hand. It reminds us that crisis is not only a problem to be solved from above. It is a relation we have failed to honour. When the nature cannot be translated, perhaps it is just our language has become too simple. When the Evenki become the last reindeer herders, how many paths are then left to them, and, to us?

There are more and more paved roads in the mountains now. When there were none, we lost our way; now there are many, but we still lose our way because we do not know which road to choose.

– (Chi 2013, 310)

I hope we are choosing the right road.

References

- Chi, Zijian. *The Last Quarter of the Moon*. Translated by Bruce Humes. New York: Random House, 2013.
- Chi, Zijian. 《额尔古纳河右岸》. Beijing: Beijing October Literature and Art Publishing House, 2005.

6. Learning to listen before translating

Of course, *The Last Quarter of the Moon* does not offer a neat answer to ecological crisis. It cannot restore the forest, return the dead, or undo forced settlement. It gives no policy programme. Its force lies elsewhere: it changes where we look. It does not begin with human need, but with relation. It does not ask how land can be used, but what forms of life the land holds. It does not leave animals in the background, but lets the reindeer to come to the front. Crisis, here, is not an abstract global condition. It enters through smaller wounds: a cut tree, a stolen animal, a restless body, a destroyed home, and a shaman's grief. This novel speaks beyond its own historical and cultural setting. We live now inside a language that makes crisis sound smooth. Mitigation. Transition. Offsetting. Adaptation.

These words may sound harmless, but they can become screens and turn loss into management.

Chi Zijian hence asks for a slower language. Not a language without translation; that is impossible. But a language that knows its own danger. A language careful enough to pause before turning forest into resource, movement into relocation, and survival into development. The reindeer scene powerfully offers such a pause. It stops the human rush to decide: Before you move people, ask what else must move with them. Before you protect the forest, ask who has cared for it. Before you translate a world, ask what your words may erase. Perhaps this is one small but significant answer to the theme of crisis. Crisis is not only what happens when things collapse.

This collection represents the fantastic work submitted for inclusion in our competition and celebration event.

Advanced Journalism, Statistics Robots, and Mixed Methods: Will I Ever Become a Good PhD?

by Khoa Do

**When Crisis Becomes Noise:
The Erosion of Strategic Narratives**

by Natsumi Shiino

The Distance Between Decisions and Lives

by Pranshu Mundada

When minds carry borders

by Md Saimul Islam

**Reaping what we sow:
Cultivations of hope in times of crisis**

by Virginia Thomas-Pickles

**When Nature Cannot Be Translated: Crisis, language,
and Indigenous ecology in *The Last Quarter of the Moon***

by Xiaoyan Tan

**A huge thank you to all
of our 2026 contributors.**

