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Ancestry without identity? Generational identity change among Chinese descendants in Peru: A life-course perspective

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Abstract

Peru hosts one of the oldest Chinese-descended populations in the Americas and presents a striking numerical puzzle. Popular and community sources routinely claim that as many as one in ten Peruvians has some Chinese ancestry, yet in the 2017 census only 14,307 people described themselves as *tusán*, the Peruvian term for a locally born person of Chinese descent, and in 2025, the first census in which *tusán* was a printed response option rather than a write-in, the share remained near 0.06%. We argue that this gap is not evidence that a Chinese identity quietly survived beneath the surface of Peruvian society. We accept that assimilation was extensive and, in most family lines, close to complete: Chinese languages were lost within one or two generations, many early mixed households were formed through unions with non-Chinese women, who often served as primary socializers, Catholic institutions supplied the dominant framework of socialization, and residential concentration dissolved. Our narrower claim is that what persisted was not a transmitted cultural repertoire but a category, a nameable and socially legible position sustained by genealogical memory, surnames, phenotypic ascription, and a thin institutional infrastructure, and claimable long after its cultural content had gone. Drawing on Elder's life-course paradigm, we specify when such a category becomes salient, dormant, or reactivated, and show that categorical salience and cultural repertoire follow different generational trajectories: the latter declines monotonically, the former does not. The reactivation we describe is narrow, symbolic, urban, and socially selective rather than a broad demographic shift. Integrating segmented assimilation, symbolic ethnicity, and boundary-making approaches, the framework yields six falsifiable propositions, most advanced as hypotheses for future testing; the 2025 census, in which an explicit *tusán* option produced no surge in identification, is treated as a first and largely negative test.

Keywords: *Tusán*; Chinese diaspora; Generational identity; Life course; Symbolic ethnicity; Ethnic categorization; Census classification; Peru

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1. Introduction

1.1. The numerical puzzle and the conceptual trap

Chinese migration to Peru began in the mid-nineteenth century, making the Sino-Peruvian population one of the longest-established Chinese-descended communities in Latin America. Traces of that presence are conspicuous in national culture. *Chifa*, the Cantonese-Peruvian culinary tradition, is not a minority cuisine but a staple of the national diet, and *tusán*, a Hispanicized rendering of the Cantonese *tou-saang* (Mandarin *tusheng*, "locally born"), entered Peruvian Spanish as an everyday word (Palma, 2022).

Against this background, the official statistics are arresting. Peru's 2017 census included, for the first time, a question on ethnic self-perception, and 14,307 respondents aged twelve and over identified as *tusán*, roughly six in every ten thousand of those enumerated (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática [INEI], 2018). In 2025, *tusán* and *nikkei* were promoted to printed options, a change intended to give both communities statistical visibility, yet the *tusán* share remained near 0.06% (INEI, 2026). Set beside the assertion that a tenth of Peruvians carry Chinese ancestry, the discrepancy is roughly two orders of magnitude.

The obvious and, we believe, mistaken reading of this gap treats the surviving descendants as a submerged Chinese community whose identity persisted informally and is now resurfacing. That reading assumes what must be demonstrated, sliding from the biological fact that a population reproduced to the sociological claim that an identity was transmitted, and the historical record offers little support for the second claim. The founding cohort was almost exclusively male, families were formed through unions with indigenous, Afro-Peruvian, and criolla women, children were raised by non-Chinese mothers and baptized into the Catholic Church, Chinese-language competence disappeared within one or two generations, and the descendant population dispersed rather than consolidating in an enclave. Every classical carrier of ethnic persistence, including language, endogamy, religious distinctiveness, residential concentration, and dense co-ethnic institutions, was weak or absent.

This article therefore takes the opposite starting point. We do not argue that Chinese culture survived in Peru; we argue that it largely did not, and that this is what makes the case theoretically interesting. What persisted was thinner and of a different kind than a cultural repertoire: a category. How a category can outlive its content, lie dormant for two generations, and become claimable again under changed conditions is the analytical problem addressed here.

1.2. Defining terms and the research gap

Four Peruvian terms recur throughout and carry historical freight rather than serving as neutral labels. *Tusán*, from the Cantonese for "locally born," denotes a person of Chinese descent born in Peru; used at first to distinguish the locally born from China-born migrants, it has since passed into general Peruvian Spanish and into official statistics. *Injerto*, literally "graft," referred to persons of mixed Chinese and Peruvian parentage, the horticultural metaphor conveying the ambivalence with which such mixture was regarded; *criollo* designates coastal Spanish-creole culture and the social world into which upwardly mobile Sino-Peruvians were incorporated; and *mestizaje* refers both to the demographic fact of mixture and to the national ideology that treated it as constitutive of Peruvianness. Part of what changes across generations is which of these loaded positions a descendant occupies or is assigned (López-Calvo & Campos, 2022).

Because the argument turns on it, we also distinguish four things that ordinary usage conflates. Ancestry is a genealogical fact, transmitted automatically and lost only through dilution and forgetting. Cultural repertoire comprises the practices conventionally treated as the content of ethnicity, including language, religious observance, marriage norms, and ritual calendars; it requires active teaching and is fragile. Categorical availability is the existence of a recognized and named social position that persons with the relevant ancestry can occupy, together with the infrastructure that keeps the name legible: a word in circulation, others able to apply it, and organizations bearing it. Identification is the act of claiming, being assigned to, or declining a category; it varies within persons across the life course and within families across siblings, and it is what censuses measure.

Our claim is that ancestry persisted and diffused, cultural repertoire attenuated to near-vanishing in most lines, categorical availability persisted at low but non-zero levels, and identification declined and later partially recovered. This is weaker than a claim of cultural survival, and it is not vulnerable to the observation that Sino-Peruvian descendants do not speak Chinese, practice Chinese religion, or marry endogamously; those observations are premises of the argument rather than objections to it. The category/culture boundary is porous rather than absolute, since *chifa* and naming practices are at once cultural products and categorical markers. The distinction is analytical rather than ontological, and what justifies it here is an empirical asymmetry: the practices that survived did so as public reference points available to anyone rather than as competences transmitted within families.

Two consequences follow. The framework does not require an unbroken chain of transmission, because categories can lie dormant: a word can remain in a language, a surname on a document, and an association on a register of corporate bodies without requiring sustained participation in Chinese cultural practices, and each is a resource a later cohort can take up. Reactivation is therefore a sociological phenomenon rather than a residue, since it reoccupies an available position instead of continuing an inheritance, which is close to Brubaker's (2004) treatment of ethnicity as category, framework, and event, and to constructionist accounts of ethnic renewal (Nagel, 1994).

A substantial literature addresses Peruvians of Chinese descent, but its center of gravity lies in history, ethnography, and literary criticism. Historians have reconstructed indenture, community formation, and commercial incorporation (Palma, 2022; Palma *et al.*, 2023; Valdizán Ayala & Chuhue, 2021), literary scholars have analyzed how Sino-Peruvian writers position themselves in relation to Chinese ancestry (López-Calvo, 2022; López-Calvo & Campos, 2022), and recent work examines the contemporary Chinese presence in the region (Armony & Hassan De Ferrari, 2024; Dussel Peters *et al.*, 2024; Ragas & Palma, 2022). Little of it asks a question that is neither historical nor textual: why do descendants born at different moments, into differently composed families, respond differently to the same ancestry?

The gap is not merely that the life-course approach has not been applied, but that each dominant template fails on an identifiable point. Classical and neo-assimilation accounts (Alba & Nee, 2003) predict monotonic decline and handle the trajectory well until the mid-20th century, after which they have no mechanism, since an upturn is not a slower decline (Ding, 2025). Cultural-retention accounts fail earlier, because they cannot accommodate language loss, near-universal exogamy, or Catholic incorporation, and they read *chifa* or surnames as retention, mistaking diffusion into the national culture for maintenance within a group. Symbolic-ethnicity accounts (Gans, 1979; Waters, 1990) describe the optional character of contemporary expression but are weak on timing, while revival and replenishment theories (Hansen, 1938; Herda, 2025; Jiménez, 2010) come closest yet assume that new arrivals reinforce the group, whereas Peru's post-1980s arrivals have as often contested *tusán* claims.

What the life-course perspective contributes is a specification of *when*. Its five principles—cohort location in historical time, the life stage at which exposure occurs, the linked lives mediating it, and the capacity for agency within structural limits, and lifespan development through adult identity change—jointly predict variation in identification among people with identical ancestry. For demography, the corresponding argument is that ethnic identification belongs with phenomena already analyzed through cohort and period decomposition: where ancestry is diffuse but identification is narrow and volatile, aggregate counts measure a demographic and a classificatory process jointly, and change between censuses may reflect the population, the instrument, the value of the category, or the cohort composition of respondents. Work on multiracial identification (Ventura & Flores, 2025; Xu *et al.*, 2021), racial fluidity (Saperstein & Penner, 2012), and question design (Flores *et al.*, 2023) has established this elsewhere; Peru extends it to a population whose mixture is old, deep, and largely unrecorded.

1.3. Theoretical framework: Life-course process and categorical persistence

The life-course approach treats lives as sequences of socially structured, age-graded transitions embedded in historical context (Elder, 1994), and has been applied increasingly to migration (Schaeffer, 2023). Applied to ethnicity, it treats identity as a process rather than an attribute possessed from birth (Guo, 2022) and presupposes a relational conception in which ethnicity is constituted at the boundary between groups rather than by a cultural inventory (Barth, 1996; Trémon, 2022; Wimmer, 2013). This is the warrant for our reframing: if ethnicity resides in the boundary, extensive loss of cultural content is compatible with the boundary's survival, provided someone continues to mark it, and if no one marks it, no amount of ancestry will resurrect it.

Cohorts encounter their ancestry within different opportunity structures, so the meaning of descent depends on when one lives. Those socialized under assimilative pressure had reason to leave Chinese ancestry unspoken; those coming of age amid intensive Chinese engagement with Peru meet an environment in which it may carry symbolic or instrumental value. Timing also operates within cohorts, since childhood exposure to heritage institutions, language instruction, or transnational kin should produce more durable attachment than equivalent exposure in adulthood (Lulle, 2024; Rumbaut, 2004).

Identities are transmitted, withheld, and reconstructed through interdependent relationships, which places the family at the center of the analysis. Households headed by non-Chinese mothers, with Catholic sponsorship and Spanish-language schooling, formed a configuration of linked lives oriented toward incorporation, while associations and, in a few families, ties to Guangdong formed a countervailing one; the second did not outweigh the first, but variation between families in their relative weight should predict variation in identification (Cifci,

2024). Agency denotes the bounded latitude descendants exercise, since ancestry may be claimed, performed, mentioned selectively, or set aside, and where it is expressed through occasional low-cost activity, it takes the form Gans (1979) termed symbolic ethnicity and Waters (1990) analyzed as an ethnic option (López-Calvo, 2022).

Identity is also reworked throughout adult life rather than fixed in youth. Salience may fall in early adulthood and rise later through turning points such as heritage travel, the death of an elder, or the birth of a child, which is the mechanism that permits genuine reactivation rather than mere residue. That one generation sets aside what a later one reclaims is a long-standing observation (Hansen, 1938), and recent scholarship locates such reactivation in shifting political and macro-structural conditions rather than in continuous transmission (Herda, 2025; Jiménez, 2009).

These principles supplement rather than displace existing accounts of incorporation. Segmented assimilation holds that descendants may follow consonant upward incorporation, downward incorporation, or selective acculturation (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zhou & Mahmud, 2023); the dominant Sino-Peruvian path approximates the first by way of mestizaje, while contemporary conditions may open the third for a minority. These dimensions interact rather than operate additively: historical time sets the value of ancestry, but whether a descendant responds depends on life stage, linked lives, and agency, which accounts for the within-cohort heterogeneity that aggregate figures conceal.

The framework's central obligation, given the audit presented in **Section 2.2**, is to specify how a category can remain claimable when the culture has gone. Six mechanisms are proposed below. None requires language, endogamy, or religious distinctiveness, and each generates observable implications.

(i) Genealogical memory: The most basic carrier is narrative: the knowledge, held within a family and communicated in fragments, that an ancestor came from China. It requires no practice and survives dilution because it passes as a story rather than a competence. It is fragile in a testable way, degrading with genealogical distance and family disruption, so its distribution should be uneven and predictably so.

(ii) Names as ascriptive triggers: A retained Chinese surname makes ancestry legible to others without the bearer doing anything. It invites remark and assumption, keeping the category active in social interaction even for persons with no cultural attachment. Because surnames pass patrilineally, the mechanism is systematically gendered, a point we return to in **Section 2.3**.

(iii) Phenotypic ascription: Where visible traits persist, external identification operates independently of self-identification and can be experienced as unwelcome. The reactivation of anti-Chinese sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that this channel remains live and outside the descendant's control (Ragas & Palma, 2022). It attenuates with successive admixture, so its reach narrows across cohorts.

(iv) Institutional persistence: Organizations bearing Chinese designations, among them the Beneficencia, cemeteries, schools, and clubs, persisted as corporate entities with legal standing, property, and continuity of name across the decades when families were assimilating (Valdizán Ayala & Chuhue, 2021). They are a standing infrastructure a later cohort can approach. This is the best documented of the six and the most amenable to archival test, since membership records exist.

(v) Public legibility: *Chifa*, the loanword *tusán*, the visible Chinatown, and the routine inclusion of Chinese migration in accounts of national formation keep the category present in general discourse. This mechanism operates at the level of society rather than the family. It explains how a descendant with no family narrative can nonetheless know what *tusán* means and that it might apply to them.

(vi) Replenishment and external sponsorship: Post-1980s migration from the People's Republic, with cultural diplomacy, language programs, and commercial ties, supplies resources for engagement that earlier cohorts lacked (Armony & Hassan De Ferrari, 2024; Ding, 2025). Following Jiménez (2009), replenishment can revitalize a category, but the Peruvian case suggests it may equally generate contestation, since newcomers may deny that mixed-descent Peruvians who speak no Chinese are Chinese at all. The framework treats the direction of this effect as an open question.

Two observations follow. These mechanisms are individually weak, which predicts the very low observed identification rates, whereas a framework built on strong transmission would predict counts orders of magnitude higher. They are also separable from cultural continuity, which makes the account falsifiable: if reactivation depended on continuous transmission, claimants should come disproportionately from the minority of families that maintained language, endogamy, or associational membership; if it depends on categorical availability, they should be found across families with no such continuity, distinguished instead by biographical timing, class resources, and access to these mechanisms. Table 1 summarizes each principle's expression.

Table 1. Life-course principles and their expression in the Sino-Peruvian case

Life-course principle	Operationalization for diaspora identity	Expression in the Sino-Peruvian case
Historical time and place	Cohort-specific opportunity structures set the social value of ancestry	Assimilationist pressure at mid-century; reactivation under China's contemporary prominence
Timing	Life stage at exposure to heritage shapes durability of attachment	Childhood versus adult contact with associations, schooling, and transnational kin
Linked lives	Transmission or non-transmission through family, institutions, and transnational ties	Non-Chinese mothers and Catholic sponsorship favoring incorporation; Beneficencia and kin ties as countervailing channels
Agency	Strategic claiming, performance, or muting of ethnicity within bounded options	Optional and symbolic Chineseness; identity strategies of Sino-Peruvian writers
Lifespan development	Identity reworked at turning points across adulthood	Late-life and third-generation recovery of heritage; reactivation without prior continuity

2. Historical trajectory and demographic realities

2.1. A compressed history: From indenture to incorporation

Mass Chinese migration to Peru began in 1849 with the *Ley China*, which encouraged the recruitment of indentured laborers in anticipation of the abolition of African slavery. Between 1849 and 1874, approximately 100,000 Chinese, overwhelmingly young men from Guangdong, arrived under indenture to work in guano extraction, sugar and cotton cultivation, and railway construction; conditions were severe, an estimated one-third died during the voyage or shortly after arrival, and the cohort entered Peruvian society at the bottom of a racialized labor hierarchy in which class and racial classification were fused (Moriuchi, 2024). Two features of this moment constrain everything that follows. The first is the sex ratio: the near-total absence of Chinese women meant that reproduction entailed union with non-Chinese women, so the first Peru-born generation was, in most localities without exception, of mixed parentage. The second is the absence of any institution capable of transmitting Chinese culture at scale during indenture, there being no schools, no established temples outside a few urban sites, and no families, so that whatever was transmitted passed informally among men and then into households in which the mother was not Chinese.

As indentures expired, freed Chinese moved into petty commerce, concentrating in Lima but dispersing widely as shopkeepers, a trajectory traced in south-central Peru through the shift in local perception from undesirable outsider to established merchant (Palma *et al.*, 2023). Two tendencies operated at once: the construction of mutual-aid structures among the Chinese themselves, and participation in Peruvian commercial and personal life. Because the migrants were almost exclusively male, families were formed by marriage or cohabitation with indigenous, Afro-Peruvian, and criolla women.

It is tempting to describe mestizaje and Catholic conversion as paradoxical routes to community consolidation, as though intermarriage and baptism somehow enabled Chineseness to persist, but on the evidence this reading is untenable. Conversion was overwhelmingly a mechanism of incorporation: baptism regularized unions in the eyes of the state and the Church, conferred legitimacy on children, opened access to schooling, godparenthood, and burial, and removed a salient marker of foreignness during decades in which foreignness carried real cost. The same is true of intermarriage, the principal engine of the descendant population's absorption into criollo and mestizo society.

What can be said, more modestly, is that incorporation and categorical persistence were not mutually exclusive, and the institutional record shows why. Benevolent associations, most prominently the Sociedad Central de Beneficencia China founded in the 1880s, operated as corporate bodies bearing a Chinese name, administering cemeteries, hospitals, and mutual aid, and representing the community to the state (Valdizán Ayala & Chuhue, 2021). They did not transmit language or religion, and their membership was never coextensive with the descendant population; their significance is narrower, in that they kept a Chinese-designated corporate presence in public life across the decades in which families were assimilating. They preserved the category, not the culture. Incorporation was also stratified, since internal hierarchies distinguished China-born from locally born and unmixed from mixed descent (Valdizán Ayala & Chuhue, 2021), so *tusán* was itself contested from early on.

Commercial activity drew freed Chinese and their children to Lima, and the streets around Calle Capón became one of the earliest Chinatowns in Latin America.

From this milieu emerged *chifa*, a Cantonese-Peruvian culinary synthesis that became a fixture of the national diet (Palma, 2024). Its diffusion is often cited as cultural retention, but it is better understood as the opposite, because a cuisine eaten by the whole nation no longer marks group membership. What *chifa* preserved was a reference, a reminder that Chinese people had come to Peru and left something behind, which contributes to categorical availability rather than repertoire. Dispersal reinforces the point, since laborers and merchants settled in coastal valleys and Amazonian towns, so the visible Chinatown was never a reliable index of the descendant population.

Incorporation did not preclude exclusion. The early 20th century brought sustained anti-Chinese agitation and arrangements restricting entry, notably the 1909 Porras–Wu Ting-fang protocol, while community organizations, Chinese-language schools, and a Sino-Peruvian press mediated between a community seeking legitimacy and homeland politics (Ragas & Palma, 2022). Chinese-language competence nonetheless disappeared among the descendant generations, and the schools served the China-born and their immediate children principally. Across the 20th century, Sino-Peruvians experienced episodes of hostility while becoming steadily more integrated into national self-understanding, and by its later decades Chinese ancestry had become, for most descendants, an occasional and elective reference rather than a daily condition (López-Calvo, 2022).

Two recent developments have complicated this trajectory. Migration directly from the People's Republic since the 1980s has produced a distinct population whose members sometimes question the authenticity of established *tusán* claims (Armony & Hassan De Ferrari, 2024), while expanded Chinese economic and political engagement in Latin America has raised the value attached to Chinese connections, prompting some descendants to reclaim heritage (Dussel Peters *et al.*, 2024). The result is a population with two socially distinct components: a long-settled, thoroughly mixed descendant population that is largely invisible as such, and a newer migrant population, conspicuous but small and not descended from the coolie cohort. Ancestry and identification, never tightly coupled here, have come further apart.

2.2. An audit of continuity and loss

The historical evidence assembled here points toward assimilation rather than persistence, and the appropriate response is to state the balance explicitly. Table 2 sets out the domains conventionally associated with ethnic continuity and records our assessment for the mixed-descent population deriving from the nineteenth-century migration, excluding post-1980s arrivals. Where an assessment rests on general historical consensus rather than a single study, we have anchored it to the literature documenting that domain most directly.

The pattern is unambiguous. Every domain corresponding to cultural repertoire falls on the loss side, whereas those on the retention side, namely associations, genealogical memory, phenotypic ascription, and the availability of a name, are precisely those that constitute a category rather than a culture. This is the empirical basis for the reframing announced in **Section 1.2**.

2.3. Fractional ancestry and the production of official numbers

The arithmetic of repeated exogamy disciplines the argument. If a China-born migrant partners with a non-Chinese woman, the children carry approximately one-half Chinese ancestry; under continued exogamy the fifth generation carries around one-sixteenth, or 6%. Because exogamy was near-total from the founding cohort onward, and that cohort's arrival was concentrated in 1849–1874, the great majority of people in Peru today descended from that migration are five to seven generations removed and carry ancestry proportions in the low single digits.

Three implications follow, and we accept all of them. First, the claim that one in ten Peruvians is of Chinese descent, if true at all, concerns the presence of at least one Chinese forebear in a person's descent lines rather than the existence of a Chinese-descended community; its provenance is obscure, since it circulates in journalism and advocacy rather than deriving from a published estimate, so we treat it as an artifact requiring explanation. Second, ancestry proportion has no direct bearing on identification: whether persons of mixed descent claim a minority ancestry depends on generation, gender, parental transmission of narrative, social context, and question wording rather than on the fraction held (Ventura & Flores, 2025; Xu *et al.*, 2021), and classification varies within individuals over time with social position (Saperstein & Penner, 2012). A person one-sixteenth Chinese may identify as *tusán*, and a person one-quarter Chinese may not.

Third, precisely because ancestry does not determine identification, the burden falls on the analysis to specify the *social* mechanisms by which a category remains claimable across five generations of dilution, which is why **Section 1.3** names them and **Section 5.1** states what evidence would show them not to operate. Transmission of the marker and of the ancestry are also asymmetric: surname passes patrilineally, so descendants in the male line may carry a recognizable name with minimal ancestry, while

Table 2. An audit of continuity and loss among Sino-Peruvian descendants of the nineteenth-century migration

Domain	Assessment	Basis and qualification
Chinese language	Lost	Competence disappears within one to two generations; schooling in Spanish, with non-Chinese mothers as primary socializers. Chinese-language schools served the China-born (Palma, 2022; Valdizán Ayala & Chuhue, 2021).
Religion	Lost as distinct practice	Catholic baptism was near-universal and functioned as incorporation; ancestor-related observance survived only in fragments (Palma, 2021, 2022; Valdizán Ayala & Chuhue, 2021).
Endogamy	Absent from the outset	The founding cohort's sex ratio made exogamy structurally necessary rather than a later drift (Moriuchi, 2024; Palma, 2022).
Residential concentration	Lost	Early and continuing dispersal across coast, sierra, and Amazon; Chinatown was never representative (Palma *et al*., 2023).
Surnames	Partially retained, unreliable	Hispanicization, adoption of patrons' names, and matrilineal transmission of ancestry make surname an inconsistent and asymmetric marker (López-Calvo & Campos, 2022; Palma, 2022).
Cuisine	Diffused, not retained	*Chifa* became national rather than group-specific; its boundary function was dissolved by its own success (Palma, 2024).
Formal associations	Retained at low intensity	Beneficencia and related bodies persisted as corporate entities; membership was always a small fraction of the descendant population (Valdizán Ayala & Chuhue, 2021).
Genealogical memory	Variably retained	Knowledge of a Chinese ancestor persists as narrative without accompanying practice; unevenly documented and probably declining with genealogical distance (López-Calvo, 2022; López-Calvo & Campos, 2022).
Phenotypic ascription	Retained, attenuating	External identification by others persisted where visible traits persisted, declining with successive admixture (Ragas & Palma, 2022).
Categorical availability	Retained	The word *tusán* remained in circulation, organizations bore Chinese designations, and the Chinese presence stayed legible in public accounts of the nation; since 2025, an official census category exists (INEI, 2018, 2026; Palma, 2022).

descendants of a Chinese woman may carry substantial ancestry with no name at all. Surname-based enumeration therefore does not merely undercount; it undercounts in a systematically gendered way, and it is not correctable by scaling.

Census design, self-identification, mixed ancestry, and sociopolitical context all bear on the discrepancy. Addressing them requires treating the census not as a window on the population but as an instrument that participates in producing what it records (Kertzer & Arel, 2002; Morning, 2008). For Peru, ethno-racial categorization in censuses and surveys has been reviewed by Valdivia (2011), and six factors operate.

The question asks about identification, not ancestry. Peru's ethnic item asks respondents how they consider themselves *by their customs and their ancestors*, making it a question about felt affiliation mediated by practice. A respondent whose great-great-grandfather was Chinese, who speaks no Chinese and was raised Catholic, can answer honestly and negatively while being fully aware of the ancestry. The instrument is not failing but measuring identification, so the gap between 10% and 0.06% is less a measurement error than a real difference between two quantities.

Category availability changed, and the change was informative. In 2017, the printed options ran from quechua and aimara through the Amazonian and Afro-Peruvian categories to white and mestizo, with *tusán* recorded only through the open "other" response, yielding 14,307 cases (INEI, 2018). In 2025, *tusán* and *nikkei* appeared as printed options, introduced because both communities had sought statistical visibility. Survey methodology predicts that moving a category from write-in to printed option raises its count, and in Mexico a modification to the ethnic item produced a large increase in indigenous counts without corresponding demographic change (Flores *et al*., 2023). In Peru, this did not occur, and the *tusán* share remained near 0.06% (INEI, 2026). One qualification is due: the 2025 list was redesigned as a whole rather than altered solely by adding a printed *tusán* option, so the comparison is not a clean test of format effects.

The mestizo default absorbs mixture. Roughly three-fifths of respondents identify as mestizo, and in a national ideology that treats mixture as the normal condition of Peruvianness, mestizo is an unmarked residual category into which mixed ancestry of every origin flows by default, so selecting *tusán* requires a positive act of differentiation with social meaning and, historically, social cost. The Latin

American literature on racial formation clarifies why: mestizaje is a governing ideology through which colonial racial hierarchies were reproduced in nationalist form (Quijano, 2000), in which classifications are negotiated rather than fixed, so that *mestizo* and *indio* mark shifting positions of education, occupation, and respectability rather than descent alone (de la Cadena, 2000). Because such systems absorb mixture into an unmarked center instead of assigning it to a marked minority, they create a structural incentive not to differentiate, the opposite of that created by regimes built on hypodescent (Wade, 2017).

Mixed ancestry has no representation in a single-response instrument. The item elicits one answer, so a person of Chinese, indigenous, and criollo descent must choose, and choosing *tusán* means declining to report the rest. Where multiple responses are not permitted, mixed populations are underrepresented in every minority category at once. The multiracial identification literature indicates that permitting it typically raises minority counts considerably (Ventura & Flores, 2025).

Sociopolitical context conditions the willingness to claim. The 2017 and 2025 items were introduced within a politics of recognition oriented toward indigenous and Afro-Peruvian populations, in which recognition is linked to territorial rights, consultation, and targeted policy. *Tusán* fits that framework poorly, naming an urban, commercially incorporated, socially unmarked population for which no such claim exists, so the incentive encouraging indigenous self-identification does not reach it. The residue of anti-Chinese sentiment, reactivated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ragas & Palma, 2022), supplies a further disincentive.

Enumeration and proxy reporting introduce further slippage. Census responses are frequently supplied by a household head on behalf of others. Where identification varies within families, as our framework predicts it does between generations, proxy reporting will tend toward the household's default answer. This compresses the intra-family variation that is of theoretical interest.

The spatial distribution of the counts bears directly on the institutional mechanism proposed above. Published tabulations for both rounds indicate that *tusán* identification is concentrated in Lima and Callao, the departments housing the Beneficencia, the historic Chinatown, the community schools, and the associational infrastructure, with thinner representation elsewhere (INEI, 2018, 2026). That concentration is consistent with institutional persistence, but equally with urban composition effects, and the published tabulations are too coarse to separate the two. A district-level analysis of the microdata, combined with the georeferenced locations of surviving institutions, would discriminate between them, and Section 5.3 identifies it as the most immediately feasible test available.

Taken together, these factors imply that official *tusán* counts measure active, publicly declared identification among persons willing to distinguish themselves from the mestizo default in a single-response instrument. They are informative about that quantity and about changes in it across censuses. They are not estimates of the Chinese-descended population, and conflating the two has produced much of the confusion this article seeks to dispel.

3. Generational positions and the non-monotonic trajectory

3.1. Four positions as heuristics

The framework can be illustrated through four generational positions, which are ideal types rather than strict birth-order categories. Staggered migration, wide variation in the age at which descendants formed families, and repeated intermarriage make clean generational boundaries unattainable in this population, and Rumbaut's (2004) demonstration that nominal generations conceal large internal differences applies with particular force here. Taken in sequence, the positions display a pattern that no unidirectional model anticipates; as Figure 1 makes clear, however, the pattern applies to categorical salience and not to cultural repertoire, which declines throughout.

3.2. The founding, locally born, and later cohorts

The founding cohort of indentured laborers and post-indenture settlers constructed a position under severe constraint. Historical time placed them at the base of a racialized labor hierarchy, and agency, once contracts expired, expressed itself in commercial mobility and mutual aid. The scarcity of Chinese women made union with non-Chinese women a condition of demographic survival rather than a choice, and this fact determined the character of every subsequent generation.

The first substantial Peru-born cohort of *tusán* and *injerto* occupied an intermediate position from birth. Raised in mixed households by non-Chinese mothers, schooled in Spanish, and incorporated through Catholic sponsorship, they lost linguistic competence early. The balance was uneven: the incorporative configuration was far stronger, and entry into the criollo and mestizo middle strata followed, so what the retentive configuration achieved was not maintenance of a culture but the survival of an organizational and nominal presence.

For third-generation and later descendants, Chinese ancestry exists, when it exists at all, as symbolic ethnicity:

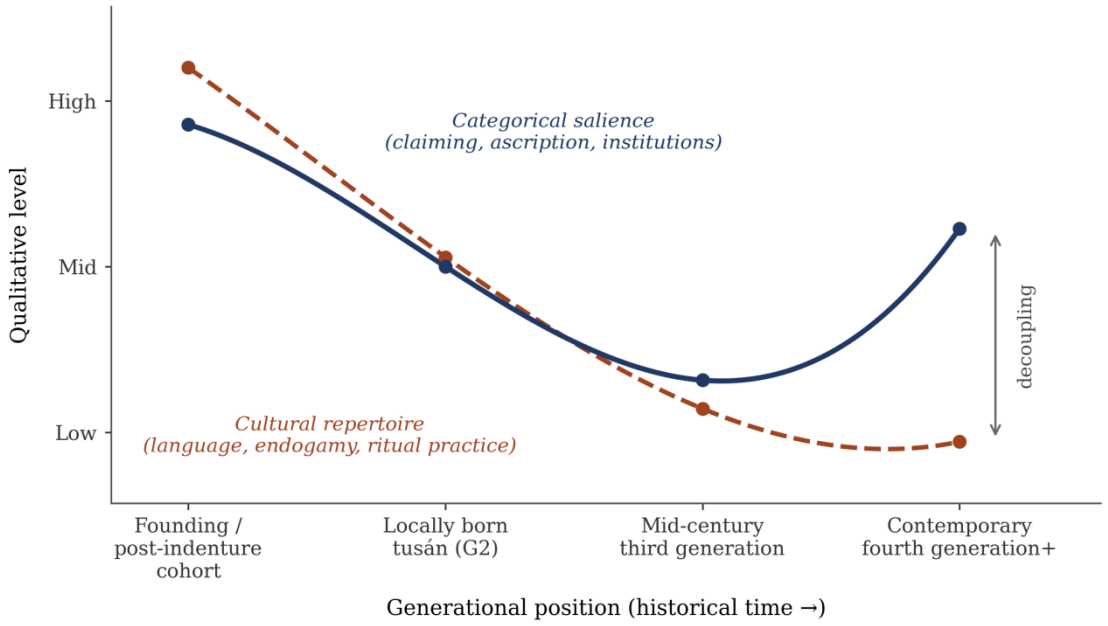


Figure 1. Divergent trajectories of cultural repertoire and categorical salience across Sino-Peruvian generational positions (conceptual schematic; not data-based). The framework's central claim is the decoupling shown at the right-hand side: reactivation of categorical salience occurs without, and does not imply, recovery of cultural repertoire.

an elective reference expressed through food, festivals, names, or family stories rather than language or conduct. The scope for agency is correspondingly wide and stratified by class, since cultivating a heritage connection through travel, language study, associational membership, or genealogical research requires time and money. This is consistent with ancestry being widely diffused while claiming remains rare and socially concentrated.

Contemporary reactivation arises from direct migration from China together with China's expanded regional role. Historical time has altered the value of Chinese descent, lifespan development permits revision of identities formed earlier, and some third- and fourth-generation Peruvians have claimed a *tusán* identity their parents muted. It occurs within contested boundaries, since recent arrivals may question whether descendants who speak no Chinese are Chinese at all, and it draws on resources unavailable to earlier revivals, since cultural diplomacy, language programs, and commercial ties lower the cost of claiming without constituting an identity.

The scale and character of this reactivation require precise statement. In magnitude, it is very small, since the 2025 census recorded approximately 0.06% of the enumerated population, with the highest shares in Lima and Callao (INEI, 2026). In kind, it is symbolic and institutionally mediated rather than demographic, visible principally where it leaves a documentary trace: literary production and anthologies of *tusán* writing (López-Calvo, 2022; López-Calvo & Campos, 2022), associational and commemorative activity, and heritage-oriented programming connected to expanded economic ties (Armony & Hassan De Ferrari, 2024; Dussel Peters *et al.*, 2024). What we describe is localized and socially selective, concentrated among urban, educated, and comparatively advantaged descendants, rather than a movement of the descendant population into *tusán* identification. The 2025 figure is thus no disconfirmation of the framework, which predicts narrow reactivation because the mechanisms sustaining it are individually weak and unevenly distributed; had the figure been large, that account would have required revision.

3.3. Assimilation paths and cross-cutting channels

Three channels operate across all positions. Gender was decisive at the origin, since male-dominated migration made Peruvian mothers the primary socializers and inclined households toward Hispanic and Catholic practice, and it produced the gendered asymmetry in surname transmission discussed in **Section 2.3**. Religion was an incorporative channel, binding families to Catholic institutions while incidentally supporting some community structures. Cultural practice, most conspicuously culinary practice, diffused well beyond the descendant population

and thereby ceased to mark it (Palma, 2021), while names operated in two directions at once, permitting rapid incorporation where Hispanicized and creating persistent enumeration problems.

These positions map onto segmented-assimilation trajectories. The majority path corresponds to consonant acculturation, with entry into the middle strata of criollo society and reduced distinctiveness; there is little evidence of downward assimilation or of a persisting enclave economy. The reactivating minority suggests an emergent selective-acculturation path, and what determines the path is not a property of the community but the life-course parameters facing each cohort.

A within-country comparison sharpens the point. Sino-Peruvian descendants appear more distant from their Asian ancestry than Nikkei descendants do, and the difference is attributable to timing and configuration rather than to culture. Japanese migration to Peru began in 1899, roughly half a century after the Chinese, and proceeded under state-organized contract and later family migration rather than indenture, so women arrived in substantial numbers, including as arranged brides, and endogamy remained common well into the second generation (Masterson & Funada-Classen, 2004; Takenaka, 2004). The resulting apparatus of Japanese-language schools, prefectural associations, cooperatives, and a community press was correspondingly denser, and exclusion reinforced rather than dissolved it: the anti-Japanese riots of 1940 and the wartime deportation of roughly 1,800 Japanese Peruvians to United States internment camps, followed by partial repatriation, marked the population as unambiguously foreign and consolidated a boundary never imposed on Chinese descendants with comparable force (Higashide, 2000; Masterson & Funada-Classen, 2004). Nikkei identity has remained a bounded, institutionally anchored position, actively transmitted and at times politically salient, whereas *tusán* survived as a name without an apparatus (Takenaka, 2004). Because the comparison holds national context constant while varying arrival timing, sex ratio, and institutional density, it is among the most informative tests available.

Taken together, the four positions describe a trajectory unidirectional models cannot generate. Collective salience was high during post-indenture institution-building, declined through mid-century assimilation, and has partially revived in a form narrow in scale and social base. These movements are produced not by the passage of generations but by shifts in the parameters the framework identifies.

4. Scope conditions and comparative perspectives

4.1. Conditions for applicability

A framework built from a single case invites the question of how far it travels; it travels as far as its scope conditions hold and no further. Five are required:

(i) Deep temporal distance: the founding migration must be remote enough for cultural repertoire to have attenuated substantially, meaning at least four generations.
(ii) Structurally imposed exogamy: an initial sex ratio so skewed that intermarriage was a condition of reproduction rather than a gradual drift.
(iii) A dominant mixture ideology: a national self-understanding in which mixture is normative, supplying an unmarked default category into which descendants can disappear.
(iv) Categorical survival: a name, a set of institutions, and public legibility persisting through the assimilative period.
(v) A later shift in the value of the ancestry: typically an external development such as homeland ascendancy, replenishing migration, or a change in official recognition that alters the payoff to claiming.

Condition (iii) deserves elaboration, because it most sharply distinguishes the Latin American setting from the North American one and does most of the work in bounding the framework. Systems organized around hypodescent assign mixed persons to the subordinate category, making mixture a route into a marked minority, so that ancestry is converted into membership by the classification system itself. Peruvian mestizaje operates in the opposite direction, absorbing mixture into an unmarked national center and generating categories that are graded and partly achieved rather than binary and ascribed, so that a change in education, occupation, or residence can shift a person's classification without any change in descent (de la Cadena, 2000; Wade, 2017). This inheritance of colonial racial hierarchy in nationalist form (Quijano, 2000) produces the configuration our framework assumes, in which ancestry can diffuse very widely while the corresponding minority category remains claimable but unclaimed. Where classification instead marks mixture, descendants need no mechanism of categorical survival because the classification system supplies one, and the problem addressed here does not arise.

4.2. Comparative cases

Where all five conditions hold, the framework should

apply with little modification. The Chinese-descended populations of Cuba and Mexico are the closest analogs, since both derive from nineteenth-century labor migration with comparable sex ratios, both underwent extensive creolization, and both exist within mixture ideologies (Lei, 2021). Costa Rica, Panama, and the Anglophone Caribbean share most conditions with variations in the density of surviving institutions and in the salience of the mixture ideology (Narváez, 2021).

Where conditions fail, applicability is limited. Chinese populations in Chile and Argentina derive predominantly from recent migration and fail condition (i), so the framework has little to say about the descendant question there, although its treatment of contested boundaries remains pertinent (Chan, 2024). Japanese-descended populations in Peru and Brazil fail condition (ii), since family migration produced high endogamy and dense institutions, and they exhibit far stronger cultural continuity, which makes them valuable contrast cases (Masterson & Funada-Classen, 2004; Takenaka, 2004). Chinese populations in the United States and Canada fail condition (iii) for the reasons given above, and fail (iv) in the opposite direction, having maintained far denser institutions.

Beyond the Chinese diaspora, the framework should apply to any long-settled immigrant-descended population meeting the five conditions, for example, Lebanese and Palestinian descendants in Latin America. It does not offer a general theory of ethnic identity, since it specifies one pathway: categorical survival through cultural loss, followed by conditional reactivation. Populations that retained their culture, that were racially marked in ways precluding absorption, or that never possessed a nameable category require different accounts. One caution is in order: the framework does not license inferring latent ethnic identity wherever ancestry is diffuse, since it requires positive evidence of categorical survival, and where that evidence is absent the correct conclusion is that the category is gone.

5. Propositions and research agenda

5.1. Falsifiable propositions

The framework yields six falsifiable propositions (P1–P6) that are testable using documentary, comparative, and secondary quantitative evidence. Because conceptual work of this kind is open to the charge that it accommodates any outcome, each is paired with the evidence that would count against it. These are hypotheses for future testing rather than findings. Only P1 and P6 are addressed by evidence currently available; P2 through P5 are offered as an agenda for the research described in **Section 5.3**.

P1. Divergent trajectories. Cultural repertoire declines monotonically across birth cohorts, while categorical salience follows a non-monotonic path, falling through the mid-20th century and rising among cohorts coming of age after roughly 2000. Disconfirmed if measures of identification show continued monotonic decline across recent cohorts, or if repertoire measures show recovery. Status: partially addressed by the evidence assembled here; a proper cohort test requires microdata not yet analyzed.

P2. Timing of exposure. Net of generational position, childhood exposure to heritage institutions predicts higher identification in later life than equivalent adult exposure. *Disconfirmed if* adult exposure predicts equally or more strongly, which would indicate that reactivation is driven wholly by contemporaneous incentives rather than biographical accumulation. *Status:* hypothesis for future testing.

P3. Interaction of intermarriage and institutions. The negative effect of intermarriage on transmission is attenuated where associational ties persist. Disconfirmed if intermarriage effects are invariant to institutional access. Status: hypothesis for future testing, requiring archival family reconstitution.

P4. Stratification of symbolic ethnicity. Elective ethnic expression varies positively with socioeconomic resources. Disconfirmed if claiming is distributed evenly across the class structure, or is concentrated among the least advantaged. Status: hypothesis for future testing; the urban concentration of reported *tusán* identification is suggestive but is not a test.

P5. Turning points rather than continuity. Reactivation is associated with biographical events and structural shifts rather than uninterrupted transmission, so claimants should be drawn substantially from families with no history of language maintenance, endogamy, or associational membership. Disconfirmed if claimants derive disproportionately from the minority of continuously connected families, which would support a continuity account. Status: hypothesis for future testing, and the most consequential one for the framework.

P6. Category availability is necessary but not sufficient. Making a category officially available raises measured identification only where the other mechanisms are present. Disconfirmed if a format change alone produces a large increase in identification. Status: partially tested and partially disconfirming, since the printed *tusán* option introduced in 2025 left the share at approximately 0.06%, the level recorded in 2017 (INEI, 2018, 2026). This is consistent with the necessity clause, inconsistent with any strong claim that instrument design alone suppressed

a large latent population, and reported here as evidence against the more expansive version of our own position.

P5 and P6 are the framework's central propositions. If contemporary claimants come predominantly from continuously connected families, the categorical account should be abandoned in favor of a continuity account. The available evidence does not settle the question.

5.2. Data, measurement, and limitations

Investigating these propositions requires methods attentive to time. Archival work offers the most direct evidence for evaluating P3 and P5, since the Beneficencia and comparable associations hold membership, cemetery, and school records spanning more than a century, which, when linked to civil registration, would allow claimants to be traced back to families with and without institutional ties. Secondary analysis of census material can address P1 and P4, subject to the constraints discussed in **Section 2.3**. Life writing and Sino-Peruvian literature narrate identity transitions and their triggers, and suit the turning points specified in P5, though the corpus is severely selected.

Measurement demands care, since the instrument participates in producing the phenomenon. Surname-based classification undercounts an exogamous population asymmetrically by gender, while self-report depends on question wording, response options, and the prevailing ethnic climate (Xu *et al.*, 2021). Apparent increases may reflect instrumentation or coding rather than the population (Ventura & Flores, 2025); the Mexican case shows how large such effects can be (Flores *et al.*, 2023), and the Peruvian 2025 result shows that they are not guaranteed.

The framework's limitations are substantial. It is a heuristic rather than a tested model, since nothing here has been estimated and P6 has already returned evidence against the stronger form of the argument. Historical reconstruction is inferential, because claims about nineteenth- and early 20th-century transmission rest on traces produced for other purposes: registers record sacraments rather than beliefs, association records membership rather than attachment, and the category-versus-culture distinction is imposed retrospectively. Writing from a moment of visible reactivation also invites teleology; we guard against it by stating the audit in Table 2 and by reporting a 2025 census result that does not favor our argument, though the risk is not eliminated.

Three further constraints apply to the evidence. Selection bias affects nearly every available source: memoirs and literary works are written by the ethnically engaged, association records document joiners, and oral history reaches those willing to be interviewed about being *tusán*, so the invisible majority of descendants appears in no source we have used, and any estimate of the prevalence of attachment is biased upward. The secondary literature is uneven, favoring Lima over the provinces, the commercial over the laboring classes, and the historical over the demographic, while Chinese-language sources, particularly the early Sino-Peruvian press, are not adequately represented. Finally, our claims concern within-cohort and within-family variation while nearly all available data are aggregate, so inference from departmental shares risks ecological fallacy and tests of P1 may lack power.

5.3. Directions for empirical validation

Four programs would move the framework from heuristic to tested. The most immediately feasible is spatial and cohort analysis of existing census microdata: a district-level analysis of the 2017 and 2025 *tusán* responses, combined with the georeferenced locations of surviving associations, temples, schools, and cemeteries, would establish whether identification clusters where institutions survive, as institutional persistence implies, or tracks urban population, as a composition account predicts. Age distributions in the same microdata would provide the first genuine cohort test of P1. Neither analysis requires new data collection; both are limited only by access to the files and by the ecological caution noted above.

Cohort-comparative life-history research would provide the most direct evidence on P2 and P5. Semi-structured interviews with descendants stratified by birth cohort, family institutional history, and current identification, using life-history calendars to date turning points, are the appropriate instrument; given the rarity of claiming, oversampling through association lists is unavoidable. The resulting selection must be modeled, ideally with a comparison group recruited without reference to Chinese ancestry.

Archival family reconstitution would be the most decisive test of P5 and the most laborious. Linking association records, parish registers, and civil registration for a defined locality would permit reconstruction of complete descent lines from the founding cohort. That would make it possible to estimate what proportion of descendants retain any connection and to compare families that maintained institutional ties with those that did not.

Survey experimentation and longitudinal observation address the instrument and the lifespan, respectively. Split-ballot experiments varying question wording, response format, and the availability of multiple responses would estimate the magnitude of instrument effects for *tusán* directly rather than by analogy to Mexico, distinguishing

a genuinely low identification rate from one suppressed by the single-response format. A panel following descendants through mid-life turning points would test the lifespan component as no cross-sectional design can, and replication across the cases in **Section 4.2** would establish the framework's boundaries empirically rather than by stipulation.

6. Conclusion

The Sino-Peruvian population has conventionally been read as a case of successful assimilation, marked by early settlement, near-universal intermarriage, rapid language loss, Catholic incorporation, and absorption into criollo society. This article has not disputed that reading. It has accepted it, arguing that the reading is incomplete in a specific way.

What the assimilation account cannot explain is why a category survived its own culture. Chinese languages disappeared, households were formed and led by non-Chinese women, the Church supplied the framework of socialization, and the descendant population dissolved into the mestizo majority, and yet a word remained in the language, organizations persisted as incorporated bodies, families remembered an ancestor, and some descendants have begun to claim a position their grandparents left unclaimed. These are not remnants of a surviving culture, but the components of a surviving category, and the two require different theories. The life-course perspective supplies the missing element, timing: it specifies why cohorts encountering the same ancestry at different moments, at different life stages, and with different resources respond differently, and thus why categorical salience has followed a non-monotonic path while cultural repertoire declined without interruption. This decoupling is the article's central claim, stated in a form that can fail: if contemporary claimants prove to come from continuously connected families, or if identification continues to fall, the account is wrong.

The available evidence disciplines the claim as much as it supports it, and we have treated the 2025 census as a first and largely negative test. When Peru offered *tusán* as an explicit response option, the count did not rise appreciably, which weakens any account attributing low identification to instrument design and rules out the stronger version of our argument, in which a large submerged *tusán* population was merely unrecorded. Whatever reactivation is occurring is narrow, urban, symbolic, and socially selective rather than demographic. This pattern is consistent with a framework built on weak and unevenly distributed mechanisms. It also cautions against more expansive narratives of diasporic revival.

For demography, the case makes a general point in unusually clear form. Ancestry propagates through reproduction, whereas identification is produced through historically situated social action and registered through instruments that shape what they record. In populations formed by deep and repeated mixture these processes come apart, and no count of the second measures the first; studying how, when, and for whom they reconverge requires holding both in view, which is what a life-course account of ethnicity is for.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare they have no competing interests.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: All authors
Writing – original draft: All authors
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Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable. This is a conceptual study based entirely on published, publicly available secondary sources; it involved no human or animal subjects and used no primary, restricted, or individual-level dataset. Ethics approval and informed consent are therefore not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data

Not applicable. No new data were created or analyzed in this study; all sources analyzed are cited in the reference list of the manuscript.

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