

Demography Dynamics in Gelephu

ABSTRACT

As the third largest city¹¹ in Bhutan, Gelephu has the fastest growing population, which would be accelerated with the proposed Gelephu Special Administrative Region (GeSAR). However, there are restrictions already in place for land transactions in the district and people from the region are forced to seek land substitutions in other districts to make way for the city. Many of the demographic indicators of Gelephu are better compared to other districts in the country. This chapter examines the demographic indicators of the Sarpang district, within which the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) is located, and do their comparative study.

Keywords: population, demography, census, settlement, eviction

Introduction

Gelephu is the third largest city in Bhutan, after Thimphu (the capital) and Phuentsholing. Human settlement in the region, where proposed GMC sits today, was assumed to have been early last century – mostly Nepali speakers who were attracted to the region's fertile soil and abundant natural resources. Nepali speakers established themselves in the area and developed a thriving agricultural community. The region was allotted under the authority of the Paro Penlop during second half of the nineteenth century until the monarchy was established in 1907 but with no direct communication or visible presence of the authority. The demography of the region continued to evolve when the Dorji family, in charge of southern Bhutan's administration following the

¹¹ Populations: Thimphu – 114,551, Phuentsholing – 27,658, Gelephu – 9858 as per 2017 census

installation of monarchy, encouraged migration from South-West Bhutan to Gelephu and surrounding regions. Dorjis, influenced by British India, played important role in shaping demographic landscapes of the region. British India encouraged mass migration out of Nepal to north-east region of current day India following the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816.

National Reflection

Gelephu is a sub-set within the national population data manipulation by the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB). Bhutan's population statistics are often interpreted by the royal regime to align with the interests of the Thimphu elites. Early records are sparse and estimates from different periods often conflict. The absence of a comprehensive, reliable historical dataset makes it challenging to analyse demographic trends of the region, and the country, accurately. This gap in knowledge has allowed the government to interpret population history in ways that align with its interests, sometimes at the expense of minority groups or to justify contentious policies.

The government emphasises quality over quantity to justify slow population growth (ADB, 2019) (1.3 per cent annually as per the 2017 census) and low urbanisation rates (Ura et al, 2012), framing these as successes of sustainable development. However, such narratives obscure underlying issues, including youth emigration, rural depopulation or forceful eviction. In recent years, the leaders have publicly acknowledged these policies were based on flawed data (BBS, 2019).

Historical data is selectively highlighted to reinforce the dominance of the Ngalop majority. Pre-1990 censuses, which included Nepali

speaking people, are rarely referenced, while post-expulsion¹² data is promoted to project ethnic homogeneity. This revisionism supports the state's cultural preservation agenda but erases Bhutan's multicultural history.

Even Bhutan's National Statistics Bureau has expressed doubts about its data, revising figures retroactively and acknowledging challenges in remote data collection. International bodies like the World Bank¹³ have noted anomalies, such as improbably low fertility rates (1.39 in 2022) conflicting with high youth populations. Such inconsistencies hint at systemic underreporting or methodological flaws. Bhutan presented its national population to be over one million at its membership application with the UN in 1971, however this was later interpreted as being not accurate but exaggerated to gain membership. The Bhutanese government's approach to interpreting population history often seems to prioritise political stability and cultural homogeneity over acknowledging the complex realities of Bhutan's demographic profile.

Gelephu, being part of this population politics, has obscure evidence of this population history. The reliability of the government census is still questionable owing to its own historical practice to project inaccurate data to support the political narrative of the time.

Settlement Prior to 1960s

Before the 1960s, Gelephu city and its neighbouring areas were primarily a small settlement with a sparse population. Gelephu was largely agricultural, and the community was composed mainly of Nepali speaking farmers. Historical records indicate that the population was small along the Mau River, which moved to present

¹² Over 100,000 of the southern Bhutanese were evicted in early 1990s.

¹³ [World Bank](#)

city area for expansion as part of the modernisation plans of the third King Jigme Dorji. The Mau River catchment population had approximately 400 households. The 1953 flood in the Mau River forced the inhabitants to move westward.

Gelephu (and Sarpang¹⁴) was included within Chirang¹⁵ region in historical references. Gelephu did not have a separate administration. Sinha quoted Captain Morris that the population of Samchi (now Samtse) and Chirang was around 60,000 in 1933 who had been living there for more than 70 years. Most of this population was in Samchi and a smaller number in Chirang. However, the eastward migration continued thereafter, which significantly increased the population in Chirang and the present day Gelephu region.

Gelephu was within the Assam Duars (India), when Bhutan ruled the duars. Bhutan and expanding British colonial forces competed each other for control over the regions for several years. During the Anglo-Bhutan war 1864-65, one of the British commands (Central Right) attacked Bhutan through Gelephu region (Bishensing) on 17 December 1864, which faced countering Bhutanese forces on 25 January 1865. The region experienced frequent conflicts with India, indicating the economic importance of the regions and heavy presence of human settlement. There are no definitive records of the human casualties of the duar war, let alone in the Gelephu region.

Settlement After 1960s

The 1960s heralded a transformative era for Gelephu, aligning with Bhutan's modernisation agenda of the Third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. This period saw the introduction of sweeping

¹⁴ Name of this district was previously spelled as Sarbhang

¹⁵ RGOB changed the name to Tsirang in late 1990s

developmental policies, including infrastructure expansion, administrative reforms, and economic diversification. This collectively reshaped the socio-economic landscape of Bhutan – including Gelephu. A pivotal moment occurred in 1964, when the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) initiated settlement programs to decentralise population distribution and stimulate regional development in south central districts. These efforts catalysed Gelephu's growth, as migrants from other districts, more precisely from Tsirang and Samtse - began relocating to the newly opened lands.

Demographic records from this era, however, reveal inconsistencies that underscore the challenges of early data collection. H. N. Mishra (1988), citing RGOB sources, noted that Chirang District—which initially encompassed Gelephu—recorded a population of 60,000 in the 1969 census. Conflicting report suggests a higher figure of 80,357 (Rose, 1977), a discrepancy likely attributable to differing methodologies or the fluid boundaries of administrative zones. The 1969 census was the first of its kinds of exercise carried out in Bhutan for population enumeration. Regardless of precise numbers, the upward trajectory was unmistakable. The government actively promoted Gelephu as a commercial hub, leveraging its strategic location along the Indian border to attract entrepreneurs, labourers, and the government employees.

This momentum intensified in 1975¹⁶ when Gelephu was designated the district headquarters of Sarpang¹⁷, consolidating its administrative significance. The relocation of government offices, courts, and public services spurred a secondary wave of migration, as families and professionals settled in the town to access

¹⁶ Sarpang [district website](#), accessed in January 2025

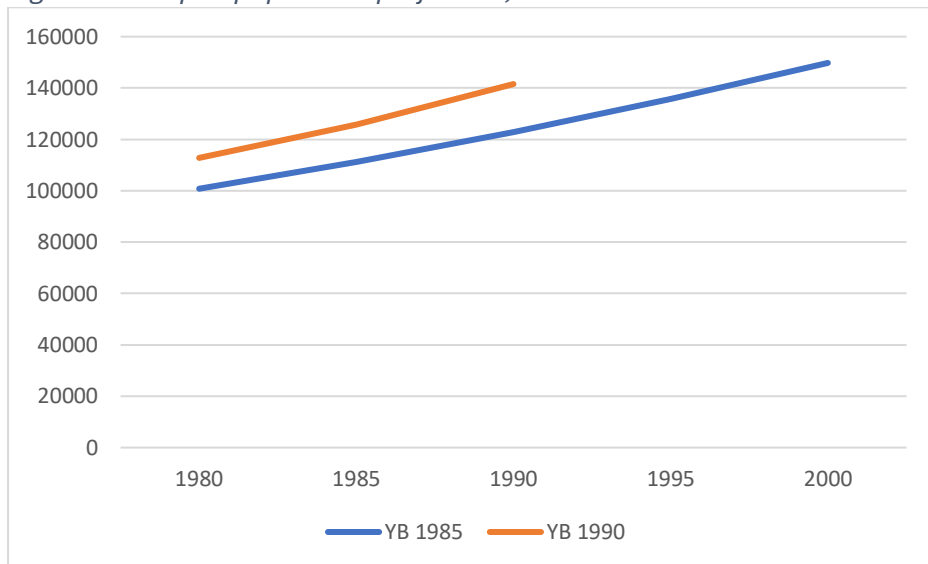
¹⁷ Sarpang district was created in 1973 as part of decentralisation processes.

employment and business opportunities and education for children. By the 1980s, urbanisation had gained irreversible momentum. The RGOB's 1980 census projected Gelephu's population to reach 111,283 by 1985 and 149,765 by 2000 (Planning Commission, 1985), indicating a steady annual growth rate of 2.5–3%. These forecasts reflected both natural increase and in-migration. In many government records, Gelephu and Sarpang are used interchangeably. This aggregation arose from the Gelephu Municipality's jurisdictional framework, which incorporated surrounding rural areas into its administrative purview. Consequently, historical datasets frequently represent the district's demographics rather than the urban core alone, complicating granular analysis of the town's growth. However, as the proposed GMC basically covers the whole Sarpang district, the demographics of the district would truly represent the history of future city.

By mid-20th century Gelephu evolved from a quiet agrarian settlement into a bustling regional nexus. The interplay of state-led modernisation, strategic governance decisions, and cross-border economic currents propelled its demographic expansion, setting the stage for its contemporary role as a linchpin of Bhutan's southern economy.

Figure 1 summarises the population projections based on the [statistical year books](#) published by then Planning Commission.

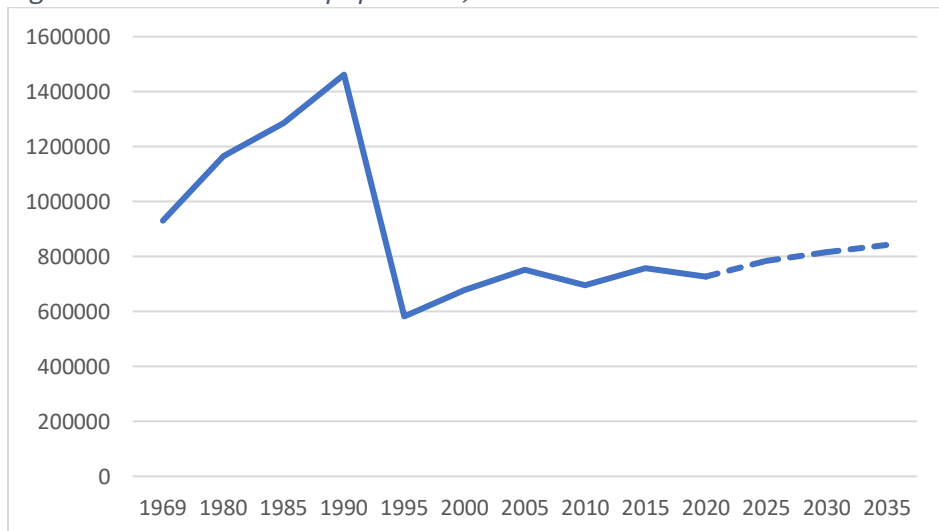
Figure 1: Gelephu population projection, 1980-2000



The district-level demographic data of Gelephu is not available between 1990 and 2005. The depopulation projects implemented in the south were expected to take foothold before number counting re-began.

Census data after 2005 shows the Gelephu population steadily rising. Some of the important demographic characteristics of Sarpang district are given below. Many of the indicators point to the fact that demographic dynamics in Sarpang district are changing for better. The population grew by 24 per cent between 2005 and 2017, child mortality rate has shown a dramatic progress between 1991 and 2017 and life expectancy show Bhutanese live much longer now.

Figure 2: Bhutan national population, 1969-2035



Sources: Based on information from Leo E. Rose, *The Politics of Bhutan*, Ithaca, 1977, 41; and *Bhutan*, Planning Commission, Central Statistical Office, *Statistical Yearbook of Bhutan*, 1989.

Table 1: Sarpang, distribution of population by sex, 2005 and 2017

Year	Urban			Rural			Total		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
2005	6247	5571	11818	13085	12198	25283	19332	17769	37101
2017	6798	6212	13010	17220	15774	32994	24018	21986	46004

Source: National Statistics Bureau, Bhutan

Table 2: Sarpang, sex ration, average household size, 2005 and 2017

Year	Sex ratio at birth (males/females)	Overall sex ratio	Avg household size	Total households
2005	97.0	108.8	4.7	7246
2017	99.6	109.2	4.0	10135

Source: National Statistics Bureau, Bhutan

Table 3: Sarpang, crude birth rate per 1000, 2005 and 2017

Year	Crude Birth Rate			Crude Death Rate		
	Urban	Rural	Combined	Urban	Rural	Combined
2005	20.9	18.9	19.5	4.1	5.9	5.3

2017	13.8	13.1	13.3	6.1	6.5	6.4
------	------	------	------	-----	-----	-----

Source: National Statistics Bureau, Bhutan

Table 4: Sarpang, Infant, child and under-five mortality rate

Year	IMR	CMR	U5MR
1991	78	50	125
1996	66.5	39.5	172.0
2000	56.0	30.5	85.5
2005	51.0	22.1	73.1
2017	14.7	18.0	32.7

Source: National Statistics Bureau, Bhutan

Table 5: Sarpang, lifetime migration

Year	Population	Out Migration	In migration	Net migration	
				No of persons	Proportion of Population %
2005	37101	15071	16460	1389	3.7
2017	46004	9939	16017	6078	13.2

Source: National Statistics Bureau, Bhutan

Table 6: Sarpang, literacy rate percentage, 2005 and 2017

Year	Urban			Rural			Combined		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
2005	80	63.1	72.1	64	40.4	52.7	69.2	47.5	58.9
2017	86.6	78.0	82.5	75.4	60.5	68.3	78.6	65.5	72.4

Source: National Statistics Bureau, Bhutan

Population Growth

Bhutan's demographic history remains shrouded in ambiguity, owing to the absence of systematic data collection until 2005. While the RGOB initiated formal, standardised population enumeration in 2005, these efforts focused primarily on basic metrics such as age, sex, and household size, omitting critical sociocultural details like linguistic diversity, religious affiliations, or ethnic composition. This paucity of granular data complicates efforts to reconstruct historical population trends, particularly in peripheral regions such as Gelephu.

Gelephu languished in administrative obscurity during the first five decades of Wangchuk rule (1907–1952), a period characterised by centralised governance and limited infrastructural development. As a result, no reliable demographic records specific to Gelephu exist from this era. Fragmentary insights emerge only in the latter half of the 20th century, with preliminary government reports, such as population projections by the Planning Commission, from the 1980s and 1990s indicating rapid population growth in the region. These documents, however, lack methodological rigor and were inconsistently published; notably, district-level statistics were entirely absent from public records between 1990 and 2005, creating a significant knowledge gap.

Analysts have attempted to extrapolate historical trends using Bhutan's national average annual population growth rate of 2.6%, calculated from the 1969 census baseline. Applying this rate to the Chirang region—which historically included Gelephu—theoretical projections suggest a population of 134,267 by 1989 and 289,995 by 2019. However, these figures starkly contrast with observed realities. The region's growth trajectory was abruptly disrupted in the early 1990s by the forced expulsion of a substantial portion of its population, predominantly ethnic Nepalis, amid state-led efforts to enforce cultural assimilation. This exodus, coupled with sporadic out-migration, precipitated a dramatic demographic contraction.

The dissonance between projections and reality is further illustrated by the RGOB's 1985 forecast, which anticipated Gelephu's population close to 150,000 by 2000. Yet, post-expulsion censuses revealed a starkly different picture: by the turn of the millennium, Sarpang district housed merely 46,000 residents (2017 Census). This discrepancy underscores the limitations of linear growth

models in contexts marked by political upheaval, forced displacement, and incomplete data. Moreover, it highlights the enduring challenges of studying Bhutan's demographic evolution, where gaps in archival records intersect with the legacies of state policies that prioritised national identity over demographic transparency.

Population Composition

The linguistic and ethnic diversity of Gelephu reflects its historical role as a crossroads of trade and migration, though precise data remains limited due to Bhutan's historical reluctance to publish granular sociocultural statistics.

The population of Gelephu is ethnically diverse, comprising various groups, including the Ngalops, Sharchops, and Nepalis. This diversity is a product of historical migration patterns and government resettlement policies that encouraged Nepali settlement in southern Bhutan.

Ethnic Diversity

Nepalis: Historically, Gelephu and southern Bhutan has had a significant Nepali population. Before the 1990s expulsion, Nepali communities likely constituted over 80 per cent of southern Bhutan's population, including Gelephu. Following state-led expulsions and resettlement of northern Bhutanese on the vacated lands, the Nepali presence in Gelephu sharply declined, local resident¹⁸ estimate, to be less than 20 per cent.

Ngalops: The Ngalop, associated with Bhutan's western regions and Tibetan cultural roots, have migrated southward since the 1980s as part of government-led resettlement programs. They now form a

¹⁸ Source identity is not disclosed for security reasons

growing share of Gelephu's population, estimated at over 50 per cent.

Sharchops: Indigenous to eastern Bhutan, Sharchop communities have migrated to Gelephu for employment and land grants. Their migration was in search for better opportunities or land replacement offer made by the government in late 1990s. Their population estimated at 10-15 per cent.

Other Groups: Temporary or seasonal workers from Assam, West Bengal, and other Indian states contribute to Gelephu's diversity, particularly in trade and construction. There are also small numbers of other ethnic groups such as Khengs or Lepchas.

Linguistic Diversity

Bhutan has not officially noted the number of languages spoken in the country nor the population based on linguistic diversity. This translates the absence of documented evidence about the linguistic diversity in Gelephu.

Dzongkha: Spoken by over 50 percent of Gelephu residents. This is a second language based on historical records for Gelephu population. Dzongkha is dominantly used in government offices, educational institutions, and other formal settings.

Nepali: Historically the lingua franca of southern Bhutan, Nepali remains widely spoken by Nepali communities, Indian migrants and by migrants from northern districts too.

Tsangla: Spoken by a small number of migrants from eastern Bhutan. Without written scripts, the language is likely to face extinction at the

domination of Dzongkha and Nepali speaking population in Gelephu.

Minority Languages: Other languages used in the region include Kheng, Assamese, Hindi and increasingly English.

Prepare The Future

The GMC is a big jump for a conservative Bhutanese society and adoption of an international metropolis culture will prove challenging. Bhutan's future policies must prioritise inclusivity by learning from historical exclusions, redefining migrants as assets, embracing its multicultural heritage, and addressing conservative resistance to change. By fostering linguistic and ethnic diversity, Bhutan can ensure sustainable development while safeguarding its cultural identity.

Reforming Exclusionary Policies

Bhutan's demographic history is marred by the exclusion of ethnic minorities. These policies, rooted in fears of cultural homogenisation, contradicted Bhutan's Buddhist ethos of compassion. Contemporary policies, though less overt, still reflect residual biases, such as stringent citizenship requirements that disproportionately affect marginalised groups. To build an equitable future, GMC could prepare laws to ensure equal rights, drawing lessons from nations like Canada or Australia, which transitioned from exclusionary practices to multiculturalism. Legal reforms could include transparent naturalisation processes and reparative measures for displaced communities, aligning with the GNH principles.

Shifting The Narrative on Migrants

The perception of migrants as economic burdens persists globally, often fuelled by xenophobia. However, empirical studies demonstrate that migrants contribute to workforce diversification, entrepreneurship, and cultural exchange (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). For Bhutan, which faces a declining youth population and labour shortages, skilled migrants could bolster sectors like healthcare and education. The GMC, envisioned as a hub for sustainable industries, will require foreign expertise and labour. Bhutan can emulate Singapore's model, where migrants constitute 40 per cent of the workforce, driving innovation without eroding national identity. Public campaigns highlighting migrant success stories, alongside inclusive labour policies, can reshape societal attitudes in Gelephu.

Accept Bhutan's Migrant Heritage

Bhutan's identity as a land of migrants is often overlooked. Historically, Tibetan Buddhists, Nepali agriculturists, and indigenous tribes like the Monpa migrated to Bhutan, enriching its cultural tapestry. The Ngalop majority itself descends from Tibetan settlers. Recognising this legacy dismantles the myth of homogeneity and legitimises diversity as intrinsic to Bhutanese history. Education emphasising migration narratives can foster pride in pluralism, countering ethnonationalist rhetoric. For instance, Australia's inclusion of migration history in schools has strengthened social cohesion; Bhutan can adopt similar strategies to reconcile past and present.

Navigating Conservative Resistance

The GMC project, integral to Bhutan's economic modernisation, will likely face resistance from conservatives fearing cultural erosion – even though it may not publicly manifest. Bhutanese conservatives

argue that foreign influence could dilute traditions (Ueda, 2003), akin to debates over UNESCO World Heritage sites commodifying culture (Tuyen, 2023). However, cultural preservation need not preclude adaptation. [Cool Japan](#) initiative balances tradition with global engagement, enhancing soft power without sacrificing identity (Walker, 2023). Bhutan can similarly position the GMC as a platform for sharing Buddhist and Hindu values globally, ensuring that development projects incorporate local artisans and monastic input. Engaging conservative leaders through dialogues and showcasing the GMC's alignment with the GNH principles will be crucial to mitigating resistance.

Bridging Tradition And Modernity

Bhutanese diaspora members, exposed to Western lifestyles and individuality, may face challenges reintegrating into the Bhutanese society prioritising collective values. However, returnees bring technical skills and global perspectives vital for sectors like technology and tourism. India's ['Reverse Brain Drain'](#) initiative, offering incentives for expatriates, have spurred innovation. Cultural friction can be mitigated through 're-acculturation' workshops that foster mutual understanding between returnees and local communities. By valuing their hybrid identities, Bhutan can transform potential discord into synergy.

Conclusion

Gelephu faces dynamic demographic shifts driven by its proposed metropolis and historical state policies. Historically, the region attracted Nepali-speaking communities due to fertile land, with migration further encouraged by Bhutan's Dorji elites under British influence that changed course post 1960s modernisation efforts and demise of the Dorjis. In shaping the Gelephu's future, there must be acknowledgement of the past.

The ethnic composition of Gelephu shifted post-1990s and will shift again under proposed GMC. The lack of data and official documentation on linguistic and ethnic diversity remains problematic. Census gaps (1990–2005) and methodological flaws, noted even by Bhutan’s National Statistics Bureau, continue to hinder accurate analysis.

The GMC project faces challenges balancing future ambitions with cultural preservation. Legal reforms for equitable citizenship and transparent data practices are critical to addressing historical exclusions and ensuring sustainable development. Without reconciling its multicultural past with future ambitions, Bhutan risks perpetuating demographic inequities amidst GMC’s transformative potential.

References

- ADB (2019). *Demographic dividend: Transition in Bhutan*. Asian Development Bank. Retrieved from <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/547471/demographic-dividend-transition-bhutan.pdf>
- BBS (2019). *PM says Bhutan’s population control measures based on flawed data*. Bhutan Broadcasting Service. Retrieved <https://www.bbs.bt/109525/>
- Docquier, F., & Rapoport, H. (2012). The globalisation of human capital: Brain drain, brain gain, brain waste. In *OECD Migration Outlook 2012: Economic and Social Determinants of Migration Flows* (pp. 41-60). OECD Publishing.
- Government of Bhutan.** (2017). *Population and housing census of Bhutan, 2017*. National Statistics Bureau. <https://www.nsb.gov.bt/publications/census-report/>
- Mishra, H. (1988). *Bhutan: Problem and Policies*. p107. New Delhi, Heritage Publishers

- NSB. (2020).** *Bhutan living standards survey 2017*. **National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan**
- Planning Commission (1985). *Statistical Handbook of Bhutan 1985*. Royal Government of Bhutan.
- Rose. L. (1977). *Politics of Bhutan*. Cornell University Press.
- Sinha, A. (2002).** *Himalayan Kingdom Bhutan: Tradition, Transition and Transformation*. Indus Publishing Company.
- Sinha, A. (1991). *Bhutan: Ethnic Identity and National Dilemma*. Reliance Publishing House
- Tuyen, Q. (2023). Staging Culture, Selling Authenticity: The Commodification of the Cham Community's Traditions. In *Heritage Conservation and Tourism Development at Cham Sacred Sites in Vietnam*. Global Vietnam: Across Time, Space and Community. Springer, Singapore.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-3350-1_8
- Ueda, A. (2003). *Culture and Modernisation: From the Perspectives of Young People in Bhutan*. Centre for Bhutan Studies.
- Ura, K., Alkire, S., & Zangmo, T. (2012). *A short guide to Gross National Happiness index*. Centre for Bhutan Studies.
<https://bhutanstudies.org.bt/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/A-Short-Guide-to-Gross-National-Happiness-Index.pdf>
- Walker, J. (2023, October 24). Soft Power and Japan's role in a complex world. *The Japan Times*.
<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2023/10/24/japan/japan-soft-power/>