Global Chinese Literature
Chinese Overseas

History, Literature, and Society

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LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Andrea Bachner, Ph.D. (Harvard University), is Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature and Chinese Studies at Penn State University. She is the author of essays on Chinese, Latin-American, and European contemporary literature and culture and is currently completing a manuscript on contemporary reflections on the Chinese writing system, Mediality, Alterity, and the Sinograph.

Rey Chow is Anne Firor Scott Professor of Literature in Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Duke University and the author of numerous books on language, literature, film, and cultural theory. The Rey Chow Reader, ed. Paul Bowman, is available from Columbia University Press (2010).

Eric Hayot is Professor of Comparative Literature and Director of the Asian Studies Program at the Pennsylvania State University. He is the author of Chinese Dreams: Pound, Brecht, Tel Quel (Michigan, 2004) and The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain (Oxford, 2009), as well as a co-editor of Sinographies: Writing China (Minnesota, 2008).

Julia Lovell is lecturer in modern Chinese history at the University of London. She is author of The Politics of Cultural Capital: China’s Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature (Hawai’i University Press, 2006) and translator of numerous works of modern Chinese literature, including the complete fiction of Lu Xun (Penguin Classics, 2009).

Kim Chew Ng, Malaysia Chinese fiction writer and literary critic, is Professor of Chinese Literature at National Chi Nan University in Taiwan. Author of numerous award-winning fiction, his scholarly publications include literary anthologies and monographs such as MaHua wenxue yu Zhongguo xing (Taibei: Yuanliu, 1998) and Wen yu hun yu ti: lun xiandai Zhongguo xing (Taibei: Maitian, 2006).

Carlos Rojas is Assistant Professor of Chinese Cultural Studies and Women’s Studies at Duke University. He is author of The Naked Gaze:

Kim Tong Tee, Ph.D. (National Taiwan University), is Associate Professor at National Sun Yat-sen University, Kaohsiung, Taiwan. He is author of *Nanyang lunshu: Mahua wenxue yu wenhua shuxing* (Taipei: Maitian, 2003) and *Guanyu Mahua wenxue* (Gaoxiong: CLA, NSYSU, 2009) and co-editor of *Chongxie T'aiwan wenxue shi* (Taipei: Maitian, 2006) and *Huida o Malaiyia: HuaMa xiaoshuo qishi nian* (Selangor: Dajiang, 2008).

Jing Tsu, Ph.D. (Harvard University), is Associate Professor of Chinese Literature at Yale University. She is author of *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature: The Making of Modern Chinese Identity, 1895–1937* (Stanford University Press, 2005) and *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

David Der-wei Wang is Edward C. Henderson Professor of Chinese Literature at Harvard University. He is author, editor, and co-editor of numerous publications in English and Chinese, including *The Monster That is History: Violence, History, and Fictional Writing in 20th Century China* (University of California Press, 2004); *Writing Taiwan: A New Literary History* (Duke University Press, 2007).

Sau-ling C. Wong is Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. She has published extensively on Asian American literature, including *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (1993) and (coedited) *AsianAmerica.net: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cyberspace* (2003).
INTRODUCTION:
GLOBAL CHINESE LITERATURE

Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang

The idea of a “global Chinese literature” draws together three recognizably fraught terms. Each of them brings into view additional related issues that the current volume addresses. But why global? Why now? Indeed, the timing is anticipatory, as the geography of modern Chinese literature has seldom been jointly reexamined from outside its national boundaries. Yet, so-called “overseas Chinese,” to borrow another imperfect designation that separates mainland China from the rest of the Sinophone world according to bodies of water, have been writing since well before the nationalistic period. The historical fact of diaspora makes the present invocation of the global also somewhat belated. We choose the title “global Chinese literature” for this volume in full awareness of its various settings, temporalities, omissions, and contradictions. Our aim is to make explicit the conceptual, disciplinary, historical, linguistic, and geographical tensions that occasion the emergence of Sinophone literature (華語系文學).

In our view, the point of departure is best staged at the gathering of consensus as well as dissensus among multiple disciplinary perspectives, each born from a different academic context and its created audience. Those who expect to rely on a readily made reference to Anglophone, Francophone, or Lusophone studies will not find it here. Each of those domains too carries its own historical imperative, and they ought not be drawn together in the same way that postcolonialism had previously rallied different experiences of oppression to its platform. Similarly, for those accustomed to a nation-based historiography of modern Chinese literature, our challenge here is to present the disarticulation of its lineage and methodology. Instead of providing an overview that inserts each of the ten essays into a single grid of purpose, we thus begin with an outline of the larger trajectories that have framed their differences.

To discuss Chinese literature in a global context, one first has to recognize the pitfalls. Historian Wang Gungwu cautions against the conceptual trap of presupposing a single Chinese diaspora, an idea that easily slides into the same register as other historically and politically
laden terms: *huaqiao* 華僑, *huayi* 華裔, *haiwai huaren* 海外華人. Designations of “sojourners,” “Chinese descendents,” and “overseas Chinese,” respectively, were invented and privileged at different historical junctures to subsume the diverse phenomenon of diaspora under the dominant imaginary of the Chinese nation. For a long time the idea of being Chinese furnished Chinese abroad with a clan-based solidarity that reinforced the significance of their home against host localities. They carefully deployed a strategy of identity, not without palpable sentiments of nostalgia and homelessness, to weather local racial hostilities in North America, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere.

From the perspective of the ancestral land, there was a pragmatic purpose in continuing to draw Chinese identities toward the center. At several points in the twentieth century, overseas resources were solicited to fund revolutions and civil war at home, as during the Revolution of 1911 and again during the War of Resistance against the Japanese, including the ensuing Communist-Nationalist split. That diasporic Chinese communities were viewed as reservoirs of extranational capital reflected two realities. On one hand, their increasing material autonomy outside of China demonstrated a separation from the continental motherland. On the other hand, still invested in the idea of China as the proper ancestral origin of their cultural identity, they lent their patriotic support from afar. The tension between these two allegiances grew in the latter half of the twentieth century as Chinese abroad came to recognize the need to establish roots in their host countries, each undergoing its own nationalization and vertical integration in the wake of widespread postwar decolonization and independence movements across East and Southeast Asia. For example, debates over the distinctiveness of Malaysian Chinese literature in 1947–48 marked an important turning point that led to its current, distinct profile both inside and outside of Malaysia.

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3 This debate was decisive in declaring an independent identity of Malaysian Chinese literature, even though momentum had been gathering in previous discussions from 1927 to 1930 (“Southern Ocean color”) and 1934 (“Local writers”).
Admittedly, associations with nationalism render diaspora a problematic concept. In addition to fixing the point of comparison on China, real or imagined, the invocation of nationalism tends to lose sight of the continual transformations of diaspora itself, now less a departure from an origin than simply different itinerant movements between places. Secondary and tertiary diasporas make it less meaningful to assume a fixed geographical place for overseas Chinese. Contemporary writers such as Hong Ying and Yang Lian move easily between London and mainland China, while Malaysian Chinese writers have negotiated a second homestay in Taiwan since the 1970s. Ge Liang, residing in Hong Kong, traverses multiple nations in his literary imaginary. Gao Xingjian, the most recognized writer according to the 2000 Nobel Prize committee, was naturalized as a French citizen in 1998. To be sure, nationality does not determine the geographical parameters of Sinophone writing. Geographical location, moreover, is no more fixed than the place of origin. To use what Edward Soja once said about the study of urban geography, the space of diaspora may be more instructively thought of as a malleable space created by new social relations rather than as a geometric, inert “container” that does not come under the influence of such relations.4 Thus looking differently at Sinophone writing as an interaction between the production of literatures and moving agents, one might subject the narrative of customary disciplinary divides and national literary histories to similar shifts. More important than the coinage of new terms is the creation of new dialogues among the fields of area studies, Asian American studies, and ethnic studies. Although each has largely focused on its own stakes in examining the notion of Chinese diaspora, they have long been implicated in one another’s histories. The study of modern Chinese literature, to begin with the most nationally dominant example, has habitually consecrated this disciplinary distinction.

For the most of the twentieth century, the study of modern Chinese literature as a national tradition carried on primarily two conversations: with modernity and with its own post-1949 factious internal landscape. The former began to take shape under the general rubric of Westernization in the nineteenth century. After the Opium War,
the political and social elite attempted a series of military and institutional reforms in one of the most tumultuous periods in Chinese history. Plagued by internal ethnic and peasant uprisings, famine, and poverty, as well as external invasion and the imposition of unequal treaties by foreign powers such as the French and the British, China was a significantly diminished empire. Attempts at technological and military Self-Strengthening (beginning in 1861) and, later, a Hundred Days Reform (1898) had limited success. The watershed event of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, which ended in China’s total defeat, further alerted intellectuals and reformers to the country’s dwindling status in the more immediate region of East Asia. This gave them the impetus to reinvent “China” as a national entity.

In response, revolution was the creed of the day. Its momentum achieved an extraordinary new vision for history, dismissing any less-than-radical stance as conservative cultural essentialism. The same felt purpose of national survival engendered the self-conscious formation of modern Chinese literature. The imprint left by the traumatic necessity of such a transformative evaluation was not to be easily erased. The ensuing decades witnessed arduous and impassioned endeavors to define literature in light of the political reality on the one hand, and aesthetic experimentation on the other. Realism was a dominant but not exclusive literary ideology, and it was this mode that came to preoccupy the creative focus of Sinophone writings such as Malaysian Chinese literature. The shared urgency of anti-Japanese colonization and occupation during the 1930s and 1940s produced certain solidarities that would once again split and follow different paths after the war.

Meanwhile, the call of the May Fourth movement was heard far and wide, stirring Chinese communities in Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere to share in its collective purpose. This early national solidarity across wide distances, however, gradually receded into the background, as the economic and colonial reality of the various host environments imposed itself as the more permanent setting. Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore have had various colonial histories (Dutch, British, Japanese), while Taiwan has been similarly subjected to the Dutch, Japanese, French, and mainland Nationalists. Chinese communities outside of the mainland, often minority groups by definition, were compelled to mobilize themselves socially in the places where they were settled. The goals of the May Fourth cultural renewal, furthermore, did not always prove as useful elsewhere. Its central tenet of establishing the vernacular—as opposed to the long-venerated classical
or literary Chinese—as the language of modern literature, for instance, met with varying degrees of success. Overseas Chinese generally more strongly identified with their home regional idiolects, which marked a cultural and ethnic distinction. It was unclear what was meant by “vernacular” or “everyday speech” when Fukienese, Hakka, and Teochiu seemed more reasonable candidates than the Beijing-based written vernacular. For the Chinese writers in the “Southern Ocean”—current-day Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore—the language of the Beijing capital was a language of prestige. Their access to learning and writing in the Chinese language was not to be taken for granted. To complicate matters, the varying national language policies in the countries where they resided did not always guarantee continual learning of minor languages such as Mandarin. “National language,” moreover, has a completely different connotation in the Japanese colonial context of Taiwan, where Japanese, not Chinese, was the official language. Writers’ commitment to writing in the Chinese language, therefore, was a pregnant gesture of great artistic and cultural significance, drawing from a cultural capital that fortified their sense of distinction in a foreign setting. This was already evident during the 1930s debates on developing a literary language based on the “language of the masses,” a discussion that was well under way on the mainland, led by intellectuals like Qu Qiubai. The writers in the Southern Ocean had an additional challenge: how to take into account local ethnic inflections in a “mass language” that was originally intended to address class rather than ethnic differences in the predominantly Han society of mainland China.5

Different versions of the same question about the social and cultural disjuncture between diasporic settlements and mainland China will be posed time and time again. Whether conceived in terms of citizenship, literary aesthetics, cultural identity, or language and dialects, evolving relations to China as a historical heritage as well as a departure point for new narratives of migration are still under discussion among historians, anthropologists, and literary critics. As China continues

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to reestablish itself as a world power in the twenty-first century, the centripetal pull of its economic presence creates a renewed cultural gravitation. That global Chinese literature can be under discussion at all bespeaks a renewed concern with the perpetuation of nation-based narrative as the only worthy narrative. Indeed, it is against that pull that many of the contributors in this volume stake their claims. “Sino-phone,” depending on the definition, excludes or includes mainland China as a focus of analysis. In the case of exclusion, the priority of analysis lies with developing a critical network of minority discourses. Inclusion entails a reworking of the lineage of modern Chinese literature as a solely mainland phenomenon. Both approaches seek to dismantle the hegemonic focus of a “national” Chinese literature and perhaps of a “national literature” at all.

At the same time, even though the tale of nation founding has occupied a central place in the study of modern Chinese literature, its apparent homogeneity and hegemony is rather undeserved. Critics and enthusiasts alike often take this point for granted. The founding of modern Chinese literature was not exclusively legislated by nationalism. If anything, it absorbed the momentum of literary activities from the preceding decades of the late Qing period. Its prized language, the vernacular, drew from sources even further back. While modern Chinese literature was undergoing its early formation under the aegis of nationalism, the idea of the nation was already being extended and traversed. Leading intellectuals and reformers found their inspirations for modern China outside of China, studying mostly in places like Japan, France, Britain, Germany, and America. Each location provoked a sense of foreignness and discrimination, compounded by a lack of language access. Being a foreigner rather than a national citizen heightened the nationalistic sentiment. Displacement worked as a negative, against which nationalism acquired its positive value. Participating in forging a literary nexus that is now recognized as “student immigrant literature” (liuxuesheng wenxue 留學生文學) writers from Lu Xun to Guo Moruo, Lin Yutang to Nieh Hualing, left their important imprints on the literary histories of Japan and Asian America.

America was the meeting place between East Asia and Asian America. The former's displacement constituted the latter's founding condition. Interestingly, the field of area studies and the writing of Asian American literature emerged for related reasons. The former was a product of the Cold War, developed as a pocket of specialized
geographical knowledge of particular areas of strategic concern. The latter was made possible by the civil rights movement, along with the attempted social redress of racial inequalities in the United States. If John Okada’s *No-No Boy* can be taken as a benchmark for Asian American literature (1957) and C. T. Hsia’s *History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (1961) as the inaugural study of modern Chinese literature in the English language, their proximity is timely. The former was about the Japanese internment during World War II, and the latter introduced for the first time writers outside mainland China’s literary canon. Both took a step outside the mainstream interpretation of national belonging and displacement. They shared in a recognized problem of cultural and racial differences within a migratory matrix, each accorded a place inside and outside the borders of China and America. Maxine Hong Kingston’s seminal exploration of the specificity of gender and Chinese patriarchy in *The Woman Warrior* appeared in 1976, just five years before the publication of another hallmark in the history of feminist immigrant writing, Nieh Hualing’s *Mulberry and Peach*.

Understandably, for Asian American literature to engage in a dialogue with area studies or modern Chinese literature, caution is needed. Although they have overlapping critical interests, especially as shaped by the past three decades of literary criticism in the United States, their intersection does not imply shared critical goals. Each has developed its own set of concerns, putting different emphases on issues of ethnicity, immigration, race, nationalism, gender, and postcolonialism, so a correspondence in their present concerns does not necessarily lead to a common experience in the world. The very circumstances that make possible such analogies are a peculiar manifestation of the current historical moment. The parallel drawn between Asian American literature and modern Chinese literature is, therefore, also vulnerable to a conflation of critical differences: either a return to Sinocentrism or a leveling of specificities under the general theorization of diaspora, ethnicity, the Sinophone, or even “global Chinese literature.” Out of a similar concern, Stuart Hall underscores the contingency of discursive

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alliances with regard to diasporic studies. The open-ended struggle in diasporic politics is in fact indeterminate and fragile: “How can we organize these huge, randomly varied, and diverse things we call human subjects into positions where they can recognize one another for long enough to act together, and thus to take up a position that one of these days they might live out and act through as an identity?” (emphasis added).  

Indeed, the contingency of a discourse on global Chinese literature is how to come together in a committed but not binding alliance, to mobilize the possibilities of a newly configured community. Such a vision, of course, also raises new points of contention, as can be seen in the dangerous conceit that Stuart Hall expresses only two sentences later: “It isn’t that the subjects are there and we just can’t get to them. It is that they don’t know that they are subjects of a possible discourse.” That pluralization might slip away, its constituents take up different and even oppositional roles to the favored political alliance, tempts even those with the most radical diasporic politics to reimpose their own definition of enlightened and unenlightened subject positions. This, incidentally, was the main critique against the May Fourth intellectuals who, in their desire to lead the masses out of despotism and feudalism, committed to a nationalistic monolith.

Rey Chow speaks to the core of the problem when she elsewhere criticizes the “management of ethnicity” as a deeply entrenched problem within China studies as well as within the implicit system of ethnic patronage inherent in the most liberal Western critical theory. Her critique rejoins the dialogue between Tu Wei-ming and Ien Ang, where Ang staged a compelling defiance against a benignly defined center proposed by Tu. “Cultural China,” famously ascribed to Tu, posits three circles of Chineseness, expanding from the innermost core of mainland Chinese and Chinese-speaking countries to the outer reaches of cultural assimilation and accommodation, including foreign

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9 Ibid.
specialists and scholars. Ang cites for support the example of the Peranakans, or Straits Chinese, whose long lineage in Southeast Asia as a mixed ethnic group of Chinese and local Malay has left little living traces of its customs or language, Baba Malay. The point is that, at the “outer edge of diaspora”—shared with Asian Australia—Peranakans demonstrate an unassimilable Chineseness that disrupts any attempt to generalize a concentric universe of voluntary Chineseness.

Ang’s argument, poignant and autobiographical, exemplifies Hall’s call for strategic subjective positioning. Yet, to return to Tu Weiming’s original remarks, the phrase “cultural China,” by Tu’s own admission, was originally suggested by a group of Malaysian Chinese writers in the audience. Interestingly, this credit was never given in the criticism of Tu’s position. In other words, Southeast Asia was the hidden third reference that did not get to participate in the dialogue between China and the little-differentiated diasporic Chinese. How is it possible that this third space, the exemplar of, paradoxically, both the outer edge of diaspora and the inner core of Sinocentrism, could not speak for itself? There is, in fact, an entire range of articulated positions, as this volume demonstrates, that do not fall easily under polarizing categories or familiar rubrics of alliance.

One might envision, as in Shu-mei Shih’s general call for minority discourses and transnational alliance, a different conversation. Ang’s critique, which has been widely cited as a critique of cultural essentialism, is perhaps better framed against fiction writer cum critic Kim Chew Ng’s exploration of the question of being Chinese in Southeast Asia from a different marginality. Ang’s remarks on the 1998 anti-Chinese riots in Jakarta need not carry the weight of the autobiographical subject alone, but find meaningful interlocutors in the writings of many—like Ng’s short story, “Supplement”—that testified to the event through a different lens of nativity and discontinuity. Such new possible relations for global Sinophone literature would facilitate a network of discourse beyond centrism and marginality. Each can serve

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as a new reference point, not only connecting national and minor histories but also further differentiating other histories within the minor. It is within this social and literary spatiality of the global Sinophone that we begin this discussion. The volume is organized according to the following progression: 1) critical issues and historical frameworks; 2) analyses and case questions that corroborate or challenge these views; and 3) an outside response. The first part begins with Kim Chew Ng’s consideration of the uneven development of Sinophone literature and the contentions between literary aesthetics and nativist realism. Speaking as a Malaysian Chinese writer and literary scholar currently residing in Taiwan, Ng points out the conceptual limitations in existing discussions of minor literature, which tend to overinvest it too quickly with a theorized optimism. Using Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of Kafka as an example, Ng notes the contrasting reality of minor writers in the Chinese diaspora who lack access to a linguistic capital that is separately determined in the contexts within which they negotiate—Malaysia and Taiwan. Advocating for an “exterior vision,” Ng proposes to ground Sinophone literature simultaneously in three words: native land, colonial heritage, and a universal diasporic structure yet to come. In so doing, he proposes to dislodge Sinophone writing from the conflicting imperatives of homeland and exile.

In a similar way, Shu-mei Shih’s piece is a programmatic call for a transnational approach to the study of Sinophone literature. Whereas Ng urges the emergence of an individual aesthetics, Shih’s vision of Sinophone production seeks and requires the alliance of other minority formations. Drawing from the framework of ethnic studies and other postcolonial and diasporic studies, Shih argues against the reification of Sinophone as an atemporal category. Sinophone is possible, she underscores, only within a place-based politics of recognition where the most powerful articulations against China-centrism are voiced.

Writing from within the context of Chinese American studies, Sau-ling Wong cautions, in contrast, against tempting alliances under the rubric of the global. Through an analysis of Wang Ruiyun’s short story, “The Visitor from Paris,” Wong analyzes how the very possibility of the Chinese migrant is undergoing new transformations with China’s rise to global dominance. Wong identifies three key terms in theorizing the Chinese diaspora: genocentrism (rhetoric of origin), translocalism (portable nativism), and racinationism (creation of new roots). She demonstrates how the three are often intertwined in practice.
and use this triangulation to question the implications of “being drawn into an orbit of a China-based critical point of view.”

Taking yet another perspective, Taiwan-based Malaysian Chinese critic Kim Tong Tee parses the genealogy of the discussion of overseas or Sinophone literature. Tracing it to debates in 1986, when the Sinophone was first viewed as a form of Commonwealth literature at conferences in Gunzburg and Singapore, Tee prefers, following Itamar Even-Zohar, the notion of overlapping polysystems. On this view, minor traditions are part, but not necessarily exclusively so, of an “international mega-polysystem.” Tee further distinguishes Sinophone from Anglophone and Francophone studies to the extent that the Chinese language is the mother tongue rather than an ex-colonizer’s language.

Jing Tsu, in an examination of the historical formation of the modern Chinese language (guoyu 国语) urges taking the phonic in Sinophone literature seriously. Excavating a largely overlooked movement of script reforms in the late nineteenth century, Tsu returns the notion of national language to a larger attempt to conceptualize new relations between sound and script, standard language and dialects. By going inside the medium in which the Sinophone is written, Tsu proposes a different point of departure that revises the notion of national-language literature and engages with the possibility of a global Chinese literature at its linguistic roots.

Each of the first five essays outlines a theoretical and historical framework for the study of Sinophone literature. In contrast, the next five essays propose new reference points that do not necessarily abide by these five perspectives and further extend the horizon of global Chinese writing to alternative modes of language, speech, orality, and aurality. Carlos Rojas, turning to the inner constituents of Chinese-language literature, looks at internal diaspora through the work of Tibetan writer Alai. Analyzing his use of Tibetan phrases in juxtaposition to standard Mandarin, Rojas points out the “communicative failure” that serves as a larger analogy for the linguistic politics of diaspora.

Rey Chow, expressing the Sinophone through a different orality and locality, considers the works of Hong Kong writer Leung Pin Kwan (Ye Si) and critic John Ma Kwok Ming. Teasing out the experience and metaphor of food and ingestion on different scales of hunger, connoisseurship, and global corporatism, Chow traces a circuit of culinary
production that “suggests an ongoing ideological conflation between cognition and food consumption.” Writing about food, these writers exercise a power of knowledge through the gradual assimilation and omission of minor marginalia, metabolized as new additions to the dominant cultural capital.

Further displacing orality onto aurality and directing attention to yet another kind of phonics, David Der-wei Wang uncovers a different register of Sinophone allegiance and history writing in the lyricism of Taiwan-born composer Jiang Wenye. A diasporic figure who lived and practiced his art through multiple phases of colonialism and nationalism, Jiang was trained in Taisho Japan under its translated European influence. His subsequent friendship with Russian composer Alexander Tcherepnin led him to seek the ideal vernacular sound through a return to Confucian musicology, resulting in the 1939 appearance of his orchestral piece The Music of the Confucian Temple. Jiang’s prodigal return is articulated in the distancing mode of nostalgia, mirroring a later construction of Taiwan through a similar musical lyricism.

Focusing on Malaysian Chinese writer Zhang Guixing’s reworking of the Chinese script, or sinograph, Andrea Bachner analyzes the mediality of Chinese writing as a space for reinvention and difference. Arguing that writing itself bears out a resistance to cultural essentialism, she demonstrates how Zhang subjects the Chinese language to the specific interethnic and interlingual inflections of Southeast Asia. In contrast, Bachner notes how different Western theorists—from a Eurocentric point of view—have staged bodily inscriptions as the “other” of writing.

If Sinophone literature is being written, interpreted, and contested largely in the Sinophone world, it nonetheless requires a global audience as it mediates and continues to reshape its parameters. In the final piece, Julia Lovell takes a close look at the international mechanisms for literary recognition and China’s nationalistic desire to achieve it. Examining the case of Gao Xingjian, the 2000 Nobel Laureate in Literature, Lovell analyzes the intersecting anxieties between national literature, its relation to national reality, and its writing in anticipation of a projected world readership.

While the first set of five essays engages with the primary debate of what it means to speak of modern Chinese literature globally, the second set suggests important ways of bridging this new orientation and the existing approaches and topics that have developed from the field itself. From the kind of critical and poststructuralist theory that
has been familiar in literary criticism in the past thirty years to the
new areas of inquiry in the more specialized domain of modern Chi-
nese literary studies, all the essays in this volume demonstrate how an
emphasis on the Sinophone can neither be subsumed under nor fully
extricate itself from the history of modern Chinese writing. This col-
lection also shows the extraordinary diversity of the subject, such that
no single approach is possible or desirable. In all its various guises as
script, phonics, mediality, aurality, or orality, global Chinese writing
is none other than the scalar reorientation of literary studies as a new
global, regional, and local practice.
 AGAINST DIASPORA: 
THE SINOPHONE AS PLACES OF 
CULTURAL PRODUCTION1

Shu-mei Shih

This chapter offers a broad, programmatic view of the parameters of Sinophone studies (huayu yuxi yanjiu 華語語系研究), situated at the intersection of postcolonial studies, ethnic studies, transnational studies, and area studies (especially Chinese studies), as the study of Sinitic-language cultures and communities on the margins of China and Chineseness. Here, “the margins of China and Chineseness” is understood not only specifically but also generally, to include Sinophone communities situated outside the geopolitical China proper and found in many parts of the world as a consequence of historical processes of (im)migration and settlement spanning several centuries, as well as those non-Han communities within China where the imposition of the dominant Han culture has elicited variegated responses ranging from assimilation to anticolonial resistance in the dominant language, Hanyu 漢語. Sinophone studies as a whole is therefore inherently comparative and transnational, but it is everywhere attentive to the specificity of time-and-place, i.e., chronotopic, configurations of its different objects of study. In this spirit, this chapter does not focus explicitly on literature, but lays out the broad contours of Sinophone studies through an analysis and critique of what I consider to be the misconceived category of “the Chinese diaspora.”

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1 This chapter is based on excerpts from Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007) but has been extensively revised for the present volume. I would like to thank Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang for their invitation to present this chapter at the “Globalizing Modern Chinese Literature: Sinophone and Diasporic Writings” conference at Harvard University in December 2007, where many provocative and exciting ideas on the contours and definitions of Sinophone studies were exchanged.
I. “The Chinese Diaspora”

The scattering of peoples from China across the globe over a millennium has long been an object of study as a subfield in Chinese studies, Southeast Asian studies, and Asian American studies, and also has a small presence in European studies, African studies, and Latin American studies in the United States. This subfield, whose parameters are set by wherever the peoples from China have gone, has been called the study of the Chinese diaspora. The Chinese diaspora, understood as the dispersion of “ethnic Chinese” people around the globe, functions as a universalizing category founded on a unified ethnicity, culture, language, and place of origin or homeland. A Uyghur from Xinjiang province, a Tibetan from Tibet and surrounding regions, or a Mongolian from Inner Mongolia who has immigrated out of China is not normally considered part of the Chinese diaspora, for instance, while the Manchus may or may not be included. The criterion of inclusion appears to be the degree of sinicization of these ethnicities, because what often gets completely elided is the fact that the Chinese diaspora refers mainly to the diaspora of the Han people. “Chinese,” in other words, is a national marker passing as an ethnic, cultural, and linguistic marker, a largely Han-centric designation, when, in fact, there are altogether fifty-six official ethnicities in China and far more diverse languages and topolects spoken across the nation. “The Chinese language,” as it is generally assumed and understood, is nothing but the standardized language imposed by the state, that is, the language of the Han, the Hanyu, also known as Putonghua (literally, the common language); “the Chinese,” as is generally assumed, are largely limited to the Han people; and “Chinese culture” refers to the culture of the Han. In short, the term “Chinese” functions as a category of ethnicity, language, and culture only to the extent that it designates the Han, excluding all the other ethnicities, languages, and cultures. The term “ethnic Chinese” is therefore a serious misnomer, since the “Chinese” nationality should designate not one but fifty-six ethnicities, if not more. In short, there is no such group called “ethnic Chinese,” only groups that can be specifically designated as Han Chinese, Tibetan Chinese, Uyghur Chinese, or Hmong (Miao) Chinese. The reduction of Chineseness to Han ethnicity in places outside China is the inverse of the hegemonic claims on Chineseness by the Han majority within China. Historically, various ethnic peoples have contributed significantly to what “China” has become today, such as the important legacies of the
Manchu dynasty of the Qing (1644–1912), whose expanded territory was inherited by the Republic of China and today’s People’s Republic of China. Hence, this ethnicized reductionism of the Chinese as the Han is not unlike the racist misrecognition of authentic Americans as white Anglo-Saxons. In each case, a different but similar form of ethnocentrism is in operation.

To elaborate further on how the uniform idea of “the Chinese” was coproduced by agents inside and outside China, we may trace it back to a racialized ideology of the Western powers in the nineteenth century that determined Chineseness according to the color line, which disregarded the many diversities and differences within China. This was when the Chinese became “yellow” and reduced to one ethnicity, when in fact there were historically people of many different phenotypes within the changing geopolitical boundaries of China. The external production of Chinese uniformity paradoxically worked well with the unifying intent of the Chinese state, especially after the end of Manchu rule in 1912, which eagerly presented a unified China and Chineseness to emphasize its cultural and political autonomy from the West. Only in this context can we understand why since the turn of the nineteenth century the notion of “Chinese national characteristics” that had been propounded by Western missionaries became popular among Westerners and the Han Chinese alike, inside and outside China, and why it continues to be a compelling idea for the Han majority in China in the present.2 On the one hand, there is no explanation for this desire to universalize Chineseness as a racialized boundary marker than that, for the Western powers, it legitimated the semicolonization of the Chinese up until 1949 and the management of the Chinese immigrants and minorities within their own nation-states from the late nineteenth century to the present; for both purposes, the discourse of “the Yellow Peril” was distinctly useful. On the other hand, for China and the Han Chinese, the racialized concept of “the Chinese” correlates at least with three different purposes: the unified nation’s resistance against imperialism and semicolonialism in the

2 The early twentieth-century version of national characteristics is evinced in the work of none other than the reputed “father” of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun, who saw his mission, as a literary doctor, to be curing the diseased Chinese people inflicted with a host of recognizable, negative characteristics. The contemporary version of the idea of national characteristics is the hot topic of the “quality” (suzhi 素質) of the Chinese people. The argument goes that the quality of the Chinese needs to be improved in order for China to advance quickly on the path of modernization.
early twentieth century; a practice of self-examination that internalized Western categories of the self; and, finally and most importantly, the suppression of ethnic minorities for their claims on and contributions to the nation in addition to the sovereignty claims of some of these groups.

What is abundantly clear from this very short and broad exposition of the problems of such umbrella terms as “the Chinese” and “Chineseness” is that these terms were activated through contacts with other peoples outside China as well as confrontations with internal Others. These terms not only operate on the most general level for their signification, but also on the most exclusive; thus they are universal and particular at the same time. More precisely, they are hegemonic particulars passing themselves off as the universal, which is complicit with the crude generalizations imposed on China, the Chinese, and Chineseness by the West, and to a certain extent, by other Asian countries such as Japan and Korea where resistances to the Chinese sphere of cultural and political influence have been most prominent since the nineteenth century. Both Japan and Korea had explicitly engaged in “de-Hanification” campaigns to define their national languages against Chinese cultural hegemony, for instance, undermining the importance of Kanji (Japanese for the Han script) and Hanja (Korean for the Han script) in their respective languages.

As much as the study of the Chinese diaspora has tried to broaden the question of the Chinese and Chineseness by emphasizing the localizing tendencies of those peoples who migrated out of China in their countries of sojourn and sometimes colonial settlement, such as in various countries in Southeast Asia (especially Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore), Chineseness continues to be the major category within this field. It is important to interrogate, however, the unifying category of the Chinese diaspora in the present moment, not only because it is complicit with China’s nationalist call to the “overseas Chinese” who are supposed to long to return to China as their homeland and whose ultimate purpose is to serve China, but also because it unwittingly correlates with and reinforces the Western and other non-Western (such as American and Malaysian) racialized constructions of Chineseness as perpetually foreign—“diasporic”—hence not qualified to be authentic locals. In postcolonial nation-states across Southeast Asia, Africa, and South America, it is not far-fetched to argue that the Sinophone peoples have been historically constitutive of the local. After all, some of them have been in Southeast Asia since
as early as the sixth century, long before nation-states ever existed, and surely long enough to outlast most identity labels tied to nationality. The question is then who is preventing them from being just a Thai, a Filipino, a Malaysian, an Indonesian, or a Singaporean who happens to have ancestors from China and who can be recognized as simply multilingual and multicultural like their fellow citizens. Similarly, who is preventing the immigrants from China in the United States (who have been coming since as early as the mid-nineteenth century) from simply being or becoming Chinese Americans with emphasis on the latter word of the compound term, “American”? We can consider the various racialized acts of exclusion, such as the Chinese Exclusion Acts in the United States, the expulsion of the Hoa (local construction of the Chinese) by the Vietnamese government, ethnic riots against the Chinese in Indonesia, the massacre of the Chinese by the Spanish in the Philippines and by the Dutch in Java, the kidnapping of Chinese children in the Philippines, and many other such examples to see how the reified category of “the Chinese” as a racial and ethnic marker readily serves such purposes of exclusion, scapegoating, and persecution. While Italian, Jewish, and Irish immigrants have gradually become “white,” merging into the mainstream white American society, the yellowness of “the Chinese” has continued to plague Chinese Americans’ struggles for recognition.

Paradoxically, scholarship on the Chinese diaspora provides ample evidence of the desire of these immigrants to localize within their lands of settlement. In Singapore, even before it became an independent city-state, intellectuals who immigrated from China saw that their culture was centered in the land of their settlement. They coined the category “Nanyang” (the Southern Ocean) for themselves, and many rejected the claim that theirs was an overseas Chinese culture. The locally born Peranakans in Indonesia and mixed-race Babas in

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3 Trade routes between China and Southeast Asia were opened as early as the second century, and by the sixth century, communities of people from China could already be found in port cities throughout the region. See C. F. Fitzgerald, *The Third China* (Melbourne: F. W. Cheshire, 1965).

4 Instructive comparisons can be made between Sinophone societies and those European countries where nationality and ethnicity are clearly not equated. For instance, in Latvia, only about 36 percent of the population is Latvian, and the rest are Russians and others.

Malaysia—the so-called Straits Chinese—developed their own particular cultures of hybridity and resisted the “resinicization” pressures from China. Many Chinese Americans have long considered themselves to be the children of the civil rights movement and refuted the “dual domination” and manipulation by both the Chinese state and the U.S. state. The Sino-Thais have localized their surnames and have more or less completely integrated into the fabric of Thai society. The Malaysian Communist Party, established in 1930, was one of the most active anticolonial units against the British and the Japanese, and its membership was mainly Chinese Malaysians of Han ethnicity. The racially or ethnically mixed populations with some traceable ancestry in China such as the Lukjins of Siam, the Metis of Cambodia and Indochina, the Injerto and Chinocholos of Peru, the Creoles in Trinidad and Mauritis, and the Mestizos of the Philippines present us with the question whether it makes any sense to continue to register these categories at all and what purposes and whose benefit such registration serves. We continue to see a certain ideology of racial and ethnic purity mandating the tracing of origins even after centuries have passed. Whether racialized pressure from the outside or internalized racialization, the basis of such an ideology is not unlike the one-drop-of-blood rule for African Americans in the United States.

The sentiments of Sinophone settlers in different parts of the world of course are various, and there was a strong sojourner mentality in the earlier phases of the dispersion since many were traders and coolies. Their intentions to stay or leave provide different measuring mechanisms for their desire to integrate or not. But the fact of the Sinophone peoples’ dispersion through all continents and over such a long historical span leads one to question the viability of the umbrella concept of the Chinese diaspora where the criterion of determination

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is Chineseness, or, more precisely, different degrees of Chineseness. In this scheme, for instance, one can be more Chinese, and another can be less Chinese, and Chineseness effectively becomes evaluatable, measurable, and quantifiable. For instance, Wang Gungwu, the renowned scholar of the Chinese diaspora, posited the idea of the “cultural spectrum of Chineseness” in this vein. As an illustration, he notes that the Chinese in Hong Kong are “historically” more Chinese, even though they are “not as yet fully Chinese as their compatriots in Shanghai,” but the Chinese in San Francisco and Singapore have more “complex non-Chinese variables.”

Another renowned scholar of the Chinese diaspora, Lynn Pan, states that the Chinese in the United States have lost their cultural grounding and are therefore “lost to Chineseness.” Pan further charges that Chinese Americans’ involvement in the civil rights movement was nothing short of “opportunism.” Here, we hear echoes of the accusation by immigrant parents, in the early twentieth-century San Francisco Chinatown, that their American children were less than satisfactorily Chinese by calling them empty bamboo hearts (juxsing), or the nationalistic Chinese from China claiming their Chineseness to be the most authentic in comparison to those living outside China. If one Chinese American can be complimented for speaking good English in the United States due to the racist equation of whiteness and authenticity, he or she can be equally complimented for speaking good Hanyu in China for someone who is not authentically Chinese enough.

Two major blind spots in the study of the Chinese diaspora are its inability to see beyond Chineseness as an organizing principle and the lack of communication with the other scholarly paradigms such as ethnic studies in the United States (where ethnic identities and nationality of origin can be disaggregated), Southeast Asian studies (where the Sinophone peoples are inevitably seen more and more as Southeast Asians), and various language-based postcolonial studies such as Francophone studies (where the French-speaking Chinese are French per the ideology of French Republicanism).

In most of the scholarship

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11 Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, 289–95.

on the Chinese diaspora, furthermore, the “Chinese American” is a missing person, and even the Hongkongers and Taiwanese can only be recognized as Hong Kong Chinese or Chinese in Taiwan. The overinvestment in the notion of the homeland in the study of the Chinese diaspora cannot account either for the global dispersion of Sinophone peoples or for the increasing heterogenization of ethnicities and cultures within any given nation. From the perspective of the longue durée of globalization, Samir Amin tells us, heterogenization and hybridization have been the norm rather than the exception since time immemorial.\textsuperscript{14}

II. The Sinophone, as Such

I coin the notion of the Sinophone to designate Sinitic-language cultures and communities outside China as well as those ethnic communities in China where Sinitic languages are either forcefully imposed or willingly adopted. The Sinophone, like the history of other nonmetropolitan peoples who speak metropolitan and/or colonial languages, has a colonial history. When China was a cultural empire, the literary, classical Sinitic script was the written lingua franca of the East Asian world where scholars could converse through so-called “pen conversations” (bitan 筆談) in writing. In the past two decades, studies of Qing imperialism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have also shown the continuous effects of this imperialism on those internal colonies within China today: Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and Xinjiang, for instance. This is similar to the official Francophonie whose existence is due largely to the expansion of the French empire and its cultural and linguistic colonization of parts of Africa and the Caribbean, a similar process as that of the Spanish empire in Hispanophone America, the British empire in India and Africa, and the Portuguese empire in Brazil and Africa, etc. Not all empires acted the same way, it goes without saying, and linguistic colonization and influence occurred through varying degrees of coercion and cooperation and to different degrees of success. What these empires uniformly left behind, however, are

\textsuperscript{13} Both Wang Gungwu’s and Lynn Pan’s books referred to earlier exemplify this.

the linguistic consequences of their cultural dominance. As mentioned earlier, in standard Japanese and Korean languages, for instance, there is a lasting, clearly recognizable presence of the classical Sinitic script in localized forms. In today’s China, the imposition of the standard Hanyu and the Sinitic script on its non-Han others—Tibetans, Uyghurs, Mongolians, etc.—is akin to a colonial relationship that most dare not criticize for fear of the government’s ire.

Contemporary Sinophone communities outside China, however, are not strictly colonial or postcolonial in relation to China except in a few cases. This is the major difference between the Sinophone and the other postcolonial language-based communities such as the Francophone, the Hispanophone, etc., except in the case of settler colonies. Singapore as a settler colony with the majority of population being Han is akin to the United States as a settler, Anglophone country. As a result of historical developments in the twentieth century, Singapore’s postcolonial language is Anglophone, not Sinophone. Taiwan, whose Han majority population settled there during the seventeenth century and after, is also similar to the colonial United States in its intention to become formally independent from the country of immigration. Furthermore, Taiwan’s situation is akin to that of Francophone Quebec, where roughly 82 percent of the population is Francophone. The French-Canadian identity in Quebec has increasingly given way to a localized, modern Quebecois identity through what has been known as a process of Révolution Tranquille, just as the uniform Chinese identity imposed by the Guomindang regime in Taiwan has gradually given way to a localized New Taiwanese identity today. Mandarin is now only one of the official languages in Taiwan’s multilingual society where the majority of the people actually speak the Minnan, while the rest speak Hakka and various indigenous languages. As settler colonizers, however, Han peoples of Singapore and Taiwan, no matter which Sinitic language they speak (Minnan/Taiwanese, Hakka, Cantonese, Teochiu, or others), are colonial vis-à-vis the indigenous peoples. From the indigenous perspective, the history of Taiwan is a history of a serial colonialism (Dutch, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, etc.), which has never ended. For indigenous peoples, Taiwan has never been postcolonial.

Those Chinese immigrants who settled in various parts of Southeast Asia also rarely speak the standard language defined by the Chinese

state, but instead use various old forms of topolects from the time when and the place where they had emigrated. 16 “The time when” is important, since the topolects would have evolved differently inside and outside China. The Han people living in South Korea, for instance, speak a mixture of Shandongnese and Korean, often creolized to the extent that the semantics, syntax, and grammar of the two languages are intermingled to a very high degree and the two seem to be organically interdependent. This is especially true for second- and third-generation Shandongnese in South Korea, even though the standard Hanyu was taught in the educational system set up by the locals originally supported by the Taiwan government, and now by the Chinese government since the reestablishment of diplomatic ties between South Korea and China. Like elsewhere, Hanyu there is standard only to the extent that it is a written language; when spoken, it is sounded out in Shandongnese. The Shandongnese they speak is also different from Shandongnese spoken in the Shandong province of China, where there are in fact many topolects all calling themselves Shandongnese. The same can be said about the speakers of Teochiu, Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, and Hailam in Southeast Asia, Cantonese in Hong Kong, and all the different topolect speakers and Chinglish or pidgin speakers in the United States. The Straits Chinese such as the Babas speak English as well as patois Malay. 17 It goes without saying that there are various degrees of creolization of the Sinitic languages as well as outright abandonment of any ancestral linguistic links to China. Increasingly, for instance, the main linguistic influence on Sinophone Chinese Malaysians comes from Hong Kong television shows and movies, a Hong Kong-style Cantonese with distinct divergences from the Cantonese spoken in Guangdong province in China. Essentially, creolized to different degrees, these Sinitic languages comprise a multilingual Sinophone world across national borders.

16 Victor Mair’s important work shows that what we know to be standard Chinese belongs to the Sinitic language group, where the mistakenly named “dialects” are not variations of standard Chinese but actually different languages. Minnan and Cantonese are thus different languages from Mandarin (Taiwan standard) and Putonghua (China standard). See Victor Mair, “What is a Chinese ‘Dialect/Topolect’? Reflections on Some Key Sino-English Linguistic Terms,” Sino-Platonic Papers 29 (September 1991): 1–31. See also Mair, “Introduction,” Hawai’i Reader in Traditional Chinese Culture, ed. Victor Mair et al. (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 1–7.

17 Cartier, “Diaspora and Social Restructuring in Postcolonial Malaysia.”
Speaking fractions of different Sinitic languages associated with China is a matter of choice and other historical determinations, and hence the Sinophone exists only to the extent that these languages are somehow maintained. The Sinophone recedes or disappears as soon as the languages in question are abandoned, but this recession or disappearance should not be seen as a cause for lament or nostalgia. Francophone African nations have, to varying degrees, sought to maintain or abandon the colonial language, and to devise their own linguistic futures. Hence, unlike the conception of the Chinese diaspora, the Sinophone foregrounds not the ethnicity or race of the person but the languages he or she speaks in either vibrant or vanishing communities of those languages. Instead of being perpetually bound to nationality, the Sinophone may be inherently transnational and global and includes wherever various Sinitic languages are spoken on the margins of China and Chineseness. By virtue of its residual nature, the Sinophone is largely confined to immigrant communities across all of the continents as well as those settler societies where the Han are the majority. As such, it can only be a linguistic identity in the process of disappearing just as soon as or soon after it comes into being, when local concerns voiced in local languages gradually supersede preimmigration concerns for immigrants and their descendents through generations, with the Sinophone eventually losing its raison d’être. The Sinophone as an analytical and cognitive category is therefore both geographically and temporally specific.

From the perspective of Democratic Party members in Hong Kong or independence advocates in today’s Taiwan, Sinophone articulations, furthermore, may contain an anticolonial intent against Chinese hegemony. The Sinophone is a place-based, everyday practice and experience, and thus it is a historical formation that constantly undergoes transformation to reflect local needs and conditions. It can be a site of both a longing for and rejection of various constructions of Chineseness; it can be a site of long-distance nationalism, anti-China politics, or even nonrelation with China, whether real or imaginary. Speaking Sinitic languages with a certain historical affinity to China does not necessarily need to be tied to contemporary China, just as speaking English does not tie a person to England per se. In other words, Sinophone articulations can take as many different positions as possible within the realm of human expression, whose axiological determinations are not necessarily dictated by China but rather by local, regional, or global contingencies and desires. Rather than a
dialectics of rejection, incorporation, and sublimation, there is at least a trialectics, since mediation is exercised by more agents than one, the so-called perennial Other. The Sinophone, therefore, maintains a precarious and problematic relationship to China, similar to the Francophone to France, the Hispanophone to Spain, and the Anglophone to England in its ambiguity and complexity. The dominant Sinophone language may be standard Hanyu, but it can be implicated in a dynamic of linguistic power struggles. Being a major language, standard Hanyu is often the object against which various minor articulations are launched resulting in its de-standardization, creolization, fragmentation, or sometimes outright rejection.

The Sinophone may express a China-centrism if it is the nostalgic kind that forever looks back at China as its cultural motherland or the source of value, nationalist or otherwise; but it is also often where the most powerful articulations against China-centrism are heard. Sinophone Taiwan, for instance, is only an aspect of Taiwan’s multilingual community in which indigenous languages are also spoken, and post-martial law Taiwan cultural discourse is very much about articulating symbolic “farewells to China.” The Sinophone pre-1997 Hong Kong also saw the emergence of a nativist fetishization of Cantonese against the looming hegemony of Beijing standard Hanyu.

It goes without saying that the Sinophone is a very important, critical category for literature. In the past, the distinction between literature written in the standard Sinitic script from inside and outside China has been rather blurry, and this has had the effect of throwing literature written in Sinitic languages, standard or otherwise, outside China into neglect and marginalization, if not total oblivion. What used to be categorized in English as “Chinese literature” (Zhongguo wenxue 中國文學, literature from China) and “literature in Chinese” (huawen wenxue 華文文學, literature from outside China) added to the confusion. The singularity of the word “Chinese” in both terms shows the “Chinese” as the hegemonic sign and easily slips into or becomes complicit with China-centrism. In effect, the notion of “literature in Chinese” or “world literature in Chinese” places Chinese literature as the hegemonic model in relation to which the various different

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18 *Farewell China* is the title of a film made by then Hong Kong-based, Britain-trained filmmaker Clara Law. Taiwan cultural critic Yang Zhao’s famous book, *Farewell China* (Gaobie Zhongguo 告別中國), captures this sentiment vividly.
kinds of “Chinese literature” are categorized and organized. There is a burgeoning industry of studies of “world literature in Chinese” (shijie huawen wenxue 世界華文文學) with established scholarly associations and academic programs in China, the political intentions of which are probably not very dissimilar to the official notion of the Francophonie of the French state. Much like the model of categorization where European and American literatures are deemed normative, universal, and hence generic, while the rest of the world produced literature of “the world at large,” “world literature” as such was therefore often a code word for all of those literatures that are non-European and non-American. “World literature in Chinese” has a similar function where “Chinese literature” is its unnamed but hegemonic, generic, and empty signifier, with the rest of the world producing “world literature in Chinese.” In this construction, the “world” is the gathering of particular places beyond the center—the universe of China proper—but everywhere connected to China in their insistence on writing in the Sinitic script. The historical coincidence of the expansion of studies of “world literature in Chinese” in China with China’s global ambitions invites a critical analysis of the political economy of this particular knowledge formation.

The Sinophone therefore usefully designates Sinitic-language literatures in various parts of the world without the assumed centrality of Chinese literature. It is multilingual in and of itself by virtue of the simple fact that the Sinitic language family consists of many different languages, and different communities tend to speak a particular Sinitic language in addition to its non-Sinitic inflections. Sinophone Malaysian literature, for instance, vividly captures Cantonese and other Sinitic languages alongside the standard Hanyu, not to mention their sometimes occasional and sometimes extensive creolizations by Malay, English, and Tamil. Similarly, in Sinophone Taiwan literature, the body of works written by indigenous Austronesian peoples often mix their various indigenous languages with the Hanyu imposed by the Han colonizers in a dialectical confrontation and negotiation. To a different extent, Taiwan writers have experimented with writing in a newly invented script of Minnan, just as Hong Kong writers have tried to invent a Cantonese script to register the distinctness of Sinophone Hong Kong literature in distinction with Chinese literature.

In the different context of American literature, there had been no clear way to designate Chinese American literature written in a given Sinitic language, hence Sau-ling Wong’s recent, important distinction
between “Anglophone Chinese American literature” and “Sinophone Chinese American literature.” In Chinese American literary history and criticism, literature written in the Sinitic languages has been systematically marginalized, if not considered politically suspect for its presumed “un-Americanness” that can arouse fears of unassimilatability. Dismissed in the canons of both “Chinese literature” and “Chinese American literature,” which are based on models of nationality and ethnicity with standard Hanyu and standard English as their languages of value, the Sinophone literally had been crying for a name for itself. Early Sinophone American literature had largely been written in Cantonese or with Cantonese inflections, while the post-1965 body of literature is largely in standard Hanyu, refracting the particular geographical contours of immigration from China, Taiwan, and elsewhere in different historical periods. The English-centrism of American literature is necessarily fractured by the proliferation of Sinophone American literature by generations of immigrants from various other Sinophone communities. American literature, like all other national literatures, is multilingual. This is a simple and obvious fact that is often occluded by linguistic and literary politics exercised by the dominant.

If both Sinophone Taiwan literature written by the indigenous peoples and Sinophone American literature written by Chinese American minorities register their discontent under the respective dominant cultures in Taiwan and the United States and express anticolonial or decolonial intent (the former does so more than the latter), we must consider Sinophone Tibetan or Sinophone Mongolian literature in a similar vein. Many Sinophone Tibetan writers, for instance, are themselves subjects living under a colonial condition, external (if their desire is sovereignty) or internal (if they feel oppressed but accept Chinese nationality). They may write in the standard Sinitic script, but their sensibilities are ambiguously positioned vis-à-vis politico-cultural China and a uniform construction of Chineseness as Han-centered.

19 “Sinophone Asian American literature” may simply be changed to “Sinophone American literature,” as it is categorized by language. Similarly, one can make a distinction between Chinese America and Sinophone America, the latter referring to Sinitic-language speaking American communities. Again, linguistic designation allows the possibility of overcoming distinctions made solely based on ethnicity or race. See Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, “The Yellow and the Black: The African-American Presence in Sinophone Chinese American Literature,” Chung-Wai Literary Monthly 34, no. 4 (September 2005): 15–53.
and Han-dominant. As historians tell us, the expansion of the Qing empire brought the far-flung regions such as Tibet, present-day Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia into the fold of China with effective military conquests and cultural managements in a typical colonial fashion. A case must be made, therefore, about internal colonialism in China, and Han hegemony over its linguistic, cultural, and ethnic Others needs to be thoroughly investigated. Ethnic writers such as Tibetans and Uyghurs who choose to write in the standard Sinitic script do so with a distinctively bicultural, if not bilingual, sensibility in which “cross-epistemological conversations” take place in antagonistic, dialectical, or any number of other ways. The Sinophone, like the category of the “third world” that can also exist within the first world, then also exists on the margins within China, albeit these margins are both symbolic and territorial. In fact, these margins—the regions colonized by the Qing and inherited by today’s China—actually helped expand China’s territory more than twofold.

Similar to its complex relationship to China and Chineseness, the Sinophone also evinces a complex relationship with the sites of settlement and lived experience. For first-generation Chinese Americans who immigrated from various other Sinophone sites or China, for example, their relationship to the cultures and languages of the United States is, though equally ambivalent and complex, of a qualitatively different kind. As the Sinophone distinguishes itself from the dominant construction of Chineseness, it also distinguishes itself from the dominant construction of Americanness in a way that is borne out by the exigencies of lived experience in the United States. Via heterogenizing the dominant constructions of both Chineseness and Americanness, it maintains its own subjectivity. Some might flaunt this as the postmodernist in-betweeness, others might see this as the existential condition of the Sinophone as a local practice. Place matters as the grounding where Sinophone acquires its valance and relevance.

The definition of the Sinophone must therefore be place-based and it must be sensitive to time, able to attend to the process of its formation

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and disappearance. For recent immigrant communities in the United States that speak Cantonese, Minnan, and various other Sinitic languages, political allegiances often run the gamut of extreme positions at odds with each other, while their psychosocial investment in the land of settlement may increasingly outweigh older attachments. The Sinophone is kept alive by successive waves of new immigrants while earlier immigrants may move further toward the mainstream to heterogenize the mainstream culture in a bid for pluralism and equality. The history of the official Francophonie cautions us that the notion of the Sinophone also risks being co-opted by the Chinese state. In the case of the Francophonie as an institutional concept, the French state can willfully neglect the anticolonial character of the Francophone and instead highlight the state’s potential as the champion of pluralism in order to refute the overpowering pressure of American cultural hegemony. The Francophonie can be partly seen as spectral remains of the French empire under whose shadow contemporary France’s waning cultural influence across the globe can be temporarily displaced. Unfortunately it can be turned into a new fantasy of French global influence, if not a point of mobilization for imperial nostalgia. The notion of the Chinese diaspora has led to similar consequences: it centered China as the place of origin and implicitly demonstrated its global influence. Rather than being a testament to the classical Chinese empire, such as the premodern Sinophone worlds of Vietnam, Japan, and Korea, or to an emerging Chinese empire that claims the sole right to Chineseness, contemporary Sinophone articulations may determine whether to respond to such claims or to ignore them altogether. Over the last two centuries, Japan tried to “overcome” China militarily by instigating the two Sino-Japanese Wars, and symbolically through a vernacular movement that displaced the Sinitic script. For Korea, the resistance was more circuitous: denouncing the ideology of “serving the great” (sadae chuui) in the seventeenth century simultaneously produced its authenticity as preserver of Confucian Chinese culture against the Manchus, but twentieth-century history saw a

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23 Choson Korea considered itself the “sojunghwa” (literally, small China), that was more authentically Chinese than the Manchu Qing dynasty.
gradual move away from Chinese influence until the rise of China in the global scene in the early twenty-first century.

III. Sinophone Studies, Literary, or Otherwise

To sum up then, the conceptualization of the Sinophone here emphasizes two major points:

1. Diaspora has an end date. When the (im)migrants settle and become localized, many choose to end their state of diaspora by the second or third generation. The so-called nostalgia for the ancestral land is often an indication or displacement of difficulties of localization, voluntary or involuntary. Racism and other hostile conditions can force immigrants to find escape and solace in the past, while cultural or other superiority complexes can estrange them from the locals. To emphasize that diaspora has an end date is therefore to insist that cultural and political practice is always place-based. Everyone should be given a chance to become a local.

2. The linguistic community is a community of change and an open community. When the descendants of immigrants no longer speak their ancestors’ languages, they are no longer part of the Sinophone community. The Sinophone is therefore a community of change, occupying a transitional moment (however long in duration) that inevitably integrates further with local communities and becomes constitutive of the local. It is an open community, furthermore, because it is defined not by race or nationality of the speaker but by the languages one speaks. Just as Anglophone speakers are not necessarily British or American, Sinophone speakers need not be Chinese by nationality. To the extent that communities are most often multilingual, linguistically determined communities necessarily trace porous and contingent boundaries.

What does Sinophone studies do, then? Or rather, what can Sinophone studies do? To these questions, I offer several tentative answers by way of proposals below:

1. By debunking “the Chinese diaspora” as the organizing concept for the study of various immigrant peoples who left China, from centuries ago up to the present, it is possible to propose organizing
concepts other than such essentialist notions as “Chineseness” and “the Chinese.” Instead, rigorously rearticulated concepts such as localization, multiplicity, difference, creolization, hybridity, bilingualism, biculturalism, and others can be deployed for more complex understandings of histories, cultures, and literatures. Ethnic studies, other “phone” studies such as Francophone studies and Anglophone studies, postcolonial studies, transnational studies, and additional relevant modes of inquiry may all be drawn from for Sinophone studies in a comparative vein.

2. Sinophone studies allows us to rethink the relationship between roots and routes by considering the concept of roots as place-based rather than ancestral, and routes as a more mobile understanding of homeness rather than wandering and homelessness. To decouple homeness and origin is to recognize the imperative to live as a political subject within a particular geopolitical place in a specific time with deep local commitments. To link homeness with the place of residence therefore becomes an ethical act that chooses concrete political engagement in the local. The claim of rootlessness by some nostalgia-driven, middle-class, first-generation immigrants is, for example, oftentimes narcissistic to the extent that it is not aware of its own trenchant conservatism and even racism. The place of residence can change—some people migrate more than once—but to consider that place as home may thus be the highest form of rootedness. Routes, then, can become roots. This is a theory not of mobile citizens who disidentify from the local nation-state and disengage from local politics, but of the politicization of that mobility that unsettle the relationship between routes and roots.

3. When routes can be roots, multidirectional critiques are not only possible but also imperative. Transcending national borders, Sinophone communities can maintain a critical position toward both the country of origin and the country of settlement. It is no longer


25 Sau-ling Wong analyzed racism against African Americans prevalent in Sinophone American literature written by first-generation immigrant students in the United States. While wallowing in self-pity over a sense of rootlessness, some of these writers had the most conservative tendencies toward issues of race, gender, and class. See Wong, “The Yellow and the Black.”
an either/or choice between the ancestral land and the local place, which has been shown to jeopardize the well-being of the immigrants and their descendants. A Chinese American can be critical of China and the United States at the same time. In the case of Taiwan, such a multidirectional critique allows for the emergence of a critical, articulatory position beyond the conventional association of Taiwan with the American Right, so that Taiwan can be critical of Chinese and U.S. policies of containment as well as their collusion and complicity without needing to choose one over the other. The Sinophone as a concept, then, allows for the emergence of a critical position that may not succumb to nationalist and imperialist pressures, and allows for a multiply mediated and multidirectional critique. In this way, the Sinophone can be considered a method. Starting from being a historical and empirical category of communities, cultures, and languages, the Sinophone can thus also be rearticulated as an epistemology.

By way of conclusion, Chinese Malaysian writer Ho Sok Fong’s intriguing short story “Never Mention It Again” offers a refreshingly sharp and critical look at the world from Sinophone perspectives. In this story, a married Chinese Malaysian man has secretly converted to Islam in order to take advantage of tax breaks and other economic benefits provided by the government. In Malaysia, a policy of “positive discrimination” has been practiced for over four decades as a way to guarantee Malay success in economy and government, while restricting Chinese Malaysian and Indian Malaysian access to success. This man has also apparently married a couple of Muslim women without his Chinese Malaysian wife’s knowledge. Things go really well until he dies. At his funeral, planned as a Daoist ritual by his Chinese Malaysian wife and children, government officials storm the ceremony and announce that only Muslims can bury a Muslim. A physical battle ensues over the corpse of the man, with each side grabbing and holding onto one half of the corpse in a tug-of-war. At the height of this struggle, the corpse defecates. Small, hard, broken pieces of his feces land on everyone, as the violent motion of the tug-of-war creates a

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large radius for their spread. In the end, the Muslims take his corpse, the Chinese Malaysians are reduced to gathering the feces and burying them in a family grave, and the Chinese Malaysian wife is, by Malaysian law, disinherited, because she cannot inherit a Muslim’s property. This theater of the absurd may serve as a perfect allegory for a double critique of state racism (of the Malaysian state) and Chinese cultural essentialism (of the Chinese family) as flipsides that reinforce and enhance each other, while the feces of the corpse contaminate everyone equally. This is the ugly and smelly picture of hybridity, not the hybridity that is celebrated by some scholars of postcolonial theory, ugly and smelly precisely because hybridity is not acknowledged by state racism and Chinese cultural essentialism, and it is not an easy condition. The Sinophone articulates itself into being through such difficulty and complexity.