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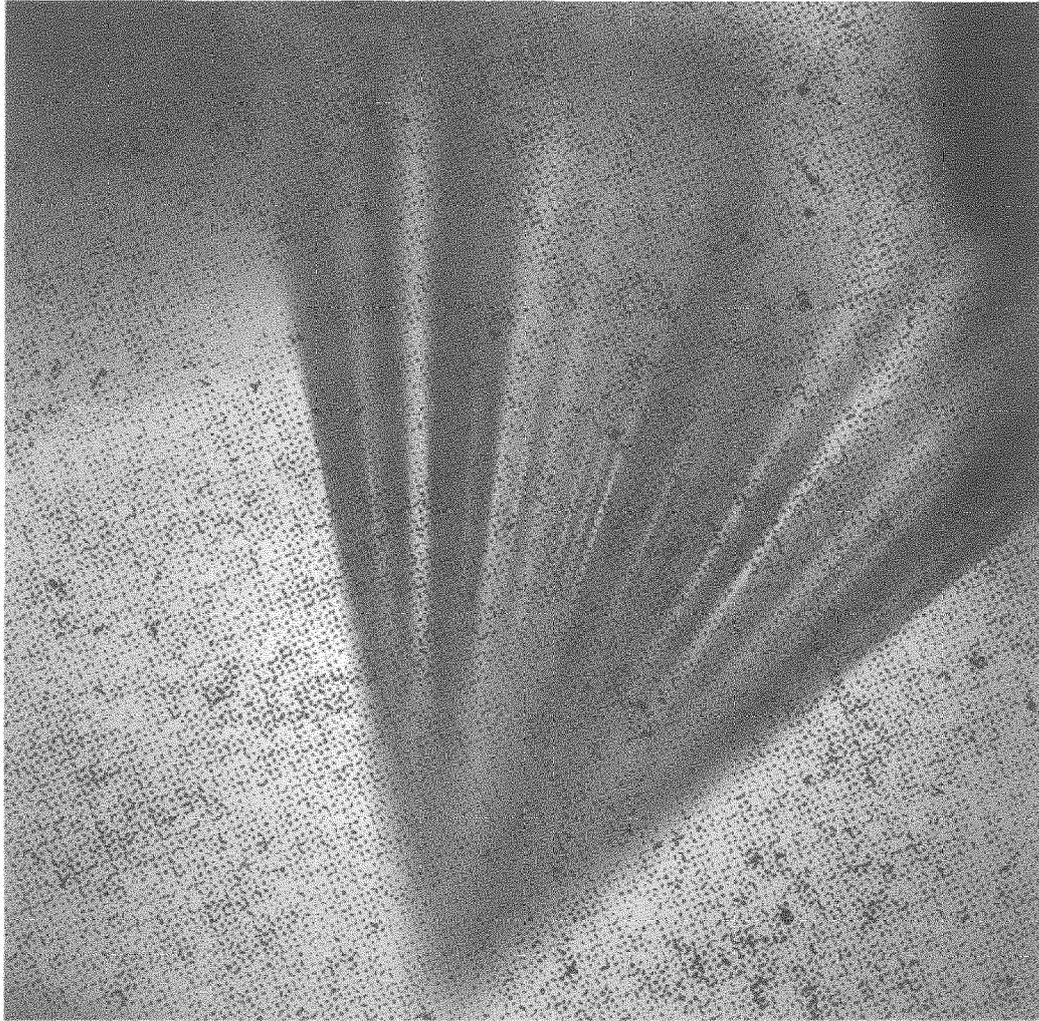
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## **Hong Kong Literature as Sinophone Literature** **華語語系香港文學初論**

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A denotative meaning of the term “Sinophone,” as used by Sau-ling Wong in her work on Sinophone Chinese American literature to designate Chinese American literature written in Sinitic languages, is a productive way to start the investigation of the notion in terms of its connotative meanings.<sup>1</sup> Connotation, by dictionary definition, is the practice that implies other characteristics and meanings beyond the term’s denotative meaning; ideas and feelings invoked in excess of the literal meaning; and, as a philosophical practice, the practice of identifying certain determining principles underlying the implied and invoked meanings, characteristics, ideas, and feelings. This short essay is a preliminary exploration of the connotative meanings of the category that I call Sinophone Hong Kong literature vis-à-vis the emergent field of Sinophone studies as the study of Sinitic-language cultures, communities, and histories on the margins of China and Chineseness.

First, a short genealogy of the term Sinophone is in order. When I first published my particular coinage of this term in a 2004 paper entitled “Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition,”<sup>2</sup> I used it to give agency to Sinitic-language literatures produced outside China that have been suffering from extreme theoretical and conceptual anemia in Western academia, where the inability to consider non-Western-language literatures beyond the lens of national literature—the prevalence of the “national allegory” model is a symptom of this—has produced severe myopia towards the multilingual realities of most national literatures including their own. If anything is written in the so-called “Chinese,”<sup>3</sup> then it must be Chinese literature, according to this logic of unquestioned, one-to-one correspondence between language and nationality. Taiwan literature written in the standard Sinitic script—the so-called “Chinese” — then must be part of Chinese literature. According to the same logic, Sinitic-language literature from Malaysia where it has been part of the Malaysian scene for a hundred years will have to be part of Chinese literature as well. It will be hard pressed to tell a Chinese Malaysian that he or she is a Chinese national, and similarly for a Chinese American who writes in the Sinitic script.

With such considerations in mind, I offered the long history of Sinitic-language literature in Malaysia and Singapore as a parallel situation to consider Taiwan’s Sinitic-

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1 Sau-ling Wong, in an unpublished manuscript entitled “Generational Effects in Racialization: Representations of African-Americans in Sinophone Chinese American Literature,” makes a distinction between her use of Sinophone as “descriptive” and mine as “theoretical” in reference to my book, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 2007).

2 Shu-Mei Shih, “Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition,” *PMLA*, 119: 1 (January 2004): 16-30.

3 “Chinese” is not one language—several dozens languages are spoken in China—but it is the effect of Hanyu masquerading as the representative language for all the peoples of China. The more precise designation of the dominant language of China should be Hanyu (the language of the Han) or Putonghua (state-sponsored standard language), while “Chinese” should refer to all the languages in the plural, as “Chinese-s.”

language literature as Sinophone literature, not as Chinese literature. Taiwan population is consisted largely of immigrants from China who arrived there about three hundred years ago and who constituted a settler society that colonized indigenous Austronesian peoples. The literature produced in the standard Sinitic language by either the descendants of the Han settlers or the indigenous writers today can by no means be called Chinese literature. The specific situation of re-colonization by the new Han immigrants from China in the second half of the twentieth century produced new anxieties and obsessions with national identity, hence there had been a lot of confusion even within Taiwan whether Taiwan literature should be Chinese literature or not. With the rise of native consciousness, Taiwan literature has achieved its long-desired autonomy within Taiwan, which has been largely ignored in Western academia. The category of the Sinophone allows for exquisite attention to the localness of this literature written in the Sinitic script: Sinophone Taiwan literature written by Han writers often mix standard Hanyu with Hokkien, Hakka, and English, while indigenous writers hybridize it with Austronesian languages, often registering strong anti-colonial intentions.

The confused reception of Gao Xingjian in the Western world after he won the Nobel Prize in literature is another case in point, with critics simply insisting that his must belong to “Chinese literature,” even though all his major novels were written outside China. Gao writes in standard Sinitic script in Paris—is his not a parallel case as those writers designated by Sau-ling Wong as belonging to Sinophone Chinese American literature, thus should more appropriately be called Sinophone French literature? French-language supremacy in the metropole on the one hand and simplistic nationality designation or Chinese nationalism on the other contributed to the persistent “Chinese-ization” of Gao Xingjian, forever “Chinese” and can never be French who happens to write in a given Sinitic language, and whose writing can never not belong to “Chinese literature.” I therefore wrote: “The affirmation of Gao by the Nobel committee should be an affirmation of Sinophone, not Chinese, literature.” Once we shift the focus from both French-language-centrism of French Republicanism and the incessant circularity of Chinese nationalism, we clear the grounds for a kind of literary studies that takes it as its premise the multilingual and multicultural reality of all national literatures, where language and nationality are not coupled to reproduce the kinds of hegemonic, nationalistic obsessions with purity and authenticity, but where literature written in any given language is granted due recognition as local.

The recognition of linguistic plurality challenges the racism and ethnocentrism underlying the constructions of national literature, which is oftentimes little more than a hegemonic expression by the ethnically or racially dominant. The fact is that American literature is multilingual: literature produced by European Americans in English should not be automatically ascribed greater authenticity than that written in minority languages. There is, for instance, a long history of American literature written in the Japanese script as well as the Sinitic script (largely inflected by Cantonese until 1965). French

literature is multilingual, hence white French literature written in French should not have precedence over literature written in the Sinitic script or any other minority languages. Similarly, Chinese colonialism in the frontier areas of Tibet, Xinjiang, Mongolia, and the southwest regions has spawned the writing of Sinophone literature by non-Han peoples whose multilingual and multicultural sensibilities fracture the standardization of Chinese literature as Han-dominant. Even the most assimilated of Sinophone Tibetan writing, such as that of Ah Lai for instance, challenges the long-standing Han centrism of Chinese literature and registers a distinctly bilingual and bicultural consciousness. In *The Dust Settles (chenai luoding)*, for instance, Ah Lai offers a Marxist analysis of the devastations wrought by the transition from feudal economy to cash-crop economy in Tibetan areas as a subtle critique of the socialist state, beating the state at its own game, by its own ideology.

With above considerations, in my book, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*, I posited the Sinophone to designate the Sinitic-language communities and cultures outside China as well as ethnic minority communities within China where specific Sinitic languages are spoken or are imposed. Sinitic languages belong to the so-called Sino-Tibetan language family (Hanzang yuxi), which is one of the largest in the world. The Tibetan part of the family refers to “Tibeto-Burman” languages with almost 400 languages in total spoken across China, Tibet, South Asia, and parts of Southeast Asia. The “Sino” part of the language family refers to all the non-Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in China, also called Sinitic languages, where the so-called dialects are actually different languages. By Sinitic-language communities, I therefore mean all the communities that speak standard Hanyu, Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka, Teochiu, or any other languages, and hence Sinophone studies is a study involving many languages and Sinophone literature is a multi-sited, multilingual literature.<sup>4</sup> The Sinophone is not monolingual or monological, but traces a heterogeneous genealogy; in each given instance, however, it is situated in its own historical as well as geographical specificity. I therefore emphasized that it is a place-based practice.<sup>5</sup>

The situatedness of Hong Kong literature as Sinophone literature involves the specificity of British colonialism lasting over one and a half centuries (1842-1997) with an interval of Japanese occupation (1941-1945), and a “postcolonial” Hong Kong with a hypercapitalist economy and compromised democracy. Hong Kong literature has always been a multilingual literature, including Anglophone and Sinophone writings, while Sinophone writing has always had some Cantonese inflections, depending on the degree to which an individual writer desires to register the living language of the local place.

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4 See Victor Mair, “What is a Chinese ‘Dialect/Topolect’? Reflections on Some Key Sino-English Linguistic Terms,” *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 29 (September 1991): pp.1-31.

5 See Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*, especially “Introduction” and “Conclusion.”

The language of instruction in most schools at all levels was either Cantonese or English, for instance, prior to the reversion to Chinese rule in 1997. If selective Sinophone Hong Kong literature during the British colonial period had as its implicit goal the overthrow of colonialism, it can be argued that after the end of this colonialism, postcoloniality did not arrive as promised. Scholars in the U.S. and Hong Kong have written about this confused state of postcoloniality that does not provide the luxury of leaving colonialism behind, as the political authority reverted back to China.<sup>6</sup> Some would consider the present a neocolonial situation, where Putonghua—the standard language designated by the Chinese state—spreads incrementally and more and more widely in the socioeconomic and, increasingly, the cultural spheres. The Hong Kong consciousness that undergirded the rise of Hong Kong studies in late (British) colonial Hong Kong was linguistically specific to the prominent deployment of the local Cantonese language, which implicitly challenged Putonghua and China-centric disparagements of Hong Kong as a “cultural desert”. The late colonial postmodern novel *Crazy Horse in a Mad City* (kwongsing luenma) written by Xinyuan documented the unsettling hybridity, pastiche, hysteria, and craziness of cultural life fraught with angst, fear, and anger towards all political and cultural colonial agents (British, Chinese, and even Taiwanese), in the sense of the novel as a “reflective mediation” of the social reality, not a mere reflection.<sup>7</sup> Cantonese is prominently deployed throughout the narrative to register a distinctly local sensibility in transition between British colonialism to something that was anticipated with sarcasm, thinly disguising a deep sense of foreboding and helplessness.

While scholars debate what should be properly called “Hong Kong literature” in contradistinction to Chinese literature, the criteria has rightfully been about residency, sensibility, and commitment. There has always been literature written and published in Hong Kong for the Hong Kong public throughout the British colonial period. To fold Hong Kong literature back to Chinese literature would be no more than a simple-minded but heavy-handed political gesture with no regard for history. Sharing the Sinitic script does not automatically make every work of literature a part of “Chinese” literature, just as the sharing of the Arabic script in the Arab world of over 20 countries does not make all literatures belong to one national literature.

In a sense, then, one of the best kept secrets of Hong Kong literature is Xiao Hong’s masterpiece, *Tales of Hulan River* (fulanhe zuen/hulanhe zhuan), written in Hong Kong before her death there.<sup>8</sup> This novel has been seamlessly incorporated into “Chinese” literature as a representative masterpiece with no attention given to the fact

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6 See the works of K.C. Lo, Rey Chow, Ackbar Abbas, and others.

7 Jean-Paul Sartre, *“What is Literature?” and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988) p.135. “What is Literature?” is translated by Bernard Frechtman.

8 See Lawrence Wang-chi Wong’s, “How to Define Hong Kong Literature: A primary question for the writing of Hong Kong Literary History” in this issue.

that it was written in the British colony, and that it should more appropriately belong to Sinophone Hong Kong literature. If a Hong Kong novel is ill-written, it does not get elected to the pantheon of Chinese literature; if it is well-written, then it might get the model minority status within Chinese literature, or its locality simply erased. It is this kind of politics of recognition that the idea of Sinophone Hong Kong literature resists and renders problematic. The northeast China that Xiao Hong conjures up in the novel is an act of imagination from Hong Kong, from the situation in Hong Kong.

What the ambiguous state of colonialism in Hong Kong today after a long history of formal colonialism suggests is that the project of Hong Kong literature is predetermined not to document postcoloniality but to articulate and struggle for *decolonization*. The realization of postcoloniality has always already been an impossibility. Instead, at the confluence of imposed and sanctioned cultures, the works of Sinophone Hong Kong writers like Wong Bik-wan exemplify the potentiality of decolonized consciousness using forms of parody, pastiche, and bricolage, infused with Renaissance preconsciousness, deep compassion, and sardonic wit. In Latin American settler colonies, the colonizers have never left and the epistemological domination of the West has been continuous—hence the project there, as Walter D. Mignolo tells us, has to always have been decolonization.<sup>9</sup> We do not have answers to the questions: Where is postcolony in Hong Kong? When is postcoloniality for Hong Kong? Instead of asking questions and framing arguments mimicked from the so-called postcolonial theory derived from the South Asian situation, there needs to be a recognition of Sinophone Hong Kong literature as a “situated” literature. This is because the presumed universality of postcolonial theory is an example of what Sartre would call an “abstract universality,” while the best of situated Hong Kong literature can live and activate a “concrete universality”:

The term ‘concrete universality’ must be understood [. . . . .] as the sum total of men living in a given society. If the writer’s public could ever be extended to the point of embracing this total, the result would not be that he would necessarily have to limit the reverberations of his work to the present time, but rather he would oppose to the abstract eternity of glory, which is an impossible and hollow dream of the absolute, a concrete and finite duration which he would determine by the very choice of his subjects, and which, far from uprooting him from history, would define his situation in social time.<sup>10</sup>

Rooted in history, situated in his/her “social time” with a “finite duration,” and

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9 See Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

10 Jean-Paul Sartre, “*What is Literature?*” and *Other Essays*, p.136.

addressing the public within that history and finite time, are the basic requirements to approach concrete universality. Wong Bik-wan and many other Hong Kong writers prominently center their narratives in Hong Kong, with Hong Kong itself oftentimes becoming the protagonist. When Xiao Hong writes about the Hulan River, we must also understand this act of imagining China as an act situated in Hong Kong. Even when one is nostalgic about China and disparaging of Hong Kong, as were many so-called “writers who came South” (namloi zokga) who migrated to Hong Kong from China proper, this nostalgia is a situated nostalgia, distinctly of Hong Kong. The degree to which they speak to or refuse to speak to the local public deemed culturally inferior limits their access to the concrete universality in the Sartrean sense, but they are all nonetheless part of the multivocal trajectory of Sinophone Hong Kong literature. Their dream of being recognized by China, the ultimate arbiter of cultural authenticity, is what Sartre calls the “hollow dream of the absolute” in search of “abstract eternity of glory.” But when the Namloi writers, such as Liu Yichang and others, decide to “become” local and engage with the local public, they enter more concretely in the finite “social time” of Hong Kong and become closer to achieving concrete universality. The critical potentiality of Sinophone Hong Kong literature resides in this. ✕