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# Transnational Chinese literature and Sinopolyphony

Yinde Zhang 

Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris, France

Email: [yinde.zhang@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr](mailto:yinde.zhang@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr)

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## Abstract

The unprecedented power of China and its cultural expansion are increasing the need to examine its hegemonic impact in the field of literature. The new concept of ‘sinophone’, inspired by postcolonial criticism, reveals vigorous protests against Mainland’s centrality by advocating Chinese Diaspora literature, which has been too long relegated to a peripheral status. This study seeks to reconsider such debates through investigations of historical reasons, ideological issues, and perspectives they have widened. The sinophone literature is thus set up as a creative space, denationalized as well as transnationalized. Denying both the weight of the matrix and the chimerical archipelago, it follows the poetics of relation, the intermixture, and the Open.

**Keywords:** Chinese literature; transnational; sinopolyphony; sinophone

‘Sinophone studies’ are at the heart of one of the most striking debates in the field of Chinese-language literature today. Over the past decade, there has been a wealth of discussions about the controversial use of the term ‘Chinese literature,’ which is too dominated by the political demarcation and cultural centrality of mainland China. The notion of ‘Sinophone’ has emerged to designate and advocate for all literature written in Chinese, especially that produced outside China and unfairly relegated to a peripheral status until now. However, the use of the concept ‘Sinophone’ has not been without questions. It may in fact seem surprising that the name of this counter-concept, inspired by postcolonial criticism, was coined with reference to ‘anglophone’, ‘hispanophone’, ‘lusophone’, and, in particular, ‘francophone’, although the last term has recently been questioned in France because of its colonial legacy and hexagonal domination, to the extent that it has been proposed to replace it with ‘world-literature’ (Le Bris, Rouaud & Almassy 2007). This obvious paradox conceals other, deeper contradictions that are important to examine. The essential issue is the ambivalence of the concept ‘Sinophone’, whose critical and constructive dimension remains to be proven despite the strong protest it has generated. The present study aims to show the need

to oppose imperialist cultural expansion while avoiding falling into one's own ideological apriori. In the following pages, I will try to give an account of the different terms that are being debated; in particular, I will argue that some theoretical formulations could be discussed and transcended. In a renewed perspective, Sinophone literature would be redefined less as an antagonistic alibi than as a creative space, characterized by a de-nationalized as well as trans-nationalized framework. The deconstruction of the Empire could thus generate a beneficial dynamism, adhering to the poetics of relationship, crossbreeding, and the Open.

### The counter-discourse

The term 'Sinophone' is a neologism that has existed for over twenty years.<sup>1</sup> Originally, it had a descriptive value: it referred to 'Chinese-speaking communities' living either outside or inside China. This included mainland China, the so-called Greater China (Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore), and the diaspora. However, a semantic shift has accompanied its increasing use, while its geolinguistic and inclusive meaning acquired a political connotation. Shu-mei Shih, a professor at the University of California, has played a decisive role in this redefinition. She assigned the word a distinctive function, distinguishing it geo-axiologically from the term 'Chinese literature' (*Zhongguo wenxue* 中國文學), which can be understood as 'literature of China or from China'. Hence her conclusion: 'By "Sinophone" literature I mean literature written in Chinese by Chinese-speaking writers in various parts of the world outside China, as distinguished from "Chinese literature" – literature from China' (Shih 2004: 29). Shih advocates an ideal of rupture by adding to the purely geographical determination considerations that belong to the postcolonial domain, especially in ethnic and area studies. The same term thus also takes into consideration literature written by ethnic minorities in China – that is, within the Chinese territory<sup>2</sup> – to the extent that 'Sinophone' is identified as a category of the 'Third World', as it may exist outside or inside capitalist countries. This approach of denouncing existing hierarchical relations gives Sinophone a very heterogeneous scope, covering a host of minorities such as Chinese-speaking Tibetans in China, Taiwanese-language speakers that switched to Chinese after the period of Japanese colonization, or Chinese-Americans, whose literature is often considered suspect because of its 'un-Americanness' and 'unassimilability'.

Shu-mei Shih's position is representative of a large number of scholars who contest the centrality of mainland Chinese language and culture. Despite the diversity of their views, they all claim the need to grant Sinophone literature an autonomous status by distinguishing it from the so-called 'Chineseness'. It is not difficult to understand this position if one considers the institutions and discourses that exist in this field in China. One of the official and common terms used to designate Chinese-language

<sup>1</sup>Ruth Keen (1988: 231) includes in the 'Sinophone communities' of Chinese literature 'the Mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, and the United States'.

<sup>2</sup>Here, "the margins of China and Chineseness" is understood not only specifically but also generally to locate those Sinophone cultures situated outside the geopolitical China proper and in many parts of the world through historical processes of (im)migration and settlement spanning several centuries; it is also understood as those non-Han cultures within China where the imposition of the dominant Han culture has elicited numerous responses, from assimilation to anticolonial resistance in the dominant language, Hanyu' (Shih 2013: 25). This essay is based on her book, *Visibility and Identity* (2007).

literatures produced outside of China is ‘overseas Chinese literature’ (*haiwai huawen wenxue* 海外華文文學). Modeled on such historically and politically charged terms as *Huaqiao* (華僑, ‘sojourners’), *huayi* (華裔, ‘Chinese descendants’), and *haiwai huaren* (海外華人, ‘overseas Chinese’), this appellation reflects a strong imaginary perception of Chinese nationhood determined by a presupposed homeland. From a diaspora perspective, such terminology appears questionable because of the collective unconscious it embodies about ‘roots’. Clearly, references to the motherland are neither wholly inaccurate nor futile when one considers the feelings of nostalgia and the identity strategies that characterize writers confronted with local hostility; nonetheless, contemporary writers tend to invalidate ideas of center, origin, or a fixed geographical location, both through their extraordinary mobility and their specific creative spaces. We are not unaware of the terminological variations, observable for example in *世界華文文學* (*shijie huawen wenxue*, ‘world literature in Chinese’), a term more suited to the globalized context and plural realities of the Sinophone world. However, an essentialist and sinocentric discourse persists, for example, in the paronym *世界華人文學* (*shijie huaren wenxue*, ‘world literature by Chinese’): this appellation, which differs from the previous one by only one word, reveals culturalist presuppositions and concerns.<sup>3</sup>

Despite a growing awareness of the specificities of the diaspora and the emergence of nuanced approaches that respect diversity, there is still a regrettable influence of a Sinocentric chauvinism that deliberately rejects any possibility of considering or developing ‘locatedness’ and homes outside China. In this regard, biological metaphors still abound to attribute ‘naturalness’ to centripetal attempts. One of the most recurrent images is that of the tree, which compares Chinese literature to the ‘roots’ and foreign Chinese literature to the ‘leaves’, in order to expressly state that ‘Chinese literature is the source and foreign Chinese literature is the tributary’ (Chen 1996). Such statements are marked by ‘genocentrism’ (Wong 2010: 64).

It should be noted that this China-centric view is not unique to mainland Chinese scholars. On the contrary, it is widely echoed in the discourse on ‘cultural China’ initiated by prominent Sino-American scholars such as Tu Weiming. By emphasizing the cultural ties that ‘overseas Chinese’ have with China, this notion reflects the troubling consensus that exists around the logic of Chinese ethnocentrism, in the name of a soft power serving the country’s economic and geopolitical rise. In this context, Sinophone studies bring to the fore voices that say ‘no to Chineseness’ and put an end to the ‘obsession with China’ (Chow 1998, Ang 1998). Sinophony therefore appears as a salutary militant concept and a radical attitude of secession that challenges Chinese tutelage. Shu-mei Shih rightly warns against a set of notions, such as ‘diaspora’, which have a connotation of servitude. She argues for the intrinsic identity of Sinophone literature, which has developed in contact with local history and cultures, through the assumption that affiliation can replace filiation and that ‘roots’ rhyme with ‘roads’, to quote James Clifford’s (1997) famous words.

<sup>3</sup>The latter two terms dominate the institutional landscape, although the former is losing ground, as evidenced by the Research Centre for Taiwanese, Hong Kong and Overseas Literatures (台港及海外華文文學研究中心), as well as numerous textbooks, such as the *Course on Overseas Chinese Literature*, edited by Rao Pengzi and Yang Kuanghan (2009).

Despite the perfect legitimacy of its crusade against the expansion of geopolitical China and cultural Chineseness, such a contentious approach runs into some limitations, even aporia, due to its purely antagonistic vision and approach. In this respect, it is difficult to understand how one can emphasize the transnational nature of Sinophone studies, as opposed to the hierarchy of political borders, and at the same time argue for the exclusion of Hong Kong from the Sinophone community from 1997 onward, on the grounds that it has lost its power of resistance since the handover to China – as if Cantonese could, overnight, disappear or cease to be a cross-border language.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, one cannot help but wonder how one can make a mockery of the ‘binaric, Manichean models of postcolonial studies, privileging a model of resistance and containment’ (Shih 2007: 171) while using arguments relying on the primordial dichotomy between China-centrism and rebellious Sinophone.

### Divergent perspectives

These paradoxes, raised both by scholars from within and outside China,<sup>5</sup> could be attributed to an exclusive and overly simplistic approach. It is therefore useful to invoke other proposals, largely marked by inclusive tactics. Their proponents pursue the same goal, namely to ‘dismantle the hegemonic focus of a ‘national’ Chinese literature’ (Tsu & Wang 2010: 6). But they take a different path to reject nationalist narratives.

They first seek to distinguish ‘sinophone’ from anglophone, francophone, or hispanophone by underlining their contextual differences. According to them, the ‘colonial history’ experienced by these different areas could hardly be applied to the Chinese-speaking world, whose specific and complex situation escapes the ‘classic definition of colonial phenomena’:

In some colonized or semi-colonized places, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Manchukuo, and Shanghai, Chinese remains the dominant language in daily life. Literary creation has not stopped, even though it has been oppressed and distorted, with remarkable results such as in Shanghai. In addition, in the last hundred years, due to political and economic factors, a large number of Chinese have migrated abroad, especially to Southeast Asia. They have built different kinds of communities, within which a Chinese linguistic and cultural milieu has been consciously developed. Despite all the family and national upheavals and changes, writing in Chinese remained a symbol of cultural (and not necessarily political) continuity for ethnic Chinese in these regions. Sinophone Malaysian literature is an emblematic example. (Wang 2006)

This line of reasoning is widely shared by both the academic community and those directly involved. For Tee Kim Tong, a Chinese-Malaysian critic based in Taiwan, the Chinese language is hardly a language of the former colonizer (Tee 2010: 81). In fact,

<sup>4</sup>For Shu-mei Shih (2007: 164), while Taiwan remains unchanged, Hong Kong after 1997 ‘may inevitably cease to be a Sinophone community on the margins of China and Chineseness’.

<sup>5</sup>See the two reviews of the above-mentioned essay by Shu-mei Shih: Zhang (2009) and Lu (2008). See also Zhu (2010).

they are reluctant to equate the recent threat posed by China's expansion with historical colonialism. It is quite true that contemporary China, both in its cartography and in its language policy towards minorities, inherits the territorial conquests of the Manchu era. But those migratory phenomena were partly triggered by the Manchu authorities' repression of the Chinese population. In these circumstances, the Chinese language that Chinese communities took with them into exile was primarily a means of survival and resistance to mainland domination and local hostility. Scholars are skeptical about the merits of a global history of Chinese colonization, in which 'continental colonialism', 'settlement colonialism', and '(im)migration' (Shih 2011: 711-715) would come together. They seem reluctant to apply a simple 'geopolitical' schema to a complex linguistic and cultural phenomenon, confusing the voluntary choice of the Chinese language in the diaspora with the imposition of the language in specific historical contexts, such as in Taiwan after the end of the Japanese occupation or the domination of Han culture over ethnic minorities within China.

In order to avoid ideological rigidity, researchers try to switch from laborious conceptual construction to empirical investigations, especially with regard to literary realities as well as collective or individual experiences. To this end, they would use the terms 'Sinophone literature' and 'global Chinese literature' indistinctly. Far from being a sign of hesitation, this choice is an effective way of taking into account the multiple parameters inherent in this field, rethinking it not as a fixed geometry but rather as a complex, shifting set of intertwined configurations. Indeed, the evolving plurality of the diaspora, alongside a China that is no longer monolithic, shifts and even deconstructs established boundaries and demarcations. Contemporary writers such as Hong Ying and Yang Nan travel relentlessly between London and China, while some Chinese-Malaysian writers managed to have a second home in Taiwan since the 1970s, as Jing Tsu and David Wang recall. Yan Geling lives between the United States and China, and writes bilingually in Chinese and English. Even older writers were already questioning the very basis of geographical anchorage, as illustrated by Nieh Hua-ling, who moved from Nanjing to the United States via Taipei before becoming very popular among mainland readers.

This mobility turns writers into 'moving agent(s)' (Tsu & Wang 2010: 3) who embed Sinophone production in a 'literary nomadism and global imaginary', in Wang's words. Unlike some scholars in Sinophone studies, Wang refuses to consider 'Chineseness' as a taboo subject, to avoid giving it a sacred power. To be sure, the concept has been criticized many times and its nationalistic and hegemonic intentions have been aptly deconstructed, as we have seen: however, Wang argues for a 'nomadic Chineseness' which, instead of being a core value serving state interests, allows for the examination of how, in contact with local realities, Chinese experiences and imaginations undergo displacement and transformation in various domains – ethnic, social, cultural, and gender. The concept ceases to be a scarecrow and becomes an inescapable neuralgic point, crossed by many tensions, and thus a place of production of meaning. *The Woman Warrior*, for example, written in English by Maxine Hong Kingston (1976), can be seen as a benchmark of Chinese American literature, significantly altering its status within the American literary system. The book's success would have been inconceivable without the ambivalence of a 'Chineseness' that the author both claims and rejects. By denouncing Chinese patriarchy and revisiting the legend of Fa Mulan, Hong Kingston deals, in a semi-autobiographical way, with the gender issue, so very

sensitive in the United States. The novel has been applauded as an original exploration of cultural and racial differences in a migratory matrix, through identifiable ‘Chinese codes’ that are rewritten or reimagined to challenge the established order, both Chinese and American. The constant interplay between subversion and recasting shifts the boundaries by overlapping the inside and the outside. This is by no means an isolated case of reciprocal inclusion: it can be found in the deceased Chinese-born poet Ye Si (Leung Ping-kuan), who grew up in Hong Kong. Considering himself an innate and eternal émigré, he argues that, far from being in a negative face-off, the island and the mainland are mutually intertwined: the island is within the mainland and vice versa (Ye Si 2006).

### The dislocation

Such an inclusive vision aims neither at a consensual eclecticism between Chinese literature in China and abroad, nor at a compromise with the Chinese superpower, as some might legitimately fear. On the contrary, it suggests another approach to resistance to hegemony, transforming the war of position around the center/periphery paradigm into a close fight within all types of empire, articulated around their visible and invisible, constituted or self-generated, forms. Engagement, in Said’s sense,<sup>6</sup> should not be seen as a forceful yet distant protest, but rather as a committed refusal, which Samuel Goldwyn expressed in his famous phrase ‘Include me out,’ taken up by the indomitable Eileen Chang (2010: 123-124). This oxymoronic *inclusive exclusiveness* would avoid falling into the imperialist logic of the status quo, and instead engage in an enterprise of deconstruction through the alliance of internal and external subversive forces and with an awareness of the need for self-examination. Sinophone studies would bring to light a real issue that goes beyond postcolonial categories such as ethnicity, culture, nationality, and language, by placing social and political issues at the heart of critical approaches.

From this point of view, the multiple transnational strands highlighted by scholars open up a whole range of possible comparative studies in an inter-Sinophone field. ‘Locatedness’, for example, which has been a motif for the construction of ‘place-based’ identities, is becoming a nomadic notion detached from topographical determinations. Abandoning ‘pathological narcissism’ (Shih 2011: 717), it plays a dynamic transnational role. Most scholars emphasize the nature and function of dialects in the life and writing of diaspora communities, as dialectal practices break away from the May 4, 1919 tradition, which established a common national language in mainland China, called *Putonghua* and known in the West as ‘Mandarin’. This Sinophone heteroglossia is seen as a clear mark of the marginality and diversity carried by the Sinophone communities, as opposed to the linguistic norms of mainland China. This invites comparative analysis as a similar dialectal marginality cannot be ignored within China, where there are ongoing tensions between regional particularities and the official language, especially in the domain of literature. Han Shaogong denounces in a lexicographical novel the impoverishment of the Hunan dialect following the

<sup>6</sup>Mentioned by Shih (2011: 717).

generalization and standardization of Mandarin (Han 1996).<sup>7</sup> Mo Yan, a Nobel Prize winner in Literature (2012) and a fervent defender of local cultures, published a short story entitled *Putonghua* (*Common Language*), depicting a tragedy caused by the authoritarian imposition of the standard language to irremediably dialect-speaking villagers (Mo Yan 2012). Jia Pingwa does not hesitate to use the Shaanxi dialect extensively in his works. These authors are not much different from Hong Kong writers such as Ye Si or Dung Kai-cheung (1997), who strive to defend the Cantonese language and insular memory, not to mention Chinese-Malaysian or other Sinophone literatures. In fact, there is a transnational resistance against institutional constraints and norms, aimed at protecting local identities against cultural standardization and at defending literary writing from the grammatical patterns imposed on writers. This is probably the meaning of the 'minor transnationalism' claimed by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (2005).

These transnational approaches are likely to enrich and renew postcolonial critique as applied to the Sinophone field, going beyond issues of race, ethnicity, and culture. In this regard, Sinophone literature has a self-reflexive dimension whose profound ambiguities deserve further exploration. Scholars draw attention to some unsuspected aspects. By examining Chinese American literature from the inside, they reveal the persistence of negative representations of African Americans in the writings of writers originally from Taiwan or China. Cultural or ethnic pride is transformed here into a sentiment with strong hints of American anti-black racism, whose stereotypes it appropriates. In some texts, Black characters embody social failure, as opposed to Chinese who stand out for their upward mobility and success in economic performance and integration (Wong 2013). The view of ethnic difference, far removed from the 'Yellow-Black solidarity' that Frank Chin called for, transforms the Chinese from outsiders to insiders, thereby separating them from African American communities. This is not only a matter of racial prejudice; it is also fuelled by social discrimination.

Sinophone literature, however, is not lacking in insight into this problematic attitude. Critical representations of Chinese ethnocentrism and racism have emerged, particularly among Sinophone Malaysian writers. Chang Kuei-hsing, who lives in Taiwan, denounces the behaviour of certain Chinese communities in their settlement history and through the complex role they played in South Sea colonialism. Their active collaboration in the policy of the British colonizers to train a local elite made them tyrannical masters on the coffee plantations. In his novel *Monkey Cup* (2000), the attitude of the Chinese emigrants in Sarawak and their descendants as rulers is on a par with that of the white colonizers towards the Dayaks, an aboriginal people of Borneo. This narrative dismantles the preconceptions that prevail in the history of this region by revealing 'layers of colonial crossings in the interactions between colonizer and colonized, perpetrator and victim' (Bernards 2013: 325). Such a work that warns against any form of domination, in the past as well as in the present, exercised by the old and new colonizers, plays a powerful transnational critical role beyond the diaspora, outside as well as inside China. It might be noted that it has inspired scholars in mainland China who are gradually, albeit timidly, becoming aware of the importance of these

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<sup>7</sup>The novel collects, in the manner of a dictionary, 115 'entries' on the life of the village of Maqiao, through the point of view of a young student who was sent there by the 'Down to the Countryside' movement.



heterodox and subversive narratives of Chinese émigrés, as well as their anti-colonial dimension (Zhu 2012). This example testifies to an unsuspected function of Sinophone productions, which could have an impact on China. Their vocation would no longer be limited to self-sufficient production or 'marginal' claims, but would aim at a reactive effect on the 'Empire' across the borders, in resonance with domestic forces and thanks to the stimulating experiences they carry.

Finally, it will be illusory and ineffective to map Sinophone literature on the basis of an antagonistic framework or a rigid cartography. It does not really matter whether A Lai, a Tibetan Chinese writer, belongs to the Sinophone category, or whether he is included in 'minor alliances'; what matters is to reveal and make heard an original and ambiguous 'voice' that is volatile, unidentifiable, and therefore free (Rojas 2013). Such a voice respects a literary taxonomy that does not correspond to any locatedness and transcends national and linguistic boundaries. It becomes an indeterminate gesture, which tends to create a space of writing/reading, subject to a perpetual displacement, as Édouard Glissant has shown, in global literary practice. This 'dislocation' characterizes Sinophone literature, which is scattered, fluctuating, and polyphonic. This is why the field of 'polysinophone' studies, changing and multiple, finally proves that it is irreducible to myth and resistant to the obsession of synthesis and excessive theorization. It requires, as Erich Auerbach (1969) wished, a greater philological attention, which could serve as a salutary safeguard against historical variability and the lure of totalization.

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