

## 7 Sinophone Modernity

### History, Culture, Geopolitics

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Pioneered by Shu-mei Shih, the “Sinophone” is an amended analytic category and a long-overdue alternative to the discourses of “Chinese” and “Chinese diaspora” that have traditionally defined Chinese studies. In her path-breaking book *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (2007), Shih defines the Sinophone world as “a network of places of cultural production outside of China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries.”<sup>1</sup> In a later essay, “Against Diaspora,” Shih offers a programmatic view of the parameters of Sinophone studies, which by 2010 she conceives as “the study of Sinitic-language cultures and communities on the margins of China and Chineseness.”<sup>2</sup> Finally, in her recent iteration titled “The Concept of the Sinophone,” Shih broadens her conception of Sinophone Studies as “the study of Sinitic-language cultures on the margins of geopolitical nation-states and their hegemonic productions.”<sup>3</sup> She qualifies that

Sinophone studies disrupts the chain of equivalence established, since the rise of nation-states, among language, culture, ethnicity, and nationality and explores the protean, kaleidoscopic, creative, and overlapping margins of China and Chineseness, America and Americanness, Malaysia and Malaysianess, Taiwan and Taiwanese, and so on, by a consideration of specific, local Sinophone texts, cultures, and practices produced in and from these margins.<sup>4</sup>

In short, Sinophone communities and cultures bear a historically contested and politically embedded relationship to China, similar to the relationships between the Anglophone world and Britain, the Francophone world and France, the Hispanophone world and Spain, the Lusophone world and Portugal, and so forth.

Although Sinophone studies emerged from literary and cultural studies, historians of China now face a similar pressing task to redefine their discipline in light of China’s rise in the twenty-first century. While world literature has moved to the forefront of comparative literary studies in

recent years, the historical discipline has recently witnessed different ventures into global and transnational history to reconsider China's role in the making of the modern world.<sup>5</sup> With that in mind, the goal of this chapter is to think through the concept of the Sinophone to help us move beyond the limitations of existing work on global China. To be fair, some historians have long resorted to the framework of diaspora and migration to understand the history and culture of overseas Chinese communities.<sup>6</sup> Shih's conceptualization of the Sinophone, though, is a decisive riposte against the diaspora framework: To say that diaspora has an end date is to recognize that one cannot still be called diasporic after long periods of localization and heterogenization in regional communities.<sup>7</sup> This builds on the idea that what we mean by the word "Chinese" in Chinese literature, history, culture, politics, and so on tends to conflate nation, ethnicity, language, and culture in what Shih calls a "chain of equivalence." The nested agenda is to move beyond national categories, and the Sinophone does so by turning our attention toward another unit of coherence around language and text, sound, and script.<sup>8</sup> In this light, how can historians and other critics come to terms with the heuristic value of (or the lack thereof) using the Sinophone as a historiographic lens to think about China's global past?

In her definitive introduction to *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, Shih identifies three main historical processes whereby the formation of Sinophone communities and cultures have come into being.<sup>9</sup> First, Shih builds on the insight of the field of New Qing history to draw attention to Qing continental colonialism. This continent-oriented modality of colonialism exceeds our familiar notion of overseas expansion that characterizes much of modern European (and Japanese) empires. The map of the contemporary People's Republic of China is directly inherited from the Qing, which doubled its size in the Qianlong reign (1735–96) in the second half of the eighteenth century and brought Xinjiang, Mongolia, and Tibet under its territorial sovereignty. Second, Shih draws on the case of the Nationalist government's relocation and reestablishment of hegemony in Taiwan to discuss settler colonialism. The Nationalist Party's colonialism can be understood in terms of the way it remains a hegemonic polity in Taiwan—instead of leaving the region—and continues to proclaim itself as the genuine "homeland" of Chinese culture. Third, Shih points to migration as the third historical pillar of Sinophone communities and cultures. The examples of Southeast Asia and Asian America are telling in this regard. People conventionally considered as "Chinese descents" in these regions are often trapped in the normative workings of dual hegemonies. Because they are often sandwiched between assimilation/naturalization in the new country on the one hand and the presumed loyalty to the mother homeland on the other (which speaks to the limits of diaspora again), a critical Sinophone perspective is useful to unpack that tension and

surveillance and to give them a “voice” while maneuvering through those imposed hegemonies.

The Sinophone framework has taken the field by storm because it provides a rich theoretical rubric for examining the diverse origins and audiences for cultural production related to Chinese-speaking peoples and communities worldwide. Building on the theoretical and historical foundations established by Shih, this chapter provides an overview of how cultural critics and historians have conceptualized the problem of Chineseness in the past and how Shih’s notion of the Sinophone makes an important intervention by moving us beyond the limitations of these earlier approaches. I will conclude by focusing on an example of cinematic production where the geopolitics of gender and sexuality intersects with Sinophone cultural formations. The classic film directed by Stanley Kwan, *Lan Yu* (2001), reroutes the cultural history of contemporary Sinophone politics through a decisively queer lens in which sexual marginality assumes the center of spotlight. Through a queer and historical refraction, my analysis will demonstrate the broader disciplinary and geopolitical significance of focusing on the making of what I call Sinophone modernity.

### Chineseness as a Cultural Construct

Before Shih’s coinage of the term Sinophone, scholars have long proposed the idea of Chineseness as a cultural problem. They variously wrestled with the construct of Chineseness as constituting a cultural phenomenon outside China proper. Flourishing and consolidating in the 1990s, the origins of this critical attention can be broadly organized into two groups. The first group of scholars reimagined Chineseness away from a political and toward a cultural spectrum, but they tended to construe China still as the center of the new spectrum. Building on but also extending from this model, the second group of scholars provided penetrating insights into challenging the tendency among the first group to reify China-centrism in their initial formulations of cultural Chineseness.

The essay that established the main contours of discussion and debates over the concept of “cultural China” is none other than Wei-ming Tu’s “Cultural China: The Periphery at the Center” (1991).<sup>10</sup> Born in Kuming, Yunan, Tu grew up in Taiwan and obtained his doctorate from Harvard University in 1968. Trying to decenter political China as a monolithic center, Tu proposes that what he calls “cultural China” can be examined in terms of three symbolic universes. The first symbolic universe consists of mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore—that is, the societies populated predominantly by cultural and ethnic Chinese. The second symbolic universe, according to Tu, consists of Chinese communities throughout the world, including a politically significant

minority in Malaysia (roughly one-third) and a numerically negligible minority in the United States. Of all three characterized by Tu, this universe is perhaps closest in resembling what various scholars have come to call the Chinese “diaspora,” referring to those people who have settled in scattered communities far from the ancestral homeland of China. The third symbolic universe comprises a more culturally diffused population, including those scholars, teachers, journalists, industrialists, traders, entrepreneurs, and writers who try to understand China intellectually and introduce their conceptions of China to their own linguistic communities. According to Tu’s formulation, in this last symbolic universe, foreign journalists and Sinologists outside China (including Tu himself as he taught at Princeton, Berkeley, and Harvard between 1968 and 2001) have exercised a great deal of power in determining the scholarly agenda for cultural China as a whole.

Eight years later, historian Gungwu Wang published the seminal essay, “Chineseness: The Dilemmas of Place and Practice” (1999), which reconceptualizes the focus of scholarly discussion on cultural China by crystallizing the concept of *Chineseness*.<sup>11</sup> Wang’s purpose is twofold. First, he wishes to overturn a predominant conception of “overseas Chinese” that includes Chinese people living in Taiwan and Hong Kong. For Wang, neither the Taipei government nor Hong Kong people consider themselves as overseas Chinese, and even when the concept of *huaqiao* (華僑, overseas Chinese) is deployed in various political contexts, what it indexes is a long history dating back to the decade before the founding of the Republic in 1911 (as we know, both Kang Youwei and Sun Yat-sen mobilized *huaqiao* and relied heavily on their support around the world to either reform or overthrow the Qing). Wang’s second objective is precisely to displace that model of *huaqiao*. In doing so, he reconsiders the history of Chinese people in four different cities: Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, and San Francisco, and posits the following spectrum:

In the cultural spectrum of Chineseness, the Shanghai Chinese would be at one end and the Singapore and San Francisco Chinese at the other, with the Hong Kong Chinese somewhere in between. The cultural gaps between Shanghai and Hong Kong, and those between them and the Singapore-San Francisco variety, are uneven and difficult to measure. But all Chinese faced modern transformations in this [20<sup>th</sup>] century, and the idea of Chineseness was exposed to the modern forces of international capitalism.<sup>12</sup>

Wang justifies the spread of this “cultural spectrum of Chineseness” on the basis of two vectors: recognizability of Chineseness and political identities/practices (including resistance to Chineseness).<sup>13</sup> In this sense, Hong Kong’s handover in 1997 may remind us of Shanghai’s past, as Shanghai becomes a model of modern Chinese identity for Hong Kong

to emulate or resist. Or Hong Kong people may choose what version of Chinese history and/or identity they wish to embrace. Notably, Wang's definition of cultural Chineseness remains imprinted by the degree of affinity or similarity with the cosmopolitan culture of mainland China. Both Tu's and Wang's work laid a crucial foundation for Sinophone interventions in the twenty-first century, because they envisioned "Chinese" in a way that is at once pluralist, synthetic, and *location-based* and pressured the term's very parameters by incorporating the lived experiences of Chinese people living outside mainland China.

Starting in the mid-1990s, scholars began to express unease with the genealogy of cultural Chineseness established by Tu and Wang. This second group of scholars provided different theoretical perspectives to undo the China-centrism encapsulated in this genealogy, especially the smooth monolithic continuum of cultural Chineseness spiraling outward from mainland China as established by Tu and Wang. A pioneer in the field of Asian American studies, Ling-chi Wang published the essay "The Structure of Dual Domination: Toward a Paradigm for the Study of the Chinese Diaspora in the United States" in 1995.<sup>14</sup> In the essay, Wang refines the theoretical construct of Chineseness by identifying two, not one, geopolitical discursive hegemonies—the United States and China. Wang suggests that we can better understand the problem of Chineseness from two interrelated angles: (1) the ways in which American discourses on Chinese Americans have perpetuated an "assimilationist" model that reflects domestic racial exclusion and oppression and (2) how policies in twentieth-century China and Taiwan have exerted "extraterritorial rule over the Chinese diaspora," which the nation views as external colonies on the basis of ethnicity. Bringing together these two viewpoints, Wang notes the glaring lack of interaction between ethnic studies research and Chinese diaspora studies, and his call for more in-depth dialogues between these fields represents precisely some of the organizing principles of Sinophone studies. Above all, Wang's analysis diverges from previous models (e.g., Tu and Wang) by locating two geopolitical centers that exert hegemony over the sources of cultural and racial signification. Moving away from an ethnicity- or nation-based definition of culture, Sinophone studies similarly provides a platform for understanding the experience of Chinese-speaking peoples across the Pacific in a unifying framework.

Drawing on biographical experience to diversify—if not debunk altogether—the meaning of Chineseness is the harbinger of the analytic method used by many scholars belonging to this second group. Another exemplary effort can be seen in the work of Ien Ang. Like Wang, Ang has a personal investment in the denaturalization of Chineseness. Ang was born into a so-called Peranakan Chinese family in Indonesia, a country that has long treated its longstanding and economically significant Chinese minority as a problem (as, of course, is the case throughout

Southeast Asia with the exception of Singapore). Since the 1960s, being Chinese in Indonesia has been a profoundly ambivalent experience, and in Ang's case, such experience is fraught with feelings of rejection (by the majority of Indonesians) and alienation (from an identity that was first and foremost an imposed one). Ang's experience is further defined by the need to come to terms with the fact that her Chineseness remained a constant even after she had relocated to the Netherlands, where she spent her teenage and young adult years, and later, after moving to Australia (where she has been living and working since 1991). So, the question of Chineseness is very much a matter of subjective experience for Ang, not just a theoretical concern.<sup>15</sup>

Ang's interrogation of the very idea of Chineseness culminated in the late 1990s. According to Ang,

There is an instinctiveness to our (sometimes reluctant) identification as Chinese that eludes any rationalization and defies any doubt. Yet it is a fraught and ambivalent Chineseness, one that is to all intents and purposes completely severed from the nominal center, China. [...] so what meaning does the notion of 'Chinese origin' still carry?<sup>16</sup>

Posing that question in a seminal essay titled "Can One Say No to Chineseness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm" (1998), Ang builds a direct critique of the concept of "cultural China" propounded by Tu Wei-ming: While Tu suggests re-centering the periphery to grasp the essence of "cultural China," Ang argues that

in this ongoing preoccupation with the center, the periphery not only reproduces unintentionally its own profound entanglement with the former; it also, by this very preoccupation, effects its own unwarranted internal homogenization and limits the much more radical potential that a diasporic perspective allows. In other words, while the aim would seem to be to rescue Chineseness from China, [...] the rescue operation implies the projection of a new, alternative center, a decentered center, whose name is *cultural* China, but China nevertheless.<sup>17</sup>

Ang's critique is intended to address the logical fallacy that scholarly obsession with China has thus far privileged China's problems as uniquely Chinese. This Chinese uniqueness, in other words, lays absolute claim to the loyalty of Chinese in all parts of the world, but something that Ang's analysis pushes back against. This is similar to Wang's earlier discussion about the need to disperse the centrality of analytic focus on China when one comes down to the problem of cultural Chineseness. Ang's approach thus shares the agenda of Sinophone studies to deconstruct Chineseness

by severing it from the “surprising return to cultural essentialism—the ghost of the ‘truly Chinese.’”<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps one of the most provocative essays on the problem of Chineseness has been Rey Chow’s “On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem” (1998).<sup>19</sup> In this essay, Chow tackles Chineseness less as a cultural or historical construct, but as a disciplinary problematic. By this, Chow refers to the fact that with every major new theoretical trend, there can be a “Chinese” supplement, and this Chinese supplement amounts to nothing less or more than an ethnic supplement that promises a certain degree of non-Western recognition but at the same time re-ghettoizes itself by way of ethnic, national labels (so only a China-specialist can speak of Chinese feminist theory, for instance). Chow writes,

Hence, whereas it would be acceptable for authors dealing with specific cultures, such as those of Britain, France, the United States, or the ancient Greco-Roman world, to sue generic titles such as *Women Writers and the Problem of Aesthetics*, *Gender Trouble*, *Otherness and Literary Language*, *The Force of Law*, *The Logic of Sense*, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, *Tales of Love*, and so on, authors dealing with non-Western cultures are often expected to mark their subject matter with words such as Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Korean, Vietnamese, and their like. While the former are thought to deal with intellectual or theoretical issues, the latter, even when they are dealing with intellectual or theoretical issues, are compulsorily required to characterize such issues with *geopolitical realism*, to stabilize and fix their intellectual and theoretical content by way of a national, ethnic, or cultural location.<sup>20</sup>

By extending Chow’s argument and relating it to the objectives of Sinophone studies, we can reasonably ask: Have Sinologists not worked toward more fixation, stabilization, and essentialization of the thing that they are said to unpack in depth—Chinese culture? Looking at Chineseness as a disciplinary and theoretical problem, then, brings me to the growing body of literature on migration, comparative, and circulation history, all of which have claimed to recast China’s past in global terms. By delving into this body of social scientific literature in greater depth, we can better grasp the kind of interventions—cultural, historical, theoretical, and interdisciplinary—that a Sinophone perspective promises to deliver.

### **Chineseness as a Historical Problem**

It is important to note that, prior to the theorization of the Sinophone, there had been a long tradition of treating “Chineseness” as more fungible and fluid than homogenous and Sinocentric in the social sciences. Anthropologist Aihwa Ong’s investigation of Chinese diasporic



subjectivities is an important example. In *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (1999), Ong writes,

the contemporary practices and values of diasporan Chinese are characteristic of larger questions of displacement, travel, capital accumulation, and other transnational processes that affect large numbers of late-twentieth-century subjects (who are geographically “in place” and *displaced*). Over the past few decades, the multiple and shifting status of “Chineseness” has been formed and embedded within the processes of global capitalism—production, trade, consumption, mobility, and dislocation/relocation—and subjected to various modes of governmentality that fix them in place or disperse them in space.<sup>21</sup>

By arguing that overseas Chinese adopt a flexible notion of citizenship across different regions of the Pacific world, Ong is really echoing some of the arguments that she made in the introduction to an earlier volume that she coedited with Donald Nonini, *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (1997). In their introduction to the volume, Nonini and Ong classify modern Chinese transnationalism as a “third culture,” a concept they borrowed from Mike Featherstone.<sup>22</sup> By “third cultures,” they mean those porous products of globalization associated with late capitalism that sift through geopolitical boundaries of nation-states. In their formulation, modern Chinese transnationalism can be considered one such third culture because it resembles “an emergent global form that moreover provides alternative visions in late capitalism to Western modernity and generates new and distinctive social arrangements, cultural discourses, practices, and subjectivities.”<sup>23</sup>

Beyond theoretical framing, Ong and Nonini define the historical parameters of modern Chinese transnationalism by describing it as “a recent global phenomenon with historical roots in the premodern trade systems, European colonialism, and more recent American geopolitical domination of the Pacific.”<sup>24</sup> (In this, their argument works well with Rey Chow’s decentering of the “Middle Kingdom” as the ultimate meaningful referent for any understanding of Chinese diaspora.<sup>25</sup>) By grounding Chinese transnationalism, “in the geopolitical context of late-twentieth century Asian modernity,” their work adds greater refinement to Arif Dirlik’s deconstruction of the Pacific Rim as a transregional cultural space of Asian capitalism.<sup>26</sup> Again, in stressing that they “do not thereby accord China a privileged ontological or epistemological position,” Ong and Nonini have provided a model for studying Chinese transnationalism that anticipates the “Sinophone” concept to be developed later by Shih although with an underexplored understanding of Sinophone’s historical parameters that date to no earlier than the 1980s.



The historical parameters of what I call Sinophone modernity are perhaps best defined through simulating the chronotypology of *the entire postwar period*. The history of the Sinophone world is essentially a history of constructions of Chineseness that exceeds the traditional historiographies of modern China and the Chinese diaspora.<sup>27</sup> If one insists on bringing the construction of Chineseness to bear on the history of Chinese diaspora, Sinophonicity would find its articulation most meaningful only when continental China is not assigned an ontologically and epistemologically privileged position. Philip Kuhn's historical study, *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (2008), is an interesting example of this problem. By insisting on the presence of over four centuries of social and economic "corridors" between overseas Chinese and China the homeland, Kuhn's analysis inevitably succumbs to a kind of "Sinocentrism" that is unwilling to let go of the Chinese roots of those people living abroad who, though emigrated from China, nonetheless have established overseas communities that are no longer identical to mainland Chinese culture and have had to deal with various measures of state and social pressure (such as the pronounced anti-Sinitism in subregions of Southeast Asia following the Pacific War).<sup>28</sup> However, diaspora, as Shih has reminded us, "has an expiration date; one cannot say one is diasporic after three hundred years, and everyone should be given a chance to become a local."<sup>29</sup> Kuhn is certainly correct in highlighting the worldwide contribution of overseas Chinese to the establishment of a new Chinese Republic in the early twentieth century. This supports his argument that "the modern history of Chinese emigration and the modern history of China are really aspects of the same socio-historical process."<sup>30</sup> But I would insist that this is not a historically continuous process, and the rupture is most evident in the postwar decades. By the 1950s, the relationship between the PRC and its peripheries came to reflect the broader geopolitical cultural contours of the Cold War.<sup>31</sup> This suggests that Kuhn's taken-for-granted nominal categorization of places like Taiwan and Hong Kong as "frontier enclaves" of China obscures more than what it illumines regarding these regions' intricate relationship to global integration.

In addition to migration, the field of global history centrally features the work of economic historians, and in fact it was very much initially driven by the study of the comparative history of modern world economy. The most important field-shifting monograph in this regard is Kenneth Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of Modern World Economy* (2000).<sup>32</sup> *The Great Divergence* is one of the rare books that have invited historians outside of the China field to learn about Chinese history and actually engage in debates with China scholars. Yet, if economic historians such as Pomeranz rarely engage in constructive dialogues with postcolonial cultural critics like Chow, at

least what I am suggesting by bringing both sets of literature to bear on Sinophone inquiries is that to a large extent, what Pomeranz's book accomplished precisely resolves the disciplinary ghettoization of China studies discussed by Chow.

It is impossible to do justice here to Pomeranz's sophisticated work, which involves a deep understanding of multivariate analysis to grasp the economic comparisons meaningfully. But for our purpose, it might be useful to borrow from the title of Peter Perdue's review of the book, "lucky England, normal China."<sup>33</sup> This phrase alludes to the fact that there has been a longstanding tradition in Western scholarly thought that tries to explain "the Great Divergence" between Asia and Europe. This arguably goes way back to Marx and Weber, and is subsequently revised or refined by the work of scholars like David Landes, Immanuel Wallerstein, and, perhaps the most problematic of all, Niall Ferguson.<sup>34</sup> Take Ferguson's *Civilization* as an example. He attributes this divergence to the West's development of six "killer apps" largely missing elsewhere in the world: competition, science, the rule of law, medicine, consumerism, and the work ethic.<sup>35</sup> The problem is that when historians try to explain "the rise of the West," frequently read as why the Industrial Revolution took place in Europe by economic historians, they fall back on notions such as proto-Industrialization, mercantile culture, consumption pattern, the Enlightenment (with that comes classical liberal philosophy, modern science, technology, and medicine, etc.), Christianity, and so on. Of course, a similar debate had already taken place among historians of science, which famously led Joseph Needham to compile his impressive series at Cambridge to address the question of why the Scientific Revolution did not take place in China. And yet the kind of explanations historians come up with tend to be nothing more than self-referential and circular: Modern science did not emerge in China due to the lack of mercantile culture, or modern science finally took root in China thanks to the spread of Western missionaries.<sup>36</sup>

Pomeranz's work rectifies this by suggesting that first, looking at the size of Europe and China, it is more reasonable to compare Northwest Europe to the Jiangnan region specifically. This concentration on the Yangtze delta region as the caliber of comparison can be traced back to the earlier work of William Skinner on socioeconomic macroregional cores and peripheries (there are nine macroregions in twentieth-century China, according to Skinner). Second, Pomeranz shows that when all different measures and standardizations are taken into consideration, China and Europe faced similar threats of environmental challenges by the end of the eighteenth century. This makes it unconvincing to make a case for Europe's exceptionalism before the nineteenth century as a way to justify for "the rise of the West." Above all, Pomeranz attributes the "great divergence" to two particular historical contingencies: convenient coal supplies

and access to the abundance of the New World. Therefore, Pomerantz concludes, it was England's *contingent* access to geological resources that significantly reversed the ecological fate the region was heading.

It is also important to note that Pomerantz's work is not the first that tries to rectify the prevailing Eurocentrism in global economic history. For example, one thinks of the work of R. Bin Wong, Aundre Gunder Frank, among others.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, critics have raised serious criticisms of Pomerantz's work, including discussions of his data and measurement. But one of the most trenchant critiques has come from South Asia specialists such as Prasannan Parthasarathi, who published a review article in *Past and Present* to argue for bringing in other parts of the non-West (including South and Southeast Asia) to complicate our understanding.<sup>38</sup> For instance, a focus on cotton-supply may drastically alter the kind of "reciprocal comparison" that Pomerantz purports to do, as cotton may have come from Egypt, India, and sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>39</sup>

Building on these comments and critiques, I want to make the subtle point here that Pomerantz's explanation for the "great divergence" relies on such seemingly neutral terms as "reciprocal comparisons" and "contingencies," which are concepts cherished by historians. But as we all know, the emphasis on coal and Europe's colonization of the Americas does not help to explain "the rise of Asia" in the two centuries after the "great divergence." The historiographical promise of Sinophone analysis, then, throws light on the question of how to take seriously China's rise as a global superpower since the late eighteenth century: Such historical formation must be conceived of as an amalgamation of continental colonialism (Tibet, Xinjiang, Mongolia), settler colonialism (Taiwan), and overseas expansion (other parts of the world)—an attribute not typically captured in the work of economic historians.

In addition to migration history and comparative history, the literature on global China has also been enriched by studies of translation and circulation. One of the major texts in this regard is Lydia Liu's edited collection, *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations* (2000).<sup>40</sup> Like most of her other works, Liu (and her collaborators) displays great sensitivity to the ways in which a presumed equivalence between seemingly incommensurable cultures had been established historically.<sup>41</sup> Note that this approach works best in comparing and contrasting Chinese versus Western cultures (often mediated by Japan), so there is a tendency in this mode of scholarship to reinforce the China versus the West binary static formulation not unlike the problem in comparative economic history. Another key text that goes some way to remedy this binary is Eric Tagliacozzo and Wen-Chin Chang's edited volume, *Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia* (2011).<sup>42</sup> Here, by zooming in on the Sino-Southeast Asian circuit/network, the contributors argue for the centrality of the role of commodities (things are as important as the people carrying and

operating them) in the history of capitalism and mercantile culture. The volume is especially compelling in light of its *longue durée* approach, but it comes with the price of sidelining the significance of language, discourse, representation, routes of cultural translation, deconstruction, and what Lydia Liu calls meaning-as-value. These two volumes invite Sinophone historians to pay attention to not only the *avenue* of the mobility of people, ideas, and material objects, but also how such trans-border movements have formed the very basis for the way historical and cultural identities change over time.

### Queer Sinophone Modernity

How do Sinophone studies, postcolonial theory, and contemporary Chinese history work together? Here, queer critique provides a valuable tool for bridging these seemingly disparate fields. To demonstrate the Sinophone approach that this chapter has advocated, I wish to conclude with a rereading of one of the most celebrated films in which homosexual experience in the PRC is depicted, *Lan Yu* (2001). In addition to its queer thematic focus, *Lan Yu* is also instructive for our purpose due to its plot employment of the Tiananmen Square incident, perhaps one of the most controversial topics in contemporary Chinese history. My goal here is to zoom out from this example of queer affective representationism to illustrate the broader significance of Sinophone historical and cultural analyses and the kind of historiographical interventions that build on but also extend some of the theoretical formulations discussed so far in this chapter.<sup>43</sup>

In an article that appeared as part of the 2010 special issue of *positions* on transnationalism and queer Chinese politics, Asian American specialist David Eng argues that what the film *Lan Yu* conveys is a “queer space of China.” This is a space occupied by two contrasting figurations of political economy that have helped shape China’s discrepant modernity—as best personified and embodied by the two protagonists: Handong (“the sugar daddy”) and Lan Yu (“the boy favorite”)—one capitalist, the other socialist.<sup>44</sup> However, if we reread the film through the lens of queer Sinophonicity, the transnational logic of the film’s *biography* according to which its production, marketing, and consumption have operated raises poignant yet previously often overlooked questions: What does it mean for mainland Chinese homosexuality/queerness to be represented through the work of a Hong Kong-based director, Stanley Kwan? How and why does the circulation of “desire” finds official legitimization and international success in a Sinophone Hong Kong-based milieu of visibility (in other words, on the margin of “Chinese” filmic culture) but not within an enclosed mainland China-based film industrial nexus? (*Lan Yu* has been banned from public screening in the PRC.) In other words, how has public and global appreciation of mainland

Chinese queer affect been cultivated through a “refracted” lens (Chinese queer affect as refracted through Hong Kong’s transnational staging)? As these questions make evident, even a compelling reading like Eng’s still considers *Lan Yu* very much from a “postsocialist China” perspective as opposed to, say, a “minor transnational China” or—what I am proposing here—“queer Sinophone” angle.

Rather than viewing Handong and Lan Yu as representative of an ongoing ideological struggle *within* the PRC’s aspiration for a socialist modernity and its contemporary investments in a neoliberal capitalist world order, a queer Sinophone reading might strategically bracket Handong, a figurative embodiment of Sinophone communities, from Lan Yu, a symbolic character of socialist China. Indeed, the relationship between the PRC and Sinophone communities is vividly captured early on in the film by the very first verbal communication between the two characters. After watching a program that introduces the city of Los Angeles on TV, Lan Yu asked, “have you been to America?” to which Handong later replied, “You come over; I have something for you.” This scene implies that Lan Yu’s impression of the Western world is entirely mediated by what is available in Chinese mass media, and his aspirations for them are able to be realized here and now, through his affair with Handong. If Handong’s invitation is reflective of Sinophone communities’ self-awareness of possessing something that the PRC lacks, their very concrete alliances—economic, political, and not just ideological—with countries such as the United States, not necessarily in a hegemonic sense but in terms of minoritizing cultures, are suitably captured in this Sinophone rereading. The relationship between Lan Yu and Handong, in other words, no longer simply denotes a filmic representation of a “queer space of China,” but registers an unruly tension of cultural and visual (dis)identification that transcends the ideological and even geopolitical contours of (post)socialist China.

This strategy of rereading *Lan Yu* must be identified with the broader horizon of Sinophone production because its epistemological-historical pillars come from outside the geopolitical China proper, including the legacies of British postcolonialism; American neo-imperialism; the re-contextualization of the Republican state’s scientific globalism; and Hong Kong’s cultural (which was, in turn, driven by economic) affiliations with other subregions of Cold War East Asia, such as Taiwan and Japan. As it is well known, between the end of the Korean War in the mid-1950s and the reopening of the Chinese mainland in the late 1970s, Japan, Okinawa, South Korea, and Taiwan became US protectorates. “One of the lasting legacies of this period,” according to the cultural critic Kuan-Hsing Chen, “is the installation of the anticommunism-pro-Americanism structure in the capitalist zone of East Asia, whose overwhelming consequences are still with us today.”<sup>45</sup> Inherent in the concept of the Sinophone lies a more calculated awareness

of the implicit role played by communist China in the Cold War structuration of transnational East Asia.

Considering *Lan Yu* as a vivid articulation of queer Sinophonicity rather than a monotonous representation of Chinese homosexuality is also instructive in four other regards. First, this Sinophone reading pushes postcolonial studies beyond its overwhelming preoccupation with “the West.” Drawing on empirical examples mainly from the South Asian context, postcolonial scholars have problematized the West either by deconstructing any variant of its essentialist invocation or by provincializing (or de-universalizing) the centripetal forces of its greatest imperial regimes, such as Europe and America. Naoki Sakai’s essay “Modernity and Its Critique: The Problem of Universalism and Particularism” (1988) and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “Provincializing Europe: Postcoloniality and the Critique of History” (1992) are perhaps the most representative studies of each of these approaches, respectively.<sup>46</sup> At other times, critics have attempted to recuperate nativist examples from the histories of third world nations. Certain modern concepts often understood as imposed from the outside and sustained by the colonial system, they argue, were actually already internal to the indigenous civilization. The work of Ashis Nandy is exemplary in this regard.<sup>47</sup> But these otherwise brilliant efforts often risk performing “reverse,” “self,” or “re-”Orientalism. Simply put, the delineation of an intrinsically Asian (or non-Westernized) order of things actually reinforces the Orientalist framework it claims to exceed. More to the point, the West is analytically deployed as a universalized imaginary Other in all of these three strategies. By perpetually being *treated as method* in historical narration and cultural criticism, the West continues to function as “an opposing entity, a system of reference, an object from which to learn, a point of measurement, a goal to catch up with, an intimate enemy, and sometimes an alibi for serious discussion and action.”<sup>48</sup>

On the contrary, viewing the transnational significance of *Lan Yu* as an historical event of Sinophone production repositions our compass—and redraws our map—by re-centering the non-West, Asia, and China more specifically. In his provocative book, *Asia as Method*, Kuan-Hsing Chen invites postcolonial scholars to “deimperialize” their own mode of investigation by moving beyond the fixation of “the West” as a sole historical-theoretical caliber of civilizational, national, imperial, colonial, and Cold War predicaments.<sup>49</sup> In his words,

In Asia, the deimperialization question cannot be limited to a reexamination of the impacts of Western imperialism invasion, Japanese colonial violence, and U.S. neoimperialist expansion, but must also include the oppressive practices of the Chinese empire. Since the status of China has shifted from an empire to a big country, how should China position itself now? In what new ways can it interact

with neighboring countries? Questions like these can be productively answered only through deimperialized self-questioning, and that type of reflexive work has yet to be undertaken.<sup>50</sup>

My grounding of *Lan Yu* in the frameworks of queer historicism and Sinophone postcolonial theory can be regarded as an attempt to perform this type of reflexive work. The genealogical trajectory from the Republican-era sexological discourse of homosexuality (as an epistemic modality in global circulations) to the geopolitics of filmic representations of queer desire in Sinophone Hong Kong shows that the Cold War “mediates the continuity between the colonial and postcolonial history of East Asia.”<sup>51</sup> *Lan Yu* is taken here to be both a medium of cultural representation and a unique form of transregional cinematic meaning-dissemination. The dispersed circuits of knowledge that saturate the meaning-making of the film refocus our attention from the “influence” of Western concepts and ideas to the inter- and intra-Asian regional dynamics of subjectivity condition—from denaturalizing the West to provincializing China, Asia, and the Rest.

Second, by provincializing China, the Sinophone framework enables us to see and think beyond the conventions of China studies.<sup>52</sup> In terms of the substantive objects of study, a growing number of Sinophone scholars have already ventured into multiple place-based analyses of literary and cinematic examples across the Pacific, from Southeast Asia to Hong Kong to Taiwan to America.<sup>53</sup> These localized examples in literature and film—in light of their authorial background or artistic form and content even—are rarely invoked in Chinese studies, Asian American studies, or other traditional (area studies) disciplines.<sup>54</sup> Sinophone studies, as “the ‘study of China’ that transcends China,” to borrow the phrase from Mizoguchi Yuzo, therefore acknowledges unforeseen possibilities in Sinological practice in the aftermath of its Cold War structuration.<sup>55</sup>

In the spirit of marking out “a space in which unspoken stories and histories may be told, and to recognize and map the historically constituted cultural and political effects of the cold war,”<sup>56</sup> my reading is intended to raise a series of inter-related questions situated at the interstices of various categorical assumptions that continue to haunt a “China-centered perspective.”<sup>57</sup> Is the kind of homosexual experience represented in *Lan Yu* “Chinese” or “Western” in nature? Homosexuality in whose sense of the term? Is it a foreign import, an expression (and thus internalization) of foreign imperialism, or a long-standing indigenous practice in a new light? How can we take seriously the administrative reordering of Hong Kong (where the director is from) in the late twentieth century, which took place not long before the film was made? Is it possible to speak of an alternative “Chinese modernity” that challenges the familiar socialist narrative of twentieth-century Chinese history? Which China is



alluded to by the various notions of Chineseness that are depicted in the film? Is the handover of Hong Kong to the PRC in 1997 another form of colonial (and imperial) domination? Evidently, the complexity of the history far exceeds the common terms used to describe the historical characteristics of “postcolonial” Hong Kong (or Taiwan for that matter). To conceive of the PRC in relation to Hong Kong circa 1997 as a regime from the outside or a colonial government only partially accounts for its proto-Chineseness or extra-Chineseness, and precisely because of the lack of a precedent and analogous situations, it is all the more difficult to historicize, with neat categorical imperatives or ways of periodization, the social backdrop against which and the conditions under which non-normative sexualities are conceptualized through a refracted modality of interregional cultural production.

Third, understood as “a way of looking at the world,” the epistemological rendition of the Sinophone as “an interruptive worldview” not only breaks down the China-versus-the West binary, but it also specifies the most powerful type, nature, and feature of transnationalism whose interest-articulation must lie beyond the hegemonic constructions of the nation-state. According to Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, the transnational “can be less scripted and more scattered” and “is not bound by the binary of the local and the global and can occur in national, local, or global spaces across different and multiple spatialities and temporalities.”<sup>58</sup> If “China” and “Chineseness” had indeed evolved over the course of the history of (homo)sexuality from sexological discourse to the growing influence of late capitalist archetypes of biopolitics, the changes over time that we witness in this history have less to do with the “coming out” of sexual minorities per se than with the shifting transnationalism of queer Chinese cultures: from the growing global hegemony of Western conceptions of lifehood and sexuality in *major* transnational China to the rhizomic interactions of geopolitical forces, historical conditions, and cross-cultural contours in *minor* transnational China.

Although I have used postcolonial Hong Kong as the exemplary frame of queer Sinophone (re)production, its implications obviously extend beyond this particular historical context. By invoking the notion of minor transnational China, I hope to garner more in-depth dialogues on the potential *horizontal* connections in queer cultural, social, and political production across postcolonial locations such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and possibly even South Korea. What I have been suggesting is that in order to capture the history of queer sexuality in modern China in all of its complexity, one needs to account for the epistemological origins of our common sexual categories as much as the transnational context of cultural representation that does not reify the normativity of China-centrism, to chronicle events and processes of change as much as to theorize the genealogy of sexuality and the

historicity of queerness. If our perspective is flexible enough to vacillate between the vertical and the horizontal, transnationalism appears to be neither always nor necessarily a top-down homogenizing force, but can very much operate as a bottom-up heterogenizing vector. One of the ensuing shortcomings of queer theory lies in its frequent inability to offer meaningful vocabularies that cut across both the global and the local to adequately register the queer otherness of non-Western cultures. But perhaps the problem also lies in the predominant mode of analysis in queer studies that oftentimes lacks in-depth genealogical insights. On such topics as the evolving meaning and transregional politics of Chineseness and gender modernity, queer studies can benefit from a more historically sensitive approach to situating the roots of global queer formations in the intercultural articulations of desire and the rhizomic interactions of minor transnational cultures “from below.”

This brings us to the last, yet perhaps the most important, contribution of the Sinophone methodology: the ability to appreciate the formation of a Sinophone modernity that began to distinguish itself from and gradually replaced an older apparatus of colonial modernity in the course of twentieth-century Chinese history. The year 1989 is a pivotal turning point for reflecting on the historical development of late twentieth-century Chinese and Sinophone cultures.<sup>59</sup> The PRC government’s military action to suppress the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 has been widely condemned by the international community. Taking place two years after the lifting of the martial law in Taiwan, the incident has been taken to be a direct reflection of the sharp divergence in democratic characteristics of various Chinese-speaking communities (e.g., across the Taiwan strait). If the Cold War structure of East Asian capitalist zones had indeed remained intact by as late as the 1990s, it would still be heuristically useful to periodize contemporary Chinese history along this temporal axis.<sup>60</sup> In this legacy of the Cold War, and despite its termination, American culture, in both its elite and popular forms, continued to operate as one of the defining forces shaping Taiwanese culture even after Nixon’s normalization of American diplomatic relations with Communist China (completed in 1979) at the expense of ties with Taiwan.<sup>61</sup> Handong’s embrace of Lan Yu immediately after the Tiananmen Incident in the film, therefore, cannot simply be read as a syncretic moment when the seemingly diachronic socialist and postsocialist tendencies that constitute China’s discrepant modernity intersect.<sup>62</sup> This reputable (if not *the* most famous and controversial) scene from *Lan Yu* should be more adequately understood as a subtle yet contentious reflection (in part on behalf of the Hong Kong-based director) on the future anterior merging of the PRC and Sinophone communities, both indicative of the triangulation of the geopolitics of desire through the unique punctuation of historical narration and reflecting the degree of difference between China and Sinitic-language communities and cultures on its margins—between China and the global sphere in which it is situated.

In the post-1987 era, the Taiwanese social and cultural space soon became home to a vibrant group of queer authors, scholars, activists, and other public figures who passionately emulated North American gay and lesbian identity politics and queer theoretical discourse.<sup>63</sup> Apart from social movement and academic theorization, gay men and lesbians in Taipei in particular have constructed an urban geography of their own with unique subcultural tempos and patterns. As Jens Damm has observed,

Taipei is the only city—probably not only in Taiwan but the whole of East Asia—where a huge open space, the Red House district, has been successfully developed into an area where gays and lesbians have openly created their own urban infrastructure, with bars, restaurants, shops and information exchange opportunities.<sup>64</sup>

Hong Kong popular culture, too, especially in the cinematic realm, has developed a sophisticated procedural nexus of artistic creativity to capture, represent, and even transform the lives of the sexually diverse, forging myriad variations of a sexual “undercurrent” everywhere.<sup>65</sup> As Ackbar Abbas has remarked, “We get a better sense of Hong Kong through its new cinema (and architecture) than is currently available in any history book.”<sup>66</sup> Lan Yu’s death in the film, then, may suggest an implicit critique of the PRC’s colonialism and imperialism in Hong Kong, namely, that the PRC must leave Hong Kong alone. But this is only among the many existing superficial readings from the Sinophone viewpoint. Although the narrative tempo of *Lan Yu* succumbs to such an ostensible ending, the expressive yearning and desire for a possible alternative gate of filmic departure precisely indexes the kind of ambivalent relationship between the PRC and Hong Kong that continues to strike resonances across the Sinophone world.

Since the 1990s, cultural flows between the PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong have steadily accelerated. Critics now tend to trace the roots of queer political activism in mainland China in the early twenty-first century to the initial influx of Western queer theory (酷兒理論, *ku’er lilun*) and the rise of the gay and lesbian movement (同志運動, *tongzhi yundong*) in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>67</sup> The first gay pride parade in Chinese-speaking communities took place in Taiwan in 2003, followed by Hong Kong in 2008 and Shanghai in 2009. Clearly, the queer Sinophone framework underscores the ways in which particular politics mediating the transmission of foreign/Western knowledge to China (such as Japan in the late Qing and early Republican periods), at least in the areas of gender and sexuality, have been gradually replaced by Sinophone communities by the end of the twentieth century. What a Sinophone rereading of *Lan Yu* reveals is precisely this apparatus of historical displacement, in which the social and cultural articulations

of non-normative sexualities are rerouted through—and thus re-rooted in—Sinitic-language communities and cultures on the periphery of Chineseness. The transnational cultural staging of the reciprocal meanings of queer intimacy and Chineseness in Sinophone postcolonial contexts exemplifies a grid of knowledge and experience that exceeds, decenters, and, indeed, replaces the familiar analytical framework of colonial modernity, which already displaces an even older notion of semi-colonialism. The historical and cultural transitions into this moment that I call Sinophone modernity remain to be fully investigated.

## Notes

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- 3 Shu-mei Shih, "The Concept of the Sinophone," *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (2011): 709–18, on p. 710.
- 4 Shih, "The Concept of the Sinophone," 710–11.
- 5 On the turn to world literature, see, for example, Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013); Pheng Cheah, *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); and Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalism and World Literatures* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016). On the global turn in history, see, for example, the essays in Maxine Berg, ed., *Writing the History of the Global: Challenges for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and James Belich, John Darwin, Margret Frenz, and Chris Wickham, eds., *The Prospect of Global History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
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- 15 Ien Ang, "Can One Say No to Chineseness?" *boundary 2* 25, no. 3 (1998): 223–42.
- 16 Ang, "Can One Say No to Chineseness?" 237.
- 17 Ang, "Can One Say No to Chineseness?" 231.
- 18 Ang, "Can One Say No to Chineseness?" 233.
- 19 Rey Chow, "On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem," *boundary 2* 25, no. 3 (1998): 1–24.
- 20 Chow, "On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem," 4–5.
- 21 Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 24.
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- 24 Ong and Nonini, *Ungrounded Empires*, 12.
- 25 Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).
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- 29 Shih, "The Concept of the Sinophone," 714.
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  - 48 Chen, *Asia as Method*, 216.
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