Epilogue

Sinophone writings and the Chinese diaspora

JING TSU

The development of modern Chinese literature into a national tradition followed a tumultuous and innovative trajectory. In pursuit of a new relationship with the past and with the world, modern literature reinvented itself at several crucial junctures. Though at times precariously maintained, a unity has often been asserted out of a sense of nostalgia. This map of reading continues to change, however, as new visions of the geopolitical imagination abound in current Sinophone literature. With the potential to reshape the field in important ways, these visions have propelled new literary production in places that are neither monolingual nor nationally Chinese. Without converging on one cultural vision or a single aesthetics, current efforts to create alternative literary histories of the Chinese diaspora are introducing new questions while reinvigorating past debates. These efforts seek to extend the horizon of modern Chinese literature beyond the historical scope of this volume.

Though "Chinese-language literature" (*huawen wenxue*) is not unfamiliar to the Chinese-speaking world, it is only in recent years that scholars have begun to reevaluate its relationships with the different histories of literary production in Chinese communities throughout the world, mainly in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Western Europe, and North America. The term "Chinese" encompasses conflicting notions of ethnicity, cultural affiliation, and linguistic center. Chinese, furthermore, is not the only language of the Chinese literary diaspora. If one were to consider this diaspora from within, the complex relation between indigenous and Han scripts in the making of minority literary traditions in the latter half of the twentieth century reveals a carefully planned process of assimilation rather than a history of a shared, natural language. Viewed from without, the diaspora includes the mixing of different host languages and mother tongues that do not always agree on the primacy of the modern Chinese language as the vehicle of literary expression. The increasing bilingualism among Chinese writers further pushes the analytical scope of modern Chinese literature.

Taken together, these issues renew the importance of language, dialects, and national affiliation in contemporary Chinese literary studies. Whether Sinophone literature belongs to, or rather revises the notion of, "national literature" will remain a hotly contested issue for some time. It has already begun to prompt critics to reflect on the practice of national literary studies in general, as transnational writing and mobility pose new challenges to existing disciplinary divides and questions of canonicity.

Certainly "diaspora" has been invoked to mean different things to different communities. Unlike Francophone or Anglophone, Lusophone or Hispanophone, however, the mere designation of "Chinese-speaking," or Sinophone, encompasses a wide range of dialectal variety with differences that can be greater than those between Spanish and French. Currently, dialects and mother tongues are presented as forms of cultural allegiance that are more compelling than national affiliation. In light of the traditional neglect of these dialects in the official representation of modern Chinese writing, the current attempt at revitalization seeks to restore materiality to lost and forgotten voices. The increasingly important role of dialects in contemporary literature and literary debates – Fujianese, Hakka, Teochiu, or Cantonese, for example – helps to reassert nativist ideologies against the predominance of nationalism. By using dialect to challenge the authority of the official language, be it Taiwanese against Mandarin (*putonghua*), or Chinese against Malay, diasporic writers turn the very medium of national language (*guoyu*, *hanyu*) into an instrument of dissent. While some insist on writing in their first language and home dialect, exposure to second or third languages in their host countries offers the additional possibility of playing on the notion of identity through shifting and combined linguistic allegiances.

Amidst the multilingualism that defines the diasporic experience, a given writer's choice to write in Chinese while living outside of China carries a particular significance. In a host environment dominated by a national tongue other than Chinese, writing in Chinese insists on language, rather than physical place, as the marker of one's cultural belonging. Writers choose language as their home and invest it with real and imagined origins of authenticity. One Malaysian-Chinese writer, Li Yongping, recounts his own discovery of the pure Chinese language in the process:

> An education in foreign languages has cultivated in me an ability to judge the capacity of language – what is Chinese, what is English. I cannot bear the kind of Chinese that has been "aggressively Westernized." The manner of trading and doing business with language and culture is desecration of the worst

> kind . . . and so I later wrote *Retribution: The Jiling Chronicles*. For eight years, on and off, I painstakingly worked on it so as to build a pure, Chinese literary form. To purify myself through the purification of the Chinese language . . . also to purify the language brought from one's native land: to de-nativize, and to get rid of the impure sediments from one's native home.

Regarded as one of Taiwan's most prominent writers, Li charges modern Chinese with straying from its cultural essence. Responding to the "aggressive Westernization" of Chinese, marked by the intrusion of foreign vocabulary and grammatical forms, he takes on the self-appointed task of purifying the Chinese language. His painstaking efforts are well rewarded in the evident success of his novel, *Retribution*, which is written in a vernacular style reminiscent of northern Chinese dialects but does not itself correspond to the colloquialism of any real locality. Set in the town of Jiling, the story recounts the events unfolding around an incident of rape, which is retold from different perspectives in twelve short stories.

As a diasporic writer, Li's allegiance to an idealized mother tongue is striking. The Mandarin Chinese he himself writes in is a standardized national language and, though originally based on the Beijing dialect, has little to do with the mother tongue. It is significant that a diasporic writer should declare the development of the modern Chinese language to be a corruption. Instead of simply expressing a nostalgia that characterizes the impossible desire of the diaspora, Li's case demonstrates the recognized capital of language, precisely because a given language can be consecrated as an ideal tongue and continually reified as a lost art against any dominant language.

If Li's migratory experience from Southeast Asia to Taiwan prompts him to return to a pure, original language, then Zhang Guixing, his contemporary, reconstitutes that experience as a new hybridity at the margins. Expressing a strong tie to his native Borneo, Zhang makes lavish use of the rich flora and fauna of the tropics to stage a reinvented genealogy and primitive exoticism. In such novels as *My South Seas Sleeping Beauty* (*Wo sinian de changmian zhong de Nanyang gongzhu*), *Elephants* (*Qunxiang*), and *Monkey Cups* (*Houbei*), tropical mythology doubles as a setting for ethnic, colonial, and racial violence between native inhabitants, European and Japanese colonialists, and Chinese settler migrants. Far from purifying language, Zhang creates thickly textured narratives that reflect the mix of racial lineages and languages by making the Sinoscript part of the morphology of life and decay.

Both Li and Zhang try to find, in their own ways, a thread to a displaced past that is founded on a certain vanishing point. For them, as for countless

writers throughout the twentieth century and beyond, the power of history to consecrate certain narratives while banishing others to silence has provided an inexhaustible source of inspiration and rebellion. The Malaysian-Chinese woman writer Li Zishu, in a poignant allegory, reimagines "History" as an abject beast that relieves others of past trauma by reliving it for them as its own horrific physical deformities. As though history can only be renarrated with the paradoxical hope of forgetting, the idea of China has undergone similar processes of distortion, reinvention, and translation.

Indeed, representations of China and Chinese writing have been disseminated in many parts of the world not only through Mandarin Chinese but also through English, French, and other languages. Once in the realm of other national tongues, Sinophone literature takes on the additional complexity of bilingualism. Given the current climate of globalizing national literatures by increasing the representation of other languages within one national tradition, the role of diasporic literatures in accommodating these new expansive visions of "-phone" literatures has yet to be sufficiently examined. Whether one writer can be claimed by several literary canons and whether the diasporic frontiers of different nations can happily overlap without controversy over new questions of belonging remains to be seen.

Regardless of future struggles, however, one can hardly avoid acknowledging writers who had already traversed those national bounds without calling themselves diasporic. Chinese students who studied abroad beginning in the late nineteenth century spearheaded efforts to introduce and exchange knowledge about China and the world. They opened up a channel of cosmopolitanism that facilitated the negotiation between foreign ideas and self-representations. The early Republican novel *An Unofficial History of Studying in Japan* (*Liudong waishi*) is one of the first compositions in the genre of displacement, modernization, and early national consciousness. Writers of the May Fourth generation who studied in Europe and America founded Chinese and bilingual journals, signifying a new awareness of audiences and readerships beyond national boundaries. Gu Hongming and Lin Yutang are among the best examples of this sensibility in earlier individual writers.

The genre that has come to be known as the "literature of students abroad" (*liuxuesheng wenxue*) has since remained a consistent nexus for the national and global imaginary. Chinese emigrant women writers of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s such as Hualing Nieh, Lihua Yu, and Geling Yan brought the new female voice to overseas writing in English through original compositions and translations. Their experimentations with narrative techniques

and themes resonated other similarly driven, consciously reinvented voices in Asian-American women's literature by writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Malaysia-born American Anglophone writer Shirley Geok-Lin Lim. The circle of exiles and student immigrants in the earlier phase of overseas Chinese literature in North America, including important figures such as Bei Dao and Bai Xianyong, has expanded to encompass writers in secondary and tertiary diaspora around the world. Formerly UK-based writer Hong Ying, for instance, is part of the post-1980s wave of Sinophone writers dispersed throughout western and northern Europe whose works have been widely translated and read, along with that of France-based writers such as François Cheng, Dai Sijie, and Gao Xingjian. This group enjoys a well-established literary presence not only as writers of fiction and poetry but also as directors and playwrights.

If Chinese diasporic literature can be written in any language, there hardly seems to be a need to identify it as Chinese at all. Taiwan-based Malaysian-Chinese writer and critic Huang Jinshu (Ng Kim Chew), in fact, recently called for the "de-Sinicization" (*qu Zhongguo hua*) and "de-nationalization" (*qu guojihua*) of Chinese-language literature. Yet neither writers nor literary critics can dispense with the historical weight of the common script. It is difficult to imagine a scenario in which distinct tongues would cease to matter and everyone would forego their own identity in favor of a pure community and pure language. At the same time, it is even harder to maintain that standard written Mandarin will remain unchanged throughout the historical, living process of language contact. Perhaps one is always dealing with a fundamental and necessary duplicity at the heart of one's allegiance to one's own language, or, to recall Li Yongping's sentiment, "doing business" with the mother tongue. Such are the difficult questions about origin, nativism, modernism, and authenticity that are raised by the current state of Sinophone literature.

The diverse contexts of diasporic writing, furthermore, highlight the problem of borders and territories in the typography of modern Chinese literature. Where, for example, does the national canon end and the diasporic counter-canon begin? Even if one recognized that such lines are not possible or ultimately fruitful to draw, they remain a central point of contention. Despite the optimism often expressed in putting forward diaspora as an antinational force of globalization, Sinophone literature seems to raise the living specter of a nation behind the diaspora. That national literary tradition suppresses minor, especially nonnative, literary traditions has not lessened the appeal of a post-national identity; the desire for community fuels the continual investment

in claims of national literatures and cultures. For diasporic writers writing under the condition of multiple marginalizations, the situation is especially poignant.

The different ways in which literature about China is consumed around the world in translation give important indications of the circuits through which Sinophone literature is propagated and pluralized. Such consideration touches on questions of literary awards, global recognition, and the power of translation to mediate as well as to mask the divergent tastes and discontinuities between reading cultures. How Sinophone literature itself reflects the global phenomenon of mediated cultural consumption provides a meaningful look at the redistribution and new concentrations of capital and power. One might take a cue from the earlier example of Eileen Chang, the most influential mainland Chinese woman writer of the twentieth century, who has attracted a wide following among such contemporary writers as Li Tianbao, Zhu Tianwen, and Su Weizhen. Widely revered and emulated for her penetrating narratives of the Chinese family through the perspective of the female psyche, Chang stood out for her solitary voice and insistent silence on politics. When a friend asked whether she would ever write about the proletariat, she replied that she knew more about the lives of invisible, domestic figures like housekeepers. Her works have established an indomitable style for literary explorations of the self, which have been the focus of a sizable body of studies of her life and works. Reaching fame in the 1940s, she wrote a novella, *Jinsuo ji*, that she herself later translated into English as *The Golden Cangue*. The story follows the female protagonist Qiqiao through the torments of widowhood and mistreatment by her husband's family, until she becomes a figure of torture herself.

The story, widely popular among the Chinese readership, was rewritten three more times in two languages between 1943 and 1967. Chang's attempt to convey her story in two language worlds, however, did not meet with equal success. When *Rouge of the North*, an expanded novel-length version based on the plot of *The Golden Cangue*, was published in 1967, Chang had already serialized it in Chinese as "Embittered Women" (Yuannü) in Hong Kong and Taiwan a year earlier. Although the serialized novel was an immediate success, critics in the Anglophone world gave the English version a lukewarm appraisal. Her story failed to speak to the Anglophone world with the same intimacy as it did to a Chinese readership.

Commercial failure notwithstanding, Chang's attempt at self-translation is significant for other reasons. As someone who always refused to subordinate literature to political imperatives, Chang wished to engage audiences outside

the Chinese-speaking world and so extended a gesture toward a new literary space that framed her concerns in a different tongue. Her attempt to cross over into a different linguistic world, often carried out under the pressure of financial hardship, also calls into question whether bilingualism facilitates one's literary appeal or condemns the native language to untranslatability. A counterexample can be found in the English translations of Lao She's two famous novels, *Rickshaw Boy* (*Luotuo Xiangzi*) and *The Yellow Storm* (*Sishi tongtang*). Lao She's translators altered the plot of *Rickshaw Boy* and added chapters to *The Yellow Storm* in order to increase their appeal to American audiences; as a result, literary critics and book clubs greeted the two altered translations with great enthusiasm.

Displacement and exile have generated a desire for a language that can articulate the uniqueness of individual sojourns away from China. Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* epitomizes this search through a narrative of self-conscious wanderings, reconstituting the historical subject "I" through the multiple addresses of "you" and "he" – first- and third-person perspectives that oscillate between the present and historical memory. Gao expressed an interest in the problem of time and historical consciousness already in his early short stories, sharing the widely felt need among writers after the Cultural Revolution to renew their artistry so as to reflect on the catastrophic scale of that event. This preoccupation persisted in the writings of Gao and other authors throughout the rest of the century, finding rich articulation in experiments with modernist aesthetics and the more familiar realist mode, especially during the root-seeking movement of the mid-1980s. Gao propelled the effort by writing a programmatic essay that ignited fervent debates about which new literary modes could provide an artistic inroad to the highly politicized historiography of the twentieth century. By relocating the foundations of cultural myths and political legends in the exotic and primordial regions of the hinterland and countryside, writers like Gao sought to reinvent a space for reexamining the accountability of history, nostalgia, and their own personal memories.

Having begun his literary career in Chinese, Gao's international success as the first Chinese to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2000, however, puts him in a unique position. Although well received by readers outside of China, Gao has been less enthusiastically acknowledged in mainland China. The tastes of and standards for international recognition do not always coincide with the desired national image of China, especially since some consider Gao's international fame to be garnered at the expense of portraying China's cultural and political barbarism. Success in languages other than the mother tongue, in this case, becomes politicized in such a way that a

writer's loyalty to his cultural and national roots is called into question, further reinforcing the kind of political scrutiny that perhaps compelled writers like Eileen Chang and Gao Xingjian to seek literary expression in a foreign tongue.

The question of whether or not to use one's mother tongue pivots on historically entangled issues of national identity, artistic freedom, the public and private spaces of literature, and an increasing reliance on an international audience. One might consider the success of the contemporary writer Ha Jin in the Anglophone world as a testimony to the politics of native language. Unlike Gao, Ha Jin has built his literary career entirely in English. Having published little prior to his migration to the United States in 1985, Ha Jin has attracted attention with his deceptively simple and linear narrative style that evokes something foreign in its expressiveness. While some observe that his lack of previous experience in writing in Chinese actually freed Ha Jin from having to make the cumbersome transition from a native grammar, others criticize his unacknowledged transference of Chinese language and idioms through direct translation into English. Though he is decidedly an Anglophone Chinese writer, Ha Jin's unusual success with writing about modern China in the English language has attracted much attention from Chinese readers.

A major hurdle to how diasporic literature might revise our understanding of modern Chinese literature is whether writers and critics can agree on the terms of the debate. "Chineseness" (*Zhongguoxing*), "modernism" (*xiandaixing*), and "nativism" have each generated extensive discussion in modern Chinese literary historiography. The role of "native soil" – or "local soil" (*bentu*) – in forging the literary imagination of the diasporic world is also tied to the advent of "native soil fiction" (*xiangtu wenxue*) in defining the national modern Chinese literary canon. Lu Xun, in his introductory essay to an anthology of modern fiction collected as part of the *Compendium of Modern Chinese Literature* (*Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi*, edited by Zhao Jiabi in 1935–1936), first defined the category of native soil fiction by describing writers from other provinces as "residential sojourners" (*qiaoyu*) in the city of Beijing who could only write about a home that was not present. They embodied for the mainstream culture of the national metropolis the lost nativism displayed through their distinctive literary voice as writers from afar.

The diasporic writer, similarly, is the necessary nomadic figure that helps to distinguish the local from the sojourner, the foreigner from the national. Implied in Lu Xun's distinction is a geographical hierarchy that places urban areas, as opposed to provincial areas, at the center of the production of national literature. The term "sojourner," incidentally, is embedded in a historical

context of systemic prejudice, as it has been used throughout the twentieth century to describe the Chinese migrant. The migrant's stay abroad was meant to be short-term, as seen in the term "sojourn," which implies not a desire to find belonging in a foreign place but a temporary, even involuntary, exile from home.

This deep ambiguity at the heart of the sentiment of nativism has been generally accepted in critical discourse as a form of nostalgia. The concept of nostalgia, as embodied in a wide range of nativist writings – aboriginal, local, national – has, however, not always been used successfully in addressing the complexity of contemporary diasporic literature. Different versions of nativism continue to compete with each other for a larger share of the global audience. Diaspora, rather than pointing at an unspecified desire that can easily be mapped anywhere onto the idea of China, generates tensions not only between nations but also between dispersed Sinophone communities vying to protect their hard-won capital of distinction.

Though Sinophone literature and the literature of diaspora compel us to reexamine the lines of demarcation drawn between them, it has not been easy either to challenge or to circumvent the attachment to Chinese literature as a national legacy. Neither those in favor of its necessity nor those objecting to its monolithic status have fully addressed its continual currency between different Sinophone and diasporic communities. The increasing mobility of writers adds to the problem of identifying any one place as home, while the traditional model of accepting one center as the locus of hegemony is gradually giving way to an alternative understanding that accounts for the flow of cultural power between multiple centers.

The recurring issue is not the right to disengage, but rather the right to claim one's own writing as the more compelling voice in capturing the nomadic essence of Sinophone writing. Even as some scholars criticize the heuristic assumption behind the ethnicizing marker "Chinese" in Western academic discourse, it nonetheless survives its conceptual contradictions as a necessary specter for comparisons and contestations. In this sense, the dialogue between national and Sinophone literature will continue to prompt new reflections and questions. Whether these different voices can be forged into a new unity or even agree enough to disagree is a question essential to the foundational issue of what constitutes a national, world, or world national literature.

Select Bibliography

Chapter 1: Literature of the early Ming to mid-Ming (1375–1572)

Barr, Allan H. "The Later Classical Tale." In *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Victor H. Mair. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, 675–696.

Birch, Cyril, ed. *Anthology of Chinese Literature, Vol. 2: From the 14th Century to the Present Day*. New York: Grove Press, 1972.

Brokaw, Cynthia J., and Kai-wing Chow, eds. *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Brook, Timothy. *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Brook, Timothy, Jérôme Bourgon, and Gregory Blue. "*Lingchi* in the Ming Dynasty." In their *Death by a Thousand Cuts*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008, 97–121.

Bryant, Daniel. *Great Recreation: Ho Ching-ming (1483–1521) and his World*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.

—. "Poetry of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries." In *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Victor H. Mair. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, 399–409.

Buck, Pearl S., trans. *All Men Are Brothers*. 2 vols. New York: John Day, 1933. Repr. New York: Grove, 1957.

Chan, Hok-lam. *Legends of the Building of Old Peking*. Hong Kong and Seattle: The Chinese University of Hong Kong and University of Washington, 2008.

Chan, Wing-tsit. *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yang-ming*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1963.

Chang, Kang-i Sun. "The Circularity of Literary Knowledge between Ming China and Other Countries in East Asia: The Case of Qu You's *Jiandeng Xinhua*." In *NACS Conference Volume: On Chinese Culture and Globalization*, ed. Lena Rydholm. Stockholm: University of Stockholm Press, forthcoming.

—. "Gender and Canonicity: Ming–Qing Women Poets in the Eyes of the Male Literati." In *Hsiang Lectures on Chinese Poetry, vol. 1*, ed. Grace S. Fong. Centre for East Asian Studies Research, McGill University, 2001, 1–18.

Chang, Kang-i Sun, and Haun Saussy, eds. *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

Chaves, Jonathan, ed. and trans. *The Columbia Book of Later Chinese Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.