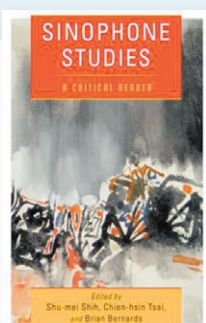


The Sinophone: not from China, but in Chinese



A decade ago Sinophone studies emerged as a new academic field within the humanities, with several scholars from North America, Europe as well as Asia engaging in research on Sinitic-language cultural production through the lens of this novel and multi-disciplinary mode of inquiry. For those who are interested in the study of Sinitic-language cultures from beyond the borders of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as well as in the production of non-*Han* artists from within the PRC who express themselves in a Sinitic language, this critical reader edited by Shu-mei Shi, together with Chien-hsin Tsai and Brian Bernards, represents a milestone in the systematization of the Sinophone.

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Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader is a well-conceived and thought-provoking anthology made up of three interconnected sections. Penned by Shu-mei Shi, the introduction to the volume represents a useful overview of what is meant with the phrase 'Sinophone studies' and the issues that this young field of inquiry is mainly concerned with. In an academic realm where Chinese studies is often a synonym of China studies and where Sinitic-language

societies and cultures outside the PRC are often considered peripheral at best, the Sinophone represents an important attempt in providing an alternative discourse, a powerful theoretical tool to analyze, reposition and give voice as well as visibility to cultural actors and products from beyond *Han* China. As Shih clearly explains, "Sinophone studies takes as its object of study the Sinitic-language communities and cultures outside China as well as ethnic minority communities and cultures within China where Mandarin is adopted or imposed" (11).

Issues and controversies

Despite the novelty of the Sinophone as a field of study, scholarly concern with the theorization of Sinitic cultures and communities at the margins of China had already resulted in several essays, many of which have challenged well-established paradigms and viewpoints on China and Chineseness. The first section of the volume, 'Issues and Controversies' contains a useful introduction by editor Chien-hsin Tsai and six essays. Apart from reprinting (in full or in part) four seminal works by four renowned scholars that focus on issues such as diaspora, identities, languages and ethnicity, it additionally presents one article by Shu-mei Shih based on her previous theoretical works on the Sinophone as well as one previously unpublished article by Ha Jin. While Shu-mei Shih's chapter is "a broad, programmatic piece to parse out a space for Sinophone studies" (25), the following chapter is a modified and reprinted version of Rey Chow's theoretical article 'On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem' first published in 1998. This essay, together with Ien Ang's ground-breaking 'Can One Say No to Chineseness?' (1998) also present in the volume, urges the reader to think critically and theoretically about the very notion of Chineseness. Kim Chew Ng, a Chinese Malaysian scholar and fiction writer based in Taiwan, contributed a brilliant essay that explores language(s) from a Sinophone Malaysian perspective (i.e., vis-à-vis China's *Putonghua*, but also in relation to *Bahasa Malaysia*, the national language of Malaysia), an issue both complex and fascinating. The following chapter by David Der-wei Wang focuses on loyalism and loyalist discourse in Sinophone writing from Taiwan. Both Ng and Wang's articles were originally published in Chinese and are presented to the Anglophone readership for the first time, thanks to Brian Bernards' skillful translations. 'Exiled in English', Ha Jin's highly personal and beautifully-written piece on issues of geographic exile and linguistic self-exile seems the perfect choice to close the section. Strictly speaking, Ha Jin who produces all his works in English and is, therefore, an Anglophone Chinese American writer, has chosen not to belong to the Sinophone realm. The "voluntary banishment of Mandarin in his stories" (22), however, compels us to take into serious consideration one of the natural possibilities of evolution of the Sinophone: Ha Jin's choice is a reminder that "diaspora has an expiration date, and the vanishing of the Sinophone in various communities is part of the historical process of localization." (22)

Discrepant perspectives

'Discrepant Perspectives', the second section of the volume collects essays originally published in the 1990s, thus well before the Sinophone was theorized as such. However, this critical reader would seem somewhat incomplete had these chapters not been incorporated into the anthology. In fact, "they in many ways lay the groundwork for the emergence of Sinophone studies in the twenty-first century," as rightfully stated by Brian Bernards in his introduction to this second part of the volume (125). The authors of the four essays reprinted here all propose sound theoretical bases for the exploration of the diverse identities and possibilities that ethnic Chinese people outside China have at their disposal. 'Chineseness: The Dilemmas of Place and Practice' (1999) by renowned Singaporean scholar Gungwu Wang befittingly opens the section. The chapter not only deals with issues of flimsy terminology such as the now rather outdated definition of 'overseas Chinese', but it also explores one of the main concerns of the Sinophone, namely, the multiplicity of responses by Chinese communities to local place and practice. Therefore, by taking Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore and San Francisco as cases in point, Wang attempts to give an answer to the question of "[h]ow have the different communities of the diaspora changed in response to the demands of their adopted countries?" (131) and challenges the idea that there is only one way of conceptualizing, understanding and practicing Chinese identity. Wei-ming Tu, author of 'Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center' (1991), shares with Wang a concern with correct terminology (he focuses his attention of the ambiguities of the term 'Chinese') as well as the role and position of Chinese communities outside China vis-à-vis the Chinese center. Famous for his theorization of a 'cultural China' which encompasses Greater China, Chinese communities across the globe and everyone who tries "to understand China intellectually and bring their conception of China to their own linguistic communities" (148), Tu wishes to draw our attention away from the purely political dimension of the relationship with the Chinese center, by reminding us that the meaning of being

Chinese is ultimately "a human concern pregnant with ethical-religious implications" (155). In his 'On the Margins of the Chinese discourse' (1991), Leo Ou-fan Lee introduces the reader to the figure of the "Wandering Chinese", by taking a close look at three major Sinophone writers' North American literary production: Nih Hua-ling, Yuh Li-hua and Pai Hsien-yung. The chapter that closes the section, 'The Structure of Dual Domination' (1995) by Ling-chi Wang, is also centered on Chinese America. In his essay, Wang attempts to "construct an alternative paradigm for the Chinese diaspora in the United States" (175), and calls for the inclusion of Chinese American viewpoints and voices in this new paradigm in order to "fully understand the structure of dual domination" (178) shaped by the equally-manipulative American assimilationist discourse on the one hand and the Chinese loyalist one on the other.

Sites and articulations

'Sites and Articulations', the third and longest section of the volume, is probably also the most interesting for the reader, since it "cover[s] polyphonic voices that constitute the major chorus of the Sinophone" (183). With an introduction jointly penned by editors Brian Bernards and Chien-hsin Tsai and eighteen short chapters focusing on literature, the section centers on the practical use of Sinophone studies as a mode of academic investigation in the analysis of Sinophone literary texts and/or writers. The variety of texts and literary figures explored through the lens of the Sinophone is impressive and it includes production from all continents, with the exception of Africa. The section opens with two chapters, one by Mirana May Szeto and one by Rey Chow, both devoted to Sinophone Hong Kong Literature and its relationship with Mandarin as well as the local Sinitic language, Cantonese. Following, the reader will find four chapters focusing on several aspects of literary practice in Taiwan ranging from Japanophone fiction during Japanese colonial rule (Chien-Chung Chen) to Sinitic-language literature by indigenous Taiwanese (Hsinya Huang) to so-called 'Mainlander' female writers (Pei-Yin Lin) to Hakka writer Zhong Lihe, whose life story bespeaks the history of Hakka migrations (Chien-hsin Tsai). Patricia Schiaffini and Carlo Rojas contributed two articles on the section of the Sinophone world that writes from within the political borders of China. While Schiaffini's essay acquaints the reader with Sinophone Tibetan literature and the ways in which ethnically Tibetan authors use the language of the colonizer as a tool to affirm their Tibetan identity, the chapter by Rojas explores the issues of language and nationalism in the production of Sinophone Tibetan writer Alai. Three chapters in the volume explore Sinophone literary production in Southeast Asia, home to sizeable Chinese communities. The essay by Kim Tong Tee, a Chinese Malaysian scholar based in Taiwan, is a brilliant and much-needed English-language overview of Sinophone Malaysian literature, a literary system which is able to reach a wide Sinophone readership, through publication in Taiwan, while being marginalized at home, due to officially-endorsed pro-Malay policies. In his essay, Bernards investigates the fiction of Sinophone Malaysian writer Chang Kuei-hsing (who is now a resident of Taiwan) and its contribution to "the formation of a 'South Seas' postcolonial discourse" (325). The multicultural and multilingual postcolonial experience in Singapore is at the center of E.K. Tan's chapter, which offers an insight into *Mama Looking for Her Cat*, a controversial play by Kuo Pao Kun on the limitations of Singapore's multiracial policies. The remaining chapters explore several aspects of Sinophone literary figures writing from geographic and cultural environments as diverse as New Zealand, Europe, and the U.S. or from a double periphery. Carles Prado-Fontes, for instance, offers a new interpretation of renowned author Lao She who was, at different times, a Sinophone writer in England and a Manchu writer in China. In the chapter rounding up the third section and this comprehensive volume, Ignacio López-Calvo, professor of Latin American literature, draws the reader's attention to a geographic area where Sinophone academic research is still in its infancy: Latin America and the Caribbean. In his informative and highly-enjoyable essay, while sharing his knowledge of Hispanophone Sino-Latin American writers and the issues they deal with, López-Calvo opens up an exciting field of study for those who are interested in exploring the Chinese experience in Spanish and Portuguese-speaking Latin America.

With its three cleverly-designed sections, its theoretical chapters and its essays on specific Sinophone authors and texts, *Sinophone Studies* is an outstanding volume that challenges existing ideas and paradigms in fields such as Chinese, diaspora, ethnic, postcolonial and area studies. An invaluable introduction to a novel and exciting field, this is a multi-authored work that will change the way both students and scholars look at ethnic Chinese communities and cultural actors around the world.

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