

Empire of the Chinese Sign: The Question of Chinese Diasporic Imagination in Transnational Literary Production

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This paper begins with an examination of the burgeoning interest in literatures in Chinese. It argues that studies in literatures in Chinese map out a terrain where complex negotiations and interventions for different purposes are carried out. As studies in literatures in Chinese often imply a shift from the nation-state paradigm to the transnational paradigm, which implicitly celebrates diasporic imagination as a counterforce to the power of the nation-state, this paper proposes to examine the intersection of Chinese Malaysian literature and Taiwan literature at two specific moments of transnational literary production—the late 1970s to the mid-1980s and the late 1990s to the present—so as to demonstrate the unstable meanings of the diaspora sign. It highlights the importance of historicization in investigating phenomena of transnational cultural production and the need to reincorporate the notion of “place” into our agenda in conducting cultural critiques. The paper ends with a critique of the global city as a methodological concept and argues for a place paradigm without privileging the global city as a metaphor for transnational space.

THE RISE OF STUDIES IN LITERATURES IN CHINESE AND THE RISE OF “GLOBAL CHINA”

IN SEPTEMBER 2005, *CHUNG Wai Literary Monthly*, one of the leading academic journals in Taiwan devoted to literary studies, published a special issue on Chinese-language literature in the United States. The guest editor, Te-hsing Shan, remarks in the introduction that the issue is an answer to the recent development of academic interest in this long-neglected area of writing, thanks to the redefinition of the concept of U.S. literature and the call for revisioning the idea of national literature in the age of globalization. He traces this development in the United States to as early as the late 1910s, when *The Cambridge History of American Literature* covered non-English literary works in its discussion of “American literature,” but he nonetheless makes a special note that this vein of academic thinking began to gather momentum only in the mid-1990s. The publication of several important books, including *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature: A Reader of Original Texts with English Translation* in 2000 and *American Babel: Literatures of the United States from Abnaki*

to *Zuni* in 2002, tellingly reveals this sea change. This rising interest in studies in Chinese-language literature poses a bold challenge to the hegemony of English literary studies in the United States. Significantly, it reflects an increasingly sensitized multiculturalist penchant in the U.S. academic world (Shan 2005; Wong 2002, 163).

It hardly needs to be added that this new trend is closely related to the emergence of the transnational diaspora subject as the key figure in contemporary cultural discourse in the past decade or so (Ang 2001, 75; Ma 2003, 4). With the remapping of Chinese literary studies, diaspora writers who dramatize Chinese diasporic experience in its various historical trajectories in their writings have begun to gain more critical attention. The spotlight is no longer cast on writers from China only. Sometimes called “Sinophone literature,” a term first coined by the U.S.-based scholar Shu-mei Shih, “literatures in Chinese” refers to “literature written in Chinese by Chinese speaking writers in various parts of the world outside China, as distinguished from ‘Chinese literature’—literature from China” (Shih 2004, 29).¹ Thus, just as transnational, diasporic imagination is often celebrated as a liberating and resistant force against the disciplines of the nation-state (Shih 2000, 86; Ang 2001, 76), the substitution of “literatures in Chinese” for “Chinese literature” is taken to unseat the implicit Sinocentrism in traditional Chinese literary studies (Shih 2004, 29).

Writings in the Chinese language by those who regard themselves as ethnic Chinese living in different countries now find entry into Chinese literary studies, which used to focus on literary works by writers from mainland China. Arguably, the field of Chinese studies is no longer equated with the study of China, and the very definition of “Chineseness” is seen to be subject to constant negotiation by Chinese diaspora in different loci. In a way, this reminds one of the concept of “cultural China” proposed by Tu Wei-ming (1994) in the early 1990s. Yet if the concept of cultural China and that of “literatures in Chinese” can be interpreted as de-Sinocentric moves, the radicalness of the challenge is nevertheless undercut, for it falls short of questioning the very category of “Chinese” itself. As Ien Ang shrewdly points out,

While the meaning of Chineseness is defined explicitly as fluid and changeable, the category of Chineseness itself is emphatically not in question here: Indeed, the notion of cultural China seems to be devised precisely to exalt and enlarge the global significance of Chineseness, raising its importance by imbuing it with new, modernized

¹I submitted this essay to *JAS* for review in June 2006 and received notification of its acceptance in November 2006. During the time between submission and publication, I have witnessed changes in the field of studies in literatures in Chinese, which is now more commonly called “Sinophone literatures.” I maintain the use of “literatures in Chinese” in this essay to emphasize the various strands of development of this field in different historical contexts, in contrast to the term “Sinophone literature,” which refers more to exchanges within the U.S. academic circle.

meanings and heightening its relevance by expanding its field of application far beyond the given spatial boundaries of geopolitical China. (1998, 231–32)

The implicit message of what Ang is saying here deserves close attention. Although this new trend of cultural remapping seems to exalt transnationalism over the paradigm of the nation-state, it is arguable that discourses of transnationalism may turn out to be of service in the expansion of the power of the nation-state by enabling it to transcend its geopolitical boundaries.

It needs to be noted that the rise of studies in Chinese-language literatures in the United States has almost coincided with the constitution of so-called *shijie huawen wenxue* (world literatures in Chinese) as a new category of Chinese (literary) studies. According to Shan's account, the term was first coined at a conference held in China in 1992. At the preceding conferences, various terms, such as "Taiwan and Hong Kong literatures" and "Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas literatures in Chinese," had been employed to designate literatures in the Chinese language by writers outside mainland China. The term "world literatures in Chinese" was first used at the 1992 conference, and it quickly gained currency in the world of Chinese literary studies (Shan 2005, 10). Significantly, a contributor to the special issue of *Chung Wai* links this new brand of literary studies to the rising power of what he calls "China global." He rightly points out that the category of "world literatures in Chinese" took shape in the 1990s, just as China was transforming itself into a competitive economic and political party in the new global structure. Through the discourse of world literatures in Chinese, the maternal China beckons to her dispersed diaspora children, trying to provide diverse Chinese economic communities with a unifying cultural identity (Wang Chih-ming 2005, 120). In other words, the rise of studies in so-called world literatures in Chinese has occurred concomitantly with the rise of China as a key player in the age of globalization. In a sense, transnational China and China global express the Chinese nationalist desire to transcend the geopolitical boundaries of China.

This certainly is not a far-fetched story. The rise and decline of English as an academic discipline in the United States already illustrates the extent to which the formation (and re-formation) of academic disciplines has very practical socio-political concerns and consequences. It goes without saying that the proliferation of English departments in universities over the world was closely related to the expansion of British imperialism in the age of colonization. There existed a close connection between the study of English literature and the forging of the English subject identity. But as the United States replaced the British Empire as the world superpower after the Second World War, the discipline of English in the United States found itself in crisis, for, as Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro points out, it served "acrobatically the American national interests by teaching English literature to American citizens" (2003, 456). Gradually, Hollywood

cinema came to be seen as an alternative to English literature, and film studies, with its focus on Hollywood as the dominant force in the mediascape and ideoscape of the new world structure, emerged as the new American nativism (Yoshimoto 2003, 457). If Yoshimoto's account of the connection between the reconfiguration of academic disciplines and the rise and fall of political powers on the new world map is not all that implausible, to link the rise of studies in literatures in Chinese to the rise of "China global" may not be totally off the mark. Transnationalism and the nation-state do not simply cancel each other out. Rather, they may be entangled in a rather ambiguous relationship that is not necessarily always a zero-sum tug-of-war.

But this does not mean that transnationalism simply serves to expand the power of the nation-state. Certainly, it is simplistic and reductive to argue that studies in literatures in Chinese have been brought into being so as to consolidate the power of "China global." Although it is likely that the constitution of "world literatures in Chinese" may help in forging or strengthening a *Chinese* (cultural) identity for the so-called Chinese diaspora, whose link with geopolitical China is getting tenuous, it also opens up a space for critically examining what it means to be designated as Chinese, as well as what it means to write in Chinese. Several important issues appear on the agenda: Does writing in Chinese necessarily entail a Chinese identity? Or does it entail tactics of intervention that can be operated in the writing so as to call into question the Chinese identity that the writer seems to embrace in choosing the Chinese language as the language of his or her literary production? More radically, is it possible that what is designated as "literatures in Chinese" can turn the tables on the very definition of Chinese and thereby drastically explode the term "Chinese" as the unifying power of the literatures in question? These are unsettling questions that have made their appearance with the spread of the new discipline. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that not all participants in studies in literatures in Chinese belong to the Chinese diaspora. What does it mean for non-Chinese scholars to shift their focus from Chinese literature to literatures in Chinese in the context of the emergence of China global? Do histories of past national conflicts and tension in the present geopolitical structure also come into play in this shift in academic discipline? I am thinking particularly of the stakes that Japanese and South Korean scholars may have in taking part in the new trend. Given Japan's fretting and uneasy relationship with China and South Korea's ambitious bid to be a key player in the world economic and political game (see Onishi 2005), it seems likely that the surging interest in the new disciplinary formation in these two countries is more a complex investment than a hearty embrace of the idea of China global.²

It should be clear by now that studies in literatures in Chinese map out a terrain where complex negotiations and interventions for different purposes

²For a discussion of the turn from studies in Chinese literature to studies in literatures in Chinese in Korea, see Park Jae-woo (2005).

are carried out. The alert practice of multiculturalism in relatively democratic societies, the currency of transnationalism as a challenge to the power of the nation-state, the rise of China global on the new world map, and the complex vested interests of China's Asian neighbors all have stakes here. To celebrate diasporic imagination and transnationalism as inherently liberating against the gripping power of nationalist imagination and discourse is, apparently, to underestimate the challenges that studies in literatures in Chinese as a rising academic discipline pose for us.

To dig into the complexity of what is at issue here, I propose to examine the intersection of Chinese Malaysian literature and Taiwan literature at two specific moments of transnational literary production: the late 1970s to the mid-1980s and the late 1990s to the present. The insertion of Chinese Malaysian literature into Taiwan's field of literary production at different historical conjunctures is chosen for study because it provides a very rich field for examining the complex interplay of different forces in transnational literary production, bringing into relief some of the most crucial issues in studies in literatures in Chinese and transnational literary studies. Specifically, it highlights the importance of historicization in discussing transnational literary production and the complex play of nationalism in the clash between diaspora identity and native identity formation.

Taiwan has a long history of being a locus of active Chinese transnational literary production. There were remarkable, restless interchanges between Taiwan and Hong Kong after the Second World War (Tay et al. 2000) that exerted a great influence on the literary production of the ethnic Chinese circle in South East Asian countries (Tee 2003, 182). With book markets increasingly opened up since the late 1980s, works by writers from China began to be published in Taiwan, and they often achieved sensational success. A comparative approach involving China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, often referred to as *liang-an sandi* (two coasts, three places), began to develop and became the most popular literary paradigm in Chinese literary studies.³

For our purposes, it should be noted that, since the 1960s, Taiwan has been an important venue for the production and development of Chinese Malaysian literature (Tee 2003, 143–44). With the institution of Malaysian literature as national literature in the 1970s, the resources of Chinese literary production in postcolonial Malaysia were seriously undercut (Chong 2004; Ng 2004; Cartier 2003, 86–87). Taiwan became an important venue for young Chinese Malaysian writers to establish their literary reputations as they found it more and more difficult to write and publish in Chinese in Malaysia. First designated as “overseas

³The prominence of this literary paradigm is best illustrated by the works of the eminent critic De-wei Wang. See his *Xiaoshuo Zhong kuo* (Fiction China, 1993) and *Ruhe xiandai zhenyang wenxue* (The Making of the Modern, the Making of a Literature: New Perspectives on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction, 1998).

Chinese literature” in the 1970s and then redefined as “diaspora literature in Chinese” in the late 1990s (Ng 1998, 28–32; Tee 2004), Chinese Malaysian literature in Chinese is a literature of transnational literary production par excellence. With its complicated (dis)play of the Chinese diasporic imagination and its transnational dimension (Tee 2004), Chinese Malaysian literature offers a most befitting case of testing and redefining some of the basic assumptions of studies in literatures in Chinese.⁴

It is my hope that by examining the intersection of Chinese Malaysian literature and Taiwan literature at two historical conjunctures, we will see how a nuanced and sophisticated treatment of any literary phenomenon inevitably invites careful attention to the materiality of literary production. This points to the urgent need to reconsider the danger of placeless abstractions often found in simplified versions of discourse on deterritorialization and diaspora (see Dirlik 2001b). I will focus specifically on the operation of the Chinese diaspora sign in the works of two important Chinese Malaysian writers—namely, Li Yong-ping and Ng Kim-chew. Their different exploitations of the Chinese diasporic imagination vis-à-vis increasingly de-Sinocentric Taiwanese literary practices provide a fertile ground for investigating the complex structure of transnational literary production and the shifting meaning of “diaspora” in different historical contexts.

CHINESE MALAYSIAN WRITERS AND THE TRANSNATIONAL MOMENT OF LITERARY PRODUCTION IN THE LATE 1970s TO MID-1980s

Like many of his contemporary Chinese Malaysians, Li Yong-ping came to Taiwan for undergraduate study in 1967. At that time, Taiwan was heavily reliant on the United States for political protection and economic development. But the impact of the U.S. presence on the island was not restricted to the economic-political field only; it also rocked the literary world as Western music and literature flooded onto the island. In the periodization of the literary history of Taiwan, the 1960s was a period of so-called modernist literature, characterized by a strong penchant for Westernization. Modernist writers appropriated Western literary codes and deliberately rejected conventional modes of writing in favor of bold experiments with new techniques and themes. They looked for inspiration from the writings of Western thinkers and writers such

⁴The title of a paper published by Tee Kim Tong in *Chung Wai Literary Monthly* testifies to the importance of terms such as “diaspora” and “transnationalism” in discussing Chinese Malaysian literature. See Tee’s “Cultural Return, Diaspora, and Traveling Transnationalism: Locating *Mahua* Literature in Taiwan” (2004). Born in Malaysia, Tee is considered one of the most important critics/defendants of Chinese Malaysian literature. It should be noted, however, that not all Chinese Malaysian writers define themselves as diaspora. See Chong Fah-hing’s (2006) critique of Tee’s diaspora paradigm.

as Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Camus, to name a few (Ye 1987, 114; Peng 1991, 109).

Although the dominance of modernism in Taiwan's literary scene seemed to be disrupted by the rise of the nativist movement in the 1970s, the 1980s saw the flowering of mature modernist works, among which Li's *Chronicle of Chi-ling* is usually considered an important piece (Chang 1993, 80). A series of stories revolving around the rape of a woman, the book is regarded as "completely devoid of any ideological relevance" and concerned mainly with "eliciting 'disinterested' aesthetic pleasures that readers of the work have been prescreened" (Chang 1993, 82). In the words of a critic, "one finds the absolute domination of aesthetic concerns" in the *Chronicle of Chi-ling*, and it is in this sense that the work is celebrated as "representing a culminating point in the Modernist project of post-1949 Taiwan" (Chang 1993, 87).

Curiously, if Taiwan modernist literature is characterized as a literary movement of Westernization, Li's modernist masterpiece is conspicuously Chinese. Several elements are combined to evoke Chineseness: the choice of the genre of Chinese classical vernacular fiction, the meticulous depiction of common people's daily lives in a premodern rural village, the narrator's emphasis on traditional Chinese beliefs such as *yuan* and *nieh* (Chang 1993, 85), and, most important of all, the spellbinding performance of the narrative language paying homage to the tradition of Chinese vernacular fiction. Almost without exception, every critic of this much-admired work draws our attention to Li's virtuosic performance of "pure" Chinese to conjure up the image of a Chinese village that reminds the reader of the world in traditional vernacular fiction (Chang 1993, 85; Lim 2004, 11; Ng 1998, 306–9). This infatuation with the perfection of Chinese is now considered a hallmark of Li's writing (Wang De-wei 2003, 12; Ng 1998, 303). Indeed, Li remarks in the preface to the second edition of the work that what he was trying to do in the *Chronicle of Chi-ling* was to deploy "purified Chinese" against the "corrupted," "Westernized literary language" (1986, 125) that characterized Taiwan's modernist writings. With the self-conscious parade of Chineseness in his writing, Li stands for a whole generation of Chinese Malaysian writers who sought to reclaim their precarious Chinese identity through writing.

Wen Rui-an, another Chinese Malaysian writer very active in the Taiwan literary scene in the 1970s, is also known for his passionate pursuit of a refined mode of Chinese writing, which he tried to realize in the *wu-xia* genre. Of all literary genres, *wu-xia* is a northern Chinese cultural formation tied to the Chinese mainland and has long enjoyed the reputation of being "the staple of Chinese fiction" since the seventeenth century (Klein 2004, 25). To write in the genre of *wu-xia* is to link the writer to a particular tradition of Chinese writing and to imbue the writer's work with a strong sense of Chineseness (Ng 1998, 246–51). It certainly deserves attention that both Li and Wen tried to pay homage to the Chinese imaginary by resurrecting the tradition of specific

Chinese literary genres. Both the genre of Chinese vernacular fiction, on which Li's *Chronicle of Chi-ling* models itself, and that of *wu-xia*, emulated by Wen, conjure up an abstract world of premodern China, existing supposedly before the contamination of Westernization and modern civilization (Ng 1998, 311). Thus, in terms of their choice of genre and their meticulous refinement of literary language, Chinese Malaysian writers impressed their Taiwan readers with a type of writing spectacularly "Chinese."

This distinguishing feature of Chinese Malaysian literature produced by diaspora Chinese Malaysians at that specific historical conjuncture should not be simply interpreted as romantic nostalgia. What was at stake here was a precarious Chinese identity. More often than not, young Chinese Malaysians came to Taiwan with the hope of reconnecting themselves with "authentic" Chinese culture (Ng 1998, 220). Taiwan, claiming to be the true heir to the Chinese cultural tradition—in contrast to Communist China, turned topsy-turvy by the Cultural Revolution—was a displaced homeland for many Chinese Malaysians at that time. But their status as "overseas" students meant that they were not really "authentic" Chinese. Writing in *becoming* Chinese genre and language was implicitly understood as a ritual required for *becoming* Chinese. It was taken to be the only way to reclaim their Chineseness, which was suspected of being seriously diluted by having grown up outside the Chinese homeland.

At the same time, this fixation with Chineseness also reflected a historically determined diasporic imagination. It was an expression of the impulse to resist the nativism practiced by the postcolonial Malaysian state apparatus. In 1957, Malaysia was freed from British colonial rule and became an independent nation-state. To consolidate the Malaysian identification, the Malaysian government instituted a series of laws to suppress the languages and cultural identities of its minority groups (Tee 2003, 70–76; Ng 2004, 51–54; Chong 2004, 77–78). These moves on the part of the Malaysian authorities seriously strained the relationship between ethnic Chinese in Malaysia and the government.⁵ It is important to note that the "imagined community" of Chinese Malaysians was formed not vis-à-vis the Malaysian community in postcolonial Malaysia. Rather, it emerged as early as the turn of the twentieth century, when Chinese revolutionists and reformists sought to involve Chinese Malaysians in their political agenda of transforming the crumbling Chinese empire (Ng 2004, 45–47; Wong 2002, 9–10). From the late Qing dynasty to the 1940s, Chinese Malaysians were implicated in a peculiar situation in which they were interpellated as both Chinese subjects and as British/Malaysian subjects. With this complicated historical shaping of identity as background, quite an impressive number of Chinese Malaysians came to see themselves not so much as ethnic Chinese citizens of Malaysia but as overseas Chinese (Ng 1998, 241; Wu 1994, 149). In other

⁵For a discussion of how Chinese identity provokes distrust in many Southeast Asian countries, see Paul J. Bolt (2000, 110–11).

words, it often happened that the Malaysian identity was suppressed under the Chinese identity (Ng 1998, 241).

Accompanying this tilt over the Chinese identification was the belief that the future of Chinese Malaysians as a group was inseparable from the future of China (Wu 1994, 149–51). The Malaysian government's suppression of the Chinese language after independence sparked a sense of acute anxiety and triggered the so-called Chinese language education movement in defense of Chinese cultural tradition (Ng 2004, 40; Chong 2004, 82–89). Given the suppression of Chinese culture and language in the postcolonial Malaysian context, quite a significant number of Chinese Malaysian writers took on the mission of continuing the Chinese cultural tradition against all odds, even when the deeply rooted Chinese imaginary was increasingly being called into question by the twists and turns of the evolving history of modern China (Tee 2003, 136–38; Ng 2004, 46–47).

It was against this political and cultural backdrop that the Chinese diaspora sign struggled to make its imprint on the literature produced by Chinese Malaysian writers. In this context, the use of Chinese was not simply a minority gesture to challenge what was seen as Malaysian cultural hegemony; it also reflected the ambivalent link to a precarious Chinese imaginary and subject position. In Li's reminiscence (2003, 39), his fetishistic obsession with Chinese characters can be traced to his first encounter with the transfixing Chinese characters of his childhood. The admonition of his schoolteachers against the Chinese language only served to make those logo-like characters more alluring and started him on a journey in pursuit of a homeland that was forever lost. In this primal scene, the problematic of the Chinese language and identity in the context of postcolonial Malaysia is encapsulated. If Li's writing exemplifies *par excellence* the Chinese diaspora narrative (Wang De-wei 2003, 19), it cannot be emphasized too much how this notable diaspora narrative was born out of the languishing intertwining of Chinese Malaysian literary history with the history of modern China, on the one hand, and the struggle of Chinese Malaysian literature against the suppression of Chinese language and identity in the context of "national Malaysian literature," on the other. To sum up, writing as a Chinese diaspora, Li was engaged in double negotiations in transnational literary production: His Chinese diaspora sign was deliberately staged in the Malaysian context to resist the erasure of his Chinese identity, whereas in the context of Taiwan literary production, it was fixatedly deployed to insist on the legitimacy and "authenticity" of his Chinese identity.

THE PLACE OF "DIASPORIC IMAGINATION"

The simultaneous inhabitation of Li's diaspora narratives in both the Malaysian and Taiwan context at a specific moment of transnational literary production

offers an excellent occasion for examining the unstable meanings of the diaspora sign as it traverses from one place to another. In spite of all the deterritorialization rhetoric associated with the idea of diaspora, practices of diasporic imagination nevertheless take *place* in concrete locations. The meaning and significance of the diaspora sign depends very much on how the history that the diaspora sign carries behind it intersects with local history in the new context (see Dirlik 2002, 228). In other words, “diaspora” is not a floating sign. Depending on how it is deployed, in what kind of historical situation, and in what concrete location, diasporic imagination may have complex and unstable implications. This means that reterritorialization needs to be considered side by side with deterritorialization in order to grasp the complex operation of diasporic imagination.

As I have tried to illustrate, the diasporic imagination so essential to the literary production of Li and many of his contemporary Chinese Malaysian writers was, in part, a response to a specific sociopolitical structure in postcolonial Malaysia. The Chinese Malaysian diasporic imagination was deliberately deployed to disrupt the Malay-dominated nationalist cultural imagination in postcolonial Malaysia. Stubbornly retaining the inscription of Chinese otherness, it sought to challenge the assimilation policy instituted by the state apparatus. In this context, the Chinese diaspora sign stages itself as the sign of inerasable other, the sign of a subversive other that challenges and frustrates the desire for sameness. It was this Chinese diasporic imagination that Li carried with him when he arrived in Taiwan in 1967, and it was this imagination that fueled his creation of the (fictive) Chinese world in the *Chronicle of Chi-ling* (1986).

But what was happening in Taiwan’s cultural arena between 1967 and 1986, the period in which Li worked with his Malaysia-born Chinese diasporic imagination to produce his celebrated Chinese stories? In order to demonstrate how Li’s Malaysia-generated Chinese diaspora sign shifted its implications when inserted into Taiwan—a site involved in the dynamics of transnational literary production whereby various Chinese subject positions intersected—I have to recapitulate briefly here a section of postwar Taiwan literary history.

The year 1967, when Li Yong-ping arrived in Taiwan, also saw the publication of the Taiwanese writer Wang Zhen-ho’s highly acclaimed masterpiece “An Oxcart for Dowry.” With its astounding mix of transcribed spoken Taiwanese and Mandarin Chinese in the narrative, the story immediately caught the critical attention of the Taiwan literary circle. Wang’s peculiar adulterated language style, with its stress on the Taiwanese spoken word, was to activate a trend of so-called nativist writing that would dominate Taiwan’s literary scene for the next twenty years. The significance of Wang’s “adulterated” form of language is that it allowed the entry of Taiwanese acoustic otherness into the public sphere of writing. This sense of otherness, which was deliberately exploited by Taiwanese cultural critics in the 1930s to insinuate a Taiwanese identity under Japanese colonial rule (Xiang Yang 2004) and was suppressed after the war for almost twenty

years under the hegemonic Mandarin Chinese language policy (Hsiau 2000, 35–140), now resurfaced in literary production. It needs to be noted here that what Wang does in his writing is more than an attempt at realistic mimetic representation. The mixture of Taiwanese spoken word with Mandarin Chinese not only appears in the dialogues of Taiwanese characters but also takes place on the level of diegesis to mark the language performance of the narrator. This means that there is an implicit reclaiming of the (stigmatized) Taiwanese spoken word as a legitimate language for artistic presentation.⁶ I hasten to add here that this nativist turn was propelled more by Wang's modernist search for a new artistic language than by a nativist consciousness to subvert the Chinese imaginary.

To avoid frustrating readers who are not familiar with the history of Taiwan, I will not delve into the intricate embedding of the modernist and nativist literary trends in the contestation and interplay of different cultural forces (namely, Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, and American) during the historical period under discussion here. Suffice it to say that the defamiliarization of Mandarin Chinese as a literary language was a distinguished Taiwan modernist practice in the 1960s. Wang Wen-xing, Qi Deng-sheng, and Wang Zhen-ho are the most renowned cases. Whereas Wang Wen-xing's and Qi Deng-sheng's convoluted Mandarin styles reflected a peculiar Taiwan modernist penchant for breaking with the writer's inherited (Chinese) cultural heritage in a Cold War environment dominated by American cultural hegemony (Lupke 2001, 138), Wang Zhen-ho's defamiliarization of Mandarin Chinese through the resuscitation of the spoken word of the common people unwittingly activated a reconnection with the (Taiwanese) cultural heritage on the brink of erasure. The artistry of this peculiar form of adulterated language reached its height in Wang Zhen-ho's masterpiece *Rose Rose I Love You*, published in 1984, two years ahead of the publication of Li Yong-ping's *Chronicle of Chi-ling* and in the wake of the nativist literature debate, which was abruptly put to an end with the arrest of several writers in the nativist camp. Though most works with a nativist flavor in the 1980s appeared in a domesticated form and often without the critical edge that marked the literary production in the heyday of the nativist literary movement (Yang Zhao 1995, 141–44), a specific Taiwanese subject position continued to develop in Taiwanese writing.

The coexistence of Li's *Chronicle of Chi-ling* and Wang's *Rose Rose I Love You* in the field of Taiwan's cultural production in the mid-1980s betrays a growing tension between the Chinese cultural tradition and the Taiwanese cultural tradition on the island (Hsiau 2000, 106–24). The hegemony of the Chinese literary tradition, with its insistence on the exclusive use of Mandarin

⁶The implication of the Mandarin-only policy by Kuomintang after its retreat to Taiwan was accompanied by the suppression and stigmatization of native languages and cultures. For a useful discussion of the problem of language in Taiwan literary production, see Hsiau A-chin (2000, 50–124) and June Yip (2004, 131–40).

Chinese, was being challenged by a Taiwan-based literary sensibility that sought to reenter the literary scene after decades of repression. Thus, it is arguable that when Li's Chinese diaspora sign was transposed from Malaysia to Taiwan, it no longer worked as the sign of the other but rather performed as a sign of the totalizing sameness in its endorsement of the unifying Chinese identity. Interestingly, in an uncanny repetition of the experience in Malaysia, only with its role reversed, the Chinese sign faced the challenge of what claimed to be "*other than Chinese*," which sought to disrupt the pedagogical temporality imposed by the state apparatus in Taiwan.⁷ If Li's Chinese diasporic imagination germinated out of a desire for the other and for differences in the Malaysian context, it now reflected more the desire for sameness in the locality of Taiwan, for it effected what Homi K. Bhabha (1990, 303) calls "pedagogical time" in a coercive attempt to suppress performative temporality. In its aspiration for a quintessential Chineseness and its insistence on the Chinese identity, Li's diaspora sign now found itself in alliance with the desire for sameness and facing the contesting difference of a place-based sensibility that refused to participate in the ritualistic reinscription of the Chinese identity.

Apparently, Li's deployment of the Chinese written language, which addressed the question of the Chinese imaginary from a Malaysian minority identity position, took on a different significance when it was transplanted to the Taiwanese literary scene in the mid-1980s. Li's case illustrates how the meaning of diaspora is not self-evident. Diasporic imagination cuts both ways. Depending on how it is operated in concrete historical locations, the diaspora sign can carry either a politically progressive or a conservative message.

CHINESE MALAYSIAN WRITERS IN TAIWAN AND TRANSNATIONAL LITERARY PRODUCTION IN THE LATE 1990s

What makes the transnational production of Chinese Malaysian diaspora writing so intriguing is that the story does not stop with Li and his contemporaries' desperate attempts to defend the Chinese identity in two remarkably different fields of literary production in which, for very different reasons, the Chinese identity was losing its stronghold. The story of Chinese diasporic imagination gets a further twist as the younger generation of Chinese Malaysian writers seeks to reinscribe Chineseness in a de-Sinocentric way. Since the 1990s, Li Yongping's and Wen Rui-an's ardent embrace of the Chinese imaginary has been critically revisioned (Lim 2004; Ng 2004, 67).

In the writing of Ng Kim-chew, who followed in the footsteps of the older generation of Chinese Malaysian writers to Taiwan for undergraduate studies,

⁷For a discussion of the formation of a new Taiwanese identity different from Chinese, see Melissa J. Brown (2004).

the infatuation with the Chinese imaginary is taunted as a sort of necrophilia (Wang De-wei 2001, 19). Indeed, the long history of Chinese Malaysians' struggle for Chinese identity is portrayed as a macabre pursuit in his celebrated story "The Fish Bone," which claimed first prize in a very high-profile Taiwan literary award competition in 1995. The story unravels the mystery of a fish-bone-like talisman that the protagonist, a Malaysia-born Chinese professor well versed in *jia-gu-wen* (oracle bone script, referring to ancient Chinese characters incised on turtle shells for divination in ancient China), always carries with him. As the story unfolds, the reader learns that the protagonist was initiated to the world of spell-binding Chinese characters by his senior brother, whose efforts to claim his Chinese identity in conflict-ridden, ethnically divided Malaysia led to his premature and violent death. The protagonist determinedly stands detached from politics and buries himself in the study of ancient Chinese bone scripts on turtle shells. But love and death are intertwined in his obsessive toying with turtle shells. He kills and dissects the turtles that he secretly steals from the school fish pond, and then he polishes and keeps the dead turtle shells for his private collection. Turtle shells with ancient Chinese bone script are obviously a fetish for the scholar-protagonist. The story takes an unexpected turn when the narrative reveals the protagonist's fixation with turtle shells as originating in his accidental discovery of the skeleton of his senior brother in a marsh surrounded by piles of turtle shells. He cut off a small section of neck bone from his dead brother's body and, knowing that he would never come back to the place again, felt involuntarily sexually excited and ejaculated on a turtle shell lying near the body. It turns out that the "fish bone" he always carries with him is actually a small piece of his beloved brother's neck bone.

From this rough outline of the story, it is not difficult to discern that a complicated interplay of love, death, and life is operating in the narrative. The protagonist makes a living by immersing himself in the world of dead ancient Chinese script. Hence, his survival depends on his attempt to resurrect a Chinese language that is no longer in use. This choice to take on the responsibility of resurrecting the dead Chinese language is apparently closely associated with his strong attachment to his senior brother, who dies defending his right to claim his precarious Chinese identity in a society hostile to this identity affirmation. To survive, the protagonist dissociates himself from the ardent political pursuit that killed his brother. Yet with all his indifference to politics, his obsession with the turtle shells with bone script nevertheless reveals his involuntary attraction to the Chinese imaginary, which has become a substitute for his lost brother. The text is saturated through and through with images of death, irretrievable loss, and compulsory attraction to death, which in one way or another all point to the simultaneous life-giving and deadly Chinese imaginary.

This story is obviously intended to be interpreted as an allegorical rendering of the dilemma of Chinese Malaysians in relation to their fetishization of the Chinese imaginary. Ng points out in his "Chineseness and Performativity"

(2004, 52–53) that for Chinese Malaysians living in a Malaysian-dominated society, claiming Chinese identity is almost inseparable from claiming the use of the Chinese language, which is considered essential to the survival of Chinese culture in Malaysia. For Chinese Malaysians, the Chinese language is not something that is naturally given but something that needs to be fought hard for. On the Chinese language is predicated Chinese identity. To give up the Chinese language means very much to give up the Chinese part of one's identity and succumb to the pressure of the dominant group. In other words, the *raison d'être* of Chinese Malaysians depends very much on the preservation of the prefix of the term, a project that is feasible only when the Chinese language functions properly in a congenial environment to carry on Chinese cultural tradition.

Interestingly, in the story “The Fish Bone,” the embodiment of the Chinese language is the ancient Chinese bone script—a long-dead, ancient form of Chinese language in currency during the latter half of the Shan dynasty (ca. 1600 BCE–ca. 1046 BCE). Why does Ng choose to embody the Chinese language with this specific form of writing rather than any living, contemporary Chinese language? One is immediately reminded of the choice of genre and literary language discussed in Li's and Wen's cases. Whereas Li's and Wen's skillful manipulations of specific literary genres and language styles aim to conjure up a vision of an abstract, ancient China, the Chinese imaginary that Ng tries to evoke with the prominent image of turtle shells with bone script is unmistakably associated with the idea of death as a fatal attraction.

For Ng and his contemporaries writing in the 1990s, the dream of “homecoming” is already spent. They have come to realize that the imagined homeland entertained by so many generations of Chinese Malaysians remains an unreachable utopia. It can be found neither in China, nor in Taiwan, nor in anywhere else in the real world. There is no return. Their Chinese imaginary is built on the remains of the past, which continue to exert their fatal attraction, just as the dead bone script continues to infatuate the protagonist in “The Fish Bone.” The entanglement of Chinese Malaysians with the Chinese imaginary becomes, in the eyes of Ng, a sort of necrophilia. It is not without reason that Ng (2006) locates the birth of Chinese Malaysian literature in tomb inscriptions.

The problem for Ng is that, as a writer trained and brought up in the specific Chinese Malaysian cultural tradition, the production of his writing hinges on his continuous operation of what he now sees as necrophilia.⁸ To give up the Chinese language is to give up writing at all. A melancholic pose begins to dominate his

⁸Ng states bluntly that, for him, writing is nothing but an archeology, resurrecting remains, sunken ships, and ruins. See “A Dialogue with Luo Yi-jun,” included as an appendix to his *Earth and Fire* (2005b, 323).

writing (Wang De-wei 2001, 23).⁹ Although mourning and melancholia are both reactions to the loss of a loved person or object, melancholia displays some symptoms that are missing in mourning: self-debasement accompanied by the expectation to be punished and, paradoxically, strong verbal communicativeness rather than feelings of shame usually experienced by people with self-reproach (Freud 1957, 246–49). In Sigmund Freud’s analysis, the melancholic’s self-reproach is a displacement of reproach against the loved object, which masks an identification of the ego with the lost object (Freud 1957, 249). A narcissistic identification is thereby enacted that allows the melancholic to maintain the love relation in spite of his conflict with the loved person (Freud 1957, 249).

It is arguable that Ng’s conspicuously paraded “diasporic” stance can be understood in terms of melancholic symptoms. With the realization that there is no homeland to return to and that the Chinese dream is all but bankrupt, the melancholic subject is forced to confront the irretrievable loss of the imaginary on which he has built his identity. As giving up the love relation with the Chinese imaginary risks jeopardizing his self-identity, the melancholic subject enacts a self-exile concomitant with the exile of the Chinese imaginary. This self-imposed exile enables the melancholic subject to continue to be identified with the beloved Chinese imaginary and thus shuns the danger of identity crisis. In spite of all his vehement debunking of the Chinese imaginary with necrophilia rhetoric, this complicated detour of identification makes it possible for Ng to sustain his *Chinese* Malaysian self-definition required for the legitimization of his *Chinese* writing. While mourning enacts the process of withdrawing one’s libido from the lost object and coming to terms with the loss, melancholia allows the libido to continue to play through narcissistic identification with the lost love object (Freud 1957, 249–50).

This may help us assess the nuanced differences and similarities between Ng’s and his predecessors’ diaspora writings. For many Chinese Malaysians, the birth of their Chinese identity takes place simultaneously with the traumatic consciousness of their distance from that identity. Their geospatial distance from the “authentic” Chinese homeland and the institutional suppression of their identity in the Malaysian context already problematize the claiming of that identity. Insofar as Taiwan was taken to be the home of the authentic Chinese community, writers of the older generation sought to cancel the distance through their “homecoming” pilgrimage and through compulsory reinscription of their “Chineseness.” Their diasporic imagination was informed by the notion of homecoming and by an essentialist view of Chineseness.

⁹Wang De-Wei uses the term *you-shang* (sad, melancholy) to describe Ng’s writing and then further defines it as a project of *dao-wang* (mourning). Lim Kien-ket (2001, 370) discusses Ng’s writing in terms of *fu-mo* (possessed) and *ai-dao* (mourning). I try to make a distinction between mourning and melancholia in my analysis.

These two notions are exactly what Ng tries to relinquish in his redefinition of Chinese Malaysian diasporic imagination. For him, to be “diaspora” means to live *without* “home”;¹⁰ it is a condition of being always *en route*. This explains why a very important collection of his short stories has a peculiar layout of three titles: *From Island to Island/Dari Pulau Ke Pulau/Back Inscription* (see figure 1). Refusing to have a fixed title, this layout is intended not only to suggest movement—from one place to another and from one language to another, which characterizes diaspora experience—but also implies the substitution of hybridity for authenticity as the very constitution of the diasporic imagination. In other words, the notion of hybridity, paradoxically, enables Ng to cling to the Chinese imaginary, which is taken to be an essential constituent of his hybrid identity. Now a (self-)exiled writer, Ng can carry the exiled Chinese sign with him wherever he goes.

I have tried to delineate some of the key elements in Ng’s diaspora writing, which is notably different from that practiced by Li and Wen in the 1970s and 1980s. Now we can finally turn to the question of transnational literary production. What happens when this newly redefined Chinese Malaysian diaspora sign is deployed in the Taiwanese field of literary production in the late 1990s? I have pointed out in the foregoing discussion that just as Li Yong-ping and Wen Rui-an sought to consolidate their Chinese identity through the staging of highly stylized Chinese language in their writings, the Chinese imaginary and language were losing ground to a Taiwan-based identity consciousness. With the lifting of martial law in 1987, the nativist movement gathered momentum (Hsiao 2000, 102–16). When Ng arrived in Taipei in 1994, the island was witnessing heated identity debates as Taiwanese consciousness began to gain currency. As mentioned before, the call for Taiwan-flavored literary production began to voice itself in the 1970s and came to the fore in the nativist literary debate. Although the debate abruptly came to a premature end with the arrest of several writers in 1979, the nativist trend in writing, though losing much of the critical edge that marked the literary products of the 1970s, continued to develop. The lifting of martial law in 1987 gave a further boost to this trend and triggered an impressive wave of mother-tongue writing.¹¹

This stress on the importance of retrieving native languages and culture quickly led to ethnic confrontations, particularly between Chinese mainlanders and the Hoklo ethnic group. At the same time, “place consciousness” began to be considered a key concept in shaping the new (Taiwanese nationalist) imagined community. In the eyes of Ng, the nativist movement, particularly its emphasis on

¹⁰James Clifford also regards “homecoming” as the negation of diaspora. See his discussion of diasporas in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997, 251).

¹¹“Native” languages in Taiwan include Hoklo, Hakka, and various aboriginal languages. The experiment of aboriginal writers in mother-tongue writing generated very fruitful critical reflections on Taiwan culture in general (see Sun Da-chuan 2003; Walis 2003).

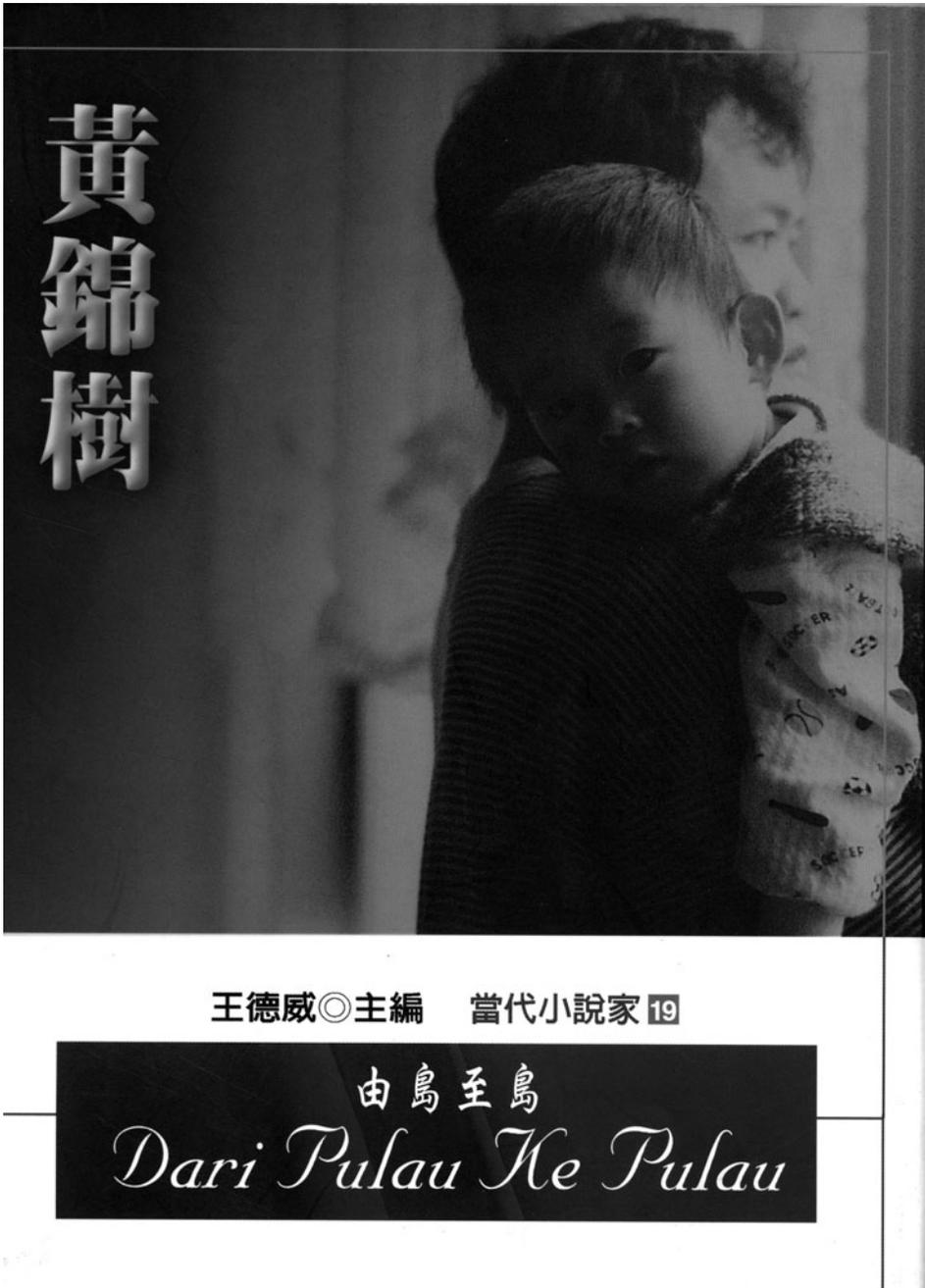


Figure 1. Front cover of Ng Kim-chew's *From Island to Island/Dari Pulau Ke Pulau/Back Inscription*.

place identification in resistance to the Chinese identity, uncannily repeats the xenophobia found in Malaysia (Ng 2005a, 14). More importantly, the urge for a stronger tie with place (Taiwan) goes very much against the diasporic position that Ng determinedly takes up (2005b, 318). In the following, I will focus on the

clash between Ng's insistence on diaspora writing and the emphasis on "place identification" in the sphere of Taiwanese literary production to dig deeper into the intricacy of transnational literary production.

It should be pointed out first that Ng's diaspora sign does not operate as a simple, total negation of place. On the surface, Ng's celebration of diasporic imagination seems to buy into what Arif Dirlik describes as a deterritorializing "off-ground" discourse of cultural identity formation that favors "supra-place (Chinese) identity" over grounded place consciousness (Dirlik and Prazniak 2001, 5–6). Off-ground discursive inclination elevates space at the expense of place. The notion of place is rejected because it comes to signify fixity, boundedness, and conservative parochialism (Dirlik 2001b, 21). Dirlik sees in this move a reflection of the hegemony of postmodern abstraction that unwittingly plays into the hands of global capitalism. In the context of Asian American literature, the celebration of diasporic imagination against place-based consciousness helps to erase the difference between Asians and Asian Americans and enables some Chinese Americans with privileged economic and political capital to exploit their alleged link to Asia (Dirlik 2001a, 86–87).

But Ng's diasporic imagination is nothing of the sort strongly criticized by Dirlik in his discussion of the slippage between Asian identity and Asian American identity. Even if Ng's diaspora discourse constantly disparages the notion of the nation-state and place identity, it is informed, paradoxically, by a very strong place consciousness. The story "The Fish Bone," unlike Li Yong-ping's *Chronicle of Chi-ling*, which attempts to evoke an abstract China and leave out all traces of his Malaysian experience, realistically paints the Malaysia that he is so deeply in love with despite all the sad, torturing memories associated with it. Indeed, the other stories included in the collection all take Malaysia as the primal traumatic scene. "Deep in the Woods," "The Story-Teller," "Dark Nights," and "Illegal Immigrants" are illustrative examples. The portrayal of the anxiety and fear of Chinese Malaysians in a hostile environment speaks of his ambiguous, involuntary tie to Malaysia.

Unlike Li, who tries to eradicate all traces of Malaysian connection in his desperate attempt to claim his Chinese identity, Ng makes his traumatic Malaysian memories the core of his writing (1997b, 5). This repeated revisiting of his homeland through writing seems to enact compulsorily his simultaneous attachment to and repulsion from his birthplace. The dangerous Malaysian woods, like the forbidden Chinese character, become a fetish. Both involve contradictory impulses of love and hate, attachment and resistance. "Topophilia" (attachment to a place) and "topophobia" (negative feelings of place) are ambivalently intertwined (Ma 2003, 11) to create a curious tension in Ng's writing. In spite of the strong antiplace rhetoric that informs his critical discourse on Chinese Malaysian literature, Ng's diaspora writing does not operate as the simple negation of place. Instead, I would argue, it reveals a troubled link to place(s).

Interestingly, if Ng exploits the Chinese sign to inscribe diasporic space for himself in the Malaysian context, it is the Malaysian sign that he deploys in the context of Taiwanese literary production to define his diaspora identity. Confronted with the nativist urge to write about Taiwan in order to demonstrate his identification with the island (2005a, 14), Ng defiantly, and deliberately, turns to his birthplace in the southeast ocean to reiterate his position as an inassimilable other. But, to give Ng's identity trajectory another twist, this self-positioning as an inassimilable other can be interpreted as more a gesture to claim his right to be connected with Taiwan rather than a move of separation to negate this connection. It is noteworthy that immediately after his refusal to answer the call for Taiwan-centered writing, Ng uses the word "double homelands" (referring to Malaysia *and* Taiwan) to define his diaspora status. In this context, to position oneself as a diaspora is to plead for one's right to "live *inside*, with a difference" (Clifford 1997, 251; emphasis added). The diasporic Ng is here to stay, and he is determined to maintain his Malaysian otherness and connection with an-other place. This is already a far cry from the tactic of *becoming* Chinese adopted by his predecessors, such as Li Yong-ping. The diasporic space in Ng's writing is a site of ambivalence, traversed by conflicting impulses to reject and to maintain the Chinese imaginary. The contradictory impulses to be attached to and detached from place are simultaneously played out.

THE INTERVENTION OF "PLACE-BASED IMAGINATION" IN STUDIES IN CHINESE LITERATURES

Diaspora is often celebrated as politically progressive because of its stress on the notion of movement and hybridity as a state of being. It speaks the rhetoric of modernity, which operates on the notion of mobility and flow (Appadurai 1996, 4; Lash and Urry 1994, 254). I have tried to show how this is a simplified understanding of the complex operation of the diasporic sign. A close examination of Chinese Malaysian diaspora writing in the circuit of transnational literary production provides a case in point. The intersection of Chinese Malaysian diaspora writing and Taiwanese indigenous writing at two particular moments of transnational literary production—namely, the late 1970s to the mid-1980s and the late-1990s to the present—demonstrates the complicated trajectory of the diaspora sign. Using Chinese Malaysian diaspora writings by Li Yong-ping and Ng Kim-chew as examples, I have tried to underscore the instability of the political implications of diaspora writings. The meaning of the so-called (Chinese) diasporic imagination is not self-evident but depends on how it is deployed in specific localities in specific historical moments. Radical transformations of the implications of the diaspora sign may take place when the sign traverses from one locale to another or from one historical

moment to another. Historicized readings of the operation of the diaspora sign reveal the naiveté of seeing the sign as having fixed, inherent politically progressive meanings.

As James Clifford rightly points out (1997, 252), there is often a tension between diaspora identity and nativist identity formations. As contemporary cultural critique often pits place-based imagination unfavorably against diasporic imagination, it is time that we reopen the case of place-based imagination to investigate its politically progressive potential. Vis-à-vis the Chinese imaginary that dominates Li Yong-ping's diaspora writing, the place-based imagination operating in the adulterated writings of Taiwanese writers in the 1970s and 1980s gave them a critical edge that is missing in Li's diaspora writing. But as the nativist discourse develops into the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, its entanglement with the nation-building project on the island casts it in a rather suspicious light. More to the point, the emphasis on place-based consciousness seems to go against the grain of transnationalism discourse, which makes it vulnerable to the critique of provincialism. Though it is true that overemphasis on place-based imagination easily falls prey to essentialist autochthonous identity discourse,¹² as some of the extreme Taiwanese fundamentalist discourses illustrate, the progressive dimension of nativist discourse should not be dismissed too easily.

One of the contributions of place-based discourse in Taiwan literature is its radical contestation of the category of "Chinese" in identity construction and in the designation of a particular field of literary studies. The common conception of Taiwanese society as constituted of descendents of Chinese immigrants is criticized as implicated in not only racist but also patriarchal thinking. As very few Chinese women were allowed to come to Taiwan in the Qing dynasty, early Chinese immigrants often took aboriginal women as wives (Williams 2003, 167). The majority of Taiwanese people are thus hybrid. To define them as "Chinese" is to perform a patriarchal, racist erasure of the aboriginal participation in the shaping of the Taiwanese (Li and Liu 1994, 25). The *Chinese* identity of Taiwanese is thus seriously called into question (Brown 2004). This problematization of Chinese identity is then extended to challenge the *Chinese* Malaysian identity assumed by Chinese Malaysian writers (Chiu 2006, 282). It is argued that Chinese Malaysians' definition of themselves as *Chinese* diaspora reveals the unreflective racist, patriarchal grip on their self-identity construction, for it is very likely that they are, like Taiwanese, descendents of mixed marriages and cultures. Not only does the notion of "fictive kinship" in the production of the Chinese diaspora identity subject look suspicious; the patriarchal, biological, and racist assumptions in the construction of the so-called ethnic Chinese also face

¹²Clifford makes a distinction between autochthonous ("natural") and indigenous ("historical") formulations. See his essay "Diaspora" in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997, 252).

serious challenges. Rather than defining oneself in terms of the myth of pure blood and patriarchal suppression of the maternal line of identity, the “place-based” discourse of Taiwanese identity acknowledges the importance of aboriginal elements in the constitution of one’s identity and culture rather than tilting the scale one-sidedly in favor of Chinese identification.

Another problem with the Chinese diaspora identity is that its production is based on the implicit activation of nationalist imagination. Ng strongly criticizes the nativist movement because of its close connection with the Taiwanese nationalist imagination. But the tables can be turned on him as the diasporic imagination is revealed to be predicated on similar nationalist logic. Ang’s pointed remarks on the connection between the discourse of diaspora and transnational nationalism are illuminating:

In this sense, the language of diaspora is fundamentally nationalist; it feeds into a *transnationalism* based on the presumption of internal ethnic sameness and external ethnic distinctiveness. Unlike the nationalism of the nation-state, which premises itself on a national community, which is territorially bound, diasporic nationalism produces an imagined community which is deterritorialized, but which is symbolically bounded nevertheless. Its borders are clearly defined, at least in the imagination, and its actual and potential membership is finite: only certain people, notionally “Chinese” people, can belong to the “Chinese diaspora.” (2001, 82–83)

It turns out that the Chinese diaspora identity is very much a product of nationalism, projecting onto the transnational space a national community based on the myth of blood connection and (often) patriarchal construction of ethnic identity.

Not only does the place-based paradigm in Taiwan push for a radical critique of *Chinese* identity category, at the same time, it also seeks to discredit the common conceptualization of Taiwan as Chinese *diaspora* space. In the field of literary studies, this paradigm challenges the categorization of Taiwan literature as a literature *in Chinese*. In the place-based paradigm, the history of literary production on Taiwan reveals Taiwan literature as multilingual, not only including works in Japanese from the Japanese ruling period but also taking into serious account works of multilingual composition and local languages. Aboriginal writers’ experiments with mixing aboriginal writing with Chinese or bilingual composition are considered a very important portion of Taiwan literature. Therefore, it is argued that defining Taiwan literature as a literature in Chinese is a Sinophone-centric move that fails not only to engage the historicity of Taiwan literary production but also fails to take issue with the historical suppression of the native spoken word under the Chinese regime.

Seen from this perspective, the designation of Chinese Malaysian literature as a literature in Chinese falls prey to the uncritical Sinophone-centrism that upholds Chinese Malaysian writings in Chinese at the expense of Chinese

Malaysian literary production in other subordinated languages (Chiu 2006, 282). Like Taiwan literature, Chinese Malaysian literature is multilingual, for not all Chinese Malaysian writers use Chinese for creative writing (Tee 2003, 127–28; Lim 2004, 22). The implication of Sinophone-centrism in studies in Chinese Malaysian literature deserves critical examination (Lim 2004, 22). To push the argument a step further, the historical suppression of the native spoken word under the Chinese regime in the Taiwanese scene brings into relief the “empire of Chinese” in Chinese studies. With Chinese commonly positioned as a victim vis-à-vis the political domination and cultural hegemony of the West (Chow 1993, 104; 1995, 51), the violence of the Chinese sign as an oppressive power is often overlooked (Chow 1995, 51). The undertheorization of the empire of the Chinese sign needs to be addressed.

In sum, the intervention of place-based imagination in studies in literatures in Chinese raises several interesting questions. First of all, it seeks to expose the patriarchal, racist implications of the construction of the Chinese diaspora identity and questions the validity of the blood tie that serves as the foundation of diaspora transnationalism. Second, through the example of Taiwan literature, it questions the category of literatures in Chinese and critiques the Sinophone-centric tendency in the paradigms we use for study. Finally, it takes issue with the status of the Chinese language as a language of victimization and calls attention to the question of the empire of the Chinese sign. With the notable exception of some aboriginal writings, place-based discourse in Taiwan is informed by a strong nation-building political agenda, which makes it look suspicious to critics of antinationalist thinking. However, to ignore these challenges of place-based imagination, in my view, is to waste an excellent opportunity to critically examine some of our most deep-seated assumptions in cultural and literary studies.

I believe that much can be gained if we reincorporate “place” as a useful methodological term into our literary and cultural studies. In her excellent discussion of the question of global Chineseness, Ang proposes to shift our focus from the nation-state to the global city as a metaphor for transnational formation (2001, 88–92). But this narrowing of geographic framework to global cities proves to be of little help in tackling problems of transnational literary production. One simply cannot understand the trajectory of transnational literary production as discussed in this essay in terms of the limited concept of global cities. Taiwan, rather than the global city of Taipei, and Malaysia, rather than Kuala Lumpur, are the geographic sites where transnational negotiations take place. The problem of literary historiography that continues to occupy Ng’s thoughts (2006) is another case in point. In spite of the importance of Taipei as a locus of literary production, it would seriously constrain our vision of Taiwan literary history if we took Taipei as the only transnational space in discussing Taiwan literature. Indeed, if a place is defined by its position in networks of relations with the wider world rather than by some internalized history, then all places are open and porous (Massey 1993, 66; 1994, 5). In other words, all places have a spatial

dimension and are imbedded in networks of interactions with other places.¹³ In the age of globalization, this means that to take the global city as the exclusive metaphor for transnational formation is to set an unnecessary, even myopic, constraint on our thinking of transnational transactions and thereby limit the scope of our critical investigation. The limitation of the global city as a methodological concept becomes even more obvious when confronted with the issue of literary history writing, which looms large in the field of literary studies. It goes without saying that the historical trajectory of Taiwan literature involves much wider geographic framework than the city of Taipei. As far as Taiwan literary history is concerned, “Taiwan” remains a more valid concept than the global city of Taipei.

Without privileging the global city as a metaphor for transnational space, the place paradigm calls for a closer examination of the intertwining of nationalism and transnationalism in diaspora studies and literary studies in general. In contrast to diaspora studies, which relies heavily on the notion of ethnic identity in defining itself and thereby falls prey to racist, patriarchal, and Sinophone-centric thinking, nativist Taiwanese literary historiography seeks to portray the trajectory of literary production in Taiwan in terms of place connection. This “place-centered” paradigm, which dominates Taiwanese literary historiography, first took a clear shape in the important essay “Preface to Taiwan Literary History,” published in 1943 when Taiwan was still a Japanese colony. Written in Japanese, this essay by Huang De-shi (1996, 2), one of the leading figures in the so-called Taiwan New Literature movement, defines the boundary of Taiwan literature in terms of the connection between the writers’ literary activities and Taiwan.

It should be particularly noted that in this place-based paradigm, neither the identity (national identity or ethnic identity) of the writer nor the language used in writing is considered an essential factor in defining Taiwan literature. The corpus of Taiwan literature is considered to encompass five categories of literary products: first, works published in Taiwan by writers born in Taiwan; second, works by writers not of Taiwan origin who have lived in Taiwan for a considerable period of time and are involved with literary activities on the island; third, works about Taiwan published by non-Taiwanese writers during their short stays there; fourth, works by writers born in Taiwan who publish their works elsewhere; and finally, works about Taiwan by writers who have never been to this place. This place-based paradigm stresses the importance of place connection but nonetheless acknowledges the porosity of place boundary and the play of transnational flows in the shaping of Taiwan literature.

A response to the literary transactions in colonial Taiwan, Huang’s essay reveals a strong consciousness of Taiwan literature as embedded in the circuit of transnational literary production. In this place-based vision of Taiwan literature, Taiwan literature is understood to be multilingual and to involve writers of different

¹³For a discussion of the spatial dimension of places that does not take the global city as the focus of analysis, see Kuei-fen Chiu (2003).

identities. This proves an invaluable insight for contemporary Taiwanese literary historians in dealing with the problems of constructing Taiwan's literary history. Originally published in Japanese in the 1940s when Taiwan was still under Japanese colonial rule, Huang's essay was translated into Chinese by the historian Ye Shi-tao and published in 1996. Since then, it has been adopted by nativist Taiwanese literary historians to demarcate the boundaries of Taiwan literature. Works by Japanese writers associated with the literary circle in colonial Taiwan, as well as those by Chinese writers temporarily involved in Taiwan's literary production on their routes to (self-) exile, are all accepted as part of Taiwan literature, placed side by side with works written by aboriginal writers in aboriginal languages.

In other words, the place paradigm drastically undermines the conventional centrality of nationality in the construction of literary history and opens up a radical transnational space of historiography in which writers can straddle different (national) literary histories. A Japanese writer with an active writing career in colonial Taiwan can be written into the history of Japanese literature as well as Taiwan literature. Chinese Malaysian writers such as Li Yong-ping and Ng Kim-chew find their places not only in Malaysian literature but also in Taiwan literature. Likewise, a writer such as Nie Hua-ling, who was born in mainland China and became active in Taiwan's literary circle before she finally settled down in the United States, is entitled to be recognized as an important figure not only in the history of modern Chinese literature but also in the history of Taiwan literature and that of Asian American literature.

Here lies the most intriguing paradox and radical potential of the place paradigm for cultural and literary studies. Although the place-based paradigm is tied up with the political agenda of nation-building in contemporary Taiwanese nativist discourse, it is remarkably transnational in its outlook. Insofar as it downplays the importance of national and ethnic identity in defining Taiwan literature, it serves as a foil for transnational diasporic imagination, which is often informed by an implicit nationalism based on the concept of ethnicity and kinship, and for the common historiographical practice of defining national literature in terms of national identity and a single dominant language. Given the hegemony of diaspora discourse in current academic scholarship and in studies in literatures in Chinese, the intervention of place-based imagination is deeply troubling, for it challenges some of the most popular presumptions in current cultural critiques. For that matter, it should be welcomed.

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