Circuits of Identities in the Margins: Multicultural Encounters and Hybrid Biopolitics in Sinophone Texts across Greater China and Southeast Asia

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Abstract

This thesis engages with the praxis of diasporic Sinophone biopolitics across East Asia exploring travelling imaginaries, hybrid material cultures, and articulations of embodied difference striking across geopolitical and temporal boundaries. By considering the interfaces of ethnic Chinese across local cultures in Malaysia, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong inflected by globalizing influences, I question how a cohesive Sinophone identity outside mainland China might be nurtured and managed through a multicultural approach. Through the lens of literary works by Li Yongping (李永平), Kuo Pao Kun (郭寶崑), and Wong Bik-Wan (黃碧雲), this thesis investigates the heterogeneous formation of Sinophone identities calibrated by the time and place specificities of each articulation and lived practice. Each author articulates distinct yet intersecting perspectives towards the Sinophone body as one that is gendered and (de)sexualized and the sociopolitical consequences of linguistic hybridity at the crossroads of international margins and routes.

The first chapter takes up Kuo Pao Kun’s Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral 《鄭和的后代》 (1995) to tease out Singapore’s multilingualism, racial hybridity, and the impact of the city-state’s language policies on ethnic Chinese identity. The second chapter will focus on Li Yongping, a Sinophone Malaysian author who emigrated to Taiwan, and the affective images of wandering, ghostly ethnic Chinese women circulating in his work. The third chapter delves into Wong Bik-wan’s short story collection, Tenderness and Violence 《温柔与爆裂》 (1994), and her misogynistic perspective on the corporeal manifestations of Sinophone Hong Kong modernity. By attending to the physical and conceptual movements that these texts each
represent and enable, close analyses of the figures populating all three works illuminate the power of gendered and subaltern bodies as they intersect with critical frameworks of postcoloniality and Sinophone studies. Taken together, this thesis argues that Sinophone synergies across diverse Sinitic communities create a space for interaction and negotiation to reevaluate the Chinese identity and “Chineseness” vis-à-vis tradition, cultural uniformity, geographical boundaries, geopolitical boundaries, biopolitical manifestations, and transculturation.
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Introduction

In the last decade, Sinophone studies — the study of Sinitic-language cultures emerging from postcolonial and postsocialist milieus — presented an important intervention for modern Chinese studies. The growing field focuses on the transnational experiences, cultures, and literatures of Sinitic-language individuals and communities vis-à-vis colonial legacies, diasporic experiences, and ethnic or minority issues. Situated at the intersection of multiple disciplines and transcending national boundaries, Sinophone studies revolves around a critique of “Chineseness” with its bodily and textual manifestations of resistance to the hegemonic Han discourse of mainland China. As scholars have reflected, until recent years, modern Chinese studies had seldom been reexamined from outside and beyond the geopolitical and national boundaries of China proper (Tsu and Wang 2010; Shih 2007).

This thesis focuses on Sinophone writers and literary texts to explore how Sinitic-language narratives articulate what it means to be Sinophone amid shifting geohistorical contexts of migration, citizenship, and colonialism. It engages both the second and third areas of study that Shih outlines in her introduction to Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader (2013); namely, to both expose the limits of the idea of the “Chinese diaspora” as well as focus on the hybridized Sinophone experience in the context of ethnic and minority studies. Engaging with the praxis of diasporic Sinophone biopolitics across East Asia exploring travelling imaginaries, circulating material cultures, and articulations of embodied difference at the junction of geopolitical and temporal boundaries, each chapter looks at distinct yet interrelated refractions of Sinophone culture.

Through the lens of literary works by Kuo Pao Kun (郭寶崑), Li Yongping (李永平), and Wong Bik-Wan (黃碧雲), this thesis investigates the heterogeneous formation of Sinophone biopolitics calibrated by the time and place specificities of each articulation and lived practice.
Each author articulates distinct perspectives towards the Sinophone body as one that is unapologetically gendered and viscerally (de)sexualized. At the crossroads of international margins and routes, each text addresses the geohistorical and sociopolitical consequences of linguistic and racial hybridity by performing the Sinophone body as one that embodies the chronotopes of modern Chinese transnationalism.

**On “Chineseness” and the Sinophone**

Prior to Sinophone studies, the subfield of “Chinese diaspora” studies had been widely adopted and circulated for decades in modern Chinese studies and various area or minority studies to address the dispersion of ethnic Chinese persons around the globe – the so-called “overseas Chinese” (Wang and Wang 1998; Shih 2007). However, formulations of the Chinese diaspora have been problematic as the term “diaspora” inevitably implies a yearning for the mythic homeland of China and affirms a Han-centric origin while excluding other ethnicities, languages, and cultures. Naming people “overseas Chinese” within the “Chinese diaspora” also deprives them of the ability to be recognized as locals in their countries of settlement despite the passage of time and processes of acculturation, particularly after the second or third generation.

Discrepant perspectives drawing attention to the impulse to locate and define the heterogeneous sites of differences varying across the place and practice as well as culture and historical context of “Chineseness” that developed during the 1990s laid critical groundwork for the emergence of Sinophone studies today. Wei-ming Tu’s famous essay on “Cultural China: The Periphery as Center” (1991) focuses on the territorial and cultural ambiguities embedded in “the meaning of being Chinese” which is “intertwined with China as a geopolitical concept and Chinese culture as a lived reality” (1). Tu posits that the Chinese cultural imaginary conceives of China as a civilization, which allows the modern Chinese state to demand political loyalties from
the diaspora. By distinguishing the notion of a “cultural China” from the territorial Chinese state, Tu decenters the Chinese political center’s hegemony on culture, enabling the diaspora existing in various “symbolic universes” to claim symbolic cultural resources as their own.

In Rey Chow’s 1998 essay “On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem,” she outlines critical reflections on the indiscriminate use of “Chinese” and “Chineseness” as terms that support the notion of a “homogenously unified, univocal China” that nonetheless stresses China as an underdeveloped “other” in Western hegemonic discourse (6). Singaporean historian Gungwu Wang alternatively argues in his article on “Chineseness” (1999) that the unqualified use of the term “overseas Chinese” has been misapplied to describe individuals who may happen to have ancestral links to China, ignoring the significance of sociocultural attributes associated with the place and practice of being ethnic Chinese. Accordingly, Wang proposes a model of “Chineseness” prioritizing relations in terms of a center-periphery model to account for the historical situatedness of Chineseness in its various locales of articulation. Insofar as the study of the Chinese diaspora has tried to counter the treatment of overseas Chinese communities as de facto extensions of China as the motherland and reflect the desire of immigrants to localize within lands of settlement through paradigms such as luodi-shengeng – or, “the planting of permanent roots in the soils of different countries” – such discourses have not been able to break free from racialized construction of Chineseness as perpetually foreign and diasporic (Wang 1991; Wang 1998, viii; Shih 2013). In “Against Diaspora,” Shu-mei Shih articulates that the Chinese diaspora ultimately “stands as a universalizing category founded on a unified ethnicity, culture, language, and place of origin or homeland” (2013, 26). Hence, the term is plagued by an inability to see beyond “Chineseness” as a product of Western racialized ideology; it fails to
communicate with other scholarly paradigms of ethnic studies and language-based postcolonial studies such as the Francophone, Hispanophone, and Anglophone.

The Sinophone category had been vested with critical valence to recognize that ethnic Chinese across the globe can be multilingual and multicultural as flexible citizens. Shu-mei Shih first coined the linguistic category of the Sinophone in *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific* (2007) to challenge categories of “China,” “Chinese,” and “Chineseness,” specifically vis-à-vis the subfield of Chinese diaspora studies. Defined as the “study of Sinitic-language cultures and communities on the margins of China and Chineseness,” the Sinophone is now understood as encompassing ethnic minority communities and cultures within mainland China where Mandarin is adopted or imposed in addition to Sinitic communities and cultures outside of China proper (Shih, Tsai, and Bernards 2013, 11). Through the Sinophone, Shih reconceptualizes the heteroglossic characteristics of ethnic Chinese experiences and cultural production within a framework that is place-based and sensitive to time.

Given that writing and speaking about ethnic Chinese experiences outside of China proper has been the primary means through which people explore what it means to be Sinophone, Jing Tsu’s book on *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora* (2010) surveys the different modern Sinitic languages used in the literatures of Chinese diasporic communities. Tsu proposes “literary governance” as a framework to understand how modern diasporic Chinese literature provides a departure point for understanding national language writing in global context. More specifically, Tsu argues that the practice of “literary governance” depends upon notions of the “native speaker” and the “mother tongue” to establish a national literature, and is intricately related to notions of ethnic, political, a cultural identity. Analyses of Taiwan-based Malaysian Sinophone writers such as Zhang Guixing and Kim Ng Chew demonstrate the way the
Chinese script is a key medium through which China’s “own internal and diasporic others” articulate a distinct identity grounded in transcolonial and migratory Sinophone landscapes (Tsu 2010, 233). Tsu posits that Sinophone writing is one that does not belong to a particular space or national language, but is individualized depending on location and language in constructing a sense of localized identity. Hence, James Clifford’s (1997) conception of the dynamics between travel and translation has been frequently invoked to describe the Sinophone as an engagement that highlights the tensions between “roots” – the imaginary pull of the homeland – and “routes” – the process of migration and acclimatizing to foreign lands – often experienced by Sinitic-language communities (e.g.: Shih 2007; 2013; Yue and Khoo 2014).

In his 2013 article on “Sinophone/Chinese: ‘The South Where Language Is Lost’ and Reinvented,” Ng Kim Chew, a Malaysian Chinese fiction writer and critic residing in Taiwan, draws distinctions among “Common Language” (Putonghua) and “Chinese” (Zhongwen) of mainland China, “National Language” (Guowu) of Taiwan, and Sinitic languages (Huayu and Huawen) of the Hua peoples in Singapore and Malaysia. Ng highlights the cultural and national language politics embedded in notions of the “Chinese” or “Standard” and “Sinitic” languages. Ng seeks solidarity in diasporic writers who are forced to find new linguistic horizons and a unique cultural identity to express different topolects through creolization. Most recently, Andrea Bachner’s monograph on Beyond Sinology: Chinese Writing and the Scripts of Culture (2014) takes the sinograph as a case study of the relationship between a national script and that nation’s cultural identity or perceptions of alterity. Tracing the history and controversies associated with attempts to establish the Chinese script as a national language, Bachner reveals that the sinograph needs to be considered as hybrid and not merely invoking an ahistorical cultural
“Chineseness,” and that Sinophone subjects constantly interact with global or technological forces and transnational modes of cultural expression.

In this way, Sinophone studies departs from what C.T. Hsia has termed the overwhelming “obsession with China” to remove notions of a monolithic ethnicity and nationality associated with essentialized notions of “Chineseness,” transplanting it instead with an emphasis on the many ethnicities and hybrid cultures manifest at the peripheries of China and Chineseness. Shu-mei Shih’s introduction to *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader* (2013) questioning “What Is Sinophone Studies?” delineates three main areas of focus: first is the colonial context of Sinophone studies grounded in research on “minority nationalities” from within mainland China; the second engages with a diasporic paradigm to examine the dispersal of Sinitic-languages across the world; the third foregrounds the non-diasporic, place-based nature of Sinophone culture and the formation of multilingual and multicultural identities (3-7).

To date, Sinophone studies has already inspired several academic monographs and edited volumes. Although there is increasing scholarship on Sinophone studies from a literary perspective, monographs on Sinophone studies, beginning with Shu-mei Shih’s own scholarship, have largely focused on the three most vocal and productive Sinitic-language communities of Hong Kong, Taiwan, or the United States (e.g.: Shih 2007; Ang 2001; Lu 2007). New English-language scholarship by Alison M. Groppe (2013) and E.K. Tan (2013) have also contributed acute perspectives to Sinophone communities in Southeast Asia, with specific attention to the Sinophone Malaysian and Singaporean cases. Recent edited volumes such as *Global Chinese Literature* (2010), *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader* (2013), *Queer Sinophone Cultures* (2014), and *Sinophone Cinemas* (2014) reflect the increasing attention drawn to Sinophone mediality with collections of essays that discuss a wide range of cultural circumstances and
communities. To examine the circulation of Chinese communities, language, and material culture in Southeast Asia, Greater China, and the West with its implications for national and ethnic self-identification, the manifold transnational interactions across Mainland China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong cannot be ignored.

The first chapter takes up Kuo Pao Kun’s play, *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* 《郑和的后代》 (1995), to tease out Singapore’s multilingualism, racial hybridity, and the impact of the city-state’s language policies on ethnic Chinese identity. Kuo takes a performative approach to conceptualizing the pre-colonial Sinophone body, reviving the classical Chinese figure Zheng He in his play to critique the Singapore government’s castrating approach to homogenize and control an interracial society.

The second chapter focuses on Li Yongping, a Sinophone Malaysian author who emigrated to Taiwan, and the affective images of wandering, ghostly ethnic Chinese women circulating in his work. I contend that the circulation of libidinal desires and female bodies in Li’s *The Snow Falls in Clouds: Recollections of a Borneo Childhood* 《雨雪霏霏：婆羅洲童年記事》 (2002) dramatizes diasporic triangulation of a colonial Sinophone Malaysian identity situated within the margins of Taiwanese, Malaysian, and Chinese cultural attachments.

The third chapter delves into Wong Bik-wan’s short story collection, *Tenderness and Violence* 《温柔与爆裂》 (1994), and her misogynistic perspective on corporeal manifestations of Sinophone Hong Kong modernity. By dissecting Wong’s “aesthetics of violence,” medical and legal discourses illuminate violated Sinophone bodies populating spectral sites that have fallen out of sight of mainland China’s supervision. Wong’s maladaptive characters make evident, viscerally and psychologically, the corporeal malaise of postcolonial Hong Kong’s relationship to Chinese modernity.
Chapter One

The Zheng He Legend and Multicultural Encounters in Southeast Asia: Kuo Pao Kun’s Geopolitics of Castrated Hybridity

The year 2005 marked the 600th anniversary of Zheng He’s (郑和) maiden voyage to the “Western Ocean” in 1405. Aside from festivities with Zheng He as the main theme held in mainland China, the anniversary was commemorated in numerous cities across maritime Southeast Asia including Semarang in Indonesia, Malacca in Malaysia, and Singapore. In Singapore alone, more than 250,000 people attended the series of celebratory events held by the Singapore Tourism Board between June to August (Silk Road 2005; Ng 2005). These events ranged from art exhibitions, musicals, academic conferences, and book launches to even the erection of a symbolic replica of the Long Ya Men (龙牙门) in Labrador Park to mark its role as a navigational aid for ancient mariners (Xinhua 2005). Additionally, an 8000 square meter Zheng He Festive Village was set up in the Marina Promenade, showcasing a series of pavilions representing the different cultures and traditions of the ports that Zheng He visited during his voyages. More than 100 foreign delegates and 50 performers from China, Indonesia, India, Iran, Kenya, and Malaysia came to Singapore to participate in the state-led anniversary celebrations (Xinhua 2005; Ng 2005).

Against the backdrop of the tributary system of the Ming dynasty, Zheng He’s fleets sailed to Southeast Asia seven times during 1405 – 1433. There is now substantial scholarship on the political and diplomatic influences of Zheng He’s marine expeditions as an envoy of the Ming dynasty in expanding Sino-foreign relationships and establishing China’s Indian Ocean trade links (e.g.: Hall 2006; Wang 1964; Peng 2004; Tan 2005). Historians have also drawn upon cultural artifacts and historical documents to discuss the ways Zheng He’s voyages provide
insights to the harmonious relationships that thrived between Chinese diaspora settlers, indigenous Muslim communities, and different racial and cultural groups during the early 1400s (e.g.: Han 1946; Huang and Xue 1985; Hsu 1976; Wang-Ma 2007). The perception that Zheng He was an envoy of peace and friendship and a great maritime voyager of the Ming dynasty extending relations between China and other nations continues to be the dominant narrative of the Admiral’s achievements in popular discourse and political rhetoric (Murphy 2010; Ptak 2007; Salmon et. al 2005).

Legend goes that the ethnic Chinese community in maritime Southeast Asia originated with male Chinese settlers left behind by Zheng He during his voyages and long before the height of British colonialism or large-scale Chinese migration to the region (Wang 1959; Blusse 2007). Zheng He’s memory survives both in China and abroad, where more than six hundred years after the first expedition to the Indian Ocean, people in Southeast Asia are still commemorating his historic voyages from the Ming dynasty. To many, his story represents the real story of the Chinese diaspora – one of initiative and innovation, and the human capacity to act without direct and constant help from state institutions (Chee 2003). Zheng He therefore symbolizes an ancient heritage of inner strength and resilience in foreign and multicultural interactions, rooted within Chinese history in response to an officialdom that was fearful of entrepreneurship in overseas trade.

Kuo Pao Kun’s Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral 《郑和的后代》 (1995) (hereafter referred to as Descendants) is a Singaporean play that provides intriguing perspectives on the impact of Zheng He’s voyages to Southeast Asia and their relevance to the sociopolitical, cultural, and economic issues of an entrepot through a literary lens. By reappropriating the Zheng He theme, Kuo re-presents the eunuch admiral as the ancient paradigm of a modern multicultural
man in an increasingly globalized and transnational world, prompting people in Singapore to show greater willingness to live together as a multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious nation. Although recurring themes of plurality are sustained throughout the play, this chapter argues that Kuo drew upon the Zheng He story to articulate a disaffected critique against the Singaporean bureaucracy and negotiate an ethnic Chinese Singaporean identity vis-à-vis Communist China in the 1990s.

Kuo Pao Kun (郭宝崑, 1939 – 2002) is one of Singapore’s foremost cultural icons, renowned for his monumental contribution to Singaporean literature and theatre. He wrote 24 bilingual and multilingual plays, translated six, and directed 28.¹ Kuo’s achievements as an artist has been recognized in Singapore and internationally: he received the Cultural Medallion in 1989, the ASEAN Cultural Award in 1993, the Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the Government of France in 1996, and the Excellence for Singapore Award in 2002.

In the Foreword to Images at the Margins (2000), an anthology of his plays in English, Kuo describes unique multinational and cross-cultural life experiences as someone “permanently on the move” (8). He was born in a poor village in Hebei, spent his youth in Beijing, Hong Kong, and Singapore before moving to Australia for university, and then back to Singapore. As he reflects upon his peripatetic journeys across land and sea, he points out that:

> The different places have been enriching, the people inspiring, the diverse cultures exhilarating. But it was at the margins of all these individually brilliant experiences that I found the most enlightening of spaces and moments. They were so singularly beautiful that one had to invent vocabularies to describe them, these uncharted territories, unexperienced happenings, unfathomed depths, these images at the margins (Kuo 2000, 8).

As Kuo would later summarize, “China gave him life, Australia educated him, and Singapore nurtured him” (qtd in He 2006, 2). It is precisely because he occupied such various margins during his lifetime that Kuo was able to transcend the shackles of
cultural essentialism to see the productive potential inherent in cross-cultural translation and multiethnic understanding.

Throughout his life works, one can ascertain Kuo’s sustained engagement with “invent[ing] vocabularies” to portray “images at the margin” and construct enlightening spaces located beyond the limits of racial, language, religious, and cultural segregation amidst environments marked by modernism, globalism, and capitalism (Kuo 2000, 8; Kwok 2003). Kuo has won a unique position in the modern theatre of Singapore not only for what he has produced on stage, but also what he practiced and advocated off the stage for Singaporean society (Koh 2002; Quah 2005).² Krishen Jit comments that Kuo’s theatre “is nothing if not purposefully persuasive about his social philosophy” as Kuo himself saw “no sense in a theatre that is aesthetically exquisite but morally empty” (1990, 18). Indeed, Kuo consistently promoted the arts as a practice of “open culture” to celebrate the intermingling of cultures – both past and present, local and global – beyond the constraints of racial and linguistic origins (Devan 2000; Kuo 1998).

Descendants is unique in Kuo’s oeuvre as its focal theme drew upon a classical Chinese character to create a text riddled with cryptic historical references. To date, scholars and reviewers who have commented on the multilayered play point out its overt allusion to Zheng He’s maritime legacy in presenting the tensions between Chinese tradition and Sinophone modernity; they emphasize the contemporary reappropriation of the Zheng He character to evoke themes of harmonious multiculturalism and Kuo’s notion of an “open culture” in the context of Southeast Asia, especially Singapore. However, more somber and personal undercurrents saturate the play, where Kuo drew upon an intimate understanding of the classical Zheng He story to record shrewd
observations and articulate concealed shafts of criticism about the Singaporean bureaucracy, intermingled with philosophical reflections addressing geopolitical dimensions of contemporary Sinophone lived reality.

Admiral San Bao’s Seven Voyages to the Western Ocean in History and Classical Fiction

Zheng He’s career at sea is a curious episode in Chinese history: his expeditions signify Ming China’s attempt to project its power by sea over a great distance, where China as an imperial power had previously only focused on land-based and continental exploits. Indeed, scholars have pointed out that even in world history, there is no prior example of power projection by sea comparable in distance, scope, and duration to Zheng He and his fleet, as even the later European colonial empires were sustained by fleets composed of smaller and fewer ships (Church 2005; Dreyer 2007; Chang 1976; Hsu 1988). The most detailed outline of Zheng He’s life is provided in a bibliographic note in Volume 304 of the Mingshi 《明史》 (Dreyer 2007; Zhong et. al 1990). However, firsthand accounts of his voyages were written by some of his followers including Ma Huan’s (马欢) Fascinating Scenes of Foreign Lands 《瀛涯胜览》 (1451), Fei Xin’s (费信) Enchanting Sights of Astro-Navigation 《星槎胜览》 (1436), and Gong Zhen’s（巩珍）Record of Barbarian States in the Western Ocean 《西洋番国志》 (1434).³ Scholars today have conducted studies on Zheng He and his deeds based on these primary materials, but the man’s background remains inconclusive (Hsu 1979; Cheng 2008; Chee 2003).

Zheng He’s original name was Ma He (马和), and he was the second son born into a Muslim family under the surname of Ma in Kunyang, Yunnan of southwestern China. His family were part of the Hui minority, a predominantly Muslim ethnic group in China (Ren 1956).⁴ However, in his boyhood about 1381 A.D., Ma He was captured and sent to Peking as a slave-boy when the Ming troops conquered Yunnan and his parents were killed. As eunuchs under the
Ming and other dynasties often came from minority peoples, Ma He was presumably castrated at the age of ten and sent into the imperial palace as a eunuch to serve Prince Yan, who later became the Emperor Yongle (永乐 1402-1424).

After Emperor Yongle seized the throne in 1402, he immediately made Zheng He a Grand Director of the eunuch offices, the highest rank a eunuch could aspire to. The Emperor also conferred the surname Zheng on Ma He on New Year’s Day, 11 February 1404, in commemoration of his role in the battle protecting Beiping (current day Beijing) against a rebel attack in 1399 (Chang 1976; Low 2005s). As the Admiral of the Ming’s armada, Zheng He was also commonly known as San Bao Tai Jian (三宝太监), or the “Grand Director of the Three Treasures.” In Western scholarship, Admiral Zheng He is commonly known as the Grand Director of the Three Treasures (Gronewald 2009).

Nearly all the Chinese accounts of Zheng He’s voyages indicate that he made seven voyages to the Western Ocean, travelling around Southeast Asia to locales such as Java, Salembang, and Malacca on all of them, and as far west as the eastern coast of Africa on the last three (Levathes 1994; Ren 1956). The modern idea of Zheng He’s voyages as peaceful exploration has been expressed and reinforced in Western works such as J.J.L. Dyvendak’s books on *Ma Huan Re-Examined* (1933) and *China’s Discovery of Africa* (1949), as well as Joseph Needham’s influential multivolume *Science and Civilization in China* (1986). It has most recently been revived by Gavin Menzies in *1421: The Year that China Discovered America* (2003), presenting the thesis that Zheng He’s sixth voyage somehow sailed through the South Atlantic and around Cape Horn, then up the west coast of the Americas as far as San Francisco Bay, finally returning to China across the pacific.
Although Zheng He’s expeditions are not without controversy, scholars have now identified that they formed part of a series of projects that Yongle promoted in the pursuit of power and extending the prestige and glory of the Ming (Wade 2005; Hui 2004). Recent articles have proposed revisionist views of Zheng He’s “voyages of friendship”: scholars such as Geoff Wade (2005) have argued that they were actually aggressive attempts to enforce a “pax Ming” through Southeast Asia, asserting China as the dominant civilization in the region due to its political, economic, military, and cultural power. In Wade’s view, the Ming voyages constituted a maritime proto-colonialism as they attempted to dominate trade routes linking the Middle East and East Asia (Wade 2005). Although it is plausible that the general strategy was to awe foreign potentates into submission by the sheer size of the Ming armada, the missions were almost certainly an exercise of sea power through intimidation and coercion, extending Chinese hegemony southward by enforcing political subordination to the tribute trade system (Swanson 1982; Li 2010).

Under the founding ruler, Emperor Hongwu (1368-1399), the Ming court pursued an introverted foreign policy; the Confucian rhetoric of the Sinocentric world order was revived and emphasized in its relations with foreign states (Wang 1968; Widodo 2007; Fairbank 1968; Twitchett and Fairbank 1988). Foreign contact and foreign trade were viewed in a unilateral way, where the empire showed no desire for foreign products or territorial expansion, and therefore did not prioritize international affairs (Li 2010, 48). When Emperor Yongle assumed power, he continued to operate under the age-old celestial imperial system of world order in which China was the only civilized empire while foreign nations were less civilized or barbarian states. The tributary system expanded the Confucian ruler-subject relationship through
establishing an overlord-vassal state relationship, where all foreign nations were considered vassal states with China as the overlord (Li 2010; Widodo 2007).

As Wang Gungwu (1998) explains, it was though tribute trade that Yongle sought "to obtain their symbolic acknowledgement of China's cosmological centrality and their acknowledgement that his succession to power was legitimate" (303). Zheng He’s voyages significantly expanded the number of tribute missions sent by foreign countries, reflecting the peak of prosperity during the time of Yongle’s reign (Tan 2005). Scholars have argued that there were only three instances where the Ming fleets had to use force against foreigners, but there is reason to believe that Zheng He’s interactions with foreigners were replete with violence as the fleet attempted to implement the Ming Emperor’s requirements.

The most famous pre-modern literary production of the Zheng He story is the 1597 novel Grand Director Sanbao Goes Down to the Western Ocean 《三宝太监西洋记通俗演义》，popularly also known simply as Xiyang ji 《西洋记》, or Journey to the Western Ocean. Most Chinese people today would know about the Ming voyages through this picaresque novel written in vernacular Chinese, in which Zheng He is featured as the central character. The novel is attributed to a certain Luo Moudeng (罗懋登), who also composed the book’s preface and might have written several other plays and books, but of whom nothing more is known of (Duyvendak 1952; Ptak 1986). Notwithstanding the fantastical character of the narrative, the novel sedulously incorporates information about the voyages found in the work of Zheng He’s followers, particularly Ma Huan’s book, and the Mingshi.

In contrast to the contemporary vision of Zheng He’s voyages as an emblem of friendly multicultural encounters and peaceful diplomatic missions, Xiyang ji does not paint a positive picture of Sino-foreign interaction. In almost every place that they visit, Zheng He’s men ask the
foreign king to submit to the Ming Emperor upon the arrival. The king refuses, and Zheng He declares war with the foreign state. The battles drag on with both mortal and magic warfare, and although Zheng He eventually wins and subdues the foreign king into surrendering and providing tribute, thousands are killed in the battlefields. *Xiyang ji* might have introduced the notion of multicultural relations and foreign marvels to a Ming audience, but ultimately these are portrayed as useless pursuits when the majority of tribute items brought by Zheng He’s fleet are simply discarded. As such, Zheng He’s experiences with foreign countries were only worthy a source of entertainment; in the considered opinion of the Ming elite and a Sino-centric worldview, foreign countries produced only strange and useless things that proper Chinese should avoid (He 2013; Brook 1998).

**The Grand Eunuch in Southeast Asia’s Entrepot: Modern Expatriatism, Castrated Hybrid**

A common starting point for discussion of Zheng He’s influence in contemporary Chinese studies begins with the revival of the maritime theme with Liang Qichao (梁启超) and Sun Yat-Sen (孙中山) in the early twentieth century. Both men commented on the early Ming voyages in the context of tumultuous periods in modern Chinese history, marked by decay and imperialistic foreign aggression against China (Low 2005; Ptak 2007). In the perspectives of these two men, Zheng He was held in high esteem as a national hero, representing China’s more prosperous times standing out as a leading world power, enjoying peace and material wealth. Liang Qichao, in particular, became very interested in early Ming politics, and saw in Zheng He’s tale an exemplar of reviving the image of China as a wealthy nation in its golden age of exploration and international diplomacy. Subsequently, many “Zheng He Studies” research institutes have been set up in Nanjing and other places in China, publishing Chinese journals that commemorate the Grand Eunuch.
Two key and interrelated subjects addressed in Kuo Pao Kun’s Descendants are hybridity and expatriotism, along with a moral jousting with an excessively rationalistic bureaucracy and its pragmatic pursuit of capitalism. Descendants resonates with parallels to Kuo’s own changing personal and psychological stance towards an ancestral Chinese cultural and literary tradition. The play is divided into 16 scenes narrating the official history and speculating upon unofficial anecdotes about Zheng He’s autobiography and personal experiences. From the beginning, themes of solitude, mobility, haunting dreams, and uncertain origins are emphasized. The contemporary Sinophone narrator begins with the statement that “dreaming has become the centre of [his] life,” but although these dreams make him feel “alone, painfully alone, and floating away,” the loneliness is “promising” as it allows him to “[dive] deeper and deeper into the stark loneliness of [him]self” to come to the discovery that he was “so closely related that [he] had to be descendant of the eunuch admiral” (38). The link between a diasporic Chinese figure from the past and the contemporary Sinophone subject is emphasized as both concept and practice. Throughout the play, waves of images focusing on the “vast, seemingly endless” potential of the ocean and the liminal position of Zheng He “in the limbo between departing and arriving, between being a man and a non-man” presents displacement and wandering as productive for the “dreaming, hoping, searching, struggling” of an uprooted person (49, 68).

In commenting on Descendants, scholars have highlighted Kuo’s cultural orphan mentality, which the playwright has conceptualized as a condition of marginality” of one unable to “return to […] cultural parentages” or “be at home in the past” (Kuo 1995, 16). Consequently, cultural orphans “can only grope for a way forward, to make his or her spiritual home in the midst of loss and alienation” and are compelled to accept multiple lines of parentage so as to “counter the cultural impurities already infused in [their]
blood” (Kuo 1995, 16). As an alternative foundation for a common local identity and culture, Kuo suggests that cultural development “should be de-linked from the racial and linguistic origin of the individual” to build upon a generative practice based on structures of multiculturalism and racial diversity beyond the constraints of state governance (Kuo 1998, 60).

The narrator of Descendants ponders Zheng He’s seven voyages across the Western Ocean during the early fifteenth century in comparison to the present-day experience of global mobility – “Maybe he was feeling what we would be thinking when we travel out of the country. In a state of limbo, but free from constraints and controls” (52). In this way, Zheng He is appropriated as an ancient example of the modern cultural orphan - a “nameless, sexless, rootless, homeless” figure who has to live a “rootless wanderer’s” life (56, 68). The eunuch admiral is believed to have been a prominent Muslim in Confucian high society, a Hui minority loyal steward in the Han-dominated imperial palace, and the primeval example of an overseas expatriate. Yet, Kuo’s play reveals how the “600-year old legend of a molested and incarcerated man” remains “a humble alien, a wandering slave, a worthless servant to all and sundry” (1, 9).

As a “faithful servant of the Ming Emperor and an imperial emissary to blaze a trail of glory for the Middle Kingdom,” the Grand Director was an expatriate, forced to create his own indefinable domiciliary zone, a home “across the ocean, on the seas” (60, 66). The play dramatizes the way Zheng He comprehended his own liminality:

To keep my head
I must accept losing my tail
To keep my faith
I must learn to worship others’ gods
To please my lord
I must eliminate his enemy
Zheng He’s soliloquy highlights the currency of his marginality in the multiple spheres of ethnicity, gender, and religion as one making him “a loyal creature,” “highly marketable” and capable of assimilating distinct cultural environments (58). By invoking the blessings of Allah, Buddha, and the Sea Goddess, Zheng He exhibits a tripartite state of being in which he is able to turn the physical violence of being “cleansed” – i.e., castrated – to reinvent his identity and “survival,” one where he would “seep into the lives of so many people in so many places, through so many ways over so long a time …” (54, 60).14

Framed in the context of a dream, Descendants exposes that, unlike Zheng He, the contemporary man seems not to have woken up to the productivity of his own liminal state as a space of encounters, transcendence, and reflection. Instead, modern individuals are castrated by the pursuit of pragmatic economic gain and postcolonial capitalism that has led to the fragmentation of multicultural exchange. Since Singapore’s independence in 1965, the decolonialization process posed significant challenges harmonizing its conglomeration of ethnic cultures (including Malay, Chinese, and Indian Singaporeans) intermingled with the remnants of British colonial culture. The People’s Action Party (PAP) led by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew subsequently sought to construct a common identity uniting Singapore’s multiethnic population (Peterson 2001; Bedlington 1978). In 1979, the government promulgated public policy that imposed English as the lingua
“franca” and “first language” of Singapore, believing that a common language would allow people to communicate with relatively little conflict (Shepard 2005). By transforming Singapore into a global village, the government aimed to promote international trade and develop science and technology (Bedlington, 1978; Ganguly 2003).

Kuo, while recognizing the real gain in national wealth and the importance of overcoming language barriers for cross-cultural communication, lamented that the privileging of the English language formally consigned other ethnically ascribed languages to marginalized roles as mother tongues. As he remarked: English as “the national first language relegat[es] all ethnic ones to second language status […] Has any other majority population ever committed such an extraordinary act of voluntary uprooting, preferring to its own language (a major world language) one which its former colonizer forced upon it?” (Kuo 1996, 168). In Kuo’s view, it was incomprehensible that Singapore, as a multiracial and multicultural city-state inhabited by a majority population of Chinese (75%), with substantial Malay (14%) and Indian (10%) communities, would reproduce the colonial mentality of post-independence Singapore and signify “a lack of self-reflexive, post-colonial consciousness” (DSS 2013; Quah 2006, 91; Ganguly 2003).

For the Chinese Singaporean community, the official appointment of Mandarin as a mother tongue was doubly limiting; the policy demoted Mandarin to the status of a second language and also discouraged other Sinitic dialects (Xu et al. 1998). This denied Chinese Singaporeans an important link to their ancestral heritage accessed through provincial dialects (Pan 1990; Xu et al. 1998; Rappa 2006). As such, the Singapore government’s ethnic management policy to maintain racial harmony fundamentally divided cultural groups, leading to gulfs of inter-racial ignorance and indifference (Kwok...
Although the language policy was successful in fostering racial peace, it has unfortunately restricted the development of cross-cultural exchange, impeding production of a unified local identity (Rappa 2006; Gopinathan 2013). In *Descendants*, the amputating effect of a homogenous language policy is likened to the eunuch admiral’s fate of being “cut and dried, plugged and exiled,” destined to wander with a shriveled sense of self (66). Yet, being an “orphan, wanderer, eunuch, admiral,” Zheng He not only reminds contemporary Singaporeans of the importance of being aware of one’s culture while assimilating others, but also prompts people to take advantage of their modern mobility and cultural liminality to fully appreciate the way “every land and sky and water is home” (66).

Kuo’s critique of the Singaporean government’s approach to nation-building speaks to Ernest Renan’s canonical text on civic nationalism. Renan’s central argument proposes that the nation is a conglomerate of people who share a common past and have derived a strong bond anchored in an agreement to live together and be governed by mutual consent. He elaborates that it is neither race, language, religion, nor geography that creates a nation, but rather the “powerful link between men” in creating a “community of interest”: if people are willing to consolidate their past and perpetuate their unity to be governed together by consent, then they are a nation (Renan 1881, 204-5). The productivity of creating such a nation through the transcendence of multiple physical and psychological frontiers is suggested in *Descendants* through the market exchange scene and a final pithy message that “Departing is my arriving / Wandering is my residence” (66).
Descendants draws explicit parallels between the history of Zheng He and the modern Sinophone Singaporean to dramatize the tensions between service to the state, individuality, and capitalism. As Kuo notes in the 1995 performance program:

I am beginning to feel that affluence has produced enough frustration to make wondering an increasingly inevitable impulse. Zheng He is especially inspiring to Singaporeans on many levels and [...] dimensions. As a minority Chinese ethnically, religiously, culturally, and as a eunuch rising to the pinnacle of power and achievement, Zheng He mirrors [Singapore’s] existence in many ways (1).

As a major entrepot port of Southeast Asia, it is undeniable that Singapore has been “rising to the pinnacle of power and achievement” as a global city-state representing bountiful trade and a burgeoning economy amidst a melting pot of multiple cultural, religious, and ethnic groups. Along these lines, the markets in Descendants are presented as spaces of prelapsarian capitalism and cosmopolitan contact zones for exchange of the carnivalesque (Wee 2004; Tan 2013). The marketplace becomes a site of active interaction for “a flotilla of people and goods” in an expansive Asian globalism (59; Pratt 2002). These contact zones are sites of transnationalism beyond “a simple homogenous idea of national culture within national boundaries policed by the nation-state” (Dirlik 2004, 15). On the basis of a “great trading festival” facilitating the exchange of commodities such as metal, seeds, fabrics, and feathers, the marketplace then transforms into a carnivalesque space that embraces and celebrates cultural interactions of diverse forms and origins. The whole process involves competition, negotiation, and integration between global forces and local markets (Pratt 2002; Wee 2004). More than a mere display of distinct cultural features, all sorts of people gather at these markets, and there is “a show of mutual respect between the Muslims, the Hindus and the Buddhists” that reveals the active and generative comingling of cultures in contact (59; Tan 2013). Such a
Festive space certainly invokes Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque as a “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order,” marking “the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” with an “atmosphere of freedom, frankness, and familiarity” (1984 153; 195).

It is intriguing that with these scenes of the marketplace, Kuo compares the Ming dynasty and modern-day Singapore going through similar modernizing processes in different eras: both experience periods of wealth and prosperity, where social life is marked by markets and a burgeoning consumerist culture. The portrayal of trading markets focuses on economic aspects that defined the Ming dynasty and corresponds to Singapore’s own trajectory of recent economic development. Although foreign objects circulated widely during the Ming, Chinese people regarded them as fascinating but ultimately useless. This sentiment comes through in Descendants where foreign objects – including “bulls that charge not at red but anything that is blue in color,” “acrobatic goats with green fleece,” and “dancing chickens as tiny and exquisite as pearls” – do not serve any functional purpose (59-60). Additionally, in scene 11, the narrator provides a vivid description of polar bears “playfully amusing themselves in the imperial garden lake now richly covered with ice” (55). The presence of these polar bears reveals the way animals from faraway lands are perceived as mere foreign spectacles. Kuo throws skepticism upon the lasting impact of markets to sustain cultural interaction and diversity, suggesting the need to turn to non-commercial engagements to achieve multicultural understanding.

**Geopolitics of Cultural Identity and Self-Castration**

When commenting on his inspiration for Descendants, Kuo explained that as he wrote the play, “a much darker and spiritually disturbing aspect of Grand Eunuch Zheng
He began to grip and sting the deeper recesses of [his] being: His castration” (qtd in Tan 2013, 230). The narrator’s preoccupation with the experience of castration as such and his inexplicable fear of being castrated – “a removal of his manhood,” his baobei – is unnerving for a play that concerns itself with the descendants of a castrated man. But what does it mean for the Grand Director of the Three Treasures to be permanently deprived of his “treasure,” to have his penis “cut, fried, and dried” and placed in a box to legitimize his status in the Imperial Palace’s eunuch service (40)? Kuo describes in detail how eunuchs had to show their baobeis as “their single most important document or article of qualification,” turning a commentary on the Ming Dynasty eunuch organizational structure into a critique of the modern world’s capitalist networks and commercial companies, stating that both organizations are “a network of pricks” (41).

The theme of castration is sustained throughout the play, and is particularly evocative of the symbolically castrated contemporary Sinophone subject. In scene 5, the narrator initially imagines himself as a young boy, nicknamed “Doggie,” who made the life decision to become a eunuch and describes the discomforting experience of being castrated by his father (44-45). This scene reveals that Kuo was aware that many men voluntarily submitted themselves to the literal and symbolic castration necessary for service in the imperial palace. In contrast to the voluntary eunuch, the narrator asserts that Zheng He did not have a choice: “He was summarily cut and cleansed by his masters when he was barely a teenager – because there was a need, a huge need for eunuchs. You see, eunuchs seem to have started fulfilling a very important aristocratic need since many thousands of years ago,” ranging from mundane bedside tasks to leading empire-building projects (45). Despite Zheng He’s castration, his voyages to foreign realms provided him with defining moments of transcendence.
The allegory of the castrated man is both a critique and a reminder for Singaporeans to appropriate their mobility and in-betweenness as contemporary subjects (Quah 2004). Kuo cautioned that we should not be complacent that the days of eunuchs “are long gone with the demise of the imperial age. Indeed, castration has been recreated by modern man, and that castration is not always inflicted by others; there is now a modern version called self-castration which can be, and has been, effected simply by people permissively heaping affluence and comfort upon themselves” (Kuo 1996, qtd in Quah and Wee 2008, 229). The severed penis, a fundamental part of the male body for fertility and reproduction, is likened to the cultural sensitivity of the contemporary Sinophone individual. It is described as “a piece of something” that has been “deep-fried in oil to keep it dry and antiseptic” that a person has to sacrifice in order to “attain wealth and status” (45). The narrative here reflects criticisms of Singapore’s arts scene as a “cultural desert” during the 1990s, reproaching the modern Sinophone person for sacrificing their cultural identity and self-castrating artistic development in the myopic pursuit of material success (Wee 2003). Although the contemporary individual may have been unwillingly or unwittingly subjected to such forms of self-castration, the circumscribed reality of castration, deracination, and entrapment by service to the state will remain as long as the pursuit of pragmatic economic gains continues to fragment local spheres (Woon and Teo 2002; Koh 1989).

As much as the play might have celebrated the appearance of harmonious multiracial relations, there is a much darker aspect of Grand Eunuch Zheng He that reflects Kuo’s personal narrative on the Singaporean experience. It is worth highlighting that the role between author, narrator, and actor are blurred in the play, hinting that Kuo
might have conceived of Zheng He as a sort of alter ego. At several points in the play, the narrator conveys suspicion about the glorious and unmarred story of Zheng He, his voyages, and the multicultural productivity of markets vis-à-vis foreign encounters. In scene 9, the narrator explicitly addresses the intentions and actual history of Zheng He, whom he states everyone knows as “the cleanest and the most respectable” of all famous eunuchs (51). Yet, he questions: “Had he really done nothing evil or untoward as a trusted lieutenant of a powerful Emperor well-known for his cruel and scheming nature? [...] Was he more than the eunuch that we have generally imagined him to be, or less than the hero which the historians and legends have portrayed him to be?” (51-2).

The narrator highlights that the Emperor who sent Zheng He on his westward voyages was “the same sovereign who allowed his secret police chiefs – all of them grand eunuchs – to devise horrendous punishments such as club-whipping, skin-peeling, fingernail-tearing, spine-breaking, and heart-piecing treatments for the Emperor’s less obedient subjects” (52). These same crimes were committed by Zheng He’s Chinese armada in Xiyang ji, indicating that Kuo was familiar with the premodern text. Moreover, the audience’s attention is drawn to the fact that Zheng He was actually in China for a period of eight years from 1422 and 1430 between his sixth and seventh voyage (51).

The narrator elucidates that “the debate is still alive” on whether Zheng He “had actually played a part in the Emperor’s draconian scheme set out for the Dong Chang” (51). When the Depot was established in 1420, Emperor Yongle appointed the most senior members of the grand eunuchs to be directors, of which Grand Director Zheng He would certainly have been a reasonable choice (Li 1994). During the organization’s early years, records indicate that the Depot was established with the sole purpose of preventing
subversive activities, especially cracking down on the corrupt activities of officials, and conducting espionage on behalf of the Emperor (Hucker 1958; Tsai 1996). Over time, the power of the Dong Chang grew enormously and it gains the reputation for being a monstrous secret service organization (Tsai 1996; Crawford 1961). What has been frequently overlooked, however, is the fact that civil officials were the ones in charge of documenting the Mingshi and other historical records about the Dong Chang. As eunuchs were the main contenders against civil officials for bureaucratic power, officials had personal motivations not to write about eunuch leadership positively (Crawford 1961).

What then is the purpose of Kuo making elusive references to tensions between eunuchs and civil officials, and how would such details be relevant to a contemporary Singaporean audience? The release of the play in 1995 is significant: in 1976, Kuo and his wife were interned without trial for allegedly being members of the Malayan People’s Liberation League and “propagat[ing] leftist dance and drama” (“The Faces of Subversion,” 30; Wee 2004, 775). Prior to his detainment, his radical theatre practices overtly critiqued the displacement and exploitation that resulted from the Singaporean bureaucracy’s blinkered focus on rapid modernization, with titles such as Hey, Wake Up 《喂，醒醒！》(1968), The Struggle 《挣扎》(1968), and Growing Up 《成长》(1973). Notably, The Struggle (1969) was banned by the authorities as it overtly dramatized Singapore’s social turmoil resulting from rapid urban reconstruction and inflow of multinational investment (Yu 2007). The PAP government released Kuo in October 1980, but did not reinstate his revoked citizenship until 1992 – and then only after application (Wee and Lee 2003).
After four years and seven months in detention, Kuo moved away from a single-minded belief in drama as a means to reform society to a more complex understanding of art’s relation to society as he continued experimenting with multilingual theatre (Devan 2000). Kuo described the detention as “a moment of humbleness” and “a very sobering experience – you get cut down, you know that you don’t know enough” (Lo 1993, 38-9). Descendants was the only monodrama that Kuo wrote both in Chinese and English himself after being reinstated as a Singaporean citizen. The play’s expressionism was a turn away from his previous works that were more straightforward and culturally accessible staged dramas; as Lin Ke Huan comments, Kuo’s earlier plays were “a little too eager in his social engagement. They were all like a tactless petition against social injustice and lacked the composure and cool detachment of a mature artist with the ability to rise above and transcend his material for the purpose of artistic creation” (2003, 140). Thus, Kuo’s change in theatrical direction and narrative technique during the mid-1980s reflects a renewed questioning of reality, history, and social concerns (Lin 2003). On a practical level, the turn to expressionism also served to engage a wider multiracial Singaporean audience (Koh 1998; Krishnan 1997; Lo 2004).

The 1990s in Singapore corresponds with significant shifts in literary and cultural production, when racial and ethnic themes became an important aspect of the popularization of Singaporean literary production (Krishnan 1997; Peterson 2001). Beginning in 1980s, against the backdrop of the dominance of the English language, the government also intensified its “Speak Mandarin” campaign (Ong 1991; Kwok et al. 2002). This campaign coincided with a “Confucianist” discourse of development that
valorized a certain definition of “Chinese-ness” and Sinitic values as the foundation of Singaporean culture (Tu 1991, 1996; Wee and Lee 2003; Kim 2014).  

At the same time, the Singapore government also began plans to turn the nation into an international center of the arts by promoting an industry of aesthetic production (Nathan 1999). Although significant funds were provided by the Ministry of Information and the Arts for literary and dramatic production, such activities pressured artists to commercialize their work to appeal to mass audiences for state sponsorship (Wong 2001). This move inevitably linked cultural production to state ideology, where literature and drama were incorporated in the government project of hegemonizing state ideology (Koh 1980; 1989; Wong 2001). The Singapore National Pledge of building a culturally open society “regardless of race, language, or religion” seemed to be a rapidly fading and distant vision (Ong 1991; Wee and Lee 2003).

The public reception of literary texts was profoundly shaped and directed by the deep penetration of state ideological apparatuses. In 1994, Catherine Lim, a popular Singaporean author, wrote a social commentary on “The PAP and the People – A Great Affective Divide” published by The Straits Times. The article criticized the ruling party’s political agendas as one based on “logic, precision, meticulous analysis and hard-nosed calculation and quantification. Their style is impersonal, brisk, business-like, no-nonsense, pre-emptive” (Lim 1994, 16). This provoked an aggressive response from then Prime Minister Goh, who asserted that the authority of the Prime Minister should not be undermined by “writers on the fringe,” singling out writers in general as a peripheral class, whose activity of cultural production is to be non-political. He articulates that the arena of the cultural should be “sanctuaries” from the political fray, and that only
politicians had the right to represent the nation. Hence, the Singaporean artist is forced to shrink from sociopolitical work (Lim 1995; Tay 2011).

The discourse of the castrated man and intellectual exile sustained throughout Kuo’s *Descendants* likely has personal significance. Although the author-narrator-actor attempts to speak out on behalf of contemporary society about issues of multiculturalism and the dangers of pragmatic capitalism, as a creative work at a deeper-level, the play reads more like a revelation of the author’s thoughts and soul, akin to a spiritual journey of self-doubt, self-debate, and self-actualization (Sim 2002; Lin 2003). The journey of the narrator from anxiety to acceptance and respect towards his roots – or lack thereof – is punctuated with satirical humour and absurd scenarios. As an individual who is always going to be speaking from the margins as a Sinophone Singaporean artist and from a unique experience of expatriotism, Kuo may have found a foil in Zheng He as the fundamental paradigm of a hybrid and diasporic existence, an anathema of purity; he is a man of (post)modern transnational times, yet also its antithesis as a premodern legendary character. In Kuo’s perspective, Singaporean society is one made up of “a body and history of uprooted peoples from different cultures, countries and races, living together, searching and struggling for something” (Kuo 1996, 172). Hence, Zheng He’s emasculated, fragmented, and exilic Hui Muslim Chinese life – as fractured as the contemporary Sinophone Singaporean’s cultural experience – fittingly comes through in *Descendants* as disjointed images.

**The Modern Zheng He Figure**

By positioning himself in the artistic role of a modern Sinophone eunuch, Kuo seeks to confront and overcome obstacles put up by red-tape and a mechanistic
bureaucracy in his work. Through this trying process, he gains a renewed respect for tradition, a newly-gained perspective that leads him to a poignant recognition of his humanity, echoed in the concluding statement that “the eunuch admiral seemed never to have given up hope of finding an alternate life” (66). This nuanced position is elaborated in his essay, “Contemplating an Open Culture” (1998). As Kuo argues, “History has proved that there is no way [Singaporeans] could reconnect to their parent cultures per se. However, having lost their own – cut loose and therefore set free – they have thus become natural heirs to all cultures of the world” (1998, 61).

Kuo Pao Kun’s appropriation of Xiyang ji and the Eunuch Admiral Zhen He’s legacy in writing his Singaporean play therefore dramatizes an individual who holds on to a Chinese identity even while engaging with immersive multiraciality. The play engages the audience in what the narrator himself indicates as “dreaming all by [him]self” so as to be “able to look at [him]self, look inside [him]self, and look through [himself]” and into an encounter with the unfathomable depths of life together (38). Kuo sets up a dialogical relationship with the premodern tale in Descendants, responding to and negotiating with the classical tradition. Put another way, cultural and ethnic castration can serve as an impetus for producing new cultural identities that are drawn from a multitude of parental sources to develop an “open culture” that can extend beyond the shores of the city-state. However, in the end, Descendants seems to tell us that cultural identity and history are hard to extricate from the economic and political realms – even Zheng He ultimately beckons to the call of the Markets (67). Any person who is implicated in serving the state and the global markets must face the challenge of transcending the literal
and symbolic violence done to the cultural sphere and aspire to flexible identities (Wee and Leng 2003; Sim 2002).18

The theme of (self)castration, read as a symptom, takes up the parameters of moral imperatives and reveals the inability and/or unwillingness of Singaporean Chinese writers to locate their ethnic identity in the flux of contemporary life. The severed and boxed up penis that was once an essential part of a young man’s body allegorizes the troping of a fundamental Chinese cultural identity as the ‘past’ of Singapore - a reminder of the past within the present, as something that has been cut and dried and rendered antiseptic and dead. As such, Descendants represents Kuo Pao Kun’s yearning for a creative open culture and productive multiculturalism, but also reveals an embittered personal critique of Singapore’s bureaucracy and cultural policies in hegemonizing a multiethnic society and marginalizing artistic creation. Although castrated, the Grand Eunuch’s corporeal non-productivity has been translated into textual and cultural Sinophone re-productivity as his legacy continues to sail on in the imaginations of many people. Artistic and cultural development is put forward not merely as an attempt to recapture a premodern past, but instead as a productive means to imagine a present moment of the past, and for proposing new directions towards a modernized and multiethnic Singaporean society.
Chapter Two

Biopolitics of Hybridity: The Circulation of Ghostly Women and Li Yongping’s Affective Sinophone Malaysian Identity

On 14 March 1939, a Chinese prostitute named Jasmine committed suicide in the brothel at 42 Nona Bahru Street, Penang, located on the northwest coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Jasmine’s body was found hanging from her bedpost in cubicle No. 47 next to a suicide note telling the mistress of the house not to worry about her death, and requested that a photo of herself be sent to her family in China (Khow, Keat, and Muaz 2004). Jasmine’s suicide became scandalous news for Penang people, heightened by the 1936 enactment of Section 309 criminalizing suicide under Malaysia’s Penal Code. Additionally, it is significant that Jasmine’s death occurs during China’s War of Resistance against the Japanese (1937-1945). At times of revolution or civil war throughout the twentieth century, the mainland solicited overseas resources to lend their patriotic support from afar (Tsu and Wang 2010). To construct Chinese individuals as biopolitical subjects willing to serve and die for the State, young girls and women were told that their bodies belonged to the nation and that they constituted a form of female army. Brothel owners capitalized on this idea of a national good to enslave prostitutes: young women were rounded up in China’s impoverished rural areas and shipped like livestock from one brothel to another in Southeast Asia (Warren 2003).

Against this backdrop, Jasmine made a rational choice to exert individual agency by taking her own life, at the very least making a defiant statement about her struggle to survive in a distant land. This reading is supported by a Foucaultian understanding of biopower, or the power to regulate life, where the right to impose death becomes the ultimate affirmation of state authority. In the biopolitical age, suicide becomes a “scandal” as it the action through which
individuals can escape from bio-disciplinary power, hence performing a subversive act of resistance (Foucault 2003: 248). Nonetheless, rumors quickly spread that the prostitute victim of oppression or an illicit love affair culminating in suicide. Before long, Jasmine faded from public memory and her cubicle was occupied by a new prostitute.

The public re-inscription of Jasmine’s suicide into the framework of patriarchal victimization ignores the productive power of her actions as a displaced Chinese woman facing undeniable sociopolitical and legal injustices. Through a postcolonial reading, Jasmine’s death summons Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s monumental essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), addressing the inability of subaltern subjects to speak for themselves. Jasmine is doubly marginalized as a Chinese prostitute in Malaysia – she is confined to the lowest strata of social respectability, and ostracized as a member of the Chinese ethnic minority. Exploited both for her female body and her Chineseness, Jasmine is denigrated as a subaltern woman without power to affect her destiny and unable to voice her experiences. Her fate illuminates unsettling tensions at the core of discourses on globalization and modern nation-building haunted by sentiments of loss, disillusionment, and misplaced yearnings associated with the Sinophone experience.

Jasmine’s life and death, together with countless other silent and silenced women, reflects a Chinese emigrant’s struggle to cope with foreign encounters during a time of global transition, forming part of an emergent Chinese Malaysian diasporic community at the turn of the twentieth century. Although the presence of overseas prostitutes is intimately interwoven into the history of a Chinese minority population and multi-ethnic contact in Malaysia, there are few written records tracing their feminine reactions. Nonetheless, the image of the ethnic Chinese prostitute in Southeast Asia, especially in
connection to the “flesh trade” of the early 1900s and the Japanese practice of comfort women during World War II, continues to be reproduced and disseminated in contemporary cultural production. The circulated representations of ghosted subaltern women parallels the physical traffic of women through time and across geopolitical frontiers. These spectral images reflect the increasingly porous and deterritorialized boundaries of citizenship, community, and nationalism complicating the concept of “Chineseness” and an affective Sinophone Malaysian subjectivity.

Given the complexities of cultural identification for a minority population of Chinese descent in Southeast Asia, Sinophone Malaysian authors straddle multiple political and cultural affiliations with China, Chineseness, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Southeast Asia in their creative expression. Li Yongping (李永平) is one such author whose writing displays an acute sensitivity to the cultural and historical positioning of the Sinophone Malaysian community and his own migratory experiences. Li Yongping was born in 1947 in Kuching, capital of Sarawak, on the island of Borneo, but is now a citizen of the Republic of China. Through his fiction, Li consistently negotiates overlapping attachments to multiple cultural belongings. He engages with history to articulate a protean Sinophone Malaysian identity. Scholarship on Li Yongping’s fiction have highlighted autobiographical aspects limned through the lush landscapes of Southeast Asia (e.g.: Tee 2004), narratorial techniques conveying the challenges of writing the Chinese script in multilingual environments (e.g.: Chang 1993, Tsu 2010), and nostalgia rooted in a Chinese ancestral heritage to assert a diasporic subjectivity (e.g.: Wang 2013, Groppe 2013). This chapter focuses on Li’s incessant engagement with issues of gender and feminine sexuality in relation to the biopolitical construction of a hybrid Sinophone Malaysian identity. Li’s keen awareness of the trafficking of desirable Chinese female bodies in Southeast Asia is inextricable from Sinophone Malaysia’s cultural history and community formation. His narratives
consistently deploy the trope of a fallen woman to depict a sexualized environment dominated by the circulation of libidinal desires and female bodies; these ghostly, wandering characters dramatize the diasporic triangulation of a Sinophone Malaysian identity situated between the margins of Taiwanese, Malaysian, and Chinese cultural attachments.

Prostitutes and subaltern women – and their spectres – figure prominently throughout Li’s oeuvre, providing insights into his authorial perspective on the significance of gender and hybridity vis-à-vis the affective Sinophone Malaysian experience. One of the first short stories that Li Yongping published, “A Dayak Woman” 〈拉子婦〉 (1976), tells the tale of an indigenous Borneo woman who marries into a Chinese family in Sarawak. She is subjected to increasingly harsh treatment and abuse, until the day she silently dies, which prompts the narrator to reflect upon the impact of her life. Much of Li’s literary fame is attributed to his first book-length novel, *Chronicles of Jiling* 《吉陵春秋》 (1986), a dark assemblage of narratives set in a town’s brothel district during the Guanyin (Goddess of Mercy) festival parade. The novel recounts a series of violent and murderous events spurred by the rape and suicide of a coffin maker’s young wife, inciting the bereaved coffin maker to seek revenge by killing the rapist’s wife and a prostitute neighbor. Both “A Dayak Woman” and *Chronicles of Jiling* exemplify Li’s peculiar tendency to place the peripheral woman at the center of his narratives, presenting her as a desirable yet easily exploitable body adulterating an idealized vision of “Chineseness.”

This chapter focuses on Li Yongping’s short story collection, *The Snow Falls in Clouds: Recollections of a Borneo Childhood* 《雨雪霏霏：婆羅洲童年記事》 (2002),
to examine how he variously deploys the trope of a prostitute figure to evoke the Sinophone Malaysian identity as a consistently reinvented affective product. Here, I use the “prostitute figure” as umbrella term to connote a range of different marginal, “fallen” women through which strong affective responses are easily attached to. The pages of Li’s fiction are traversed by “inappropriate” figures through which he grapples with the concept of “Chineseness” and its limits of community, gender, ethics, and ethnicity. Reading the subaltern woman as a stock character or affective laborer that generates popular imaginaries, Li’s narration of political and personal attachments to various female characters – from anonymous prostitutes to his childhood sweetheart and little sister – recreates shifting boundaries of a transnational, mixed, and diasporic Sinophone Malaysian subjectivity. He conveys an ambivalence towards the multicultural Chinese Malaysian experience marked by betrayal and violence at every turn. Moreover, Li also reveals a deep fear and preoccupation with the biopolitical implications of hybridity and multiethnic contact, narrating a grimy corporeal social history of inter-racial encounters and circuits of women undergirding diasporic Chinese migration to Nanyang.

**Ghosted Prostitute Bodies: The Geopolitical Peril of Transnational Libidinal Economy**

*The Snow Falls in Clouds: Recollections of a Borneo Childhood* 《雨雪霏霏: 婆羅洲童年記事》 (2002) is a collection of nine short stories in which the first-person narrator, provocatively named Li Yongping after the author, recollects memories from his childhood years in Kuching, one of the oldest and largest cities in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak. These memories are conveyed when Li Yongping meets and converses with Zhu Ling, an eight-year-old girl, as they roam the streets of Old Taipei over the course of one night. Many evoke bitter episodes exhibiting past acts of malice, and critics have noted the inappropriate and even perverse implications of an older male narrator telling such stories to a young girl (e.g.: Groppe
Due to the seemingly autobiographical nature of many episodes, Tee Kim Tong has argued that *The Snow Falls in Clouds* “is simply a retold story of Li’s own pre-exilic life, or more specifically of his childhood and youthful years before he went abroad to Taiwan for his college education” (2004, 99). Although Tee acknowledges that the novel “takes on a special socio-cultural significance as the work of a Chinese/Malaysian/Taiwanese writer in exile,” he emphasizes that Li Yongping’s primary concern “is not the representation of his national and cultural identities […] but an inward journey in search of his self or personal identity” (2004, 97-99).

Like Tee, I am interested in the way Li grapples with his self-identity as a Chinese/Malaysian/Taiwanese writer in (self) exile. However, Li’s concern with a collective national and cultural identity for a diasporic Sinophone Malaysian community cannot be ignored. This aspect of Li’s work is brought out in *The Snow Falls in Clouds* when the narrator’s reflections do not merely revolve around his personal worldview, but are often absorbed in piecing together the life stories of women he meets. Notably, one of the first few chapters in the collection focuses almost exclusively on Li Yongping’s memories of brothels and his curiosity about the life circumstances of young women driven to sex work. Female characters such as Li’s childhood sweetheart and his sister, Mary Seto and Cui Ti respectively, frequently crop up throughout the novel as Li traces their downfall from innocent, bright girls into dejected women. The last chapter of the novel ends with a story centered upon the lives of overseas prostitutes from Taiwan whom Li Yongping befriends and eventually betrays as a boy. As such, Li Yongping bookends his narrative journey with subaltern women that have haunted his personal understanding of multicultural encounters and (self) exile.
“Sonya” (桑尼亚): Searching for the Sinophone Malaysian Body Politic

The third chapter’s title - “Sonya” (桑尼亚 Sangniya) - already hints at the dark and desolate story about to unfold. As the narrator explains to Zhu Ling, Sonya is the teenage prostitute character forced by her own father into sex work in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. Initially, Sonya’s father had to coerce his daughter to sell herself, but after her first customer, Sonya wordlessly goes to the streets herself and hands her father the money she earns. Her sacrifice of prostituting herself is made even more poignant by the fact that it would not have been necessary were her father able to control his alcoholism. When introducing Sonya to Zhu Ling, Li confesses that in all of the Western literature he has read, he has “come across many women who make him feel awe and subdued,” but the one whom “his heart pampers and misses the most” is “Sonya, the Russian prostitute of seventeen or eighteen, because she did not die” (52).20 As Li elaborates, it is precisely because “she cannot die; she has to feed her family” that Sonya’s character inhibits him from reading Dostoevsky’s book a second time, as he “cannot bear to watch the scene where Sonya leaves for the streets again” (53). Through no fault of her own, Sonya becomes a victim of displaced circumstances. When she leaves her house, Sonya is ostracized as a destitute prostitute; when she returns home, she is alienated from her own family. Sonya’s phantom existence thus represents a state of in-betweenness that is full of contradiction and misery, flickering on the border between being a devoted daughter and a debauched woman, between life and death.

The fictional paragon of Sonya haunts Li as he wanders the seamier streets of both Taipei and Kuching, where Zhu Ling observes that “in this lifetime, [he] is always looking for Sonya” (65). However, the actual prostitutes he encounters in brothels alternatively fascinate and horrify him. Li first tells Zhu Ling about venturing into a dark Kuching alley lined with brothels as a
boy, and then goes on to describe a terrifying misadventure in Taipei’s brothel district shortly after he arrives in Taiwan. In both of these episodes, Li details his visceral reaction to the degenerate manifestations of interracial contact inscribed on the bodies of immigrant sex workers and their clients in dystopic red-light districts, exposing his apprehension over the lingering indices of biopolitical control haunting the expansion of a modern Sinophone population. According to Michel Foucault, the emergence of contemporary society is predicated upon “biopolitics” or “biopower,” a new form of disciplinary regime for the control and regulation of bodies, desires, and sexuality. Accordingly, Li Yongping’s world of Sinophone Malaysia displayed in _The Snow Falls in Clouds_ is populated by liminal bodies that transgress, challenge, and redefine the boundaries of groups, ethnicities, and national affiliations.

In modern Chinese fiction, the prostitute figure is often portrayed as performing the most private of human attachments (be it an exchange of desires, talent, or bodily fluids) while marketing it as a public service (Zamperini 2010). As an iconic character symbolizing the exteriors of collective intimacy, the prostitute figures in Li’s novel suggest how the private realm of sexual desires is inextricably connected to the public fate of diasporic Chinese individuals. The overseas Chinese prostitute, in particular, embodies the porous boundaries of “Chineseness” as an ahistorical essence characteristic of a fixed geographic region or ethnic peoples, and is intimately linked to Li’s own affective Sinophone Malaysian identity. It is in the shadowy brothels of Kuching and Taiwan that Li conjures a place where numerous figures of Chineseness and hybridity comingle, dramatizing how commodified bodies negotiate gendered and racialized difference across cultural and national contexts. This sexualized landscape induces a
Foucaultian theme of biopolitics, where “between the state and the individual, sex became an issue, and a public issue no less,” to consider the shifting subjectivity of a diasporic Chinese community (1978, 26).

When venturing into a Kuching brothel, Li recollects the Malay, Indian, and European men meandering the murky alleyway in a passage that is as vivid as it is unsettling to read:

The alleyway was filled to the brim with men of various colors and races sticking out their heads and looking about, sweaty and reeking, full of weird smells: betel nut juice splashing from the mouth holes of Malays, the odor of curry emanating from the bodies of Indians, the gamy stink from the armpits of Europeans……. Mixed together under the big sun, they pervaded the entire alley, like a miniature United Nations (55).

Amid the presence of these foul men, Li as a little boy “pinched his nose and treaded carefully across them” to get a closer look at the brothels (55). Spying into the buildings, Li realizes that many of the prostitutes were young Chinese women and exclaims in dismay: “the girls sitting in each room in those small metal shacks, they were all Chinese – the daughters of Chinese people!” (56). For Li, the sight of ethnic Chinese women being fetishized and consumed by foreigners is an intensely abject experience, one that compromises his own cultural identity.

The spectacle of interracial sexual activity revolts Li, making him sprint out of the alley “as if he were being chased by a ghost” and squats next to the market pork vendor where he “desperately grabbed his chest and, with uncontainable grief, vomited” (56). For Li, racial interbreeding is an abject site where what is inside the body is expelled to the outside, and contaminating elements from the outside is taken in, blurring the boundaries between self and other. Li cannot escape from identifying with the overseas Chinese prostitute as a diasporic figure, yet constantly retaliates against her marginal existence. The image of a destitute Chinese woman serving grimy foreign men amalgamates an abject body and object of desire; Li’s behavior displays the traumatic experience of being confronted with a materiality that signifies
his own multicultural impurity and “show[s] [him] what [he] permanently thrust[s] aside in order to live” as an expatriate Chinese Malaysian (Kristeva 1982, 3).

The notion of the prostitute as a recurrent site through which affective flows materialize and mediate, making transparent power structures involved in the production of community, is also emphasized in Li’s encounters Taipei’s streetwalkers. Themes of abjection and the biopolitical fear of hybridity are sustained through the portrayal of a filthy environment teeming with ghostly, demonic figures that make visible the dark side of multiraciality pervaded by sexual violence, transgression, and illegitimacy. Wandering through the labyrinthine passageways, the Taipei brothels that Li describes are full of eerie women and frightening sounds: broods of heavily made up women “raise their red-rimmed black eyes to gaze outside at the rain” and old men alternatively let out “blood-curdling screams as if a pig had been slaughtered” or wildly break out in laughter and song (60). In contrast to the brothels in Kuching that are “filled with little girls sitting gently and quietly alone by the sides of their beds […] as if looking over a sweetly sleeping toddler in a cradle,” the first Taipei prostitute Li encounters wrapped “two cold little hands in a death grip around his neck” (55, 60).

After running away, Li finds himself in alleys “filled with the acrid smell of sweat, cosmetics, menstruation, and urine,” and is horrified when mama-sans “raise their arms out together, black and shiny, exposing clumps of sweat as large as beans under their armpits” calling out to him as a customer (61-62). The narrator also stumbles upon a “little mama of sixteen or seventeen” who had the “full face of a child” but a swollen belly about eight months pregnant (60-1). While chewing on the head of a stewed duck, she beckons Li to sleep with her. The sight of this pregnant teenage prostitute confronts
Li with a profoundly wretched image of bastardized existence, and he scrambles into the dark corners of a fire escape lane as the girl chuckles ominously behind him. Angry red neon signs and uncanny alien tongues surround Li at every turn, engulfing him in a hellish landscape to which he cannot find a way out (62-3).

The parallel episodes in Kuching and Taipei brothels correspond to Li’s increased awareness of a multicultural identity as he grows up and moves to Taiwan. He is overcome with self-abjection when empathizing with the young Chinese girls exploited by men of other ethnicities in Kuching, but is later made intensely aware of his own difference even amongst ethnically Chinese people in Taipei. Li himself feels “prostituted” to various cultures as a Chinese/Malaysian/Taiwanese individual. The commodified bodies of foreign prostitutes possess a dangerous power and abject sexuality that dovetails with what Shih Shu-mei has called the “geopolitics of desire.”

Although Shih’s gender theorization does not discuss the migration of Chinese women to Southeast Asia, they also influence the complex trajectory of anxieties intimately enmeshed with “volatile” political and economic relations in Greater China, impacting the formulation of a “transnational Chinese culture” (Shih 2004, 87-88). Specifically, the fetishization of the foreign feminine body reveals a geopolitical asymmetry in wealth and power, breaking down barriers of nationality, ethnicity, age, and gender. As Kristeva writes, prostitutes epitomize abjection as they present “a wild, obscene, and threatening femininity” that collapses “identity, system, [and] order” (167). Examining Li’s representation of subaltern women through this prism of a gendered transnational articulation of desire, the circulated prostitute body serves an evocative metonym for the liminality of the Sinophone Malaysian body politic.
By explicitly framing this episode as a “detective story” to Zhu Ling, Li Yongping as author/narrator prompts readers to infer that he is looking for Sonya. Li himself remarks to Zhu Ling that he is: “Searching, searching, spending [his] whole life and death searching…… Only heaven knows what [he is] actually looking for!” (65). As the Russian name “Sonya” derives from “Sophia” (σοφία), the Greek word for "Wisdom," Li’s search for Sonya can be interpreted as a search for wisdom about how to reconcile his Chinese and Malaysian cultural affinities. In this way, Li depicts the constant movement, migration, and trafficking of women across biopolitical and geopolitical boundaries to triangulate the question of a Sinophone Malaysian identity through ambivalent multicultural attachments to Taiwan, Malaysia, and China. He invokes the neglected social history of overseas Chinese prostitutes to unveil them as ghosts haunting a Sinophone reality.

**The Fallen Woman: The Harbinger of Degenerative Reproduction**

The female characters of Cui Di (翠堤) and Mary Seto (司徒玛丽) reappear throughout *The Snow Falls in Clouds*. Li presents them as subaltern women by tracing their initiation into a degenerate adult world, focusing on their poor choice of sexual partners. Chapter Five – entitled “Little Sister Cui Di” (翠堤小妹子) – in the middle of the collection tells the story of a young girl’s descent into madness when she stops going to school and spends her days alone in a bamboo forest claiming to feed Little Wu, the dead family dog. As Li disconcertingly recounts:

One day, Cui Di suddenly changed without reason! She didn’t like going to school anymore. Early in the morning, she carried her bag and lunchbox and, hiding from her brothers and sisters, snuck into the bamboo forest behind the house […]. Cui Di said Little Wu had not died, and was just living in the bamboo forest. She would often meet and talk to him (102).
The narrator continues to describe how Cui Di strangely stopped going to the bamboo forest “without saying a word, but only laughed,” causing other women to gossip that her soul had been taken away (108). When Cui Di returned to school, the school principal no longer favored her, but with an eerie feeling somewhere between fear, regret, and confusion. Li laments “[he] only knew that [his] little sister Cui Di had really changed” before graphically describing a grisly incident in which he catches a neighbor Malay boy “lying on top of his little sister” in the bamboo forest, and uses a brick to “comb his hair” – i.e., smash his head (111). The narrative implies that this violent incident precipitated Cui Di’s premature initiation into a degenerate adult world. Although Li claims never to have told anyone of this incident, after witnessing his sister’s voluntarily engagement in an act of sexual transgression, he is never able to see Cui Di the same way again. She becomes a ghost to him, where “every time [he] sees that innocent and brilliant smile on her face, [his] whole body will shiver” (113).

Similarly, the penultimate story focuses on “Mary Seto,” Li’s Kuching childhood infatuation, and her fall from grace in the narrator’s eyes after she engages in sexual activity with a Malay man. Li recounts how he saw her regularly on the bus to school and while wandering the city, but never had the chance to speak with her. A student at Saint Margaret’s, Kuching’s English-language school, Mary Seto often read English Penguin novels while Li buried himself in Chinese books. As they grow up, Li hears of her graduation with honors and aspiration to study abroad and become a teacher. However, she disappears for some time and Li finds out that her plans were derailed when she becomes a teenage mother. Li describes his final encounter with Mary to Zhu Ling:

I walked to the riverside market to trace Mary Seto’s tracks and just entered the alleyway when suddenly I saw her carrying a parasol, walking alone slowly, heading my way, long hair swaying at her waist just like before, but in her hand
she was carrying a bamboo basket. Inside the basket, there was a little doll wrapped in yellow satin. Little girl, that was a newly born infant! (203).

He is shocked that the baby’s face was a “swarthy black” and undeniably of the “Malay breed” (204). Li confesses his rudeness towards Mary Seto when she greets him by turning away and even spitting on the ground after her, yet does not deny it when Zhu Ling later points out that he is “still in love with her” (205).

Both Cui Di and Mary Seto embody the interweaving of political, cultural, and economic threats posed by transnational migration and multiracial contact. Evidence of miscegenation with Malay men provokes Li to retaliate against them “losing the face of Chinese men” (205). These episodes evince a fearful discourse of racial mixing and diasporic hybridity, echoing arguments made by scholars such as Robert Young that “the hybrid was a degradation of humanity” seen as inferior and degenerate mutations (1995, 15). These “Fallen Women” in Li’s fiction speak to Young’s observation that “a problematic of sexuality [lies] at the core of race and culture” where Spivak’s notion of a “historically muted subject of the subaltern woman” is only able to become a productive agent through an act of interracial violation (Young 1995, 19). In this way, the liminal and ghosted presence of Cui Di and Mary Seto represent an anxiety over a volatile Sinophone Malaysian cultural identity. For Li, the powerful and ambiguous conflicts of a hybrid cultural identity is pervaded by mixed feelings of love and hate that are both sisterly (towards Cui Di as a little sister) and maternal (towards Mary Seto as a young mother).

Notably, Li Yongping explains that “Seto” (司徒 situ) is a “big name” in Cantonese, implying that it is either commanding high status or very popular (134). Moreover, the pronunciation of “司徒” (seto) in Cantonese is a homonym with “使徒,”
which means “apostle.” In this reading, Seto’s character presents a fictional Apostle from Saint Margaret, a school named after the Virgin-Martyr who is regarded as a heavenly advocate for childbirth and pregnant women, but also for exiles and the dying. Given that apostles are defined as individuals sent forth on a mission as messengers, Mary Seto’s fate portends the double disposition of the Sinophone Malaysian community. Being of Chinese descent in a Malay-dominated Malaysia and an extraterritorialized Sinophone Malaysian writer, Li’s experience typifies Robert E. Park’s “marginal man.” In his 1928 essay on human migration, Park describes the cultural hybrid as “a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples […] a man on the margin of two cultures and two societies, which never completely interpenetrated and fused” (1928, 892).

As a Sinophone Malaysian author, Li’s personal approach to the question of cultural identification has been to emphasize the Chinese element at the expense of the Malaysian one. This attitude is most clearly displayed by his zealous use of the Chinese script and decision to reside in Taiwan after relinquishing Malaysian citizenship. Li has repeatedly commented on his love for the Chinese script and for a romanticized China, declaring that he “was very sensitive to the Chinese characters” in the books he read as a child, and “developed an intense longing for China, a love” where he is “very much in love with Chinese characters!” (1992, 66). These comments have influenced Sinophone Malaysian critics such as Ng Kim Chew to perceive Li’s expression of cultural identification as one that is rooted in an abstract, textual, and idealized form of Chineseness. As Ng argues in an essay on “Sinophone Chinese literature and Chineseness” (1998), Li’s literary practice can be configured as an attempt to present an “authentically pure” Chinese cultural identity that suppresses a Sinophone Malaysian subjectivity. Despite this Sinocentric literary approach, however, Li’s fiction consistently returns
to settings in Southeast Asia, reflecting how his Malaysian background continues to shadow him. Like the displaced Chinese woman Li so often portrays in his works, he himself will always be perceived as a diasporic figure marked by an inherent multicultural difference as a Sinophone Malaysian writer in Taiwan.

Here, Li’s experiences are representative of a larger group of ethnically Chinese people living in a Malay-dominated Malaysia who pursue higher education in Taiwan. As early as the 1950s, travelling to Taiwan had been considered an educational rite of passage for many Sinophone Malaysian individuals, and the journey was regarded as a “cultural return” to their Chinese heritage (Tee 2004). Malaysia’s post-1969 enactment of *Bumiputraism*, policies that strengthened ethnic Malay dominance and estranged non-*Bumiputra* communities, further prompted Chinese Malaysians to seek opportunities abroad. By the 1970s, an increasing number of Sinophone Malaysian writers have emerged on the Taiwanese literary scene, forming a small community for themselves (Tee 2013, 312).

However, the position of Sinophone Malaysian writers and their texts are doubly displaced, plagued by questions of cultural identity and belonging. In Malaysia, only Malay literature is recognized as national literature, and Chinese-language literature is denigrated as second-class “sectional literature.” In Taiwan, Sinophone Malaysian writers are considered “overseas Chinese” writers. Although written in Chinese, the social and cultural experiences with which Sinophone Malaysian texts engage are not necessarily linguistically determined, and often convey a Malaysian homeland. Huang Jinshu, one of the most renowned *Mahua* writers in Taiwan, lamented at his Taipei book talk in August 2014 to a full room of people that when he held a similar launch in Kuala Lumpur, only
seven people had showed interest. Regardless of whether they write about Malaysia or Taiwan, Sinophone Malaysian writers are variously criticized for their misrepresentations of both locales. As such, Sinophone Malaysian literature is “nationless,” relegated to a peripheral position in relation to the more dominant Chinese literature produced in and about mainland China (Ng 2010; Tee 2010, 88-90). Nonetheless, avid supporters of Mahua literature such as Taipei-based Malaysian Kamloon Woo, chief editor of Lingking, emphasize the importance of providing an alternative perspective on what it means to be Chinese outside of mainland China (2014).

Mary Seto’s perceived downfall reflects how some bodies cannot access any celebratory hybridity, and interbreeding ineluctably results in aberration. She initially symbolized a positive vision of cultural hybridity by being ethnically Chinese and Westernized, but is ultimately unable to escape from the influence of her Malaysian surroundings. Li’s vicious reaction to the sight of Mary’s mutt baby characterizes a deep apprehension about the bastardized Sinophone Malaysian identity. Yet, the narrator is unable to stop worshipping the young Mary Seto from his childhood fantasies. This fictional yearning for an idealized girl whom Li was never able to embrace parallels his actual longing to achieve an “authentic” form of cultural Chineseness that constantly eludes him. Nonetheless, the rejection of a Malaysian background exacerbates the Sinophone Malaysian experience of geopolitical tensions, resulting in an exilic reality where the intrusive reminder of an Othering and degenerative cultural hybridity looms.

**Overseas Prostitutes in Sinophone Malaysia: Affective Laborers in (Self) Exile**

“Looking Homeward” (望乡), the last chapter of the novel, ends with a story that offers yet another estranged perspective on the Sinophone Malaysian community by revealing the victimization of women through the Japanese comfort-women practice. When he was a seven-year-old boy, Li learned of three older Sinophone women living at the outskirts of Kuching.
Known to other residents as the “three sisters of the Lin family,” Li recounts that “nobody knew the history of these women or where they came from” (226). However, the women were notorious for the rich Malay men who visited them in black cars. Curious about these “white-skinned women with unknown origins,” young Li begins to spy on them (230). One day, he is caught for spying on one woman as she is bathing, but instead of getting angry the woman invites him inside for lunch. Li feels “like a little emperor” as the three women watch him eat and talk to him adoringly. They feed him miso soup, which he initially has to “force into his stomach” but later acquires a taste for and admits to being “addicted to drinking” it (235).

Thereafter, Li eats the lunch his mother prepares for him every day with the three women, and they soon await his arrival like “mothers leaning next to the door painstakingly waiting for their sons to return safely home after school” (328). Rather than his own birth mother, Li claims that it is these three women who “let him truly feel the way a mother’s love that is just so immense, so peaceful” (236). One of the women, Yueluan (月鸾) confides in him that Japanese soldiers came to her hometown to recruit nurses to work in a military hospital in Nanyang for the imperial army (242). Taken from home at the age of sixteen, she was then forced to serve as a comfort woman in Borneo during World War II (242-3). The other two women had similar experiences after being sold off to the Japanese by their destitute fathers in rural Taiwan. Due to this ordeal, they can no longer bear children, and even though they are no longer comfort women after the war ends, they continue to work as prostitutes.

Recurring themes of betrayal, marginality, and phantom women are at the heart of this last tale in Li Yongping’s Borneo recollection. Li’s mother cries and refuses to talk to her son when she finds out about his daily visits with the women. To prove that he loves his own mother
more than these other women who have become mother figures in his life, he reports them to the police and gets them arrested for prostitution (254-6). As the women are pushed into police cars by Malay policemen, Li describes how “a group of Chinese onlookers, upon seeing that the three women had been with Malay customers, glaring and with raised fists, spat at them through gritted teeth” and ridiculed them for losing face (257). After serving time in prison, Yueluan “was afflicted with a little dementia, only opening her mouth wide to laugh when she sees people, like a stupid big sister” (257). It is striking that this episode of palpable violence vividly portrays the way these subaltern women are subjugated to intra-ethnic abuse in a chauvinistic system, rather than conflict between Chinese and Malays. The women were first betrayed by their own fathers who sold them off to the Japanese, and then by the Japanese and Malay men who ravaged their bodies. Not only are they exiled from Taiwan due to their shameful past after having been coerced to work as a comfort woman, they are ostracized by the Chinese Malaysian community because of their only means of survival. Confronted with the image of Chinese women carnally servicing Malay men, the Chinese Malaysian community reacts with barbaric revulsion to the threat of interethnic contamination.

Theese women who become ghosted figures even while still alive directs readers to consider the title of the chapter: “望乡” (wangxiang), the Chinese title for the Japanese film *Sandakan 8* (Kei Kumai, 1974), tells a similar story of a woman named Osaki who was sold by her impoverished family in the early 1920s and forced into prostitution in Borneo. In this way, Li Yongping anchors this chapter in the actual social history of Malaysia when the historical plight of women like Yueluan and Osaki made up a social group of overseas prostitutes prevalent in Southeast Asia. Since the early 1900s, the rapid increase of immigrating Chinese laborers was the single most important demographic and social development in Malaysia’s history. Many
were driven out of South China by poor local conditions and moved to Southeast Asia in search of better prospects. Thousands of Chinese and Japanese women, known as Ah Ku or the Karayuki-san, worked in hundreds of brothels providing sexual gratification to a veritable horde of immigrant laborers without wives (Warren 2002). They were often sold as young girls when parents can no longer support them, and spent their lives in bondage to brothels but still contributed to the traditional family economy by sending money home.

During World War II, the Japanese specifically recruited women from destitute families in occupied territories and transported them offshore to work as comfort women. This practice caused a surge in the number of foreign prostitutes in Malaysia. As Li describes to Zhu Ling, the Japanese held captive women of every nationality, including English and Dutch women, but ethnic Chinese women were the least valued (243-4). Even if these women were able to make enough money to return to their distant homelands after the war, they find themselves in a double bind where even their own people and families rejected them. Even in death, they are deprived of agency and remain in obscurity at the periphery of social and historical memory.

Li’s interaction with and eventual betrayal of these three women can be read in relation to his conflicted relationships with multiple cultures. As David Wang has posited: “Through these three Taiwanese women who are looking homeward, [Li] is looking homeward to his East Malaysian hometown, and from East Malaysia looking back over to Taiwan” (2003, 23). Hence, these liminal characters embody his own shuttling between Taiwanese and Malaysian cultural attachments as a Sinophone Malaysian writer in Taiwan. Wang’s analysis that these three “mothers” represent his
cultural “mothers” of Malaysia, China, and Taiwan is particularly suggestive (24). In this reading, the twist where Li ends up betraying all three women in an attempt to stay loyal to his to his “true” mother parallels the sentiment that in an attempt to stay loyal to an “authentic” Chineseness, Li Yongping ultimately betrays all three of his Malaysian/Chinese/Taiwanese cultural affiliations.

Returning to the problem of the marginal man and transnational migration, Li’s subjectivity is intimately interwoven with that of an individual who has grown up in a melting-pot of races and nationalities. Li occupies a doubly marginalized position: in Malaysia, he is part of a non-Bumiputra ethnic minority, whereas in Taiwan he is perennially differentiated as a foreign-born “overseas Chinese.” As such, he feels pressured to do most of the melting, adjusting, and conforming – or risk remaining unassimilated. Li’s resentfulness of his childhood nickname of “rice cake” (糍粑, ciba), a popular food in Malaysia, speaks to this experience. The nickname of a shapeless dough serves as an evocative metonym for the malleability of a multicultural Sinophone Malaysian identity. Although made up of discreet grains of rice, rice cakes are molded or otherwise squeezed into a single object. When explaining his nickname, the narrator discloses how his aunts used to always pinch and squeeze his body, allegorically referring to his Sinophone Malaysian identity constantly being shaped by outside forces (233). Li confesses to Zhu Ling that, in contrast to his own mother or aunts, he will “forever feel gratitude towards the three [Taiwanese] women” because they “loved and respected [him], and did not treat his body like a mound of rice dough” (236). This confession coming at the very end of the novel signals Li’s active search to regain control over his own being and mold a distinct identity.

The Mirage of Purity: Imaginary Encounters and Spectral Returns
In *The Snow Falls in Clouds*, Li Yongping grapples with the question of cultural and national representation in relation to a Sinophone Malaysian identity. The stories in his Borneo recollections repeatedly feature ghosted and destitute female figures, recreating them as biopolitical forces that are intimately connected to Sinophone Malaysian history. Through the trope of the fallen woman, Li Yongping engages with different aspects of the Sinophone Malaysian experience to scrutinize complex sociocultural links to Taiwan, Malaysia, and China. Li’s stories provide insight to his experience growing up as a person of Chinese descent in Borneo’s multiethnic environment during the waning years of colonial rule and the difficult transition to independence. The ghostly teenage prostitutes in Malaysia and Taiwan, Cui Di, Mary Seto, and (self) exiled Taiwanese ex-comfort women all embody forms of surface, superficial continuity vs. a more vicious, penetrative rupture that can characterize the multicultural Sinophone Malaysian subjectivity. Narrated as stories-within-a-story, these subaltern feminine characters are already twice removed from reality and appear as spectral illusions lingering over Li’s narrative subconscious. Their stories expose the geopolitical inflection of gender in perceived economic and cultural integration of the Sinophone region experienced on an individual level.

At the root of discourse on multicultural identity is a paralyzing biopolitical fear of contamination and corrupt hybridity. The prostitute and her unrespectable progenies materialize as actual ghosts haunting Li’s world of Sinophone Malaysia – looming over peripheral spaces. She makes an angry appearance at every attempt to constitute a Chinese core, disturbing any promise of purity or belonging. The prostitute figure, or rather its specter, functions as an affective laborer who generates the porous boundaries
of “Chineseness.” As “marked” subaltern characters, they defame ideologies of an inviolable and clearly defined nation-state, working as symbolic mediums that problematize nationhood or cultural nativity. In contrast, Li presents us with Zhu Ling as a seemingly uncontaminated essence of youth and innocence. As Carlos Rojas put it in his analysis of Zhu Ling’s character: “Zhu Ling generally represents a state of idealized purity which serves as a powerful counterpoint to the rather degenerate social practices of the adult world which surrounds her, while at the same time herself standing on the threshold of entry into that same adult world” (2008, 191). In interviews, Li Yongping himself comments that Zhu Ling’s role in his fiction is not merely to serve as an ideal listener, but also as a muse. In his own words: “Whether it is a poet or a classical novelist, when creating a piece of work, [Western artists] will always look to the muse, asking for inspiration […] The muse magically leads everyone into heaven or hell. I really like this idea. Therefore, in my own work, I created a muse in Chinese literature – Zhu Ling” (Sun and Liang 2010, 2). As a pre-fallen young girl, Zhu Ling serves as a foil to Li’s journey through Taipei and into his past, reflecting the narrator’s conscience and challenging him to confront his own hypocrisy about gendered violence and ethnic discrimination.

Zhu Ling’s character may also represent what David Wang has identified as an “imaginary nostalgia” in which Li Yongping recreates “an imaginary past on behalf of the present” to convey his “rootless” Chinese experience in the “moral allegory of the Chinese wasteland” (1993, 107). Li Yongping’s unabashed yearning for the Chinese script and an idealized Chineseness epitomizes what he has described as a “love that can only become a recollection, can only be something that was already dejected at the moment” (196). As Li expounds, he “became addicted to the Chinese language,” and liked the characters “邂逅” (xiehou, meaning “encounter”) the most because they represent “humankind’s most poignant
kind of love […] the kind of love that fate has predestined to have no ending” (196). In a novel describing countless encounters, Zhu Ling’s presence forces Li to acknowledge his anxiety over the threat of hybridity inflicting ordinary woman and a modern Chinese core. The narrator repeatedly connects Zhu Ling to the teenage prostitutes, Cui Di, Mary Seto, and other young fallen women that appear in his tales, revealing a concern with the (im)possibility of an innocent young girl not to grow up. Accordingly, Zhu Ling’s disappearance at the end of the novel portends the vacuity behind the mirage of an ahistorical, romanticized Chineseness.

Zhu Ling is revealed to be a figment of Li’s imagination designed to facilitate a process of soul-searching rather than simple storytelling, a process that has “finally brought this self-exiled wanderer – who has escaped for so many years by wandering everywhere – home” (260). The question that remains is, what happens after her disappearance? Can the Sinophone Malaysian produce a new cultural identity distinct from the mainland? The process of wandering and (re)writing will likely continue to drive Li Yongping’s identity negotiation. By writing stories about memories, Li prods readers to engage with past memories as a means of regaining greater access to home and identity, regardless of physical location.
Chapter Three
Wong Bik-wan’s Violent Women and the Wasteful Ugliness of Sinophone (Re)Productivity

In the short story *Twelve Female Charms《十二女色》* (2002), Wong Bik-wan (1961-) presents ironically uncharming vignettes of the stunted lives and emotional or physical deaths of twelve women in rapid succession. From Jin Xin, the girl with the “brocade heart” who can foretell the gory deaths of others with good intentions but is ostracized for her knowledge, and Dai Nu, a gentle woman who “never speaks loudly… [nor] complains” but vomits at the sight of her own menstrual blood and ends up “broken in the flesh,” bleeding to death after a random gang murder, to women who cling on to their youth only to find themselves wilted and old before their times, Wong dramatizes the stories of these women from within the cracks of patriarchal and heteronormative society (137-8; 149-50). All twelve women are variously exposed as abnormal due to “transgressive personalities” and either meet an abusive social death ostracized from all others or are left to decompose as feminine bodies infested with maggots and emanating the stench of rot. Feminine history, under Wong’s ruthless pen, is presented as an inescapably circulatory and ugly corporeal experience – in the sensory perception of barren survival, truncated human connection, and agonizing desires. As the conclusion to the second vignette provokes, “you think that being alive will let you do this and that, but in the end, it always returns to the original” (你以为人生存可以怎样怎样，到头来，打回原形) (2002, 134).

Although one of her less discussed works, *Twelve Female Charms《十二女色》* reveals key themes that run throughout Wong Bik-wan’s oeuvre, including a reiterative concern with feminine lives, the wandering ascetic, liminal death, and drastic transcontinental mental and physical shifts. It is noteworthy that twelve stories are highlighted to parallel the twelve-year cycle of the Earthly Branches (地支) in the traditional Chinese calendar that repeats itself without
end. Interestingly, the title’s reference to “female charms” 女色 (nû se) can be interpreted in multiple ways, from the colloquial Chinese understanding of the term referring to femininity and lust, to a literal reference to the “colors of women” or a kaleidoscopic color palette. Upon further consideration, the Buddhist understanding of 色 (sè) as 色相 or 色象(sè xiang) reveals a fundamental concern with the visible world, material appearances, and external manifestations as distinct from true self-expression and wisdom that is also highly relevant to Wong’s narrative (Soothill 2004). Indeed, Twelve Female Charms 《十二女色》 highlights Wong’s fascination with blurring distinctions between the mundane and horrors of daily life, the cruelties and bodily mutilations of birth and death, and with the extremes of transgression, violence, pathological love, and hysteria. Her characters invariably shuttle through states of psychological dis-ease and bodily disease, flipping between sacrifice and sacrilege. With such preoccupations, Wong evinces her logic that “writing fiction is to pursue truth” where “the author is like a friar, as both have to possess a sacrificial spirit” to represent that truth in all its ugliness (1994, 150). By putting feminine bodies and negative spaces on center stage, Wong’s fictions shed light on a hidden underside of phallocentric Chinese modernity and (non)productivity that circulates out of public sight – one that is intimately brutal, unseemly, illegal, and terrifying.

Wong Bik-wan has received increasing attention as an avant-garde voice in contemporary Hong Kong literature, noted for her violent imagination, sadistic energies, and morbid preoccupations. Wong began her writing career in the 1980s, and in the past three decades, she has authored two novels as well as more than eleven short story and prose collections.24 Some of her more renowned works include 《其后》 Afterwards (1991), 《七种静默》 Seven Types of Silence (1997), and 《后移民志》 Postcolonial Records (2003). Wong continues to be productive and has won numerous accolades across Hong Kong and Taiwan, including the Third
Hong Kong Biennial Award for Chinese Literature in Fiction for her short story collection *Tenderness and Violence* 《温柔与暴烈》 (1994). In 1997, she won the Hong Kong Arts Development Council’s Award for Young Writers. Her first full-length novel, *Portraits of Martyred Women* 《烈女图》 (1999), was recognized with the Sixth Hong Kong Biennial Award for Chinese Literature. The book exhibits three generations of women and feminine differences as each character struggles with the materiality of daily survival amidst rapidly shifting demands of the urban city. Most recently in July 2014, Wong was also the first Hong Kong writer to receive “The 5th Dream of the Red Chamber Award” for her second novel, *Children of Darkness* 《烈佬傳》 (2013). This latest novel is a male counterpart to her 1999 novel and depicts peripheral lives lurking in the shadowy realms of society – from drug dealers and addicts, to male prostitutes, gangsters, and ex-criminals – in contemporary Hong Kong.

Wong Bik-wan’s fiction constantly returns to the theme of travel, wandering, or homelessness and manifests polylingual aspects, most prominently exhibited in her first English/Chinese bilingual novel set in Macau, *Doomsday Hotel* 《末日酒店》 (2011). Wong’s work intimately reflects the author’s own position within transcontinental Sinophone space. As the chief editor of Park Literary Magazine surmises, Wong is a woman who embodies aspects of all the characters she has created (Huang 2014, 1). This chapter takes up Wong’s award winning short story collection, *Tenderness and Violence* 《温柔与暴烈》 (1994), to explore the prototype of violent women vis-à-vis her misogynistic perspective on Sinophone Hong Kong modernity, grounded in attention to the shuttling of gendered bodies in peripheral margins.

**Both Tender and Violent: Wong Bik-Wan as Female Misogynist**

First time readers of Wong Bik-wan’s stories will no doubt be startled by the sadistic energy and blood-drenched imagery of her work. Her fiction is filled with murders, suicides,
drug addicts, the mentally ill, dysfunctional marriages, and alienated souls. Wong’s morally transgressive imagery of dysfunctional human relationships are often read in relation to Hong Kong’s postcolonial crisis of nebulous local culture and identity. Indeed, Hong Kong has experienced many moments of crises where the territory has had to grapple with its relationship to China in the years after World War II (Hooper 2003).  

The territory’s 1997 handover and reversion to Chinese sovereignty is perhaps one of the most drawn out crises in Hong Kong’s recent history. This prolonged period of despair, anxiety, and hope provoked by the city-state’s impending return to Chinese rule brought more attention to all aspects of life in Hong Kong, especially literature (Renditions 1997; Ngo 1999). Most recently, the 2014 Umbrella Revolution in protest against China’s Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress announcement of Hong Kong’s electoral reform has drawn out tensions embedded within shared values and a common identity vis-à-vis Chineseness, and allows people a platform to reflect upon local developments post-97. After all, it is often only through encounters with differences that a diverse group of people are prompted to better define the shared experiences that may form the basis of a communal identity (Vries and Weber 1997).

In Hong Kong’s context, almost every major productive local author in the past two decades has been formulated in terms of the Hong Kong story in one way or another, speaking to ever-riddling questions about how people can conceive of a national identity amid shifting multicultural corporealities (Cheung 2001; Leung 1995).

There have been three overarching approaches to literary criticism on Wong’s work. The first focuses on the textual representation of alienation and despair in storylines of homelessness and wandering as a reflection of the selfsame fate of postcolonial and postmodern Hong Kong (e.g.: Tai 2002; Huang 2004). Wong’s works written in the early 1990s have frequently been
assessed in terms of discourse on the 1997 handover and Hong Kong’s position as a city-state wedged between British and Chinese colonial powers (Szeto 2013, 192; Wang 2003). Ghostly images of Hong Kong lingering throughout her short stories are analyzed in connection to the anxieties of individuals grappling with the intrusion of a Chinese polity upon a localized Hong Kong identity and everyday life in the 1990s. One of Wong’s best known short stories, “Losing the City” 《失城》，often serves as evidence for a postcolonial allegorical reading and has been highlighted as representative of the genre of “Nineties Lost City Literature” in Hong Kong literature (Liu 1997; Li 2003; Xu 2005). Related to this view, narratives of displacement and migration in Wong’s fiction have frequently been connected to the actual migration of Hong Kong citizens prior to and immediately post-1997 (Xu 2005; Wong 2014). A second common reading practice categorizes Wong as an emotionally-charged feminist Hong Kong author by pointing out the centrality of femininity and female-gendered consciousness in her works (Lu 2005; Wong 2014). This strand of analysis generally discusses Wong Bik-wan’s writing style in comparison to Zhang Ailing or Wang Anyi’s attention to feminine details (e.g.: Du 2005; Huang 2000; Lu 2005). Another approach notes the incessantly recurring themes of violence and abuse in Wong’s work, inviting comparisons with Lu Xun or Yu Hua as writers from mainland Chinese literary tradition who have engaged violent symbolisms to provoke reforms in the Chinese national consciousness (Cai 2000; Lau 1998; Wang 2004). These reiterative themes are paralleled by Wong’s penchant for using recycled characters that appear and reappear in different stories and settings (Du 2005; Lau 1998).

Whether she is read as a national allegory, a feminist writer, or in comparison to iconic figures in the Chinese literary canon, critics have consistently identified in Wong Bik-wan’s works an “aesthetic of violence” and an element of subaltern despair (Huang 2004; Lun 2002;
Lau 2000). Wong’s writings characteristically display a propensity towards narrating brutality to reflect the unpalatable underside of modern capitalist society riddled with dysfunctional human socialization (Asker 1999; Lin 2002). Her stories primarily feature women protagonists haunted by violent pasts or depraved desires as they drift through intimate lives (Berry 2013; Ying 2010). Such features have prompted scholars such as Janet Ng to summarize that the style and intensity of her fiction appear “at odds with the bourgeois sensibilities of Hong Kong, which since the late twentieth century have been expressed as an unwavering pursuit of capitalist wealth and commodity culture and a strong nostalgic tendency” (2008, 44). Wong writes against conventional views of the Chinese diaspora that echo discourses of a homogeneous ethnic nationalism and China-centrism by bringing the very denizens that fall through the cracks of a blinkered capitalist imaginary to center stage. By populating her stories with unbecoming, parasitic characters – from racial others and vagrants, to the mentally ill and ostracized criminals – Wong reveals her prototype of the violent woman to counter gendered stereotypes of patriarchal society and articulate a Sinophone subaltern transnationalism that is horrifyingly embodied in nonproductive and wasted life.

In Joseph S. M. Lau’s 1998 article, “The ‘Little Woman’ as Exorcist: Notes on the Fiction of Huang Biyun,” he begins a discussion of Wong Bik-wan with a quote from her autobiographical essay in which she recounts her experiences as a reporter visiting war-torn Vietnam and Cambodia on assignments. Here, Lau indicates that her remarks “[betray] a peevish nature and an impetuous proclivity to inflict pain,” and posits that her journalistic experiences of war accounts for why “the shadow of death, the tyranny of violence, and an abiding awareness of the precariousness of existence” looms large in her work (1998, 149-150). Huang Nianxin similarly observes, “As someone who previously worked as a journalist and lawyer, Wong’s
writings deal primarily with the urges of social life, even extending to the entire human civilization” (2000, 268). Wong’s writings have no doubt been influenced by her background in criminology, as well as her personal sensitivity to death, wandering, and loneliness. In interviews, Wong has emphasized on several occasions that her “addiction to writing about violence” relates to her childhood experiences: when her mother passed away when Wong was only seven, she “completely did not understand death, and only remembers the icy cold touch of her mother’s face” (Huang 1996; Li and Zhang 1989). With seven siblings, Wong’s father struggled to make ends meet and take care of the family. This caused him to be an emotionally unstable and sometimes abusive father, who once beat a teenage Wong so hard after catching her trying to run away that she was bedridden for a month (Li and Zhang 1989).

By dissecting Wong’s “aesthetics of violence” and propensity towards narrating brutality and abuse, poignant medical and legal discourses expose violated Sinophone bodies populating spectral sites that have fallen out of sight of hegemonic supervision. Wong’s maladaptive marginal characters make evident, viscerally and psychologically, the corporeal malaise of Hong Kong’s abject relationship to Chinese modernity. Her characters survive zombie-like, caught within a nightmarish interstitial region at the very margins of life, sustained by animalist energies and hardcore realist brutality as modern Sinophone reincarnations of Giorgio Aganben’s homo sacer in a state of exception that is transitional Hong Kong. For Wong, the subaltern and phantasmagoric proliferation of Sinophone hybridity is embodied in depraved and mutant forms that are recycled without end.

**The Messy Hong Kong Story: Neurotic Desires, Monstrous Women, and Cannibal Mothers**

Unlike other renowned Hong Kong writers such as Xi Xi (1938 - ), Shi Shuqing (1945 - ), and Yi Shu (1946 -), Wong Bik-wan has caught the attention of critics primarily as the result
of her depictions of subaltern violence and bodily degradation that transgress political and literary crossroads. Wong makes a heavy political move through her unrelenting attention to neurotic violence, grotesque cannibalism, and the mutilated body to shatter expected stereotypes about gender writing. Her fiction reveals an eschatological preoccupation with the tumultuous political history that Hong Kong has been subjected to in the last few decades, where numerous incongruous bodies that neurotically question the internal logics of nationalism, postcolonialism, and human existence itself vis-a-vis Chineseness.

Violence and Tenderness (1994) is an exemplar of the ways Wong Bik-wan’s stories represent a heterogeneous Sinophone Hong Kong experience that obviates the silence of those marginalized, particularly women. In “Vomit” 《呕吐》, a psychiatrist named Dr. Zhan Keming narrates his personal memories of interactions with Ye Xixi, a mixed-blood “chocolate skinned” girl who, after a traumatic experience witnessing the rape and death of her birth mother, “suddenly developed an illness where [she] vomits uncontrollably” (44). A nine year-old Ye Xixi is reluctantly thrust into Zhan Keming’s care by his mother. On their first meeting, Xixi vomits into Keming’s hands, filling his outstretched palms with “yellow and green vomit particles emanating waves of a pungent sour stench” (44). Fighting off the reflex to vomit himself, Keming proceeds to help bathe her. The sensual experience of washing a young Xixi in the bathtub overwhelms Keming with an inexplicable desire and attraction to get to know her better while at the same time “wanting to evade her” (47). From this first encounter, what follows is the beginning of an ambiguous relationship between Xixi and Keming marked by simultaneous carnal arousal and physical revulsion. Xixi is variously described as sensually alluring and morbidly deviant, and as she grows up, comes to assert her erotic desire for Keming even after he gets married and has a child with another woman.
Xixi’s desire for Keming becomes an illness that must be cured through sexual consummation, and even though Keming repeatedly rejects her advances she continues to profess her love for him. One day, Xixi approaches Keming and asks him to accompany her to get an abortion after she has been impregnated by another man. After the operation, Keming takes her into his home to let her rest, only to have a half-naked Xixi confront him once again: “Why don’t you love me? … My love for you is a sickness, I wish for it to be cured… Zhan Keming, won’t you disillusion me so that I won’t love you anymore?” (58). Xixi finally manipulates Keming to have sex with her, assuring him that she merely “hopes to become a normal person… who doesn’t love [Zhan Keming] anymore” (59). Nonetheless, as he approaches climax, Keming grips her shoulders and has sadistic impulse to kill Xixi: “If I had a small knife or a handgun at this moment, I would kill her without hesitation” (59).

Wong’s fascination with the convergence of extreme emotions with the eruption of sexual desire and painful death is evident in “Vomit” and recurs in many of her other stories, such as when Chen Luyuan has disturbingly similar thoughts about killing his wife in “Lost City” 《失城》 before murdering his family, and when the male protagonist in “The Butterfly Catcher” 《捕蝶者》 rapes and murders his college teacher, Ding Yusheng. Wong’s devotion to depicting the excesses of human depravity and ugly feminine experiences of contemporary society, exposing her attempt to reconcile the discordant displays of violence and femininity that characterizes male stereotypes about gender writing. Wong herself is aware of this discrepancy – during her years at the University of Hong Kong, she completed a Master’s thesis on the subject of the criminality of women in Hong Kong films as part of her degree in Criminology. Through this thesis, Wong articulates many of the gender-related social concerns and injustices that she
further explores through her fiction, particularly concerning the painful, paranoid, and inevitable politicization of a woman’s personal experience.\textsuperscript{26}

What is at issue in “Vomit” is Ye Xixi’s story of a lustful, mentally shrewd and sickly, young woman who physically and psychologically manipulates others around her, including her own male psychiatrist. In postcolonial readings of the story, critics have drawn metaphorical associations between the relationship of Xixi and Keming with that of China and Hong Kong (e.g.: Liu 1997; Ng 2008). Xixi, in her transgressive abnormality permanently haunted by the traumatic memory of her mother’s rape and murder, has been likened to a politically erratic and dangerously unpredictable mainland China with its violent history. Keming, an embodiment of a postwar Hong Kong born generation, is forced into an inescapable association with Xixi due to alleged family ties. Although he tries to distance himself from her, he is unable to evade Xixi’s seduction and strange contagion. Xixi and Keming’s involuntary, painful, but inevitable sexual consummation has been broadly linked to the return of mainland China intruding into Hong Kong’s local identity. Their relationship transgresses all moral boundaries of heteronormative society from the perspective of an acceptable doctor-patient relationship, adultery, and inter-generational intimate relations.

The female body and its reproductive capabilities becomes an exceedingly terrifying and grotesque biology. Instances of misogynic brutality, matricide, and infant cannibalism run rampant in \textit{Tenderness and Violence}. Xixi, with her manipulative and forceful seduction, provides but one of many faces to Wong’s prototype of a “violent woman” in modern Chinese history. In “Plentitude and Suffering,” Zhao Mei and Yousheng find solace in each other during wartime Shanghai, only to be separated by an altercation over eating chicken meat. When they find each other again upon the liberation of Shanghai and the end of the war, Zhao Mei whispers:
“I have eaten human flesh. Do you still want me? … The child died. I was starving and I ate it” (1994, 104). To which Yousheng laughs off that they now “balance each other off” as he used to throw up at the sight of meat after their separation (104). In a different story, “Lost City,” Zhao Mei is constantly pregnant, much to the dismay of her husband, Chen Luyuan. As a mother of four, she finally snaps after sleep deprivation and worrying about the family’s future: when their son, Mingming, does not stop crying in the middle of the night, she takes the child into the kitchen and stuffs a whole banana into his mouth, nearly choking the boy to death. Rather than show any remorse over her actions, Zhao Mei merely smiles wryly and states: “Now he will not be crying anymore” (195). As both parents continue their daily routines, Zhao Mei progressively sinks further into insanity at the same time that her husband has increasingly frequent dreams about killing her. One day after coming home from work, Chen Luyuan enters the kitchen to find the children wailing while Zhao Mei forces them to eat bloody raw pig liver, cow spleen, and chicken hearts (202).

The metaphor of the “mother” is particularly sensitive both emotively and politically. In the past decade, analogies of “birth mother” (China) and “adoptive mother” (Britain) have been widely used in relation to the status and history of Hong Kong (Hooper 2003). Hong Kong’s fate was discussed between the two “mothers” during the Sino-British negotiations, during which Hong Kong people themselves were not able to voice input (Hung 2008, 6; Kuan et. al 2002). As such, themes of matricide and irresponsible, malicious mothers in Wong Bik-wan’s fiction expose an apocalyptic sense of frustration with motherhood and the issue of sovereignty in contemporary Hong Kong. Cao Qiqiao’s reincarnation in “Moon of Twin Cities” is a telltale sign of Wong Bik-wan’s early influence from Eileen Chang in depicting a woman who is “afraid of children” and “afraid of the whole world” (Wong 1994, 86; Lin 2005). Through initiating a
dialogue with Eileen Chang as the desolate “mother” of modern Chinese literature, Wong Bik-wan seeks to provide an updated version of feminine Sinophone modernity. As David Der-wei Wang points out, Eileen Chang’s tradition of “embittered woman” (怨女) has been replaced by Wong Bik-wan’s “violent woman” (烈女) (2000, 6). Both female authors “preserve the legitimacy of May Fourth literature,” but while Eileen Chang “preserves a noble aesthetic distance in her approach towards the shortcomings of life” Wong Bik-wan does not hesitate to “lay it all bare – all the anger, hate, and craziness in its dialectical extremes” (Wang 2000, 6). Wong Bik-wan’s violence is “not a violence of violating rules and norms of feminine chastity, but rather a biting, oppressive kind of violence” (Wang 2000, 6).

In parallel to concerns with the postcolonial relations between Hong Kong and China, the vivid writing of Xixi’s belligerent desire and manipulative behavior reveals Wong’s provocative style that has thus been coded as “masculine” and brings the issue of gender performance to the fore. As Isabel Cristina Pinedo has observed in her 1997 study on women in horror films, “Active desire and aggression are the prerogatives of masculinity… Because violence is gendered male, the violent woman is defined as masculine” (82). At the same time a mixed blood African-Chinese and undiagnosable mentally ill Xixi represents a foreign Chineseness encroaching upon Hong Kong normalcy, her character also embodies feminine agency and resistance to male control, addressing the oversight that female identities can also be constructed through acts of violence. Fittingly, Xixi’s vomiting complex enables her to destabilize existing hierarchies and power paradigms by simply vomiting bile on everything. Her subversion of power hierarchies at the level of interpellation is also indicated by Xixi’s refusal to call Yan Keming by any titles such as “brother” or “uncle” and insistence on calling him only by his full
Ultimately, she staunchly imposes her presence and does not allow her mother’s horrifying rape to be forgotten, as the vile stench of dried vomit trails her everywhere she goes.

Yet, the deluge of vomit saturating the text and the ugly presence of abjection in relation to a Sinophone Hong Kong self-identity cannot be ignored but has yet to be discussed in recent scholarship on Wong’s fiction. After their painful, intolerable, yet inevitable sexual consummation, Keming is overcome with paralyzing fits of nostalgia as he stumbles around Hong Kong’s Central Business District at the conclusion of the story:

I feel nostalgic about the 1960s. My life now is trite and waning. Hong Kong’s sovereignty is about to be transferred; why is it so? The radio just played John Lennon’s “Imagine.” Beautiful John Lennon. Beautiful Berkeley, California. Beautiful Ye Xixi. The golden age of the past has already left me… At this moment I feel that the entire world is crumbling; impossible to support… Autumn’s stealthy death is unclear in the city, the new night makes me feel chilly and my stomach starts to make trouble while my whole body shivers. I bend over, and see the grayish black asphalt road. I kneel down. My stomach convulses, and I violently throw up on throw up on the spot (1994, 63-4).

In the middle of a busy street, Keming vomits as he reflects on a palimpsestic spectrum of daily life on the island. Behind his nostalgia and retching, he carries the weary burden of his past relationship with Xixi, and also the unpredictable future of a Hong Kong that is “crumbling” and receding unto an “Autumn death” with its change in sovereignty (63). Keming now has to face the fact that he can no longer sustain an attempt to achieve normalcy, and is now infected with Xixi’s contagion of abjection along with the necessity of reconstituting his splintered sense of self as a person living in Hong Kong.

It is appropriate, therefore, that “Vomit” emphasizes not only Xixi’s ceaseless vomiting throughout the story as she survives as a mixed-race, dark-skinned woman in Hong Kong, but also culminates in Keming’s own abject retching when confronted by the city’s unfamiliar surroundings and impending loss. Through tormenting processes of abjection and self-abjection,
Wong reveals the ongoing breakdown and botched reformulations of all sorts of bodies vis-à-vis Hong Kong locality; regardless of whether national, political, postcolonial, legal, cultural, racial, ethnic, or gendered bodies, they are all manifest corporeally through unruly abject characters that do not present much hope for redemption. All of Wong’s characters signify bodies that restlessly violate their own borders with an aesthetics of excess, proliferating beyond containment.

**Hong Kong as Biopolitical Camp: The Point of Eternal No Return**

Another popular story of Wong Bik-wan’s that has frequently been read through a postcolonial frame and displays an aesthetics of violence along with themes of abjection, dysfunctional intimate relationships, and cannibalism is “Lost City” 《失城》 (e.g.: Li 2003; Lau 1999). Through her choice of title, we can see Wong’s overt attempt to (re)write the Hong Kong story and provide an alternative to previously existing texts, most notably in response to Xi Xi’s (1938 - ) iconic multimedial narratives in *My City* 《我城》 (1979), “The Story of Fertile Town” 《肥土镇的故事》 (1982), and “Marvels of A Floating City” 《浮城志异》 (1986). In contrast to the expressive childish delight that critics have observed in the stories and characters penned by Xi Xi, Wong’s narratives present a sinister underside of daily intimate life experienced by Hong Kong people. In comparison to Xi Xi’s animated diversity, Wong Bik-wan brings to the page the dreaded stories and ugly voices of the “wretched of the earth” (Szeto 2013, 194) ranging from Cantonese working class women and peasants to maladaptive foreign immigrants, compulsive murderers, and those with strange mental illnesses that cannot be diagnosed. Wong’s characters are always wedged in-between and are never permanently settled, painfully emphasizing a transnational Sinophone sensibility that “decouple[s] homeness and origin, and politicize[s] routes and roots” (Shih 2007, 190). Indeed, the metropolis in “Lost City”
resists ownership, and is fundamentally *unfertile* in its unpredictable sociopolitical state that continually disrupts the lives of Hong Kong people.

In “Lost City,” the character Zhan Keming reappears, this time as an ambulance driver in Hong Kong. The story opens up when Zhan Keming’s neighbor, Chen Luyuan, casually appears in front of his house and asks him if he can come over as “something had happened” (185). Zhan Keming quickly finds out that Chen Luyuan recently moved back to Hong Kong from Canada together with his wife and four children, and works as an architect. Outside Chen’s house, there is an ominous “iron bar dyed with blood” that Zhan Keming soon realizes is the weapon Chen used to murder his entire family, bashing their heads in one by one, so that the entire house reeked of a “fishy meat odor” and the floor was covered by “a pool of fresh blood” (185). Maintaining a detached, dignified composure, Chen puts on Bach’s Cello Suite No. 1 and offers his guest high quality Blue Mountain coffee, all the while inviting Zhan to see the bloody killings yet apologizing profusely for having to witness the crime scene. The extent of the carnage is revealed when police investigators arrive at the house: the three and five year old sons were killed in their beds covered by blankets, “only that the wall had a big splash of red blood,” and one of Chen’s daughters had her “neck chopped to the extent that it almost came off” while clutching a now blood-stained teddy bear (188).

The narrative unfolds as Chen recounts his story to the police. Chen and his wife, Zhao Mei, who worked as a nurse, married in a politically tumultuous Hong Kong during the Sino-British negotiations. Worried about Hong Kong’s ambivalent future, Zhao Mei wanted to leave and the couple emigrated to Calgary, Alberta. Little did they know that they were simply incarcerating themselves in “a large prison of ice and snow” where though the food was plentiful, Chen found himself “existing in a state between [their] Shepard dog, child, and the
rubbish bin” in a dark house (193). Chen reveals that his first thoughts of killing his wife was during their residence in the frigid city, when she, pregnant with their second child, would pass the time on snowed-in days by “taking out all their cash, or change it all into coins, and count them all one by one” (192). As Chen watched television while listening to the clinking sounds of coins and Zhao Mei’s sighs, murderous thoughts would form in his head: “In a flash, use a knife to smash in her head, a purplish-black fetus would flow out of her belly. Then kill the sleeping Mingming [their first child]. The police would regard me as an important person, and we would make it onto the headlines of the Calgary news” (192).

The family moved to Toronto after the birth of their second child, where their kitchen becomes infested with swarms of white rats that rapidly reproduce, driving them to move again to San Francisco. Witnessing Zhao Mei’s progressive descent into insanity with more mouths to feed and more children than the couple can care for, Chen finds himself unable to “bear the burden of the cross of love” and takes off to Europe on his own before returning to Hong Kong (192; 203). Just when he believes he has begun to reshape his independent life, his livid pregnant wife and three children find and descend upon him. Nonetheless, it is that same night of their reunion that husband and wife make love “against the strange and evil swollen belly” that is “impregnated with a devilish freak” and Chen makes his final murderous decision (204).

In “Lost City,” nostalgia becomes a sentiment that is deeply problematic. Chen, Zhao Mei, and their children are caught in a vicious cycle of backward glances driven by a desire to move and settle or return home to a better place, but ultimately end up falling in between the cracks and left behind with nowhere to go. When in Canada and San Francisco, Zhao Mei repeatedly brings up returning to Hong Kong (192; 199). Back in Hong Kong, Chen laments that nothing is recognizable any longer: “I wanted a cup of fragrant coffee only to find out that the
old coffee store has already been closed. Telephone numbers are now all changed to seven digits. I no longer understand this new Cantonese English…” (203). In Toronto, the family had been driven out of their home by an infestation of white rats, but back in Hong Kong, Chen finds himself reminiscing their time in Toronto. In order to “recollect their memories in Canada,” he even buys a large white rat as a family pet to commemorate the once-feared pestilence now a perverse kind of nostalgia (204). In the family of six, Chen portentously discloses that “only the rat and I were the most healthy, the rat squeakily growing and spreading like cancer, while my decision continued to breed in the dark, waiting for birth” (204-5). Throughout his confessions, Chen maintains a cool and detached composure, believing that his actions were because he “loved [his] family, and so made the decision for them” and that by killing them, he was in fact providing them the best solution against a desolate future (206).

Chen’s position of disheartened nostalgia and abject marginality is overlaid by the brief narrative disclosed by the police officer interrogating him. This police officer reveals his own background as an Englishman who, since coming to Hong Kong to work, has had crumbling relations with his UK wife, “probably due to the fact that [he has] had Chinese women one after the other” (190). Although already married to a British woman who adores him, he “cannot turn away the temptation of a colonized land” and resist the seductive advances of a Chinese girl with a large peacock tattoo on her back (190). This tangent about the policeman’s personal relations with his wife and son reveals the unwanted yet inevitable incursion of both English and Chinese influences into the lives of those who pass through Hong Kong, regardless of being a citizen, immigrant, foreign worker, or temporary resident. Like the policeman, they are unable to fathom the future, and are no longer able to recollect a past that was once an important part of their self-
identity: “After coming to Hong Kong, because it is hot, and because it is easy, I have already forgotten the frigid cold and hardships of Ireland’s winter” (211).

In his essay on Wong Bik-wan, David Wang locates her writing of nostalgia as one that exists in the home as a pathological, uncanny space (2002, 340). Wong Bik-wan’s ethos of the “uncanny” allows seduction and fear to coexist, laying bare “the reality that we are away from home, or without home,” manifest in figures that “suffer from profound alienation and haunted by unfulfillment” (Wang 2002, 340; Ng 2008, 49). From the East to the West and other places in between, Wong’s characters painfully agonize over “the irony of having a fortunate life” as they cannot find a home (203). In Zhao Mei’s redundant gabble, they had been “jumping from an oil pan into a pile of fire, only to be jumping again from the pile of fire back into the oil pan” (192; 205). As a result, they have no future but also no longer a past.

As Wong’s fiction reveals, all of the bodies that pass through Hong Kong are on a never-ending search, “always looking for something [and] always feeling like [they’ve] lost something,” only to conclude that their search for identity has always already been lost from the very beginning (199). “Lost City” demonstrates the observations Ackhas Abbas puts forth in his book on Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance (1997). Specifically, the imagery of the city being lost resonates with what Abbas terms *deja disparu*, defined in his own words as an uncanny feeling "that what is new and unique about the situation is always already gone, and we are left holding a handful of clichés, or a cluster of memories of what has never been" (Abbas 1997, 25). This sense of originary loss and the sentiment of a culture and the politics of disappearance has come about more generally as a result of Hong Kong's rapid change and modernization, fueled by a recent desire to locate and establish a fixed sense of Hong Kong identity approaching the 1997 return to Chinese sovereignty. Abbas finds that this philosophic
and melancholy *deja disparu* typifies contemporary Hong Kong as it attempts to suture colonial and postcolonial, modern and postmodern multicultural experiences.

The abject women and subaltern individuals that populate Wong’s fiction as wandering nomads and dis/eased bodies may be viewed as specimens of what Giorgio Agamben conceives as the *Homo Sacer*, the Greek concept of “bare life” (zoe).27 Wong’s probing of an ethical representation of bare life as one that both desanctifies and de-aesthetizes violence is chillingly questioned in Chen Luyuan’s uncertain reflection upon the deaths in his family: “Was it me who destroyed them, or they who destroyed me, or have we all been victims?” (205). Other examples of the *homo sacer* run amok throughout Wong’s stories, embodied by the women that the nineteen year-old college student protagonist in the “The Butterfly Catcher” murders on a whim and the foreign Thai prostitute he visits, the deranged yet manipulative Ye Xixi in “Vomit,” the imprisoned drug addict son of the police officer in “Lost City,” and the various other *lienü* or “violent women” who refuse sympathy and devour the suffering of their lot with an unforgiving ruthlessness. All of these figures reveal “the unpunishability of [the homo sacer’s] killing and the ban on his sacrifice” when death is considered a better alternative to an abject bare life that was not fully human to begin with (Agamben 1998, 49).

In his work, Agamben also contends that the camp is an absolute “biopolitical paradigm” where “politics become biopolitics and *homo sacer* is virtually confused with the citizen (1997, 110). In such a space, human beings can be deprived of their rights and prerogatives to such an extent that acts committed against them no longer appear as crimes (Agamben 1997, 110). As a space of exception – “a piece of land which is placed outside the normal juridical order, but it is nonetheless not simply an external space” – the camp “inaugurates a new juridico-political paradigm in which the norm becomes indistinguishable from the exception” (Agamben 1997,
Wong’s fiction reflects Agamben’s concern with the body and *corpus* being politicized in multiple forms in relation to both sovereign power and individual liberties. On this note, Wong Bik-wan presents the city of Hong Kong itself as a modern state of exception and biopolitical camp, rendering it a “site of sovereign political decision that operates in the absolute indifference of fact and law” (Agamben 1997, 111). Regulated as a Special Administrative Region (SAR), the links between the state, the nation (or the birth of bare life), and land in Hong Kong has now entered a messy stage of dissociation. Formulated as a state of exception, the disarray evident in Hong Kong’s political and legal framework originally intended to be a temporary disruption of order, has now metamorphosed into a new and persistent, but highly schizophrenic, state.

The notion of the camp as a “dislocation of population and human lives along entirely new lines of flight” is key to understanding Wong Bik-wan’s rendering of Hong Kong as an instance of Agamben’s biopolitical camp populated by *homo sacer*. Scholars have repeatedly noted that cultural production from Hong Kong in general, and Hong Kong literature in particular, constantly portray the local Hong Kong milieu as one defined significantly by transit and a frantic population (e.g.: Liang 2012; Hung 2008; Xu 2009; Liang and Huang 2005). Hong Kong has long been a point of passage for many travelers and evokes a vague awareness of temporality and ephemerality, along with the sense of continuous motion associated with temporal and monetary flows. Frenetic movement is a defining trait that ties together all of Wong’s myriad stories and restless characters. Her fictions travel at multiple levels textually and intertextually to explore the rhizomatic possibilities of representing the disoriented – literally, those who have an experienced an intangible “loss of the East” – as they move in transit.

At the textual level, Wong Bik-wan’s stories are set in many other cities and countries aside from Hong Kong, and the author herself, not unlike the characters she creates, all live a
vagabond life. Wong’s characters transgress multiple racial and national boundaries to constitute hybrid individuals, including Afro-Asians, Amerasians, and Eurasians. On the one hand, the meandering international trajectories of characters such as Xixi and Zhan Keming in “Vomit” who both study abroad or Chen Luyuan and Zhao Mei in “Lost City” who move across various countries in North America and Europe, reflect the multinational and culturally diverse backgrounds of people in a global metropolis like Hong Kong. On the other hand, such chaotic movements evoke the mass emigration of anxious individuals scrambling to leave the city as a result of the 1997 return to mainland Chinese power.

Wong’s Sinophone subaltern mode of transnationalism is one that Mirana May Szeto has referred to as a “rhizomatic nomadology,” exhibiting horizontal and rhizomatic cultural and affective affinities (2013, 193). Applied to Wong’s fiction, rhizomatic nomadism is evident when the characters in her stories are always situated in the between points, characterized by movement and change within the intermezzo. As ascetic nomads, they thrive in the margins of inhabiting multiple landscapes despite being forced to move by different national regimes.

At the inter-textual level, readers will quickly notice Wong’s penchant for using the same character names in different stories. The circulatory reappearance of characters with the same name across multiple stories creates an unsettling palimpsestic effect dramatizing Hong Kong as “a borrowed place living on borrowed time” (Hughes 1976, 13). The reiterative transplanting of character frames leaves readers with a sense of agitated apprehension about the next recurrence, an effect that can be interpreted as what Michael Berry terms Hong Kong’s “anticipatory trauma” (2008, 367). In A History of Pain, Berry articulates the notion of “anticipatory trauma” as “a complex whereby angst and trepidation about the future are projected into catastrophic visions of what is to come, reinforced by historical or psychological scars from past traumas.
Anticipatory trauma is just as much about fear for the future as about memories of the past” (2008, 367). Berry posits Hong Kong as a “unique chronotopic space” that repeatedly revisits and refigures modern China’s “century full of acts of historical violence and their continual resurrection” where “atrocity had become a fundamental part of the modern Chinese … imagination of the future” (2008, 379).

The intertextual movement of ghostly characters and cyclical nature of “historical or psychological scars from past traumas” is further accentuated by Wong’s evocation of paradigmatic characters limned by deceased literary figures such as Lu Xun and Eileen Chang. For example, “Moon of Twin Cities” 《双城月》 resurrects Cao Qiqiao from China’s Republican Era in Eileen Chang’s The Golden Cangue 《金锁记》 (1943) and unleashes her monstrous madness in the contemporary period (Lu 2005). From history into its modern rendition, Qiqiao is a strong-willed and resourceful woman who is battered by a misogynistic patriarchal society after she trades her youth for financial reward. Whether she lives the rest of her life wasting away in Eileen Chang’s version, or if she is killed by a humanoid grim reaper in Wong’s retelling, Qiqiao’s embittered and vicious madness inexorably infects a younger generation after her.

Moreover, imagery of a blood red moon figures prominently in “Moon of Twin Cities,” not only echoing Eileen Chang’s opening passage of the moon in The Golden Cangue but also educing the fractured identity in Lu Xun’s dark tale, “Diary of a Madman,” where a changing moon has been read as a sign of madness and femininity (Lyell 1990). Wong’s unbearable “love-cross” calls up Lu Xunian imagery of painful Chinese history haunted by incidents such as the 1937 Rape of Nanjing and Cultural Revolution, reviving his cannibalistic conspiracy whereby
“the older generation metaphorically ‘eat’ their children by chaining them to ancient and increasingly redundant verities” (Asker 1999, 141).

**Ghost Writing the Illegal Truth: History as Bodily Pain**

Wong’s approach to violent historical reality emphasizes that it works like a contagious disease, infecting daily life in an obsessive-compulsive manner. In “Crime and Punishment,” Wong poignantly writes that “law enforcers may be the law offenders [and] prison guards may themselves be criminals; yet, in the justice system, the most immoral persons are not the criminals, but the lawyers” (149-50). The legal system evinces a moral paradox where it is unable to account for the *homo sacer* and marginalized individuals in society. Wong asserts that literature has greater potential to achieve truth and provide “bitter medicine” for a sickly modernity (qtd. in Lin 1997, 37). However, “a person who relentlessly pursues truth will eventually understand, that there was never any truth to begin with” and “so such a cycle continues on repeat, sustained in hell” (Wong 1994, 150). Wong’s words here evokes the Nietzschean eternal return, chillingly pointing out that the search for truth and modern identity is necessarily shadowed by originary loss and illegal existence, dramatizing human survival as a state between life and death *ad infinitum* without real agency (Lowith 1997).

As scholars have such as Yan Chunjun and Joseph S.M. Lau have observed, minute attention to the excesses of human depravity at the “borderline between life and death, love and hate” reveals how “eschatology is played out in [Wong Bik-wan’s] fiction through the agencies of violence and cannibalism” (Yan 1996, 69; Lau 1999, 155). Wong’s distinctive aesthetics have prompted critics to wonder why she should show “such an undiminished interest in ugliness and evil” (Lau 155, Yan 1995, 62-63). In his study, David Wang describes her writing as a “history of pain” (2002: 341). From repugnant bile and sexual consummation in “Vomit” or infant
cannibalism in “Plentitude and Sorrow,” to the serial murders in “The Butterfly Catcher,” “Moon of Twin Cities,” and “Lost City,” Wong’s fiction presents endless mutations of personal apocalypse and projected violence, both real and deranged. Through subversive, hellish retellings, Wong’s stories elucidate the interaction between the fictive and the real. She pens ugly, subaltern individuals in myriad extreme states of physical and psychological deterioration that nonetheless bears uncanny parasitic relation to real life.

The freakish fantasies and disturbing desires in Wong’s fiction disrupt the façade of Hong Kong’s sociocultural order, one glossed over by commercial success and economic achievement. Through violent imagery, Wong pries open a domain of chaos and illegality, revealing the horrifying proliferation of abject bodies that do not fit into and negate hegemonic value systems. Yet, Wong’s animalistic energies and vision of hardcore brutality is limned in a lyrical writing style that is highly appealing at the same time it is intolerably repugnant. It is this commitment to examining death and decay in detail that lends her fiction a unique power, one that can endure the agonizing anxiety of recollecting ghosts from a traumatic past and anticipate the undead in a shadowy future marked by erratic change and messy globalization.
Conclusion

The Sinophone as an Interrogative Praxis

The transitional category of the Sinophone refers to a complex community that is characterized by a culture of change, in-betweenness, and travel. The term challenges the China-centric discourse embedded in the notion of “Chinese diaspora” as an organizing concept referring to the various peoples who have emigrated from China beginning during imperial times to the present. As Andrea Bachner observed, the Sinophone “both contests identitarian formations, the illusion of a coherent, unified ‘Chinese’ culture, and signifies as a contestation of essentialism itself” (2014, 202). Drawing upon ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, transnational studies, and other “phone” studies such as Francophone and Anglophone studies, Sinophone studies prompts us to rigorously question essentialist notions of “Chineseness” and a “Chinese” identity to reformulate organizing concepts of creolization, multiculturalism, and multilingualism to better understand multifaceted societies, identities, and cultures. Therefore, this thesis has conceived of the Sinophone body as one that encompasses all sorts of bodies – be they biopolitical, cultural, textual, or physical – that are constantly in motion and transformation, unrestricted by fixed national or geographical boundaries.

The Sinophone community is constantly searching for an identity that resists China by articulating difference from continental Chineseness, all the while laying claim to distinct place-based culture and local history. The Nanyang Chinese population across Malaysia and Singapore and the citizens of Hong Kong or Taiwan in Greater China are all examples of uniquely creolized Sinophone communities, continually changing vis-à-vis mainland China and other global powers. As such, this thesis explored three cases of multicultural encounters and Sinophone articulations through the literary works by Kuo Pao Kun, Li Yongping, and Wong Bik Wan.
From Kuo’s reiteration of Zheng He as the ancestral model of a seemingly castrated, yet nonetheless formidably productive Sinophone traveler, to the fallen women haunting colonial Malaysia and Taiwan in Li’s texts, to Wong’s hysterical, undying characters persisting at the nightmarish interstices of life, all three Sinophone locales vividly dramatize a source of discomfort that dislocates homogenizing impulses underpinning contemporary Chinese ethnic and cultural studies. The act of grouping these diverse communities together is one that is simultaneously productive, subversive, and yet liberating. Rather than merely lamenting their own rootlessness, Sinophone communities constantly rewrite their distinct ethnic affiliations to Chineseness across time and space, both locally and globally.

Through Sinophone articulations that make visible subaltern gendered bodies lurking in multiple margins, each text opens up new strategies and interrogative praxes to rethink a kinship system that crystallizes Chineseness and various other shifting identities as multicultural constructions. Taken together, Sinophone synergies across diverse Sinitic communities create a space for interaction and negotiation to reevaluate the Chinese identity and “Chineseness” vis-à-vis tradition, cultural uniformity, geopolitical boundaries, biopolitical regimes, and transculturation. The intersectionality of such a dynamic understanding of the Sinophone holds out hope for creating an alternative theoretical praxis that can accommodate the rhizomatic experiences defining the global Chinese community today.
NOTES

1 A number of his plays, including The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole (1985), The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree (1987), Mama Looking for Her Cat (1988), and Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral (1995) have been pioneering works in Singapore’s art scene. Aside from being performed in Singapore’s four official languages of English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil, his works have been translated and staged in Hindi, Japanese, and German internationally. In 1965, Kuo and his wife, Goh Lay Kuan, co-founded the Practice Performing Arts School (PPAS). In 1986, he was the founding Artistic Director of the Practice Theatre Ensemble, now called The Theatre Practice (TTP). In 1990, he was also the founding Artistic Director of The Substation – A Home for the Arts in Singapore.

2 For example, Mama Looking for Her Cat (1988) pioneered the concept of multilingual theatre as a means to represent the complex multiracial and multicultural Singaporean experience, investigating Singapore’s compartmentalization of diverse racial communities brought about by the government’s language policies (Chan 2003; Quah 2004).

3 However, aside from the preface and three rescripts of the Ming Emperor included in the text, Gong Zhen’s book was mostly plagiarized from Ma Huan’s (Hsu 1979).

4 His father and grandfather were both named Hajji, a title suggesting that they were indeed Muslim and had made the pilgrimage to Mecca. In other words, Zheng He came from a devout Muslim family with a strong awareness of Islam’s religious heritage, which included a religious law that prohibited castrating or enslaving Muslims.

5 The origin of the alias San Bao is still unknown, but historians have argued that the character for “Bao” as it appears in the Minshi is actually the character for “protect” (保 bao), a simplified homonym for “treasure” (宝 bao), and so the term “San Bao” might have derived from a Sanskrit Buddhistic term “Triratna” indicating Buddha (佛), Dharma (法), and Sanha (僧) (Kahn 2005).


7 There is no evidence for such a thesis in any of the Chinese sources to date, although the return of the sixth expedition in 1422 is recorded. There is significant reason to doubt that Zheng He’s flotilla were seaworthy enough to make such a long voyage over rough waters, and many scholars have responded saying that Menzie’s evidence is unconvincing on academic grounds (Zhu 2003; Lee 2005).

8 Scholars have recently detailed that China had frequently sent maritime missions to Southeast Asia before Yongle, but Zheng He’s fleet is the largest and one of the first led by a eunuch instead of civil officials (Wang 2004).

9 Ye Jun, a Beijing historian, disputes the official statement that Zheng He was a good-will ambassador, saying that such a “one-sided interpretation … blindly ignores the objective fact that Zheng He engaged in military suppression” to achieve the Emperor’s goals (qtd in Kahn 2005). In other articles, Gungwu Wang (1964; 1968; 2007) and Tan Ta Sen (2006) note that the Ming court appears to have been more interested in advancing the rhetoric of a Chinese world order rather than colonizing or just profiting from maritime commerce. Then again, Edward Dreyer (2007) contends that the primary goal of the voyages was to exact tribute and to promote the flow of luxury goods from maritime states to markets in China. Another common speculation is that Yongle initiated the voyages for personal reasons: under the belief that the deposed Emperor Hongwu might have fled westward, the Emperor Yongle sent Zheng He to look for and subdue him (Huang 1985; Dreyer 2007).

10 Scholars point out that the purpose of the Hongwu emperor, in addition to the early Ming court’s emphasis on tributary missions, the practice of granting titles to foreign rulers, and even the expeditions of Zheng He, formed an integral part of the so-called “Da yitong” (“Great Unified [Empire]”) ideology.

11 From 1402-1424, China received a total of 76 missions from foreign countries. In 1923 alone, 16 countries and 1200 envoys made tribute to the Ming Imperial Court (Tan 2005).

12 In “A Biography of Zheng He, the Great Navigator of the Motherland” (祖国伟大航海家郑和传) (1904), Liang lauded that Zheng He’s voyages preceded any European navigation achievements, and the Ming armada constituted of colossal boats that took the West hundreds of years to build to a similar scale. Dr. Sun Yat-Sen praised the voyages in his book, A General Plan for National Reconstruction (建国方略) (1911), and encouraged the Chinese people to follow the exploiting spirit of Zheng He to build a wealthy and strong nation.


14 Although little is known about Zheng He’s emotions or personal life, many texts have elaborated upon the eclectic nature of his religious beliefs as an adult during his voyages (Han 1946; Zhong et al. 1990).

15 In “What is a Nation?” (1882), Renan points out that too many people make the error of “confound[ing] the idea of race with that of the nation and attributes to ethnographic, or rather linguistic, groups a sovereignty analogous to
that of actually existing peoples” (186). He states, “To have common glories in the past and to have common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more – these are the essential conditions for being a people” (Renan 1882, 196).

As a result of this discourse, literary texts were studied in school alongside colonial texts, producing a generation of young Singaporean consumers of local fiction. This radically altered the Singaporean arts audience, which now consisted of younger but less well-educated people perusing literary works for entertainment rather than enlightenment (Holden 2000; Kwok et. al 2002; Koh 1980).

Koh Tai Ann’s work on cultural development in Singapore argues that the state’s promotion of cultural activity is linked to the political agenda of developing national solidarity and shaping national culture so that both ethnic communalism and ‘over-Westernization’ are contained (1980; 1989, 717-8). By promoting each racial group’s traditional culture, ethnic art is produced as a “museumization of an ossified past, a show-case culture” (Koh 1989, 734). The government’s ideological commitment to multiculturalism and a “democratic spirit that eclectically combines a socialist spirit with capitalism practices” mean that cultural values and development are consistently, even insistently, linked to economic development and productivity (Koh 1989, 720; Wong 2001).

Singapore artists duplicate Eurocentric allochronistic approaches to Chinese culture by using the temporal ‘otherness’ of the past to represent Chinese ethnic culture itself as their own ‘other,’ even while seeking to embrace this ‘other’ as the self. This framing device of time splits Chinese culture into the past and represents present culture as the “modern.” Rey Chow uses Johannes Fabian’s concept of “allochronism to describe this casting of the ‘other’ in another time” (1991, 30). Chow poses some very pertinent questions for a nation that is seeking to articulate the Asian/Chinese with the modern: “What would it mean to include the [ethnic] ‘other,’ the object of inquiry, in a cotemporal, dialogic confrontation with the critical [Western] gaze,” and “how might the argument of coevalness affect our reading of [Chinese] modernity?” (1991, 33). Kuo confronted these issues to problematize the state’s construction of essentialistic ethnic identities.

Spivak describes the suicide of Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, a young woman covertly involved with the armed struggle for Indian independence who killed herself when she was unable to complete a political assassination. Despite Bhuvaneswari’s calculated efforts to assert self-agency through the physiological control of her body, others still concluded that her actions were due to illegitimate love, prompting Spivak to assert that the subaltern cannot speak.


In The History of Sexuality: Vol. I, Foucault writes of biopower as “working to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, organize, and orient the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them” (136). In contrast to sovereign power which could “take life or let live,” biopower is the power “to foster life or disallow it to the point of death” (Foucault 1990: 138). Biopower accesses the body because it functions through norms rather than laws: it is internalized by subjects rather than being exercised from above through acts or threats of violence and it is dispersed through society rather than located in a single individual or government body (Taylor 2011, 43). This biopolitical framework has been deployed by critical race and postcolonial thinkers to address how the questions of self, identity, and self-actualization become crucial preoccupations for individuals in increasingly transnational, globalizing societies (e.g.: Chow 2002, Lu 2007).

She also completed a Master’s degree in Journalism from The Chinese University of Hong Kong and took courses on French language and culture at Université Paris 1 in France. She also completed a Master’s degree in
Criminology at the University of Hong Kong and worked in a law firm for several years after graduation. Before devoting herself to creative writing, Wong worked as a scriptwriter, editor, and freelance reporter for various newspapers and magazines. Wong Bik-wan is often considered a new, albeit controversial, voice in Hong Kong literature among the ranks of more established writers such as Xi Xi and Xin Qishi and has been included in anthologies as a “seasoned veteran of colonial global capitalism” (Szeto 2013, 192; Renditions 1997).

To name a few: the influx of refugees in the 1950s, the Leftist riots in 1967 and 1968 along with a surge in emigration resulting from the mainland’s Cultural Revolution, the Defend the Diaoyu Island Movement (保釣運動) initiated in the early 1970s, and the impact of China’s Open Door policy on Hong Kong’s social and economic structures all forced the Hong Kong people to probe their relationship to and distinctions from the mainland (Cheung 2001; Renditions 1997).

Exploring crime as a case study of social behavior revealing ingrained distorted beliefs about femininity, Wong takes issue with the fact that women’s criminality is only seen as “mad, not bad” where “women offenders are biologically backward, sexually deprived, [and] subsequently more pathological” in a way that re-inscribes them into an oppressive patriarchal order (1995, 7; 16). Citing Sigmund Freud’s analysis of women’s sexuality and delinquency in the light of sex roles, Wong’s study asserts that the predominant belief held is that women do not commit violent crimes because they internalize aggression, and the root of women’s deviance or insanity has historically been traced to the wake of sexuality (Wong 1995, 9). It is worth highlighting that Wong closely consulted Karlene Faith’s 1994 work on Unruly Women: The Politics of Confinement and Resistance which describes the way “female crime is treated as an expression of masculinization and opposition to male authority” where “[m]en’s fear of women’s reproductive functions, combined with exaggerated presumptions of female lust, reduced women to their sex” (Faith 1994, 43). The frequent appearance of female prostitutes, violent criminals, and lustful lunatics in Wong’s own fiction at the time can thus be seen as an extension of her aspiration to shed light upon ingrained gender stereotypes of modern patriarchal society.

Expanding upon a provision in ancient Roman law, Agamben describes the homo sacer as a paradigmatic example of “human life [that is] included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion” (1998, 12). In other words, the homo sacer is the human body that is banned and ostracized from society, both as the sacred and as the damned. Defined by its capacity to be killed, the homo sacer is rendered a sacrificial figure that provides the foundation of the law’s putative legitimacy. Thus, killing the homo sacer does not constitute murder or sacrifice; it becomes the opposite of the martyr. To those in power, they are but dispensable lives, no longer fully human and reduced to animalistic value. Agamben posits that these subaltern homo sacer figures mark the ideological limits of the polis and symbolize the grounds on which existing political regimes derive their authority by being “situated at the intersection of a capacity to be killed, and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine law” (1998, 49).

Drawing upon Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s philosophical theorization in A Thousand Plateaus (1980), a rhizome apprehends multiplicities and presents history and culture as a wide array of connections and influences with no specific origin or genesis, as an activity that “has no beginning or end” as “it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo” (25).

As an aside, it is curious to note Wong Bik-wan’s personal traveling aesthetic outside of textual space. Although Wong is a Hong Kong woman and often includes local dialects in her writings, her works have primarily been published in Taiwan rather than locally. Wong is also a flamenco dancer, and has travelled extensively to Spain to learn the art of flamenco dancing. The stories she wrote during her stay in Spain reveal indelible influences from a Latin American environment, even though they are written in the Chinese script (Szeto 2013).

Nietzsche’s philosophy of the “eternal recurrence of the same” envisions the world as an eternal process of coming into existence and dying which has no beginning or end. In Nietzsche’s view, the fact that there is infinite time and a finite number of events, and eventually the events will recur again and again indefinitely is a horrifying thought. With no final state of the universe, the world is in a constant state of flux, always changing and becoming: “If the world had a goal it must have been reached” (Nietzsche 1910, no. 1062). Consequently, there cannot be any permanence and the world never settles at a final state.
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