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## The Concept of the Cantophone: Memorandum for a Stateless Literary History

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The Concept of the Cantophone:  
Memorandum for a Stateless Literary History

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## ABSTRACT

This essay considers the Cantophone as a subject(-to-come) of literary history foreclosed by Sinophone statelessness. Cantonese, historically marginalized in Sinitic literacy and subjected to compradorial colonialism, highlights the complexity of topolectal representation beyond the “local vs. national” binary. This is further compounded by the Cantonese-speaking diaspora and the global cultural industry, owing much to the historical status of Hong Kong as a colonial city on the periphery of China and an Asian outpost of Cold War liberalism. The Cantophone suggests a topolect-based literary-cultural system eccentrically centered upon Hong Kong, existing in negotiated entwinement with the logics of state-authorized orthographies, sinographic or alphabetic. As a non-sovereign space, Hong Kong nonetheless informs, beyond its spatial border, a Cantonese-based cultural archipelago even while it negotiates its formal dependence on Anglophone and Sinophone literary capitals.

Instead of considering “dialectal literature” (*fangyan wenxue*) as a subset of national literature, this essay analyzes in four parts the literary politics of topolectal representation as played out within what the author calls the “colonial-classical-national-local” intellectual-historical matrix. To the extent that writing Cantonese is a textual performance independent from the category of the locally-embodied “native speaker,” the essay suggests that topolectal misfit within different orthographic orders far exceeds the questions of Sinophone place-making; it sustains both a non-national alternative to retell sinographic literary history, and an inscription of epistemological difference within/out “Chineseness” as a postcolonial ethnocultural identity. As a thought-experiment, the Cantophone is an invitation to an exercise in thinking literary history without the One-ness of nation-states.

Keywords: Topolectal literature, Sinophone studies, written Cantonese, non-national literary history, statelessness

## INTRODUCTION: A LITERATURE THAT BOTH IS AND NEVER WAS

Both classical and vernacular Chinese have a history. We know this is true because we can read it in the books. But patois or argots too have a history; it is just that nobody bothered to write it down.

Lu Xun (2005 [1935], 441–442)

寫廣東話，mark 音無字

(write in Cantonese, marking the sound where there is no [Chinese] character [for a given expression])

Wong Bik-wan (2016, 16)

The notion that the *Cantophone* exists as a culture whose literary history remains to be written may appear as both self-evident and obfuscating at once. *Self-evident*, because Cantonese (varieties of Yue Chinese), a Sinitic language native to Guangzhou (formerly Canton), Hong Kong, and Macau, was, according to popular belief, once considered a close contender for the status of China’s official language, losing to Mandarin only by a razor-thin majority (Tam 2020, 74). Up to now, Cantonese remains the second most spoken in the entire Sino-Tibetan language family across the world. *Obfuscating*, because written Cantonese, like all other “regional varieties” of Chinese (or *fangyan* 方言), is considered a substandard form in Chinese letters, whether classical or modern. Sometimes translated as “topolect” (and more frequently, but erroneously, as “dialect”), *fangyan* is conventionally regarded as solely oral, and writing in a vernacular Sinitic in exclusion of classical Chinese (*wenyan* 文言, also known as Literary Sinitic<sup>1</sup>) and/or modern standard Mandarin (*baihua* 白話, “plain speech”) is historically rare. *Fangyan* literature is usually understood to have great definitional flexibility, and thus rarely to be truly mono-topolectal. Premodern literary sources qualified as *fangyan* (such as traditional opera and folk

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Mair (1994) suggests using the term “Literary Sinitic” to highlight its transnational use as the lingua franca in the classical Sinosphere, rather than as a linguistic marker of nationality as “Classical Chinese” would suggest.

oral literature) typically feature topolect-specific expressions or grammatical patterns within a text versified in accordance with classical Chinese syntax and poetic meters (Tam 2020, 419). Even in contemporary literature, vernacular Cantonese appears only intermittently among standard Chinese in most cases of what is understood as a Sinophone performance of “localization and creolization” (Shih 2011, 716). The practical result is that contemporary Sinophone writings – or our theoretical discourse about them – have not exceeded Victor Mair’s almost three decades-old observation, “to this day, it remains almost unthinkable to write down any of the topolects in a relatively integral form, although isolated topolectical expressions are occasionally added to Mandarin texts to give a bit of local flavor” (1994, 725).

This domestic challenge of unapologetically committing Cantonese to literary form is further compounded by the language’s global reach in non-Sinitic cultures. Cantonese was the first Sinitic language to have extensive interaction with the Western world after Guangzhou became a port city for foreign trade following the First Opium War, giving rise to Chinese Pidgin English. The global trade of tea spread the word *tsa* from Cantonese (or alternatively, *tay* from Hokkien) to the rest of the world’s languages (Liu 2020, 2). Colonial presences in China further brought about two Cantonese-influenced creole languages, Macanese Patois (a Portuguese creole now critically endangered) and Hong Kong English (or “Kongish,” made notable recently by its vibrant prominence during the 2019 anti-extradition protest [*Hong Kong Free Press*, 2019]). Many early documents of vernacular Cantonese still in existence were written in connection with missionary activities, often related to biblical translation and almost always with the (usually uncredited) help of locals (Tam 2020, 45–58). Notably, *Cantonese Love-Songs* (粵謳, *jyut-au* in Cantonese, *jyutping* or *yue’ou* in Mandarin pinyin), an important early Cantonese literary document of folk songs compiled by Qing dynasty Lingnan (嶺南, “South of the Nanling Mountains”) literatus Jiu Ji-yung (招子庸, 1786–1847), was first translated into English by Cecil Clementi, a British Orientalist trained in both classical Chinese and Cantonese who later became the colonial governor who co-founded the University of Hong Kong. The modern development of Cantonese is thus inextricable from the history of Western imperialism and China’s capitalist integration. Thanks largely to the cultural exports of Hong Kong, Cantonese pop culture is recognized as a global phenomenon during the Cold War in the form of TV dramas, music, and cinema, relating transnational cultural industry and overseas Sinophone communities (K. Wang, 2020). Having come a long way from its

topolectal origin in the Lingnan region and the Pearl River Delta, a distinctively *Cantophone* culture has been transnationally developed via colonial translation, diasporic movements, and globalization of popular entertainment. So why such difficulty of admitting Cantonese into the realm of literary history?

The epigraph above from Wong Bik-wan (黃碧雲) eloquently reveals the gaps in Sinitic writing that force Cantonese users to resort to homophones, coinages, or even non-Sinitic phonographs to transcribe local expressions. In a remark as short as four characters, Wong's scriptural undulation from Cantonese to English ("mark") and standard Chinese ("無" instead of "冇" for negation) effortlessly circumnavigates the wide sea of Hong Kong's heteroglossia as a normative vacuum of languaging. The difficulties of writing a literary history of Cantonese, I argue, are symptomatic of the *statelessness* of the language, a fact reflected primarily by its lack of institutionalized orthography. In writing, Cantonese can be represented in Sinitic characters, as one usually does in Sinophone Hong Kong literature, or via Romanization, as is the case in some Asian diasporic literature. In their "pure" state, neither form perfectly transcribes Cantonese; footnotes are usually required for non-Cantonese readers. The specifically Cantophone awareness that no writing system escapes its destiny as flawed technology of transliteration rather than transparent medium of cultural meanings troubles the naturalized – and *racialized* – link between Sinographs and Sinitic languages.

As a *writable* language *without a writing* (ever so slightly different from spoken-only languages and "digraphia," languages with multiple writing systems like Urdu/Hindi), the grammatological anarchy of Cantonese challenges conventional models of literary history-writing. Chinese literary history is typically modelled upon the teleology of nationalization *qua* vernacularization along the vein of Benedict Anderson's (2016) theory of print-capitalism and modern nationalism, a moment of "grand beginning" conveniently identified with the 1919 May Fourth literary generation to which Mao's socialist state claimed to be the spiritual heir.<sup>2</sup> David Der-wei Wang's edited volume, *A New Literary History of Modern China* (2017), represents one of the most innovative and capacious attempts in recent times to methodologically de-center the nation in Chinese literary historiography. In the introduction to his over-1000-page volume featuring over 140 contributors, Wang argues that "modern Chinese literature is

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<sup>2</sup> The "May Fourth paradigm" has been academically contested on a regular basis, although it is still used as a conventional periodization, if only to be problematized. For a critique, see D. Wang 1997.

not merely a national project, with distinct linguistic, discursive, and cultural characteristics, but also part of a transnational endeavor that defines the nation in relation to other political and cultural entities” (11). Instead of “literary histories hemmed in by ideological guidelines and cultural provincialism” (ibid.) that in his view characterize the current status of both mainland China and Taiwan, Wang construes his project in light of “worlding” in Heideggerian philosophy and *wen* 文 (“letters” but also literariness, eloquence, schematization, civilization) in classical Chinese poetics and Confucian cosmology. Their combination allows Wang to frame his editorial efforts, bringing together discussions about late Qing, (Republican and Communist) China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Malaysia, as materializing “a theory of sympathetic resonance,” making legible “a latent pattern follow[ing] its innate disposition to become manifest” (5) as Wang quotes the classicist Stephen Owen to support his undertaking of “worlding literary China.” The philosophical core of *wen* as proper textual performance linked to cosmological harmony and ritualistic balance thus determines the discursive basis of Wang’s literary-historical ecumenism. Devised in accordance with the global reach (or “worldliness”) of Sinitic writing (*shijie huawen*), it largely bypassed the lacuna of representing *fangyan* – traditionally peripheral to the logocentric *wen* (*yan*) of the Confucian literati – even though Sinophone peripheries are substantially consulted. (Only in one case is the Sinitic universalism of *wen* broken, by an essay on Tibetan poetry, which has its own writing system.) This essay asks this question: could topolects become the subject of literary history?

In contrast to the diffusive omnipresence of literary China, the spasmodic ramification of literary Cantonese bears the character of *exile*: on the peripheries of classical literary tradition, as strategic object of colonial linguistics, and subject to a multi-situational array of local negotiations and foreign recontextualizations.<sup>3</sup> Being *non-national*, literary Cantonese would not provide a transnational narrative of cultural reunification. To construe, if only in a hypothetical way, the literary history of a stateless language-at-large such as Cantonese requires a new historiographical method. My literary-historical conceptualization of the *Cantophone* is in conversation with Sinophone studies. In “Concept of the Sinophone” (2011), Shu-mei Shih envisages that

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<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the development of written Cantonese bears much similarity to that of written Taiwanese (see A. Lin 1999).



Sinophone studies disrupts the chain of equivalence established, since the rise of nation-states, among language, culture, ethnicity, and nationality and explores the protean, kaleidoscopic, creative, and overlapping margins of China and Chineseness, America and Americanness, Malaysia and Malaysianness, Taiwan and Taiwanness, and so on, by a consideration of specific, local Sinophone texts, cultures, and practices produced in and from these margins (710–711).

Likewise, the concept of the Cantophone explores how one singular *fangyan*, marginalized in Confucian scholasticism and linguistic nationalism, and partialized in postcolonial and transdiasporic contexts, nonetheless enables the planetary *danse macabre* of “overlapping margins” choreographing the dissolution of “Chineseness” as such. Spoken Cantonese, one may recall, is a rallying point in Hong Kong’s struggle for democracy and local autonomy, in addition to Guangzhou’s popular call for preserving local-language public media in opposition to Beijing’s push for Mandarin in recent years (Chu 2018, 91–116; Tam 2020, 221–229).

To give historical substance to the Cantophone as a *literary* concept, however, one could not possibly omit the role of the littoral Lingnan (southern Yue) culture as its *longue-durée* historical origin and continued source of intellectual ferment. This in turn calls for a critical historicization of “China,” down to its political unity and territorial border. The question is not simply whether to say “yes” or “no” to the “China(s)” as we know it – both responses would, I argue, condone the stately fiction of Westphalian territoriality. The statelessness of the Cantophone ordains an alternative cultural geography that radically unthinks the unity of “China” as given borders by the global interstate system. Instead, it foregrounds the Sinophone southern cultural imaginaries existing irrespective of, or *in begrudged indifference to*, the world atlas of sovereign (and not-so-sovereign) nation-states. Working the historical scale up beyond modern nationalism, the incorporation of southern Yue into the fold of the Chinese civilization (*huaxia wenming*) and ethnic Han-ness was an ongoing process fraught with negotiation and hesitation, far less matter-of-factly than it appears now.<sup>4</sup> Thinking the Cantophone as a

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<sup>4</sup> Erica Fox Brindley (2015) has extensively discussed the ancient interactions of the “Huaxia” civilization in the Central Plains (*zhongyuan*) with its southern frontier (Yue/Viet, now Guangdong and Vietnam) and the function of Confucian

non-territorial, multitudinous literary formation maintained without state patronage, I attempt the epistemic *delinking* of the small history of Cantophone from the Chinese imperium and its geopolitical infrastructure (see Mignolo & Walsh 2018).

The concept of the *Cantophone* also draws inspiration from some of the historiographical discussions on the problem of writing Hong Kong literary histories, an ongoing intellectual project that has been wading troubled waters of a similar kind.<sup>5</sup> It goes without saying that Hong Kong is an important center of Cantonese-based Sinophone cultural production. In 1950, the British colonial government imposed permanent border control and restrictions on immigration over the Shenzhen River as the Chinese communists came to power, ending free movement between Hong Kong and the rest of the Guangdong province (Tsang 2007, 180–181). Later, Guangzhou fell with the rest of mainland China into the throes of the Cultural Revolution, whereas Hong Kong developed into a colonial entrepôt and frontier-zone of Cold War liberalism, becoming a “city of migrants” and one of “Asia’s Four Tigers” (Carroll 2007, 140–166; Tsang 2007, 161–179). Its tentative centrality in the Cantophone cultural force-field in connection to Macau, Guangzhou, Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam, as well as other parts of Southeast Asia and the Cantonese-speaking diaspora, owes less to state sovereignty (as is the case for imperial metropolises such as Paris vis-à-vis the *francophonie*) as, paradoxically, to its non-sovereign status. Shuang Shen has written perceptively about the methodological conundrums facing the project of writing Hong Kong literary history, which requires that its model be “dynamic enough to account for Hong Kong’s specific condition of colonialism and nationalism” (2012, 570). Critiquing the obsession of literary historians with China–Hong Kong relations, Shen asks,

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“educational transformation” as civilizing mission and frontier governance. Kevin Carrico (2012) called Guangdong an “integrated periphery,” which in return calls attention to the Han as an ethnic “melting pot.” Even now, southern China is populated by, besides Cantonese, cultural groups considered “peripherally Han” such as Hakkas and Tanka boatpeople as well as non-Han ethnic minorities (Hmong, Mien, Yi, Zhuang, etc.).

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Chan Kwok-kau, the chief editor of the *Compendium of Hong Kong Literature, 1919–1949* suggests that his editorial team decided to abandon the category of “Hong Kong author” as an anthological principle because of the historical instability and subjective uncertainty of the Hong Kong context (2016, 25). See also Shen 2012, 577.

What about other translocal histories, such as Hong Kong in relation to Taiwan, to the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, or to other Asian cultures? What about literary histories of Hong Kong that transgress the linguistic boundary of Chinese?

Although most Hong Kong literary histories produced in the disciplinary setting of "Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas literary studies" represent Hong Kong as the periphery of China, it is in fact the center of "converging histories" that do not necessarily yield a singular and coherent narrative of Hong Kong or of "Chineseness." When scholars approach Hong Kong as a productive site of literary history, they may not find *a* Hong Kong literary history. Indeed, imagining Hong Kong literary history as a history without a core only allows us to materialize the rich potential of writing histories from this location. But this proliferation of history does not mean that one can circumvent situatedness vis-à-vis the local. (578)

The concept of the Cantophone, it is hoped, solves partially the problem Shen posed regarding Hong Kong as historically both "the periphery of China" and "the center of converging histories." Cantophone performs the conceptual act of "approach[ing] Hong Kong as a productive site of literary history" without once and for all providing "*a* Hong Kong literary history." As a non-sovereign city-state, Hong Kong non-exclusively represents the *eccentric center* to the Cantophone, which had not the power to even cohere its literary identity, let alone export its cultural logic of recognition.<sup>6</sup> However, while negotiating its formal dependence with existing metropolises (London, Beijing, New York, and Taipei) and their hegemonic languages (Mandarin and English), Hong Kong has developed its unique, if precarious, kind of informal interdependence of mutual recognition in tandem with other communities of the Cantophone.<sup>7</sup> The archipelagic, inter-peripheral, and non-dualistic structure of the Cantophone

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6 In addition to the difficulty that neither birthplace nor citizenship status would be reliable markers to determine a "Hong Kong writer," criteria such as place of publication and thematic focus would also arbitrarily exclude many early (as well as recent) Hong Kong literary works (L. Chan 2015, 24–25). Literature in non-Chinese languages such as English is also routinely excluded from Hong Kong literary history (Shen 2012, 572).

7 Hong Kong literature scholar and critic Chan Chi-tak (2019) also draws from James Clifford's "root/route" dialectic to discuss Hong Kong literary subjectivity in terms of a local/translocal dynamic without a center.

literary formation is thus a critical supplement to the center-periphery theories of world literature built upon Western macro-systems (Casanova 2004; Moretti 2000).

As a “memorandum,” this essay seeks to serve as the prolegomenon to a work to be done.<sup>8</sup> By no means exhaustive, it stakes out a constellation of literary-historical conjunctures to outline a theoretical conjecture on the Cantophone, a thought-experiment on literary ungovernability.<sup>9</sup> Presenting each of these conjunctures as a vignette, I promise no narrative continuity nor epistemic closure, the teleological certainty of “seeing like a state.” But I do invoke them as snapshots of a historical nexus of thought-provocations, knotted in their conceptual interrelatedness and vivisectional illumination for a literary culture without the state.<sup>10</sup>

The first of such conjunctures involves Cecil Clementi (金文泰, 1875–1947, British India) and Lu Xun (魯迅, 1881–1936, Shaoxing-Wu), as they virtually encountered each other in Cantonese through the Hong Kong-based classical-Chinese newspaper *Tsun-wan yat-po* (循環日報 Universal Circulating Herald) published by late-Qing translator and reformist intellectual Wang Tao (王韜, 1828–1897, Suzhou-Wu). This “first encounter” with the Cantophone displaces the traditionally *national* dialectic between common language and vernacular authenticity into a *colonial* context, placing *fangyan* at the center of the conflictual entanglement of Orientalist knowledge, Confucian classicism, Chinese nationalism, and collaborative colonialism. These four pillars constitute, as we shall see, the intellectual matrix in which the Cantophone as a lacuna of literary representation is materially reiterated throughout the history of Sino-topolectal writing.

The second conjuncture juxtaposes Eileen Chang (張愛玲, 1920–1995, Nanjing-

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8 My propositions are built upon the foundational work of Don Snow (2004) and Li Yuen-mei (2011), historical linguists who extensively studied the history of written Cantonese in China. Snow covered written Cantonese as found in oral literature documents, early modern popular journalism, and contemporary everyday communication; Li was more strictly focused on Cantonese literary writings from the late-Qing to the early modern republican period in southern China.

9 My methodological framework is also informed by what Heidi Yu Huang (2015) calls “a constellation solution” to the Hong Kong literary-historical dilemma.

10 By “statelessness,” I do not mean writing-subjects who are themselves stateless or a literature that represents stateless persons (although there are good historical reasons for the Cantophone to consider these subjects), but rather a collective *écriture* characterized by its indifference to state-authorized, hegemony-producing orthographic recognition.

Mandarin/Shanghai-Wu), Ng Kim Chew (黃錦樹, 1967–, Malaysian-Hokkien), and Lau Yee-wah (劉綺華, 198?–, Hong Kong-Cantonese). They collectively stage the problem of hearing/not hearing Cantonese through the constraint of narrative mediation. Cantonese, in its glaring absence, serendipitous presence, and/or citational containment, variously raises a more generally Sinophone question of topolectal representation vis-à-vis the disembodied narrative voice in the conventional space of the "Chinese-language vernacular fiction" (*huawen baihua xiaoshuo*) and the ideology of the "native speaker" as embodied localism.

The third conjuncture revolves around Timothy Mo (毛翔青, 1950–, British Hong Kong-Cantonese), Siu Kam Wen (蕭錦榮, 1950–, Peruvian-Cantonese), and Amitav Ghosh (1956–, Bengali Indian). Transmogrified by diasporic experience and oceanic connections, these linguistic shapeshifters stage the transnational adoption of spoken Cantonese by the Latin alphabet as its "second nature." Cantonese, displaced into postcolonial articulations and/or submerged underneath the ethnocultural configurations of "Chineseness," intermittently sustains an epistemological interregnum between both postcolonial nationalism and consanguine essentialism.

The fourth and final conjuncture concerns the Sinophone recursions of Cantophone oral traditions in the contemporary fictions of Lin Zhao (林棹, 1984–, Shenzhen-Cantonese), Dung Kai-cheung (董啟章, 1967–, Hong Kong-Cantonese), and Wong Bik-wan (黃碧雲, 1961–, Hong Kong-Cantonese/Hakka). Their narrative destabilization of the novelistic hierarchy of "*baihua* vs. *fangyan*" as well as their artistic renditions of intra-Cantonese heterogeneities radically imagines a Cantophone estrangement of the "Chinese vernacular fiction" as the localization of a *foreign* form (in Moretti's sense).

The *dramatis personae* listed here are bookended between the presumed "parental figures" of the modern Chinese canon – Lu Xun and Eileen Chang – and a transcontinental assemblage of contemporary writers, Sinophone or non-Sinophone. This shall indicate that the stateless genealogy of the literary Cantophone does not exist in a vacuum entirely autonomous from the grand history of national literatures. Rather, the topolectal interplay of partial presence and spectral absence functions as the "ghost in the machine" of Chinese letters, its internal Other whose *ob*-literation (不成文 *bucheng wen*) is epistemologically essential to its literary identity (*wen*). Meanwhile, the topolect's expatriation to non-tetragraphic scripts signals the unruliness of the Cantophone, which refuses to be contained in (the shadow of) singular historical arcs. My point is that, historically, the literary life of Sino-topolects

is more dynamic and complex than the dialectical binary of “local vs. national.” Fishing for glimpses and shadows of a spoken language in the ocean of sovereign literary archives and the logocentrism of canonizing, history-making powers, I argue, is how one may hope to approach the history and future of a stateless literature.

FIRST ENCOUNTER OF THE CANTOPHONE KIND – LU XUN AND CLEMENTI

No one can hope to appreciate the extreme sentimentality of the Cantonese, unless he has delighted in senses... but the more fully this sentimentality is understood, the more clearly will it be seen to tinge the temperament even of the coldest business-man, or the most uncouth coolie.

Cecil Clementi (1904, Preface)

Chinese people will be destined to have to be competent in multiple Sinitic languages.

Lu Xun, (2005 [1934], 78)

For many who know about Lu Xun’s complicated relationship with colonial Hong Kong, the story of the Shaoxing native ironically repeating verbatim the Cantonese spoken by the British governor Cecil Clementi is a familiar one. Lu Xun was invited briefly by some local youth organizations to visit Hong Kong in 1927 (where he was roughed up by the colonial police) to give speeches about the New Culture Movement in China. In one of the speeches, entitled “The Old Tunes Are Over” (老調子已經唱完), Lu Xun called for a new, vernacular literature in radical departure from classical belle-lettrism. “Chinese culture is the culture of submission.... Whether Chinese or foreigners, those who sing praises for Chinese culture invariably consider themselves masters” (Lu Xun 2005 [1927], 326). Lu Xun spoke in Shaoxing-accented Mandarin, translated into Cantonese by his partner Xu Guangping (許廣平, Panyu native). Around the same time, upon the founding of the Chinese department at the University of Hong Kong, Clementi spoke in enthusiastic agreement to its elite Chinese sponsors about the prospect of the colonial university to institutionalize the study of Chinese classics. In accented Cantonese, Clementi

cited the demographic majority of ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong, the Chinese obligation to enrich and promote traditional learnings, and the future of greater Sino–foreign cultural exchange, as the reasons for Chinese studies in the Hong Kong university. In the end, Clementi recited a poem drawn from the epigraph of the classical-Chinese journal *Hanfeng* (Sino-Zephyr) to accentuate the need to restore (Han) Chinese civilization to its former glory: “may glory be to the ancestral spirits, hallow the celestial voice of the Great Han!” (光祖宗之玄靈，振大漢之天聲). Lu Xun came across Clementi’s Cantonese speech in the classical-Chinese Hong Kong newspaper *Tsun-wan Yat-po* and initially dismissed it as merely Qing loyalist clichés, before realizing this “Jin Wentai” (Clementi’s Sinitic name) was in fact a white man. With the help of an unnamed Cantonese friend, Lu Xun copied Clementi’s words to the letters, with brief notes to translate certain Cantonese-specific characters into *baihua* (written vernacular Chinese modeled on Mandarin), which became a section of his op-ed “About Hong Kong, A Few Things” (略談香港) published in the Beijing journal *Tattler* (Yusi 語絲). Lu Xun concluded this section with a note about the irony of Clementi’s *Hanfeng* poem, previously used to incite anti-Manchu (“xenophobic”) revolution by the Chinese race, now being used to promote “Sino–foreign friendship” in the colony (Lu Xun 2005 [1927], 446–456).

On the outset, this event largely corroborates the narrative in Chinese literary history about Lu Xun as the representative of the May Fourth generation, as well as postcolonial criticism concerning British colonial governance and native culture. Vernacular writing was a core tenet in the New Culture Movement. Pitting “new” versus “old,” *baihua* against *wenyan*, Lu Xun’s remark from “The Old Tunes Are Over” suggests that Confucian traditionalism is a philosophical discourse on voluntary servitude, essentialized as “Chinese” culture but always liable to appropriation by foreign “masters.” Cecil Clementi, a British administrator patronizing Chinese studies in a colonial institution, bears out perfectly Lu Xun’s thesis about traditional culture and collaborative colonialism. Possibly because of Clementi’s frequent slippage into classical expressions, Lu Xun misidentified him as a southbound loyalist-literati (“old Qing relic” 前清遺老), whose studied prestige was regarded highly by the elite “native gentlemen” in Hong Kong. What surprised Lu Xun was certainly *not* that Clementi mimed the local language so well as to be seen as “going native” – it was obvious even to Lu Xun, a non-Cantonese speaker, that this speech was too clumsily laconic to be representative of native Cantonese – but that “Chineseness” as an imperial performance could segue so seamlessly between races and play into such vastly different political

interests. Lu Xun's ending note regarding the classical *Hanfeng* poem that Clementi favorably cited about making China great again, makes an ironic observation about the collaborative complicity between colonialism and ethno-nationalism.<sup>11</sup>

The other narrative, equally plausible, is a pro-Cantonese one, which may raise concerns about imperialist apologia. On the one hand, Lu Xun, who advocated vernacular (*baihua*) writing, complained about the difficulty of reading Clementi's spoken Cantonese transposed to print, writing that the text was "using Cantonese, which is straining to read." Neither Lu Xun, a Shaoxing native, nor his Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong audience, spoke the "common language" the new *baihua* literature would be supposed to be based on – ironically, Lu Xun's accent was so difficult to understand that he needed Xu Guangping to interpret for him. His ability to grasp the Cantonese in the newspaper came from an unnamed "Cantonese friend," perpetuating a long-time missionary translational practice of uncredited native informants. Lu Xun, viewed this way, represents the May Fourth nationalist who holds the colony in contempt as a bastion of conservatism. On the other hand, Clementi the British Orientalist had adopted a Sinitic name, supported the study of Chinese classics, and translated Cantonese sing-songs *Jyut-au* (*Cantonese Love-Songs*, as noted above). Almost ninety years later, Dung Kai-cheung, who once named the English version of his collected volume of short stories after Clementi (*Cantonese Love Stories* [2017]), wrote favorably of Clementi's translation in his column for the *Mingpao Weekly*. Anticipating criticism, he preemptively rebukes these in written Cantonese, "You may think: this gweilo from the colonial metropole was bewitched by these miserable Cantonese sing-song girls because of his white-supremacist savior complex. In any case, regardless, he certainly was a true Cantonese aficionado" (2018). Clementi's great respect for Cantonese culture goes beyond colonial appropriation of "Chineseness" for the sake of political convenience.

Both narratives would, I argue, iron out the complexity of the Cantophone to reproduce a coherent ideology about Sinophone language politics. On the one hand, as is evidenced by the epigraph, Lu Xun believed in a polylingual (or poly-topolectal) future for the Chinese populace, in a statement linguistic nationalists found unbecoming. By Lu Xun's later assessment, "what we can now achieve is the following: (1) study Latinization; (2) do something about languages with more readers *such as*

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<sup>11</sup> A similar argument can be found in S. Lin 2018.



*Cantonese*; (3) try our best to make *baihua* even more simple, to increase literacy” (Lu Xun 2005 [1934], 78–79, italics added). Lu Xun’s proposal for *baihua* and Latinization, sometimes evoked to suggest his Western-philic phonocentrism, should be read in the context of his belief in a “multi-speed” literacy development for different regional languages in realistic acknowledgment that *baihua* was already ahead nationwide (with Cantonese a close second), a position more nuanced than the mechanical imposition of the national language.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the colonial police who behaved aggressively toward Lu Xun upon his arrival, likely an aftermath to the Guangdong–Hong Kong General Strike (省港大罷工, 1925–1926), illustrates coercion and cultivation as both sides of the Queen’s coin. Clementi, attributing the anti-British disturbance to “Bolshevik” influences from Canton (Carroll 2005, 159), was, as a colonial administrator, already exhibiting a proto-Cold War mindset. When later dispatched to British Malaya, the Sinophilic Clementi resolutely curbed Chinese education in a place where the Kuomintang government was spreading anti-British and anti-imperialist propaganda to the local Chinese population (Law 2009, 111). Clementi’s sinological interests could be submerged by colonial realpolitik. And yet, even with China’s internal divides pragmatically considered, none of that would explain his interest in Cantonese folk songs, which were never admitted into classical Chinese nor traditional learning; the affective universality Clementi identified in *Jyut-au*, as seen in the epigraph (“tinge the temperament even of the coldest business-man, or the most uncouth coolie”), denies the social difference that Confucian hierarchy would seek to maintain. If promoting conservatist docility was in the interest of colonial governance, then Cantonese was an awkward remainder of the “native culture” in Hong Kong to pay tribute to. This conflictual assemblage would be even more complicated if the original platform of this Cantophone first encounter is taken into account – *Tsun-wan yat-po*, a classical-language newspaper run by Wang Tao, the co-translator of James Legge (missionary and sinologist) turned politically centrist journalist who supported reforming Confucianism and moderate Westernization to protect Chinese interests and sovereignty (Cohen 1974). Clementi’s pro-Confucian propositions would no doubt be music to Wang’s ears, but it must have been quite unusual for a

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<sup>12</sup> “But the true synthesis – the moment where *Hanyu*, the *Han minzu*, and the common language coalesced – was the May Fourth movement. It was then that ‘modern literature,’ first materialized by men such as Lu Xun and cultivated by Mao Zedong, that the common language of imperial China dissolved into a modern literary Han language.” (Tam 2020, 165)

classical-language daily to publish something entirely in vernacular Cantonese – enough to make an impression on Lu Xun.<sup>13</sup>

To simplify the problem raised by the Cantophone of deciding *which* binary narrative would be the politically correct one in the interest of local agency and Cantonese specificity would misrepresent the multi-dimensional nature of the *colonial-classical-national-local* matrix around which the topolect question historically coalesced. At a historical time when the nation had not yet a set-in-stone answer for the technical question of vernacular writing, Lu Xun and Clementi are illuminating test-cases to tease out the complexity of the concept of the Cantophone. They problematized the literary representation of Cantonese as they both tentatively experimented with makeshift solutions within their respective epistemological limits. Cantonese takes up furtive, uneasy habitation within all regimes of writing, *wenyan* or *baihua*. Colonial interest jostles with traditional constructs of Chineseness, from which vantage Clementi's Cantophone sensibility was only a sentimentalist excess irrelevant to the larger geopolitical scheme of containing China (see epigraph). The national cause for *baihua* wrestles with a self-professed claim of vernacular authenticity challenged by the existing tradition of written Cantonese, compelling Lu Xun to look hopefully (in vain) towards a future of multilingual Chineseness. In both cases, the heterogeneity of Cantonese represents an intellectual challenge awaiting a response, not an object made for foregone conclusion.

The framing of Lu Xun and Clementi as the tentative point of departure of the unwritten literary history of the Cantophone may be less self-evident than, say, the vernacular fiction of Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873–1929), late-Qing reformist thinker and a Xinhui (Guangdong Province) native who employed some Cantonese in his literary works (Li 2011, 173–218). My point in evoking Lu Xun and Clementi in this context is that they both trouble the category of the “native speaker” as the organic vehicle of topolectal authenticity. Paralleling, paraphrasing, or perhaps even parodying Cantonese in their respective ways, Lu Xun and Clementi complicate, without offering any satisfying solution, the problem-space of literary Cantonese beyond the right to freedom of speech and topolectal self-assertion. They help situate the Cantophone as the “ghost in the machine” that concurrently sets the colonial-classical-national-local

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<sup>13</sup> While it may be rather unusual for *Tsun-wan yat-po* to feature Cantonese writing, written Cantonese was in fact common in late-Qing southern Chinese journalism. “Unlike Shanghai where journals were run by elite literati, late Qing Cantonese regional gazettes were not purist generically nor linguistically.” (Li 2011, 77)

matrix into motion and short-circuits it to system error. How is the messy orality and locality of Cantonese textually mediated and technically managed in history? Can one think the Cantophone without the "native speaker," the would-be good citizen of a nation that never was, never is, never will be? The next section broods on these questions of topolectal representation as a function in the literary negotiation beyond the classical vs. vernacular divide.

NIGHTMARE OF THE RED CHAMBER: TOPOLECTAL GLASS-CEILING  
OF THE SINOPHONE FICTION

People of turbulent times live from day to day, nowhere to call home for real.

Shanghainese was something I picked up halfway through, not from my childhood. My mother tongue was a kind of Nankinese diluted by northern and Anhui languages.

Eileen Chang (1991, 153; 1994, 108)

Between embargo by racism and drowning in Chineseness, writers must find their own road to survival. This is why logos must be in exile.

Ng Kim Chew (2012, 312)

If in popular opinion, Lu Xun represents committed literature and critical nationalism, then Eileen Chang stands on the other extreme of the modern Chinese literary spectrum. She studied at the University of Hong Kong in her early days, and began her literary career with a series of stories set in colonial Hong Kong and published in Japan-occupied Shanghai, which would become one of the reasons for her exclusion from the socialist canon. Her fiction, influenced by classical vernacular novels such as *Dreams of the Red Chamber* 紅樓夢, which she read carefully and repeatedly, handles the whimsical vicissitudes of interpersonal dramas and material life with delicacy and skill, tangibly fleshing out the quotidian experience of (semi-)colonized metropolises. Whether romancing Shanghai or Hong Kong, Chang's sensitive observation of pedestrian realities is one her readers never fail to notice. Leo Ou-fan Lee comments that "Chang's Hong Kong stories contain more authenticity and emotional

truth” than British colonial literature about the city, often offering “a rare glimpse of Hong Kong’s lower-class residents” (2017, 480).

However, critics generally do not comment on the fact that Chang’s fictions employ very little topolect, Cantonese or otherwise. Adapted by the Taiwanese-American film director Ang Lee into a well-known movie, “Lust, Caution” (色·戒, 1991 [1978]) is a spy novel about a patriotic young woman tasked with seducing and assassinating a pro-Japanese collaborator hiding in Hong Kong. Wang Jiazhi, the heroine, manages to become close to Mr. Yi precisely because her Cantonese proves useful to his wife in navigating the commercial scene to satisfy her desire for luxuries during wartime. But, curiously, the reader does not hear Wang’s Cantonese in the text’s quoted speech. “She said in Cantonese” (15), comments the invisible narrator as the nationalist youths communicate in secret codes.

Even Chang’s Shanghai stories rarely feature Shanghainese. A rare exception is in a lesser-known short story, “Shame, Amah!” (桂花蒸·阿小悲秋, 1991 [1944]), which centers on the daily routine of a nursemaid in semi-colonial Shanghai. The voice of the chatty Amah Little is richly adorned with local expressions (姆媽 – “mother”), slang (觸祭了 – a religious profanity similar to *sacré bleu*), and pidgin English (密西 *missy* – for “Miss”). Although in that time Shanghainese would be commonly spoken among lowly housemaids and middle-class urbanites alike, Chang for some reason reserves Shanghainese specifically for Amah Little.

The absence of Cantonese in Chang’s Hong Kong stories could easily boil down to her lack of proficiency, even though, as we have seen with Lu Xun, not speaking the “dialect” does not entirely preclude writing it. But the glaring absence of any *fangyan* in Chang’s writings overall should be surprising, because Chang herself is otherwise immensely dexterous with regional tongues. She translated into plain Chinese *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* (海上花列傳), a late Qing Wu-topolect novel (more precisely, a *baihua* novel with Wu dialogues well within the tradition of Chinese vernacular fiction; see Dai 2018) about courtesans.

In her monographic study of *Dreams of the Red Chamber* – playfully entitled *Nightmares of the Red Chamber* (紅樓夢魘) – Chang has carefully analyzed the lexical divergence between different versions of the text to reflect the process by which Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹, 1710–1765), the originally Nankinese author (thus Chang’s true fellow-provincial), who spoke Wu natively, gradually mastered Beijing Mandarin and edited the topolects out of his text (helping her to date different versions). “Yu

Pingbai pointed out that the [Qianlong-era] complete version used 多 and 都 interchangeably, which reflected Jiangnan phonics. Early on, when Cao Xueqin went north, he should have been speaking the Suzhou tongue. Therefore, theoretically earlier versions should contain more Wu inflections, while Nankinese survived for a longer time" (Chang 1977, 96). Chang also notes that there was more classical Chinese in earlier versions as well (126). The prevalence of *baihua* in Chang's fiction cannot be explained by linguistic nationalism, to which Chang was obviously averse.

The rare resurfacing of Shanghainese in "Shame, Amah!" from underneath *baihua*, I argue, is in fact an exception that *proves* the rule. The factor dictating the use of *baihua* in Chang's fiction is not the Herderian nationalism of the May Fourth literary modernizers, but rather the classical narrative tradition of the "Chinese-language vernacular fiction" (*baihua xiaoshuo*) inherited from *Dreams of the Red Chamber* and *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*. To the extent that, according to the conventions of *baihua xiaoshuo*, topolectal heterogeneities are either pre-emptively straightened out into the common language or contained within intradiegetic enunciations, whether a character's speech is marked by *baihua* or *fangyan* is not a material difference *as long as the disembodied narrative voice remains unmarked*. Ironically for the "anti-communist" Chang, it is class consciousness, not regional attachment, that motivated her choice to represent Shanghainese through the mouth of her "amah."<sup>14</sup> In other words, in the generic space of the *baihua xiaoshuo*, the presence of topolects does not reliably indicate the Sinophone function of "place."

The generic convention of the Chinese-language vernacular novel legalizes this citational containment, which I call the *topolectal glass-ceiling*. As Shang Wei examines this written tradition, he suggests that

plain Chinese had long been an integral component of the written language of the empire, helping to fulfill administrative functions while granting educated men of all regional and ethnic origins access to the imagined multiethnic community of "civilization." Sharing the same sacred script with classical Chinese, it was constructed by a logic alien to that of the national vernacular; and again like classical Chinese, it was

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<sup>14</sup> For a more complex account of Eileen Chang's relationship with Cold War antagonism, see X. Wang 2013.

by no means fixed in its relationship with speech, much less bound to transcribe its writer's "mother tongue." (2014, 294)

"Plain Chinese" or *baihua* frees the individual from his or her regional particularity and grants entry to the universal empire of Sinitic writing, even before the heyday of nationalism. Therefore, to describe what happened to literary language around the time of May Fourth as "vernacularization" is, according to Shang, something of a misnomer.<sup>15</sup> We do not hear Wang Jiazhi's Cantonese in "Lust, Caution" because, as an educated youth, she is as much a lawful citizen of the dominion of Sino-writing as any other of Chang's Shanghainese characters – except Amah Little. Topolectal glass-ceiling is therefore a structural limitation of *xiaoshuo*, not an individual oversight of Eileen Chang.

The Grand View Garden has ensured that *fangyans* are locked in the nightmares of the Red Chamber, so that the invisible *baihua* narrator may live out his dream about the remembrance of things past. The narrative tradition of the Chinese-language novel is so powerful that, even during the Dialect Literature Movement (1947–1949), led by leftist intellectuals in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, the most commercially successful Cantonese-language fiction, *Shrimp-Ball Chronicles* 蝦球傳 (1947) by Wong Kuk-lau (黃谷柳, 1908–1977), was actually narrated in standard vernacular Chinese as well (Snow 2004, 107). As Li Yuen-mei notes perceptively, the matter is not only about language choice, but also loyalty to narrative traditions. "What Wong [Kuk-lau] was using here was likely not Cantonese popular speak-singing forms such as saltwater songs, dragon boats [drum singing], and *naamyam* (南音, "southern tunes"); otherwise there is no easy way to convert the musical part into standard Chinese. In fact, he was probably not very close to these speak-singing traditions" (Li 2018, 217). Since "China did not experience the radical rupture with its own written past" (Shang 2014, 295), "dialect literature" has since its inception rarely been practiced in literal terms and is very often incorporated into the existing *xiaoshuo* tradition, a phenomenon belatedly recognized as creolization in the Sinophone sense of the term.

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<sup>15</sup> "What is called the Chinese vernacularization movement availed itself of plain writing, part of the linguistic legacy of the empire, while resorting to the modern Western discourse on vernaculars, phonocentrism, modernity, and the nation-state, thereby setting the emergent Chinese "nation-state" on its unique and intriguing route for achieving the standardization of pronunciation and the unity of script and sound, writing and speech." (Shang 2014, 296)

Under the aegis of the topolectal glass-ceiling, the language politics of the Sinophone novel plays out horizontally, as a matter of shifting between regional tongues (which include *baihua*), rather than vertically, in overt opposition to Mandarin as a unified standard. As Chang reminds us in this section's epigraph, due to a traumatic childhood, she was only a late learner of Shanghainese. The Shanghainese in "Shame, Amah!" amounts to Chang's lip-syncing of the native speaker – not wholly different from Lu Xun's textual masquerade of Clementi's Cantonese. Like Lu Xun, Chang the wordsmith forces a non-nativist perspective onto the Sinophone problem of topolectal representation overdetermined by linguistic nativity recast as embodied localism.<sup>16</sup> The absence of Cantonese in Chang's writings, therefore, does not diminish her value as a possible subject of Cantophone inquiry. Her partiality to *Dreams of the Red Chamber* is informed by its author's Nankinese that she archaeologically recovered from its various versions as the text was gradually redacted to approach northern Mandarin; the disappearance of Cantonese into an extradiegetic reminder in "Lust, Caution," on the other hand, is Chang's ironic footnote about the vanity of attempting to break the topolectal glass-ceiling. Cantonese, the language of the spies in "Lust, Caution," frustrates our eavesdropping. *Baihua*, Chang shows us, is the necessary evil of the Sinophone after the fall of the Sinitic Babel.<sup>17</sup> Chang's provincial compromise to the generic limitation of *baihua xiaoshuo* and the linguistic legacy of empire makes thinkable the possibility of an ironic, *provincializing* deployment of the pan-Chinese literary tradition.

Thinking along this vein, Ng Kim Chew's short story, "Blessings" (祝福, 2015), is another curious literary exercise in the Cantophone. Ng was born in the Hokkien-speaking community in Johor, Malaysia, and emigrated to Taiwan for study and university work. His literary career is characterized by his consistent concern for the history of the Sinophone Malaysian communities under Malay ethnonationalism and the Cold War. "Blessings," a title Ng took from Lu Xun's work of the same name, stages the afterlives of anti-colonial socialism in both postcolonial Malaysia and post-socialist China. The female narrator, Nan (南, "south"), is the mainland-born daughter of a Sino-Malaysian communist

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<sup>16</sup> My viewpoint is indebted to Jing Tsu (2010) who suggests a critical review from Sinophone studies of the essentialized concept of the native speaker, although she was primarily thinking about the "literary governance" of Mandarin Chinese.

<sup>17</sup> Chinese literature scholar Chen Pingyuan suggests that even the so-called "modern" May Fourth literature was a hybrid synthesis of late-Qing *baihua xiaoshuo* with influences from classical Chinese as well as the occasional topolects in *zhanghui xiaoshuo* (episodic romance), rather than an absolute break from those traditions by borrowing Western sources (2003, 121).

and so-called “repatriated rightist” (海歸右派, PRC’s term) expelled by Malaysia. Born and raised in Henan, she “returns” to Malaysia because of her late father’s wish to reunite his disconnected Malaysian family, his ex-lover, and their daughter Hong (紅 “red,” the narrator’s half-sister). They are now living with his former comrade, Ah Fuk (also a metafictional reference to the title). Through one of Hong’s business contacts in Hong Kong, they are finally able to re-establish connections, but they decide to keep the old grandmother from knowing about her son’s death. As the story goes on, we learn about the old comrade’s transnational business of counterfeiting Lu Xun’s handwriting, the Father’s post-expatriation experience during the Cultural Revolution and obsession with Lu Xun’s inscriptions, and so on.

The encounter between the Chinese narrator and her Malaysian half-family is one riddled with linguistic oddities and misplaced local inflections, showing how much Ng revels in the confusion of tongues in out-of-the-way places. In Malaysia, the narrator repeatedly notes the “*Nanyang* Mandarin even more out-of-tone than Father’s” being spoken around her (16). She is first greeted in Malaysia by her half-niece, Yu 魚 (also the title of Ng’s volume), which in her accented Mandarin morphed into *yi* – a sound that could be inscribed as 姨 “aunt,” but also 伊 the topolectal “she” as used frequently by the Wu-speaking Lu Xun, who was writing when Chinese pronominal norms were still unstable.<sup>18</sup> The Mandarin-speaking narrator then inexplicably begins using *yi* interchangeably with the standard *ta* 她 for the pronoun. She even occasionally lapses to vocabulary more suitable to a Southeast Asian than to a mainland Chinese, such as referring to her “Chinese language” as *huayu* instead of *putonghua* or *guoyu*. Towards the end, the reader learns that this is a Cantonese-speaking family, when the grandmother passionately cries out about missing her estranged son: “Ayah Ah Fat how you made Old Ma miss you to death lor (阿發啊想念死你老母囉)!” This is when the narrator “suddenly understood” what the non-Mandarin-speaking grandmother is saying (30).

The serendipitous re-emergence of Cantonese from the mediation of the Mandarin-speaking narrator did not shatter the topolectal glass-ceiling. But by having the *baihua* narrative voice of *xiaoshuo*

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<sup>18</sup> Here Ng dashes rapidly through a sequence of Sinographic homophones: “not distinguishing various *yu* and *yi* (fish, aunt, risk, fool, remain, me, therefore, loss)” 魚姨虞愚餘余于遺不分 (2015, 15–16). The inability to distinguish the phoneme /i/ and /ü/, possibly a Hokkien influence as well, is also common among non-standard Cantonese speakers such as those influenced by Seiyap dialect (in Jiangmen and Xinhui), in which /ü/ is not present. Here I speak from personal experience.



personified and then forcing her out of native ground into Malaysia, Ng renders the geographical origin and representational limitations of the narrative tradition visible, turning her "transparent" reportage of her grandmother's Cantonese into an inexplicable, almost supernatural moment in the story. In between the Malaysian rock of postcolonial racism and the Chinese hard place of diasporic nationalism, Ng himself writes that his fellow Sino-Malaysian writers must set *logos* in a state of exile (詞的流亡, see epigraph). Cantophone responds to this call by refusing the geolocalization of its linguistic position. The use of *yi* for "she" is a consciously jarring choice within the setting of the short story, given that in neither Mandarin nor Cantonese, the languages spoken by the characters, is *yi* pronominally used (*ta* or *kui*), but the regional form *yi* (also a classical residualism, from *yiren* 伊人) is present in Ng's Hokkien and Lu Xun's Shaoxing Wu topolect. Regionality contaminates the narrator's Mandarin in the linguistic contact zone of the Cantophone, in Malaysia where Ng's native Hokkien is imbricated in other Cantonese (and Hakka) communities that find their way into Ng's fiction. If the *xiaoshuo* always has its way of domesticating linguistic heterogeneities, Ng problematizes its topolectal containment as groundless and arbitrary, his homeopathic resolution to the Oedipal conflict of the Sinophone. "The fatherland is merciless. The love of the fatherland is always unbearably heavy to us" (19). As even the narrator's linguistic identity begins to deform – not into any singular topolect but a mix of everything, like Chang's diluted Nankinese – topolectal non-nativism of the Cantophone performs its critical work of countervailing (if incompletely) vertical subordination with horizontal cross-pollination.

Focalizing on the politics of language in Hong Kong, Lau Yee-wah's literary debut, *Speechloss* (失語, 2019), is a spot-on case in which to examine Sinophone negotiations with the topolectal glass-ceiling in its wide and complex array of varieties. Its two heroines, Ling (伶) and Wai (慧), both names connoting feminine eloquence and grace, are middle-school Chinese-language teachers made contracted precariats by Hong Kong's infamously exploitative public education system. But they could not be any more different from each other. Ling is a street-smart "Kong girl" (a local stereotype for superficial, materialistic women) who wisecracks her way around office politics and panders to self-entitled students to get through her days. Wai, a female Forrest Gump of the tragic sort, is a socially awkward newcomer who takes institutional demands literally with dead seriousness, to the annoyance of her co-workers. Wai insists on speaking her non-native Putonghua, believing that practice makes perfect Chinese. But her Mandarin is broken and often wrongly intonated. "All the jā-, jà-, judging work

(評—評—潘—判) of the Putonghua group will be in my charge. I just think... being the jū-, jùj-, judge, will give me a chance to practice..." (48) Far from convincing others she is the hard worker she strains to be, Wai's gaffes constantly make herself a laughing stock. She struggles to throw out her trash, though right in front of the trash can, because, as Ling relates to her headmaster jokingly,

She [Wai] went like, "I don't know if I should say *lā jī tǒng* or *lè sè tǒng* ["trash can" in PRC and Taiwan Mandarin]..."...And then I [Ling] was almost like [當時我想講 – marked as Cantonese], "So are you actually asking, if you yourself are a piece of *lā jī* or *lè sè*." (44)

Ling, whose sassy Cantonese is clearly contrasted to Wai's tongue-tied Mandarin, is not above trashing her colleague to impress her superiors and blend in with her in-group.

From the contentious identity issues in Hong Kong concerning Mandarinization of Chinese curriculum and anxieties for the future of Cantonese, Lau graciously shifts the critical focus onto the violence of linguistic prescription of all kinds. Even within "standard" Mandarin, the China-Taiwan divide made its phonics inconsistent, stunting the linguistic fundamentalist who just desires the simplicity of the rule of the book. Behind the official "Mandarin for Chinese teaching" policy being pushed for political correctness in Hong Kong, Lau's realism draws much from the bureaucratic hypocrisy of acquiescing to the Cantonese-speaking student body, itself also unlikely to budge anytime soon. In the age of Shenzhen-Hong Kong cross-border schooling, "even mainland students mostly speak Cantonese," observes Ling (48). Language teaching, far from being the frontline of linguistic colonization, is a matter of ad-hoc compromise, of dragging one's feet over responding to institutional pressure and slouching towards performative compliance. Wai makes a fool of herself again by disgracing her pedagogical authority and asking her mainland students (assumed to be "native speaker") how to better speak Mandarin. Her dogmatic belief that learning Mandarin helps improve Chinese is challenged by her own student.

This time, Ling thought the student was in the right rather than Wai. Rumor has it that Holy Scriptum College had a student whose parents were from Hong Kong and spoke

Cantonese natively. But after primary school, his parents forced him to speak Putonghua and forbade him to watch Hong Kong TV programs.... The Chinese in his homework submission was very awkward *because he could not tell the difference between spoken and written language*. His Chinese grade was much worse than other Cantonese-speaking classmates. Also, he could not even express everyday objects in Cantonese, pronouncing *faanke* as *xihongci* [tomato], *syutsai* as *tudou* [potato]. Everyone thought he was a weirdo, so they made fun of him, and two years later, under the pressure, he dropped out of the school. (54, italics added)

*Speechloss* circumlocutes the topolectal glass-ceiling by deftly detangling the compositional issue of “written” vs. “spoken” languages from the identity politics of “Mandarin vs. Cantonese.” Written *baihua* is philologically irreducible to spoken Mandarin. The ability to tell sound and script apart, Lau suggests, is critical to actual success in the Chinese classroom (*zhongwen*): in the context of Hong Kong, one has to understand the incongruity between speaking and writing in order to be properly socialized (and avoid bullying). Imposing Mandarin forcibly builds a false chain of equivalence between speech and writing, which in reality sets one up for failure in both worlds.

Insofar as Cantonese is contained in Ling’s and other characters’ speech, the topolectal glass-ceiling remains relatively intact in *Speechloss*. However, the sound-script incongruity in Hong Kong allows Lau to suggest that this citational containment is, if paradoxically, a *local* phenomenon organic to Cantophone Hong Kong. It is its perfunctory way of dealing with the world of sovereign phonocentrism. “Mandarinization” in Hong Kong personified as Wai feels not so much like a calculated conspiracy of topolecticide as a bumbling attempt to appease the schizophrenic political center at the cost of sacrificing sanity. For Lau the author, being able to tolerate the inconsistencies between linguistic worlds – to pay lip service to the topolectal glass-ceiling and cynically navigate the messy equivocality of Hong Kong’s “one language, two systems” – is the repressed truth of institutional Chinese education. Wai’s inability to recognize this obvious fact ultimately leads to her aphasic tragedy, which ends in her horrific suicide by driving an electric drill into her head in a desperate attempt “to reform my brain” (118). As the story continues, Ling, ever the well-spoken pragmatist, is ultimately no better than Wai in adapting to the normative society around her, whether Cantonese- or Mandarin-speaking. When Ling

hits the occupational glass ceiling for failing her teachers' aptitude test for Mandarin, certain "historically unresolved questions" now demand an unequivocal answer. Again, in the Sinophone setting, horizontal negotiation of inter-topolectal interaction is preferred over vertical contestation against any unitary "standard."

This section delimits the Cantophone negotiation with the representational constraint of the Chinese-language *xiaoshuo* as a problem posed in the thick of Sinophone internal contradiction, materialized as the "naturalized" *baihua* writer without native Mandarin proficiency. Cantophone, however, is by no means delimited by Chinese literacy. When Lau's invisible narrator hypnotically slips the reader into Ling's stream of consciousness at a moment of mental breakdown, as "the loudspeaker was playing the Cantonese track, but the singer was singing in English, two audio tracks overlapped ..." the cacophony of Hong Kong's heteroglossia blasts through its glassy-cold *baihua* surface, now running amok in free indirect discourse:

Yesterday all my troubles seemed so far away

Now it looks as though they're here to stay

[lyrics of the Beatles' "Yesterday"]

小城故事多 充滿喜和樂

若是你到小城來 收穫特別多……

[lyrics of Teresa Teng's Mandarin song "Story of the Small City"]很吵很吵—

— [very noisy]

你哋啲老師呀，心理學家呀，話我個腦有問題，我咪有問題囉。我係點，都係你哋定義呀啫

[Cantonese: You teachers and psychologists say my brain has a problem and voila, I have a problem. How I am is up to you guys to define anyway.]

真的要多得他

去使我懂得

每一個故事結尾無非別離

[lyrics of Faye Wong's Cantonese song "Thanks to Him"] (241)

In this temporary breach of the topolectal glass-ceiling, Lau juxtaposes Cantopop and Mandopop to make the divergent vocalization of written Chinese clearly audible, again alluding to the Cantophone revindication of *baihua* vis-à-vis spoken Mandarin.<sup>19</sup> The relationship between the Sinophone novel and Cantophone orality is a subject we will return to in the fourth section. But the textuality of this passage also merits attention: Lau textualizes the plurilingualism in Hong Kong, whose colonial history has naturalized bi-literacy, staging their uneasy co-existence. Is the Cantophone a tributary subset of global Chinese literature, or a variation of Sinophone literature with creolized characteristics? The next section explores the possibility of Cantophone as an alphabetical practice.

#### THE TONGUE SET "THREE": CANTOPHONE IN AND OUT OF THE CHINESE FINGER-TRAP

To speak English properly, Mrs. Lee said, you must learn  
the difference between *three* and *free*. Three men  
escaped from Alcatraz in a rubber raft and drowned  
on their way to Angel Island. Hear the difference?

Eric Yip, "Fricatives" (2022)

餐風嘗浪廿餘日，幸得平安抵美洲。以為數日可上埠，點知苦困木樓囚。  
(I ate wind and tasted waves for more than twenty days. Fortunately, I arrived safely on  
the American continent. I thought I could land in a few days. *How was I to know* [in

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<sup>19</sup> Modern Cantopop is also mostly composed in *baihua* and then vocalized as Cantonese. In the rare cases where vernacular Cantonese is directly used, it is done usually for comic effect.

Cantonese] I would become a prisoner suffering in the wooden building?)

Chinese Poetry of Angel Island (via Lai et al. 2014)

When asked about his linguistic upbringing, Hong Kong-born Welsh-Cantonese novelist Timothy Mo gives a magical account about losing one's mother tongue that involves a rather costly boat ride.

My first language, believe it or not, was Cantonese. I can't really speak it anymore; it's been overlain by so many other languages. I was extracted from Hong Kong at the age of seven [some sources say ten], and no one really spoke Cantonese to me on the P&O boat, so by the time we arrived at Port Said, I could not speak Cantonese. There was a member of the Chinese diaspora (which is a polite way of putting the word 'coolie') I was required to bargain with by the ship's crew, and when I opened my mouth, the Cantonese wouldn't come. Then, English came to me as a gift of a precious release. (via Lim and Mo 2010, 557)

Mo's personal story about losing Cantonese over the span of a ferry ride and ironically mincing his words about the "Chinese coolie" may be a tongue-in-cheek dramatization of English being his "rescue boat" while making fun of the "fresh-off-the-boat" stereotype, rather than a biographical reality. However, Mo is very critical of the inflexible conservatism of Chinese culture, stating that "the 'RC' there didn't stand for 'Roman Catholicism.' It stood for 'Rigid Confucianism'" (ibid.). Given that Mo said in the same interview that he spends months every year in Hong Kong and his novels occasionally have Cantonese expressions slipped in, his alleged "loss" of his first language may not have been so absolute. However, being very much the restless kind, Mo recalls that "I came from Chinese to English, and in adult life, in the last twenty years I have had to become fluent in Thai and Visayan, which is the Southern Philippine language" (558). The linguistic shapeshifter has absorbed many different tongues. But Mo ultimately places himself in the tradition of the Victorian English novel. "Although my subject matter is new to the English novel, the way I am employing language, a high classical English language, in what I am writing, you can see it's coming from Henry Fielding, Charles Dickens, E. M. Forster and such writers" (ibid.). For Mo, his "rescue boat" has the last word.

The glass ceiling hanging above the head of novelists working in non-Sinitic languages is not about topolects, but ethnocultural difference. The working double-bind is that one must either write in the dominant language in search for metropolitan recognition, or refuse to participate in its cultural domination in allegiance with difference and minor traditions, a choice between what Casanova (2004) terms the "assimilationists" and the "rebels." Timothy Mo's statements above, as well as his literary career, seem to suggest strongly the assimilated kind. He vigorously contests being a "Chinese" writer, maintaining that he is "a Brit" and going so far as to say that he knew "nothing about Chinese culture" (Ho 2000, 12–13). His first two novels are sharp critiques of the oppressive patriarchy and self-isolating conservatism of Chinese culture, set in Macau and Hong Kong (*Monkey King* [1978]) and London's Chinatown (*Sour Sweet* (1982)). Mo's escape from Chineseness will become so complete that, after the historical novel *Insular Possession* (1986) about the Sino–British conflict that led to the concession of Hong Kong, he never wrote anything remotely about China again, casting his eyes on faraway places such as East Timor. After clashing with his publishers and dabbling in self-publication, Mo eventually stopped publishing altogether in 2012.

Looking deeper into Mo's oeuvre, however, things become less apparently clear. *Monkey King* satirizes the patriarchal Chinese family while titularly evoking the literary archetype of the simian troublemaker from the classical Chinese story *Journey to the West*. Wallace Nolasco, its protagonist, is a Macanese of Portuguese heritage, physically indistinguishable from the Chinese population and speaking "impeccable Cantonese," but Wallace would pretend "not to understand that vulgar, braying dialect" (1978, 8) – as Mo himself likely did during the interview. He married the illegitimate daughter of a certain Mr. Poon, a traditionally minded wealthy businessman from rural Hong Kong who believes that, "because Wallace was not a *faan gwei lo* [番鬼佬 in Cantonese], a foreign devil" (ibid.), he makes a good groom for May Ling, who has been struggling to find any suitors among full-blooded Chinese. In a move that the narrator praises satirically as "a creative solution" to May Ling's problem, Mr. Poon arranges for the "poor Portuguese" Wallace to marry into a doll's house ruled by its patriarch. Growing increasingly frustrated by the conservative household, Wallace is transformed into the eponymous Monkey King. "You couldn't behave like this in the modern ages. You thought you was [*sic*] the God of us all or something?" (21)

*Monkey King* is about the dialectical containment of rebellious unruliness – after all, the original

Monkey King wreaked havoc in the Celestial Palace and flew to the end of the universe only to find that he never actually went further than Buddha's five fingers. The irony of a "critique" of Chineseness packaged in a literary archetype overtly ethnicized as Chinese could not have escaped Mo. The mixed-race Wallace, the representation of modernity against tradition, will undergo a succession of events to reform the community around him and prove himself the worthy heir to the business legacy of Mr. Poon, who dies towards the end of the novel. Before the novel closes on what seems to be a happy ending, however, Wallace has a dream in which he witnesses certain diners at a luxurious banquet: they are spooning the fresh brain off the exposed skull of a live monkey, tethered to the table.

A critic notes that, in *Monkey King*, there are "slippages between 'Cantonese' and 'Chinese' which occur throughout the novel so that the fiction of a specific geographical and ethnic location comes to stand for an entire and complex configuration of cultures" (Ho 2000, 35). When Wallace refuses to speak Cantonese, when the narrator ironically cites Mr. Poon's Cantonese words *faan gwei lo*, and when the rumored dietary practice of eating live monkey brains typically associated with the southern province is evoked, they are understood as indicating or repudiating "Chineseness" within a (post)colonial language. But the practice of naming them "Cantonese" sometimes and not just "Chinese" all the time raises the question as to whether they are used simply in an unreflectively interchangeable manner or whether there is indeed some meaningful difference between them so as to warrant an explication – after all, "Chinese" is the more recognizable ethnonym to use in the metropolitan literary space for Mo, our assumed assimilationist. This slippage is evident even in its opening sentence, on the protagonist's Sinophobia. "On the whole Wallace avoided intimate dealings with the Chinese. Despite a childhood spent cheek by jaundiced jowl with the Cantonese in Macau, he still found *the race* arrogant and devious" (5; italics added). This question – does "the race" refer to the Chinese or Cantonese? – is *undecidable*; it is a moot point to ask that of Mo because "Cantoneseness," if it exists at all, has never entered the discursive field of white-normative racialization so as to become relevant for Mo's British critics (who see him as just "Chinese") nor Mo himself (who disputes such labelling).

Nobody writes to the colonel that is "Cantoneseness." But by exploring the internal divisions within Chineseness itself, which Mo does sardonically, with the ironic detachment of form from content, *Monkey King* pries open the application of the ethnic category as a postcolonial form of inter-state epistemic violence. The stateless concept of the Cantophone makes this work explicit by triangulating



these seemingly opposite epistemic regimes without providing a full-fledged order of alternative identification. While Timothy Mo represents a case that remains within the familiar territory of Hong Kong's "in-between colonizers" of Britain and China (Chow 1992), a similar logic is at work even in a different setting with Hispanophone Peruvian-Cantonese writer Siu Kam Wen. "La conversion de Uei-Kuong" (The Conversion of Uei-Kuong, 2004 [1986]) narrates the story of a *kuei* (a Hispanicized Cantonese expression for foreigners, with the same root as Mo's *faan gwei lo*) returning to Peru, who was raised by his stepfather in Guangdong since childhood and speaks Cantonese natively. Told through the Peruvian-Cantonese narrator Tío (Uncle) Keng, Siu's story consistently poses whether the non-Chinese-looking Uei-Kuong (born Manuel Lau Manrique) has been converted by his Cantophone upbringing into a "Chinese" man like Keng himself. Throughout the story, Tío Keng (or Keng *tai-súk* as Uei-Kuong calls him) incessantly uses his ideas about Chinese characteristics to assess Uei-Kuong's ethnic belonging.

Like all Chinese Uei-Kuong couldn't speak even the most basic Spanish well after four years [...] Tío Keng had always believed that the Chinese were the people with the least gift to learn a foreign language; after meeting Uei-Kuong, he realized it wasn't really a simple question of aptitude or natural gift. The proverbial inability of the Chinese to learn Spanish or any other languages is due to the abysmal difference between these languages and their mother tongue. (81)

Metatextually, this pitch-perfect Hispanophone text also asks its reader whether its author has also lost his "Chineseness." This receptive divergence is reflected in Siu's critical interpretations as well. Kyle Shernuk, a Sinophone critic, suggests that Siu "presents Chineseness as a learned, culturo-linguistic form of sociality" and calls for an enlarged Chinese studies by "embracing the Xenophone" (2021, 512). In contrast, Ignacio López-Calvo, who works closely on Asian Latin American cultures, reads Siu's works in terms of a "uniquely Sino-Peruvian perspective" that "democratizes" Peruvian history "by including the minority history of a previously excluded ethnic group" (2014, 103).

The disciplinary differences between Shernuk and López-Calvo are obvious, but their approaches to Siu's fiction are, of course, not incompatible. Cantonese terms and references, introduced

into the text markedly in italics (*kuei, tai-súk, pai-nin* “New Year visits”), are registered as Hispanicized markers of Chineseness. Referred to as *Tío Keng*, the perspective of the narrative voice is marked as Hispanophone even though his mind is preoccupied with Uei-Kuong’s “Chineseness”; Uei-Kuong himself, however, identifies self-assuredly as *kuei* in his own words when he first met *Tío Keng* (72). What made him “return” to Lima, we are told, is that his Cantonese stepfather, who had taken him to Panyu (“Pun-yi” in the text), was executed during the PRC’s Land Reform Movement (1948–1950), forcing him to escape via Hong Kong. Originally, he had intended Uei-Kuong to inherit his land “because Uei-Kuong would never be accepted into Whampoa Military Academy” (Y puesto que jamás aceptarían a Uei-Kuong en la Academia Militar de Wang-pu – *not italicized in the original*), presumably due to Uei-Kuong’s non-Asian appearance (74). Insofar as the Cold War produced contending claims of Chineseness, which unevenly and differentially impacted Sinophone communities *in situ* or in diaspora, the Cantophone functions as a deconstructive index to the existing incoherence of “Chineseness” as a racial or linguistic category in postcolonial discursive fields.<sup>20</sup> In the end, after much internal debate, *Tío Keng* still could not fully accept Uei-Kuong because, “when Uei-Kuong stays silent and turns sulky, he looks just like a *kuei*” (cuando Uei-Kuong se callaba y se ponía adusto, daba la impresión de que fuera un *kuei*) (85–86). When the Cantophone subjects are silent, they are replete with undecidability; when they open their mouths, they are automatically heard as the empty signifier of “Chineseness.”

The Chinese finger-trap tightens its grip on its victim when his reaction is try to pull his fingers out. Literatures under the Cantophone, however, teases out the many ways in which the deployment of “Chineseness” onto the Cantophone, seemingly a smooth operation, is an identificatory process that is politically contingent, practically inconsistent, and epistemologically partial – it tells us more about the actors manipulating “Chineseness” to different ends themselves than about the Cantophone subject *per se*. The Cantophone can do so only because it shares with Sinophone studies its deep suspicion about “Sinicization” as an ethnocultural destiny, a teleological one-way street. Mo claims to have lost his status as native speaker coming fresh off the boat; Siu’s Uei-Kuong is a *de facto* native speaker who does not look the part. *River of Smoke* (2011), from Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy, further estranges the Cantophone

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<sup>20</sup> Shernuk also discussed Siu’s other short story “El discurso” (The Speech) about a Cantonese speaker who, in defiance of the expectations of the times, was secretly a communist sympathizer rather than a Kuomintang loyalist (2021, 515–517).

from topolectal nativism while presenting the possibility of untangling it as a function of narrating "Chineseness," even if only in the ironic sense. Ghosh's trilogy is a carefully researched historical fiction on the nineteenth-century circum-Indian Ocean opium trade, deliciously served with a wide palette of seafaring Anglophone languages drawn from Indian vernaculars, Cantonese pidgins, and Laskari sailors' lost argots (Hart 2020, 165). *Rivers of Smoke*, its second installment, takes place in Fanqui-town, located in the treaty port Canton (Guangdong) where foreigners enjoy extraterritorial rights from the Qing state of China. In a subplot, Neel Rattan Hyder, a Bengali-Indian merchant, discovers a certain booklet called "Ghost-People-Talk" (*Gwai-lou-waah*), which Compton (real name Liang Keui-ch'uan), an acquaintance of Neel, has been working on.

In leafing through "Ghost-People-Talk" Neel was surprised to find that the first entry featured two ideograms he had learnt to recognize: one was the character for "man" and the other the sign for "dollar." The pairing of "man" and "dollar" puzzled him. Was it perhaps a subtle philosophical statement?

Compton laughed at this. "Mat-yeh?" he said. "What, don't you see? 'Dollar' is *maan* in Cantonese."

Neel was greatly taken by the ingenuity of this: instead of using phonetic symbols, Compton had suggested the pronunciation of the English word by using a character that sounded similar when pronounced in the Cantonese dialect. For longer and more complicated words, he had joined together two or more one-syllable Cantonese words: thus "today" became "to-teay" and so on. (253)

Ghosh here describes the birth of a Chinese-version glossary for Cantonese pidgin English. The comprador Compton's work (who "was not Canton-born and nor had he grown up in the city" (250), again not a native speaker), inspires Neel to do an English version to be called "The Celestial Chrestomathy," seeing its huge market potential. "So will you let me do it?" *Yat-dihng! Yat dihng!* "What does that mean?" Neel inquired a little nervously. "Yes. Certainly." (254)

The profit motive reigns supreme in the minds of the characters in *Ibis*. But Ghosh narrates the dissemination of Cantophone well beyond the familiar grounds of Chineseness. The pidgin glossary

identifying “man” with “money,” which Ghosh humorously suggests could be “a subtle philosophical statement” in the age of transoceanic trade and imperialist money-grab, rests on a Cantonese-English pun. The “sea gypsies” Tanka (疍家) boatpeople, the *Nanyang* pirates, and the Canton merchants roaming the rough seas of poppies in Ghosh’s novel exist extraterritorially from the Qing Chinese empire’s perspective (Hart 2020, 177); neither by state of mind nor legal status are they “Chinese” (or even “Cantonese,” for that matter). Through global commerce, Cantonese has travelled far over the *aqua incognita* and transmogrified beyond recognition.

Bahram’s breakfast always ended with a beverage that Mesto claimed to have invented himself: the drink was made with tea leaves but it bore no resemblance to the *cháh* that was commonly served in Canton – indeed it was considered so revolting by the Achha Hong’s Chinese visitors that the very smell of it had made a couple of them vomit (“Just look,” said Vico, disparagingly, “these fellows are happy to eat snakes and scorpions but milk they cannot take!”) (179)

As *Ibis* connects the maritime histories between Bengal, Mauritius, and Canton, the Cantophone, Ghosh shows, need not take the *terra firma* of “Chineseness” as its necessary, even if only negative, ethnocultural frame of reference.

As shown by London-based Eric Yip’s award-winning poem “Fricatives” and the Angel Island Chinese poetry (see epigraph), Cantonese, beached on different shores, may seem to have been stripped down into merely a grain of the voice, an awkward accent in English, or an out-of-tune grammatical rustle within a classical-Chinese “doggerel.” Yip’s poem would go on, “*You must be given / a voice before you speak. Nobody wants to listen / to a bespectacled boy with a Hong Kong accent.*” The Cantophone dramatizes the aphasic refuge (“be given a voice”) of stateless language (the untouchable “Hong Kong accent”) – relating us back to Lau’s Sinophone novel about speechlessness. But alternatively, what disappears into a vocal *frisson* of a second-language English learner may as well also be a widespread phantasmagoria haunting metropolitan languages and postcolonial literature – Cantonese itself becomes the *gwei/kuei/gwai*. The next section boomerangs this sense of Cantophone (self-)estrangement back to the space of Sinophone literature. Picking up where we leave off from the

last section, about *xiaoshuo* and orality, this section explores the possibility of a Cantophone novelistic practice that bids the "Chinese novel" farewell.

*TENG-GU-MAI-BOK-GU*: EMBRACE THE CANTOPHONE, BREAK THE  
TOPOLECTAL GLASS-CEILING

Creativity involves re-sculpting language anew. Write down Cantonese and it's Hong Kong literature – that's just not the case.

Wong Bik-wan (2016, 16)

我怕講官話的人，他講甚麼我聽不懂，他像要煎我皮、拆我骨、吃我血肉，又像要把我高高架起，叩我拜我。

(I fear people who speak Mandarin [lit. "official's speech"], what he says I don't understand, he looks like he wants to peel my skin, break my bones, eat my flesh and blood, and also looks like he wants to stake me up high, worship me.)

Lin Zhao (2022, 85)

*Tidal Charts* (潮汐圖, 2022), authored by Shenzhen-born novelist Lin Zhao, is narrated by a giant speaking frog – of the species of *Polypedates giganteus* – living in the Pearl River. "It" – or she, because deciding on her gender is an important plot point of the novel – was first found by Tanka boatwoman Big Sis (大家姐) and subsequently discovered by a Scotsman (Frog says, in truth it discovered him) who brought Frog to his aquarium in Macau for scientific research and exotic entertainment. The novel opens with an epigraph *teng-gu-mai-bok-gu* (聽古咪駁古) "listen to the story, don't argue with it," a Cantonese proverb used by oral storytellers advising the audience to suspend disbelief. Frog picked up the languages along the aqueous way of its travel in the Pearl River and beyond. "I can speak Tanka language, Canton language [lit. speech of the provincial capital], and English, much better than pidgin English. A little bit of Macanese Patois. Know a bit of Hokkien, Portuguese, and Dutch. Can read about a dozen characters" (3). Her encounter with the human world, and particularly with H and his comprador, leads her to enter the circuits of colonial commerce and European adventures, while her

animalistic side puts her in touch with the Tanka boatpeople and the grassroots Cantonese population, as well as the riverside fauna and flora. *Tidal Charts* fictionalizes the history of interracial (and interspecies) intermixing in the Pearl River enabled by the Age of Empire, a subject largely overlapping Amitav Ghosh's, although telling the story through a speaking frog is a far cry from the historical realism of Ghosh. Lin employs not only the Cantonese dialect, but also its oral traditions.

崩！我在一棵龍眼樹下發射！崩！龍眼樹大吃一驚，半樹龍眼震三震。我崩崩撲撲咕嘟嘟，連續發射廿一響憤怒禮炮，一切感覺隨炮彈炮汁離我而去，唯剩羞恥。

(*Bang!* I blew my loads under a longan tree! *Bang!* The longan tree got the shock of its life, half a treeful of longans shivered their timbers. I was all *bang-bang* or *pop-plop* and *ghu-dud-dud*, shooting twenty-one loads of raging cannon balls in a row. All my feelings were drained as the slobs and juices were oozing out of me, except shame.) (91)

Describing her ovulation in the most visceral ways, our amphibian narrator completely shatters the topolectal glass-ceiling. This passage, however, is not “pure” Cantonese either; Lin’s lexical choices and syntactical structures are somewhere between vernacular Cantonese and written *baihua*. But the reader can *feel* its orality, mainly because the rhythmic texture, with the frequent use of onomatopoeia, alliteration, and parallel verses, is greatly informed by Cantonese folk storytelling tradition (*gong-gu* 講古).

In the second section, we saw that the topolectal glass-ceiling is a structural constraint of the Sinophone *xiaoshuo*, under which one can at best make ironic metacommentary about its unease with its obligatory *baihua*. In this sense, they fall reluctantly under the literary governance of what Franco Moretti once called the “unstable” narrative voice as a world-literary mechanism:

foreign *plot*; local *characters*; and then, local *narrative voice*: and it’s precisely in this third dimension that these novels seem to be most unstable—most uneasy, as Zhao [Henry Zhao, the author of *The Uneasy Narrator*] says of the late Qing narrator. Which

makes sense: the narrator is the pole of comment, of explanation, of evaluation, and when foreign ‘formal patterns’ (or actual foreign presence, for that matter) make characters behave in strange ways (like Bunzo, or Ibarra, or Bràs Cubas), then of course comment becomes uneasy—garrulous, erratic, rudderless. (2000, 65)

The narrative voice is the most resistant to localization, or for our purposes topolectal performance as a Sinophone novelistic practice. If it is “local” at all, as Moretti adds, it is constantly anxious of its location, torn between local content and foreign form. While writing entirely in plain Cantonese is not impossible, its spoken-ness makes it difficult on paper to achieve rhetorical embellishment, what the formalist linguist Roman Jakobson called the “poetic function of language.” The exclusive writing of vernacular Cantonese is therefore still mostly found in everyday communication and popular, “vulgar” literary genres<sup>21</sup>; whereas *baihua* writers, with strings attached, can avail themselves of a well-developed literary tradition to brush up their prose. The Cantophone, however, also has a time-honored oral tradition of verbal arts, which were also relatively well documented. As Li Yuan-mei suggests, early practitioners of “dialect literature” were often unaware of Cantonese oral traditions (see above). Contemporary Sinophone writers like Lin Zhao from Shenzhen can implode the topolectal glass-ceiling of *xiaoshuo* by mobilizing Cantophone spoken genres to sustain the external voice of their narrative fiction in an aesthetically consistent manner.

But the Cantophone experimental practice of localizing *baihua xiaoshuo* by mobilizing indigenous oratorical arts is arguably more developed in Hong Kong literature, where the rhythmic memories of *jyut-au*, *naamyam*, and other spoken forms were better preserved in the colony. These spoken genres were meant for popular consumption but often composed by down-on-their-luck ex-imperial southern literati (*Lingnan wenren*) trained in the classical poetic tradition (Li 2011, 119–172). Their phonics are also available nowadays largely thanks to colonial linguistics of the kind Ghosh

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<sup>21</sup> A recent notable product may be found in *HKU Seven Incredible Hookups* (港大七不思議食女事件, 2014) published under the pseudonym Jiazi (賈子), an erotica first serialized on a popular online forum about the sexual adventures of a fictional male HKU graduate. The same writer resumed using *baihua* when serializing a more “highbrow” romance on social media.

fictionalized.<sup>22</sup> Just as in our first main section, the colonial-classical-national-local matrix remains operative in the shattering of the topolectal glass-ceiling of the Sinophone novel. Therefore, when writers mobilize these past genres, they also unwittingly activate Literary Sinitic, even though the classical literary tradition of *wen* barely acknowledged their existence; while they also grapple with colonial knowledge, which made an anthropological investment in topolects a politically interested object. Dung Kai-cheung's *Hong Kong Type* (香港字, 2021) bears out this contradiction to the full extent. A novel in a tripartite structure, it is narrated by a young woman in Hong Kong recovering from an unnamed trauma suggestive of the 2019 anti-extradition protest. As she undergoes therapy with a mysterious Jungian psychologist, she learns of the rediscovery in Dutch archives of the “Hong Kong type,” a set of movable Chinese typeset characters crafted in Hong Kong by British missionaries for printing biblical translations and sometimes Chinese classics as well (a history that gives Wang Tao, the owner of *Tsun-wan Yat-po*, a cameo in the novel). That history brings the protagonist to undergo a spiritual encounter with the “Character Spirit” writing automatically on MS Word, an experience which ultimately reunites her with her grandfather's spirit, who tells his own story through her. From the generic space of magical realism and metafiction, we can also hear the old Cantonese from Dung's text through the grandfather's voice, inflected by *jyut-au* rhythmic and classical Chinese.

如今粒粒活字自我手中生出，每粒活字又印出更多文字。涓滴成流，百川會海，文字汪洋，知識巨浪。你試想一下，係幾咁宏偉嘅景象。唉，我一講起本行就滔滔不絕，真係成條紮腳布噏，又長又臭，望你唔好見怪。

(Now is every type bein' born from my hands, every type printin' out more words. Trickle stream into creeks, the rivers convergeth upon the sea. Over the ocean of words, roil the waves of knowledge. Just think: how spectacular 'tis! Alas, how I am inclin'd to

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<sup>22</sup> According to her epilogue, for the Cantonese used in the novel, Lin consulted *Tongshang Zihui* (A Commercial Vocabulary, Containing Chinese Words and Phrases), an 1824 Cantonese–English glossary fictionalized precisely by Amitav Ghosh.



swagger when it cometh to my profession. 'Tis all like the foot-binding cloth – long and trite [a Cantonese proverb]. I beg thy pardon.) (232)

Taking the Cantophone mobilization of oral traditions in another direction, Wong Bik-wan turns instead to subaltern sources. Her Cantophone literary practice in *Triptych of Martyred Women* (烈女圖, 1999) appropriates the misogynistic vulgarities of Cantonese to write women's history in Hong Kong, which has already been given the memorably playful name of "Cuntonese" (Szeto 2013, 197). That novel was informed by Wong's interviews with the aged, pre-war female population in Hong Kong who likely spoke different topolects (Wong 1998). This style of Cantophone articulations is directly influenced by Wong's earlier work in oral history, which puts her in touch with the folk rhymes in Cantonese dialects – the different dialects of Cantonese, rather than Cantonese as a "dialect" – from her former informants.

翻頭婆葬到老舉婆，坐在圓墩墩新墳上，點一枝煙仔，吧吧吸。你婆婆林卿，從來未聽過翻頭婆說這麼多話。

唉呀。十里洋場千里眼，漢文院長老西當，妹仔衫和殖民褲，半句番文半句唐。你家婆老舉婆教我唱。老舉婆會番文

(*Faan-tao-po* gave *lou-goei-po* a funeral, sat on her roundy-dumpty new grave, then lit a cig, smack-sucked *bha-bha* on it. Your nanna Lam Hing, she'd never heard *faan-tao-po* talking so much like this.

Ayah. 10-*li* foreign concession, far-seeing eyes; Chinese headmaster, Western suit; Au pair long dress, colonial pants; speak *faan gwei* language, and mix with Chink's. Your mum-in-law *lou-goei-po* taught me to sing this rhyme, *lou-goei-po* knew *faan gwei* language.

**Note:** *faan-tao-po* – slang, "remarried woman"; *lou-goei-po* – slang, "aged whore"; *bha-bha* – onomatopoeia; "10-*li* foreign concession" – Shanghai's foreign settlement) (1999, 43)

Even “native” Cantonese speakers born and raised in contemporary urban Hong Kong would struggle to read this, a passage which possibly reflects the influence from the Waitau dialect (圍頭話) of the New Territories indigenous populations in Hong Kong (into which the originally Hakka Lam Hing “your nanna” was married/sold in the story). Wong’s ethnographic sensibilities with respect to subaltern Cantophone vocalities continue to inform her more recent novelistic works, such as the underworld Cantonese in *Lielaohuan* (烈佬傳, 2012) and the various non-standard Cantonese, Hakka, and *naamyam* singing in *Mei-hei Revisits Her Old Ways* (微喜重行, 2014). “Someone was singing *naamyam* from afar, the sound of *erhu* came through along the breeze, there was a male voice, should be singing, darlin’ ar may you be safe and sound ar” (嬌啊但得你平安願呀) (93).

In all three cases, intra-Cantonese (and sometimes inter-topolectal) heterogeneities disrupt the ethnolinguistic coherence within the Cantophone.<sup>23</sup> The folk oral traditions memorialized the “old” Cantonese of Lingnan culture, which survived because of colonial documentation. The presence of the Tanka boatpeople, the Waitau-speaking New Territories indigenous population, and all other topolects and pidgins leaving mnemonic traces in the culture of the Cantophone, remind us that Sinophone studies represents a heterogeneous resistance to ethnolinguistic identitarianisms of all sorts, even that of contemporary Hong Kong Cantonese, to return to Wong’s words used as the epigraph of this section.<sup>24</sup> It is no coincidence that all three authors discussed here display in their fictions to a certain extent magical-realist features. On Latin American magical realism in the wake of the European novel, Mariano Siskind writes that “a marvelous Latin American cultural specificity allows Carpentier to criticize Breton’s brand of surrealism and to burn the bridges that could have led critics to think of the marvelous real as a Third World offspring of surrealist aesthetics” (2014, 75). Alejo Carpentier’s claim of Latin American newness as to Parisian avant-garde surrealism rests on the availability of “the inventory of our cosmogonies,” the legacy of indigenous myth-thinking and epistemologies unavailable in the metropole. In the Sinophone context, the development of an autonomous narrative tradition is

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23 For the history of the complex identity composition beyond a singular post-1970s “Hong Kong identity” seen through literature, see Cheung 2001.

24 See also Rey Chow’s discussion on regional lingual variations in Cantophone sonic memories as part of her upbringing in Hong Kong (2014, 109)

confronted by the glass ceiling imposed not only by the Western novel but also the Chinese *xiaoshuo*, the latter (if not the former as well) being already an inherently hybrid genre, with its technology of linguistic accommodation built in. In tandem with the marvelous indigeneity to question historical objectivity and cultural authority as New World magical-realism once did with Enlightenment rationality and the European novel, the Sinophone also performs the critical shattering of the *xiaoshuo*'s topolectal glass-ceiling with Cantonese spoken genres. Lin, Dung, and Wong, I argue, could be viewed as Cantophone Southern agents of the Sinophone localization of the novel/*xiaoshuo* as an originally Northern literary form.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION: SOUTH BY SOUTHEAST – CANTOPHONE  
SOUTH, SINOPHONE DECOLONIALITY

Neither of us said goodbye. For boatpeople, bidding farewell is all but mumbo jumbo  
(發噏瘋 – Cantonese expression).

Lin Zhao (2022, 101)

言語家園。在那裏？  
(Home of language. Is it there?)

Wong Bik-wan (2018, 16)

These four sections form a conceptual whole, each playing a singular function: 1) delineate the colonial-classical-national-local matrix as the problem-field of the Cantophone; 2) analyze the Chinese-language novel (*xiaoshuo*) as the Sinitic literary infrastructure that generically platforms the Sinophone provincializing of its obligatory topolectal limitation in a dialectic of "(classical-)national vs. local"; 3) examine within the space of the Western novel the lingering sonic traces and cryptic residues of the Cantophone in a non-nativist engagement with the dialectic of "(post-)colonial vs. local"; and 4) speculate on the possibility of a Cantophone South as the decolonial agent of Sinophone localization under the literary dominance of the Global (Sinitic) North, whose position of enunciation remains situated within the same colonial-classical-national-local matrix. These intersecting sections delineate

a possible literary history centering not on individual authors nor works but on the collective responses to the intellectual challenge of representing Cantonese (alongside other topolects) within the constraints of Sinitic or alphabetical writing traditions; together, they contour the messy inter-imperiality that simultaneously interpellates the Cantophone into existence and condemns it to dispossession on one hand, and the non-normative decoloniality enacted by literary practitioners to interrogate Cantophone identity-foreclosure on the other. They locate the tension of Sinophone literary politics not only between discrete “languages” (Mandarin vs. other topolects) but also between concrete “speech genres” in the Bakhtinian sense of the term (*baihua xiaoshuo* vs. local oral traditions), some of which are classically oriented, and thus ordains a critical scrutiny of the role of Literary Sinitic in Sinophone studies. As a memorandum, it is inherently limited. Other literary genres such as poetry and theater are regrettably underexplored here.<sup>25</sup> Many other Sinophone writers, such as Li Zishu (黎紫書, 1971–, Malaysia) and Yeng Pway Ngon (英培安, 1947–2021, Singapore), are Cantonese speakers themselves (Ngan 2019). But as we have seen, one need not privilege the “native speaker” as the good subject of the Cantophone kingdom that will never come. More recent Canto-nativist developments in Hong Kong militating for Cantonese-exclusive literary writing should therefore be treated as a creative option to be explored with utmost seriousness and respect, as much as their core ambition should not be teleologically condoned in the would-be literary history of the Cantophone.<sup>26</sup> This is not only because realistically, the condition of Cantophone statelessness is not going to change in the foreseeable future, but also, and more importantly, because it misrepresents the *longue-durée* historical relationship of Cantonese with written vernacular Chinese – a simple reversal of that would be a formally insufficient critique of the *xiaoshuo* narrative tradition. Uncritically accepting the Sinitic script in exclusion to other writing systems, Canto-nativism in fact extradites Cantophone delinquency back into the jurisprudence

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25 For instance, Hong Kong Sinophone poet Yam Gong 飲江 (1949–) and Anglophone poet Nicholas Wong 黃裕邦, (198?–); the study of Cantonese opera, an already robust tradition, is also increasingly institutionalized in Hong Kong in the age of the Greater Bay Area.

26 For recent attempts to employ written Cantonese exclusively as the literary language, see the popular literature journal *Resonate* (迴響), launched in 2020: <https://resonate.hk/>; see also Heidi Yu Huang’s Cantonese translation of Gregory Lee’s biographical novel *The Eighth Chinese Merchant and the Disappeared Seamen* (第八位中國商人同消失咗嘅海員, 2022).

of the Sinitic literary norms. The world republic of the Cantophone has always been, can only be, peopled by nautical barbarians, illegal immigrants, and fugitive offenders of language.

Although the concept of the Cantophone in the way I frame it here does not provide Hong Kong with a literary history, I argue that it does go some way towards making Hong Kong a literary-historical subject in a planetary sense. The Cantophone hypothetically places Hong Kong in the "empty center" of a (im)possible world-literary history. While Hong Kong is by no means a metropolitan center equipped with the technologies of literary recognition – what goes culturally with "the army and the navy" that proverbially tells a language from a dialect – Hong Kong's oft-neglected eccentric centrality in the making of the modern capitalist world, given its unique world-historical position in colonial commerce, Chinese revolutions and modernization, the Cold War, and global financial capitalism as well as diasporas (Chinese or non-Chinese), coalesced into the Cantophone as a cultural archipelago to be reckoned with. In this regard, the uniqueness of Hong Kong may find illuminating comparabilities from the Caribbean, another non-sovereign space, with its location within the slave-driven plantation economy in relation to mercantile capitalism and Black-Atlantic creolization (Trouillot 2021; Gilroy 2003). As we have seen with Lu Xun ("patron-saint of modern China") and Eileen Chang ("proto-Sinophone literary matriarch"), many received wisdoms about modern Chinese literature will be even defamiliarized if the complexity of the topolect question and the uniqueness of Cantophone Hong Kong are properly engaged. In the age of the National Security Law prompting Hong Kong into yet another wave of emigration at the time of writing (to which we owe Eric Yip's poem cited above), the future(s) of the Cantophone remains an open question. The so-called "Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao-Greater Bay Area," the PRC's project to integrate the Cantophone South by paying tribute to the Lingnan culture, seeks to schematize (another dimension of *wen*) the non-territorial Cantophone within a continental cartography, thereby writing off Hong Kong's eccentric centrality. But as a policy from the administrative state of Beijing, it dialectically reactivates some of the historical folds streamlined under the integration of the southern Yue into the northern center of Sinitic civilization (Brindley 2015) and the contestation of China's southern frontier with Dai Viet (now Vietnam) (Baldanza 2016), which in some way was precluded in the *longue durée* Hong Kong's aberrant postcoloniality within the PRC's political structure (Hung 2022, 39–44). The colonial-*imperial*-national-local matrix continues to generate political tension, cultural heterogeneities, and epistemological discontinuities within the

Sinophone and across the world. The Cantophone is a Sinophone response to decolonize cultural knowledge about such geopolitically-conditioned but locally-situated multitudes.

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