

## Overlapping Scriptworlds: Chinese Literature as a Global Assemblage

Wai-chew Sim

*Nanyang Technological University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Chinese Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

### Recommended Citation

Sim, Wai-chew. "Overlapping Scriptworlds: Chinese Literature as a Global Assemblage." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 21.4 (2019): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3206>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 112 times as of 11/07/19.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

**CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture**ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>  
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 21 Issue 4 (June 2019) Article 7****Wai-chew Sim,****"Overlapping Scriptworlds: Chinese Literature as a Global Assemblage"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss4/7>>Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 21.4 (2019)**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss4/>>

---

**Abstract:** In his article "Overlapping Scriptworlds: Chinese Literature as a Global Assemblage," Wai-Chew Sim offers a globalist vision or understanding of Chinese literary studies/Sinophone studies. Deploying the notion of scriptworld (Damrosch), he examines how the Chinese, English, and Malay-language scriptworlds interact in the Southeast Asian context. He traces the rhizomatic connections between Joo Ming Chia's *Exile or Pursuit*, a Singapore Sinophone text that explores multiple belongings, and two novels: M. L. Mohamed's *Confrontation* (originally published as *Batas Langit*), and T.H. Kwee's *The Rose of Cikembang* (originally published as *Bunga Roos dari Cikembang*). Tracing the sinophonicity of the latter two works opens up a relatively untrodden domain for Sinophone studies while the comparative optic establishes "assemblages" (Deleuze) between different scriptworlds, avoiding therein enervating debates over compositionality while fostering "South-South" or "Bandungist" knowledge production and exchange. For Chinese literary studies/Sinophone studies, a set of such ensembles would make up a global assemblage.

## Wai-Chew SIM

### Overlapping Scriptworlds: Chinese Literature as a Global Assemblage

In a recent contribution to the debate over the Sinophone, Der-wei Wang, building on an observation by the critic Kim Tong Tee, suggests that we use the collocation "huayifeng" (literally "sino-foreign-wind") to reference the domain. This, Wang asserts, moves the discussion away from the "bitter entanglements" or bickering that have erupted in recent years over whether the term entails a constitutive connection to "Chinese-ness/China-ness," or whether it may instead cleave to the scene of enunciation and evince, say, "Malaysia-ness," the cited contribution being an in-depth discussion of Malaysian Sinophone and Sinophone-linked cultural production (5) (the current consensus Chinese translation for "Sinophone" is "huayu yuxi wenxue") (see glossary). For Wang, the collocation convinces because it portrays the Sinophone as "oscillating" perennially and productively between two determinations, Han and non-Han ("Yi"); while "feng," a rendition of the morpheme "phone," designates the sense in which the object of study has become a craze or fad, an engrossing "scenery," a "sign" of the times, and so on (5). Wang notes that as a "collective designation" for the non-Han, the term "yi" has "no derogatory meaning" in classical Chinese history (8). Citing the reformist thinker Qichao Liang, he adds that the referent Han has an under-appreciated history of "inter-breeding" with other ethno-race groups, so the category itself has undergone constant semantic "mobility" (8). To use a term proposed by Rancière, we might say that Wang enjoins critics of Sinophone literature to re-work the distribution of the sensible between the classifications Han and non-Han. He asserts that difference has a positive aesthetic value.

In this essay, I wish to give greater tonality to the issue raised above regarding the transition or contact zone between Han and non-Han, Sinitic and non-Sinitic. I use the notion of "scriptworld" (Damosch), so that from an enhanced world-scale perspective we can move beyond bitter definitional entanglements and appreciate how the Sinophone as a broad literary system interacts with other systems, in particular the Southeast Asian Anglophone and Malay-language systems. Such an approach provides one direction that a "globalist" vision of Chinese literary studies/Sinophone studies can take. If a pressing theoretical imperative of our times is a need to provincialize Europe, and if such a move entails "deprovincializing" global South culture(s) while valorising "South-South" or Bandungist connections, then we should presumably track such interactions. My use of the notion of scriptworlds and delineation of how criticism forms "assemblages" among them is meant to address that imperative. As will be shown below, the mooted approach alerts us to syncretic arrangements or "oscillations" between Han and Yi, to cross-cultural outreach conducted by autochthonous and migrant communities, and to post-migration self-fashioning undertaken by ethnic Chinese authors. To the extent that a linguistic purist or isolationist stance heeding only sinoscript material risks missing out on such articulations, the plurilingual methodology proffered here thus enjoins our critical attention.

Beginning with a discussion of the existential challenges faced by Southeast Asian writers, who are tasked to animate forms of interculturalization, I briefly elucidate Joo Ming Chia's *Exile or Pursuit*, a Singapore Sinophone text that explores multiple belonging. I pursue the rhizomatic connections between *Exile or Pursuit* (henceforth *Exile*) and two novels: Mohamed Latiff Mohamed's *Confrontation* (originally published as *Batas Langit*) and Tek Hoay Kwee's *The Rose of Cikembang* (originally published as *Bunga Roos dari Cikembang*), both of which I read primarily in English translation while also making reference to the original Malay. As will be clear from my discussion below, both texts express enlivening affinities with Sinitic culture. Kwee's work in particular contributes to a revivalism of Chinese cultural expression in Indonesia, and so while stemming from a different scriptworld also blurs the distinction between similarity and difference. A degree of commensurability between cultural arenas – painstakingly rehearsed by migrant-heritage writers such as Kwee and discerning authors such as Mohamed – validates a conception of global Sinophone criticism that enters into extrinsic relations with adjoining literary systems, forming assemblages (Deleuze) that contribute to regional knowledge production and exchange. A set of such ensembles makes up a global assemblage.

I should add that my interest in the sinophonicity of *Confrontation* and *The Rose of Cikembang* probably extends the Han-Yi frame beyond that envisaged by Wang, who elsewhere offers what he calls "post-loyalism" as the mainstay of his conception of the Sinophone ("Sailing" 2014). For Wang, post-loyalism encompasses both positive and negative identification with mainstream (or mainland) Chinese cultural-historical legacy. It arguably conceives identity as transmission, albeit in a problematized way, and therefore is opposed to another influential delineation of the Sinophone, that proposed by Shu-mei Shih, which resists the centripetal prerogatives of that presumed connection with the insistence that "diaspora" has an end point (Shih 2013). Once we ascribe positivity to difference, however, the filiation

thought-figure that conceives identity primarily as transmission arguably becomes untenable, particularly in a "frontier" setting where, as, respectively, settler and host, Han and Yi may develop fraught relations as well as ties of reciprocity and mutuality. In this regard, I would contend, we are closer to what Edward Said called "affiliation," where identity is conceived as adaptation, elective affinity, and the awareness of belonging to shared communities of fate (19).

Just such a consideration exercises the literary historian Xiu Fang, who as far back as 1968, had observed that although Sinophone writers from deeply pluralistic formations such as Singapore and Malaysia may take their bearings from China, they ultimately have to address local conditions. Also cited approvingly by Wang in his essay, Fang's claim is worth revisiting because it allows us to appreciate the scale of the task bequeathed to these places, namely to bring together in a Southeast Asian setting the socio-cultural traditions of West, South, and East Asia:

While the new literature in China has the mainland as its primary subject, Malaysian [and Singapore] new Chinese literature is ultimately concerned with its role within [its domain], of which it forms a part – it joins up as a whole with Malay literature, Tamil literature, English literature and so on, so that it can serve the needs of the masses. (8)

The challenge for Southeast Asian Sinitic-language writers is to conjoin cultural self-expression with modes of syncretism and consociation so that they do not become antinomial developments that cause social fracture. Cultural production in any one language should ideally have an incipient becoming-unitary relationship with that conducted in other languages.

In recent years, Singapore Sinophone writing and criticism has raised such concerns in illuminating ways. The critic Chee Lay Tan argues, for instance, that Sinitic language writing from Singapore has wellsprings in both the English and the Chinese cultural domains, meaning to say that it has "bicultural nativity" (106). Elucidating two bilingual poems by, respectively, Pway Ngon Yeng and Ni Er Xi, and a micro-fiction piece by Meng Wen Huang, Tan argues persuasively that these works are "condensed sample(s) of biculturalism" (109).

To describe such mixing of languages and perspectives, we may use a term proposed by David Damrosch, "scriptworld," especially in its plural determination as overlapping or merged scriptworlds; a configuration that furthers our discussion because it elaborates Damrosch's insights into world literature (195). Questioning the assumption that world literature is a "secondary or even future formation" stemming from the various literatures produced by the modern nation-state system, Damrosch argues that, for most of recorded history, "World literature" actually meant "different things in different parts of the globe" (218, 195). Furthermore, literary works were produced in translocal scripts and tended to circulate within cross-territorial domains, the horizontal entity thus formed constituting that mentioned scriptworld. In this regard scriptworlds are key intermediary categories operating between world literature and various bounded "national" literatures.

Thus, for example, one may speak of the Chinese scriptworld and track its operations in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. For Damrosch, national literatures often arise from the already "transcultural context" trailed by scripts and thus have to negotiate tensions between voicing autochthonous traditions and "absorption into a broader milieu," which is to say that writing systems are "key indices of cultural identity." An emblematic example would be the decision that Kamal Atatürk made in 1928 to shift Turkey from an Arabic script to a Roman derived one (219, 195).

While to speak of overlapping scriptworlds and bicultural nativity may seem extravagant in the context of Chinese letters, such considerations are arguably prefigured by Yutang Lin, Eileen Chang, and Ha Jin, who are notable for publishing works in English and Chinese. Apart from these canonic authors, we can also cite other English-Chinese authors such as the British-Chinese novelist Xiaolu Guo, and the Singaporean playwright Pao Kun Kuo, while beyond the English-Chinese pairing, Malaysian authors Guo Qi Li and Thean Chye Goh have published creatively in Chinese and Malay. This list is by no means exhaustive.

The significance of such border-crossing affinities can be assayed if we attend to how *Exile* criticises linguistic monism, encouraging in the process consideration of other scriptworlds contiguous with or which overlaps the Sinophone. The telling feature here is the way it limns a rapprochement between the so-called "English-" and "Chinese-speaking" sections of the Singapore ethnic Chinese population, a dichotomization resulting from Cold War manoeuvrings effected in the republic. It does this through its delineation of the protagonist, Fu Liang, having significantly improved life chances because he falls in love with an Indonesian-Chinese classmate and learns through her to modify his aversion to English. By interspersing a surprising amount of English into the Chinese text – mainly in the form of songs lyrics, depiction of code-mixing when rendering dialogue, and in the use of proper names – the novel arguably

spurns the cultural marginalization meme that is a distinct leitmotif of Singapore Sinophone writing. It signals the end of mourning.

Among other things, such movement clear space for a critique of the Cold War inspired labelling of the Singapore ethnic-Chinese population (circa the 1960s) as being prone to communism and communalism. As historian P. T. Thum cogently argues, these labels were used expediently by the incumbent party to purge its ranks but amounted to a gross simplification of the socio-political forces traversing the ethnic Chinese population. This was exercised not so much by ideology but by issues of "livelihood and education," something that *Exile* also attests to (29). Nevertheless the labels worked because in the governing climate of the times the overriding concern for "foreigners" was whether Singapore was "leaning" left or right (45). In recent years, however, Singapore English-language works such as Jeremy Tiang's *State of Emergency* and Chinese-language novels such as Pway Ngon Yeng's *Sao Dong* (Unrest) have problematized such reductionist tags, suggesting that it was anti-colonialism as much as anything else that fuelled the political claims-making of that era.

For my purposes, the most provocative aspect of *Exile*, however, is not so much its potential contribution to a timely historical debate, but the way it directs attention on the language ecology that subtends the Sinophone. This occurs at one point when the text shows not two but three languages operating in unison. Fu Liang is having an after-work drink with his Malaysian-Chinese colleague Steven when the latter utters a Chinese proverb in Malay, "Tiga orang, satu guru saya," and he replies in English, saying graciously "you are my only teacher" (206). The Malay clause here translates one of the most famous of the Confucius analects, the one about how, when walking with two other individuals, one may find a positive example among them (a teacher) as well as a negative example. Significantly, the aphorism itself doesn't appear in sinoscript in the "speaking" parts of the dialogue. Only a rudimentary level of Malay is needed to parse the clause, one that can be picked up from quotidian experience. Equipped with an "English-knowing" bilingualism fostered by an English-medium education system (Pakir 167), local readers of Chia's novel should have no trouble following the entire section of dialogue. By depicting commutability between simple Malay, English, and Chinese in this episode, *Exile* arguably tries to de-link sinoscript from the cultural aura assigned to it. In the spirit of the cited analect, we might say, it enjoins us to learn from *all* social interaction, not just in colloquium with members of our own speech community.

What happens in the Confucius citing episode, I suggest, is that as he experiments with heterolingualism, Chia stumbles onto what Damrosch identifies as "the power of scripts to cross the boundaries of time, space, and language itself" (218-19). If Singapore Sinophone writing showcases an emergent biculturalism, one implication is that the English-knowing vector of that articulation also offers access to other Roman script domains including the modern Malay scriptworld. Through the mediality of shared alphabetism other cultural-ethical dispositions become legible, making feasible the option of inserting a third language into the text. Given the significant role assigned to the East-West master narrative in cultural criticism generally, the interplay between English, Chinese, and Malay in this episode can thus be read as an enjoyment to open up Sinophone criticism to other forms of otherness – to set aside anxieties about the "West" or "North" and to bring into view neglected "South-South" (or "Bandungist") connections and articulations.

Among the advantages of such an opening is that it allows us to sidestep what Shih tellingly identifies as "technologies of recognition" – among them academic discourse and the literary market – that stratify the emergent field of "world literature" ("Global" 17-18). Such technologies tend to code the North/South, West/non-West, and majority/minority dyads as asymmetrical binaries even when, paradoxically, they contest such arrangements. The assumption that minor cultures are always already engaging with "majority" cultures in a vertical relationship of domination and resistance grounds these apparatuses; but as a result the critical and pedagogical possibilities offered by "other relational identifications" are elided (18). My comparison of *Exile* with *Confrontation* and *The Rose of Cikembang* is meant to uncover the implications of just such transversal alignments of culture, which Shih elsewhere helpfully terms "minor transnationalism" (Lionnet and Shih 8). In this regard, the tag designates two cultural modes pertinent to my discussion. The first involves situations where the minor enters into "productive relationship with the major," which for me references how *Confrontation* extends the Sinophone analytic rehearsed and also deterritorialized in *Exile* (Lionnet and Shih 8). The second involves "minor-to-minor networks that circumvent the major altogether," which I take as designating how *Confrontation* and *The Rose of Cikembang* invoke a Sino-Malay creole culture locally referenced as "peranakan," one that straddles several Southeast Asian littoral locations. It is precisely these transversal alignments of culture that prompt the deployment of assemblage theory below.

This brings us to Mohamed Latiff Mohamed's *Confrontation*, which may be taken as pressing further the question of the Han-Yi relationship raised by Wang, one that *Exile* registers through its citation of

Confucius in Malay, and also one which the peranakan synthesis explicitly poses. The operative question is how Sinophone criticism intends to handle "Sinitic" or hybrid-"Sinitic" lifeways carried out in non-Sinitic languages and indexed by diverse forms of cultural production. Does it take hybridity as a line of flight (Deleuze's term) out of "Chineseness," or can it accommodate more expansive construals of cultural flourishing? Set in early 1960s Singapore, *Confrontation* concerns a young Malay boy, Adi, who grows up in a mixed Chinese-Malay village. His father is a gambler who squanders away the housekeeping money. Nevertheless, the main thematic takeaway is not so much a hardscrabble present but a depleted future, with the dominant image coming towards the end of the novel as Indonesia, opposing the creation of the federated states of Malaysia, launches a violent bid to squash it; this "Konfrontasi" is the conflict that the English translation adopts as its title. The novel ends with the announcement, circa 1965, that Singapore is separating from Malaysia. Adi conveys the news to Dolah, a family friend who is dying from cancer, who tells Adi poignantly that he has "no ... future" (*Confrontation* 176) ("tidak ... ada ... masa ... depan..." [*Batas Langit* 287]). The fact that Singapore loses its hinterland is, the text suggests, a tragedy.

*Confrontation* asserts in addition that separation from Malaysia entails prohibitive costs because the mentioned Sino-Malay creole formation is left unnurtured. This idea is trenchantly symbolized through a peranakan infant girl whom Adi's mother adopts. For undescribed reasons the girl is cognitively impaired but is still fiercely loved by the latter. The textual stance towards inter-culturation may be gleaned from such details. In addition, the extent of the generally syncretic public culture can be appreciated if we compare the English translation of the text with the original. Right at its opening, for instance, *Confrontation* describes in telling fashion Adi climbing down from a tree that he retreats to contemplate the world:

One day, Adi climbed down the tree to find two men crouched at its foot, shaking for numbers. They were trying their luck at chap ji kee, a game of chance and illegal lottery. "Go away, go away!" one of the men shouted. He wore a torn singlet, and shooed Adi off. "Sa, ji, kau," Adi teased the man as he left, reciting Hokkien numbers he had no intention of betting on, his eyes focused on the Mandarin oranges below. He intended to take them once the Chinese men were gone. (*Confrontation* 3, italics original)

Semasa Adi turun, dua orang Cina sedang terbongkok-bongkok menggoncang nombor. Mereka tikam *cap ji ki*. "Pegi, pegiii!" Cina berbaju singlet berlubang menghalau Adi. "Sa, ji, kau." Adi mengusik sambil berlalu. Mata Adi merenung tepat ke limau Cina sembahyang. Limau masih ada. Adi berhasrat mengambilnya apabila Cina goncang nombor *cap ji ki* berlalu nanti. (*Batas Langit* 3, italics in the original)

As can be seen from the above, Mohamed's use of romanized Hokkien/Fukienese words ("chap ji kee"/"cap ji ki", "sa, ji, kau") is preserved in the English translation. But unlike the last, we should note, Sinitic terms are not glossed in the original. The original assumes that Malay-knowing readers also know the Hokkien terms, just as *Exile* assumes that Chinese-knowing readers will also understand some simple Malay. Through their performance of hetero-lingualism, both novels evoke an era with a different language ecology, when Singapore's bridge-language was bazaar Malay mixed with Hokkien, not English. As Anthea Gupta helpfully points out, "Those born roughly 1930 to 1960 were the most multilingual generation, especially the Chinese, who were typically able to speak English, two or three varieties of Chinese and Bazaar Malay" (108). In comparison, however, "Those born after independence are likely to know fewer languages, and are less likely to have some knowledge of a language associated with another ethnic group than those born in the 50 years before independence" (99).

The ending of *Confrontation* no doubt laments through the figure of Dolah the Malay community's loss of status following Singapore's withdrawal from Malaysia. Most pertinently, as can be seen from Mohamed's use of romanticized Hokkien, the notion that Sinophone criticism should only elucidate sinoscript works becomes problematized. When linguistic gatekeeping predominates, outreach directed by non-Han, "Yi" communities towards migrant Sinitic populations is elided, inclusive of the way in which *Confrontation* mourns the lost protean culture symbolised by the infant girl. Such outreach and regard for hybridity evokes an era when knowledge of Malay was commonplace for the Chinese demographic, although that multiglossic arrangement appears to be less appreciated nowadays. Nevertheless, the cultural-semantic promiscuity of scripts continues to press the case for these historically-sedimented affiliations, with the Roman alphabet referencing through transliteration practice Sinitic lifeways operating in the Malay scriptworld.

The literary cum historical implications of such merged or overlapping scriptworlds can be further

appreciated if, chasing the "transcultural context[s]" that they trail, we turn to our last novel, *The Rose of Cikembang* (henceforth *Rose*), which was published in 1927 by the Indonesian-Chinese peranakan author Tek Hoay Kwee. Although written almost a century ago, this work may be usefully compared with *Exile* and *Confrontation* because it spotlights alignments that go beyond the dominant North/South or West/non-West axis. Indeed, the horizontal connections revealed by these alternative comparisons may be said to revivify the spirit of the Bandung conference of 1955, when Asian and African leaders congregating in the Indonesian city had laid the foundation for non-alignment in the Cold War context, in what was to become "a pivotal moment in southerners' collective quest both to liberate themselves from colonialism and to re-forge the international order on more inclusive and emancipatory foundations" (Hongoh 374).

*Rose* tells the story of a Chinese-Indonesian plantation manager, Ay Cheng, who has to abandon his native partner, Marsiti, due to family pressure to enter an endogamous marriage with Gwat Nio, the daughter of a tycoon. Ay Cheng and Gwat Nio have a daughter Lily, who is afflicted with a melancholic disposition. About eighteen years after Ay Cheng left Marsiti, Lily dies, apparently from her affliction, soon after which Lily's intended, Bian Kun, discovers that Marsiti had a daughter with Ay Cheng, Rosminah, who greatly resembles Lily. Eventually, at the end of the novel Bian Kun and Rosminah are married. We learn as well that Marsiti is herself the daughter of a thwarted relationship between Gwat Nio's father and a native woman.

Through the use of a convoluted plot that spotlights unexpected consanguinity, the novel announces its concern with the question of how existential ties may be developed with cultural Others. This consideration is also pursued through authorial intrusion, in the following provocative comments made near the end of the novel:

The day will come when Ay Cheng, Gwat Nio, Rose, Bian Kun and the other people mentioned in this story will pass from this earth. There will be a time as well when they will return in different bodies, with different names and perhaps belonging to different races, with different means of livelihood to continue their evolution and karma. But no matter where they will be, whether in this world or the next, their souls, known now as Ay Cheng, Marsiti, Gwat Nio, Rose [Rosminah], Lily, Bian Kun, will be fused as one, together tasting happiness and sorrow, the sweet and the bitter, which they must experience in their journey upward in becoming one with God. (*Rose* 89)

Ada satu kutika yang Ay Tjeng, Gwat Nio, Roos, Bian Koen dan laen-laen orang yang tersebut dalem ini cerita aken berlalu dari ini dunia. Ada waktunya pula marika aken balik kombali dengan pake laen tubuh, laen nama dan brangkali juga laen kabangsaan dan pencarian, buat lanjutken marika punya evolutive dan Karma. Tapi biar pun di mana juga marika ada, di acherat atawa di dunia, di ini bumi atawa di laen planet, itu roh-roh yang sekarang terkenal sabagi Ay Tjeng, Marsiti, Gwat Nio, Roos, Lily dan Bian Koen, tinggal juga tergabung jadi satu buat sama-sama merasakan senang dan susah, getir dan manis, yang marika musti alamken dalem perjalanan aken naek ka tingkatan lebih tinggi buat menjadi satu dengan Tuhan. (*Bunga Roos dari Cikembang* 402)

Bio-critical considerations relevant to the above passage include Kwee's belief that the combined study of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism was "more suitable" for Indonesian Chinese than focusing solely on the first, a conviction that led him to start the "Sam Kauw Hwee" (three religions organization) in the 1930s (Suryadinata 1981: 57). Apart from involvement in such initiatives, Kwee was also "active in [the] Tiong Hoa Hwe Koan... [an] organization that ran Chinese schools" (Suryadinata 2012: 464). Kwee undertakes religious self-expression in *Rose* through the delineation of a reincarnation frame. At the same time, the reference to the souls of native and migrant-heritage characters being "fused as one" appeals to a future formation where particularity does not preclude commonality, part of which would presumably be achieved through a greater acceptance of exogamy. In suggesting that the fates of his characters are intertwined, Kwee stresses that they live in communities of fate. The notion that they may return as "different races" may be compared to Nietzsche's doctrine concerning the eternal recurrence of the same. Like the last the suggestion arguably functions as a thought experiment designed to foster radical change. Rather than an injunction to pursue self-actualization, however, Kwee's version prompts transformation in how we determine in-and-out-group constitution, meaning how we treat the distinction between Han and Yi.

In recent years, it should be noted, Kwee's work has undergone a vital reassessment. For Indonesian director Daniel Jacob, for instance, "in depth" study of Kwee's writing had apparently made him realize how "Chinese-Malay literary works" were historically "marginalized"; thus Jacob notes, "Many people don't know that writers of Chinese descent also had a major role in the literary repertoire of Indonesia" (qtd. in Ramsay). The event that occasions these comments is a restaging of a play by Kwee titled *Nonton Cap Go Meh* during the 2012 Chinese New Year period. Reporting on the event for the *Jakarta*

*Post*, a journalist sought out Jacob for his views, and the latter reveals that he first encountered Kwee's work in 2004 when he participated in a theatre version of *Rose* staged at the University of Indonesia. Endorsing the argument that it is timely to recognize the contributions made by Kwee and his peers, the article mentions as well that Kwee had posthumously received a national cultural award in 2011 (Ramsay).

These sentiments are echoed by Chee Chiang Sim, who argues that the version of Malay in which Kwee wrote, low Malay or Melayu rendah, had played a key role in the development of modern Indonesian letters but had not been properly valued as "national heritage" because of a distaste for its "hybridity" (22). Comprising of a "rich linguistic stew that contained in its fundamental Malay broth chunks of Javanese, Hokkien words and grammatical structures, Balinese [...] Portuguese and Dutch" (Fowler, p. vii), the dismissal of the idiom is, for George Fowler, an injustice "indicative of the hardening of the politics of race in the 1920s and 1930s Dutch Indies" (p. xxiii). The author of a 2013 English translation of *Rose*, Fowler believes, nonetheless, that a re-evaluation is timely. For taken as a demotic version of the national language rather than as an inferior, hybridized variety, he contends, "no group had done more to disseminate and develop [that language] by their press and writings than the *peranakan* Chinese" (ibid., italics original).

Although Fowler endorses a review of Kwee, a comparison of his translation with the original is instructive and gives a more disquieting picture pertinent to our discussion. The original contains a number of romanized Hokkien terms interspersed into the Malay-language text including "tauwke" (312), "kongtauw" (313), "owe" (313), "chutsie" (314), "siocia" (314), and "boceng" (331). These terms are synecdochic of Chinese culture and foreground tellingly the novel's hybrid formation. In Fowler's translation, however, they are rendered in nondescript English as, respectively, "boss" (11), "black magic" (12), "I" (12), "born" (13), "lady," (13), and, "insincere and dishonest" (27). The option of preserving these terms in a glossary was apparently rejected. In addition, a reference at one point to Lily burning joss sticks and praying fervently on every "ce-it" and "capgouw" or every first and fifteenth of the month is mistranslated as "Every seventh and fifteenth of the month" (2001: 345; 2013: 41). A related reference to Lily being brought to see fortune tellers, rendered as "khaomia," is also given a rationalistic patina as a series of consultations with "traditional healers" (2001: 346; 2013: 41).

The key consideration here is that the reassessment of Kwee comes in tandem with a revivalism of Sinitic cultural expression. During the authoritarian Suharto-led New Order regime that lasted from 1967 to 1998, an assimilationist policy was pursued and most forms of Chinese identity were either banned or discouraged. In the more liberal atmosphere that distinguishes the post-Suharto era, however, such expressions are again allowed. The restaging of Kwee's works and the 2001 republication of *Bunga Roos dari Cikembang* in a multi-volume series tracking Indonesian-Chinese *peranakan* writing can be accounted part of that more inclusive development. Nevertheless, such cultural expression faces the threat of renewed oblivion if Sinophone criticism doesn't bring it within its ambit. If, adopting an isolationist stance, the field confines itself to only sinoscript material, then the bridge-building efforts of pioneering *peranakan* writers such as Kwee are elided, the earlier disavowal of hybridity by the host community now being met with an answering disavowal by Sinitic cultural mediation. As in the case of translation practice which routinely suppresses Sinitic nomenclature, rendering them literally lost in translation, innovative forms of ethnic/cultural (self-)maintenance would be lost – and this ironically coming at a time when the host society seeks greater participation from members of the minority population.

How do we frame, express, and ground such cross-cultural connections and affinities? How can such a framing contribute to a "globalist" vision or understanding of Sinophone writing? Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and his collaborators, the best way I suggest is through the notion of assemblages, which are comprised of "heterogeneous elements that may be human and non-human, organic and inorganic, technical and natural" (Anderson and McFarlane 124). Assemblages also have expressive capacities that may be linguistic (declarations, rules) or non-linguistic (body-language, traffic signs, and so on). Their defining characteristic is that they are wholes characterized by relations of "exteriority" or "extrinsic" relations, one example being "an alliance of several communities, such as those involved in a social justice movement" (DeLanda 2016: 2, 18). In an atmosphere dominated by particularistic sensibilities, the Han-Yi relational pairing operating across a range of scriptworlds and domains initiates, I would contend, the rudiments of assemblage thinking.

Arising from the vitalist philosophy that he elaborates (stressing becoming over static being) Deleuze also maintain that assemblages are engaged in processes of gathering (territorialization) and dispersal (de-territorialization), processes that either stabilize or destabilize their identity. Gatherings include the ways in which social entities arrogate to themselves material resources and exercise expressive or rhetorical modalities. A recent suggestion by one commentator that we translate "Sinophone" as "New Han-

language writing" is thus a (re)territorializing move that seeks to sharpen borders and homogenize the components parts of the social object we call Sinophone studies (Huang 105). I will elaborate on these delineations below, but for now we may note that Chinese literature as a global assemblage would be a nested set of assemblages or a "macro" assemblage (DeLanda 2016: 20). I have provided the lineaments of the Sino-English-Malay and Sino-Malay components of that larger entity. Other sections may be worked out such that there would be Sino-Hispanic components, Sino-Indian ones, Sino-Thai ones, and so on. Everywhere where different scriptworlds interact, the potential for assemblages come into play.

For an understanding of the social figured in terms of assemblages, the chief conceptual opponent is one that grasps objects as integrated totalities. As Manuel DeLanda, a gifted explicator of Deleuze, puts it, the latter stance grasps objects using organismic metaphors and assumes invariant relations "between parts and wholes," with wholes expected to "constitute a seamless totality" or "display an organic unity" (2006: 9). Because a seamless whole is "inconceivable except as a synthesis of these very parts, that is, the linkages between its components form logically necessary relations which make the whole what it is," this also means that they "may be investigated by thought alone" (2006: 11). In effect, DeLanda argues, such a stance privileges "relations of interiority" or intrinsic relations in which the component parts are "constituted by the very relations they have to other parts of the whole"; so defined, a part "detached from such a whole ceases to be what it is, since being this particular part is one of its constitutive properties" (2006: 9). Following from the above, we might say that debates over the "constitutive" properties of social entities – of, say, Sinophone studies – risk overstating their uniformity or degree of homogeneity. With such debates the line of questioning itself allows an organismic metaphor to take charge of reality.

The problem with such a stance is that the fixation with compositionality pushes out of the picture the capacity of an entity to interact with other entities. As DeLanda observes, "there is no way to tell in advance in what way a given entity may affect or be affected by innumerable other entities"; furthermore such capacities "may go unexercised if no entity suitable for interaction is around" (2006: 10). Yet in the above communities-in-alliance example, for instance, it is the capacity to engage in external relations that allows new sustaining properties to emerge from the common struggle for social justice. The affected communities may be physically distant and have little in common. One may have grown out of an ashram and the other function as a market town clustered around a railway junction. As an assemblage rather than a totality, what brings them together is not the traits or intrinsic relations that they have, but rather extrinsic relations that are, as DeLanda notes, only "contingently obligatory" (2006: 11). Whether such alliances occur involve "a consideration of empirical questions, such as [their] co-evolutionary history" (2006: 11). In other words, it would be their separate but convergent developmental trajectories that is the key, the happenstance that the communities in question come to be affected by similar problems. They thus establish a contingent co-functioning that fosters symbiosis.

To return to the issue at hand, the revival of Chinese cultural forms in Indonesia is, I would contend, an instance of a contingent occurrence where convergent pathways make possible the thought of a social assemblage tying together two fields of investigation, resisting by implication territorializing impulses in both domains. On the Sinophone side, there is the urgency posed by the question of what it means for Chinese literature to be "global." There is Fang's reminder that we mustn't forget the determining context for Sinophone cultural production in Southeast Asia, namely that of social mutuality. On the Indonesian side, the key development is the amelioration of assimilationist demands by various post-Suharto regimes.

Commenting on how assemblages function within Deleuze's overall ontology, Hillier and Abrahams note tellingly that his philosophy is "not concerned with what something is, its inherent traits or essence, but what it does, what it might do, how it might affect what other things do and how it might be affected by them" (4). My notion of Sinophone studies as an externalist oriented set of assemblages is similarly an enjoinder to cultivate the capacities that Sinophone criticism has to interact with other entities (other literary systems), to focus on what it can do rather than fixate on what it is. This option is only contingently obligatory, but many critics can certainly undertake the kind of research shared in this essay. This means, among other things, attending to literary multilingualism, a topic that has become increasingly popular in Anglophone literary studies. It means investigating how the Chinese scriptworld interacts with other scriptworlds. "South-South" connections unveiled by such comparativisms can help to revivify the Bandung spirit, allowing criticism to sidestep the deleterious effects of the above-mentioned "technologies of recognition." Such peripheral connections are also a useful testing ground for ideas emerging from the "world literature" arena, for instance, the claim that global literary production is irradiated by the combined and uneven development of capitalism (Warwick research collective). Further lines of inquiry should emerge as new texts enter into conversation with Sinophone cultural output.

Since assemblages only emerge through extrinsic relations, they provide a framing that is arguably more attuned to the emergence of new properties. They represent one direction that a "globalist" vision of Chinese literary studies/Sinophone studies can take. At the least, such a move avoids reifying our object of study. A becoming-regional and becoming-global of Chinese cultural criticism should arguably attend to such considerations.

Note: I would like to thank the reviewers of this essay for their helpful suggestions. The research for this paper was partially enabled by research grant 2017-T1-001-162, from the Ministry of Education's Academic Research Fund.

## Glossary:

bicultural nativity 双文化原乡  
boceng 不诚  
capgouw 十五  
ce-it 初一  
chap ji kee/cap ji ki 十二支  
Chia Joo Ming 谢裕民  
Chinese-ness/China-ness 中国性  
chutsie 出生  
condensed sample of biculturalism 浓缩中西方双文化的小展示品  
*Exile or Pursuit* 放逐与追逐  
Fang Xiu 方修  
feng 风  
Goh Thean Chye 吴天才  
Huang Meng Wen 黄孟文  
huayifeng 华夷风  
huayu yuxi wenxue 华语语系文学  
khaomia 看命  
kongtauw 降头  
Kwee Tek Hoay 郭德怀  
Kuo Pao Kun 郭宝昆  
Li Guo Qi 李国七  
Liang Qichao 梁启超  
Malaysia-ness 马国性  
New Han-language writing 汉语新文学  
*Nonton Cap Go Meh (Watching Cap Go Meh)* 观赏十五暝  
Owe 我  
peranakan 土生华人  
sa, ji, kau, 三, 二, 九  
Sam Kauw Hwee 三教会  
Sao Dong 骚动  
siocia 小姐  
tauwke 头家  
Tee Kim Tong 张锦忠  
tiga orang, satu guru saya 三人行必有我师焉  
Tiong Hoa Hwe Koan 中华会馆  
Xi Ni Er 希尼尔  
Yeng Pway Ngon 英培安  
Yi 夷

### Works Cited

- Anderson, Ben, and Colin McFarlane. "Assemblage and Geography." *Area*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2011, pp.124-127.
- Chia, Joo Ming (谢裕民). 放逐与追逐 (Exile or Pursuit). Fuhaoshi, 2015.
- Damrosch, David. "Scriptworlds: Writing Systems and the Formation of World Literature." *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 2, 2007, pp. 195-219.
- DeLanda, Manuel. *Assemblage Theory*. Edinburgh UP, 2016.
- DeLanda, Manuel. *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. Continuum, 2006.
- Fang, Xiu (方修). 新马文学史论集 (Collected Writings on Singapore and Malaysian Literary History). Xinjiapo Wenxue Shuwu, 1986 (1968).
- Fowler, George A. "Introduction." *The Rose of Cikembang*, by Kwee, Tek Hoay, Lontar, 2013, pp. vii-xxviii.
- Gupta, Anthea Fraser. "The Language Ecology of Singapore." *Ecology of Language*, edited by Creese, Angela, Peter Martin, and Nancy Hornberger, Springer, 2008, pp. 99-111.
- Hillier, Jean, and Gareth Abrahams. *Deleuze and Guattari: Jean Hillier in Conversation with Gareth Abrahams*. Association of European Schools of Planning, 2013.
- Hongoh, Joseph. "The Asian-African Conference (Bandung) and Pan-Africanism: The Challenge of Reconciling Continental Solidarity with National Sovereignty." *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 70, no. 4, 2016, pp. 374-390.
- Huang, Weiliang (黄维梁). "学科正名论: 华语语系文学与汉语新文学" (Course Rectification: Sinophone Literature and New Han-Language Literature). *Fujian Luntan*, no. 1, 2013, pp.105-111.
- Kwee, Tek Hoay. *The Rose of Cikembang*, translated by Fowler, George A., Lontar, 2013.
- Kwee, Tek Hoay. "Bunga Roos Dari Cikembang." *Kesastraan Melayu Tionghoa dan Kebangsaan Indonesia* (Chinese-Malay Literature and the Indonesian Nation), vol. 2., edited by Marcus, A.S. and Pax Benedanto, Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2001, pp. 297-425.
- Lionnet, Françoise, and Shu-mei Shih, editors. *Minor Transnationalism*. Duke UP, 2005.
- Mohamed, Mohamed Latiff. *Confrontation: A Novel*, translated by Selamat, Shafiq, Epigram, 2013.
- Mohamed, Mohamed Latiff. *Batas Langit* (Sky Limit), new ed. [1997]. Pustaka Nasional, 2014.
- Pakir, Anne. "The Range and Depth of English-knowing Bilinguals in Singapore." *World Englishes*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1991, pp. 167-179.
- Ramsay, Deanna. "Remembering an Overlooked Auteur." *Jakarta Post*, 31 Jan. 2012, p. 21.
- Said, Edward W. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Harvard UP, 1983.
- Shih, Shu-mei. "Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production." *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, edited by Shih, Shu-mei, Tsai Chien-hsin, and Brian Bernards, Columbia UP, 2013, pp. 25-42.
- Shih, Shu-mei. "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition." *PMLA*, vol. 119, no. 1, 2004, pp. 16-30.
- Sim, Chee Chiang. "Indonesian Pre-War Chinese Peranakan Writings as Indonesian 'Post-Colonial' Literary Texts." *Akademica*, no.74, 2008, pp. 21-39.
- Suryadinata, Leo, editor. *Southeast Asian Personalities of Chinese Descent: A Biographical Dictionary*, Iseas, 2012.
- Suryadinata, Leo. *Eminent Indonesian Chinese - Biographical Sketches*, revised ed., Gunung Agung, 1981.
- Tan, Chee Lay (陈志锐). "从三篇作品窥见新华文学双文化原乡的构建" (Constructing a Bicultural Nativity in Singapore Chinese Literature: A Close Reading of Three Works). *Huawen Wenxue*, no. 2, 2012, pp. 106-111.
- Thum, Ping Tjin. "'Flesh and Bone Reunite as One Body': Singapore's Chinese-speaking and their Perspectives on Merger." *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, vol. 5, 2011-2012, pp. 29-56.
- Wang, Der-wei (王德威). "华夷风起: 马来西亚与华语语系文学" (Sino-Foreign-Wind-Rising: Malaysia and Sinophone Literature). *Shijie Huawen Wenxue Luntan*, no. 1, 2016, pp. 5-17.
- Wang, Der-wei. "Sailing to the Sinophone World: On Modern Chinese Literary Cartography." The Chineseness of Chinese Literature. Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities, Cambridge, UK. 20 May 2014. Lecture.
- Warwick research collective. *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*. Liverpool UP, 2015.

**Author's profile:** Wai-chew Sim teaches English in the School of Humanities, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has research interests in Postcolonial studies, Sinophone studies, and Comparative Literature. Email: <[wcsim@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:wcsim@ntu.edu.sg)>. For more information, please go to: <https://blogs.ntu.edu.sg/wcsim/>