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Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora (review)

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Jing Tsu, *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora*
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010, 306 pp.

Jing Tsu makes a provocative claim in the conclusion to her newest book: “whatever appeal Sinophone studies now has, it will need to establish stronger dialogical roots in the long history of diaspora and migration in all its disarticulated forms” (234). The revelatory importance of linking China to its diasporic sites of linguistic and literary production reframes the terrain of study from one that positions China as the unified center from which all discussions about Chinese-language literature emerge and return. In this moment of globalization Jing Tsu’s *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora* asks readers to step back and critically contend with multifaceted, polynodal presentations of Chinese as language and literature. Her textured and illuminating analyses of native language and writing debates, technological innovations, and the politics implicit in linguistic standardization open up possibilities for engaging with identity and “all its attendant concepts of nativism, nostalgia, nationalism, and ‘Chineseness’” (13). Deeply grounded in the intricacies of language and literature, Jing Tsu provides entrée into the complex study of Chinese in a time of global movements of people, languages, cultural products, and knowledge from a theoretical understanding of how phonetics, orthography, literacy, and migration connect and fracture dependent on location. Rather than pitting an undifferentiated monolithic Chinese language against its seemingly lesser diasporic relatives, Jing Tsu deftly exposes the submerged linguistic assumptions that support a literary field; she takes the dyad of “sound and script” as the contentious starting point for her enlightening study.

Since the 1990s cultural critics and feminist theorists have underscored how we must rethink modernist notions of a unified and unquestioned Chinese identity and language. Proposing a literary process she calls “literary governance,” Jing Tsu examines the local and global tensions that arise between how one accesses the language and script and the persistent reliance on the concept of a primary linguistic home (2). Her scholarship remains closely tethered to analyses of nationalism to understand the process of literary governance. At the heart of her study is an attentiveness to linguistic nativity. Questions of authentic speaker—“native speaker”—inform discussions of language learning and usage. Jing Tsu provides a new way to conceptualize this struggle: instead of taking linguistic competence as innate to certain speakers, she unmask the politics in play with regard to linguistic nativity. She explains and demonstrates that “networks of normalization operate both within and outside of monolingual national traditions, motivating writers and readers to observe a common currency of language” (3). She unveils the

functioning of these operations over the course of her book, thereby destabilizing reductive concepts about the nation, mother tongue, and the primacy of native speakers to literary production.

The scope of Jing Tsu's research details key historical and socio-political moments impacting Chinese language and literature that attest to the interwoven threads of nationalism and globalization. Whether in the technological advances brokered through a new typewriter or the scholarly and politic endeavors in the mid-20th century to craft a world literature, Chinese language has been invested in nationalism within a global forum. The Chinese-language typewriter is a physical incarnation of this phenomenon. In chapter three Jing Tsu tells a compelling history of the Chinese language typewriter and the man who patented it in the U.S., Lin Yutang. Positioned against a cultural war over the medium of writing, where world literacy was seen as the exclusive purview of alphabetic script, Lin Yutang conceptualized a reclassification system that broke up the traditional inventory of Chinese characters as inherently non-alphabetic and instead treated stroke order as serial manifestations of the ideographic. This innovation, made manifest in the Chinese-language typewriter, demonstrates "how the technologization of writing advanced the aims of a national language into an international arena" (78), but only through engagement with other worldly sites of technological production.

When we consider languages and literatures as "going global" a certain post-modern freewheeling tendency can creep into the realm of translation theory. Jing Tsu turns away from any easy pomo liberation that abrogates the linguistic, cultural and geo-political border tensions surrounding and informing the literary mobility of Chinese-English translations. She provides a critical analysis of Chinese Anglophone writers, in particular Eileen Chang and Ha Jin, to theorize how their bilingualism manifests an ambivalent linguistic and literary practice by raising "questions of accountability in the freedom of linguistic and cultural mobility" (81). Jing Tsu's explication of the linguistic dilemma Chang confronted in translating her novel *Yuuannü* revokes the weary cliché that "something is lost in translation." Her analysis reveals that the tensions between Chinese and English in the translation are irresolvable into bilingual fluency. It is in that moment of collision between Anglophonic and Sinophonic worlds—that moment when the disarticulated movement between languages creates discomfort for readers—that Chang as author finds linguistic freedom. This discussion, along with an intriguing analysis of the alleged plagiarism in Ha Jin's *War Trash* plus innovative readings of Chinese Malaysian literature, opens the door for a reexamination of geo-social linguistic authority, cultural identity, and the politics of translation for educators teaching Chinese Anglophone writers in U.S. classrooms. Jing Tsu perceptively suggests, "The lesson to be taken from worldwide circulation of Chinese writing is that going global renews local concerns" over use, translation, and authenticity (234).

For educators who might feel overwhelmed by the vastness of Chinese literary history and the complexity of the language, *Sound and Script in the Chinese Diaspora* will prove an intriguing read. For scholars of Chinese the book will be thought-provoking. Jing Tsu shows us the internal dynamics of a linguistic realm one might think of as monolithic and impervious to outside influence. Throughout her analysis of the phonetic, semantic, and aesthetic aspects of the language, she underscores the reflexivity of literary production and the polyvalences in the linguistic field that is Chinese. She pinpoints the crux of the current terrain for Sino-phone writing by signaling how its individuation “ultimately depends on the intersection between location and language in constructing a sense of nativity that can be as powerful as it is dividing” (17). Readers of *Sound and Script in the Chinese Diaspora* will value Jing Tzu’s timely intervention into a complex arena of linguistic and literary studies. Her contributions to the concept and praxis of literary governance set the scene for future interrogations into the established and emerging literary (cyber)geographies of Chinese and its diasporic iterations of linguistic power, identity, and culture.

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Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic
in American Popular Culture*

New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 256 pp.

Although the suburbs have become a dominant space in both the U.S. housing market and in the American popular imagination, few literary critics have studied the fictions they inspire. Bernice M. Murphy’s *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* not only offers an important addition to this under-explored field, but also indicates the need for further analysis of the genre. The books, films, and television shows that Murphy examines reveal skepticism toward the rapid expansion of post-war suburbs, and an anxiety about the conformity, materialism, and ecological damage they bring. This anxiety lends itself well to horror and supernatural plots, in which “one is almost always in more danger from the people in the house next door, or one’s own family, than from external threats” (2). While she rightly contradicts social critics like Lewis Mumford, who portrayed suburban sprawl as an inherently corruptive force, Murphy does claim that the widespread growth of suburbia has not been accompanied by a proper examination of its demands and effects. This lack of reflection necessitates the study of suburban fiction, as the frequent use of horror tropes reveals lingering concerns about community and belonging in post-war America.