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Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora (review)

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ican imperialism in the first decade of the twenty-first century, a time when the discourses of empire and the rhetorics of civilizing missions (and their necessary savages) have made a dramatic comeback. *Tropics of Savagery* is thus guided, Tierney writes “by the conviction that we can deepen our awareness of history and better understand our present times by examining the rhetoric of a defunct empire” (p. 6). In asking us to reexamine our own notions of savagery, conquest, and empire, *Tropics of Savagery* is in good company with the finest of recent books like the Classics scholar Tim Rood’s *American Anabasis: Xenophon and the Idea of America from the Mexican War to Iraq*.¹⁰ Both works ask us to engage the past in order to engage the present, and they eloquently testify to the fact that Kipling clearly holds no monopoly on narratives of imperial conquest.

Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora BY JING TSU.

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. Pp. xii + 306.

\$45.00.

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Jing Tsu’s outstanding new book *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora* perceptively analyzes the institutionalization and dissemination of the modern Chinese language from the late nineteenth century to the present by focusing on sinophone writing in the Chinese-speaking world and on key bilingual forays. This study investigates everything from recent calls for the merger of simplified and traditional Chinese scripts—calls that reflect not only the largest divide in the modern Chinese language but also the greater, enduring conflict between spoken sounds and written script—to lesser known contentions about the modern Chinese language in the literatures of its diasporic communities around the world. Discrediting common perceptions of the “native language,” including renowned literary scholar Claudio Guillén’s assumption of “biological delight” in the literature of one’s “mother tongue,” Tsu rightly argues that with global migration, multilingual

¹⁰ Tim Rood, *American Anabasis: Xenophon and the Idea of America from the Mexican War to Iraq* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2010).

upbringings, and forcible alienation from early languages, linguistic nativity no longer can be taken as a “once-and-for-all endowment” (p. 12). Instead, to use Jing Tsu’s words, this nativity is a “repeating process of acquisition”; entry into language is a privilege, one that, marketed under rubrics such as “mother tongue,” “literacy,” and “standard language,” is unevenly distributed. The implications of this insight are significant and require us to rethink the production of national languages and literatures, as well as that of literature and criticism more generally. Tsu analyzes “sinophone” as primarily a problem of sound and script, making her book a groundbreaking work in sinophone studies. This volume is also essential reading for scholars and students of Chinese literature, comparative literature, world literature, cultural studies, and diaspora studies.

One of the most important contributions of *Sound and Script* is its introduction of the concept of “literary governance,” which Tsu describes as a global process that “emerges wherever there is an open or veiled, imposed or voluntary coordination between linguistic antagonisms and the idea of the ‘native speaker’” (p. 2). Literary governance, as Tsu understands it, differs from Michel Foucault’s notion of governmentality and from similar conceptions of state power. At the core of literary governance is the notion of linguistic nativity—something that can be both deeply personal and explicitly institutionalized but tends to support a range of linguistic allegiances, from centers of literary and cultural prestige to disregarded margins. The term “governance” emphasizes strategies of collaboration across different occasions of language use, and Tsu is careful to note that her use of the concept of governance does not signify control from the top down, but instead points to the ways that “linguistic alliances and literary production organize themselves around incentives of recognition and power” (p. 12). The “linguistic antagonisms” of literary governance result from tensions between, on the one hand, the political and material processes of accessing language and script through learned orthography and, on the other, reliance on a notion of a primary, naturalized linguistic home (the “mother tongue”) to support cultural cohesiveness. The conflicting dimensions of such phenomena as language standardization and reform, native speakers and mother tongues, and national literatures and diasporic writings can result in strong rivalries. But they also somewhat paradoxically can facilitate local, national, and global

literary cooperation. Ingeniously examining language as a “medium of access” rather than a “right to identity,” *Sound and Script* reveals how the Chinese language, as “national” or “mother” tongue, travels across borders of all kinds. This allows us to reconceptualize notions of identity—and concepts such as nativism, nostalgia, and nationalism, as well as “Chineseness”—as spaces for manipulating linguistic capital. Even more importantly, especially for scholars of comparative literature, Tsu highlights how scholars have minimized subnational differences in order to highlight nation-based comparisons. The book more than lives up to its stated aim of providing “a framework that compels an account of the hidden linguistic assumptions that support the governance of any literary field” (p. 14).

Sound and Script is divided into eight chapters, including an introduction, each of which insightfully discusses an aspect of literary governance by focusing on a specific linguistic issue. Chapter 2 examines the late nineteenth-century historical construction of Chinese as a national language. The chapter opens with a reference to Wang Zhao’s draft proposal for the “Mandarin alphabet” (*guanhua zimu*), a new phonetic writing system for the Mandarin dialect of Chinese that he developed during his two-year exile in Tokyo. Tsu then segues into a discussion of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century attempts to change the Chinese writing system, believed by many to be at fault for China’s “evolutionary belatedness” (p. 18). She tracks the materiality of the Chinese language, offering a fascinating discussion of experiments with phonetic scripts that were intended to take the place of Chinese characters and ultimately unify language. She also emphasizes the broader importance of late Qing script reforms that instigated continued language wars and struggles for cultural identity both within China and across translocal networks.

Tsu’s focus on “the materiality of modern writing in relation to the variability in speech” (p. 19) opens new pathways in the study of modern Chinese-language literature. Most impressive in the second chapter is how Tsu builds on the notion of the sinophone as articulated by Shu-mei Shih and others.¹ By focusing on the uneasy alliances between sound and script in Chinese writing, Tsu demonstrates the

¹ See, for instance, Andrea Riemenschneider and Deborah L. Madsen, eds., *Diasporic Histories: Cultural Archives of Chinese Transnationalism* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009); Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across*

importance of recognizing the multiplicity of linguistic and cultural mediums, and of looking beyond national authority and individual institutions. Here she ingeniously examines not intonations as a matter of style within a defined literary space—as is customary in scholarship on Chinese, East Asian, and comparative literature—but, instead, “how spoken sounds enter the arena of textual combat at all” (p. 21).

Chapter 3 examines further pursuits of the power of a national, standard language by turning to the famed Chinese bilingual anglophone writer Lin Yutang and his Chinese-language typewriter in particular. Tsu convincingly argues that the new technology of writing signified by the Chinese typewriter—for which Lin filed a patent application with the U.S. Patent Office in 1946 after thirty years of research and experimentation—had significant ramifications during the Cold War. Lin’s method of Chinese-language classification, which made the logograph commutable into an alphabetic logic of sequentiality, solidified the perception that the Chinese language is directly opposed to alphabetic writing. By setting the typewriter to Chinese radicals rather than alphabetic keys, Lin countered entrenched perceptions of the alphabet as a superior, more civilized form of script. Tsu here uncovers the forgotten history of how Lin’s typewriter, which appeared at the critical juncture between the mechanical and the computer ages, joined the global struggle for language dominance.

Especially noteworthy is Tsu’s discussion of Lin’s conception of pidgin English. For Lin, pidgin English was “neither creole nor patois.” Instead, it was “retranslation, created through a secondary export from Chinese back into English” (pp. 62–63). Lin saw translation as a “distinct, and even proud, process of retribalization toward anti-institutional language use. . . . By defining translation as pidgin, Lin thereby underscores the force of nativist transformation whenever English is absorbed in a foreign tongue. . . . included in Lin’s notion of pidgin English are also transliterations that might not carry any semantic meaning but that serve the sole purpose of resetting the sound of an utterance, as in ‘the already popular *tu-se* (‘toast’) in modern Chinese usage” (p. 63). Also significant is how Tsu redefines the rivalry between the Chinese character and Basic (British American Scientific

the Pacific (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang, eds., *Global Chinese Literature: Critical Essays* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

International Commercial) English as a matter not of the exercise of imperial or national power but, instead, of “naming the very linguistic condition by which one can participate in globality at all” (p. 63). It was, after all, this typewriter that “catapulted the Chinese language to the forefront of the competing technologies of global languages” (p. 80). The chapter’s concluding section on the impact of Lin’s typewriter on the era of machine translation is equally absorbing, particularly in its observation that Lin’s indexical system, unlike Norbert Wiener’s prediction that Chinese would serve as another code for English, undermined “the basic assumption of the alphabetic ‘word’ as the irreducible unit in translation by offering a logic of the alphabetic ideograph” (p. 77). Tsu’s book here reveals how the technologization of writing brings a national language into an international arena, crossing boundaries between native and nonnative Chinese speakers and users.

Chapter 4 places Lin Yutang in the context of other Chinese anglophone writers, including Eileen Chang and Ha Jin, “who share a sense of betrayal because of the language they use” (p. 81). Eschewing the familiar focus on translation that often characterizes studies of multilingualism, Tsu examines what happens when creative texts cannot make linguistic crossings (when, as Tsu argues, they literally cannot be successfully translated), or when they cross linguistic borders so successfully that writers are accused of plagiarism. *Sound and Script* also interrogates the very concepts of translation and bilingualism, examining the passageways they open between audiences and the world, as well as the function of linguistic allegiances in a world requiring make-shift alliances. This chapter argues provocatively and convincingly for translation to be understood as “enforcing new closures” even as it “grows meanings” (p. 82).

Tsu demonstrates how Lin and other writers are “too bilingual for [their] own good” (p. 89); not only do they lack a single linguistic comfort zone, but also their facility in switching languages comes with real consequences, most notably, their becoming arbiters of a false commonality. Tsu rightly notes that “the concern is less the native informant’s betrayal, or the foreign Sinologist’s imperfectly mastered understanding, than the native speaker’s undecided relation to the national object behind the Chinese language” (pp. 91–92) as well as to audiences both anglophone and Chinese. Rather than theorizing, or even romanticizing bilingual writers as mobile intermediaries,

as is customary among literary scholars, Tsu reveals them as products of the contradictions between two cultural worlds, and thus as being neither broker nor agent. Lin Yutang provides an intriguing comparison with Eileen Chang, whose self-translations were commercial failures, as well as with Ha Jin, who has been sharply criticized for betraying the mother tongue. Most interesting here is how Lin Yutang, Eileen Chang, and Ha Jin all use one dominant language against another (English against Chinese, Chinese against English), raising issues of loyalty and allegiance to multiple cultures. Tsu turns to the linguistic encounter between Chinese and French in the following chapter in the context of early twentieth-century Chinese conceptions of world literature. But the discussions of Chinese-anglophone writers in Chapter 4 might have benefited from comparison with their Chinese-francophone, lusophone, or japanophone counterparts. In addition, Tsu might have further theorized the notion of untranslatability to address the varying degrees of difficulty that translating into different languages poses. (For example, a Chinese-language text that cannot cross the linguistic border into English might be translatable into Japanese.)

By reconceptualizing the Chinese language as a global medium that gains and loses power through accommodation and access, the fifth chapter turns to the global space in which Chinese literary production operates. Tsu discusses late nineteenth-century Chinese conceptions of world literature, focusing on Chen Jitong, the first bilingual Chinese francophone writer, and his insights into how China could most effectively navigate an international political space where literary and cultural capital depended on access to a world audience. *Sound and Script* shows that world literature for Chen Jitong and his contemporaries was part of a larger rivalry between French and Chinese, and ultimately Eastern and Western, cultures; invocations of world literature were “part of an elaborate, long-range strategy to reintroduce China’s dominance at the heart of the world vision” (p. 113). Their approach involved creating “a supranational arena that would elevate national [including Chinese] interests under the guise of transcending them” (p. 125), one that “restructures the modality of competition and international rivalry through the civil governance of letters” (p. 126). Yet it also ignored the fact that “Chinese literature” can be multicentric and thus that China’s place in the world cannot be understood in

monolithic terms. In fact, as Tsu rightly argues, although China is part of the sinophone world, it is not necessarily at its center, with Taiwan posing the greatest challenges to its dominance.

Chapter 6 elaborates on the case of Taiwan, where linguistic tensions are particularly acute. Tsu highlights the island's distinct paradox of linguistic modernity and nativist intentions by focusing on its history of foreign orthography. This history includes interventions in the Taiwanese vernacular and attempted romanizations, most notably by the early social reformer Cai Peihuo. Also significant are the contemporary Taiwanese writer Song Zelai's attempts to revive writing in the mother tongue. In this chapter Tsu breaks new ground in revealing how discourse on the Taiwanese language, projecting a vision beyond the sinophone world, has done far more than simply carve out space within a Sinitic cultural system. Focusing on the larger orthographic changes and linguistic experiments that inform literary texts, Tsu exposes the multidisciplinary conceptions of Chinese-language literature necessary to an understanding of linguistic nativity in Taiwan. She astutely discusses how Taiwanese, a language most of whose native speakers barely know in its written form, has attempted "to regain its rightful status as the original host of a linguistic setting that was one-sidedly claimed by Japanese and Mandarin" (p. 173). But even while speakers of Taiwanese struggle to establish their language as the "mother tongue," and as an important and autonomous literary voice, they further marginalize less-established tongues and peoples. Tsu rightly notes that "the way in which a language of minor status claims its own capacity to accommodate and efface other emerging tongues puts literary governance at the core of all scales of literary practices and the politics of language" (p. 173). Comparisons within the literary corpus of a national language function similarly to those between national literatures—in both cases, the fulcrum of comparison rests on the national language as the privilege of the "native speaker."

In Chapters 7 and 8 the spotlight moves to Malaysian Chinese literature, currently one of the most dynamic sites of Chinese-language literary struggle. Chapter 7 focuses on the author and critic Kim Chew Ng as a prism through which to contemplate the phenomenon of linguistic allegiance and to interrogate notions of native speakers and mother tongues. *Sound and Script* places Ng's fictional dialogues in the context of the north-south divide between Mandarin and other

dialects of Chinese that initially defined the terms of national-language standardization in the Mandarin-dominated sinoscape. The book demonstrates how Ng and other writers reconfigured notions of lineage, genealogy, and kinship to highlight the segmentations enacted by diaspora and have thereby revealed the permeability of lines of cultural descent. In so doing, they have explicitly confronted traditional sino-centrism and modern Chinese literary genealogies.

Chapter 8 examines additional challenges to the Chinese center, ones that enact vital changes through cohabitation and accommodation. Tsu's focus here is Zhang Guixing, a writer whose manipulation of the pictograph, the quintessential sinoscript, offers new perspectives on the difficulties of accessing education in Chinese during British colonial rule and postcolonial independence in Malaysia. Zhang's attention to both the philosophical origins and the privilege of writing compels us to think about language as a space of both local and foreign habitation, concepts that are visually represented in the work of the Chinese artists Gu Wenda and Xu Bing. Xu, for instance, envisions the Chinese language as "the substrate of all languages, ideographic or alphabetic" (p. 230). His experiments with sinographic writing actively adapt the Chinese language into a global literary medium, one that is "user friendly." They reveal the new face of literary governance, one operated by "linguistic hospitality and assimilationist diplomacy" (p. 231).

Sound and Script aptly demonstrates the deep complexities and ambiguities of sinophone writing, showing how it belongs to multiple spaces and national languages and how its constructions of nativity can be at once solidifying and dividing. Examining sinophone linguistic and literary phenomena from around the world and throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with constant references to earlier phenomena, Tsu ably guides the reader from the standardization of the modern Chinese language to the reclamation of this language by its diasporic writers and its appropriation in spaces of global linguistic rivalries and imaginings of world literature. Erudite, elegantly written, and brimming with important insights, challenging conventions and common assumptions at every turn, *Sound and Script* is a significant achievement.