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Book review: Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora

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dancing was one of the first practices to be reinvigorated in Shanghai life, this time seen in the ‘quaint pursuit of middle-aged to elderly Chinese in the parks and gardens of the city’ (p. 289).

Overall, this book is an impressive and stimulating historical work that successfully recreates for the reader a sense of what life was like in the cabarets and dance halls of Shanghai in the early to mid-20th century. The book effectively links the intimate details of the era to broader social and political events that shook China at the time. Moreover, it provides an important historical backdrop to the ongoing mystique of Shanghai as China’s most modern and cosmopolitan city today. There is enough in this book to titillate readers with a historical interest in a wide range of fields, including Chinese state–society relations, gender, class, architecture, city identities, nightlife, dance, music, and the media.

Jing Tsu, *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010; xii + 306 pp., with glossary, notes, index, and illustrations: 9780674055407, US\$45.00 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Henning Klöter, *Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany*

There are many generalizations about ‘the Chinese language’, among them claims that there is one Chinese language with the capital Beijing as its regional centre and an ‘ideographic’ character script as its intrinsic mode of written representation. Exploring the intersections of language, script, and literature in the Chinese diaspora, Jing Tsu’s study counters these and other generalizations and provides diverse and seemingly unrelated examples of Chinese diasporic communities, past and present.

Central to her analysis is the notion of ‘literary governance’ which is defined in the first chapter. In Tsu’s words, literary governance ‘develops from both local and global tensions between the ongoing political and material processes of how one can access a language and script through learned orthography, on the one hand, and the continual reliance on a notion of a primary, naturalized linguistic home like the “mother tongue” to support expressions of cultural belonging, on the other’ (p. 2). The second chapter, entitled ‘Chinese lessons’, can be read as a chronological and thematic precursor of the subsequent chapter ‘Lin Yutang’s typewriter’. The former examines various attempts to challenge the cultural status of the Chinese character script by establishing phonetic coding devices for Chinese at the turn of the 20th century. Proposals ranged from a replacement of character writing with alphabetic writing to shorthand systems and hybrid scripts. The discourse on the status of Chinese character vis-a-vis alphabetic writing entered a new dimension in the first half of the 20th century, with the successful efforts of the US-based Chinese scholar and writer Li Yutang to develop a Chinese typewriter, effectively demonstrating ‘how the technologization of writing advanced the aims of a national language into an international arena’ (p. 78). In the chapter ‘Bilingual loyalty’, Tsu examines the status of English and Chinese as literary languages and languages of translation in the works of the bilingual authors Lin Yutang, Eileen Chang, and Ha Jin. One of her conclusions is that the ‘recurring issue is how they each, precisely as foreign speakers, used one dominant language against another’ (p. 110). The subsequent chapter examines the attempts of Chen Jitong, an ‘oddly little remembered’ (p. 118) bilingual figure, in promoting the participation of Chinese literature

in world literature. The analysis closely links the work of Chen, who was based in France, to a historical contextualization of the concept 'world literature'. The chapter 'The missing script of Taiwan' examines the attempts of the Taiwanese intellectual and activist Cai Peihuo (1889–1983) and the literary writer Song Zelai (b. 1952) to establish a written form of the Taiwanese language (Southern Min) against the historical background of language debates and language policies after the 1920s and 1980s. Tsu concludes her journey through the linguistic and literary diaspora with two chapters ('Look-alikes and bad relations' and 'The elephant in the room') on Malaysian Chinese literature in the contexts of May Fourth discourses and Malaysian language policies.

The book is a must-read for students and scholars interested in the frictions that have arisen as standards of the spoken and written languages of China and taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes Chinese literature linguistically are challenged, renegotiated, and/or circumvented. One of the numerous merits of the study lies in its identification and rigorous analysis of common patterns that underlie very disparate examples, ranging from 19th-century phonetization schemes to contemporary Chinese literature from Malaysia. To be sure, some of the arguments call for caveats. For example, the analysis of the 'missing script of Taiwan' distinguishes Mandarin literature from local language (Taiwanese) literature. A Mandarin vs Taiwanese dichotomy, however, cannot be applied equally for the early and the late 20th century. Whereas Mandarin was virtually foreign to Taiwan's linguistic environment in the early 20th century, it is now widely used and, especially in northern Taiwan, it is the first language of many members of the younger generation. This fundamental change in the linguistic ecology deserves more attention in the treatment of a concept such as 'mother tongue', which is central to many of the book's arguments. Another critical remark pertains to a lack of precision in the use of linguistic terminology, such as 'tone', in a study that is primarily concerned with language-related phenomena. However, these remarks are not intended to question the outstanding overall quality of Tsu's book. Combined with a brilliant writing style, the study provides a multifaceted analysis that will be of special interest to scholars in comparative literature, translation studies, and sociolinguistics.

Xu Guoqi, *Strangers on the Western Front: Chinese Workers in the Great War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011; 366 pp. with appendix, notes, glossary, bibliography, acknowledgments, and index: 9780674049994, US\$39.95 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, *Pace University New York, USA*

In the opening scene of the 2010 movie *Legend of the Fist: The Return of Chen Zhen*, the martial arts master Chen Zhen (played by Donnie Yen) was among dozens of Chinese labourers trapped in a Great War battle between the advancing German army and retreating French troops. With the aid of Hong Kong-styled action choreography and advanced computer graphics, the film shows how Chen stormed the German military strongholds and rescued fellow Chinese countrymen. Despite this cinematic portrayal of their heroism, the history of Chinese workers in wartime Europe remains an under-researched topic. The author of the book under review, Xu Guoqi, is to be commended for his valuable contribution in threading together the wartime experiences of Chinese labourers working for Britain