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Sinophone Classicism: Chineseness as Temporal and Mnemonic Experience in the Digital Era

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Abstract

In recent decades, highly heterogeneous literary and artistic articulations harking back to China's classical past have gained increasing currency in the global Sinophone space and cyberspace. Instead of dismissing them as "fetishisms" or authenticating them as "Chinese traditions," I propose "Sinophone classicism" as a new critical expression for conceptualizing this diverse array of articulations. It refers to the appropriation, redeployment, and reconfiguration of cultural memories evoking Chinese aesthetic and intellectual traditions for local, contemporary, and vernacular uses, by agents identified or self-identified as Chinese. This essay proposes a subjective, intimate, and reflexive way to experience an individual's culturally acquired "Chineseness" that is temporal, mnemonic, and often mediated by digital media. It joins recent scholarly efforts to dismantle the view of "Chinese modernity" as a monocentric and homogenous experience by refocusing on classicism as a kind of "antimodern modernism." It also joins the post-Eurocentric turn in global academia by hinting at a future of "global classicisms."

Keywords: canonicity; Chineseness; classicism; cultural memory; invented tradition; modernity; post-Eurocentrism; postmodernism; Sinophone

In a YouTube music video titled "My New Swag" (2017), the Chinese rapper Vava liberally blends visual and acoustic elements from period drama and Peking Opera into a mellifluous flow in Mandarin, Sichuanese, and English. In May 2021, the celebrated Taiwanese calligrapher Tong Yang-tze 董陽孜, in collaboration with six fashion designers, opened in Taipei the fifth *From Ink to Apparel* exhibition, showcasing possible ways of "wearing" classical Chinese calligraphic art. On October 17, 2021, a group of young locals dressed in reinvented ethnic clothing known as *hanfu* 漢服 performed the "climbing high" ritual on the Double Ninth Day (in the traditional Chinese calendar) in a park in Kuala Lumpur, while wearing the de rigueur surgical masks. Online poetry and novels, linguistically and stylistically inspired by premodern Chinese literature, are increasingly common, defying the narrative of a teleological "literary revolution" (*wenxue geming* 文學革命) canonized in historiographies and institutions of modern Chinese literature. Fantasy fictions with classicist elements published on Chinese websites have achieved viral success. Adapted into manga, video games, audio drama, films, and TV series, they contribute to an emerging Sinophone youth culture in cyberspace saturated with fragments of aesthetic classicism.

These are not isolated anachronisms. In recent decades, literary and artistic articulations harking back to China's classical past have gained increasing popularity in the global Sinophone space and cyberspace. Ranging from revived (and reinvented) traditions to hybrid orientalism, pastiche, and avant-gardism, these phenomena encompass textual, visual, sonic, and performative expressions that are highly heterogeneous in genre, register, function, and agency. No scholarly conceptualization so far has captured this dazzling diversity and ebullient energy. As this classicist surge coincides with China's rise in economic and military power, researchers have been alarmed by the ostensible cultural nationalism in the discourse of some cultural producers and consumers in promoting their tastes to convey identity, driven by political as well as commercial incentives. While in some cases these

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cautions are abundantly justified, labels like "Han supremacism" in describing a grassroots fashion trend in mainland China (see, e.g., Leibold 2010) or "fetishism" when it represents the voluntary choices of Sinophone writers outside the People's Republic of China (PRC) (see, e.g., Shih 2013, 62) appear reductionist in summarizing the manifold motivations of individuals across groups, peoples, and cultures. Furthermore, by choosing to contextualize these practices exclusively in the narrative of a rising PRC threat, such criticisms may reflect the phantom of the Cold War that continues to overshadow Western academic discourse (Wang 2018, 20). We lack a critical term that would enable scholars to study such practices dispassionately as a pan-Sinophone and cross-cultural trend, powered by complicated factors as much ideological as aesthetic, cultural, and social.

This article proposes the concept of "Sinophone classicism" to address this paradigmatic lacuna. As a working definition, it refers to the appropriation, redeployment, and reconfiguration of cultural memories harking back to Chinese aesthetic and intellectual traditions for local, contemporary, and vernacular uses. The agents of cultural remembrance include all individuals identified or self-identified as "Chinese" living in the transnational Sinophone space, or wherever the Sinitic languages are used for cultural creation. Their purposes are diverse, local, context specific, multidimensional, and, at times, self-conflicting. By stressing the dimensionality of Sinophone culture rather than its substantiality, I follow Arjun Appadurai's (1996, 13) suggestion to think of culture "less as a property of individuals and groups and more as a heuristic device that we can use to talk about differences." Whenever this article uses the term "Chinese" or "Sinophone" in association with culture, it is a heuristic device rather than a suggestion of any essentialized, homogenous, or overdetermined ontological entity. I also use the plural form "Sinophone classicisms" when the diversity of the phenomena is stressed, while the singular form signifies their commonality.

My motivation for proposing this concept is as much academic as it is personal. First, on the academic side, this concept grows out of my interest in modern and contemporary Chinese poetry following classical genre conventions. I previously suggested calling it "classicist poetry" to underline the fact that it is part and parcel of modern Chinese literature and that its lasting appeal among authors and readers implies an alternative vision of literary modernity (Z. Yang 2015, 2018; Z. Yang and Ma 2018). There have been crucial works on this type of poetry pioneered by leading scholars (e.g., Ko 2016; Kowallis 2006; Lam 2015; Tian 2009; Wu 2013; H. Yang 2016). Our synergy led to a "Frankfurt Consensus," cosigned after a symposium held in Frankfurt in 2014 to encourage the study of modern classicist poetry, to affirm the "vitality, continuity, and power of rebirth" of Chinese literary tradition, and to rewrite modern Chinese literary history (Z. Yang et al. 2015).

Over the years, I have further noted the broad array of aesthetic classicisms gaining popularity across Sinophone communities. The term "Chinese tradition" appears ill-fitting. For one, it is predicated on the ahistorical fallacy of a homogenous, continuous, and indigenous tradition stemming from the geopolitical entity of today's PRC. Second, many of these communities have problematic relations with Chineseness, because of complicated historical, political, ethnic, and cultural factors. Third, this term obscures the culturally hybrid nature of these articulations as well as their decentralized production and consumption, today further empowered by digital technologies. "Sinophone classicism," in contrast, is a more dynamic and inclusive concept. It contains both descriptive and prescriptive connotations. It is an objective description of a recent cultural trend, and its application entails no judgment of aesthetic values (or lack thereof) or ideological agenda. Yet this statement of neutrality also implies an idealist aspiration. This paradigm aims to enable Sinophone communities to create aesthetic expressions that foster a sense of "root" while remaining fully aware of its constructed and hybrid nature, as the term "classicism" has already discarded the pretense of continuity. It does not wistfully deny that different agents of "Sinophone classicism" have vastly different purposes, some in the service of Han chauvinist and hegemonic agendas. The diversity of the phenomena and of their ends will be examined through case studies throughout the article.

On the personal level, this concept helps address my own complicated feelings toward Chineseness. On February 4, 2022, while revising this article, I opened the German ZDF TV home page to watch the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics. After the hoisting of the Chinese national flag, on a darkened stage, laser-projected blue ink began to materialize in thin air. It condensed into a blue waterfall that cascaded into a river washing over the giant LED stage. I found myself instantly in tears,

silently reciting the Tang poet Li Bai's 李白 poem "Please, Drink!" (*Qiang jinjiu* 將進酒): "The water of the Yellow River descends from the sky; / it gallops eastward to the ocean, never turning back." It feels like a metaphor of my own journey, from China to the United States and then to Germany. While the German TV commentators were struggling with the symbolism, I continued to recite the next line, this time loudly: "Parents looking into a bright mirror lament their greying hair; / that dark silk in the morning has turned into snow at dusk" (Li 2007, 225). A poem that I had committed to memory as a child, it uncannily resonated with the present moment, as I had not seen my aging parents since the beginning of the pandemic. I was fully aware that my emotional response was engineered by a patriarchic power. But it worked: where culturally less informed viewers saw a big-budget, high-tech gimmick, this diasporic intellectual was mesmerized by the visualization of her lyric fantasy, an echo of her intimate dream crystalized a continent away and transmitted to her desk over a web of ethereal codes.

Since the enciphered cultural memory (see the section "Chineseness as a Temporal and Mnemonic Experience") whispers to those who can decipher, the hermeneutic process at once creates a community of memory and of sentiment. At that moment, I was confronted with a visceral lingo-cultural nostalgia, my own scholarly rationality or political persuasion notwithstanding. While empathizing with Rey Chow's (1998) "Chineseness as a theoretical problem," Allen Chun's (Chun 1996, 2017) proposal to "fuck" or "forget" Chineseness, and Ien Ang's (1998) question "Can one say no to Chineseness?," I would like to add that knowing Chineseness to be a discursive construct does not make the experience of it less visceral. As Arjun Appadurai (1990, 92) notes, emotions have a "linguistic life" that draws on embodied experience. Cultural remembrance may happen involuntarily. In some cases, the very act of saying no to Chineseness reaffirms one's Chineseness, however ambivalent. As this article argues, Chineseness may be a mnemonic, temporal, and contextualized experience, often activated by cultural memory transmitted via media technology. It is a dynamic, polyvocal, and nonexclusive identity, "the work of the imagination" that has entered the logic of ordinary life dissociated from particular loci (Appadurai 1996, 5). While providing a sense of continuity for the agent of remembrance, the intensive experience of it also creates disjuncture with her immediate environment, reaffirming at the same time her belonging and alienation—the curious, fragmented subjectivity in the age of global mobility.

In the following, I first expatiate on the concept of "Sinophone classicism." Both "Sinophone" and "classicism" are richly invested as well as highly contested terms. Conjoining them necessarily generates new questions. This article offers an exploratory cartography of the problematique. I then examine in some depth a few case studies from literature, pop music, fashion, and consumer culture to illustrate its applicability. It provides basis for the proposal to see Chineseness as a temporal and mnemonic experience. In the end, I offer some preliminary reflections on digital mediality and on how "Sinophone classicism" may contribute to a discursive shift beyond a Eurocentric debate about "classics" and toward an inclusive vision of "cross-cultural classicisms."

Working Definition

My working definition of "Sinophone classicism," as proposed earlier, refers to the appropriation, redeployment, and reconfiguration of cultural memories harking back to Chinese aesthetic and intellectual traditions for local, contemporary, and vernacular uses. It remains for now a working definition, since more scholars of various specializations need to join forces to enrich the understanding of its full potentials and problems. It contains the following interlinked arguments.

First, while the Han ethnic region in premodern China was traditionally the geopolitical center of cultural production, the current trends of classicism, powered by the new digital media that knit global Sinophone communities into an increasingly tight network, are decentralized, multilingual, multinational, and cross-cultural. This is particularly the case when China's great firewall digitally divides the realities experienced by inhabitants of various Sinophone cyberspaces, each with its own texts, contexts, shibboleths, dialects, idioms, and linguae francae—including Sinitic languages like Cantonese, Hakka, and Hokkien, national languages like Malay and Indonesian, as well as English as a first, second, or third language. Modern standard Mandarin, together with its ideological, political, and cultural implications, is but one of the many linguae francae spoken across Sinophone communities.

Second, classicism can be, but is not intrinsically, conservative, hegemonic, or (in the postcolonial discourse) imperialist. Cultural articulations that evoke the Chinese past may serve entirely different ends, ranging from chauvinistic and nationalist to their opposites. Sinophone communities are dispersed around the world, and each community has its own historical experience with modernity, colonialism, nation building, and democratization. Since Chinese traditions were generally suppressed during the Maoist era, aside from some practices such as classical poetry, which were exploited for political agendas, the postmodern came hand in hand with the postsocialist and the postrevolutionary in the PRC, which sometimes appears in the form of a haunting nostalgia for the premodern (Dirlik 2011; Dirlik and Zhang 2000). Recently, however, the Chinese state has launched public initiatives to fill the ideological vacuum with pastiche that mobilizes traditional ruling philosophies in the service of an authoritarian state that justifies its hold on power by its success in steering a market economy. In Fredric Jameson's (1998, 98) words, such pastiche is a performance of the older philosophical moves as though they still had a content, which have long become "simulacra, the somnambulistic speech of a subject long since historically extinct." On the other hand, because of the concrete historical circumstances that have shaped overseas Sinophone communities, these classicist articulations may ally themselves with anticolonialism or with minority identity politics against the hegemonic majority culture. As for suppressed minorities in Han majority states, such as the Taiwanese Aboriginals or the Chinese Uighurs, the state promotion of these traditions may be perceived as chauvinist if not colonial.

Third, the evoked cultural memories are associated with the Chinese classical past, which by necessity is imagined and reconstructed. No individual or group has a privileged claim to this repertoire of cultural memory as a birthright. All individuals identified or self-identified as "Chinese" living in the transnational Sinophone space have the potential to behave as agents of cultural remembrance (or oblivion). While their power, prestige, influence, or cultural capital may differ, their right to access this mnemonic repertoire is equal.

This inclusive definition of "Sinophone classicism" leads to a new, though not the only, way to conceptualize Chineseness—namely, as a temporal and mnemonic experience. It must be constantly re-created and reaffirmed through the cultural remembrance of an imagined past. The agent of cultural remembrance hereby joins a temporal community bound by linguistic nostalgia as well as by a dynamic process of cultural re-creation.

Another implication of this paradigm is decoupling "Sinophone classicism" from Chinese cultural nationalism. The latter, its authoritarian twin, remains a phantom that frequently haunts its evocations. Since nationalism has become the dominant legitimating ideology for geopolitical entities in the modern world, for a non-Western postcolonial state, to become a "nation" often entails the rediscovery of native cultural roots, despite their constructed or "imagined" nature. The postcolonial identity, therefore, is often constructed in complicity with cultural nationalism (Dinter and Marquardt 2021). But postmodern conservatism is similarly rising in developed worlds, driven by the belief that liberal rationalism, marching under the banners of science and utilitarianism, was increasingly leading people to feel disconnected from their particular identities and the traditions and values associated with them (McManus 2020). Caution against the misuse of the past as chauvinistic mythology, however, should not lead to a blanket denunciation of any evocation of the past, since condemnation does not address the genuine grievance over the dystopic side of cosmopolitan homogenization. Instead, creative imagination is necessary to transform the past in the service of contemporary and local purposes. The paradigm "Sinophone classicism" is proposed to enable the rethinking of dynamic, multilayered, and evolving cultural exchanges among Sinophone communities, in constant vigilance against Han nationalism or cultural essentialism.

On the "Sinophone"

Since Shu-mei Shih coined the seminal concept of "Sinophone" in the early 2000s (Shih 2007, 2010, 2011; Shih, Tsai, and Bernards 2013), Sinophone studies has been one of the fastest-growing fields in Asian studies. Transformation, sometimes beyond or against the founder's intent, is the inevitable price of growth. The scope of Sinophone studies was first articulated by Shih (2011, 710) as

"the study of Sinitic-language cultures *on the margins of* geopolitical nation-states and their hegemonic productions" (italics added). By emphasizing the transnational and multilingual nature of the Sinitic communities, Shih wishes to debunk what she perceives as the outdated concept of "the Chinese diaspora," which presumes an immutable relation between the "center" and the "margins" of Chineseness (Shih 2010, 45–46). However, when excluding Han ethnic mainland China from Sinophone studies, Shih neglects China's own heterogeneous nature and reaffirms the same discursive binary that she ostensibly revolts against (Chua 2012, 35). In effect, because of the constant interactions across geopolitical borders in the last centuries, what is purported to be "Chinese" is often a product of transcultural and transnational dialogues, negotiations, and confluences. As David Der-wei Wang (2018) argues, the boundaries of "Chineseness" (*hua* 華) have always been mutable, a dialecticism that he describes as the "Sinophone/Xenophone differentiation." In short, a thorough decentralization of the "Sinophone" would require the inclusion of mainland China in the geopolitical scope of investigation, an approach that this article adopts.

Shu-mei Shih's attempt to exclude "China" from the "Sinophone" does reveal the term's "original sin": it may not be unfair to say that the "Sinophone" was created to serve as a linguistic as well as a political category. Linguistically speaking, not every PRC citizen speaks a Sinitic language as their native tongue. Outside China, not every individual identified or self-identified as "Chinese" speaks a Sinitic language. There are, for instance, many Indonesian Chinese who lost their surnames and languages during the repressive New Order under President Suharto. Despite their perceived thorough integration, many continue to identify themselves as ethnic Chinese. "Sinophone," therefore, cannot fully replace "Chinese" as a cultural, linguistic, and ethnic category, regardless of how inaccurate—let alone politically fraught—the latter term might be. For the purpose of delineating a scope of investigation of "Sinophone classicism," it is essential to define the Sinophone space as wherever the Sinitic languages are used, in written or oral forms, as media of cultural transmission, production, and dissemination. The association of "Sinophone" with "classicism" will further limit the scope of our investigation to texts, images, arts, and practices deriving from or inspired by China's written traditions.

On Classicism

Nuances of the term "classicism" vary in its cognate forms in European languages as well as in its translations into other non-European languages. In English, it refers first of all to a general high regard for the classical Greek and Roman period; second, to aesthetic principles such as formal precision, adherence to tradition, artistic conservatism, simplicity, and restraint; and third, to classical motifs especially in narratives, architecture, or plastic art (Perry 2012). It is a nineteenth-century coinage originally used to describe a cultural war happening in France and later in Germany between, on one hand, romanticism, which emphasizes liberation from restraints, and, on the other hand, an aesthetic and political program devoted to the recreation of an ideal of spiritual beauty and artistic purity associated with an idealized classical Greek culture.

A common critique of classicism is that it is derivative and "inauthentic." But "authenticity" has long been discredited for being problematic, contextual, and polemic (Trilling 1972). Today, it is increasingly implicated in marketing and consumption as a device to produce meaning and monetary value (Canavan 2021). The term "classicism" summarily rejects the pretense of "authenticity." Instead, by claiming to venerate and emulate the past, the classicists also reinvent and reimagine the past to project their ideals and create something new. Every form of classicism takes on characteristics of its own time. It is always a synthesis of past and present and never simply a restoration of antiquity. For this reason, the prefix "neo," as in "neoclassicism," is redundant (Ziolkowski 2015, 9).

While classicism can be used to serve conservative, authoritarian, or even racist ends (the Nazi cult of architectural classicism is a case in point), it is not intrinsically the opposite of innovation, or even of avant-gardism. In effect, pioneers of Western modernism, such as T. S. Eliot, Pablo Picasso, and Igor Stravinsky, were all professed classicists (Ziolkowski 2015). Only in the postwar West did a desire to achieve a clean cut with the past set in motion a chain of relentless aesthetic progressivism, therefore disrupting the delicate prewar balance between the avant-garde and the classicist. Nevertheless,

classicism remains pronounced in works by quintessentially modern artists, such as Marguerite Yourcenar's *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (1951) and Edward Allington's sculptures in Greco-Romanesque designs. After the postmodern turn, classicism may well be, in the words of Milan Kundera, a kind of "antimodern modernism," or even "the only modernism worthy of the name" today. As he points out, while being conservative used to mean being comfortable with the status quo, today the status quo is moving, so that "a person could be both progressive and conformist, conservative and rebel, at the same time" (Kundera 2007, 55–56). We may envision a kind of avant-garde classicism that rejects relentless progressivism and "revolutions" as another status quo. Today, hybridity in cultural influences, temporal references, and registry is often a feature of genuinely innovative classicist literature and art, which is particularly the case in postrevolutionary China. The poet Yang Lian's 楊煉 "classicist" works, for instance, pay equal homage to the Chinese lyric tradition and to canonical modern Western poetry. The novelist Chen Chuncheng 陳春成, who first gained recognition by publishing online, refreshingly integrates classical Chinese poetic, fictional, and philosophical motifs into stories of Borgesian magical realism.

The temporal reference and formal connotation of classicisms are genre specific, which is also the case in European classicism. While in architecture, this is generally represented in the emulation of ancient Greek public buildings, "classical music" was a term that emerged in the nineteenth century to canonize German composers from Bach to Beethoven. In the case of Chinese traditions, while the major schools of Chinese philosophy together with their canonical texts were established between the sixth and the third century BCE, in poetry, the point of reference is the Tang and Song periods; in literati painting, the Southern Song to the Yuan dynasty; in novels, the Ming and Qing periods; in opera, the late Ming and Qing, and even through the Republican period (especially in the case of Peking Opera). What "classicism" means, therefore, varies in each Sinophone art and is intrinsically related to its unique process of canonization.

To be sure, the specter of classism lurks behind every instance of classicism. Too often and under woeful circumstances, classicism is used as a weapon of exclusion and distinction. Cultural capital in exercising classicism implies privilege, first of all, in access to educational resources, as famously voiced by Ben Jonson that William Shakespeare had "small Latin and less Greek." The conventional association of classicism with classism is one unspoken reason why calligraphies by prominent Chinese politicians pollute seemingly every inch of public space, as the display of classicist cultural qualifications is perceived as a marker of sociopolitical distinction. In the digital age, however, access to educational resources has become much more democratic and egalitarian, making the gap far less formidable. Classicism may therefore be exercised as an aspirational instrument to help individuals marginalized by the establishment gain recognition. Aesthetic classicism evokes the cultural memory associated with a privileged past, which serves as the foundation of a group's cultural identity. Whoever makes a successful connection to this repertoire of memory speaks to this group's shared sense of self. Even an institutional outsider may thereby claim the status of a cultural insider. The aspirational use of classicism merits sociological research on group identity, dynamics, and mobility.

Case Studies

Aside from literary and cultural studies, I expect the new paradigm to be applied to study cases in fields as diverse as political science, anthropology, and sociology. Since it envisions a network of cultural authority that is more deterritorialized, rhizomatic, and dispersed (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7), it may help shed light, for instance, on the revival of Confucianism in public discourse around the Sinophone space or the use of classicist practices to strengthen community ties. The case studies analyzed here come from my own research, observation, and discussion with colleagues and especially students. They are meant to offer a preliminary glimpse into what may be gained from applying this paradigm.

First, in terms of modern classicist poetry, "Sinophone" suggests linguistic variety that helps dismantle the hegemony of standard Mandarin in defining modern Chinese culture. Since the New Culture Movement, literature written in a newly created modern vernacular—and ideally pronounced

in a common tongue that gradually consolidated throughout the twentieth century—has monopolized the claim of modernity. "Modern Chinese literature" becomes synonymous with this "new literature." In this progressivist view, the formally "new" equates with the aesthetically and ethically "good." Even the institutionalized history of premodern Chinese literature has been rewritten: the most vernacularized literature now becomes the "representative genre" of every younger dynasty, thereby creating a master narrative that portrays the rise of modern vernacular literature as the teleological outcome of a historical evolution (Z. Yang 2018).

A vast corpus of literary works (especially poetry) in the classical language, which continue to be written and read across Sinophone communities around the world, are designated for immediate marginalization—perhaps with the only exception of Mao Zedong's poetry. Notably, most Sinophone writers of *shi* 詩 and *ci* 詞 today continue to use Middle Chinese rhyming systems, leading to the accusation of obsolete archaism. Multiple proposals have been made since the Republican period to simplify the rhyme categories and to better reflect modern standard Mandarin (Han 2018). Arguably, however, given the great diversity of Sinitic languages (or "topolects," see Mair 1991), no prescriptive rhyming system reflects the vernacular realities. For many poets whose native tongue is not Mandarin, Mandarin rhymes sometimes appear no less prescriptive than their Middle Chinese predecessors. Furthermore, many words that do not rhyme in Mandarin do rhyme in other Chinese topolects. A primary example is the entering tone (*rusheng* 入聲), an important category in *shi* and *ci* rhyming systems. Though it has entirely disappeared in modern standard Mandarin, most southern topolects and even some Mandarin dialects have preserved this linguistic feature to varying degrees (Chen 2001; Shi 2007; Wang and Cheng 1987).

Once we acknowledge the vernacular diversity of Sinitic languages and no longer use modern standard Mandarin as the only linguistic yardstick for literature, classicist poetry in Middle Chinese rhymes appears less anachronistic. The concept of "Sinophone classicist poetry" will further break the national boundary of contemporary literary research. Classicist poets from Nanjing, Kaohsiung, Singapore, and San Francisco, despite their creative differences, all frequently refer to the same repertoire of classical poetry for formal and linguistic inspiration. Some PRC classicist poets have also in recent years migrated overseas. A cross-national comparative study will make a tremendous contribution to understanding the nexus points of cultural remembrances, imaginations, and re-creations across Sinophone communities.

The new focus on classicist Sinophone literature complicates the relation between the vernacular and the written, as well as the modern and the premodern, or the elite and the popular. While the May Fourth literary critics canonized late imperial vernacular romances as the purported legacy that the "New Literature" inherited, they also marginalized the "Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies" popular writers despite the latter's succession of that very native tradition (Link 1981). The continuous marginalization of classicist popular literature is nowhere more patently reflected than in the case of the Hong Kong writer Li Bihua 李碧華, whose tales of reincarnation, ghosts, and supernatural phenomena—frequent themes in late imperial Chinese romances—are deemed vulgar by critics and their popularity arguably reflects the poor taste of the Hong Kong (a "cultural desert") reading public (Zhu 2007).

The redemption of classicist literature as candidate for canonicity will help level the playing ground for Sinophone authors outside the PRC, who have been historically less obliged to follow the rules of literary progressivism. Aesthetic and narratological classicism is also seen in viral internet novels such as *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* 魔道祖師 (2015–16), now officially banned in China for its explicit homosexual content (though unauthorized editions remain easily accessible online). Traditional male camaraderie, therefore, is evoked in its equally viral TV (*The Untamed* 陳情令, 2019) and eponymous anime (2018–21) adaptations to evade censorship. By February 2022, the first episode of *The Untamed* had been played more than 100,000 million times on Tencent Video and more than 10 million times on YouTube, making it one of the most successful series in Sinophone (if not global) TV history. Since eroticism and homosexuality are common in late imperial Chinese novels (see, e.g., Vitiello 1992), classicism in this case plays a subversive role against the censor's sterile vision of literary modernity.

Furthermore, I argue that the "Sinophone classicism" paradigm can be applied to cases other than literature to clarify conceptual confusions and avoid pitfalls. For instance, "China Wind" (Zhongguofeng 中國風) pop music is generally categorized as a subgenre of Mando-pop. First popularized by the Taiwanese singer Jay Chou and later Hong Kongese singers before traveling to mainland China, it represents a cultural trend that starts on the outskirts or periphery of geopolitical "China" and is appropriated by the "center" of this imagination. The common association of Zhongguo with the PRC, however, led to allegations that the Taiwanese girl group S.H.E. was "pro-Beijing" for releasing a single titled "Chinese Language" (Zhongguohua 中國話, 2007). Though Mandarin is the common tongue on both sides of the Taiwanese Strait, by labeling this language Zhongguohua instead of Taiwanhua 臺灣話, as its detractors demanded, this song seems to symbolize Taiwan's subjugation to a patriarchic concept of Zhongguo, the interpretation of which is monopolized by Beijing (Chow and de Kloet 2013, 70).

Given the political sensitivity of zhongguo, it may be salient to call "Zhongguofeng" music "Sinophone classicist pop."[1] The redefinition will also enable the recognition of classicist Cantopop, popular in 1980s and 1990s Hong Kong, as a precursor to the twenty-first century Zhongguofeng. Hit songs like "Legend" 傳說 (1987) by Raidas, which integrated the music and plots of Cantonese opera into a Eurobeat dance pop, traveled broadly across the Sinophone space. It will further allow the future of this music to speak other Sinitic languages than Mandarin. Even inside the PRC, this transformation is already underway as a result of the rise of regional pop-cultural power houses like Chengdu and Changsha. The aforementioned "My New Swag" (2017) by Vava, for instance, combines typical "China Wind" acoustic features with rap lyrics in both Mandarin and Sichuanese. Making "China Wind" more inclusive will also help this nascent subgenre go beyond orientalist aesthetics evolving around a static imagination of Chinese traditions, by reflecting the great linguistic and cultural variety in different Sinophone communities.

Another case in point is the Han ethnic clothing movement (hanfu yundong 漢服運動), a youth subculture that came into public view by a viral photo posted in November 2003, showing a young man (a factory worker) walking down the street of Zhengzhou in flowing robes and leather shoes, seemingly out of a period drama set (see the Baidu Baike entry "Wang Letian" 王樂天). As Kevin Carrico argues, this movement illustrates the "ethnicization" of the Han majority; the ambivalent relationship produced by the transference of ethnic imaginings, however, generates a number of defense mechanisms from hanfu advocates to redifferentiate the ethnicized Han from minority nationalities, resulting in the reassertion of the supremacy of Han-ness (Carrico 2017, 48, 67). It is worth noting that there has long been a representative ethnic sartorial style worn by the Han in daily rituals, cinema, and fashion: qipao 旗袍, a modernized, body-hugging dress developed during the Republican era based on the Qing dynasty Manchu women's clothing. As qi (banner) refers to the insignia of Manchu tribes, replacing qipao with hanfu may smack of ethnic chauvinism. Yet, it also follows the intrinsic logic of clothing: while qipao is only worn by women and does not necessarily compliment every body type, hanfu is gender neutral, more diverse in shape and form, and more accommodating in helping its wearers achieve their desired appearance. But hanfu is a neologism and an "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) par excellence, as every Chinese historical period had its own dominant style worn by people of various classes or professions. Its lack of prescriptive specifics opens a wild spectrum of choices for its wearers to develop their individual preferences. Its enabling of consumerist freedom, symptomatic of the rising Chinese consumer culture, is perhaps another explanation for hanfu's success. Further, in comparison with other sartorial subcultures like punk or goth, hanfu's ethno-cultural resonance makes it more acceptable by Chinese families and society. As Dick Hebdige's (1979, 94) classical research on punk points out, the preferred "map of problematic social reality" must be constantly redrawn; through a continuous process of recuperation, "the fractured order is repaired and the subculture incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant mythology from which it in part emanates." Consumerism plays an important role in this recuperation process.

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[1]A point that Jeroen de Kloet, in our email exchange on February 2, 2022, agreed with.

In short, the success of *hanfu* is multifaceted and merits in-depth research by cultural anthropologists and sociologists alike.

Notably, the Chinese state so far has remained cautious in embracing this grassroots movement, perhaps wary of its signification of Otherness. To the disappointment of *hanfu* advocates, it did not make an appearance at the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics, though "ethnic clothes" representing Chinese minorities were on ostensible display. In contrast, the image of the Han Chinese, as conveyed by this ceremony, remained "advanced, modern, and normal" (Carrico 2017, 48).[2]

According to the recent field research of Yifan Dai, a doctoral candidate studying under my supervision, the Hanfu Movement after two decades of development has been adapted to fit various local contexts, inside and outside mainland China (Dai 2019). In China, the significance of a Han ethnocultural identity differs from wearer to wearer. Some do regard it as an articulation of the superiority of the Han ethnicity. On Weibo, as well as Twitter, wearers aggressively assert the historical influence of Chinese sartorial style on Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese national clothing, fueling mutual accusations of "cultural appropriation." But many (if not most) wearers are simply fascinated by the fashion per se. There are cosplayers who care little about the historicity of the costume, as well as amateur material historians who reconstruct period clothing with painstaking accuracy. Some make their clothes by hand; some buy them on Taobao. Some even eschew the word *hanfu* precisely for its historical fallacy and chauvinist connotations. Recent Chinese period dramas, like *Serenade of Peaceful Joy* 清平樂 (2020), are paying increasing attention to the historicity of costumes and props, as the effort unfailingly invites *hanfu* aficionados to start social media discussions that would push the rating. *Hanfu* as an evolving subculture, in short, simultaneously empowers its advocates and subsumes their countercultural energy into a consumerist logic through the digital ecosystem of media production, distribution, and consumption.[3]

There are also overseas Sinophone communities who use *hanfu* as a counterhegemonic code to reclaim their marginalized ethno-cultural identity. A case in point is the Malaysian Hanfu Movement.[4] Founded in 2007, it closely followed the mainland China fad that was spreading across cyberspace and spilling into the real lives of Sinophone communities worldwide. The activities of the Malaysia *hanfu* community center around the re-creation of ancient Chinese rituals, such as coming-of-age rites, banquet rites, arrow-shooting, festivities, and nuptial rites. Clothing becomes a means of socialization and ritual performance. According to my interview with Ooi Miao Eng,[5] vice chair of the Malaysian Hanfu Society, the local Chinese community has long perceived its cultural identity as threatened by the government's integration policy. *Hanfu* not only gives them a distinctive physical appearance, but also reintroduces Chinese culture into their quotidian lives. In Daniel Miller's (2010, 13) words, clothing is not superficial—as Ibsen's Peer Gynt observes, we are all onions. By consciously choosing to don a reinvented style that bears no isomorphic relation to one's "habitus" (in this case, Sinophone Malaysia), these *hanfu* wearers use sartorial classicism to imaginarily consolidate an ethno-cultural minority identity, striving to assert its uniqueness against another hegemonic nationalism.

Classicism, as creative and future-oriented adaptations of a venerated cultural past, differs from museumized "cultural legacy," which is protected with state authority (and funding) and impervious to market demands. An intriguing case is calligraphy, which is not "classicist" per se, as writing with brush and ink on a piece of rice paper is a cultured human behavior (like drinking tea or coffee) and not an "-ism." For calligraphy to remain a creative art that adapts to the multicultural global now, however, it often requires conscious innovations that may be termed "classicist." The celebrated Taiwanese calligrapher Tong Yang-tze, for instance, has become an iconic artist not only because she has been

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[2]Ironically, the appearance of a performer of the Chinese Korean minority (Joseonjok) wearing a *hanbok* in this ceremony evolved into a diplomatic incident, with Korean netizens and politicians accusing China of "cultural appropriation." Though one may debate whether *hanbok* is "national clothing" or "ethnic clothing," the controversy will not be resolved academically, as long as primordialism continues to overshadow the cross-cultural discourse.

[3]I owe this sentence to an anonymous reviewer of this article.

[4]See the "Hanfu Malaysia" Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/hanfumalaysia/.

[5]Conducted by Zoom on July 10, 2021.

studying calligraphy since age eight, but also because of her training in modern visual arts in the United States and her embrace of non-Chinese (primarily Japanese) calligraphic inspirations. In recent years, Tong has attempted to integrate calligraphy into popular art. She has collaborated with a musician and an architect in the *Silent Music* exhibitions and with fashion designers in *Reading Clothes*. The rhythm, lines, emotions, and philosophy of calligraphy are translated into music, architecture, prints, and sartorial structures, making these modern art forms expressions of "Sinophone classicism."

The urgency for a new paradigm is underlined by the continuous rise of Chinese cultural nationalism in the PRC, now fueled by consumerist capitalism, as illustrated by the recent *guofeng* 國風 (national style) trend. Initially a subsection in the *Book of Odes*, the term was first used as a shorthand for Zhongguofeng pop music before being borrowed to describe a highly aesthete and primarily visual style marketed by domestic consumer product brands to gain distinction against their international (and more established) competitors. A case in point is Florasis 花西子. Founded in 2017 and selling exclusively online, it is now the second-largest domestic cosmetic brand in China. Its aesthetics embodies fantastical nostalgia, with tubes of lipstick embossed with sculptural details of palatial marble columns or eyeshadow palettes in the likeness of bejeweled desk screens. It thereby creates the simulacra of aristocratic patina (McCracken 1988, 34) lost to a century of revolutions, investing cultural distinction in consumerist choices. These fragments of a purported "Han ethnic high taste" cater to the predominantly visual social media culture: a consumer's desire is primarily triggered by the image of the object, without even testing it on their skin. Livestreaming influencers push these products to infiltrate the Sinophone market deeply and broadly. Consumerism thus feeds on "imagined nostalgia": nostalgia for things that never were and that they never had (Appadurai 1996, 77). The term *guofeng* has also been exploited to merchandise other material or cultural products, such as a type of dance theater dressed in *hanfu* that has been trending since 2021 on TV galas. Given the problematic implication of equating the Han with the *guo* (national), this term is yet to be officially endorsed, but it is nevertheless used unapologetically in mass media, social media, and the marketplace. The powerful mixture of chauvinism, classism, and digital capitalism sells like a dream: not of a nostalgic past, but of a consumerist future.

To those aware of the danger of nomenclature, "Sinophone classicism" in its idealist pursuit serves as a paradigmatic antidote, offering ways of creative participation in experiencing one's "Chineseness" as a contextualized cultural identity without embracing the hegemonic discourse. The latter, however, persists as part of reality.

Chineseness as a Temporal and Mnemonic Experience

Chineseness, either intuitively triggered, as when I was watching the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics, or consciously donned, as in the case of Malaysian *hanfu* lovers, is presented here as a contextualized experience, constantly being renegotiated and reaffirmed. Describing Chineseness as "experienced" thus inevitably localizes the social process of identity construction in the domain of everyday subjectivity, of remembrance, and of imagination.

Remembrance is a psychological process situated paradoxically between the private and the collective. To "recollect" is intimately subjective, as it involves retrieving bits of information from one's neurons and fusing them with ever-renewed narratives. Remembrance creates a sense of consistency for the self. Who am I, if I do not remember who I have been? Subjectivity is thus as much spatial, defined by the physical contour of our existence, as it is temporal, defined by our sense of inner consistency. On the other hand, memory is primarily social and collective. As the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs points out, we "remember" only in a social framework; we articulate our memory in language, itself a social and cultural construct. We can be taught to remember things that we have never experienced (Halbwachs 1992). Halbwachs's insight has profound consequences. Neurological research has established that memory is plastic, subject to fragmentation, manipulation, falsification, and oblivion; every remembrance is an instance of reassembling fragmented memories, which makes remembering the past not unlike imagining the future (Gardner 2001; Tversky and Kahneman 1974). And, as Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann point out, a human group has its own cultural memories, too, subject

to constant reconfiguration and adapted to the local framework of active remembrance. Since a group's collective memory of a shared past serves as the nexus point of its identity construction, how it remembers its cultural past is not only related to its vision of group identity but betrays ways of imagining its future. Canons and censorship, or compulsory remembrance and selective oblivion, are both indispensable in constructing an authoritative cultural memory (A. Assmann 1999; J. Assmann 2011; Assmann and Assmann 1987).

Inspired by the theory of cultural memory, I argue, first of all, that the "regime of authenticity" (Duara 2003) must be actively dismantled as a hegemonic practice. "Authenticity," as discussed earlier, is a social construct. Just as individual identities must be constructed and reconstructed by acts of memory, by remembering who one was, and by setting this past self in relation to the present self (Erll and Nünning 2008, 6), communities are not only imagined (Anderson 1983) but must be constantly reimagined through active, collective, and sometimes ritualized acts of remembrance in a local discursive context. Today, when electronic mass mediation and transnational mobilization have broken the monopoly of nation-states in defining cultural identities, everyday subjectivities are profoundly transformed to reflect the changing horizon of individual and collective imaginations. By defining Chineseness as cultural remembrance that constitutes "the work of the imagination" (Appadurai 1996), it is liberated from both the geographical border and the political authority that often control the discourse. An individual becomes "Chinese" when she voluntarily or involuntarily acts as an agent of cultural remembrance, hereby reactivating the connection to a repertoire of collective memory in local, vernacular, and contemporaneous contexts. It also means that one can be both Chinese and not Chinese at the same time, in different contexts or on different dimensions of the subjectivity.

This essay does not attempt to fashion a sweeping definition of Chineseness. Instead, I propose one subjective, intimate, and reflexive way to experience an individual's culturally acquired "Chineseness," which is temporal and mnemonic. Cultural remembrance can happen either voluntarily, as deliberate evocation, or as involuntary, spontaneous, even subconscious recollection. It may be a moment when one recalls a line from Tang frontier poetry while a crimson sun sets between skyscrapers, when an old man's wrinkled smile reminds one of the grieving notes of *erhu* from a deep *hutong*, or when one silently recites Mencius to weather adversities. These fragments work as "mnemenes"—the most elementary components of cultural memory (Martin 1979). Conceived of as mnemenes, such fundamental units of expression "encapsulate and indicate something deemed worthy of being culled and recalled so it can be transferred and used in another context" (Engel 2001, 243). Being "Chinese," therefore, means turning your body into a repository of cultural mnemenes that connect you to an affective past—and an imagined community. In his now-classic work, Benedict Anderson (1983, 24) describes print-capitalism nations as living in, borrowing the words of Walter Benjamin, "homogenous, empty time," measured by clock and calendar. In contrast, the nonlinear and heterogeneous temporality enacted through disjointed fragments of cultural remembrance in the digital era turns the location of the nation into a rhizomatic network of shifting nodes and transfiguring shoots. What is imagined is a deterriorialized China that conjures differently affective modes of belonging, at times defying, at times reinforcing, a certain patriarchic order of Chineseness.

Toward Cross-Cultural Classicisms

To sum up, the purpose of this article is fourfold. First, against patriarchic authorities that attempt to monopolize the discourse of Chineseness as an ontological and overdetermined ethno-cultural identity, I propose to make it decentralized, inclusive, contextualized, and subjective, even for Han Chinese living inside the PRC. Second, instead of exercising tortuous denials of one's Chineseness, which often reaffirms what is denied, I encourage embracing its invocation as a temporal, mnemonic, and creative experience. The third purpose is to join recent scholarly efforts to dismantle the view of "Chinese modernity" as a monocentric and homogenous experience. Classicism is part and parcel of "Chinese modernity." As this article strives to show, its articulations, functions, and loci of production are highly heterogeneous, today increasingly connected in a digital network of mass communication.

The fourth purpose of studying "Sinophone classicism" is to join the post-Eurocentric turn in global academia. Modernist studies are undergoing a paradigm shift toward the transnational and transcultural model of global—or even planetary—modernisms (see, e.g., Friedman 2015; Wollaeger 2012), acknowledging the various kinds of non-Western modernity not simply as the diffusion of, or alternatives to, the Western model of modernity. A similar transnational turn is necessary to go beyond the Eurocentric bias intrinsic in classical studies. While Dan-el Padilla Peralta's critique of the history of white supremacism in classical studies as a modern discipline is well justified (see, e.g., Poser 2021; Yaffe 2021), the answer is not to dismantle departments of classical studies in august Western academies, but to expand them to include other classical traditions. A brilliant example is set by John Levi Barnard (2018) in his investigation of black American artists and writers' subversive use of classicism to challenge the appropriation of the classical tradition in the service of an American imperial culture. But Barnard's term "black classicism" does not challenge the Eurocentric definition of classicism per se. Similarly, the "Modern Classicisms" project at King's College, London (modernclassicisms.com), despite its use of the plural form of "classicism," continues to narrow its investigation into "ancient Greek and Roman art that still captivates and provokes the modern imagination," as stated on its home page. Since classicism refers to aesthetic practices that formally embody a high degree of reverence for classical traditions, a recognition for global classical traditions will necessarily lead to the study of cross-cultural classicisms.

As Rey Chow (2006, 84–85) points out, the literary, cultural, and identitarian formations of non-Western modernity are "thoroughly immersed in, indeed predicated on, comparisons." The concept of "global classicisms" challenges the idea of a Eurocentric definition of "classicism" and does not take the Greco-Roman classical culture as the point of reference for other traditions. As each classicism is part and parcel of the modernity of its respective locus of cultural production, however, it does predicate on the comparison with what is considered to represent "Western modernity." The comparative act is not to reproduce an "us versus them" polarity, but to mobilize previously marginalized intellectual resources to reflect upon a contemporary practice—recognizing its strengths, addressing its weaknesses, and sometimes relocating it in rediscovered if not reinvented cultural traditions. The study of global classicism, in short, has a certain utopian character and is future oriented, while acknowledging the dystopian reality of disjuncture caused by globalization, immigration, and cultural clashes.

My final remarks are preliminary reflections on how digital technologies change the experience of Chineseness. As the cases analyzed in this article show, classicist aesthetic products and cultural trends are well adapted to the digital era. Consumer products, music, period dramas, films, video games, literary and performance art forms with classicist themes, aesthetics, or formal features trend well online across the Sinophone space. Precisely because these textual, visual, and sonic mnememes activate the cultural memory shared across Sinophone communities that their language is innately cosmopolitan. Digital media hereby provide instantaneous means to strengthen these mnemonic nodes in a deterritorialized rhizomatic network. It helps users connect to virtual neighborhoods, which have the potential to become spatial neighborhoods, albeit more geographically dispersed than traditional ones. For instance, while Sinophone classicist poets publish primarily online, they organize regional "elegant gatherings" (yaji 雅集) to celebrate traditional festivals. Digital media also provides access to cultural memories hitherto unavailable in the users' immediate sociocultural contexts. Meanwhile, it necessarily fragmentizes this experience, as the access is only maintained as long as one "checks in" to the media platform. Deliberate hybridization may also serve to push the trending of the product. For instance, a Zhongguofeng song with R&B, hip-hop, and indie rock elements may convince the YouTube algorithm to recommend it to a broader base of potential listeners. Furthermore, China's rapid expansion of digital capitalism provides new ways for Sinophone consumers to acquire material objects with classicist aesthetics to construct a chosen identity. And once a Chinese-heritage student in Sydney buys a hanfu from Taobao, next time she may find Taobao recommending Florasis lipsticks, silk fans, incenses, embroidered screens, beside more hanfu dresses and shoes and jewelries that furnish her quotidian outfit, making her feel increasingly "Chinese." This slow material transformation helps intensify the "work of the imagination," that is, the consumer as the fantastic cultural subject in an unbroken and elite classical tradition, while at the same time

creating disjuncture between the consumer's world of fantasy and that of reality. They hereby contribute to the emergence of postmodern mediascapes, which are "large and complex repertoires of images, narratives, and ethnoscapes," provided to "viewers throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed" (Appadurai 1996, 35).

As illustrated by the two fictive cases just presented, for understanding the everyday experience of digital platforms, it is not enough to exclusively focus on the users. Instead, we need to study the digital systems themselves: "the material conditions of their production, the cultural logics that go into their design, their capacity to reorganise the temporality or spatiality of social relations, or the opacity of many of the infrastructures of digital life" (Geismar and Knox 2021, 7). China's digital firewall increasingly leads to different appearances and functions of classicism for inhabitants of different Sinophone cyberspaces, though entrepreneurial PRC content creators may use VPN to cross the wall and cash in both markets. How do the different algorithms of the platforms—for instance, Tencent Video versus YouTube—affect the visibility or marketability of a "China Wind" pop song, which, in turn, influences users' exposure to and experience of it? How do different modes of interactions evolve among members of WeChat groups versus Facebook groups organized around a classicist cultural expression, considering that different standards of digital censorship may apply? All these are topics of digital anthropology that merit careful case studies. In short, the classicist Sinophone culture constitutes a vibrant microcosm in a global landscape of cultural flows, accelerated by digital technology. A more comprehensive topography of this symbolic landscape shall be mapped through further scholarly collaborations and interdisciplinary exchanges.

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