WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE CHINESE? DIASPORIC LITERATURE VERSUS ORIENTALISM IN AN ANGLOPHONE MARKET

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Introduction

In recent years, more and more English-language literature is being published by Asian diaspora writers. Often catering to a young adult (YA) audience, diaspora writers are slowly breaking into mainstream book circles with stories in the popular forms of fantasy and science fiction (sci-fi). These genres are seen by many as a form of escapism and, therefore, attract a wide audience. While most of these works stem from the Sinophone diaspora communities, there is much debate about how such publications and authors should be labeled. The most common labels for the literature include "Chinese Sci-Fi" or "Chinese Fantasy," categories which are vague, limiting, and overall do not consider the vast diversity the diaspora communities contain. This diversity also ties into the debate surrounding the labeling of the authors themselves. Are they Chinese? Do they only represent the country where they have settled? Or are they a hyphenated combination of both? The attempts to identify this group of authors as simply Sinophone and unified in nature reinforce the notion of Orientalism that has plagued Western society for generations.

While Chinese writers writing in English have been around for decades, there exist disparities between them, their works, and how they are perceived by their Western audiences. By analyzing Andrea Stewart[1] and her 2020 publication *The Bone Shard Daughter* alongside Xiran Jay Zhao[2] and their 2021 novel *Iron Widow*, this essay will attempt to dissect the complexity of Sinophone diaspora writers and how they face their Western audiences while in the shadow of Orientalist filters. As Stewart and Zhao have different backgrounds concerning what diaspora is, an explanation of the Sinophone must first be given to understand the imagined community of the Chinese diaspora. Also, it is crucial to lay the foundations of the history of sci-fi and fantasy in Chinese history due to the contestation attributed to this phenomenon. Despite their differing backgrounds and Stewart's first-glance ability to "pass" as a non-diasporic writer, both Stewart and Zhao are seamlessly placed into an identity category that is not tailored to either.

[1] Stewart uses she/her pronouns.
[2] Zhao uses they/them pronouns.

A Definition of the Sinophone

To address the identities of Sinophone diaspora authors, one must have a working definition of such an abstract topic. Originally coined by UCLA professor Shih Shu-mei, the concept of the Sinophone is undoubtedly shaped by similar concepts from the Anglophone and Francophone.[3] This first impression limits the scope of the definition to the Chinese-speaking world. However, this language-based community can be found in mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia while excluding neighbors such as South Korea and Japan. The term Sinophone is often interchanged with the related term Sinosphere—a term invented by UC Berkeley professor Jim Matisoff—which expands the concept to regions in Southeast and East Asia with significant cultural influence from China (which would include the likes of South Korea and Japan).[4] In order to look specifically at diaspora writers with ties to the Chinese-speaking world, the use of Shih's concept of Sinophone is more beneficial.

Although the idea of the Sinophone has been established, there still exists no single definition. Cultural issues, generational conflicts, and the inherently transnational nature of the Sinophone result in an ever-evolving concept.[5] The term is often used to categorize all writers of Chinese heritage regardless of their unique backgrounds. Stewart and Zhao would, therefore, be placed side-by-side without the acknowledgment that the two are anything but similar. Zhao spent their life growing up in China before immigrating to Canada. In contrast, Stewart, the daughter of Chinese immigrants, grew up in the United States of America. If the working definition for the Sinophone is the Chinese-*speaking* world, would Stewart be considered a part of this category? Regardless, because of her Chinese heritage, she is simultaneously labeled as a Sinophone and Chinese-American author. Paradoxically enough, this phenomenon has also happened with Zhao. They are both a Sinophone writer and a Chinese-Canadian author. Does the fact that both authors write novels inspired by Chinese history and culture make them Sinophone writers, or is it simply a linguistical definition as first assumed? This very confusion plays a critical role and creates an important yet controversial category within the discourse of diaspora literature.[6]

Sinophone Diaspora and the Literature Created

Diaspora communities are often explained as any group of people who are detached from their historical or cultural homeland. In the context of the Sinophone, this diaspora is categorized as a group of people who have been separated from—

[3] Victor Mair, "Sinophone and Sinosphere," Language Log University of Pennsylvania, November 8, 2012. https://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=4306.; Shu-Mei Shih, "Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production," *Sinophone studies: A critical reader* (2013): 25–42. https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004187658.i-234.9.
[4] Mair, "Sinophone and Sinosphere."
[5] Shih, "Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production."
[6] Shih, "Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production."

voluntarily or involuntarily—Chinese-speaking countries. It is a universalized category based on a single, unified ethnicity—Han Chinese.[7] As a result, Sinophone diaspora has become an umbrella term that can include those from first-generation immigrant status to those whose families have lived in a certain location for several generations to those of varying different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds that stem from the diverse structure of the Sinosphere itself.

However, this notion of a so-called uniform group is often contested. Due to the vastly different linguistic, cultural, and ethnic groups within the Sinosphere itself, the idea of the Sinophone diaspora is in a state of constant flux.[8] Establishing a hard and fast definition of a Sinophone diaspora does not allow for any form of malleability. In fact, it increases the risk of forced marginalization and the portrayal of the community as perpetually foreign in whatever location it may be established.[9] Likewise, different areas of the world can and will view similar diaspora communities differently due to contrasting political, societal, and cultural beliefs.[10] In order to fully understand the Sinophone diaspora—and diaspora as a whole—one must understand the hybridity and multiplicity of their environments and that these community identities are often built upon distinct, yet shared, connections.[11]

Among the academic discourse on the definition of diaspora communities, there also exist divides within the communities themselves. The Sinophone diaspora often encompasses several generations, including first-generation immigrants to third-generation descendants. There are also conflicting ethnic and sometimes linguistic backgrounds that can contribute to diasporic divisions. It is often the case that parents do not transmit their cultural identities to their children, creating both a gap in understanding and a seeming end-in-sight to being categorized as diaspora.[12] This phenomenon can be the result of either forced marginalization turned forced assimilation to better adapt to the local society or a lack of interest in forwarding these

[7] Shih, "Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production."; Min Hyoung Song, "Asian American Literature within and beyond the Immigrant Narrative," in *The Cambridge Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. Crystal Parikh and Daniel Y. Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3–15.
[8] Shelly Chan, "The Case for Diaspora: A Temporal Approach to the Chinese Experience," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 1 (2015): 107–28, doi:10.1017/S0021911814001703.; Melody Yunzi Li, "Home and Identity En Route in Chinese Diaspora—Reading Ha Jin's *A Free Life*," *Pacific Coast Philology* 49, no. 2 (2014): 203–20. https://doi.org/10.5325/pacicoasphil.49.2.0203.
[9] Chan, "The Case for Diaspora: A Temporal Approach to the Chinese Experience."; Song, "Asian American Literature within and beyond the Immigrant Narrative."; Ien Ang, "Can One Say No to Chineseness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm." *Boundary 2* 25, no. 3 (1998): 223–42, https://doi.org/10.2307/303595.; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York,: Vintage Books, 2004).
[10] Chan, "The Case for Diaspora: A Temporal Approach to the Chinese Experience."
[11] Li, "Home and Identity En Route in Chinese Diaspora—Reading Ha Jin's *A Free Life*."; Chan, "The Case for Diaspora: A Temporal Approach to the Chinese Experience."
[12] Ang, "Can One Say No to Chineseness?"; Shih, "Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production."

distinct cultural ideas.[13] When taken together, the variation of foundational identities—such as ethnic and linguistic backgrounds—and the differentiation within the communities themselves, the term Sinophone diaspora presents a severe limitation for such intricate identities. For example, Zhao is simply considered "Chinese" despite their ethnicity being that of Hui Chinese—an ethnoreligious minority mostly comprising Chinese-speaking adherents of Islam. Although they do not personally speak about their ethnic background in detail, Zhao speaks Mandarin Chinese and this is often the only criteria to be considered "Chinese."[14] As a result, one must take great care when using such a term to determine what constitutes the notion of "Chineseness."

This notion of what it means to be Chinese in the Western context has minoritized not only the community but also the literature it produces. Over time, someone's "Chineseness" has slowly become quantifiable.[15] People—mostly outside of the diaspora but also some from within—look at the members of the Sinophone diaspora and begin to question how "Chinese" someone and their writing is. Do you have direct experiences with Chinese culture (as in the case of Zhao)? How much of the language can you speak? How long has your family been overseas? Do you incorporate too little or too much Chinese culture into your writing? This obsession with "Chineseness" can easily cause fissures to erupt among those who have been deemed the same.[16] For a long time, Sinophone diaspora writers were expected and forced to write about immigration narratives or their "Chineseness" would be questioned.[17] In the face of such criticism, authors have recently begun finding ways to express their rebellion against these restrictive stereotypes and labels.

Today, authors are discovering new outlets for their creative writing skills in the form of YA sci-fi and fantasy novels. Stewart and Zhao are among hundreds of Sinophone diaspora authors who have published works in contemporary fiction genres while also incorporating Chinese culture and inspired motifs. Although still classified as "minority literature," these writers have been able to reach a wide audience by simply writing in English. This phenomenon is not new. Countless Sinophone diaspora writers have come to the conclusion that writing in English may be their only option, especially if they are first-generation immigrants.[18] For these immigrants, there is the very real possibility that if they write in Mandarin, they will be subjected to the censorship of mainland China which severely limits what authors can publish. Since the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), all types of literature within mainland China have

[13] Song, "Asian American Literature within and beyond the Immigrant Narrative."; Chan, "The Case for Diaspora: A Temporal Approach to the Chinese Experience."; Ang, "Can One Say No to Chineseness?"
[14] Xiran Jay Zhao, "Press Kit," Xiran Jay Zhao, 2020, https://xiranjayzhao.com/index.php/press-kit/.
[15] Shih, "Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production."
[16] Ang, "Can One Say No to Chineseness?"
[17] Song, "Asian American Literature within and beyond the Immigrant Narrative."
[18] Jin Ha, "Exiled to English," *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader* (2013): 117–24.

been severely censored by the state. Writer's either abide by censorship laws or self-censor their works in order to have even the chance of publication due to the omnipresent dread of retribution from the government.[19] As a result, more and more Sinophone literature geared toward younger audiences is being written and published in English.

Sinophone diaspora writers ostensibly have one of two options when publishing in English, regardless of whether or not the language is native. The first of these is that the authors act as cultural ambassadors for the Sinophone.[20] They would be expected to not only showcase known forms of Chinese culture but also be highly knowledgeable in the area themselves. Following this model would create the risk of harsh ostracization for being too Orientalist. There would be seemingly no room for the introduction of any other culture. The other option for Sinophone diaspora writers is pure assimilation which rejects any and all recall of their cultural roots.[21] Many authors in the past have adopted this style in an effort to be more readily accepted into their adoptive countries. However, following this method can lead to severe criticism for not paying homage to one's "country of origin" or cultural roots. All of the demands placed on Sinophone diaspora writers have caused a fair number of them to attempt to break out of these restrictions by curating a new form of English-language diasporic literature.

Modern Diasporic Literature: Neither Ambassadorial nor Assimilationist

To understand the modern concept of YA Sinophone diaspora literature, its origins must first be addressed. Chinese sci-fi and fantasy writing has its beginnings in the ancient dynasties of China with many scholars believing that the Classic of Mountains and Seas (*shanhaijing* 山海经) is one of the first instances of writing about the unknown and mysterious.[22] The details of beasts and the lands they roamed are similar tropes to those found in modern sci-fi and fantasy literature. Today, various sub-genres of sci-fi and fantasy writing exist, and the two genres have even been known to overlap. The embedded nature of Chinese history and culture in its popular forms of writing would force modern audiences to expect that sci-fi and fantasy works by Chinese and Sinophone diaspora writers would draw heavily on traditional culture. However, yet again, much controversy surrounds the use of Chinese traditions in modern writing.

Sinophone diaspora sci-fi and fantasy authors who choose to incorporate aspects of Chinese traditional culture into their writing are often limited to two forms

[19] Perry Link, *Stubborn Weeds: Popular and Controversial Chinese Literature after the Cultural Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).
[20] Jin Ha, "Exiled to English."
[21] Jin Ha, "Exiled to English."
[22] Yan Wu et al., "A Very Brief History of Chinese Science Fiction," *Chinese Literature Today* 7, no. 1 (2018): 44–53. https://doi.org/10.1080/21514399.2018.1458378.

of interpretation by audiences. Some view this incorporation as forcing an identification with otherness or self-Orientalizing their works.[23] This can happen whether the authors are first-generation immigrants such as Zhao or children of immigrants such as Stewart. However, the use of Chinese traditional culture by those writers who are not originally from Sinophone nations and receive their cultural education second- or third-hand is often seen as more forced than writers who experienced the culture first-hand.[24] The other form of interpretation is more positive, believing that various possibilities can exist for Sinophone diaspora authors without patronizing Chinese culture.[25] Such avenues of possibility include, but are not limited to, social commentary through the incorporation of feminism, political satire by rebelling against an oppressive regime, or simply just being a form of escapism as the genres are known for. For example, both authors' main characters are females who aim to bring change to their oppressive societies by overthrowing their respective male leaders. Despite this explicit portrayal, both Stewart and Zhao are subjected to these critiques of their works.

Modern Sinophone diaspora writers possess the ability to interweave Western realism with Chinese traditions and myths which make their works intriguing for a mainly Western audience.[26] Stewart's 2020 publication, *The Bone Shard Daughter*, fuses sci-fi and fantasy in an Asian-inspired world that is equal parts social commentary and political satire. The references to traditional Chinese culture are there but exist in a more subtle way than Zhao's. For example, the architectural styles and technology which exist within Stewart's book are inspired by elements in East and Southeast Asia. The names of the characters also allude to traditional Chinese given names. On the other hand, Zhao's 2021 sci-fi novel *Iron Widow* incorporates actual historical characters and traditional Chinese belief systems. For instance, all of the characters are named and based on real Chinese leaders and generals including An Lushan, Dugu Qieluo, and Yang Guang. Zhao also based most of their mechas—giant piloted robots—on creatures from the Classic of Mountains and Seas such as the Nine-Tailed Fox, Hundun, and Xingtian. Furthermore, the author directly included the practice of foot binding and the allusion to the Great Wall of China as the main elements of *Iron Widow*. Despite these explicit references, Zhao is able to seamlessly blend these elements alongside Western technological details and structures.

Whether or not the incorporation of traditional Chinese culture in the author's works is considered an avenue of possibility, both Stewart and Zhao can be subjected

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[23] Yang Mu, "From Nature to Humanity: Renaissance of Chinese Cosmology and Technology in Ken Liu's 'The Grace of Kings.'" *Comparative Literature Studies* 57, no. 4 (2020): 744–57. https://doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.57.4.0744.; Li, "Home and Identity En Route in Chinese Diaspora—Reading Ha Jin's *A Free Life*."

[24] Li, "Home and Identity En Route in Chinese Diaspora—Reading Ha Jin's *A Free Life*."

[25] Mu, "From Nature to Humanity."

[26] Melissa Lam, "Diasporic Literature," *Cultural China in Discursive Transformation* 21, no. 2 (2011): 309–18. https://doi.org/10.1075/japc.21.2.08lam.

to the idea that they Orientalized themselves. Stewart's subtle inspiration rather than direct incorporation can be viewed as not "Chinese" enough or wanting to appeal to a Western audience at the expense of her cultural heritage. For instance, the names, architecture, and technologies present in Stewart's world are all inspired by 1500s East Asia, without directly calling attention to them.[27] Conversely, Zhao's extremely noticeable references to Chinese history and culture may be viewed as over the top and not having the ability to gain a wide audience as a result. Regardless of the criticisms both authors and countless others receive concerning the "Chineseness" of their novels, the incorporation of traditional Chinese culture in a YA sci-fi or fantasy novel is no doubt a massive undertaking in a popular literature world so saturated by Western ideals.

The Demands of Orientalism

It is near impossible to discuss sci-fi and fantasy literature published by Sinophone diaspora writers without mentioning the lasting implications of Orientalism. Coined by Edward Said, Orientalism is a way for Westerners to come to terms with the Oriental—greater Asia—in a Eurocentric worldview.[28] Purely a European invention, Orientalism has left an inherent legacy of racism and misunderstanding directed at people from all over Asia. This notion dictates the expectations for the behaviors, ideologies, and appearance of those living inside the so-called Orient and those who live outside but retain cultural ties. The Sinophone diaspora has been greatly impacted by this, as such the concept of a unified diaspora is a Western racial ideology founded on Orientalism which harmfully undermines all ethnic diversity within the "community."[29] Terms such as "Chinese" and "Chineseness" act as external labels that create a sense of otherness and lead to discrimination.[30] For many, Orientalism also leads to over-simplified cultural stereotypes.[31] Such categorizations lead to an obsession surrounding the Sinophone diaspora community and the products it produces.

Sinophone diaspora writers such as Stewart and Zhao are constantly subjected to arbitrary ideas and classifications of their cultural heritage and style of writing. Zhao has personally dealt with discrimination after their immigration to Canada, leading to them actively changing their accent to avoid harsh school bullying.[32] Nevertheless, by

[27] Lu, S. Qiouyi. "Exploring Empire and Agency in the Bone Shard Daughter by Andrea Stewart." Tor.com, September 14, 2020. https://www.tor.com/2020/09/15/book-reviews-the-bone-shard-daughter-by-andrea-stewart/.
[28] Said 2004
[29] Shih, "Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production."
[30] Shih, "Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production."; Said 2004; Ang, "Can One Say No to Chineseness?"; Song, "Asian American Literature within and beyond the Immigrant Narrative."
[31] Lam, "Diasporic Literature."
[32] Xiran Jay Zhao, "How I Became A #1 Bestselling Author - My Publishing Journey," YouTube, October 18, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwhEN9iuX0E.

using their full name—Xiran Jay Zhao—and having their book's cover art explicitly linked to Chinese culture, Zhao is more prone to a harsh Orientalist gaze. Stewart, on the other hand, is more likely to be deemed as "passing" or assimilated due to the nature of her name sounding less "Chinese" and her book cover being more subtle in its call to Chinese architectural styles. Both authors are of Chinese descent and yet are subjected to different stereotypes and expectations based on factors as minute as their names. These demands placed upon Sinophone diaspora writers and the communities as a whole by their adoptive countries constantly force an identity crisis to occur.

Identity Crisis

It is understood that the Sinophone already encompasses a wide array of people and the diaspora communities that are formed afterward are just as diverse; however, in the face of Orientalism's legacy, an identity crisis has developed. The Sinophone diaspora community deals with a constant push and pull of being forced to choose between one identity or the other while simultaneously never truly being allowed to.[33] It is a common belief that those from another country must be undyingly loyal to that country.[34] Nevertheless, this simply is not true. Many people leave their home countries voluntarily and involuntarily due to various factors such as political instability, financial opportunities, or education. While these people may still practice cultural traditions and identify with this part of the world, they are by no means obligated to love their country of origin.

The Sinophone diaspora and cultural communities alike deal with stereotypes, marginalization, and discrimination. They all struggle to gain representation without the lasting effects of microaggressions and hate crimes.[35] Despite recent developments in the acceptance of Sinophone and greater Asian media, mainstream recognition of this non-Western representation is often accompanied by long-held prejudices.[36] With increasing English-language fiction publications from Sinophone diaspora writers, the authors themselves are faced with acceptance and criticism for their works, where the questions of "Chineseness" resurface. No amount of effort will ever be justified among Western audiences.

YA sci-fi and fantasy authors who are a part of the Sinophone diaspora are at an interesting place in society. Not only is publishing into YA sci-fi considered a hard sell, but most authors also do not have the resources for continued promotion even if they are fortunate enough to get a publishing deal. Even after an author secures publishing rights, their novels are often immediately categorized as a marginalized subgenre such as "Chinese Sci-Fi" or "Chinese Fantasy." Although Sinophone literature emphasizes the concept of the Chinese language, English-language works by

[33] Li, "Home and Identity En Route in Chinese Diaspora—Reading Ha Jin's *A Free Life*."
[34] Jin Ha, "Exiled to English."
[35] Rey Chow, "Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem," *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader* (2013): 43-56.
[36] Chow, "Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem."

Sinophone diaspora authors are stretching the boundaries of what it means to be a "Chinese" author.[37] In the end, these pluralistic identities that the Sinophone diaspora possesses are what allow them to create a whole new concept surrounding literature.

Conclusion: To Be or Not To Be Other

As an increasing amount of literature is being published in the field of YA sci-fi and fantasy by Sinophone diaspora authors, the delicate subject of what it means to be "Chinese" has resurfaced yet again. The discourse surrounding these discussions no doubt has its origins in the discriminatory notion of Orientalism. Harsh external labels force diaspora communities to the edges of society while they are simultaneously taunted for being there. Without the ability to assimilate into either culture or to be deemed a good cultural ambassador, Sinophone diaspora writers are slowly rebelling against what Western audiences demand from them. From explicit references to Chinese historical and cultural traditions to the subtle nuance obtained from a heroine wearing something akin to Chinese traditional dress, these authors are currently reshaping the genre to better fit their needs rather than the expectations of their audience. For instance, even though every card was stacked against Zhao as they went down the path of publishing YA sci-fi, their debut novel appeared on nearly every bestseller list. However, humans like organized categories, and when some people start to straddle divides, others become angry. Although the field of Sinophone literary studies is still expanding and the West is attempting to shake off the shadow legacy of Orientalism, there is much work still to be done to better incorporate Sinophone diaspora writers into the mainstream Anglophone literature market until there is no longer a need for such labels.

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