Metatextual Reconstruction of Chineseness as a Site of Constellation in Tash Aw's Literary Representation

Pembinaan Semula Metateks Bahasa Cina sebagai Tapak Buruj dalam Perwakilan Sastera Tash Aw

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ABSTRACT

The notion of Chineseness has been contested and negotiated for decades due to the cultural and geopolitical contingencies and disjunctures of disparate lived experiences between the mainland and cross-border Chinese communities. Under these circumstances, the polemic has never ceased to be settled, with the major focus on the tensions between state-led nationalism and diasporic transnationalism. Despite the fact that prior studies have proposed a variety of approaches to avoid any effort at blanket integration or radical exclusion, both sides are inevitably bound inside the habitualized ideological apparatus, locking the discussion in an endless loop of essentialism. To transcend the epistemic gridlock, this article, based on Tash Aw's selected literary works, postulates an experimental praxis for rewriting composite Chineseness via metatextual reconstruction. Through the strategic juxtaposition and comparison of fluidly correlated narratives, the structural flaw built within the theoretical terrain of Chineseness would possibly be bridged, which foreshadows a constellation of multilayered Chineseness to come.

Keywords: *epistemic gridlock; Tash Aw; strategic juxtaposition; metatextual reconstruction; constellation*

ABSTRAK

Dalam beberapa dekad yang lalu, isu kecinaan telah menjadi subjek perdebatan yang terus-menerus kerana perbezaan budaya dan pengalaman hidup di antara masyarakat Cina di negara asal dan masyarakat Cina diaspora yang tinggal di luar negara asal. Persoalan ini melibatkan pertentangan antara nasionalisme yang diperjuangkan oleh negara dan pengalaman transnasional masyarakat Cina diaspora. Walau bagaimanapun, perdebatan ini terjebak dalam pemikiran ideologi yang telah menjadi rutin, dan tidak ada keputusan yang dapat mencapai kata sepakat. Kajian terdahulu telah mencadangkan pelbagai pendekatan untuk mencari penyelesaian yang menyeluruh atau radikal, tetapi kedua-dua pihak masih terikat dalam pemikiran yang berulang-alik. Untuk mengatasi kebuntuan dalam pengetahuan, artikel ini menggunakan karya sastera Tash Aw sebagai asas untuk mencadangkan pendekatan baru dalam penulisan semula tentang kecinaan melalui penggunaan teks yang berulang. Dengan menggunakan perbandingan naratif yang teratur, kecacatan struktur dalam konsep kecinaan mungkin dapat diatasi, dan ini membuka peluang untuk melihat kecinaan dalam perspektif yang lebih berlapis di masa depan. Secara keseluruhan, artikel ini menyuarakan kepentingan untuk merumuskan semula pandangan tentang kecinaan dengan cara yang baru dan kreatif. Ia mencadangkan agar kita menghindari pendekatan yang terlalu esensialis dan mencari cara untuk mengintegrasikan pelbagai konstelasi kecinaan dalam pandangan yang lebih inklusif dan dinamik.

Kata kunci: *kesesakan epistemik; Tash Aw; penjajaran strategik; pembinaan semula metateks; konstelasi*

INTRODUCTION

Chineseness as a checkered cultural topography has plagued the global Chinese for decades because of the distinctive geopolitical landscapes among diverse Chinese communities. China's recent burgeoning economic growth prompts it to reposition itself in the global arena by rebuilding a stronger collective nationalism known as the China Dream. This intention, however, triggers a barrage of suspicions as the overarching term oversimplifies the situational and mobilizing experiences of the diasporic Chinese, demoting them to the subordinate of mainland China. To resist the grand narrative of nationalism, some seminal overseas Chinese scholars, aligned with subaltern studies pioneered by postcolonial giants like Spivak and Bhabha, strive to refashion an alternative discourse based on their transnational experiences. Shi Shumei (2011), a renowned academic who warns

against "unreflective nationalism", coined the word *Sinophone* to emphasize the diaspora's "situated and place-based" sentiments (709-717). Sinophone is interpreted as a multidirectional cultural location where diverse Chinese language communities, such as Cantonese, Teochew, and Hokkien, interact with host lands. Rather than claiming atavistic allegiance to the motherland, Sinophone is more likely to be a polyglot signifier to celebrate its multiplicity that disrupts any essentialism encoded in structured center-periphery antithesis.

However, this framework was soon questioned by mainland scholars like Zhang Longxi, Wang Ning and Ge Zhaoguang as skewed and ahistorical for its blind repudiation of Chineseness as a totalized entity. Instead, Chineseness, like the malleability of water, develops its own location within "syncretic social connections" as a result of the importation of other cultures and the assimilation of diverse ethnic groups, which refutes Sinophone's charge of Chineseness as a unitary concept (Gilroy 2008: 6). And the intentional exclusion of mainland China from its cultural sphere belies Sinophone's initial goal of anti-essentialism, which winds up being caught in an ideological aporia. Thus, two incessantly contending forces have been pitted against one another on the basis of national or translocal modality, resulting in an irreconcilable impasse. Even while mainland scholars' latter attempts to hermeneutically construe Chineseness as an inclusive concept that is open and performative, this paradigm is still subject to the mainland's underlying and hard-nosed nationalist vision.

To break off the endless confrontation, this paper, in its latter part, proposes a new metric of seeing Chineseness beyond structural bias via the rhetoric of metatextual reconstruction. Based on the tactical reconfiguration of Chineseness mediated through the discursive navigation of parallel narratives in Tash Aw's key literary works, this tentative approach enacts in a performative and relational way by defying the jail of grand History (with a capital 'H') and putting together our histories (without a capital 'H')" of diasporic Chineseness to envision a non-linear narrative that does not "tend towards the One but opens out onto diversity" (Glissant 2016: 81-87). That is, history, as a narrative passed down from generation to generation, is not a static reality; it must be reread within the context of its time as a continuous process of recreation and reproduction. Similarly, Tash, as the younger generation Malaysian

Chinese residing overseas, views Chineseness as a site open to porous access and interpretation. The novel invites the intersection of multiple narratives as a new trope to reorient the binary antagonism entrenched in Sinophone and mainland nationalism to a dialectic and creative interplay.

SINOPHONE REVISITED AND ITS THEORETICAL DILEMMA

As China's global footprint sprawls, the mainland's central government seeks to solidify its hold through the mythology of collective memory. The kernel of this memory is its gravitational pull on all the Chinese people spread around the world. Thus, China's image becomes a cohesive conglomerate characterized by the peaceful cohabitation of diverse Chinese people both on and off the mainland. Sinophone scholars, however, condemned this endeavor as cunning essentialism based on the ethnic line, manifesting both internally and internationally as a "Chinese dichotomy of within-without" (Wang 2005: 1). On the mainland, the Han people occupy the lion's share of the demographic mapping, while non-Han people account for the minuscule portion. Thus, Han culture is always viewed as the pinnacle of Chinese heritage, while minorities are incorporated into the Han majority's metanarrative of diversity through a "carefully planned process of assimilation" (Tsu 2011: 706). This is what Shi (2011) refers to as internal colonialism: the imposition of hegemony on non-Han minorities by the majority Han as "arbiters of identity" (710). In terms of Chinese populations located beyond the mainland, they are assigned by the mainland narrative as the Chinese diaspora, displaced and alienated, perpetually yearning for their ethnic origins. In this way, the colonial minority and the Chinese diaspora are both naturalized as vital parts of Greater China in this grand narrative, regardless of the language and cultural divergences generated by geographical and cultural crisscrossing. Such essentialist racial delineation, as mandated by "pure Chinese" mythology, lowers others to insignificance (Tan 2012: 283). Besides, Sinophone scholars deem the word 'Chinese diaspora' as a theoretical trap used by nationalist Chineseness to imply an ancestral origin for overseas Chinese to anchor their yearnings. Returning, both spiritually and physically, becomes a means of soothing the insatiable homesickness in this case. In this way, mainland officials use desire for one's homeland to bolster their control over Chinese citizens living

outside the national boundary. This interpretation of diaspora is "centered and fundamentally political", which is woven into a purity complex by national solipsism (Dufoix 2015: 10). For Sinophone, there is no absolute definition of the homeland. Rather, its highlight of multidirectional Chineseness welcomes a performative and continuous recreation occurred throughout cross-border interaction. Transnational trajectories of Sinophone's demographic mapping across the globe subvert the unidirectional claim of rootedness by "unlearning the myth of consanguinity" and foreseeing a flexible place that is always in the making (Chow 2013: 24). This dissociation from chauvinistic nationalism, imperialism, and racism predicts a non-linear process of continual repositioning that violates "an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin'", implying that there is no one-size-fits-all understanding of the so-called homeland. (Hall 1988, 1989: 447, 226).

However, Sinophone's subjective formation based on mobilized lived experiences is double-edged. Here, some questions arise. Is location-based Sinophone eligible to speak for itself as the alternative discourse outside of grand nationalism? Is its critique on the monolithic and homogenous nation-based Chineseness truly feasible? Sinophone as a discursive and multidimensional literary and cultural site, when debunking mainland Chineseness, reveals itself to be exclusive and self-contained. The intention to resist mainland hegemony by exploiting the periphery as an alterity is itself a reverse version of hegemony, which runs counter to its initial aim. And why does Sinophone's ostensibly self-claimed open space exclude mainland China from its scope of study? Even though Sinophone critics argue that it is a strategic move to create a distinct space that deters the mainland's all-encompassing force, how can they stay neutral without succumbing to the allure of fundamentalism? Sinophone's recasting of Chineseness and its critique of mainland Chineseness as an undifferentiated colossal entity is untenable since Sinophone is itself self-contradictory and essentially radical. While Sinophone proponents attempt to disrupt the authorized narrative and tilt towards a specified literary space, this argument unavoidably slides into a loop of essentialism. An even more ironic aspect is that Sinophone, as a self-proclaimed open framework, justifies its place-based discourses by subtly soliciting the West for "theoretical backing" to muzzle voices within its own racial communities, which undoubtedly breeds epistemic Manicheanism and animosity among the Chinese community, preventing an equitable discourse for further intra-racial dialogue between global Chinese clusters. (Zhang 2015: 198).

SINOPHONE IN PRACTICE: MALAYSIAN CHINESE CONFRONTATION AND REPOSITIONING

Malaysian Chinese identity development, an ally in Sinophone studies, is a combination of several possible paths, and policymaking is a key element defining its distinctiveness throughout postcolonial nation-building. Malaysia, after 1957 Merdeka (independence), ushered in a new era for all the Malaysian people. To maintain its political presence, the government headed by Malay elites, however, continues to adhere to the previous British racialization policy of 'divide-and-rule', which is now masked by the new language of multiculturalism in response to the nation's varied constituency of races. Despite Malaysian Chinese efforts to adapt themselves to the local culture and settle in this newly-born country, they are still designated by the government as a subset of the larger Malaysian multicultural society. Under Malay-dominant nationalism, the image of Malaysian Chinese is objectified as sojourners or outsiders from other countries. Indeed, the pre-1949 early immigration wave witnessed a strong sense of longing to return to the homeland. However, after years of acculturation to the local cultures alongside the advent of independent Malaysia, the tie to the previous motherland gradually became blurred. They are more likely to be regarded as Malaysians with Chinese origin than Chinese immigrants. But the stagnant narrative of displaced Chinese immigrants espoused by the nationalist Malay elites fails to acknowledge and synchronize with the new tropes of fluid reconstruction in Malaysian Chineseness, especially for the younger generations who prefer to negotiate themselves "predicted on the actual experiences and social practices" (Gabriel 2011: 342). As a result, the anachronistic approach to non-Malay groups inherent within the Malaysian populist discourse perpetuates the in-built fact by delimiting the racial line between bumiputera (indigenous) and pendatang (newcomers).

To avoid being "gridlocked into racial politics" and expecting to be on par with the majority Malay, Malaysian Chinese groups take different approaches to retain their uniqueness, with language policy in Malaysian Chinese education being a typical

example, as language plays an important role in cultural expression in certain ethnic groups. For national integration under multi-ethnic Malaysia, the 1960 Talib Report was enacted to consolidate national consciousness by establishing Malay as the official medium of instruction in the education system (Ho et al. 2018: 215). Take secondary education, as an example. To be funded by the government, previous schools with Chinese as the official medium of instruction must be converted to Malay. Some opted for the national type with Chinese only as a language course, while others remained intact and later became Independent High Schools sponsored by the United Chinese School Committees' Association of Malaysia (UCSCAM). Obviously, these schools are established as a resistance discourse to fight for their subjective consciousness since using Chinese as the official medium of instruction is regarded as a crucial hallmark for identification (Yow 2016: 295). As a result, its test, called the United Examination Certificate (UEC) is not accepted by the government, and hence its students cannot be enrolled in public universities, except for most private universities and colleges. Surprisingly, many countries and regions, including the United Kingdom, the United States, China, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, accept the UEC. Many students with UEC qualification, faced with this situation in line with the quota policy, finally chose to go abroad.

Malaysian Chinese literary engagement (later referred as Mahua literature) also reflects their struggle for identification over the course of creolization. According to Florence Kuek and Tek Soon Ling (2017), 1957 independence marked the watershed for Mahua literature representation, and its literary tropes were constantly changing in response to specific socioeconomic and political events. Back to World World II era, literary creation was inevitably linked to cultural origin as Malaysian Chinese occupied only a small portion of colonized Malaya (Shamsul 2004). For example, in Tie Kang's *White Ants*, overseas Chinese sent war relief back to China in the face of Japan's invasion. At that time, national salvation, nostalgia, and patriotism were the main themes. However, after the 1960s, influenced by modern literature in the West, Hong Kong and Taiwan, modernism sprouted in the Mahua literature circle as well, and literature began to flourish with novels becoming the prevalent genre. The motif accordingly shifted from the motherland complex to the Malaysian Chinese's fighting for self-recognition and equality in the post-independent Malaysia where the official discourse was Malay-dominant. Breaking away from pre-war literary realism, Mahua literature resorted to "symbolism, euphemism, creative imageries and cultural alienation" to evade the pressure from the authorities (244). For example, in Xiao Hei's memoir novel *Drizzle*, the son's confusion about his missing father who once served in the Malaysian Communist Party (MCP) and joined the British to fight against Japan reflected the status of many Malaysian Chinese who tried hard to embrace Malaysia as their home but ended up being marginalized in the bumiputra (sons of the soil) system endorsed by the National Language of Act (NLC) and the New Economic Policy (NEP). Wang Gungwu (2003) once pointed out "the inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia are characterized by "distance and distrust" in the name of multiculturalism (12). Later, this term was rephrased by Shamsul as "a state of stable tension" (131). Thus, even different ethnicities cohabit in multicultural Malaysia, identity issues still remain sensitive. For example, Xu Yuquan's *Citizenship* questioned the legitimacy of the language policy that rejected a group of Malaysian Chinese who have resided in Malaysia for many years the access to identity cards just because of their failure to meet the standard Malay oral test. Again, in He Shufang's *Don't Mention it Again*, disputes about the burial rites for a converted Malaysian Chinese deceased corpse reflected the ethnic and religious tension. From the 1990s onward, it has been a cooling time that demands a divorce from the past, either China as the country of origin or the traumatic May 13, 1969 riot, and moves toward a new and independent Mahua literature. For example, Ying Xin Show (2021) argued how Li Zishu in *The Era of Farewell* (Gaobie de niandai) used feminist narratives to recall the past and challenge the patriarchal and racialized Malaysian discourse. By focalizing the self-sufficient mother as the omnipresent narrator, Li's articulation "crafted an imagined space" for the post-1969 generation and "discovered a feminized territory" for new identity formation (217-219). Plus, in Ng Kim Chew's short story *A Slow Boat to China* (kaiwang zhongguo de manchuan), China exists in protagonist Iron Bull's (Tie Niu) mental space with no specific location, which "bespeaks the subject's inherent sense of loss" (61).

While the aforementioned writers, either stayed or went to Taiwan, later formed Mahua literature (Malaysian Chinese literature written in Chinese), others chose to leave for western countries such as

Ee Tiang Hong, Shirley Lim Geok-lin and Tash Aw to form a new literary rhetoric called Anglophone Malaysian Chinese diaspora. Kim Cheng Boey (2010) argued how Ee, a male Baba born in Malacca and migrated to Australia, negotiated with his homeland Malaysia, and found his belonging in his new land through poetic imagining. At the beginning, Ee in his poems *Requiem* and *Done* dealt with the tragic 1969 riot as "a dark day in Malaysian history" and touched upon alienation and displacement (94). But later in his collection *Nearing a Horizon*, Ee finally conjured up a utopia for his spiritual repositioning "on the banks of the Swan River, away from the oppressive politics of Malaysia" (96). Similarly, returning to the homeland Malaysia is a recurring theme in Lim's work. However, in her autobiographical novel *Among the White Moon Faces*, there is a sense of absence during the physical revisiting to Malaysia, which indicates the impotency of homecoming. Thus, exile to a new place becomes an alternative for identity reconstruction. As Walter S.H. Lim (2018) claimed, for Lim, settling herself in a more open and inclusive America offers her a relatively pure literary space to speak out of the former colonial shadow and the stifled Malaysian political regime. In *Joss and Gold*, Feng Pin-chia (2007) indicates how Lim uses Suyin's rojak (hybridity) as feminist body politics to destabilize the paternalistic sway and allow "the female characters to remain rooted while exploring different routings of identification" (148). Also, in Tash Aw's Novel *The Harmony Silk Factory*, Gabriel (2013) emphasized the fluidity of Malaysian Chinese identification, challenging the hegemonic state control. Thus, for the Malaysian Chinese diaspora, ancestral home is a place that they cannot return to, so they reconstruct their imagined home in the host countries through a mixture of their transnational memories.

In conclusion, whether through strategic conversion or steadfast preservation, Malaysian Chinese groups disrupt any assumptions of reified categorization by relentlessly (re)negotiating identities between productive reconciliation with dominant local cultures and unwavering resistance under the grand narrative, reconceptualizing the marker of Chineseness as an active agent always in the process of recreation. It is this meandering route of identity formation juggled between host cultures and imagined homeland that makes the Mahua community an idiosyncratic cultural site, a mixture of transnational Chinese experiences with local Malaysian cultures. However, potential problems still lurk. While Malaysian Chinese try to register their own distinctive racial language and literature in line with actual experiences historical and cultural baggage embedded in Nanyang (the South Sea) to imagine global south as "congeries of place-specific and space-making human geographies" (Sparke 2007: 123), they risk falling into the trap of Sinophone. The built-in issues with the aforementioned Sinophone paradigm lie in its overemphasis on the so-called "open and indeterminate signifier" conditioned by its intricate geopolitical and historical circumstances, together with its paranoia to mainland China (Ang 1998: 225). Likewise, facing the trend of localized writing, how do they circumvent overreacting to the endorsed discourse of postcolonial Malaysian nation-building and the manipulation of traumatic marginalization to recreate a new exclusive center? The incessant negotiation with the grand narratives often engenders mental split and psychological insecurity, which throws the identity remaking for Malaysian Chinese in a quandary. The consequence of localization overriding other external elements would lead to a vicious circle of irrational narcissism covered by the excuse of self-preservation. As Leo (2008) asserts that "localism with a parochial face can be the most exclusive provincialism", the self-aggrandizing open framework of Sinophone, which opposes any oppressive uniformity, is very exclusive in and of itself (276). To avoid haunted essentialism in defining any enclosed and segregated literary domain, such as Sinophone, Anglophone, or Francophone, this paper introduces metatextual reconstruction as a point of departure to address the long-existing theoretical impasse.

EPISTEMIC LEAP: SINOPHONE AND BEYOND

In retrospect, to overcome the duality in Sinophone, as manifested in Malaysian Chinese literary localization, intellectuals like Tu Weiming and Wang Ling-chi attempted to reimagine Chineseness as an open-ended location within the global nexus. Tu (2005) coins the term "Cultural China" to analyze Chineseness through the lens of "three symbolic universes", connecting global Chinese entities of distinct geopolitical locales as a wholeness (154). While this paradigm contributes to the problematization of any hierarchical centrism and anticipates an equal dialogue insight via viewing center and periphery as interchangeable

agents, its very nature still emanates a strong sense of categorization divided by different layers of Chineseness, which results in a return to the binary pitfall. As for Wong (1998), she suggests a new word, "luodi-shenggen (the planting of roots in the soils of other nations)", the polar opposite of "luoye-guigen (return to one's roots)" to bridge the two current paradigms (p. x). The new idea is intended to act as an interface between the Chinese cultural legacy and creative acculturation in host nations. Instead of falling back on the repeated parochial localization or complete integration, it views Chineseness as an amiable interlocutor who traverses easily between different geopolitical domains inside polyphonic Chinese communities. However, regarding the ostensibly different geopolitical experiences, how is this bright vision achieved in light of the complex Chinese identity landscapes? Is it the result of compromise or another version of the big story masked by pluralism and equality rhetoric?

Actually, the polyphonic world in which we live is predicated on differences, as are the numerous cultural variants and competing geopolitical divisions within Chinese communities like Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore. To resolve the epistemological deadlock, this essay proposes a new rubric of effective identification called metatextual reconstruction. This new hypothesis, inspired by Zhao Tingyang's (2009) philosophical notion called the "all under heaven" model, moves beyond polarized representation either in an exclusive or ideal way by enacting an experimental approach to anticipate an imagined literary space of criss-crossing (30). The essence of metatextual reconstruction is its mellowness and fluidity, which never doggedly adheres to any particular location. Unlike Sinophone, which places an excessive focus on locality, this paradigm necessitates a conception that views Chineseness as a miniature of the world based on reciprocal and organic relationships. This is not to say that locality is irrelevant; rather, it must be realized in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Otherwise, the world would descend into anarchy where each entity pursues self-interest out of its free will. To facilitate the proposed framework, "interactive cognition" is the basis for eluding any centrism and achieving "bidirectional interpretation" (Yue 2016: 134). It points out an empathetic dialogue that renders an "external viewpoint" by viewing others as a mirror to better reflect and renew oneself through "distant contemplative space" (136). Metatextual reconstruction advocates

a "world consciousness" since there is no self-centered and isolated entity, but many agents played in relationships with other specific individuals" (94). Aligning with world poetics both "in the singular as well as plural forms", the newly proposed paradigm thus addresses Sinophone's identity crisis caused by the blind appropriation of western terms. Most importantly, metatextual reconstruction helps each Chinese entity to reinvent itself as a culturally-specific yet inclusive agent to be on par with its Western counterparts in the world literary space, thus salvaging the aphasia of Chinese literary representation in Eurocentric academia.

Given the tangled landscape of Chineseness sprawling globally, any discourse that is bound to its own specific socio-cultural codes, such as Sinophone or the grand narratives of mainland China's revival, proves to fail in capturing its panorama. Thus, this study invites Casanova's world literary space to illustrate how metatextual reconstruction is a possible way out for tackling the theoretical impasse that haunts the field of Chineseness studies. World literary space embodied in the proposed metatextual reconstruction circumvents the trap of Sinophone with its blind reappropriation of postcolonialism as a political weapon to forge its own alleged independence. It calls for a parallel sphere of Chineseness free from political encroachment, postulating an organic space where delimitation on the basis of nation, gender, and race is naturally undone. In other words, each entity can be truly perceived "only in terms of the position it occupies within the whole" (73). Any attempt to compartmentalize Chineseness covered by the locally-based rhetoric turns out to be a tunnel vision. In addition, unlike unifying model sanctioned by grand nationalist discourse within which the predetermined hierarchy is subtly operated, the aesthetics of world literary space requires an objective relationship that allows for coexistence and contestation of different entities to make "the Republic of Letters" based upon inclusivity and diversity (81). This disinterested insight critically accesses Chineseness as a heterogeneous Oneness by forming an "art of distance", thus escaping the nationalist discourse of centrism obsession (89). Starting from this angle, the structural collision between different clusters of Chineseness is possibly resolved, facilitating the upcoming of a constellation of glocal Chineseness.

The significance of this study is to form an ontological break from the teleological cycle

rooted in Hegelian dialectics that always refers to an ideal Oneness, which contributes to reinventing Chineseness as a constellation in the world space where the diverse cultures, ethnicities, and languages that cohabit this planet can compete as well as interact to envision a symbiotic interconnection based on disparities. Constellation is the creative interplay of each entity inside this loose but linked network rather than the annexation, dilution, or contamination of other cultures (Gilroy 1993). Within "mutual constructedness", the binary antagonism of self/other or center/periphery could be destabilized (Gabriel 2005: 43). There is no predetermined either/or option or prescribed order for the various approaches to Chineseness across worldwide Chinese groups. As Gilroy (1993) further contends, being rooted and displaced are not mutually exclusive, but rather complement each other's cultural repositories via "intercultural cross-fertilization" (188). This new mindset is not embedded in institutionalized racial layers or hierarchies, but rather, in the very end, to avoid the unending circle of labeling in order to bring out "transcendental humanity" (Wright 1965: 129). Thus, this ideological shift renders Chineseness as the site of temporal worldliness in the ongoing process of dynamic exchange. In the next section, this paper chooses Tash Aw's selected works to elucidate how metatextual reconstruction functions in erratic yet interconnected narratives as a critical lens to break the abovementioned ideological deadlock.

TASH AW: METATEXTUAL RECONSTRUCTION AS A WAY OUT

Before unpacking Tash Aw's imagined space for metatextual reconstruction, it is necessary to shed light on his literary path. Aw was born in Taiwan and raised in Kuala Lumpur by his Malaysian parents. Growing up in multilingual Malaysia, he can speak Chinese, Cantonese, Malay, and English. He migrated to England when he was a teenager and studied law at Cambridge and Warwick Universities. He then relocated to London, worked in a variety of positions, including four years as a lawyer, and subsequently went to the University of East Anglia to study Creative Writing. It is just his diasporic experiences that prepare him for his later literary path. For example, in *The Harmony Silk Factory*, his debut novel, three narratives of the life of Johnny Lim, a Chinese peasant set in British Malay,

are juxtaposed, disrupting the linear narrative, and indicating his mobile routes to identity formation. His second and third novels *Map of the Invisible World* and *Five Stars Billionaire* as well deal with the issues of self-positioning within the diasporic context. His elusive narration and plot structure catch many scholars' attention in reviewing his works. Here, this section will expound on how Tash Aw draws on his diasporic experiences to conduct metatextual reconstruction by inventing a fictionalized space and persona beyond any ethnocentric trap.

Home and identity are the two main themes for many diasporic groups and different generations cope with these two concepts based on their lived experiences. Departing from the earlier generations who could not get rid of the past, the younger generations take the initiative to reformulate their new self-recognition by creatively selecting the old traditions and stories in line with their actively registered experiences. The targeted author Tash Aw, a subversive diasporic writer often on the front line of literary exploration, fits the thorough study of the younger generations' engagement with identity issues. For example, in *Five Stars Billionaire*, Walter S. H. Lim (2021) states how the younger generations of Malaysian Chinese dare to traverse the national boundaries and leave for cosmopolitan Shanghai to upend the prescribed racial demarcation underneath multiethnic Malaysia and seek new identities through supranational traveling. However, after landing in Shanghai and being prepared to restore themselves through first-hand experiences, they find their initial exultation has evaporated and what awaits them is to grapple with the upcoming alienation and reification. The failure of homecoming challenges the fixed and atavistic understanding of the so-called ancestral bond. Being separated from homeland for a long time, they feel ill at ease in such a fast-developing metropolis Shanghai as their imagined hometown is weaved by second-hand memories retold by earlier generations, and their generative diasporic experiences compounded with historical conjuncture also undo their liner identification with home (Walter 2018). What Aw intends to convey through five characters is the ideological transformation in line with the ever-changing surroundings, thus calling for a dynamic self-remodeling. Echoing with Walter, Ting-hui Hsiung (2014) suggested that, in both Aw's first and second novels, homeland and self-construction are restored within pieces of memories and

embedded historical moments such as the impact of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) during the Cold War. Physical connection is displaced, while spiritual fictionalization serves as a conduit for new identity searching. By highlighting the way memory and history shape protagonists' self-positioning, Aw creates an intangible space awash with miscellaneous reproduced folklore, tales, languages, customs, and mythologies to break off the genealogical obsession and racialized dichotomy endorsed by state-led nationalism and embrace a more resilient and performative identification. Gabriel (2014) also reads the incoherent narration of protagonist Johnny through the lens of three spectators in *Harmony* as an alternative force to combat the "essentialist notion of ethnicity and national identity", and the sense of uncertainty caused by intermittent memory unleashes subjective uncanniness that subverts the orthodox national narration (1212). She questioned the continued residue of racial division policy in plural postcolonial Malaysia that has long been stipulated by the British colonial and called for reassessing Malaysian Chineseness since the Chinese past stories, traditions, and legacies have been "remade into a 'new' Malaysian identity" (1213). Wai-chew Sim (2011) combined Raymond Williams' structure of feeling and Hayden White's metahistory to explore how Aw as a Malaysian Chinese, by recasting a series of historical events like the MCP insurgency after the Japanese invasion, 1957 independence, and the 1969 riot, uses Kantian unbounded and lofty sublime to anticipate an oceanic feeling, a self-transcendence crossing social and cultural boundaries in postcolonial Malaysia. Multivocal narratives in *Harmony* decentralize protagonist Johnny's presence, inducing a contesting and equivocal discourse that is hard to settle by any singular and totalized metanarrative, which gives voice to the Malaysian Chinese during nation-building. The metaphorical interpretation of the swimming scene and romantic love crossing racial and class lines reflects the author's vision to reframe a new mode of narration that gestures at "an inclusivity yet to be born" and an "internationalism worthy of the name" (300). Also, "affiliative ties" based on equal interaction instead of hierarchical subordination are enacted within polyphonic discourses to address the inter-ethnic tension underneath the multicultural policy (300, 308). Most importantly, Aw's works offer a utopian picture for the next generation to "alter our concept of geography" by enlivening a democratic society free of biased power systems and atomistic racialization and inviting new parameters of identification based on multi-dimensional blending (308). Thus, compared with the typical postcolonial review of Aw's works by Walter, Gabriel, and Hsiung, Sim's analysis tilts more toward the philosophical interpretation by using Kant's key term sublime to envision an idyllic space that transcends cultural and geopolitical restraints, echoing the core value of metatextual reconstruction for espousing worldliness.

Apart from multivocal narratives and the tactical use of Kantian sublime, this paragraph examines how objective rereading is activated in Aw's works to foresee a field of creative interaction that deters both the subjective trap and reified social structure. Wei-Hsin Gui (2014) argued that instead of just emphasizing the negative effect of objectification which leads to "commodity fetishism and social alienation", Aw's literary representation features the "conceptual place of objects" that offer a glimpse of "alternative social relations and self-fashioning" in an objective interpenetration (291). For example, in *Harmony*, Aw employs objectivism through decentering. The account of protagonist Johnny's life by three characters Jasper, Snow, and Peter, rather than by himself, abates his subjectivity and also places each character in the realm of an interwoven network. Likewise, in *Five*, Walter Chao's seemingly omnipotent authorship is also offset by Phoebe's resistance female gaze. The objective rereading aims to juxtapose the characters in a dynamic equilibrium with which each can effectively interact. Wei's objectivism not only bursts the bubble of false subjectivity and equality that postcolonial Malaysia clings to under the guise of neoliberal multiculturalism or affirmative action, but also avoids the aforementioned Sinophone's dilemma caught by the overreliance on subjectification. Besides, Lily Cho (2018) discussed objectification by using fake goods or identities in *Five Stars Billionaire* as a site of complexity to reject "the moralizing binarism" and embrace "multifaceted forms of value" (54). Aw's counterfeit items, like self-help books, fake identities, and handbags that enable characters to survive by wearing social personas, are interpreted as financial derivatives that extract "the underlying asset" to negotiate their positions through the jungle of global capitalism permeated all levels of the ultra-modern Shanghai (70). Thus, rather than stressing the alienation and standardization accompanied by the progress of modernity, Lily's analysis tried to

rearticulate fakeness as a creative language to elude the legitimate and homogenous discourse, which coincides with Ming Tak-Chew's (2020) innovative sociological rereading of consumption that denied the assumed stereotype of fakeness as absolute evil. The use of fakeness by the subaltern minority and the socially underprivileged is a quick fix for them to combat "stigmatization and social exclusion" as the doubleness of fakeness resembles the status of the diasporic Malaysian Chinese in Malaysia (12). The guiding role of the self-help book in *Five* also can be read as a literary approach that aims to create "a space beyond global capitalism's reach" (Naydan 2018: 9). Instead of entirely jettisoning decayed parts of capitalism and modernity, characters manipulate fake goods as social capital derivatives to wrestle with the oppressive society and secure their positions. Thus, objectivism in Aw's works not only welcomes a site of creative and open dialogue but also breaks the ossified social structure legitimized by the above.

Whether through Kantian sublime or objectivism, Aw's works point to a broader literary space that is not confined by any regional force. Angelia Poon (2021) argued how Aw as a diasporic Malaysian Chinese Anglophone writer situates his position in the world literature space by recuperating the universalism that has long been suspected by postcolonial studies as an imperialistic intrigue. Although alterity and resistance prevail in the postcolonial agenda as a counter-narrative to any form of universalism, overemphasis on singularity and difference overlooks the archetypal commonalities innate in human history, which incurs an endless loop of hatred and misunderstanding. Under the influence of the globalized context, the "multi-sited unboundedness" of multiethnic Malaysia, driven by a bunch of new socioeconomic policies, makes the geopolitical and ethnographic landscape of Malaysia no longer a national-scale concern (Xiang 2013: 286). In Aw's novels, Malaysia is converted into a miniature of the world so that universal themes such as economic inequality, migrant labor, and ethnic tensions are highlighted to respond not only to the postcolonial Malaysian society but also to shared humanity. Extending the Malaysian socioeconomic and "political dynamics to universalism" then becomes a common "cultural vocabulary and thinking" of identity construction for both the Malaysian Chinese and the international audience (5). Aw's concern over mounting issues engendered by global modernism and capitalism

mixed with the quandary of the Malaysian Chinese illustrates typical postcolonial cultural discourse superimposed by "the local and global productive frames", which both correspond to his own position as a diasporic Malaysian Chinese writing in the Anglophone academia and his humanitarian spirit as a transnational man of letters (Chew 2001: 612).

We, the Survivors tells a story of how Ah Hock, a Chinese man raised in a rural Malaysian fishing village, is double jeopardized as the underprivileged non-Malay subaltern Other. His miserable life later embroils him in a murder case, which further accentuates his social status as a marginalized outsider. Actually, what Aw aims to convey here is not just to emphasize how Malaysian Chinese are stranded in postcolonial Malaysia, but to index Malaysia's multiethnic landscape marked by the intersection of varied ethnicities, languages, and cultures as a microcosm of the world. In other words, Aw's literary mapping of Ah Hock's suffering brings out a series of ongoing universal issues like racial discrimination, migration, and poverty shared by people around the world, which pulls the discussion of Chineseness out of the binary loop and essentialism. For example, Ah Hock's inability to move upward as "my father was a fisherman, just like my grandfather before him" indicates the ossified social strata legitimized by the capitalistic exploitation (Aw 2019: 22). The repetitive route he takes, like a family curse, locks his life in a cyclic struggle. Ah Hock's smothered disenfranchisement resonates with the contemporary dilemma of working people seeking survival in the merciless society, which evokes a pang of disillusionment, especially among those millennials who are "trapped in obscurity, hard to get in, hard to get out" facing a cruel world full of bias, injustice and social divide (27). Also, the police's stereotype of a Chinese kid carrying loads of money as a gangster not only shows the stagnant racial discrimination propagated since colonial times but also points to the deep-seated racial prejudice as a global concern. And racial segregation exacerbates this racial discrimination; as Ah Hock states in the novel, people are clearly separated and they feel "like ocean between two continents" (22). It is worth noting that Aw's probe into the protagonist's alienation is not merely a realist novel that hints at a moral code in the end, but rather exudes a strong sense of nihilism because "we knew that for no-money Chinese people like us, there was no point in even trying" (202). The depiction of migrant, poverty, and racial inequality,

in a broader sense, turns Malaysia into a glocal site for a "universal applicable existential meditation on humanity's capacity for survival and cruelty" (Poon 2021: 4).

The universalism in *We, the Survivors* well explains why this study chooses Aw's literary representation as a point of departure for metatextual reconstruction of Chineseness because it dovetails with the core of the proposed framework that examines Chineseness beyond the geopolitical and racial filter and advocates a dynamic collectiveness with a critical engagement to the tension between the local and the global. Similar cases can also be found in Tash Aw's *Map of the Invisible World* and *The Harmony Silk Factory*, both characterized by the strategic non-linear yet loosely linked narrative structure to reveal the multilayered Chineseness, which again fits into the goal of metatextual construction to refashion a constellation of global Chineseness. The inconsistency and "multiple duplicities" in the story of Johnny narrated by three characters highlight the multifaceted texture of Chineseness (298). Meanwhile, the discursiveness and inscrutability are temporally suspended as "the boiling sea" scene Jasper watches on the television broadcasting Malaysia's independence celebration foreshadows a sense of unbounded force shared by all humankind for freedom (100). Moreover, the swimming scene with his father Johnny also evokes a transcendental longing for freedom that traverses ethnic and national boundaries. The symbolic portrayal of the sunlight glistening on the water as if someone had "cast tiny jewels all over the ocean" calls for a "commonality that can overcome ethnic particularism but doesn't slip into a totalizing conception of that ideal (Sim 2011: 301). Here, the dialectical logic manifested in the symbolic interplay between the jewels-like sunlight and the sea projects a possible way out for the never-ending binary between Sinophone and Grand discourse of China's revival.

In *Map*, the sea scene as a metaphor for self-transcendence also coincides with Adam and Johan's collective experience of the sea, which gestures towards a vast and infinite universe resembling "fields of coral, which, in the moonlight, looked like a shadowy map an unknown world where the boundaries were uncertain and the countries kept changing shape" (131). The sea represents an ambiguous space that cannot be defined by any singular vocabulary, where the dichotomy between nation, race, and culture is melted away. The refusal of any absolute tag, as evidenced by the mythological genealogy of Adam and Jasper both in *Harmony* and *Map*, predicts an invisible world in the making. Adam's triple ties with Johan, Karl, and Zubaidah, whether it be fraternity, familial affinity, or romantic love, underscores a transnational "fellow feeling" crossing national and ethnic lines (303). Also, Zubaidah's pivotal role in rescuing Adam from national turmoil and helping him reunite with his adoptive father Karl forms a stark contrast with Din's radical nativism, which also strengthens Aw's appeal for a fluid entry to Chineseness as a supranational complex. Through the entwined yet interconnected narratives of the selected texts, Aw's imagined space offers a kaleidoscopic glimpse of Chineseness in which fragments of lived experiences among global Chinese groups are woven into a disjointed whole, contributing to a better understanding of the multifaceted formation of Chineseness as a constellation as a glocal site.

In a nutshell, this section cautions against the neoliberal fallacy of extolling the impetus of subjectivity and equality, which ends up breeding more social divides. Thus, the objective reconfiguration and the call for the revival of true universalism, both of which are missing in postcolonial studies, are adopted to view identity formation as an international topic that must be processed dynamically and empirically. Tash Aw, as a self-exiled writer, is more inclined to envisage a free and open literary space going beyond the geopolitical limits and anticipating temporal worldliness that circumvents any ontological duality. Through cross-border sociocultural and ethnic translation in his entangled narratives, he puts the discussion of Chineseness in the pantheon of world literature. The very end of the metatextual reconstruction is to see Chineseness as a constellation of plural signifiers calling for a shared humanity for emancipation. Thus, metatextual reconstruction is not an ideal hypothesis seeking symmetry or harmony, but a critical and malleable matrix for transnational interplay. More importantly, following Casanova's (2005) "thinking literature as a world", Aw pushes the frontier further by introducing metatextual reconstruction as a trailblazing experimental praxis across disparate geopolitical and cultural fences to realize a genuine two-way dialogue (73).

CONCLUSION

Overdetermination of Chineseness as a result of diverse lived experiences and distinct historical disjunctures deters any absolute essentialism or extreme exclusivism. While Sinophone makes use of the peripheral of the overseas Chinese minority as a counter-narrative to nationalism's grand narrative, it eventually falls into the trap of radical exclusivism and racial violence. Its approach to Chineseness implies that attitudes and visions are "positioned and partial" within a context-specific framework (Gal & Irvine, 2019: 2). Sinophone's objective of retaining its own position to combat the umbrella incorporation of the mainland grand narrative finally get backfired, which ends up being caught in a loop of essentialism. Therefore, when particularity is stressed excessively, it risks devolving into a self-proclaimed ghetto or blind provincialism. To break this impasse, scholars either from the mainland or overseas attempt to invent new paradigms. The first approach is cultural China, but its core appears to be hierarchical and biased. The second approach "luoye-guigen (return to one's roots)" tries to embed Chineseness in a global context. However, it again falls into the trap of the Sinophone.

To break free from this established binary conflict, this article, by analyzing Aw's interwoven narratives as a fictional space of creative interplay, calls for an ideological shift through metatextual reconstruction to engage Chineseness as a constellation in world literature. Since identity as a performative and cultural concept is fluid across geographic and cultural boundaries, it could be managed flexibly between host and homeland cultures. Different from conglomeration in the manner of multiculturalism, the constellation paradigm espouses the multilateral exchange of divergent entities without losing one's own, which resists mindless absorption and political confinement. Through this dynamic metric of navigation, the complexities of Chineseness could be manifested as a linked but loose site in the global web with which many forms of cultural elements can interact in a relational manner. This new paradigm thus offers a starting point for reconceptualizing Chineseness that is not based on politics-ridden analysis or polemics but on an integrative schema as an everyday attitude and practice. Furthermore, the cross-cultural divide should not be used maliciously through identity politics, which only serves to incite intra-racial animosity and cruel racial categorization. The presumptive ideological wall raised out of the fractured political stances should be abandoned, whether in the guise of patriotism or nativism. Otherwise, we would be saddled with politicized confrontation and forever caged in the pigeonhole of essentialism or ethnocentrism. Metatextual reconstruction points to a larger world immune to the physical barriers where national borders are naturally dissolved and the epoch of multilateral communication via "fluid interdependence" are accelerated (Sheller & Urry 2006: 212). Whatever chaotic the world is, the archetypal humanity for chasing temporal worldliness remains solid as represented in Aw's selected works. In this case, it is imperative to adopt an organic vision to embrace the constellation of Chineseness as a critical and reflective site.

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