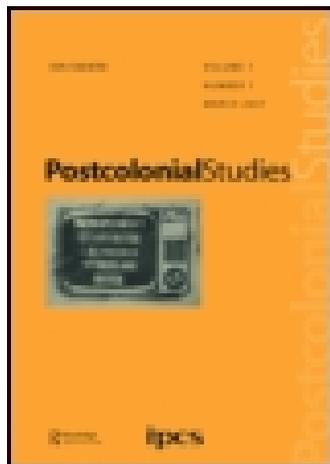


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Lingchei Letty Chen

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# When does ‘diaspora’ end and ‘Sinophone’ begin?

LINGCHEI LETTY CHEN

The most common buzzword in the fields of modern Chinese literature and Chinese cinema today is probably none other than ‘Sinophone’. Conceptualized and developed by Shu-mei Shih, ‘Sinophone’ proposes to redraw the map of the regions and communities occupied by Chinese descendants throughout the world. Shih argues to de-centre ‘China’ as the symbolic and material source of all manifestations of ‘Chineseness’ and to reject the Sinocentric argument in constructions of identities for Chinese people across ethno-geographic boundaries.<sup>1</sup> Shih carries her argument further by envisioning what I call a ‘Sinophone sphere’ that excludes mainland China and the ethnic majority of Han-Chinese who live there. This ‘Sinophone sphere’ thereby encompasses all people of Chinese descent who reside in various parts of the world and who have adopted their chosen foreign land as home for themselves and their offspring. As Sheldon Lu states, Shih’s theory of Sinophone is ‘a theory of Chinese diaspora that does not privilege ancestral home’.<sup>2</sup> In fact, not only does Shih reject ancestral home as one of the criteria for defining Chinese diaspora, she goes one step further to call for an expiration date on the idea of ‘diaspora’ for people who have lived in their adopted land for generations and have largely been assimilated to the host culture: ‘one cannot say one is diasporic after three hundred years, and everyone should be given a chance to become a local’.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly Shih is ready to retire the notion ‘diaspora’. A year after Shih first articulated her notion of ‘Sinophone’, Rogers Brubaker published an essay, ‘The “Diaspora” Diaspora’, discussing how the term ‘diaspora’ has been overused to the point of near uselessness.<sup>4</sup> Brubaker calls the extensive elaboration and proliferation of ‘diaspora’ in the past decade or so a “‘diaspora’ of diaspora’ to characterize how this notion has strayed too far from its original Jewish roots and has come to describe a great variety of populations in dispersion, from people who voluntarily or involuntarily leave their homeland, to migrants/immigrants/emigrants who maintain a close tie to their native land, to people who have lost direct connection to their original homeland but remain in what Brubaker calls ‘transethnic and transborder linguistic categories’ such as Francophone, Anglophone, Lusophone, and Sinophone in our case, to global religious groups like Hindu, Confucian, and Muslim communities.<sup>5</sup> What further compounds the fraying of the term ‘diaspora’ is its broad application in academia, on the one hand, and its wide adoption by the media and popular culture, on the other.<sup>6</sup> In order to rescue the term ‘diaspora’ from exhaustion, Brubaker proposes to treat it as ‘an idiom, a stance, a claim ... as a category of practice’.<sup>7</sup>

Although Shih did not articulate a systematic argument to debunk the term ‘Chinese diaspora’ until her 2007 book *Visuality and Identity*, it is quite obvious

that ‘diaspora’ by then had already lost its theoretical rigour. Shih’s objection to ‘Chinese diaspora’ basically coincides with the trajectory of the term’s overuse that Brubaker outlines.<sup>8</sup> The rationale behind Shih’s call for an expiration date for ‘diaspora’ is a chronological one. ‘Diaspora’ understood as such thus signifies a temporal existence whose nature can, and indeed will, change over the course of time. With its spatial and temporal significations thus disavowed, ‘diaspora’ as a critical concept is on the brink of bankruptcy. But I would argue to the contrary that the concept is still useful and valid. Instead of attempting to further complicate the term’s spatial or temporal connotations, I propose to understand ‘diaspora’ as a state of being, an existential condition, and an emotional and psychic disruption. That is to say, this proposed meaning of ‘diaspora’ cannot be appreciated fully without the intervention of ‘memory’. Whether applied as a spatial or temporal notion, ‘diaspora’ always points to a state of displacement as preserved in memories. As people relocate, what they bring with them are memories of the times and places they have left behind. Their children not only inherit the first generation’s memories but also have their own experiences—incomplete and fragmented as these may be—with the native home and/or the cultural heritage. The children’s inherited and future generations’ mediated memories are what Marianne Hirsch defines as ‘postmemory’<sup>9</sup> and Alison Landsberg conceptualizes as ‘prosthetic memory’.<sup>10</sup> Traces left by memory manifest themselves in longing and nostalgia, in searching for identity, in community building, and in reproduction of cultural and religious rituals and customs. Thereby treating ‘diaspora’ as an emotive concept would necessarily tease out the politics of homeland, cultural authenticity, ethnocentrism and so on.

Similarly, the editors of *Transforming Diaspora*, Robin E Field and Parmita Kapdia, highlight an overlooked but critical point made by William Safran in his influential essay that provided what later would become the foundation of many scholars’ subsequent discussions of ‘diaspora’. The critical point that Safran mentions, but is not included in his list of the term’s basic characteristics, elucidates that the ‘diasporic consciousness is an intellectualization of an existential condition’.<sup>11</sup> While Field and Kapdia privilege the ‘intellectualization’ as it ‘suffices to create a distinctive cultural identity that still may be termed diasporic’,<sup>12</sup> taking ‘culture’, not ‘place’, to be the centrepiece of a new understanding of ‘diaspora’,<sup>13</sup> I would, however, highlight the ‘existential condition’ as it brings to the fore the emotive depth of the diasporic experience. This emotional experience then becomes part of the memory, postmemory, or prosthetic memory that essentially constitutes an important part of one’s cultural identity.

Field and Kapdia’s new formulation of ‘diaspora’ agrees with Shih’s theorization of ‘Sinophone’ in discarding ‘place’—understood as the ‘homeland’—as an indispensable element in articulating identity for people who have settled in their ‘host land’, and supports Shih’s argument of a ‘Sinophone’ identity as a result of many generations’ localization in their adopted land. What is clearly absent from this argument, and all others that concern themselves with time and space, is the person—the product of diaspora—herself. As people relocate for whatever reason, they carry with them memories and these memories are passed down to family members from generation to generation, as second or third generations of family

members also form their own postmemories of the familial past. More distant generations create prosthetic memories through various sources of mass media such as films, television, the internet, visiting museums, reading novels, and from observing traditional ethnic rituals, customs, and habits.

Memory thus is the thread that binds people to the place, the culture, and the past. The 'existential condition' of diaspora can be understood through the connections between memory, place, and displacement. As people move, their memories move as well. It is through the double movements of people and of memory that I argue to consider 'diaspora' not simply as a physical situatedness, but rather as an emotional and psychic condition. Taking inspiration from the collection of essays *Memory and Migration: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies*, whose contributors posit the question of how to understand 'memory that has migrated or has been exiled from its local habitations',<sup>14</sup> I ask the question of how the condition of migration, and by extension diaspora, can be understood through memory.

Paul Ricoeur uses 'imprint' and 'likeness' of the actual thing to illustrate that memory is an absence (forgetting) made present through imagination (remembering).<sup>15</sup> What we remember is engineered by what we forget. This is the twin function of forgetting and remembering with which memory is created. What we call memory then is representation or reproduction of an intricate working of remembering and forgetting all at once. We cannot help to forget as we remember. Memory associated with migration, displacement, exile, or expulsion is intrinsically linked to the place of origin. But the original location with which the memory is associated never reappears in recollection as the same place. It is never the same, original place because of what we simultaneously remember and forget. And, as we 'look back', we also do so from where we stand: the here and now. The symbolic meaning of the original location thus varies with the passage of time as well as the spatial location that the individual occupies at the present moment. Therefore the 'site' of memory is not so much the place of origin but the ongoing human agency. 'Memory is where we have arrived rather than where we have left. What's forgotten is not an absence, but a movement of disintegration that produces an object of origin. In other words, memory is produced over time and under erasure.'<sup>16</sup>

The diasporic condition thus is marked by memories of the twin journeys of relocation and localization. I argue that 'diaspora' never ends (even) when 'Sinophone' begins. The Sinophone writer always carries within him or her imprints of the diasporic experiences passed down for generations. This existential condition of the diaspora is part and parcel of the Sinophone. In what follows, I will read closely two short stories by two Sinophone writers, Guo Songfen, a native Taiwanese who later became a Taiwanese American, and Ng Kim Chew (Huang Jinshu), a Malaysian Chinese who resides primarily in Taiwan. Their diasporic experiences are reflected through memory in their fictional works.

### Memory of the running mother: Guo Songfen

An international incident, the Diaoyutai incident (*Diaoyutai shijian*) in 1971, permanently altered the life trajectory of Guo Songfen (1938–2005). The

Diaoyutai incident was triggered by the United States' announcement of the return of Okinawa and the southwestern islands, which would include the Senkaku Islands, or Diaoyutai Islands in Chinese, to Japan. This announcement stirred up an intense reaction from Taiwanese students and the Taiwanese community in the US over the dispute of the sovereignty of Diaoyutai. Guo Songfen was working on his doctoral degree in comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley, at that time. When the controversy erupted, Guo decided to give up his doctoral studies and threw himself into the protest movement. The Diaoyutai incident brought together Taiwanese students in the US to hold organized demonstrations that were known as the Protect Diaoyutai movement (*Bao Diao yundong*). The point of the protest was for the Islands to be returned to rightful Chinese sovereignty. However, as the event would turn out, the real challenge facing the Taiwanese in the US was not so much the issue of sovereignty over the Islands themselves, but rather the conundrum of having 'two Chinas'—the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) of the mainland.

Guo's political activism during this incident temporarily changed his political identification to that with the PRC. In 1974, Guo with his father and wife made a visit to China.<sup>17</sup> This journey effectively put Guo on the ROC government's blacklist and he was not allowed to enter Taiwan until the annulment of martial law in 1987. The visit to China itself also turned out to be a disappointing one. After seeing with his own eyes the backwardness and social chaos resulting from the Cultural Revolution, Guo realized that Mao's socialist China was not what he imagined and he thus gave up his support for the PRC. These turns of events—blacklisted by his own government in Taiwan and his rejection of 'the other China', the PRC government—forced Guo into exile in the US for more than 20 years. Guo did not return to Taiwan until 1989. This would be his only visit back home. Guo passed away in July 2005 in New York, after suffering a series of strokes. Though disavowed by his own government, Taiwan remained a preoccupation in Guo's writings throughout his years in the US. Representative works include *Running Mother* (*Benpao de muqin*) and *Tale of Two Moons* (*Shuangyue ji*). His wife Lee Yu, who was also an accomplished writer, completed his unfinished manuscript, *Jing Hun* (Marriage's wake<sup>18</sup>); it was printed posthumously in 2012 by INK (Yinke) Publishing in Taiwan.

Effects of memory on Guo's diasporic condition are best depicted in his monumental work, 'Running Mother'. The story is a dialogue between the narrator and his childhood friend Liao, a psychiatrist, about their childhood memories and particularly about the narrator's and his own recurring dream of his mother running away from him. The present-day narrator is an overseas Taiwanese (though not revealed, the locale of this host country is likely the US) who is now sitting with Liao in the courtyard of Liao's old house in Chiayi, a city in southern Taiwan. This short story is permeated with Guo's memories of his childhood in Taipei. Through the lens of the narrator's postmemory of his mother and the family circumstances, Guo creates a world in which the diasporic subject's existential condition is permanently inscribed with the memory of feelings of displacement. The narrator's remembrances of various moments in his earlier life in war-torn Taiwan during the Pacific War are interwoven with his

recurring dream. This dream is an intensified and magnified manifestation of his postmemory of his mother throughout his childhood and adolescence. It is postmemory because the memory itself is fragmented and stems from the youngster's incomplete understanding of his surroundings, particularly his mother's circumstances. Postmemory here is thus a child's memory created primarily from re-remembering/re-assembling of his/her patchy childhood impressions and extensively exercising his/her imagination to fill the gaps.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory helps to highlight the temporal and experiential gap in the memories of children:

I use the term *postmemory* to describe the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they 'remember' only as the stories and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right. The term is meant to convey its temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory, its secondary or second-generation memory quality, its basis in displacement, its belatedness.<sup>19</sup>

(Post)memory thus is the key to two things: on the textual level, postmemory originates in the narrator's recurring dream of his mother running away from him; and on the meta-textual level, memory underpins Guo's fixation on his childhood, Taiwan and the Taiwanese people's collective traumatic experiences under Japanese colonialism and the Nationalist government's post-1945 brutal governance, epitomized by the February 28 Incident in 1947, and the subsequent White Terror period beginning in the 1950s. We can find these recurring themes in almost all of Guo's fictional works. Through works such as 'On Writing' (*Lun xiezuò*), 'Snow Blind' (*Xue máng*), 'Cloves' (*Cáo*), and 'Moon Seal' (*Yue yin*), the diasporic subject that Guo creates, whether a Taiwanese American, a Taiwanese colonial subject, or a Chinese mainland in Taiwan, occupies the space of the displaced—the liminal space between native Taiwan and ancestral China—because to a diasporic Sinophone writer like Guo, neither is a viable ideological choice as home.

The liminal space in 'Running Mother' exists in the narrator's fragmented postmemory of his father leaving home (never to return) and his mother struggling for livelihood and to maintain her loyalty to her marriage (as she was forced to remarry by her own father). Being a child and later a teenager, the narrator has no choice of his circumstances, nor does he have the ability to resolve his mother's predicament. All he can do is to cling to her. His inherent fear of abandonment—first by the father and later repeatedly by the mother in the haunting dream—literalizes the diasporic subject's lasting sense of displacement. This fear is the underlying reason for him to remain in the host country and eventually put down roots there. After hearing the narrator's fear that his mother is going to run away as she plans on travelling around the world, Liao points out: 'But in fact, you were the one who was running!'<sup>20</sup> Most scholars interpret the central image of the story, the mother, either as a political metaphor of the Taiwanese people's struggle with nationhood/nationalism,<sup>21</sup> a mnemonic symbol of the homeland,<sup>22</sup> or the figure of the colonial subject's reconstruction of cultural

identity.<sup>23</sup> Regardless of these interpretations, ‘the mother’ is nonetheless treated as a static image. However, with the linkage between dream and memory and considering memory’s capricious nature, the signification of the mother image, I would argue, is always in flux as the narrator’s positioning in life changes both physically and intellectually. Therefore it would make more sense to regard the image of the mother as the sign of the existential condition of the diasporic subject, the narrator.

As I argue earlier, the site of memory is not limited to the place of origin but can be extended as the individual human agent travels through his or her life journey. And indeed as the narrator experiences different life stages from childhood to fatherhood, his remembrance of his mother and the colonial and post-war Taiwan undergo changes as well. As a child, he repeatedly dreams of being left alone by his mother in the middle of the street late at night, and when he finally sees his mother, she is running away from him, leaving him crying and feeling terribly frightened. This childhood nightmare is tied to his fragmented memories of his father’s unexplained absence (he was likely sent to battle in the South Seas) and of having to escape the constant bombardment during the war—all experiences that threaten a child’s most fundamental sense of security and rootedness.

The narrator’s feeling of abandonment and rootlessness begins in childhood and continues during his adolescence. During his teenage years, his dream changes slightly: he would fight with his mother and then the mother would run away. It is also during this period that the mother was under increasing pressure from her father to remarry. The fear of losing his mother thus intensifies not only in reality but also in his dream. During his days abroad, his mother appears in his memory not as the ageing old woman that she had become, but instead the young and beautiful mother of his childhood.<sup>24</sup> As the narrator now returns to his host country from his visit in Taiwan, and as his mother is no longer mobile and has given up on the idea of travelling, the mother in his dream becomes younger and purer: ‘The B-29 bombers no longer appeared in my dreams, but my mother appeared in them more frequently than before. In my dreams she was a slim and graceful young mother, not a bedridden old woman with a lingering disease.’<sup>25</sup> In this gradual and subtle change of the image of the mother, it appears there is *less remembering* (i.e. forgetting) of the painful and *more imagining* (i.e. remembering) of tranquillity. On ‘forgetting’, Paul Ricoeur lays down this equation: when forgetting and forgiveness are considered together, appeased memory—or happy forgetting—can beget forgiveness.<sup>26</sup> It would seem that the narrator has arrived at ‘happy forgetting’ of the childhood trauma produced by the historical and familial circumstances that created his recurring nightmare of the running mother: Japanese colonialism, the Pacific War, the White Terror, the absence of the father and harshness of the mother caused by life’s challenges.

‘The work of postmemory, in fact, is to uncover the pits again, to unearth the layers of forgetting, to go beneath the screen surfaces that disguise the crimes and try to see what these images—the family pictures and the images of destruction—both expose and foreclose.’<sup>27</sup> The historical context in Hirsch’s statement is the Holocaust and the photographic images are those of the victims’ dead bodies and mass graves. Common to ethnic minorities is their historical memory of collective

trauma. What the theory of postmemory allows us to do is to continue our effort in understanding how effects of trauma linger on to the next generation and beyond. Again, on the usefulness of postmemory, Hirsch states: 'Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object of source is mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection, and creation—often based on *silence* rather than speech, on *the invisible* rather than the visible.'<sup>28</sup> It is usually silence and the invisible that tend to be overlooked. The existential condition of the diaspora is of just this sort, and postmemory can bring them to us.

### Searching for the slow boat to China: Ng Kim Chew

The career path of Ng Kim Chew is not atypical among Malaysian Chinese writers who write and publish in Taiwan today. Ng, an ethnic Chinese, was born in Johor, the southernmost state of Malaysia. After receiving the basic education, he went to Taiwan in 1986 at the age of 19 for both undergraduate and graduate studies, and eventually settled in Taiwan for a literary and scholarly career. He earned a doctorate in Chinese literature and is a professor at National Chi Nan University teaching creative writing and Chinese literature. In addition to writing fiction, Ng is also an influential literary critic in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. What is noticeable is, unlike his contemporary Malaysian Chinese writers in Taiwan such as Li Yongping and Zhang Guixing who gave up their Malaysian citizenship and became citizens of the Republic of China (Taiwan), Ng never pursued citizenship but opted for permanent residency while retaining his Malaysian citizenship. A versatile writer and a prolific literary critic and scholar, Ng has a long list of publications to his name. Among his fictional works are: *Meng yu zhu yu liming* (Dreams, pigs, and dawn, 1994), *Wu an ming* (Dark nights, 1997), *Dari Pulau Ke Pulau* (From island to island, 2001), and *Tanah Melayu* (Earth and fire, 2005).<sup>29</sup>

Another common characteristic among this group of ethnic writers is their mnemonic obsession with the landscape of their homeland, the forest and the rubber trees of Johor in Ng's case, as well as the identity challenge that ethnic Chinese face in Malaysia. The question of 'Chineseness' has been extensively discussed and has been especially scrutinized in Shih's theorization of 'Sinophone'. My interest in Ng thus is not in how he regards this particular issue, but rather how memory figures in his imagining of his relationship with his Chinese-Malaysian cultural heritage, and, through which, how the diasporic condition—passed on from his Chinese ancestors who migrated to Malaysia in the nineteenth century, and compounded by his own relocation to Taiwan—is reflected in his fictional works.<sup>30</sup>

The form of memory that is most appropriate to explain the diasporic condition of contemporary Malaysian Chinese is Landsberg's 'prosthetic memory'. This concept of memory can free Malaysian Chinese from the entangled issue of cultural loyalism—whether to the ancestral Chinese culture or to Malaysian culture—as prosthetic memory has no 'umbilical cord', as it were, tied to the original location and past with which the memory is associated. As Landsberg defines it, prosthetic memory is 'not natural, not the product of lived experience

... but [is] derived from engagement with a mediated representation ... [L]ike an artificial limb, (prosthetic memory) is actually worn on the body'.<sup>31</sup> The 'mediated representation' Landsberg has in mind is mass media-based, such as films, television, the internet, books, magazines, newspapers, etc. What I would like to add to this list are cultural and religious rituals, traditional ethnic customs, and folklore. Time-honoured rituals and customs represent the first-generation migrants/immigrants/emigrants' memories of the ancestral home/homeland. As these rituals and customs become embedded in the everyday life in the host land and are repeatedly practised by members of the ethnic community, such practices, over a long period of time, become localized and hybridized, and might bear only slight resemblances to the original. These elements of ethnic culture inevitably create in the later generations prosthetic memories of a distant land and tradition to which the later generations have no direct connection. And yet they embody these cultural marks both emotionally and intellectually. 'Prosthetic memory' thus opposes the narrow notion of 'organic memory' which relies on heredity, assuming 'one inherits memories from ancestors along with their physical features'.<sup>32</sup> The bio- and ethno-centrism opposed by the concept of 'prosthetic memory' parallels the 'Sinophone' objection to Sinocentrism. And this is why I argue that the existential condition of the diaspora continues on with future generations in the *mediated representations* of the first generation's memories, stories, and artefacts, rituals and customs they brought and wove into the everyday life in the new land. This continuation of memory is not restricted, nor does it demand loyalty, to one's 'original' cultural heritage. Therefore it does not matter whether there have been 300 years since the day of the migration, or how much localization/hybridization has taken place; prosthetic memory will ensure that the diaspora, or the condition of the diaspora, passes on.

As the tangible qualities of cultural rituals, customs and folklore 'attach' themselves, they become prostheses carried by the Malaysian Chinese. These prosthetic memories include their ancestors' stories of sailing across the ocean from China to the Malay Peninsula and beyond and their lived experiences of setting down roots in this new land. Ng's prosthetic memories are connected to his physical and emotional experiences of the rubber forest of Johor, as well as to the local Chinese-Malaysian cultural heritage.<sup>33</sup> Landsberg uses the example of visiting the Holocaust museum in Washington, DC to illustrate how the sensations of seeing the Holocaust victims' shoes affectively allow her to identify with the victims, even though Landsberg has never actually experienced the Holocaust herself.<sup>34</sup> Therefore it is not so much about the personal nature of the memory as about the inescapable tangibility of the sensations triggered by the prosthesis—the victims' shoes in the Holocaust museum—that the experience, though mediated, does take place. And it is this (mediated) experience that assures the knowledge of the original historical occurrence will continue in the prosthetic memories of future generations. In what follows, I will read Ng's short story, 'A Slow Boat to China' (*Kaiwang Zhongguo de manchuan*),<sup>35</sup> to illustrate how prosthetic memory retains in Ng the existential condition of the Malaysian Chinese diaspora from some 200 years before.

'A Slow Boat to China' has two subtexts and is book-ended with the foremost Malayan literary figure Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir (1796–1854), better known as

Munysi (teacher) Abdullah, his voyage and his travelogue *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah Ke Kelantan* (The tale of Abdullah's voyage to Kelantan).<sup>36</sup> The first subtext is a short story of the same title by the renowned Japanese writer, Murakami Haruki. The Murakami story depicts three episodes in which the nameless narrator—whose ethnic identity, either Japanese or Chinese, is never revealed—runs into three different Chinese people in Japan: a Chinese elementary school teacher, a shy 19-year-old Chinese girl who speaks no Chinese, and a forgotten Chinese high school classmate who sells encyclopaedias only to the Chinese in Tokyo. At the end of these three encounters, the nameless narrator begins to read books about China and contemplates 'his' China. The story closes with the narrator waiting on the stone steps by the harbour for the slow boat to China to appear on the far horizon.<sup>37</sup> The second subtext is the fictionalized tales of the fifteenth-century expeditions of the Ming dynasty mariner-general Zheng He (1371–1435), known as '*Zheng He xia xiyang*' (Zheng He's expeditions to the western oceans). '*Zheng He xia xiyang*' entails Zheng He's seven expeditions through the western Pacific Ocean and across the Indian Ocean, including his visits to various ports in South and Southeast Asia. The Ming Yongle emperor had commissioned Zheng He's voyages to exhibit the wealth and power of China and also to gain tributaries for the Ming court. This legendary Zheng He is deified in Malaysian Chinese culture and his expeditions are popular stories known to everyone. The third text that book-ends Ng's story is Munysi Abdullah's voyage and the travelogue *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah Ke Kelantan*. Munysi Abdullah is of Indian-Arab-Malayan descent. The mission of the voyage is for Munysi Abdullah to deliver three letters to the Malay *rajas* (rulers) in Kelantan to ask for their protection of the cargo ships of Chinese merchants. The text's likely relevance to Ng's story is probably its reference to ships and voyages<sup>38</sup> and the three letters that would correspond to the three subtexts mentioned here. Ng's main interest in these legendary adventures may have been more in the figure of Munysi Abdullah who represents the honest voice of a social, political, and cultural critic of his time.<sup>39</sup>

Ng's short story tells of a present-day Malaysian Chinese boy, Iron Bull (Tieniu, a typical Han Chinese name), who grows up listening to stories from an old Chinese man in the village. Among the most frequently told stories are the adventures of Zheng He. The old man often tells the children that the great General Zheng He in fact has left behind one of his treasure boats in a secret harbour up north and the boat still sails back and forth between China and Malaysia. Being an old boat, it sails slowly and the round-trip voyage would take 10 years to complete. The old man adds that only children under the age of 13 are allowed to get on the boat. Immensely intrigued by this legendary treasure boat, the boy embarks on a journey to search for it, hoping that he can ride on the boat to see China, and perhaps also to find his missing father who, according to his mother, has gone to China to sell salted eggs. The boy eventually finds the boat, not in its original glory but as a big pile of wreckage. By then the boy has grown into a young man and has been adopted by a Malayan truck driver and given a new, Malayan name, Yadula, or Abdullah in English. The ending of the story is curiously anachronistic. By now Yadula has become a wanderer hopping from island to island. One day, after losing consciousness from choking on a Malayan

rambutan fruit, Yadula wakes up having lost all the memories of the years he has spent after leaving home, except the day he set out on his journey. Surrounding him are three Chinese men and an Indian-looking Malayan who is introduced as Munsyi Abdullah, the famous Malaysian literary figure from the nineteenth century. These four men have just returned from a voyage to Kelantan and are embarking to sail back to Singapore.

Growing up in an ethnic Chinese community, Iron Bull and his playmates are used to hearing old stories about China such as Zheng He's expeditions. The children are also familiar with Chinese myths such as those recorded in the novel *Investiture of Gods (Fengshen bang)* and classical popular romances such as *Journey to the West*, *The Water Margin*, and *The Three Kingdoms*. The source of the children's knowledge and fascination with the old cultural China is a nameless old man, known as Mr Tangshan ('Mr China' in Cantonese) or 'orang cina' ('lousy Chinese' in Malay).<sup>40</sup> This old man represents the preserved culture and memory of the homeland. He claims that he was recruited as a young boy to come on one of General Zheng He's expeditious voyages; now he is too old and cannot go back any more.<sup>41</sup> If anything, this old man is a living relic representing all of the diasporic Chinese; and the original voyage to the new country is given a unique and mystical aura.

Stories and books about China must stimulate the Murakami narrator's and Iron Bull's imagination and excitement. The sensations created by these tales generate prosthetic memories in the Murakami narrator of the far-away China, and in Iron Bull his ancestors' journeys to Malaysia. Even though neither the Murakami narrator nor Iron Bull has been to China, they nonetheless have both created their own mental images of a 'China'. This 'China' does not have a geographical location; what it occupies is a psychological position that bespeaks the subject's inherent sense of loss and, by the same token, the desire to (re)connect. Carrying these prosthetic memories, it is only natural that Iron Bull would go on his own journey to find the historical treasure boat that symbolizes the ultimate return—not only in a larger cultural and historical sense for the diaspora, but also in a personal sense for the boy symbolically to unite with his absent father. But as the diaspora population age, and with the birth of their offspring, the existence of the treasure boat itself, whether in its physicality or in its manifestation, can only remind them of the impossibility of return. The ageing immigrants no longer qualify for the age restriction (13 years old, as the Zheng He legend dictates); even though the later generations such as Iron Bull may qualify to get on the boat, the ship itself by now is no longer operative. Chia-chian Kao describes the diaspora and the later generations as the perpetual latecomers, finding themselves left in the space between departure and arrival, simultaneously trapped in the fissure of ethnic conflicts in Malaysia. 'Having been left behind' thus becomes the spiritual condition of the Malaysian Chinese diaspora.<sup>42</sup> As it would turn out, Iron Bull/Yadula eventually becomes a homeless wanderer who not only loses his previous identity but who floats from place to place without any possibility of finding a home.

The dialectic between displacement and memory is manifested in the movement of the boy as he travels further and further away from his home and goes deep into rubber forests and through unfamiliar villages and townships occupied by different ethnic groups: the Chinese, the Malays, and the Indians. His

journey also puts him in the midst of the bloodiest Sino-Malay sectarian conflict in the history of Malaysia, the May 13 Incident of 1969. Iron Bull is an accidental witness of this significant traumatic event that nearly tore asunder the entire nation. It is also at this juncture that the narrative brings Iron Bull to the treasure boat. His prosthetic memory of China *vis-à-vis* the treasure boat now meets the actual remnants of the boat—broken masts stretching skywards like giant arms, torn sails whose colours have nearly faded but on which parts of some Chinese characters are still discernible, and standing on what is left of the shell of the boat are countless black ravens.<sup>43</sup>

The narrative of 'Slow Boat' is consistently written in a simple and straightforward style of realism, until the boy reaches the site where the treasure boat lies; then surrealistic images start to appear in the narrative and the clarity of its language begins to diminish. This progression, or rather regression, of the language is emblematic of the boy's transformation/degeneration. It is as if Ng is unable to deal with the destruction of Iron Bull's subjectivity and he needs to resort to the surreal. The transformation of Iron Bull entails the loss of memory, identity, and language. As the story comes to its end, Iron Bull, now Yadula, has grown up into a young man, barely surviving; he would wander around the Malay village where he has been adopted, occasionally begging for food, hardly speaking at all, and spending most of his time at the harbour staring at the wreckage of the treasure boat with saliva dripping down from the corner of his mouth.<sup>44</sup> Yadula's degeneration is complete when he wakes up one day not knowing where or who he is. It is at this very moment that he awakes to meet the father of modern Malay literature, Munsyi Abdullah, who has just finished his voyage to Kelantan. The year is 1837. Munsyi Abdullah would write what later was to become part of the literary canon, *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah Ke Kelantan*, to describe his experiences on this voyage. In fact the epigraph of this short story is a passage from this book. This trans-spatial-temporal meeting of the two Abdullahs is, to say the least, fascinating.

Julia Creet argues that 'movement is what produces memory' and poses the question: 'What would it mean to take the quality of memory's migration rather than the distance from its forever-lost point of origin as our object of study?'<sup>45</sup> My enquiry in this article is to understand the condition of diaspora through memory. My question and Creet's are two seemingly opposing approaches to the same argument—that instead of taking 'place' as the source that provides contextual frame for meaning, it is rather the combined effects of movement and memory that beget meaning. The collapse of Iron Bull's subjectivity is caused by the joint effects of his prosthetic memory and his journey; and this collapse can in turn be interpreted as Ng's rejection of the signifier 'China', which as Iron Bull attests, has been reduced to an empty sign. When Yadula meets the literary figure Munsyi Abdullah, Yadula no longer has his memories or any sense of who he is. His subjectivity now is like a blank sheet and he is on an aimless and likely endless journey in a past historical time, 1837. His fortuitous meeting with Munsyi Abdullah may imply a new page for Yadula; or this meeting of the two Abdullahs may signify a possible ethnic union/unity for Malaysia. But just like his role in the May 13 riot, it may simply be that Iron Bull/Yadula is again an accidental witness of a historical voyage. Ironically the historical Zheng He voyage that the boy Iron Bull so much wants to be a part of is not to be; and he,

now a converted Malay, should see a voyage important in the history of Malaysia. On the meta-narrative level, we may yet interpret the destruction of Iron Bull's prosthetic memories of China as the beginning of Ng's prosthetic memories of China, Malaysia, and Taiwan.

However we interpret this episode, the fact that Ng would end this story in such a suggestive way betrays his own anxiety and aspiration. David Der-wei Wang in his article '*Enfant Terrible* Ng Kim Chew' sums up the identity predicament Ng wrestles with in what Wang calls the cycle of fate of the diaspora: from being migrants/immigrants/emigrants to becoming loyalists to their homeland, and as they and their offspring assimilate, to finally becoming nativists.<sup>46</sup> Do the two historical voyages of Zheng He and of Munsyi Abdullah signify Ng's anxiety of being a double loyalist, both to his ancestral China and to his inherited Malaysia? Does Iron Bull/Yadula's final state of being—whose mind has been wiped clean—indicate Ng's refusal to become a nativist? When aspiring young Malaysian Chinese such as Ng go to Taiwan in pursuit of higher education and/or better opportunities, this diasporic cycle will no doubt repeat itself. In terms of the Sinophone literary industry in East Asia, Taiwan is the production centre to which many talented Chinese-language writers flock: this is especially true for Malaysian Chinese writers such as Ng.<sup>47</sup> In the Sinophone sphere, Taiwan is clearly the power centre, which in effect would place outsiders/foreigners such as Ng on the margin. Herein lies another layer of Ng's anxiety over his ethnic, literary, and cultural identity, albeit participating in the literary and cultural industry of Taiwan also gives Ng a voice and influence. This is indeed a double-edged sword. Coming back to our text of analysis: is 'A Slow Boat to China' then a fable of the past or prophesy of the future? Bound together with memory, perhaps past and future may not be all that different for the diaspora after all.

### Memory: diaspora in the Sinophone sphere

Ng Kim Chew in his scholarly article, 'Minor Sinophone Literature: Diasporic Modernity's Incomplete Journey',<sup>48</sup> talks at length about the 2001 Nobel laureate V S Naipaul, a third-generation Indian from Trinidad, how he compensates for his 'lack of a homeland life experience' through travelling extensively in India and the Caribbean to (re)discover and (re)connect with his ancestral roots, and through reading and researching in archives to widen his intellectual landscape, which enables him to write, both creatively and historically, of the suffering in the colonial realms of the Caribbean, South America, Africa, India, and the Islamic world.<sup>49</sup> Ng sees in Naipaul a kindred spirit, whose intellectual and experiential journey, as Ng suggests, points to a likely path for Malaysian Chinese writers in Taiwan and similarly for Taiwan writers as well.

What attracts my attention in Ng's article is the tremendous inspiration he draws from Naipaul's journey. Naipaul's (re)discovering process has the effect of prosthetic memory. By travelling through India and the Caribbean and by reading extensively about the colonial regions in that corner of the world, Naipaul has gained access to memories of those lands and the peoples living there. He carries these prosthetic memories as his own and his identity and writing have since been enriched by them. The power and usefulness of prosthetic memory is precisely as Landsberg elucidates:

Because they (prosthetic memories) feel real, they help condition how a person thinks about the world and might be instrumental in articulating an ethical relation to the other ... to produce empathy and social responsibility as well as political alliances that transcend race, class, and gender ...<sup>50</sup>

Particularly true to building and holding together the Sinophone sphere are the ethical relations and the political alliances that prosthetic memory is able to generate. Because we share certain things in common, we are able to come together and build a community. Memory is pivotal in creating this commonality. The commonality shared by members of the Sinophone sphere is their ethnic minority status. This peripheral position necessarily entails experiences of oppression, discrimination, and traumas of colonialism and displacement through migration. The emotional and psychic disruption of the diaspora is thus the mutual ground of the Sinophone sphere.

I believe the concept of prosthetic memory is helpful, and so is the notion of postmemory. Postmemory is primarily familial, though not limited to it; it is fragmented memory from childhood or partial memory inherited from parents and/or grandparents. For a Sinophone Taiwanese writer like Guo Songfen, his postmemory of the colonial Taiwan, the traumas of his parents' generation, underpins his diasporic condition in the United States. As Marianne Hirsch states:

The structure of postmemory clarifies how the multiple ruptures and radical breaks introduced by trauma and catastrophe inflect intra-, inter- and trans-generational inheritance ... Postmemorial work ... strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression.<sup>51</sup>

Depending on their 'distance' from 'China', as viewed through the lens of memory, there are various degrees of diasporic condition that exist in the simultaneous generations of all kinds of Chinese migrants. Maintaining the memories of the first generation of migrants is imperative in sustaining the identity of the ethnic minority. Diaspora, understood through memory as a state of being, thus is a critical stipulation for any argument concerning the Sinophone.

#### Note on contributor

Lingchei Letty Chen is Associate Professor of Modern Chinese Language and Literature, Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures, Washington University, St Louis. She published her first book, *Writing Chinese: Reshaping Chinese Cultural Identity*, in 2006. Her second monograph, *Memory's Shores: Remembrance of the Mao Years*, examines the different mnemonic writings in fiction and non-fiction about the Mao era (1949–1976) and frames these expressions as testimonies made outside of officially sanctioned parameters.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term 'Sinophone' first appeared in Shih's article, 'Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition', *PMLA* 119(1), 2004, pp 16–30, p 29.

- <sup>2</sup> 'Notes on Four Major Paradigms in Chinese-Language Film Studies', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 6(1), 2012, pp 15–25, p 21.
- <sup>3</sup> Shu-mei Shih, 'The Concept of Sinophone', *PMLA* 126(3), 2011, pp 709–718, p 714.
- <sup>4</sup> Rogers Brubaker, "'The Diaspora' Diaspora', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28(1), 2005, pp 1–19.
- <sup>5</sup> Brubaker, "'The Diaspora' Diaspora', p 3.
- <sup>6</sup> Brubaker, "'The Diaspora' Diaspora', p 4.
- <sup>7</sup> Brubaker, "'The Diaspora' Diaspora', p 12.
- <sup>8</sup> One of the major components in Shih's debunking of 'Chinese diaspora' is the notion and value of 'Chineseness'. I have no quarrel with Shih's arguments towards 'Chineseness'. My objective in this article is to address the question of 'diaspora' and so I will not engage in the other discussion.
- <sup>9</sup> Marianne Hirsch has done extensive work on memory writings by the second-generation of the Holocaust, particularly the concept of 'postmemory' which she has developed over two and a half decades. Her articles and books on this research include *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997; 'Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory', *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14(1), 2001, pp 5–36; 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today* 29(1), 2008, pp 103–128; and *The Generation of Postmemory: Visual Cultures After the Holocaust*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
- <sup>10</sup> See Alison Landsberg's seminal article, 'Prosthetic Memory: Total Recall and Blade Runner', *Body & Society* 1(3–4), 1995, pp 175–189. Also see her book, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- <sup>11</sup> Safran's essay, 'Diasporas in Modern Society: Myths of Homeland and Return', was published in the inaugural issue of the journal *Diaspora* 1(1), 1991, pp 83–99, p 87.
- <sup>12</sup> Robin E Field and Parmita Kapdia (eds), *Transforming Diaspora: Communities Beyond National Boundaries*, Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011, p xii.
- <sup>13</sup> Field and Kapdia, *Transforming Diaspora*, p xiii.
- <sup>14</sup> Julia Creet and Andreas Kritzmman (eds), *Memory and Migration: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011, p 3.
- <sup>15</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (trans), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- <sup>16</sup> Creet and Kritzmman, *Memory and Migration*, p 6.
- <sup>17</sup> Yi-Ming Chien, 'An Interview with Guo Songfen' (Yu Guo Songfen fangtan), collected in *Jing Hun*, Taipei: Yinke, 2012, pp 175–243. In this interview, Guo specifically corrected an erroneous report that he was received by Premier Zhou Enlai while visiting China.
- <sup>18</sup> This English title is my translation. I would like to thank my colleague Chien-hsin Tsai for brainstorming the translation of this title. *Running Mother* and *Tale of Two Moons* are formally published English titles.
- <sup>19</sup> Marianne Hirsch, 'Projected Memory', in Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer (eds), *Acts of Memory*, Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999; reprinted in David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky (eds), *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*, New York: Bedford/St. Martin, 2002.
- <sup>20</sup> 'Running Mother', Yingsih Balcom (trans), in *Running Mother and Other Stories*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. All English translations quoted in this article are from this publication.
- <sup>21</sup> Kim-Chew Ng, 'Poetry, the Sickly Body of History, and Maternal Love—on Guo Songfen' (Shi, lishi bingti yu muxing—lun Guo Songfen), *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly*, 33(1), 2004, pp 91–119. Chi-Feng Huang, *The Moon Seal in the River: A General Study of the Fiction of Guo Songfen and Lee Yu* (Heliuli de yueyin: Guo Songfen yu Lee Yu xiaoshuo zonglun), Taipei: Hsiu-Wei Information Technology, 2008.
- <sup>22</sup> Shu-Lan Hsu, 'Exiled Father, Running Mother' (Liuwang de fuqin, benpao de muqin), in *Running Mother* (Benpao de muqin), Taipei: Maitian, 2002, pp 277–301.
- <sup>23</sup> Wei-Li Wei, *Foreign Country and Dream Land: A Study of Guo Songfen's Thought and Literary Works* (Yixiang yu mengtu: Guo Songfen sixiang yu wenxue yanjiu), Tainan: Tainan shili tushuguan, 2010.
- <sup>24</sup> *Running Mother and Other Stories*, John Balcom (ed and intro), New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, p 135.
- <sup>25</sup> *Running Mother and Other Stories*, p 137.
- <sup>26</sup> Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p 412.
- <sup>27</sup> Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', p 20.
- <sup>28</sup> Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', p 9. The emphasis is mine.
- <sup>29</sup> The English translation of these titles is mine. Notice the last two original titles are in Malay.
- <sup>30</sup> Ng is a third-generation Malaysian Chinese. His grandparents migrated from Fujian, China to Malaysia; his father was a native-born Malaysian, and Ng himself was born in the independent Malaysia in 1967.
- <sup>31</sup> Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, pp 20–21.
- <sup>32</sup> Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, p 7.

- <sup>33</sup> Malaysian Chinese scholar Tee Kim Tong (Zhang Jinzhong) argues that the surviving Chinese cultural practices that are still celebrated in Malaysia today are testament to the ethnic essence and spirit of the Malaysian Chinese, despite the fact that these cultural practices may no longer be authentic. See Tee's *Studying Southeast Asian Chinese: Essays on Chinese-Malaysian Literature and Cultural Identity* (Nanyang lunshu: mahua wenxue yu wenhua shuxin), Taipei: Miantian, 2003, pp 90–91.
- <sup>34</sup> Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, pp 133–134.
- <sup>35</sup> Originally published in 2000, this short story is later collected in *Youdao zhi dao* (in Malay: *Dari Pulau Ke Pulau*), Taipei: Miantian, 2001. All citations here are from this collection.
- <sup>36</sup> Or, *Being An Account of His Experiences on A Voyage from Singapore to Kelanta, A.D. 1838*, A E Coope (trans), Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- <sup>37</sup> 'A Slow Boat to China', collected in *The Elephant Vanishes*, translated from the Japanese by Alfred Birnbaum and Jay Rubin, New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- <sup>38</sup> Chia-chian Kao, 'History and Narrative: On Ng Kim Chew's Metaphorical Writing' (Lishi yu xushi: lun Huang Jinshu de yuyan shuxie), in *The Modernity of Malaysian Chinese Literature* (Mahua wenxue yu xiandaixing), Alumni Association of Malaysian Chinese in Taiwan editorial board, Taipei: Xinrui wenchuan, 2012, pp 69–87, p 84.
- <sup>39</sup> Ooi Keat Gin (ed), *Southeast Asia: A Historical Encyclopedia, from Angkor Wat to East Timor*, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc, 2004, p 116. Siti Hawa Haji Salleh, *Malay Literature of the Nineteenth Century*, Quest Services (trans), Kuala Lumpur: Institute Terjemahan Negara Malaysia, 2010, pp 126–132.
- <sup>40</sup> *Youdao zhi dao*, p 246.
- <sup>41</sup> *Youdao zhi dao*, p 247.
- <sup>42</sup> Kao, 'History and Narrative: On Ng Kim Chew's Metaphorical Writing', p 83.
- <sup>43</sup> *Youdao zhi dao*, p 263.
- <sup>44</sup> *Youdao zhi dao*, p 264.
- <sup>45</sup> Creet and Kritzmman, *Memory and Migration*, p 9.
- <sup>46</sup> David Der-wei Wang, 'Enfant Terrible Ng Kim Chew' (Huai haizi Huang Jinshu), in *Youdao zhi dao*, pp 11–35.
- <sup>47</sup> The list of such writers is long, for example, Li Yongping, Zhang Guixing, Pan Yutong, Chen Dawei, Zhong Yiwen, Li Zishu, and Li Tianbao.
- <sup>48</sup> Kim Chew Ng, 'Minor Sinophone Literature: Diasporic Modernity's Incomplete Journey', collected in Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang (eds), *Global Chinese Literature: Critical Essays*, Leiden: Brill, 2010. The article is translated by Andy Rodekohr.
- <sup>49</sup> Ng, 'Minor Sinophone Literature', p 25.
- <sup>50</sup> Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, p 21.
- <sup>51</sup> Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', p 111. Original emphasis.