

# Poetics of Propensity in Sinophone Fiction

## An Analysis of Lai Hsiang-yin and Lee Wai Yi's Ghost Narrative

Di-kai Chao

Canterbury University, New Zealand

Riccardo Moratto

Shanghai International Studies University, China

**Abstract** This study aims to analyse two novellas, namely “Rain Tree” (“Yudou shu” 雨豆樹) by Lai Hsiang-yin 賴香吟 (2017) from Taiwan and “Away” (“Li” 離) by Lee Wai Yi 李維怡 (2018) from Hong Kong. This article attempts to understand how non-corporeal or non-representational ghost narratives become a mobile strategy for re-investigating mainstream narratives or the violence of modernity. Through the ‘de-temporalisation’ of the city and the momentary folding of time and space, *Rain Tree* reconsiders the meaning of Taiwan as a superior signifier. *Away* endeavours to reveal the ghostly nature underneath the instrumental rationality of Hong Kong, tapping into the fluctuating heterogeneity of modernity. This study also draws on Sinophone articulation to juxtapose two texts belonging to Taiwan and Hong Kong, thus highlighting how ghosts become a poetics of ‘propensity’ (*shi* 勢) within the Sinophone framework. These spectral entities transcend the confines of conventional categorisations and challenge the fixedness of ‘roots’. This strategy does not follow the logic of psychoanalytic selfhood or postcolonial grand narratives, but rather a fluid nature and potential.

**Keywords** Sinophone literature. Poetics of ‘propensity’. Ghost narrative. Lai Hsiang-yin. Lee Wai Yi.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Literature Review. – 2.1 Ghost Narrative in Sinophone Taiwan. – 2.2 Ghost Narrative in Sinophone Hong Kong. – 3 Lai Hsiang-yin’s *Rain Tree*. – 3.1 The Timelessness and Subjectivity of Urban History. – 3.2 Remembering. – 4 Lee Wai Yi’s Mobile Strategy. – 4.1 Disenchantment and Re-Enchantment. – 4.2 Moving Between Polarised Categories. – 5 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

Since the end of the twentieth century, many literary texts created within the Sinosphere have contributed to the emergence of ghost narratives.<sup>1</sup> Numerous authors have endeavoured to incorporate ghost images into various problematics of the world. When analysing Chinese ghost narratives, many scholars have underscored the ultimate concern about different texts as well as the writers' desire to unveil sociopolitical conflicts and sentiments on the homeland and native soil through ghostly elements. The exploration of literary works within the framework of Sinophone discourse has emerged as a crucial subject in the past two decades. Nevertheless, numerous scholars have not fully embraced the broader scope of Sinophone studies when engaging with these themes. Therefore, we contend that the current studies on Sinophone ghost narratives are still insufficient.

In retrospect, Shu-mei Shih (2007) was the first scholar to theorise Sinophone and to give it a critical and resistant intensity with a strong anti-China-centric stance. Inspired by postcolonial disciplines in Francophone and Anglophone studies, Shih sought to challenge the prevailing frameworks of North American Regional Studies and Sinology, which lumped all Chinese-language writings into the category of Chinese literature, reflecting a form of Orientalism towards Chinese civilisation. Instead, Shih introduced the concept of Sinophone literature. This term refers to texts written in Chinese from regions including Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia. By focusing on these marginalised perspectives, Shih aimed to bring attention to the diversity and richness of Chinese-language writings beyond the confines of the Chinese mainland. At the same time, Sinophone studies are also influenced by the study of the Chinese diaspora, which advocates against the PRC's imposition of Chineseness on overseas Chinese, regardless of whether such imposition is genuine, thereby echoing the discourse of confronting China-centrism. Clearly, the intellectual foundation of knowledge production in the field of Sinophone studies primarily emerges as a reaction to the Oriental discourse prevalent in American academia, ultimately leading to an exclusivist approach. This approach is characterised by the deliberate 'Othering' of the Chinese mainland and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in order to differentiate non-PRC texts. Therefore, Sinophone literature focuses on texts of identity, political trauma, and diasporic experiences, especially those of minoritised groups allegedly persecuted by PRC and China-centrism. Shih (2007, 268-70) introduced the notion of Sinophone literature, which suggests that the Chinese diaspora outside China will eventually end,

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<sup>1</sup> For related discussion, cf. Wang, Der Wei 2012 and Fan Ming-ru 2008.

and the distinctive ‘Sinophone’ attributes of overseas Chinese cannot simply be substituted with the terms ‘China’ or ‘Chineseness’ in an ongoing manner.<sup>2</sup>

Concerned with the strongly dichotomised and sublated attitude of Shih’s idea, Wang (2018, 3-4) argues that the Chineseness and the obsession with China haunting the Chinese migrants and their descendances cannot be rejected. Wang argues that the dynamic relation between *hua* 華 (China) and *yi* 夷 (barbarians) may be used as a tool to engage in a dialogue with the concept of Sinophone. Wang (2018, 18-20) identifies this dynamic as the projection of individual anxieties and desires onto the notion of ‘Chineseness’ within the context of the Sinophone/xenophone. Moving beyond the binary opposition between Chineseness and locality, Wang (2015, 25) believes that Shih understands the interaction between the regime of *zhongyuan* 中原 (China Proper or Central Plains) and neighbouring countries (ethnic minorities) from a Western colonial perspective, and further discusses ‘Chinese colonial hegemony’, thus ignoring the historical entanglement between the dynasties situated in China Proper and the minority/peripheral groups.

While this is not exactly the place to recapitulate the details of such debates, we highlight it for the purpose of underscoring the potential in-between implications of Wang’s (2013) argument, and it is especially helpful to understand the pattern and style of Sinophone ghost narratives in recent years. Wang (2018) sees the potential of *hua* and *yi* in the traditional Chinese context, and by reinventing the two terms, the Sinophone discourse allows contemporary Chinese to think about their dynamic relationship with China in the context of globalisation. Inspired by French sinologist François Jullien’s (1995) observations on Chinese philosophy, Wang (2013) emphasises a poetics of “propensity” between *hua* and *yi*. Wang (2013) compares Jullien’s *écart* with Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980) rhizome theory, highlighting the notion of propensity (*shi* 勢):

the discourse of ‘propensity’ (*shi* 勢) can serve as a starting point for exploring the discourse of Sinophone studies. [...] If ‘roots’ refer to the limits of a particular position, [...] ‘propensity’ refers to something beyond space, the ebb and flow and shifting of intervals. The former always reminds us of a standpoint or position, while the latter reminds us of a tendency or disposition, a momentum. (Wang 2013, 15)<sup>3</sup>

2 For Shih (2008, 13), the term Sinophone “give[s] agency to Sinitic-language literatures produced outside China that have been suffering from extreme theoretical and conceptual anemia in Western academia, where the inability to consider non-Western-language literatures beyond the lens of national literature [...] has produced severe myopia towards the multilingual realities of most national literatures including their own”.

3 The original Chinese text is: “我以為[勢]的論述可以作為探討(案:華語語系論述)的起點[...]. 如果[根]指涉一個位置的極限, [...], [勢]則指涉空間以外, 間距的消長與推移。前者總是

For Wang (2013), both the anti-China centrism's emphasis on border demarcation and the identity politics' emphasis on the identification of a position, are all a kind of politics of 'root' and an overemphasis on a strict division between the 'I' and the 'Other'. Wang argues that the Sinophone discourse should be broader in scope, exploring the dynamic process of change between the 'I' (*hua*) and the Other (*yi*). In this way, 'propensity' can also serve as a powerful tool for observing any ambiguity or entanglement between any dichotomy or politics of categorisation, as well as for understanding the meaning of the current Sinophone ghost narratives.

## 2 Literature Review

Wang (2004, 278) uses the expression "phantasmagoric realism" to refer to the phenomenon of ghost narratives in Chinese fiction since the 1980s. By using this term, he intends to highlight that Chinese writers of ghost narratives have deviated from the literary trope of realism. Wang also explains:

among late-twentieth-century writers there is a rigorous endeavour to replace modern realism with a discourse about the 'materiality of incorporeal things'. [...] These writers exchange the 'order of mimesis' handed down by their modern forerunners for the 'seduction of simulacra'. (Wang 2004, 280-1)

The texts that Wang (2004) analyses were mostly published between the 1980s and 2000s, and he does not fail to consider that these ghost narratives may have been influenced by foreign literature (Western fiction, magical realism, etc.). Although Wang intends to link the ghost narratives of Chinese fiction to the dominance of May Fourth Realism from the angle of literary history, and to highlight the recession of the narrowly-defined realism in the present literary works, the notion of the 'seduction of simulacra' is still worthy of re-evaluation.

The notion of simulacra, as argued by Wang, is an application of the 'philosophy of the phantasm' proposed by Michel Foucault (1981, 167-71) in his review of Deleuze's reversal of Platonism. Unlike Plato's philosophy, which emphasises the pursuit of the 'supreme good' via ideas, Foucault (169) believes that the "materiality of incorporeal things" belongs to the contents dealt with by the discourse of metaphysics (e.g. phantasms, idols, simulacra). They are "the reversal that causes every interior to pass to the outside and every exterior

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提醒我們一個立場或方位 (position), 後者則提醒我們一種傾向或氣性 (disposition/propensity), 一種動能 (momentum)". All translations are by the Authors, unless otherwise stated.

to the inside, in the temporal oscillation that always makes it precede and follow itself”, “roaming the surface of things and play of surface effects without the aid of model” (171). Therefore, through Wang’s perspective, simulacra possess the potential to dissolve essentialist discourses.

## 2.1 Ghost Narrative in Sinophone Taiwan

As far as ghost narrative in Sinophone Taiwan is concerned, the 1980s are an important point in time. This is a pivotal period for the development of localism and Taiwanese subjectivity under the KMT’s - 國民黨 (Kuomintang, also referred to as Guomindang, the Chinese Nationalist Party) - China centrism. The grand narrative of ethnic and national fables and historical memory has been the main theme of Taiwan’s fictional ghost narratives since the 1980s. This concern for deconstructing or questioning national and historical discourses was first embodied in works that drew on Latin American magical realism resources, especially its critical political orientation, and translated them into the local context of Taiwanese society. In particular, as an island, Taiwan’s environment and hybrid cultures were often disliked, despised, and negated by colonial powers: to the coloniser, Taiwan was like a “ghost island” (Wu 2016, 23). Inspired by Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) concept of ethnoscape, Wu (2016, 25) points out that the ghost-island narrative “focuses on the cultural loss and the ethnic conflicts in a translocal view”. In this light, the ghost-island literature emphasises the historically marginalised and suppressed multi-ethnicity of Taiwan. Regarding the ghost narratives in local writing, Wu (2016, 118) combines the insights of Latin American magical realism and proposes “magical nativism” or “magical localism”.<sup>4</sup> For Wu (2016, 120), magical nativism highlights “the reconstruction of ethnicity and locality in Sinophone Taiwan” and “is where the intersection of nativist calling and magical writing surfaces”. Combined with the post-colonial agenda, magical realism also serves as a mnemonic strategy in Sinophone Taiwan. Lin Fang-mei (2019, 337) uses the term “ghosting” to liken Taiwan to the discourse of China-centrism. Compared to the noun “ghost,” the verbalised word “ghosting” refers to a dynamic process in which someone or something is marginalised, othered, denigrated, and excluded (namely to be ghosted) by mainstream society. It is a common starting point for scholars to interpret the characteristics and metaphors

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<sup>4</sup> Unlike the expression ‘ghost narrative’, which implies haunting of histories or traumatic memories, Wu (2016, 118) posits that the concept of magical nativism aims to encompass all spiritual and fantastical elements imbued with a sense of nativism. This notion is not solely limited to historical or political grievances, but can also extend to encompass ethnicity, gender, and post-colonial writing.

of ghosts in terms of ‘marginality’. Ghosts, inherently, serve as a metaphor for marginalised groups that are despised and rejected by the majority. Within literary narratives incorporating magical elements, there exists a distinct purpose of invoking suppressed and excluded historical as well as cultural memories (Lachmann 1997, 307).

In her analysis of Taiwanese fiction, Fan (2008, 270) proposed the concept of “post-nativism”. Unlike previous nativist novels, post-nativist writers use historical archives, customs and beliefs, rural legends, and other important resources of memory politics; additionally, they also do not forget to reveal the fictional nature of their writing and downplay their criticality. One of the practices of post-nativism is the blurring of realism, which is deployed by supernatural power, legendary or folklore elements. Unlike traditional nativist novels, post-nativist novels have a different intellectual system behind them, and are heavily influenced by academic discourses (Fan 2008, 261). Likewise, Liou (2018, 225) highlights the influence of the Chinese mainland’s emergence and its impact on Taiwan’s position in East Asia and the global context as the underlying reason for the distinct writing strategies employed by young writers in comparison to the pre-war generation. Amidst these anxieties, writers born in the 1960s and 1970s engage in the imaginative reconstruction of war memories from a contemporary standpoint. They employ a certain degree of imagination in their endeavours to bridge the historical divide before and after the war, as well as the rejected colonial legacy, particularly by the KMT prior to the 1990s. This is accomplished through the adept utilisation of bold writing techniques such as ghost stories, magical realism, suspense novels, and more.

In essence, the depiction of ghosts in the narrative encompasses more than just representing a specific group or a fixed identity connotation. It also serves as a manifestation of diverse ideas that traverse the nativist landscape. While identity can function as a ‘label’ for recognizing individuals in relation to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and political stance, it does not strictly adhere to mainstream values or political correctness. Instead, it permits the individual self to navigate and transcend various categories of transformation and hybridity.

## 2.2 Ghost Narrative in Sinophone Hong Kong

The metropolis of Hong Kong has been regarded as a site that is gradually ‘disappearing’ within the Sinophone sphere since the Handover. As posited by Abbas (1997), Hong Kong is perceived as a space characterised by disappearance, offering an intriguing perspective on the cultural identity of the city. This notion of disappearance encompasses the misperception of the local culture as a “reverse hallucination” (Abbas 1997, 6) by the people of Hong Kong, along with the formation

of self-cultural reproduction.<sup>5</sup> This disappearance paradox has been a fundamental part of Hong Kong's cultural discourse since Abbas' argumentation, thus shaping a history of "absence of the subject and loss of memory" (Wang 2008, 285). Hong Kong's ghost narratives may be represented by Lilian Lee Pik-Wah's novels, and Lee's (1984) *Rouge* (胭脂扣 胭脂扣), a classic text in Hong Kong literature,<sup>6</sup> and these narratives are marked by themes of disappearance and nostalgic discourse.

David Der-wei Wang (2014) considers Hong Kong's ghost narratives in the context of Chinese writers' departure from the May Fourth tradition in the 1980s. In Wang's (2014, 282) view, the significance of Hong Kong literature in the history of literature since May Fourth is that it provides an alternative literary mission or imagination that transcends mimesis, native soil mythology and national politics;<sup>7</sup> especially when the revolutionary rhetoric pervaded both sides across the Taiwan Strait since 1949, the British colonial rule allowed Hong Kong to escape the constraints of national consciousness and to be outside of the nationalist fever (Wang 2008, 281-3). As the May Fourth tradition of enlightenment and the literary space dominated by 'revolution plus love' was challenged by the ghost-narrating trend of Chinese fiction at the end of the last century, the Hong Kong ghost narrative could be considered utterly crucial amidst such challenges.

For Wang (2007, 141), Hong Kong is a city in which 'somethingness' (*you* 有) and 'nothingness' (*wu* 無) are entangled. Wang (2007, 141) once quoted Abbas' (1997) '*déjà disparu*' argument to emphasise that Hong Kong literature has the characteristic of "short-squeezing out of nothing" (*yi kong zuo duo* 以空做多) and "making nothing out of something" (*you zhong cheng wu* 有中成無). Such a painstaking effort is nothing but an attempt to strike the reality with the imaginary, to refer to a more real reality with the play of the signifier. If we regard the trend of Hong Kong writers to adopt an imaginary city as a means of conjuring something out of nothing in Hong Kong since the release of Xi Xi's 西西 novel *My City* in 1979 (Chan 2019, 58),<sup>8</sup> then under the predestination of the rapid circulation of capital,

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<sup>5</sup> Abbas (1997, 6) points out that if Sigmund Freud's hallucination refers to seeing something invisible, such as a ghost or an apparition, then reverse hallucination means not seeing something that is clearly there.

<sup>6</sup> In 1987, Stanley Kwan transformed the novel *Rouge* into a film with the same title. The movie's release sparked a massive reaction, surpassing even the influence of the original novel within Hong Kong's cultural sphere.

<sup>7</sup> The native soil mythology here refers to the tendency of the May Fourth New Literature to give the native soil an enlightened, moral and national redemption obsession in the framework of the native soil/urban dichotomy.

<sup>8</sup> Chi-Tak Chan (2019) argues that the local identity presented in Xi Xi's *My City* is transformed from the colonial suzerainty identity and shaped by the concept of

Hong Kong literature seems to present a cycle of referential and self-reflective subjectivity of desire.

Chan Weng-kit (2015) points out that the haunting of Hong Kong points directly to the difficulty of including Hong Kong in the imagination and definition of a modern 'nation', and that this points to the history-lessness of a colonial city.<sup>9</sup> Chan (2015, 53) argues that if the myth of the national imagination seeks "an absolute teleological fixity in the name of a nation" beyond calendrical temporality, then the mythicisations of the nationless recognise that there is no proper corpse available for temporalising a community, or simply, there might be nothing outside and beyond the calendar. Hence, nationless temporalisation may eliminate the dichotomies between subject and object, centre and periphery, and the past and the present along its embarkation on an imaginative process (Chan 2015, 57). Hong Kong's supernatural temporality is a way of tracing its own calendrical temporality in ghost narratives, mending the historical gap for a Hong Kong that has long been denigrated as history-less and rootless.

Since the 1980s, Hong Kong writers have been interested in the various magical and ghostly tropes. While Lilian Lee Pik-Wah's *Rouge* (1984) is a representative work of Hong Kong's ghost narratives, there is another type of ghost narrative in Hong Kong closer to magical realism. Notable examples include Xi Xi's (1979) *My City (Wo cheng 我城)*, Xi Xi's (1986) *Marvels of a Floating City (Fucheng zhi yi 浮城誌異)*, Wong Bik Wan's 黃碧雲 (1994) *Lost City (Shicheng 失城)*, Dung Kai Cheung's 董啟章 *The V City Series* (1997-2012), Tse Hiu-Hung's 謝曉虹 (2020) 'land of unfamiliar root' (*mogen di 陌根地*) in her novel *Eagle-Headed Cat and the Music Box Girl (Yingtou mao yu yinyuexiang nūhai 鷹頭貓與音樂箱女孩)*, Pun Kwok-Ling's 潘國靈 (2016) 'sandy city' (*sha cheng 沙城*) in his novel *Writopia and the Spell of Disappearance (Xietuobang yu xiaoshi zhou 寫托邦與消失咒)*, and Lee Wai Yi's 李維怡 'the city of vagueness' (*wuheyou cheng 無何有城*) in a series of her novellas. These works showcase a way of fictionalizing Hong Kong, using collage and kaleidoscopic language to construct a different space outside the urban space (Wang 2008, 288-9).<sup>10</sup>

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urbanality in a nationless reality. This transformation reflects the fact that since the 1970s, writers have recognised the 'nothingness' of Hong Kong's locality and constructed 'somethingness' out of such 'nothingness' as a means of reflection and identity (57-8).

<sup>9</sup> It is essential to acknowledge that the concept of 'history-lessness' in Hong Kong, as mentioned here, represents Chan's (2015) method of argument. It serves as a means to interrogate and critically examine whether Hong Kong lacks historical significance or not. It is crucial to recognise that the quality of being history-less or not necessitates a thoughtful analysis of the power dynamics and ideological considerations embedded in the construction of historical narratives.

<sup>10</sup> All translations of the titles and the following selected texts are by the Authors, unless otherwise specified.



The literary production environments in Taiwan and Hong Kong are certainly different, and both places have their own historical contexts. However, Taiwan and Hong Kong have always been two important literary venues outside of the Chinese mainland, and their literary production mechanisms have long influenced each other. In addition, most of the texts and literary criticism from other Sinophone communities (e.g. Malaysia) are also praised in the literary scene of both places. In fact, Sinophone literary production is a multi-site co-construction process based in a translocal context (Zhan 2017, 82), and Taiwan and Hong Kong can be considered as important nodes of such a production.

This article aims to explore the potential of ghost narratives in Sinophone fiction. In contrast to the post-colonial interpretation of ghosts and monsters as bearers of historical memory and social culture, this study focuses on the supernatural presence of ghost narratives that may not necessarily involve tangible references or material characters. The expression 'ghost narrative' in this article refers to the arrangement of various supernatural phenomena that propel the plot or carry symbolic meaning within the text. Accordingly, the term 'ghost' can refer to a concrete manifestation of a supernatural being or simply evoke a certain atmosphere. We set out to analyse two novellas, namely "Rain Tree" ("Yudou shu" 雨豆樹) by Lai Hsiang-yin 賴香吟 (2017) from Taiwan and "Away" ("Li" 離) by Lee Wai Yi 李維怡 (2018) from Hong Kong. The rationale for juxtaposing these two texts lies not only in their contemporaneous creation but also in the absence of specific ghosts or demons in the ghost narratives depicted in both texts. This article seeks to explore the ways in which non-corporeal or non-representational ghost narratives serve as a mobile strategy for re-examining historical narratives or modernity. This approach diverges from the logical frameworks of psychoanalytic selfhood or postcolonial grand narratives and instead embraces a fluid and transformative nature, emphasising its inherent potential. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of two texts from Taiwan and Hong Kong underscores how ghosts, within the framework of Sinophone discourse, embody a poetics of 'propensity', challenging and transcending categorical boundaries while resisting the rigidity of fixed 'roots'.

### 3 **Lai Hsiang-yin's *Rain Tree***

Lai Hsiang-yin was born in 1969 in Tainan, Taiwan. She graduated from Taiwan University with a degree in Economics and from the University of Tokyo with a Master's degree in General Cultural Studies. Lai's literary work has been acknowledged by numerous literary awards. Although her writing also touches on political and historical themes, she does not construct a grand history, but rather

adopts a personal and egoic approach to writing.<sup>11</sup> Such a style may be found in “Rain Tree”.

Published in 2017, this novella depicts the narrator’s complex relationship with the city of Tainan upon her return from Taipei. While the city is both familiar and unfamiliar to her, the emotional core of this dichotomy lies in the narrator’s reminiscence of her father, who was also a faculty member at National Cheng Kung University (NCKU). The narrator has always puzzled over her father’s decision to settle in Tainan instead of Taipei, despite having the opportunity to do so. This sense of confusion raises questions about the narrator’s understanding of the emotional dynamics of the previous generation. The narrator frequently roams the NCKU campus, seeking to unravel the enigmatic past of her father and gain a deeper understanding of him. Concurrently, she contemplates the significance of Tainan, juxtaposing it with the city of Taipei and continuously juxtaposing her memories with the present. The narrative culminates one night as the narrator encounters the apparition of her father on the university campus.

Defining the genre of this story proves challenging due to Lai’s (2017) utilisation of her personal experiences as the foundation for this novella, and her incorporation of prose elements, blurring the boundaries between fiction and prose.<sup>12</sup> The subsequent paragraph will examine the significance of the moment when the ghost appears in “Rain Tree” and how the author utilises this text to explore how her generation reevaluates the meaning of *nan* 南 (southern) in Tainan. Given the fictional nature of the novel, the author treats the narrator as a character within the text. The degree to which the narrator aligns with the author is not the subject of discussion in this article. For the narrator, unravelling the image of her father serves not only to achieve personal comprehension but also to impart significance to her generation, caught between the past and the future during a historically critical moment: the 2016 presidential election in Taiwan.

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**11** Xu (2007, 36) comments on Lai’s approach to handling grand historical narratives by “blending the collective self and the individual self,” thereby presenting another facet of female writers.

**12** In the context of Chinese literature, prose is a literary genre in which authors share their personal opinions, attracting readers through their unique language style and insightful perspectives. It emphasises ‘truth’ and does not allow for fictional elements. On the other hand, fiction is a genre in which authors have the freedom to create entirely fictional narratives. In the case of Lai’s (2017) work, her novel falls somewhere in between these two categories. Although Lai’s text is indeed a work of fiction, she deliberately incorporates material that aligns perfectly with her own life experiences and uses her own name, creating an effect of authenticity that blurs the line between fiction and reality for readers.

### 3.1 The Timelessness and Subjectivity of Urban History

The narrator of Lai Hsiang-yin's (2017) "Rain Tree" – the textual Lai of the fiction– endeavours to reconstruct the memory of her deceased father by examining the plants and buildings on the NCKU campus. Additionally, through discussions with Julien (her French translator), the narrator seeks to navigate the urban streetscape of the fictional Zeelandia (*relanzhe* 熱蘭遮) to reframe her recollection of the past and the contemporary Tainan.<sup>13</sup> Lai also attempts to free Tainan from a linear perception of time and reinterprets the city with an alternative temporal perspective. Within the text, Julien persistently questions the narrator about the precise tense of the narrative in Zeelandia, seeking accurate translation into French. However, the narrator finds it challenging to provide definitive answers to all the questions, as the narrative of Zeelandia often exists within a temporally undefined context. Consequently, distinguishing whether a thought pertains strictly to the past or the present becomes challenging.

Indeed, the narrator's difficulty in determining the temporal context of the text stems from the emphasis on 'aspect' rather than 'tense' in the Chinese language.<sup>14</sup> However, it can also be contended that the narrator's incapacity to attribute a precise temporal placement to Zeelandia may symbolise the ambiguity of the island's historical past, rendering it unfeasible to delineate the past within the confines of the present frame of reference.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, we assert that Lai has skilfully utilised the disparity in temporal perspectives among different languages, employing the notion that the Chinese

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**13** Zeelandia has a clear reference to Fort Zeelandia, the fortress built by Dutch colonisers in the seventeenth century. The narrator's discourse points to the historical memory through the 'ghost' of a disappeared city, clearly influenced by a similar procedure which can be seen (with far more introspection and complexity) in Chu T'ien-hsin's (Zhu Tianxin) 朱天心 *Gudu* 古都.

**14** Linguist Wang Li (1985, 151) has offered an explanation for the lack of tense in the Chinese language. He states that the expression of time is present in most languages, however, the perception of time varies from language to language. Broadly speaking, people's perceptions of the relationship between events and time fall into two categories. The first category is to focus on when something happened, without asking much about the time elapsed (from the moment of speaking) or its length; the second category is to focus on the length of time that has elapsed and whether the event was started or completed, without much regard to when it occurred. The former can be represented by Romance languages (French, Italian, Spanish, etc.), while the latter can be represented by Chinese. In addition, 'tense' uses verbs to indicate the timepoint when the action occurs, whereas 'aspect' uses verbs to indicate the length and type of the action (Chen 2017, 114). Yu-cheng Yang (2010, 30-1) further posits that languages employing tense reflect a tendency to objectify time, whereas languages employing aspect emphasise the speaker's internal experience rooted in a specific temporal context.

**15** However, the choice of Zeelandia has a clear reference. It would be interesting to further investigate whether Lai is intentionally trying to avoid an evaluation of the complex past of the island.

language does not inherently objectify time, to express her subjectivity towards urban space and local memory.

Through this novella, Lai explores the anxieties surrounding her generation's position in the post-2010 era. With the story of the older generation, particularly the narrator's father, still shrouded in ambiguity, and the younger generation holding unwavering belief in Taiwan's subjectivity, Lai grapples with the implications of being caught between two generations. To delve into this question, Lai intertwines her memories of her father, constructing a lyrical spacetime that reflects her personal perception. Within this framework, she contemplates the generational issue within the juxtaposition of the tangible city and the textual city. Lai's search for her father's memory follows collective coordinates: the text constantly emphasises the image of the south (as opposed to Taipei). This is evident through her relocation to Tainan, the rootedness of her friends in Tainan, and the text coinciding with the 2016 presidential election, during which the young generation "returns to their hometown to vote" (*fanxiang tou-piao* 返鄉投票) (Lai 2017, 138).

For the narrator, understanding the significance of the South is crucial in unravelling the reasons behind her father's decision to return to Tainan in his youth. The narrator's own body carries imprints of Tainan's past, and she attempts to establish connections with the past through various external objects such as streets, campuses, and buildings. However, the ever-evolving Tainan presents a challenge, as the spatial embodiment constructed by the past and the current impressions of Tainan appear to be incompatible. While symbols may temporarily capture the shifting meaning at a certain moment in time, the meaning continuously slips away in the passage of time and space, resulting in the symbols losing their precise referential capacity. It has been argued that

despite the fixed and immobile nature of space, the transmission of cultural discourses and ideologies within that space can occur through the movements of characters. These movements initiate intercultural collisions and dialogues as they traverse borders, leading to the questioning, affirmation, or revision of their own perceptions. (Fan 2015, 85)

Drawing on the significant chronotope of Taiwan's 2016 presidential election, the author, Lai (2017), is engaging in a reflection of Taiwan's current state of ambiguity within the context of global mobility, from the perspective of the so-called 'organic independence' (*tianran*

du 天然獨) generation.<sup>16</sup> In other words, while the present-day generation holds an unwavering belief in Taiwan's inherent 'authenticity', Lai challenges this conviction by exploring the elusive nature of memory. Furthermore, even though Lai does not directly address the longstanding North-South divide that has shaped Taiwanese politics, she elucidates the global interconnectedness of southern Taiwan during the early modern era by emphasising its distinctive imagery. This perspective offers a contrasting understanding of Taiwan, distinct from the perceptions of the contemporary generation.

Through intertextuality that alludes to actual political changes and incorporating the narrator's uncertain perception of urban space alongside Julien's inquiries, the text accentuates the embodiment of urban space within a non-objective, linear temporal framework. This implies that urban space is marked by ambiguity, eluding a precise placement within a fixed timeline. The underlying suggestion is that an objectivist understanding of Taiwan's global position is consistently overshadowed or disregarded due to the dominant presence of the Other, specifically the Chinese mainland. Lai's approach, characterised by impressionistic and sensory depictions of landscapes imbued with a sense of temporality, portrays the city while establishing links to historical and political transformations. Through this approach, the objective is to contextualise every facet of the city within an interconnected web of relationships, aiming for a profound understanding of *worlding* as viewed through Heidegger's lens. Pheng Cheah (2016, 5-6) argues that the significance of the world extends beyond a mere spatial arrangement in geography; it also encompasses temporal interdependence. When applied to Taiwan and Lai's (2017) text, Cheah's (2016) concept implies that Taiwan is not merely a small island adjacent to the Chinese mainland but is intricately connected to other locations, necessitating an exploration of its temporal dimensions. However, through the metaphor of temporal collapse exemplified by the 'spacetime singularity',<sup>17</sup> space can acquire a temporal dimension.

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**16** *Tianran du* 天然獨 is one of Taiwan's political terms and propositions formulated in 2014, referring to Taiwanese born after 1980 who believe that Taiwan has become 'independent' and there is no need to debate the fact. The phrase is generally considered to have originated from a statement made by then Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Chairman Ing-wen Tsai 蔡英文 in 2014, and is becoming a popular term after the Sunflower Student Movement. Cf. Lin 2014; Lin 2015.

**17** The astrophysical term 'spacetime singularity' is from Einstein's general relativity theory, which states that spacetime breakdowns at a point of infinite density and curvature (such as the centre of a black hole or the beginning of the Big Bang). Cf. also Wheeler 1980.

### 3.2 Remembering

Lai (2017) employs a ‘spacetime singularity’ in “Rain Tree” to craft the moment of encounter between the narrator and her father. This concept of a spacetime singularity serves not only to emphasise an alternative perception of Tainan through a blurred temporality but also to converge her extensive memories into a specific temporal and spatial nexus.

Upon leaving her friend’s coffee house, where she had observed the election results and contemplated their significance for her generation, the narrator proceeds homeward, passing once more through the NCKU campus. In the enveloping darkness and stillness, she traverses a dimly lit corridor adorned with portraits of alumni that had previously escaped her notice. Curiously, this corridor takes on an inexplicable transformation, morphing into a temporal portal that transports her into a spacetime singularity, where she unexpectedly encounters the apparition of her father. However, this encounter does not afford the narrator an opportunity to unravel the enigma, as her father’s phantom merely gestures silently before vanishing, leaving the narrator in a state of astonishment. Despite the lingering uncertainties, the inclusion of a spacetime singularity within the narrative facilitates the seamless emergence of the ghost, enabling the entwined memories of the past and present to intersect and converge in the overlapping realm of time. Through this construction, the objective space assumes a temporal dimension, allowing the fluid dissolution of spacetime to be redefined in accordance with the author’s purpose of ‘remembering’.

Richard Terdiman (1993, 8) states that memory is the past-made present, or the “present past”, which inspired Michael Rothberg (2009, 3) to develop the idea that memory is multidirectional for the subject’s “ongoing negotiation, cross-reference, and borrowing” in contemporary societies and indicates its relation to the past. Pentzold, Lohmeier, Hajek (2016, 6, cited in Zhan 2020, 96) even argue that remembering has a future-oriented dimension, and the purpose of remembering is not a retrospective but a “*prospective* employment of memory work [...] to revive and reconstruct personal and public life” (italics in original). In other words, by employing memory work in a prospective manner to reconsider and reconstruct personal and public life, the ‘spacetime singularity’ is set for remembering, and remembering is for ‘making present’.

The narrator’s perception of the city and her understanding of intergenerational gaps are intricately linked to her bodily experience within the urban space. This embodied sense becomes the foundation for her encounter with the ghostly presence of her father. It becomes evident that the ‘body’ not only serves as a conduit for spectral manifestations or ghostly apparitions but also serves as a crucial platform for the author to engage with historical discourse, local memory, and

generational identities within the narrative. Furthermore, the haunting itself is inherently tied to bodily circumstances within a specific context, and its manifestation, vocalisation, or relentless presence and storytelling can be viewed as an ongoing process of negotiation with the corporeal aspects of others within the phenomenal realm.

Lai (2017) intentionally situates the generation of meaning in Tainan amidst global trade, the Chinese mainland, and the inter-transferences centred around Taipei. This is achieved through the intertextuality of Zeelandia and the appropriation of materials related to the Taiwan elections. The symbolic representation of the father's ghostly presence as a spacetime singularity also suggests a volatile position in relation to these references. Regardless of the narrator's efforts to infuse the city and its history with multiple meanings and engage in acts of remembrance, these endeavours ultimately contribute to the production of meaning specific to a particular generation and temporality.

For the production of meaning, flow is always arrested at a specific conjuncture of time and space; that is, it has its own chronotope [...] depending on context and therefore avoiding fixity and determinism. (Shih 2007, 44-5)

Likewise, ghostly apparitions serve as a warning of the risks of fixity, thereby reminding the narrator to choose silence. In this light, the appearance of her father's ghost is a process of negotiation, a strategy to maintain one's 'propensity'. In other words, it is preferable to interpret the Sinophone perspective not as a mere articulation of locality in relation to Taiwan's position on the Chinese periphery, but rather as a reading strategy that traverses between the meaning structures centred around the Chinese mainland and those centred around the flow of capital.

#### 4 Lee Wai Yi's Mobile Strategy

Lee Wai Yi, born in Beijing in 1975 and raised in Hong Kong, obtained her Bachelor's degree in Journalism and Communication from the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1997. She further pursued her studies in Anthropology at the same university and earned a Master's degree. In 2000, Lee was honored with the New Writer's Award for her debut novella *Our Chrysalis in Those Summers* (*Naxie xiatian li women de yong* 那些夏天裡我們的蛹). Despite devoting herself to documentary films and civic activism in the subsequent years, she continued to contribute essays and short stories to newspapers and magazines.

Lee's fiction typically leans towards traditional realist critique. As argued by Wang (2010, 43), Lee "practiced writing and intervened in

social action” and her texts “sincerely documented the interaction between literature and society, a persistence that I am afraid is rare among mainland writers”. Among the lines of formal exploration pioneered in Hong Kong literature by writers such as Xi Xi, Wu Xubin 吳煦斌 and Wong Bik-Wan, Lee Wai Yi appears at first glance to be a return to traditional realism, and therefore stands out as unique.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, Kwok Sze-Wing (2020, 50) notes that since 2010, Lee’s creative works have progressively integrated entirely implausible elements of fantasy and psychic phenomena, thus suggesting Lee’s “change of direction”. According to Kwok (2020, 55-7), an analysis of Lee’s ghost narratives should incorporate the concept of ‘haunted realism’ as defined by Chris Berry, as well as Georg Lukács’ literary theory of realism. Kwok (2020, 55-7) further contends that Lee’s ghost narratives serve the purpose of reflecting upon notions of justice and envisioning open communities, thereby presenting her left-wing ethical concept of freedom. Building upon Kwok’s insights, it becomes evident that Lee’s critical perspective emerges through the intertwining of human beings and ghosts in her writings, even though her texts remain highly critical of the challenges faced by marginalised communities and immigrants from the Chinese mainland.

Lee’s (2018) novella “Away” provides a narrative account of a supernatural incident wherein the presence of specific ghosts remains undisclosed. This tale is an integral component of the literary series known as *The City of Vagueness* (*Wuheyong cheng* 無何有城), which Lee has consistently published in various literary magazines since 2017.<sup>19</sup> Although *The City of Vagueness* does not specify a city, the other texts in the series suggest that the City of Vagueness might refer to Hong Kong. The novella “Away” (2018) tells the story of He Lili 何離離, who comes from Guangwu County (*Guangwu xiang* 廣蕪鄉) and whose mother’s family has a tradition of shamanism.<sup>20</sup> She recalls a spiritual encounter she had when she moved to the City of Vagueness

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**18** Kwok (2020, 48-9) has undertaken an initial inquiry into the academic perception of Lee Wai-Yi.

**19** The term *wuheyong* 無何有 is from *Free and Easy Wandering* (*Xiaoyaoyou* 逍遙遊) in *Zhuangzi*, meaning a place where there is nothing. It is often used to refer to an empty and illusory realm or dream.

**20** The metaphorical implications of the title *Wuheyong* 無何有 (Away), and the name of He Lili also require consideration of ‘Guangwu’ Township. The ‘Li’ in the name of He Lili means ‘to leave’. The ‘Guangwu’ in Guangwu County means ‘barren and desolate’. By combining the names of characters and the county, the author intentionally implicates that He Lili left the barren county (He Lili was taken away from the desolate countryside by her parents at a young age, and was admonished to find ways to survive in the city). This implies the unequal position of Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland within the global capital structure, as well as the economic factors influencing the movement of people between Hong Kong and the mainland. In fact, this story contemplates the cultural significance of the migration of individuals between Hong Kong and the mainland from the perspective of economic structures.



at the age of 15 and joined a guided tour of ancient monuments (Lee 2018, 24-30). Organised by the local history association of the city, this excursion entailed a visit to the most prominent temples within the urban area. During the tour, led by a knowledgeable guide, Lili and the rest of the group explored four temples. It was at the (presumed) fourth temple, where a display of nostalgic toys captivated their attention, that an extraordinary event unfolded. Suddenly, everyone in the group, except for Lili, became motionless, transforming into stone-like figures. Perceiving an ominous presence in the atmosphere, Lili summoned her grandmother's taught witch chants, enabling her to resist the ghostly ambiance. With great determination, she rescued each petrified individual from the temple, one by one, restoring them to their original state.

This narrative delves into the ongoing discourse surrounding the contentious issues of heritage demolition and conservation campaigns in Hong Kong. While Kwok (2020, 60) contends that this novella employs the structure of the traditional Chinese trope 'misplaced in a fairyland' (*wuru xianjing* 誤入仙境) to stimulate the younger generation's curiosity in rediscovering and comprehending history, we posit that this novella, in fact, reasserts the thematic concerns evident in Lee's previous works. Lee's writings persistently reflect upon dichotomous thinking by traversing various realms, such as work and leisure, rural and urban, ancient and contemporary, (dis)enchantment and re-enchantment, as well as historical authenticity and transformation. Additionally, the allegorical storyline depicted in "Away" transcends specific social issues, focusing instead on the alienating characteristics of Hong Kong as a modern metropolis and its instrumental rationality.

#### 4.1 Disenchantment and Re-Enchantment

Lee's (2018) novella "Away" begins by establishing a stance of resistance against the instrumental rationality of state violence. The novella commences as He Lili pays a visit to her grandmother in Guangwu County after her time spent in the City of Vagueness (Lee 2018, 21). Her grandmother's witchcraft chants, previously condemned by the state as mere superstition, are now being reappropriated as a spectacle of "intangible cultural heritage" (UNESCO) through a process of codification. Nevertheless, despite the transformation of the singing incantations from being banned in the past to becoming a part of modern cultural heritage, they are still perceived as "remnants of ancient superstitions" (Lee 2018, 21). These incantations now serve as cultural commodities utilised by the state for the promotion of tourism. Furthermore, when He Lili was just four years old, her mother was coerced to violate the one-child policy due to her father's desire

for male offspring. Consequently, she was compelled to undergo an abortion by government officials and was even subjected to the imposition of an intrauterine device (IUD) during a hospital visit. As a four-year-old, Lili witnesses her mother collapsing and bleeding due to a miscarriage while attempting to evade the police. Overwhelmed by the situation, she cries out to the police, who harshly retort, saying, "Who told your mother to behave like a dog in heat and be so negligent?" (Lee 2018, 22) This incident not only brings attention to the rationalised violence perpetuated by the state but also exposes the patriarchal degradation of women, evident in the derogatory perception that an unplanned pregnancy signifies a woman's resemblance to a dog in heat. Additionally, this event can be interpreted through the lens of Foucault's (1995) perspective on power, specifically the utilisation of the panopticon prison disciplinary technique. It exemplifies how power, in this case, the technology of state control, infiltrates and permeates the mechanisms of the modern human body, surpassing the confines of instrumental rationality (Foucault 1995, 215-17). Despite the long-standing suppression or codification of He's grandmother's family's witchcraft tradition by modern instrumental rationality, He's experience at the dilapidated temple accentuates the enduring enchantment associated with urban modernisation (or modernity itself). From this perspective, "Away" is an extension of Wang's (2004, 280) position, that is, under the "figure of the sublime" in revolutionary narrative, the ghost highlights the heterogeneity of human experiences that cannot be tamed by modernity.

Lee (2018) deliberately employs a juxtaposition of two concepts: the ancient and the modern. It is widely acknowledged that disenchantment has served as a central tenet of Enlightenment thought since its inception, with science and rationality at its core. Max Weber (2009, 139) has elucidated that disenchantment refers to the exclusion of ineffability and the embodiment of characteristics found in Western society during processes of modernisation, bureaucratisation, and secularisation. Michael Saler (2006, 695-6) highlights the narrative logic of "modernity-disenchantment," which is rooted in binary thinking. By applying this framework to Lee's (2018) "Away", we can unravel the implications that the author incorporates. According to Lili's grandmother, Lili has resided in the City of Vagueness for an extended period, gradually adopting urban behaviors that have rendered her unable to access the realm of witch's chants and stripped her of the capacity to experience the enchantment conveyed through these chants (Lee 2018, 30-1). In essence, the city is thus a kind of 'alienation' from the ancient social desires of the disenchant-ed to the modern subject. Ironically, in Lili's eyes, this 'alienation' is the only way to survive in the City of Vagueness. For as long as people (especially migrants from other villages) retain the ability to sense ancient things (e.g. to see ancient creatures), they are judged

by the disciplinary power of the urban rational discourse to be drug addicts, mentally disturbed, or suffering from psychosis, and must undergo mandatory treatment (Lee 2018, 30-1). In other words, Lili has embodied how the internalised 'micro-power' constructed by Foucault's (1995) panoramic view of the disciplinary technique works on the modern subject. This logic echoes Foucault's (1988) definition of reason as always defined by its opposite, madness. By forcing the treatment of those who do not accept the taming of reason, society achieves the benefits of sustained economic production. The presence of individuals who have not experienced alienation and possess the ability to perceive things beyond the senses implies that witchcraft, which lies outside the realm of urban rationality, has never truly vanished from the city. Rather, it is the urban populace that has long relinquished the capacity to establish a connection with it.

Furthermore, this juxtaposition and confrontation also accentuate the moment of literal petrification experienced by the members of the tour group. Upon reaching the fourth temple, the group members were filled with delight upon seeing the toys from their childhood exhibited within the premises. These nostalgic toys transported them back to the realm of childhood games. However, at the very pinnacle of their excitement, they were instantaneously transformed into stone figures (Lee 2018, 28). In an urban system that prioritises productivity and rationality, playfulness is rejected as unproductive. Nevertheless, as numerous pedagogical experts have emphasised, childhood play and exploration are essential processes through which individuals learn and navigate the world with creativity. The petrification of the tour participants in a playful setting due to the presence of 'malevolent energy' brings to the forefront the suppression of play within the urban environment. However, what is particularly intriguing is that the group is rescued from this predicament through the recitation of a chant. Once again, by intertwining rationality and enchantment, Lee (2018) challenges the dichotomy between work and play within the urban setting. If we look at "Away" in the context of urban literature of female writers in Hong Kong,<sup>21</sup> Lee Wai Yi does not exhibit a clear rejection of modernity; rather, she tends to delve into the allure of modernity itself, albeit with a somewhat ironic stance.

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**21** According to Zhao's (2018, 192) analysis, Zhong Xiaoyang 鍾曉陽 and Pik-Wah Lee have demonstrated their rejection of modernity in their novels by examining their attitudes towards the city.

## 4.2 Moving Between Polarised Categories

The approach of employing mobility as a method is also used by Lee Wai Yi (2018) in "Away". As previously discussed, Lee (2018) aims to delve into the inherent enchantment embedded within modernity itself, highlighting the absurdity of the City of Vagueness, where instrumental rationality is employed to suppress and exclude the uncontrollable forces that challenge established notions of rationality. People born in the city and trained by the power machine for a long time are unable to perceive the fascination of antiquity, and only the newcomers or the untamed ones can realise the power of the ancient. These are the people who are in a translocal situation (newly moved from the countryside to the city) and who possess the characteristics of mobility, not only between Hong Kong and the mainland in geopolitics, but also between pre-modernity and modernity, and between the 'I-ness' and the 'Otherness' in the city. In other words, mobility serves as a means to transcend the confines of instrumental rationality within the city, while also infiltrating the operational mechanisms of the power apparatus, consequently challenging the prevailing narratives surrounding the urban landscape. Furthermore, Lee's (2018) portrayal of the City of Vagueness can be seen as a symbolic representation of the cultural crisis confronting the city. It encapsulates the crisis of modernity within a standardised global system that increasingly prioritises political and economic aspects, while simultaneously rejecting any forms of deviance or ideological constraints associated with modernity.

From a broader scope, in recent years, with the rise of post-humanism and the growing importance of environmental issues, there has been an increase in contemplating the phenomenon of apparitions.

Contemporary ghostlore features the (future) afterlife of animate matter - an entity unable to communicate its secrets or failures in a language humans are willing or able to decode - under the condition of massive technological interventions into the planet's natural rhythm of regeneration. (Riemenschnitter 2014, 108)

In light of this,

Hong Kong offers itself as a compelling signifier of the contradictions of global capitalism and a cultural crisis created by a more and more standardised - though not at all homogenised - world system that spreads its principles for a modern political economy while denying responsibility for its excesses, deviations, limitations and ideological blind spots. (Riemenschnitter 2014, 111)

According to Lee, this crisis serves as an opportune moment for ghostly intervention. In the case of the 'malevolent energy' depicted

in “Away”, its absence of a concrete form accentuates the presence of a non-figurative spiritual ambiance, which in turn underscores the diverse suppressed and mobile elements existing beneath the framework of instrumental rationality within modernity.

By combining the aforementioned observations, namely the polarised categorisations of Disenchantment and Re-enchantment, Lee (2018) effectively incorporates the distinctions between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland. Through the interconnectedness of cross-border experiences, she articulates the contemporary predicament faced by individuals within the framework of the global capitalist structure and power technologies. In the field of Sinophone studies, where the focus is on analysing texts originating from the fringes of Chinese culture and exploring the cultural practices within specific localities, Lee’s literary works skilfully employ cross-border experiences to critically examine the inherent violence of modern technologies that shape the locality of the urban context, particularly in the case of Hong Kong. In Guangwu County, on the mainland, both the singing incantations and the violence of the birth control policy embody a coexistence of ancient and modern elements. Similarly, in the City of Vagueness, modern rationality suppresses superstition and the supernatural, yet it cannot eliminate the primal nature inherent in the process of civilisation. Applying the dialectical thinking of *hua* and *yi* to this context, we can assert that the coexistence of ancient elements from the mainland and the rationality from the city is intertwined. This predicament extends beyond He Lili and reflects the contemporary situation of the entire Sinophone communities. Just as Wang (2013) argues for the shifting propensity between *hua* and *yi*, we believe that the differentiation between *hua* and *yi* is no longer limited to the dichotomy of ‘Chineseness’ or ‘Otherness’, nor should we be fixated on a diasporic ending. Instead, it should be understood as an ongoing process of de-categorisation within the current global flow of capital. In conclusion, Lee’s work (2018) re-examines this heterogeneity and presents a means of intervention: by embracing the position of the Sinophone, which navigates between the Chinese mainland and the Hong Kong locality, we can once again perceive this heterogeneity. This position goes beyond a mere geopolitical division between the Chinese mainland and Hong Kong; it represents a “poetics of propensity” that intentionally traverses between the Other and the Self, aiming to dissolve the rigidity of the politics of “root” (Wang 2013).

## 5 Conclusion

The ghost narratives found in Sinophone fiction since the 1980s can be characterised as a form of “phantasmagoric realism” (Wang 2004, 278). This term specifically highlights how these writers of ghost narratives deviate from realism and instead emphasise a reversal of the ‘aesthetics of corporeality’ that had prevailed throughout the twentieth century. With this in mind, the objective of this study was to examine two novellas on ghost narratives produced after 2010. The aim was not only to demonstrate the perspective of phantasmagoric realism within Sinophone Taiwan and Hong Kong, but also to explore the potential new meanings that emerge within contemporary ghost narratives. Our study centred on two specific novellas: “Rain Tree” (*Yudou shu* 雨豆樹) by Lai Hsiang-yin (2017) from Taiwan and “Away” (*Li ni* 離) by Lee Wai Yi (2018) from Hong Kong. Unlike typical ghost narratives where apparitions and spirits play a central role, these two texts evoke a chilling effect not through the deliberate creation of ghosts, but rather by cultivating a mysterious atmosphere and a sense of the unknown. Our argument posits that when haunting ceases to be corporeal or representational, it transforms into a strategy for re-examining mainstream narratives or modernity. However, unlike the twin relationship between Goethe’s novels and modernity in the Western context, the employment of a ghostly narrative strategy in this case deviates from the frameworks of psychoanalytic selfhood and post-colonial grand narratives. Instead, it prioritises a nature or potential that underscores the significance of mobility.

Furthermore, through the juxtaposition of these two novellas from a Sinophone discourse perspective, our aim was to underscore the significance and function of ghost narratives in Sinophone literature. Since the inception of the Sinophone theory discourse, Wang (2013, 11) has consistently emphasised Sinophone as a poetic exploration of “propensity” – a dichotomy that surpasses notions of inner/outer, inclusion/exclusion, settlement/diaspora, or a means to transcend “roots” and “dendritic” theories of knowledge. In essence, the notion of Sinophone should not be confined to a mere instrument for delineating the other or engaging in political spatial maneuvers. Instead, it should be viewed as a means to navigate the ebb and flow of the implied distance encapsulated in ‘propensity’ – a disposition and kinetic energy. Consequently, we contend that in the examined texts, the text itself becomes a manifestation of this very ‘propensity’.

Lai Hsiang-yin’s (2017) “Rain Tree” centres around two cities in Taiwan, and within this north-south framework, the writer delves into the disparities and unreachability of historical memory and space between generations. She purposely ‘detemporalises’ her hometown, Tainan, to cultivate a narrator’s perception of temporal and spatial strangeness and alienation. Through this, she accentuates the

potential for a fresh interpretation of Taiwan within the context of a distinct form of globalisation. Within this narrative structure, the unexpected spatial singularity that emerges at the conclusion of the text can be seen as a form of *écart*. Contrary to Lin Fangmei's (2019) advocacy of nostalgia, the presence of her father's ghost accentuates the ambivalence inherent in the prevailing discourse in Taiwan, perpetuating an enduring sense of separation. In essence, ghosts serve as intermediaries traversing the boundaries of dominant discourse, thereby challenging the categorical certainty held by the generation that upholds the concept of 'natural independence' (*tianrandu* 天然獨). Within the post-loyalist perspective of time, phantoms possess the ability to disrupt the seamless flow of time, enabling the subject's imagination to be deconstructed and reconstructed. In the collision of temporal trajectories, ghosts or magicians often symbolise a unique spatial singularity. The encounter between the living and the dead not only presents the possibility of a dialogue between distinct historical periods, but also prompts a contemplation of 'Taiwanese-ness' transcending temporal boundaries.

Lee Wai Yee's (2018) novella "Away" employs a malevolent energy or evil atmosphere to portray the enduring spectral essence of modernity. Through strategic writing, Lee (2018) utilises translocal mobility to unveil the problematic aspects of Hong Kong narratives within the framework of commodification. The intensifying confrontation between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland has stifled the inherent heterogeneity of Hong Kong, particularly in the aftermath of the anti-extradition law amendment bill movement. Amid Hong Kong's struggle to navigate between globalist and neo-regionalist self-positioning, Lee Wai Yee's writing revisits this heterogeneity and demonstrates a way to intervene: only by returning to the Sinophone position of displacement can this heterogeneity be seen again. This position transcends mere geopolitical divisions between the Chinese mainland and Hong Kong; it embodies a gesture of 'propensity', shifting the boundaries of various categories and opposing the rigidity of 'roots'.

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