



Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies

Bai, Runyuan. *Exploring Sinophone Liminality in Contemporary Chinese Fiction: Ghost Narratives and the Contouring of Invisible Realms* by Di-kai Chao. *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies*, vol. 6.2 (2025): 157–162.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25365/jeacs.2025.6.2.bai>

---

## BOOK REVIEW

# *Exploring Sinophone Liminality in Contemporary Chinese Fiction: Ghost Narratives and the Contouring of Invisible Realms*

By Di-kai Chao

London: Routledge, 2025. 200 pp.

ISBN: 9781032792682

Runyuan BAI   
University of St Andrews, UK  
[rb301@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:rb301@st-andrews.ac.uk)

---

**Keywords:** Sinophone, Ghost narratives, Liminality, Contemporary Chinese Fiction

**關鍵詞：** 華語，鬼怪敘事，邊界性，當代華文小說

---

The Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies (JEACS) is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the EACS, [www.chinesestudies.eu](http://www.chinesestudies.eu). ISSN: 2709-9946

© 2025 the author(s), published on 30 Dec 2025 under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Di-kai Chao's *Exploring Sinophone Liminality in Contemporary Chinese Fiction: Ghost Narratives and the Contouring of Invisible Realms* takes ghost narratives as a critical lens for understanding contemporary Sinophone literature. Chao brings together Sinophone theory and ghost studies through the shared concept of liminality, proposing that ghostly figures resist fixed meanings and open alternative imaginaries. Drawing on post-2010 fiction from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and mainland China, Chao foregrounds local experience through the trope of the ghost and demonstrates how these narratives interrogate modernity and transgress cultural and political boundaries. For Chao, Sinophone literature does not simply represent the periphery; it forms a dynamic field where cultural memory, linguistic hybridity, and narrative experimentation generate new imaginaries of belonging. Rather than symbols of haunting, ghost narratives are vehicles of thought, spectral mediators that reveal the fracture of power and possibilities for alternative futures. The book thus argues for a Sinophone theory capacious enough to account for internal heterogeneity, resist both nationalist and diasporic essentialism, and challenge dominant epistemologies shaped by a China-centric worldview in Sinophone studies.

The introduction outlines the book's major contribution: that it bridges Sinophone studies and ghost theory through the shared concept of liminality. Engaging with scholars such as Shu-mei Shih 史書美 and David Der-wei Wang 王德威, Chao proposes a fluid, decentralised framework that incorporates Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the Chinese mainland into an expanded Sinophone corpus. Chao further argues that Sinophone discourse must address its unresolved relationship with "China" itself. By reintroducing "China" into Sinophone critique, Chao reveals dimensions of identity, cultural memory, and geopolitical formation that the existing diaspora-focused models have left unexplored. This move is consistent with Sinophone theory's origins in transnationalism and its interest in identities formed through shifting power dynamics rather than fixed territorial logic.

The other essential handle of this book is the ghost. Drawing on postcolonial literary analysis, Chao demonstrates how ghost narratives function as transgressive literature mediating between past and present. The book adopts a flexible, case-specific approach that foregrounds how ghostly figures challenge linear temporality, disrupt categorical thinking, and embody affective and political tensions. Ghosts are not treated as stable symbols but as shifting figures whose meaning emerges from their entanglement with memory, trauma, and fabulation. In doing so, Chao positions spectrality as a destabilising force within Chinese-language literature, one that opens new possibilities for reading identity, history, and power. He introduces metaphors like *wangliang* 罔兩 (penumbra) and *Mitte* (middle thing) to describe ghostly figures that occupy ambiguous zones. These spectral presences disrupt binary oppositions, visibility and invisibility, and centre and periphery, and expose the unstable foundations of modern knowledge systems.

Chao closes the introduction by emphasising that polyphonic fictional narratives highlight the personal experience and identity among tensions of the present, haunted by unresolved

histories of trauma, colonialism and ethnicity. Such narratives urge a more nuanced understanding of Sinophone histories as plural and contested. Central to this is the idea that “Chineseness” is not a fixed or essentialist identity but a fluid concept under constant negotiation.

The discussion is coherently structured and firmly grounded in close reading. The main body of the book consists of four chapters, each focusing on a different region: Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the Chinese mainland. Each chapter follows a consistent format: it opens with a theoretical framework, introduces a region-specific analytical approach, and applies this to selected literary texts. Whether through national allegory, performativity, post-Chineseness, or fabulation, Chao reads the works through the combined lenses of Sinophone studies and ghost narrative theory. Each chapter begins by briefly introducing each author’s personal and creative background, which places the texts in their local cultural and historical context and enables the reader to better understand how each text reflects, negotiates, or resists local conditions. It also enhances the book’s attention to how individual histories intersect with larger cultural, political, and literary questions in the Sinophone world. Chao’s readings are precise and perceptive, combining textual analysis with historical awareness. This coherence gives the study clarity while enabling each chapter to sustain its own focus.

Chapter One focuses on ghost narratives in post-2010 Sinophone Taiwanese literature, using four texts, including *Huoxiang zhi ren* 惑鄉之人 (Whither Do You Go Home, 2012) by Kuo Chiang-sheng 郭強生; *Wuli* 巫旅 (A Shaman’s Journey, 2014) by Badai 巴代; the novella *Yudou* 雨豆樹 (The Rain Tree, 2017) by Lai Hsiang-yin 賴香吟; and *Gui difang* 鬼地方 (Ghost Town, 2019) by Kevin Chen 陳思宏. Chao traces how these narratives draw on magical realism and postcolonial allegory, emphasising the way ghosts symbolise marginality, suppressed memory, and non-linear history. The in-depth analysis highlights the narratives’ emphasis on localness, place, body, and landscape as sites of narrative resistance and cultural imagination. In developing the idea of “Sinophonising Taiwan”, Chao argues these narratives resist the stabilisation of identity through national allegory. Rather, the ghost narratives interrogate Taiwan’s cultural significance by foregrounding relational entanglements and spectral figures that disturb the linear time and space. The chapter positions Taiwanese literature within wider Sinophone debates and demonstrates the capacity of ghost stories to reconceptualise belonging and historical consciousness.

Chapter Two turns to post-2010 ghost narratives in Sinophone Hong Kong literature, focusing on Mak Shu Kin’s 麥樹堅 novella *Manman changye* 慢慢長夜 (Slow and Long Night, 2019) and Tse Hiu-Hung’s short story *Wuzhe gui* 無遮鬼 (The Umbrellaless Ghost, 2015). Chao argues that these ghost narratives capture the anxieties and contradictions of Hong Kong’s sociopolitical climate after the 1997 Handover by engaging with ghostly figures and haunted spaces as expressions of imagination and negotiation of Hong Kong’s social and cultural identity. Chao revisits Ackbar Abbas’s *Déjà Disparu* framework by asking whether

disappearance is the only logic through which Hong Kong identity can be understood. Instead, it proposes a spectral situatedness that acknowledges Hong Kong's entanglement with both colonial nostalgia and the pressures of mainland assimilation. Through close reading of these fictions, this chapter concludes that these ghost narratives resist the binary of colonialism and nationalism. Instead, they offer a spectral reimagining of Hong Kong rooted in affect, community, and unresolved memory. Ghost narratives become a site of cultural resistance, allowing writers to articulate alternative identities amid the ongoing debate about whether Hong Kong is disappearing or will vanish, which has become a novel way of expressing its identity.

Chapter Three explores ghost narratives in Sinophone Malaysian literature, framing it through the concept of "post-Chineseness" as a way of interpreting identity in Malaysia's multiethnic, postcolonial context. The chapter highlights Malaysia's unique situation whereby Chinese is not the dominant language, positioning Sinophone Malaysian writing as both "minor literature" and a product of diasporic cultural tension. Chao builds on E. K. Tan's notion of the Sinophone as translational, arguing that Malaysian Chinese literature, shaped by both local and translocal forces, reflects a continual renegotiation of cultural identity beyond essentialist understandings of Chineseness. The analysis focuses on ghost narratives from two authors, including *Yezhu duhe* 野豬渡河 (Wild Boars Cross the River, 2018) by Chang Kuei-hsing 張貴興, based in Taiwan, and *Liusu di* 流俗地 (Vulgar Land, 2020) by Li Zishu 黎紫書, based in Malaysia. The comparative reading reveals the tension between Taiwan-based and local Sinophone Malaysian literatures. This chapter demonstrates how ghost narratives serve as powerful tools for questioning dominant identity paradigms and imagining alternative futures, thereby transcending the dilemma of a "bilingual hegemony" of Chinese and Malay that dominated *Mahua* literature 馬華文學.

Chapter Four examines ghost narratives in contemporary mainland Chinese fiction based on Sheng Keyi's 盛可以 *Jinhui* 錦灰 (Splendid Ashes, 2018) and Yan Lianke's 閻連科 *Liaozhai benji* 聊齋本紀 (The Annals of Liaozhai, 2023). Chao positions this chapter as a response to Sinophone theory's exclusion of the PRC, arguing instead that including the mainland broadens the field's conceptual reach. The two texts, as Chao reads, reveal how post-reform Chinese fiction uses spectrality and fabulation to challenge discourses on modernity, developmentalist ideology, utopian teleologies, and the legacy of May Fourth realism. The discussion shows how Sheng and Yan represent a generation of mainland writers who no longer seek to represent China as a coherent cultural totality. Instead, they use spectrality and fabulation to explore the violence of history, the illusions of progress, and the fragility of identity. Chao suggests that including such texts within the Sinophone framework enriches our understanding of Chineseness as historically contingent, politically fraught, and imaginatively unstable.

The conclusion chapter of this book reinforces Chao's central claim that ghost narratives provide critical tools for understanding the heterogeneity of Chineseness across Sinophone

contexts. Chao recaps his regional case studies, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the mainland, not as isolated readings but as expressions of ghostly liminality, each engaging with different histories of displacement, trauma, and identification. Chao reiterates his stance on including the Chinese mainland in the Sinophone framework. Rather than treating PRC literature as an ideological monolith, he argues for a “Sinophonised” reading of mainland texts that acknowledges their role in shaping and circulating forms of Chineseness beyond national confines, therefore overcoming the limitations of a unidirectional reference to the West and the inevitable risks of essentialising Chineseness.

While gender is not specified as a primary analytic category in the book, Chao’s discussion nonetheless opens a space for comparative reading on female ghost figures across Sinophone fictions. Repeatedly inhabiting a paradoxical position of both marginality and resistance in different local contexts, these ghost women articulate otherwise silenced experiences, enabling a symbolic overturning of normative hierarchies and social constraints. For instance, in Taiwan’s *Ghost Town*, the town is depicted as a symbolic site of female tragedy within patriarchal structures, offering an alternative perspective for understanding the fluidity of nationhood. In Hong Kong, the narrator of Tse Hiu-Hung’s *The Umbrellaless Ghost*, a 37-year-old woman who finds a bloodstained yellow umbrella and faces police interrogation, embodies everyday precarity and muted resistance under political pressure. Li Zishu’s Malaysian *Vulgar Land* links spectrality with reproductive trauma, abandonment, and miscarriage, and exposes a metaphor for racialised and gendered vulnerability. As for the mainland, through the female ghost Yao Minzhu 姚皿珠 in Sheng Keyi’s *Splendid Ashes*, fabulated critiques of state power, reproductive control, and biopolitical violence disrupt official narratives through surreal and grotesque forms. Across these texts, the gendered ghost stages an unresolved confrontation with the localised yet overwhelming patriarchal structure within contemporary Sinophone literature.

One promising direction for future research is the linguistic dimension of Sinophone locality. Chao has briefly noted the use of Cantonese in Hong Kong narratives, such as in Tse Hiu-Hung’s *Wuzhe gui*, while a more sustained analysis of language would have further enriched the study. Across the Sinophone world, diverse language practices, ranging from Hokkien and Cantonese to Malaysian multilingualism, as well as differences between simplified and traditional script usage, could themselves serve as spectral signifiers of cultural specificity and historical memory. A closer engagement with the politics of script, register, and language choice would illuminate how texts are not only descriptive but also *performative* of localised Sinophone experience.

*Exploring Sinophone Liminality in Contemporary Chinese Fiction: Ghost Narratives and the Contouring of Invisible Realms* demonstrates how ghost narratives mediate questions of identity, memory and locality across interconnected Sinophone contexts. The in-depth textual analysis shows that the articulation of locality is constructed through a localised self, defined in contrast to what it is not, while revealing how Sinophone literature negotiates identity through strategies of distancing and differentiation. The spectral mobility of ghost

narratives allows them to transcend linear time and fixed place, inhabiting the liminal zone, the *wangliang/Mitte* in Chao's terms, a shadowy threshold where presence and absence blur. This ambiguity allows the ghost stories to challenge dominant hierarchies and destabilise centralising logics of nation, ethnicity, and cultural identity. By combining close textual reading with theoretical insights, Chao offers a compelling framework for understanding how literary hauntings contour invisible realms of subjectivity and belonging. The book ultimately refines the epistemological potential of ghost narratives and broadens the scope of Sino-phone studies towards a more pluralistic, decentralised, and localised model.