



Editor's Introduction

Interpreting Sinitic Heritage

Ethnography and Identity in China and Southeast Asia

This special issue seeks to explore shifting dimensions of implicit, adopted, or imposed Chinese ethnicity with regard to contemporary ritual and performance traditions in China and Southeast Asia. The introductory article addresses recent issues within the framework of scholarly debates known as “critical Han studies” and “Sinophone studies,” which seek to deconstruct conventional understandings of “Chineseness” within China and the diaspora. Ritual and performance traditions are often overlooked as factors in the formation of ethnic identities. However, they offer a rich domain for examining local inflections of being “Chinese” or, in some cases, resisting being “Chinese.” Conventional views have maintained that oral and performance traditions are simply variants of a common “Chinese” culture or are marginal to national discourses about Chinese identity. It is argued here that a range of local players are seizing new opportunities to revive or reconstruct traditional performance culture in unexpected ways. Commerce, globalization, and state heritage agendas are dramatic factors in the transformation of non-elite or even formerly stigmatized cultural forms into iconic items of cultural heritage that engage with notions of “Chineseness” in ways both various and contestable.

KEYWORDS: ritual—performance—ethnicity—ethnography—Chinese—
cultural heritage—identity

“Chinese history has always been written from the point of view of the center...”
(FAURE and HO, 2013, xi)

RECENT SCHOLARSHIP has attempted to de-center notions of a monolithic China through the exploration of Sinitic languages and cultures beyond the borders of the Chinese state and in areas formerly considered marginal or peripheral.* This is evident in the work of historians and anthropologists such as David Faure and Ho Ts’ui-p’ing (cited above) and also in the emergence of new sub-disciplines that seek to deconstruct notions of a monolithic Chinese identity. We refer here to scholarly dialogues now known as “critical Han studies” and “Sinophone studies.” Critical Han studies takes its name from the title of a major volume in this field (MULLANEY et al., eds. 2012). The critical Han scholarly dialogue offers an illuminating critique of the supposed unified ethnicity of the majority Chinese population, known as the Han people. It specifically critiques the conventional conflation of Han-ness with Mandarin speech and foregrounds instead the fact that so-called Han communities are divided into eight broad language groupings. In this collection we examine issues of folkloristics, ethnography, and identity in the case of two communities regarded as Han Chinese; one speaking a variety of western Mandarin, and the other a non-Mandarin speech form within the Wu language group. In recent decades, the song traditions of both regions have undergone distinctive reconstructions to emerge as valued heritage items of “Han Chinese” culture. A third case examined here deals with an ethnic minority in south China who do not identify as Chinese. In spite of this, their distinctive song forms are now construed as part of the culture of greater China.

Sinophone studies challenges notions of “Chineseness” in the case of the migratory communities in Asia. Conventionally, these “Chinese” attributes hinge on a Mandarin-speaking culture and the conventional written script. According to Shu-mei Shih, the author of influential studies in this field, the term “Sinophone” is used “to designate Sinitic-language cultures and communities outside China as well as those ethnic communities within China, where Sinitic languages are either forcefully imposed or willingly adopted” (SHIH 2013, 30). To date, Sinophone studies has dealt mainly with the influence of the Chinese written script and culture beyond Chinese national borders. In this special issue we will extend notions drawn from Sinophone studies to examine the ritual and theatrical culture of two Southeast Asian communities, one in Singapore and the other in Indonesia.

The collection of five studies presented here is the result of collaborative work on the part of scholars based in Asia and in the West. Some of the articles were originally presented in a panel entitled “Scripts and Oral Traditions in the Sino-phone” at the Asian Studies Association of Australia Biennial Conference, University of Western Australia, 8–10 July 2014. Others were commissioned from scholars in Singapore and the United States. Two are coauthored by Western and Chinese scholars who engaged in joint fieldwork in their respective regions. Our intention here is to draw from scholarly frameworks that critique notions of a unitary “Chinese character” in order to explore issues of identity in oral traditions, folk performance, and the ritual arts of communities in China and beyond. Each case study reflects different types of engagement with ethnic and nationalist agendas in their respective communities. As a whole, these studies illuminate the dilemmas of “Chinese” heritage transmission in an era when China is gaining a stronger profile in world affairs and notions of “Chineseness” are becoming more fraught and contested.

The first two articles in this collection (McLaren and Zhang; Gibbs) deal with a folk performance form in a non-Mandarin and a Mandarin-speaking community respectively. Both communities are regarded as “Han Chinese” in current state classification in spite of very considerable differences in language and customs. As discussed here, the folk performances of these two regions, one coastal and one in China’s western hinterland, undergo a process of refinement in order to measure up as examples of “Chinese” heritage. One even plays a role in international economic exchange (Gibbs). The third article (Ingram and Wu) is an example of a culture regarded as outside “Han Chinese-ness” but one that is capable of being co-opted into the greater cause of Chinese civilization. However, as demonstrated by Ingram and Wu, many compromises need to be made for this transformation to be effected. The population’s own response is ambiguous, depending largely on education, generation, and economic opportunity. The fourth article deals with the dual ethnic identity (Javanese and Chinese) of a particular folk form still used in shamanistic rituals in contemporary Indonesia. The author (Chan) takes issue with contemporary Sinophone studies for seeming to elide issues of “Chineseness” with regard to folk performances and calls for greater recognition of Sinitic derivation. The final article (by Chia) deals with the survival strategies of a puppet troupe speaking a regional non-Mandarin language in contemporary Singapore. Chia focuses on the troupe’s attempt to sustain the support of its own community (Henghua speaking), to engage with other Chinese communities (Hokkien and Mandarin speaking), and even to “negotiate” with the state, in the promotion of state-sponsored multilingual, multicultural events.

The latter-day transformations of the song traditions, rituals, and theatrical forms examined here are somewhat unexpected, in that each stands in an equivocal position with regard to China’s traditional elite civilization. Orally-transmitted genres belonging to the common people have been historically ignored, marginalized, or stigmatized in the pre-contemporary period. Often they have been transcribed or recreated in writing only in recent decades. One example is the Wu-language songs of secret love affairs, sung throughout the Yangzi Delta by

rice paddy farmers. Before the advent of socialist China, the genre in question was a cherished part of rural popular culture. Nonetheless, it was at the same time a source of embarrassment for its perceived “vulgarity” or even “obscenity.” This case is reminiscent of Michael Herzfeld’s notion of “cultural intimacy,” that is, “the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality” (HERZFELD 2005, 3).

None of the genres discussed here were heralded as quintessential examples of Chinese civilization in the pre-contemporary period but, for reasons discussed in this special issue, many have become important cultural markers of regional identity in the twenty-first century. In the process of gaining recognition, these folk forms have become more visible within their own local regions, although the tradition requires modification to meet the needs of new audiences. This is particularly true for the cases from Mainland China. The two case studies dealing with Chinese cultural forms in Southeast Asia (temple puppet theater and spirit mediumship) have a more complex and less “visible” ethnic identity in their home contexts. In this special issue we will assess the reasons for variable rates of ethnic visibility and hence “Chineseness” in a range of oral and ritual genres. Levi Gibbs’s study explains how songs from a once impoverished region became transformed into a regional “treasure,” playing a role in international exchange. Catherine Ingram and Wu Jiaping examine the choral singing of the non-Chinese Kam people of south China and the process that led to the inscription of Kam songs in UNESCO’s list of World Intangible Cultural Heritage. The once obscure songs of the Kam are now understood to add luster to the “Chinese” musical tradition. The Wu language song-cycles discussed by Anne McLaren and Emily Yu Zhang have undergone the elimination of “embarrassing” elements in their transition from a purely local tradition to a regional icon of Chinese heritage. Carol Chia describes how the temple theater of Singapore’s Henghua-speaking population, a diasporic Chinese community, has been adapted to meet the needs of secular, modernizing Singapore. In this historical shift, the new form of Henghua puppetry that is performed to multicultural audiences is construed as representing “Chinese” culture in general, although it is still performed in the Henghua language. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, a remarkable form of spirit mediumship is implicitly understood within its receptive community to possess a dual identity as both Indonesian and Chinese. Understandings of “Chineseness,” as negotiated by local players, receiving communities, and ethnographers, have been central to the renewed transmission of these cultural forms in recent times.

The first topic to be addressed here will be the reevaluation of Chinese ethnicity in recent scholarship. The Chinese state lists fifty-six ethnic groups on Chinese soil, of which the majority group, known as Han Chinese, comprises over 90 percent.¹ The arbitrary and “invented” nature of these categorizations and the absurdity of the assumption of unity for the massive Han majority have become clearer due to recent scholarly analysis. Stevan Harrell, known for his study of ethnicity in China’s southwest, observes that governments “actively hide the fluidity and changeability of identity and group membership” (HARRELL 1996, 5). Melissa J. Brown has

demonstrated the malleability of ethnic classifications in her study of shifting ethnic identifications, both towards and away from Han Chinese ethnicity, in the case of Taiwanese plains aborigines and the Tujia people of Hubei (BROWN ed. 1996; BROWN 2004). Thomas S. MULLANEY's book (2010) is a fascinating exploration of the process of ethnic classification carried out by state-commissioned ethnographers in 1950s China, a classification that remains the bedrock of ethnic taxonomy in China today. His chief finding is that Chinese ethnographers went beyond static Stalinist models of ethnic classification to develop frameworks based around "ethnic potential." In other words, the classifying ethnographers sought to assess whether a particular community could, with state encouragement, develop into a fully-fledged *minzu* 民族 or major ethnic grouping (MULLANEY 2010, 11).² He further states that "the Chinese state would be free, and indeed required, to intervene and oversee the actualization of these 'potential' *minzu* in the post-Classification period" (MULLANEY 2010, 12). In order to realize "ethnic potential," the ethnographers, the state, and the potential *minzu* group had to engage in a sustained project of consolidating ethnic identities. Far from being fixed or innate, ethnic identity in China is thus based on "perpetual management by the state and the continued participation by the people" (MULLANEY 2010, 135).³ During the chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) there was a general hiatus in state policy to promote ethnic diversity.⁴ During this period of revolutionary zealotry the attempt to "realize the potential" of ethnic groups was in abeyance. However, after Mao's death in 1976 the reformist state led by Deng Xiaoping sought to restore previous policies of encouraging multiculturalism and accommodating ethnic diversity. At the same time there were large-scale attempts to revitalize Han Chinese traditions. Folklore studies was reinstated as a recognized discipline and thousands of career folklorists, culture cadres, and amateur ethnologists were mobilized to collect and record folklore genres across every province and region of China (TUOHY 1991, 205–10; MCLAREN 1994; 2010). Among the beneficiaries of this policy were the Wu-speaking communities of the lower Yangzi Delta discussed by McLaren and Zhang, the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe in northern Shaanxi discussed by Gibbs, and the Kam community examined by Ingram and Wu in this special issue.

Three decades of active promotion of selected items of "tradition" has left a somewhat ambiguous heritage, as will be discussed by the contributors here. The economic and social transformation of rural China and of the non-Han borderlands has inevitably led to the same sort of dilemmas in heritage preservation and revitalization that one finds throughout global developing societies. One of the most significant changes has been the progress towards almost universal schooling at primary level, coupled with an intensification of the use of Mandarin as a medium of instruction. This factor, designed to promote economic growth and national unification, has severely undermined the transmission of the language and cultural forms among many ethnic groups.⁵ The market economy of the reform period has led to a higher standard of living, but when "ethnicity" becomes commodified and sold in the marketplace it risks being transformed into a hybrid form of dubious "authenticity." Ingram and Wu, in their contribution to this special issue, discuss the impact of the marketization of folk culture in the case of the

southern Kam people. As Dru Gladney noted two decades ago, non-Han Chinese in the borderlands are easily objectivized and eroticized as the Orientalized “Other” appreciated by Han Chinese and international tourists (GLADNEY 1994; 2004).⁶ Now that China’s urbanization has reached approximately half of its 1.4 billion population, it is rural China that is now exoticized for the benefit of urban Chinese, who increasingly seek out eco-tourist or nostalgic theme park sites to remind them of their cultural roots (CHIO 2011; MCLAREN 2011).⁷

As noted by numerous scholars, the Chinese state, while accommodating ethnic diversity, also aims to ensure that the realization of “ethnic potential” never be allowed to come into conflict with the primary goal of promoting “the nation-state as the primary source of emotional transference and personal identification” (JANKOWIAK 2008, 91). In response to these two somewhat contradictory goals, the state tends to “oscillate” between “soft” policies on the one hand, designed to promote affirmative action for minorities, and on the other hand, repressive policies designed to intimidate any ethnic resistance to the unified nation (JANKOWIAK 2008, 93). This can lead to a sense of divided loyalty on the part of some ethnic groups. The consequence of this divided loyalty is that communities tend to promote the “local attributes” of their traditions while making suitable adaptations to ensure the receiving audience can accept the revised form as “Chinese.” Many communities have been happy to accommodate state agendas of multicultural harmony, seeing this as a way for regional folk forms to attain national prominence. One example is the Man or Manchu communities studied by Chih-yu Shih who take part enthusiastically in national patriotic activities (SHIH 2002, 101–13). Another example is the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe investigated by Levi Gibbs, which has welcomed its new role as a “bridge” in establishing commerce between the home province and The Dow Chemical Company, based in the U.S.. In the latter case, the folk genre concerned is perceived not as the expressive art of a remote rural community but rather as representing an originary form of “Chinese” culture. In the case of Kam big song, the “reform” of traditional song forms in the contemporary period is seen as a loss by some members of the community; for others the reforms offer a career opportunity and national prestige (see the article by Ingram and Wu).

CRITICAL HAN STUDIES

Critical Han studies offers fresh insights into the constructed nature of Han Chinese ethnicity and allows us to see more clearly the complexity of ethnic identification within the vast population that we conventionally view as “Chinese.” As Mullaney observes in his “Introduction and Prolegomenon” to *Critical Han Studies*, the Han Chinese comprise 1.2 billion people living within Chinese state boundaries (MULLANEY et al., eds. 2012, 1). They speak many different languages, which are often mutually unintelligible, and reside across vast tracts of space in very diverse geographic zones. As he points out, the term “Han” is not so much “a coherent category of identity” as “an umbrella term encompassing a plurality of diverse cultures, languages and ethnicities” (MULLANEY et al. 2012, 2). The

term “Han,” while an ancient term used from time to time to indicate the people of north and central China, came into prominence in the late nineteenth century as a way of identifying and mobilizing those Chinese who did not belong to the Manchus, the ethno-group who ruled China from 1664 to 1911. In the nineteenth century, under the influence of imported notions of Social Darwinism, the term “Han Chinese” came to be interpreted rather as a bio-racial category within the so-called Yellow Races (DIKÖTTER 1992, 82–83). Building on the work of other scholars working in Chinese ethnicity, and on Fredrik BARTH’s (1969) notions of “ethnic boundaries and boundary maintenance,” Mullaney puts forward a stimulating new way of understanding the constructed nature of contemporary Han ethnicity (MULLANEY et al., eds. 2012, 16). In this new framework, contemporary Chinese self-identification as “Han” becomes a historically contingent process whereby diverse peoples arrived at a notion of common ethnicity in relation to other groups in their shared space. In other words, notions of “Han-ness” relate to constructions of the Other, which in this case are those considered not to have the cultural attributes of the dominant race. Han Chinese populations define non-Han populations within their state boundaries as “more and less civilized, more and less dangerous, more and less exotic, and so forth, establishing a hierarchy in which each group is defined relationally to the Han apex” (in MULLANEY et al., eds. 2012, 3, citing BLUM and JENSEN eds. 2002).

The critical Han hypothesis can be fruitfully applied to the Wu-language folk epics studied by McLaren and Zhang in this volume. These long song-cycles relating tales of love and passion from the lower Yangzi Delta have been transmitted orally over many generations. They were traditionally sung by nonliterate rice-paddy farmers while toiling in the fields or journeying along the waterways that crisscross the delta. In pre-contemporary times this genre was regarded as vulgar at best and obscene at worst. In the nineteenth century, provincial governors and local magistrates attempted to ban the publication of printed booklets based on these popular songs. During the early socialist phase in China, traditional Wu songs were either repressed or rewritten to reflect new ideological content. It was not until the reform era (post 1978) that Wu songs came to be regarded as a cherished part of the regional tradition and were inscribed as items of national-level Intangible Cultural Heritage (MCLAREN 2011). However, the transition from marginalized genre to regional treasure was not an easy one. In order to promote Wu songs to national recognition, local ethnographers first needed to resolve issues related to the nature of Han Chinese ethnicity and Marxist historiography.

When lengthy sung narratives were elicited by ethnographers in the 1980s from rural communities in the lower Yangzi Delta, the scholarly world in China was shocked and amazed. Conventional Chinese thinking was influenced by Marxist frameworks that associated the emergence of epic poetry with preliterate societies, whereas the Han Chinese, who developed the writing system thousands of years ago, were believed to have entered a state of civilization in ancient times. For this reason, in Chinese scholarly thinking, sung epics found on Chinese soil are associated with non-Han peoples such as Tibetans, Mongols, Kazaks, the Yi people, and so forth, but not with the category designated as Han. Placing

Wu song-cycles on a par with the epic production of non-Han populations thus required rethinking conventional Marxist historiography. More fuel was added to the fire by other Chinese scholars who saw the edited transcripts as an artificial assemblage put together by local folklorists seeking a reputation. In the end the scholarly controversy was resolved largely in a consensus that Han Chinese communities could indeed possess verse narratives of epic length, even if this meant placing Han Chinese people on a par with “less advanced” minorities.

Another point of contestation was the intrinsic value of vernacular material regarded as vulgar or pornographic and its suitability to be included in ongoing heritage projects. This study examines one of the more famous of the song-cycles to explore issues of ethnicity in non-Mandarin speaking Han Chinese communities, the place of formerly stigmatized genres in Chinese cultural heritage, and newly emerging constructions of “Chineseness” in the contemporary period. Were these songs of illicit love worthy of a niche in the civilization of the Han Chinese? Through a comparison of original and later transcripts and enriched by fieldwork with ethnographers and singers, McLaren and Zhang explore the dilemmas faced by those seeking to promote once stigmatized cultural forms as regional icons of “Han Chinese” culture.

In the article by Levi S. Gibbs, “Culture Paves the Way, Economics Comes to Sing the Opera,” we turn to a more mainstream Han Chinese community residing in China’s ancient western heartland at the intersection of the Yellow River and the Great Wall. However, the villagers in this part of northern Shaanxi Province, while speaking a local version of Mandarin, suffered a form of “invisibility” based on remoteness and poverty. Today the region of Yulin has a vibrant cultural existence in the songs of its master-singer, Wang Xiangrong, who is the main performer examined in this study. The song repertoire of this area, comprising love songs, drinking songs, spirit medium tunes, and Mongol-Han ditties, drew little attention in premodern times and perhaps would not have survived into the contemporary period without the extensive efforts of singers, ethnographers, and local administrators. In 2009 the broader regional genre of “northern Shaanxi folk songs” was listed as a national-level item of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Gibbs’s study profiles the imbrication of contemporary folk performance and economic aspirations in this locality. This is not a new subject. Historically, the ritual and folk arts have often played a strong role in regional economies. Helen F. Siu, for example, in her study of the Chrysanthemum Festival in the Pearl River Delta (1990), has demonstrated the concentration of interests shared by powerful lineage groups and the local governing elite in pre-socialist China. In the post-Mao period, the Chrysanthemum Festival was revived by the state specifically to attract overseas Chinese investors and build business confidence (Siu 1990, 785–86). Other coastal regions underwent a similar revival of ancient material and intangible culture. The discovery of an ancient trading junk in the waters of Quanzhou was profiled in a new maritime museum to not only celebrate past heritage but also to signal openness to trade and foreign investment (Wang 2006, 10–11). While earlier studies of the economic impact of folk revival have focused mostly on the deployment of “folk” culture in tourism, or to attract overseas Chinese people nostalgic for

their “homeland,” Gibbs’s study is possibly the first to specifically treat the role of folk performance in the negotiations of major global players, in this case, China’s largest coal company and the multinational giant, The Dow Chemical Company. Gibbs makes two innovative contributions to the discussion of issues of Han Chinese identity and folk culture. The first is to develop a paradigm, based on notions of relationship and reciprocity, in which one can understand an exchange of cultural forms as a form of “ritualized relationship” essential for the development of positive personal economic outcomes. The second contribution is to understand how this complex form of “gift exchange” is interpreted in the case of a key individual folk song performer called Wang Xiangrong. Wang’s apparent goal is to render his marginalized local region visible to the outside world: “I only want [...] that outsiders can get to know Fugu, to see our northern Shaanxi” (see Gibbs in this special issue). However, when the Yulin troupe performs on the international stage, Wang’s songs from his hometown become transformed into something understood as authentic “Chinese” culture. In this way, Gibbs’s study testifies to the convergence of individual, business, and diplomatic interests in the case of a northern Shaanxi locality.

The reification of a Han Chinese culture that one often finds in the contemporary revival of folk performance is reminiscent of earlier projects where non-Han minority cultures were used as a form of international exchange. Ralph A. Litzinger, in his discussion of an exhibition of Yunnan Nuosu culture held at a museum in the United States in the year 2000, draws out the dilemmas of U.S. anthropologists who organized this exhibition: “How to work against the grain of the standard ethnological representation of minority nationality otherness in China, in which ethnic minority culture is often viewed as a remnant of the social evolutionary past of the Chinese nation?” (LITZINGER 2001, 90). But on interviewing Nuosu scholars involved in the exhibition, Litzinger realizes that their objective was to “give the viewer a sense of what they see, and not incorrectly so, as the sheer and indisputable beauty of Nuosu cultural life” (LITZINGER 2001, 95). The Nuosu people had suffered greatly during the socialist decades and were proud and delighted that their culture could now be the object of aesthetic appreciation by an international audience. In this case obtaining international recognition was a crucial step in gaining national recognition. Nor did the Nuosu elders wish to erase the impact of modernity in order to parade an artificial “authenticity” for their cultural forms. Rather, they attempted to assert the “dignity” of the minority culture and to escape from the paradigm of ethnic primitivity, where the minority is forever fossilized in the pre-contemporary period (LITZINGER 2001, 95).

In the case of the Han Chinese population of northern Shaanxi, the elevation of a folk song genre to become part of diplomatic exchange, together with the famous terracotta warriors, implies a similar elevation of the status of the people in this once marginalized and impoverished rural community. In this curious “ritual exchange” we see The Dow Chemical Company learning how to play the diplomatic game “Chinese-style.” They declare they wish to “share some of China’s important heritage with the people of this region (that is, the Midwest)” (see Gibbs in this special issue). Gibbs concludes that this cultural dance, superimposed

against the hard business of negotiations between two energy giants, opens up a “liminal space” in which both sides can realign their economic relations with public opinion. This finding demonstrates that it is not just “minority” folk culture that can be used for economic gain as a cultural signifier; a reified version of Han Chinese folk culture can be used to the same end.

The study of Catherine Ingram and Jiaping Wu examines the impact of state-led research into the discovery and transformation of a folk performance genre of the Kam people of Guizhou Province, south China. The Kam speak a Tai-Kadai language and are a non-Han Chinese people. Known as “Dong” in Mandarin, the Kam belong to a designated ethnic minority group (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族).⁸ In the early 1950s Chinese cadres visited remote Kam villages and investigated the community’s language, folk customs, and expressive culture. They took a particular interest in a form of singing known as “big song,” a form of polyphonic choral singing. As Ingram and Wu explain here, this ethnographic intervention of the 1950s was to radically alter the future of this people. Until then Chinese music had been considered to lack polyphonic singing. In fact, Westerners had earlier critiqued Chinese music for its “monotonous” quality in comparison with the more advanced and “complicated” forms of European polyphonic singing. The serendipitous discovery of polyphonic singing in the Kam community was warmly welcomed by Chinese folklorists who were now able to point to the existence of polyphonic music on Chinese soil. It is ironic that the Kam people, who do not belong to the Han Chinese majority, were used to fill this perceived “gap” in the “Chinese” musical repertoire, thus enhancing the status of this non-Han minority by recognizing their contribution to greater Chinese civilization.

Ingram and Wu argue that the ethnographic engagement with the Kam people represents “one particular stage in a long-standing and complex interrelation among notions of ethnicity, culture, and Chinese nationalism or identification” (see Ingram and Wu in this special issue). However, this process was not without its sacrifices and compromises. Ingram and Wu explain in detail the modifications made to the traditional genre under the influence of new social and economic trends of the reform era. Big song had traditionally been performed in pagoda-shaped buildings known as *dare lom*. Big songs were significant within the Kam tradition because they were used to transmit “history, philosophy, and other local knowledge” (MCLAREN et al. 2013, 63). However, once identified as a remarkable type of choral singing, big song was promoted as a stage performance for a local public and in this way became “entirely divorced from its original cultural context” (see Ingram and Wu in this special issue). This gradually led to its latter day transformation into a form suitable for the entertainment of national and international audiences. In 2009, Kam big song was inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as “Grand Song of the Dong Ethnic Group.” Once canonized in this way, Kam big song could not escape engagement with shifting paradigms of Chinese ethnicity. Although clearly non-Han in origin, this once local genre has now been naturalized as a form of “Chinese” singing.

This case study adds strength to the hypothesis put forward recently by Tim Oakes that China heritage projects are viewed by the Chinese state “as powerful

tools of modernization and development; that cultural display implies a project of 'improvement' and of building 'quality' among the 'backward' rural population" (OAKES 2013, 381). This offers a bleak prognosis for the agenda behind Chinese attempts at "preservation" (*baohu* 保护), which too often are simply blunt tools of development. However, Ingram and Wu also discuss the simultaneous existence of what they call the "village tradition," where villagers interested in transmitting their own songs in the form they please to future generations continue to do so, although often in different forms and with different participants. In Kam communities it is now mostly married women, formerly prohibited from Kam singing, who carry on the tradition. This phenomenon of an officially-recognized ethnic culture and an unofficial one carried out in private domains is known elsewhere in China.⁹ The ongoing Kam "village tradition" is not entirely the same as in the past but rather illustrates that some Kam people have seized the initiative to carry on aspects of the past in spite of the pressures of commercialization and modernization.

SINOPHONE STUDIES

The newly emerging sub-field of Sinophone studies extends scholarly dialogue about shifting ethnicities by highlighting the complexity of notions of Chinese identity in the migratory communities of Southeast Asia. Shu-mei Shih points out that the term "diaspora" to describe Chinese-origin communities residing outside China is increasingly problematic as Chinese populations have undergone a process of localization and hybridization over the generations (SHIH 2013, 38). The conventional notion of the Chinese diaspora was one based "on a unified ethnicity, culture, language, as well as place of origin or homeland" (SHIH 2007, 23). She observes further that the term "Chinese" is too often reduced to the Mandarin-speaking Han Chinese. The reality of the diaspora is somewhat different. Chinese-speaking communities in Asia speak mostly non-Mandarin Chinese languages, or may speak Mandarin with a non-standard accent. She points out the historically contingent nature of languages spoken by these migratory communities, which combine the language of the site of origin with the languages of the settlement community, resulting in hybridized forms of expression. The resulting "Sinophonic culture" may well be quite distinct from the culture of its home of origin. Some communities have assimilated to the extent that they no longer speak any Chinese language (SHIH 2007, 29). Shih concludes that "Chineseness is not an ethnicity but many ethnicities" (SHIH 2007, 24).¹⁰ Sinophone studies, with its focus on the non-Mandarin speaking groups of Asia and critique of the "colonialism" of the Mandarin-speaking Han Chinese, offers fresh insights into the condition of China-derived cultural forms in Southeast Asia. However, to date Sinophone studies has concentrated principally on written forms used in the diaspora. In this special issue we seek to critically evaluate the potential contribution of Sinophone studies to areas of oral and ritual culture among diasporic communities.

Margaret Chan is a specialist in theater anthropology who has authored a monograph on spirit mediumship in Singapore (CHAN 2006). As a second-generation

Singaporean of Hokkien descent, she explores the intriguing dual ethnicity of a form of spirit mediumship in Indonesia. In her study of Nini Towong, Chan explores the rarely-acknowledged affinities between a divinatory ritual performed in Indonesia and a parallel ritual form known in China. It has been said that the most ancient basic substrate of religious experience in China is ritual activity to propitiate the spirits (POO 1998, 3 and 207). Chan's major contribution here is to highlight the importance of recognizing ethnic origins and affiliations that have been elided for political reasons in indigenous and Western scholarship. In this way, she calls for greater understanding of the interconnected nature of ritual expression across ethnic lines, and greater public recognition of historic Sinic influences within Indonesian society. Chan's major objective is not so much to establish historical links, although the argument here is persuasive, but rather to understand how it came about that probable non-indigenous origins have been obscured in the construction of this spirit-basket divination ritual as an iconic Javanese cultural treasure.

Drawing on extensive fieldwork carried out in Java, Yogyakarta, Kebumen, Cirebon, and West Kalimantan between 2008 and 2010, she presents a richly-textured study of the practice of Nini Towong in modern day Indonesia. Nini Towong is a spirit possession ritual featuring a doll-like effigy. The movements of the doll when shaken by participants were used to make predictions on matters important to the village such as the coming harvest. One of the more puzzling attributes of the effigy in Indonesian practice is that the doll can be devised as either male or female, and the choice of sex also determines the choice of ethnicity. The male form has slanted eyes and is considered to be Chinese, whereas the female form is regarded as Javanese. The ritual form is given two different names: Nini Towong refers to the Javanese type of effigy and *jailangkung* to the Chinese type. Nonetheless, in spite of the dual names and two types of effigy, the likely Chinese origin and attributes of this spirit-doll practice have been obscured in scholarship and public opinion. One important factor was the animosity felt by indigenous populations towards the Chinese ethnic community in the colonial period, a state of affairs that carried over into the New Order era. In contemporary Indonesia even Chinese whose forebears arrived centuries ago bear the label of "non-indigenous" and are still considered "outsiders." Understandably many seek to put aside Chinese identity (REID 2009). This "outsider" status contributed to the general denial or ignorance of possible Chinese origins for what were seen as embedded indigenous culture and customs. Another issue is the focus of Western scholarship on Indic as opposed to Chinese influences. The monumental material culture of Indic culture fascinated early European scholars, who tended to underplay the role of Chinese merchant communities in the cultural formation of the Indonesian archipelago. Drawing on models of "social encounters" in "contact zones," Chan concludes that, whatever the ethnic origin of Nini Towong and *jailangkung*, both can be considered complementary cultural artefacts belonging to contemporary Indonesia. In this line of analysis, Chan takes issue with the focus of Sinophone studies on eliding Chinese distinctiveness in the diaspora, preferring instead the notion put

forward by Wang Gungwu that individuals choose to draw from a range of cultural inheritances.¹¹

Carol Chia's study deals with the attempt of a non-Mandarin Han Chinese community to maintain their tradition of ritual puppet theater as a marker of identity in contemporary Singapore. The ancestors of the Henghua-speech community in contemporary Singapore migrated centuries ago from the Putian region in Fujian Province. Like other Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, they formed temple associations to offer social and ritual protection in their host country. Temple puppet theater aims to bring down blessings from guardian deities to the temple community. Henghua people commission temple puppeteers to entertain the gods with plays in order that their families may prosper and that their children succeed in exams; also, the passing of the soul ceremonies provide ritual closure at death. In modern, contemporary Singapore, the puppeteers and temple custodians have to navigate their way between the perceived need to propitiate traditional guardian deities on the one hand, while on the other hand they must present a nonreligious "face" as entertainers in the public domain. The Singaporean state, concerned about national cohesion in this multiethnic society, is cautious about drawing attention to ethnic and religious divisions. For this reason, the ritual activity of sub-ethnic groups in Singapore has often been elided or rendered invisible in regular discourse. As noted in Sinophone studies, non-Mandarin-speaking Chinese communities tend to be marginalized in a diaspora that equates "Chineseness" with Mandarin. Chia draws on contrasting frameworks of "state-regulation" and "state-toleration" to explain both the resilience of temple theater into the present day and the modern-day adaptation of puppet theater into a form of public entertainment. She demonstrates that the Henghua-speaking group in Singapore is a distinctive example of a community that has managed to preserve cherished religious rituals in the private space of their own temples, while at the same time adapting their performance art into a more public form that can be used to entertain a multiracial audience. In this way the tiny Henghua-speaking community can play a visible role in state-promoted demonstrations of racial harmony between the three major racial groups of Singapore (Chinese, Malay, and Indian). In order to play this dual role of being both Henghua and "Chinese," the community needs to develop a new, secular, and multilingual performance mode.

Chia's findings can be read in conjunction with the work of Beng Huat CHUA who has observed the importance of public celebrations of ethnicity in modern-day Singapore (2009). He notes the anomalous use of the term "Chinese" to describe the majority population "when the overwhelming majority of the contemporary *Huaren* are local born and for whom Singapore is home" (CHUA 2009, 240). He favors the adoption of the historic self-identifier, *Huaren*, over the newer term, Chinese, to describe this majority. As in Mainland China, the Singapore state tries to promote Mandarin as the lingua franca of this majority group: "Dialects were abolished in all public broadcast media, with the aim of uniting the *Huaren* through *Huayu*" (CHUA 2009, 240). In any case, English became the dominant primary language of education in the 1970s (CHUA 2009, 241). This leaves the city-state's mother tongues pushed to the margins of social and economic life,

especially the non-*Huayu* (non-Mandarin) language forms of the polyglot Chinese population. In modern-day Singapore, Chua claims, Asian identities are expressed primarily through language, culture, and art. These public performances of multiracial harmony are necessary to avoid “cultural erasure” and provide a bulwark against the perceived corrosive effect of Western culture (CHUA 2009, 246). Chua argues that “vernacular” culture allows *Huaren* to vent anxieties about the quotidian: “Family, making a living, financial problems, (un)employment, children’s growing up pains and education, death, and ghosts and deities” (CHUA 2009, 247). This is exactly the provenance of the temple puppet theater of the Heng-hua-speaking community, a cultural expression that offers blessings and consolation amid the trials of everyday living.

CONCLUSION

This special issue seeks to draw on recent scholarly paradigms in Chinese ethnicity, critical Han studies, and Sinophone studies to investigate specific oral and ritual traditions in the case of different types of “Chinese” communities both within China and beyond. In general, folk song genres, vernacular rituals, and theatrical traditions have been regarded as too localized to be a part of the national discourse about “Chinese” ethnicity or as simply variations of a common Chinese culture.¹² It is only in recent decades, particularly after the introduction of the global norms of Intangible Cultural Heritage, that selected folk genres have gained national and sometimes international recognition as a valued part of “Chinese” cultural heritage. As discussed here, the elevation from merely local appreciation to national or even international recognition has led to challenges to the transmitted tradition and various dilemmas for performers, receiving communities, ethnographers, and officialdom. In this special issue we have sought to set aside notions of preservation and authenticity to acknowledge that change and transformation is inherent in any oral or performance tradition. The performers of the cultural forms discussed here have lived out different types of modernity and their performances have embraced different types of visibility as ethnically-marked items of cultural heritage. This analysis goes beyond notions of cultural and ritual activities “as remnants or survivals of traditional, archaic or pre-modern modes, thus ignoring the contemporaneity of ritual activities,” in the words of Ken DEAN and Thomas LAMARRE (2004, 257). As Dean and Lamarre point out in their study of Daoist rituals in Chinese Fujian, “It is simply impossible to submit that there exists a stable spatial and temporal divide between ritual activities and modernizing or globalizing forces” (DEAN and LAMARRE 2004, 262–63). Just as Dean and Lamarre’s temple leaders “frame” ritual activities to honor both the communist state and their own guardian deities, so too do singers, ethnographers, and local bureaucracies in the cases examined here seek to “frame” their own performances in line with the perceived need for community acceptance and state tolerance or approval. As contemporary Asian societies confront rapid modernity, economic transformation, and the dominance of Western modes of living, the need to seek distinctiveness in inherited cultural forms

becomes more acute. In particular, the promotion of selected vernacular forms as items of Intangible Cultural Heritage presents an image of cultural continuity in a world of constant change. The construction of cultural continuity offers reassurance to the citizenry and the outside world that an inner core of stable identity remains in spite of Western-style modernization. The discourse of “Chineseness,” and its imbrication with the vernacular culture shared by the population at large, is an important part of this promised but possibly delusory cultural continuity.

NOTES

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1. The designated fifty-five “minority nationalities” reside in vast swathes of Chinese territory but tend to have a lower standard of living than the Han Chinese majority.

2. In an earlier study, Brown adopted the idea of “narratives of unfolding” to understand shifting ethnicities in China (BROWN 2004, 5).

3. One could add that this ethnic identification process was more “successful” in some cases than in others. Chih-yu Shih adopts the notion of “becoming minorities” to explain the strategies adopted by designated minorities in dealing with the state’s ethnic agenda (SHIH 2002, 4). He also notes that the Tujia and Miao minorities of west Hunan have a relatively “weak ethnic consciousness” (SHIH 2002, 101).

4. During this period, both Han Chinese and minority group customs and traditions suffered catastrophically at the hands of the Red Guards.

5. Chih-yu SHIH gives many examples, including the case of the She people of Zhejiang and Fujian. The state promotes welfare and affirmative policies to assist people with She bloodline but it is becoming harder and harder to transmit the She language and unique cultural forms (2002, 114–28). Exceptions in the use of Mandarin are made in a few cases such as the singing of She folk songs (“mountain songs”; SHIH 2002, 126–27). State promotion of Mandarin is also having a negative effect on the transmission of Wu-language folk forms (LIU 2013, 66–71). The problem of Mandarin education is particularly acute among the Uyghur people of western China (SAFRAN 1998).

6. The same point has been made by Chih-yu Shih who notes the eroticization of folk arts when performed to outsiders, including officials and visiting ethnographers (SHIH 2002, 63–68).

7. See also the acerbic comments of Stephen Jones concerning a performance for officialdom by the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe, the same troupe discussed in the contribution of Gibbs in this special issue (JONES 2009, 211–12).

8. This collection focuses on performance culture in regional languages where different types of Chinese script are employed. For this reason, we have adopted simplified Chinese script in cases where the relevant scholars and practitioners have used this script (Mainland China) and traditional full-form script in cases where the scholars and practitioners have used this script (parts of Southeast Asia).

9. See the fascinating study by Sarah Davis into the Tai Lüe cultures of Sipsongpanna: “In Sipsongpanna, some elements of the unapproved, unofficial ethnic culture were also preserved underground” (DAVIS 2005, 7). In this case, the underground culture is religious and seen as subversive by the state. This is not the case with the unofficial “village traditions” of the Kam people.

10. While Shu-mei Shih concentrates on the distinctiveness of “Sinophone cultures” outside China, acclaimed scholar of the Chinese in Southeast Asia, Wang Gungwu, presents a

nuanced picture of a people experiencing different levels of being “bound” to Chinese identity as they adjust to the differing “history paradigms” of their host societies (WANG 2009).

11. In a recent study Chan has additionally investigated spirit mediums in West Kalimantan who channel multiracial spirits from Dayak, Malay, and Chinese culture at the Chinese New Year celebrations (CHAN 2013).

12. For a critical discussion of the latter point see LIU and FAURE (1996). In this line of thinking, local identity is necessarily subsumed within a greater “Chinese” identity. Liu and Faure argue this tends to overstate the supposed integration of the local region with the Chinese state.

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