Scripted Resonances: Han Écriture, Minor Literature and Vernacular Negotiation in Sinophone Asia

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Abstract

This paper examines how the Han script, as a non-phonographic and ideographic writing system, has historically mediated linguistic diversity in East Asia and how it continues to function as a site of negotiation between standardized national languages and vernacular or subaltern voices. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's critique of phonocentrism and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of minor literature, the study argues that the Han script resists the phonographic imperatives of modern nation-states by retaining semiotic elasticity. Through this capacity, it enables the co-articulation of dominant and minor languages, allowing alternative modes of voice and subjectivity to emerge within its scriptural space. Case studies from Taiwan, particularly the diasporic Chinese communities in Taiwan and China illustrate how Han écriture enables both subversion and accommodation of linguistic norms, as seen in Liām-kua, Mahua literature, and scriptal visuality. These examples show that Sinophone expression is not merely a reaction to central authority but often operates within a hybridized field of cultural production that exceeds binary oppositions. Rather than conceptualizing Sinophone texts solely as resistance, the article proposes a reframing of scriptal mediation as an arena of affective, performative, and visual negotiation. It offers a new account of East Asian modernity as shaped not only by state-led language reform or colonial influence but also by the persistent pluralism encoded in the materiality of script. The Han script thus emerges not as a static emblem of tradition but as a dynamic infrastructure through which linguistic diversity is continuously voiced, managed, and reimagined.

Keywords: *Sinitic-languages, Han script, Sinophone Asia*

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Introduction

This article explores the reconciliation of orality and literacy in East Asia, focusing specifically on the ideographic—or more precisely, logographic—nature of the Han script that enables communication across regional linguistic boundaries. The Han script has long played a critical role in enabling written communication among literate speakers of mutually unintelligible spoken languages. In contrast to phonographic scripts such as the alphabet, Cyrillic, or DevanŌgari, the ideographic nature of the Han script allows it to decouple written form from pronunciation. This semiotic flexibility has historically allowed the Han script to function as a shared medium across East Asia, including China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.[1]

Yet, in the era of modernization in East Asia beginning in the 19th century, polities across the region, confronted with the imperial ambitions of Western powers, recognized the necessity of adopting the institutional frameworks of modern states as defined by European standards—including the promotion of linguistic nationalism. In this context, the very semiotic flexibility of the Han script that once enabled cross-linguistic communication became a site of tension. Linguistic nationalism in East Asia aimed not only to raise literacy rates through the adoption or encouragement of phonographic writing systems, but also to promote particular spoken varieties as normative national languages. This process led to a conflict between two linguistic paradigms: the ideographic nature of the Han script, which historically allowed for the coexistence of diverse spoken voices, and the phonographic orientation of modern national languages, which aimed to codify and promote a single normative spoken variety.[2] Through state education, media, and policy, the tension between the script's capacity to accommodate multiple voices and the national language's drive toward phonographic uniformity became increasingly acute.

This historical episode thus exemplifies the broader argument of this article: that writing systems, far from being neutral tools of transcription, actively shape the conditions under which voices emerge, circulate, or are suppressed. The case of Han script illustrates how technologies of inscription mediate linguistic authority and resistance alike, determining the possibilities and limits of cross-linguistic interaction in the modern East Asia.

This article interrogates how East Asian local communities developed unique responses to the tension between the ideographic nature of the Han script—which historically enabled the coexistence of diverse spoken voices—and the phonographic orientation of modern national languages. The ideographic nature of the Han script allows for the coexistence of diverse spoken voices and provides local language communities with opportunities to resist the normative sound of national languages. Local community responses often appear outwardly compliant with standardized phonographic norms, but in practice, they subtly and

[1] Mareshi Saito argues in his insightful work, "the potential of classical Chinese writing" lies in its ability to transcend regional languages in East Asia, and "debating whether it is Japanese or Chinese risks erasing the potential of written language as written language by imposing the phonetic system of a unified nation." (Saito, 2005: i).

[2] Yoji Yamaguchi introduces Ueda Mannen's 1894 argument on national language formation, who was a central figure to invent the national language in pre-war Japan. According to Ueda, "Language for the people who speak it is like blood, which identifies physical compatriots, and identifies spiritual compatriots. To apply this to the Japanese language, it can be said that Japanese is the spiritual blood of the Japanese people" (Yamaguchi, Y., 2016: 252-253).

skillfully undermine them. This duality constitutes a fundamental characteristic of East Asian communication: writing functions not merely as a transcription of speech but as a complex field of symbolic, political, and cultural negotiation.

The central research questions of this article are therefore as follows: How has the Han script functioned as a site of reconciliation between multiple local languages and national linguistic regimes in the process of modern nation-state formation in East Asia? In what ways does it enable or inhibit dialogue across linguistic boundaries? And how does it structure the production of voice in a local linguistic community in East Asia?

To explore these questions, the article develops its theoretical orientation by grounding itself in Derrida's critique of phonocentrism (Derrida, 1998), while drawing further insight from Deleuze's theory of minor literature (Deleuze & Guattari,1978) to frame a broader analytic perspective. In East Asia, where an ideographic script like *hanzi* plays a central role in communication, these frameworks allow for an examination of how power and identity are articulated at the intersection of script and speech. The analysis is grounded in specific sociolinguistic contexts—mostly Taiwan, but also representing the situation in Fujian Province, Guangdong Province, and overseas Chinese communities—where competing norms and vernacular voices intersect.

Theoretical Foundations: Écriture, Minor Literature and Sinophone Critique

This chapter provides the theoretical foundation for the subsequent case studies, which examine literary and performative texts within Sinit-language communities. Rather than seeking a return to a putatively authentic or normative spoken voice, these literary practices foreground the inherent multiplicity and semiotic instability of the written sign, thereby opening space for a rearticulation of the politics of voice.

Écriture and Minor Literature: Derrida, Deleuze-Guattari, and the ideographic challenge

Within the apparatus of the modern state, documentary practices have been integral to the definition, categorization, and regulation of citizens, including those who migrate across borders (Torpey, 2018: 16-17). In phonocentric regimes—such as those employing alphabetic or syllabic scripts—this process of documentation is often more straightforward, as the writing system purports to transparently represent the spoken word.

In contrast, in regions such as China and Japan, which historically rely on ideographic scripts, the definition of national and linguistic identity operates through markedly different logics. The ideogram's partial disarticulation from phonology complicates the state's ability to map writing directly onto speech, necessitating alternative mechanisms of linguistic normalization and population management.[3]

[3] Japanese family registers are written in kanji but are not assigned pronunciations. Residential certificates are assigned a phonetic notation. When a citizen applies for a passport, he or she decides on the Romanized spelling in accordance with the phonetic notation on his or her residential certificate, but it is theoretically possible to change the spelling.

It is important to underscore that, despite these structural differences, East Asian states remain firmly embedded within the broader international system of state sovereignty and citizenship. As such, they are subject to the same pressures of standardization, legibility, and bureaucratic rationalization that underpin modern governance globally. However, the tension between the phonocentric assumptions of Western modernity and the semiotic affordances of ideographic writing systems has produced distinctive forms of nationalism and subject formation in East Asia. To analyze this divergence, particular attention must be paid to the role of Han script in mediating between state-imposed linguistic norms and the plural voices of local communities.

Derrida argues that in the relationship between spoken language (*parole*) and written language (*écriture*), a form of phonocentrism—or logocentrism—privileges *parole* as the more authentic mode of expression. This privileging is underwritten by the idea of presence, wherein speech is seen as closer to thought and thus more immediate (Derrida, 1998: 18).

What Derrida's critique reveals is the belief that spoken utterances are more direct than written texts is itself a historically contingent construction. The binary opposition between orality and literacy is not intrinsic, but rather a product of Western metaphysical assumptions about language and knowledge.

Viewed from this perspective, the interface between writing and speech in East Asia—especially through the case of the Han script—poses a direct challenge to the normative assumptions underpinning Western literacy ideologies. The Western modernist project, predicated on a clear disjunction between voice and script, undergirds the formation of phonographic nationalism, wherein written language is expected to transparently encode a standardized national speech. By contrast, the Han script's lack of phonemic transparency disrupts this framework: its characters do not consistently correspond to spoken sounds, making it resistant to phonographic alignment. Consequently, from the vantage point of alphabetic modernity, such a system may be misrecognized as archaic or deficient. Yet this view stems less from objective linguistic criteria than from a historically situated belief in the normative trajectory of Western literacy, one that privileges the separation of speech and writing as a universal developmental schema.

This article contends that the ideographic Han script cannot be fully assimilated into the phonocentric epistemologies that have historically underwritten modern nation-state formation. Unlike alphabetic systems that seek a one-to-one correspondence between written form and standardized speech, the Han script retains an inherent capacity to encode linguistic multiplicity. Even within formally standardized regimes, it continues to afford expressive space for heteroglossic enunciations grounded in diverse regional vernaculars.

In the East Asian context, *écriture* must therefore be understood not as a secondary representation of speech, nor as its merely functional substitute, but as a semiotic field shaped by the interplay of state ideology, literary tradition, and subaltern agency. The incorporation of Han script into national language policies serves a dual function: it legitimizes the phonological norms associated with dominant language ideologies while simultaneously suppressing the script's potential to register subaltern voices. These marginal enunciations

often persist as covert deviations from officially sanctioned norms, inscribed within the very medium that ostensibly enforces linguistic uniformity.

Through the analytic lens of "minor literature", Han script emerges not as a neutral vehicle of linguistic transcription but as a mode of writing that enables deterritorialization from dominant linguistic orders. As Deleuze and Guattari propose, minor literature is not defined by its use of a minor language, but by its capacity to deterritorialize a major one from within—foregrounding the collective enunciation and political force embedded in language itself (Deleuze & Guattari, 1978: 27-28). In this framework, Han *écriture* enables the surfacing of latent vernacular energies within a dominant script, offering a channel through which subordinated registers may be revoiced without being entirely subsumed.

This semiotic elasticity constitutes not merely a technical feature of the writing system, but a politically consequential affordance. It allows *écriture* to move beyond simply mirroring spoken language and instead become a space where meanings, authority, and identity are constantly reshaped. Especially under regimes of phonographic nationalism—where state language planning aims to synchronize script and sound—the Han script's resistance to phonemic transparency enables alternative forms of linguistic expression that challenge the ideological project of standardization from within.

Reframing Sinophone Literature and scriptural turn

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, language has been widely believed to constitute a principal axis of national identity formation in East Asia. Conventional frameworks tend to reify linguistic identity through discrete phonological and grammatical taxonomies—designating, for instance, "XX language" or "YY language"—and tether these forms to territorialized sovereignty. Such essentialist renderings, however, obscure the performative and negotiated character of linguistic belonging. Language, far from being a static structure shared a priori by community members, is acquired through interactional praxis and embedded within differential regimes of expectation, obligation, and affective investment.

Situated within this semiotic and political matrix, Sinophone literature[4] emerges as a critical archive for interrogating the relational tensions among Han *écriture*, normative Chinese linguistic forms, and non-standard Sinitic vernaculars. The designation "Sinophone" signals a strategic displacement of literary production in Sinitic-languages beyond the epistemological and geopolitical confines of mainland China.1 While earlier formulations such as *huawen wenxue* endeavored to reconceptualize Chinese-language literature within a transnational frame, they often inadvertently reassert Han-centric cultural logics, resulting in the marginalization of literary works produced by authors from Taiwan and diasporic Chinese

[4] The word " Sinophone" is also translated as "*huayi feng*" by David Der-wei Wang. According to Wang, the term "Sinophone" first appeared in the 1990s, but its direct use in today's Sinophone literary criticism dates back to 2007, when it was proposed by Shih, Shumei in *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific,* (Shie, 2007). Concurrently, Tsu Jing, Tee Kim Tong, and other commentators (including, of course, David Der-wei Wang) have used the term in a wide range of discussions, though not necessarily based on the same position (Wang, 2016: 3).

contexts beyond mainland China (Yamaguchi, M., 2006: 22-23).

Critically engaging with minor literature, Sinophone criticism foregrounds the insurgent textualities that emerge from minoritarian positionalities. It is the labor of reconfiguring a hegemonic linguistic system from within, rather than opposing it from an entirely separate linguistic domain. Within this framework, Sinophone texts enact linguistic and semiotic disruptions that unsettle the coherence of phonological and syntactic norms. Code-switching, interlingual slippage, and graphic multiplicity become tactics for undermining the epistemic authority of standard Chinese.

How does Sinophone literary critique conceptualize the complex interplay between Han *écriture*, the normative national language, and the vernacular articulations of subnational and diasporic communities? In order to elucidate this question, it is instructive to engage the theoretical interventions of two paradigmatic figures in the field: Shih Shu-mei and David Der-wei Wang, whose respective frameworks have significantly shaped the discursive parameters of Sinophone literary studies.

Shih Shu-mei's influential work on Sinophone letrary critiques attempts to identify the heteroglossic nature of the languages of diasporic Chinese and minorities in China, and defines their languages and cultures as Sinitic-language Cultures (SLCs)(Shih, 2013: 7). According to her, the languages of Chinese overseas and ethnic minorities in China, or Sinitic-language or Sinophone, are "the product of discrepant but interrelated historical processes involving different colonial formations (continental, internal, settler), the movements of Hua people, and the dissemination of Sinitic-languages by will or by force, producing minor and minority cultures on the margins of China and Chineseness within the geopolitical boundary of China as well as in various locations across the world" Shih, 2013: 8).

While Shih's framework successfully foregrounds the multiplicity inherent in Sinophone cultural (re)production, it nonetheless tends to rely on a model of language that presumes the discreteness and autonomy of phonologically and grammatically bounded systems. Such an assumption inadvertently reinstates the essentialist paradigms that the theoretical apparatus of minor literature is designed to critique. In privileging localized, place-based cultural articulations, her model may obscure the deterritorialized, translingual, and performative dimensions that typify much of Sinophone textuality, particularly in diasporic or hybridized contexts.

Whereas Shih positions the languages of Chinese diasporic and minority communities as instruments through which to contest the authority of normative Chinese, David Der-wei Wang introduces a conception of Sinophone literature that draws upon the idea of minor literature in a manner that more closely adheres to the concept's foundational logic, positioning Sinophone texts as aesthetic and political interventions articulated through a dominant language from peripheral locations. Wang situates Sinophone literary production within a historically persistent polyphonic condition located at the periphery of Chinese civilizational discourse. Replacing the spatial metaphor of "periphery" with the more fluid notion of the "contact zone" (Pratt, 1992), Wang identifies the Han script as the site through

which a multitude of utterances, representations, and interpretive registers enter into dialogic interplay.

According to Wang, Sinophone literature is not simply a newly coined category to demarcate extraterritorial Chinese-language writing, but rather a critical point of departure for dialectical engagement. As he writes, "Sinophone literature is therefore not simply a paraphrase of overseas Chinese literature; it originates abroad, encompasses Chinese literature in mainland China, and initiates a dialogue between them" (Wang, 2006: 3). While his project seeks to decenter the authority of national literature, Wang ultimately grounds dialogue in an expansive—though arguably ambiguous—understanding of language (Tsu & Wang, 2010: 5-6). Whether termed Han Chinese, *Huayu, Huawen,* or *Zhongwen*, language in Wang's formulation encompasses not only standard forms but also topolects, colloquialisms, and even non-verbal sonic elements (Wang, 2006: 3).

Nevertheless, his theorization insufficiently addresses the material and signifying role of Han *écriture* in mediating this polyphony. Although Wang acknowledges a qualitative distinction between "original" Chinese literature and its Sinophone counterparts, this distinction risks re-inscribing a hierarchical logic in which the latter is cast as derivative (Wang, 2006: 3). The framework of dialogue, in this case, is not situated within an array of *signifiants* but within a relational schema that presupposes the primacy of the normative Chinese linguistic order. If Sinophone texts are positioned merely as imperfect replications of an original, then the purported dialogue becomes a mechanism for reproducing the very hierarchy it intends to subvert.

A reorientation through the conceptual framework of *écriture* permits a more nuanced analytic approach. Rather than delimiting Sinophone identity through communal affiliation or linguistic sovereignty, this perspective emphasizes the scriptural processes by which vernacular utterances are mediated, transformed, and recontextualized within the visual and material affordances of Han characters. The question, accordingly, shifts from issues of ethno-linguistic categorization to the performative logics of inscription—how the Han script serves simultaneously as a vehicle for the articulation of hegemonic norms and as a semiotic space for their subversion. Under this reframing, Sinophone literature emerges not as a static cultural inventory but as a dynamic site of negotiation, wherein the politics of voice, legibility, and linguistic legitimacy are continually contested within the evolving architectures of Chineseness.

In the subsequent chapter, we transition from theoretical exposition to the close examination of textual and visual cases from Taiwan that instantiate the dynamic interplay between orality and literacy. These case studies illustrate how Han *écriture*—as both a visual code and a discursive infrastructure—functions within culturally specific contexts to mediate vernacular articulation and resist normative regimes of representation.

Sounds and scripts in Taiwan: Visual semiotics and scriptal disjunction

Taiwan offers a particularly compelling site for investigating the entanglement of Han script and local voices. Here, literary texts, oral performances and typographic images

through the creative manipulation of Chinese characters demonstrate how graphic signifiers can operate beyond, or even against, standardized linguistic codes. The two photographs of typographic re-inscriptions discussed below exemplify how fragmented or reconfigured characters enact meaning through their visual affordances, and in so doing, interrogate the conventions of scriptural authenticity and phonetic regularity.

In Figure 1, the character for "love" (愛) is dissected and distributed across the backs of two figures—a male laborer and a female farmer. On the man's back, the character is divided with geometric precision into four symmetrical components; on the woman's back, the segmentation is more asymmetrical and idiosyncratically scaled. The juxtaposition enacts a visual metaphor for the ambivalent affective responses—ranging from compliance to resistance—toward the normative figure of the citizen, with differentiated inscriptions representing gendered participation in the productive systems that underpin the modern nation-state. Typographic re-inscription of embodiment suggests that socio-political identity is not only legible but visually contingent—encoded through the material morphology of the written character.

Figure 1.: An object with the word "love" divided in two different ways (Kaohsiung City). The fragmented symbols serve as material manifestations of semiotic layers that resist their original meanings.

Figure 2 presents another example of orthographic deconstruction.[5] Here, the character for "willow" (柳) is disaggregated into three elements: "ten" (十), "eight" (八), and a variant of "rabbit" (卯). This partitioning, supported by the accompanying English gloss "18 daybreak," reinterprets the script in accordance with Chinese calendrical symbolism, where "卯" denotes the early morning hours of 5:00 to 7:00 a.m. This interpretive maneuver reveals a tension between the script's visual form, its phonetic range, and the semantic impositions layered onto it. This tension becomes especially apparent in the disassembly of the name of the Japanese-era restaurant Yanagiya, which can be interpreted as a visual expression of conflicting emotional responses—nostalgia and anguish—toward the colonial past.

Figure 2.: Teahouse's trade name, which is a decomposition of the character for "willow" (Tainan City). The discomposed symbols bridge the two types of time—the time of a day and the time of history—and deconstruct the original meanings of the Chinese ideograms.

Together, these visual texts foreground both the "tolerance" and "intolerance" latent within the script-sound-meaning triad. In terms of script-to-sound correspondence, Han characters exhibit polyphonic potential, accommodating multiple readings and resisting phonocentric determinacy. Yet in sound-to-meaning translation, one reading is often

[5] "Yanagiya," a Japanese colonial era restaurant, was built in Tainan in 1934.

privileged as the normative anchor, generating a reified interpretive “representation”—as in the case of the standardized reading of "十八卯" as "18 daybreak." Nonetheless, even this normativity is unstable, as the example in Photo 1 reveals, where visual play introduces semantic plurality and defers any singular normative representation.

Sinitic-languages and politics of literary inscription

This section continues our investigation of the linguistic as well as visual disruptions introduced in the previous chapter by turning to a more explicitly textual cases in the from postcolonial Taiwan. Here, we consider how Sinitic-languages—particularly Minnan and Hakka—interacted with, and were displaced by, the emergent dominance of Mandarin as enforced by the Republic of China (ROC). The case below provides a particularly illustrative instance of how Han *écriture* functioned as both a medium of linguistic mediation and a contested field of cultural authority during the island’s transition from Japanese colonial rule to ROC administration. While the Han script remained ostensibly constant throughout these political transformations, its semantic and phonological affiliations were radically reconfigured. What appeared to be a stable system of inscription in fact concealed the suppression of vernacular plurality and the imposition of a singular, nationalized linguistic norm.

Zhong Zhaozheng (鍾肇政), one of Taiwan’s most prominent postwar writers, whose personal linguistic trajectory highlights the disjunction between vernacular voice and national language regimes—a theme central to this article’s argument about how Han *écriture* mediates voice in the process of national language formation, articulates the inner tension produced by this historical shift. As cited in Jing Tsu’s Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora, Zhong reflects on his personal trajectory through multiple linguistic regimes (Tsu, 2010: 11):

> I am a native of Taiwan, born and bred. When I was growing up, especially when I was seven years old and entered public school (during the Japanese occupation, the schools that were set up for local children were called "public" schools), I was forced to learn Japanese. Before that time, I had only used Hoklo and Hakka. This was because my father was of Hakka descent and my mother was of Hoklo descent. My relatives were also half Hakka and half Hoklo, so I grew up hearing both languages… After I went to school and gradually got older, my Japanese ability also advanced. By the time I entered middle school, while we were in school we used only Japanese. During those middle school years, I even thought only in Japanese. Now I've abandoned Japanese and switched to Chinese (Zhongwen, i.e., Mandarin) when I write. After getting a bit used to it, I've also started to think in Chinese… But then a problem came along. Normally when I'm writing, I think in Chinese and write my thoughts down in Chinese. This is as it should be, and I find nothing objectionable about it. But when I come to dialog, then there's a big difference. When a character in one of my stories says something, clearly it's one kind [of language], but when I write it down it's another kind [of language]. It goes without saying that, between these [two kinds of language, my writing has]

to undergo a process of translation.

Zhong's reflection encapsulates a key dilemma in postcolonial linguistic expression: the disjunction between vernacular or spoken voice and the normative language of literary inscription. While he accepts Mandarin as a medium for narrative exposition, dialogic moments—where characters are meant to speak in voices tied to specific linguistic and cultural contexts—expose the friction between internalized multilingual experience and the monologic demands of national language policy.

This passage also illuminates how the Han script, despite its stability across regimes, functions not as a neutral vehicle for linguistic continuity but as a contested space of inscription. During the Japanese colonial period, Han *écriture* served as a medium that could accommodate Japanese, Minnan (Hoklo), and Hakka vernaculars. With the ROC's linguistic reforms, that semiotic plurality narrowed: the Han script was recruited into the nationalization of Chinese as *Zhongwen* (Mandarin), displacing the multilingual affordances it once harbored.

In this context, Zhong's narrative practice may be read as an instance of minor literature, wherein the normative language is redeployed to register the disjunctures, absences, and hybridities that the dominant linguistic ideology seeks to efface. The act of "translating" dialog from a lived multilingual experience into a monolingual textual surface foregrounds the labor of inscription as a political act—an act mediated by Han *écriture* yet resistant to the singularity that national language regimes demand.

Mahua Taiwanese Literature: Diasporic soundscapes and Han Écriture

Building on the previous discussion of linguistic mediation, we turn to Mahua Taiwanese literature, particularly the work of Li Yongping,[6] as illustrative of the complex dynamics of translingual inscription. Mahua Taiwanese literature, written from diasporic and multilingual positions, have embedded the phonetic textures of regional Sinitic-languages—such as Minnan, Hakka, Teochew, and Cantonese—as well as non-Sinitic-languages like Melayu and Dayak, into the Han script. As shown in Table 1, the Han characters used in Li's texts often encode a polyphonic range of referents, with phonological values that diverge from standard *Putonghua*.

Table 1: Examples of the Han script used by Li Yongping in his novels (the sounds refer to those of *Putonghua*, but the pronunciation of the Chinese characters is not necessarily *Putonghua*).

巴剎（ba sha） pasar [market]
巴仙（ba xian） percent [percent]
特里瑪卡謝（telima kaxie） terima kasih [Thank you.]
伊布(yi bu) ibu [mother]
多啲達（duo you da） Toyota [a car company name]

[6] When referring to indigenous personal names in this article, romanization is always problematic. The English names of David Der-wei Wang and Jing-Yuan Shi as Tsu Jin are Sinophone-like. The names Tee Kim Tong and Ng Kim Chew are read in *Minnan*.

His writing exemplifies the creative appropriation of rarely used or visually evocative Chinese characters to articulate experiences grounded in Sarawak. For instance, the character "刉" (*ji*) is employed not merely for its phonetic value, but also for its visual morphology—the right-hand blade radical invoking the act of cutting. Similarly, the character "爨" (*cuan*) incorporates the semantic imagery of cooking, with its component radicals depicting a pot above fire. These characters are not simply obscure or exotic; rather, they enact a form of scriptal mimesis, wherein visual morphology aligns with semantic referent to create a layered field of meaning.

The Mahua writers' linguistic trajectory—from Chinese-language education in Malaysia to literary production in Taiwan—further complicates the classification of their texts. Though composed in the normative Chinese of the Republic of China, their works resist full assimilation into the dominant literary regime.[7] While their lexical surface conforms to national standards, their phonological, cultural, and referential densities derive from diasporic and minoritized language practices.

> 這群爪哇工人……每走到一顆橡膠樹旁就停下腳步，(1)刉——擦————往那刀痕斑斑的樹身上操刀一割……滿園子刀光閃爍飛迸，刉擦刉擦。
>
> *Zhequnzhao wagongren…meizoudao yike xiangjiao shupang jiu tingxia jiabu,ji-ca-wangnadaohen banbande shushenshang caodaoyige…manyuanzi daoguang shanshuo feibeng.*
>
> This group of Javanese workers ..... stopped at every rubber tree, (1) *ji*----ca --- and slashed at the knife-marked tree with their knives ..... in a garden full of flashes and flashes of sword light, ji----ca --- ji----ca --- (Li, 2012: 36).
>
> 四處飄漫著隔壁大巴剎傳送來的各種氣味，辛辣、腥膻、酸腐，一股腦兒羼混在河畔那一灘灘陳年尿溲中，攪拌成一大鍋中年(2)蒸爨在烈日下。
>
> *Suchu piaomanzhugebi dabasha chuansonglaide gezhong quwei, xinlam xingshan, suanfu, yigunaoer chanhun zaihepan nayitantan chennian niaosouzong,jiaobancheng yidaguozongnian, zhengcuan zailierixia.*
>
> There are all kinds of smells from the next door, spicy, fishy, sour and rotten, all mixed together in a puddle of old urine by the river, (2) stirred and steamed in a big pot under the blazing sun (Li, 2012: 63).

From this perspective, Mahua literature can be understood as occupying a liminal

[7] Chen states that the literary texts of Ma Hua writers such as Li Yong-ping and Ng Kim Chew belong to the voices of the periphery, yet they are closely connected to the reality of Taiwanese society and serve as a discourse that constructs Taiwaneseness (Chen, 2015: 328).

position—one marked by linguistic and cultural in-betweenness. Its narrative voice is formally assimilated to the 'authenticity' of the normative Chinese in ROC, yet its enunciative content continually disrupts that very authenticity by drawing on diasporic and vernacular registers. Here, 'liminal' denotes both a structural positioning between dominant and marginalized language regimes and an aesthetic strategy that foregrounds instability, hybridity, and negotiation. "The perceived 'lack'—the dissonance between normative linguistic authenticity and vernacular peripheries—does not signal literary deficiency, but rather forms the generative core of Sinophone writing." As illustrated in the excerpted passages, even single characters such as "刣" and "爨" materialize the aural and sensory landscapes of diasporic life. The inscriptional labor of Mahua literature thus exemplifies how Han *écriture,* far from being a transparent scriptural apparatus, mediates between the sonic plurality of lived experience and the visual regularities of standardized language.

Liām-kua as performed vernacular memory in Taiwan

The tensions outlined above are likewise manifest in Taiwan's oral performance traditions. One of the most compelling examples is *Liām-kua*, a Minnan-language storytelling genre accompanied by the moon lute. Prominent performers of *Liām-kua* include Chen Da, Lu Liuxian, Qiu Fengying, Huang Qiutian, Wu tianluo, and Yang Xiuqing. Chen Da (April 16, 1906 – April 11, 1981) was born in Hengchun Township, Pingtung County. He was a traditional Taiwanese singer specializing in recitative folk songs. With one-quarter indigenous heritage, he was exposed to Pingpu tribal folk songs from a young age and learned Hengchun folk songs from his older brothers. His performances encompassed both short, improvised pieces and long narrative works, delivered in a free-flowing rhythm that blended singing and recitation. He was also skilled at composing lyrics. Another legend, Yang Xiuqing was born on January 1, 1935, in Xindian, Taipei. Her father was of Hakka descent. She lost her sight in both eyes in 1938 and began performing with a traditional instrument called a "moon lute" at the age of 10. Despite being blind, Yang Xiuqing learned and memorized "recited songs" by ear. She had a wide repertoire, including comedy, news reading, and eroticism. In her later years, she also collaborated on works with filmmakers and musicians from other genres (Zhou & Lin, 2019). She passed away in 2022. This genre illustrates how vernacular expression—though constrained by lexical limitations and institutional suppression—finds a semiotic outlet as a performance seeking to accommodate the normative expectations of inscription.

Liām-kua is characterized by poetic meter and regional tones such as the Hengchun melody. While *Liām-kua* is an oral literary form, it remains subject to the normative constraints of Han *écriture*, interestingly incorporating elements of written classical Minnan-language and thereby reflecting the regulatory force of scriptural conventions. Paradoxically enough, even while operating within the normative boundaries imposed by Han *écriture*, its linguistic surface often defies full representation through Han scripts, prompting performers to adopt alternative orthographic strategies such as *pe̍h-ōe-*

Figure 3: Cover of *Island Epic*

jī (POJ) or character substitution.[8]

In this hybrid scriptural landscape, the Han script becomes a site of negotiation: it is neither fully appropriated by state standardization nor wholly autonomous from it. The excerpt below illustrates this dynamic through a poetic narration that blends mythic genealogy with political allegory.

> Hoah, 頭殼(thâu-khak) kāi割了離(kat-liáu-lī), 順(sūn) sòa kāi tih 題詩(tê-si)
>
> 題有四句詩(tê ū sì-kù-si) ah:
>
> 五祖傳來(ngó-chó. thuán-lái) i.....ih,chit 首詩(siú- si),
>
> 不能露出(m̄-thang hiàn*-chut) ah chit 根基(kin-ki),
>
> 多望兄弟(to-bōng hian-tī) ah 來指教(lâi chí-kàu),
>
> 記憶當初(kì-ik tong-cho.) eh……, ah 子丑時(chú thiú sî)。
>
> 林有理(Lîm iúlí), tī 唐山(Tn̂g-suan) teh 做官(chò-kuan),
>
> 探聽台灣(thàm-thian Tâi-uân) leh 反亂(huán-luān) nah,
>
> 五人點兵過來(gō.-lâng tiám-ping kuè-lâi) beh 平台灣(pîng Tâi-uân)。
>
> The narrative recounts the arrival of five ancestral figures in Taiwan, shrouded in historical ambiguity and temporal distance. It invokes a collective appeal for remembrance, while positioning Mr. Lin—a bureaucrat in China—as a conduit through which official authority responds to local unrest. The dispatching of five soldiers to quell the rebellion allegorically encodes state intervention within the fabric of diasporic origin myths, thereby layering national historiography with vernacular voice (Ding2014: 134).[9]

Here, the text fluctuates between Minnan literary registers—mediated through Han scripts and connected to other Sinitic-languages—and colloquial spoken forms that defy such inscription. Many lines defy direct representation through Han scrips, requiring phonographic adaptation. The use of poetic structure—typically composed through sets of three- and four-syllable words—further distinguishes *Liām-kua* from prose narration,

[8] Although there were some discrepancies between the standard church romanization and the notation in the original text, this article follows the original text as it is. The cases where the Minnan sound of a character is chosen based on its meaning rather than the sound of the substitute character are indicated with an asterisk (*).

[9] This song describes the rebels of *Dai Chaochun 1862*.

inviting affective resonance over semantic precision.

Despite its limitations in lexical development—largely a result of state-driven language suppression during both the Japanese and ROC periods—*Liām-kua* channels emotional and political expression through its rhythmic intensity and oral delivery. The absence of standardized Minnan vocabulary for contemporary topics paradoxically sharpens the emotive impact of *Liām-kua*, as listeners are able to imagine what might be unspoken or ineffable in either the normative Chinese language or the local vernacular.

In this regard, *Liām-kua* functions as a performative enactment of voices excluded from the phonographic imaginary of the modern nation-state. The Han script, which are invisible to most performers and audiences in *Liām-kua*, but are nevertheless aware of, is not merely a recording device but a trigger that evokes alternate acoustic and historical registers. It mediates the tension between what can be represented and what resists capture—between the normative national language and the suppressed vernaculars. This performance genre thus exemplifies how Han *écriture* can be repurposed to articulate what the standard language disavows, preserving subaltern speech through sonic memory and what might be called 'scriptural play': a deliberate manipulation of the visual and phonetic affordances of script to animate voices that elude standardized orthography, producing new alignments between sound, meaning, and visual form.

Together, Mahua literature and *Liām-kua* reveal how Han *écriture* mediates the complex interplay between standardized linguistic regimes and vernacular pluralism. They exemplify the central claim of this article: that the ideographic script in East Asia constitutes not a residue of tradition but an active site of cultural negotiation, resistance, and invention. The following chapter further develops this claim by analyzing how Han *écriture*—as both a visual and scriptural infrastructure—mediates conflicts between standardized linguistic regimes and regional vernaculars in Taiwan.

Analytical Considerations

This section considers the questions posed at the outset of this article in light of the preceding case studies and the historical context of linguistic environments in colonial and postcolonial Taiwan: How has the Han script served as a site of negotiation between multiple local languages and national linguistic regimes in the formation of modern East Asian states? How does it enable or hinder cross-linguistic dialogue? And how does it structure the production of voice within East Asian linguistic communities?

Vernacular reform and the politics of standardization

As a starting point, we turn to the vernacular language movement (*baihua wenxue yundong*) in early twentieth-century China to reexamine the relationship between written and spoken language. The Sinitic-languages have undergone diverse historical transformations and defy unification under a single linguistic taxonomy. The *baihua* movement of the 1910s, led by Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, and Lu Xun, profoundly shaped the emergence of a standard spoken Chinese language (Hirata, 1999: 99). These reformers criticized the legitimacy of

classical literary Chinese (*wenyan*), which had long been used by the educated elite in conjunction with the imperial examination system, and promoted the use of vernacular forms in literature and discourse to advance Chinese modernization.

Wényán (文言), commonly translated as "classical Chinese," refers to a written style characterized by dense intertextual references and an archaic syntactic structure. It came to be criticized as outdated and inaccessible to the general public (Fujii (Miyanishi), 2003: 21).

In contrast, *Báihuà* (白話), or "vernacular Chinese," refers to a written form modeled on the phonological and syntactic features of northern spoken topolects, especially as shaped by narrative traditions from the Song dynasty onward. It was promoted as more accessible and more representative of everyday speech.

Tōngyīn (通音) and *tǔyīn* (土音)—both translatable as "local pronunciations" or "regional phonologies" or simply “topolect” (鄉音*xiangyin*)—designate non-standardized spoken varieties used across diverse communities. These stand in contrast to *zhèngyīn (*正音*) or yǎyīn (*雅音*),* meaning "standard pronunciation" or "elegant speech," which were associated with officially sanctioned speech norms, particularly in the context of *guānhuà* (官話, official speech). Topolects were thus not understood merely as deviations from a standard language, as is often the case in the English notion of dialect, but rather as distinct phonological realizations of written Han Chinese.

In addition to topolects, "official speech" (*guānhuà*, 官話) referred to the spoken language modeled on the speech of capital regions (Fujii (Miyanishi), 2003: 47). During the Qing dynasty, when Beijing served as the imperial capital, the northern dialect-based Beijing *guānhuà* came to be institutionalized as the standard form of official speech. Under the Yongzheng Emperor, language academies (*zhengyin shuyuan*) were established in southern regions like Guangdong and Fujian to train officials in the use of *guanhua* (Fujii (Miyanishi), 2003: 21). This policy suggests that the ways in which the literate classes in different regions read and vocalized Han script were strongly shaped by their native spoken languages. Accented forms of official speech—colored by regional topolects (*xiangyin*)—were often viewed with contempt and became targets of linguistic prejudice.

To bridge the linguistic gap between northern *guānhuà* and the regional speech varieties of areas such as Fujian and Guangdong—commonly referred to as Minnan and Cantonese—regionally adapted colloquial forms emerged as a pragmatic necessity. Among these adaptations, the *Kǒngzǐ bái* (孔子白) was created to make Confucian texts more accessible to native speakers of Minnan Chinese. Functioning as a phonological intermediary, it aligned classical texts with regionally intelligible readings. This adaptation exemplifies vernacular mediation through hybridized phonological strategies, enabling engagement with canonical literature without requiring strict conformity to northern-based phonological standards (Li, 1995).

Even within Minnan itself, two distinct phonological modes coexist: *wényán dúyīn* (文言讀音, "classical reading pronunciation") and *báihuà dúyīn* (白話讀音, "vernacular reading pronunciation") (Ministry of Education Taiwanese Common Dictionary, 2025). The

persistence of these divergent readings—manifesting clearly in basic lexical items such as numerals—reflects a negotiated compromise between official *guŌnhuà* and regional Sinitic-languages. These literary readings within Minnan Chinese thus illustrate how written forms can mediate between standardized norms and vernacular phonologies, preserving both the authority of tradition and the particularities of local speech.

In the capital region, both official speech (*guānhuà*) and the emergent vernacular style of *báihuà* shared a common phonological foundation in northern topolects, allowing for relatively smooth assimilation among educated elites. By contrast, in regions such as Fujian and Guangdong, significant phonological divergence between local Sinitic-languages—such as Minnan and Cantonese—and northern-based *guānhuà* necessitated complex accommodations. This resulted in the development of creolized or hybridized oral registers that bridged the gap between the phonology of local literati and the prescriptive norms of *guānhuà*, thereby highlighting the asymmetrical linguistic integration imposed by state-centered language reforms.

Following the Literary Revolution, *baihua* emerged as an effective medium for mass communication, particularly in wartime propaganda and the flourishing of theatrical and popular oral genres (Hirata, 1999: 99-100). However, this vernacular movement—based on northern dialectal norms—exposed two profound cleavages within the sociolinguistic fabric of the Chinese mainland. First, regional disparities in topolect rendered the acquisition of *baihua* uneven, privileging speakers of northern topolects and disadvantaging southern speakers, thereby institutionalizing a new axis of literary inequality. Second, the movement underscored the enduring problem of literacy.

Whereas *wenyan*, functioning largely independent of phonetic constraints, had historically enabled relatively uniform textual engagement across dialectal boundaries, *baihua*—rooted in northern phonology—reinscribed those boundaries with marked asymmetries. For native speakers of northern topolects, especially those closely aligned with Beijing Mandarin, the vernacular script enabled relatively effortless literary production. In contrast, speakers of southern Sinitic varieties such as Minnan, Cantonese, or Hakka, for whom Beijing-based *baihua* approximated a foreign language, found themselves structurally disadvantaged (Hirata, 1999: 82). Their vernacular expressions were often unusable as literary media, and they were compelled to acquire *baihua* through formal instruction, akin to second-language acquisition. At the same time, the long-standing divide between literate and non-literate populations persisted. While *fanqie* (反切) and *zhiyin* (直音) provided topolect-based phonetic tools for learning Han characters, such methods primarily facilitated character acquisition within one's native phonology and did little to bridge the gap to the standard northern reading norms. The publication of primers such as Lu Ganzhang's *Yimuliuran Chujie* (1892), tailored to the Xiamen topolect, exemplifies early efforts to raise literacy through dialectally contextualized scripts. Nonetheless, these initiatives remained insufficient to overcome the sociolinguistic barriers posed by standardization (Ban, 2015: 12). Thus, dialectal disparity and the literacy divide converged, reconfiguring the vernacular project into a stratified regime of linguistic access.

However, these linguistic disparities did not establish absolute separation between

topolects and official speech. Rather, the tonal architecture of Sinitic-languages—consisting since the Song dynasty of two registers each for level, rising, departing, and entering tones—fostered structural parallels across topolects despite divergent phonetic realizations (Hirata, 1999: 83). For example, although Minnan and Mandarin differ significantly in syllabic inventories, their tonal systems often exhibit functional correspondences. Likewise, surname pronunciations, though phonetically diverse, remained socially intelligible across dialectal boundaries, sustaining a shared linguistic consciousness. The Han script, through its historical role as a supra-dialectal medium, thus became a crucial interface between regional phonologies and national linguistic regimes. This enabled even non-literate or peripheral communities to orient themselves within a broader matrix of linguistic reference. In such a landscape, complete disarticulation of topolects or social strata was neither realized nor entirely possible, complicating efforts to impose top-down language standardization and generating a complex terrain of cultural negotiation.

One emblematic event emerging from this complex linguistic environment was the tension between Nanjing and Beijing guanhua during the process of language standardization (Ban, 2015: 13). While advocates of Nanjing *guanhua* sought to elevate it to the status of national language as a more regionally inclusive standard, their efforts were ultimately unsuccessful. With the ascendancy of Beijing-based *guanhua*, speakers of other regional dialects found themselves excluded from the official trajectory of national language formation. Consequently, these communities—particularly those in southern China—began to explore alternative alignments with the Han script outside the institutional framework of standardization, seeking new pathways of literary and linguistic expression rooted in their local phonologies and oral traditions.

One example is Ouyang Shan, a Guangdong writer who, in the 1930s, launched the newspaper literary column *Guangzhou Wenyi* to cultivate Cantonese vernacular writing (Matsuura, 2011: 366-367). One of his motivations for establishing the column was his concern that many literarily capable young writers—particularly those who had never left Guangdong—were unable to participate in the creation of modern literature because they could not write in the northern-based *baihua* language and were instead forced to rely on a version learned solely from books, rather than through lived linguistic experience.

Such efforts by speakers of non-northern topolects to develop written forms could not revert to classical forms, as the project of linguistic and literary modernization precluded a return to feudal norms. Instead, writers experimented with oral-based vernacular modes as foundations for literary innovation.

One salient example of this development is the publication of Cantonese *yueou* in Liang Qichao's *New Fiction* (1903–1905), including works by Liao Endao (Zhu, 2017). Although *yueou* originated as romantic songs sung by courtesans aboard Pearl River boats or in pleasure quarters—often expressions of longing, hospitality, or lamentation—they were repurposed in the pages of *New Fiction* into vehicles for bold, socially critical discourse and stylistic reinvention (Yao, 2017: 59). This marked a shift from sentimental lyricism to assertive prose, transforming a local poetic tradition into a tool for literary resistance.

Viewed in this light, the later writings of Ouyang Shan may be seen as a continuation of the same vernacular impulse. His work channeled the performative energy and local affect of oral traditions into a countercurrent against the hegemony of northern-centered national language formation, thereby offering regional forms not merely as expressive alternatives but as foundational elements in the literary politics of modern China.

These dynamics are not confined to mainland China. In Taiwan, similar tensions can be observed in Mahua literature and in oral forms like *Liām-kua*. At issue is how the Han script facilitates or impedes cross-linguistic dialogue. The next section focuses on Taiwan to explore how minoritized languages have challenged normative regimes of phonographic standardization and reasserted their expressive capacities.

Linguistic hybridity and Minor Literature in colonial and postcolonial Taiwan

The linguistic dynamics in Taiwan diverge markedly from those of mainland China, largely due to Taiwan's distinct trajectory of modernization under Japanese colonial rule. While the late imperial Chinese bureaucracy had already exerted some influence—most notably through the imperial examination system and the diffusion of *guanhua*—Taiwan was not fully subsumed into the nation-building processes that later established northern-based *baihua* as the normative language of literary and official discourse in the Chinese mainland. Instead, Taiwan underwent a radically different form of linguistic modernity shaped by Japanese colonial governance following its annexation in 1895.[10]

Under Japanese rule, Taiwan became subject to Japan's evolving national language (*kokugo*) policy, itself a product of Japan's own struggle to consolidate a modern national language amid competing dialects and residual classical forms. Facing pressures similar to those experienced by China in defending against Western imperial encroachment, Japan pursued a model of language standardization grounded in phonographic coherence: the alignment of written and spoken forms. This policy entailed the erasure or marginalization of linguistic diversity—including Ainu and Ryukyuan languages—and the suppression of regional vernaculars in favor of a homogenized national language conceived as central to the modern state (Yamaguchi, M., 2006: 10).

The introduction of Japanese into Taiwan, however, carried a dual character that reflected both the imposition of a modern national language and the persistence of traditional linguistic forms. While the Japanese national language (*kokugo*) was promoted as a symbol of assimilation and state modernity, it did not function exclusively as a unifying national idiom. Rather, it came to serve as a shared communicative medium—within the multilingual fabric of the Japanese empire, and thus was relativized as merely one among several imperial languages.

Simultaneously, *kanbun kundoku*—the Japanese syntactic rendering of classical Chinese texts—retained a strong institutional presence, particularly in legal, bureaucratic, and

[10] This article takes the position that language should be viewed in the reconciliation between written and spoken forms, and thus assign a position to Japanese in Taiwan that differs from the conventional view of literary history, as exemplified by Chen, F. M., *Taiwan Shinbungakushi Jo/Ge* (2015).

ceremonial contexts. This form of linguistic mediation, reliant on Sinitic textual traditions, signaled that Japanese itself, at least in its formal registers, was still operating within a Sinitic cultural framework. The co-existence of the standard spoken Japanese language and *kanbun* thus produced a layered linguistic regime in colonial Taiwan, one that bridged the normative aspirations of phonocentric modernity with the inherited authority of classical Chinese script.[11]

The introduction of Japanese into Taiwan did not entail an obvious break from Sinitic traditions. Instead, it re-situated the Japanese national language as one colonial language among others, while simultaneously reinforcing the bureaucratic authority of the Han *écriture*. In sum, Taiwan's engagement with the Han script, in particular, was mediated through overlapping ideologies: the traditions of the Han *écriture* and the Japanese national language ideology. This dual development shaped the conditions under which Taiwanese writers and performers negotiated their position between Chinese and Japanese linguistic regimes. How, then, can these dynamics be observed in the case of *Liām-kua* and Mahua Taiwanese literature, as discussed in this article?

If *Liām-kua* is to be understood as embodying a form of resistance to colonial rule, it should be viewed as a mediated expression—articulated through Han script—resisting not Japanese political authority directly, but rather the normative hegemony of Sinitic-language practices, including the pre-war Japanese written language grounded in Han script and classical Chinese conventions. Crucially, this linguistic governance, while serving colonial objectives, did not exhibit the overt severity often associated with economic or military domination. The relative phonological and syntactic distance of both Japanese and Minnan from classical written Chinese created a situation in which Minnan speakers did not experience acute linguistic subjugation, nor did Japanese speakers gain exclusive dominance over Han literacy. Consequently, neither group monopolized the symbolic capital embedded in the classical Han script. Resistance through *Liām-kua*, then, did not take the form of explicit oppositional discourse, as seen in *yueou* or other literate polemics. Instead, it relied on affective registers, nostalgic allusions, and metalinguistic ambiguity, operating beneath the surface of overt critique.

After World War II, however, the hierarchical structure of language shifted dramatically. The influx of Nationalist government officials from mainland China introduced a new linguistic hierarchy centered on Mandarin, which positioned other Sinitic-languages such as Minnan and Hakka below it, and indigenous Austronesian languages even further down the hierarchy. Unlike under Japanese rule—where Japanese had functioned as a colonial common language alongside Sinitic forms—Mandarin was promoted as the sole legitimate medium in public discourse, further marginalizing local linguistic ecologies.

[11] While Japan's official *kokugo* ideology adhered to a phonocentric, logocentric model of modernity, this ideal was undermined by the entrenched use of classical Chinese writing practices—particularly in legal codes and imperial proclamations. The Imperial Rescript on the Termination of the War 1945 (*Gyokuon-hōsō*) illustrates this paradox: though spoken in Japanese, it followed syntactic conventions derived from *kanbun*. Even within Japan, colloquialization of legal discourse was not fully realized until the 1950s, with semi-classical forms persisting in the Civil Code until 2005.

These new stratifications transformed the meaning of *Liām-kua* as a counter-discursive form. Pre-war *Liām-kua* Performers like Chen Da sang in Minnan, infusing Han-structured verse with indigenous Plains Austronesian inflections, and offered subdued resistance to the normative voice of Japanese imperial syntax through nostalgic retrospection. Yet this tacit resistance, grounded in affect and memory, was increasingly insufficient in the face of postwar standardization policies. Post-war performers, such as Yang Xiuqing, adjusted to the evolving linguistic terrain by reconfiguring *Liām-kua* as a medium of vernacular artistry that exceeded its folkloric framing. Under successive governments—receiving national awards under both Democratic Progressive and Kuomintang regimes—Yang not only preserved but innovated within the genre through multimedia collaborations and erotic motifs (Taiwan Today, 2020). In doing so, *Liām-kua* circumvented assimilation into the lowest rungs of the linguistic hierarchy and reclaimed agency as a site of unpredictable, heteroglossic identity formation. It thereby enacted a resistance that could not be subsumed under the dichotomy of dominant versus minor languages—a resistance predicated not on opposition, but on disruption.

This structure of resistance can also be observed—albeit in a different form—within the margins of Mahua Taiwanese literature.[12] Ethnic Chinese communities in Malaysia, the communities of origin of the authors of Mahua literature, have historically emphasized education in Mandarin Chinese since the era of British colonial rule. While most Malaysian Chinese are descended from immigrants from Fujian, Guangdong, and Hainan provinces in southern China, and thus speak dialects such as Minnan, Cantonese, Teochew, or Hakka—topolects which differ substantially not only from Mandarin but from one another—Mandarin Chinese (*Huayu*) came to function as both a shared lingua franca and a symbolic link to the cultural motherland. It is this language that they acquire in formal education and use in literary expression.

However, from the 1950s—particularly after the independence of the Federation of Malaya in 1957—nation-building efforts in Malaysia prioritized Malay as the central national language, leading to increasing restrictions on Chinese-language education. Chinese independent high schools faced acute challenges in securing financial resources, student enrollments, qualified teachers, and physical infrastructure. As many institutions were forced to suspend student admissions, a growing number of ethnic Chinese students began to pursue higher education abroad, especially in Taiwan. Mahua Taiwanese literature thus emerged from this cohort of overseas students. By the 1970s, amid rising anxieties over the future of Chinese-language education, the cultural attachment of Malaysian Chinese to *Huayu* became even more pronounced. This sentiment galvanized a movement to revive Chinese independent schools, which in turn led to a steady increase in student enrollments across subsequent decades. This situation, however, began to improve incrementally over the following years. With the gradual stabilization of the sociopolitical climate surrounding Chinese-language education in Malaysia, and in parallel with the evolving development of Mahua Taiwanese literature, a robust foundation was established within the Malaysian Chinese community for the production of Chinese-language literature.

[12] The following description of the language environment of Malaysian Chinese is based on Matsuura, 's overview (2011).

During periods when Chinese-language education faced significant challenges, it was often stated that 'Chinese independent schools are bastions of Chinese culture,' a phrase that encapsulates a widely held belief: that acquiring language through formal schooling, newspapers, and other media, along with attaining literacy in Chinese characters, serves as a guarantee of Chinese ethnic identity (Matsuura). *Liām-kua*—as a form of oral literature—managed to secure a discursive space by maintaining a deliberate distance from the normative Chinese while simultaneously presupposing Han *écriture* as an imagined scriptural common ground. This genre thrived in the linguistic interstices created by the tension between Minnan and northern Sinitic topolects, positioning itself in the shifting acoustic terrain shaped by these divergent phonological traditions. Its oral nature resists full transcription into Han characters and frequently requires alternative orthographic systems such as *pe̍h-ōe-jī*. Han script, in this case, functions as a visual and symbolic proxy for suppressed vernacular expression—evoking sounds that cannot be neatly encoded within the dominant writing system.

In contrast, Mahua Taiwanese literature—strongly shaped by Malaysian Mandarin—has been composed in written Chinese that syntactically aligns with northern Mandarin topolects and is typically voiced through standard Mandarin phonology. As a result, Mahua Taiwanese literature is embedded within a linguistic regime that defines literary legitimacy through the aesthetics of a standardized spoken Mandarin. This positioning renders it perpetually susceptible to aesthetic devaluation due to its proximity to the normative phonology of official discourse. As with the Taiwanese *xiangtu* (鄉土) literature of the 1950s—which was frequently interpreted through the narrow frame of social realism—Mahua Taiwanese literature similarly risks being read as a social history rather than as an aesthetically autonomous literary formation (Ng, 2010: 17, 18).

Understanding the value of Mahua Taiwanese literature therefore requires an even more nuanced application of the concept of minor literature than in the case of *Liām-kua*. Unlike oral traditions such as *Liām-kua* or *yueou*, which are composed in Minnan and Cantonese respectively, and thus retain greater room to contest the formation of national language and standardization by maintaining linguistic distance from Mandarin through Han *écriture*, Mahua Taiwanese literature operates under more constrained conditions. Because it is composed in Huayu as both a spoken and written language, it collapses the distance between speech and script and thus lacks a separate linguistic positionality from which to negotiate with the dominant Mandarin-centered norm.

As Ng Kim Chew, a leading Mahua Taiwanese author, has observed in his metafictional essays and literary reflections, Mahua literature inhabits a paradoxical space. The language in which it is composed—*Huayu*—is at once an instrument of cultural continuity and a symbol of aesthetic constraint. Ng writes, "My writing is a kind of ghost story... written in a language that does not belong to me, in the characters that carry someone else's genealogy" (Ng, 2011: 43). In this way, Mahua Taiwanese literature exemplifies a form of minor literature not composed in a minor language, but rather in a widely used and officially recognized one—yet one whose authors remain structurally marginalized within the broader literary and cultural hierarchies of Greater China.

Precisely because Mahua Taiwanese literature necessitates a deeper engagement with the framework of minor literature, it also invites a critical reappraisal of the mediating role played by Han *écriture*. Rather than functioning solely as a vehicle for standardized Mandarin or as a neutral textual conduit, Han *écriture* enables an intertextual environment that connects disparate Sinitic-languages with the official languages of *guanhua*, *guoyu*, or *putonghua*. In doing so, it functions as an apparatus that renders minor readings possible. Through this apparatus, localized orality—rather than being interpreted as an isolated utterance in a minor language—comes to be imagined as co-referential or parallelized with other Sinitic topolects. That is, each form of orality is articulated not in isolation but through the resonance of multiple imagined voices embedded in the *écriture*. Such forms of orality remain implicitly opposed to, and persistently challenge, the claims to authenticity made by national or normative spoken languages. Importantly, these normative regimes of language cannot fully exclude orality's subversive potential, and are tacitly compelled to accommodate it, however reluctantly.

Conclusion

This article has defined Taiwanese *Liām-kua* and Mahua Taiwanese literature as forms of minor literature, and has sought to elucidate how the aesthetic and linguistic tensions embedded in these works shape the conditions under which voice is produced within regional Sinitic-language communities. It further investigates how such tensions enable or inhibit cross-linguistic interaction across language boundaries, particularly in Taiwan's multilingual environment. By focusing on these dynamics, the study clarifies how Han script—as a visual signifier—sustains the mutual referencing of diverse Sinitic-languages, while also complicating the dominance of any single normative phonological regime. In doing so, the article advances a broader inquiry into how language, writing, and literature mediate the cultural politics of voice and recognition in East Asia. v

In premodern China, the gap between literate elites and non-literate populations produced asymmetric relationships to writing, with the latter simultaneously resisting textual authority and aspiring to participate in the cultural capital of Han *écriture*. Similarly, a pan-East Asian scriptural community emerged among literate elites, anchored in classical Chinese (*wenyan*), enabling a transregional communicative framework that transcended phonological difference.

Unlike the phonographic national languages of Europe, which codified a single dialect into standardized orthography, Han script preserved a visual medium through which different topolects could continue to interact. This enabled a condition of intertopolectal resonance, where regional oralities were not fully subordinated to state-imposed speech norms. However, with the rise of modern nation-states, new linguistic hierarchies emerged. The institutionalization of standard Chinese—as exemplified by the phonocentric ideology that underpins systems such as pinyin and *zhuyin* (bo/po/mo/fo)—gradually eroded this diversity. Han script, which had previously facilitated the participation of multiple topolects in written communication, increasingly came to privilege a single topolect—usually Mandarin—as the normative spoken form. As the alignment between script and a singular phonological system intensified, alternative phonetic registers were increasingly marginalized. Populations who

did not share the assumptions of the standard—such as ethnic minorities, diasporic Chinese communities, and elite literati in Japan and Korea who had long maintained written engagement with Han script—found themselves displaced from the formerly negotiable space of phonological signification.

In this shifting landscape, projects in Taiwan have staged new forms of negotiation between marginalized topolects and standardized Chinese. These include the redefinition of non-dominant phonological signifiers as autonomous spoken standards, and the creation of minor literature that integrates peripheral orality within Chinese writing. These literary projects often deploy parody, irony, and aesthetic dissonance as tools for resisting the epistemic authority of normative Chinese, positioning themselves not outside but within its semiotic field.

More broadly, this study suggests that the framework of minor literature remains essential for understanding how linguistic agency is exercised under conditions of asymmetrical power. Mahua Taiwanese literature, in particular, compels us to recognize that subversion can occur even when a minor voice adopts the syntax of the major. What matters is not only the choice of language, but the way it is inhabited, troubled, and transformed. Han *écriture* emerges not simply as a visual sign system or a historical legacy, but as a generative terrain through which linguistic multiplicity persists, contests authority, and demands new modes of cultural legibility. Han script is neither an exclusively Chinese nationalist symbol nor a neutral medium, but a dynamic site of diasporic and vernacular expression.

To evaluate the subversive capacity of such works, however, the analysis of orality-literacy interaction advanced in this article must be complemented by close readings of intertextuality, particularly through theoretical frameworks such as Baudrillard's concepts of the 'simulacrum' and the 'copy without an original. Whether parody can meaningfully destabilize the authority of normative Chinese depends on its capacity to be situated within a constellation of non-hierarchical, parallel utterances. Interaction among different Sinitic-languages, in this context, is often a hegemonic mechanism that marginalizes other voices. A pluralist linguistic condition can emerge only when Han script and visuality are no longer treated as sources of original, authoritative meaning, but instead understood and used as shared tools for creating and exchanging meaning among diverse linguistic communities.In conclusion, Han *écriture*, while implicated in the construction of national linguistic regimes, also remains a latent infrastructure for minoritarian expression. By enabling the intertextual circulation of peripheral speech forms, it offers an alternative to phonocentric homogenization. Minor literatures such as *Liām-kua* and Mahua Taiwanese literature thus do not merely resist domination—they transform the terms of cultural legibility itself. In so doing, they illuminate the critical potential of script to unsettle hierarchies, amplify marginalized voices, and reconfigure the aesthetic and political terms of linguistic belonging in East Asia.

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