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Editorial

Navigating In-betweenness: Literary and Filmic Border Crossings in the Cultural Sinosphere

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Introduction

This special issue stems from a panel presented at the 2024 Association of Chinese and Comparative Literature (ACCL) conference at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, titled "Behold the Human." Against the backdrop of rapid global transformations and the rising influence of posthumanist, inhuman, and anti-humanist perspectives, the conference centered on a critical reflection on the concept of the human in literary and cultural discourse, particularly within the contexts of Chinese and comparative literature. Panels addressed a range of issues—including epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions—examining how conceptions of the human have been constructed, contested, or reimagined across diverse literary forms and media, including classical texts, modern literature, genre fiction, cinema, and digital platforms. Several contributions focused on the human's entanglement with the non-human and the role of literature in articulating these evolving dynamics. The articles presented in this special issue reflect the discussions and insights generated during a panel titled "More than Human: Transgressions of Human and Non-human Realms in Chinese Literature and Films," which specifically focused on themes of border transgressions, the concept of the "more-than-human," and how Chinese-language and related literary and cultural narratives engage with these issues.

The three articles explore various perspectives on different forms of border crossing in Chinese-language literary and filmic narratives. Each contribution focuses on a particular thematic, historical, and geographical context. Historically, the issue spans research from the long nineteenth century to the present. Geographically, the contributions focus on Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China, and Malaysia. The narratives examined, focusing on different themes and situated across diverse geographical contexts, reflect the multiplicity of cultural productions that are produced in what Khun Eng Kuah (2024: 19–20) terms a "collaborative cultural basin"—a framework we refer to as the cultural Sinosphere.

Framing the Cultural Sinosphere

Chinese-language narratives produced outside mainland China are often categorized under terms such as "Chinese diaspora literature" and "Chinese diaspora film," labels that invoke the concept of "diaspora" or "diasporic." Originally used to describe the dispersion of the Jewish people, the concept of diaspora has since been expanded to encompass any "deterritorialized" or "transnational" population (Brubaker 2005). However, scholarly debates have questioned whether the term "Chinese diaspora" is analytically useful or overly restrictive. Wang Gungwu, for example, argues that there is no singular Chinese diaspora, but rather multiple, distinct diasporas (Wang 2004: 170). Shih Shu-mei critiques the term "diaspora" for its inherent emphasis on the country of origin, which she contends can hinder processes of localization (Shih 2010).

Shih's advocacy for the concept of the Sinophone shifts the focus from a nation-centered understanding to one that emphasizes place-based, Sinitic-language literary and cultural productions. Building on this perspective, David Der-wei Wang extends the conversation with his concept of "Sinophone-Xenophone mesology." Wang's mesology transcends the linguistic and cultural boundaries associated with the Sinophone, underscoring how the environment, both natural and cultural, influences and interacts with human identity and experience (Wang 2015, 2022).

Rather than re-engaging with the debates concerning the definitional boundaries and analytical utility of terms such as "Chinese diaspora" or "Sinophone," this special issue proposes the Sinosphere as a more capacious and generative conceptual framework. By adopting this broader lens, we aim to move beyond entrenched theoretical disputes to foreground the formal and aesthetic dimensions of cultural and literary production. Drawing on recent new formalist approaches—such as those articulated by Caroline Levine (2006, 2015), who emphasizes the mutual imbrication of form and social reality—we investigate how literary texts within the Sinosphere both reflect and actively shape complex questions of identity, migration, and cultural negotiation. This methodological shift allows for an in-depth engagement with the aesthetic strategies through which cultural meanings are constituted and contested.

In this context, we draw inspiration from the preface to the German translation of Trinh Minh-ha's *Elsewhere, Within Here*, where Babka and Schmidt (2017: 14) introduce the notion of *poetische Wissenschaft* ("poetic science").[1] We propose an extension of this idea in the form of "poetic theory," a concept that resonates with Mersch et al.'s (2019) notion of "literature as theory." This challenges conventional hierarchies between theory and literature by proposing that theoretical insights can emerge not only through the application of external frameworks but also from the texts themselves—through their formal properties, narrative structures, and aesthetic

1 The German term *Wissenschaft* encompasses all areas of academia, including the natural and social sciences as well as the humanities. Accordingly, *Wissenschaft* is less narrowly associated with the hard sciences than the English term *science*.

characteristics. By advancing the concept of poetic theory, we aim to conceptualize literature as a generative space for theorization, wherein literary form functions both as a mode of expression and as a site of knowledge production.

Literary and cultural productions from across the Sinosphere often explore themes such as displacement, alienation, "in-betweenness," and border crossing—including but not limited to migration contexts. The contributions in this issue focus on examining various types of such border transgressions. For instance, they investigate transgressions between the human and the non-human, the physical and the metaphysical realms, and crossings of geographical, epistemic, and socio-cultural boundaries in Chinese-language literary and cultural productions. Expanding on Wang's Sinophone-Xenophone mesology, which deepens our understanding by exploring the interrelations between human beings and their environmental contexts, we propose adopting a "more-than-human" perspective, as described by Sarah Whatmore (2006: 604–607), which encompasses non-human subjects, particularly environmental and cultural elements, to bridge the dichotomy between "nature" and "culture." Non-human and supernatural elements, such as representations of ghosts, remain integral to the literary and visual traditions within the contemporary cultural Sinosphere, with new forms emerging in newer popular genres like science fiction.

Fran Martin (2003: 132–133) emphasizes in the context of Taiwanese queer literature that identifications with ghosts are often appropriation strategies that refer to the marginalization of subjects who do not conform to the heteronormative attributions prevalent in society:

> Elsewhere, following Foucault, I have referred to this *tongzhi* obsession with anthropomorphic animals, spirits, cyborgs, ghosts, vampires and the like as a reverse discourse that cites *tongxinglian*'s exclusion from the human realm in order effectively to criticize that exclusion by effecting a textual return of the outcast in these disquieting figures of queer haunting. Such figurations bear an interesting relation to normativity. (Martin 2003: 240)

Building on Fran Martin's insights into the spectral and hybrid figures that populate Taiwanese queer literature, we see how these non-normative representations—ghosts, cyborgs, spirits, and other liminal beings—function as metaphors for social exclusion and as tools for resisting hegemonic norms. These figurations not only challenge the human/non-human divide but also resonate with broader themes of displacement and boundary-crossing central to Sinophone cultural productions. As such, they provide a conceptual bridge to a queer methodology that similarly resists fixed identities and normative boundaries. Moving on from these haunting, hybrid presences, in the remainder of this introduction we shall shift focus from representations of marginality to the critical practices that unsettle and rework the very structures of normativity, identity, and belonging.

Queer(ing) as Method

In her essay *Critically Queer*, Judith Butler contends that the term "queer" must remain open and mutable if it is to serve as a site of collective contestation and a point of departure for both historical reflection and future imaginations. According to Butler, the term should not be fully owned by any group but should instead be continually reinterpreted and redirected for urgent political purposes. She suggests that "queer" may even be replaced by more effective terms that better serve these political aims. Furthermore, she argues that the term will become obsolete if it succumbs to demands that seek to exclude certain groups, as this would undermine its original purpose (Butler 1993: 19–20).

At the same time, Helen Hok-Sze Leung (2008: 2–3) highlights a tension between the anti-normative aspirations of queer and its widespread use outside of theoretical discussions as a shorthand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identities. According to Leung, "queer" often functions as an umbrella term for sexual minorities, representing an open-ended category for a diverse range of identities, both established and potential. Nonetheless, Leung advocates for conceptualizing "queer" as something that critiques and resists normative forms, while also acknowledging the real appeal of identity politics, especially when considered in plural and coalitional terms. She further notes that terms like homosexual, gay, and lesbian are rooted in Western contexts and have different histories in East and Southeast Asia.

Howard Chiang (2014: 25–30) observes that the introduction of the Western concept of homosexuality into Chinese culture led to a significant shift in how same-sex desire and relationships were understood in Chinese society. He explains that the translation of this foreign concept produced an epistemological shift in the cultural and social meanings attached to these relationships.

Likewise, the term queer cannot be easily transplanted into Asian contexts. For example, there is no direct Chinese equivalent for queer. In Chinese-speaking communities, terms such as *tongzhi* (literally "comrade") have been repurposed as umbrella terms for sexual minorities. Another term, *ku'er*, is a homophonic translation of queer. However, *ku* (酷) can also mean "cool" or "cruel," which gives *ku'er* the additional connotation of "cool kid," reflecting the multiple layers of meaning associated with queer (Lim 2008: 244–245).

In this context, Andrea Bachner (2014: 201–202) proposes understanding "queer" not as a fixed state, but rather as a process of *doing* and *becoming.* For Bachner, the focus should be on "queering" rather than "queerness," with queering serving as both a practice and a method for challenging and subverting normative understandings of gender, sexuality, and identity.

Donna Haraway (2008) similarly critiques the stability of categories—especially "species"—and insists on their openness, internal contradiction, and continual

reworking through encounter. Instead of a distinction between human and non-human, Haraway proposes the concept of "companion species":

> Queering has the job of undoing "normal" categories, and none is more critical than the human/nonhuman sorting operation. That is crucial work and play. But perhaps companion species can remind us that terran critters have never been one—or two. Tubes, membranes, orifices, organs, extensions, probes, docking sites: these are the stuff of being in material semiotic intra-action. There is no ontological starting or stopping point, neither order nor disorder, boundaries nor boundary violations. (Haraway 2008: xxiv)

Companion species, according to Haraway, are about "patterning, consequences, and the possibility of response" (Haraway 2008, xxv). Like Butler's queer, Haraway's concept of "companion species" resists singular meaning, emphasizing mutual becoming, misrecognition, and relational entanglement. The term "companion" itself, rooted in *cum panis* (with bread), evokes shared vulnerability and a material practice of co-flourishing, much like queering as a method.

Haraway's notion of "queer worlding" offers a speculative and material ethic that aligns with Bachner's and Leung's calls to keep queering dynamic and responsive to context. She warns against the violence of normative classification, whether in species, gender, or identity, and instead invites us to inhabit the messiness of "response-able" relations. In this sense, queering and companioning are parallel practices—both insist on remaining open to the unfamiliar, to the off-category, and the unpredictable potential of living and dying together, transcending differences. In light of these linguistic and cultural complexities, we propose considering queering as a method for critically examining normative identity categories.

Navigating In-betweenness

The act of navigating in-betweenness—both as a strategy and an analytical lens—is particularly relevant in light of shifting borders, linguistic and cultural diversity, and patterns of both internal and external migration in the cultural Sinosphere. While early migration was largely confined to Asia, from the nineteenth century onward—and with increasing momentum to the present day—Chinese populations have emigrated globally. As a result, Chinese-speaking communities have emerged across diverse regions, accompanied by corresponding cultural and literary productions.

The articles in this special issue are arranged in chronological order, beginning with analyses of literary works published in the late nineteenth century and concluding with literary and screen media produced in the early 2020s. This ordering was chosen primarily to facilitate continuity in the discussion of historical contexts and terminology. To some extent, the articles build upon one another.

It is essential to note, however, that this structure is not intended to replicate a Western-centric, linear conception of history—an approach that has been critically examined by scholars in postcolonial studies as well as in Chinese studies. In these fields, it has been argued that traditional Chinese understandings of history conceive

of time not as linear and teleological, but as cyclical. More recently, scholars have proposed new concepts for thinking about time and history (e.g. Chen 2024; Wang et al. 2022).

Among these alternative frameworks is Prasenjit Duara's (2021) approach, which conceives history as currents flowing like those of the ocean. This metaphor resonates strongly with several contributions in this issue, particularly those engaging with the theme of water. Indeed, some articles even incorporate sources dating back to the 17th century, placing them in dialogue with contemporary literary productions. The papers can thus be read as being linked through threads tracing historical events, socio-political contexts, and theoretical concepts—like small streams of water that are interconnected in complex ways and sometimes create shared basins.

The first article by Hock Keong Choong titled "Reimagining the Weretiger of the Malay Peninsula: Western Colonial and Chinese Diasporic Perspectives" examines the evolving representations of the weretiger—a mythical shapeshifting creature from Malay folklore—contrasting its cultural significance with that of the Malayan tiger, a national symbol of Malaysia, while tracing accounts from non-indigenous observers, such as Western colonists and Chinese authors. On the one hand, this paper explores the research and writings of Manuel Godinho de Eredia and Hugh Clifford, arguing that the narrative frames the weretiger within a hierarchical framework of disdain, employing a two-tiered gaze. On the other hand, from Ma Huan to Hsu Yun Tsiao and, more recently, to Maniniwei and Amanda Nell Eu, it illustrates how Chinese authors have transformed the weretiger motif from folkloric curiosity into a vehicle for cultural critique. Together, this paper advocates for the weretiger as a polyvalent symbol whose meanings shift across historical, cultural, and ideological contexts.

The article "A Queer Momotaro under the Postcolonial Pacific: Reading *The Membranes* Alternatively" by Sophia Huei-Ling Chen argues that *The Membranes,* published in 2021, functions as a national allegory of Taiwan, challenging the dominant interpretation of the novella solely as a work of science fiction. While previous readings often overlook the author's engagement with shifting global power dynamics, this study situates the narrative within the post-martial law context of 1990s Taiwan—a time marked by cultural liberalization and subversion of genre and gender norms. Set in a postapocalyptic underwater world where heterosexuality is abnormal and Taiwan exerts significant regional influence, the narrative reflects a queer and nationalist fantasy that resonated with contemporary Taiwanese readers and continues to hold relevance amid ongoing geopolitical tensions. Focusing on the protagonist Momo's origin story, the article offers an alternative reading that highlights cultural specificity and explores Taiwan's modern identity and existential anxieties beneath its science fiction and queer themes.

The third article, "Off to Other Shores: Transgressing Borders in Contemporary Sinophone Screen Media" by Helen Hess, examines how contemporary Sinophone

feature film and series portray crossings between physical and metaphysical realms, analyzing how these thresholds function as sites for negotiating cultural, linguistic, and political tensions. The study highlights two case studies: the Taiwanese–Malaysian Netflix series *The Ghost Bride* (2020), in which a young woman enters the realm of the dead to confront supernatural violence and reclaim agency, and the Malaysia–Hong Kong co-production *Barbarian Invasion* (2021), which offers a contemporary Sinophone perspective on spiritual and embodied forms of border-crossing beyond explicit ghostly encounters. Through an intersectional lens, the article demonstrates how these narratives of in-betweenness challenge gendered, classed, and ethnic hierarchies and offer imaginative models for coexistence and plurality in the Sinophone world.

Delving into these various aspects, the contributions in this special issue aim at analyzing how different, at times intersecting types of transgressing boundaries—geographical, epistemological, socio-cultural, discursive, etc.—are represented in literary and filmic productions, and how the writers, their protagonists, and their works are situated in, create, and navigate worlds "in-between."

To refer to such spaces "in-between" in the context of Sinophone Malaysian literature, also known as Mahua literature, scholars Khor Boon Eng and Chen Sihe employ the term "third cultural space" to characterize the unique cultural landscape inhabited by Sinophone Malaysian writers and communities. This term is adapted from Homi Bhabha's influential concept of the "third space," which originally referred to the hybrid cultural zone that emerges from the interaction between colonizer and colonized. However, Khor and Chen reframe this idea to suit the specific dynamics of the Malaysian context. Their "third cultural space" does not center on colonial power relations but instead describes the complex and multifaceted cultural space that arises from the intersection of Chinese and Malaysian linguistic and cultural traditions. Khor and Chen's reinterpretation highlights the creative potential and distinct identity formation that occur when different cultural frameworks coexist and interact within a shared environment.

This resonates with the artwork by artist I-Lann Yee titled "Like the Banana Tree at the Gate." In this work, Yee critically addresses the overlaps of the marginalization of women, ethnic minorities, and the destruction of the environment in the context of Malaysia's national history. The title is a reference to a seventeenth century sultan in Borneo who advised his subjects not to plant banana trees in front of their houses so as not to give the impression of wealth to potential colonial exploiters. This story was cited by Michael Dove in his book *The Banana Tree at the Gate: A History of Marginal Peoples and Global Markets in Borneo* as an example of anti-colonial resistance (Dove 2011).

The female figures in Yee's work symbolize the so-called Pontianak, also referred to as Kuntilanak, a female spirit who died giving birth to an illegitimate child and lingers among the living after her death as a man-eater. There are many stories about Pontianak, which often serve to admonish young women not to risk such a fate.

Pontianak is said to have long black hair and often lives in banana bushes. It is a common symbol in Malaysian and Indonesian popular culture.

In local folklore, Pontianak is sometimes described as crossing the boundary between human and animal forms. Informants report that she can transform into a bird when travelling long distances. This ability reflects her strong association with nature. The name "Pontianak" is sometimes linked to the Malay phrase *pohon tinggi* ("tall tree"), reflecting the belief that the ghost inhabits either banana trees (*Musa* genus; Indonesian: *pohon pisang*) or banyan fig trees (*Ficus* genus; Indonesian: *pohon beringin*), depending on the region (Duile 2020: 290).

As an undead figure, Pontianak embodies a dual nature. She may appear as a frightening vampire-like spirit dressed in white with long black hair, but she can also take the form of a woman constrained by traditional gender roles. This transformation occurs when she is subdued by driving a spike or nail into her head or the nape of her neck. Nicholas and Kline (2010: 202) interpret this act in Pontianak narratives from Malaysia not only as an expression of sexualized control but also broader patriarchal authority. When restrained, she becomes a beautiful but compliant woman; once the nail is removed, she reverts to her ghostly form and regains her uncontrollable and dangerous character. In this state she symbolizes behaviors considered socially inappropriate for women: she seduces men and her presence is marked by loud, shrill laughter. As Cohen (1996: 16) argues, monstrous figures often embody transgressive traits that societies attempt to suppress, yet these repressed elements continually return. Pontianak reflects this dynamic, as her independence and sexuality become threatening when they are no longer controlled.

Duile (2020) further interprets the popularity of the Pontianak figure as reflecting broader cultural negotiations between social values and conceptions of nature. In this context, the ghost represents forces associated with the natural world that remain excluded from the human sphere, highlighting an unresolved tension between society and nature.

> "The pontianak continues to haunt us in 21st century patriarchal Southeast Asia," Yee explains. "She is the woman standing at the gate like the banana tree in full view. She is potential and power and resource. A banana plant lives only briefly, bearing just one bunch of fruit before it dies. Its root structure, however, grows a new plant immediately – and so the cycle continues, ever present with a memory of the past." (Yee 2016)

I-Lann Yee thus addresses a structural correspondence between the fear of planting a banana tree and the fear of women's agency. In her artwork, she addresses the stigmatization and oppression of women. According to Yee, these women are made into monsters because they embody a different form of femininity than admitted (Boo 2016), a femininity that expresses strength. Julia Kristeva explains this phenomenon through the concept of abjection. The abject represents parts of identity and society that do not conform to order and are therefore feared (Kristeva 1982: 1-31).

Yee's artwork can therefore be understood as a votive gesture for female self-determination—for instance, the right of women to decide if, when, and whom to marry. Through strategies of appropriation, it reclaims figures historically framed as threatening and turns them into symbols of resistance and visibility. At the same time, the Pontianak motif itself embodies a condition of liminality, occupying a space between categories such as human and ghost, victim and monster, subjugation and agency.

This idea of in-betweenness is echoed in the cover image of this issue, which depicts the burning of an effigy of Da Shi Ye (大士爷), the King of Ghosts. The photograph was taken during the Hungry Ghost Festival in September 2025 in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. In Chinese folk and Daoist-Buddhist traditions, the festival marks a period when the gates of the underworld are believed to open and spirits are released into the human world. A towering paper effigy of Da Shi Ye is typically installed at the ritual site to preside over the proceedings and to maintain order among the wandering spirits, ensuring that offerings made by the living are distributed fairly. At the end of the festival, the effigy is ceremonially burned, symbolically sending the deity—and the spirits under his supervision—back to the underworld (Xiao En 2021).

Such offering rituals exist precisely at the threshold between worlds, as described in Helen Hess' paper "Off to Other Shores: Transgressing Borders in Contemporary Sinophone Screen Media" (this issue). Materially present yet intended for the realm of spirits, joss paper offerings mediate between the living and the dead, the visible and the invisible. As a visual motif, the image therefore foregrounds a liminal space where the boundaries between the physical and the metaphysical become permeable. In this sense, the cover image resonates with Yee's reworking of the Pontianak figure, as well as with creatures such as the weretiger and the various Malaysian ghosts discussed in Hock Keong Choong's paper, "Reimagining the Weretiger of the Malay Peninsula: Western Colonial and Chinese Diasporic Perspectives" (this issue), and the liminal character Momo examined in Sophia Huei-Ling Chen's paper, "A Queer Momotaro under the Postcolonial Pacific: Reading *The Membranes* Alternatively" (this issue)—the android who lingers between the worlds of human and machine, reality and artificiality, and life and death. All these symbolic figures highlight how marginalized identities emerge and gain meaning within transitional or ambiguous zones.

Khor and Chen's notion of the third cultural space provides a productive framework for conceptualizing such liminal configurations, understanding space as simultaneously material, symbolic, and lived. The analysis of hybrid "in-between" worlds that arise when established boundaries are crossed foregrounds how marginalized subjects create meaning and agency within contested spaces, thereby challenging binary distinctions such as center/periphery, self/other, or tradition/modernity. The concept thus offers a useful lens for examining the dynamic and layered spatial imaginaries explored in the contributions gathered in this special issue.

Considering the continuous transformations and relationships inherent in these transgressions, the authors of this special issue argue that including non-human and supernatural elements enriches our understanding of historical, socio-political, and cultural-aesthetic phenomena in Chinese-language/Sinophone narratives. This approach prompts us to move beyond simplistic stereotypes and dichotomies such as culture versus nature, human versus non-human, physical versus metaphysical, or male versus female, while also encouraging a more multifaceted exploration of the intricate connections and intersections between these realms. Ultimately, this special issue aims to foster a deeper understanding of the complexities and interplay between the worlds created in literary and cultural productions across various historical and geographical contexts, but also of the "worlding" of Chinese-language literary and visual media, as introduced by Chan Cheow Thia (2023).

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the organizers of the ACCL conference in Hong Kong for making this panel possible. We are especially grateful to Prof. Dr. Nicolai Volland for his invaluable and insightful feedback as the panel's discussant. We also wish to express our sincere gratitude to all the participants for their contributions, as well as to Jeanette Gerhardt and the ASIEN editors, Dr. Florian Pölking and Anna Fiedler—without their support, this special issue would not have been possible.

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