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Can One Say No to Chineseness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm

Ien Ang

William Yang was born in 1943 and grew up in Dimbulah, a small mining town in northern Queensland, Australia. Today a celebrated photographer working and living in Sydney, he is presented—classified—as "a third-generation Australian-Chinese." In an autobiographical account of his life, he recounts:

> One day, when I was about six years old, one of the kids at school called at me "Ching Chong Chinaman, Born in a jar, Christened in a teapot, Ha ha ha." I had no idea what he meant although I knew from his expression that he was being horrible.
>
> I went home to my mother and I said to her, "Mum, I'm not Chinese, am I?" My mother looked at me very sternly and said, "Yes you are."
>
> Her tone was hard and I knew in that moment that being Chinese was some terrible curse and I could not rely on my mother for help. Or my brother, who was four years older than me, and much more experienced in the world. He said, "And you'd better get used to it."[1]

1. William Yang, *Sadness* (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1996), 65.

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This is a classic tale of revelation that can undoubtedly be told in countless variations and versions by many people throughout the world, articulating the all-too-familiar experience of a subject's harsh coming into awareness of his own, unchosen, minority status. "Chineseness" here is the marker of that status, imparting an externally imposed identity given meaning, literally, by a practice of discrimination. It is the dominant culture's classificatory practice, operating as a territorializing power highly effective in marginalizing the other, that shapes the meaning of Chineseness here as a curse, as something to "get used to." Yang reveals that for most of his life, he has had negative feelings about "being Chinese." But what does his Chineseness consist of? "We were brought up in the western way," explains Yang. "None of us learned to speak Chinese. This was partly because my father, a Hukka [*sic*], spoke Mandarin, whereas my mother, a See Yup [*sic*], spoke Cantonese, and they spoke English at home. My mother could have taught us Cantonese but she never did—frankly she couldn't see the point."[2] This glimpse into one ordinary family's history indicates the apparent lack of interest Yang's parents had in transmitting their Chinese roots and cultural traditions to their children. This would have been a difficult thing to do in Australia in the forties and fifties, when the official ideology was still one of "white Australia" and required the few nonwhite people in the country to assimilate. But at the same time, Yang's family obviously never lost a sense of certainty about the self-declared *fact* of their Chineseness. But are they indeed Chinese? What makes them so? And how do they know?

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Scholars have always been bewildered by China. The intricate empirical multifariousness and historical complexity of the country is hardly containable in the sophisticated (inter)disciplinary apparatus and theoretical armory of Western researchers. Language, culture, civilization, people, nation, polity—how does one describe, interpret, and understand China, that awesome, other space that has never ceased to both fascinate and infuriate its dedicated scholar? The difficulty has grown exponentially, however, with the emergence of a so-called diasporic paradigm in the study of Chineseness. The booming interest in what is loosely termed the *Chinese diaspora* has unsettled the very demarcation of China as an immensely complex yet ontologically stable object of study. The view from the diaspora has shattered the convenient certainty with which Chinese studies has

2. William Yang, *Sadness*, 63–64.

been equated, quite simply, with the study of China. "China" can no longer be limited to the more or less fixed area of its official spatial and cultural boundaries nor can it be held up as providing the authentic, authoritative, and uncontested standard for all things Chinese. Instead, how to determine what is and what is not Chinese has become the necessary preliminary question to ask, and an increasingly urgent one at that. This, at least, is one of the key outcomes of the emergent view from the diaspora.

Central to the diasporic paradigm is the theoretical axiom that Chineseness is not a category with a fixed content—be it racial, cultural, or geographical—but operates as an open and indeterminate signifier whose meanings are constantly renegotiated and rearticulated in different sections of the Chinese diaspora. Being Chinese outside China cannot possibly mean the same thing as inside. It varies from place to place, molded by the local circumstances in different parts of the world where people of Chinese ancestry have settled and constructed new ways of living. There are, in this paradigm, many different Chinese identities, not one. This proposition entails a criticism of Chinese essentialism, a departure from the mode of demarcating Chineseness through an absolutist oppositioning of authentic and inauthentic, pure and impure, real and fake. The anti-essentialism of the diasporic paradigm opens up a symbolic space for people such as Yang, a distant member of the diaspora, to be Chinese in his own way, living a de-centered Chineseness that does not have to live up to the norm of "the essential Chinese subject."[3]

I am entering into this discussion from the perspective of cultural studies, where the new theorization of diaspora has most energetically taken place.[4] One of the distinctive characteristics of cultural studies is its

3. See Stuart Hall's similar critique of the notion of the essential black subject, for example, in his essays "New Ethnicities" and "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" reprinted in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1997), 441–49 and 465–75.

4. For some examples of the wide-ranging emergent body of work on the Chinese diaspora along these theoretical lines (which can be described loosely as informed by postmodern, poststructuralist, and postcolonial theory), see, for example, Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Ien Ang, "On Not Speaking Chinese: Postmodern Ethnicity and the Politics of Diaspora," *New Formations* 24 (winter 1994): 1–18; Aihwa Ong, "On the Edge of Empires: Flexible Citizenship among Chinese in Diaspora," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 1, no. 3 (winter 1993); Allen Chun, "Fuck Chineseness: On the Ambiguities of Ethnicity as Culture as Identity," *boundary 2* 23, no. 2 (summer 1996): 111–38; and Yao Souchou, "Books from Heaven: Literary Pleasure, Chinese Cultural Text

recognition of the positionality of any mode of intellectual practice or style of knowledge production. Such a recognition implies a de-universalization of knowledge and an emphasis on the particular historical and cultural coordinates that inform the enunciation of discourse and the formation of knowledge. For cultural studies, as Lawrence Grossberg puts it, "there can be no separation between theory, at whatever level of abstraction, and the concrete social historical context which provides both its object of study and its conditions of existence."[5] Importantly, this is both a political and an epistemological statement. Thus, any intellectual investment in an object of study—say, Chineseness—is not the innocent reflection of a natural reality that is passively waiting to be discovered; rather, the very quest for knowledge actively brings into being, in the knower's experience and understanding of the world, slices of reality he or she then calls and classifies as Chinese. Furthermore, there are stakes involved in the ongoing ontological confirmation of Chineseness, just as nineteenth-century Western science had a stake, beyond the noble one of scientific progress, in producing the existence of distinct, and hierarchically ordered, human "races." This analogy should provoke us to interrogate the political and ideological significance of the ongoing currency, as well as shifting currents, of discourses, claims, and disclaims to Chineseness in the modern world. How Chineseness is made to mean in different contexts, and who gets to decide what it means or should mean, is the object of intense contestation, a struggle over meaning with wide-ranging cultural and political implications.

I also have a personal investment in this interrogation of Chineseness. Like Yang, though along a rather different historical trajectory, I am intimately familiar with the injunction to "get used to being Chinese." I was born into a so-called Peranakan Chinese family in Indonesia, a country that has always had a problem with its long-standing and economically significant Chinese minority (as, of course, is the case throughout Southeast Asia, except Singapore).[6] In Indonesia, from the sixties to the present, I have found being Chinese a profoundly ambivalent experience, fraught

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and the 'Struggle against Forgetting,'" *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 8, no. 2 (1997): 190–209.

5. Lawrence Grossberg, "History, Politics, and Postmodernism: Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 153.

6. For a recent discussion on the position of Chinese in Southeast Asia, see, for example, Leo Suryadinata, ed., *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1997).

with feelings of rejection (by the majority of Indonesians) and alienation (from an identity that was first and foremost an imposed one). The need to come to terms with the fact of my Chineseness remained a constant after I relocated—in a peculiar diasporic itinerary informed by the historical connections established by European colonialism—to the Netherlands, where I spent my teenage and young adult years, and later, after I transferred to Australia (where I live now). In these different geocultural spaces, the meaning of being Chinese was both the same and different, shaped by changing specific contexts, yet enduringly framed by the fact that I could not take my Chineseness (or lack of it) for granted. In short, the status of Chineseness as a discursive construct—rather than as something natural—is a matter of subjective experience to me, not just a question of theory.[7]

Conceiving Chineseness as a discursive construct entails a disruption of the ontological stability and certainty of Chinese identity; it does not, however, negate its operative power as a cultural principle in the social constitution of identities *as* Chinese. In other words, the point is not to dispute the fact that Chineseness exists (which, in any case, would be a futile assertion in a world where more than a billion people would, to all intents and purposes, identify themselves as Chinese in one way or another, either voluntarily or by force), but to investigate how this category operates in practice, in different historical, geographical, political, and cultural contexts. As Stuart Hall remarks, the fact that race is not a valid scientific category does not undermine its symbolic and social effectuality. The same could be said about Chineseness. What highlighting the constructed nature of categories and classificatory systems does, however, is shift "the focus of theoretical attention from the categories 'in themselves' as repositories of cultural [meaning] to the process of cultural classification itself."[8] In other words, how and why is it that the category of Chineseness acquires its persistence and solidity? And with what political and cultural effects?

What I call the view from the diaspora, which will be my starting point, is necessarily unstable. After all, the spirit of diasporic thought, motivated as it is by notions of dispersal, mobility, and disappearance, works against its consolidation as a paradigm proper. Contained in the diasporic perspective itself, therefore, are the seeds of its own deconstruction, which provides us with the opportunity to interrogate not just the different meanings Chi-

7. See my "On Not Speaking Chinese."

8. Stuart Hall, "For Allon White: Metaphors of Transformation," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, 302.

neseness takes on in different local contexts but, more fundamentally, the very significance and validity of Chineseness as a category of identification and analysis.

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The process of de-centering the center, which is so pivotal to diasporic theory, has been forcefully articulated in the recent influential collection *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today*, edited by Tu Wei-ming, professor of Chinese history and philosophy at Harvard.[9] In this collection, Tu elaborates on the contours of a symbolic universe he calls "cultural China,"[10] a newly constructed cultural space "that both encompasses and transcends the ethnic, territorial, linguistic, and religious boundaries that normally define Chineseness."[11] For Tu, the project of cultural China is one designed to de-center the cultural authority of geopolitical China, an intellectual effort to redefine "the periphery as the center" in current engagements with what it means to be Chinese.[12] This project is critical insofar as it aims to break with static and rigid, stereotypical and conventional definitions of Chinese as "belonging to the Han race, being born in China proper, speaking Mandarin, and observing the 'patriotic' code of ethics" (preface, vii). Instead, Tu wants to "explore the fluidity of Chineseness as a layered and contested discourse, to open new possibilities and avenues of inquiry, and to challenge the claims of political leadership (in Beijing, Taipei, Hong Kong or Singapore) to be the ultimate authority in a matter as significant as 'Chineseness' " (preface, viii). The impetus for this

9. Tu Wei-ming, ed., *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994). This book is a reprint (with some additions) of a special issue of *Daedalus* 120, no. 2 (spring 1991).

10. The emergence of a discourse on cultural China, as launched by Tu, is closely related to the growing prominence of the discourse of "Greater China." The latter is the most commonly used term, in English at least, for "the system of interactions among mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and people of Chinese descent around the world" (Harry Harding, "The Concept of 'Greater China': Themes, Variations and Reservations," *China Quarterly* 136 (1993): 683. Harding distinguishes three key themes in the contemporary discourse of Greater China: the rise of a transnational Chinese economy; the (prospect of a) reunification of a Chinese state; and the emergence of a global Chinese culture, to which Tu's discussion of cultural China is an important contribution.

11. Tu Wei-ming, preface to *The Living Tree*, v. Subsequent references to the preface are cited parenthetically.

12. Tu Wei-ming, "Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center," in *The Living Tree*, 1–34. Subsequent references to this essay are cited parenthetically.

intervention is a certain disillusion, if not despair, about the political reality of mainland China, the People's Republic of China. As Tu observes, "Although realistically those who are on the periphery . . . are seemingly helpless to affect any fundamental transformation of China proper, the center no longer has the ability, insight, or legitimate authority to dictate the agenda for cultural China. On the contrary, the transformative potential of the periphery is so great that it seems inevitable that it will significantly shape the intellectual discourse on cultural China for years to come" ("Cultural China," 33–34).[13]

It is important to note the political implications of Tu's project. His position is known to be explicitly neo-Confucianist and largely anticommunist, which we need to keep in mind when assessing his critiques of "the center." Placed in the context of Chinese *cultural* history, however, the assertion of the periphery as the center is a radical one. The notion of a single center, or cultural core, from which Chinese civilization has emanated—the so-called Central Country complex—has been so deeply entrenched in the Chinese historical imagination that it is difficult to disentangle our understandings of Chineseness from it. Yet the very emergence of a powerful discourse of cultural China enunciated from the periphery and formulated to assert the periphery's influence at the expense of the center is a clear indication of the increasingly self-confident voice of some Chinese intellectuals in diaspora, such as Tu Wei-ming himself. This growing self-confidence has much to do with the historical and economic state of affairs in global modernity at the end of the twentieth century. As Tu puts it, "While the periphery of the Sinic world was proudly marching toward an Asian-Pacific century, the homeland seemed mired in perpetual underdevelopment" ("Cultural China," 12). Indeed, it is precisely the homeland's seeming inability to transform itself according to the ideal image of a truly modern society—an image still hegemonically determined by the West—that has led to the perceived crisis of Chineseness, which the project of cultural China aims to address.

Central to the intellectual problematic of cultural China is what one sees as the urgent need to reconcile Chineseness and modernity as the twentieth century draws to a close. There are two interrelated sides to this challenge. On the one hand, the question is how to modernize Chineseness itself in a way that will correct and overcome the arguably abject course

13. It should be noted that Tu's paper first appeared in 1991, only two years after the crushing of prodemocracy demonstrators at Tiananmen Square in June, 1989, by the People's Liberation Army. This event has arguably had a massive impact on the fate of representations of Chineseness in the contemporary world and has been of major significance in the emergence of the dissident discourse of cultural China.

taken by the existing political regime in China, a course almost universally perceived as wrong and, provocatively, as somehow having a debilitating effect on the fate of Chineseness. According to Tu, the Chinese diaspora will have to take the lead in the modernization of Chineseness. "While the overseas Chinese may seem forever peripheral to the meaning of being Chinese," he writes, in an implicit attack on the center, "they [can] assume an effective role in creatively constructing a new vision of Chineseness that is more in tune with Chinese history and in sympathetic resonance with Chinese culture" ("Cultural China," 34).

On the other hand, there is also the reverse question of how to sinicize modernity—how, that is, to create a modern world that is truly Chinese and not simply an imitation of the West. The radical iconoclasm of the May Fourth movement—which was based on the assumption that China's modernization could only be realized through a wholesale process of Westernization and a simultaneous renunciation of Chinese culture—is now regarded as completely outdated. Instead, inspiration is drawn from the economic rise of East Asia to look for models of modernity—Chinese modernity—which pose challenging cultural alternatives to the Western model. Tu refers specifically to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. The experiences of these countries suggest for Tu that "active participation in the economic, political, social, and cultural life of a thoroughly modernized community does not necessarily conflict with being authentically Chinese," signaling the possibility that "modernization may enhance rather than weaken Chineseness" ("Cultural China," 8).

The privileging of the periphery—the diaspora—as the new cultural center of Chineseness in Tu's discourse is an important challenge to traditional, centrist, and essentialist conceptions of Chinese culture and identity. Yet I want to suggest that the very postulation of a cultural China as the name for a transnational intellectual community held together not just by a "common awareness" but also by "a common ancestry and a shared cultural background, . . . a transnational network to explore the meaning of being Chinese in a global context" ("Cultural China," 25), is a move that is driven, and motivated, by another kind of centrism, this time along notionally cultural lines.

An important element here is the continued orientation of, if not obsession with, the self-declared periphery-as-center in the discourse of cultural China in relation to the old center, even if this center is so passionately denied its traditional authority and legitimacy. "What mainland China

eventually will become remains an overriding concern for all intellectuals in cultural China" ("Cultural China," 33), writes Tu, and in this ongoing preoccupation with the center, the periphery not only reproduces unintentionally its own profound entanglement with the former; it also, by this very preoccupation, effects its own unwarranted internal homogenization and limits the much more radical potential that a diasporic perspective allows. In other words, while the aim would seem to be to rescue Chineseness from China, to de-hegemonize geopolitical China, which is found wanting in its own, heavy-handed politics of modernizing Chineseness/sinicizing modernity, the rescue operation implies the projection of a new, alternative center, a de-centered center, whose name is *cultural* China, but China nevertheless. It is clear, then, that the all-too-familiar "obsession with China," which has been a key disposition in the work of Chinese intellectuals in the twentieth century, remains at work here with undiminished intensity.[14] This obsession, which is so profoundly inscribed in the psychic structure of a wounded Chinese civilizationalism, "privileges China's problems as uniquely Chinese, which lays absolute claim to the loyalty of Chinese in all parts of the world."[15]

According to Leo Ou-fan Lee, who came from Taiwan to the United States as a graduate student more than thirty years ago and who describes himself as "a voluntary exile situated forever on the fringes of China," the "excessive obsession with their homeland has deprived Chinese writers abroad of their rare privilege of being truly on the periphery." For Lee, it is only by being truly on the periphery that one can create a distance "sufficiently removed from the center of the obsession," allowing one to "subject the obsession itself to artistic treatment."[16] From this point of view, cultural China definitely does *not* occupy a truly peripheral position at all. On the contrary. An overwhelming desire—bordering, indeed, on obsession—to somehow maintain, redeem, and revitalize the notion of Chineseness as a marker of common culture and identity in a rapidly postmodernizing world is the driving force behind Tu's conception of cultural China. While the meaning of Chineseness is defined explicitly as fluid and changeable, the category of Chineseness itself is emphatically not in question here: In-

14. C. T. Hsia, "Obsession with China: The Moral Burden of Modern Chinese Literature," in *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 2d ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1971), 533–54.

15. Leo Ou-fan Lee, "On the Margins of Chinese Discourse: Some Personal Thoughts on the Cultural Meaning of the Periphery," in Tu Wei-ming, *The Living Tree*, 232.

16. Leo Ou-fan Lee, "On the Margins of Chinese Discourse," 226, 232.

deed, the notion of cultural China seems to be devised precisely to exalt and enlarge the global significance of Chineseness, raising its importance by imbuing it with new, modernized meanings and heightening its relevance by expanding its field of application far beyond the given spatial boundaries of geopolitical China.

The Chinese diaspora, as we have seen, is posited as one of the key pillars of the imagined community of cultural China. It is noteworthy that Tu persistently accentuates the quest for Chineseness as a central motif in his wide-ranging discussion of variant diaspora narratives. In the case of Southeast Asian families of Chinese descent remigrating from Malaysia or Vietnam to North America, Western Europe, or Australia, he sees the "irony of their not returning to their ancestral homeland but moving farther away from China with the explicit intention of preserving their cultural identity" ("Cultural China," 24). In mainland Chinese intellectuals' decision not to return to China after the Tiananmen event in 1989, he reads a "conscious and, for some, impulsive choice to realize one's Chineseness by moving far away from one's homeland" ("Cultural China," 24). But isn't Tu being too insistent in foregrounding the salience of Chineseness in the configuration of these diasporic flows and movements? Doesn't this emphasis unduly confine diverse strands of the diaspora to the narrow and claustrophobic shaft of a projected, if highly abstract, "obsession with Chineseness"?

The organic metaphor of "the living tree" to describe cultural China provides us with a clear insight into the problem I am hinting at here. A living tree grows and changes over time; it constantly develops new branches and stems that shoot outward, in different directions, from the solid core of the tree trunk, which in turn feeds itself on an invisible but life-sustaining set of roots. Without roots, there would be no life, no new leaves. The metaphor of the living tree dramatically imparts the ultimate existential dependence of the periphery on the center, the diaspora on the homeland. Furthermore, what this metaphor emphasizes is continuity over discontinuity: In the end, it all flows back to the roots.

In thus imputing an essential continuity and constancy in the diaspora's quest for Chineseness, the discourse of cultural China risks homogenizing what is otherwise a complex range of dispersed, heterogeneous, and not necessarily commensurable diaspora narratives—a homogeneity for which the sign of Chineseness provides the a priori and taken-for-granted guarantee. But in this way, the hegemony of "China" (cultural, if not geopolitical, China) is surreptitiously reinforced, not undercut. As Tu rightly notes, "Hegemonic discourse, charged with an air of arrogance, discrimi-

nates not only by excluding but also by including. Often it is in the act of inclusion that the art of symbolic control is more insidiously exercised." (preface, vii). Tu refers here to the coercive manner in which the People's Republic includes a variety of others (such as the non-Han minorities inside the borders of China) within the orbit of its official political control. But a wholesale incorporation of the diaspora under the inclusive rubric of "cultural China" can be an equally hegemonic move, which works to truncate and suppress complex realities and experiences that cannot possibly be fully and meaningfully contained within the singular category of "Chinese."

Ironically, Tu recognizes the fact that not all members of the diaspora would feel comfortable with their inclusion in the grand design of cultural China. Indeed, he writes, "learning to be truly Chinese may prove to be too heavy a psychological burden for minorities, foreign-born, non-Mandarin speakers, or nonconformists; for such people, remaining outside or on the periphery may seem preferable" (preface, vii–viii). Let's ignore the surprising return to cultural essentialism—the ghost of the "truly Chinese"—here. What we must start to question is the very validity and usefulness of the spatial matrix of center and periphery that is so constitutive of the conventional thinking about the Chinese diaspora; we must give the living tree a good shake.

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The condition of diaspora—literally, "the scattering of seeds"—produces subjects for whom notions of identity and belonging are radically unsettled. As James Clifford puts it in his very useful discussion of contemporary theorizing on diasporas, "Diasporic subjects are distinct versions of modern, transnational, intercultural experience." In this sense, diasporic subjects are exemplary cases of the multiple and hybrid subjectivities so favored by postmodern and poststructuralist theory. Interestingly, however, as I have discussed above, a dominant tendency in thinking about the Chinese diaspora is to suppress what Clifford calls "the lateral axes of diaspora," the ways in which diasporic identities are produced through creolization and hybridization, through both conflictive and collaborative coexistence and intermixture with other cultures, in favor of a hierarchical centering and a linear rerouting back to the imagined ancestral home. Such a conceptual focus on the center, Clifford notes, inhibits an understanding of the significance of diaspora cultures in the late twentieth century. As he puts it, "The centering of diasporas around an axis of origin and return overrides the

specific local interactions (identifications and ruptures, both constructive and defensive) necessary for the maintenance of diasporic social forms. The empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling *here* assumes solidarity and connection *there*. But *there* is not necessarily a single place or an exclusivist nation."[17]

Indeed, for Clifford, the most important aspect of diasporic formations is the multiplicity of "here's" and "there's," which together make up "decentered, partially overlapping networks of communication, travel, trade, and kinship [that] connect the several communities of a transnational 'people.'"[18] The metaphor of the living tree is not at all suited to capture the features of such dispersed, discontinuous, fractal cultural formations. Interestingly, Paul Gilroy has chosen the image of ships as a starting point for his groundbreaking work on the African diaspora: "ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organizing symbol" for the particular diasporic formation that has developed historically as a result of the transatlantic slave trade, a formation he calls "the black Atlantic."[19] What is highlighted in this image is a virtual space of continuous mobility, of crisscrossing flows and multiple horizontal exchanges between different sites of black diasporic concentration, in which there is no center. I am not suggesting here that a similar image should be adopted for the Chinese diaspora—indeed, the image of the ship is particularly appropriate in Gilroy's context for its evocation of the African diaspora's founding moment of the Middle Passage—but this comparative note might serve to illuminate the fact that the metaphor of the living tree is by no means ideologically innocent. It could encourage us to problematize the predominance of centrist and organicist conceptions of Chineseness, Chinese culture, and Chinese identity in diaspora.[20]

Leo Lee, with his claimed desire to be "truly on the periphery," comes close to embodying the diasporic Chinese subject who has renounced the debilitating obsession with the center. "By virtue of my self-chosen marginality I can never fully identify myself with any center," he writes. He de-

17. James Clifford, "Diasporas," in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 266, 269, Clifford's emphases.
18. Clifford, "Diasporas," 269.
19. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 4.
20. Gilroy explicitly and passionately rejects Africa-centered discourses of the black diaspora, which are highly influential among some African American intellectuals in the United States (as in the idea of Africentricity).

fines his marginality in relation to two centers, China and America: "On the peripheries of both countries, I feel compelled to engage actively in a dialogue with both cultures." Freed from the usual obsession with China, Lee declares himself "unbounded" by his homeland. Instead, he advocates what he calls a "Chinese cosmopolitanism," a cosmopolitanism "that embraces both a fundamental intellectual commitment to Chinese culture and a multicultural receptivity, which effectively cuts across all conventional national boundaries."[21] Cosmopolitanism, of course, is an idea warranting a discussion of its own (which I cannot provide here), but what is the surplus gained in the addition of the word *Chinese* to *cosmopolitanism* here? And what does Lee mean by a fundamental (that is to say, a priori, fundamentalist) intellectual commitment to *Chinese* culture? What makes Lee's vantage point so interestingly contradictory is that while he places himself on the margins of both "China" and "America," he does this from a position of unquestioned certainty about his own ontological Chineseness and his (inherited?) proprietorship of "Chinese culture." Once a Chinese, always a Chinese?

Ouyang Yu, a poet and a specialist in English and Chinese literature, who moved from mainland China to Australia many years ago, actively resists such ethnic determinism. "Where is the way out for people such as me?" he asks. "Is our future predetermined to be Chinese no matter how long we reside overseas?" Ouyang expresses a desire to contribute to his present culture—Australian culture—"more than as just a Chinese." But, he tells us, he has been prevented from doing so: "My effort to 'English' myself has met with strong resistance from all sorts of people ever since I came here. Even if I wanted to be English, they wouldn't let me be. I would find my frequent criticism of China was not appreciated. On many occasions, I found people preaching that I should be proud of being a Chinese. . . . I was made to feel uneasy with my disloyalty."[22]

This story highlights how difficult it can be for people like Ouyang to embrace a truly diasporized, hybrid identity, because the dominant Western culture is just as prone to the rigid assumptions and attitudes of cultural essentialism as is Chinese culture. In other words, there seems to be a cultural prohibition of de-sinicization, at least for intellectuals from mainland China or Taiwan, such as Ouyang Yu and Leo Lee, who have moved

21. Leo Ou-fan Lee, "On the Margins," 231, 229.

22. Ouyang Yu, "Lost in the Translation," *Australian Review of Books* 2, no. 9 (October 1997): 10, 35, 10.

to the West. It would be interesting to speculate why this should be so. It would be easy—and perhaps too simplistic—to suggest the antagonizing work of racism or Orientalism here; their capacity as forces that perpetuate and reinforce essentialist notions of the Chinese other should not be underestimated. However, the important point to make here is that Lee's ideal of "being truly on the periphery" is inherently contradictory, if not a virtual impossibility, because his notion of the periphery is still grounded in the recognition of a center of sorts, the de-territorialized center of Chinese culture or, perhaps, of Chineseness itself.

While Lee and Ouyang now live in different parts of the (Western) world, their diasporic Chineseness is still clearly linked to their obvious biographical rootedness in the cultural formations of the territorial center. Moreover, even though they no longer live in the center, their subjectivities are still steeped in Chineseness: Being first generations migrants, they possess the linguistic and cultural capital that is generally recognized as authentically Chinese. Lee and Ouyang *know* that they are Chinese, and they are known by others as such. While both express a desire to go beyond their Chinese identities (Lee, by staking a claim to a Chinese cosmopolitanism, and Ouyang, in wanting to be more than *just* Chinese), their bottom-line Chineseness is not in doubt. Theirs, in other words, is a relatively straightforward narrative of (self-)exile from the homeland, and as such they are still easily incorporated in Tu's cultural China and firmly attached to one of the branches of the living tree.

Without wanting to devalue the de-centering discourses articulated by intellectuals such as Lee and Ouyang, I would nevertheless argue that there are other narratives that tell of much more radical, complicated, and checkered routes of diasporic dispersal. In these narratives, the very validity of the category of Chineseness is in question, its status as a signifier of identity thrown into radical doubt. It is in these narratives that the diasporic paradigm is pushed to its limits, to the extent that any residual attachment to the center tends to fade.

The Peranakan Chinese in Southeast Asia are often mentioned as one distinct group of Chinese people who have lost their Chinese cultural heritage and have gone "native." The Peranakans are an old diaspora. From the tenth century onward, traders, mostly men from South China, visited various Southeast Asian ports. At first they remained temporarily and rarely established permanent Chinese communities, but between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, Chinese trading quarters in cities such as Bangkok, Manila, and Batavia became large and permanent, aided by the ascen-

dancy of European colonialism in the region. Over the course of centuries, they intermarried with local women, began to speak the local languages, and adapted to local lifestyle (while selectively holding on to some Chinese traditions). This is not the place to enter into a detailed historical discussion of this important diaspora; the question to ask here is, Why are they still called Chinese? As David Yen-ho Wu observes, "While the 'pure' Chinese may question the legitimacy of the *peranakans'* claim to being authentic Chinese, the *peranakans* themselves are quite confident about the authenticity of their Chineseness. They are often heard referring to themselves as 'we Chinese.'"[23] Having been born into a Peranakan family myself, I can testify to the correctness of this observation: There is an instinctiveness to our (sometimes reluctant) identification as Chinese that eludes any rationalization and defies any doubt.[24] Yet it is a fraught and ambivalent Chineseness, one that is to all intents and purposes completely severed from the nominal center, China. In contemporary Indonesia, for example, where the state deploys a strict assimilation policy to eradicate Chinese difference within the national culture (for example, by banning the use of Chinese characters from public display), Peranakan Chinese are said to "see themselves as Indonesian rather than Chinese, [but] recognize their Chinese origin, albeit knowing very little of Chinese culture and tradition."[25] And for many Peranakans, "China" has no relevance at all in their lives, so what meaning does the notion of "Chinese origin" still carry?[26]

23. David Yen-ho Wu, "The Construction of Chinese and Non-Chinese Identities," in Tu Wei-ming, *The Living Tree*, 161.

24. See my "On Not Speaking Chinese."

25. Mely G. Tan, "The Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia: Issues of Identity," in *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1997), 51.

26. Suryadinata mentions a survey that reveals that most Southeast Asian Chinese capitalists who have invested in mainland China are those who are "culturally Chinese." Peranakan Chinese have, by and large, been prevented from this "return" for economic purposes because, "having lost their command of Chinese, [they] are unable to communicate with the mainland Chinese" (Suryadinata, "Ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia," in *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians*, 16). Sadly, as has been made all too clear by the recent anti-Chinese mass violence that erupted throughout Indonesia in early 1998 as a consequence of a severe economic downturn, which saw massive price increases, a rise in unemployment, and social chaos in the country, the meaning of being of Chinese origin in this context can all too easily become related to fear and scapegoatism. I partly address the complex and ambivalent positioning of Indonesian Chinese in the Chinese diaspora in a forthcoming paper entitled "Indonesia on My Mind: Diasporic Intellectualism and the Politics of Hybridity."

Wu argues that two sentiments identify those who see themselves as Chinese. The first, a culturalist sentiment, is a feeling of connectedness with the fate of China as a nation, a patriotism associated with "a sense of fulfillment, a sense of being the bearers of a cultural heritage handed down from their ancestors, of being essentially separate from non-Chinese."[27] But it is clear that this sentiment does not apply to those in the diaspora who not only have lost most of their cultural heritage, language being chief among them, but also do not have a great attachment to the ancestral homeland at all, while still identifying themselves (and being identified) as Chinese. The Peranakans in Indonesia are a case in point, but so, for that matter, is William Yang, the "Australian-Chinese" photographer, with whose story I began this essay.

Yang's story illuminates the precarious meaning of Chineseness at the outer edge of the diaspora. If Yang, brought up the Western way in small-town Australia, can be described as Chinese at all, then his is a Chineseness that is stripped of any substantial cultural content. This, of course, is the case with millions of "ethnic Chinese" throughout the West, those who have settled in all corners of the world in a checkered history of several centuries of dispersal from the original "homeland." To undersand Yang's Chineseness in terms of his imaginary and subjective relationship to this imputed homeland, which can only be an extremely tenuous relationship anyway, would be missing the point altogether. As his own account of the formative event shows, he came to know about his Chinese identity only because someone else, arguably a non-Chinese, labeled him as such, to Yang's own initial surprise and to his later chagrin, when his mother confirmed that he *was*, indeed, Chinese. In other words, Yang's identification as Chinese took place in a context of coexistence and copresence with others, others who were *different* from him. Yang's Chineseness, then, is fundamentally relational and externally defined, as much as it is partial. Its boundaries are fuzzy. Its meaning, uncertain. Yang both is and is not Chinese, depending on how he is perceived by himself and by others. But what is it, we might ask, that still ultimately determines the possibility of Yang's categorization as Chinese in the first place?

This brings us to the second sentiment, which, according to Wu, is common to those identifying themselves as Chinese. This is the sentiment that Chinese share of seeing themselves as members of "the Chinese race"

27. David Yen-ho Wu, "Construction of Chinese and Non-Chinese Identities," 149.

or "the Chinese people."[28] We are returned here to a concept that, as I remarked earlier, refuses to go away from social discourse despite its repudiation as a "scientific" concept in the West: race. So when Yang's mother affirmed sternly that he *was* Chinese, his brother adding insult to injury by informing him that he'd "better get used to it," the only tangible markers of distinction could only have been those associated with "race." The glee with which the schoolkid, most probably white, could yell "Ching Chong Chinaman" at Yang was based on the former's dominant positioning within the prevailing social network, which gave him the *power* to offend in this way, but it also depended on the availability of some clues that enabled him to single out the guileless William as an appropriate object of such an attack: What else could it have been but his "yellow skin" and "slanty eyes," the key "racial" markers for Chineseness in the West?

While scientific racism has long been discarded, then, it is in situations like these that the notion of race continues to thrive in everyday life, where race theories operate in practice as popular epistemologies of ethnic distinction, discrimination, and identification—which are often matched by more or less passionate modes of self-identification. The idea of being part of a race produces a sense of belonging based on naturalized and fictive notions of kinship and heredity; in Chinese discourse, of course, this is eminently represented by the enduring myth of the unity of the Chinese people as children of the Yellow Emperor.[29] What Rey Chow calls the "myth of consanguinity"[30] has very real effects on the self-conception of diasporic subjects, as it provides them with a magical solution to the sense of dislocation and rootlessness that many of them experience in their lives. Yang describes it this way: "I've been back to China and I've had the experience that the ex-patriot [*sic*] American writer Amy Tan describes; when she first set foot in China, she immediately became Chinese. Although it didn't quite happen like that for me I know what Amy's talking about. The experience is very powerful and specific, it has to do with land, with standing on the soil of the ancestors and feeling the blood of China run through your veins."[31]

28. David Yen-ho Wu, "Construction of Chinese and Non-Chinese Identities," 150.

29. See Etienne Balibar, "The Nation Form: History and Ideology," in Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class, Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991), 99. For a discussion of Chinese conceptions of race, see Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992).

30. Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 24.

31. William Yang, *Sadness*, 23.

In this extraordinary narrative of return to the imposing center, Yang constructs himself as a prodigal son who had lost his way, a fallen leaf that has blown back to the soil where the living tree has its roots. In this narrative, race—blood—operates as the degree zero of Chineseness to which the diasporic subject can resort to recover his imaginary connectedness with China and to substantiate, through the fiction of race, what otherwise would be a culturally empty identity.

But, as Chow has rightly pointed out, "the submission to consanguinity means the surrender of agency"[32]: The fiction of racial belonging would imply a reductionist interpellation (in the Althusserian sense of the term) that constructs the subject as passively and lineally (pre)determined by blood, not as an active historical agent whose subjectivity is continuously shaped through his or her engagements within multiple, complex, and contradictory social relations that are overdetermined by political, economic, and cultural circumstances in highly particular spatiotemporal contexts. Race, in other words, provides a reductionist, essentializing discursive shortcut, in which, to paraphrase Stuart Hall, the signifier *Chinese* is "torn from its historical, cultural and political embedding and lodged in a biologically constituted racial category."[33] In the imagining of "the Chinese race," differences that have been constructed by heterogeneous diasporic conditions and experiences are suppressed in favor of illusory modes of bonding and belonging. Recently, I had a taxi ride in Sydney with a driver who was from mainland China. We mutually recognized each other as Chinese, but I had to tell him that, unfortunately, I couldn't speak Chinese. "Well," he said, "it will be easy for you to learn. After all, you have Chinese blood." As if my imputed racial identity would automatically and naturally give me access to some enormous reservoir of cultural capital!

As Balibar has remarked, "The racial community has a tendency to represent itself as one big family or as the common envelope of family relations."[34] Indeed, there is an equivalence between the organicist metaphor of the living tree and the lineal notion of race-as-family that is profoundly problematic if we are to interrogate Chineseness effectively from the diasporic point of view. In his work on the African diaspora, Gilroy has criticized "the dubious appeal to family as the connective tissue of black experience and history," as it disables black intellectuals from developing alternative

32. Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 24.
33. Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" 472.
34. Balibar, "The Nation Form," 100.

perspectives on black lives in diaspora, which, in Gilroy's view, must be grounded in explicitly disorganic, hybrid, and synthetic notions of identity and community, not in some cozy, familial notion of blackness.[35] Similarly, Hall has argued against "reaching for an essentialized racial identity of which we think we can be certain" as a guarantee for political solidarity or cultural unity. Instead, the very category of "black" needs to be interrogated: "Blackness as a sign is never enough. What does that black subject do, how does it act, how does it think politically . . . being black isn't really good enough for me: I want to know what your cultural politics are."[36]

In the same vein, if we are to work on the multiple, complex, over-determined politics of "being Chinese" in today's complicated and mixed-up world, and if we are to seize on the radical theoretical promise of the diasporic perspective, we must not only resist the convenient and comforting reduction of Chineseness as a seemingly natural and certain racial essence; we must also be prepared to interrogate the very significance of the category of Chineseness per se as a predominant marker of identification and distinction. Not only does the moment of pure Chineseness never strike; there are also moments—occurring regularly in the lives of those "truly on the periphery," in Leo Lee's words—in which the attribution of Chineseness does not make sense in the first place. The liberating productivity of the diasporic perspective lies, according to Rey Chow, in the means it provides "to *unlearn* that submission to one's ethnicity such as 'Chineseness' as the ultimate signified."[37] This will allow diasporic subjects to break out of the prisonhouse of Chineseness and embrace lives—personal, social, political—"more than as just a Chinese" (Ouyang), to construct open-ended and plural "post-Chinese" identities through investments in continuing cross-influences of diverse, lateral, unanticipated intercultural encounters in the world at large. As it happens, Yang, who now calls himself "bicultural," does occupy such a position in his public life. His celebrated photographs of friends suffering from AIDS testify to his identification with Western gay culture, which he represents as entangled with, but also distinct from, the cultural identifications derived from his ethnicity, and articulate a hybrid,

35. Paul Gilroy, "It's a Family Affair," in *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993), 203.

36. Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" 474. The quotation on blackness is attributed to black British filmmaker Isaac Julien.

37. Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 25; Chow's emphasis.

disaggregated, multiple identity that is uncontainable, in any meaningful sense, by the category of "Chinese."[38]

As I have put it elsewhere, "If I am inescapably Chinese by *descent*, I am only sometimes Chinese by *consent*. When and how is a matter of politics."[39] The politics involved here reaches far beyond the identity politics of individual subjects, in diaspora or otherwise. What is at stake are the possibilities and responsibilities of these subjects to participate, as citizens of the world, in the ongoing political construction of world futures. As we enter the twenty-first century, we face ever greater challenges in light of growing global economic disparity, continuing environmental degradation, rapid technological change, increasingly massive transnational migrations, and shifting geopolitical (im)balances of power. There is no necessary advantage in a Chinese identification here; indeed, depending on context and necessity, it may be politically mandatory to refuse the primordial interpellation of belonging to the largest race of the world, the "family" of "the Chinese people." In such situations, the significant question is not only, Can one say no to China? but also, Can one, when called for, say no to Chineseness?[40]

38. Yang's book *Sadness* (which was originally presented as a one-man slide show) alternately traces two stories of his life—one about his Chinese family and the other about his gay community in Sydney.

39. Ien Ang, "On Not Speaking Chinese," 18.

40. The first question is posed by Rey Chow, "Can One Say No to China?" *New Literary History* 28, no. 1 (winter 1997): 147–51. On the second question, I am thinking of, for example, the ideological role Chinese essentialisms and chauvinisms have played in the rising power of ethnic Chinese business networks throughout the Asia-Pacific region and its exclusionary and potentially oppressive implications for non-Chinese Asians. See Aihwa Ong and Donald M. Nonini, eds., *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Arif Dirlik, "Critical Reflections on 'Chinese Capitalism' as a Paradigm," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 3, no. 3 (1997): 303–30.