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PREFACE

The International Research Centre for Cultural Studies (IRCCS) is pleased to announce the launch of the inaugural issue of the IRCCS Working Papers Series in Cultural Studies. This issue features contributions from esteemed scholars and emerging voices from Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and the United Kingdom.

The Working Papers Series aims to publicize and inspire, fostering a vibrant exchange of ideas that invigorates cultural research. By circulating these working papers, we encourage the exploration of innovative concepts and methodologies, including pilot studies that test new hypotheses. This initiative is designed to inspire early-career researchers—PhD, EdD, and MA students—by supporting them in the publication process and refining their work for submission to professional peer-reviewed journals.

Through a collegial review process facilitated by an editorial board and the Centre's members, we provide authors with constructive feedback that paves the way for the successful publication of their research. In doing so, we cultivate an environment where new thoughts and concepts can flourish within the field of cultural studies.

On behalf of the IRCCS, we invite scholars to engage with the thought-provoking abstracts presented in our inaugural issue, which traverse a rich tapestry of themes from care to cultural health, literary criticism, and digital humanities.

In his paper, Erni advocates for a citizen-centric health paradigm, emphasizing the empowerment of individuals and communities through diverse health discourse. Bagulaya

explores how narratives of care intertwine with the calamities depicted in Delgado's disaster novel, revealing the intricate layers of human experience in crisis.

Guan applies Bourdieu's theory to analyze how Chinese students navigate digital landscapes for language acquisition, highlighting disparities in access and engagement. Tabunan extends the notion of "righting" within the framework of radical human rights, examining how Ilokano literature reflects on the traumatic memories of martial law in the Philippines. Li revisits critical concepts of self-representation among Asian writers, interrogating the dynamics of appeal to Western audiences. Finally, Cheung delves into the cultural implications of prompting as a form of artistic expression.

These abstracts serve as an intellectual appetizer, inviting readers to delve deeper into the full texts. We encourage curious minds to reach out to the authors for a more enriching exploration of these vital topics.

Jose Duke Bagulaya, PhD

Editor

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*These are Extended Abstracts only. Interested readers may request the full papers by contacting the authors directly.

Citizen Self-Health for Sustainable Care in Hong Kong:

Exploring Health Discourses from Below

John Nguyet Erni (The Education University of Hong Kong)

In Hong Kong, the phenomenon of ordinary citizens managing their health through community engagement has emerged as a significant social phenomenon that predates the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis has catalyzed an explosion of health information and discourses, reshaping cultural meanings of “good health,” physical and mental vigor, resilience, health competency, and community well-being. This transformation has led to vibrant discussions about health issues occurring both online and offline, in workplaces, and among family, friends, and social media acquaintances. These interactions have created a unique *de facto* public health culture that operates alongside formal medical establishments, often revolving around word-of-mouth information and knowledge sharing.

The *Primary Healthcare Blueprint*, recently promulgated by Hong Kong’s Health Bureau in 2023, emphasizes a critical shift in mindset from treatment-oriented to prevention-oriented healthcare. This initiative aligns with the growing recognition of the importance of citizen engagement in health management, particularly in fostering a culture of self-health among residents. In this context, our project adopts a critical health-humanities theoretical approach to explore the evolving sphere of “citizen self-health.” This concept refers to the community-based discourse surrounding health, emphasizing practical information sharing and deliberation aimed at achieving “good health.” By fostering discussions around self-health, we aim to raise health literacy among community members, empowering them to navigate the complexities of the healthcare landscape.

The communicative sphere of citizen self-health, however, is not without its challenges. It encompasses a range of speculative and anecdotal claims, as well as misinformation, which can undermine health autonomy and propagate health risks. To better understand these dynamics, we conducted a pilot qualitative study that examined prevalent community discourses through focus group discussions with four socioculturally and economically diverse groups: young adults, the elderly, mothers/housewives, and ethnic minority residents. This diverse representation allowed us to scrutinize how different demographic groups assess the value, risks, and sustainability of health discourses emerging from their communities.

Our findings reveal that personal networks, particularly friends and family, play a crucial role in the search for vital healthcare information across all demographic groups. However, the

degree of trust in these sources and the preferred platforms for obtaining health information vary significantly. For instance, mothers and housewives often rely on community recommendations and local resources, while ethnic minorities engage with community institutions that provide culturally relevant health services. In contrast, the elderly population tends to prioritize professional healthcare advice, seeking guidance from established medical practitioners. Meanwhile, young adults show a strong inclination towards digital platforms, actively seeking health information online and utilizing resources like social media.

Despite the appreciation expressed by our informants for the public healthcare system in Hong Kong—highlighting aspects such as personalized care for mothers and housewives, community support for ethnic minorities, affordability for the elderly, and technological advancements for youth—significant challenges persist. These challenges include overwhelmed healthcare providers, long waiting times, inequity in access to services, and systemic inefficiencies. Such issues collectively reveal a nuanced landscape of healthcare experiences and expectations that vary among demographic groups.

The elderly, for example, often express concerns regarding the cost-effectiveness of healthcare services and the availability of targeted support. Programs like the Elderly Health Care Voucher, which offer free consultations, are viewed positively, yet the frustrations with appointment scheduling and long wait times contribute to a sense of dissatisfaction. For mothers and housewives, the establishment of long-term relationships with healthcare providers is valued, but the perception of rushed diagnoses and inattentiveness due to provider overload presents substantial barriers to effective care.

Ethnic minority residents, on the other hand, emphasize the importance of community-driven initiatives that honour their cultural heritage while providing essential healthcare literacy. They often face unique challenges such as language barriers and limited access to information, which can hinder their ability to navigate the healthcare system effectively. This demographic's reliance on community support networks, such as local health centers and mosques, reflects a community-oriented perspective that contrasts with the more individualized approaches of other groups.

Young adults, while appreciating the technological advancements in healthcare, particularly telehealth options that gained prominence during the pandemic, express concerns about the reliability of information accessed through digital platforms. Their engagement with online health narratives often leads to a blend of scepticism and empowerment, as they navigate the complexities of health information in a digital age.

Ultimately, our pilot study highlights that empowering individuals and communities through a citizen health approach—focused on cultivating agency, enhancing health literacy,

participatory policy formation, leveraging digital narratives, and promoting resilience—can significantly improve healthcare engagement and equity in Hong Kong. By recognizing the diverse health information preferences and trust levels among different demographic groups, stakeholders can develop targeted interventions that address the specific needs and challenges faced by each group.

The concept of citizen self-health aligns with the broader goals of the Hong Kong government's *Primary Healthcare Blueprint*, which aims to promote a shift from a treatment-oriented to a prevention-oriented healthcare system. This initiative underscores the importance of active citizen engagement in health management and positions community health as a shared responsibility. By rethinking citizens as active participants in their health journeys, we can harness their insights and experiences to create a more effective and equitable healthcare system.

In this context, the importance of health literacy emerges as a vital component in countering misinformation and promoting informed decision-making. Understanding the complexities of health literacy, particularly among minority, elderly, and disadvantaged populations, is crucial for developing holistic interventions that reduce healthcare inequities. Furthermore, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration that integrates insights from medicine, social sciences, education, and cultural studies is essential for empowering individuals and communities. By adopting a critical humanistic and multicultural perspective on public health, we can enable citizens in Hong Kong to engage proactively in their health, ultimately paving the way for a resilient and equitable healthcare landscape that benefits all residents.

In conclusion, this study illuminates the potential of a citizen health approach to not only enhance healthcare engagement but also to address systemic inequalities through community empowerment and participatory practices. As Hong Kong navigates the complexities of its public health landscape, embracing the voices and experiences of its citizens will be crucial in shaping a more inclusive and responsive healthcare system.

Keywords:

Cultural Health Discourses; Community Health Practices; Citizen Self-Health Narratives; Health Literacy in Culture; Socio-Cultural Health Inequalities

The Narrative Structure of the Archipelagic Disaster Unconscious:

Disaster and Care in Daryll Delgado's novel, *Remains*

Jose Duke Bagulaya (The Education University of Hong Kong)

Humanity has just witnessed and experienced a real world-wide disaster— the COVID Pandemic. Images of medical personnel in masks and medical suits are still fresh in the mind. The wailing of ambulance sirens still reverberates in the ears. News of the deaths of family members and friends still bring pain and regret in the heart. The experience of the pandemic brought home the idea that disaster is not something that happens in some remote world and only to people we hardly know. This time disaster was no longer simply imagined. Disaster was something we had to live through, a condition that we had to endure and survive.

It is in this post-pandemic context that Daryll Delgado's novel *Remains* must be reread. Published in 2019, the novel *Remains* aimed at representing the aftermath of the Haiyan (locally known as Typhoon Yolanda) disaster. The novel grew from early texts written two months after the storm surge that hit Tacloban City in Central Philippines on November 8, 2013 to a twenty-five chapter narrative published in 2019. Barely a year could pass after its first printing when another catastrophe struck, killing millions around the globe, thereby globalizing the experience of disaster.

According to the International Law Commission, “disaster” means “a calamitous event or series of events resulting in widespread loss of life, great human suffering and distress, mass displacement, or large-scale material or environmental damage, thereby seriously disrupting the functioning of society”. This definition describes disaster as a calamitous event that causes widespread loss of life, human suffering, mass displacement, which lead to society's failure to function. These elements can be divided into a) a calamitous event; b) causing widespread loss of life, human suffering, or mass displacement or environmental damage; c) disrupting the functioning of society.

Of the three elements, the most critical would be the element of “disrupting the functioning of society”, because it qualifies the calamitous event. Nonetheless, whatever the intent of the framers of the articles might have been, the word “disruption” may be an understatement. It suggests a momentary break from normal functioning like a short disruption of the supply of water or electricity. This connotation of the legal definition may not be apt in describing a real disaster. Indeed, disaster stories have been described as “narratives of collapse.” Rather than just a simple disruption, cities are reduced to rubble; survivors panic and struggle to survive,

and even countries sink. Thus, in contrast to the International Law Commission's subdued definition of "disaster" as a mere disruption of the functioning of society, film and literature's representations reveal a vision of social, material, and spiritual collapse.

Both these senses of disaster as disruptions and collapse inform the narrative of *Remains* (2019), the first novel to retell the aftermath of the Haiyan storm surge that drowned the populated shorelines of Leyte Island, killing no less than ten thousand people, a majority being residents of Tacloban City. With maximum sustained winds of 195 miles per hour with gusts reaching 235 miles per hour, Haiyan was considered "the strongest storm to ever make landfall anywhere in the world in modern records." The typhoon winds would siphon the waters and release it upon landfall, crushing houses and carrying away thousands into the sea. *Remains* attempts to make sense of this catastrophe. Like other postcolonial disaster fictions, it informs readers about the catastrophic event and the humanitarian interventions, both international and national, that came after as a response to the event. More importantly, it does not only tell readers something about the catastrophe but also help those who might have gone through the disaster manage their own experience through narration. From this point of view, the fictional narrative attempts to mitigate the impact of the catastrophe on the writer as well as on the victims, thereby reshaping traumatic experience and pushing it into what Pallavi Rastogi calls "the disaster unconscious".

This paper argues that Daryll Delgado's novel *Remains* reveals the narrative structure of an archipelagic "disaster unconscious" through which notions of care are interrogated. Using the Yolanda disaster as a central event and Tacloban as the site of traumas, it weaves a story with two narrative levels corresponding to the narrator's experience of a present disaster and her repressed experience of a past personal disaster. These narratives of disaster are bound by the same visions of disruption and collapse of an order, both temporal and spatial (archipelagic), that result in displacement and suffering. Beneath the two narratives of disaster, the novel then unveils the absent cause of the narrator's personal disaster, the national and archipelagic disaster of Philippine History: the experience of dictatorship and its collapse. Through these narrative levels, plural temporalities, and modes of experience, the novel interrogates the role of care in surviving disasters even as it expresses a cynicism that questions not only care subjects and agents, but also the authenticity of care acts. The novel affirms a positive concept of unconditional and subversive care that is reflected in both the narrative closure and the very structure of a complex narration of disasters which opens a *via regia* to the unconscious of Philippine history. Through its narration of these levels of disasters, various ways of caring for the other are explored. The novel critiques the caring that is parasitic on the victims of disaster. It questions all the characters' motives, including the narrator's self-reflexive criticism. Nonetheless, while the novel encourages skepticism of our own care acts, it also shows images of authentic caring that is unconditional and

unchanging amidst disruptions and collapse of society and family. Moreover, it suggests that care is far from being merely soothing. It can also be disruptive of dominant structures and endanger all. It can subvert class divisions and make all human life grievable. Indeed, one recognizes that care has its own subversive ways.

Viewed from outside of the narrative world, the novel is ultimately a construction in the authorial world. The different levels of narration are aesthetic choices made by the author who speaks the native language and have deep connections to the place struck by catastrophe. These are aesthetics choices that express care. Thus, the writing of the novel, which preserves the memory of disasters present and past, is itself an affirmation of human care not only in the fictional world, but also in the real world. For the creation of art is no doubt a care act. By showing us how we can all deal with various disasters through care, the novel becomes one of the most creative expressions of care.

Keywords:

Care; Archipelagic Disaster Unconscious; Daryll Delgado; Novel and Disaster; Typhoon Haiyan/ Yolanda; Philippine Literature

Cultural Capital's Impact on International Students' Informal Digital Learning of English: The Contrasting Cases of Two Chinese Students

Lihang Guan (The Education University of Hong Kong)

Chinese international students (CISs) comprises one of the largest cohort of international students in English medium instruction (EMI) in international higher education, and their academic and cultural transitions in English-speaking countries present unique challenges. This study responds to the growing theoretical and practical need to understand how digital technology mediates the language learning processes of these students. While technologies such as mobile apps, Generative AI, and online platforms are integral to their informal digital learning of English (IDLE) for EMI courses, the specific ways in which cultural capital influences students' engagement with these tools are underexplored. To address this gap, the study draws on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, which includes educational, skill-based, and economic dimensions, to ethnographically examine the IDLE commonalities and differences of two students—Alice and Sean—who differ significantly in their family, learning and English backgrounds, for cultural capital's impacts on learners. This comparison provides a nuanced understanding regarding similarities and differences manifested in their attitudes and behaviors toward IDLE and how cultural capital moderates their engagement with digital technologies.

This study draws on the IDLE framework and Bourdieu's capital-field-habitus theory as contextual and analytical groundings to excavate CISs' experiences before and after embarking on higher education in the UK. As defined in past literature, IDLE refers to self-directed English learning practices facilitated by digital technologies outside of traditional classroom settings. Previous research in this field has primarily emphasized on the role of learner autonomy and the logic attitude-intention-behavior (e.g., technology acceptance model; TAM) in predicting students' engagement with IDLE. However, the findings of this study argues that cultural capital also plays critical roles in shaping IDLE attitudes and behaviors on both individual and categorical sense. Through a narrative inquiry approach, this research investigates the influence of cultural capital on IDLE among two CISs with markedly different economic, educational, and skill cultural capitals. By examining their individual perceptions and experiences, the study offers new insights into the interplay between cultural capital and the attitude-intention-behavior framework in the context of international education.

Specifically, Alice, a final-year bachelor's student in Media, Film and Television at a prestigious UK university, comes from a wealthy Chinese family and has a creative but less academically focused profile. With limited English proficiency and an introverted personality, Alice relied heavily on digital tools, such as auto-translation software and AI, to meet academic requirements and cope with language barriers. On the other hand, Sean, a first-year bachelor's student in Finance, comes from a moderately wealthy family and displayed strong academic performance throughout his education. His approach to IDLE was more structured and strategic, focusing on tools like vocabulary-building apps, academic databases, and AI for clarification of terminologies, instead of a full reliance. However, despite the differences, both participants reflected a utilitarian view of international education by showing strong interests in achieving academic success (e.g., grades) and limited interests in socialization and acculturation. Such views guided the commonalities in their usage of AI and other digital technologies for international education.

The findings reveal themes regarding cultural capital's influence in shaping IDLE attitudes and behaviors. First, although both Alice and Sean utilized a variety of AI/digital tools to support their academic journey, their choices and strategies were influenced by their distinct cultural capitals. Alice, with limited English skills and introverted personality, used technology to compensate for her struggles through the utilization of auto-translation and AI to complete academic tasks. Sean, however, adopted digital tools to enhance his already strong academic performance and reflected usage of AI technologies to help vocabulary-building and field-specific knowledge clarifications. These distinctive approaches highlight the influence of knowledge and educational experience as cultural capital on students' digital learning behaviors in EMI higher education. Second, both participants reported positive attitudes toward AI-IDLE, driven by their perception of its usefulness and ease of use. This shared positive attitudes and perceptions reveal that they view technologies as assistance for their academic pursuits in EMI international education. Third, both participants displayed minimal intention and engagement in acculturation and social integration, a finding linked to the influence of the exam-oriented cultural capital, which prioritizes academic achievement over diversity in culture experience.

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of IDLE by integrating Bourdieu's cultural capital theory with the TAM framework. While the TAM framework emphasizes the role of perceived usefulness and ease of use in shaping attitudes and behaviors toward technology, this study highlights the moderating effect of cultural capital, particularly educational and knowledge dimensions, on these relationships. By introducing cultural capital into the attitude-intention-behavior framework, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing students' engagement with digital learning technologies. This integration offers valuable insights for future research on IDLE, particularly

in the context of EMI international education, where cultural capital plays a central role in shaping students' learning experiences.

Moreover, the findings also present practical implications for higher education institutions in supporting their international students in academic and social transitions. First, the study indicates the need for tailored language tuition and academic support to help students from exam-oriented cultures with diverse English proficiency and personalities in their international academic journey. While digital tools are easy to use and perceived to be useful, over-reliance on technology, as seen in Alice's case, may hinder the development of language skills with ethical concerns. Second, the study highlights the importance of fostering acculturation and social engagement among CISs, who may prioritize academic success at the expense of social integration. One possible solution for higher education institutions is to provide cultural exchange programs to support socialization and acculturation. Last but not the least, the study identifies the potential prevalence of a utilitarian view of education among CISs, characterized by a focus on grades and a reliance on effort-saving technologies like AI, which may raise concerns in ethical AI usage.

Despite of the contributions, the study also has limitations. First, the generalizability possibilities of the utilitarian view was logically deduced through theoretical reasoning of cultural capital's influence, instead of the sample's representativeness. Future research are encouraged to include larger and more diverse samples to explore the influence of educational cultural capital on AI-IDLE practices within EFL students from exam-oriented cultures for validation. Additionally, this study focuses on a few forms of cultural capital. Future studies are encouraged to investigate the roles of economic and social aspects in shaping IDLE attitudes and behaviors. These avenues for further research can provide more comprehensive understandings of the cultural capital that influences CISs' engagement with digital learning technologies in international education and inform institutional strategies to support their success beyond mere academic successes.

Keywords:

Informal Digital Learning of English; Artificial Intelligence; Chinese International Students; Technology Acceptance Model; Cultural Capital; School Culture

Resistance, Righting, and an Ilokano Novel

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University of Northern Philippines)

The Marcos dictatorship (1972-1981) in the Philippines, despite the sheer magnitude of evidence of human rights violations and plunder of government coffers, is a contested time for Filipinos' history and memory. Contrary to the Holocaust, there is no consensus on these atrocities. In this work, I aim to demonstrate how one novel in the Ilokano language of northern Philippines, the origin of Marcos Sr., shows the ways of resisting through literature the legacies and atrocities of the Marcoses and how it envisions more emancipatory politics and futures beyond cleaving to ethnolinguistic-based loyalist sentiments.

Reading the novel *Panangsapul iti Puraw a Kabalio* (Search for the White Horse) by Ariel S. Tabag (2017), I zero in my analysis on the character Felipe, the master killer and womanizer as a personification of the period. Although encoding distance and difference, the character, I argue, particularly his strategic emplotment and actions, corresponds to the novel as *pammalagip*, a mnemonic device through which the present and future generations are compelled to remember the period's horrors. The novel's martial law chronotope, with Felipe at the center, can be characterized as a state of exception which was described by JD Bagulaya as a condition where "law and time are suspended, rights dissolve, and force reigns supreme." Nonetheless, the novel's narrative structure and recourse to Ilokano folklore as a resolution, while may be symptomatic of the author's reservations of confronting head-on the legacies of pro-Marcos Ilokano literature and the complex power relations of what it means to be an Ilokano writer, envision *panangsupiat* through righting. I conclude that such a righting, which enacts a "new world", is achieved through "writing which constructs a new world in the narrative."

I take the Ilokano word *panangsupiat* in this work to mean resistance. Resistance finds iterations, for instance, in resistance literature rooted in colonial and postcolonial experiences and which Barbara Harlow has characterized as "a particular category of literature that emerged significantly as part of the organized national liberation struggles and resistance movements." It bears the revolutionary vision that literature could and should actively resist oppressive structures of power. Elleke Boehmer meticulously argues that resistance literature works through literary form, particularly the technique of juxtaposition or the "combination of two or more things not normally associated together." Hence, even works that do not appear as politically engaged may have the effects of resistance literature.

Literary works of resistance to the conjugal dictatorship of the Marcoses are abundant as they have been shaped by the country's tradition of resistance writing. My focus on an Ilokano novel introduces a new form of resistance – the same in praxis yet different from Anglophone works. What does it mean to write in Ilokano, the language of the Solid North, the bailiwick of the Marcoses? What are the power relations involved? Panangsapul's way lies in its subtlety, particularly its use of personification and the narrative structure of juxtaposition.

My reading of personification draws from a wealthy use of personification in Martial Law literature and, more generally, Philippine literature. Personification gives a face to something. Interestingly, Hidalgo's *Saksi ti Kaunggan* as a Marcos apologist novel deploys the name Felipe for the protagonist. As R. Galam (2008) reads it, Felipe is both the sick national soul-body and stand-in for Marcos, fleeing to Hawaii after the 1986 Revolution. In *Panangsapul*, Tabag appears to be taking the same pattern as Felipe as not necessarily a Marcos figure but an embodiment or personification of the Filipino nation during the period.

Panangsapul is textualized as a mnemonic device through which the present and future generations are compelled to remember the period's horrors. The novel achieves this through its strategic insertion of memories of the period, starting with the sixth chapter titled "Panekpek, 1972" when Felipe is hired as "castrator of humans." The novel's discontinuous narrative consisting of short memories of the period conjures the "chaotic and indeterminate world of the state of exception". "Many were stopped," he heard this once from the radio. 1972 as the start of the state of exception is characterized by the suspension of law and time, dissolving of rights, and supreme reign of force. This state is illustrated in the burying of the bodies of those he killed. Neither properly entombed nor mourned, they are just strewn back to the earth, an act normalized at a time of the dominating presence of violence. No one is to mourn them or mention their names, an act done during the Ilokano *dung-aw* (dirge) that would have brought them back under the rubric of the human.

In the same manner, I tie the novel's use of juxtaposition as a characteristic of resistance writing to righting. Bagulaya appropriates this term to mean not only an exercise of constituent power but also the "creative praxis" achieved through the textual construction of worlds through words in literature. The novel achieves this through its narrative structure which juxtaposes the four generations, namely: Santiago, Felipe, Miguel, and Eliezer. The narrative contour creates a thread between Eliezer and Felipe – years apart, same ethical dilemma, but different choices and fate. A close connection exists between the novel and the nation's traumatic history of Martial Law. The specter of this past still haunts us and there is a need to pursue *panangsupiat* – that is, to continue the struggle to create new possibilities of thinking as well as living beyond horrendous violence and unabated power and greed. The work of juxtaposing chapters foregrounds this message further, eliciting the reader's participation to suture the message through the contrasting lives of the generations.

The end suggests creative renewal through a better future achieved because of the sacrifice of Miguel. In other words, better futures achieved through death signals emancipatory panangsupiat. It is not a direct type of resistance, but rather righting, the binding of memories and creating of better worlds through words, through a spiritual engagement and a poetics of making, transforming, and escalating the struggle in spirit as in words and praxis.

Keywords:

Personification; Dictatorship Novel; Philippine Literature; Resistance; Memory

Reverse Self-Orientalism in Yiyun Li's Short Stories: Analyzing "Immortality" and "Gold Boy, Emerald Girl"

Li Jiaoyang (The Education University of Hong Kong)

As a celebrity author in America, Yiyun Li's writings about China in English usually receive both comments of "realistic" and "self-Orientalism". In Khoo's (2007) view, since the success of Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* (1991), diasporic Chinese female authors, who write about China in English after going abroad, generate a genre of "fictional autobiography" selling Chinese exotics, which "becomes a form of consumption of spectacularized images of Chinese femininity." Similar views appear in other scholars, who argue that diasporic Chinese female intellectuals take a superficial logic of "before and after", which constructs a binary model of their misery China's past and heavenly overseas new lives, to invite the western readers to gaze at their Eastern others from the vantage point of human rights. However, for later authors like Annie Wang and Yiyun Li (as discussed in this essay), although they are likely aware of the popularity of Chinese diasporic female narratives, they use the exoticism as a method towards visibility in their writing, which may still offer a portrayal of "realistic" China. Through Li's short stories "Immortality" and "Gold Boy, Emerald Girl", this essay argues that through performing seemingly exotic China and Chinese people, Li's writing transcends the "self-exotic action" or "self-victimization" of self-Orientalism, and constructs subjectivity based on human commonalities.

In some ways, it is reasonable that some reviewers take Li's writing as self-Orientalism. Both her collections *A Thousand Year of Good Prayers* (2006) and *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl* (2010) offer stories happening in China's political and economic transformation, presenting an unfamiliar world to Western readers. For instance, "Extra" tells the difficulties of female laid off workers (xiagang) after the breakdown of state-owned enterprises; "After a Life", portrays men who still believe in Marxism but pursue profits from the stock market. Some stories critique the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), like "Immortality" and "A Man Like Him." Other stories present Li's exploration of queer intimacy and transnational movement of China's sexual marginal group, like "Son", "Princess in Nebraska, and "Gold Boy, Emerald Girls." As Lee (2016) comments, stories, like "Immortality" which writes about eunuchs and a self-castrated young man who has the same face with the dictator, offer an obvious sense of self-Orientalism, and make her works as 'salable exotic object[s]'. Such comments lead to a second review of controversial stories like "Immortality" and "Gold Boy, Emerald Girl" in this essay.

Taking an unusual 'we' narrative, "Immortality" responds to Li's profound observation on the relationship between individuals and collective. The story takes 'we' as spectators of the protagonist, an unnamed "our young man[s]" life, as well as the social changes in China. In late Qing Dynasty, the "we" witness the fate of Eunuchs in their village; during the Cultural Revolution, they witness the death of a carpenter, the young man's father, due to being considered as a counterrevolutionary; they also witness the bullying of the young man and his sudden fame as an impersonator of the former dictator. Compared with the dramatic fate of the young man, the seemingly unchanged "we" reveals more about how collective power functions in a group far from the political center. It presents Li's critique of how individuals are oppressed due to an indifferent collective and totalitarian politics behind it. Such sharp criticism on the vague collective aligns with Li's choice to write in English rather than Chinese, which enables her to discuss censored political issues and construct a "representational afterlife" through transnational writing. It also mirrors Western readers through the "we" narrative, blurring the boundary between the "we" as Chinese in this story and the readers, which further leads to a more general critique of human society, and thus transcending the narrow scope of self-Orientalism.

If "Immortality" presents Li's concerns about the collective, "Gold Boy, Emerald Girl" presents her keen imagination on human commonality. In this story, Li deconstructs the heterosexual discourse of family and marriage by portraying a queer story among Siyu, Hanfeng, and Hanfeng's mother, Professor Dai. Although the seemingly matched couple, Siyu and Hanfeng, are both homosexual, Professor Dai still arranges their engagement due to her special intimacy with Siyu, her student. In constructing the unique connections among the three characters, Li plays with the title 'Gold Boy, Emerald Girl' to create irony and parody the readers' expectation of an exotic Chinese love story. The three characters' new family seems unusual, but Li makes it reasonable through highlighting their shared loneliness and personal histories of growing up in single-parent families. Thus, Li's writing reveals the performativity of Orientalism, and takes the exoticism as a tactic to enhance her own expression. Furthermore, her stories go beyond merely 'domestic melodrama', highlighting the visibility of shared human feelings (such as solitude in this story) that "the pains and joys that we have are the same." Such recognition of human commonality in her stories offers a strong foundation to reverse the negative "self-exoticism" or "self-victimization."

Stories like "Immortality" and "Gold Boy, Emerald Girl" offer cases of how Chinese voices can exist in Western publications. Those stories provide the "art museum" of Chineseness, but also show the possibility of challenging the Western gaze through "staged marginality." Li's writing about universal humanity transfers the "self-referential exoticism" from an objective position to a subjective one. Compared to catering to the Western publishing industry in self-Orientalism, her choice of writing China's stories in English presents a flexible position to

draw on cultural resources from both sides and construct her own transnational cultural space in between.

Keywords:

Self-orientalism; Autoethnography; Yiyun Li; Cultural Revolution; Short Fiction

Dreams Rendered, Context Erased: Generative Aesthetics, Pseudo-Agency, and the Politics of Prompting

Manni Cheung (University College London)

This paper interrogates the cultural, aesthetic, and ideological implications of generative AI systems that enable users to produce stylised images through natural language prompts. Using “Ghibli-style” image generation as a case study, I examine how these systems simulate aesthetic traditions without reference to context, authorship, or narrative coherence. Such systems do not merely mimic artworks. Rather, they produce emotionally resonant, yet epistemically shallow outputs designed to feel familiar. The result is a stylised surface untethered from cultural and historical meaning: a style detached from world.

At the heart of this inquiry is a deceptively simple question: what kind of cultural act is prompting? The act of prompting, reimagined not as a neutral command but as a culturally mediated gesture, is then crucial here. In systems trained on massive datasets and optimised for legibility, the prompt becomes a gesture of orchestration rather than creation. The user is invited to “make” an image, but this making is tightly circumscribed by platform design, aesthetic norms, and algorithmic bias. The result is a form of interaction that rewards fluency, coherence, and affective satisfaction, while smoothing over contradiction, context, and critical ambiguity.

To analyse this shift, I draw on three intersecting critical traditions. First, Walter Benjamin’s theorisation of aura and mechanical reproduction helps identify what is lost when artworks become severed from temporal, spatial, and ritual contexts. In the context of generative systems, this detachment occurs not after reproduction but before creation—a pre-emptive loss. Second, I invoke the Frankfurt School’s critique of the culture industry, particularly Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis of pseudo-individualisation and standardisation. Generative outputs exemplify what Adorno described as pseudo-differentiation: surface-level variation within deep structural sameness. Third, I turn to Humanistic Human-Computer Interaction and cultural studies, which emphasise the politics of design, the social embeddedness of technology, and the generative value of ambiguity, friction, and situated use.

The first section introduces the *aesthetics of simulation*, a term I use to describe the computational rendering of style without narrative intentionality. Generative systems do not inherit aesthetic traditions so much as recombine stylistic signifiers through statistical

proximity. Ghibli-style outputs are recognisable not because they understand the underlying worldview of Studio Ghibli, but because they emulate its atmospheric markers, namely the glowing skies, soft lines, and emotive quietude. These features travel well in training datasets, but they arrive stripped of ecological philosophy, post-war imagination, and cultural specificity.

The second section revisits Benjamin's concept of aura as the "unique apparition of a distance, however near." While Benjamin theorised aura in the context of mechanical reproduction, generative systems eliminate aura at the point of generation. There is no original; only training data correlations. What Benjamin feared as desublimation becomes normalised as platform logic. This is further intensified by the design of generative tools that prize clarity, immediate feedback, and user retention, values that resonate with Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of industrialised culture as repetitive, emotionally managed, and ideologically smoothing.

The third section examines the role of the user through the lens of pseudo-agency. Drawing on Jameson's theory of cultural logic, Sara Ahmed's concept of orientation, and Wendy Chun's analysis of habituated media, I explore how prompting becomes a scriptable, anticipated act. The user becomes what I term the "button-pusher," a figure invited to express creativity but only within boundaries that have been shaped in advance by the system. Interface design ensures that deviation, ambiguity, and hesitation are either discouraged or invisible. Emotional coherence and stylistic legibility dominate.

To respond to this condition, the fourth section turns to Humanistic HCI, which encourages interaction designs that resist fluency and reintroduce ambiguity. In contrast to seamless user experiences, Humanistic HCI proposes design strategies that interrupt, reflect, and defer. Rather than reducing prompting to an extraction of output, it can be approached as a moment of negotiation: an invitation to think, question, or feel differently. Here, hesitation is not a flaw. Rather, it becomes an epistemic gesture.

The fifth section presents *The Ignorant Co-learner*, a speculative AI literacy interface. Inspired by Rancière's "ignorant schoolmaster," the system refrains from correcting or teaching. Instead, it reflects the user's prompt back to them: sometimes deferring output, sometimes rephrasing it, sometimes asking for clarification. Its aim is not to optimise generation, but to surface assumptions embedded in prompts and open space for contextual awareness. Drawing on traditions in speculative and critical design, feminist data ethics, and decolonial refusal, this intervention is not a tool but a provocation: a counter-interface that centres reflection over resolution.

The final section reflects on what is lost in cultures of simulation—not only aura, but difficulty. The difficulty of interpretation, of withholding judgment, of inhabiting uncertainty. These are

not qualities generative systems typically support. But they are essential if users are to maintain agency not just over images, but over imagination itself. If prompting is becoming the dominant metaphor for interacting with cultural infrastructure, then how we prompt matters. To prompt differently is to see differently, and to resist the system's assumptions about what we want.

This paper therefore contributes a historically grounded critique of generative aesthetics and a speculative design intervention. It argues that prompting is not just a technical gesture, but a cultural act. In reframing it as a site of ideological negotiation, I call for interaction models that support friction, care, and situated authorship in a computational culture increasingly optimised for ease, fluency, and flattening.

Keywords:

Aesthetic Simulation; Prompting as Cultural Practice; Pseudo-Agency; Human-Computer Interaction (HCI); Speculative Counter-Interfaces

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