The Settler Baroque:

Decay and Creolization in Chang Kuei-hsing’s Borneo Rainforest Novels

Yu-ting Huang

Introduction

This chapter is foremost a contemplation about style. It interprets the unique aesthetics of Sinophone Malaysian author Chang Kuei-hsing (Zhang Quixing) in two novels, *Elephant Herd* (*Qun xiang*, 1998) and *Monkey Cup* (*Hou bei*, 2000), as representations of Sinophone settler colonialism in the Sarawak rainforest in Borneo.¹ This chapter describes Chang’s exuberant style as Baroque, drawing comparison between Chang’s literary performance in the Sinitic script and Latin American experiments of the New World Baroque, arguing that a settler anxiety motivates his project of transfiguring and unsettling the Sinitic language.

The chapter begins with the understanding that Sinophone immigration from China to Malaysia settlement in the past few centuries has at times embodied settler colonial violence against Indigenous lifeworlds and that Sinophone Malaysians constitute a settler group vis-à-vis the Indigenous communities. While Sinophone Malaysians never established nation-wide sovereign governments, many early settlers have engaged in colonial exploits of pioneering, plantation building, and resource extraction in scattered pockets of frontier settlements across Southeast Asia. This chapter reads Chang Kuei-hsing’s novels as his attempts at confronting such history of invasion and exploitation as a third-generation Sinophone Malaysian, who grew up in the Malaysian state of Sarawak amidst racially mixed Chinese and Native communities.

*Sinophone Settlements in Malaysia*
This chapter thus expands the settler colonial cultural archive beyond its current Anglophone focus, and attends to Chang’s Sinophone Malaysian novels as products of a different settler colonial formulation, one that Shi-mei Shih has termed “middleman settler colonialism” and that I have theorized as “minor settlement” elsewhere (Shih, “Theory” 478; Huang 9-19). Historically, early Chinese settlements in Malaysia bear both similarities and important differences from Anglophone settler societies. On the one hand, as historian Philip Kuhn demonstrates, pioneering Sinophone settlers in Borneo had maintained autonomous settler governance in the 18th century, conflicting primarily with Indigenous Dayaks for land and resources before European colonial powers dominated the region in the 19th century (56, 83-5). On the other hand, scholars like Shih and Brian Bernards emphasize the complex nature of Sinophone Malaysian settlements under British colonial rule: rather than being buttressed by an imperial administration from their empire of origin (i.e. China), Han Chinese settlers attained economic domination and claimed frontier space in colonial Malaysia through intricate power exchanges with British colonial authority, acting as middlemen between different ethnic groups and economic sectors (Shih “Theory” 465-84, Bernards Writing 113). Shih’s coinage of “middlemen settler colonialism” thus aptly describe Sinophone settler’s unique role in the multiply colonized space of Malaysia. In post-independent Malaysia, Sinophone Malaysians continue to occupy an ambiguous position—both a part of the country’s non-native majority and an ethnic minority marginalized by national policies favoring the majority Malay.

Conditions of Sinophone Malaysian settlements are further impacted by the country’s complicated Indigenous politics. Present-day Malaysia is a multiracial, federated country with thirteen states across Malaysia peninsular and Borneo island, largely inheriting the British colonial territories. Nationally, Malays (legally defined by their Muslim faith and cultural adherence to cultural Malayness) make up half of the national population, alongside roughly 22 percent ethnic Chinese, 11 percent Indigenous, and 7 percent ethnic Indian citizens. More than 80 percent of the combined population resides on the Malay peninsula, and ethnic distributions vary widely across the national map. Despite
being a minority nationally, Indigenous peoples of various tribal affiliations are the demographic majority in the Borneo states of Sarawak and Sabah, where ethnic Chinese is the second largest group. However, as Kirk Endicott has observed, while Malaysia’s Indigenous peoples are included in the legal category of bumiputera (literally “son of the soil”), which ensures Malay and Indigenous political and educational advantages over Chinese and Indians, they are under constant pressure to change cultural affiliations and convert to Islam to assimilate into the Malay majority. Further, their ancestral territories are threatened by state and federal governments, who wield the power to convert Indigenous titles into business reserves for logging and other industries. Since the 1980s, Indigenous peoples of Sarawak have consistently protested the region’s logging business and hydroelectric dams—both are with significant Sinophone business investments.

Sinophone settlers’ roles in these shifting ethnic politics are thus ambiguous—while they were instrumental in “opening” parts of the Sarawak rainforest and continue to invest in local business of resource extraction, they have also been integrated into the multicultural fabric of Sarawak daily life; conversely, while they have been neighbors with the Sarawak Indigenous peoples for centuries, they remain complicit in the historical and ongoing settler encroachment on Indigenous territories. These political configurations are at the background of Chang’s novels, where Sinophone settlers’ power wanes and Indigenous resilience glows in recent struggles. As such, his novels depict a kind of settler life that is seldom studied in settler colonial scholarship—namely that of an economically privileged but politically disadvantaged minority who lives alongside a regionally prominent but legally embattled Indigenous population. Other than the scholarship cited above, few scholars have examined Chinese settle culture in Malaysian Borneo within a settler colonial framework. Through Chang’s novels, this chapter begins to consider how Sinophone Malaysian settler histories and cultural expressions complicate what we know about settler colonial cultures.

Overview of the Chapter
I approach these issues by way of narratives and style. Highlighting Sinophone Malaysian settlements’ local negotiations, this chapter examines how Chang’s novels portray the clamoring, proliferating identities in the Sinophone Sarawak settler frontier. His novels foreground the decay of the Sinophone settler hegemony after decades of violent conflicts, as their past influence is now undercut by nation-wide discriminatory policies. Rather than narrating settler perpetuance, in other words, Chang’s novels foreground the end of a settler history, for which he mobilizes certain stylistic innovations which this chapter seeks to explicate.

To describe his settler style, I will borrow Latin American theories of cultural conflicts and admixtures, particularly the Baroque and creolization. With similarly complex colonial histories and multiracial communities, Latin America has produced rich theories of cultural encounters that are suggestive for Southeast Asia, despite their different contexts. As the first section of the chapter will explicate, both creolization and the New World Baroque are invoked by Latin American artists, authors, and critics such as Ángel Guido and Alejo Carpentier to describe a syncretic style of cultural production, which are stimulating lenses for reading Chang’s Sinitic-language texts. Indeed, as I explain below, a number of scholars have employed the concept of creolization to read Chiang’s writing, and some remark on the Baroque exuberance of his style. However, in the second section, this chapter will distinguish between “creolization”—a linguistic, social, or cultural process of mutual becoming and new assemblages—and “the Baroque”—the stylistic display of uncertain movements between incompatible elements at cultural contact zones. In the main, I will identify Chang’s writing as Baroque rather than creolized, and I will discuss how, in settler colonial contexts, a focus on creolization may orient too much towards a settler-dominated syncretic future at the expense of indigenous survivance. In turn, I want to explore whether the Baroque may not be a more productive style for representing the gap between settler and indigenous temporalities, in order to reserve space for Indigenous divergence and decolonization. As I will note, existing theories of creolization frequently feature an optimism for convivial futures among nonnative inhabitants, whose ad hoc rules of engagement do not always reflect on the deep history of
Indigenous dispossession. The Baroque tracks a different process. Effected around tensions and incompatibilities and lacking future projections, the Baroque contains an openness and indeterminacy and may better characterize scenarios where Indigenous lifeworlds persist against settler attempts at occupation or localization.

My chapter ultimately reads Chang’s prose as a Baroque response to settler history. It builds on but also departs from previous critical interpretations of Chang’s style as either diasporic or creolized. I argue that, in confronting Sinophone settler violence in Sarawak, Chang rejects creolization as a solution for continued Sinophone presence. Rather, he articulates the inevitable dissolution and unsettlement of old Sinophone settler power, as the Sinophone settler culture collapses under the weight of inherited guilt and contemporary political marginality. Written of a settler culture beleaguered both internally and externally and with historical hindsight, Chang’s novels thus differ remarkably from settler texts by dominant settler groups in the Anglophone literary tradition: rather than stories of frontier heroism, settler resilience, and familial inheritance, Chang offers tales of violence, bigotry, incest, and destruction. His narratives are products of a different kind of settler colonial historiography. In the conclusion, I will delineate some possible rewards of expanding our interpretive repertoires across linguistic and geographical borders.

The Baroque in Sarawak Rainforest: Chang Kuei-hsing and His Novels

Written in Sinitic scripts (Chinese writing system that can be sounded in different dialectics, see note 1) and published in Taiwan, Chang’s rainforest novels offer some of the most elaborate literary explorations of Sinophone Malaysians’ settler history amidst the entangled colonial, postcolonial, and interracial relations in the Sarawak rainforest. Chang is one of many Sinophone Malaysians who pursued higher education and careers in Taiwan, due both to their marginal status in Malaysia and to Taiwan government’s long-standing incentive scholarship programs. Among these emigrated Sinophone Malaysians, Chang belongs to a stand-out group of authors—alongside Li Yongping, Ng Kim-chew,
Chen Da-wei—who throughout the 1980s and 90s dominated major literary awards in Taiwan. They are masters of literary innovations, frequently drawing on topics of physical and linguistic exile, the reconstruction of Sinophone Malaysian histories, the settings of Southeast Asian tropical exotics, and nostalgia for an ambiguous homeland that exists somewhere between China, Malaysia, and Taiwan.2

Chang’s *Elephant Herd* and *Monkey Cup*, published in Taiwan in 1998 and 2000 respectively, belong to this cohort of exilic literary productions. However, while other Sinophone Malaysian authors foreground themes of alienation from either China or the Malaysian mainstream, Chang’s two novels stand out as the rare Sinophone Malaysian texts that foreground Sinophone settlers’ long and violent relations with local ecosystems and the Indigenous peoples in Sarawak. By Chang’s own account, they are informed by his experiences of growing up at the edge of Sarawak rainforests and of his youthful ventures into the jungles alongside his Indigenous Dayak friends (*Monkey 3*). Sharing similar plot structure and thematic concerns, the two novels form one artistic project: an extended exploration of Sinophone settlers’ relationships with local ecosystem and Indigenous communities in the past century. Each novel describes a multigenerational family history at the border of the Borneo rainforest from the perspective of a sole surviving male descendant, who travel deep into the rainforest and Indigenous communities in search of uncertain redemption for the family’s sins of ruthless exploitation and violent land grab. *Elephant Herd* specifically describes local havoc wrecked by China-leaning communist guerrilla fighters in the 1960s. And *Monkey Cup* portays the longer-standing violence in a Sinophone settler family’s plantation exploits, specifically around the family patriarchs’ bloody conflicts with local Indigenous peoples, other pioneering immigrants, animals, and even a vividly agentic rainforest vegetation. In both novels’ presents, the settler families have decayed from greed, feuds, lust, inhumanity, war, and the environmental backlash. Against such deterioration, the two protagonists carry the plots forward as they go on hopeless missions to recover whatever possible, while giving an account to the cycles of unsavory but spectacular violence that they have inherited. Both novels end with the protagonists conceding to the family’s irrevocable loss, as they each disappear into the rainforests and Indigenous communities.
As Ng Kim-Chew once remarked, these novels are Chang’s explorations into Sinophone settler “heart of darkness” (263). But what also attract critical attention is Chang’s ebullient literary experiment with Sinitic scripts and sounds in these novels. As the plots traverse the landscape of tropical rainforests, Chang’s prose is packed with increasingly baroque explorations of ancient forms, new character constructions, and entangled rhythms. It appears as if Chang has reached deep into the fabric of the language to unearth characters and phrases that are ancient, obscure, and complex, frequently to the degree that most Sinophone readers cannot easily comprehend or pronounce them—and for that reason also difficult to reproduce here without some Chinese character lessons. Critics marvel at Chang’s formal experiments in light of the cultural distance between the “metropole” of geopolitical China and the “frontier” of Malaysian Borneo where Sinophone culture and Chinese-language education were marginalization in Malay nationalism in post-1971 Malaysia. From a supposedly marginal position, Chang writes prose that is both highly sophisticated and insistently primitive, both local and alien.

Critics have interpreted Chang’s exploration into the rainforest setting and his transfiguration of the Sinitic script variously as a reaction to Sinophone Malaysia’s distance from the Chinese cultural center (Wang), as a challenge to the “essentialist fantasies of and about Chinese culture” (Bachner 177), as a theoretical visitation to Sinitic writing’s ancient origins from a local and diasporic standpoint (Tsu), as an ecopoetic embrace of Borneo rainforest as mother land (Bernards Writing), as a writing strategy for a creolized and place-based identity (Tan), and as a tentative attempt at reconciliation with the Indigenous peoples (Shih “Comparison”). These interpretations position Chang’s stylistic exuberance on a spectrum, ranging from a return to cultural origins, innovative language play, to local attempts at creolization. But suppose they are all correct? I will maintain that Chang’s style is really characterized by the coexistence of these divergent movements, which may be approached by the aesthetics of the Baroque.

The Baroque
Art historian Heinrich Wölfflin describes the Baroque as the assemblage or “overlap” of diverse movements:

The Baroque had achieved its purpose by means of the irregular and apparently incomplete, the unsettled and impermanent form.... Overlapping forms result in something intangible and are therefore a stimulus to movement. If, in addition to this partial overlapping, the composition is complex and the forms and motifs bewilderingly profuse, so that the individual part, however large, loses its significance in the mass effect, then there are the elements that produce that impression of overwhelming and intoxicating lavishness peculiar to the Baroque style (63-4).

Wölfflin’s definition of the Baroque is useful for describing the massive effect of lavish extravagance in Chang’s prose—achieved not by one single primitive, creolized, or ecopoetic turn, but rather as the total effect of profuse and overlapping forms and elements. As I will show presently, to recount Chang’s rhetorical strategies requires a long list: meandering similes, unyieldingly graphic sketches of the bodily and the abject, juxtapositions between realism, dreams, and psychedelic illusions, repetitious onomatopoeias alongside willful creations of unsound-able Chinese words, and the dazzling movements from never-ending sentences to short bursts of sounds. Together, the architecture of Chang’s novels fits what Wölfflin describes of the Baroque in visual art: “the composition is complex and the forms and motifs bewilderingly profuse.”

The almost compulsive proliferation of asides, in the form of surprising similes, characterizes Chang’s descriptive paragraphs, as in the following passage from *Monkey Cup*, when the protagonist Zhi visits his old Chinese teacher in the rainforest with an Indigenous Dayak girl Yanini. I render the passage here in English translation:

The old man invited the two to sit by the firewood as they exchanged pleasantries. It was getting dark, the old sun shrunk and wrinkled, and a dark green corpse of a cloud floated in from afar, bringing an overwhelming funereal air that quickly infested the remaining
few white clouds. There were always a few eagles, stiff in their positions like some stars in bright daylight, forming horoscopes in their pieces of the sky. There were also always a few faceless birds flitting between the horizons, between here and there, between Hades and Hades, as high as tree and as fast as they dared, like rats stealing by a nest of cats. There were also always sounds from indeterminable sources—human, beasts, or the cosmic elements—struggling upriver in the converging flows of the three’s Chinese, English, and Dayak, flourishing like algae…. The old man did not intend to invite the visitors into his house. He proudly recalled Zhi’s forceful recitations in past classes; looking at one of his best students, his smile showed warmth and his eyes were flecked with spirit. Pengzhi, the old man said—his voice was sometimes dry, sometimes viscous, filled with fiber, lacking calcium, having good amount of carotene, lacking in vitamin-D, suffering from diarrhea, insomnia, frequent urination at night—you sat at a corner seat on the first row in high school, always glancing at a girl sitting on your right. You had a crush on her…. Zhi was surprised at the teacher’s memory, listening to his memories of this and other girls in a state of shock. The two spoke Mandarin that was smooth like pearls, which sounded to Yanini like pieces of goat poop. (152)

Part of a two-page long paragraph, my translation of this passage hardly does justice to the breathtaking series of rhetorical flourish in the original Sinitic script. But it shows the prose’s tendency to excessive decoration, resulting from clashes between linguistic registers and social and animal worlds. A scene of a relatively calm rainforest sunset is here decorated with allusions to heaven and hell from different cultural contexts, while the characters’ conversations are interrupted by an indulgent examination of the health of the old man’s voice, concluding at the Indigenous girl’s lack of enthusiasm in the two Sinophone speakers’ supposedly glorious Mandarin. The denigration of the Mandarin sounds at the end of the passage—compared to ungraceful excrements from a goat—is significant: it corresponds to the decay of the Sinophone settler family that dominates the novel’s plot. Remarkably, the decay and humiliation of the
Mandarin sounds are delivered in the original text through a verbose flourish of Sinitic-language prose. Like some perversely enthusiastic death rattle, the Sinitic language in Chang’s hands develops dazzling effect and expansive capacity only to announce its own degeneration. Chang’s settler Baroque not only responds to the meeting between cultures, but records its own resulting unsettlement.

As such, Chang’s Baroque performance registers the Sinitic language’s violent encounter with settler history, emerging as the inevitable explosion by conflicting elements at the end of that settler epoch. For twentieth-century theorizers and practitioners of the Baroque, the Baroque form almost always registers some sense of epochal transition, particularly under the demand of transcultural contacts and the acknowledgements of heterogeneity. Although Wölfflin’s treaty on the Baroque concerns the 17th-century counter-reformation architectural style in Europe, the Baroque has been reconfigured and reclaimed many times over since in different geopolitical and historical contexts, as in Latin American theorization of the New World Baroque by art historians and literary authors including Ángel Guido, José Lezama Lima, and Alejo Carpentier. Among them, Carpentier is the most generous in considering the global application of the Baroque and thus most relevant here. Carpentier maintains that the Baroque is not a singular event, but is a spirit, a “human constant” that arises “where there is transformation, mutation, or innovation” (91, 98). His describes the Baroque in literature, here with reference to Marcel Proust, as “prose in which are inserted… parenthetical asides, further series of proliferating cells, sentences within sentences that have a life of their own and sometimes connect to other asides that are also proliferating elements” (97). These describe Chang Kuei-hsing’s prose style equally well.

**Baroque Decay**

Drawing on ideas of the New World Baroque, I would argue that Chang’s prose becomes Baroque precisely to mark the dissolution of Sinophone settler hegemony, the thematic focus of the two novels. It is, in other words, the end of the settler cultural order that invites or necessitates the Baroque performance. Reading *Elephant Herd*, both Andrea Bachner and Jin Tsu have argued that the novel’s main
obsession—a nearly extinct herd of wild elephants—is a stand-in for the Sinitic script, whose pictographic characteristic is called literally “elephant shaped” (xiangxing) in Chinese (Bachner 191-3, Tsu 225). The elephant herd analogizes the Sinitic language and the Sinophone culture. It is thus significant that, when the protagonist finally encounters this legendary herd, each elephant bears horrible wounds—“wounds that are only possible on cadavers” (160). As markers of trauma, these wounds are also extraordinary, even spectacular: “Leisurely, the elephants ambled away shoulder to shoulder. In the binoculars’ view, their garish wounds also moved side by side, like a brilliant ray of sunshine disappearing at the horizon at dusk” (161). The brilliance of the sight corresponds to the terror of these wounds, just as I would argue that Chang’s dazzling prose also carries signs of cultural wounds. Significantly, the elephants are shown to be responsible for their own wounds, as the protagonist witnesses them repeatedly and forcefully throwing their bodies against the rainforest trees. Readers are not given an explanation for the elephants’ self-harm, but it is telling that these wounds are self-inflicted. To return to the parallel between these elephants and the Sinophone settler culture, in light of Chang’s narrative exploration of the original sin of conquest and invasion, these cultural wounds seem likely the result of the internally corrupting forces of settler guilt.

That the baroque form may be associated with decay again returns us to the theories of New World Baroque. They posit that the hegemonic form—the corresponding “Old World” Baroque from Europe—has come to exceed itself in the Americas, when Indigenous elements intervened to push the colonial style beyond its original limits. Thus Carpentier describes the Baroque as fundamentally decentering, as an “art that moves outward and away from the center, that somehow breaks through its own borders” (93). This explosive quality of the Baroque seems everywhere present in Chang’s settler self-critique. While Sinophone settler aspirations lead to projects of invasion and exploitation, the violent encounter with Indigenous peoples and land is shown to eventually overburden and explode the settler culture. For example, Elephant Herd ends with the protagonist Shicai destroying a notebook of his family history, withdrawing from the delirious dream of a Chinese-centric settler regime, and disappearing into the indigenous rainforest. The notebook originally belongs to his maternal uncle, who led many violent
exploits against the Indigenous peoples and land in the name of establishing a China-style communist regime in the Sarawake rainforest. By killing his uncle and destroying the notebook, Shicai finds uncertain redemption by destroying cultural traces of this settler dream. *Monkey Cup* ends similarly in settler dissolution. Zhi, oldest fourth-generation descendant of a settler-planter family, cannot keep his family together. After his grandfather’s death, his adopted sister goes insane from the trauma of being incestuously raped by the grandfather; the Indigenous peoples capture his brother to avange for the destruction brought by the grandfather’s aggressive exploitation; and his family homestead is overrun by monitor lizards attracted to its stench of death. Zhi eventually ransoms his brother with his late grandfather’s skull, gives up his own settler identity, and marries into an Indigenous family. Both novels’ settler genealogies end in death and surrender, and Chang’s ebullient prose style is the vehicle by which readers arrive at the vanishing point of the century-long settler history.

**Distinguishing Between the Baroque and the Creole**

I have so far argued that the Baroque is Chang’s stylistic response to the impossible burden of Sinophone settler history. As I associate the stylistic Baroque to the narrative termination in death and corruption, I would further suggest a rarely made distinction between the Baroque form and the process of creolization: while the Baroque registers movement and explosion resultant from cultural clash, creolization goes beyond such clash to posit the emergence of new combinations. As I demonstrate in this section, I identify Chang’s style as Baroque but maintain that he refrains from employing a creolized language in his writing. I argue that Chang resists the temptation of positing a creolized settler future and instead trains his focus on the dissolution of settler power.

But first, this distinction is necessary because the two terms are frequently thought together in the Latin American context. Carpentier, for example, declares that “the American baroque develops along with criollo culture, with the meaning of criollo, with the self-awareness of the American man, be he the son of a white European, the son of a black African or an Indian born on the continent… the awareness of
being Other, of being new, of being symbiotic, of being a criollo; and the criollo spirit is itself a baroque spirit” (98, italics original). Here Carpentier associates the Baroque with creole (or criollo) culture and thus also with a consciousness of the new. Yet, we may call this equivalence chain into question and challenge the troubling ease with which Carpentier imagines European, African, and Indian sons participating in the creolizing process with seeming equality and shared pride. Historically, their awareness of being Other cannot be so similar, nor their political differences so easily settled. For these reasons I dissent from Carpentier’s equation of creolization and the Baroque. My reading of Chang’s novels suggests instead that, while the Baroque seems a form of settler self-critique, it does not necessarily lead to the emergence of a creolized culture. It does not, in other words, envision a path to settler future through the process of mutual becoming. It is not a given that the Baroque’s chaotic effect should necessarily herald a creole formation of co-becoming. Specifically, I do not think Chang’s prose pretends to be this creolized language; it has remained Baroque—that is, unresolved.

This is not to say that Chang does not imagine a creolized articulation of Sinophone Malaysian identity as some scholars have proposed (Shih “Comparison” 92; Bernards “Beyond” 312; Tan 164). Indeed, there is a strong impulse of creolization in Chang’s novels. But I would argue that it is a separate event from the Baroque experiment in Chang’s prose style. While related, they are not the same. At the end of Monkey Cup, when the protagonist Zhi explains his intention to marry the Indigenous girl Yanini, the narrative makes clear that this marriage will strengthen the thriving Indigenous community by selecting and absorbing nonnative kin on Indigenous terms; the marriage will not lead to Sinophone settler survival by the infusion of indigenous blood. And it is in that moment we can most clearly see the divergences between Chang’s Baroque prose on the one hand (which continues to register the end of Sinophone settler hegemony) and his description of Yanini and Zhi’s creolizing co-mingling (which implies Indigenous future) on the other. Here we see a description of linguistic creolization:

Yanini switched between English, Chinese, Dayak, and sign language, creating a language that only Zhi understood. It was dazzling and uncanny, vibrant and beautiful,
like a child birthed from the mixture of four races. Inheriting genes directly from its mother and nurtured with the mother’s breast milk and saliva, the mixed-race child’s grammar and intonation takes after the mother. The four languages become impossible to distinguish like quadruplets. Or, more precisely, they are the illegitimate children born from Zhi and Yanini’s many intercourses and mutual infections. Spontaneous and *ad hoc*, they do not have names or nationalities. The mother’s womb is still dripping with blood.

This passage is every bit a vivid imagination of creolization. Invoking both the biological and linguistic meanings of creolization, Chang describes the two cultures’ mutual becoming as a dynamic event of emergence. This figurative child, in fact, is the only one given a chance to live in a narrative filled with stillborn and murdered infants. As Shu-mei Shih suggests, such possibility of creolization provides a hopeful glimmer of reconciliation in response to the brutal history of settler violence (“Comparison” 92). However, this creolized language is described, but not enacted. Chang’s Sinophone readers never hear this creolized language—it is not used to tell the novel’s story; it belongs only to Yanini and Zhi. This creolized language is privileged to those who live together in intimate daily discourses and intercourses and those who have worked to mingle; it is not a language Chang can use to communicate Sinophone settler stories to a transnational Sinophone audience and the future of reading time. Indigenous presence does not lead to a continuation of settler culture through creolization. As I described earlier, what Chang engages with his prose experimentation is rather the mutation of a settler culture under internal conflicts. While Zhi and Yanini’s creole flourishes outside the pages of the novel, it is the Baroque form of decay and self-critique that delivers Sinophone unsettlement.

*Creolization and Settler Colonialism*

I emphasize the distinction between the Baroque and the creole in Chang’s texts not only because it would be inaccurate to equate Chang’s Baroque style with his description of creolization, but also
because imaginations of creolization can risk subsuming Indigenous sovereignty within new, settler-dominated, syncretic futures. Many theorists of creolization have focused on such emergence of a new, syncretic, and usable future: Stuart Hall, for example, observes that creolization originally designates the combination of linguistic and cultural elements into a shared vernacular in the colonial contact zones of the Caribbean (28). Similarly, Édouard Glissant defines creolization as a “new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry” (34). Creolization’s promise as an anti-colonial cultural theory comes from this usefulness, this newness, and this plebeian quality, which elevate creolization in postcolonial considerations as a potential site of native resistance, despite—or rather against—the fatal displacement and sexual violence inherent in the historical conditions for creolization. This promise however does not necessarily flow from a Baroque exploration of overlapping, incompatible formal elements. Glissant’s idyllic is a state that Chang’s Baroque simply cannot yield—rather than being free and in harmony everywhere, his Sinophone characters do not belong anywhere.

And the tendency towards syncretic future can be potentially harmful for Indigenous decolonization. For example, in the context of Guyana, Shona Jackson argues that creolization as an identity strategy has led to a national discourse privileging immigrant hegemony over unresolved issues of Indigenous sovereignty. According to Jackson, in Guyana’s attempt to articulate a postcolonial national identity, Indigenous sovereignty took a backseat in the creole interpretation of national belonging, through the shared trauma of coerced labor and forced displacement: “labor becomes the dominant social discourse around which Creole form new identities: the basis for their subaltern, settler modes of indigeneity and power” (3). In this eagerness to install Creole identity as a new form of national belonging, wittingly or not, those who have arrived under colonial subordination now continue Indigenous dispossession by insisting on Creole’s equal (settler) right to belong. Recent discussions in Hawai‘i reveal a comparable dilemma about Asian Hawaiian’s creolized and place-based identity. Since the 1960s, local Asian Hawaiians—mostly descendants of the islands’ early plantation laborers—have claimed a quasi-
native identity through their creolized culture, articulated in Hawaiian pidgin. Their expressions of
Hawaiianess, similar to the Guyana case, frequently privilege a common origin in plantation labor and
transpacific displacement. However, as Haunani-Kay Trask, Candace Fujikane, Dan Saranillio, and
others have contended, such iterations of Asian Hawaiian local identity, however creolized, create settler
privileges among local Asians at the cost of Native Hawaiian sovereignty. These cases demonstrate the
potential problem in settler investments in creolization.\footnote{5}

Admittedly, Sinophone settlement in Malaysia is different case, wherewith the Indigenous peoples
being the regional majority and Sinophone Malaysians sidelined in national politics. But it is still
significant that Chang refrains from envisioning creolization as a collective path for settler future. Rather,
opposing the decaying Sinophone families, Chang chooses to represent thriving Indigenous communities
actively resisting settler greed and state control while carrying on a robust living tradition with modern
articulations. In *Monkey Cup*, a Dayak conversation Zhi overheard embodies just such Indigenous
survivance:

With bliss Badu talked about the fishing season in Baram River, games and fruits on
shore, the size of wild boar herd, the annual bat migration. Under the Dipterocarpaceae
tree, a Malayan civet just birthed some kitten covered with the rarest black stripes;
someone should skin them and sell the pelt to the Chinese people. Punans are setting up
traps for yellow-throated martens in this neighborhood. A Swiss photographer is taking
pictures of maroon leaf monkeys and silver leaf monkeys nearby. A Chinese businessman
man, who has a hardware store by the Baram river three kilometers away, rigged the
scale when buying games from our people, so that our bearded pigs frequently come up
as light as some pig-tailed macaques. A group of Japanese swarmed the long house to look
for and pay tribute to the Japanese soldiers, who were pursued into the rainforest by the
Allied tropes during the Second World War and beheaded by our people. There are
some skeletons at the tourist long house for them to mourn. Punan, Kenyah, Kelabit, and
our people are organizing protests against Japanese logging. But the Japanese have
logging licenses given by the state government; those who protest are branded as
subversive, and can be locked up for life. The central government in West Malaysia is
building a giant hydroelectric dam here, ruining the rainforest ecology. (115)

Spanning roughly a page in the original, this passage impresses its readers with a modern Dayak world
actively and adeptly managing local ecology, colonial trauma, and contemporary state policy, all
constituent aspects of Dayak modernity and subjectivity. In a world of thriving Dayak order, they combat
external aggressions and maneuver for advantages. And this is the background against which Chang's
Sinophone characters move and reminisce about their own debt and decay, their futile century-long
struggle to settle and exploit. Fore grounding the strong Indigenous cultures, Chang thus eschews a
creolized vision of national common where Sinophone settlers may simply belong without acknowledging
their roles in Indigenous dispossession. The Sinophone settler future as such in these novels is at best
uncertain, and at worse, impossible.

Before concluding, I should clarify that I do not wish to undermine the salient role of creolization
in Sinophone Malaysian literature, particularly its resistive function against the China-centric paradigm of
diaspora and Malay-centric model of postcolonial nationalism. Both paradigms relegate Sinophone
Malaysian identities and literatures to the ethnic, linguistic, or national margins, which Sinophone
Malaysian authors have effectively challenged. Bernard s has compellingly demonstrated how a sense of
creolized identity informs many Sinophone Malaysian authors' artistic projects, enabling their
multidirectional critique and the transnational formation of Sinophone Malaysian literature (“Beyond”).
E. K. Tan concludes similarly that Sinophone Malaysian authors’ creative responses to their multilingual
and multiracial environments lead to a generative place-based identity as well as a flexible sense of
belonging not bound by geopolitical and linguistic borders. However, as Shih, Bernard s, and Tan also
importantly observe, such creolized self-expression cannot be taken for granted, and literary performances
like Chang’s are marked first of all by self-conscious settler critique. As my analyses hope to highlight,
attempts at creolization are negotiated among daily and embodied communion, and they occur only with involved, self-critical labor—of which, I have argued, the Baroque flourishes as a stylistic registry. These traces of self-criticism then attest to a settler author’s effort to critique settler hegemony and to resist partaking in Indigenous transfer. Chang’s rainforest novels depict minority settlers’ painful struggles to shoulder the original sin of settlement, and his settler Baroque may be a moment of maximum expression of the Sinophone minor settler culture, a parting boom as he relinquishes the projection of a Sinophone settler future.

Conclusion

Scholars of Anglophone settler literature have described the mechanisms of settler cultural hegemony. According to Anna Johnson and Alan Lawson, typical settler narratives both “act out the suppression or effacement of the indigene” and “perform the concomitant indigenization of the settler” (369). And Mark Rifkin has studied how settler literature imagines “place, personhood, and political belonging” as framed by “the construction and maintenance of the settler-state” (xvii). These construction of settler subjectivity come from authors belonging to a self-professedly victorious, dominant, and supposedly permanent settler collective. Supported by regimes of settler truth, settler literatures in these paradigmatic conditions seem to persistently perform hegemonic functions.

However, when we turn our gazes to settler cultures that are no longer dominant and whose relation with a thriving Indigenous majority have propelled significant self-critique—as the case discussed here—these hegemonic forms of writing are no longer supportable. Through Chang Kuei-hsing’s two novels, I argue in this chapter that Sinophone Malaysian settler guilt and its fading powers lead to new literary languages that acknowledge conflicts and defeat. Rather than common-sensical reiterations of settler values or the repression of Indigenous sovereignty, Chang’s atypical settler texts confront the dissolution of settler futures. Such narratives of settler dissolution, while not actively envisioning Indigenous decolonization, do offer a distinct imagination of settler-Indigenous futures in which settler
hegemony gives way to Indigenous survivance. Chang’s novels witness settler defeat without ire but, in Baroque flourishes, remember and condemn settler exploitations’ excessive violence and settler self-importance.

An expanded interpretive repertoire thus allows us to examine settler cultural projects in the minor key and to draw alternative transnational comparisons. This chapter references Guyana’s creole culture and Asian Hawaiian articulations as minor settler formations, and similar comparisons may be possible with other settler cultures that are no longer singularly dominant, as in post-apartheid South Africa. In these cases, settler colonial conditions involve multiracial negotiations and uncertain historical progresses, and they may just be some of the openings we need for imagining alternative historical outcomes.
Work Cited


Wang, David Der-wei (Wang Dewei). “Zai qunxiang yu houdang de jiaxiang: Zhang Guixing de MaHua gushi [At Home with Elephant Herds and Monkey Gangs: Chang Kuei-hsing’s Sinophone


1 I use Shu-mei Shih’s definition of the Sinophone, as “Sinitic-language cultures on the margins of geopolitical national state and their hegemonic productions” (Shih “Concept” 710). It covers Chinese-speaking settlers and immigrant communities as well as borderland cultures that become Sinophone through statist policies. In this chapter, Sinophone is also a linguistic designation in place of “Chinese,” with emphases on local variations within the more conventional term. Relatedly, I use “Sinitic” with reference to the written language conventionally designated as “Chinese” to highlight the heterogeneity in the language, where the same written characters can register dialectic sounds depending on the reader’s linguistic location.

2 My descriptions of Sinophone Malaysian literature are drawn primarily from Tee Kim Tong’s scholarship. See his “Sinophone Malaysian Literature” for an overview. See also Alison Groppe’s important monograph.

3 See Jin Tsu’s chapter on Chang, titled “Chinese Lessons,” in her Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora.

4 All translations from Chang are mine.

5 C.f. Hisatake in this volume. Hisatake offers an alternative reading of Hawaiian pidgin as instrumental to Native Hawaiian literary decolonization.