Writing the Ethnic Self—Languaging the Upper Middle Class Woman
in Xu Xi’s The Unwalled City

In short, if I am inescapably Chinese by descent, I am only sometimes Chinese by consent.

— Ien Ang, “To Be or Not to Be Chinese” (1992)

I’m a writer. I happen to write in English.

— Xu Xi, “The English of My Story” (2016)

Popular perception of Hong Kong’s hybridity has often rested on the rhetoric of “East-meets-West” propagandized in official discourse, which arguably denotes the contact between the Chinese and Anglo-European races. Such a perception then runs the risk of essentializing both races based on certain cultural traits. Its direct consequence can be observed in much of the public discussion of who counts as a “local” Hong Konger. Underlying these discussions is often an undisputed assumption that those of the Chinese race should be considered as the agents of local culture. This essay challenges such an assumption by advocating a notion of ethnic Sinophonicity that further contests the hybrid nature of Hong Kong’s local cultural formation. Ethnic Sinophonicity specifically refers to the formation of the ethnic subject who actively contributes to the social fabric of Hong Kong, and is thus recognized as local. Insofar as race is often used to describe the cultural activities of Sinitic language-speaking communities under the blanket category of “Chinese,” the violence exerted upon marginalized ethnic bodies is often

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1 Drawing on Shih Shu-mei’s definition of Sinophone, Sinophonicity refers to the subject formation of the individuals whose consider themselves as a cultural member of the local Sinitic language-speaking community.
overlooked by the rosy picture of “East-meets-West.” By replacing the category of race with ethnicity, ethnic Sinophonicity throws light on the multi-layered cultural identification that the ethnic body undergoes. Moreover, by underlining various manifestations of the ethnic subject, ethnic Sinophonicity paints a more substantial picture of Hong Kong’s Sinophone culture than the prevailing rhetoric of hybridity. To exemplify the concept of ethnic Sinophonicity, I will focus on one of the Hong Kong native English-language writer Xu Xi’s novels— *The Unwalled City* (2001). I argue that Xu’s English texts offer a unique look into the complex ethnic composition of the city, which decidedly sets the totality of Hong Kong literature apart from the monolithic category of Chinese literature.

Written at the time when the women’s movement was on the rise in 1990s Hong Kong, Xu Xi’s novel exposes the xenophobic Han-centrism in Hong Kong, expressed in a language of gender conflict, discrimination, and injustice. Such is told through the characters’ anxiety to fit into the place they call “home.” My analysis of ethnic Sinophonicity delineates Xu Xi’s careful observation of the structural hierarchy along the axis of ethnicity. At the same time, I argue that ethnic Sinophonicity also derives its critical agency from Xu’s use of the English language to convey the effect of normative ideals of being Chinese in Hong Kong. This aspect of ethnic Sinophonicity broadens the parameters of Hong Kong’s Sinophone culture. As Shih Shu-mei’s rightly argues, “Hong Kong literature has always been a multilingual literature, including Anglophone and Sinophone writings” (Shih, “Hong Kong Literature” 15). Taking the lens of ethnic Sinophonicity.

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2 The women’s movement has always been present since the 1940s in Hong Kong. But as Ching Kwan Lee notes, “prior to the 1980s, the women’s movement in Hong Kong was largely the effort made by wives of Chinese elites or expatriate women…then in the 1980s, more grass roots-oriented women’s groups were formed, targeting different groups of local Chinese women as their constituencies” (C. Lee 229). In 1994, for instance, the women’s movement successfully changed the land inheritance law in Hong Kong, allowing women in the New Territories to inherit land property for the first time.
Sinophonicity, I expand Shih’s point further by arguing for the inclusion of Anglophone writings that speak from a local point of view in the breadth of Hong Kong’s composite Sinophone culture.

My analysis begins with the character Andanna’s story, which represents the confusion and paradoxes experienced by the majority Hong Kong people in the face of the 1997 Handover. I argue Andanna’s story delineates how cultural conflict within Hong Kong can be observed through the lens of language. My discussion of the conflict between different ethnic affiliations within the Hong Kong society furthers via an investigation of the bi-racial character Gail’s story where the discourse of a cosmopolitan local identity prevails in the 1990s. Gail’s story, examined through the lens of ethnic Sinophonicity, underlines Xu Xi’s depiction of the intersectionality of ethnicity and gender engendered by a different set of power relations outside the institution of family.

The Tale of Andanna—The Paradox of a Hong Kong Chinese

In this section, I focus on the subjectivity of a Hong Kong Chinese woman, Andanna, whose ethnic and gender identity is deemed unproblematic and neatly perceived. In many ways, Andanna in The Unwalled City is the archetype of the majority Han Chinese in Hong Kong. Her expression of ethnic Sinophonicity therefore serves as a political allegory of the confusion and paradoxes experienced in Hong Kong’s negotiation for a nuanced representation of its cultural heritage in cultural discourse.

Even though the topic of the 1997 Handover has been common in literary discourse, I suggest the centering of the question of language allows readers to see from a new angle how strongly contested this topic is. The ethnic Sinophonicity stemmed from this point of view then puts into perspective the public discussion of Hong Kong’s political situation.
today, thus serving as an act of decolonization. My following analysis will be based on this premise, highlighting Xu Xi’s unique aesthetic construction of a Hong Kong at the crossroads.

Published in the immediate years after the Handover, *The Unwalled City* retrospectively taps into “the nature of Hong Kong’s evolution during [the] pre-handover period—what people did with their lives and the societal and even linguistic context of their days” (Xu, “Writing” 424). It weaves together the life stories of four different characters, two local and two American expats. Andanna is, again, described as the quintessential Hong Konger—ethnically Han Chinese, but culturally hybridized. Her hybridized cultural upbringing is reflected through her conflicted feelings about two languages, Cantonese and English. Such conflicted feelings are embodied in the text through the trope of music. At the outset, Andanna presents herself as a deadbeat working-class figure. Crammed in a tiny shabby apartment with her aspiring Jazz musician boyfriend Michael, she stands on the opposite end of the stereotypical fast-paced, money-minded Hong Kong lifestyle that we know from mass media and popular culture. Nevertheless, Michael and Andanna live a lifestyle that is rendered “cool,” albeit undesirable by the majority of pragmatic Hong Kongers. Their pursuit of a non-popular genre of music, Jazz to be precise, puts them in a marginal place in the marketplace. The jazz music that they perform requires them to sing English lyrics in a society where Cantonese dominates. Despite the fact that she “can’t stand speaking English,” Andanna nonetheless has to engage with the English language due to the lyrics she sings in order to make a living, and thus experiences a bohemian Hong Kong life because of it (Xu, *The Unwalled City* 182).
Andanna’s situation arguably performs an extradiegetic function, one whereby Xu Xi reflects the unease of writing a local Hong Kong experience in English. Unlike Xu Xi the author who finds herself a proper voice through writing in English, Andanna, however, falls gradually out of love with jazz. This can be inferred from her view of her boyfriend’s love of jazz: “Michael was too old fashioned and stubbornly purist” (76). Jazz is a foreign pursuit in Andanna’s eyes; she is not able to translate it into a cultural bearing that suits her Hong Kong sensibilities. As the text proceeds, we observe a desire in Andanna to move towards Canto-pop out of a pragmatic consideration, as it is a more lucrative genre than jazz.

At a symbolic level, Andanna’s preference for the local music genre suggests a movement of sustaining a distinctive local identity in postcolonial Hong Kong during the Handover period. This can be further explicated by Michael’s contrasting position on Jazz music. Michael’s persistent pursuit of Jazz is, on the one hand, a counter-narrative to the hegemony of mainstream Canto-pop in Hong Kong’s music industry. On the other hand, his determination to leave Hong Kong for the United States to pursue his Jazz career reveals his loss of touch with Hong Kong’s own cultural particularities. In a sense, Michael’s “purist” attitude towards Jazz music represents his direct grafting of this western music genre onto his own cultural sensibilities. There is no necessary process of his own indigenization into the Hong Kong context involved when he attempts to connect with the local audience through his Jazz performances. Accordingly, his failure to sustain a Jazz career in Hong Kong gives an escapist hue to his decision to leave the city for the States where Jazz music has more audience. With the handover timeline looming large in the background of the novel, Andanna’s strategic choice of Canto-pop, on the contrary,
represents an insistence on Hong Kong’s distinctive cultural identity vis-à-vis mainland China.

Deeply rooted in Hong Kong soil, Canto-pop as a music genre arises from a combination of local creative energies and a variety of cultural influences elsewhere. It is also a genre that hallmarks the Cantonese language in a celebratory way. Singers like Leslie Cheung, Andy Lau and Anita Mui have influenced generations of youths locally regarding their perception of their own identities and globally regarding what Hong Kong culture is. As such, like local television and film productions, Canto-pop is an effective tool for the dissemination of a collective sensibility. For instance, halfway through the novel, Andanna attends Michael’s farewell party for his imminent study in the States. Upon hearing a perfect rendition of a jazz song, Andanna undergoes a revelation: “She was right to have left [Michael], right to have gone back home. Now she could become her kind of singer, here in Hong Kong, instead of running off to sing a foreign music in a foreign land” (199). Andanna’s emotional attachment to Hong Kong as her home, and Cantonese as her native language, is thus seen clearly through her investment in Canto-pop. However, as mentioned previously, Andanna’s transition from Jazz to Canto-pop is largely out of a practical consideration, rather than a culturally informed one. She regards performing Canto-pop as a much more promising and easy way to earn a living.

As a mainstream performing art, the aesthetics of Canto-pop is embedded in the dominant masculinist ideology of Hong Kong Chineseness. By transitioning to Canto-pop, Andanna subjects herself to the gender ideology embedded within Canto-pop. This is shown in one instance where Andanna has an affair with her boyfriend Michael’s best friend Tai Jai. The sexual experience brings her to her first orgasm. Afterward, when she
looks at herself in the mirror, she wonders:

Surely she must look different. Long legged and small waisted, with a real 34-B bustline, her figure… turned men’s heads wherever she went, no matter what she wore… Flawless skin, not a hint of a blemish… Her eyes were naturally rounded, framed by long, thick lashes. They slanted perfectly, and if she narrowed them at just the right angle, she could manufacture a sexy, feline gaze that photographed well. She traced her finger around the outline of her “lipstick ad mouth,” so dubbed by some smart ass creative, and wondered about these lips that some photographer had once told her were “too hot to kiss.” (78)

The mirroring of the self that occurs in this scene is at once Andanna’s act of recognizing both her ethnic features and her feminine beauty. Andanna’s description of her beauty, exemplified by the phrase “lipstick ad mouth,” gives context to how female body is objectified under male gazes in society. At the same time, the “performance” of female beauty, to borrow Butler’s term, is notably initiated by Andanna herself in this scene. She knows how to manipulate her beauty, which is to say her bio-capital, to advance her career. As such, her revelation can be construed as either a sign of willing subjectivation or playful subversion. Either way, the textual construction of such gender performativity keeps Andanna’s own perception of ethnic and gender identity at a critical distance. Her articulation of her ethnic Sinophonicity thus deviates from the normative representation of Hong Kong Chinese females who have internalized patriarchal gender norms. More precisely, it overthrows the legitimacy of homogenizing precepts such as a unified Hong Kong Chineseness, thus urging readers to think about the intersectionality of gender and
ethnicity operating at the formation of the local Hong Kong subject.

It requires further scrutiny to dispel the notion of a uniform, or homogenous, Hong Kong cultural identity, particularly when I intend to argue for a distinctive Hong Kong culture through Andanna’s story, as mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, the word “distinctive” is not synonymous with “uniform” in conceptualizing Hong Kong’s cultural identity. Instead, by “distinctive” I also argue for a multifarious perspective of Hong Kong’s Sinophone space that allows different, and even competing, cultural ideologies to interact and co-exist. My analysis of Andanna’s mirroring of self in the passage above is illustrative of the multiple facets that Hong Kong culture is able to signify. However, that Andanna recognizes the masculinist cultural discourse underpinning her performance of gender does not substantiate Hong Kong’s particularities. At the basic level, there exist similarities between the Hong Kong Chinese values and those of mainland China regarding gender. These similarities can be shown through the example of Hong Kong martial arts movies. As Man-Fung Yip notes, martial arts cinema at its early stage “engaged more with horizontal transnational exchanges through processes of translation and hybridization” in the production process (M. F. Yip 189). Subsequently, audiences from regional (East Asian and Southeast Asian) and global Sinitic language-speaking communities can all identify with some familiar cultural elements in the movies, such as Chinese notions of masculinity and traditional Chinese values. In turn, the wide circulation of such movies like Jackie Chan’s has, to some extent, contributed to the homogenization of concepts such as Chinese masculinity and femininity. From this consideration, the gender ideology that objectifies Andanna’s Chinese feminine beauty can arguably be applied to explain similar issues in mainland China and elsewhere. Thus,
in order to come to comprehensive understanding of Hong Kong’s distinctive culture, it
cannot be approached merely from the perspective of gender.

In analyzing Wong Bik-wan’s *Portraits of Martyred Women*, the above issue
regarding gender has also been mentioned in chapter two. As I have argued, Wong finds
her solution through her stylistic rendering of a colloquial Cantonese speech context in
which her characters tell their stories. Similarly, here in *The Unwalled City*, Xu Xi adds
specificity to Andanna’s articulation of Sinophonicity by underscoring a language
conundrum in postcolonial Hong Kong. For instance, Andanna’s manager Colleen keeps
reminding Andanna that she should learn Mandarin for future career considerations.
Citing the names of famous stars, Colleen claims “many of the big name performers
could handle both dialects. Some of the Taiwan and mainland singers even [sing] in
Cantonese now” (Xu, *The Unwalled City* 200). Colleen’s consideration of both Mandarin
and Cantonese dialects gives them equal status. Andanna’s immediate response, “why
[do] things always have to be difficult[?]”, hints at neither a rejection nor acceptance of
Colleen’s suggestion (ibid.). At another point in the text, Xu Xi allows three languages to
appear in the text:

“*Wei, leng leui.*” Albert’s voice floated towards them during the break
after the first set.

“*Bu jiang Guangdong hua.*” Colleen’s command that he not speak
Cantonese.

“*Meih dou gau chat.*” ’97 hasn’t arrived, he declared in Cantonese.

“*Putonghua hai bu shi Xianggang de mu yu.*” Putonghua isn’t Hong
Kong’s mother tongue yet, he added, in Mandarin. (199-200)
The political tension in Hong Kong during the pre-handover years is embodied in a language tussle between the speakers here. Xu Xi’s English rendering of this scene additionally makes it clear that the struggle is not only between Mandarin/China and Cantonese/the local, but also with English/Hong Kong’s history. In doing so, Hong Kong’s historical particularities are fully shown to readers. In Andanna’s case again, this conflict between powers is manifest in, for one, her reluctance to learn Mandarin. For another, Andanna chooses to perform Canto-pop songs with classical music elements as her specialty, as she had learned western classical music in university. The songs that she performs thus deviate slightly from the modern type of Canto-pop played on popular media. In this way, Andanna occupies a paradoxical position where she is subjected to the dominant identity discourse in Hong Kong through her performance of Canto-pop, while simultaneously resisting it with her own deviated articulation of western classical music elements.

Andanna’s choice of music genre, therefore, demonstrates that the distinctiveness of Hong Kong’s culture lies in its inclusion and incorporation of different cultural elements within a single space. By virtue of this, Hong Kong’s culture is kept alive by the dynamic nature of its formation. However, this dynamic formation does not preclude the contradiction, dissonance, and ruptures caused by the interactions among these various elements. This view also finds resonance in Ka-Ming Wu’s invocation of the term “the north-bound project” in discussing the transnational cultural formation between Hong Kong and mainland China. The term refers to Hong Kong’s outward economic and cultural expansion in mainland China after the implementation of the “reform and opening up” policy. According to Wu, the term describes “the process not only as
economic exploitation of mainland labor by Hong Kong capitalists but also as a heavy investment of Hong Kong cultural industries in the mainland, where images of Hong Kong singers and idols, videos, films, magazines, and novels abound” (Wu 133). Wu interestingly views Hong Kong’s active participation in trans-regional activities as a form of exploitation. This view thus subverts the popular narrative where Hong Kong is the weaker player vis-à-vis China in the city’s postcolonial era. It affirms the strength and vitality of Hong Kong’s culture, as well as exposing its exploitative potential, often veiled, if without critical supervision.

Applying the above to view Hong Kong’s culture on the local level, I seek to draw attention to how certain cultural values often take precedence in disseminating the knowledge of what Hong Kong’s Sinophone culture entails. Subsequently, critical evaluation is needed to resist any prevailing lopsided discourse of such a disposition. This need for critical evaluation is also present in the text. At the end of the novel, Andanna’s aspiration as a singer seems to waver as she wonders whether she should do something else. Her uncertainty stems from an escapist desire to avoid the heavily routinized work associated with a pop career. However, there is no guarantee that her alternative career choice, possibly as a dancer, will not put her in the same position as her current one in music. At the symbolic level, Andanna’s uncertainty thus can be understood as a manifestation of her paradoxical Sinophonicity. On the one hand, her move away from performing Canto-pop signifies her resistance to the objectification and commodification of her feminine beauty in such an industry. On the other, if she were to go into the field of another performance art, she would then continue to subject herself to the same dominant gender and cultural ideology in Hong Kong. The root of Andanna’s
predicament is, as I argue, her lack of a critical examination of the available cultural discourses in circulation. Hence, she is not able to link her personal problems with the structural deficiencies of Hong Kong’s current social, economic, and political system. In the process of conceptualizing her own subjectivity, her strategy of going with the flow limits her potential radical agency therein. Andanna’s story, therefore, shows one example of how gendered, ethnic subjectivities can be co-opted by the official masculinist discourse of Chineseness.

There is another observable thread in Andanna’s narration on her family’s loosening grip on her life choices. It should be noted that Andanna’s self-fashioned marginalization is enabled by her affluent background. In moments of weakness, she has the option to fall back on her family’s support and connections. This aspect of her behavior is arguably another manifestation of her paradoxical Sinophoncity. Her family, hence, is likened to the power apparatus for the production of normative ideals of Chineseness. Indeed, the individual woman’s relationship with her family is an important trope in literary representations of the city. Especially in a society like Hong Kong where the basic social unit is the family, familial ideology has direct bearings on the self-fashioning of the ethnic body.

**The Tale of Gail— The Precarity of a Hong Kong Eurasian**

This section examines Xu Xi’s characterization of Gail Szeto in *The Unwalled City*, who is half Chinese and half white, in the hopes of highlighting the hidden aspect of ethnic relations within 1990s Hong Kong. As my analysis will show, her ethnic Sinophonicity is shown through a subject position in which she insists on her “Chinese” identity despite her mixed-race background. This leads to her perpetual sense of precarity
over the legitimacy of her ethnic identification with the local Sinitic community in which the discourse of a collective cosmopolitan local identity prevails. As such, Gail’s story provides a forum upon which Hong Kong’s relationship with colonialism is directly confronted. More importantly, I contend Gail’s story provides an enlarged perspective on Hong Kong’s self-positioning in the post-Handover years vis-à-vis mainland China and development of global capitalism.

Specifically, Xu Xi once wrote that Rose’s story “did not inspire me the way feminist courage did, and there were days I longed for a more powerful voice to emerge from my work” (Xu, “Writing” 423). From this consideration, the characterization of Gail is arguably the answer to Xu’s literary aspiration. For such a character, it is very difficult to imagine that she would suffer the same type of oppression as someone of a weak character would have. The subtlety of discrimination that Gail encounters then reveals a new aspect of the unaddressed issues regarding decolonization. In Andanna’s story, my discussion has centered the issue of language to unravel the confusion and paradoxes experienced by Hong Kong Chinese about the Handover. By contrast, the narrative of Gail’s story constructs an outward projection of prevailing myths of the local onto an ethnic body, whose racial characteristics mark her as the role of an outsider. As Sheldon H. Lu helpfully notes, the popular “teleological reading and representation of Chinese/Hong Kong history as a series of losses and recoveries eclipses the private drama of individuals in their daily existence and the formation and deformation of their identity and subjectivity” (Lu 108). Lu’s argument about the complex and diversified formations of individual identity in Hong Kong has been examined through Andanna’s story. What remains missing is how the process of the deformation of subjectivity can reveal another
side of the story about who is ruled out once a certain notion of who counts as the local people is determined. Also, through an analysis of Gail, the decolonizing project in Hong Kong acquires a new dimension in unsettling the homogeneous idea of what constitutes a local in Hong Kong, which is still the central concern in public discourse of Hong Kong today. In this regard, Gail’s story serves as an appropriate ending point to this chapter’s discussion of ethnic Sinophonicity.

From the beginning of the narration, Gail’s social parameter is described as confined between her home and workplace. The rigidity of her life routine suggests her strong work ethic, which, coupled with her Harvard-educated background, justifies her privileged life with an apartment which “ha[s] a view and a lot of space” and a “live-in domestic” in the central area of the city (Xu, The Unwalled City 30-1). Underlying this façade of comfort and success is her crippling fear of being excluded from the local community. Growing up Eurasian, Gail has been constantly subjected to racial discrimination. As she observes, she is often perceived as the “miscellaneous, assorted species. Not the species as defined by the respectable, family-obsessed Hong Kong yan, the ‘real Chinese,’ the only ‘humans’ who [count]” (104). The racism implicit in such perceptions of Gail is revealing of the hypocrisy of the elite class in colonial Hong Kong. Gail’s situation to some extent echoes Rose’s dilemma where she needs to keep up the appearance of her marriage in order to be accepted by the local Chinese community. What we see here then is the prevalence and endurance of such a racist mentality in Hong Kong society. Such a notion of racism stems of a misconceived idea of Chineseness, one that uses the category of race as its sole marker, as both Ien Ang and Rey Chow remark. Nevertheless, how can the ethnic Hong Kong Chinese have discriminatory views, when
they are simultaneously colluding with the other (white Euro-American) race to set up the colonial order as we know it today? In a broader context, isn’t Hong Kong’s struggle for a local identity even during the pre-handover years evidence for a deviated form of the old doctrines of Chineseness? Consequently, we can argue that it is these layers of hypocrisy—of discriminating the non-Chinese while pursuing a cultural identity that differentiates from the Sino-centric one proposed in mainland cultural discourse—that limit our conception of ethnic Sinophonicity in Hong Kong.

More importantly, such hypocrisy is especially detrimental to the women of society. Compared to Rose’s meekness and Andanna’s pretended indifference, Gail’s critical awareness of the conservative cultural values of the elite class has nurtured in her a decisive and assertive character in her career pursuit. In her own understanding, “discipline and persistence got her where she [i]s” (212). However, such a character often comes across as unattractive in her romantic dealings with men, including her ex-husband that is briefly featured in the novel. For instance, her then-husband had always tried to turn her work ethics against her, complaining “that she s[ees] life as only work and responsibilities” (221). Even her dear mother, harshly reproaches her regarding her divorce, blaming her assertive character as the reason for the divorce: “Ngaahnggeng ngaam. For years, she was deaf to her mother whom senility finally silenced. Always have to have your way. Always have to be right. Sometimes Gail, you’re just out and out wrong” (223). The Cantonese term used here, literally denoting “strong-man female,” points to a more general phenomenon in which women with a tough character are negatively conceived as un-feminine, and thus unappealing to men. Such a phrase is an act of discrimination against women disguised as a complimentary word at the surface.
The criticism made by Gail’s mother reveals the lasting influence of the entrenched masculinist Chinese familialism in Hong Kong. However, by rendering the Cantonese phrase in English, its derogatory meaning is somewhat lost. The explanation in italics in the quote, “you’re just out and out wrong,” delivers a reprimanding tone of less severity. This stylistic choice of using Cantonese transliteration thus paves the way for Gail’s insistence on her alternate expression of Chineseness, or rather her ethnic Sinophonicity, as a middle-aged, divorced, and mixed-race Hong Kong woman.

One turning point for Gail’s conception of her identity is her experience of watching the opera “Marco Polo” by Tan Dun. Prior to this, Gail has been perturbed by her unrequited romantic feelings for an American photographer named Vince. Gail, and by extension Xu Xi, have again linked her failure to her idea of womanhood which goes against normative perceptions: “She said she’d never give in like other women who expected a ‘mommy track’ to yield the same amount of power as the traditional, expected climb” (150). If we are to recall Rose’s situation, womanhood in Hong Kong is largely regulated by traditional Chinese values. Even though time has advanced since Rose’s time, and Gail has made a home in Hong Kong with a boy from her former marriage, the difficulty that Gail has experienced in dating betrays the same old story of tilted male-female gender relations. The problem with such a gender relation is that it is often regarded as non-existent in public discourse, given the reality that Hong Kong women are enjoying equal opportunities in other fields such as education, work, healthcare, and so forth. But nonetheless, in both Andanna’s and Gail’s experiences, their perception of gender has been continuously subjected to the scrutiny of male gazes in public. Gail’s excellent performance in her career, which fares much better than her male counterparts
at times, is therefore considered out of place in society. In this light, the lines in the opera understandably strike a chord in Gail: “Kublai Khan sang about waiting in a city which is not my city/ where I am a stranger also/ in this city, in this place… Make your escape to where you always were” (258). Khan had used military forces to enter the vast territories owned by Han Chinese. The un-walling of these territories nevertheless failed to lessen his sense of exclusion by the local Han Chinese community.

Shown in the pre-handover era, the performance echoes the prevalent anxiety shared by citizens of Hong Kong. As Amy Lai correctly notes, “like Mongols who thrive in the wilderness, Hong Kong’s social and psychological landscape has long perpetuated a strong sense of alienation in its people from their ‘motherland’” (Lai 115). For Gail, the tune performed in the opera is reminiscent of her childhood dream in which “she live[s] outside the Great Wall, where she would knock and knock at the door to the Wall, but no one would ever let her in” (Xu, The Unwalled City 104). Following the line of thinking in the opera, what is left to subsequently do is only to escape. As we have seen, in the days close to the handover, the number of the migrating population had surged in Hong Kong. However, what is ironic is that by fleeing from Hong Kong, one arguably loses his/her sense of belonging while living in a foreign land. The question then becomes: which one is really worse, rehabilitating yourself in a foreign land, or staying in Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region of PRC? As Gail’s story suggests, instead of letting the angst of the Handover overwhelm oneself, it is crucial to cultivate a critical mind about the forces at work in shaping one’s subjectivity within one’s living environment. In this way, one can attain a resilient outlook in life, such as Gail’s insistence on claiming herself to be “Chinese” despite the prevalence of Sino-centrism embedded within public
perceptions. Such an outlook will help to navigate confusions that engendered by a broader scale of political change in society.

This tension between fleeing and staying in Hong Kong provides a room for Gail to unsettle the idea of the local. As she reflects upon her decision to come back to Hong Kong after her graduation at the end of the performance, “it [i]sn’t escape if it was where you belonged” (259). She remarks that life in Hong Kong is more about the politics of home-making in her native soil. Underlying this remark is her acknowledgment of her bicultural roots, thereby removing the grudges she had kept from being excluded by the local community. Additionally, her remark that the opera “transform[s]” (260) her can be seen as Xu Xi’s intention to highlight the function of art, including literature, to illuminate the possible ways in which we can conceive our living reality. To this end, similar to the enlightening effect of the opera on Gail, this novel has arguably been consistently advocating for voices of alterity to represent women’s lives in Hong Kong. It reminds us to be careful of the homogenizing tendency contained within our existing perception of Hong Kong’s local identity. It also takes us beyond the 1997 handover timeline to examine the possibilities and limits of Hong Kong’s vernacular cultural production, which is, I contend, one variety of global Sinophone cultural production. The importance of the concept of Sinophonicity can be further inferred in the title of the novel, *The Unwalled City*. As Hong Kong is transitioning from one political identity to another one in the post-1997 era, it is crucial to stay open to its transnational flow of resources, such as competing cultural ideologies. This is something that Gail somehow fails to achieve. Even though she is able to discern the structural discrimination against ethnic minority women, she never seeks to overthrow it by any means. In her urgent desire to be
included in the local community, she never dares to make such a move. As such, devoid of radical agency, her articulation of Sinophonicity is understood as a precarious one, which arguably springs from a reactionary, self-enclosed, defensive attitude.

Gail’s precarious Sinophonicity can be observed in one instance where her performance at work is linked to her bi-racial background. In her workplace where the staff is populated by local Chinese, Gail’s working principles sometimes clash with the others’. As much as she strives for a relaxing and less formal environment, she notices the employees always “[keep] up that local formality, creating rules of behavior she had never imposed” (54). Such an observation betrays the conservative side of Hong Kong’s local cultural values. As Helen Siu shrewdly puts, Hong Kong people’s “functional links to trade and the world assembly line have given them the false impression that they are global and modern” (Siu 136). Siu’s provocative view boldly attacks the rhetoric of “east-meets-west” that is much heralded in Hong Kong. This echoes my main argument that the dominant cultural values in Hong Kong are a discursive construct out of the masculinist, ethnocentric Chinese traditional value system. To return to Gale, under her totalizing gaze, her staff’s over-formality is deemed mostly negligible, as is illustrated by her view on the building where she works: “Up here on 48, the mess below was contained, reassuring her that her home city was still beautiful” (Xu, The Unwalled City 51). What she fails to realize is that, just like them, she also refuses to change to a large extent as well. Hence, when she overhears what her employees think of her, she feels that her authority being threatened:

“That Szeto bitch makes me want to throw up.”

…
“It’s that ‘A-merican’ experience of hers. She’s not Chinese anymore.”

... 

Her first reaction, how dare they, and then she began to cry, weeping uncontrollably… That crack about American experience. Did they still see her as one of “them” and not “us”? (284-5)

It is the alienation from the Chinese community in her childhood that has eventually driven her away to the U.S. where she acculturates herself successful with Western cultures. The experience has arguably helped to transform her into an independent and capable woman, allowing her to claim legitimacy as part of the local community of the city. Ironically, the very formula to her success now is being questioned, criticized and even weaponized to attack her. This is not by any means suggesting that Gale should conform to the conservative values for the sake of belonging to the city. Instead, Gail’s trauma is a cautionary tale that calls for the delegitimization of the “us-other” dichotomy, as represented between herself and her staff. This position calls for a horizontal view of the differentiated expressions of ethnic Sinophonicity in the city. To hold such a view is to initiate a transcultural perspective not only at the state level but also at the individual level with regard to the conception of identity. Consequently, I argue that Gail’s confidence in her alternative lifeway as a bi-racial single mother is the key to increasing the visibility of other diverse lifeways of women today confronting the intersectionality of ethnicity and gender. Instead of panicking over which group to belong to, Gail can reach out to and ally with other ethnic minorities in Hong Kong. To have a grounded understanding of their experience will likely inspire her to find a better way to cope with her own reality.
At the very end of Gail’s story, she laments how her son grows too fast. As she remarks, “one day, he wouldn’t even need his mother” (290). If we stick to the “loss-and-recovery” narrative discussed by Sheldon Lu at the beginning of this section, the inevitable departure of Gail’s son arguably signifies a shared sentiment shared among the local people in the face of the 1997 Handover. Nevertheless, I think the melancholy expressed in Gail’s words can be interpreted as Xu Xi’s reminder about the constantly evolving process of one’s subject formation. That is, the precarious state of mind that Gail feels about the prospect of her son’s leaving can, alternatively, provide a chance for Gale to re-negotiate her notions of selfhood and womanhood for the better. Such negotiation will surely occur multiple times during her lifetime, in a fashion similar to that Hong Kong’s return to the sovereign of China is not simply a one-time political event. As recent history has shown, Hong Kong’s colonial heritage, and its vernacular articulation of Sinophonicity, can easily become the source of conflict and dispute. Gail’s epiphany from her experience with the play “Marco Polo” thus lends insight to our perception of Hong Kong’s situation in the post-Handover years. The guiding principle here is to “make your escape to where you always were,” where to “escape” denotes an act of tracing back the historical formation of Hong Kong’s identity (285). This act of tracing back is in effect a process of decolonization of prevailing modes of knowledge on what constitutes the local in Hong Kong. With a grounded knowledge of the city’s past, and simultaneously an open attitude towards change, the city is never going to be obliterated of its cultural distinction but remains home for millions of people of different ethnic and gender backgrounds.
**Conclusion: The Becoming of Female Ethnic Sinophonicity**

This essay has aimed to attain an understanding of ethnic Sinophonicity through a consideration of how the troubles experienced by Xu Xi’s literary characters due to their ethnic identities are put into language. In analyzing the life-stories of the two women from Xu Xi’s *The Unwalled City*, I have shown how the ethnic subjectivities of these women are co-opted by the dominant discursive construct of Chineseness. The framework of ethnic Sinophonicity is to disrupt, as well as expand, popular perceptions of Hong Kong’s cultural identity, specifically vis-à-vis the 1997-Handover timeline. As Howard Chiang helpfully notes, to call Hong Kong a Sinophone modernity is “to distinguish itself from and gradually replace an older apparatus of colonial modernity” (Chiang 549-550). Chiang’s words point to the distinction between two temporalities, one based on political dates and the other based on the psycho-cultural transformations of the local people of Hong Kong. The psycho-cultural line of temporality specifically finds an embodied resonance in the novel discussed above. As the characters’ ethnic bodies are perceived only by the commonsensical notion of race categories, they are barred from having a secure sense of belonging in the local community. This insecurity is expressed through tropes of failed marriages, troubled inter-ethnic love romances and language conundrums. Although these tropes are common themes in English-language writings about Hong Kong, Xu Xi’s construction nevertheless places them under the rubric of intra-ethnic conflicts. In such a way, her writings overthrow prevailing notions of Han Chineseness within Hong Kong society. As a result, they extend the existing epistemological reach of Hong Kong’s Sinophone culture. Ethnic Sinophonicity thus proves how English language can be an effective instrument to articulate the transcultural
space of Hong Kong.

My discussion will be concluded by a further consideration of Xu Xi’s use of English to render ethnic Sinophonicity in the novel. Xu Xi’s own background as well as her characters has attested to the fallacy of the idea of linguistic nativity, as mentioned earlier. Linguistic nativity denotes that an accurate portrayal of Hong Kong’s local experience is associated with the use of the Cantonese language in discourses. However, the incorporation of Romanized Cantonese and Mandarin words in Xu Xi’s English narratives proves the inadequacy of using a the native tongue, Cantonese, to describe the subjectivity of a local individual whose ethnicity refuses reductive categorization by the racial concept of “Chinese.” Furthermore, Xu’s characterization of the female subject in her novels overthrows stereotypes by other popular English-language writings about Hong Kong, such as *Suzie Wong*. In this way, Xu’s use of English breaks conventions within the line of Hong Kong writing, with a renewed affectivity attached to this mother tongue of imperialistic ideology. In this fashion, the two novels show the possibility for multi-lingual representations of Hong Kong’s cultural sensibility at the local level.

Additionally, writing about Hong Kong in English allows for another space of creativity and transculturation that puts the city in dialogue with other places/cities that are undergoing their own process of decolonization. In the contemporary age where political agency in Hong Kong is active and much needed, it is important to envision the city through a distinctive collective imaginary. Such an imagination, in my opinion, can draw inspiration from the alliance of inter-literary sensibilities between Chinese- and English-language writings within the city, and between different regions. Ultimately, my conception of ethnic Sinophonicity is to shed new light on the possible ways one can
form that alliance to enhance the current understanding of global Sinophone cultures.
Works Cited


