For the Refined Perusal of the Master of the Pavilion of Moving Sentiment: Chinese Calligraphic Inscriptions at Japan’s Sun Yat-sen Memorial Museum

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This paper considers modern Japan’s Chinese script culture through an examination of calligraphic panels preserved at the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Museum (Son Bun Kinenkan) near Kobe. In the early twentieth century it remained common for business and political leaders in both China and Japan to write calligraphy and compose poetry and prose in literary Chinese. Some of these elites made a practice of brushing select passages from canonical Chinese literary texts or auspicious, allusive compositions that they composed themselves for installation and long-term display in private and public spaces. Multiple works of this type are preserved at the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Museum, the structures of which were once the home of an immigrant trader and leader of Kobe’s Chinese community, Go Kindō (Ch. Wu Jintang, 1855-1926). Chinese politicians, businessmen, and artists, some of whom had extensive connections of their own with Japan, produced these panels of Chinese poetry and prose for Go in the 1910s and 1920s. Although predicated upon developments in modern Sino-Japanese business and politics, the inscriptions invoke a shared literary and artistic tradition to celebrate Go’s accomplishments in Japan.

The Life of Abe no Seimei in Edo-Period Popular Literature

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The Heian-period nobleman Abe no Seimei (921-1005) is known as an expert onmyōji, a practitioner of Yin-Yang divination in service at the Japanese imperial court. Such divination demanded considerable erudition and was imbued with the prestige long associated with Chinese culture in Japan. In contemporary Japanese popular culture, by contrast, Seimei has been depicted as a kind of Heian-period wizard, who uses magical skills to battle dark forces. Popular interest in Seimei, however, is not a uniquely modern phenomenon: he is one of the many figures from the classical past taken up in new texts and contexts in the Edo period (1600-1867), a time which saw the flourishing of Japanese literature aimed at a popular (non-elite) audience. The Abe no Seimei ichidaiki (Life of Abe no Seimei, ca.1792) is an illustrated narrative that describes fantastical events involving Seimei. This paper will examine the Ichidaiki’s depiction of Seimei and his skills in the context of Edo-period popular literature, which is notable for its use of parody and humour in its treatment of the past.
This talk will focus on the writer Yu Dafu and his appearance as a character in both Japanese and Sinophone Malaysian literature. Yu is well-known for his early avant-garde work while an overseas student in Japan; however, during World War II he moved to Malaya, before eventually assuming a new identity in Sumatra and disappearing at the end of the war. Unlike his earlier collaborators, Yu has led a strange transnational literary afterlife. Yu was appropriated by two authors, Satō Haruo and Ng Kimchew. Satō wrote a movie treatment featuring two Chinese characters in Japan. The two characters are clearly based on Yu and his close friend and collaborator, Guo Moruo, but the text departs from reality in featuring the pro-Japanese reawakening of Guo’s counterpart. Yu is depicted as the villain in the story, leading his gullible friend to potential ruin in China. Satō later attempted to modify their final literary exchange by issuing an open letter, ostensibly searching for Yu Dafu after the war, while simultaneously attempting to justify his embrace of fascist ideology during the war. Many years after his disappearance in Sumatra, Yu makes an appearance in a number of stories by Kim, as the ghostly progenitor of Sinophone Malaysian literature, eluding his alleged death in Sumatra in a number of unlikely ways. While representing a substantial engagement with Yu Dafu’s literary legacy, both writers use Yu Dafu to confront anxieties and concerns that lie at the heart of contemporary literary debates for both of them.