



Dong Wang

TSE TSAN TAI (1872–  
1938)

An Australian-Cantonese Opinion  
Maker in British Hong Kong

Asian Studies

Collection Editor  
**DONG WANG**

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PUBLISHING





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## **Abstract**

Who was Tse Tsan Tai? Insurrectionist? Socialite? Patriot? Public Intellectual?

Born and raised in Australia and trained in Anglo-Hong Kong's civil service, Tse Tsan Tai (1872–1938) was all of these and more. A first native media man and anti-Qing patriot, he advocated independent thinking and a free China. Through his words, this book explores a composite identity, touching on themes of diaspora, religion, colonialism, civil society, science, and revolution in Hong Kong, Australia, Qing and Nationalist Chinas, and of our time.

Ideal reading for students of Asian Studies, East Asian Studies, Diaspora Studies, Chinese and Hong Kong History, International Relations, Indo-Pacific Studies, Colonial Studies, Cultural History, Sociology, and related courses, this fascinating book uses biography to ask the question: what were the original ideals for republicanism in China?

## **Keywords**

Colonialism; East Asia; cultural history; diaspora; revolution; biography; identity; republicanism; Qing; race; sociology; Christianity

# Acknowledgments

Hong Kong (HK) has been close to my heart and mind. In 2001–2002, I worked at Lingnan University HK (Tuen Mun) to help found its history department on a teaching fellowship funded by the US Lingnan Foundation based at Yale University at the time. Hong Kong is the place where I rediscovered myself, powered by professional calling, before I came back to the United States to work at Gordon College on the North Shore of Boston in 2002. Two decades afterwards, hopes and efforts for a democratic China are renewed in the unfolding story of Tse Tsan Tai (1872–1938) in British Hong Kong. Intellectual support from John Fitzgerald, David Parker, Flemming Christiansen, Kathryn Myers, Kristin Stapleton, David Kenley, William Tsutsui, Lynn White, III, Paul Dunscomb, and the Alaska World Affairs Council is acknowledged herewith.

Dong Wang, NW Germany, December 25, 2022.

# Epigraph

Since I belong to no party and have no political enemies, I shall gladly welcome contributions toward this history from all friends and colleagues, irrespective of nationality or party, as I am conscious of the fact that many important historical details must have escaped my memory or remain hidden from my knowledge.

– Tse, 1924, conclusion



# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>		<b>x</b>
<b>Learning objectives and discussion topics</b>		<b>xxviii</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	“A native of Sydney”	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	The 1911 Revolution: a Christianized democratic China?	<b>21</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	“The world’s great problem solved”	<b>53</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	Where business, culture, politics, and advocacy converged	<b>69</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	Conclusion: Chinas and the curse?	<b>97</b>
<b>Chapter 6</b>	Historical documents reading: excerpts of Tse Tsan Tai’s writings	<b>101</b>
<b>Notes</b>		<b>219</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>		<b>231</b>
<b>Index</b>		<b>241</b>

# Introduction

Tse Tsan Tai (Xie Zuantai 謝纘泰 1872–1938, also known as James Ah See) is perhaps best known for his 1899 cartoon “The Situation in the Far East” (Tse, 1899) and as Hong Kong’s first native media man who cofounded the influential and still existing *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) in 1903. Owned by the Alibaba Group of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) since 2016, SCMP has been widely considered as a PRC soft-power promoter.

This book tells the story of Tse, an Australian-Cantonese public intellectual who lived his entire adult life in British Hong Kong. Critically reading his words, we explore how mixed heritage, diaspora, religion, democracy, colonialism, and revolution impacted identity, while considering the roots of republicanism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chinas.

Born and raised in Australia and trained in British Hong Kong’s civil service, Tse Tsan Tai established the *South China Morning Post* in 1903 together with Alfred Cunningham (1870–?).<sup>1</sup> A leading anti-Qing insurrectionist in Hong Kong, he worked alongside the major figures, Chinese and foreign, in the movements leading up to the 1911 Revolution and the first Republic of China (1912–1928) in Nanjing and Beijing. A sophisticated socialite, an acerbic debater, and the inventor of aluminum airships, he put his mastery of English to use in public opinion pieces and newspaper polemics. The life course he steered between revolutions, the print media, contemporary science, Christian



faith, Cantonese patriotism, independence, freedom, business, and cultural preservation made him a vibrant witness to the constantly changing identities that defined his age and place. Tse's words throw a fresh light on the original meanings of the Chinese Republic, a possibility still very much alive today.

Tse Tsan Tai's life and place invite scrutiny as well. Neither is typical – the man was just as unusual as Hong Kong is unique. However, the period between the 1890s and the 1930s produced constellations that are worth examining. What they called "Far East", and we now refer to as "East Asia" were and are still again the site of a major geopolitical shift. Hong Kong was and again today is in focus when it comes to determine the reach of empires and the issues of nationalism, democracy, autocracy, and freedom are again in the air. It is essential for us to carefully study dimensions of nationalism, racism, the Christian faith, and universalism as they were used by Tse and others in British Hong Kong and China at the time.

Divided into six chapters, this book is organized around four themes in the first four chapters: place (mainly Sydney, Hong Kong, and Canton); revolution and politics; religion and universalism; and business and culture. Juxtaposing Tse's own words with other sources and discussions, core histories are teased out. Chapter 5 serves as a conclusion, followed by Chapter 6 consisting of lengthy excerpts from Tse's works. My aim is to provide substantive insights into British Hong Kong and China arising from sources written by Tse and others. An edited collection of Tse's works, some facsimiles, as well as links to further resources can be found at <https://wellingtonkoo.org>.

## Note on sources and style

Tse Tsan Tai at the age of 65 deemed his chief legacy to include his *The Chinese Republic. Secret History of the Revolution*, his argument that the biblical Garden of Eden was in Xinjiang (Chinese Turkestan), and his synthesis of historical China's art civilization. He selected items on these themes from among his many newspaper contributions, mainly to the English language press that burgeoned on the China coast at the time, and pamphlets he had had printed by Kelly & Walsh. He bundled them, together with an issue of *United China Magazine* from October 1933 which also reprinted some of his works – containing his stylistic, careful handwritten corrections in red ink. He entrusted the package to a British woman two years his senior, Miss Clara Beatrice Mitchell (1870–1947), on her way from mainland China via Hong Kong back home to Leeds in Yorkshire. Tse gave Mitchell a written permission to have them published in Britain, suggesting they “ought to sell in millions, when properly advertised” (Tse, 1937b).

This full set of publications, which Tse Tsan Tai authorized in 1937 for publication in Toto, constitutes an important source for this book. In the event, Mitchell's illness and the ravages of World War II thwarted the publication plan, and the material came into my possession after spending ninety years in an attic somewhere in Britain.

Tse and Mitchell seemed to have hit it off instantly at what seems to have been their first encounter in 1937: “I am still wondering how we could have sat & talked for 6 hours, when you called to see me at Noon yesterday. & [sic] no doubt the exchanges of views

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I, the undersigned hereby authorize Miss Clara B. Mitchell to obtain the best possible terms and conditions for the printing and publishing of my following three books and supplementary pamphlets by a leading London Publishing Firm for sale in Great Britain, her Colonies and Dominions, the United States of America, and other countries of the world, together with translation rights:

Revised Edition (1937).

1. "The Creation: The Real Situation of Eden; and the Origin of the Chinese" with supplementary "Map of Asia". (1914).  
also  
Supplementary Pamphlets Nos. 1 to 12, and also  
No. 13 to No. 49.
2. Ancient Chinese Art.
3. A Short History of the Chinese Revolution.

Terms and conditions to be submitted for my approval.

*Tse Tsan Tai*

Hong Kong, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1937.

P.S. A few suitable illustrations dealing with the upheaval of Central Asia and the subsidence of the "Pacific" Continent, and Prehistoric Discoveries, might be included at the discretion of the Publishers.

Note. These three books ought to sell in millions, when properly advertised.

**Figure 1** Tse Tsan Tai's written permission for Miss Clara B. Mitchell, in Dong Wang's possession.

re Religion & other matters was mutually interesting". (Tse, 1937c) We also know that Mitchell returned home to Leeds around 1938 and convalesced for two years from ill-health "caused by her experiences when the Japanese attacked [Shanghai on August 13–November 26, 1937]" (Lui, October 19, 1940).

Mitchell, a single lady and teacher at Quarry Mount School in Leeds who had at least since 1921 rented out accommodation to a Chinese student lodger in her house on Meanwood Road in Leeds,<sup>2</sup> went to China upon her retirement and stayed there for about eight years before she headed home when the Japanese invaded Shanghai in 1937. We do not know what Mitchell did in China. Although she was a schoolteacher by profession, her bilingual business card indicates that she held a master's degree in technology (MTSc, 英國工科碩). A Chinese book found with the papers, *Happy Family* by female activist Frances W. Liu (劉王立明, 1897–1970), carries the author's personal dedication to Mitchell, dated September 15, 1933, but I am afraid that these are the only sparse straws to clutch at when seeking for motives and context. Neither do we know who introduced her to Tse nor why he entrusted her with the task of getting his work published. No matter whether their encounter was sheer historical contingency or part of a larger scheme, Tse took the opportunity offered seriously, for the careful selection and arrangement of his works and detailed instructions for their publication reveal, as we shall see, his deeply concerned verdict on the direction Chinese politics had taken.

They are therefore not just normal historical sources charting the lifetime of a protagonist; they add important information on how Tse himself at one given time chose to curate his own legacy, a

point confirmed by both omissions and meticulous handwritten corrections and insertions in the material.<sup>3</sup>

## **Name, place, and quotation styles**

Names of Chinese protagonists are mainly rendered in the original format used in historical sources, followed, on the first occasion, by any aliases, pinyin transcription where known, traditional Chinese characters where known, as well as birth and death years. I avoid normalizing formats of names in direct quotations, so while I use the correct Wade-Giles format in the running texts, for example, “Kang Yu-wei,” it may in quotations be rendered “Kang Yu Wei” to follow the original.

Chinese geographical names are in pinyin transcription, except in direct quotations, where they are included in the original format. Hong Kong and Macau are in the classical postal transcription. In quotations, the old form “Hongkong” is retained where appropriate. Emphases in quotations are original if not marked as “emphasis added”.

## **Chapter outline**

The opening chapter charts how Tse’s life (1872–1938) among heterogeneous diasporic Australian-Cantonese Chinese communities, secret societies, and colonial Hong Kong shaped his engagement with Qing China. Both person and places were essentially composite: Tse, an Australian-born Cantonese Christian of anti-Qing reform and revolutionary stock, British Hong Kong civil servant, cartoonist, political conspirator, cofounder of South China’s oldest still published newspaper, and socialite who knew

how to spread his message; Australia's Sydney and Melbourne areas, home to the largest ethnic, political, social, trading, and mining groups of Cantonese and other Chinese Australians, who played a crucial role in building the Republic of China; colonial Hong Kong, an entrepôt, a global hub, free port, gateway city, and a place of contending interests and crossed purposes. Our story is about a man who conducted a cosmopolitan life as a virtuoso in multiple registers. British Hong Kong – a place that still seeks its roots and role models in a constantly changing and vibrant diversity. Tse Tsan Tai was in favor of British monarchical democracy, was mostly silent on historical Australian white racism, and did not object to British colonialism in Hong Kong and in Australia, yet framed some of his views in explicit racist terms.

Chapter 2 examines Tse's account of revolutionary movements that ultimately toppled China's last dynasty, the Qing (1644–1911), and led to the founding of the Republic of China, and its Hong Kong-based precursors, providing fresh insights and firsthand perceptions of important events that many contemporary historians have treated as mere stepping stones on the path toward major historical turning points.

Chapter 3 reveals Tse's other identity as a Christian dreamer of one humanity with sino-centric traits. Tse's short book, *The Creation: The Real Situation of Eden, and the Origin of the Chinese* (1914), reinterpreted the biblical Genesis as a mythology of the historical "Far East" (East Asia). Tse claimed that the Garden of Eden was the Tarim Basin (i.e. today's Xinjiang where the People's Republic of China's first atomic test took place on October 16, 1964), and mapped the biblical narratives onto Chinese origin myths.

Chapter 4 examines Tse as an avid shaper of public opinion in the English language press in East Asia who locked horns with opinion makers in Hong Kong, Australia, Qing and Nationalist China, Britain, and the United States, and explores his fusion of business, culture, heritage, science, politics, and diverse mix of associates within the media and cultural circles on the China coast.

The book concludes with Chapter 5, covering Tse Tsan Tai's afterlife in Australia, Hong Kong, and the PRC. In Australia, Tse has been considered a son of Sydney, a paragon of Australian Chinese heritage, and an antidote to the White Australia lore. By contrast, Nationalist and Communist Chinese statehoods alike have reincarnated him as a patriotic hero to the degree that his Christian, civil liberty, and anti-Party identities were erased. Is history a double-edged sword? An uncomfortable mirror of the present? The straight path from the past to the present? Or something we need to dress up so that it justifies us?

## **Antiquities and geoculture**

Tse's "free China" cause that amounted to a violent racist campaign against the Manchus, who were singled out and blamed for China's modern misery, unveils how he was suspended between a sino-centric, racial bias, and color-blind faith in universal love and one humanity. Yet his rhetoric placed the universal "we" at the apex of passion, reason, and morals, while masking partisan opinion and preference as scientific truths. The following intermezzo may indicate how this worked.

He himself probably never became aware of it, but in 1905 an Italian advocate of cultural nationalism circulated Tse's vigorous commentary on the pillage of national treasures among the participants in one of the most symbolic international congresses:

An interesting little incident was the circulation during the Congress of printed slips of paper, presented by an Italian Countess. These papers contained a protest by a Chinaman, Mr Tse Tsan Tai, against the removal of great works of art from their places of discovery, the taking of any relics to museums in other countries than that to which they naturally belong.

(Dapp, 1905)

These words were part of Isabel Frances Dapp's report on the first International Congress of Classical Archaeology held in Athens in 1905. Her disdain for the Italian countess as well as for Tse probably reflected the general reaction at the conference to Tse's and the countess's message, for the majority of scholars and connoisseurs gathered there regarded Romano-Hellenic classical antiquity as the common ground of modern civilization and were convinced that national museums and private collections had a natural duty and right to put on display the original heritage of universal culture and save it from local savagery. At the time, Tse Tsan Tai's appeal was shrugged off as odd, but it was put on record.

Why would an Italian countess sow Tse's protest in such barren soil? British-Italian Evelyn Lillian Haseldine Carrington, Countess Martinengo-Cesaresco (1852–1931), a prolific and erudite historian of the Italian Risorgimento and avid scholar of Italian folklore championing nationalist and liberal cultural currents in



Italy and Greece, used Tse's statement to make a provocative political gesture (Hopkin, 2017). Likely without Tse's knowledge, she had his letter to the editor of the *Daily Graphic* in London reprinted and distributed it at the conference. The letter, also published in the *Westminster Gazette* under the title "Plundering Ancient Monuments. A Dignified Protest from Hong Kong" (December 15, 1904, p. 10), can be seen below from the 1905 conference proceedings, where it was printed under the title "On the Removal of Works of Art and Relics":

Mr Tse Tsan Tai writes from Hong Kong, that he has read with growing concern the constant reports of archaeological discoveries and the desecration of the ancient pyramids, temples, etc. in Egypt, the Euphrates Valley, Ancient Greece, and Italy, and the wholesale removal of works of art, sepulchral remains and relics, etc., to swell the collections of the museums of Europe and America.

'These acts of vandalism ... should henceforth be suppressed, and I appeal to every historian, bibliologist, archaeologist, and Egyptologist to advocate that the plundering and destruction of these ancient monuments and historical remains should immediately cease.

An international society should be founded for the protection of all ancient monuments and relics of civilization, no matter in what country they may be discovered, and none of the relics should be removed from the country to which they belong.

All the important and valuable works of art and relics which are at present exhibited in the museums

of Europe and America should be restored to the countries from which they have been taken, and be stored, catalogued, and protected in special buildings to be erected for their reception in accordance with the laws of this society.

If the different museums of the world should require any particular relics it is possible to get replicas made in stone, metal, or plaster, and, if this is impossible, photography can be resorted to. Thus will the monuments and remains of ancient civilisation be preserved in their entirety, and be saved from loss and destruction.

Would the peoples of modern Europe and America relish the idea of their sacred edifices and tombs being plundered and robbed of their contents at any time in the distant future? This morbid craving for archaeological collections is contrary to the high ideals of civilization, and should be checked before it is too late.

In order to add to our knowledge of the earth and its history, archaeological excavations should be encouraged throughout the world, but the relics which are brought to light should not, on any account, be removed. They should be treasured in a building to be built on the spot.'

(Tse, 1905)

Tse's sharp pen was later vindicated. He drew attention to a cause that is today regulated by international conventions on world heritage alongside global efforts to clamp down on the smuggling of and the black markets for antiques and works of

art. Embodying the perennial tension between nationalism and internationalism in cultural heritage, Tse predated by a decade the fledgling attempts of the early Chinese Republic to counter the removal of China's national treasures by foreign museums and collectors (Wang, 2020a, ch. 6). That he imagined the establishment of an "international society" to deal with art and relics is testimony to the staying power of peace and cultural heritage protection pulses. The international community did, after two destructive world wars and other misery, eventually make such an organization come true in the form of UNESCO's World Heritage Center, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, and others.

Here, Tse – as always – snatched the initiative by standing on the side of high ideals of civilization, knowledge, and science, while in the abstract blaming the US and European art elites for their morally low – criminal (plunder) and addictive (morbid craving) – behavior. Tse took side with effect, leaving it to his opponents to expose themselves as bigots (seen in the expressions of "little incident", "Italian Countess", and "protest by a Chinaman").

## **Agency and worldview**

Living in a context where omnipresent ethnic, nationalist, religious, and racial differences were situationally negotiated, blurred, and morphed, Tse's human condition is perhaps best summed up as what Benedict Anderson terms "colonial cosmopolitanism" (Anderson, 2018, pp. 171–177). Like everybody else around him, Tse simultaneously lived out multiple language registers, cultural and religious expressions, social roles, and political convictions. Each of these identities was subject to social dynamics outside

the local colonial setting, yet within it amalgamated into evolving constellations of intersectional opportunities and sense of normality, diversity, and convergence.

Applying Anderson's notion to trace or "reimagine" the biographical complexity of historical protagonists, we gain a potent tool to understand and better explain their world views and activities. Anderson examined the literary-political biography of Kwee Thiam Tjing of Java. Kwee (郭添清, 1900–1974), known as Tjamboek Berdoeri, was born of Chinese stock in what is now Indonesia and was a vociferous Indonesian patriot during the last twenty years of the Dutch colonial rule (1816–1941) before Japan's occupation (1941–1945). Here I shall discuss Tse's opinion-shaping activities within the evolving situations in Australia, Hong Kong, mainland China, and other parts of the world during his lifetime.

Although Kwee and Tse were both journalists and columnists of Chinese (respectively, Hokkien and Cantonese) ancestry in colonial settings, only separated by a generation, they were distinctly different in character, beliefs, forms of social engagement, and historical circumstance. For example, Kwee experienced the Japanese occupation and violent revolution of the Dutch Indies, whereas Japan occupied Hong Kong in 1941 after Tse had died. Kwee's literary work perfected language switches, for instance, between Indonesian, Javanese, Hokkien, Dutch, English, and Japanese, while Tse mainly excelled in his stylistically sophisticated English, on occasion interspersed with carefully chosen Chinese names and phrases written in characters. Colonial cosmopolitans like Tse and Kwee internalized and challenged contrasting purposes and norms of their times.

They refracted political purposes in ways hard to stereotype into convenient categories.

Kwee and Tse are today largely undervalued. Anderson recounted the hard task he had to track down Kwee's works. Many of Tse's works seem idiosyncratic and difficult to connect with, not offering ready-made visions and templates for twenty-first-century movements and identity politics. Even so, Tse may find some new resonance through his "Proclamation of Independence" (1902) and his national anthem (1912) in juxtaposition with other anthems of Hong Kong.

It is indicative that China's official histories under Nationalist and Communist Party auspices credit Tse with his "contributions" to Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary attempts in South China and rebut him for withdrawing from the revolution to become a "comprador capitalist". Party historians write into a tradition of historical determinism which evaluates individual agency in terms of how it furthers the "objective" progress of the forces and modes of production; obviously, in this narrative, Tse's "class consciousness" was "reactionary", while Sun, within the "historical limitations" of the time, was "progressive". In any case, both parties, in order to claim Sun's legacy for themselves, retrospectively claim that Sun reflected "historical necessity", while Tse's rejection of Sun relegates Sun to an ancillary role, in their view going against the grain of history. Even so, the PRC and ROC still think Tse is a legitimate object of study because Tse did contribute to the "anticolonial" and "anti-feudal forces", albeit only for a period, before falling prey to his "class constraint". Historical sources at hand, however, tell a different story, one of political visions, individual ambitions, and moral values contending in the public

sphere, with Tse as an important participant. The relative oblivion that befell Kwee and Tse among others indicates the degree to which cosmopolitanism, be it colonial or not, sits awkwardly with political claims for national and ethnic purity.

In essence, my approach is to discern the diverse meanings associated with Chinese nationalism, Han Chinese supremacy, and sino-centrism which both Tse and Sun shared up to a certain point, and the ways in which these ideas were realized in political movements, revolutions, and state building between the 1890s and 1937. As we shall see, Tse represented an open-ended aspiration for China's future that increasingly diverged from Sun Yat-sen's and Chiang Kai-shek's visions. The China coast contingencies of foreign power competition, wars, reform movements, uprisings, and railway concessions between the 1890s and 1911 – just to mention some well-known episodes – were driven by contention of foreign powers, Chinese (Han, the Manchus, and many others) officials and military men, the Qing court, Chinese insurrectionists and activists in mainland China, British Hong Kong, and in the diaspora. In this context, countervailing registers of personal integrity, culture, ethnicity, nationhood, and cosmopolitanism were utilitarianized situationally and opportunistically to make sense of existing realities and visions of the future.

Beyond the contending interests of myriad actors, the dynamics of the two decades were particularly manifested by technological progress, Hong Kong's breathless expansion, rapid industrialization, and growth of transport, media, and telecommunication that constantly shifted power relations, all reflecting a global rather than national thrust of development.

Therefore, Tse's story provides excellent material to critique Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Kuomintang (KMT) Chinese national history accounts of Sun's "progressive" and Tse's "retrograde" roles in the Chinese revolution and the struggle of the colonized against the colonizers. Using Benedict Anderson's formulation, this book will go beyond Tse's entrepreneurial, political, and cultural activities in their own right, and rather explore their "interlocked relationship" in order "to reimagine the 'colonial cosmopolitanism' of that era, created by a huge wave of urbanization, capitalist expansion, new means of communication, and rapidly expanding education (including self-education)" (Anderson, 2018, p. 177).

Hong Kong as a cosmopolitan city was the backdrop of Tse's Han Chinese nationalism and he never turned against British colonialism. He related Chinese identity to world-spanning Christianity: "Proving" the Chinese to be God's "chosen people", in a curious way both superseded and confirmed the existing order. He consistently promoted the "brotherhood of mankind", while at the same time, as we shall see, arguing for the rightful place of the Chinese in the world with reference to the Bible, universal moral judgment, and scientific knowledge. For example, he alluded that the Chinese ranked higher than Europeans in the biblical bloodline from Adam and Eve, that the Garden of Eden had in reality been in what was in his time called Chinese Turkestan, that the Europeans sinned badly when starting World War I in 1914, and that Chinese art throughout history had belonged among the most civilized in the world.

The cosmopolitan, universal frame of reference characterized Tse's expressive style of English writing, the result of his Australian

schooling and training for the Hong Kong civil service. It is factual and, with the force of frequent biblical references, plays to straightforward, commonsense reasoning. Tse stylistically juxtaposed, on the one hand, common sense, facts, proofs, and truth (biblical and scientific) and, on the other, misconceptions, lack of knowledge, and “theory” (to his mind meaning “unproven facts”, hence falsity). Apart from his three books, his entire oeuvre consists of lengthy “letters to the editor” (i.e. unsolicited manuscripts) published in English language newspapers in East Asia, which provided a set format of polite confrontation – pointed courtesy, combined with indirectly stated acerbic contempt for the opponent’s ignorance or low motives, created a frame for promoting his contrasting ideas as true and representing the most advanced learning.

Each age and context probably have their fitting stylistic subterfuge. Where European Renaissance thinkers resorted to the format of “symposiums” to contrast opposing views without being open to accusations of heresy, or where today’s social media content must be brief and stir simple moral sentiments in order to have the broadest possible influence, so colonial cosmopolitanism demanded the invocation of common sense, scientific discourse, civility, and basic Christian faith, whereas personal attacks and themes openly provoking racial, nationalistic, and sectarian discord were generally considered uncomfortable, morally base, and prone to be censured by the editor.

Tse’s education and life environment in Australia and Hong Kong gave him ability, capacity, and freedom that the Qing dynasty would never have offered him, including to oppose the Qing from what in essence was a Han supremacist stance. That being



said, Tse's perception of the (Han-)Chinese was ambiguous when it came to visions of statehood. Did he embrace a united China? If so, why did he oppose Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek? In any case, Tse's identity story invites students of conventional scholarship on Hong Kong and diasporic Chinese to unpack Han Chinese nationalism and sino-centrism (Mullaney, 2011).<sup>4</sup> Today, political assumptions about overseas Chinese including in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau, not to speak of the diversity of populations in the PRC, are still open for debate as evidenced in ongoing efforts that have been made to decrease their political, cultural, and linguistic diversity, increase their clientelist subordination, and to extirpate their rich history in favor of simplistic ideological narratives.

# Learning objectives and discussion topics

Tse Tsan Tai's life spanned Hoiping (Kaiping) in Guangdong, Sydney and Grafton in Australia, and Hong Kong. However, Canton (Guangzhou) was also a key place for him. Place is important for bounding historical narratives as points of material resources, social interaction, meanings, as well as symbolism and references that their users (inhabitants) draw on. That place is always *meaningful* we know because even any white spot on the map, any no-man's-land (terra nullius), any *non-lieu* ("non-place" in the sense of Marc Augé) is designated and used as such by somebody for some reason or with some intention that we can explore and explain in a historical narrative. What we are interested in here is the intersecting and contending interests and imaginings of different groups and individuals in relation to the places that bore on Tse's identity.

For each of the above places, the point of view differs: Kaiping – to tease out how Tse decided to refer to his ancestral background and capitalize on family history; Grafton and Sydney – to discuss the overseas Chinese identities in relation to Australian situations and Christianity and how they provided resources for Tse's life course; Hong Kong – to identify Tse's cosmopolitan colonialism