This talk explores the peripatetic life and work of the 1930s modernist writer Hei Ying. The formal experimentation and musicality of his writing — and especially his engagement with Hollywood cinema and the sounds of Hawai’ian music — allow us to chart the complex material, maritime, and media circuits out of which Chinese modernism emerged, displacing narratives that postulate Shanghai as the center of modernist literary production. How does popular music serve as the ‘mise-en-scène’ for a particular modernist literary idiom? And what do Hei Ying’s tropical origins in Dutch Sumatra, his travels along colonial-era steamship lines, and his postwar fate in new China have to tell us about the centripetal lure of the nation-state in an age of colonial displacement?