

**CHINA AND THE OVERSEAS CHINESE QUEST FOR IDENTITY  
IN *HUN DE ZHUISU*, A SINOPHONE MALAYSIAN SHORT  
STORY\***

*UDC 821.581(595).09-32*

**Antonio Paoliello**

Department of Translation and Interpreting, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona  
08093 Bellaterra, Spain  
E-mail: antonio.paoliello@gmail.com

**Abstract.** *Sinophone Malaysian literature is an important branch of the global Sinophone literary system. Central to the production of many Sinophone Malaysian authors are two interconnected issues: language and identity. To them, language is not simply a natural means of interpersonal communication; it is often imbued with strong connotations linked to the identity of the speaker (which is, in most cases, multiple). Therefore, when specifically dealing with language, Sinophone Malaysian authors are actually also investigating their own identity. Connected to their identity quest is also the image they have of China, which can be a cultural reference, an imagined/dreamt geo-cultural entity or the homeland. In this paper, I analyze *Hun de zhuisu*, by Malaysian Sinophone author Chen Zhengxin, a short story in which such themes are pivotal issues. I attempt at showing how people can deal with identity in different ways and from different angles, and I also aim at deciphering to what extent the linguistic choices of the main characters shape their vision of who they are. Moreover, I try to demonstrate that the perception the overseas Chinese have of China can be multifaceted, when not directly contradictory. Through the textual analysis, I show how there is more to Chinese identity than the somewhat general idea of Chineseness, just in the same way as there is more to the so-called "Chinese" language than just the standard variety.*

**Key words:** *Sinophone Malaysian fiction, Language & identity, Overseas Chinese, Images of China.*

---

Submitted October 2010, revised and accepted for publication in December 2010.

\* The research on which this paper is based was made possible by a doctoral grant for Research Personnel in Training (Beques Predoctorals PIF) offered by the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), which I gratefully acknowledge

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysian Sinophone<sup>1</sup> writers have always found themselves caught within an identity dilemma, which caused them to write extensively about their *Chineseness*, their *Malaysianness*, their multiple identities or about their lack of a specific one.

Many use images of a long-lost "cultural China" to link themselves to the greater Chinese world, while others insist on their childhood memories and the depiction of tropical settings to stress their belonging to their Southeast Asian birthplace.<sup>2</sup> Not many authors, however, use present-day China as the backdrop of their fiction, as this new image differs tremendously from the romantic "imagined China" they have grown up with, and only a limited number of Sinophone Malaysian authors seem ready to come to terms with it. On the other hand, the issue of language, of speaking or not speaking a Sinitic language (whether it is Mandarin Chinese, Hokkien, Cantonese and so on) and how it relates to their identity seems to be very common among this group of writers.<sup>3</sup>

The short story I analyze in this paper is an example of the perception of this new China by a contemporary Sinophone Malaysian writer, Chen Zhengxin,<sup>4</sup> who uses the country and its language(s) as the background to a voyage along the road to identity awareness by two different types of overseas Chinese. The quest for identity takes place not only on a spatial level, but also on a linguistic one. Thus, we see how China takes on another meaning if compared with works where it was a mere image, a dreamlike vision of the Chinese Malaysian community's homeland, and actually comes to life as one of the protagonists of the story. To see how China and the overseas Chinese quest for identity are presented by Chen Zhengxin, I will look at the text from two different angles: on one hand, I shall analyze the linguistic and stylistic features of the short story; while on the other hand, I shall focus on the specific themes touched by the writer.

---

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of clarity, I prefer to use the expression Sinophone Malaysian instead of the more widely accepted Malaysian Chinese, when referring to Malaysian authors of Chinese ethnicity who write in Chinese, since the second expression can also mean Malaysians of Chinese descent who write in another language, mainly English and Malay. Moreover, following the accepted use in the English language, I use the expressions Sinophone Malaysian and Chinese Malaysian in the same way we would use the expressions Anglophone Canadian and Chinese Canadian, for example, thus having the modifier preceding the modified. I agree with Strauch (1981), when she writes that "[m]ost, possibly all, of the Chinese of whom I am writing probably prefer to identify themselves politically with Malaysia rather than with China, and thus the ethnic term 'Chinese' is properly an adjective modifying the noun 'Malaysian,' which connotes nationality in the sense of citizenship or political affiliation." (p. 235)

<sup>2</sup> See especially Sinophone Malaysian writers in Taiwan, such as Zhang Guixing (張貴興) and Ng Kim Chew (黃錦樹).

<sup>3</sup> On a theoretical level, the relation between language and identity has been analyzed extensively. Among the various studies, one of the most interesting is probably *Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious* by John E. Joseph who gives, through specific case-studies, a broad-based overview of the interconnection between identity(ies) and specific linguistic usage and choices.

<sup>4</sup> Chen Zhengxin (陳政欣), of Cantonese descent, was born in 1948 in Bukit Mertajam, a town with a strong Chinese presence in the state of Penang, Peninsular Malaysia. After his studies in Singapore, he worked in the corporate sector for many years before retiring, but never neglecting his artistic side. In fact, he has been writing since 1969 and has held important positions in many local and international Sinophone writers' associations and publishing houses' editorial boards. He dedicated his first artistic years to poetry, but later on he moved to fiction writing and translation. A multifaceted writer, he also made incursions in the realms of literary criticism, play-writing and newspaper columns. Recently, he was the recipient of the Huazong Literary Prize (2007) and of the Haiyou Literary Prize (2008), both in the fiction section. Sensitive to the new technologies and to their use as a means to access literature from virtually anywhere and to connect authors and readers sharing the same interests/languages, he is also an active blogger: <http://www.yourenblog.com/blogs/zhengxin.php>

*Hun de zhuisu* (魂的追溯, *The Traceability of the Soul* in English),<sup>5</sup> a short story of slightly less than six thousand Chinese characters, received the Special Award for fiction at the Haiou Literary Prize in 2008, and was first published in the arts supplement of an important Sinophone Malaysian newspaper, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* in September 2009.<sup>6</sup> *Hun de zhuisu* is the story of Mike Lin, a half-Chinese, half-Caucasian Australian who is relocated from Shanghai to Shenyang, in Northeast China, to run the local branch of the multinational company he is working for. The short story is the third and last – to date – in what I would name "The Soul" series, with the other two stories also set in China and containing the word *hun* (魂/soul) in their title.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. SETTING

Various Chinese geographic locations are mentioned in the text, and the reader has the impression that each place has been carefully chosen by the author to symbolize an identity, a characteristic, or to trace a historical connection. The story begins with the arrival at Shenyang<sup>8</sup> airport of one of the two main characters: Mike Lin, always referred directly to by the writer/narrator. Part of the story is also set in Shanghai, the most dynamic, international and modern Chinese city. In Shanghai, there lives a sizable expatriate community and many of the city's foreign residents are ethnic Chinese from America, Europe and Australasia. The main characters here belong to such community: as previously stated, Mike Lin is a half-Chinese, half-Caucasian man from Australia, while the other protagonist, CS Chen, is a Chinese Malaysian, tracing his origins back to a Teochew village in Guangdong province.

The story also mentions some unidentified villages in the Shanghai area, in Zhejiang and Anhui, as well as Chongqing, which the author connects to the popular Chinese novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

Part of the story takes place in Puning (alternatively known as Liusha), a small village in northeast Guangdong province. As the place where CS Chen's family hails from, it carries a highly symbolic value and it is the link to CS's identity, a sometimes questioned, sometimes assumed *Chineseness*. It is in Puning, where everybody speaks the Teochew language, CS Chen's mother tongue (i.e. one of the many Sinitic languages, but not Mandarin Chinese, the official language of the PRC, Taiwan and one of the four official languages of Singapore) that the link between language and identity is strongest.

Three more geographic locations are mentioned: Malaysia, Sydney and Perth. These serve as indicators of the global and multinational character of the overseas Chinese.

---

<sup>5</sup> No English translation of the short story is currently available. The English title is mine, as are all translations throughout the paper.

<sup>6</sup> The short story is also available on the paper's online edition: <http://www.sinchew.com.my/node/131162?tid=18>. It is on this edition that the present analysis was carried out.

<sup>7</sup> The first story in the series is *Hun de qiehuan* (The Shift of the Soul), which appeared on *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, *Wenyi Chunqiu* on 2008 August 3 and 10, while the second is *Hun de zhengzhi* (The Dispute of the Soul), which appeared on 2009 March 3 and 10 on *Nanyang Wenyi*, the literary supplement to the Sinophone Malaysian newspaper *Nanyang Siang Pau*.

<sup>8</sup> Shenyang, the largest city in Northeast China, was the first capital of the Qing dynasty, the last to rule over the Chinese territory before being overthrown in 1911.

## 3. LANGUAGE AND STYLE

*Hun de zhuisu* is written in standard Mandarin Chinese, and it is devoid of localisms and dialectal words and structures. As with many other Sinophone Malaysian writings, foreign words (all English, in this case) are scattered throughout the text.

Whether it is a coincidence or a carefully thought device, the first non-Chinese word to appear is the term "Chinese" itself. On a graphic level, the word is very visible as it is the only word in Latin script surrounded by Chinese characters, at least in the first part of the text. Moreover, it is repeated four times. The word serves to focus the reader's attention on the identity issue within the overseas Chinese community. A local man from Shenyang is described as being a "very Chinese Chinese" ("很Chinese"的Chinese). This leads Mike Lin to brood over the meaning of "being Chinese" and who can consider himself a Chinese. Being his father an ethnic Chinese, is he himself one too? What about his colleague CS Chen, an ethnic Chinese from Malaysia, born and raised in Southeast Asia? Is that enough to be considered Chinese? What kind of Chinese does it make him? Are those Chinese born abroad less Chinese than those born and raised in China? These are all questions that overseas Chinese have been asking themselves for a long time. Obviously, no unanimous answer has ever been given, as identity can be as subjective an issue, as it can be fascinating. As the reader realizes, Chen Zhengxin does not give any real answers to these questions either, thus proving the difficulty of solving the identity puzzle. However, this does not prevent the author from explicitly dealing with it:

當初聽到這"很Chinese"的詞彙時，你感覺到很不自在。你覺得你自己才是"很Chinese"。

(*You felt very awkward the first time you heard the expression "very Chinese".  
You always thought you were the "very Chinese" one.*)

Another possible reason for the writer's use of the English word "Chinese" is a deliberate choice to be generic and avoid narrowing the meaning of the term. In fact, the word has multiple translations in Chinese, not all of them interchangeable and often excluding a portion of the population included in the English word. For example, Chinese can be *Zhongguoren* (中國人: people from/of China; it mainly indicates Han Chinese, but also people of other ethnic backgrounds who are citizens of the PRC), *Hanren* (漢人: the stress, in this case, is on their ethnic background; the term is mainly used in mainland China to distinguish Han people from ethnic minorities), *Huaren* (華人: putting emphasis on their culture and ethnicity, it is normally used to indicate Chinese people, born in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong or Macau, who relinquished their PRC or ROC nationality and are citizens of another country) and its derivatives: *Huaqiao* (華僑: overseas Chinese who still hold PRC or ROC nationality), *Huayi* (華裔: person of Chinese ancestry born and raised outside of the greater China region), and finally *Tangren* (唐人: indicates a strong connection to the history of China and its dynasties; it is mainly used in compound words/expressions, such as *Tangren jie* 唐人街, Chinatown).<sup>9</sup>

It is also worth mentioning the fact that when referring to important authors and works of the Chinese literary culture, Chen Zhengxin uses the English translations with

<sup>9</sup> For an extensive discussion of the *problématique* of naming Chinese people in Chinese, English and Malay languages, please refer to chapter seven in Hou Kok Chung (何國忠)(2002).

the Chinese original within parenthesis. For example, he mentions Lu Xun (spelled Lu Hsun) and two of his masterpieces, *The Outcry* and *The True Story of Ah Q*, as well as the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, one of the great novels of the Ming dynasty. We learn that Mike Lin has become acquainted with the works of Lu Xun after moving to China and has read them in their English translation. He has never read the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, nevertheless he is aware of the general plot. The language barrier, the inability to access Chinese culture through a direct linguistic path is crucial to the feeling of distance between the protagonist and Chinese identity. Chen Zhengxin treats language as a decisive trait when it comes to shaping identities. Therefore, Mike Lin, who has most likely received an English-medium education, is depicted as being less Chinese, in every aspect, than his colleague CS Chen who, on the contrary, is able to speak and read Chinese and to experience the culture that language conveys, mainly because he hails from Malaysia (where the ethnic Chinese community is bigger and better organized) and before moving to Perth has attended Chinese-medium schools for twelve years:

據CS陳說，在他到澳洲柏斯讀書前，曾在馬來西亞接受過十二年的華文教育，所以對中國文化還有相當的認識，對風水學有點心得。

(According to CS Chen, before moving to Perth to attend university, he had received twelve years of Chinese-medium education in Malaysia and he knows quite a bit about Chinese culture and feng-shui.)

But I shall touch upon the identity-language connection later.

The use of English is also a symbol of the international environment many ethnic Chinese live in today. For example, CS Chen calls Mike in Shenyang just to say "Hello", using the English word: 只是想跟你打個招呼，說聲 "Hello" (*I just called to say "Hello" to you*). Or again: 他說：No, No, No (*He said: No, No, No*).

Another interesting feature in the linguistic choices of Chen Zhengxin is the naming of the main characters. The "you" in the narration is called Mike Lin. His name is given only once and in Chinese characters (麥克林), despite the fact that only the surname is a Chinese word. On the other hand, CS Chen is always referred to with the initials of the two characters forming his first name CS and his surname in Chinese characters (陳). He is probably an alter ego of the writer himself: they are both Chinese Malaysian, their surname is Chen, they have both studied and worked abroad (Chen Zhengxin mainly in Singapore) and behind CS we might see Zhengxin, if the two characters were transliterated using a local Malaysian system as *Cheng Sin* (CS).

Also to be noted as a peculiar linguistic feature is the constant use that the author makes of the second person singular pronoun "you" when referring to Mike Lin. Thus, Mike is the recipient and the reader feels as if he himself is Mike and the character's experiences as an overseas Chinese, are his own too.

#### 4. IMAGES OF CHINA

We could say that China is the real protagonist of *Hun de zhuisu*: China as a real, tangible place where past and present continuously intertwine. The different faces of China are presented thanks to the description of locations, people and situations. Such descriptions lead the average reader through a process of knowledge and critical thinking

about China. Moreover they are a showcase of China's diverse realities. The reader can thus approach Northeast China's present: the busy streets of Shenyang, its noisy downtown neighborhoods, its skyscrapers, its important role as an industrial and commercial hub:

車子進入瀋陽鬧市，經過瀋陽火車站時，熙熙攘攘的人頭讓你眉頭緊皺。轉進太原街時，東尼王手指向一幢藍色玻璃屏幕的摩天大樓說，公司就在第二十層，

*(The car reached the busy streets of downtown Shenyang, passed through its train station bustling with people and you looked at them with your eyebrows raised in confusion. As the vehicle turned into Taiyuan Street, Tony Wang said, while pointing at a skyscraper made of blue crystal screens: our company's offices are on the twentieth floor.)*

and

中華路路面上的車笛似乎都能聽到，而眼底下太原街上男女的匆忙步伐更是清晰可見。斜對面就是百盛超市[...]這裡是瀋陽市區內最美的景觀。

*(You could hear almost every car horn on Zhonghua Road, and you could distinguish the hurried pace of the men and women walking along Taiyuan Street. On the other side of the road there was a Parkson Department store. This is one of the most beautiful sceneries in downtown Shenyang.)*

Or still, 中國最大的礦業基地也是在東北。(*The Northeast is also China's biggest mining industry base.*)

However, the writer seems most interested in leading the reader to the past of the region (through the inner and the real journey the character is undertaking) and its importance: not only the glorious role as the birthplace of China's last dynasty, but also the symbol of the hardship China – and the Chinese – had to endure throughout modern history:

這是片曾經佈滿中國式苦難的大地，也是中國大地上最堅韌與最受傷的土地。在上海時間，你想瞭解中國的近代史，有人向你建議，就從東北三省的黑土地開始吧。

*(This land was once covered with Chinese hardship, and it is also the most tenacious and the most enduring place in China. In Shanghai, you wanted to understand China's recent past and someone told you to start from the black soil of the Northeast.)*

And also, on the same lines:

開始研讀中國近代史後，你就一直想親身去體會東北、體會瀋陽、體會一個王朝的興起、體會一個傀儡政權的滅亡。

*(Since you started reading about China's recent past, you have wanted to see the Chinese Northeast for yourself; you have wanted to experience what it felt like to be in Shenyang, in the birthplace of an imperial dynasty, the place where the Puppet Regime was destroyed.)*

The importance of Shenyang in Chinese dynastic history is also made evident by Mike Lin's urge to visit the Imperial Palace:

明天，你要到瀋陽的故宮，那裡是你到這城市參觀的首項目標。[...]明早，你要到瀋陽的故宮，那是你近年來就一直期望造訪的地方。這時，你又想起CS陳的說法：那個地方，蘊藏著皇統的大氣。

*(Tomorrow, you want to go to Shenyang's Imperial Palace, the first place you'll visit in this city [...] Tomorrow morning, you want to go to Shenyang's Imperial Palace, a place you've been wanting to visit for quite a few years now. This time, you recall CS Chen's words: that's a place filled with imperial solemnity.)*

and by its comparison with other important capitals in Chinese history such as Xi'an and Beijing:

北京西安與瀋陽，曾經都是中國某個皇朝的國都。他說古人建都時都很謹慎，不會隨意在某個地方建都的。[...]滿洲人入關前的國都就是在瀋陽，是偉大事業的發祥地。

*(Beijing, Xi'an and Shenyang were all Chinese dynastic capitals at some point. He said that in ancient times, capital cities were built only after serious consideration.[...] Before conquering the whole of China, the Manchu set their capital in Shenyang, the birthplace of great undertakings.)*

China is also presented as the backdrop of a spatial journey to self-awareness, especially in the case of CS Chen. When the Chinese Malaysian decides to travel south, to Guangdong province, in order to discover his roots, Mike Lin follows him – 去年的十月國慶假期，CS陳帶你去了一趟他父親在廣東省的家鄉 (*during the national holidays of last October, CS Chen took me to his paternal hometown, a village in Guangdong province*) –, and thus embarks in the discovery of another face of China. The trip is not a holiday; it is an experience that the Chinese Malaysian feels he *has* to do:

起程前，CS陳向你申明，他這一次到鄉下去，並不是真正的去旅遊。他說他會在那沒有旅遊景點的小縣城住上四五天，期間會每天都到郊外的小鄉鎮亂逛，主要是到他祖父的鄉村，還有他祖母的鄉村去溜蕩、去拍照、去觀瞻、去探源去追溯。

*(Before leaving, CS Chen explained to you that this trip to the countryside was not a real holiday. He told you that he planned on staying four or five days in that unassuming little town and that from there he would visit his grandfather's village daily. He would also pay a visit to his grandmother's birthplace and he would walk around, take pictures, explore the area, and find his roots.)*

When describing China, the main idea that Chen Zhengxin wants to convey is that of two Chinas, a modern, hip and glittering China and a poor, backward China that caused many people to emigrate. It is this second country CS Chen feels a sense of belonging to and it is because of the language he shares with the community from this other face of China, as we shall see in the following section:

他說：我不在乎讓你看到我祖輩的源頭，這沒什麼好隱蔽的。家鄉要不是窮得不能再活下去，我祖父當年就不會走出去。這或者能啟發你能對自己來路的回溯。如果你想看到時尚的中國，就請你留在上海，那裡是另一種的中國。他又說：那個小縣城應該沒有什麼娛樂，晚上最多可能是逛地攤，或者吃一些鄉村的小食。

*(He said to you: "I am not ashamed of showing you my ancestral home, there's nothing to hide. Hadn't people lived a miserable life over there, my grandfather wouldn't have left. This experience will probably ignite your will to investigate your origins. If the trendy China is what you are looking for, then you are better off here in Shanghai. It is a whole different China down there." He added: "I guess there's nothing to do in that little village, a stroll across the stalls at the night market at most, or eating local snacks.")*

and this "other China", far from pushing Mike away, arises his interest:

"另一種中國"。這是CS陳說的。正是這一種說法，讓你義無反顧跟隨著他走進中國南方的鄉鎮。

*("A whole different China", that's what CS Chen had said, and that's what made you so determined in following him to that small little town in southern China.)*

##### 5. LANGUAGE AND THE QUEST OF THE OVERSEAS CHINESE

Chen Zhengxin brilliantly shapes, in the brevity of this text, two characters that symbolize two different approaches to (overseas) Chinese identity. On one side, we have Mike Lin, who is struggling with his identity, who sees in his life in China, the opportunity to understand a culture, a people and a lifestyle that feel alien to him, and at the same time takes it as a journey to discover a part of himself and where he stands in the Chinese-Western dichotomy others have built:

約翰·摩根對他並不下評語，只是說他是個"很Chinese"的"Chinese"。是貶是褒是揚是抑，就看你是站在哪個檯面上了。

*(John Morgan didn't really make any comments about him. He just said that he was a "very Chinese Chinese". Whether it was a way to belittle him, or to praise him, it all depended on the angle from which you looked at it.)*

The tug of war that many overseas Chinese experience within themselves is evident in Mike Lin:

你覺得你自己才是"很Chinese"。你的父親是澳洲華僑，你的母親是愛爾蘭後裔，雖然你有一張中國人的臉，一個中國人的姓：林，但你對中國文化的認知是一片空白。

*(You always thought you were the "very Chinese" one. Your father is a Chinese Australian, while your mother is of Irish descent, and despite your Chinese face and your Chinese surname, Lin, your knowledge of Chinese culture was a blank page.)*

Before settling in Shanghai, Mike Lin wasn't able to speak a word of Chinese, nor was he able to read Chinese characters; yet he would not feel uncomfortable, since he could hardly see any relationship between himself and China:

在來中國上海工作之前，你不會說一句中國話，不懂得一個方塊字，這並不讓你感受到謙卑或愧疚，因為你跟這個國家這個文化沒有任何瓜葛。你有個西方的名字：麥克。

*(Before coming to work in Shanghai, you could speak not even one word of Chinese, nor were you able to read it, but still, you wouldn't feel ashamed or guilty, since you had no real connection to this country and its culture. After all, you have a Western name: Mike.)*

Once again we are able to see the relevance of language in the process of identity formation. Knowledge of Chinese is important for Mike, not only to have an easier life in the country, but also as a means to understand, without distortions, the inner essence of that place:

你參加了上海公司人事部主辦的華語語文班，目前已有閱讀報章與社交交談的能力。最近你就嘗試直接閱讀中文撰寫的中國近代史與小說。這之前，你是通過英文書籍來認識中國歷史。在那些英文的字裡行間，你總感覺到一種疏離感，一種語言上的隔閡，總是讓你覺得作者是站在一個不恰當的角度，以一種站在岸上指指點點的姿態[...]

*(You attended the Chinese language classes provided by the Shanghai office, and by now you are already capable of reading the newspaper and engaging in social interaction. Lately you even tried to read novels and other books on China's recent history in their Chinese original. Before, you had approached Chinese history through English texts, but you always felt a sense of alienation, a language barrier, as if the writer was standing on the wrong side, pointing his finger [...])*

We learn that Mike has grown closer to the Chinese in the three years he has been living in the country, and yet, he is still far from feeling one of them. The key to this is the use of the verbs "to accept" (jieshou接受) and "to understand, to forgive" (liangjie諒解), meaning that he is acknowledging – and respecting – a *different* behavior, consequence of a *different* identity and a *different* historical background:

在上海工作都三年了，你覺得你還能接受中國的生活方式 [...] 你還是能接受他們的一些想法，也能諒解他們處理生活的方式與思維，更能理解他們背負著沉重的歷史枷鎖在他們心靈上烙印的苦澀。認識與體會中國的歷史與文化，讓你更能靈活與寬厚地省察這個社會的人際關係。

*(After three years working in Shanghai, you reckon you can accept the Chinese lifestyle [...] you can accept their way of seeing things, and you can understand their attitude towards life. Even more so, you can feel you can understand the bitterness that the heavy yoke of history has branded on their soul. Learning about Chinese culture and history made you more tolerant and kind in your analysis of interpersonal relationships in Chinese society.)*

On a linguistic level, the juxtaposition of the pronouns "you" and "them", the first referring to Mike Lin, the latter to the Chinese, is an effective device used to clearly state that by no means Mike Lin belongs to the same community/society as the Chinese. He perceives himself as being closer to the expatriate community than to the Chinese:

當然，在生活上，你還是生活在你的同事以及外籍朋友圈子裡，日常接觸的中國人都是圍繞在你公司業務的生意人。

*(Nevertheless, you still lived your daily life amidst your coworkers and your expat friends, and the Chinese you had to deal with were all professionals somehow connected to your company.)*

On the other hand, we find CS Chen, which has the role of a social and cultural mediator between Mike Lin and China, a mentor and a modern Virgil. He is the one who introduces many aspects of China to Mike: 他不同意你的看法，他跟你說起了中國的風水學 (*He had a different opinion, and he was the one who introduced you to the art of fengshui*), and the one who explains incomprehensible Chinese behaviors to him. The role played by CS Chen is clarified by the fact that Mike's travels around China, in which he tries to discover his "imagined China", are largely made in the company of CS Chen:

在上海期間，你跟CS陳成了好朋友。在CS陳的帶領下，你走遍上海周邊的江南水鎮，還有浙江西部與安徽南部一帶的古老鄉鎮。你就是從這些古老的鄉鎮和碧綠的山水中走進你構思的、你想像的中國。

*(While in Shanghai, you became good friends with CS Chen and with him you discovered all those little villages around Shanghai and those ancient towns in western Zhejiang and southern Anhui. Old towns and beautiful lush landscapes were the entrance to your imagined China.)*

Why is CS Chen's identity as a Chinese stronger than Mike's, despite the fact that he is also a foreigner in China? The key has to be found in his formal Chinese education, as we learn from his own words reported previously. Chen Zhengxin, as most Chinese Malaysians, attaches great importance to the knowledge of the Chinese language to understand and assume *Chineseness*. Thus once again, we can find a clear indicator of the unquestionable link between language knowledge/usage and perceived identity.

As briefly mentioned earlier, language is an important element in the identity-building process, and it is especially so in diasporic communities. In *Hun de zhuisu*, the role of language and its connection to identity issues is stressed time and again by the author. The clearest example is perhaps when CS Chen arrives to his grandfather's village in Guangdong province, and he immediately feels that he fits in, he belongs, and he is at home. The main reason is that the village is a place where he can speak his own language/dialect.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, by sharing the most natural means of communications with the locals, he does not feel like an outsider:

在那個小縣城，CS陳像是找到了他的水，整天情緒高昂地留連在他所說的，他的母語音韻裡，蠻有趣味地到處跟人說著不是普通話的方言。他說他終於回到了他母語方言的大海。他說那些純正的母語方言讓他感動讓他震

<sup>10</sup> On the various definitions of dialects and the link between dialect and personal identity, see among others, Edwards (2009).

撼。他說這裡的語音世界只能在他的夢裡出現。他是潮州人。他說他從沒有在一個全城的人都說潮州話的地方生活過。

*(In that little town, CS Chen was at ease, like a fish in the sea. He was elated, immersed in the sounds of his mother tongue and he would go around and talk to everybody in the local dialect. He said he had finally reached the ocean of his mother tongue. The purity of the dialect touched him, shook him, that's what he said. Only in his dreams had he heard the sounds he could hear there. He was a Teochew and that was the first time he found himself in a city where everybody spoke the Teochew language.)*

It appears clear to the reader that CS Chen is not searching for his *Chineseness*, which he has already acknowledged; his search aims at finding his *local* identity, for a Teochew and a Hakka, a Cantonese and a Hainanese are not the same, and they do not necessarily feel the same, mainly because they speak different Sinitic languages.<sup>11</sup>

The journey around China and especially to CS Chen's ancestral home is highly symbolic. What Mike and CS see in that village also reveals their different points of view on Chinese emigration. Mike has a negative perception of the village: it is poor, dirty and backward: 你說你是看到了他的祖父祖母的村落，看到那裡的破爛與殘舊，窮困與落後 (*You said you could only see run-down shabbiness and backward poverty in his grandparent's village*), while CS firmly disagrees as he sees hope, improvement and a brighter life for villagers, a life that nobody thought possible when his grandfather left in search of a better future:

他說他看到的是這裡空中飄蕩著的希望。他說他在這裡看到水電供應、還有學校，還有小型包工制工場。他說這裡的老太婆笑臉都很自足都很坦然。他說在他祖父的時代，情況肯定不會是這樣的。

*(He said he could feel hope floating in the air, and he could see electricity, running water, even a school and a small factory. He said that all those smiling old ladies looked so satisfied, so peaceful. The situation had definitely changed a lot since his grandfather left, he admitted.)*

CS Chen makes his point clearer when he wonders what his life might have been, had his grandfather not left for Malaysia:

CS陳跟你說：要不是我的祖父走出去，那麼，那位大叔可能就是我的爸爸。他指著一位背扛著一大捆柴木正從小山坡走下的瘦削老人，揶揄地說：而我就是位三輪摩托車的司機大哥了。那時，正好有位載客的三輪摩托車司機停下向你們招徠。

*(CS Chen confessed: "Hadn't my grandfather left, my father would be like that man over there." He pointed at a bony old man carrying a bulky bale of firewood down a hill and added with a hint of self-derision: "And I'd be that guy on the tuk tuk." As he was speaking, the tricycle driver stopped in front of us, obviously looking for customers.)*

---

<sup>11</sup> On local identity issues among ethnic Chinese from Malaysia, please see, among others, Carstens (1983, 2003).

He is leading a better life, and yet, he speaks with a hint of sadness, especially when he voices his feeling of losing the essence of his local identity due to the peculiarities of the Malaysian environment:

他說：我的岳父岳母，我的爸爸媽媽，都是純粹的潮州人。我的兒女就像這裡的少男少女，只是在馬來西亞被多元化了，就是沒了這裡的純樸語音與氣質。

*(He said: "Both my parents and my in-laws are pure Teochew. My children are not very different from these kids. The only difference is that they are exposed to many diverse influences in Malaysia and they do not possess the simplicity of these children when they speak.")*

How CS Chen sees Malaysia leads us to a capital issue for the overseas Chinese: where is the homeland? CS Chen explains his point of view, based on Chinese tradition, and draws the conclusion that his homeland is Malaysia, the burial place of his parents. However, it was different for his father, whose homeland was definitely China (the burial place of CS Chen's grandfather), even though he was born and raised in Malaysia as well:

他說他的爸爸是在馬來西亞出生的。他說爸爸的故鄉是在馬來西亞還是在中國的那個小鎮，他也不能有個肯定的說法。他的爸爸的父親死後卻是埋葬在這個小鎮的某處山坡上的。父母親葬身之地應該是兒女們的故鄉吧，但爸爸的母親卻又埋葬在馬來西亞。

我不同。CS陳語重心長地說：我在馬來西亞出生，我父母的墳墓都在馬來西亞的土地上，所以我的故鄉肯定是在馬來西亞。

*(He told me that his father was born in Malaysia and that he was not sure whether his father's hometown was in Malaysia or in that little village in China. He couldn't say, really. His paternal grandfather was buried on a hill somewhere around that village. The burial place of your parents: that's home. And yet, his dad's mother rested in Malaysia.)*

*"I am different", CS Chen admitted. "I was born in Malaysia, and my parents were both buried in Malaysia, so my home is there, that's for sure!"*)

## 6. CONCLUSION

Through the difference CS Chen draws between his father and himself, Chen Zhengxin leads us to think that the bond linking the overseas Chinese to China will become less strong generation after generation. Nevertheless, the contrary might also happen, as indicated by Mike Lin's showing greater concern for his Chinese heritage, at the end of the story:

受到CS陳的語言、行為和思維的影響，你也逐漸地能站在另一個寬敞的平台上，審視你周圍的景象。

*(CS Chen influenced you in some way, with his language, his behaviour, his way of thinking. Thanks to him, you gradually learnt to examine everything around you standing on a broader stage.)*

and attempts at "opening that ancient Chinese door":

你說過，你會嘗試去敲開那扇厚實古老的中國的門。(You said you wanted to try and open that sturdy ancient Chinese door.)

However, Chen Zhengxin is fully aware that the overseas Chinese still live within their own realm: they stand on an island of their own, within the greater Chinese space, close yet never really touching it, as the author shows with an image rich in symbolism:

你記得當時你是跟他站在流沙市的大街分流交通島上，街道兩邊熙熙攘攘的都是些說著潮州話的路人。

(You remember standing on the traffic island in the middle of the road in Liusha. All around you, the streets bustled with people speaking the Teochew dialect.)

Through the presentation and the analysis of *Hun de zhuisu*, I aimed at introducing the reader to China as seen from the perspective of an overseas Chinese. Moreover, I attempted to showcase the identity possibilities faced by ethnic Chinese from overseas, mainly in connection with their linguistic choices. Mike Lin and CS Chen's quest for identity is pursued on an individual level. However, the role played by language and by transnational and global messages can hardly be denied. In response to these messages, we can see how Chinese/local identities are ignored, questioned, resisted, rediscovered, extolled and/or altered, to use Carsten's (2005) terminology.

#### REFERENCES

1. Chen, Z. (2008, August 3 & 10). *Hun de qiehuan*. *Sin Chew Jit Poh, Wenyi Chunqiu* (pp.28-30 & 29-30).
2. Chen, Z. (2009, March 3 & 10). *Hun de zhengzhi*. *Nanyang Siang Pau, Nanyang wenyi*. (pp. D6-D7 & D6-D7).
3. Chen, Z. (2009, September 20). *Hun de zhuisu*. *Sin Chew Jit Poh, Wenyi Chunqiu*. (pp.16-18).
4. Carstens, S. (1983). Pulai, Hakka, Chinese Malaysian: A Labyrinth of Cultural Identities. In L.A.P. Gosling and L.Lim (Eds.), *The Chinese in Southeast Asia: Identity, Culture and Politics*, (pp.79-98). Singapore: Maruzen Asia.
5. Carstens, S. (2003). Constructing Transnational Identities? Mass Media and the Malaysian Chinese Audience. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23, 2: 321-44.
6. Carstens, S. (2005). *Histories, Cultures, Identities: Studies in Malaysian Chinese Worlds*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
7. Chen, H. (2004). Xieshi de yu guiyi de xiangxiang – Nian Hong he Cheng Zhengxin de jiduanpian. [Realistic and Bizarre images – The minifiction of Nian Hong and Chen Zhengxin] In C. Xie (Ed.), *Mahua wenxue daxi: Pinglun: 1965-1996* [Anthology of Mahua Literature: Criticism: 1965-1996], (pp. 350-354). Bangi, Selangor: Pelangi Publishing Group.
8. Edwards, J. (2009). *Language and Identity: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
9. Hou, K.C. (2002). *Malaixiya huaren: shenfen rentong, wenhua yu zuqun zhengzhi*. [Malaysian Chinese: Identity, Culture and Ethnic Conflict]. Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Malaysian Chinese Ethnic Studies.
10. Joseph, J.E. (2004). *Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious*. New York: Palgrave McMillan.
11. Strauch, J. (1981). Multiple Ethnicities in Malaysia: The Shifting Relevance of Alternative Chinese Categories. *Modern Asian Studies* 15,2: 235-60.
12. Ye, X. (Ed.) (2006). *Dangdai Mahua zuojia bairenzhuang*. [Handbook of Contemporary Mahua Writers]. Kuala Lumpur: The Writers' Association of Chinese Medium of Malaysia.

## **KINA I PREKOMORSKO TRAGANJE ZA IDENTITETOM U HUN DE ZHUISU, JEDNA SINOFOVA MALAJSKA PRIČA**

**Antonio Paoliello**

*Sinofona malajska literatura važan je deo globalnog sinofonog književnog sistema. Kod malajskih autora važna su dva međusobno povezana problema: jezik i identitet. U odnosu na ova pitanja, jezik ne predstavlja samo prirodno sredstvo interpresonalne komunikacije već je često prepun jakih konotacija u vezi sa identitetom govornika (što, u mnogim slučajevima, znači višestrukost istog). Stoga, kada se radi baš o jeziku, sinofoni malajski autori između ostalog istražuju svoj sopstveni identitet. Slika koju oni poseduju o Kini vezana je za traganje za identitetom a to može biti kulturološka referenca, zamišljeni ili odsanjani san o geo-kulturnom identitetu ili zavičaju. U ovom radu pokušao sam da analiziram Hun de zhuisu koji je napisao malajski sinofoni autor Chen Zhengxin, jednu kratku priču u kojoj se obrađuju suštinska pitanja. U radu pokazujem kako se ljudi bave identitetom na različite načine i iz različitih uglova, i pokušavam da dešifrujem u kojoj meri jezički izbor glavnih likova određuje njihove poglede i to ko su oni zapravo. Štaviše, pokušavam da pokažem da viđenje Kine od strane udaljenih sinofonih predstavnika može biti višestruko, pa čak i vrlo kontradiktorno. Preko analize teksta pokazujem da je kineski identitet mnogo više od samog pripadništva kineskoj kulturu, baš kao što je kineski jezik mnogo širi pojam od standardnog kineskog jezika.*

*Ključne reči: sinofona malajska književnost, jezik i identitet, geografski udaljeni Kinezi, predstave o Kini*