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Becoming Muslim or Becoming Malay? Conversion to Islam in Two Sinophone Malaysian Short Stories

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Historically at the crossroads of important sea routes sailed by Arab, Chinese, and Indian merchants, and due to its more recent history of British colonization, the territories that constitute present-day Malaysia have been deeply influenced by civilizations other than its local cultures. In fact, "the Malay World and more so the Malay Peninsula and the adjacent islands [have] been since time immemorial the half-way house of peoples plying the sea between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific" (Abdul 108). As Jim Baker notes:

> [Malaysia] contains cultural elements of many countries—the indigenous influences of archipelago Southeast Asia; the impact of Asia's cultural giants China and India on the area; the coming of Islam from western Asia by way of India; the contributions made by the West through European colonialism and economic exploitation; and finally, the impact of the process of globalization [...] in the late twentieth century. (10)

On a religious level, Islam has had the greatest impact on the Malay world, or *Nusantara*, as the Malay realm is traditionally and locally known, and on the local population of Austronesian ethnic background. The Malay people became acquainted with the religion in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when they came into contact with merchants from the Middle East who arrived via Indian ports (Nagata, "A Question of Identity" 48). According to Baker, "[o]rdinary Malays converted to Islam because it provided unity and a sense of identity" (47), but the religion was able to spread also because of its adaptable nature, which tolerated existing cultural and social practices (Yegar 6). Islam, therefore, made a peaceful and gradual arrival to the Malay realm and to the rest of Southeast Asia, as it was "borne not by sword, but peacefully by merchants, scholars, teachers, and Sufi mystics" (Nagata, "A Question of Identity" 50).

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Throughout the centuries and after its independence from British rule in 1957, Malaysia—known as the Federation of Malaya until 1963—has evolved into a multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious country, inhabited by Malays and other indigenous peoples, collectively known as *Bumiputera*, by people of Chinese origin (24.6% of the total population) and by ethnic Indians (7.3% of the Malaysian population) (Department of Statistics Malaysia). Although a considerable number of non-Malay Malaysian citizens follow religions other than Islam, the latter is the religion of the Federation, as stated in Article 3.1 of the Federal Constitution, which was drafted between 1956 and 1957. However, the Constitution also states that "[e]very person has the right to profess and practice his religion and [...] to propagate it" (Article 11.1), but only among non-Muslims. Constitutional articles concerning religious issues have become central to political and legal debates. For instance, Yvonne Tew states that while a secularist approach does not interpret Article 3.1 as an endorsement of Malaysia as an Islamic State, "[e]xpansive interpretation of [it] in the Islamic constitutional clause by the civil courts has also led to the elevation of Islam's place in the public order" (Tew). The centrality of Islam within the context of Malaysia is, therefore, undeniable, and how people from other religious backgrounds relate to it is relevant to the understanding of social relations in Malaysian society.

This article investigates conversion of ethnic Chinese as a special type of engagement with Islam in the Malaysian context, which not only involves religious and spiritual issues, but is also connected to ethnic as well as political and social matters. As noted by Rosey Ma, scholarship on ethnic Chinese Muslims in Malaysia is limited in number and focus and it deals mainly with issues such as religion and ethnicity (26). Similarly, in the field of Sinophone Malaysian narrative studies,[1] the relationship between Chineseness and Islam has been consistently overlooked, with most scholars focusing on the position of Sinophone Malaysian literature in the larger Sinophone transnational literary polysystem[2] (Bernards, *Writing the South Seas*), or on how authors deal with the issue of identity vis-à-vis both Chinese and Malaysian cultures (Groppe), highlighting the struggles of both the authors and the Chinese community in a generally hostile environment.

This article, by examining how ethnic Chinese converts are portrayed in contemporary Sinophone Malaysian fiction, aims not only to fill a gap in the fields of Chinese Muslim studies and Sinophone studies, but also to delve into the issue from a novel perspective, exploring the possibilities of literary forms in scrutinizing religious and social issues. To do so, I analyze "Bie zai tiqi" (别再提起, "Never Mention It Again") by Ho Sok Fong (He Shufang) 賀淑芳 and "Wo de pengyou Yadula" (我的朋友鴨都拉, "My Friend Abdullah") by Ng Kim Chew (Huang Jinshu) 黃錦樹, two short stories whose main character happen to be Chinese converts and in which the theme of their conversion is central to the narrative. Although Ho Sok Fong's story has been briefly discussed by Shu-mei Shih, who interprets it as a portrayal of the "ugly and smelly picture of hybridity" ("Against Diaspora" 40), and both stories have been touched upon in Brian Bernards's analysis of Sinophone Malaysian literature

as a site for the practice of creolization ("Beyond Diaspora"), the centrality of the theme of conversion to Islam and how becoming Muslim in Malaysia is entangled with ethnic, social, and political issues has been neglected by international scholarship on Sinophone studies. Hence, by foregrounding the issue of conversion, this article provides a more detailed discussion of the problematic correlation between religion and ethnicity in the Malaysian context. Therefore, this study applies sociological criticism in the analysis of two Sinophone Malaysian narrative texts seen not only as works of art, but also as reflections of a *problematique* specific to Malaysian society. This type of sociological approach to the literary text "derive[s] its relevance from the fact that it should apply both to works of art and to social situations outside of art" (Burke 303).

Through a close reading of the two narrative texts, this article shows how, by focusing on the portrayal of seemingly opportunistic converts, both Ho Sok Fong and Ng Kim Chew consciously express the view of mainstream Chinese Malaysian society on those of their ethnic fellows who decide to espouse Islam, thus failing to present the daily struggles of those new converts who find themselves at the margins of both the Chinese and the Muslim/Malay communities.

Ethnic Issues in Malaysia

The complexity of Malaysian society becomes especially evident in its ethnic composition and in the asymmetric relations of power existing among the different communities. Although religion does not officially play an explicit role in shaping such relations, it should be noted that the "delineation of the 'Islamic/Muslim' sociopolitical space [...] is rooted in a straightforward constitutional provision in which every Malay person is automatically defined as a Muslim" (Azmi and Shamsul 351); therefore, religious and ethnic issues are inevitably entangled and "religion (read Islam) [becomes] the ethnic identifier (read Malayness) for the Malays" (Azmi and Shamsul 351). However, the strong connection between social (and ethnic) sphere and religious identification is not a contemporary phenomenon, as it dates to the pre-colonial era. According to Judith Nagata:

> [i]nitially, the economic and social rewards for being Muslim took precedence over mastery of doctrine. In the Malay world, conversion was as much a matter of social and group conformity as of theology [...] Lacking a word for conversion, "becoming Muslim" (*masuk Islam*) in the local context was popularly equated with "becoming Malay" (*masuk Melayu*). ("A Question of Identity" 50-51)

The evolution of ethnic and religious identities in Malaysia cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the ethnic riots of 1969, since they "have affected and to a certain extent, changed the economic, political, and ideological situations in Malaysia from then onwards. By implication, pre-1969 and post-1969 independent Malaysia has been viewed broadly as two somewhat distinct periods

in the history of post-colonial Malaysia" (Shamsul 84). The riots were both an indirect consequence of the British colonial administration based on the division of society along ethnic lines (Malay, Chinese, and Indian) and a direct consequence of the sweeping Chinese victory in the general elections of that year. The electoral outcome not only ignited violence between the Malay and the Chinese communities, but also threatened Malay political dominance. Therefore, after the riots of 1969, the pro-Malay ruling sectors of the Malaysian government announced the adoption of several measures aimed at achieving "national unity in view of the socioeconomic inequality inherited from the colonial period and consolidated in the post-independence years" (Jomo 2). These measures were shaped into the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP, or *Dasar Ekonomi Baru*) of 1971, a set of controversial and highly ambitious affirmative actions that were aimed at reshaping the economic and social landscape of Malaysia. The policy reached every layer of Malaysian society, and lasted for twenty years before being replaced by the National Development Policy
4 (NDP, or *Dasar Pembangunan Nasional*), which continued to pursue most of the goals put forward by the NEP. As K.S. Jomo notes:

> [t]he NEP had two prongs, namely "poverty eradication regardless of race" and "restructuring society to eliminate the identification of race with economic function." The NEP was supposed to create the conditions for national unity by reducing interethnic resentment due to socioeconomic disparities. In practice, the NEP policies were seen as pro-*bumiputera*, or more specifically, pro-Malay, the largest indigenous ethnic community. Poverty reduction efforts have been seen as primarily rural and Malay, with policies principally oriented to rural Malay peasants. As poverty reduction efforts had been uncontroversial and had declined in significance over time, the NEP came to be increasingly identified with efforts at "restructuring society" efforts to reduce interethnic disparities, especially between ethnic Malay and ethnic Chinese Malaysians. (iii)

This resulted in important economic and political advantages bestowed upon the Malays and other members of the *Bumiputera* group, such as exclusive allocation of certain jobs in the public service sector, government and education quotas, competitively cheap loans, business premises in favourable locations, and preferential treatment in the allocation of business licences and contracts (Yen 27-28). Thus, far from achieving the integration of all ethnic groups in the political and economic administration of national wealth, the NEP "had come to symbolize the racial divide between Malays and non-Malays in Malaysia. It has not only frozen racial relations but is seen as a symbol of *Ketuanan Melayu* [Malay dominance]" (Chin 167). In 1990, the NEP was dismantled; however, most of its *Bumiputera*-empowering actions were kept alive and still shape ethnic interactions today.

Therefore, the role of ethnic identity within the Malaysian context becomes evident: since Malays (and other *Bumiputera*) enjoy clear economic, political, and social advantages, being considered Malay becomes desirable for non-Bumiputera, such as the Chinese or the Indians. While it is not possible to become ethnically *Orang Asli*, Iban, Belait, or any other group classified as *Bumiputera*, for an ethnic Chinese or an

ethnic Indian who was born in the Federation it is not impossible to qualify as Malay. Malayness in contemporary Malaysia is an ethnic label as much as it is a legal one; in fact, the Federal Constitution describes a Malay as "a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom" (Article 160.1).

Definitions of Malaysian ethnic groups such as the Chinese, the Indian, or the *Orang Asli* of Peninsular Malaysia are of the primordialist type, which means that they are "something given, ascribed at birth, deriving from the kin-and-clan-structure of human society, and hence something more or less fixed and permanent" (Isajiw 408); however, the constitutional definition of the Malay ethnic group is a cultural one that, as Nagata notes, stresses the importance of customs or *adat*, which "is sometimes understood to cover all aspects of Malay culture and social life, from styles of dressing and housing to rules of etiquette and social interaction, but it is most commonly restricted to the major life crisis ceremonies of birth, engagement, marriage and death" ("What is a Malay" 335). This definition of who is a Malay, which allows for people originally belonging to other groups to join the Malay ethnic group, combined with the political, economic, and social advantages of being considered Malay, responds to the utilitarian notion of ethnicity as proposed by J.A. Ross, who considers it "a group option in which resources are mobilized for the purpose of pressuring the political system to allocate public goods for the benefit of the members of a self-differentiating collectivity" (455).

Moreover, according to William Safran, "[i]n many cases, religion has been the bedrock of nation-building; and even today, it is difficult to separate a number of national identities from their religious matrices" (171). Such is the case with the Malay identity, in which Islam plays a prominent role, and any non-Muslim person who aspires to be considered Malay must inevitably go through the personal and social rite of conversion.

Chinese Conversion to Islam in Malaysia

Among the three elements that constitutionally define Malayness, religion is the major element of separation between the Malays and the ethnic Chinese, who are generally not Muslim. As noted by J.Y. Lam:

> [w]hile Malay language serves as the national language of Malaysia and all citizen of Malaysia are expected to learn it in school and Malay culture is a vibrant concept that is difficult to define, Islam becomes the most significant ethnic characteristic of the Malay and the distinguishing boundary between Malay and Chinese. (3-4)

There is, however, a segment of the Chinese population in Malaysia that is indeed Muslim. Of the around eighty thousand ethnic Chinese Muslims, only a small number can trace their origin to Chinese Muslims from China (known as Huizu 回

族), while the vast majority are converts who decided to embrace Islam for reasons such as interethnic marriage, gradual assimilation into Malay society (H. Ma 25), or, in some cases, "to get some economic or political mileage" (R. Ma 28). Known as *muallaf* (convert) or *saudara baru* (new brother/sister) within the larger Muslim community, Chinese converts constitute a double minority, an ethnic one within their religious community which is overwhelmingly Malay, and a religious one within their ethnic group which is largely non-Muslim. Therefore, as Rosey Ma points out (28), from their double-marginality, they deconstruct, redefine and reconstruct their identity on a religious and on an ethnic/cultural level.

Unlike Christianity, which sets a specific rite of conversion (baptism) and Judaism, which regards Jewishness as a condition determined by being born to a Jewish mother and which is traditionally less welcoming to converts, Islam conceives conversion as a private matter and does not require the aspiring convert to perform any special rite of conversion other than the recitation, in front of two witnesses, of the *shahada*, the
 Muslim declaration of belief in the oneness of God and the acceptance of Muhammad as God's prophet. Although it is mainly a personal experience, in Malaysia conversion to Islam has a strong impact on the identity of the Chinese convert and on the way in which he/she relates to society and society, in turn, responds to his new status. As Rosey Ma notes, Chinese converts generally struggle to be accepted both by the Malay Muslim community and by their own Chinese community (32).

In a country in which being a Muslim is strongly associated with being a Malay, many members of the ethnic Chinese community see conversion to Islam as an ethnic issue that highlights the preference of the convert for Malay culture over Chinese cultural heritage. Moreover, converting to Islam is "often described as an act of becoming Malay (*masuk Melayu*)" (Wu 78). From the perspective of the Chinese community, conversion to Islam is considered an act of embracing the customs of the uncivilized, or *jip huan* (進番) in Hokkien, a Sinitic language spoken by many Chinese Malaysians (Abdullah and Shukri 42). Therefore, it becomes clear that the mainstream of the Chinese Malaysian community otherizes new converts by defining them as different not only on the account of their faith, but also on cultural and ethnic levels. Similarly, when Malays use the terms *muallaf* and *saudara baru*, emphasizing the fact that they are Muslim through conversion, new converts may feel a sense of alienation and of not fully belonging to the Muslim community (Abdullah and Shukri 67).

Therefore, although one should not forget that most religions seek to address the spiritual needs of the human being in general and not those of specific ethnic groups, the common equation between conversion to Islam and embracing Malayness places Chinese converts in a blurred territory between the predominantly Malay Muslim community and the mainly non-Muslim Chinese community. New converts stand, therefore, on undefined ground marked by a high degree of in-betweenness: Muslim, but not Malay; Chinese, and yet Muslim; Muslim, although not by birth. Becoming Muslim does not make a Chinese less Chinese, nor does it make him/her ethnically

Malay, although the "religious identity of the convert overshadows his[/her] cultural and ethnic identity in the eyes of other Chinese" (R. Ma 32).

THE CHINESE CONVERT IN "BIE ZAI TIQI" AND "WO DE PENGYOU YADULA"

In the Malaysian context, conversion of an ethnic Chinese to Islam is clearly a problematic issue that carries consequences that go beyond the obvious, religious ones and can lead to "painful, messy and 'unmentionable' processes of creolization that emerge in this postcolonial context" (Bernards, "Beyond Diaspora" 321). Ho Sok Fong and Ng Kim Chew[3] depict one such process in their respective short stories "Bie zai tiqi" and "Wo de pengyou Yadula." While both stories focus on a Chinese *muallaf*, they do so from the perspective of the ethnic Chinese community that loses one member, rather than from that of the convert himself, who embraces a new faith. Both authors, therefore, turn the character of the convert into a voiceless literary figure used to critique the state-sanctioned uneven economic and civil treatment faced by Chinese Malaysians.[4]

"Bie zai tiqi" was originally published in Taiwan in 2002 and received the 25th *China Times* Short Story Prize. The story is a brief account of how, twenty years earlier, the Taoist funeral of the narrator's uncle was put on hold first and then cancelled due to religious issues. On the day of the burial, the family learned that the man had secretly converted to Islam and had married a Muslim woman, the one officially in charge of the funerary rites according to both Islamic and Malaysian law.[5]

According to Shih, the story "may serve as a perfect allegory for a double critique of state racism (of the Malaysian state) and Chinese cultural essentialism (of the Chinese family)" ("Against Diaspora" 39), while according to the narrator, the metafictional text is produced as "a way to make sense, as an adult, of [her] childhood memories" (這是一個成年人處理他童年回憶的方法) (Ho 334).[6] The memories are hurtful and "almost nobody is willing to face such a past" (幾乎沒有人願意面對過去) (Ho 334), and yet the narrator decides to faithfully recount them, hoping to propagate the truth not only about the specific case of her family, but also about the fate of the ethnic Chinese community in Malaysia as a whole. Although the reasons of the conversion are never stated, the narrator's late uncle is not presented as a devout Muslim, but as someone moved by practical interests that might result from conversion to Islam in the Malaysian context:

> 爸爸：誰叫華人這樣貪小便宜，要申請廉價屋呀，德士利申呀，統統以為姓敏阿都拉就好辦事。有甚麼冬瓜豆腐，用白布一包就去了。有些人改信了回教，到死都不敢告訴家人。男人每天在外頭，妻子怎知道他在幹甚麼？ (335-36)[7]

The above passage should be read as an overt negative judgement of the opportunism of some ethnic Chinese, but also as a veiled critique of the uneven social treatment

received by *Bumiputera* and non-*Bumiputera*. The secrecy with which ethnic Chinese convert to Islam is confirmed by Abdullah and Shukri, who noted that these new converts sometimes decide not to inform their families to avoid unnecessary troubles (56).

The passage also touches on a sensitive aspect of Chinese conversion to Islam: the change in personal naming practices. Both Ho's and Ng's stories, as we shall see, use a Muslim name for the ethnic Chinese protagonist: *bin Abdullah*[8] and *Abdullah*, respectively. The use of such patronymics is common practice among Chinese converts and is considered by other Chinese as a sign of *masuk Melayu*, since the words *bin* and *binti* are generally used for a child of Malay ethnicity in order to acknowledge who their father is. Although since 1999, it has been neither compulsory nor considered necessary for an ethnic Chinese convert to officially change his/her name to a Muslim one (Chu et al.), among the ethnic Chinese community there exists the misconception that it is not only one of the requirements, but also one reason for the new convert to relinquish his/her ties with his/her community and heritage (Zhong).

As previously stated, conversion to Islam is not merely a religious matter in the Malaysian context, as it sometimes involves ethnic identification, social changes, and political benefits for the convert. Therefore, it is not surprising that the narration of the religious ritual turns political when several bureaucrats and law enforcers appear on the premises:

> 宗教局的代表，即兩個華裔端哈芝坐在長桌的另一端沉默不語。[...] 二舅父一拳打在桌面上，杯子一震，咖啡濺到桌上來，舅母的臉急白。「他不是回教徒。」舅母的聲音顫抖得厲害。[...] 舅母執意要為舅父打齋。 [...] 我的先生不是回教徒。舅母哭著說。 (Ho 334-36)[9]

Unwillingness to acknowledge and opposition to the conversion make the presence of these officials inevitable:

> 當一個人去世，醫院收回死者的身分證。假如死者的名字後面跟隨著敏阿都拉，當局便知道那是第一代皈依回教的信徒。宗教局代表便會在當地警察和衛生官員的陪同下抵達葬禮現場，和死者的家屬談判。(Ho 335)[10]

Conversion to Islam is a life-changing decision that, far from being only a personal question of faith, has direct social consequences on the convert's family members who have not embraced the new religion, as it deprives the ethnic Chinese family of inheritance rights, which the law then bestows on the family members who belong to the Muslim community. Ho's critique of the uneven treatment reserved to non-Muslims is unmistakable:

> 舅父留下來的東西一點一點地送走，後來她也搬走了。她不能再住遠來的屋子，因為那間屋子屬於舅父的名字，舅父是回教徒，舅母就不能承續他的遺產，包括那間屋子。她後來就搬到表哥的家裡住了。(Ho 336)[11]

Apart from material rights, the Chinese wife also loses the possibility of claiming any type of cultural association and familiar bonding with the convert, who is con-

sidered as having legally acquired a new identity, incompatible with his/her former Chinese identity. In Ho's story, the incompatibility between Chineseness and Islam/Malayness is presented as an uneven transaction in which one community's loss is the other community's gain:

> 妳丈夫的第二妻子沒有來，因為我們認為要她出現在這裡不論對誰都是太大的打擊，但是你們不是回教徒，你們不能辦理一個回教徒的葬禮。屍體必須從棺材裡搬出來，交回給妳丈夫的第二妻子，只有回教徒才可以幫另一個回教徒殮葬。(Ho 336)[12]

The situation becomes grotesque and the solemnity of the issue is carnivalized when, amidst the social and identity tensions caused by the man's conversion to Islam, the corpse starts to defecate:

> 屍體最後終於大便完畢，並以一個响屁作為結束。當時宗教局告訴家屬，回教徒的糞便必須埋葬在回教徒的墳場裡。舅母憤恨地說，這堆糞便是由兩個信奉道教的女人煮出來的三餐所變成的。爸爸、媽媽、二舅父和阿姨們都紛紛的拍掌，最後宗教局的人同意這堆糞便該由家屬埋葬在原來的墳墓裡。(Ho 339)[13]

The final scene can be read as a carnivalesque allegory of the constant negotiation between one's old Chinese identity and one's new identity as a Muslim, a situation experienced by most converts, as noted by Lam (22), among others. Moreover, the absurd ending of the story reveals the author's contempt for the authorities' inability to set interethnic disputes, but also the complexity of ethnic Chinese conversion to Islam, which encompasses issues that transcend the religious realm and shatter cultural, ethnic, and social convictions, obliging people to rethink their identity and their social interactions. It is probably because of this complexity that, although many works of fiction do portray the situation of the Chinese Malaysian community within Malaysian society, the conversion of Chinese Malaysians to Islam is a theme scarcely explored in Sinophone Malaysian literature. The importance of Ho's story lies not only in the exceptionality of the topic presented, but also in her mastery of literary devices such as the grotesque and carnivalesque, as well as in her decision to publicly delve into the issue through the portrayal of private and sensitive aspects such as death, funerary rites, and the problem of ownership over the body of the departed, as Ng has also noted ("Shishou de zuqun guishu" 294). Nevertheless, while agreeing with Ng as to the importance of Ho's narrative text, the satirical description of the burial, which turns into a grotesque event, prevents Ho from presenting ethnic Chinese converts to Islam in a sympathetic way. By not giving voice to those who espouse Islam moved by spiritual convictions, Ho's story portrays only some of the many aspects that make conversion to Islam in the Chinese Malaysian context so complicated.

"Wo de pengyou Yadula" is connected to "Bie zai tiqi" not only thematically, but also through Abdullah, the main character who is the same *bin Abdullah* of Ho's short story. Completed in June 2002 and published in September of the same year in *Hong Kong Literature* (*Xianggang wenxue* 香港文學), it appeared again in *Tu yu huo –Tanah Melayu*, a short story collection published in Taiwan in 2005. Although the

first publication of the story precedes that of "Bie zai tiqi" by a few months, the 2005 version closes with a reference to Ho's text: "Please refer to 'Never Mention It Again,' written by his niece, for additional details" (詳情請參考他外甥女寫的〈別再提起〉) (Ng 76).[14] This reference acknowledges the intimate thematic relationship between the two works.

"Wo de pengyou Yadula" is the tragicomic account of a few key moments in the life of Abdullah, a Chinese Malaysian convert and a friend of the narrator. The story presents the protagonist as an opportunistic convert who embraced Islam to marry a beautiful and well-off Malay woman. His faith is put constantly to test by the friends he mingles with: among other things, they incite him to eat *haram* (forbidden) food and applaud his libertine lifestyle. Abudullah's behaviour, although not acceptable from a religious perspective, is far from extraordinary within the community of Chinese converts; in fact, sociological studies have shown that around thirty percent of Chinese converts admitted to having been unable to abandon eating pork (Abdullah and Shukri 69). The man is described as constantly juggling between his Chinese heritage and his new Muslim identity, as someone who is always seen as the Other:

> 眾所周知，此地華人一旦進伊斯蘭教，華人社會會將你視同「如番」，而馬來社會仍不會毫無保留的接受你。(Ng 63)[15]

Abdullah's new identity as a Chinese Muslim seems to be rejected by both communities. In a country in which identity issues are essential to cultural, social, and political life, Abdullah's conversion undermines the socially predictable equation that Chinese are non-Muslim. Moreover, Ng mockingly subverts the importance of ethnic classification by describing the protagonist as someone willing to marry four women, one from each major ethnic group of Peninsular Malaysia (Malay, Chinese, Indian, and *Orang Asli*). While highlighting the opportunistic ease with which Abdullah accepts and relinquishes aspects of his new religion, the author condemns the official division of Malaysian society along ethnic lines.

The mention of polygyny is one of the several references to Islam that appear in the text; other Muslim customs, such as the prohibition of eating before sunset during the holy month of Ramadan and the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) that every Muslim should perform at least once in his/her lifetime, are also introduced as markers of the newly-acquired identity of the Chinese Malaysian protagonist, although Ng always does so with skepticism. Conversion to Islam for Abdullah is not a question of faith, as Ng emphasizes time and again:

> 進伊斯蘭教之後（用死黨們的話來說，「割掉那塊珍貴的皮之後」）如果有他的穆斯林妻子陪同，即使約了朋友往往吃的是印度菜或馬來菜，或是素食；只要他那位「黑金妻子」不在，肉骨茶大包燒肉樣樣好，補償似的數量更勝往昔，一面還半真半假的抱怨說，「你們不知道在家裡吃飯有多痛苦。」(Ng 62)[16]

Ng's words corroborate the idea that when "a convert goes for circumcision, and stops taking pork [...], to the non-Muslims, these are proof of entering 'Malayhood'"

(Abdullah and Shukri 42).

Although his conversion to Islam is not taken seriously by his ethnic Chinese peers, by embracing the Islamic faith, Abdullah has taken on a new identity, which incorporates elements of the Malay identity: "we didn't see his articles on the newspaper for a while, and we guessed that he had probably started writing for the Malay paper" (好一陣子不再看到他的文章在報上出現，我們猜想，也許轉到馬來報去了) (Ng 64). This idea is in consonance with the opinion of many Chinese in Malaysia who believe "that becoming Muslim is equivalent to becoming Malay" (R. Ma 32), and highlights the general misconception that when a Chinese converts to Islam, he or she gradually tends to gravitate towards the Malay social and cultural realm, thus also preferring the use of *bahasa Melayu*, the Malay language, over the use of Chinese.

The story of Abdullah comes to an end with the disclosure of the fact that Abdullah's coffin did not contain his corpse. Instead, it was filled with novels by Jin Yong 金庸, a copy of *Journey to the West*, and one of the *Kṣitigarbhasūtra*.[17] Ng explains that, as in Ho's story, Abdullah's corpse was taken away in the early hours, because "he was still a Muslim, after all" (畢竟他仍是個穆斯林) (Ng 76). Although this last sentence seemingly acknowledges Abdullah's Muslim identity, it also reaffirms, through the presence of Chinese cultural and religious texts, the idea that the Chinese convert inhabits the liminal space between the two communities.

Ng Kim Chew's satirical approach to ethnic Chinese converts is strikingly similar to that presented by Ho Sok Fong in her story. However, Ng seems even more poignant in his emphasis on Abdullah's conversion as a shrewd way of gaining access to the privileges that come with *Bumiputera* status. Through the use of satirical elements, while criticizing the opportunism that moves a few ethnic Chinese who decide to espouse the Muslim faith, he fails to give a fair and complete, or at least plural, picture of what it means to be an ethnic Chinese convert in Malaysia.

Conclusion

From the analysis of "Bie zai tiqi" and "Wo de pengyou Yadula," it becomes clear that the issues faced by Chinese converts to Islam in the Malaysian context are not exclusively of a religious nature. Chinese Malaysians who decide to embrace Islam are not only questioned by both their ethnic and religious communities, but they are also expected to assimilate into the mainstream of Malay society by preferring Malay over their Sinitic language, by wearing the Malay traditional attire and by preferring the Malay diet, among other practices (Chu et al.).

Written by ethnic Chinese writers who are not converts to Islam, both stories seem to reaffirm the idea that, from the Chinese perspective, the crossing of religious boundaries equals to the crossing of ethnic boundaries as well. Therefore, conversion results in a problematic decision that affects both the daily life of the new Muslim and his relationship with the ethnic and religious communities that he/she is seen as

leaving and joining, respectively.

In both stories, the character is presented as a bicultural subject who possesses characteristics of both communities, the Chinese and the Malay: both writers portray conversion to Islam as a move from the ways of the Chinese to *masuk Melayu*, rather than a move towards Muslim religious practices not belonging exclusively to the Malay community. In sum, Ho and Ng both depict a social environment in which it is not possible to become Muslim without becoming Malay as well, at least to a certain degree.

Both authors also infer that perhaps the association between Islam and Malayness so engraved within Malaysian society and the benefits that might come from it are the motives behind the conversion of the protagonist. In fact, while conversion to Islam is spurred by many factors such as interethnic marriage and interaction with the surrounding Malay/Muslim community, both short stories present one type of Chinese convert, who embraces Islam moved by opportunism rather than faith. Therefore,

both short stories, though commendable efforts to represent a religious minority within their own minority community, do so by questioning the real motives behind conversion: in "Bie zai tiqi," the narrator's father points out that conversion was aimed at obtaining certain benefits; similarly, in "Wo de pengyou Yadula," Abdullah's conversion is set off by his desire to marry a well-off Malay woman. In both instances, therefore, the narrating voice conforms to the mainstream of Chinese Malaysian society that suspects that conversion is a passport to obtaining special privileges reserved for the Malays and other indigenous groups.

In my opinion, since both stories depict an opportunistic approach to conversion, in an effort to challenge the official government policies that favor *Bumiputera*, they are not representative of the community of Chinese converts and do not do justice to the personal struggles of many Chinese Malaysians who, because of their decision to embrace Islam, find themselves in a sort of limbo, accused by their own community of "betraying their tradition and mingling with the Malay more than with the Chinese" and questioned by the Malays, according to whom "Chinese can only be considered a convert if they adopt a Malay's ways of life" (Lam 6). However, I consider both stories exceptionally accomplished examples of the mainstream Chinese perspective on the issue of conversion to Islam.

Notes

1. By *Sinophone Malaysian narrative studies*, I refer to studies on those texts written in a Sinitic language by Malaysian authors who were born and live (or lived) in Malaysia. Although already occasionally used by scholars such as Keen who defines *Sinophone* communities as those communities of Chinese people in "the Mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia and the US" (231), an ideologically-charged notion of the *Sinophone* was popularized in the mid-2000s by Shu-mei Shih, who first used it to "mean literature written in Chinese by Chinese-speaking writers in various parts of the world outside China" ("Global Literature" 29) and later readjusted "to designate Sinitic-language cultures and communities outside China as well as those ethnic communities within China,

where Sinitic languages are either forcefully imposed or willingly adopted" ("Against Diaspora" 30). Although essentially exclusivist in its approach to Sinitic-language cultural production, Shih's Sinophone remains a useful concept to discuss cultural productions from outside mainland China and/or by non-Han artists who express themselves in one or more Sinitic languages. Scholars such as Pengcheng Gong, however, argue that one should not neglect all those ethnic Chinese writers from the margins of China-centred Chineseness who still consider themselves Chinese, rather than Sinophone (10). Others, such as Yingjin Zhang, note that "Shih's territorial concept of the Sinophone does itself a disservice because it has abandoned a rich field of cultural production inside Mainland China" (7). Similarly, David Der-Wei Wang has suggested that the Sinophone as an alternative to China-centred discourse is present within China as well, as shown by the diversity of themes and literary and linguistic styles exemplified by authors such as Su Tong 蘇童 from southern China, 賈平凹 from the northwest of the country, Alai 阿來 from the Tibetan area of Sichuan, and Zhang Chengzhi 張承志, an ethnic Hui (par. 9). Moreover, Wang and Tsu, taking a more inclusivist approach than Shih, have proposed the term *Global Chinese Literature* to indicate the transnational dimension of literature written in Sinitic languages. While there exist several studies on the ongoing debates on the relationship among cultural production expressed in Sinitic languages, Chineseness, and China, as well as on issues related to the Sinophone dimension of Sinophone Malaysian literature, this article deals more specifically with the Malaysian aspect of fictional texts, highlighting the interaction (and the tensions) with local Malay(sian) culture, rather than with the transnational Sinophone. I use, therefore, the word *Sinophone* when language is a defining factor, and *Chinese* when referring to ethnic or cultural aspects that can or cannot be expressed in a Sinitic language.

2. The problematization of Sinophone Malaysian literature within several literary polysystems was first put forward by Taiwan-based Malaysian scholar Tee Kim Tong. Tee sees it as a "border literature in the Malaysian literary polysystem because its activity is confined to the ethnic Chinese community and it has been denied the legitimacy as a national literature" (108); at the same time, it can also be part of the transnational Sinophone literary polysystem. Moreover, Tee notes that in the case of those diasporic Sinophone Malaysian writers based in Taiwan, their literary production, although "not situated in the central position of the Taiwan literary polysystem" (108), is able to go beyond "the borders of national literatures in both the Malay and Taiwan literary polysystems" (118), thus serving as an example of the transnationality and the adjustability of Sinitic-medium literatures.

3. Born in 1970 in the predominantly Malay and Muslim state of Kedah, Ho Sok Fong is one of the most appreciated Sinophone Malaysian fiction writers today. In addition to the *China Times* Short Story Prize, she has also won awards in her native Malaysia and in Singapore. Ng Kim Chew (1967-) was born in Johor, Malaysia, and currently resides in Taiwan where he is professor of Chinese literature. His short stories have been published across the Sinophone world, from Taiwan to Malaysia, from Hong Kong to mainland China, and some have recently been translated into English and published in the United States.

4. Ho's and Ng's portrayals of the Chinese *muallaf* contrast sharply with the treatment of conversion to Islam in Malay-language fiction by ethnic Chinese authors such as Soo Cham, who deals with the issue in her novel *Air Mata Ibu* (*A Mother's Tears*, 2007). Through her narrator Sui Yin, who recounts how she and her two brothers chose to embrace Islam, Soo Cham, a convert herself, presents the issue of conversion from the perspective of the *muallaf*. While the novel inevitably displays the dichotomy between the ethnic Chinese converts and their mother, who does not approve of her children's espousal of Islam, the spiritual change is never portrayed as an opportunistic move. On the contrary, the Chinese *muallaf* in the story are presented as pious Muslims who refrain from eating *bak* (pork, in the Hokkien language), and show enduring devotion to Allah.

5. The issue of the corpse of a convert being taken away from his Chinese family narrated by Ho and Ng is also central to *Siwang jishi* 死亡紀事 (*Chronology on Death*), a theatrical play written by Chua Seng Shen (Cai Shengshen) 蔡承燊 and Koh Choon Eiow (Gao Junyao) 高俊耀 and staged for the first time in 2011 in Macau by Ho Theatre (禾劇場製作), a Sinophone Malaysian theatre company. In this case, the play centres on the memories of two brothers who recount how, after learning that their father had converted to Islam and had officially changed his name from Tan Tua Yang to Hasan Tan bin

Abdullah, try to hasten a secret Taoist funeral during the night to avoid the body of their deceased father being taken away by the Muslim religious authorities. However, before the dead man can be properly buried according to the Taoist tradition, government officials arrive on the scene. Amidst the general chaos generated by the conflicting interests of the Chinese family and the Muslim officials, the corpse disappears (Tenn; Yu).

6. There is as of yet no published English translation of Ho's story. All translations are mine.

7. My dad said: "This happens because some Chinese go after petty profits, such as buying property at a special price or getting a taxi license. They believe that just because they change their surname to *bin Abdullah*, everything will come easy. But then, if something happens and they suddenly die, they are rolled in a white cloth and taken away. Some guys convert to Islam without ever having the guts to tell their families. Men spend all day outside: how could a wife possibly know what her husband is up to?"

8. *Bin Abdullah* literally means "son of Abdullah, servant of God," and is the patronymic generally used by new converts in Malaysia. The female equivalent is *binti Abdullah* (daughter of Abdullah).

9. A representative of the Religious Bureau and two Chinese *haji* sat silent at the other end of the long table. [...] Second uncle hit his fist on the table, knocking the cup over and spilling the coffee that was inside. My aunt's face turned pale with anxiety. [...] "He was not a Muslim!" my aunt protested, with a trembling voice [...] and insisted in going on with the funeral. [...] "My husband wasn't a Muslim!" she repeated in tears.

10. When someone dies, the hospital retains his ID. If the name of the deceased is followed by bin Abdullah, then he is obviously a *muallaf*, a first generation convert to Islam. Therefore, an official from the Religious Bureau, escorted by a police officer and a clerk from the Health Bureau, normally show up at the funeral to mediate with the family of the deceased.

11. Everything that uncle had left was taken away bit by bit, and in the end she [my aunt] had to move out of the house. She wasn't allowed to live there anymore, because the house was under uncle's name, and since he was a Muslim, auntie couldn't inherit anything, not even the house she lived in. So, she moved in with my cousin.

12. The reason why your husband's second wife is not here is only because we thought that her presence would be too traumatic for everyone. But you are not a Muslim, and you are not allowed to bury a Muslim. The corpse must be taken out of the coffin and returned to your husband's second wife; only a Muslim can bury a fellow Muslim.

13. When the corpse was finally done defecating, he let out a resounding fart. The official from the Religious Bureau informed the family that the feces of a Muslim had to be buried at a Muslim cemetery. Auntie was furious. "This shit is the result of three meals cooked by two Taoist women!" she replied. My parents, my second uncle, and second aunt all started clapping. Finally, the guy from the Religious Bureau agreed to let the family bury the excrements in the original burial ground.

14. There is as of yet no published English translation of this story. All translations are mine.

15. As everybody knows, when a local Chinese converts to Islam, he is regarded by the Chinese community as someone who has embraced the foreign customs. At the same time, Malay society will not accept him so easily.

16. After converting to Islam (or "after removing that precious piece of skin" as his buddies would say), if there was his Muslim wife, even when he was out with his friends, he would eat Indian or Malay or vegetarian food. But if his "black-golden wife" wasn't there with him, he would splurge on *bak kut teh*, steamed pork buns, and pork belly even more than before, as to compensate. "You don't know how difficult it is to eat at home!" he would complain, half-jokingly.

17. Jin Yong 金庸 (1924-2018) is a Sinophone novelist whose writings "became the best representative of the genre of 'new Martial Arts novels,' attracted large audiences in Hong Kong" (Huss and Liu 9),

and throughout the Sinophone world, from mainland China to Taiwan, including the Sinophone community of Malaysia. *Journey to the West*, or *Xijouji* 西遊記 in Chinese, is a Chinese vernacular novel written in the sixteenth century and generally attributed to Wu Cheng'en, which relates the pilgrimage of Tang-dynasty Buddhist monk Xuanzang to Central Asia and India to obtain Buddhist sutras. It is a popular novel throughout the Sinophone world, with many cinematic and television adaptations. The *Kṣitigarbhasūtra*, known in Chinese as *Dizang Pusa benyuanjing* 地藏菩薩本願經, is a popular Mahayana sutra, "translated at the end of the seventh century, specifically relates the bodhisattva's vow to rescue all beings in the six realms of existence before he would attain buddhahood himself" (Buswell and López 1114).

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