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// ARTÍCULO

Of Mamak Stalls and Malaysian Weather: Sinitic Languages and Identity in Ah Niu (阿牛)'s Sinophone Malaysian Pop Music

De puestos mamak y clima malasio: Lenguas siníticas e identidad en la música pop sinófona de Ah Niu (阿牛)

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Abstract

Malaysia is home to a sizeable ethnic Chinese community that speaks several Sinitic languages. As such, it is not only an importer of Sinophone culture, but also an important site of Sinitic-language cultural production. In the field of popular music, Malaysia has been a hotbed of many transnational Sinophone talents whose Malaysianness, however, has often gone unnoticed. Nevertheless, some international artists such as Ah Niu have consistently showcased their Malaysian identity. Through a close reading of his songs, this paper aims to show how the use of Sinitic languages conveys Malaysianness and presents local features, thus challenging the opinion that only culture expressed in Bahasa Malaysia has the right to be considered of national value. Moreover, it is demonstrated that the use of Sinitic languages in Ah Niu's musical production is an example of how such languages can express a thriving local identity that goes beyond Chineseness and the center-periphery dynamics.

Keywords: Sinophone pop music, Ah Niu, Malaysian identity, Sinitic languages, Mandopop.

Resumen

Malasia alberga una importante comunidad étnica china que habla distintas lenguas siníticas. Como tal, no solo es un país importador de cultura sinófona, sino también un importante lugar de producción cultural en las mencionadas lenguas. En el contexto de la música popular, Malasia es la tierra de origen de muchos talentos sinófonos transnacionales cuya malasianidad, sin embargo, ha pasado a menudo desapercibida. No obstante, algunos artistas internacionales, como Ah Niu, han mostrado constantemente su identidad malasia. A través del análisis de sus canciones, este trabajo quiere mostrar cómo el uso de lenguas siníticas puede transmitir la identidad malasia y presentar la realidad local, desafiando así la opinión de que solo la cultura expresada en Bahasa Malaysia es de alcance nacional. Además, el estudio pretende demostrar que el uso de lenguas siníticas en la producción musical de Ah Niu es un ejemplo de cómo dichas lenguas pueden expresar una próspera identidad local que va más allá de la sinidad y de dinámicas centro-periferia.

Palabras clave: Música pop sinófona, Ah Niu, Identidad malasia, Lenguas siníticas, Mandopop.

1. Introduction

On August 5, 2012, during the London Summer Olympics, an online firestorm hit mandopop[1] star Fish Leong (梁静茹) after the Chinese badminton player Lin Dan (林丹) defeated his Malaysian opponent Lee Chong Wei (李宗偉) in the men's final. That very same evening, the Taiwan-based Malaysian singer wrote on her Sina Weibo account:[2] "Oh, I've just got home... I missed an incredible match. Cry, cry… but I am still very proud! Malaysia won a silver medal! (cool)" (my translation).[3] The post received less than three thousand likes, but more than thirty thousand comments. Many were written by angry Chinese netizens who accused the singer of being disloyal to China. Although some Weibo users seemed to be aware of her nationality, they still insisted that she should not forget her Chinese origins (Ang, 2012). Others, on the contrary, appeared to be completely unaware of the fact that she is Malaysian, probably mislead by her decade-long popularity in China, her looks, and her Mandarin fluency (Chen, 2012). This misunderstanding, however, could have also arisen from the fact that, sung in flawless standard Mandarin, her songs, like those of many other Malaysian Sinophone[4] popstars, do not feature any aspect of local Malaysian culture, therefore not allowing the average listener to guess her/their provenance.

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[1] Mandopop stands for Mandarin language pop music, a genre born at the beginning of the 1980s in Taiwan (Moskowitz, 2009, p. 69).

[2] Sina Weibo, or simply Weibo, is a Chinese microblogging website, with many of its features resembling those found in similar services such as Twitter.

While it is true that the majority of Sinophone artists from Malaysia do not generally stress their provenance, nor consider their nationality as a defining trait of their public personas, some even stressing their connection and their sense of belonging to the Chinese nation,[5] there is also a limited number of them, such as Ah Niu (阿牛), Namewee (黃明志), and Joyce Chu (四葉草), whose songs prominently feature their home country and its local issues. In this paper, through a close reading of a selection of Sinophone tunes by Ah Niu, one of the most internationally successful Sinophone Malaysian singers/songwriters, I aim at showing that, although sung in Sinitic languages, they clearly have a distinct Malaysian identity and are, therefore, to be considered Malaysian cultural products. In this sense, it is intended to demonstrate that they challenge the official idea that only cultural production in Bahasa Malaysia, the sole official language of the country, possesses national value.[6] Moreover, by featuring remarkable aspects of Malaysia in his songs, Ah Niu also questions the notion of Chineseness which "may simply be defined as the quality or state of being Chinese" (Wong et al., 2021, p. 132), or denotes, as sinologist Geremie Barmé (2012) puts it, "a kind of Chinese cultural essentialism, with overtones of 'racial' uniqueness".[7] Additionally, by focusing on the dynamism of local production by Malaysian artists, I put forward the idea that Sinitic-language culture outside the Greater China region, while peripheral if considered from the perspective of the Chinese geopolitical center, is crucial to the construction of a thriving Sinophone identity that, although linguistically connected to China, is deeply rooted in the local reality of multicultural and plurilingual Malaysia.

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[3] The original post in Chinese is available here: https://www.weibo.com/1731972042/yvNoLiF8t (accessed on March 2, 2o23).

[4] Generally, the term Sinophone, as coined by Shih Shu-mei, "designate[s] Sinitic-language cultures and communities outside China as well as those ethnic communities in China where Sinitic languages are either forcefully imposed or willingly adopted" (Shih, 2010, p. 36).

[5] For a discussion of the complex relationship between Sinophone Malaysian singers and China, see Paoliello (2022).

[6] In the filmic realm, for instance, Wee (2007, p. 154) notes that a movie "in any other language other than the official language of Bahasa Melayu is not considered a Malaysian film". Similarly, in the literary field, although one must acknowledge that "Malaysian literature is vibrantly multilingual, diverse in genre and readership, and simultaneously local, regional, and global in its scope and circulation" (Menon, 2016), the official discourse states that only works written in Malay have the right to be considered Malaysian, while those in English (the former colonial language), Sinitic languages and Tamil (spoken by the second and third largest ethnic communities in Malaysia, respectively) can be considered sectional literatures at best (Paoliello, 2018, p. 267).

[7] For an articulate discussion of the concept of Chineseness, see Chow (1998).

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2. Background and Context

2.1. The Ethnic Chinese Presence in Malaysia

Before delving deep into the Malaysianness of some of Ah Niu's songs, however, it deems necessary to briefly sketch the ethnic Chinese presence in Malaysia. According to the data made public by the Department of Statistics (2021), Malaysia's population was of slightly less than 32 million people at the end of 2021, of which more than 22%, that is to say, around one out five Malaysian citizens, belonged to the Chinese ethnic group. Their presence in the country is largely a direct consequence of British colonialism and of the turmoil that affected the Qing Empire (1644-1914) and early republican China. In fact, while Chinese imperial history has been intertwined with that of Southeast Asia since ancient times, it was not until the nineteenth century that large-scale Chinese migration to the territories of present-day Malaysia took place, spurred by the expanding economy of British-controlled Malaya (as peninsular Malaysia and Singapore were known at that time) and Northern Borneo, and by the chaotic situation of 1920s and 1930s China (Tan, 2005, p. 698).

After the territories that conform today's Malaysia—that is, the Malay peninsula and the states of Sabah and Sarawak (on the island of Borneo)—gained independence from the British Empire in the second half of the twentieth century, the Malay majority, concerned over the economic privileges of the Chinese community, pushed for a constitution that favored them and other indigenous peoples (collectively known as *Bumiputra*, that is, the 'children of the land') and bestowed special rights upon them (Freedman, 2016, p. 369).[8] Tension between Malay Malaysians and those of Chinese descent was further exacerbated by the ethnic riots that broke out on May 13, 1969. The incident, still "viewed as an unhealed wound on the nation's psyche" (Sukumaran, 2019), was ignited by the overall good performance of the largely Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) in the general elections of that same year and the threat posed by such an electoral outcome to Malay political dominance. As a result, parliamentary activities were suspended until almost two years later. Moreover, as a direct consequence of an increasingly polarized society, the government passed a series of laws and regulations aimed at preserving the special rights of the Malays.

Sinophone Malaysian culture was deeply affected by the National Culture Policy (NCP), a law formulated in 1971, which states that "[t]he national culture must be based on the indigenous culture of [the] region", that only "[s]uitable elements from the other culture may be accepted as part of the national culture" and that "Islam is an important component in the formulation of the national culture" (The Government of Malaysia, 1971). Therefore, in contemporary Malaysia, local Sinophone culture is rarely, if ever, considered of national interest, and it is generally not seen as Malaysian at all by the Malay majority. Although the NCP aimed at "strengthen[ing] national unity through culture" and at "foster[ing] and preserv[ing] national identity created through national culture" (ibid.), in reality, it had an alienating effect on the ethnic Chinese population. Additionally, the National Language Act, which was first passed in 1963 and, after being amended in 1967, reached its current form in 1987, made Bahasa Malaysia the official language of the country. As noted by Davey (1990), the adoption of Malay, once an ethnic language and a regional lingua franca, as the language of the Malaysian nationhood "has been stressful on ethnic minorities" (p. 95), and has actually marginalized those Malaysian artists that do not express themselves in it.

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[8] Davey (1990) clearly explains that "*Bumiputra* privilege as established by the Constitution provided for concessions in land, quotas in public service, educational grants and university positions, permits, and the like" (p. 97).

Within such a challenging official environment for non-Malay communities, local Sinophone culture has often had to resort to private patronage for survival. However, as stated by Carstens (2005), even if privately funded, non-Malay cultural activities are subject to the acquisition of government permits, a practice allowing policymakers to exert great control over the cultural and social life of the local Sinophone community (p. 151). Therefore, Sinophone Malaysian artists and other creative workers have often opted for migrating to other Sinitic-language sites of cultural production such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and, as suggested by Baker (2018), increasingly to mainland China as well (p. 1).

2.2. Sinophone Malaysia and Pop Music: Between the Global and the Local

Due to its relatively large ethnic Chinese population and thanks to a well-developed Sinitic-medium educational system that allows many of them to be fully proficient in one or more Sinitic languages,[9] Malaysia has been an important market for Sinitic-language popular culture, mostly imported from abroad. For instance, as early as the 1920s, Sinophone cinema was exported to colonial Malaya, while Hong Kong movies were especially popular in the mid-1900s (Kang et al., 2021, p. 111).

In the 1980s, many ethnic Chinese families in Malaysia resorted to Cantonese-language video series from Hong Kong for their entertainment. In order to have better control on what media products the ethnic Chinese Malaysian audience was consuming, in 1984, the government allowed the establishment of a private TV channel (TV3) that aired—for the first time in Malaysia—popular television series from Hong Kong and Taiwan, either in Cantonese or in Hokkien (McDaniel, 1994, p. 271). Roughly around the same time, Sinophone karaoke "gained in popularity, attracting young people to sing along with the latest stars of the Hong Kong and Taiwanese music scene" (Carstens, 2003, p. 327).

With the rapid growth of new digital media, Malaysia experienced an increase in self-produced and privately funded cultural products such as films, web shows and music videos, which do not have to cope with the language limitations imposed to mainstream media. For instance, independent cinema can freely use languages "commonly spoken in Malaysia: English, Cantonese, Mandarin, Hokkien, and Tamil, rather than just Malay" (Khoo, 2007, p. 228). Although Sinophone Malaysia is heavily dependent on foreign productions, these days it produces its own Sinophone TV shows as well, some in collaboration with Mediacorp, Singapore's largest content creator and national media network (Chan et al., 2021, p. 2). In recent years, local Sinophone commercial feature films such as the romantic comedy *Ice Kacang Puppy Love* (初戀紅豆冰, 2010) directed by Ah Niu, the comedy-drama *The Joruney* (一路有你, 2014) by Chiu Keng Guan (周青元), just to name a couple, have also been released in theatres across Malaysia and abroad.[10]

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[9] For a brief, yet rather comprehensive overview of Chinese education in Malaysia, see Ang (2009).

[10] Hee (2018, pp.199-209) analyzed the Malaysianness portrayed in *Ice Kacang Puppy Love* in his book-length study on Malaysian Sinophone cinema.

Malaysia must be seen, therefore, not only as an importer of Sinophone culture, but as an exporter as well. And it is especially so in the field of popular music. For decades, Malaysia has been a hotbed of Sinophone singing/songwriting talents: ethnic Chinese artists born and raised in the Malay peninsula, in the states of Sarawak and Sabah (on the island of Borneo) or on the small island of Labuan have become true transnational stars singing in Mandarin, Cantonese and, occasionally, in other Sinitic languages such as Hokkien, or in English.[11] I could mention many of them, but I will limit myself to just a few, starting with the artist that opens this paper: Fish Leong, who was born in the state of Negeri Sembilan in 1979, and, after winning a singing competition in Malaysia, moved to Taiwan in 1997. There, she was dubbed "queen of romantic ballads" and has sold over eighteen million records to this day. I could continue with the singer and songwriter Penny Tai (戴佩妮), also born in 1978 and originally from the state of Johor. Like Fish Leong, she has been living in Taiwan since 1999, and since then she has been one of the most original and innovative voices in the mandopop music scene. Before them there was, among others, Eric Moo (巫啟賢), born in 1963 in the state of Perak, with over forty successful albums to his credit, both in Mandarin and Cantonese. Among the artists hailing from the island of Borneo, singer and TV actor Nicholas Teo (張棟樑) (born in 1981 in the state of Sarawak) is undoubtedly one of the most internationally successful. If, on one hand, their use of Sinitic languages has allowed them to reach a huge Sinophone audience beyond Malaysian national borders, it has, on the other hand, often silenced their Malaysian identity, especially after they have pursued their artistic careers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China. [12] In fact, being produced mostly in Taiwan, their songs and the music videos which accompany them do not possess features that could be regarded as typically Malaysian. On the contrary, they are constructed in such an unlocalized way that makes them relatable to transnational Sinophone audiences.[13]

Conversely, artists such as Ah Niu, Namewee and Joyce Chu have made/make constant references to their country and their own identity as Malaysians. Their Malaysianness is stated through geographical references to Malaysia, through the use of a localized version of Mandarin or other Sinitic languages mixed with English and Malay, and by mentioning Malaysian food culture.[14] Addi-

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[11] Recently, even some ethnic Malays have started to sing in Sinitic languages, mostly in Mandarin, to step into the huge mainland Chinese market. One successful case is that of singer-songwriter Shila Amzah who took China by storm in 2014 by taking part in the singing competition show *I am a Singer* (我是歌手). Lately, Malay singer-songwriter Firdhaus Farmizi (菲道爾), a Sinitic-medium school graduate (Lin, 2021), became popular performing his own tune "Gulf of Alaska" (阿拉斯加海灣) in flawless Mandarin. Currently, the song has more than one million views on YouTube, and in March 2021 Firdhaus was feature on the cover of *Yazhou Zhoukan* (亞洲週刊), a widely read Sinophone international affairs newsweekly.

[12] It must be noted that, although their singing in Sinitic languages has allowed them to become transnational artists with an international fan base, this is not the main motivation behind their language choice. In fact, one must not forget that, despite hailing from a non-Sinophone country, their mother tongue is, indeed, one of the Sinitic languages spoken by the local community, be it Cantonese, Hokkien or Mandarin. In this sense, their choice to sing in Mandarin and/or Cantonese could not be compared to non-Anglophone artists who choose to use English as a way to reach an international audience. In other words, for Sinophone Malaysian artists, singing in their mother tongue is a natural choice, and the internationalization of their career that comes with it is a collateral perk.

[13] Apropos of this, see, for instance, Penny Tai's song "Blessing from the Street Corner" (街角的祝福) (2002), which starts with a reference to autumn and winter: "How many autumns / how many winters have passed / I've almost healed completely" (多少個秋/多少個冬/我幾乎快要被治癒好), two seasons unrelated to the equatorial environment of Malaysia and whose music video does not show any clear reference to anywhere.

[14] Some tunes, such as Namewee's "My Negaraku – I Love My Country" (Negarakuku – 我愛我的國家), a controversial reinterpretation of "Negaraku" ('My Country'), the national anthem of Malaysia, show a less than positive side of Malaysian society. In fact, the song is "about the failings of the Malaysian nation from the perspective of a Chinese Malaysian student who felt that he was forced to venture

tionally, music videos are, in many cases, shot in a way that the Malaysian environment becomes central to the expression of Malaysianness. In this sense, these artists are perfect examples of the Sinophone as envisioned by scholar Shih Shu-mei who states that the Chinese diaspora must have an expiration date and suggests "that cultural and political practice is always place-based. Everyone should be given a chance to become a local" (Shih, 2010, p. 45). In fact, to label the ethnic Chinese from Malaysia as a diasporic community, completely disregarding the fact that they have lived there for generations and that some have never even set foot in China, equates to consistently overlook "the ability and desire of these immigrant communities to make Malaysia their native homeland" (Kuan, 2019, p. 221).

3. Methodology

The present study employs a qualitative textual analysis method to examine the representation of Malaysian and Chinese Malaysian cultures in five selected songs by Ah Niu. The close reading is performed on tunes from his earlier production in the late nineties, recorded in Malaysia, as well as on songs from the 2000s, primarily released in Taiwan, thus showcasing the artist's continued and consistent identification with Malaysia throughout his career. The songs were chosen for their notable references to the artist's home country, and their portrayal of recognizable features of Malaysian and Chinese Malaysian culture, such as food, language, and social interaction. In this study, passages from lyrics written in Sinitic languages will be translated and analized, including (but not limited to) Standard Mandarin, Cantonese and Hokkien. In addition, one song primarily written in English was selected as well, since it prominently features both language and identity issues, which are central to the Chinese Malaysian experience.

4. Ah Niu as a Case Study

4.1. A Sinophone Voice that Sings Malaysianness

Ah Niu, whose real name is Tan Kheng Seong (陳慶祥), is undoubtedly one of the most prominent figures among Sinophone Malaysian singers and one that asserts his Malaysianness most clearly. Therefore, a close textual analysis of some of his songs will help us see how Malaysia and Malaysian identity are showcased in Sinophone pop music. Born in 1976 in the state of Penang, he is a multifaceted and truly versatile artist. He is, in fact, not only an accomplished singer since 1997, with more than a dozen full-length albums to his name, but also a talented songwriter, having penned hits for international Sinophone stars such as Taiwanese Richie Ren (任賢齊) and Hong Kong superstar Karen Mok (莫文蔚). On top of this, the 45-year-old Penangite is also an actor, having starred in several feature films, and a movie director himself, having directed successful films such as the already mentioned *Ice Kacang Puppy Love* and *The Golden Couple* (金童玉女, 2012). While it can be said that Ah Niu constantly wavers between his native Malaysia and Taiwan, thus embodying "the fluid localness" of Sinophone Malaysian identity (Hee, 2019, p. 278), the Malaysian

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to distant Taiwan for his university education because of the discrimination against independent Chinese middle schools in Malaysia within the national education system" (Keng, 2008, p. 54). Sung in Mandarin with a sprinkle of Bahasa Malaysia here and there, "My Negaraku" offers a glimpse of Malaysia from the perspective of a disillusioned ethnic Chinese Malaysian youth.

elements present in his songs—albeit heavily influenced by a de-territorialized and subsequently reterritorialized version of Chineseness—manifestly show his Malaysianness.

Ah-Niu's first full-length studio album, *City, Blue Skies* (城市·藍天), was produced in Malaysia in 1997. The second LP, *Singing Songs for You* (唱歌給你聽), was released in his home country the following year. Also, in 1998, songs from these two albums were released in Taiwan in his first international double LP titled *My First Personal Original LP* (個人第一創作專輯). While these first records contain a relatively large number of songs directly connected to Malaysia, subsequent albums feature them too.

For instance, if we focus on the titles of the songs, which generally serve as a sort of introduction much like a business card does, many of them explicit an unmistakable connection to his home country and his origins: starting with "The Wind of Sungai Puyu" (Sungai Puyu的風, 1997),[15] continuing with "Mamak Stall" (Mamak 檔, 1998), "Singing to my Native Land" (唱給故鄉聽, 1999), "How Have Things in the Village Changed, Lately?" (村子最近怎麼不一樣, 1999), "The Whole Family Sings the Durian Song" (榴槤歌兒一家唱, 1999) and "I Say I Love You with the Passion of Malaysian Weather" (用馬來西亞的天氣來說我愛你, 2006).

However, Malaysianness does not only appear in the titles of the songs, but also constitutes an important element of the lyrics, as we shall see in the following section. In other instances, such as with the ballad "The Language of Flowers" (花的語, 1999), the connection to Malaysia is stated not through the title or the lyrics but rather through Ah Niu's linguistic choice, since the song is sung in the local, Malaysian variety of the Hokkien language rather than in Standard Mandarin.

4.2. Textual Analysis of Selected Songs by Ah Niu

In this section of the study, five tunes written by Ah Niu that clearly contain elements associated with Malaysia or that convey Malaysianness will be examined. Specifically, I will focus on those aspects that I believe are unique to the Southeast Asian country, such as its gastronomy, social features, linguistic environment, and climate.

In songs such as "Mamak Stall" or "Come to my Place for Dinner" (來我家吃飯, 2008) Malaysianness is expressed through food and social interaction. The first tune is unmistakably Malaysian from the very title, since it refers to market stands, unique to Peninsular Malaysia and to neighboring Singapore, selling Indian Muslim street food and drinks. In the music video, shot somewhere in Malaysia, Ah Niu is seen strolling a typical night market while singing, dancing, and selling local delicacies, which prominently feature in the song lyrics as well. Through a close reading of the text, it becomes clear that the uniqueness of Malaysian street food is at the very core of "Mamak Stall". The opening lines immediately immerse the listener in the bustling night market atmosphere: "The busy mamak stalls / The lights that never go out / Keep the sleepless city company till the break of the day".[16] Afterwards, Ah Niu praises local specialties such as *teh tarik*, or 'pulled tea', which is sometimes considered the official drink of Malaysia (Stirn, 2022) ("Steaming hot *teh*

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[15] Sungai Puyu is a small town located in the Malaysian state of Penang.

[16] The original lyrics read as follows: "熱鬧的 Mamak 檔/ 不滅的燈光/ 陪著城市不眠到天亮. All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.

tarik / Gets pulled longer and longer");[17] *roti canai*, an Indian flatbread found in many parts of Southeast Asia usually served with curry ("We're overjoyed as we chat / Our faces glowing / And piping hot / Like a *roti canai*"),[18] and *mee goreng*, or Chinese fried noodles with an Indian twist, which are typically prepared and sold at mamak stalls ("*Mee goreng* with a fried egg / The hawker moves busily around / Our lovely and familiar mamak stall").[19] The song is interesting since, apart from showcasing a very distinctive trait of Malaysian food and social culture, it does so from a refreshing perspective: the Indian Muslim contribution to the construction of Malaysianness, rather than the Chinese elements embedded in it. Although sung in Standard Mandarin, the song shows a certain degree of linguistic hybridization, which is typical of the Malaysian environment: even though the dishes mentioned in the song do have Sinophone names as well, Ah Niu chooses to use their Bahasa Malaysia denomination, as it is customary among Sinophone Malaysians, too.

Similarly, "Come to my Place for Dinner" also articulates Malaysianness through food. In this song too, Ah Niu presents a series of dishes such as *nasi lemak* (rice cooked in coconut milk and pandan leaf), *laksa* (spicy noodle soup), *otak otak* (fish cake), *satay* (seasoned and skewed grilled meat), curry, *kaya kuih* (glutinous rice cake) and *roti canai*, and drinks such as *kopi o* (black coffee), which are quintessentially Malaysian and have been considered as part of the "Malaysian food heritage" (Omar and Omar, 2018). To sing about them, the artist uses an even more hybridized language which mixes a heavily-Malaysian-accented Mandarin with Malay. Before introducing the listener to local cuisine, Ah Niu opens with a welcome greeting in Bahasa Malaysia and Mandarin: "Tuan-Tuan dan Puan-Puan selamat datang! 歡迎來我家啦" (which can be translated as 'Ladies and Gentlemen, Welcome! Welcome to my place!'). Moreover, the Chinese word 家 (*jia*, literally 'home', 'house') in the title clearly refers to Malaysia, seen therefore as the homeland, and not to Ah Niu's private house, since all the dishes the singer mentions are mostly part of the local street food culture and are not typically eaten in a private home. In sum, I consider the song to be a celebration of Malaysian culinary culture and of the hybrid nature of Malaysian identity.

Sung with fellow Malaysian singer and composer Ah Hui (阿輝), "We Are All People" (我們一家都是人, 2000) illustrates the diversity of the local Chinese community. This song is a trilingual Sinophone duet in which, apart from standard Mandarin used by both performers, Ah Niu sings in Hokkien, his heritage language, while Ah Hui makes use of Teocheow, another Sinitic language widely spoken among Chinese Malaysians. With its simple and feel-good melody, "We are All People" proposes a common national identity that should complement ethnic ones and acts as the glue that holds the highly fragmented local ethnic Chinese community together:[20] "I am Hokkien / I am Teochew / No matter our origin / We are all Malaysians".[21] In this case as well, Malaysianness is featured prominently in the lyrics through local food ("Fans in hand and legs crossed while making *kopi* / I bite into a chili while eating *laksa*”),[22] but also through its people’s dressing customs (“Some wear pants, others wear linen [it refers to the traditional *sarong* here] / Some wear a shirt, some others don’t / And when’s too hot everyone *suka* [the Malay word for ‘to love’ or ‘to like’] to take them off”)[23] and its tropical weather:

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[17] "Teh Tarik 熱熱/ 拉得長又長".

[18] "講到興高采烈/ 臉油油發光/ 熱烘烘/ 像 Roti Canai 一樣".

[19] "Mee Goreng 加煎蛋/ 老闆忙到團團轉/ 我們可愛又熟悉 Mamak 檔".

[20] In this sense, Tan (1997) acknowledges that while ethnic Chinese in Malaysia identify themselves as *Huaren* (i.e., ethnic Chinese), "they also identify with their respective speech-groups such as Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, Teochiu, Hailam (Hainanese), Hokchiu, Kongsai, Henghua, Hockchia and others" (p. 103).

[21] "我是福建人/ 我是潮州人/ 冇管我是什么人/ 我是馬來西亞人".

> The sky has become so gloomy, and it is going to rain a lot,
> The rainwater floods every street and road.
> My clothes have been hanging to dry for three days, but they are still humid.
> So, I haven’t been able to change for the last three days.
> The rain gets heavier as it pours,
> The flood gets more and more serious.
> Loud thunders roll in the sky,
> Grandma looks for her sarong in shock.[24]

To reiterate their love for and their sense of belonging to Malaysia, the song then ends with “Malaysia boleh” a Bahasa Malaysia expression meaning ‘Malaysia can do it!’, designed for marketing purposes in the 1980s, but then generally used to celebrate the county’s achievements, since the 1990s, when “[i]t echoed from the stadium as Malaysian sportsmen upheld national honour on the field, and it rang out in response to any news that could be construed as a Malaysian triumph” (Wain, 2009, p. 183).

The language issue is also central to the portrayal of Malaysianness in Ah Niu’s mainly Anglophone song “Speak my Language” (1998). This rock tune is mainly sung in local Malaysian English (which the artist himself defines as “broken *Rojak* Market English” in the lyrics),[25] but verses in Sinitic languages (Hokkien and Mandarin) also edge their way through the text. “Speak my language” starts with a statement that resonates with many local Chinese youngsters (“I’m about to leave my family and country / To go oversea to study”) who, due to the ethnic quota system that regulates the access to higher education in Malaysia, decide to attend university abroad, especially in Taiwan.[26] In the song, Malaysian identity is not clearly defined as Ah Niu sings: “Tell me please what is my culture / Tell me please how should it be”, but again language and food are clear indicators of a distinctive Malaysian experience. Ah Niu manifestly rejects the use of a non-Sinitic language for intra-ethnic communication among Chinese Malaysians and for his cultural production: “I speak Hokkien and Mandarin / And I like eating *Wantan Mee* / Why do I have to speak other language / While I am talking to my people / Why do I have to use another language / While I am singing my song”. With his indirect references to pro-Malay policies such as the university quota system and the promotion of Bahasa Malaysia as the language of all Malaysians, regardless of their ethnicity, this is perhaps the only instance in which Ah Niu somehow contests, although in a veiled manner,

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[22] “泡杯 kopi 拔扇翘翘脚/ 吃吃 laksa 咬到辣椒仔”.

[23] “有人穿褲有人穿麻/ 有人穿衫有人冇穿衫/ 熱熱人人 suka脫衫”.

[24] “轰险天要落大雨/ 雨水淹得贵街路/ 晒衫三日晒未干/ 害我三日冇换衫// 雨啊愈落愈大/ 水啊愈淹愈满/ 雷公响得大大声/ 阿妈著惊找冇麻”.

[25] For a general overview of the English language in Malaysia, see Saraceni (2010) who states that “the more English appears to have a Malaysian character, the more it is considered corrupted, flawed, broken or a *rojak* [‘mixture’ in Malay]” (p. 132).

[26] Thornett (2019) suggested that “[t]oday over 70,000 Malaysians have attended college or university in Taiwan, and many have stayed and made a new life there”.

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the official Malay-centered policies of the Malaysian government. Additionally, as is the case with the previously analyzed lyrics, here too, unmistakably, local food seems to be an important element in the definition of who Ah Niu is: "I like to eat *roti* and *mee* / [...] / I like to listen radio and I like to eat durian".

Another song that clearly celebrates Malaysianness is "I Say I Love You with the Passion of Malaysian Weather". This romantic tune mixes modern lyrics in Mandarin with the refrain from "Rasa Sayang" ('Loving Feeling'), a traditional Malay folksong popular in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, whose text perfectly suits the general mood of the song. "I Say I love You" opens with the chorus from "Rasa Sayang", in Bahasa Malaysia: "I have a loving feeling, hey! / I have a loving feeling, hey! / See that girl in the distance / I have a loving feeling, hey!".[27] Then Ah Niu goes on: "I cannot say this red autumn leaves are not beautiful / I cannot wonder how come it drizzles in this cold winter / It's not that I am not poetic enough / It's just that in this land where I grew up there are only the wet season and the dry one",[28] and continues declaring his love for Malaysia: "My dear, sorry if I am not romantic / It's just that I love this land too much / And I've fallen in love with its weather too".[29] Additionally, the music video is essential to the construction of Malaysianness expressed through the lyrics and through the intertwining traditional folk tune. In fact, while singing, Ah Niu dances happily to the rhythm of "Rasa Sayang" as photos of Malay children, ethnic Chinese hawkers, rural and urban settings are shown on screen.

5. Conclusion

By means of a close textual reading of five songs by Sinophone Malaysian artist Ah Niu, its has been shown that singer-songwriter regularly uses them to showcase his Malaysianness and to present Malaysia, and that he does so from a mostly safe and non-confrontational standpoint, but also being subtly critical of specific government policies. This analysis demonstrates that Malaysianness is expressed through food, social interaction, linguistic and cultural diversity. In "Mamak Stall", Ah Niu presents the uniqueness of food sold at Indian Muslim market stands. Similarly, "Come to my Place for Dinner" also expresses Malaysianness through local dishes, such as *nasi lemak*, *laksa*, and so on. The duet "We Are All People" aims at promoting a common national identity that should complement ethnic ones and touches upon the thorny issue of ethnic and national languages, a topic which he addresses again in the mainly Anglophone song "Speak my language". Lastly, by combining a traditional Malay song with modern self-penned lyrics in Mandarin, in "I Say I Love You with the Passion of Malaysian Weather", Ah Niu seem to suggest that Chineseness and Malaysianness are not conflicting identities.

In this sense, I consider him to be one of the most prominent examples of how the use of Sinitic languages can convey an unquestionably Malaysian identity. Ah Niu's lyrics are not only sung in Mandarin, in other Sinitic languages such as Hokkien, in the official Bahasa Malaysia and even in English, the language of the former colonizer, but they also feature quintessentially Malaysian themes, from traditional food to linguistic environment, from dressing customs to local weather. In this sense, Ah Niu challenges the idea that the culture of Malaysia can only be expressed in the national language. He also makes his country a central, rather than peripheral, site of Sinophone cultural production.

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[27] "*Rasa sayang, hei! / Rasa sayang sayang, hei! / Hey, lihat nona jauh / Rasa sayang sayang, hei!*".

[28] "我不能說這個秋季的紅葉不夠美麗/ 我不能說這個寒冬為何會有綿綿細雨/ 不是我的情懷不夠詩情畫意/ 只是我生長的這片土地上只有雨季和旱季".

[29] "親愛的請你原諒我沒有浪漫的戀情/ 只是我太愛這片土地/ 當然也愛上了它的天氣".

Through their music, artists such as Ah Niu also seem to contest the idea that the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia still constitute a diasporic community. The notion of diaspora has often been misused to construct a “homogeneous Chinese population perpetually loyal to China” and to deny “immigrants the opportunity to become locals” (Chan, 2018, p. 9). Contrary to this idea, in his songs, the artist presents himself first and foremost, as a Malaysian, one that happens to be ethnically Chinese. His Chineseness is local-based, and his use of different Sinitic languages should be seen as evidence of his Malaysianness, rather than as loyalty to China. In this sense, Malaysia gains prominence and becomes the center. Additionally, Ah Niu’s use of Sinitic varieties that differ from standard Mandarin, the official language of mainland China, strongly asserts his Malaysian identity.

Lastly, while it is important to investigate questions of Chineseness “in the evolving cultural practices of popular music in the Sinophone world, as they are always intertwined with questions of power, cultural representation, and politics” (Lin, 2020), it is also true that the Sinophone can and must go beyond Chineseness. As this paper has shown, it is an important tool to analyze how Malaysianness (but also other local Southeast Asian identities such as Singaporeanness or Indonesianness) is constructed through the use of Sinitic languages.

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