

Weaving New Perspectives Together:
Some Reflections on Literary Studies

Edited by

María Alonso Alonso, Jeannette Bello Mota,
Alba de Béjar Muñíos and Laura Torrado Mariñas

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P U B L I S H I N G

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IS SINOPHONE MALAYSIAN LITERATURE A MINOR LITERATURE? ON HOW AND WHY NON-WESTERN TRADITIONS SHOULD ENTER THE FIELD OF LITERARY THEORY

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Introduction

The world as we know it today is undoubtedly very different from the one our parents knew some thirty years ago, and even less like the one known by our grandparents more than half a century ago. The growing interconnectedness between geographically distant and apparently unrelated places, people and situations, together with the continuous development of newer communication technologies, which seemed almost science-fiction only a couple of decades ago, make it easier for cultural products and their authors to trespass frontiers and engage in fruitful, and sometimes challenging, artistic interaction with authors and works from other cultural circumstances.

Because of this increased interconnectedness, geopolitical and imaginary borders are continuously reshaped. The pure geopolitical distinction among literatures becomes highly problematic since what were once regions become states, and vice versa.¹

¹ The latest example being provided by the referendum held in Sudan from January 9 to 15, 2011 that divided the country into two different political entities from the summer of 2011; but without going any further, one could talk about the new States and political divisions that have mushroomed in the Balkans after the fall of the former Yugoslavia.

An interesting example is that of the Sinophone Malaysian literary system. Alternatively known as Malaysian Chinese literature, Malaysian literature in Chinese or *Mahua* literature is undoubtedly the liveliest literary tradition in a Sinitic language outside of the greater China region. Seldom taken into account by Western academicians focusing on Asian studies and even less so by scholars of literary theory, the study of Sinophone Malaysian literature still lacks a strong and consistent theoretical approach. In this article, which is a small part of an on-going project, I attempt at analysing Sinophone Malaysian literature using Deleuze and Guattari's idea of *littérature mineure*, or minor literature (1975), and thus I aim at demonstrating that non-Western literary traditions can also help us clarify general theoretical concepts. Conversely, literary ideas originating from the West can be useful to shed light on these literary traditions. This is in the hope that literary studies, which to date are still too Eurocentric, will embrace non-Western literary traditions as well and will take them into the consideration they deserve.

Language(s) and geography in literature: on the concept of Sinophone

It is difficult, and by no means my intention here, to point out which criteria should be used when dealing with the categorisation of a certain literary canon or (poly)system. However, speaking about literature in terms of nationalities is, in my opinion, not completely suitable in times like these in which changes are speedy and geopolitical labels often fluctuate. For instance, what once would have been considered Yugoslavian literature is now divided into Serbian literature, or Slovenian literature, or Macedonian literature, etc. Talking about national literatures is also problematic in the opposite direction, in the sense that it is sometimes difficult to find a clear-cut point of separation among different national literatures written in the same language and forming a sort of geo-literary continuum.²

In his *Entre lo uno y lo diverso* (2005), Spanish literary theorist Claudio Guillén, clearly states that 'the study of international influences is the study of the relations not among nations and nationalities, but among

² For example, Austrian and Swiss German Literature, or Flemish and Dutch literature, just to remain within the European realm.

some languages and other languages,” when talking about internationality in literary relations.³

Considering the importance given to language over nation(ality) in the above statement, I thus insist on the categorisation of literature mainly on the basis of linguistic factor(s). Therefore, what has been known for years as Malaysian Chinese literature, in my research becomes *Sinophone* Malaysian literature.

I borrow the term Sinophone from Prof. Shih Shu-mei's theoretical and terminological approach to Sinitic-medium cultures. In fact, Shih “tries to demonstrate that the Chinese communities situated on both shores of the Pacific adhere more to linguistic and emotional values mediated through a global and visual culture than to ethnic or national references.”⁴

In an early-2004 article entitled “Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition,” professor Shih explains in a footnote her concept of the Sinophone as follows:

By ‘sinophone’ literature I mean literature written in Chinese by Chinese-speaking writers in various parts of the world outside China, as distinguished from ‘Chinese literature’—literature from China. [...] The imperative of coining the term sinophone is to contest the neglect and marginalization of literatures in Chinese published outside China and the selective, ideological, and arbitrary co-optation of these literatures in Chinese literary history. Sinophone, in a sense, is similar to anglophone and francophone in that Chinese is seen by some as a colonial language (in Taiwan). Sinophone literature, furthermore, is to be distinguished from the universalization of the Chinese written script during the premodern era in East Asia when scholars from Japan and Korea, for instance, could converse with Chinese scholars and each other in the Chinese written script by ‘pen talks’ rather than speech.⁵

In the above passage, Shih specifically defines the Sinophone as used in the expression “Sinophone literature”, but this conception is by no means limited to the literary realm in the strict sense, as she also

³ Claudio Guillén, *Entre lo uno y lo diverso. Introducción a la literatura comparada (Ayer y hoy)* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 2005), 283. The original text is in Spanish and reads as follows: “El estudio de las influencias internacionales viene a ser de las relaciones no entre naciones o nacionalidades, sino entre unas lenguas y otras.”

⁴ Emmanuel Lincot, “Shu-mei Shih, Visuality and Identity. Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific,” *China perspectives [Online]*, no. 4 (2007): <<http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/2713>> (accessed February 28, 2011).

⁵ Shu-mei Shih, “Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition,” *PMLA* 119, No.1 (2004): 29.

demonstrates in her 2007 book-length essay. In fact, it is a useful idea which can modify virtually any cultural realm whose production is (written and/or oral) language-based. Therefore, for instance, one can also talk about Sinophone cinema, Sinophone theatre and Sinophone music.

In a recent article, Shih gives another precise definition of the meaning she attributes to the Sinophone, which

usefully designates Sinitic-language literatures in various parts of the world without the assumed centrality of Chinese literature. It is multilingual in and of itself by virtue of the simple fact that the Sinitic language family consists of many different languages, and different communities tend to speak a particular Sinitic language in addition to its non-Sinitic inflections.⁶

It is evident that the Sinophone is not a mere synonym of “Chinese language”, a problematic concept in itself according to Shih, who consistently avoids it in her more recent works in favour of the expressions “Sinitic language” or “Sinitic script”, in the case of the written language. To be considered Sinophone, an author, a film director or a cultural product must not only express himself/itself or be written/performed in one of the various Sinitic languages,⁷ but he/it must also come from a geographic circumstance at the periphery of, or with no apparent direct relation to what was once known as the Middle Kingdom, i.e. China.

Hence according to Shih, one can find Sinophone culture in Taiwan, pre-1997 Hong Kong, i.e. before China regained political jurisdiction over the former British colony, in most of Southeast Asia, North America and in virtually every corner of the world where there is an ethnic Chinese community.

Still according to Shih, in order to be considered part of the Sinophone cultural realm, an alternative prerequisite to the geographic marginality in relation to China is the ethnic difference, which in many cases becomes ethnic marginality, of the artist or his cultural product in relation to the centrality of the *Han* majority within the borders of China. For instance, in this last case, one can consider ethnic Tibetan writers such as Alai or Tashi Dawa as exponents of Sinophone culture within the political borders of China.

⁶ Shu-mei Shih, “Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production,” in *Global Chinese Literature. Critical Essays*, edited by Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang (Amsterdam: Brill, 2010), 41.

⁷ Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, and all the other linguistic varieties used by ethnic Chinese people across the globe.

The Sinophone is thus a linguistic and cultural characteristic shared by geographically unrelated literatures, not dissimilar to what we find in the Anglophone realm or in the Francophone world, for example. And yet, to say that the Sinophone is a concept similar to other “-phones” (and I am thinking here of the above-mentioned Anglophone, Francophone, but also of the Hispanophone and the Lusophone) can be misleading and not entirely correct.

For instance, when talking about Anglophone literature, and the same holds true for the other “-phones”, one must not forget that one deals with (post)colonial literary systems using the language of the former coloniser as main tool of expression (Anglophone Indian literature, Anglophone Malaysian literature, Francophone Canadian literature or Lusophone African literature, just to name but a few examples). In Sinophone literature, however, this is not completely true: while some might argue that Taiwan, Tibet and the central Asian region of Xinjiang are *de facto* Chinese colonies, it must not be forgotten that many contemporary Sinophone literary systems have sprout in countries which were not politically and/or culturally colonised by China.

Another important difference between the Sinophone and the other “-phones” lies in the very same linguistic-based idea of the “-phone”. In the Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Lusophone cases, the situation of the “phone” base language is one of numerical and official dominance. For instance, English is the *de facto* official and most spoken language in the United States. French enjoys the privilege of being the only official and the most widely spoken language of Québec, and also the co-official language with English of the Federation of Canada and the province of New Brunswick. Portuguese has official character and is widely spoken in both Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe. On the other hand, the Sinitic languages on which the concept of the Sinophone rests are not official languages—legally or *de facto*—in any of the countries where most Sinophone diasporic communities reside. The only exception is Singapore, where standard Mandarin shares its co-officiality with English, Bahasa Malaysia and Tamil, but where the language is practically subordinated to English, which is the *de facto* administrative language. Mandarin is also to a certain extent ideologically subordinated to Malay, which is constitutionally designated as the only national language. In all other cases, such as Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Canada, Peru—just to name a few examples of countries with relevant ethnic Chinese populations who still interact in some sort of Sinitic speech—Sinitic languages have no official recognition, nor are they spoken by the majority of the population. They are languages that live in a position of double

marginality, as does the Sinitic-medium culture which they carry: at the margins of the host country/culture and at the periphery of the geographic centre from which the settler experience began.

Therefore, this situation of being doubly marginalised is unique to the Sinophone experience. For instance, Sinophone Malaysia, or Sinophone Canada, or Sinophone Peru represent linguistic and cultural communities at the periphery of both the Chinese cultural centre (embodied by the *Han* Chinese mainland) as well as of Malaysia, Anglophone and Francophone Canada and Peru, respectively.

Literature in Malaysia is an emblematic case of the interrelations among languages discussed by Guillén. It is also one of the most notable examples of Sinophone literature in which the Sinophone does not relate directly to the coloniser. A former British colony, Malaysia is now an independent country, where at least four literary traditions coexist. There are a Malay literature, written in the official/national language of the country, an Anglophone literature, in the language of the former coloniser, a Sinophone literature and a Tamil literature, which are a somewhat (in)direct consequence of colonisation⁸ and are written in the languages of a segment of the colonised population.

Therefore, when dealing with literature in Malaysia, we must never forget that Anglophone Malaysian literature is the post-colonial expression of a colonial past, while Sinophone Malaysian literature is a literary tradition which has broken free from its immigrant status to become the expression of a sector of the Malaysian population that, for ethnic and cultural reasons, is deeply rooted in the country, yet undeniably global.

If one focuses on these interrelations, one might discover that literary canons and/or (poly)systems seemingly worlds apart do share some characteristics and can actually become connected and mutually influence each other in some ways. In the same text, Guillén points out that it is highly improbable that “joint research on Chinese and European texts, carried out by experts in the necessary languages, will arise basic questions which are different from” those arising when dealing with two

⁸ I consider them to be an (in)direct consequence of colonisation due to the fact that the bulk of the Chinese and Indian population of present-day Malaysia descends directly from Indian labourers forcibly moved from one colony (southern India) to another (Malaya), and from people from the Chinese south. The ethnic Chinese immigrants were greatly encouraged by the British to work in the tin mines scattered along the Western coast of Peninsular Malaysia, where the majority of Chinese Malaysians still live today.

or more Western literary traditions.⁹ In other words, Guillén is telling us that the basic questions which arise from/within a literary canon have universal validity. Moreover, Guillén's view of the universality of the basic issues within any given literary tradition must be supplemented by a movement which goes in the opposite direction. As a matter of fact, peripheral literatures can also contribute to pose new questions, to question existing paradigms, and to clarify theoretical issues.

Therefore, following Guillén's suggestion of universality supplemented by my idea that peripheral literatures are not only mere raw data, I will try in the present article to apply to Sinophone Malaysian literature the notion of minor literature previously theorised by Deleuze and Guattari. Hence, I will scrutinise a geographically, culturally, linguistically and socially distant literary canon through the lens of the theory which the two French philosophers used to explain the peculiar situation of Kafka as a Jewish German-language writer in Prague.

What is a minor literature? Qu'est-ce que c'est une littérature mineure?

The idea that minor literatures exist and thus that there are also major literatures was first put forward by Deleuze and Guattari in their *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure*, first published in French in 1975 and translated into English by Dana Polan eleven years later. In chapter three of their essay the two authors clearly outline the characteristics of a so-called minor literature.

First of all, they point out that "[a] minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs in a major language."¹⁰ Deleuze and Guattari here refer to Kafka as part of a minority group (the Jews of Prague), who wrote in a majority language (German). Sinophone Malaysian literature shares this important trait with the object of study taken by the two French philosophers; in fact, Sinophone Malaysian literature is the expression of a minority group (the Chinese in Malaysia) written in (Mandarin) Chinese, a language which is everything

⁹ Guillén, 120. The original reads as follows: "No creo que la investigación conjunta de textos chinos y europeos, emprendida por conocedores de las lenguas necesarias, suscite cuestiones básicas distintas de las que hemos visto en el presente apartado."

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Trans. Dana Polan), *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16.

but minor, and in any case not one of the terms in the coloniser/colonised dichotomy.

Moreover, Deleuze and Guattari discuss three fundamental elements that shape a minor literature, which are the fact “that in it, language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization,”¹¹ “that everything in them [i.e. minor literatures] is political,”¹² and “that in it everything takes on a collective value.”¹³

Sinophone Malaysian literature and the three characteristics of a minor literature

Literary critics from Malaysia such as Lim Kien Kit (Lin Jianguo) 林建國 and Tee Kim Tong (Zhang Jinzhong) 張錦忠, have already investigated whether Sinophone Malaysian literature can be considered a minor literature and to what extent. Among the most interesting and recent contributions, one finds a recent article by Taiwan-based Chinese Malaysian scholar and creative writer Ng Kim Chew (Huang Jinshu) 黃錦樹. As noted by Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang, “[u]sing Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of Kafka as an example, Ng notes the contrasting reality of minor writers in the Chinese diaspora who lack access to a linguistic capital that is separately determined in the contexts within which they negotiate.”¹⁴

Moreover, Ng defines Sinophone literature as an

inescapably [...] Chinese ethnic minority literature (in Malaysia it is excluded from the ranks of national literature). It is a nationless ethnic tribe in the literary kingdom. In this kind of literature, language directly signifies the writer’s ethnic identity. [...] Undoubtedly, the ethnicity invoked here does not indicate a species, but signifies *culture*.¹⁵

In the above definition, one can easily perceive the marginality of Sinophone literature and also the fact that its linguistic characteristics are

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 17.

¹³ Ibid., 17.

¹⁴ Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang, “Introduction: Global Chinese Literature,” in *Global Chinese Literature. Critical Essays*, edited by Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang (Amsterdam: Brill, 2010), 10.

¹⁵ Kim Chew Ng, “Minor Sinophone literature: Diasporic Modernity’s Incomplete Journey,” in *Global Chinese Literature. Critical Essays*, edited by Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang (Amsterdam: Brill, 2010), 16.

much more related to ethnicity and culture, than to a specific geographic location. Hence, it is “inescapably Chinese” in the sense that it belongs to the ethnic Chinese cultural realm, but not to China, the geographic location normally associated to such language.

The linguistic issue leads us to the discussion of the first characteristic of a minor literature, i.e. the deterritorialisation of language, which can be easily perceived in Sinophone Malaysian literature as well. The Chinese language is not solely related to its place of origin, China. In fact, as the ties between language and territory weaken, the cultural products in that language are slowly removed from a certain specific location in place and time. Thus Sinophone literature does not refer only to Chinese literature, but it also embraces literary systems which make use of the Sinitic script, but are geo-culturally unrelated or have a weak relation to China, as is the case of Sinophone Malaysian literature. In my opinion, the deterritorialisation of the Chinese language in Sinophone Malaysian literature, however, has already given pace to its subsequent phenomenon: reterritorialisation. In the case of contemporary Sinophone Malaysia, literature is already produced in the context of the local culture and Sinophone Malaysian authors make the Chinese language their own local language. Some of the original characteristics of the language have been preserved, while others have been lost or transformed in order to match the geographically, socially and politically changed environment. Just to name but one example of this deterritorialisation-cum-reterritorialisation of the Chinese language, one could talk, as Wong Yoon Wah does, about the peculiar linguistic choices made by some writers, which respond to specific geographic factors. For example, while authors in mainland China, Taiwan or other latitudes would use the term *xizao* (洗澡) for “to take a bath/shower”, Sinophone Malaysian writers would most likely use *chongliang* (冲凉), literally meaning “to freshen up,” “to cool off the heat.” This

is simply because the language of *xizao* itself already carried associations with [the] northern China experience. In the cold weather country people spend more time and labour to take a bath. In the tropical Malaysia, people [...] usually took a quick shower in the river or by pouring water from the well with a bucket on one's body. The act was just to cool off the heat from the body. A new experience needed a new language.¹⁶

¹⁶ Yoon Wah Wong, “After Crossing the Boundary of Community: Enlarged Vision and Multi-Cultural Expression in Malaysian Chinese Writing Today,” in *Yuweishi, liulian, tiechuan yu xiangjiaoshu/ Merlion, Durian, Dredge and Rubber*

Mandarin Chinese in Malaysia and among other ethnic Chinese communities around the world thus becomes *Huayu*, a transformed and somewhat subverted version of the standard variety spoken in China where it is known as *Putonghua*.

In my opinion, the distance from the cultural centre(s)¹⁷ and the possibility of regular interaction with other languages (especially Malay and English) gives *Huayu* a certain degree of fluidity, enabling authors who express themselves in such language to experiment and invent. The situation is strikingly similar to that of the German language in Czechoslovakia during Kafka's times. *Mutatis mutandis*, what Deleuze and Guattari say about Kafka holds true for the Sinophone Malaysian writer as well: "the situation of the German language in Czechoslovakia, as a fluid language intermixed with Czech and Yiddish, will allow Kafka the possibility of invention."¹⁸

The second trait that distinguishes a minor literature is its political nature. According to Deleuze and Guattari, while in a major literature the writer is mostly concerned with the individual, "[m]inor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics."¹⁹ In other words, everything in it assumes a political valence, even when not immediately. If one tries to transfer this assumption to the specific case of Sinophone Malaysian literature, one will find out that it is not a difficult task, all considering.

Xu Wenrong 許文榮, for example, in his book-length essay published in 2004 on the poetics of political resistance in Sinophone Malaysian literature, clearly states that due to its subordination to Malay national literature,²⁰ Sinophone literature in the context of contemporary Malaysia has no choice but to assume the role of political resistance and to become a voice of protest rising from the margins. According to Xu, the political nature of Sinophone Malaysian literature manifests itself in various forms

Tree: Essays on Chinese Literature and Culture in Malaysia and Singapore (Taipei: Wenshezhe, 2007), 200.

¹⁷ I consider Sinophone Malaysian literature and culture to be at the margins of two cultural centres; one is China, the globally acknowledged cultural centre of Sinophone culture, while the other being Malay Malaysia, the core of official culture in Malaysia which is also an imaginary centre proposed and promoted by a government consistently pushing forward the agenda of Malay supremacy in every sphere of public life.

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰ Such secondary status of Sinophone Malaysian literature is a direct consequence of the subordination of the ethnic Chinese to the Malay elite.

of resistance, among which one could find the call to ethnic culture as a political capital able to resist the Malay official and hegemonic discourse. Other forms of resistance mentioned by Xu are the *ridiculisatio*n of the Other in order to glorify the Self while subverting the representation of the dominant ethnic group and its authority, and the use of a diasporic discourse. This last type of discourse can be considered thoroughly political in nature, as it not only casts doubts on the narrow-mindedness of the Malay nation-state, but also helps the writer to build his own symbolic world, distancing him from officialdom and from the dominant discourse.

In the resistant trait of Sinophone Malaysian literature mentioned by Xu, I believe there is much of the potentially revolutionary character that Deleuze and Guattari attribute to a minor literature, in which “minor no longer designates specific literatures, but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature.”²¹

The political and revolutionary character of a minor literature is inevitably connected to its third defining characteristic: its collective nature. Every author speaks individually, however, what he “says already constitutes a common action.”²² Most importantly, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the fact that minor literature comes from a minority results in relative paucity of voices that can be heard separately. Therefore, the single voice becomes the voice of the multitude, of the masses. And “because collective or national consciousness is ‘often inactive in external life and always in the process of break-down,’ literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation.”²³

The minor author thus subverts the rules of the major language and of the major culture in order to adapt it to his own purposes, which ultimately are the purposes of the collectivity on whose behalf he speaks. The author, then, produces a hybrid text that responds to the characteristics of the collectivity where major language and minor culture mingle.

Reading Sinophone Malaysian fiction as product of a minor literature

Let us now try to carry this idea of the collective value of minor literature into the realm of Sinophone literature from Malaysia. If one

²¹ Ibid., 18.

²² Ibid., 17.

²³ Ibid.

focuses on fiction solely, it should not be hard to notice how an extensive number of texts are concerned mainly with topics related to the ethnic Chinese community in Malaysia and deal more with the life of the whole collectivity than with issues affecting only the individual. Even in those cases where the individual seems to be the apparent focus of the narration, the actual core of the story lays on the ethnic group.

As an example, I will mention *Bie zai tiqi* (別再提起 Don't Mention It Again), a contemporary short story by Sinophone Malaysian writer He Shufang 賀淑芳,²⁴ first published on the arts supplement to a Taiwanese newspaper in 2002, and in an anthology of Sinophone Malaysian fiction in 2004. *Bie zai tiqi* is a brief, yet intense account of how the Taoist funeral of the narrator's uncle was put on hold and subsequently cancelled due to religious matters, twenty years before the narration. The deceased had in fact converted to Islam probably moved by practical interests and economic benefits, rather than true faith, a fact which his family was unaware of. Moreover, the man also had another family of Muslim faith, the one entitled to carry the funerary rites according to both the Islamic precepts and Malaysian religious law.

The story is marked by various points of tension. However, even in a matter as private as a funeral, such emotional strain is never portrayed as individual. It goes beyond a personal tirade or a diatribe between families. Actually, one of the two families, the Muslim one, is not even portrayed, but only mentioned indirectly. Therefore, the story takes on a collective meaning, embracing the entire Chinese Malaysian community which is depicted in direct antagonism with the dominant Malay ethnic group. As also noted by Shih Shu-mei in a recent article, this ethnic and religious antagonism takes the shape of an actual hostile interaction as “[a] physical battle ensues over the corpse of the man, with each side grabbing and holding onto one half of the corpse in a tug-of-war. At the height of this struggle the corpse defecates.”²⁵

²⁴ As happens with many younger Sinophone Malaysian writers, very little is known about He Shufang's biography. Born in 1967 in the predominantly Malay and Muslim State of Kedah, in northwestern peninsular Malaysia, she is undoubtedly one of the most appreciated Sinophone Malaysian fiction writers today. After graduating from Universiti Sains Malaysia with a B.Sc. in Chemistry, she put her degree in the drawer and became a journalist for the arts supplement to *Nanyang Siang Pau*, one of the leading Sinophone Malaysia newspapers, before moving to Taiwan to pursue postgraduate studies in Chinese literature. Her fictional works have been awarded with prizes in both Taiwan and her native Malaysia.

²⁵ Shu-mei Shih, “Against Diaspora”, 47

The story ends with a reinforced statement that in the context of Sinophone Malaysia, even an issue of mainly private concern such as a funeral ceremony can be—and normally is—invested with a political and collective worth, which are two of the three characteristics of a minor literature. The concluding passages of the text portray the Malay/Muslim officials carrying the corpse away and the ethnic Chinese extended family left with nothing but the faeces of the deceased.

Hence, in *Bie zai tiqi*, the private turns into collective, and the collective carries strong political connotations. In fact, He Shufang's fictional text can be read as an allegory of the political situation in Malaysia, where citizens are treated differently according to the ethnic community they belong to. Therefore, this reinforces the idea within the Chinese community that they live in a country that is governed through the constant use of state discrimination in favour of the Malay population, and to detriment of the Chinese and Indian ethnic communities.

On a linguistic level, we can notice the tetralinguistic model proposed by Henri Gobar and used by Deleuze and Guattari, in which language is divided into: vernacular (or maternal or territorial), vehicular, referential and mythic. He Shufang, and many other Sinophone Malaysian authors become minor through the process of writing and by using vernacular (their Sinitic geolect), vehicular (*Huayu*), referential (Standard Mandarin Chinese) and mythic (classical Chinese, oftentimes connected to religion and spirituality) language in their texts. *Huayu* is the predominant means of expression and it represents, as already mentioned above, the deterritorialisation and subsequent reterritorialisation of standard Mandarin Chinese within the Malaysian context.

Also on a linguistic note, one cannot help but attribute the extreme diversity of linguistic choices in *Bie zai tiqi* to the peripheral situation from which He Shufang writes. The author is given the “possibility of invention,”²⁶ to use Deleuze and Guattari's words, in the same way in which Kafka was.

Moreover, the linguistic fluidity of He Shufang's narration is a fine example of heteroglossia within a work of fiction, to use Bakhtin terminology, a characteristic also perceived by Ng Kim Chew in a critical essay on the short story. In fact, the author sprinkles the short story with non-Standard Mandarin expressions, such as Malay/Muslim concepts left untranslated but rendered in Chinese characters, or expressions belonging to other Sinitic languages, Cantonese being the main one.

²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, 20.

Through a close analysis of the text, one can easily perceive how the shift in language choices, which corresponds to a change in tone that goes well beyond the purely linguistic sphere, gives the narration a choral or collective dimension. To achieve this polyphonic effect, the writer employs different linguistic attitudes to convey the diversity of perspectives on the subject matter. Hence, *Bie zai tiqi* presents a

complex mixture of languages and world views that is always, except in some imagined ideal condition, dialogized, as each language is viewed from the perspective of the others. This dialogization of languages, dialogized heteroglossia, creates a complex unity, for whatever meaning language has resides neither in the intention of the speaker nor in the text but at a point between speaker or writer, listener or reader.[...] Such a dialogization of languages is always occurring, and language is always changing, as a result of what Bakhtin calls hybridization.²⁷

He Shufang's marginal position as a Sinophone author from the periphery of the Sinophone world (Malaysia) becomes her strength, allowing her freedom in language use and giving her the consciousness of representing one among Sinophone cultures as well as one among the cultures of Malaysia. The author therefore challenges both the political authority and the Mandarin Chinese canonic language, shaking the position of both. Once again, the similarities between He Shufang and Kafka's positions as minor writers are strikingly evident.

Moreover, He Shufang is a step closer to heteroglossia, when compared to the Russian novelists analysed by Bakhtin, who argued that:

[t]he resistance of a unitary, canonic language, of a national myth bolstered by a yet-unshaken unity, is still too strong for heteroglossia to relativize and decenter literary and language consciousness. This verbal-ideological decentering will occur only when a national culture loses its sealed-off and self-sufficient character, when it becomes conscious of itself as only one among other cultures and languages.²⁸

²⁷ James P. Zappen, "Mikhail Bakhtin," in *Twentieth-Century Rhetoric and Rhetoricians: Critical Studies and Sources*, edited by Michael G. Moran and Michelle Ballif. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000). <<http://www.rpi.edu/~zappenj/Bibliographies/bakhtin.htm>> (accessed September 2, 2010)

²⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin (Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), 370.

For instance, taking a close look to the text, one finds out that the Chinese spouse of the deceased, a woman who harbours strong feelings against the authorities and the Malay/Muslim culture they represent, uses the most colloquial language and, at the same time, the most irreverent expressions:

A group of religious servers in charge of keeping the joss sticks burning, the Taoist officiant and all family members sat at the two sides of the long table, listening to grandmother who stood up and imposing her figure over the assembled company took the floor: “The law holds firmly to the bollocks of the dead, but it doesn't care about the heart of the living!”²⁹

Applying the tetralinguistic model by Henri Gobard, which was also used by Deleuze and Guattari, it can be noted that the widow, who vents her anger and disappointment in front of everybody contrasts sharply with the narrator who makes use of a more sedate language, proper in its content and standard in its linguistic form. While the woman uses *Huayu*, the vehicular language, the narrator constantly swings between *Huayu* and Standard Mandarin, the referential language. Conversely, the language used by the authorities is rather composed but firm, thus showing the irremovable official position on religious and ethnic issues. Moreover, it is imbued with terms directly related to Islam (*Ala* 阿拉 Allah, *Zhenzhu* 真主 the Lord, *Hazhi* 哈芝 Hajj, and continuous and almost obsessive references to conversion to Islam *guiyi huijiao* 皈依回教, or to being a Muslim *huijiaotu* 回教徒), which charge the referential language with a certain degree of solemnity. The flip side of this coin is that one finds terms related to the Taoist religion expressed in Cantonese, which is the vernacular language (*nanwulao* 喃嘸佬 Taoist monk, *guancailao* 棺材佬 religious servers). The meaning of this linguistic choice is two-fold: firstly, it denotes a certain degree of intimacy connecting the narrator and Taoism, which in this case is the embodiment of *Chineseness*; secondly, it underlines the unofficial character of everything that directly relates to the

²⁹ He, Shufang (賀淑芳), “Bie zai tiqi [別再提起 Don't Mention It Again].” In *Bie zai tiqi: Mahua dangdai xiaoshuo xuan: 1997-2003* [別再提起: 馬華當代小說選: 1997-2003], edited by Jinshu Huang 黃錦樹 and Jinzhong Zhang 張錦忠. (Taipei: Matian, 2004), 288.

The translation is mine and this colourful passage in the original Chinese text reads as follows: “一群顧香火的棺材佬、喃嘸佬和眾家屬面對面分坐在長桌兩邊，外婆巍巍然站立起來發言：「法律抱的是死人的卵葩，就是沒顧到活人的心。」”

ethnic Chinese community. Hence, a linguistic variety which is regarded as non-standard is used to write about elements which do not enjoy official legitimacy.

The mythic language is not directly used in *Bie zai tiqi*. However, it is clearly referred to in a story within the story, which corresponds to the Taoist monk who goes to the toilet and meets with a ghost face-to-face. The reader is immediately able to connect it to the traditional ghost story, a popular subsection of Chinese vernacular literature and classical prose intended for a wider audience.

As already discussed, the political and collective worth of the text (i.e. the second and third characteristic of a minor literature) are inextricably tied together. The author can be seen as speaking on behalf of the whole Chinese Malaysian community as she affirms a stance which is subversive in its mockery and political in its ultimate meaning. For instance, the author softens the general tension through the description of a political figure, Mr. Lin, a local congressman and the symbol of officialdom. The man sits at one end of the table and unremittingly scratches a mole on his forehead, which looks both pitiful and disgusting, according to the author, and funny, I might add. Moreover, the retelling of a funeral which was not allowed to take place some twenty years before the narration is subtly denounced as being the symbol of the ethnic tensions within contemporary Malaysian society, to date still a burning political issue.

Therefore, *Bie zai tiqi* is a rather clear example of cultural product from a minor literature, as it carries in itself the three characteristics of deterritorialisation, political value and collectivity.

Conclusion: Sinophone Malaysian literature as minor literature

I used the above examples, which I gleaned from the specific case of Sinophone Malaysian literature, to demonstrate two basic matters.

The first and most evident one is the fact that Sinophone Malaysian literature, not unlike the literature of Kafka and other Czech-Jewish authors who wrote in German, is a minor literature as theorised by Deleuze and Guattari. In fact, it possesses all three defining characteristics, namely deterritorialisation, political nature and collective value. The second issue which I addressed was the fact that Western theories of/on literature are not obliged to go in pair with Western literary traditions, but they can also serve the purpose of shedding light on aspects of apparently distant or unrelated cultural systems. They can prove highly helpful when trying to systematise and criticise non-Western literary systems. Therefore,

by using the theory of a minor literature created by Deleuze and Guattari in the nineteen-seventies, I attempted here to raise a matter which is rather important, yet very often forgotten: literary theories are not a Western/Euro-American prerogative only applicable to the study of Western literary systems and traditions. The converse is also true: non-Western examples can indeed be useful to supplement, question or validate theories which were born in a thoroughly Western realm. In fact, the example of *Bie zai tiqi* by He Shufang clearly demonstrates how Deleuze and Guattari's theory of a minor literature is perfectly applicable to literary systems which do not belong to the Western/Euro-American cultural tradition. By making the influence mutual and bidirectional, these theoretical models and the literature analysed can then take on a more universal worth.

It must be always kept in mind that literatures that were once considered *exotic* and that were once looked at from an *orientalist* perspective, although such approach is far from being extinct, call for the same need of systematisation as better established literary traditions, at least in the Euro-American context. It is for this very same need of systematisation and canonisation that theories have sprout also within these *peripheral* or minor literatures themselves, and it is important that literary critics and academicians deservedly take them into consideration. However, theories of literature born locally in non-Western realms have not been analysed here since the scope of the present work is to demonstrate the applicability of Western theories to the study of non-Western literatures and conversely, the usefulness of non-Western literary works in the questioning and enrichment of Western literary theories. Nevertheless, I strongly believe and suggest that a blend of literary theories from both inside and outside a literary system will undoubtedly help us have a more thorough view of the system itself, of its internal mechanisms, and of the interrelations with other literatures.

Finally, it shall not be forgotten that the fact that many literatures blossom in peripheral/intercultural situations is a universal issue. Such universality can only be destined to grow, especially when we take into account the increasing globalisation. Therefore, it is important and of extreme topicality that we keep in mind what Deleuze and Guattari wrote more than three decades ago:

How many people today live in a language that is not their own? Or no longer, or not yet, even know their own and know poorly the major language that they are forced to serve? This is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of a minor literature, but also a problem for all of us: how to tear a minor

literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path? How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language? Kafka answers: steal the baby from its crib, walk the tightrope.³⁰

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³⁰ Ibid., 19.

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