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**Self, Other and Other-Self:  
The Representation of Identity in Contemporary Sinophone Malaysian  
Fiction**

Tesi doctoral en  
Traducció i Estudis Interculturals

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*To my parents,  
for when all hope was lost, they stubbornly clinged to life.*

*And to Pino, my brother,  
for the shoulder he lent me when all hope was lost.*

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## CHAPTER I:

### Introduction

#### I.I. How it all started

It was 2006, a late spring afternoon in Hong Kong. It was hot and unbearably humid, as it always is in spring and summer at those latitudes. A menacing gray sky was quickly turning black, a sign that a heavy thunderstorm was about to hit the bay, hence I decided to take shelter at the Joint Publishing Bookstore (*Sanlian Shudian* 三聯書店) on Queen Victoria Street, in Central. And there it was, in that oasis of peace and culture, amidst the busy streets of the downtown business district, waiting for me to pick it up: *Bie zai tiqi – Maua dangdai xiaoshuo xuan* (別再提起—馬華當代小說選 1997-2003), a collection of fictional works, edited by Tee Kim Tong (Zhang Jinzhong 張錦忠) and Ng Kim Chew (Huang Jinshu 黃錦樹), whose English subtitle read *Don't Look Back - Selected Contemporary Chinese Malaysian Stories (1997-2003)*.

Curiosity prompted me to open the green-grayish paperback book and flip through its three hundred pages, and as I started reading random sentences from the stories contained in the anthology, an unknown world, written in Sinitic script, unfolded in front of me. I was soon swallowed by those traditional Sinitic characters juxtaposed one after the other, vertical line after vertical line, and formed a refreshingly new narrative, both in topics and in the way in which the language was used. Those words had a hypnotic effect on me, and before I could even realize it, I had already left the hustle and bustle of one of Asia's most dynamic and hectic cities, and I found myself walking through the dense evergreen forest of Sarawak, on the island of Borneo, or gazing from the window at the rubber plantation which laid still in front of me, while an imaginary peninsular Malaysian house soaked in

the poignant scent of the joss-sticks burning before the image of a Chinese deity which stood calm, but proud, in its tiny shrine at the threshold. The agreeable fragrance of the incense mingled with the appetizing odour of the *laksa* - a popular spicy noodle soup typically found in Malaysia and Singapore - which was cooking in the kitchen and the strong and penetrating aroma of the freshly-picked durians - the king of fruits - which rested in the wicker basket, waiting to be eaten.

The written page was able to whisper how Chinese Malaysian people proudly spoke Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien, Mandarin or other Sinitic languages, all with a local twist, combining their mother tongue with Malay, English or other Sinitic tongues. The written language I was by then so familiar with was introducing me to a new vocabulary necessary to portray a realm I had never visited before and which spoke of minarets and Muslim funerals, of the muezzins who led - through their chant - the *salat*, the five daily prayers that the followers of Islam are required to perform. The pages depicted Indian women wrapped in their colourful saris and Malay female fruit-sellers who timidly smiled at their customers with their dark and brilliant eyes framed in their traditional *tudong*, the Malaysian female headscarf worn in accordance to Islamic *hijab*.

I devoured all of the thirteen short stories contained in the anthology line after line, and one weekend was all it took me to finish the book. In other words, this is how my *love story* with Sinophone Malaysian literature and culture began. Contrary to what the title of the collection suggested, I did *look back* and bought other works by Sinophone Malaysian authors; I regularly visited the Hong Kong Central Library in Causeway Bay where, facing the beautiful Victoria Harbour, I would read manuals on the history and society of Malaysia, textbooks on its past and present political situation, on its ethnic composition, and on the life of the ethnic Chinese who dwell in that southeast Asian Islamic country where summer is eternal and seasons are unknown.

Having received a rather traditional education in Sinological studies, I possessed a very China-centred background, which rested on the pillars of traditional Chinese culture and literature and on the modern and contemporary cultural manifestations which take place in the People's Republic of China and - to a smaller extent - in the Sinophone territories of Taiwan and Hong Kong. Therefore, my first contact with Sinophone Malaysian literature was also a momentous personal event which paved my way to the discovery and subsequent academic research in the highly rewarding interstice at the confluence of various fields of studies, such as Chinese studies, Comparative Literature, Post-colonial studies and Southeast Asian studies.

I then traded the fast-paced life in Hong Kong for a somewhat calmer and decidedly more culture-oriented sojourn in Taipei, before landing again at the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, albeit this time in Barcelona, facing another coastal city, Naples, the place where my academic life began years ago. I was always followed, in my wandering years, by my tiny personal Sinophone Malaysian library, which I have been building up, book after book, since that rainy afternoon of five years ago.

It was then only too natural that first as a Masters' student in Contemporary East Asian Studies and then as a Doctoral candidate in the Translation and Intercultural Studies programme, I would attempt at combining my previous academic background in East Asian languages and civilizations with my *love affair* with Sinitic-medium literature by Malaysian authors. Hence, as many other academic inquiries, this dissertation too is the result of a personal cultural restlessness supported by a theoretical and methodological framework acquired throughout the years, which transformed a personal interest into a piece of academic research. Therefore, Sinophone Malaysian literature would be the phrase I'd most often use to answer to "So, what's your research exactly about?", a somewhat nagging question most people who devote their working life to university research are asked

throughout their careers. While answering American literature, Russian literature, or even less studied (at least in the local context) literary systems such as Chinese literature or Japanese literature would cause looks of approval and even of admiration, the answer Sinophone Malaysian literature inevitably requires an *explanatory note* to cast the unavoidable puzzled look away from my interlocutor's face.

### **I.II. Object of study: aim and rationale**

This dissertation deals with contemporary Sinophone Malaysian literature, and more precisely with Sinitic-medium fiction written by ethnic Chinese authors from Malaysia in the last forty years. Various clarifications - which will be given in the present section - are needed in order to expand this definition of the object of the present study, the aim of this research work and its rationale.

The specific object of study of the present dissertation is constituted by two very interconnected issues both belonging to the realm of Sinophone Malaysian literature: one of a more general nature - contemporary Sinophone Malaysian fiction -, and another of a more restricted scope - the identity construction and its representation through intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic interaction in contemporary Sinophone Malaysian fiction -.

The main objectives I aim to reach with this research are to identify, investigate, systematize, and textually analyze a very specific body of Sinitic-medium fictional writings selected among a wider number of short stories (*duanpian xiaoshuo* 短篇小說) and novellas (*zhongpian xiaoshuo* 中篇小說) produced by Malaysian writers. Through this process of scrutiny, systematization, and analysis, I also aim at pinpointing a topic less researched in Sinophone Malaysian literary studies, yet very often explored by Sinophone Malaysian authors in their creative writing: how the Chinese Malaysian identity is shaped

through the representation of the interaction between the Chinese Malaysian self and other identities of similar (mainland Chinese) and different (Malay, Sarawak aboriginal, just to name a couple) ethnic backgrounds.

Several reasons justify the selection of this object of study:

- **Lack of scholarly attention to the subject.** The first reason is its already mentioned importance in the creative writing practice of a substantial group of Sinophone Malaysian writers and, on the other hand, the lack of adequate scholarly attention both in the Sinophone and Western academia.
- **Adequacy of the project.** Secondly, it must be pointed out that, on a practical level, the specific issue of identity formation through intra- and inter-ethnic interaction and its representation in a critically selected corpus of contemporary Sinophone Malaysian fiction is a *problématique* which perfectly fits the scope of a doctoral dissertation, a reason which prompted me to focus my academic inquiry on it.
- **Representativeness of the subject-matter within the Sinophone Malaysian literary system.** Moreover, I consider such issue to be highly representative of the general status of and the dynamics taking place within the contemporary Sinophone Malaysian literary system. Hence, by circumscribing my investigations to a very concrete temporal dimension, a specific subgenre within fictional writing, and to one particular and recurring issue - among many - present in the works of a large number of Sinophone Malaysian writers, I also aim at shedding some light on the current general situation of one of the most prospering, yet unheeded Sinitic-medium literatures.
- **Uniqueness of the Sinophone Malaysian literary way of representing the identity issue.** Lastly, the way in which Sinophone Malaysian creative writers deal with the identity issue is very unique in the Sinitic world, hence deserves to be thoroughly scrutinized. Whilst in the mainland Chinese case (minority ethnic groups excluded)

identity is generally not challenged and does not represent a thriving literary topic, in the case of Taiwan, the *problématique* of identity inserts into a set of wider cultural, political and diplomatic dynamics, and is a concern of national dimension. In the case of Sinophone authors writing from the West, identity and the way in which it is formed, questioned, altered, traded, dismissed or embraced becomes an exclusively personal matter. On the other hand, the Malaysian case stands out for Sinitic-medium writers from Malaysia while tackling the issue of identity formation from a personal angle, simultaneously validate it on a wider level and treat it as representative of the entire ethnic Chinese community of Malaysia.

As far as the rationale behind the selection criteria of the object of study is concerned, a few considerations are needed.

Firstly, the fact that the present dissertation will analyze attitudes towards otherness and the way in which said attitudes shape the formation and the representation of the (Chinese Malaysian) self, a concept so often tackled by contemporary Sinophone Malaysian fictional writers, automatically obliged me to only take into account those works written from the 1970s. In 1969, ethnic riots blew across the newly-born Federation of Malaysia like a fierce wind of negative change and represented a watershed in almost every aspect of Malaysian life, be it public or private. The cultural, educational, political and social policies set up by the Malaysian government and the predominantly ethnic Malay ruling elite since the early seventies should all be considered as a direct consequence of the unfortunate incidents of 1969. Hence, due to the obvious fact that Sinophone Malaysia and its cultural production too were directly affected by the changes which were taking place throughout the wider Malaysian society, and considering that such changes also had a great impact on the attitudes toward ethnic otherness, I choose to focus my research on

Sinophone literature written from the 1970s onward. The creative writings analyzed in the present dissertation span four decades, the first text - *Jun zi guxiang lai* (君自故鄉來) by Shang Wanyun (商晚筠) - having been published in the 1970s (1977), and the most recent short story – *Hun de zhuisu* (魂的追溯) by Chen Zhengxin (陳政欣) - having appeared a mere two years ago (September 2009) on the Arts supplement to the leading Sinophone Malaysian newspaper *Sinchew Jit Poh* (Xingzhou ribao 星洲日報).

Secondly, as far as literary genre selection is concerned, the decision to trim the focus of my scrutiny down to the fictional subgenres of the short story and the novella was born out of multiple reasons:

- First and foremost, due to the small size of the Sinitic-medium publishing market of Malaysia, the production and publication of lengthier fiction such as novels (*changpian xiaoshuo* 長篇小說) is not considered a viable practice by both Sinophone Malaysian writers and publishers. They most often prefer to engage in the creation and edition of shorter fictional works such as short stories or novellas which find their most natural means of circulation in local newspapers, magazines or sometimes and subsequently in personal or multi-authored collections of creative writing. Sinophone Malaysian novels are few and far between, especially when compared with the quantitative richness of shorter fictional forms, and most of them have been published outside of the Sinophone Malaysian publishing realm, mainly in Taiwan.<sup>1</sup>
- Moreover, the very issue of where Sinophone Malaysian fiction is released constitutes another reason for my choice of shorter creative writings as the focus of my research.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, notable examples of Sinophone Malaysian novels published in Taiwan are *Wo simian de changmian zhong de nanguo gongzhu* (我思念的長眠中的南國公) by Zhang Guixing (張貴興) (published in 2002), *Haidong Qing* 海東青 by Li Yongping 李永平 (published in 2006), and *Gaobie de niandai* (告別的年代) by Li Zishu (黎紫書) (published at the end of 2010).

In fact, while there is a substantial numerical imbalance between the novels published in Sinophone Malaysia and those released in Taiwan, with the latter group outnumbering by far and large the former, the situation appears to be more even when dealing with short stories and novellas. In fact, fiction in these two shorter forms is regularly released in both Malaysia and Taiwan.<sup>2</sup> Hence, by scrutinizing short stories and novellas from two different geographic circumstances, both very important in the cultural economy of Sinophone Malaysia, I aim at pinpointing and analyzing the plurality of voices which mould a unique literary system, which is typically Malaysian, yet irrefutably transnational.

- Thirdly, in spite of my position on the theoretical side which considers Sinophone Malaysian literature as an independent literary system, and by no means a sub-category or a lesser branch of the wider Chinese literary system, the influence that modern (roughly from mid-nineteenth century to the 1970s) Sinitic-medium literature from China<sup>3</sup> has exerted on its Malaysian counterpart is undeniable, and this has implication on the crucial role of the short story as a thriving subgenre in Sinitic-medium literary traditions. Therefore, the wind of modernization which blew across Chinese literature managed to cross geopolitical borders and reached the tropical shores of *Nanyang* (南洋), or the South Seas, as Southeast Asia has been traditionally known in the Chinese language, thus bringing a modern change in Malaysian literature written in Sinitic

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<sup>2</sup> While their publication in mainland China is a rather recent phenomenon, it is in all probability destined to grow at a steady pace in the foreseeable future, as an increasing number of artistically active Chinese Malaysians choose to move to China.

<sup>3</sup> I agree with the idea of Carles Prado-Fonts who considers that there is confusion on the chronological naming practice of twentieth-century Sinitic-medium literature from China and that the term *modern* often coexists with the adjective *contemporary*. Since an analysis of such terminological practices is not the main concern of the present work, I decided to fully embrace Prado-Fonts choice of applying the term *modern* to Chinese literature "roughly, from the late-Qing era (mid-nineteenth century) to the end of Maoism (1976)," and the modifier *contemporary* to that section of Chinese literature written from the end of Maoist era onward. (Prado-Fonts, 2005: 17-18)

script. As noted by Tan Junqiang among others, in China the practice and research of Western-style narrative modes started around 1919, during the May Fourth period, and in association with the influence of Western literary theory. Shorter narrative forms of creative writing were soon adopted by many Chinese authors, among which one finds Lu Xun (魯迅), the father of modern Chinese fiction, according to many.<sup>4</sup> Modern Chinese writers considered the flexibility of the point of view within the narration as one of the strong points of short story-telling. An author of fiction could thus become a fictional character, a witness, or someone in close relationship vis-à-vis the character(s) of the story (Tan, 2001: 7), thus allowing for multiple fields of vision and narrative alternatives. In my opinion, this narrative flexibility greatly influenced and prompted Sinophone Malaysian writers to embrace shorter fiction with open hearts, as I attempt to render visible in the analysis of the narrator's perspective scrutinized in chapters IV and V.

- Lastly, the choice is the result of a personal interest in prose fiction, the very same interest which led me to take *Bie zai tiqi* into my hands, and that put me on this challenging, yet highly rewarding path of academic investigation. It is true that in the specific case of Sinophone Malaysian literature, essays (*sanwen* 散文) as well as poetry (*shige* 詩歌) too touch upon the interconnected issues of the self, otherness, intra- and inter-ethnic relations, therefore could be useful to tackle the subject matter of how Chinese Malaysian identity is constructed. However, if fiction is understood not simply as a literary genre, but also and especially as a genre in life having an important cognitive function, as Jean-Marie Schaeffer does in her 2010 book-length essay *Why*

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, Tan Junqiang (2001: 27) states that: "[i]n May of 1918, Lu Xun's first short story in vernacular Chinese, 'A Madman's Diary,'" was published in *New Youth*. Its publication opened up a new chapter in the history of Chinese fiction and laid the foundation for all modern Chinese literature."

*Fiction?*, then creative fiction becomes an important tool at the disposal of the literary scholar who can use it to investigate issues that go beyond the purely literary field. Nevertheless, one should always bear in mind that after all, a work of fiction will always remain fictional, no matter how faithful it is to the reality it depicts.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is important that such works never be handled as sociological treatises or read with the eye of an anthropologist.

Hence, in light of the aspects analyzed until now, I consider shorter narrative forms to be the feather in Sinophone Malaysian fiction's cap, and I decided to focus on these forms, leaving aside longer fictional practices (novels) or alternative, newer or spoken forms of fiction such as graphic novels, films and plays, which could however represent an interesting future research line.

### **I.III. State of the field**

Sinophone Malaysian literature is a literary system completely unknown among non-Sinophone reading circles. Moreover, its potential as a research object has not been fully explored yet. Hence, this dissertation is also an attempt at introducing this thriving literary tradition as a research object in Western academia, especially in the European context.

As far as translations of Sinophone literary writings into Western languages are concerned, to date only two Sinophone Malaysian works of creative writing have been published in the Euro-American context and in English translation, namely *Retribution: The Jiling Chronicles* (2003), an abridged edition by veteran translator Howard Goldblatt

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<sup>5</sup> According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, the etymology of the word *fiction* is the following: "late Middle English (in the sense 'invented statement'): via Old French from Latin *factio(n-)*, from *ingere* 'form, contrive'." (<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/fiction>)

and Sylvia Li-chun Lin of *Jiling Chunqiu* (吉陵春秋) an episodic novel by Li Yongping (李永平) first published in Taiwan in 1989 and saluted as "a literary event of real moment for English readers of Chinese literature" (Chen, 2006), and *My South Seas Sleeping Beauty: A Tale of Memory and Longing* (2007), a brilliant English-language rendition by Valerie Jaffee of Zhang Guixing (張貴興)'s *Wo simian de changmian zhong de nanzhu gongzhu* (我思念的長眠中的南國公).<sup>6</sup>

As far as scholarly works are concerned, the bulk of the research on Sinophone Malaysian literature - which still remains extremely meagre and unjustly marginalized - is produced in Asia, especially in Sinophone Malaysia and in Taiwan, with mainland Chinese institutions timidly showing some interest in the topic.

Chinese Malaysian literary theorists and critics attached to universities and research centres in Taiwan such as Tee Kim Tong, Lim Kien Ket (Lin Jianguo 林建國), Ng Kim Chew, and Chong Yee Voon (Zhong Yiwen 鍾怡雯) dedicate many of their scholarly publications to theoretical issues ranging - for instance - from the problematic of naming the object which I refer to as *Sinophone Malaysian literature*, to the position of Sinitic-medium production by Malaysian writers within the Sinophone and the Malaysian literary polysystems, to the problematic relationship between Sinophone Malaysian literature and Chinese literature.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Both novels were made available to an international Anglophone readership thanks to Columbia University Press which, however, misleadingly released both translations in its *Modern Chinese Literature from Taiwan* series. While both *Jiling Chunqiu* and *Wo simian de changmian zhong de nanguo gongzhu* were published in Taiwan and are creative writings by Sinophone Taiwan-based authors, I insist that justice be rendered to the Sinophone Malaysian status of the writers and the similarly unequivocal Sinophone Malaysian dimension of their works. Hence, whilst the novels' inclusion in a series characterized by a very evident geographic focus and devoted to literature from Taiwan might have responded to a precise and easier editorial and marketing strategy, it completely annihilated the possibility of non-specialized readership becoming acquainted with Sinophone Malaysian literature for what it is: a thriving, independent literary system not subject to other Sinitic-medium literary traditions.

<sup>7</sup> Among the works by this group of literary critics and theorists one can mention, among the most

On the other hand, a numerically significant portion of academic research carried out in Malaysia mostly by Chinese Malaysian scholars such as Xu Wenrong (許文榮), Lim Choon Bee (林春美), among others, tends to focus on very specific thematic aspects or temporal dimensions of Sinophone Malaysian literature.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the present dissertation joins a very slender body of scholarly research on Sinophone Malaysian literature carried out in non-Sinitic languages and in non-Asian academic institutions. In the field of Sinophone Malaysian literature, most of the very few scholarly investigations in European languages are mainly carried out in the United States, Europe lagging decidedly behind. This is the first doctoral-level dissertation on the topic to be developed in the Iberian context.

Since this inquiry attempts to tackle both theoretical aspects of Sinophone Malaysian literature and rather specific issues, I personally consider the present dissertation to be somehow complementary to *Not Made in China: Inventing Local Identities in Malaysian Chinese Fiction*, the dissertation by American scholar Alison Groppe presented in 2006 at Harvard University. A few words on the similarities and differences between the present Groppe's work and mine are due. Despite taking very different theoretical postulates and methodological approaches as starting points of our respective dissertations, both Groppe and I investigate the construction and representation of Chinese Malaysian identity through the scrutiny of fictional works. However, Groppe does so by analyzing Sinophone

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representative ones, Ng Kim Chew's *Mahua wenxue yu Zhongguoxing* (馬華文學與中國性), a volume exploring the intense and problematic relations between Sinophone Malaysian literature and *Chineseness*, and Chong Yee Voon's *Mahua wenxueshi yu langman chuantong* (馬華文學史與浪漫傳統), a book-length essay which scrutinizes Sinophone Malaysian literature diachronically and through the lens of romanticism (*langman zhuyi* 浪漫主義).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Xu is the author of, among others, *Nanyang xuanhua* (南洋喧嘩) a volume on the poetics of political resistance in Sinophone Malaysian literature, and of *Jimu Nanfang: Mahua Wenhua yu Mahua wenxue huayu* (極目南方- 馬華文化與馬華文學話語), a collection of more general essays on a few aspects of Sinophone Malaysian culture and literature, while Lim authored *Xingbie yu bentu* (性別與本土) a book-length collection of essays devoted to Sinophone Malaysian literature analyzed from a gender perspective. All three books were published in Malaysia.

Malaysian authors' posture vis-à-vis the Chinese literary tradition, their use of nostalgia and collective memory of popular history, thus not touching upon how the identity of the self is formed (or "invented", using her terminology) in relation to otherness.

On the theoretical and methodological differences between the two research works, I consider it important to explicitly state that whilst acknowledging the uniqueness of the subject-matter in question, Groppe still posits it within the territory of "*Chinese* literary and cultural studies" (Groppe, 2006: iv. Italics are mine.) Conversely, in spite of recognizing the obvious interactions between Sinophone Malaysian literature and Sinitic-medium literary production from other spatial and temporal circumstances, my main theoretical concern is to underline the importance of considering it as a cognate, but independent and non-subordinate literary system; hence my use of the theory of the Sinophone as my chief tool of scrutiny.

Methodology-wise, the two dissertations differ in the way the creative writings taken as case studies are analyzed: while Groppe brilliantly carries out a more general study of the various texts chosen to support her thesis, I opt to perform a more text-based scrutiny of the fictional writings chosen from a larger corpus which I have personally built up. Therefore, I choose to mainly use the writers' own words to support the research questions of the present dissertation.

#### **I.IV. Research hypothesis**

The present dissertation departs from the general hypothesis that due to the historical, political and especially social circumstances with which Sinophone Malaysian writers - as Malaysian citizens - are regularly confronted, a significant portion of Sinophone Malaysian literature is concerned with the representation of Chinese Malaysian identity in relation with the other, a relation which can be intra- or inter-ethnic. In fact, the Chinese Malaysian

community lives caught in between two (or more) ethnic, linguistic, cultural and social realms: the Sinitic and the Malay(sian), therefore the intra-ethnic interaction takes the form of social relations between the ethnic Chinese from Malaysia and those from other geographic locales (mainly mainland China), while exchanges (which can be amicable or not) among different ethnic groups are the norm in a country like Malaysia, characterized by a high degree of ethnic diversity.

In order to clarify the general hypothesis a step further, the introduction of several sub-hypotheses and/or related observations is needed:

- There is an evident parallelism between the identity status of the Sinophone Malaysian literary system and the *problématique* of the Chinese Malaysian community. In fact, one could say that Sinophone Malaysian literature, not dissimilarly from the Chinese Malaysian community itself, grounds its identity on a double negation: it is not half-Chinese, nor half-Malaysian, a fact which places it in a position of double marginalization.
- The identity problematic of "who am I / who are we" also translates in the realm of literary criticism and theory, hence the great concern of Sinophone Malaysian creative writers and critics with the status and identity of Sinophone Malaysian literature itself.
- Also on a theoretical note, Malay(sian) literary theories which consider that only those works written in Malay, the national language, are to be considered part of the Malaysian literary system are limited and problematic, as they tend to marginalize local literatures in other languages by completely disregarding their quintessentially Malaysian dimension.
- Chinese Malaysian identity is primarily shaped through the ways in which Chinese Malaysians see and are seen by the other. In fact, as Stuart Hall puts it,

identity is actually something formed through unconscious processes over

time [...] is always 'in process', always 'being formed'. [...] Identity arises, not so much from the fullness of identity which is already inside us as individuals, but from a *lack* of wholeness which is 'filled' from *outside us*, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be seen by *others*.  
(Hall, 1995)

Thus, I theorize that different others give birth to different selves (or identities).

- For the Chinese Malaysian community, one interaction with otherness takes the shape of interplay with people from a common ethnic background, but a different geographic location (intra-ethnic relations), i.e. as already mentioned above, it is constructed through mutual exchanges with other Chinese people from outside of Malaysia (the vast majority of them being from mainland China).
- For the Chinese Malaysian community, interaction with otherness takes the form of exchanges with people from a common locale, but a different ethnic background (inter-ethnic relations), i.e. Malaysians belonging to other ethnic groups, such as the Malay or the aboriginal people (known as *Orang Asli*)<sup>9</sup> of Peninsular Malaysia, or the different Austronesian groups of East Malaysia.
- Everyday Chinese Malaysian identity is absolutely not monolithic, or static. It is, on the contrary, rather dynamic, very fluid, and extremely situational, as the different approaches analyzed in chapters IV (Chinese Malaysian identity constructed vis-à-vis mainland Chinese identity) and V (Chinese Malaysian identity shaped through interaction with other local ethnic identities) will corroborate.

#### **I.V. Methodological framework**

The methodological framework within which the present research was carried out is double. Firstly, since the beginning of my research, it has always been very clear that the

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<sup>9</sup> The *Orang Asli* are considered to be the original inhabitants of the Malay peninsula, hence their name which literally means "aboriginal people".

present dissertation is ascribable predominantly to the realm of literary studies, hence the methodological framework within which it was developed clearly belong to that field of study. Therefore, textual analyses will be predominant, especially in chapters IV and V.

Secondly, despite never forgetting that the research which led to the present dissertation is primarily of a literary nature, thus belongs first and foremost to the field of literary studies and criticism, I also attempt to tackle the sociological and anthropological question of Chinese Malaysian identity formation and self-awareness from the micro-level angle called for by many scholars, among which we find Lee Yok Fee. Hence, in the present work I also pay attention to the social aspects of Sinophone/Chinese Malaysia as they are shaped and represented in the fictional works of contemporary Sinophone Malaysian authors. As a matter of fact, considering that in Malaysia, ethnic interaction is a daily phenomenon, which affects Malaysians of every background and from every walk of life, I believe it to be – in all likelihood – the most representative aspect of contemporary Malaysian society of which, it must always be born in mind, Sinophone/Chinese Malaysia constitutes an essential section. Agreeing with Lee Yok Fee, I too believe that to date in the studies of Chinese Malaysian identity,

most writings are based on macro-level analysis, which mainly focus on social structures, but not the social actors. The characteristics of the social actors are always assumed as fixed, passive and homogeneous. The abilities, creativity and roles of social actors are often overlooked. Ironically, there are very few micro-level studies conducted to understand the formation of Chinese identity in Malaysia.  
(Lee, 2009: 21-22)

Therefore, one of the methodological objectives of the present work is to look into the Chinese Malaysian identity issue from the more private, personal approach taken by each one of the writers selected as case studies in point.

In order to address the research *problématique* of the present doctoral project in the

most effective possible manner, I have been moving regularly between the theoretical field and the more practical realms of data collection, corpus building, and textual analysis. As it will become clear in the following chapters, the theoretical apparatus used - which rests on the innovative theory of the Sinophone as a research tool - is a means to effectively analyze the creative writings chosen as case studies and, conversely, the fictional works selected are often used as examples to corroborate the theoretical hypotheses. Hence, the present research could be ideally divided into two interconnected parts, a theoretical one and a textual one, which only gain a meaningful *raison d'être* through their mutual interaction.

As briefly mentioned in the previous paragraph, I opt to tackle the object of the present study through the theoretical lens of the Sinophone, which I consider the most suitable to scrutinize Sinitic-medium cultural production from Malaysia and from all other geographies unrelated to China. The adoption of the Sinophone as the theoretical framework within which I carried out my research has been made only after the theory itself has been analyzed, *dissected*, questioned and compared with other theoretical models. Therefore, the use of the concept of the Sinophone as the basis on which my investigation rests is what sets the present dissertation apart from most other research works devoted to non China-based Sinitic-medium cultural production. Nevertheless, theories become meaningful only when used as tentative insights into certain facts or phenomena, i.e. only when they are put into practice. Hence, the Sinophone Malaysian texts presented in this work become a tool to put the theory of the Sinophone to test and to validate its applicability to the specific case of Sinitic-medium fictional works from Malaysia.

The different phases that were followed in the production of the present dissertation can be summarized as follows:

- Identification and definition of the object of study.
- Scrutiny of the historical, political, social and cultural contexts in which Sinophone

Malaysian literature is produced.

- Creation of a theoretical framework which is adequate to investigate the research context and *problématique* of this study.
- Creation of a corpus of Sinophone Malaysian shorter fiction writings specifically dealing with the object of this dissertation.
- Analysis of the texts contained in the corpus and translation into English of fragments of varying length.

A very important, challenging, yet rewarding phase of the doctoral research process was the creation of a literary corpus from which I then drew the fictional works analyzed in this dissertation. Sinophone Malaysian literature can be considered a non-*canonized* literary system, a condition which sets it apart from other Sinitic-medium literatures such as Chinese literature, Taiwanese literature and Hong Kong Literature. This situation is ascribable to the paucity of general literary manuals which give an extensive vision (both chronological and theme-based) of the Sinophone Malaysian literary tradition, with the notable exception of a few chronological anthologies and literary histories, such as those compiled by Fang Xiu 方修, especially in the 1980s. Therefore, building a corpus of fictional texts proved to be the most significant task I had to undertake during the entire research process.

Once the boundaries of subgenre (shorter fictional works), time (from the seventies onward), and topic (works which ventured in the scrutiny of identity through ethnic relations) were prescribed, there were then a few other criteria I attempted to meet in order to come up with the most representative possible corpus. Hence, I made sure that the texts selected were:

- **chronologically balanced** (i.e. that no decade from the 1970s to date was left

unrepresented);

- **geographically even** (due to the differences in ethnic composition and relations between Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia, I chose texts by both Peninsular and East Malaysian writers. Additionally, due to the important role played by Taiwan-based writers in the blooming and development of Sinophone Malaysian literature, I made sure that texts by authors based in Malaysia and in Taiwan were represented);
- **gender representative** (despite the present dissertation not falling within the field of gender studies, I made certain to include works by both male and female authors. However, scrutinizing the representation of Chinese Malaysian identity taking into account the gender of the writer could be an interesting research line to explore in the future).

It must be noted here that, as the corpus was being created, I became gradually aware of the fact that texts tackling the identity issue through depiction of inter-ethnic relations outnumbered by far and large those focusing on intra-ethnic dynamics. Hence the numerical disparity between the two analytical chapters.

As far as sources are concerned, the texts are chosen from anthologies such as *Bie zai tiqi*, from other multi-authored and mono-authored collections published in Malaysia and Taiwan. However, the most invaluable sources for Sinophone Malaysian shorter fiction remain the supplements to Malaysian national newspapers such as the *Sinchew Jit Poh*, the *Nanyang Siang Pau* (Nanyang Shangbao 南洋商報), and the *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* (Guanghua Ribao 光華日報) which publish works of Sinophone Malaysian literature on a regular (normally weekly) basis. Moreover, *Chao Foon* (Jiaofeng 蕉風) the most important Sinophone Malaysian literary magazine, regularly published since 1955 until today, with only a short hiatus between 1999 and 2002, also publishes fictional works on a regular basis.

All the above-mentioned sources were consulted throughout the research process.

Trips to Malaysia and Taiwan were necessary, in order to collect both primary and secondary sources which are unavailable in most university and specialized libraries in Europe. A six-month stay at the Mahua Literature Centre (*Mahua wenxueguan* 馬華文學館), attached to Southern College (*Nanfang Xueyuan* 南方學院, or *Kolej Selatan*, as per official Malay name), a predominantly Chinese and Sinophone institution of higher learning in Johor Baru, Malaysia, proved to be especially fruitful. The Mahua Literature Centre, which officially opened in 1998, is undoubtedly the most complete resource centre aimed at collecting any type of materials related to Sinophone Malaysian literature and culture. With more than twenty thousand books (the oldest being a publication from 1930), more than eight thousand journal and magazine issues, and more than eighty-five thousand newspaper cuts on Sinophone Malaysian literature, the centre is a compulsory destination for any scholar of Sinophone Malaysian literature.

At the Mahua Literature Centre, and thanks to its links with other academic institutions in Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan, not only was I able to gather invaluable written resources, but I could also supplement them with personal conversations and interviews with Sinophone Malaysian creative writers (Chen Zhengxin, among others), and literary scholars. Such conversations proved to be of the utmost importance, especially in the textual analysis phase following the corpus-building stage, as they provided me with the necessary local and personal perspective on the texts and the situations they portrayed, which is oftentimes impossible to gather only from the written page. Subsequently, the exchanges of thoughts and opinions, together with the theoretical background and the secondary sources on Sinophone Malaysian literature were used as the main tools in the interpretative analysis of the texts.

## **I.VI. Structure of the dissertation**

According to the objectives proposed at the beginning of the research process and in order to present them in the most accurate and clear manner, the present dissertation is divided into six chapters. The present introductory chapter is followed by one chapter of contextualization (II), a theoretical one (III), two chapters devoted to textual analysis (IV and V), and one dedicated to concluding remarks (VI).

Chapter II is intended as an analytical scrutiny of the historical, social, political and cultural contexts in which the ethnic Chinese community of Malaysia was born and flourished. In so doing, I thus aim at outlining a more thorough comprehension of both the theoretical and the analytical sections of this dissertation.

The following chapter (III) is devoted to the investigation, analysis, and *reprocessing* of the theoretical perspectives on the object of study of the present research. One section is dedicated to the genesis, the usage and the *dissection* of the Sinophone as a theoretical framework. Once the concept has been thoroughly analyzed, in the subsequent section, I will apply it to the specific case of Sinitic-medium Malaysian literature, by scrutinizing the Sinophone dimension of the literary system in question. Afterwards, the Malaysian aspect of Sinophone Malaysian literature will be put under inquiry. Lastly, an external theoretical perspective (the concept of a *littérature mineure* by Deleuze and Guattari) will be brought in the discussion and applied to the Sinophone Malaysian case, so as to demonstrate that literary theories born in the West and for the scrutiny of Western literatures, can be effectively applied to - and find themselves strengthened by - the research of non-Western literary systems.

Some of the working hypotheses on which this research rests are then put to test through the interpretative analysis of selected short stories and novellas. Hence, Chapter IV

opens the textual analytical part of the dissertation, as it is dedicated to the in-depth analysis of three fictional works by Shang Wanyun, Li Kaixuan (李開璇), and Chen Zhengxin which deal with the formation of the Chinese Malaysian identity through the interaction of the Chinese Malaysian self with ethnic Chinese from other geographies (and which I name the *other-self*).

Similarly, since I hypothesize that interaction with ethnic otherness is a crucial factor in the construction of Chinese Malaysian identity, in Chapter V I will gather evidence to support my assumption through the analysis of six fictional texts (among which one finds works by Ng Kim Chew and Zhang Guixing, for instance) centred on intra-ethnic relations (i.e. the relation between the self and the other).

Lastly, Chapter VI hosts the concluding remarks and future research perspectives, and is followed by a bibliographical section of the works cited and used throughout my research process.

### **I.VII. Terminological and formal considerations**

The present research work was carried out amid ongoing debates on how the object of study should be named. However, for clarity's sake, I adopted the following naming conventions:

- Throughout the dissertation, I opt for the expression *Sinophone Malaysian Literature*, rather than the more widely-used *Malaysian Chinese Literature*, as I consider the former to be the most appropriate to convey my view of the study object of the present dissertation as an independent literary system. In direct citations, I keep the naming practice of the author cited. Hence, expressions such as *Chinese Malaysian Literature*, *Mahua Literature*, *Huama Literature*, *Malaysian Literature in Chinese*, apart from the

aforementioned two, may appear in this work.

- As far as ethnic Chinese people from Malaysia are concerned, I decided to consistently refer to them as *Chinese Malaysians* (or alternatively, and to avoid unnecessary repetitions, as *ethnic Chinese from Malaysia*), preferring such expression over the more widely-accepted *Malaysian Chinese*. My choice is due to the fact that most - if not all - of them (authors, literary critics, readership and Chinese Malaysians in general) emphasize their being Malaysian citizens who happen to be of ethnic Chinese origin. Hence, *Chinese* as a modifier of the noun *Malaysian* precedes it in the same way the modifier precedes the noun in the more universally-accepted naming practices of *Chinese American*, and *Asian American*, for instance. The also available hyphenated options *Malaysian-Chinese* and/or *Chinese-Malaysians* have been discarded *tout-court*, since they tend to graphically unite two identity dimensions which are not necessarily blended together in the actual practice of Chinese Malaysian life.
- When referring to Sinitic-medium Malaysian authors, I use the expression *Sinophone Malaysian*, in order to differentiate them from Malaysian authors of ethnic Chinese background who write in other languages (English and/or Malay), and to emphasize a linguistic diversity which the term *Chinese* (referred to the language) fails to convey. Moreover, when there is a need to emphasize such multiplicity of languages and their distance from both the place where they originated and from standardized Mandarin Chinese, the term *Sinitic*, rather than *Chinese* is used.

Other conventions adopted are the following:

- *Pinyin* is the most widely-used system to transcribe Chinese characters (based on their Mandarin Chinese pronunciation) into the Roman alphabet, hence proper names of Sinophone authors and literary critics are given in *pinyin* first, followed by the corresponding Sinitic script. However, since many Chinese Malaysians' official name

in Latin script is based on the phonetics of other Sinitic languages (for instance, Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien), the first time they are mentioned, their names appear in the following format: official name (*pinyin* transcription + Chinese characters). Subsequently, only their official name, or the *pinyin* romanization (if the two coincide, or if the first is unavailable/unknown to me) will be used.

- Sinophone Malaysian newspapers, magazines and other publications normally possess a romanized name which does not necessarily follow the transcription rules of the *pinyin* system. Hence, the first time they are mentioned the following format is used: official romanized name (*pinyin* transcription + Chinese characters). From the second time onward, only their official name in Latin script will be used.
- Titles of books, short stories, novellas and articles originally written in a Sinitic language will be given in the *pinyin*-(Chinese-character) format the first time they appear, and in the *pinyin*-only format when mentioned again.
- Quotations are always given in their English translation (a published translation in the few cases when it was available, my own version in all other cases). It must be noted that the translation of all scholarly essays originally written in Chinese and of all excerpts of Sinophone Malaysian fiction quoted in this work have been carried out by me and are presented in the body of the dissertation with the text in the original language given in footnotes, or in parenthesis if the quotation is one line or shorter. All quotations are followed by the corresponding reference in the (author surname, date: page) format.

## **CHAPTER II:**

### **"So, do people in Malaysia speak Chinese?"**

#### **The Chinese Community in Malaysia**

##### **II.I. Introduction**

Many times, I receive puzzled looks when I attempt to explain the subject matter of my research to people within and outside of the academic environment. Therefore, more often than not, my explanations require a introductory clarification not only over the current situation of Sinophone Malaysian literature and its status, but also on the historical, social, political and cultural contexts in which the ethnic Chinese community of Malaysia was born and flourished, in spite of the challenges and setbacks that it had (and to a certain extent still has) to face.

Unlike other East and Southeast Asian countries, Malaysia remains rather unknown to most people in the West. For instance, to the average European person, it does not have the tourist appeal of Thailand, despite its also pristine beaches, nor has it the mesmerizing economic power of China, in spite of it being considered by many as the fifth Asian tiger, due to its aggressive and well-managed economy. Nor has Malaysia the fame of a technologically advanced country of the likes of Japan, South Korea or Taiwan, for instance, despite its locally developed high-tech products constituting more than half of the country's total manufactured exports. On a negative note, social and ethnic frictions have been present in modern and contemporary Malaysia, however, they never made international headlines like the aggressions against the ethnic Chinese community that swept the neighbouring country of Indonesia in the late nineties. In other words, Malaysia still remains a possible target of exoticizing attitudes connected more to a fictionalized vision of

the country than to its real condition. For instance, the fictional works of Joseph Conrad and Emilio Salgari and the image of a romantic tropical backwater will come to many people's mind when the name Malaysia is mentioned.

As pointed out by Milton Osborne, author and historian on Asian issues:

when dealing with the unknown or little-known [...] there is a familiar readiness to discount the achievements of unfamiliar civilizations by comparison with the presumed importance of our own society and cultural traditions. This may be less of a feature of life today than it was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the exploring Europeans and their successors, the administrators, missionaries, planters and men of commerce, had not the slightest doubt about their own superiority. Nonetheless, the problem remains today as Southeast Asia is still an unfamiliar area to most who live outside its boundaries.  
(Osborne, 2010: 2)

Therefore, I believe that it is important to contextualize Sinophone Malaysian literature within the environment of the linguistic and ethnic community by which it is produced in the broader context of Malaysian history, society, politics and culture.

The relatively small number of international publications (both scholarly and popular) on Southeast Asian in general, and on Malaysia in particular, as well as the paucity of higher education courses aimed at expanding and deepening knowledge of the region/country also make it indispensable that any research work devoted in full on in part to Southeast Asian/Malaysian themes in the humanities or in the social sciences dedicates a section to place the topic in its adequate general context.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In the European context, i.e. the one in which this dissertation is produced, studies on various Southeast Asian topics in the humanities and the social sciences are rather uncommon, especially if compared to studies and research output on other world regions (East Asia, for instance). Notable exceptions are the French INALCO (Institut National de Langues et Civilisations Orientales) and the University of Paris VII, both having a rather long tradition in the study of continental Southeast Asia (Vietnam, in particular and the historical and colonial region of Indochina); the British SOAS (School of Asian and African Studies), affiliated to the University of London, with its department of South East Asia, which according to the School's website is "the only department in a UK university which is dedicated to the study of South East Asia" and whose "teaching and research focuses on five of the major languages of the region - Burmese, Indonesian/Malay, Thai, Vietnamese and Khmer - and in their literatures, cinemas and associated cultures" (<http://www.soas.ac.uk/sea/>); and the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, where graduate and postgraduate courses on the region are offered, and training in the research of Southeast Asian themes is also carried out, especially in the framework of the *Master Talen en culturen van Indonesië* (Master's degree in

Hence, each one of the three following sections of the present chapter are aimed at providing a concise, but necessary and appropriate contextualization of Sinophone Malaysian literature in its historical (II.II), social and political (II.III) and cultural (II.IV) dimensions.

## **II.II. Historical context**

### **II.II.1. Malaysia is born!**

Late one night last week the searchlights illuminating the spacious cricket ground of sleepy Kuala Lumpur (pop. 300,000) suddenly went out. Two minutes later, precisely at midnight, the lights flashed on again, and as a crowd of 50,000 voices shouted *Merdeka* (freedom), the Union Jack slowly fluttered down to be replaced by a red, white and blue flag very like that of the U.S., save that instead of 48 stars it bore the single star and crescent of Islam. After 83 years of British rule, Malaya was an independent nation.  
(Time Magazine, 1957)

On September 9, 1957, the American Magazine *Time* announced the end of British colonial rule over and subsequent independence of Malaya, the peninsular section of modern-day Malaysia, an historic event which had taken place on August 31, 1957.

A few years later in 1961, Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of the newly-independent Federation of Malaya, brought up the idea of forming a larger political entity, also federal in nature, encompassing the entire Malay world that had been or still was under British colonial influence, namely Brunei, Malaya, Sabah (by then known as British North Borneo, and a crown colony of Great Britain), Sarawak, and Singapore. The

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languages and cultures of Indonesia, a former colony of the Netherlands), "an intensive study of Southeast Asia—with a strong focus on Indonesia—which emphasises particular disciplines within the humanities and social sciences." (<http://www.hum.leidenuniv.nl/indonesisch/aanstaande-studenten/ma-tci.html>)

Moreover, only since 1992, there operates a European Association for Southeast Asian studies (EuroSEAS), "an international initiative to foster scholarly cooperation within Europe in the field of Southeast Asian studies." (<http://www.euroseas.org/platform/en>)

In the Spanish context, an exception is the Barcelona-based Pompeu Fabra University and its Department of Humanities, where research and some teaching mainly on the history and international relations of the former Spanish colony of the Philippines is carried out within the framework of the activities of the Escola d'Estudis de l'Àsia Oriental (School of East Asian Studies).

idea, however, was not new and the British colonial administration and various local groups too had mooted the idea of a *Greater Indonesia* or *Greater Malaysia*, mainly in a preoccupied attempt to incorporate Singapore which - still a British colony, but with self-governing status - "had become increasingly dominated by the communists and other radical groups" (Watson Andaya, 1982: 270).

After a couple of years of intense negotiations among the interested territories, it was agreed upon that on August 31, 1963, the new Federation of Malaysia was to come into being, and that it would consist of the above-mentioned regions, minus the Sultanate of Brunei, which had withdrawn its interest in joining the new political entity due to strenuous objection from the *Parti Rakyat Brunei* (Brunei People's Party) and an important segment of the Bruneian population. However, due to fierce opposition of Indonesia (fearful of a growing importance of the role of Malaya in the Southeast Asian region) and the Philippines (claiming the territory of Sabah), the birth of Malaysia was only proclaimed two weeks later, on September 16, 1963. Due to increasingly preoccupying racial tensions, caused by federal discrimination against the Chinese (who formed the majority of the population in Singapore) and other non-Malay ethnic groups, and to an already difficult situation between Malaysia and Indonesia, which had resulted in the bombing of the Singapore's MacDonald House by two Indonesian saboteurs in 1965, Tunku Abdul Rahman took the decision to expel Singapore from the federation. The decision was unanimously backed up by the parliament of Malaysia. On that same day, August 9, 1965, Lee Kwan Yew proclaimed the birth of the Republic of Singapore. Hence, the Federation of Malaysia as we know it today was born too.

### **II.II.2. Chinese migration to Malay(sia)**

As most modern, postcolonial nation-states, Malaysia too is an ethnically and culturally

diverse geopolitical entity, in which people of distinct ethnicities share a common territory.

Using the description by William Van der Heide, one could very well say that

Malaysia is a country and society that because of geographic location and historical consequence is crisscrossed by lines of voluntary and forced connectedness as a result of trade, migration, and colonialism. The outcomes of these interactions are manifest in Malaysia's political, religious, social and cultural configuration.

(Van der Heide, 2002: 57-58)

Broadly speaking, the ethnic groups of Malaysia can be divided into two categories, namely those "whose cultural affinities are indigenous to the region and to one another," (Hodges-Aeberhard & Raskin, 1997: 55) and which are collectively known as *Bumiputra*, or "children of the soil," a Malay term officialized in 1971.<sup>11</sup> Ethnic Malays constitute the dominant *Bumiputra* group, but other ethnic communities also classified as such are the Orang Asli (the aboriginal people of peninsular Malaysia), and the various indigenous groups of the Malaysian Borneo, such as the Iban people in Sarawak and the Kadazan-Dusun in Sabah, among others.

"In addition there are non-*Bumiputra* groups whose cultural affinities may be traced from outside the indigenous region,"(Ibid.) namely the ethnic Chinese and the ethnic Indians, who constitute the numerically most-significant populations of non-*Bumiputra* background.

The ethnic Chinese constitute roughly one quarter of the total population of the country, which in 2010 was of slightly more than twenty-eight million people, according to the federal Department of Statistics of Malaysia. Conversely, the majority of the population is

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<sup>11</sup> On the origin and usage of the term *bumiputra* (alternatively spelled as *bumiputera*), Shamsul A. B. points out that

[t]he federal government used the term *bumiputera* (son of the soil) to accommodate the Malays and the native Muslims and non-Muslims of Sarawak and Sabah in a single category. When the New Economic Policy was launched in 1971, *bumiputera* became an important ethnic category: it was officialised and became critical in the distribution of development benefits to poor people and also the entrepreneurial middle class. (Shamsul A. B., 2004: 146-47)

categorized as *Bumiputra* (around 60%), while the Indians make up less than one tenth of the Malaysian population.

Such a high percentage of Malaysian nationals belonging to non-indigenous ethnic groups clearly shows how the country (especially the peninsular area) received waves of migrants from other Asian territories. In fact, as explained by Swee-Hock Saw,

[d]uring the prewar period there were essentially three main streams of migration into Peninsular Malaysia: the northern stream from China, the western stream from India, and the relatively less important stream from the then Dutch East Indies in the south.  
(Saw, 2007: 11)

The relationship between the Chinese and the territories of today's Malaysia date back to Imperial China. In fact, already during *Han* times, both mainland and insular Southeast Asia<sup>12</sup> acknowledged the hegemony of the Middle Kingdom "through its celebrated tributary system and [...] direct rule over the Tongking region for very long periods (111 B.C. to A.D. 939 and for a decade and a half in the fifteenth century)" (SarDesai, 2010: 1).

However, it must be noted that the numerically strong ethnic Chinese presence in the country is mainly ascribable to two chronologically distant and unrelated migratory events; one took place around the fifteenth century, while the second Chinese migratory wave reached the region during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The first important Chinese settlements throughout Southeast Asia were mainly the result of the Chinese maritime trade activity, which fully blossomed during the mid-late Ming period (Wu, 2009: 10). As Wakeman clearly summarizes:

During the later years of the fifteenth century, Chinese began to colonize the Malay Archipelago, Java, Sumatra, Borneo, the Sulu Archipelago, and the Philippines. In the sixteenth century, another stream of Chinese settlers began to arrive in Siam, and by the end of the 1600s, there were thousands in the capital of Ayuthhaya. The Qing (1644-1912) government continued

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<sup>12</sup> Southeast Asia is generally divided into two distinct geographic and cultural entities: a mainland region comprising modern Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam and an insular area formed by the modern states of Brunei, East Timor, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore.

the Ming policy of forbidding emigration. Article 225 of the Qing code read: "All ... who remove to foreign islands for the purpose of inhabiting and cultivating the same, shall be punished according to the law against communicating with rebels and enemies and consequently suffer death by being beheaded." Individual emperors issued pardons to overseas merchants who returned home, but not until 1727 was the interdiction removed; by then hundreds of thousands of Chinese were living abroad. A century later, virtually half the 400,000 residents of Bangkok were Chinese immigrants.  
(Wakeman, 1993: 15-16)

Many of the Chinese immigrants that left China during the late Ming to the mid-Qing period decided to settle in the *Nusantara* region, i.e. the Malay peninsula, Singapore, the island of Borneo, as well as the myriads of islands which constitute today's Indonesia.

According to Saw:

it was only in the fourteenth century that they [the Chinese] were known to have first settled [...] at *Temasik* or Old Singapore. In the fifteenth century Chinese merchants and emissaries visited the Malay kingdom in Malacca, and during the later years there were probably Chinese staying there as merchants and traders. Under the control of the Portuguese and later the Dutch in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Malacca witnessed the founding of a Chinese community.  
(Saw, 2007: 11)

The majority of early Chinese settlers were male, therefore they often took up local women of Malay ethnic background as wives. The descendents of those Sino-local intermarriage activities are today known as *peranakan* Chinese or *Baba-Nyonya*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> In spite of the fact that the Malay term *peranakan* is today most widely used to indicate people of Chinese descent who were locally born and alternatively known as Straits Chinese (*tusheng huaren* 土生華人), the word itself literally means "descendant" (it derives from the word *anank*, "child"), with no connotation to the ethnicity of the descendent. Therefore, the term *peranakan* can be used in combination with a qualifying noun indicates local-born people of various ethnic background, such as *peranakan Cina* (Straits Chinese), *peranakan Belanda* (local-born people of full or partly Dutch parentage). Conversely, according to Lee Su Kim,

Frank Swettenham explained that the term Baba was used for Straits-born males, whether children of English, Chinese or Eurasian parents, and was of Hindustani origin [...]. Baba is the term for the male and Nyonya the female. The word Baba may have been derived from the word *bapa* which means father in Malay. Some historians think that it an honorific and the equivalent for a *tuan* [Malay equivalent for "sir" or "mister"] or a *towkay* [also "sir", "mister", as a form of address]. The word Nyonya is said to have originated from Java.  
(Lee, 2008: 162)

The Chinese equivalent for the Baba-nyonya expression is *baba niangre* (峇峇娘惹).

The *peranakan* Chinese community which resulted from the first migratory wave possessed (and although to a much lesser extent, still does today) a unique culture blending Chinese and Malay elements together. For instance and as pointed out by Lee Su Kim:

The Peranakan spoke Malay, ate a Malayanized cuisine, tended to dress in Malay costumes, and incorporated a good deal of Malay into their kinship terminology together with certain matrilineal tendencies [...] The customs practiced were however heavily Chinese in form and substance. Filial piety was very important and ancestral worship was at the core of their culture. In the past, an altar was commonly found in Peranakan homes for the worship and remembrance of ancestors.  
(Lee, 2008: 164)

However, the cultural distinctiveness and syncretism of the *peranakan* Chinese community began to slowly fade due to

the gradual geographical dispersion of the Babas, modernization and socialization with other groups. Dispersion from the traditional bastions of Peranakan culture led to diffusion of its cultural characteristics. It was in Malacca that Baba society had its deepest roots. From Malacca, the culture was exported to Penang and Singapore. The Babas gradually became more scattered throughout Malaya and the Southeast Asia region, and with socialization with other groups taking place, they soon lost much of their distinctiveness and exclusiveness. [...] [T]he large-scale immigration of Chinese into Malaya in the late 19th century contributed to the disintegration of the Baba culture [...]. Intermarriage took place between Straits Chinese and non-Straits Chinese, leading to a dilution of Nyonya culture.

With modernization and the introduction of Western ideas, the clannishness of the Babas gradually eroded, and family ties became weak. [...]. Many customs and rituals were less practiced and even the language is transmitted less from one generation to the other under pressure from languages such as English and, with independence, Malay. Presently, some Peranakan families send their children to Mandarin primary schools to master Mandarin.  
(Lee, 2008: 166)

The second large wave of Chinese migration to many Southeast Asian countries, and especially to the region of present-day Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, which is seen by Lee Su Kim as one of the causes of the gradual deterioration of *peranakan* Chinese culture took place in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In fact, according to Wakeman, "[e]migration increased dramatically during the nineteenth century, when the coolie trade

flourished" (Wakeman, 1993: 16). Ethnic Chinese of this second migratory tide were escaping the difficult living condition in their homeland aggravated also by the Opium Wars (1839-42 and 1856-60). This time, Chinese people arrived mainly from the southeastern provinces of Fujian and Guangdong and their arrival was encouraged by the British colonial administration, which regarded them as cheap free labour or indentured labour to be put to work in their tin mines and rubber plantations.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Chinese migratory flux especially to the peninsula was already very well organized into an efficient system of recruitment. Swee-Hock Saw points out that "[p]otential immigrants were recruited in South China [...] by a returned emigrant known as *kheh thau* or headman or by a professional recruiter" (Saw, 2007: 12).

Migration to the Malay peninsula and other Southeast Asian territories was relatively free and unrestrained, and it is not until 1877 that the British Colonial Government with jurisdiction over Malaya passes the *Chinese Immigration Ordinance*, in an attempt to protect and regulate the migratory flow (Saw, 2007: 12).

During the 1930s because of worsening economic conditions and widespread unemployment in Peninsular Malaysia due to the shutting down of many tin mines and rubber estates, the Government decided to proclaim a monthly quota of Chinese immigrants allowed into the territory. However, this limitation only affected male migrants. Chinese females were not only exempted from the quota system, but the government openly encouraged their arrival in an attempt to improve the sex ratio among Chinese migrants (Saw, 2007: 12-13).

The possibilities for Chinese people of reaching peninsular Malaysia continued to shrink in the postwar period, when the general demand for labour was not increasing at a pace rapid enough as to absorb all new immigrants, and at the same time, labour was now supplied by people from the Malay and the indigenous ethnic groups, as well as by earlier

immigrants and their descendants (Saw, 2007: 17).

The gradual end of the Chinese migratory flow had the effect of stabilizing the racial composition of the Malaysian territories and appeased the Malay fear of their becoming a minority in the southeast Asian region that they had been calling home for tens of centuries.

### **II.II.3. At home in Malay(si)a?**

As these Chinese new immigrants reached Malaya, Sarawak and North Borneo, they slowly began to constitute a local Chinese society, especially characterized by a high degree of traditionalism and conservatism due to three main factors, according to Ching-hwang Yen, namely the fact that

the Chinese society was fundamentally an immigrant society, and the ethos and mores of the immigrants were determined by their economic status. Since most Chinese immigrants were concentrated in entrepots and mining centers pursuing their trading and mining activities, they were physically segregated from each other, and as a result, an united and coherent Chinese society failed to emerge. Second, most of the Chinese immigrants were imbued with traditional ideas before they left China, and tended to cling to those ideas and habits when they settled overseas. [...] Third, the Chinese society in Malaya was permeated with traditional ideas of loyalty and patriotism due to the efforts of the Chinese Consul-General in Singapore and the Consul in Penang who cultivated the idea of loyalty to the emperor and Qing dynasty. All these contributed to the formation of a tradition-ridden conservative Chinese society.  
(Yen, 2008: 13-14)

The historical changes which affected the areas of what is present-day Malaysia, also had a lasting impact on the Chinese community, which was gradually transforming from an immigrant group to an ethnic society rooted in the local territories. Changes after the Second World War were especially considerable. In fact, the British colonial administration in peninsular Malaysia outlawed the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), despite its help in fighting against the Japanese, and resettled the entire rural population of ethnic Chinese background to government-controlled *Kampung Baru* (New Villages), set up around cities

and towns. Due to the fact that the majority of MCP members were of ethnic Chinese background, the government began to have doubts on the loyalty of the Chinese population. Even so, there was a part of the ethnic Chinese population, especially those of *peranakan* Chinese origin, that "began to promote local political consciousness among the Chinese. Most of the members of this group were English-educated and were influenced by Western or Malay culture, and they had little or no link with China" (Yen, 2008: 22).

The 1950s saw a more widespread local consciousness among the ethnic Chinese of the region, "and many of them were prepared to accept that they will permanently reside in Malaya, and considered it to be the 'First Hometown' (*Diyi guxiang*)" (Yen, 2008: 23).

Therefore, ethnic Chinese - be they new immigrants, be they the descendents of earlier waves of migrants - began to believe in the possibility of a new political entity and fought strenuously for a dream that would become the Federation of Malaya first and the Federation of Malaysia later, in 1963.

The ethnic Chinese were gradually moving from being Chinese in Malay(si)a to become truly Chinese Malay(si)ans, and saluted with joy the birth of the new nationhood. They too, like the Indians, the Malay and all other ethnic groups, were elated at the possibility of a better and more just life than under British rule. The government of the new independent federation only partially met their expectations in aspects such as politics, education, culture and economic life.

Ching-hwang Yen points out that:

[u]nder the leadership of Tunku Abdul Rahman, Chinese economic interests were protected. Chinese were given important economic portfolios such as Finance Minister and Minister of Industry and Commerce in the cabinet. During this period, Chinese industry and commerce achieved remarkable growth due to the government's encouragement and concessions. However, Chinese language and education in this period were placed under a mounting pressure to change. Before the independence, Chinese communities under the leadership of Lim Lian Geok were prepared to suspend their demand for making

Chinese language as an official language of Malaya. This political concession made by the Chinese was intended to show solidarity among different races so as to facilitate the independence movement. (Yen, 2008: 24)

The Chinese concession on linguistic and educational matters had detrimental consequences for the ethnic Chinese community and especially for the role of the various Sinitic languages in the federation.

The government now aimed at giving Malay the status of the only official and national language, thus rejecting the possibility of an officially multilingual country in which Malay would share its usage and prestige with the former colonial language (English) and with the various Sinitic languages and Tamil, spoken by a substantial part of the population.

Hence, the government's continuous pressure on Chinese high schools obliged most of them (54 out of 70) to remodel themselves into nation-type high schools where the media of instruction were Malay and English, in order to receive financial support from the state. The sixteen schools which did not agree to the change, were declared independent high schools (today known as Chinese Independent High Schools, or *Huawen duli zhongji xuexiao* 華文獨立中級學校 in Chinese), and their main medium of instruction remained the Chinese language. However, the federal government requested that all schools, whether state-run or independent, be regulated by a set of educational rules stipulated by the government itself.<sup>14</sup> As explained by Yen, "[g]overnment's harsh treatment of Chinese education generated a great deal of ill-feeling among the Malayan Chinese, and the Chinese language and education became a sensitive political issue." (Yen, 2008: 25) Chinese

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<sup>14</sup> Nowadays, students of the independent schools follow a different curriculum, approved by the Malaysian Ministry of Education, and take a standardised test known as Unified Examination Certificate (UEC), different from the national *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM), needed to attend government-run Malaysian universities. Many graduates from such schools opt for furthering their education in other Sinitic-speaking territories, such as the P.R.C or Taiwan, in Anglophone countries such as the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia, or in neighbouring Singapore. Independent schools are managed by a nation-wide association called United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia (*Malaixiya huaxiao dongshi lianhehui zonghui* 馬來西亞華校聯合會總會), whose information is available at: [www.djz.edu.my](http://www.djz.edu.my).

Malay(si)ans began to gain an increasing level of political consciousness; they realized that they indeed had obligations and privileges in the new independent country, and they needed to take personally care that their rights as a community be protected in the federation.

Deeply involved in the independence process of Malaya, North Borneo, Sarawak, and Singapore, the various ethnic Chinese communities were slowly, but unequivocally relinquishing their migrant status and mindset in order to acquire a new role as an integral part of a new Malaysian society. However, this process of localization was put to the test by the Article 153 of the Constitution which had come into force in 1957. In fact, the article, still today one of the most controversial, sanctioned the beginning of federal affirmative actions directed at preserving the *Bumiputra's* privileged position vis-à-vis other Malaysian ethnic communities, as it clearly states that "[i]t shall be the responsibility of the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* [the head of state of Malaysia] to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak."

Hence, during the early sixties, the phrase "Malaysian Malaysia," normally attributed to Lee Kwan Yew, then premier of Singapore that was a component part of the new nation, began to circulate among the ethnic Chinese and Indian population of the federation as a complaint to the increasingly discriminatory policies aimed at creating a state of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy/dominance), a notion which implied that both ethnic Chinese and Indians "had to accept 'special Malay privileges' in education and government services, 'Malay' royalty as their rulers, Islam as the official religion, and the 'Malay' language as the official language of the new nation-state." (Shamsul A. B., 2004: 146) As noted by Yen, the new slogan, and the emphasis it put on the formation of an ethnically just country, "had influenced the political outlook of many non-Malays, and had heightened Chinese political consciousness" (Yen, 2008: 25-26).

The belief that political activism would eventually lead to changes in the ethnic

dynamics of power prompted many Chinese Malaysians to get seriously involved in the fight against political and social marginalization. However, the events that took place in 1969 changed radically and dramatically the political and social environment of Malaysia and resulted in an even heavier ethnic polarization of the country, which - still today - is one of the main characterizing aspects of Malaysia.

### **II.III. Political and social context**

#### **II.III.1. Ethnic tensions give birth to modern-day Malaysian society**

May 13, 1969 represents a dreadful date in Malaysian history and coincidentally a watershed in the social path taken by the country. In fact, as noted by Shamsul A. B.:

[m]ost scholars of Malaysian studies, irrespective of theoretical orientations, generally agree that the events of 1969 (that is, the racial riots) 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 A. B., 1986: 84)

1969 was an electoral year throughout the federation, and the campaign was "fought on the highly emotional issue of education and language, which masked a deeper concern regarding the role of each ethnic group in the new Malaysian nation" (Watson Andaya, 1982: 280). Malaysia was by then ethnically fragmented, and each major group (Chinese, Indian, and Malay) saw in the elections the possibility of preserving its own interests to the detriment of the others. The largely Chinese opposition "Democratic Action Party" (DAP - *Parti Tindakan Demokratik*) and the also largely Chinese-based "Malaysian People's Movement Party" (*Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia*) won the elections on May 10, and during the victory parade held in Kuala Lumpur two days later, the followers marched through the ethnic Malay district of Kampung Baru, deriding the dwellers.

The following day, members of the youth wing of the "United Malays National

Organization" (UMNO - *Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu*), a party which has always been in the forefront of pro-Malay and pro-Islamic policies, also organized a counter-rally, which quickly turned into uncontrolled violence throughout the capital city. The events prompted the government to declare a state of emergency, and order was restored only after four long days of bloody ethnic confrontations between the ethnic Chinese and the Malays.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, the situation continued to remain tense for months. For instance, the following is a description - which appeared on *Time Magazine* - of the changes in daily life which resulted from the May incidents:

Residents of Kuala Lumpur, both rich and poor, used to congregate by the thousands each night around long rows of food stalls throughout the city. Many were there for their evening meal of satay (meat roasted on a short skewer of cane and dipped in curry sauce). Others stopped off on their way home for a bowl of soup. In the polyglot capital of Malaysia, this nightly relaxation attracted not only Malays but also citizens of the large Chinese minority and the smaller Indian and Pakistani groups. For the past two months, however, Kuala Lumpur's food stalls have closed early and the street crowds that usually mingled pleasantly now scatter for cover at any unusual sound. In the wake of bloody race riots that may have claimed 2,000 lives,<sup>16</sup> Malaysia's peoples have broken little bread together; they have probably broken any hope for multiracial harmony for many years to come.  
(Time Magazine, 1969: 1)

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<sup>15</sup> An article which appeared on the American weekly magazine *Time* in July 1969, explained perhaps in a simplistic fashion, but reaching the very core of the social and political problems of Malaysia, the situation of the country in the aftermath of the events:

For all its practical success, Malaysia never really managed to overcome racial enmities. The Chinese and Indians resented Malay-backed plans favoring the majority, including one to make Malay the official school and government language. The poorer, more rural Malays became jealous of Chinese and Indian prosperity. Perhaps the Alliance's greatest failing was that it served to benefit primarily those at the top. It was not unheard of for a government official to discover a new car in his garage, its donor a mystery until a Chinese towkay (rich merchant) mentioned it offhandedly—and then perhaps asked for a favor. For a Chinese or Indian who was not well-off, or for a Malay who was not well-connected, there was little largesse in the system. Even for those who were favored, hard feelings persisted. One towkay recently told a Malay official: "If it weren't for the Chinese, you Malays would be sitting on the floor without tables and chairs." Replied the official: "If I knew I could get every damned Chinaman out of the country, I would willingly go back to sitting on the floor."  
(Time Magazine, 1969: 2)

<sup>16</sup> It must be noted that according to official reports, the figure are much lower: 196 people were killed in the riots between May 13 and July 31, 1969.

After the events of 1969, Malaysian politics and society took a sudden radical twist: the politically moderate elite represented by Tunku Abdul Rahman had to give place to Tun Abdul Razak, who was then leader of the more radical faction of the UMNO. Suspension of all parliamentary activities for the following eighteen months, resulted in the National Operation Council (NOC - *Majilis Gerakan Negara*), an emergency administrative body, taking it upon itself to restore law and order throughout the country. Parliament was restored in February 1971 and the NOC was dissolved.

In that very same year, when the emergency rule was lifted, the re-established parliament passed, without any constructive discussion, a series of laws and policies which would change the social and cultural face of Malaysia for good. For instance, according to the new laws, it was now not legally possible "to discuss sensitive issues such as the 'special rights' of the Malays and other indigenous population [...], citizenship rights of the non-Malays, the Malay rulers, and the use of Bahasa Melayu as the official language" (Chin, 2009: 167).

The two policies which had the greatest impact on the ethnic Chinese population, and on all Malaysian ethnic groups were the New Economic Policy (NEP - *Dasar Ekonomi Baru*) and the National Cultural Policy (NCP - *Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan*), which were both ratified in parliamentary activities in 1971.

### **II.III.2. The new policies that changed the face of Malaysia**

Right after the unfortunate incidents of 1969, the ruling sectors of Malaysia, announced the adoption of various measures aimed at achieving "national unity in view of the socioeconomic inequality inherited from the colonial pe-riod and consolidated in the post-independence years. " (Jomo K. S., 2004: 2) Therefore in 1971, the government which was led by the rather radical and pro-Malay Tun Abdul Razak agreed upon the

implementation of the NEP, an affirmative action (considered both controversial and highly ambitious) which was directed at reshaping the economic and social landscape of Malaysia. The policy was a very thoroughly thought action, which virtually reached every layer of the society, and lasted for twenty years, before being substituted - in 1990 - by the National Development Policy (NDP - *Dasar Pembangunan Nasional*), which continues to pursue most of the goals put forward by the NEP.

As noted by Jomo K. S., among others:

The 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 socioeco-nomic 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. (Jomo K. S., 2004: iii)

In order to correct the economic disparity among the various ethnic groups, and especially between the ethnic Chinese minority and the Malays, the government took various actions aimed at restructuring the job market through the allocation of the majority of jobs in the public service sector to *bumiputra* and by obliging private companies to employ *bumiputra* to fill at least thirty percent of their positions. Moreover, in order to create a Malay business class which according to the policy views had to reach at least one third of the total national business class, the government provided Malay and other *bumiputra* people with competitively cheap loans, business premises which were easy to reach, preferential treatment in the allocation of business licences and contracts (Yen, 2008: 27-28).

The NEP far from reaching the integration of all ethnic groups in the political and

economic administration of national wealth, "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*" (Chin, 2009: 167). Hence, the discontent among non-*bumiputra* ethnic groups started to grow, but it was never channeled in fruitful policies of opposition to the *status quo*. In spite of the dismantlement of the NEP in 1990, most of its programs supporting *bumiputra* empowering actions to detriment of the socio-economic conditions of non-*bumiputra*, were kept alive. As explained by James Chin,

[a]lthough the NEP officially ended in 1990, as noted above, old attitudes have died hard. The new economic plan after 1990, called the New Development Policy (NDP), contains all the NEP bumiputera quotas. One recent attempt at blatant racial discrimination, which even surpassed the old 30 percent quota, involved Maybank, the largest bank in Malaysia. It issued an internal directive that only bumiputera firms were to be hired for the bank's legal work. After the circular was exposed, however, the bank was forced to back down.  
(Chin, 2009: 169)

Many non-*bumiputra*, especially many Chinese Malaysians are especially harsh in their judgement of the NEP, and the boldest ones like Dr. Boo Cheng Hau, opposition leader in the Johor State Assembly, from the Chinese-based DAP even compare it to the apartheid systems which was in force in South Africa until 1994. In a letter to online newspaper *Malaysiakini*, and in response to an article titled "Why Malaysia is not like South Africa," Dr. Boo drew a poignant and daring parallel between the situation socio-economic and political situation of the two countries and pointed out that:

Umno's *Ketuanan Melayu* is race-based dominance in a multiracial country and is the exact ideology employed by the single-race National Party which imposed apartheid rule in South Africa. The National Party of South Africa upheld Afrikaner nationalism and nativism and imposed a state-guided capitalist economic system. [...] It is not difficult to find similarities between the two. Both achieve the effect of divide-and-rule by a dominant ethnic group it being either the majority or a minority.  
(Boo, 2009)

The NEP was supplemented by the implementation of the revised National Language

Act (NLA) in July 1971,<sup>17</sup> which reinforced the dominant position of the Malay language in every aspect of Malaysian life. Malay, which until the formation of the new independent nation-state had been the language of Malay community, just like the various Sinitic language had been the means of communication of most ethnic Chinese and Tamil had served as means of intra-ethnic communication among the Indian Malaysians, had seen its status uplifted to that of national language, while with the revision and re-enactment of the NLA in 1971, the Sinitic and Tamil languages lost all hope of having any official validity, be it at the federal level or at the state/local level.

Moreover, through the adoption of the NEP, the government also set out revised educational policies, which caused great discontent among the Chinese Malaysian and Indian Malaysian population, despite the fact that they were meant to dampen ethnic frictions and promote social equity in the country. The most controversial reform was the adoption of the ethnic quota system in regulating the access to local public universities (which numbered four when the NEP was implemented). This admission policy aimed at promoting the social mobility of the *bumiputra* through higher education. In fact, since the Malays and other *bumiputra* groups were identified as the poorest, most disadvantaged or economically marginalized, their access to university was seen by the government as an important step in the erasure of social inequities. The number of *bumiputra* students enrolled at Malaysian universities increased tremendously in the years following the implementation of the NEP. In 1970, they constituted forty percent of the total university students, five years later they represented already more than half the total university population (57%) and by 1980 at seventy-three percent, *bumiputra* students exceeded their population percentage in the country. Conversely, the ethnic quota system in higher

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<sup>17</sup> The NLA was first enacted in 1963, then with slight modification in 1967 and finally in its present-day form in 1971.

education represented a substantial setback for the majority of non-*bumiputra* people wishing to be trained at the university level locally. Matter-of-factly, while in 1970 six out of ten university students were non-*bumiputra* (basically, either Chinese Malaysian or Indian Malaysian), their proportion dropped to a meagre 2.3:10 proportion in 1980 (Lim, 1995: 11).

Apart from the gradual decline in education opportunities for non-*bumiputra*, the firm choice of the government to introduce Malay as the main and only medium of instruction further alienated the ethnic Chinese and Indian communities. English-medium schools were reshaped into public schools where teaching was exclusively conducted in Malay, while as already pointed out, most ethnic Chinese schools were given the option of either being assimilated into the Malay-medium educational system (and thus receiving public financial support) or to continue functioning as Sinitic-medium schools, but without any support from the federal or state governments.

The dissatisfaction which lingered throughout the non-Malay communities was especially palpable among Chinese Malaysians who started to face growing difficulties in job and educational opportunities. This led to their clinging to their cultural heritage, one of their last assets (Lim, 1995: 12).<sup>18</sup> As a matter of fact, the ethnic Chinese community was determined to fight for its rights in education as shown by various attempts since the late 1960s to establish a Sinitic-medium private university, Merdeka University, which was backed up by the opposition party DAP. The proposal of a Sinitic-medium university, had already been seen as a fundamental ethnic issue in the electoral campaign of 1969, and after the introduction of the NEP, it had become a strongly hoped-for source of alternative education for Chinese Malaysians (Carstens, 2005: 151). However, the institution was

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<sup>18</sup> The cultural situation of the ethnic Chinese community of post-independence Malaysia will be discussed in greater detail in section II.IV.

never granted governmental permission to operate and to confer official degrees, and the decision of the government was later upheld by the Supreme Court in 1983 (Loh, 2002: 27).<sup>19</sup>

#### **II.IV. Cultural context and production in Chinese/Sinophone Malaysia**

In the same years when social and economic discussions racialized the economic sphere, and aggravated the ethnic divide of Malaysia, changes in the definition and practice of culture were also affecting the social situation of the federation. In August 1971, during a congress held at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur,<sup>20</sup> and organized by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, various Malaysian cultural policy-makers announced the birth of the NCP, which rested on three fundamental pillars that until today have not been shaken yet. The three key points of the policy are that:

- the national culture of Malaysia must be based on the cultures of the people indigenous to the region;

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<sup>19</sup> Today, the situation appears to have slightly improved. In fact, since 2001 there exists the Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UNITAR - *Laman Daxue* 拉曼大學), a fully-accredited university-level institution which is allowed to confer Bachelor, Master and Doctoral degrees in various academic areas and which is run by the Malaysian Chinese Association. Moreover, in the country there exist other higher education institutions funded in part or wholly by the ethnic Chinese community, such as Southern College (*Nanfang Xueyuan* 南方學院) in Johor, established in 1990 and currently in the process of applying for university status which would allow it to bestow official degrees upon its mainly ethnic Chinese students, New Era College (*Xinjiyuan Xueyuan* 新紀元學院), founded in 1998 in Selangor thanks to the unwavering support of the local Chinese community, and finally Han Chiang College (*Bincheng Hanjiang Xueyuan* 檳城韓江學院), located in Penang and established in 1999. All colleges have signed various memoranda of understanding with foreign universities in Anglophone countries, the PRC and Taiwan, in order to confer bachelor's degree to their students. Hence, they represent an important channel of higher education for non-*bumiputra* (especially Chinese Malaysians) students within the country.

<sup>20</sup> The University of Malaya is considered by many to be the leading institution of Higher Education in the federation. Established in 1949 through the merger of Raffles College with the King Edward VII College of Medicine, both located in Singapore, due to its rapid growth a new division in the capital of the newly-established Federation of Malaya was set up in 1959. Subsequently, two years later, a bill was passed establishing the former Kuala Lumpur campus as the University of Malaya while the original Singapore branch was first renamed the University of Singapore, then in 1962 it was shaped into today's National University of Singapore. The University of Malaya too, like all other public institutions of Higher Education, had to introduce the ethnic quotas, as a consequence of the NEP.

- elements from other cultures which are suitable and reasonable may be incorporated into the national culture;
- and Islam will be an important element in the national culture (Kementerian Kebudayaan, 1973: vii).

According to many social scientists and political analysts, "Malaysia's national culture policy has become one important point of vigorous debate and political conflict." (Badaruddin Mohamed, 2005) Moreover, as insightfully noted by a substantial number of Malaysian cultural analysts, looking at the NCP in hindsight, the definition of Malaysian culture - most probably put together in a hurry, in an attempt to speed up the process of Malaysia's nation-building and identity-formation - has always remained very contentious. Following the congress, new cultural policies began to be formulated, affecting the life of Malaysians in almost every aspect (Ghulam Sarwar Yousof, 2008).

Since the 1970s, the government actively intervened in the promotion of the three fundamental pillars of the NCP. This resulted in, for instance, increased university-level research on Malay folklore and traditional arts and practices, an abundance of publicly-funded festivals and performances devoted to traditional Malay performing arts (Van der Heide, 2002: 96). Conversely, specifically non-Malay cultural activities were all privately-funded. Apart from the inclusion of the Chinese New Year and the Indian Deepavali festival among the federation-wide public holidays, the government did not incorporate any elements of these numerically and socially important non-Malay cultures within the newly established Malaysian national culture.

Additionally, even when funded thanks to private patronage, non-Malay cultural performances were subject to the acquisition of government permits, a practice which allowed cultural policy-maker to exert further control over the social and cultural life of non-Malay communities (Carstens, 2005: 151).

#### **II.IV.1 Cultural discontent in Chinese/Sinophone Malaysia**

Deeply affected by the NEP, the NCP and NLA, the Chinese community of Malaysia had to culturally reshape itself in order to respond to the federal and local policies which defined social, economic and cultural privileges exclusively on ethnic terms. Important factors are, according to Sharon A. Carstens, "[t]he return to Chinese primary schools in the 1970s and the national cultural debates of the 1980s [which] encouraged Malaysian Chinese to identify with aspects of their Chinese heritage that might otherwise have faded with time" (Carstens, 2005: 5).

Hence, one could say that the unique culture of the Chinese community continued to thrive in Malaysia, in spite of the federal encouragement of Malay culture above other local or imported cultures (especially the Chinese and the Indian), and in spite of the continuation of sharp ethnic divisions due to the very same reason, which the government tried to avoid, at least nominally, through the creation of a Department of National Unity in charge of monitoring and promoting cooperation among ethnic communities. Moreover, it also formulated a national ideology (*Rukunegara*) "to publicly define (what were expected to be) the key shared beliefs and goals of all Malaysian citizens" (Carstens, 2005: 150).

Nonetheless, it must be pointed out here that seen from a pan-southeast Asian perspective, Malaysia was, together with Singapore, the only notable exception to a general trend that saw local government pursuing policies of forced or "strongly suggested" cultural assimilation of the local ethnic Chinese communities, as can be seen in Indonesia and Thailand, for instance.

In her collection of studies on the ethnic Chinese communities across Malaysia, Carstens explains how only in the 1980s, Chinese Malaysian responses to the NCP began to be heard and they were triggered by three key issues:

Firstly, the already mentioned refusal of the federal government to grant permission for the founding of a privately-funded and run Sinitic-medium university;

Secondly, a negative declaration by the then Minister of Home Affairs, Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie in response to the Chinese request to include the Chinese lion dance within the body of Malaysian national cultural activities. Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie argued that such a foreign element could never be incorporated in the definition of Malaysian national culture;

Thirdly, the Chinese request that the government recognized the Chinese Kapitan Yap Ah Loy as the leading founder of Kuala Lumpur were not only dismissed, but Datuk Abdul Samad Idris, then Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports, proposed that an ethnic Malay businessman, Raja Abdullah be considered the father of the national capital. His decision was made final as textbooks and national school exams were changed accordingly, in order to give Kuala Lumpur a Malay "parent" (Carsents, 2005: 151-53)

Hence, facing the ever-increasing pressure to embrace Malay culture as THE national culture of Malaysia, the only action the Chinese Malaysian community could take to respond was to revive its own culture and sensitize Chinese Malaysian about the specificity of their cultural heritage. Privately-sponsored activities such as exhibitions on Chinese cultural roots, traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy, Chinese regional opera, music or martial arts began to spread across Malaysia. Moreover, the Chinese Malaysian community also started organizing large-scale celebrations of Chinese new year, dragon boat festival and other traditional festivities. In addition since 1984, forums on Chinese culture were organized annually in each one of the Malaysian states, where "prominent scholars and personalities were invited to speak on Chinese cultural issues, so as to raise the level of cultural consciousness among the Chinese" (Yen, 2008: 31)

1985 represents a milestone in the Chinese Malaysian cultural world and it is remembered as the year in which the *Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies* was set up in

Kuala Lumpur. The centre "began to collect source materials related to the Chinese community, and published [an] academic journal [...] as well as monographs on the Chinese in Malaysia. It also organized academic forums on Malaysian Chinese issues." (Yen, 2008: 32)

#### **II.IV.2. The challenges to Chinese Education**

The social and cultural worth of the three controversial issues mentioned above goes well beyond the anecdotal curiosity, as they are all extremely important in demonstrating how things had changed - culture-wise - for the Chinese Malaysian community, and to what extent the community now felt culturally endangered. Carstens points out that "[o]f the three key issues raised by Malaysian Chinese in the national culture debates, Chinese education were by far the most complex and the most written about, and carried the most practical implications" (Carstens, 2005: 163). For most ethnic Chinese, it was indispensable that their own education system be preserved, in order to assure cultural continuity to the community in the new overly-*Malaynized* federation.

Difficulties for Sinitic-medium education in this part of Southeast Asia had started early. In fact, already in 1950s there had been suggestions that English and Malay become the sole languages of instruction in all schools of what was about to become the newly independent Malaya. As previously mentioned, 1961 saw a dramatic change in the linguistic structure of Malaysian education. While Sinitic- and Tamil-medium primary schools were allowed to retain their structure more or less unaltered in terms of both curriculum and medium of instruction, secondary schools were required to adopt either English or Malay (afterwards Malay only) in order to be eligible for public financial support.

The economic problems faced by Sinitic-medium schools were a reason for continuous

grievance for the ethnic Chinese community. Carstens explains that:

[L]imited government financial support for Chinese primary schools made it necessary to constantly seek assistance from other quarters, a situation even more true for the privately operated independent Chinese secondary schools. Whereas in the past, schools had primarily depended on donations from wealthy Chinese businessmen, by the 1970s, mass fund-raising campaigns promoted increasing grassroots support for Chinese schools. (Carstens, 2005: 165)

Practical factors such as the elimination of English-medium schools in the seventies, as well as an increased number of ethnic Chinese who identified themselves mainly with the Chinese dimension of their Chinese Malaysian self, led many parents to send their children to schools in which instruction was carried out in a Sinitic language (for the overwhelming majority of Sinitic-medium schools it was Mandarin). Therefore, by the 1980s, the educational situation for Chinese Malaysians depended on a series of choices in which the language of instruction was the prevailing factor. Hence, at the primary school level, the choice was between public Malay- or Sinitic-medium schools, while at the secondary level the choice between the two languages also carried a choice of public (Malay-medium) against private (Chinese Independent High Schools). At the tertiary level, the choice was between in-country education (at Malay-medium tertiary institutions) or overseas education. (Carstens, 2005: 166)

The fear of losing their cultural legacy, also prompted many English-educated Chinese Malaysians to strenuously support Sinitic-medium schools, while the various Chinese community associations continued advocating the virtues of Chinese-style education to an ever-increasing audience.

Carstens' analysis on the educational issues of Chinese Malaysia clearly shows that:

factors of practicality, identity, and traditional values closely intertwined in the renewed and expanded support for Chinese education among Malaysian Chinese in the 1970s and 1980s. [...] [R]enewed support for Chinese education by the Malaysian Chinese middle class occurred in the context of NEP educational and employment policies that were

particularly detrimental to the socioeconomic opportunities previously enjoyed by this group.  
(Carstens, 2005: 167)

On the other hand, with the increasingly central role played by the PRC on the global stage, many ethnic Chinese (and non-Chinese) Malaysian parents look at Sinitic-medium education with renewed interest, as an open door to the language and culture of a leading actor in global economy and politics.

### **II.IV.3. Chinese/Sinophone Malaysian culture: between the local and the global**

The debate over Sinitic-medium education which flourished within the Chinese Malaysian community in the eighties also meant a stronger commitment of the entire community to the languages which were considered as the most immediate and practical tool of transmission of Chinese Malaysian culture. Many middle-class Chinese Malaysians had been fervent supporters of English-medium instruction for their children. In fact, they saw a tool for empowerment in the global language *par excellence*. When these schools were converted into Malay-medium schools, however, the same parents turned to Sinitic-medium schools. Graduates of such schools would often continue their education either in Taiwan or in Singapore (by the mid- to late nineties, the PRC too began to receive Sinophone Malaysians willing to further their education in a Sinitic-medium setting),

where they were exposed to alternative versions of Chinese identity. Malaysian Chinese graduates of Malaysian public high schools, encountering the pro-Malay admission policies of Malaysian universities, likewise left the country in increasing numbers [...] many of them in English-speaking countries.  
(Carstens, 2005: 160)

The study-abroad experience represented for many Chinese Malaysians - who relied mainly on family expenses, contrary to what happened with Malay students, who were supported by government-funded scholarships - an invaluable opportunity to come into

contact with other possibilities of being Chinese. Since the 1980s, for those Chinese Malaysians who remained in the country, the exposure to new faces of *Chineseness* was provided by the rapid spreading of VHS cassettes of Sinophone television programmes, mainly from Hong Kong. In an essay concerning the relationship between mass media and Chinese culture in Malaysia, Sharon A. Carstens notes that:

The powerful appeal of alternative forms of entertainment made possible by VCRs and video rentals during the 1980s was partly a response by Malaysian Chinese to the limited choices available on Malaysian television. From the 1960s to the mid 1980s, the government broadcasting network offered only two television channels, with a majority of programming in Malay and English medium. As Chinese audiences turned away from state sponsored television, concerns over a growing ethnic divide prompted the government to approve the establishment in 1984 of Malaysia's first commercial channel, TV3, which quickly added increased Chinese programming to its schedule. [...] [T]he government-sponsored channel, TV2, followed suit, adding Chinese programmes to prime time slots that recaptured a growing share of Chinese viewers. Although the advent of commercial television also stimulated the development of local production companies which began to create local Chinese medium shows, the vast majority of Malaysian Chinese television programming featured serials and movies from Hong Kong and Taiwan. (Carstens, 2003: 327)

Television programmes from other Sinophone communities across the world (mainly Hong Kong and Taiwan) not only introduced the ethnic Chinese people of Malaysia to new ways of being Chinese, but it also reinforced the idea that more than one Chinese Malaysian community, there existed many Chinese Malaysian communities, and that their differences rested on the different Sinitic languages they used. Hence, in the linguistics diversity of the programming which they received and still receive from abroad (mainly Cantonese from Hong Kong, and Mandarin and Hokkien from Taiwan), Chinese Malaysian saw the specificity of their culture reinforced, rather than undermined by a transnational and unified sense of Chinese identity.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Neighbouring Singapore presents a completely different situation, in which great efforts are put in the formation of a unified Chinese Singaporean identity, resting on a common Sinitic language, Mandarin

The increased globalization and transnational relations which involved the Chinese Malaysian community too since the early nineties have partially transformed Chinese Malaysian culture. While throughout the eighties Chinese Malaysians were mainly holding to traditional Chinese culture, which they saw as the only tool of cultural survival at their disposal, the following decade saw traditional culture competing with other forms of Chinese culture, especially in their popular and transnational dimension. In fact, urged by the ever-increasing presence of Sinophone popular culture from elsewhere (mainly Hong Kong and Taiwan), the decade of the nineties saw the birth of Chinese Malaysia as one of the main producers of Sinitic-medium popular culture, ranging from the appearance of Sinophone Malaysian actors on the global stage - the most noticeable example being Michelle Yeoh (*Yang Ziqiong* 楊紫瓊) - to that of singers and songwriters such as Fish Leong (*Liang Jingru* 梁靜茹), Penny Tai (Dai Peini 戴佩妮) or Michael Wong (*Guang Liang* 光亮) among others, who took the Sinophone pop music scene by storm and eventually moved to Taiwan in order to develop a successful career in the transnational Sinophone music industry.

Therefore, since the 1990s the Chinese community of Malaysia has found itself embracing two cultural scenarios, one traditional and one decidedly more popular,

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Chinese, one of the four official languages of the country. In fact, the Speak Mandarin Campaign (*Jiang huayu huodong* 講華語活動) launched on September 7, 1979 aims at reinforcing the role of Mandarin as the acceptable correct speech among Chinese Singaporeans, thus discouraging the use of other Sinitic languages such as Cantonese, Hokkien or Hakka.

According to the Promote Mandarin Council,

[a]part from promoting Mandarin as an avenue to understanding one's roots and Chinese culture, the campaign also highlights the importance of Mandarin for economic and business competitiveness. A lifestyle-oriented approach – with the tagline ‘華語 COOL’ – is being used to reach out and engage more English speaking Chinese Singaporeans, particularly those in the ‘post-65 generation’, to speak and use Mandarin in their daily lives.

(Promote Mandarin Council, 2006)

The use of Sinitic languages other than Mandarin is banned in all local broadcast media, and Hong Kong or Taiwanese dramas and serials in either Cantonese or Hokkien are consistently dubbed into Mandarin.

contemporary and global. The situation is better exemplified by Sharon A. Carstens. In 1998, during one of her fieldwork trips to Malaysia, the American anthropologist noted that the first scenario, which she sees taking place in a private Chinese secondary school, "highlights specifically Chinese institutions and the attempts made to defend and retain 'traditional' forms of Chinese culture" (Carstens, 2005: 203), while the other demonstrates that "a combination of local, national and global systems of meaning and identification now shape the alternatives of a new generation of Malaysian Chinese" (Ibid.).

Therefore, the different ways of getting to know, embracing, and promoting Chinese culture in its traditional form or in its localized, national and global dimensions available since the nineties are deeply entangled with different ways of being Chinese Malaysian. The issue of identity, so central in Sinophone Malaysian fiction as exemplified in chapters IV and V of the present work, is a constant presence within the Chinese Malaysian community and transcends the purely cultural realm. Agreeing with Carstens' argument, I also believe that Chinese Malaysian identities are "multiple, diverse, and constantly shifting, both in official discourse and in the daily experiences of particular individuals" (Carstens, 2005: 202).

An increasingly high number of Chinese Malaysians tend to see the most unmistakable identity marker in the uniqueness of their own culture, i.e. a culture that has its undeniable geographic origin in China, but also its irrefutable birthplace amidst the pluvial forest and the rubber plantations of tropical Malaysia. In fact, in her various field trips to the Southeast Asian country, Carstens noted that even if many Chinese Malaysians were unwilling to relinquish the core values of the Chinese cultural tradition carried from China by their forefathers, "most remain aware of, and often celebrate, the ways in which Malaysian Chinese are unique" (Carstens, 2005: 231)

## **II.V. At the heart of cultural Chinese Malaysia:**

### **Sinophone Malaysian Literature in the global literary system**

The presence of both traditional and more modern, popular and transnational cultural aspects of Chinese (Malaysian) culture are also evident in the position occupied by Sinophone Malaysian literature in the national and global contexts. Literature too, like all other aspects of Chinese and Sinophone Malaysian culture, is rooted in China, in its literary and cultural tradition, but it saw the light under the tropical sun of Malaysia. Thus receiving multiple influences, did not make it less Chinese or more Malaysian: it simply made it a sublime expression of what it means to be Chinese Malaysian, a clear example of the multiple identities of the Chinese people of Malaysia, and a source of pride for the achievements of many Sinophone Malaysian authors in the transnational Sinophone literary arena (Li Yongping, Li Zishu and Zhang Guixing, just to name a few).

As a minor literature,<sup>22</sup> but also as an expression of both the wider Sinophone literary system and of the Malaysian literary system (despite the ongoing debate on what ought to be considered Malaysian literature and the rather strict and chauvinistic posture of Malaysian officialdom and some Malay academics), Sinophone Malaysian literature is deeply rooted in the Chinese Malaysian community, and yet it is also undeniably connected to literary traditions and practices from other geographic circumstances and/or linguistic environments.

#### **II.V.1. The relationship with Chinese literature**

For Sinophone Malaysian literature, the Chinese literary tradition (i.e. the literature from China written in a Sinitic language, be it classical or modern, literary or vernacular)

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<sup>22</sup> The concept of Sinophone Malaysian literature as minor literature will be analyzed in detail in section III.V.

has always represented “both a resource for, and threat to, literary innovation.”(Groppe, 2006: 4)

The birth of modern Sinophone Malay(si)an literature is inextricably linked to the May Fourth Movement of China. Hence, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the influence of the new vernacular (*baihua* 白話) literature from the Chinese Mainland on the birth and development of modern Sinophone Malay(si)an literature is of paramount and undeniable importance.

Before the introduction of the new and revolutionary cultural ideas brought forward by the May Fourth Movement, in Malaya and Singapore, there already existed a rather vibrant Sinophone literary community which produced literature in the classical language, rather than in vernacular and published its works on the art supplements to local newspapers.

In his book-length historical outline of Sinitic-medium literature in Malay(si)an and Singapore, scholar Fang Xiu states that the first publication which showed the strongest belief in the possibility of using the modern version of a Sinitic language in Malay(si)an and Singaporean literary works was the Singaporean newspaper *Xin Guomin Ribao* (新國民日報) along with its cultural supplement, the *Xin Guomin Zazhi* (新國民雜誌), which in October 1919 started to consistently publish a large amount of texts (mainly *sanwen*, but also editorials and more trivial pieces of news). Other newspapers and magazines, such as the *Le Bao* (叻報) and the *Xingzhou Pinglun* (星洲評論) followed shortly after. (Fang, 1986: 12)

Still according to Fang, the shift from classical language to *baihua* that took place in the early years of the twentieth century was made possible by two main and interrelated factors, one internal (the local experience of the Chinese in Malaysia itself), and one external (the changes that were taking place in the textual tradition of China). The Chinese

Malaysian life and experiences (the natural environment, the climate, social interaction and the political situation) were extremely dissimilar from life in mainland China, which thing resulted in the inadequacy of the classical language to accurately portray the local situation and convey the feelings of local Chinese Malaysians. Hence, local authors saw in the tide of cultural changes which was sweeping China at the time an opportunity to discard the constraints of classical Chinese and embrace the possibilities of expression offered by the vernacular language. (Fang, 1986: 9-10)

In the formative period of Sinitic-medium literature in Malay(si)a and Singapore (to which the scholar refers to as *Mahua* literature),<sup>23</sup> the influence of Chinese literature is undeniably evident in locally-produced texts which make large use of the writing techniques and the ideological approaches that were revolutionizing literature in China, but at the same time, in terms of topics discussed, Sinitic-language authors were walking on their own independent and local path (Fang, 1986: 19)

However, Fang Xiu goes even further in time and explains that what he calls *Mahua* Old literature (*Mahua Jiu Wenxue* 馬華舊文學) (from 1815, date of publication of the *Chinese Monthly Magazine* (*Cashisu Meiyue Tongjizhuan* 察世俗每月統記傳), the first magazine directed to a Chinese readership outside of the Chinese borders, to 1919) only existed as a small and weak branch of Chinese (i.e. of China) literature. *Mahua* Old literature had no choice but to mimic the Chinese textual tradition, also due to the fact that most of the writers were not real Sinophone Malay(si)an writers (真正的馬華作家), but were Chinese authors temporarily residing in Malaya and Singapore.

As mentioned above, things in Malaya and Singapore started to change with the

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<sup>23</sup> Fang divides into the four distinct phases of sprouting (*mingya* 萌芽 from 1919 to 1925), expansion (*kuozhan* 擴展 from 1925 to 1931), low tide (*dichao* 低潮 from 1932 to 1936) and flourishing (*fansheng* 繁盛 from 1936 to 1942) (Fang, 1986: 15-17)

introduction of new ideas on language, literature and culture proposed by the advocates of the Chinese May Fourth Movement. These changes led to the formation of a new literature (*xin wenxue* 新文學), which however was still under a clear mainland Chinese influence. The molding position of Chinese literature over *Mahua* New Literature manifests itself in three ways, according to Fang Xiu: firstly, in the fact that *Mahua* New literature still continues to be emotionally and ideologically attached to the textual tradition from China; secondly, in the fact that many Sinitic-language authors from Malaya and Singapore looked at Chinese writers such as Lu Xun, Guo Moruo (郭沫若), or Ba Jin (巴金) as examples to follow; thirdly, the Sinophone Malay(si)an literary community was made up of a large number of writers from China who decided to call this Southeast Asian region home, either permanently or provisionally. (Fang, 1983: 40-41)

According to scholar Yeo Song Nian,

[b]y the end of the 1920s, a new influence swept from China again. This time it was "revolutionary literature"[...] The theorists of "revolutionary literature" used realism and naturalism to expose the social evils of the time with the ultimate wish that the people should unite against the inequalities that existed in society and build a classless, casteless, and free society. Literature to the theorists was a means to communicate their ideas and to achieve reforms.  
(Yeo, 1993: 173)

The introduction of Chinese leftist literature to the colonial regions of Malaya and Singapore, and the subsequent acceptance of a militant vision of literature by Sinophone authors from the region, is also a clear indicator of the fact that China was still the most influential cultural system for the Chinese Malaysian community.

Fang Xiu also distinguishes a third phase in *Mahua* literature, which begins in the early fifties of last century and is still very much continuing today. In fact, after the foundation of the People's Republic of China on the mainland, the influence of Chinese literature on local writers changed considerably. Local Sinophone authors began to realize that Sinophone

Malaysian literature was one part of the global literary scene (整個世界文學的一環), and that it was mature enough to receive the Chinese influence not as a subordinate literature, but as an independent one. This change in attitude was mainly due to diplomatic tensions between the newly established political entities in China and the Southeast Asian region, which led to a shortage of publications from the Chinese mainland reaching Malaya (then Malaysia, from 1963 to date) and Singapore, and also to increased difficulties for people from mainland China to migrate to the region. (Fang, 1986: 42-43)

Fang Xiu insists on the ambivalence of the relationship between Chinese literature and Sinophone Malaysian literature and states that

whenever an important event, or instability, or an especially harsh popular crisis swept China, the relationship between Chinese literature and *Mahua* literature became closer. On the other hand, when there wasn't anything big going on, the relationship would relax. It was not a relation between mainstream and offshoot literature, and it was not an even one from beginning to end; it was loose at time and tight at others, and vice-versa. (Fang, 1986: 4)<sup>24</sup>

This very last point mentioned by Fang Xiu, i.e. the view of Sinophone Malaysian literature not as a side shoot of Chinese literature, but as a literary system in its own right is especially interesting, but not shared by all scholars, especially not by mainland Chinese academics and writers, who still hold firmly onto a very centralist vision of cultural dynamics in the Sinitic-speaking world. In fact, Chinese scholars see the relationship of Chinese literature and the various Sinophone literatures as a centre-periphery kinship, where the Sinitic-medium literature from China (*Zhongguo wenxue* 中國文學) is considered as the fully-developed parent of other Sinophone literatures, which exist only in relation to their Chinese "mother". It is not a coincidence, and definitely not a mere

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<sup>24</sup> The original Chinese language reads as follows: “每逢中國發生大事件、大動盪、民族危機特別嚴重的時候，中國文藝和馬華文藝的關係就很密切。碰到沒有大事件發生時，這個關係就鬆緩。它不是一個主流和支流的關係，也不是從頭到尾一個狀態，而是一鬆一緊、一緊一鬆。”

terminological choice, the fact that Chinese academia still holds rather firmly to the denomination of Overseas Chinese literatures (*Haiwai Huawen wenxue* 海外華文文學), instead of World literatures in Chinese (*Shijie Huawen wenxue* 世界華文文學), or Sinophone literature (*Huayu yuxi wenxue* 華語語系文學), for instance.

Also Chinese Sarawakian scholar and writer Tian Yingcheng (田英成) admits that mainland Chinese scholars need to readdress the issue of Sinophone Southeast Asian literatures (*Dongnanya Huawen wenxue* 東南亞華文文學) in a different way, i.e. by acknowledging the fact that these Sinophone literatures did receive much influence from Chinese new literature, but that after decades of literary and cultural efforts they have been able to fully develop a native literature with its own characteristics (具有特色的本土文學), which is not a subject of the Chinese literary system, nor is it a part of the theoretically problematic concept of Hong Kong and Taiwan literature (*GangTai Wenxue* 港台文學). (Tian, 1999)

Lim Kien Ket also notes this tendency in one of his articles from the early nineties and says that when called to answer to the question of what is Sinophone Malaysian literature, scholars give answers according to two different views shaped by their origin or locale of intellectual practice. Hence, Malaysian academicians, literary critics and writers would undoubtedly answer that Sinophone Malaysian literature is that segment of Malaysian literature written in a Sinitic language. Conversely, those scholars hailing from mainland China would normally claim that it is but a branch of Chinese literature, since by using the Chinese language (*zhongwen* 中文), Malaysian writers are unable to sever the umbilical chord which keeps them linked to their mother culture (母國的文化) (Lim, 1993: 89)

Lim Kien Ket notices how already in 1988, at a conference held in Singapore, Chinese

American scholar Chow Tse-tsung (Zhou Cezong 周策縱) introduced the idea of multiple literary centres (*duoyuan wenxue zhongxin* 多元文學中心). In his work, Zhou insisted on the fact that Southeast Asian literatures written in Sinitic languages (hence, including Sinophone Malaysian literature) had their own artistic centres and were not to be considered peripheral literatures, let alone offshoot literatures, vis-à-vis Chinese literature. (Chow, 1988: 360)

For instance, Malaysian sinologist and Peking University graduate Fan Pik Wah (Pan Bihua 潘碧華) sees a clear-cut difference between pre-World War II Sinophone Malay(si)an literature and its postwar continuation. Pan states that while the former is a mere offshoot (*zhiliu* 支流) of mainland Chinese literature, which used China as its main source of inspiration, the latter received multiple influences from other Sinophone literatures, especially those from Hong Kong and Taiwan, as an independent literary system. (Pan, 2009: 5)

Fan Bik Wah suggests that

[t]he founding of New China prompted the Chinese literature in Malaysia to develop in the direction of native distinctiveness while the then colonial government banned the import of Chinese books, thus suspending the literary exchange between China and Singapore and Malaysia for 40 years. From 1959 to 1975, Hong Kong took the place of China, exporting to Singapore and Malaysia countless literary books and journals and strongly influencing the development of Chinese literature in Malaysia. (Fan, 2000: 95)

However, after the circulation of cultural products between China and Malaysia was interrupted, it was not only Hong Kong which took the role of a cultural model for many Sinophone Malaysian authors. In fact, Taiwan too began to be seen as an important cultural inspiration for many Chinese Malaysians who were proficient in Sinitic languages, and publications from Taiwan started to reach Malaysia regularly. With those literary products, new ideas also arrived to the South Seas. In fact, especially in the 1970s and 1980s,

Sinophone Malaysian authors were well aware of the changing that were taking place within the literary circles in Taiwan. As Pat Gao notes,

[u]ntil modern times, Taiwanese literature lived in the shadow of the traditions of China. In the past few years, however, Taiwan has been finding its own voice. [...] The rebirth of interest in native literature and history dates back to the 1970s. In 1974, the reprint of *Newsboy*, which Yang Kuei (1905-1985) had published locally in a newspaper in Japanese four decades earlier and won him a Japanese literary prize, generated interest among Taiwan's writers and intellectuals in the period of Japanese colonialism (1895-1945). It was during this time that a burgeoning awareness of local literary traditions was accompanied by a call for the return to native roots and socially responsive literature. Then, roughly corresponding with the abolition of martial law in 1987, the discussion of Taiwan's unique literary experiences began to notably increase in quantity and quality among Chinese literature scholars.  
(Gao, 2003)

Just as Taiwan had found its literary voice, so needed to do Sinophone Malaysia, which also attempted at severing its ties with Chinese literature. The ambivalent position of Sinophone Malaysia literature with respect to the literature of China is still a thorny issue that authors and scholars from Malaysia still address regularly. Nevertheless, they do so with a new conscience, with the awareness that they do not constitute a part of Chinese literature, but that decades of textual practice have resulted in an independent literary system, albeit its connectedness with other literary systems with which it shares either linguistic bonds (other Sinitic-medium literatures) or geographic location (other Malaysian literatures).

The geographical shift of Sinophone Malaysian literature from a subordinate local section of Chinese literature to an independent Southeast Asian literary tradition is also noted by Leo Suryadinata who states that

since the Second World War, *Mahua* literature has gradually been transformed into a Malayan literature in the sense that the writers had begun to consider Malaya as their homeland and wrote their works from that perspective. The influence from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and, later, Taiwan is still apparent, but increasingly, local themes dominate *Mahua* literature as they do *Xinhua* (Singapore Chinese) literature.

(Leo Suryadinata, 1993: 5)

The words of Leo Suryadinata clearly show that as Sinophone Malaysian writers start focusing on local issues, the literature they produce gains independence not only vis-à-vis Chinese literature, but also with respect to another important Sinophone literary tradition, the Taiwanese one.

### **II.V.2. The relationship with Taiwan**

The importance of the role played by Taiwan in the formation, in the vitality, and in the circulation of Sinophone Malaysian literature is undeniable. Many scholars have attempted to shed light on the relationship between Sinophone Malaysian writers and the Taiwanese literary system. An interesting recent essay on the topic is an article by Kuei-fen Chiu, professor of Taiwan literature at Chung-hsing University, Taiwan, published in 2008. In his paper, Chiu takes "[t]he insertion of Chinese Malaysian literature into Taiwan's field of literary production at different historical conjunctures" (Chiu, 2008: 597) as an example which could help in the examination of "the complex interplay of "different forces in transnational literary production" (Chiu, 2008: 597). Chiu observes that

Taiwan has a long history of being a locus of active Chinese transnational literary production. There were remarkable , restless interchanges between Taiwan and Hong Kong after the Second World War [...] that exerted a great influence on the literary production of the ethnic Chinese circle in Southeast Asian countries. [...] With book markets increasingly opened up since the late 1980s, works by writers from China began to be published in Taiwan, and they often achieved sensational success.  
(Chiu, 2008: 597)

Similarly, Tee Kim Tong points out how Sinophone writers from Malaysia were not the only ones who appeared on the Taiwan literary scene since the 1960s. In fact, he argues that writers from the Philippines, Hong Kong, Singapore and other international Sinophone communities too published their works on the island. (Tee, 2003: 143)

Chiu attributes the massive appearance of Sinitic-medium writings from Malaysia on the Taiwan literary scene to the

institution of Malaysian literature as national literature in the 1970s, [when] the resources of Chinese literary production in postcolonial Malaysia were seriously undercut. [...] Taiwan became an important venue for young Chinese Malaysian writers to establish their literary reputations as they found it more and more difficult to write and publish in Chinese in Malaysia.

(Chiu, 2008: 597)

Besides, since the late 1980s, mainland writers such as Mo Yan (莫言), Su Tong (蘇童), Han Shaogong (韓少功), Jia Pingwa (賈平凹), Zhang Chengzhi (張承志), Wang Anyi (王安憶), Can Xue (殘雪), and Yu Hua (余華), all had their works published in Taiwan, thus internationalizing even more the already position of Taipei as a centre of paramount importance for the Sinophone editorial world. Tee goes as far as saying that mainland Chinese fiction from the nineties published in Taiwan prompted a flourishing of Sinophone Malaysian writers too. (Tee, 2003: 143-44)

Moreover, it must be kept in mind that - as already mentioned - since Malaysian independence, Taiwan was the preferred destination for Chinese Malaysians who had been educated in Sinitic-medium schools and wanted to pursue higher education. This fact brought to the emergence of a Sinophone Malaysian literature in Taiwan, whose

existence as a transnational literature in Taiwan has a long history that started in the 1960s, when ethnic Chinese Malay(si)an students were encouraged to travel to Taiwan for higher education under the Nationalist government's Overseas Compatriot educational policy.

(Tee, 2010: 86)

Taiwan is considered the natural publishing soil for most Malaysian Sinophone writers, whether they write from Taiwan itself (such as Li Yongping and Zhang Guixing, among others), or whether they still reside in Malaysia (as Li Zishu, for instance). Moreover, it is also an important base where to build a literary career thank to the many literary prizes

offered by the Taiwanese cultural system. However, these prizes and the subsequent establishment of Sinophone Malaysian writers into the Taiwan literary engine, also caused problems within the Sinophone Malaysian literary community itself. As reported in one of the rare popular articles on Sinophone Malaysia literature published outside of Malaysia,

[t]he [Sinophone Malaysian] writers in Taiwan are too flashy. They go home firing cannons. Their work is a major blow to the local [Malaysian] literary scene, which is still involved with traditional realism," says Li Jui-Teng. He feels that the awards they have won have helped to raise the level of writing in Malaysia, but have also caused them to become the rivals of the writers "back home".  
(Chen & Pu, 1998)

Similarly, Li Zishu, also a recipient of various literary prizes in Malaysia

admits that she originally, she decided to "enter a Taiwanese literary contest with some thought of vengeance in mind."  
From her outsider's point of view, "These writers who live in Taiwan are exceptionally conceited and arrogant. They dare to resist tradition and have brought about changes, but their works have a Taiwanese flavour. It is almost as if they are exploiting the South Pacific and the ethnic conflict in the same way that Zhang Yimo [sic] has sold old China to the nations of the West."  
(Chen & Pu, 1988)

According to Zhang Guangda (張光達), the exoticizing technique used by many Sinophone Malaysian writers residing in Taiwan has been noted by others such as scholar Liu Xiaoxin (劉小新), who believes that the reason for their success on the island is due to the qualitative and stylistic differences between their works and the textual products of Taiwan writers. Liu points out that in a society which heavily consumes culture, the Southeast Asian flavour (or *Malaysianness*) of their literary works allowed the Taiwan-based authors to reach the best-selling point of the Taiwanese cultural market. For instance, fictional works by authors such as Huang Jinshu, Pan Yutong (潘雨桐), and Zhang Guixing portray the rainy forest and the rubber plantations of Southeast Asia with a pen imbued with magic and exoticism. Zhang Guangda points out that scholars and writers

in Malaysia tend to perceive the use of an exoticised Malaysian background as a somewhat opportunistic marketing manoeuvre. (Zhang, 2002)

Hence, as it is evident by Sinophone Malaysian writers' will to be recognized in the Taiwan cultural scene, Taiwan becomes one of the two centres of Sinophone Malaysian literature, the other one being Malaysia itself. In spite of the complaining voices from Malaysia, it is undeniable that writers and their works travel back and forth across the South China Sea, thus making the influences mutual.

For instance, it is true that the Malaysian flavour kept lingering over the pages written by most Sinophone Malaysian writers in Taiwan, but it must not be forgotten that these writers were also responsible for introducing new literary movements to Sinophone Malaysia. For example, the Taiwanese nativist movement of the seventies had a decisive role on Sinophone literature from Malaysia, as it indirectly goaded Sinophone Malaysian writers to partially free themselves from the influence of Chinese tradition and invent a tradition of their own.

Additionally, since the 1960s,

Taiwan was heavily reliant on the United States for political protection and economic development. But the impact of the U.S. presence on the island was not restricted to the economic-political field only; it also rocked the literary world as Western music and literature flooded onto the island. (Chiu, 2008: 598)

Sinophone Malaysian writers on the island too embraced these new Western movements, especially the modernist one. Li Yongping, for instance, is the author of one of the most interesting pieces of modernist fiction ever produced in Taiwan, *Jiling Chunqiu*, "a series of stories revolving around the rape of a woman, the book is regarded as completely devoid of any ideological relevance and concerned mainly with eliciting 'disinterested' aesthetic pleasures that readers of the work have been prescreened." (Chiu, 2008: 599)

Therefore, these culturally active Chinese Malaysians in Taiwan have always been the

most natural and constant vehicle connecting two spheres of Sinophone culture, their native Malaysian one and the hosting Taiwanese one. This, together with the unfavourable relations between Malaysia and Mainland China, led Taiwan to be seen as the leading model and major source of inspiration for Sinophone Malaysian literature.

Hence, Sinophone Malaysia was and still is exposed to various literary systems, Sinophone and non-Sinophone, mainly through Taiwan, a central actor in Sinitic-medium publishing and a very receptive soil for literary and cultural trends also from non-Sinitic linguistic areas, such as the United States and Japan, for instance.

Nevertheless, as Tee Kim Tong reminds us, when a nativist positions began to spread across post-martial law Taiwanese cultural circles, Sinophone Malaysian literature published in Taiwan

is suspected, if not accused, of being politically incorrect and un-Taiwan (or un-native) because it generally expresses the Malaysian experience of the Sinophone writers, who reside in Taiwan but still write about memories of tropical rain forests and rubber plantations in their homeland. (Tee, 2010: 87)

Sinophone Malaysian literature published in Malaysia is virtually unknown in Taiwan, while Sinitic-medium works from Chinese Malaysian writers residing on the island are occasionally looked at from the angle of sectional literature and put into the salad bowl of the "new Sinophone literary communities" (*Xinxing Huawen wenxue shequn* 新興華文文學社群) containing other portions of the local literary tradition such as Hakka literature, aboriginal literature, LGBT literature, feminist literature, or e-literature. (Tee, 2005: 11)

In an article appeared in the Taiwanese literary magazine *Wenxun zazhi* (文訊雜誌), Yang Zonghan (楊宗翰) complains of the position of marginality of Sinophone Malaysian writers within the Taiwan literary system. The scholar sees a main problem in the status of Sinophone Malaysian literature on the island: the fact that the great majority of research on

the topic within Taiwanese higher education and research institutions is carried out by fellow Chinese Malaysian academicians, while non-Malaysian scholars generally show little or no interest in scrutinizing the history, the development or the theoretical issues involving Sinophone Malaysian literature. (Yang, 2004: 69-70)

Therefore, one could say that while Taiwan has become fertile soil for Chinese Malaysian who want to express themselves artistically in a Sinitic language, the investigation of their works is still pretty much relegated to scholars coming from a the same Malaysian background and the possibilities of a broader and enriching comparative study of both the Sinophone Taiwanese and the Sinophone Malaysian literary systems has not been carried out yet, and still waits to be addressed.

The situation of Taiwan as the place to which most Sinophone Malaysian writers (wish to) gravitate is largely due to its centrality in the Sinitic-medium cultural realm, and his preeminent position in the Sinophone publishing world. Interestingly, its clear leading role is mainly due to its blurred political situation and meagre international recognition.

Scholars such as Shih Shu-mei are keen to see in Taiwan both a colonized area, non dissimilar to all former colonies across the world, as well as a settler region of the likes of Francophone Canada, as we shall see in more detail in chapter III. However, if regarded as such, how could its pivotal cultural role and its catalyst cultural value be explained? In fact, we shall see in the following chapter how the cultural preeminence of some of the former colonies vis-à-vis their metropolises on the global stage is mainly due to the former colonized entities population (hence, culture consumers) outnumbering by far and large that of the metropolises (an emblematic case is that of Brazil vis-à-vis Portugal, or the role of Mexico, rather than Spain, as the main cultural model for many Central and South American Spanish-speaking countries). Similarly, settler communities with a much smaller cultural market (such as Lusophone insular Africa, to which Taiwan is compared by Shih)

lack either the means or the historical conditions to be considered global models or centres of the language-based cultural communities to which they belong.

Hence, I suggest that the role of Taiwan as a cultural model not only for Sinophone Malaysian literature, but for all Sinophone cultures, be scrutinized under a more complex and political light. If we see Taiwan as the modern (post)colonial periphery of the Chinese metropolis, then it would be a very *sui generis* (post)colonial entity, with a cultural specific weight too heavy if compared with the size of its cultural market. Moreover, if seen as a colony or a small settler community almost contiguous to its "motherland", how is then explainable the fact that since the founding of the PRC on the mainland, its role in the international arena and with respect to ethnic Chinese communities worldwide was one of competing antagonism with Communist China?

To me, the answer is pretty much as straightforward as it is convincing. It is true that Taiwan had been the object of various colonizing assaults (Dutch, Spanish, Qing, Japanese, Chinese Nationalist) and that it received various waves of *Han* settlers; but it must not be forgotten that in 1949, after it lost control of mainland China following the Chinese civil war, the Republic of China (ROC) government under the Nationalist withdrew to Taiwan, thus making the island the temporary seat of what they considered the one and only possible Chinese authority. Hence, from colony or settler community, Taiwan willy-nilly found itself in the position of a shared status of metropolis or "motherlandhood" with Communist China.

Since the 1950s, anxious about being recognized as the only rightful government of China, and prompted by a general climate of international distrust toward Communist China, the Nationalist government on the island sought allegiance among the ethnic Chinese communities scattered globally, and especially in Southeast Asia. The cultural ties between the Sinophone communities and Taiwan were knotted mainly through education.

Ethnic Chinese students from Southeast Asia were given the economic possibility to study at Taiwanese institutions of higher education "based on historical kinship, national feelings, cultural factors, constitutional spirit, and the nation's overall development." (Ministry of Education, 2006)

When in the early seventies of last century, the PRC began to be recognized internationally as the only righteous Chinese government which vigorously opposed any move seen as an endorsement of the ROC on Taiwan as an independent sovereign state, these students were considered an important link between the ROC, the ethnic Chinese communities and the countries to which they belonged. According to the Ministry of Education,

The [educational] policy is implemented with the beliefs of "overseas Chinese are the mother of revolution," "all Chinese people deserve equal educational opportunity," and "there would be no overseas Chinese affairs without overseas Chinese" in mind.

The educational policy for overseas Chinese aims at cultivating overseas Chinese talent and promoting the continuation and development of Chinese culture.

(Ministry of Education, 2006)

Moreover, in 2006, the ROC also clearly pointed out that

[s]ince education for overseas Chinese began in 1951, over 160,000 students from abroad have studied in Taiwan, with over 90,000 graduating. They were from 62 countries around the world. After graduation, the students returned to the countries where they were from and are in all trades and professions. All of them have performed well in their respective trade and *have become the backbone of Chinese society*. In addition to raising the status of the local Chinese, *they have made outstanding contributions to Taiwan's diplomacy or settlement of issues involving foreign countries*, and have helped Taiwan businesses invest in foreign countries.

Educational policy for overseas Chinese is a part of the overall national policy. The policy will not change. However, the policy needs adjustments according to changes in regional and global situations in order to meet the actual needs. *Many years of effort in the education of overseas Chinese have born fruit*. The government will keep up its enthusiasm and faith in paying special attention to education for overseas Chinese and aggressively promote the educational policy for overseas Chinese.

(Ministry of Education, 2006. Italics are mine)

From the above passages one can infer that the main preoccupation of Taiwan in providing educational opportunities for the ethnic Chinese was (is) to assert its role as a promoter of Chinese culture, a leader in the Sinophone cultural arena, but also to avoid diplomatic marginalization in a world increasingly polarized toward the PRC.

Hence, it is easy to see how in a political and diplomatic tug of war with the PRC, and in an effort to be recognized as the guardian of Chinese civilization, the ROC transformed Taiwan in the most important centre of the Sinophone cultural world.

Many Sinophone Malaysian writers such as Huang Jinshu, Li Yongping, Shang Wanyun, and Zhang Guixing, or more recently He Shufang (賀淑芳) and Gong Wanhui (龔萬輝), all belong to those ethnic Chinese who were given the opportunity to study in Taiwan, thus being directly influenced by the Taiwan literary system. Others, such as Chen Zhengxin or Li Zishu, who have apparently no direct connection to Sinophone Taiwan, have acknowledged the island preeminence in the Sinitic-medium cultural and publishing world, as their interest in being published in Taiwan clearly shows.

However, an increasingly high number of ethnic Chinese from Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries choose to further their studies at mainland Chinese university. This geographic shift in educational choices, while not affecting the role of Sinophone Taiwan as a culturally important source of inspiration for Sinophone Malaysian writers, undoubtedly allows many of them to get into a direct and unmediated dialogical relationship with the Chinese literary system, while allowing Sinophone Malaysian literature to become even more global.

### **II.V.3. The relationship with other literatures from Malaysia**

Malaysia with its ethnically and linguistically diverse environment is home to various

literary traditions: the Anglophone textual tradition, Malay-medium literature, the object of the present study: the Sinophone one, and lastly the Tamil-medium one.

In section IV of chapter III, I will extensively discuss Malaysia's official cultural position vis-à-vis non-Malay literary traditions, which are relegated to the marginal position of sectional literatures, thus in a status of inferiority with respect to Malaysian national literature (i.e. the one written in Malay).

It must be pointed out, however, that the inclusion of a literary work within the national literary system is based only on a purely linguistic factor. Hence, writers who are not ethnically Malay can join the ranks of national literature as long as their textual production is written in Malay.

According to Muhammad Haji Salleh,

[w]hen Malay was implemented as the official medium of instruction, ten years after Independence in 1967, literature began to bloom with its brightest tropical colours. Soon it also became the literary language of non-Malay writers like Akhbar Goh, Goh Thean Chye, Joseph Selvam, and others. In the 1970's and 1980's, Ismail Abbas, Jais Sahok, Siow Siew Seng, Lim Swee Tin and Jong Chian Lai followed their footsteps. They brought the Bajau, the Bidayuh, the Chinese and the Indian experience into Malay and enriched it with their cultures and local languages.  
(Muhammad Haji Salleh, 2008: 83)

Therefore, ethnic Chinese writers have contributed to most literary traditions whose geographic centre is Malaysia, and especially to the Anglophone and Malay-medium ones, besides the Sinophone one.<sup>25</sup> However, the interactions among the different language-medium literatures in Malaysia have never been too steady, or fully taken advantage of by writers and scholars alike. Hence, for instance Sinophone Malaysian writers and literary critics have little knowledge of the Malay-medium literary environment,

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<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, Anglophone Chinese Malaysian writers seem to be gravitating more around foreign cultural areas, with which they share linguistic ties, rather than around the Malaysian cultural system. Notable examples are Shirley Geok-lin Lim, who publishes her works mainly in the United States, where she resides, Tash Aw, whose novels have been published in England, or Khoo Gaik Cheng, whose short stories and novels have been published not only in Malaysia, but also in Canada and Australia.

unless they are well-versed in the Malay language. Conversely, authors belonging to the Malay literary system have virtually no understanding of the Sinophone Malaysian literary situation, unless they have access to the scant number of Sinitic-medium Malaysian texts translated into Malay or English.

Malaysian writers and literary scholars of ethnic Chinese background who use Malay as their main medium of creative writing and scholarly research too seem to have little or no interest in a comparative approach to the various literatures of their country. One notable exception is Chong Fah Hing (Zhuang Huaxing 莊華興), whose Sinitic- and Malay-medium writings often deal with Sinophone as well as Malay-medium Malaysian literature. The efforts made by Chong in the direction of a better mutual understanding among the various literary traditions of Malaysia, and more specifically among ethnic Chinese writers who write in different languages, are praiseworthy.

Limited linguistic ability in the Malay language for many Sinophone Malaysian writers (especially for those who were not schooled in post-independence public schools), and conversely, limited or no reading ability in the Sinitic script for many ethnic Chinese Malay-language writers,<sup>26</sup> who come mainly from areas with small Chinese communities with little Sinitic-medium educational infrastructure (such as the states of Kelantan and Terengganu) (Chong, 2008: 18), might be one of the reasons for the lack of communication and mutual influences among Sinophone and Malay-medium literature by ethnic Chinese Malaysians.

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<sup>26</sup> Among ethnic Chinese authors who use Malay as their main or only language of creating writing, one finds writers who have greatly contributed to the development of Malay-medium literature such as Lim Swee Tin, associate professor of traditional and modern Malay literature at the Universiti Putra Malaysia, a writer of poetry and short stories since 1973, and Malaysian recipient of the S.E.A. Writer Award in the year 2000, well-known Sarawakian novelist and short story writer Jong Chian Lai, who also received the same award in 2006, and whose fictional works have been translated into both Chinese and English, and female short story writer and novelist Siow Siew Sing, from the peninsular state of Negeri Sembilan, where she served as a committee member of the local authors' association (Persatuan Penulis Negeri Sembilan), and who now lives abroad.

In a recent essay on Malay-medium literature by ethnic Chinese writers (*Hua Mama wenxue* 華馬馬文學), Chong advocates closer contacts among ethnic Chinese writers who use Sinitic and Malay languages, and sees in literary translators (of ethnic Chinese background mainly) from and into Malay key actors in connecting literatures which albeit written in different languages, share geographic, social and historical traits (Chong, 2008: 19).

As more and more Chinese Malaysians show an increasing interest not only in their community and Sinitic-medium culture, but also in the entire society and language of their own country, while at the same time gaining bilingual competence in both Sinitic and Malay languages, what Chong envisions as a positive future of more intense and regular interactions among literary traditions in different languages, may be closer than expected.

Only when the different literatures in/from/of Malaysia and by Malaysians will not simply acknowledge and respect the existence of each other, but also start to look at each other as equal components of a wider literary polysystem, we could actually see the beginning of a textual tradition which can be called truly Malaysian.

In a truly Malaysian literary polysystem, each language-based textual component will benefit from new ideas coming from the other branches of the polysystem and - through them - from other literary systems. Hence, for instance, Sinophone Malaysian literature would benefit from ideas and theoretical approaches coming from the Malay-medium literatures of Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Indonesia,<sup>27</sup> and from Anglophone literatures from diverse geographic and cultural locations, while Malay-medium literature could greatly benefit from refreshingly new ideas originating not only in Anglophone cultural areas, but also in the Sinophone cultural realm, and presented thanks to Sinophone

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<sup>27</sup> As a normative form of the Riau Islands dialect of Malay, the Indonesian language is roughly mutually intelligible with Bahasa Melayu/Malaysia, the official language of Brunei, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Malaysian writers and scholars.

**CHAPTER III:**  
**Sinophone Malaysian Literature:**  
**Three Words, Two Adjectives, One Concept**

**III.I. Introduction**

This chapter is an attempt at looking at the object of study of the present dissertation from different theoretical perspectives. In so doing, I wish to shed light on *Sinophone Malaysian literature*, a concept only apparently easy to define. Therefore, this theoretical section of my research work constitutes a thorough examination of the various approaches to the Sinophone, and other terminological concepts (as alternatives to the highly problematic use of the term *Chinese*).

As the name itself shows, Sinophone Malaysian literature is a complex literary system in which at least two souls coexist: the Sinophone and the Malaysian. Hence, in section III.III of the present chapter, I scrutinize the Sinophone aspect, while in section III.IV, I enter the Malaysian dimension of Sinophone Malaysian literature, in order to present the reader with a complete and effective theorization of the object of study.

**III.II. What are Sinophone Studies?**

**III.II.1 Genesis and usage of the Sinophone as a theoretical framework**

The concept of the Sinophone is a new and controversial idea coined in the early years of the first decade of the new century, and which is slowly gaining acceptance and popularity in Western (mainly North-American) and Taiwanese (where it is known as *huayu yuxi* 華語語系) academic circles. It proposes new critical approaches to the study of Sinitic language cultural actors, phenomena and production.

In the forefront of Sinophone studies, we find the work of Shih Shu-Mei, who insists in drawing a clear-cut line between the Sinitic-language cultural expressions by ethnic *Han* people within the geopolitical borders of China, and the myriads of Sinitic-medium outputs from fertile soils at the margins of Cultural (or Greater) China.<sup>28</sup> In an early-2004 article titled "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition", professor Shih explains 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.  
(Shih, 2004: 29)

In the above passage, Shih specifically defines the Sinophone as used in the expression "Sinophone literature", but it is by no means a conception limited to the literary realm in the strict sense, as she also demonstrates in her 2007 book-length essay. In fact, it is a useful

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<sup>28</sup> Tu Weiming defines Cultural China as a continuous interaction among three symbolic universes. The first consists of mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore--that is, the societies populated predominantly by cultural and ethnic Chinese. The second consists of Chinese communities throughout the world, including a politically significant minority in Malaysia and a numerically negligible minority in the United States. These Chinese, estimated to number from twenty to thirty million, are often referred to by the political authorities in Beijing and Taipei as *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese). [...] The third symbolic universe consists of individuals, such as scholars, teachers, journalists, industrialists, traders, entrepreneurs, and writers, who try to understand China intellectually and bring their conceptions of China to their own linguistic communities.  
(Tu, 1993: 13-14)

According to Prado-Fonts (2006: 42), with whose idea I agree, the notion of a Cultural or Greater China is a "sometimes vague, controversial but, at the same time, useful concept", which is however not devoid of limitations.

Wang Gungwu is also aware of the vagueness of the term Greater China, but he also affirms that such unclarity "should not prevent it being used to explore some current and future developments. [...] depending on which aspect is emphasized, the actual area covered can be significant." (Wang, 1993: 926)

idea which can modify virtually any cultural realm whose production is language (written and/or oral)-based. Therefore, for instance, one can also talk about Sinophone cinema, Sinophone theatre and Sinophone music.

According to Lincot,

[m]ore fundamentally, Shih's thesis is 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.

(Lincot, 2007: 1)

In an extensively revised excerpt of her 2007 book-length disquisition on the subject, 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.

(Shih, 2010: 41)

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 expression "Sinitic language" (or "Sinitic script"); to be considered Sinophone, an author, a film director (or a cultural produce) must not only express himself (or be written/performed) in one of the various Sinitic languages (e.g. Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, and all the other linguistic varieties used by ethnic Chinese people across the globe), 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, an alternative prerequisite to the geographic marginality (in relation with China) in order to be considered part of the Sinophone cultural realm is the ethnic difference (which in many cases becomes ethnic marginality) of the artist (or his cultural product) in relation with 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.

Sheldon Lu, in a 2007 essay on Chinese-language cinema, also aims at defining the category of the Sinophone, which he already proposed in an earlier article co-written with Emilie Yueh-Yu Yeh, where Sinophone is a concept used to explain the linguistic multiplicity in the Chinese cinematic realm, in contrast with the mainland Chinese linguistic standard and despite of "the linguistic hierarchy and social discrimination embedded in Chinese cinema and society." (Lu & Yeh, 2005: 3).

Lu seems to be aware of the fact that the concept of the Sinophone transcends the meaning embraced by the simpler expression "Chinese-language", and he admits that, for instance,

“Huayu dianying,” “Chinese-language cinema,” and “Sinophone cinema” seem to be equivalent terms denoting a same field of cultural production and a same analytic framework. But the connotations of these terms may diverge as well as overlap.  
(Lu, 2007)

However, in his discussion on Chinese cinema (2007), Lu only focuses on the purely linguistic aspect of the Sinophone, in practice equating it to a sort of Sinitic polyphony of languages, jargons and speeches. Lu's explanation of the Sinophone lacks what Shih, on the other hand, considers one of the constitutive elements of the theory of the Sinophone: the geopolitical and/or ethnic dimension. Lu analyses, among others, filmic productions which have sprout from the geographic centre of the Chinese world (mainland Chinese movies)

and which are the craft of ethnically central *Han* artists .

Hence, in Lu's essays one witnesses discussions over cultural items which - if one accepts Shih's definition - should not be considered Sinophone *sensu stricto* (i.e. the films of Feng Xiaogang (馮小剛) and Jia Zhangke (賈樟柯), produced in China by ethnic *Han* directors). In fact, they do not present either of the two alternative prerogatives that according to Shih constitute a Sinophone cultural produce, i.e. its being produced outside of the mainland Chinese borders - or as Shih writes, in "those areas of the world where different Sinitic languages are spoken and written outside China" (Shih, 2007: 28) -, or its being the cultural output - from within the frontiers of mainland China and in a Sinitic language - of an artist not belonging to the *Han* ethnic majority.

However, in Sheldon Lu's vision, any production by ethnic *Han* artists from within China which challenges the idea of a monolithic linguistic (and cultural) standard can be considered Sinophone. Hence, his discussions of the movies by Jia Zhangke, who

[c]onsistent with the usage of dialect in his previous films, [...] made *The World* as another Shanxi dialect film. However, set in 21st-century Beijing, the film uses language in a way that connotes more than a provincial dialect; it intervenes in the mixed premodern, modern, and postmodern condition of China at large.  
(Lu, 2007)

Similarly, Lu analyzes the more recent production of commercial director Feng Xiaogang as Sinophone by virtue of the fact that

local dialects also play important thematic functions [...]. The use of the Sichuanese and Hebei dialects in *Cell Phone* (Shouji, 2003) and the Hebei dialect in *A World without Thieves* (Tianxia wu zei, 2004) produces comic effects to entertain the domestic Chinese audience on New Year Eve's in 2004-05. More important, these dialects subtly mount a social critique of China's modernization.  
(Lu, 2007)

The different positions on the Sinophone held by Shih and Lu should be read also on the basis of the intellectual and ideological provenance of the two critics.

Shih's exclusion of *Han* cultural production from China from the concept of the Sinophone might respond to an ideological alignment of the scholar to a position against the China-centric vision of Sinitic-medium culture and hence, as an answer to the idea of the term 'Chinese' as an "hegemonic sign [which] easily slips into or becomes complicit with China-centrism". (Shih, 2010: 40)

On the other hand, Sheldon Lu, of mainland Chinese background, does not perceive the Sinophone as the theoretical expression of geographic centre-periphery dynamics, and prefers to see a uniting thread - rather than a dividing line - among cultural produces which question the very idea of an undiversified Chinese language use conveying a uniform cultural world. Hence, in Lu's vision, the centre-periphery dynamics do not correspond to the geopolitical existence of a Chinese centre and a Sinophone periphery, which Shih attempts to put into question time and again.

Despite the different views on the conceptual and terminological value of the Sinophone, both Lu and Shih agree on the fact that even though language is not the only prerequisite for a cultural item or its producer to be classified as Sinophone, however it is the most important, since

[t]he Sinophone recognizes that speaking fractions of different Sinitic languages associated with China is a matter of choice and other historical determinations, and hence the Sinophone exists only to the extent that these languages are somehow maintained. The Sinophone recedes or disappears as soon as the languages in question are abandoned.  
(Shih, 2007: 30)

In 2006, U.S.-based Taiwanese literary scholar David Der-Wei Wang (Wang Dewei 王德威) also used the term Sinophone (which he translates as *huayu yuxi* 華語語系) in a Chinese-language article which appeared on the literary supplement to the Taiwanese newspaper *United Daily News* (Lianhe Bao 聯合報). According to Wang, the expression Sinophone literature is not dissimilar from

Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Lusophone literatures, in the sense that it denotes the literature written in every corner of the world, but the respective suzerain states, in the language of the suzerain state itself. [...]

Hence Sinophone literature is not a refurbished version of what was earlier known as Overseas Chinese literature. Its original territory lies overseas, but it should also be extended to mainland Chinese literature and the two should engage in a dialogic exchange.

(Wang, 2006)<sup>29</sup>

In spite of a somewhat similar non-mainland Chinese background, Wang's position appears to be more conciliatory than that of Shih Shu-mei. Moreover, by putting the accent on the linguistic (and cultural) commonalities of Sinophone literatures, rather than on their national differences, Wang "attempts to denationalize and deethnicize literature in Chinese; for him the Sinophone is language- and community-based" (Tee, 2010: 80).

As the above quote shows, Taiwan-based Chinese Malaysian literary theorist Tee Kim Tong as well analyzes the inclusive/exclusive character of the term Sinophone and says that while for Shih Shu-mei it is an exclusive concept, for David Der-Wei Wang the word has an inclusive meaning. Tee writes,

Unlike Shih, David Der-wei Wang proposes to use the term 'Sinophone literature' globally, to include all modern literatures in Chinese, including Chinese literature produced inside China. [...] As Wang's definition of Sinophone literature includes products from both inside China and outside China, it is a literature that is Chinese, but not quite so; and China, in Wang's schema, is 'included *outside*' the Sinophone. 'Sinophone,' therefore, is the *mot juste* to qualify such a literature.

(Tee, 2010: 80)

While the coinage of the Sinophone as a conceptual category is (self-)attributed to Shih -"I coined the notion of the Sinophone [...]" (Shih, 2010: 36) -, and the earliest mainland Chinese perspective on the same notion is attributable to Lu, there has been an ongoing

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<sup>29</sup> The translation is mine. The original text in Chinese reads as follows: "這個詞的對應面包括了Anglophone (英語語系)、Francophone (法語語系)、Hispanophone (西語語系)、Lusophone (葡語語系)等文學，意謂在各語言宗主國之外，世界其他地區以宗主國語言寫作的文學。[...] 華語語系文學因此不是以往海外華文文學的翻版。它的版圖始自海外，卻理應擴及大陸中國文學，並由此形成對話。"

debate on the Sinophone field of studies since the second half of last decade, as demonstrated by a conference held at Harvard University in December 2007, "Globalizing Modern Chinese Literature: Sinophone and Diasporic Writings". In 2010, the results of "the dynamic and polemical discussions that took place at [the] conference" (Tsu & Wang, 2010: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS) were collected in a volume of critical essays titled *Global Chinese Literature*, and edited by U.S.-based literary critics and scholars Jing Tsu and David Der-Wei Wang.

The volume is the first multi-authored collection which clearly deals with Sinitic-medium literature (and culture) from the perspective of the Sinophone.

The contributions - all from scholars carrying out their research activity in the U.S, Anglophone Europe (England) and Taiwan - seem to share Shih's view of the Sinophone as a category excluding the China-based *Han* artist and his production from the discussion, and as a sign of resistance to China-centric forces. Even literary theorist and translator Julia Lovell's contribution, which centres on the dynamics of international recognition of what she names Chinese literature, actually falls within the object of study of the Sinophone theoretical framework, as Lovell's essay deals with Nobel-prize laureate Gao Xingjian 高行健, a Sinophone (and Francophone) writer who traded his official Chinese identity for a French identity long ago.

Besides Shih Shu-mei's extensively revised excerpts of her 2007 monograph, the most important theoretical contributions to the field of Sinophone (literary) studies which appear in the volume are those by Ng Kim Chew, Sau-ling C. Wong and Tee Kim Tong.

Ng Kim Chew, whose stories will be analyzed in chapter V, "proposes to ground Sinophone literature simultaneously in three words: native land, colonial heritage, and universal diasporic structure yet to come" (Tsu & Wang, 2010: 10). All three elements

mentioned by Ng, can be easily found in many of the fictional works analyzed in chapters IV and V of the present dissertation. For instance, native land - in the shape of Sarawak - is of paramount importance in Zhang Guixing's text analyzed in chapter V; the occasional use of English expressions in many Sinophone Malaysian creative writings reminds the reader of the fact that the independent country we now call Malaysia, once was a colonial entity subject to the British crown; the "universal diasporic structure yet to come" is probably already here and made its appearance in Chen Zhengxin's short story, which connects ethnic Chinese people from different locales in one single net of interpersonal relations. In his essay, Ng Kim Chew elaborates the idea of a minor Sinophone literature, thus blending the concept of the Sinophone with that of *littérature mineure* proposed by Deleuze and Guattuari (1975) in an attempt to analyze the peculiar situation of Kafka, a Jewish author writing in German in Prague.

Sau-ling C. Wong's contribution to the volume is a brief, but enlightening survey of the various naming practices of the object of Sinophone studies, as well as a better look at the centre-periphery dynamics which a thorough conceptualization of the Sinophone cannot avoid taking into account. Wong declares that

[i]n much current Sinophone cultural discourse, [...] a center is often spoken of as if it were a powerful gravitational field, made up of some unspecified and irresistible (not to be resisted) combination of the Chinese nation-state, the Chinese cultural tradition (including the Chinese language), the Chinese national literature, and the Chinese people.  
(Wong, 2010: 51)

Wong proposes to see the reverse of the China-centric power not in the centrifugal possibilities of the various Sinophone peripheries, but rather in their potential to localize themselves in such a way that makes it feasible, at least on a theoretical level, for the localized Sinophone to see the centre as culturally irrelevant. (Wong, 2010: 52)

In the analysis of the various nomenclatures of what Shih theorizes as the Sinophone,

Wong pays particular attention to two especially problematic naming practices within the Sinophone world itself: *haiwai huawen/ren wenxue* 海外華文/人文學 (both translatable as "Overseas Chinese Literature") and *shijie huawen/ren wenxue* 世界華文/人文學 (translatable as "World Chinese Literature"). The first definition, chronologically anterior, has slowly given pace to the latter. According to Wong, this shift marks a movement - not only terminological - from China-centrism and diasporic concerns to a greater awareness of possible global interactions across the Sinophone world (and beyond) which take little or no account of China's position. Using Wong words, "[i]f *haiwai* evokes the process of scattering as well as a muted anxiety about the center/origin, *shijie*, in completely ignoring the issue of center/origin, [...] connotes an ambition to make one's presence known and appreciated in the world" (Wong, 2010: 68).

More problematic is, still according to Wong, the shift from *wen* to *ren*, i.e. from language to ethnicity. "Assembling a literature by language is relatively defensible because of the simplicity of the criteria applied", says Wong (2010: 68), but on the other hand, ethnicity conceptualized as 'shared blood' "allows disparate writers in non-Chinese languages, some of whom are quite distanced by circumstances or by choice from Chinese culture, to be claimed as one of us (*zijiren* 自己人)" (Wong, 2010: 69).

While the *shijie huawen wenxue* mentioned by Wong certainly fits well in the definition of Sinophone literature proposed by Shih, as it not only deals with the linguistic aspect of Sinitic-medium writings, but also with the transnational artistic interactions among the very diverse Sinophone communities, *shijie huaren wenxue* can definitely not be considered a Sinophone expression, not only for obvious linguistic reasons. In fact, the *ren* - i.e. the ethnic component - in literature by actually facilitating a process of appropriation by the centre of writings by ethnic Chinese from outside of China's boundaries, undermines

the 'anti-China-centric' essence of the whole concept of the Sinophone

It must be added, that Wong has a somewhat ambiguous position on the term Sinophone. She admits that her usage of the term "is strictly denotational, without the theoretical complexities in Shu-mei Shih's sophisticated analysis" (Wong, 2010: 49). She also uses the expression "Sinophone Chinese literature outside China" at various points in her essay, thus implicitly obliging the reader to take into consideration the fact that there could be a Sinophone Chinese (I understand her use of Chinese here as being equivalent to *Han* within the Chinese boundaries) cultural production from within China - as Sheldon Lu proposes -, thus questioning Shih's assumption of the Sinophone as the Sinitic-medium outside *Han* China, be it in a peripheral position or not.

Tee Kim Tong takes yet another angle from which to look at the concept of the Sinophone, on a more chronological and alternative tone. In fact, the Chinese Malaysian scholar notes how most recent efforts to construct a concept of the Sinophone applicable to Sinitic-medium literatures is not new. He supports his thesis by mentioning the first international conference on "The Commonwealth of Chinese Literature," held in 1986 in Gunzburg (former West Germany) and a second conference held two years later in Singapore, also centred on the theme of Sinitic-medium literature in the Southeast Asian context. Tee notes how one can see in these early international encounters on Sinitic-medium literatures from outside China an alternative theorization of the Sinophone, even if it was still called Chinese literature, and not known by the term Sinophone, as such. In fact, he quotes the late Professor Chow Tse-tsung and his idea of "'multiple literary centers' for various Chinese communities of literary production" (Tee, 2010: 81).

The multiple literary centres thus balance the China-centric tendency to look at the Sinophone as a peripheral cultural space.

Tee also proposes the Taiwanese poet Yu Kwang-chung (Yu Guangzhong 余光中)'s Three-world theory of Sinophone literature as an alternative vision of the Sinophone. The first world, Tee explains is constituted by Sinitic-medium literature produced on the Chinese mainland, the second world consists of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau literatures, while the third is made up of the various Sinitic-medium literatures from Southeast Asia, and elsewhere, I might add. This theory of the Sinophone, which however is never mentioned by Yu as such, is inclusive of mainland Chinese production, pretty much like the ideas proposed by David Der-wei Wang and Sheldon Lu, and unlike Shih Shu-mei's exclusive view.

However, the most interesting contribution made by Tee Kim Tong to the field of Sinophone literary studies is the application of the polysystem theory by Israeli cultural theorist Itamar Even-Zohar to the specific case of Sinitic-medium literatures from outside China.<sup>30</sup> In fact, it is in the light of the polysystem theory, which helps to explain the complexity of culture within a single community and between communities, that Tee comes up with the idea of *xinxing huawen wenxue* 新興華文文學, i.e. "new Chinese literatures" or "new literatures in Chinese". The Chinese Malaysian scholar explains his concept as follows:

My idea is to resist the incorporation and co-optation of the diasporic and border voices into the China-centric dominant institution under the rubric of overseas or world Chinese literature. The concept of "new Chinese literatures", in my formulation, refers to the writing in Chinese produced in the diasporic Chinese communities, which form a deterritorialized and reterritorialized space in the postcolonial and postmodern age.  
(Tee, 2010: 84)

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<sup>30</sup> Even-Zohar declares that:

the term "polysystem" is more than just a terminological convention. Its purpose is to make explicit the conception of a system as dynamic and heterogeneous in opposition to the synchronistic approach. It thus emphasizes the multiplicity of intersections and hence the greater complexity of structuredness involved. Also, it stresses that in order for a system to function, uniformity need not be postulated.  
(Even-Zohar, 1990: 12)

They are named "new", because they have flourished in the decades of the seventies, eighties (Hong Kong and Taiwan), and nineties (Sinophone Malaysia) of last century.

Tee, similarly to what Shih does, draws an imaginary line between the Sinophone (or new Chinese, using his terminology) and Chinese literatures which follows the geopolitical (Han/non-Han ethnic) divisions, which contrasts sharply with the dialogic image proposed by Wang (2006). The reason for Tee's exclusion of Sinitic-medium literature from China (which he names *ChinaLit*) is due to his "idea of new Chinese literatures [being] also both language and place-based, but emphasizes the mobility and transnationalism of Sinophone literature." (Tee, 2010: 86).

However, the place-based definitions of the Sinophone (or new Chinese) supported by Shih and Tee pose another problem, which has not been solved (although Tee himself acknowledges its existence): with more and more ethnic Chinese authors choosing to move to mainland China, be it permanently or for a fixed period of time, mainly due to academic reasons, as in the case of Sinophone Malaysian prose writers Fan Pik Wah and Kek Lian Wah (Guo Lianhua 郭蓮花), for instance, how to categorize their production? Should it still be considered Sinophone, even when China-based?

Hence, as this and the following sections demonstrate, the Sinophone is still pretty much a concept *in-the-making*, and its definition and usage are both variable and highly subjective.

### **III.II.2. The other "-phones"**

To most people with even only a meagre smattering of Postcolonial studies, the term Sinophone will ring a bell, and they will most probably relate it immediately to other "-phones", whose usage is more widely accepted both within the academia and in everyday

life, such as Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Lusophone. As Shih explains, "[t]he Sinophone, like the other nonmetropolitan areas that speak metropolitan languages, has a colonial history." (Shih, 2007: 28) In fact, when explaining the intellectual origin of the theory of the Sinophone, Shih admits that her major inspiration is ascribable to her colleague Françoise Lionnet's work on the Francophone (Shih, 2007: ix).

In 2006, in his already-mentioned Chinese-language article, David Der-Wei Wang also compares the Sinophone to the other aforementioned four "-phones", tracing commonalities (their transnational character), but also being attentive to their fundamental differences, which shall be analyzed in detail in this section of my study.

However, firstly, I will attempt at scrutinizing the Francophone, from which Shih has admittedly taken inspiration in order to create her theoretical concept of the Sinophone.

The field of Francophone studies was born and originally practiced mainly in France by French-speaking scholars who, according to Hargreaves and Moura, "have seen in 'postcolonialism' an oversimplified and unduly politicized 'Anglo-Saxon' approach to the cultures of formerly colonized peoples." (Hargreaves & Moura, 2007: 307)

The very same term Francophone is deeply rooted in the French language, and is a cognate of the word *Francophonie*, a concept widely used throughout the French-speaking world, albeit a general agreement on its meaning has never been reached and a commonly accepted definition is yet to be created.

Ager summarizes *Francophonie* as a

changing concept becoming gradually better known in the Francophone world and outside it, but not yet clearly understood nor yet itself clear on its purposes. [...] It is firstly the French language and its future. Secondly, it is the values, ideals and identity of an imagined community of nations and peoples. Thirdly, it is a recently founded international organization of the governments of some 50 countries or regions.  
(Ager, 1996: 177)

For some scholars, like Badr, the *Francophonie* is a concept which swings between the

purely linguistic and the more widely cultural realms, and

generally means the group of peoples, French people included - of course -, that express themselves in French, as a native or acquired language. Therefore, one is not only talking about a language, but also about a plural cultural heritage which translates the very spirit of such language. (Badr, 2007: 3)<sup>31</sup>

It is interesting to note how Badr talks about "peoples" in the plural form, thus underlining a plurality which is not only cultural, but also ethnic.

Tétu, apart from the linguistic and the geopolitical dimension of the Francophonie, also underlines its cultural character, a shared sense of belongingness common to Francophone communities across the five continents. To him,

the francophone space represents a reality which is not exclusively geographic or linguistic, but also cultural. It groups those who, whether near or far, feel or experience a certain sense of belonging to the French language or to the Francophone cultures. (Tétu, 1997: 14)<sup>32</sup>

Through a postcolonial perspective, to the above dimensions Parker adds one of solidarity:

If the centre (France) is perceived as oppressive, francophonie can gain strength from solidarity. Whereas *francophonie institutionnelle*, that is, the OIF remains suspected of neocolonialism, the community of people/s who make up *francophonie* can create an *espace de solidarité*, reconciliation, hybridity and identity/ies. This amounts to a reinvention of francophonie from the outside. If this is the case, then francophonie is postcolonial not so much because it comes into its own *after* colonization is over, but because it goes *beyond*. (Parker, 2003: 101)

While recognizing the evident colonial past of the Francophone, Parker also states that a shift is possible in the direction of postcoloniality, but not understood as a mere

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<sup>31</sup> The French-language original reads as follows: "Le terme 'francophonie' signifie généralement l'ensemble des peuples, y compris les Français bien entendu, qui s'expriment en français, en tant que langue maternelle ou acquise. Pourtant ici, il ne s'agit pas seulement d'une langue, mais aussi d'un héritage culturel pluriel qui traduit l'esprit même de cette langue."

<sup>32</sup> The text in French reads as follows: "L'espace francophone représente une réalité non exclusivement géographique ni même linguistique, mais aussi culturelle; elle réunit qui, de près ou de loin, éprouvent ou expriment une certaine appartenance à la langue française ou aux cultures francophones."

chronological phase which comes with the end of political colonization. Rather, she sees the postcolonial dimension of the francophone in the unfolding possibilities of reconciliation and pluralism. In sum, according to Parker and to most academicians in the Anglophone world, the colonial past of *Francophonie* is undeniable (with the notable exception of some European regions such as Wallonia in Belgium, Romandy in Switzerland, and the Aosta Valley Region in Italy) thus making it a postcolonial expression, more than it is a set of common linguistic practices and shared cultural values, as it appears to be theorized by many French scholars.

One peculiarity of the *Francophonie* is its official character within the international community as a supranational organization. This very same official aspect is also shared by another important "-phone": the Lusophone, or *Lusofonia*, as it is known in Portuguese.

In an article published in 1991, Hamilton differentiates the adjectives Francophone and Lusophone, from their respective French and Portuguese nouns, *Francophonie* and *Lusofonia*. He states that while the adjectives are fairly neutral in meaning,

[t]he noun *lusofonia*, on the other hand, is modeled on *francophonie*, a word reputedly coined by General Charles de Gaulle and used by the famous Gallic statesman and fervent patriot to identify an ideological, mythic construct shared by diverse human groups and held together by the millennial force of a common language that conveys a historic and, of course, French-dominant macro-culture.  
(Hamilton, 1991a: 612)

Hamilton's view is interesting especially because it dispenses the "-phones" from their negative colonial burden,<sup>33</sup> a negative and somewhat patronizing load which he attributes only to the postcolonial official organizations. It is also worth noting his view of a monolithic shared linguistic practice within the realm of each "-phone", a vision which does not apply to the Sinophone, as we shall see below.

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<sup>33</sup> In another essay, the same scholar writes even more clearly that "[t]o [his] mind, Lusophone is a fairly innocuous appellation that compares with Francophone and Anglophone; *francophonie*, on the other hand, describes a well-defined ideological concept" (Hamilton, 1991b: 314).

Dacosta Holton and Klimt propose a dynamic view of the various "-phones", through the Lusophone case, by stating that "[t]he degree of acceptance—or adamant rejection—of the concept of the “Lusophone world” as a multi-continental, multi-racial harmonious whole depends upon the historical period, ideological purpose, and geographic and social space in which it is deployed" (Dacosta Holton & Klimt, 2009: 9)

The Anglophone and Hispanophone concepts are not dissimilar from the two "-phones" discussed above, and all four share a few fundamental characteristics which can be exemplified as follows: they are all multi-national and multi-ethnic constructs which result from a common history of European colonialism (except the examples of Francophone Europe mentioned above). Moreover, their basic and most constitutive component is the presence of a shared linguistic medium (the language of the colonizer) and the culture and values which it conveys.

On the issue of inclusion/exclusion of the metropolises/ideal (or ideological) centres within the realm of the "-phone", the points of view vary greatly. While for instance, there is a tendency to include Portugal within the field of Lusophone studies, and when one speaks of the Hispanophone world, Spain is normally included, an exclusion tendency is usually the norm when dealing with Francophone and Anglophone studies.

Another important trait of these European-language based "-phones" is the fact that their respective base languages are spoken, outside of the former metropolis, by ethnically diverse peoples who spoke (or in some cases still speak) indigenous languages. Hence, English, French, Spanish and Portuguese were all imposed over an existing multilingual substratum.

While the concepts of Anglophone and Francophone also present a settler dimension (Anglophone United State and Francophone Canada), Hispanophone and Lusophone only present a colonial (and postcolonial) feature.

### **III.II.3. How is the Sinophone different?**

The differences between these "-phones" and the Sinophone are rather important, in my opinion. Therefore, I will try to exemplify them, with precise examples drawn from the above-mentioned four other "-phones", when necessary.

Firstly, I believe that one should actually make a further division of the Sinophone into two branches, which result from different historical circumstances. On the one side, one finds the postcolonial dimension of the Sinophone, while on the other side of the coin, one observes the diasporic or postmigrant character of the Sinophone.

In this respect, both Shih and Lu trace differences between the Sinophone and other language-based communities or cultural systems. Lu, for instance, clearly states that Sinophone communities around the globe are

by and large not the result of the historical colonization of indigenous peoples of the Southern hemisphere and the consequent imposition of colonizers' languages on them, as in the case of the former colonies of France. [...] To a great extent, Chinese-language cinema [and any other Sinophone cultural product] is the result of the migration of Chinese-dialect speakers around the world.  
(Lu, 2005: 4)

The postcolonial Sinophone is not the least different from the other "-phones" mentioned supra, and it represents the expression of the colonized by means of the language of the former colonizer. Therefore, just as Shih does, one can draw certain parallelisms - *mutatis mutandis* - between the situation of former subjects of European colonial powers and the situation of former (or present) Chinese colonies.

For instance, Sinophone Taiwan, which fell under Qing imperial administration in the seventeenth century, and then after fifty years as a Japanese subject territory (1895-1945), it was occupied by the Nationalist Party of China in 1949, is still considered by some as a *de facto* Chinese colony, and in this respect its postcolonial relation vis-à-vis the metropolitan

area is not unlike that of, for example, Lusophone Africa and Portugal, or Francophone Maghreb and France. Tibet and the central Asian region of Xinjiang (the area which was earlier known by the name of Chinese or East Turkestan) as well are often considered subject territories geographically adjacent to the *Han* Chinese metropolis. Hence, their relationship too can be considered one between colonizer and colonized.

On the other hand, what I named diasporic or postmigrant Sinophone is not the result of a colonial past, but it is rather the consequence of migratory fluxes from the centre to places considered at the margins in relation with that very same centre. When the two dimensions of the Sinophone are compared geographically, the diasporic or postmigrant represents the biggest share between the two, as it spans across five continents, following the migratory routes of the Chinese people from China outwards.

Shih draws parallelisms between this diasporic or postmigrant aspect of the Sinophone across the world and the other various "-phones". To her, Sinophone Singapore is not dissimilar to Anglophone United States, insofar as both can be considered settler countries, the first with a *Han*, thus Sinophone majority, and the second with an Anglophone majority.

Shih also compares Taiwan to Francophone Québec ("[i]n Quebec, roughly 82 percent of the population is Francophone, and a similar percentage of the Taiwanese speak the standard Mandarin") and to the Lusophone insular countries of Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe, "where the Portuguese settled in the fifteenth century and where diverse immigrants and Africans form a mixed-race community." (Shih, 2007: 28-29)

I believe the situation of Taiwan to be much more postcolonial rather than diasporic or postmigrant, insofar as even today, the power relation between Sinophone Taiwan and a real or imagined centre of Chinese culture is a relationship between the colonized periphery (Taiwan) and the metropolis, albeit with its own specificities not comparable to other postcolonial situations, as we shall see momentarily.

An important difference between the examples of non-postcolonial Sinophone geographic circumstances and settler communities (Anglophone United States, Francophone Québec and Lusophone insular Africa) lies in the very same linguistic-based idea of the "-phone" which Shih uses to draw comparisons among these diverse realities. In fact, in the Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone cases cited by Shih, the situation of the base language of the "-phone" is one of dominance, both numerical and official. In fact, 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 being Singapore, where however, standard Mandarin shares its co-officiality with English, Bahasa Malaysia and Tamil, and is practically subordinated to English, which is the *de facto* administrative language, and to a certain extent is also ideologically subordinated to Malay, 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 marginalized 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) and Malaysia, Canada (both Anglophone and Francophone) and Peru respectively.

Moreover, many former "-phone" communities of the settler type (and also some of the postcolonial type) not only are not in a marginal position vis-à-vis their linguistic and cultural centre (or metropolis) any more, but they have also become linguistic and cultural centres in their own right, becoming linguistic and cultural models for other former settler regions or colonies. Thus they freed themselves from the label of settler countries and (cultural) colonial subjects, which relegated them to a peripheral and/or subordinate position in relation with their European metropolises. The most emblematic case is that of the Anglophone United States, which severed the linguistic and cultural Atlantic umbilical chord linking them to England and became their own cultural centre and also the cultural model of - among others - Anglophone Canada, which traded her peripheral position vis-à-vis England for an equally marginal position in relation to the United States.

Similarly, Francophone Québec - and not metropolitan France - has become the linguistic and cultural referent for all Francophone communities in North America (Québec itself, New Brunswick, Francophone Ontario, and Southern Manitoba). In the Lusophone and Hispanophone worlds too, one can easily find similar example, with the only difference that the marginal regions which became cultural centres are to be considered less of settler communities and more of former colonies. Brazil, for example, is now the cultural centre of the Lusophone world, and a linguistic and cultural model for much of Lusophone Africa, while Mexico's linguistic and cultural prominence in the Hispanophone world cannot be denied.

In all the above situations, with the notable exception of Francophone Québec, all the

former peripheries have gradually transformed into centres due to a dynamism ignited by an Anglophone (American), Lusophone (Brazilian) and Hispanophone (Mexican) population outnumbering - by far - the metropolitan populations of England, Portugal and Spain, respectively.

Another important peculiarity of the Sinophone, which distinguishes it from other similarly language-based transnational concepts, resides in its constitutive linguistic element itself. Talking about Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Lusophone means to deal with one base language (both written and oral) commonly accepted as the standard form by all groups within the respective supranational linguistic/cultural community. Eventual variations in speech, pronunciation, spelling or grammar, are due more to the local evolution of the language in each geographic setting, rather than to intrinsically different varieties of the base language. Hence, one will notice how French is the sole common and standard language across the entire *Francophonie*, despite the minimal differences among metropolitan French, Québec French and the Moroccan version of the language, just to name a few.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the role of Spanish as the uniting linguistic factor of the Hispanophone world is not jeopardized by the minimal differences among the various regional standards in Spain and across Spanish-speaking America. English and Portuguese too, despite having various national or sub-national varieties (American, British and South African English, just to name a few, or Brazilian and European Portuguese), are the sole base languages on which the very same idea of the Anglophone and the Lusophone has been built.

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<sup>34</sup> By minimal differences, I mean those local variations of one single language which are big enough to be perceived by speakers of the same language from other geographic locales, and yet are small enough not to jeopardize mutual intelligibility. One example is the French word *magasiner* (to shop), or the more recently coined *courriel* (a contraction of the words *courrier électronique*, meaning e-mail). Both terms are exclusively used by Québec (and other North American) speakers of French, but understood by French-speaking people worldwide.

The Sinophone case is, once again, incomparable due to fundamental differences in the linguistic structure itself and in the political worth of the language.

Firstly, let's consider the linguistic structure on which the idea of the Sinophone rests. Unlike English, French, Spanish and Portuguese, which are all languages within the Germanic and Romance language families, what is normally known as Chinese (and which is the equivalent of Sinitic, in Shih's usage)

rather than a language in reality is a family of languages which forms the subfamily of Sinitic languages [...]. Therefore, one must be aware of the fact that to simply talk about Chinese means referring to a multiplicity of non-mutually intelligible languages, just in the same way in which one talks about Romance or Anglogermanic languages.  
(Rovira-Esteva, 2010: 195-97)<sup>35</sup>

Hence, while the other "-phones" are concepts based on one single language (with mutually intelligible geolects), the Sinophone is an idea resting on a fragmented linguistic reality due to the multiplicity of the Sinitic languages (Mandarin - in its standard PRC and Taiwanese forms -, Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien and so on).

It is true that the Sinophone experiences a global predominance of standard Mandarin, and of a unified written standard, but it is also true that it can be expressed in other languages as well, such as Hokkien, or Hainanese (among other languages) in Southeast Asia, Cantonese in North America and varieties of the Wu language in many European countries, for instance. Some of these varieties, such as Cantonese and Hokkien have developed a written standard as well, which further separates them and their communities from the monolithic idea of a unified (and unifying) Chinese language in the shape of standard Mandarin.

Secondly, the political situation of the Sinitic languages in the Sinophone world did not

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<sup>35</sup> The passage, originally written in Spanish, reads as follows: "más que una lengua es en realidad una familia de lenguas que forma la subfamilia de las lenguas siniticas[...] Por lo tanto hay que ser conscientes de que al hablar del chino, sin más, se hace referencia a una multiplicidad de lenguas ininteligibles entre sí, del mismo modo que sucede cuando hablamos de lenguas románicas o anglogermánicas."

allow the identification of one single standard Sinitic language to be consistently considered the base of the Sinophone. In the Sinophone realm, Sinitic languages, in the form of standard Mandarin, enjoy official character only in Taiwan and Singapore. In all other countries, the use and standardization of the different Sinitic languages relies on community-based or private initiatives. Therefore, while in the *Francophonie* French is legally (or *de facto*) considered the official language and used as such, in the Sinophone realm, the growing predominance of standard Mandarin is due to its usefulness as a lingua franca of intraethnic communication among Chinese communities scattered throughout the world. Hence, while the *Francophonie* (but it holds true for the other "-phones" as well) speaks the same French (albeit with prosodic differences due to the various regional accents) be it in Québec, or in Belgium, or in Senegal, the Sinophone can be spoken in Cantonese, Hakka, Mandarin and so on.

While the idea of Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Lusophone is one of a transnational linguistic and cultural community based on a single mutually intelligible language (both oral and written), the Sinophone is a concept based on the idea - rather than the reality - of such mutual (at least oral) intelligibility.

The rise of peripheral linguistic and cultural communities to a prominent central position within their respective "-phone" realms which I mentioned above is nowhere to be seen in the Sinophone circumstance, with one notable exception: Taiwan. In fact, due to years of inaccessibility to the Chinese experience for many ethnic Chinese from various Sinophone communities (among others, those from insular Southeast Asia - Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore - ), Taiwan has risen to the role of a cultural model for the Sinophone world, as can be seen in the specific case of Sinophone Malaysian literature. The reasons leading to Taiwanese cultural prominence within the Sinophone area is, however, of an entirely different nature, and thus incomparable with the situations which have arisen

within the Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Lusophone realms. The political specificity of the Chinese case has given birth to interactions between the Sinophone peripheries and the centre(s), which are unseen in other similar language-based margin/centre relations.

For instance, if we take into consideration the Southeast Asian case, we can see how China's unfavourable diplomatic relations with most countries in the region, in the aftermath of the proclamation of the People's Republic (1949) and throughout the decades until the Open Door policy (1978) and the relaxation of the Cold War (late 1980s), impeded many ethnic Chinese from taking China as their natural linguistic and cultural model.<sup>36</sup> This role was then assigned to Taiwan, officially the Republic of China, whose Nationalist government saw it as an opportunity to gain a faithful base against communist China throughout the Sinophone world.

Therefore, the situation experienced across the Sinophone world right after the establishment of the PRC on the mainland (and the escape of the Nationalist ROC on the island of Taiwan), and throughout the Cold War era lit a war for legitimacy between Communist and Nationalist China, which in turn led to the unique Sinophone situation of having two coeval and antagonistic centres which aimed at attracting the various Sinitic-medium peripheral communities. In other words, the peculiarity of the Chinese political experience in the second half of last century is the main cause of the uniqueness of multi-periphery/bi-centre relations which can be observed in the Sinophone realm.

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<sup>36</sup> For instance, and just to mention a few cases of PRC-Southeast Asian foreign ties, diplomatic relations between Indonesia and the PRC were established on April 13, 1950, but were severed in 1967 due to the October 1, 1965 abortive Indonesian coup d'état blamed on the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). The normalization process of such relations began only in the late 1980s and formally in the year 1990 when the governments of both states issued a "Communiqué on the Restoration of Diplomatic Relations between the Two Countries".

Diplomatic relations between the Malaysia and the PRC were established in 1974, but it was only after the end of the Cold War, in the late 1980s that such relations changed positively.

On the other hand, Singapore and the PRC only began official diplomatic ties on October 3, 1990, despite having tied unofficial relations since the late 1970s.

In this respect, Taiwan is a *sui generis* Sinophone, since it is both the periphery of the metropolis, and - if considered as the seat of one of two contemporaneous metropolitan governments - it becomes the centre itself, albeit one maimed of most of its territory.

In his review of Shih's book-length essay on the Sinophone *Visuality and Identity*, Sheldon Lu analyzes Shih's comparison between the Sinophone and the Francophone in the following way:

The Francophone/Sinophone analogy is heuristic and insightful in some respect, but misleading and imprecise in other ways. China is indeed the ancestral home of numerous Chinese-dialect using settlers around the world, whereas France is not the ancestral home of French-speaking people in its former colonies in Africa, the Middle East, Latin American [sic], and Indochina. The Chinese diaspora speaks of varieties of Chinese dialects (Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka, Shanghainese, etc.) not because of forced colonial education in the way the French language was imposed on the indigenous population during colonization. The concept of Sinophone works in the case that Mandarin was imposed on the local population of Taiwan during the Kuomintang rule.

(Lu, 2008)

I personally find the above explanation problematic in a way. It is true that Lu sees the specificity of the Sinophone case (however, truth be told, Shih is very much aware of this uniqueness too), but he fails - and it seems to me that so does Shih - to see the peculiar position of Taiwan within the Sinophone realm. Taiwan is mentioned as an example of a colonized area (as in the passage above), or as the representative of a settler region (as Shih does when she compares the situation of Taiwan to that of Francophone Québec and Lusophone insular Africa), but neither Lu nor Shih seem to take into account the peculiar political situation of the island which I have mentioned above, and which has drifted Taiwan closer to the imaginary centre of the Sinophone, while simultaneously maintaining it at the periphery of *Chineseness*.

Therefore, as this section has shown, the field of Sinophone studies is a rather complex one, and the very same concept of the Sinophone requires a closer analysis, which goes

beyond the simplistic formula which equates Sinophone to Chinese (or Sinitic) language (and/or script). Hence, to fully understand and embrace, adapt, clarify or reject the concept of the Sinophone, one should take into serious consideration every aspect of it, the linguistic, the historical, the political and the cultural.

### **III.III. What is *Sinophone* about Sinophone Malaysian Literature?**

After having tried to analyze the Sinophone as a new general theoretical approach to a complex cultural situation, which expresses itself in a variety of Sinitic languages either in one of the numerous locales outside of the Chinese core, (i.e. Mainland China) or within that very core, but through ethnically peripheral communities (i.e. non-*Han* people within the territory of the PRC), I shall attempt at defining the Sinophone character of Sinophone Malaysian Literature.

When engaging in research on Sinitic-medium cultural phenomena, deeply localized and yet undeniably global, the concept of the Sinophone comes in very handy- despite the limitations I have singled out in the previous section - , as it helps us avoid the use of rather imprecise, blurred or even misleading concepts such as Chinese and *Chineseness*. Agreeing with Chun, when referring to the terms China and *Chineseness* he says that "terms are important, not only for what they mean semantically but for what they mean pragmatically, as well--that is to say, given the speaker's intended usage." (Chun, 1996: 112) In this sense, I believe Sinophone to be an expression which is much less dependent on ideological interpretations when compared to the term Chinese. Moreover, it is not surrounded by the linguistic and geographic haziness so typical of the latter. It is not simply a matter of terminology, as I shall demonstrate through the exemplary case of Sinophone Malaysian literature.

In the specific case of Malaysia, the complex ethnic and linguistic relations, not only

among the various ethnic groups, but also within the Chinese Malaysian community itself and between this very same community and other cultural Chinese realities call for special attention on the question of naming.

*Sinophone Malaysian literature* has been more widely known as *Malaysian Chinese literature*, *Malaysian literature in Chinese*, or more seldom as *Chinese Malaysian literature* and - among Sinophone Malaysian scholars - as *Mahua literature*.

All these labels, despite their (more or less) widespread usage within the academia as well as in local Malaysian society, present a series of shortcomings, which prompted me to embrace Shih's terminological choice. As I have stated previously, Shih's vision of the Sinophone also requires further clarification, which I attempt to give in this dissertation.

The concept of the Sinophone is gaining a certain degree of popularity in non-Western academic and intellectual circles as well, especially in Malaysia and Taiwan.

For instance, Chinese-language articles by David Der-Wei Wang (2006a) and Chen Zhenxin (2011) adopt Shih's terminology and transfer Sinophone into Chinese as *huayu yuxi* (華語語系), literally meaning "Sinitic language family". Moreover in 2008, in a talk given at a conference of Sinology in Malaysia, literary theorist Tee Kim Tong also uses the expression when referring to Sinitic-medium literature written at the margins of the Chinese world. Wang admits that Sinophone could be translated simply as *huawen* (華文), meaning "Chinese language" (in the varieties written and spoken by ethnic Chinese from outside China), but such translation would still be misleading, as it would lack the new vision on the topic given by the theory of the Sinophone and perpetrating the dichotomy between *huawen* literatures (the peripheral and the lesser) on the one side, and *Zhongguo* (中國) or *zhongwen* (中文: of China, Chinese) literature (the central, the major) on the other. (Wang, 2006a: 1)

Similarly, Tee Kim Tong also underlines the substantial differences between *huayu yuxi* and *huawen*, and does so by taking the specific situation of Sinophone Malaysian literature as an exemplary case in point. In his paper, Tee declares that the Sinophone dimension of what he calls *Mahua literature* gives the Sinitic-medium literature of Malaysia a new position in the global and national literary systems as it becomes one branch of a transnational Sinophone literature, and it can thus avoid being considered "a foreign version of Chinese literature" (非中國文學的海外版) (Tee, 2008: 1). Moreover, it shares the same literary realm as Malay-medium Malaysian literature, Anglophone Malaysian literature and Tamil-medium literature (馬華文學的存在空間，意味著是和馬來語語系、英語語系、印度語系文學共存的空間) (Tee, 2008: 1).

It is evident, in both intervention by David Der-Wei Wang and Tee Kim Tong, that the use of *huayu yuxi* instead of *huawen* becomes helpful to free Sinitic-medium literatures from the subordinate position in relation with Chinese literature, a position to which Sinitic-medium literature from Malaysia has often been relegated. Therefore, the Sinophone gives Sinitic-medium literature from Malaysia a new global dimension and allows it to be considered and scrutinized not only in relation with the local and the mainland Chinese cultural circumstances, but also with Sinophone literatures "breathing" at the borders of Chinese literature (Tee, 2008: 7).

On the other hand, to talk about *Mahua literature*, *Malaysian Chinese literature*, *Malaysian literature in Chinese*, or *Chinese Malaysian literature* means to cut the transnational dimension of this literary system out of the discussion, while also using a geographically inappropriate and linguistically problematic term (Chinese) as one of its defining elements. For instance, in the expression *Mahua literature*, the linguistic dimension is predominant, thus narrowing the diversity of Sinophone Malaysian literature

to its geolinguistic characteristic. However, as Alison Groppe notes,

[r]ecently, scholars such as Huang Jinshu, Lin Jianguo 林建國 (Lim Kien Ket) and Zhang Jinzhong 張錦忠 (Tee Kim Tong) have challenged this definition by taking into account the cultural and linguistic diversity that characterizes Malaysian society in general and the ethnic Chinese population in Malaysia specifically. They have helped to popularize the idea that the *hua* in *Mahua* should be connected to *ren* 人, for person, instead of *wen* 文, for written language. This configuration expands the definition of "Malaysian Chinese literature" to include the creative writing produces by people in Malaysia (or Malaya) of ethnic Chinese descent, whether it be written in modern Chinese vernacular, classical Chinese, romanized Baba Malay, English, or in Malay. (Groppe, 2006: 15-16)

Already in the early 1990s, Ng Kim Chew, for instance, declares that:

"*Mahua* literature" being the abbreviation of "Malaysian literature in Chinese (*huawen*)" has already been common knowledge for a long time, and has been popularly accepted and used as such. Notwithstanding, it has been completely forgotten that the abbreviation originally possessed an intrinsic hidden ambiguity, that is to say: it also has another possible originally unabbreviated form. What I want to put forward here is a proposal to revise the complete form of "*Mahua* literature" from "Malaysian literature in Chinese (*huawen*)" to "Malaysian literature by the ethnic Chinese (*huaren*)". (Ng, 1990: 87)<sup>37</sup>

This new analysis of the *hua* (華) constitutive element in *Mahua literature* posits a new problem, in my opinion. By dampening the linguistic element and putting emphasis on the ethnic dimension of literature, it adds confusion to the very same definition, embezzles authors and writing which linguistically belong to other literary traditions - unless, of course, we take into account the possibility that a piece of literature can belong to more than one system at any give time -, and paves newer ground for division (and subsequent legitimation) of culture along exclusively ethnic lines.

Similarly, *Malaysian Chinese literature* is also a very problematic naming choice, in

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<sup>37</sup> The original text reads as follows: "‘馬華文學’是‘馬來西亞華文文學’的簡稱早已是普通常識，被廣泛的接受、引用。而全然忽略了這個‘簡稱’原具有的內在潛藏歧義性，意即：它還有另外一種‘全稱復原’的可能，筆者在此要提出的，正是建議把‘馬華文學’的全稱由‘馬來西亞華文文學’修改為‘馬華華人文學’。"

more than one way. The position of the adjectives Malaysian and Chinese within the expression already gives a clear ideological view of the subject matter in question, despite the blurriness of the very same term Chinese. Malaysian a modifier, thus becomes a mere geographic attribute which contextualizes a special "section" of Chinese literature, while at the same time subordinating it to what is considered Chinese literature *tout court*. However, the term Chinese remains ambiguous: are we talking about literature written in the Chinese language? If so, what language are we dealing with? If not, then does the word Chinese here refer geographically to China? Is it therefore a synonym of literature of China? If this is the case, then it becomes highly problematic, since there is nothing Chinese about the literature written in Sinitic-script by authors from Malaysia (or any other locale outside of the borders of China), as we shall gather evidence from the textual analysis carried out in chapters IV and V. At the same time, Chinese here could also refer to the Chinese people as an ethnic category, therefore meaning literature written within the Chinese Malaysian community, thus losing any specific relation with the linguistic dimension, as it could mean literatures in any language by writers from Chinese Malaysia. In this sense, it would be the English translation of the interpretation of *Mahua* by Ng Kim Chew, Lim Kien Ket, and Tee Kim Tong mentioned by Groppe.

Referring to what Shih and others name Sinophone Malaysian literature as *Chinese Malaysian literature* also presents a few problems. Here, the stress is put on the adjective Malaysian, and is similar to more widely accepted expressions such as Asian American, or Chinese American, for example, thus circumscribing the literature geographically, and ascribing it to a specific literary system (that of Malaysian literature, which is also very problematic, as we shall see in the following section). The Chinese characteristic is, however, still very blurred, as it is yet unclear whether it refers to the language, the people, or both. Notwithstanding, it must be said that the expression does not enjoy great popularity.

However, one noteworthy example of the use of *Chinese Malaysian* (and its Chinese-language counterpart, *huama* 華馬) can be found in an anthology published in Malaysian in 2008 and whose English subtitle is *Stories by Chinese Malaysian writers* (*Huama Xiaoshuo* 華馬小說). Despite being a Chinese-language volume, the collection contains not only Sinophone Malaysian writings, but also Anglophone Malaysian short stories and Malay-medium Malaysian works (the last two in Chinese-language renditions). Hence, importance is attached more to the ethnic (Chinese) and geographic (Malaysian) dimensions of literature, rather than to its linguistic and transnational characters (embodied by the idea of the Sinophone). In the introduction to the collection, Tee Kim Tong explains that *huama* (Chinese Malaysia) refers to that part of Malaysian literature written by people of ethnic Chinese descent (“華馬文學”乃“華裔馬來西亞文學”的簡稱) and incorporates not only those Malaysian works of literature written in a Sinitic-language, but also those written in other languages as well (Tee, 2008: 3-4). Tee had already proposed this alternative denomination in various earlier occasions (1984, 1991, 2003). However he acknowledged the difficulty of popularizing this innovative expression, due to the high level of widespread circulation of *mahua*. (Tee, 2003: 61)

*Malaysian literature in Chinese* is - apparently - a much more suitable naming choice, insofar as it acknowledges the Malaysian character of such literary system and, at the same time, it differentiates it from Chinese (i.e. of China) literature, still admitting the link between the two (by means of language), but rejecting the subordination of the former in relation to the latter. Hence, the expression sets what I call *Sinophone Malaysian literature* free from the somewhat oppressive shadow of Chinese literature: it is not the child of a major and more fully-developed literary system, but it is a literary system in its own right, on a equal level shared by all Sinitic-medium literatures. However, the expression presents

a very problematic approach to the linguistic factor, as it does not take into the deserved consideration the fact that, as Wong Yoon Wah (Wang Runhua 王潤華) states, "there are not only many kinds of Chinese people, there are also many different kinds of Chinese languages and cultures" (Wong, 2007b: 237) Despite Wong Yoon Wah's terminological flimsiness (he appears to be rather inconsistent when addressing Sinophone Malaysian literature, which in his writings becomes Malaysian-Chinese literature - with or without hyphen -, Chinese literature of/from Malaysia) he makes a valid point when he affirms that:

[i]n order to focus on the complex ways in which the Chinese language has been used in different Chinese communities of the world, we [must] distinguish the standard Mandarin Chinese inherited from the empire and the huayu which the language has become in post-colonial countries.  
(Wong, 2007b: 245)

Hence, the expression *Malaysian literature in Chinese* while following an interesting theoretical path which advocates that "literature by Chinese overseas be studied in the context of their respective national environments, and taken out of a dominant China reference point" (Wong, 2007b: 247), completely neglects the linguistic multiplicity of Sinitic languages used by ethnic Chinese communities across the globe. Moreover, in the specific case of Malaysia the monolithic expression "in Chinese" does not take into account the fact that

[t]he Malaysian huawen was developed because the Malaysian brought-up or local-born Chinese felt the gaps when zhong wen the language [sic] was inadequate to describe a new place. Local born writers [...] needed to transform the language, to use it in a different way in its new context and so make to bear the burden of their experience.  
(Wong, 2007b: 246)

In the specific case of Malaysia, the China-centric use of Chinese, instead of Sinophone or Sinitic, completely neglects the intrinsic linguistic peculiarities of its Sinophone literary production. The centrality of the linguistic dimension of literature, and the cultural values which it conveys, are an essential and distinctive characteristic of

Sinophone Malaysian creative writing. For instance, as we shall see in chapter IV and V, Sinophone authors show their awareness of the linguistic situation of the ethnic Chinese community in Malaysia and attempt - with varying degrees of adherence to the actual reality of the communities they depict - to transfer such richness on the written page, thus making extensive use of the local features of the many Sinitic languages spoken in Malaysia. In other words, they *indigenize* the Sinitic languages, rejecting "the Sino-Centric power of the means of communication. [This] appropriation involves remoulding the language to new usages" (Wong, 2007b: 243).

Wong compares the linguistic uniqueness of Sinophone literatures to the singularities of the various Englishes used in postcolonial Anglophone literature throughout the world (Wong, 2007: 245). However, his interesting comparison seems to lose most of his argumentative strength when one scrutinizes the linguistic choices made by ethnic Chinese Anglophone authors from Malaysia. In fact, while it might be true that the conscience of the existing differences between the varieties of the English language used in postcolonial or post-migrant societies is rather high in the Anglophone literary system in general, the specific situation of Anglophone Malaysian literature by ethnic Chinese writers is not a good example of that very same awareness. In fact, attention to the linguistic diversity within the community is rather scarce in such literature, while the historical dimension, which somehow lacks in its Sinophone counterpart abounds, as demonstrated for instance, in *The Gift of Rain* by Tan Twan Eng, a novel set in Penang just before and after World War II and *The Harmony Silk Factory* by Tash Aw, also a brilliantly told account of wartime Chinese Malaysia under Japanese occupation.

Hence, as one can notice, the Sinophone dimension of Malaysian literature encompasses more than just the linguistic characteristics. To talk about *Sinophone Malaysian literature* does not simply equal to dealing with *Malaysian literature in Chinese*.

To apply the Sinophone theoretical model to the specific case of Malaysia means to pay attention to the linguistic characteristics of literature - by showing awareness of the differences among the various Sinitic languages spoken in Malaysia and elsewhere, the interaction between these languages, the Sinitic literary language and the standard language proposed (and subtly imposed) by the cultural centre (i.e. China)-, to its ethnic multiplicity (Sinophone does not necessarily equal to ethnic Chinese, therefore it does not entrap literature in the suffocating cage of ethnicity and race), to national and transnational interactions (freed from the burden represented by the towering figure of Chinese literature, it is able to interact with literary systems from other Malaysian linguistic realities, and with Sinophone literatures from other geographic realities on a level of equality).

### **III.IV. What is *Malaysian* about Sinophone Malaysian Literature?**

#### **III.IV.1. Introduction**

In the early 1990s, Lim Kien Ket while asking "Why *Mahua* literature?" (*Weishenme Mahua Wenxue?* 為甚麼馬華文學?), in one his most important essays,<sup>38</sup> he also exposed two different perspectives from which Sinophone Malaysian literature is normally analyzed. Scholars who take China as their standard and central object of study tend to accentuate the *hua* (Sinophone) character of Sinophone Malaysian literature, insisting on the fact that the very same use of a Sinitic language does not allow Sinophone Malaysian authors to sever their ties with the cultural centre. (Lim, 1993: 89). Clearly, this vision is a very simplistic one, which does not take into account the peculiarities of the Sinitic languages written and spoken in Malaysia and the high degree of indigenization they have been going through.

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<sup>38</sup> The essay was republished numerous times, both in Malaysia and Taiwan and in 2004 was also included in *Chidao Huisheng* (赤道回聲), one of the very first and to date still the most complete reader in Sinophone Malaysian literature published on the island.

On the other hand, - Lim Kien Ket declares - authors hailing from Malaysia have a tendency to consider the Malaysian dimension the predominant one and look at Sinophone Malaysian literature as one element of Malaysian literature (馬來西亞文學的一環) (Lim, 1993: 89)

Notwithstanding, the above statement which sees Sinophone Malaysian literature merely as the Sinitic-medium voice of a plurilingual literary system appears to be an oversimplification as well, especially when analyzed through the lens of the official cultural policy of Malaysia, which shall be discussed later in the present section.

In his *Qu'est-ce que la littérature* (1947) Jean-Paul Sartre investigated the very nature of literature.<sup>39</sup> Paraphrasing the title-question of his essay, in this section I will try to shed light on the meaning of the Malaysian in the Sinophone literary field, by attempting to give an answer to the "*Qu'est ce que* Malaysian in Sinophone Malaysian literature?" question.

The Malaysian dimension of Sinophone Malaysian literature is not less problematic than the Sinophone one, and the definition of its Malaysian character is not as straightforward as it may seem at a first glance. The different linguistic realities of Malaysia have naturally given birth to a diversity of literary systems, i.e. the Anglophone literary system, the Malay one, the Sinophone, and the Tamil one. These literatures do not only differ along linguistic lines, but - to a certain extent - they also present a more or less strong ethnic dimension.

Anglophone literary expressions can be considered the most supraethnic, since Malaysian authors from various ethnic backgrounds have chosen to write in English. Moreover, as Koh Tai Ann suggest,

[a]lthough most of the writers in English are ethnic Chinese, the literature

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<sup>39</sup> Before appearing as a free-standing volume, it was published in the journal *Les Temps modernes*. This essay is considered to be a manifesto of the concept of the so-called *littérature engagée* (committed literature), and Sartre aims at answering the questions of "What is to write?", "Why to write?" and "For whom to write?".

in English is distinguished from the literatures in the other local languages in not having been motivated by ethnocentric concerns. [...] In other words, the nationalism that brought the literature in English into existence was [...] a nationalism which envisioned both Malaya and Singapore, then later, Malaysia, as the homelands of all who had been born here, all the races who had settled here, regardless of their country of origin or ethnic affiliation.

(Koh, 1993: 121)

Therefore, in the Anglophone literature of present-day Malaysia, one easily finds writings by Chinese Malaysians Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Tan Twan Eng alongside those of Indian Malaysians such as K.S. Maniam and Rani Manicka, or ethnic-Malay Malaysian authors such as Dina Zaman.<sup>40</sup>

Secondly, literature in Malay also enjoys an important degree of ethnic variety, due to the fact that apart from authors of ethnic Malay background, writers from other communities (Chinese Malaysians, Indian Malaysians or aboriginal people) also contribute to the flourishing of a Malay-medium literature.

On the other hand, Sinophone and Tamil literatures from Malaysia, while striving to get rid of the constraining label of ethnic literature are still mainly produced by people of ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indian background, respectively.

Just as the Sinophone allows us to look at Sinitic-medium literature from non-Chinese geopolitical circumstances in a new manner, by shaping novel linguistic and spatial dynamics across the peripheral areas vis-à-vis the cultural Chinese centre, the Malaysian element is the embodiment of both the localization of the Sinophone dimension and the

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<sup>40</sup> There are quite a few scholarly works devoted to the Anglophone Malaysian (and Singaporean) literary system. In 2001, Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks edited an interesting critical reader on the subject titled *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*. Apart from a purely genealogical section on the development of Anglophone Malaysian literature, the book collects essays examining the state of Malaysian cultural productions in English in the major genres of fiction, drama and poetry.

Similarly, *Sharing Borders*, also edited by Mohammad A. Quayum in collaboration with Wong Phui Nam, is also a very comprehensive account of Anglophone Singaporean and Malaysian literatures, as it provides an essential background, traces the origins and early development of the Anglophone literary system in the two Southeast Asian countries, and scrutinizes the way in which significant themes in the life of the two nations have evolved and been articulated in literature.

proof that Sinitic-medium literature from Malaysia transcends its ethnic sphere - despite it being mainly the expression of ethnic Chinese Malaysians - and acquires validity on a national level. However, for Sinophone literature in Malaysia, the acquisition of national validity is not a process devoid of hardships. In a recent essay, Ng Kim Chew also notices the difficulties of Sinophone literature (from Malaysia and elsewhere) in getting rid of its ethnic label. In fact, Ng clearly states that

Sinophone literature [...] is inescapably a 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 witer's ethnic identity.  
(Ng, 2010: 16)

However, it should be clarified that ethnicity in Ng's discourse denotes culture and does not necessarily indicate a common and distinctive racial or national heritage. Moreover, it is true that "[t]o date Mahua Literature is written by [ethnic] Chinese writers only but will not reject possibilities of being written by writers of other races in the future." (Chong, 2009: 82)

The Malaysian dimension of Sinophone Malaysian literature is the result of various factors - linguistic, cultural, and social - which set it apart not only from Chinese literature, but also from other Sinophone literatures from around the world. According to Wong Yoon Wah the Malaysian character of Sinophone Malaysian literature can be easily seen in the new linguistic choices made by local authors who deconstruct and subsequently reshape the Sinitic language (script) to "reconstruct indigeneity, in order to create an independent local identity" (Wong, 2007a: 204). Therefore, through the linguistic specificity of Sinophone Malaysian authors, the local (i.e. Malaysian) flavour is fully validated and "the dominance of Chinese literary hegemony [is] abrogated" (Wong, 2007a: 205).

Moreover, Wong Yoon Wah reminds us that Sinophone Malaysian literature is a literary

system comprising two distinct traditions, an imported one (from the Chinese mainland)<sup>41</sup> and an indigenous one, that is to say, it "is a hybridized phenomenon involving dialectical relationship between the imported and the indigenous" (Wong, 2007a: 207-08). In addition, Wong insists on the fact that what sets Sinophone Malaysian literature apart, are "the complex ways in which the Chinese language has been used in Malaysia", since "[w]hen a language travels, it alters: pronunciation changes, new words are added. It evolves to reflect the local life." (Wong, 2007a: 208). In sum, the Sinitic languages and script have "been transformed and subverted into distinctively Malaysian. The Chinese literary traditions and inheritances have been modified and domesticated. The Malaysian Chinese writers use them from [a] consciousness that is specifically Malaysian" (Wong, 2007a: 208).

However, it is not only a mere linguistic issue. The very nature of the topics dealt with by Sinophone Malaysian authors has been changing and spreading in order to incorporate a less Chinese Malaysian and more Malaysian *tout court* vision of the subject-matters of literature. As Wong explains,

[b]y and large, the literature in Chinese tends to reflect, to take [its] substance from the life of [its] own community. The most significant development in the past decades is that more and more writers using Chinese have been reflecting not merely the life of its own language community, but also the communities around them. The Chinese literature has enlarged its vision, its view of things to take in the whole life in Malaysia.

(Wong, 2007a: 208-09)

According to Wong, therefore, the *Malaysianness* of Sinophone Malaysian literature rests on its multi-ethnic dimension, able to render justice to the great variety of peoples and cultural traditions which Malaysia hosts. And it is its very same multi-ethnic characteristic

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<sup>41</sup> When talking about imported tradition in Sinophone Malaysian literature, Wong Yoon Wah means the body of writings by Chinese authors who moved to Malaysia (once known as Malaya, under British colonial rule) and Singapore, but who never relinquished their *Chineseness* and their attachment to their Chinese literary background. The most notable examples of this type of authors are Lao She (老舍) and Yu Dafu (郁達夫).

that gives justification to the selection of the creative writings analyzed in chapters IV and V.

Notable examples of the Malaysian dimension possessed by Sinophone Malaysian writings are many works of fiction by Sarawakian-born Li Yongping and the late novelist Shang Wanyun. Li Yongping's stories such as *Lazi fu* (拉子婦, translatable as "The Native Wife") and *Zhinaren - weicheng de muqin* (支那人－圍城的母親, which could be rendered in English as "Chinaman - Mother in the besieged city"), for instance, depict the indigenous mores of the peoples of Borneo, while Shang Wanyun's novella *Xiaojiu yu malai nüren de shijian* (小舅與馬來女人的事件, which literally translates as "Young uncle and his affair with the Malay woman") investigates the customs and traditionally Muslim way of life of the ethnic Malay community. All beautifully written, with great attention to details, these work of fiction can be considered as quintessentially Malaysian, just like their descriptions of the rainforests of Borneo, the rubber plantations of peninsular Malaysia and the eternal summer on the streets of the unassuming small towns where one tiny shop follows the other, where wet markets are the centre of local life.

### **III.IV.2. History**

The first attempts to a systematic localization of the cultural experience of Sinophone Malaysian authors begins with the first batch of Chinese immigrants who, instead of seeing the South Seas as a temporary base in which to secure a better living before returning to China, started to grow a stronger sense of attachment to Malay(si)an soil and began to settle down. As stated by Yeo Song Nian (Yang Songnian 楊松年), already as early as the 1920s,

many writers began to feel the need for Xin Ma [Singapore & Malaysian] Chinese literature to have its own local characteristics and flavour. It was no longer adequate for this literature to be a branch of mainland Chinese literature, as the social and geographic contexts were vastly different.

(Yeo, 1993: 174)

In the decade of the thirties of last century, many influential figures of the Malayan and Singaporean editorial world started advocating literary practices in tune with the local society and culture, and in 1933 the phrase *Malayan Literature* (*Malaya Wenyi* 馬來亞文藝) was coined and started appearing regularly in the literary supplements to local Chinese-language newspapers. Local writers soon adopted the expression and interpreted it as a call to turn their back to the influence of mainland Chinese literary production, while embracing with open hearts the task of constructing a local literature base on a distinctive Malayan identity. (Yeo, 1993: 174).

The *Malayanization* (later and until today *MalaySianization*) of Sinophone literature experienced only a brief halt during Japanese occupation, when

Chinese writers in Malaya began to write about China again. Nonetheless, once the Anti-Japanese war was over, they reoriented themselves to Malaya (and Singapore). "Malayan orientation" re-emerged as the main stream in Xin Ma literature. The achievements of Chinese literature in Singapore and Malaysia today is indeed due to the foundations laid by the pre-war writers and editors.  
(Yeo, 1993: 178)

The achievements mentioned by Yeo are undoubtedly due to the ability of Sinophone Malaysian authors to keep walking on the path traced by their Malayan forefathers who - through the indigenization of the Sinitic languages they spoke and their inquisitive and concerned mind set on local issues - gave birth to a literary tradition which is both undeniably Sinophone and typically Malaysian.

An interesting example of the *Malaysianization* of both language and topics within Sinophone literature can be found in the short stories by Wen Xiangying (溫祥英) who masters the art of inventing a new Sinitic written language which closely adheres to the linguistic attitudes of Sinophone Malaysian communities. Hence, Wen uses standard

Mandarin Chinese alongside Cantonese, broken and standard English and Malay in order to portray Malaysian society in a highly realistic manner.

The Malaysian character of Sinophone literature is not only highly problematic, but also very contradictory. In fact, despite the gradual Malaysianization which Sinitic-medium literature from Malaysia has been going through since last century, it is still minoritized in the multicultural context of Malaysia, where the official cultural discourse regards it as the local branch of a foreign (Chinese) literary system, or dismisses it as a literature with only ethnic value, unable to speak at a wider, multicultural (and multiethnic) national public.

For instance, Malaysian literary scholar Muhammad Haji Salleh points out that

it is usually agreed that the national literature is one written in the national language. If an Indian writes poems in Punjabi in Britain, would he be included in an anthology of British national literature? Or a descendant of the Javanese in Holland writing in Indonesian – should his work be included in an anthology of Dutch literature? Should not the national literature of Malaysia be written in Malaysia's national language?  
(Muhammad Haji Salleh, 2010: 156)

Ng Kim Chew extends this minority position of non-recognition to all literatures written in minor languages. In his 2010 essay, Ng states that an

aspect of the problem of political recognition is that, in the context of multiculturalism, literatures composed in minor languages (like Sinophone literature in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines)<sup>42</sup> go unrecognized by national traditions and are devalued as ethnic literatures. Under these circumstances, even given the presence of literary masters, they are not likely to be discovered under the national machinery (nationalist ideology demands their natural dissolution), much less recognized.  
(Ng, 2010: 23)

### **III.IV.3. The Malaysian debates on National Literature**

In order to understand the problem of the recognition of its Malaysian dimension faced

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<sup>42</sup> On a global scale the Mandarin Chinese language can be considered anything but minor, however, it becomes so in the nationalistic contexts of the southeast Asian countries mentioned by Ng.

by Sinophone literature produced by Chinese Malaysians, it is of paramount importance that the discussions on national literature in Malaysia be brought to the reader's attention in the present section.

According to the official discourse, since only literary works produced in the Malay language can be formally considered part of the national - thus Malaysian - literary canon, therefore all language-based cultural products in a different tongue (hence, not only literature - both fiction and non fiction- but also theatre performances and film production) are excluded from it. Hence, the denomination "Malaysian" merely becomes a hollow adjective resonating only with a purely geographic meaning.

The position of influential Malaysian scholar Muhammad Haji Salleh is especially close to the official governmental posture. In fact, in one of his book-length essays, titled *An Introduction to Modern Malaysian Literature*, the author consistently uses the term Malaysian when he actually and unequivocally means Malay-medium, since he "focuses only on the literature written in the national language of Malaysia" (Muhammad Haji Salleh, 2008: xvi). *Sea of Rainbows*, a book edited by the same scholar, carries the interesting albeit highly misleading subtitle of *An Anthology of Multi-cultural Short Stories from Malaysia*. The collection was most probably conceived with a very noble aim, that is "to draw together works from the rainbow of ethnic groups/races that live in Malaysia at present." (Muhammad Haji Salleh, 2009: ix) However, the book is a showcase of a multicultural Malaysia that expresses itself only in the Malay language, since the anthology presents the English-language translations of short stories selected following one main criterion, "that the authors write in the national language, Malay." (Ibid.: x)

The official Malaysian stance vis-à-vis the language and literature issue is rather peculiar and began in the late sixties of last century, as noted by literary theorist and critic Mohammad A. Quayum, who states that:

the language debate in the country [...] began with the introduction of the National Language Policy in 1967 and the National Culture Policy in 1971 - policies that made Malay or *Bahasa Melayu* the country's national language and the literature written in it its "National Literature," concomitantly reducing literature in other languages to what is now known as "Sectional Literatures".  
(Mohammad A. Quayum, 2009: 1)

The above statement by Mohammad A. Quayum is contained in the introduction to *Writing a Nation. Essays on Malaysian Literature*, a monograph he co-edited together with Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf and represents a milestone in literary studies within the Malaysian context, as it is the first critical reader which uses a holistic approach to Malaysian literature and - even if timidly - puts national and sectional (i.e. written in languages other than Malay) literatures together on an equal level. In fact, the scholar believes

that as long as a work is by a Malaysian writer and deals with Malaysian experiences and Malaysian immigration, no matter what linguistic or literary category it belong to, it still comes within the scope of Malaysian literature, be it in the category of "Sectional Literature" or "National Literature."  
(Mohammad A. Quayum, 2009: 1)

In spite of his belief that non-Malay-medium literatures (e.g. Sinophone Malaysian literature or Tamil Malaysian Literature) still possess the right to be considered Malaysian, Mohammad A. Quayum reaffirms, or at least does not challenge, the official position maintained by the governmental Institute of Language and Literature (*Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*) which - by centering only on the writers' choice of medium - does not bestow national worth to those literatures.

In another scholarly article contained in *Writing a Nation*, Anglophone Malaysian poet Wong Phui Nam unequivocally questions the validity of setting Malay-medium literature apart from other literatures produced in Malaysia in other languages, and he sees in such a practice an effort on the part of a group of Malay-medium academics and writers at cultural

assimilation. Wong states that "all writings in languages other than Bahasa Malaysia are being marginalised into insignificance as 'sectional literatures,' not worthy of serious consideration." (Wong, 2009: 59)<sup>43</sup>

On the issue of Sinophone Malaysian literature, Chinese Malaysian literary critic and academician Chong Fa Hing contributed a very insightful essay to *Writing a Nation*, in which he makes an interesting analysis of the Malaysian literary scene and on the position of Sinophone literature. Chong states that "[w]hen we discuss Malaysian Literature, we need to be aware that it has no concrete meaning due to its general connotation." (Chong, 2009: 70) Chong notes how scholars such as Ismail Hussein try to give a concrete meaning to the expression "Malaysian literature," and separate the equation Malaysian = National. Hence, it is true that according to Ismail Hussein, all literatures written in Malaysia (in English, Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, and all the vernacular languages) are to be considered as belonging to the Malaysian literary polysystem (*kesusasteraan Malaysia*), however the scholar insists on the fact that only Malay-medium literary production can righteously be considered as having national value. Literatures in vernacular languages are to be seen as "local literatures" (*sastera daerah*) while literatures in non-vernacular languages are community-based and limited to specific audiences, therefore, still according to Ismail Hussein, one cannot consider them as belonging to National Literature. (Ismail Hussein, 2006: 35)

Chong believes that

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<sup>43</sup> In the same essay, Wong also envisions an impoverishment of Malay-language writers due to divide created between them and Malaysian authors in other languages. He states that

[t]his setting apart of writers in Bahasa Malaysia from all others will lead to them communing only among themselves apart from all others. Such a closing off of external contacts always means a closing of minds to new ideas, new perspectives on old issues, new ways of feeling and so on. This will surely lead to a gradual stultification of the creative genius of writers in the language. The signs of this are already evident in the current writing.  
(Wong, 2009: 59)

Malaysian literature is measured by its geo-political and citizenship background of its writers. Similarly, National Literature is tied to the language used. Both criteria have no relation to the issue of literariness or any internal factors which are essential for defining literature. (Chong, 2009: 71)

Xu Wenrong also tries to explain Ismail Hussein's viewpoint and points out how the Malay scholar insist on the fact that literatures written in other languages have to live in a subordinate position vis-à-vis Malay-medium literature. (其他文學的層次必須在馬來文學之下. Xu, 2003: 5)

Similarly, in an article published in Taiwan, Tee Kim Tong explains the position of Sinophone Malaysian literature vis-à-vis literature in Malay, therefore also indirectly scrutinizing how much Malaysian Sinitic-medium literature is or, in other words, what is the Malaysian dimension of Sinophone Literature from Malaysia. Tee writes that

*Mahua* literature is confined to the boundary of ethnic literature and it is not given legitimacy to enjoy the status of national literature. This statement clearly points out the nature and position of *Mahua* literature in Malaysia: it is a literature produced in the country, but since it is not written in the national language (Malay), it is a Malaysian literature that is not recognized by the official discourse as national literature. In other words, it is described by the non-geographical borders of race and language. Critics have employed terms such as sectional literature, communal literature, ethnic literature, and "Malaysian literature" to describe the structural relationship between the literary products written in Chinese in Malaysia and the national concept of Malaysian literature. These terms, however, fail to indicate the border space and subject position of *Mahua* literature in Malaysia; they merely restate that, though produced by Malaysians, *Mahua* literature is denied its national nature in the public sphere. Existing on the borderlines of such literary and political discourses, *Mahua* literature, in fact, positions itself as a border literature to interrogate the question of national literature. (Tee, 2006: 170)

From the above passage, one can easily infer that according to Tee the *Malaysianness* of Sinophone Malaysian literature lies in its being at the margins of the national literary system and what makes it easily recognizable as quintessentially Malaysian within the sphere of Sinophone literature is not enough for it to be considered as a literary expression

truly representative of the Malaysian nation.

In a 2008 article published in mainland China, Fan Pik Wah shares Tee's vision of literary marginalization and associates it to a shared Chinese Malaysian feeling of being socially left out of Malaysian political life, marginalized and disappointed with the government's discriminating policies. (Pan, 2008: 62)

Chong, on the other hand, suggests that Sinophone and other literatures from Malaysia should open up and counter-attack marginalization from within. He suggest that the so-called "sectional literatures" be less community-centred if they wants to reach their goal of becoming a true expression of the Malaysian people, and they

must initiate the move to include the images of Malaysians in general. In other words, it is a responsibility to realise a mission not achieved in any of the literary groups to date. This includes formulating themes and issues, setting, characters, moods, humanist sensitivity and speech. (Chong, 2009: 79)

Within the Sinophone Malaysian context, the most important and systematic work on the issue of national literature and how such concept affects what could be considered as a minor literature<sup>44</sup> is *Guojia wenxue - zaizhi yu huiying* (國家文學—宰制與回應 National Literature: Hegemony and Response) a monograph edited by Chong Fah Hing, with contributions from ethnic Malay and ethnic Chinese Malaysian scholars alike and published in 2006. In the introduction to the volume, Chong Fah Hing makes a few interesting points on the "unavoidable topic of national literature" (不得不面對國家文學這個議題), which he considers a "necessary evil" (必要之惡), and wonders whether the matter could be ignored or at least put aside, while focusing only on the literariness of writings rather than on the medium used. In a way, Chong advocates that the Malaysian element of those literatures which are not yet seen as national to date (hence, including the Sinophone), be

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<sup>44</sup> For the theory of Sinophone Malaysian literature as a minor literature, please refer to section V of the present chapter.

taken into the consideration it deserve, and therefore that scholars and literary critics put much more effort in solidifying and consistently carrying out the idea of a "multi-languages-national literature" (*duoyu-guojia wenxue* 多語-國家文學), instead of a "mono-lingual national literature" (*danyu-guojia wenxue* 單語-國家文學). or a "literature of single nation-state" (*danyi minzu-guojia wenxue* 單一民族-國家文學) (Chong, 2006: 15).

*Guojia wenxue* contains the Mandarin translation of Ismail Hussein's article mentioned by Chong (2009), in which the author, despite its clear affirmation of Malay-medium literature as the only righteous national literary system, admits that both local literatures and ethnic ones (*sastera sukuan*) have a considerable impact on national literature. Ismail Hussein equals Malay-medium literature to national literature merely on the basis of linguistic factors. According to him, only a literature which makes use of Malay, the national language, can be understood by all Malaysians, while literatures in other tongues cannot break free from their ethnic/community dimension. Moreover, Malay is the language of the original people of the land (*anak negeri*), i.e. the Malay people, hence it is also symbolically the only language in which a literature that wants to be considered national can be written. (Ismail Hussein, 2006: 36)

In my opinion, Ismail Hussein's discourse stands out not only for its inaccuracy (the Orang Asli - i.e. the original inhabitants of Peninsular Malaysia - and the various ethnic groups indigenous to the states of Sabah and Sarawak, in northern Borneo, traditionally are not Malay speakers, therefore Malay cannot be considered an indigenous language, or at least not the sole indigenous one), but also for its perilous idea that late- or newcomers (such as the ethnic Chinese, or the ethnic Indians of Malaysia) who express themselves in languages other than Malay are not entitled to the same degree of legitimacy possessed by

Malay-medium writers. Moreover, Ismail Hussein argues that the language in which a certain literature is produced shapes the vision and the ideas put forward by the author. Therefore, if one wants to share ideas and visions which are truly Malaysian, i.e. possessing national worth, he has no choice but to turn to the Malay language. Ismail Hussein says that, for instance, Anglophone Malaysian literature uses a world view that belongs to the English people, and therefore, it lives under the shadow of English literature. Hence, following Ismail Hussein's thesis, by being the expression of a Chinese vision of society and the world (whatever that means) Sinophone Malaysian literature should be doomed to living under the shadow of Chinese literature. However, as the previous sections of the present chapter have shown, it is not the case. Ismail Hussein's ideas are quite widespread in Malay academic circles and are backed by the official cultural policies put forward by the Malaysian government. In a 2006 article appeared in the Taiwanese *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* (*Zhongwai wenxue* 中外文學), Ng Kim Chew also notes the widespread official desire of the Malaysian government to assimilate other cultural traditions, in the name of Malay nationalism, disguised as patriotism. The Chinese Malaysian scholar states that not only the state apparatus, but also the Malay elite and intellectuals (circle to which Ismail Hussein belongs), "[urge] Chinese Malaysians to give up or transfer their cultural allegiance" (Ng, 2006c: 176). In other words, the very same characteristics that make Sinophone Malaysian literature a representative of Malaysia in the Sinophone world (the specifically Malaysian usage of Sinitic languages, the themes touched, the settings chosen, a typically Malaysian vision of daily life, and so on), make it only the expression by ethnic writers for their ethnic community within the Malaysian national context.

Also in *Guojia wenxue*, there is an essay by scholar Syed Husin Ali which investigates the role of what he names *ethnic literatures* in the multicultural structure of Malaysia. He

insists on the fact that being written in languages which are only understood by a limited portion of the population, ethnic literatures such as Sinophone and Tamil literatures still only speak to their respective communities. Therefore, they cannot be considered Malaysian, or national, as they cannot reach the entire population.

However, Syed Husin Ali proposes that they be Malaysian in the topics treated. In fact, according to the scholar, by including a faithful depiction of Malaysian society with its diversity and multiethnic environment, they can open a space for dialogue among the various communities which goes well beyond the written page. (Syed Husin Ali, 2006: 54)

In my opinion, in this respect Sinophone Malaysian literature is in the forefront of interethnic dialogue and the depiction of other ethnicities, the relation between the ethnic Chinese Self and the Other are a regular presence in fictional works by Sinophone Malaysian writers, as we shall see in chapter V. In other words, according to Syed Husin Ali, ethnic literature can be made part of the Malaysian literary system as long as they fulfill a positive function of cohesion among the different ethnic and linguistic communities of Malaysia. Literary sophistication is a great absent in this Malaysian scholar's discourse, as it seems to be that for him and others such as Ismail Hussein, the medium in which a writers carries out his activity is the only factor of paramount importance.

Of a different nature is the contribution by Ng Kim Chew, who does not see the matter of whether Sinophone Malaysian literature can be seen as truly Malaysian simply as a linguistic issue, and disagrees with Chong Fah Hing's proposal of encouraging Sinophone authors to become thoroughly Malaysian writers through the literary practice of bilingualism and publish in both Sinitic languages and Malay. According to Ng, the call to bilingualism made by Chong is both non-viable and dangerous at the same time, since in the long run the stronger linguistic medium - and the one with a stronger publishing market to back it up - (Malay in the specific case of Malaysia) would swallow up the weaker one

(Sinitic languages). In the ideally good example of bilingualism proposed by Chong, Ng Kim Chew foresees a death sentence for Sinophone Malaysian literature which would be gradually left agonizing. (Ng, 2006b: 152)<sup>45</sup>

As noted by Chong Fah Hing, younger Chinese Malaysian scholars such as Xu Wenrong insist in stressing the Malaysian dimension of the Sinophone literature produced in their country. For instance, Chong observes how Xu Wenrong makes a precise terminological choice when translating *Mahua wenxue* 馬華文學 as "Malaysian literature in Chinese." It is to him, first and foremost one essential and constitutive part of the Malaysian literary mega-polysystem (馬來西亞文學的元系統). (Chong, 2006: 107)

As can be inferred from the discussions around national literature and the righteousness of including non-Malay literatures in the national Malaysian literary system, the question of what is Malaysian in Sinophone Malaysian literature is a tricky one and the answer is not as straightforward as it seems. Summing it up, we could say that the Malaysianness of the literature discussed in the present dissertation is much more acknowledged outside of Malaysia than within its geopolitical borders. In fact, it is agreed upon that writers such as Li Yongping, Li Zishu, and Zhang Guixing just to name a few examples are unequivocally Malaysian in their works, as the variety of the Sinitic languages they use, the themes they discuss and the settings in which their stories develop. However, within Malaysian, the mere fact of their literature being written in a language other than the national language, automatically classifies them as ethnic or community writers. Hence, their literature is the literature of the ethnic Chinese community of Malaysia, but it does not belong to the national literature of Malaysia.

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<sup>45</sup> Examples to support Ng Kim Chew's vision can be found in the practice of originally Sinophone writers from other geographic locations. For instance, Ha Jin and Shan Sa who stopped writing Sinophone literature when they took up English-medium and French-medium writing respectively.

### **III.V. Western Theory, Eastern Practice? Sinophone Malaysian Literature as a Minor Literature**

Defining Sinophone Malaysian Literature is not an easy task, as can be inferred from the previous sections of the present chapter. Nevertheless, I believe that the use of theoretical models based on other literary traditions can help us shed light on the very constitutive characteristics of Sinophone Malaysian literature and conceptualize the problem.<sup>46</sup>

As an example, in the present section, I will attempt at scrutinizing Sinophone Malaysian literature using the theory of a minor literature formulated by Deleuze and Guattari, in order to supplement the discussions on the nature of the literature under discussion here with a different theoretical approach, but also in light of what has been written in the previous sections.

The idea that there exist minor literatures (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 in English eleven years later, thanks to a translation by Dana Polan. 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." (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986:16) 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 academics; in

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<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Malaysian literary theorist Md. Salleh Yaapar attempts at scrutinizing various Asian literary traditions (especially the Malay-medium ones from Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore) using theoretical perspectives originally from the West "to create a healthy equilibrium in the thought, knowledge, and appreciation of literature in this region [i.e. Malay-speaking Southeast Asia]." (Md. Salleh Yaapar, 2009: xii)

fact, Sinophone Malaysian literature is the expression of a minority group (the Chinese in Malaysia), but written mostly in (Mandarin) Chinese, a language which is everything but minor, and in any case not one of the terms in the colonizer - colonized 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,"(Deleuze & Guattari, 1986:17) "that everything in them [i.e. minor literatures] is political,"(Ibid.) and "that in it everything takes on a collective value."(Ibid.)

Literary critics from Malaysia such as Lim Kien Kit and Tee Kim Tong, have already investigated whether and to what extent Sinophone Malaysian literature can be considered a minor literature. Among the most interesting contributions, one finds a recent article by Taiwan-based Chinese Malaysian scholar and creative writer Ng Kim Chew. 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."(Tsu & Wang, 2010: 10)

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.  
(Ng, 2010: 16)

In the above definition, one can easily perceive the marginality of Sinophone literature and also the fact that its linguistic characteristic is 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 the geographic location normally associated to such language (China).

The linguistic issue leads us to the discussion of the first characteristic of a minor literature, i.e. the deterritorialization 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; as the ties between the two entities weaken, the cultural produce by means of 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 deterritorialization of the Chinese language in Sinophone Malaysian literature, however, has already given pace to its subsequent phenomenon: reterritorialization. In fact in the context of contemporary Sinophone Malaysia, literature is already produced in the context of the local culture and Sinophone Malaysian authors made the Chinese language their own. Some of the original characteristics of the language have been preserved, while others have been lost or transformed in order to match the changed geographic, social and political environment. Just to name but one example of this deterritorialization-cum-reterritorialization 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.

(Wong, 2007: 200)

As mentioned in earlier occasions, the Mandarin Chinese language in Malaysia (and among other ethnic Chinese communities around the world) thus becomes *huayu* (華語), a transformed and somewhat subverted version of the standard variety spoken in China (where it is known as *putonghua* 普通話, or "common speech").

In my opinion, the distance from the cultural centre(s),<sup>47</sup> 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." (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986: 20)

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, "Minor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics," (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986: 17) or 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, for example, in his book-length essay on the poetics of political resistance in Sinophone Malaysian literature published in 2004, clearly states that due to its

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<sup>47</sup> 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, an imaginary centre proposed and promoted by a government consistently pushing forward the agenda of Malay supremacy in every sphere of public life.

subordination to Malay national literature (a direct consequence of the subordination of the ethnic Chinese to the Malay elite), Sinophone literature in the context of contemporary Malaysia has no choice but to assume the role of political resistance, and become a voice of protest raising from the margins. According to Xu, the political nature of Sinophone Malaysian literature manifests itself in various forms 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, the ridiculization of the Other in order to glorify the Self and thus subvert the representation of the dominant ethnic group and its authority, and 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." (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986: 18)

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."(Ibid.: 17) 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."(Ibid.: 17) The minor author thus subverts the rules of the major language (and 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, responding to the characteristics of the collectivity, where major language and minor culture mingle.

Let us try, now, to carry this idea of the collective value of minor literature, into the realm of Sinophone literature from Malaysia. If one 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 briefly mention *Bie zai tiqi* 別再提起 (Don't Mention It Again), a contemporary short story by Sinophone Malaysian writer He Shufang, first published on the arts supplement to a Taiwanese newspaper in 2002 and which will be discussed in greater detail in chapter V of the present work.

*Bie zai tiqi* is a brief, yet intense account of how, twenty years before the narration, the Taoist funeral of the narrator's uncle was put on hold and subsequently cancelled, due to religious matters. The deceased had in fact converted to Islam, 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 so private as a funeral, such emotional strain is never portrayed as individual; it goes beyond a personal tirade or a diatribe between families (as a matter of fact, one of the two families,

the Muslim one, is not even portrayed, but only mentioned indirectly) to take on a collective meaning, embracing the entire Chinese Malaysian community and putting it in direct antagonism with the dominant Malay ethnic group.

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

On a linguistic level, we can notice the tetralinguistic model proposed by Henri Gobard, and used by Deleuze and Guattari, in which language is divided into: vernacular (or maternal or territorial), vehicular, referential and mythic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986: 23). He Shufang, and many other Sinophone Malaysian authors "become minor" through the process of writing and by using vernacular (their Sinitic geolect, i.e. their variety of Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien, etc.), vehicular (*Huayu*, or Mandarin Chinese as it is spoken in Malaysia), referential (Standard Mandarin Chinese) and mythic (classical Chinese, oftentimes connected to religion and spirituality) language in their texts. *Huayu* (the vehicular language) is the predominant means of expression and it represents, as already mentioned above, the deterritorialization, and subsequent reterritorialization within the Malaysian context, of standard Mandarin Chinese (the referential language).

As already discussed, the political and collective worth of the text 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 (for example when she softens the general tension through the description of a political figure, Mr. Lin, a local congressman and the symbol of officialdom, who 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.) and political in its ultimate meaning (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).

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 theorized by Deleuze and Guattari. In fact, it possesses all its three defining characteristics, namely deterritorialization, political nature and collective value.

The second issue which I aimed at addressing is 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. Matter-of-factly, they can prove highly helpful when trying to systematize and criticize non-Western literary systems. Therefore, by using the theory of a minor literature created by Deleuze and Guattari in the 1970s, 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 other way around is also true: non-Western examples can indeed be useful to supplement, question, enrich theories which were born in a thoroughly Western realm. By making the influence mutual and bidirectional, these models can then take on a more universal worth.

On the other hand, 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 systematization as better-established (at least in this part of the world) literary traditions. It is for this very same need of systematization and canonization that theories have sprout also within these

"peripheral" or minor literatures themselves, and it is important that literary critics and academicians take them into their deserved consideration.

A blend of literary theories from both within 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.

Lastly, it shall not be forgotten that some issues, like the fact that many literatures blossom in peripheral/intercultural situations, are universal and their universality is only destined to grow, considering the increasing globalization. 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.  
(Deleuze & Guattari, 1986: 19)

Departing from Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of a *minor literature*, in this section, I aimed at scrutinizing Sinophone Malaysian literature from an external perspective, and at enriching the debate on both dimensions (the Sinophone and the Malaysian) by tackling the object of study using a conceptual framework originally envisioned to investigate a literary systems from a different linguistic, geographic, historical, and social circumstance.

## CHAPTER IV:

### When Chinese Malaysians Meet the *Other-Self*

#### IV.I. Introduction

As shown in the previous sections of this work, the ethnic and social make-up of present-day Malaysia is rather complex, to say the least, therefore making ethnic interaction a common daily phenomenon. However, we should also bear in mind that

it is not the current globalization phase which has rekindled ethnic differences, nor for that matter, has it been responsible for the presence of cultural pluralism or multiculturalism in its midst. Indeed, multiculturalism and indigenous variants of cultural pluralism in the pre-capitalist civilization of the Malaysian region pre-dated the coming of western colonialism itself. The paradox is that it was the subsequent elaborations by colonialism upon this “initial pluralism,” which gave rise to the ethnicism and competing ethnicities currently inherited by the modern Malaysian nation-state.

(Zawawi Ibrahim, 2004: 115-16)

As can be inferred from the above citation, Zawawi Ibrahim attributes the existing ethnic problems of contemporary Malaysia to the zeal with which the British colonizer applied the ancient Roman maxim of *divide et impera* (divide and rule), a strategy where small power groups (ethnic groups in the case of Malaysia) are prevented from linking up and becoming a possible threat for the existing colonial structure. Noted American author James Carroll, also remarks in his *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews - A History* how the British were rather successful in implementing the Latin adage, however without making any mention to the specific case of Malaysia, which also had its share of unfortunate incidents ignited by ethnic hatred:

Typically, imperial powers depend on the inability of oppressed local populations to muster a unified resistance, and the most successful occupiers are skilled at exploiting the differences among the occupied. Certainly that was the story of the British Empire's success, and its legacy of nurtured local hatreds can be seen wherever the Union Flag flew, from

Muslim-Hindu hatred in Pakistan and India, to Catholic-Protestant hatred in Ireland, to, yes, Jew-Arab, hatred in modern Israel. [Ancient] Rome was as good at encouraging internecine resentments among the occupied as Britain ever was.

(Carroll, 2002: 81-82)

Hence, the Chinese Malaysian experience too is thus shaped by regular relations (which in some cases can also be of confrontational nature) with the Other. The intricacy of such Chinese Malaysian - Other interaction is also due to the fact that such Other is very variable, ranging from the dominant Malay ethnicity to the Indian minority, from the *Orang Asli* of Peninsular Malaysia to the various indigenous groups of East Malaysia.

Moreover, the increased ease with which people and idea cross borders and trespass frontiers contributes to the fact that Chinese Malaysians are now confronted not only with people from different ethnic groups within Malaysia, but also with other ethnic Chinese, with whom they share a common ethnic background, many cultural traits and a certain number of social patterns. Nevertheless, coming face to face with Chinese people from different realities also means interacting with the Other, albeit differently. In my opinion, it can thus be said that the Chinese Malaysian identity is shaped through social interaction with the *Other* and is subject to shifts and changes directly connected to the changes in the Malaysian social environment and in the nature of such interethnic activities. Using Hirschman's words, when analyzing Wang Guangwu's theories on Chinese identity,

[b]eing a Chinese in Southeast Asia rests not only on an historical sense of a shared background, but on contemporary conditions, especially the interaction of Chinese minorities with indigenous populations and national governments. Given changes in these external conditions, there have been changes in the range and content of Chinese identities in Southeast Asia. Wang emphasizes this temporal dimension with his contrast between 'older' and 'modern' Chinese identities.

(Hirschman, 1988: 23)

Being so central to the Chinese Malaysian experience, this constant identity (re)negotiation is a recurring theme in modern and contemporary Sinophone Malaysian

fiction, as this chapter and the following one will try to put in evidence through the textual analysis of short stories and novellas by authors coming from different backgrounds.

According to Hou Kok Chung (He Guozhong 何國忠),

the issues of identity and cultural trends have historically been questions of interest within the Chinese Malaysian community. The most noticeable characteristic of the Chinese sense of identity, as well as of their cultural fate, is the fact that both are constructed within a process of ethnic interaction, or in other words, they are built through the appearance of the *Other*.

(Hou, 2000: 1)<sup>48</sup>

The choice of texts is the result of a double effort to (i) prove that the issue of identity and the constant challenges to and shifts in such a fluctuating idea are of concern to a large number of authors who, apart from the language they use and the "Sinophone Malaysian" label they are given or give to themselves, may or may not have much else in common, and also to (ii) showcase the different approaches to the issue.

The difference in approaches to the identity question is also due to another relevant factor, which resides in the very nature of the Other. As a rule of thumb, who the other is, i.e. the identity of the Other, affects the way the subject relates to him.

Therefore, it can be argued that when narrating social interaction with other ethnic groups, Sinophone Malaysian authors will look at the identity issue from a certain angle, thus shaping the Chinese Malaysian identity in a certain way, while when concerned with interaction between the Chinese Malaysian and other Chinese people (primarily from the Chinese mainland), which I see as the *Other-self*, the issue will be dealt with differently, thus constructing (consciously or not) an identity resting on other foundations. While ethnicity, religion or provenance are oftentimes used as an incontrovertible difference marker in inter-ethnic relations, in intra-ethnic ones (i.e. those between the Chinese people

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<sup>48</sup> The original text, in Chinese, reads as follows: "身份的認同問題和文化的走向是馬來西亞華人史中引人注目的議題。華人的身分意識和文化命運的最大特徵是兩者都在族群之間的互動過程中形成，也就是有'他者'的出現而建構起來的。"

of Malaysia and other people of Chinese background), identity rests on the peculiarities of the Malaysian Chinese experience, hence sitting on geo-social grounds.

In fact, it is undeniable that the ethnic Chinese in/from Malaysia share certain common cultural traits with other Chinese within and outside the greater China region, but it must also not be forgotten that

there has also been a major change from Chinese historical identity (consciousness of traditional family values and symbols of a glorious Chinese past) to cultural identity, the modern version of the traditional Chinese identity. What is most significant about this category is that much of the cultural content of modern Chinese identity is not Chinese or Southeast Asian, but rather Western. Wang [Guangwu] notes that what distinguishes Southeast Asian Chinese culture is its readiness to adapt to Western languages, education, and even religion.  
(Hirschman, 1988: 24)

Short stories and novellas centred on the interaction between the Chinese Malaysians and other ethnic groups abound in contemporary Sinophone Malaysian literature, as we shall see in the next chapter. On the other hand, spotting fiction revolving around the relation between the Chinese Malaysian and the *Other-self* has proven to be a somewhat more difficult task.

During my five-month stay at the *Mahua Literature Centre*, housed in the library of Southern College, in Johor, Malaysia, and after a thorough research through their shelves and among their closed stacks, I was not able to locate other short stories or novella which had the Chinese Malaysian - *Other-Self* interaction as their backbone.

A rather common idea among Sinophone authors and researchers in Malaysia (which I have soon come to share) is that the *Mahua Literature Centre* is a stop one cannot miss if one wants to accomplish a thorough scholarly work on Malaysian Sinophone literature. In fact, I was constantly repeated - only half-jokingly - that if I was looking for a specific text, an article from an academic journal or even a newspaper clipping, I could be rest assured that I would be able to find it there, and if I didn't, then it meant that such text, article or

newspaper cutting did not exist.

While attempting at creating a corpus of post-independence Malaysian Sinophone short fiction, which would serve the purpose of my study, as well as helping future researches in this field of study, I noticed that in anthologies, personal collections, literary magazines and Sunday supplements to local Sinophone newspapers, works centred on the issue discussed here were consistently absent. As it had appeared evident to me by then, after the first couple of months in Malaysia, not only such stories of separation and reunion, of friendship and mistrust, of joy and sorrow shared by ethnic Chinese from both sides of the South China Sea did not make it into anthologies, collections and magazines, but there was also no consistent mentioning of the issue (not even as a neglected topic) in works of literary criticism or in texts aiming at systematizing the body of Sinophone Malaysian works.

However, my puzzlement at the paucity of this kind of texts, has been shared by Ng Kim Chew as well who, in his commentary to Li Kaixuan's short story, also notes how

the Chinese in Malaysia constitute a typical immigrant society, formed by successive waves of migration which resulted in different time-defined "strata" [within the population]; therefore, the differences in Chinese "nativeness" have naturally led to various degrees of proximity to their ancestral home. Thus, whether they go to China to visit their relatives and find their roots, or it is their mainland Chinese counterpart that visits them in Southeast Asia, the relations and the exchange of experiences between the two peoples are inevitable. Therefore, such issues should also be a frequent topic in fiction; but strangely enough, after Shang Wanyun's *Jun zi guxiang lai*, they have become very scant in number in Sinophone Malaysian literature.  
(Ng, 2004: 117)<sup>49</sup>

Shang Wanyun's short story dates back to the late seventies, and it was published in 1977, i.e. only three years after Malaysia and the People's Republic of China established

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<sup>49</sup> The Chinese original reads as follows: "大馬華人社會是典型的移民社會，而移民抵達的時間不可能是同時的，反而勢必是由時間差構成的「重層」；相應的，華人的「土生」的世代差異，也必然導致他們與祖籍地的關係又著親疏遠近的不同。因而不論是到中國探親尋根，還是從祖籍地到南洋尋親，在兩地人民關係史、經驗史上，都有著結構的必然性。相應的，它本也該是小說常見的題材。但奇怪的是，在商晚筠〈君自故鄉來〉之後，在馬華小說史上卻並不多見。"

diplomatic ties. This major bilateral event, however, did not pave the road to the normalization process of Sino-Malaysian diplomacy, which only took a major positive turn since the end of the Cold-war. Therefore, I might suggest that the lack of Sinophone Malaysian fiction focusing on the relations between the Chinese Malaysians and their *Other-self*, i.e. the mainland Chinese, is easily explained by the actual diplomatic climate, which prohibited (in the case of Malaysia) international encounters between the two ethnic Chinese groups until the nineties. Despite the difficulties, such encounters would still take place, since "Malaysian Chinese were permitted clandestinely to visit China with special visas issued by the Chinese government in Hong Kong, and [...] they were treated like returning overseas Chinese and looked after by the Commission for Overseas Chinese Affairs in China." (Liow, 2009: 50)

Fear of being seen as close to the political positions of the mainland Chinese communist government might also have played a role in these authors' choice to avoid a topic which directly involved writing about contemporary China. As a matter of fact, I believe that the cold-war-era climate of suspicion on everything communist (which in many Asian countries normally translated into distrust and open opposition to everything Chinese, especially in Malaysia and Indonesia) was actually the main reason why Sinophone Malaysian writers consistently discarded Chinese Malaysia - China relations as a possible topic of narration.

The turn of the century saw an increase in the Chinese Malaysian - mainland Chinese relations, and they also start to be recorded in Malaysian Sinophone fiction, as is the case with Chen Zhengxin's *Hun de zhuisu*, written in 2008, or in *Dage kuankuan zou lai* by Li Kaixuan, published in 2002 for the first time.

Thus, these three works will constitute the primary texts on which I will base my analysis of the relationships between ethnic Chinese from within and outside of Malaysia.

Before embarking on the actual literary analysis of the fictional works chosen, I deem it necessary to spend a few more words on the reasons that led me to the selection of these three specific pieces.

One clarification must be made here about the availability of texts centred on the Chinese Malaysian - Chinese relationship. As Ng Kim Chew commented, and as I have noticed myself after checking a much broader corpus of writings, the scarcity of short stories and novellas<sup>50</sup> on this specific subject-matter made my choice almost inescapable. However, for the sake of truth and clarity, I must also admit that the cultural pages of most Sinophone newspapers in Malaysia often publish short works of fiction in which China or the Chinese people play a leading role. However, most of the pieces put into print are written by amateur one-time writers, who rarely publish again on daily papers and never make it into anthologies or literary magazines.

On the contrary, it must be pointed out that the authors I chose, all share a certain degree of notoriety among Sinophone Malaysian readership and critics, and have all published personal collections of their short stories and novellas. Moreover, late Shang Wanyun is undoubtedly the most international of the three, with her works being published in Taiwan too, where she was also the recipient of important literary prizes.

Shang, Li and Chen can also be taken as different, albeit all three of them equally representative, faces of contemporary Sinophone Malaysian literature of different periods: Shang Wangyun, a female writer and former student in the humanities in Taiwan, then a

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<sup>50</sup> During the collection of data in Malaysia, I also leafed through the pages of the very few Malaysian Sinophone novels, despite the fact that they fell out of the scope of the present research. Nevertheless, the topic did not seem to be present in lengthier works either. On the other hand, it appears to be rather common practice for many Malaysian Chinese who have been studying in China to publish collections of prose writings dealing with their mainland Chinese experience. Worth mentioning, among others, are Fan Pik Wah's *Zai Beida kan zhongguo* (在北大看中國, which could be rendered in English as "Looking at China from Peking University"), and Kek Lian Wah's *Chuntian zhong yi ke shu* (春天種一棵樹, translatable in English as "Plant a tree in spring"). Fan is a Malaysian sinologist currently based at the University of Malaya, while Kek specializes in Chinese literature of the Tang and Song periods and currently serves as professor of Chinese at the Universiti Putra Malaysia.

*returnee* to her native Malaysia; Li Kaixuan, male brought up and educated in Malaysia; and Chen Zhengxin, born and brought up in Malaysia, educated in Singapore, where he also worked in the corporate sector, while never shelving his artistic (as a creative writer and translator) side.

Hence, *Jun zi guxiang lai*, *Dage kuankuan zou lai* and *Hun de zhuisu* are, on a purely literary level, the most representative works of fiction dealing with the topic I shall analyze hereunder. By choosing these three stories, I also tried to assure temporal consistency. The analysis is thus carried out following the chronological order of creation/publication of the texts (therefore *Jun zi guxiang lai* will be analyzed first, then I will focus on *Dage kuankuan zou lai*, and lastly will inspect Chen Zhengxin's short story), so as to show whether the topic follows an evolutionary path, and if so, to what extent and how can such evolution be critically described.

## **IV.II. China and The Chinese in Sinophone Malaysian Fiction**

### **IV.II.1. *Jun zi guxiang lai* (君自故鄉來) (1977) by Shang Wanyun**

*Jun zi guxiang lai*, which could roughly be translated as "You came from home", is a novella written in 1977 by Shang Wanyun and published in Taiwan in the same year. It was awarded the first prize for fiction at the second edition of the *United Daily Literature Award* (*Lianhe Bao Wenxue Jiang* 聯合報文學獎), held in Taiwan, also in 1977.

Beginning from the title, the novella already shows a connection to China and to the Chinese cultural tradition. In fact, Shang Wanyun borrowed the title from the first verse of a well-known unclassified poem (*zashi* 雜詩)<sup>51</sup> by Wang Wei (王維) (699-759), one of the

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<sup>51</sup> The poem is a five-syllable regulated quatrain:  
君自故鄉來，應知故鄉事。  
來日綺窗前，寒梅著花未。

most famous and brilliant artists of the Tang period. Moreover, the word *guxiang* (which can be rendered in English as "hometown, homeland, native place, birthplace," all words indicating the strongest possible connection between a person and a geographical space) already gives out a hint of what the reader should expect as the general topic dealt with in the story. Nevertheless, one question will most naturally come to mind when reading such a title, i.e. "where is this *guxiang* located?" Is the author referring to somewhere in Malaysia? Or is she talking about some place in China? As we can see, even what might be a very straightforward matter (where is home?) for most people, becomes a problematic issue when we raise it within the context of Chinese Malaysian society.

However, it does not take the reader long before he understands that *guxiang* actually refers to Puning, a location in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong.

The plot of the novella is rather simple, however it is beautifully told. Shang Wanyun centres the story on the internal unease and worries of the protagonist, Chen Rijin (陳日金, who is almost always referred to as *ta* 他 "he/him" in the story). He lays ill in bed in the house of his elder son, whom together with his wife takes grudgingly care of him. The old man has left China to settle in northern Peninsular Malaysia, right across the border from Thailand (which incidentally is also the place the author hails from) as many others in search of a better future, but he has left his wife, Chunmei, back in Puning, his birthplace. He spends the day narrated in the novella waiting for the arrival of a Singaporean relative, who has just been in Puning, and subsequently for first-hand news about his beloved. The excitement, which caused him to wake up very early in the morning, turns into sadness, doubt and guilt as he reads the letter and looks at the photograph that Chunmei asked the Singaporean relative to deliver him. The harsh life in China under communist rule, the

backwardness of his hometown compared to the relative wealth enjoyed by Chinese Malaysians accentuate his prick of conscience for leaving without taking his wife along with him (which thing, however, was fairly common among Chinese migrants).

As can be inferred from the brief synopsis given above, the interaction between a Chinese Malaysian and a Chinese from the Mainland, in this case is only imagined, as a real encounter between the main character and his beloved never takes place. Even so, thanks to the mediation of a third party (the relative from Singapore), the relationship between the two is virtually restored, in a way. This relation, which only exists in the mind of the protagonist, but not in the actual world, has to come to terms with the changes caused by the traumatic experience of separation.

The atypicality of such relationship is also due to the political situation of the period. As we mentioned before, it was hard for Chinese Malaysians to go to mainland China and for mainland Chinese to visit Malaysia before the end of the cold war. It is probably considering this diplomatic issue that Shang Wanyun chose a Singaporean national as the intermediary between the protagonist who left, and the woman who was left behind, thus avoiding incongruities between her fiction story and the real-life situation.

Shang Wanyun portrays what was a common feeling of uncertainty and unawareness among the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia regarding the life and situation of their relatives and friends back in China. This unknowingness used to spur a number of questions, which were the only connection Chinese Malaysians had with their Chinese counterpart, besides their own memories or the ones handed down by the elder generation.

For example, the reader learns from one specific passage of the text that the protagonist is not even sure whether Chunmei is still alive and still living in their hometown. The lack of communication between Malaysia and China in the Cold War era was such that this type of situation should not come as a surprise at all. Well into the story,

Shang Wanyun writes:

Is Chunmei really still alive? Does she still live in our hometown in China (唐山)? Our bedroom back there was narrow and dark, untouched by the sunlight. Chunmei used to complain about the room not having a window on the eastern wall, thus sunbeams couldn't get in, and the stuffy smell wouldn't go out. After a while, when I had earned enough money abroad (番邦), the Japanese had been defeated and peace restored, I would go back with the children and tear down the entire eastern wall, and I would build a new one in its place, this time with two windows, so that the warm scent of the sun could pervade the room in every season. That way, it would never again smell mouldy. He should have never left a woman so virtuous as Chunmei back home alone. He should have left someone to guard their piece of land and their house, someone who would also burn joss-sticks and pull up weeds in front of the ancestors' tomb!  
(Shang, 1977: 190)<sup>52</sup>

As can be inferred from the above paragraph, things haven't gone as expected for the protagonist of the novella and he hasn't been able to set foot in China again. However, the memories are still very vivid in his mind, after so many years in Malaysia, the country where all his family but his wife have planted their roots. His intentions were apparently good, the outcome, however, has proven far from being a positive one for his marital relationship and the old man taxes himself with selfishness, especially after realizing that all his efforts have always been directed to provide himself, but not his wife, with a better life:

[W]hen he thought of Chunmei, whom he had left in China, his hearth would be overwhelmed by guilt. He had never really worked hard to give her a comfortable life, he had always thought for himself, and his preoccupation was to build a new home in this foreign country.  
(Shang, 1977: 192)<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> The Chinese original reads as follows: "春妹真的還活著？還住在唐山老家？老家的臥房又窄又黯，一點也不透光。春妹就嫌它東牆沒挖口窗子，陽光投不進來，陰淫味散不出去。等過了一陣子，我在番邦賺了些錢，日本人敗戰了，天下太平那時候，我跟孩子一塊兒回來，把整片東牆拆垮下來，再造一堵牆，弄兩口窗，讓屋裡頭春夏秋冬地老流動著陽光溫暖的氣息，就不再會有陰淫發霉的味道了。那麼一個賢慧的女人家，他不該教春妹一個人留下來。總得有個人留下來看守這塊地這個家啊，祖墳也得要個人上上香除除草啊！"

<sup>53</sup> Following is the original Chinese text: "想起唐山的春妹，他心裡有太多的愧疚，他未曾為了給她舒適的生活而累壞了，他只想到為自己。為自己在番邦見一個家。"

It is only with the arrival of the Singaporean relative, bringing news from the hometown, that Chen Rijin is directly confronted with the reality of contemporary China, of the changes that have taken place in the country he has left thirty years before (他老人家離開唐山都三十個年頭了 Shang, 1977: 196). It is only then that he is ideally, but painfully "reunited" to his wife, as he cannot help but acknowledge the severe condition in which she lives. When he is shown a photograph shot in front of his old house in China, he has mixed feeling and still hesitates in recognizing the woman of the picture as his wife Chunmei:

"[...] I have a photograph somewhere here in my pocket, wait, where did I put it? Yes, here it is. This photo of Auntie was taken in front of the entrance to her house." Chen Yaoping held the picture in front of his eyes. As soon as he heard it was his old house entrance, tears inevitably accumulated at the corner of his eyes, and with blurred vision, he dove his eyes into the yellowish black-and-white photo. "She is still alive, then! So many years and she's still alive!" [...] "That's not my Chunmei!" A pose with her hand begging for food and the old lady would be a perfect beggar, with that decrepit appearance as if she weren't able to stand on her feet, and not even a walking-stick. And she's supposed to be Chunmei? No way! Look at her desperate attempt to stand straight. It seems as if so soon as the camera shutter is pressed, she would fall down [...] "That's not Chunmei! Even if she aged so unbearably much, she'd never have that wasted face. No matter how busy, no matter how scruffy she were, she'd never go as far as cutting her head of hair that short. She would wake up very early in the morning to comb her hair toward the back into a tidy bun so neat and well-groomed that you would never see one single hair standing out. Why didn't anybody give this poor old lady a chair to sit on and take the picture more comfortably?" (Shang, 1977: 197-98)<sup>54</sup>

The above passage clearly shows how the old man, Chen Ruijin, refuses to come to terms with the Chinese reality, which Chunmei is clearly a symbol of. She used to be a tidy

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<sup>54</sup> The Chinese original reads as follows: "「[...] 我袋子這兒有一張照片，唔——放哪裡了？哦哦，有了。喏——，是伯娘在老人家門前拍的。」陳耀平把照片張到他眼前。一聽說是老家門前，眼眶已情不自禁地積了兩池淚水，視覺愈發模糊，瞧入黑白發黃了的照片裡。「人還活著呢，都這麼多年，人還真活著呢！」[...]「那不是咱家的春妹！」這老乞婦手上頭差就差那麼個討飯的活兒，那付老態龍鍾，彷彿站不住腳，又沒個扶手的拐杖，說是春妹，可真差了幾萬里，瞧她那勉強支撐起來的表情，好像按下快門以後她準會隨課跟著倒下去[...]「那不是春妹。她即使必須老得每個頭看，也不會老成這付咀臉。她在忙，再隨便邋邋，也不致於懶得將大把髮剪短了，每個早上她趕個早，就是為梳理盤結腦後的髻，八前頭的髮齊向後梳，滑亮得一點也不起毛毛，這可憐的老女人，怎麼沒個人給她一把椅子教她坐著舒舒服服的上照。」"

woman, very concerned with her appearance. But times have changed, and in the China of the mid-seventies, there's is no room for such futilities, as the country is going through a period of hardships both economically and socially, and a simple, unadorned and frugal life is demanded of everyone. The contrast with Malaysia, and even more so with Singapore, the country represented by the business-man/relative Chen Yaoping, is striking. The image that the protagonist has of China, i.e. that of a country, and subsequently its people, being at a standstill is conveyed with unrivaled power and beauty by Shang Wanyun.

However, soon enough, the Singaporean gives a slightly different picture of the situation, probably in an effort to reassure Chen Rijin. It must not be forgotten that Chen Yaoping is the only character in the store having first-hand experience of the Mainland China of the 1970s. According to him, the condition in which Chunmei - who can be seen as symbolizing an entire segment of the mainland Chinese population of that period - lives are not that bad after all:

"Uncle, Auntie is doing very well in China, she has enough food to eat and enough clothes to wear. At her age, she's still afraid of remaining at home and sitting there with idle hands, so she happily follows the others to the field in the very early hours of the morning. She seemed rather happy!"  
(Shang, 1977: 199)<sup>55</sup>

But the old man, whose thoughts are presented in a sort of internal monologue, does not seem to believe Chen Yaoping's reassuring words. For him, the photograph he is shown is the only tangible proof of how things are in China, and thus it regards it as the only fist-hand experience of life in his hometown. One picture, in his case, speaks louder than all the words others could possibly tell him:

"Is that really Chunmei, Asheng's mother? Poor old lady! What has become of her?! Any old Indian woman begging on the streets looks

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<sup>55</sup> Shang writes the following in Chinese: "「阿伯，伯娘她在唐山很好，不愁吃不愁穿，這麼大歲數的人，還怕閒著不好過，和大夥兒大清早下田幹活聽樂的！」"

better than her. She is even sadder than the most pitiful of beggars. She is still working her stiff old bones off and she is happy about that? I wonder whether she can even move!"  
(Shang, 1977: 199)<sup>56</sup>

It can be noted, from the above quote, how Shang is actually comparing the situation of China and Malaysia. She is telling the reader that, the circumstances in China are so difficult that the average old woman, here represented by Chunmei, is probably living in a condition even worse than that of the poorest person in Malaysia. As symbol of Malaysian poverty, Shang resorts to the image of a fictitious Indian old beggar, as it must not be forgotten that often times Indian Malaysians live(d) in conditions of extreme economic disadvantage, especially when compared with the socio-politically dominant Malays and with the economically better-off Chinese Malaysians.

In a later passage, the Singaporean reports the words that Chunmei has entrusted him and, again, the reader can see a subconscious attempt to calm the old man's sense of unrest and to dispel his doubts. In fact, it should be born in mind that the feelings of the old man are only known to the reader, as Chun Rijin is unable to speak:

"Uncle, don't you worry! Auntie asked me to tell you that there is no one who knows how to write and read around her, but still if Dasheng and his wife could write to her... a letter every month or two will do. She was afraid that you were not here anymore, that's why she wants Dasheng to write about you, whether you were still... I mean, she wants to hear everything, good and bad.[...]" "Uncle, she is doing well, don't you worry!"  
(Shang, 1977: 199-200)<sup>57</sup>

Clearly, in *Jun zi guxiang lai*, Shang Wanyun is constantly showing two different approaches to the relationship with mainland China and the mainland Chinese (what I

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<sup>56</sup> Following is the Chinese original: "「她真的是阿勝的親娘春妹嗎？可憐的老女人，老成這模樣，隨便抓一個街上流浪的老印度婆娘跟她比較，她連個討飯的可憐相都不如，一身的老骨頭硬了還幹活稱快，她真動得了嗎？」"

<sup>57</sup> The original reads as follows: "「您老人家放心，伯娘要我把話帶給您，這些年來沒個認識的識字朋友，教大勝和他媳婦能寫甚麼就寫甚麼，個把月的給她一封信，她是怕您不在了，教大勝信裡頭提一提您的事如果您...我是說讓她高興的事或傷心的事她都想知道。[...]」" "阿伯，她一切都很好，您別掛心。"

previously called the *other-self*), through the two main characters, namely the old man and his Singaporean relative. Both approaches are a consequence of the interaction with the new China (which in this specific case means the China of the 1970s) and not the China/ancestral homeland as portrayed in many Sinophone Malaysian works.

The Singaporean relative represents a modern approach to China, mainly business-driven and somewhat utilitarian. From what one is able to infer from the story, he is not interested in anything Chinese, nor is he moved by any kind of romantic ideal of soul-searching and root-finding of some sort (as we shall see, for example, in Chen Zhengxin's story). His connection to China and mainland Chinese people is, therefore, based on a merely economic interaction.

On the other hand and contrasting with this utilitarian approach, the old man is representative of a whole first generation of Chinese Malaysians who were forbidden to go back home by a two main reasons, the first being the not-so-idyllic relations between Malaysia and the P.R.C., the second being the changes that had taken place in China under Communist rule, which had dramatically changed the social, political, economic and even cultural core of the country. Therefore, they could never go back home again, because that home as they knew it was lost forever, buried under the inclemency of time and man. It is for this very same reason that Chen Rijin craves, as any other emigrant, to know more about the current situation in his hometown:

"And that's all? You stayed in China for a few days, even if you didn't have time to travel everywhere, I am sure you did at least go all over Puning county. Tell me a bit about Puning! Those people in the Chen Village... And that land, that sky, are they still as big as they used to be? All those families, are they still alive? Are their roots still growing strong? Who's become rich? Who's fallen down in misery? Probably there are still one or two persons who remember me, maybe some of them even hated me, and some like me. [...] I want to ear every story about everyone of them, even the boring ones, even those of no importance. [...] You say you are just back from China, you say you have been to Puning. Well, how many faces of Puning have you seen?"

(Shang, 1977: 200-01)<sup>58</sup>

It is not hard for us to see, in the words of the old man (words that only remain in his mind and are never pronounced out loud), his longing not only for his beloved, but also for his homeland. He shows, however, extreme lucidity by acknowledging that all the years that have passed since he left, have surely changed a lot of things, that is to say, he knows that things are not and will never be as before, even if he could go back. It is as if he were drifting away from who he once were, as if the circumstances had shaken his *Chineseness* off him and replaced it with a localized identity, the Chinese Malaysian one.

After the Singaporean relative has departed, the old man is left alone in his room, where lying in his bed he engages in a conversation with the old woman in the photograph, the woman he finds hard to recognize as Chunmei. The conversation/monologue is transcribed by Shang Wanyun as a train of thoughts reminiscent of the Joycean tradition:

"Chunmei, the hometown, yours and mine, that sky, that land, those villages, the people I knew and those I did not, how are they all really doing? Thirty years before, thirty years later, such a huge time in between, how could it possibly be that nothing changed? [...] Who in his sane mind would ever go to China, were it not to buy jade ware?"

(Shang, 1977: 201-02)<sup>59</sup>

This last sentence, which shows the protagonist's disillusionment with what once was his home, stands in sharp contrast with the description the author gives in the closing paragraphs. The man is in his bed, the window is open and he looks at the clouds floating high in the Malaysian sky:

Probably he too went back to his Chinese home in Puning to see Chunmei

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<sup>58</sup> In the Chinese text the same passage reads as follows: "「就這些麼？去了一趟唐山住了把些日子，就算沒能跑遍整個唐山，至少也走遍整個普寧縣，說些普寧的事啊！陳家村前前後後那些人家，那塊地和天空看上去一般大，那些房屋人家，他們還活在人世嗎？他們的根還扎實吧！她們當中誰發福起來了誰沒落下去？他們當中或許還有一兩個還記得我，有的或許恨過我，有些可能喜歡過我。[...]我願意聽聞關於他們當中任何人的任何事，無聊的事，無關痛癢的事。」[...]你說你從唐山回來，你說你去了普寧。你看到多少普寧的面貌？"

<sup>59</sup> Following is the original text: "「春妹，老家，你的我的，那片天空，那塊地，那兒前村後村，認識的人或不認識的人，他們都真真正正確確實實的怎樣了？三十年前三十年後，中間垮了那麼大的一個時空，會沒變嗎？[...]唐山那地方，若不是收買玉器玩意兒，鬼才去。」"

again, to have one more close look at her from head to toe, and to ask her why is it that she didn't choose a nice and tidy dress for the photo. [...] Or he could probably go back to his home in Puning on the occasion of the Qingming festival, when new and old faces, those who were still alive and those that had already passed away would gather.  
(Shang, 1977: 202-03)<sup>60</sup>

In this last passage, it is not hard for the reader to feel the old man's longing for his home in China and his beloved.

Because of, or thanks to, the contradictory statements in the above two passages ("Who in his sane mind would ever go to China..." and "Probably he too went back to his Chinese home in Puning..."), the reader is left in a sort of limbo, floating between Malaysia and China, not really there, but not totally here either. The greatness of Shang Wanyun writing rests, in my opinion, in her ability to infuse in the reader's mind those universal feelings of longing and *in-betweenness* so common among the majority of emigrants.

On a literary level, one cannot but note Shang's ability in the use of the internal monologue and train-of-thought techniques. The contrast between what is really happening and what the reader experiences is strikingly powerful: the old man does not have a voice, as if it had been taken away from him, and yet, his thoughts have a potent way of reaching us.

In my opinion, the man's unuttered, unpronounced words can be seen as an allegory of the Chinese Malaysian unvoiced longing for home during the cold-war era. On a superficial level, it seemed as if the fear of being labelled as allies to the communists prompted most Chinese Malaysians to sever all remaining links to their mainland Chinese heritage; however, on a deeper, emotional level, the umbilical chord between the 'where I am at' and the 'where I come from', had never been cut off completely, as the old man reminds us.

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<sup>60</sup> The original passage reads as follows: "也許他也會去唐山普寧老家一趟，看看春妹，仔細的從頭到尾，問她為甚麼不揀一套漂亮乾淨的衣服上照。[...]也許逢著清明時節回去普寧老家一趟，生面孔和舊面孔，活著的人和死去的人，都是趕那時節在那兒碰面。"

In *Jun zi guxiang lai*, as already stated in many occasions, the contact between the Chinese Malaysian and the mainland Chinese takes place by means of an intermediary (another ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia, the Singaporean relative). Nevertheless, it is not less tangible and concrete than if it were real, as it obliges the main character to come to terms with a new Chinese reality, with a new idea of what it means to be (mainland) Chinese (Chunmei's tidy and somewhat cocky personality has given pace to a much more severe and even slightly shabby traits) in the Mao era.

#### **IV.II.2. *Da ge kuankuan zou lai* (大哥款款走来) (2002) by Li Kaixuan**

After the publication of *Jun zi guxiang lai* in the late 1970s, silence falls once again over the Chinese Malaysians - mainland Chinese relations, and it is hard, if not impossible to find fictional works which deal with the topic of the encounter between these two sectors of the global Chinese population, whether they take place in Malaysia, in China or elsewhere. This situation was also noted by Ng Kim Chew in his commentary to Li Kaixuan's *Da ge kuankuan zou lai*, and by my personal inability to locate any other such text during my fieldwork, as I have already mentioned earlier in the chapter.

Like most pieces of Sinophone Malaysian literature, the short story by Li Kaixuan appeared for the first time on the literary and arts supplement to the *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, a leading Sinophone Malaysian newspaper. It was published on the 29 September and 6 October 2002 issues, and it was later revised to be included in Tee and Ng (eds.), 2004. The short story was published again thanks to Southern College Press, in *Hongchen zhong de xin huayuan* (紅塵中的新花園 that could roughly be translated as "The new garden amidst red dust"), Li Kaixuan's first personal collection of short stories and novellas all focusing on the Chinese Malaysian community, its peculiarities, the problems it faces and its

responses to external factors. This newer edition of the story is the one used to carry out the following textual analysis.

*Dage kuankuan zou lai* is a touching story of separation and reunion, a story about the strength of blood ties, which are able to connect and reconnect people across land and sea and despite the entanglement of politics and international relations. The novelette is the account of two brothers who meet each other for the first time well into their adulthood. The elder brother was taken from Malaya (present day peninsular Malaysia), where his Chinese parents had moved in search of a better future and away from the difficult political situation in their home country, back to Guangxi by his father in 1949, the year the P.R.C. was founded, when he was only three or four years old. In China, the narrator's father was obliged by his father to marry a local woman, whom he planned to take back to Malaya together with his elder son and their baby girl. However, due to the complaints of his wife in Malaya and the restrictions imposed by both the British colonial administration in Malaya and the communist government in China, the elder brother too was left behind in Guangxi, where he grew up with his grandparents, stepmother and stepsister. *Dage kuankuan zou lai* moves back and forth between the two shores of the South China Sea as well as between past and present.

On a purely linguistic note, it is necessary to note that the story is written in standard Mandarin Chinese and, were it not for the theme it deals with, it would be impossible to distinguish it from a novelette written by a Sinitic-writing author from the Chinese mainland or from Taiwan. In other words, its Chinese Malaysian flavour is given by the general plot and the topics touched upon, rather than by a conscious choice to localize the linguistic standard.

Throughout the twenty-page-long story, there is only one word that may help the reader geographically locate the text, or to be more accurate, to exclude with a certain

degree of correctness an hypothetical mainland Chinese or Taiwanese provenance: *baxian* (巴仙), the word most widely used in Malaysia and Singapore Mandarin (and in Hong Kong's variety of the Cantonese language) to translate the English "percent", usually preferred to the standard Mandarin *baifenzhi* (百分之) ("For the medication prescribed by other barefoot doctors, one could get a hundred percent government financial aid.") (Li, 2009: 115).<sup>61</sup>

Again on a linguistic note, it should be added that, as in many other Sinophone Malaysian works of fiction, a high degree of intimacy and coziness is associated with the use of a Sinitic language or dialect other than the standard variety. In the case of *Da ge kuankuan zou lai*, the Chinese returnee "spoke warmly in his Guanxi dialect" (Li, 2009: 104), a dialect which is however gradually being lost as younger generations "aren't fluent in it anymore" (Li, 2009: 120).<sup>62</sup>

Even so, the dialogues linguistically blend into the standard Mandarin of the narration, thus giving the reader the idea that the words reported by the narrator and those actually spoken by the fictional character do not match. In my opinion, the writer in this case fails to deliver the story with a certain degree of realism/authenticity, which was otherwise his intention throughout the story. Considering the importance Li attaches to the what he calls 'the Guangxi dialect', had he decided to faithfully transcribe this non-standard(ized) linguistic variety into the text, the short story would have probably acquired increased literary value, as it would have shown an outstanding mastery of the great wealth of linguistic choices and literary devices available to the Sinophone Malaysian writer.

The idea of a non-standard(ized) language as a means to bridge the gap between two

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<sup>61</sup> The original Chinese texts reads as follows: "別的赤腳醫生所開的藥方，都可獲得一百巴仙的政府資助。"

<sup>62</sup> In the original Chinese text, Li writes: "他親切，用廣西方言說。" and "我們這些不會講方言的孩子們".

people, or two different groups of Chinese people is not an uncommon theme in contemporary Sinophone Malaysian fiction writings (as we shall see in the next section, devoted to Chen Zhengxin's *Hun de zhuisu*). However, the divide between the one who left (or the one who was taken away, to put it more accurately) and those who stayed is wide and the lack of understanding is stressed time and again by the author.

Political events, such as the Cold War, that cut the free flow of people and communication between Malaysia and China also undermined the affection between people who share the same blood:

After forty-five years of separation and estrangement, their kindred feelings, which had been pushed away in two different lands by politics and diplomacy, suddenly melted in a very western action [i.e. an embrace] [...] We visited our relatives while still continuing to straighten out our mutual feelings which had been so messed up by politics. [...] The unsurmountable height of diplomacy had made us almost forget our elder brother, whom had become but an empty name to us.  
(Li, 2003: 104)<sup>63</sup>

It is clear, from the above passage, how the author insists on the power external factors (political and diplomatic ones, in this case) have over such personal matters of brotherly love and kinship. Moreover, such factors can produce, apart from a feeling of estrangement, also the inevitable lack of understanding that comes with that feeling:

I didn't have the patience to listen to his stories about the land reform and the distribution according to labour, and I never quite understood in what year they enjoyed big indiscriminate egalitarianism and when, instead, the red guards publicly criticized and denounced him.  
Elder brother too did not quite get why his southeast Asian relatives would go on and on about racial disputes and our ethnic emotional ties, as if all hardships had a fatal relation with the colour of the skin one was born with.

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<sup>63</sup> The Chinese original reads as follows: "45 年的分離和隔閡，被國際和政治扯開在兩地的骨肉之情，在這個很西式的舉動中，一下子消融了。[...] 我們一邊訪問親戚，一邊繼續整理這段被政治和國際踐踏的亂七八糟的親情。[...] 大哥因而被國際的高山遠遠隔離，直到我們幾乎把他忘得一乾二淨，只剩下一個內容空洞的名字。"

(Li, 2003: 104-05)<sup>64</sup>

The short paragraph above clearly summarizes the distance and the different socio-political situation faced by ethnic Chinese in two unrelated parts of the world. The problems that mainland Chinese people were confronted with before the country's Open Door policy were different from those faced by ethnic Chinese living in a multicultural country like Malaysia where they constitute a minority sector of the total population and where a person's ethnic background can be a discriminating factor in daily life and in the long term.

Differences, however, do not stop here, and one can find many other examples in the text, ranging from distinct approaches to daily life, stressed by the juxtaposition of the Chinese personal particles *ta* (他 "he/his") and *women* (我們 "we/our"),

*He* told everything from start to end at his own sweet time, while *our* typically Malaysian impatience would abruptly interrupt his accounts just when he was talking with gusto.

(Li, 2003, 104)<sup>65</sup>

to unlike positions while facing unlike difficulties. Li Kaixuan presents life of elder brother in China, during the sixties and seventies, as one full of hardships hard, or even impossible, to overcome: poverty, political abuse and retaliation, loneliness and a destiny which can be changed only by what seemed, - at the time - an unlikely escape from the countryside. In sum, the story could be seen as an outspoken critique of the administration of Communist China before the implementation of the Open Door policy.

Nevertheless, Li does not conceive adversities as a mainland Chinese prerogative: Chinese Malaysians have to face their own asperities too. The situations, however, have

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<sup>64</sup> Translated from the Chinese original: "我沒耐心聽他談所經歷的土地改革和按勞分配，也老是搞不清楚是哪一年他吃大鍋飯，又是甚麼時候被紅衛兵批鬥。他也不甚了解，何以南洋的親人老是講他陌生的種族糾紛和民族情結，好像所有的困難都和這天生的膚色有個擺脫不了的宿命關係。"

<sup>65</sup> The original reads as follows: "他凡事都要慢吞吞的從頭說起，而我們馬來西亞式的沒頭沒腦的胡扯，常常在他講得最起勁的時候，把他的話題打岔。" Italics in the translated text are mine.

little or nothing in common: each group lives amidst its own difficulties that cannot be shared, cannot be understood. The ultimate conclusion by the author seems to be that the burden cannot be levied by the *other-self*, no matter how close in appearance, culture or social customs he may be. Li also seems to admit that an apparently better material condition, does not necessarily guarantee a stabler life:

He noticed that our lives seemed stable and satisfactory, at least on the surface, but in reality, it was as if we were walking on a cable wire, from which we were in danger of falling at anytime. The situation in his countryside was probably a lot steadier.  
(Li, 2003: 119)<sup>66</sup>

However, only a few paragraphs later, an apparent contradiction becomes evident, when elder brother is struck by the variety of people in Malaysia and their ability and freedom of movement:

He also saw people of any type living together in such a melting pot, and he also saw how the international wall, once so tall, had shrunk so much that one could jump to the other side with just a tiny hop. All these things had never been seen in the countryside where he came from.  
(Li, 2003: 119-20)<sup>67</sup>

but also by their pureness, liveliness and sensibility:

Elder brother realized that we lived a rich, yet simple life, he noticed that our offsprings were lively and sensitive, thus acknowledged, with a hint of embarrassment: "Well, it seems that you are a better off here in Southeast Asia."  
(Li, 2003: 121)<sup>68</sup>

The contradictory statements - mentioned in the lines above - about the 'here' and the 'there', comparing and scrutinizing both China and Malaysia, lead us to another thorny issue

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<sup>66</sup> Following is the original Chinese text: "他看出我們的生活表面上穩定和足夠，實際上好像走在一條鋼索上，隨時有摔下來的危險，沒有他們農村的穩定。"

<sup>67</sup> In the original Chinese text, Li writes: "他又看到各種各樣的人混雜地生活在一起，國際的高牆已經很短小，輕輕一跨就跨過去了。這樣的事沒在他鄉下出現過。"

<sup>68</sup> The original reads as follows: "大哥見我們的生活充實而單純，下一代活潑靈敏，為感慨的說：「看來還是南洋好些。」"

in this short story (and in many other works by many Sinophone Malaysian authors): the notion of 'home'.<sup>69</sup>

For some, as for the father of the protagonist, the idea of 'home' will always and inevitably be an idea taking them back to China, their birthplace; no matter how strong the sense of belonging to Malaysia is, how homey it feels, the Southeast Asian country will always be second to China:

He then went back to what he now considered his second homeland, Southeast Asia. [...] [But] the rains of that tropical land were unable to wash away the sense of attachment to the homeland. [...] The homeland was the place to return to, the destination of a holy pilgrimage, it was where the worries and the longing of a lifetime resided, and it was a regret impossible to appease.  
(Li, 2003: 106 & 108)<sup>70</sup>

The above passage unequivocally shows China - the homeland - under a very romantic(ized) light, as it is described as the 'destination of a holy pilgrimage' (the more attentive reader will note in this phrase the ease with which the author uses a terminology typical of Islam, in which the *Hajj*, i.e. the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca is considered one of the *arkā al-Islām*, the five pillars of the religion), the land of worries, but

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<sup>69</sup> Devoted to this important issue within Sinophone Malaysian (and Singaporean) literature is James St. André's essay "'You Can Never Go Home Again' Cultural Memory and Identity Formation in the Writing of Southeast Asian Chinese", published in 2006 and in which he notes a certain tendency, especially by writers of younger generations, to see Malaysia as home, as the cozy place where heart-warming memories reside:

Many Malaysian Chinese writers celebrate geographic places; often, the places are no longer their "hometowns" in China, but rather their hometowns in Malaysia. Lim Choon Bee's essay, "My Deep Attachment to Penang", for example, focuses on the street she grew up on, the newspaper stalls, rickshaws, religious festivals, and above all the food. She even has a whole section dedicated to the garbage. Other writers miss the quiet village life of their childhood, such as Wan Ran 69 ("A Mud Path"), Fan Pik Wah ("Old Temple"), and Ng Kim Chew (Dark Night). In all of these stories, the family home is surrounded by oil palm plantations, rubber trees, or forest. In fact, besides "My Deep Attachment to Penang," no one seems interested in celebrating cities, and even in that essay, the author emphasizes the almost village-like atmosphere when she was growing up on her particular street, which was mainly Chinese.  
(St. André, 2006: 49)

<sup>70</sup> These sentences correspond to the following original Chinese passages: "自己回到已是第二個家鄉的南洋。[...] 蕉風椰雨沖不淡他對故鄉的眷戀。[...] 故鄉是他的歸宿、朝聖的地點、一生的煩惱和思念，也是一個無法補償的缺憾。"

also of longing, which mingles with the regret of not being able to go back.

This somewhat uncritical *romanticization* of China, devoid of any historical and socio-political perspective is not uncommon among older generations of ethnic Chinese in Malaysia (but it is probably common to most early immigrant societies), but in Li's story it is mitigated by the presence of the returnee, the elder brother who symbolizes, pretty much like Chunmei in Shang Wanyun's novella, a different China, far removed from the idolized/idolized homeland.

The different attitudes toward the homeland are represented in the story by the parents of the protagonist, who embody the diverse positions one can find among Chinese Malaysians:

[Father's] emotional ties to the motherland were in sharp contrast with mother's attitude of going fashionably 'native'. These chaotic feelings entangled the whole Malaysian family, which sank into a helpless chaos. (Li, 2003: 109)<sup>71</sup>

Moreover, the father's attachment to China, symbolized here by elder brother, is so strong that the man risks his own life in order to go back to China during a time when frontiers were closed and relations between the two countries were far from amicable.

Such strong attachment is probably due to the fact of the man being a latecomer (i.e. a Chinese immigrant who arrived in what was once Malaya in the first half of the twentieth century, as opposed to those who reached Southeast Asia well before that time). The migrant identity of the protagonist's father is explained by the author at a given point in the text, to stress the typically Chinese Malaysian feeling of being at the same time (not) here and (not) there, somewhere in between:

On that southbound boat which sailed across the seas, he was like a coconut, vigorously pushed by the waves onto the fertile shores of the tropical rain forest. From that moment on, the dice of his immigrant life

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<sup>71</sup> The following text is the corresponding Chinese original paragraph: "他的祖國情結，並且時尚和“本土化”的母親針鋒相對。這感情的亂麻糾纏著南洋著一頭家，真個是剪不斷理還亂。"

were thrown, while the machete and the hoe severed a destiny that would last a lifetime.  
(Li, 2003: 109)<sup>72</sup>

As one can probably infer from the various passages quoted above, Li Kaixuan's short story is pretty much a tale of *in-betweenness*, continuously shifting between China and Malaysia, between past and present, between the point of view of the self (the Malaysian brother) and the point of view of the *other-self* (the Chinese elder brother). It is, in sum, a description of the relationship between those who migrated and those who left; it is a story of migration and uprooting, but also a tale of settling. In my opinion, it is in this very quintessentially Sinophone Malaysian - yet unequivocally universal - theme lays the strength of Li Kaixuan's story.

Li Kaixuan's linguistic choice of manifesting this tension and *in-betweenness* through the contraposition of the personal pronouns *he/him* and *we/us* is undoubtedly the strongest literary feature of the text. I believe this peculiar pick to be a very carefully thought device, which deserves special attention on a literary level. Firstly, by using the *we/us* formula when referring to the Malaysian brother, he indirectly states not only where the narrator (and the author himself) stands in the Chinese Malaysian /mainland Chinese interaction, but he also leaves the reader (who most likely is of Chinese Malaysian background) no other choice than that of becoming himself part of this interaction. Secondly, the *we/us* expression also generalizes the characteristics of the Malaysian brother, as they are considered to be common to the entire Chinese Malaysian community. Moreover, the reader, as a member of the community in question, has the instruments to accept or refuse this generalization.

On the other hand, we do not find universalization in the description of the mainland

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<sup>72</sup> The original text reads as follows: "隨著這風帆的南漂，他像一粒椰子，被浪潮沖刷到熱帶雨林的一個肥沃地點。從此命定了他的移民身分，並與膠刀和鋤頭結下了一生的情緣。"

Chinese brother. He is referred to as *he/him*, never as *they/them*. His experience and his traits do not have, therefore, general value and cannot be taken as describing factors applicable to the whole of the mainland Chinese population.

Thus, this cautious pronominal choice is very praiseworthy, as it allows the writer not to fall into the dangerous well of generalizations and leaves entirely to the reader the possibility to discover for himself the common traits and peculiarities of mainland Chinese people, if these do exist.

#### **IV.II.3. *Hun de zhuisu* (魂的追溯) (2009) by Chen Zhengxin**

Compared with *Jun zi guxiang lai* and *Dage kuankuan zou lai*, this short story by Penang-born author Chen Zhengxin goes in the opposite geographical direction; that is to say, while in the texts by Shang Wanyun and Li Kaixuan “China goes to Malaysia”, thus following the century-long tradition of “going South” (*xia nanyang* 下南洋, in Chinese), Chen Zhengxin carries his characters, and the reader who ventures to follow them, on a journey to the discovery of China and its many faces.

The importance of *Hun de zhuisu* (which could be translated as “The Traceability of the Soul” in English) lays in the novelty of the approach used by the author in dealing with China, which has always been a rather common presence in Sinophone Malaysian fiction, since its beginnings.

Matter-of-factly, many Sinophone Malaysian writers use images of a long-lost “cultural China” to link themselves to the greater Chinese world, while others insist on their childhood memories and the depiction of tropical settings to stress their belonging to their Southeast Asian birthplace.<sup>73</sup> Not many authors, however, use present-day China as the

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<sup>73</sup> See especially Sinophone Malaysian writers in Taiwan, such as Li Yongping, Ng Kim Chew, and Zhang Guixing.

backdrop of their fiction, as this new image differs tremendously from the romantic “imagined China” they have grown up with, and only a limited number of them seem ready to come to terms with it.

On the other hand, the issue of language, of speaking or not speaking a Sinitic language (whether it is Mandarin Chinese, Hokkien, Cantonese and so on) and how it relates to their identity seems to be very common among this group of writers.<sup>74</sup>

The journey to China presented in this short work of fiction becomes more than a mere social and anthropological showcase of China’s diversity; Chen Zhengxin uses the country and its language(s) as the background to a voyage along the road to identity awareness by two different types of overseas Chinese. The quest for identity takes place not only on a spatial level, but also on a linguistic one. Thus, we see how China takes on another meaning if compared with works where it was a mere image, a dreamlike vision of the Chinese Malaysian community’s homeland, and actually comes to life as one of the protagonists of the story.

*Hun de zhuisu* is a rather brief work of fiction, consisting of slightly less than six thousand Chinese characters, which received the Special Award for fiction at the *Haiou Literary Prize (Haiou Wenxue Jiang 海鷗文學獎)* in 2008, and was first published in the arts supplement of an important Sinophone Malaysian newspaper, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* in September 2009.<sup>75</sup>

The story was actually conceived as a longer piece of fiction, but was later cut short to

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<sup>74</sup> On a theoretical level, the relation between language and identity has been analyzed extensively. Among the various studies, one of the most interesting is probably *Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious* by John E. Joseph who gives, through specific case-studies, a broad-based overview of the interconnection between identity(ies) and specific linguistic usage and choices.

<sup>75</sup> The short story is also available on the paper’s online edition: <http://www.sinchew.com.my/node/131162?tid=18>. It is on this edition that the present analysis was carried out.

comply with the submission conditions of the Haiou Literary Prize, which does not allow fictional works of more than six thousand Chinese characters. Chen, however, plans to publish the original extended version of *Hun de zhuisu*, along with other independent short stories, as part of a novel.<sup>76</sup>

*Hun de zhuisu* is the story of Mike Lin, a half-Chinese, half-Caucasian Australian who is relocated from Shanghai to Shenyang, in Northeast China, to run the local branch of the multinational company he is working for. The short story is the third and last – to date – in what I would name “The Soul” series, with the other two stories also set in China and containing the word “soul” (*hun* 魂) in their title.<sup>77</sup>

The text has a truly international feel to it, pretty much in tune with the real life experiences of many of today’s ethnic Chinese. In fact, various Chinese geographic locations are mentioned in the text, and the reader has the impression that each place has been carefully chosen by the author to symbolize an identity, a characteristic, or to trace a historical connection.

The story begins with the arrival at Shenyang<sup>78</sup> airport of one of the two main characters: Mike Lin, always referred directly to by the writer/narrator. Part of the story is also set in Shanghai, the most dynamic, international and modern Chinese city. In Shanghai, there lives a sizable expatriate community and many of the city’s foreign residents are ethnic Chinese from America, Europe and Australasia. The main characters here belong to such community: as previously stated, Mike Lin is a half-Chinese, half-Caucasian man

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<sup>76</sup> Private conversation with the author held at Southern College, Johor, Malaysia in mid-January 2011.

<sup>77</sup> The first story in the series is *Hun de qiehuan* (魂的切换 The Shift of the Soul), which appeared on *Sin Chew Jit Poh, Wenyi Chungiu* on 2008 August 3 and 10, while the second is *Hun de zhengzhi* (魂的爭執 The Dispute of the Soul), which appeared on 2009 March 3 and 10 on *Nanyang Wenyi*, the literary supplement to the Sinophone Malaysian newspaper *Nanyang Siang Pau*.

<sup>78</sup> Shenyang, the largest city in Northeast China, was the first capital of the Qing dynasty, the last to rule over the Chinese territory before being overthrown in 1911.

from Australia, while the other protagonist, CS Chen, is a Chinese Malaysian, tracing his origins back to a Teochew village in Guangdong province.

It also mentions some unidentified villages in the Shanghai area, in Zhejiang and Anhui, as well as Chongqing, which the author connects to the popular Chinese novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義).

Part of the story takes place in Puning (alternatively known as Liusha), a small village in northeast Guangdong province, which is also the *guxiang* Shang Wanyun refers to in her *Jun zi guxiang lai*. As the place where CS Chen's family hails from, it carries a highly symbolic value and it is the link to CS's identity, a sometimes questioned, sometimes assumed *Chineseness*. It is in Puning, where everybody speaks the Teochew language, CS Chen's mother tongue that the link between language and identity is strongest.

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

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

Whether it is a coincidence or a carefully thought device, the first non-Chinese word to appear is the term "Chinese" itself. On a graphic level, the word is very visible as it is the only word in Latin script surrounded by Chinese characters, at least in the first part of the text. Moreover, it is repeated four times. The word serves to focus the reader's attention on the identity issue within the overseas Chinese community. A local man from Shenyang is described as being a "very Chinese Chinese" ("很Chinese"的Chinese). This leads Mike Lin to brood over the meaning of "being Chinese" and who can consider himself a Chinese. Being his father an ethnic Chinese, is he himself one too? What about his colleague CS

Chen, an ethnic Chinese from Malaysia, born and raised in Southeast Asia? Is that enough to be considered Chinese? What kind of Chinese does it make him? Are those Chinese born abroad less Chinese than those born and raised in China? These are all questions that ethnic Chinese from outside of the Greater China region have been asking themselves for a long time. Obviously, no unanimous answer has ever been given, as identity can be as subjective an issue, as it can be fascinating. As the reader realizes, Chen Zhengxin does not give any real answers to these questions either, thus proving the difficulty of solving the identity puzzle. However, this does not prevent the author from explicitly dealing with it: "You felt very awkward the first time you heard the expression 'very *Chinese*'. You always thought you were the 'very *Chinese*' one." (Chen, 2009)<sup>79</sup>

Another possible reason for the writer's use of the English word "Chinese" is a deliberate choice to be generic and avoid narrowing the meaning of the term. In fact, the word has multiple translations in Chinese, not all of them interchangeable and often excluding a portion of the population included in the English word. For example, Chinese can be:

*Zhongguoren* (中國人: people from/of China; it mainly indicates Han Chinese, but also people of other ethnic backgrounds who are citizens of the PRC);

*Hanren* (漢人: the stress, in this case, is on their ethnic background; the term is mainly used in mainland China to distinguish Han people from ethnic minorities);

*Huaren* (華人: putting emphasis on their culture and ethnicity, it is normally used to indicate Chinese people, born in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong or Macau, who relinquished their PRC or ROC nationality and are citizens of another country) and its derivatives: *Huaqiao* (華僑: overseas Chinese who still hold PRC or ROC nationality), *Huayi* (華裔: person of Chinese ancestry born and raised outside of the greater China region);

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<sup>79</sup> The original Chinese text reads as follows: “當初聽到這「很Chinese」的詞彙時，你感覺到很不自在。你覺得你自己才是「很Chinese」。”

*Tangren* (唐人: indicates a strong connection to the history of China and its dynasties; it is mainly used in compound words/expressions, such as *Tangren jie* 唐人街, Chinatown).<sup>80</sup>

It is also worth mentioning the fact that when referring to important authors and works of the Chinese literary culture, Chen Zhengxin uses the English translations with the Chinese original within parenthesis. For example, he mentions Lu Xun (spelled Lu Hsun) and two of his masterpieces, *The Outcry* (*Nahan* 吶喊) and *The True Story of Ah Q* (*A Q Zhengzhuàn* 阿Q正傳), as well as the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, one of the great novels of the Ming dynasty. We learn that Mike Lin has become acquainted with the works of Lu Xun after moving to China and has read them in their English translation. He has never read the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, nevertheless he is aware of the general plot. The language barrier, the inability to access Chinese culture through a direct linguistic path is crucial to the feeling of distance between the protagonist and Chinese identity. Chen Zhengxin treats language as a decisive trait when it comes to shaping identities. Therefore, Mike Lin, who has most likely received an English-medium education, is depicted as being less Chinese, in every aspect, than his colleague CS Chen who, on the contrary, is able to speak and read Chinese and to experience the culture that language conveys, mainly because he hails from Malaysia (where the ethnic Chinese community is bigger and better organized) and before moving to Perth has attended Chinese-medium schools for twelve years: "According to CS Chen, before moving to Perth to attend university, he had received twelve years of Chinese-medium education in Malaysia and he knows quite a bit about Chinese culture and *feng-shui*." (Chen, 2009)<sup>81</sup> But I shall touch upon the

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<sup>80</sup> For an extensive discussion of the *problématique* of naming Chinese people in Chinese, English and Malay languages, please refer to chapter seven in Hou Kok Chung (何國忠) (2002).

<sup>81</sup> Chen writes the following in the Chinese original: "據CS陳說，在他到澳洲珀斯讀書前，曾在馬來

identity-language connection later.

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

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

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

In *Hun de zhuisu*, as in Li Kaixuan's story, the pronominal choice is not random. On the contrary, this literary decision responds to a specific desire to *globalize* the ethnic Chinese experience, as the author himself confirmed during a personal conversation I had with him in January 2011. The *you* in the narration is, in fact, not the Chinese Malaysian, but Mike, the Australian of half-Chinese background. Therefore, the reader is cleverly led

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西亞接受過十二年的華文教育，所以對中國文化還有相當的認識，對風水學有點心得。”

by Chen Zhengxin to empathize with another way of being ethnic Chinese. The constant use of the pronominal particle *you* reminds the Chinese Malaysian readership that being of ethnic Chinese background does not necessarily mean to be either Chinese Malaysian or mainland Chinese. *You*, as a reader, are now Chinese Australian, and that too is an equally legitimate form of *Chineseness*, if such thing as *Chineseness* does actually exist.

I also understand the hybridization of the literary language, which appears here in the form of English language "intrusions" within the Chinese text, as a direct consequence of Chen's urge to *internationalize* the ethnic Chinese experience mentioned above. At the same time, it seems to be a faithful response to the actual linguistic and social situation of most ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia and other latitudes, who prefer a localized version of the Chinese language (*huayu*) to the mainland Chinese standard as their primary tool of communication.

Literary form and thematic content are thus perfectly balanced, as we shall see through the following analysis of the specific issues with which the short story is concerned.

One could say that China is the real protagonist of *Hun de zhuisu*. China as a real, tangible place where past and present continuously intertwine. The different faces of China are presented thanks to the description of locations, people and situations. Such descriptions lead the average reader through a process of knowledge and critical thinking about China. Moreover they are a showcase of China's diverse realities. The reader can thus approach Northeast China's present: the busy streets of Shenyang, its noisy downtown neighborhoods, its skyscrapers, its important role as an industrial and commercial hub:

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

(Chen, 2009)<sup>82</sup>

and

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

(Chen, 2009)<sup>83</sup>

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

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

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

(Chen, 2009)<sup>84</sup>

And also, on the same lines:

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

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<sup>82</sup> In the original Chinese text, Chen writes: "車子進入神羊鬧市，經過瀋陽火車站時，熙熙攘攘的人頭讓你眉頭緊皺。轉進太原街時，東尼王手指向一幢藍色玻璃屏幕的摩天大樓說，公司就在第二十層。"

<sup>83</sup> Following is the Chinese original: "中華路路面上的車笛似乎都能聽到，而眼底下太原街上男女的匆忙步伐更是清晰可見。斜對面就是百盛超市[...]這裡是瀋陽市區內最美的景觀。"

<sup>84</sup> The original passage reads as follows: "這是片曾經佈滿中國式苦難的大地，也是中國大地上最堅韌與最受傷的土地。在上海時間，你想瞭解中國的近代史，有人向你建議，就從東北三省的黑土地開始吧。"

(Chen, 2009)<sup>85</sup>

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

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

(Chen, 2009)<sup>86</sup>

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

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

(Chen, 2009)<sup>87</sup>

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

Before leaving, CS Chen explained to you that this trip to the countryside

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<sup>85</sup> Following is the passage in the original Chinese text: "開始研讀中國近代史後, 你就一直想親身去體會東北、體會瀋陽、體會一個王朝的興起、體會一個傀儡政權的滅亡。"

<sup>86</sup> Chen writes: "明天, 你要到瀋陽的故宮, 那裡是你到這城市參觀的首項目標。[...] 明早, 你要到瀋陽的故宮, 那是你近年來就一直期望造訪的地方。這時, 你又想起CS陳的說法: 那個地方, 蘊藏著皇統的大氣。"

<sup>87</sup> The original reads as follows: "北京西安與瀋陽, 曾經都是中國某個皇朝的國都。他說古人建都時都很謹慎, 不會隨意在某個地方建都的。[...] 滿洲人入關前的國都就是在瀋陽, 是偉大事業的發祥地。"

was not a real holiday. He told you that he planned on staying four or five days in that unassuming little town and that from there he would visit his grandfather's village daily. He would also pay a visit to his grandmother's birthplace and he would walk around, take pictures, explore the area, and find his roots.  
(Chen, 2009)<sup>88</sup>

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

He said to you: "I am not ashamed of showing you my ancestral home, there's nothing to hide. Hadn't people lived a miserable life over there, my grandfather wouldn't have left. This experience will probably ignite your will to investigate your origins. If the trendy China is what you are looking for, then you are better off here in Shanghai. It is a whole different China down there." He added: "I guess there's nothing to do in that little village, a stroll across the stalls at the night market at most, or eating local snacks.  
(Chen, 2009)<sup>89</sup>

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

"A whole different China", that is what CS Chen had said, and that is what made you so determined in following him to that small little town in southern China.  
(Chen, 2009)<sup>90</sup>

Chen Zhengxin brilliantly shapes, in the brevity of this text, two characters that symbolize two different approaches to ethnic Chinese identity. On one side, we have Mike

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<sup>88</sup> The original paragraph reads as follows: "起程前，CS陳向你申明，他這一次到鄉下去，並不是真正的去旅遊。他說他會在那沒有旅遊景點的小縣城住上四五天，期間會每天都到郊外的小鄉鎮亂逛，主要是到他祖父的鄉村，還有他祖母的鄉村去溜蕩、去拍照、去觀瞻、去探源去追溯。"

<sup>89</sup> Following is the original passage: "他說：我不在乎讓你看到我祖輩的源頭，這沒什麼好隱蔽的。家鄉要不是窮得不能再活下去，我祖父當年就不會走出去。這或者能啟發你能對自己來路的回溯。如果你想看到時尚的中國，就請你留在上海，那裡是另一種的中國。他又說：那個小縣城應該沒有什麼娛樂，晚上最多可能是逛地攤，或者吃一些鄉村的小食。"

<sup>90</sup> Chen writes: " "另一種中國"。這是CS陳說的。正是這一種說法，讓你義無反顧跟隨著他走進中國南方的鄉鎮。"

Lin, who is struggling with his identity, who sees in his life in China, the opportunity to understand a culture, a people and a lifestyle that feel alien to him, and at the same time takes it as a journey to discover a part of himself and where he stands in the Chinese-Western dichotomy others have built:

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

(Chen, 2009)<sup>91</sup>

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

Mike Lin:

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

(Chen, 2009)<sup>92</sup>

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

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

(Chen, 2009)<sup>93</sup>

Once again we are able to see the relevance of language in the process of identity

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<sup>91</sup> The original reads as follows: "約翰·摩根對他並不下評語，只是說他是個“很Chinese”的“Chinese”。是貶是褒是揚是抑，就看你是站在哪個檯面上了。"

<sup>92</sup> Chen Zhengxin originally writes: "你覺得你自己才是“很Chinese”。你的父親是澳洲華僑，你的母親是愛爾蘭後裔，雖然你有一張中國人的臉，一個中國人的姓：林，但你對中國文化的認知是一片空白。"

<sup>93</sup> Following is the original paragraph in Chinese: "在來中國上海工作之前，你不會說一句中國話，不懂得一個方塊字，這並不讓你感受到謙卑或愧疚，因為你跟這個國家這個文化沒有任何瓜葛。你有個西方的名字：麥克。"

formation. Knowledge of Chinese is important for Mike, not only to have an easier life in the country, but also as a means to understand, without distortions, the inner essence of that place:

You attended the Chinese language classes provided by the Shanghai office, and by now you are already capable of reading the newspaper and engaging in social interaction. Lately you even tried to read novels and other books on China's recent history in their Chinese original. Before, you had approached Chinese history through English texts, but you always felt a sense of alienation, a language barrier, as if the writer was standing on the wrong side, pointing his finger.  
(Chen, 2009)<sup>94</sup>

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

After three years working in Shanghai, you reckon you can accept the Chinese lifestyle [...] you can accept their way of seeing things, and you can understand their attitude towards life. Even more so, you can feel you can understand the bitterness that the heavy yoke of history has branded on their soul. Learning about Chinese culture and history made you more tolerant and kind in your analysis of interpersonal relationships in Chinese society.  
(Chen, 2009)<sup>95</sup>

On a linguistic level, the juxtaposition of the pronouns “you” and “them”, the first referring to Mike Lin, the latter to the Chinese, is an effective device used to clearly state

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<sup>94</sup> The original reads as follows: "你參加了上海公司人事部主辦的華語語文班，目前已有閱讀報章與社交交談的能力。最近你就嘗試直接閱讀中文撰寫的中國近代史與小說。這之前，你是通過英文書籍來認識中國歷史。在那些英文的字裡行間，你總感覺到一種疏離感，一種語言上的隔閡，總是讓你覺得作者是站在一個不恰當的角度，以一種站在岸上指指點點的姿態。"

<sup>95</sup> Following is the original text: "在上海工作都三年了，你覺得你還能接受中國的生活方式 [...] 你還是能接受他們的一些想法，也能諒解他們處理生活的方式與思維，更能理解他們背負著沉重的歷史枷鎖在他們心靈上烙印的苦澀。認識與體會中國的歷史與文化，讓你更能靈活與寬厚地省察這個社會的人際關係。"

that by no means Mike Lin belongs to the same community/society as the Chinese. He perceives himself as being closer to the expatriate community than to the Chinese:

Nevertheless, you still lived your daily life amidst your coworkers and your expat friends, and the Chinese you had to deal with were all professionals somehow connected to your company.  
(Chen, 2009)<sup>96</sup>

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

While in Shanghai, you became good friends with CS Chen and with him you discovered all those little villages around Shanghai and those ancient towns in western Zhejiang and southern Anhui. Old towns and beautiful lush landscapes were the entrance to your imagined China.  
(Chen, 2009)<sup>97</sup>

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

As briefly mentioned earlier, language is an important element in the identity-building

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<sup>96</sup> Chen writes: "當然，在生活上，你還是生活在你的同事以及外籍朋友圈子裡，日常接觸的中國人都是圍繞在你公司業務的生意人。"

<sup>97</sup> Following is the original passage in Chinese: "在上海期間，你跟CS陳成了好朋友。在CS陳的帶領下，你走遍上海周邊的江南水鎮，還有浙江西部與安徽南部一帶的古老鄉鎮。你就是從這些古老的鄉鎮和碧綠的山水中走進你構思的、你想像的中國。"

process, and it is especially so in diasporic communities. In *Hun de zhuisu*, the role of language and its connection to identity issues is stressed time and again by the author. The clearest example is perhaps when CS Chen arrives to his grandfather's village in Guangdong province, and he immediately feels that he fits in, he belongs, and he is at home. The main reason is that the village is a place where he can speak his own language/dialect.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, by sharing the most natural means of communications with the locals, he does not feel like an outsider:

In that little town, CS Chen was at ease, like a fish in the sea. He was elated, immersed in the sounds of his mother tongue and he would go around and talk to everybody in the local dialect. He said he had finally reached the ocean of his mother tongue. The purity of the dialect touched him, shook him, that's what he said. Only in his dreams had he heard the sounds he could hear there. He was a Teochew and that was the first time he found himself in a city where everybody spoke the Teochew language. (Chen, 2009)<sup>99</sup>

It appears clear to the reader that CS Chen is not searching for his Chineseness, which he has already acknowledged; his search aims at finding his local identity, for a Teochew and a Hakka, a Cantonese and a Hainanese are not the same, and they do not necessarily feel the same, mainly because they speak different Sinitic languages.<sup>100</sup>

The journey around China and especially to CS Chen's ancestral home is highly symbolic. What Mike and CS see in that village also reveals their different points of view on Chinese emigration. Mike has a negative perception of the village: it is poor, dirty and backward: (*You said you could only see run-down shabbiness and backward poverty in his*

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<sup>98</sup> On the various definitions of dialects and the link between dialect and personal identity, see among others, Edwards (2009).

<sup>99</sup> The translation refers to the following original paragraph: "在那個小縣城，CS陳像是找到了他的水，整天情緒高昂地留連在他所說的，他的母語音韻裡，蠻有趣味地到處跟人說著不是普通話的方言。他說他終於回到了他母語方言的大海。他說那些純正的母語方言讓他感動讓他震撼。他說這裡的語音世界只能在他的夢裡出現。他是潮州人。他說他從沒有在一個全城的人都說潮州話的地方生活過。"

<sup>100</sup> On local identity issues among ethnic Chinese from Malaysia, please see, among others, Carstens (1983, 2003).

*grandparent's village* 你說你是看到了他的祖父祖母的村落,看到那裡的破爛與殘舊,窮困與落後 ), while CS firmly disagrees as he sees hope, improvement and a brighter life for villagers, a life that nobody thought possible when his grandfather left in search of a better future:

He said he could feel hope floating in the air, and he could see electricity, running water, even a school and a small factory. He said that all those smiling old ladies looked so satisfied, so peaceful. The situation had definitely changed a lot since his grandfather left, he admitted.  
(Chen, 2009)<sup>101</sup>

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

CS Chen confessed: "Hadn't my grandfather left, my father would be like that man over there." He pointed at a bony old man carrying a bulky bale of firewood down a hill and added with a hint of self-derision: "And I'd be that guy on the tuk tuk." As he was speaking, the tricycle driver stopped in front of us, obviously looking for customers.  
(Chen, 2009)<sup>102</sup>

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

He said: "Both my parents and my in-laws are pure Teochew. My children are not very different from these kids. The only difference is that they are exposed to many diverse influences in Malaysia and they do not possess the simplicity of these children when they speak."  
(Chen, 2009)<sup>103</sup>

How CS Chen sees Malaysia leads us to a capital issue for the many ethnic Chinese: where

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<sup>101</sup> Chen writes: "他說他看到的是這裡空中飄蕩著的希望。他說他在這裡看到水電供應、還有學校、還有小型包工制工場。他說這裡的老太婆笑臉都很自足都很坦然。他說在他祖父的時代,情況肯定不會是這樣的。"

<sup>102</sup> The original reads as follows: "CS陳跟你說:要不是我的祖父走出去,那麼,那位大叔可能就是我的爸爸。他指著一位背扛著一大捆柴木正從小山坡走下的瘦削老人,揶揄地說:而我就是位三輪摩托車的司機大哥了。那時,正好有位載客的三輪摩托車司機停下向你們招徠。"

<sup>103</sup> Chen writes: "他說:我的岳父岳母,我的爸爸媽媽,都是純粹的潮州人。我的兒女就像這裡的少男少女,只是在馬來西亞被多元化了,就是沒了這裡的純樸語音與氣質。"

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

He told me that his father was born in Malaysia and that he was not sure whether his father's hometown was in Malaysia or in that little village in China. He couldn't say, really. His paternal grandfather was buried on a hill somewhere around that village. The burial place of your parents: that's home. And yet, his dad's mother rested in Malaysia. "I am different", CS Chen admitted. "I was born in Malaysia, and my parents were both buried in Malaysia, so my home is there, that's for sure!"  
(Chen, 2009)<sup>104</sup>

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

CS Chen influenced you in some way, with his language, his behaviour, his way of thinking. Thanks to him, you gradually learnt to examine everything around you standing on a broader stage.  
(Chen, 2009)<sup>105</sup>

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

However, Chen Zhengxin is fully aware that the ethnic Chinese still live within their

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<sup>104</sup> Following is the original text: "他說他的爸爸是在馬來西亞出生的。他說爸爸的故鄉是在馬來西亞還是在中國的那個小鎮，他也不能有個肯定的說法。他的爸爸的父親死後卻是埋葬在這個小鎮的某處山坡上的。父母親葬身之地應該是兒女們的故鄉吧，但爸爸的母親卻又埋葬在馬來西亞。我不同。CS陳語重心長地說：我在馬來西亞出生，我父母的墳墓都在馬來西亞的土地上，所以我的故鄉肯定是在馬來西亞。"

<sup>105</sup> The original passage reads as follows: "受到CS陳的語言、行為和思維的影響，你也逐漸地能站在另一個寬敞的平台上，審視你周圍的景象。"

own realm: they stand on an island of their own, within the greater Chinese space, close yet never really touching it, as the author shows with an image rich in symbolism:

You remember standing on the traffic island in the middle of the road in Liusha. All around you, the streets bustled with people speaking the Teochew dialect.  
(Chen, 2009)<sup>106</sup>

In my opinion, the importance of *Hun de zhuisu* within the realm of contemporary Sinophone Malaysian fiction rests in the fact that it goes well beyond what one can see in *Jun zi guxiang lai* and *Dage kuankuan zou lai*. In fact, the short story is not only a dialogue between two segments of the ethnic Chinese population, namely the Chinese Malaysian and the mainland Chinese, but it adds a third element in the picture: Mike Lin, who symbolizes yet another attitude toward what it means to be Chinese, due to different personal and social experiences of Chineseness. Chen Zhengxin thus is able not only to trespass the border between Chinese Malaysia and China, but he succeeds to position the Chinese Malaysian quest for identity on a *borderless* global stage comparing and uniting - through difference - the identity possibilities faced by ethnic Chinese globally, mainly in connection with their linguistic choices.

Mike Lin and CS Chen's quest for identity is pursued on an individual level. However, the role played by language and by transnational and global messages can hardly be denied. In response to these messages, we can see how Chinese/local identities are ignored, questioned, resisted, rediscovered, extolled and/or altered, to use Carsten's (2005) terminology.

#### **IV.III. Conclusion**

The present chapter, essentially analytical in nature, has been an attempt at explaining

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<sup>106</sup> In the original Chinese text, Chen writes: "你記得當時你是跟他站在流沙市的大街分流交通島上，街道兩邊熙熙攘攘的都是些說著潮州話的路人。"

the Chinese Malaysian identity issue by scrutinizing a yet unexplored field of study in Sinophone Malaysian literary criticism: the nature of Chinese Malaysian/mainland Chinese relationship and how writers from the Sinophone Malaysian community represent it in their works of fiction.

The chronological analysis of the texts has put in evidence a literary evolution, which corresponds to the actual changes in the interaction studied in the present chapter.

On a merely spatial level, one can easily note a shift in the direction of the interaction: in Shang Wanyun's novella, the core movement is southbound, thus reflecting the traditional migratory motion from China/north to Malaysia/south (in the story it is exemplified by Chen Rijin's own experience as a Chinese migrant to Malaysia); in Li Kaixuan's short story, we see a bi-directional movement (embodied by the mainland Chinese brother's double journey, from Malaysia to China as a child, and then again from China to Malaysia, as an adult), while *Hun de zhuisu* reflects a more global notion of space, in which the ethnic Chinese flow is definitely multi-directional, as the international dimensions of the two main character's life experiences tell the reader.

The evolution of these geographical motions is accompanied by a progression in the notion of *Chineseness*. In *Jun zi guxiang lai*, Chinese identity can only be understood when linked to a specific geographic location, China, and there seems to be no possibility for a localized form of *Chineseness* to be born.

In Li Kaixuan's text, there still is the same geographic-specific type of *Chineseness*, however, it is supplemented by a new identity, which is still Chinese in its essence, but which is, at the same time, deeply rooted in the *here and now* (Malaysia). In other words, we experience the birth of a *Malaysianized* version of *Chineseness*. The two identities are very well-outlined thanks to the antithetic use of the personal pronouns *he/him* (the elder brother, i.e. Chinese identity) and *we/us* (the narrator/younger brother, i.e. Chinese

Malaysian identity).

Chen Zhengxin gets rid of the geographic dimension which the term *Chineseness* seems to carry within itself: according to him, one can be Chinese anywhere, be it in China, in Malaysia or in Australia. This *deterritorialized* and more complex notion of identity is strengthened by a bold and innovative (at least in Sinophone Malaysian literature) device: the employment of the personal pronoun *you* to address the protagonist. The writer is telling us, his readership, that who we are is ultimately up to us. *You*, in *Hun de zhuisu*, experiences a gradual approach to Chinese identity because he wants to "to try and open that sturdy ancient Chinese door".

The shift in attitudes toward *Chineseness* is thus supported by an gradual innovative change of the literary devices employed. From Shang's use of internal monologue which gives the reader a special place in the story (as he is the only person who knows what the old man is thinking), one moves onto the *he/him - we/us* dichotomy built up by Li Kaixuan, which allows the reader to enter the narration as a member of the Chinese Malaysian community, to finally arrive at Chen Zhengxin's employment of the *you* form, which turns the reader into the real protagonist of his *Hun de zhuisu*.

## **CHAPTER V:**

### **When Chinese Malaysians Meet the Other**

#### **V.I. Introduction**

It has been stated, time and again, throughout this work, that interethnic relations in Malaysia are rather commonplace and constitute the backbone of most daily social interactions. As a result, many Sinophone Malaysian authors make this topic central to their production, or at least touch upon it far more than their Malay counterpart do, at least according to Malaysian scholar Chong Fah Hing, who acknowledges that ethnic relations in Sinophone Malaysian fiction are inextricably connected to their commitment to writing about the survival of the Chinese as an ethnic group, to portraying a state of crisis and to voicing their obsessive feelings toward the future of the Chinese community in the country.

(Chong, 1999) This last idea exposed by Chong is a direct consequence of the fact that

[i]n the period since its implementation [1971], Malaysia's national culture policy has become one important point of vigorous debate and political conflict. In the years since the formulation of a National Cultural Policy, and particularly in the late 1980's, the Malaysian government has been concerned to implement its basic principles by intervening directly and across the board in the cultural field. Not surprisingly, and perhaps because it has not been altogether clear and efficient about its task, government intervention in the cultural field has produced a response on the part of a variety of non-Malay groups who feel that their cultural freedom has been curtailed. For example, at a meeting of the Chinese guild and associations of Malaysia held in March, 1983, delegates passed a series of resolutions that were compiled in a joint memorandum to the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. In April 1984, a group of the best-known Indian cultural, social and religious organizations submitted a similar memorandum. Both memoranda accused the government of having formulated a cultural policy which was Malay-centric and undemocratic, and requested that a new policy on national culture be established which was more clearly multi-ethnic and democratic.

(Badaruddin Mohamed, 2005)

Malay writers, on the other hand, tend to focus their writings on either nationalistic

struggle or on religious themes emphasizing recurring ideas of *aqidah* (Islamic theology) (Chong, 1999).

Therefore, in Sinophone Malaysian fiction, one finds an openness to the *problématique* of how to approach the Other which remains still rather unexplored in the production in the Malay language. I dare to assume that it is mainly a result of the different positions held by the two ethnic groups within Malaysian society. The dominant Malay ethnic group has constructed a powerful national identity, strongly resting on the sturdy pillars of indigenous (mainly Malay) culture and Islamic precepts, which leave little room for the incorporation of cultural elements taken from the Chinese and the Indian ethnic groups.

In actuality, the Malay-dominated government has gone as far as to construct the idea of *bumiputra*, which we have already analyzed in chapter II of this work, as a superior "fictive ethnicity", to use Etienne Balibar's terminology.<sup>107</sup>

The relatively closed and hegemonic character of the dominant cultural discourse shows also very clearly in the literature of the dominant ethnic (and cultural) group, a literature where identity issues are rather static. In it, literary identity is basically national cultural identity, which "is regression to the idea of identity conceived in the nineteenth century." (Škulj, 2000: 2) One could also say, again using Balibar's words, that national ideology and the so-called national literature in Malaysia do

much more than justify the strategies employed by the state to control populations. It inscribes their demands in advance in a sense of belonging

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<sup>107</sup> Balibar explains the phrase as follows:

I apply the term 'fictive ethnicity' to the community instituted by the nation-state. This is an intentionally complex expression in which the term fiction, in keeping with my remarks above, should not be taken in the sense of a pure and simple illusion without historical effects, but must, on the contrary, be understood by analogy with the *persona ficta* of the juridical tradition in the sense of an institutional effect, a 'fabrication.' No nation possesses an ethnic base naturally, but as social formations are nationalized, the populations included within them, divided up among them or dominated by them are ethnicized—that is, represented in the past or in the future *as if* they formed a natural community, possessing of itself an identity of origins, culture and interests which transcends individuals and social conditions.  
(Balibar, 1991: 96)

in the double sense of the term – both what it is that makes one belong to oneself and also what makes one belong to other fellow human beings. [...] The naturalization of belonging and the sublimation of the ideal nation are two aspects of the same process.

(Balibar, 1991: 96)

In the case of Sinophone Malaysian literature, on the other hand, the perspective from which authors produce their works is different. They write from multiple margins: they find themselves standing at the margins of the Sinophone cultural world, but also at the social and political margins of their own country, Malaysia. Therefore, it is only natural that from their peripheral position, they strive for continuous interaction with the Other, in an attempt to identify the nature of the Self, as reflected in the production of many of them. This search leading to interaction is therefore inevitable, especially if one agrees with Škulj's assumption that

[l]iterature works, genres, trends, and periods of artistic orientation in a given nation, as manifested through history, cannot exist as isolated events of the closed national existence of cultural history and cannot be understood without contacts with literary phenomena of other national cultures. No cultural identity can be identified or analysed only on its national ground. Any national culture was given form on the borders of other influential cultures.

(Škulj, 2003: 143)

The ethnic interaction discussed here can be found in authors coming from all types of backgrounds, which thing is symptomatic of the centrality of the topic within the Sinophone Malaysian literary system.

However, thanks to the extensive and in-depth reading of Sinophone Malaysian short fiction I have engaged in throughout the last few years, I came to realize that interethnic relations between the ethnic Chinese of Malaysia and the Other are not necessarily depicted in similar ways.

As a rule of thumb, different personal experiences lead to different ways of dealing with a (apparently) similar issue. For example, if one focuses on the geographic provenance

of the authors, one will surely find out that for those hailing from Peninsular Malaysia the interaction with the Other takes the form of interaction with the dominant Malay group or, in more recent years (especially from the nineties onward), with the ethnically related immigrants - legal or illegal - from Indonesia (as the reader shall notice hereafter, in the analyses of *Feifa yimin* by Ng Kim Chew).

The ethnic make-up of East Malaysia calls for the depiction of the interaction among different groups: Malays are not the numerical majority neither in Sarawak nor in Sabah, where Iban and Kadazan-Dusun constitute the largest ethnicities respectively, while the Indian population has a very scant presence in both states. For example, *Longtuzhu* by Sarawakian author Liang Fang

is a story that narrates the family tragedy of a child of mixed Chinese and Iban parentage, and apart from its minute analysis of human nature, it also reflects the peculiar ethnic relations which characterized early Sarawakian society.  
(Wu, 1985: 8)<sup>108</sup>

In *Wandao, lanhua, zuolunqiang*, a novella by Sarawak-born Zhang Guixing set between Sarawak and the small sultanate of Brunei, also on the island of Borneo, the interaction is between the protagonist, an ethnic Chinese and people of Malay background. In this case, Malays embody officialdom and represent the steady and irreversible process of *Malayzation* of Sarawakian society.

I believe it is important to bring once more to the reader's attention, the fact that the abundance of texts narrating interethnic issues is in striking contrast with the paucity of works focusing on the intraethnic relationship between the Chinese population of Malaysia and Chinese people from other locations (mainly from the Chinese mainland and, to a lesser extent, Taiwan and Hong Kong). The quantitative disparity between the two topics, which I

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<sup>108</sup> The original text, in Chinese, reads as follows: "這篇小說寫的是一個華族與伊班族混血兒的家庭悲劇，反映了早期砂朥越社會特有的民族關係，也對人性作了解剖。"

have been noticing since the very beginnings of my bibliographical search for short stories and novellas that would constitute the corpus of my dissertation, can be explained in two ways. The scarcity of texts on the Chinese Malaysian - *Other-Self* interaction has been discussed in the previous chapter and the reason has been identified in the difficult diplomatic climate which prevented real flow of individuals between Malaysia and China, considered a communist threat at least until the end of the Cold War.

On the contrary, the important presence of interethnic issues is due to the adherence of most Sinophone Malaysian authors to the local reality and also responds to a process of *nativization*, which has gradually detached Sinophone Malaysian literature from Chinese literature, as noted by Wong Yoon Wah who firmly believes in the fact that

[t]he Chinese literature of Malaysia is not a branch from the Chinese Tree but a plant rooted indigenously in the new soil. Produced by Malayan and later Malaysian post-colonial society. It is in no sense continuations or simple adaptations of Chinese models. A much more profound interaction and appropriation has taken place. This post-colonial literature is a hybridized phenomenon involving dialectical relationship between the grafted Chinese cultural systems and an indigenous ontology. It has developed different characteristics from that of China and established its right to be considered independently.  
(Wong, 2004: 19)

The key element underlined by Wong here is the dialectical relationship between "the grafted Chinese cultural systems and an indigenous ontology", which can only take place, in my opinion, through real, daily interaction between those who carry Chinese culture (Chinese Malaysians) and those who are believed to embed Malaysian or Bornean nativeness (Malays and indigenous groups of Sabah and Sarawak). Even when the Other is a recent immigrant (as is the case with the Indonesian characters in some of Ng Kim Chew's stories), (s)he is still the bearer of this idea of indigenous nativeness, as Indonesians belong, ethnically, to the same group as the Malay people.

Hereafter, I shall analyze five short stories and one novella, which will help in the

understanding of the ways in which different authors deal with the interethnic issue and will show the complex ethnic structure of Malaysia. I suggest, however, that the analysis of the following texts be read mainly as literary in nature, and only secondarily on a sociological or anthropological level. As Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood warns us, "[n]ovels are not sociological textbooks, although they may contain social comment and criticism" (Atwood, 1994). The risk of reading non-Western literatures (those that were once labelled as "exotic") through the lens of sociology and/or cultural anthropology is especially high, as noted by Prado-Fonts:

Any teacher of non-Western literatures repeatedly meets readers perfectly capable of producing sophisticated interpretations of works that are close to them but that, when it is a question of confronting texts that are culturally distant, they turn into naive readers who forget the complexity of the literary act and blend reality with fiction, literature with history. Unfortunately, however, this is not an attitude limited to the student or amateur reader; rather, it is shared in the academic sphere and in the field of criticism. Modern and contemporary Chinese literature is a paradigmatic example. Victim of unsophisticated interpretations and of the sole perspective provided by Area Studies, Chinese literature has been seen from the West as a cultural mirror, historical document or sociological fieldwork that provides us with clear, unquestionable truths about an objectivable China. Consequently, Chinese literature has had difficulties in being treated on an equal footing –as literature in its breadth and complexity– in the global literary system. (Prado-Fonts, 2008: 38)

The texts have been arranged in strictly chronological order, taking into account the date of first publication of each one of them.<sup>109</sup> For the sake of balance, since the first text on Chinese Malaysian - Chinese relations available to me was the novella by Shang Wangyun, published at the end of the 1970s, I decided to start the present section with a text written roughly around the same period of time. Hence, I chose *Wei xiang* by Ding Yun, which was completed on August, 4<sup>th</sup> 1982.

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<sup>109</sup> For the sake of clarity, it must be specified here that the edition of each text which I used to carry out the textual analysis is the one most readily available to me, and it does not necessarily correspond to the first edition. However, if differences between the first publication of the texts and their subsequent editions exist, they will be brought to the reader's attention and analyzed accordingly.

One must not forget that there is, however, an already-mentioned important short story by Sarawak-born author Li Yongping, *Lazi fu*, which was completed in 1967, before the author moved to Taiwan. The story

deals with relations between Hakka settlers and the indigenous Dayaks on Borneo. The narrator's uncle takes a squaw to wife, begets three children upon her and abandons his wife and children when he has the opportunity to marry a girl from a respectable Chinese family. Though very little of Dayak society is suggested, aside from the detail of the communal longhouse mentioned by the narrator's mother, the story is noteworthy for the narrator's (and the author's) abhorrence of Chinese settler inhumanity to the indigenes.  
(Sterk, 2009: 71)

Nevertheless, due to its being temporally rather remote from all the other texts used in this dissertation, I decided not to include it in the literary analysis I am carrying out here. Nevertheless, it must be said that, probably due to the status enjoyed by the author as one of the most preeminent Sinophone Malaysian writers, there are extensive scholarly articles (in Chinese) of literary criticism on *Lazi fu*.

## **V.II. The Other in Sinophone Malaysian Fiction**

### **V.II.1. *Wei xiang* (圍鄉) (1983) by Ding Yun**

The first work of fiction which shall be analyzed here is *Wei xiang* a short story by Ding Yun (pen name of Chen Chun'an), an author hailing from the vicinities of Klang, the former capital of Selangor, in Peninsular Malaysia. The personal path of Ding Yun is not uncommon among Sinophone Malaysian writers: of Hokkien parentage, he was born into a peasant family and after graduating from a Chinese-language elementary school he took up numerous jobs before starting his writing career in 1974, at the age of twenty-two.

*Wei xiang*, literally 'the besieged village' in English, draws upon the author's personal experience of living in the countryside. The sense of oppression conveyed by the title

accompanies the reader throughout the text. In fact, *Wei xiang* is a gloomy and claustrophobic account of how the ethnic riots which swept Kuala Lumpur in May, 1969 affected the lives of peasant dwellers of a rural settlement in Hulu Langat, once a quiet district in Selangor, now a booming area in the heavily urbanized Klang Valley. The writer describes how life in this mountainous hamlet begins to change negatively for twenty-two year-old Chinese Malaysian truck driver Lin Tuo, his father Lin Zhen and his younger sister Xiaotao. The essence of the story lies in the contrast between the peaceful relationship among Chinese Malaysian, Malays and indigenous people (*Orang Asli*) before the ethnic turmoils and the climate of fear, and mutual suspicion that falls upon the area during and after such tumults.

The text, written slightly more than ten years after the riots<sup>110</sup> is an attempt by Ding Yun to shed light on the real causes of the 1969 incident. It is not the only work of fiction that deals with the issue, however, as noticed by Lim Kien Ket, it looks at it from a fresh, non-intellectual perspective (Lim, 2004: 60). Interaction among different ethnic groups is, therefore, the backbone of the narration, and makes the story a quintessentially Sinophone Malaysian piece of fiction.

*Wei xiang* opens with a scene of peaceful cooperation, as Lin Tuo and his assistant Kunzai help two other drivers, Samad and Mohammad, with their damaged truck. As the names, and the fact that Samad wears a *songkok*<sup>111</sup> suggest, the two are of Malay/Muslim

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<sup>110</sup> It was published for the first time on February, 12th 1983 in *Wenfeng* (文風), the literary supplement to then now defunct Sinophone newspaper *Malayan Thung Pau* (*Malaiya Tongbao* 馬來亞通報). The story subsequently appeared in many Sinophone Malaysian anthologies of short fiction. The text used in the present work is taken from an anthology published in 1983 by *Malayan Thung Pau* and edited by Chen Jinxiang. Please refer to the bibliography section of the present dissertation for more detailed information.

<sup>111</sup> A *songkok*, alternatively known as *peci* or *kopiah*, is a typical cap widely worn by males in Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, the southern Philippines and southern Thailand as part of the traditional Muslim attire. According to Rozan Yunos (2007), "to describe what a songkok looks like to someone who has never seen one is actually quite hard. The closest that one can do would be to describe songkok as a type of oval brimless hat, resembling a skull hat or skull cover. Songkok is an interesting headgear for [...] many in the region. Wearing a headcover has always been part of the Bruneians' [and other Malays'] old tradition. No one

background. The first passages are especially worth of notice as they present the pre-1969 tranquil living conditions of Lin Tuo and his family, while at the same time being a typical reflection of the Chinese Malaysian rural experience:

Their [Lin family's] house had been built up by assembling, piece by piece, sturdy logs collected in the surrounding forest and wooden sheets discarded by the local sawmill. The roof was made out of *attap*, a thatch made from *nipah* and other palm trees, and zinc sheets, a very messy thing indeed, but it was solid enough to shelter them from the storms. The back of the house was very close to the forest, from which was separated by an open ground [...] that they started farming. They planted cassava, sweet potatoes, vegetables, etc. Even though the crop was not that great, the little money they could get from agriculture was still less dangerous than clambering on the steep mountain crossings with an chainsaw. (Ding, 1983: 9)<sup>112</sup>

The thatched roof, the forest, the garden with cassava and sweet potatoes all help the reader to picture the rural landscape in his mind, and simultaneously give an unmistakable Malaysian dimension to the text.

The Kuala Lumpur riots of 1969 are of paramount importance in Malaysian history, as they constitute a watershed event in the practice of interethnic relations in the country. At first however, people like Lin Tuo, who live in an inaccessible mountainous setting, are unable to conceive a change - for the worse - in their relation with neighbouring communities of different ethnic background:

What kind of disturbance could ever take place in such a remote and poor mountain region? He thought. Malay, Chinese or Orang Asli, they were all eked out a living together, they worked together. Of course, every now and then there were disagreements that led to quarrels, but riots? Slaying? Those things belonged to bustling cities, with their diversity and their tumults!

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knows when it first started. In the past, it was used to tell society one's social strata or place in life. Today, everyone uses a songkok. *It has become a symbol of being a Malay.*" (Italics are mine.)

<sup>112</sup> No English version of the short story is currently available. Therefore the translation of this and all other passages is mine. Hereafter is the corresponding passage in the original Chinese: "他家的屋子是用粗大的林木和一些鋸木廠的棄板料釘釘搭起來的，屋頂是亞答加一些鋅片，總之雜亂無章的，擋風遮雨倒也相當堅實。屋子後頭靠近森林，有一些空地 [...] 墾出塊田園來，種植一些木薯、番薯、蔬菜什麼的。雖然不是有好收成，能賺到甚麼錢，總比攀山越嶺當電鋸手少些風險。"

(Ding, 1983: 14)<sup>113</sup>

As the above passage shows, in the harsh environment of mountainous Malaysia, interdependence rather than confrontation is the key element regulating interethnic relations. Ethnic identity is not seen as an impediment to mutual understanding and fruitful cooperation.

Therefore, according to the protagonist of the story and at least at this point of the narration, the nature of interethnic relations is determined more by the social environment in which they take place, than by actual ethnic differences between the various groups of population. Hence, the relative tranquility he experiences in his rural setting contrasts sharply with the tumultuous urban happenings:

"A Tuo, do you plan to go to work?! Martial law has been imposed. Things have gone crazy out there, they are burning down houses, cars, and they are even killing people..."

Truth be told, Lin Tuo had already been aware - since the night before - that martial law had been imposed over the entire country. He had learnt that from the news broadcasted through the only television set available at the sawmill. The news report had actually informed that in a certain Kuala Lumpur neighbourhood there had been tumults, including arson and murders. The federal government had already called a state of crisis, and had advised all citizens to stay at home. Even the only telephone line in the sawmill had been cut off.

(Ding, 1983: 14)<sup>114</sup>

At this stage of the narration, one has the feeling that there are indeed differences, but they do not take shape around ethnic characteristics; in fact, they are more of a rural/urban nature. While people in Kuala Lumpur engage in a violent confrontation over political issue

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<sup>113</sup> The original text reads as follows: "他想在這窮壤的山裡，能弄出甚麼亂子來？馬來人，華人，或者是山族人，同在一起討生活，一起工作，偶有齟齬爭執是有的，暴亂嗎？殺人嗎？那是屬於混雜紛亂的繁華城市的事！"

<sup>114</sup> Hereafter is the original Chinese passage: "「阿拓，你還想開工嗎？都戒嚴了，外面亂得不得了，又是放火燒屋，少汽車，又是殺人．．．．．」  
其實林拓昨晚已知道了全國戒嚴的消息，還是在鋸木廠唯一的那一架電視機的新聞報告上聽到的消息。新聞報告說是甚麼吉隆坡某地區發生了暴亂縱火殺人的事件，政府即宣佈全國進入緊急狀態，勸告人們留在家中不要出門。連鋸木廠的唯一電話通訊也給切斷了。"

ignited by ethnic diversity, rural dwellers of Chinese and Malay background share common feelings of fear:

Obviously, in River Garden, the village in the vicinity of the sawmill there lived a few Malay people too, maybe seven or eight. Some were lumberjacks or people who sew wood at the mill, and there were two clerks sent by the Bureau of Forest Affairs: they too had friends or relatives in the neighbourhood where the riots had burst. The night before they had learnt of the martial law from the news, together with the Chinese, and everybody felt worried and alarmed.  
(Ding, 1983: 14-15)<sup>115</sup>

Notwithstanding, the situation suddenly takes a negative turn in the mountain region as well, and despite the shared feelings, a division along ethnic lines begins to surface:

"They've gone! They've all gone!"  
"What are you talking about? Who has gone?"  
"Those Malay people: Hashim, Yeluni... They have all left, and I have no idea when. Last night, we were all watching TV together and after we learnt of the martial law, we all discussed the news together. We didn't say anything bad. Who would have thought that they would become so suspicious of us... They've probably secretly left in the middle of the night and taken shelter in the Malay *kampung* ["village" in Malay] along Jalan Kacau."  
[...] There were a lot of Malay people living in the *kampung* along Jalan Kacau, probably four to five times more than all the inhabitants of our River Garden. The major problem was that our sawmill was surrounded by mountains on three sides and the only way up to the village was through the Malay *kampung*. Therefore, it was as if the *kampung* had turned into the fourth barrier blocking the access and the way out of River Garden... If the martial law was not withdrawn and the turmoils continued, anything could happen.  
(Ding, 1983: 15)<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> The original reads as follows: "河之園板廠裡自然也住著些馬來人，大概有七八人，有的是伐木營或板廠裡幹鋸木工作的工人，還有兩個是政府森林局工作人員；他們也有情人或朋友在城市內的暴亂區。昨晚他們也跟華人在一起從電視上知悉戒嚴的消息，慌亂和憂慮是大家共同的感受。"

<sup>116</sup> Hereafter is the Chinese original text: "「都走了，他們都走了．．．．．」  
「甚麼都走了？誰走了？．．．．．」  
「那幾個馬來人啊，哈欣，耶魯尼他們．．．．．都走了，也不知道是幾時走的，昨晚大家還在一起看電視，聽到戒嚴的消息，大家還在一起談論那件事，我們也沒說甚麼，怎麼想到他們會疑心生暗鬼的．．．．．大概是在半夜裡悄悄的溜到外面加蕉路的馬來甘榜去吧！」  
[...] 加蕉路甘榜裡的馬來人很多，有河之園這裡的四五倍人數，而鋸木廠三面環山，唯一通往鎮上的路就是馬來甘榜坐落之處，彷彿形成第四道屏障包圍著河之園．．．．．如果戒嚴繼續下去，如果暴亂不休止，甚麼事件都可能發生。"

The word *kampung*, village in Malay, indicates a traditional village whose population is primarily of Malay ethnic background.

A gloomy sense of fear - symbolized also by the oppressive geographic position of the village, locked in a valley surrounded by mountains - sets over the population. The situation begins to acquire ethnic polarity, despite the shared sense of fear. Ethnic Chinese from the River Garden village start to feel trapped, and sensing that the situation might only get worse, they start to leave one after another, before it becomes too late. However, the attachment to the soil is strong, especially for Lin Tuo's father who has turned a wild plot of mountain land into a garden capable of bearing fruits and vegetables:

What Lin Tuo meant was that in case the Malay people attacked them, would he really be able to defend his garden? [...] In the end the father stretched his waist, put the hoe on his shoulder and said with a husky voice: "A Tuo, go back and get our stuff ready, we are leaving too!..." (Ding, 1983: 19)<sup>117</sup>

In the above scene, the reader is informed of how the Lin family leave their land and house behind, albeit reluctantly. The problem is now stated clearly: what urges them to escape is the fear of a possible attack by the Malay. Hence, one can notice a clear shift toward ethnic tension which persist even today, more than forty years after the events of 1969; a tension that leads to the acknowledgement of the Self as different from the Other, under an oppressive climate of negativity. Thus, the Other becomes the one who has to be feared, be him the Malay neighbour, the Indian colleague, the *Orang Asli* passer-by, etc.

Notwithstanding, Ding Yun suddenly and unexpectedly opens a glimmer of hope, and as the Lin family passes through the *Orang Asli* village, the scene that passes before their eyes is of unquestionable peace:

The truck passed through the *Orang Asli* hamlet. All they could see was the usual, unchanged serene picture, aloof from the world. The smoke from the kitchen chimneys lingered in the air behind those messy and primitive thatched huts. The children ran around the open ground, none of

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<sup>117</sup> Following is the passage in Chinese: "林拓想說假設馬來人攻進來，這園子還保得住嗎？[...] 父親終於腰直了直，把鋤頭扛在肩上，乾澀著聲音說：「阿拓，回去收拾一下，我們也走吧！.....」"

them was wearing trousers, while the elderly sat at the bottom of the wooden staircase brushing the hides.... There was absolutely no trace of even the slightest change, despite the tumults that were sweeping the cities and the subsequent enforcement of the martial law. A few young *Orang Asli* recognized the truck that Lin Tuo was driving, and when they saw the Lin family drive through they even waved at them.  
(Ding, 1983: 21)<sup>118</sup>

Already on the way out of the mountains, the Lin family realizes that, after all, things might not change for the worse in that secluded area; hence, they decide to turn around and drive back to their house. The narration then concludes with a message of hope when, already back home, the Lin family is visited by Lin Tuo's two Malay fellows. Samad and Mohammad pay them a visit and ask for some food, which they have not been able to get anywhere else, due to the martial law:

"Oh, Mr. Lin...." said Samad with an embarrassed smile, "Is your son here?... Oh, let me explain, because of the martial law, we have almost no more food provisions left, and we dare not go up to the village to get more, so we came to ask you for some of your cassava, or beans or whatever... Anything goes, really..."

[...]Lin Tuo looked at the honest face of Samad. In that frightened and embarrassed look, days of anxiety, suspicion and pressure suddenly disappeared.

"Come on, Samar, Mohammad, let's go and get you some cassava!"

As they walked along the small garden path, they all cast their eyes on the night sky, as if in tacit agreement. It was dotted with bright stars, they were so mysterious, so distant, so enchanting. The night in the mountain forest was so serene, beautiful, reassuringly quiet. How come they had never noticed that before?...

(Ding, 1983: 24)<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> The original Chinese text reads as follows: "盤車經過山族人部落時，這件那裡依舊那麼閑靜與世無爭，凌亂簡陋的草屋後炊煙四起，沒穿褲的小孩在曠地上跑來跑去，老人坐在屋前木梯口刷著獸皮.....完全沒有因城外的暴亂戒嚴而呈現絲毫的異樣。幾個年輕的山族人認得林拓駕的盤車，看見他們經過揮手打招呼。"

<sup>119</sup> Hereafter is the closing scene of the story in Chinese: "「哦，阿林的爸爸.....」沙末擠出尷尬的笑容，「阿林在嗎？.....哦，是這樣的，戒嚴了好幾天，我們家的糧食都快吃光了，又不敢上鎮去辦糧食，所以想跟你們要點木薯、豆類甚麼的都好.....」林拓[...] 望著沙末那憨直，帶有幾分悚惶幾分尷尬的斂容，幾天來的擔憂，猜疑，心頭重壓都消失無蹤了。

「走，沙末、莫哈末，我們這就去拔木薯！」  
踏著菜園小徑，像含有默契的，他們一起仰望夜空，只見點點星光閃爍，神祕，幽遠而迷人，山林的夜是如此靜謐、美麗、安詳，他們怎麼總沒發覺呢？....."

The last paragraph of the closing passage, which I have highlighted in italics, does not appear in a later

Ding Yun gives an apparently positive closure to *Wei xiang*. Nevertheless, I consider it to be only an outward demonstration of optimism, as it clearly shows how peaceful interethnic relations can only be maintained in a secluded mountainous area, at the margins of mainstream Malaysian society. On the other hand, tumults continued to spread across urban Malaysia, widening the gap between the different ethnic groups and aggravating the negative confrontational dimension of diversity.

Ding Yun demonstrates how fluctuating and relative identity can be. At the beginning of the story, ethnic consciousness among the mountain dwellers seems to be of little importance, while the sense of community based on shared living situations is high.

Things change only when outside events sweep the rural peace away, thus obliging the people living in the various mountain hamlets to acknowledge the issue of ethnic diversity and of their own ethnic identity, which had otherwise gone rather unnoticed until then.

In Ding Yun's story, divisions along ethnic lines did exist well before tranquility was shaken by the 1969 turmoils (for example, people of different ethnicities lived in different hamlets and villages), but they were more due to dissimilarities in lifestyles than to actual ethnic incompatibility - a concept of rather dubious foundation.

Defining *Chineseness*, or even making the main characters stand out as ethnic Chinese is not one of the main concerns of Ding Yun. Hence, the story lacks direct references to the Chinese cultural world or to any issues which are of great concern to the Chinese Malaysian community (tradition, education, mores, etc.). The writer portrays a type of ethnic Chinese people too absorbed in the difficult task of making a living under rather unsuitable geographic circumstances, in order to engage in matters not directly related to their most basic needs of subsistence.

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(1984) version of the story, also published in Malaysia. The reasons for this minor change - which however does not affect the economy of the general narration, nor diminishes the optimism of the closing - is not known.

To the simplicity of life in the mountains, Ding Yun couples a sober style, plain and almost basic. Words are weighed up wisely, unnecessary ones being consistently avoided.

With a change in the overall climate, and with the sense of fear falling over the peaceful mountain hamlets, Ding Yun's writing also experiences a shift toward a gloomier direction: descriptions are darker, almost claustrophobic, the rhythm of the narration becomes faster, with sentences getting shorter, thus following the agitated pace of the situation exposed. In this masterly pairing of form and content lies, in my opinion, the literary strength of Ding Yun's prose. The author, who could have easily fallen in the temptation of embellishing the narration with overly-polished sentences and lexical choices, remains true - through bare form - to the seriousness of the content.

As far as linguistic choices are concerned, the localized flavour of the text is mainly due to the topic dealt with, rather than to a language use typical of Sinophone Malaysia. Ding Yun remains faithful to Mandarin Chinese throughout the text, and only in rare occasions does he depart from this choice; the most emblematic example being his consistent use of the Malay word *kampung* (*ganbang* 甘榜), instead of the available Mandarin equivalents (such as *cunzhuang* 村莊, *buluo* 部落 or *xiangcun* 鄉村, among others) to denote the Malay village.

In conclusion, one could say that *Wei xiang* is an attempt to investigate the causes of the ethnic tensions of contemporary Malaysia. Ding Yun decides to do so by going back to the very explosion of these tense relations in 1969. In so doing, the writer matches the content of the narration with a sobriety in the linguistic tone, and avoids any experimentation in literary style, and any unnecessary excessive localization in language. Notwithstanding, *Wei xiang* can be read as a quintessentially Sinophone Malaysian short story, due to the discussed topic. However, for the very same reason, it has universal

validity, in so far as antagonism based on ethnic diversity unfortunately is more globally widespread than we often care to admit.

### **V.II.2. *Wandao, lanhua, zuolunqiang* (彎刀·蘭花·左輪槍) (1983) by Zhang Guixing**

Written roughly around the same period of time, also depicting the relationship between the ethnic Chinese and the Other, but lacking even the slightest glimmer of optimism is *Wandao, lanhua, zuolunqiang* by Zhang Guixing.

Zhang Guixing, the author of the novella (whose title could be roughly translated as "The machete, the orchid, the revolver"), was born in Sarawak, Malaysia in 1956 and left for Taiwan in 1976, where he still lives and works as a high school English teacher. Sarawak, on the northern part of the island of Borneo, was a British crown colony at the time of Zhang's birth and became one of the federated states of Malaysia in 1963, six years after the federation was constituted. He graduated from a local Chinese-run primary school and after receiving his high school diploma he moved to Taipei to pursue studies in English language and literature at Taiwan Normal University. After obtaining his degree, Zhang decided to remain in Taiwan and in the early eighties renounced his Malaysian citizenship and became a citizen of the Republic of China (in 1983 or one year earlier according to Jaffee, 2007 and Xu Weixian, 2003 respectively). However, although he returns to Sarawak only occasionally, he never really cut the umbilical cord that ties him to his birthplace, as most of his production (short stories, novellas and novels) explore his childhood and teenage memories and recounts the personal stories of the ethnic Chinese in Borneo. His novels *Sailian zhi ge* (賽蓮之歌 "Siren song", 1992), *Wanpi jiazhu* (頑皮家族 "The clown dynasty", 1996), *Qun xiang* (群象 "Herd of elephants", 1998), *Hou bei* (候杯 "The primate cup", 2000) and *Wo sinian de chang mian zhong de nanguo gongzhu* (我思念的長

眠中的南國公主 "My South Seas Sleeping Beauty", 2002)<sup>120</sup> and his collections of short stories *Keshan de ernü* (柯珊的兒女 "The children of Keshan", 1988) and *Fu hu* ("伏虎 Subduing the tiger", 2003) are considered among the finest examples of Sinophone Malaysian fiction and have been studied extensively in academic and literary circles both in Taiwan and in Malaysia.

The story appeared in the collection *Keshan de ernü* in 1988, together with other three short stories and novellas. However, the novella had been published a few years earlier (1983) in *Wenji* (文季), a Taiwanese literary magazine.

The action takes place in Sarawak and Brunei (which was still formally a part of the British Empire at the time Zhang wrote the novella). The story is an account of the road trip Buming (不明), the protagonist, embarks on to reach the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (roughly corresponding to an embassy/consulate) in Bandar Seri Begawan, the Bruneian capital, in order to renew his Taiwanese visa. On his way to Bandar Seri Begawan, due to flooding, Buming is only able to reach the Sarawak-Brunei border by public transportation. From the border onwards he has to resort to lifts on private cars to reach his destination. The same thing happens on his way back. This time, however, he hops on the car of a Malay family, with whom he is unable to communicate, due to his inability to speak Malay and to their lack of knowledge of English or Chinese. The linguistic and visual misunderstandings (Buming is unable to explain that the weapon he carries is just a toy, a gift for his nephew) cause the Malay family to think that Buming has evil intentions and wants to hijack their vehicle. The police officers as well, informed by a gas station employee that the Malay driver was able to reach for help, seem to think that Buming is

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<sup>120</sup> As also noted in the introduction to this dissertation, this is the only novel by Zhang Guixing, and one of the very few Sinophone Malaysian works of fiction, for which there exists an English translation, which was carried out by Valerie Jaffee and published in 2007 by Columbia University Press.

actually a perilous man and quickly surround him, ready to shoot him at the first sign of danger. The situation rapidly grows in intensity as journalists and TV cameras reach the location and witness, together with the reader, as Buming is tragically shot to death by the police.

As can be inferred by the brief summary given above, the backbone of the story revolves around two main topics, interethnic relations between the dominant Malay and ethnic Chinese, and the identity issue faced by the Chinese Malaysian protagonist, which is a direct consequence of such relations. The novella presents the darker side of Borneo. The weather is gloomy; the dusty coastal road (通往南中國海的灰塵大道 p.186) runs through an inhospitable and suffocating environment (亞熱帶的一月是雨季，可熱得像悶在太陽的肚皮裡。p.186). Mud is a very vivid character in the novella, as much as Buming and the other human figures are; muddy waters seem to come to life at the end of the story, and swallow Buming after he is shot by the police:

When Buming collapsed into the water, his left hand was holding one petal of the orchid, while the other fell on the surface of the muddy water which had almost instantly started to turn red.  
(Zhang, 1988b: 22)<sup>121</sup>

Zhang Guixing masters the art of description and the reader can easily picture in his mind a typical Borneo town not far from the coast, where ethnic Chinese usually reside:

It was a small town of seventy-two all-purpose grocery shops, five retailers of electronic goods, some restaurants and bars, a shop selling leather shoes and another stocked with dresses and accessories. There were also three bookstores that mainly sold lousy magazines and erotic novels, two banks at daggers drawn with each other, three movie theatres that would only show third-rate films, one Chinese-language newspaper of a circulation of four thousand and five hundred, eight 'sex' hotels, six brothels and fifty thousand inhabitants.

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<sup>121</sup> No English version of the novella is currently available. Therefore this and all other passages are rendered in English by me. Hereafter is the corresponding ending of the novella in the original Chinese: "當不明倒在水中時，他的左手捏著一片蘭花花瓣，另一片落在立刻染紅的濁水上。"

(Zhang, 1988b: 186)<sup>122</sup>

The town is apparently described *en passant*, but the fresco is only apparently sketchy, as it actually reveals, through few modifiers, quite a few negative or seedy traits of the town: the only two banks in town are at daggers drawn with each other (誓不兩立), creating a climate of tension, while most of the other businesses have a sordid and squalid edge to them, like the third-rate cinemas (三流電影院), the bookstore, which sells mainly vulgar magazines and pornographic novels (低級雜誌黃色小說), or the hotels that cater mainly to those looking for steamy encounters (色情酒館) and the motels that are actually brothels (窯子旅社). The idea we get by reading the novella is that of a dreadful place, where mostly morally degraded activities take place; the description itself is as dark as the environment, and when the sun is mentioned, it is in connection with the unpleasant and somewhat claustrophobic caused by the scorching heat. From the sketch brilliantly painted by Zhang Guixing's words, the environment stands out as horrendous, as a dire place to escape as soon as possible (趕快離開這個鬼地方。赤道下。亞熱帶。霍亂區。).

*Wandao, lanhua, zuolunqiang* is the only work where Zhang Guixing directly addresses the theme of his change of nationality, and he does so in a very vivid and powerful manner. The main character, whose name – Buming – is highly symbolic, can be easily perceived as an alter ego of Zhang Guixing himself and just like him, he also seems to be living suspended between two places, Malaysia and Taiwan, not entirely detached from the former, but not quite completely immersed in the latter. The Chinese characters forming the name of the protagonist literally mean “unclear”, “unknown”, and also “to not understand”.

While not ruling out the first two meanings, here it is this last meaning that I want to

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<sup>122</sup> Zhang writes the following in the original text: "這座七十二家百貨雜貨店五金電器行飲料餐廳皮鞋服飾公司、三月賣低級雜誌黃色小說書店、兩家誓不兩立銀行、三間三流電影院、一家銷路四千五百份的中文報館、八家色情酒館、六棟窯子旅社、居民五萬的小鎮。"

stress out as the most appropriate. Matter-of-factly, the entire story is constructed upon a series of misunderstandings leading to a tragic finale. The continuous misunderstandings between Buming, the ethnic Chinese protagonist, who only speaks Mandarin, Hakka and English, and the Malay people he encounters along his journey and who only speak Malay are a clear metaphor of the lack of understanding and the often tense relation between the Malay (or other *bumiputra*) and Chinese Malaysians (the relations between ethnic Chinese and Indian Malaysians – the other main minority ethnicity in Malaysia – or between the latter and the Malay majority being seldom portrayed in Sinophone Malaysian fiction). The intensity of such relation is clear from the very beginning of the story, when Buming, unable to speak Malay, engages in a conversation in English with the bus-ticket seller who puts to test his identity:

"Can't you speak Malay? Where do you come from?"

Buming answered: "Malaysia."

The bus-ticket seller then said: "You are Malaysian and you cannot speak Malay?!"

Buming answered: "Correct! I am a Malaysian who cannot speak Malay"  
(Zhang, 1988b: 175)<sup>123</sup>

As soon as he had landed, however, he was asked the same set of questions by the custom officer, whom Buming consistently and derogatorily refers to as the “Malay pig” (馬來豬). Through the dialogue between the two, the reader learns about Buming’s current situation, which was – and still is nowadays – not different from that of many Malaysians of Chinese descent, caught in between two worlds, but belonging to neither :

Sir, your country of citizenship is Malaysia, but you are Chinese. You lived twenty years in Malaysia without knowing how to speak Malay. After four years spent in Taiwan as a student, you have now come back to pay a visit to your family, but your intention is to go back to Taiwan!

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<sup>123</sup> Hereafter is the original dialogue in Chinese: "「你不會講馬來話？你是哪國人？」不明說「馬來西亞。」售票員說：「你是馬來西亞人不會講馬來話？」不明說：「不錯，我是不會講馬來話的馬來西亞人。」"

(Zhang, 1988b: 176)<sup>124</sup>

Before going back to Malaysia, however, Buming was warned by a fellow Chinese Malaysian also living in Taiwan that things had changed over there, that Malay now was the sole official language of the country<sup>125</sup> and that people like them were considered suspicious, to say the least. This harshening of interethnic relations in post-independence Malaysia, which culminated, but my no means ended, in the riots of 1969, together with the *malayzation* of the country that continuously put obstacles on the path to the advancement of the ethnic Chinese in the new society, were decisive factors that pushed the young Chinese Malaysia elite away from their birthplace and initiated their diasporic status.

Buming is not the only character who openly despises ethnic Malays. An elder Chinese who sits next to him on the bus, a character the narrator calls Spider Face (蜘蛛臉) also voices out his contempt, by calling them Malay devils (馬來鬼), sweet potatoes (馬來人真番薯) and considering them lazy people who do nothing more than sleep and quarrel:

Those Malays, their are all a bunch of good-for-nothings! In the morning, they sleep until the sunbeams burn their ass. Look at that Malay guy! [...] He started to snore as soon as he got seated! [...] Malays are nowhere as hard-working as us Chinese. [...] Everyday, if they are not sleeping, then they spend their time chit-chatting and making so much noise that even hens are unable to lay eggs!  
(Zhang, 1988b: 188-89)<sup>126</sup>

These ethnic generalizations and prejudices are actually quite widespread even today, among ethnic Chinese in Malaysia.

When the bus to Brunei stops, unable to go any further due to bad weather and

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<sup>124</sup> The original Chinese text reads as follows: "先生，你的國籍是馬來西亞，但是你是中國人，你在馬來西亞住了二十年，你不會講馬來話，你在台灣讀了四年書，你回來探親，你還要回台灣！"

<sup>125</sup> Malay became the only officially recognized language of Peninsular Malaysia in 1968 and gradually, from 1974, in East Malaysia too.

<sup>126</sup> Following is the passage in Chinese: "那些馬來人，一個個都沒用，早上睡到太陽曬的屁股冒煙才起身，你看這個馬來人[...]一坐下來睡得鼻孔八個洞！[...]馬來人哪裡有中國人勤立 [...]天天不是睡覺就是聊天，吵得母雞生不下蛋！"

precarious road conditions, Bumng takes a lift from a white man (called 'Blue Eyes' throughout the text), who actually reinforces the stereotyped image of the Malay people when he is asked by Bumng whether he likes the Malays or the Chinese better:

Bumng asked: "Do you prefer the Malays or the Chinese?"

The blue-eyed man answered: "Good question! I guess, I like Chinese people better. Malay people are just bumming around all day. They spend their lives sleeping, they dream at night and they dream during the day."  
(Zhang, 1988b: 193)<sup>127</sup>

Both Spider Face and Blue Eyes' words reinforce what Syed Hussein Alatas considers a typically colonialist idea, rather widespread throughout Southeast Asia between the sixteenth and the twentieth century: "the myth of the lazy native", which can be described as follows:

The negative image of the people subjugated by Western colonial powers, which dominated the colonial ideology, was drawn on the basis of cursory observations, sometimes with strong built-in prejudices, or misunderstandings and faulty methodologies. The general negative image was not the result of scholarship. Those who proclaimed the people of the area indolent, dull, treacherous, and childish, were generally not scholars. They were monks, civil servants, planters, sailors, soldiers, popular travel writers, and tourists. They generated the image of the natives. Subsequently a few scholars became influenced, such as Clive Day. It appears that their shortcomings originated in five major sources. They are (a) faulty generalization, (b) interpretation of events out of their meaningful context, (c) lack of empathy, (d) prejudice born out of fanaticism, conceit and arrogance, and (e) the unconscious dominance of certain categories of Western colonial capitalist thought.

(Syed Hussein Alatas, 1977: 112)

Through Spider Face, the author voices his concern for the hardships that Chinese Malaysian returnees from Taiwan have to face due to the changed sociopolitical climate and the official insistence on affirmative actions in favor of the Malays and other *bumiputra*

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<sup>127</sup> The original text reads as follows: "不明說：「你喜歡馬來人還是中國人？」藍眼說：「問得好，我想我喜歡中國人，馬來人一天到晚都昏昏噩噩的，好像一年到頭都在濫睡，晚上做夢，白天夢遊。"

groups.<sup>128</sup> According to Spider Face, the difficulties in finding a job and the inevitable submission to the dominant group are good enough reasons for young Chinese Malaysians to leave Malaysia behind and build a new life in Taiwan:

The children of some friends of mine too graduated from universities in Taiwan. I always tell them to convince their children not to come back here. They wouldn't listen, good, they come back and what for?! I am not the one who doesn't respect you guys who obtained a Taiwanese degree. It's the Malay devils who don't acknowledge those degrees and you have to count only on your skills. [...] So, you made the right choice in deciding to go back to Taiwan. Here you'd have food on your table only if you licked those Malay devils' ass. So yes, you are better off back in Taiwan. [...] Work well, back in Taiwan!  
(Zhang, 1988b: 188-89)<sup>129</sup>

Zhang Guixing himself made the choice to renounce his Malaysian citizenship and become, at least officially, a national of the Republic of China on Taiwan.

The first meaning of the name Buming (i.e. “unclear, unknown”) also suits the protagonist, in a way. Even if he is officially a Malaysian citizen, his identity is actually unclear to him, as he lives in a sort of limbo, suspended between two islands, the one that he left and where he doesn't quite fit in, and another one where he decided to live, but cannot call home. Chinese Malaysian youth of Buming/Zhang Guixing's generation, moved to Taiwan not only for linguistic reasons, but also moved by “a rather romantic interest in the Chinese motherland and in what it might feel like to live life as a member of the ethnic majority.” (Jaffee 2007: viii-ix)

Buming's fascination with the assumption that Taiwan equals the long-dreamed Chinese motherland inevitably transforms into frustration, as “Taiwan, of course, was not the mainland motherland from which the ancestors of most Malaysian Chinese had

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<sup>128</sup> Although the novella was written in the early 1980s the sociopolitical climate in Malaysia remains generally unchanged.

<sup>129</sup> Zhang writes: “我有幾個朋友的兒子也是台灣大學畢業的，我同他們講叫他們不要回來，他們不聽我的，好，回來，有屁用！不是我看不起你們台灣畢業的，馬來鬼不承認都沒相干，你要靠自己。 [...] 你回台灣沒錯，在這邊幫馬來鬼擦屁股才有飯吃，回台灣好 [...] 你回台灣好好幹。”

departed, and Taiwan itself was a land suffering from the identity crisis that accompanies collective exile” (Jaffee 2007: ix). And Jaffee, while analyzing *My South Seas Sleeping Beauty* in her “Translator’s Preface”, also points out how “searches for motherlands, for homes where history can be clarified and imagined memories can be actualized, rarely have ecstatic endings” (Jaffee 2007: ix), as it is also demonstrated in the present novella.

It is interesting to note how official identity status and reality sometimes diverge. This is the case of many ethnic Chinese in Malaysia, who are technically Malaysian citizens by birth, but who do not feel, or are not comfortable with being labeled as such. It is even more evident in the case of Chinese Malaysians who left the country, as is the case of Buming, in the novella, and of its author in real life. Zhang Guixing uses an interesting device to vividly reach the heart of the identity question: he reproduces the information on Buming’s passport, undoubtedly the most widely recognizable sign of citizenship and belonging to a national community. The passport clearly states Buming’s nationality as “Malaysian” (國籍：馬來西亞 p.179), but this fact is constantly questioned throughout the text, by different people - belonging to the numerically and politically dominant Malay group - who confront him in different ways. As mentioned before, the novella starts with two different Malay persons (a bus-ticket seller and an immigration officer) puzzled at Buming being Malaysian and not being able to speak Malay, the national language. Buming’s official identification papers might acknowledge him as a citizen of Malaysia, but there is much more to his identity. He is constantly reminded, for example, that he is an ethnic Chinese (he is often called "Chinaman" *zhinaren* 支那人 or "Chinese" *zhongguoren* 中國人, by Malay characters and ethnic Chinese characters respectively). It is interesting to note that not once, throughout the entire novella, the author uses the word *huaren* 華人, the most widely accepted form to refer to the ethnic Chinese from outside the greater China region. Zhang

uses two very problematic terms, which are not synonyms between them, or with *huaren*. The first, *zhinaren* (roughly equivalent to the English “Chinaman”)<sup>130</sup> has a derogatory edge to it and in the dialogic parts of the novella it is used by non-ethnic Chinese, while the second, *zhongguoren* (equivalent to the English “Chinese”) has a strongly geographic and national connotation. As it primarily denotes Chinese from the People’s Republic of China, this term associates Buming to a national entity he doesn’t actually belongs to and separates him – whether he wants it or not – from the country he is a subject of, at least officially: Malaysia.

Throughout the novella, the reader has an idea of Buming’s identity only through other people’s classifications, and this identity is multiple and fluctuating: he is a Malaysian who doesn’t speak Malay for the bus-ticket seller and the immigration officer, he is a Chinaman for some people and a Chinese for others. In the end, however, they all become irrelevant as a new identity imposed on him becomes predominant and leads him to a tragic outcome: he is labeled a gangster, an evildoer (*daitu* 歹徒), and he resignedly accepts his faith and this new imposed identity from which he doesn’t seem to have the means to escape, despite his will to do so:

Pointing at the orchid with the gun, he said: "How did I become an evildoer? That's something I, myself too, have really no idea. The only thing I know is that everyone thinks I am a bad guy. So, I have a toy gun in my hand, yeah, big fucking deal! Everyone thinks I am a bad guy!" (Zhang, 1988b: 221)<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> The term comes from one of the Japanese words used to refer to China: 支那 (*Shina* しな), and albeit having originally neutral connotations, it became pejorative in the context of the Second Sino-Japanese War. According to Fogel (1995: 74), “the use of Zhina in modern China dates to the years just after the Sino-Japanese war, when large number of Chinese came to Japan as students.” He also states that “[t]he Chinese scholar who most strongly condemned the use of Shina was Guo Moruo (1892-1978). In a 1936 article, Guo, who knew Japanese exceedingly well, argued that Shina was not an evil term by itself, nor were its origins necessarily pernicious. When enunciated by Japanese, the term, however, came out in a derogatory manner”. (Fogel, 1995: 71)

<sup>131</sup> Zhang uses the following words in the Chinese original: "用手槍指蘭花說「我是怎麼變成歹徒的，我一點也不清楚，但是每個人都認為我是歹徒了，就算我手上拿的是玩具手槍，又他馬的怎麼樣？每

Surrounded by the police ready to shoot him at his first move, Buming still considers escaping as his only hope. The flight he is willing to embark on, even by risking his own life, can be seen as an allegory of many Chinese Malaysians leaving their country for Taiwan or other countries where they might have more and better opportunities to develop professionally and personally. In this novella, and unlike other works by Zhang Guixing, the rainforest's gloomy appearance and its intricacies are not seen as perilous. As a matter of fact, its thickness and darkness are the only hope Buming has to run away from his doomed fate:

I considered fleeing in the grassland that I had on my left. Because the grass was pretty high on that side, it would have been difficult for the police to see me; moreover, not very far from there there was the indigenous forest, where I could hide myself, and I could even live there, in case I could not find a way out of it.  
(Zhang, 1988b: 221-22)<sup>132</sup>

The identity issue, so central to this and many other works of Zhang Guixing and a great number of fellow Sinophone Malaysian writers is brought to the reader's attention again toward the end of the novella, when one reporter from the local Chinese-language newspaper aggressively tries to interview Buming. When he says "I know you are Chinese"(later on, the reporter from the Chinese programme of Radio Brunei will also present him as a "twenty-something Chinese" 一個二十幾歲的中國人 p.215), it must again be noted that in the Chinese version he uses the word *Zhongguoren*, a word with a strong geographic rather than cultural/ethnic connotation, as it denotes primarily Chinese people from China, in contrast to *huaren*, which stresses the cultural nature of "being Chinese" and can thus be appropriately used to indicate Chinese people regardless of their

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個人都認為我是歹徒」"

<sup>132</sup> Hereafter is the original paragraph: " 我打算逃入右邊的草叢中，因為那兒的草很高，警察不容易看到我們，而且離草叢不遠是原始叢林，我們可以躲在那邊，倘若我們逃不出來我們乾脆住在那兒。"

place of origin or residence (請問你先生貴姓？哪裡人？我知道你是中國人 p.214).<sup>133</sup>

The reporter from the newspaper presents himself as a mediator, an intercessor between Bumang and the government, in light of their shared ethnic/cultural background. He uses the expression "descendants of the Yellow Emperor" (*Yanhuang zisun* 炎黃子孫), a common Chinese-language phrase very much used to historically denote the common ancestry of ethnic Chinese people in every corner of the world.

The analysis of a few passages of the novella has hopefully brought the reader's attention to the intricacies of two interconnected issues in Zhang Guixing's work, namely the relation between the dominant Malay ethnic group and the Chinese Malaysian *returnee*, and the identity challenges posed to the latter by society.

In addition, to fully understand the ethnic and identity dynamics depicted by the writer, it must be paid a certain degree of attention to the specifically linguistic devices used in the text.

Zhang Guixing uses a language devoid of dialectal expressions and localisms, and were it not for the theme touched, it would be almost impossible for the reader to guess the author's national background only through the linguistic style. The author shows great attention when it comes to word choice. A feature that must be underlined here is the brilliant and appropriate use of measure words as a means to focus the reader's attention on one special meaning of a given term. (這座七十二家百貨雜貨店五金電器行飲料餐廳皮鞋服飾公司、三月賣低級雜誌黃色小說書店、兩家誓不兩立銀行、三間三流電影院、一家銷路四千五百份的中文報館、八家色情酒館、六棟窯子旅社、居民五萬的小鎮 p.186).

The characters in the novella speak a variety of languages, namely Mandarin Chinese,

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<sup>133</sup> For an extensive discussion of the problématique of naming Chinese people in Chinese, English and Malay languages, please refer to chapter seven in Hou Kok Chung (何國忠)(2002).

Malay (all of the Malay characters from the bus-ticket vendor to the petrol station attendant, to the Malay family on which car Buming hops on to go back to Sarawak), Hakka (the old man on the bus), English (the foreigner who agrees to give Buming a lift to cross the border into Brunei's Belait district). When dialogues in such languages are performed, the author opts for rendering them into standard Chinese: "Spiderface suddenly addressed Buming in the Hakka language: 'You know how deep is the water ahead?' Buming answered, also in Hakka: 'No, I don't know.'"(蜘蛛臉突然用客家話問不明：「你知道前面的水深嘛？」不明用客家話說：「不知道。」 p.186).

However, since one of the central themes of the novella, and definitely the one that leads to the tragic outcome of the narration, is the lack of communication between Malay and Chinese, sentences uttered in Malay are transcribed in a mix of incomprehensible symbols and Latin alphabet, thus showing, also graphically, the linguistic divide between the various Sinitic languages (Mandarin and Hakka in this specific case) and English on one hand and the Malay language on the other. (△□O 咿野\* R K M X Y 嗚唔 p.194 and similarly on pp. 203, 206).

This brilliant choice helps the reader put himself in Buming's shoes, as the reader too is unable to get the meaning of what Buming doesn't understand either. It is only through the words of a journalist from Brunei Radio's Chinese service, that the reader learns what the Malay family felt when Buming stopped them in order to get onto their car and reach Sarawak.

Another linguistic choice worth nothing is the fact the reporter dots his speech with English terms, even when a Chinese translation is readily available. Therefore, words such as “revolver”, “sniper”, “hostages”, “snap enter the Chinese text. This helps the reader understand that this section of the novella is recounted by a different narrator, thus the

stylistic change. Also, when Buming approaches the family car driven by the Malay man (consistently named "fatty ears" *fei'er* 肥耳 throughout the novella), he salutes them using the English expression "Hallo" (rendered in Chinese characters in the text: *haluo* 哈囉, p.200). Reading the text at a superficial level, there would be nothing about this form of greeting that would catch the reader's eye. However, when put into perspective and analysed in light of the general plot as well as the social and political climate the story refers to, it becomes instantly clear that such an apparently simple word carries a heavy meaning to it. In fact, it is highly improbable that a Malaysian, even one without a functional knowledge of Malay like Buming, is incapable of uttering a greeting in such language. Therefore, his use of "Hallo" can be seen as a strong statement made by Buming to assert his non conformity to the current situation that saw Malay replacing English as the official language and *lingua franca* of the federation.

It is clear from the story that Buming's knowledge of Malay is way below the survival line (and the atrocious finale can also be seen as a symbol of such linguistic inability). The author clearly states that the protagonist only knows very simple words in Malay such as "me", "you", "English", but funnily enough, one of the most complete sentences he knows in Malay is "*Semua babi*" (rendered phonetically as *songma babi* 送馬八斃 in the text, p.201), which can be roughly translated as "You are all pigs", an offensive utterance used in interethnic quarrels and disputes (generally between Malay and Chinese).

On a stylistic level, it must also be pointed out a peculiar choice which Zhang Guixing uses when naming the various characters in the novella. Apart from the highly symbolic name of the protagonist Buming and the name of one of his Chinese Malaysian friends in Taiwan, Ma Qiao (馬橋: *Ma* is both a surname and the Chinese abbreviation for *Malaixiya* 馬來西亞 Malaysia, while *Qiao* literally means "a person living abroad", as in the common

expression *huaqiao* 華僑 "overseas Chinese", thus Ma Qiao literally means "Malaysian living abroad/overseas Malaysian", and it is somewhat ironic here, as the person carrying such name has a difficult relationship, to say the least, with his Malaysian identity), all other characters are never called by their names but they are named by their most prominent characteristic. Thus the old man Buming befriends on the bus is known as "Spider face" (*Zhizhu lian* 蜘蛛臉), while the foreigner who agrees to give him a lift across the Sarawak-Brunei border is "Blue eyes" (*Lan Yan* 藍眼), while the man travelling in his car with his family is known as "Fatty ears" (*Fei'er* 肥耳), as already mentioned.

Zhang Guixing's skills as a novelist also lie in his capability of conveying the feeling of his characters through changes in tone, the use of appropriate and lively expressions, and the employment of irony, as mentioned above. This novella can definitely be considered one fine example of such ability and a showcase of Zhang's mastery of the Chinese language.

Through his words we can enter the emotional world of Buming and many self-exiled Chinese Malaysian youths, and it is not hard for us to guess his feelings of despair, anger and discomfort. For example, we can read a mixture of derision and anger in the phrase "Malay pig" (*Malai zhu* 馬來豬), and his anger is even more obvious and straightforward when he keeps repeating the expression *gai si* (該死!) (roughly equivalent to the English "Damn!") or *cao ni ma* (操你媽) (which carries the same meaning/connotation of the English "fuck you/your mother"), or when in a burst of rage shouts: "Damn Malay pigs! Go to hell!" (該死的馬來豬! 下地獄! p.193)

In conclusion, one could say that the series of misunderstandings, which trigger the events narrated, can be considered as the embodiment of the lack of communication between the Chinese and the Malay in contemporary Malaysian society. In the fictional

world of Zhang Guixing, there is no hope to overcome these ethnic communication problems, as one finds no possible solution to the Chinese Malaysian identity issue.

### **V.II.3. *Longtuzhu* (龍吐珠) (1984) by Liang Fang**

This short story is also set against the backdrop of rural Sarawak. However, despite dealing with issues of interethnic relations and identity, it has a completely different taste to it, when compared with Zhang Guixing's novella.

*Longtuzhu*, which Liang Fang finished writing roughly one year after the publication of Zhang Guixing's *Wandao, lanhua, zuolunqiang*, and Ding Yun's *Wei xiang*, i.e. on April 3, 1984, takes its title from the Chinese name by which the bleeding heart vine<sup>134</sup> is commonly known. The story is among the first pieces of literary fiction by Liang Fang, who started writing professionally in the early eighties, and was awarded the first prize in a state-wide literary competition. He had taken part in a similar contest, one year before, with another piece of short fiction, *Senlin zhi huo* (森林之火 "The fire in the forest"), a text depicting and exalting the courage and kind-heartedness of the Iban people.

In 1985, Nanfeng, a publishing house based out of Kuala Lumpur, published *Yanyu shalong* (煙雨砂隆), a collection of short fiction by Liang Fang, which also contained *Longtuzhu*.

The short story opens with Guda, the protagonist/narrator going back to his natal village, a remote hamlet amidst the rainforest of northern Borneo, in order to take his mother back with him to Kuching, the capital of Sarawak and the city where he is now living with his wife and son. The long and winding trip, apart from being real and spatial, is also temporal as Guda is obliged to reminisce about his hurtful past. In fact, the narrator is

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<sup>134</sup> The bleeding heart vine, botanically known by the name of *Clerodendrum thomsoniae* is a tropical flower originally from West Africa, but also present in the Borneo rainforest.

the son of an ethnic Chinese who spitefully left him and his Iban mother to go back to China, to his Chinese family. Now an adult, the narrator arrives to his natal settlement only to discover that his mother has already died. The story ends with Guda holding a photograph of his mother close to his chest and calling her name with his eyes blurred in tears.

According to Wu An,

[t]he author, using the technique of first-person narration, and from the perspective of a laughed-at child of mixed parentage, delineates a family tragedy: the cold-heartedness of the Chinese man, the unspoken and everlasting love that the Iban wife feels for her unmerciful husband, the sorrows and greatness of motherly love, the anger of the son toward his father and his eternal regret toward his mother. The writer mastered with success the skill of creating the images of all these characters. (Wu, 1985: 9)<sup>135</sup>

It is thus clear, from what mentioned above, that the backbone of *Longtuzhu* is constituted by the interethnic relations between the Chinese and the Iban, and also by the identity issues triggered off by these relations and embodied in the person of the narrator. As the son of a Chinese father and an Iban mother, Guda has a fluctuating identity, which is constantly rejected (the Chinese father does not accept his own son as being Chinese; the narrator himself, as a child, did not see himself as belonging to the Iban community) or appropriated (the mother and the Iban extended family have always considered Guda as one of them).

On a linguistic note, Liang Fang skillful mastery of the art of storytelling is undeniable and it is difficult not to agree with Wu An, who admits that the linguistic ability shown by the author "fills the entire story with an artistic charm reminiscent of poetry". (Wu, 1985:

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<sup>135</sup> The Chinese original reads as follows: "作者以第一人稱的手法，從一個被社會歧視的混血兒的觀點，揭示了一個家庭的悲劇：華族丈夫的無情，伊班族妻子至死對無情的丈夫的無言的愛，母愛的悲痛和偉大，兒子對阿爸的鞭撻和對英代（伊班語母親）的永遠的悔恨。作者成功地塑造了這些人物的形象。"

10)<sup>136</sup> For example, the reader begins to know about the family situation of the narrator through the description of Guda's own happy family, in striking contrast - as the reader will learn only a few paragraphs later - with his hard childhood:

I thought about my son, about his strong build, his dark and healthy skin complexion, his soft and curly black hair, his wide and sparkling jet-black eyes, and his long wavy eyelashes, all inherited from his grandmother. *Ini*, that's what I taught him to say when calling his nanna in Iban. "I--ni--", he would repeat after me, with a voice that would erase every inch of fatigue. Unfortunately, Xiuwen was not granted leave from work, otherwise I would have loved for her and Xiaohang to come with me. They couldn't even imagine how happy to see them would *indai* (mother in the Iban language) be. How had *indai* been all these years? That, I didn't know. But it was all in the past, now I wanted to take her to Kuching with me, so that our family would never be apart again.  
(Liang, 1985: 113)<sup>137</sup>

Before Liang mentions directly the fact that Guda's mother belongs to the Iban ethnic group, the Sinophone reader is already made aware of the fact that the story will deal with Otherness, thanks to the sharply accurate and thorough description of some of the characteristics which the narrator's son inherited from his grandmother. The dark skin complexion, the curly hair and eyelashes, the wide and sparkling eyes are all physical attributes that in Sarawakian Chinese collective imagination embody the average Iban person (the Other) as opposed to the average ethnic Chinese person (the Self).

The physical features that define the (grand)mother/Other are presented by Guda under a rather positive light, in striking opposition to the negative idea that the narrator's father (the embodiment of the average Chinese Sarawakian) has of his indigenous wife and offspring's Iban identity. With an attitude that reminds us of the colonizer's sense of

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<sup>136</sup> Wu An writes: "它使整個故事充滿詩一般的藝術魅力。"

<sup>137</sup> There exists no English translation of *Longtuzhu*, therefore all the translated excerpts are mine. Hereunder is the original passage in Chinese: "我想起我的孩子，結實的身子，褐色的健康膚色，油黑柔軟的卷髮，黑亮而凹進的大眼睛，卷而長的睫毛，全部遺傳自他的祖母。「伊逆」，我這樣教它用伊班話叫祖母，他也似樣地學：「伊——逆——。」那聲音使人忘卻一切疲勞。若不是秀雯請假不果，我多希望她與小航和我同行，印代見了他們也不知有多高興。這麼些年來，印代也不知怎樣過的，但這一切已成為過去，我要她一起回古晉來，一家人再也不分離。"

superiority, he sees them as primitive people, almost barbarians, who are not even worthy of sharing the same eating table with him:

Dad seemed superior to *indai* and me in every aspect, it had always been so. At lunch or dinner time, he would squat by himself on a stool at the dining table, with the crook of his left arm embracing his left knee. He would hold a bowl in one hand and use the right one to grab food with his chopsticks. When he ate it was all a rumble and grumble. *Indai* and I used to sit on the straw mat, by the foot of the table, and there, grovelled on the floor, we would ladle up our food from an iron plate. More than once I tried to sit at the table, but I was repeatedly stopped by dad's angry shout: "Go back to the mat, go back, eat with your *indai*! You are going to make a mess, there will be rice grains all over the table."  
(Liang, 1985: 114)<sup>138</sup>

The Chinese man treats his wife and son not like family, but as the primitive Other, lacking the worth and merits necessary to partake the comfort of sitting at the same table. The Iban wife does not rise against what she believes to be the only acceptable order of things (it should be said here, that it is customary for Iban people to eat and sit on a straw mat, not at an eating table). On the contrary, the young Guda, who has yet to realize where he stands in the Self-Other divide, finds it difficult to understand why he, who is at least half Chinese, cannot sit at his father's table, hence his rebellious behaviour against the unacceptable (to him) order of things.

On the other hand, by means of the narrator's voice, Liang Fang seems to perpetrate the myth of the *bon sauvage*, reminiscent of eighteenth and early nineteenth century romantic primitivism, and of sixteenth century travel literature, in which indigenous people were described by voyagers (who often improvised themselves as travel writers) as people who were generous, gentle, had physical beauty, and minds open to being trained.

The father of the narrator does not share the idea of the *bon sauvage*; nevertheless, he

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<sup>138</sup> Hereafter is the original Chinese passage: "阿爸一向就處處顯得比印代與我優越。吃飯時，他一個在桌子上開飯。他蹲坐在凳子上，左臂彎勾住左膝頭，手上捧著一隻碗，右手的筷子挾菜扒飯，吃得唏哩呼嚕响。印代與我卻坐在桌子腳邊的草蓆上，匍匐著舀著鐵盤內的食物。我不只一次要上哪桌子，阿爸卻一再把我喝住：

「下去，下去，跟你印代吃，弄得一桌子飯粒，脏死了。」"

is not dissimilar from a sixteenth century voyager in the sense that he does not see Sarawak as his new-found home; his identity as a Chinese migrant and not as a Chinese Sarawakian is clear to him and to others:

"He has to go back to China!"

Go back to China. These words were always on dad's lips, especially when he quarreled with *indai*. He'd keep saying that we were a burden to him and that if he didn't have two more mouths to feed, he would have already saved enough money to go back. I had gotten used to his way of speaking about us, but that one time, it was different and it looked like he really meant it.

"And what about us?"

"We can't go!"

"*Indai*, don't let dad go! If he leaves, what's going to become of us?"

"Son, how am I supposed to keep him from going? He *has* to leave!"

[...] He had to return home. He said that his home was there, not here.

(Liang, 1985: 113-14)<sup>139</sup>

In the above passage the reader is made aware, once again, of the sharp contrast between the mother's passive acceptance of things and Guda's bold resistance to them. Moreover, we also see how the narrator's identity is an idea that wavers between the Chinese Self and the Iban Other. When the two elements are set one against the other, Guda is always identified together with his mother (the Other, from the Chinese perspective), while his father is always identified, him alone, as the Self (also from the Chinese perspective). Linguistically, this narrative attitude is made evident by the constant opposition of the personal pronouns *women* (我們 "we/us") and *ta* (他 "he/him"), referring to the mother-son couple and to the father, respectively.

The narrator resists, time and again, the Chinese (Self) unaccepting and despising attitude, while refusing the Iban (Other) tolerant inclusiveness:

"How can I have a son like you? You are so dark! What a squaw!"

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<sup>139</sup> Following are the original words by Liang: "「他要回唐山去了！」回唐山。阿爸老掛在口邊的話，尤其是與印代吵嘴時，口口聲聲說我們把他給拖累了，若不是多了兩張口吃飯，他早已畜足前回去。這一切，我已習以為常。但這回，好像並不是說說而已那麼簡單。「那我們呢？」「我們不能去的。」「印代妳留住阿爸吧。他走了，我們怎麼辦？」「孩子，我該怎麼留法？他非走不可！」[...] 他要回家。他說那兒才是家。"

In occasions like these, *indai* would lower her head in silence, while keeping me away from him. I didn't inherit dad's fair and slender complexion, that was a fact [...] but I did carry his bad character in me. [...] "I am not going! I hate it there [uncle's longhouse]. I don't want to live with those Iban people!", I would protest, as soon as *indai* opened her mouth.

"Son, you are a half Iban too!"

"No, I am not! I am nothing!" At school, I wouldn't dare to vent my anger, nor to fight, for fear of being pointed out as 'having a squaw temper', or as being 'the seed of a squaw'. Not even my dad would acknowledge our blood ties, he would never speak Hokkien with me, let alone Mandarin. And I would cry and shout, while kicking my legs on the floor.

(Liang, 1985: 114-15)<sup>140</sup>

In the above text, one can easily perceive that in Guda there exist important emotional issues that are linked to the function of language as a marker of identity, a theme which has already been approached in the analysis of *Hun de zhuisu*, in the previous chapter. In this case, not addressing his own son in a Sinitic language (Hokkien and Mandarin) is a clear stance of exclusion made by the Chinese father.

The half-*Chineseness* embodied by the narrator is not acknowledged by his father, hence, the man's unwillingness to share an identity marker as strong as language with someone whom he considers as being the Other. Therefore, Guda's *Otherness* neutralizes his *Chineseness*, thus he is not expected (nor permitted, at least in his interaction with his parent) to speak Chinese. In this situation, one can find the reverse of the personal condition recalled by Ien Ang in her "On Not Speaking Chinese", in which she says that,

[t]hroughout my life, I have been implicitly or explicitly categorized, willy-nilly as an 'overseas Chinese' (*hua qiao*). I look Chinese. Why, then, don't I speak Chinese? I have had to explain this embarrassment countless times

(Ang, 2001: 23).

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<sup>140</sup> Hereunder is the passage as appears in the Chinese original: "「怎麼有你這孩子，黑黝黝的，拉仔種！」那時候，印代會低頭不語，把我帶開。我並沒遺傳阿爸的白晳修長，[...] 我還承續阿爸的劣性。[...]「我不去，那兒甚麼也不好，我不要與那些伊班人在一起！」印代一開口，我已大聲抗議。「孩子，你是半個伊班人！」「我不是，我甚麼也不是！」在學校裡，我不可以稍為發脾氣，不可以打架，怕的是給指責「拉仔性情」、「拉仔種」，就連阿爸也不承認我的血統，從不跟我說福建話，華語更不必說了。我哭鬧著在地上打滾。"

When the narrator's father returns to China, to his socially accepted family (the embodiment of the Self), Guda and his *indai* are left alone and almost penniless, and their only means of survival is the support of and inclusion within the Iban clan. Guda's family ties with *Chineseness* are thus severed, while those with Otherness are strengthened. Even so, he firmly holds onto his Chinese cultural background, as he is able to attend a Chinese-medium boarding school in a neighbouring village, thanks to his brilliant score in the entrance examination. Cultural *Chineseness*, together with his being ashamed of his mother's Iban heritage, turn Guda into the inheritor of his Chinese father's spitefulness toward *indai*; in other words, the narrator is not caught between the Self and the Other dichotomy anymore, but his identity has a firm shift in the direction of Selfness, leaving *indai* alone to carry the burden of Otherness. Liang underlines this change also linguistically. The *women* (我們 "we/us", mother-child couple) is broken into the opposite of the Self, represented by Guda, through the use of the personal pronoun *wo* (我 "I/me") and the Other, embodied by *indai*, through the use of the personal pronoun *ta* (她 "she/her"), as can be inferred by paying attention to the following passage:

I noticed *indai*: she wore a *nyonya* dress sewed out of thick fabric and a somewhat worn-out floral sarong, in strong contrast with the school's modern dormitory. I wasn't happy at all [to see her]. My classmates sent her inquisitive looks. As I glanced at *indai*, even her unreserved love and concern annoyed me.

It was already a dark moonless night when I told her to go back home.

"Can I stay for the night?"

"No, you can't; the teachers will scold me!"

"I'll talk to them."

"No! Go back!", I prompted again and again, while stuffing the black fake-leather bag and the small parcel containing a few clothes that she had put on my bed back into her chest.

(Liang, 1985: 118)<sup>141</sup>

<sup>141</sup> Liang writes: "見到印代，她身著一襲粗布娘惹衣與半舊的花紗籠，與現代化的宿舍成了強烈的對比。我並不怎麼高興。同學們也投來好奇的眼光，我看了看印代，連她臉上那不保留的慈愛與關懷都覺得討厭了。「妳回去吧！」我說。那時天已黑。是一個沒有月亮的晚上。「我可以住在這兒住一晚嗎？」"

The contrast between the Other, as a symbol of backwardness (the *indai* dressed in the worn-out sarong), and the modernity of the Self, here typified by the boarding school, a physical representation of *Chineseness*, is not left to the reader's imagination. In fact, Liang decides to set Self and Other in opposition in order to show or emphasize their differences, as seen through the mindset the narrator inherited from his Chinese parent.

Now completely immersed in his Chinese identity, Guda goes as far as to deny the very existence of the Other in relation to the Self:

A-Lin approached me and said: "You speak very good Iban!" , then he asked: "Is that your mother?" [...] I gave him a ferocious stare [...]: "No, she isn't!"  
[...] I now bitterly hated that teacher for he knew that I had an Iban mother.  
(Liang, 1985: 118-19)<sup>142</sup>

The reader is made aware of a shift in Guda's attitude toward *indai* when, in his adolescence, he receives a letter from his father complaining about the bad personal and economic situation in China. He realizes that his father's misfortune is a reason of joy. However, perceiving that his mother would be devastated if she knew about the unpleasant living conditions of the man she has always loved, he decides to hide the content of the missive from her:

It was also during the holidays when someone came from town to deliver a letter from dad. He wrote that things were not going well for him in China. The thing that saddened him the most, he confessed, was that his two wives couldn't stop fighting for the sewing machine he had taken back with him. The situation at home was unbearable. As I read those words, I couldn't avoid feeling happy, so I immediately crumbled the letter into a ball and threw it far away. [...] He never sent another letter again. *Indai* kept asking about the content of the missive, but I would keep silent. She would moan and groan, while I would smile on the inside, thinking that

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「不可以，老師要罵！」「我跟老師說。」「不要，妳回去吧！」我再三催促，把她攔在我床上的黑色假皮的手袋與一小包裹的衣物一股兒全塞在她懷裡。」

<sup>142</sup> Following is the original Chinese text: 「你的伊班話那麼好呵，那是你的母親？」阿林走過來問。 [...] 我狠狠地盯了它一眼[...]：「不是！」[...] 我恨透那老師。他知道我有個伊班母親。」

dad got what he deserved.  
(Liang, 1985: 119)<sup>143</sup>

Here, one can easily perceive the narrator's transition back to Otherness, as he is drawn closer to his mother, while rejoicing in the misfortune of the Chinese experience of his father. The loss of the paternal figure in the adolescence feels more like a liberation than a deprivation. On the contrary, the death of *indai*, well into the narrator's adulthood, is felt as a painful experience of bereavement. Even so, the last passages of the short story clearly provide a different symbolic option to the identity issue faced by the narrator. Guda is given by his Iban uncle a wooden trunk which belonged to his father and that his *indai* had always kept very dearly. On the surface of the trunk, a flying dragon rises amidst the mist. The image of the mythological animal, however, is fading and with it, is fading the Chinese pride of which the creature is a symbol:

"Oh, it's a dragon. And the dragon is the creature that we Chinese people value the most. " he [dad] said to himself with satisfaction. Then he added that he was a dragon, according to the Chinese horoscope.  
But now, the wooden trunk was already moth-eaten. The body of the dragon had come off for the most part, and worms had swallowed up its eyes. It was now a blind dragon.  
(Liang, 1985: 121)<sup>144</sup>

The animal is now blind: how not to see a parallel between this image and the Chinese experience in Malaysia? Liang Fang is telling us that, in a natural process of adaptation to the new environment, the ethnic Chinese had to give up willingly or not, some of their characterizing elements.

In the trunk, the narrator finds his own family experience and is reminded, once and for

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<sup>143</sup> Hereafter is the passage in the original Chinese version: "也是在一個假期裡，市鎮上有人轉來一封信，是阿爸寄來的。他說唐山不好過。最傷心的是他買回去的縫衣車，兩個媳婦爭著要，弄得一家不歡。我看了按捺不住一份快感，把信立刻揉了丟得老遠。[...] 他也沒寫來第二封信。印代一直追問那封信的內容，我甚麼也不說。她只有長吁短嘆。阿爸也有今天，我笑在心裡。"

<sup>144</sup> The original text reads as follows: "「哦，是一條龍。我們中國人最重視的就是龍。」他自顧自地說，蠻得意的樣子。他說他肖龍。今天那木箱卻已蛀了，龍身脫落不少。蛀蟲還蛀入龍的眼睛。那時已條瞎了的龍。"

all, of the painful divide that there had always been between his father (*Chineseness*) and the mother-child couple (Otherness):

On the bottom of the trunk there were two photographs, one was a picture of dad, while the other was a photo that *indai* and I took together when I was eight. [...] I held everything [the content of the trunk] close to my chest, my nose twitched, tears encountered no obstacle and I started to cry relentlessly.  
"Indai..."  
(Liang, 1985: 121)<sup>145</sup>

The fact that the three family members do not appear on the same photograph serves as evidence of the unresolved *Chineseness* - Otherness tension skilfully portrayed by Liang throughout the text.

#### **V.II.4. *Feifa Yimin* (非法移民) (1995) by Ng Kim Chew**

Another text where the antagonistic relationship between the Chinese Malaysian and the Other is central to the narration is *Feifa Yimin* (translatable as "Illegal Immigrants" in English), by noted novelist and literary scholar Ng Kim Chew.

The first draft of the short story was completed at the end of September 1987, but it was only published almost eight years later, on March 17, 1995, on the supplement to the *China Daily News* (*Zhonghua Ribao Fukan* 中華日報副刊), a leading Taiwanese newspaper. Two years after its first publication, the story was included in *Wu anming* (烏暗暝 "Dark night"), a personal collection of short fiction by Ng.

Ng, a Chinese Malaysian of Hokkien descent (hence, the official transcription of his name: Ng Kim Chew), was born in 1967 in Johor, the southernmost state of Peninsular Malaysia.

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<sup>145</sup> Hereafter is the closing paragraph of the story in Chinese: "箱底有兩張相片，一張是阿爸的，一張是我八歲時與印代合拍的 [...] 我把這一切全兜在懷裡，一陣鼻酸，眼淚像缺了的提防，再也忍不住四面狂流。「印代... ..。」"

I deem it necessary to note here that the task of gathering biographical information about many contemporary Sinophone Malaysian writers is rather difficult, and it is most probably due to the fact that they belong to a literary system which has not been canonized yet. However, such is not the case when dealing with Ng Kim Chew. Ng himself recounts in a somewhat anecdotal fashion, his Malaysian childhood in the introduction to his collection of short stories *Wu anming*. "My grandparents came from Mainland China," he writes, "my father was born and raised here, and as for myself, I was born after independence; therefore, each one of us carried a different time engraved in our minds." (Ng, 1997b: 6) He grew up in a rubber plantation in the Kluang district where his parents, like many other Chinese Malaysians of that region, worked as rubber tappers. The shadowy and cool environment of the rubber forest was everything he knew about the outside world, until he went to school where, among other things, he learnt to express himself in Mandarin Chinese, which gradually became his preferred language of communication, to the detriment of his dialect.

In 1987, amidst the economic difficulties faced by his family and many other Chinese Malaysians, Ng left to Taiwan in order to further his studies and to pursue the opportunities he felt he would never have in his native Malaysia. A student of Chinese literature, he received his degrees from Taiwan University (Bachelor of Arts), Tamkang University (Master of Arts) and Tsinghua University (Doctorate). He decided not to go back to Malaysia after his studies and he currently serves as professor of Chinese literature at Chi Nan University in Puli, a township in Nantou County, located at the exact centre of the island. Ng Kim Chew is a versatile literary personality, being active not only as a fiction writer, but also as a literary critic, an occasional columnist for newspapers and a professor of literature, as previously mentioned. Despite being a permanent resident of the Republic of China, he retains his Malaysian citizenship (Groppe, 2006), not unlike the way deep in

his mind and memories he retains the rubber forest, a place that is probably lost forever (Ng, 1997b: 9).

The difficult economic conditions not only lead him to Taiwan in search of better opportunities, but they also lead him to the realm of professional writing. In the introduction to *Tu yu huo - Tanah Melayu* (土與火 "Soil and Fire"), Ng recounts his first steps into creative writing during his university years and honestly admits being attracted, when he was a poor undergraduate student, to the money he could earn by winning a literary prize and not by some high ideals of writing a new chapter in Sinophone Malaysian literature:

During my university years, I started to write fiction. At first, it was a reaction to the bed quality of the works that were awarded literary prizes; what a megalomaniac I was! To be honest, I was very poor at the time, and the money I could earn by winning a literary award would be a good on-the-side income. As a poor student, that was the only reason I entered the literary world and I was not moved by other ideals such as continuing the "tiny joss-stick" of Malaysian Chinese literature, or writing a new chapter in the history of literature. I was more practical than my predecessors and I knew that writing novels would eventually lead me to starvation and I wouldn't dare dreaming of becoming a professional writer.[...] Writing essays became then my routine, while fiction writing turned into a side activity.  
(Ng, 2005: 13)<sup>146</sup>

As a matter of fact, since his first incursions into fiction writing, he has been regularly awarded literary prizes not only in Taiwan, but also back in his native Malaysia, which thing may have boosted his status as a successful writer, since it cannot be denied that such prizes can oftentimes save the pages of a book from hardness and from falling, that is to say, from oblivion. Ng's relationship with literary prizes as a system of recognition and fame is

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<sup>146</sup> The original Chinese text that follows appeared for the first time in the *Sin Chew Jit Poh - Wenyi Chungiu* on May 1, 2005. The translation is mine and is based on the text as reproduced in the introduction to the volume *Tu yu huo*. The original text reads as follows: "大學時代開始學寫小說，最初不過是嫌別人得獎作品差，「彼可取而代也」；也實在因為太窮了，文學獎獎金可補濟生活。窮學生的臨時起意，並不是為了替馬華文學延續那「微細的一線香，更別說是為文學史續一章。我比前輩務實，知道寫小說會餓死，不感心存僥倖想當傳業作家 [...] 論文寫 作成了常規，而小說寫作幾呼成了可有可無之事".

ambivalent, as he himself writes in the introduction to *Tu yu huo*. He considers such awards as an important mechanism of general approval within the literary system, since not only critics, but also the general readership oftentimes assesses the literary value of a writer's production based on whether it was awarded any literary prize. However, he also believes that there are too many of them, and that there is no need to award them so often.

His short stories have been published across the Sinophone world, mainly in Taiwan and Malaysia, but also in mainland China and Hong Kong. This exposure to a transnational readership makes him currently one of the most global Sinophone Malaysian authors. The publishing format is also very diverse: before being edited into collections, most of his short stories were published in literary magazines, such as *Hong Kong Literature* (*Xianggang Wenxue* 香港文學) or in the arts supplements to a Sinophone newspapers, such as the Malaysian *Sinchew Jit Poh*, and therefore reach different strata of the Sinophone reading population.

His attachment to the land where he grew up is evident in the themes touched upon in his fiction works. As Ng himself explains in the afterword to *Si za Nanfang* (死在南方 "Death in the South"), a collection of previously published works, which appeared in mainland China in 2007, only a scant number of his stories narrate events not directly related to the Malaysia he knows and has experienced, which continues to be an almost endless source of inspiration.

In his production, Ng deals with the shadows of Malaysian ethnic politics, the gloomy atmosphere of the immigrants' villages, the rubber forest as a symbol of the colonial era, the various constrictions, the violence of the Malayan Communists, of the Japanese Army during World War II and of the post-independence assimilation politics, imprisonment due to political reasons, feelings toward the homeland and the obsession with the bones of the

dead.

In the field of literary criticism, he is an accomplished personality, as much as he is a controversial one actually, so controversial as to be called the *enfant terrible* of Sinophone Malaysian literature by David Wang Der-Wai in an extensive essay on the writer, which appears as a preface to *Kebei: You dao zhi dao– Dari Pulau Ke Pulau* (刻背：由島至島 "Engraved on the Back: From Island to Island").

In a polemic lecture he held at the Universiti Putra Malaysia in 2009, he answered with a negative to the rhetorical question of whether Malaysia(ns) still needed a Sinophone Malaysian literature. (Chen Xuefeng, 2009: 1-3).

It is possible that Ng drew from his personal life experiences of growing up in Malaysia to write *Feifa yimin*. In fact, the action takes place in a remote rubber plantation in Peninsular Malaysia. The environment described carries very close resemblance to the rural area where Ng Kim Chew was brought up. The story is a gloomy and dark account of a Chinese Malaysian woman's state of constant fear. Living in a remote rural area, she is waiting for her husband to come back home at night and, at the same time, she is praying that Indonesian illegal immigrants will not assault their home, rob them of their belongings and put their lives in danger. An apparently simple tale about affright and danger, in the social and political contest of Malaysia, *Feifa yimin* becomes an accusation against government indifference to the fate of the Chinese Malaysian community.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> The issue of illegal migration from Indonesia into Malaysia has always been highly topical and problematic, but has never been successfully addressed by the Malaysian government, as noted by Liow:

While Indonesians have historically migrated into the peninsula and played a critical role in shaping the culture and economy that has evolved there, in recent times Indonesian migrants has been viewed in a markedly negative light, and have been blamed for a host of social problems that have plagued Malaysia. In particular, fingers have been pointed at Indonesian workers who have entered peninsular and Eastern Malaysia via the coasts of Sumatra and across the Indonesia-Malaysia borders in Borneo without valid documents. Until recently, illegal immigration had been a relatively muted issue on the political stage owing to efforts by both governments to tone down rhetoric that might have otherwise sent bilateral ties into a tailspin. Diplomatic indulgence however, could not conceal the

From the very opening passage, the reader is thrown into a state of apprehension, as he follows the woman anxiously awaiting her husband's return:

Who knows how many times had she unconsciously cast her eyes upon the road back home, to see if her husband was arriving. After a hurried lunch, he had draped his jacket over his shoulders and had driven away. He had to press the middleman for his debt payment and, apart from that he also wanted to stock up on some more fodder. Then, if time allowed, he would go to the neighbouring village to check a new chicken factory farm, but anyway, he would manage to go get their daughter from school. However, he was now late, as he should have been home at least half an hour before. (Ng, 1997b: 187)<sup>148</sup>

The sketchy description above already gives an idea of the family situation the text deals with: the devout spouse of a local Chinese farmer, the head of the family who strives to make ends meet, a daughter attending the local school.

The landscape in which the entire action takes place is also described in a rather incisive fashion. Thanks to Ng's mastery of the Chinese language and his skillful lexical choices, the reader finds himself locked up in a tropical setting, as if he were in a cage, and a sense of claustrophobic oppression grovels among the words:

The entire rubber plantation now looked like a boundless fence, under the slanting sunbeams of that late afternoon. Every single rubber tree and its long, dark shadow blocked her sight, preventing her from seeing the vast land that was on the other side. At that point, the road white as the belly of a snake seemed extremely scrappy. (Ng, 1997b: 187)<sup>149</sup>

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fact that illegal Indonesian workers were fast becoming a major problem for the Malaysian government, and the inability to find a satisfactory solution has meant that this issue remains a thorn in the side of bilateral relations. (Liow, 2004: 12-13)

<sup>148</sup> No English translation of the short story is currently available. Translation of all excerpts is mine. The original passage, in Chinese, reads as follows: "也不知道第幾回了，伊無意識的把目光投向丈夫歸來的路。匆匆吃過午飯後他就披衣開車離去，除了向中間商催債之外，還打算多囤積一些飼料，趕得及的話可能還會到鄰鎮去參觀一家新的養雞農場，總之會趕在女兒放學前把她接回來。然而，他預定回家的時間已過去了大半個小時。"

<sup>149</sup> Hereafter is the original passage: "傾斜的西照日把一整座橡膠林子投照成一望無邊的柵欄，沒一顆橡膠樹和它被延長的鬼黑樹影，共同切割著伊有限視野中的大地。那條蛇腹白的路，於焉也零碎不堪了。"

Despite the geographic differences, the above passage conveys a stifling feeling of confinement not dissimilar to the one felt by the reader of Zhang Guixing's novella *Wandao, lanhua, zuolunqiang*.

The sense of seclusion, of being held captive on her very own land is reiterated only a few paragraphs later:

She casted another gaze over at the road on which the husband had left. They lived very far from the village, and there was no running water, nor electricity. She didn't know how to drive, so it was always her husband who went to run errands, once or twice a day - he was the one driving their child to and from school, he was also the one in charge of buying the grocery and everything else they needed... Therefore, everyday there would be a few times when she was left at home alone in that place so desolated and far from everywhere, with only one neighbouring house and seven dogs sporting among the woods.  
(Ng, 1997b: 188)<sup>150</sup>

However, seclusion does not come alone, as we have already mentioned: it is in fact, good friends with fear, with a comprehensible and justifiable feeling of alarm caused by what seems to be an impending danger:

Lately, she had returned to her parents' home quite a few times. Her mom told her how terribly skinny she looked and asked whether it was fear that stole her sleep and her appetite. Of course it was because of fear, she declared. And who wasn't scared? On a daily basis, newspapers reported about robberies, murders of ethnic Chinese, and raped women, all by the hand of illegal immigrants from Indonesia... People in their village too had been robbed: the Indonesians would go around in knots, holding long knives in their hands and they'd violently pry the doors open. They were more ferocious than the most ferocious of robbers. In a neighbouring area, there had already been a few cases. One day around dawn, a young female rubber tapper was blocked on her way to the plantation... Another woman was shot dead in the forest, she was still holding a knife in her hand, when they found her. The spot of the accident was only about half a *li* away from here. Following a bunch of people, her husband too had gone there to have a look: the back of the lady's neck had been smashed into pieces, and her hair had fallen deep into her brain.

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<sup>150</sup> Ng writes: "伊又瞟了一眼丈夫離去的路。住得離鎮數哩遠，沒自來水沒電，伊又不會開車，每天丈夫都得出一兩趟門——接、送孩子上學，採購食物及幾他·····。每天都有一些伊必須獨處的時間空檔。這麼一個荒郊野外，遠遠的，只有獨一無二得一戶鄰居。七隻狗在林中嬉戲。"

(Ng, 1997b: 188-89)<sup>151</sup>

In the above passage, the author voices the fear and concern of many ethnic Chinese, especially in rural Malaysia, for the state of insecurity in which they found themselves in, since the arrival of several waves of illegal immigrants from neighbouring Indonesia. According to the writer, they rob, they rape, they kill, and their preferred target is the Chinese community, which is considered an economically strong group.<sup>152</sup>

The sense of impotence experienced by Chinese Malaysians is aggravated by the indifference of the Malaysian government, accused of taking sides with the Indonesians:

It had been already three months that, whenever people met, they'd end up talking about illegal immigrants, whether they knew each other or not. They would complain about the fact that illegal immigrants had sprung up like mushrooms, and that the government allowed them to get in and commit crimes, and that the victims were, for the most part, ethnic Chinese. Meanwhile the police...

"It's because they share the same language and they are of the same race. They can increase the population ratio, and in time of elections, the government will benefit from their votes." "They all think that Chinese people have got money, Indonesians and Malays alike." "If by any chance, one day they robbed a rich Malay, the situation would be very different." And police officers would always arrive a long while after the crime had been committed.

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<sup>151</sup> Following is the original Chinese language version of the passage: "最近幾次回娘家，母親都盯著伊說怎麼瘦得那麼厲害，是不是因為太過害怕而睡不好吃不好？是呀，誰不怕呢？每天報紙都在登，印尼非法移民打劫，殺死華人，強姦婦女．．．．．。鎮子裡的也被搶，三五成群，拿著長刀，硬硬把門撬開，比甚麼強盜還兇。附近郊區發生了幾件案子，一位年輕的割膠婦人在黎明上班途中被攔下．．．．．一位婦人被擊斃，手上還握著膠刀，那地方離這裡不過半哩遠，他也隨眾去看了，死著後腦稀巴爛，頭髮都陷進腦袋中去。"

<sup>152</sup> The idea of Chinese dominance in the economic sector is a rather widespread idea among Southeast Asian non-Chinese ethnic groups and is especially deep-rooted in Malaysia and in Indonesia. In the latter country, tension and hatred against the Chinese population was extremely widespread and the Chinese were discouraged from joining the all-powerful security forces and banned from celebrating holidays such as the Chinese New Year or using Chinese characters on their shops.

On May 14, 1998, as the Suharto regime limped to an ignominious end, riots erupted in areas of cities predominantly populated by ethnic Chinese.

More than 1,200 people died, dozens of women were raped, and hundreds of shops were burned to the ground.

(Johnston, 2005)

(Ng, 1997b: 189)<sup>153</sup>

The impassivity of the government is attributable, as Ng suggests in the above passage, to ethnic as well as political reasons. The arrival of immigrants from neighbouring Indonesia is seen as an easy way to stem the demographic threat allegedly posed by the Chinese, and to reinforce - numerically - Malay dominance. In fact, considered as part of the Malay world and ethnic group, Indonesians unknowingly help

[t]he ruling class of the nation state of Malaysia [to maintain] a hegemonic Malay identity based on the difference between supposedly indigenous Malays and 'outsiders', namely Chinese and Indians. This identity is regarded as a national base of the state.

(Vickers, 2004: 27)

The Chinese Malaysians feel defenseless, and are caught in a situation necessitating a choice between two equally undesirable situations: staying and defending the land would mean exposing oneself to the high risks; leaving, on the other hand, would sweep away everything they have worked for and would plunge them into an unknown future:

They [i.e. the neighbours] could leave, but her family had to remain there, on the land which they had rented and on which they had invested all the money they had.

[...]

"...Think about leaving! Even if you have to hide for a short while. You are both still young: the money lost can be earned back. Your life is all you really need to hold onto!"

[...]

"I told you to move out long time ago, but you wouldn't! Tomorrow, I'll call a removal van, first thing in the morning!"

(Ng, 1997b: 189-90, 193, 195)<sup>154</sup>

Trapped in this dilemma, the Chinese Malaysian wife, then resorts to religion, in a last

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<sup>153</sup> The passage as appears in the Chinese original reads as follows: "半個月來，不論相識還是不相識，見面必談非法移民，一徑的都在埋怨：怎麼突然冒出那麼多非法移民？為甚麼政府放他們進來做案，而受害者大多又是華人？

「因為他們同文同種，可以增加人口比率，大選時投票對他們有利。」「印尼人跟馬來人一樣，都認為華人有錢。」「要是那一天他們搶到了有錢的馬來人頭上，那情況就不同了。」而警察總是事發許久之後才趕來。"

<sup>154</sup> Hereafter are the original passages in Chinese: "他們能走，而伊一家人卻走不了。在這一片租來的土地上，投下了夫妻倆全部的資金" "「還是搬出去吧，暫時避一避也好。你們還年輕，前沒了還可以賺回來，性命要緊啊！」" "「早就叫你搬你又不搬！明日透早我去叫車來搬。」"

attempt to put her fear to rest and in an effort to find a way out of what seems to be a dead-end street.

The religious turn given by Ng Kim Chew to the story is very Chinese Malaysian in its syncretism, as it combines the Chinese system of beliefs with local tradition. Matter-of-factly, in the narration many deities are named: Tudi Gong (土地公), Tuapeh Gong (大伯公), Tian Hou (天后), Xuan Tian Shangdi (玄天上帝), Guanyin (觀音), and Datuk Gong (拿督公). Except for Datuk Gong, all of these divinities are members of the Chinese pantheon, and are worshipped - to a larger or smaller extent - by Chinese communities around the world.

Datuk Gong, instead, is a local Malaysian guardian spirit, probably a remnant of pre-Islamic Malay religious beliefs, and nowadays worshipped by the Chinese Malaysians.

According to Goh:

Nadu Gong or Datuk Gong (datuk is an honorific Malay title for chiefs) and Tuapeh Gong (大伯公; the first phrase refers to the father's eldest brother) — both terms anonymously deifying legendary communal leaders — have replaced Tudi Gong as the tutelary and territorial deity of the local district in Malaysia and Singapore and spirit mediumship takes pride of place in religious practice.  
(Goh, 2009: 122)

Ng himself, in a endnote to *Feifa yimin* introduces the deity to the non-Malaysian reader:

The idea of Datuk Gong is similar to that of Tudi Gong. He is a local deity which was created by the Chinese people, after their arrival to Southeast Asia, as part of a process of adaptation to their new living conditions. According to a popular legend, he is the incarnation of the spirit of a white tiger, while his interior person belongs to the Malay ethnicity. However, since Malay are followers of Islam, they are not allowed to worship Datuk Gong. Ethnic Chinese living in rural Malaysia normally put a statue of Tudi Gong in the house, while building Datuk Gong's altar outside. The latter deity is not carved into a statue with human features, and is not offered pork during worship rituals - probably as a form of showing respect to Islam. More precise facts concerning the origin, the development and the geographic distribution of these beliefs still need to be researched further.

(Ng, 1997b: 196-97)<sup>155</sup>

The above passage not only acquaints the readership with this specifically Chinese Malaysian god, but the very fact that Ng feels the need to explain the figure of Datuk Gong shows us that the writer is well aware of the fact that his writings are able to trespass frontiers and thus are not confined to a Chinese Malaysian readership.

Datuk Gong is seen as a benevolent intermediary between the Self (the Chinese Malaysian) and the Other (the Malay ethnicity to which - it must not be forgotten - the Indonesian migrants belong). Hence, he is not simply expected to protect the Chinese Malaysian from adversities, but in this specific case, the female protagonist hopes he will persuade the illegal immigrants not to harm her and her family:

From today on, You are our only neighbour, Datuk Gong...  
...I will pray to You everyday, in the hope that You will protect us and bestow peace upon us. In the past, during every festival, we have never left you out when we worshipped all other gods, not even once. On the first and the fifteenth day of the New Year, we always burned joss sticks before You. We always prayed that You let the price of chickens be stable, and to keep illnesses away from our animals. And we also prayed that You grant good health to our family. In the past, I have even besought You for a child, and begged in front of Your altar in the vain hope of an unexpected fortune. But today, I only seek Your help to get out of this difficult situation. Please control those illegal immigrants who belong to the same family of your children...  
(Ng, 1997b: 195)<sup>156</sup>

The plea sets off with the woman showing her respect to Datuk Gong and it almost seems as if she were sweet talking him, by reminding the deity that her and her family have

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<sup>155</sup> The explanatory note, in Chinese, reads as follows: "拿督公在概念上一如土地公，是華人到「南洋」之後，順應新的生存狀況而生產出的地方神。據傳聞祂是白虎精靈的化身，而祂內在的「人」的屬性應屬於馬來人種，然而信奉回教的馬來人又不（許）拜神。住郊外的華人一般都把土地公安在屋內，拿督公一定立於戶外。後者不設神像，不拜豬肉——這似又是基於尊重回教。關於此一信仰的起源、發展、分佈的詳細情形，待考。"

<sup>156</sup> Hereafter is the prayer as it appears in the original Chinese text: "今後只有拿督公祢是我們的鄰居了。 . . . . . 日日向祢求平安保佑。往昔逢年過節拜祭諸神時也從沒漏了祢的份。初一十五上香。祈求雞價穩定，莫胡亂得病。一家大小健康。也曾向祢求子，妄想橫財。如今只求度過難關，求祢管束和祢的子民同族的非法移民。 . . . . ."

always been reverent. He has always been treated on a par with the 'Chinese' gods, as the lady recalls, and he has never been overlooked.

It is not difficult to discern the reason why Datuk Gong is the one, out of all available deities, called upon: his ethnic background is the obvious motive. The choice, and the ethnic factors on which it is based, are once again clear evidence of the importance of ethnicity in the context of Malaysian society. Hence, Datuk Gong is asked to fulfill a double role as a deity, but also as a mediator and shielder, a function which the Malaysian government and the police are not able and/or refuse to carry out. Thus, to turn to Datuk Gong - a superior entity - for help into a worldly matter becomes the chosen form of criticism used by Ng to point his finger at the government and official inadequacy and unwillingness to protect the ethnic Chinese.

The Chinese Malaysian migratory experience finds a parallel also in the supernatural world as well, as suggested by the words of the deity Tudi Gong himself:

In vain am I Tudi Gong!... In vain am I one of the Gods!... Their ancestors brought me here, across the seas, escaping from the seclusion and the remoteness of the north... And here, amidst the warmth and humidity of this southern land, they set me an offering altar in the main gathering hall. Tuapeh Gong, Tianhou, Xuantian Shangdi, Guang Di, Guanyin... They are usually all neighbours of mine. Oh, right, I am, I am that God who could do nothing but see his own power shrinking, here in this foreign land.  
(Ng, 1997: 191)<sup>157</sup>

The Chinese people carried their gods with them in the hope that they would protect them in that faraway land. However, as Tudi Gong shamefully admits, the Chinese gods too are only guests in that "foreign land", which for centuries has been a soil consecrated to Allah, so their ability to watch over the ethnic Chinese has diminished. The similarities with

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<sup>157</sup> Tudi Gong's words in the original Chinese text read as follows: "枉我身為土地公 . . . . . 枉為眾神之一, . . . . . 他們的祖先把我從世代蟄居的北方大陸遙迢渡海 . . . . . 供奉於這塊南方燠熱潮濕的土地, 在他們家居的廳堂的內壁。大公伯、天后、玄天上帝、關帝、觀音 . . . . . 是我尋常的鄰居。哦我是, 我是那不得已權限萎縮的神祇, 在異鄉的土地。"

the earthly situation of the Chinese in Malaysia can be easily perceived in the above passage and in the following one:

Ah, I am that abandoned god, I have jurisdiction over nothing now. Where did they go ashore? On the beach? At the mouth of the river? At the pier or at any other possible place by the shore? Group after group, bunch after bunch, boat after boat. Where did they go? To construction sites, desolate places into the wild, and plantations in the hands of ethnic Chinese. They can go ashore more freely than local citizens.  
(Ng, 1997: 191)<sup>158</sup>

Tudi Gong is complaining as if he were one of the ethnic Chinese directly affected by the massive arrival of illegal immigrants and he too, as the people he is supposed to watch over, sees them as a threat, a dangerous menace with a very specific, ethnically driven target in mind: the Chinese Malaysians.

The parallelism between earthly matters and spiritual world is a convincing device that aims at adding importance to interethnic dynamics, by showing how the issue transcends the worldly realm and inscribes itself in a more religious dimension. All this, in spite of the negligence of the Malaysian government and police officers whom overtly diminish the magnitude of the matter.

Closing the story are a few words uttered by Datuk Gong. Ideally they could be interpreted as a somewhat indirect response to the heartfelt prayer made by the woman in an earlier passage. However, it appears to be a self-pitying monologue, through which the deity externalizes his commiseration for his own fate marked by his *in-betweenness*.

It is here necessary to remind the reader that in spite of his ethnic background, Datuk Gong lacks any authority or prescriptive power over both Indonesian migrants and Malaysian Malays, in a country heavily influenced by Islam, one of the pillars on which the

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<sup>158</sup> Hereafter is the paragraph in Chinese as it appears in the original text: "啊我是那廢棄的神，甚麼也管不著。他們從哪裡登岸？海灘、河口、馬頭與及所有可能的岸邊。一窩窩、一簇簇、一船船。到哪裡去？工地、荒郊、華人掌管的大園坵。他們登岸的自由猶甚於國民。"

very idea of Malaysian national culture rests:<sup>159</sup>

In vain am I Datuk Gong!... My status is ambiguous, and I am made to feel embarrassed everywhere. I do belong to this soil, but I do not belong to this country. I am helpless! Helpless!  
Ghosts and gods do not care about earthly matters!  
(Ng, 1997b: 196)<sup>160</sup>

In the above closing passage to *Feifa yiming*, even the most distracted reader could not miss the evidence: every single character, every single word uttered by Datuk Gong is part of a lamentation for the situation of the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia. In this case, the fact that the deity is an ethnic Malay becomes irrelevant. Or to put it differently, the fact that the deity is a non-Muslim entity automatically puts him in a marginal position, hence disregarding his ethnicity.<sup>161</sup>

The ambiguity to which the god refers to is thus an allusion to the unclear identity status of the ethnic Chinese, especially *vis-à-vis* illegal immigrants from Indonesia. Chinese Malaysians hold the Malaysian red passport, while the illegal immigrants hold - if any - the Indonesian green one; and yet, according to the narration, the ethnic Chinese are made to feel outsiders, are pushed out and away from the soil they believe to righteously belong to.

Then again, the expression "I do belong to this soil, but I do not belong to this country"

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<sup>159</sup> Once again it should be noted here, as was done in chapter II, that Malaysian national culture was clearly and officially defined in 1971, when the National Cultural Policy was adopted, for the following reason and with the following objectives in mind:

Cultural development for a newly independent nation is extremely important in the creation of a stable and united country. Therefore, the creation of a Malaysian national culture is intended to achieve three objectives:

(i) Strengthening social and national unity through Culture;(ii) Nurturing and preserving a National Identity which stems from a National Culture; and(iii) Enriching and increasing the quality of life from a practical and spiritual perspective, in line with socioeconomic development.

(Pencapaian Negara, 2010)

<sup>160</sup> In the original text, the closing passage reads as follows: "枉我身為拿督公。 . . . . 我身分曖昧，處處尷尬。屬於這塊土地，不屬於這個國家。無奈無奈！鬼神不管人間事。"

<sup>161</sup> This situation, in real life, could not be tolerated, as all ethnic Malays are born - by law - as members of the Islamic community and apostasy by ethnic Malays is considered a crime and treated as such.

cannot but remind the reader of the Chinese Malaysian experience, and their ambiguous identity within the complex context of Malaysia. Legally, however, the utterance must be reversed, as Chinese Malaysians do belong to *this* country (they are officially citizens of Malaysia), but they do not belong to *this* soil (they do not hold the status of *bumiputra*, i.e. 'children of the soil'). In any case, what is of the highest concern to the author is the fact that ethnic Chinese are helpless in this identity limbo in which they are suspended, the situation being aggravated by the lack of concern shown by the authorities (embodied by ghosts and gods in the supernatural sphere), as stated by the last unequivocal sentence of the short story: "Ghosts and gods do not care about earthly matters!".

The narration has a circular structure, as it opens with an unfinished utterance ("In vain am I..." 枉我身為 . . . . .) - which the reader is able to attribute to a god only as he continues to read further - and closes with the same words, now part of Datuk Gong's monologue filled with a deep feeling of self-indulgent sorrow over his own situation.

An interesting feature of Ng's narrative technique lays in its linguistic variation, as the text in standard Mandarin is dotted with dialectal expressions, hence adding vividness and realism. The main female characters is always referred to as *she/her*, but the author never refers to her with the most widely used personal pronoun *ta* (她), and chooses, as he did in *Huo yu tu* (火與土 "Fire and soil") too, the pronominal form *yi* (伊) (Paoliello, 2007). In standard Mandarin, the form *yi* is now obsolete, and is considered a literary device reminiscent of pre-May Fourth language. However, it is also the standard third person singular pronominal form in the Hokkien language. Therefore, its use, as well as the use of other dialectal expressions (either in Hokkien or in Cantonese) such as *siánn-bí lâng?* (啥咪人? "What person?"), *nei jau nou mou?* (你有腦冇? "Have you got any brain?/ Have you got something in your head?") helps Ng to present a more lifelike and realistic portrait

of the Chinese Malaysian experience.

Hence, dialogues between the ethnic Chinese characters are colourful and variegated. At the same time, they contrast acutely with the silence of the illegal immigrants, portrayed more as gloomy entities wandering around, than as real people capable of interaction with the Self. Interplay between the voiced Self (Chinese Malaysian) and the voiceless Other (Indonesian) takes place only in the form of tension (robbery, rapes, murder), in a state of harsh opposition in which the power dynamics are reversed: the voiceless becomes the powerful aggressor, while the voiced turns into the powerless victim. Hence, Ng Kim Chew portrays a situational oxymoron in which a voiceless tormentor (the Other) violently interacts with a voiced victim. Therefore, the Chinese Malaysians are here given a voice and the attention of which the Other (in this case the Malay-dominated officialdom) has deprived them. Hence, the story is narrated only from the ethnic Chinese perspective.

#### **V.II.5. *Bie zai tiqi* (別再提起) (2002) by He Shufang**

The religious issue which Ng Kim Chew relegates to the supernatural realm in *Feifa yimin*, becomes central to the identity question and the interethnic issue raised in *Bie zai tiqi*, a short story written by He Shufang and published on *Renjian Fukan* (人間副刊), the arts supplement to the *China Times* (*Zhongguo Shibao* 中國時報), one of the leading Taiwanese newspapers, on November 16 and 17, 2002.

The short story received high appraisal from most critics and it was the recipient of the *Short Fiction Critics' Award* at the 25th edition of the *China Times Literary Prize* (*Zhongguo Shibao Wenxue Jiang* 中國時報文學獎). Nevertheless, some Taiwanese critics pointed out a certain lack of clarity in dealing with the specifically religious theme. Ng Kim Chew, however, strongly disagrees with such an opinion and attributes the difficulty to

understand the essence of the text less to the author's narrative skills, and more to the average Taiwanese reader's lack of knowledge on specific issues regarding Malaysian society in general, and the Chinese Malaysian community, in particular.

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 the Sinophone newspaper *Nanyang Siang Pau*. She is currently pursuing postgraduate studies in Chinese literature in Taiwan. In addition to the *China Times Literary Prize*, she has also won awards in her native Malaysia.

Translatable as "Don't mention it again", *Bie zai tiqi* is a brief, yet intense account of how, twenty years before the narration, the Taoist funeral of the narrator's uncle was put on hold and subsequently cancelled, due to religious matters. The deceased had in fact converted to Islam, a fact which his family was unaware of. In addition, the man also had another family of Muslim faith, and most probably of Malay background, the only one entitled to carry the funerary rites according to the Islamic precepts and Malaysian religious law.

The text is an account of things happened in the past, when the narrator was only a child. As a matter of fact, the aim of the narrator, according to his own words, is to make sense, as an adult, of his childhood memories (這是一個成年人處理他童年回憶的方法 p.334). What he recalls is something hurtful to the family and the community and a matter nobody is willing to talk about (幾乎沒有人願意面對過去 p.334). Memories, however, have to be transmitted in order to be remembered, and thus avoid the subtle risk that they

may be altered due to shame (回憶會斑駁,甚至會被羞恥感篡改 p.334). It is for this reason that the narrator decides to faithfully tell the reader, whom he consistently addresses in the *ni* (你 "you") form, everything exactly as he remembers it (我可以坦然的告訴你,我所說的保證是我所記得的 p.334). Hence, one reads in the text a somewhat obsessive desire to transmit memories as a means to propagate the truth, not only about the specific and very personal case of the family in question, but also about the ethnic Chinese community in Malaysia as a whole.

The exact location where the action takes place is never mentioned. It is not known whether the story takes place in an urban or rural setting. Furthermore, the writer does not disclose whether the place where the wake is carried out - the house of the defunct and his family - is located in a predominantly Chinese environment, or in a multiethnic area. There are no hints in the text that may allow the reader to locate the action in Peninsular Malaysia or in East Malaysia. If the author drew mainly from her own personal experience, one might - with some degree of accuracy - set the action in the state of Kedah.

By not disclosing the exact location, He Shufang shows how the situation could have countrywide validity. Hence, it becomes a literary portrayal of the typically Malaysian ethnic and social experience.

The importance of *Bie zai tiqi* probably rests in the fact that the author deals with the conversion of Chinese Malaysians to Islam, a theme scarcely explored in Sinophone Malaysian literature; and also in the fact that she does so with great artistic power and by touching upon very sensitive issues such as death, funerary rites and the problem of ownership over the body of the departed, as Ng Kim Chew (2004c: 294) has noted as well.

The protagonist of the short story, the narrator's late maternal uncle, embraced the Islamic faith for reasons which are never clearly stated. Nevertheless, the reader has a

feeling that the dead was never moved by true religious feelings and that he was more likely pushed by the practical interests that might have resulted from his conversion:

My dad said: "This all happens because some Chinese people are too eager to gain petty advantages like buying a house at a discounted price, or getting a taxi licence. They believe that just because they now call themselves 'bin Abdullah', things can get done easily. But then, if something happens and they die unexpectedly, they are rolled in a white cloth and taken away. Some people convert to Islam and they never have the courage to tell their family. Men stay all day outside and how could a wife possibly know what her husband is doing?"  
(He, 2008: 335-36)<sup>162</sup>

Through the voice of the narrator's father, He Shufang transforms the above passage in an overt negative judgement of the opportunism of some ethnic Chinese. At the same time, it can also be considered a veiled critique to the uneven social treatment received by the different peoples of Malaysia.

From the story we also know that the deceased had a second wife, a Muslim woman, and one can assume, with a certain degree of sureness, that she is an ethnic Malay. This situation leads the reader to another possible explanation to the man's conversion: in fact, interfaith marriages involving a Muslim and a non-Muslim are generally frowned upon and prohibited by law. The only way to getting around the situation is thus for the non-Muslim to embrace Islam. As stated on the Malaysia Government website, "[a] non-Muslim must convert from his/ her religion to Islam in order for him/ her to marry a Muslim. He/ she must refer to the State Religious Department or seek help from an Imam at the nearest

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<sup>162</sup> There exists no English translation of *Bie zai tiqi*, therefore all the translated excerpts are mine. Following is the original passage in Chinese: "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？"

Bin Abdullah (literally 'son of Abdullah, servant of God') refers to the most common Muslim patronymic adopted by many men upon conversion to Islam. The female version is Binti (daughter of) Abdullah.

The white cloth mentioned in the text refers to the *kafan*, a plain piece of fabric (normally white linen or cotton) used by Muslims to enshroud the corpse of a deceased. This is done to respect the dignity and privacy of the dead person, while allowing, at the same time, well-wishers to pass on their respects and condolences to the family.

mosque in the area." (myGovernment, 2011)

Therefore, we see how what apparently seems a positive approach between the Self and the Other is actually the result of uneven power dynamics regulating the interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim people. Hence, private matters such as marriage (and death, as we shall see momentarily) become public and take on a political worth. The ethnic Chinese Self is thus obliged to renounce to a constitutive part of his identity (religion) in order to approach the Malay/Muslim Other who, due to his political and social power - acknowledged officially - is in a position of advantage. Such favourable position allows the Other to determine "the rules of the game" in the Self/Other relationship.

The relation in *Bie zai tiqi* is a very tense one, and is not dissimilar to the one one can notice in *Feifa Yimin*, and *Wandao, lanhua, zuolunqiang*, both analyzed above, and also in many other works of fiction which, due to space constraint, had to remain outside of the textual analytical section of this study.<sup>163</sup>

Albeit the interaction in He Shufang's text appears to be primarily religious in nature, it actually lays its foundation in the peculiar ethnic composition of Malaysia, thus becoming inherently interethnic. The fact that the majority of Muslim followers in Malaysia are ethnic Malays and that, conversely, all Malays are officially labelled as Muslim cannot but turn a religious matter into an ethnic one. Moreover, despite the fact that - officially - conversion to Islam does not turn the *muallaf* (the convert) into an ethnic Malay,

[i]n Malaysia, one of the stereotyping of someone embracing Islam is "masuk Melayu, i.e., becoming Malay." In Chinese, it is known as "*jip Huan*," or becoming a Malay. In the Chinese Hokkien dialect, it means as entering the ways of an uncivilized race. Islam is synonymous of being Malay. Thus embracing Islam would mean entering the "Malay way" [...] When a convert expresses the two testimonies of witness (*kalimatayn*) and

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<sup>163</sup> For example, one can find such tension in *Huo yu tu*, by Ng Kim Chew., a short story dealing with the uneven relationship between the leaving Self (the ethnic Chinese who desert Malaysia and move to Taiwan) and the incoming Other (the Indonesian immigrants who take up the land and housing left empty by the departing Chinese).

becomes a Muslim, they are usually branded as entering the "Malayhood."  
(Osman Abdullah & Abdul Salam Muhammad Shukri, 2008: 42)

Such religious-turned-into-ethnic tension follows an ascending curve, which starts with the arrival of the religious and health officers on funeral premises. The younger brother of the deceased flies into a rage at their sight and violently hits his fist on the table. On the other hand, the dead man's wife turns deathly pale with apprehension and discomfort, whilst trying, with determination first and with tears later, to avoid any disrespectful interruption to the funerary rites:

The representative of the Religious Department and two ethnic Chinese *haji* sat at the other end of the long table, without uttering a word. [...] Second uncle hit his fist on the table, the cup trembled spilling coffee on the table, and aunt's face turned white with anxiety. [...] "He's not a Muslim!" said aunt with an awfully trembling voice. [...] Aunt insisted in going on with the religious rituals to honour uncle. [...] "My husband was not a Muslim", said aunt in tears.  
(He, 2008: 334-36)<sup>164</sup>

The confrontation, which only apparently unfolds more within a religious realm, takes an even more political and administrative turn when four police officers and a lawyer enter the picture. The narrator's father then shows contempt for the deceased who, according to him, got what he deserved for thinking that by converting to Islam he would enjoy the same privileges to which *bumiputra* are entitled.

The tension is aggravated by the intimate situation dealt with, which however turns into grounds for religious and ethnic confrontation; death, funerary rituals and the corpse are treated in different ways by the Chinese and the Malays (or Muslims in general), due to cultural and religious differences. Hence, these rites are treated as incontrovertible identity markers drawing a clear separation line between the Self and the Other.

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<sup>164</sup> The passages in the original Chinese text read as follows: "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。[...] 而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。"

The narration opens with a scene that could not be more typically Chinese, as it presents the character of the Taoist monk who visits the house of the dead, invited by the narrator's aunt, to held religious rituals (*fashi* 法事) in order to expiate the sins of the dead:

When my maternal uncle passed away, my aunt insisted that the taoist monk go on with the religious rituals for him. Twenty years later, I saw that same priest who had conducted the funerary rites for my uncle. He had aged a lot, but his way of performing funerals had remained unchanged. A small *yunluo* hung from his left wrist, while his fingers held a red wooden stick which he used to beat the time. Hanging from his right wrist was a bell, while he used the small hammer he held in the same hand to strike the small *yunluo* from time to time. Occasionally he would take the hollowed-out ox horn and called back the spirit of the dead with a long blare. (At the first sound of the horn, we started the funeral procession.) (He, 2008: 334)<sup>165</sup>

In addition, other people in charge of traditional Taoist funeral arrangements such as keeping the incense burning during the rituals are present in the scene, thus making it all the more Chinese in flavour.

It is in this critical moment, when the rituals are being carried out, that the reader becomes aware of the possible “clash” between the Taoists and the Muslims, when the narrator presents a representative from the Religious Bureau and two ethnic Chinese Muslims who had performed the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. Just one line suffices to understand the awkwardness of the situation (沉默不語) and the distance dividing the two groups of people, here symbolized by the fact that the Taoists and the Muslims are sitting at different ends of the long table (坐在長桌的另一端).

However, the general tension is softened down by the description of a political figure,

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<sup>165</sup> In the Chinese original, the opening passage of the short story reads as follows: "我的大舅父去世的時候，舅母堅持要為他做完法事。二十年以後我再度見到那個為我舅父打齋的喃嘸佬。他的樣貌衰老得多了，但打齋的方法還是老樣子。他的左腕上掛著一個小雲鑼，手指夾著一對赤板打拍子，右手掛鈴，手上還抓著小錘子偶而敲一下雲鑼，偶而執牛角，吹號招魂。(嘖嘖號角響起，我們開始出殯了)" The *yunluo* (雲鑼) mentioned in the text is a percussion instrument, originally formed with ten small bronze gongs of various pitches, with the top layer consisting of one gong and each one of the other three layers consisting of three gongs.

Mr. Lin, a local congressman who, "sitting at the other end of the table, unremittingly scratches a mole on his forehead, which looks both pitiful and disgusting" (He, 2008: 334-35),<sup>166</sup> according to the author, and funny, I would add. I see the irreverent attitude demonstrated by He Shufang toward the local congressman as a powerful device used to mock - indirectly - the Malaysian bureaucratic apparatus.

The writer also explains how administrative matters related to the death of a Malaysian citizen are carried out and she introduces the reader in a short paragraph, but with great efficacy and punch, to the complex issue of the effects of conversion to Islam in Malaysia:

When a person passes away, his or her identification card is retained by the hospital administration. In case the name of the deceased is followed by the patronymic *bin Abdullah*, then it is clear that they are in front of a *muallaf*, a first generation convert to Islam. They are then obliged to inform the Religious Bureau who will send a representative, escorted by a police officer and an officer of the Health bureau, on funeral premises to carry out a negotiation with the family of the deceased.  
(He, 2008: 335)<sup>167</sup>

The above explanation, a sort of note within the text, probably indicates the author's awareness of the target audience. In fact, as previously stated, *Bie zai tiqi* was first published in Taiwan, and thus intended for a Taiwanese audience, generally not familiar with the social and political climate of Malaysia, nor with Islamic precepts and customs.

These very same precepts, in the form of the prescriptive funeral laws of Islam, are the moving force behind the entire narration, therefore, it is of paramount importance that the readership clearly understand the prominence of religious affairs, and Islam in particular, in contemporary Malaysian society. The peculiarity of the topic in the Taiwanese context is

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<sup>166</sup> The Chinese original says: "林議員坐在長桌的另一端不停摸著額頭上的一顆痣，看起來即可憐又惡心。"

<sup>167</sup> Hereafter is the original text in Chinese: "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。"

what, according to Ng Kim Chew, made evident Taiwanese critics' inadequacy in treating original themes to which they are not accustomed, and stressed the risk of reading texts from the Sinophone periphery as mere portraits of colourful and unusual lives, imbued with exotic flavour. (Ng, 2004c: 294)

Nevertheless, had the author written this piece of fiction with the average Sinophone Malaysian reader in mind, the majority of explanatory passages would have most probably been unnecessary.

The deceased decision to convert to Islam, so central to the narration, intensifies the divide between the Self and the Other, by depriving the Self of some of its rights which the law then delivers to the Other:

Uncle's inheritance was donated bit by bit, and in the end she [aunt] moved out of the house too. She was not permitted to live there anymore. Since their house was under uncle's name - and since uncle was Muslim - aunt could not be the beneficiary of his patrimony, including the home she had lived in. She then moved in with my elder cousin, her son. (He, 2008: 336)<sup>168</sup>

The fracture between the Self and the Other is thus the main cause for friction. The Self (the Chinese Malaysian) is deprived of his rights - even over his own community (here embodied by the deceased) - which are in turn acquired by the Other (the Malay/Muslim), as if in a very basic game where the only rule is that a player's loss becomes his opponent's gain:

Madam, I apologize if I am making you sad. But this piece of paper expedited by the department of Religious Affairs has official validity, and it certifies that the deceased had accepted Allah the Almighty as his only Lord. The document is official and legally valid. The deceased was a Muslim, and this is unquestionable. There are witnesses to testify and we also have material evidence. The reason why your husband's second wife is not here is only because we thought that her presence here would be to

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<sup>168</sup> Hereafter is the original Chinese text: "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。"

traumatic for everyone. But you are not a Muslim, therefore you are not allowed to perform an Islamic funeral. The corpse must be taken out of the casket and returned to your husband's second wife, as only a Muslim is entitled to lay a fellow Muslim's body in a coffin.

(He, 2008: 336)<sup>169</sup>

In sum, as non-Muslim ethnic Chinese, the first family of the deceased is left with nothing, being deprived of the possibility to give the corpse a Chinese burial which they perceive as a fair right. The situation becomes then grotesque and the solemnity of the issue is put into a *resized* perspective, and from serious it is treated as trivial, petty and *carnavalesque*, at least on a literary level:

When the corpse was at last done defecating, he ended his bowl movements with a fart. Then the representative from the department of Religious Affairs informed the relatives of the deceased that the faeces of a Muslim had to be buried in a Muslim graveyard. Aunt was full of anger by then and replied that his husband's stool was the result of three meals cooked for him by two Taoist women. Dad, mom, second uncle, and all my aunties started clapping their hands. In the end, the man from the department of Religious Affairs agreed to let the family bury the fecal matters in the original burial ground.

(He, 2008: 339)<sup>170</sup>

Behind its wittiness, the humorous portrayal made by He Shufang hides the author's contempt for the inability of the authorities to set interethnic (and interfaith) disputes, and the lack of a real and effective official policy aimed at improving peaceful and constructive dialogues among the various Malaysian communities.

Humour, accompanied by a high degree of liveliness, is a distinctive trait of He Shufang's narrative style, which the reader can savour at its best in *Bie zai tiqi*. Besides the

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<sup>169</sup> The passage in the original Chinese version reads as follows: "太太，我很抱歉令妳這麼傷心。這件宗教局發出的文件是有效的公文，證明死者已經皈依阿拉為唯一的真主。這公文有法律效力。死者是回教徒一事無庸置疑。人證、物證都在。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。"

<sup>170</sup> Hereafter is the original closing passage in Chinese: "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。"

scatological situation presented supra which the writer addresses with wit and a refreshing pen, other linguistic devices are worth analyzing.

Linguistically, the text appears very diverse: a fine example of heteroglossia within a work of fiction, to use Bakhtin terminology, a characteristic also perceived by Ng Kim Chew (2004c: 295). Matter-of-factly, the author consistently avoids the use of foreign words throughout the narration, but even so, she sprinkles the short story with non-Mandarin expressions such as Malay/Muslim concepts left untranslated but rendered in Chinese characters, or expressions belonging to other Sinitic languages (mainly Cantonese).

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

The multi-voicedness of the narration erodes the authority traditionally attributed to the narrator and casts doubts on his words (hence, his obsession with assuring the reader of the truthfulness of his account). Therefore, the narrator enters in a dialogic relation with the characters of the story, shown through linguistic variation within the text. Hence, one can conclude that *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.  
(Zappen, 2000)

Hence, the linguistic dynamism that can be found in *Bie zai tiqi* corresponds to the multiplicity within Malaysian society, and thus proves that:

[l]anguage - like the living concrete environment in which the

consciousness of the verbal artist lives - is never unitary. It is unitary only as an abstract grammatical system of normative forms, taken in isolation from the concrete, ideological conceptualizations that fill it, and in isolation from the uninterrupted process of historical becoming that is characteristic of all living language.  
(Bakhtin, 1981: 288)

and also that:

language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the 'taste' of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life.  
(Bakhtin, 1981: 293)

He Shufang's marginal position as a Sinophone writer from the periphery (Malaysia) writing from what could be considered the cultural centre of this peripheral world (Taiwan) becomes her strength, allowing her freedom in language use and giving her the consciousness of representing one among Sinophone cultures and 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. Hence, He Shufang is a step closer to heteroglossia, when compared to the Russian novelists analyzed 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.  
(Bakhtin, 1981: 370)

Taking a close look to the text, one finds out that the widowed aunt, 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!" (He, 2008: 334)<sup>171</sup>

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.

On the other hand, 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 it with a certain degree of solemnity.

Flipping the coin to the other side of the matter, one finds Cantonese-language terms related to the Taoist religion (*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*), thus clarifying once again the distance between the Self and the Other and assigning strong identity worth to religion; secondly, it underlines the unofficial character of everything that directly relates to the 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 literary usage of singular first and second personal pronouns, denoting the narrator and the reader respectively, gives the text a very high degree of intimacy. Such sense of

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<sup>171</sup> 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。」"

familiarity would have been difficult to achieve otherwise.

Moreover, the use of *I/me* and *you* somehow manages to place both narrator and readership within the story, and therefore it legitimizes the very same fact that the account can be told. The first person also affirms the position of the narrator within a multicultural, multi-faith but also confrontational society. He stands on *this* side of the ethnic Chinese/non-Muslim vs. Malay/Muslim divide.

In the same way in which one cannot deny the peripheral position from which He Shufang writes, one needs to acknowledge the fact that most Sinophone Malaysian literature rests on a foundation which is typically Chinese in its essence. Therefore, reading a brief story within the story recounted in *Bie zai tiqi* (the taoist monk going to the toilet and meeting face to face with a ghost) the reader is immediately able to connect it to the traditional ghost story, a popular subsection of Chinese fiction, especially of Chinese vernacular literature and classical prose intended for a wider audience. In its well written style, and with a satirical outlook and a gothic touch, He Shufang takes the reader away from the interethnic tension of contemporary Malaysia and carries him back to pre-modern China, even if only for a moment.

Lastly, mention needs to be made of the title of the short story. *Bie zai tiqi*, or "Don't mention it again", can be read as a two-fold message: a message of hope that interethnic tension will cease one day and one of despair, since aware that such a change is highly unlikely, the author considers that the best thing to do is probably to put the problem aside and try to forget that it exists by not mentioning it again.

#### **V.II.6. *Wo de pengyou Yadula* (我的朋友鴨都拉) (2002, 2005) by Ng Kim Chew**

Ideally connected to the thematic developed by He Shufang in *Bie zai tiqi* is another

short story by Ng Kim Chew titled *Wo de pengyou Yadula* ("My friend Abdullah").

The text was completed in June 2002 and was published in the September 2002 issue of *Hong Kong Literature*. In 2005, it appeared again, this time in Taiwan, in *Tu yu huo - Tanah Melayu*. The publication of *Wo de pengyou Yadula* in Hong Kong precedes by a few months that of *Bie zai tiqi* in Taiwan. However, in the second version (2005), which is the one used in this work to carry out the textual analysis, Ng adds one sentence, in the closing paragraph of the narration: "Please refer to *Bie zai tiqi*, by her niece for additional details" (詳情請參考他外甥女寫的〈別再提起〉) (Ng, 2005c: 76), thus linking his text to He Shufang's and acknowledging the intimate thematic relationship between the two works.<sup>172</sup>

Ironically, He Shufang's call to "not mention again" that delicate matter is here disrespected by Ng Kim Chew. However, it is necessary to point out that he had already stated in his analysis of *Bie zai tiqi*, that He Shufang's text situates the reader directly within the action, making him feel as if he were entering in the middle of a narration which has already started to be told. In sum, according to Ng, the short story by He Shufang has the shape and characteristics of an epilogue of a longer work of fiction, hence his choice of drawing a logical connection between the two fictional works. However, it is not known whether He Shufang drew his inspiration from *Wo de pengyou Yadula*, or whether the two short stories were developed independently.

In *Wo de Pengyou Yadula*, the action unfolds in an unspecified place in Peninsular Malaysia, and the narration is the tragicomic account of a few key moments in the life of Abdullah, a Chinese Malaysian convert to Islam and a friend of the narrator. The reader is gradually acquainted with the protagonist and learns that Abdullah, who was already

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<sup>172</sup> Since the connection between the two texts did not appear in the first published version of *Wo de pengyou Yadula*, and since I find such connection extremely relevant in order to understand both texts, I shall consider the two versions of the story as two slightly diverging texts. Hence, the decision to consider *Wo de pengyou Yadula* chronologically subsequent to *Bie zai tiqi*.

married to a Chinese Malaysian woman, embraced the Islamic faith in order to be able to marry a beautiful and well-off Malay woman. However, Abdullah's faith is questioned time and again by his bad companies who, among other things, incite him to eat pork, which he most willingly does, and applaud his libertine lifestyle, which however causes him quite a few health and family problems. Moreover, despite his conversion to Islam, Abdullah is still very much part of the Chinese Malaysian society and supports, also economically, a great number of activities and projects within his ethnic community, including literary ones (for a limited period of time, he himself, according to the narrator, takes on creative writing in both Chinese and Malay).

In addition, he also gives his economic support to a cultural/religious project in which the narrator is involved and which envisages the creation of various Confucius temples across the country. It is in one of such temples that he is found by the narrator, hiding from the police who suspects him of having links with an international net of dangerous Islamic terrorists. Abdullah is in very bad conditions and almost unrecognizable. The narrator keeps him company throughout the night, but at dawn, he wakes up to discover that his friend has gone missing again. It is only a few months later that the narrator and his friends find out that Abdullah is dead and they take part in his *fake* burial ceremony, his corpse not being there. At the end of the story, the narrating voice informs the reader that the real funeral was carried out at a more suitable location, according to Islamic funerary precepts.

*Wo de pengyou Yadula* is a fine example of a short story investigating one of the fundamental differences between the ethnic Chinese and the Malays: religion. As stated supra, in this aspect, it is very similar to *Bie zai tiqi*, hence Ng's clarification of the interesting fictional connection between the two short stories, within his text itself.

This short story shows just how much of a Sinophone Malaysian writer there still is in Ng Kim Chew, despite the years that he has been living away from his country. In fact, the

setting, the accurate and vivid depiction of not only the life of the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia, but also of what it means to be a Muslim in Malaysia make it a truly Malaysian piece of fiction. However, to its *de facto Malaysianness* does not correspond a *de jure* acknowledgement of its Malaysian character. I deem it necessary to underline again here that since it was not written in Bahasa Malaysia - the official language - it lacks the necessary linguistic requirement for every literary work to be labelled as part of the national literary system.

Even so, it is an interesting case of an increasing number of writings that try to escape the unwritten law which makes literature(s) in Malaysia oftentimes ethnic or racialized, meaning that protagonists in Malay fiction are mostly Malay, while they are Chinese and Indians in Sinophone Malaysian and Tamil Malaysian literature respectively (Tee, 2009b). This aspect too exemplifies the strong connection between the author and the country he left some fifteen years before writing *Wo de pengyou Yadula*.

One of the most interesting features of this short story and the one that immediately allows the reader to categorize it as a Sinophone writing from/about Malaysia is its showcase of a wide range of Malay/Muslim customs. It is probably necessary here to remind the reader that according to the Malay(sian) official discourse as formulated by the Malaysian government in its 1971 National Cultural Policy, Islam is one of the pillars of national (i.e. Malay) culture, therefore making it not only a religious affair, but also a cultural trait present to a greater or lesser degree in the daily life of virtually everyone living in Malaysia.

These elements, which might seem foreign to most non-Malaysian readers, add to the exotic flavour for which many Sinophone Malaysian texts are often best known. They are treated very naturally by Ng, despite his being well aware of the fact that his main readership is Sinophone, but not necessarily of Malaysian background.

To deal with very cultural- and geographic-specific elements in a plain manner, allows Ng Kim Chew to avoid the risk of falling into the tricky field of self-exoticism, thus keeping the reader's mind on the text as a whole and not only on those elements that stand out because of their exotic characteristics.

Another possible explanation to the unadorned treatment of those traits so foreign for a non-Malaysian audience might be found in the distance the author keeps between himself and the narrator. Ng Kim Chew is the writer, i.e. the person writing the text, but not the person telling the story. Hence, there is a clear-cut divide between the *here* (*cidi* 此地), the place from which the account is told, and the *there*, from which Ng writes.

Through an analysis of the passage hereunder, one can easily clarify the position of the writer and the narrator toward the readership:

As everybody knows, when a local Chinese person converts to Islam, he is regarded by the ethnic Chinese community as someone who has embraced the foreign customs. At the same time, Malay society will not accept him unreservedly. Accordingly, my friend Abdullah informed us of his noble aspirations for 2002: to marry four women of four different ethnic backgrounds, one Chinese, one Malay, one Indian and one *Orang Asli*. (Ng, 2005c: 63)<sup>173</sup>

In the above passage, the narrator informs us of the double discrimination faced by ethnic Chinese *muallaf*, who live in a sort of social limbo, not completely within their ethnic community anymore, but also still somewhat outside of the dominant Malay/Muslim society, and opens the sentences with the phrase "As everybody knows". Hence, he treats the question as a *fait accompli*, explicitly showing that his direct interlocutor is of Malaysian background.

In the same sentence, the phrase "ethnic Chinese community" (*huaren shehui* 華人社會)

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<sup>173</sup> There exists no English translation of *Wo de pengyou Yadula*, therefore all the translated excerpts are mine. Following is the original passage in Chinese: "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，在這個意義上，我的朋友鴨都拉提出他的二零零二年的宏願：娶四個不同種族的妻子，一個華人、一個馬來人、一個印度人、一個「山番」。"

is modified by "here/this place" (*cidi* 此地). The *here* in the context of *Wo de pengyou Yadula* cannot be anywhere else but Malaysia, while the *here* in Ng Kim Chew's personal situation is Taiwan.

However, treating Malaysia as if it were a tangible present, even if only in the fictional realm shows Ng Kim Chew's bond to his birthplace. Moreover, on a more general level, this visceral attachment to his country of birth becomes evident when one considers the fact that most of his fiction is strongly connected to Peninsular Malaysia (setting, characters, topics, childhood memories, etc.), and his essays very often focus on the Sinophone Malaysian literary system.

The above translated paragraph also serves to position the reader within the peculiar ethnic composition of Malaysia. By stating his desire to marry four women, one for each major ethnic group of Peninsular Malaysia, the protagonist underlines two important factors, one religious (the fact that Muslim people in Malaysia are allowed to take up to four wives) and one social (the division of Malaysian society along ethnic lines).

The remark to the four marriages the average Muslim male is entitled is only one of the many references to Islam made throughout the story, from the very beginning up until the conclusion. Matter-of-factly, the narration starts with Abdullah's friends teasing him over his regular infringement of one of the basic precepts of Islam: the ban on eating pork (譬如說關於他偷吃豬肉的事，便是經常又經常重演的 p.62). Other customs such as the prohibition to eat before the sunset during the holy month of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) that every Muslim should perform at least once in a lifetime are also mentioned.

The reference to the muezzin call to prayer, typical of most Muslim countries, shapes an exotic image of mysticism before the eyes of the average Sinophone foreign reader.

However, bearing in mind the fact that *Wo de pengyou Yadula* is narrated from the perspective of a Chinese Malaysian who addresses other Chinese Malaysians, the scene is to be considered a realistic depiction of daily life in contemporary Malaysia as well as a literary device used by the author to delimit the spatial location of the story.

Religion, however, is also realistically presented as a business opportunity. In fact, the narrator is involved in the project of developing various Confucius temples across the country (he has already successfully carried out similar projects with Buddhist and Taoist temples), in the hope to make them as ubiquitous as mosques :

But talking about my business, there was a sea of opportunities laying in front of me. Earlier on, together with people of very good insight, I had already put a lot of effort in developing two systems of temples (one Buddhist and one Taoist - each one covering every religious denomination. We had built them everywhere, from north to south, and from east to west, including Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore)[...]. At that time we were considering reviving various Confucius temples. Our plan was to start by building one in each Chinese Independent High school, thus reviving the ancient Confucian rites. Then we would move on and reach every ethnic Chinese association, community, cemetery, and they would become as ubiquitous as mosques.  
(Ng, 2005c: 70-71)<sup>174</sup>

Not being moved by true spiritual concerns, the narrator is the epitome of the business-oriented mentality which is very often associated to the ethnic Chinese, in Malaysia and elsewhere. The above text portrays *Chineseness* from within and from outside: Ng Kim Chew plays with the money-driven label attached to Chinese identity by those who do not belong to the ethnic group (*Chineseness* seen from outside), while simultaneously acknowledging the importance attached to traditional values as markers of identity by the ethnic Chinese themselves (hence, the prosperity of the narrator's business, which lays its foundations on the Chinese views on traditional culture and religion).

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<sup>174</sup> Hereafter is the original Chinese text: "可是就我的行業，卻是時機一片大好。之前我和一群識之士著力發展兩個系統（佛教和道教——涵括所有的教派，蓋遍東南西北、台灣香港新加坡）[...] 那一段時間[...]我們正研發復興孔廟[...]，計畫先從華文獨立中學做起，在所有的華文獨中內蓋孔廟，恢復舊禮制，再逐步擴大到各華人會館、社區、墳場，以期和回教堂一樣普遍。"

Notwithstanding, we can also read the passage as a political critique to the current religious situation of Malaysia that - it must not be forgotten - is an officially Muslim country. Hence, the state systematically gives priority and advantages to everything which is connected to Islam, including the building of mosques, *madrasah* and other religious sites. Thus, when stating that Confucius temples in Malaysia will become as ubiquitous as mosques, it sounds not only very far from any plausible reality, but also a clear expression of disapproval of Malaysia's current social, cultural and religious policies.

In *Wo de pengyou Yadula*, Ng also deals with the identity issue, albeit it is not as central, nor discussed with the abundance of details that one might find in other Sinophone Malaysian writings (for example the short story *Hun de zhuisu* by Chen Zhengxin and the novella *Wandao, lanhua, zuolunqiang* by Zhang Guixing).

By embracing the Islamic faith, Abdullah has not only chosen a new religion, he has also embarked on an irreversible journey to a new identity, which also his name shows. As an ethnic Chinese, his name at birth was different (nevertheless, the reader is not made aware of it, as the narrator consistently calls him Abdullah throughout the text), but Islamic practice in Malaysia strongly encourages every *muallaf* to change his name to a Muslim one, Abdullah being the most common chose name for male converts, due to its meaning (servant of the Lord).

However, a new faith and a new name do make him a Muslim, but are not enough to make him a Malay (or, more generally, a *bumiputra*). Thus the protagonist moves between two worlds, the Chinese Malaysian and the Malay, belonging to both and to neither at the same time. He strives hard to be accepted by both communities: he is unwilling to relinquish his Chinese background, but simultaneously, he does everything he can to be a full member of Malay society.

He gives his full support to the Chinese Malaysian community and he gets involved in

the Sinophone literary scene becoming himself a writer and helping economically:

He was not only the patron of many Chinese schools, associations, and temples; he was also the director of several associations of public welfare. He spared no efforts in trying to get donations from his fellow moneybags and promoted the publication of Malaysian literature in Chinese. Unexpectedly, he himself engaged in creative writing too. (Ng, 2005c: 64)<sup>175</sup>

Nevertheless, he behaves as a good Malay/Muslim at least in the public sphere and away from his die-hard ethnic Chinese friends. Hence, he performs the holy pilgrimage to Mecca, dresses according to Malay fashion and makes extensive use of the Malay language.

When he is found by the narrator in the Confucius temple, where he is hiding, Ng describes an interesting scene, which conveys this sense of in-betweenness: Abdullah starts recounting awkward stories in Chinese, but as it gets well into the night, he suddenly switches to Malay (隨著夜漸深，他突然改用馬來語獨白).

The ending of the story also reasserts Abdullah's double identity as an ethnic Chinese and as a member of the Malay/Muslim community. In fact two funerals are held, a "fake" Chinese one (without the body, but with Chinese cultural products close to the deceased, such as novels by Jin Yong (金庸), a widely-read martial arts writer, *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji* 西遊記), one of the four great novels of imperial China, and some Buddhist scriptures) and an official Muslim one.

His situation is common to many people living between two cultural traditions who, as Gladney affirms when talking about the Hui people of China, "are often seen as somehow between Chinese and non-Chinese, distrusted by both sides, the liminal, eternal stranger, inherently useful as mediators, traders and scapegoats" (Gladney, 2004: 182).

Thus, Abdullah becomes the *eternal stranger*, the *liminal*, the mediator between two

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<sup>175</sup> The original text reads as follows: "他不但是許多華校、會館、神廟的贊助人，也身兼若干公益團體的理事。不辭勞苦地向他的財主朋友們捐錢，贊助馬華文學的出版，竟然閒到去寫作了。"

communities sharing the same soil, but living in a constant antagonistic confrontation. His figure could almost embody a message of hope going beyond ethnic separation, he could almost be seen as the embodiment of a real Malaysian identity, which is tangible and possible: an identity which is not the result of the mutilation of existing identities, but is, on the contrary, the result of a harmonious synthesis of different identities. "Almost", I say, because in the end, Abdullah is presented as emaciated and in shock, just before disappearing again, his body never to be found.

However, his in-betweenness, his being ready to acknowledge his Self (Chinese Malaysian) and, simultaneously, embrace the Other (Muslim/Malay) is not uncommon in peripheral situations, as Chee Kiong Tong states:

[A]t the periphery or on the fringe, as opposed to the center, ethnic identity is more instrumental rather than expressive. As opposed to the private nature of ethnicity at the core, at the fringes, in public places and where there are transactions and negotiations with other ethnic groups, particularly members of the host society, we observe a more situationist view of ethnic identity. Here, we find multiple Chineseness; ethnic identity becomes changeable, culturally and ecologically defined, and situationally sensitive. Ethnic identification becomes a "strategic" choice by individuals who, in other circumstances, would choose other forms of group membership as a means of gaining some power and privilege[...] Depending on the social context, the Chinese present certain aspects of their ethnic identity to deal with the host population, and the business of living an everyday life as a migrant minority in a new host society. In the strategic use of ethnic identity, ethnicity becomes more fluid and more plastic.

(Chee, 2010: 7)

The instrumentality of *Chineseness*, and its strategic use are perfectly exemplified, in the fictional world, by Abdullah, whom achieves a different type of identity, "more fluid and more plastic", instead of conforming with the static identities of the Self or of the Other.

Apart from being a short story about Malaysia, religion and identity, *Wo de pengyou Yadula* is also a text about Sinophone Malaysian Literature.

It has already been mentioned how the version of the text published in 2005 is ideally

connected to *Bie zai tiqi* by He Shufang, with which it shares a character (Abdullah) and the two main issues (religion and identity).

However, literature is also present in another way: Ng Kim Chew resorts to a brilliant device which allows him to write about Sinophone Malaysian Literature within the short story itself. Abdullah and the narrator attend a conference by an important Taiwanese author, and the protagonist asks a question which concerns many Sinophone Malaysian writers, i.e. the problem of what to write about and how to trespass the frontier of ethnic/racialized literature:

"Respectable Master, I have a question which is really obsessing me. I've already published more than ten books, but each one of them sold very poorly. The worst thing, however, was the criticism I received from friends within the literary circles. For example, in my stories I always write about ethnic Chinese people, and for this reason I was criticized as being too ethnocentric. People ask me why don't I write about the Malays, or the Indians, or the Kadazan people. Another critic was even more over the top: he asked me why don't I write about Aliens. For example, I like writing about politics, economy, and education, all topics of great interest to the Chinese community. Well, even then, there are people asking me why don't I write about issues more closely related to the daily life of common people, such as the annual increase in the price of highway tolls, or the Nipah virus, the Dengue fever, or about the droughts..."  
(Ng, 2005c: 65)<sup>176</sup>

The answer given by the Taiwanese writer reminds the reader of the provoking nature of many of Ng Kim Chew's speeches and articles:

The answer given by the writer is also quite worth remembering:

"You can write about orangutans, then!"

"?"

"Is it true that there are many orangutans in the forests around Malaysia?"

"????"

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<sup>176</sup> Hereafter is the original Chinese version of the passage: 「敬愛的大師：我有個問題非常困擾。我出過十幾本書，每一本都賣得很慘。最慘的還是文學界朋友們的批評。像我小說都是寫我們華人，就有人批評我種族中心，問我為甚麼不去寫馬來人、印度人、或者卡達山人；另一個評論者更過分，問我為甚麼不去寫外星人；像我喜歡寫政治、經濟、教育這些華社最關心的大問題，就有人批評我為甚麼不去寫高速公路收費年年漲價、立百病毒、骨病熱症、苦旱不雨這些和小市民生活更直接有關聯的民生問題... ..」

(Ng, 2005c: 65)<sup>177</sup>

The above passages also show a general trend in the ongoing debate on what is Sinophone Malaysian literature, what issues should it address, and what segments of the reading population should it write for. Of course, there are as many answers to these questions as there are authors and literary critics, since we must always bear in mind that Sinophone Malaysian literature does not constitute a literary school, nor has it ever had a manifesto in which generally-accepted and commonly-shared principles and goals are set out.

When Abdullah lists his interest in specific issues as a writer, it somehow reminds us of Deleuze and Guattari's idea of a minor literature (*littérature mineure*), extracted from one of Kafka's diary entries (namely December, 25, 1911), and which they use those writing in a major language from a marginalized or minoritarian position.

As already noted in chapter III, section V, this first aspect of minor literature is very evident in Malaysian Sinophone writings as well: texts written in a major language from a double marginal position (at the periphery of the Chinese world, but also at the margins of Malaysian mainstream society). Notwithstanding, we shall not forget, that this aspect is not sufficient when we talk about minor literature, as there are two other key elements that must be taken into account, i.e. its political nature (Abdullah is interested in writing about politics, economy and education), and its collective worth (Abdullah shows interest in issues that are meaningful to the ethnic Chinese as a collective unity).

Hence, Abdullah symbolizes many Sinophone Malaysian authors, who engage, consciously or not, in voicing the (often political) concerns of an entire community.

In addition, if we take into account the specific linguistic circumstances in which Ng

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<sup>177</sup> Hereafter is the text in Chinese: "大師的回答也指得一記：「... ..你可以去寫猩猩。」「？」「你們馬來西亞森林裡不是有很多紅毛猩猩嗎？」「？？？」"

produces his works, it is not difficult to see how, despite the geopolitical, historical and social differences, he is in a situation not very dissimilar to that of the *minor* writer. He too does not write in his vernacular/mother tongue (Hokkien), nor writes he in the official language of his country (Bahasa Malaysia), but he writes in an acquired language (Mandarin), which is both culturally-specific and collective (it is the language of the entire Chinese Malaysian community, regardless of their regional affiliation).

Here and in all of Ng's writings, Mandarin is not associated with a specific area, therefore it loses its geographic connotation, or better still, such connotation is reshaped into a new linguistic identity, which associates Mandarin to the distinctive Chinese Malaysian experience.

This new identity of what can be considered a supranational language (of the likes of English, French, Spanish, etc.) is also clearly indicated by the fact that whenever such language is mentioned in the story, it is always referred to as *huayu* (華語) and never as *zhongwen*, *hanyu* or *guoyu* (中文, 漢語, 國語). This naming choice follows a commonly accepted convention and matches the actual terminological use in Malaysia and Singapore (but also among ethnic Chinese elsewhere, especially in Southeast Asia).

Ng often touches upon language-related issues, as many of his non-fiction works also demonstrate, and he has always shown a great interest in how Mandarin can be used to convey a distinct identity and a local literary tradition.

In fact, *Wo de pengyou Yadula* does come across as being rather linguistically localized, a feature also found in He Shufang's *Bie zai tiqi*.

Religious (Islamic) terminology is the main linguistic indicator of the Malaysian provenance of the story (expressions such as *qijieyue* 齋戒月 "Ramadan", *Maijia zhaosheng* 麥加朝聖 "the holy pilgrimage to Mecca", *hazhi* 哈芝 "Hajj", but also

*huijiaotu* 回教徒 and *huijiaotang* 回教堂, meaning "Muslim" and "mosque" respectively, and which are typical of Mandarin as it is spoken in Malaysia, the more common equivalents in the language as used in China being *musilin* 穆斯林 and *qingzhensi* 清真寺).<sup>178</sup>

Occasionally, other phrases connected to Chinese Malaysian society, which might come across as awkward, or might need an explanatory note (which however Ng or the various editors don't provide) are used. Two examples are: *huaxiao* 華校 (for *huawen xuexiao* 華文學校), which indicates a school where Chinese is the only or the primary language of instruction (normally in a country, such as Malaysia, where Chinese does not have official recognition), *ru fan* 入番, literally "to enter (the society of) the foreigner/outsider", which indicates a Chinese Malaysian's conversion to Islam, and *shan fan* 山番, or mountain aborigines (i.e. Orang Asli).

Moreover, in a few occasions, especially when rendering direct dialogical situations, Ng moves away from Mandarin and chooses to use Cantonese to transfer the vividness and the linguistic complexity of the Chinese community in Malaysia onto the written page.

Therefore, it is thanks to the general plot, the issues touched upon, and the of linguistic heteroglossia that we can label *Wo de pengyou Yadula* as an example of Sinophone Malaysian work of fiction; all this despite the fact that it was written and published outside of the geographic borders of Sinophone Malaysia.

### **V.III. Conclusion**

The textual analysis of the works of fiction presented in this chapter and in the previous

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<sup>178</sup> According to Gladney "[u]ntil the 1950s, in China, Islam was simply known as the 'Hui religion' (Huijiao) - believers in Islam were Huijiao believers, " but since then, the term Hui has taken up an ethnic meaning and its religious one has been slowly dismissed. (Gladney, 2004: 161)

one was aimed at showing in what way and through what specific devices Sinophone Malaysian authors deal with the issue of identity.

Due to the complexity of the matter, I tried to look at it from a double angle. Hence, I chose to scrutinize how the Chinese Malaysian identity is shaped through interaction with ethnic Chinese people from other geographic circumstances (mainly China) and with people of other ethnic backgrounds within the Malaysian context.

The various texts have shown "that the conceptualization of ethnic identity is complex, and not in the simple terms of assimilation, integration or acculturation. Nor is it a unilineal process of the Chinese becoming indigenous or retaining their identity." (Chee, 2010: 11)

Moreover, it is of crucial importance to bear in mind that - as I have tried to show through the selected texts -

to engage with scholarly issues concerning ethnicity is also to deal with matters concerning ethnic *relations*, since the existence of ethnic identity is based on an assumption (rightly or wrongly) of difference(s). Where alleged differences exist, social interaction (that is, ethnic relations) becomes potentially problematic. Thus the question of ethnic identity is not an isolated one. Its present and indeed historical reality has to be framed within the context of its cultural contact with the state, whose use of ethnic politics that draw from the adoption of assimilationist, acculturationist, integrationist or pluralist policies exerts a range of cultural and political pressure upon the identities of ethnic groups. (Chee, 2010: 12)

The cultural and political pressure exerted by external factors on both identity self-awareness and ethnic relations is evident in all the texts chosen and analyzed in this work, to a greater or lesser extent.

On an international scale, these external factors having an impact on the (intra)ethnic relationship and the subsequent acknowledgement of the identity of the Self (*Chineseness*) take the form of diplomatic and global relations. In fact, they range from the difficult Cold War Era relations between Malaysia and China which affect the protagonists of *Jun zi guxian lai* and *Dage kuankuan zou lai*, to the prominent economic role played by China at

the dawn of the twenty-first century, which situates ethnic Chinese people from diverse geographic locations (including Malaysia) in a scenario of constant interaction with other forms of *Chineseness*, as demonstrated by Chen Zhengxin in *Hun de zhuisu*.

When (inter)ethnic relations take place on a national level, then one can notice how they are the result of the policies mentioned by Chee (2010). They range from the turmoils caused by the ethnic turn taken by Malaysian politics discussed in *Wei xiang*, to the difficulties experienced by the returnee in *Wandao, lanhua, zuolunqiang*, to the Malaysian government's indifference to the problems experienced by the ethnic Chinese in *Feifa yimin*.

Cultural pressure is also an important factor in determining the nature of the (inter)ethnic relations between the Self and the Other, as demonstrated by the antagonistic confrontation of Chinese and Malay/Muslim cultural practices portrayed in *Bie zai tiqi* and *Wo de pengyou Yadula*, and by the continuous highlighting of differences in mores between ethnic Chinese and Iban people in *Longtuzhu*.

Although all the works of fiction analyzed in this dissertation focus on the relationship between the Self (Chinese Malaysian) and the Other (people of other ethnic background) or the Other-Self (ethnic Chinese from different geographic circumstances), the ways in which such theme is dealt with - on a literary level - vary greatly.

The diversity in the linguistic choices, as well as the wide spectrum of styles adopted by the writers, remind us that when analyzing Sinophone Malaysian literature (short fiction in the present case), we should be careful not to fall into the temptation of portraying it as a literary school. In fact, the great diversity found among writers and texts sprouting from such a fertile soil, indicates that one is in front of a well-developed literary system, rather than a literary school with its manifesto declaring its principles and intentions.

Hence, the linguistic and stylistic options proposed by the Sinophone Malaysian authors examined in this research show astounding multiplicity ranging from the sober and

plain style in which *Wei xiang* is written, to the colourful and heteroglossic language used by He Shufang in *Bie zai tiqi* and by Ng Kim Chew in both *Feifa yimin* and *Wo de pengyou Yadula*.

As I have attempted to show through direct quotation of many excerpts from the original texts, linguistic variation within the diverse Malaysian society, or even within the smaller, but not less heterogeneous Chinese Malaysian community is approached differently by the authors in question. Hence the great gap between the dialogues in *Dage kuan kuan zou lai* or in *Hun de zhuisu*, which are consistently rendered in Standard Mandarin on the written page, and those in *Bie zai tiqi* and *Wo de pengyou Yadula*, which adhere closer to the actual linguistic reality of the Chinese Malaysian and are seen by the writers as a perfect playground on which to experiment and bring the various Sinitic languages together.

Zhang Guixing stretches the adherence to linguistic reality even further, by rendering Malay utterances in an incomprehensible mixture of graphic symbols and Latin alphabet letters, thus transferring the incommunicableness between the ethnic Chinese and Malay from the Malaysian social reality directly onto the written page, and then from the written page out again to the experience of the reader. Therefore, the reader sees and understands the situation and the context in the same way in which Buming, the protagonist does, and sympathizes with him, despite the fact that he is never implicated directly.

I have already discussed the evolution of the reader's position within or outside of the narration in the texts analyzed in chapter IV. It has been stated how the internal monologue in Shang Wanyun's short story gives the readership a special place within the narration, while the consistent use of us/we in *Dage kuan kuan zou lai*, almost obliges us to read the text from the perspective of the entire Chinese Malaysian community. Chen Zhengxin, on the other hand, approaches the reader directly, and by using the *you* form to address him, he explicitly implicates the reader in the story.

In the texts analyzed in the present chapter, only He Shufang asks the reader to directly partake in story, and like Chen Zhengxin addresses him in the *you* form. Moreover, the position of the reader within the text is made relevant and required by the narrator, who obsessively requests him to interact - virtually - with him (e.g. by continuously reminding him that he's telling the truth, or by asking for approval of what he is recounting).

Apart from Zhang Guixing's *Wandao, lanhua, zuolunqian*, and He Shufang's *Bie zai tiqi*, in all the other texts, one observes a more traditional relation between narrator and reader: the readership is never directly involved in the story, having therefore the more traditional role of the audience.

The different treatment of the readership could also be ascribed to the different audience to which the texts were directed. In fact, two of the three texts (*Dage kuan kuan zou lai* and *Hun de zhuisu*) discussed in chapter IV were published in Malaysia, presumably for the Sinophone Malaysian reader. Coincidentally, the two stories are also the ones which request the most direct participation of the readership.

On the other hand, all but two (*Wei xiang* and *Longtuzhu*) of the texts in chapter V were published in Taiwan or Hong Kong (the first edition of *Feifa Yimin*). Apart from *Bie zai tiqi*, they all maintain a certain distance between the reader and the story, as if the writers were aware of the fact that identification of a non-Malaysian Sinophone audience with the narration was highly improbable or out of context.

Notwithstanding, the two short stories published in Malaysia too do not call for any type of identification by the reader. I ascribe this situation to two main factors: one being the rather sober and traditional literary style in which the narration is carried out, unsuitable for a postmodern interaction between narrator and reader; the other being the distance of the average readership from the topic of the narrative, either in time (as in *Wei xiang*, published in 1983, but retelling an event which took place in 1969) or in situation (the protagonist and

narrator of *Longtuzhu* is of mixed ethnic background and comes from a forlorn hamlet in the Sarawakian rain forest, a circumstance which the average Sinophone Malaysian reader can hardly relate to).

Especially in the case of *Longtuzhu*, it appears evident how the mixed ethnic background of the protagonist is an inhibiting factor for the average reader's identification with him, since as Wong Yoon Wah states:

[f]or members of a traditional Chinese extended family, marriages across ethnic lines occurred, but not often. None of the traditional cultures encouraged marriage outside the group. This is true not only for the Chinese, but also of other Asian societies. The Hindu tradition of caste endogamy and the Malay insistence on conversion to Islam as a condition of marriage were major barriers to intermarriage.  
(Wong, 2007a: 220)

The narrators, on the other hand, all have varying degrees of closeness to the story, ranging from the directly-implicated narrating *I* in *Longtuzhu*, *Bie zai tiqi*, and *Wo de pengyou Yadula*, to the external narrators of *Wei xiang*, *Wandao*, *lanhua*, *zuolunqian*, and *Feifa yimin*.

## **CHAPTER VI:**

### **Concluding Remarks**

I started my dissertation by stating - in the introductory chapter - the aims, the rationale (I.II), and the general working hypothesis (I.IV) that constituted the starting point of my research on the representation of identity in contemporary Sinophone Malaysian fiction. Through the analysis of a critically selected corpus of short stories and novellas written in Sinitic script by Chinese Malaysian authors in the last forty years, I aimed at demonstrating that the historical, political, social, and cultural peculiarities of Malaysia in general, and of Chinese/Sinophone Malaysia in particular (which I have presented and analyzed in chapter II), call for special attention by local Sinophone writers to the representation of Chinese Malaysian identity vis-à-vis a particular Other. Moreover, I have attempted to show how this kind of otherness is not a monolithic entity, but on the contrary is extremely varied. In fact, as exemplified in the textual analyses carried out in chapters IV and V, it ranges from the ethnically-related Other (which I named the Other-Self), embodied by Chinese people from other geographic locales (first and foremost from mainland China) present in Shang Wanyun (IV.II.1), Li Kaixuan (IV.II.2), and Chen Zhengxin's (IV.II.3) texts, to the geographically-related, but ethnically-distant Other (Malay people, indigenous groups from Borneo, Orang Asli, or Indonesian immigrants, for instance) which appears in the analyzed creative writings by Ding Yun (V.II.1), Zhang Guixing (V.II.2), Liang Fang (V.II.3), Ng Kim Chew (V.II.4 and V.II.6), and He Shufang (V.II.5).

It is only too natural then to find the Chinese Malaysian identity shaped and represented differently, according to the nature of such an Other and the resulting interaction with such otherness. Matter-of-factly, the responses to so many different Others are extremely varied and shape different Selves (or identities). Hence, through the textual

analyses carried out in chapters IV and V, I demonstrated how difficult - if not impossible - it is to talk about one single Chinese Malaysian identity. On the contrary, Sinophone Malaysian writers represent it by means of different approaches and literary techniques, which show a dynamic, fluid, and highly situational identity.

The corpus of texts selected offers clear evidence of all the aforementioned issues. For instance, the Chinese Malaysian characters in Li Kaixuan's *Dage kuankuan zou lai* (IV.II.2) tend to stress the Malaysian dimension of their Self when confronted with the elder brother from mainland China, while the protagonists of Chen Zhengxin's *Hun de zhuisu* (IV.II.3) show an increasing closeness to their Chinese Self. Or still, another clear example is the mixed-heritage protagonist of Liang Fang's short story *Longtuzhu* (V.II.3) who is caught between two identities (the paternal Chinese identity and the maternal Iban one) which are constantly and strongly denied, questioned, resisted, and rediscovered (by him and by the people around him), and only after a long and somewhat painful process of self-awareness are they blended together. On the other hand, Abdullah, the Chinese Malaysian *muallaf* in Ng Kim Chew's *Wo de pengyou Yadula* (V.II.6) does not succeed in this combination of two identities, as shown by the unhappy ending of his life spent between his faithfulness to the Chinese Malaysian community and his desire to be accepted by the Malay/Muslim society. The deceased protagonist of *Bie zai tiqi* by He Shufang (VI.5) also represents a similar type of in-betweenness, which is presented by the author in a very negative way. In fact, as Shih Shu-Mei also points out:

[t]his is the ugly and smelly side of hybridity, not the hybridity that is celebrated by some scholars of postcolonial theory, ugly and smelly precisely because hybridity is not acknowledged by [Malaysian] state racism, and Chinese cultural essentialism, and it is not an easy condition. (Shih, 2010: 48)

Moreover, as I demonstrated in chapter III, and especially in sections III.III, III.IV, and III.V, in the specific Sinophone Malaysian case, the issue of identity transcends the merely

literary exercise and becomes also a theoretical concern for most agents (be they creative writers, be they literary theorists and critics) directly engaged with the Sinophone Malaysian literary realm. What is *Sinophone* about the kind of literary texts examined here (III.III), and what is *Malaysian* about them (III.IV) are some of the most recurring debates within the literary circles of Malaysia and Taiwan especially. Sinophone Malaysian literature can be said to have a two-fold relationship with other literary circumstances, which parallels in a way, the two-fold relationship of the Chinese Malaysian community with otherness. In fact, it is a literary system which continuously engages in direct interaction with other Sinitic-medium literatures (especially the literatures from mainland China and Taiwan) - as it has been mentioned in II.V.1 and II.V.2 -, and with literatures sprouted from the same tropical soil (mainly Anglophone Malaysian, Malay-medium Malaysian, and to a rather smaller extent, Tamil-medium Malaysian literatures) - as shown in section II.V.3. Most Sinophone Malaysian writers and literary theorists seem to be very aware of the fact that, despite the strong influence of Sinitic-medium literatures from the Chinese tradition (and more recently from the Taiwan tradition), they have been able to respond to such tradition with innovative and inventive literary practices in terms of stylistic features, thematic choices, linguistic devices, as I have demonstrated in the analytical chapters IV and V. Thus, their responses gave birth to a new literary tradition, undeniably indebted to the Chinese one, but also - and most importantly - deeply rooted in the local environment of Malaysia. This self-evident fact is, however, often questioned by China-centric literary scholars (of mainland Chinese background), who still tend to see Sinophone Malaysian literature as a mere branch of Chinese literature, as a lesser literary tradition born out of a fully-blown, *proper* literary system.

On the other hand, the very same Malaysian character which has been examined in the fictional texts discussed in the present dissertation, and which sets Sinophone Malaysian

literature apart from other Sinophone literary systems is consistently challenged by the official Malaysian discourse on literature. As analyzed in III.IV.3, according to the theories proposed by noted Malaysian (mainly of Malay ethnic and cultural background) literary scholars such as Muhammad Haji Salleh and Ismail Hussein, among others, only literary works written in Malay, the sole national language, can be ascribed to the Malaysian (which in their vision equals to Malay-medium) literary system, i.e. to the national literature of Malaysia. The Sinophone Malaysian fictional works analyzed in chapters IV and V show how such a vision is limited and inaccurate, to say the least.

Hence, the parallelism between the identity status of Sinophone Malaysian literature itself, and the identity *problématique* of the Chinese Malaysian community as presented through the analysis of the fictional works of chapters IV and V appears to be very evident. Sinophone Malaysian literature, as a doubly-marginalized literary system finds its strength, its *raison d'être* and its vitality in its being not half-Chinese, nor half-Malaysian, but in its being a complete literary system *per se*. Similarly, the Chinese Malaysian community presented by the authors analyzed in this work too has a distinctive Chinese Malaysian identity: it is not Chinese (seen as the Other-Self) and it is not officially connected to their land, like the *bumiputra* group is. The Chinese Malaysian community thrives in this marginalized position, and it has been able to thrive, and to acknowledge and celebrate its uniqueness. Throughout the present dissertation, I have always born in mind that the focus of my research was mainly of a literary (textual) nature. Hence, I consider the theoretical chapter III and the analytical chapters IV and V to be the most prominent sections of this study. While chapter III is a thorough analysis of the various theoretical approaches to Sinophone Malaysian literature, which I attempted to supplement through my own theoretical approach, chapters IV and V give complete centrality to the creative writings, which I analyze in detail. Not only I focused on the specific issue of the representation of

identity vis-à-vis otherness, but I also aimed at searching for the peculiarities of such identity within the literary page itself, thus paying special attention to the specific literary choices made by the authors. In other words, I navigated across the written pages in search of literary elements (ranging from language use, to stylistic devices, from linguistic syncretism to literary innovation) which could contribute to underline how to the uniqueness and diversity of the Chinese Malaysian identity experience there corresponds a uniqueness and diversity in literary outputs. Therefore, I consider the critically selected corpus constituted by all nine texts analyzed in the present dissertation (three in chapter IV and six in chapter V) to be undeniably Sinophone Malaysian, hence highly representative of not only contemporary Sinophone Malaysian fiction, but also of the Chinese Malaysian experience itself.

With the present dissertation, I hope to have reached my goal of scrutinizing, systematizing and analyzing a body of Sinophone fictional texts produced within the Sinophone Malaysian context. Moreover, through this process of investigation, systematization, and analysis, I also attempted at underlining a topic still left unexplored in Sinophone Malaysian literary studies, yet very often proposed by Sinophone Malaysian authors in their writings: how the Chinese Malaysian identity is shaped and represented through the interaction between the Chinese Malaysian self and other identities of similar (mainland Chinese) and different (Malay, Indonesian immigrants, Orang Asli, just to name a few) ethnic heritage.

The process which lead to this work opened new research paths which are worthy of being followed. Among these paths, it could be interesting and appropriate to supplement the analysis of shorter fictional works with the analysis of essays, poetry, longer narrative practices (novels), and alternative, newer or spoken forms of narration such as graphic

novels, films and plays, in order to scrutinize how authors who engage in different literary genres, face the same issue of the representation of the Chinese Malaysian identity.

Additionally, the gender of the writer might also be an important factor determining the way in which the topic is treated. However, falling this specific aspect outside of the main purpose of the present study, I decided not to read any of the texts through a gender-study lens. Nonetheless, a gender-study approach could also be a possible future line of research, which could enrich the investigations of my dissertation.

In a comparative perspective, the identity issue within Sinophone Malaysian literature could be scrutinized in comparison with the same topic within other Sinophone Southeast Asian literary systems (Sinophone Filipino, Sinophone Thai, Sinophone Indonesian, just to name a few). In fact, all the Southeast Asian countries have different cultural, social and political realities, apart from having diverse historical backgrounds. The Chinese populations which have been living there for centuries also experience varying degrees of social and cultural adaptation to the local environments and different types of interaction with other ethnic and cultural groups residing in those countries. Hence, as a rule of thumb, the different situations of the Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese will determine different ways of facing the identity issue not only in daily life, but in the literary realm as well. Moreover, how identity is (or multiple identities are) constructed in Sinophone Southeast Asian literature can reveal interesting insights on how it is shaped in the real life of the Chinese communities across the selected Southeast Asian nations. This regional comparative research line would be a first step toward a more global perspective on the issue of the representation of identity within the various Sinophone literary systems.

Lastly, if taken as a showcase of the literary talents hailing from a very fertile soil such as Sinophone Malaysia, the present work could not only contribute to the knowledge of a thriving literary tradition, but it could also be a first step in the circulation - through

translation into English and other European languages - of creative writings which despite their apparently very localized topics are able to speak to everyone, as the "who am I" question is shared by people of every latitude and living under diverse environmental, political, and social conditions.

## VII:

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