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Ethnicity and the Subjectivity of Malaysian-Chinese Diasporic Writers

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Abstract

Diasporic writers are blessed with two cultures. Their choice of which culture to identify with may be promoted by social circumstances. During the 1970s and the 1980s when Malaysia prioritized the Malays and the Chinese were marginalized and reduced to an inferior position in the country, Malaysian-Chinese writers turned traditional Chinese culture into cultural capital to bring comfort and consolation for their community. Besides, they wrote to protest the country's unfair treatment of the Chinese, lamented the aphasiac state of their fellowmen and defied the nation's actualizing attempts to stifle the ethnicity of the Chinese. The Malaysian-Chinese writers' choice of ethnic identity indicated that they were not passive targets to consent the power of the dominant discourse; and it highlighted their subjectivity as diasporic writers.

Keywords

Diaspora, Malaysian-Chinese writers, subjectivity, ethnicity

1. Introduction

Chinese people have crossed the seas and put down roots in different parts of the world. During Zheng He's seafaring period (1405-1433) from China to Southeast Asia, he stopped in Malacca, and some of his people stayed in Malaysia after he proceeded with his voyage. After that many Chinese people from Fujian Province and Guangdong Province came to Malaysia on business purposes. And Chinese people came to Malaysia on a larger scale in the 19th century when British colonialists recruited cheap labor to develop tin mines and work on rubber plantations. Up to now Malaysian Chinese have taken up nearly a quarter of the Malaysian population, forming one of the largest diasporic Chinese communities.

However, life for these diasporic Chinese was far from being easy, especially when the circumstances in the hostland were hard.

2. Diasporic Chinese in Malaysia

Robin Cohen holds that the diasporic community leaves behind them their homeland and tries to put down roots in a strange new land, but their relationship with the host society is not necessarily desirable, for some host societies have a low level of acceptance of the diasporic population, so the diasporic communities constantly worry that disaster might befall them (2008, p. 7). This is the case for Malaysian Chinese as well. The Malays, the Chinese and the Indians are the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia. They fought for the nation's independence from British colonial rule, after which, however, the new government practically took over the British policy concerning different ethnic groups. The colonialists divided the country into 4 groups, the colonialists ranking at the top, the Malays ranking second, the Chinese and the Indians third, and the local hybrids fourth. Though the colonialists were ousted, their way to "divide and rule" was taken over, the difference being that the Malays were promoted to the top. As Lee Hock Guan & Leo Suryadinata maintain, nation building in this country was featured by "the politics of ethnicity" (2011, p. 5), which resulted in the division, rather than combination of various ethnic communities.

The superior status of the Malays was established through various means. Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of the new nation, had it that the Malays were Bumiputera (indigenous) and should enjoy privileges that other ethnic groups did not have. Besides, Malay was made the national language in 1967, and Islam the official religion in 1970. Therefore, though the government claimed to build the national identity for all the people, the truth is that it defined the nation with the Malay language, religion and culture, so that the Malays enjoyed the privileges whereas other ethnic groups were marginalized.

Politically, many Malaysian Chinese could not get the citizen identity even though they had lived on this land for generations and claimed again and again that their loyalty was with Malaysia, they were still regarded as the outsiders and could not be accepted. The Malays were politically dominant whereas the Chinese were somewhat financially dominant, so each group felt insecure because of the other party (Zhu & Zhou, 2016, p. 162). The tension reached the peak when a racial riot broke out on May 13, 1969, in which more than one hundred Chinese people died.

Financially, the policies, especially the New Economy Policy, which started in 1971 after the riot and lasted for twenty years, favored the Malay people and sacrificed the interests of the Chinese, though such compromise on the part of the Chinese was necessary because if the Malays who took up the largest population could not benefit from economic development, they would eventually lead to great social upheaval and the Chinese would be greater victims (Cao, 1998, p. 21).

Culturally, education in Chinese was seriously impaired. During the colonial rule, the Chinese people saw the British had no intention to develop Chinese education, so they built Chinese schools to teach

their children Chinese language and culture by mobilizing their own sources. Nevertheless, the Education Act 1961 had it that the ultimate goal of education in the country was to have Malay as the working language in all schools. Under this act, Chinese high schools were required to teach in English (and eventually in Malay). As for those that refused to change the working language, they had to support themselves and the government stopped allocating any funds for them, and they became Chinese independent high schools. The Act also had it that Chinese elementary schools, together with English and Tamil schools, would change to teach in Malay when the Minister of Education saw fit (Jia, 2018, pp. 22-24). Language is a prominent component of one's ethnic identity, so the partial deprivation of the young Chinese people's right to receive education in Chinese pushed the Chinese further on the way of being assimilated.

Therefore, the Malaysian Chinese were marginalized and reduced to an inferior position politically, financially and culturally, especially during the two decades after the riot. It was not until 1991 when the then Prime Minister Mahathir proposed "Vision 2020" that the circumstances for the Malaysian Chinese have been improved, and the superiority of the Malay identity has been replaced by the hybrid conception of cultural hybridity in the background of globalization (Zhao, 2004, pp. 98-99).

Writers are generally more sensitive and observant than other people, so Malaysian-Chinese diasporic writers might feel the rejection and marginalization of the hostland even more acute. Facing the official denial of their cultural and political identities during the 1970s and the 1980s, they presented their contemplation and feelings in their writing and tried to seek a meaningful sense of belonging. This article is to analyze how Malaysian-Chinese writers exerted their subjectivity and responded to the harsh social environment during the two decades before the 1990s.

3. Malaysian-Chinese Writers' Longing for Traditional Chinese Culture

Each ethnic community has its own unique culture. It covers language, literature, art, and the people's spirit, characters, values and thoughts. It anchors its people and provides spiritual capital for its people when their survival is seriously challenged by the external world. It can often be turned into political capital to defend its people's subjectivity and resist the hegemony of another culture that comes with military or political conquest. However, in the case of Malaysian Chinese, they turned to their ethnic culture when the nation emphasized "homogeneous" national community to stifle other ethnic groups and their diversity (West, 1990, p. 104). When the Malaysian Chinese were stranded in the harshness of the hostland, they resorted to traditional Chinese culture, their ancestral culture, for comfort and consolation. Seeking the past was not merely out of the nostalgic feeling about what had been lost or one's wish to recuperate the ancient legacy; rather, it was a desire to get the secretes of ancestral culture and turn it into cultural capital which would bring them consolation, treat their trauma, and more importantly, get rid of the violence of the dominant discourse and deconstruct the cultural hegemony of the dominant ethnic group.

Malaysian-Chinese writers instinctively chose to embrace their ethnic culture. As Chen Xianglin, a

Malaysian-Chinese writer, holds, "During the 1970s and the 1980s when there was a crisis in national identity, Malaysian-Chinese writers felt as if they were orphans, so they held Chinese language and literature dear" (see Zhao, 2004, p. 97). They received education in Chinese, so Chinese opened their minds, shaped their wishes and values, and provided a channel for them to locate their relations with the outside world and understand their own cultural roots. Chinese education and Chinese classics made them naturally internalize the Chinese literati feelings. And the poems and proses which praised the great rivers and mountains of China inevitably stimulated their desire of returning to China, which was practically impossible in reality, so they turned such desire into a sense of homesickness which can be called "China complex", calling for a strong cultural identification among Malaysian Chinese.

"China complex" showed writers' continuous involvement with Chinese culture. It was deeply rooted in Malaysian-Chinese writers' hearts. It covered the writers' emotion for China and their view points, which could be cultural, historical or even geographical. It reflected the writers' longing for the vast land of China and their admiration for Chinese traditions, their pride in the long history of Chinese culture. In his poem "Begonia", He Naijian claimed that he insisted on planting the begonia though it was not really popular in Malaysia, because only this flower emitted the fragrance of five thousand years, and the poet saw through it the pride, passion, tranquility, leisure, magnanimity of Chinese poets, statesman and historians, and it aroused his love for the golden means of traditional Chinese culture.

Among these writers, Wen Ruian was a noted figure in pursuing traditional Chinese culture. The crisis of the Chinese community aroused in him grief and indignation. He called for the Chinese to realize the grievance of the situation. What pained him most was that many Malaysian Chinese people did not understand the history of China and could not even write a proper letter in Chinese. Such a crisis urged him to shoulder the mission of saving Chinese culture in Malaysia. He started writing in his late teens. His poems were eternally filled with his pursuit of Chineseness. Signifiers of Chinese traditional culture were constantly found in his poems such as swords, arrows, white gowns that signify the owners' moral integrity and flutes that voice the player's ambition to serve the nation. These signifiers pointed to his extolment of chivalry, which was accelerated in his swordsman fiction. He created a gallant swordsman world in his swordsman fiction which mostly took place in China during the Song Dynasty. He voiced Confucius concepts of developing one's virtues to develop the nation, and he created heroes who were loyal to friends and would sacrifice themselves in carrying out missions that were crucial for the nation. What was paramount in his novels was the swordsman's blazing and unwavering pursuit or even sacrifice for the righteous cause of the ethnic community and the nation. Such intense emotion was the manifestation of Wen Ruian's concern for the development of Chinese education and inheritance of Chinese culture among his ethnic community.

4. Malaysian-Chinese Writers' Resistance

Right before independence, Malaysian Chinese were full of joy and were expectant of the new nation, of which they thought they would be an indispensable component. Writers shared and aired such

jubilant sentiments in their writing. For instance, Wu An said in his poem, upon the establishment of the new nation, he would stay here in his motherland, though his mother would go back to China, her motherland. From this poem we can see the poet really regarded Malaysia as his homeland, on which he was prepared to put down his roots. This was also the reflection of most Chinese people's thoughts at that time. However, as it turned out, the new nation did not open to them the embracing arms. Instead, they were met with cold rejection. The Malaysian government's unfair treatment of the Chinese people only sharpened their ethnic identity rather than national identity.

Therefore, apart from resorting to their ancestral culture for cultural capital to anchor themselves and their fellow men, Malaysian-Chinese writers wrote to resist the dominant discourse. Their resistance was mainly two aspects:

First and foremost, they wrote to protest against the country's unfair treatment of the Chinese against the backdrop of the Malays' privileges. As analyzed previously, the government prioritized the Malay ethnic group by making them Bumiputera, enjoying various favorite policies, such as the New Economic Policy. You Chuan expressed the Chinese community's dissatisfaction about such unequal measures in his poem "Crutches": he was willing to support those who were weak in walking; however, they still depended on crutches when they were already sound and strong, because the crutches symbolized authority, stately manners and privileges. Their offspring thrived because the crutches were made of a kind of traditional Malay herbal that improved male reproductive ability. The Malays' privileges were something that should not be questioned in the country, so the poet could only use metaphorical expression of crutches and herbal magic to refer to the favorable policies for the Malays, but the satirical tone still voiced his dissatisfaction.

Malaysian Chinese were not allowed any privileges; what was worse, though they had been in the country for generations, they were always branded as immigrants, and the procedure for them to get citizenship was particularly hard. Pan Yutong expressed his anger on this issue in *Life Apart across the Water*. In this novel, Lin Meiyun, a newly married Chinese woman from Taiwan, wondered why the Philippines and Indonesians could easily become Malaysian citizens whereas she couldn't even after waiting for a long time and her documents being examined for many times; and she could not understand why Chinese refugees from Vietnam were ousted when they swarmed into Malaysian coastal states whereas illegal Indonesian immigrants were allowed into the country and were left alone even when they committed crimes. Through Lin Meiyun, the writer voiced his protest and the indignation of all Malaysian Chinese. They lived on the land but were not accepted by the nation. You Chuan also wrote to resist such unfairness: The Chinese with the dragon totem/Originally descendants of the Yellow Emperor/ Bounded southward five hundred years ago and stroke roots here/They irrigated this land in all sincerity with their blood and sweat/Living and thriving with the land/And yet, they are stilled called/ Immigrants/ Rejected. You Chuan clearly announced that the Chinese ancestors had made a great contribution in developing the country: they "irrigated this land in all sincerity with their blood and sweat". However, such contribution was intentionally ignored. The cold rejection filled

the Chinese community with disappointment. The poet's announcement was an outcry for all his people.

Moreover, the Malaysian-Chinese writers wrote to resist the aphasiac state of the community. Malaysian Chinese felt insecure during the 1970s and the 1980s because of the superior status of the Malays in the country. One of the sources that caused the sense of insecurity was religion. The diversified nature of the ethnic groups called for diversity in beliefs. However, Islam was made the official religion of the country in 1970, and the Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad declared in September 2001 that Malaysia was an Islamic state. Though no amendment has been made to the Constitution concerning the status of Islam in Malaysia up to now after Mahathir's announcement, the importance of Islam was unchallengeable. For the Chinese who did not believe in this religion, they felt threatened. Xin Yinsong wrote in his poem: "Walking on the old street of a small town/ I see small shabby wooden houses/ shivering in the huge shadow of mosques". And in You Chuan's poem, the threat of Muslim mosques was manifested through hearing: I see five million mouths/ Big and small, open and close, talking/ But nothing can be heard/ The monotonous sound from the speakers at the top of mosques/ threats my heart like raging tide. Under the pressure of the official religion, the Chinese were marginalized. Though there were five million of them, they became aphasiac.

Secondly, Malaysian-Chinese writers wrote to defy the nation's attempt to actualize the Chinese. The diasporic community usually attempt to get integrated into the host society, but at the same time, they also cling to some of their ethnic features such as their living habits, customs, religion and most importantly, language. As for Malaysian Chinese, they kept some of their living habits and also voluntarily integrated with the local elements; they spoke Chinese and of course hoped their offspring could speak the mother tongue. However, the Education Act 1961 worried the Chinese, because such an act would seriously endanger the reproduction of Chinese culture: once the young Chinese stopped receiving education in Chinese, carrying on Chinese culture in Malaysia through the Chinese language would be impossible.

Wen Ruian personally went through the repression of Chinese schools by the government while he was still in high school. In his essay "Mourning Dragon", Wen Rui'an expressed the pain of "his own culture being pressed at the bottom of the garbage box", and he felt a "great force" pressing on him, and his only resistance was writing. Other writers also voiced their grief and indignation at the crisis of Chinese education and their moral responsibility to guard it and pass on Chinese culture. In his poem "The Lantern", Tian Shi used the lantern as the metaphorical expression of the Chinese language and culture: the narrator lamented at the extinguishing of the lantern, but in grief he held tight his friends' hands, passing on faith and support to each other.

Ng Kim Chew's short story "Allah's Will" was a fictional expression of the misery that the Chinese ethnic community went through under the actualizing measures. Liu Cai, a Chinese political criminal, signed an agreement with his "most respectable" Malay friend and was saved from an execution. According to the agreement, he was sent to an island where he was given a new identity: a Muslim with

a Malay name – Abdulah, and he was required to give up everything in the past, giving up his Chinese name, the Chinese language and the Chinese ways of living. He was required to convert to Islam. Ridiculously, these were all carried out in the name of Allah's will. However, the sparkle in his heart as a Chinese refused to die down, so he resisted such arrangement secretly: he named his first born as Aci, and the second Ana, which when combined together was the Malay word for China; and though he had lived in the new identity for thirty years, he still tried to leave behind him traces to show that he was a Chinese, so he inscribed on stones his names with ideographs similar to the earliest form of the Chinese language. Such unquenchable desire for the marking of his Chinese identity was a criticism against the Malaysian government's effort to use Malay culture to replace other cultures. It shows the impossibility to eliminate the cultural and ethnic identity of the diasporic members.

5. Conclusion

Diaspora involves pulling out roots from the homeland and putting down roots in the hostland. Both are painful processes, the first being the pain of loss, and the second being the pain of (possible) rejection. As for Malaysian Chinese, the pain of rejection was particularly acute in the 1970s and the 1980s. Facing the rejection from the dominant discourse, Malaysian-Chinese writers reacted actively in their writing. Though most of them did not experience the rupture of displacement because they were mostly the second or third generation of immigrants, the Chinese education they received and the idealized narration they got from the parents or grandparents about China filled them with nostalgia about the ancestral homeland. They borrowed signifiers from the traditional Chinese culture to signify the uniqueness of their ethnic group and give their fellowmen comfort and consolation.

Meanwhile, these writers exercised their power of writing to resist, as Foucault contends:

[Power] is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands … Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application (1980, p. 98).

Power circulates instead of being focused in the hands of any person or group, and the net-like way in which power is exercised leaves individuals at a position of "simultaneously undergoing and exercising" power; thus, individuals are both the recipients and vehicles of power. In the case of Malaysian-Chinese writers, they underwent repression from the dominant discourse, but they were not "inert or consenting" targets. At a time of social upheaval and facing rejection and even repression from the dominant discourse during the 1970s and the 1980s, they represented through artistic ways the lack of equality among different ethnic groups in Malaysia, which highlighted the subjectivity of diasporic writers.

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