

(Be)longing and Otherness: China and the Mainland Chinese in Two Sinophone Malaysian Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

The Chinese in Malaysia constitute an ethnic minority of diasporic origin formed by several waves of migrants and their descendants; therefore, they are often confronted with the issue of identity and the notion of home. While Chinese Malaysian identity is shaped through interethnic and intraethnic interaction, the idea of home can be connected to the place of origin (China) and/or the place of residence (Malaysia). By employing the concepts of sojourner (Siu), middleman (Bonacich) and settler (Uriely), this paper examines how ethnic Chinese characters in two Sinophone Malaysian short stories frame their identity and construct their conception of home. Through close readings of “Jun zi guxiang lai” (君自故鄉來), by Shang Wanyun (商晚筠), and “Dage kuankuan zoulai” (大哥款款走來), by Li Kaixuan (李開璇), three interconnected issues are explored: the relation of the Chinese Malaysian subject to China, the representation of China, and how these two authors approach the construction of the Self when the Other is constituted by the mainland Chinese.

KEYWORDS: Sinophone Malaysian Literature, Shang Wanyun, Li Kaixuan, Chinese diaspora, representation of China, Chinese Malaysian identity

* Received: September 22, 2018; Accepted: May 7, 2019

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I. Introduction

Malaysia as a modern, postcolonial nation-state is multiethnic in nature and the result of maritime trade activities, waves of migration and colonialism. According to the 2010 census, people of Chinese heritage constitute around one-quarter of the total population (24.6%), preceded by the *Bumiputra* group¹ (67.4%) and followed by people of Indian descent (7.3%). Within such an ethnically composite environment, the Chinese Malaysian experience is, of course, shaped by regular interactions with the Other. As Charles Hirschman affirms, “[b]eing a Chinese in Southeast Asia rests not only on a historical sense of a shared background, but on contemporary conditions, especially the interaction of Chinese minorities with indigenous populations and national governments” (23). In Malaysia, the complexity of such interaction is intensified by the fact that the Other is diverse, ranging from the dominant Malay ethnic group to the Indian minority, from the *Orang Asli* of Peninsular Malaysia to the various aboriginal groups of the Malaysian Borneo. Moreover, the increased ease with which people and ideas cross borders and trespass frontiers further contributes to the fact that Chinese Malaysians have been confronted not only with people of different ethnicity within Malaysia but also with mainland Chinese people, with whom they share a common ethnic background, many cultural traits and a certain number of social patterns. As noted by Sharon A. Carstens, over the last decades, scholars have “invoked concepts of ‘Greater China’ and ‘Cultural China’ to describe Chinese links that transcend the nation state” (178). However, each Chinese community has its peculiarities, strongly shaped by the environment in which each diasporic community has settled. As Tu Wei-ming points out, “[t]he impression that the overall cultural orientation of Chinese settlers has been shaped predominantly by the magnetic power of the homeland is simplistic” (17). Therefore,

¹ *Bumiputra* (also spelled *Bumiputera*, which literally means “children of the soil” in Malay) is an umbrella term that collectively refers to those peoples who are indigenous to the region. Ethnic Malays constitute the dominant *Bumiputra* group, but other ethnic communities which belong to it 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. The idea of a *Bumiputra* ethnic group was conceptualised by the Malaysian government in order 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 364).

interacting with Chinese people from elsewhere also means interacting with the Other, albeit differently.

Being so central to the Chinese Malaysian experience, interaction with the Other, and the constant (re)negotiation of identity that comes with it, are recurring themes in post-independence Sinophone Malaysian fiction. Connected to the interaction with the Chinese Other and with the issue of identity is the image of China that Chinese Malaysians fabricate in relation to the notion of home, since the way in which they perceive themselves and the Chinese Other also shapes the way in which they relate to China. I utilise the notions of sojourner (Siu), middleman (Bonacich), and settler (Uriely) to analyse and consider the ethnic Chinese characters in two Sinophone Malaysian short stories, “Jun zi guxiang lai” (君自故鄉來), by Shang Wanyun (商晚筠), and “Dage kuankuan zoulai” (大哥款款走來), by Li Kaixuan (李開璇). Through a close reading of the two texts, this paper investigates three interconnected issues: the relation of the Chinese Malaysian subject to China, the representation of China, and how these two authors approach the construction of the Self when the Other is constituted by the mainland Chinese. Special attention is paid to the formal devices used, such as the descriptions of the characters that inhabit their stories (especially in Shang Wanyun’s case) and the wise use of personal pronouns (in Li Kaixuan’s instance).

The paper, therefore, relates to a growing body of studies on Sinophone Malaysian narrative texts that have been produced in Anglophone academia in the past decade and after the popularisation of the field of Sinophone Studies by Shu-mei Shih.² For instance, in *Writing the South Seas*, Brian Bernards focuses on how Southeast Asia is conceived, imagined and described by Sinophone writers, while in *Sinophone Malaysian Literature: Not Made in China*, Alison M. Groppe carries out a profound and perceptive study on many texts centred on memory and nostalgia. Similarly, *Rethinking Chineseness*, by E. K. Tan, investigates the relationship among ethnic Chinese writers, their homelands in Southeast Asia, and an imagined version of their ancestral homeland (China). This paper’s contribution to the existing English-language

² Shih first used the term Sinophone to “mean literature written in Chinese by Chinese-speaking writers in various parts of the world outside China” (“Global Literature” 29) and later reformulated it “to designate Sinitic-language cultures and communities outside China as well as those ethnic communities within China, where Sinitic languages are either forcefully imposed or willingly adopted” (“Against Diaspora” 30).

scholarship on Sinophone Malaysian literary studies is twofold: it presents narrative texts by two authors who have consistently been neglected in previous studies, and it scrutinises the way in which China, as a real geopolitical entity, rather than as an imagined homeland, is portrayed in Shang Wanyun's and Li Kaixuan's short stories.

Whether China is considered the ancestral home (from which the diasporic community emanates, and to which it belongs), home (as the place of longing), or the former home (which has been traded for the foreign land, the new home), might be contingent upon the mental perception of the Self as a sojourner (in the former two cases) or as a settler (in the last instance). In his widely-cited article focusing on the Chinese laundryman in America, Paul C. P. Siu defines the sojourner "as a stranger who spends many years in a foreign country without being assimilated by it" ("Sojourner" 34). In 1987, Siu further refers to the sojourner as someone who "lives his mental life in China; his purpose is to make a fortune as soon as possible so that he can join his fellows at home" (*Chinese Laundryman* 298). However, the condition of the sojourner is not necessarily permanent, and can lead to the condition of the middleman, who, according to Edna Bonacich, can act in two ways: "relinquish his dream of the homeland and settle in the new country" (592), and thereby integrate in the mainstream of the host society, or "keep alive the desire to return" (593), and thus engender a group which is permanent in its residency, but also in its minority status. However, not all Chinese Malaysians set foot on foreign land with the idea of returning home; some of them are, therefore, settlers "characterised by the absence of either general or concrete plans of returning to the country of origin. Those who hold this type of orientation consider their stay in the home country as a permanent situation" (Urieli 435).

As we shall see in sections 2 and 3, in the two short stories chosen, China acquires different meanings for different ethnic Chinese people, depending on their status as sojourners, middlemen or settlers. It can be argued that while ethnicity, religion, and provenance are often used to mark interethnic difference, in the case of intraethnic interaction, Chinese Malaysian identity is asserted by emphasising geographic, historical and social differences, which can be more (or less) pronounced, based on how the Self regards his or her own status in relation to the diasporic condition. Therefore, the degree of Otherness attributed to a mainland Chinese person can also inform us of the degree of attachment to China as home.

However, finding works of fiction centred on the interaction between the Chinese Malaysian Self and the mainland Chinese Other, and in which China is treated as a geographic entity (as compared to China as an idealised, almost mythological locale) is not an easy task. While Sinophone Malaysian literature that deals with interethnic interaction abounds, fictional works that focus on the relation between Chinese Malaysians and the Chinese Other are not as common. Taiwan-based Sinophone Malaysian intellectual Ng Kim Chew notes that whether Chinese Malaysians travel to China to visit their relatives in search of their roots or welcome their mainland Chinese relatives, the interaction between the two groups is inevitable. Therefore, such issues should also be a frequent topic in fiction; despite this, they are rarely seen in Sinophone Malaysian literature, the short stories discussed in this paper being two notable examples (Ng 117).

The shortage of works addressing such intraethnic relations has a political explanation: as pointed out by Leo Suryadinata, after gaining independence from Britain, the Malayan (since 1963, Malaysian) government was immersed in a domestic struggle against communist insurgents who belonged, for the most part, to the Chinese ethnic group. Therefore, Chinese Malaysians were often the target of anti-communist and anti-PRC policies, even after Malaysia established diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1974. In fact, this important bilateral event did not pave the road to the normalisation process of Sino-Malaysian diplomatic relations, since the Malaysian government heavily restricted any type of interaction between Chinese Malaysians and mainland Chinese (Suryadinata 108). It was not until the end of the Cold War that relations between Malaysia and the PRC took a positive turn. The lack of Sinophone Malaysian fiction focusing on the interaction between the Chinese Malaysians and the Chinese Other might, therefore, be explained by the diplomatic climate of the Cold War era, which prohibited international encounters between the two ethnic Chinese groups until the 1990s. Nevertheless, 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 50). The turn of the century saw an increase in the relations between Chinese Malaysians and the mainland Chinese and such encounters and engagements began to be recorded

in Malaysian Sinophone fiction, as is the case with Li Kaixuan's short story, published in 2002.

II. “Jun zi guxiang lai”

“Jun zi guxiang lai,” which could be translated in English as “You’ve Come from Our Hometown,” is an award-winning short story written in 1977 by Shang Wanyun³ and published in Taiwan in the same year, when diplomatic relations between China and Malaysia were still in their infancy. Through the title, the reader is led to draw connections between the text he or she is about to read and classical Chinese culture. In fact, Shang Wanyun borrows the title from the first line of a famous miscellaneous poem (*zashi* 雜詩) by Wang Wei (王維, 699-759), one of the main men of arts and letters of the Tang dynasty (618-907).⁴ The idea of welcoming a guest from afar and the word *guxiang* (故鄉), which can be translated as “home, hometown, homeland, native place, birthplace” (all words denoting a strong connection between a person and a geographical locale), suggest that there had been some sort of displacement, from which the binary relation here (place of residence)/there (home) originates. Nevertheless, one question arises: where is this *guxiang* located? Is

³ Shang Wanyun is the pen name of late Huang Lili (1952-95), who was born into a family of Chinese merchants who had settled in the state of Kedah, in northwestern Peninsular Malaysia. In 1971, she moved to Taiwan where she enrolled in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures of National Taiwan University. Unlike other Sinophone Malaysian writers of her generation who had also attended university in Taiwan (Li Yongping and Zhang Guixing, among others), after graduating in 1977, Shang Wanyun decided to return to Malaysia where she became an editor for Chinese-language publications. In 1987, she moved to Singapore to work as Chinese-language scriptwriter for the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation, a position she held until 1994, when she decided to return to Malaysia to focus on her career as a fiction writer. Unfortunately, due to health problems, she died at the age of 43 in her native Malaysia. Her literary legacy is made of several works of fiction in which she explores universal themes, such as the role of women in traditional societies, interethnic relations, the generational gap and so on.

⁴ The untitled poem, the second in a series of three unclassified poems, is a five-syllable regulated quatrain (*wuyan jueju* 五言絕句) and reads as follows:

君自故鄉來，
應知故鄉事。
來日綺窗前，
寒梅著花未？(Wang Wei 205)

Or in its English translation by Charles Egan:

You’ve come from our hometown
And must know what’s happening there
The day you left, by the patterned window
Was the cold plum tree in bloom? (205)

the author referring to a place in Malaysia? Is she writing about somewhere in China? What might be a straightforward issue for many (Where is home?) becomes problematic when raised within the context of Chinese Malaysian society. However, it does not take the reader long before he or she understands that *guxiang* refers to Puning, a town in Guangdong province, in southern China, which is the same town from which the author's family migrated to Malaysia.

The plot of the short story is simple and, according to Wang Luen Yu, the main theme is that of “older people deserted by their children” (216). Shang Wanyun focuses on the psychological anxiety and worries of the main character, an older Chinese immigrant, who is portrayed as he lays ill in bed, in the house of his son and daughter-in-law, who begrudgingly take care of him. The author chooses to present the situation mainly from the perspective of the old man, who is physically unable to speak. This voiceless character's thoughts and reminiscences of the old days in China are given a fictional voice which, through a sort of internal monologue, mingles with that of a third person omniscient narrator. While the man settled in Malaysia with his son in search of a better future, his wife Chunmei remained in Puning to look after their meagre land possessions and the ancestral grave. In the man's attitude, one perceives some traits of the sojourner, who usually leaves his home community on his own, without taking his spouse along (Woon 673). Despite the many years of separation, however, Chunmei remains at the centre of his heart and thoughts. Therefore, he spends the day narrated in the short story waiting for the arrival of a Singaporean relative, who has just returned from Puning with fresh, first-hand news from his beloved wife. 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. The harsh life in China under communist rule and the backwardness of his hometown, compared to the relative wealth he has enjoyed in Malaysia, accentuate his feeling of guilt for leaving without taking his spouse along with him. Chunmei shares the destiny of many sojourners' spouses and can be considered one of the unlucky “left-behind wives” (*fankeshen* 番客孀 in Mandarin), who “received little or no financial assistance from their husbands and had to support themselves and their families in a society where women received little education and lacked marketable skills” (Shen 2).

In this short story, the interaction between a Chinese Malaysian and a mainland Chinese is only simulated, as a real encounter between the main character and his spouse never takes place. Nevertheless, thanks to the mediation of a third party, the relationship between the two is virtually, albeit partially, restored. This relation, however, must come to terms with the changes caused by the traumatic experience of separation and abandonment. The atypicality of such relationship is also due to the political situation of the period. As previously mentioned, at the time it was difficult for Chinese Malaysians to travel to mainland China and for mainland Chinese to visit Malaysia, since “[d]uring the cold war period, i.e. from the 1950s to the 1970s, Malaysia perceived China as an ideological and security threat, mainly because of Maoist support of the communist revolutionary movements in Southeast Asia” (Shee 6). Most likely considering these diplomatic difficulties, Shang Wanyun chooses a Singaporean national as the intermediary between the one who left and the one who was left behind, thus avoiding incongruities between the fictional account and the actual situation.⁵

In the short story, the author portrays what was a common feeling of uncertainty among the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia regarding the life and situation of their relatives and friends back in China. Such unawareness would spur many doubts. Uncertainty and blurred memories became, therefore, the only feeble connection between Chinese Malaysian sojourners and their loved ones who had been left behind in China. For example, the reader learns from the text that the old man is not sure whether Chunmei is still alive and living in their hometown. At the time, the communication flow between Malaysia and China was obstructed, therefore this type of situation should not come as a surprise. Shang Wanyun writes:

⁵ As pointed out by Sarah Tong,

[b]etween 1965 and the late 1970s, when ideological differences and Cold War hostility dominated political relations between China and Singapore, two-way trading activities in fact took place, albeit at a low level. . . . From Singapore’s perspective, its separation from Malaysia had actually given it a free rein to trade with China and to deal independently with any related issues without being hamstrung by pressure from Kuala Lumpur. (52)

Is Chunmei alive? Does she still live in our village in China (唐山)?⁶ Our bedroom was so narrow and dark, unreached by sunlight. Chunmei used to complain that since the room didn't have a window on the eastern wall, sunbeams couldn't get in, and the stuffy smell wouldn't get out. Time has passed, and I have earned enough money in this foreign land (番邦);⁷ the Japanese have been defeated and peace has been restored. I wanted to go back with our child and I wanted to tear down the entire eastern wall and build it again, this time with two windows so that the warm scent of the sun could pervade the room in every season. That way, it'd never smell mouldy again.

He should have never left a woman so virtuous as Chunmei behind. And yet, he had to leave someone to guard their plot of land and the house, someone who would also burn joss-sticks and pull up weeds from the tomb of the ancestors!

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！(Shang 190)⁸

The way in which the old man talks about China and about his condition in Malaysia, the foreign land, reveals the mentality of the sojourner who

⁶ It must be noted that instead of using the word *Zhongguo* (中國) to refer to China, the old man uses the expression *Tangshan* (唐山), which literally means "Tang Mountains" and is a term used by many ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia to indicate their hometowns in southern China. As Caroline S. Hau points out, it is "a term of identification with a dynastic state (C.E. 618-907) that was founded by Li Yuan, who was of mixed Han and Xianbei (Turkish) ancestry" (11).

⁷ It is an older Chinese expression used to refer to countries in Southeast Asia.

⁸ All translations from the Chinese are mine, unless otherwise noted.

stays on abroad, but he also never loses his homeland tie. In the beginning he ventured to take up residence in a foreign country with a definite aim. Soon he found that the job was taking much longer than he had expected. His original plan, as a matter of fact, has been complicated by new social values and social attitudes. (Siu, “Sojourner” 39)

As for many sojourners, events have not turned out as anticipated and he has not been able to set foot in China again. Nevertheless, after so many years in Malaysia, memories are still vivid in his mind. His intentions were good; the outcome of his sojourn, however, has been quite different. For this reason, the man burdens himself with guilt, especially after realising that all his efforts have always been directed to provide himself, but not his wife, with a better life:

When he thought of Chunmei, whom he had left in China, his heart would be overtaken by guilt: he had never worked hard enough to give her a comfortable life, he had always thought for himself, and his preoccupation was to build himself a house in this foreign land.

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。為自己在番邦建一個家。(Shang 192)

In other words, the old man, as a sojourner, has adopted a new attitude and has become unsure about “the termination of his sojourn because of the fact that he has already made some adjustments to his new environment and acquired an old-timer’s attitudes” (Siu, “Sojourner” 35).

With the arrival of the Singaporean relative bringing news from home, the man is confronted with the reality of contemporary China, and the changes that have taken place in the country he has left thirty years before. It is only then that he is ideally, but painfully, reunited with his spouse, as he cannot help but acknowledge the severe condition in which she lives. When he is shown a photograph taken in front of their old house, he has mixed feelings and hesitates in recognising the woman in the picture as Chunmei:

“I have a photo somewhere here in my pocket. Hold on, where did I put it? Look, here it is! Auntie took this picture in front of the house.” Chen Yaoping [the Singaporean relative] held the photograph in front of his eyes. As soon as he had 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 black-and-white photo that had started to turn yellow. “She is still alive, then! After so many years, she is still alive!” . . . “That’s not my Chunmei!” A pose with her hand begging for food and that old lady would be a perfect beggar, with that decrepit appearance as if she weren’t able to stand on her feet without a walking stick. How could she possibly be Chunmei? No way! Look at her desperate attempt to stand straight. It looks like she had fallen down once the photo had been taken . . . “That’s not Chunmei! Even if she had aged so unbearably much, she’d never have that wasted face. No matter how busy or scruffy she was, she’d never cut her hair that short. She would wake up very early in the morning to comb her hair into a tidy bun so neat and well-groomed that you would never see one single hair sticking out. Why didn’t anyone give this poor old lady a chair to sit on and take the picture more comfortably?”

「……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。」

(Shang 197-98; 3rd ellipsis in original)

In the above passage, the old man refuses to come to terms with the Chinese reality, embodied by Chunmei. She used to be a tidy woman, very concerned with her appearance. But times have changed, and in the China of the 1970s, there was no room for such futilities, as the country was experiencing economic and social hardships, and a simple, unadorned and frugal life was demanded of everyone. The contrast with Malaysia and Singapore is striking. The image of China as a country at a standstill is conveyed with unrivalled power and tragic beauty by Shang Wanyun. Nonetheless, the Singaporean relative presents the situation differently, probably to reassure the old man:

Uncle, auntie is doing well in China: she doesn't need to worry about food and clothing. At her age, she still doesn't want to sit at home with idle hands, so she happily follows the others to the fields in the very early hours of the morning. She seemed quite content!

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挺樂的！
(Shang 199)

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 the situation in China:

Is that really Chunmei, Asheng's mother? Poor old lady! What has become of her?! Even an old Indian woman begging on the streets looks better than her. She looks sadder than the most pitiful of beggars. Still working her stiff old bones off and she is happy about that? I bet she can't even move.

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？(Shang 199)

Here, to compare the situation in the two countries, the author resorts to the use of two female figures symbolising China and Malaysia respectively. The circumstances in China are so difficult that the Chinese people are probably living in a condition worse than that of the poorest person in Malaysia. Malaysian poverty is epitomised by a fictional female beggar of Indian ethnicity.⁹

In a later passage, the Singaporean relative reports the words that Chunmei has entrusted to him and, again, the reader can see it as an attempt to calm the old man's sense of unrest. It should be mentioned here, however, that the old man's feelings are only known to the reader, but not to the other characters, since the main character is unable to speak:

Uncle don't worry! Auntie wants you to know that even if there is nobody who knows how to read over there, if Dasheng and his wife could write to her . . . a letter every month or two would 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.

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。(Shang 199; ellipsis in original)

Clearly, in “Jun zi guxiang lai,” Shang Wanyun is moving between two different approaches to the relationship with mainland China and the Chinese Other, between the old man's perspective and the Chinese Singaporean's point

⁹ It must be noted that Indian Malaysians often live in conditions of economic disadvantage, especially when compared with the dominant *Bumiputra* group and with the ethnic Chinese.

of view. However, both approaches are a consequence of the interaction with the new China and not with the ancestral homeland. The Singaporean relative epitomises a modern approach to China, which is business-driven and utilitarian. From what the reader can infer from the story, he is not interested in China as home, nor is he moved by any kind of romantic ideal of soul-searching and root-finding. His connection to China and mainland Chinese people is based on a merely economic interaction. This corresponds to Singapore's general attitude which has "enthusiastically embraced the PRC in economic terms from the 1970s onwards" (Hammond 67). The Singaporean relative can be considered a typical example of middleman who "maintain[s] strong ties with [his] compatriots in the host and origin countries" (Douglas and Saenz 147). Similarly, the old man's son does not possess even the slightest emotional connection to China, and the daughter-in-law is only interested in the jade ornaments that the relative has brought with him, thus showing that there has been a shift from sojourner to settler mentality. In fact, their estrangement from China is typical of those who have come to think of Malaysia as their new, permanent home and the future home of their offspring.

In contrast with the settler approach of the younger generation, the old man is an "entrapped" sojourner, a representative of an older generation of Chinese Malaysians for whom there was no chance of returning home, because of the diplomatic climate and the internal developments within Communist-ruled China that had dramatically changed the social, political, economic and cultural core of the country. For the older generation of Chinese Malaysian sojourners, home as they knew it was lost forever, buried under the inclemency of time and politics. Understandably, like any other displaced person, the old man craves to know more about the current situation in his hometown:

And that's all? You spent quite some time in China, and although you haven't had time to travel around the country, I am sure you did at least travel around Puning county. Tell me a bit about Puning! . . . I want you to tell me every story from back home, even the boring ones, even those of no importance.

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！……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。(Shang 200)

As soon as the Singaporean relative has left the room, the old man engages in a conversation with the woman in the picture. Through a train of thoughts reminiscent of the Joycean tradition, Shang Wanyun allows the old man to express his deepest feelings:

Chunmei, our home, yours and mine, that sky, that land, those villages, the people I knew and those I did not, how are they all doing? Thirty years before, thirty years later, such a huge time in between, things must have changed for sure? . . . Who would ever go to China, were it not to buy jade ware?

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。(Shang 201-02)

This last sentence shows the old man's disillusionment with China, but also the changes the sojourner has undergone in his life organisation. Being a new, different person, "he has developed a mode of living peculiar to his present situation" (Siu, "Sojourner"36) and provides a stark contrast to the closing paragraphs. In the final scene, the old man gazes out of the open window at the clouds floating high in the Malaysian sky:

Probably, the old man too could return home. He could go to Puning to see Chunmei again, to look at her once more, from head to toe, and to ask her why she hadn't chosen a nice and tidy dress for the photo. . . . Or he could go back home for the Qingming festival, when new and old faces, the living and the departed would gather.

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。(Shang 202-03)

In this last passage, it is easy for the reader to feel the old man's longing for and belonging to his home and his spouse. The contradictory statements in the above two passages ("Who would ever go to China . . ." and "Probably, the old man too could return home . . .") are meant to leave the reader in a sort of limbo, floating between Malaysia and China, not really here, but not there either, thus experiencing the ambivalence toward both the place of residence and home, typical of those permanent sojourners who carry within them both the intention of returning home and the lack of clear plans to set foot on the homeland again (Uriely 435).

The greatness of Shang Wanyun's short story rests, in my opinion, in the author's ability to engage the reader with the universal feelings of longing, melancholy and in-betweenness so common among sojourners. On a literary level, the story showcases Shang Wanyun's mastery in the use of internal monologue. The contrast between factual events and the reader's experience is strikingly powerful: as mentioned earlier, the old man does not have a voice, as if it had been taken away from him, and yet, his thoughts have an effective way of reaching us. The old man's unuttered words are an allegory of the Chinese Malaysian sojourner's 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 cord between "where I am" and "where I come from" had never been severed completely, as the permanent sojourner reminds us.

III. "Dage kuankuan zoulai"

After the publication of "Jun zi guxiang lai," we must wait twenty-five years to find a short story that addresses the interaction between Chinese Malaysians and mainland Chinese. Like most pieces of Sinophone Malaysian literature, "Dage kuankuan zoulai" (Elder Brother Is Leisurely Approaching),

by Li Kaixuan,¹⁰ appeared for the first time in the arts supplement to the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (星洲日報), a leading Sinophone Malaysian newspaper. Published in two parts on the 29 September and 6 October 2002 issues, the story was later revised to be included in an anthology of Sinophone Malaysian literature published in Taiwan in 2004, and in *Hongchen zhong de xin huayuan* (紅塵中的新花園 *A New Garden amidst Red Dust*), Li Kaixuan's first personal collection of short stories, 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 zoulai” is a touching story of separation and reunion, a story about the strength of blood ties, which can connect and reconnect people across land and sea and despite the entanglement of politics and international relations. It narrates the story of two brothers who meet each other for the first time well into their adulthood. Through the younger brother's voice and from his perspective, Li Kaixuan chronicles how, at the age of three, the elder brother was taken from Malaya (present-day Peninsular Malaysia), where his Chinese parents had moved, to Guangxi in southern China, following the typical sojourner behaviour, according to which “[s]hould any of his children be born in the host society, they would be sent home to receive an education or to marry” (Woon 673). While in China, the narrator's father (the sojourner) was obliged by his own father to marry a local woman, with whom he planned to travel back to Malaya, together with his elder son and their baby girl. However, due to the complaints of his first spouse in Malaya and the restrictions imposed by both the British colonial administration and the communist government in China, the elder brother was also left behind in Guangxi, where he grew up with his grandparents, stepmother and stepsister. In “Dage kuankuan zoulai,” the author moves back and forth between the two shores of the South China Sea as well as between past and present.

On a linguistic note, it must be pointed out that the story is written in a standard, non-localised language. However, as in many other Sinophone Malaysian stories, a higher degree of intimacy is associated with the use of a

¹⁰ Li Kaixuan was born in the state of Negeri Sembilan, peninsular Malaysia in 1956. A journalist for the *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, his works have been published in Taiwan as well as in his native Malaysia, where he was awarded the Huazong Literary Award, the main Sinophone literary prize in the country, for his works of both fiction and nonfiction.

Sinitic language other than the standard variety. In the case of “Dage kuankuan zoulai,” the Chinese returnee “spoke warmly in his Guanxi dialect” (他親切，用廣西方言說 [Li 104]), a linguistic variety which is gradually being lost as “younger generations aren’t fluent in it anymore” (我們這些不會講方言的孩子們 [Li 120]). The idea of a local linguistic variety as a means to bridge the gap between two ethnic Chinese communities is not an uncommon theme in contemporary Sinophone Malaysian fiction.¹¹ However, in the case of Li’s short story, the divide between the one who left and those who stayed is wide, and the lack of understanding is continuously stressed by the author. Political events 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 to two different lands by politics and diplomacy, suddenly melted in a very western action [i.e., an embrace]. . . . We visited our relatives while 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, who had become nothing but an empty name to us.

45 年的分離和隔閡，被國際和政治阻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 104)

The author insists on the power of external factors that produce feelings of estrangement and misunderstanding:

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

¹¹ On this issue, see Chen Zhengxin’s “Hun de zhuisu,” which centres on issues of identity and language in the frame of Chinese Malaysian-mainland Chinese interaction (Paoliello).

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.

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。(Li 104-05)

Here, Li Kaixuan is able to summarise the distance and compare the differences in the socio-political situation in China and Malaysia; the problems that mainland Chinese people were confronted with before the country's Open Door policy were different from those faced by the ethnic Chinese living in a multicultural country such as Malaysia. This comparative narrative approach can be found in the text, where differences in daily life are stressed by the juxtaposed use of personal pronouns:

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

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。(Li 104; emphases added)

The contraposition of *he/our* deserves special attention on a literary level. Firstly, by using *our* for the point of view of the Chinese Malaysian brother, the author not only indicates where the narrator stands in this interaction, but he also leaves the reader no other choice than to become himself part of this interaction. Secondly, the use of the first-person plural pronoun generalises the characteristics of the Malaysian brother. Conversely, the author does not universalise the character of the mainland Chinese brother. He is referred to as *he*, never as *they*. His experience and his traits are presented as personal and are

not necessarily applicable to the entire mainland Chinese population. Li Kaixuan describes the life of the elder brother in China as characterised by a series of hardships: poverty, political abuse and retaliation, loneliness, and a destiny which can be changed only by what seemed 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 face their own asperities too. However, each group lives amidst its own difficulties that cannot be shared or fully understood. The conclusion seems to be that the burden cannot be levied by the Chinese Other, no matter how close in appearance, culture or social customs such Other may be:

He noticed that our lives seemed stable and satisfactory, at least on the surface, but it was as if we were walking on a cable wire, from which we could fall at any time. The situation in his countryside was probably a lot more stable.

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。
(Li 119)

However, an apparent contradiction becomes evident, when the elder brother discovers the variety of people in Malaysia and their ability and freedom of movement:

He also saw people of all sorts living together in such a melting pot, and he also saw how the wall between countries, once so tall, had shrunk so much that one could jump to the other side with just a tiny hop. He had never seen anything like this in the countryside where he came from.

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。(Li 119-20)

Similarly, the elder brother is touched by their pureness, liveliness, and sensibility: “Elder brother realised that we lived a full, yet simple life, he noticed that our offspring were lively and sensitive, thus acknowledged, with a hint of embarrassment: ‘Well, it seems that you are better off here in Southeast Asia’” (大哥見我們的生活充實而單純，下一代活潑靈敏，頗為感慨的說：「看來還是南洋好些」 [Li 121]).

The comparative statements about “here” and “there” naturally lead us to the next issue: the notion of home. While younger generations of Chinese Malaysians are not sojourners anymore and locate home in rural Malaysia where heart-warming memories reside (St. André 49), for others, such as the father of the protagonist, the idea of home will inevitably take them back to China:

He then went back to what he now considered his *second home*, Southeast Asia. . . . But those tropical sights couldn’t weaken the sense of attachment to his home. . . . *Home 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.*

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。

(Li 106, 108; emphases added)

China is romanticised, as it is described as the “destination of a holy pilgrimage,” the land of worries, but also of longing and belonging, which mingles with the regret of not being able to go back, not uncommon for the sojourner who “finds himself in the midst of constant emotional conflicts . . . developing a mode of living which is totally characteristic neither of his home nor of the dominant group” (Siu, “Sojourner” 42). The romanticisation of China, devoid of any historical and socio-political perspective is not uncommon among older generations of ethnic Chinese in Malaysia; however, in Li’s story it is mitigated by the presence of a returnee who, similarly to Chunmei in Shang Wanyun’s story, symbolises a more accurate, less idealised notion of the

homeland. The different attitudes toward China are represented by the parents of the protagonist:

[Father's] emotional ties to the motherland grew and were in sharp contrast with mother's attitude of going fashionably *native*. These confused feelings entangled our whole Malaysian family, which sank into a helpless chaos.

這就助長了他的祖國情結，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這一頭家，真個是剪不斷理還亂。(Li 109)

While the protagonist's mother can be considered a settler in her effort to adapt to the new environment, the father clearly possesses a sojourner mentality, which “used to tie intimately the Chinese with their home villages or towns, their ancestral graves, and their extensive kinship connections” (Wang Gungwu 346). His migrant destiny is exemplified in the following passage:

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 forest. From that moment on, the dice of his vagrant life were thrown, while the machete and the hoe severed a destiny that would last a lifetime.

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。(Li 109)

In sum, “Dage kuankuan zoulai” is a story of in-betweenness, continuously shifting between China and Malaysia, between past and present, between the point of view of the Self and the perspective of the Other.

IV. Conclusion

This paper has offered a close reading of “Jun zi guxiang lai” and “Dage kuankuan zoulai,” with the aim of examining how the Chinese Malaysian characters in these two short stories interact with the mainland Chinese Other, how they see China and to what extent this image of China is connected to their self-perceived status as sojourners or settlers in Malaysia. Despite the centrality of the notion of home and the issue of identity in a diasporic community such as the Chinese Malaysian, the interaction between the local Chinese and the mainland Chinese has seldom been recorded in Sinophone Malaysian fiction; however, I consider the representation of both this interaction and China fundamental to gain a deeper understanding of the diverse possibilities that the members of diasporic communities such as the Chinese Malaysian have at their disposal when dealing with the notion of home and the idea of the Self.

In the short story by Shang Wanyun, although the interaction between the Chinese Malaysian Self (the old man) and the mainland Chinese Other (his spouse) is not direct (as it is only possible for it to take place thanks to the mediation of a third person), the old man is obliged to think comparatively of his status, his condition and the achievement of his goals. As the textual analysis shows, the old man thinks and acts in accordance with the condition of the sojourner, who, despite not seeing his life in the foreign land as permanent, is not given a chance to return home. While for the old man China will always be home, the place which he belongs to and longs for, in her short story, Shang Wanyun also introduces two other attitudes toward China, which reveal two other identity options. On the one hand, there is the Singaporean relative, who is presented as a middleman who stands with one foot in the homeland (China) and the other in the place of residence (Singapore/Malaysia); on the other hand, we have the old man’s son and daughter-in-law, who see Malaysia, rather than China, as the place they and their children call home.

Contrary to “Jun zi guxiang lai,” in Li Kaixuan’s short story the interaction between the Chinese Malaysian Self (the younger brother) and the mainland Chinese Other (the elder brother) is real and takes place in Malaysia. Through close scrutiny of the stylistic choices of the author, I have shown how Li deliberately chooses to present an image of China as the foreign land and of the mainland Chinese as the Other; he does so by using the third-person singular pronoun for the elder brother and the first-person plural pronoun for the Chinese

Malaysian community, thus framing a perspective which the reader is called to adopt. The elder brother is a returnee and, similarly to Chunmei, carries with himself a non-idealised representation of China. While this image of China is understandable for the younger brother who has the settler mentality and does not see it as home, it clashes with the father's romanticised sojourner vision of China as the place of (be)longing.

Therefore, in these two stories one can see different approaches to the Self and to China; moreover, the authors not only portray the attitude toward China as home, but also “the two extremes of the process of immigrants' commitment to the host country, and sojourners and settlers are immigrants who represent the two ends of this commitment” (Yang 63). In conclusion, the two short stories presented in this paper oblige us to think about China and Chineseness in a more complex, interconnected and layered way. In both texts, the authors decide to focus on the relationship between those who left and those who stayed; they are stories of migration and uprooting, but they are also tales of sojourning and settling. And it is in these quintessentially Sinophone Malaysian, yet unequivocally universal themes that we can find the strength of Shang Wanyun's and Li Kaixuan's stories.

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