

Allegorical and Parabolic: Sinophone Malaysian Literary Community in the 1980s Revisited

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The 1980s for Malaysia were a decade of social and political turbulence. In 1981, Mahathir Mohamad became the fourth prime minister, marking the beginning of “the Era of Mahathir,” a term I would later use in a conference paper, in Chinese, entitled “Chen Keong Wah, a Lyric Poet in the Era of Mahathir.” But in 1988 UMNO, the ruling political party he led, was declared illegal by the court in the aftermath of a party crisis, though he quickly formed a new UMNO. A year before, six months after the country’s constitutional crisis, Mahathir had ordered the notorious Operasi Lalang (the *Lalang* Grass Operation), arresting more than a hundred opposition activists and dissidents. The decade of the 1980s was ended with the signing of a peace agreement between the Communist Party of Malaya and both governments across the Malaysia-Thailand border, bringing the underground military struggle movement of the Communist Party to a historical end.

It is with this historical-contextual background of Malaysia of the 1980s in mind that I revisit the Sinophone Malaysian literary community (hereafter SMLC) of those turbulent years. In my journey to revisit the SMLC, I also ponder the following three questions: What is the significance of revisiting such an era? What is the significance of revisiting the SMLC of that era? What issues are raised in Sinophone Malaysian literary production of the era? A way of answering these questions is to revisit/reread a text by the Sinophone Malaysian short story writer Xiao Hei (literally “Little Black,” penname of Tan Kee Keat). A revisit always leads to other revisits.

The act of revisiting the past scene of a literary community is itself allegorical

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and parabolic. In his rereading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, J. Hillis Miller argues that Conrad's text is parabolic. According to Miller, "Unlike allegory, which tries to shed light on the past or even on our origins, parable tends to be oriented toward the future, toward last things . . ." (40). In this short essay I borrow Miller's idea of parable in my discussion, but my contention is that Xiao Hei's text, my object of study here, is both allegorical and parabolic. In 1990, Xiao Hei published his second collection of stories, *Qianxi (The Dawn)*. The author, who in his literary formative years used to write in the Modernist style about the self's existence in an absurd world, re-adopted a realistic approach to write about the dilemma of the Chinese Malaysian community in the decades before the Operasi Lalang. Xiao Hei's "turn" is also allegorical as it is already a "revisit" to the Realist field of Sino-phone Malaysian literature. Realism as a literary discourse had dominated the literary scene since its emergence in the 1920s.

The Sino-phone literary Realism in Malaya/Malaysia was importantly associated with the leftist Chinese writer Xu Jie, who arrived in Malaya in 1928 with the idea of "Emergent Literature" (*Xinxing wenxue*). During Xu's sojourn in Malaya, he served as editor of the literary supplement of *Yik Khuan Pao (Yi Qun Bao)*, a Kuala Lumpur-based Chinese-language newspaper, and urged local Sino-phone writers to compose works with progressive ideologies. Though Xu himself did not stay long in Malaya, he set the tone for the writings produced by the "South-coming" (*Nanlai*) Chinese writers in Malaya—to mirror the reality of Singapore-Malaya and to depict things *Nanyang* (literally "of the South Seas"), as well as the life of the working-class people. About two decades later, in the 1960s, however, the Sino-phone literary community was basically divided into two camps: the Realist and the Modernist. In fact, each formed a literary (sub-)community of its own.

Whereas the Realist writers from the SMLC continued to produce works that they claimed to reflect the society and life of the proletariat, another group of "South-coming" writers, the Modernist-leaning ones who fled from China to Hong Kong after Mao Zedong established the People's Republic of China, moved to the Nanyang in the mid-1950s; there, they established publishing houses and founded literary magazines. So, in the early 1960s the first wave of literary Modernism emerged, as young poets and fiction writers, mostly under the influence of Modernist writers in Hong Kong and Taiwan, began to publish their works in *The Student Weekly* and the *Chao Foon Monthly*. They planted the Modernist seed in the tropical soil of the Sino-phone Malaysian literary field. After the mid-1960s, Liang Meng Kwang and Tan Swie Hian in Singapore reinforced the Modernist movement when Liang took over the editorship of the literary supplement of *Nanyang Siang Pau* and when Tan founded May Publisher with his Modernist

comrades. While May Publisher put out various collections of avant-garde fiction and poetry, Tan joined the *Chao Foon Monthly* and edited several topical issues on Modernist writings, in which Chinese translations of works by James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, T. S. Eliot and Alain Robbe-Grillet were published. I termed Tan and Liang's endeavor the second Modernist wave of the SMLC.

Among the contributors from the Malay Peninsula who sent their works to Liang's Modernist literary supplement in the late 1960s, Xiao Hei is one of the few who are still writing after the new millennium. In his early years as a budding fiction writer, Xiao Hei published his short stories mostly in the literary supplement of *Nanyang Siang Pau*, *The Student Weekly*, and the *Chao Foon Monthly*. In 1979, his collection of experimental short stories, *Hei (Black)*, was published by Chao Foon Press. He tried, quite successfully, some longer pieces in the late 1970s, but basically he is a writer of short stories. The "sites" where his works appeared conveniently put him in the Modernist camp. During the late 1980s, however, Xiao Hei began to "revisit" the local Realist strand of literary expression and reorient his own writing ideology. In fact, he was not merely reproducing the social realism of the Realist writers; since the 1980s, in his attempt to write about the reality of "the Era of Mahathir," he has made use of Modernist or even metafictional techniques to reflect on the questions of ethnic and cultural identities. One work of note in this period is the short story "Shi.nianqi de wenxue jishi yu qita" ("October 27th's Literary Reportage and Other Accounts").

This allegorical story suggests "the tyranny of history" imposed on the SMLC in the 1980s. In a passage that opens the third section of the story, the narrator points out that "generally speaking, writers of Chinese descent write with extreme caution, holding the pen tightly before putting down a word, since it is crystal-clear that in a multiracial country one has to write very implicitly and objectively so as to avoid unnecessary trouble and misunderstanding" (130; my translation). While scholars like Syed C. Harrex have pointed out, taking the example of Cecil Rajendra, that Anglophone writers in Malaysia tend to voice their social concerns, Sinophone Malaysian writers are more likely to accept a mentality of self-censorship. Such a mentality has indeed reflected the dilemma of writers in the SMLC. For a believer of literary Realism, the task of a writer is to mirror reality faithfully, as literature is considered as the product of history and society; in the case of Sinophone Malaysian writers, however, such an act could be dangerous.

In "October 27th's Literary Reportage and Other Accounts," the Chinese Malaysian community is facing a cultural and ethnic crisis. In October 1987, the Chinese community leaders and education workers gathered to protest against the

Ministry of Education's appointment of non-Chinese-speaking personnel to Chinese elementary schools as administrators. Communal tensions exacerbated when some Malay leaders threatened to gather a mass of five-hundred thousand people in a counter-protest. Eventually what followed was the Operasi Lalang, with the arrests of over a hundred political activists of different ethnic backgrounds in a move to crack down on the dissidents. In Xiao Hei's story, worrying that he may be put in jail, the protagonist Han-sheng, an intellectual who writes social critiques for a newspaper column and whose name literally denotes "Chinese-born," hurriedly packs and drives, with his family, to leave Kuala Lumpur for his parents' home in Air Panas. As they are approaching Air Panas, they get stuck in a thick fog, and the driver can barely see anything in front of the car. This symbolic journey seems to suggest the uncertain future of the Chinese-born community in the country. In fact, quite a number of people emigrated after the Operation.

What makes Xiao Hei's story interesting are the intertexts within the text. Xiao Hei embedded a number of texts in the story, giving it a flavor of metafiction. In the story the narrator, also called Xiao Hei, mentions "The Dawn" ("Qianxi"), a short story by the author Xiao Hei himself, and a critical response to it by Tang Lin, a renowned Sinophone Malaysian critic. Poems from *Xianren zhang de huhuan* (*The Call of Cactuses*), a collection of poetry by He Naijian—specifically "Gu dao" ("Isolated Island") and "Zhongqiu" ("Mid-Autumn")—are also quoted. Both poems express the anxiety and cultural semiotics of the Chinese community. In addition to He's works, Fang Ang's poem of protest "Gei HCK" ("To HCK") is also quoted by the narrator. In the poem Fang's speaker protests against the Malay politicians' calling the ethnic Chinese "foreign immigrants" and against their accusation of the Chinese community of being nostalgic for China. This is of course a question of (the politics of) recognition. As pondered by the speaker: "If the motherland does not recognize her children, how could they express their love to her?" (qtd. in Xiao Hei 135). Three poems by Fu Chengde—"Shanyu yu lai" ("Before the Storm"), "Haoyu sui yue" ("Those Rainy Days"), and "Jinghun" ("Fright"), all published during the tumultuous months of September and October of 1987—also function as intertexts in the story. Furthermore, Xiao Hei, the author's namesake in the story, has not forgotten to quote his own writings. A column essay to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the independence of Malaysia and a poem arranged upside-down purposefully, "Daoli bushi na ren shuo de" ("That Man Has Not the Final Say"), are both cited: the former depicts the mentality of the Chinese community, and the latter the topsy-turvy political situation of the country. These intertexts within the text of "October 27th's Literary Reportage and Other Accounts" contribute to its centrifugal narrative structure, which in turn signifies

the centrifugal situation of the Chinese community. Readers of the story can hardly tell the literary scene from the political. It is in this sense that the act of revisiting a previous moment for a literary community is parabolic.

Xiao Hei's text is parabolic because toward the end of the story Han-Sheng's family are lost in their homebound journey due to a sudden thick fog, suggesting that the future of the community is unpredictable. After many years, when asked about Han-Sheng's journey, the narrator Xiao Hei is still obsessed with the symbolic connection between the fog and the communal dilemma.

It is parabolic because it reveals what has been veiled from the two journalists in the story who revisit the narrator after "many years" hoping to find out what has happened, one of them the younger brother of Han-sheng. The story, in reality, was written only a few years after the Operasi Lalang, the historical event that serves as the backdrop in the story leading to the missing of Han-Sheng. The two journalists want to confirm what they have heard regarding the past, but toward the end of the narrator's memory narrative, what is revealed to them is instead a symbolic future. In other words, the reporters, together with Xiao Hei (both the author and his namesake in the story), revisit the literary scene of the 1980s only to realize that the revelation has summed up the gloomy future of the Sinophone Malaysian literary community. Xiao Hei's story demonstrates the parabolic function of Sinophone Malaysian literature. It is in this sense that the multiple revisits in the story serve as an answer to the three questions posed at the beginning of this essay regarding the significance of revisiting the era of Mahathir, the significance of remapping the SMLC of that era, and the dominant theme of Sinophone Malaysian literary production of the era.

In the 1980s those writers from the SMLC who were sympathetic to the Modernist camp tended to respond to the social and political scenes in a more down-to-earth manner than their Modernist predecessors in the 1960s and the 1970s, as demonstrated by Xiao Hei and the poets whose works he quoted in his story. The political vicissitudes and historical violence, ironically, reinforced their obsession with Chineseness as a vantage point from which to preserve the cultural roots of the community.

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