

THE SPECTRAL NANYANG: RECOLLECTION, NATION, AND THE GENEALOGY OF

CHINESENESS

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ABSTRACT

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Decolonizing counter-narratives to Malaysia's official national history are insufficient to account for the complex legacies of nationalism in Malaysia, and its relationship with Chineseness, race, and colonialism. This dissertation close reads the fictional works of three contemporary Mahua (Malaysian Chinese) authors – Zhang Guixing, Ng Kim Chew and Li Tianbao – to argue that Mahua identity is haunted by a nationalistic Chineseness deriving from late 19th and early 20th century mainland China, which defines itself on the basis of an archaic, civilizational imaginary, with undertones of racial and cultural purity. This conditions Mahua political and cultural identity during flashpoints of Malaysian history across Malaya (now Peninsular Malaysia) and Borneo (now partially East Malaysia), spanning anti-colonial Hua-dominated communist movements during the Cold War, such as the Sarawak Communist Insurgency (1962-1990) and the Malayan Communist Party during the Malayan Emergencies (1948-1960 and 1968-1989); and Hua literati responses to a post-1969 renewal of the politics of Malay indigeneity. By complicating recuperative but reductive accounts of Hua communism that stress their nationalistic contributions, and subverting diasporic fascination with a literary and cultural China (*wenhua Zhongguo*) ideal, their fictional histories provide postcolonial critiques of the legacies of Hua nationalism, revealing how it appropriates and translates turn-of-the-century

nationalistic Chineseness as a response to local and regional politics. They deconstruct the appearance of static universality and unbroken temporality that forms part of the discourse of nationalistic Chineseness, and propose an alternate, mobile understanding of Chineseness that guards against ethnocentric Hua nationalism.

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Introduction

“The thin and long traces of handwriting (which belonged to his third brother) were immediately recognized by him.” (*Elephant Herd*, Zhang Guixing)

“All this hinted that their existence was now insignificant, weightless...a failed revolution’s fragmented recollection.” (*Nanyang People’s Republic Memorandum*, Ng Kim Chew)

“Her skin and his had never separated. The ending she listened to that night (before his death) she kept in her heart, such that in the future they would meet again one day, where she would tell him about it.” (*The Scent of Silkwear*, Li Tianbao)

These three moments, drawn from the authors examined in this dissertation, encapsulate the themes of this study. All three quotes are examples of spectrality – the haunting of the past in the present – taking place in the Nanyang, intersecting the history, recollection and politics of this space.¹ The first, from Zhang Guixing’s novel *Elephant Herd*, describes the opaque remainder of a jungle conflict, the Sarawak communist uprising from the 1960s to 1970s, an important moment for the reorganization of Borneo as part of the nation-state of Malaysia. The second, from Ng Kim Chew’s *Nanyang People’s Republic Memorandum*, is the narrator’s realization of the futility of his youthful struggle, as member of the underground Malayan Communist Party (MCP) who fought in the Communist Insurgency War from the late 1940s to the end of the 1980s – a Cold War proxy war fought over the alignment of a past British colony. The third, a melodramatic scene drawn from Li Tianbao’s short story collection, about a woman from the underworld, is located in an imagined Kuala Lumpur of the 1950s and 1960s, coinciding with the moment of Malayan

¹ The Nanyang (南洋), literally the South Seas, refers to the area now typically known as maritime Southeast Asia, which includes all of modern Indonesia, East Timor, Borneo, Singapore and Malaysia.

independence. All three texts deal with the haunting of the past in and by the Nanyang – which here stands as a liminal space of recollection and reimagination – a spectral space that reframes the postcolonial national imperative of Malaysia, and the regional appellation of Southeast Asia.

This dissertation studies these evocations of the Nanyang through the framework of spectrality. It suggests that the critical power of this imaginary, as employed by these authors, is due to their depiction of the space as a space of recollection. These authors do not merely represent the histories situated in the Nanyang; they recollect them, and draw our attention to the Nanyang as a contingent imaginary, through their form and content. I summarize this particular type of recollection through the term *spacing* – deriving from Jacques Derrida’s singular usage in his book, *Specters of Marx*.

Derrida’s use of this term is important for my dissertation. In *Specters*, he uses it to connote the indissociability of space and time in discussing displaced imaginaries, especially in relation with a conception of the nation that depends on the notion of “national rootedness.” Derrida suggests the discourse of nation depends, paradoxically, on an initial memory of movement, most concretely in the “anxiety of a displaced – or displaceable – population.” According to Derrida’s view of the nation, “it is not only time that is ‘out of joint’, but *space in time, spacing*.” (103) In the nationalist’s claim to rootedness and stability, there is a history – the “space in time, spacing” – that is suppressed and forgotten, for the nation to exist in the first place. Thus, there is a possible opening in the form of the nation – that is, its time and space – which recollection brings forth, destabilizing the smooth narrative of the nation.

By recollecting the spacing prior to the nation’s constitution, these authors cut through its time and space, showing what was forgotten for it to exist. In other words,

they recollect the forgotten histories that are supplementary, in the Derridean sense, to the establishment of the nation. I emphasize this supplementary relationship to suggest the Nanyang's status as a persistent imaginary for these authors – it hovers as a past within the present, and provides clues, echoes, and whispers (remainders of the past) that hint at a present that could be otherwise.² But it is not an alternative in the sense of something concrete, organized, or politically defined yet. Indeed, one of the recurring themes in their writing is the cost and failure of past forms of political organization that revolve around national identity, and how seemingly progressive alternatives can be drawn into its trap. The Nanyang specter disrupts the smooth mythology of the nation, and reveals its contingency as the defining feature of political organization in Malaysia.

The “trap” that these authors outline and depict in their works is, crudely put, Chinese nationalism, especially the form that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century, as experienced by ethnic Chinese groups located in Southeast Asia. This dissertation is indebted to Ng Kim Chew's attempts to come to grips with this haunting and persistent Chineseness, which arguably serves as a hidden backdrop to contemporary Malaysian Chinese, or Mahua politics and identity. The history of how mainland Chinese nationalism cultivated and drew substantial energies and support from ethnic Chinese groups located in Southeast Asia is well-documented³; however, Ng's work suggests that this nationalism persists as an ethnocentric specter that arises whenever anxieties over Malaysian Chinese identity appear, what he calls an “undead” form of Chineseness, which is also rooted in a cultural-civilizational textual imaginary

² A material fact: for instance, a prominent newspaper in Malaysia today is called the “Nanyang Siang Pau”.

³ See “From Immigrants to Citizens: Changing Identities of the Chinese in Malaysia” by Ching-hwang Yen, in *Ethnicities, Personalities and Politics in the Ethnic Chinese Worlds*; and “Revolution and ‘National Salvation’”, chapter 6 of Philip Kuhn's *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* for an overview of this history.

that originates from archaic China.⁴ My dissertation builds on this insight, suggesting that these authors – including Ng – perform an excavation of nationalistic Chineseness through their Nanyang spacing. It also expands the discussion to include other locales (such as Borneo), and cultural mediums such as film and music, to discern the features of this persistent Chineseness as it emerges in different geographical and historical conjunctures. The spectral Nanyang is thus a historical method – these authors excavate the persistence of Chineseness through their Nanyang recollections, and reveal the contingency of the Malayan/Malaysian nation by doing so.

The field of the nation – national history, recollection, and temporality

In his introduction to *End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, T.N. Harper notes that

In Malaya, where Malay, Chinese and Indian populations have created the classic plural society, historians have sought to explain how politicians and governments have attempted to create community, new cultures of belonging. The standard political accounts of decolonisation emphasised how ethnic parties forged a nationalist Alliance, dominated by Malay nationalism, to which the British could devolve power, and how it used this power to promote a common Malayan, later Malaysian identity. However, the integrationalist assumptions of this kind of nation-building have now been questioned. Pluralism did not give way to assimilation, nor ethnic politics to multi-racialism. Historians now look to explain why this has been so, and

⁴ Ng's book *Textuality, Soul, and Body: On Chinese Modernity* traces the connection between what he calls the "recent invention of Chineseness" and its textual basis.

now see the nation as more contested than they have done in the past, not only between the constituent ethnic communities, but also within the majority Malay nationalism itself (2).

As Harper points out, the writing of history is inseparable from the present in which history is being written; the historian's goals and rationale correspond with the political horizon and place one is writing from. Summarizing the existing historiography of Malaysia – at least, as available in the English-speaking world – Harper notes that there are three main discourses: first, a history-writing that participated within a colonial modernization framework, what Harper calls “a necessary adjunct of the practical business of government,” which derived its legitimacy from goals of establishing modernity, and the creation of a state that would construct a modern nation out of disparate ethnic groups and modes of being (3). It also originated from “a long line of colonial scholar-administrators who combined the development of modern administration with pioneering enquiries into the character of indigenous arrangements” (3) – highlighting the way historical writing was also a tool for colonial organization, carried over to the postcolonial context as part of a discourse of state development.⁵ Secondly, there is a history-writing derived from “a view from below” – a “subaltern vision” that challenged state perspectives on development, and tried to depict “indigenous agency” and the spaces that colonial subjects in Malaya found to, if not evade, at least accommodate colonial rule (4). Harper connects this to the rise and reassertion of civil society in Malaysia, which questioned state imperatives and provided a counter-hegemonic response (4-5). Thirdly, there is a “tradition that eschews secular modernity,” influenced by cultural anthropology, directed at looking for indigenous concepts within the local past that

⁵ As Nicholas Tarling notes in *Nationalism In Southeast Asia*, institutions such as the “Royal Asiatic Society Malayan Branch” and the “Raffles Museum” were established to produce such historical writings in the late 19th century (236).

distances itself from the Eurocentrism and “colonial records history” that permeated the first type of historical writing, and authenticates local experience and institutions as continuous from pre- to post-colonial times (6).

The way Harper reads and organizes these historiographies according to their political corollaries situates history-writing within a self-reflexive context – to provide certain explanations that are clearly goal-driven, with the aim to *elucidate*. This reflects the institutional basis of these historical writings, important to consider as what de Certeau calls the “historicity of history,” linking “interpretative practice to a social praxis” (21), emphasizing the social role and position of the historian as academic, speaking to specialized audiences that include policy-makers, and in postcolonial contexts, tied still with the project of nation-building and writing *bildung* for its citizens. The recollection of the past, however, is not limited to the institutional discipline of history, as memoirs, artworks, museums, monuments, and so on function as part of a “memory discourse,” which potentially expand and disrupt these histories.⁶

A prominent example of a “counter-memory” text, which challenges existing state narratives would be Chin Peng’s 2003 memoir on his time with the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), *My Side of History*, providing an alternate picture of the decolonizing era and communist resistance during the Malayan Emergency, which defies the conventional state-driven representation of communists as enemies of the nation.⁷ Another example would be *The Fajar Generation*, a collection of essays published in 2009, written and edited by ex-members of the University Socialist Club

⁶ What Pierre Nora calls the “lieux de memoire”, or places of memories, in his essay “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*”.

⁷ Chin Peng was not allowed by the state to return to Malaysia even after his death, and died in exile in Thailand in 2013. In the introduction to his memoir, he writes: “History is the written testimony – or interpretations – of events by those who live it or inherit its spoils. When it comes to matters of military conflict, history is inevitably portrayed from the point of view of victors whose utterances end up in libraries and archives.” (9, *My Side*)

during the early days of the University of Malaya (now National University of Singapore), which pushed left-wing ideas of socialism and decolonization, and tells the story of Singapore from the perspective of those who were subsequently imprisoned and experienced crack-down over a number of years by the ruling government. In recent years, more such narratives have become available to the public, expanding discourse on the roots of both modern nation-states, and reflecting heightened interest in their historical foundations beyond the state-approved version of what Harper calls the “standard political accounts of decolonisation” (2).⁸ Be they official, institutional histories that are state-mandated recollections of the past, academic histories derived from disciplinary operations of the university, or individual counter-memoirs that explicitly challenge institutional recollection, what unifies these approaches is the importance assigned to narrative as a representational form – the telling and retelling of the past in words. Each of these recollections have distinct narrative forms that reflect their historiographical goals.

My goal in this study is to broaden this historiography, through what I call the *spectral Nanyang*. This is a historical method that takes fictional texts about the formation of the nation-state of Malaya and Malaysia as its basis, and, juxtaposed with other recollections that narrate the same period, interrogates assumptions of historical retelling and recollection of national formation that have not been discussed. As a method of encountering postcolonial history – what Walter Benjamin calls “a unique experience with the past” (396) – the spectral Nanyang provides an imaginative perspective that proceeds from a denationalizing angle, and expands the basis of history-writing in this context beyond the nation-form. Beyond counter-memory, it interrogates the philosophical assumptions of historical writing that

⁸ Apart from English sources, a number of writings in Chinese have also been published to this end, mostly by members and ex-members of the communist movements throughout Malaysia.

revolves around the nation, attempting to show the limits of such approaches to the formation history of Malaysia, and the gaps in perspective that inhere in existing narratives.

This is not to collapse fiction into history, or history with fiction; yet, as fictions *about* history, informed by events, peoples, and dates that did exist, these texts occupy a unique space that illuminate the blind spots of conventional, nation-driven writings of history. By not being solely historical accounts, they are able to ask meta-historical questions about the writing of history, and foreground its process as part of their narrative. Inviting the reader to reflect upon not just the content of these histories, but also the form of their presentation, they ask what is left out of the formation narratives of Malaysia, and how this occurs, through assumptions of uninterrupted materiality, textual coherence and temporal linearity. They argue that such narrative features are constitutive of nationalistic recollections, which do not just refer to state-approved historical writing, but to all such writings that are drawn into the field of the nation.

In an extensive reading of Derrida's *Specters*, Pheng Cheah points out that for Derrida,

...the persistence, survival, or living-on of the form of a present being through time – the form which makes something actual, which allows it to be materialized, and the persistence of which represents a momentary arresting of our dying in any given instance – is a minimal idealization before idealization proper because this persistence allows us to identify this present being as the *same* throughout all its possible repetitions...as the iterability that constitutes the present in general, that which makes any and all presence possible, this minimal

idealization is the trace of the inhuman and unnatural spectral other within the present in general. But more important, spectrality is also the condition of possibility of the externalization of ideas proper, of their incorporation in an external body qua present object, etc., as well as the condition of possibility of ideologization. (191, “Spectral Nationality”)

In this passage, Cheah lays out a reading of Derrida’s spectralization as “a general process of paradoxical incorporation” (189). Cheah reads this as part of his project to show the “mutual haunting between the nation and the state” in the postcolonial context, and the origins of another metaphor for the postcolonial nation based on the figure of the ghost instead of an “organic people” (276, *Spectral Nationality*). While his work focuses on the macro interpenetration of capital and the postcolonial nation-state, I suggest that Derrida’s notion of spectrality can also be productively read at a micro-level: that of the iterative necessity of the nation’s appearance. In the nation’s presentation (or, “incarnation”) as a necessary form of life, in other words, as presence, we can detect the “trace of the inhuman and unnatural spectral other” (278). Its “materialization” or “incorporation” as a unified body that carries spirit (*geist*) is always a presentation and re-presentation that requires the constant and forcible expulsion of this specter, for it to function through continuity, instead of disjunction. This “presentation and re-presentation” is the work of recollection – most obviously through national history written by the victors of conflict, but also, as argued by these authors, alternative histories and memories that are generated under this national framework.

For the postcolonial nation to exist in time, as a continuous body that can be imagined, aspired to, defended, or transfigured, it requires a recollected past. Andreas

Huyssen, in *Present Pasts*, sums up the traditional relationship between history and nation as one directed

to guarantee the relative stability of the past in its pastness...to anchor the ever more transitory present of modernity and the nation in a multifaceted but strong narrative of historical time...the main concern of the nineteenth-century nation-states was to mobilize and monumentalize national and universal pasts so as to legitimize and give meaning to the present and to envision the future: culturally, politically, socially (1-2).

To point the movement of the nation towards a future, the past needs to be recollected as past, as something that has been accounted for within the boundaries of national meaning. This “strong narrative of historical time” for the nation’s constituents, Huyssen points out, is the bulwark to the project of modernity and its “transitory present”, the foundation that prevents its dissolution, and gives it the sense of a vehicle that moves towards an unfolding future (or, a linear and progressive time). Relatedly, Eric Hobsbawm points out that the nation depends on the “invention of tradition” to appear as “natural” – “so natural as to require no definition other than self-assertion” (12). In other words, the nation’s “incarnation” and “presence-ing” requires a most unnatural need to wrest control of historical time, be it the recent or an archaic past, such that it appears as a “stable”, “natural”, and “organic” beyond time, as a body that does not and cannot die. However, this incorporation of an “undead body” is paradoxical – how does the nation-form appear as a “natural” body that is beyond time (with all the implications of stasis and unchangeability), while still existing continuously in time, as a mobile subject of history?

Benedict Anderson's observation that the "imagined community" of the nation depends on an "empty, homogenous time" as a backdrop gives us a clue. As Anderson argues, the nation's defining temporal characteristic is that for its constituents, the experience of time is simultaneous, which means that A can assume B's, C's, D's participation in the "same clocked, calendrical time", even if A has never met the rest of his or her fellow citizens, and does not meet any of B, C, D during the course of his actions (26). This, he notes, applies also to the person reading about these people. To the reader of the newspaper or the eighteenth-century (and early postcolonial) novel – both narrative forms that accompany the nation-form – it is possible to imagine the simultaneity of these characters' actions, as "they, like God, watch A telephoning C, B shopping, and D playing pool all at once." (26) To the reader, these characters all inhabit the same temporal milieu, and possess the same temporal sense, which draws them together under the same "firm and stable reality" (25). Such a depiction of time – which allows for "complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity" (26) is precisely the depiction of time as background, "empty and homogenous" – an unchanging, linear entity that points one-way, assumed to be held by all its members. This allows for the conception of "a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history" (26) – but only if history itself is imagined as an inert background. That is to say, the nation can appear to move, to progress, only if it continuously redefines past *as* past, such that it does not interfere with the present and future.

If the past, and history itself, is presented this way, the nation can always move as the carrier of history – it is the only entity that moves in time, which also renders it "beyond time." The nation works as a "field" that draws in the past, and yet always reaffirms its central position as subject of history – what is historical is what

fits in the narrative of the nation. This is so even if what is written is a counter-memory or memoir that is intended to challenge existing state narratives. This is not to denigrate the value of alternative histories and recollections – rather, it is to critique how the nation functions as an unsurpassable horizon for meaning-making and past-collection for these alternate histories, as a conditioning form for interaction with the past. Wang Gungwu gives a perceptive account of this limit; as he puts it,

National history rarely begins with the past few decades. On the contrary, there is the well established tradition in the modern West of tracing every national history to its ancient past in an effort to connect everything that happened within the country's boundaries to the "final" outcome, the present nation-state. Indeed, national historians are often expected to concentrate on earlier periods that enhance the sense of nationhood and support the nation's ultimate rise and development. Some might even see that as their primary contribution to enable present and future generations of their fellow citizens to recognize the continuities in the past and identify with them. Only in that way could citizens develop the deep-rooted sense of pride that all nation-states need...National history, therefore, tends to look backwards to find the nation's beginnings far back in the past and thus tackle later developments *teleologically* so that patriotic citizens can connect them with a *meaningful* present.⁹ (7-8)

What I am arguing as "past as past" here is not that the past does not "contribute" to the present, or that it has no resonance in the present; as Wang notes, for certain "patriotic citizens" it makes the present meaningful, as it derives an interpretation of

⁹ Italics mine.

the past based on teleology, which can be reconnected to the present. In fact, national history (like national politics) in Southeast Asia is tied with a legacy of progressive and decolonizing politics, as part of nation-building, as

the nationalist slogans that promised a great new beginning had now to be translated into policies and actions that not only confirmed the power of the state but also launched the project to make nationals of every citizen. (13)

This, however, shows both its goal and limit – it is related to a centralizing entity of power, as an apparatus of state function. The ethos of this centralizing entity can be pointed out as *making the past make sense* in national terms, part of an extended project of citizenship. The limit of such a history is that it assumes a unified present, which can be equally applied to the constituents of the geographical field that it takes on. It is part of a centralizing force, a disciplining power that contains the past within its teleological borders. The corollary to Anderson’s observation of the simultaneous time of the nation is precisely the erasure of difference – the uneven temporalities, histories, standpoints, geographies, and experiences of the past that are unaccounted for in the movement of the nation. The “past as past” thus means that this history has now been reintroduced to (or recuperated in) the nation’s temporal field, and its unifying body. Its specters are those who do not fit within this project, or those who are quite literally, as Derrida would put it, in a “time out of joint.”

Engaging with the spectral Nanyang as a form of historiography illuminates certain assumptions hidden in the formation of the nation-state, and the limits of a political imaginary that is conditioned by this formation. By critically presenting spectral recollections of the formation of Malaya and Malaysia, and taking the perspective of those who have been left behind – holdovers from the project of

national modernity – these texts challenge the unifying force of national recollection, and present an irreducible alterity to simplifying conceptions of the national body. They interrogate the national body by considering Chineseness as an unresolved specter that haunts the temporality and spatiality of the nation, a historical outlier that interacts but is not fully subsumed within the Malayan and Malaysian nation, despite political accommodation in an apparently multi-racial political and social system.

Chineseness: race, history, and nationalism

This study considers the recurrence of “Chineseness” as a flashpoint in three moments of formation and unification – the formation of Malaya, marking formal independence from the British in 1957, the constitution of Malaysia through the addition of Borneo in 1963, and the post-1969 re-emphasis on Malay-Muslim identity as national culture. Each of these moments are times of transition, what Benjamin calls “a moment of danger” that crystallizes conjunctures of political and social identities (391), and reveals a snapshot of the social forces that are in play.

In these three moments, the notion of Chineseness forms an alterity to the constitution of the nation. However, Chineseness here is not assumed as an essentialized identity; rather, the point of interrogating its appearance in these moments is to understand how it is an inheritance, which these authors excavate and work through. By excavating and working through this inheritance, the authors seek to contextualize, and denationalize its contemporary appearance.

They do so by historicizing the appearance of Chineseness, showing how Mahua identity – the local term for Malaysian Chinese – is conditioned by not only the immediate political context, but also historically constructed Chinese nationalism

that draws inspiration from archaic sources.¹⁰ However, this is also subject to local pressures and formations. Tracking how it is shaped and formed, then, reveals a translation that is essential to Hua identity at these moments, as a way of making sense of their surroundings; even in nationalistic Chineseness, a gap remains in the way Hua translation of such ideas takes place. At the same time, these authors also show how Chineseness at these moments is constituted and reproduced by national pressures, and how it absorbs the imperatives of nation-building, state-craft, and other modernist goals that are characteristic of these moments of formation. They critique these formations of Chineseness, by presenting alternative, fictional recollections of these time periods, as described by individual narrators who remain outside of the nation-building imperative.

These recollections escape the field of the nation, as each presentation challenges an element of nationalistic recollection, which also reflects upon certain goals of nationalistic construction. They also reveal the different contexts whereby nationalistic Chineseness comes into play, and the assumptions laden in them that suggest a continuity, rather than a break, with what it seemingly opposes. In other words, nationalistic Chineseness is not an alterity to the horizon of the Malayan-Malaysian nation; it is in fact constitutive of and constituted by it, which explains its persistence as a racial identity and grouping until the present day.

¹⁰ *Mahua* (马华) – Ma standing in for Malaya/Malaysia, Hua for Chinese – is a relatively recent term that began as an abbreviation of *Malaiya Huaqiao* (Overseas Chinese in Malaya). Debates over localization of Chinese literature in 1930s Malaya led to the widespread adoption of Mahua as a Malayan identity, and Chinese literature produced in Malaya as *Mahua wenxue* (Mahua literature). See Tee Kim Tong, “Sinophone Malaysian Literature: An Overview”, in *Sinophone Studies*, ed. Shu-Mei Shih and Brian Bernards, for a brief historical account of this phrase. *Hua* (华), however, is a long-standing term that has claims to being one of the earliest self-signifiers that implied ethno-cultural unity of the ancient Chinese – that is, the people living near the Central Plains and Yellow River – even prior to the preferred term *Han* today that is used as an equivalent term for the “Chinese race”. See Mark Elliot, “Hushuo: The Northern Other and the Naming of the Han Chinese” in *Critical Han Studies*, ed. Mullaney et. al. for a discussion on the ancient nuances of both terms.

While recent studies of racial politics in contemporary Malaysia focus on the way racial identities were constructed and essentialized by long periods of British colonial rule in Malaya, this study argues that this is only part of the picture.¹¹ British colonization, which transformed the social fabric of 19th century Malaya through mass Chinese migration for its colonial projects, is inseparable from the larger story of Western imperialism and British semi-colonialism of China in the 19th century. British incursion into Southeast Asia had begun in the late 18th and early 19th century as part of an effort to secure trading points with China, and involved Chinese migrant assistance – especially the earlier, creolized Chinese migrants who worked as cultural and commercial middlemen called the Peranakan in the Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca, and Singapore)¹² (101). However, Philip Kuhn points out that “Chineseness, in those early days, had not emerged as a *political* concept in East Asia, nor the nation-state as a focus of loyalty” (103).

Only until the mid-19th century did mass migration of the Chinese to Malaya take place, a movement impossible without the accompanying opening up of China to the West, especially through the treaties signed after the First Opium War (1840-42). These treaties, examples of British determination to impose “free trade” at the time, not only created the legal framework for mass exportation of Chinese laborers globally through the establishment of treaty ports (Canton) and colonial enclaves (Hong Kong), but also the social and economic conditions (poverty, war, and chaos) in the Southern provinces that led to mass migration abroad (111). In the case of

¹¹ See Charles Hirschman, “The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia: An Analysis of Census Classifications.” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 1987; “The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology.” *Sociological Forum*, 1986; and Collin Abraham, “Racial and Ethnic Manipulation in Colonial Malaya.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 1983.

¹² The Peranakan (“local born”) were early Chinese migrants who settled in Malaysia and Singapore, prior to the massive influx of Chinese immigrants (the “Totok”) in the late 19th century. Also known as the Straits Chinese, they were a creolized community who melded regional Chinese and local customs and habits, and also had major roles in running and maintaining the colonial economy. See Chapter 2 of Philip Kuhn’s book, *Chinese Among Others: “Early Colonial Empires and Chinese Migrant Communities”*.

Malaya and the Straits Settlements, this begun after 1874, as the British prioritized the profitable tin mining industry in West Malayan states, but also developed sugar and rubber plantations, which required numerous cheap labor to operate (148). This mass migration also included Chinese artisans, merchants, and entrepreneurs, the accompanying infrastructure for trade (for instance to Singapore) – to such an extent that the Chinese became the “dominant ethnic group in Malaya’s west coast states,” more than the Malays, Indians, and indigenous peoples who comprised Malaya (148).

This mass migration formed the background conditions for the political expression of Chinese nationalism in Malaya. It is a “reciprocal production of intersecting cultures,” inseparable from both British imperialist ambitions and Chinese responses to defeat and incursion by Western, and later, Japanese powers (271). Chinese communities in Malaya and Southeast Asia thus became subject to multiple demands and exhortations for loyalty – a complex, interweaving web of nationalisms that reflects the relative political instability of the late 19th and early 20th century worldwide. The losses suffered by the ruling Qing government at that time to Western powers, as part of the “opening up of China” (108) led to both a reformist movement, driven by figures like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, that sought to reform the Qing government into a constitutional monarchy, and a revolutionary, Han-nationalistic movement, spearheaded by Sun Yat-Sen that would establish a modern republic. Both movements drew from Western conceptions of race and nationhood as they reimagined a post-imperial China, appealing to Chinese communities abroad in their quest to strengthen differing conceptions of a new, imagined “Chinese nation.”¹³

¹³ Kuhn points out that all three factions – the Qing government, the reformists and the revolutionaries – had established a presence in Southeast Asia by the late 19th century to garner support for their respective objectives. See Chapter 3, “Imperialism and Mass Emigration” for an account.

As Kai-wing Chow points out, this included not only advocating for political and social restructuring, it also included an epistemological reorienting to insert a hitherto missing China in a “world history” deriving from a Hegelian, Eurocentric perspective.¹⁴ This “missing China” was also a linguistic problem for intellectuals, because “China” as a term, even transliterated, was a foreign name by others like the English, French, Sanskrit and Japanese, not used for self-reference, which typically was the dynastic name of the time (e.g. *Da Ming* – The Great Ming).¹⁵ To establish “China”, or *Zhongguo*, within this new world meant to establish it as a nation, which also meant introducing new racial terms, deriving from “scientific” discourses of Social Darwinism, which was popular in the West¹⁶ (53). While there was much dispute and discussion about how to translate these terms to the Chinese context, one of the results of this reorientation was the construction of a “Han race” that served as

¹⁴ “China” as a historical entity obviously exists; its own historical time was explained in cyclical terms based on the Mandate of Heaven and the notion of *tianxia*. However, in the Hegelian scheme of the world, it was regarded as a despotic and unenlightened entity because it could not be understood in the “national” sense, and its accompanying linear temporality. To be part of the “world”, as Lydia Liu points out in her discussion of Arif Dirlik’s work on Chinese anarchism, “...at issue is not the collapse of a Confucian order in the Levensonian sense, but the emergence of a new dialectical view of the nation and global society that enabled the ‘redefinition of China as a nation in a world of nations’ while eliciting ‘as its dialectical counterpoint a new vision of a world in which nations would once again disappear and humankind would discover a world of unity.’ (40, *Translingual Practice*)

¹⁵ See Lydia Liu, “Figuring Sovereignty” in *The Clash of Empire* for a history of the term “China”. The term “China” conceals slippages, misrepresentations and projections, “an object of possession, evangelization, aggression and conquest...In the effort to recover a missing referent for “China”, the late Qing nationalists such as Huang Zunxian and Liang Qichao helped forge the powerful super-sign *Zhongguo/China* that masked a dubious referent even as it produced simulacra of Chineseness that came already embedded in the other’s discourse. Having said so, what do we make of the indigenous naming of the self in the past? Has it been less burdened by similar sorts of conjurations and anxieties? The answer is no. For the bounded geopolitical entity variously known as *Zhonghua*, *Zhongyuan* (Central Land), *Zhongtu* (Central Terrain), or *Zhongguo* (Central States) has been subjected to “alien” rule for a good portion of its dynastic history and is never fully identical with itself. Whether we are talking about the Warring States, the Han dynasty, the Tang, the Song, the Mongol Rule in the Yuan, the Ming, or the Qing dynasty, the ideas of *Zhonghua* and *Zhongguo* have never achieved a stable, definitive meaning in indigenous discourse.” (81)

¹⁶ See Arif Dirlik, “Born in Translation: ‘China’ in the Making of ‘Zhongguo’”: “Properly speaking, *Zhongguo*(or *Zhonghua*) as the name of the country should be restricted to the political formation(s) that succeeded the last imperial dynasty, the Qing. Even if the modern sense of the term could be read into its historical antecedents, it does not follow that the sense was universally shared in the past, or was transmitted through generations to render it into a political or ideological tradition, or part of popular political consciousness...It was in the in the nineteenth century, in the midst of an emergent international order and under pressure from it, that *Zhongguo* in the singular acquired an unequivocal meaning, referring to a country with a definite territory but also a Chinese nation on the emergence.”

the basis of anti-Qing rhetoric, and anti-Manchu rule, who were framed as “foreigners” (*wairen*)¹⁷ (53). Another effect of this would be the invention of a “comprehensive history” (*tongshi*) that narrated the history of “China”/ “Zhongguo,” which differed from older imperial histories in that it “rendered the earlier dynastic histories into building blocks of a progressive narrative construction of the nation” – the origin of the myth of an unbroken five thousand-year history that culminated in the current “China” (Dirlik).

This argument against the legitimacy of Manchu rule departed from earlier arguments about dynastic legitimacy because it utilized a new framework of sovereignty, and racial categories which originated from the European conception of nation-state and national identity (53, Chow). The notion of a “Han race” that became dominant was also critically related to a “lineage” framework. This “patriarchal lineage” framework, drawn from Manchu genealogical practices, was intertwined with racial categories of yellowness deriving from French orientalist theories and Social Darwinism. In the past, “Han” was “one of several identities loosely used to distinguish inhabitants of China from the ‘barbarians’ beyond the frontier before the nineteenth century” (48); however, late Qing revolutionaries against Qing rule popularized the idea of the Han race as successors of the mythical “Yellow Emperor”

¹⁷ As Chow points out, the reformists supported including the Manchu in the “yellow race”, whereas the revolutionaries excluded them. Other writings of this time showed a variety of ways these Western concepts could be appropriated and refitted. Also see Mark Elliot’s essay, “Hushuo: The Northern Other and the Naming of the Han Chinese” in *Critical Han Studies* ed. Mullaney et. al. for a history of “Han” naming, which he suggests is largely arbitrary and has been applied to multiple groups: “...the notion of a durable, unified conception of the Han people as a people dating back to millenia is largely a myth; for much of Chinese history, divisions of various sorts – both those between Chinese and non-Chinese and those between northerners and southerners – prevented such an idea from taking hold.” (175) According to Elliot, “Han” as an ethnonym – that is to say, not merely as a dynastic signifier (as there was a Han dynasty from 3rd century BC to 3rd century AD) to refer to *both* northern and southern populations of the mainland, only came to prominence in the 15th century during the Ming dynasty to stoke unity against a Mongolian Other (188). Even this ethnonym, however, was subject to further revisions, disputes, and changes in the Qing dynasty, as Chow’s account shows.

(*Huangdi*) in ancient folk religion, and rewrote Chinese history and historiography into a history of Han versus the Other. As Chow puts it:

Only by narrating the struggle of various dynasties against a generalized enemy, the barbarians, could continuity be located in the new historical narrative. Even though the various dynasties were founded by different houses, and in many cases by barbarians, they were homogenized into one subject in a constant struggle against the faceless barbarians, homogenized into an enemy of the Han lineage. The national identity of the Chinese was imagined in historical narratives of barbarian invasion (61).

This racial national identity, formulated during a time of great socio-political transformation on the mainland, became the basis for a different form of Chineseness in the late 19th and early 20th century that was exported to Southeast Asia by anti-Qing revolutionaries and nationalists who sought support from Chinese abroad.

This Han-dominated nationalistic Chineseness, however, is only one contingent form of Chineseness that has existed in Malaya, and subsequently Malaysia. As various scholars have pointed out, prior to the introduction of this new nationalistic Chineseness in the late 19th century, the main bodies of socio-political organization for the Nanyang Chinese were associations based on dialect (more accurately, *topolect*)¹⁸, region, and kinship through notional surnames. At the same time, because others (the colonial state and other ethnic groups and indigenes) treated them as a “single population group”, these associations could be “supplemented,

¹⁸ From a linguistic perspective, the Chinese “dialects” are mutually unintelligible languages – for instance, the relationship between Hokkien and Cantonese is similar to that of French to Italian, and so not be subsumed under the vague rubric of “Chinese dialects”, which gives the false impression that they are more or less mutually intelligible. Topolect is a recent term that seeks to combine the political and linguistic history of these languages, and also has the advantage of a direct equivalent in Mandarin, *fangyan* (literally, “place speech”). See Victor Mair, “What is a Chinese ‘Dialect/Topolect’? Reflections on Some Key Sino-English Linguistic Terms”.

when necessary, by a pan-Chinese vision” (248, Kuhn). However, this grouping did not refer to a centralized state in the mainland, and functioned as a symbolic and cultural reference rather than a political one, evinced by the terms *Huaren* (people of the Hua) and *Tangren* (people of the Tang dynasty) as self-descriptions. The diversity of languages and origins from the south rendered them separate, particularistic entities that frequently came into conflict and dissension – for instance, in the Hakka and Hokkien gang wars that took place in the 18th century. Kuhn, thus, terms the nationalism originating in the late 19th a “taught nationalism” – brought by political activists from the mainland and driven by this imperative to “unify” the “overseas Chinese”, or the “Chinese sojourners” (*Huaqiao*) who had previously been viewed as less a resource than a threat, by the imperial governments in the mainland.¹⁹ It was also “taught” as the Chinese school system played a major role in transmitting nationalist ideas, to the extent that the British attempted to control the education curriculum after 1920.²⁰

At the turn-of-the-century, various nationalisms and political movements – the Qing court, reformists, revolutionaries and the colonial British – competed for the loyalty of the Nanyang Chinese, for their respective causes. In both Malaya and Borneo, the visits of Chinese intellectuals from the mainland proved to be popular, as nationalistic figures like Sun Yat-Sen and Wong Nai Siong called for “Nanyang Chinese unity” to restore the greatness of the mainland. This kind of proxy

¹⁹ Wang Gungwu, in *The Chinese Overseas*, points out that “from the 1370s till 1893, the main thrust of imperial law on the subject of Chinese leaving their country’s shore were very clear. If they had no approved reason for being outside the country, these Chinese would be punished as criminals on their return.” (43) For instance, as Kuhn writes, in 1749, Chen Yi, a wealthy Hokkien merchant based in the Dutch East Indies, was arrested and tried under suspicion of having “served a foreign government” by coastal officials upon his return to the mainland (90). The tension between trade and security persisted in Chinese emigration policy, and it was only until after 1893 that this law was officially scrapped. The term “overseas Chinese” also came into view to describe the Chinese abroad at this time, both officially and popularly, but as Kuhn points out, “...it was a euphemism that was not based on empirical knowledge of how particular populations of Chinese overseas felt about their land of origin or their venue societies.” (243)

²⁰ See TN Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*.

competition continued throughout the 20th century, for instance in the establishment of the Malayan branch of the Kuomintang (KMT) and the reformation of the Nanyang Communist Party into the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in 1930. This competition for Chinese loyalty also sparked a reaction on the part of the British, which banned Guomindang societies twice in 1925 and 1930, to curb what they perceived as the growth of “outside interference” in their colonies (269).

Rising alongside this volatile mix of Chinese nationalisms was anti-colonial Malay nationalism in the late 19th century, deriving from Islamic activism in the Middle East. It had coalesced into a significant political movement by the 1930s, also equally split among multiple factions and influences. This included an Anglo-educated elite, Indonesian-influenced leftists, and the Islamic modernists. At the same time, there was a growing pan-Indian movement in Malaya, influenced by the Indian independence movement and Dravidian movement (101, Solomon).²¹ These competing nationalisms showed the complex intersecting forces that produced nationalistic Chineseness, Malayness, Indianness, and the tensions that arose from disputes over loyalty to the local versus a homeland abroad, present even among the multiple decolonizing movements that subsequently followed in Malaya. In Sarawak, the nationalism that took shape – a Sarawakian autonomy movement spearheaded by Chinese leftist vanguardists – intersected with the political goals of Indonesia and Brunei respectively, to promote a pan-Bornean, anti-colonial nationalism. While this would later manifest itself as a concrete North Kalimantan political imaginary, its roots stem from resistance towards Japanese occupation of Borneo from 1942 to 1945. This paralleled the ongoing Sino-Japanese conflict in the mainland (1937-45), which in

²¹ See John Solomon, *A Subaltern History of the Indian Diaspora in Singapore*, Cheah Boon Keng, *Red Star Over Malaya*, K.S. Sandhu, “The Coming of the Indians to Malaysia”, and Sinnappah Arasaratnam, “Malaysian Indians: The Formation of Incipient Society”, both in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, for descriptions of early Indian nationalism in Malaya.

its original incarnation of the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) was one of the impetuses for nascent Chinese nationalism that spread to the Nanyang.

Specters of denationalization

The point of revisiting this earlier history of Malaysia is to illuminate how Chineseness is inflected by regional geopolitical occurrences, such that one must speak of multiple Chineseness-es at any given historical conjuncture. Rather than essentialize and fold Chineseness into one unified, timeless entity that can be integrated into the field of the nation, it is imperative to historicize and denationalize its various manifestations, by showing the continuities and fragmentations that follow its contingent appropriations by the Nanyang Chinese. It is a specter insofar as it requires historical contingency and geopolitical events for its “body” to be “filled out.” Examining this specter at these various points, then, illuminates how the field of the nation is constructed, and the kinds of philosophical and textual assumptions that Chineseness absorbs in order to establish *presence* in a society structured by nationalism – much like how the nation “Zhongguo/China” could only come into existence after it was reformulated in national terms. It shows that the appropriate way of framing this history is not through the discourse of Chinese nationalism, but Hua nationalism with Chinese characteristics.

This is important to counter the fraught idea of “Chinese exceptionalism,” both as a point of pride for ethnocentric self-identification and as a tool of Othering employed by states and indigenous nationalisms.²² It requires a sensitivity to the history *and* spectrality of Chineseness – not to be misunderstood as a timeless entity

²² The term “Chinese exceptionalism” today refers to the rise of “China” as a powerful and peaceful nation; much like its equivalent, “American exceptionalism”, it is a mythology created to justify a cultural or ideological uniqueness that abets the cultivation of political nationalism. One of its claims is of a civilization that is culturally archaic and historically unsurpassed, with universal “values” that are applicable to all Chinese everywhere at all times.

that serves as an imaginative, originating homeland elsewhere, as in diaspora – but rather a constitutive Other of Malaysian nationalism that inflects even those who have never been to the “homeland.” That is to say, the specter here is produced and reproduced by the nationalistic framework that purportedly seeks to eliminate and assimilate it, a paradox that serves, as all three authors argue, the elites and vanguards of these national transformations. This is not in order to draw a people-elite distinction, even if recent historical studies argue that one could apply the term “derivative discourse” to the discussion of nationalism in Malaysia and Singapore.²³ Rather, the left behind here are denationalizing agents who stand apart from the field of the nation. Their narratives question the framework for understanding not only history that has been accepted and written in by the victors, but also by their contradictors. In so doing, they critique one element of the nationalistic framework that has been put into place – nationalistic Chineseness.

I call this critique “the spectral Nanyang,” to decentralize the field of the nation as a determining discourse for historical recollection. As the name implies, this critique proceeds from a conjunction of the spatial and temporal. The term Nanyang originates from a history of ancient Sinocentric and imperialistic perspectives on the south of the mainland, but was also used during the age of mass emigration in the late Qing period (roughly 1860-1911), to connote connection between places like Fujian and Guangdong – the southern seaboard of the mainland – with Southeast Asia.²⁴ The border-crossing and movement implied in these journeys prior to the formation of the nation, suggest a different way of conceptualizing spatial loyalties, as in the

²³ See the introduction to *The University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya*, ed. Loh et. al. for an account of how this term, originally used by Partha Chatterjee to describe Indian nationalism, applies to the Malayan/Singaporean context.

²⁴ Brian Bernards discusses the historical usage of this term in detail in *Writing the South Seas*. He defines one usage of this with the term “Nanyang Orientalism”, referring to the way ancient Chinese writers and governments feminized and barbarized the Southern Other to justify invasion.

phenomenon of the Chinese sojourner. The sojourner, whose characteristic description was that of someone who existed in two places at once, and loyalties was not so much to his originating region or village, but rather to the imagined homeland resituated in his current space – nonetheless came into conflict with the national imperative that overtook Malaya.²⁵ As Loh et al. point out, one of the goals of the “high modernist” ethos that accompanied nationalism in Malaya and Singapore was the transformation of such sojourners into productive citizens of a new polity, under the banner of an anti-colonial freedom, driven by vanguard movements that sought to “organize the masses” (27).²⁶ Yet in the promise of nationalistic freedom and self-identification, there is also a resultant tension deriving from the necessity of declaring allegiance and loyalty to one place – part of the disciplining apparatus of the nation-state – with the *specter* of disloyalty always on the horizon.

The spectral Nanyang critiques this paradoxical transformation, not by posing the Nanyang as an idealized alterity of border-crossings and spatial freedom, but rather by showing how these questions of ultimate homeland and belonging resurface as a constitutive part of nationalisms in Malaysia, which has its origins in the fin-de-siècle period that I sketched earlier. The Nanyang was still an operative term for describing affiliation (as in the “Nanyang Chinese”) at this point; its later abandonment stems from the solidifying of the nation-form as the dominant political imaginary in the region, and the adoption of the Western-centric name “Southeast

²⁵ For instance, in Mahua literature in the 1930s, debates between “sojourning writers” and “local writers” over the themes and audience of their writing were common. The term “Mahua” as a way of referring to “local Chinese” also resulted from these debates. See Tee Kim Tong, “Sinophone Malaysian Literature: An Overview”, in *Sinophone Studies*, ed. Shu-Mei Shih and Brian Bernards.

²⁶ *University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya*: “...the inner contradiction of the entire nationalist enterprise in Singapore and Malaya, which applied to all political and student groups, was to promise colonial subjects and Asian sojourners freedom while preparing for them to inherit new responsibilities as citizens, besides new rights.” (27)

Asia” as a regional appellation during the Cold War.²⁷²⁸ Yet, the Nanyang is still constitutive of the everyday present, even if it is not referred to as an operative force. For instance, today’s prominent Chinese-language Malaysian newspaper *Nanyang Siang Pau*, which has its origins in 1920s Singapore, was founded by the Overseas Chinese businessman-philanthropist Tan Kah Kee, who was an outspoken supporter and rallying point abroad for the nationalist revolutionary movement in the mainland, and later supported the communist party in the Chinese civil war. These historical resonances are specters from this period of competing nationalisms; to denationalize, these authors suggest the need to excavate and engage with history as haunting, especially in the way Chineseness is framed and subsequently structured in Malaysia. The spectral Nanyang, through attention to the way Chineseness is conceived and appropriated at different historical points of nation-formation, works through its nationalistic inheritances, and raises a dissonant note in the representation of national formation.

Chapter outlines

The first two chapters of this study examines the legacy of communism and communist movements in Malaya and Sarawak, as a specter constitutive of the formation of Malaya and Malaysia. This haunting is exemplified by the continuing designation of Chin Peng as “national enemy,” and his death in exile in Bangkok, as multiple appeals to allow him to return to Malaysia was denied by the national courts.

Chin Peng, a prominent leader of the post-war Malayan Communist Party (MCP),

²⁷ For instance, the Nanyang Communist Party changed its name to the Malayan Communist Party in the 1930s. See Danny Wong Tze Ken’s article, “View from the Other Side” for a history of the MCP.

²⁸ Southeast Asia as a name is tied to Second World War, and subsequently Cold War military definitions – the Southeast Asia Command (SEAC) established in 1943, a British-led Allied military structure during World War II; and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), an anti-communist security alliance led by the United States established in 1954. See Albert Lau’s Introduction to *Southeast Asia and the Cold War* for an overview.

figures as the national face of the “communist and Chinese” other – a combination of boogeyman threat and race traitor that sparks unresolved tension in the historiography of the nation. “Communism” serves as an appellation for a spectral threat, which constantly needs to be vigilantly policed, a legacy of the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) and Second Malayan Emergency (1968-89) that suffused Malaya and Malaysia from its establishment. In the Bornean perspective, the remnants of the Sarawak Communist Insurgency (1962-1990) which opposed the formation of Malaysia in favor of a North Kalimantan state, also serves as a haunting specter, not least in formalizing the actual events that happened, and its legacies. The lack of information there, exemplified by the disappearance of its founding leaders, presents a dilemma for historians who seek to understand the full picture of an insurgency that lasted until the conclusion of the Cold War.²⁹

In recent times, there have been attempts to fill in the historical record, through the publishing of memoirs by ex-members of the insurgency, and even a narrative history by Chin Peng himself, which was published and distributed with relatively little official interference. These narratives are welcome additions to the historiographical record, as accounts that show the other side of these prolonged conflicts. They are couched, understandably, in terms that privilege the revolutionary struggle and its goals. For instance, Chin Peng’s memoir has the motive of reframing

²⁹ James Chin, in a review of one of the few comprehensive histories on the Sarawak Communist Insurgency – *The Rise and Fall of Communism in Sarawak, 1940-1990* by V.L. Porritt – points out multiple issues that remain unanswered, and for him unanswerable without the recollections of the missing leader of the Clandestine Communist Organization (CCO), Wen Ming Chyan: “It is obvious that no complete history of the CCO can be written without Weng’s input. If Weng is willing to come back to Sarawak, would the government allow him back for a visit?... The gaps in Porritt’s study mean that there is still a lot of work to do on Sarawak’s hidden history. For example there are still questions left unanswered: Why did Weng never tried to return to Sarawak to lead the movement? Why was Weng not present at the 1990 peace agreement? Was Weng in contact with Chin Peng? Chin Peng based himself along the Thai-Malaysian border for a long period but Weng appeared to be happily based in Beijing. Why did the CCO not establish links with the MCP? They appeared to have tried in the 1960s but nothing came of it. Was it because of ideological differences or was it on Beijing’s instructions? The links between Beijing and the CCO is also largely unexplored in Porritt’s work.” See “Book Review: *The Rise and Fall of Communism in Sarawak, 1940-1990*”, in the *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*.

the MCP's *modus operandi* as an authentically Malayan and patriotic decolonizing struggle, as opposed to a solely "Chinese" operation as painted by its enemies.³⁰ And several memoirs by ex-participants of the Sarawak Communist Insurgency put its agenda for Sarawak independence and self-government at the forefront, as continuation from prior leftist groups that sought to liberate Sarawak from colonial rule (104, Ooi). These "renationalizing" memoirs show the continuing importance of the nation in these political imaginaries; yet, it also places them within the Cold War paradigm of regional and proxy war in Southeast Asia, where nationalism and communism coincided. While undeniably nationalistic insurgencies, they are also vanguard wars that played into regional geopolitical interests. It is this dual paradox that drives Zhang Guixing and Ng Kim Chew's approaches towards the legacy of these insurgencies.

In Chapter 1, Zhang deals with the missing legacy of the Sarawak communist insurgency by staging an excavatory journey about its history, through the eyes of a young narrator named Shicai, who enters the tropical rainforest to seek his uncle, a prominent leader of the insurgency. As a migrant writer to Taiwan in the 1970s, who grew up in Sarawak, Shicai's journey also reflects Zhang's displaced perspective about past events in the place of his birth. Mimicking the opacity of documented history about this struggle, the jungle is a place of hidden narratives, figures, and truths that are only belatedly uncovered through Shicai's journey. Zhang's novel *Elephant Herd*, however, takes a detached point of view towards both the rhetoric of

³⁰ During the height of the conflict, Tunku Abdul Rahman (known as the founding father of Malaya) and Chin Peng met for Peace Talks at Baling. One of Chin Peng's demands for the MCP to give up arms was to form a legitimate political party to push for its agenda. However, Tunku argued that this was impossible because the communists needed to "prove themselves loyal to the country" and this was difficult to show because most of their members were "Chinese". Primary documents on the British side also show a racial and Orientalist undertone to their depictions of the MCP, as "two-faced Chinese" that was unworthy of trust and often suspect in their loyalties. See T.N. Harper's account in Chapter 4 of *The End of Empire and The Making of Malaya*, "Rural Society and Terror."

communist struggle, and the governmental narrative of victory. He critiques the modernist imperative of development that is operative on both sides, and is destructive of the rainforest and its indigenous inhabitants. By doing so, he also suggests the failure of the communists to lie in their political imaginary, which treats the indigenous environment as a tool for their political projects, and is driven by a “mapping” mentality that reflects their statist goal. While purportedly a movement for Sarawakian independence and leftist state formation (the North Kalimantan state), Zhang’s excavation reveals the hidden side of this “mapping” imaginary, which is entangled with a history of nationalistic Chinese settling in Borneo, driven by the ghost of a civilizational Chinese imaginary. This is further complicated by the historical connections between mainland China communist party members and their own efforts to train communist cadres in Southeast Asia, as part of a Cold War theatre of operations.³¹

For Zhang, this is the defining legacy of the communist insurgency – a vanguardist settler project that echoes past understandings of Chinese nation and state-hood, and disrupts the indigenous use of the land. As Ooi points out, “the Chinese in Sarawak were primarily drawn to one of the Cold War players – China under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) – more by ethnicity and patriotism than by ideological considerations” (103). This represents an aporia in their imaginary – a relationship with Chineseness that remains unresolved by ideology. In Zhang’s critique of this project, he employs something I call “counter-mapping” and “spacing,” to redefine the legacies of the insurgency from the perspective of those left behind, including the indigenous people, those who perished from the war, and nature herself, exemplified by the elephants in the jungle who are ravaged by the war. This is neither

³¹ See Fujio Hara, “The North Kalimantan Communist Party and the People’s Republic of China” in *The Developing Economies* journal; and Ooi Keat Gin, “The Cold War and British Borneo: Impact and legacy 1945-63” in *Southeast Asia and the Cold War*, ed. Albert Lau.

the pro-Malaysian viewpoint that dominates historical representation, nor the pro-communist narrative of struggle and resistance. Instead, Zhang shows the cost of this uncanny combination between nationalism, modernist development, and geopolitical conflict on both sides, disrupting linear recollections of the insurgency that reiterate the progressive temporality of nationhood, culminating in the nation-state. He thus critiques the temporal element of Sarawakian nationalization that was carried out by the Sarawak Hua communists, and reveals what its vanguardist aspirations elide in its self-representations.

Chapter 2 deals with the legacy of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in Malaya, or Peninsular Malaysia today. Ng Kim Chew, another Taiwan transplant in the 1980s, originates from a rural area in the state of Johor, which was a central location for communist uprising in both the First and Second Malayan Emergency. His collection of short stories, the *Nanyang People's Republic Memorandum*, also takes a viewpoint from participants and remnants of this war, questioning attempts to reintegrate their recollections into a national history, and the field of the nation-state. By recontextualizing and deconstructing the memoir form that dominates recollections of this period of Malayan communism, Ng shows how representation is a contingent process that requires interpretation. To Ng, the inheritance of history cannot be directly uncovered, and its construction proceeds through multiple parties and sources, where it is written and rewritten on each level. Ng's radical contingency in his approach to communist history reveals the multiplicity of historical recollection, and opens up space for those who are typically rendered silent in historiography to decenter narratives of nation-building and contribution. It also challenges straightforward realist depictions of these opaque, underground narratives – an important acknowledgement of the incompleteness inherent in such histories.

This commitment to contingency and multiplicity in historical representation, as opposed to the closed-off “text of the nation,” parallels Ng’s critique of a Chinese nationalism that can be called “ontopological Chineseness.” Ng suggests that the anti-colonial struggle on the MCP’s part is haunted by a nationalistic ghost that conditions fin-de-siècle Malayan politics, and because of this its political imaginary is limited by the terms of a nationalism that is susceptible to ontopology. This Derridean term encapsulates a “land-and-blood” thinking of the nation, which invokes a racial structuring among its constituents that emerges as an unsurpassable horizon, due to its dependence on originary discourses of community and nationhood. While the MCP’s goal remains to form a nationalistic alternative to the British and subsequent Malaysian government, Ng argues that this is haunted by an ontopological Chineseness, whose roots can be traced to the formation of a “defensive” Chineseness by late Qing-era revolutionaries in a time of crisis on mainland China, specifically through the writings of the scholar-revolutionary Zhang Taiyan. The “Malayan” project on the part of the MCP, which Ng imagines through a speculative history, recapitulates racial division and ethnocentric structuring that plagues real-life Malaya and Malaysia, which Ng shows is the limit of any nationalistic political imaginary.

Chapter 3 examines Li Tianbao’s short stories, which are set in past eras of Kuala Lumpur (primarily the 1950s to 1970s), and evokes the Golden Age of Chinese cinema and music, to evade the “nation” as a structuring form for the idea of Chineseness. In contrast with Zhang and Ng, Li is an explicitly “apolitical” writer who does not confront major history and high politics head-on, instead putting quotidian lives and melodramas in the forefront, while leaving political events in the background. Yet, he engages Mahua diasporic fascination with cultural Chineseness

(*wenhua zhongguo*) that became prominent post-1969, as a response to political changes that renewed “Malayness” and “Islam” as a cultural imperative for the nation.

Mahua engagement with cultural Chineseness draws inspiration from classical Chinese tropes, in order to highlight their exile and displacement, while claiming a direct lineage of textuality from ancient China. Li mediates this classical ideal by showing its translational legacy in multiple mediums beyond text, especially in other transmission-based media such as film and music. The transmission of Chinese cinema and popular culture to and from the Nanyang, which moves through multiple locations such as Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Taipei, is utilized by Li to show an alternate route of Chineseness that deconstructs the “timelessness” of the classical imperative, revealing a messy cosmopolitanism that results from the transmission of culture. Focusing on its ephemerality and contingency, Li shows how Chineseness can become a remainder and outlier from the national imperative, especially as an alternative temporality within the space of the nation itself. Representing the decadent Nanyang past through classical Chinese tropes, Li translates archaic literary and cultural tropes to this peripheral space, displacing the “timeless” lineage claimed by other uses of this heritage, revealing Chineseness to be a mobile and timely concept. This critiques the static accretions of Chineseness that have become bound with the dominant political organization of the Nanyang – the nation.

Chapter 1: Zhang Gui Xing's *Elephant Herd* and the spectrality of Chineseness

Part 1: The state of *guo* and the political nationalism of the Sarawak *Hua*

In Zhang Gui Xing's *Elephant Herd* (*Qun xiang*, 1998), a crucial question is asked by the narrator, Shicai, in an early chapter of the novel. Addressing his elder brother, Shi Shang (the fourth brother in the Shi family), whose ambition is to “learn a set of skillful martial arts to *baoguo*” (serve the *guo*³²), a young Shicai asks: “Elder brother, what *guo* will you serve?”³³ which is met with silence from his brother (45).

Shicai's seemingly naïve question, and his brother's mute response to his query underline this chapter. It becomes clear, as the novel unfolds, that Zhang's critical thrust in *Elephant Herd* is directed at this unresolved query, and the historical legacies stemming from this innocuous question. Built into the exchange about which *guo* to serve are issues relating to the status of “Chineseness” in the Borneo region, the spatial organization and imaginary of Sarawak's experience of communism,³⁴ and how this “Chinese” identity is negotiated throughout from the perspective of different groups in the Borneo space, as shown through the older Shicai's journey through the Borneo jungle space.³⁵ Shicai's journey through the jungle space, in order to find his communist uncle's whereabouts, unpacks this set of questions about Sarawak Chinese identity.

³² *Baoguo* – 报国. The latter character, *guo*, is a tricky term to translate. Depending on its usage, it can be translated as nation, nation-state, or country; it is an ancient term, as in the phrase *Zhongguo* (中国, or Middle Kingdom). Here I will not attempt to disambiguate it, as the slippages that it provokes are deliberately set up by Zhang. See also the introduction to Wang Hui's *China: From Empire to Nation-State* for a discussion of the difficulties of translating this term.

³³ “哥哥，你报什么国？”

³⁴ Sarawak is a state in modern day Malaysia, but it had a particular history of British and Japanese colonialism that differs from the Peninsular (or West) Malaysia. It only officially became part of modern day Malaysia in 1963.

³⁵ The Borneo island is an entity that today incorporates three nation-states, namely Malaysia (which controls the parts named Sarawak and Sabah), Indonesia (which controls the part named Kalimantan), and Brunei. The Borneo rainforest, however, precedes any of these entities, and transcends these distinctions.

In *Elephant Herd*, Zhang writes a journey which maps out the spatial constitution of Chineseness in the Borneo space, particularly the imaginary of the Sarawak Hua communists who took up arms under the banner of the North Kalimantan Communist Party, against the formation of the Malaysian nation-state. The journey that Shicai undertakes in the jungle, which enables him to meet and confront different characters and groups who reside in this space, is an *excavatory* journey. This excavation reveals the specter of Chineseness that conditions the geopolitical imaginary of the Sarawak Hua communists, and the historical legacies that result from their spatial imaginary. This legacy, Zhang argues, is the result of an aporia is inherent in their conception of Chineseness.

The question that is asked relates to state formation by the Sarawak communists, which is ambiguously undergirded by a concept of *guo* that is unresolved in both its ancient and modern usages. The framing of their modern struggle in these ancient terms forms the central paradox of their political imaginary – an aporia that can only be understood through examining its parallels with another historical phenomenon in the Borneo space, specifically a Han-driven Chinese settler colonialism. This is a concrete manifestation of the “Chinese” specter that conditions the imaginary that drives their revolution. Zhang’s critique of the Hua communists stems from the way they impose a spatial mapping deriving from this ancient source, which simultaneously works as a political nationalism that affects the jungle and its indigenous constituents – the indigenous people and the animals of the land – the primary example being the eponymous elephants of the novel.

Zhang critiques this imaginary through the formal aspects of the text itself. By employing a textual style that criss-crosses past and present, time and space, without stable markers to differentiate either, he shows how recollection and representation

are opaque, and inadequate to the past. Zhang presents Shicai's narrative as a *journey* through the Borneo rainforest, discovering remainders of the communist struggle, but with awareness of the gaps and inadequacies of recollection. Excavating the burden of the past, Zhang shows its impact on the present, and through textual experimentation, manifests the form this burden takes. This journey narrative is a form of *spacing*, a method he employs to show the intertwining of past and present, and the spectrality that historical Chineseness imposes on the Borneo space. Zhang's spacing excavates and critiques this history, offering an alternative to the specter of Chineseness driven by the Sarawak Hua communists.

Context

With *Elephant Herd*, Zhang responds to recent accounts of the Sarawakian Hua experience of communism. As context, leftist groups had already begun forming in Sarawak as early as the late 1930s, and in the 1950s the mainland Chinese Communist Party had already made inroads into Sarawak, spreading communist literature and teachings within Chinese language schools (103, Ooi). By the mid-1950s, a communist movement had formed in Sarawak – the Clandestine Communist Organization, which later developed into the Sarawak Communist Organization (SCO) (104, Ooi). This anti-colonial, and pro-independence movement sought to liberate Sarawak from British crown colony status, and used “united front” tactics throughout the 1960s, including the formation of a legitimate political party called the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP).

The mooted formation of Malaysia by the British and Malayan governments in 1961 sparked the Brunei revolt in 1962 – led by leftists in Brunei under the Brunei People's Party (PRB) and members of the North Kalimantan National Army (TKNU),

who attempted to overthrow the Brunei monarchy and British colonial forces to establish their own North Kalimantan state. This was a precursor to the regional armed conflict known as the Konfrontasi (or Confrontation), a standoff over the formation of Malaysia between Indonesia – supported by China and the Soviet Union – and the British and Malayan governments, which lasted from 1963 to 1966. The beginning of the Sarawak Communist Insurgency, as it is called, can be traced to this time as well. Left-wing groups within Sarawak opposed this new state, supporting instead the creation of an independent leftist state known as North Kalimantan, which would incorporate Sarawak, North Borneo, and Brunei, and the SCO took up arms in 1963 alongside TKNY and Indonesia forces. In 1965, the SCO renamed itself the North Kalimantan Communist Party (NKCP) to reflect this ambition (121), and established a “people’s militia” called the North Kalimantan People’s Force (PARAKU) as an armed group to oppose Malaysia, with assistance from the PKI, the ruling communist party of Indonesia. Even though Indonesia officially signed a peace treaty in 1966 with Malaysia, remnants of NKCP guerillas continued to fight the Malaysian government until 1990, when a peace agreement was finally signed. Thus, from 1962 to 1990, there was armed, guerilla opposition to the formation of Malaysia in Sarawak.

Recently, memoirs and studies have been produced on the communist side, especially Chinese language sources that supplement existing colonial and Anglo sources about this history. For example, *An Enlightening Journey (Manman qiu xuolu, 2012)* is a book produced by the North Kalimantan Forty Year Revolution Editorial Committee, comprising ex-revolutionaries, with the stated goal of studying the “Forty year History of the North Kalimantan Revolution” (title). *Chasing Dreams in a Wildfire (Lieyan zhong zhuimeng, 2012)* is also written by ex-revolutionary Bong Kee

Siaw, a personal narrative of this Sarawakian revolution. In both texts, the effort to narrate the truth of the communist period is marked by the desire to pay tribute to the struggle of that period, and the sacrifices that were made by individuals in pursuit of their idealism and dreams. Their recollections are thus marked by a righteous, heroic notion of the struggle – as the titles of their books imply.

While not wanting to belittle the very real sacrifices of these individuals, and their efforts at testimony and recollection of the past, it is clear that for them, recollection and writing is a form of memorial, continuous with the kind of critical duty that drove their entrance into the jungle.³⁶ Both books are written by direct members of the revolution, and their recollection is framed as a way of making sense of the event – filled with details like dates, figures, locations, objects (like maps, photographs, songs and memorabilia) – and attempts at clarification, “greater objectivity” (preface, North), and the need to narrate the truth of the struggle from within. They present information and documentation, and provide reflection upon these raw materials of history.³⁷ In this narration and representation then, it is assumed that historical facts do clarify, and that the work of representation and recollection is to contain this historical truth. Further, it is also assumed that being *within* the struggle (or, having taken part in the revolution) grants one a perspective from which one can pursue the politics of truth, through representation.

Elephant Herd explores a different approach. As Zhang writes in his new preface to the novel, the novel is a “ferocious and beautiful wild spirit” (9) – which

³⁶ The foreword to *An Enlightening Journey* writes, “Now, our hero’s pavilion has been built, and our duty to write and publish history has basically been completed, which shows the revolution of our generation has a beginning and an end. Even though our revolution has not been completed, we can still face the people and our martyrs.”

³⁷ Granted, there are different ideological perspective in both books – *An Enlightening Journey* is more a collective leftist reflection that narrates the past as a continuous struggle even to the present day, whereas the latter is an individual reflection on the past that, as he puts it, tries to avoid solely “leftist understandings of history.”

describes both the form and content of the novel. The “wild spirit” here, I argue, implies the sense of dislocation that infects both the narrator of the novel, Shicai, and the Sarawak Hua communists. As a fictional surrogate for Zhang’s own displaced engagement with this history, Shicai enters the jungle belatedly in search of the truth of his brothers’ deaths in the jungle, encountering the remains of the revolution that was partly led by his uncle, Yu Jiatong.³⁸ Thus, he does not search this history from an insider’s perspective with the aim of clarification or enlightenment, but reflects the outsider’s perspective of the jungle and its communist activities, which appear opaque and fragmented to the dislocated observer. *Elephant Herd*, in that sense, is not just about the history of communism of the Sarawak Hua, but also the *process* of looking for this history – a commentary on the excavation and representation of history itself, a meta-textual and fictional gesture that is absent from the previous examples I noted.

Zhang’s narrative of Shicai’s dislocation from the jungle and its history also extends to Shicai’s relationship with Chineseness. In the prior recollections, the self-identity of the North Kalimantan party is linked with the victory of the Chinese Communist Party on the mainland in 1949 – as both books note, the establishment of the People’s Republic of China served as a catalyst for the “awakening” of the Sarawakian people (3, Bong; 7, North), the genesis of their narrative. For them, the revolution in China goes hand in hand with the revolution in Sarawak, and their cultural identity as Sarawakian Hua Chinese. In a passage from *Enlightening Journey*, the authors describe a day of celebration held in Sarawak, dedicated to the establishment of the PRC:

³⁸ Zhang is part of a group of Malaysian Chinese diasporic writers who now reside in Taiwan. Some local (i.e. non-travelling) writers criticize his depiction of Borneo, claiming it is an exoticized image of the Borneo rainforest, which serves the market needs of Taiwanese literature. My point here is that this displacement is precisely what drives Zhang to present an excavatory engagement with this history. The focus on space and movement as a way of excavating history is very much a condition of the displaced perspective.

During that time the Kuching and Sibu Hua Chinese business associations, social organizations and schools all came together, and prepared for a massive celebration. During the day of celebration, workers rested for a day, students had a day of holiday, the streets and the shops put up lamps, decorations, and even hung the flag of the PRC, in the day they released firecrackers, and the night was filled with fireworks...some organizations even sent telegrams to Mao Zedong as congratulations. This series of celebrations naturally created an affinity from the Hua people towards the new China. (7, North)

This passage is followed by a passage describing the importance of Marxist and Maoist thought, to help spread revolutionary fervor among the youth. This intellectual ferment, in addition to what they call “blood and land ties” (7) with the mainland, to them constitutes a natural reason for affinity between the Sarawak Hua communist and the mainland Chinese communist revolution. In that regard, the “insider” perspective of the struggle is conditioned by an originating myth of the communist revolution, one that derives inspiration from the “great world achievement of the people” (4, Bong).

In Zhang’s novel, however, an anti-romantic and ambiguous tone predominates. Shicai’s naïve question undermines the direct relationship between revolution and source that these narratives describe. This questioning, I suggest, is manifested through not only the content of the novel, but also its form. Its formal qualities of being situated between fiction and history depart from these other recollections, as “truth” here is slippery, opaque, and fragmented. His “spacing” method betrays this ambiguity – by utilizing a journey narrative, it shows the process of historical excavation, and the opacity of trying to piece together a history that

predominantly occurred underground, in the jungle. Zhang's use of spatial and textual dislocation in the novel is crucial for understanding Zhang's critique of the Sarawakian Hua communist revolution, as a formal gesture that reworks historical recollection beyond the limits of one undergirded by an originating Chineseness.

Space and representation

The various spaces represented in Zhang's *Elephant Herd* delineate this critique. As mentioned, what drives the narrative of the novel is Shicai's journey through the Borneo rainforest, a journey that leads him to encounter the different groups that inhabit the space. The way these encounters are depicted through an exploratory movement – we are taken along the journey from Shicai's perspective, and experience his flashbacks, memories, and various reflections throughout – makes his journey a *spacing*, a dynamic journey that evokes and creates the space surrounding Shicai, even as he moves. This is an important distinction as spacing – a modernist approach to the spatiality of the novel – manifests Zhang's awareness about the opacity of representation itself.

Zhang's characteristic shift between multiple temporalities and spatialities in his writing, drives home the point that Shicai's journey is to be understood as something that is written as he moves, a representation that is neither neatly situated in the past (as when a narrator "recounts" his journey – for example, Marlowe in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*), nor one that is merely present. For instance, Zhang segues between years and characters based on the characteristics of nature, which interrupts the current linear narrative – a stylistic strategy he returns to throughout the novel:

Both of them rowed upstream. It was raining lightly, a consistent rain that did not stop. This rain was coming down hesitantly...the boy clearly remembered that his third brother had lied to his parents, and left him and his fourth brother behind in this kind of rain...it was 1969, and the communist militias were in their most vibrant phase, with cannon shots firing non-stop in the village and jungle, and hunting rifles thundering. The communists comprised three main militias: The North Kalimantan People's Army. The Flaming Mountains Militia. The Sarawakian People's Guerilla (78).

This move from Shicai's perspective to history suggests the permeability of time in the jungle; the lack of a neat distinguishing marker between past and present in the text suggests that these temporalities exist concurrently. It highlights the novel's status as a representation, in the sense of a *re*-presentation – one undertaken by Zhang through his surrogate, the narrator Shicai. Zhang's novel is situated between fiction and history, similar to how a memoir tends between history and fiction; the fiction works to bring out the spatiality of history, in the sense of a lived sense of space and geography. As Hack puts it in *Dialogues with Chin Peng*, a crucial testimony of the legacies of the Malayan Communist Party conducted with its long-time leader:

...The 'Dialogues with Chin Peng' in part two remind us how important this war period was, and just how different topography appeared to Chin Peng's comrades, compared to the British view. Geography, it seems, was not just scientific: it was also a matter of an imaginary and emotional landscape of politics and memory. (5)

Zhang's re-presentation can be situated in this tradition of representation. Its focus on history as not only a temporal entity, but a spatial one, follows the tradition of self-

representation by members of the MCP, such as Jin Zhimang's *Hunger*, which also blurs the boundaries of history and literature, through his personal evocation of the jungle space where the MCP conducted its guerilla warfare. If Jin's fiction has as its core a historical burden which tends towards a realist evocation to immerse the reader in the jungle, *Elephant Herd's* spatiality, where the narrative proceeds as Shicai's memories and recollection, makes it a surrogate memoir about the Sarawak communists' underground struggle, albeit one that is *also* about looking for historical recollection and memories about that struggle. Zhang's use of the Borneo rainforest not only serves the purpose of evoking the spatial pressures of jungle guerilla warfare and opacity of insurgency life, where one could literally disappear and be left for dead, but in so doing also evokes the opacity of representing the Borneo Hua experience, and their relationship with the local indigenous people, which has been largely ignored and unnoticed by the world-at-large.

The canopy and mud of the jungle renders history here an underground and fragmented endeavor; the material pressures of historical circumstance bearing on its idealist representation. The "spacing" method allows Zhang to draw out the opacity of the Borneo rainforest, to show a haunting of Chineseness in this space. While the temporal period covered by the novel primarily depicts the Sarawak Communist Insurgency (1962-1990) and encompasses the rise and fall of the North Kalimantan Communist Party, the excavation that occurs through Shicai's journey in the jungle moves beyond this temporal period to a confrontation with this spectrality of Chineseness, which has deeper historical roots.

Space and Chineseness

Through spacing, Zhang shows how space and geography are constitutive of the identity of a subject. The specter of Chineseness is a spatial imaginary and an identity. Thus, instead of limiting history to its temporal elements, Zhang combines both space and time in Shicai's excavation, and traces the way spectral Chineseness operates in Sarawak.

Zhang shows that Chineseness evokes a spatial connection with an imaginary origin, and crucially, a landed beginning. A scene of instruction in a Chinese school – mimicking the way mainland CCP agents spread their doctrine – establishes the imaginative connection drawn by the Borneo Chinese with the notion of Chineseness. While most of the novel focuses on Shicai's journey through the jungle that he undertakes when he is nineteen, it begins with a prologue chapter that recounts his past before the journey (60). This chapter describes his background as the youngest child of a pig-rearing family in Sarawak, whose siblings become progressively radicalized to the communist cause. His uncle Yu Jiatong forms a revolutionary communist cadre called the Yangtze River Militia that his three older brothers join (22). One of Shicai's siblings – his second brother – dies in service of the communist militia that Yu leads, forming a scene of trauma that repeats throughout the novel, as his siblings each give their lives to the cause. At the end of the prologue, his uncle and radical comrades have entered the jungle to hide themselves from the colonial police, who have started an anti-communist purge.³⁹ Before entering the jungle, however, a crucial relationship between Borneo and an imagined "Chinese" space has been formed, which will follow them into the jungle.

Through Shicai's youthful memories, Zhang shows the intimate link between Chineseness and the communist insurgency. This Chineseness is not a static racial

³⁹ This references the 1962 post-Brunei revolt crackdown on left-wing elements, which had the effect of radicalizing local Chinese youth, and deporting several leaders of the communist movement back to China.

identity, but one that veers between the polarities of an imagined “Chinese” origin, and the local surroundings where it is applied. As a young child, Shicai is already exposed to this double-ness through his school classes. His Chinese teacher, Shao Lao Shi (Teacher Shao), is a communist party agent assigned from mainland China to the Borneo region. He offers free classes on Chinese civilization history from his Borneo home, everything from “oracle bone language to the Shi Jing”⁴⁰, and “Li Shi Zhen to Lu Xun”⁴¹ (27) – the mainstays of a civilizational imaginary, drawing together an image of Chineseness for his captive audience, which includes Shicai, his brothers, his uncle, the teachers in the high school, and other youths in Shicai’s town. This scene of instruction brings together two elements that defines Shicai’s main preoccupations in his jungle journey – the entanglement of Chineseness with communism. As Ng Kim Chew writes in an essay on Zhang, the various communist insurgencies in Malaya and Borneo form a “deep scar” in the history of the Malaysian Chinese, a situation of “original sin” that raises suspicions about loyalty and identity to the state that persists until this day (485). Through this opening scene, Zhang shows how Sarawakian communism is an identity-driven venture, its ideology tied intimately with an imaginary civilizational mission of establishing a “Chinese” home. The “North Kalimantan” revolution signals spatial and geographical difference – it distinguishes the Sarawak Hua communists and their originating Chinese imaginary in Borneo from the nationalist appeal for “Malaya” by the communists in Peninsular Malaysia.⁴²

⁴⁰ The Shijing is the Classic of Poetry, which became a canonical part of Confucian education in the Han dynasty.

⁴¹ These are important figures in Chinese history, Lu Xun being one of the founding figures of modern Chinese literature, and Li Shizhen an important medical scholar in the Ming dynasty.

⁴² What is interesting about Chin Peng’s memoir is how similar his youthful experience of indoctrination in Malaya is with what Zhang writes about the Sarawak communists, and the accounts by the Sarawak communists themselves. There is the Maoist influence from contemporary political currents, combined with the classical Chinese legacy – the product of local education by teacher-

This scene of instruction is also a scene of interpellation. Shao Lao Shi, a charismatic presence in the classroom, leaves his students spellbound as he narrates Chinese civilizational history. This history, in Shao's description, is intimately connected with the spatial and geographical imaginary of the mainland and its South. His presence signals a cartographic ordering, as he establishes a geographical link between the mainland and the South, through the usage of corporeal words from ancient Chinese texts that describe the origin of crocodiles in China. According to one of these texts, "the South Sea has crocodiles, which are like turtles." (28, Zhang) This ancient epigram marks an imaginary construction of the South, which is linked back to the mainland, as Shao proceeds to explain that in the ancient past, the central part of the mainland had a similarly tropical climate, which was conducive for crocodiles. The creature, according to him, was idealized throughout the ancient mainland, as one could find crocodile motifs, in everyday items like vases (30). In Shao's view, the crocodile was fundamentally connected with the dragon, the *ur*-creature connoting Chineseness, thus legitimizing the crocodile's status as an ancient, foundational animal in the Chinese imaginary. Shao goes on to argue that due to changes in the climate, the crocodiles migrated further south and became the "Yangtze crocodile," while those in the mainland went extinct.⁴³

This genealogy of the crocodile foregrounds the spatial aspect of this desire for history, bound up with the specter of Chineseness. The migrational crocodiles are crucial symbols, as they contrast with another type of moving animal, the eponymous elephants of the novel. While the crocodiles are firmly linked by Shao with the ancient mainland, the elephants have an ambiguous and uncertain origin, as they have been sighted rarely. As will be discussed, this ambiguity is what Zhang exploits to

scholars from China who are also leftist sympathizers. The difference between both lies predominantly in the political imaginary, which is related to the divergent histories of the two places.

⁴³ Note the similarity in geographical naming with Shicai's uncle Yu's "Yangtze river militia".

suggest a different form of Chineseness, from the foundational kind represented by the crocodiles. Shao's linking of the crocodiles to ancient Chinese texts legitimizes the Chineseness of these Borneo subjects through historicity. This negotiation with Chineseness by Shao's students departs from existing terms such as "diaspora" or "overseas Chinese", or even the "sojourning" concept favored by Wang Gungwu and Philip Kuhn. As Zhang's description makes clear, the subjects interpellated here are not displaced through a movement *from* the mainland, as they were born in Sarawak. Shicai, his siblings, and his uncle have never been to China proper, and so this "China" exists primarily for them in a cultural-civilizational imaginary, through Shao's teaching. For them, there is an existing gap and distance from the mainland, as it is a place that can only be imagined through this distant acculturation via words and maps.⁴⁴ Through such acculturation, the ghost of "China" becomes operative, as does the spectrality of Chineseness in this space.⁴⁵

This connection made between the South Seas and mainland is a cultural *mapping*, a cartographic integration of the South into the cultural imaginary known as "ancient China." This attempts to give the Nanyang a foundational place in Chinese civilizational history, like Shao's argument that the ancient mainland also possessed a tropical climate in the past, suitable for crocodiles. Chineseness is corporealized in the form of Chinese words and characters which evoke another place, written as cartography – the mapping of the South through words and animal classification. However, it requires Shao's performative presence to transform the corporeal texts that evoke an imagined space into living reality for his subjects, his intermediation akin to a ritual performance that invokes the ancient spirits of Chinese luminaries on

⁴⁴ Both elements recur throughout Zhang's novel as corporeal figures that stand in for "Chineseness", as will be explored later. One of the striking things that occur later in the book is when Shicai's father develops an illness where he literally eats books, thus consuming and destroying this corporeality.

⁴⁵ As defined by Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, the specter is an entity both present and absent simultaneously.

the blackboard. His performance leaves “their blood boiling and them in awe” (29), and makes them “hurriedly imitate his writing,” which also has a pictorial element that accentuates the primitive corporeality of this process. The transformation is only complete, however, when the subject internalizes this Chineseness sufficiently to negotiate it in the local context, which externalizes Borneo as part of “China.” Zhang writes that for Shicai, his noting down of Shao’s words was like a “setting free of wild animals”, the “planting of trees”, and “seeding of plants” (30) – all metaphors for the conflation of Chineseness and the tropical setting of Borneo, showing Shicai possessed by the Chinese specter.

Zhang’s foregrounding of this ritual performance through use of exaggerated language, hyperbolic descriptions, and exotic wordplay highlights that this constitution of Chineseness has a fantastic element that transcends time and distance. It confers legitimacy through the interpellated subject’s own recognition of a hegemonic, original history. The cartographic aspect – the doubling and substitution of the mainland with Borneo – is what renders this history present and real. This link of the local space – present in front of Shicai’s eyes – with the imagined homeland evoked by Shao’s performance, texts and maps, that manifests itself through the opening of desire and fantasy is how spectral Chineseness figures, as an imagined history that becomes a burden and spirit to be constantly negotiated in reality.

Another manifestation of spectral Chineseness can be read in Shicai’s question directed at his brothers. Whereas Shicai’s third brother, Shiwen aspires to read Shao Lao Shi’s entire book collection before he is twenty, his fourth brother Shishang wants to learn a set of martial arts in order to *baoguo* (serve the *guo*) (45). The former evinces cultural ambition and the desire to integrate himself into the civilizational history of “China” by evoking its literary tradition, while the latter implicitly evokes

the spirit of Yue Fei, a famous Song dynasty general who is deified in Chinese cultural history as a symbol of loyalty. Each exemplifies one aspect of ancient Chinese masculinity – as captured by the adage *wenwu xuangquan* – adept in both the literary arts and the martial arts – which Yue Fei, as both poet and general symbolizes.⁴⁶ Shiwen’s use of the phrase *baoguo* is also a borrowing from Yue Fei’s myth, as he is known for tattooing the phrase *jingzhong baoguo* on his body, which literally means loyalty and repayment of debt to the *guo*.⁴⁷ This phrase is a cultural inheritance which becomes conceptual apparatus for understanding his position in relation to the imaginary homeland of “China” and his immediate surroundings. His understanding derives from an imaginary civilizational history, a framework which stretches back to pre-modern Chinese culture, which Shicai’s question undercuts. Shishang has no response to Shicai’s question, “which *guo* will you serve?”

Whose state, whose nation, whose empire?

This moment of aporia reveals the tension inherent in the concept *guo*, interpreted by those who are displaced like Shicai and his brothers. It raises questions about how to interpret the entity called “China,” which is given an ancient civilizational narrative by Shicai’s teacher. It also asks how Chineseness functions as an identity-granting specter, and the kind of loyalty this demands.

As mentioned, Shao is a member of the Communist Party of China, sent to the South to spread and inculcate communist ideology in the region. He is later deported back to the mainland by the British authorities after a sting operation. He, however, deeply influences the formation of the communist cadres in the Sarawak region; later

⁴⁶ 文武双全.

⁴⁷ “精忠报国”. This is a common story and legend that is taught in Chinese schools in Malaysia even today.

in the novel, it is mentioned that Yu Jiatong tries to replicate Shao's classroom in his jungle hideout, filled with Shao's books and texts. His teachings resonate with Shicai's brothers, who eventually join the communist struggle. His position as CPC member and authority of Chinese culture could be interpreted as abetting Chinese colonialism, using *guo* loyalty to influence and incorporate the outer territories of a modern Chinese empire.⁴⁸ However, the aporia inherent in *guo* complicates this. Depending on how this term is used, it could imply *diguó*⁴⁹ (empire), *guojia*⁵⁰ (state), or *guo*⁵¹ (nation), with different connotations of Chineseness. Zhang exploits this ambiguity through Shicai's naïve question, which forces one to reconsider the positionality of Shao and his followers. Shao's cultural inculcation, and attempt to integrate Borneo into the foundation and essence of ancient China, shows a more complex relationship than a purely colonial, resource-extraction based one.

Their appropriation of this Chinese imaginary is a historical phenomenon. As Wang Hui points out in regard to the historical Chinese dynasties, appealing to Chineseness was an important strategy for ruling groups to gain legitimacy, by defining themselves as ethical successors to the orthodoxy (*zhengtong*)⁵² of the empire, defined by rituals, symbols, and so on (104). This was appealed to even by ethnic groups such as the Jurchen and the Manchu, which formed dynasties at different times in history, and were subsequently painted by Han nationalists as outsiders to the essence of China.⁵³ What this suggests, however, is the plasticity of

⁴⁸ See Shu-Mei Shih's manifesto, "What is Sinophone Studies?", for a recapitulation of this form of argument about Chinese colonialism.

⁴⁹ 帝国.

⁵⁰ 国家.

⁵¹ 国.

⁵² 正统.

⁵³ See Kai-wing Chow's article "Narrating Nation, Race, and National Culture: Imagining the Hanzu Identity in Modern China" for a thorough discussion of the construction of Han identity by the late Qing revolutionaries.

the Chinese *guo*, which survives as an imaginary, applicable to other spaces and places.

“Empire” (or *diguó*) in classical China also implied a sense of virtuous rule, as opposed to a state of political conflict by various competing hegemonies – the legitimate successors were to be “distinguished from those states founded by usurpers, hegemonies, kings and their associated political forms” (33). As Wang puts it, “the new concept of empire that took shape in the nineteenth century (influenced by the development of Western empires) was actually closer to the political structures *repudiated* by the ancient concept of *diguó* (e.g. hegemonic states, dictatorial states)” (33). This does not imply that actually existing states were necessarily “virtuous,” nor that they expanded through purely “cultural/virtuous/kingly means,” as some Chinese-centric commentators would argue. Wang notes that the Qin and Han dynasties possessed elements of this newer notion of empire, with military conquest part of its expansion strategy. However, it does show that the term *diguó* is imbued with an additional layer of political-ethical legitimacy, and to claim succession to it is to stake one’s identity in relation to this legacy of ritual orthodoxy and moral supremacy.

As Wang puts it,

In this sense, “Chinese” identity is not produced through Han-centric narratives, but through the ways in which different nationalities claim legitimacy for themselves as they establish new dynastic eras— that is, the ways in which they remake or transform themselves into Chinese dynasties...the continuous development of orthodoxy is closely related to the ways that different dynasties— including minority- rule dynasties— seek political legitimacy for themselves. At the same time, the development of orthodoxy is also tied together in constantly

changing historical relationships with the remaking and redefinition of ethical values, institutional forms, and modes of living (117).

Shao's civilizational-cultural teaching, and his attempts to integrate Borneo into the narrative of Chineseness established by ancient texts, is a form of cultural appropriation that legitimizes its succession to ancient Chinese dynasties. This *guo*, when applied to Borneo, localizes in a strange way. This can be seen from the people-given name of Yu Jiatong's communist militia, the "Yangtze River Militia" (78, Zhang) – the Yangtze river being a river in mainland China associated with the Southern frontier, which hosts the migratory crocodiles in Shao's origin story.⁵⁴ This shows a local negotiation with the narrative of Chineseness; however, as *always already* displaced inhabitants of this imaginary Chinese *guo*, it is a spectral engagement, distinguishable from melancholic exile, diasporic longing, and loyalist consciousness. This relationship is closest to the idea of "sojourning" – in the way Chinese sojourners maintain a connection with their homeland by implementing physical markers and reshaping spaces, to redefine the land one inhabits as "home".⁵⁵ By making an imprint of one's origin in a new space, through institutions such as surname and village associations, temple rituals, the space of "Chinatown," they carry over home to a new land. However, even sojourning fails to account for the spectral element that is operative, and the political impetus behind this idealized communist remapping of space *through* armed uprising. This is a spectral political nationalism –

⁵⁴ The official name given to them by the ruling government and official media in the novel (and also, as we have seen earlier, the official memoirs of the ex-communists themselves) is the "North Kalimantan People's Army" (78), a Borneo-centric mode of naming this space.

⁵⁵ As Philip Kuhn describes in his introduction to *Chinese Among Others*, "...the English word 'emigrant' means 'one who removes from his own land to settle (permanently) in another.'...until recently, the intentions of most Chinese 'emigrants' were not to settle (permanently) outside China but to work abroad for a while and then return to their homes and communities...many millions of 'emigrants' actually have done so – a practice known as 'sojourning'. The spatially dispersed model of the Chinese family, with its long-practiced strategy of exporting labor and remitting money back home...assumes a continuous connection between migrants and their home communities. The essence of the matter *is not the separation but the connection.*" (4)

one that replicates late Qing China revolutionaries' attempts to carve out an "authentically Chinese" nation, albeit one that is set in Borneo.⁵⁶

While the late Qing revolutionaries constructed a national identity – now known as the "Han" – based on modern racial theories of yellowness, and their interactions with Western colonialism, the Sarawak communists pose a different kind of nationalism. As signaled by Shao's use of the "crocodile" trope, this nationalism is inflected by the Chinese perception and imaginary of the South Seas as a place of danger and exoticism, which needs to be settled. This settling is the remaking of a "wild space" for civilizational legitimacy to take hold. This kind of Chinese remaking has a history in Borneo – its predecessors being the Lanfang Republic established in 1777, and Wong Nai Siong's establishment of Sibü (also part of Sarawak) in the late 19th and early 20th century. The latter is particularly resonant since Wong was one of the late Qing intellectuals who actively participated in reformist efforts to transform the existing Qing government.

One might call these historical movements "settler colonialism"; however, unlike the British settling of Malaya which received acknowledgement as an agent of the Queen (for instance, the East Indian Trading Company's trade settlements), this form of settling does not receive legitimacy from the existing Chinese government, nor does it seek legitimacy from that existing power. Rather, the imaginary of Chineseness serves to legitimize their political revolution. Chineseness here functions as a rallying cry against existing authority, but it is primarily an imaginary, and need not be associated with any particular government, group, or even geographical location. Its spectrality is related to the aporia of *guo*, as this imaginary can be applied to the establishment of different political units – empire, nation, and state. It confers a

⁵⁶ Kai-Wing Chow gives a good account of how this took place in the mainland, and the subsequent racialized connotations that were formed through the creation of the Han race, and the favored rhetoric of the "Sons of the Yellow Emperor".

spectral legitimacy that authorizes the revolution, and it is this legitimacy Zhang critiques, through Shicai. Shicai's opening question shows the ambiguity of this political appropriation of Chineseness, especially for the purpose of Hua communist nationalism, which is haunted by the ghosts of other modern Chinese nationalisms.

This Hua nationalism combines settling with the desire for a legitimate, "authentic Chineseness." Zhang's historical excavation reveals the "heart of darkness" of Sarawak Chinese displacement, which is the desire to take up arms to master their inhabited land. The close relationship between the Sarawakian communists and the CPC in China, exemplified by Shao Lao Shi's character, is secondary to the *guo* imaginary that infects their political aspirations. This imaginary of civilizational Chineseness cannot be equated with the modern Chinese nation-state. Even though for the Sarawak Hua, the Maoist struggle was an inspiration both materially and culturally, what Zhang shows through his critique of *guo* is the disjunction that exists in this geopolitical realm.⁵⁷ In this genealogy of communist Hua nationalism in Sarawak then, one sees how the locality of Borneo as an exotic rainforest space transforms the imaginary of Chineseness, with consequences for regional geopolitics.

Hua communist mapping and settling

The communists manifest this imaginary through their settling of the Borneo jungle. At the end of *Elephant Herd's* prologue, Shicai's uncle Yu Jiatong, Yu's friends, and his eldest brother are among those who go underground, in order to avoid capture by the police. They eventually participate in the communist insurgency in Sarawak, and their entrance into the jungle marks the end of Shicai's youthful

⁵⁷ One can even point out that historically the CCP established a bilateral relationship with Malaysia proper in 1972, rather than continue supporting the underground struggle of the Sarawak communists.

memories. It is the period of their active, jungle-based opposition to the government that leaves historical traces, which Shicai's journey recollects.

The communists' division and remaking of the jungle – their *spacing* – reveals a geopolitical imaginary that is driven by spectral Chineseness. They actively attempt to remake the jungle, by taming and settling it into a utilitarian place for resistance against governmental forces. But in the waning revolutionary timeframe of Shicai's journey, the militia remnants – now divided into petty gangs – haunt the jungle space. They extort money from Shicai and Dezhong, his indigenous Iban friend, as they make their way upstream through the jungle via the river (59). Shicai's earnest plea, as he reveals himself to be the youngest sibling of the Shi brothers who sacrificed themselves for the insurgency, falls on deaf ears (60). Dezhong remarks, "in the past these two shores were where my people were most vibrant, and now they are the breeding grounds of China communists" (61). From Dezhong's indigenous perspective, the rise and fall of communism has its roots in the pioneering and settling by "a Chinaman, who led thousands of people from Fuzhou to open up both coasts of the Rajang river, and created nests within the savage wilderness" (61). This refers to the aforementioned late Qing intellectual Wong Nai Siong, and his pioneering efforts to establish the town of Sibü in Sarawak.

The communists transform the jungle by delineating territories, which now belong to different communist militias. The remaking of this frontier is based on the political mapping of civilizational Chineseness, as each group competes for legitimacy in this space, to establish the *guo* that will encapsulate the communist ideal. Led by individuals from different walks of life, each group utilizes names and symbols that create a unique identity, such as Yu Jiatong's "Yangtze River Militia". Others include, for instance, the "Sarawakian People's Guerilla Army" (which is also

nicknamed the “Small Hippo Militia”), and the “Flaming Mountains Militia” (*huoyan shan budui*)⁵⁸, led by Yu’s comrade Wang Da Da.⁵⁹

As mentioned, the “Yangtze River Militia” led by Yu Jiatong evokes the imaginary of the Yangtze, the longest river in mainland China, and is also associated with the Southern frontier where the migratory crocodiles originate in Shao Lao Shi’s story. A Chinese geographical entity is imprinted upon the local space, as the Yangtze is implicitly a substitute for the longest river in Borneo, the Rajang river (79). This imaginary mapping of one space onto the other is exemplified by a school teacher with leftist sympathies telling Yu Jiatong: “if Mongolia were not independent, look at how similar China and Borneo would be!”, as he etches the Rajang river onto the Yangtze River on the blackboard (78). This is further emphasized by the Yangtze militia’s emblem, which is of a Chinese dragon (79). The Flaming Mountains Militia also references a geographical landmark in China, the Flaming Mountains situated in the Xinjiang Silk Road area, a trade route stretching to South East Asia, popularized by the Ming dynasty epic novel *Journey to the West*. These geographical mappings and spatial imprinting build on Shao’s origin story, revealing the specter of “Chineseness” that is operative as they perceive and remake their local space. They betray a desire for geographical prestige and legitimacy (China could in fact be *like* Borneo), and the desire to remake their current location in the image of this fantasized wholeness – a *guo* rooted in an imagined “China” that is foundationally related with their South location, from the halcyon days of the Chinese Empire.

Their look towards the past inspires them to restructure the present, for the future establishment of *guo*. The ghost of Chineseness interacts with the geopolitical

⁵⁸ 火焰山部队.

⁵⁹ See Chapter 10, pg. 115 of *An Enlightening Journey*, for a historical account of the formation of the “Flaming Mountains Militia”.

climate of the present to produce a vision of the future. This imaginary is situated within regional politics, and the insurgency's resistance towards the Malaysia Agreement, whereby Malaya, Sarawak, North Borneo (now Sabah) and Singapore would be integrated into a federation named Malaysia. The communists' opposition to this entity was for the establishment of an independent leftist state called North Kalimantan, with assistance from the pro-communist Indonesian state, and communist China at the time. The Sarawakian space serves as a proxy conflict zone in the Cold War, as competing sides try to convert the land into their visions of the future. *Guo* is haunted by the Chinese specter, but its translation to a regional and local context means that it has to be incorporated into existing, concrete political frameworks. The strange and messy political coalitions that are formed is described in *An Enlightening Journey*, whose authors point out that:

Within the base of armed struggle, situated within Indonesian territory, we clearly saw: there existed the contradictions of different nationalities; the contradiction between our army and the Indonesian people, the contradiction of ethnicity, that is to say the contradiction between our nearly all-Chinese army, and the Indonesian army made up of Dayaks. (82, North)

This criss-crossing of political interests, shows how *guo* confronts the reality of Borneo geography. Its messiness warns of the perils of imposing upon this space an idealized image of civilizational Chineseness. This tension between past and future lends credence to Zhang's criticism of the Sarawak communists' goals, which he views as driven by the desire to close this gap via force, by the remapping and resettling of the space.

As J.C. Scott describes in *Seeing like a State*, a political state's "mapping" transforms a space for its own use. A modernist transformation is one that seeks to implement a vision of the future in the name of progress (92). The spectral "mapping" of the Hua communists is, in fact, political and modernist. The invocation of the past through appellations and symbols of imagined Chineseness merges with their aspirations for the future, as the term *ge ming* (revolution) connotes. This term is used by the communists to name their jungle activities.⁶⁰ Yu's comrade Wang Da Da exhorts early on in the novel, "*yiqie wei geming*" ("everything for the revolution") (26, Zhang).⁶¹ It is an ancient term used to describe the overthrowing of a dynasty – *ming* being legitimacy granted by Heaven, which loss means a ruler is susceptible to being overthrown.⁶² Revolution here involves the past while staking a claim for the future. Their mapping remakes the jungle space as an imagined Chinese *guo*, while also figuring in Cold War geopolitical discourse of state-driven progress. As is clear from Yu's own words, his notion of progress does not depart from modernist transformation, with the aim of exploiting the jungle for construction (113). In Zhang's depiction, their revolution, while seemingly riding on popular mandate, is in fact a vanguard-driven effort (89).⁶³

This vanguardist mentality is framed by the classical Chinese concepts of hegemon and emperor, as Shicai's conversation with Yu reveals. Speaking of his role in the insurgency, Yu recollects,

At that time, when I walked at the side of the Rajang river, the people treated me as emperor, and my army as the imperial guard. Every time we entered a town, the people would cook poultry and slaughter goats

⁶⁰ 革命.

⁶¹ "一切为革命."

⁶² See Wang Hui's book for a deeper discussion of the importance of the concept of *ming*, 命.

⁶³ For instance, Yu attempts to transform an indigenous school in the jungle into a Chinese-language school (75).

to welcome us. The media called the Yangtze River Militia the “underground government.” “Underground government”? Such a derogatory name. Our army was the people’s nanny. Any difficulties the people had, they could solve by voicing their grievances to the Yangtze River Militia (113).

Yu’s recollection clearly distinguishes the “people” and the “vanguard”, further emphasized by Yu’s concepts of emperor, army, and people. The use of these terms in conjunction with one another – a past vocabulary, combined with a future struggle – gestures at political nationalism. In his essay “Narrating Nation, Race and National Culture: Imagining the Hanzu Identity in Modern China,” Kai-Wing Chow describes how the reinvention of historical time, and the appropriation and invention of an original race called the “Han” was crucial to the late Qing revolutionaries’ efforts to overthrow the Manchu government based on the prevailing terms of political nationalism, circa late 1890s and early 1900s – which established an imagined lineage from the “Han race”, the first ancestor being the mythical Huangdi, or Yellow Emperor. This establishment of Huangdi was connected with the formulation of the Other (namely, the Manchu) as barbarians that could be legitimately expelled from the constitution of the Chinese nation-state – a rewriting of Chinese history into specifically a Han history, rendering its narrative one of thousand year Han conquest of the “outer races” (62, Chow), the rise and fall of the Han race in a linear timeframe of history that now confronted the “threat” of the Manchu.⁶⁴

Yu’s invocation of emperor and army, combined with place genealogy deriving from an imagined classical China transmitted by mainland communist agents (Shao Lao Shi) link these political nationalisms. Their looking back to look forward

⁶⁴ Chow comprehensively discusses the way lineage ideas, Han settling and conquest are related with one another through the late Qing revolutionaries’ efforts at defining a modern Chinese nation-state.

constructs a linear, progressive narrative – something notable also in *An Enlightening Journey*, which chronologically narrates the history of the Sarawak insurgency, ending with the exhortation that “the road of societal progress is winding, but its future is bright” (306, North). This discourse of linear progress is inseparable from the construction of an anachronism, which for the Hua communists is civilizational Chineseness, mobilized as an anti-colonial political imaginary. Their vocabulary for political revolution is inherited, and limited by the way it is imbricated with mainland political nationalism. The “blood and land” ties between the Sarawak Hua and the mainland Chinese that *An Enlightening Journey* describes as natural is not limited to the movement of mainland Chinese agents to Borneo, but also involves the very framework of political revolution, shot through with these specters of history.

Within the evocation of *guo*, then, are multifarious legacies. Shicai’s journey into the jungle excavates and critiques them. Zhang is clearly skeptical of and distanced from this endeavor to remake the Borneo space, and Shicai represents his position as an observer who is resolutely anti-romantic about its goals. Shicai, unlike his brothers, does not join his uncle’s communist militia (114, Zhang), and his journey through the jungle searches for remains of the failed struggle, represented by the deaths of his brother. His journey deals with the failure and consequences of the modernist attempt to restructure the Borneo space as an idealized image of the Chinese *guo*. Importantly, however, one can derive from his journey traces of an alternative route, both spatially and temporally, in things left behind by those who are no longer present, who are now specters in relation to the living.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Towards the end of the novel, Shicai has a dream where he “rides a dream creature to pick up the bones of his brothers and sister” (159). These bones are a potent image for conveying the remains of history.

Part 2: Shicai's alternative journey

Shicai's journey through the Sarawakian jungle is a journey of belated recollection. He enters the jungle when he is nineteen, when most of the communist members have left the jungle, or perished during the insurgency. His journey takes place in 1973, when the Federation of Malaysia had already been established, and communist China had already normalized relations with it. The communist party in Indonesia had been overthrown, and the Confrontation ended several years before. The remaining communist guerillas in the jungle are holdovers, the remainders of political developments that have left them behind.

The people he meets early on in the jungle, school teachers of an indigenous school, are convinced that he is going into the jungle to make his uncle give up the insurgency (74). As they note, the government implemented a policy to reintegrate those who leave the jungle, by finding them jobs and giving them economic benefits in society. The remaining holdouts in the jungle like Yu, his uncle, are separated from the outside world, remainders of a time that is about to be superseded. As described earlier, Zhang represents this temporal and spatial disjunction in the jungle through frequent interruptions in Shicai's journey, his present is interrupted by multiple past reminiscences involving his brothers, depending on location. He also maps the remains of the communist struggle, through encountering the few remaining guerillas who are still underground and in hiding. The stories of and *in* the jungle reveal themselves to him as bits of history that are scattered throughout this opaque space, triggered by his entrance.

Shicai's movement serves a cartographic purpose, which maps out the legacies of the communist struggle in Sarawak. While the modernist and revolutionary cartography of the communists is associated with the establishment of a new space, a

new *guo*, this alternative cartography picks out the remains of that effort, and its ambiguous legacies. As a form of recollection, it recovers traces of the past left behind by the modernist spacing of the communists and their enemies. It also reflects Zhang's own position as a displaced writer based in Taiwan, distanced from the space and time that he is attempting to represent. Shicai serves as his surrogate traveler in the Borneo rainforest.

Zhang's "mapping" is further contextualized by a comment that Denis Cosgrove makes in his article, "Mapping/Cartography":

In some respects all spatial activities might be regarded as 'mappings', and all maps as metaphorical to some degree. Mapping is always a performative act, a spatial activity incorporated into the creation and communication of individual and group identity, leaving a trace or mark in the world. (32)

The temporal aspect of Zhang's surrogate mapping can be understood through the idea of the "trace" or "mark". It recollects the mapping left behind by the Sarawak communists performance of their identity, influenced by spectral Chineseness. The spaces that he moves through are marked by the communists' attempts to transform the Borneo space for their own purposes – their cultural negotiation with the varied demographics of the jungle, for instance, and the attempts to restructure institutions such as indigenous schools in the jungle to reflect their understanding of Chineseness.

Shicai's belated entrance into the space differentiates him from his brothers' participation in the communist movement. This feeling of lateness can be seen in the way his journey of recollection is presented. Shicai's spacing in the novel grasps historical remainders to draw out the jettisoned past, which resides in a jungle that has been subsumed by the narrative of the ruling government, who control the space

exterior to the jungle.⁶⁶ Zhang's stylistic experimentation in the novel, which includes temporal interruptions and the unstable merging of past and present timelines in the narrative, reflects Shicai's relationship with the jungle space, as it presents an excavation of the past from his perspective – a journey that begins with gaps, belatedly. His narrative is a counter-mapping to the communist mapping influenced by the specter of Chineseness – an opaque journey that follows the trace of history as it manifests itself. This is in contrast with the recollections in *An Enlightening Journey*, which proceeds via assumptions of narrative coherence, linearity, and a clarity of the past as directed by revolutionary struggle. Zhang's counter-mapping challenges this teleological impulse, as it introduces the past as an ambiguous process, to be excavated, without necessity.

Zhang's novel is constructed accordingly. Shicai's journey through the rainforest begins years after his uncle and comrades have escaped into the jungle. An elision occurs between the first and second chapters – chapter one describes the boy's past relationships with these characters, functioning as a prologue or prehistory; chapter two begins with him *in medias res*, as a teenager undertaking the journey through the jungle. This shows a gap in history, as the time of the communist insurgency is missing, waiting to be filled out by Shicai's journey through this space, his encounters with the communist holdouts, and the indigenous peoples of the forest. During his journey, it becomes clear that both these groups have been bypassed, by time, development, and the forces that won. Shicai enters the jungle at a time when the communists have all but lost, with his uncle one of the few remaining holdouts – he has missed the main event, and can only collect its fragmented remains. Shicai can only engage the “main event” of revolutionary time through the recollections of these

⁶⁶ As the inhabitants of Shicai's town note, the ruling government has plans to develop and make the town capitalism-friendly, through the development of businesses and tourism.

remained groups, which Shicai excavates in his jungle encounters. The unknown legacy of this event is represented by this elision, to be discovered and interpreted by Shicai's excavations in the jungle.

Zhang's elision of that past does not eradicate history; instead, history resurfaces in certain triggered locations. This ambiguity of past and present during Shicai's journey suggests that past events are never submerged completely, and are partially recoverable. The question that Zhang poses, however, is precisely what is recoverable through such an excavation, and any form of recollection about this insurgency, when most of its events took place in the concealment of the jungle. Zhang's use of "mapping" signals the jungle's dense misdirection, a spatial imposition on historical representation, which is also affected by the guerilla tactics and movement utilized by the communists, uncondusive for historical documentation and systematic representation of their activities. What *becomes* history, thus, are fragments and remnants, which need to be searched for and excavated. Zhang's novel distinguishes itself from a straightforward historical recollection, by exemplifying through his elisions and resurfacings, the difficulties involved in its representation.

Shicai encounters the remnants of history through his journey. He meets multiple characters and parties, both human and animal, subject to the legacies of the conflict. His encounters with them elicit historical accounts. For instance, we discover through the words of a schoolmaster he meets that during the Yangtze River Militia's most successful period, his uncle Yu had tried to spread the teaching of the Chinese language and Maoist thought among the indigenous population, deep within the jungle (74, 75). This is another example of the vanguardist cartography that was described earlier, as the restructuring of the space is clearly driven by the construction of a Chinese identity. This uneasy relationship between the indigenous groups and the

predominantly Chinese communist cadres is another revolutionary legacy revealed by Shicai's journey; his journey, however, reworks the vanguardist cartography of the communists, rendering it ambiguous.

As Shicai looks upon a jungle school classroom in session, it reminds him of his own childhood days of learning, and reciting famous Chinese poems to the teacher⁶⁷ (76). Seeing the teacher animatedly teaching his students, Shicai is suddenly reminded of his third brother, who used to be a teacher at a similar Chinese school, before eventually joining the communists in the jungle. This seems like a standard flashback, but Zhang renders it as more than a brief past interlude. Instead, it is depicted as haunting Shicai, as he notes – “isn't that third brother?” (76) – a substitution of the present figure in front of him for an absent ghost, with an unspoken history. This triggered memory haunts Shicai for the next few pages, as the narration that explains how and why his third brother (and other brothers) joined the communists in the jungle is interspersed with Shicai's journey upstream, up until his third brother's death – an opaque event narrated to the family by an undercover member of the communists (79).

The fault-lines of the past is revealed through this memory. His third brother is revealed to be an excellent teacher for the town school, praised by none other than Teacher Shao, the mainland communist agent who is now its headmaster. Shao's influence on the school is such that it has become known as a place for spreading communist ideology, “churning out a cadre of communist members” (76). This, Zhang shows, is combined with a strong sense of Chinese identity, evident in the school anthem: “The origin of knowledge resides within the alma mater of the

⁶⁷ The poem that triggers this memory is a poem that describes the beauty of springtime – a clear disjunction with the tropical surroundings of Borneo.

Chinese, located in Da Zhong [the name of the school]”⁶⁸ (76). The school’s identity carves out a space for Chineseness that needs to be defended from outsiders – the seeds of nationalism, which results in competition and altercation with the English school that they share borders with. Racial lines are already drawn here, as “the Malays fought the Chinese (students), the Chinese fought the Malays” (76). When the armed conflict between communists and government begins, this results in curfews and restriction of movement, and his brother’s school is mysteriously destroyed by an unknown fire, which leads to him joining the jungle communists.

This resurfacing memory is part of Shicai’s excavation that links past and present, which tries to account for the hidden conditions that surrounded his third brother’s death. His third brother’s story is told in parallel with Shicai’s journey within the jungle, resituated within the larger political background of the conflict. The Sarawak communist insurgents, trained in Indonesia during the height of the Confrontation, had already become remainders after the Indonesian coup of 1965, which led to the removal from power of the left-leaning Sukarno, and the death of the Indonesian Communist Party leader Aidit (76).⁶⁹ The subsequent communist purges in Indonesia, aided by Malaysia, meant that the Sarawakian communists lost their Indonesian base of support, as well as their Borneo homeland, and thus reentered the Sarawakian jungle as underground insurgents. Shicai’s third brother’s entrance into the jungle in 1969 – the consequence of his unemployment from his destroyed school – is the act of an individual remainder joining a collective one, in a space that they do not belong. All three timeframes, from the micro-level of individuals involved in the insurgency to the macro-level of regional politics, are suffused with this logic of

⁶⁸ “中华母校在大中，知识渊源在其中...”

⁶⁹ The Confrontation, or Konfrontasi, refers to the standoff between Indonesia and Malaya over the formation of Malaysia, which incorporated the Borneo states and Singapore into a nation.

belatedness, haunting, and remainder. The jungle – location of this “new” Hua space – is a space of remainder, and those who enter, be it the communists, Shicai’s third brother, or Shicai himself are all entangled by its logic.

This paradox of spectrality, exemplified through the past that haunts the progress narrative of the struggle, is continuously brought out by Shicai’s moving deeper and deeper into the jungle. His journey is a progressive movement driven by ghosts of the past – the ghosts of his brothers who perished in there. As he continues, other memories are triggered by the jungle environment. For instance, Shicai remembers a traumatic scene where his third brother bids farewell to him as he leaves for the jungle with members of the Yangtze militia, and other traces of his third brother that originated from the jungle due to his assistant propagandist role, like his handwritten communist decrees that came from the jungle.⁷⁰⁷¹ Finally, Shicai recalls how his third brother’s death was conveyed through a member of the Yangtze militia, who sneaked into town to inform Shicai’s family. Even the cause of his death is ambiguous, unofficial, and undocumented, and the story told of him used as a pawn for infighting and politicking between Yu and another cadre is hearsay, its details unconfirmed.⁷²

In contrast with the vanguardist communists, who attempt a strong remapping of the space based on a progressive temporality of desired victory, Shicai’s journey reveals a temporality of failure, as it maps the remainders of history. He meets leftovers of the Yangtze militia, who survive on extortion and bribery; his

⁷⁰ “His hunched back and those of the members of the Yangtze militia who risked their lives melded together in his tears, and became one single figure, disappearing into the wilderness.” (78)

⁷¹ “The thin and long traces of handwriting (which belonged to his third brother) were immediately recognized by him.” (79)

⁷² He is kidnapped by members of another militia who extort Yu for weapons, but Yu does not comply fully, leading to his death. The fantastical way the scene of his death is narrated, which includes him pleading “don’t shoot me in the head, my brain still contains knowledge for the revolution that I can serve in my next life” to his captors, shows the ambiguity of this account.

companion's indigenous family, who still possess land and houses, but have lost members in the conflict; later, he meets two other members of the Yangtze militia, who finally bring him to his uncle's hideout, but he discovers that the militia, which at its peak had seven hundred and sixty two members, has dwindled to only five members (98). This sense of decline hangs over Shicai's journey, but Shicai's mapping goes beyond the immediate past, as it is implied that this is the result of the jungle war, and is inseparable from the spectral Chineseness evoked by the vanguardist mapping of the communists.

The journey in the present reframes Shicai's memories of the past, and emphasizes the connection between his upbringing as a Sarawak Chinese, the history of communist influence in Borneo, and the deeper history of this spectral Chineseness – pasts that are evoked through triggered revelations and recollections. Zhang argues that the failure of the Hua communists originates from this spectral Chineseness that imposes limits on their political imaginary, which results in a settler vanguardist movement undergirded by ancient Chinese political ideals. Shicai's excavation, of its fragments and effects, critiques this limit.

A different animal

Indeed, there are real elephants in the jungle that are not addressed by this communist vision, such as the status of the indigenous people, whose plight Shicai is sensitive to, unlike his uncle's ruthless and racist viewpoint of them as mere tools for the communist struggle (146). His companion for this journey, De Zhong, is a Chinese-speaking indigene who went to school with him, and he provides another viewpoint on the jungle, one that departs from the Hua-centric perspective of the communists. During heavy rain in their journey, De Zhong and Shicai take refuge in

the home of the indigenous people, where Shicai begins to understand the impact of spectral Chineseness on them. Shicai notices old Chinese dynastic pottery and instruments in the indigenous longhouse, and even some tattooing on the natives that belies a “classical Chinese style” (*Zhongguo feng*)⁷³ (82). Shicai’s experience in the indigenous home is told from his perspective, and a stream-of-consciousness style that makes it ambiguous whether this Chineseness is Shicai’s projection, as Chinese references and tropes proliferate for him at every turn (83). Local objects and landmarks become read through a classical Chinese perspective.⁷⁴ Through this, Zhang highlights the mentality of this spectral Chinese perspective, and the way it can be projected upon any inhabited space as an epistemology and identity.

However, through his interactions with De Zhong and others in the longhouse, including De Zhong’s sister Fatiyah, this projection is challenged, especially via his encounter with an important object – the elephant tusk (85), which is a key symbol that conveys the heavy burden of history. As Shicai sees several elephant tusks in the longhouse, which are “three times larger than the indigenous knife he is carrying” (86), he realizes that these are old tusks more than two hundred years old, left behind from the ancestors of the indigenous people. According to their story, they got this tusk from a legendary elephant that had died at the Indonesian border, decaying and being picked apart by scorpions and crows, without any visible sign of injury (86). The other tusk that they removed from the dead elephant was taken by the British who came with a “Mauser rifle” – symbolizing the way the outside world historically enters, and forcefully expropriates objects and peoples for their own use. This

⁷³ 中国风.

⁷⁴ “The boy...took a bite of the durian. Durian. When Zheng He made his voyage down to the Nanyang, he stopped at Borneo twice, and saw that a contagious disease was proliferating, and used the fruit of durian to cure it...a few hundred kilometers outside of the longhouse was a world famous rock cavern, and its formation period was four hundred and fifty to five hundred years ago...its most recent remains was Tang dynasty era coins and pottery. (83)

elephant – a vanished species that none of the living indigenous people have seen – is a pregnant symbol of the lost past.

Even the Chinese communists are fixated by its mystical appeal. While the crocodile represents a spectral desire for historical legitimacy of the South, the elephants here suggest a different end for Sinophone identity, which departs from the dream of closing this historical gap through force. Instead of staging a "return" to the imagined Chinese motherland, or restructuring space to establish a new *guo*, the elephants symbolize a Hua identity that is always in-between.

Elephants are hunted in the Borneo jungle by many parties, including Shicai's brothers and uncles. There are rumors of an unsighted, mythical elephant herd, migratory animals with an uncertain origin. Multiple stories describe where they originated – one explains they are descendants of army elephants belonging to a third century Indian king, another traces them as part of a coterie of animals brought along during Zheng He's voyage – a famous admiral who sailed from the mainland to the South with a large maritime fleet. They have evolved to suit local Bornean conditions, yet have been hunted by British and Dutch colonialists in subsequent centuries, and are possibly extinct (38). Their indeterminate origin is the opposite of the crocodiles', which were situated by Shao as a direct link to ancient Chinese civilization. Their mysterious form, disappearing and appearing at different points in the novel, embody another form of spectrality, which suggests another kind of migratory identity. Yet, they are under threat of extinction due to hunting, paradoxically including the Chinese Malaysians with whom they share a migration history.

In the novel's first chapter, Shicai's uncle, his brothers, Wang Da Da and a young Shicai go on a hunting expedition to look for the mythical elephant herd. Shicai is stricken with high fever when he enters the jungle, but is picked up by a live

elephant and separated from the group after he accidentally fell off his uncle's back. The others only manage to find some elephant bones and remains (34). While unclear whether he had hallucinated the elephant incident (86), the young Shicai evinces a sense of loss and care for the animals during the hunt – asking if this meant that "the birds lose their family, mother and father massacred" (37) – and is also affected by the elephants' deaths, questioning if they possessed an afterlife (42).

This sense of curiosity contrasts with Yu's and Wang's motivations for tracking down the elephant herd, which is for their tusks – a lucrative source of income for the revolution (42). Their different motivations and mentality in relation with the jungle are made clear, as those who end up spearheading the communist insurgency see the space and its other constituents as resources, whereas Shicai is concerned about the effects of their actions on the environment.⁷⁵ From the beginning, there is a clear difference in disposition between Shicai and his uncle, which ultimately results in their conflict.

When Shicai is finally brought to his uncle's base by the remaining members of the militia, he first encounters a room that reminds him of Shao Lao Shi's classroom (102). As his uncle Yu explains later, they had carried his books all the way through the jungle after Shao was deported back to China by government officials. Shicai is struck by how this reenactment is faithful to the memory of the classroom, with the "same ideograms, the same books, the same photographs, the same classroom and studying atmosphere, (as if) Shao Lao Shi's Chinese culture had been moved and planted here!" (103) Even the blackboard in the room, he notices, is inscribed with Shao Lao Shi's writing. This eerie reenactment shows the extent to which the restructuring cartography takes place according to his uncle's memory of

⁷⁵ Their conception of rule and domination of the space is also patriarchal, which Zhang links to his uncle Yu's treatment of a fellow women comrade – a story he tells Shicai later on in the novel.

Shao's teaching, which also shows the Chinese specter that hovers over the communist insurgency.

For his uncle, the communist struggle is also the struggle to establish *guo* that is simultaneously ancient and modern – ancient in its inherited imagination of Chinese civilization, and the terms with which it conceives statehood. Yu's later comments on the initial phase of the communist struggle, when it received support from the people reveal this dual temporality, as he tells Shicai that the people "treated him as the emperor," "gifted them rice and wine," and "sent their sons and daughters for the revolution" (113), anointing the Yangtze militia as the "protector of the people," who could help solve any problems they encountered. His uncle's language shows how the revolution is shot through with past legacies in its self-conception – this is a vanguardist *and* hegemonic relationship with the people, described in terms of political nationalism that invokes the archaic as justification.

With Shicai, Yu also discusses plans for building an international casino in the jungle, as a means of generating revenue – a familiar developmental and governmental idea that belies a modernist mentality. In the room is also a pair of elephant tusks, and his uncle's photos of himself with hunting gear – symbolizing the destruction of the space, wrought by the vanguardist struggle and mapping. As Shicai enters deeper into the room, this remapping is shown, literally, through a map belonging to his uncle, which has both Borneo and mainland China on it, and is filled with markings on Sarawak. This division of space is accompanied with a message outlining communist principles, and a poem written in Chinese to remember a fallen comrade (109). The combination of ancient and modern, at the heart of their vanguardist cartography, is mapped onto the jungle, shown by the corporeal marks of

Yu Jia Tong, Shicai's uncle, representing a *placing* that is constitutive of the identity-building of the Hua communists.

When Shicai meets Yu, Yu is rearing various farm animals like duck, pig, and chickens. Shicai discovers that these farm animals are important to his uncle not as a food source for the communist militia, which is nearly non-existent now, but are used to feed the crocodiles in the river which surrounds his base (111). This encirclement by the crocodiles contrasts with the elephants concealed in the jungle, which are not controlled by humans. The crocodiles mark spatial perimeters and boundaries for the communists. Ironically, this also applies to the ex-communist Wang Da Da – he who proclaimed “everything for the revolution” – who after leaving the jungle ends up running a crocodile farm business (148), which Shicai visits after his jungle journey. Both Yu and Wang are trapped by crocodiles of their own making – Shicai's uncle encircled in the communist jungle base, Wang Da Da stuck in the new world of the capitalism, forced to make the crocodiles tourist attractions, and sell them as raw material for crocodile goods (151). These encirclements belie the fact that both were driven by a vanguardist cartography before, similarly influenced by the imperative to divide and restructure the jungle space according to the Chinese specter.

Through Shicai's journey, Zhang shows how this kind of identity-making constricts the Hua communists; the specter is a trap that prevents Hua identity from accommodating local conditions. The crocodile encirclement perfectly symbolizes this constriction; the drawing of strong borders to project an *a priori* determined identity. Yu's attitudes towards the indigenous people also show this, as he advocated a limited intermarriage between the Hua communists and indigenous people, but only as part of a revolutionary strategy – otherwise, he advises Shicai to not “waste his seed” on an indigenous woman, as he is the only remaining male heir in his family

(146). The prevailing mentality of the Hua communists is that the Sarawak jungle space and its constituents are mere strategic concerns for revolutionary purposes.

The elephants symbolize something different. Their evanescence makes them difficult to pin down – further emphasized by the inability of hunters to find them, as they have developed the intelligence over generations to evade humans, “like hermits in the jungle” (39). Over years of adaptation, they have transformed their default elephant traits to survive in the harsh environment of the Borneo jungle, becoming smaller, and learning evasion tactics that hides them from the humans (38-39). This is also why they are relatively free compared with the crocodiles. While the crocodiles are associated with Yu and the communists, Shicai and his family have a unique relationship with the elephants – as mentioned, Shicai meets a mythical elephant early in the novel, which sensitizes him towards these creatures later on.⁷⁶ Shicai’s journey through the jungle thus follows this elephant trace, exemplifying its movement. They bring Shicai to recover and map the fragments of revolutionary history in the jungle, and enlarges the scope of Sarawak Hua identity.

The elephant bones that Yu’s hunting expedition discovers are remains of a forgotten history in the jungle – an elephant massacre that went undocumented, which Yu notes was carried out by the British colonizers (40). Their bones remain as corporeal history; accretions of the space that went unwitnessed, requiring an excavation for it to return to history. This is Shicai’s role, as he asks his uncle Yu and his brothers where elephants go after they die, and if there are such things as elephant graves, summarily dismissed as an old wife’s tale by Yu (42). This concern for the corporeal remainder of undocumented history also includes his brothers’ traces – for instance, his third brother’s remaining handwriting in notes he left behind during his

⁷⁶ When Shicai was a child, his younger sister was swept away by a crocodile and killed, which leads him to be wary of crocodiles later on.

time in the jungle (79) – and the indigenous people’s history, a localized history that is not widely disseminated, but fraught with encounters with colonizers and other trespassers (87-88). Their memento of these historical encounters are the human heads hung in the perimeter of the indigenous longhouse, where his companion De Zhong, an indigene who went to Chinese school with Shicai, is from. This corporeal history records their experience of colonialism. As Shicai’s conversation with Fatiyah – an indigenous girl who he develops feelings for – reveals, the four heads hanging around the longhouse belonged to the various invaders of the jungle space, including the British, Japanese, Chinese, and Malay at different times in history (88). In their defense of the jungle space, the indigenous people are on the side of the elephants who were preyed on and hunted by these aggressors, similarly threatened with erasure from history. The bones and heads link them together as remains of the jungle, subjects of the legacy of vanguardist cartography.

Shicai’s sensitivity towards the remainder of history leads him to the elusive, the forgotten, and those who do not conform to either the governmental vision of the future as a place of capitalist accumulation, or the communist ideal of a spectral Chinese utopia. Those lost in the vanguardist cartographic pursuit – like Shicai’s brothers – and those hunted and destroyed by colonial aggression – such as the elephants and indigenous people – leave behind corporeal traces that signal the failings of the current spatial imaginaries. Their trace is a testament to the effects of what came before, and also a clue for a possible future for the space. They show a possible post-communist Hua identity, which does not aggressively restructure the local space, and aims for a form of co-existence and inhabitation. This can be seen in the relationships Shicai has with the indigenous people, and the aforementioned elephant herd.

Indigenous identities

In the indigenous people's perspective of history, the Chinese specter looms large. As De Zhong notes, "In our longhouse there's China everywhere...how can I not read Chinese books?" (82), referencing the long and fraught history of Chinese and indigenous relations in the region. De Zhong also points out that the spatial landscape of the indigenous people has been affected by the influx of Chinese migrants; in the early 20th century the two sides of the Rajang river was settled by Wong Nai Siong, the late Qing revolutionary leading thousands of people from Fuzhou, which transformed what used to be an indigenous space into a "hotbed for Chinese communism" (61). The communist undertaking to restructure the land is not something new; its seeds originate from Chinese migration into the Borneo region, which in one form at least, shares characteristics with settler colonialism.⁷⁷

While journeying through indigenous land, Shicai recounts the history of Chinese encounter with the indigenous people. These historical snippets are triggered by his encounters with different elements of the space – nature, the animals, and the indigenous people who inhabit the land. His family history is intertwined with the indigenous people as well – his second brother, who joined his uncle's Yangtze River Militia, was headhunted and killed by the Ibans for monetary reward (62, 132), whereas his eldest brother married an indigenous woman as part of his uncle's strategy of converting the Ibans to the communist cause (70). Ironically, the eldest brother becomes an "Iban warrior" after his marriage, taking on the cultural attributes and characteristics of his wife's people, wearing loincloth, drinking rice wine, and using a sabit (a scythe-like weapon) (70), even "inheriting" the bravery of the Ibans.

⁷⁷ In Zhang's second novel of his "Borneo rainforest" trilogy, *Monkey Cup*, he explores this issue of Chinese settler colonialism at length. One can read that novel as a pre-history of sorts to the events of *Elephant Herd*.

Nonetheless, he is killed in battle, sacrificing himself for other members of the militia to escape (122). The indigenous-Chinese relationship is flexible; as either invader or collaborator, colonialist or anti-colonial. De Zhong's grandfather fought with the anti-Japanese army that was predecessor to the communist militias (78), and "headhunted four Western men" to show loyalty to the cause.

At various points in the novel, the Chinese specter appears directly to Shicai. While rowing downstream with De Zhong, the river water reminds him of well water, which he associates with Zheng He, the famous Ming dynasty admiral who sailed South, and landed in Malacca, a prosperous sultanate at the time.⁷⁸ This is one of the many associations made in his journey; even the fruit that they encounter is tied to Yang Kwei Fei, the famous Chinese princess of the Tang Dynasty (77). Since these associations are the product of traditional Chinese education, and part of the influential "Chinese civilization" discourse, Shicai's initial perspective on his indigenous friend's longhouse is unsurprising (82). He even thinks of Fatiyah, De Zhong's sister whom he is attracted to, by describing her in those terms, noting that she possessed "black hair, dark eyes, and high cheekbones...like a Chinese person...Chinese women's shyness (83)..." In Shicai's stream of consciousness, however, this segues into a general theory of migration, as he recalls the Northward movement of the ancient Javanese ancestral group from a hundred million years ago, which eventually became the basis for the Peking people, after transformations and settlements in between. He also thinks that this cycle is continued by the migration of the Shi family Southwards, to the ancient homelands of the Javanese people in the year 1900 (83). Although the genetic argument may be fanciful, Shicai attempts to show an overlap between what is considered "Chinese" and "indigenous," even if

⁷⁸ This is now part of Malaysia, and functions as a crucial originary symbol and imagined cradle of civilization for Malay-centric nationalist discourse.

only through a lost generational trace. The “native” and “outsider” binary is blurred, revealed to be mutually implicated with one another.

Unlike the others who joined the communist struggle, Shicai’s ambivalence towards it is clear from his detachment from the *guo* ideal. This allows him to see parallels between the indigenous people’s suffering at the hands of the British (year 1841 onwards), and the Chinese migrant experience of massacres and killings at the hands of various colonizers in the region (1603 – Spanish at Philippines, 1740 – Dutch at Java, 1969 – Peninsular Malaysia)⁷⁹ (89). The connection forged between him and Fatiyah takes the point of view of those who have been silenced by history through violence – a shared experience that reaches across racial boundaries. This points towards a solidarity of the left behind, which returns through another spectral form. While the Chinese communists chase a specter with boundaries that are fixed – the accretion of historicism – what propels Shicai in his journey is, as he puts it, the “unceasing sounds of the elephant herd’s movement, which seemingly existed in between fantasy and reality...” (91) This elephant specter represents another migrational possibility in the region, an identity that is not fixed, and always on the move.

Shicai’s connection with the elephants makes him a crucial part of this reinterpretation of Hua identity. As he discovers later through his uncle Yu, their family history was irrevocably changed by the entrance of an elephant herd into the Shi family land when Shicai was born (161); Yu’s mother had attempted to stop the elephants’ rampage in the Shi vegetable farm, but ended up as victim of their stampede. Her death created a rift between the two families, as it was believed that

⁷⁹ The last date has a strong influence on the displacement of subsequent generations of the Malaysian Chinese, including Zhang himself. Shicai’s journey is situated in 1973, which belongs to the post May 13, 1969 racial riot political timeframe. This incident took place in Peninsular Malaysia, not Sarawak, but forms part of the imaginary of the Hua people there.

this form of death was an inauspicious one for both, even though their patriarchs – Shicai’s grandfather and Yu’s father – were both migrants to the South on the same boat. Their intertwined family history – which took another turn as Yu’s sister married Shicai’s father – is a migrant story that was commonplace at that time, and Shicai’s role as a future turning point for their respective families is marked dramatically with his birth, and the death of the Yu matriarch. The way these elephants “enter” the Shi-Yu family is a spectral insertion into their family genealogy; these elephants were ultimately untraceable because it rained non-stop for two days after the incident, rendering their tracks invisible (154). The traumatic breaking in of the elephants precipitates Shicai’s own break from the existing Hua order.

Zhang further undermines the migrant family narrative by introducing twists to the Yu and Shi genealogy; as it turns out, the Shi children were all bastard children, as Shi’s mother (Yu’s sister) had to prostitute herself in order to pay off his father’s various gambling debts (179-180). Any supposed “pure” line of descent is contaminated through this revelation– a subtle metaphor for the history of the Sarawak region, which was itself subject to multiple colonialisms and migrations. It is revealed that the eldest son of the Shi family was impregnated by rape, by Japanese soldiers who intruded into the Shi estate. This multiple miscegenation through horrific circumstances makes Shicai’s origin unclear, and ties the Shi family history irrevocably with the historical circumstances of the region. Shicai’s connection with the elephants, which recurs throughout the novel as momentary hallucinations or dreams show their similar destiny, as wandering, ambiguous elements of Borneo. Shicai’s dream space is another space within the jungle, which continues Shicai’s movement, guided by the benevolent specter of the elephants. His spectral kinship with them, signaled in their “adoption” of him when he was younger – the moment

during the hunting trip when he encountered the mythical large elephant – and subsequently a dream of him being saved by an elephant, in a battle between him and his uncle against government forces, another identity that transcends this conflict (152).

Shicai's connection with the elephants is tested when he is asked by his uncle to join him on a final elephant hunt (147). During this trip, his uncle brings him to the different places where he used to hunt elephants. This is his uncle's cartography, premised on profit from the elephants, crucial as a source of income for the revolution. But Yu, strangely, is also sexually aroused by the elephant cry, conflating it with the cry of a female comrade he sleeps with (158). The elephant hunt connotes a fantasy of patriarchal conquest, the association of a desire and gap that is closed, which began with the crocodile narrative at Shao Lao Shi's class (157). Yu's journey to track the elephants can be contrasted with Shicai's tracing – they follow the same animals, but with different goals and intentions ultimately. Shicai later discovers that Yu's journey into the jungle was also a retracing of the steps of his uncle's father, who disappeared into the jungle after his mother's death. He was rumored to have become an elephant hunting expert, supplying Shicai's family with elephant tusks until his death (167). This genealogical journey of trace and retracing is similar to Shicai's own journey to track down his uncle; except Shicai's journey ends with Yu's death at his and De Zhong's hands. Their combined effort marks an end to the communist struggle, paradoxically, as the governmental forces mop up the few remaining forces; at the same time, this is an opening into a post-communist future for the Hua, and other groups in Sarawak.

When Yu and Shicai finally catch sight of the elephant herd in the jungle, it is clear that something has irrevocably changed over the course of the insurgency. The

elephants are not the majestic, mythical creatures that were rumored before, but are an afflicted, decaying horde, wounded and suffering from disease (160). They do not represent the majesty of an imagined Chinese civilization, connected through Zheng He's southward journey, but are the remainder, the legacy of failed attempts to restructure the land in the Hua image. Their decay reflects the decay of the imagined ideal, and the effects of vanguardist cartography in the insurgency, which has resulted in a "wound in nature," seen and felt by Shicai and the indigenous people (62). The beheading of Yu by Shicai and De Zhong is the removal of one of the roots of the disease, the ultimate end of an ideal that was doomed from the beginning, which even Yu recognizes. He confides to Shicai this realization, and suggests that he end the struggle, by killing him for the government reward.

After Yu's death, Shicai becomes the inheritor of his possessions – including his personal notebook, which records many secrets of their family history, and also information about the various elephants hunted by his uncle in his jungle. Both are corporeal remainders – artifacts of his uncle's legacy, which is inseparable with the fate and history of the Sarawak communist insurgency. Even in death, his uncle's remains are historically representative (165). The notebook, however, ends abruptly before it is completed (180) – leaving Shicai to continue excavating family history, and refashion his uncle's legacy. As Shicai notes, "the latter half of the book was full of mud and moisture, obscuring many unknowable riddles and unforeseen futures (181)." Its incompleteness – Yu's last notes destroyed by nature – and Shicai's father's sickness that causes him to literally consume maps, books, and writings – show the end of that generation's hold on history and space, the end of the patriarchs of the Yu and Shi families, along with its male kin, except for Shicai.

Shicai's role is not only to inherit the past; it is to show another future, however vague. As a collector of remains, he personifies the promise of a different spectrality – to recover something from the debris of the past, for an opening that disturbs the present. His excavation has revealed the failure of the communist ideal as partly due to its attempts to restructure the jungle in the image of spectral Chineseness. Shicai's recollection points beyond a simple overthrow of the old existing order, even as he inherits the shards of the past. It is clear that his uncle's legacy continues beyond his death – for instance, his grave is disturbed by some Malay mystics, revealing the racial fault lines opened up by the conflict. His bones are “spilled with animal blood,” “arranged in a strange position,” and also filled with “curse papers” (176). This disturbance signals a spectral battle; various ghosts conjured from distant racial pasts, in an identitarian conflict that is driven by political nationalisms on all sides.

Paradoxically, the ripples of this conflict is not acknowledged in the land where the specter supposedly derives from; his uncle's death is not noticed by the communists in China, with not even a statement from his mentor, Shao Lao Shi, who is now a high-ranking party member there (177). As Zhang describes,

...his uncle's death had elicited a small wave in the many countries in South East Asia, but when it reached the faraway ancestral land it had become calm. The ancestral land was as if an ancient well in the interior, separated by thousands of mountains and millions of seas, and an even stronger wind would not have elicited even a hint of a wave.

(177)

The cruel irony of his death is revealed in stark cartographic terms; in the desire to close the gap and establish a *guo* in its image, there was always an insurmountable

distance, even to its most ardent pursuer. Shicai understands this through his journey in the jungle to “ontologize remains” – a mourning that proceeds by “identifying the bodily remains and localizing the dead” (9, Derrida). This work is undertaken through his spatial mapping which takes place in time. Shicai’s journey restores space and time to a missing history – by showing an inheritance that has been forgotten, which can only be understood through its resurfacing. As Derrida points out, “inheritance is never a given...it is always a task.” (67) Unrepresented history is brought back to light through intervention into the Hua spatial and temporal imaginary.

What Shicai understands through this journey is not an alternative ideal that needs to be constructed, but the power of the past – even the deep past, such as the migrational history of crocodiles, elephants and the Chinese – in shaping the desires of the present, as of the Hua communists’ future ideals. The specter of Chineseness shows the power of history to dictate the possibilities and parameters of the present. However, *inheritance* of this history renders the future opaque, as it restores a futurity not predetermined by the dictates of the present. Zhang’s novel comments on Malaysian Chinese identity beyond the communist ideal, and stretches into an originary history represented by the specter of Chineseness. His discovery of hidden links between Hua communist ideal, the civilizational Chinese specter, and the settler colonialist impulse represented by the late Qing revolutionary Wong Nai Siong attests to this. Zhang expands the jungle space beyond a mere description of the communist hideout, into a historical-spatial-temporal meditation that elevates the facts of communist existence into a political aesthetic – transforming and deepening its spatial dimension, by revealing the complex historical imaginary it is intertwined with.

Zhang’s primary concern in this novel is with the past; however, it does not end with Shicai’s journey through the jungle, as it also extends to the time after Shicai

leaves the jungle with his uncle's remains. Subsequently, it is revealed that his father's injury by some town assailants belonging to a gambling ring and later death – an important plot point in the novel that signals the death of the Shi patriarch – only occurs *after* he has left the jungle for some time. This renders the journey as one already situated in the past, despite it being narrated as if it were the present for most of the novel, with temporal interruptions during the journey signaling either past or future. Such a layered temporality shows a historical intervention, as intervention into the past through its re-presentation opens up the present and future. The secrets of the past, once worked through, become an opening for the future to be written, symbolized by Yu's incomplete notebook kept by Shicai. Shicai's inheritance of that notebook gives him comprehension of the secrets that have structured his family history; after disposing of the notebook, he starts seeing a phantom that appears in his family farm.

Shicai first suspects it is the ghost of one of his brothers; later on, following the notebook's prognostications, he shadows his mother while on one of her daily walks, and discovers that his family farm contains a well full of elephant tusks. As narrated in Yu's notebook, after his mother's death his father was rumored to have disappeared into the jungle, supposedly becoming an elephant hunter, who supplied tusks to Shi's family. While the notebook speculates that he died after Shicai turned eight, as the supply of tusks seemed to stop then, what Shicai discovers following his mother are even larger stashes hidden away at other locations (186). Later, Shicai sees this phantom in the midst of placing elephant tusks in the well, and he gives chase, going on another mini-journey through the jungle. In one of the most opaque passages of the novel, the phantom leads him along a hallucinatory path filled with animals and plants that overwhelm Shicai with clues of its trail, eventually leading to a coffin boat,

and a cave overflowing with elephant tusks. Shicai wonders if the phantom is his granduncle's ghost, and if the coffin belongs to him. However, he does not discover any remains there, except for elephant tusks and a "dragon crocodile totem" that is indirectly associated with the Yu family (190). The mystery of the phantom is unresolved, and Shicai later even wonders whether there was a phantom, or just a trick of his senses.

This phantom chase is a coda to the journey to find his uncle; its inconclusive search makes the novel's cycle incomplete, and importantly, does not close off Shicai's movement, as if he has discovered the ultimate key to Hua identity. This futurity is important because it suggests that the negotiation of this identity does not end; concurrently, the mapping that Shicai undertakes is not complete, having symbolically worked through the legacy of the Yangtze River Militia. Meeting Yu reveals that there is another layer of provenance – Yu's father; and the inconclusiveness regarding his condition puts Shicai on a recapitulating journey (191), his steps laid out and marked again by elephant tracks. The phantom is an impetus for another possible journey by Shicai through the same areas:

Tomorrow he might buy a sampan to head up river on the Rajang again, visit the Yangtze base again, hunt for that rumor monster that had grown full of meat, and bring along the well-full and cave-full of elephant ivory buried in the rough shrubs and wild lands in his heart.
(191)

This ending seems to suggest a static repetition, as if the novel is stuck in a cyclical movement, never to be completed. Before the ending, however, Shicai ejaculated his semen onto his uncle Yu's dilapidated elephant notebook. The story to be written about his family history, and the space that was mapped by his uncle previously, has

been metaphorically marked with Shicai's generative intervention. This dream-like coda to the main journey in the novel is a transitory stage to another journey, one that begins Shicai's journey anew. It signifies the past (the phantom reminds him of his grand-uncle) and the future (its real identity is ambiguous) simultaneously. As Shicai notes, after the phantom chase he felt as if "a hundred years had passed." The temporal warp resets the space, and Shicai's next possible journey is opened up to a futurity that is yet unspecified. Although in the main journey the alternative identity generated by Shicai took the form of a hybrid Chinese-indigenous entity, contrasting his uncle's static, Chinese-centric imaginary, this does not imply that the identity will remain the same in the future. Zhang's restaging of this journey is to show the necessity of adaptation and change, and an evolving identity of the Hua that cannot be predicted in advance.

Through mapping the space of Sarawak Hua communism and excavating its history, Zhang has shown the inheritance that is part of its constitution, and advocated for a necessary departure from its past. The question about *guo* that begins as a naïve, innocent question on Shicai's part unlocks a journey that clarifies the multiple inheritances that are present in the Hua communist ideal, and shows how the specter of Chineseness impacts their history.

Chapter 2: The critique of linguistic ontopology and the representational gaps of the nation in Ng Kim Chew's *Nanyang People's Republic Memorandum*

If Zhang Gui Xing critiques the concept of Chineseness through his explorations of the Chinese specter and its resurfacing in the Sarawak communists' imaginary, Ng Kim Chew, another writer from Malaysia based in Taiwan, deals with the question of Chineseness and communism by taking a different approach. Ng takes on an issue that forms the locus of the politics of Chineseness in the Peninsular Malaysian region (also known as Malaya, prior to the formation of Malaysia), which is the nation-state and its formative ideology, what Derrida terms as "ontopology" in *Specters of Marx* (102, Derrida). His exploration of the connection between Chineseness, the nation-state, and ontopology underlines his critique of the Chinese specter that hovers in the Nanyang, especially through "blood and land" discourses that permeate conceptualizations of Chineseness in Malaya.

In his 2013 collection of short stories, the *Nanyang People's Republic Memorandum* (*Nanyang renmin gongheguo beiwanglu*), Ng excavates the history and legacy of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). Unlike Zhang's novel, Ng examines Malaya, which has a different history of Chineseness and communism from Zhang's Borneo. The MCP has a distinct history from the Sarawak communist cadres described in Zhang's novel, as they did not form a united front.⁸⁰ Ng's spatial exploration of communist history and experience is not through a narrated journey into the jungle, but via opaque reports delivered to the external world *from within* the jungle – highlighting the difficulties of representing communist history in Malaya.

The short story format that he uses shows this representational difficulty, by suggesting that the fragmentation and dispersion of such narratives are unrecoverable

⁸⁰ Scholars have not pieced together their exact relationship. However, see James Chin's review for some speculative questions on why they did not collude.

in some form. In his preface, Ng emphasizes the “gaps and elisions” of history, instead of “telling a story” – connecting linear narrative with a smoothening out of history, a representational naïveté, which he dispels through his representation of the history of the MCP. Ng associates this naïveté with the realist tendency in Malaysian Chinese literature, and has criticized it in other writings. One of his contentions is that Mahua realism, which positions itself as inheritor of mainland Chinese revolutionary literature in the 20th century, simplifies history into archetypes that fit leftist ideological positions rather than engaging with history concretely.⁸¹ In this collection, Ng connects this realist tendency with an ontological impulse that roots writers in nation-building discourse.⁸² His criticism displaces Malayan communist literature, or *magong shuxie*, from that impulse, by exposing representation as a problem.⁸³ He deconstructs the ontological impulse – intertwined with the “Chinese specter” that conditions the MCP’s ideals – through his textual practice, incorporating formal and stylistic experimentation. He shows how Chineseness can be defined as a *linguistic ontology* – the legacy of turn-of-the-century, late 19th and early 20th century mainland nationalism that sought to define a unique Chinese cultural identity via textual preservation.

This textual practice also performs an excavation of the historical problem that haunts Chineseness in the region, by showing how “ontological Chineseness” underpins the MCP’s effort at revolution. Ng’s excavation of MCP history from the perspective of those left behind – holdovers from the past – lead him to write something I call “speculative history.” This reveals the limits of the MCP’s political

⁸¹ See his comments on Fang Bei Fang and the poverty of Malaysian Chinese realism in “Mahua Realism’s Practical Dilemma” (馬華現實主義的實踐困境——從方北方的文論及馬來亞三部曲論馬華文學的獨特性), in his collected volume of essays, *Mahua Literature and Chineseness* (馬華文學與中國性).

⁸² Ng’s Taiwan sojourn from Peninsular Malaysia parallels Zhang’s move from Borneo to Taiwan.

⁸³ 马共书写

imaginary, which is conditioned by a secret history of ontopological Chineseness intertwined not only with the founding of the Malayan nation-state, but also the establishment of Chinese nationalism in the mainland. Ng deconstructs this *text of the nation-state* by observing the hidden history of Nanyang connection with mainland Chinese nationalism. Ng's goal is to denationalize *magong shuxie*, and recuperate the remainders of communist history as a reminder against the ontopological impulse that resurfaces in Malaysian Chinese identity politics.⁸⁴ This recuperation forms the *text of the remainder* that challenges the historical record of the nation-state.

Ontopology, origin, and Ng's displacement of history through the letter form

Ontopology is a term that I borrow from Derrida in *Specters of Marx*. As he puts it,

...by ontopology we mean an axiomatics linking indissociably the ontological value of present-being [on] to its *situation*, to the stable and presentable determination of locality, the *topos* of territory, native soil, city, body in general. (102, *Specters*)

The connection that Derrida draws here between locality and presence is salutary, as it shows that ontopology connects the idea of “being” and “belonging” with the stable presentation of location. This presentation of location is constantly framed through themes of “territory, native soil, city, body” – that is to say, ways of thinking and representing space. The “spatial mapping” that takes place through the MCP's movement in the jungle, and its subsequent representation in historical recollection, is where Ng detects this ontopological impulse.

⁸⁴ As Shu-mei Shih puts it, “Ng...takes a more defiant attitude and considers the possibility of Sinophone Malaysian literature as a non-national literature (*fei guojia wenxue*) or denationalized literature, and criticizes Chong [Fah Hing, another Mahua scholar] for succumbing to the nationalist and assimilationist demand of the Malaysian state as a utopian, tragic gesture.” *Intersecting Identities and Interculturality: Discourse and Practice*, pp. 65

In one of his earliest stories about communism in Malaya called “Fish Bones” (1995), Ng explores MCP history as trauma. He argues that the historical connection between nationalistic Chineseness and Malayan communism prevents proper representation and understanding of its legacies. In this story, the narrator’s inability to confront directly his brother’s death for the communist cause – as a member who fully bought into the conflation of ethnocentric Chineseness with historical revolution in the Nanyang – is only properly dealt with after he realizes how cultural and civilizational Chineseness conditions the historical worldview of communist youth in Malaya.⁸⁵ The narrator, who is a professor of Chinese studies, is obsessed with ancient turtle bones – remnants of an originary civilizational Chinese history. This, however, is an alibi for his foreclosed search for his communist brother’s remnants, which he eventually discovers in skeletal form in a lake near his childhood home. This transfiguration of bones from an ancient Chinese source to Malayan communism signals the conditioning of the latter by the former – an awareness of how a nationalistic and ontopological specter can haunt historical representation retrospectively and leave out gaps in the record. Ng explores this further in the *Nanyang’s People Republic Memorandum*, seeking to develop a discourse of bones that retains its historical integrity.

In the *Memorandum*, Ng examines the memoir as a way of recollecting history, which is tied to the experience of *being-there*, of bearing witness to a particular

⁸⁵ In “Fish Bones”, Ng makes clear the connection between Chineseness and communism through a revolutionary character named White Mountain – the narrator’s classmate – who sees history as a culmination of the Chinese communist revolution. “He [the main character] had no idea where his classmates obtained their publications, which included novels, essays, and poetry by Lu Xun, Hu Feng, Ba Jin, Mao Dun, Guo Moruo, among others...Based on these reading materials, his classmate White Mountain would patiently explain to him the principles of peasant rebellions and class struggle, and would relate the Chinese people’s difficult history dating back to the Opium Wars... ‘The Chinese people have stood up!’ They covered the Long March, American imperialism, Chinese coolies, and revolutionary youth. With this, White Mountain proceeded to give him a lesson in modern history, attempting to endow him with a sense of historical destiny, an awareness of historical depth, and an appreciation of his position within a system of abstract ideals.” See “Fish Bones”, *Slow Boat to China and Other Stories*, pp. 112.

moment in space and time.⁸⁶ It is also susceptible to the vicissitudes of memory, as it is a personal testimony of time and place. A prominent memoir is long-time exiled leader of the MCP Chin Peng's 2003 recollection, *My Side of History*. Chin suggests that his memoir is a form of redress to the "winner's history" of the Malayan Emergency – what he calls an anti-colonial war instead.⁸⁷ Such a counterpoint to the dominant narrative broadens the perspective of this period of history – at the same time, its perspective is also limited to, as Ng puts it, the description of "major history" (329, Memorandum). If the conventional representation of this period of history is told from the victor's point of view, which paints the MCP as a terrorist insurgency that hindered nation-building efforts post-independence – the ultimate accusation of "traitor" always hovering above – the loser's point of view emphasizes its contribution to the cause of independence, accelerating the departure of the British.⁸⁸

Either way, the emphasis is on the way the party and its individuals intersect with the historical event of Malayan independence – a narrative of the nation's founding, which becomes part of the smooth mythology of the nation-state. In Chin Peng's memoirs, there is the tendency to narrativize the "I" and its unique circumstances, seeing the imperative of history as driving the main character forward to certain fateful decisions and choices – a feature of linear narrative and

⁸⁶ While the communist memoir is the main genre that Ng attempts to deconstruct, memoirs from the other side of the conflict – for instance by ex-British army and police – also exist.

⁸⁷ Chin writes, "So during the Emergency years – for insurance purposes and therefore monetary reasons, the British would not call it a war, which it was – my comrades and I were made to wear the sobriquet of CTs. We were communist terrorists and that's how we were dismissed in the books that touch on that grim and gruesome time. My men died because we wanted to end colonialism and replace it with a political philosophy we believed to be infinitely fairer. The other side lost some 2000 men – many of them non-British, fighting on the behalf of the Empire – because they were defending an idea that had long gone irrelevant." (10)

⁸⁸ As Chin Peng writes in *My Side of History*: "This is exactly what my comrades and I achieved. We made the British sit up and acknowledge that they had to listen to the true owners of Malaya. We forced them to the bargaining table long before they were prepared to sit there." (10)

recollection.⁸⁹ Ng's stories counter this through both their form – which undermines the linear narrative construct through meta-textual elements like fragmentation, retellings, and thought experiments – and content, which focuses not on heroic narratives and the nation, but the experiences of those who are left out of historical representation, the historical remains of a society that has moved on without them.

One of the stories in the collection, “Letters from the Jungle” (“Senlin li de laixin”), exemplify this. This story narrates a collection of testimonies that are loosely related, all by underground communist members, who tell of their experiences in the jungle during the Second Malayan Emergency (or the Communist Insurgency War), and relations to those outside of the jungle.⁹⁰ However, the testimonies themselves are found in letter form, collected by a Tokyo-based Japanese professor, who has been researching this period of communism in the region. Similar to Zhang, the jungle here is depicted by Ng as an obscure space, which seemingly invites the mapping that Zhang's protagonist undertakes in his novel. However, instead of following a protagonist who enters the jungle in search of narratives – or, the inheritances of history – the letters here originate from within the jungle. To undercut the neatness of a conventional memoir, Ng highlights the dispersal of these narratives, their perishability in the material sense, and the need for interpretation that accompanies their testimony. The conditions for interpretation are brought forward through a foreword by the professor, which self-reflexively announces that the “story” does not fulfill literary requirements

⁸⁹ Quite a few passages in the memoir showcases a determined tone of “I would see to that.” / “I was forced to make a choice”. The memoir is a heroic and patriotic narrative about a man and what he sacrificed for his ideals, for a greater collective – the nation. This is not to say that it does not pay tribute to those who are left behind –however, the nation predominates the text.

⁹⁰ The First Malayan Emergency – essentially, a period of war between the Malayan Communist Party and the British colonial government that ruled Malaya at the time – began in 1948, and was revoked in 1960, after the Malayan government declared an end to the state of emergency after independence; however, the MCP regrouped along the Thai borders, and renewed their struggle in 1968, which is known as the Communist Insurgency War, or the Second Malayan Emergency, and lasted until 1989, when the MCP officially laid down arms.

of “coherence” (85), as “it is not literature in the first place” (85). If a memoir uses narrative devices to ensure that the disparate threads of memory add up to a readable, logical and singular narrative of past experiences, Ng inverts the logic by proposing fragments of multiple fictional testimonies that are incoherent overall, tied together only by the circumstance of collection.⁹¹ This notion of “collection” is particularly crucial, as the letters – the testimony of those in the jungle – go through multiple layers of displacement before arriving at this presentation by the professor.

Ng reveals the hidden mediation necessary for these testimonies to come together as a “meaningful” set of documents, to function as a representation of history. Inheritance requires interpretation – which conditions are explored from the beginning of the text. The “story” consists of documents and letters circulated by members of the MCP at different times and places, told in an epistolary fashion, tacked on with an explanation about the origin of these documents. They were purportedly collected by the history professor, in collaboration with Xiu Lan, the daughter of a communist party member who left the jungle. The ambiguous veracity of these documents, however, is already pointed out in the foreword. The professor casts doubt on their originality, suggesting the possibility of tampering and rewriting by an unknown third party, as well as its original material being eroded by the local climate (87). This focus on materiality highlights the conditions for historical production, and adds an archival element to the supposed fiction. If it shows how history is contingent, subject to conditions for production, it equally shows how fiction can masquerade as history, blurring the line between both.

⁹¹ See “The National Longing for Form” by Timothy Brennan, in *Nation and Narration* (ed. Homi Bhabha) for an extensive discussion on how the nation is narrated by cosmopolitan elites through the form of the novel, even while it seeks to create the image of a nation with its folk. I suggest that the communist memoir, here, performs the same kind of function for the nation, by recuperating figures of warfare into the narrative of its founding.

The letter, as a form of communication, opens up an important perspective on space and mapping. It is a moving object; through its movement, it accumulates history. Here, the letters move from their provenance, to the recipient. It is unclear as to who the actual recipients of these letters might be, and whether they are actually received by anyone, as the story never clarifies whether they reach their intended addressee. They end up in an archival state, excavated by an observer of history in the future – the professor character in the story. As the professor points out, this stack of documents should not be read in “literary” terms, simply because they are not written for the “purpose of purposelessness” (85). Instead, they are written *with* a purpose and *for* a recipient – it is only due to the vicissitudes of history, and the writer’s and recipient’s historical hardship, which has caused them to be partially lost, now existing in fragments and remains (85). This awareness of the historical, contained within the letter’s circulation, is what makes this excavation by the professor character another form of mapping. The circulation of the letter maps a route and journey – intertwining space and time – but it is an object that moves, rather than a subject. In the movement from within the jungle, to the location of the intended recipient of the letter, and finally to its archival resting place, its accumulation of the temporal is intertwined with its spatial element – emphasized by Ng’s descriptions of the various provenances of the letters, which are affixed with both a timestamp and an intended recipient.

Compared with a memoir that narrates (or at least, promises to narrate) the truth of an era, these testimonies are unstable and fragmented.⁹² The verisimilitude of their origin and reception is placed under critical question by Ng. Each stage of its

⁹² As Chin Peng’s memoir at times sounds – for instance, when he writes, “Over the years intelligence agencies and histories have wrestled with the intrigues and mysteries surrounding the sinister figure of Lai Te. Today, I am the sole remaining person who can provide cold, hard facts about the man.” Lai Te was a triple agent who crossed the British, the MCP and the Japanese at various points of the war, and was Chin Peng’s predecessor as the leader of the MCP. (84)

inheritance and transmission is put under scrutiny, and shown to be susceptible to tampering and mediation by different parties. In effect, Ng argues that the whole circuit of transmission necessitates the erasure of truth, and undermines any consistent attempt to represent it fully. Ng shows that at each level of transmission and inheritance, these letters are tied up with the circumstances of production, reception, and storage, each with its unique problems and possibilities.

This susceptibility can be analyzed at different levels. First, at its origin and production, it encompasses the difficulties that accompany an underground movement, which requires duplicity and the masking of names and identities. This renders the real origin and identities of those who sent these letters ambiguous, as the professor attests to being unable to discover their identities even after a trip to the communist village in Thailand, which houses some communist holdovers (86). The underground conditions and constant movement of the MCP also contributed to the fragmentation of historical documentation (86). Second, at the level of reception, there is also doubt about the intention of the letters, as they are all sent to Xiu Lan's father, who goes by multiple names, including Xi Dan, Hitam, his real name Li Guang Ming, and also the pseudonym Huo, or Fire (86). He resides in a town as an unstable link between the members within the jungle and the exterior world. It is unclear whether these letters are real testimonies dedicated to recording jungle life (Xi Dan as witness), or if they are letters meant to cause trouble for an ex-member (Xi Dan as traitor), which makes their testimonies untrustworthy. Thirdly, at the level of the archive, the narrator notes that one of his sources consists of archive material found in the National Archives of Malaysia, which were transcriptions and copies of the original. They were seemingly transcribed through a mask copy method by someone who did not understand written Chinese, with predictably wild results (87). Even the "originals" in Xiu Lan's

possession that were inherited from her father, seems to the narrator to have undergone reworking, as some of them had the same handwriting, as if transcribed by a single person. All these factors throw the notion of “originality” into doubt, and question the status of these “historical documents,” which could well be the result of a fictional tampering. The reply letters from Xi Dan, mentioned in the letters, are also nowhere to be found.

A discontinuity exists in the way the letters are randomly collected, even if they may be tangentially related. Names that appear in one letter reappear in another, which suggests a connected milieu. The overall narrative of the collected letters, however, is dispersed in a way that challenges the typical narrative form of the memoir, which attempts to tie up loose ends, and provide a coherent picture of an individual’s place in history. Here, the singular is fractured into unstable multiples, and the notion of testimony – of being witness at a particular place and time – is undermined through the questioning of narrative itself, highlighting the instability of memory, and the construction required to transform it into a legible and coherent historical narrative. It shows the gap between an authentic experience of history and its re-narration. But in Ng’s work, this gap is not closed through historical correction, and not solely by bringing out more narratives – as in an effort to recover repressed histories. Instead, he displaces the question of authenticity and originality, blurring the lines between the original and the fake, the unmediated and the constructed, showing the impossibility of determining either. His writing here could be described as “voiding” the original – to introduce to the historical representation of the MCP what Derrida proposes against ontopology:

...all stability in a place being but a stabilization or a sedentarization, it will have to have been necessary that the local differance, the spacing

of a displacement gives the movement its start. And gives place and gives rise. All national rootedness, for example, is rooted first of all in the memory or the anxiety of a displaced – or displaceable – population. It is not only time that is "out of joint," but space in time, spacing (103).

In Derrida's formulation, the idea of the "original," or the "national rootedness" which reaches for the rhetoric of the "original population" is always already infected with an attempt to eradicate its opposite – namely displacement, but more specifically, the *memory* of this displacement. Similarly, the fetishization of the "original" narrative is infected with the anxiety of forgetting, the linearization of memory smoothing out the gaps and discontinuities that exist in a mobile history. Ng's writing expands Derrida's initial insight about the ontological, connecting "national rootedness" with the simplification and reduction of historical narrative to suit the purpose of the nation. And the singularity of the "original" narrative – which gives it power and force – is also challenged by the questioning of what constitutes the "original" or the "first," unleashing multiple unstable narratives that under- and over-write one another. Unlike standard historical narratives which aim for coherence, here history is expanded in its dimensions to incorporate what is left out and contradictory – the gaps and overlays of history, to use a spatial metaphor.⁹³

Via this displacement of the original, we are placed in a world of simulacra.⁹⁴

Historical representation in Ng's story is the copy of a copy, which puts the notion of the original under erasure. It expands the representational space of history, while also highlighting the production – reception – archival, or distribution chain of history.

⁹³ Michel de Certeau provides an interesting take on the narrativity of history in *The Writing of History*.

⁹⁴ I am using the term "simulacrum" in the general sense of Brian Massumi's reading of Deleuze – as the copy of the copy that "undermines the very distinction between copy and model"... "A simulacrum has a different agenda, it enters different circuits... The simulacrum affirms its own difference." See "Realer than Real: The simulacrum according to Deleuze and Guattari" by Brian Massumi.

What Ng shows is the underbelly of history – the hidden, conditioning space that underwrites represented history while being glossed over. He hints at its existence by introducing a dream-space that co-exists with the narrative that moves the story forward. Xiu Lan, in her letter to the professor – the first document in the set of letters that the professor presents – describes her witnessing her father’s reading and writing of the letters late at night, and compares it to a scene from a dream (90). Besides suggesting the possibility that her father, a minor poet, composed and edited the letters himself – a circumvention of the chain of historical production – the dream discourse signals another spatial element in the story, permeated with feelings of nostalgia and loss about represented history, which has totalized to the extent that the unrepresented exists only in this ghostly space.

As Xiu Lan writes in her letter, “I dream of words/writing” (91) – the history that is signaled in this dream-space has yet to be written, but at the same time, she notes that after his father’s passing, he left behind many writings for her, including the letters that the professor is now presenting in his narrative. This meta-movement from within the text to its outside is what gives the story its strange and eerie texture – as if the distinction between each narrative level is collapsed, and there is in fact no space for the unrepresented to arise, because everything that exists here is flattened, and could be a copy of a copy – a simulacrum of words and signifiers floating around. The dream itself – the possible alternate space dreamt by Xiu Lan in the future (the other letters are technically the “past” of the story) – is filled with words, but it conveys nothing because Xiu Lan has not opened the letters before. She even notes that she is afraid of what may be inside (91).

The dream only suggests writing, but its actual message needs to be seen in the presentation of the fragmented letters, at the meta-level of the professor’s

narrative. In the narrative, the future is conditioned by the past simultaneously – the past that had existed only in sealed form, which is now being unsealed and revealed by the professor’s own narrative. And yet there is always Xiu Lan’s father’s writing hanging over the subsequent letters presented here – the undecidable dream/reality that Xiu Lan has about her father hovering over the authenticity of the texts, their originality forever undermined by this dream-space that persists from a recounted past. This expansion of the “narrative space” in the story to incorporate this persistence is Ng’s attempt to incorporate the gaps and discontinuity of history into the body of the text, to show how it affects the present, even though it is situated in the past.

Like Zhang, Ng engages the MCP past and shows the effects of its inheritance in the present; what is examined here are also the cultural and political forms that underpin its imaginary. His strategy of voiding the “original,” and introducing the simulacrum, however, is different from Zhang’s spatial mapping, and works towards a different end as well. While Zhang charts out how the specter of Chineseness and settler colonialism haunts the political imaginary of the Sarawak communists, Ng shows how the ontopological impulse – a form of originary obsession with Chineseness, and cultural authenticity that is intertwined with the construction of the Malayan nation-state – conditions the MCP’s imaginary, even in its attempt to engage in an international revolution of egalitarian purpose. Ng’s simulacrum strategy deconstructs and contaminates the notion of the “original” – in both the sense of uniqueness, and movement from one particular place. If other writings about the MCP emphasize the jungle experience as the authentic narrative of the MCP’s struggle in Malaya – a prominent example being Jin Zhimang’s *Hunger (Ji-e)*, a socialist realist narrative about the perils of jungle survival and warfare – “Letters from the Jungle” plays with this notion of the “origin,” and displaces it by emphasizing the imagined

jungle space as an opaque one where simulacra predominate, and contamination of the singular and authentic takes place.

In his usage of simulacra to contaminate the original and authentic, Ng confronts us with the deconstruction of the notion of the MCP itself. He pushes the idea of the MCP to its limits in order to see what is assumed and covered over by grand narratives of struggle, battle, and nation-building. By revealing the instability of this historical representation, these grand narratives are shown as intertwined with an ontological ideal, and fractured to show the copies that could replace the “original” narrative, as if substitutable. The simulacrum proliferates to show the multiple perspectives that exist about MCP history, and the flattened texture of the story forces one to evaluate them on their own terms, not as footnotes to a master narrative of victory or defeat.

The story here encompasses multiple fragmented perspectives, as the letters circulate. The letters, though not all directed to Xiu Lan’s father, Huo (Fire), seemingly pass through him at some point of their lifespans, ending up in his collection. He exists in the story as the background condition for the circulation of the letters. These comprise letters from a high ranking party member giving him directives for the “mission” he is supposed to undertake while outside the jungle, as their contact person for food and strategic information, to letters directed to him from a former lover still in the jungle, and letters from seemingly another ex-lover in the jungle, depicting the progress and transformation of the MCP, to the extent of establishing a state. Other letters include one detailing the difficulties of lovers split within and without the jungle, giving a fragmented snapshot of jungle life; a letter from an imprisoned communist member asking to clarify the reasons and conditions

of his imprisonment, and even a poem dedicated to the rubber tree.⁹⁵ Although there is an inescapable sense of wartime, the quotidian, everyday elements of life, such as the lack of food, and difficulty of maintaining romantic relationships, are magnified by jungle existence. This shows a quotidian normalcy that is resolutely unheroic in the context of revolutionary warfare. If a memoir of heroic struggle leaves out these details in favor of an event-driven, and major player-driven narrative, the persistence of these details reveals the minor narratives that are driven into the background, fragmented and dispersed by the fact of their marginality. But the form of the letter means these details return to the light of day, through a spectral circulation that takes place in an unspecified future time. Huo links these letters together, and becomes the space where this unheroic multiplicity can congregate and proliferate, through his absence from the narrative voice.

At stake in this absence is the inheritance of history. Several letters revolve around the real identity of “a child of the jungle” (108), who may or may not be Huo’s actual child. This refers to Xiu Lan, who meta-textually is also one of the sources of the documents, and has not read the content of the letters. She does not know that her parental identity is ambiguous. She is a metaphorical inheritance of the MCP, the legacy of the underground jungle years, unresolved in historical hindsight. Her identity as Huo’s daughter is unstable, as it depends on how one interprets these fragmented letters, which hint at the possibility that she might actually be his step-daughter, and whose actual father is a fighter in the jungle, the Malay warrior Indera, who, coincidentally, appeared in another letter directed at Huo.⁹⁶ The reader is confronted with a spatio-temporal dissonance, as the identity of Xiu Lan, who

⁹⁵ The rubber tree was a lucrative crop during the colonial period, and many rubber estates were established by excavating the jungle.

⁹⁶ This references Mat Indera, who was a prominent Malay MCP member and anti-Japanese and anti-British guerilla.

provided the documents, keeps getting rewritten by the content of the letters, which are purportedly already situated in the past. The gap between the time of writing (a distant past) and time of receiving (a closer past) is enlarged as the narrative unfolds, while the present, which is the time of the reader who encounters this text, is constantly affected by revelations in the past. Ng shows how a past, and more pertinently the *reception* of the past – its inheritance – can affect the present, in different levels and temporalities of the same text.

Ontological representation, part one – the gap in the historical text

In her identity, anxieties over the legacy of the MCP play out. Her identity depends on how one understands Huo's own position outside of the jungle, and where his loyalties lie. Does "leaving the jungle" imply a betrayal to the MCP cause, and if so, how does that affect the status of this "child of the jungle"? This movement out of the jungle becomes a metaphor for evaluating the legacy of the MCP – a perspective available only by leaving the opaque space of the jungle. However, Ng deliberately makes this perspective from the outside ambiguous, by casting doubt on Xiu Lan's identity – he suggests that the space outside, is paradoxically at a remove, even though it is where reflection and representation of events within the jungle primarily takes place, through memoirs and such. To reflect on the legacy of the MCP, and represent its inheritance, one has to have already left the jungle space. In that departure, the gap between original and displaced becomes apparent. Confronting this gap, Ng does not try to stage a return to the original; rather, he uses it to interrogate the conditions for "originality" itself.

Ng spotlights the positionality of the inheritor-observer of history, through the questions about Huo's status. Ng employs the same strategy of "voiding the original,"

to dispel the singularity of a memoir written from a single perspective, and to open up multiplicity in the remembrance of history. He does this through by voiding the central character of the story, Huo, of any direct narrative power. The questions raised about Xiu Lan and the legacy of the MCP hinges upon how one reads Huo's intentions – although implied that he may have tampered with the letters, he is inscrutable except through the perception and representation by others who have written to and about him.⁹⁷ He is a void in the text, while also central to it, as his narrative would answer the questions that are posed here. His simultaneous absence and presence makes the gap conditioning and irremovable, while raising the status of other voices in that world. This reverses the memoir's central conceit. It makes those who would be narrated for by him, as the singular voice of coherence, actually the sole source of information about the absent narrator. It displaces the role of the central character in this historical record, into a contingent mechanism that records silently not one general inheritance of the MCP, but the multiply dispersed, particular *inheritances* that result from an event like the Insurgency War.

This attempt to disperse singular representation into multiplicity parallels Ng's attempt to destabilize the nation as a representative force for history.⁹⁸ Just as a nation is irreducibly constitutive of multiple groups and individuals, and yet is often singularized as one united voice, the historical record of the nation effaces those who were suppressed, and continue to be suppressed after its founding.⁹⁹ The MCP is relegated to a footnote of history by the forces that rule the nation; within the MCP are also multiple groups and individuals effaced through its unification as one

⁹⁷ "Strangely enough, the letters seemed to be missing his responses, even it was clearly addressed to him." (87)

⁹⁸ This goes back to the issue of representation and re-presentation of those left out the historical record: see Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak" for a discussion of the intersection between political and textual representation.

⁹⁹ See the Introduction to *Nation and Narration*, by Homi Bhabha for a discussion of how the nation-state does this as a force of unification.

consistent entity in the historical record. Ng's representation proliferates the voices within this entity, and shows the inconsistencies and discontinuities that are papered over in a history that considers only unities as representative forces. This proliferation deconstructs the nation as a representative force, and critiques its dominance in the political imaginary of the MCP, by examining its driving utopian impulses. Ng shows the specter that haunts the MCP's dominant political imaginary – the nation – pointing out the multiple inheritances that are covered over by it.

One of the letters delivered to Huo concerns the founding of a utopian republic, called the “Republik Rakyat Melayu” (the Malay People's Republic), in the northern part of Malaya and Thailand (104). This revolutionary republic crosses the Thai-Malaya border, with one-third of it situated within Thailand, and two-thirds of it on land donated by the Malay sultans. The letters are from Shen Yu Lan, who was his classmate in university, and asks him to join their revolution as a poet and historian. While this “Malay People's Republic” never existed in actual MCP history, the northern retreat to the Thai borders did take place, and even resulted in factional splits into three different groups that occupied different parts of the border in 1970. In fact, there still exists a “Peace Village” near the Thai-Malaysia borders, which comprises remaining communists who did not return to Malaysia after the peace accords were signed between the government and the MCP.¹⁰⁰ Thus, this republic is a utopian thought experiment, loosely based on historical realities, rewritten through Ng's simulacrum strategy.

Ng's proliferating of simulacrum splits the idea and identity of the MCP, subjecting it to a rewriting that pushes its constitution to the limit. Ng's introduction of the “Malay's People Republic” twists the geopolitical coordinates of the time,

¹⁰⁰ For a visual memoir of the Peace Village, see Amir Muhammad's documentary “The Last Communist”, which is primarily about Chin Peng, but also contains interviews with people in the village.

positing the founding of an “Islamic communist” state at the Thai-Malayan borders. Ng smashes together two entities that have been designated as mutually exclusive in the present historical climate, as communism is posited as the enemy of Islam and Malay-Muslim identity in Malaysia, encouraging an imaginative dissonance that transgresses the limits of determined historical discourse.¹⁰¹ This fictional take on history – a simulacrum that copies designated historical coordinates, but proliferates its own world and logic, reveals the limits of the current historical conjuncture, the hidden specter that determines even the most transgressive imaginary.

Ng’s simulacrum reimagines part of the MCP as the “Malay People’s Republic” – a non-modernizing, agrarian republic that is friendly to Islam, and under the patronage of the Malay royalty. It is an Islamic communism with substantial Malay support, which the MCP historically did not achieve. In this reimagination, however, the utopian republic is permitted by the royalty as a fighting force against other geopolitical entities in the region, such as the Thai communists, Kuomintang sympathizers and militia, even Islamist separatists in the Thai region (104). The British and Malayan governments – the MCP’s historical enemies – are prevented from fighting them. This republic is used by the political-powers-to-be as a proxy army to fight other insurgencies and threats, while being allowed to practice their communist beliefs. The utopia does not last, as the British betray them by imposing a “hunger strategy” that denies them food supplies, slowly starving the republic’s constituents (109). While this parallels the MCP’s own fraught relationship with the British forces, Ng’s rewriting of history, through a reorganization of the geopolitical

¹⁰¹ Recent historical work have tried to challenge this idea that communism was an exclusively Chinese phenomenon in Malaya – see Rachel Leow’s article on the 10th regiment of the MCP, in “Rethinking Chinese Communism in the Malayan Emergency” (forthcoming article), and memoirs by Rashid Maidin, Shamsiah Fakeh, and other non-Chinese communists. Maidin, Rashid. *The Memoirs of Rashid Maidin: From Armed Struggle to Peace*. 2005, and Fakeh, Shamsiah. *The Memoirs of Shamsiah Fakeh: From AWAS to 10th Regiment*.

coordinates of the time, shows the limits of the MCP's capability to reinvent itself, due to historical circumstances.¹⁰² Even with this unprecedented support, Ng diagnoses an eventual failure of the MCP to achieve its goals – a historical determination that seemingly closes off this thought experiment, as failure.

Ng's rewriting, however, inserts other understandings of this historical period; it contaminates the notion of one true history, by showing an equally legitimate possibility arising out of the geopolitical coordinates of the time. The notion of Islamic communism, seemingly oxymoronic in present historical discourse, nonetheless confronts one of the failures of the MCP head-on. It allows Ng to bring a strange, limited hybridity to life, which challenges the perceived Chinese-centrism of the MCP. By rearranging the political coordinates of that period through this fictional method, Ng de-concretizes historical accretion, and shows the arbitrary form these alliances and their representations take. The geopolitical coordinates that were in place, and the racial forms that became standard divisions in Malaysian society – for example, by associating the MCP with solely the Chinese – are redrawn here in surprising fashion, through Ng's contaminating writing.

This utopian republic, however, does not last. It quickly descends into dystopia, as the realities of the jungle – hunger, and lack of living resources and weapons – “enter” the simulacrum due to British counter-insurgency tactics. As historical reality intrudes into this simulacrum of the jungle space, this utopian alternative for Ng, is not really an alternative, but a reflection on the limits of any alternative at this historical juncture. In his subsequent stories, Ng diagnoses this as a failure to break out of the confines and structures of the nation-state – a symptom of ontopology at the level of the political. In this story, however, Ng shows its

¹⁰² The MCP – previously known as the MPAJA (Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army) – fought with the British against the Japanese, as the remaining resistance force in Malaya against the occupation during World War Two.

symptom at the level of textual representation. The collision and blurring between different worlds, of legitimized history and fictional history, is Ng's response to the gap in the representational process. It suggests that not only is there a gap in recollection, but also an undeniable rift even within the act of imagining another utopia. This utopian imagining – which takes the form of a single, party-driven imaginary – drives the revolutionary act of taking up arms and entering the jungle. Ng fragments this singular party vision by showing what comes out of the jungle are scattered and multiple letters, with the narrator voided, releasing the multiplicity of voices that are both subject of, and subjected to this utopian imaginary.

This approach to the failure of the MCP radically opens up the imagining process, by questioning the narrating voice of representation. This gets at the heart of historical recollection, by examining the rift inherent for those in the past being represented by a singularizing voice. If Zhang suggests that there needs to be an engagement with Chinese inheritance that has to be worked through, for an alternative to the communists' failure, Ng decenters this engagement by destabilizing the conditions of production for both the representing and the imagining process. While Zhang primarily examines the effects of this imaginary, Ng explores its cause and introduces disjunction in its enunciation, voiding the narrator and disseminating multiple unidentifiable and unstable voices.

Ng's exploration of other voices from the jungle is not just an attempt to clarify the historical record, or to fill the gap of representation; it develops a form of recollection that incorporates the gap as a constitutive part of this historical archive. His other stories in the collection narrate marginal figures from the jungle, but introduces a swerve in the diagetical world, interrupting and destabilizing the narrative, while placing the narrator under question. The simulacrum strategy that Ng employs

in “Letters from the Jungle” is also present in other stories like the “Malayan People’s Republic Memorandum” (“Malaiya renmin gongheguo beiwanglu”) – about an ex-communist who recently left the jungle after 40 years, after the peace accords were signed between the MCP and the ruling government. Most the story explores another failed utopia and alternate history from the character’s remaining written texts – themes of textual instability, and rifts in historical representation are highlighted. The story “The Poor Mouth that Cannot Speak” (“Qican wuyan de zui”), is about a betrayer of the MCP cause, a high-ranking officer turned informant for the government. It incorporates parallel narratives, including the collected letters and diaries of the betrayer – signaling narrative inconsistencies and delayed testimonies in the historical record. Another story, “Looking for a Dead Comrade” (“Xunzhao wangxiong”), is a noir-like take on this problem of history – featuring an investigation about a remaining ex-communist, who disputes the historical record on both the government and communist sides. In all these examples, their textual form actively manifests the gap in representation, and casts doubt on the actual narratives. It fulfills Ng’s stated aim of manifesting the “gap” in the mainstream narrative of this conflict, those leftovers and remainders that do not cohere neatly in the historical record.

This formal decentering of what is dominant extends Ng’s position as described in the “Letters from the Jungle” story – the effaced narrator who is constantly searching and receiving other narratives from alternative sources. This gap of the narrator challenges the writing of history, because unlike most histories, which rely on an unconscious effacement of the narrator in order to sustain the historical narrative, this deliberate effacement questions the viability of historical representation. Ng’s project is not only to decenter dominant narratives, but also to find a style to encompass the marginality of the marginal, subversion through marginal form. By

blurring of boundaries between fiction and history, Ng shows how the unrepresented critiques representation itself, which is not confined to the “telling” and “showing” of realism. This radicality in Ng’s writing shows that the problem of representation here cannot be resolved solely through more representation, as that risks returning to a singular, centered historical recollection. To deal critically with the ontological impulse that resides within the MCP’s historical legacy, one has to challenge the singularity of textual representation, which is concurrent with the political representation of the nation-state.

Ontological representation, part two – the ghost in the nation

The historical gaps that Ng defines in his critique of textual representation relates with political representation, as historical forgetting is the corollary of exclusion from the political body of the nation. In “Malayan People’s Republic Memorandum,” Ng shows this by taking on the point of view of a holdover from the past – an ex-communist who leaves the jungle after forty years of guerilla warfare. The story include elements of a fictional history, in which the MCP succeeds in defeating the Japanese imperialist army and establishing a nation-state prior to the return of the British, called the “Malayan People Republic.” Ng imagines the conditions of its establishment, tracing the geopolitical obstacles that it faces, and describes its demise – exposing its historical limit, where the nation-state is the ultimate horizon for political representation and organization. This *speculative* history critiques the limits of the present by excavating and reimagining the past.

In the story, the main character Lao Jin – literally, “Old Man Jin” – left the jungle after the Hat Yai peace accords were signed in 1989, which signaled the

official end of the communist insurgency in Malaysia¹⁰³ (64, Ng). Some of the communists settle in Thailand, at the Peace Village located at the Southern Thai border, despite being permitted back into Malaysia. Lao Jin decides to return to his hometown, a place he has not seen for 40 years. He initially returns to his old childhood house, and meets his elderly mother, who has been waiting for his and his brothers' return all along. After his mother passes away from old age, he becomes increasingly hermetic, and in the fifteenth year of his return, he disappears completely, leaving behind the fictional histories of the "Malayan People's Republic" and the "Nanyang People's Republic" (78). Eventually, his body is discovered amidst a few giant trees in his hometown, presumed to have committed suicide, with his writings and belongings excavated and memorialized in a museum.

This story deals with the remainder of history, and how one can understand the past's living-on in the future. Ng links the personal remainder that is embodied by Lao Jin's story with the collective remainder of those left behind by the movement of history; however, he also links the gap of the past with a gap in the future, in the form of an "impossible" future, through Lao Jin's speculative writings on the fictional histories of the "Malayan People's" and "Nanyang People's" republics.¹⁰⁴ Through Lao Jin, Ng connects this gap in the historical past and imagined future with ontology. He shows the nation-state's role in controlling and limiting historical possibilities, conditioning the historical field via its retrospective construction of official narratives and reception of historical memoirs.¹⁰⁵ This conditioning also has a

¹⁰³ Pg. 64 – "Let us call him Lao Jin" – this 'naming' by Ng here references Jin Zhimang, writer of *Hunger*, a prominent MCP memoir/novel in the style of socialist realism. This enunciatory statement is a form of 'renaming' by Ng since he uses Lao Jin as a mouthpiece in this alternate history, which is written in a meta-textual modernist form, rather than the socialist realism that Jin Zhimang is known for.

¹⁰⁴ As the narrator describes Lao Jin – "It was as if his past was a fake, imagined one, that no one could testify to."

¹⁰⁵ As Lao Jin notes, a "high-ranking's official's memoir was not banned" – referring to Chin Peng's memoir which was surprisingly permitted for publication and distribution in Malaysia (72).

racial element, as the gaps in past and future under the nation-state is tied to the unresolved specter of Chineseness. In both of Lao Jin's imagined republics, the MCP's eventual demise as the ruling authority is due to racial issues that divide the nation. Thus, the question that Ng asks about Chineseness is – if it is meant to inhabit the text of the Malayan nation-state, why does it constantly fail to inscribe itself on the body of the nation?¹⁰⁶ What is the secret history of Chineseness and its relationship to the MCP, which renders this an impossibility, even if the recuperating claim of the MCP is that it contributed to the national cause?

Lao Jin's position, as a low-ranking party holdover unable to reintegrate into society, gives him a unique perspective. Unlike his many comrades, who have normalized and adjusted to the capitalist system that controls the space he returns to, profiting to the extent that some have become rich businessmen, he is resentful about the failure of the revolution, and its subsequent representation. He reads the memoirs that have been published and distributed, such as Chin Peng's, and cynically notes that its publication implies that not only was the revolution at an end, but that the revolutionaries' existences were no longer of any significance, as if they had become ghosts.¹⁰⁷ He bitterly criticizes these publications, deeming them worthless, the “fragmented records of a failed revolution” which belonged to the top brass of the party, not the foot soldiers who had given up their youth and their lives, turned into “ash and dust” (72). This repetition of imagery of the ghost, and the “ash and dust” that is scattered and forgotten, hints at Lao Jin's experiences as a holdover: “no

¹⁰⁶ Referring to the MCP, Ng writes in the introduction to *Nanyang People's Republic Memorandum*, “even in its anti-colonial activities...it found difficulty escape from the temptation of Sino-centrism...” pg. 6

¹⁰⁷ Specifically, the phrase here is that they had become “weightless”: “A few years later, their erstwhile leader, the MCP head published, with the assistance of two British capitalist journalists a memoir called “My side of history”...the book was not confiscated by the customs, and the Chinese version was also not investigated and banned, which caught him by surprise. This implied that their existence was no longer of any significance” – the phrase used here is 无足轻重 *wu zu qing zhong* – which means they had no more weight, suggesting a form of ghostliness. (72)

friends came to visit him, no one gave him a phone call, he did not call anyone...it was as if his past was a fake, imagined one, that no one could testify to” (74). He and his forgotten comrades are absent and present, residing in a spectral space where the failure of historical recognition in the present time is compounded by their still living-on, even though they might as well be dead (74). Lao Jin points out that the memoir form is insufficient as a recuperation and representation of this history.

In “Letters from the Jungle”, Ng explores this insufficiency by showing its singularity, and the way a linear memoir covers over the multiplicity that exists outsidings of the original narrative. His strategy there is to posit simulacra as a way of voiding the original, to disperse and show the ghosts within those representations – thus complicating the production and reception of these inheritances of MCP history, and positing “simulated letters” as a way to reform the reception of history. The way this inheritance is received conditions the imaginary of the future, as the question of “who speaks for history today” is equated with “who constructed the past,” and from the perspective of the past, “who imagined the utopian future?” In that story, the narrative is constructed such that the letters’ contents affect both the diagenetic present of the characters, and the exegetic present of the reader. This timely intervention resituates the recollection of MCP history, by positing a form – “simulated letters” – that accounts for the complex temporalities and spatialities inherent in the act of recollection, challenging the memoir. In “Malayan People’s Republic Memorandum,” Ng undercuts the memoir from a different angle.

Similar to “Letters from the Jungle,” the narrative is meta-textual, consisting of multiple layers. The story’s overarching narrator – the top layer – is revealed to be a group of researchers who are piecing together Lao Jin’s story through interviewing his ex-comrades, his niece, and by examining his remaining writings and belongings.

This includes a set of notebooks entitled the “Malayan People’s Republic Files,” and another called the “Nanyang People’s Republic Chronicles,” along with MCP memoirs, historical texts about Malayan communist history, and literary texts such as Ba Jin’s “Family,” and two mysterious, carefully handmade antique books sent to him by an ex-comrade who is now a businessman in Indonesia – one of which turns out to be the *Ramayana*.¹⁰⁸ As the narrator recounts, after his mother’s death, Lao Jin built a house in the woods (with “Nanyang wood from a nearby ancestral forest”), and spent his time “completing his life’s last struggle” (72). This is Lao Jin’s writings – as his ex-comrades points out, he was always the most literary among them, and wrote a “utopian and failure-themed novel” called the “Malayan People’s Republic Chronicle” (76) while in the jungle, questioning the value of their struggle in the shifting political circumstances post-independence Malaya, and in light of the “famine strategy” implemented by their enemies, which caused the deaths of many of the jungle fighters. This book was accordingly censured by the party (77).

Lao Jin’s remaining writings follow this impulse to reflect on the failure and purpose of the MCP, but in the form of speculative history, as opposed to the memoirs that he criticizes. It is speculative history accessed as a *remainder* – something left behind by the dead, improperly integrated into the fabric of history. Not only is Lao Jin himself a holdover, the remainder of an era that has passed him by – as his body discovered stinking and hidden in an ancient tree vividly suggests (73); his works also become a remainder for others who are crafting their own narrative of MCP history, waiting for excavation.¹⁰⁹ The meta-textual form of the story also manifests an excavatory tone, as the text is presented without a concrete sense of the narrator’s identity until near the end of the story. It intersperses fragments from Lao Jin’s

¹⁰⁸ See pg. 71, 73 and 78 for descriptions on these books: some of them are even burned and destroyed in the text of the story – another example of Ng’s meta-textual narrative strategy.

¹⁰⁹ “A part of his skin and flesh was still stuck within the tree bark.”

writings with a narrative about Lao Jin's post-jungle activities, which are pieced together through the words of his ex-comrades and niece. The sudden reveal of the narrator as a researcher – in a switch from third-person storytelling to first person reflection on Lao Jin's remaining writings – transforms the meaning of the earlier parts of the story, as it becomes clear that the narrative there is “stitched” together by the others' testimonies. What was seemingly an omniscient narrator is actually a narrator that has performed the alchemy of representational coherence. Ng stages this sleight of hand to show the process by which a memoir and historical text is written, which covers over the gap in temporality via the magic of narrative.¹¹⁰ The sudden break in tone reminds the reader of Lao Jin and his writings' status as a remainder, that is in the process – through the writing of the text itself – of being excavated. The gap of history is in the process of being filled, be it by the fictional researchers in the story, or Ng's own efforts to recontextualize his research into the remainders of history.¹¹¹

Ng brings up a question about historical inheritance. How does one recuperate the histories of those who have been left behind by history, without merely reducing it to an afterthought in the linear history of the Malayan nation-state? Or, even in official and dominant communist narratives, be they memoir or fiction? Ng satirizes the latter in his introduction to the collection, as being a trilogy of “revolution,” “nation-building,” and “demise of the nation” – a linear historical epic that has the sound and fury of a heroic undertaking, tied ultimately to the establishment of a republic (6). What he argues is that both sides share more in common than expected, in the way they utilize the remainder for the text of the nation. The former expunges it

¹¹⁰ For instance, the narrator describes, as if omniscient, what Lao Jin felt about Chin Peng's writings “in the moment”, a perspective that is achievable only through fiction.

¹¹¹ See Ng's introduction to the *Memorandum*, which touches briefly on his visit of the remainder communists who now reside at the Thai-Malaysian border, in the Peace Village settlements.

from its records while maintaining it as a “threat-less threat,” an undead of history which threatens the establishment of the nation; the latter restores it to the nation as a contributor to its progress, which Ng argues still leaves the dead as nothing more than a footnote in the text of the nation, unable to account for the ghosts that were created in its establishment.¹¹²

By writing this story of excavation and representation, Ng tries to show his own way of “giving thanks” to the communist struggle in the form of fiction (*xiao shuo*), even though Ng concedes that this might not be appreciated by the communists, who have their own view on the role of history and fiction (6). His use of fiction to deal with this history is marked by his insistence that fiction possesses its own “logic, pleasures, and territory” (9) carving out another form of historical writing about the MCP, which deconstructs the assumptions inherent in this particular genre of historical writing.¹¹³¹¹⁴ As noted earlier, simulacrum and multiplicity are two strategies he employs to counter the singular tendencies in the memoir form; this story situates those tendencies within the *text of the nation-state*, essentially connected with the formation of the “body” of the nation, which signals presence rather than absence, wholeness instead of gaps.¹¹⁵ Lao Jin’s existential absence in the story – his “fake past”

¹¹² pg.7, Ng – “after independence and the building of the nation-state, the MCP lost its mandate for armed struggle...they were placed in history’s meaningless remainder...but they did not know that the Malayan government actually needed them, as a threat-less threat.” – this threat-less threat can be speculated to also be intertwined with the history of “Chineseness” as Other. The threat of “China” and “communism” is intertwined in the identity of this specter, conceived as the new nation’s existential enemy.

¹¹³ This goes back to his earliest engagements with and critique of Malaysian Chinese literature, as noted earlier. He insists on “literariness” as a way of distinguishing his literary project – see his criticism of Fang Bei Fang, an early Malayan Chinese realist writer, “Chineseness and Performativity – the Limits of Malaysian Chinese Literature and Culture”, in *A Malaysian Chinese Literature Reader (II): Equatorial Echoes*. Also see footnote 77.

¹¹⁴ See the “Special interview with Ng Kim Chew” by Xu Tongyuan in *Chao Foon* vol. 509 (2015), about whether his work should be considered “Malayan Communist Writing” (magong shuxie), a genre of writing centering on remembrances of the communist past by ex-communist members.

¹¹⁵ I use the term “body of the nation” here to signal, first, the symbolic corporeality assigned to the idea of the nation, and secondly the “body” as in the “people”, the constituency of the nation. I suggest that this is characteristic of the ontology that Derrida describes, and Ng picks up on. See also

and “weightless presence” (74) – is the corollary to the *text of the remainder*, a specter that haunts the present as a reminder of the gaps in history.¹¹⁶ It stands apart from official histories on both sides of the conflict, and persists outside the text of the nation-state as an irreducible Other, which does not desire recognition nor integration into the temporal web of the nation.

Lao Jin’s refusal of the memoir in favor of speculative history in his writings is thus an attempt to reset the temporal image of the nation. However, as Ng clarifies in the story, upon Lao Jin’s death, his writings are now out of his control, his legacy subject to others’ interpretation and excavation. One option for the would-be interpreter is to memorialize – for instance, by keeping his writings in the Peace Village Malayan Communist museum, to return his body of text to its “rightful” place, per his ex-comrades request (78). Ng, however, ends the story at a point where the researchers examine Lao Jin’s writing. It remains as a holdover, signaled in the way the “Nanyang People Republic Chronicles” end, with several quotes from “Don Quixote,” which then lead to a “blank space,” “as if the pen had been snatched away suddenly, coming to an abrupt halt.” (83) This textual elision, which stops the researchers in their tracks, literally manifests a gap in the narrative, and removes the text from any attempt to integrate it into the historical past of the nation. The white space can be read as a point where the present of the text ends, and breaks with the ongoing excavation and its attempts to make the historical record coherent. By clearing the space of the present through this blankness, one is forced to return to the past as a way to the future – the speculative history that is the subject of Lao Jin’s writings.

Rosalind Morris’ essay on Thai communism, “Returning the Body Without Haunting: ‘Nai Phi’ and the End of Revolution in Thailand”, which reflects on the significance of the body to the nation.

¹¹⁶ Hence, Ng’s constant refrain in his introduction that he wants to write a “fiction of gaps, like a leaky roof” (9) – see also the last story in the collection, which literalizes this gap by depicting a document recovered from the mouth of a fish.

This is “speculative history,” as the imagined past that Lao Jin excavates disrupts the present, by reimagining a parallel universe where the MCP succeeds in defeating the Japanese army in 1945, and forms a nation-state called the “Malayan People’s Republic” (*Malaiya renmin gonghe guo*) (79). This is one of two political entities that appear in Lao Jin’s notebooks, the other being the eponymous “Nanyang People’s Republic” (*Nanyang renmin gonghe guo*) of the collection. They are linked as they both represent Lao Jin’s attempt to rethink the political situation after his return to society from the jungle space – “his last struggle,” where he writes their putative history, from their establishment to demise.

In the “Malayan People’s Republic” notebooks, Lao Jin rewrites the text of history, first by elevating “all those who have fortunately survived until the end of the war, died in battle, died of hunger, died of accident,” and also those who have “lost” in the post-war battle for political hegemony, to positions of power in his new republic (79).¹¹⁷ This is combined with a somewhat humorous and vitriolic inversion of major figures of history, which includes leaders of the post-war right-wing governments of Malaysia and Singapore, and even Chin Peng himself, who are either exiled, or die of a painful death – such as in Lai Teck’s case, an infamous triple agent who was the head of the MCP prior to Chin Peng. This rewriting belies the *ressentiment* of history, the ghosts within the body of the nation built upon such specters. But this *ressentiment* is a mere inversion – the ghosts written into the body of this imagined nation, no longer remainder, as they are rewritten as “victors.”

As Lao Jin continues writing, he realizes that this inversion recapitulates the same problems that beset the actual Malayan nation-state, even though it supposedly inaugurates a new imaginative space and geopolitical entity. Racial division, religious

¹¹⁷ For instance, his brothers who died in the jungle are now the army chief, and cabinet chief; and Lim Chin Siong, a famous left-wing figure in Singapore, detained without trial by the Lee Kwan Yew government is now Labor Minister.

chauvinism, and language issues combine to destabilize the new republic, even while the tables are turned in the racial composition of the nation, as it is implied that the top leadership – as historically it was in the MCP – is predominantly Chinese rather than Malay. The issue of minority rights, which in contemporary Malaysia is frequently cast as an issue of Malay cultural, political, and economic hegemony over the other racial groups – including Chinese, Indian, and indigenous groups – is reversed as the hegemonic group in this republic is now Chinese. Historically, the questions of minority rights in the formation of the Malayan and subsequently Malaysian nation-state, at least for the Chinese, revolves around citizenship, language, education and cultural rights – the political issues of “Chineseness” in Malaysia (Ng, *Chineseness*, 51). Here, similar controversies abound, except now it takes the form of issues of “Malayness,” such as the existence of the royalty, question of Malay land rights, and the Islamic religion. Racial questions of language and education rear their ugly head again, as again the nation is divided over which language (Chinese, Malay, Tamil, or English) becomes the symbolically important “official language” and medium of instruction (81, Memorandum). As these issues flare up in his speculative history, Lao Jin is unable to find a solution to satisfy the multiple parties involved, even with the MCP government in charge. Hence, he tries to undercut the text itself, literally removing those issues from history by putting a cross through them, metaphorically “resetting” the history of the republic, and attempting to “cover” up these problems that are politically charged.¹¹⁸ Each time he attempts to do that, however, another related issue comes up, and the violence resulting from these issues continue to plague the nation in the form of armed uprisings, ultimately resulting in the most feared situation from the perspective of the communists – the reintroduction

¹¹⁸ This neatly summarizes Ng’s position on the relationship between historical text and political representation.

of imperialism into the nation, abetted by the development of a race-based proxy civil war between the Malay and Chinese, which cuts across another Cold War geopolitical conflict.

Lao Jin's attempt to "reimagine" history, then, does not show the possibility of utopia, but reveals the limitations that beset the MCP and its historical mission in Malaya. As is also clear in Lao Jin's alternate history, the rise of this new nation-state is accompanied by an ontological Chineseness, shown by the rise of right-wing Chinese nationalism in the state, culminating in the threat to exile the Malay royalty and expropriate Malay lands in the nation (80). Such a threat has its counterpart in right-wing Malay nationalism, in the threat to "send the Chinese back to China" and "bathe the Chinese pigs' blood in the Malay *keris*" – in both cases, recapitulating ontology as a metaphysics for the nation.¹¹⁹ The text of the nation is soaked with a discourse of land, blood, and body, as "everything returned to the issues of religion, race, land rights..." (83, Memorandum), showing that the MCP's revolution ultimately does not escape the field of the nation-state. This situation can be attributed partly to British colonial policies in the nation, which relied on racial division as a tool of social control, thus entrenching racial divides; however, by posing this history from the perspective of the MCP, Ng suggests that their anti-colonial struggle recapitulates the field of British colonialism, because it is subject to another historical inheritance – the specter of an ontological Chineseness.¹²⁰ This, according to Ng, can be seen in the historical failure of the MCP to move away from its perception as being a "Chinese" party – its political intertwining with the mainland and its largely

¹¹⁹ In Derridean language, "...the stable and presentable determination of a locality, the *topos* of territory, native soil, city, body in general." (103, Specters)

¹²⁰ For an account on the way the British "divided and conquered" the Malayan population, and created and entrenched racial notions as part of their economic divisions, see Charles Hirschman's article on British Malaya, "The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya"

Chinese membership, which to him are symptoms of a spectral Chineseness that, as he puts it, comes back to haunt the Malaysian Chinese in “moments of crisis.”

To understand his critique of this ontopological Chineseness, and its connection with the political dynamics of the MCP, one has to return to an earlier essay by Ng, called “Chineseness and Performativity” (“Zhongguoxing yu biao yanxing”). In that remarkable essay, he gives a broad but incisive critique of the way the notion of Malaysian Chineseness has been historically formed, and its countless permutations within the discursive framework. This essay, along with another essay called “Haunting” (“Hunzai”) serves as Ng’s genealogy of this formation, which he argues can be traced all the way back to crises in the late Qing dynasty, and attempts to construct a Chinese nationalism in the mainland – a secret history of Chineseness, which infects the Nanyang surreptitiously through the Southward movement of both reformists and revolutionaries to the region (45-46, Chineseness). In Malaya, this form of nationalism is imagined through the construction of a Chinese consciousness by both the reformists and revolutionaries as they competed for Chinese support in the region – which required the unification of prior local loyalties to disparate parts of “China,” through the power of print media and education, in favor of this national consciousness (45).¹²¹ It is in this context that one can speak of the *text of ontopological Chineseness* – a form of ethnocentric nationalism that is spread through the specter of this notion of “cultural-civilizational” Chineseness, which interacts with local political conditions to produce racial concretizations, and awakens in moments of crisis as a recurring slogan of defense.

As Ng describes in “Haunting,” this particular Chineseness arises out of the complex socio-political situation of the late Qing dynasty, which is marked by

¹²¹ The historical disunity is evident in the different topolect and village-based associations that exists in Malaya (such as the Hokkien, Hakka, Teochew, Cantonese and others), which is not based on a common national identity.

anxieties of the possibility of the “loss of the nation” (*wang guo*),¹²² under imperialist aggression from its neighbors, and encounters with the West. Ng diagnoses this as the conditions under which “National Studies” (*guo xue*)¹²³ – which attempted to define “national essence” (*guo cui*),¹²⁴ “national spirit/soul” (*guo hun*),¹²⁵ and “national characteristics” (*guo xing*)¹²⁶ (21) – became established as an ethnocentric Han project, especially through the focus on language, history, and classical works (23). Further, using Zhang Taiyan’s specifications of National Studies (*guo xue*) as an example, Ng points out that spectrality was built into this project itself, as the conditions for using proper “language”, and understanding “words” (*shi zhi*)¹²⁷ was precisely that one could evoke the “classical tradition” (*gu xue*),¹²⁸ to carry on its burden even while using modern Chinese (*baihua wen*) (25). This served as a basis for constructing a nation that would not be easily *forgotten* – a “last guarantee against a collective forgetting similar to genocide, resulting from the invasion of other tribes/races” – which spirit resided in this transmission of culture, through particularly the use of (Han) writing (25). The formation of this national tradition is haunted by the anxiety of displacement and disappearance, but what Ng points out is how such a linguistic and cultural construction transforms the nation into a spectral entity. This nation haunts, and can be resurrected in different contexts, like a “collective memory” that is beyond time and death, always already there (31, 34). This “undead form” of the Chinese nation does not necessarily depend on a physical existence, but is rather a textual return intertwined with script and language.

¹²² 亡国.

¹²³ 国学.

¹²⁴ 国粹.

¹²⁵ 国魂.

¹²⁶ 国性.

¹²⁷ 识字.

¹²⁸ 古学.

This textual understanding of Chineseness¹²⁹ is situated historically as part of a nationalistic effort to define enemies of the race – be it the Manchu, barbarians, or Japanese imperialists (49). Ng suggests that it has a second life in Malaya, observable through both the long history of what is termed as “Chinese issues” here, and what Ng calls the “sublimation” of Malaysian Chinese culture. While the context is necessarily different, Ng’s expansion of the context of late Qing anxieties over nation-building and nation-losing, to include its recruitment efforts and reach into the South, highlights a pre-history of subsequent discursive formations of “Chineseness” in Malaya, and a parallel – especially the discourse of “crisis.” Ng suggests that the textual formations of this late Qing project of nation-building manifests itself through “defending (Malaysian) Chinese culture, protecting (Malaysian) Chinese schools, ensuring the continuation of the Chinese language” – discourses of crisis that arise continually as a reaction to national cultural policies that emphasize the sole development of Malay culture and language as the legitimate symbol of the nation (40, 41). The same anxieties of threatened cultural continuity resurrect the specter of ontological Chineseness, through the sublimation and mystification of what is perceived as the historically constituted “roots” of this culture (48).¹³⁰

If, as Ng writes, this specter continually reasserts itself because it primarily resides in the textual, and is linked to the body of the nation-state, we see why Ng’s deconstruction of recollections of MCP history proceeds from the remainder’s point of view. What Lao Jin stumbles upon through his speculative history is the limits of the revolution, derived from the structuring conditions of ontological Chineseness, which results in the creation of a “Chinese nation within a nation” (57), and a cultural

¹²⁹ Ng, in his “Chineseness and Performativity essay” calls this the “revolutionaries’ form of Chineseness”.

¹³⁰ For instance, the common refrain that “we are the inheritors of five thousand years of history”, which contains the specter of Han ethnocentrism. Ng traces this refrain back to Zhang Taiyan’s formulations.

and political horizon that is still based on the threatened nationalism of the late-Qing revolutionaries, which is subject to the Chinese versus enemy – be it those traditionally known as barbarians (*yi*), or the Manchus, who are seen as colonizers – distinction. In pre-independence Malaya, then, Ng argues that a similar mapping possibly takes place. There is a colonizer (the British), and other racial groups that compete for hegemony (Malay, Indians, and indigenous groups), which can be mapped as threats from the perspective of ethnocentric Chineseness – as is what happens in Lao Jin’s speculative history about the MCP. It is important to qualify Ng’s claims and the “Chineseness” that is evoked here, as even among the Chinese in Malaya at the time there were different groups of Chinese with varying claims to “Chineseness”. As Ng himself notes, the Straits Chinese, or the Peranakan Chinese would have a different, more minimal relationship with this ontological Chineseness, one that is not necessarily defined by the inheritance of the textual, and more to do with cultural habits, and so on.¹³¹ The point, however, is not that the MCP was necessarily ethnocentric, as this is a historical question that can be disputed, but that its history needs to be situated within this larger history of Chinese interaction with and within Malaya. It is part of a history of mainland Chinese and Malayan Chinese identity, crucially linked with the formation of *both* nation-states – an ontological history. Ng poses the specter of this Chineseness as a form of recurrence, as his term *zhao hun* (resurrection)¹³² implies – it is an inheritance that haunts, during moments of crisis when the nation-state’s hegemony shifts against the

¹³¹ The Straits Chinese are an earlier group of Chinese who migrated to Malaya, and are considered to be a prime example of hybridity, in that they have assimilated part of the local Malay culture while also maintaining some Chinese traditions. Their language also reflects this hybridity. See footnote 10 of this dissertation.

¹³² 招魂 – literally, “calling out for the specter”.

Malaysian Chinese.¹³³ As he eloquently puts it, it is “like a hidden pain in the deep past, which once is triggered, will cause complete psychic and emotional collapse” (68), which can be mapped onto the body of the nation-state that Lao Jin draws in this story, the “Malayan People’s Republic”. The result is the fragmentation of the republic, and Lao Jin is unable to write his way out of the aporia created by this specter.

In his later writing, Lao Jin tries to think his way out of this aporia, by imagining another political entity called the “Nanyang People’s Republic,” the eponymous republic of this collection. This represents an alternative geopolitical arrangement premised on an internationalist political outlook, which explicitly tries to curtail the race issue that arose in the previous nation. For instance, its declaration of independence is read in three different languages – Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. The “Nanyang” represents an imaginary that is based on an alliance between the different communist republics in South East Asia – including Indonesia, Kalimantan, and Vietnam – but it also extends to include, crucially, the Chinese Communist Party, which in this alternate universe succeeds in defeating the KMT and taking Taiwan, thus unifying China (64). This “Nanyang republic,” although nominally independent, is also dependent on a strong China for its survival, as the “South Seas” of the mainland. As a political entity, it belies a greater China *and* communist imaginary – exemplifying what was precisely feared by the British and Malayan governments, as shown in a chronicle dated January 1960, when the president of the Nanyang republic meets with Chairman Mao to discuss the liberation of Western-allied states in South East Asia, such as Thailand, Philippines, and Burma (82).

¹³³ Ng gives the example of the reaction among local Chinese poets, post-1969 National Cultural Policy, which redefined the terms of “Malaysian culture” in strong Malay and Islam-centric terms, to the exclusion of other cultures and languages as “subsidiary cultures” – which, subsequently led to a resurgence in the classical Chinese paradigm in poetry. This is discussed further in the third chapter of this dissertation.

However, this becomes one of the triggers for World War Three, as the Soviets also invade an American-allied Japan, sparking a counter-offensive from America and Britain, which escalates into a global war. Even in this other imaginary, where the geopolitical worldview is expanded, the same problems that beset the other republic reappear (83). Imperialism reenters South East Asia, as the colonial powers retake their former colonies, and within the Nanyang republic, the same racial and religious lines are drawn, as an uprising based on right-wing Malay nationalism splinters not only the nation, but the entire region along ethnic lines, as it allies itself with similar groups from Indonesia, gaining support from the Middle Eastern Islamic bloc. It makes claims to territory based on the “traditional legitimacy” of the Malay world (82). In other words, the body, blood, and land discourse characteristic of ontopology resurfaces, except this time it becomes regional, and sparks a world war. This dystopian outcome shows the inextricable grip that the specter of ontopology has on the region, as every time a “body” manifests itself, it is subject to the same racial lines drawn through the nation-state. Ontopological Chineseness recurs, be it from the self-identification of the Chinese, or from it being imposed as a form of Othering, through the mechanism of the nation-state.

While its outcome is dystopian, this reimagining of space is connected with the motif of "bones" in the story – Lao Jin literally writes the Chinese characters for "bones" in his notebook. This is a reminder of Lao Jin’s past. His mother, who survived both his long insurgency and the death of his brother in the jungle, ultimately goes mad and fetishizes the missing bones of his deceased brother. In her demented state, she asks Lao Jin for his brother’s bones as a replacement for his absence – as she puts it: “at least dig up the bones and return them to me.” (70) This invocation of the bones – a corporeal entity that is simultaneously spectral, evoking both absence

and presence – is a reminder of the missing remainder of the past. The concrete presence of bones would be a remainder that could be reintroduced into a historical narrative, providing a corporeal grip on history; its absence, however, shows a missing historical link, a gap. It also suggests something different from both the specter and the body – instead of a transformation of the gap that concretizes the specter of ontopology, which recapitulates the same outcome of nation-state and racial division, it is a symbol of the past that has a yet unnamed future. It is the remainder of a body that is no longer recognizable as such. However, as these bones are missing, the question that is raised is – what is possible, if the body is not constituted, and the specter kept as specter?

In Ng's formulation of this question, the gap cannot be closed, but is transformed from a gap of the past into a gap of the future. This signals the missing potential of the "Nanyang People's Republic," which Lao Jin sketches out but is unable to further expand, beyond the historical coordinates and circumstances that have already been set in stone by the reality of Cold War geopolitics. Notwithstanding this inability to transcend history, this entity still serves as a touchstone for a spatio-temporal re-imagination, a moment in the text where fiction and reality collide to form the "bones" of the future. It evokes the title of the collection – the "Nanyang People's Republic Memorandum" – which functions as a memorial for a future that has never existed. In this evocation, then, we see a complex interplay of space and time that cannot be reduced to either a concrete past or a static future; they instead form a continuum that is both and neither. Ng's writings about the MCP, predicated on the gap, goes beyond a memoir or history due to this recasting of time and space, even though it excavates a past; the result of his excavation has an in-built futurity – manifest in the bones of a future, which identity is unclear, and body has yet to be

constituted. This temporal demand is the demand of the remainder, and is Ng's negative answer to the specter of ontopological Chineseness, which possibly becomes embodied in any given time, and space.

Chapter 3: Li Tianbao's Nanyang modernity: the time of Chineseness, displaced and "cultural China" redefined in *The Scent of Silkwear*

David Wang's article helps to clarify Li Tianbao's position among the previous writers.¹³⁴ In his essay, he points out that Li occupies a unique position in relation to his contemporaries, as he manifests a different sensibility with regard to Malaysian Chinese history. While Ng Kim Chew, for instance, deals with political issues via allegory in his stories, Li explicitly avoids the political, by focusing on quotidian characters and their petty everyday lives, particularly their romantic encounters. In other words, Li chooses to depict the quotidian, foregoing major History as theme for his writings. His characters are seemingly unconcerned with their historical context, wrapped up as they are with their private thoughts, lives and affairs – a singular and decadent perspective on the world. This has led to comparisons with Eileen Chang, who pursued a similar representation of characters during revolutionary wartime periods, and in David Wang's reading, the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies writers of the 1920s in mainland China, who similarly depicted the quotidian and the decadent during a period of national crisis, and charged nationalism. This genealogy of writers leads Wang to conclude that Li channels a form of "belated Nanyang decadence" – but one that is peculiarly aware of its own belatedness in relation to the history of modern Chinese writing, and its exiled geographical position from the mainland, which in the conventional scheme of Chinese literature originates the general scheme of such tropes.

Even if this is the case, I argue that Li is concerned with history, but of a different tenor. The question of what is considered legitimate "history" is interrogated within the confines of his text, as his attempt to evade the political questions what is

¹³⁴ See David Wang's introduction to Li's short story collection, "Describing the Nanyang through Silk-hate and Sorrow – Li Tianbao and his 'Tianbao' Past Incidences."

assumed to be worthy of representation – a move that runs counter to the established tradition of revolutionary, social and critical realism in Malaysian Chinese literature.¹³⁵ Juxtaposing Li’s stories with Ng’s project, Wang notes that this advances another tradition of writing, which challenges the dominant position of critical realism. While Ng highlights gaps, multiplicities, and doppelgangers in his historical representation, Li’s writing is characterized by a sense of overreach, due to a desire to capture time and history, which seem to be always out of reach. Li employs this sense of overreach as a method for representing history, invoking spatial and temporal distance to meditate on the question of Chineseness in the Nanyang. This overreach and decadence is hinted at in the title of his short story collection, *qiluo xiang* (*The Scent of Silkwear*),¹³⁶ as it refers to the scent of a baroque clothing material, and alludes to a Tang dynasty poetry collection – a reference that simultaneously evokes the imaginary of civilizational-cultural Chineseness, and points out the distant position that his characters, being in the Nanyang, inhabits in relation to this ideal.¹³⁷

This overreach is intimately related with Li’s use of the film medium in his writing. Li’s evocation of film and film culture of that period explores temporality; as representations of passing time, they are comparable to the classic Japanese melodramas by directors such as Kenji Mizoguchi and Yasujiro Ozu who Li admires.¹³⁸ Li’s emphasis on the film medium departs from the predominantly textual projects of both Zhang and Ng.¹³⁹ While Li still maintains a strong relationship with

¹³⁵ See Tee Kim Tong’s article about the tradition of Malaysian Chinese realism, influenced by May 4th revolutionary writers from the mainland, which is considered “established” or “dominant” – “Sinophone Malaysia Literature: An Overview” in *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*.

¹³⁶ 绮罗香.

¹³⁷ The official English title for the collection is *Romance of Malaya*.

¹³⁸ I use the term “film culture” to denote not only the films that were produced during the era, but also the surrounding apparatus of stardom, exhibition halls/cinemas, musical production, and so on.

¹³⁹ Zhang, as Jing Tsu points out, is engaged in a form of orthographical experimentation, while Ng alludes to textuality and other literary texts frequently in his writings as a way of redefining a “Southern”, Nanyang writing. See Jing Tsu, “Sinophonics and the Nationalization of Chinese”, in *Global Chinese Literature*.

the textual – as his allusions to classical Chinese literature shows – this textual relationship needs to be situated alongside his filmic inclinations, and the film medium’s unique ability to capture and document time and space, in snapshots that indicate modernity’s fractious relationship with collective memory. Li’s overreach here is intertwined with the belatedness of film as a medium of memory – in its uncanny ability to be simultaneously evocative and belated, and its habitation of the present that does not simply function as a nostalgic reminder of the past. The “overreach” in this case works against this simple categorizing of the past, as it belies its unattainability, and the disappearance that is inherent in the filmic medium.

Thus, in mobilizing the golden age of film culture in Kuala Lumpur, a city that was essentially connected with the consumption of Chinese Golden Age films, and that era of cinemas and icons in the region, as part of his textual project – Li exploits the idea of longing, as a way of relating to the past, as Li writes in his introduction of “looking for a mother” in Japanese and Chinese cinema, recollecting time and space from a position of temporal loss and spatial marginality.¹⁴⁰ In Li’s stories, these films and music do not just serve as contextual accompaniment – his characters seem to derive from these films, as they are alluded to in the writing itself, but as displaced versions in the Nanyang. As such, characters – which sometimes, due to this overreach veer close to caricatures – are Li’s way of exploring the temporal and spatial displacement of Chineseness. In his case, however, he differs in transplanting characters to the Nanyang, and evoking their local equivalents in the most mundane of environments. In that sense, the space of Kuala Lumpur generates its own culture of decadence, which Li suggests can be reprised and represented through the tropes of

¹⁴⁰ The major cinema studios of the time – primarily Cathay and the Shaw Brothers – had a large South East Asian audience, and formed a production, distribution, and exhibition network that extended from Hong Kong, Taiwan, to Malaysia and Singapore. Two collections that give a useful overview of this time period are *The Cathay Story*, ed. Wong Ain-ling, and *China Forever: The Shaw Brothers and Diasporic Cinema*, ed. Poshek Fu.

Golden Age films. This manifests a different route of Chineseness from the civilizational ideal, one that is tied intimately with incipient modernity and its entertainment complexes in mainland China (Shanghai), its shifting center to Hong Kong post-1949 communist takeover of the mainland, and finally, peripheral Kuala Lumpur absorption of this influence as a diasporic market for film and musical productions.

Modernity's medium(s)

By focusing on this era of culture in his writing, Li highlights the performativity that is inherent in the notion of Chineseness, and its attendant distance when placed in a diasporic context. Ng Kim Chew critiques this performativity, suggesting that its lack of textual linkage to the “Chinese” tradition leads to an overabundance of performance, and a desire to display a “concretized” Chineseness in its most symbolic form – a point of critique that is linked to his criticism of “defensive” Chineseness, as described in the previous chapter.¹⁴¹ Ng’s criticism seeks to derive an alternative to the structuring field of the nation-state and its attendant ontological Chineseness, which dominance affects the field of text and culture as well as political organization, and proposes a speculative history that derives from a republic of letters; Li’s writing similarly evades the field of the nation-state, but does so by tracking a different, contaminating route of film and music, which points beyond and

¹⁴¹ For example, the fan dance, guzheng music, lion dance, and drum performances – what one might call “official” Chinese culture that is supposed to present a cohesive, totemic and essentialist symbol of Chineseness. Ng argues in “Chineseness and Performativity: Discussing the Limits of Malaysian Chinese Literature and Culture” that these are historically constructed symbols.

transfigures the textual tradition simultaneously, with its emphasis on performance and non-textual sources.¹⁴²

The use of “cultural Chineseness” as a trope in Mahua writing, post-1969 racial riots served as an exilic, defensive response to the establishment of “Malayness” as cultural hegemony. Socio-economic inequalities among the different races post-independence, with more capital concentrated in Chinese hands, and striking political developments leading to unprecedented strides made by opposition parties culminated in racial violence primarily between Malay and Chinese groups. Known as the 1969 May 13 incident, it led to major policy restructuring directed at equalizing educational opportunities and wealth among the different races, among which was the infamous New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced in 1971 – a comprehensive affirmative action policy for the majority Malays and indigenous groups of Malaysia in all areas of social and economic life, including university admissions, urban housing, and business holdings. Besides economics, the 1971 National Culture Policy put forth Malay culture as the national culture of Malaysia, and Islam as its official religion. This rewriting of Malaysian identity relegated minority cultures to the status of assimilatory elements, based on its potential contribution to national culture. It raised the fear and specter of assimilation, a definitive end to the unresolved status of Chineseness in the nation, which politically was manifested in battles over state policy on Chinese education between prominent members of the Chinese community and the government.

Culturally, this fear of assimilation and alienation from the nation found expression in the revival of “cultural China” as a Mahua literary imaginary, pioneered by modernist poetry organizations such as the Sirius and Shenzhou Poetry Society and

¹⁴² On this point about Ng’s “republic of letters” and its materialism that evades the nation, refer Nicholas Wong’s essay “The Imaginative Materialism of *Wen* in Ng Kim Chew’s Malayan Communist Writing.”

figures like the Woon brothers and Foong I-chin. The text of ontopological Chineseness resurfaced amidst an atmosphere of anger and resentment against the Malay establishment, which also could not be expressed through conventional political channels, due to official government policy that cracked down on discourse it perceived as disturbing racial sensitivities. Through translation of archaic tropes such as the story of the exiled poet-general Qu Yuan – a totemic figure for loyalty to the state in civilizational Chinese imaginary – and use of identifiably “Chinese” symbols such as the dragon, zithers, and lutes in their poetry and writing, they conveyed their sense of alienation from national culture in Malaysia.¹⁴³ While this “Chinese turn” has been criticized by various Mahua critics for its move towards political disengagement and ethnocentric fantasy, its influence on subsequent writing in the 1970s and 80s is undeniable. It is a legacy that exemplifies the persistence of ontopological Chineseness as a reactionary form towards nationalistic policies in Malaysia. However, they also mined the archaic without regard for the Nanyang context. The driving goal of their appropriation of *wenhua Zhongguo* (cultural China) was a return to a notion of Greater China, which manifested itself in Shenzhou’s eventual integration into the Taiwanese literary scene.¹⁴⁴

Li subtly undercuts this borrowing by localizing the notion of *wenhua Zhongguo* in the Nanyang context, thus alienating it from its imagined archaic roots. Further, he undermines the textual-cultural-civilizational imperative of ontopological Chineseness by drawing from a performative tradition of *wenhua Zhongguo* which

¹⁴³ See Ng Kim Chew, “Shenzhou: cultural nostalgia and the inner China” [Shenzhou: wenhua xiangchou yu neizai Zhongguo], in *Malaysian Chinese Literature and Chineseness [Mahua wenxue yu Zhongguo xing]* (1998) and Lim Kien Keat, “Why Mahua literature?” [Wei shenme Mahua wenxue?] in *A Malaysian Chinese Literature Reader (II): Equatorial Echoes [Chidao huisheng: Mahua wenxue duben II]*, for an overview and critique of the “Chinese turn” in Mahua literature.

¹⁴⁴ *Wenhua Zhongguo* 文化中国 is a concept of civilizational Chineseness that subsequent scholars have discussed, without referencing the Mahua experience. See, for example, Tu Weiming, “Cultural China: The Periphery as The Center” in *Daedalus* journal (1991).

does not rely on the archaic for cultural legitimacy. Performativity, in Li's stories, functions more broadly than the kind of nationalized, concretized performativity criticized by Ng. The cultural performances of Chineseness that he depicts there do not take place in official displays or collective, national positions; instead, they are underground, and linked to the underworld, in Li's writing encapsulated by the term *jiang hu*,¹⁴⁵ literally "lakes and rivers," a concept derived from traditional Chinese fiction and especially popularized by its use in martial arts fiction. This refers to the space of the underworld, outside of officialdom, which in Li's Kuala Lumpur imaginary is invariably connected with its decadent past, and its entertainment spaces of the cabaret, nightclub, dance halls, and so on – places also depicted in the cinema and music of the time, the roaring 1950s and 60s of post-world war Malaya. Li recalls this era and its associated spaces from the perspective of the present day, as a bygone time that now only presents itself as remains, most symbolically through the *shidaiqu* and Chinese films of the time.¹⁴⁶ In Li's depiction, these media of popular entertainment, and the spaces that they evoke become forms of collective memory that metonymize an era, a folk performativity that captures the decadent memories of Kuala Lumpur, and also an evasive form of diasporic Chinese community at a time of nation-building in newly independent Malaya. By restaging this past of Kuala Lumpur as a decaying, fading memory of performative decadence, Li recalls an alternative Chineseness that is forgotten in the nation's records, one that holds out against the progress narrative of the nation, and symbolized by the destruction and disappearance

¹⁴⁵ 江湖.

¹⁴⁶ Shidaiqu 时代曲 refers to the "songs of the era" that originated from Shanghai in the 1920s, a popular musical fusion between Western jazz and Chinese instrumentation of the time. Post-1949, its production center gradually shifted to Hong Kong, as many artists and singers of the Shanghai era migrated out of the mainland.

of these entertainment spaces, in subsequent tightening of moral and religious law through Malay-Islamicization.¹⁴⁷

The Kuala Lumpur film industry of that time comprised parallel language film industries with Chinese investment, as the Malay film industry that took root proceeded from Shaw Brothers investment. Li's transposing of *wenhua Zhongguo* to this milieu suggests a limit to the localization of his alternative Chineseness – it is not a creolizing form that seeks to show the interpenetrability of the Nanyang races, nor does it show the evolution of Chineseness in the region. He does not draw out the multiracial composition of the film scene of the time, which is another evasion of the national imperative towards multiculturalism. Yet, its deconstruction of the deep past makes it invaluable as a refutation of the archaic impulse in ontological Chineseness. Li's "more Chinese than Chinese" take on this decadent Nanyang past effaces the striving for cultural legitimacy associated with *wenhua Zhongguo*, by showing how "cultural Chineseness" is a textual construction that can be played with, molded to fit a transient, illegitimate venue. The rewriting of the archaic here is not an accurate representation of the multicultural past – it is a play of the past, a deliberate restaging of diasporic *wenhua Zhongguo* in unfamiliar and decadent terms.

Li's alternative Chineseness is marked by an awareness of its transience. The songs and films that Li quotes in his stories – titles of past popular movies and songs – serve as adornment to his characters, resituating them in a Chineseness that departs from both the civilizational Chinese specter in Zhang's novel, and the late Qing dynasty nationalist ghosts that Ng excavates through his writing. Li's evocation of this performative tradition as link to Chineseness in turn evokes the transience of this tradition, marked by historical displacement, shortness, and mobility in its

¹⁴⁷ See Shamsul A.B.'s article "Identity Construction, Nation Formation and Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia", in *Islam in an Era of Nation-States*, for a discussion of Islamic revival in the Malaysian public sphere, influenced by the global resurgence of Islam as a political force in the 1970s.

transmission. This cultural link is tenuous in comparison with the permanence sought after through ontopological Chineseness based on textuality, ancientness, and imagined prestige derived from canonicity over the course of millennia. Li's stories combine this transient performative Chineseness with an overwhelmingly baroque "Chinese" writing style populated with classical Chinese literary tropes – another aspect of the "overreach" in his textual project – to reveal its contingent construction. This forms a paradoxical critique of the spectral Chineseness that founds itself on timelessness and civilization – paradoxical because on the surface Li's writing appears to be "more Chinese than Chinese," rather than a decisive break.

Li's use of this performative tradition of Chineseness, and its links to transient notions of time and memory, redefines the textual possibilities of Nanyang writing, to incorporate its sense of contingency in space and time. His baroque writing style is filtered by both a folk performativity and a modern sensibility, as in the use of popular film and musical tropes. The limited timespan of the "performance" – especially within the entertainment milieu of dance halls and clubs – metaphorizes this contingency. It evokes a fading, decadent beauty, exemplified by his entertainer characters who are past their prime, and remain in the underworld as ghosts beholden to their past. This trope of fadedness appears in Golden Age Chinese cinema and music, signalling its diasporic mobility, a result of historical and political changes such as the Sino-Japanese war, and the eventual communist takeover of the mainland, which led to it being controlled and banned as bourgeois entertainment.¹⁴⁸ This enforced mobility forms a different spectrality of Chineseness, distinct from the ancient Chinese imperative of cultural legitimacy, conferred by the apparent distance of a static, imagined "classical Chinese" civilization. These mobile forms diffract the

¹⁴⁸ Wong Kar-wai's 2000 film *In the Mood for Love* meditates on this contingency, as it is centered around the diasporic community of ex-Shanghai artists, entertainers, and writers who emigrated to Hong Kong.

monolithic prism of this concept, emphasizing the multilateral and unlikely networks that are formed in its transmission; it brings attention to the construction of Chineseness, which is denied by the essentialism of the “classical Chinese” ideal.

This mobility upends the nation-state, as it is insufficient to represent affective links that cross borders. These links generate identities, attachments, and identifications that constitute a negotiation with Chineseness. In Li’s stories, transience is a recurring theme for his characters, who are unable to reconcile with a time that has passed them by, and a space that now belongs in their imaginary, supplemented by sights and sounds that represent another place and city. This longing for a time in Kuala Lumpur, represented through other diasporic mediums, makes Li’s writings compelling forms of negotiation with Chineseness. His characters remain mired in their imaginaries and recollections, and do not step out of this parallel world. Their decadence means they do not move forward in the way that is demanded by, for instance, the communist revolutionaries in Zhang or Ng’s stories. Decadence manifests a temporality that is not linear nor progressive, and always returns to the past as a site of traumatic rekindling. The filmic image, the physical medium of tape, even the CD – they contain and compress time and space, as decadent mediums that allow something to live on, but only within the confines of an already out-of-date object, which trespass present political boundaries.

Li mobilizes the trope of “film” and “song” to describe the cultural imaginaries of these characters, and borrows from the performativity of musicals and melodramas in the Golden Age of Chinese cinema to depict his characters actions and behavior. A third evocation in his stories relates to the overall arrangement of the short story collection, as it attempts to replicate the “object” form of these compressed memories. The collection is divided into snippets and snapshots of life in the past

remembered – a “slice-of-life” feeling; they evoke leftover memorabilia from the past, such as postcards, photographs, calendars, advertisements – media that are necessarily transient, which reflect the passing of its time.¹⁴⁹ They are fragile, and frequently do not survive time itself. Li’s recalling of these memorabilia is present in the titles and form of his stories – snippets of a character’s life gathered under a succinct and pun-filled title, like “Wulou fangxin”¹⁵⁰ (“The Feelings of a Young Woman on the Fifth Floor”), or “Cixiong qiezei qianzhuan”¹⁵¹ (“Prologue to the Victory and Defeat of the Thieves”), or “Caidie suimao”¹⁵² (“The Colored Butterflies Follow the Cat”), and particularly the series of stories collected in the “Shiyan yi tanlang zhi...”¹⁵³ (“Ten Colorful Memories of Male Beauties...”) section, which mimics old “slice of life” comics – a form Li has expressed fondness for.¹⁵⁴

By mobilizing these non-textual forms¹⁵⁵, Li proposes a different genealogy of Chineseness, an alternative to the classical-textual ideal that Ng and Zhang ultimately do not depart from, even if they critique it through their own textual projects. Li consciously appropriates some parts of the classical Chinese tradition as well; however, he displaces it through his interest in modern media. A postcard of a classical Chinese beauty is surely different from a poem about said beauty. Li’s textual project decenters the textuality of the classical Chinese tradition, and its implied Chineseness, by weaving these contingent, non-textual forms into the fabric of the text.

¹⁴⁹ Li’s collection of short essays (*sanwen*), *Xieyang jinfen* 斜阳金粉 (*The Setting Sun of the Golden Powder*) also conveys this fleeting feeling, as it is explicitly about the films and figures of that era.

¹⁵⁰ 五楼芳心.

¹⁵¹ 雌雄窃贼前传.

¹⁵² 彩蝶随猫.

¹⁵³ 十艳亿檀郎之...”

¹⁵⁴ See Li’s preface to *Setting Sun*.

¹⁵⁵ Of course, there is text in some of these forms, but they are not part of the “classical Chinese textual tradition” that Ng Kim Chew critiques in his writing, as I have described in chapter 2.

Stories of the city, stories of the past

“The silkwear (*qiluo*), when it is infected by the decadent (*fengchen*) flower scent, and lowered into the mud and dust, does not necessarily undergo transformation into a red lotus, and might wither halfway; but in that moment of bloom, even a whiff of drifting fragrance is for eternity”¹⁵⁶ (30, Li).

Li’s baroque writing style, sometimes accused of floridness, nonetheless supplements his project as it conjures up sensual, sinewy lines – a decadent texture that generates a sense of over-elaboration for his quotidian characters. Their mundane lives unfold in his baroque text as dramatic recriminations, nostalgic remembrances, chances and opportunities missed in the past, now only accessible in their memories. These characters are entirely unimportant to the current of History – they do not participate actively in large historical movements, and remain steadfastly tied to their singular world of affective and emotional upheaval. As the quote above, part of the preface to the short story collection, suggests, the *qiluo*¹⁵⁷ (silkwear) in its lavishness, when placed in a decadent *fengchen*¹⁵⁸ (dust-and-wind) environment, blooms briefly, but may last for an eternity. This is a fitting analogy for Li’s characters and their relationship with history, who have little concern for their current surroundings, and are more invested in an instant of singular shine. The over-elaboration and grandiloquence in such a statement, almost to the point of bathos, reveals a displaced decadence to the Nanyang region – an essential trait of Li’s writing. Nanyang decadence represents a different tradition of writing from Mahua critical realism; it

¹⁵⁶ “绮罗染到风尘的芳香，低到泥尘烂泥里去，不一定会历劫修成红莲，可能半途就枯死，然而刹那芬芳，即使一缕飘香也是永恒。”

¹⁵⁷ 绮罗.

¹⁵⁸ 风尘.

shows another form of identification with Chineseness, through the representation of non-textual memories of the past, by figures stuck in time.

The characters in the short story series “Shiyan yi tanlang zhi...”¹⁵⁹ (“Ten Colorful Memories of Male Beauties...”) – *tanlang* being attractive young men who become the objects of desire and attraction for older women – symbolize this grandiloquence. Each story revolves around a character who pines for a figure in their past, typically a woman who reminisces about a man in her regretful present, though in one story, “Missing Cai Feng” (“Shiyan yi tanlang zhi caifeng xiangsi”), the gender roles are reversed.¹⁶⁰ The stories weave film, music, and historical references of 1950s and 60s Kuala Lumpur, into episodes of longing and regret. The episodic, snapshot-like nature of these stories encapsulates the lifetime of these characters, by connecting their history with the space of Kuala Lumpur. Different parts of Kuala Lumpur are captured by these snapshots, along with the changes the city experiences. The Kuala Lumpur that is under scrutiny here is the decadent Kuala Lumpur of song girls, music and night clubs, and the stage – a past now relegated as footnotes in history, available only through classic film snippets, old photographs, and personal recollections. What Li describes is not only the disappearance of these places and characters, it is the disappearance of a spatial imaginary that dominated Kuala Lumpur. This imaginary depicts Kuala Lumpur as a postcolonial city inflected with a kind of Chineseness that is associated with figures like the courtesan, entertainer, and songstress – a shadow world of influential men and the places they frequented.¹⁶¹

Li transports this shadow world to Kuala Lumpur, and its given name in Chinese – the *jianghu*, an ancient Chinese term for the underworld that runs parallel

¹⁵⁹ 十艳亿檀郎之。

¹⁶⁰ 十艳亿檀郎之彩凤相思。

¹⁶¹ This alludes to, among other texts, Han Bangqing’s *Sing-song girls of Shanghai*, set in fin de siècle Shanghai.

to but outside of government reach – suggests not only illegality, but also the twilight, a disappearing and barely visible world.¹⁶² This is a *guangying shijie* – a world of light and shadow – implying the *lumiere* of film, which captures the feeling of a world on the verge of disappearing, later alluded to only by fragmented references and snippets from that era.¹⁶³ Li’s textual world is filled with these references, signifying the transience and limitation of his representation of this world, as it is a *qimeng*, a dream with the texture of silk (55).¹⁶⁴ The title of the collection – *Qiluo xiang*, or *The Scent of Silkwear* – implies an essential gap in the representation of this Chinese world.¹⁶⁵ It is a dream that contains only a trace, signifying the fantasy of something not-quite-there. *The Scent of Silkwear* renders a world that is out of reach.

Its title can be traced back to a Mandopop and *shidaiqu* song, “weishi qiluo xiang”¹⁶⁶ (“Yet to know the scent of silkwear”) – the main theme of a classic Shaw Brothers musical film, *A Songstress Called Hong Lingyan* (1953).¹⁶⁷ The original singer and lead actress of the film is Bai Guang,¹⁶⁸ one of the so-called Seven Great Singing Stars in 1930s and 40s Shanghai and singer of countless classic *shidaiqu* tunes, who would make her own Nanyang journey.¹⁶⁹ She permanently resettled in Kuala Lumpur sometime in the 1960s, and died there in the 1990s. This song has also been covered by other singers numerous times, including Poon Sow-Keng (Pan Xiu-Qiong)¹⁷⁰, a musical star of the 1950s and 60s born in Macau, who came of age in

¹⁶² 江湖.

¹⁶³ 光影世界.

¹⁶⁴ 绮梦.

¹⁶⁵ 绮罗香.

¹⁶⁶ 未识绮罗香.

¹⁶⁷ *Genu Hong Lingyan* 歌女紅菱艷.

¹⁶⁸ 白光.

¹⁶⁹ Contemporary of Zhou Xuan, Li Xianglan, and so on – the original Shanghai songstresses.

¹⁷⁰ 潘秀琼.

Singapore and Malaya.¹⁷¹ The movement of this song associates multiple times and spaces. Li's title suggests a trace of Chineseness that is even more apparent in the lyrics for the song, which is based on a Tang dynasty-era poem called *pinnu* ("Poor girl").¹⁷²

The first line of the song – "Fengmen weishi qiluoxiang / nituo liangmei yi zishang" ("This poor house has not known the scent of silkwear, and to rely on a matchmaker is to hurt oneself even more")¹⁷³ – is directly taken from the poem. The Tang poem describes the longing for a better life by a girl in poverty, envious of her richer contemporary, who can afford the bridal dresses she sews. She pines for a suitor who will appreciate her *qinggao*¹⁷⁴ – loosely translated as "integrity." In the poem, her eschewing of makeup implies that her sewing is more substantial than those who merely wear her clothes. This theme resonates with Li's short story characters, who long for missed suitors in their lives.

The 1950s film theme song adds lyrics that touch on the theme of diaspora, asking "menghui hechu shi jiexiang"¹⁷⁵ ("when I dream again, where is my hometown?") The songstress here is situated in a different world, the *fengchen* space of courtesans and entertainers, and *jianghu* milieu of those who are adrift from society, making this dissolute arena their home. Li's borrowing of this title places the songstress squarely in Kuala Lumpur, corralling the *fengchen* and *jianghu* tropes as metaphors for the diasporic Chinese world. This is also explored in Chinese Golden Age films that touched on the post-1949 Shanghai to Hong Kong migration wave,

¹⁷¹ Contemporary of Cui Ping, Gu Mei, Rebecca Pan, and so on. This is a different generation of songstresses from the aforementioned Shanghai group.

¹⁷² 贫女.

¹⁷³ 蓬門未識綺羅香 / 拟托良媒益自傷.

¹⁷⁴ 清高

¹⁷⁵ 夢回何處是家鄉.

which Li transposes to the inhabitants of Kuala Lumpur.¹⁷⁶ This “shadow world” of Kuala Lumpur is a bubble – an apt locale for interrogating the complexities of a displaced Chineseness. The song and poem express longing for a different life, echoed by Li’s characters elliptically as a diasporic longing originating from their displacement to the Nanyang, an out-of-way place. The poverty of the girl, now songstress in the song, equates with the poverty of Kuala Lumpur; it drifts along in a shadow world, while casting envious glances at the cultural richness of other places and spaces. The mobile Chineseness represented by *shidaiqu* songs and films, however, is a cultural connector, albeit a spectral one for those who seek refuge in it.

In the song’s remaking of the poem, there is already a gap in its classical evocation. Its additional lyrics update it to 1950s Hong Kong, but the trace of the original poem and thematic remains in the song. Li’s use of this title for his short story collection displaces the poem thirdly.¹⁷⁷ The *qiluo xiang* not only names his story and milieu – it also names Li’s method for negotiating Chineseness, contending with the classical Chinese imaginary and its legacy in the place of his birth, urban Kuala Lumpur. Li employs the spectral mediums of modern Kuala Lumpur, which includes film and *shidaiqu* – modern media par excellence – but also temple figures and spiritual mediums in his stories, to renegotiate the imaginary of “classical Chineseness.” These mediums contain ghosts, which Li utilizes to interrogate the constitution of Chineseness.

¹⁷⁶ See Kenny K.K. Ng’s article, “Romantic comedies of Cathay-MP&GI in the 1950s and 60s”, for an overview and discussion of these films. On another note, if Wong Kar-wai’s films are contemporary representations of this Shanghai-Hong Kong centre of entertainment, Li Tianbao’s writings are contemporary representations of a forgotten Nanyang milieu of decadence and entertainment.

¹⁷⁷ There are quite a few examples of such remakings. Teresa Teng – a major Taiwanese pop star in the 1970s and 1980s who could legitimately be described as successor to the *shidaiqu* era as her popularity spanned the global Chinese diaspora – recorded a 1983 album, *Dandan youqing (Faded feelings)*, based on Tang and Song dynasty era poems, for instance.

Flowers of Kuala Lumpur

A bevy of characters exemplifies this gap. The eponymous story of the collection, “Shiyan yi tanlang zhi qiluoxiang”¹⁷⁸ (“The Story of the Scent of Silkwear, in Ten Colorful Memories of Male Beauties”) narrates the life and longings of a cabaret dancer who achieved fame in Kuala Lumpur in the 1950s-1960s, loosely based on the life of Rose Chan. Rose was a cabaret dancer known as the “Queen of Striptease”, and achieved notoriety throughout Malaya (and subsequently Malaysia) due to her various revue performances. Accordingly, the cabaret dancer in the story is named Green Rose (Lü qiangwei)¹⁷⁹, and the narrative follows her rise to fame and subsequent downturn in fortunes post-1970s, when cabaret culture suffered a governmental crackdown and virtually disappeared. Through her character, Li depicts a disappearing and disappeared time – an era of decadence in Kuala Lumpur, which Green Rose is a remainder of until 1987, when she dies of ovarian cancer – the same year as the real-life Rose Chan. Li plays on this doubling of roses in the cabaret arena, introducing more flowers in the guise of her mentor, Purple Orchid (Zi lanhua)¹⁸⁰, and Green Rose’s adopted daughter, Blue Cherry Blossom (Lan yinghua)¹⁸¹, situating them in different temporal relationships with this era of decadence.

This difference is reflected in their respective fates – Purple Orchid, as Green Rose’s predecessor, is embedded in her “time” prior to its ending, but is paradoxically also the only one who leaves the *jianghu* (underworld) milieu cleanly, as she marries a suitor – Peng Xin Chun, a wealthy businessman from outside of the Nanyang, aptly described as *waijiang ren*¹⁸² – or someone from “out of the river,” an outsider to this

¹⁷⁸ 十艳亿檀郎之绮罗香.

¹⁷⁹ 绿蔷薇.

¹⁸⁰ 紫兰花.

¹⁸¹ 蓝樱花.

¹⁸² 外江人.

decadent space. He supposedly originated from Hunan or Hubei, and headed South after the war to Singapore before moving to Kuala Lumpur (52). He is also rumored to be a Kuomintang agent. The divergent paths they take in Li's story – Green Rose achieves fame in the cabaret circuit, while Purple Orchid leaves the arena – is due to their different response to Peng's courtship, reflecting their respective ambitions as entertainer-courtesans. As Li puts it, Green Rose is “dissatisfied with the adulation of only one man” (55). This divergence, however, can also be read as a difference in their relationship with time itself, as they evince contrasting attitudes towards the disappearing, decadent milieu. Purple Orchid attained fame here prior to Green Rose, and Green Rose, her protégé, is her legacy, her imprint on time and history in this underworld, even if she ultimately leaves it behind. Blue Cherry Blossom, as Green Rose's mentee, is the remainder of a remainder, the product of a holdover that is about to vanish, the remainder of an ending era.

Green Rose alone lives through the different eras of decadent Kuala Lumpur as a dancer. The story implies a span of time from the Japanese occupation of Malaya – from 1942 to 1945 – until 1987, the year she passes away. Her continuity through these different periods suggests the possibility of her being a witness of history; the decadent milieu of the underworld that she inhabits, however, dominates her life and traps her within *its* own time, preventing her from registering the larger historical milieu. This is shown through the compressed form of the story, which distills nearly forty years of history into ten pages, a lifetime made short in its selective remembrance. Green Rose's entrance into this space of desire and evasion, marked by Purple Orchid's pedagogy, encompasses not just the teaching of strip dance techniques, but also the courtesan etiquette that accompanies the dancer's interactions with the men of this milieu. As Purple Orchid notes in her initial lessons to Green

Rose, apart from the dancing, they had to learn how to manage their costumes and fashion, including an important piece of advice – that the “man should buy it” (52). This sets the stage for her interpellation into the world of decadence and desire, the *fengchen shijie* (world of dust and wind), which runs on hidden rules governing the interactions between men and women. Green Rose’s lifetime is thus inextricably tied with the time and space of this milieu.

To evoke a singular milieu that contains its own time, Li employs several textual techniques in the story. He signals time compression by depicting symbols and objects that persist across Green Rose’s lifetime – for instance, the costume that she wears on stage for the first time is made from a lavish, expensive red rose cloth that Peng buys for her, a dress that shows off her status as the premier performer in the arena. In contrast, she receives a black cloak made of swan feathers from another suitor – a young, drug-addled tailor – in the waning days of the cabaret, when she is around thirty five years old, which protects her modesty rather than display her brilliance. In Li’s world, the move from lavish silkwear and wealthy businessman to black swan cloak and drug-addled, dependent tailor is only one stroke of fate away. The milieu of premier cabaret clubs and theater establishments that were prominent in her prime – the one that she works at is appropriately called the Siren – disappears in one quick transition from the first to the second part of the story. This is marked only by a transitional Chinese word in the text – the character *xia*,¹⁸³ signalling a section break in the story – which moves the reader abruptly to the second part of the story, about her less-than-glorious demise and struggle to stay afloat in the changing times

¹⁸³ 下.

of Kuala Lumpur.¹⁸⁴ The contrast of fabric here summarizes her contrasting fortunes in different eras of Kuala Lumpur.

Further, this time compression in the story confers a hazy, nostalgic tinge on Green Rose's golden age, which is also the city's golden age, as what is narrated in the first part is now colored by her downfall in the second part. The different paths that Green Rose could have taken in her life is retrospectively condensed to her decision to walk the musical stage, rather than to follow Peng to a married life out of the spotlight. As Li writes in the beginning of the story,

In the year 1965, Green Rose stepped onto the stage for the first time, and wore exactly this outfit. It was known, though, that this was merely a moment's magnificence and dazzle, and the outfit inevitably needed to be removed, piece by piece (51).

The temporal here is evoked by a feeling of inevitability, a knowing sense that the "magnificence" is temporary. This effect is achieved through an omniscient narrator who is seemingly absent, but has foresight into Green Rose's future *while* narrating the story in the present. This formal quality brings forward the content of the story, exemplifying the transience of the stripdancers, their limited time on stage, and the dresses' brief shelf life for public display. Through this stylistic tool, the narrative develops a belated tone, and becomes a recollection that pinpoints the pivotal moments that determine Green Rose's fate, something Green Rose cannot tell, as an actor within this recollection. A seemingly detached narrator is responsible for telling her life story, as if a simple recollection of her fate from an objectively unproblematic position, belying a naïve realism with regard to temporal representation.

¹⁸⁴ Her death is reported in a matter-of-fact way: "In 1987, Green Rose was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, and passed away." (56)

However, there are points in the narrative where this objective narrator slides into a subjective position – one hinted as belonging to Green Rose’s perspective. Later in the first section, the narrator recapitulates the beginning of Green Rose’s career, again with her outfit:

Forever thus remembering the outfit from the night – a real red silk of roses – it was due to his generosity¹⁸⁵ that he bought it – the pleats at the waist sewn with roses, surrounding it like a bouquet; the floor full of women, standing horizontally on the stage (55).

This paragraph is preceded by a crucial point, where Purple Orchid goes away with Peng, leaving Green Rose to her cabaret world, and relegating her encounter with Peng to a brief moment in the past.¹⁸⁶ Who is “remembering the outfit from the night” here? The narrator’s identity becomes ambiguous, as it seems to suddenly slip into Green Rose’s perspective, narrating her musings about the pivotal slips in her life, as she “remembers the outfit from the night forever” – the moment when she irrevocably enters the world of decadence as a subject, and leaves the alternative, more stable life as a rich man’s wife behind.

When she enters this decadent world as a subject, she also experiences a shift in the ownership of her body, which is now privy to the public gaze of the men in the club. As Li writes,

The band always played the “Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White” theme, those few decadent and sultry trumpet sounds which signaled the introductory melodies of the striptease, and, listening to it, one seemingly felt dejected. Green Rose completely did not notice this, and

¹⁸⁵ This is rendered as *zuan* (竹杠) – or literally, bamboo rod – a neat metaphor that fits the context of roses.

¹⁸⁶ Li writes, “Green Rose had only coincidentally met Peng in 1959...later on, Purple Orchid had already climbed onto him.” (54)

only knew that the first time she heard this main theme slide past, she had shown everything on her body, and that it no longer belonged to her, as she was implanted in countless men's memories, the ripples of her breasts and shoulders, the flirtatious glances containing youth, the body's luster that existed for quite a few years without decaying (55).

Through her body becoming publicly available, Green Rose becomes a public marker of time in that arena, comprising men who form the audience of this underworld. If her body no longer belongs to her, it is because it has now become a symbol of the decadent milieu. In the temporality of that space, it remains "without decay," forever young and exciting. This stasis on the stage reflects the stasis of the milieu – a moment beyond time that exists for its own sake, a singular space that defers reality through the collective memories and desires of its constituents, driven by the spectacle and bodies on stage. Everything is "forever" in this milieu, including the music, bodies, and the play of desire contained within these underworld spaces, where Green Rose and her fellow performers display their timelessness.

This timelessness comes at a cost of their identities and relationships – decadence extracts a form of emptiness and blankness on the part of its constituents. The narrator points out,

Following this (the striptease routine), Green Rose also abandoned her existing familial relationships, the relationships and ties of the ordinary world, and temporarily relinquished any connections, she was an Eve who had not yet been exiled from paradise...the men simultaneously trained their respective desires in the same direction – it was a collective spiritual intoxication, an experience that was unprecedented. Green Rose lost her background and identity, but she received the

adulation of thousands of men. She did not become one person's object of adulation, instead splitting and arousing the silk-dream (*qi meng*) of many others (55).

In the moment of the stage, which metonymically represents the time of the milieu, Green Rose serves as a temporal projection for the men below, a figure who does not age. At the same time, she links them back to the imagined "paradise" they have been exiled from – a link that refers to the title of the story, the *qi meng*¹⁸⁷ (silk-dream), which simultaneously hints at the sensuality of silk, and the vagueness of a dream. If they cannot possess her body – or return to paradise before exile – they can at least channel that space through this silk-dream, the elusive and yet tangible past that is always already an illusion, as it is tied to the "few trumpet notes," the dance, routine, and most importantly, the bodies of the dancers themselves. For a night, they exist in an eternal time that has no clearly defined beginning or end, a separate dream-space that distinguishes itself from the "ordinary world" by its singularity and blankness, except for what exists in front of the stage. Green Rose's name becomes synonymous with this silk-dream, as if it were made of "flowers and jewelry," "aromatic and lustrous" (55).

The consequence of this is that even what is off-stage becomes double – as Green Rose notices, when she broke off from Peng, her tears were "theatrical," flowing "as if she were acting," and subsequently "becoming real, at least the tears were real" (56). This doubling of her affect – the merging of the stage with her off-stage life – blurs the boundaries between dream and reality, and the subjectivity that she now experiences in this space is disjunctive. Her private space, now publicized, is subject to a form of staging, encapsulated in her performing the melodramatic gesture

¹⁸⁷ 绮梦.

of “leaving it all behind,” and “to walk alone through the subsequent wind and snow” (56). Green Rose successfully transforms into a character, existing in the flattened temporality of a metonymic name in Li’s saga, one of many *yan*¹⁸⁸ (beauties) of Kuala Lumpur. She coexists in the silk-dream of the city, which in Li’s recollection has been transformed into myth, with Green Rose as an essential emblem. Like a song that evokes an era through its melody, Li turns Green Rose into textual shorthand for an era.

She is spectral, in her subjective disassociation, and the ghostly way she haunts the text, as she is declared to have died in 1987, in the beginning of the second half of the story. Yet, she lives on in the text retrospectively. The second half describes her post-glory days and her struggle to remain relevant in a time that no longer has use for her skills, with the story actually ending in 1973. The afterlife of Green Rose coincides with the end of the cabaret era, the banning of the striptease and its associated places and spaces (56). She appears in incongruous spaces – at a Chinese school fundraising event, in theater, *shidaiqu* performances, even Cantonese opera, a strange movement for someone like her into the realm of legitimate art (57). As the spaces of the revue disappear one by one – the “Siren Dance Club had fallen, so had the Mayflower, the Kuala Lumpur nightclub, the Eastern Dance Club, the Odeon Theater, even the playground...”, so does her beauty, which follows the end of a decadent era (60). As Green Rose herself feels in relation to this disappearing time,

“...it was a desolate, impermanent feeling of vanishing, and Green Rose for the first time felt acutely the sun of the Golden Age moving further away, and an impending chill deepening...she had experienced

¹⁸⁸ 艳.

the infatuation of the eyes of men of different eras, and had exchanged everything for that” (60).

In her realization that this era is vanishing, she returns to a familiar memory in the past – the memory of Peng, whose significance as another possible life for her becomes apparent in the vanishing time. However, it has already become a memory which cannot be recovered. His memory can only be lived as a regretful turning point for her in the present. The story ends on a quotidian note, midway through her eight-year affair with the drug-addled tailor who gives her the black swan coat, as her reputation as entertainer extraordinaire disappears into the footnote of history. It concludes with a flashback to her attempt to pass down striptease lessons to her adopted daughter, Blue Cherry Blossom – a remnant of the striptease era (61). This is 1973, when the golden age of the cabaret is winding down. The story ends on a poignant note with this flashback, and the addition of the tailor to her “household” – “she never married, but she seemed to lead a similarly husband and wife, married life” (62) – recapitulating the life that she could have had, but with a faint, detached irony, a feeling of unfulfilling repetition, as she ultimately ends up with a household life she had supposedly evaded. If this second section feels like a ghostly afterlife to her glory days, it is because she split as a subject after her entrance into the decadent milieu. What she tries to recover thereafter is colored by a feeling of disappearance, as part of herself has vanished along with that era (“she exchanged everything for that”). The timelessness that was seemingly eternal in the space is unrecoverable, except through recollection and memory.

“Timelessness” is a construction, which is not due to an object achieving “classic” status based on its significance in the past – it is always involved in a temporal dialectic with the present, and *appears* timeless through a recollection that is

situated in the present. Li's recollection is shot through with the melancholic awareness that even this "timelessness" passes, and that its appearance is thus a silk-dream, destined to never be captured. Li narrates Green Rose's story through the silk-dream, as an after-life, a spectral remembering, where Green Rose's ghost and the spaces where she inhabited take centre stage. The text replicates the uncanny remembering associated with the transmission of film and music from that era, like a haunting melody which sounds like it has been there all along, appearing as timeless. If this risks falling into nostalgia, it also deconstructs the effect of timelessness, constitutive of the Chineseness that is alluded to in the story title, and the associated poem and song it reiterates. In Li's writing, the classical allusion drawn from Tang dynasty China and musical remaking based in Shanghai and Hong Kong do not form a direct line to Kuala Lumpur. The story allegorizes the impossibility of any claim to timelessness as a direct evocation of the past, as Green Rose notices that the "Golden era," a symbol for the spectral past, is "moving ever further away" – a past that can be chased but not attained. Green Rose's failure to recapture her years of splendour shows Li's point that the timeless past does not exist, and highlights the discontinuous gaps that form in each cultural memory and transmission. The classical allusions that Li invokes when applied to Kuala Lumpur's past becomes associated with a vanishing era, the time of the cabaret that is not only an imperfect reflection of the classical world of decadence and desire, but has also faded away in Li's present recollection. This double fadedness moves Li's writing away from nostalgia, as it suggests an awareness of the contingency of recollection, through a style of writing that incorporates the fact and feeling of disappearance.

In Zhang Gui Xing's novel *Elephant Herd*, discussed in the first chapter, the revolutionary communists' mapping of Chineseness onto the Borneo space is a

timeless mapping, which gains legitimacy through the historical distance of time and space, forcibly transplanted onto a geographical Other. In Li's stories, a discontinuous mapping occurs, through a melancholic gap which appears within even a seemingly "Chinese" form of writing and imaginary. Li, through his meditation on the impossibility of timelessness in the story, undercuts the familiar pull of a timeless Chineseness. He does so by depicting the singularity of such a vision, and its dream-like nature, where the appearance of timelessness is punctured by the sudden awareness of its construction, and eventual disappearance. If the silk dream is a collective fantasy, it nonetheless has a tangible quality through the traces left behind – the afterlife of Green Rose's cabaret costume, which transforms into the black cloak as a reminder *and* remainder. This reminder/remainder, however, is not the same as what is being recalled, as a spectral recollection that is aware of what is already gone. The remainder – the memory of the Chinese past – has undergone a spectral transformation that is like Green Rose's entrance into the cabaret space, which makes her actual death in the story immaterial; her body has been split from her being, and she lives on as a signifier, a public memory that evokes the faded fantasy of a contingent past.

The ghost of the real, the real of the ghost

In another story called "Shiyan yi tanlang zhi Haitang chun"¹⁸⁹ ("The Story of Spring Crabapple, in Ten Colorful Memories of Male Beauties"), Li explores the plight of a similar, specter-like flower figure, *Haitang chun*¹⁹⁰ (Spring Crabapple), who literally lives in the past. As the narrator puts it,

¹⁸⁹ 十艳亿檀郎之海棠春.

¹⁹⁰ 海棠春. This is a flower endemic to the northern regions of China.

She continued to be at the balcony – compared with the past, now she seemed dead. The golden sun shone on Spring Crabapple’s face, and her entire person seemed like a mask of gold dust, having lost her thoughts and emotions...even if they existed, they were but the emotions of a past, a past love (66).

She is another dead flower in the present, holding on to affective ties in the past. Li alludes to Golden Age music and films as context for this affective drama, and borrows the well-worn classical trope of the pining maiden as underlying structure of the story (66).¹⁹¹ But he also includes in the story a literal medium for accessing the past – a spiritual medium who channels the ghost of Springtime’s erstwhile lover, an infamous gang leader, Brother Yin¹⁹², killed by an unknown assailant (71). Li introduces a bodily embodiment of the past connection between her and her lover, his birthmark reappearing on her body, after a dream she has of him kissing her nape (70).

This ghostly reconnection – where the dead returns in different forms, through dreams and spiritual mediums – takes place in the *jianghu*, the underworld which is the space for entertainers and itinerants, as in the earlier story. Springtime is yet another courtesan character, who becomes the mistress of the influential gang leader, Brother Yin. This evokes the courtesan milieu, though in a lower-class world that is far from the glitz and glamour of Green Rose’s cabaret and night club scene. The world they inhabit is the underworld of gangsters and prostitutes, located in old

¹⁹¹ In the story, Li quotes the lyrics to the song “Gei wo yi ge wen” 给我一个吻 (“Give me a kiss”) (1954) originally sung by Zhang Lu 张露 as it “wafts over the radio”, setting the temporal context of the story; and the song “He ri jun zai lai” 何日君再来 (“When will you come again”), originally sung by Zhou Xuan 周旋. Notably, the former is a remake of the 1953 English song “Seven Lonely Days.” It is also the name of a Shaw Brothers movie in the 1950s, which was exhibited in cinemas in Kuala Lumpur of the time.

¹⁹² 谭鸚哥. Literally translated, his name is “Speaking Parrot Brother”, which forms a neat pairing of Chinese flora and fauna between them.

apartments, back alleys, and faded doors.¹⁹³ This is a secret world that runs parallel to the world above ground, abandoned to its own temporality, which makes a spectral reconciliation between the living and the dead possible.

Even so, time still progresses in this space, as Spring is destitute compared to her prostitute days, old and worn-out, having lost her beauty to the ravages of time.¹⁹⁴ She settles within the faded doors and destitute alleys of this abandoned space, as part of a tableau of abandonment. It is in this milieu where the temporal warp of spectrality takes place, a ghostly temporality that exists in isolation. An underworldly and otherworldly haunting takes place, as the memories of Spring – which reiterate her “glory days” of being the mistress of an influential figure in the underworld, their love affair, and his subsequent fall from grace and death – coexist with her afterlife, spent in the dingy, abandoned veranda, in regular “communication” with her dead lover, as if she is already dead. Like Green Rose in the previous story, Spring achieved notoriety due to her past reputation, and so has become a myth, a legend of the underworld among the common folk. In their telling of her, she was rumoured to be involved in Brother Yin’s criminal activities, as part of his inner circle (65-66). She is herself a medium for the dead, a silent symbol of the legacy of her gangster lover, left behind as a remainder of time and the vicissitudes of this underworld (66).

This spectral milieu runs on rumors and voices, with past events recalled only through hearsay, like the myth of Spring and her lover. The underworld is a shadowy place where vague whispers in the dark behind one’s back are sufficient for constructing a narrative of events.¹⁹⁵ If such whispers are insufficient, then other realms are necessary, such as the realm of dreams and spirits – the realm of haunting.

¹⁹³ For example, the “North Brunei Alley No. 7 old flats” (65)

¹⁹⁴ “...When she was old to the point that she could not be called ‘Springtime’ anymore...” (65)

¹⁹⁵ Witness, for instance, her “sister” Ah Rong who gossips about her private life with the townfolk (67).

Spring's search for the truth about Yin's death takes her beyond the living world, as she is frustrated and deceived by others who take advantage of her desire for the truth, to extract from her money and sex. In her search, she becomes increasingly spectral – her body described as “aging ten years in a year, as if she were a witch that had lost its spell” (67). Yin's body was cremated after his death, without a conclusion about the cause. This missing information conditions the milieu, as remnant of an opaque history.

In the absence of the body, and the impossibility of resolution in the living realm, other realms become paramount. This paradox creates their spectral communion – as Ah Rong puts it, “she must be thinking of heading underground to accompany Brother Yin, so that they can become a ghostly couple” (68). While the body has disappeared through cremation, its physical and historical remainders live on in the legacy of Spring's reputation as his “wife figure,” and objects left behinds – such as his clothes and jewelry (70). These are reminders of his prior existence, which spark her recollections day and night. There is no need to “head underground,” however, as the boundaries between the dead and living can be crossed here. Spring's visit to the spiritual medium is part of her quest to discover the truth of his death, and she is able to glean clues and signals about that incident through a tarot reading:

Seventh Aunt calmly took the paper cards in her hands...they were all figures dressed in ancient costumes. Spring said: “Invite him to come up.” Seventh Aunt's tiny eyes shined on top of her meat pie-like face, and she shook her head. The past few times, Brother Yin came up, and did not say much, it was Spring who was asking questions alone, even when she asked about the pertinent questions, Seventh Aunt did not say a single thing, and was extraordinarily quiet...and then he

left...today Seventh Aunt placed the paper cards in one stack, and placed them in front of Spring, asking her to pick one. Spring did not think twice, when she threw the card on the table, the card showed a court lady; Seventh Aunt said with a low voice: “A woman. That’s a woman” (68).

Shortly after, Spring dreams that she is crying, and is visited by the spirit of Brother Yin, who leaves a mark on her nape through his interdimensional kiss, which she cannot remove from her skin after she wakes up (68). The absence of a body creates other forms of corporeal communication, the specters manifesting other than an actual physical body, but with effects on the lives of those in the real world. This ghostliness of communication and communion, with speech replaced by mediated gestures and objects, signals not only the absence of a figure, but recurrence in the world of the living remainder. It implies the terrifying circularity of a spectral milieu, in which time cannot break out of what is already determined, and only returns to emphasize the waiting for the dead.

The “red room” – Spring’s place of work – and Yin’s jewelry still exist as they are left behind, and they elicit Spring’s traumatic recollections of Brother Yin’s death, up until the moments before he disappeared forever. Yin asked Spring to record the final episode of a martial arts radio broadcast before he left, but never returned. Spring holds on to this ghostly medium, as reminder of missing closure; the memory of the recording evokes his absence, as meta-remembrance. For her, it is a constant reference point for his future return – the birthmark and the radio broadcast remain present, long after their initial appearance:

After many years, she closed her eyes and squatted at the balcony, and, underneath the sun, touched the birthmark...she seemed to feel his

presence. Her skin and his had never separated. The ending she listened to that night (before his death) she kept in her heart, such that in the future they would meet again one day, where she would tell him about it (72).

The final episode of that broadcast does not signal an ending for her. She carries it with her as a future possibility, a spectral message twice removed. The content of the broadcast matters less to her than the circumstances surrounding the message – and her desire to tell him the ending, to close the loop of transmission, stems from their deferred ending. Here, a medium that elicits specters (the spiritual mediator) coincides with a spectral medium (the radio broadcast), as continuations of the past and projections into a strange, circular “future.” This gothic time exists on another plane. Her memories and the spiritual world are fused together in an oddly timeless way, where reality is displaced in favor of affect. We return to the “timelessness” that marked the story of Green Rose, which evokes the singularity of place and space conjured by recollection. Timelessness here, however, is shut within the faded doors and Spring’s dilapidated balcony – she sat under the sun, she touched the birthmark as usual – and this scene repeats until her death.

The abandonment and dilapidation of the space – Spring’s dingy quarters, forgotten room, the balcony – shows her own abandonment, and a different relationship to “timelessness” compared with the first story. While Green Rose transforms herself in a changing milieu, exposing herself to other spaces and places even if they lack the glitz of her prime, Spring obsessively returns to the traumatic disappearance, seeking to recover that timelessness through different forms of spectrality. However, it is only her own memory that perpetuates this timelessness, as it fuses together all the necessary elements for an obsessive pining to continue. This is

a decadent abandonment to the past which refuses the progression of time, and tries to stage a return by trespassing spiritual and physical dimensions. Such decadence exemplifies the abandonment of a peripheral space like Kuala Lumpur.

Metaphorically speaking, as it is already an abandoned space forgotten and ignored, there is no need for Spring to return to the living, or communicate anything beyond the singular obsessions of memory. Spring's tragedy is her disengagement from the living, compelled by the shadowy underworld, a far cry from the glamor and beauty of the silk dream. The silk dream cannot be returned to, and preserves its beauty; Spring's dream is continuous with her present, and yet is not beautiful, punctuated by the sadness of an illusion held together by force of will.

Either way, this timelessness exists within a space, which Li returns to constantly to show how it is dictated by memory and fantasy. Spring's refusal to move on from the past – her decadent refusal of the progression of time in the space of Kuala Lumpur – and her subsequent retreat into the realm of dreams, memory, and the spiritual world, is a refusal of the imperatives of developmental time in the city. This opposes the “timeliness” that purportedly removes the opacity and spectrality of the underworld, in favor of a linear and progressive time that accompanies developmental rhetoric. The so-called progressive time reproduces what it attempts to eradicate, as the underworld coexists with the world above. In Li's description of Spring's present, we see how the city's space and time proceeds, and her relationship with its changing nature:

After many years, when she was old to the point that she could not be called “Springtime” anymore, some people still brought up their (her and her lover) matters – of course, that crimson red tent/screen had disappeared long ago. She became destitute to the point of inhabiting

an even cheaper and degrading location: the dirty back alleyway, a row of small doors with faded paint, different races and type of men carried metal ash in and out, if they were to pay a little attention, they would be able to see an old woman squatting on the balcony – when she was not smoking, one of her hands would touch the birthmark on her nape, and she would close her eyes underneath the sun, thinking (65).

The men carrying the metal ash – a construction material – represent the new developments that are about to spring forth in the city. Her destitute place is undergoing gentrification. This paragraph highlights the isolation and singularity of Spring in this rapidly changing space – her temporality is completely out of joint with her surroundings, and her cheap and destitute space is about to be replaced by new constructions that loom on the horizon. In Li's depiction of decadence and melodrama, we find a sharp critique of the development of Kuala Lumpur – its changing time and space that bears no relationship or sympathy with its remaining constituents, who do not conform to the progressive time of the city.

Li's stories, which map the *jianghu* from classical Chinese literature to Kuala Lumpur, portray a different form of Chineseness to critique urban time and development. This Chineseness is not invested in a vanguard-like spatial construction. Rather, it encompasses what is left behind – a metaphor for a disappearing time and space, of the 1950s and 60s. This coincides with the time of Malayan independence, where a decadent space is gradually eradicated due to its incompatibility with the time of the Malaysian nation-state. Green Rose and Springtime Crabapple are both flowers of decadence, whose disappearing histories and solitary witnessing reflect the way the narrative of the nation excludes what does not conform to its needs. In Malaysia, this is driven by the combination of a Malay-centric modernism and moralism that

reshapes the urban and cultural narrative of Kuala Lumpur. Li's writing betrays the anxiety of this change, a diasporic response to the abandonment of history, which utilizes the tropes of a remaining Chineseness to counter the national imperative.

Chineseness in another tenor

Li's Chineseness differs from the static "Chineseness as civilization" imaginary that is imported and mapped upon another space, as it is aware of its own spectrality and movement in transmission. Li's stories exemplify the transformations that take place due to this gap, and the ghostliness inherent in returning to something approximating Chineseness. As Li writes in his preface to *The Scent of Silkwear*:

Since the 50s of the previous century, this space has seen many different ideologies (*yishi*)¹⁹⁶ and forms (*xingtai*)¹⁹⁷, be it leftist or rightist, of which different streams have converged in the brains of many Chinese brothers (*zidi*)¹⁹⁸ – just on the basis of the insipidness of revolutionary womanhood, I did not like leftism of the time; in contrast the popular culture (*liuxing wushi*)¹⁹⁹ of Hong Kong and Taiwan, which were accused of "extreme mundaneness", this was the favourite of us ordinary folk. Luckily, I did not absorb the poison of "political correctness", and did not make the imperative of "representing the realism of society" as my task, and turn myself into a beacon of moralism – the principles of righteousness fearfully shone at "darkness", and denounced the "wrong thinking" of others...now that I

¹⁹⁶ 意识.

¹⁹⁷ 形态.

¹⁹⁸ 子弟.

¹⁹⁹ 流行物事.

think about it, it is funny and worthy of sympathy. I only remember in the hazy fog looking for a “holy mother” (*senmu*)²⁰⁰ figure... (20)

Li names the different figures that fulfill this “holy mother” trope present in his writing – examples drawn from multiple traditions of film, including the Italian actress Anna Magnani from Rossellini’s *Rome, Open City*, the Japanese actress Kinoyu Tanaka, who is Mizoguchi’s muse, Deanie Ip’s “fallen women and old prostitutes” character in 1980s Hong Kong, even Taiwan actress Lu Xiao Fen, known for her infamous breast-piercing scene in a seminal Taiwanese film in the 1970s. He connects Ip’s “unclean” character with the suffering holy mother character, from the films of Mizoguchi and Rossellini.²⁰¹ He also celebrates Ip’s pioneering of the jazz and blues tradition in Chinese popular music, and her influential voice in 1980s Kuala Lumpur, the site of his childhood. This *mélange* of figures who he quotes are mixed, messy, and entangled within a cinematic and musical realm that builds upon, borrows from, and refers to one another, which shows the plasticity of cultural transmission in a space like Kuala Lumpur.

If we take Ip as his example of Chineseness, we see how it encompasses multiple strands of transmission and spaces, where the only connection is how voice and image travel in strange trajectories. The cinematic image reflects cultural borrowing and movement, with scant regard for borders.²⁰² His rejection of the “leftism of the time” and the “search for a holy mother,” is a rejection of the narrowly circumscribed and contained woman figure – exemplified by the static revolutionary woman figure – which echoes the singularity that Ng and Zhang explores in their respective writings about communism in the Nanyang. The representation of

²⁰⁰ 圣母.

²⁰¹ Li elaborates on this with examples from classic Japanese films by Mikio Naruse, Yasujiro Ozu and Kenji Mizoguchi.

²⁰² As Li puts it in allusive fashion, “the holy mother guards the Western Holy Lands and Far East Mount Penglai” (20).

femininity in Li's stories reveals divergent forms of engagement with culture, and a countering of the purposeful and neatly delineated subjectivity that forms depictions of revolutionary womanhood. Li embraces the messy realities of cultural transmission, by showcasing the opacity suppressed by "beacons of moralism." Li's writing combines decadence with cultural openness, which opens up thinking on Chineseness, beyond the imperative of social and critical realism.

Li manifests a difference from the mainstream of Malaysian Chinese literature, via the decadent impulse that drives his writing, and the way he employs an exaggerated Chineseness. It is in that exaggeration – the more Chinese than Chinese utilization of classical tropes to depict a disappearing space, where one can find a different representational space. As David Wang writes,

He distances himself from racial causes, and also any kind of flaunting of Malaysian Chinese localism, and topics to do with national styles...his content and form is actually conservative; but in its self-indulgence, it paradoxically creates an unexpected and radical content (15).

By fusing the extensive use of classical Chinese tropes, with the space of Kuala Lumpur as a periphery of multiple transmissions, Li transforms this imaginary of Chineseness into a multiplicity that belies its conservative origin. It introduces a sense of movement to the static constitution of Chineseness – which, befitting the spectral medium of film and music, is predicated upon a messy, ghostly cosmopolitanism that disrupts the policing of the nation-state.

Instead of reinstating a binary of cosmopolitanism versus the nation-state, however, there is a different way to conceptualize the messy, peripheral cosmopolitanism that Li puts forth in his search for the "holy mother" of his stories.

This is predicated upon the spectral gap that exists in cultural transmission. A certain Chinese cosmopolitanism may suggest cultural forms of a center (such as an imagined Shanghai or Hong Kong) that combines East and West – the fusion of *shidaiqu* music, of American jazz instrumentation and Chinese folk melodies – now raised to the status of timeless classics. Li’s peripheral cosmopolitanism, however, cannot afford this status, and is treated as a derivative form, due to its displaced desire for classic status, which allegedly seeks legitimacy through “soft” cultural forms.²⁰³ But what if Li’s point here is to question the “classic” and “timeless,” to show that this timeless cultural form is a construction that has forgotten its timely origins?

If so, then even Chineseness has a cosmopolitan history, which does not disappear the moment it is raised to the status of a “timeless” form. Li’s “conversation with the Chinese tradition” (11, Wang) does not just depart from May 4th style revolutionary literature, in favor of a decadent “Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies” tradition, as his writing themes and style would suggest. Rather, it radically speaks back to any nationalist constitution of Chinese literature, which when established as tradition conveniently forgets the multiple criss-crossings and transmissions hidden by the name of Chineseness. Li’s spectrality begins from these forgotten transmissions, subtly inflecting them with other tenors, to show that the speaking voice was always already inflected, that an Other resides within any constitution of “timeless Chineseness”. What appears to be “Chinese” is a Chineseness interpreted monolingually. The ghost of the Other is never too far from its constitution, however, and returns in multiple spectralities that do not cohere in its imagined appearance.²⁰⁴

This also pushes back against the effects of a local nationalism – the agent that is in Li’s stories, responsible for the vanishing spaces of decadent Kuala Lumpur –

²⁰³ This is David Wang’s argument in his introductory essay to the book.

²⁰⁴ See Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*.

which is counterposed by a similarly nationalistic, defensive “Chineseness.”²⁰⁵ One way of excavating the multiple histories of the Malaysian nation-state is by looking at its hybridity prior to the nation-state. A hybrid nation is still a nation, however, which does not address sufficiently the failures of enunciation that persist in every constitution of the nation-state, and the spectral gap that occurs when a narrative of Malaysian nationhood is created and subsequently maintained through repeated reinforcement.²⁰⁶ The narrative of nationhood overdetermines discourse such that it covers textual gaps, creating a field that encompasses and resignifies the corporeality of Chineseness. Li’s focus on spectral transmissions highlights the movements and gaps that exist within ontological Chineseness – a defensive Chineseness that roots itself in the imagined timelessness of a Chinese tradition as a response, as in the post-1969 Mahua writers and poets who reenacted an exilic Chineseness through the figure of Qu Yuan, and other ancient Chinese tropes. This unwittingly takes the form of a Mandarin-speaking hegemony that reroutes the Southern diaspora through an ancient nationalistic Chineseness, as response to local nationalism. By charting the spectral transmission of “Chineseness” to the Nanyang, Li reveals how Chineseness can be conceived beyond ontological Chineseness. Li’s search for a “holy mother” in his writings is a process that undoes this static constitution, and manifests the time within the timeless. This is the time of the ghost that moves, the ghostly mothers of Kuala Lumpur.

The afterlife of culture

²⁰⁵ One thing to note about Li’s “refusal of politics” is that political agents seem to not exist in his stories; time is seemingly an agent of change that transcends political barriers. One can obviously criticize Li for this idealism, but I argue that this would be missing the point of his refusal in the first place, which is to open up space for conceiving this change beyond the circumscribed realm of politics.

²⁰⁶ In contrast to “hybridity” that attempts at cosmopolitanism, the Malaysian form of hybridity is still very much tied to the constitution of the nation-state – a strange kind of conceptual mixing that risks being incoherent; see Shih Shu Mei’s take on Malaysian hybridity in her essay “Against Diaspora”.

Li's writing brings out uncanny temporal properties. It does not cover over the gaps of the past, nor does it give a realist representation of the lives that existed in the past. In his use of baroque metaphors of Chineseness to describe the quotidian lives of his characters, Li goes beyond nostalgia; time is extended, reshaped, and ultimately played with to show its plasticity. Nostalgia is a return that contains the past within the past, with the present uninterrupted; Li's return to the past is not simply a return, but rather an attempt to interrupt and transform modern temporality.²⁰⁷ If "nostalgia" is not the proper term to describe Li's project to reclaim and rewrite the modernity of "Chineseness" in Kuala Lumpur, what method does he offer us?

Li's epilogue to his short story collection, called "To Dream Again of a Tower of a Different Era" ("Menghui yizhu loutai")²⁰⁸ describes this method (235). The motif of the dream recurs in Li's stories, deconstructing the concept of "timelessness" as part of Li's critique of "Chineseness," showing how in Kuala Lumpur it is predicated upon a gap. Li reworks the past in his representation of this space, such that it does not merely belong to the realm of nostalgic consumption. The key to understanding this reworking lies in his return to the dream, which appears in his stories as an underlying space that coexists with the present, and flows into the memories of the past. This is the *afterlife* of Kuala Lumpur.

The *loutai*²⁰⁹ (tower) is a totemic image emblematic of "Chineseness" – in classical Chinese poetry, it refers to a pagoda tower. Here, it serves as a metaphor for the changing times, its doubling and extension through a different era. The use of the phrase *yizhu* (different owner or ethos) suggests the tower's continuity through a

²⁰⁷ Li laments the tendency of nostalgia today, which has been turned into a primarily consumption-driven affect. He gives the example of old British colonial buildings that have been turned into a jazz bar or a restaurant, which for him cannot recapture the homely feeling of people living in neighborhoods (237).

²⁰⁸ 梦回易主楼台.

²⁰⁹ 楼台.

different time, even if its owner and ethos has changed fundamentally. Dreaming of the tower extends its lifespan, and allows a reentry, even when it has transformed and become situated in a different era. Li outlines this extension of its lifetime – an afterlife – in his epilogue. By borrowing classical Chinese imagery and resituating it in the space of Kuala Lumpur, Li suggests the possibility of extending the passing decadent era, even if it is disappearing, or has already disappeared. The spectral mediums and ghosts he depicts access this afterlife, a realm where linear temporality is displaced. This other temporality coalesces the afterlife of buildings and spaces in the city – a combination of spectrality and corporeality, where the disappeared lives on.

Li reminisces his childhood in the epilogue. In relation to his childhood neighborhood, Li writes: "this is my grandmother's place – the different world where I occasionally, and accidentally enter, in my memory" (236). This world seems to stand alone, as it is built on the minute details of the building, and the way it was in the past. Li conjures a world from memory that comprises a "70s family layout" that is his "grandmother's home" (236) – populated with details of the kitchen, the layout of the living room, and the arrangement of the altar. But this is not merely a report of the past. Li describes his arrival to this place as an "accidental entrance" that disturbed his present at the time, a surreptitious gap that transformed the mundane. This is because he grew up here ("a small town"), moving over after his father's passing. While Li does not name the place, he is describing a dynamic of displacement in 1970s urban Malaysia, from the old city of Kuala Lumpur to the newly developed satellite cities that surround it – his main example being Petaling Jaya, which is today also a major city (235). The "accidental entrance" of the past is a displacement which puts Kuala

Lumpur at a distance; Kuala Lumpur names a past temporality that coexists with the new present of these satellite cities.

Li's recollection of his childhood – which was lived at a distance from the city – describes a co-existing past and present temporality. It places Kuala Lumpur in the past, from the perspective of these new developments. Even in this movement to a new place, however, Li remembers the “new” as a substitute for the “old”, as almost equivalent in the way it replicates the layout of the old shophouse in Kuala Lumpur. This makes it stand apart from the rest of the new terrace houses (236).²¹⁰ His childhood dwelling is a space where past and now coincide, creating the strange feeling of *both* temporalities overlapping – a surreal space that is at the heart of Li's project. This spatial past appears in the form of dreams in the present, and this dream gives Li a spatial continuity with the past even after he moves to other places and spaces.²¹¹ The dream, then, is where remainder dwells; it also spills over to the textual present of his written recollections, which equivocates between past and present times. The insertion of the dream into his writing is akin to remapping an old shophouse layout onto a space of new developments, which reveals the “past-ness” of not only the dream, but also what is present outside of it.

As Li writes, he “always liked things belonging to the distant past, the kinds of buildings that were remainders from English colonial times” (236). He describes the architecture and layout of that type of building, bringing the reader along into that space, and narrates how he stumbled upon a “large mirror, which reflects the flowers in the balcony opposite, into a clear mercury” (237). The effect of this is the feeling of what he calls “flower in the mirror, moon in the water” (*jingzhong hua, shuizhong*

²¹⁰ “...only our house followed the old shophouse layout, that big zipper-like metal gate, which required a lot of strength to open and close” (236)

²¹¹ “In my dream this image of the *ge lou* 阁楼 still recurs...” (236)

yue)²¹² – a surreal form of reflection. The object is untouchable, only available in a reflection that removes the object from its original position, storing it in a place that is not concrete. In this representation, the reflection is a copy that moves further away, the closer one approaches the original object. The object is always present, like the moon, but it only exists within the reflective medium. This intertwining of object and medium, which here refers to the old buildings of his childhood, is analog to the “spectral mediums” that Li proliferates in his short stories. The films and music that he quotes are surreal quotations that can be accessed as ghostly reflections, present in its “past-ness” when encountered, yet always out of reach. This tricky reflection contrasts with a nostalgic consumption that merely refurbishes the structure of a past building for present use, which Li describes as a poor substitute for the “life of a real living neighborhood” (237). Yet it exists only in representation, through produced texts and films, which are also not “real, living” objects like the neighborhood. What Li points to is the *afterlife* of this past – a past that lives on only after the expiration of its original life, and in this haunting, surreal representation that renders it a “moon in the water”.

In his representation of the past, the remainder remains, and is not easily repackaged into the present. Li writes that

The real household living cannot be replaced, and the idealistic modern person returns in nostalgic dreams, but cannot ever go back, and so I intentionally or unintentionally wrote these scenes into these stories, and merely fulfilled a kind of private desire (237).

In this fulfillment of “private desire”, Li separates the afterlife from public remembrance, radically disconnecting the past from its public uses, which is tied to

²¹² 镜中花，水中月.

the field of ontopological nationhood. Personal memory separates the private from the public, and so his stories are told from the perspective of quotidian memory, and the personal, mundane projections that it is associated with, rather than a larger history. Through the personal and quotidian past, what Li isolates is an afterlife that exists without being reincorporated into a larger narrative – a singularity of the past, which escapes an ontopological representation that uses the past. Li's epilogue recollects buildings and places that are significant for him. This includes descriptions of past sights and sounds located in his present day, such as an old public flat that the Indian bread seller on the motorbike still passes by, the bakery that continues selling old kaya treats, and an old cinema that has already shut down, populated with faded posters – all signifiers of the Malaysian past. He describes the sight of this as having the feeling of “many years not moving, as if nothing has changed...and when you walk up it is as if entering a time hole” (238). Li points out that even as progress tries to abandon this place – metaphorically depicted as a “firetruck that passes by on the main road”, which leaves the person who is responsible for keeping the incense burning at a temple far behind (239) – the afterlife of this place persists like incense, a personal past that cannot be taken away, as it resides in memory.

The way Li condenses this past into memory elucidates his transformation of culture and Chineseness in his writing, into a singular and mobile form, two characteristics captured by the shidaiqu. In its lineage and history, the shidaiqu contains memories of movement and displacement, which persists in various mobile forms (vinyl, cassette, discs, karaoke) and places. For Li, the shidaiqu is the afterlife of culture *par excellence*, a cultural form that exemplifies the mobile Chineseness he articulates. The shidaiqu transposes itself in different contexts and borders, and persists throughout changes in multiple cities. While it may appear timeless, Li's

displacement and extension of its origins to the modernizing and peripheral space of Kuala Lumpur redefines its persistence not as characteristic of “timelessness”, but as an afterlife that resurfaces, due to the reduction of public time to a linear and progressive one. It is not Chineseness imposed to propagate a future, as it is a reminder and remainder against such efforts to circumscribe a political future. In Li’s seemingly apolitical and conservative stance, and obsession with the decadent history and culture of modern Kuala Lumpur, he derives a different form of Chineseness that is already there at the onset of the Malayan nation’s independence, which leaves the political battleground of “defensive Chineseness” to contaminate the time of the nation. Li’s meditation on time suggests a contingent remembrance of culture that is not recuperated by the nation, and instead lives on for those who are left behind by national culture. Delinking haunting and Chineseness from its ethno-nationalistic roots, Li shows a different kind of haunting that persists.

In the story “Shidaiqu”, Li explores this persistence of memory. This story describes another ordinary, slightly regretful woman’s life, though from the perspective of a male narrator. The *shidaiqu* accompanies and triggers reminiscences about both his personal history, and his impressions of Yan Pihong, a teacher who was his childhood neighbor, who worked in the “primary school behind his house” (162). The story begins with him meeting Yan in her house in the present day, as a *shidaiqu* song plays in the background:

“Eyes full of flourishing beauty...” the valuable golden voice arose from a desolate wilderness of time, and started singing securely.

Teacher Yan held the thick porcelain cup in her hands, and simultaneously stirred the small teaspoon; in the hot smoke, there was a different kind of aroma, as at that time it had just become fashionable

to eat brown vermicelli; she was overweight, and her body had many small illnesses, so she was willing to try any new products that she heard of (161).

In Li's description, the texture of the past – encapsulated in the “golden voice” and the “porcelain cup” – is tangible, as it is secure and thick, in comparison with the present Yan who is fragile and beset with illness. These tangible objects intervene in the present as a concrete reminder of temporality, as they trigger the narrator's reminiscences of his childhood and relationship with the past Yan.

Li further describes,

With “Manyuan chunshè” (“The Garden Full of Spring Colors”)²¹³ playing, the spring colors of more than sixty years ago radiated brightly again, and was superimposed²¹⁴ on this moment of space and time, and it was merely a mirage, the remaining echoes of the spring scenery, which was shaking in the air, and the beautiful flowers of brilliant purples and reds of the time perhaps never really existed (162).

This superimposition – a cinematic technique which derives from Méliès – suggests that the “afterlife” relates past and present here, as the song evokes not the past, but a mirage of the past, which only comes into bloom in relation to the present. The song conjures up a remainder that accompanies the present, a radiant past that does not go away even if it “never really existed.” The use of this cinematic term highlights its “fictional” origins, as this is an effect that only exists through manipulation in the editing room, and in the cinematic universe. It also refers to the “moon in the water, flower in the mirror” effect described earlier, where the content of what is being

²¹³ 满园春色. This is also the name of a black and white Shaw Brothers movie in 1952.

²¹⁴ The Chinese phrase for this is *dieyin* (叠印). Li is deliberately using a cinematic term here, a technique for manipulating multiple images that originates from Georges Méliès.

represented is intertwined with the medium of representation, and the object is finally untouchable. This “afterlife” of the object is distinguishable from a mere evocation of the past, as it did not necessarily exist in the past, but continues to haunt the present *as if* it did. Li utilizes the *shidaiqu* to suggest a present that has entered the realm of haunting, to distinguish the narrator’s recollections from a nostalgic pining for his past.

The narrator’s love for the *shidaiqu* is clear, as he quotes multiple songs and lyrics that he describes as essential to his childhood; his strange relationship with this object of the afterlife begins when he is young, as his family’s vinyl collection are filled with old records. The newest records they own belong to those by Lin Zhujun or Lena Lim,²¹⁵ a famous Nanyang songstress in the late 1960s and 1970s based in Singapore and Malaysia who also covered songs by the classic 1940s Shanghai songstresses such as Bai Guang. These songs became evocative of his childhood, as he would listen to their melodies to fall asleep. The reference to Lim implies a detachment on his part from the current of time, as the songs that he remembers of hers are *shidaiqu* covers instead of more contemporary songs. Through these songs, he is transported to a world out of joint with the present, as he wryly remembers “singing *shidaiqu* numbers as a young child, for an elementary school competition” – a memory that he describes as “indescribably strange” (164).

This transport is indicative in the way he describes his memories of Teacher Yan, as they are filled with references to the world of music and cinema. She is intertwined with his cinematic and musical memories – when he was a child he remembers going to the cinema with his family, and always encountering her and her young family. The narrator remembers this vividly, the interaction between Yan and

²¹⁵ 林竹君.

his mother seemingly “a way of politeness that belongs in the past,” as each would exchange pleasantries, and Teacher Yan would ask with a soft voice: “You’re here to watch the film too?” before gifting each other melon seeds and prawn crackers (163). This merging of cinema and Yan’s mannerisms into a general memory of the past shows *how* the persistence of cultural memory takes place. The movies and music that Yan was a fan of – the era of 70s Taiwanese popular music and films, when actresses such as Brigitte Lin ruled the screen, and Teresa Teng was on the airwaves – become shorthand for that era, and inflect the narrator’s memory of Yan herself. Like the other stories in Li’s collection, this condenses her into an exemplar of an era; however, here the subjectivity of the narrator is also present, and we see the active construction and drawing together of her image with the films and music of the time – the interweaving of cinema, music, and life captured by this paragraph:

In the cinematic era of dual Qin and Lin, Pihong could be said to be part of the Brigitte Lin faction, always choosing to watch her movies, and of course one cannot forget the Qiong Yao-like original soundtrack – in the past the cinemas had to broadcast this music, as without the voices of Fong Fei Fei, Teresa Teng, Jenny Tseng, Shiao Lih-ju, it was as if the red cloth of the big hall could not be opened, and the film could not be shown. The familiar songs of the time (to the point of being overly so) such as “I’ve never left my address”, and “Half of the hill is rainy, and half of it is clear,”²¹⁶ if one were to hear it today, there would instead be a slight trace of the disappointment that remains after the hot bright sun’s cooling, an era that has followed these songs and disappeared with them; the songs of the time have become buried in

²¹⁶ 未曾留下地址 and 半山飘雨半山晴.

the mud of time and space, and will not leave the ground without being dug up²¹⁷ (163).

The narrator's segueing from Pihong to the music and movies of the time suggests her role as an important spark of remembrance of the era, in his memories. As the narrator and his family move to a different place shortly after, he gradually forgets her existence – and she becomes part of his childhood memories. He notes that the next time the “fragmented scenes of the past resurfaced, I had already left my youth” (165). However, she is not just a childhood referent, but also a formative presence for his own interest in the cultural past, as he recalls seeing her buy records in a record store that he used to pass by on his way to tuition class, where he would “stand at the door to get a whiff of the air-conditioning” (164). Her soft demeanor when buying records, he notices, contrasted with her strict comportment as school teacher – a hidden, private side of her that conceals a different world, one that implicitly hides her emotions and feelings, as it is hinted through the record she buys that her marriage was not entirely happy.

The narrator's displacement from his childhood, both spatially and temporally, coincides with his listening to the *shidaiqu*. In his new place – the first time he possesses his own room – he notes that all he needed was “an old, broken record player, and paper box upon paper box of books” to occupy his hot afternoons and nights (165). The expansion of his interiority – shown through his writing, which he notes is always about the old-fashioned – begins with his moving to a new place and his appreciation of the *shidaiqu*, a neat juxtaposition of several temporalities (165). His present of his new place becomes intertwined with his past – the *shidaiqu* of his childhood home. The latter is also tied with the memory of Pihong, and the cultural

²¹⁷ Li is referring to popular actresses of the time. Qiong Yao is a famous popular romance novelist from Taiwan, whose best-selling books were adapted to the big screen as melodramas in the 1970s.

memory that is evoked by her engagement with the music and films of the time. His move to a new place is his first brush with the afterlife of this culture; as he notes:

Until today, there are some who claim that Wu Yin's songs are too commercial, and are not sufficiently refined to move others, and is limited to being nice to listen to...I did not dare to admit, it was because in the pale whites and greens of youth, these songs that carried a heavily nasal voice, helped to smoothen over the waves of young uncertainties in the heart. It was a strange, miraculous kind of magic; a *shidaiqu* that had lost its voice and had been muted, was thrown into the caverns of time, and in the numerous years and months later somehow sang again in the heart of a young boy (165).

Yan Pihong's imprinted onto the narrator a portal to another world. For him, she was an important predecessor as someone out of joint and displaced, looking for the afterlife of the *shidaiqu* to hold on to the *feeling* of the past, if not the past itself. She was "never his teacher" in the sense of formal education (161), but he calls her that anyway, as tribute to this opening to the afterlife of culture.

When they meet again, he is already an adult, and ironically is himself a teacher, as he is introduced to her grandson. This reversal of roles from his childhood is startling to him, a literal time warp – the "time and space had become chaotic" – and he is momentarily transported back to the time when *he* was "politely smiling, holding his mother's hand" as the young child meeting Yan Pihong (167). The present appears strange, but his memories of that past – encapsulated by the 70s cinema hall, and the background music of a Fong Fei Fei song – remain vivid, as if "time had not moved, and all the impressions had stopped at that moment" (167). This is also why his mother asks him to "gift her several cassette tapes" of popular music of that era –

these tapes contain a temporality specific to Yan Pihong and the narrator's childhood, and they freeze time the same way his memories freeze her in time.

He notices that Yan desires to remain in her youth – to live among the songs of that era. As the narrator points out, she

...still carefully dyed her hair, seriously put on her makeup foundation, and plucked her eyelashes, drawing on them once as well; smiled in a very elegant manner, so that it did not create too many wrinkles; however, she was already a plump old lady (168).

Not only does she maintain this physical poise of the past; her listening habits do not change even after all these years. She maintains her love for Brigitte Lin, and when the narrator brings up a singer from the previous era, she became unhappy, noting that she was not familiar with her, “proving that she was not part of that era, such that even if she was old, she was not old until that point” (168). This careful delineation of her time indicates the difference between her and the narrator's relationship with temporality. While she holds on to what was considered “modern” in her time, and the past as a way of living her youth endlessly, the narrator points out that his fondness for the old *shidaiqu* meant that he had begun by living what was “already disappeared” (169). If she subsequently tries to recapitulate this youth by joining singing clubs and taking up karaoke, he notes that his fandom was different, though they end up in the same dream space eventually:

...I was suffused by songs that had long disappeared; the past's finch crowing, did not have a place in time and space, and only parasitically lived on in the addict's ear and brain. It merged with memory and fantasy, to become a large scarlet safety web, and allowed us dreamer souls to find a dependent space (169).

This evocation of the “dreamer souls” suggests a similar afterlife to the “dream space” in the tower; the merging with “memory and fantasy” here returns the past to a private space. Both their desires to hold on to and collect the remainder of the past, even of different eras, connects them together through fate. This is a bond that forms through facing, as the narrator puts it, the “onslaught of the new”, which is “hurried and unfeeling...and whatever does not fit the present, is discarded and removed” (169). Without this, they would not be placed in the same space, as similar dreamer souls who are invested in picking up the remnants of the past.

Juxtaposing his desire for the past with Yan’s, however, shows an important point about the “modern” – even though Yan was a follower of what was modern of her time, it was “necessary for it to become the past, and could not stay on forever – in an instant, it had already become history” (169). In linear time, the modern inevitably becomes historical once something “new” enters, and itself becomes obsolete. The “modern” then is always positioned precariously, at risk of becoming old in an instant; as the narrator asks, “all that is currently in front of us, must it also be forgotten in a blink of an eye?” (169) This risk of being outdated is what drives the endless discarding of the old, to keep up with the newness of the current. Modernity relies on the past to define its own position, and it relegates those who are obsessed with the past to a subsidiary position:

Those who like it [the *shidaiqu*], are forever a minority, assigned many different names – nostalgic, love for the past, escapism; they use ears, and their imagination which gallops without borders, to let it live on (166).

Even if the current attempts to exhaust the past through such names, they still do not fully capture possible relationships with the past. Nostalgia and escapism suggest a

static past that is condemned to stay in the past, as they depart from the present and do not intervene in it. The afterlife, as indicated by the narrator's ears and imagination, signals movement – “galloping without borders” and “living on” – a temporal expansion rather than constriction. It lives on as an ineradicable remainder of the present, residing in the realm of the imagination, unbounded by the necessity of the new. This remainder undermines the time of the modern, as it is a surplus not recuperated by linear time, even as the modern tries to deny the value of the past.

This afterlife of “dreamer souls” creates an unplanned community, a minority united only through being left behind by the present. It is an inoperative community only “operative” through a shared connection with the past. Its freedom lives on in the afterlife because its expression is contingent upon the circumstances of transmission, which cannot be predicted in advance. This is dependent on both its movement and the personal circumstances of those it reaches, as the narrator's and Yan's encounters show. The audience is scattered, and the transmission is always incomplete, subject to the “memory and fantasy” of the receiver. This realization of incompleteness shows the freedom of not being faithful to the original source – which sums up Li's utilization of Chineseness in his writing, imaginatively recasting its tropes in a different space and time. It is not a faithful rendition of the Chinese past; rather, it displaces this civilizational understanding by showing the unpredictability of transmission – looking at the moon *through* the water, and the flower *in* the mirror.

If the modernist project requires a grand narrative and movement of united wills, which we have seen Ng Kim Chew deconstruct as always insufficiently representative of the collective, we see in Li's descriptions of the *shidaiqu* another community – a minority that does not map, but is mapped by the circumstances of transmission. This can be extended to describe a “weak Chineseness” that is not

driven by an imperative to lead, or build, or project; but rather just is, the result of a dream that has settled in a faraway place, its time encapsulated in this quote:

...in an instant, the singing voice in the radio was transmitted. The current female star lazily opened her voice, and the words and sound were impressionable and vague, a song like a piece of silk fabric, in the moment winding out without end. I listened, the surrounding people listened; living in today's air, an era, a voice, in the future becoming a vague memory, a little distant (170).

Li's focus on culture offers us a different route of Chineseness, one that incorporates the gaps and discontinuities of transmission into its constitution. In modernity's narrative of progress, and its concretization into the nation-state as representation in the Nanyang, there is still a remainder, summarized by this "voice" that can "become a vague memory"; a reminder of the past, which does not maintain Chineseness as a weight and burden to be cast aside, or endlessly recapitulated. In its self-awareness of contingency, and the gaps in reception, Li reminds us that the movement of this alternative, decadent form of Chineseness has its own logic: when situated in an out of the way place like the Nanyang, it opens up a dream space that is out of place, and out of time.

Coda: Nationalism and its characteristics – identity, textuality, and inheritance

The goal of this dissertation has been to critique the conjunction of Chineseness and nationalism, through fictional excavations of its historical expression in Malaysia – or what was called the spectral Nanyang. Conjoining spectrality with the Nanyang highlights the spatial and temporal stakes in the negotiation of Chineseness, and how, as a historical inheritance, it conditions the cultural and political imaginary of the Malaysian Chinese, or the Mahua people.

Nationalistic Chineseness is both a spatial and temporal construction. Its plasticity as a civilizational and cultural imaginary and inheritance means that it can be employed in multiple contexts, politically and geographically, marshalled in times of unrest as part of a unifying group identity. As a specter, it seeks a body. Zhang Guixing, Ng Kim Chew, and Li Tianbao have respectively and retrospectively diagnosed the different forms it can take. This ranges from a communist vanguardist mapping that evokes a settler colonialist past in Borneo, to a linguistic ontopological discourse of nationhood intertwined with anti-colonial struggle in Malaya, and a literary and cultural China (*wenhua Zhongguo*) imaginary arising from alienation within the Malaysian nation-state. They represent different expressions of Hua nationalism, which needs to be carefully distinguished from Chinese nationalism. Incorporating elements of turn-of-the-century nationalistic Chineseness, in its undertones of racial and cultural purity and emphasis on archaic, civilizational discourse, they are nonetheless responses to local and regional political and cultural frameworks that involve the mainland, but is not fully constituted by it.

In recent years, scholars have become more attentive to Mahua literature, most prominently under the banner of “Sinophone studies.” Sinophone studies departs from earlier forms of Chinese studies through, among other things, an insistence on the

limits of the diasporic paradigm for understanding Chineseness. To quote Shu-Mei Shih in “What is Sinophone Studies?”:

Sinophone spaces are scattered around the world and Sinophone culture is produced in different locations, but in each site the Sinophone is a place-based, local culture, in dialogue with other cultures of that location (8).

Shih’s call to be attentive to place and locality is salutary, as it highlights the differences in Sinophone communities throughout the world, especially in the way they negotiate the idea of Chineseness. It is an idea always in flux, affected by local cultural and political circumstances. Chineseness is produced through tension with the local, as a racial, cultural, and political entity. It is an active construction, not a static given. The diaspora paradigm assumes a universally applicable, singular attachment to the imagined homeland of “China” that has been constant throughout history; this dissertation highlights the contingency of this attachment and imaginary, which is always constructed and produced with reference to the local, and can only be truly understood with careful attention to history and geography.

The Hua nationalism described in this dissertation is thus a Nanyang response to regional politics, conditioned by the specter of Chineseness; it is a translation of Chineseness to the local configuration of politics and identity. Even within the ideological framework of anti-colonial communism, Sarawak and Malayan communism belie a different political imaginary, and also different entanglements of Hua identity with nationalism, as Zhang Guixing and Ng Kim Chew’s explorations show. This dissertation has tried to show how multiple Chineseness(es) is produced within a historical framework that goes beyond just the history of Chineseness; namely, the cross-conjunction of Western imperialistic history, the rise of global

nationalisms and Cold War geopolitics, which produce the conditions for Hua appropriation of defensive Chinese nationalism, in times of crisis. As such, nationalisms are never solitary – they reflect and rebound off equal but opposing forces, requiring a defined enemy, living or dead, to feed off on. It is an undead field of political structuring, which conditions not only the present, but also understandings of the past. Its pernicious power derives from how it appears as a natural, organic body to its constituents, while simultaneously transcending nature to become an eternal, undead entity that retrospectively rewrites the past for its own purposes. This reflexive approach to temporality and history, which cleans up the unwanted parts of the past, is what perpetuates the nation in the present.

A critical, denationalizing excavation of history is needed to interrupt this production, which the spectral Nanyang manifests. Zhang Guixing, Ng Kim Chew and Li Tianbao have shown how recollection and representation of history contribute to the construction of nationalistic Chineseness, which they challenge through their respective writings that excavate a denationalizing history. By emphasizing what is left out of the field of the nation in the writing of national history, they clarify alternatives to a nationalistic recuperation of the past. The remnants of these nationalistic narratives provide an alterity that critically stands apart from the linear and progressive temporality of the nation – a reminder of the difference that is erased in the field of the nation. This alterity is crucial as it guards against the constant resurfacing of nationalistic Chineseness, which haunts the current political conjuncture of nation-states.

As writings that denationalize history, they each spotlight certain assumptions that undergird national representation. Zhang questions the progressive time and aggressive mapping that drive the nation's movement and development, which when

linked with the specter of cultural-civilizational Chineseness produces a Hua nationalism that manifests settler colonialist characteristics in Borneo. Ng spotlights the racial divisions that are reproduced within a postcolonial nation-form that persists with an originary discourse of land and blood – or ontopology – and the hidden history of Han Chinese racial construction in late 19th and early 20th century nationalism, which resurfaces in Malaya. Li subverts arguments of archaic Chinese tradition that trace and appropriate a single, pure origin for the nation, by showing how traditions are based on mobile appropriations and readings of the past that derive creativity from diverse contaminations. Their writing opens up the singular tendencies of nationalist representation and identity, to highlight the messy multiplicity that constitutes any identity.

The other aspect revealed in this study is the intersection of textuality and ontological Chineseness. In the first chapter, Zhang shows the way pedagogy of ancient texts become a form of historical legitimation – the interpretation and reading of canonical classical texts as a way of writing one's identity into the imaginary of classical Chineseness. In the second chapter, Ng argues that textuality was constructed as a defensive bulwark against the threat of cultural extinction as part of a nationalist project, as the persistence of ancient Chinese texts is equated with racial survival – what was described as the text of the nation. In the third, Li shows how archaic literary and cultural motifs, based on classical fiction, are translated into a conception of cultural China that is staticized as an unbroken form of tradition.

Zhang and Ng, while keenly aware of the textual inheritance of this Chineseness, experiment with other forms of corporeality – represented by physical bones – to disrupt the textual, and bring out the remainder of such nationalistic projects. In both their writings, the text is a contingent and conditioned entity,

susceptible to damage, circumstance, and rewritings. They highlight its corporeality to bring out its status as a physical object. Textuality is not an authentic, originary transmission from the past. It is a construction that is constantly interpreted and reinterpreted. By exploring other performative traditions of Chineseness, Li's writing contaminates this obsession with textual purity and authenticity, opening up the space of Chineseness to a mobile, moving form. Even the archaic, which seemingly forms an inarguable horizon of historical legitimacy, is a construction that can be reappropriated beyond ontopology. His writing shows how the archaic is mobilized, transmitted, and reinterpreted in other media like Golden Age Chinese film and music, whose moving traditions not only redefine it, but also remind one of the myriad influences that constitute any cultural tradition, including Chineseness.

This opening up of tradition to other media and mobile forms show other possible avenues of exploration for the reconstitution of Chineseness. The move away from textuality signals other engagements with sound, image, and performance, which do not by themselves mean an evasion of ontopology; nonetheless, they serve as important openings for negotiating culture. Nationalism, after all, is as much a cultural as it is a political phenomenon, and in an age of image saturation, any denationalizing effort needs to account for the power of image production in fueling this ideology. While this study has only indirectly dealt with cinema as a displacing medium in relation with text, engaging the works of directors like Tsai Ming-Liang would expand this idea of a mobile tradition brought up by Li's explorations. Tsai is also influenced by the Golden Age of Chinese cinema; his perspective as a Borneo-raised and Taiwan-based film artist promises a visual and acoustic exploration of the ontopological past. Layered works like *Goodbye Dragon Inn* and *The Hole*, quoting from Tsai's childhood memories of Golden Age cinematic history and culture in

Sarawak, subvert and reinterpret centers of Chinese cinematic culture. Wong Kar-wai's sensitivity to the migratory context of Golden Age cinema, and his liberal reimaginings of the Nanyang in works like *Days of Being Wild*, *In the Mood for Love* and *2046* also provide important conversations with past cinematic works set in Malaya and Singapore. The wealth of cinematic culture and history in the Nanyang past promises a fruitful excavation that has only been hinted at with the Li chapter, in redefining Chineseness beyond ontology.

Finally, if Chineseness is to be truly delinked from its nationalistic base, the study of solely Chineseness will necessarily be inadequate. This dissertation has attempted to set the context for nationalisms in Malaysia as a fin-de-siecle phenomenon that spans multiple races and cultures; more serious excavation of their intersections and translation may reveal hitherto undocumented links and connections. The work of denationalizing Nanyang history, as these authors have shown, can only be undertaken through the multiplying of perspectives. Putting together the story of this fin-de-siecle period thus requires a multi-lingual and cross-field study, to account for the linked nature of the construction of Malayness, Chineseness, Indianness, Iban-ness, and so on. Denationalizing Nanyang history may begin with the study of Chineseness; its future work, however, requires a broader horizon, to contend with the field of the nation-state.

A final note on the conjunction of history and fiction: this dissertation has tried to show how fiction can provide an *encounter* with history that sets it apart from other historical methods. Where history is missing, or fails to account for gaps in its records, fiction may step in to supplement its work, with its imaginative confrontations that bring the reader closer to historical experience, which would otherwise be lost. Like Li's community of dreamer souls, these imaginative

experiences of history provide us hints for reimagining a collective without nationalism. It brings forth the past as a reminder of those lost to the present, to form a denationalized community that is sensitive to the perils of history.

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