MAPPING THE SOUTH SEAS: THE COMMUNIST FICTION OF NG KIM CHEW

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LITERATURE can function as a form of mapping, as writers of fiction seek to make sense of "real" places in their fiction or they create imaginary places that bear similarities to the actual world. This paper examines the works of Sinophone writer Ng Kim Chew who, in his narrative mapping, creates a spatio-temporal place of the Cold War South Seas (Nanyang, or Southeast Asia in today's term). It studies his metafictional representations of the geographical referent—the South Seas—and juxtaposes with it the Cold War's historical temporality. This is to understand how Ng creates a fictional world of Nanyang in which the history of Chinese Malaysians is connected with the legacy of Chinese leftist literature.

By using a fictional approach to narrate the geopolitical situation, Ng's works not only supplement the history of the Cold War with various psychosocial faces, but also advance aesthetical representations of the event in the South Seas. His narrative mapping allows a multi-vocal and multifaceted examination of the Cold War to take place, and; more importantly, positions a geographical picture of a place at the periphery of the Cold War—the South Seas.

Ng Kim Chew, over twenty years, continues to write "bits and pieces" about the Malayan Communist Party in order to build up dialogues with Sinophone Malaysian language and histories. He endeavors to create a fictional Nanyang to de/reconstruct the mobility and fluidity of Chinese diaspora and map the dissemination of the Chinese leftist revolution.[1] In doing that, he always positions himself at a doubly-marginal point of departure, narrating in the language of violence, lust, and greed. Through such practices, Ng spatializes "South Seas" narratives, putting them in a broader range of vision, while simultaneously positioning Malaysia as the point of

1. In this essay, I refer the "Sinophone" to the linguistic and cultural constellation of the Southeast Asian Chinese, as what have been defined in *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, edited by Shih Shu-mei, Tsai Chien-hsin, and Brian Bernards. For the term "Chinese," I use it as an ethnic reference, and also referring it to Mainland China in historical and cultural terms, unless otherwise mentioned.

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departure and reference. At the same time, his act of writing can be further seen as a constellation of different geopolitical engagements, in which they manifest a diasporic yet local identity to make sense of the history of Malaysia.

In the following sections, I will first analyze Ng Kim Chew's early works such as "Fish Skeletons" [Yuhai] (1995) and "Backcarving" [Kebei] (2001) to explore how he uses Sinophone language as a "right" thereby cementing his identity as a member of the Chinese diaspora, and also as a tool to resist language fetishism and Chinese essentialism. Following that, I will examine his more recent works—the Nanyang revolutionary trilogy: *Memorandum of the People's Republic of Nanyang* [Nanyang renmin gongheguo beiwanglu] (2013), *As If Seeing Fuyu* [You jian fuyu] (2014) and *Fish* [*Yu*] (2015), to probe into his endeavor of revisioning, or more precisely, subverting, the communist history in Malaysia by means of his metafictional and intertextual techniques. I argue that his narrative of the communist history in Malaysia is still backboned by the history of the Chinese diaspora and Chinese literature. He also expresses doubts in the process of revolution.

Ng Kim Chew and the Sinophone Language and Histories

A writer and an academic, Ng Kim Chew not only produces many representative creative works, but also works to theorize Sinophone Malaysian literature with his thought-provoking essays. In his younger days, he earned himself the nickname of "enfant terrible" (*huai haizi*) for his sharp criticisms that lashed out against the prevailing sense of complacency of the writers and critics within the circle (Wang 11). Ng won first prize of the *China Times* Literary Award with his short story "Fish Skeleton" when he was still a graduate student in the 1990s. At the time, he had already made his name in Malaysia when he claimed that Sinophone Malaysian literature did not have a canon (*jingdian*). He further heavily criticized the writing of realist fictions in Malaysia, which found their roots from China, when he asserted that Sinophone Malaysian literature should already be "weaned" (*duan nai*) from motherland China. These criticisms, of course, caused a local uproar, especially from the writers of older generation. The site of Sinophone Malaysian literature, which had always attracted small numbers of audience, had never been so bustling before.[2] Ng claimed that this act is to burn the plantation (*shao ba*, a traditional Southeast Asian agricultural way of clearing land for more cultivation), as the field of Sinophone Malaysian literature has been too barren. He suggested setting fire on the older land in order to fertilize it for the further nourishment of more healthy seedlings. For him, the future of Sinophone Malaysian literature has to be modernist literature. Many critics describe this period as the "Ng Kim Chew phenomenon."

Born in the state of Johor and brought up in the rubber estates, Ng Kim Chew turns his experiences and imagination of the estates into the backdrop of his stories. Similar to many Chinese Malaysians, he furthered his studies in Taiwan after

2. For the debates in this period, please see Chan Yeong Siew, Teoh Kong Tat, and Lim Choon Bee, eds. (2002).

graduating from a Chinese-medium high school, bidding farewell to his homeland which, in his view, values only the Malay sovereignty in politics, education and language. Like his counterparts, he was labeled as an "overseas compatriot student" (*qiaosheng*) by the Republic of China (Taiwan).[3] Setting foot on another marginalized zone of Chinese culture in Taiwan (where mainland China remains the "central"), Ng started questioning the general pursuit of so-called literary and cultural "Chineseness" by Sinophone Malaysians. He wrote an essay dealing with "the south where the language is lost," spreading out the route in the global south where Chinese migrants took to articulate in the Sinophone (but not standard Chinese) when facing the centrifugal environment, cultures and languages (2013a: 74-92). He also asserted that the process that Sinophone Malaysians take to construct the imagination of Chinese culture has already been objectified, in which "China" has become an emotional, affective symbol. Furthermore, he claimed that ethnic Chinese Malaysians consciously turn the symbol into ritual performances, for example, as in the annual Chinese poetry recital show "When the Earth Trembles" [Dong Di Yin]. For Ng, the underlying power in the show is arguably strengthened by a sense of Chinese cultural crisis in Malaysia (Ng 2012: 69). To borrow from David Der-wei Wang, Ng Kim Chew is always scornful of the Chinese cultural and linguistic fetishism performed by many Sinophone Malaysian writers.

> It is the writers' top priority to realize the historical expediency of China and the Chinese language in the imagination of ethnic Chinese Malaysians, and to operate it wisely in order to establish a dynamic and multifaceted Sinophone Malaysian culture. (Wang 13; my translation)

Here, we could argue that the aftermath of Cold War had affected Ng Kim Chew, who was studying in marginal Taiwan, into being skeptical of patrimonial Chinese culture. Yet he has been constantly using Chinese characters to repeat the cultural identity predicaments faced by ethnic Chinese Malaysians. The problematic formation of Chinese/Sinophone words, culture, histories and identity are questions that he has been making inquiries into. In a similar manner, the (re)writing of the history of the Chinese diaspora and revolution in Ng's works are his literary actions to fill in the gaps in official history, either in China or in Malaysia. Since his departure for Taiwan, for more than twenty years, Ng has published seven volumes of short-stories collections, one prose collection and five essay collections. Since the 1990s, his

3. The title "Overseas Compatriot Student" was given to the children of overseas Chinese, encouraging them to return to their "motherland" (Republic of China) to receive proper Chinese education. The policy was implemented after the Kuomintang government moved to Taiwan, and has been in practice to date. The long-term phenomenon of Chinese Malaysian students studying in Taiwan is arguably a product of the global Cold War structure as the disrupted communication with People's Republic of China made studying in China almost impossible during that time. The division of two Chinas has certainly affected the identity and consciousness of Chinese Malaysians towards the Chinese culture. Many Sinophone Malaysian writers have tried to respond to this rupture.

writings involve the re-creation of historical landscapes of Malaysia, especially the rubber estates (where he grew up), and the narratives of Malayan Communist Party, whose stories occurred around the estates and jungles. On the other hand, Taiwanese experience has also interfered and enriched his writings about "home" and history. These images (the rubber estates, MCP, Taiwanese academia) continuously form the historical background in Ng's works, and become important symbols for him to construct his imagination of the Sinophone histories. His short stories are seemingly *sui generis*, yet reciprocally work in concert with one another intertextually. This shows Ng's effort to probe into various fragments of histories, subverting them and further rewriting them.

This section will put Ng's creative works as its main subject of analysis, while his literary criticisms will serve as ancillary materials for me to understand and restore Ng's ideological mapping as a writer. From "Fish Skeleton," "Backcarving" to *Memorandum of People's Republic of Nanyang*, how does Ng continuously reflect upon the complexities of "Chineseness" and the "Sinophone"? Meanwhile, how does he play his role as a Sinophone literary citizen and revisit the history of the Malayan communists? These are issues to be tackled in the following parts.

"Fish Skeleton": Returning to the Homeland

IN response to his own reflections regarding the concepts of Chineseness and nationalism, Ng Kim Chew wrote his magnum opus "Fish Skeleton" in 1995. The protagonist, a Malaysian professor teaching Chinese at National Taiwan University, seeks shelter in Formosa Island in order to escape from his home country and the political nightmare of his brother's death. This reticent existentialist hero is always in a depressive state, seemingly having concealed an unspeakable secret. It turns out that he has been secretly cooking turtle meat in his office, masturbating with the turtles and craving letters on their shells. We later find out that his brother, who had disappeared mysteriously in Malaysia, is found in a swamp with lots of turtle shells alongside, years after his death, with head separating from the body.

The protagonist's brother disappeared into the jungle after joining the Malayan Communist Party when he was eighteen. Forty years later, his skeleton is found, only to prove that he died at the year of his disappearance. At the time, the protagonist was only a primary school student. When he enters secondary school, he stays away from the Leftist study group in school and feels downhearted about all the revolutionary stories that his classmates are so interested in. It is not until he meets a senior nicknamed "Changbai Mountain," who takes care of him like a real brother, that he starts reading works by Lu Xun and Ba Jin. However, his growing interest in these revolutionary writers does not give rise to his revolutionary spirit. Instead, they stimulate his interest in Chinese literature and culture, which allow him to feel connected to his missing brother. For him, his brother and the revolutionary era seem to have long gone, and he could never be one of the "sons and daughters from the era", only "the era's laggard" (Ng 1998: 200). Unlike his brother who fought hard for the revolution, the fate of their motherland (China) and the homeland (Malaya) are not his

concerns. Thus he cannot understand why his brother and most of his classmates were dying to return to the Great Wall or Yangtze River, or even harbored dreams of engraving their names on the stone of the motherland (193).

Instead, China to him is "a curse that causes the death of brothers and all sons and daughters of the era" (194). It seems that the only connection that he makes with China is through the Chinese scripts, and this gives rise to his curiosity about the "Oracle"—referring to the origin of Chinese characters inscribed on animal bones or turtle shells during the Shang dynasty. When he finally settles down at National Taiwan University, he often fishes for turtles at the NTU Drunken Moon Lake and grills them inside his office for consumption. Furthermore, he inscribes the Oracle scripts onto the turtle shells, as though returning to that ancient time. This secret hobby can be traced back to his high school days, when "Changbai Mountain" told him about the mysterious Oracle. The boys have even discovered that among the turtle shells unearthed in China, some large land turtle shells could likely be tributes from the Malay Peninsula over 3000 years ago. This discovery has turned the protagonist's aloofness into excitement.

The existentialist search for oneself in "Fish Skeleton" not only reflects the protagonist's effort to get rid of the nightmare of the political history of Malaysia, but also emphasizes his rejection of the so-called "motherland," an idea that he simply does not understand. Nevertheless, politics have embroiled his whole family and he can never escape it, even when he finds shelter in Taiwan. He carries the burden of the fatherly image of his brother and the failed imagination of the motherland all the way to this new country, and immerses himself into ancient Chinese literature. When he finds that the earliest Chinese characters inscribed on turtle shells might be from the Malay Peninsula, his surge of excitement evokes the emotional connection between the turtle and his homeland Malaya.

In the Chinese language, the character "turtle" (龜) is pronounced as *gui*, which is a homophone of the word "return" (歸). What *gui* symbolizes is the animalization of Chinese characters as written on the *gui* 龜 shells, and also the diasporic Chinese's not being able to *gui* 歸 ("return") to the paradoxical motherland China. To put it in another way, what the protagonist achieves when he masturbates with the inscribed turtles is a connection to his homeland Malaya, as well as to his brother, and this reconciliation has to be done through the medium of Chinese characters. This bodily link to the homeland is concretely done through the convergence of "flesh and blood" (*xie rou*), but not through nostalgic imagination. Symbolically, this connection is realized at the climax when the protagonist picks up a part of his brother's bones from the swamp, he is well aware that that is the "most special part" that connects the head and the body (207). He takes the bones' remains (*yuhai* 餘骸, which is the homophone of the title "fish skeleton" *yuhai* 魚骸) and the scattered *gui* 龜 shells away with him, and again "flees" to Taiwan.

Interestingly, the image of the writer Ng Kim Chew seems to echo this juxtaposition as he is symbolically saddled with the remains of the national, cultural and familial history of his own, fleeing to Taiwan in hopes of settling down. Yet, Taiwan is another marginal place in terms of international politics and Chinese

culture, and Ng's centrifugal position along with his sharp criticisms of the literary field catches him in the swamp. Nevertheless, this is the way that he makes his return (*gui* 歸) to the homeland and to the Chinese culture from a doubly-marginal point of departure. By and large, his narration mapping in this story showcases the intertwined relationships of ethnic Chinese Malaysians caught between the geopolitics of China, Taiwan and Malaysia; and what links them together in Ng's literary project is arguably Chinese/Sinophone language and culture.

"Backcarving": Overcoming Language and Cultural Fetishism

CONTINUING to work on the motifs in "Fish Skeleton," Ng's "Backcarving" (2001) again returns to the mysterious scene of the Oracle infatuation, but this time the site is further extended to an encounter with necrophilia. In this story, the Chinese characters, which are either less or extra in strokes, are engraved on the flesh body. A British merchant, Mr. Fu, who left China for Nanyang during the late Qing and early Republic period, opens brothels for the expatriate Chinese writers or officials looking for entertainment in a foreign land. Upholding his enthusiasm and fascination with the Chinese language, he goes so far as to abandon his own language and learns Chinese from scratch. More insanely, he engraves the Chinese words onto the back of many Chinese coolies, claiming that looking at these characters shining in the coolies' beads of sweat under the sun, he sees "the oldest form of Chinese characters" and finds the "most profound, esoteric meaning of the Chinese" (Ng 2002a: 353-54).

It seems that "Backcarving" continues Ng's criticism of paradoxical Chinese essentialism as he deals with the almost fetishistic affection of Chinese culture in the two stories. Nonetheless, one important formulation that "Backcarving" has extended from the previous story is that the language fetishism has been injected into the "flesh and blood" in engraved forms, like the ancient tattoos registered by the indigenous tribes. What is more, in the story Ng gives impetus to criticize the colonial power relations, as seen in the character of Mr. Fu.[4]

Zhan Min-xu, a Taiwanese critic, has noted the colonial metaphor underlying Ng's narratives, as he points out that Ng's works in fact "discuss about how Malaysian Chineseness is involved in the entire colonial system of knowledge production" (67; my translation). He states that the British colonial power, as represented by Mr. Fu, has deeply engraved its ownership on the back of the Malaysian Chinese, which implies that "colonialism will tie up the Chinese and Chineseness firmly" (67). Besides, in the novel we see that Professor Yu (鬻先生), a local history professor, brings a team of Taiwanese researchers to do their fieldwork in Singapore. This is Ng's tactic to highlight a "non-local" point of view, telling a story about "gazing, narrating and representing Malaysian Chinese through the

4. Mr. Fu's language fetishism can be seen as a criticism to the western Sinologists' fetishism of Chinese characters, such as Ezra Pound's play with imagism in Chinese poetry. Sinophone theorist Shih Shu-mei raised this connection in her talk titled "Racializing Area Studies, Defetishizing China" at National University Singapore on 9 May 2014.

Taiwanese eyes" (69). Zhan is of the view that "Backcarving" attentively responds to the "Southward policy" promulgated by the Kuomintang government in Taiwan in the 1990s.[5] In other words, the story attempts to picture a non-Western colonial desire, which was generated by Taiwan in the shadow of its localization project (Taiwan's independence), and the story sharply points out "the hidden worries underlying this transnational links" (72). Zhan's opinion resonates with Chen Kuan-hsing's critiques in his seminal book *Asia as Method*, in which Chen lays out how the Taiwanese colonial desire and its discourse are formed and shaped in the Southward Policy narratives.

Zhan's analysis is a critical reflection of a Taiwanese researcher working on Sinophone Malaysian literature, in which he also rightly indicates that all minority discourse (such as the Sinophone theory) has to face the hidden worries of its desire of power expansion when carrying through transnational links. In other words, Sinophone theory, which sets out to criticize China-centrism and Western-dominated theory, might give impetus to another form of colonial desire when it tries hard to map out the Sinophone territory in the world.[6] Standing in the juncture of the Greater China region and his Malay supremacy homeland, Ng Kim Chew seems to passively position himself at a doubly marginal site, and meanwhile refuses to engage in any of the minority alliances. And what he connects himself with is always the Chinese/Sinophone language and literature, which are the main theme of his stories. At the same time, he calls into question the concepts of language fetishism, the fetishism of China, and Sinicism.

With all the materials that Professor Yu and his Taiwanese researchers collect from their fieldtrip to Singapore, they manage to produce a circumstantial thesis titled *History of Everyday Life of the New Chinese Migrants in the Straits Colony, from 19th to 20th century*. Yet, Professor Yu still fails to locate the legendary back-craving that Mr. Fu does on human bodies. In the mysterious ending, Professor Yu is terribly engraved to death, with the word *hai* (sea) all over his body and with only one different word, *xia* (down), on the hollow side of his tailbone. Who killed Professor Yu in such a cruel way? We are led to discover that Mr. Fu has a follower, who happens to be a Peranakan living next door to him, and who, according to Mr. Fu's wife, could be Mr. Fu's illegitimate son. Mysteriously, throughout his lifetime, this Peranakan learns only one word from Mr. Fu, which is the word *hai*. In this appalling ending, Mr. Fu's skeleton rolls out from somewhere, having been engraved densely with words. However this time they are not *hai*, but unknown symbols—"maybe symbols older than words, likening to the tracks of birds and beasts" (Ng 2002a: 359).

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5. In 1994, former President Lee Teng-hui put forward the "Southward policy," which aimed at promoting economic and trade cooperation with Southeast Asian countries, and encouraged Taiwanese corporations to invest in Southeast Asia to enhance the economic relationship with the area.
6. See, for example, the territory mapping of the Sinophone in Shih, Chai, and Bernards eds., *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*.

The motif of necrophilia is once again tackled, yet the engraver is neither a Chinese Malaysian (like the protagonist in "Fish Skeleton") nor a British personnel (like Mr. Fu), but a Peranakan Chinese. Here, Ng points out the identity crisis of the Peranakan community—Chinese in blood, British in culture—and he calls into question the problematic compartmentalization of "Chineseness" itself. In fact, since the independence of Malaya, the Peranakan has been forcibly categorized as "Chinese" in the racial quota, but whether in the language, culture or custom they have already undergone a creolization process with the natives and the British colonizers. In other words, under the exclusive ethnic division scheme, they are too Chinese for the Malays and too Malay for the Chinese. As a result, they have been facing crisis and dilemma in the construction of their class or racial identity.[7] Many of the Peranakans do not understand the Chinese language, but are inevitably involved in the paradoxical discourse of Chineseness. Pushing Professor Yu "*xia hai*" (down to the sea) and the engraving on Mr. Fu's back are Ng's staging of the Peranakan Revenge, which signifies the Peranakan's resistance to succumbing to the ethnic division system, Chinese fetishisms and British colonialism.

In this regard, the symbol of "sea" is key to understanding Ng's mapping of the South Seas (Nanyang), for the contemporary history of the region is the history of sea voyage—the colonial journey of conquest. The ancestors of many Chinese Malaysians, including Ng's, also came to the settlers' colony by the sea route. Symbolically, the Peranakan pushes Professor Yu down to the sea, meaning that he pushes the new Chinese immigrants back to their motherland through the South China Sea, and also sets the colonial masters back to their land.[8] By means of this seemingly absurd drama of necrophilia, Ng Kim Chew does not intend to generate a nativist approach to understand the history of colonialism and migration. Instead, he endeavors to stage his mockery of the narcissistic nature of Malay nativism, Chinese essentialism, and British colonialism, claiming that it will lead to nowhere except historical tragedy (or farce).

The Nanyang Revolutionary Trilogy: Flesh and Blood in the Historical Site

IN 2013, Ng Kim Chew published *Memorandum of the People's Republic of Nanyang* (henceforth *Memorandum*)—his first short-stories collection in eight years. Following that, his creative imagination on the history of Malayan Communist Party (MCP) continued to flourish as he published another two similar collections—*As if*

7. Within this context, please see Celina Hung's paper in Chinese "Sinophone Studies in the Context of Mixed Blood (Language)" for her discussion on the construction of Peranakan culture.
8. The hard-to-pronounce surnames of the Chinese Malaysian characters in the story like *yu* 鬻 and *tiao* 糶 entail a similar meaning of "selling." It is worth further exploration to see if Ng is implying that Chinese Malaysians sell their soul to the Mainland Chinese or Taiwanese cultural essentialism.

Seeing Fuyu in 2014 and *Fish* in 2015, completing his Nanyang Revolutionary Trilogy.[9] Just as in his previous works, Ng never ceases to challenge and provoke taboos and mental limitations in fiction writing, and this time he attempts to subvert history in a playful, fictional manner. While living up to his nickname *enfant terrible*, Ng's playful and subversive narration of history in a postmodernist manner might give rise to anxiety among readers, especially those who pay high respect to "History," for instance the leftist and realist camps. He is well aware of the fact that the ex-communists are very concerned about the objectiveness of historical appraisal in terms of their struggles (Ng 2013: 10). However, he once summarized his writing stance on these seemingly "playful" works by quoting from the Chinese writer Qian Zhongshu: "Though it seems to be a work of jokes, but is in effect a writing of anxiety" (10). In other words, his sense of anxiety is shaped by the fact that "the curfew in [his] homeland is not yet lifted," thus it is necessary for him to respond to the part of history by means of writing, and it is also a way to respond to himself as a diasporic figure (Ng 2002b: 364). In the process, he maps out the Cold War geography in Asia, underlining the connection of the Chinese Left with communist China, Taiwan and Malaya, creating a fictional "Nanyang Republic" to deal with the problems in history.

Unlike his previous stories, in the Nanyang trilogy, Ng writes about the Malayan communists directly, probing into their psychosocial dimension *after* the communist war. This is the most valuable and distinctive part of Ng's writing of the communists and leftists in a (post)modernist attempt, if one has to compare his writing intention with the realists and communist writers. His portrayal of the communists always represents the common human nature of the ex-communists and their lives as ordinary persons after the war, instead of the images of communist warriors on the battlefield. The latter is always seen in the works of ex-communist writers such as Jin Zhimang, He Jin, A He, Li Ming and so on. In other words, Ng has neither intention to write a "revolutionary literature" nor attempt to give new energy to a "leftist writing" tradition. Instead, he seeks to reconstruct a literary discourse *about* revolution and Chinese Malaysian. That is to say, his writing about the communists is a means to include their history of struggles into the literary history of Sinophone/Chinese Malaysian literature. And by doing so, he simultaneously calls into question the official and dominant narratives of the Malayan communists, while at the same time demonstrating that the Cold War still affects these people in contemporary times.

The history of Malayan communists has long been narrated by the colonial and state officials, especially in the archives of British colonizers. In their narratives, the communists were "terrorists" who gave rise to "insurgency" and later "escaped" to the Malayan jungle. After the Hatyai Peace Treaty was signed in 1989, the

9. Ng's *Huo, yu weixian shiwu* (Fire, and Dangerous Things) was published in 2014 as his first story collection appeared in Malaysia, is a self-selected collection that includes many of his previous works which have been included in the three Taiwan-published collections. That is why I do not consider this collection as part of his Nanyang Trilogy even though the stories are also about the Malayan communists.

communists gave up armed struggles—some remained in Southern Thailand until today, some returned to Malaysia. Since the 1990s, not a few ex-communist members started to write their memoirs on the jungle war, and the one that attracts most attention and discussion is undoubtedly the memoir of the last Secretary-General of MCP—Chin Peng's *My Side of History* (2003). Malaysian historian Danny Wong Tze-ken believes that the publication of these MCP memoirs has at least provided two significant perspectives: first, it challenges the national narrative, claiming legitimacy for the MCP's contribution to nation-building; second, it provides views "from the other side," especially from the eyes and mouths of the MCP members, who vividly record their real struggles. These views are important because they have long escaped the attention of both "the counter-insurgency agencies and scholars alike" (Wong 89-90). More importantly, these memoirs allow us to pry into the "emotional dimension" of the MCP members, namely the genuine feelings and convictions of "flesh and blood" (99).

However, for Ng Kim Chew, historical narratives from any given side are partial and selective, and this applies to MCP memoirs as well. He calls into question the "realities" that have been published in both the state's accounts and the ex-communists' memoirs, arguing for the "fictionality" of the entire revolutionary history of the MCP. For example, in the story "Looking for My Dead Brother," an ex-communist told the writer that

> "You are a fiction writer, how could you believe that kind of explanation? . . . . Those MCP memoirs are all fakes, what should have been written is not in there. Chin Peng's *My Side of History* is even **full of loopholes**, not a single sentence is credible. What does he mean by letting the foreigners to write on his behalf? Even published in English?" He later adds that: "I am already being courteous when I refrain from calling it **a pack of lies**." (Ng 2013: 130; emphasis original)

This is not the first time that Ng mocks a "mysterious" figure in history. In the 1990s he wrote about an influential Chinese writer, Yu Dafu, who came to Nanyang in the 1930s and disappeared in Indonesia during the Second World War.[10] Ko Chia Cian rightly points out that Ng's intention of writing Yu Dafu in a playful and doubtful manner "is not directed against Yu Dafu himself, but pointing towards the fictionality of the entire literary discourse about Yu, which lacks flesh and blood in a mobile 'site'(*xianchang*)" (Ko 114). Similarly, what Ng does in the Nanyang trilogy is not directed against Chin Peng or other MCP members, but it is his intention to question the historical "site" that is absent of "flesh and blood."

In other words, Ng Kim Chew observes the loopholes in History, as well as in the literary history and the communist writings, and he sees them as big gaps that need to be filled up with "context." What he does in the Nanyang trilogy is to

10. For more analysis on Ng's narration on Yu Dafu, please see Alison M. Groppe, *Sinophone Malaysian Literature: Not Made in China*, Chapter 4.

supplement the stories of the Malayan communists with their "flesh and blood," and this fictional path will also manifest their psychosocial mental state after the "coming out" of the jungle, which is unseen in the memoirs or historical archives. In other words, he attempts to dig out another virtual historical site so that the living communist warriors can stand on the stage to tell their stories individually. Henceforth, s/he is no longer a mysterious "object" being written about, no longer a blurred face carrying a collective name—Malayan Communists—but one real, independent body with emotional feelings like every ordinary person. These characters walk out of the jungle after the revolution and start a journey of self-reflection. Some of them live happily, some remain melancholic until death, and some bear the guilt of betraying their comrades to death. For Ng, this is the on-site "flesh and blood" and "emotional dimension" that the entire discourse about the MCP lacks. To use Ng's own words, he is of the view that

> History is originally an activity of collecting and processing the remains (corpses). Behind the text (mentality) is **always the flesh and blood after all**; literature, body, words and death—the system of Sinophone Malaysian literary history as a coffin is too small to fit them—the corpses do not experience an empirical presence. This legacy, can only be undertaken by literature, by writing. (Ng 2006: 103; emphasis original)

Metafiction and Metahistory

NG'S questioning of the official history as well as of the MCP memoirs, I argue, might resonate with what Hayden White defines in his influential *Metahistory*, as he highlights that the idea of metahistory is a recognition of the "history work as…a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse" (1973: ix). In other words, the historian White and the writer Ng both juxtapose the historical and fictional narratives, reflecting on how both narratives work within and around each other. White, in another essay, argues that

> Historians are concerned with events which can be assigned to specific time-space locations, events which are (or were) in principle observable or perceivable, whereas imaginative writers—poets, novelists, playwrights—are concerned with both these kinds of events and imagined, hypothetical, or invented ones…What should interest us…is the extent to which the discourse of the historian and that of the imaginative writer overlap, resemble, or correspond with each other. (1985: 121)

In other words, it is important to lay out the dialectical link of the historical and the fictional, underlining the fictionality of history and the historical consciousness in fiction. In addition, Ng Kim Chew also uses the technique of metafiction in his works to further manifest his process of writing fiction about the revolutionary history.

In what follows, I will examine his stories in the Nanyang trilogy for how he supplements the "emotional dimension" of the MCP's history—not through the genre of memoirs but fiction. This is done by his subversive playing about with "historical" facts and by his focus on individual stories of the ex-communists who continue to live their lives as ordinary people *after* the jungle war. Within this context, Sinophone/Chinese language and literature are still Ng's main mechanism to probe into the revolutionary history, as his endeavour to rewrite the revolutionary history is not done for the sake of the underrepresented ex-communists, but for the rewriting of Sinophone Malaysian literary history.

From *Memorandum* to *As if Seeing Fuyu* and later to *Fish*, each individual story seems independent but works in concert with one another intertextually. Moreover, they are related closely to Ng's previous works, as the recurring motifs continue to manifest in every story in the trilogy. In "Memorandum of the People's Republic of Malaya," Ng delineates the story of a communist fighter Lao Jin who returns to his hometown after forty years of struggles in the jungle. Since his return, he never contacts any of his comrades. Yet, after fifteen years of living in his mother's house like a normal person, he is found dead and naked in a tree hole. As we know, Lao Jin has been facing mental problems since he walked out of the jungle, and during the fifteen years he has been ceaselessly writing a novel titled "People's Republic of Nanyang."

> (Lao Jin) seems to immerse himself in the pleasure of nation-building, as he subverts History, exchanging the bright and dark sides, making plans about the personnel arrangement, roughly setting up the state system, confiscating all the property of the foreign capitals (especially those big rubber and palm-oil plantation and the tin mines). He also confiscates the property of many Chinese capitalist businesses. (Ng 2013: 80)

Ng adopts Lao Jin's pen to subvert history, using fiction to reconstruct a historical site where Lao Jin can fill his imagination with a successful revolution to replace the failed one. This metafictional story is Ng's attempt to open a dialogical possibility of the text and the communist history in the present times, in order to "prevent [the past] from being conclusive and teleological" as suggested by Linda Hutcheon (110). In another story "That Year I Returned to Malaya," we can again discover a more radical and complete version of subverted history.

The protagonist "I" is the son of an important ex-leader in the People's Republic of Malaya; his father has been put under house arrest due to his differing political ideas from the state's. In fact, his father is unsatisfied with the Republic's implementation of "Operation Coldstore" and "Great Migration"[11]: Sending all the

11. In actuality, Operation Coldstore was a security operation launched by the Lee Kuan Yew government in Singapore on 2 February 1963, in which over hundred left-wing activists were arrested and detained without trial under Internal Security Act. The arrested activists included many key members of the opposition party Barisan Sosialis, one of them being Lee

royal members in the Federated Malay States to reform through labor in Siberia, deporting four million Malays to Indonesia in exchange for the five million Chinese located there. The protagonist returns to Malaya from Taiwan—which has already been "liberated" by the Mainland—after his father's death. He is asked by his father's old comrade Dr. Chong to be in charge of the "Bumiputra Committee." [12] However, the Republic is soon faced with the revenge of the Malays, and the entire Malaya is divided by the Pahang river into two camps in the south and the north respectively—one controlled by the "People's Army" from the Republic, the other by the "Malay Army Consortium." The collapse of the Republic seems to be only a matter of time.

The metafictional story in this work is *The Malayan Battles Saga* written by the father of "I" during his home arrest, but, miraculously, the entire piece engraved on a coffin board becomes the real history. In fact, the father had been sleeping in the coffin in his later years to carve words on the board, and this masterpiece predicts the decline and fall of the People's Republic of Malaya and the death of Dr. Chong. As Dr. Chong tells "I":

> "Do you know what has he written about? He wrote about the **future** of our nation! And all the events that he wrote actually happened one by one. Those events of betrayal, assassination, the revenge of the Malays!"
>
> "He wrote about his own death, his wife's illness and your return."
>
> "A future of no hope—he also wrote about my death! Assassinated!" He smiled wryly. (Ng 2013: 55; emphasis original)

In the end, the magazine *Renmin Wenxue* (People's Literature) asks "I" to publish the posthumous works of his father, but "I" rejects their request. The reason he gives is that "they are not literature, but history" (60). The father writes about the "future," but the future has accurately become "history." Here, Ng calls into question the linear narrative of history, employing a metafictional mechanism to subvert our viewpoints about history, and to remind us to keep questioning how history is being "written." Metafiction allows Ng to create fiction while at the same time "mak[ing] a statement about the creation of that fiction"; as Patricia Waugh delineates,

> [t]he two processes are held together in a formal tension which breaks down the distinctions between "creation" and "criticism" and merges them into the concepts of "interpretation" and "deconstruction." (6)

Kuan Yew's main opponent Lim Chin Siong. For more detailed and non-official information, see Poh Soo Kai, Tan Kok Fang, and Hong Lysa (eds.) *The 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore: Commemorating 50 Years.*

12. "Bumiputra" means "sons of the soil," and it was used by the Malaysian government to refer to the Malay ethnic group as the native of the land.

To put it in another way, Ng uses metafiction to call into question the paradox of history being "written," as he thinks it is in fact a process of creation and criticism not so different from fiction writing. In addition to negotiating between historicity and fictionality, the point of reference of Ng's metafiction has extended to an intertextual connection of his previous works and, more significantly, the works of other important writers, especially those who became the leftists' inspiration such as Lu Xun and Chen Ying-zhen.

Intertextual Cross-referencing: Mapping the Chinese Left in Nanyang

IN his literary project, Ng creates a fictional "Nanyang Republic" which maps out various communist linkages in Southeast Asia. And in this communist Utopia/Dystopia, it seems that all non-Chinese members are left out.[13] The reason is that Ng's project of narrating the communist history is largely informed by the history of the Chinese Left and the Chinese leftist literature. In other words, his historical narrative always showcases the dialectical process of the situation of Chinese Malaysians and their Chineseness—meaning that Ng is most concerned about the construction of identity of the Chinese Malaysians and their historical context.

Unlike other Malaysian writers who extend their concern to the Malay world, Ng is arguably more Chinese-centered. When he writes about the MCP, he does not intend to write about the revolutionary thoughts or class struggles, but the identity crisis that Chinese Malaysians have been facing in the national, cultural and linguistic terms—a "historical tragedy" as he often claims (Ng 2015: 318). He harbors a great suspicion over the legitimacy of "revolution"; as can be seen in his stories, revolution loses to human nature and ethnicity in the end. Hence, for him, the Malayan communist revolution is more a legacy of the Chinese Left and the Chinese leftist literature, spearheaded by Lu Xun, and in the Taiwanese counterpart, Chen Ying-zhen. Ng continuously uses their figures and their literary works as intertextual references; some of his stories are even titled after works written by Lu and Chen. In an appendix to his latest collection *Fish* (2015), Ng notes that Sinophone Malaysian literature started in the early 20th century as a "Lu Xun legacy." Inheriting social-realism from the most important modern Chinese writer, early Sinophone Malaysian writers were all readers of Lu Xun, upholding didacticism as their philosophy of writing and tending to produce a lot of *zawen* (short essays) in response to burning social issues of the day (Ng 2015: 310-11).

In the award-winning story "Blessing" (*zhufu*), which has the same title as an earlier Lu Xun story, Ng uses the point of view of a Mainland Chinese—the descendent of a female *guiqiao* (returned overseas Chinese).[14] She brings back her

13. In fact, although Chinese are the majority in the MCP, the Malays, especially the rural Malays, also maintain a significant part in the party. See Mohamed Salleh Lamry, "A History of the Tenth Regiment's Struggles."

14. "Blessings" won The Year's Best Story Award 2014 held by Chiu Ko Publisher in Taiwan.

father's ashes to his hometown in Taiping, Malaysia to meet the family of her father's ex-lover, Aunt Lan, and their daughter (her half-sister). In this story, Ng maps out the route of the dissemination of the body and thoughts of the Chinese Left. Unlike his early works that dealt with the migration of Chinese diaspora from the Mainland to Nanyang, and from Nanyang to Taiwan, this story is arguably Ng's first attempt to pin down his concern of the *guiqiao* and their "coming back" to the birth land Malaya. He highlights the unfamiliarity and awkwardness of the two parties manifested in the language—one speaks with "out-of-tune Nanyang *huayu*," another with "Mainland accent *huayu*" (Ng 2015: 18; 30). The seemingly happy reunion is in fact awkward and uneasy, with both sides trying with great difficulty to understand each other. More interestingly, the name of the protagonist is "Xiao Nan" (Little South), which signifies her father's nostalgic longing to go back to his homeland Nanyang, while her half-sister is named "Xiao Hong" (Little Red), which shows her mother Aunt Lan's yearning for reuniting with her revolutionary lover in Red China. This juxtaposition showcases the distorted identity that Chinese Malaysians have been facing, and the history of the Chinese Left has even complicated the relationship at a deeper level.

Intriguingly, during the Cultural Revolution, their father Ah Fa is sent to a small village in Henan after his "return" to the motherland to be "re-educated." Ah Fa falls in love with the place immediately and decides to stay there for the rest of his life simply because it is where the Oracle was first unearthed. He is excited as he finally comes to the site closest to the origin of Han culture (Ng 2015: 31). He soon starts engraving the poems of Mao Zedong and the works of Lu Xun on the turtle shells that he digs out from the earth. When Xiao Nan brings back these shells as gifts to the family of Aunt Lan, she finds that the husband of Aunt Lan—Ah Fu is an accomplished imitator of Lu Xun's handwriting, and has sold many of his works to the Lu Xun museums in China and elsewhere, under the guise of being Lu Xun's authentic works. Ah Fu is projected as an incarnation of Mr. Fu from the story "Backcarving," who copies Chinese words as a hobby, while Ah Fa seems to be the professor in "Fish Skeleton" who engraves the Oracle on turtles. The common motifs of Ng's story-writing, such as his critiques of language fetishism and Chinese essentialism, have been continuously drawn on in his works so far, and it is interesting that in the Nanyang trilogy he actually uses the history of the Chinese Left as a "backbone." In addition, the origin of Chinese leftist literature as represented by Lu Xun formulates Ng's main concern regarding the construction of Sinophone Malaysian literature.

In other words, Ng's response to the "Lu Xun legacy" in Sinophone Malaysian literature can be seen in the portrayal of Ah Fu. The character imitates Lu Xun's handwritings like a trickster and even writes Xiao Nan a revised version of Lu Xun's poem with pornographic elements, showing that Ng plays with the symbol of Lu Xun to criticize the so-called "Lu Xun followers" in the literary field. In the same fashion as Ng does in his previous works, he calls into question the realist writers' didacticism inherited from Lu Xun and seeks to subvert it by means of modernist aesthetics. He calls out for greater localisation and creativity from Sinophone

Malaysian writers, as, in his view, the new generations should have long ago abandoned the legacy of Mainland Chinese literature.

Ng's similar intertextual practice can further be seen in his usage of Chen Ying-zhen's titles such as "*Shan Lu*" (Mountain Path) and "*Qican de wuyan de zui*" (Miserable and Speechless Mouth) in the Nanyang trilogy. He thinks that Chen's earlier works are the "benchmark of Leftist literature outside China" which can also be regarded as part of the "Lu Xun legacy" (2013: 12). Though he does not play with Chen Ying-zhen the writer as a symbol, he imitates Chen's tone and plot in the story "Mountain Path" but does it in an oppositional political ideology. The elderly woman in Chen's story starves herself to death silently in the 1980s after she reads a piece of news in the newspaper—her leftist friend who was betrayed by her brother during the White Terror has been granted amnesty.[15] Since the imprisonment of this friend in the 1950s, she has left home and has sacrificed herself to serve as atonement in the family of another leftist friend who had been persecuted. Living with guilt and political pressure for thirty years, the moment she reads the news, and as she writes her suicide notes, she is unable to ignore the truth that she has long put aside the socialist dream and has been living in the capitalist way that she once detested. For this reason, she can only resort to starving herself to death—a way that she believes allows her to possibly connect herself with the revolutionists.

However, in Ng's story, the elderly woman serves in the family of a victim who was killed by her communist lover in the most terrible way. She starves herself to death for the reason that she learns in the news that, ex-communists, including her ex-lover, are returning to Malaysia after signing the Hatyai Peace Treaty. Here, Ng replaces Chen's story with a completely different ideology, and the communist-turned-terrorist lover of the woman is Ng's way of characterizing another face of the communists, again with an ending that the revolution loses out to "human nature," to "flesh and blood." In Malaysian critic Lim Choon Bee's examination of another Sinophone Malaysian writer Li Zishu's story of the communists, she criticizes Li for not extending an emphatic understanding to the communists, which in turn might make her work complicit with anti-communist ideology deployed in state propaganda. Ng's fiction walks a thin line carefully between the two sides. On the one hand, he argues for complete freedom in creativity, in order to narrate the various faces of "human nature," including the dark sides of the communists, and which potentially works in tandem with the state's anti-communist ideology. On the other hand, he calls into question the absence of "flesh and blood" in the entire discourse on and of the MCP, proposing to probe into the psyche of MCP members as ordinary individuals especially after the Cold War, as resistance to the dominant narratives. Instead of arguing that Ng wants justice for the MCP members, I would say that his intention

15. White Terror in Taiwan was the period of martial law in the island from 1949 to 1987; it was the suppression of political dissidents carried out by the Kuomintang government. Many were prosecuted under the label of "bandit spies," being charged with working as spies for the Chinese communists. Many intellectuals were also imprisoned for the reasons of resisting KMT rule or sympathizing with communism.

and point of departure are arguably set in rewriting the literary history of Sinophone Malaysian literature. As a whole, Ng's intertextual mapping empowers him to view the MCP revolution as a legacy of the Chinese Left and Chinese Leftist literature passing onto Sinophone Malaysian literature.

To sum up, maybe as a postscript, I believe that the investigation of cultural legacy cannot be managed in a simple, binary term, like abandoning the older traditions and moving to a new trend—an act of burning the plantation. It has to be perceived as a continuously contested site in which the traditions and new elements meet, converse, and negotiate. The controversies that *enfant terrible* Ng Kim Chew caused in the 1990s, and perhaps till now, are results of the cutting off of the continuity of cultural legacy in ways that Ng was advancing in a postmodernist approach. Thus the practice shocked the entire literary field, especially the writers of older generation. Ng's effort in spurring the progressive quality of Sinophone Malaysian literature, as can be seen in his excellent criticisms and fictions, is worth praising, yet, perhaps there is a need for reestablishing an emphatic link to the writers of the older generation, especially the leftist, realist writers whose names have been forgotten in contemporary times. As a matter of fact, their works also contribute to capturing the voices of marginality and portraying the identity dilemma of Chinese Malaysians during the historical period in question. To reimagine, as Ng does, the communist revolution extending successfully into our own era might also have to be carried out if we want to successfully grasp the history of the era in its own terms, when ideas like postmodernism had yet to appear, and academic discourse had yet to lose touch with culture on the ground.

Ng Kim Chew, in his fiction and literary criticism, continues to write about the Malayan Communist Party as part of the memories of Chinese Malaysians. He creates a fictional Nanyang to illustrate the mobility and fluidity of the Chinese diaspora, mapping the dissemination of the Chinese leftist revolution in conjunction with the Chinese leftist literature spearheaded by Lu Xun. By means of metafiction, Ng supplements the MCP revolution with "flesh and blood," and connects it with the legacy of Chinese leftist literature.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the “communist fiction” of Sinophone Malaysian writer Ng Kim Chew who, in his narrative mapping, creates a spatio-temporal place of the Cold War South Seas (Nanyang, or Southeast Asia in today’s terms). It studies Ng’s artistic representations of the geographical referent—the South Seas—and juxtaposes with it the Cold War’s historical temporality. By using a fictional approach to narrate the geopolitical situation, Ng’s works not only supplement the history of the Cold War with various psychosocial faces, but also advance aesthetical representations of the event in the South Seas. It argues that Ng creates a fictional Nanyang to illustrate the mobility and fluidity of the Chinese diaspora, and continues to write about the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) as part of the memories of Chinese Malaysians. By means of metafiction, Ng supplements the MCP revolution with “flesh and blood,” and connects it with the legacy of Chinese leftist literature. Yet, he harbors a great suspicion over the legitimacy of “revolution”; as can be seen in his stories, revolution loses to human nature and ethnicity in the end. Hence, for him, the communist revolution is more a legacy of the Chinese Left and the Chinese leftist literature.

Keywords: communist fiction, Ng Kim Chew, Sinophone Malaysian literature, Cold War, Nanyang(South Seas), Malayan Communist Party (MCP)

繪製南洋圖景：黃錦樹的馬共小說

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摘　要

本文以馬華作家黃錦樹的「馬共小說」為線索，討論他二十餘年創作中不斷出現的南洋圖景和符號，以及馬來亞共產黨歷史作為馬華記憶最深刻的部分。通過塑造冷戰時期及情境下的南洋圖景，黃錦樹以虛構的小說補充歷史的血肉，也描繪了南洋華人的離散與流動。他通過持續書寫馬共革命來尋找和華人歷史的對話，而這場後設書寫的對話往往是以中國左翼文學為基礎的。他的歷史敘事，一直是馬來西亞華人的處境與中國性的辯證過程。換句話說，黃錦樹多年來的書寫仍是圍繞在「華人」身份建構的問題，對於革命他抱持極大懷疑，也認為革命終究輸給人性和種族。小說家黃錦樹筆下的馬共歷史，與其說是政治及革命的血淚，不如說是中國左翼文學的遺產。

關鍵詞:馬共小說，黃錦樹，馬華文學，冷戰，南洋，馬來亞共產黨

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