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Not Made in China

ALISON M. GROPPE

Sinophone Malaysian Literature

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Sinophone Malaysian Literature

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Sinophone Malaysian Literature

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Chapter 1

Introduction

"Not Infertile Territory"

A famous comment Salman Rushdie once made about writers of Indian descent living in Britain did much to inspire this project: "Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not infertile territory for a writer to occupy" (1991, 15). In this book, I examine the texts and practices of a group of contemporary authors of Chinese descent who were all born in Malaysia and write in Chinese. Their circumstances do not strictly parallel those that Rushdie described, but his observation aptly conveys both the benefits and challenges of being a Malaysia-born, Chinese-language author. To start with the positive aspects, the identities of the authors under consideration here are similarly plural in that they were born in Malaysia and their family lineages have historical ties to China. They also write within and from that "not infertile territory" between cultures, or to be more precise, between different sets of cultural resources, some related to Malaysia and Southeast Asia, some related to China and Taiwan. In aspiring to straddle multiple cultures in their

creative expression, Sinophone Malaysian writers have created a vibrant and sophisticated Chinese-language literature that provides important insights into the complexity of cultural identification for a minority population of Chinese descent in Southeast Asia. Indeed, it is precisely in the process of confronting their predicament of position that they most effectively avail themselves of the "not infertile territory" that they occupy. In Rushdie's original essay it is clear that the rhetorical strategy of a double negative implicitly accentuates the cultural and aesthetic advantages of writing from the position of "in-betweenness" that he and writers like him inhabit. In this spirit I avail myself of Rushdie's phrasing so as to more vividly propose that it is the complexity of its authors' relation to Malaysia, China, and Taiwan that makes Sinophone Malaysian literature so fruitful, the territory of Sinophone Malaysians so fertile.

I would not have been able to write this book if I did not see the positive dimensions of the cultural and historical positioning of Malaysia-born, Chinese-language authors of Chinese descent as ultimately outweighing the negative ones, but the latter should be acknowledged at the outset. Most important, Chinese-language literature produced by Malaysia-born authors is doubly marginalized. Within Malaysia, because it is not written in the national language of Malay, it is currently denigrated as second-class "sectional literature." This makes it, as has been observed, a "nationless" literature and puts it at a distinct disadvantage in an era in which literatures are conventionally categorized and assessed in national terms (Ng Kim Chew 2010; Tee 2010, 88–90). As a literature written in Chinese outside of China, the work of Malaysia-born authors inevitably occupies a peripheral position in relation to the more dominant Chinese literature produced in mainland China. Terminology and concepts for literature written in Chinese but produced in contexts outside China, such as "overseas Chinese literature" (*haiwai huawen wenxue* 海外華文文學) and "world/global Chinese literature" (*shijie huawen wenxue* 世界華文文學), end up enforcing the dominance of mainland Chinese literature (Tee 2010, 77–78). Ng Kim Chew, a Sinophone Malaysian author and scholar whose work occupies a prominent place in this study, has

pointed out that "within a system of literary and political recognition that takes mainland Chinese nationalism, the Central Plains, as its center, the status of the minority writer is bound to be subordinate to that of the mainland Chinese writer." He provocatively added that "those 'overseas' (*haiwai* 海外) outside of Taiwan or Hong Kong are further subordinated, moreover, as a subset of the Chinese (*Huaren* 華人)" (2010, 22). Under these circumstances, and to return once more to Rushdie's imagery, producers of Sinophone Malaysian literature are all too often seen as having only a partial identity, and their literature is allowed to "fall between two stools." One of my fundamental objectives in writing this book is to draw attention to a body of Chinese-language literature that is incredibly rich yet remains (unjustly) marginalized.

Chinese emigrants and their descendants currently live all over the world, but most of them live in Southeast Asia. According to statistics compiled by the Republic of China's Overseas Chinese Affairs Council (OCAC), in 2011 approximately 65 percent of the world's total population of people classed as "overseas Chinese" lived in the Southeast Asian countries of Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines.[1] Recent estimates of the Chinese-origin Malaysian population put their numbers at just under a quarter of that country's population—figures range from 23.7 percent (Zhuang 2009, 64) to 24.6 percent (Malaysia 2010 Population and Housing Census)—making it the world's largest Chinese-origin minority population.[2] Thanks to historical and infrastructural factors that I elaborate on later in this work, there is a long-standing and vigorous history of Chinese-language literary production on the Malaysian Peninsula and in Borneo as well. Sinophone Malaysian authors are extremely well-positioned to comment on the experience of being of Chinese descent outside China or Taiwan, in general, and in Southeast Asia and postcolonial Malaysia, more specifically. Furthermore, the span of their Chinese-language literary history ensures that they are uniquely capable of representing these experiences in a manner that enriches the Chinese-language literature that has been and is being produced all over the world.

This leads to the basic concerns of this study. In calling attention to these writers and the "not infertile territory" they occupy and by examining their literature, this book answers several fundamental and related questions—primarily, and most broadly, What does it mean to be Chinese-speaking and of Chinese descent in postcolonial Malaysia? As already touched upon, the writers and their works instruct readers that, first of all, it involves negotiating attachments, contexts, and sources of power—political and cultural in particular. That negotiation is just part of the picture, however, because it also turns out that those attachments, contexts, and forces are complicated and always in flux. Literature in general provides an excellent means of exploring life's messiness and mutability, and Sinophone Malaysian literature is no exception. The Sinophone Malaysian literary texts examined here valuably put the political and cultural affiliations of Chinese-origin, Chinese-speaking Malaysians under a microscope, revealing intricacies and transformations that would otherwise remain invisible. Of course, the previous sentence is metaphorical; no such mechanism exists. So *how* does Sinophone Malaysian literature render visible the political and cultural complexities and transformations that matter most to those writing it? This book is also about the particular literary strategies and modes that Malaysia-born Chinese-language authors have deployed to articulate their multifaceted identities and their multiple and complicated attachments—to the Chinese literary tradition, Sinitic languages (Mandarin and other topolects), and to Malaysia, or Borneo, Taiwan, and China.

PROBLEMS OF NAMING AND TRANSLATION

Contrary to what one might expect, deciding on an English name for the body of literature under discussion here is not a simple matter. In Mandarin Chinese, this corpus is called *Mahua wenxue* 馬華文學. Currently, *Ma* 馬 most often refers to Malaysia or *Malaixiya* 馬來西亞, in Chinese. *Ma* can also designate Malaya, or *Malaiya* 馬來亞, as Malaysia was referred to during the colonial era and the transition to

independence (the Federation of Malaysia was formed in 1963). More complications arise in relation to *hua* 華 as part of the term. A general signifier for both China and Chinese, *Mahua* preceding *wenxue* 文學, "literature," has conventionally referred to literature in Mandarin, or standard modern Chinese, which is known among the Chinese-speaking populations in Southeast Asia as *huayu* 華語 in its spoken form and as *huawen* 華文 when written; such ways of referring to standard modern Chinese, whether written or spoken, differ from, for instance, *zhongwen* 中文 ("written Chinese"), *putonghua* 普通話 ("common language") and *guoyu* 國語, ("national language") terms that are used in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan. Thus *Mahua wenxue* 馬華文學 becomes a shortened form of *Mahua(wen) wenxue* 馬華(文)文學 and can be translated "Chinese-language Malaysian literature." This translation also accords with the phrase I most often use, *Sinophone Malaysian literature*, in its implied stress on the literature's linguistic medium.

The *hua* in *Mahua* need not have a linguistic referent, however; it can also refer to people, as in *Huaren* 華人, meaning "Chinese people" or (along with *Huayi* 華裔) "people of Chinese descent." Some scholars have recently moved in this direction to argue that *Mahua wenxue* should stand for *Mahua(ren) wenxue* 馬華（人）文學, meaning that the category should include all creative writing by Malaysians of Chinese descent, whether it is written in modern Chinese or in other languages that are and have been used by Malaysians (and Malayans) of Chinese descent, including English, Malay, classical Chinese, and romanized Baba Malay (Ng K. 1996, 13–21; Lim K. 2004a, 22–23; Tee 1991, 34–36).[3] Though this study concentrates on recent Chinese-language literature produced by ethnic Chinese Malaysia-born authors, it is important to note that Malaysians of Chinese descent have produced literature in multiple languages and that this linguistic diversity grows from historical patterns of migration, resultant cultural flows, and twentieth-century politics in both colonial Malaya and postcolonial Malaysia (among other factors, such as differences in family and educational backgrounds and personal choice). More information about this translingual

dimension appears in the literary history presented in the following and concluding chapters. Of course, it is equally important to acknowledge at the outset that, although the literary texts examined here are written in Chinese, the social and cultural experiences with which they engage are not necessarily or strictly linguistically determined. When Malaysia-born authors write in Chinese about the experience of being of Chinese descent in Malaysia, to a significant extent they are writing about experiences shared by Malaysians of Chinese origin regardless of their linguistic affiliations. At the same time, one should also recognize that linguistic affiliations stem from and are reinforced by familial, educational, and social backgrounds and that they often lead to divergent experiences and identification processes among the Chinese-origin population in Malaysia. Though I support research into the cultural production of the Chinese-origin population in Malaysia that transcends linguistic divides, this project largely focuses on how Chinese-language literary texts articulate perspectives and explorations of speaking Chinese and of being Chinese descent in Malaysia.

Returning to the problems of naming and translation in English, it seems possible to sidestep questions of whether *Mahua wenxue* should refer to Malaysian literature written in Chinese or to Malaysian literature written in other languages by Malaysians of Chinese descent by translating the term somewhat literally as "Malaysian Chinese literature." I have used this phrase in prior work on the subject, in part because it closely approximates *Mahua* and also in accord with scholarly trends (Groppe 2006; Lee and Tan 2000, ix–x; Tsu 2010). As it turns out, however, although it apparently avoids one debate, this translation leads directly to others. Should it be *Malaysian Chinese* or *Chinese Malaysian*? Perhaps in making *Malaysian* an adjective that describes the noun *Chinese*, the former phrase downplays the fact that these people are citizens of Malaysia who are of Chinese descent, even if the first phrase seems to conveniently coincide with *Mahua*. The latter phrase, meanwhile, follows the logic of *Chinese American* in implicitly stressing the Malaysian citizenship of the person of Chinese descent. Deciding

between Malaysian Chinese and Chinese Malaysian, however, raises other important questions and issues for debate. In what sense are this literature and its producers Chinese, and what are the implications of linking them to China?

To address these questions, I review some earlier approaches to the populations of people who have ancestral ties to China but do not live in China. Recently, these populations have most often been seen as part of the Chinese diaspora and "cultural China." Tu Wei-ming sees cultural China as emanating from the ongoing interactions among "three symbolic universes" (1994, 13). The first consists of mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, societies whose populations are considered predominantly culturally and ethnically Chinese (13). The second is composed of Chinese societies elsewhere in the world, including Malaysia, which Tu has rightly called "politically significant" (13). In relation to this second "universe," or group of societies, Tu added that, on one hand, they have been referred to as *Huaqiao* 華僑—literally, "Chinese sojourners"—by "the political authorities in Beijing and Taipei," but on the other, "they tend to define themselves as members of the Chinese 'diaspora,' meaning those who have settled in scattered communities of Chinese far from their ancestral homeland" (13–14). The term *Huaqiao*, it should be noted, became widespread in both popular and official discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and connotes a perpetual connection with the homeland of China because the emigrants were expected to return and sent their earnings there while away (Kuhn 2008, 243). The word reflects China's patterns of emigration in that, historically, large numbers of people who left China to work abroad did eventually return to China or at least intended to do so (Kuhn 2008, 4). Yet the term clearly becomes problematic when applied to populations of people who were not born in China or Taiwan or are citizens of their own countries; Tan Chee Beng observed that the *Huaqiao* label is today rejected by Malaysians of Chinese descent, though it is still applied to them by Chinese from the PRC and Taiwan (2000, 37). Finally, in Tu's cultural China configu-