Mis/communication and identity in Chang Kuei-hsing's novella *Wandao. Lanhua. Zuolunqiang* (1983)

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This paper analyses *Wandao. Lanhua. Zuolunqiang* (彎刀·蘭花·左輪 槍 Machete, Orchid, Revolver) (1983), an early novella by Taiwan-based Sinophone Malaysian (Sarawak) writer Chang Kuei-hsing (張貴興 Zhang Guixing) . A widely read and one of the most respected Sinophone authors, since the 1990s Chang has been known for writing both short and long fiction centred on the trope of the Bornean rainforest, often processing it by means of personal and literary memories. However, through a close reading of the novella, I demonstrate that such a trope was already present in his early writings, albeit in an unprocessed way, being the rainforest a crude environment as well as a shared site of inter-ethnic mis/communication between ethnic Chinese and Malays. Additionally, the novella is Chang Kuei-hsing's only work of fiction that directly addresses the issue of national identity, thus urging us to examine the 'Sinophone Malaysian writer' label he has unproblematically been given, especially considering that the term 'Malaysian' most often refers to West Malaysia and marginalises the Bornean states of Sarawak and Sabah. The paper, therefore, seeks to promote a deeper understanding of the multiple factors that should be taken into account when investigating and categorising Sinophone literature by authors who are (or once were) Malaysians.

Keywords: Chang Kuei-hsing, Identity, Miscommunication, Sinophone Malaysian Literature, Sinophone Sarawakian Fiction

1. Introduction

The new millennium has seen an increase in English-language research focusing on Sinophone issues, especially thanks to the tireless effort of scholars such as Shu-mei Shih, David Wang Der-wei and Jing Tsu who have equipped this emerging field of studies with a sound theoretical framework.[1] However,

[1] Shu-mei Shih defines the Sinophone as a concept encompassing "Sinitic-language communities and their expressions (cultural, political, social, etc.) on the margins of nations and nationalness in the internal colonies and other minority

it is important to point out that, as obvious as it may sound, well before the concept of the Sinophone was created, cultural products that could be labelled as such had been produced for centuries worldwide, in regions as diverse as Taiwan, Southeast Asia, North America and so on. Among all art forms, literature has been especially dynamic in its contribution to Sinophone cultures, and among all geographic regions, postcolonial Malaysia and its preceding political entities of British Malaya, Sarawak and British North Borneo have provided the Sinophone literary polysystem[2] with numerous writers whose talent has been recognised throughout the Sinitic-speaking world and beyond. Sinophone Malaysian literature is extremely diverse in terms of the genres explored (fiction, but also poetry, essay and theatre), of the geographic provenance of the writers (Peninsular Malaysia, but also Sarawak and Sabah), of the location from where they write (Malaysia, but also Singapore, Taiwan and, to a lesser extent and as a more recent phenomenon, mainland China), of the Sinitic languages they use (standard Mandarin, but also its localised version/s, heavily influenced by other Sinitic languages as well as Malay and English) and of the themes they portray (the rainforest and the rubber plantations, the history and fate of the local Chinese community, the often-tense relations with other Malaysian ethnic groups, but also the destiny of the eternal wanderer in search of their place in society, and so on).

However, and despite the heterogeneity of issues, it is rather common for Sinophone Malaysian authors to explore the interaction between the Chinese community and other local ethnic groups: a logical choice, considering that in a country such as Malaysia, "ethnicity remains the most potent force" (Lee 2000: 1). If one focuses on works of fiction, it is only too obvious that in the multi-ethnic environment of Malaysia they are often permeated by a special literary preoccupation with identity, with the question of who we are vis-à-vis the rest of Malaysian society and in relation to the larger Sinitic cultural world. This preoccupation mirrors a similar interest within the Chinese Malaysian community at large, whose sense of identity has been constructed through a constant process of inter-ethnic interaction and is built upon the appearance of the Other, with whom the ethnic Chinese Self is constantly confronted. Especially after the 1969 Racial Riots that broke out in the Kuala Lumpur area

communities in China as well as outside it, with the exception of settler colonies where the Sinophone is the dominant vis- à-vis their indigenous populations" (2011: 716). Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang acknowledge that in its analysis, the Sinophone can either include or exclude mainland China; in both cases, the main idea is to "dismantle the hegemonic focus of a 'national' Chinese literature and perhaps of a 'national literature' at all" (2010: 6).

[2] Rather than a single literary system, I consider Sinophone literature(s) as a diverse and dynamic set of literary systems "which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent." (Even-Zohar 1990: 11)

and led to the Malaynisation of the country, Chinese – Malay/Indigenous relations have often been portrayed as being confrontational, resentful and characterised by lack of communication and understanding.

One salient example is Chang Kuei-hsing (張貴興 Zhang Guixing)'s[3] semi-autobiographical novella *Wandao. Lanhua. Zuolunqiang* (彎刀·蘭花·左輪槍 "Machete, Orchid, Revolver;" 1983) which, through the terrible fate of its Chinese Malaysian protagonist who is unable to communicate with local Malays, articulates the writer's worries about an increasingly Malaynised homeland, where the rights of other ethnic communities are gradually being eroded. Chang's novella is especially important not only because it was written by one of the leading contemporary Sinophone Malaysian authors, but also because, published in Taiwan, it trespassed the borders of Sinophone Malaysia and acquainted a wider, transnational Sinitic-language readership to the challenges of being Chinese in a country consistently promoting *Ketuanan Melayu* ("Malay Primacy"), a political ideology that has become "a narrative of special birthright and ethnic primacy – if not supremacy – that in the view of non-Malays strikes at the very heart of attempts to envision a civic and pluralist conception of nationhood" (Liow 2015). Moreover, I consider this semi-autobiographical novella a crucial text to understand how *Ketuanan Melayu* and the subsequent Malaynisation of the country affected the lives and the choices of many young Chinese Malaysian intellectuals such as Chang Kuei-hsing who decided to relocate to Taiwan, a place where they could eventually thrive, albeit not without difficulties, both personally and professionally. Through a close reading of the novella, this paper aims at showing that while tackling highly entangled issues of personal, ethnic and national identity as well as inter-ethnic mis/communication, Chang also challenges the idea of a postcolonial country where "Malay Muslims as the majority have lived with plurality, shared powers, wealth and resources with other communities of various religious and ethnic backgrounds in relative peace and harmony" (Ahmad 2007: 140).

Lastly, by choosing a Sinophone Malaysian novella from 1983 as the object of my analysis, I also aim at attesting to the dynamism of Sinophone Malaysian fiction in a period generally thought to be dominated by authors and voices from the Chinese mainland and Taiwan, therefore showing that Sinophone literature was thriving long before the emergence of the Sinophone as an academic field.[4]

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[3] This and other personal Chinese names are transcribed using their official/preferred Romanisation rather than pinyin, which is used to render non-personal names, instead.

[4] As Gálik suggests, in the Chinese literary context, "we hardly find a more successful (from the axiological point of view) period than that immediately preceding and following the year 1985" (2000: 154). The 1980s were, in fact, vibrant with writers gravitating around the scar literature movement (傷痕文學 shanghen wenxue), which recounted the wounds left by the Cultural Revolution, and around the root-seeking literary movement (尋根文學 xungen wenxue), which called for a

2. Chang Kuei-hsing: a Sinophone Malaysian (?) writer

An ethnic Chinese of Hakka heritage,[5] Chang Kuei-hsing was born in 1956 in Lutong (Sarawak), a coastal town nestled between the Bornean rainforest and the South China Sea and adjacent to the Bruneian border. In a recent interview (2019), the writer recalls the tense atmosphere that, in the 1960s and 1970s, loomed upon his hometown due to the Communist insurgency.[6] Chang attended the local Sinitic-medium primary school and after graduating from secondary school at the age of nineteen he left his native Sarawak to pursue higher education in Taiwan, where he enrolled at Taiwan Normal University. It was – and still is – not uncommon for Chinese Malaysians to attend university there, not only because they had grown disillusioned with the possibilities of improving their social and economic condition in a Malay-dominated country, but also because they were moved "by a rather romantic interest in the Chinese motherland and in what it might feel like to live life as a member of the ethnic majority" (Jaffee 2007: viii–ix).[7] Immediately after graduation, Chang decided to relinquish his Malaysian citizenship and to become a national of the Republic of China (RoC hereafter), i.e. Taiwan, the country in which he decided to put down roots and from which he still writes today. Although a major event in a person's life, the reasons for this nationality change are hinted at only in *Wandao. Lanhua. Zuolunqiang*, which becomes a unique and invaluable key text to understand the process of identity formation of both Chang Kuei-hsing, the person and Chang Kuei-hsing, the writer. Notwithstanding the fact that Borneo has been a source of artistic inspiration for Chang since his debut in 1980 with the short story collection

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rediscovery of the Chinese tradition and cultural identity. Around the same period, the Taiwanese literary scene was dominated by the Nativist literary movement (鄉土文學 *xiangtu wenxue*), a reaction to Modernism as well as to the rapid urban and uncontrolled industrial development.

[5] The majority of Chinese Sarawakians belong to the Hakka community. According to T'ien, "[t]he first big wave of settlers were miners coming from Pontianak, West Borneo, in about 1850" (1983: 279).

[6] Occurring between 1962 and 1990 and not as well-known as the one in Peninsular Malaysia (1968–1989), the Communist insurgency in Sarawak began as an armed conflict between the colonial government and the Sarawak Communist Organisation (SCO), which not only fought for independence and to establish a communist society, but also opposed the inclusion of Sarawak into the Federation of Malaysia. It is important to note that the SCO's membership was predominantly Chinese. As James Chin observes, "Communism in Sarawak had its origins in the Chinese schools in the 1950s, the Chinese media and trade unions. The communist infiltrated the Chinese schools, and used the newspapers to further reinforce their ideology. The three major Chinese-language papers in the late 1950s were all controlled by the communists" (2006).

[7] Among the many Chinese Malaysians who settled in Taiwan, there are other important Sinophone figures such as novelist Lee Yung-ping (李永平 Li Yongping) (1947–2017) and film director Tsai Ming-liang (蔡明亮 Cai Mingliang) (1957–), both also from Sarawak, writer and literary scholar Ng Kim Chew (黃錦樹 Huang Jingshu) (1967–) from Johor, singer-songwriter Penny Tai (戴佩妮 Dai Peini) (1978–) also from Johor, and Mandopop star Fish Leong (梁靜茹 Liang Jingru) (1978–) from Negeri Sembilan, just to name a few.

Fu hu (伏虎 "Tiger in ambush"), it is only starting in the 1990s that memories of his native land are treated more extensively in his fiction (Lin 2010). While the stories collected in *Fu hu* uncover an author who navigates through Taipei's urban scene, the Southeast Asian rainforests and Taiwan's campus life in search of a common thematic thread, it is only with *Sailian zhi ge* (賽蓮之歌 "Siren Song," 1992), the story of an ethnic Chinese young man growing up in colonial Sarawak, that his native land gains centre stage. The tropical lands of Borneo thus become the setting of all his subsequent works of fiction as well, including the most recent *Ye zhu du he* (野豬渡河 "Wild Boars Cross the River," 2018), a novel depicting the dark days of the Japanese imperial invasion of Sarawak.

Being a transnational Sinophone writer and a transnational ethnic Chinese person (or 華人 *huaren*, in Chinese) has certainly shaped Chang Kuei-hsing's relationship to both his homeland (Sarawak) and his host land (Taiwan), with the first having been moulded through personal memories, which were then presented to readers as literary memories. Moreover, Chang's transnationalism has also been an important factor in shaping a fluid personal and literary identity. In fact, prior to becoming a RoC national, Chang Kuei-hsing was born a British subject when Sarawak was still a Crown Colony. In 1963, when his native land joined the Federation of Malaysia, he became a Malaysian citizen. Far from being a merely anecdotal issue, therefore, the transformation of Chang Kuei-hsing's national identity deserves a deeper scrutiny than it has received so far, and it should be problematised vis-à-vis his identity as a Sinophone author. Although he is universally presented as a Sinophone Malaysian writer,[8] Chang's identity as Malaysian requires further consideration, especially in view of the relationship between his native Sarawak and the rest of Malaysia and on account of the importance that Borneo/Sarawak plays in his fiction and in the novella analysed in this paper.

While being a federated state of Malaysia since the early sixties, Sarawak, which together with the state of Sabah and the Federal Territory of Labuan conforms East Malaysia, shows great differences with West (or Peninsular) Malaysia in terms of geographic landscape, ethnic and religious composition, population density, and so on.[9] Although Sinophone Sarawakian literature is generally considered a branch of the wider Sinophone Malaysian literary polysystem, it occupies a peripheral position, with its peculiarities in constant danger of being overlooked by readers and scholars alike.[10] Even in

[8] Among the extremely insightful English-language studies that, however, unproblematically treat him as Sinophone Malaysian, cf. Huang Yu-ting, who "interprets the unique aeatehics of Sinophone Malaysian author" (2018: 238) and Andrea Bachner, who similarly classifies him as a "Malaysian-Chinese writer" (2010: 177).

[9] For instance, Sarawak is the only Malaysian federated entity without a Muslim-majority population (Lee 2018: 2).

[10] One notable example is Huidao Malaya – Huama xiaoshuo qishi nian (Return to Malaya: Stories by Chinese Malaysian Writers, 1937–2007), a Chinese-language collection of short fiction by Chinese Malaysians who write in Sinitic languages,

academic contexts, the interest shown for Sinophone Sarawakian authors is considerably weaker than that for their East Malaysian counterpart, an attitude that contributes to wiping Sarawak out of the Peninsula-centric Sinophone Malaysian literary map (Chan 2006: 57). Therefore, the Malaysian identity of writers such as Chang Kuei-hsing should be discussed more critically, so as to recognise East Malaysians' contribution to the development of Sinophone Malaysian literature.[11] Taiwan-based Malaysian literary critic and editor Hu Jinlun suggests that there are several reasons for Chang Kuei-hsing and other Sinophone Sarawakian writers not to see themselves as Malaysians: from the peripherality of their homeland to the fact that Malaysia as such was established years, even decades after they were born, to the fact that their literary preoccupations generally do not include Malaysia as a geopolitical entity (Zhou 2012). Moreover, having developed his literary career in Taiwan, there is hardly anything (West) Malaysian in Chang Kuei-hsing the man, whose personal memories are deeply rooted in the Bornean rainforest, rather than in Malaysia's rubber plantations, and in Chang Kuei-hsing the fiction writer whose literary output is entrenched in Taiwan's publishing sector. If, as previously observed, Sinophone Malaysian literature is West-Malaysia-centric, then one cannot help but acknowledge that Chang Kuei-hsing writes from a doubly peripheral position: that of a Sarawakian in Taiwan.[12] If, however, Sinophone Malaysian literature is seen as a literary polysystem in which its three constitutive elements (namely, Sinophone Literature by West Malaysian authors, by East Malaysian authors and by Taiwan-based Malaysian authors) are independently developed section of a whole, as suggested by Chan Tah Wei (2006: 82), Chang Kuei-hsing can then be rightfully considered one of the most outstanding Sinophone Malaysian writers.

English and/or Malay. The word Malaya, which appears in the title, makes the volume problematic: in fact, it refers to Peninsular Malaysia and does not include Sarawak, nor Sabah. However, the anthology, which was published in West Malaysia also contains short stories by ethnic Chinese writers from Sarawak, such as Chang Kuei-hsing himself, Pan Yutong (1937-) and Liang Fang (1953-).

[11] Another notable writer often unproblematically labelled as Sinophone Malaysian is Sarawak-born Taiwanese novelist Lee Yung-ping. Lee himself, however, consistently rejected the inclusion of his works in the Sinophone Malaysian literary canon. In an interview from a few years ago, the writer refused to be identified as Malaysian, since Malaysia as a geopolitical entity was something completely foreign to him, a notion to which he felt no direct connection (Lee 2016).

[12] To further complicate the matter, one could also suggest a third marginal position for Chang's literature, in this case vis-à-vis Malaysian National literature that, according to the official discourse, can only be written in Malay, the national language. For an extensive discussion on the complicated relationship between National literature and Sinophone literature in the Malaysian context, see Paoliello 2018: 266-270.

3. Identity and mis/communication in the rainforest: *Wandao. Lanhua. Zuolunqiang*

Although Chang Kuei-hsing has undergone changes in nationality that might appear as rather lineal (British subject > Malaysian citizen > RoC national), especially in comparison with the intricacies of his literary identity mentioned in the previous section, the decision to relinquish his Malaysian citizenship in favour of an official Chinese identity is not as straightforward as it seems, since it might have been spurred not only by his growing personal attachment to Taiwan as his land of choice, but also by the political and social changes that were taking place in his native Sarawak. In this regard, *Wandao. Lanhua. Zuolunqiang* is a key text to understand both the development of Chang's Chinese identity as well as his disillusionment with an increasingly Malayanised homeland.

The novella, published for the first time in 1983 in the June issue of *Wen-ji*, one of Taiwan's leading literary magazines, was later included in Chang's collection *Keshan de ernü* (柯珊的兒女 "Keshan's Sons and Daughters," 1988) and more recently in *Shalong zumu* (沙龍祖母 "Grandma's Studio Photograph," 2013).[13]

The action takes place in northern Borneo, between Sarawak and Brunei, which at that time was in the process of gaining independence from the United Kingdom.[14] The story is the account of the tragic trip undertaken by the main character, Buming, to reach the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office, roughly corresponding to an embassy or consulate, in Bandar Seri Begawan, the capital of Brunei, to renew his RoC visa. However, due to massive flooding along the road, the bus he is travelling on is only able to reach the Bruneian border. From there, Buming must resort to lifts on private cars to reach his destination. On his way back to Sarawak, he must do the same and, after insisting for a long while, he is given a ride by a Malay family. However, miscommunication problems arise during the trip, mainly due to Buming's inability to speak and understand Malay and to their lack of knowledge of English or Chinese. Both the language barrier as well as the visual misunderstanding (Buming is unable to explain that the weapon he is carrying with him is just a toy, a gift for his nephew) lead the Malay family to think that Buming wants to hijack their vehicle. The police officers too, informed by a gas station employee the Malay driver was able to reach for help, misunderstand Buming's intentions and hastily surround him, ready to open fire at the first sign of hostility. The situation rapidly escalates as journalists and TV cameras reach the location and witness, together with the reader, as the protagonist is tragically shot to death by the police.

[13] The present textual analysis has been performed on the 2013 edition of the novella.

[14] Brunei's independence was formally proclaimed on January 1, 1984.

As can be inferred from this brief summary, mis/communication, ethnic identity and Malay/Chinese ethnic relations form the backbone of the story. Although it is true that "Chang's rainforest writing hinges on the representation of magical localism" (Wu 2016: ch. 5), rather than introducing a fascinating land of wild animals and lush rainforests, in this earlier novella Chang Kuei-hsing leads the reader through the unappealing side of Borneo, characterised by gloomy weather, heavy rains reminiscent of the atmosphere in Gabriel García Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*,[15] rough roads that run through inhospitable and infernally hot areas, sleepy and somewhat sordid towns, as well as the pervasive presence of mud that swallows up Buming's corpse at the end of the story. As the narration unfolds, it becomes apparent that the ethnic Chinese protagonist, while being a literary alter ego of Chang Kuei-hsing, the wanderer and exile, also carries the burden of being the epitome of the marginalisation of the ethnic Chinese in an increasingly Malay-centred society, where the national language (Malay, or *Bahasa Malaysia*) becomes a tool for mis/communication. A burden the protagonist carries in his name as well, which literally means "to not understand" and "unclear" (不明 in Chinese characters) and which highlights the series of misunderstandings that will eventually lead to the tragic finale of the novella.

Throughout the text, effective communication between Buming and the Malays he meets along the way is hindered by linguistic barriers and mutual mistrust. Placed at the very beginning of the novella, the dialogue between Buming and the Malay bus-ticket seller sets off the pace for the overall climate of questioning and doubt:

> "Where are you going?"
> "I'm sorry, I don't speak Malay", said Buming in English.
> "You don't speak Malay?! Where are you from?" asked the ticket seller in English, with his eyes half closed.
> "Malaysia!" answered Buming.
> "You are Malaysian, and you don't speak Malay?!" uttered the ticket seller.
> "That's right: I am a Malaysian who doesn't speak Malay", said Buming (Chang 2013b: 267)[16]

[15] As noted by Brian Bernards, "Chang [...] is frequently compared to the likes of literary giants such as Gabriel García Márquez, William Faulkner, and Joseph Conrad" (2013: 324).

[16] This and all following translations from the Chinese are my own. The original reads as follows: 「你去哪兒？」不明用英文說：「對不起，我不會講馬來話。」睏得兩眼沒有完全睜開的售票員用英文說：「你不會講馬來話？你是哪國人？」不明說「馬來西亞。」售票員說：「你是馬來西亞人不會講馬來話？」不明說：「不錯，我是不會講馬來話的馬來西亞人。」

It is worth noting that, while the fact that Buming switches to English, the former colonial language, responds to a practical communication need to which the ticket seller adjusts accordingly, it can also be perceived as a political stance, since "when deciding on which language to use one must take into consideration the political implications of using English and Standard Malay" (Ting 2001: 54–55).[17]

As the narration unfolds, we learn that Buming's national identity had been already questioned on his arrival in Sarawak by an immigration officer, whom he derogatorily refers to as "Malay pig" (**馬來豬** *malai zhu*), an insult he uses several times in relation to Malay characters. In the new Malay-dominated Sarawak, an ethnic Chinese holding a Malaysian passport who doesn't speak Malay, studied in Taiwan and plans to return there becomes a potential suspect. As a fellow Chinese Malaysian in Taiwan once told Buming, "it's all different now: English is not the official language anymore. When you go back, they'll make things impossible for you! I'm quite sure they'll want to have a chat with you" (Chang 2013b: 297).[18] While, as we have seen, English could be used as Buming did to accommodate the most basic and urgent practical communication needs, and while it is free of ethnic (although not colonial) biases, "it is not always the right language choice in Sarawak. Some people may not understand English, while others may regard the use of English as a rejection of their national identity" (Ting 2001: 55).

In a 2001 interview, Chang Kuei-hsing addresses both the identity issue as well as Malay – ethnic Chinese relations, seemingly corroborating such an idea:

> After all, what's our status in that place [i.e. Malaysia]? Do we live there as Chinese, as Chinese Malaysians or what else? In Malaysia, the anti-Chinese sentiment is very powerful, even if, on the surface, it might seem hard to notice. Especially after moving to Taiwan, the feeling that I had been pushed away has grown even stronger. My family says it feels good to come to Taiwan and see that everyone is Chinese here, it feels wonderful to them. They would rather stay here, even as beggars. And this kind of mood is quite widespread among Chinese Malaysians (Chang 2001).[19]

[17] Chinese Malaysian scholar Ting Su-hie also notes a similar situation to Buming's and says: "On one occasion, while on a research field trip, a Malay participant insisted on speaking Standard Malay to me. He asked me why I could master English but still could not speak Malay proficiently, implying that I was not a true Malaysian" (Ting 2001: 55).

[18] 現在不一樣了，英文已經不是官方語言，你回去一定給吊個半死！他們大概會約談你。

[19] 我們到底是以中國人或馬來西亞的中國人或怎麼樣的身分存在於那個地方？馬來西亞也許在表面上看不出來，但其實在暗地裡他們排華的情況是相當嚴重的！尤其當我到台灣來之後，對過去的那種被排擠的感受更是強烈，我的家人就說來到台灣真爽，看到的都是中國人，他們說真爽！到台灣來就算當乞丐也都願意。那樣的心境，是馬來西亞華人很普遍的心聲。

It is not difficult to see Chang Kuei-hsing's own frustration reflected in Buming's anger directed to the immigration officer, whom he calls *babi* ("pig" in Malay). However, he is not the only character in the novella who expresses negative feelings towards ethnic Malays. Spider Face, a Chinese elder who sits next to him on the bus, repeatedly refers to Malays as "devils" (馬來鬼 *malai gui* in Chinese) and has a very low opinion of them. Spider Face, then, becomes the voice of the ethnic Chinese growing discontent with an increasingly Malayanised Sarawak:

> Good you are going back to Taiwan. Here you only have food on your table if you wipe those Malay devils' asses. Go back to Taiwan! Those Malays are a bunch of good-for-nothings: they sleep until the sun burns their asses. Look at this one, he started snoring as soon as he got seated! (Chang 2013b: 307)[20]

A similar idea is voiced by another man Buming meets along the way, this time a Westerner:

> Buming asked: "Do you prefer the Malays or the Chinese?"
> Blue Eyes answered: "Good question! I think I like Chinese people better. Malays are just bumming around all day, they spend their lives sleeping: they dream at night and sleepwalk during the day!" (Chang 2013b: 311)[21]

Both Spider Face and Blue Eyes seem to reinforce the idea of the "lazy native," a typically colonialist perception lacking even the slightest scientific evidence that, according to Syed Hussein Alatas, "was drawn on the basis of cursory observations, sometimes with strong built-in prejudices, or misunderstandings and faulty methodologies" (1977: 112). Moreover, both characters seem to corroborate the fact that "Malays often are labelled as lazy" (Chiu 2000: 589). However, while Blue Eyes' prejudices stem from an imperialist mind-set, Spider Face, an ethnic Chinese, seems to be moved by resentment, a feeling that becomes clear when he voices his concern for the hardships faced by many younger Chinese Malaysians:

> The sons of a few friends of mine are Taiwan graduates, as well. I've told them not to let their sons come back here, but they just didn't listen. Well, now they are back and what

[20] 你回台灣沒錯，在這邊幫馬來鬼擦屁股才有飯吃，回台灣好，那些馬來人，一個個都沒用，早上睡到太陽早上睡到太陽晒得屁股冒煙才起身，你看這個馬來人[...]一坐下來睡得鼻孔八個洞！

[21] 不明說：「你喜歡馬來人還是中國人？」藍眼說：「問得好，我想我喜歡中國人，馬來人一天到晚都渾渾噩噩的，好像一年到頭都在濫睡，晚上做夢，白天夢遊。[...]」

> for?! It's those Malay devils who couldn't care less about your Taiwanese degrees, not me! You can only count on yourselves. (Chang 2013b: 306–307)[22]

The fact that Taiwanese and other foreign degrees were not officially recognised in Malaysia put many Chinese Malaysian returnees such as Buming in an uncompetitive and marginal professional position, since they were often "denied and scoffed at on the spot by potential employers because their education qualification was not recognised by the Malaysian government" (Soon 2014). While professional marginalisation was – and, to a certain extent, still is – a common cause for disillusionment among younger Chinese Malaysians who decided not to move back to Malaysia, it also became a decisive factor in forming a new transnational and fluid identity within the Sinosphere, as is the case with Chang Kuei-hsing himself.[23] In the novella, Chang also seems to touch upon the idea that, for many Chinese Malaysians, their official identity and the (self-)perceived one do not always correspond. In theory, Buming's status as Malaysian is undeniable, since his passport says so and Chang decides to provide such apparently unquestionable fact by reproducing Buming's passport information in the text (Chang 2013b: 299–300). Despite this, however, his status as a Malaysian is questioned throughout the text: the Malays he interacts with do not understand how, as a Malaysian, he doesn't speak the national language, the policemen call him "Chinaman" (支那人 *zhinaren*),[24] completely erasing his Malaysian identity, and the reporter from Radio Brunei addresses him with the Chinese term 中國人 (*zhongguoren*), which literally means "person of China". Another ethnic Chinese journalist, who presents himself as a mediator between Buming and the police forces, uses the expression "descendants of the Yellow Emperor" (炎黃子孫 *Yanhuang zisun*), stressing their common ethnic and cultural ancestry. Hence, Chang Kuei-hsing presents Buming as an ethnic Chinese whose identity is fluid, situational, subject to constant scrutiny and, most importantly, always incomplete: an incomplete Malaysian unable to speak Malay, and an incomplete Chinese, who needs a visa to re-enter the RoC/Taiwan.

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[22] 我有幾個朋友的兒子也是台灣大學畢業的，我同他們講叫他們兒子不要回來，他們不聽我的，好，回來了，有屁用！不是我看不起你們台灣畢業的，馬來鬼不承認都沒相干，你要靠你自己。

[23] The problems faced by Chinese Malaysians with Taiwanese degrees is discussed in other Sinophone Malaysian texts, as well. See, for example, Shang Wanyun (商晚筠)'s novella *Xialihe* (夏麗赫, 1978), in which Yali, the ethnic Chinese narrator, is confronted with the same difficulties described by Chang in *Wandao. Lanhua. Zuolunqiang*.

[24] The term derives from 支那 (Shina しな), one of several Japanese toponyms for China. Although it did not originally have negative connotations, it became pejorative in the context of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). For an illuminating discussion on the issue, see Fogel (2012).

However, through the end of the narration, national and ethnic identities all become irrelevant as a new social identity is cast upon him: he is now the criminal (歹徒 daitu) who hijacked the Malay family's car. At a loss, Buming tries to break away from the police by holding the family's daughter hostage, hence conforming to his fate and this imposed, new persona (Chang 2013b: 336). Allegorically, Buming's desperate flight can be considered a metaphor for many Chinese Malaysians' emigration and displacement; his final drowning into muddy waters powerfully symbolising Chang's (as well as many fellow Chinese Malaysians') complete and categorical abandonment of his homeland. Chang Kuei-hsing admitted to his feeling of having escaped from a backward village that couldn't offer any good prospects, hence his unwillingness to elaborate on his Sarawakian memories for the first ten years in Taiwan (Chang 2001).

Additionally, Buming's body slowly sinking into the mud is also a tragic symbol: the epitome of the eroded status of languages other than Malay in a new society in which Malaysians who don't master *Bahasa Malaysia* have lost their ability to communicate. Miscommunication and lack of understanding between Buming and the Malay characters is a pivotal issue in the novella, central to the unfolding of the narration from the beginning to its tragic outcome. In the second half of *Wandao. Lanhua. Zuolunqiang*, after Buming has been successful in obtaining his RoC visa in Brunei, his return to Sarawak (from where he is expected to embark a plane for Taiwan) is hindered not only by the temporary suspension of transportation options between the two places but also, and most decisively, by his inability to make himself understood. Desperate to get a ride on a private vehicle on its way out of Kuala Belait (Brunei) and into Sarawak, Buming throws himself in front of a red car. While the Malay family of four stares at him in astonishment, he tries to make himself understood, but to no avail. Brandishing the Dayak machete he bought as a souvenir and convinced that the four have agreed to give him a ride, Buming squeezes himself into the car, next to the Malay siblings, a boy and a girl. His efforts to communicate with the young girl, however, fall on deaf ears:

> Hello! My name is Shen Buming. You really don't speak *English*!? [...] If you don't speak English, then talk to me in Malay, it's ok, you can speak and use your hands and gestures at the same time, just like I am doing right now. That way I can understand something, perhaps (Chang 2013b: 321).[25]

[25] 哈囉，我叫沈不明，妳真的不會講鶯歌力嘶嗎？[...] 妳不會講英文，就講馬來文，沒關係，妳可以邊講邊做手勢和表情，像我現在一樣，也許我可以聽懂一點。

Chang Kuei-hsing makes *Bahasa Malaysia* incomprehensible not only to Buming, but to the reader as well. While dialogues in English, the other non-Sinitic language of communication used in the novella, are rendered in Mandarin, thus making them accessible to Sinophone readers, utterances in Malay are always reproduced with a mix of symbols, letters of the Latin alphabet and meaningless Sinitic characters. This happens, for instance, when Buming turns the TV on and two Malay women are chatting: "Δ◯咿嘢★RKMXY 嗚唔ㄣ↓"(Chang 2013b: 312), but also when he is in the car with the Malay family, thus causing the reader to experience the same feeling of confusion. The impossibility to communicate and the feeling of having been misunderstood all along are the cause for frustration, disorientation and despair, all feelings Chang Kuei-hsing experienced in Sarawak and that pushed him away from his homeland, in search of a place where his ethnic identity would not be dismissed. Therefore, while it is true that *Wandao. Lanhua. Zuolunqiang* constitutes one of Chang's earliest examples of rainforest writing, it presents his native land in an unprocessed way. Here, Chang's Borneo has not been reconstructed through the prism of memory and it has yet to become the literary site where the history (and the stories) of the ethnic Chinese unfolds; it is not yet what Wong Lihlih considers to be a rich and complex literary setting, a site for the production of a sentimental narrative of the rainforest (2015: 110), nor is it the homeland reclaimed through memory as in later works, such as the already-mentioned *Sailian zhi ge* and *Yezhu du he*. It is, on the contrary, a crude realm, a site of constant confrontation and failed communication, a place where ability to communicate in *Bahasa Malaysia* and national identity are first tested, then dismissed. Additionally, it is a hostile homeland where people are dehumanised, as shown by Chang Kuei-hsing's choice to almost always address characters by nicknames.[26]

Lastly, although the novella is entirely set between Sarawak and Brunei, it should be considered a product of Chang's Taiwanisation, in which his native rainforest is used as a literary gimmick to underline the author's embracing of a local, Taiwanese consciousness (Wang 2014). Hence, *Wandao. Lanhua. Zuolunqiang* can be considered one of Chang Kuei-hsing's earliest examples of translocalism, in which although not physically present, Taiwan is used as the bridging stone between the homeland and Chineseness.[27] From one island to another, Chang frees himself from the suffocating homeland that, due to Malaynisation, is not "home" but just "land" and at the same time attempts to recreate it

[26] Apart from the already mentioned Spider Face and Blue Eyes and the many Malay characters who are often insultingly referred to as "pigs," the Malay father whose car Buming forces himself into is called Fatty Ears, his wife is nicknamed Heavy Makeup, while Fatima, the daughter, is often referred to as Orchid, because of the flower in her hair.

[27] Wu Chia-rong (2016) addresses the role of Taiwan as a cultural medium between China and Malaysia in the fiction of both Chang Kuei-hsing and Lee Yung-ping.

in a safer, new homeland where his identity is not questioned and his right to Chineseness is not hindered. Symbolically, Buming's only safe haven throughout the novella is the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office, where things go smoothly, where communication flows and where there is no trace of the gloominess of the outside world.

4. Conclusion

While Chang Kuei-hsing has been harshly accused by local Sinophone Sarawakian authors such as Tian Si of presenting a distorted version of Borneo (Chai 2016: 8), it cannot be denied that he is one of the key authors that shaped Taiwanese and other Sinophone readers' consciousness vis-à-vis his Southeast Asian homeland and the often-difficult situation of Chinese Sarawakian communities. Although Chang's consistent use of the Sarawakian rainforest as the main background for his short and long fiction becomes his literary trademark only with the novel *Sailian zhi ge*, the analysis of *Wandao. Lanhua. Zuolunqiang* has shown that his homeland has been present in his literary imagination since the early eighties, albeit serving a different purpose. Far from displaying the fictionalised and magical Borneo of his later works, the novella proposes an unprocessed local environment as seen from the perspective of a Chinese Malaysian intellectual who is still coming to terms with a new Malay-dominated Malaysia, where the languages, the culture and the identity of the ethnic Chinese are being unapologetically pushed aside. Therefore, this article has demonstrated how the novella, by engaging with issues such as mis/communication and the challenges faced by Chinese Malaysians, not only helps us understand the personal and literary evolution of one of the most important Sinophone writers in Taiwan, but also the painful process of identity de/construction and re/construction faced by many ethnic Chinese in post-independence Malaysia. Moreover, by directly addressing issues pertaining to national identity, the analysis of the novella compels us to problematise the labels with which transnational Sinophone writers such as Chang Kuei-hsing are often presented: while definitely a Sinophone author, his Malaysian identity is complex and should be analysed more thoroughly. Perhaps, unless the term Malaysia is enriched with the plurality of East Malaysia's historical, cultural and ethnic uniqueness, it should be discarded in favour of his Sarawakian identity: that would not only do justice to the centrality of North Borneo in his works, but also to Sinophone Sarawakian literature, a literary system in constant danger of being silenced and hidden under the idea of a monolithic and homogeneous Sinophone Malaysian literature.

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