

# Narrating Ethnic Relations in Sinophone Malaysian Fiction: “Wei xiang” as a Case Study

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## *Abstract*

Malaysia, as an ethnically diverse country, is the site of regular interactions among people from different ethnic groups. However, while Malay literature does not seem to be especially concerned with the portrayal of these interactions, many Sinophone Malaysian writers centre their works on these ethnic relations. Through the textual analysis of “Wei xiang” a Sinophone Malaysian short story by Ding Yun, the paper argues that Sinophone Malaysian fiction, by presenting Malaysia in its ethnic diversity, transcends the official label of sectional, ethnic or community-based literature. Moreover, the article claims that, through focusing on the struggles and the preoccupations of the Malaysian people regardless of their ethnic background, Ding Yun’s story, although not written in the national language, should be part of the *Kesusasteraan Nasional Malaysia* (Malaysian national literature).

*Keywords:* *Ding Yun, ethnic relations, Malaysian literature, Sinophone fiction, Sinophone Malaysian literature*

## *1. Introduction*

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country where Malays and other indigenous peoples share the country’s territory with people of Chinese and Indian origin; therefore, ethnic interactions constitute the backbone of most daily social activities. Moreover, as Malaysian Chinese poet Kee Thuan Chye observes, ethnic issues are both “pressing and central to [Malaysian] society and will never be resolved if [Malaysians] don’t properly address them” (2009, 87). Similarly, Lee Hock Guan notes that “ethnicity remains the most potent force in Malaysia even if of late its influence has been somewhat adulterated by other social stratification forces, principally class and gender” (2000, 1).

As a result, this social phenomenon is often portrayed in literary works by Malaysian authors. However, while the depiction of ethnic interaction abounds in Sinophone fiction<sup>1</sup> and, to a lesser extent, in Anglophone Malaysian fiction by non-Malay writers, literature in Malay touches upon this topic only tangentially, as it tends to focus on either nationalistic struggles or on religious themes highlighting recurring ideas of *aqidah* (Islamic faith). As noted by Omar, “one of the biggest challenges faced by writers of Modern Malay Literature is to depict the multicultural reality of modern Malaysian life. This reality is rarely handled by these writers, with most of them choosing only to depict an ethnocentric reality populated with Malay characters, and issues that are seemingly of exclusive concern to Malay community” (2014, 142).

Hence, in Sinophone Malaysian fiction one finds an openness to the issue of how to approach the Other that remains still unexplored in Malay-language production. This situation is clearly a result of the different positions held by the Chinese and the Malay ethnic groups within post-independence Malaysian society. The dominant Malay group has constructed a strong ethnic/national identity, based on indigenous culture and Islam, which leaves little room for the incorporation of Chinese and Indian elements<sup>2</sup>. The closed and hegemonic character of the dominant cultural discourse is reflected in the literature of the dominant Malay group: a literature in which identity issues are mostly fixed and literary identity conforms to the idea of a national cultural identity. By doing so, it validates a rather old-fashioned and static idea of identity typical of the Nineteenth century which, however, doesn't take into consideration the fact that “cultural identity exists only through its own deconstruction and permanent multiplication of several cultural relations” (Skulj 2000, 1).

Conversely, Sinophone Malaysian literature is produced from a peripheral position. Sinophone Malaysian authors write in a situation of marginality: at the margins of the Sinophone world, but also at the political, social and

<sup>1</sup> I use the expression “Sinophone fiction” to refer to narrative texts written in a Sinitic language at “the margins of geopolitical nation-states and their hegemonic production” (Shih 2011, 710).

<sup>2</sup> The Malay-dominated government has shaped what one might consider a fictive ethnicity named *Bumiputra* (alternatively spelled *Bumiputera*, which literally means ‘children of the soil’ in Malay). This umbrella term collectively refers to those peoples who are indigenous to the region. Ethnic Malays constitute the dominant *Bumiputra* group, but the *Orang Asli* (the aboriginal people of Peninsular Malaysia), and the various indigenous groups of the Malaysian Borneo, such as the *Iban* people in Sarawak and the *Kadazan-Dusun* in Sabah also belong to this ethnic group. The conceptualization of a new ethnic category aimed at accommodating both Muslim and non-Muslim indigenous groups had a political and economic justification. In fact, with the implementation of the New Economic Policy of 1971, this category became official and “critical in the distribution of development benefits to poor people and also the entrepreneurial middle class” (Shamsul 2001, 364).

cultural fringes of their own country, Malaysia. Hence, they portray their community's interaction with the Other to identify the nature and the place of the Self. While these interactions are mainly addressed from the perspective of the Chinese community, there are cases in which authors chose a non-ethnocentric approach thus overcoming the label of community-based literature (*sastera sukuan*), as is the case with Ding Yun 丁雲 and his short story "Wei xiang" (圍鄉 or "The Besieged Village" in English). The story is also of relevance since it depicts the changes in ethnic relations as a direct consequence of the racial riots of 1969.

## 2. *Ethnic relations in Malaysia*

At the time of independence (1957), at the time of the events narrated in "Wei xiang" (1969), but also when the story was published (1983) and to this date, Malaysia was and is an ethnically diverse country, a characteristic further complicated by other types of differences, such as religious, economic and linguistic ones. In post-independence Malaysia, relations among different sectors of the population have been characterized by the emphasis put on ethnicity; therefore, the way in which different ethnic groups interact is central to Malaysian public life.

Ethnic interaction in contemporary Malaysia is generally thought as being a direct consequence of the Kuala Lumpur racial riots of 1969 which "have affected and to a certain extent, changed the economic, political, and ideological situations in Malaysia from then onwards. By implication, pre-1969 and post-1969 independent Malaysia has been viewed broadly as two somewhat distinct periods in the history of post-colonial Malaysia" (Shamsul 1986, 84). The riots were ignited by the unprecedented Chinese victory in the general elections of that same year and the subsequent threat to Malay political dominance. After the incident of that year, Malaysian politics and society took a radical twist: parliamentary activities were suspended and restored only in February 1971. The re-established Parliament passed, without any constructive discussion, a series of laws and policies which would greatly affect Malaysian society and the way in which ethnic groups interact.

According to the new laws, it was now illegal "to discuss sensitive issues such as the 'special rights' of the Malays and other indigenous population [...], citizenship rights of the non-Malays, the Malay rulers, and the use of Bahasa Melayu as the official language" (Chin 2009, 167). However, the policy which had the greatest impact on ethnic relations in Malaysia was the New Economic Policy (NEP — *Dasar Ekonomi Baru*) ratified by the Malaysian Parliament in 1971. The NEP reached every layer of Malaysian society and affected all ethnic groups. According to Jomo,

[it] had two prongs, namely “poverty eradication regardless of race” and “restructuring society to eliminate the identification of race with economic function”. The NEP was supposed to create the conditions for national unity by reducing interethnic resentment due to socioeconomic disparities. In practice, the NEP policies were seen as pro-*bumiputera*, or more specifically, pro-Malay, the largest indigenous ethnic community. Poverty reduction efforts have been seen as primarily rural and Malay, with policies principally oriented to rural Malay peasants. As poverty reduction efforts had been uncontroversial and had declined in significance over time, the NEP came to be increasingly identified with efforts at “restructuring society” efforts to reduce interethnic disparities, especially between ethnic Malay and ethnic Chinese Malaysians. (2004, iii)

However, the NEP far from reaching the integration of all ethnic groups in the political and economic administration of national wealth, highlighted “the racial divide between Malays and non-Malays in Malaysia. It has not only frozen racial relations but is seen as a symbol of *Ketuanan Melayu* [Malay dominance]” (Chin 2009, 167). Therefore, the NEP, while officially aimed at building a more equal and prosperous society, resulted in a series of actions that alienated the Chinese and Indian communities, causing a climate of resentment and mutual suspicion among the country’s main ethnic groups.

It is in this complex ethnic environment that Ding Yun bravely produced “Wei xiang”, a lucid and objective account of one of the main issues in Malaysian society.

### 3. *Malaysian National Literature and Its Identity*

Several scholars have analyzed the Sinophone dimension of Sinophone Malaysian literature, stressing its transnational character (Bernards 2016) and its identity concerns *vis-à-vis* the cultural environment of post-independence Malaysia (Groppe 2013); issues related to the Malaysian aspect of Sinophone Malaysian literature in connection with the debates around what constitutes Malaysian literature from the official perspective, on the other hand, have been largely neglected by international scholarship. However, to understand the position from which Sinophone Malaysian writers portray ethnic relations, I deem it necessary to address the issue of what constitutes Malaysian literature.

After gaining independence from Britain in 1957, the then Federation of Malaya (Malaysia since 1963) instituted Malay as the official language of the country. However, English was accorded concurrent official status until 1967 when the National Language Act (NLA) officialized Malay as the only national language, thus completing the transformation of *Bahasa Melayu* (i.e. the Malay language) into *Bahasa Malaysia* (i.e. the Malaysian language), the official language of all ethnic groups, including the Chinese.

Additionally, in 1971, the National Culture Policy (NCP) was launched. This policy is based on three fundamental principles, namely that “the national

culture must be based on the indigenous culture of this region”, that “suitable elements from the other culture may be accepted as part of the national culture” and that “Islam is an important component in the formulation of the national culture”<sup>3</sup>.

While the main aim of both the NLA and the NCP was to strengthen national unity, they resulted in the further construction of barriers between *us* (Bumiputra) and *them* (non-indigenous ethnic groups) and in the marginalization of those ethnic groups that did not express themselves in the national language and whose cultures were not based on the fundamental principles of the NCP.

In the literary field, according to the official discourse only works written in Malay can be considered part of the national literary canon, while texts written in non-indigenous languages such as English, the language of the former colonizer, Chinese and Tamil fall within the category of sectional or community-based literature (*sastera sukuan*).

Scholar Ismail Hussein while considering that Malay, vernacular and non-indigenous literatures conform the Malaysian literary polysystem (*kesusasteraan Malaysia*), also insists on the fact that only literary production in Malay has national value. Literatures in other vernacular languages must be considered ‘local literatures’ (*sastera daerah*) while those in non-indigenous languages are by and for limited ethnic groups; therefore, they cannot be considered part of the national literary canon (2006 [1976], 35). Ismail Hussein, therefore, not only reinforces the central role of Malay literature within this polysystem, but also subordinates non-Malay literature to it, as noted by Xu Wenrong (2003).

Similarly, the position of influential Malaysian scholar Muhammad Haji Salleh is a clear indication of the official position towards non-indigenous literary traditions. In his *An Introduction to Modern Malaysian Literature*, the author consistently uses the term Malaysian to denote Malay literature, since he “focuses only on the literature written in the national language of Malaysia” (2008, xvi).

*Sea of Rainbows*, edited by Muhammad Haji Salleh in 2009, carries the misleading subtitle *An Anthology of Multi-cultural Short Stories from Malaysia*.

<sup>3</sup> Since the implementation of the policy, the government actively intervenes in the promotion of these three pillars. This results in, for instance, increased university-level research on Malay folklore and traditional arts and practices, an abundance of publicly-funded festivals and performances devoted to traditional Malay performing arts, and so on (Van der Heide 2002, 96). Conversely, specifically non-Malay cultural activities are generally privately-funded. Moreover, even when funded through private patronage, non-Malay cultural performances are subject to the acquisition of government permits, a practice which allows policy-makers to exert further control over the social and cultural life of non-Malay communities (Carstens 2005, 151). Additionally, except for listing the Chinese New Year and the Indian Deepavali festival as federal public holidays, the government did not incorporate any elements of these non-Malay cultures within Malaysian national culture.

While the collection was conceived with the noble aim of drawing “together works from the rainbow of ethnic groups/races that live in Malaysia at present” (ix), it only showcases the multicultural Malaysia that expresses itself in Malay. In fact, the anthology presents the English translation of short stories selected following one main criterion, “that the authors write in the national language, Malay” (ivi, x).

Malay scholar Mohammad A. Quayum has, on the other hand, an inclusive approach to Malaysian literature as shown in *Writing a Nation: Essays on Malaysian Literature* (2009), in which he brings literature written in Malay and literatures written in non-indigenous languages together on an equal level, believing “that as long as a work is by a Malaysian writer and deals with Malaysian experiences and Malaysian immigration, no matter what linguistic or literary category it belong to, it still comes within the scope of Malaysian literature, be it in the category of ‘Sectional Literature’ or ‘National Literature’” (1). While Quayum doesn’t advocate for the inclusion of Sinophone literature within the national literary canon, he argues that

the language policy should not translate into a literature policy and the medium should not be the sole criterion for the definition of national literature. On the contrary, emphasis should be on the meaning and message of the writing as well. As long as a literary work [...] contributes to the formation and progression of nationhood and national identity, it should be seen as part of the self-constituting entity of national literature. (2009, 65)

In another scholarly article contained in *Writing a Nation*, Anglophone Malaysian poet Wong Phui Nam unequivocally questions the validity of setting Malay literature apart from non-indigenous literatures and sees such a practice as an attempt at cultural assimilation. Wong states that “all writings in languages other than Bahasa Malaysia are being marginalized into insignificance as ‘sectional literatures,’ not worthy of serious consideration” (2009, 59). Moreover, Wong envisions an impoverishment of Malay literature due to its lack of interaction with non-indigenous literatures. He states that

[t]his setting apart of writers in Bahasa Malaysia from all others will lead to them communing only among themselves apart from all others. Such a closing off of external contacts always means a closing of minds to new ideas, new perspectives on old issues, new ways of feeling and so on. This will surely lead to a gradual stultification of the creative genius of writers in the language. The signs of this are already evident in the current writing. (*Ibidem*)

Chinese Malaysian scholar Chong Fa Hing opposes the idea of a Malaysian literature because he considers it as devoid of any concrete meaning (2009, 70). Moreover, Chong states that “Malaysian literature is measured by its geo-political and citizenship background of its writers. Similarly, National

Literature is tied to the language used. Both criteria have no relation to the issue of literariness or any internal factors which are essential for defining literature” (ivi, 71).

Taiwan-based Malaysian scholar Tee Kim Tong questions the existence of a national literature in Malaysia and notes that all literatures are ethnic or racialized, since Sinophone Malaysian literature focuses on the ethnic Chinese experience, literature in Tamil depicts the Indian community and Malay literature is centred on the Malay ethnic group (2009, 10). Tee also notes the marginal position of Sinophone Malaysian literature (or *Mahua*, as he refers to it) within the Malaysian literary polysystem, which does not officially recognize it as national literature. Tee points out that the official discourse on national and sectional literatures fails to “indicate the border space and subject position of *Mahua* literature in Malaysia; they merely restate that, though produced by Malaysians, *Mahua* literature is denied its national nature in the public sphere. Existing on the borderlines of such literary and political discourses, *Mahua* literature, in fact, positions itself as a border literature to interrogate the question of national literature” (2006, 170).

The marginalization of Sinophone Malaysian literature stems from its belonging, both linguistically and culturally, to a non-indigenous ethnic community. Its position apart from being liminal is also contradictory; while by being the expression of the Chinese diasporic community in Malaysia, it is recognized as quintessentially Malaysian within the Sinophone literary polysystem, for the Malaysian official discourse, this very same characteristic is not enough for it to be considered a literary expression of *Bangsa Malaysia* (the Malaysian nation). Malaysian scholar Fan Pik Wah shares Tee’s view of literary marginalization and associates it to a shared Chinese Malaysian feeling of being socially and politically discriminated against (2008, 62).

According to Chong Fah Hing, literary marginalization, whether real or perceived, should be overcome from within. To have a chance of becoming national, Sinophone and other non-indigenous literatures should focus less on community issues and “initiate the move to include the images of Malaysians in general. In other words, it is a responsibility to realise a mission not achieved in any of the literary groups to date. This includes formulating themes and issues, setting, characters, moods, humanist sensitivity and speech” (2009, 79). Therefore, Chong proposes to overcome the national/sectional divide through a multilingual national literature (多語-國家文學, *duoyu-guojia wenxue*; 2006a, 15).

Language in the discourse on national literature is not only connected with writers, but also with their readership. According to Ismail Hussein, the reason why literature in Malay should be considered national is because it is the only literature able to speak to all Malaysians regardless of their ethnic background (2006 [1976], 36).

Similarly, Malay scholar Syed Husin Ali insists on the fact that being written in ethnic languages, Sinophone and Tamil literatures only speak to their respective communities and cannot reach all Malaysians. Nevertheless, Syed Husin Ali suggests that although they are not Malaysian in the language they use, they can be Malaysian in the topics they deal with. The scholar proposes that by including a faithful depiction of Malaysian society with its diversity and multiethnic environment, they can open a space for dialogue among the various communities which can trespass the written page (2006, 54). In this respect, Sinophone Malaysian literature is at the forefront of interethnic dialogue and the portrayal of ethnic relations.

While the official discourse does not see Sinophone Malaysian literature as national literature, many ethnic Chinese scholars in Malaysia and abroad stress the Malaysian component of the Sinophone production. For instance, Xu Wenrong takes a clear ideological stance when translating *Mahua wenxue* as *Malaysian literature in Chinese*. To him, it is first and foremost an essential and constitutive part of the national literary polysystem (Chong 2006b, 107).

#### 4. “*Wei xiang*” as a case study

While Malaysian official discourse does not grant Sinophone Malaysian literature the status of national literature based on a linguistic issue, Sinophone writers have succeeded in depicting the ethnic plurality of Malaysian society, far more than authors that express themselves in the national language. Like Noritah Omar, Ungku Maimunah Mohd Tahir notes how ethnic interactions are consistently absent from Malay literature. She states that “although there are works that address these matters, they are usually coloured by certain perceptions. Racial issues perceived in these works are portrayed in a positive light, depicting harmonious racial relationships manifested through interracial marriages, such as when non-Muslims embrace Islam, or adopted children (usually Chinese children raised by Malays) bring together two estranged families” (as cited in Omar 2014, 142).

Authors who write their works in English, the language of the former colonizer, also deal with ethnic issues far less than Sinophone writers do. According to Jerome Ting and Ruzy Suliza Hashim, Anglophone Malaysian writers face several challenges when “writing about Malaysia’s plurality and diversity as the result of their own ethnocentric preoccupations with characters from their respective ethnic communities and the issues affecting them” (Collin, Su Hie, Hashim 2016, 24). Seen under a positive light, however, we can say that these challenges faced by Malaysian authors are opportunities that can turn into infinite possibilities when shaping fictional characters and stories. As suggested by Raihanah Mohd Mydin, “a multicultural landscape presents a platform for authors to air the country’s multitude of voices. In a society with such diverse ethnicities, cultures and religions, writers have a larger pool of exposure to draw from” (2009, 44).



While it is true that Sinophone Malaysian authors see ethnic relations from the perspective of the Chinese community, it is also true that exposure to such perspective is necessary if one wants to understand the literatures written by Malaysian subjects in their plurality. Moreover, the portrayal of ethnic relations in Sinophone Malaysian fiction shows a preoccupation with and a commitment to the local reality that goes well beyond the scope of what the official discourse calls sectional or ethnic literature, as it delves into issues that are of national interest. This adherence to the local reality responds to a process of *nativization* that has gradually turned Sinophone Malaysian literature into a literary expression of Malaysia, an “hybridized phenomenon involving dialectical relationship between the grafted Chinese cultural systems and an indigenous ontology” (Wong 2004, 19).

Such “dialectical relationship” between Chinese and indigenous cultural systems is at the core of Ding Yun’s<sup>4</sup> “Wei xiang”, a short story published in 1983. “Wei xiang” is a claustrophobic account of how the Kuala Lumpur ethnic riots of May 1969 affected the lives of the rural dwellers of Hulu Langat, at the time a quiet hamlet in Selangor, now a booming area in the heavily-urbanized Klang Valley. The short story shows how the riots ended the feeble multiethnic coexistence on which Malaysian society rested. More specifically, in the story Ding Yun describes how life in the settlement takes a negative turn for twenty-two-year-old ethnic Chinese truck driver Lin Tuo, his father Lin Zhen and his younger sister, Xiaotao. Throughout the story, the author highlights the contrast between the peaceful ethnic relations before the riots and the climate of fear and mutual suspicion during and after the tumults. It can thus be considered a literary anatomy of the evolution of Chinese-Malay relations as well as an attempt at shedding light on the causes of the 1969 incident. Although it is not the only fictional work that deals with the issue, it does delve into it from a fresh, non-intellectual perspective, as noted by Lim Kien Ket (2004, 60)<sup>5</sup>.

“Wei xiang” opens with a scene of peaceful ethnic cooperation as Lin Tuo and his assistant Kunzai help two Malay drivers, Samad and Mohammad, with their damaged truck. Both the names and the fact that Samad is described as wearing a *songkok*, a typical cap widely worn by males in the Malay world as part of the traditional Muslim attire, reveal the ethnic background of the two Malays.

<sup>4</sup> Ding Yun (pen name of Chen Chun’an) was born in 1952 in the Klang area of Peninsular Malaysia. The personal path of Ding Yun is common to other Sinophone Malaysian authors: of Hokkien parentage, he was born into a peasant family and after graduating from a Chinese-language elementary school he took up numerous jobs before starting his writing career in 1974. He is considered one of the most important Sinophone Malaysian authors of the 1980s.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Anglophone Malaysian author Lloyd Fernando relates the riots in his 1993 novel *Green is the Colour*. Shirley Geok-lin Lim also deals with the issue in *Joss and Gold*, an English-language novel published in 2001.

The first descriptive passages introduce the reader to the tranquil living conditions of the Chinese community before 1969 and reflect the frugality of the Chinese Malaysian rural experience:

他家的屋子是用粗大的林木和一些鋸木廠的棄板料釘釘搭搭起來的，屋頂是亞答加一些鋅片，總之雜亂無章的，擋風遮雨倒也相當堅實。屋子後頭靠近森林，有一些空地 [...] 墾出塊田園來。(Ding 1983, 9)

Their [Lin family's] house had been built by assembling, piece by piece, sturdy logs collected in the surrounding forest and wooden sheets discarded by the local sawmill. The roof was made of *attap*, a thatch made from *nipah* and other palm trees, and zinc sheets: a very messy thing indeed, but it was solid enough to shelter them from the storms. The back of the house was very close to the forest, from which was separated by an open ground [...] that they started farming.<sup>6</sup>

As the narration unfolds, however, Lin Tuo starts to question the durability of their relations with the surrounding communities of different ethnic background:

他想在這窮壞的山裡，能弄出甚麼亂子來？馬來人，華人，或者是山族人，同在一起討生活，一起工作，偶有齟齬爭執是有的，暴亂嗎？殺人嗎？那是屬於混雜紛亂的繁華城市的事！(Ivi, 14)

“What kind of disturbances could ever take place in such a remote and poor mountain region?” he thought. Malay, Chinese and *Orang Asli* worked together to make a living. Of course, every now and then there would be disagreements leading to quarrels, but riots? Slaying? Those things belonged to bustling cities, with their diversity and their tumults!

In the harsh mountainous environment, ethnic relations are marked by interdependence rather than confrontation. Therefore, ethnic identity is not an impediment to cooperation and the nature of such relations is determined by the social environment in which they are performed, rather than by ethnicity. Hence, the urban performance of ethnic relations is in stark contrast with the tranquillity of the rural *milieu*:

<sup>6</sup> There is no published English translation of the story. Therefore, all the translations are by the author.

「阿拓，你還想開工嗎？都戒嚴了，外面亂得不得了，又是放火燒屋，少汽車，又是殺人……」[...] 新聞報告說是甚麼吉隆坡某地區發生了暴亂縱火殺人的事件，政府即宣佈全國進入緊急狀態，勸告人們留在家中不要出門。(Ibidem)

“A Tuo, do you plan to go to work?! Martial law has been imposed. Things have gone crazy out there, they are burning down houses, cars. They are even killing people...” [...] The news report had informed that somewhere in Kuala Lumpur there had been riots, including arson and murders. The federal government had already called a state of crisis and had advised all citizens to stay at home.

At this point of the narration, the feeling is that the differences presented are social (urban *vs* rural *milieu*) rather than ethnic. While people in Kuala Lumpur engage in violent ethnic confrontations, Chinese and Malay rural dwellers share a common feeling of fear:

河之園板廠裡自然也住著些馬來人，大概有七八人，有的是伐木營或板廠裡幹鋸木工作的工人，還有兩個是政府森林局工作人員；他們也有情人或朋友在城市內的暴亂區。昨晚他們也跟華人在一起從電視上知悉戒嚴的消息，慌亂和憂慮是大家共同的感受。(Ivi, 14-15)

A few Malays lived in River Garden, the village by the sawmill. There were maybe seven or eight of them. Some were lumberjacks, some sew wood at the mill. There were also two clerks sent by the Bureau of Forest Affairs who had friends or relatives in the area where the riots had burst. The night before they had learnt of the martial law from the news, together with the Chinese, and everybody was worried and alarmed.

Nevertheless, the situation takes a negative turn in the rural area as well, and division along ethnic lines begins to surface: a gloomy sense of fear, symbolized by the oppressive geographic position of the village, locked in a valley surrounded by mountains, sets over the population. Ethnic polarization appears, despite the shared sense of fear. The Chinese from the River Garden village start to feel trapped, and sensing that the situation might degenerate, they start to leave:

「那幾個馬來人啊[...] 都走了，也不知道是幾時走的，昨晚大家還在一起看電視，聽到戒嚴的消息，大家還在一起談論那件事，我們也沒說甚麼，怎麼想到他們會疑心生暗鬼的……大概是在半夜裡悄悄的溜到外面加蕉路的馬來甘榜去吧！」[...] 鋸木廠三面環山，唯一通往鎮上的路就是馬來甘榜坐落之處，彷彿形成第四道屏障包圍著河之園……如果戒嚴繼續下去，如果暴亂不休止，甚麼事件都可能發生。(Ibidem)

The Malays [...] have left, but I don't know when. Last night, we were watching TV together and after we learnt of the martial law, we discussed the news together. We didn't say anything bad. Who would have thought that they would become so suspicious of us? They've probably left in the middle of the night and taken shelter in the Malay *kampung* along Jalan Kacau. [...] Our sawmill was surrounded by mountains on three sides and the only way up to the village was through the Malay *kampung*. Now it was as if the *kampung* had become the fourth barrier blocking the way in and the way out of River Garden... If the martial law was not withdrawn and the riots continued, anything could happen.

The shift toward ethnic tension in the narration is clear and it carries the acknowledgement of the Self as different from the Other, under an oppressive climate of suspicion and unsafety. The Malay Other becomes, in other words, the one to fear. Notwithstanding, the narration opens an unexpected glimmer of hope when the Lin family, in their escape from the village, passes through an *Orang Asli* settlement immersed in its usual peace:

盤車經過山族人部落時，  
這件那裡依舊那麼閑靜與  
世無爭，凌亂簡陋的草屋  
後炊煙四起，沒穿褲的小  
孩在曠地上跑來跑去，老  
人坐在屋前木梯口刷著獸  
皮· · · · · 完全沒有因  
城外的暴亂戒嚴而呈現絲毫  
的異樣。幾個年輕的山族人  
認得林拓駕的盤車，看見他  
們經過揮手打招呼。(Ivi, 21)

The truck passed through the *Orang Asli* hamlet. They could see the usual, unchanged serene picture, aloof from the world. The smoke from the kitchen chimneys lingered in the air behind those messy and primitive thatched huts. The children ran around the open ground without trousers, while the elderly sat at the bottom of the wooden staircase brushing the hides. . . . There was no trace of even the slightest change, despite the riots in the cities and the martial law. A few young *Orang Asli* recognized Lin Tuo's truck and waved at the Lin family.

After experiencing this scene of unchanged peace, the Lin family optimistically realizes that things might not change for the worse, after all, and decide to drive back to their house. The narration ends with a message of hope when the Lin family is visited by Samad and Mohammad, the Malay drivers who appear at the beginning of the story. The two Malays approach the Lin family hoping to get some food, which they have not been able to get anywhere else, due to the martial law:

望著沙末那憨直，帶有幾分  
悚惶幾分尷尬的斂容，幾天  
來的擔憂，猜疑，心頭重壓  
都消失無蹤了。「走，沙  
末、莫哈末，我們這就去拔  
木薯！」踏著菜園小徑，像含  
有默契的，他們一起仰望夜  
空，只見點點星光閃爍，神  
祕，幽遠而迷人，山林的夜  
是如此靜謐、美麗、安詳，  
他們怎麼總沒發覺呢？ . . .  
(Ivi, 24)

[Lin Tuo] looked at the honest face of Samad. In front of that frightened and embarrassed look, the anxiety, suspicion and pressure of the previous days suddenly disappeared. "Come on, Samad, Mohammad, let's go get you some cassava!" As they walked along the small garden path, they all cast their eyes on the night sky, as if in tacit agreement. It was dotted with bright stars: they were so mysterious, so distant, so enchanting. The night in the mountain forest was so serene, beautiful and reassuringly quiet. How could have they never noticed that before? . . .

The story thus ends with a positive closure and a message of hope. Nevertheless, at a closer look, this demonstration of optimism stems from the pessimistic acknowledgement of the fact that ethnic relations in the Malaysian

context can only be maintained in secluded areas at the fringes of mainstream urban society.

Through this short story, Ding Yun demonstrates the fluctuating and relative nature of ethnic interaction and identity: at the beginning of the story, ethnic consciousness among the mountain dwellers seems to be of little importance, while the sense of community is high. Things change because of external events, thus obliging the various characters to acknowledge ethnic differences and to consider their own ethnic identity as factors that might lead to confrontational relations.

Defining ethnic Chinese identity, however, is not the author's main concern and since "Wei Xiang" is an attempt to investigate the causes of the ethnic tensions of contemporary Malaysia, the story resonates with all members of Malaysian society, regardless of their ethnic background. Ding Yun presents the response of the Chinese, Malay and *Orang Asli* rural communities to the 1969 riots and does so narrating the appearance of fear and the changes in attitudes within each ethnic community. Using a third-person objective narrator, the author attempts to delve into the emotions and perspectives of each character, regardless of their ethnic background. The description of the Chinese characters is not more detailed than the characterization of the Malays or the *Orang Asli*. Moreover, the narration lacks direct references to Chinese culture or to issues which are of concern to the Chinese Malaysian community, such as holding on to tradition, the longing for the ancestral home or the attachment to Chinese education. The writer portrays the rural Chinese community as being too absorbed in the difficult task of making a living under rather unsuitable geographic circumstances, with no time or energies to engage in issues of secondary importance.

Ding Yun, therefore, contradicts the perceived idea that "Chinese [...] writers to a great extent ignore the Malay communities" and that "[t]heir portrayal by Chinese [...] writers presents them from an external perspective" (McLaren 2010, 1).

### 5. Conclusion

Using "Wei xiang" as a case study, this paper has tried to demonstrate that Sinophone Malaysian literature far from being a "sectional", "ethnic" or "racialized" literature is sensitive to the issue of ethnic relations in Malaysian society and delves into the issue far more than Malaysia's national literature does. The analysis of "Wei xiang" by Ding Yun has shown that Malaysian writers from one ethnic community do not necessarily focus only on the struggles and conditions of their own ethnic group. As is the case with Ding Yun and his short story, he focuses on the preoccupations, the fears and the situation of the Chinese, the Malay and the *Orang Asli* not only as members of their respective communities,

but as members of the wider *Bangsa Malaysia*. Therefore, rather than being considered a Sinophone Malaysian short story, that is a text belonging to the *sastera sukuan* (community-based literature) canon, I regard Ding Yun's "Wei xiang" as being part of the *Kesusasteraan Nasional Malaysia* (Malaysian national literature), despite it not being written in the national language.

Ethnic relations have always affected, in one way or another, all Malaysians and a text like "Wei xiang" published in 1983 and still relevant today proves how necessary literature dealing with ethnic interactions is. Therefore, I consider that writers who produce texts that speak to all Malaysians have the right to be considered writers of national literature, regardless of the Malaysian language in which they decide to express themselves.

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