



Research article

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“Bie zai tiqi” and *You Mean the World to Me*: Two Subversive Sinophone Malaysian Metatexts

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2020-0006>

Received December 19, 2018; accepted March 4, 2020

Abstract: This article aims at exploring the subversive nature of two Sinophone Malaysian cultural products, namely “Bie zai tiqi” (2002) a short story by Ho Sok Fong and *You Mean the World to Me* (2017), a full-length feature film by director Saw Teong Hin. I argue that, despite their differences, both fictional products use powerful metafictional and metanarrative devices to challenge factuality. In doing so, they not only blur the fine line between fiction and reality, but they also question cultural power dynamics and ethnic politics in Malaysia. Moreover, they defy the truthfulness of Mandarin as the preferred Sinitic cultural language as well as the idea that, in Malaysia, literature and film can be considered Malaysian only if produced in Malay, the official language of the country. By performing an analysis of the linguistic choices made by Ho Sok Fong and Saw Teong Hin, I will suggest that both the short story and the feature film analysed in this article use metafiction and metanarration to subvert widely-accepted, yet problematic, notions of national culture and common ethnic language.

Keywords: Ho Sok Fong, Metatext, Saw Teong Hin, Sinophone Cinema, Sinophone Literature

Introduction

Generally, when reading a work of fiction, the reader focuses on the plot, the characters, the descriptions, sometimes even on the overall formal structure and on the linguistic aspects of the story itself, but he or she is seldom called upon to reflect on the text as discourse rather than as a story. Similarly, when watching a feature film, the audience focuses on the storyline and the characters or on more technical features such as the actors’ performance, the photography, and so on, but viewers are rarely invited, through a conscious act by the director, to consider thoughtfully the issue of filmmaking itself. When this happens, we, as readers and filmgoers, are in front of narrative works in which the act of narrating is central.

The engagement of the readership and the audience with the fictional text or film can take place on two different levels: they can be asked to reflect on the act or process of narration, or they can be invited to meditate upon “the fictionality and/or constructedness of the narrative” (Neumann and Nünning, par. 1). In the first instance, we would talk about metanarration, while in the second we would be in front of a work of metafiction, which “designates the quality of disclosing the fictionality of a narrative” (par. 1). Whether we are in front of a narration that reflects on its fictional nature or in front of one that comments on the act of writing/filmmaking, this type of storytelling is powerful and subversive, since it challenges the line that separates reality from fiction, truth from fabrication, opening up to the possibility of questioning historical facts, social norms, political convictions, cultural experiences, and so on.

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While the disruptive power of metanarration and metafiction in the West has been extensively documented in seminal works such as those edited by Currie (1995) or written by Hutcheon (1980), among others, there still remains an entire world of metafictional products (intended both as written texts and as feature films) that originate from linguistic locales beyond the West awaiting to be explored in their subversive force. By examining the metanarrative and metafictional aspects of a Sinophone Malaysian short story and a Sinophone Malaysian feature film, this article aims at showing that more than just literary and cinematic devices, metanarration and metafiction allow the writer and the director, respectively, to challenge not only social and political issues, but also personal memories. It is, therefore, with the intention of bringing the margins (Sinophone Malaysia) into the theoretical discourse on metanarration and metafiction, that I analyse the role of the writer, the narrator, the reader and the narration itself in “Bie zai tiqi” (別再提起, “Never mention it again”) a short story written by Ho Sok Fong (賀淑芳 He Shufang) in 2002 and the act of filmmaking in *You Mean the World to Me* (海墘新路 Hái Kînn Sin Lōo) a semi-autobiographical feature film by director Saw Teong Hin (蘇宗興 Su Zongxing) released in 2017.

Although these two fictional works differ in several ways, starting from the art forms themselves (literature and cinema), I suggest that they both use powerful devices to challenge factuality, thus blurring, in the mind of the reader and the audience, the fine line between fiction and reality. Moreover, I argue that, together with the linguistic choices made by both Ho Sok Fong and Saw Teong Hin, such devices play a key role in defying the centrality of Mandarin as cultural language as well as the idea that literature and film can be considered Malaysian only when produced in Malay, the official language of the Federation of Malaysia.

While one might argue that there exist several other examples of Sinophone Malaysian literary metatexts, such as “M de shizong” (M的失蹤, “The Disappearance of M”) or “Si zai nanfang” (死在南方, “Death in the South”), both short stories written by Ng Kim Chew (黃錦樹 Huang Jinshu) in 1990 and 1992, respectively, they fall out of the scope of this paper.¹ For instance, although they are metatexts in the sense that they are based on intertextual discourse and that another fictional text becomes the centre of the short stories, the author does not seem to defy the factuality of what is being narrated, nor does he seem to focus on the act of writing, per se; rather, Ng seems to put the stress on the effects that the written outcome, i.e. the text mentioned in the text, has on certain sectors of Malaysian society. However, it must be also noted here that “M de shizong”, too, does challenge the official Malaysian discourse that cultural products in languages other than Malay cannot be considered expressions of the national culture of Malaysia, as we shall see.

Meta-fiction/narration/cinema

Ever since Gass coined the term metafiction in 1970, there have been several studies on this form of self-reflexive narrative. Some scholars such as Hutcheon (1980) and Waugh (1984), despite “reduc[ing] its effect to anti-illusionism” (Neumann and Nünning, par. 3), have proposed a comprehensive theoretical framework for the study of metafiction. Among the several definitions proposed, I find Santovetti’s especially clear and comprehensive:

Metafiction – which may refer to specific techniques including digression, metalepsis, mise-en-abyme, parody, intertextuality, metaphors, narrative embedding, authorial alter egos, dialogue with the reader, or representations of reading and writing – highlights the constructed nature of narrative, undermining its realism, and can therefore be conceived as ‘fiction about fiction’. (309)

Although often used interchangeably, especially within Anglophone academia, and although both refer to types of self-reflexive narration, metafiction and metanarration are indeed two different concepts. As suggested by Nünning, who clearly differentiates the two terms, “‘metanarration’ or ‘metanarrative’

¹ Both short stories have been translated into English by Carlos Rojas and are included in Ng’s short story collection published by Columbia University Press in 2016.

is only appropriate when the act of narrating or factors of the process of narration are discussed” (19). Similarly, Fludernik also makes a distinction between the two concepts and limits the widespread English term *metafiction* “to self-reflective statements about the inventedness of the story” (28). In other words, and succinctly summarising the terminological issue, I will use the term *metanarration* when the narrator discusses the act of narrating and *metafiction* when the focus is on the fictionality of what is being narrated.

In the field of film studies too, there have been several works discussing the relationship, within the film, between the story being filmed and the production (and/or the reception) of the film itself, which could be called *cinematic metanarration*, and films focusing on the constructedness of what is being filmed, i.e. *cinematic metafiction*. Also called *metacinema*, the different types of cinematic self-reflexive narrations have been analysed, for instance, by Gerstenkorn, who distinguishes between cinematic reflexivity, i.e. films which refer to cinema per se, and filmic reflexivity, which encompasses those instances in which films relate to other films or to themselves (7). More recently, in an article discussing the classification of metacinema, Canet gives a precise definition and considers it “the cinematic exercise that allows filmmakers to reflect on their medium of expression through the practice of filmmaking, whereby cinema looks at itself in the mirror in an effort to get to know itself better” (18). Similarly, Yang Yishu gives a comprehensive definition and considers metacinema as

cinema about cinema, which includes all those movies whose theme is cinema or in which cinema is involved. Films which directly quote, refer to or point at other films, as well as those reflecting on the process of filming are all examples of metacinema. The object of metacinema is cinema itself. (5)

In the West, most research output on self-reflexive textual and cinematic narration, although theoretically sound, has focused on Western cultural production, neglecting the abundance of contemporary works of fiction from other linguistic locales, such as the Sinitic one. In fact, as noted by Liang in one of the few English-language essays devoted to Chinese metafiction, “dominance of metafiction persists in contemporary Chinese culture, with metafictional novels and novellas thriving in the last two decades of the twentieth century” (590). Also in an English-language article, Zhao classifies Chinese metafiction as self-reflexivity metafiction, pre-textual metafiction and para-fictional metafiction, to differentiate fiction in which “the narrational mediation is foregrounded as an almost masochistic self-exposure” (93), from “a fictional work about or alluding to other, or other groups of, fictional works” (93) and from fiction about “[a]ll meaning systems that connect man with the world - consciousness, imagination, experience, knowledge, human relationship, history, culture, ideology, etc. . . . regarded as texts in the broadest sense” (94), respectively.

Recently, in the area of film studies, Stuckey contributed an outstanding volume on metacinema in Chinese film. The study, apart from filling a gap in academia, also recalls some of the very first metacinematic films from the early and mid-1930s, thus reminding us that the “metacinematic mode is by no means something new in Chinese cinema” (2) and corroborating the more general assumption by Canet that “[a]lthough it may seem that metacinema was born with the rise of cinematic post-modernity, it is actually a tendency that has been present throughout the history of film” (18).

Just as metacinema was already practiced well before it became object of scholarly research, metafictional and metanarrative literary texts existed prior to the post-modern consciousness about the act of narrating and/or the fictionality of narration. For example, both *Don Quijote* (1605, 1615) and *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767) are to be considered examples of metafiction ahead of time (Hutcheon 8). In the realm of Chinese literature, elements of both metanarrative and metafiction can be found in novels from the Ming and Qing dynasties (Liang 590). Zhao, on the other hand, traces this Chinese metasensibility further back in time to Taoist philosophical texts such as the *Daode jing* (道德經) and Chan Buddhist texts (95-96). He also traces the birth of the Chinese metafictional novel to the publication, in the sixteenth century, of the esoteric novel *Xiyoubu* (西遊補, Supplementary Chapters to the Journey to the West) (ivi, 96). Although I use the term Sinophone rather than Chinese to describe “Bie zai tiqi” and *You Mean the World to Me*, I consider Sinophone Malaysian production to be part of a greater cultural polysystem which includes Chinese culture from mainland China, as well. Therefore, I believe that comparably to mainland Chinese literary and filmic

production by Han artists, Sinophone Malaysian metadiscourses, too, have a direct connection with the traditional metasensibilities mentioned by Liang and Zhao.

The Challenges of Sinophone Malaysian Cultural Production

While most Western scholarly works that deal with Sinophone Malaysian cultural production (Bernards 2015, Groppe 2013) highlight issues of ethnic and cultural identity, as well as the concept of diaspora and the dichotomy between centre and periphery, this article has a different focus. It centres on how metanarration and metafiction in Sinophone Malaysian production dismantle the notions of fiction and reality, challenge factual accuracy, subvert memory, while also deconstructing the narrative process per se. Moreover, it delves into the issue of language use as a means of subversion, defying the notion of Malaysian national culture and a common ethnic language for all Chinese Malaysians. Hence, it is important to contextualise the social and cultural background in which both “Bie zai tiqi” and *You Mean the World to Me* were produced, to understand how they problematise cultural power dynamics and ethnic politics within Malaysia, while also challenging official ideas about Malaysian national culture.

To understand the role of these two cultural products within Sinophone Malaysia, it is necessary to briefly touch upon the concept of Sinophone Malaysia itself. With such expression, I refer to the cultural community in or from Malaysia that expresses itself in one of the many Sinitic languages, such as Hokkien, Cantonese or Mandarin, just to name the more common ones. Although the term Sinophone had occasionally been used by scholars such as Keen (231) since the 1980s, it is not until the mid-2000s, thanks to Shu-mei Shih, that debates on such concept started to take place in Western academia. Shih popularised the concept to “mean literature written in Chinese by Chinese-speaking writers in various parts of the world outside China” (“Global Literature and the Technology of Recognition” 29) and later readjusted it “to designate Sinitic-language cultures and communities outside China as well as those ethnic communities within China, where Sinitic languages are either forcefully imposed or willingly adopted” (“Against Diaspora” 30). Shih’s exclusivist approach to Sinitic-language cultural production has been questioned by scholars such as Gong who suggests not to overlook Chinese artists from the margins of China who do not reject the centrality of China as a site of cultural production and therefore do not relinquish their Chineseness, thus feeling Chinese, rather than Sinophone (10). More inclusivist than Shih, David Der-Wei Wang points out that the Sinophone as a marker of diversity within the Sinitic world should not neglect the heterogeneity of mainland Chinese cultural production (4-9).

In this article, although I use the adjective Sinophone in the inclusivist meaning proposed by Wang and as a synonym of Sinitic-language, I am also aware that the polyphony used by Ho Sok Fong and Saw Teong Hin’s preference of Penang Hokkien over Mandarin highlight the differences between China-centred and marginal Sinophone cultural productions. However, and most importantly, I aim at highlighting the linguistic heterogeneity of Sinitic-language Malaysian culture as well as limiting my study to Malaysian cultural production which is expressed by means of a Sinitic language and not through Malay, the national language, or English, the former colonial tongue.

Whether Sinophone Malaysian cultural production is actually Malaysian is an issue of constant debate within the borders of Malaysia itself. In fact, since the launch of the National Culture Policy (NCP) in 1971, which rests on the three principles that “[t]he national culture must be based on the indigenous culture of this region”, that “[s]uitable 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” (National Department For Culture And Arts 1971), non-Malay cultural production is rarely considered of national interest, being hardly seen as Malaysian, at all. While the NCP officially aimed at strengthening national unity, it pushed the Sinophone away from the Malaysian, thus marginalizing those artists that do not express themselves in Malay (also, and officially, *Bahasa Malaysia*), the national language.

In the field of literature, only works originally written in the Malay language are considered as having national value, while works such as “Bie zai tiqi”, written in a Sinitic language, fall within the category of sectional or community-based literature (*sastera sukuan*). This stance is best exemplified by Malaysian

scholar Ismail Hussein who states that only literary production in Malay has national value. Literary works written in indigenous languages other than Malay should be considered ‘local literatures’ (*sastera daerah*), while those written in Sinitic or Indian languages, being produced by and aimed at limited ethnic groups, cannot be considered part of the national literary canon (35).²

Similarly, as noted by Asiah Sarji, “[h]istorically, culturally and institutionally, the mainstream film community has always regarded Malay films as Malaysian films. The FINAS [National Film Development Corporation] Act stated that films that can represent Malaysia to international exhibitions and festivals are films made by Malaysians in the Malay language” (144), despite the fact that there is no mention to the issue of language in the National Film Policy of 2005. The issue of what constitutes Malaysian national cinema was most recently reignited in 2016, when a Tamil-language film, *Jagat*, was nominated in the Best Film category at that year’s Malaysian Film Award. Similarly, *Ola Bola*, a multilingual feature film by Chinese Malaysian director Chiu Keng Guan (周青元 Zhou Qingyuan) also ran in the same category. However, since neither movie reached the seventy-percent Malay-language quota, they were both disqualified, only to be readmitted in the newly devised category of Best Malaysian Film. Films that include at least seventy percent of *Bahasa Malaysia* dialogues compete, since 2016, in a separate category, the Best Film in the National Language. Many Malay-language artists and cultural personalities strongly contested the new regulations that allowed feature films not produced in Malay to compete as Malaysian films. For instance, the secretary of the Film Directors Association of Malaysia (FDAM), Datuk Abdul Rahim Awang argued that “to allow all movies to contest for the Best Film award was akin to insulting the Federal Constitution and showing disrespect to the *Rukunegara* [National Principles]” (Loshana K Shagar and Niezam Abdullah). This recent controversy, rather than being merely anecdotal, seems to reinforce the official discourse that although under certain circumstances non-Malay movies can be considered Malaysian, they cannot be considered part of the national cinema of Malaysia (Guan).

Therefore, in a country such as Malaysia, where official policies aim at promoting an idea of national culture that does not allow for the incorporation of non-indigenous elements, unless they are considered suitable, while also not conceiving a national culture expressed in a language other than *Bahasa Malaysia*, Sinophone culture can only thrive either through private patronage or by being displaced to other sites of Sinitic-language cultural production, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and, more recently, mainland China. The case of “Bie zai tiqi” and *You Mean the World to Me* perfectly exemplifies the situation of marginalization of the Sinophone within the Malaysian cultural space. While Ho Sok Fong’s short story could first circulate thanks to its publication in Taiwan, Saw Teong Hin’s film was produced by Astro Shaw, a Malaysian private production company, and distributed internationally by Good Move Media, a Hong Kong-based international sales agent.

Despite the difficulties of these two cultural products in circulating as Malaysian, I consider both as much Sinophone as they are Malaysian, thus agreeing with Malaysian scholar Mohammad A. Quayum who, when specifically writing about literature, states 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). Similarly, McKay argues that “[t]he cinema of Malaysia will be a truly national cinema when it can, with confidence, represent the diversity and complexity of the nation as a whole - its diversity of peoples, of remembered histories, of differing values and complex identities”.

² The already mentioned “M de shizong” by Ng Kim Chew, defies this idea by centring on *Kristmas*, a fictitious and critically acclaimed novel by an unidentified Malaysian author. As Carlos Rojas notes in his analysis of the short story, the fictitious novel “is described as a heteroglossic work composed primarily in English but also featuring a variety of other languages” (396) and, therefore, according to the official discourse, it should not be considered part of the national literary system. However, due to the international success of *Kristmas* and the interest shown by *The New York Times* in discovering the identity of the author, both the Malay and the Sinophone Chinese literary communities organise two separate conferences to discuss the issue. Ng Kim Chew highlights the near-sightedness of both communities: while Malay intellectuals stubbornly defend the idea that the linguistic medium used prevails over the qualities of the novel, Sinophone Malaysian writers acknowledge the importance of the fictitious novel, but also conclude that efforts should be made to locate a supposed Chinese language text, of which, the internationally acclaimed *Kristmas* is a translation.

It is undeniable that both Quayum and McKay somehow challenge the official discourse in much the same way Ho's story and Saw's film challenge the readership and audience, respectively. The two cultural products analysed in this article not only question, through metafictional and metanarrative devices, factual accuracy, but they also propose different possibilities of being Sinophone *and* Malaysian in a cultural realm (Malaysia) which is officially extremely static.

“Bie zai tiqi”: A Subversive Short Story

In this brief, yet extremely subversive award-winning story, Ho Sok Fong³ recounts how twenty years before the narration, the Taoist funeral of the narrator's uncle was abruptly cancelled due to religious issues. On the day of the burial, the Chinese family was made aware of the fact that the man had secretly converted to Islam and had married a Muslim woman, the one officially entitled to oversee the funeral according to both Islamic and Malaysian law. As the story unfolds, the Chinese family enters in a heated discussion with the authorities, represented by a few policemen, an official from the Bureau of Religious Affairs and two Chinese Muslims. As the two parties fight over the deceased, the corpse starts to defecate. As noted by Bernards “[t]his absurd scene sullies the pretence to the moral high ground asserted by both sides in the struggle” (“Beyond diaspora and multiculturalism” 322). The bizarre story ends with the Chinese family being left with only the faeces of the deceased to bury, thus highlighting the ethnic and religious tensions that still permeate Malaysian society.

Within this climate of distress in a highly polarised community, the narrator's recalling her uncle's funeral and the insistence on the factuality of the details narrated have a subversive meaning: although requested not to mention the issue again (hence the title of the story), the narrator, who was a child back then, insists on bringing up the difficulties of interethnic and interreligious relations in contemporary Malaysia and persistently asserts that their criticalities are indeed real. In other words, it is important for the narrator to have her memories circulate and acknowledged as real, because they tell a story of injustice which goes beyond the personal realm and affect an entire ethnic community, the Chinese Malaysian one. In doing so, through the voice of the narrator and through her stubbornness, Ho Sok Fong aims at highlighting the unfair and corrupt side of multicultural Malaysia and at mentioning “an unmentionable process of postcolonial creolization” (Bernards, “Beyond diaspora and multiculturalism” 322).

The short story abounds in glosses with which the narrator sprinkles the text. As noted by Xu Wenrong and Li Shuzhi, while metatexts generally stress the fictionality of what is being narrated in a work of fiction, the narrator's annotations in “Bie zai tiqi”, by reminding the reader that the narrative is not a fabrication, serve the antithetic purpose; they are, in other words, reminders of the narrator's reliability. The story is presented, in fact, as “a way to make sense, as an adult, of [her] childhood memories” (這是一個成年人處理他童年回憶的方法) (Ho 334),⁴ and the narrator transforms the text into a site of dialogue with the reader, in an attempt to convince him or her of the credibility of her words:

You must believe me. The reason why I am telling you this story now, twenty years after it has occurred, is because at the time I was only a child and you wouldn't have believed the words of a child. But I am an adult, now. . . You have every right to question the veracity of this story, but I can assure you, in all honesty, that I am telling you exactly what I remember. (你要相信我說的話，我不得不把這個故事在二十年以後才告訴你，因為我當年還是一個小孩子，你不會相信一個小孩子講的故事。可是現在我長大了。... 你有權利質疑故事的真實性，之於我，我可以坦然的告訴你，我所說的保證是我所記得的。) (334)

By insisting on the fact that time has passed and that although she was a child at the time of the events the

³ Born in 1970 in the predominantly Malay and Muslim state of Kedah, Ho Sok Fong is one of the most appreciated Sinophone Malaysian fiction writers today. In addition to the *China Times Short Story Prize* that she won for “Bie zai tiqi”, she has also won awards also in her native Malaysia and in neighboring Singapore.

⁴ The textual analysis is performed on a version of the short story included in an anthology of fictional works by Chinese Malaysian authors published in Malaysia in 2008. There is no published English translation of the short story; therefore, all translations are mine.

narrator is now an adult, Ho Sok Fong seems to be reflecting on the issue of (un)reliability in a fictional text and on what turns an unreliable narrator into a reliable one and vice versa: generally, a young narrator would not be reliable due to her "limited knowledge (and understanding)" (Rimmon-Kenan 100). Nevertheless, the narration is often interrupted by digressions in which the narrator shares with the reader the memories of other witnesses to the funeral. These spectators repeatedly challenge the narrator, thus undermining the reliability she is so strongly claiming, and transform her into someone "whose rendering of the story and/or commentary on it the reader has reasons to suspect" (100). Perhaps, more importantly, these characters' defiance of the narrator's memories should be read as an aim at downplaying the political aspects of the issue recounted, in an effort to minimise the critical power of the narrator's memories: a power that defies the official image of a harmonious multicultural Malaysia.

For instance, when the narrator describes her second uncle's rage directed at the authorities, the very same narrator remarks that three years after the facts, the man disproved her words:

When I mentioned it to my uncle, he objected: 'How could it be? I remember that I had fallen from my motorbike that time and my hand was in so much pain that I couldn't possibly have hit the table with such fury!
(我跟舅父提起這件事，他說：怎麼可能？我記得那時騎機車摔下來受了傷。手疼得不得了，怎麼可能還拍桌子呼呼喝喝的？) (Ho 335)

Similarly, the narrator's account is refuted by the Taoist monk who was supposed to perform the funeral:

"Twenty years later, he said that he could have never meddled. We were outsiders, and he could have never put his hand between the family of the deceased and the Bureau of Religious Affairs."
(二十年以後，他說，他怎麼可能插嘴說話？我們是第三者，永遠不會插手於喪家和宗教局之間。)(335)

In many cases, such annotations not only refute the narrator's memories, but also interrupt the rhythm of the narration, converting it into a conversation between the narrator on one side and the reader on the other. Thus, the text is constructed not only on multiple narrative levels, but also as a dialogical framework. As noted by Wu Yanling, the reader can easily detect, from the beginning, two narrative levels within the story, one being the account of the funeral and the other being the creative process that leads to the retelling of the event; moreover, in addition to these two layers of narration, the reader is often summoned by the narrator as a means to convince him of her reliability (422). These three textual levels also correspond to different moments in time (twenty years before, twenty years later, and the moment in which we read the story, respectively), which continuously overlap.

As the recounting of the aborted funeral rites unfolds, the first level of narration from highly believable turns into preposterous, as the corpse starts to defecate and concludes his bowel movement with a fart. The reliability of this scatological event is undermined, again, by the words of a medical doctor who dismisses post-mortem defecation as not very plausible and by a narrator's gloss which is intended to inform the reader that, on the newspapers, there is not a single picture of the messy ending of the funeral. The narrator, however, attributes this lack of visual proofs to the fact that publishing such a damaging photo would cause legal problems for the newspapers. Again, Ho Sok Fong plays with the factuality of what is being narrated, an issue which she decides to leave unresolved. In fact, the story ends with the narrator confessing that she will know whether her uncle's casket only contains his faeces when the burial recess will be opened to accommodate her aunt's remains, as well (Ho 339). The ending leaves all three levels of the text unresolved: whether the Chinese family is left burying the excrements of the deceased or not is not confirmed, the process of retelling the story is to be continued in the future, as is the dialogue with the reader, who is left with a cliff-hanger finale.

In sum, the metanarrative and metafictional elements in Ho Sok Fong's text, including the continuous digressions, the repetitions about the factuality of the story, as well as the glosses that seem to refute it, the dialogue with the reader, and the farcical aspects of the narration, all seem to challenge more than just the narrator's reliability and the authenticity of the facts. In fact, as noted by Shih Shu-mei, the short story should be read as a subversion of the idea of "hybridity that is celebrated by some scholars of postcolonial theory" ("Against Diaspora" 40). Through her narration, Ho Sok Fong critiques the farce of

Malaysian multiculturalism: in her text, the confrontation between Chinese and Malays over the remains of the deceased are an allegory of the constant clashes between the different ethnic groups that share the Malaysian territory. While such disputes over the remains of a Chinese Muslim are a fact, as they have taken place in Malaysian society (Xu and Li), the unresolvedness of the three layers of the text can be interpreted as a symbol of the Chinese and Malays' inability to resolve their disputes.

Through the voice of the narrator, Ho Sok Fong not only subverts the idea of a reliable narrator, she also defies the positive idea promoted by government actors of a multicultural society, by stressing the disadvantageous position occupied by the ethnic Chinese in many aspects of Malaysian life. In other words, "Bie zai tiqi" subverts the official reality in which "Malaysia presents itself to tourists and other outsiders as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society" (Somers Heidhues 14) and replaces it with the narrator's memories, which are highly critical of the perceived discrimination towards the ethnic Chinese community, echoing Somers Heidhues, who notes that

frequent emphasis on the Malay and not the pluralistic nature of the nation, as well as concessions to Islam, leave the impression that the ethnic Chinese may become second-class citizens while Bumiputra politician-bureaucrats determine what they and their children will be allowed to do. (14)

On a linguistic level, the author consciously uses a polyphonic approach to the text which, written in standard Mandarin, also includes many Cantonese expressions and a few Malay words. Aware of her linguistic eclecticism and of the challenges that it might pose to the reader, in adding annotations and footnotes that explain most of these expressions, the author indirectly shares with the reader her reflections over and awareness of her own linguistic choices; choices which while challenging the idea of a standard language proposed/imposed by a cultural centre (China), also celebrate the linguistic polyphony of the Sinophone. Through her linguistic choices, therefore, Ho Sok Fong subverts the linguistic reality of Sinophone Malaysia, thus challenging the idea of a standardised (read 'Mandarin') literary language while, at the same time, acknowledging that "Sinophone literature can be polyphonic, not simply intended to be read aloud in Mandarin, and the reader must also attend to the acoustics of indeed the *Sinophone* despite its visual traits" (Bernards and Tsai 186).⁵

You Mean the World to Me: A Subversive Feature Film

Centred on the re-elaboration of childhood memories is also Saw Teong Hin's⁶ feature film that premiered in Malaysian cinemas on May 4, 2017. Its official English title is *You Mean the World to Me*, but the Hokkien one is *Hái Kīnn Sin Lōo* (海墘新路), which literally means 'New Road by the waterfront' and is the Sinitic name of Lebuh Victoria (Victoria Street) in Georgetown, the capital of Penang. While the title already

⁵ However, Ho Sok Fong is not the only Sinophone Malaysian (and Singaporean) author who is preoccupied with how to present the heteroglossia of the Sinophone communities of her country, and she joins other writers such as Ng Kim Chew, just to name one notable example, in their use of a polyphonic language constructed through the use of several Sinitic languages to challenge the idea of Sinophone Malaysia which expresses itself in Mandarin. As Shih notes, "Sinophone Malaysian writers [...] often incorporate English, Malay and Tamil into their work, not to mention often crossing between different Sinitic languages such as Mandarin, Hokkien, and Cantonese" ("Introduction", 9). Not unlike Ho, the already mentioned Ng Kim Chew also frequently uses a heteroglossic written language to represent the linguistic reality of Sinophone Malaysia in which Sinitic languages other than Mandarin coexist and mingle among themselves and with other tongues, such as Malay, English and Tamil. Similarly, Singaporean author Yeng Pway Ngon (英培安 Ying Pei'an) makes extensive use of Cantonese dialogues in his novel *Xi Fu* (戲服, *The Costume*), about an old man and his granddaughter's shared love for Cantonese opera. Not unlike what Ho and Ng do in the context of Sinophone Malaysia, Yeng challenges Singapore's obsession with Sinitic monolingualism/Mandarin, through adhering to the linguistic reality of the small Southeast Asian country and taking its oral Sinitic polyphony to the written page.

⁶ Born in Penang in 1962, Saw has directed several feature films and theater plays. Apart from the film discussed in this article and *Hai Kin Xin Lor* (海墘新路 2014), the Hokkien-language play on which the movie is based, he is also known for being the director of *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (2004), a Malay-language musical play, based on a traditional Malay legend and *Apa Kata Hati?* (2008, meaning 'What are your intentions?'), a Malay-language romantic comedy. Saw's career shows that it is indeed possible to navigate both the Malay and the Sinophone cultural realms and that, perhaps, his linguistic and cultural versatility could best embody what it means to be a Malaysian filmmaker and playwright.

serves the purpose of spatially contextualizing the film, by showing Sunny and his mother coming out of the cinema after having seen the Taiwanese movie *Xin you qianqian jie* (心有千千結 *The Heart with a Million Knots*, 1973),⁷ the director incorporates an interfilmic reference to delimit the time frame of Sunny’s childhood memories, but also to connect the action to another Sinophone locale (Taiwan) which shares a condition of Sinitic heteroglossia with Penang (00:01:41).



Fig. 1: The Taiwanese film *Xin you qianqian jie* (1973) on show at the Majestic Theatre.

The semi-autobiographical film is constituted by two textual layers which constantly overlap: on the one hand, there is the childhood story of Sunny, who is now an adult and a film director, while on the other hand, one finds the metacinematic account of the process of the director making a film about his childhood in Penang. Through the narration of Sunny’s childhood, we slowly get to know a family where the focus of attention is almost always on his elder brother, a mentally disabled young man prone to violent outbursts and unable to control his sexual libido. Through the metatext, the audience gets acquainted not only with adult Sunny and his dysfunctional relationship with his sister and aunts, the only family he has left by now, but also with the difficulties of Sinophone Malaysian filmmaking, from the economic struggles of the director who is unable to find patronage for his film to a more personal conflict connected to the memories of his mother accepting to be raped by her disabled son. The childhood narrative and the account of/ reflections on filmmaking are on two time levels, too, which constantly overlay, without continuity, until the audience discovers that what have been presented as childhood memories, are in reality scenes from the movie Sunny is directing: when young Sunny gets home from school and peeps inside only to witness his brother raping their mother, the director’s off-screen voice interrupts the scene with a “Cut!” and transforms what the audience has thought real until now into fiction (01:09:24).



Fig.2: Young Sunny peeping into his house.

⁷ The romance film directed by Li Xing (李行) (b. 1930-) is a cinematic adaptation of the homonymous novel by Taiwanese author Qiong Yao (瓊瑤) (b. 1938-) who is commonly regarded as the most popular Sinophone romance writer. It must be noted that this particular romantic movie is a Mandarin-language film, although in Taiwan, too, a variety of the Hokkien language known as Taiwanese (台語 *Tâi-gí*) is spoken. However, despite having had a thriving film industry in the local Sinitic language between 1955 and 1979, “[t]he early 1970s saw a rapid decline, with only one film produced in 1974 and again in 1979, and none at all between those years” (Taiwanese-Language Cinema, 1).



Fig.3: Director Sunny halting the scene of his mother being raped by her disabled son.

Through this *mise en abîme*, that is the “relation of repetition and reflection the second-level narrative entertains with the quantitatively greater narrative within which it is contained” (Coste and Pier, par. 24), it is now clear that what the audience has previously interpreted as the site of Sunny’s memories, i.e. early-1970s Penang, is a reconstruction of that Penang that serves as the set of the film within the film. The audience must perform a similar interpretation with the characters: those who, until now, have been presented as the characters of the childhood story (young Sunny, his mother and Ah Boy, his disabled brother) suddenly turn into actors playing actors in a movie. To further complicate the multi-layered filmic text, as in a game of mirrors, the film ends with a scene that overlaps memories and filmmaking in the opposite way: the man that the audience has seen as director Sunny until now enters the set to direct the actress interpreting his mother; while embracing her, he shakes off his director’s identity and whispering the word ‘mom’ turns into the adult version of young Sunny hugging the old version of his mother (01:21:29). In other words, by turning filmmaking into reality, the final scene subverts the process of turning childhood memories into filmmaking that the audience witnessed previously.



Fig.4: Director Sunny hugs the actress who interprets his mother.

While “Bie zai tiqi” challenges the official pro-Malay policies of multicultural Malaysia as well as the closedness of the Chinese community through a scatological story where interaction between the Malays and the Chinese takes place in a climate of constant tension, *You Mean the World to Me* questions Malaysia’s multiculturalism through silencing the non-Chinese people of Penang. Although Penang’s population in the 1970s was largely ethnic Chinese (56.27%) and in 2005 they constituted 43.01% of the total population (National Higher Education Research Institute 9), in its more than ninety minutes, the film only shows two non-Chinese characters: the Australian fiancé of one of Sunny’s aunts in the 1970s, and the ethnic Indian gatekeeper who prevents director Sunny to enter the site of his childhood home and is, therefore, burdened with a clearly antagonistic role. Malays are nowhere to be seen in the movie, as Penang is shown as an exclusively Chinese site of interaction both in the 1970s and the 2010s. The absence of interethnic relations, therefore, questions the government’s priority in restructuring and blending a “nonintegrated plural society” (DeBernardi 112).

Saw Teong Hin’s film is metacinema not only because he presents a multi-layered movie in which memory, present day and cinematic reality constantly overlap on the scene, but also because he unveils the

economic issues involved in filmmaking, which normally stay behind the camera. In fact, when adult Sunny goes back to Penang to shoot a film about his childhood, he is a director somewhat down on his financial luck and is seen scraping for money among his former classmates, now wealthy businessmen. However, none of them seems to have any particular interest in the film and they keep giving him the run-around, until his sister, after much internal struggle, presents him with a red envelope with money to complete a movie that transcends the cinematic realm and, in the words of his devoutly Christian sister, symbolises Sunny’s baptism through the shaking off of his resentment towards his mother, his elder brother and his childhood: “Maybe shooting this movie is like a baptism for you, you’ll stop being resentful then” (可能你拍這部電影就像洗禮，不要在怨恨了。) (00:58:24), she says as she leaves the money on the table. The sister, thus, becomes the financial sponsor allowing Sunny to make up with his past and to produce the film in his own terms.



Fig. 5: Sunny’s sister giving him money for his film.

As Cheang points out, similarly to Sunny, Saw Teong Hin, too, encountered difficulties as potential patrons proposed him to change the language of the film from Penang Hokkien, the main Sinitic language spoken by the ethnic Chinese in Penang⁸, to Mandarin, which would have been more profitable for the sponsors and more desirable for international and/or non-Hokkien Sinophone audiences.

In fact, similarly to “Bie zai tiqi”, Saw’s film also presents linguistic features that challenge the idea of a standardised Chinese language and that further promote the Sinophone as a site of linguistic diversity, “not monophonic, but polyphonic” (Shih, “Introduction” 9). It also confirms Sheldon Lu’s idea that “[h]ow a film employs specific local and provincial dialects, or does not, is an important marker of a film’s cultural imaginary” (par. 7); in this instance, the connection between linguistic choice and geographic locale is paramount as it embodies not only the director’s personal memories, but also Penang’s Hokkien community’s heritage. Saw himself states that “[his] parents spoke Penang Hokkien. All the characters speak Penang Hokkien. If you change that to Mandarin, you might as well be changing it to Tamil! It’s just not the same!” (Cheang).

The movie presents a Sinitic language other than standard Mandarin as the preferred language of daily interaction, thus reinforcing the connection between Penang and Hokkien so engraved in the collective imagination of most Chinese Malaysians (Teh and Lim 245). In a perhaps somewhat exaggerated statement, Mok suggests that the language “has long been identified with Penang where almost everyone speaks the language, including local Malays and Indians”. Being the first Malaysian cinematic production entirely filmed in this variety of the Hokkien language, *You Mean the World to Me* represents not only a linguistic milestone in Sinophone Malaysian cinema, but it also constitutes an example of double subversion: it

⁸ In the year 2000, almost 300.000 Penangites spoke Penang Hokkien. The second most-spoken Sinitic language was Teochew, used by slightly more than 120.000 Penang residents (Sim 69). Hokkien belongs to the Southern Min family of Sinitic languages and as noted by Xiao,

the word Hokkien is actually the pronunciation by the Hokkien-speakers of the characters 福建, which represents the Fujian province . . . The term is a misnomer, for in mainland China, this dialect called Hokkien is only spoken in the south-eastern region of the Fujian province, on both sides of the Jiulong river, and does not represent any common tongue spoken throughout this linguistically diverse province. This dialect is sometimes also called Taiwanese, which itself is also misleading, since the dialect is not even native to Taiwan. (1)

subverts the idea that Malaysian national culture can only be expressed through *Bahasa Malaysia*, while also subverting the dominance of Mandarin.⁹ In fact, in a country where the use of Sinitic languages other than Mandarin is experiencing a steady decline (Sim), Saw's film can be considered both an act of support to a language that is closely connected to his personal self (Tan) and to the heritage shared by many ethnic Chinese in Penang,¹⁰ as well as an act of disapproval of the dominant position of Mandarin among Sinitic languages, also in Malaysia. In fact, studies show that although Hokkien is still the Sinitic language most closely connected to Penang, its importance is gradually declining (Teh and Lim 244). Its decline is connected to both national and transnational factors, such as the gradual 'monophonisation' of the local Sinitic polyphony in favour of Mandarin, through education and mass media, on the one hand, and the pressure to prioritise Mandarin over other Sinitic languages to linguistically adjust to the growing importance of China on the global stage. In fact, although there is no Malaysian state organisation in charge of the standardization of the Sinitic linguistic landscape within the country,

Chinese [Mandarin] is the medium of instruction in national-type Chinese primary schools which were integrated into the national education system in the 1960s. Therefore, the standardization of the Chinese [Mandarin] language has been implemented through education since independence. Generally, it follows the standards in China but at a slower pace. (Wang 208)

Saw's brave approach to language and his stubborn grip onto Penang Hokkien thus epitomise the "historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture [that] has been taking place for several centuries" (Shih, *Visuality and Identity* 4), while also compelling the audience to the polyphony of the Sinophone "that has hitherto been suppressed under the myth of 'standard Chinese'" (Chow 49). Penang Hokkien serves as a tool to illustrate the non-Mandarin-centred heterogeneity of the Sinophone. Most importantly, however, the use of Penang Hokkien in *You Mean the World to Me* shows that, within the Sinophone Malaysian movie and media industry, local(ised) Sinitic languages can serve as the main means of communication, not as a subordinate or supplementary one. In other words, Saw Teong Hin's feature film subverts the idea that if a Sinophone Malaysian movie is shot monolingually, this monolingualism must be carried out in Mandarin. Moreover, it is also an example of the adaptation of a diasporic language to a new environment: travelling from Zhangzhou, in southeastern China, to Penang, in Peninsular Malaysia, Hokkien has gradually incorporated elements from other Sinitic languages as well as from Malay, English and Tamil (Wu 66), becoming highly localised and differing greatly from varieties of Hokkien spoken in Singapore, Taiwan and mainland China (Lewis).

Conclusion

As Sinophone Malaysian cultural products in which the meta- component is central, "Bie zai tiqi" and *You Mean the World to Me* differ in many ways: from the artistic medium (the first is a literary text, while the latter is a feature film), to the language used (the first is written in Mandarin sprinkled with Cantonese expression, while the latter is spoken almost entirely in Penang Hokkien), to the mode of circulation (the first was published in Taiwan, while the latter circulated in Malaysia first and then in Singapore and other Sinophone regions); however, and most importantly, they both share a subversive purpose.

As metatexts, they challenge the idea of a linear, one-layered narrative: in "Bie zai tiqi" the narrator obsessively emphasises the unfabricated nature of the account, only to be constantly contradicted by

⁹ The dominance of Mandarin in cinema is being challenged in mainland China, as well. An example of the resurgence of the polyphonic character of the Sinitic-speaking world is the Zurong Dialect Film Festival (足荣村方言电影节). Held annually since 2015, the event aims at promoting cinematic products in which at least one main character speaks a Sinitic language other than Mandarin ("Zurong Dialect Film Festival Aims to Promote Productions in Local Chinese Dialects").

¹⁰ Currently, the revitalization of Penang Hokkien is one of the main preoccupations of the Hokkien Language Association of Penang, which was founded in 2014 and has been promoting the language through the *Speak Hokkien Campaign* (<https://www.speakhokkien.org/about-us>). Moreover, the language is also being revitalised thanks to the creation, in 2007, of a private TV channel (Hua Hee Dai 歡喜台) which broadcasts exclusively in Hokkien (Sim 87).

others, thus obliging the reader to reflect on the reliability of the narration, as well as the political and social issues central to such narration; in *You Mean the World to Me*, which is ultimately a film about a film, the audience is challenged through the constant shift not only between past and present, but also between the re-enacted memories and reality. Moreover, the challenges that both cultural products pose go beyond formal, narrative issues and affect the way the reader and the audience reflect on topics such as interethnic relations, language use and linguistic dominance. While "Bie zai tiqi" questions the possibility of peaceful interactions between the Chinese and the Malays through a text that displays Malaysia's unfair official policies, *You Mean the World to Me* challenges Malaysia's multiculturalism through the concealment of Malay characters in a quasi-exclusively ethnic Chinese environment.

Linguistically, they both challenge the idea of standard Mandarin as the main, if not only, Sinitic language of cultural production. On the one hand, "Bie zai tiqi" still uses Mandarin, but the language is heavily localised, through the use of Cantonese, borrowings from Malay and English, as well as Islamic terms necessary to narrate the Chinese experience in a Muslim country. *You Mean the World to Me*, on the other hand, goes even further, by using Penang Hokkien, a different Sinitic language and a heavily localised variety of it. In fact, the use of such variety of Hokkien not only challenges the central position of Mandarin within the Sinophone cinematic realm, but it also presents a local film spoken in a local, truly Malaysian language, other than Bahasa Malaysia, the only officially sanctioned national language. Therefore, I regard the linguistic choices in both cultural products as subversive in another way, also: although neither "Bie zai tiqi" nor *You Mean the World to Me* use Malay and thus they cannot be considered part of the national literary and cinematic canons according to the official discourse, through the use of such localised versions of two Sinitic languages, they both use what I consider Malaysian languages, hence they should be considered not only Sinophone, but also unquestionably Malaysian.

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