

Language, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Literary Taxonomy: Ng Kim Chew and Mahua Literature

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THE PUBLICATION OF THE ANONYMOUS NOVEL *KRISTMAS* WAS AN extraordinary literary event and had far-reaching implications. A virtuosic work written mostly in English but intermixed with an array of other languages, from modern and classical Malay to Jawi, Arabic, Bali, German, French, and even ancient Chinese oracle bone script, *Kristmas* was enthusiastically received by critics around the world, some of whom wanted to nominate its author for a Nobel Prize. But because the novel was published under the pseudonym M, no one knew who the author was. There was even uncertainty about the work's language of composition, since the published version may have been a translation of an unreleased original.

Evidence that the author was from Malaysia generated considerable excitement that the novel could help raise the international profile of Malaysian literature. Two major conferences were therefore quickly convened in Kuala Lumpur, one by the Malaysian Writers Association, one by the Malaysian Chinese Writers Association, both of which focused on these questions: Who is the author? What is his or her ethnicity? Can a Malaysian work published in English count as national literature?

Kristmas is actually a fictional work introduced in the short story "M de shizong" M 的失蹤 ("The Disappearance of M"), by Ng Kim Chew 黃錦樹 (*Slow Boat* 1–26).¹ First published in 1990, near the beginning of Ng's literary career, "Disappearance" anticipates a set of concerns with language, community, and literary taxonomy that have haunted his oeuvre for more than twenty-five years. As an ethnically Chinese author from Malaysia who lives in Taiwan and writes in Mandarin Chinese intermixed with linguistic elements derived from other Chinese dialects as well as from other languages, Ng publishes fiction that is positioned at the interstices of a number

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what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls family re-
semblance: a set whose members, like those
of a family, are linked by an array of overlap-
ping characteristics rather than by a single
characteristic that all the members share.
- If conceived along these lines, the category
of Mahua literature could be used to desig-
- nate not only works by ethnic Chinese from
- Malaysia writing in either Chinese or other
languages, such as English or Malay, but also
works written in Chinese by Malaysians who
- are not of Chinese descent.
In Chinese, there are several distinct
- terms that could be translated into English
as “Chinese literature,” including *Zhongguo*

wenxue 中國文學, which literally refers to literature from China, and *huayu wenxue* 華語文學, which literally refers to literature written in Chinese. The English term *Chinese literature*, however, has an ambiguity similar to that of *Mahua literature*, in that *Chinese* may indicate nationality, ethnicity, language, or culture; it could therefore be applied to a variety of overlapping categories—literature in Chinese from China, literature by ethnic minorities from China, literature from Greater China and the global Chinese diaspora, literature by Chinese authors writing in other languages, and even works by non-Chinese authors writing on Chinese topics. All these possible categories can work together to create what we intuitively feel makes a work Chinese. Instead of trying to isolate one determining criterion (nationality, ethnicity, language), we should focus on the interaction among various criteria, as they apply not only to works that are conventionally included in a particular category but also to works that might otherwise be overlooked.

This multidimensional approach invites an examination of the interrelations among literature by authors who write in both Chinese and another language (such as Gao Xingjian and Xiaolu Guo), literature by expatriate authors whose first language is Chinese but who write primarily in a second language (such as Ha Jin and Dai Sijie), literature by foreign-born authors of Chinese descent who write on topics relating to Chinese culture (such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Gish Jen), and even China-themed literature written by authors who are neither ethnically Chinese nor Chinese nationals (such as Pearl Buck). The point is not that the works by all these authors are equally Chinese but that there may be important commonalities among them, commonalities that go unnoticed by established nation-, language-, or ethnicity-based categories.

Ng is a professor and leading expert on Mahua literature; he is also a prize-winning

author of six collections of short stories.³ Unlike the early works of Li Yongping, a fellow Mahua author who compensates for his Malaysian origins by writing in a Chinese that aspires to be purer than any existing version of the language,⁴ Ng writes stories that, like *Kristmas*, could be described as having “mixed up a number of the world’s languages, thereby creating a unique new written language” (Ng, *Slow Boat* 8). As Ng notes in a different context, this mixing obtains in much of Mahua literature, which often struggles to reflect the “multilingual environment of Malaysian society. Besides the Chinese dialects that are difficult to render in writing such as Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochiu, and Hailam, there are also Malay, English, and Indian languages, all of which seep into the spoken Mandarin or *Hanyu*” (“Sinophone/Chinese” 76). By drawing eclectically on a variety of different languages and dialects, he creates a literary language that challenges conventional understandings of what it means to write in Chinese. In this essay, I consider several works from Ng’s third collection of short stories, *Youdao zhidao* 由島至島 (“From Island to Island”), focusing on how they problematize the relation between language and community. I also consider the implications that his work has for issues of literary classification and affiliation.

“Allah’s Will”

Originally published in 1996 and reprinted five years later in *From Island to Island*, “Ala de zhiyi” 阿拉的旨意 (“Allah’s Will” [*Slow Boat* 21–148]) revolves around a Malaysian Chinese named Liu Cai, who is sentenced to death in 1957 on account of his affiliation with the Malaysian Communist Party. On the eve of Liu’s scheduled execution, a childhood friend who is now a politically powerful Malay aristocrat intervenes and arranges for Liu’s life to be spared, but on the condition that Liu agree to relocate to a remote island

and renounce all traces of his former identity. He must abandon his name, family, community, and even his language. When Liu reluctantly agrees, he is escorted to the island that has been selected as his new home.

“Allah’s Will,” with its numerous allusions to the Malayan Communist Party and emphasis on the cultural and religious differences between ethnic Malays, who are Muslim, and ethnic Chinese, comments on the political underpinnings of modern Malaysia. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, what is now Malaysia—together with what is now Singapore, Sarawak, and North Borneo—was British Malaya, under the direct or indirect control of Great Britain. The Malayan Communist Party played a critical role in shaping the political landscape of Southeast Asia in the mid-twentieth century. A militant arm of the party led the war of resistance against Japan. While some members of the party left it after the war, others organized into an underground group dedicated to fighting a guerrilla war against the British colonial authorities. This resistance movement lasted from 1946 until 1960, but even after the establishment of an independent Malayan state in 1963, the party remained a destabilizing force, representing a web of alliances between Malaysia’s ethnic Chinese minority and Mainland China. That the party functioned as both a protonational and subnational force anticipated two mutually opposed tendencies that continue to shape the nation’s sociopolitical and cultural landscape. Malaysia has instituted a series of state policies that favor ethnic Malays and their customs, language, and religion at the expense of ethnic Chinese, who make up a quarter of the nation’s total population.

The story relates the decades Liu Cai spends in exile, having been assigned a new name, a new language, a new family, and a new religion. Soon after he arrives on the island, he is ritually circumcised and married to the daughter of the local village chief. With

her he has over a dozen children. On the birth of each child, Liu’s benefactor sends Liu a gift, and as the children grow up, the benefactor arranges for them to go to the Malaysian mainland to continue their studies. But Liu is never permitted to leave the island to attend their graduations or weddings, nor is he permitted to explain to his family why he is unable to leave, because another condition his benefactor placed on him was that he never tell anyone about their agreement.

Liu’s situation on the island illustrates quite precisely Derrida’s aphorism in *Mono-lingualism of the Other*: “I have only one language; it is not mine” (1). Derrida cites his background as an Algerian Jew whose native language is French but who was stripped of his French citizenship for several years during World War II, when the Vichy regime revoked the citizenship of all Algerian Jews. The French language, as a result, was in a very real sense not his, even as it remained the only language he could call his own (though he was fluent in several European languages). But he uses this example to make a more general point: we can never step out of the space of language, because there is no metalanguage with which we can discuss language itself. Language is predicated on the existence of a set of communal (and therefore necessarily external) rules and conventions that make it intelligible to others. When Derrida says that his language is not his own, he means that we all speak a language that is, in a very practical way, not our own. Language functions as a figurative prosthesis, as a stand-in for an identity and origin that no individual can ever fully possess. The only language that Liu has is Chinese, but according to the vow he made to his benefactor he may never use it again.

Ng, in “Allah’s Will,” is interested in the many ways that language can affect a person. Liu, having lived under his adopted identity for more than thirty years, becomes concerned about the name by which he will be buried: he does not wish to be buried as a

Malay. He decides to write his own epitaph but, mindful of his vow, will write it with invented ideographs inspired by ancient Chinese seal script:

It would be too obvious if I were to carve actual Chinese characters, because they would immediately be recognized, leading to enormous problems.

It occurred to me that ancient Chinese characters were all pictographs, but I hadn't learned ancient seal script and consequently could only imagine what it might have looked like. It would certainly not be a violation of our agreement if I were to carve some made-up designs or figures.

First, I inscribed a lopsided pig—my zodiac birth sign.

After writing a period, I then proceeded with my name. . . . I carved an ox together with several copper coins and the sort of cowrie shells that the islanders occasionally collect along the sea shore. My surname is *Liu*, which rhymes with *niu* ["ox"], and my given name is *Cai*, which is homophonous with the *cai* ["wealth"] that many parents dream their children will one day obtain. More specifically, my given name was inspired by the fact that just before I was born my father happened to find some coins in the courtyard. (140)

In this way, Liu is able to symbolically reclaim his Chinese name while technically honoring his agreement with his benefactor. The epitaph expresses his attachment to his former identity and also shows how that identity is continually being transformed and reinvented.

The script that Liu invents functions as a secret code that can be read only by himself but that is theoretically decipherable by an attentive reader (Ng helps the reader by explaining the significance of several of the invented characters). The epitaph can be viewed in the context of what Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, calls a private language—by which he means not a language that happens to be intelligible to only one person but a hypothetical linguistic

system that by its very nature will be intelligible to only one person. Wittgenstein is arguing against the idea that human language is a direct translation from an individual's inner mental state; he contends instead that language is necessarily predicated on its position in a network of rule-governed social interactions. Although a code grounded solely on the subject's mental state cannot function as language *qua* language, Wittgenstein does not rule out the possibility that a linguistic utterance, despite its public status as language, may also contain a dimension that transcends language (Wittgenstein secs. 244–71). The existence of this dimension points to the emotional resonances that language carries, including not only a sense of attachment to a language that a speaker has but also a sense of alienation that a speaker feels from aspects of the language.

Liu's ad hoc epitaph may be seen as operating on two levels: first, there is the meaning itself of the message contained in the coded script (his name, birth sign, and so forth); second, there is the significance of his decision to use a code. The first is decipherable, but the second is not: we understand that his writing in code stems from his frustration at having been stripped of his language and identity, but only Liu knows what he feels. The message of the epitaph is a form of public language (albeit one that in this story can be read by only one person), but the epitaph is also a form of what Wittgenstein calls private language. The code, in other words, is both public and private, being a linguistic construct and a non-linguistic index of the subject's mental state.

The story opens with a Chinese translation of a short passage from the *Qur'an*, on unbelievers, and is followed by the narrator's reflection, in Chinese, on his decision to write his epitaph in Chinese:

I am very well aware of the fact that if the following story were to be revealed to the world, it would surely precipitate a grave crisis.

It would have dire consequences not only for my wife, children, grandchildren, and many other descendants with whom I've already lost touch, but also for my "most cherished friend," the island where I live, my country, as well as my fellow countrymen.

This is a very complicated matter, and I hardly know even where to begin. My thoughts are very confused—especially given that I haven't written in Chinese for over thirty years and there are therefore a lot of Chinese characters I've forgotten how to write (I often either add or leave out strokes, mistake one character for another, remember the character only vaguely, or only know its pronunciation . . .). But if I can't write a certain character, I refuse to transliterate it into Malay, and instead prefer to use another Chinese character with a similar pronunciation. Given that I've already breached the contract that I signed on pain of death (and which I will describe below), I might as well go ahead and break it completely. (121)

Embedded between the epigraph and the opening paragraph, however, is an enigmatic, parenthetical note that reads, in Chinese: "*Originally written in Malay.*"

The meaning of this paratextual remark is ambiguous and remains so in the text. The remark might refer to the quotation from the *Qur'an* that appears in the epigraph, suggesting that the quotation was translated into Chinese from Malay. We are in fact told that at one point Liu asked his benefactor for some Buddhist sutras in Chinese, but the benefactor instead sent him a copy of the *Qur'an* in Arabic. However, the font and positioning of the parenthetical remark align it with the text that immediately follows, suggesting that it is the story that was originally written in Malay, which contradicts the claim of the narrator in the opening paragraphs that he made a point of writing the story in Chinese. The contradiction enacted by the parenthetical remark illustrates the internal tensions of the story, among them the tension between public and private that characterizes all language use.

The story's paratextual remark underscores the sorts of taxonomic questions that are addressed in "The Disappearance of M." Just as the original language of composition of *Kristmas* cannot be confirmed, the original language of "Allah's Will" is cast into doubt at the very beginning of the work.⁵ This uncertainty, combined with the process of racial reacculturation that Liu undergoes on the island, raises the question of whether Ng's story should be classified as Chinese, Malay, Mahua, or something else entirely. This taxonomic indeterminacy invites us to approach the story from a perspective that doesn't evaluate it on the basis of its language of composition, its point of geographic origin, or the ethnic identity of its author.

"Monkey Butts"

Similar concerns about the relation between language and community are developed in "Hou pigu, huo yu weixian de shiwu" 猴屁股、火與危險的事物 ("Monkey Butts, Fire, and Dangerous Things" [*Slow Boat* 149–74]), which describes an ethnically Chinese man who was the plenipotentiary of the Malayan Communist Party on Lion Island (Singapore) and goes by the nickname Lighter (*Laide*). Like Liu Cai in "Allah's Will," he has been exiled to a remote island, but unlike Liu, who is given a new identity and embedded in a new community, the protagonist of "Monkey Butts" is placed in complete isolation. His only connection to the outside is the provisions that are periodically air-dropped to him. The island has no other inhabitants, and the Plenipotentiary's only social interactions are with a local troop of monkeys. We are told that he tried to kill or exile to the interior all the male monkeys on the island in order to avail himself sexually of the females, but it is later observed that there are many baby monkeys, so the males must still be active behind his back. In "Monkey Butts," a man has been stripped of all contact with society, and the

only human things he has left are his memories and his language.

Over the years that the Plenipotentiary has lived on the island, five men were air-dropped to visit him. The first three died immediately when they fell. The fourth, who survived, was a Japanese scholar named Yamamoto Gojuuichi, who was researching the history of Malaysia's communist movement. Yamamoto spent several months interviewing the Plenipotentiary but then disappeared. The fifth visitor was a Malaysian Chinese man who was instructed to take to the Plenipotentiary a signed copy of a memoir written by one of his former political rivals, known as Elder. This final visitor, who arrived shortly after Yamamoto disappeared, is also the narrator through whose eyes the story unfolds.

"Monkey Butts" may be read as a political allegory. The character known as Elder, who asked the narrator to take his signed memoir to the Plenipotentiary, was probably inspired by Lee Kuan Yew, the first prime minister of Singapore and considered the founding father of modern Singapore. The Plenipotentiary was probably inspired by Lim Chin Siong, who collaborated with Lee in helping create the People's Action Party but then broke with him to join a rival political party. Lim, who was later repeatedly imprisoned and ultimately had a nervous breakdown, is discussed in a memoir by Lee, who praised his charisma and hypnotic oratory. The emphasis on oratory anticipates one of the central themes of the story while also reflecting the role that culture and rhetoric played in shaping contemporary Singapore. Whereas modern Malaysia implemented a series of political initiatives designed to favor indigenous Malay identity and culture, Singapore promoted a more flexible understanding of identity, in which ethnicity, language, religion, and culture intersect and diverge in complex ways. "Allah's Will" underscores the role of state policies in shaping ethnonational identity, but "Monkey Butts" considers in-

stead the role of culture, writing, and oratory in shaping that identity.

"Monkey Butts" focuses on the narrator's interaction with the exiled Plenipotentiary. At the end of the first day of their meeting, the Plenipotentiary gives the narrator a box to take back to Elder. The narrator, once he is alone, opens the box and finds a document labeled "Secret Files from Malaya's Communist Period," which contains a list of names and bios. The first entry reads simply, "Plenipotentiary—that's me," and is immediately followed by a longer entry detailing a revolutionary leader known as Lighter, which begins:

Laite ("Lighter"), Huaite ("White"), also known as Hoang Thieu Dong, Huang Nalu, Lao Wu, Li Tek, Yalie, Huang Jinyu, Huang a Nhac.

Lighter was one of the most legendary, controversial, and terrifying leaders from Malaya's communist period. His reputation was heightened by the uncertainties concerning his family background. Although he was reincarnated with a different name and among a group of Chinese speaking a different dialect, files in other languages (including English imperial files, Japanese files, Malaysian national files, together with the University of Singapore's pre-war Malayan-Chinese files) all assume that he is not ethnically Chinese, though they lack any convincing evidence to substantiate this. In addition to being fluent in Mandarin, Lighter was also proficient in Min Nan, Cantonese, Hakka, as well as several South Seas dialects. He was also fluent in Malay, and his skin was as dark as that of an ethnic Malay—though dark skin is also not unusual among Chinese (including the black-skinned people discussed below). (165–66)

The entry provides considerable additional biographical detail on Lighter, and it is followed by shorter entries on several other figures, each of whom is identified with many different names (e.g., "*Xiao He, also known as Ah He, OOpe, OOtuer, Ta He, Bak Zue, and OOkazen*" [167]). As the entries progress, they become shorter and more fragmentary; the

the narrator of the circumstances in which he first met Elder—a meeting that, he notes, must have taken place around the time that the announcement was printed. Elder was being attended by several physicians, who were performing an unspecified medical procedure that left him in considerable distress. The narrator recalls how

the bald doctor appeared to be very senior, and I could hear him quietly advising Elder (from his accent I could tell he was from Beijing), “Sir, I think we should stop; your health is critical. We can’t extract any more, since we’re already drawing blood. If we continue, I’m afraid we might kill you. As for the rest, can’t we ask your son to sub in for you?” Before the doctor had a chance to finish, I heard Elder bellow, “How would that be possible? How can I cheat my countrymen? Keep trying, until you’ve succeeded in extracting the motherload.” (157)

The implication is that the physicians are taking a semen sample to be used in the National Bloodline Improvement program mentioned in the newspaper clipping.

The description of Elder as a semen donor promoting national “bloodline purity” and the Plenipotentiary’s (real or imagined) cross-species coupling are scenes, bookending the story, that dramatically defamiliarize the blood bonds on which contemporary notions of ethnoracial and ethnopolitical identity are predicated. The scenes invite a critical examination not only of the fiction of hereditary identity but also of the biological definition of a social community in which a language is spoken.

The sperm donation and cross-species mating point to a possible divergence between the reproduction that forms families, on the one hand, and the society that those families produce, on the other. This divergence encourages a reassessment of the metaphor of the family as it appears in Wittgenstein’s logic of family resemblances. Although the basis of his original metaphor involves the

way members of a family share traits because they are biologically related (Wittgenstein observes, “I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than ‘family resemblances’; for the various resemblances between members of a family—build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, and so on and so forth—overlap and criss-cross in the same way” [36]), the metaphor also applies to the traits that family members share by virtue of their social bonds. Combining Ng’s emphasis on desocialized insemination with Wittgenstein’s metaphor of family resemblance may ground an approach to literary taxonomy that looks at overlapping sets of affinities instead of focusing on single traits. Such an approach also considers groupings of texts based on criteria that diverge from conventional identity-based classifications—for instance, diasporic literature or second-language literature. This approach does not use literary taxonomies to reinforce existing national, ethnic, or sociopolitical sites of identity but opens the possibility that alternative taxonomies may defamiliarize these naturalized categories and invite new ones.

Discourses of Diaspora

The multidirectional dispersal of semen in “Monkey Butts” resonates etymologically with the Western term *diaspora*, which is derived from the Greek roots *dia* (“across”) and *speirein* (“to scatter” or “to sow”) and which is therefore conceived as a scattering of seed. Diaspora is a theme in many of Ng’s texts, and both “Allah’s Will” and “Monkey Butts” explore it through a character who has been forbidden from keeping any visible ties to his original identity and through a character who has been inserted into an environment that lacks even a minimal semblance of a social community. In both stories, the protagonist’s exile is articulated through the use of fractured language. “Allah’s Will” concludes with an epitaph scene that illustrates the degree to

which the protagonist remains haunted by the memory of who he once was. “Monkey Butts” culminates with the Plenipotentiary’s frenzied oration to his monkey audience, suggesting that the political identity to which he clings has become no more than a parody. In both stories, the fractured language has a public as well as a private dimension, in that it communicates a legible meaning while indicating an illegible mental state.

Like almost all the texts in *From Island to Island*, both stories have two titles—one that appears at the beginning of the story and one that appears in the volume’s table of contents. In the table of contents, “Allah’s Will” has the title 不信道的人們 (“Unbelievers” [literally, “the people who don’t believe in the Way”]). The first title cites the phrase that Liu repeatedly uses to rationalize his fate; the second is the Chinese translation for the Arabic term for unbelievers that is given in the story’s opening epigraph from the *Qur’an*. “Monkey Butts, Fire, and Dangerous Things” is the title that appears at the beginning of the work, while the volume’s table of contents gives the title as 全權代表的秘密檔案 (“Secret Files of the Plenipotentiary”), suggesting that the entire story has been taken from the Plenipotentiary’s “Secret Files from Malaya’s Communist Period.” In both cases, the title listed in the table of contents reflects a religious or political perspective corresponding to the remote island to which the protagonist has been exiled—which is to say, the private core embedded in the story’s publically legible exterior.

Only two stories in *From Island to Island* do not have a doubled title. The first is 訴求 (“Supplication”) both in the table of contents and at the beginning of the story (111). The second is 不可觸的 (“Untouchable”) in the table of contents but untitled at the beginning of the story (113). It is significant that the other distinguishing characteristic of these two stories is that they are each highly experimental pieces that feature only the sort of text that, I would argue, in Ng’s fiction marks the space

of Wittgenstein’s private language, without a corresponding public dimension. “Supplication” consists of a single paragraph composed entirely of the same sorts of meaningless symbols found at the end of the “Secret Files” section of “Monkey Butts,” while “Untouchable” consists of nothing but six pages of completely black paper.⁶ Both stories present a language beyond language, in which there is no semantic meaning, only the subject’s struggle with the limits of language itself.

Commissioned by Rye Field Press, one of Taiwan’s main literary publishers, as part of a series that highlights leading Chinese-language authors from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, this volume has both 由島至到 and *From Island to Island* on the title page. The cover gives the title in Chinese and a translation into romanized Malay: *Dari Pulau Ke Pulau*. The book’s spine gives a different title altogether: *Kebei* 刻背, which could be translated as “inscribed backs” and is also the title of the final story in the collection. The doubly redoubled title of the volume suggests that it, like the stories it contains, is employing a doubled use of language: *From Island to Island* marks the outward-oriented, public dimension of the project; *Inscribed Backs* marks the inward, private side.

The story “Inscribed Backs” involves a figure named Ah Kun who resolves to produce what is described as a “modern-day *Dream of the Red Chamber*,” by creating a vast literary text and inscribing it on a series of ten thousand tortoise shells, in the tradition of ancient Chinese oracle bone divination. Although the story mentions this oracle bone project only briefly, it does note that a European visitor identified in the text as Mr. Fu takes interest in the endeavor and decides to embark on a similar one of his own, to compose “a novel as great as *Ulysses*” (271).⁷ Instead of using tortoise shells, Mr. Fu plans to tattoo his text on “the backs of a thousand men”—using mostly transnational migrant Chinese laborers, or coolies, for

this purpose (271). Given that Mr. Fu barely knows Chinese, the resulting text is a virtually meaningless assortment of miswritten Chinese characters. The story concludes with the narrator's discovery that the entire back of her elderly mentor—who spent decades trying to track down the meaning of the coolies' mysterious tattoos and has just passed away—is similarly covered with tattoos of miswritten versions of the Chinese character 海, meaning “sea.” The narrator concludes that these tattoos are the work not of Mr. Fu but of some anonymous disciple who took inspiration from Mr. Fu's project—making the text on the mentor's back a copy of a copy of a copy . . . all the way back to the Chinese oracle bone inscriptions that inspired Ah Kun to inscribe a literary masterpiece on ten thousand tortoise shells, which in turn inspired Mr. Fu to tattoo a similar masterpiece on the backs of a thousand men, which in turn apparently inspired his disciples to undertake similar tattooing projects of their own, and so forth. Through a chain of iterative citation, the text in “Inscribed Backs” comes full circle from illegible ancient Chinese oracle bone inscriptions to illegible deformed Chinese characters inscribed by a foreigner who barely knows Chinese.

Mr. Fu's dream of composing “a novel as great as *Ulysses*” brings us back to the discussion, in “The Disappearance of M,” of the fictional novel *Kristmas*, which is described by one of the conference speakers as

the first work to cross Malaysian literature's ethnic boundaries. It has mixed up a number of the world's languages, thereby creating a unique new written language. Because it is so multifaceted, the novel is literally untranslatable. In fact, strictly speaking it is not even written in English to begin with. In terms of its genre, it resembles a “Malaysian calendar,” and is as extraordinary as *Ulysses*. (8)

Both Mr. Fu's magnum opus and the anonymous *Kristmas*, not to mention Ng's entire

literary oeuvre, are multilingual texts and geographically decentered works that defy categorization. Reflecting dialectical tensions between the local and the universal and between origin and dissemination, these texts exemplify a set of diasporic processes that challenge conventional literary taxonomies based on nationality, language, or ethnicity, even as they raise important questions about the nature and limits of diaspora itself.

The remark that the multilingual *Kristmas* is “literally untranslatable” echoes Derrida's observation, in his discussion of Paul Celan, that “everything seems, in principle, *de jure*, translatable, except of the mark of the difference among the languages within the same poetic event” (*Sovereignities* 209). Like Joyce's *Ulysses*, Ng's oeuvre is located in a diasporic space between different languages and linguistic orders and also between different ethnic and national orders. In this space, the limitations of conventional literary taxonomies become evident and we may find new approaches there to literary taxonomy and to traditional assumptions about sociality and influence.

I propose, therefore, that we take Ng's fiction as a starting point for rethinking the logics of literary categorization and affiliation. By adopting a multidimensional approach to literary taxonomy, we will be able to delink literary formations from their naturalized ethnonational and sociopolitical constructs; we will be able to use the inherent contingency of literary communities as a model for rethinking the ways in which language, community, and social identity intersect. Through an attention to the sorts of fissures that are introduced into familiar social formations in Ng's stories (by means of forcible exile, intra-species coupling, artificial insemination, and so forth), we will be able to productively reflect on the inevitable contingent dimension that characterizes all sociocultural groupings.

NOTES

1. For all the stories by Ng discussed in this essay, I am citing the translations included in *Slow Boat to China*.
2. Shih does propose that literature by ethnic minorities in China may also be included in the category of Sinophone.
3. For useful discussions of Ng's work in English, see Bachner, ch. 4; Groppe, ch. 4; and Tsu, ch. 7.
4. See Rojas, ch. 7. In his recent novels, particularly *Da he jintou* 大河盡 ("The Head of the River"), Li Yongping has begun adopting a more diaglossic approach.
5. We know that Ng wrote the work in Chinese, but if the text of the story is taken at face value, its language of composition is uncertain.
6. In "Supplication," the title at the beginning of the story is the only Chinese script that appears on the page. In "Untouchable," even if a title were printed, it would be invisible against the black page.
7. Although not made explicit in the story, the name Mr. Fu is an abbreviation in Chinese of the surname Faulkner—this point was made to me in a personal communication with Ng Kim Chew, in May 2015.

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