

The circulation of ghostly women and Li Yongping's affective Sinophone Malaysian identity

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Abstract

Li Yongping's writing displays an acute sensitivity to the changing cultural and historical positioning of the Sinophone Malaysian (Mahua) community and his own migratory experiences. This article focuses on Li's incessant engagement with issues of gender and feminine sexuality in relation to the shifting biopolitical construction of a hybrid Sinophone Malaysian identity. Through an analysis of Li Yongping's short story collection, *The Snow Falls in Clouds* (2002), I aim to examine how he deploys the trope of a prostitute figure to evoke the complexities of a Sinophone Malaysian identity and identification as a consistently reinvented affective product. Li's keen awareness of the trafficking of desirable Chinese female bodies in Southeast Asia is inextricable from Sinophone Malaysia's cultural history and community formation. Spectral feminine images reflect the increasingly porous and deterritorialized boundaries of citizenship, community, and nationalism complicating the concept of "Chineseness" and an affective Sinophone Malaysian subjectivity.

Keywords

Chineseness, ethnic identity, identity politics, Li Yongping, Sinophone Malaysia

On March 14, 1939, a Chinese prostitute named Jasmine committed suicide in the brothel at 42 Nona Bahru Street, Penang, located on the northwest coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Jasmine's body was found hanging from her bedpost in cubicle No. 47 next to a suicide note telling the mistress of the house not to worry about her death, and requested that a photo of herself be sent to her family in China (Khor et al., 2004). Jasmine's suicide became scandalous news for Penang people, heightened by the 1936 enactment of Section 309, which criminalized suicide under Malaysia's Penal Code (Laws of Malaysia, 1936). Additionally, it is significant that Jasmine's death occurred

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during China's War of Resistance against the Japanese (1937–1945). At times of revolution or civil war throughout the 20th century, the mainland solicited overseas resources to lend their patriotic support from afar (Tsu and Wang, 2010). To construct Chinese individuals as biopolitical subjects willing to serve and die for the state, young girls and women were told that their bodies belonged to the nation and that they constituted a form of female army (Wang and Widmer, 1993). Brothel owners capitalized on this idea of a national good to enslave prostitutes: young women were rounded up in China's impoverished rural areas and shipped like livestock from one brothel to another in Southeast Asia (Warren, 1993).

Against this backdrop, Jasmine made a rational choice to exert individual agency by taking her own life, at the very least making a defiant statement about her struggle to survive in a distant land. This reading is supported by a Foucaultian understanding of biopower, or the power to regulate life, where the right to impose death becomes the ultimate affirmation of state authority. In the biopolitical age, suicide becomes a "scandal" as it is the action through which individuals can escape from bio-disciplinary power, hence performing a subversive act of resistance (Foucault, 2003: 248). Nonetheless, rumors quickly spread that the prostitute was a victim of oppression or an illicit love affair culminating in suicide. Before long, Jasmine faded from public memory and her cubicle was occupied by a new prostitute.

The public re-inscription of Jasmine's suicide into the framework of patriarchal victimization ignores the productive power of her actions as a displaced Chinese woman facing undeniable sociopolitical and legal injustices. Through a postcolonial reading, Jasmine's death summons Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's monumental essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), addressing the inability of subaltern subjects to speak for themselves.¹ Jasmine is doubly marginalized as a Chinese prostitute in Malaysia – she is confined to the lowest stratum of social respectability, and ostracized as a member of the Chinese ethnic minority. Exploited both for her female body and her Chineseness, Jasmine is denigrated as a subaltern woman without power to affect her destiny and unable to voice her experiences. Her fate illuminates unsettling tensions at the core of discourses on globalization and modern nation-building haunted by sentiments of loss, disillusionment, and misplaced yearnings associated with the Sinophone experience. Yet, her death also becomes the condition of possibility for a subaltern woman's emergence into historical discourse.

Jasmine's death serves as a paradoxical condition for political immortality, representing some form of resistance to injustice and oppression. Together with the lives and deaths of countless other silent and silenced women, Jasmine's lingering image symbolizes a Chinese emigrant's struggle to cope with foreign encounters during a time of global transition, forming part of an emergent Chinese Malaysian diasporic community at the turn of the 20th century. Although the presence of overseas prostitutes is intimately interwoven into the history of a Chinese minority population and multi-ethnic contact in Malaysia, there are few written records tracing their feminine reactions. Nonetheless, the image of the ethnic Chinese prostitute in Southeast Asia, especially in connection to the "flesh trade" of the early 1900s and the Japanese practice of comfort women during the Second World War, continues to be reproduced and disseminated in contemporary cultural production (Rimmer et al., 1990). The circulated representations of ghosted subaltern women parallel

1. Spivak describes the suicide of Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri, a young woman covertly involved with the armed struggle for Indian independence who killed herself when she was unable to complete a political assassination. Despite Bhuvaneshwari's calculated efforts to assert self-agency through the physiological control of her body, others still concluded that her actions were due to illegitimate love, prompting Spivak to assert that the subaltern cannot speak.

the physical traffic of women through time and across geopolitical frontiers. As spectral images, they reflect the increasingly porous and deterritorialized boundaries of citizenship, community, and nationalism complicating the concept of “Chineseness” and an affective Sinophone Malaysian (Mahua, 马华) subjectivity (Shi, 2013). These phantom women embody “female sexuate bodies that bear the burden of genderedness” with the potential to destabilize norms (Rajan, 2010: 133). In her liminality, the subaltern woman’s death transforms her into a symbol of alterity and an internalized idea of identity.

Given the complexities of cultural identification for a minority population of Chinese descent in Southeast Asia, Sinophone Malaysian authors straddle multiple political and cultural affiliations with China, Chineseness, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Southeast Asia in their creative expression (Ng, 1999). Li Yongping (李永平) is one such author whose writing displays an acute sensitivity to the cultural and historical positioning of the Sinophone Malaysian community and his own migratory experiences. Li Yongping was born in 1947 in Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, on the island of Borneo, but is now a citizen of the Republic of China. Through his fiction, Li consistently negotiates overlapping attachments to multiple cultural belongings (Li, 2003). He engages with history to articulate a protean Sinophone Malaysian identity from the perspective of an overseas Chinese writer living in Taiwan and writing about Malaysia. Scholarship on Li Yongping’s fiction has highlighted autobiographical aspects limned through the lush landscapes of Southeast Asia (e.g. Tee, 2004; Tan, 2013), narratorial techniques conveying the challenges of writing the Chinese script in multilingual environments (e.g. Chang, 1993; Tsu, 2010), and nostalgia rooted in a Chinese ancestral heritage to assert a diasporic subjectivity (e.g. Groppé, 2013; Wang, 1993). Li’s incessant engagement with issues of gender and feminine sexuality reveal his keen awareness of the way the trafficking of desirable Chinese female bodies in Southeast Asia is inextricable from Sinophone Malaysia’s cultural history and community formation. His narratives consistently deploy the trope of the fallen woman to depict a sexualized environment dominated by the circulation of libidinal desires and female bodies. As such, the ghostly characters wandering his texts dramatize the diasporic triangulation of a Sinophone Malaysian identity situated within the margins of Taiwanese, Malaysian, and Chinese cultural attachments, yet at the same time erasing those very boundaries.

Prostitutes and subaltern women – and their spectres – figure prominently throughout Li’s oeuvre, providing insights into his authorial perspective on the significance of gender and hybridity vis-a-vis the affective Sinophone Malaysian experience. One of the first short stories that Li Yongping published, “A Dayak Woman” (拉子婦) (1976), tells the tale of an indigenous Borneo woman who marries into a Chinese family in Sarawak. She is subjected to increasingly harsh treatment and abuse, until the day she silently dies, which prompts the narrator to reflect upon the impact of her life. Much of Li’s literary fame is attributed to his first book-length novel, *Chronicles of Jiling* (吉陵春秋) (1986), a dark assemblage of narratives set in a town’s brothel district during the Guanyin (Goddess of Mercy) festival parade. The novel recounts a series of violent and murderous events spurred by the rape and suicide of a coffin maker’s young wife, inciting the bereaved coffin maker to seek revenge by killing the rapist’s wife and a prostitute neighbor. The haunting imagery of these peripheral women in Li’s work illuminates Avery F Gordon’s theorization of how “modern forms of dispossession, exploitation, and repression concretely impact the lives of the people most affected by them and impact our shared conditions of living” (Gordon, 2011: 1). In Gordon’s analysis of haunting, the experience of being haunted and the unexpected arrival of ghosts “troubles or even ruins our ability to distinguish between reality and fiction, magic and science, savage and civilized, self and other,” forcing a process of “reality-testing” to identify the “visible and disquieting symptoms of repression and bringing their origins

and nature to light” (Gordon, 2008: 53). Both “A Dayak Woman” and *Chronicles of Jiling* exemplify Li’s tendency to place the peripheral woman at the center of his narratives, presenting her as a disturbingly desirable yet easily exploitable body adulterating an idealized vision of “Chineseness.”

This article analyzes Li Yongping’s short story collection, *The Snow Falls in Clouds: Recollections of a Borneo Childhood* (兩雪霏霏：婆羅洲童年記事) (2002), to examine how he variously deploys the trope of a prostitute figure to evoke the Sinophone Malaysian identity as a consistently reinvented affective product. Here, I use the “prostitute figure” as an umbrella term to connote a range of different marginal, “fallen” women through which strong affective responses are easily attached to. The pages of Li’s fiction are traversed by “inappropriate” figures through which he grapples with the concept of “Chineseness” and its limits of community, gender, ethics, and ethnicity. Reading the subaltern woman as a stock character or affective laborer that generates popular imaginaries, Li’s narration of political and personal attachments to various female characters – from anonymous prostitutes to his childhood sweetheart and little sister – recreates shifting boundaries of a transnational, mixed, and diasporic Sinophone Malaysian subjectivity. He conveys an ambivalence towards the multicultural Chinese Malaysian experience marked by betrayal and violence at every turn. Moreover, Li also reveals a deep fear of and preoccupation with the biopolitical implications of hybridity and multiethnic contact, narrating a grimy corporeal social history of inter-racial encounters and circuits of women undergirding diasporic Chinese migration to Nanyang.

Ghosted prostitute bodies: The geopolitical peril of a transnational libidinal economy

The Snow Falls in Clouds: Recollections of a Borneo Childhood (兩雪霏霏：婆羅洲童年記事) (2002) is a collection of nine short stories in which the first-person narrator, provocatively named Li Yongping after the author, recollects memories from his childhood years in Kuching, one of the oldest and largest cities in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak. These memories are conveyed when Li Yongping meets and converses with Zhu Ling, an eight-year-old girl, as they roam the streets of Old Taipei over the course of one night. Many evoke bitter episodes exhibiting past acts of malice, and critics have noted the inappropriate and even perverse implications of an older male narrator telling such stories to a young girl (e.g. Groppe, 2013; Rojas, 1998; Wang, 2003). Due to the seemingly autobiographical nature of many episodes, Tee Kim Tong (2004: 99) has argued that *The Snow Falls in Clouds* “is simply a retold story of Li’s own pre-exilic life, or more specifically of his childhood and youthful years before he went abroad to Taiwan for his college education.” Although Tee acknowledges that the novel “takes on a special socio-cultural significance as the work of a Chinese/Malaysian/Taiwanese writer in exile,” he emphasizes that Li Yongping’s primary concern “is not the representation of his national and cultural identities [...] but an inward journey in search of his self or personal identity” (Tee, 2004: 97–99).

Like Tee, I am interested in the way Li grapples with his self-identity as a Chinese/Malaysian/Taiwanese writer in (self) exile. However, Li’s concern with a collective national and cultural identity for a diasporic Sinophone Malaysian community cannot be ignored. This aspect of Li’s work is brought out in *The Snow Falls in Clouds* where the narrator’s reflections do not merely revolve around his personal worldview, but are often absorbed in piecing together the life stories of women he meets. Notably, one of the first few chapters in the collection focuses almost exclusively on Li Yongping’s memories of brothels and his curiosity about the life circumstances of young

women driven to sex work. Female characters such as Li's childhood sweetheart and his sister, Mary Seto and Cui Di respectively, frequently crop up throughout the novel as Li traces their downfall from innocent, bright girls into dejected women. The last chapter of the novel ends with a story centered upon the marginal lives of overseas prostitutes from Taiwan whom Li Yongping befriends and eventually betrays as a boy. These stories recall the tradition of female ghost stories in Chinese literature: as Judith Zeitlin (2007) observes in *The Phantom Heroine*, the predilection of Chinese ghost narratives is to displace fear back onto the timid and lonely spectre, arousing feelings of pity and tenderness in her human benefactor. This reflective practice fits into the Freudian definition of projection as an "operation whereby qualities, feelings, wishes, or even 'objects,' which the subject refuses to recognize or rejects in himself are expelled from the self and located in another person or thing" – in Li's case, the abject being of the subaltern, ghosted woman (Zeitlin, 2007: 3). As such, Li Yongping bookends his narrative journey with subaltern women who have haunted his personal understanding of multicultural encounters and (self) exile.

"Sonya" (桑尼亚): *Searching for the Sinophone Malaysian body politic*

The third chapter's title – "Sonya" (桑尼亚 *Sangniya*) – already hints at the dark and desolate story about to unfold. As the narrator explains to Zhu Ling, Sonya is the teenage prostitute character forced by her own father into sex work in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Initially, Sonya's father had to coerce his daughter to sell herself, but after her first customer, Sonya wordlessly goes to the streets herself and hands her father the money she earns. The sacrifice of prostituting herself is made even more poignant by the fact that it would not have been necessary were her father able to control his alcoholism. When introducing Sonya to Zhu Ling, Li confesses that in all of the Western literature he has read, he has "come across many women who make him feel awe and subdued," but the one whom "his heart pampers and misses the most" is "Sonya, the Russian prostitute of seventeen or eighteen, because she did not die" (p. 52).² As Li elaborates, it is precisely because "she cannot die; she has to feed her family" that Sonya's character inhibits him from reading Dostoevsky's book a second time, as he "cannot bear to watch the scene where Sonya leaves for the streets again" (p. 53). Through no fault of her own, Sonya becomes a victim of displaced circumstances. When she leaves her house, Sonya is ostracized as a destitute prostitute; when she returns home, she is alienated from her own family. Sonya's phantom existence thus represents a state of in-betweenness that is full of contradiction and misery, flickering on the border between being a devoted daughter and a debauched woman, between life and death. Although still biologically alive, Sonya's character bears the indelible mark of social death – the process by which a person is made into a human non-person as a result of externally imposed social negation.³ Sonya, and the other peripheral women that linger within the pages of Li's text, appear and are treated as if they were already dead.

2. Citations and page number references taken from the Chinese-language novel (Li, 2002). All translations are my own.

3. Orlando Patterson's work, *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), provides a detailed analysis and theorization of the notion of social death as an idiom of power, a language for making systemic relations of domination and exploitation socially and cognitively acceptable. Although Patterson does not focus on whether prostitution is or is not like slavery or a type of enslavement, women who are imprisoned within the continuum of prostitution or brothel systems manifest a similar process of social negation and therefore social death. The woman enslaved to prostitution as a means of survival is conceived as an "internal exile,

The fictional paragon of Sonya haunts Li as he wanders the seamier streets of both Taipei and Kuching, where Zhu Ling observes that “in this lifetime, [he] is always looking for Sonya” (p. 65). However, the actual prostitutes he encounters in brothels alternatively fascinate and horrify him. Li first tells Zhu Ling about venturing into a dark Kuching alley lined with brothels as a boy, and then goes on to describe a terrifying misadventure in Taipei’s brothel district shortly after he arrives in Taiwan. In both of these episodes, Li details his visceral reaction to the degenerate manifestations of interracial contact inscribed on the bodies of immigrant sex workers and their clients in dystopian red-light districts, exposing his apprehension over the lingering indices of biopolitical control haunting the expansion of a modern Sinophone population. According to Michel Foucault, the emergence of contemporary society is predicated upon “biopolitics” or “biopower,” a new form of disciplinary regime for the control and regulation of bodies, desires, and sexuality.⁴ Li’s portrayal of biopolitics here again evinces Gordon’s exploration on the theme of haunting. In his work on *Ghostly Matters*, Gordon (2008) writes that haunting raises spectres that disrupt our sense of linear time and represents an “animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known” to produce a “something-to-be-done.” As such, haunting is an emergent state; the living that haunt as if they were dead alerts us to abusive systems of power and the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or being done in the present. In their liminality, the living dead haunt from a position of social death flickering between the worlds of the living and the dead, carrying a frightening existential message. Accordingly, Li Yongping’s world of Sinophone Malaysia displayed in *The Snow Falls in Clouds* is populated by liminal bodies that transgress, challenge, and redefine the boundaries of groups, ethnicities, and national affiliations. These ghosted characters haunt by allowing us to imagine what was lost yet probably never truly existed in the first place, and provoke a “steeling sorrow laced with delight for what we lost that we never had” (Gordon, 2008: 57).

In modern Chinese fiction, the prostitute figure is often portrayed as performing the most private of human attachments (be it an exchange of desires, talent, or bodily fluids) while marketing it as a public service (Zamperini, 2010). As iconic characters symbolizing the exteriors of collective intimacy, the prostitute figures in Li’s novel suggest how the private realm of sexual desires is inextricably connected to the public fate of diasporic Chinese individuals. The overseas Chinese prostitute, in particular, embodies the porous boundaries of “Chineseness” as an ahistorical essence characteristic of a fixed geographic region or ethnic peoples, and is intimately linked to Li’s own affective Sinophone Malaysian identity. It is in the shadowy brothels of Kuching and

one who had been deprived of all claims of community...because [s]he had fallen” and no longer belonged (Patterson, 1982: 44).

4. In *The History of Sexuality: Vol. I*, Foucault (1990: 136) writes of biopower as “working to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them”. In contrast to sovereign power which could “take life or let live,” biopower is the power “to foster life or disallow it to the point of death” (Foucault, 1990: 138). Biopower accesses the body because it functions through norms rather than laws: it is internalized by subjects rather than being exercised from above through acts or threats of violence and it is dispersed through society rather than located in a single individual or government body (Taylor, 2011: 43). This biopolitical framework has been deployed by critical race and postcolonial thinkers to address how the questions of self, identity, and self-actualization become crucial preoccupations for individuals in increasingly transnational, globalizing societies (e.g. Chow, 2002).

Taiwan that Li conjures a place where numerous figures of Chineseness and hybridity come together, dramatizing how commodified bodies negotiate gendered and racialized difference across cultural and national contexts. This sexualized landscape induces a Foucaultian theme of biopolitics, where “between the state and the individual, sex became an issue, and a public issue no less,” to consider the shifting subjectivity of a diasporic Chinese community (Foucault, 1978: 26).

When venturing into a Kuching brothel, Li recalls the Malay, Indian, and European men meandering the murky alleyway in a passage that is as vivid as it is unsettling to read:

The alleyway was filled to the brim with men of various colors and races sticking out their heads and looking about, sweaty and reeking, full of weird smells: betel nut juice splashing from the mouth holes of Malays, the odor of curry emanating from the bodies of Indians, the gamy stink from the armpits of Europeans...Mixed together under the big sun, they pervaded the entire alley, like a miniature United Nations. (p. 55)

Amid the presence of these foul men, Li as a little boy “pinched his nose and treaded carefully across them” to get a closer look at the brothels (p. 55). Spying into the buildings, Li realizes that many of the prostitutes are young Chinese women and exclaims in dismay: “the girls sitting in each room in those small metal shacks, they were all Chinese – the daughters of Chinese people!” (p. 56). For Li, the sight of ethnic Chinese women being fetishized and consumed by foreigners is an intensely abject experience, one that compromises his own cultural identity.

The spectacle of interracial sexual activity revolts Li, making him sprint out of the alley “as if he were being chased by a ghost” and squat next to the market pork vendor where he “desperately grabbed his chest and, with uncontainable grief, vomited” (p. 56). For Li, racial interbreeding is an abject site where what is inside the body is expelled to the outside, and contaminating elements from the outside are taken in, blurring the boundaries between self and other. Li cannot escape from identifying with the overseas Chinese prostitute as a diasporic figure, yet constantly retaliates against her marginal existence. The image of a destitute Chinese woman serving grimy foreign men amalgamates an abject body and object of desire; Li’s behavior displays the traumatic experience of being confronted with a materiality that signifies his own multicultural impurity and “show[s] [him] what [he] permanently thrust[s] aside in order to live” as an expatriate Chinese Malaysian (Kristeva, 1982: 3).

The notion of the prostitute as a recurrent site through which affective flows materialize and mediate, making transparent power structures involved in the production of community, is also emphasized in Li’s encounters with Taipei’s streetwalkers. Themes of abjection and the biopolitical fear of hybridity are sustained through the portrayal of a filthy environment teeming with ghostly, demonic figures that make visible the dark side of multiraciality pervaded by sexual violence, transgression, and illegitimacy. Wandering through the labyrinthine passageways, the Taipei brothels that Li describes are full of eerie women and frightening sounds: broods of heavily made-up women “raise their red-rimmed black eyes to gaze outside at the rain” and old men alternatively let out “blood-curdling screams as if a pig had been slaughtered” or wildly break out in laughter and song (p. 60). In contrast to the brothels in Kuching that are “filled with little girls sitting gently and quietly alone by the sides of their beds [...] as if looking over a sweetly sleeping toddler in a cradle,” the first Taipei prostitute Li encounters wraps “two cold little hands in a death grip around his neck” (pp. 55, 60).

After running away, Li finds himself in alleys “filled with the acrid smell of sweat, cosmetics, menstruation, and urine,” and is horrified when mama-sans “raise their arms out together, black

and shiny, exposing clumps of sweat as large as beans under their armpits” calling out to him as a customer (pp. 61–62). The narrator also stumbles upon a “little mama of sixteen or seventeen” who had the “full face of a child” but a swollen belly about eight months pregnant (pp. 60–61). While chewing on the head of a stewed duck, she beckons Li to sleep with her. The sight of this pregnant teenage prostitute confronts Li with a profoundly wretched image of bastardized existence, and he scrambles into the dark corners of a fire escape lane as the girl chuckles ominously behind him. Angry red neon signs and uncanny alien tongues surround Li at every turn, engulfing him in a hellish landscape from which he cannot find a way out (pp. 62–63).

The parallel episodes in the Kuching and Taipei brothels correspond to Li’s increased awareness of a multicultural identity as he grows up and moves to Taiwan. He is overcome with self-abjection when empathizing with the young Chinese girls exploited by men of other ethnicities in Kuching, but is later made intensely aware of his own difference even amongst ethnically Chinese people in Taipei. Li himself feels “prostituted” to various cultures as a Chinese/Malaysian/Taiwanese individual. The commodified bodies of foreign prostitutes possess a dangerous power and abject sexuality that dovetails with what Shi Shu-mei has called the “geopolitics of desire” (Shi, 2007: 86–116).

Shi’s gender theorization in *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific* (Shi, 2007) examines the increasing economic, political, and cultural integration of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China into the imaginary single entity of “Greater China” via the cross-country trafficking of women. She posits that “there is no identity negotiation that is not at the same time a gendered negotiation. In highly volatile situations, the greatest fears and desires as well as the most fantastic projections of confidence are always articulated in gendered terms” (Shi, 2007: 87). In this analysis, the migration of Chinese women to Southeast Asia influences the complex trajectory of anxieties intimately enmeshed with “volatile” political and economic relations in Greater China, impacting the formulation of a “transnational Chinese culture” (Shi, 2007: 87–88). Specifically, the fetishization of the foreign feminine body reveals a geopolitical asymmetry in wealth and power, breaking down barriers of nationality, ethnicity, age, and gender. As Kristeva writes, prostitutes epitomize abjection as they present “a wild, obscene, and threatening femininity” that collapses “identity, system, [and] order” (Kristeva, 1982: 167). Examining Li’s representation of subaltern women through this prism of a gendered transnational articulation of desire, the circulated prostitute body serves an evocative metonym for the liminality of the Sinophone Malaysian body politic.⁵ Further, for Li to be haunted by these subaltern women “refers us to what’s living and breathing in the place hidden from view: people, places, histories, knowledge, memories, ways of life, ideas” (Gordon, 2011: 3). By meditating on their existence between the living and the dead, Li brings to life – and not merely to light – feminine phantoms on their own terms, revealing what is

5. Interestingly, Li’s recollections of his experience in Taipei’s brothel district are saturated with repeated references to rain. In traditional Chinese texts, water is a major element of *Yin* (阴) in the cultural conception of a *Yin-Yang* world balance, where flowing water can be a symbol of purification and the regeneration of life or the distortion and overwhelming power of sexual passion (Stone, 2003). In particular, vigorously moving water (e.g. incessant rain and breaking waves) alludes to sexual climax and the full arousal of carnal passion, but also emphasizes the destructive power of water (and erotic emotion) to envelope and destroy. Water is deployed to create a paradoxical moral and political situation in which it no longer purifies, but instead suffocates, expressing destructive transitional tensions (Liao, 2006). Apropos of Li’s misadventures in brothels, then, rain alludes to the dangerously seductive power of hybridity, but also the apprehension associated with embracing an expatriate Sinophone Malaysian identity.

there but lying out of sight, and forcing an engagement with them and the conditions they represent.

By explicitly framing this episode as a “detective story” to Zhu Ling, Li Yongping as author/narrator prompts readers to infer that he is looking for Sonya. Li himself remarks to Zhu Ling that he is: “Searching, searching, spending [my] whole life and death searching...Only heaven knows what [I am] actually looking for!” (p. 65). As the Russian name “Sonya” derives from “Sophia” (σοφία), the Greek word for “Wisdom,” Li’s search for Sonya can be interpreted as a search for wisdom about how to reconcile his Chinese and Malaysian cultural affinities. In this way, Li depicts the constant movement, migration, and trafficking of women across biopolitical and geopolitical boundaries to triangulate the question of a Sinophone Malaysian identity through ambivalent multicultural attachments to Taiwan, Malaysia, and China. He invokes the neglected social history of overseas Chinese prostitutes to unveil them as ghosts haunting a Sinophone reality.

The fallen woman: The harbinger of degenerative reproduction

The characters of Cui Di (翠堤) and Mary Seto (司徒玛丽) reappear throughout *The Snow Falls in Clouds*. Li presents them as subaltern women by tracing their initiation into a degenerate adult world, focusing on their poor choice of sexual partners. Chapter Five – entitled “Little Sister Cui Di” (翠堤小妹子) – in the middle of the collection, tells the story of a young girl’s descent into madness when she stops going to school and spends her days alone in a bamboo forest claiming to feed Little Wu, the dead family dog. As Li disconcertingly recounts:

One day, Cui Di suddenly changed without reason! She didn’t like going to school anymore. Early in the morning, she carried her bag and lunchbox and, hiding from her brothers and sisters, snuck into the bamboo forest behind the house [...] Cui Di said Little Wu had not died, and was just living in the bamboo forest. She would often meet and talk to him. (p. 102)

The narrator continues to describe how Cui Di strangely stopped going to the bamboo forest “without saying a word, but only laughed,” causing other women to gossip that her soul had been taken away (p. 108). When Cui Di returned to school, the school principal no longer favored her, but felt an eerie sensation somewhere between fear, regret, and confusion. Li laments “[he] only knew that [his] little sister Cui Di had really changed” before graphically describing a grisly incident in which he catches a neighbor Malay boy “lying on top of his little sister” in the bamboo forest, and uses a brick to “comb his hair” – i.e. smash his head (p. 111). The narrative implies that this violent incident precipitated Cui Di’s premature initiation into a degenerate adult world. Although Li claims never to have told anyone of this incident, after witnessing his sister’s voluntary engagement in an act of sexual transgression, he is never able to see Cui Di the same way again. She becomes a ghost to him, where “every time [he] sees that innocent and brilliant smile on her face, [his] whole body will shiver” (p. 113).

Similarly, the penultimate story focuses on “Mary Seto,” Li’s Kuching childhood infatuation, and her fall from grace in the narrator’s eyes after she is impregnated by a Malay man. Li recounts how he saw her regularly on the bus to school and while wandering the city, but never had the chance to speak with her. A student at Saint Margaret’s, Kuching’s English-language school, Mary Seto often read English Penguin novels while Li buried himself in Chinese books. As they grow up, Li hears of her graduation with honors and aspiration to study abroad and become a teacher.

However, she disappears for some time and Li finds out that her plans were derailed when she became a teenage mother. Li describes his final encounter with Mary to Zhu Ling:

I walked to the riverside market to trace Mary Seto's tracks and just entered the alleyway when suddenly I saw her carrying a parasol, walking alone slowly, heading my way, long hair swaying at her waist just like before, but in her hand she was carrying a bamboo basket. Inside the basket, there was a little doll wrapped in yellow satin. Little girl, that was a newly born infant! (p. 203)

He is shocked that the baby's face was a "swarthy black" and undeniably of the "Malay breed" (p. 204). Li confesses his rudeness towards Mary Seto when she greets him by turning away and even spitting on the ground after her, yet does not deny it when Zhu Ling later points out that he is "still in love with her" (p. 205).

Both Cui Di and Mary Seto embody the interweaving of political, cultural, and economic threats posed by transnational migration and multiracial contact. Evidence of miscegenation with Malay men provokes Li to retaliate against them "losing the face of Chinese men" (p. 205). These episodes evince a fearful discourse of racial mixing and diasporic hybridity, echoing arguments made by scholars such as Robert Young (1995: 15) that "the hybrid was a degradation of humanity" seen as an inferior and degenerate mutation. These "fallen women" in Li's fiction speak to Young's observation that "a problematic of sexuality [lies] at the core of race and culture" where Spivak's notion of a "historically muted subject of the subaltern woman" is only able to become a productive agent through an act of interracial violation (Young, 1995: 19). These interpretations must also be understood within the context of ghosts in the Chinese literary tradition. The spectral occupies a privileged position in Chinese traditional culture, where ghosts and dream visions are able to transcend the boundaries of the individual. They have been mechanisms through which traditional writers explored questions of subjectivity and identity. As cultural constructs and the ultimate border crossers, they dissolve the boundaries that delineate time, place, reason, body, consciousness, and life itself. As projections of a living person's imagination, ghosts can take on a life of their own as agents in the production of new identities and cultural meanings (Zeitlin, 2007: 5).

In this way, the liminal and ghosted presence of Cui Di and Mary Seto provides a portal through which to peer into the mind of the author and unpack his anxiety over a volatile Sinophone Malaysian cultural identity. For Li, the powerful and ambiguous conflicts of a hybrid cultural identity are pervaded by mixed feelings of love and hate that are both sisterly (towards Cui Di as a little sister) and maternal (towards Mary Seto as a young mother). Cui Di and Mary Seto haunt Li's conscience, alerting him to the loss that they represent: a loss of innocence and purity, and a path not taken. Yet at the same time, the ghost that haunts also "represents a future possibility, a hope" as it embodies a lesson about how to "reckon with it graciously, attempting to offer it a hospitable memory *out of concern for justice*" (Gordon, 2008: 63–64, emphasis in original). As a phantom sister and mother, Cui Di and Mary Seto intimately represent changing beliefs about the connections between body, mind, and identity; they become emergent agents in the production of new identities and cultural meanings.

Notably, Li Yongping explains that "Seto" (司徒 *situ*) is a "big name" in Cantonese, implying that it either commands high status or is very popular (p. 134). Moreover, the pronunciation of "司徒" (*seto*) in Cantonese is a homonym with "使徒," which means "apostle." In this reading, Seto's character presents a fictional apostle from Saint Margaret, a school named after the Virgin-Martyr who is regarded as a heavenly advocate for childbirth and pregnant women, but also for exiles and the dying. Given that apostles are defined as individuals sent forth on a mission as

messengers, Mary Seto's fate portends the double disposition of the Sinophone Malaysian community. Being of Chinese descent in a Malay-dominated Malaysia, and an extra-territorialized Sinophone Malaysian writer, Li's experience typifies Robert E Park's "marginal man" (Park, 1992: 881). In his 1928 essay on human migration, Park describes the cultural hybrid as "a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples [...] a man on the margin of two cultures and two societies, which never completely interpenetrated and fused" (Park, 1992: 892).

As a Sinophone Malaysian author, Li's personal approach to the question of cultural identification has been to emphasize the Chinese element at the expense of the Malaysian one. This attitude is most clearly displayed by his zealous use of the Chinese script and decision to reside in Taiwan after relinquishing Malaysian citizenship. Li has repeatedly commented on his love for the Chinese script and for a romanticized China, declaring that he "was very sensitive to the Chinese characters" in the books he read as a child, and "developed an intense longing for China, a love" where he is "very much in love with Chinese characters!" (Park, 1992: 66). These comments have influenced Sinophone Malaysian critics such as Ng Kim Chew to perceive Li's expression of cultural identification as one that is rooted in an abstract, textual, and idealized form of Chineseness. As Ng argues in an essay on "Sinophone Malaysian literature and Chineseness" (1999), Li's literary practice can be configured as an attempt to present an "authentically pure" Chinese cultural identity that suppresses a Sinophone Malaysian subjectivity. Despite this Sinocentric literary approach, however, Li's fiction consistently returns to settings in Southeast Asia, reflecting how his Malaysian background continues to shadow him. Like the displaced Chinese woman Li so often portrays in his works, he himself will always be perceived as a diasporic figure marked by an inherent multicultural difference as a Sinophone Malaysian writer in Taiwan.

Here, Li's experiences are representative of a larger group of ethnically Chinese people living in a Malay-dominated Malaysia who pursue higher education in Taiwan. As early as the 1950s, travelling to Taiwan had been considered an educational rite of passage for many Sinophone Malaysian individuals, and the journey was regarded as a "cultural return" to their Chinese heritage (Tee, 2004). Malaysia's post-1969 enactment of *Bumiputraisim*, policies that strengthened ethnic Malay dominance and estranged non-*Bumiputra* communities, further prompted Chinese Malaysians to seek opportunities abroad. By the 1970s, an increasing number of Sinophone Malaysian writers had emerged on the Taiwanese literary scene, forming a small community for themselves (Tee, 2010: 312). It is worth highlighting that Li intentionally references Borneo in the title of his work and has frequently returned to this island as a specific geographical theme throughout his oeuvre. This authorial decision draws our attention to the geopolitics of Borneo within Malaysia, and the way that the minoritization of Chinese in relation to the Malay-majority hegemony manifests differently dependent upon the Malaysian peninsula's demography. Li's status as a non-*Bumiputra* Chinese with Borneo origins further brings his marginal and peripheral state to the fore.

As a whole, the position of Sinophone Malaysian writers and their texts is doubly displaced, plagued by questions of cultural identity and belonging. In Malaysia, only Malay literature is recognized as national literature, and Chinese-language literature is denigrated as second-class "sectional literature." In Taiwan, Sinophone Malaysian writers are considered "overseas Chinese" writers. Although written in Chinese, the social and cultural experiences with which Sinophone Malaysian texts engage are not necessarily linguistically determined, and often convey a Malaysian homeland. Huang Jinshu, one of the most renowned Mahua writers in Taiwan, lamented at his

Taipei book talk in August 2014 to a full room of people that when he held a similar launch in Kuala Lumpur, only seven people had showed interest. Regardless of whether they write about Malaysia or Taiwan, Sinophone Malaysian writers are variously criticized for their misrepresentations of both locales. As such, Sinophone Malaysian literature is “nationless,” relegated to a peripheral position in relation to the more dominant Chinese literature produced in and about mainland China (Ng, 2010; Tee, 2010: 88–90). Nonetheless, avid supporters of Mahua literature such as Taipei-based Malaysian Kamloon Woo, Chief Editor of *Lingking*, emphasize the importance of providing an alternative perspective on what it means to be Chinese outside of mainland China (personal interview and conversation with Kamloon Woo, Taipei, Taiwan, 2014).

Mary Seto’s perceived downfall reflects how some bodies cannot access any celebratory hybridity, and interbreeding ineluctably results in aberration. She initially symbolized a positive vision of cultural hybridity by being ethnically Chinese and Westernized, but is ultimately unable to escape from the influence of her Malaysian surroundings. Li’s vicious reaction to the sight of Mary’s mixed-race baby characterizes a deep apprehension about the bastardized Sinophone Malaysian identity. Yet, the narrator is unable to stop worshipping the young Mary Seto from his childhood fantasies. This fictional yearning for an idealized girl whom Li was never able to embrace parallels his actual longing to achieve an “authentic” form of cultural Chineseness that constantly eludes him. Nonetheless, the rejection of a Malaysian background exacerbates the Sinophone Malaysian experience of geopolitical tensions, resulting in an exilic reality where the intrusive reminder of an Othering and degenerative cultural hybridity looms.

Overseas prostitutes in Sinophone Malaysia: Affective laborers in (self) exile

“Looking Homeward” (望乡), the last chapter of the novel, ends with a story that offers yet another estranged perspective on the Sinophone Malaysian community by revealing the victimization of women through the Japanese comfort-women practice. When he was a seven-year-old boy, Li learned of three older Sinophone women living on the outskirts of Kuching. Known to other residents as the “three sisters of the Lin family,” Li recounts that “nobody knew the history of these women or where they came from” (p. 226). However, the women were notorious for the rich Malay men who visited them in black cars. Curious about these “white-skinned women with unknown origins,” young Li begins to spy on them (p. 230). One day, he is caught spying on one woman as she is bathing, but instead of getting angry the woman invites him inside for lunch. Li feels “like a little emperor” as the three women watch him eat and talk to him adoringly. They feed him miso soup, which he initially has to “force into his stomach” but later acquires a taste for and admits to being “addicted to drinking” it (p. 235).

Thereafter, Li eats the lunch his mother prepares for him every day with the three women, and they soon await his arrival like “mothers leaning next to the door painstakingly waiting for their sons to return safely home after school” (p. 328). Rather than his own birth mother, Li claims that it is these three women who “let him truly feel...a mother’s love that is just so immense, so peaceful” (p. 236). One of the women, Yueluan (月鸾), confides in him that Japanese soldiers came to her hometown to recruit nurses to work in a military hospital in Nanyang for the imperial army (p. 242). Taken from home at the age of 16, she was then forced to serve as a comfort woman in Borneo during the Second World War (pp. 242–243). The other two women had similar experiences after being sold off to the Japanese by their destitute fathers in rural Taiwan. Due to

this ordeal they can no longer bear children, and even though they are no longer comfort women after the war ends, they continue to work as prostitutes.

Recurring themes of betrayal, marginality, and phantom women are at the heart of this last tale in Li Yongping's Borneo recollection. Li's mother cries and refuses to talk to her son when she finds out about his daily visits with the women. To prove that he loves his own mother more than these other women who have become maternal figures in his life, he reports them to the police and gets them arrested for prostitution (pp. 254–256). As the women are pushed into police cars by Malay policemen, Li describes how "a group of Chinese onlookers, upon seeing that the three women had been with Malay customers, glaring and with raised fists, spat at them through gritted teeth" and ridiculed them for losing face (p. 257). After serving time in prison, Yueluan "was afflicted with a little dementia, only opening her mouth wide to laugh when she sees people, like a stupid big sister" (p. 257). This episode of palpable violence vividly portrays the way these subaltern women are subjugated to intra-ethnic abuse in a chauvinistic system, rather than conflict between Chinese and Malays. The women were first betrayed by their own fathers who sold them off to the Japanese, and then by the Japanese and Malay men who ravaged their bodies. Not only are they exiled from Taiwan due to their shameful past after having been coerced to work as comfort women, they are ostracized by the Chinese Malaysian community because of their only means of survival. Confronted with the image of Chinese women carnally servicing Malay men, the Chinese Malaysian community reacts with barbaric revulsion to the threat of interethnic contamination.

These women who become ghosted figures even while still alive direct readers to consider the title of the chapter: "望乡" (*wangxiang*) is the Chinese title for the Japanese film *Sandakan 8* (Kei Kumai, 1974), which tells a similar story of a woman named Osaki who was sold by her impoverished family in the early 1920s and forced into prostitution in Borneo. Through referencing characters like Yueluan and Osaki, Li Yongping anchors this chapter in the actual social history of Malaysia when women such as Jasmine, introduced at the beginning of this article, made up a social group of overseas prostitutes prevalent in Southeast Asia. Since the early 1900s, the rapid increase of immigrant Chinese laborers has been the single most important demographic and social development in Malaysia's history. Many were driven out of South China by poor local conditions and moved to Southeast Asia in search of better prospects. Thousands of Chinese and Japanese women, known as *Ah Ku* or the *Karayuki-san*, were essentially enslaved in hundreds of brothels, providing sexual gratification to a veritable horde of immigrant laborers without wives (Warren, 1993). They were often sold as young girls when parents could no longer support them, and spent their lives in bondage to brothels, still contributing to the traditional family economy by sending money home.

During the Second World War, the Japanese specifically recruited women from destitute families in occupied territories and transported them offshore to work as comfort women. This practice caused a surge in the number of foreign prostitutes in Malaysia. As Li describes to Zhu Ling, the Japanese held captive women of every nationality, including English and Dutch women, but ethnic Chinese women were the least valued (pp. 243–244). Even if these women were able to make enough money to return to their distant homelands after the war, they found themselves in a double bind where their own people and families rejected them (Rimmer et al., 1990). And now, even in death, they are deprived of agency and remain in obscurity at the periphery of social and historical memory.

Li's interaction with and eventual betrayal of these three women can be read in relation to his conflicted relationships with multiple cultures. As David Wang (2003: 23) has posited: "Through

these three Taiwanese women who are looking homeward, [Li] is looking homeward to his East Malaysian hometown, and from East Malaysia looking back over to Taiwan". Hence, these liminal characters embody his own shuttling between Taiwanese and Malaysian cultural attachments as a Sinophone Malaysian writer in Taiwan. Wang's analysis that these three "mothers" represent his cultural "mothers" of Malaysia, China, and Taiwan is particularly suggestive (Wang, 2003: 24). In this reading, the twist where Li ends up betraying all three women in an attempt to stay loyal to his "true" mother, parallels the sentiment that in an attempt to stay loyal to an "authentic" Chineseness, Li Yongping ultimately betrays all three of his Malaysian/Chinese/Taiwanese cultural affiliations.

Returning to the problem of the marginal man and transnational migration, Li's subjectivity is intimately interwoven with that of an individual who has grown up in a melting-pot of races and nationalities. Li occupies a doubly marginalized position: in Malaysia, he is part of a non-*Bumiputra* ethnic minority, whereas in Taiwan he is perennially differentiated as a foreign-born "overseas Chinese." As such, he feels pressured to do most of the melting, adjusting, and conforming – or risk remaining unassimilated. Li's resentfulness of his childhood nickname of "rice cake" (糰子, *ciba*), a popular food in Malaysia, speaks to this experience. The nickname of a shapeless dough serves as an evocative metonym for the malleability of a multicultural Sinophone Malaysian identity. Although made up of discrete grains of rice, rice cakes are molded or otherwise squeezed into a single object. When explaining his nickname, the narrator discloses how his aunts used to always pinch and squeeze his body, allegorically referring to his Sinophone Malaysian identity constantly being shaped by outside forces (p. 233). Li confesses to Zhu Ling that, in contrast to his own mother or aunts, he will "forever feel gratitude towards the three [Taiwanese] women" because they "loved and respected [him], and did not treat his body like a mound of rice dough" (p. 236). This confession coming at the very end of the novel signals Li's active search to regain control over his own being and mold a distinct identity.

The mirage of purity: Imaginary encounters and spectral returns

In *The Snow Falls in Clouds*, Li Yongping grapples with the question of cultural and national representation in relation to a Sinophone Malaysian identity. The stories in his Borneo recollections repeatedly feature ghosted and destitute female figures, recreating them as biopolitical forces that are intimately connected to Sinophone Malaysian history. Through the trope of the fallen woman, Li Yongping engages with different aspects of the Sinophone Malaysian experience to scrutinize complex sociocultural links to Taiwan, Malaysia, and China. Li's stories provide insight to his experience growing up as a person of Chinese descent in Borneo's multiethnic environment during the waning years of colonial rule and the difficult transition to independence. The ghostly teenage prostitutes in Malaysia and Taiwan, Cui Di, Mary Seto, and the (self) exiled Taiwanese ex-comfort women all embody forms of superficial, surface continuity vs. a more vicious, penetrative rupture that can characterize the multicultural Sinophone Malaysian subjectivity. Narrated as stories-within-a-story, these subaltern feminine characters are already twice removed from reality and appear as spectral illusions lingering over Li's narrative subconscious. Their stories expose the geopolitical inflection of gender in the perceived economic and cultural integration of the Sinophone region experienced on an individual level.

At the root of discourse on multicultural identity is a paralyzing biopolitical fear of contamination and corrupt hybridity. The prostitute and her unrespectable progenies materialize as actual ghosts haunting Li's world of Sinophone Malaysia – looming over peripheral spaces. She

makes an angry appearance at every attempt to constitute a Chinese core, disturbing any promise of purity or belonging. The prostitute figure, or rather its spectre, functions as an affective laborer who generates the porous boundaries of “Chineseness.” As “marked” subaltern characters, they defame ideologies of an inviolable and clearly defined nation-state, working as symbolic mediums that problematize nationhood or cultural nativity. In contrast, Li presents us with Zhu Ling as a seemingly uncontaminated essence of youth and innocence. As Carlos Rojas puts it in his analysis of Zhu Ling’s character:

Zhu Ling generally represents a state of idealized purity which serves as a powerful counterpoint to the rather degenerate social practices of the adult world which surrounds her, while at the same time herself standing on the threshold of entry into that same adult world. (Rojas, 2008: 191)

In interviews, Li Yongping himself comments that Zhu Ling’s role in his fiction is not merely to serve as an ideal listener, but also as a muse. In his own words:

Whether it is a poet or a classical novelist, when creating a piece of work, [Western artists] will always look to the muse, asking for inspiration [...] The muse magically leads everyone into heaven or hell. I really like this idea. Therefore, in my own work, I created a muse in Chinese literature – Zhu Ling. (Sun and Liang, 2010: 2)

As a pre-fallen young girl, Zhu Ling serves as a foil to Li’s journey through Taipei and into his past, reflecting the narrator’s conscience and challenging him to confront his own hypocrisy about gendered violence and ethnic discrimination.

Zhu Ling’s character may also represent what David Wang has identified as an “imaginary nostalgia” in which Li Yongping recreates “an imaginary past on behalf of the present” to convey his “rootless” Chinese experience in the “moral allegory of the Chinese wasteland” (Wang, 1993: 107). Li Yongping’s unabashed yearning for the Chinese script and an idealized Chineseness epitomizes what he has described as a “love that can only become a recollection, can only be something that was already dejected at the moment” (Li, 2003: 196). As Li expounds, he “became addicted to the Chinese language,” and liked the characters “邂逅” (*xiehou*, meaning “encounter”) the most because they represent “humankind’s most poignant kind of love [...] the kind of love that fate has predestined to have no ending” (p. 196). In a novel describing countless encounters, Zhu Ling’s presence forces Li to acknowledge his anxiety over the threat of hybridity inflicting ordinary woman and a modern Chinese core. The narrator repeatedly connects Zhu Ling to the teenage prostitutes, Cui Di, Mary Seto, and other young fallen women that appear in his tales, revealing a concern with the (im)possibility of an innocent young girl not growing up. Accordingly, Zhu Ling’s disappearance at the end of the novel portends the vacuity behind the mirage of an ahistorical, romanticized Chineseness.

Zhu Ling is revealed to be a figment of Li’s imagination designed to facilitate a process of soul-searching rather than simple storytelling, a process that has “finally brought this self-exiled wanderer – who has escaped for so many years by wandering everywhere – home” (p. 260). The question that remains is, what happens after her disappearance? Can the Sinophone Malaysian produce a new cultural identity distinct from the mainland? The process of wandering and (re) writing will likely continue to drive Li Yongping’s identity negotiation. By writing stories about memories, Li prods readers to engage with their own past memories as a means of regaining greater access to home and identity, regardless of physical location.

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