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Writing an Alternative View of History through Fiction: The Novels of Xiao Hei

Fan Pik Wah  Lee Poh Ping

Abstract: In Malaysia, communism has never been officially considered as a social movement aimed at fighting for social justice, but as a terrorist one bent on overthrowing the government. Therefore writing an alternative view of the movement is a sensitive and even hazardous task. This article considers how Malaysian novelist, Xiao Hei, manages to do this. Through an analysis of his four stories on this subject written between 1985 and 2006, this article detects Xiao Hei’s literary techniques, including the use of metaphors to describe sensitive matters, the use of the second person narrative that reduces the directness of references to implicated persons, a display of ambivalence to communism and the technique of writing a plot within a plot to make it difficult for the reader to distinguish fiction from history.

Key words: Malaysian Chinese literature Xiao Hei historical narrative political metaphors

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标题: 另类历史叙述:论小黑的小说

内容摘要: 在马来西亚的官方叙述中,马来亚共产主义运动无关社会正义,而是被视为图谋推翻政府的恐怖主义行为。马来西亚华文作家小黑从1985年至2006年共创作4部有关马来亚共产党问题的小说,重新诠释这些被官方刻意反面化的课题。为了避免触犯国家的政治禁忌,小黑运用各种文学手段,以隐喻的语言,通过第二人称以及虚实结合的方式,以减少现实的敏感度。小黑将历史和虚构结合的书写体现了马来西亚华人对马共的矛盾态度。

关键词: 马华文学 小黑 历史叙述 政治隐喻

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The postwar history of Malaysia\(^1\) has been profoundly influenced by the Malaysian communist movement, more particularly by the communist insurrection of 1948. This insurrection led to a declaration of emergency by the British colonial government which lasted till 1960, and the launching of a second emergency by an independent Malaysian government which lasted from 1969 till 1989 when the Communist Party of Malaysia\(^2\) formally agreed to give up the armed struggle. The insurrection had also implanted in the minds of the Malays, the politically dominant indigenous race, that communism equaled a Chinese attempt to overthrow the Malaysian government. As a result of this, communist ideas were eliminated from Malaysian political life and everything associated with communism and even with socialism was frowned upon if not considered taboo. Those who attempt to give an alternative narrative to the official version which considers the communists a terrorist group out to seize the government instead of fighting for social justice and against colonialism as they claimed, do so at their own risk.

However, even during the communist armed struggle, there were attempts to present an alternative narrative, an example being Han Suyin’s English-language novel *And the Rain My Drink*.\(^3\) But there was “much more in Chinese” (Zhoong 4). One of the most outstanding Chinese-language writers on the subject is Xiao Hei, the pseudonym of Chen Qijie.\(^4\) Known for both the rich content and the good style of his novels, Xiao Hei showed courage in writing on taboo subjects that less intrepid writers avoided. This paper will focus on Xiao Hei’s novels on the Malaysian communist movement, since they constitute his most important writings.

More importantly, they demonstrate how fiction is used to describe a sensitive subject such as the Malaysian communist movement and, by doing so, they spur the reader to think about the content. Four of his stories on this topic will be considered. “The Jungle” (1985), “Pouring Rain” (1991) and *White Water, Dark Mountain* (1992) have been published in book form, while the fourth, “The Finished Journey” (2006), was published in a newspaper. The novels considered have been written in a period of time spanning more than twenty years. The Communist Party of Malaya was still banned until 1989 and even after that date, sensitivity about the issue still lingered for some time. It was not until much later that the sensitivity diminished.

Many of Xiao Hei’s stories revolve around families torn apart by one member or more joining the communists. As many of his readers would have been members of such families or know of such families, they would not want to be reminded of the painful experience or be implicated, especially when communism was still taboo, with a direct even if fictional account. Xiao Hei avoids the reader’s direct implication by using the second person narration. Moreover, this second person’s narration is oftentimes based on what he has heard from the third persons and not on direct experience. With the issue having become less sensitive, Xiao Hei shows a clear attitude towards the communists.

**Outside the Jungle: Vague Memories of the Struggle**

In the course of his career, Xiao Hei has worked in secondary schools in many small towns such as Kulim in Kedah and Sitiawan in Perak. Until recently, such small towns were populated by people of Chinese descent. Many of these small towns are situated near so-called New Villages. These New Villages were established in 1951 by the British authorities in Malaysia to concentrate, for purposes of control, scattered Chinese squatters, many of whom were communist sympathizers. The aim was to prevent them from supplying food and other necessities to the communist guerrillas in the jungle. Under such circumstances, Chinese schools in these small towns were greatly imbued with leftist ideology. Being a sensitive and concerned person growing up and living in these small towns, Xiao Hei could not help but be influenced by the communist struggle, both
against the Japanese during the war and against the British.

When Xiao Hei wrote “The Jungle,” the first of his stories on the Malaysian communists in 1985, communism was still a taboo subject. Few discussed this topic publicly. Those who had experience of or connection with the communists were reluctant to talk and said little or nothing on this topic to their children. Thus in this novel, Xiao Hei recounts the story of the narrator’s family and how they dealt with the communist, without mentioning the communists by name. Here Xiao Hei uses the metaphors of the “hill people” and “going into the jungle” which indicate the communists and the act of joining the communists respectively.

In “The Jungle,” the narrator mentioned that his mother left the family for the jungle and never returned, an indirect way of saying that she went to join the communists. He was raised by his father alone who made a living by selling ice cream. Every time the father went out to work, he had to enter the forest and returned with empty glass bottles. These empty bottles were what he got in return from the poor villagers and hill people for his food. The obvious conclusion to draw from here is that his father was either a communist or a communist sympathizer supplying the guerrillas with food. This can be gathered from the response of his father to his question as to how far his father went to sell ice cream:

Papa slowly blew out another puff of smoke again.

“To the jungle and village in which the hill people live.”

Aren’t you afraid of them?

“Papa is their good friend.” (“The Jungle” 265)

“Papa is their good friend” says it all. The narrator could not understand the actions of his father, until one day his father, like his mother went to the jungle and never returned. On the third day after his father went missing, a Mr. Yang brought some policemen to the house to search for something. They broke the bottles of glass cleaned by his father and said something “known but not understood” (suggesting something useful to the authorities) as described by the narrator.

“It must be hidden among the bottles.”

“Poor guy.”

“Are they human beings worthy of sympathy?”

“Oh how he died horribly, with his face smashed thoroughly.”

“He could just sell ice cream; why help them to deliver goods?”

“This is a lesson from the people.” (“The Jungle” 272 –273)

Does that face smashed without recognition belong to the narrator’s father? Xiao Hei does not give a clear answer when he writes that the child stared at the forest and wondered “Not sure when papa will appear at the other side of the jungle. This is a jungle he is familiar with; there is no reason for him to get lost in it” (“The Jungle” 273). Will his father return? This is a question for the reader of “The Jungle,” a question asked by many families whose members entered the forest at the height of the struggle to fulfill their dreams, wondering whether one would return after entering the jungle. “The Jungle” is thus written with an uncertain storyline.

One of the literary techniques Xiao Hei employed to make the reader aware of the possibility of an alternative narrative without incurring in a negative official reaction is to indirectly describe the communist guerrilla by presenting them with a vague “hill people.” The communist guerilla fighters were based in the hilly and mountainous jungles of Malaysia which constituted a large por-
tion of Malaysian territory then. It is therefore easily understood by the Malaysian Chinese reader that when one talked of the "hill people," one meant the communists. On the same lines, the author uses the expression "going into the jungle" which means going to join the communists.

While in "The Jungle" Xiao Hei leaves the narrator's final attitude towards his father's commitment to the cause unresolved, in the story "Pouring Rain," he again uses the activities of a family as a metaphorical device to describe activities related to communism, but this time his description of the communist struggle is clearer. According to Xiao Hei, this struggle, while noble in aim, is not without a dark side. This dark side had the father, himself a decent man, involved in violent activities like bombing that killed somebody close to his son, and his abandonment of his mother for some woman in the jungle who was part of the struggle.

Thus the story in "Pouring Rain" has the father entering the jungle to join the communists and leaving his son, the narrator, and wife behind. They were left waiting for his return, unsure whether he was dead or alive. After the struggle formally ended in 1989, mother and son went looking for the father. The south of Thailand which, sharing a border with Malaysia, constituted a sort of base where the remnants of the Malaysian communists gathered to stage attacks in Malaysia. But they were shocked to find that the father had married a female comrade and had a fourteen-year-old son. The father refused to return with them, not only because of his second family but also because he had prepared himself psychologically for a long struggle. It was a lifelong struggle to him and, not believing that the struggle had ended, he chose to remain in the jungle, unable to return to normal society. The father, however, left a letter to mother and son before they departed from the jungle. He admitted he was involved in planning the bombing that killed the innocent girlfriend of the narrator. He had to do that to eliminate traitors even if innocent lives were sacrificed. Grievously pained over this, the son, the narrator, left the jungle with his mother in despair.

In a sense, the father was already dead to him the day he left, though not physically. It was one of the families left fatherless to struggle for a livelihood in a cold and unsympathetic environment. He was dead to him for all the hardship and suffering he had brought upon them. Before that, his image of his father was that of a kind and brilliant person who got along well with the Malays. But the May 13th riots of 1969 where the Malays turned against the Chinese affected him deeply, even if he found that his Malay friends protected him when he was threatened by other Malays. After deep consideration, he became determined to leave family, friends and relatives for the jungle in order to fight an unjust government. Many then dissatisfied young Chinese followed suit. Thus since the day he left, the father became a terrorist in the narrator's eyes. He was aware that such terrorists were regularly hunted by soldiers in dark green military vehicles driving through his village.

"Where are they going?"
"To kill people."
"Where?"
"K town." ("Pouring Rain" 286)

And yet the narrator could not completely get his father out of his mind. A father is a father. The narrator says, "When the newspaper carries news of military police fighting with the communists, I will read it very thoroughly" ("Pouring Rain" 288).

Thus through the second person narrative of the communist family, in "Pouring Rain," Xiao Hei describes a subject that is considered sensitive. He paints a picture of the trauma suffered by
the family, especially the psychological effect on the children if one of the parents entered the jungle. On a societal level, the struggle affected all classes of society. Yet Xiao Hei does not paint the government in a completely negative light. Xiao Hei writes that the narrator, despite being the son of a communist, successfully obtained a government scholarship to go to university where he completed three years of education. In the university, he often pondered on the “system problem” (an unjust social system) mentioned by his father but could not quite understand how that works out in history. He felt he could not forgive his father for abandoning his mother and him. However people always move on. “The past,” says the narrator, “is irredeemably lost... to cling to the past is nothing but resentfulness and mourning” (“Pouring Rain” 277). Probably, the last farewell to his father is what ends all grudges of the past and a means to stay alive.

And not only is the novel not completely unsympathetic to the government, it also criticizes what the communists have done. What was the significance of the struggle after so many years of struggle? And what was the pay off?

Outside the Black Mountain: the Battle Lost, but the Ideal Lives for Some

Whether it is “Pouring Rain” or “The Jungle,” the sympathies of Xiao Hei are with the families left or abandoned by a father who has gone to join the communists. Much of these two novels consist of psychological portraits of “survivors” having to face the reality of life outside the forest. However, these two novels can be considered as preludes to his magnificent work, a magnum opus, White Water, Dark Mountain which penetrates into the heart of the jungle, and is widely considered the most outstanding piece of writing in Chinese on Malaysian communism. The story in White Water spans the years from the 1930s to the 1990s. Whereas historical events form a small part of the narration in the previous two novels, this novel has a greater historical depth and much more complex meaning. This novel, according to Chen Pengxiang, “linked many important historical events and has a grand sweep of history” (435). Xiao Hei dwells on the experiences of those who went through the anti-Japanese and the anti-British struggles and the end of the emergency period, only to find their dreams unfulfilled. Not only had they not achieved their ideal society, they had to cope with the harsh economic realities of the 1990s, for which they were ill-equipped to adapt. Some adjusted while others did not. In sum, White Water, Dark Mountain recreates the vigorous history and the final outcome of the struggle of the Malaysian communists with a few stories of different families interwoven within.

Xiao Hei uses the device of a story within a story to describe this. He tells the story of a narrator, Chen Baishui writing a novel entitled White Water, Dark Mountain. The novel consists of stories within stories, plots entwining imagination and reality and inter-explaining the development of plots in the story. The main protagonist is his father Chen Li’an and second uncle Yang Wu, both based in the mountain as guerilla fighters first against the Japanese who had occupied what was then Malaya. When the Japanese were defeated, the Malaysian communists could not come to a satisfactory deal with the returning British colonialists. Both Chen Li’an and Yang Wu followed the communists when they subsequently returned to the jungle to fight the British colonialists. They fought bravely. But in one ambush, Yang Wu was shot and given up for dead. The demise of Yang Wu, the spiritual leader of the group in which Chen Li’an was in, disheartened the group so much that they gave up the struggle. But Chen Li’an remained nostalgic about the struggle. Despite the passing of the years and the changing of the times, Chen Li’an still stood outside the jungle, hearing back to their commitment to the cause and the heroic feats they had achieved. So caught up with the past, Chen Li’an could not adjust to the reality of life outside the jungle. He became skinny and was viewed as an obstinate old man.
As if to show that time makes a mockery of those with strong convictions, Xiao Hei arranged for the return of Yang Wu. Yang Wu had in fact survived the ambush, and fled to China where he had a new career as a professor. Back as a retired professor, Yang Wu met his relatives, including Chen Li’an. The difference between the two was stark. Yang Wu was dignified and magnificent in appearance and possessed a “muddy complexion, smooth cheeks and sharp eyes” (White Water, Dark Mountain 371). Chen Li’an looked emaciated. The reunion between the two was touching and heart rending as they reminisced about the past. Chen Li’an suggested to Yang Wu that they climb Kabulung Mountain to try to relive this past. Astonished by Chen Li’an’s attachment to something long gone, Yang Wu rejected the invitation saying that he had already bought an airplane ticket for the next day. Unlike Chen Li’an, Yang Wu adapted well to the new environment. He was wise enough to accept that the sufferings he and his comrades underwent were in an era that history has passed by. There was no sense in holding a grudge against the country and life in general.

In White Water, Dark Mountain, Xiao Hei attempts to construct the history of the Malaysian Chinese apart from the official one, which was one of constant identification of Malaysian communists with the Chinese and dismissed their contribution to the anti-Japanese and anti-colonial struggle. It came out in 1992, just three years after the reconciliation of the communists with the government in 1989. In a sense it was an opportune time for renewal or reflection and Xiao Hei who cares deeply about topics related to Malaysian communism had lots of thoughts and feelings regarding this historical event. The novel reflects much of this. Though objective, the novel constantly reveals surging emotions, leaving much room for the reader to think about the communist struggle, the scars of the new villages and the endless grudge between the communists and the government. Can all these be swept aside by a declaration that the communists were on the wrong side of history? What about the countless innocent lives that were lost? Do they not deserve more than a footnote? Can history give a fair judgment?

While constructing this history he is also deconstructing it as he doubts its authenticity. He participates in the narration and yet narrates outside of it. He assembles and transforms the narration of subjective and objective points of view. The “realness” of the novel and the “abstractness” of the story intertwine to form a complex theme. Among themes such as nation, ethics, culture, politics, economics, dreams, morals, and survival, which one is the most important? In the end, the approach of White Water, Dark Mountain is only “fractional,” meaning that we can only construct a partial view of history, much as Chen Li’an is unable to come to grips with the true face of history.

“The Jungle,” “Pouring Rain” and White Water, Dark Mountain thoroughly portray Malaysian communism in various dimensions. They received critical acclaim when published and were considered by many scholars to be fine examples of how history could be interpreted.

Even as he portrays some of the communists in White Water as having adjusted successfully to normal society and others still clinging to memories of the struggle, Xiao Hei is unsparing in his fourth novel, Alchemy, in his critique of those communists left behind in the south of Thailand. He paints a picture of once idealistic men turning into lustful old men. However, he changed his attitude to these “old men” or the anti-Japanese fighters in “The Finished Journey.” Where they were seen as dissolute in Alchemy, they were now seen as heroes or successful people. While in White Water, Dark Mountain Xiao Hei left many questions of the painful history of the Malaysian communists unanswered, he was more direct in “The Finished Journey” where his verdict was more positive. Here, the narrator brought the once missing “third uncle” in White Water, Dark Mountain to Bantai to reflect on the past 60 years. Third uncle in this novel is the prototype of
second uncle in White Water, Dark Mountain. During the Japanese invasion, third uncle had joined Force 136, an anti-Japanese but pro-British group. Xiao Hei described the group in the following way: “After Force 136 finished their training in India, they landed here quietly. They went through Lumut and Ipoh, then entered the Kampar Mountain Range to help the British fight the invading Japanese army. For their race and nation, they were brave men who were willing to put death aside” (“The Finished Journey” 390). Xiao Hei has the third uncle returning to the shore, the historical place where Force 136 first landed to look for the specific location of the landing. He wandered here and there with nary a word. Finally he left. As he entered the car, he said that although unsure of the specific location, history still existed. And here Xiao Hei directly mentions that no matter how officialdom tries to eliminate the real history of the past, what once existed must leave traces. The real historical facts lie not with government but with the people.

And the real historical facts are more openly stated. Thus in one scene, the narrator and third uncle guided tourists to visit the caves the communists once used. Thus Xiao Hei writes: “Is there any difference between the communists and the anti-Japanese armies?” asked a young man in the tourist group. The guide answered directly to the commonly asked question: “The anti-Japanese armies are the communists of later time; they were the ally of the British but later became the enemy of the British Army” (“The Finished Journey” 393). “The Finished Journey” ends the series of novels on Malaysian communism by Xiao Hei. These novels represent his attempt to rethink history. He allows the reader to experience both the real and the imaginary. In doing so, Xiao Hei raises the question of the truthfulness of Malaysian communists’ history. Should we consider life as a novel or novel as life? Xia Hei’s “The Finished Journey” draws the fictional closer to the historical fact as well as letting the historical narration return to the fictional realm. Would there be one day when Xiao Hei will reconstruct “The Finished Journey” to reinterpret Malaysian communism?

Xiao Hei has shown great courage in writing on sensitive subjects affecting the Malaysian Chinese community. In addition to Malaysian communism, such subjects also include that of anti-colonialism, the anti-Japanese struggle, the May 13th racial confrontation, the reform of the Malaysian Chinese school system and so on. Of these subjects, his writings on Malaysian communism are the most distinguished. Using a postmodern approach, through his novels, Xiao Hei has highlighted the travails of the Malaysian Chinese. In making such historical subjects public, he has provided us with space for reflection and is therefore the recipient of the well-deserved 2006 Mahua Literary Award.

[Notes]

① Malaysia was formed in 1963 from the state of Malaya and the ex-British colonies of Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore. Singapore left Malaysia in 1965. Independence was first given to Malaya by the British in 1957. Malaysia and Malaya will be used interchangeably in this article.

② The Communist Party of Malaya, which was the official name of the Malayan Communist Party, had never recognized officially the formation of Malaysia. Hence the communists retained the term “Malaya” to the very end.


④ Chen Qijie, or Xiao Hei, was born in the state of Kedah in Malaysia. His ancestral home is Chaoyang which is a district of the province of Guangdong, China, making him a member of the Chaohou dialect group. His primary and secondary education were in Chinese schools in Malaysia. After graduating from the University of Malaya with degrees in Mathematics and Education, he embarked on a teaching career, and now is the principal of the Jit Sin Independent Chinese school in Penang.
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In order to further promote literary scholarship and international academic exchange, the University of Pennsylvania-based Chinese/American Association for Poetry and Poetics (CAAP) will collaborate with the School of Foreign Languages and School of Humanities of Central China Normal University, Foreign Literature Studies, and Forum for World Literature Studies in hosting “The 2nd CAAP Convention and International Symposium on Literatures in English” (June 8 - 9, 2013) in Wuhan, China. Scholars and writers all over the world are welcome.


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