Rooted in Nanyang: Localization in Yuan Shang Cao’s Short Stories

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Abstract: Yuan Shang Cao is an outstanding Malaysian Chinese writer in the early stages of the Malaysian Chinese literary movement. He plays an important role in directing the Malaysian Chinese literature towards a more Malaysian orientation. His short stories demonstrate a tendency of localization mainly in three distinct ways: a sharp focus on and strong emotional engagement with the local milieu; an indigenous perspective in the description of the Malaysian Chinese community; and the liberal use of the Hakka dialect in description of the Malaysian Chinese life experience.

Key words: Malaysian Chinese Literature; Yuan Shang Cao; short stories; localization

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题目：根植南洋：原上草短篇小说中的本土化

内容摘要：原上草是马华早期成就突出的一位作家，在推动马华文学不断本土化的进程中，他起到了相当大的作用。其小说作品呈现出明显的本土化特征，主要表现在三个方面：一是聚焦本土，融情于景；二是深入乡土，审视现实；三是善用方言，追寻土味。因而他的作品既有深刻的历史感和真实性，又有浓厚的生活感与南洋味，本土色彩鲜明。

关键词：马华文学；原上草；短篇小说；本土化特征

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Yuan Shang Cao (原上草), the pen name for Gu Dexian (古德贤, 1922-1999), was born in Mei County, Guangdong, China. At the age of four, he came to Malaya, part of Nanyang as called by Chinese people to refer to the Southeast Asian areas, where he received both junior and
secondary education in Chinese. Subsequently he worked in a variety of occupations as a clerk, a hawker, a helper in a guild hall and a school teacher. He ventured into journalism and writing at thirty seven, and from then on served as chief editor of a variety of publications such as Xuesheng Zhoubao (学生周报), Jianguo Ribao (建国日报), Malaiya Tongbao (马来亚通报) and Xiezuoren (写作人). When the Malaysian Chinese Writers Association was formed in 1978, Yuan Shang Cao became its first President. But he actually began writing in 1941 and thus his writing career stretched over 50 years, in which he used other pen names such as “Sha Feng” (沙风) and “Gu Ji” (古迹). His strength was particularly on writing prose and short stories. His published prose works include The Myriad Twinkling Lights (万家灯火, 1976) and The Collection of Prose by Yuan Shang Cao (原上草散文集, 1991). His fiction includes short stories such as “When the Chives Blossom” (韭菜花开, 1961), “House-mate” (房客, 1964), “Go Astray” (迷途, 1975), and “The Water Flows to the East” (水东流, 1981), and a novel Children of the Troubled Time (乱世儿女, 1985). In 1998, Yan Shang Cao was awarded the fifth Malaysian Chinese Literary Award for his great contribution to the Malaysian Chinese literary scene.

The writings of Yuan Shang Cao reflect the political changes in Malaysia after the Second World War. After the Second World War, especially with the establishment of People’s Republic of China and with the development of a multi-racial polity in Malaysia, Malaysian Chinese writers began to shift from the Chinese orientation towards a Malaysian focus. A turning point in this localization came in 1948 when debates erupted among Malaysian Chinese writers over the uniqueness of the Malaysian Chinese literature, indicating that the Malaysian Chinese writers had to adjust to the new political realities. The establishment of the Federation of Malaya in 1948 and the declaration of independence in 1957 had strengthened the awareness of local political developments among Malaysian Chinese writers. As Huang Wanhua pointed out that by around 1955, the local orientation of the various writers in Southeast Asia were maturing as the desire of the Southeast Asian Chinese writers to localize their activities grew stronger in the turbulent decade after the war. In that decade many countries were moving towards independence and were distancing themselves from China. It was in this period that Yuan Shang Cao wrote most of his works. In these works he depicted more livelihood of the people living in Malaysia than anything about China, reflecting his love for the land on which he was living.

I. Localization and the Regional Milieu

In Yuan Shang Cao’s works, localization features the inclusion of the local life experience, local imagination, local stance and culture of the Chinese people in Malaysia. Like the American writer William Faulkner who could not finish telling stories about his hometown and the people living there, Yuan Shang Cao devoted his entire life to writing about and for the Malaysian Chinese rural society, with which he was most familiar. For him, the rural life of the Malaysian Chinese people had been absorbed in the Southeast Asian geographical environment while maintaining some Chinese cultural tradition. Familiar with the rural environments he lived in, Yuan Shang Cao used his writing skill to do in-depth explorations of their living habits, the surroundings as well as social changes over time, and integrating the fate and experiences of the
Malaysian Chinese people into the peculiar scenery of the tropics, thus foregrounding protruding the main objective of the story.

He is very good at expressing feelings and emotions in description of natural scenery, not just using natural scenery as background. There are many examples to demonstrate this integration. An example is his expression of the feelings of frustration and confusion in a scene in the Kelantan River at night. He wrote:

“The slow moving water glitters in the sparkling moonlight. The thinly scattered street lights over the other side of the river look like the cold stars dotted over the distant sky. The chilling wind blowing over the river comes right into the window and touches on the peeling wall paper, making rattling sound which interrupts my thoughts. Sweet Malay melodies, coming from the folks living along the river bank together with some light laughter and knocking noise, curiously attract me to looking out for something. But I don’t know what I really want. The day is still young while most of the people may have left the houses” (Yuan Shang Cao 50).

It is not difficult for one to imagine how much the writer indulged his feelings into the scenes in the above passage. He made use of the night scene, the breeze and human laughter to air his feelings, his confusion as well as his frustrations. In this story, the author managed to diffuse his entire feelings into the description of a tropical scene with touches coming deep from his heart. Another example is his depiction of natural scenery in “The Water Flows to the East.” Towards the end of the story, Yuan Shang Cao described the twilight scene of a tropical village. By the twilight, Yuan Shang Cao suggested the end of the glorious daytime, which is juxtaposed with the narrator’s aged friend who pondered over his past romance. Thus a strong sense of depression and despair is triggered and the twilight scene is tainted by a sense of sadness (Yuan Shang Cao 242-60).

Yuan Shang Cao’s technique of keeping the depiction of natural scenery and the expression of subjective feelings and spiritual experience can be traced back to classical Chinese poetics. Liu Xie says, “When one climbs a mountain he focuses his feelings entirely on the mountain; when one is at the sea he immerses his emotions into the sea” (111). In general, the unity of human and nature, or the subjective and the objective, is central in Chinese poetics constantly and further theorized by scholars like Wang Guowei in the 20th century. Yuan Shang Cao obviously accepted this poetics and applied it to his writings. However, what distinguishes him from other Chinese or Malaysian Chinese writers is that he localized this poetics by applying this technique to the description of the tropical Nanyang, where he and his fellow Malaysian Chinese people lived.

II. Localization and Social Reality

Yuan Shang Cao’s localization is also demonstrated in his engagement in social writing. Localization is also a phenomenon whereby a certain entity seeks to transform and adapt itself into its own country, land, race, and thus is a process that draws out the distinctive characteristics
and flavor of the land and people. As a writer, Yuan Shang Cao demonstrated his enthusiasm in observing and writing his fellow Chinese people in Nanyang. Just as he said, “I have a basic principle in my works. To create a story, it must involve real people and actual event. Thus those articles collected in this booklet reflect real events that had happened or were known or retold to me. For example the lead player in the article ‘The Water Flows to the East’ is my former colleague. Those characters including ‘Dented-teeth Ah Chu’ (崩牙朱) and others in the short story entitled ‘The Dust’ (微尘) are my seniors from my hometown. The character involved in another short story ‘Father’s Grudge’ (爸爸怨) is my uncle’s peer.”

He had thorough knowledge about the sufferings and pains of the ordinary people of the Malaysian Chinese community, especially those from the lowest social strata, and was fully devoted to the writing for and about his people. In his short story “Five Dollars” (五块钱), Ah Chang was poor and ill, and there was no way he could borrow money from anyone. He asked his brother-in-law “Red-nose Zhu” for help to raise some money to do business. In the whole process of begging for money, “Red-nose Zhu” gave all sorts of excuses and lent him just five dollars at the condition that Ah Chang should no longer come back to him. Ah Chang was humiliated. At that moment some people came around to ask for donations. Ah Chang determinedly donated the five dollars as “Red-nose Zhu” was not willing to make any donation. The sadness and humiliation experienced by Ah Chang and the stinginess and heartlessness of “Red-nose Zhu” are fully reflected in the story (Yuan Shang Cao 77-88). In another short story, “Grand Opening” (开张大吉), Yuan Shang Cao related that his colleague Lao Wu persuaded him to join in to start a business. He agreed and borrowed money from others and worked hard for it. At the critical moment, Lao Wu, the greedy fellow, cheated him, and made him a bankrupt (Yuan Shang Cao 99-109). Thus Yuan Shang Cao, while demonstrating the hardships and some defects of the Chinese community, reflected the glory of humanity in the depressed people, which casts light on the hope of a people in a new land.

Yuan Shang Cao was good at revealing the inner mind of the Malaysian Chinese people, especially those who were educated and the womenfolk. In “When the Chives Blossom,” he gave a vivid description of the psychological activities of a teacher who was under great pressure due to his love affair with a student’s elder sister Xiumei. The story “The Water Flows to the East” is wholly devoted to the regret of the narrator’s aged friend at his cowardliness which caused the loss of his love twenty years ago (Yuan Shang Cao 242-60). In both these two short stories, women were depicted as brave and courageous. In “When the Chives Blossom,” Xiumei, though under great pressure, shouted to the teacher she loved, “Before I die, I want to see you and wait for you. Please say if you like me or not” (42). Although her love ends up in tragedy, Xiumei’s courage in fighting against her pre-determined destiny makes her truly noble. In the story “A Wisp of Light Smoke” (一缕青烟), the woman Xiaohua, though in great poverty, is also brave enough to pursue her future and love (Yuan Shang Cao 282-303). In portraying these failed heroines, Yuan Shang Cao expressed his respect for the oppressed fellow people.

Apart from portraying the strong characteristics of women, Yuan Shang Cao also made in-depth analysis on the unfortunate happenings encountered by the womenfolk in those days.
Fan Pik Wah commented, “Yuan Shang Cao’s works had outlined the misery of the women’s life at that time as there were no equality between men and women. They had to face all sorts of pressure. The tragedies encountered by them were due largely to social pressures, cultural practices, the ethnic community’s ways of life and the education systems” (46). In general, the womenfolk did not have the chance to go to school. Thus, it was not possible for them to break away from the suppressions that befell them. They had to depend on the males for supports in their daily life. For example, in the short story “House-mate” (房客), Cai Funiang had to rely on her husband, Guifang turned to her father; even the people like “lady boss” needed to seek help from her nephew. The lady in the story “The Howling Mother” (妈妈哭), who gave birth to an illegitimate girl, was humiliated and mocked and became insane (Yuan Shang Cao 231-41). All the tragedy suffered by the women was caused, for Yuan Shang Cao, by the social injustice and stereotypes.

From the above examples, it is not hard to find that Yuan Shang Cao never wrote about the Chinese people in Nanyang as outsiders, but instead as the indigenous, a people who lived in their homeland. But he did not state so in a direct way. Technically, he based his social exploration not only in the context of the Chinese community in Malaysia or Nanyang at large but also inside this particular community. In this way, he examined the life of Malaysian Chinese people as both human and a special people who struggled for better life and spiritual improvement in a new homeland. Thus Yuan Shang Cao took a nativized perspective to the Malaysian Chinese people.

III. Dialect and Local Flavor

Overseas Chinese literature usually involves a question of how to deal with two traditions: local tradition rooted in the country of domicile, and the ethnic tradition originated from Chinese culture. It is also true of language in which the writer writes. Yuan Shang Cao, as an authentic Hakka whose ancestors were from Mei District, Guangdong, China, never abandoned the Hakka dialect in his literary creation. For him, the Hakka dialect is the vehicle of preservation of his ancestral cultural tradition. He had his outlook and feelings deeply imbued with the Hakka customs and traditions, country songs and speaking habits. He incorporated the elements that he is most familiar with in his works, thus created his own unique localized characteristics. The abundant use of the Hakka dialect has given his fiction a particularly strong local Hakka flavor. The liberal use of the Hakka dialect in Yuan Shang Cao’s writings enriches the art of expressions by skillfully carving out the lively characters and the surroundings, and thus projects the Hakka’s way of life and thinking.

Apart from using dialect, Yuan Shang Cao also largely quoted Hakka idioms and phrases, be it in the form as nouns, verbs, adjectives or slang in his work, to further enhance the liveliness of the characters and images. The Hakka slang which came from the lower strata of the society truly reflects the Hakka way of life and the social environment.

Yuan Shang Cao used the Hakka dialect mainly in two ways: in nicknames of the characters and in the everyday dialogues. For example, he used “Four-eyed Boy” (四眼仔), “Big-head Fu” (高佬福), “Jut-teeth Qiu” (射牙秋), etc. These nicknames, derived mostly from the Hakka
dialect, are simple but strongly descriptive in portraying the typical Hakka community. This also achieves a comical or amusing effect to relieve the sufferings of the Malaysian Chinese people. In the dialogue or monologue of the characters in his stories, Yuan Shang Cao paid special attention to the use of the Hakka dialect to reveal their mind and feelings, just as Lao She said, “In a novel, dialogue is responsible for the development of the story, and also reflects the dignity of the people in the novel” (150). Yuan Shang Cao was good at letting the characters use the Hakka dialect to express their own feelings or reveal their character. He would match the right dialogue with right people and expressed at the most appropriate moment so that such elements as identity and feelings are properly synchronized with the environment to perfectly protrude the images of the characters. Just as Wang Xijie said, “By using the right proportion of the local dialect, it will further enhance the story’s localized features, rural feelings and human character building” (85), Yuan Shang Cao achieved this effect by tactfully using the Hakka dialect.

The localization of overseas Chinese literature itself is a complicated cultural phenomenon. Theoretically, localization is a conscious selection based on one’s own ethnicity, cultural tradition and thinking ways. It is not a simple process of borrowing and transplantation, but one of development and innovation through interaction and integration between different cultures which in turn will continuously consolidate one’s own unique characteristics. As for Yuan Shang Cao, emphasis upon his “planting root in the local region” or integrating into the local culture of the country of domicile without taking into consideration the Chinese cultural traditions would not mean localization but rootlessness, which would lead to a loss of his basis for existence, raison d’etre, ability to “modernize,” and uniqueness as either an individual or a member of a community. So in this sense, Yuan Shang Cao took the right standpoint by sticking to Chinese cultural tradition and applying it to the life experience of Malaysian Chinese community in terms of the local milieu, social reality and language, among many aspects. This is what makes Yuan Shang Cao’s works such a milestone and model in the localization process of Malaysian Chinese literature. Thus he and his works deserve further examination from the perspectives of globalization, ethnicization and modernization.

Notes


② All quotations from Yuan Shang Cao’s fiction in the article are translated from Chinese to English by the authors of this article.

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(1) 庞德、现代主义与中国新诗；(2) 美国当代诗歌理论在中国的传播与接受；(3) 美国诗歌中的儒释道；(4) 朦胧诗以来的中国诗歌及其与美国的交流；(5) 中国诗歌在美国的研究与传播；(6) 声音、视觉、表演：诗歌文本建构；(7) 中美诗歌中的伦理问题；(8) 美国族裔诗歌研究；(9) 中国与亚洲对洛杉矶诗歌的影响；(10) 诗歌翻译研究。

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