

“Do Cultures Leak into Each Other?” : Polycultural Considerations in Selected Malaysian Anglophone and Sinophone Texts

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The sea was deep green, the colour of old, dark jade.
That was the first time I ever noticed my skin, the
colour of it. Not brown, not yellow, not white, not
anything against the rich and mysterious green of
the water around me.
Tash Aw, *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005)

IN a recent article addressing Malaysian Literature in English (MLE), Kavitha Ganesan argues cogently that scholars working in this domain may take heart from thematic overlaps between three life-writing works published between 2002 and 2007.¹ Written by three women authors of, respectively, Malay, Chinese, and Indian descent, the works appear to reproduce the social fissures that characterise the formation. The first text deploys a “nationalist” stance that potentially strengthens social exclusion while the latter two rehearse minority-diasporic allegiances that resist such exclusion, in particular the avowal that Malaysia’s settler populations don’t actually belong because they are, to use the local term, “*pendatang*” (new arrivals), or else the avowal that their belonging is merely juridical compared to the autochthonous population who are the true “sons [and] daughters of the soil” (Ganesan 170, 173). Nevertheless, Ganesan argues, the fact that these dyadic positions are constructed through the use of nature imagery—through depictions of the sea, rivers, tropical flora, rainstorms, plantation monoculture and the like—suggest that “nature is as central as nationalist and diasporic agencies” in the self-delineation undertaken in these works (174). Such attributes

1. The three texts discussed by Ganesan are: Adibah Amin’s *This End of the Rainbow* (2006), Christine Wu Ramsay’s *Days Gone By: Growing Up in Penang* (2007), and Muthammal Palanisamy’s *From Shore to Shore* (2002).

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amount to “a trend towards commonality” and bespeak “fundamental similarities” between the different groups (171,179). As “emergent moments” they may provide solutions to “new . . . more challenging issues” confronting MLE in the future, thus “allowing it to overcome the confines of ethnicity”; and overall this suggests that the field’s trajectory “lies towards a promising future,” Ganesan asserts in the conclusion to her essay, “not just within the local literary landscape but also within the larger framework of postcolonial studies” (179-80).

In this essay, I would like to sketch a theoretical propaedeutic to the putative trajectory identified by Ganesan, while also extending her claim to include Malaysian Literature in Chinese (MLC). Ganesan’s claim that writerly engagements with nature—here taken as a metonym for “Green” thought in general—constitute emergent rationalities “crucial for the continuous growth and expansion of MLE” sounds plausible and appealing (180). But how such a move is to be accomplished is left largely unanswered. In the context of eco-crisis, nature engagement and relationality include the public virtues of stewardship and conservation. Its obverse, environmental degradation, may act as a rallying point for different constituencies to come together. Existential, health, and quality-of-life concerns raised by such despoliation may foster the creation of a common culture that moves beyond the “confines” of ethnic particularity, and this I argue is precisely the consideration proffered by a text published around the same time as the mentioned life-writing works, namely K.S. Maniam’s Anglophone novel *Between Lives*. Detailing the travails of a government official tasked with reversing a deemed “obstructive” use of land by an elderly lady, this text encourages a consideration of what constitutes genuine “development” and what needs to be conserved. Another text which delves into these issues is Chuah Guat Eng’s Anglophone novel *Days of Change*. Published in 2010, *Days of Change* delineates the existential challenges faced by a real-estate developer who reassesses his life after he falls down a ravine and hurts his head. It shows him fashioning an alternative notion of “development,” one that questions our over-reliance on hegemonic formulations of the last.

Through a reading of *Between Lives*, *Days of Change*, and two MLC short stories written by, respectively, Li Zhishu and Hai Fan, I argue that an important feature of recent MLE and MLC texts is their focus on cross-cultural synthesis as both a key social imperative and an arena providing some needed answers to the existential challenges posed by eco-crisis. Timothy Luke has suggested that “environmental justice movement[s], site defense organizations . . . and NIMBY (‘not in my backyard’) coalitions at the local level” can all be seen as “vital expressions” of popular political impulses (7). I use the term (eco-) popular as opposed to “populist” to designate the trend towards commonality spotted by Ganesan, and as rehearsed in the works discussed below. Abjuring hermetic or monadic notions of self and other, these works prompt our consideration by situating intergroup relations within a larger existential imperative to re-build human engagement and relationality with nature. For the mentioned syncretisms to thrive (or to even be noticed), however, I believe that we must adopt in an amended manner historian Vijay Prashad’s notion of polyculturalism, which affirms that our cultural “lineages” are multiple rather than singular. For Prashad, polyculturalism names a situation in which a kind of “horizontal assimilation” between

cultural entities is possible because it is based on the assumption that “people live coherent lives that are made up of a host of lineages” (xii). His insights are important because he proffers a dynamic notion of identity, and so avers that an unprepossessing status quo is capable of changing. The critical and pedagogical payback of engaging with this work is that it can counter the sway of neo-traditional currents in intellectual and social life, insofar as they tend to inhibit cross-cultural exchange by purveying hermetic notions of identity. Under its purview, as I attempt to show below, it can delineate an inclusive imaginary that helps to improve intergroup relations. Dwelling a moment with how Prashad substantiates his argument is thus important because it allows us to appreciate the significance of the border-crossing acts enacted in recent MLE and MLC works.

Dynamic Identities

IN his important 2001 book, *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity*, Prashad argues that the current dominant framework for conceiving and managing diversity, namely liberal multiculturalism, preserves at the level of “culture” conceived as a *sui generis* lineage the biological determinism that fuels coloniality, hegemonic racism (white supremacy), and, indeed, many non-white or subaltern varieties of racism. Multiculturalism, for Prashad, “refuses to accept that biology is destiny, but . . . smuggles in culture to do much the same thing” (xi). Its diktat mean that we tend towards “a static view of history, with cultures already forged and with people enjoined to respect and tolerate each cultural world” (66). But this then generates familiar, vexed questions which plague both the academy and “our everyday interactions,” questions such as: “Who defines the boundaries of culture or allows for change? Do cultures leak into each other? Can a person from one culture critique another culture?” (xi) Reservations about multiculturalism have also been tabled by other theorists such as Meer and Modood. For them the separatist construals of culture authorized by multiculturalism is problematic because a stress on “coexistence” comes arguably at the expense of “interaction and dialogue”; such a stance is too “groupist” in orientation, too “[c]ulture-[b]ound” or unyielding of synthesis; and furthermore it lacks “a sense of whole, in terms of such things as societal cohesion and national citizenship” (177, 185).

Prashad shares this view, and argues that postcolonial historians should therefore accentuate “cultural complexity” (66). His or her work is not to “carve out [different] lineages but to make sense of how people live culturally dynamic lives” replete with complex histories of engagement, intermixture and conflict (xii). Intellectual work in this arena should help us to recognise that “the cultures we produce are multifaceted and multivalent, that they borrow from as much as they tend to disagree with each other” (36). Prashad bids us to consider in this regard:

the rebel Africans, who fled the slave plantations in the Americas and took refuge among the Amerindians to create communities such as the Seminoles’; the South Asian workers who jumped ship in

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eighteenth-century Salem, Massachusetts, to enter the black community; Frederick Douglass's defense of Chinese "coolie" laborers in the nineteenth century; the interactions of the Black Panther Party with the Red Guard and the Brown Berets in the mid-twentieth century; and finally the multiethnic working-class gathering in the new century. (x)

Pertinent to the issue of fostering pluralism in the Nusantara world,² Prashad also bids us to revivify the solidarities forged during the 1955 Afro-Asian conference held in Bandung, Indonesia, in which representatives of over twenty-five Southern formations gathered to articulate the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement. Referencing Sukarno's speech at the opening of the conference, Prashad notes that these polities were united not by considerations of race or religion but by their "common detestation" of "colonialism . . . [and] racialism": although the "intense suspicion" of the Cold War era meant that such a platform ultimately didn't amount to much, it is worthy of emulation (144).

Although Prashad doesn't use the term, his work also constitutes a necessary provocation to the conceits of Han Chinese chauvinism—because it can help reduce the triumphalisms that we weave into our definitions of self. Posing the question "[w]hat would history look like from a polycultural perspective" and referencing in his response two prominent historians who study Confucianism, Prashad argues that, "rather than see Hong Kong business exclusively as a hybrid of an ancient Confucianism and a modern capitalism, as in the work of Tu Wei-ming, we might [then] take heed of the Jesuit role in the making of early modern 'Confucianism,' as in the fine work of Lionel Jensen" (67). For my purposes, this change in basic orientation is important because avoiding self-aggrandisement is a crucial first step for improving intergroup relations. Furthermore, this willingness to acknowledge the imbricated nature of the legacies we *actually* inherit also allows us to "snub the pretensions" of that ideology that arrogates to itself knowledge from different geo-cultural arenas but then proceeds to erase those contributions through amnesiac pronouncements on the achievements of "Western rationality" and "Western science" (often enough invoked to justify colonialism), a move that, as Prashad observes, "erases the influence of those Arab and Jewish scholars who extended Aristotle's insights, those Indian wizards who made mathematics possible with their discovery of the zero, [and] those Iroquois whose experiments with federalism helped frame some of the concepts for the U.S. Constitution" (67-68). For Prashad then (quoting the words of historian Robin Kelley):

so-called 'mixed-race' children are not the only ones with a claim to multiple heritages. All of us, and I mean ALL of us, are the inheritors of European, African, Native American, and even Asian pasts, even if we can't exactly trace our bloodlines to all of these continents. (65)

As can be seen in the first indented quote above, Prashad is not endorsing elite forms

2. Nusantara is the Javanese word for "archipelago." It references Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, (Southern) Thailand, (Southern) Philippines, and Timor-Leste.

of cosmopolitanism enjoyed by those safely ensconced in the upper circuits of globalization, or the consumerism that reduces complex lifeways to symbolic tokens available for use as ornamentation (e.g., Indo-chic, chinoiserie). The case studies that ground his claims are instead drawn from the class struggle and from anti-racist activism.

What supports Prashad's thesis is also its uptake in the field of social psychology as a new paradigm for comparative research of intergroup attitudes. In a 2012 study of several adult population groups in the United States, Rosenthal and Levy find, for instance, that "greater endorsement of polyculturalism was consistently associated with more positive intergroup attitudes" (11). This relationship held "for both dominant and marginalized groups" and its particulars included "[greater] appreciation for and comfort with diversity" as well as greater "*willingness for intergroup contact*" (1, 11). Building on the work of Prashad, Rosenthal and Levy, as well as others, Morris, Chiu and Liu also argue for the appositeness of the construal that our cultural traditions are "interacting systems" rather than separate genealogies (631). Because "[i]ndividuals take influences from multiple cultures" they also "become conduits through which cultures can affect each other" (631). And this suggests that literature also has a role to play by giving sensuous, believable detailing to the becoming-other that turns certain individuals into conduits, laying the groundwork then it would seem for *further* interaction and dialogue.

While Prashad sees polyculturalism as in some ways replacing multiculturalism, I would however advocate a more practicable mobilisation of *both* approaches, together with a third framework for construing diversity, namely colour-blindness, in line with Rosenthal's and Levy's suggestion in a 2010 paper that all three stances be taught in "educational settings" so that we can maximize the "strengths" and minimize the "weaknesses" of each position (215). Such a move views a strong emphasis on cultural boundedness as the historical and institutionally legitimised framework that polyculturalism needs to work both with and against to tackle the hazards of social fragmentation. For many individuals, a strong emphasis on (mono-)cultural heritage and allied notions of historical continuity does seem to compensate for the uncertainties generated by neoliberal capitalist modernity. Where the social reproduction of unequal difference occurs, it is also understandable that "strong" boundaries are maintained. To the extent that boundedness encourages people to live "parallel" lives, and to the extent that this may fuel prejudice and antipathy, however, a willingness for intergroup contact is also clearly important because it can help to improve social cohesion. Worth noticing also is Ganesan's implicit deployment of a polycultural frame when she discerns the assigning of an equal weight to "nature" as well as "nationalist[-exclusivist] and diasporic agencies" in the works she discusses. Unlike the identity politics or politics of recognition rehearsed by the latter two foci—one emphasising economic oppression, the other cultural-political oppression—nature appreciation and the sustainability ethos it fosters serves the common good because it maintains conditions of possibility needed for all to flourish. Since the authors she surveys are female, Ganesan's reading also implies that shared encounters with and resistance to patriarchy can animate intergroup solidarities. Rather than the current default, the mentioned politics of recognition

pursued in the main by postcolonial studies, what the polycultural perspective encourages is thus a shift in interpretive foci to what we might call a politics of commonality that spotlights overlapping interests, projects, and concerns. As Prashad makes clear in his book, this entails a commitment to analysing cultures as historically interacting systems, connections, and convivialities, and not just as entities gripped by trials of contestation and self-avowal. Most importantly, the theoretical move that I am proposing is not to take the above as a settled argument. I suggest merely that we defer judgement on the feasibility or otherwise of “polyculturalism” while we return to the cultural archive and excavate texts with an eye to delineating the forms of socio-political commonality they may rehearse or endorse. An example that comes quickly to mind would be the works of the poet Salleh Ben Joned, who writes in Malay and English.

Before we can proceed, however, a brief excursus on nomenclature is needed in order to avoid confusion. While I share the reservations raised earlier about liberal multiculturalism’s propensity to enshrine “tolerance” rather than transformative interchange, I do not adopt the category that Meer and Modood propose as a substitute, namely interculturalism. I think interculturalism and its cognate terms, hybridity or métissage, are better used to describe micro-processes pertaining to synthesis between “discrete” ethnic lifeways, a good example being the Sino-Malay creole culture that arose in earlier epochs when male Chinese migrants to Malaysia regularly practiced exogamy because of the paucity of female migrants from East Asia. Polyculturalism is for my purposes a more capacious category that includes “binary” processes as well as, for instance, the described interactions between English, Tamil, and Malay speech communities in *Between Lives*, and also the described interactions between English, Chinese, and Malay speech communities in *Days of Change*. “Manglish,” the homegrown variety of English which shows ethnolectal contribution from several different tongues would be a good example of polyculturalism. In addition, I think it is necessary to distinguish our everyday understanding of (cultural) hybridity from its articulation within colonial discourse theory, where Lacanian analysis is used to render “hybridity” a paradigm of colonial anxiety, not a descriptor of postcolonial social realities (Bhabha, 1994). Finally, another term that needs to be briefly touched on here is transculturation. Popularised by Mary Louise Pratt, who uses it to denote “how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (6), transculturation appears to illuminate a number of South American contexts dominated by European cultural norms. However, this situation is arguably fundamentally different from Malaysia, where the imperative is to secure co-development of *different* Global South cultures rather than to tackle existential problematics tied intrinsically to the North-South divide.

Coalition Efforts

TO return to the matter at hand, I will elaborate in the sections below how *Between Lives* and *Days of Change* valorise the formation of polycultural “compacts” between individuals from different communities, instantiating in the process a politics of

commonality. Such compacts are needed because the scale of the challenge posed by the existential imperative to find sustainable lifeways means that all groups have to contribute. *Between Lives* (hereafter *Lives*) tells the story of Sellamma, an old woman of Indian heritage whose attachment to a plot of land “stretching from the laterite trail to the river and on to the fringes of a jungle” stands in the way of a developer’s plans to build “a few blocks of condominiums, and a theme park” on it (1). Sumitra, who works for the government-run “Social Reconstruction Department” and who is also of Indian heritage, is sent to make her change her mind (1). To gain Sellamma’s trust, Sumitra works alongside her in a fruit orchard cum vegetable garden adjoining her home. She allows Sellamma to believe that she is her lost/deceased sister, Anjalai, bathes naked with her in the river, and treks with her into the jungle. In more abstract terms, Sumitra participates in and fosters Sellamma’s memory-cum-identity work as she narrates her life. A top performer in her department, Sumitra takes great pride in her “aloofness” from the “subjects” with whom she engages (8). As she enters Sellamma’s orbit, however, it is, interestingly, she who undergoes a sea change.

In the process, readers sample an alternative, at times obscure, at times mystical worldview, one where it is not so much the land belonging to a person who gets to enjoy ownership rights, but where an individual belongs to the land, and thus has stewardship and conservation commitments. In effect, Sumitra undergoes a conversion experience. As she tills the vegetable plot with a hoe, working alongside Sellamma, the latter notes approvingly that “[y]our earth hands are coming back” (63). The possibility of a non-alienated relationship with the land also causes Sumitra to recall an “environmentalists’ . . . song” that she hears often on the car radio, one stressing a “nurture-and-be-nurtured” mutuality between human beings and nature (63).

The reason for the bio-centric slant becomes clear as Sellamma recounts her growing up experiences before the outbreak of the Second World War. We learn that, having started out as a migrant rubber tapper, Sellamma’s father had set up a homestead when his employer began to lay off workers, presumably because of a market slump. Newly enacted colonial administrative rules prohibited businesses from sending excess workers back to the “Big Country,” which is to say, India, so the rubber company had helped them set up small land holdings (91). Sellamma’s father was chosen to lead the way because he was literate, was in fact given to reading the Indian-Hindu epic *Ramayana*, and was seen as a leader or role model. Setting up home and planting food crops is framed as a figure for migrants putting down roots in a new homeland. Hence Sellamma’s stubborn attachment to her surroundings.

For our purposes, the most provocative feature of *Lives* is the social compact it appends to the mentioned homesteading efforts.³ This comes through in a key passage describing how a character named Pak Mat helps Sellamma’s father set up the family’s fruit orchard or “dusun,” with the upshot that ecological reproduction is aligned with the reproduction of minority cultural life (109). An occasional provider of animal trapping, weed removal, and jungle-clearing services for the plantation that is releasing workers, Pak Mat, has been tasked to help with their transition to a new life:

3. For an opposed reading stressing the essentialist investments of the novel, see Lim (2008).

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The land was already overflowing with mango, coconut, papaya, pineapple, sugar cane, besides bunds of Malaikaran [Malay], Cheenan [Chinese] and Indian vegetables such as pandan, serai, puchok, manis, lady's fingers, pumpkins, avarakai, chillie, brinjal, and murungakai. Now with the dusun Pak Mat was helping to start, they would have seasonal fruit trees: chiku, chempedak, jack fruit, mangosteen, rambutan, langsung, and of course, the most exotic of fruit, the durian! (109)

By juxtaposing local food crops with those brought over by migrant settlers, the text stresses *commensurability* between settler and autochthonous lifeways. "Pak" is a Malay word meaning "Sir" while "Mat" is an informal term referencing the autochthonous population. That a so-named character helps Sellamma's father, and also the fact that they later become firm friends, suggests that the enterprise of putting down roots is cast as a public good, a cross- or polycultural compact that initiates, preserves, and extends the benefits of mutuality. The use of literary multilingualism, with insertions of romanized Tamil ("Malaikaran," "Cheenan") and Malay words ("dusun") into the English text strengthens this meme. Furthermore, the fact that the durian, an iconic local fruit, is tagged as "exotic" suggests an attempt to loosen the native-settler distinction in the national cultural imaginary. Against the exclusionary pressures directed at settler communities, *Lives* stresses the bounteous, munificent nature of the tropical rainforest and lowland biome. It suggests that the key requirement for minority cultural reproduction is meaningful forms of localization.

What needs to be stressed here is the contingent rather than essentialist (or neo-traditionalist) gloss given to Pak Mat. For rather than grant nativist imprimatur to the homesteading efforts of Sellamma's father, an act that preserves the priority of the former, Pak Mat's legitimating function may be said to stem from his fruit-farming and outdoorsman skills, which is to say from his ability to forge a sustainable relationship with the land. The importance of sustainability is underlined by other details including the "[e]co-art" that Sellamma's late brother, Chinnathambi, makes or finds: these are fallen tree branches that he retrieves from the forest, a practice that implicitly censures modern-day consumerism (69). But most importantly it is the closure of *Lives* that most validates my argument, for it avers that meaningful levels of sustainability can only be achieved by *all* communities coming together in an extensive, new social compact. The closure follows Sellamma's signing of her landholdings to Sumitra just before she dies, the baton being passed to the latter. But rather than fight the unnamed developer threatening her lands on her own, Sumitra convinces two of her colleagues to join her: Mei, who is of Chinese heritage, and, Aishah, who is of Malay heritage, which means that the earlier compact between Sellamma's father and Pak Mat actually foreshadows this turn of events.

Earlier in the novel, Sumitra's and Sellamma's swim in the river had presaged Sumitra's transformation of perspective. As the novel closes, we are shown Mei, Aishah, and Sumitra swimming in the same stretch of river, undergoing it appears an analogous act of transformation. As the epigraph above suggests, submergence in water

supplies an experience of corporeal boundaries “falling” away. The encounter with the sublime gestures at an attenuation of ethnic being, so that it is not skin colour that matters but “green-ness” or our common humanity. We might say that, as an iteration of eco-popular impulses, the polycultural coalition set up here exemplifies the trend towards “commonality” identified by Ganesan. It advances a national imaginary less riven by ethnic self-assertion. *Lives* ends with the three women putting the details of their struggle on the internet. They break the figurative fourth-wall as they address the reader, saying, “[t]his is the only way we can reach you—through our web site” (384). We are not told whether they succeed in fending off redevelopment, but the important point it would seem is the coalition they constructed, and the struggle that they’re engaged in.

As shown above, the notion that shared conservation ideals can provide the basis for new forms of collective life is powerfully explored in *Lives*. Beyond the conservation ethic, however, the concrete details of what we might call alternative forms of development are not provided. This is where *Days of Change* and the remaining texts supply part of the answer, insofar as they gesture at indigenous and autochthonous forms of knowledge that can be deployed in the larger endeavour to secure social progress, while urging the formation of polycultural coalitions to aid that effort. *Days of Change* (hereafter *Days*) is conceptually or generically related to *Lives* in that it also presents a reversal story with existentialist implications. As mentioned, it tells the story of a property developer who “changes” sides rather than a bureaucrat fighting obstructive land use. Having made his fortune from, in essence, contributing to a “dirigiste” or state-led model of economic advancement, the developer, Hafiz, undergoes a sea-change analogous to Sumitra’s when he falls down a ravine while on land inspection and wakes up suffering from amnesia in an isolated village named Kampung Basoh (Zainor 32). Cared for by two traditional healers named Pak Endoh and Mak Soh, Hafiz is impressed by their “professionalism” and grasp of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) even as he is appalled by the crushing “poverty” that he sees around him and the fatalism that it breeds (99, 163). The formal academic term TEK is not used in the text, but the practices of the two healers, their vast knowledge of herbal pharmacology, and their “bone-sett[ing]” and therapeutic massage skills come under its domain (94). While Hafiz is eventually rescued after a sojourn in Kampong Basoh, his memories of its *gemeinschaft* setting and of the uncomplicated piety of Pak Endoh and Mak Soh cause him to reassess his priorities even as he ponders the antimonies between “tradition and modernity” (170).

As he undergoes what is in effect an existential and spiritual crisis, Hafiz begins to question his adherence to dominant notions of progress, these being “dream[s] conjured up . . . by a consumerist system,” and also the “mindless pursuit of western definitions and standards of development” (152, 158). He recalls suddenly a conversation that he had with his gardener, Maniam, when the latter was being pressurised to abandon his lodgings in an urban squatter area earmarked for an office block cum shopping mall project. Like the other squatters, Maniam was slated to receive in return what Hafiz felt was “more than adequate compensation” for the “hovels” at issue, namely a new “brick and concrete” low-cost flat (157). But Maniam

disabuses him of that presumption. As he explains:

what developers and the government failed to grasp was that the hovels were surrounded by land on which the squatters could grow vegetables and small fruit-bearing trees, rear chickens, ducks, geese, perhaps a goat or two, or even a milk-cow—food, or sources of food, that kept them going on a day-to-day basis when money was scarce. Or that they could sell to supplement the day-wages most of them earned. Move them to a low-cost flat, and they would have to pay for everything they ate. Gone would be the wild plants or parts of cultivated plants that many city-dwellers hardly think of as food: male papaya flowers, young tapioca shoots, banana flowers, and edible convolvuli growing wild by the ditches. (157)

Arising from these deliberations, Hafiz decides to revive a community project cherished by his father, Yusuf, one that he had left dormant while chasing business goals. Instead of the “science college” that his father wanted to establish, however, Hafiz proposes to build a “college of traditional science” focused on the study of “alternative medicine,” preserving therein the TEK practices of Pak Endoh and Mak Soh while validating the alternative epistemologies they instantiate (167). With the college acting as a backdrop, Hafiz imagines that Kampung Basoh could grow into a kind of “traditional health village,” a network of which could form the basis of a “nationwide health- and eco-tourist industry” (168, 173). Among the possibilities for expansion: members of the indigenous community called “*orang asli*” can act as “guides” for the jungle treks arranged in the eco-tourism itineraries (168); the health villages can feature “botanical garden[s] of trees and plants used in traditional medicine,” and specialists such as “botanists [and] biochemists” can also be hired so that TEK treatments are “tested, documented, and systematised” (167).

In a plot twist that functions as a warning against investment in untenable notions of ecotopia and regressive “populist” nostalgia, Hafiz discovers however that his recollection of Kampung Basoh was actually a false-memory. Rather than a protracted stay in a so-named village, he had actually spent six months in hospital in a coma after his fall down the ravine. Hafiz experiences a breakdown after the discovery and questions his sanity. After recovering, he decides nevertheless that his scheme is worth pursuing, and as such ropes in his cousin, Ai Lian, who is of Chinese heritage, and niece, Anna, who is of mixed Chinese-European heritage, to join his project. As in *Lives*, the concluding polycultural compact set up here suggests that the know-how and resources of all communities have a role to play in discovering and promoting sustainable lifeways. Anna we are told used to run a landscaping business; Ai Lian has knowledge of investment and financing. As in *Lives*, *Days* also foreshadows this development by enacting an earlier compact between members of different communities. This occurs when some of his hometown denizens try to rope Hafiz into a NIMBY protest against plans to turn a nearby forest reserve into a “cartoon theme park,” one that would be “bigger and better and more state-of-the-art than anything the country had yet seen” (84). In a memorable iteration of the eco-popular, we see

members of both settler and autochthonous communities joining the protest effort, which attracts an assortment of working professionals and retirees. While taking the form of the journal writings of a Malay Muslim man, that is, of Hafiz, *Days* is also marked by the intriguing use of hexagrams taken from the Chinese *Book of Changes*, with different hexagrams from the classic acting as epigraphs for different sections of the text, thus underscoring through *both* form and content the polyculturality that is at issue.

Common Dreams

AS can be seen above, *Lives* and *Days* advance a politics of commonality that I would argue doesn't necessarily invalidate a strong "culture-bound" interpretive foci, since they also clearly pursue, respectively, Malaysian-Indian and Malaysian-Chinese concerns. Since my analysis only tackles Anglophone texts, I am, however, vulnerable to the charge of making an insidious claim, of suggesting that only MLE works have the expansive horizons needed to enact modes of polyculturalism. To forestall this accusation, I would like to turn now to two MLC texts that, I claim, also highlight polycultural considerations. Like the Anglophone texts, the following works underline the need for cooperation and mutuality between minority and majoritarian communities even in the face of tensions and dissensus. But concomitantly they also appreciate that such goals cannot be accomplished if hermetic notions of culture pressed by neo-traditionalism are not tackled and dispelled. The first MLC work that I would like to discuss is a short story by Li Zhishu titled "Northern Country Borderlands" (hereafter "Borderlands"). Told eerily in the second person, "Borderlands" is the lead story in Li's 2010 short story collection, *Rogue Buddha*. It concerns a twenty-nine-year-old Malaysian-Chinese protagonist named Chen who fights a curse that afflicts the men of his family, causing them all to die young before they reach the age of thirty. The curse began from the time of his great-grandfather, who, shortly after arriving in Southeast Asia from China, had killed a "strange-looking beast" for food, offending as a result a "mountain goblin-spirit" which placed the curse on him and his male offspring (21).⁴ The deaths of Chen's great-grandfather, grandfather, father, uncle, and several of his grand-uncles are all attributed to the curse.

To escape the affliction, Chen needs to find a fabled "dragon-tongue" herb mentioned in testimonies and records left behind by his father and great-grandfather (19, 37). His main clue is his father's journal which details his search for the plant, and which also contains between its leaves the mentioned records. Chen's research into the affliction leads him to consult a Chinese encyclopaedic dictionary published in 1915 called "Cihai" (23). The narration also weaves in other instantiations of the Chinese cultural archive including a classic sixteenth-century herbological text called the "Compendium of Materia Medica" as well as a "Chinese herbal illustrative compendium" (20, 28). As Chen approaches his thirtieth birthday, the symptoms of the affliction—falling hair, searing pains and cramps, uncontrolled sweating, palpitations,

4. All quotes from this and the following story are my own translations from the original.

migraines, nightmares, hallucinations, and even a mania to chew wood—get progressively worse. Chen returns to his hometown situated in the northernmost part of the country near the Thai border and searches for the plant in the area near where his father's cadaver was found at the mouth of a nearby river. He has a vague memory of searching thereabouts with his father for the herb, of achieving some success in an isolated unnamed "ravine" when he was a young boy (19, 30). At his father's funeral, Chen had found in his clenched palm the remnants of one of the sought-after plants, which his father apparently did not have time to imbibe, so he is convinced that his memories of encountering it have some basis in reality. He enlists members of the indigenous population to help him find the ravine, and also consults the gatherers who come to the area to harvest Tongkat Ali, a highly-prized local aphrodisiac-herb; but all his efforts are in vain.

Eventually after suffering great hardship—and with the affliction increasingly impeding his movement and grip on consciousness—Chen finds the dragon-tongue herb in an isolated marshy river. He discovers that it is not a conventional plant with normal roots but a semi-aquatic, "parasite-[type]" plant with "hollow" stalks that can draw sustenance from micro-organisms found in water (35). After he recovers, Chen sets out to find out more about a half-brother whom he only learned about recently. The existence of the brother is revealed in a handwritten plea written on the back of his father's will. From the note, Chen learns that his father, in a bout of dissipation caused by the affliction, had had a tryst with a Malaysian-Chinese widow and had gotten her with child, a son who, after he was born, was given up in adoption to a man who ran a business making Chinese funeral caskets. Any of his progeny who survive the curse should also help this son, Chen's father pleads in his message. Chen discovers that his half-brother was not, however, brought up in the casket maker's family. He was instead given up in adoption again to a Malay family because the wife of the casket maker found him too "swarthy": his "large mouth" and "thick lips" made her suspect that he was of a foreign or "external ethnicity" (36). Chen goes to his half-brother's residence, a Malay-style house on stilts, and begins talking to his wife. From framed photographs hung on the wall, Chen learns that his half-brother was brought up a Muslim and had gone on pilgrimage to Mecca. He is three years older than Chen so the latter expects that he has died from the family affliction. To his surprise, however, Chen learns that he is alive. He makes a comfortable living selling homeopathic and beauty products derived from Tongkat Ali, so it is presumably the imbibing of this herb that saved his life. In an implicit rebuke to the authority of Chinese herbalism, and, by implication, the neo-traditionalism performed by the archival instantiations cited above, "Borderlands" tells us that Chen's half-brother is actually in much better state than him. Chen is emaciated and frail whereas his half-brother is robust and hale: he has, in fact, three wives and eight children. Chen leaves the house when his questions about his half-brother's health upsets his wife and she shouts—ironically given the context—"Why do you Chinese people like to curse other people!" (38). Before he leaves, Chen buys a box of Tongkat Ali ointment from the wife. He elects to stay on in the town. As the story ends, he sees a doppelganger or secret sharer figure walking towards him, one that resembles a personification of death encountered earlier in the text.

As can be seen, “Borderlands” is a rich, suggestive text whose *primary* plot twist—the half-brother’s surmounting of the putative family curse—shows up the limitations of hermetic notions of identity. The text foreshadows this denouement when it provides at one point a detail about the Chinese businesses operating in the town: “Tongkat Ali is a herb that belongs to the Malays; but much like Malay traditional healers, Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners in the town also revere its medicinal properties” (29). The town also has two Chinese restaurants selling game whose liberal use of the aphrodisiac-herb allow them to do a roaring trade, with the text noting that its devotees are, as it were, “converts” to a beguiling new set of beliefs (30). Although culinary hybridity is only an initial step in the development of meaningful polyculturality, it would seem that “Borderlands” invites us to compare its endorsement of *difference* with the racial exclusion enunciated by the casket maker’s wife. The fact that her family gets its income from selling coffins would seem to be a figurative way of stating that ethnocentrism is a dead-end. That Chen’s father gives to the half-brother the Chinese name “Guan Hong,” which means wide or “great vision,” further points to the story’s rejection of chauvinism (36). In this concern, the title of the story—emphasising the crossing of borders by those who come from Southern Thailand to Malaysia to gather the Tongkat Ali herb—may be said to emphasize the ordinariness of cultural border-crossing. Because it acts as a metonym for culture, the fact that the dragon-tongue plant is itself semi-aquatic in nature and can drift on water would then further undermine the assumption that cultural borders must of needs be impermeable. In this regard, Chen’s failure to find the “ravine” where he first encountered the dragon-tongue herb—or so he believes—arguably operates in the same way as Hafiz’s misremembering of Kampung Basoh in *Days*. They both register the limitations attending neo-traditional construals of self and the other.

Forest Scripts

OUR final text, “Prey,” is by Hai Fan, and appeared in his 2017 short story collection, *Delicious Hunger*. “Prey” is constructed as three separate mini-stories with different protagonists. Each of them stresses the importance of sustainability and human-nature relationality, thus raising trenchantly the question of what constitutes the “common good.” Before elaborating on these features, however, I should add that Hai Fan is by citizenship a Singapore writer. I place his work here nonetheless because it draws on his thirteen-year experience as a soldier fighting with the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in the jungles of northern peninsular Malaysia, the stint ending in 1989 when he resumed civilian life following the signing of the historic Hatyai peace accord. While Hai Fan didn’t settle down in Malaysia, he risked his life for ideals held by many Malaysians, including those in the MCP’s tenth Malay regiment, whose members were predominantly Malay, and which is referenced indeed at one point in the collection (see “Wild Mangoes”). As the world retreats from the absolutisms of the Cold War, the proposition that the MCP’s post-Second World War activities were anti-colonial rather than narrowly communitarian in scope has gained ground, a stance bolstered it would seem by its earlier anti-Occupation efforts. To the extent that many Malaysian-Chinese

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view the retrieval of this historical understanding as crucial to a judicious appreciation of their collective contribution to national formation, Hai Fan's writing aids that effort. Furthermore, as Li Zhishu herself notes in a foreword to the collection, Hai Fan's writing stands out among most or even all of the works produced by former MCP fighters-turned-writers because it doesn't carry a "propagandistic" tone inhibiting circulation and acceptance (7). "Regrettably," therefore, he "may well be . . . the only one" among this coterie of writers who has both the literary skills and experiential-heft needed to make that era come to life (9).

Even so, Hai Fan stresses in a recent interview that his works should be termed "rainforest writing" rather than "MCP writing," one of their aims being to challenge the insidious notion that the rainforest is a "gruesome" place full of "terror" (Hai 71) and "fear" (Hai 73). Instead, Hai Fan insists, the rainforest is a place of "amity, *joie de vivre* [and] gracefulness" (Hai 73). Arising from this orientation, all the stories in *Delicious Hunger* inclusive of the three "Prey" mini-stories contain passages of great beauty celebrating human-nature engagement. They are not "war" stories in the conventional sense of the term, seeking instead to communicate an ecological anagnorisis gleaned from long residence in the jungle, that being a repudiation of the general cultural "ecophobia" (Estok, 2018) that fosters environmental despoliation. To the question of what constitutes the common good, therefore, the answer provided by "Prey" is its commitment to a politics of commonality advanced through a conservation and stewardship agenda.

Returning to the work under discussion, "Yellow Muntjac," the first mini-story of "Prey," describes two MCP cadres who are out hunting. One of them, Ah Na, is from the "Senoi" tribe, one of the indigenous peoples of Malaysia (107). The other, Keding, who is of Chinese ethnicity, marvels at how he often "learns new things" when he sets out with his indigenous comrades, including in this instance how to set a trap properly and how to bury game in the soil so that it can be retrieved unspoilt at the end of the hunt (108). Apart from hunting skills, Ah Na also teaches Keding how to munch certain kinds of leaves that leave an invigorating aftertaste in the mouth. A while later, they chance upon a muntjac (a kind of deer) caught in a trap just at the point where it gnaws off one of its limbs and runs away. When Keding gives chase, however, Ah Na stops him. He shares with him a Senoi belief that forest creatures will, in extremis, deploy dangerous "secret weapons" to defend themselves, so it is safer not to continue the hunt: his brother had apparently experienced that trait once while chasing a porcupine (111). Although surprised, Keding elects to follow Ah Na's decision because of the latter's attitude of reverence and fear as he recounts this item of belief. Nevertheless, the turn of events leaves him stunned and confounded.

The issue of assigning strict, regulative principles to human-nature interaction is also staged in the second mini-story "Black Bear," which starts with two female members of an eight-person agriculture unit checking on the game traps they had set up earlier. Spotting a bear in one of the traps, one of them, Dan Xiu, shoots it dead. Realising that the bear is a cub, and figuring that the mother will come back for it, they decide to set another trap with the dead cub as bait. If they kill the mother, each member of their unit would have a bear paw that can be used to make traditional Chinese tonics

or remedies. When Dan Xiu later sets out to check on the trap, however, Yan Hua, who had accompanied her earlier, is assigned to sentry duty. She learns subsequently that the mother bear did come back for the cub and was killed by Dan Xiu. When the paws are distributed, however, Yan Hua refuses to take her share. Her portion should go to the “public purse” or to Dan Xiu, she says (119). Yan Hua doesn’t take her share because, as often happened, she was assaulted by memories of her partner and child while on guard duty. Her partner had died a few years earlier during an ambush conducted by joint Thai-Malaysian forces. Their son was left behind in a village a day after he was born, just before they both joined the struggle. As Yan Hua struggles with these memories she also reminisces about her parents. Her refusal to take her share of the spoils thus stems from an awareness of kindred-ness. She connects the behaviour of the bear returning for its cub with her own loss and sacrifice. It is her own grasping after an ethical universal that would make sense of her experience that sustains this rendition of cross-speciesism, her understanding that her own pining for her son and parents is violated if she takes the bear paw. Furthermore, her experience of losing her partner in an ambush allows her to understand to the fullest extent what it means to be the titular prey of the story.

A continuation of this train of thought—the vulnerability of MCP fighters highlighting the vulnerability of nature—is also seen in the final mini-story “Mousedeer.” The story begins with news going around the encampment that someone named Ai Yue has captured a mousedeer, the Chinese term itself, “本蘭鹿” (“Ben Lan Lu”) being a transliteration of the creature’s Malay name “pelanduk,” which is actually given in Roman script in the text (120). While working in the underground in Singapore before she joined the struggle in the rainforest, Ai Yue’s selfless devotion to her cause had badly damaged her health, and now her poor constitution means she is often a hindrance to her comrades. She often disturbs their sleep at night with her coughing, is unable to take on many duties, has odd and eccentric ways, gets into unnecessary quarrels, and is often lost in her thoughts. The mini-story ends with Ai Yue releasing the mousedeer. She seems to see aspects of herself in the creature, for like it, she is weak, secretive, and isolated. More positively, however, Ai Yue also references its status in Malay folk culture, where it is celebrated for being able to use its wiles and intelligence to consistently outwit the nasty “crocodile” (121). Although unsaid, she is like the mousedeer fighting the crocodile, someone who can only rely on her wiles and intelligence.

As can be seen, all three mini-stories of “Prey” refuse to confine animals to the realm of *zoe* or bare life, to that which is killable, to use the term proposed by Agamben. In so doing, “Prey” gestures at the need to move beyond speciesism: it critiques the hyper-separation of the human socio-cultural realm from the realm tagged as “nature.” For my purposes, however, the striking feature here is the way in which these properly “ecological” concerns are delineated through expansive encounters with indigenous and Malay folkways, and also through critique of one’s own traditional belief system. Like *Lives*, literary multilingualism is used in “Mousedeer” to express affiliation with the majoritarian community. In contrast to the Marxist doxa that might have proclaimed tribal lifeways backward and retrograde, “Yellow Muntjac” opts to register their nature-

directed awe and reverence. “Black Bear” in turn underscores the need to modernise lay beliefs about the restorative value of imbibing animal parts. In sum, we might say, “Green” thought is evidently important in the present context of eco-crisis, but on top of that, as “Prey” and the epigraph above suggests, it can also help us navigate the problematics of ethnic particularity by spotlighting commonplace human fallibility redeemed by fellow-feeling and companionableness.

To return to the engagement suggested in the introduction, the theoretical propaedeutic that I am proposing is inscribed in the methodology deployed in the present essay. The task at hand is to re-visit the cultural archive with a view to identifying the modes, modalities, and forms of polyculturalism inscribed in them—exactly in the manner done so here—so that we can register positive cultural engagement—a politics of commonality—and not just conflict or tension. While my language capabilities limit me to texts written in English and Chinese, there are certainly many scholars who can widen the scope of the present discussion by engaging texts written in other languages. The key consideration, I think, is that we must undertake *comparative* analyses of fiction written in different languages, since it is difficult to see how monological conceptions of culture can be weakened if we attend only to literature drawn from a single speech community. Such work will not fully displace the “myths” of cultural purity that permeate public life and our everyday interactions. But it may help reduce the appeal of the neo-traditionalist nostrums animating xenophobia and Islamophobia in the West and social exclusion in the global South.

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ABSTRACT

The present essay tracks "emergent" moments in recent Malaysian Anglophone and Sinophone fiction. Drawing on the notion of polyculturalism proposed by Vijay Prashad, it argues that these moments delineate an alternative to the dominant "identity politics" framework for reading postcolonial texts, endorsing instead a politics of commonality based in part on the larger existential imperative to re-build human engagement and relationality with nature. The upshot is a loosening of the "confines" of ethnic particularity without foregoing historically sedimented forms of solidarity, and this also yields a heuristic for reading other texts in the cultural archive so that more border-crossing affordances can be discovered, analysed, and disseminated.

Keywords: politics of commonality, human-nature relationality/"green" thought, polyculturalism, K.S. Maniam, Chuah Guat Eng, Li Zishu, Hai Fan

「文化是否會互相流動？」：馬英和馬華文本中的多元文化

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摘 要

本論文探索了晚近馬來西亞英語和華語小說中的「冒現」時刻。根據普拉薩(Vijay Prashad)提出的多元文化主義概念，本文認為，這些時刻為閱讀後殖民文本觀點呈現了一個有別於主流「身份政治」框架，而指出我們有必要更著重重建人與自然互動和關係的共同性政治。這樣一來，族裔特殊性的限制得以舒緩，並以不動搖團結歷史的形式呈現，這也為我們閱讀文化檔案中的其他文本提供了一種頗具啟發性的方法，以發現、分析和播散更多跨越疆界的途徑。

關鍵詞：共性政治、人與自然的關係／「綠色思想」、多元文化主義、K.S. 馬粘、蔡月英、黎紫書、海凡

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