



## **At the Margins of the Margins: Liang Fang and Sinophone Sarawakian Fiction**

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### **Abstract**

Sinophone Sarawakian literature is produced and circulates in a position of multiple marginality. Written in Sarawak, a geographically peripheral entity within the Federation of Malaysia and not produced in the national language (Malay or *Bahasa Malaysia*), it finds itself on the fringes of several literary realms: at the margins of Malaysian Sinophone literature, which has its center in Peninsular Malaysia, and at the periphery of Malaysian national literature, which only includes texts written in Malay. Despite this position, I argue that Sinitic-language Sarawakian literature goes beyond its frontiers and is able to deal with issues of great relevance, such as the environment and multi-ethnic relations, without having to compromise its local characteristics. Through the analysis of “Longtuzhu” a short story by prominent Sarawakian writer Liang Fang, both representative of Sinophone Sarawakian literature in terms of themes and sensibility, I aim at exploring the characteristics of Sinitic-language Sarawakian fiction, while also presenting an author, a text and, ultimately, an entire body of literature unjustly neglected by international scholarship.

**Keywords:** Liang Fang, Longtuzhu (龙吐珠), Sinophone Malaysian literature, Sarawakian Sinophone literature, Sinitic-language fiction, Sino-Iban identity

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### **1. Introduction**

Occupying the northwestern part of the island of Borneo and separated from Peninsular Malaysia (also known as West Malaysia) by the South China Sea, the former British crown colony of Sarawak joined the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 on the condition that its geographic, ethnic, religious and social characteristics were respected and safeguarded within the new political entity (Fong, 2011). Although many of the privileges bestowed upon Sarawak have been gradually withdrawn, the eastern member of the Federation still presents great differences with the peninsula, in many ways. For instance, in its ethnic diversity, it is the only Malaysian state in which none of the more than 26 ethnic groups forms an absolute majority and it is also the only federal entity that does not possess a Muslim majority population (Lee, 2018, p.2). The geographic distance as well as the distinct natural and human environment that

set Sarawak (and the fellow Bornean state of Sabah)<sup>1</sup> apart from the more-populated Peninsular Malaysia have also shaped centre-periphery dynamics that marginalize Sarawak (and Sabah) in many aspects of federal life, including literature.

This peripherality affects literary production in Sinitic languages, as well. Therefore, Sinophone literature from Sarawak finds itself in a position of multiple marginalization: not being written in the national language (Bahasa Malaysia), it finds itself on the fringes of Malaysian national literature; moreover, being produced at the geographic periphery of the Federation, it is frequently seen as marginal, by writers and critics alike, also within the Sinophone Malaysian literary system (Chan, 2006, p.57), which has historically had two centers: Singapore, before the region's independence from British rule and Kuala Lumpur, after the formation of the Federation (Tian, 2001). Some scholars, such as Chai Siaw Ling (2016), have gone as far as proposing the notion that Sinophone Sarawakian literature is indeed “an independent body” not belonging to the Sinophone Malaysian literary system, since it came into being in the 1950s, that is before the formation of Malaysia as a country including both the peninsula and northern Borneo, and because “it has its own uniqueness” (p.2), connected to its unique natural, ethnic and social environment.

Despite this fringy position and the strong attachment shown by its authors to their tropical motherland, Sinophone Sarawakian literature addresses themes that go beyond the frontiers of the local (Sarawakian), the realm of the Sinophone and even the field of literature. For instance, as Sarawakian writer and literary critic Tian Si (2014) points out, it often deals with issues of great relevance, such as the ways in which ethnic groups in a disadvantageous position adapt to modernization and globalization (p.26), the challenges faced by the natural environment, including deforestation and water pollution (p.30), or interaction between Chinese Sarawakians and Sarawakians of other ethnicities. Anglophone research on Sinitic-language Malaysian literature has shown a certain degree of vibrancy in recent years, and especially since the popularization of the concept of the Sinophone by scholar Shih Shu-mei in the mid-2000s. However, attention to Sinophone writers and texts from Sarawak has been extremely scarce and has focused on Taiwan-based authors such as late Li Yongping (李永平) (1947-2017) and Zhang Guixing (张贵兴) (1956-),<sup>2</sup> neglecting the production of authors who have always been and are still writing from Sarawak, whose works find themselves in an unfavourable position in terms of opportunities of publication and easiness of circulation.

Through the textual analysis of “Longtuzhu” (龙吐珠 The bleeding heart vine), a short story written by prominent author Liang Fang (梁放) (1953-) in the mid-1980s, and which I consider representative of Sinophone Sarawakian fiction in terms of themes and sensibility, this paper has two aims of investigating the characteristics of Sinitic-language Sarawakian fiction and of presenting an author, a text and, ultimately, an entire body of literature unjustly neglected by international scholarship.

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<sup>1</sup> The Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah as well as the Federal Territory of Labuan, an island located off the coast of Sabah, are collectively referred to as East Malaysia. While representing around sixty percent of the total land area of the Federation, according to the 2010 Census, they were home to only twenty percent of the Malaysian population (Department of Statistics, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Carlos Rojas (2007), for instance, has focused on the theme of dislocation in relation to two novels written by Li Yongping in the 1990s, while Andrea Bachner (2010) centered a more recent study on Zhang Guixing and how, through the Chinese script, he defies “essentialist fantasies of and about Chinese culture” (p. 177). While both scholars critically analyze, through theoretically sound studies, these two writers and their texts, they do not problematize their identity as members of the Sinophone community, as Malaysians and/or, most importantly, as Sarawakians.

## 2. Sinophone Sarawakian Literature at the Margins

Before discussing Liang Fang and his fiction, however, I consider it necessary to contextualize the literary environment in which his texts are produced and circulate. Although Sinitic-medium Sarawakian literature belongs to the wider Sinophone literary polysystem,<sup>3</sup> its relationship with Sinophone Malaysian literature and Malaysian national literature is problematic. In fact, while it perfectly fits Shih's (2013) definition of the Sinophone as a concept embracing those "Sinitic-language cultures and communities outside China as well as those ethnic communities within China, where Sinitic languages are forcefully imposed or willingly adopted" (p.30) and it is considered a branch of the wider Sinophone Malaysian literary system by most authors and scholars, the relationship it should have with the Sinitic-language literature of West Malaysia is still a matter of debate (Shen, 2004, p. 605). For instance, according to Ah Shaman (2004), since the 'Sinophone Malaysian literature' label normally refers to the Sinitic-language literature of Peninsular Malaysia without taking into much consideration the literature written in Sarawak (and Sabah), if Sinophone Sarawakian literature is uncritically given such a label, it risks being swallowed by its West Malaysian counterpart, especially in non-Malaysian contexts (p. 645). Similarly, Tian Si (2003) noted that, although communication between Sinophone Sarawakian and Peninsular Malaysian writers has improved, "the political, economic and cultural marginalization of Sarawak and Sabah has caused resentment" among East Malaysians (p. 6-7).

While the idea of cutting the umbilical cord connecting Sinitic-language Sarawakian literature to Chinese literature was first proposed in the 1950s when local writers began to see themselves as Sarawakians rather than Chinese (Chai, 2016, p.2),<sup>4</sup> its subsequent automatic inclusion within Sinophone Malaysian literature took place in 1963, when Sarawak officially became part of the Federation of Malaysia. Such inclusion, however, was not accompanied by real interest in the works of Sinophone Sarawakian writers who now found themselves on the fringes of a new literary environment. This situation of marginalization continues to this day, as confirmed by Chan Tah Wei who argues that the number of studies devoted to Sinophone Sarawakian writers and texts is considerably inferior to that of researches that center on the literary output by West Malaysian authors. He also notes that, in many cases, when scholars produce works aiming at a comprehensive approach to Sinophone Malaysian literature

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<sup>3</sup> Using Even-Zohar's (2005) polysystem theory, I consider Sinophone literature not as a unitary literary system, but as a dynamic, vibrant and heterogeneous set of systems "which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent" (p.3).

<sup>4</sup> The newly found Sarawakian consciousness is evident in many texts from the 1950s, such as "Kelian de haizi" (可怜的孩子 Poor Child), a short story written by Wei Ming (巍萌) (1933-1986) in 1956 in which the author recounts the story of Aniu, an ethnic Chinese torn between showing filial piety by staying in Sarawak with his parents and following his friends who were moving to China. Ultimately, the young ethnic Chinese chooses not to leave and, with the vigour of his youth, pledges allegiance to the land by saying: "We should love the land that gave birth to us! And we should fight for its bright future!" ("我们应该热爱诞生我们的土地·为它美好的未来而斗争!") (Wei, 2009, p.50, my translation). Similarly, in "Zuguo" (祖国 Motherland), a poem written in 1957, poet Wu An (吴岸) (1937-2015) depicts a young ethnic Chinese who, while bidding farewell to his mother who is about to return to China, professes his attachment to Sarawak: "My motherland is calling me too/ she is under my feet, not across the sea/ Oh, this hot land of tropical landscapes!/ Oh, this stormy island hit by raging waves!" ("我的祖国也在我呼唤·她在我脚下,不在彼岸, /这椰风蕉雨炎热的土地呵! /这狂涛冲击着的阴暗的海岛呵!") (Wu, 2012, p.35, my translation).

consistently pay no attention to Sarawak, thus provoking its disappearance from the country's literary map (Chan, 2006, p. 57-58).

Sinophone Sarawakian writers can fall within three main categories: those who write from Sarawak, such as Liang Fang; those who moved to West Malaysia and thus have a closer relation with the Peninsular Malaysian literary environment (essayist and fiction writer Kho Tong Guan 许通元, among others); those who moved to Taiwan and whose classification or self-identification as Malaysian writers is definitely more complex. Within this last category of writers, the already-mentioned Li Yongping and Zhang Guixing stand out. In their case, when their identities are discussed, they are generally and unproblematically presented as Sinophone Malaysian writers. However, Li Yongping categorically rejected the inclusion of his own works within the Sinophone Malaysian canon as well as the concurrent silencing of his Sarawakian and, most importantly, Taiwanese identities.<sup>5</sup> Hu Jinlun, a Taiwan-based literary editor and writer states that there are multiple reasons for Li Yongping and Zhang Guixing not considering themselves Malaysians, ranging from the fact that they hail from Sarawak to the fact that they were born before the Federation of Malaysia came into existence, to the fact that their literary concerns are directed to the island of Borneo as a geographic locale as well as a state of mind, and not to Malaysia as a geopolitical entity (Zhou, 2012).

The relationship between the Sinophone literatures of Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia reproduces the uneven center-periphery dynamics that are also present in the wider and multilingual Malaysian context. In fact, while the Malaysian center of Sinophone literary activities is located on the western side of the country, Sinophone Malaysian literature is considered marginal within the national context, since it is not written in the national language (Malay or *Bahasa Malaysia*). In 1967, Malay or *Bahasa Melayu*, the language of the Malay people, was officially renamed *Bahasa Malaysia* (the language of Malaysia) and was officialized, through the National Language Act, as the sole national language. Accordingly, debates on the language to be used to build the new Malaysian literary system began to heat the cultural (and political) scene. The official discourse is clearly exemplified by Malay literary critic Ismail Hussein's posture. Although the scholar believes that other vernacular literatures, as well as Sinitic-language, Tamil and Anglophone literatures can be included in the Malaysian literary polysystem (*kesusasteraan Malaysia*), by defining literatures in other vernacular languages as 'local literatures' (*sastera daerah*) and considering non-indigenous literatures as 'community-based literatures' (*sastera sukuan*), he acknowledges the dominance of Malay-language literature (Ismail, 2006, p.35).<sup>6</sup> This highly compartmentalized idea of literature in Malaysia reflects the rigid categorization of culture, society and politics that defines Peninsular Malaysian social life. However, as Zawawi Ibrahim (2017) also notes, the multiculturalism performed in Sarawak possesses a "more fluid character" (p.41) and "Sarawak seems to bask in its pluralism and intercultural fluidity" (p.42).

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<sup>5</sup> Interviewed in 2016, Li Yongping stated that, as a writer, he "considers himself '100% Made in Taiwan'" (Qiu, 2016). In another interview which appeared on one of the main Sinophone Malaysian newspapers (Sinchew Daily), Li Yongping categorically refused to be identified as Sinophone Malaysian, pointing out that "[he] had repeatedly told Taiwanese literary circles that he does not have anything against 'Sinophone Malaysian literature' as a concept, but Li Yongping is not a Sinophone Malaysian writer, since Malaysia is completely foreign to him and it is a notion to which he has no direct connection." (我已经一再一再和台北文艺界提过了，我对“马华文学”这个名词没有意见，但李永平不是马华作家，马来西亚对我来说是一个陌生的，没切身关系的概念而已。) (Wu & Shi, 2009, my translation).

<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive discussion on the relation between Malaysian national literature and Sinophone Malaysian literature, see Paoliello (2018).

This structural difference between Sarawakian and West Malaysian societies is also differently portrayed in the Sinophone literature of the two locales. Sinophone authors from West Malaysia highlight the issues that come with the interaction between the ethnic Chinese minority and the Malays, the dominant group that, together with other indigenous peoples, are collectively known as *Bumiputra* (literally meaning ‘children of the soil’, in Malay). Therefore, preoccupation with how the ethnic Chinese adapt to or confront the Muslim/Malay-dominated culture is at the core of many Sinophone texts from the peninsula, such as those by highly praised and influential writers Ho Sok Fong (贺淑芳) and Ng Kim Chew (黄锦树).<sup>7</sup>

In Sarawak, conversely, the Iban are the numerically dominant ethnic group followed by the Malays who have recently surpassed, although by only a few thousand individuals, the Chinese. Following the three major ethnic groups, there are other indigenous groups such as the Bidayus and the Melanau. Unlike in West Malaysia, ethnic Indians in Sarawak are a numerically negligible group (“State Statistics”, 2014). The different ethnic composition of the state naturally leads to a different portrayal of not only different ethnic groups, but also of the ways in which these group interact with the ethnic Chinese population. According to Chai (2016), Sinitic-language Sarawakian literature highlights the non-confrontational coexistence among the many local ethnic groups, while the literature by Sarawakians in Taiwan such as Zhang Guixing “often expresses the unequal relationship between the ethnicities” (p.7). Although the textual analysis of Liang Fang’s “Longtuzhu” will show that the depiction of interethnic relations by Sarawak-based authors is not as unproblematic as Chai suggests, it is true that their literature is generally more in tune with Welyne Jeffrey Jehom’s (2002) idea that in Sarawak, “inter-ethnic interactions are more extensive” and that “inter-marriage and religious tolerance are important features of ethnic pluralism in Sarawak” (p. 59-60). One important factor shaping the fluidity of Sarawakian society is probably the less strict approach to religion as opposed to the more uncompromising stance of the Malaysian government, which constitutionally grants Islam the title of sole official religion of the country. Moreover, while all West Malaysian *Bumiputra* adhere to Islam, in Sarawak, where the largest religion is Christianity, the *Bumiputra* population is further divided into a non-Muslim majority and a Muslim minority (Hazis, 2012, p.20). This also allows for greater “pluralist tolerance in inter-marriages where the people have less limitation on mixed marriages despite differences in religion and culture.” Moreover, “[d]iverse cultural backgrounds and differences in religious values and practices do not appear to be a great barrier for the interaction and intermingling among the people in Sarawak” (Welyne, 2002, p. 63). Inter-marriage, in turn, can lead to the birth of ethnically mixed Sarawakians, as is the case with the protagonist of Liang Fang’s short story, who is of mixed Chinese and Iban parentage. “Longtuzhu” critically presents a character with a multi-layered identity where Chineseness is denied and desired, while Ibanness is hidden only to be re-discovered later in life, as I shall point out in the following section. Therefore, apart from its literary value, Liang Fang’s text is also powerful and necessary since it gives voice to the Sino-Ibans, who are normally silent and, as “a non-dominant group, [...] are struggling [their] way up”, so as not to be “forgotten and marginalized” (Yapp & Anita, 2013, p. 24).

### 3. Liang Fang and “Longtuzhu”

Liang Fang was born in the Saratok district of rural Sarawak into a modest ethnic Chinese family. The son of a tailor tracing his origins back to the Chinese province of Guangdong, Liang

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<sup>7</sup> Both authors investigate, for instance, the issue of Chinese conversion to Islam in two of their short stories, “Bie zai tiqi” (别再提起 Don’t Mention it Again) and “Wo de pengyou Yadula” (我的朋友鸭杜拉 My Friend Abdullah). For a brief discussion of both texts, see Bernards (2012).

Fang spent his childhood in close contact with the Iban people, living with his family in a *rumah panjai* (longhouse), a type of traditional dwelling which due to its architecture promotes communal living, before moving to an attap dwelling. Later on, Liang and his family moved to a traditional Malay village (*kampung*). In a recent interview, Liang Fang spoke fondly of his childhood memories, highlighting the peaceful atmosphere and sense of community that overcame ethnic divisions in both the Iban longhouse and the Malay *kampung* (Deng, 2017). After studying in Kuala Lumpur, England and Scotland, Liang Fang returned to his native Sarawak where he worked as a civil engineer, a job which allowed him to travel statewide, thus enriching his first-hand knowledge of both the territory and the ethnic diversity of his birthplace.

Liang Fang is one of the most accomplished Sinophone writers hailing from Sarawak, who has published a wide range of texts including short stories, essays and a novel. In 1994, he was awarded the Sarawakian Chinese Literary Prize (砂拉越华族文学奖), while in 2016 he was the recipient of the fourteenth Sinophone Malaysian literary prize (马华文学奖).

As noted by Choong (2007), one of the main characteristics of Sinophone Sarawakian writers is the attention they pay to the description of indigenous life, being particularly accurate in their depiction of the lifestyle of the Iban, the Sarawakian ethnic group with which the ethnic Chinese have traditionally interacted the most (p. 407).

Such feature is also present in many of Liang Fang's texts which focus on Iban people and their way of life. For instance, in the essay "Changwu" (长屋 The longhouse), the author with the eye of an anthropologist introduces the reader to the longhouse, the main symbol of Iban culture, while with the sensibility of an accomplished storyteller takes him/her beyond the surface, connecting this symbolic architectural element to the history and the social structure of Iban communities (Choong, 2007, p. 408).

As far as fiction is concerned, in 1983, Liang Fang published "Senlin zhi huo" (森林之火 The fire in the forest), a short story in which, through an ethnic Chinese narrator, the writer depicts and exalts the courage and kind-heartedness of the Iban people. A few years later, he published "Mala'ada" (玛拉阿妲) (1989), a short story titled after its female protagonist, an Iban girl, and portraying life in a village inhabited by both Iban people and ethnic Chinese. Far from being an ethnographic account of life in rural Sarawak, the story follows, through the memories of the narrating voice, the tragic life of Mala'ada as she is forced into prostitution and trapped in a web of deceit, lewdness and violence. Through the narrator, a young ethnic Chinese who had been friends with Mala'ada during their childhood, Liang Fang recounts the tragedy of this young Iban woman without any type of judgement, allowing the events to speak for themselves as the story unfolds (Peng, 1996, p. 55).

The relation between ethnic Chinese and Iban, which can be found in many of Liang Fang's stories and which is a key element of Sarawakian society, is also the central theme of one of the writer's most achieved texts: "Longtuzhu" (1984). Belonging to Liang Fang's earlier production, the story is thematically and ideologically complex, as it deals with multiple issues strongly connected with the Chinese experience in Sarawak and with Liang Fang's own experience of growing up in a multiethnic rural milieu. "Longtuzhu", by presenting a mixed Sino-Iban character as the narrator of the story, explores questions such as the formation, appropriation and denial of personal identity, the *huaqiao*/sojourner mentality of earlier Chinese migrants, as well as the Chinese primitivization and marginalization of the Iban identity. In light of what I have explained in the previous section of this paper, I consider the text representative of Sinophone Sarawakian fiction. Moreover, as a fictional text, it examines

themes that, although relatable to other geographic and social environments, are addressed from a uniquely Sarawakian perspective.

“Longtuzhu”, too, is set against the backdrop of rural Sarawak. The short story opens with Guda, the narrator, going back to his birthplace, a remote hamlet amidst the rainforest of northern Borneo, with the intention of taking his mother to Kuching, the capital of Sarawak where he lives with his ethnic Chinese wife and son. The long and rough journey, which reminds the reader of Sarawak’s marginal position within the Federation, is spatial as well as temporal, as Guda is obliged to reminisce about his hurtful past and his uncompassionate behavior towards his Iban mother (*indai*, in the Iban language). Guda is the son of an ethnic Chinese who ruthlessly left him and his mother to return to China to his wife and family. Now an adult, Guda arrives to his birthplace only to discover that his mother has already died. The story ends with Guda holding a photograph of *indai* close to his chest and calling her name, while tears blur his vision. According to Sinophone Sarawakian poet Wu An (1985),

by using a first-person narrator, the writer delineates a family tragedy from the perspective of a scorned child of mixed parentage. The cruelty of the Chinese man, the unspoken and enduring love that the Iban wife feels for her unkind husband, the sorrow, the abnegation of motherly love, the anger of the son toward his father and his everlasting regret toward his mother: the writer skilfully mastered the portrayal of all these characters and emotions. (p. 9)

At the beginning of the story, adult Guda describes the Iban traits that his son has inherited from his mother in a positive light:

I thought about my son, about his strong build, his dark and healthy skin, his soft and curly black hair, his wide and sparkling jet-black eyes, and his long wavy eyelashes, which he had inherited from his grandmother.

我想起我的孩子·结实的身子·褐色的健康肤色·油黑柔软的卷发·黑亮而凹进的大眼睛·卷而长的睫毛·全部遗传自他的祖母。(Liang, 1985, p. 113)<sup>8</sup>

It is only as the story unfolds that the reader is made aware of the fact that accepting his own Iban identity has been a long and tortuous process for Guda. In fact, the Sino-Iban narrator finds himself entangled in a complicated net of identities: as the child of a Chinese father and an Iban mother, Guda has a fluctuating identity, which is multi-layered and problematic. His Chinese identity is constantly denied by his father; in turn, he undergoes a process of self-denial of his own Iban identity, while, at the same time, Chineseness becomes the object of his desire. Moreover, his Iban identity is acknowledged, upheld and appropriated by his mother and his Iban extended family, who have always considered him as one of them. Guda’s identity concerns perfectly fit Geetha Reddy’s (2018) conceptualization of “identity as an active position, rather than a passive acceptance”, although, at the same time, “the construction and negotiation of racial identities can be limited by societal structures and practices” (p.2).

Young Guda’s negative idea of Iban identity is shaped by his Chinese father who sees both mother and son as primitive people, not even worthy of sharing the eating table with him. However, although the narrator acknowledges and internalizes his father’s cruel attitude, Liang

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<sup>8</sup> All translations from the Chinese original are mine.

Fang (1985) describes the man's eating habit with sarcasm, thus ridiculing his sense of superiority:

Dad had always been superior to *indai* and me, in every aspect. When it was time to eat, he'd squat by himself on a stool by the table, with the crook of his arm around his knee. With a bowl in his hand, he'd grab food with his chopsticks and would eat noisily. Grovelled on a straw mat by the table, *indai* and I ladled our food from an iron plate. I tried to sit at the table several times, but dad would stop me shouting: "Go away! Eat with your *indai*! You'll make a mess, there'll be rice grains all over the table."

阿爸一向就处处显得比印代与我优越。吃饭时，他一个在桌子开饭。他蹲坐在凳子上，左臂弯勾住左膝头，手上捧着一只碗，右手的筷子夹菜扒饭，吃的稀里呼噜响。印代与我却坐在桌子脚边的草席上，匍匐着舀着铁盘内的食物。我不止一次要上那桌子，阿爸却一再把我喝住：「下去，下去，跟你印代吃，弄得一桌子饭粒，脏死了。」(p. 114)

Although the man treats his wife and son as the primitive Other, *indai* does not challenge what she believes to be the acceptable order of things. On the contrary, young Guda does not understand why, as the offspring of a Chinese, he cannot sit at his father's table, hence his disobedient behaviour.

The father is presented as a typical *huaqiao* (a Chinese sojourner, literally), who considers Sarawak a temporary home.<sup>9</sup> *Indai's* passive acceptance of things includes the acknowledgement that, sooner or later, he will leave to go back to China:

"He has to go back to China!"

*Go back to China.* These words were always on dad's lips, especially when he quarreled with *indai*. He kept saying that we were a burden to him and that if he hadn't had two more mouths to feed, he would have already saved enough money to go back.

「他要回唐山去了！」回趟上。阿爸老挂在口边的话，尤其是与印代吵架时，口口声声说我们吧他给拖累了，若不是多了两张口吃饭，他早已蓄足了钱回去。(Liang, 1985, p. 113)

The words hanging from the father's lips show what Paul Siu, in a widely cited paper on the Chinese laundryman in America, describes as the sojourner attitude. According to Siu (1952), the sojourner "clings to the culture of his own ethnic group" and "is unwilling to organize himself as a permanent resident in the country of his sojourn" (p. 34). When the father states clearly his intention to leave, again, in stark contrast with his mother's resignation, young Guda shows resistance:

I had gotten used to his way of speaking about us, but that one time, it was different and it looked like he really meant it.

"And what about us?"

"We can't go!"

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<sup>9</sup> Many have analyzed the genealogy and the political usage of the Chinese term *huaqiao*. Wang Gungwu is undoubtedly one of the most prominent scholars to critically examine this term and others connected to the ethnic Chinese outside China. One of the most comprehensive explanation of *huaqiao* can be found in an article Wang published in 1985. More recently, Leo Suryadinata (2017) has investigated the People's Republic of China's appropriation of the term and its political usage.

“*Indai*, don't let him go! What are we going to do, if he leaves?”

“Son, what can I do? He *has* to leave!”

[...] He had to go home. He said that his home was there, not here.

这一切，我已习以为常。但这回，好像并不是说说而已那么简单。「那我们呢？」「我们不能去的。」「印代你留住阿爸吧。他走了，我们怎么办？」「孩子，我该怎么留法？他非走不可！」[...] 他要回家。他说那儿才是家。(Liang, 1985, p. 114)

Young Guda constantly fluctuates between the father's denial of his Chineseness and the inclusiveness of his Iban mother.

“How can I have a son like you? You are so dark! Such a native!” When he would say things like these, *indai* would lower her head in silence, and keep me away from him. I didn't inherit his fair and slender complexion, [...] but I did carry his bad temper in me.[...]

“I am not going! I hate it there [uncle's longhouse]. I don't want to live with those Iban people!”, I would protest, as soon as *indai* opened her mouth.

“Son, you are a half Iban, too!”

“No, I am not! I am nothing!”

「怎么有你这孩子，黑黝黝的，拉仔种！」那时候，印代会低头不语，把我带开。我并没遗传阿爸的白皙修长，[...] 我还承续阿爸的劣性。[...]

「我不去，那儿什么也不好，我不要与那些伊班人在一起！」印代一开口，我已大声抗议。

「孩子，你是半个伊班人！」

「我不是，我什么也不是！」(Liang, 1985, p. 114-115)

The father's denial of Guda's Chineseness also entails the refusal to share his languages with his Sino-Iban son, thus consciously not only excluding him from the Sinitic-language community, but also denying him the chance to claim belonging through language:

My dad would not acknowledge our blood ties, he would never speak Hokkien to me, let alone Mandarin. And I would cry and shout, while kicking my feet on the floor.

就连阿爸也不承认我的血统，从不跟我说福建话，华语更不必说了。我哭着在地上打滚。(Liang, 1985: 115)

The father's refusal to acknowledge his son's Chineseness follows a pattern not uncommon among ethnic Chinese in northern Borneo, as noted by Danny Wong (2012), who also reports of the difficulties of Sino-indigenous people (the Sino-Kadazans of Sabah, more specifically) to be accepted by the Chinese community (p.115).

When the narrator's father returns to China, to his socially accepted family, Guda and his mother are left alone and poor: their only means of survival being the support of the Iban clan. Guda's feeble ties with Chineseness are thus momentarily severed, while those with the Iban community are, apparently, strengthened. Nevertheless, he firmly holds onto his Chinese heritage through education, as he is able to attend a Chinese-medium boarding school in a neighbouring village. Pride in his own Chineseness and shame for his Iban heritage turn Guda into the inheritor of his father's contempt toward Iban culture, embodied by his mother. The narrator is not caught between Chineseness and Iban identity anymore, leaving *indai* alone to carry the 'burden' of Otherness. Liang Fang underlines this change also linguistically. The

pronominal usage often describing the mother-son couple (we/us) is now broken into an 'I' represented by Guda and a 'she/her' embodied by *indai*:

I noticed *indai*: she wore a thick *nyonya* dress and an old floral sarong, which contrasted with the modernity of the school premises. I wasn't happy. My classmates sent her inquisitive looks. As I glanced at *indai*, her unconditional love and concern annoyed me. It was already a dark moonless night when I told her to go back home.

"Can I stay for the night?"

"No! The teachers will scold me!"

"I'll talk to them."

"No! Go back!" I prompted again and again, while stuffing the black fake-leather bag and the small parcel containing a few clothes that she had put on my bed back into her chest.

见到印代，她身着一袭粗布娘惹衣与半旧的花纱笼，与现代化的宿舍成了强烈的对比。我并不怎么高兴。同学们也投来好奇的眼光，我看了看印代，连她脸上那不保留的慈爱与关怀都觉得讨厌了。「你回去吧！」我说。那时天已黑。是一个没有月亮的晚上。「我可以在这儿住一晚吗？」「不可以，老师要骂！」「我跟老师说。」「不要，你回去吧！」我再三催促，把她搁在我床上的黑色假皮的手袋与一小包裹的衣物一股儿全塞在她怀里。(Liang, 1985, p. 118)

The above passage, besides showing the coldness and shame of young Guda, also sets Iban identity and Chineseness in opposition: while Chineseness is represented by the modern school premises, the Iban mother wears an old, worn-out sarong. The description of the scene brilliantly couples Guda's perception of Chineseness as symbolizing modernity as opposed to Iban culture, considered old and primitive. Completely immersed in his newly found Chinese identity, Guda denies his Iban heritage:

A-Lin approached me saying: "You speak very good Iban!" Then he asked: "Is that your mother?" [...] I gave him a ferocious look [...]: "No, she is not!" [...] I now hated that teacher for he knew that I had an Iban mother.

「你的伊班话那麽好呵，那是你的母亲？」阿林走过来问。[...] 我狠狠地盯了它一眼[...]：「不是！」[...] 我恨透那老师。他知道我有个伊班母亲。(Liang, 1985, p. 119)

Guda's attitude toward Chineseness changes when, in his adolescence, he receives a letter from his father who complains about the economic and personal difficulties he is experiencing in China. Through the letter, the narrator is able to adjust his idea of Chineseness to reality, as his father's Chinese identity is not something to look up to, anymore. Concurrently, adolescent Guda starts to realize that his identity is definitely more complex than the straightforward upholding of Chineseness and denial of Iban heritage. Amidst this epiphany, the narrator is able to relinquish his paternal figure. Conversely, the death of *indai*, well into Guda's adulthood, is felt as a painful experience of bereavement and regret.

The last passages of “Longtuzhu” provide a symbolic reading of the identity concerns examined throughout the short story. Guda is given a wooden trunk that belonged to his father and that *indai* had cherished through the years. On the surface of the trunk, a flying dragon rises amidst the mist. The image of the mythological animal which clearly symbolizes Guda’s father and Chineseness, however, is fading:

“Oh, it’s a dragon. And the dragon is the creature that we Chinese people value the most.” he [dad] said to himself with satisfaction. Then he added that he was a dragon, according to the Chinese horoscope. But now, the trunk had been eaten by moths. The body of the dragon had almost completely come off, and worms had swallowed up its eyes. It was now a blind dragon.

「哦，是一条龙。我们中国人最重视的就是龙。」他自顾自地说，蛮得意的样子。他说他肖龙。今天那木箱却已蛀了，龙身脱落不少。蛀虫还蛀入龙的眼睛。那是一条瞎了的龙。(Liang, 1985, p. 121)

In the trunk, the narrator finds his own family experience and is reminded, once and for all, of the painful divide that there has always been between his father and the mother-child couple:

On the bottom of the trunk there were two photos, one was a picture of dad, while the other was a photo that *indai* and I took together when I was eight. [...] I held it close to my chest, my nose twitched, tears encountered no obstacle and I started to cry relentlessly. “*Indai...*”

箱底有两张相片，一张是阿爸的，一张是我八岁时与印代合拍的 [...] 我把这一切全兜在怀里，一阵鼻酸，眼泪像缺了的提防，再也忍不住四面狂流。「印代... ..。」(Liang, 1985, p. 121)

The fact that the three family members do not appear on the same photograph serves as evidence of the unresolved tension between Chineseness and Iban identity skilfully portrayed by Liang Fang throughout the text. Such unresolvedness mirrors the concerns voiced by Yapp and Anita (2013) that, while highlighting the enrichment that comes with their bicultural identity, also emphasize the difficulties in preserving their hybrid identity (page number).

Through Guda’s long path to adulthood dotted with the denial of his Iban heritage, the blind upholding of Chineseness, his anger, his regret and his failure in judgement, Liang Fang has portrayed a marginal subject whose marginality in Sarawakian society echoes Sarawak’s marginality within the socio-political-cultural environment of Malaysia as well as Sarawakian Sinophone literature within the literary field. Liang Fang, however, far from romanticizing Guda and the Sino-Iban identity he carries within, cleverly delineates a character who, like every human being, is liable to err.

#### 4. Conclusion

Through the presentation of Liang Fang, one of the main Sarawak-based Sinophone writers, and “Longtuzhu”, among his most prominent short stories written in the mid-1980s, I have attempted at presenting not only a lesser-known literature within the global Sinophone literary polysystem, but also a literary production that, for historic, geographic and social circumstances is both marginal(ized) within and distinct from Malaysian Sinophone literature. Moreover, Sarawakian Sinophone literature is also excluded from the national literary canon and, being written in a language other than *Bahasa Malaysia*, it is officially considered as having value only for and within the Chinese ethnic community, by which it is produced.

Notwithstanding this situation, I argue that, although presenting characteristics that make them quintessentially Sarawakian such as the attention to local environment, customs and culture, as well as the presentation of indigenous characters and their interaction with the ethnic

Chinese, Liang Fang and Sarawakian Sinophone literature are able to cross the border of community-based literature and of the Sinophone.

In this paper, I have used “Longtuzhu” as an example of the far-reaching power of this marginal(ized) literary system. In fact, throughout the text, the story is presented from a Sino-Iban perspective, thus going beyond the cultural and linguistic community normally associated with the Sinophone. Additionally, Liang Fang is able to traverse the Sarawakian realm and go beyond its geographic, ethnic and social space by critically addressing the theme of multi-ethnic identity which, although here highly contextualized, speaks globally and to many people who, like Guda, go through several stages in the process of formation, appropriation, denial and rediscovery of a fluid and multi-layered personal identity.

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