

The Trajectory of Chineseness in English Novels Written by Chinese Singaporeans in 1990s

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ABSTRACT

As a critical period of transition and transformation, the ten years in the 1990s had witnessed both the improvement of Sino-Singapore relationship and the rise of Singapore economy. However, the satisfaction of material propelled Chinese Singaporeans to pursue spiritual sustenance by discovering their ethnic and cultural root, which can be reckoned as “Chineseness”. With regard to the mixed nature of Chinese Singaporean reared in Western mode, this thesis intends to analyze the “Chineseness” of Chinese Singaporeans as a whole through a few English novels written by Chinese Singaporeans in the 1990s. The “Chineseness” which used to face desperation was gaining momentum by virtue of the pride cause by the rise of China and the increasing communication between the two countries. In the meanwhile, the open-mindedness of new generation also help accustomed their Chinese Singaporeans’ Chineseness to the country they lived and thrived. Besides, this thesis would discuss the value of English novels created by Chinese Singaporeans as a tool for historical and cultural research on overseas Chinese.

KEYWORDS

Chineseness; Chinese Singaporeans; English Novels; Singapore History and Culture in the 1990s.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Chineseness of Chinese Singaporean has undergone an impressive adjustment during the 1990s. Just as Singapore strives to survive and thrive with the surroundings of both oriental and occidental system, so too Chinese Singaporeans are internally confused by the interweaving of Chinese ethnicity and Western context. The way they define their Chineseness depends mainly on the needs of development. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the satisfaction of material pushed people toward higher level of self-awareness and self-achievement, which intensifies their intention to discover the root of their family and nation.

Before 1991, the economy of Singapore was in a period of development, and the practical problem that Singaporeans needed to solve was the basic survival problem. In the later period of the development of Singaporean English literature, especially after 1991, Singapore had ranked among the developed countries and had solved the basic survival problem. In literary works, the theme of survival paid more attention to the broader sense of spiritual survival, which manifests itself more in the creation of novels. The 1990s was also a prosperous period for the creation of English novels in Singapore. The landmark event was that more and more Singaporean English writers, such as Catherine Lim Baoyin and Hweehwee Tan, were recognized by mainstream European and American publishing institutions outside Singapore and published their literary works in the West, which showed that the creation of English literature in Singapore has been recognized by European and American academic circles.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1. What is Chineseness

The definition of "Chineseness" in foreign academic circles, including Singapore, falls within the following categories: (1) citizenship of national identity; (2) ethnic markers including but not limited to appearance, language and ancestry; (3) A cultural label that symbolizes certain customs, practices, and values; (4) A question about why China is such a country. Though there has never been a unified concept of Chineseness at home and abroad, the word *ver se* continually appeared in many theses as an important tool or method to analyze the overseas Chinese. This paper perceives Chineseness as the cultural identity about "being Chinese". The Chinese in diaspora as a whole formed diverse and complex cultural attributes, among which there are the traditional Chinese culture with Confucianism as the main component, that is, the traditional agricultural civilization, and the free cultural elements composed of experience, common sense, habit, inherent emotion, patriarchal relationship and so on. At the same time, there is the cultural spirit of rationalism based on modern industrial civilization, which is composed of rational, information, science, rules, contracts, equality, creativity, subjectivity and other conscious cultural elements.

2.2. Chinese Singaporeans and Singapore Society in the 1990s

The ten years before the arrival of 21 century had witnessed the transition of international landscape. Diplomatic relations between Singapore and China were fully established in 1990, which justified the interactions and communications between the two countries. Given the fact that over 70% of Singapore people are ethnically Chinese, PAP and Singapore government adjusted its global strategy by striking a better balance between developed USA and rising China. On one hand, the downfall of the Soviet Union marks the collapse of bipolar structure, making USA the only hegemonic power in the world. As a young and small country, Singapore has to resort to America for national security. On the other hand, the People's Republic of China had adopted the reform and opening policies of historic significance since 1978, which dispelled Singapore's doubts and fears of Socialism and Communism. The thriving of Chinese economy aroused the internal pride of Chinese Singaporeans for their homeland. Besides, the increasing cooperation between the two countries has strengthened the role of Chinese Singaporeans as a solid and smooth bridge. Singapore merchants and enterprises who are familiar with Chinese dialects and culture would be preferred when it comes to the joint construction and benefits of Belt and Road initiatives. Furthermore, the speed-up of globalization serves as a double-edged sword for Singaporeans. The closer bond with other countries and regions has brought huge gains to this capitalist country. However, it has set more challenges for this city-state to gain a foothold in international society without losing independence and sovereignty.

As an effective mechanism famous for pragmatism and flexibility, Singapore government was acutely aware of the value of unified Chinese language in the end of 1970s. In order to promote trade cooperation with China, Singapore's Speak Mandarin campaign began to encourage English-speaking Chinese Singaporeans to speak Mandarin more in 1979. Furthermore, Singapore government also added traditional East Asian Confucianism to primary and secondary school textbooks since 1989, and compiled a Good Citizen textbook based on Confucianism to inculcate students with Eastern moral values suitable for Singapore, train students' moral judgment, and teach students how to treat others. The inclusion of these traditional Chinese teaching materials has turned around a younger generation influenced by Western liberal democratic ideas, allowing the national identity to remain strong in the face of the erosion of other values. In 1991, the Singapore government issued White Paper on Shared Values to inject the core values of Confucius into the national consciousness, combining traditional Confucianism with modern social concepts. However, Lee Kuan Yew himself said shamefully in his later years that his promotion of Chinese a little too late, which really delayed two generations, making a large number of young Singaporeans have slowly abandoned Chinese.

The majority of Chinese Singaporeans accept their nationality as Singapore citizens. But all the Singaporeans nowadays regard themselves more as citizens of the world, which intensifies their inner bewilderment and void when regarding their cultural identity. Therefore, desire for economic interest and cultural identity drove Chinese Singaporeans to review their Chineseness in the guidance of pragmatism.

2.3. Singaporean Novels in English

Compared with European and American English writers, the particularity of Singaporean Chinese English writers is that there are contradictions and conflicts between their innate native culture and political education, but with the completion of socialization, the two have achieved integration and coexistence, and finally embody their unique form in their English literature creation. The Chinese Singaporean writers who engage in English writing are generally immersed in western culture. Most of them accepted British education and belongs to the elite class. Compared with the new immigrants from China since 1978, they hold great fidelity for Singapore. In the meanwhile, their appearance and family structure remind them of their root and convention. Considering the official language status of English, English writing dominates in Singaporean literature. Singaporean English literature mostly focuses on culture shock, immigrant identity, gender equality, and contemporary life issues such as marriage. In fact, culture shock and anxiety are prominent elements in Singapore's contemporary English literature. Most of the works reflect contemporary Singaporeans' awakening to national consciousness, ethnic identity and local culture. Such a kind of national emotion propelled them to discover their Chineseness and integrate it to the local environment in which they live and prosper. In another word, they are endowed with the ability to reconstruct their unique Chineseness in accordance with their personal development and national solidarity.

3. BACKGROUND OF SINGAPOREAN NOVELS IN ENGLISH

From the perspective of constructivism theory, the cultural changes of Chinese society under the guidance of literature also have an important impact on the public opinion cognition and policy orientation of the national government above the Chinese society in Singapore. In view of the role of the Chinese Singaporeans themselves as a bridge between the country of residence and the ethnic state, their literature also plays a certain role in the construction of international relations between the two countries.

Most Western scholars place Singaporean Chinese English literature in the perspective of global English literature, while this paper classifies the literary creation of this language as Singaporean Chinese literature from the perspective of ethnically or anthropologically Chinese authors. Instead of taking English as a sole object of study, it renders language as one of the tools and symbols for the study of the social and cultural adaptation as well as the development of Singaporean Chinese. That's why Singapore Literature in English forms an indispensable part of Singapore's culture and identity. Whether writing on public or private themes, the stories, poems and plays give expression to the nation's and individual's consciousness, imagination and experience.

Novel is one of the most expressive genres in literature. What exists in life and can be expressed in language, novels have the ability to describe, and can depict in a certain length the historical picture that exists in the vast space and time and the spiritual world in the deep heart of the characters with vivid colors. In particular, realistic novels deepen readers' thinking and understanding of the world by focusing on the reinterpretation and writing of events and characters in history and reality. This kind of works is more realistic and vitality, and also provides valuable materials for the study of Chinese writers and the social and historical situation of the era in which they lived.

Influenced by the multi-cultural environment, the Chinese culture in Singapore has formed a unique Singaporean Chinese identity. The Chinese community here celebrates various traditional festivals,

such as Chinese New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival. They also actively participate in national festivals, showing the characteristics of multi-cultural integration. The Chinese culture in Singapore not only integrates itself into the local society, but also has an impact on the whole Chinese community in Southeast Asia and the world. The spread and development of Chinese cultural traditions in the Chinese society in Singapore is enough to prove that Chinese culture has strong adaptability. Even if it has left the nourishment of the cultural mother, even in the period of setbacks, Chinese culture still relies on its tenacity to preserve overseas in a way of Chinese humanity. At the same time, the openness and inclusiveness of Chinese culture enabled it to absorb the nutrition of local culture in the long-term development process of Southeast Asia. Through practice, integration and development, it finally formed the unique Chinese cultural attributes of Singaporean Chinese, and made significant contributions to national construction and national identity. However, As a Chinese-dominated country, Singapore has always suppressed its citizens' sense of "being Chinese" due to historical reasons (fear of interference from the mother country and fear of hostility from neighboring countries such as the Federated Malay States), and the development of Singapore will continue to be plagued by disharmony. Multicultural Singapore, by its nature, has always been the carrier of power relations in the post-colonial era of globalization, and it hides the anxiety of collectivized identity wandering and loss of roots.

4. THE TRANSITION OF CHINESENESS IN ENGLISH NOVELS

This thesis will analyze Chinese Singaporeans' attitudes toward their Chineseness from confusion to pride through the following aspects: the image, theme and style of the selected Singapore English novels.

4.1. Puzzlement and Struggle

The novels in this particular period mainly revolve around the new generation of Chinese Singaporeans. Different from the older generation of overseas Chinese, the new immigrants and inhabitants mostly pursue a comfortable life and their own development as the purpose, pay more attention to the realization of personal value, which differs from the modern overseas Chinese that loyalty to the motherland, the concept of falling leaves to the root. They seek to actively participate in and integrate into mainstream society, and despite the many obstacles in this process, becoming a local citizen, putting down roots, and seeking development are the main motivations for new immigrants to go abroad. With hard work and ingenuity, they have made important contributions to the economic, scientific and cultural development of the host country and the home country while realizing their own values.

Since the 1990s, due to the prosperity of the country and the prosperity and stability of the society, the main contradictions in Singapore society have been dispelled, and the criticism in literary creation has been greatly weakened and tends to be flat. Although the general style of writing is still realism describing real life, the content is no longer to expose and criticize the dark phenomena of society, and writers are more likely to describe the living conditions of Singaporeans in a multi-cultural and multi-racial society in the new era. Reflecting the cultural conflict between the East and the West has become an important content of Singaporean English literature in this period.

Among all the important writers in the 1990s, Hwee Hwee Tan is considered as the most talented and influential one. Born and reared in a typical Chinese Singaporean family, Tan was affected by the Confucianist and Taoist culture throughout systematic Western education. Her novels centered on cultural identity and modernization of Singapore society. Her first novel, *Foreign Bodies*, stood out for its fascinating insight into the multiple attitudes and mindsets when dealing with Singapore's mixed culture and ethnicity. "Foreign Bodies" is an image full of symbolism. The appearance of the word was a medical term initially used by May's grandfather. It turned out that when May's grandfather swallowed a fish bone, a bone got stuck in his throat. In this case, the so-called foreign

body is fatal. Both May and Eugene had had events in their past lives that stuck in their minds like foreign bodies “affecting their lives.” In May’s narrative, the reader learns that when she was very young, she was raped by her father, a terrible experience that “followed me and affected me all my life like a foreign object in my body”. [1]For Eugene, Charlie’s death was a foreign object lodged in his body that made him restless. At the same time, there are many symbols of “foreign bodies” in the novel. For example, in the eyes of Singaporeans, Andy, as a white man, is like a foreign body, and he himself feels “like a foreign body that brings infectious diseases to a healthy society”. [2] As for Eugene, a Singaporean living in the Netherlands, “Living in a foreign country may seem exotic, but it's really boring.” [2].

Mei Ching Tan’s *Crossing Distance* (1995) concentrated on a young woman’s encounter with her cultural roots, and explores the individual worlds of the young and old. According to the author, the novel reveals the distances between people and within people. Sometimes all that people do, or try to do, is cross distance. In the same year, Goh Poh Seng published his third novel, *A Dance of Moths*, which explores the complex lives and human relationships of two men in modern Singapore. The theme of the individual’s sense of alienation and search for meaning in life is the main concern of Goh.

4.2. Reflections and Collective Memories

With regard to the interwoven conflicts inside and outside their lives, these authors from the 1990s imply post-colonial reflections on the new world order. In order to get rid of their yellow-skinned Oriental characteristics, English writers in Singapore can only wear white masks, or think of themselves as subjects in an English-speaking world. Therefore, there is an inevitable split between the consciousness and body of English writers in Singapore. Chinese writers in Singapore have contradictory psychology towards Western culture, and the coexisting desires to repel and to attract each other invariably plague them and remind them: If you get too close, you will easily lose yourself; And if you go too far away, you lose the support of the source culture.

Plenty of novelists at this time choose the story of a family as the microcosm of Chinese Singaporeans’ collective memory. They are proficient in evoking people’s inner Chineseness by depicting the tensity relations between individual experiences and social backgrounds. That’s also how they review their image and character as Singaporeans with China roots. Aligned with Singaporean government’s promotion of traditional Chinese culture and Asian values, the collective memory in these novels also boost Singaporeans’ sense of confidence and security when confronting the impact of modernization and westernization. After putting down roots in Singapore, Chinese Singaporeans have come back to re-examine their Chinese cultural memory. This kind of historical memory not only has the observation of overseas culture and cross-cultural vision, but also has the reference and penetration of reality, which drives them to constantly ask themselves where they come from and where to go.

Lim’s third novel, *Fistful of Colours*, won the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize in 1992. This historical novel focuses on the growing process of a group of modern young people and their parents in Singapore, with the heroine Su Wen as the center, and the scene constantly changes between the two periods before and after Singapore’s independence. Suwen uncovers and reveals the hopes and struggles of Singapore’s first generation of immigrants and residents – from Chinese colliers, Indian doctors and Malay waiters, each is given a unique and vibrant voice. Woven into this narrative are stories of Suwen’s fellow artists that touch upon themes of art, identity and the pursuit of personal and artistic freedom. [3].

In 1999, Daren Shiau won Singapore Literature Award with his novel *Heartland*, which explores the paradox of rootedness and rootlessness in fast-changing Singapore. Set in the early 1990s, the novel follows the years of Wing Seng as he leaves school and is conscripted into full-time National Service. As Wing tries to reconcile his past with his future amid transitions through different phases of life, he finds meaning in his intense attachment to his surrounding landscape. Yet, as relationships and the

years slip by, Wing is forced to question his own certainties and the wisdom of the people he values. Set in Singapore's heartland at the turn of the century, *Heartland's* capturing of the texture of everyday life provides the backdrop essential to the bildungsroman's exploration of identity, belonging and connection in an increasingly urbanized Singapore.

4.3. Confidence and Utilitarianism

The increasing use of Singlish also distinguishes the novels in the 1990s from other eras. Singlish is mixed with a large number of Chinese and Southeast Asian languages, which is popular among the people. Given the fact that the majority of earlier Chinese Singaporeans came from Fujian Province, southern Fujian dialect plays a key role in their daily communication, which strongly affected the transformation of English in Singapore. Its prevalence caused the government's concerns about the accuracy and standard of national English, and was mocked by early writers. For the new generation of Singaporean writers, Singlish is no longer a symbol of low status, but represents the local culture of Singapore. Compared with Standard English, Singlish has its own unique advantages. They regard Singlish as a symbol of Singaporean identity and elevate the use of this language to the height of national identity. Hwee Hwee Tan believes that Singlish can express something that standard English cannot express. In *The Foreign Body*, the protagonist Mei is a multilingual person. She can use different English in different situations, using standard English when facing the British and Singlish when facing the Singaporeans. [2].

Besides, the tone commonly adopted by the novels in the 1990s is characterized by its open-mindedness and global vision. That is, accepting the identity as a global citizen might be the easiest way to elude ethnic conflicts and attract more intelligent immigrants.

5. CAUSES OF THE TRANSITION OF CHINESENESS

As for the reasons behind these characteristics, all the factors including communication within the Chinese family, the interaction between the residents in the community, and the communication between the Chinese residents and the indigenous residents profoundly promote the construction and representation of their Chineseness in an unconscious way. The Chineseness embodied in these novels is characterized by its hybridity. The concept of hybridity is complex and variable. Historically utilized to refer to the mingling of biologically separate races, the term has been co-opted to refer to cultural and ethnic "recombination", whether based on ancestry or on interaction. Such hybridity emphasises the fluidity and multiplicity of ethnic, racial and cultural identities, as constructed through feelings of belonging, heritage, memory and experience. [4].

Another factor that helps reconstruct the nature of Chineseness is the rise of new generation Chinese Singaporeans. The new generation of Chinese in Singapore are typically Peranakan, who have very weak emotional ties with their native country and very limited awareness of ethnic culture. Therefore, they are more inclined to treat their Chinese nature with realism and pragmatism, so that they can avail themselves of such ethnicity.

6. CONCLUSION

All in all, the cultivation of Chineseness relies on Singaporeans' approach to Chinese culture. As the development of Chinese culture in contemporary Singapore lacks the support of the Chinese education system, and is restricted by social changes and generational changes, the prospect of Chinese culture is still faced with challenges and hardships. However, the cross-ethnic and cross-border trends and characteristics of contemporary Chinese culture in the process of revitalization are likely to inject new impetus into the future development of Chineseness and Chinese culture.

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