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# **An Interview with Ng Kim Chew**

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Ng Kim Chew, 2015, Puli, Taiwan

Although Ng Kim Chew has been producing fiction since the mid-90s, familiarity with his work within Malaysia is largely confined to fellow Sinophone Malaysian writers, scholars and students of ethnic history and literature, and journalists and publishers of local Chinese presses. But his prominence as a *mahua* (Malaysian Chinese literature) author is undeniable, not only for his distinctively experimental short stories (his preferred and only medium to date) but also his advocacy of a literary tradition that is linked less to China and more to Malaysia—a position he sometimes implicitly expresses in his writings through experimentations and parody—and thus of Sinophone writings that are fundamentally diasporic and not derivative of China’s literary heritage. Ng has since migrated to Taiwan, where he had earlier pursued his undergraduate and graduate degrees, but his stories remain unmistakably rooted in his original homeland and often deal with issues directly related to Malaysian history (like the Communist insurgency), social realities (such as racial relations) and/or identity politics (Taiwan on the other hand, based on the stories published so far, only features indirectly, if at all). His distinction as a literary author is attested to by the fact that a selection of Ng’s short stories was recently selected for translation by Columbia University Press (published as *Slow Boat to China and Other Stories*, 2016; trans. Carlos Rojas) under its “Modern Chinese Literature from Taiwan” series, which also includes the novels *Retribution* (2003) and *My South Seas Sleeping Beauty* (2007) by fellow Malaysian Sinophone writers, Li Yun-Ping and Zhang Guixing, respectively.

It was through Rojas' translation that I first became acquainted with Ng's writing, whose experimental style caught my attention not only for its ludic quality and self-reflexivity reminiscent of postmodern literature, but also its appropriateness as a form that complemented a narrative often underscored by ambiguity, irony, and aporia. Indeed, the recurrence of a certain character who never actually establishes palpable presence across several tales, for instance, is arguably an example of Ng's ludic strategy (whereby the reader is simultaneously encouraged to identify a connection between narratives and also obstructed from doing so) to periphrastically express a metafictional commentary on *mahua* literature's cultural status and literary heritage. Also notable is how Ng's stories, while revolving around the Chinese community, also involve non-Chinese characters in substantial roles — a characteristic untypical of Malaysian literature whose communal insularity is apparent in most writings in the nation's vernacular languages.

What follows is an interview with Ng conducted via e-mail in which he speaks candidly about his craft and the influences on his work, his sense of belonging as a writer, the state of *mahua* literature, and the difference between Anglophone and Sinophone Malaysian writers, among others. Evident throughout is Ng's succinct responses. Here, I would like to express my gratitude to Ng, who is also Professor of Chinese Literature at National Chi Nan University, Taiwan, for his generosity in taking the time to respond to my questions over several e-mail exchanges. Special thanks are also extended to Dr. Show Ying Xing, a colleague of Ng's, for helping to translate my questions into Chinese for the author and his responses back into English for me, and for conveying subsequent clarifications to me on Ng's behalf. The former was, I am sure, especially onerous but Ying Xing executed the task with ready willingness, professionalism, and unerring attention.

**When did you first arrive in Taiwan and for what reason? When did you decide to make it your base?**

I left Malaysia for further study in Taiwan at the age of 19. I had no choice — because I graduated from a Chinese independent high school, my qualifications were not recognised by the Malaysian government and so I was not able to pursue tertiary education locally; also, Taiwan had the cheapest tuition fees then. I would also face no language barrier there. As with the case of many graduates from universities in Taiwan, the Chinese Studies degree I subsequently earned there was not recognised by the Malaysian government either. So again, I was compelled to continue my higher education there. By the time I enrolled in a PhD programme, I had already lived in Taiwan for ten years. I knew clearly then that in terms of an environment for creative writing and researching, Taiwan was far better suited to me than Malaysia, and as a result, I decided to remain in Taiwan when given the choice. Moreover, since I have many siblings back in Malaysia, I was spared from the pressure of “filial duty”.

**Do you return to Malaysia for visits often? What do you miss most about it?**

I left Malaysia more than thirty years ago, but I still return from time to time — about once every year or two. Back when I was studying at the university, I would go back mainly to visit family and relatives; nowadays, however, I usually return only when there is an academic conference to attend. What I miss most is the home

that no longer exists. My old home, a wooden house built illegally in a rubber estate, was burned down after my family moved away. I also miss the food, especially the variety of local fruit and snacks.

**Who is one author who has inspired you, and why?**

It would have to be Lu Xun, not only because he is the Father of modern Chinese literature, but also due to the conciseness and meaningfulness of what he calls “problem fiction”. His proficiency in writing across diverse genres and sensitivity in investing profound ideas in succinct pieces of writing are also reasons why I admire him.

**What would you consider your favourite work of fiction (please also include name of writer), and why?**

Jorge Luis Borges’ “Three Versions of Judas”. Borges’ strength is the ability to deal with big questions – philosophical and theological – with utmost brevity. This story explores the issues of betrayal and sacrifice via a number of possible coexisting antitheses, all of which are proposed in one brief narrative. Such is how Borges encourages deep thinking in his stories.

**What was your first published work of fiction and when was it published? Can you briefly tell us what it is about?**

My first book, *Dream and Swine and Aurora* (夢與豬與黎明), was published in 1994. It is a collection of short stories mostly set against the backdrop of the rubber estate in Malaysia. It indirectly reflects on the predicament of Sinophone Malaysian literature.

**As a writer, you would certainly appreciate the discipline and tenacity that goes into crafting good fiction. Could you enlighten us on what are some of your habits and/or strategies as a practitioner?**

This question is usually more pertinent to novelists, since lengthier writing pieces require physical energy and continuous hard work over a long period of time. My chosen genre (the short story), however, does not require such conditions. Moreover, writing fiction is not my profession — indeed, I would never be able to survive on it. Hence, since it is more urgent for me to make ends meet, I devote myself to writing only when I have free time after work. If I am too busy, or do not feel I’m up to the task, I would just not write. Even if all the necessary circumstances are present, there is still the question of a flow in my writing. If there is, I could complete a ten thousand-word story within a week’s time, more or less ready for publication, with minimum corrections. If there isn’t, I might be stuck at the first thousand words or two of the story for years. Having said this, I am also in the habit of rewriting my stories with which I am dissatisfied or that I deem as having flaws, even years after earlier versions of them have already been published. One example of this is “In the Depths of Rubber Plantation” (膠林深處). To produce fiction, it is important to expand one’s knowledge. For

example, in order to write effectively about the Malayan Emergency in some of my recent short stories, I had to read extensively about the history of communism in the country.

**Although the focus of your fiction is Malaysia and on being Malaysian, do you see yourself as a Malaysian writer and why?**

I have always defended my status as a *mahua* (Chinese Malaysian) writer, but the term has to be understood in relation to Sinophone literature that is fundamentally stateless (無國籍華文文學). This is because Sinophone Malaysian literature remains viewed as secondary (read: inferior) literature to this day in terms of cultural worth according to Malaysia's cultural policy. For this reason, I see my *mahua* writer's status as dissociated from the state and more in correspondence with a diasporic identity.

**I understand that one of your objectives as a diasporic writer is to wrest Sinophone Malaysian literature's historical influence from Chinese literature. Why is this important for you? Can you give an example or two of how you express this in your fiction?**

It is an undeniable fact that Sinophone Malaysian literature has been influenced by Chinese literature. The entire discourse of Sinophone Malaysian literary realism and its production has never been divorced from Chinese revolutionary literature and its discourse. Some senior writers hold the view that Sinophone Malaysian literature can stand on its own as long as writers address local themes with local flavour, and provided that they are Malaysian nationals. However, the issue is not so straightforward. Sinophone Malaysian literature, in truth, has yet to find its place as a literary discourse dissociated from Chinese literature. To do this, it must go into exile, or experience a kind of symbolic death at least once, but more likely many times over. It is a contention I have explored in my fiction in as early as "Dying in the South" (死在南方, 1994) and, more recently, in "Blessing" (祝福, 2013) and "Father's Smile" (父親的笑, 2013).

**There is a strong focus on the Communist Insurgency in Malaysia in your fiction. Why is this historical period significant to you as a writer? What do you wish to convey (ideologically or symbolically) through its depiction?**

The history of Sinophone Malaysian literature is synonymous with the history of Malayan Communism — both originated from the Chinese literati who "came to the South"<sup>1</sup>. (My grandfather, in fact, migrated from China to Nanyang around the 1930s). And just as Malayan communism has been forgotten by the country's official history, so has Sinophone Malaysian literature been ignored by the state. My focus on communism in some of my stories is, in part, aimed at encouraging readers to reflect comprehensively on its shared history with *mahua* writings. I also use communism as a figurative means to address contemporary concerns.

**You are probably aware of the headway currently made by Malaysia-born Anglophone writers in the West, with writers like Tash Aw and Tan Twan Eng winning major literary prizes in the English-speaking world. I am wondering if you have read their works? If yes, what do you think of them?**

I have only read very few of their works, and in translation, like Tash Aw's *Harmony Silk Factory* and Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists*. I found them quite commercial and seeming to have a certain target audience in mind. But this is typical of fiction in the English-speaking world that operates according to a mature marketplace logic (I am sure these writers have very conscientious editors to see their works through to publication) and is accorded symbolic value in the form of literary prizes and academic evaluation, and has a ready-made readership. In contrast, Sinophone literature has limited commercial value, fewer recourse to symbolic rewards (we must remember, after all, that modern Chinese literature arrived later than modern English literature), and fewer readers.

**To my knowledge, you primarily write short stories? What is it about this medium that appeals to you? Do you have plans to write a novel in the future?**

For me, writing a good story is more important than writing a lengthy one. There is no need to write a longish story if the issue can be dealt with in a shorter piece. I am especially interested in what is known as “problem fiction”, which is characterised by brevity, and hence, problems that require a longer form to explore do not interest me. And since my stories have little commercial worth, it is unlikely that I will be asked by my publishers to develop them into novels. A novelist would probably consider the short story a kind of summary or outline of a longer narrative minus its plethora of details. For me, however, the short story is more like a remnant, or the essence, of a novel — like driftwood separated from its more substantial parent object and washed away during a storm. It's hard to say if I will write a novel in the future, but I certainly will not rule out the possibility of writing at least one, which moreover, will likely be lengthy and the culmination of my life's work as an author.

**Finally, if, say, you are speaking to readers who are greatly interested in Sinophone Malaysian fiction, what are some titles or authors you would recommend? To your knowledge, are they available in English translations?**

“Home-looking” (望鄉) by Li Yong Ping (李永平); Elephant Herds (群象) and Monkey Cup (猴杯) by Chang Kuei-hsin (張貴興); “Bleeding Heart Vine” (龍吐珠) by Liang Fang (梁放); “Night Trip” (夜行) by Li Zishu (黎紫書); “Lake Like A Mirror” (湖面如鏡) by Ho Sok Fong (賀淑芳). As far as I am aware, none of the above has been translated into English at the time of this interview.

**Thank you so much, Prof. Ng, for your candidness and forthright responses to my questions. It has indeed been a valuable learning experience for me, and I wish for many more short stories from you.**

Thank you, it was my pleasure.

## **NOTE**

<sup>1</sup> The word “South” here refers to Nanyang, which is the Sinocentric Chinese term for Southeast Asia.