

English language novels of Chinese Malaysians

Sixth of ten fortnightly articles for Star Two, published on 25 June 2017

In the previous article, we saw how the heritage novels of some South Asian writers reveal the cultural diversity within their community caused by differences in the place of origin, language, and traditions.

In the heritage and historical novels by Chinese Malaysians, the factors that most influence whether and how the authors write about the nation are not related to culture, but rather to the history of their ancestors' migration: when they first arrived on these shores, and which part of present-day Malaysia they settled in.

Chinese Malaysian heritage novelists may thus be divided into three groups: the Peranakan, whose ancestors arrived here during the fifteenth century; the descendants of later immigrants who came to British Malaya in the last century; and the descendants of immigrants to Sarawak during the rule of the Brookes or "White Rajahs".

Peranakan heritage writings

The earliest evidence of English-language fiction by ethnic Chinese in this region is found in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, a quarterly journal that appeared in Singapore in 1897. The authors were local-born, Malay-speaking, English-educated Peranakan (or Straits-born) Chinese, whose multilingualism and general openness to different cultures made them particularly suited to work as mediators between the British and the local people.

The openness to different cultures and the assumption of a mediating role in society seem to be discernible characteristics of Peranakan novelists. We find it in the writings of Lee Kok Liang, the first significant Peranakan fiction writer in modern times (and it has been noted in my own fiction by critics and scholars). Thus, in Lee's works – from *The Mutes in the Sun and Other Stories* (1962) to *Flowers in the Sky* (1981) – the main concerns are not communal, but social and national; and the narratives give hardly any indication of the narrators' (or the author's) ethnic identity.

Peranakan heritage novels by locally based writers are rare (so far). I know of only two – Chin Kee Onn's *Twilight of the Nyonyas* (1984) and Yeap Joo Kim's *Of Comb, Powder and Rouge* (1992); both semi-autobiographical in tone and, as the title of Chin's novel indicates, infused with a consciousness that they are writing about bygone days and vanishing values.

Most Peranakan heritage writings are non-fiction. Well known examples Yeap Joo Kim's *The Patriarch* and Ruth Ho's *Rainbow Round My Shoulder* (both published in 1975) and, today, the series of books (e.g. *Sarong Secrets* and *Kebaya Tales*) by Lee Su Kim.

Heritage novels by and about later immigrants

The first decade of this century saw the publication of six heritage novels about the later immigrants. They are Khoo Kheng-Hor's *Taikor* (2004), *Nanyang: The Lure of the Southern Ocean to Lands of Opportunity and Danger 1861-1966* (2007), and *Sifu: An Unusual Teacher in the Turbulence of the Malayan War* (2009); and Kuan Guat Choo's *Mouse Clutching Winter Melon* (2008), *Or Rau* (2009), and *4...5...6* (2011).

As the titles suggest, these novels are communally centred. Since I have read only two of them, *Nanyang* and *Or Rau*, I am not able to comment on whether and how these novels as a group contribute to the national discourse.

Sarawak heritage novels

The most interesting of Chinese heritage novels are Alex Ling's historical novels, *Golden Dreams of Borneo* (1993) and *Twilight of the White Rajahs* (1997). I have not been able to find a copy of *Twilight*, but on the theme of nation-building, *Golden Dreams* alone offers much to think about. It gives insights into how the first two White Rajahs, James and Charles Brooke, carved out the territory for themselves and then set about moulding it into a sovereign nation. And it helps us to understand why the people and present government of Sarawak seem to hold concepts of nation building that are sometimes at variance to those held by the Federal government and many peninsular Malaysians.

Golden Dreams is not a light read – 867 pages of narrative spanning more than a century – but it is not dry and boring. There is romance, intrigue, villainy, a couple of battles and skirmishes, and struggles for economic and political power among the Europeans, the

Chinese clans, and the Sea and Land Dayaks. The backdrop to all this are the development of the gold mines in Bau and the idiosyncratic rule of the second Rajah, Charles Brooke.

The main character is Stephen Young, who joins the Rajah's service soon after his arrival in 1898. As we follow his rise from cadet officer to Resident of the First District and, finally, trusted advisor of the third Rajah, Vyner Brooke, we learn about the key aspect of Charles Brooke's rule that seems to have left an indelible mark on the psyche of Sarawakians today: much justice and little law, and native laws before British law.