

Yao Tuo: A First Generation Malaysian Chinese Writer

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Abstract

This is a study of Yao Tuo and his literary works and an overview of some of his major creations. He was born in war-time China and experienced many difficulties in his youth. He later became a writer and, at the age of thirty-six, settled down in Malaysia and gradually earned a name for himself as a Malaysian Chinese (*Mahua*) writer. This article discusses his literary works on war-time topics and life in rural China, his representative works on Malaysia and the influence of his life in Malaysia on his literary works. The paper will also explore important factors that have an influence on the man and his works as well as racial and political issues in relation to his life in the Malaysian context. As a writer who gained fame among Chinese readers throughout the Chinese world including Mainland China, Taiwan and Southeast Asia, Yao Tuo's literary works have left an enduring legacy as they continue to win a wide audience of readers.

Key words: Yao Tuo, literary works, Mahua literature

Introduction

Yao Tuo, born in 1922 as Yao Tianping and also known as Yao Kuang, came from a village in Henan province in North China. He settled in Malaysia at the age of 36, and stayed there until his death at the ripe old age of 87 in 2009. He has become known as a Malaysian Chinese (*Mahua*) writer in the Chinese world. The term Mahua is abbreviated from "Malaysia" and "*Huaren*" (Chinese) and Mahua literature has become a recognized field of study in its own right. A study of Yao Tuo's life and experiences and literary creations will be of interest to many as they will be able to appreciate better the significance of the contributions of a first generation Malaysian Chinese writer from northern China, as opposed

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This paper is based on the materials provided by Mr. Yao Fuwei, one of Yao's grandsons, sources from the website of the Malaysia-Chinese Literature Centre: <http://www.sc.edu.my/Mahua/exhibition/yaotuo/biographical.htm>, as well as the author's personal background knowledge of Yao Tuo and his home village in China.

to those from the south. His readers would understand in greater depth the process of change of a Mainland Chinese to a Malaysian Chinese.

From the mid-1950s to the early 1990s, Yao Tuo published many collections of short stories, essays and plays, most of which were published in Malaysia, mainly by the Jiaofeng Press, and others in Hong Kong and China. He gradually earned a name for himself as a Mahua writer with a growing readership.

Some amount of research has been done on Yao Tuo and his works produced in Malaysia and China. The research is available only in Chinese and English-speaking readers may be unaware of the writer and his works. This study will present a general introduction to the writer and to provide an overview on some of his representative works as well as to examine certain issues affecting his life in Malaysia.

Yao Tuo's Life and Literary Works

Southeast Asia was a popular destination for large numbers of Chinese immigrants since the time of the Ming dynasty (1364-1644). The earliest groups of Chinese who settled in the Malay Peninsula arrived during the Malacca Sultanate in the fifteenth century. But it was not until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the inflows gathered momentum. By far the majority of the Chinese migrants to Malaya came from the southern Chinese provinces of Fujian, Guangdong and Hainan. The Chinese revolution in 1911, the civil wars between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party in 1927-36 and 1946-49, and the subsequent establishment of the People's Republic of China drove many economic and political refugees overseas. Yao Tuo may be described as an economic as well as a political refugee because his decision to settle down in Malaya was directly due to the civil war that erupted immediately upon the surrender of the Japanese in 1946.

Yao Tuo was born into a prosperous farm family just ten years after the Republic of China was founded. He was the youngest among his three brothers and a sister. His hometown, Gongxian, is situated near Luoyang, one of the five ancient capitals of China and known for its many imperial tomb complexes of the Song dynasty (960-1127 AD). He studied in a traditional and private school, learning primarily the Confucian classics. It was during this period that he began to read classical Chinese novels and stories, and developed an interest in literature. He believed that if China was not torn by wars and destruction, he might have become a writer even earlier. Like almost every Chinese teenager, he soon became familiar with popular classical Chinese literature. One can easily detect the weight of influence of the classics on his writings in such titles as *Jing Ke Assassinating Emperor Qin* (1969) and *Heroic Sons and Daughters* (1984).

In 1936, he studied in the County Teachers' School, but only for half a year. His marriage in 1939, at the tender age of 17, did not stop his education career. Following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, he enrolled in the Central Army Military Academy in Hanzhong, Shaanxi province in 1940, and graduated at the end of 1941. China's War of Resistance against Japanese aggression was raging in north China then. He was commissioned as a second lieutenant and assigned to the Nujiang River area in Yunnan province to participate in the well-known West Yunnan Anti-Japanese warfront. Injury to his left foot in a battle left a mark that would constantly remind him of his glorious contributions to his motherland. By the end of the war, his rank in the Chinese army was that of deputy company commander.

Yao Tuo left the army at the end of War of Resistance in 1945. Poverty forced him to seek help from a cousin in Hebei province. He soon rejoined the Nationalist Army in Shandong to fall back on the only "profession" for which he had been trained. The civil war between the Kuomintang and Communists broke out in the second half of 1946. He moved with the Nationalist army to Kaifeng, Henan province, in the second year of the civil war. In the scramble for control of the industrial Northeast (Manchuria) between the rival parties, the Kuomintang undertook a massive transfer of troops to the region. Yao Tuo, now a major and a deputy regimental commander, was ordered to battlefield in the winter of 1948. The Nationalist army was badly out-maneuvered during the entire civil war and withdrew to Taiwan in 1949. He was captured shortly after he arrived at the battlefield, but was released in June 1949. His years of wartime engagements had led him to many provinces such as Henan and Shandong in North China, Liaoning in the Northeast, and Yunnan in the Southwest. These places were to form the locational backdrop of many of his literary creations.

After his release by the Peoples' Liberation Army, he returned home for a brief stay before leaving again, this time for Nanjing where he worked in a tobacco factory managed by one of his brothers. The factory went into bankruptcy in 1950 and he was thrown on of job. He made his way to Hong Kong and did odd jobs to support himself. In 1952, he changed his name to Yao Tuo. As "Tuo" (拓) indicates opening new areas of endeavour, the man was symbolically reborn with a fresh resolution in life. He soon secured an appointment in a magazine-publishing house called Chinese Students Weekly in 1953 as a proofreader. Within four months, he had become its general editor. It was a calling that was to shape his destiny in the world of Chinese literary writings. His earliest creations were inspired by the vast repertoire of ancient Chinese stories. By 1954, he had to his credit a succession of short titles based on famous historical episodes. As China was fast becoming a "closed" society with little contact with the outside world, Yao Tuo found himself eternally separated from his family. In 1955, he remarried in Hong Kong.

In early 1956, he brought out his inaugural collection of short stories called *My Cousin*, published by the Chinese Student Weekly Press of Hong Kong. In 1957, he moved to Singapore to take charge of the same publishing house. At the same time, he took on the editorship of another popular publication called *Jiaofeng Monthly Magazine*. His relation with this magazine was a lifelong association that helped him to launch into a serious literary career. The year 1957 coincided with the independence of the Federation of Malaya. In the exuberance of new-found political freedom, the Chinese community saw opportunities in publications to cater for a growing population of students in Chinese schools. In 1958, Jiaofeng Press was shifted to Kuala Lumpur, the capital of the Federation, where Yao Tuo found himself for the first time. His engagement with this publishing house had become part of his life. In the same year, his *Meandering River Bank* was published in Hong Kong by Youlian Press.

Yao Tuo's literary creativity reached its apogee in the 1960s as he brought out in quick succession *Four Marriage Stories* in 1961 (Hong Kong International Book Press), *Fond Memories of My Childhood* in 1962 (Hong Kong Zhengwen Press), and *Flowers Blossomed in Wuliwa* in 1965 (Kuala Lumpur Jiaofeng Press). It was not until 1981 that his next title appeared as *Selected Short Stories of Yao Tuo* (Jiaofeng Press). The 1980s was a decade of literary dormancy until the 1990s when several titles were issued. The first was *Pink-Flowers on the Wall* in 1992 and *Collection of Yao Tuo's Plays* in two volumes in 1993 (both by Jiaofeng Press), and a third title on *Croaking of Frogs* in 1997 (Changchun Jilin Educational Press). His last book was an autobiography in more than half a million Chinese characters in length, entitled *A Bird of Passage with Footprints on Sand* and published in 2005 in Kuala Lumpur by a new publication house called Red Dragonfly Press.¹ Apart from the above titles, he published several hundred short stories, essays, sketches, folklores, memoirs, criticisms, forewords and many other pieces. These were mainly published in the local *Students Weekly*, the *Jiaofeng Magazine*, and in the local Chinese press.

Yao Tuo also occupied the post of the general-editor of *Jiaofeng Magazine* and various other positions, including the editorship of textbooks for local Chinese primary schools and high schools. He was also a founding member of "The Writers' Association of Chinese Medium of Malaysia". Yao Tuo never acquired Malaysian citizenship and remained a permanent resident of the country all his life. Malay language proficiency as a condition for citizenship was a handicap that was beyond him (see 《光华日报》/Kwong Wah Daily, 9 September 2009). The fact that he spent the greater part of his life in Malaysia and had contributed considerably to Mahua literature was sufficient to earn him the status as a well-known "Mahua writer".

Literary Writings on War-Torn Topics and Countryside Lives in China

A review of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 to 1945 and the subsequent civil war until the formation of the Republic of China in 1949 will place the works of Yao Tuo in a proper historical context. A general survey of the period is available in Jin Dexing/靳德行(1987). Prior to Japan's invasion of North China, Japanese troops had already occupied Northeast China since 1931 and had established the puppet state of Manchukuo through political machinations. On 7 July 1937, Japanese troops faked a plan to avenge provocations by Chinese troops near the Marco Polo Bridge just south of Beijing. Thus began an eight-year war of aggression of the Japanese against which the Chinese masses resisted valiantly and suffered bitterly. The national crisis forced the Nationalist Party or Guomintang and the Communist Party to ally with each other for the second time. The first was in the early 1920s as both parties set aside their differences to confront regional warlords who had usurped power after the downfall of the Qing dynasty in 1911. Yet the undercurrent of inter-party rivalry and struggles was intense, and in 1927 Chiang Kai-shek, supreme commander of Nationalists, conducted a large-scale massacre of suspected Communist members in Shanghai.²

Following the surrender of Japan in August 1945, a peace negotiation was held between the two rivals and a temporary truce was engineered. However, as the two parties failed to establish a "coalition government", the hard-gained peace lasted no more than a year before a civil war broke out for the control of China. This war consumed the energies of both parties between 1946 and 1949 which saw the final withdrawal of the Nationalists to Taiwan and the declaration of the People's Republic of China in October 1949. By then a new international political and military order pitting the Soviet Union and the United States had emerged at the end of World War Two. This state of affairs would endure for several decades as international relations were shaped by the forces of the Cold War into which both the Communists in China and the Nationalists in Taiwan were engulfed.

Yao Tuo's personal life too was affected by rapidly changing events in China and the world. He confessed that his short stories were primarily inspired by his own experiences and those of persons whom he was personally acquainted with. The storyline and plots were varied for literary impact. The main reason for the creation of these short stories was to put on record the lives and thoughts of the common people of his generation, so that future generations would know something about the real lives of their forefathers (姚拓/Yao Tuo, 1992c: 5).

Yao Tuo's penetrating portrayal of many different characters dealt with the lower class of Chinese society. Many of these characters shared a common fate in being victims of circumstances in one way or another as he revealed the agonies of poverty, separation,

sufferings and sorrow, and the helpless struggles against the harsh reality of disillusionment, oppression and social injustice. He was an artist in skillfully painting touching scenes and putting across messages that are hauntingly distressing. His accounts of conditions of life in war-torn China shocked as well as gripped the sympathies of all his readers.

A selection of the themes and messages portrayed by the short stories reflect the moral repugnance for war and the intense celebration of the human spirit for peace and love. In “The Most Unforgettable Face” included in *Meandering River Bank*, Yao Tuo relates a true story between the narrator and a dying Japanese soldier in the battlefield. The soldier was a young man freshly recruited into the Japanese army and was badly wounded in battle. Unable to bear the pain, he asked the narrator to shoot him with one more bullet and to let him die. In the dead soldier’s notebook was a note which read: “second lieutenant, Miyabo Saburo, soldier from registered students, twenty-years old”. Like the soldier, too many young students had become unwilling victims of the militaristic and aggressive policy of wartime Japan. In “Miracle”, a short story in *Flowers Blossomed in Wuliwa*, Yao Tuo recollects a true miracle that linked two events spanning over forty years. A Chinese soldier fighting in Yunnan province had once saved a dying Japanese soldier in a battle. Forty years later, the Japanese soldier donated his blood in a Kuala Lumpur hospital and saved the Chinese soldier’s wife who had lost much blood in childbirth. Nothing seemed impossible in this unseen world. As the ex-Chinese soldier left the hospital for home, he gave thanks to the kindness of the human spirit as he bathed in the warm sunshine that brightened up the peaceful and quiet land.

In yet another story entitled “A Yang-Surnamed Couple”, the message is one of despair arising from the cruelty of political dogmas. The story is based on the Chinese army’s counter-attacks against the Japanese army in the remote Nujiang River battlefield of Yunnan in 1944. Yao Tuo had served as a deputy company commander of a division and witnessed the brutality of battles that killed more than 30,000 Chinese soldiers. Yang Zhe, a soldier in the story and whose real name was Yang Zhaoqin, was one of the author’s military schoolmates from Henan province. He had risked punishment by marrying a woman whom he met by chance during the war. The couple had a child but was soon separated by the civil war that followed. Half a century later, Yang Zhe, who had remained in the Mainland, learned that his wife had re-married and was the grandmother of a big family. His son, now a government official in Taiwan, refuses to acknowledge his father as his current position is determined by his testimony that his father “was killed in battle for the country”. The years of hope for a reunion with his family left Yang Zhe a hugely disillusioned man as he accepted his fate as a victim of political differences. To the surviving soldiers, this true story of Yang Zhaoqin and his love was especially touching as they dreamed to live a peaceful life with their beloved ones after fighting their “final” war. But it was not to be as their dreams were shattered by more wars.

Similarly, *Four Marriage Stories* is a collection of short stories with the primary theme on war-torn tragedies. One of the stories, also entitled “Four Marriage Stories”, tells the love stories of his fellow-soldiers who endured unimaginable hardships during the civil war only to eventually meet with disappointments and disillusionment. For example, Zhao Mingde, a hero in the story, was dispatched to the battlefield in Northeast China during the civil war just a month after his marriage to his fiancée who had waited for him for ten years. He was killed in battle and his wife was so traumatized that she became mad. She painted a pathetic figure and would grasp whoever she met to plead for the return of her husband. Zhao Chenglu, the hero of a story in the *Meandering River Bank*, was a cook in the army and a fellow countryman from Yao Tuo’s native province. A loveable and cheerful person, he was afflicted with mental rather than physical injuries in battle. He would develop a habit of scribbling his name all over the place, thinking that it was amusing to onlookers. Instead, it added to his helplessness and the sympathies of those around him.

A “Half Piece of Baked Cake” in *Meandering River Bank* tells of the plight of “one of my aunts”, probably during the chaotic warlord period in the 1920s. This is probably the only war-time theme by Yao Tuo that is outside the period of Anti-Japanese War and the civil war. This “aunt” and her husband were driven by the force of circumstance to beg for a living. Their miseries worsened when she had to sell herself to a buyer in exchange for thirty *jin* (equal to 15kg) of wheat in order to save her husband. She immediately used one *jin* to exchange for two pieces of baked cakes and gave them to her husband from whom she would soon be separated forever. She pleaded, “Just eat it, please. You have not eaten a grain of rice in the past two days.” Soon after, the buyer came to take the “aunt” away. They never met or heard from each other ever since.

Another category of Yao Tuo’s works is about memories of his past as well as those close to him. He admitted that “the backgrounds of the majority of my stories collected in the *Meandering River Bank* came from China and Hong Kong. Among these stories one can find the figure of my mother as well as many figures of my native neighbours and their daily quibbling” (姚拓/Yao Tuo, 1992b: Preface). Appearing in the story also entitled the “Meandering River Bank”, “the figure of my mother” was more than fifty years old and so thin that “she would be blown away by a wind”. Yet she valiantly led her youngest son and two grandsons to collect blocks of stones to reinforce her land by the meandering river in a struggle against the rushing waters that eroded and reduced the land each autumn. This tale is a throwback to the well-known tale of “The foolish old man who moved the mountains”, and displays the Chinese peasants’ love for their land and a demonstration of their indomitable spirit.

All the stories compiled in *Fond Memories of My Childhood* (published in 1962) and

some in *Small Pink-Flowers Blossoming on the Wall* (1991) illustrate the author's delightful and mischievous boyhood. His stories entitled "In the Hot Cotton Field", "Watching Local Operas", "Wheat Harvest Season", "Stealing Pea Sprouts", "Kites in February", and "Visiting Relatives" are familiar to children in North China even today. The "Return of the Native" is a series of essays, telling an old wanderer's visits to his native town, recalling memories of his boyhood and youth, obviously drawn from Yao Tuo's own experience. The traditional Chinese literary melancholy theme over changes was repeated by Yao Tuo, but he crafted his stories with new content. Under his pen, the vast and monotonous North China Plain becomes alluringly appealing; the way of life is so profound in the cultural sense that, in spite of the diversities of the Chinese people, readers today can still find them refreshingly nostalgic.

Yao Tuo's Selected Mahua Literary Works

The *Selected Short Stories of Yao Tuo* published in 1992 is a collection of short stories from Malaysia. It is regarded as an outstanding contribution to Malaysian Chinese literature. The underlying theme of the stories is centred on common characters and the ordinary people in Malaysian society. The stories portray simple and realistic daily occurrences among Malaysian Chinese, and shone of political or historical undertones and imaginary idealism. Together, the stories reflect the author's deep perception of and concern with the life of the common people of his adopted country.

Yao Tuo portrays many facets of typically Malaysian life. The story in "A Nine-Character Love Letter" (1965) is about a young man and a girl who always take the same bus when they travel to work in the city. In time, the boy falls secretly in love with the girl but does not have the courage to greet her. When he finally drums up his resolve to dash a letter to her, he manages only to write nine words: "To my dear girl whom I do not know." Even then, he is too nervous to hand over the one-sentence letter to the girl. When he does so in the bus, he is shaking. When the girl calls out for him as he leaves the bus, he is so confused that he snatches the letter back from her. To his astonishment, he finds that it is a note from her, which reads: "To the gentleman whom I do not know," but without the word "dear." He is delighted and whistles as he walks to his office. This romantic encounter is probably repeated many times among ordinary young men and women of Kuala Lumpur who travelled by public buses to work in the 1950s and 1960s. The writer saw these seemingly trivial encounters as the stuff of romance that spiced up the drudgery of daily life then.

Malaysian Chinese have retained some traditional and regional rites and rituals that are now forgotten in China. Some superstitious practices are illustrated in such stories as "Catching a Ghost" and "The Magic Spell". The former tells of a story of a "ghost" who

frightens and drives away the audience in a cinema. The narrator, who works in the cinema, discovers that the “ghost” is just an eccentric man who lives near a cemetery. As he is always chewing a betel nut, he appears to have a “bloody” mouth. The plot is intriguing and full of suspense not unlike a detective story. Description of this “ghost catching” tale is rendered in a witty and humorous manner to advocate the author’s anti-superstitious attitude.

“The Magic Spell” deals with a theme that Malaysian Chinese are familiar with. The story tells of “my cousin” who keeps a mistress. His worried wife and mother have to “drag” him back. Having failed to persuade him to come to his senses, they consult a medium and pay two hundred dollars for a magic potion. The medium is certain that the man will return to his wife if the potion is rubbed onto his clothes. Ridiculous as it may sound, the method works and the man leaves his mistress. The family is happy again and heaps praise on the medium. The story in fact ridicules the blind belief in superstitions. The moral of the story is that the family ignores the real cause of the man’s infidelity and instead falls back on an irrational and laughable approach to its problem.

Yao Tuo began writing plays in the 1980s. These plays are generally considered successful in terms of their genre-transformation as they were based on the novels or short stories by other writers. For example, he transformed *The Garden of Repose* by the famous modern Chinese writer, Ba Jin, into a three-act play called *Return to Life*. This original adaptation by Yao Tuo is popularly regarded as his representative play and is included in *Collection of Yao Tuo’s Plays* (1993). The play touches on moral issues through the agency of a superstitious act. Readers may consider the plot as bizarre and exotic if they are not familiar with Chinese beliefs. The play is about a Dato Ding Jinbao,³ an elderly and prosperous politician and curio-collector, who suddenly dies while attending an important ceremony. His family and close associates immediately begin a heated argument over who will be the appropriate legal heir to his fortune. Disturbed by what his departing spirit sees (according to Chinese beliefs), he entreats the God of the Underworld to return him to life for a mere twenty minutes so that he may sort out his problems. He then “returns to life” and is furious with his family and close associates and declares that his wealth will be donated to charity and a sum to be left to his mistress and two illegal children. Unlike other relatives, his mistress and her children are truly devoted to him. In a dramatic change of event, the God of the Underworld, overwhelmed by the Dato’s act of generosity, decides to prolong his life for an additional thirty years. Although furious with his young wife who is the mistress of his lawyer, he does not want to lose her. As he calls his wife back to him, she walks away with his lawyer as the curtain falls. The play is a reminder of mankind’s greed in the pursuit of wealth and pleasure without a care for morality and kindness.

It may surprise many that Yao Tuo, having experienced so many hardships and difficulties

in his life, demonstrates a writing style that is light-hearted and humorous. The *Small Pink-Flowers Blossoming on the Wall* (1991) is a representative collection of essays with such a basic theme. Originally published in local Chinese newspapers, the stories are set in Malaysia and told, with sharp perception and revealing accounts, in witty and attractive prose.

His work is a mirror of himself and reflecting Confucian tolerance, Taoist harmony and Buddhist flexibility to which Yao Tuo is exposed throughout his life and that provides the key to his philosophy in life. He does not stoop to religious preaching though he employs some religious forms familiar to Chinese readers to convey messages through his literary works. He confesses that:

My stories are full of trifles which have no so-called persuasive religious preaching or other great purposes. I just record down the daily quibbles, which may be my own experiences, for my readers to appreciate....I just show the absurd and incredible side of life; although I am not to preach, I teach readers after all.

(姚拓/Yao Tuo, 1992c: 5)

Contributions to Mahua Literature

Yao Tuo represents many facets of the first generation Malaysian Chinese in his literary writings. Among these are the shift in mindset and political orientation. By examining his life and literary works, one discerns several distinctive features of Yao Yuo's position as a literary figure among early Mahua writers.

The first concerns the language. Yao Tuo's technique of narration employs a style of "plain description" inherited from the great tradition of Lu Xun and his peers in modern Chinese literature. Realistic characters are crafted with the use of simple and concise sentence structures adopted by modern Chinese novelists in China. Additionally, he has an advantage over contemporary Mahua writers in his skillful use of the Northern Chinese dialect and its rich vocabulary and distinctive nuances of meaning. On the other hand, he is not familiar with variations of the language derived from the many Southern Chinese dialects spoken by local-born Chinese writers.

The second feature is the different backgrounds in which Yao Tuo's works are based. His works are divided according to the background in China and in Malaysia. The works with China as the background include *My Cousin* (1956), *Meandering River Bank* (1958), *Four Marriage Stories* (1961), *Fond Memories of My Childhood* (1962) and *Flowers Blossomed in Wuliwa* (1965). Those with a Malaysian background include *Selected Stories of Yao Tuo* (1981), *Pink-Flowers on the Wall* (1992), and *Collection of Yao Tuo's Plays* (two volumes, 1993). His style is essentially realistic, or an approach that describes life without idealization

or romantic subjectivity. The realistic style is the concern with common characters in typical circumstances in everyday life, no matter how grotesque or absurd the characters appear to be (宛磊、张华/Wan Lei and Zhang Hua, 2004). His China-background works belong to this genre. However, the Malaysia-background short stories are imbued with a rich romantic tint. Exoticism is one of the most prominent characteristics of romanticism, along with another characteristic that is associated with the supernatural.

The third feature refers to the different themes of his literary works. The China-background works possess two basic themes, war-torn tragedies and nostalgia. The former are represented by short stories, the latter by his collective essays mainly in *Fond Memories of My Childhood* (1962) and *Flowers Blossomed in Wuliwia* (1965). The short stories include many figures that the author met in his youth, during the periods of war and while residing in Hong Kong. Although literary creations are different from true stories, his short stories are intimately connected with his autobiographical experiences. The China-background works are concerned with the tragedies of war and the sufferings of common Chinese people living under difficult circumstances.

Of the stories inspired by the war, Yao Tuo's purpose is to send a message that declares wars as "battles between one people and another" and as an "evil legacy of the past". Wars produce nothing but innocent victims who taste the bitterness of the evils of war (姚拓/Yao Tuo, 1992c: 5). However, he does not explore the causes of the wars in modern China, or their consequences and meanings. Yao Tuo came from a family of well-to-do peasants who longed for nothing more strongly than a life of peace and sufficiency. His own bitter experience in a prolong period of continuous wars had exposed him to the tragic sufferings of humanity. These were put into sharper spiritual focus when he finally converted to Christianity. On a more practical level, Buddhist influence has allowed him to view the tragedies of war as a keen "observer" and to craft his writings in a role to awaken society to the evils of war.

That Yao Tuo had chosen to settle in Malaysia was significant in the history of Mahua literature, in that he was free to narrate his stories from the perspective of a "spectator". Had he continued to live in Mainland China or Taiwan, it would have been impossible for him to create his stories without being influenced by political or ideological dogmas.

Another theme of the China-background works concerns memories of his childhood and appears mainly in *Fond Memories of My Childhood*, *Flowers Blossomed in Wuliwia*, and some stories in *Meandering River Bank*. He writes in a light tone that is removed from the war and social turmoil to portray his youthful days with nostalgic fondness. Nostalgic tales by the first generation migrants are a throwback to the delightful "good old days" and their personalities and events, and recounted with a tint of happiness or sorrow.

The yearning for the past, often in an idealized form, may be triggered by one's desire to

recall an event or item of the past. Nostalgia is associated with “home sickness” sentiments; in which the “home” is a place, specifically a country, inhabited by people who are born there and sharing the same culture and tastes. For one who has no homeland to return to, one’s writing may be characteristically nostalgic as one invariably looks homeward while residing in a foreign land. Yao Tuo is a representative of such “homeless wanderers” and applies his creative energies in producing many literary writings dealing with the theme of nostalgia for his “homeland”.

It is difficult to place Yao Tuo’s Malaysia-background works neatly into the general categories of Mahua literature.⁴ As many of his works deal with “alien” themes, one may categorize Yao Tuo’s writings as belonging to the realistic genre and at the same time showing a romantic style that is absent in his China-background stories. Many of his characters have certain eccentric and absurd streaks and behaviours. The caricature of the ordinary is the focused embodiment of his observations and thoughtful reflections through a skillful display of his craft. In his victim-themed stories, the victimization never goes too far as to lead to tragic endings, and wit and humour are injected to maintain a comic streak in these stories. Descriptions of lyrical romanticism are never over-used but employed in a practical manner.

Generally, the “alien stories” by a first generation writer are based on the writer’s experience in a foreign country and an attempt to identify with the local community. Evidence of this process is discernible in three stages as the writer immerses in the life of the local society. The first stage shows a “detached” attitude as the writer, consciously or unconsciously, displays his discrimination against or indifference to local society in his literary creations; the second stage is one of “re-consideration”, in which the writer revises his views on local society; and the third is the “tolerating” stage, when the writer begins to seep into local life to write about the “eccentricities” of the people around him (王列耀/Wang Lieyao, 2006). His “Catching a Ghost” is a representative work of the first generation writer with a disinterested attitude in dealing with a “foreign” character. The “ghost” figure is a watchman, often viewed as a distant figure who has no interests in anyone. His interests were in drinking and sleeping (姚拓/Yao Tuo, 1992c). As a fresh immigrant, Yao Tuo found this type of behaviour unusual and “funny”.

In dealing with issues of the local Chinese community, Yao Tuo similarly treats them as “alien” themes. In “The Magic Spell”, he explores the topic of a common superstition. Coming from North China, Yao Tuo is a stranger to many traditions and customs of the local Chinese whose forefathers had come from South China. Superstitious practices are one of these. Although Yao Tuo died as a Christian (光明日报/ *Guang Ming Daily*, 11 October 2009; and梁放/Liang Fang, 2010), one can hardly detect any trace of Christian influence in his works. Instead, he delves into his knowledge of Chinese beliefs and Buddhism for snippets

of wisdom. He did this in *The Return to Life*, a play that discusses a theme on the awakening to the true nature of life. This theme is easy enough for his readers and audience to mull over. He looks upon the role of literature as having a lasting impact of a philosophical or religious nature on his readers.

Issues of Identity and Social Commitments

Yao Tuo experienced the many twists and turns of political and social events during several decades of residence in Malaysia. Although these events hardly featured in his works, two issues in particular will help us to gain a better understanding of the man. These are issues that concern his identity and Chinese education in Malaysia.

The Chinese became conscious of issues of identity during the Japanese Occupation during which they were the primary victims of military oppression. While they were unreservedly anti-Japanese in common with their compatriots in China, their allegiance was divided between the two Chinese governments of the Kuomintang and the Communists. When the Federation of Malaya gained independence in 1957, the undercurrent of ethnic tensions persisted among Chinese, Malays, and Indians as they contested for resources and rights through the hasty formation of ethnic-based political parties. A compromise was reached by which Malays would enjoy special rights and privileges in return for citizenship for and guarantees of business interests of the Chinese and Indians.

At the time of independence, there were large numbers of settlers who were non-citizens. Even in 2008, statistics confirm that there were nearly 200,000 Chinese who carried “red identity cards” that certify their status only as permanent residents. The majority of them are, legally speaking, stateless because their passports are originally authorized by the “Republic of China”. As early as 1912, with the permit of the British government, the Kuomintang established its Singapore and Malaya branches. Their activities were prohibited in 1925 until 1930 when the Chinese government persuaded the British authorities not to brand these Kuomintang branches as illegal organizations so long as they refrained from involvement in local politics. In 1949, the Kuomintang closed these branches and the Communists spread their influence through the activities of social clubs. Many who were loyal to the Kuomintang continued to retain passports of the Republic of China. This group of Chinese and their descendents could only stay in Malaysia as permanent residents. As Taiwan declined in political influence in Malaysia, the issue of allegiance has gradually lost its relevance.

While Yao Tuo occupied himself with writings to expose the tragedies of wars inflicted on the common people, the Chinese “civil war” seemed far from over as the Kuomintang and the Communists wrangled across the Taiwan Straits. As a non-citizen, Yao Tuo carried a “red identity card” as a reminder that he was an “Overseas Chinese” rather than of a Malaysian,⁵

despite his declaration of allegiance in a song entitled “I Love Malaysia” (星洲日报/ *Sin Chew Daily*, 2009). At the time of his funeral, local Chinese politicians had appealed to the Malaysian government to re-examine his stateless status (光华日报/ *Kwong Wah Daily*, 2009).

Yao Tuo ended his literary creations with the publication of his autobiography, *A Bird of Passage with Footprints on Sand* comprising five sections. The first concerns his childhood days, the second about his teenage years, the third on his difficult and challenging times of his family, the fourth on his sojourn in Hong Kong, which was the turning point in his life, and the final one on life in Malaysia. As to why he devotes so little to his life in Malaysia which he claims to be his homeland, Yao Tuo explains that:

Most of my life has been in Malaysia, and until today in 1998, my major work is still in Malaysia. ... But I feel the most difficult in writing the fifth section [of my autobiography]. Because the time is long, thus the friends I have relation with are many. I feel it difficult to choose putting them into my writings....so I decide not to compose this section; or maybe even the in future I will not write about this.

(recounted by 李锦宗/Li Jinzong, 2009)

Even then, the last section was added almost for the sake of completeness (李锦宗/Li Jinzong, 2009). Although Yao Tuo does not touch on the political and racial issues in Malaysia in his autobiography, one may discern that, in his subconscious mind, he feels alienated by his status as a “red identity card” holder and looks upon himself as an “Overseas Chinese”. Despite having spent years of living in Malaysia until his final days, his was a case of the fate of many first generation settlers in an “alien country”.

A political aspect of life in Malaysia that Yao Tuo does not detach himself is that which concerns Chinese education. Many Chinese children study in Chinese primary schools that are recognized as an integral part of the national education system. They then continue to study in government-run secondary schools or in independent Chinese high schools. The former uses the national language (Malay) as the medium of instruction and the latter insists on teaching some subjects in Chinese. These independent high schools are completely funded by the Chinese community.⁶ The British colonial administration (1786–1957) had allowed the different ethnic groups to run vernacular schools. Despite the harsh fact that students of Chinese schools are shut out of the civil service and that funding is a perpetual problem, Chinese education has managed to thrive. The primary rationale for the maintenance of Chinese schools relates intimately to the issue of cultural and ethnic identity. The Chinese community is also wary of the government’s intention to convert all primary schools into “national schools” as its “final goal” in which the national language would be used as the sole

medium of instruction (Kuek, not dated).

Yao Tuo's contributions to Chinese education in Malaysia have been immense. He jointly compiled many Chinese textbooks for primary and independent Chinese high schools, and published Chinese textbooks through his Youlian Press (星洲日报/*Sin Chew Daily* 2009). These textbooks include *Chinese Language* (Grades 1-6, 1970-80), *Mathematics*, *Ethics*, and *Humanity and Environment* (Grades 1-6, 1980-1996), *Literary Readings* (4 volumes, for Teachers' Training, 1985-87), *Chinese Language* for Mara College⁷ (1985 to the present) and national schools (Grades 3-6, published in 1983), *Selected Loose-Leaf Works from the Youlian Press* with 640 essays (Mahua Literature Centre, <http://www.sc.edu.my/Mahua/exhibition/yaotuo/biographical.htm>).

In addition, Yao Tuo published the popular *Chinese Students Weekly* for thirty years between 1955 and 1984. The *Jiaofeng Magazine* appeared in November 1955 and continued until February 1999, lasting four decades and a half and spanning 488 issues. This magazine has become a lasting legacy of Mahua literature. It is also the most durable periodical in the history of Chinese publication in Malaysia. Many contemporary Mahua writers have been influenced and inspired by these two publications.

An idea of the influence of Yao Tuo and his publishing house on the Chinese society in Malaysia may be gauged from the comment of a local Chinese writer: "if there were no Yao Tuo and his Youlian Press that provoked the democratic thought in the chaotic years of 1960s, what the Chinese political and cultural conditions would be like in today's Malaysia is beyond one's imagination" (庄若/Zhuang Ruo, 2009). This is because his publications and magazines nurtured countless number of children and teenagers in a literary fairyland. It is this generation of readers who have created the present-day social milieu of the Chinese community in Malaysia (庄若/Zhuang Ruo, 2009).

Yao Tuo also participated in and contributed to cultural events that enrich the cultural life of Malaysia. He was a convener and general supervisor of the opera "Han Li Bao" in 1967. Han Li Bao was a legendary Chinese princess who was married to the Sultan of Malacca during the Ming dynasty. The legend has special meaning to the traditional friendship and relations between China and Malaysia. He also founded the Malaysian Chinese Calligraphy Society in an attempt to promote this art in Malaysia. Through his own company that dealt with the arts, he made efforts in various ways to sustain the continuity and heritage of Chinese culture in Malaysia.

Yao Tuo was duly recognized and richly rewarded for his literary achievements, contributions to Chinese education, and the propagation of Chinese culture in Malaysia. He won the third "Malaysian Chinese Literature Prize" and the thirty-fifth "Literature Prize of China Literary Association" of Taiwan in 1994. In the following year, he was awarded the prize

for “Memorable Years for Senior Writers” by the Writers’ Association of Chinese Medium of Malaysia. In 1996 and 1997, he was twice awarded with prizes in Taiwan again, namely, the “Literature Prize and Literature Medal” from the Literature Foundation of the Asian Chinese Writers’ Association and the “The Second-Degree Prize of the Education Ministry”.

Conclusion

To discuss Yao Tuo, the outstanding first generation Mahua writer, requires an appreciation of modern Chinese politics and history, Chinese cultural traditions in China and its heritage in Malaysia, and issues concerning ethnicity, politics and education in Malaysia. He passed away recently but left behind a rich legacy as an accomplished writer and a concerned social activist with a special background and extensive experience in times of war and peace in three different countries and territories. Research work on Yao Tuo and what he stands for is just at its initial stage and rather limited in both language and scope. His unique life history and his remarkable achievements and contributions to Mahua literature, education and cultural life constitute an immensely attractive area of academic exploration. It is hoped that future research efforts will lead to the publication of in-depth studies on this literary pioneer of Mahua literature.

Notes

- 1 For a list of Yao Tuo’s books and date of publication, see the *Biographies of One Hundred Malaysian Chinese Writers*” in http://www.worldchinesewriters.com/my/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=106&Itemid=2
- 2 The anti-Communists raids and executions were carried out on a large scale in 1927 and 1928. See an example in “Communists in Liang Hu Provinces” in *North-China Herald*, Shanghai: March 17 1928.
- 3 “Dato” is a title awarded by the Sultan or Governor of individual states in Malaysia to persons who are deemed to have contributed their service to society and country.
- 4 Modern Mahua literature has been categorized into five periods. These are the Initial Period beginning with China’s New Literature Movement in 1919 until the breakout of the Anti-Japanese War in 1937; the War Literature Period between 1937 and the immediate post-war years to 1948; the Post-war Period from 1949 when New China was established to 1964 when Malaysia tightened its internal security laws; the “Low-tide Period” from 1964 till 1974 when China and Malaysia normalized diplomatic relations, and the Contemporary Period from 1974 till the present. For details, see Meng Sha, 1986, also Fang Beifang, 1987.
- 5 The People’s Republic of China divides Overseas Chinese into two categories. The first are “Chinese nationals” who are permanent residents in foreign countries but bear the passports of the People’s Republic of China. The second category refers to “Hua ren”, or people of Chinese stock who have become citizens of foreign countries. The “Republic of China” in Taiwan, however, consider Chinese people living outside Chinese territory as “Overseas Chinese”.
- 6 This educational system is supported and coordinated by the United Chinese School Teachers’ Associations of the Federation of Malaysia (*Jiaozong*) and the United Chinese School Committees’ Association of the Federation of Malaysia (*Dongzong*), commonly known as *Dong Jiao Zong*.

- 7 Mara College is a government-funded college exclusively to train Malay and other Bumiputera students in academic and vocational subjects.

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