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Research Review and Theory Reflection on Malaysian English Literature

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Abstract

Malaysian English literature has been an important part of Malaysian literature, and also an important part of world English literature in spite of its relative marginal position. A large number of works were published from British colonial period, national independence period and contemporary globalization period. Compared with the full study of Malaysian English literature in the western world, Chinese scholars pay little attention to it. Over concentration on individual cases, lack of linguistic studies, and insufficient comparative researches such as Malaysian English literature with Malaysian Chinese literature, it is still insufficient in the discussion of some topics with the deepening of research vision and ideas, there still has insufficiency. The perspective of research on Malaysian English literature is definitely inseparable from the direction of social development. The combination of multiple disciplines and fields, the application of digital humanities and so on have become new ways that scholars can not avoid in literary research.

Keywords

Malaysian English literature, Literary Genre, Literary theory

Malaysian English literature originated from *Straits Chinese Magazine* which was first published in the straits settlements in 1897[1]. After a hundred years of development, a considerable amount of works were published. However, research on Malaysian English literature lags mush behind. This paper discusses the general research and genre research of Malaysian English literature respectively, and makes a tentative outlook on the future research trends.

As for the concept of Malaysian English literature, Malachi Edwin Vethamani proposed that Malaysian English literature should be written by Malayan, including those born or raised in Malaysia (Malachi, 2003). This definition is divided by the identity of the writer. However, Malachi's definition of the scope of Malaysia English literature is not comprehensive enough. Malaysian English literature should also add English works written by those who have ever settled in Malay(si)a, such as Edwin Thumboo's English works written before the independence of Singapore (Lin, Jiale, 2003). It has been 20 years since Lin Jiale's paper was published in 2003. The scope of Malaysian Eng-

[1] There are different opinions on the origin of Malaysian English literature. Malaysian scholar Jiale Lin quoted the view of Philip Holden in his "A Survey of Malaysian English Literature" that "Singapore's earliest English works are seen in Straits Chinese Magazine". Since Singapore was independent in 1963, Lin pushed the origin of Malaysian English literature to the Straits Chinese Magazine in 1897. According to the research of other scholars, the real Malaysian English literature written by Malayan people could be traced back to a English magazine The Cauldron published by the King Edward VII Medical College Union in the late 1940s, as well as The New Cauldron (1949-1960) launched by students of the University of Malaya. In this paper, the origin of Malaysian English literature is determined in 1897.

lish literature still needs to be supplemented. Literary output in the millennium has been dominated by prose fiction, with the global or transnational Malaysian novel by diasporic writers taking center stage. Local publishers have also fostered new ideas, themes, genres, and styles among Malaysian writers (Grace V.S. Chin & Mohammad A, 2021). These writers are the new generation of Malaysian English writers living in the English-speaking countries while still write stories about Malaysia. For example, Tash Aw and his works Harmony Silk Village (2005), Map of the Invisible World (2009), etc.

Above all, the concept of Malaysia English literature should be: English literature written by Malaysian writers, including those born or raised in Malaysia, Malaysia permanent residents, and Malaysian who emigrated overseas. In a broad sense, Malaysian English literature also includes Malay works translated into English.

In recent years, new literature in English or new English literature, have become the focus of scholars' attention. Since the independence of Malaysia, Malay has been established as the national language, Malay literature has been established as the national literature of Malaysia. As a result, Malaysia English literature and Malaysia Chinese literature have been included in the regional literature system. English works published in the British Malaya were taken for granted as a part of Singapore literature where English is established as official language. As a product of the long-term use of English in the colonies, Malaysia English literature entered the golden period from 1950s to 1970s. Since then, due to domestic politics, Malaysia English literature almost lost its voice in this country in the late 20 century. On the contrary, a group of immigrant writers have emerged in the English-speaking countries of the world, constantly seeking answers and solutions to the relationship between self and nation, bringing a great influence on the contemporary literature.

1. Overall research of Malaysian English Literature

1.1 Research on Malaysian English Literature in Chinese-speaking world

Jiang Shuzhen, from National Chiao Tung University, was the first person in Chinese-speaking world to conduct an overall study of Malaysia English Literature. In 1996, Jiang began the project *"English Literature in Southeast Asia: Malaysia"*, and completed several research reports on Lloyd Fernando, Ee Tianhong, Shirley Geok-lin Lim and other writers. In 2003, Lin Jiale from Southern University College, published "A Survey of Malaysia English Literature", introducing Malaysia English literature from eight parts: achievements, scope of Malaysia English literature, origin of Malaysia English literature, introduction of seven outstanding writers with works, reflection on the development of Malaysia English literature, publishing activities of contemporary Malaysia English literature. Unfortunately, in the following 20 years, there has been none collection of Malaysian English literature has been published or introduced into China.

It is worth noting that many scholars in China have included Malaysian English writers such as Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Tash Aw into the category of world Chinese writers. For example, *Making a History: A Historical Narrative Study of British Chinese Literature* by Xiao Chunrui (2020) traces the development of British Chinese literature for more than 90 years, where Tash Aw's novels are included. This phenomenon of only taking the writer's ethnic group as the classification standard, neglecting the content of works, is problematic. It also reflects a complex boundary between world Chinese literature and world English literature in the era of globalization, as well as the cultural centralism among such scholars.

1.2 Research on Malaysian English Literature in the English-speaking World

In the English world, it is very common for Malaysian English Literature being included in world English literature. Wagner Tamara believes that the literary works in the Straits Chinese Magazine are imitations of the novels of Clifford while *The Tragedies of Eastern Life* published by Lin Boom Keng in 1927 was the first native English novel (Wagner, Tamara, 2016). With the rise of the Third World, literature from Asian, African and Latin American countries has received more and more attention in the world literary world. In this area, scholars such as Mohammad Quayum, Peter Wicks, Bernard Wilson and Syd Harrex have made many contributions.

In 2001, Mohammad Quayum published *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader.* In this book, Quayum explored the origin and development of Malaysian English literature, and relationship between literary works and Malaysia's national policy. Later, Quayum published *Petals of Hibiscus: A Representative Anthology of Malaysian Literature in English (2003)*, sorted out all published works of mainstream writers. Fadillah Merican's *Voices of Many Worlds: Malaysian Literature in English (2004)* introduced English literary creation in Malaysia from the 1960s to the 1990s, introduced numbers of writers in a biographical way. In 2007, Quayum published *One*

Sky, Many Horizons: Studies in Malaysian Literature in English. Ismail Talib from National University of Singapore, also published a bibliography of Malaysia English literature in 2004, 2005 and 2007 in The Journal of Commonwealth Literature (Volume 40, Issue 4; Volume 41, Issue 4; Volume 43, Issue 4).

Taken together the analysis of the above researchers, Malachi distinguishes the bibliography by genre (novels, folktales, poems, dramas). Fadillah introduces the works of Malaysia English literature writers by biography, Ismail uses the mode of promoting the annual book list, and Quayum uses the way to compile the main writers and works. The research of these four representative scholars has its own unique value.

2. Different Literary Genre of Malaysia English literature

Poetry, prose, novel, drama and other literary genres, in different forms, express the writer's inner feelings and represent the social life of a certain period and region. There are more novel and poetry works in Malaysian English literature. The number of publications also determines the hotspot of research to a certain extent.

2.1 Novels

The first journal introducing Malaysian English literature to Chinese Mainland was the *Cultural Studies and Literary Theory* launched by the School of Literature and Journalism, Sichuan University. In the 16th issue of 2008, there were 3 article about Malaysian English literature: Wang Guanglin's "From Non-home Illusion to the Third Space: A Research On the Novel of Malaysian English Writer Hsu-Ming Teo"; Wen Yiming's "The Historical Consciousness of the Narrative Subject: A Research On The Harmonious Silk Factory by Malaysian English writer Tash Aw"; Teoh Kian Hoon's "Lee Kok Liang: A Pioneer of Malaysia English Novel". However, there were only 9 academic papers concerning about Malaysian English novels, including 3 master's thesis and 1 doctoral thesis in the following 15 years. The hoping that "there could be more research on Southeast Asian and truely understood their complex cultural" (Zhao Yiheng, 2008) seems far from being realized. Chinese domestic research on Malaysian English literature is relatively weak, which forms a strong contrast with the current upsurge of Singapore English literature research as well as Malaysia Chinese literature research.

The research of Malaysian immigrant writers is mainly focused on Tash Aw. Zeng Peiling's "*On the Narrative Strategy of Anti-hegemony and Opposing Nation-formation in Contemporarv Malaysian English Literature*" (Master thesis of Zhejiang University, 2010). This thesis expounds the narrative strategies of Anti-colonial and anti-hegemony and rethinks the nation-formation through The Harmony Silk Factory and Map of the Invisible World. When other post-colonial writers tried to explore cultural roots in their works, Tash Aw went further to look for the psychological and social factors on identity-construction, make inquiries on the alienation in the name of unity and patriot and proposed the possibility to esteem the values of cultural diversity. Aside from Tash Aw, You Xiaotong's "*The Application and Supplement of Aixelá's Translation Strategies for Culture- specific Items: Taking the English-Chinese Translation of The Night Tiger as a Case Study*" illustrates characteristics of different strategies with specific examples, hoping to provide reference and help for the translation of Malaysian English literature, especially for the handling of culture-specific items.

2.2 Poetry

Chinese Mainland have only one conference paper about Malaysian English poetry, On November 8, 2008, Agnes·Y·S·K, a Malaysian scholar, published *Visions of eco-apocalypse in selected Malaysian poetry in English: Cecil Rajendra and Muhammad Haji Salleh* at the Wuhan International Conference on Literature and Environment. Tee-Kim Tong, from National Sun Yat-sen University, completed project "(Ex)changing Places: Diaspora, Trans-Nationnalism, and Literature" in 2005. He discussed the language problems, cultural identity, hometown memory, hometown imagination, identity attribute, discrete consciousness in Shirley Geok-lin Limand Chin Woon Ping's poetry works.

Asian Centre Anthology of Malaysian Poetry in English (Singapore: Partridge, 2014), a monograph on Malaysian English poetry published by Dr. Ghulam Sarwar Yousof, is the most complete collection of Malaysian English poetry in recent decades. In addition, foreign scholars have also published lots of article, such as W. P. C Holaday's "Singing in a Second Tongue: Recent Malaysian and Singaporean Poetry in English" (The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 1983); R·S Patke's "Nationalism, diaspora, exile: Poetry in English from Malaysia" (The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 2003), L·Jeyam's "The most underrated genre: Malaysian Poetry in English in the 21st Century" (IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature, 2018) and The Oxford Companion to Twentieth

Century Poetry in English (Ian Hamilton, Oxford University Press: Oxford & New York: 1994).

2.3 Drama

Influenced by the cultural policy and religious background of the country, it is difficult for English dramas to perform on the stage. Therefore, there are few academic research on Malaysian English dramas around the world. *The Introduction to New Drama (London: Oxford UP, 1972)* compiled two collections of scripts by Malaysian writers such as Lloyd Fernando, Yeoh Patrick, Dorall Edward and Lee Joo For, which are also the main literature about Malaysian English dramas.

Malaysian Drama in English: Is there a case for a post-mortem? (Margaret Yongg, 1983), and *Colonial, post colonial, neo-colonial and, at last, a "post-national" Drama* (Margaret Yongg, 1984), by Margaret Yongg, probed into the survival path of the Malaysian English drama in a country with multiple cultures and languages. Yongg believed that the development of drama is inseparable from the political fate of English in Malaysia. Sheng-Hsiang Hung, from the Drama Department of National Taiwan University, presented his master's thesis "*Malaysia in Kee Thuan Chye's Play: Ethnicity, Class and National Identity",* tooking Kee Thuan Chye, a Malaysian playwright, as the research object. Hung believes that through Kee Thuan Chye's plays, it is easy to find the current situation of Malaysia's political and social development since its independence. For Malaysia, in the post colonial, facing the economic and cultural domination of Western countries, must deal with the internal ethnic, class and national identity issues with great care (Sheng-Hsiang Hung, 2015).

On the whole, publication and distribution of Malaysia English literature in China is quite small. The researches in this field tend to focus on such discourse frameworks as "identity", "others", "power" and "dispersion" without their own voice.

3. A Study Perspective of Malaysia English Literature

3.1 Research using post colonialism theory

In the published papers on Malaysia English literature, scholars often focus on the country/nation, center/margin, self/other. *A "Center" at the Margin: An Account of Malaysian Literature in English from (the) In/Out/Sid*e, written by Quayum, details the subjective and objective factors of Malaysian English literature turning from the center to the margin. This paper expounds how the cultural hegemony exercised by Malaysia's national political machine under the banner of "nationalism" to intervene literature and impact on the publishing industry, the reading market and the cultivation of the following generation of writers. Holden · Philip's paper entitled "*Communities and Conceptual Limits: Exploring Malaysian Literature in English*", proposed to take Malaysian English literature as an independent subject, and rethinking the tradition of English writing in different ethnic groups in Malaysia from the perspectives of history and geography (Holden·Philip, 2009). *"Local" and "national" transformations: Cultural globalization, heterogeneousness, and Malaysian literature in English* by Gabriel Sharmani Patricia proposed that the early criticism of cultural globalization focused on literary homogeneity. In recent decades, post colonial scholars tend to focus on the concept of heterogeneity, which shows that globalization provides a space for developing countries to express their opinions (Gabriel Sharmani Patricia, 2016).

Although there are many achievements in post colonialism criticism, there are some contradictions unconsciously. Under the post-colonial theory, the study of Malaysia English literature is more and more focused on the external study of "the center" and "the other", and the way of discussion is more and more stylized, neglecting the literary text itself.

3.2 Research using New Historicism Theory

The new historicism advocates bringing historical investigation into literary research. It emphasizes the relationship between literature and culture, and believes that literature belongs to a large cultural network. It focuses on the complex relationship between literature and politics, and believes that literature not only participates in the shaping of ideology, also could be the result of the role of ideology.

At present, in the study of Malaysia English literature, Chinese scholars pay more attention to the comparative study of literature under the complex ethnic politics of Malay and Chinese. Ch'ng Ee Cheik's *"The Utterance for History among the Ethnic Groups: Writing of Ethnic Relations between Malaysian, Malaysian-English and Malaysian-Chinese Literatures and New Historicism"*, samples individual cases from a variety of writings about the ethnic relations in the three languages for textual commentaries and analysis, explicating the significance of ethnic

writings in various ideologies and demonstrating how Malaysian writers use “ethnic groups” as a symbol of writing in their construction of another historical practice (Ch’ng Ee Cheik, 2016).

When tracing back to the history, most of the papers focus on the conservative policies of the government in the 1970s, but ignore the efforts made by the Malaysian government in the past decade to restore the English language in the educational framework and increase the proportion of Malaysian labor force in the global area. Under the development of globalization, it is worth further thinking whether English can be used as a medium for the self shaping of multicultural countries, and whether Malaysian English literature can be used as a mode of communication and interaction.

4. Challenges and development trends

After more than a century, Malaysian English literature has developed stably despite facing many challenges. As a relatively marginal part of the world English literature, the current research on the Malaysian English literature still has more room for exploration. *Reading Malaysian Literature in English: Ethnicity, Gender, Diaspora, and Nationalism* (Quayum, 2021), included 14 article covering topics such as feminism, nationalism, discreteness, language integration research, and contemporary emerging immigrant writers. In 2021, the Journal of Postcolonial Writing launched the Special Issue of Malaysian English Literature, including 9 article, focusing on literary works in 21st century, with topics involving Cyberpunk, COVID-19, queer literature, etc.

4.1 Challenges Faced by the Study of Malaysian English literature

At present, Malaysian English literature facing the following challenges: First of all, due to different publication policies in different countries, it is difficult for Malaysian English literature to be circulated internationally. Secondly, multidimensional perspectives and multiple dialogues have always been the characteristics of the study of Malay English literature. Malaysia English writers come from all over the world and researchers have different identity backgrounds, but there are still Malaysia domestic scholars engaged in literary research or publishing activities. It is undeniable that the Chinese domestic research on Malaysian English literature is still at the initial stage, and there is still more room for excavation. Finally, due to the complex historical, geographical and political factors in Malaysia, there are more external researches than internal researches. The origin of Malaysian English literature are still controversial in academic circles. However, as the two documents, *Straits Chinese Magazine* and *New Cauldron*, there is little specific research on them. The multicultural and multilingual background in Malaysia affects literary creation to a certain extent, while the current academic research on Malaysian English literature pays attention to literary research, but neglects language research. For example, is there a large amount of language creolization in the novels, poems and plays of Chinese or Malay writers?

4.2 The development trends of Malaysia English literature

In the 21st century, the Malaysian government’s ethnocentrism policy has made Malaysia English literature gradually move out of the mainland of Malaysia, and more and more writers become mobile and transnational. Malaysia has become their imagined "home". Anglophone writers in Malaysia seek new ways of expression under the Internet media. New Malaysia English literature, composed of local and transnational writers, is increasingly leaving a deep mark on the global stage. In the millennium, many writers such as Tash Aw has appeared in the world literary world and won many national awards. At present, there are three main trends in Malaysian English literature: firstly, Malaysian English literature has emergenced new literary categories and forms, such as fantasy novels, science fiction novels and online comics; Secondly, the backbone of literary creation has shifted to diaspora or transnational writers, rather than Malaysia native writers; Thirdly, transnational writers often receive more literary criticism and media attention than Malaysian writers (Grace V.S. Chin & Mohammad A. Quayum, 2021). Although faced with many challenges, Malaysia English literature has still made many achievements. The academic research on Malaysia English literature also keeps moving. Gender, race, dispersion, nationalism, multiculturalism, and even COVID-19, the metaverse and any other topics have been included in the discussion.

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