Time for Tea: Representations of Postcolonial and Chinese Diaspora Culture and Identity in Chuah Guat Eng's *Echoes of Silence*

Goh Cheng Fai, Zach
HKU SPACE Community College, Hong Kong
E-mail: zach.goh@hkuspace.hku.hk

Manuscript received January 10, 2024; revised March 3, 2024; accepted May 17, 2024; published August 20, 2024

Abstract—**Tea, the second most consumed beverage in the world, originates from China, and was then brought all over the world through trade, affecting the many different cultures that it encounters along the way. The way a person takes their tea can often reveal parts of their cultural identity and upbringing. This paper aims to examine the representations of the hybrid identities of the Chinese Diaspora in Malaysia through a close reading of tea scenes and tea culture in Chuah Guat Eng's first novel, *Echoes of Silence: A Malaysian Novel*, first published in 1994. The novel explores the complex race relations and postcolonial politics and identity in Malaysia and provides an excellent springboard for the examination of Malaysian literary cultural politics, as well as postcolonial issues such as cultural hybridity, and the way that culture spreads and is spread from one part of the world to another and is manifested in diaspora identities. Through such an exploration, I hope to examine the negotiation between the hybridizing culture of being overseas Chinese as well as a British subject simultaneously in relation to representations of tea consumption and culture in Anglophone literature, which may provide more insight into the mentality of Anglophone Malaysian writers concerning issues of cultural identity and diaspora.**

Keywords—**tea culture, Malaysian anglophone literature, *Echoes of Silence,* identity**

I. Introduction

When introducing the importance and the significance of food and foodways in Asia, Cheung and Tan argue insightfully that "Food is one of the most important cultural markers of identity in contemporary Asian societies, and it has provided a medium for the understanding of social relations, family and kinship, class and consumption, gender ideology and cultural symbolism" [1]. Food can be, and has been used by writers to represent the many complex layers of cultural identity and self-identification, and food studies scholars explore and analyze the role of food in literature. One such recent food studies scholar is Wenxing Xu, who examined how food is used to present and represent the multifarious layers of cultural identity in her book titled *Eating Identities, Reading Food in Asian American Literature* [2].

In a similar vein, while exploring representations of tea culture and consumption, I would argue that something similar can be said about tea culture and tea consumption habits. Tea as a beverage was and remains an important symbolic marker of identity in many cultures. According to the Encyclopedia of Food and Culture, "Tea has a social, medicinal, economic, political and class implications for centuries, being used as a chew, a beverage, a vehicle for familial and business bonding, a curative, a preventative, a stimulant, and a soporific" [3]. Additionally, Ling Wang argues that "[s]erving tea to entertain guests is one of the most fundamental types of social behaviour in China" [3], which further emphasizes the importance of looking at tea representations in literature, especially those that have historical links with China and Chineseness.

I look at the negotiation of overseas Chinese cultural identity and diaspora in relation to tea consumption and culture as it is represented in the Anglophone literatures written in and about a former British colony with a significant overseas Chinese population: Malaysia. The different ways that tea drinking is represented in Malaysian Literature in English may be examined as a medium of negotiation between the hybridizing cultures of being a person with Chinese identification as well as a colonial British subject simultaneously.

II. Using Diaspora as a Concept

One of the most important points to note is that the cultural identities, or even the sense of belonging to a certain cultural identity, or the notion of that cultural belonging in relation to a national identity, is neither permanent nor stable, but regularly flexible and changing, depending on the situation or environment, which is why it can be so difficult to pin down an "essence" of Chineseness. A case in point is the prominent historian and scholar Wang Gungwu, who admitted in a lecture on the question of "a single Chinese diaspora" given in 1999 that he "started life as a Chinese sojourner, a huaqiao, someone temporarily resident abroad" [5], and he casts doubts on the feasibility of a "single Chinese diaspora", preferring "many different Chinese diasporas" [5].

In the chapter *China Abroad: Nation and Diaspora in a Chinese Frame*, Elaine Ho proposed that "in the recent past, diaspora has been an important epistemological concept organizing literary and cultural studies… diaspora offered a timely critique to the nation and the structuring concept of individual and collective identities" [6]. This observation is particularly apt when we examine it via the history of Chinese migration in Southeast Asia, which is historically a remnant of British colonialism.

About being Chinese in Malaysia, anthropologist Tan Chee Beng argues that "there is no one common Chinese culture for Chinese everywhere" [7], and that "there are various models of Chinese culture and identity even within a single country like Malaysia" [7]. He then elaborates on the complexities of Chinese identity in Malaysia:

doi: 10.18178/ijlll.2024.10.4.545

> It is common knowledge that Chinese Malaysians are divided into various speech groups such as Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, Teochiu, Hainanese, Hockchew, Kwongsai, Henghua, Hockchia and others. Seen from the perspective of acculturation, Chinese Malaysians actually comprise two main categories, the 'pure' Chinese and the peranakan Chinese [7].

Tan also reaffirms the idea that identity is not static and unchanging, saying that "one common fallacy of many scholars is to compare unconsciously the Chinese in Southeast Asia to an invisible static model of 'traditional' Chinese identity" [7].

III. History of Malaysia and Tea

Discussions of the early history of Malaysia in the context of tea and China will revolve around the major themes of trade and colonization, and the forces of attraction that led to the massive influx of Chinese migrants to Malaysia. A chronological and colonialism-focused discussion of the history of Malaysia usually begins with the establishment of the Malacca Sultanate in the 1400s, followed by the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511, the Dutch colonization of Malacca by the VOC (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or Dutch East India Company) between 1641 and 1795, and the British involvement from 1786 [8, 9]. Some important aspects of the British involvement and how that has led to increased Chinese migration into Malaya include the establishment of the Crown Colonies of Penang and Singapore, which, with Malacca, formed the Straits Settlements between 1826 till the end of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya in 1946.

Tea in Malaya had to be imported from China for a long time, since all the tea was produced there in the beginning, and it was not until later that other countries also had their own tea industries, such as Japan, or India. Malaysia also has its own tea plantations in the hilly central plains of Cameron Highlands, which is still a location with some semblances of colonial nostalgia, with mock-Tudor style buildings, tea plantations, and restaurants serving English tea, with buttered scones.

While milk tea has been drunk in China for hundreds of years, especially by the Mongols, who ruled China during the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368) [10], milk added to tea was introduced by Europeans when they developed their tea practices a few centuries later. According to linguist and historian Van Driem:

> Taking tea with milk appears originally to have been a French practice, and taking sugar with tea was originally adopted from some Chinese tea drinkers in the Dutch East Indies by some Dutchmen in Asia. The practice of sweetening tea was then either adopted or, more likely, independently innovated by Persian tea drinkers. Yet the practice of drinking tea with sugar is even rarer in China than it is in Holland. It was the English who, with their notorious sweet tooth, subsequently embraced both habits and began regularly to take their tea with either milk or sugar or, most often, with both [10].

As far as hybridity and mimicry goes, some of the former British colonies located in Asia, including Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and even India has some version of sweetened tea served with milk and sugar. Anthropologist Sidney Mintz comments on the fact that the English working class drank tea with milk in imitation of those who were more privileged [11], when trying to explain the connection between sweetness and power, and the consumption of sugar in tea to the immense energies required to "symbol making and meaning investment" [11].

In other texts of Malaysian Literature in English, such as Suchen Christine Lim's *A Bit of Earth,* tea culture is used as a method to establish the power relations between the various characters, where people would serve tea to their seniors and elders as a sign of respect. Besides that, milk tea is used as a metaphor to represent the mixture or co-operation between two races, the Chinese and the English in a business venture, as Tuck Heng, seeing the reactions to his business projects and having some of them blocked by the colonial government, starts a new tin-mining company that has the retired Inspector Ian Thomson, an Englishman, sitting on the board. He muses of the absurdity of the situation, and thinks of his company in this fashion:

> *Teh susu!* A "tea-and-milk" company. Me, the tea, and he, the milk! As any tea-drinking Chinese would tell you, tea is of the essence, not milk. Only the white man is stupid enough to dilute his tea with milk, he mused [12].

The implication here is that the tea represents the Chinese and the milk represents the English, and that the adding of milk to tea is a dilution, and a mistake, because tea is the essence and can stand on its own, in a seeming rejection of the notions of hybridity. It also tracks the historical notion that the adulteration of tea with milk and sugar is a Western phenomenon, and this seems to be quite true.

Lee [13], in her examination of Han Chinese racism and Malaysian contexts, considers "the arena of world Anglophone literature, which has emerged as a transnational site of narrating Chinese Malaysian experiences". In the article, Lee emphasizes the previously noted stance of many scholars that:

> overseas Chinese identities are not necessarily constructed with China as its primary referent but are shaped by a myriad of local cultures and historical influences. While the rise of China is certainly an increasingly powerful historical factor in shaping the racialization of Chinese subjects around the world, there are also alternative transnational arenas of representation for Chinese cultural production, where China is not the primary driving force [13].

In this study, Lee considers global Anglophone literature, of which Malaysian literature in English is a part of, as one such sphere for shaping overseas Chinese identities.

In his comprehensive tea book *The Tale of Tea,* Van Driem offers a detailed history about the arrival of the tea industry in Malaya:

> The tea industry in Malaya is associated with the name of British businessman John Archibald Russell… In 1928, Russell acquired a land concession of over two thousand hectares in the Cameron Highlands with the Ceylon tea planter Alexander B. Milne…The Boh estate established by Russell in the Cameron Highlands to this day, and still run by his family, remains the oldest and most famous tea estate on the Malay peninsula [10].

Interestingly, according to the BOH estate website that details the plantation's origins and history, the name BOH was derived from the word "bohea", which is also the name of Wuyi Mountain in Fujian province, a major producer of what is known as "black tea". This connection provides another link between this tea plantation in Malaysia and Chinese-produced tea, and it later becomes a supplier of tea leaves for the British, and Cameron Highlands was turned into a hill station that provides respite from the tropical heat of the rest of Malaya to the British living in Malaya at the time.

IV. Echoes of Silence

Usually known as "Malaysia's first English Language novel" written and published by a female writer, *Echoes of Silence* was first published in 1994 by Chuah Guat Eng, who also wrote its sequel, *Days of Change,* which was published in 2010, and a collection of short stories titled *The Old House and Other Stories,* published in 2008. In 2010, Chuah also earned a PhD degree from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) for her thesis "From Conflict to Insight: A Zen-Based Reading Procedure for the Analysis of Fiction", which "attempts to… adapt Zen methods of developing insight for use in a reading procedure" [14].

The novel *Echoes of Silence* begins with a declaration from the protagonist, Lim Ai Lian: "In March 1970, as a direct result of the May 1969 racial riots, I left Malaysia." [15] She went abroad to Germany as a student and meets and falls in love with an Englishman born and raised in Malaysia, Michael Templeton. Ai Lian's decision to leave Malaysia was prompted by the traumatic racial riots that occurred in May 1969, shortly after the 1969 general elections in Malaysia, and led to a state of emergency.

The flashpoint event and its aftermath are the subject of a number of literary texts in Malaysian Literature in English. The events of 1969 eventually led to the promulgation and consolidation of the National Language Act 1971 and the National Cultural Policy 1971, which placed emphasis on Bahasa Malaysia as the national language, relegating all literature written in languages other than Bahasa Malaysia as "sectional literature", hence marginalizing many writers who wrote in languages such as English.

The plot of the novel involves a murder mystery that the protagonist, Lim Ai Lian, seeks to solve. The novel, which shifts between different important time periods in Malaysia's history, provides important context and insight into the attitudes and cultures of certain groups of Malaysians through the detailed representations of life in colonial Malaya and postcolonial Malaysia.

In the following excerpt, Ai Lian speaks of the airs that she was brought up in, which can be representative of English-speaking Chinese Malaysians in the early years of independence, in the 1950s:

> ⋯ And I became a snob.
> It was an attitude learned from my parents and diligently cultivated as we assumed poses, behavioral styles and opinions from English books, Australian women's magazines and American movies. One ate with the fork so, the knife so, and the spoon so. One turned up one's nose at eating with the fingers at roadside stalls. One sniffed at this and sneered at the other, so long as it had not been sanctified by what we had seen in books, magazines and movies.
>
> And like all snobs, we lived in constant fear of doing something wrong. My mother, who never talked about her parents either, scoured the pages of her monthly and weekly magazines for tips on etiquette, for social niceties such as whether the Queen of England poured her tea before or after the milk. My father insisted on surrounding himself with British things, right down to his socks and shoe-laces [sic]. [15]

The obsession with becoming as British as possible, or at least being seen as being British, by emulating the dress and mannerisms of the British, even in things like how tea is served can be seen as a symptom of mimicry, even though it was only in the nineteenth century that Great Britain's industrial and agricultural working classes adopted the practice of drinking tea, which was seen as a ritual that brought together various ideas, attitudes and commodities. According to Smith, "If you took tea at the proper time and place, in the proper way, with the proper equipment, it meant more than anything else that you were respectable" [16].

Besides that, whether milk is poured before or after tea can be a matter of debate. According to George Orwell, who wrote an essay titled "A Nice Cup of Tea" in 1946, the tenth point out of eleven rules for making a nice cup of tea is that tea should be poured into the cup first, because "by putting the tea in first and stirring as one pours, one can exactly regulate the amount of milk whereas one is liable to put in too much milk if one does it the other way round" [17]. However, it is also possible that those who were upper class would put the tea in first, as they would have access to fine quality china (porcelain) that would be more resistant to thermal shock. Those who were middle and lower class may not be able to afford such fine teaware and may put milk in first to avoid pouring hot tea into their cups, risking the cups cracking when subjected to sudden thermal shock. Ai Lian also seems to have self-awareness of the situation of her upbringing, and continues her narration, saying that:

> Yet we were not mimic people, pretending to be white or British. We knew what we were: English-educated Malaysians of Chinese origin. But we were perhaps too conscious of being different from the more traditional Chinese, whose values and behavior we found difficult to understand [15].

Ai Lian's perceptions of cultural identity and education tracks with what Pan explains as the way education factored into the issue of identity in the *Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*:

> In everyday vocabulary and public discourse, Chinese identity came to be qualified by the terms 'Chinese-educated' and 'English-educated'. The bifurcation of the Chinese community into these two sectors broadly re-enacted that between the China-born sinkeh and the Straits-born Chinese of the earlier generation. However, unlike the illiterate sinkehs, the Chinese-educated transcended the particularism of dialect-based identities, speaking a common language (Mandarin) and interested themselves in the anti-colonial movement in Singapore in addition to the nationalist struggles in China. But like the China-born immigrants, most of the Chinese-educated did not have the command of English that the older Straits Chinese and those who went to English schools had [18].

Despite her seeming self-awareness of her own differences from the British people, Ai Lian does have a stereotype of English tea in her mind that she read about in books, as shown when she was served English tea by Johnathan Templeton, her boyfriend Michael's father, who owns a plantation in Ulu Banir, and who became a Malaysian citizen:

> Jonathan was already on the patio, where tea was laid out. It was what I thought of as a typical English tea – strong tea, a fruit-and-nut cake and several kinds of sandwiches. I was a bit disappointed not to find the cucumber and watercress sandwiches I had read about in books. There were only chicken, ham, and egg sandwiches [15].

Unfortunately for Ai Lian, even though she had expected some of the fancier tea foods that she read about, such as cucumber and watercress sandwiches, which were popular among the upper classes during Victorian England and was then popularized further by the Edwardian play *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde, there were only common chicken, ham, and egg sandwiches available for tea.

The differences between the sandwiches in tea expose the social class of those who partake in it. Despite having the word "high" in it, "High Tea" is not taken by those who are in the upper classes, but rather by the working class. The "high" in "high tea" refers to the height of the table that the tea is taken, and usually food that is more substantive and filling than finger sandwiches are eaten. The upper classes would usually take "low tea", or "afternoon tea", served leisurely at lower tables, with delicate finger sandwiches with cucumber or watercress filling, such as those mentioned in Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest.*

Despite being English, Jonathan's tea sandwiches show that either he does not identify as upper class, or that he is content to have sandwiches that are more substantial, that have more protein, such as chicken, ham and egg, because of his work at the plantation that he owns in Ulu Banir, rather than the delicate cucumber and watercress sandwiches which, while being delicious, seems a lot less filling than the ones he ended up serving.

V. British Tea Etiquette

While trying to solve the murder that occurred in the novel, Ai Lian comes across Puteh, an older lady who was the daughter of a Chinese tin magnate, who had invited her to tea so that they might discuss the events surrounding the murder. At tea time, Ai Lian observed that:

> Later, as Puteh poured out the tea, I noticed the silver tea service and the fine china. Very traditional and English. I felt so gauche and tongue-tied that I might as well have been having tea with the Queen of England. I fought the slow rise of an old familiar resentment as I thought of how like my mother she was. It was probably a generational thing, I thought, this doing of things according to the British gospel of St. Etiquette [15].

Ai Lian, the anglophile, became tongue-tied when having tea with Puteh, and thought how similar Puteh was to her own mother. Similarly to how those in the working class in England sought to emulate the upper classes in their tea drinking practices, and the aristocracy's attempts at mimicking royal behaviors in taking tea, so Ai Lian feels she is having tea with the Queen of England when confronted with a silver tea service and fine china, which was traditionally used to serve tea among the upper classes in England.

VI. Conclusion

The passages examined in this paper illustrate the attitudes and behaviors of certain groups of Malaysians, specifically the English-educated Chinese Malaysians, through the literary portrayal of their tea practices, as illustrated within Chuah Guat Eng's debut novel *Echoes of Silence*. It is interesting to note that in an interview, Chuah explicitly states that she was "extremely conscious of keeping [her]self and [her] ancestry and family background out of Ai Lian's narrative" [19]. These literary representations about tea and tea culture offer us a clearer idea not only of the colonial attitudes towards issues like race, ethnicity and culture that were pervasive in Malay(si)a and Malaysian Literature in English, but also some of the cultural stereotypes that were seemingly common during the colonial period before Malaysia's Independence in 1957, especially the attitudes surrounding the group of English-educated, Malaysian-born Chinese. Not only that, these cultural representations in literary texts also shed more light on the notions of cultural and national identities and the issues of hybridity and belonging among the Chinese diaspora living in Malay(si)a, which connects to the context of cultural hybridity and the negotiation of identities among Malaysians, even today.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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