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A Comparative Analysis on the Diasporic Narrations in Lee Yung Ping's "The End of the River" and Chang Kuei Hsing's "Wild Boars Cross the River"

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Abstract:

Lee Yung Ping and Chang Kuei Hsing are both renowned worldwide Chinese writers in Malaysia. They share several significant common points: being born in Sarawak, having a close relationship with Taiwan, persevering in writing in the Chinese language, etc. The narrative backgrounds of The End of the River and Wild Boars Cross the River are contemporaneous and geographically proximate. Both authors employ a forthright approach in exposing historical traumas and vehemently criticize the atrocities committed by aggressors. However, starkly contrasting authorial attitudes lie beneath the veneer of shared thematic concerns. Lee Yung Ping's portrayal of historical wounds adopts a tangible quality, earnestly endeavoring to articulate the ineffable and yearning for a form of "poetic justice."

In contrast, Chang Kuei Hsing's depiction of wounds is more elusive, with the novel's narrative structure unfolding in a non-linear fashion, beginning after its conclusion and ending before its commencement. This temporal distortion suggests a deeper existential struggle, transcending the confines of narrative and text, ultimately rendering each endeavor futile. This article briefly compares the two novels' different narrations to investigate the connotations that exhibit the two authors' nuanced attitudes towards their virtually and poetically sophisticated "homeland". Therefore, their distinctive emotional pursuits for seeking homeland are explored, concluding that Lee's diasporic perceptions of homeland are featured with reconciliation after experiencing turmoils in his early life, while the unforeseeable future of his community still shackles Chang's perceptions.

Keywords: Lee Yung Ping; Chang Kuei Hsing; homeland; comparative studies.

1. Introduction

In the realm of diasporic literature, particularly within the context of the „South of the South", a term emblematic of the region where generations of Chinese have settled, notably in Malaysia, a profound divergence in emotional attitudes and poetic treatments towards their shared homeland's fate among diasporic writers of similar backgrounds is observed. A considerable number of research papers depict this idea through a diachronic perspective, such as Huang Wanhua's „Starting from the ‚South of the South': A Glimpse into Contemporary Malaysian Chinese Fictions" and Zhu Chongke's „The Entanglement of Indigeneity: A Brief Discussion on the Central Thread of Malaysian Chinese Literary Historiography," to name a few[1,2]. However, there is scarce discussion on the synchronicity of this viewpoint. This study believes it necessary to provide supplementary elaboration, thus focusing on two authors active in the Malaysian Chinese literary scene in the 21st century.

The joint examination of Lee Yung Ping and Chang Kuei Hsing is prompted by their contributions to developing „tropical rainforest literature" in Chinese writing. Initially conceived as a geographical entity, the tropical rainforest evolves into a unique literary construct within writers' discourse. Tropical rainforest literature emerges as a subset of ecological literature, prioritizing not realpolitik concerns but rather the myriad images, symbols, and narrative perspectives inherent within the rainforest ecosystem. Lee Yung Ping (1947-2017) and Chang Kuei Hsing (1956-) both hail from Sarawak, Borneo. In 1968, Lee Yung Ping, then residing in Taiwan, published the novel „A La-tsu Woman," centered on Borneo themes, which marked the inaugural occasion for Chinese readers to „gaze into the heart of the tropical rainforest through textual exposition" [3], thus christening the genre of tropical rainforest literature, which narrates the multifaceted lives of Sarawak's diverse ethnic groups and elucidates the legendary history

of the rainforest. Commencing in 1978, coinciding with Lee Yung Ping‘s academic pursuits in North America, Chang Kuei Hsing emerged as another Sarawakian novelist, commanding attention in literary circles. Chang unveiled a series of novels revisiting Sarawak, showcasing its historical tapestry within the tropical rainforest. Works such as „The Song of Siren“ (1992), „The Herd“ (1998), and „The Monkey Cup“ (2000) garnered a plethora of distinguished literary awards. These novels vividly depicted the Borneo rainforest‘s flora, fauna, and human narratives, interweaving them into captivating rainforest legends. Consequently, they ignited a fervor for „Sarawakian writing“ within Malaysia, with Malaysian Chinese literature delineated into three distinct domains: „Peninsular Malaysia,“ „Sarawak (Borneo),“ and „Malaysian writers in Taiwan,“ thereby solidifying the prominence of tropical rainforest literature.

Tropical rainforest literature is heralded as a pivotal avenue in the indigenous construction of Malaysian Chinese literature. Through the literary works of Lee and Chang, tropical rainforest literature assumes paramount importance in contemporary Chinese literary circles. Their narratives encapsulate the enthralling ecosystem of the tropical rainforest, intertwining its myriad creatures, climatic phenomena, and the tapestry of Sarawak‘s ethnic history, crafting a distinct Chinese literary landscape that reflects the writers‘ profound explorations. However, neither authors themselves nor literary critics contend to remain in the highly localized domain of rainforest literature. In Zhong Jiayi‘s statement, Malaysian Chinese literature is now liberated from being exclusively analyzed through the lens of „local color“ [4]. Rather, it should undergo rigorous and unbiased evaluation to foster comprehensive research and critical analysis, akin to the standards employed in scrutinizing Chinese literature. This methodology signifies the most effective route towards the rapid advancement of Malaysian Chinese literature. By a strong independent will, Malaysian Chinese literature demonstrates potential substantial enough to establish roots within the global literary arena. Therefore, this article aims to apply a new research paradigm based on the diaspora theory to highlight the distinctions that render a profound ideological and epistemological mingling beyond the impasses of locality and universality.

2. The Background Information of These Two Novels

2.1 The End of the River‘s Background

„The End of the River“ tells a journey where the narrator „Yong,“ under the guidance of his non-blood-related Dutch-Indonesian aunt Kristin (presumed lover of his father), travels upstream along the Kapuas River, the largest river in Borneo, with a group of companions. Their pilgrimage culminates at the source of the river, Mount Batu Tiban.

Lee Yung Ping chose the full moon from the beginning of July to the 15th of July in the lunar calendar of 1962 as the exact period in which his novel takes place. This is a critical period in the history of colonial countries, especially in Southeast Asia, in that they have not long been free from colonial rule and need to bring a set of new rules to the liberated lands. Furthermore, the novel initiates its journey at the beginning of the lunar seventh month (Ghost Month). It concludes at the full moon (Hungry Ghost Festival), setting the tone for the entire narrative: an atmosphere imbued with spirits, an eerie ambiance, and a journey infused with the sense of salvation.

In both volumes of „The End of the River,“ David Derwei Wang provides prefaces, indicating that this book can be viewed as Li Yongping‘s retrospective journey, a prequel written for both himself and the readers[5]. It is suggested that Lee‘s future works should find their beginnings here. Additionally, it serves as Lee‘s reflection on past events, offering insights gleaned from hindsight.

However, this study differs from Wang‘s opinions and believes that there is a lack of direct continuity with Lee‘s later works, notably the absence of significant characters like Aunt Kristin, whose influence is pivotal in „The End of the River“. Moreover, in contrast to Lee‘s earlier literary endeavors, two significant disparities emerge: Firstly, the portrayal of Borneo in „The End of the River“ diverges markedly from its depiction in his earlier works. Before this book, Lee‘s representation of Borneo had been confined largely to the insular existence of East Malaysian Chinese communities, with limited ventures into the wilderness. However, the narrative in „The End of the River“ unfolds in the western reaches of the island, tracing the Kapuas River in Indonesian-administered territory—an unfamiliar terrain for Lee, hailing from British Sarawak. Lee‘s endeavor in this novel is to expand the scope of his Bornean perspective, aiming to offer a more comprehensive portrayal to authenticate his identity as a native son of Borneo. Secondly, „The End of the River“ presents a linguistic mosaic wherein Chinese and Chinese dialects recede into the background. The prevailing language in the narrative, if not English, is Malay, supplemented by several local dialects, so the usage of Chinese is markedly subdued. As a meticulous wordsmith, Lee previously showcased a predilection for „pure“ Chinese in his magnum opus, „The Jilin Chronicles“. Therefore, this work cannot be regarded as a retrospective summary because the concept of „pure“ Chinese cannot have originated from the hybridity of multiple languages. It is interpreta-

tive. On the one hand, it collects the important motifs and propositions in Lee‘s writing history. Through a narrative journey, it makes a comprehensive clean-up and constructs a more complete vision.

2.2 Wild Boars Cross the River‘s Background

In „Wild Boars Cross the River,“ the Sarawakian tropical rainforest retains its paramount importance as a geographical backdrop, focusing on the small fishing village of Pukba situated in the northwest region of Sarawak. Within this contextual framework, the narrative unveils the tragic circumstances endured by the villagers of Pukba amidst the Japanese occupation of Sarawak. In this history of the Later-called „three years and eight months“ period, the Japanese massacred their opponents, oppressed the indigenous people engaged in arms production, and the Pukba village people organized to fight the enemy, only leading to the bloodiest retaliation. At the same time, the Pukba village is troubled by wild boars every year.

This novel begins in 1952, set in the neighboring Kingdom of Sarawak adjacent to Borneo, with similarities in geography and time to Lee‘s works. The description of the rainforest, its symbolic significance, and the brutal actions of the aggressors hidden within the rainforest also bear many similarities. However, Chang Kuei Hsing does not employ a linear narrative or a fixed protagonist. If there is something that runs through the main storyline, it is the galloping and plundering wild boar herd. Similarly, David Der-wei Wang also provides a preface for this book, stating that the novel‘s characteristics lie in its narrative ethics of „the world‘s indifference,“; its (anti-) allegorical structure interwoven with wild boars, poppies, and masks, and the melancholic symptoms of Sino-foreign imagination[6]. This article will primarily focus on the last point, namely, the melancholic reflections on the fate community of the Chinese in Malaya conveyed by Chang in this work, which is also where he differs most from Lee.

Chang Kuei Hsing adopts a tone characterized by coldness, brutality, and eerie undertones, effectively juxtaposing elements such as wild boars, the inhabitants of Pukba, and the Japanese military personnel within the same harrowing narrative tableau. This narrative approach portrays a relentless cycle of violence, wherein each character is impelled by their survival instincts, ultimately providing a nuanced portrayal of the day-to-day struggles experienced during the three years and eight months of tumultuous history.

Notably, Chang Kuei Hsing diminishes the emphasis on the Chinese homeland and national allegories, instead focusing on the Japanese occupation of Sarawak. He intends to uncover the history of Chinese resistance against Japan, a narrative previously obscured in the rainforest series. By stripping away metaphors and reframing allegories, he seeks to reconceptualize and reconstruct the aesthetic of the rainforest, depicting universal human experiences within the Chinese literary world. His endeavor represents a transformation of his rainforest aesthetics and paves the way for new themes in Chinese literature.

3. The Comparisons of the Two Novels

3.1 Metaphor of the Rainforest: The Fusion of the Fictional World and the Reality

In „The End of the River“, Lee‘s narrative stands out as relatively accessible within the genre of rainforest literature. Despite the unfamiliar setting of Kalimantan, Borneo, the author meticulously elucidates the region‘s dark history, indigenous folklore, cultural nuances, and character complexities. This narrative richness precludes the need for intricate allegories, ensuring clarity for readers. The depiction of Iban and Dayak‘s life retains its exotic allure while focusing on universal themes such as sexual awakening and the pursuit of life‘s essence. Challenges may arise in translating Malay phrases, yet these linguistic nuances do not detract significantly from the narrative flow. Lee‘s deliberate approach facilitates readers‘ understanding, even those unfamiliar with Malaysian Chinese or Sarawakian backgrounds, offering a comprehensive exploration of the rainforest milieu. Through vivid storytelling, the „talk-listen“ structure of the Borneo, or rainforest, story could not be clearer [7].

„The End of the River“ effectively captures the enigmatic, romantic, and traumatic facets of the rainforest experience. The rainforest narrative unfolds with the Kapuas River as its focal point, serving as a rich canvas for fantastical imagery and symbolic exploration. The narrative traverses through various locales along the riverbanks, from longhouses and settlements to vibrant celebrations, each imbued with diverse layers of meaning. The journey along the river is shrouded in mystery and uncertainty, heightened by introducing surreal and bizarre elements that enhance the sense of adventure and intrigue. For instance, following a tropical storm, the narrative presents a series of peculiar objects washed ashore, including drifting graveyards, the waterborne palace of a European museum curator, and corpses of animals, among others. Strange and miscellaneous objects and bizarre imaginations all emerge on the river, as if it were a garbage dump or a graveyard on the water, carrying the copulation, killings, colonization, and destruction that have occurred in Borneo. A flash flood within the narrative is a powerful metaphor for renewal and cleansing, culminating in a vivid imagery crescendo.

Additionally, the narrative constructs a mystical realm

around the sacred mountain, symbolizing the journey's culmination and introducing tribal legends that foretell the appearance of boats carrying souls during the full moon of the lunar seventh month. This ultimate destination imbues the protagonist's journey with fantastical significance. The convergence of ancestral spirits and the protagonist's coming-of-age ceremony adds layers of symbolism related to themes of death and return. Surrounding the legend of the sacred mountain are lakes steeped in supernatural lore, such as the Blood Lake, where women who died in childbirth return, and the tranquil Lake Pulau Batu, where children find solace. By portraying these elements, the novel transcends ecological and historical dimensions, embracing diverse mythological and religious imaginings and presenting a nuanced exploration of the rainforest world.

The components mobilized in Lee's fantastical rainforest world tend more towards myth, legend, and the writing characteristics of exotic locales. Through exhaustive depictions of wonders and exotic atmospheres, it constructs another narrative possibility for the vast terrain of Borneo, initiating a unique rainforest chronotype and embarking on a journey of intertwining textual desires and experiences. The main clue laid out in „The End of the River" is not the historical experiences of the Chinese in the rainforest, but rather the journey of Yong's growth, exchanging a re-witnessing of the scars of virgin territory in the Borneo rainforest. Upon crossing borders, Lee returns through the form of Borneo Chronicles, where hidden sins and forms of penance are intertwined, reflecting the complexity and ambiguity between personal desires and belonging.

In „Wild Boars Cross the River", Chang Kuei Hsing's animal metaphors are integral to the rainforest imagery. Lin Yunhong points out that „the metaphorical animalization references all things, annotates human emotions, and even indirectly portrays the homeland. This is the subtle interpretation of Chang Kuei Hsing's novels" [8].

There are plenty of animal images in this book, but unlike Chang's previous works, they are no longer mysterious or burdened with intricate metaphors. Chang Kuei Hsing begins to deconstruct the animal metaphors. This attempt is particularly evident in the imagery of the „wild boar." Yang Yixiong extensively discusses the phenomenon of wild boars crossing the river in „Hunting and fishing in Borneo" describing how they fill the river like pieces of wood: „At this time, one can see pieces of wood floating downstream, slowly pushed by the meandering river" [8]. In „Wild Boars Cross the River", a similarly spectacular scene is depicted: „The herd swam downstream from the Pukbar River, crossed the fence, divided into two groups, landed, shook off the mud and water from their pig hair, emitted terrifying roars, and surged towards the village of Pukbar" [9]. A comparison of the two reveals that Yang Yixiong's wild boars crossing the river are anthropomorphized, even militarized boars.

In contrast, Chang Kuei Hsing similarly portrays the strength and herd behavior of the boars but writes about them being ambushed by the people of Pukbar Village and fleeing in all directions. The representation of the „boar king", representing the wisdom of the boars, also avoids appearing. The wild boars shed layers of metaphor and mystery, revealing their natural attributes and representing Chang Kuei Hsing's bold attempt to reinterpret the rainforest and animal metaphors. When animals lose their social metaphors, the emphasis should be on their natural attributes, starkly contrasting with human nature. Chang's brushstrokes create new connections between people and things inside and outside the text, disrupting seemingly clear boundaries of knowledge, senses, and ethics. His demythologized animal rhetoric attempts to reveal the true nature of animals, intentionally guiding readers to construct a new understanding of the rainforest.

In Lee's novels, the mystery and exoticism of the rainforest are self-evident. For him, who has wandered through life, Borneo, Taiwan, and mainland China have gradually reconciled as three maternal figures. Therefore, the exposure of violence by invaders in the Borneo rainforest is a courageous confrontation with the past and a longing for justice. In Chang's novels, the mystery of the rainforest gradually disappears, and even the shadow of the homeland exists only faintly. The majority of the narrative focuses on the people, animals, and plants living in the rainforest, with little emphasis on the dominion that humans should possess. His depiction of life and death is as mundane as eating and drinking: it is a natural submission process to fate. Therefore, akin to the repetitive deaths, the past is not just the „past" but rather an uncertain future that may repeat itself.

3.2 Sex and Historical Debt: The Struggle Between the Primitiveness and Civilization

As an exploration narrative set in the rainforest, „The End of the River" inevitably features several instances of typical revelry. Apart from the protagonist Yong, the journey of the white expedition team, composed of individuals from various backgrounds, tracing the river's source through the rainforest also becomes a journey of revelry and debauchery. At the outset of the voyage, during the Ghost Month festivities in Sanggau, a town in the middle and lower reaches of the Kapuas River, the Chinese community celebrates with a splendid performance showcasing the extravagance of the Ghost Month. This juxtaposition of human celebrations and ghostly revelry sets the eerie tone for the narrative. The subsequent appearances

of ghosts, both logical and exhilarating, maintain the narrative‘s heightened state of excitement. Particularly striking is the scene where the white men and women, choosing to venture into the jungle at midnight, engage in nude revelry in a guava orchard, indulging in a frenzy of sexual activity reminiscent of wild beasts, adding an element of sensual allure to the rainforest during the Ghost Month. This alarming scene marks a critical point of sexual awakening for Yong as a witness, thrusting him into the forbidden realm of sexuality. Subsequent events, such as the Ibans‘ performance of the headhunter dance, the North European twins‘ lustful pursuit of Iban women, and the juxtaposition of violent killings and sexual consumption within the longhouse, imbue the narrative with a unique blend of mystery and obscenity. On the stranded and anchored ship, the boredom of the white men and women leads them to mimic Iban headhunter dances and ritualistic ceremonies on the Kapuas River, turning indigenous customs and rituals, originally of anthropological significance, into mere performances for the amusement of the motley crew of adventurers. Karma ensued: a group of white men were subjected to retaliatory teasing by an indigenous man, calling himself a member of the Borneo Liberation Organization, who planted indigenous sexual decorations on each man‘s genitals and even took the syphilis virus that the former white men had brought to the indigenous settlement and placed it on the group of unprovoked white men. In the end, young Yong entered a hotel converted by a wartime Japanese club deep in the rain forest, brandishing a Japanese samurai sword like a demon, imitating the Japanese despotic power, and almost raping the Japanese maid. Such a bizarre rainforest carnival time and space, full of sexual passion and aggression. The river adventure of 15-year-old Yong is a sexual enlightenment and temptation, or even a sexual expedition, echoing the species ecology and scars of the rainforest.

In „Wild Boars Cross the River“, Chang Kuei Hsing ritualizes the violence of „headhunting“ among the Dayak people, imbuing it with cultural significance. Headhunting is considered a catalyst for sexual desire among the Dayak men and women. The book recounts that during World War II, „Dayak warriors hunted down thousands of enemy heads,“ making this tradition in the eyes of outsiders barbaric and bloody, carrying the publicity of lust, the bravery of the indigenous people, and the significance of history and culture[9]. The boundary between tradition and modernity is blurred in the hybrid cultural identity embodied in the rainforest‘s anti-Japanese saga. On the one hand, the animal nature of human beings in the rainforest is the desire and vitality; on the other hand, it is the primitive, violent impulse, symbolizing the brutal animal nature of invaders and the power relationship between traditional „primitiveness“ and modern „civilization“ has been subverted in that civilized humans gradually lose order and rationality in the struggle against animals. The killing scenes of the Japanese army in this novel are always accompanied by the scenes of wild boar destroying around or in heat, eating corpses, and the barbarism and cruelty of the invaders are juxtaposed with the animal nature of the wild boar. After the Japanese beheaded dozens of Chinese men and cut open the bellies of several pregnant women, the narrative turns to a male pig in the heat: „Without hesitation, it lifted its head and plunged its snout into the old man‘s belly, beginning the ferocious devouring process. When the sow sees the boar, she sniffs the anus and penis of the boar, arches her buttocks and scratches the male pig, makes a low cry of lust, and exudes hot urine“ [10]. The portrayal is so intense that it almost prompts one to avert one‘s gaze and flee. However, his underlying implication is that a pig is merely a pig. People need not, and perhaps should not, attempt to justify their brutality or instinctual behavior with further humane explanations. Rather than interpreting Chang‘s intention as aiming for a naturalistic, detached depiction, asserting that his narrative technique creates novel connections among characters, objects, and textual elements within and beyond the narrative framework is more appropriate. This process disrupts what initially seemed to be clearly defined boundaries regarding knowledge, sensory perception, and ethical considerations. Just as David Der-wei Wang states in the preface of this book, amid the chaos of humans and beasts, amid the chorus of giant insects and monstrous birds in the jungle, amid the flood of blood and obscenities, the wild boar crosses the river. Once the power of these exotic creatures is unleashed, everything is overturned[11]. The presence of sex and violence here carries no connotation of remorse; instead, it embodies only the savage force that destroys everything. Chang‘s style completely departs from the conventional nostalgic reflection from outside the rainforest. Through this harrowing historical narrative, Chang‘s surreal descriptions unveil his fresh imagination of the rainforest, not only lifting the veil of its mysterious oriental fantasies but also injecting a melancholic contemplation on the past and present of the Sarawak Chinese community.

In Lee‘s works, the end of the river is the source where life originates from death. Yong loses himself in various sordid, acquired sexual stimulations and ultimately finds redemption in his aunt, who is both a mother and a wife. This reflects the author‘s belief: there is no need to be burdened by heavy historical debts and die in the past, and leaving the homeland does not necessarily mean betrayal and abandonment. In the pilgrimage-like journey back home, not only Yong but also the author himself finds sal-

vation. There may be many Yongs in the world, but very few truly find redemption.

In contrast, in Chang‘s novel, he combines the slaughter of barbarians against invaders with their sexual allure, depicting the burgeoning sexual desires of beasts over human death. This is a way of expressing unspeakable pain. However, the reason for doing so is not because everything is getting better now, to the extent that all historical wounds can be exposed to everyone. On the contrary, it is because of the painful reality and the uncertain future that he doubts whether history will repeat itself. So, in Chang‘s narrative, no one finds redemption; people simply transition from one hell to another.

4. Conclusion

Through comparison, it can be seen that both Lee‘s „The End of the River“ and Chang‘s „Wild Boars Cross the River“ explore similar themes of the jungle, sexuality, and historical debts. The two books share these common points because Lee and Chang are diasporic authors with similar experiences, and they choose to showcase more collective values than individual distinctions when it comes to the historical sufferings of their community. The jungle retains its mystery in Lee‘s work, while Chang gradually unveils the natural mysteries. Regarding sexuality and historical debts, both authors candidly portray past traumas, with Lee firmly believing in redemption. At the same time, Chang hesitates and wanders in the abyss of reality, unsure of the correct direction.

This article manages to find out several reasons for these differences. Lee‘s indictment of aggression in „The End of The River“ stems from his experience as an elderly wanderer, lamenting the misfortunes of his „birth mother“ - the unfortunate fate of Sarawak. Therefore, readers can discern an almost straightforward use of mythical archetypes in the seemingly fantastical narrative of the rainforest. The author pursues poetic justice, whether it is philosophical contemplation of life and death, longing, or critique of desire, all of which reveal a yearning for redemption. On the other hand, Chang‘s depiction of violence aesthetics and rainforest imagination in „Wild Boars Cross the River“ appears even more brutal in a narrative that is closer to reality. This is not to say that the author is cold-blooded, but rather that the people and nature he portrays do not offer any possibility of redemption. It is like the spiral progression of history, where the past always seems to inadvertently reappear, bringing pain while propelling the „wild boars“ to „cross the river“ repeatedly.

This article provides a comparative study of these two novels, presenting the eternal themes of homeland and homeland-seeking in the diasporic works of Southeast Asian Chinese authors. The analysis of similarities and differences in the texts demonstrates the impact of the authors‘ personal emotions on the presentation of similar themes to readers and future researchers. However, it is also evident that attributing the differentiated factors in the works entirely to the authors may lead to neglecting other important factors, such as the influence of society and political realities. This study will strive to address these shortcomings in future research.

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