

DOCTORAL THESIS

Tea and Tea Culture: Representing Chineseness in Anglophone Malaysian Literature

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Date of Award:
2023

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ABSTRACT

At the turn of the 21st century, novels written by Malaysian authors in English joined a transnational body of world literature that began garnering international attention as a result of the international literary awards they were gaining. While Anglophone Malaysian literature has garnered some scholarly attention (Quayum, 2007; Holden, 2009; Chin, 2021), most of the studies focused on the construction of identities, as well as the strategies and future directions of the national literature as a whole. There has so far not been any in-depth analysis of identity construction through tea culture and literature in Malaysian Anglophone literature, and it is this gap that this study seeks to address and fill.

The recent discourses of “the rise of China” in recent decades, and the historical and transnational connections between Malaysia and China make the novels a useful lens through which to observe the formation of a nationalist subjectivity – “Chineseness”, which seems to stem out of a rising Chinese nationalism, and it has also affected tea culture, creating a “Chinese tea nationalism”, which by extension lays claim to all people with Chinese ethnicity around the world as being a part of “One China”, a homogenizing essentialism that I argue is not compatible with the heterogeneous and multiple vicissitudes of Chineseness that is represented not only within Malaysian Anglophone literature, but all around the world. By focusing on the way that tea and tea culture is represented, I show how the Chinese characters negotiate their different contexts and situations and display adaptability depending on the demands of the situation. I draw on postcolonial, poststructuralist and cultural theory to argue that the various forms of Chineseness demonstrate that not only is there not a single form of Chineseness, but many different forms depending on the changes and adaptations that emerge from localizations.