

## Female Bonding and Marginality in Shang Wanyun's novella "Xialihe" (1978)

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### Recommended Citation

Paoliello, Antonio. "Female Bonding and Marginality in Shang Wanyun's novella "Xialihe" (1978)." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 24.2 (): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3895>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

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**CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture**ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>  
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**Volume 24 Issue 2 (March 2022) Article 9****Antonio Paoliello,****"Female Bonding and Marginality in Shang Wanyun's novella 'Xialihe' (1978)"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol24/iss2/9>>Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 24.2 (2022)**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol24/iss2/>>

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**Abstract:** This article explores the representation of homosociality between two marginalized female characters in "Xialihe" (夏麗赫) (1978), a novella by Sinophone Malaysian writer Shang Wanyun (商晚) (1952-1995). Although some scholars have suggested that the writer's preoccupation with the intimate world of women started only in the 1980s, I argue that "Xialihe" already highlights issues such as female intimacy and women's social marginalization. The text represents, therefore, a link between her earlier nativist production and her later more feminist approach. Additionally, I contend that, writing from a marginal position at the periphery of Malaysia's national literary system and from a doubly-conservative environment (Muslim-majority Malaysia and the local Chinese community), by means of sensual descriptions and dialogical innuendos, the author bravely blurs the line which separates female bonding from homoaffectivity, thus leading the reader to question the real nature of the relationship between the Chinese narrator and her Malay friend. Lastly, through the analysis of a novella by one of the leading Sinophone Malaysian female writers of the twentieth century, this article fills a gap in Western scholarship, where studies on Shang Wanyun and her *oeuvre* are virtually non-existent.

## Antonio PAOLIELLO

### Female Bonding and Marginality in Shang Wanyun's novella "Xialihe" (1978)

Published in 1978 in the July issue of *Bulanan Chao Foon* (蕉風月刊)<sup>1</sup> the novella "Xialihe (Syariah)" (夏麗赫)<sup>2</sup> by the late Shang Wanyun (商晚筠) (1952-1995) contends with personal and social issues such as female homosociality, female marginalization as well as Chinese-Malay relations within the context of postcolonial and multi-ethnic Malaysian society. Additionally, the text has also been read as one of the earliest examples of LGBT fiction within the Sinophone Malaysian literary system (Xu, "Jiashi" 212).<sup>3</sup> Hence, "Xialihe" can be considered somewhat of a milestone in the Sinophone Malaysian context and Shang Wanyun an unjustly underrepresented author within the field of Sinophone literary and cultural studies.<sup>4</sup> The text is especially relevant because through the portrayal of the female bonding between a Chinese and a Malay woman, it addresses – although from a fictional standpoint – a relatively unexplored area within the Humanities and the Social Sciences: cross-ethnic female friendships. Therefore, the novella responds to the "need to study and problematize the idea of a continuous relation between female homosocial and homosexual bonds and friendships" (Hammarén and Johansson, "Homosociality"). The aim of this article is to acquaint non-Sinophone readership with this important Sinophone Malaysian female writer, while also trying to demonstrate, through a close reading of the novella, how the author uses writing from a marginal(ized) position as a powerful tool of resistance. By presenting two nonconforming women – an ethnic Chinese who is being marginalized by her Chinese community because she does not comply to the traditional female roles of spouse and mother as well as by the Malaysian state and labor market because she holds a foreign degree, and an ethnic Malay who does not behave according to her community's norms – Shang Wanyun resists the established social patterns that regulated the ethnic Chinese community as well as Malaysian society in the 1970s.

Before doing so, however, it is necessary to contextualize the literary environment in which "Xialihe" was written and circulated. I will do so by briefly introducing the reader to the concept of the Sinophone as well as the debates around National literature (*sastera nasional*) in the Malaysian context.

Conceptualized more than a decade ago (Shih, "Global Literature"), the Sinophone is a field of inquiry able to provide an alternative to the China-centered framework generally used to analyze Sinitic-medium cultures shaped mainly through the processes of "continental colonialism, settler colonialism and (im)migration" (Shih, "Introduction" 11).<sup>5</sup> Narrowing it down to the literary field, the Sinophone is an appropriate concept that can be used to designate "Sinitic-language literatures in various parts of the world without the assumed centrality of Chinese literature. It is multilingual in and of itself by virtue of the simple fact that the Sinitic language family consists of many different languages, and different communities tend to speak a particular Sinitic language in addition to its non-

<sup>1</sup> *Bulanan Chao Foon* is, still today, the most important Sinophone literary journal published in Southeast Asia and it has always had an active role in promoting Sinitic-medium literature in both Malaysia and Singapore. The first issue dates from November 1955, when the journal's headquarters were based in Singapore, where it was published until 1999. After a few years' hiatus, it resumed publication in 2002, when it became a biannual magazine promoted and distributed by the Malaysian Chinese Literature Centre, Southern University College in Johor, Malaysia. According to Sinophone Malaysian writer Ma Lun, it is thanks to the positive welcome her first short story received after publication on the November 1975 issue of *Bulanan Chao Foon*, that Shang Wanyun, at the time still a university student, decided to pursue a career in creative writing (Ma, "Jiaofeng yangqi" 11).

<sup>2</sup> "Xialihe" is the *pinyin* transcription of the Chinese characters 夏麗赫, which in turn translate the Malay female name "Syariah" into Sinitic script. For the sake of clarity, I will use "Xialihe" when referring to the novella and "Syariah" when referring to its protagonist.

<sup>3</sup> However, it must be noted that not all scholars agree with the LGBT reading of the novella. As suggested by Ye Fuyan, while some – such as Chew Bee-Sun (周美珊) – echo Xu's viewpoint, others – such as Teo Shi-siang (張斯翔) – consider that Xu stretches his queer analysis too far, reading too much into it (Ye, "Yali de tongzhi hun" 52).

<sup>4</sup> Bernards also calls for "more translations to showcase the indispensable contributions of Malaysian women writers like Ho Sok Fong (He Shufang), Shang Wanyun, and [...] Li Zishu" (Bernards, "Interview").

<sup>5</sup> Today, Sinophone studies is a thriving academic field within Asian studies and has gone a long way since its initial theorization. It counts with an international, nonprofit scholarly association, the Society of Sinophone Studies, founded in 2019 ([www.sinophonestudies.org](http://www.sinophonestudies.org)). Additionally, upper-crust publishers such as the University of California Press and Cambria Press underwrite academic series devoted to the field, namely the UC Press Sinophone Series and the Cambria Sinophone World Series.

Sinitic inflections" (Shih, "Against Diaspora" 41). To be considered Sinophone, cultural actors (or products) must not only express themselves (or be expressed) in a Sinitic language, such as Mandarin, Cantonese or Hokkien, but they must also come from a geographic position at the periphery of China or with no direct relation to her. Therefore, Sinophone culture(s) can be found not only in places such as Taiwan and pre-1997 Hong Kong, but also among ethnic Chinese communities around the world, such and those in South-east Asia, in North America and, more recently, in continental Europe.<sup>6</sup>

Although the term *Sinophone* is not synonymous with the expression *Chinese language*, the linguistic issue is central to its definition. Still according to Shih, "[t]he Sinophone recognizes that speaking fractions of different Sinitic languages associated with China is a matter of choice and other historical determinations, and hence the Sinophone exists only to the extent that these languages are somehow maintained. The Sinophone recedes or disappears as soon as the languages in question are abandoned" (*Visuality and Identity* 30).

It is evident how the Sinophone, as a theoretical framework, is indebted to other concepts that critically re-examine, through the prism of postcolonialism, the relationship between center and periphery. In fact, it is undeniable that the concept of the Sinophone will inevitably echo other – perhaps more familiar to the reader – *phones*, such as the Anglophone, the Francophone, the Hispanophone and the Lusophone. Nevertheless, while to talk about these other concepts means to deal with cultures expressed through one common language (English, French, Spanish and Portuguese, respectively) that may – or may not – have local standards presenting minimal differences<sup>7</sup>, to engage with the Sinophone means to be confronted with a fragmented linguistic reality due to the multiplicity of Sinitic languages.<sup>8</sup> Although it is true that in the contemporary world the Sinophone experiences a global predominance of standard Mandarin and of a unified written standard, it can be – and it in fact is – expressed through other languages as well, such as Hokkien or Hainanese in Southeast Asia, Cantonese in Macau, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia and North America, varieties of the Wu language in many European countries, and so on. Some of these languages, such as Cantonese and Hokkien have developed a written standard as well, which has further separated them from the monolithic idea of a unified – and unifying – Chinese language.

Another characteristic that sets the Sinophone apart is connected to the political status of the different Sinitic languages. In fact, if we consider the People's Republic of China to fall outside the Sinophone world, Sinitic languages, in the form of standard Mandarin, enjoy official status only in Taiwan and Singapore. In all other countries and regions, the use and standardization of the different Sinitic languages relies on community-based or private initiatives. Therefore, while in the *Francophonie* French is legally (or de facto) considered the official language and used as such, in the Sinophone realm, the growing predominance of standard Mandarin is due to its usefulness as a lingua franca of intra-ethnic communication. Hence, while the *Francophonie* – but it holds true for the other *phones*, too – speaks the same language, albeit with prosodic differences due to the various regional accents, be it in Québec, in Belgium, or in Senegal, the Sinophone can be spoken in Mandarin, but also in Cantonese, Hokkien, Hainanese and so on.

As Sinophone and as Malaysian, Shang Wanyun and her oeuvre belong to a place "of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries" (Shih, *Visuality and Identity* 4). Therefore, from the peripheral position where she stands,

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<sup>6</sup> To be considered Sinophone, there is, however, an alternative prerequisite to geographic marginality: ethnic difference, which in many cases equates to marginalization, as well. Cultural actors of non-Han ethnic background from within China who express themselves in a Sinitic language should be considered Sinophone, rather than Chinese. Examples of Sinophone writers from China would be Alai (阿來), who is an ethnic Tibetan, and Huo Da (霍達), a novelist of Hui ethnicity.

<sup>7</sup> By minimal differences, I mean specific variations in speech, pronunciation, spelling or grammar within one language, which are big enough to be perceived by speakers of the same language from other geographic regions, and yet are small enough not to jeopardize mutual intelligibility. Examples of such differences would be the French word *magasiner* (to shop), or the more recently coined *courriel* (a contraction of the words *courrier électronique*, meaning e-mail). Both terms are exclusively used by Québec (and other North American) speakers of the language, and yet understood by French speakers worldwide.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, according to Rovira-Esteva, Chinese is a linguistic family, rather than a single language and one must be aware of the fact that to talk about Chinese means to refer to a multiplicity of non-mutually intelligible languages, just in the same way in which one would talk about Romance or Anglo-Germanic languages (Rovira-Esteva 195-197).

her courageous attempt at challenging different types of marginality through writing seems only natural. In fact, I maintain that Shang Wanyun resists multiple marginalizations and one should not assume that her position as a marginalized author stems only from the fact that she writes from the periphery of China and Chineseness, as it is also very much a result of her being an ethnic Chinese writing from the margins of Malaysia and Malaysianness. Since the community Shang Wanyun belongs to is the result of several waves of Chinese migration to British Malaya (now Malaysia),<sup>9</sup> her status is that of a peripheral writer, who is not allowed to belong to the national literary system of the country.

At this point, to understand the doubly marginal(ized) position from which she writes, it is necessary to address the issue of what officially constitutes Malaysian literature. At the time when Shang Wanyun wrote "Xialihe" and to this date, Malaysia was and is ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse.<sup>10</sup> However, the dominant Malay group has constructed, through several legislative actions, a strong monoethnic and monolingual national identity. One such action was the National Language Act (NLA) (*Akta Bahasa Kebangsaan*) of 1967, which officialized Malay as the only national language of the country, transforming its name as well, which ceased to be *Bahasa Melayu* (the language of the Malay people) and became *Bahasa Malaysia* (the language of Malaysia). Furthermore, a few years later, in 1971, the National Culture Policy (NCP) (*Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan*) was implemented to promote a heavily Malaynized national culture.<sup>11</sup> While the NLA envisioned and promoted a Malaysian nation that expressed itself monolingually, the NCP further marginalized cultures other than the Malay one, on which the policy was built, and religions other than Islam, by clearly stating that the Islamic faith was an "important element in the formulation of the national culture." Although the NCP also declared that "cultural elements of the Chinese, Indians, Arabs, Westerners and others which are considered suitable and acceptable are included in the national culture", the reality has shown that non-Malay cultures are only able to survive thanks to privately funded initiatives and, even so, they are subject to the acquisition of government permits, making it easier for cultural policymakers to strictly control the cultural life of Malaysians (Carstens 151).

Both the NLA and the NCP had an obvious impact on the Malaysian literary polysystem, politicizing it and causing a fracture between Malay-medium literature and those written in other languages that remains open to this day.<sup>12</sup> Far from being mere political actions, policies such as the NLA and the NCP "have fragmented the literary scene largely along ethnic lines, making the writers culturally insular, rather than encompassing, in their imagination" (Quayum 1). However, far from being a purely literary debate, the National literature issue discloses the anxiety of many academics and authors "about national identity and about being able to shape it in accordance with their ideas of what a Malaysian national identity should be" (Wong 51).

Starting from the 1970s, Malay intellectuals have promoted the idea of a National literature (*sastera nasional*) expressed only through Malaysia's national language, thus marginalizing those literatures written in English, Sinitic languages and Tamil, which are now considered community-based or sectional literatures (*sastera sukuan*) and therefore, as noted by Quayum, they are not able to enjoy the privileges normally accorded to National literature and to its writers (Quayum 3).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The nineteenth century saw the first large-scale migration from South China to British Malaya. After that, "[t]he chaotic periods of the 1920s and 1930s saw another surge of migration to Southeast Asia" (Tan, "Chinese in Malaysia"). According to Kit Siang Lim, today, however, around ninety percent of the members of the ethnic Chinese community were born in Malaysia (Lim, "Chinese or Malaysian Identity?" 1). In my opinion, to still talk of a diasporic or migrant community is, therefore, not accurate and problematic.

<sup>10</sup> According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the 2020 estimated population of the country is 32.7 million. While *bumiputera* (an umbrella term, which collectively refers to those peoples who are indigenous to the region and includes ethnic Malays, as well as the Orang Asli, i.e. the aboriginal people of Peninsular Malaysia, and the various indigenous groups of the Bornean states of Sabah and Sarawak) make up 69.6% of the total population, ethnic Chinese are the second most numerous ethnic group, constituting 22.6% of the Malaysian population. The 2.01 million ethnic Indians represent 6.8% of all Malaysian citizens, with a remaining 1% of Malaysian citizens classified as "others".

<sup>11</sup> Cartsten suggests that the NCP stemmed from a National Culture Congress whose roughly a thousand invited attendees were mostly Malays (Carstens 150).

<sup>12</sup> Despite such an evident fracture, I consider Malaysian literature as a whole or, using Even-Zohar's terminology, as a polysystem, since it is formed by several interdependent literary systems "which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole" (Even-Zohar 3).

<sup>13</sup> For instance, only authors writing in Malay can be awarded the title of Malaysian National Laureate (*Sasterawan Negara*) and although in theory any Malay-language writer can become a Laureate, to date only *bumiputera* writers have been bestowed the title. Additionally, among the fourteen awardees, there are only two female writers: Zurinah Hassan (2015) and Siti Zainon Ismail (2019).



The late scholar Ismail Hussein, long-time leader of the Federation of National Writers' Associations of Malaysia (*Gabungan Persatuan Penulis Nasional*, GAPENA) was probably one of the fiercest advocates of a monolingual (i.e. Malay) National literature. According to Ismail Hussein, literatures written in indigenous languages other than Malay should be accorded the status of "local literatures" (*sastera daerah*), while those in Tamil and Sinitic languages fall inevitably outside of the national literary system, since they address issues only relevant to their respective ethnic communities and, therefore, their audiences are limited, not only linguistically, but also ethnically and culturally (Hussein 35). Similarly, Malay academic and political activist Syed Husin Ali also underlines the limited scope of non-Malay literatures (Ali 54). Such an argument, however, is easily refutable, since writers such as Shang Wanyun, with their preoccupation for interethnic relations and their faithful depiction of Malaysia's multi-ethnic environment, go beyond the idea of community-based literatures and could be, therefore, of relevance to all Malaysians, regardless of their ethnic background, if only their works were translated in English and/or Malay, for instance, and thus made accessible to non-Sinophone Malaysians.<sup>14</sup>

While Ismail Hussein's and Syed Husin Ali's postures seem to suggest that the peripheral position of Sinophone authors is self-imposed, being ascribable only to the language they use to write in, Ng Kim Chew asserts that their marginalization is clearly imposed by the banishing character of the Malay-dominated cultural system, which drives them away and confines them to the boundaries of National literature; hence, within the context of Malaysia, Ng considers Sinophone literature as a "stateless Sinophone literature" (無國籍華文文學 *wu guoji huawen wenxue*) or an "ethnic-nationless literature" (民族—非國家文學 *minzu-fei guojia wenxue*) (Ng, "Wu guoji" 3). Similarly, Tee Kim Tong underlines how the Sinophone literature of Malaysia is constrained within the "non-geographical borders of race and language" (Tee 170). Additionally, he suggests that while the official Malay-dominated discourse uses expressions such as sectional literature, communal literature and ethnic literature, these labels all fail to draw attention to the liminal space inhabited by Sinophone writers, as well as their subject position vis-à-vis national (Malay) literature (170).

Chong Fah Hing points out that generally literature in Malaysia is "measured by [the] geo-political and citizenship background of its writers" and that while being seen in connection with the language used, it is seldom seen in "relation to the issue of literariness or any internal factors which are essential for defining literature" (Chong 70). Moreover, he suggests that post-colonial countries such as Malaysia, "are obsessed with outlining differences between them and their colonial masters, but at the same time, they inherit all sorts of ideology and mindset of the colonial 'other'" (80). Hence, within the Malaysian literary polysystem, Sinophone literature is marginalized through the colonial mechanism of otherization.

It is precisely – and perhaps paradoxically – in this highly politicized cultural arena that Shang Wanyun could thrive as a writer, becoming, as Zhu asserts, an example for later generations of Sinophone Malaysian authors (Zhu 80). Born Huang Lili (黃莉莉) in the north-western part of Peninsular Malaysia to sundry shop-keeping parents originally from Puning county, in the Chinese province of Guangdong, she was the fourth of seven children. She was locally educated until she left for Taiwan in 1971, where she graduated from National Taiwan University's Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures in 1977.<sup>15</sup> Being of delicate health and suffering from asthma, after graduation she returned to Malaysia, where she started working as assistant editor at the *Kin Kwok Daily News* (建國日報), a now defunct Chinese-language newspaper. After many years in the publishing sector, where she was mostly in charge of cultural supplements and magazines, she moved to Singapore, where she worked as a screenwriter of radio and television dramas for the Singapore

<sup>14</sup> Apart from "Xialihe", as examples of the many Sinophone Malaysian fictional works dealing with the multiethnic environment of Malaysia, one can mention short stories such as "Lazi fu" (1968) (拉子婦, The Native Wife) by the late Li Yongping, which depicts the indigenous peoples of Borneo and their relationship with the ethnic Chinese community, or still "Wo de pengyou Yadula" (2002) (我的朋友鴨都拉, My Friend, Abdullah) by Ng Kim Chew, which revolves around Abdullah, an ethnic Chinese convert to Islam. Paying great attention to details and to local society, these and many other texts apart from being Sinophone, should also be considered quintessentially Malaysian.

<sup>15</sup> In his analysis, Chong states that Sinophone Malaysian intellectuals that pursued their university degrees in Taiwan are most vocal about their "criticism of issues relating to nationalism and nation-state" due to their feeling of being dismissed by their own country (Chong 70). Although Shang Wanyun kept herself at the margins of the debates around National literature, she, too, like many ethnic Chinese Malaysian returnees, experienced marginalization since her foreign qualification was never recognized by the Malaysian government.

Broadcasting Corporation until 1994 when she decided to return home, with the intention of concentrating exclusively on writing. However, at the age of 43, she passed away in Kuala Lumpur due to a stroke.

Despite her short life and the marginal position from which she wrote, Shang Wanyun can be considered an outstanding and rather successful writer within the Sinophone world. Although her first short story, "Mimi" (秘密, The Secret), was published in Malaysia in the November 1975 issue of *Bulanan Chao Foon*, it was in Taiwan that she harvested the most important successes of her career as a fiction writer starting in 1977 when her short story "Mubanwu de Yinduren" (木板屋的印度人, The Indians in the Wooden House) won the Taiwan National Short Story Writing Prize, awarded by one of the island's leading literary magazines, *Youshi Wenyi* (幼師文藝). In September of the same year, the short story "Jun zi guxiang lai" (君自故鄉來, You Came From my Hometown) was distinguished with the prestigious Lianhe Bao (聯合報) Fiction Award, a prize she also won the following year thanks to "Chinü Alian" (癡女阿蓮, A-lian, the Idiotic Woman), a story which also lends its title to Shang Wanyun's first collection of short stories containing all her award-winning fictional texts, among others. Around the same period, the influential *Chung Wai Literary Monthly* (中外文學) published Shang Wanyun's longest fictional work: the novella "Xiaojiu yu malai nüren de shijian" (1977) (小舅與馬來女人的事件, Young Uncle and his Affair with the Malay Woman), yet another text that, while deeply rooted in the realist tradition, was perceived as highly exotic by Taiwanese readers who were generally not acquainted with Southeast Asia. Probably influenced by the thriving nativist literary scene on the island,<sup>16</sup> many of the stories Shang wrote in the late seventies touched upon issues such as interethnic relations, the life of the ethnic Chinese and the tropical rural milieu. Hence, through the depiction of people, events and subjects which were unquestionably Malaysian, she was able to achieve success in Taiwan (Xu, "Yongyuan de Shang Wanyun" 2).

According to Qiu, by the 1980s, her fictional works started to explore the depths of female feelings as well as their life experiences, thus dealing with issues such as sexual desire, homoaffectivity and female bonding (Qiu 73). Although her marriage (1979-1983) and her 1980 trip to Taiwan might have served as catalysts for the writer's feminist turn (Chen 443), I contend that Shang's earlier novella "Xialihe" already shows a clear preoccupation for the intimate world of women and the ways in which they bond to contest patriarchy and male social dominance, hence representing a steppingstone towards the portrayal of later female characters that show a strong desire and need to befriend other women. Additionally, despite having been published in Malaysia, "Xialihe", too, belongs to Shang Wanyun's personal, Malaysian version of Taiwanese nativist literature and can be considered the link between the author's former, more local corpus of texts and the latter, more feminist one, represented by *Qise huashui* (七色花水, The Water of the Rainbow Flower), her second short story collection published in Taiwan in 1991, as well as "Tiaozao" (跳蚤, Flea) and "Renjian · Yanhuo" (人間 · 煙火, World · Fireworks), both left unfinished and published posthumously in *Tiaozao* (2003) (跳蚤, Flea). These two incomplete fictional works, for instance, were intended as novels concerned with how HIV/AIDS affects the lives of two female friends, while also causing them to bond further ("Tiaozao") and with the way in which two female characters go from diffidence to homoaffectivity, thus revealing their true, intimate feelings in the process (Xu, "Yongyuan de Shang Wanyun" 3).

"Xialihe"'s plot is fairly straightforward as it follows the bonding process between Syariah, the Malay protagonist of the novella, and the ethnic Chinese narrator, from the first time they meet in Yali's family-run shop to the story's tragic outcome, the main character's suicide. Throughout the narration, Yali uses her *personal voice*<sup>17</sup> to present Syariah, a plainclothes policewoman who moved to

<sup>16</sup> Nativist literature (鄉土文學) appeared on the Taiwanese cultural scene in the 1970s. Generally seen as stemming in reaction to Modernism as well as to the rapid and unregulated industrial development of the country, it showed, through realism, a preoccupation with Taiwan's immediate environment and with its social reality endangered, as Passi points out, by massive urbanization, environmental degradation as well as the US and Japan's imperialistic attitude (Passi, "La scrittura").

<sup>17</sup> Coined by Lanser, the expression is employed "to refer to narrators who are self-consciously telling their own histories" (Lanser 18).

the Malay *kampong*<sup>18</sup> on the outskirts of her remote small town. Syariah is an independent forty-year-old woman and, although at first, she presents herself as a widow to Yali, she is actually a divorcée who entrusted her sister with the care of her son Yaacob. She does not seem to be well respected in the Malay hamlet where she lives nor in the neighboring town, especially among ethnic Chinese women such as Yali's mother and conservative sister-in-law, while she appears to be the center of the narrator's attention and desire. Being in an intimate relationship with Yahya, a Malay man younger than herself, complicates Syariah's situation even further, especially when Hasan, her now infirm husband shows up at her door and, with the help of their son, is begrudgingly taken back in, thus regaining his marital role. Defeated and afflicted, Syariah's lover decides to leave and in the end the woman, unable to escape the constraints of such a male-dominated society, shoots herself to death. Yali's *personal voice* wraps the story up with the commitment to never forget her and with the certainty that Syariah "did not lose neither Hasan nor me, but we instead have lost her forever" (Shang, "Xialihe" 107)<sup>19</sup>.

At its publication, the novella was harshly criticized by poet Mei Shuzhen who, under the pen name Liu Feiqing, wrote an unforgiving review, which commented on the narrative techniques, the dialogues, the characters as well as the representation of Malay customs and found them extremely faulty (Liu 108). Liu was especially critical of Shang Wanyun's choice of the narrator, whom she considered a negative, petty, self-indulgent character and a hindrance to the reader's full understanding of Syariah's personal story (110). Such a severe critique of Yali's narration might have been spurred, at least in part, by her female *personal voice*, which as Lanser declares, is

less formidable for women than authorial voice, since an authorial narrator claims broad powers of knowledge and judgment, while a personal narrator claims only the validity of one person's right to interpret her experience. At the same time, personal narration offers no gender-neutral mask or distancing "third person," no refuge in a generic voice that may pass as masculine. A female personal narrator risks the reader's resistance if the act of telling, the story she tells, or the self she constructs through telling it transgresses the limits of the acceptably feminine. (Lanser 19)

Before moving on to the analysis of Syariah, as seen from the narrator's perspective, and the relationship the two women build, first it is necessary to spend a few words about Yali. As in other instances when Shang Wanyun chooses the first-person mode of storytelling, the narrator and the writer herself share many similarities, from the fact that they are both daughters of sundry shopkeepers to their status as returnees who graduated from university in Taiwan. Being a foreign-university graduate puts Yali, as did put Shang Wanyun herself, in an uncompetitive, marginal professional position, since Taiwanese-degree holders were often "denied and scoffed at on the spot by potential employers because their education qualification was not recognised by the Malaysian government" (Soon, "Malaysian Graduates"). As the narrator affirms,

I felt the double blow of my degree not being valued nor recognized. My applications were rejected time and again: a complete defeat and the confirmation to what my eldest brother once told me: 'Coming back with a degree from National Taiwan University's Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures is absolutely useless: the climate here is different and wind blows in a whole different direction...' (Shang, "Xialihe" 74)<sup>20</sup>

Towards the end of the novella, we learn that Yali has only been able to land a temporary job as a teacher at a kindergarten in a neighboring town (105).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> A *kampong*, also spelled *kampung*, is a traditional hamlet in the Malay-speaking world. In Malaysia, these small villages are mostly inhabited by ethnic Malays and other indigenous peoples. It is rare for ethnic Chinese and Indians to live there.

<sup>19</sup> This and all subsequent translations are mine. The original reads as follows: "她並沒有失去耶哈雅和我，只是我們永遠的失去了她。"

<sup>20</sup> The original text reads: "我終體會到學位不被重視及不被承認的雙重痛擊。屢次應征的戰績可謂全軍覆沒。也應了大哥先前一句話——念台大外文系回來有屁用，這裏是什麼氣候吹的是什麼風……"

<sup>21</sup> It must also be emphasized here that since 1969 and until 2002, it was difficult for most non-*bumiputera* secondary school graduates to attend local universities, since access to higher education was given through an ethnic quota system which favoured *bumiputera* candidates. Despite the changes in the university access system, in 2013, 77% of spaces in public universities were still allocated to Malay and other *bumiputera* students (Stephenson and Rajendram, "This barrier between").



Having said that, it should be pointed out that, while in previous fictional works the narrative generally unfolds from a little girl's perspective thus allowing the writer to observe and reflect upon her past childhood experiences (Lim 119), in "Xialihe" the reader is in front of an adult female narrator, who is intrigued by Syariah and finds herself attracted to the woman's appearance, personality and demeanor. There seems to be a latent sexual desire in Yali's intense fascination with her new Malay friend, patent from their initial encounter in the family-run sundry shop, when the narrator assumes that "she deliberately bumped into [her] shoulder", and describes Syariah as emanating a "delicate and fragrant scent, similar to the famous French perfume Chanel No.5" and possessing a "deep and magnetic Malay voice" (Shang, "Xialihe" 65).<sup>22</sup> Yali's interest in Syariah is also spurred by the woman's request of two posters: one of the charming Farrah Fawcett<sup>23</sup> and another one portraying a young woman walking naked on the shore. Yali takes it as an indicator of Syariah's attraction to the American actress, but it turns out to be a misunderstanding, as can be deduced by the dialogue between the two:

'Are you Farrah's fan, too? There was a time when I was crazy about her, but I can't tell why.'  
'Eh... Farrah? Who are you talking about? A man or a woman?' she replied, somewhat unexpectedly, as she furrowed her brow, her eyes lost in a clot of confusion.  
'Well, she is Farrah Fawcett, the woman in the poster you want to buy!'  
'Who cares about this Farrah whatever!' (Shang, "Xialihe" 66)<sup>24</sup>

As it turns out, Syariah, a self-proclaimed "country bumpkin" (土包子), is interested in the poster's alleged artistic value as a means to feel more sophisticated, rather than in the female subject portrayed, whom, however, she considers not to come across as lascivious or vulgar, despite her snug, sleeveless white t-shirt, an opinion that, according to Yali, is strongly seductive (66). At this point, it shall be borne in mind that Syariah's looks, manners and words are filtered through the narrator's *personal voice*, hence the reader, too, sees her from Yali's often sexualizing perspective. As an example, I use the portrayal of Syariah when the narrator pays the woman her first visit: "She sat down against the open white door, unbuttoned two buttons on her chest, and wiped the lines of sweat on her neck" (70).<sup>25</sup> According to Xu, however, Yali's flirtatious description of Syariah's sensuality has been largely ignored by critics, who have mainly been concerned with the relationship between the two women from an ethnic perspective (Xu, "Jiashi" 212).<sup>26</sup> Although the fact that the two characters come from different ethnic communities certainly allows for such an analysis, it is necessary to transcend the binary relation Malay/Chinese to examine and fully understand their bonding, which develops from being marginal(ized) women within their respective communities and Malaysian society, at large. I have already discussed Yali's liminal position in Malaysia's labor market; nonetheless, her marginalization as a woman that does not conform to the traditional female roles of spouse and mother also needs to be pointed out. Introducing herself at the beginning of the novella, the narrating voice says:

Being as old as I was, people had long been calling me 'old spinster' behind my back. Besides, most of my childhood friends were already mothers to two or three kids. I was the only one who still wandered outside

<sup>22</sup>"有意的撞了我的肩膀子一下", "一股淡雅清香味, 那種近似查奈兒五號的法國名牌香水" and "低沈而富具磁性的馬來女子聲" in the original text.

<sup>23</sup> The late Fawcett (1947-2009) rose to fame in the 1970s, especially after starring as private investigator Jill Monroe in the first season of the ABC television series *Charlie's Angels*. It is interesting and, perhaps not coincidental, that she is mentioned in the novella, since "Farrah and her body are linked to the cultural ideals and currents of the late '70s, and [...] those ideals speak to the idea of female independence" (Roberts 83).

<sup>24</sup> "「你也迷花拉嗎? 我曾一度瘋也似迷花拉, 又說不出一個所以然。」

「嗯—, 花拉? 你說的是誰? 是男是女?」她促緊雙眉, 兩道眼光散散失失混成一團疑惑, 倒有點出乎人意料之外。

「嘿, 就是你要買的這張海報女郎花拉法茜啊!」

「我才不管什麼花拉法茜的。」

<sup>25</sup> "她靠著敞開的白漆門板坐下, 解開胸前兩顆鈕扣, 淨揩著頸項間一行行的汗水。"

<sup>26</sup> While Xu stresses the queerness of the relationship between the two women, Ye Fuyan considers it an example of female bonding or sisterhood at best (Ye 53), thus downplaying the homosexual value of the story.

the marriage gate: that's when I realized that I had spent too much time on my education and I had missed the best age to get myself a boyfriend." (Shang, "Xialihe" 65)<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, she is often advised not to be picky and is urged to marry any Tom, Dick or Harry before it is too late. The lack of attention to Yali's interest in Syariah from an intimate, sexual perspective might be explained by the fact that, generally, lesbians are concealed and ignored, since "[a]ccording to a heteronormative order and male gaze, women's intimate relations are understood as friendship or a sexual display aimed at heterosexual men" (Hammarén and Johansson, "Homosociality").

Syariah, too, is presented as a nonconforming woman who does not act in accordance to the norms dictated by Malay society. Although a Muslim, she smokes and drinks, two habits that strongly contradict Malay traditional customs. Moreover, according to the small-town gossip that Yali's sister-in-law shares with the narrator, "she is looked down upon even by Malay people, and she has only herself to blame, since she holds herself cheap" and is a "shameless one" (Shang, "Xialihe" 68).<sup>28</sup> Considered a promiscuous woman who, among other things, bewitches the young soldiers who congregate at her place, everybody seems to keep at a distance from her, as she herself reminds Yali the first time the narrator goes to her house: "There's a wall between my house and the outside world, and even so when you come to my house you are full of scruples. Is it, perhaps, that you don't consider me your friend? Maybe you, too, want to keep away from me, just like the rest of the people!" (72).<sup>29</sup>

And yet Yali, far from sharing society's ousting attitude, appears to be completely mesmerized by Syariah, so much as to pledge allegiance to her: "Frankly speaking, after meeting a warm-hearted friend like you, even if you put rat poison in my noodles, I'd eat them and go happily see my ancestors" (72).<sup>30</sup> Here, the narrator seems to navigate in blurred waters, crossing the line between female homosociality and homoaffectivity and it is perhaps useful to bear in mind that, as Sedgwick suggests, "the diacritical opposition between the 'homosocial' and the 'homosexual' seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women, in our society, than for men" (Sedgwick 2). Although as Griffin contends "[i]t is important to point out that same-sex female desire – or young women's passionate feelings for one another – cannot be read simply in all instances as 'evidence' of lesbianism and/or bisexuality" (Griffin 228), in "Xialihe", there are enough indicators suggesting the *personal voice's* romantic interest for her Malay friend. For instance, when Syariah breaks up with her boyfriend Yahya, after Hasan's return, she spends the night at Yali's, who is more than happy to have her stay at her place and suggests that they sleep together. While Syariah does not spurn the narrator's offer, she feels the need to set things straight: she is too tired and just wants to sleep (Shang, "Xialihe" 88).

The homoaffective attraction, therefore, seems to be one directional: it is not shared by Syariah, who, throughout the story, is described as an independent, heterosexual and feminine woman in love with a younger man. For example, she considers having to carry a gun as one of the disadvantages of being a policewoman, since "women with guns give the impression of being neither flesh nor fowl, completely unfeminine, even somewhat masculine, with their stiff uniforms, showing off their shining gun" (73).<sup>31</sup> Therefore, Shang Wanyun's decision to have Syariah shoot herself to death is a powerful and ingenious narrative expedient, a tool to denounce the high price nonconforming, independent women must pay in a male-dominated society of which the gun is a clear symbol.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the Malay woman not showing signs of amorous interest for her Chinese friend, the dialogue towards the end of the novella, before Syariah's and Yali's destinies part, is loaded with a tragically romantic tension that blurs the line between female bonding and homoaffectivity. Syariah, who has already broken up with Yahya and is determined to leave, opens up to the narrator and tells her:

<sup>27</sup> "像我這般大把年歲，早就讓人在背後叫起老小姐。而且我底兒時童伴泰半做了兩三個毛娃娃的媽媽，唯有我依是徘徊在婚姻門外，才驚覺自己書唸得太多了，錯過交男朋友的大好年華。"

<sup>28</sup> "他們馬來人都不太瞧得起她，怪她自己犯賊嘛！" and "不知羞的東西".

<sup>29</sup> "來我家，和外頭隔了一層牆，你還顧忌那麼多，是不是每當我是你朋友，也學別人一樣跟我保持一段距離！"

<sup>30</sup> "坦白說，交了你這種熱情的朋友，即使麵裡下了老鼠藥，毒飽了見老祖宗去也心甘情願。" "Seeing one's ancestors," in Chinese, is an euphemism for *dying*.

<sup>31</sup> "配槍的女人，總教人不倫不類，沒一點女人的柔順味，那一身板硬的制服，亮著一柄槍，成了半個男人了".

<sup>32</sup> According to Hillier and Wood, "[th]e power of guns is inextricably linked with the notion of masculinity in both industrialised and traditional cultures" (Hillier & Wood 46).

'I've sadly come to realize that we have become past tense and tomorrow, tomorrow is a big question mark. Perhaps, you'll move to Alor Setar, and I might head to the South. See? We are clearly taking separate ways.'

'I've got the same feeling.'

'You've been having this feeling for a while, it's just that you didn't dare to say it out loud.'

'I don't like the feeling of being made a fool of time and again. I am so disappointed.'

'Tomorrow, everything will be over. At this point, I am not asking you to understand me. I know you couldn't possibly accept my explanation.' she said with a feigned smile. I have always thought that she looked uglier when she smiled than she did when she was bitter. (104)<sup>33</sup>

Yali feels betrayed by Syariah's lying to her about her marital status when they first met and until she couldn't hide her condition of divorcée anymore, but she also feels saddened by the woman's decision to leave.

At this point, it has become clear that the entire novella is both a description of a Malay woman as seen through the eyes of an ethnic Chinese female narrator as well as a portrayal of the process of bonding between two Malaysian women at the margins of Malaysian society: Yali – marginalized by her own ethnic community for being a nonconforming woman as well as by the State and the labor market for being an ethnic Chinese with a foreign degree – finds comfort in the bond she created with the Malay protagonist, ostracized by both fellow Malays and ethnic Chinese who all consider her a lecherous woman. Their condition as Malaysians on the fringes of their own country is what spurs them to bond and to overcome ethnic mistrust, a feeling of suspicion that, however, has not always been there. In fact, while at first Yali refuses to accompany Syariah to the *kampung* and the Malay woman assumes that it is because the narrator is afraid of entering Malay territory, the reader learns, through Yali's *personal voice*, that it hasn't always been the case, since when she was in primary school, she had many Malay friends and would often go to their village (70).

However, the betrayal and possibly the unrequited love cause their connection to end, perhaps also showing the difficulty of interethnic relations in postcolonial Malaysia, which are generally thought to be a direct consequence of the 1969 ethnic riots that saw the Chinese and Malay communities clash over the unprecedented Chinese victory at that year's general elections. Ultimately, therefore, the novella can be also read as an allegory of the ethnic Chinese/Malay divide: the uneven relation between the two women becomes a tool to denounce the power dynamics that govern the Chinese presence in postcolonial Malaysia, where "unilateral changes to the ethnic bargain and the formal introduction of ethnic-biased social engineering" (Tan, "From Sojourners" 965) have favored *bumiputera* to the detriment of the ethnic Chinese.

While Liu dismisses the tragic ending of the novella as poorly thought and written (Liu 110), I claim, instead, that it serves as a denouncement of several types of marginalization and the impossibility, especially for women, to overcome them. On the one hand, in Yali's case, her begrudgingly taking up a job as a kindergarten teacher stresses the marginalization suffered by Chinese returnees with foreign degrees. Additionally, the ending scene of the narrator sipping a coffee, all by herself, in a sad, small-town café denounces the loneliness and ostracization of nonconforming women in the traditional ethnic Chinese community of Malaysia. In Syariah's instance, on the other hand, suicide serves as a powerful tool to condemn the marginalization of self-sufficient, independent women in a male-dominated society that does not acknowledge their right to independence and a second chance at love. Moreover, Shang Wanyun also uses it as an admission of the impossibility to change things, even for such self-reliant and seemingly liberated women.

For these reasons as well as for the fact that through this text the author, a Sinophone writer on the fringes of Malaysian literature, bravely challenges the conservative notions of womanhood – within the Chinese community as well as among Malays – and the idea of female bonding as something more than desexualized friendship, I consider "Xialihe" a fictional text whose social value transcends the realm of literature. Lastly, written from within Malaysia and showing an honest concern for local

<sup>33</sup>「我很痛心地發現，我們已經成了過去，明天，明天永遠是一個未知數。你或許去了亞羅士打，我或許南下走走。你看，我們的路線，很明顯的，有著很大的距離。」

「我也有這種感覺。」

「你早就有這種感覺，只是你不肯明講。」

「我不喜歡受騙的感覺，一次又一次，我很失望。」

「明天一切終將成為過去，我這會子不要求你了解我，一時間，你不可能接受我的澄清。」她說這句話，還裝得出微笑。我始終覺得她笑比苦著臉還醜。

society and interethnic dialogue, it also challenges the prescriptive idea of a monolingual National literature, since although not written in Bahasa Malaysia, the novella is truly, unquestionably Malaysian.

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