

# BEYOND THE COLOR LINE: INTERSECTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS IN CHUAH GUAT ENG'S FICTION

Wai Chew Sim

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

wcsim@ntu.edu.sg

## Abstract

This essay argues that the work of Malaysian-Chinese author Chuah Guat Eng gives pause to the culturalism that dominates literary analysis. Articulated primarily through identity politics (the politics of recognition), culturalism's self-understanding keeps at a distance other forms of social justice commitments including class struggle. However, Chuah spotlights their intersectionality in Malaysia and enjoins us to combine the two – to see the native population's demand for economic parity and rural development as coterminous in some respects with the demands for recognition made by settler communities. In particular, Chuah's *Echoes of Silence* (1994) points to the commensurability between socialist principles that underpinned the left-insurgent activities many Malaysian-Chinese joined or supported during the war and immediate post-war, and the social protection principles that underpin post-independence programmes aimed at alleviating poverty. Chuah's second novel, *Days of Change* (2010), in turn suggests that shared ecological conservation ideals provide an arena for redistribution and recognition interests to come together in Malaysia, and this again counters the prevailing tendency to prioritize the claims of cultural otherness. To use terms provided by Émile Durkheim, Chuah highlights organic solidarity and downplays mechanical solidarity. In this regard, her fiction rehearses the theoretical insights of Nancy Fraser, who argues cogently that the framing of redistribution and recognition interests as unrelated or dichotomous commitments is problematic. Like Fraser, Chuah urges an expanded interpretive paradigm unsettling that assumed dichotomy. To the extent that postcolonial literary studies lacks such a focus, a new conceptual vocabulary that extends its horizons is needed.

## Keywords

biodiversity, mechanical and organic solidarity (Durkheim), new economic policy (Malaysia), politics of recognition, postcolonial literature, Southeast Asian writing

**About the Author**

Wai Chew Sim obtained his BA (Honours, first class) from the University of East Anglia, UK, and his PhD from the University of Warwick, UK. He has published several books on British-Asian/Postcolonial cultural production. He is currently working on a book comparing Singapore English- and Chinese-language fiction. His fiction has appeared in the *Straits Times* (Singapore), the *Silverfish* new writing series (Malaysia), and the journals/e-zines: *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings*, *EnterText*, *Julie Mango*, *Asiatic*, and *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*. He has research interests in Postcolonial Literature and Theory with a special focus on Southeast Asian writing.

## Introduction

Malaysia has in recent years produced a crop of outstanding English-language writers – Tash Aw, Tan Twan Eng, Rani Manicka, Preeta Samarasan, Shirley Lim, and Chuah Guat Eng to name a few – who are putting the spotlight on the region. Increasingly, the quality of its English-language fiction may be said to match that of acknowledged strongholds such as India, Nigeria, and the Caribbean.<sup>1</sup> Such writing adds new exciting contours to postcolonial literary studies. However the intellectual protocols for their analysis are arguably dominated by Euro-American theoretical and cultural exigencies. Reflecting these exigencies, the protocols give prominent billings to identity politics, which is to say to struggles for recognition.<sup>2</sup> Such struggles oppose social practices and discourses that marginalize individuals and communities on account of ethnicity or other ascribed features such as gender or sexual orientation. Among other things, they seek a strongly multicultural public ethos, one that fosters parity of participation in social life. The dominant understanding in the Euro-American academe is that the new social movements have supplanted older forms of social struggles centered around class, which agitated over the issue of “what should count as a just distribution” in society (Fraser, *Scales* 3). The former rather than the latter now provides the dominant “grammar of political claims-making” (Fraser, “Rethinking” 108). This also means that recognition and (re)distribution struggles are generally seen as separate or decoupled commitments. Because the prevailing understanding frames them as addressing different constituencies and as following different development pathways, their potential imbrication is little discussed or investigated.

This essay explores the work of one of the above mentioned writers – Chuah Guat Eng – with a view to crafting literary interpretive protocols it considers appropriate for a Southeast Asian setting. Against the dominant framework sketched out above, I argue that single factor considerations (especially those centered around ethnicity) fail to capture the complexity of the issues tracked by Chuah’s writing. An interpretive frame that looks only at ethnicity, stressing in the process the claims of cultural difference, would tend to give a one-sided account of Malaysian social dynamic and cultural production. Whereas the dominant framework considers recognition and redistribution to be separate commitments, I argue that Chuah’s work enjoins us to combine the two. Both are equally important to her vision of progressive social praxis in Malaysia, meaning that their intersectionality within that context needs to be acknowledged and examined.<sup>3</sup> Otherwise the prospect for social justice is dimmed. My intention in articulating this argument is not to dismiss, slight or underrate recognition as a key social justice goal but to demonstrate its imbrication with redistributive concerns in the literature under consideration. Such imbrication demands that we pursue a more expansive interpretive framework.

Put in another way, my essay is also a plea for the recognition of regional particularities. If we take protocols developed for reading anglophone writing

produced by that portion of the Chinese diaspora that fetched up in North America and apply it to anglophone writing produced by that portion of the diaspora that fetched up in Southeast Asia, to, say, Chuah or other Malaysian-Chinese authors, the specificities of the latter group will, I think, be overlooked. In order to grasp these specificities, we must be willing to countenance that *South-South* migration to Southeast Asian locales conceivably raises theoretical and cultural exigencies qualitatively different from that arising from *South-North* migration, and as tracked, for example, in Asian-American writing. This intellectual expansiveness is also what Edward Said taught us, namely that when theory travels from place to place, the conditions for its applicability change, and thus theory must itself change to fit the different socio-cultural matrix.<sup>4</sup>

In the interview accompanying this essay, Chuah suggests that she is against a “Malay-centric ideology of nation.” At the same time, she opposes those members of the Malaysian diaspora who have returned in recent years, attracted by economic and other opportunities, and who are insistently negative about aspects of the Malaysian polity including “the New Economic Policy, the National Language Policy, and the National Literature Policy,” a stance that she labels “opportunistic and cynical.” To the observation that Malaysia labels its English-language writing “sectional” rather than “national,” she adds that all writing is sectional. These comments suggest that the cultural imaginary she delineates in her works tries to give due weight to the concerns of different communities in Malaysia. In my opinion, the imagined community they express assert that redistributive and recognition considerations can work hand in glove to further the common good in Malaysia. Rather than working at loggerheads, Chuah’s texts assert that the two kinds of social justice commitments are commensurable. They can be jointly pursued, and in fact doing so helps construct cross-cultural links that further the cause of community-building in the country.

In particular, Chuah’s first novel, *Echoes of Silence*,<sup>5</sup> shows, I argue, that there is a semantic or logical overlap between redistributive concerns – the demands of the Malay community for economic parity and rural development – and the extension of recognition to settler communities. The novel points to the commensurability between socialist principles that underpinned the left-insurgent activities that many Malaysian-Chinese joined or supported during the war and immediate post-war period, and the social protection principles that underpin post-independence programmes aimed at alleviating poverty.<sup>6</sup> Chuah shows in other words that recent Malaysian history already contains the seeds of a different way of understanding inter-ethnic relations. Also an alternative way of understanding history and nation, this interpretive frame opposes discourses that foster ethnic separatism and fractiousness. Having provided a different way of approaching history in her first novel, Chuah’s second novel, *Days of Change*,<sup>7</sup> looks to the future by addressing alternative forms of development. Set in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, it sees shared ecological conservation ideals as a potential way to rally together

the entire community. Working together to attain such ideals provides a shared experience that again counters separatist or segregational discourses.

In what follows, I examine how Chuah articulates the considerations outlined above. I argue that *Echoes*' detection plot and characterisation strategies are used to broach the issue of elective affinities that subjects may engage in regardless of ascribed identity. With the second novel, I argue that Chuah uses a false-memory motif to spotlight an innovative development scheme that aims to preserve and enhance indigenous forms of knowledge. Apart from combating rural underdevelopment, the scheme weakens the insidious appeal of neo-traditionalist, prelapsarian rhetoric that excludes settler populations from the national cultural imaginary. In the final section of the essay, I draw on the recent work of critical theorist Nancy Fraser to delineate the significance of Chuah's writing. Fraser argues that the assumed dichotomy between redistribution and recognition commitments is in some respects a false binary. In my opinion, Chuah's writing lends support to Fraser's provocative formulations.

## Redressing Uneven Development

Arguably the most compelling aspect of *Echoes*' commitment to redistributive social justice goals is its plot, which works towards emphasizing the need to redress colonial imbalances. The plot trajectory highlights a crucial decision made by Ai Lian, its main protagonist. By the end of *Echoes*, the whodunit question has been resolved. Puteh, a former house servant of Ai Lian's late-husband, Jonathan Templeton, is responsible for the two murders that drive the novel's mystery plot.<sup>8</sup> However, the main focus of the book is not on issues of blameworthiness. The detection genre's predilection for issues of a pecuniary nature is used instead to spotlight how Ai Lian handles the bequest given to her by Jonathan. That bequest left Ai Lian as the sole beneficiary of a large plantation estate in which much of the novel's action occurs. This estate is an obvious symbol of colonialism, of the wealth it generated for Britain, and of the economic and cultural concerns it leaves behind for the postcolonial successor state to handle.

Ai Lian's decision is telling because she donates the estate's mansion to a community development project championed by Puteh's son, Hafiz. Hafiz on his part is pursuing a cherished dream of his father, Yusuf, who had wanted to set up a science college. This project thus promises to bring development to Ulu Banir, the small market town dominated by the Templeton estate. Ai Lian's decision means the school will have additional monies for a "scholarship trust fund for poor, deserving students" (284). In this way, the novel also articulates its support for the New Economic Policy (NEP), the affirmative action programme that Malaysia launched to tackle poverty in 1971.<sup>9</sup> When Ai Lian first meets Yusuf and Puteh, she wonders how they could have done so well materially. Must be the "New Economic Policy" she muses (58). From subsequent sections of the novel, we learn that Yusuf and Hafiz

initially benefited from the leg-up given by the programme, and also that Hafiz's business acumen played a part in their success. Another reason is that, despite her choosing Yusuf over him, Jonathan still loves Puteh, his first love. Over the years, he had transferred some of his assets to Yusuf and Hafiz, with Hafiz becoming a kind of surrogate son that he wanted to groom to take over his businesses. Through its delineation of how subjects develop existential ties with cultural others through romance and family, *Echoes* elaborates its anti-segregational concerns.

What needs emphasizing, however, is the history pursuant to the economic imbalance that *Echoes* posits as a key national concern through Ai Lian's donation, Jonathan's transfer of assets, and through supportive reference to the NEP. In the nineteenth century, as Malaysia started to develop its tin and rubber resources, British colonial authorities had made a fateful decision to not draw on or develop the Malay yeoman peasantry for these industries. Instead they brought in indentured East- and South-Asian labor to meet the booming manpower needs. This was done in the interest of political stability, which is to say that the cost of the political stability needed for economic development was borne mainly by one community. Between 1909 and 1940, Malaya experienced in consequence inward migration flows that, on one estimate, was surpassed only by the US.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the war and in the run up to independence, these policies had established a pattern of uneven and restrictive development, embedding social class differential patterns that partly mirrored ethnic fault-lines and a growing rural-urban divide. Responding to the unpropitious colonial legacy, *Echoes* suggests through the plot details enumerated above that the operations of social justice in Malaysia necessarily involves a social protection agenda – a commitment to tackling issues of uneven development, in particular to meeting the needs of rural population.

## Elective Affinities

But that isn't all, for the novel's more ambitious objective is to show the partially co-constitutive nature of redistributive and recognition commitments in Malaysia. This is done through reference to the mentioned left-insurgent activities, in particular the anti-occupation resistance mounted by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). Against the dominant narrative which paints this group as essentially a Chinese affair, we learn that Yusuf had interacted during the war with some "Malay Communist guerrilla fighters" who were willing to "risk their lives in the hope of repossessing what they had lost" (198). We learn that Jonathan and his friend and physician, Yew Chuan, – the "[s]cion of a tin tycoon" – had fought during the war with the MCP (54). It is the latter who forcefully underscores the issue of elective affinities when he is shown later in the novel heavily involved in "[l]ocal politics," championing the cause of the disadvantaged and roping in Hafiz, a lawyer, to set up what the latter laughingly describes as an "unofficial Legal Aid Bureau" (287). Reacting to the news, Ai Lian muses that it "sounds very much in character, doesn't

it?” this key line reminding us that Yew Chuan’s wartime intrepidity had followed a disavowal of his presumed upper-class status (287).

Yew Chuan’s depiction is, in my opinion, vitally important to the rhetorical goals of *Echoes* because it shows that we are, after all, more than just our ascribed identities. The scion of a tin tycoon *can* express cross-class affiliation with the disadvantaged. Through him the continuity between the socialist principles that drove the MCP and the social protection principles epitomized by the NEP is underscored. The telling feature here is Yew Chuan’s involvement in the MCP’s wartime resistance *and*, in the narrative present, in community work. The fact that he works hand in hand with Hafiz (a feature further developed in *Days*), and that Ai Lian is won over to their vision is the novel’s manner of emphasizing that redistribution and recognition commitments are commensurable. To use Chuah’s language, it is cynical (or illogical) for those who seek a strongly multicultural Malaysia (pointing perhaps to the resistance and anti-colonial activities of the left-insurgents for support) to also in the same breath dismiss the social protection principles that underpin the NEP. And the overlap works both ways. The suggestion, aired in some circles, that the insurgents were primarily bandits dismisses the contribution of settlers at a time of national emergency, but then threatens to undercut the same redistributive ideals that ground the cause of poverty alleviation.

Furthermore, it is Hafiz *and* Yew Chuan who advise Ai Lian to change her isolationist stance and “commit yourself to something,” thus setting the scene for the thematic riffs woven into the ending (296). After leaving Malaysia following the 1969 race riots, Ai Lian had returned in 1973, but doesn’t establish a strong connection to local culture. Reflecting her quasi-nomadic outlook, she invests money in financial markets, not in industry or agriculture. Only at the climax when she donates the plantation mansion does she alter her stance, apparently heeding the advice of Yew Chuan and Hafiz. After this, the novel closes with the revelation that Puteh is actually Ai Lian’s long lost aunt and Hafiz, her cousin, with the wording of Ai Lian’s response – “A family connection, at last” (332) – suggesting some causal connection between her attitudinal change (her elective affinity) and the utopian connotations of the ending, with its promise of the deep shelter attainable from hearth and kin. The revelation of a shared or hidden family lineage helps to bolster the shared values argument that the novel deploys.<sup>11</sup> In this regard, Ai Lian’s commitment to Ulu Banir is, as Chuah states in the accompanying interview, an affirmation of Malaysia’s “multi- and inter-ethnic origins and nature.”

#### Village Life Redux

I have been arguing that *Echoes* urges a different way of understanding Malaysian history and society. Eschewing the prevailing focus on cultural otherness, the novel rewrites the script to emphasize commonalities. Recognition and redistributive struggles are shown to have a mutually reinforcing structure. Taken as a whole, *Echoes* provides an “ideological synthesis” or “defensible common program” (and associated historical understanding) in which the interests of native and settler

populations are shown to be commensurable (Robbins 10). In this concern, it clears space for *Days*, which goes on to give more positive content to the vision of imagined community guiding Chuah's writing. In the sections below, I first provide a quick summary of *Days*, focusing on its use of a false-memory meme. Again, I describe how this text tries to articulate shared communal norms, including ecological ideals that question current forms of development and seek alternative, more sustainable modes of living. Working towards these ideals furthers the cause of what Emile Durkheim calls organic solidarity in Malaysia. Such solidarity creates the conditions of possibility for cultural plurality, understanding, and cooperation.

*Days* is told in the first person and continues Hafiz's story from *Echoes*. Now a successful developer, Hafiz wrestles with amnesia and false-memory concerns after he falls into a ravine while on land inspection. He remembers waking up suffering from amnesia in a secluded village, Kampung Basoh. Cared for by two traditional healers who took him in, the *gemeinschaft* setting, the simple piety of his interlocutors, and their kindness despite wrenching poverty cause Hafiz to reflect on issues of "tradition and modernity" (170). Lamenting that places such as Kampung Basoh need more "development" than what goes by that name with many trumpeted schemes, Hafiz decides to revive his father's community project (155). Busy with work, he had let that particular dream slip by. Rather than the mooted college of science, however, he believes the community would be better served by a "college of traditional science" located at Kampung Basoh and focused on the study of "alternative medicine" (167, my italics). Such an undertaking would preserve from disappearance the deep knowledge of traditional herbal cures and jungle ecology demonstrated by his elderly carers. The herbal gardens and ancillary facilities required for such an undertaking would provide "employment" while maintaining the "ecological balance" of the country's rainforest resources (211, 216). With the college as a backdrop, Kampung Basoh could grow into a kind of "traditional health village," and with time such villages could even form the basis of a "nationwide health- and eco-tourist industry" (173, 168).

It transpires, however, that Hafiz's recollection of Kampung Basoh is a kind of false-memory. Hafiz believes that he was trapped there for months fighting amnesia until a villager, recognizing him from a photo in a news article, contacted his family. But in actuality he had languished in a coma in hospital for six months. "There is no Kampung Basoh," he is told (222). Hafiz has a breakdown after the revelation, which causes him to doubt his sanity. When he recovers, he fights sporadic depression; his family and associates treat him like an invalid. But crucially with Ai Lian's and her daughter Anna's support he begins to rise from that nadir. Even if the village doesn't exist, the cause is worthy, and furthermore Ai Lian and Anna agree to join his scheme. Together with Ai Lian and Anna, Hafiz spends six months combing the backwaters of West Malaysia searching for Kampung Basoh to no avail. Eventually at the end of the novel, Hafiz states that they will set up an herb garden on the grounds of the former Templeton mansion. He adds in the closing lines of the text:

“I’m excited as I haven’t been for a long time. We have much to do in the days ahead” (271).

## Roots Revivalism with a Twist

As suggested by the summary above, the novel’s most interventionist feature is arguably its use of a false-memory motif. Again, I contend, this feature showcases Chuah’s attempt to craft a *defensible* common programme articulating the interests of different communities. Hafiz’s desire to revive his father’s project puts forward the case for rural development. Kampung Basoh may be a construct of his imagination but the rural-urban gap he delineates – the “[p]overty that was supposed to have been eliminated by the NEP” (99) – is a pressing enough concern. By staging his reminiscence as a false memory, however, Chuah also tries to navigate the shoals of neo-traditionalist discourse in Malaysia, rejecting therein its socially marginalizing propensities. This discourse often imbues the village setting with a bucolic ambience, painting it as the *fons et origo* of the good life characterized by deep social bonds and a common sustaining culture. In the national imaginary, the village represents nature and authenticity, the city, artifice and existential complacency. While appealing in many ways, the difficulty is that neo-traditionalism is vulnerable to racialist invocation of a prelapsarian Malaysia disrupted (or threatened) by settlers. It excludes the latter. Hafiz points to the power of such nativist discourse when he notes that “[p]oets and politicians make it easy and tempting for town Malays like me to talk glibly about the romantic simplicity of rural life” while overlooking the “squalor” and “hardship[s]” faced by residents (99). Because the discourse sanctions a residual feudal mindset expressed through a “fatalistic ignoring” of certain modern lifeways, he takes care to register the deleterious impact of such fatalism on the village dweller’s quality of life (106).

*Days* in this regard uses a false-memory meme to undermine socially exclusive strands of neo-traditionalism without at the same time underrating the needs and claims of the rural population. Those strands are “false” because they ignore rural hardships. But Hafiz’s failure to find Kampung Basoh also doesn’t stop him from pressing ahead with his project, for like the “dreaming” experiences of Australian aborigines when they go on a “walkabout,” he feels that that aspiration represents contact with a deeper, more weighty “reality,” with what “really matter[s]” (226). Overall, *Days* suggests that any venture addressing rural hardships and development potential in effect refuses to romanticize it. And this helps to limit the appeal of neo-traditionalism, allowing other, more socially inclusive narratives to gain ground in the public imagination. At any rate, it reduces the demagogic reach of the unnamed politicians mentioned by Hafiz. Their use of exclusivist rhetoric to polarize the population and win votes is hampered if rural development is secured.

In my opinion, what weakens the trenchant appeal of neo-traditionalism is that Hafiz’s scheme grants traditional forms of knowledge due weight and status. The

two are different things. The knowledge of herbal cures and jungle ecology that Hafiz's two elderly carers possess is, to give it its proper name, a form of "Traditional Ecological Knowledge" (TEK) that is increasingly being valued nowadays. As stated on the website of a non-profit organization which seeks its development, TEK has attracted increased attention in recent years from "academics, natural resource managers, and commercial concerns." With its focus on the valued goals of biodiversity and sustainability, it has the potential to provide "valuable information if not useful models that can be adapted for resource management." These include practices in the areas of "permaculture (mixed cropping and agroforestry systems), water harvesting and soil conservation, fire management (controlled burns), botanical medicines, heirloom grains and vegetables, handicrafts" and so on."<sup>12</sup>

The important point here is that Hafiz slots TEK into a wide array of skills, knowledges, and processes that all need to be mastered if his project is to have any chance of success. To succeed, he needs "botanists" and "biochemists" to document and systematize the knowledge of the mentioned healers, to put it on a modern, scientific footing (167). To develop "[n]on-disruptive tourism," he needs the involvement of the country's indigenous peoples known collectively as the "*orang asli*" (168, italics in original). He himself has had to learn how to use the "Internet" (168). He needs to master "town-planning, healthcare, herbs, pharmacology, the lot" (193). He understands that he is "out of [his] depth" and that sooner or later he will need to bring in "experts" (168). Thus as Hafiz delineates the promise of TEK, the limits of the exclusivist "nostalgic" vision of "tradition" are simultaneously underscored. Unlike the latter, there is place in the former for all who wish to join and who can contribute, including Ai Lian and Anna. Anna herself had run a "landscape gardening" business that fell victim to the 1997 "Asian financial crisis"; she feels that a health village venture answers her own "existential" needs and therefore joins it (232).

## Individuality and social cohesion

To use the terms provided by Durkheim, Chuah proposes and constructs organic solidarity in order to counter the insidious appeal of mechanical solidarity. In contrast to what we might expect, Durkheim uses the term mechanical solidarity to refer to the social cohesion which inheres in a *gemeinschaft* or traditional village setting. There is little room for individuality in such an environment. Members reflect in a cookie-cutter fashion the collective consciousness or "totality of beliefs and sentiments" prevailing in society.<sup>13</sup> Solidarity here is strongest when collective consciousness "completely envelops" one's personality. When we act, "we are no longer ourselves; we are a collective being." In contrast, modern, pluriform societies characterized by widely-variegated division of labor allow a different kind of cohesion – organic solidarity – to prevail. Whereas mechanical solidarity is possible only to the extent that individuality is "absorbed into" and expresses social

being, organic solidarity relies on individual development sustained *by* the division of labour. Individuals operate like the organs of “higher animals,” with each having their “own sphere of action” or “special functions.” For Durkheim, organic solidarity surpasses mechanical solidarity because the former allows subjects to understand their dependency on others and on society while championing “individual” or “personal” development precisely to fulfill those special functions: “on the one hand, the more labour is divided up, the greater the dependence on society, and, on the other hand, the more specialized the activity of each individual, the more personal it is.”

Without delving into the intricacies of Durkheim’s thought, we might say that Hafiz’s scheme articulates the lineaments of organic solidarity, with subjects performing differentiated tasks and society benefiting from complementarities between people. Social cohesion (of the organic variety) is needed and achieved when the community comes together to solve common social problems.<sup>14</sup> And the proposed venture comes at a time when it isn’t just Malaysia facing economic turmoil. As the moniker suggests, the Asian financial crisis has a regional and actually global impact. Anna’s landscaping business goes under. Hafiz observes that “[e]verywhere were to be seen multi-million projects abandoned” (151). In this context, TEK enterprises can help to diversify the economy, insulating Malaysia from the periodic upheavals besetting the global accumulation regime. Moreover, the text makes clear that the project answers Anna’s as well as Hafiz’s spiritualist or existentialist anxieties.

Most crucially, however, *Days* suggests that the ecological conservation ideals that ground the project under the watchwords of sustainability and biodiversity provide a platform that all can rally under. Their individual contributions enhance social cohesion through social interdependency, just as Hafiz, in his weak, distressed state, relies on Ai Lian and Anna as they travel round the country. The analogical argument here asserts that co-nationals working together to attain shared goals can acquire a shared sense of belonging. And that is also why *Days* constructs Hafiz’s story as the revelations contained in a number of notebooks that he wills to Anna after his death, and which she ponders over before publishing. The metafictional arrangement of the text, with Anna cast as the custodian of Hafiz’s dream, betokens Chuah’s focus on shared norms fostering the development of a mutuality that connotes the beginning of multicultural community. A cultural hybridity worthy of the name emerges if social protection becomes a valued goal and undertaking.

#### South-South Encounters

In the movement from *Echoes* to *Days*, Chuah’s signal achievement is to recognize that the social vision she pursues needs more positive content, not just a different way of understanding history and nation. The benefits of smaller-scale, more sustainable kinds of development, in particular those that augment “the relationship between people and their living environment” provide that content

(157). To reiterate the themes of this essay, the focus in *Days* as in *Echoes* is on the intersectionality of redistributive and recognition interests in Malaysia. Hafiz's scheme presses the case for rural development while challenging neo-traditionalist rhetoric that exclude or implicitly stigmatize minority communities. Such intersectionality demands that we move beyond culturalism as the main mode of literary engagement and attempt some synthesis of culturalist *and* materialist considerations in our interpretive protocols, that we see the former as being commensurate with the class struggle and a social protection agenda. To the extent that postcolonial literary studies currently lacks such a focus, a new conceptual vocabulary that extends its horizons is needed, one that rejects a binary or zero-sum logic that would perforce set the two spheres at loggerheads.

From a broader perspective, we might say that Chuah's fiction rehearses the theoretical insights of Nancy Fraser, who has argued that our notional understanding of redistribution and recognition struggles as decoupled, dichotomous, or even adversarial commitments is problematic. Fraser argues cogently in a recent essay that our conception of the perimeters of anti-system resistance needs to be expanded. It involves not just conflicts between capital and labor at the point of production but also other struggles that shape and orient that primary conflict. These include struggles over gender domination, environmental spoilage, and political/geopolitical structures and processes. Just as Marx "looked behind the sphere of exchange, into the 'hidden abode' of production, in order to discover capitalism's secrets," Fraser contends that these struggles constrain and determine the "background conditions of possibility" for the prevailing mode of production ("Behind" 57, 60). In this sense, the anti-capitalist struggle is "much broader than Marxists have traditionally supposed" ("Behind" 72). From the earlier discussion, it would seem that Chuah's pursuit of the historical and conceptual overlaps between redistribution and recognition commitments in Malaysia does dovetail provocatively with the theoretical advances secured by Fraser's analysis. It may be timely as such to see what Southeast Asian writing has to say about the issues raised herein, rather than blindly following the metropolitan protocols dominating literary discussion. To take a leaf from the TEK concept, knowledge arising from *South-South* migration, exchange and encounters may also provide useful models for us to follow.

## Notes

1. The Philippines also belongs to this configuration although its encounter with Spanish and American imperialism sets it apart from these former constituents of the British empire.
2. See Charles Taylor (1994).
3. The term intersectionality derives from Black Feminist Studies, which asserts that single-factor considerations may advance partial analyses of the social exclusions they seek to ameliorate. For Patricia Hill Collins, “Intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppressions cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (18).
4. See the chapter titled “Travelling Theory” in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*.
5. Henceforth abbreviated *Echoes*.
6. As defined by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, social protection is concerned with “preventing, managing, and overcoming situations that adversely affect people’s well being”; in developing countries, it provides “a policy framework for addressing poverty and vulnerability” (135). See UNRIFSD Combating Poverty and Inequality: Structural Change, Social Policy and Politics.
7. Henceforth abbreviated *Days*.
8. Puteh’s name and situation alludes to Maria Hertogh, a Dutch child who was raised a muslim by her Indonesian foster mother after wartime conditions led to her being separated from her biological parents. Hertogh was nicknamed “Putih” meaning “white” by her foster mother. This connection to the real-life “Maria Hertogh case” is acknowledged in *Days* (250).
9. The NEP lasted from 1971 to 1991 and has since been superseded by other schemes. On the reasons for its implementation, see Faaland and others (1990).
10. See Abraham (1983, pg. 22).
11. For a contrasting reading, see Perera (2008).
12. “Traditional Ecological Knowledge.” Society for Ecological Restoration: Indigenous Peoples’ Restoration Network, 2014. Web. 15 June 2014. <<https://www.ser.org/iprn/traditional-ecological-knowledge>>.
13. The quotes in this paragraph are taken from Durkheim (2004). See Reading 3: *The Division of Labour in Society*.
14. I adapt here an argument used by Daniel P. S. Goh (2010).

## Works Cited

- Abraham, Collin E. R. "Racial and Ethnic Manipulation in Colonial Malaya." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 6.1 (1983): 18-32. Print.
- Chuah, Guat Eng. *Echoes of Silence: A Malaysian Novel*. Kuala Lumpur: Holograms, 1994. Print.
- . *Days of Change: A Malaysian Novel*. Kuala Lumpur: Holograms, 2010. Print.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Durkheim, Emile. *Readings from Emile Durkheim*. Ed. Kenneth Thompson. London: Routledge, 2004. Google Play E-book.
- Faaland, Just., J.R. Parkinson, and R. Saniman. *Growth and Ethnic Inequality: Malaysia's New Economic Policy*. London: Hurst, 1990. Print.
- Fraser, Nancy. "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism." *New Left Review* 86 (Mar.-Apr. 2014): 55-72. Print.
- . "Rethinking Recognition." *New Left Review* 3 (May-June 2000): 107-20. Print.
- . *Scales of Justice*. New York: Columbia UP, 2009. Print.
- Goh, Daniel P.S. "Multiculturalism and the Problem of Solidarity." *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*. Ed. Terence Chong. Singapore: ISEAS, 2010. 561-78. Print.
- Perera, Suvendrini K. "A Case of Mistaken Identities? Retelling Malaysia's National Story." *Overcoming Passion for Race in Malaysia Cultural Studies*. Ed. David C.L. Lim. Leiden: Brill, 2008. 13-27. Print.
- Robbins, Bruce. *Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007. Print.
- Said, Edward. *The World, the Text and the Critic*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983. Print.
- Taylor, Charles. "The Politics of Recognition." *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Ed. Amy Gutmann. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994. 25-73. Print.
- United Nations. *UNRIFSD Combating Poverty and Inequality: Structural Change, Social Policy and Politics*. UNRISD: Geneva: 2010. Print.