Zheng Tufei and "The Coconuts". Revolution, Coolies, and Heartbreaks in Nanyang

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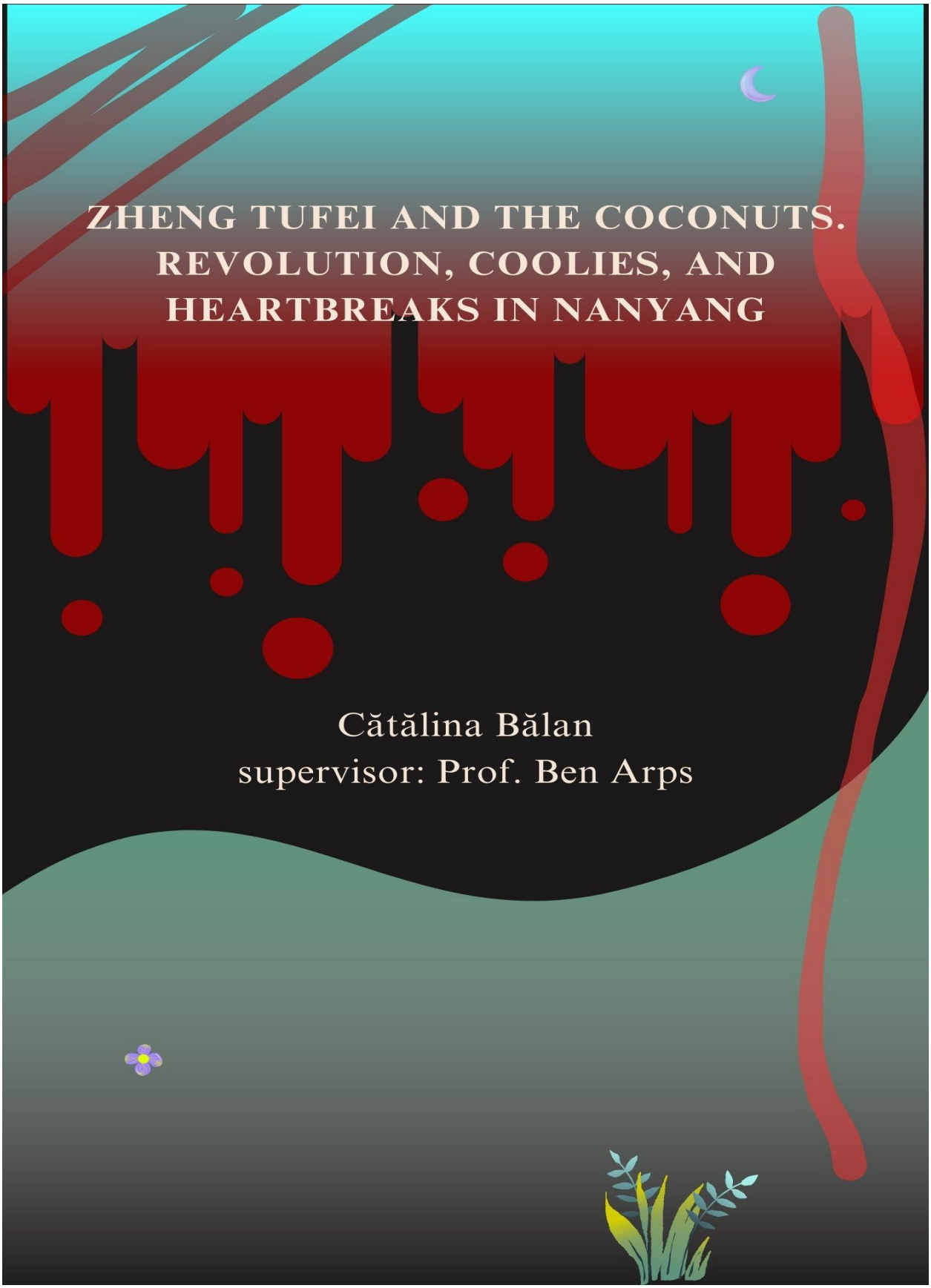
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Introduction

Shanghai 上海 in the 1920s. A bustling arena of all kinds of "modernity" molded after Western things – from jazz bars to translations of French naturalist novels. The press advocating for radical change in society and literature, altogether. Political debates and twists between communists and nationalists. Men in Western suits and university-educated women. Ambitious student literary societies. A sea of books and journals under the ideal of a New Literature. And, overall, the turbulence of the Civil War and foreign imperialist manifestations.

Among all these, there appears in 1929, in one of the publishing houses who like to take the face of Westernized modernity, a book with an exotic title that doesn't fit entirely in the trends, *The Coconuts* (《椰子集》*Yezi ji*). The author, whose pen-name is Zheng Tufei 鄭吐飛, is a *Huaqiao* 華僑[1] student majoring in Western literature and law at the *Huaqiao*-oriented Jinan University (暨南大學 Jinan Daxue).

He comes from an exotic space for the Chinese: Southeast Asia, more precisely the Dutch East Indies, nowadays Indonesia. His book is rich in descriptions, cultural aspects, and love stories, but in spite of that, instead of the dream-like Nanyang 南洋[2] from the Chinese imaginary, the Chinese reader discovers a world of injustice, superficiality, violence, exploitation, where the coconut trees hide bloody events and evil spirits. Coming from a colonial environment, where nationalistic movements and leftist protests started to appear only to be suppressed by the colonial authorities, Zheng Tufei comes up with a book full of pessimism and rage. He also approaches other themes, dear to the New Literature of China: anti-Confucian critiques, stories of free love, sexual life, and male sentimentalism.

Personally acquainted with great authors of that time and part of an ambitious but short-lived *Huaqiao* student literary society, Zheng Tufei tries to enter the literary scene of Shanghai,

[1] *Huaqiao* "华侨" – term traditionally used for people of Chinese ethnicity residing in another country than China and preserving nevertheless their status of Chinese nationals, translated in English as "overseas Chinese"; in present times, the term refers to the persons who did not take the citizenship or nationality of the country of residence, as there is the possibility of choosing to do so, but before World War II (in Indonesia, before independence) all persons of Chinese ethnicity were considered subjects of China and Chinese law, thus *Huaqiao* – cf. Suryadinata 1997.
[2] Culturally-charged Chinese term designating Southeast Asia; literally translates as the "South Seas".

but around the time of publication of his only book, *The Coconuts*, he leaves China and heads towards British Malaya, and soon his footsteps are lost in history. Not much information about his life is to be found, but what he left behind – a 196-pages volume of novellas – is a complex book that stands at the intersection of two spaces, China and the Dutch East Indies, and shows many facets of interaction between them.

Now, questions arise: what did he aim at through his (few but strong) texts? Why so much violence and hatred? Why only tragical love stories? Who were the categories of people he talked about, who seemed to be completely neglected by other authors? Who were Zheng's peers and what inspiration could he have drawn from them? What was his position in the literary scene in China? How did he relate to the social and literary developments from the Indies? What and why does this book speak to the Chinese reader about the interactions between different ethnicities in colonial Indonesia? These questions will be answered throughout the present study, leading to the understanding of the reciprocal game of interactions: what is the place of Zheng Tufei in the (literary but not only) history of China and the Dutch East Indies, and what is the place of China and the Dutch East Indies in *The Coconuts*?

In the next pages, Zheng Tufei's life and work will be presented in the basis of currently available data, followed by the theoretical approach that will be used, as the book will be analyzed through philological lenses in the next chapters.

1. Zheng Tufei's biography and bibliography

1.1. Scholarship and other writings on Zheng Tufei

Secondary sources documenting the life and literary career of Zheng Tufei are quite scarce. Most of the research was done so far by Chinese scholars[3] in the period 1965-2019, among whom Hong Huiyun, Ma Feng, Lai Baijiang, Guo Huifen, and Wu Yiqi brought the most substantial contributions, integrating him in the history of Sino-Indonesian literature, but also showing his connections with Chinese literature, presenting important biographical and bibliographical data (mostly about the years he spent in China), presenting his volume with reference to the themes, fictional universe, characters, ideology. The other scholars usually only briefly mention him in

[3] See Fang Xiu 方修, Wu Yiqi 吳奕錡, Wang Yisheng 汪義生, Yang Yi 楊怡, Guo Huifen 郭惠芬, Lai Baijiang 賴伯疆, Deng Jitian 鄧集田, Wang Xishan 王西山, Hong Huiyun 洪惠雲, Ma Feng 馬峰, An Kang 安康, Hsu Yun-ts'iao 許雲橋.

their accounts of the history of Sino-Indonesian literature. From Indonesia there is Maharani, who mentions him in her MA thesis written in China at Huaqiao University (華僑大學 Huaqiao Daxue) in 2004, on the history of Sino-Indonesian literature; apart her, no other research seems to have been done on him by Indonesian scholars. An extremely important research is done by French scholar Claudine Salmon in 1988, who provides biographical and bibliographical data – including his activity in the Straits Settlements, which is not documented by other scholars – and summaries and analysis of the texts in *The Coconuts*. Canadian researcher Josh Stenberg also refers to him in his paper on Sino-Indonesian literature, naming him "the first accomplished Chinese-language litterateur from the Indies" (Stenberg 2017, 635). He is often set as an example of a Sino-Indonesian writer influenced by the May Fourth Movement in China.

Zheng Tufei is also mentioned by his contemporaries, in non-fictional writings and a poem: Lu Xun 魯迅, Yu Dafu 鬱達夫, and his fellow writers from Jinan University – Chen Xiangbing 陳翔冰, Chen Fei 陳斐, Wen Zichuan 溫梓川.

Thus, this section aims to gather together all the disparate data found so far about Zheng Tufei, after readings, comparation of sources, and critical evaluation.

1.2. Real name and pen-names

To begin with, Zheng Tufei's real name was Zheng Sishui 鄭泗水, where Sishui 泗水 is the Chinese word for the city of Surabaya in Indonesia.[4] His other pen name (*hao* 號) was Chongyuan 崇源 (Guo 2019), but in most (known) publications, including *The Coconuts*, he signed with Zheng Tufei. His acquaintances referred to him in their autobiographical writings by his real name or by his pen-name. It seems like his pen-name was a homonym of the noun *tufei* "土匪" (*thief*) – his nickname in university because of his sturdy stature and negligent hair (Wen 1960).

1.3. Origins, the Dutch East Indies period

Regarding Zheng Tufei's life before coming to China, not much information is known, not even his year of birth. Most scholars agree that he was born in the Dutch East Indies, in Surabaya,

[4] A possible indication of the fact that he was born there.

East Java, in a family whose ancestral homeland was Yongchun 永春, Fujian 福建 Province (Lai 2019). His contemporary, Wen Zichuan, writes in his memoires basic but illuminating information: he confirms that Zheng Tufei was a *Huaqiao* Chinese from Java. He also mentions that he was fluent in Malay and Dutch languages (Wen 1960), which may possibly indicate that he attended Dutch-language education in the Indies.

1.4. Studies, the China period

What is known for sure from Zheng Tufei's biography are his university years, spent in Xiamen 廈門 (Fujian Province) and Shanghai, between 1926-1929. The exact date of his arrival in China is not documented, but it is known that in 1926 he was already there: according to Wen Zichuan's memoires, Zheng Tufei was studying in 1926 at Jinan University, located at that time in Shanghai, together with his friend and future collaborator from *Qiuye*《秋野》(*Autumn Field*) journal, Chen Xiangbing. In the autumn of the same year, they transferred to Xiamen University (廈門大學 Xiamen Daxue) in Xiamen, in order to attend Lu Xun's courses there. After Lu left Xiamen in 1927, Zheng and Chen went back to Jinan University in the second half of the year, where they studied until 1929 (Ma 2017). Zheng Tufei's major was Western literature, at the Faculty of Literature (文學院 Wenxue Yuan), the same as for many other members from Qiuye. Apart from literature, he was also skilled for basketball (Wen 1960). Ma Feng notes that Zheng Tufei's major was actually Law, but expresses uncertainty (Ma 2017). This is also the time when he and his *Huaqiao* friends at Jinan University founded the literary society Qiuye She 秋野社 (Autumn Field Society) (Hong 2015b).

1.5. Connections in China

One of the most remarkable connections that Zheng Tufei had in China was with great writer Lu Xun, founder of modern Chinese literature (Ma 2017). Zheng attended his lectures at Xiamen University, and in Shanghai Lu was invited to Qiuye She for lectures and for having texts published in *Qiuye* (the lecture *The Wrong Road of Arts and Politics*/《文藝與政治的歧途》 *Wenyi yu zhengzhi de qitu*, published in January 1928) (Ma 2017). It seems like he had a direct influence on Zheng himself (Ma 2017), and they had a correspondence through letters between

April 1927 and November 1928, mentioned briefly in Lu's diaries. What is remarkable about their interaction is the fact that Lu wrote on the 18th of November 1928 that he received a letter from Zheng and on the 19th that he gave him back the manuscript (Lu 1981, 733), and one of the novellas in *The Coconuts* is dated in the volume on the 11th of November, with the mention that it is the "first manuscript" (Zheng 1929, 103). So, the manuscript that Lu was talking about might have been the one for this story (also, it has specific features that differentiates it from the other texts in the volume, which will be discussed in chapter 5).

Apart Lu Xun, there were also other renowned Chinese writers invited to Qiuye She for lectures and other activities, such as Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (also dean of the faculty) (Wen 1960), Xu Zhimo 徐志摩, Baren 巴人, Liang Shiqiu 梁實秋 (Hong 2015a). Many authors had texts published in *Qiuye* or participated in events organized by Qiuye She, and some of *Huaqiao* background, for example Chen Xiangbing (even if originally born in China, he had lived with his family in Burma until 1925), Chen Xuejiang 陳雪江 (Chinese-Filipino), Liu Jue nüshi (Chinese-Siamese), Chen Guchuan (had worked in the Straits Settlements) (Hong 2015a). Among them, Zheng collaborated a lot with Chen Xiangbing; their relation seems to be quite close, because they didn't only collaborate for the society and the journal, but also spent together their university years, moving from Shanghai to Xiamen and back (Guo 2019).

Moreover, the fact that Zheng published *The Coconuts* at Zhenmeishan Bookstore/真美善書店 Zhenmeishan shudian indicates the fact that he was an acquaintance of Zeng family, who owned the bookstore, as they usually helped their own acquaintances and friends to publish (Salmon 1988).

1.6. Literary career in China

Zheng Tufei attempted to integrate in the literary scene of cosmopolitan Shanghai from the 1920s, by participating in the foundation of the literary society Qiuye, organizing literary events where greater writers were invited for speeches, publishing his own texts, and doing translations.

According to Hong Huiyun, Qiuye She was intended to be a literary society of students of *Huaqiao* background at Jinan University (Hong 2015b), but Wen Zichuan describes it merely as a "literary group of young authors" (Wen 1960, 70). The society's journal, *Qiuye*, existed between 1927-1929. The society drew its name from Chinese poet Li He's 李賀 (790-817) poem *A Walk*

in the Middle of Southern Mountain's Fields (《南山田中行》*Nan Shan tian zhong xing*): the opening words of the poem, *qiu* "秋" (*autumn*) and *ye* "野" (*fields*), thus the name of the society can be translated as *Autumn Field*. The poem is a simple descriptive text about an autumn landscape, and the most apparent connection is the fact that the society was founded in autumn (He 2014). Zheng Tufei was editor, together with Chen Xiangbing, and one of the leading figures of the society. They organized literary events and published in the journal novellas, poetry, essays, translations, and lectures (Wen 1960). Even if the society was constituted by a group of *Huaqiao* students from Southeast Asia, the manifesto of the journal's first issue doesn't make the slightest mention, having instead an agenda of fighting for revolution and showing solidarity for China's struggles:

> We must not long for that distant "paradise", moreover, "paradise" really isn't what we need right now. For the people who are standing in this same moment in a pool of blood on the battlefield: we should cry sorrowfully, laugh insanely, console with our cries and laughs those great revolutionary souls from below and above the ground, and awaken fiercely in the same time our own lonely and lazy souls, what we need is revolution, not "paradise". Let's leave the "paradise" to our distant friends from the future. We must go to the battlefield, singing songs of bravery! (Zhang 1927, 1)

Most of the texts don't show any correlation with Southeast Asia: most of the fictional texts have their action placed in China, the translated texts are from European and Japanese literature, the essays are concerned with Chinese society and mores, modernity and Westernization, or literary theory.[5]

Zheng Tufei published there, however, seven novellas about Southeast Asia, which would later be compiled in *The Coconuts*, all of them probably written between 1927-1929, in China (Ma 2017), plus two others which were not featured in *The Coconuts* (*Grave of Love*/《愛的墳墓》*Ai de fenmu*and *Fasting*/《禁食節》*Jinshi jie*), and a collection of Fujianese poetry (*Love Songs from Minnan*/《閩南情歌》*Minnan qingge*) (Hong 2015b).

The most important achievement of Zheng Tufei in China was the publication of his volume at Zhenmeishan Bookstore, on the 30th of May 1929. Wang Xiqiang mentions the fact that

[5] At least in the issues that I consulted: the texts from vol. 1, no. 1, the titles from vol. 2, no. 6.

he also published translations there, but doesn't name titles or authors (Wang X. 2012); on the other hand, Wen Zichuan recalls that Zheng translated "many Malay love songs" (Wen 1960, 71) – without saying where they were published. Zhenmeishan Bookstore was preoccupied with the promotion of foreign literature in China through translations, as many other bookstores, joining the efforts of creating a literature for the masses, accessible to everyone (Wang X. 2012). Thus, by publishing his volume here, Zheng aligned pretty much with the mainstream development of literature and publishing houses in China at that time.

After leaving Shanghai (date remains vague, probably 1929, possibly even before *The Coconuts* was printed), there are a few years when not much is documented about his activity, but according to Ma Feng's deductions, in 1934 Zheng became editor at *Jiaoyu xunkan*《教育旬刊》(*Journal of Education*) from Guangxi 廣西 Province, where he published *Introductory Remarks on the Compilation of Folkloric Arts* (《民間文藝征集例言》*Minjian wenyi zhengji liyan*) and *The Play of the Jintou Research Institute of Promoting Popular Education* (《津頭村觀普及國民基礎教育研究院演劇》*Jintou cun guan Puji Guomin Jichu Jiaoyu Yanjiuyuan yanju*) in the first two issues of the journal (Ma 2017).

1.7. The life after China

Not much is known about Zheng Tufei's life outside China. Even if he seemed to be one of the most skilled writers from Qiuye She (Wen 1960), he apparently ended his literary career very soon. He is supposed to have shifted to commerce and become a good businessman working in Hong Kong, Singapore and Indonesia (Ma 2017).

However, other scholars claim that Zheng did not completely end his literary and publishing career with *The Coconuts*. Claudine Salmon notes that he worked for the literary supplement *Mantuoluo*《曼陀羅》from the Singaporean Chinese-language journal *Nanyang shangbao*《南洋商報》(*Nanyang Journal of Commerce*), which had only two issues (31st of May 1929, 14th of June 1929). This was a publication with revolutionary and political content related to the Sino-Malay literature and the affirmation of a Nanyang identity, progressive ideas, socialist perspectives (Salmon 1988), which he might have shared as well. If he indeed wrote for *Mantuoluo*, he probably left China earlier than the date of publication of *The Coconuts* (30th of May 1929). In *Mantuoluo* he published translated fragments from *The Crown of Kings* (*Mahkota raja-raja*) by

Bukhari al-Jauhari, a classical Malay text written in 1603 in Johor, and he expressed his admiration for this work. He worked together with a certain Zheng Wentong 鄭文通, aiming to introduce classical Malay literature to the Chinese-speaking readership from Singapore, because they considered very important that *Huaqiao* people from Singapore acquire knowledge about Southeast Asian native literature. It looks like he worked on a novel too, which he started publishing in 1929 in the Singaporean literary supplement *Pupu*《瀑瀑》(*Waterfall*), but which wasn't published in its entirety (Salmon 1988). Hong Huiyun claims that he stopped writing after the translation of *The Crown of Kings*, with no mention of the novel (Hong 2015b). After his activities at *Mantuoluo* in 1929, there's no information about the following years, until 1934, when he was apparently writing for *Jiaoyu xunkan* in Guangxi (Ma 2017).

A brief but important information is brought by Masao Suzuki 鈴木正夫, who notes that Yu Dafu, as refugee in the Dutch East Indies during the Pacific War, stayed for a while in Sepotong in Zheng Tufei's house (whom he calls by his real name, Zheng Sishui) and dedicated to him a short poem, *On the Half Idle Residence of My Friend, Zheng Sishui* (《題友人鄭泗水半閒居》*Ti youren Zheng Sishui ban xian ju*), dated 1942. Its last verse compares Zheng Tufei with Tao Zhu 陶朱, a wealthy statesmen and businessman from Han 漢 Dynasty (206 BCE-220 AD) (Suzuki 1996), which confirms the fact that in the 1940s Zheng was living in the Indies and was indeed a prosperous businessman. The poem is also a testimony of a certain connection, even friendship, between Yu and Zheng.

Lastly, Ma Feng claims that in September 1952 Zheng Tufei was accompanying a tourist group of Chinese-Indonesians in China, saying that he was residing in Indonesia at that time (information relying on an entry in Indonesian journal *Shenghuo bao*《生活報》/*Life* from the 11th of September 1952, republished by Zheng Yeying 鄭椰影 in *Selected Works by Zheng Chuyun*/*Z*《鄭楚雲文選》*heng Chuyun wenxuan*) (Ma 2017).

Apart from these data regarding Zheng Tufei's biography and bibliography, most of his life before and after China remains very vague.

1.8. *The Coconuts*

The Coconuts is the main artefact known to the present day to have remained after Zheng Tufei's life. Published in a (probably) unique edition in 1929, it is now a rare book. The volume

contains seven novellas of different lengths, in the following order. A short summary of each one of them will be provided here, and developed in the final chapter.

***Human Head* (《人頭》*Rentou*)**, pages 1-19

Since the very beginning, the reader is introduced in the colonial context, with useless and disturbing technical progress brought by the colonial Dutch government in the villages in the Dutch East Indies. A steel bridge doesn't fit in the natural harmony of the place, that is why the spirits of the river rise up (at least that is what the locals believe) and start killing innocent people (Chinese and Malays) by cutting their heads and throwing their bodies in the river. The protagonist, a poor, old, decayed Chinese merchant named Ah Jin 阿金, who had been living in the Indies for many years, also pays with his own life for this bridge.

It is the Malays who seem to be right regarding the issue – with their beliefs and awareness, they understand the best what is happening and start protecting themselves. Ah Jin's Malay wife warns him against going out at night for business, but he doesn't listen to her advice, eventually getting attacked and killed. The Dutch are depicted as ignorant, egoistic, and materialistic, and they don't understand the situation, they take inefficient measures against it: sending police to catch a supposed murderer, where it rather seemed to be a supernatural force.

***Sharks* (《鯊魚》*Shayu*)**, pages 21-32

A fisherman, Xiwen 西溫, living in complete precarity in a coastal village on an island near Sumatra, faces a cruel and unyielding fate: he gets eaten by sharks while fishing in order to assure the survival of his poor family. The night before his departure on sea for fishing sharks, there are strange omens around their house, which alarm Xiwen's wife, Qina 芹娜: a prophetic dream, a strange song of the hen, the possibility of having offended the spirit of a tree, the appearance of a black cat. She tries as much as she can to convince him to not leave on sea, however he does not listen to her superstitions and still goes, but never returns, just like his brothers – as if there was an implacable fate of death for the men in this family, caused by the fierce sharks.

In the end, it looks like the woman was right to believe in her superstitions and had an accurate understanding of the seen and unseen world, while the man's pragmatism and superficiality cost him his life.

***A Night of Heavy Rain* (《狂雨之夜》*Kuang yu zhi ye*)**, pages 33-103

During a "night of heavy rain", two old Peranakan[6] friends, Bohai 伯海 and Wang Bingde 王炳德, who hadn't seen each other in years, meet in a bar in Padang and share their life stories. They had been together to China to study Western literature, but Bingde had been forced to abandon his studies because his family asked him to go back to the Indies and get married, according to the Chinese Confucian system of marriage: with a completely unknown wife chosen by the family. Because of the pressure and unsatisfaction, Bingde left his family and became a school teacher in a Chinese school in Java. He became friends with another Peranakan teacher, a young gentle girl called Chen Lingfang 陳靈芳, and her family. This friendship provided him happiness in the context of an unhappy life, where he had no pleasure or accomplishment neither at work, nor in his personal or family life. In spite of the happiness and love they had found in this friendship, Bingde and Lingfang eventually chose to separate, for the sake of virtue: for not interfering with Bingde's marriage and for protecting Lingfang's reputation and career. Afterwards, Lingfang got married with another man. Bingde started to stray away and decay morally and physically, being devasted by the loss of the only true love he had, caused only by the restrictions of the traditional patriarchal Chinese society and by the pressure of the public opinion in the Peranakan communities. He met Lingfang by chance on a boat to Singapore, when both of them were widowers, and they discussed the possibility of getting married, but finally Bingde decided that he had become unworthy of her, and left her, returning to his decadent hopeless life.

***Brother Ah Qiu* (《阿述哥》*A Qiu ge*)**, pages 105-122

Ah Qiu 阿述, a boy coming from China to work in the Dutch East Indies in a Chinese business in order to earn money to support his ill mother in China, starts to feel extremely attracted to the Malay girls around him. The novella follows in a quite explicit vein his process of surrendering to lust, also his moral decadence, with a lot of attention to his psychology. The Malay women are portrayed with much detail, as seductive, dominating, inescapable, but also superficial, materialistic, and mean, causing a lot of pain to the innocent and naively attached Ah Qiu. He goes

[6] Person of Chinese ethnicity born in Indonesia, as opposed to Sinkeh/新客 *xinke* – Chinese who came from China to Indonesia.

from voyeurism to masturbation, chasing girls, paying money for sex, having illicit relations with a married woman, and finally getting beaten up by Malay men for having interfered with their women. His morality is more and more questionable, even apart from his love life: he neglects his ill mother, is resentful and despises his own country and people, has debts and steals from his own counter in order to pay them back, acquires a pessimistic and cynical view on the world. There is a strong conflict in Ah Qiu's mind between his desire (sex, love) and his duty (filial piety, work), and he surrenders to the desire, investing all of his attention, feelings, and money into that. In the meantime, the harsh life of workers in Chinese businesses is also described, showing the abuses of the Chinese boss over the employees.

The story ends with an overly dramatic scene: Ah Qiu discovers the photo of his lover's husband in her house, then her husband breaks in together with his friends and catches them in bed, they beat Ah Qiu up and steal his belongings. Besides being betrayed and heartbroken, Ah Qiu is caught stealing from the counter of his shop and is beaten up once again by his boss and arrested by the police.

***The Rose from the Rubber Plantation* (《橡園之玫瑰》*Xiang yuan zhi meigui*)**, pages 123-156

Similar to *Brother Ah Qiu*, *The Rose from the Rubber Plantation* also follows the gradual change and degradation that a Chinese young man goes through because of his love for a local girl.

Yisheng 益生 had fallen in love with a Javanese girl who was admired by all the workers, Rose, who was however the girlfriend of the Javanese supervisor of the plantation. Yisheng put a lot of efforts into chasing her: he acted very gentleman-like by defending her honour to everybody else, he started to learn Malay language and Malay love songs, he improved his appearance, he spent all his money on buying her gifts, he went into gambling in order to earn more money, he even adventured himself in the Javanese village. His pure and ardent love eventually led to a devastating heartbreak, when Rose told him that she didn't love him and asked him to leave her alone, her Javanese boyfriend attacked and humiliated him, so the next day he hanged himself, claiming that without Rose he had no reason to live anymore, and being also hopelessly strained in the coolie life.

***Where Are You Heading to* (《你往何處去》*Ni wang hechu qu*)**, pages 157-179

Ah Fu's 阿福 trajectory of becoming a coolie labourer in Sumatra is narrated: in China (Shantou 汕頭, Guangdong 廣東 Province), he was tricked into coolie labour, and he willingly and trustfully left together with other people, in order to earn money and support his numerous and poor family. The novella presents his journey to Nanyang together with other coolies: the hardships on the steamboats, where they are treated as less than human beings and start losing their humanity themselves. They maintain, somehow, a feeling of community and the hope for a better life, until a certain young man from the boat tells them directly what was going on in this business, and then commits suicide, because he had no way out and he knew what was coming.

Ah Fu arrives in Deli, Sumatra, where he works on the tobacco plantation of a Dutchman together with other 10,000-20,000 Chinese laborers. The inhumane conditions of life and work are presented: great amounts of work, violence, no medical care, no time to rest, unbearable heat, oppression and abuses from the part of the Chinese supervisors. Zheng exposes the evil system of trade and employment under the Dutch plantations, but places even more focus on the direct oppression and violence put by the Chinese traders and supervisors of plantation on their own nationals.

The story ends with Ah Fu's collapse under the work system of the plantation, followed by his failed attempt to evade and his deadly punishment.

***The Sorrow of the New Jews* (《新猶太人的悲哀》*Xin Youtairen de bei'ai*)**, pages 181-195

The last novella of the volume presents a (failed) rebellion organized by Chinese and Malay laborers against Dutch plantation owners, because of the abuses they had over them. The incident takes place in Deli, on the tobacco plantation owned by a Dutchman.

Unwilling to restrain their anger anymore, the laborers decide to go against the Dutch owners of the plantation straight away, being also joined by a Malay labourer. This is a rare collaboration between Sinkeh Chinese and Malays, they get united against their common enemies because they had been equally abused and oppressed and they were all going through hardships while simply being some honest and hard-working people. The novella is very anti-colonialist, presenting in very critical terms the Dutch. In the end, the Dutch are more powerful and kill them all, and the novella – and the whole volume – ends with the final scene of the Dutch flag reigning over the corpses of the massacred labourers.

Zheng Tufei's literary activity is an interesting case of interactions between two spaces, proving the historical interaction that existed at a greater level, through the themes he approached in his texts. Claudine Salmon praises Zheng Tufei's book, claiming that this is the first known Chinese language literary work from the Dutch East Indies published in an individual book; she also argues that it is extremely important for being the only book published by a *Huaqiao* writer from the Dutch East Indies in China before 1949 (Salmon 1988). The book is appreciated, especially by Chinese scholars, as one of the first great achievements of Sino-Indonesian literature (Hong 2015b).

For its study, a philological approach, through textual analysis, comparative methods, historical grounding, is an appropriate method for analysing the ideas promoted throughout the book and for situating it in the dynamics of literary trends and socio-political changes from both China and the Dutch East Indies in the 1920s. In what follows, I describe the theoretical approach I use, giving an account of Western philology – as it constitutes the basis for my work – but also Chinese and Indonesian philology – as my work is on a Chinese-Indonesian book, I consider it relevant to also involve the philological traditions from these areas. The historical description, containing practical aspects too, is followed by the concrete theory to apply – the approach proposed by Ben Arps in his book *Tall Tree, Nest of the Wind. The Javanese Shadow-play* Dewa Ruci *Performed by Ki Anom Soeroto*.

2. Theoretical Approach

There exist different philological practices in different languages and cultural areas, but the discipline has existed everywhere in one way or another, because it was used wherever there were texts, even before it became theorized and conceptualized (Pollock 2015). I will treat philology as an interpretative study of texts, that takes into consideration textual information, such as form and content, and extratextual information, such as historical context of production and biography of the author, in order to achieve a complex understanding of the ideas conveyed within the text and the reasons lying behind them, but also to define the texts' position in the history of literature, by integrating it among comparable works from one of more bodies of literature.

2.1. Western Philology

The origins of Western philology lie in the Greek antiquity, where scholarship on texts was divided into rhetoric and philology – involving only the study of language, with no reference to the network between the textual and the outer-textual world. Over the following centuries, Roman scholarship in Greek language was practiced in the east of Europe, and turned into what is nowadays called Byzantine philology, while in the western part of the empire it was Latin language scholarship that was prevalent (Turner 2014).

An important moment in the development of Western philology was in the 16th century, when the technical and communicational advancement permitted an exchange of knowledge and texts between different spaces and cultures, so Western scholarship came into contact with other traditions as well, such as Chinese (Turner 2014).

Up to the 18th century, philology, as well as other fields, relied a lot on comparison, and mixed the study of languages, history, and antiquarianism. In the 19th century, philologists in Germany put a lot of emphasis on linguistics, origins of languages, comparisons between modern and classical languages, European and non-European languages, from where resulted the Indo-European comparative historical philology, the scholarship on language families, and a serious study of the origins of languages. There existed some ideas that languages (especially their structural composition) reflected their nations' features, it was believed that it was possible to get to know and understand a culture exclusively through its language. American philology in the 19th century still followed the Enlightenment style, joining philology to humanistic learning and philosophy and avoiding historical methods (which were popular in Europe instead). The discipline of literary history, as well as literary criticism, defined its practices and aims within philology: tracing histories of literary developments in specific timeframes and areas, proving how the literature of a nation mirrors its character, understanding authors according to the intellectual milieus, political situations, social customs, artistic eras, education that they experienced (Turner 2014).

Starting with the 20th century, distinct disciplines evolved from philology, such as linguistics or literary theory. On the whole, philology is nowadays related to numerous disciplines, but even these relations have undergone changes over the time and showed certain specificities in all different spaces. Nowadays, even if we talk about modern philology, it has been long discarded in the Western academia, and it was left behind other sciences and approaches (Pollock 2015).

2.2. Chinese Philology

However, philology is still extensively practiced and has more authority in East Asia (China, Japan, Taiwan) than in the West, because of the long, authoritative philological tradition from this area (Pollock 2015).

Michael Lackner argues for the integration of the non-Western (more specifically Chinese) philological practices in the general field of philology, proposing the term of "world philology" (Lackner 2015, 139), which would allow to rightfully include practices from more diverse cultures (Lackner 2015). Benjamin A. Elman also promotes a decentralizing view on philology and knowledge authority in general, arguing that the intellectual developments in East Asia constitute equally important parts of theory as the Western developments (Elman 2015).

Chinese philology has an extremely long history, dating back to the Han Dynasty linguistic philology: exegetical commentaries on the Confucian Classics. There were very strict guides and guidelines for the philological practices, focusing mostly on linguistic aspects: grammar, lexicology, semantics, etymology, but also rhetoric. Usually, there was no idea of multiple co-existing interpretations – the books were supposed to contain the unique and universal truth, and the commentaries had a didactic value (Lackner 2015). This type of philology continued throughout the centuries, being institutionalized and officially regulated by imperial authority, because the classical texts themselves were of crucial importance in the governing of the empire and in the social dynamics. Thus, the commentaries elaborated on the meanings of these texts had a direct influence on the politics, values, behavior, careers, relationships of people, both in the private and the public sphere (Elman 2015). The arrival of Jesuit missionaries in China in the 16th century influenced the philological scope: scholars started to enlarge their perspectives by introducing new disciplines in the practice, such as (Western) mathematics and astronomy.

If previous scholars tried to grasp the meanings of the Classical Books through the pre-established system of thought (ethical, philosophical, cosmological thought), scholars in the Qing 清 Dynasty (1644-1911) put more focus on the language and paleography, opening thus the possibility of new interpretations and conclusions. Philology found new uses in other disciplines (natural sciences), so there were efforts of organizing, decoding, and evaluating the existing writings on these disciplines (Elman 2015).

In the 19th century and Republican era (1911-1949), everything – including the contents to be learnt and the process of learning – was supposed to be reformed in order to face the Western and Japanese threats (Elman 2015). Philology, even if a traditional discipline, also underwent fundamental changes and became inclined to the Western methods (Wang G. 2019), being nowadays split into Western-derived disciplines like literary criticism, and the study of characters as a continuator of the classical Chinese philology.

2.3. Indonesian philology

In Indonesia, instead, there is not an equally old philological tradition, but the present philological activities are gaining momentum, showing many discoveries of ancient manuscripts, and are deemed important and relevant for the area's history and literature.

Historically, there is an acknowledged influence from Dutch philology. The first philological activities on texts from Indonesia were started by Dutch missionaries arriving in Southeast Asia, who started studying manuscripts in order to gain a better understanding of the language(s) and culture(s). Later, the study of the manuscripts broadened: from the functional study of the language, it developed towards publishing, editing, textual criticism. The interest on old manuscripts extended in other areas of Europe as well, England for example, and the study of Southeast Asian manuscripts in the West has been done through literary and linguistic lens until present times (Lubis 1996).

Nowadays, Indonesian philology puts a lot of emphasis on textual practices such as correcting errors, elucidating ambiguous meanings of words, and it is carried out only on classical, premodern manuscripts related to the religious sphere (Lubis 1996). Stuart Robson shows that the difference between philology in and on the West (on classical European literature – Latin, Greek – and on Biblical writings) and the philology in and on Indonesia (on classical Indonesian manuscripts) is that the former, while having a longer history and subsequently more time to develop, deals more with textual criticism, while the latter still has to go through a lot of transcription, edition, unification in order to acquire a stable ground for deeper study (Robson 1988). Indonesian philology, even if it follows the Dutch tradition and theory, is encouraged to be well adjusted in the present to the specificities of Indonesian (ancient) literature (Lubis 1996). Stuart Robson discusses philology in Indonesian literature in relation with classical texts, which are still in manuscript form, sometimes undecipherable, and fairly inaccessible. Thus, the objective

of the philologist of Indonesian literature must be to shed light on these texts, through fundamental actions like edition, transliteration, translation, but also through interpretation. Another element to pay attention to is the use of the text, in its time and nowadays; this is also related to the author's intent, that can be stated explicitly in the text or not (Robson 1988).

Nabilah Lubis promotes three approaches to texts: from a linguistical point of view, through stylistic lens, and as conveyors of a people's culture in a specific era. The duties of the philologist are stated also according to citations from other scholars from the 20th century:[7] to make a text accessible to a greater public, to make a unified and correct edition (in order to facilitate interpretation), to situate the text in its historical and cultural context, and to provide translations (in order to facilitate its use in other domains) (Lubis 1996).

2.4. Theoretical approach in Ben Arps's *Tall Tree, Nest of the Wind* (2016)

From the broad sphere of philological study, I chose to have an approach inspired by Ben Arps's classification (2016). I will analyze *The Coconuts* from the perspective of the five fundamental characteristics of a text: artefactuality, interpretability, intertextuality, contextuality, and historicity (Arps 2016), in quantitatively unequal proportions, according to the complexity of the discussion of each of the characteristics in relation with *The Coconuts*.

Ben Arps (2016) makes reference to Euro-American theories (Sheldon Pollock and James Turner). The general approach to texts is summarized as such:

> [Philology] regards its object of study as artefacts that are not just interpretable but indeed must be interpreted, that borrowed from and responded to other texts, that reflected the broader cultural context in which they were written, and that were intentionally or accidentally modified in the course of their further transmissions. (Arps 2016, 27)

The basic idea of artefactuality is that texts are generally human-made objects, whose dependence on people cannot be denied. After the concrete creation of the artefact (the text), the next step is to render it accessible and understandable to a public, by linguistic means such as transliteration, translation, or simply by settling on a certain meaning/use of a word (Arps 2016).

[7] Nabilah Lubis mentions Harjati Soebadio, Indonesian scholar, and Andries Teeuw, Dutch scholar.

Interpretability in philology doesn't aim at an "absolute and impersonal meaning" (Arps 2016, 48), but is about personal understanding of a text. However, this "personal" understanding doesn't depend on a simple or naive understanding of the common reader, but relies on the scholarly authority on the subject; multiple interpretations can coexist, issued by different scholars, and it remains the individual reader's choice which one to consider. There are scholars who pay attention to the original readership's possible understanding of the text, if it differs substantially from the scholar's understanding (because of time and space/culture differences). This is particularly specific to classical philology, where there is "a strong desire to trace connections linking texts across time and space" (Arps 2016, 51), but it can (and should) be taken into consideration for more recent texts as well, even if the difference between the scholar's and the text's époques (and spaces/cultures) is smaller.

Intertextuality works mostly through connections between texts (where "texts" include also other forms of art than literature, because they all use a certain type of language in order to convey a message). The connection between texts is named "compositionality" (Arps 2016, 52) and refers to elements "borrowed" from one text to another. Intertextuality can exist between texts from different times (connections with previous texts) or between texts that are contemporary to each other (Arps 2016).

Contextuality means positioning a text in a certain timeframe, space, and implicitly cultural context, in order to get a better understanding of it. It is a double-folded process: it means drawing conclusions about the context with the aid of the text, and using information about the context in order to further clarify the text (Arps 2016).

Historicity is also included among the fundamental aspects discussed in a philological study because "the artefact [is seen] as a historical production" (Arps 2016, 59), which means placing the text in its time and place of creation. Actually, the most important moment is the text's moment of creation, that is why this moment receives so much attention in philology. Historicity is very much about the moment of creation of a text, but this moment is usually not a culturally and historically isolated initiative of an individual, but relates to the specific development of the literature at that time (being included in a movement, or directed against it as well), where historicity comes closer to contextuality. The other side of historicity is the text's diachrony, that means: its changes over time or the changes that occurred in time in its process of creation. An

issue related to that is the issue of confirming a text's authenticity and identifying a possible forgery (Arps 2016).

This approach is very appropriate for my thesis, because it allows me to achieve the following objectives: to put in order the basic facts about the book (such as the time of writing of the texts), to compare the first versions of some of the texts (published in 1928 in journal) with the final versions (published in 1929 in volume), to observe the impact of political and cultural movements in both China and the Dutch East Indies, to explore the author's inspiration from other (contemporary and previous) bodies of literature on his literature, and to make a textual analysis.

Chapter 1

Artefactuality

The analysis of *The Coconuts* will start by attesting its physical form, by seeing it in its quality of artefact, as a product of human creation. The most important target of the analysis of artefactuality is the edition: the form of writing and publishing of the text (Arps 2016). Even if artefactuality is most interestingly applied to old, unique documents such as manuscripts, it can also be applied to *The Coconuts*, a printed text, with concern for the printed edition(s), for the cover of the book, for the information about the writing of the novellas (the dates and other mentions written at the end of each one of them), and for different incongruities such as characters written wrongly or impossible to find in dictionaries, as these features trace back the text to its process of (physical) creation, "proving" its artefactuality.

The book has 196 pages and contains seven novellas, in this order: *Human Head*, *Sharks*, *A Night of Heavy Rain*, *The Rose from the Rubber Plantation*, *Where Are You Heading to*, and *The Sorrow of the New Jews*. It doesn't have preface or postface, and was published in 2,000 issues, as it is mentioned on the front page, which was a common number at that time in Shanghai (Salmon 1988). The cover image reflects a blend of modern and traditional art: a kind of modernist ink painting, depicting in large strokes two trees (even if the title is *The Coconuts*, the trees depicted here resemble more bamboo), on a vague background of diagonal shadows, with the illustrator's minimalistic seal on the side.[8]

The book was published on the 30th of May 1929 at Zhenmeishan Bookstore in Shanghai, as it written on the front page, and there is no information of it having been republished ever since. Thus, it is supposed to exist a unique version, but there are incongruities between the book documented by Claudine Salmon and the one that I have, in what concerns the order of the novellas in the volume, the dates of the novellas: Salmon states very clearly that only three of them are dated with year (Salmon 1988), while in the book I obtained five of them are; the date of publication is also slightly different: June 1929 (Salmon 1988) or the 30th of May 1929 (as written on the front page). There are two possible explanations: either there were two different editions of

[8] See annex 1.

the book, at the same bookstore, one in May and one in June, which seems improbable, or there are inaccuracies in Claudine Salmon's account.

The book is written in traditional Chinese characters, on vertical lines, from right to left – as an inheritance of the Chinese writing tradition, that had not been replaced yet by the modern, Western-inspired writing (horizontal lines from left to right, simplified characters) at that time. There are also several words written in Latin script. These are Malay words: usually names (of persons or places), religious terms, and addressing terms. A few examples are: *Nja* (*Ms.*), *Allah*, *Olo* (place name). Interestingly, not all the Malay words are kept in their original script – some are transliterated in Chinese characters, for example *Rili* "日里" (*Deli*), *jilisisi* "吉力斯斯" (*keris*), *Yamen* "亞門" (*Amin*), and some are in both Latin and Chinese characters, like the name *Rose*, written like *ROSE* and *Luosi* "羅絲". There are two Dutch names transliterated in Chinese characters as well: *Wangdejiali'an* "望德嘉利安" and *Bodehasheng* "柏德哈生", both of them impossible to associate with the original name so far. There is an interesting transliteration designating China and Chinese people: *Zhina* "支那", which is extensively used in the book, usually in Malay or Javanese people's vocabulary (even if the commonly-used *Zhongguo* "中國" also appears); there are two possible sources: either from Japanese language, where the same word is a derogatory term for *China*[9] (it also appears in other contemporary Chinese texts), or from Malay and Javanese languages, because it aligns very well phonetically with the word *Cina*, used for *China*. There are also different transliterations than present-day ones: *shalang* "紗郎" instead of *shalong* "沙籠" / "莎籠" (*sarong*), and words spelled differently across the book: *Aelah, Allah and Alah,* for Allah, or *Sumendana* "蘇門答納" and *Sumendala* "蘇門答臘", both for *Sumatra*. There exist across the book several doubtful characters, that might have been wrongly typed, based on homophony and/or on graphical resemblances, such as: *shufu* "舒福" (inexistent in the dictionary as such) instead of "舒服" (*comfortable*), *he'ai* "和靄" (inexistent in the dictionary as such) instead of "和藹" (*kind*, *nice*).

In lack of a preface or postface, that would represent the author's voice, each of the novellas has an annotation at the end – the only direct sign of the author's activity. These visible signs of

[9] 支那的解释|支那的意思|汉典"支那"词语的解释 (zdic.net)

authorship are also part of the book's artefactuality, as they show indications of the process of creation of the texts. The annotations mention the date of creation, and some of them also provide additional information.

Five out of seven texts have complete dates, with day, month and year, and four of them can be seen in the order of their creation:

- *The Rose from the Rubber Plantation* is dated the 28th of April 1928: "Seventeen,[10] fourth, the twenty-eighth." (*Shiqi, si, ganba ri.* "十七，四，甘八日。") (Zheng 1929, 156)

- *Where Are You Heading to* is dated the 9th of June 1928: "The nineth of June seventeen." (*Shiqi nian liuyue jiu ri.* "十七年六月九日。") (Zheng 1929, 179)

- *The Sorrow of the New Jews* is dated the 22nd of February 1929: "Nineteen-twenty-nine,[11] second, the twenty-second." (*Yijiuerjiu, er, gan'er ri.* "一九二九，二，甘二日。") (Zheng 1929, 195)

- *Human Head* is dated the 27th of February 1929: "Eighteen, the twenty-seventh of February." (*Shiba nian, eryue ganqi ri.* "十八年，二月甘七日。") (Zheng 1929, 19)

- *Brother A Qiu* is dated the 10th of September 1929: "The tenth of September eighteen." (*Shiba nian jiuyue shi ri.* "十八年九月十日。") (Zheng 1929, 122), which is probably incorrect because the book itself was published on the 30th of May 1929.

A Night of Heavy Rain is dated on the night of the 11th of November but with no year; it has nevertheless the mention that this is the "first draft": "The night of the eleventh of November, first draft" (*Shiyiyue shiyi ye chu gao.* "十一月十一夜除稿。") (Zheng 1929, 103), which can be correlated with his letter correspondence with Lu Xun from November 1928, mentioned in the introduction – so the complete date of the (first) writing of *A Night of Heavy Rain* may be the 11th of November 1928.

Sharks is annotated as follows: "The night of setback/bumping into the wall of the twenty-fourth of October." (*Shiyue gansi pengbi zhi ye.* "十月甘四碰壁之夜。") (Zheng 1929, 32), where the date is the 24th of October, with no year, followed by the expression *pengbi zhi ye* "碰壁之夜". The literal meaning of this expression is "the night of bumping into a wall", and

[10] The calendar system follows here the Republican timeline, counting years after the Xinhai Revolution from 1911: 1928 is the 17th year after the instauration of the Republic.
[11] Here, the calendar system is the international one. Both systems coexist in the literary writings of the Republican era, and consequently in Zheng's writings.

figurative meaning is "the night of getting rejected".[12] This figurative meaning supposedly originates on one of Yu Dafu's novellas, *Clam Castle* (*Shen lou*《蜃樓》),[13] published first in the journal *Chuangzao yuekan*《創造月刊》(*Creation Monthly*) in June 1926, no. 4.[14] If Zheng really drew upon this essay for this expression, so using it with its figurative meaning and not the literal one, it attests on the one hand that he was well informed about the most important literary journals of that time in China, and he might have been an eager reader and admirer of Yu, but on the other hand it raises the question of what personal event he referred to and why he needed to put this reference here. However, upon consulting the respective issue of *Chuangzao yuekan*, I did not find the expression, because the text is incomplete, nor did I find the text in Yu's 1928 volume of prose. In the case where the expression was used by Zheng in its literal meaning, it remains as an ambiguous annotation.

The section above provides the overall presentation of Zheng Tufei's book in its aspect of artefact. Its physical form, the annotations at the end of every text and the several typing errors across the book have been taken into consideration as visible indicators of the author's creative process, as well as of the publishing house's activity.

[12] https://www.zdic.net/hans/%E7%A2%B0%E5%A3%81
[13] https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%A2%B0%E5%A3%81/10628598#reference-[2]-610603-wrap
[14] https://www.kanunu8.com/book/4438/55252.html

Chapter 2

Historicity

Discussing the historicity of a literary work has been for a long time a central aspect of the philological work, European philologists have been concerned for centuries with the historical transmission and possible corruption in time of a text (Turner 2016). James Turner also brings into discussion the unification of variants, where historicity comes closer to textual editing (Turner 2016), Another dimension of the historicity of a text is its place in history – its emergence as a product of its own time, and the reflection of a certain time within the narrative (identical or different from the time of creation) (Arps 2016).

A comparative approach between different versions of a text is more commonly used for the study of manuscripts, where many modifications (intentional or not), omissions, added elements, commentaries occurred during the process of transmission, through the hands of copyists (Robson 1988). In what concerns philology on Indonesian literature, historicity is an extremely important aspect, as Indonesian philology has been carried out mainly on classical, premodern manuscripts and has put a lot of emphasis on textual practices such as writing analysis, correcting errors, comparing different variants (van der Molen 1983). However, in the case of modern literature, where texts were published by typographies, their historicity is not so evident anymore, or takes different appearances.

In what concerns *The Coconuts*, it remains uncertain whether there existed one or two editions (as discussed in chapter 1). However, some of the novellas were published first in the *Qiuye* journal, and then in volume, which will make the object of inquiry of the present chapter. Zheng Tufei as author was in charge of both editions of these novellas, so it would be assumed from the beginning that there were no unintentional modifications from the first to the second variant – and, implicitly, that modifications actually existed. I have acquired the first versions of three texts: *Where Are You Heading to*, *A Nigh of Heavy Rain*, and *Sharks*,[15] and the application

[15] *A Night of Heavy Rain* – vol. 2, no. 6 (1928). The other two – full reference lost; the year of publication might be 1928 too.

of historicity on *The Coconuts* means to compare the first versions – published in journal – with the final, supposedly complete versions – published in book form.

However, upon reading them in a textually and graphically comparative perspective, there was found almost no difference between the variants from the journal and the ones from the book. The only differences lay in the punctuation, for example a comma (,) instead of a full stop (.), and they are not meaningful in context. It looks like there were made no revisions of the texts before republishing them in book form, because even wrongly-typed characters survived from the journal edition to the book edition.

Other aspects of historicity would regard the outward historical setting of the book, which will be discussed extensively in the following chapter, because it overlaps greatly with contextuality – and the historical setting discussed by the book itself. The proportion between the two is that they coincide in terms of time, but not in terms of space: the texts in the book were written in the years 1928-1929, in China, and the historical setting described is that of the colonial times in the Dutch East Indies (no mention of years, but there is no indication that there was a great time difference from the time of the writing) – which was still the regime at the time of the writing, and which had been lived by the author a few years before he started writing. Only the place where he wrote and published the book was different, and implicitly the cultural, social, political surrounding, and these aspects and their impact on the author will be discussed in the following chapter.

In conclusion, looking at the historicity of *The Coconuts* as historical development of the texts doesn't bring new information, because this is a modern book, whose texts were published in typographies, in probably only two editions (journal and volume), appearing a short time one after another, showing no meaningful differences. However, historicity understood as historical setting of the writing and of the facts narrated shows a significant difference between the two, because even if the time discussed doesn't seem much different, the stories being situated in their contemporaneity, the place of writing and publishing was different from the places described. This last aspect will be developed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Contextuality

Situating a literary text in the socio-historical context of its production, with regards to the country of origin and ethnic background of its author, to the social group to which the author belongs, and so on, is extremely important for elaborating a complex view on a text, by showing its anchorage in its time and space. Nabilah Lubis also shows that a proper philological enterprise must situate a text in its historical and cultural context. She turns contextuality also the other way around: gaining more information on the history of a people through a text that is by and about this people (Lubis 1996), so it is not only the context that provides more information about the text, but also the text about the context.

Contextuality shouldn't be concerned only with the society in which the text is created and published – the general context, but should also take into consideration specific aspects of the author's life – the personal context. The personal context is, of course, influenced by the general one, but from a methodological point of view it helps identify specific directions of interest, based on the author's own selective experience in the multifaceted society where they live, write, and publish. For a discussion of the personal context of *The Coconuts*, I will refer to the (scant) existing information about Zheng Tufei's biography, concerning the specific places where he lived and studied. Nabilah Lubis also mentions the helpfulness of clarifying the personal context – without naming it as such, but defining it instead as the social and professional context of the author (Lubis 1996).

Thus, the contexts that are deemed defining for Zheng Tufei's development and choices and consequently for his book will be treated as follows: the general context (socio-political situations and cultural developments in both Republican China until 1929 and the Dutch East Indies in late colonial times, more specifically the 1920s, with subsections about the situation of *Huaqiao* students coming from Southeast Asia to China and the situation of Chinese people in the Dutch East Indies), and the personal context (more specific aspects that Zheng himself came in contact with).

1. General Context

1.1. The situation in the Dutch East Indies

The general social and political atmosphere in the Dutch East Indies in the 1910s-1920s was very turbulent, with numerous public manifestations and strikes spread throughout the country (Ingleson 2008).

In the 1910s-1920s, communist, nationalist, and anti-colonialist goals were intertwined. Java was an area of intense activity in this sense. Socialist and communist associations were actively developed, many of them being founded in Surabaya – Zheng's hometown – and stimulated by Western-educated Indonesians and Dutch socialists, for example Partai Komunis Indonesia (Indonesian Communist Party) or Indonesische Studieclub (Indonesian Study Club). There were promoted workers' rights, education of the masses, a rise in the quality of life, social progress, the ideal of an Indonesian nation, anti-colonialist goals, Western values considered useful for improving the workers' lives. Turbulent protests and strikes (biggest ones in 1925), alongside educational activities and publications whose contents were threatening the colonial system, were carried on. However, the communist activities were quickly and thoroughly suppressed by the colonial authorities in 1926 (Ingleson 2008).

In spite of the lack of information about Zheng Tufei's life in the Indies before coming to China, and in spite of the general segregation between Chinese-Indonesians' and non-Chinese-Indonesians' activities (Teeuw 1967), he was probably aware of the socio-political unrest in Java in the 1920s (exactly the years before his – documented – arrival in China). These things would find their reflection in the radical, violent representations of colonialism from *The Coconuts*, where the most disturbing example is *The Sorrow of the New Jews*, significantly placed at the end of the volume: a revolt organised by Malay and Chinese plantation workers against the Dutch plantation-owners, completely eradicated by the Dutch and turned into a massacre. The hopelessness and pessimism pervading each of the texts is also an indicator of the author's previsions for the situation in the Indies: no chance for improving, no power lying in the hands of the colonized population – as all the efforts conducted by then in reality had been unsuccessful. It can be seen, however, that Zheng was fully preoccupied with the situation of the plantations and small businesses where Chinese people were present (such as gambling houses), in the rural areas, making no reference to the urban areas and other forms of employment (factories, railways etc.). In any case, his choice of subject in *The Coconuts* might have been influenced to a great extent by

events that he had witnessed in the Dutch East Indies, and can be seen as a "self-exiled" intellectual's reaction to the injustices happening in his home-country – reaction voiced in another country, where he could be free from the colonial censorship and oppression.

From a cultural point of view, the Dutch East Indies had a multicultural and multiethnic society, spread over a vast, fragmented territory (Tjong 2007). In spite of the separation between ethnicities, there existed, of course, commercial exchanges as well as personal interactions. The interethnic contacts represent an important part of Zheng's inspiration: all of the texts in the volume contain at least a reference, if not a whole plot, to the contacts between Chinese people (usually Sinkeh, occasionally Peranakan) and other ethnicities (Malay, Javanese, Dutch).

The ethnic Chinese community, to which Zheng Tufei himself belonged, represented a constitutive part of the Indies society, with an individualized experience and status, that will be treated separately as follows.

1.1.1. The situation of the Chinese in the Dutch East Indies

1.1.1.1. The Peranakan society

Ever since Chinese migrants started to settle down in Southeast Asia, permanently or temporarily, the area became from the Chinese perspective a space in-between, where the Chinese (sojourners or locally-born) acquired a hybrid, ambiguous identity (Stenberg 2022). This is how the Peranakan community (locally-born Chinese having adopted the local languages) came into being over the ages and became a constitutive part of the Dutch East Indies society, being similar yet distinct from the other ethnic groups (Salmon 1981). Moreover, the Chinese communities were quite closed and preserved their culture, and gradually developed a cultural environment consisting of Chinese schools and Chinese publications (Chen 2017).

The social and political unrest from China reached the Indies in the first years of the 20th century (Salmon 1986), and in the first decades of the century there was a strong wave of Chinese nationalism in the whole Southeast Asia, supported directly by political and intellectual figures from China (Salmon 1997). Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan 中華會館 (The Chinese Association), the historically most important Chinese association from Indonesia, as well as many other educational initiatives, was founded in order to awaken the national consciousness of the *Huaqiao* Chinese (Hoogervorst 2021). In this way, numerous Chinese periodicals with progressive content appeared, in Malay, Chinese, and occasionally Javanese languages (Salmon 1986), aiming at creating a

community of moral, political, but also aesthetical values (Maharani 2004). The intellectuals coming from China were recognized as authorities in culture, literature, politics. The Revolution and the May Fourth Movement had a deep impact on the Chinese communities there and led to the spiritual unification of the previously relatively separate communities, towards a common ideal (Bernards 2015).

China supported the foundation of Chinese schools where Putonghua (普通話) was taught and promoted as a benefactive tool that would unify the different, separated Chinese communities in Southeast Asia (for whom it wasn't actually vital to learn because they could already use their respective dialects or the local languages to communicate); in this way, Putonghua and Putonghua schools actively reinforced the Chinese ethno-nationalism (Bernards 2015). The Dutch authorities reacted against the rising Peranakan nationalism, founding Sino-Dutch schools (to counterattack the Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan education) (Salmon 1981). These were meant to diminish the Chinese national awareness and increase the assertiveness to the colonial system (Lai 2019). There were also (elite) Peranakan Chinese who were pro-Dutch and aimed to adopt the Dutch education, language, and customs (Salmon 1981). There is a great possibility that Zheng also attended a Dutch school, because of his mastery of Dutch language, however his writings show no admiration or tolerance for anything related to the Dutch community in the Indies, but are strongly directed against it instead. This was not a totally uncommon practice, though: there were many intellectuals, including writers, of different ethnicities, who made use of Dutch language even if they stood against the colonial government (Teeuw 1967).

There was a consistent expression of Chinese nationalism in the Malay language press of the Peranakan Chinese. The Chinese nationalistic propaganda incited Peranakan and Totok Chinese to preserve their Chinese nationality and culture. This nationalism was not only supportive to the Chinese cause, but also shares a common feature with the Indonesian nationalism arising at the same time: the anti-colonialist struggle (Salmon 1981). Zheng Tufei's writings don't present nationalistic tendencies, and make no reference to the nationalism of the Peranakan communities or to the political situation in China, they show instead a lot of criticism towards Chinese culture and are extensively oriented towards the situation of the Dutch East Indies.

Even if it seems like there were not many Chinese pro-communism (Salmon 1981), there appeared some Chinese communist association in Surabaya (Salmon 1997). There is no information available on Zheng Tufei's political involvement in the years spent in the Dutch East

Indies, but from his affiliation with Qiuye She and with left-wing writers in China (Lu Xun, for example), it can be estimated that he stood more on the communists' side, possibly even before arriving in China. His writings also tend to go in a leftist vein, with a lot of concern for the lower classes and with a strong opposition against the privileged (rich, powerful) categories of people in the Indies society (colonial authorities, plantation owners, plantation supervisors, business owners), Dutch and Chinese as well.

The Peranakan Chinese showed increasing interest in their own problems and history, and became preoccupied over time with their own situation in the Indies, trying to get organized in order to claim more rights and improve their lives (Salmon 1981). This seems to be partly the case of Zheng Tufei's inclinations as well, as he discusses the problems of the Peranakan and Sinkeh Chinese, without much concern for the political problems in China – even if he published in *Qiuye*, a journal which manifestly supported the Chinese revolutionary cause. He was however extremely interested in engaged in two of the issues in China (the social debates related to marriage and the problem of labor migration and exploitation) – but applied on the Indies context.

1.1.1.2. The Chinese coolie workers communities

An important aspect of the situation of Chinese people in the Dutch East Indies is the labor migration from China, the period from 1870 to the first decades of the 20th century representing the most intense period in its history (Stenberg and Minasny 2022). The labor export was directed to the colonial enterprises, but also to the Chinese-owned enterprises and businesses all over Southeast Aisa (Bernards 2015). This huge migration was motivated by the natural and social problems in China, which forced a lot of peasants to leave the country and try to make a living in other areas (Chen 2017). This is how a whole system of organized migration and labor trade was developed over the decades. In the Dutch East Indies, many immigrants worked on very restrictive contracts on plantations of tobacco, rubber and so, leading a life close to that of a slave, and many abuses from the Dutch plantation owners and administrators happened, as they are documented in local histories. The injustice, violence, and lack of concern for the human life were commonly spread in these work environments, especially on the Deli plantations in Sumatra. These were areas of very harsh life conditions, where the laborers were often severely affected by diseases and violence, causing high rates of mortality, while official laws allowed severe treatment and

punishment of the "lazy" workers and especially of those who tried to flee (Stenberg and Minasny 2022).

The coolie life is one of the main sources of inspiration for Zheng's narratives: four out of seven stories are focused on the dynamics of worker migration and present in a realistic vein the cruel lives they had on plantations and in other businesses. What is interesting is that Zheng Tufei's rage expressed through these texts is not directed only against the Dutch, but also against the Chinese supervisors and intermediates – and even to a greater extent (except of *The Sorrow of the New Jews*, the other three texts expose almost exclusively the actions of Chinese supervisors and intermediates).

The question remains: how did Zheng Tufei, given the fact that he probably originated from an educated well-off environment, get so familiar with the coolie life, with all its harshness and violence, also with the human relationships developed there, showing familiarity to details such as the daily routine of the workers, but also a great understanding of the psychology of these people?

1.2. The situation in China

Socio-political reform and literary reform were interdependent in China in the beginning of the 20th century (Denton 2016a). The most important (and definitory for the future of the country) political events of the early 20th century in China were the overthrowing of Qing Dynasty through the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, and the May Fourth Movement (五四運動 *Wu Si Yundong*) from 1919. The May Fourth Movement had very deep cultural implications and is usually considered the beginning of Chinese cultural modernity (Laughlin 2016a). However, it began as a fundamentally political movement: a student protest on the 4th of May 1919 against the Peace Treaty from Paris. Its main political goals were fighting against the feudal system, but also against Western and Japanese imperialism in China, asking the abolishment of foreign concessions in China, of the foreign monopoly on ports etc. The May Fourth Movement can be considered an indivisible part of the New Culture Movement (新文化運動 *Xin Wenhua Yundong*) and it's also often referred to as a cultural movement in itself (Denton 2016a). Its literary manifestations will be discussed more extensively in the next chapter.

The main targets of May Fourth Movement intellectuals' attacks were the traditional society, regulated by the Confucian system of thought and the patriarchal social organization, the traditional sciences and techniques that were deemed not relevant anymore, as well as the literature in classical language (Denton 2016a). Thus, there was a strong quest for modernization, through a blend of politics, social change, culture, and arts, where the Chinese heritage (in arts, philosophy, popular culture, sciences) was seen as the main obstacle that had to be completely eradicated (Bernards 2015). Zheng Tufei joins the trend, as his texts manifest a deep hatred for tradition and Confucianism. Familial authority, arranged marriages, filial piety, lack of freedom in social interactions are criticized directly by the characters in *A Night of Heavy Rain*, and indirectly by the narratorial voice in *Brother A Qiu* and *The Rose from the Rubber Plantation*.

An interesting aspect of the movement is that China sought to fight against the Western and Japanese (political, military) dominance with the aid of technique and cultural elements adopted precisely from the exterior, from the "enemy". China sought to integrate itself in the outward world, after being closed upon itself for centuries, in a self-superiority state of mind (Bernards 2015). In this way, numerous elements, sometimes conflicting with each other, were imported from the Western and Japanese world, such as currents of thought, political orientations, scientifical approaches, and concepts like "nation", "revolution", "individualism" (Denton 2016a). Thus, Chinese modernity (and modern literature) was explicitly and manifestly inspired from Western culture, science, literature (Huss 2016). In what concerns education, ever since the second half of the 19th century, new curricula were implemented in schools in China, drawing the inspiration from Western sciences and foreign languages (Laughlin 2016b). In Zheng's case, the education he received at Jinan University (Western literature) reflects the whole trend of reform in education, and seems to have been influential for his writing style and narrative techniques. The way Zheng appropriates the "borrowing form the exterior" is most interesting, because he chooses as space of reference not the West, like most of his contemporaries, but Southeast Asia, more specifically the Dutch East Indies. He presents in an ambivalent way cultural aspects that were relevant for China's problems: for example, the freedom in love and social interactions practiced in the Malay and Javanese communities – which is explicitly praised by many of the (male) characters.

2. Personal Context

Zheng's education at Jinan University is of great importance for his development as an intellectual and a writer. What was remarkable about Jinan University, founded in 1906, is the fact that it was to a great extent dedicated to *Huaqiao* students (Liang Dekun 1980), thus giving them a sense of community and solid opportunities for academic development. Literary studies were an important part of the higher education curricula, and the academic literary studies had started to be influenced by the Western style of analysis ever since the 19th century, mainly by putting more emphasis on prose (novels) than had it been before; after the literary revolution in 1917, even contemporary Chinese works were included in the academic curricula (Laughlin 2016a), leading to a consolidation of the contemporary literature and of the "May Fourth spirit" discussed earlier. This can be seen in Zheng Tufei's writing style as well: his skilled writing, with a lot of attention to the development of the plot and consequentiality of ideas, stable narrative techniques, focus on the psychology of the characters, very realistic dialogues, shows that he wasn't writing in an amateur, naive way, or inspired by classical literature that he might (or not) have accessed at home, but proves instead that he had been exposed to a study of literature, and especially to contemporary literature. The fact that he had his major in Western literature is an indicator of the fact that he probably came into contact with Western styles like naturalism, realism, romanticism, decadentism – there are signs of these influences in many of his texts.

Zheng's status as being an ethnic Chinese coming from Southeast Asia (Dutch East Indies) to China is also part of his personal context. There existed several communities of Southeast Asians, not extremely prominent in the cultural scene though. There existed, for example, a certain Malaya Shudian 馬來亞書店 (Malaysian Bookstore) in Shanghai (Deng 2009), and other similar associations, but they are poorly documented and don't seem to have gained importance in the general cultural life. These don't seem to represent an issue in Zheng Tufei's life, because, according to Wen Zichuan's record, he seemed to be well integrated in university, mingling with both the locals and the Chinese students from diaspora, and being very active in artistic and sports activities, just like other students with similar status (Wen 1960). In his texts, there exists just a brief mention of the student life of Chinese-Indonesian students in China in *A Night of Heavy Rain*, which might have an autobiographical basis. The scene presents two Chinese male students coming from the Dutch East Indies to a university in Shanghai, who became friends and were very passionate about literature, sharing their creations and dreaming about a literary career. What disturbs this harmony is the family back in the Indies, who urges a conservative marriage for the

protagonist and his return, causing him to abandon his studies and get depressed, and later to fail in many sides of life. The other one continues his studies in Shanghai, but gives up his ambitions of a literary career, and at his return in the Indies he faces numerous difficulties obstructing an academic career and eventually ends up unhappy as well. Even if brief, this is an interesting record of the dreams that *Huaqiao* students from the Indies nurtured regarding the opportunities they would have in China, which would eventually be hindered by the obligations towards their families and by the poor career prospects back home.

The exterior events have an undeniable influence on the choices that an author makes, being crystalized either in a reflective, complying work meant to align with reality, or in a reactionary work or other forms meant to intentionally dissociate from the reality.

In Zheng Tufei's case, *The Coconuts* reflects the realities of the mixed society of the Dutch East Indies, the abuses of the Dutch colonial regime, a little part of the life of the *Huaqiao* from the Indies arriving in China, the dynamics of trading coolies from China to Southeast Asia and the horrors of the coolie life, and gives a response to China's anti-Confucianist debates. Thus, looking at the different contexts that surrounded the creation and publication of *The Coconuts*, it can be seen how the author related to the socio-political and cultural events happening in his homeland, as well as in the space where he wrote and published. These socio-political landscapes are paired with the intellectual dynamics and cultural life, which will be discussed in the following chapter, with focus on literature itself.

Chapter IV

Intertextuality

Intertextuality is manifested in a text through the explicit (references, allusions, quotations etc.) and implicit (influences) connections that can be identified between a text and other specific texts and authors, but also broader bodies of literature and genres. Stuart Robson argues that connecting a text to a genre and to other texts is an integrate part of the philological analysis (Robson 1988). Thus, the fact that a text adheres to a certain genre is in itself a form of intertextuality.

For this chapter, I will make comparisons between *The Coconuts* and the bodies of literature that Zheng Tufei can be related to, from national, linguistic, and thematic points of view, showing to what extent he can be associated with them. These are: Indonesian literature – more specifically Malay literature, early modern Indonesian literature, Sino-Malay literature, Sinophone literature, and Chinese literature – more specifically modern Chinese literature, with a sub-branch of Nanyang writings.

1. Indonesian literature

The beginnings and scope of Indonesian literature are debatable, being currently limited by scholarship that emphasizes linguistic and ethnic factors. Here, I refer to Indonesian literature as literature from the area of today's Indonesia, that times' Dutch East Indies, regardless the language, more specifically: (modern) Indonesian literature from the 1920s, Sino-Malay literature, Sinophone literature, but also classical and popular Malay literature.

1.1. Malay literature

Malay language was the lingua franca in the region of today's Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Indonesia. A broad corpus of Malay-language literature was formed, and it was also a means of cultural and ideatic communication between these areas and between different ethnicities. Literature was an extremely important cultural artifact in the Malay-speaking world,

thus classical literature contains beliefs, worldviews, cultural elements of the Malay people, so it is tightly connected to their ethnic character (Braginsky 2004).

Zheng Tufei's knowledge of Malay literature is attested by Wen Zichuan, who says that he had translated "many Malay love songs" (Wen 1960, 71). A very important aspect of intertextuality in *The Coconuts* is the translation of a popular Malay song, in *The Rose from the Rubber Plantation*. Later, when he was in British Malaya, he translated for the *Mantuoluo* journal parts of *The Crown of the Kings* by Bukhari al-Jauhari, one of the most important and influential work in classical Malay literature, a reference reading in the royal courts in its time (17th century) and later (Braginsky 2004). However, he mentioned himself that he hadn't read the original Malay text, he didn't even know if it was still preserved, but made reference to the French translation from 1878 (1905, according to him) by Aristide Marre and to the English incomplete translation from 1901 by Chauncey C. Starkweather (Salmon 1988).

In any case, his interest in Malay literature and culture was obvious – as promoting classical and popular native literature for the readership in China and for the *Huaqiao* communities in Southeast Asia, as he himself affirmed in *Mantuoluo* (Salmon 1988).

1.2. Modern Indonesian literature

What fundamentally differentiates modern Indonesian literature from the classical (Malay, Javanese etc.) literatures existing before lies in the ideas and feelings expressed, and also in the formal aspects, like the affirmation of an Indonesian language. It had strong nationalist reverberations, being developed in the same time as the struggle for national awareness and independence (Teeuw 1967).

However, histories and anthologies of Indonesian literature tend to treat separately Chinese and non-Chinese literature from Indonesia, especially Indonesian scholarship strictly restricts modern Indonesian literature to literature in Indonesian language, with very little consideration to authors of Chinese descent (Sarwadi 2004), which would deny from the very beginning any affiliation of Zheng Tufei to it. What Zheng shares nevertheless with Indonesian literature is the very engaged critique of the actual state of facts of the country (the colonial system), but he doesn't go as far as promoting a national ideal. Instead, he appears as rather pessimistic regarding the population's struggle against colonial oppression, like in *The Sorrow of the New Jews* and *Human Head*.

1.3. Sino-Malay literature

The beginnings of the Sino-Indonesian literature in Malay language (usually called Sino-Malay literature, before the gradual shift to Indonesian language after its institutionalization) are in the 19th century. In the first decades of the 20th century, it underwent heavily the impact of Western literature, through the education in Sino-Dutch schools (Tjong 2007). Many translations from Western literatures, especially English and French, were made; in what concerns Chinese literature, there were translated a few dozen novels, mostly historical ones, but contemporary modern novels were also attracting readers. There were also didactic and Confucian works translated, for the interest of the Peranakan Chinese adhering to the traditional values. However, Confucian propaganda organizations were criticized by nationalists and by modern thinkers (Salmon 1981).

The genres of novel and short story were increasingly popular in the 1910s and 1920s for all readerships in the Dutch East Indies (Chinese, Indonesian, Dutch). The epicenter of creative and publishing activity was Java, and many Peranakan authors of fiction and translators were raised in Dutch education (Salmon 1981).

Given the context when it was formed (alongside the apparition of the Sino-Dutch schools and the introduction of foreign literatures through translations) and the society where it evolved and which it reflected (the mixed society of the Dutch East Indies), it can be said that the Malay-language Sino-Indonesian literature was a bridge between Indonesian, Chinese, and European culture (Tjong 2007), as can be seen in texts by Tio Ie Soei, Njoo Cheong Seng, Chan Leang Nio and others. We can assume that Zheng was exposed to the literature published at that time in periodicals and book form, a corpus offering Indonesian, Chinese, Western characters, themes, and references. Moreover, because he got familiar with native, Chinese, and European culture in both reality and literature, in both the Indies and China (considering his European literature studies in China as well), he was capable of introducing characters and references from all these cultures in his texts, even emphasizing intercultural manifestations.

Claudine Salmon (1981) makes a detailed account of the history of Sino-Malay literature, which, in spite of the harsh periodization, provides valuable data in the enumerations of authors, works, periodicals, and literary themes. Main themes approached in prose were the Peranakan society, the debate on modernization, conflictual types of education in schools (Chinese and

Dutch). Western values, like free marriage and emancipation of women, were almost always put in a negative light and criticized. Authors like Tan Hong Bon and Chan Leang Nio approach themes related to love and family, very popular overall, which were generally arranged marriages, the ideal education of children, younger generation's attitudes towards Chinese traditions, the conflict between passion and social norms. There were also other subjects, like political critiques (against Serikat Islam, for example), Westernization and Christianization of Chinese (usually criticized), opium farming and trafficking, detective plots (Salmon 1981).

Zheng Tufei visibly differentiates himself from Sino-Malay literature, focusing on different themes (coolie life, critiques of the colonial system), and approaching differently the topics that were popular in Sino-Malay literature too. Change and modernization, especially in relationships and marriage issues, constituted indeed important topics of debate in the Indies, but Zheng adhered more deeply to the anti-traditionalist cause in China, showing in his texts more radical ideas and more progressive attitudes than the authors from the Indies. Many Sino-Malay authors manifestly supported the traditional family and traditional mores, as opposed to the progressive ideas promoted by Zheng Tufei.

In popular Sino-Malay literature, the theme of interethnic interaction, even if sometimes present, is rather overshadowed by stories centered on only one ethnicity, while for Zheng interethnic love stories represent one of his main points of interest. Authors in the Dutch East Indies placed most of the focus on their own ethnicity, especially the Sino-Malay authors' narratives were often exclusively within and about the Peranakan community, ignoring almost completely other ethnicities, even Sinkeh Chinese such as coolie workers, while Zheng Tufei was most interested in the Sinkehs, having only one story about Peranakans.

As characters, the representations of women are also completely different: the Sino-Malay prototype was that of silly young women eager to embrace modernization and emancipation but eventually falling into disgrace, indecency, sin, tragedy, because they approach modernization in wrong ways; another one, rather different, is that of the victimized yet pure woman, praised for her loyalty, endurance, and obedience within the household. Both prototypes are extremely different from Zheng Tufei's female characters, which will be further described in chapter 5. Dutch people are also portrayed in fundamentally different ways, limited probably by censorship: while Zheng presents Dutch people exclusively in the colonial context (for example as owners of plantations and gambling houses, supporting an inhumane, one-direction profit), authors in the

Indies focus on other aspects, the most prominent being education and culture (Dutch school students being a bad influence for young Peranakan girls, Western cultural elements looking ridiculous in the Peranakan community etc.).

Similarities and influences from Sino-Malay literature on Zheng's writing prove to be rather difficult to find. He approaches different themes and comes with much more radical modern ideas, and where he discusses similar themes, he comes with different perspectives.

1.4. Sinophone literature from the Dutch East Indies

Sinophone literature, as manifestly distinct from Chinese literature (published in China), affirmed itself first in Southeast Asia as a result of the intense political and cultural stimulation coming from China. However, writers in Southeast Asia quickly started to define themselves their literature, reorienting it towards local culture and local politics (Bernards 2016). An Kang shows that Zheng's choice to write exclusively about the Dutch East Indies society proves that Sino-Indonesian literature was actually inclined towards localization ever since the beginning (An 2018).

A step in the history of Southeast Asian Sinophone literature was the initiative of creating an over-comprising "Nanyang literature" in the 1920s and 1930s. What exactly is Nanyang literature and its scope remains quite vaguely defined, and it is a subject of scholarly debate.

Under the stimulation of Chinese intellectuals coming from China, there appeared in the 1920s in some of the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia the concept of a Nanyang culture and Nanyang literature as their own. In the 1930s, the existence and potential of this literature were already attested, by local authors but even more by authors coming from China, advocating for a Nanyang literature that depicts the local society but also proves itself a follower of the May Fourth literature in China. These initiatives were particularly strong in the Straits Settlements (Bernards 2015). *Nanyang shangbao* and its supplement, *Mantuoluo*, where Zheng also published after leaving China, were also part of the attempt (Zhou 1988). Eventually, the ideal of a greater Nanyang literature was never realized, because of the lack of sufficient unity between the literatures developed in different countries (Bernards 2015).

Unfortunately, Chinese language periodicals from the Dutch East Indies that could provide primary sources earlier or contemporary with Zheng Tufei are hard to find, so a direct comparison is not possible in this study.

An important concept in Nanyang literature is the “南洋色彩” *Nanyang secai* (*South Seas color*). It was strongly promoted in the Chinese communities in the Straits Settlements, since the 1920s, even if apparently not directly called this way, but described as such (Liang Dan 2008), while in China there existed in the same period the idea of the “local color”/*difang secai*“地方色彩” of a literary work in general (Yu 1961, 128), and even that of “Nanyang local color”/*Nanyang difang secai*“南洋地方色彩” (Wen 1960, 139), highly appreciated by Yu Dafu and occasionally discussed among the authors from *Qiuye*, as Wen Zichuan recalls in his memoires (Wen 1960).

On the whole, *Nanyang secai* is a feature of both content and formal aspects: it designates a Southeast Asian background for the story, with Southeast Asian characters (including ethnic Chinese people, such as the Peranakans in Indonesia), and usually the subject of the story is related to aspects of Southeast Asian society (Bernards 2015); in terms of language, the texts often contain vocabulary from local languages or from Chinese dialects used in the Chinese communities (Liang Dan 2008).

The literary activity of *Huaqiao* Chinese coming from Nanyang to China is also extremely relevant for a comparison with Zheng Tufei, as he can be categorized as such himself, and he was part of a community of this kind at Jinan University. This type of Nanyang literature is at the intersection of Southeast Asian literature (the authors originate from different countries in Southeast Asia) and Chinese literature (the texts are published in China and written in Chinese, and follow closely the trends of mainstream Chinese literature).

Unfortunately, this was not a consistent corpus of texts in its time and not much primary data exists. There were, for example, periodicals launched by *Huaqiao* students from Southeast Asia, such as *Qiuye* and *Bangjia*《邦加》, both of them under the supervision of Jinan University in Shanghai. There existed another publication called *Shanghai He shu Huaqiao xueshenghui jikan* 《上海荷屬華僑學生會季刊》 (*The Periodical of the Association of the Dutch East Indies* Huaqiao *Students from Shanghai*), of rather obscure origins. Nevertheless, the sources I consulted so far don’t show visible thematic or stylistic influences from Southeast Asia. Not even the other *Huaqiao* writers from *Qiuye*, with the exception of Chen Xiangbing and Wen Zichuan, wrote much about Southeast Asia. In general, the writings of the *Huaqiao* Chinese coming from Southeast Asia followed thematically and stylistically the trends of the New Literature of China.

In this context, Zheng Tufei was quite remarkable, because he is one of the few *Huaqiao* authors who actually depicted Southeast Asia in their texts, and not so much China (Wu 1993a).

Zheng is indeed typically associated with Sinophone literature, more precisely with Sino-Indonesian literature – Indonesian literature in Chinese language, continuator of the Sino-Malay literature discussed above). His volume is esteemed by most scholars as a reference book for the beginnings of Sino-Indonesian literature.

2. Chinese literature

2.1. Modern Chinese literature

Modern Chinese literature emerged during the May Fourth Movement, being preceded by forms of premodernity; it is generally approved that the first modern Chinese work was *A Madman's Diary* (《狂人日記》*Kuangren riji*) by Lu Xun, from 1918 (Denton 2016a).

Programmatic literary reforms began in China in 1915, with the New Culture Movement and May Fourth Movement. Starting from aesthetic criteria, originality issues and other artistic concerns, the literary reforms soon aligned with the "national salvation" ideal, being a means of transmitting revolutionary ideas, as literature has been traditionally seen as a medium for social change as well as individual improvement (des Forges 2016). The political events and social problems of this period determined writers to transmit revolutionary ideas and ideals through writing in order to support revolution on all facets (Laughlin 2016b). We can see the same inclination in the manifesto of *Qiuye*, made very explicit; Zheng was also part of this trend, but in a different way than his colleagues from Qiuye She: while they were supporting China's revolution through their writings and publications, Zheng was mostly supporting the Dutch East Indies' revolution in his anti-colonialist texts.

A very important change in the May Fourth period was the passage from classical literature to vernacular literature – accomplished through active, programmatic actions and manifestos. The political aim of this new type of writing was even stronger than the aesthetic one: vernacular language was meant to reflect the struggle for social change, and the "democratization" of culture, by making it accessible to the masses, to anyone who didn't receive an elite scholarly education (which represented the traditional society as well) (des Forges 2016). This type of writing was considered closer to reality, to the actual speaking in daily life, thus more appropriate for

conveying an authentic, realistic image of the world (Laughlin 2016a). Obviously, Zheng was a follower of this trend, using a very skilled and natural vernacular Chinese, with much concern for authenticity in the characters' spoken word.

The literary revolution of the early 20th century was characterized by a strong admiration of non-Chinese literatures, these becoming widely-acknowledged sources of inspiration for new types of writing; foreign literatures meant European, American, and Japanese literature (Riep 2016). What is remarkable here is the fact that Zheng brings here the Indonesian world as a reference, even introducing Malay literature (a popular song) through his texts.

Literary realism, as well as other Western-inspired genres, was seen as a desirable element appropriate for conveying ideas of modernization and inciting to revolution (Wang B. 2016). Writers like Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 called for a proletarian literature, inclined towards the masses and the working class (Laughlin 2016b). Literary leftism from the 1920s aimed at representing the interests of the lower classes and leading to a betterment of their situation (Denton 2016a).

In what concerns romanticism, an important feature of the early modern and modern literature was the emergence of subjectivity, with emphasis on introspection and the creation of a new model of selfhood – representing some of the fundamental differences between modern and pre-modern Chinese literature. The emergence of subjectivity comes as a reaction against the traditional attitude, severely molded by Confucianism (ritual, self-restraint, submission of the individual in front of the community etc.). The new perceptions of the self were influenced by Western literature, but adapted to the Chinese context (Denton 2016b). Yu Dafu was among the representatives of the romanticist current, promoting self-expression, sentimentality, exposure of the private life, a romantic type of aesthetics. These things are also visible in Zheng's characters, especially in *Brother A Qiu* and *The Rose from the Rubber Plantation.*

Zheng actually shows a combination of realism and romanticism, with realist depictions and very radical and violent scenes (*Where Are You Heading to*, *The Sorrow of the New Jews*) but also introspective, sensitive characters of a romanticist type (*Brother A Qiu*, *The Rose from the Rubber Plantation*, *A Night of Heavy Rain*).

Shanghai was the origin of modernism in China, because of its openness to foreign, Western culture (through the abundance of foreign books, foreign movies, foreign products etc.); the foreign stuff present in Shanghai started to enter literature as well as motifs, symbols, or just background, all signifying modernity (Riep 2016). We can see a similar tendency, at a very small

scale, in *The Coconuts*, in *A Night of Heavy Rain*, where the protagonists drink brandy; except of that, the symbols of modernization (the steel bridge from *Human Head*, for example) are extremely few and have different connotations: they are associated with colonialism, and prove the fact that the imported modernity was not necessary.

Chinese modernism was usually fascinated by the modern city life, presenting urban environments, city life problems, urban characters (Riep 2016), which have no echo in Zheng's writings. There were also other environments that inspired the narrative background and the characters of modern Chinese prose: the rural space, the folklore, the peasant life; these were valued and used by writers like Lu Xun and Shen Congwen 沈從文 (Kinkley 2016) – this is relevant for Zheng's writings because he places his narratives only in the rural environment, but in an Southeast Asian landscape. Another interesting connection, this time with Chinese culture, is a Chinese folk song in *Brother A Qiu*, sang by a Chinese coolie – which proves that Zheng was familiar enough with this type of literature, confirmed later by his papers on folkloric arts in *Jiaoyu xunkan*.

Lu Xun seems to have had an extremely important role in Zheng Tufei's academic and literary life, because Zheng was one of Lu Xun's ardent followers, they even had some correspondence, and Lu was invited at Qiuye She for lectures (Ma 2017). Lu participated in literary, social, political debates, issuing critiques of China's history, critiques of the tradition and culture (especially Confucianism), critiques of the weaknesses of the Chinese individual (incapacity of being an individuality, of solving one's own problems, of adapting to the reality etc.) (Huss 2016). Zheng might not have been influenced by Lu's own writing style, with anecdotes and dark humor, but by his ideas, especially because of the urge of revolution in different forms (emancipation in relationships, modernization of school education, assuming one's individuality and affirming one's own will in the family, but also political revolution) which held the first place among the topics in *The Coconuts*.

Zheng Tufei's writing shows visible influences from the May Fourth Movement and the New Literature, as Guo Huifen also affirms (Guo 2019). *The Coconuts* is a unique book in this sense, because there are no other Sino-Indonesian works in Chinese language published in China in the 1920s dealing with the topics that Zheng deals with (Wu 1993b).

At first sight, the formal level proves the fact that Zheng Tufei was at the same pace with the linguistic reforms of the Republican era, where most important was the change from classical

language to vernacular. Another aspect, which was fervently exploited by contemporary Chinese authors, was writing in a realistic vein, as raw as possible (compared with classical literature) (Denton 2016b), the same as Zheng Tufei also does in his texts.

In what concerns his characters, Zheng Tufei's texts also show important similarities with the popular types of characters from modern Chinese literature, which also reflected the social change of the modern era. The types of characters adopted also by Zheng Tufei in his texts were: the fascinating, overly-sexualized, independent woman, seen through male lenses, for whom the naïve young men feel both attraction and fear; the sentimental, pure-hearted young men, observed in their process of self-discovery and change; the young decadent intellectual, resigned to pessimism and a wanderer's lifestyle, observed in his process of disillusionment with the world and (physical and spiritual) degradation; lower classes (destitute peasants, coolie workers, poor fishermen, an old poor peddler, plus their families who are in need).

The ideas promoted by Zheng prove his affiliation with a leftist type of writing, with much concern for the lower classes, for social equality and equity, which started to be promoted in China in the 1920s. Another important aspect consists of his critiques of the traditional, Confucian system of thought, especially concerning love, marriage and family – this being one of the main targets within the social modernization initiatives in China (Chung 2016) and one important trope in literature, approached by numerous authors in similar forms: urge of emancipation, conflicts between generations, elements of foreign culture associated with liberation, critiques of traditional values such as filial piety and hierarchy. All these elements are present in Zheng Tufei's texts as well.

But the most poignant difference is a thematic one. Zheng Tufei brings to light original themes for Chinese literature: the life of coolie workers, which this was not at all a topic in Chinese literature, even though it was a great social phenomenon, and Zheng realistically documents the hardships of poor Chinese people leaving in mass to become coolie workers on Dutch-owned plantations and in Chinese-owned businesses, presenting their motivations, aspirations, disillusionment, exploitation, and observing the dynamics of the system of coolie trading. Another original focus was Southeast Asia itself: in modern times there was indeed a fascination with foreignness in the Chinese society, reflected heavily through literature, and Southeast Asia had indeed represented an interesting place in the Chinese imaginary for a long time (Bernards 2015), but, in spite of that, the main places of interest in the Republican era remained the West and Japan

(Riep 2016), while Southeast Asia was not consistently approached through literature – Zheng Tufei dedicates instead an entire book to making it known to the Chinese readership, showing both positive and negative aspects, and focusing a great deal on the Chinese experience of Nanyang.

2.1.1 Nanyang writings in Chinese literature

From the Chinese perspective, the term "Nanyang" (*South Seas*) originally designated the maritime commercial area southwards of China and its surrounding sea, an important economic and commercial route, linking the empire with other regions of Asia. In the Republican Era, it had several literary reverberations, after some Chinese authors travelled there and came back with a thematically new type of writings – which are put under the broader field of modern Chinese literature, being closely related to the sub-branch of New Sensationism. The *Nanyang secai* of these works coincided partly with that promoted in Southeast Asia, adding an impressionistic style, with focus on subjectivity and perception during the Chinese traveler's journey of discovering an exotic place (Bernards 2015).

Before the New Literature, Southeast Asia had been rarely discussed, and only described as an exotic, erotic, and barbarian place, over which China's superiority was legitimized. This kind of "China-centric" perspective worked in the same vision as the Eurocentric Orientalism. But this way of imagining Southeast Asia wasn't acceptable anymore after the 1911 Revolution, because it aligned with the imperial objectives, feudalistic values, traditional views; instead, a new image of Southeast Asia was created and the ethnic Chinese living there became the entity onto which China projected its nationalistic and revolutionary ambitions. The quest for sources of enlightenment from abroad concerned Southeast Asia too, which became in the literary imaginary a place of "colonial modernity" – a different perspective than the previous barbarian, inferior, almost fantastical land (Bernards 2015). Zheng Tufei's writings come in line with this: this newly-acquired admiration of Southeast Asia is reflected in his characters' experiences, who fall in love with the Nanyang women, landscapes, food, and with the Nanyang dream of becoming wealthy. However, this ideal image about the Dutch East Indies is eventually turned upside down by the actual state of facts, that was far from ideal.

However, the exotic and sexualized image of Southeast Asia and specifically Southeast Asian women continued in a certain way from imperial times up to the Republican era, leaving its footprint in literature – we can still see the fascination for Nanyang women, but the idea of

affirming China's superiority and culture wasn't present anymore; instead, there was labor mass-migration there with the hope of escaping precarity in China, and even intellectuals were going, which is almost the opposite of the previous image (Bernards 2015). This tendency is partly reflected in Zheng's texts too, because he creates a complex, ambivalent image of Southeast Asia: he reinforces the traditional, patriarchal image of an exotic, sexualized, technically backwards Southeast Asia, nevertheless put in a positive light, but he also discusses the layers of cultural differences, considered as superior in the eyes of Chinese people arriving from China. It is these specific cultural aspects that go hand in hand with Chinese people's struggle for social modernization through the attacks against the traditional Chinese mentality, but Zheng questions this cultural "superiority", showing its dark side (superficiality, promiscuity, disappointments, inequality) and potential danger for the Chinese who enthusiastically adopt it without being actually familiar with the social mechanisms in the Indonesian society.

Many traveler-writers made stopovers in Southeast Asia during their itineraries towards the usual destinations (Europe, North America) and recorded their experiences in a form of fiction with strong autobiographical nuances at their return to China. By its thematic novelty, and by the *Nanyang secai* present in its style, this kind of writings brought something new to the New Literature of China (Bernards 2015). Another writer who travelled to Southeast Asia and wrote a few short stories based on what he had witnessed is Hong Lingfei. Moreover, he published in the same time as Zheng Tufei, in 1929, so he can be considered alongside Zheng Tufei one of the first writers who wrote in Chinese and published in China fictional prose about Southeast Asia. Zheng Tufei's writings are fully characterized by thematic novelty and *Nanyang secai* as well (Hong 2015b). Many writers had the chance to see only the ports in Southeast Asia and these were the only environments they depicted, which became vignettes of Southeast Asia in the New Literature (Bernards 2015). On the other hand, Zheng Tufei, who had experienced Southeast Asia differently and more complexly (this being his homeland), presents multiple sides, not easily accessible for the sojourning writers: plantations, gambling houses, rural environments, Chinese-owned businesses, schools.

A point of interest for Chinese writers who went to Southeast Asia consisted of the cultural differences, including different approaches of sexual life. In Nanyang literature, the male protagonists often crave for the Nanyang woman's body but are in the same time afraid and threatened, to the point of "losing" their own body and language (Bernards 2015), and the same

thing is experienced by some of Zheng's characters. He develops this theme in its complexity, presenting a trajectory of escapism, hope, change, lust, heartbreak, and disillusionment.

The Southeast Asian Chinese communities were also supposed to inspire the Chinese from China in terms of nationalism and solidarity for China's problems (Bernards 2015). However, the Nanyang *Huaqiao* portrayed by Zheng Tufei, both the Peranakans and the Sinkhes, don't show any concern of solidarity for China. He prefers instead to delve on the Chinese people's aspirations regarding their travel to the Dutch East Indies.

Apart of the traditional view on Southeast Asia, there were also texts who focused on other aspects and didn't present it as a feminized and oversexualized space, but as spiritual and enlightened, but these were very rare.

Zheng Tufei is included in all scholarly writings in Sino-Indonesian literature, not in Chinese literature, even if most of his (known) literary activity was only in China, in Chinese language. However, he is not featured in any large-scale anthology of Sino-Indonesian writers (Salmon 1988) or history of Indonesian literature.

With an overview of all the readings and analysis, Zheng Tufei's prose comes closer to Chinese literature (including the Nanyang writings by Chinese authors) than to Indonesian literature (both Chinese and non-Chinese literature in the Dutch East Indies), because there exist very important similarities between *The Coconuts* and other contemporary texts from China, in style, characters, ideas developed, and partially themes. According to Indonesian literary histories, literature in any language except of Indonesian is not considered as Indonesian literature, even if written by authors from Indonesia/the Dutch East Indies, but it cannot be overlooked that Zheng Tufei originated in the Indies, was probably influenced by the education received there and the events and categories of people he came in contact with, and drew all his inspiration for his book from this space. Also, his involvement in the journal initiatives of creating a Nanyang culture and literature are relevant for his connection to Sinophone literature, more precisely Sino-Indonesian literature. So, his connection with the Dutch East Indies is still important – rather on a thematic level, being influenced by the social circumstances as shown in the previous chapter, than on a literary level, where the Chinese literature's influence was undeniably deep – on the Sinophone literature in general, and on him in particular. His position in the Nanyang literature, understood here as both Nanyang literature from Southeast Asia and Nanyang writings from China, was

particularly important, emphasizing the intersection between Chinese and Southeast Asian (here, Indonesian) literature.

Chapter V

Interpretability

The interpretability of a text refers to its capacity of containing meanings, ideas, which can be understood in different ways by its readers.

Decoding the meaning of a literary text works through interpretability and contextuality as well, interpretability is intertwined with contextuality in the sense that the historical context shapes the meanings of the text, but meanings also exist in themselves, independent to a certain extent from the context of writing and publication of the text (Turner 2014). The most complex interpretation of a text comes after the understanding of its other features: its artefactuality, historicity, contextuality, and intertextuality. Interpretability can also involve the author's intention, which should be seen as important, even if denied by certain theories. It can be related to contextuality too, as general and personal contexts motivate the choice of ideas promoted. Intertextuality also plays an important role, anchoring the text in a network of literary trends, motifs, themes, and so on.

Nabilah Lubis shows that texts are conveyors of cultural aspects, and it is the philologist's task to reveal them to the readers; thus, the "meaning" of a text must be understood according to its specific cultural surrounding (Lubis 1996). This can also be related to the author's intention, and in Zheng's case it is visible that his intentions and the cultural aspects were blended, because one of his goals (expressed directly by him in *Mantuoluo*) was to familiarize the Chinese readership with the culture of Southeast Asia. This is also where literary realism comes into play, setting for the writer the task of revealing the truth, through a realistic mode of presenting the reality (Laughlin 2016a).

However, interpretability could be considered as the most flexible feature of a text, or of any artistic product in general, because it is primarily based on the readers' understanding, depending on numerous factors such as cultural background, life experience, previous contacts with similar or different artistic products. There exist different currents of thought and theoretical discourses, in both the society and era of the reader and those of the writer, which add an objective layer to the act of interpretation. In this way, there are "officially valid", academic interpretations

of a text, but there is no definitive or restrictive interpretation. Whenever the author makes his or her ideas and intentions explicit, this adds a solid layer to the interpretation of the text, but, still, does not contradict the reader's liberty of adhering to a different, personal understanding and contributing to the richness of the text's meanings.

Human Head

The book opens with the quick introduction of the reader into the plot of some odd disturbances occurring in an exotic environment: the flood and destruction of an iron bridge in the village of Batu Pagar, surrounded by mystery and fear. The colonial context is introduced as well, since the very first pages of the book, showing briefly the inequalities between the colonizers and the colonized and the exploitative work:

> The collapsed piers were already slowly being rebuilt, several hundred workers covered in sweat were working in a rush and a muddle. On the side of the river a white tent was raised in the shadows of the trees, where the Dutch engineer and the supervisor were working on the project. (Zheng 1929, 2) (annex 2, 1.1)

Numerous descriptions of unexplainable facts and of the weird atmosphere in the local community contribute to the increase of mystery and tension. The cause of the successive destructions of the bridge and of the strange murders appears to be the disturbance of the river's spirits by technical works, and now some mysterious beings were taking revenge on the locals, by decapitating humans and throwing their bodies into the river. The traditional beliefs and superstitions are presented to the reader, and they are deemed to be true.

> After the sunset, the dark night was launching its attack, the owls were beginning to appear and disappear in the woods. The river that was so calm during daytime was rolling on agitatedly at this time. First, the waves were just moaning deeply, then they were howling and wailing, with increasingly frightening sounds. The waves were coming down like demons and monsters, and when they reached the bridge they were blasting with a loud crash, foam splashing in all directions, while a mourning cry shattering the sky came out from under the bridge, a whistling wind swirled up from the ground, carrying with it the fallen leaves of [?],[16] tangerines, and [?];[17] mourning cries were echoing unceasingly in the woods, which were not

[16] Undecipherable.
[17] Undecipherable.

> the shouts of either humans or evil beasts, but the most mysterious and most frightening sounds. These sounds were slowly spreading from the woods towards the village, where the dogs were suddenly beginning to howl up to the sky in quick succession, with their fur stiffened, their legs trembling, now pouncing forth then retreating with bended legs and lowered heads. Hens and ducks were flying out of their stables, pigs were running and oinking in their barns, cows and horses were raising their heads from their troughs and neighing, children were waking up in tears in their mothers' arms. (Zheng 1929, 2-3) (annex 2, 1.2)

The villagers complain in despair about the state of facts and throw the blame on the Dutch authorities who force a useless progress onto the previously harmonious environment, where people and nature had been coexisting peacefully. The issue is stated very explicitly: "These Dutch people with no conscience keep on building bridges, 20-30 years ago weren't we living the same as now even if we didn't have bridges?" (Zheng 1929, 3) (annex 2, 1.3). However, in this weird situation where terrifying things continue to happen with no prospect of armistice, the Dutch authorities take on a very realistic approach, by sending local militia to hunt for a supposed human murderer, while the murders and the destruction of the bridge don't cease.

The main character is introduced very soon, showing the life trajectory of a Chinese immigrant in the Dutch East Indies: Ah Jin, an old *baobing* 薄餅[18] merchant, who had been living in the Dutch East Indies for over 20 years. He had settled down in Batu Pagar, married a Malay woman and had a family with her, even if he had a Chinese wife as well, and engaged in different businesses (opium and coconut trade, agriculture), becoming a wealthy, powerful, respected man within the Chinese community. Family and business problems gradually wrecked his prosperity, and his situation at the time of the narration was that of an old, senile, poor man being despised and mocked by all the villagers.

Ah Jin is nevertheless loved and taken care of by his Malay wife, who tries to prevent him from leaving the house at night, when the murders are taking place. Since he didn't earn money any more on those days and their food supplies are over, she asks neighbors for food, which triggers Ah Jin's pride and makes him go out again in the evening for selling his *baobing* in the village. His wife proves to be right to try to keep him at home: his pride and despise of the dangers are fatal to him. The death of her husband is anticipated by the wise and loving Malay woman: "So from now on I'll never see you coming back…" (Zheng 1929, 11) (annex 2, 1.4).

[18] Chinese snack.

With a slow, detailed narration of Ah Jin's incursion in the village, the mysterious and tense atmosphere increases. The coconut trees hide mysteries and dangers, strange lights appear among the trees, threatening sounds can be heard. Ah Jin, like the other villagers, has been living in complete harmony with the nature, and this harmony is beautifully described in the story, but now he is attacked and killed by the evil spirits, proving that the whole balance of the original environment has been cruelly disturbed by the construction works.

The anticolonial layer of the novella is thus presented, showing the harms brought by the Dutch in terms of technical progress that does not fit in the environment. The pragmatic, utilitarian initiatives of the Dutch are in contradiction with the spiritual load of the Indies world, a place that functions in accordance with its own ancestral logic. Three ethnicities are presented in this novella, with three different understanding of the issue: the Dutch who are anchored too much in a pragmatic and realistic worldview, the Chinese who continue their daily trade and gambling without being much impressed by the tragic happenings, and the Malays who get the real understanding and awareness of the spiritual dynamics. Eventually, the revenge of the supernatural world is supported by the innocents and powerless: the 12 innocent Malay and Chinese villagers who were decapitated. Meanwhile, the construction works continue, and the Dutch are portrayed as unbothered, caring only about achieving their own projects and getting recognition from the government.

Sharks

Sharks is the shortest (only 12 pages) and least developed text of the volume, and the action is relatively linear and very limited in time. The geographical and social settings are presented from the very first sentence:

> On a small island near Sumatra, there were a few fishermen huts near the sea. The night was approaching dawn, the waves were madly howling, like wolves and tigers, the little birds were hidden deep in the trees; at this time, there were only owls and crows flying in the woods. (Zheng 1929, 21) (annex 2, 2.1)

The narrator continues with natural descriptions of an early morning in this environment, presenting sounds and movements that appear amid the exotic vegetation in the darkness, creating an overall atmosphere of tension and mystery, like in *Human Head*. These descriptive elements

will occur many times along the storyline, maintaining the tension and the anticipation of something gloomy.

The protagonists are a couple, Xiwen and Qina.[19] Scared by negative omens, the woman begs her husband, who was a fisherman, to not go fishing that day.

Numerous scenes of romantic and familial affection are deployed in this novella. Xiwen and Qina constantly hug, kiss, and comfort each other, showing a solid love where both partners are committed to their life together and their family. The family life is described with tenderness, showing the joy and love shared by the parents and the children, in spite of their poverty and grief. Zheng Tufei presents through dialogues and narration scenes from the private life of a married couple, creating a beautiful melodramatic atmosphere of love and safety, overshadowed by a cruel fate.

> She started crying, and her tears dropped on Xiwen's cheek.
> Xiwen caressed her hair and wiped away the tears from her eyes, but the moment he put down his hand, her tears gushed out again; also, the more [they] were falling, the more [?][20] the more,
> 'What's going on? Why did you start crying?' Xiwen rocked her gently in his arms.
> Then she finally smiled. (Zheng 1929, 22) (annex 2, 2.2)

Xiwen is instead strongly motivated by their sheer poverty and doesn't surrender to any of his wife's advices. Their arguments show a clear opposition between the pragmatic and the spiritual ways of thinking: even if he was a Muslim practitioner and put hope in Allah's protection, Xiwen is very determined to go at sea by these (otherwise perfectly reasonable) motives: the debt they had to pay to someone else, the lack of food, the illness of his mother who was living with them; instead, Qina invokes her nightmare, the strange chirp of their hen, an incident of a cat blowing off a candle, the antecedent of her brothers-in-law dying at sea as well, the chirp of a crow – all anticipating Xiwen's death. The (Chinese) reader discovers here cultural elements as well:

[19] Even if not stated explicitly, it may be a mixt couple. Xiwen's family might be Chinese, because Xiwen's and one of his late brother's names, Miwen 米溫, follow the pattern of Chinese names, where siblings' names have a common syllable; however, the third brother has a name that doesn't match, sounding like the transliteration of a Malay name: Jiaxilun 加西倫. Their ethnicity remains thus vague. Qina's ethnicity isn't explicitly stated either, but her name resembles transliterations of Malay names, so she might be Malay.
[20] Undecipherable.

Qina's superstitions and Xiwen's Muslim prayers. We see the progression of Qina's fear, through the narration of her inner thoughts:

> She thought over and over again about the omens of the great misfortune that was going to fall on them, she couldn't let her husband receive this misfortune, she wished she could hold him fiercely and never let him go, however, in the same time, the mother-in-law who was lying sick in bed, the children who were starving, the dreadful man from Bombay,[21] the chains, the prison, the police, the fishnet full of fish, small and big, the sharks with big tails… were all showing up in succession on the scene of her mind. (Zheng 1929, 26) (annex 2, 2.3)

After Xiwen's departure, his senile mother starts ranting about her sons' death, and Qina recalls the Malay rituals that they had been doing in order to expel the evil spirits living in the mango tree next to their house, that were constantly bringing bad luck over their family. Xiwen's mother also anticipates his death.

Shortly after, the approaching of a storm is felt among the coconut trees, and late at night some villagers bring them the news of Xiwen's death. When Qina's prophecy comes true in spite of Xiwen's realistic determination of catching a big shark and selling it in order to solve their financial problems – the same as every man in their family had done, just to end up eaten by those sharks – it is proven that the women were right, because they detained the ancestral, spiritual wisdom and had the real understanding of life and death.

In this way, with *Human Head* and *Sharks*, Zheng Tufei introduces a new type of reasoning to the Chinese reader, which comes in line with the trend of importing new ideas and systems of thought in the modern Chinese intellectual realm, but means a completely different source of import and an unusual system of thought: traditional thinking and superstitions from Malay culture. This is an interesting counterpart to the "Western learning" and Western sources of inspiration that were so popular in the Chinese modernity. Moreover, while everybody was looking towards more pragmatic, realistic, cosmopolitan references for consolidating modernity, Zheng Tufei comes instead with stories where superstitions and spiritual forces are more powerful than reason, technical progress, police, or money.

[21] Weird combination of characters, unidentifiable as such in the dictionary: "孟拜" *Mengbai*. Might be a different spelling for *Bombay*, normally written like "孟買" *Mengmai*.

A Night of Heavy Rain

A Night of Heavy Rain stands out, being narrated at first person, by a character-narrator telling the story of what he heard, being much longer than the other ones (around 70 pages), being more developed as narration and description, presenting the Peranakan society and not the Totok, and setting a wealthy intellectual background for the characters.

The novella starts by the description of the after-storm atmosphere in a late night, near the sea,[22] with heavy clouds, powerful wind whistling amid the coconut trees, the frightening sound of waves, night birds chirping. The character-narrator, a young man called Bohai, enters the bar where he was used to go drinking and orders a glass of brandy.[23] The bar is also extensively described, as a place of loneliness, decadence, dirtiness. Elements of *Nanyang secai* are present here, in order to create a Southeast Asian décor: coconut trees, mangos, rambutans, the sound of the sea, an equatorial storm.

In this tense and exotic atmosphere, a mysterious figure appears: a lonely and decadent man whom Bohai had noticed before, because he used to come drink alone every night in there. His aspect and behaviour are long described:

> Every night when he was coming here, he sat down at this same table. He was always drinking by himself, I had never seen him greeting with someone else, or having a drinking companion. He was often very silent, not talking to anyone, yet he was very good at drinking; this silent drinker had already aroused my curiosity and interest. He was skinny and tall, his hair had a slight shade of brown-yellow, all messy and untidy, covering his forehead, almost to his eyes, his unusual gaze was instead piercing out from behind the hair, a bright and forceful gaze that you couldn't bear too close, which was fixing entrancingly the glass of *huangjiu*, as if he had an age-long enmity with everything that was found in that glass. His cheeks were covered by beard and moustache, which were hiding away his mouth and nose, making him look even older. His clothes were unbearably broken, one could notice from the first sight that he was struggling under the pressure of the heavy chains of life. In spite of his decayed appearance, one could see from those manners that were keeping people at distance that he was a haughty, unyielding person. As I was interested in him, I was often turning to his direction, sneakily watching him. I was often thinking that if I had a chance to get to know him, that would be very interesting. (Zheng 1929, 35-36) (annex 2, 3.1)

[22] In Padang, as it will be mentioned towards the end of the novella.
[23] Brandy can be seen here as a sign of cosmopolitanism, in spite of the ambiguous exotic décor where nothing reminds Western elements. It aligns the character in the model of a Western decadent protagonist.

The two men eventually come closer and start talking, sharing many glasses of alcohol, and Bohai discovers that this was his best friend from university, Wang Bingde, a Peranakan Chinese originating from Bengkulu, Sumatra. Bohai first narrates his memories, revolving around Bingde – the true protagonist of the story: 10 years before, they had been classmates in a school founded by missionaries in China,[24] where they were studying Western literature and also writing – Bingde poetry, Bohai prose. Soon, Bingde was forced to give up his studies and go back to the Indies because his family asked him to get married, according to the traditional Chinese custom, with a woman chosen by the family, whom he didn't know. This event caused him to get depressed and isolate himself gradually from everybody, keeping silent about his grief. They kept in touch for a while through letters, until Bingde didn't reply anymore. This is where Bohai's narration ends, and he invites Bingde to share with him what had happened in all this time, in very affectionate words:

> Ten years ago, your hands were definitely not like this; youth was worn away through these wrinkles. If it doesn't hurt your quiet heart, please tell me the history of each of the wrinkles on your hands; even if all the grief remains in the past, and I already have no way to comfort you, I'd still want to know what misfortunes you had after you left, and how cruelly you were played by fate. (Zheng 1929, 41-42) (annex 2, 3.2)

The two men share very friendly words, showing that in spite of all the sorrow, friendship still exists and soothes the soul. Bingde continues narrating his life himself, sharing brandy and cigarettes with his friend, while the storm breaks out again outside. Mystery is deployed everywhere, with Bohai's questions about Bingde's decayed appearance and Bingde's cliff-hanging answers about his depression and alcoholism. The narration works through deduction: first the current state of facts is presented, then the story behind it is narrated.

Bingde had to surrender to his family's decision regarding his marriage, but after half a year he left his home, because he couldn't stand anymore his imposed life. He thus became a teacher in a school from a place in Java whose name is transliterated as Qiwu 芑物.

The life in the Chinese schools in the Indies is described as very tough and hopeless, because the students were not interested in learning about China and despised their teachers –

[24] The name of the city is not mentioned, but there is an indication that it was Shanghai, because there is a mention of the Huang Pu 黃浦, a small river that crosses Shanghai.

which contradicts both the illusion of China-educated Peranakan intellectuals who could have high professional expectations back home, and the model of the respected master from Confucian tradition. It seems from this passage that the traditional view on teachers and learning were lost in the Chinese communities in Nanyang, but not the traditional view on marriage and family. The prospects of professional accomplishment for these young Peranakans who had studied in China proves to be very low, as we can see from the two men whose hopes of attaining a literary career were shattered, and couldn't even find a work that would bring them satisfaction in the Indies, eventually throwing themselves into decay and pessimism. Zheng Tufei shows the sad trajectory of Peranakan intellectuals in the Indies. This is where he became friends with another teacher, Chen Lingfang, another Peranakan who had studied in China and was now teaching in a Chinese school in the Indies, and with her mother and brother. Their friendship evolved in a beautiful way, with reciprocal visits, gifts, help, care, turning soon into love. However, the threat of the society's disapproval was still present, acknowledged by Bingde. The Chinese reader from China can see a brief description of the mentality shared by the Chinese community from the Dutch East Indies, who is directly characterized by Bingde as very conservative and judgemental.

Another interesting description is that of Lingfang's house, a mix of Malay, Chinese, and Dutch architecture and design:

> We walked a few steps, and I saw a Malay-style stilt house in front of the lawn. In front of the gate there were some phoenix-tail sugar canes[25] standing up like the royal umbrellas carried for the Malay kings on their travels in ancient times. (Zheng 1929, 56) (annex 2, 3.3)

> On the walls there were hanging two pairs of Dutch landscape paintings, two old plates were added to both sides of the paintings, and below, there were hanging two portraits, one of Lingfang, and one of an old man, who was probably Lingfang's father. On the door there was a pair of antithetical couplets, and next to the door there were two windows; on the windows there was red square paper with the sayings "Prosperity" and "Blessing"; outside of the main hall there were two round stone tables and eight chairs, and on the ground there was laid a flowery rug; outside of the main hall there was hanging a "sky lantern", under the lantern there was a small square table, serving as a small incense burner. These decorations showed good taste, and in the same time one could see that this family was still preserving a strong Chinese style. (Zheng 1929, 57) (annex 2, 3.4)

[25] Literal translation of the botanical term in Chinese: *fengweizhe* "風尾遮".

Apart from their house's architecture and design, Lingfang and her family had adopted Malay culture in many aspects of their daily lives: they were wearing sarongs, speaking in Malay, cooking traditional food, drinking coffee, which attracts the protagonist's admiration.

The serene atmosphere and innocent friendship that Bingde experienced in Qiwu, in Lingfang's company, leading him to enjoy the beauty of those places and start living with enthusiasm and trust, would soon come to an end: when Lingfang found out that he was in love with her even if he was married, she asked him that they both put an end to this even if she loved him as well, for the sake of virtue and morality. Bingde couldn't face losing his reason of happiness and peace, moreover gossips about their love started to spread in the Chinese community, so he decided to leave Qiwu in order to save Lingfang's reputation and career.

He settled down first in Bandung, where he found another teaching work and lived in the house of a Malay family. There, he was forced to teach traditional Chinese education, which he disliked and criticized: classical literature, calligraphy, old books instead of mathematics, music, drawing, sports, modern textbooks, just for the sake of preserving traditional moral values and cultivating the children's obedience.

Except of this aspect, Bingde started enjoying his exiled life, praising the climate, the landscape, and the locals: "Even if I had the misfortune of living a wretched life in a foreign place, this magnificent nature could still bring a great deal of consolation for my sadness of being far away from home." (Zheng 1929, 72) (annex 2, 3.5). Several elements of the local culture are enumerated: foods, plants, Islam, and the locals' politeness towards guests. Even if he was somehow happy again, his longing for Lingfang still persisted, and he felt a deep hatred for the traditional society that had forced him into an unwanted marriage and into abandoning his only true love:

> Fight! Be a brave man! Rise in revolt! For you, my Lingfang, I'm ready to sacrifice everything, even my life! What's Confucian ethics? What's morality? What's the society's opinion? I'm not afraid! Overthrow it! Destroy it! Love is the highest of all, let's destroy everything in the world, we just need our love, Lingfang! I want to be a brave man! (Zheng 1929, 74) (annex 2, 3.7)

These statements can be seen as an advice for the reader as well, given the social context where the book was published and the social context from where it was inspired: thus, an advice for both Chinese and Indonesians to join the struggle for emancipation.

When he found out that Lingfang had actually married another man in the meantime, he felt betrayed, and his hatred extended towards women and towards himself too, which led him towards moral and physical decadence. He started seducing girls just to hurt and abandon them, in order to take revenge on his lost love, starting with his host, a young girl called Siti (transliterated as Xidi 西地), whose reputation was completely destroyed after her parents found out. After this episode, his process of moral and physical degradation is presented to the reader: living an unstable outcast life wandering from a place to another (Surabaya, Semarang, Batavia, Deli etc., later British Malaya), complying with a pessimistic and cynical worldview and with a tough survival, enduring humiliation and abuse and taking revenge, being treated bad and treating bad people weaker than him, giving in to drinking, prostitution, and gambling, seducing and putting to shame innocent girls (Chinese and Malay), getting suicidal thoughts. After a while he found out that his wife had died and his family was in a poor situation, but he still didn't go back to them.

One day, on a steamboat going from Singapore to Java, he met by chance Lingfang, whose husband had also died. Lingfang was kind to him and asked him to be together and get married, because now both were freed from their previous partners. They had a tender conversation, from heart to heart, but Bingde decided to leave, because he considered himself too corrupted to be worthy of her love again. After that, he spent the past years in the same bad lifestyle.

The storyline comes back to present at this point, and Bohai and Bingde say goodbye and leave the bar, while the "heavy rain" is still falling, symbolizing the chaos of the life Bingde has been through. The next day, Bohai doesn't find him anymore.

It is visible that this novella is a straight attack to the Confucian society, which is deemed to be the cause of all the unfortunate events in Bingde's life: he couldn't finish his studies and start a literary career in China, afterwards missed the opportunity of having a happy life with the girl he loved, all that because he had been forced into a traditional marriage and couldn't find the courage to fight back, and because the Chinese community gossiped around his friendship with Lingfang and threatened her future. Bingde takes revenge on all the other people around him, also on himself, arriving to complete moral and physical decadence. His love and life are doomed to

fail because of the society he lives in. All vocabulary related to the system of marriage and traditions shows the characters' grief and disapproval: "he surrendered under the severity of Confucian ethics" (Zheng 1929, 40), "My family is unbearably conservative" (Zheng 1929, 46), "yell with rage under the oppression of Confucian ethics" (Zheng 1929, 47). However, he blames himself very harshly for being too weak to openly fight and defend his values. This is the point where Zheng Tufei stands on the side of Chinese intellectuals' concern for emancipation in love and marriage, dedicating the longest novella from the volume to this issue.

This text might contain several autobiographical elements, such as the fact that Bingde and Bohai were *Huaqiao* students of literature in Shanghai dreaming of becoming writers, just like Zheng Tufei and his peers. Another connection can be made with Yu Dafu's poem dedicated to Zheng Tufei, where he described Zheng's household as one that still couldn't expel the Confucian customs (Suzuki 1996) – Bingde's story of being forced to abandon his studies in China because of the pressure of his Confucian family back in the Indies might have been inspired by the author's own life experience and family environment, as nothing is actually known about the reasons why Zheng Tufei left in 1929 China, his studies, his literary activities in Shanghai.

Brother Ah Qiu

This novella begins in media res, announcing that a certain change occurred in Ah Qiu's behaviour, turning him upside down: he seemed to be distracted and overlooked his duties at work.

Ah Qiu, a good and devoted boy, came to work in the Dutch East Indies[26] in a Chinese shop in order to support his ill mother in China. Initially diligent with his work and innocent, he became very sensitive to the feminine presences around him: the Malay women who were walking nonchalantly wherever they wanted, dressed up with few clothes, tempting him irremediably. The narrator elaborates an explicit description of a woman, revealing the exotic beauty of the Malays, that fascinates Ah Qiu to the point of giving into voyeurism:

> A middle-aged Malay woman, she was bare foot, with the upper body naked, only with a sarong, wrapped around her breasts. All the curves of her body were visible, her voluptuous flesh with a tint of brownish black, her tempting smell. At this point, Ah Qiu's heart was [?][27]

[26] The only precise geographical indication is a place nearby called Olo.
[27] Meaning unidentifiable, probably the character "椿" *chun* was typed wrongly.

> like a small toon,[28] palpitating uncontrollably. […] he watched her pouring basin after basin of water over her head and downwards; the water was rushing down from her breasts to her belly and further splitting in two over her legs. (Zheng 1929, 107) (annex 2, 4.1)

The sexual interest of Ah Qiu is more and more developed and he doesn't miss any opportunity of getting close to women. He is encouraged by his Chinese colleagues to take advantage of the freedom in the sexual life that is practiced there and to pay money for sex, and maybe even get a Malay girlfriend or wife – as this was the sole enjoyment of all the Chinese coolie laborers who were sojourning in the Indies, who were deprived of other joys and were far away from their families (where their families in China represent the love of their wives whom they miss, but even more the constraints of the traditional society – again, the issue of love emancipation is brought into question).

There are numerous descriptions of the sexual appeal of Malay women in this novella, everything going through the male gaze (being concretized in the gaze of the male characters, in the perspective of the narrator, and also in the gaze of a male Chinese reader who would enjoy finding out details about Malay women's bodies and sexual habits): "In what concerns their body, Malay women willingly offer themselves to anybody" (Zheng 1929, 108) (annex 2, 4.2), "If you can get yourself a foreign woman, that's better than anything else, just look at their plump tits, that's enough to get you crazy, and then their ass, their huge ass, and then…" (Zheng 1929, 109) (annex 2, 4.3).

Also here, the harsh life of coolie laborers is for the first time presented: it is described by some laborers themselves as a life in very poor conditions, with not much joy or prospects of accomplishment. In this context, the company of local women was considered as the only consolation.

Ah Qiu's process of discovering his own sexuality is depicted over a few pages. He is overwhelmed and transported by desire and fascination for women, neglects his work, starts to envy all other men who seem to be more successful among women, blames himself for being too shy, abandons himself to masturbation. On the occasion of the night fair of the town, he enters a dream-like realm where he is surrounded by beautiful local girls. Eventually, he goes through a hard decision: he puts in parallel his ill and poor mother from China and a beautiful Malay girl

[28] Weird combination of characters, that don't make sense pragmatically: "椿子" *chunzi*. Probably typed wrongly.

tempting him, representing his duty as a filial son and his own desire and needs respectively. He succumbs to the latter and proceeds to the quest for sexual accomplishment, dazzled by scents and images, and finally abandons himself in the arms of a Malay girl, under the coconut trees.

Cultural aspects are also revealed here, contributing to the *Nanyang secai* of the book, and they are praised by the narratorial voice:

> It was the time of the Night Fair Festival, and all the boys and girls from the town were becoming restless. The boys were taking this old festival as an opportunity to chase girls, and for the girls, especially for some young Malays, this wonderful festival had a great significance in their lives, so they were contending to blossom like clumps of flowers in spring, with ardent blood surging through every little cell of their bodies. Every time the moon was hiding amid the clouds, there often appeared in the faint darkness of the night indistinct signs of life on the beach, under the palm trees: a mouth was kissing another, a hand was holding another, a leg was pressing another, oh, what were they doing? Only Alah[29] knows! Who wouldn't be charmed by this romantic people who still preserved the primitive customs handed down by their ancestors? (Zheng 1929, 113) (annex 2, 4.3)

Ah Qiu naively falls in love with the girl and sacrifices his earnings for her materialistic interest, he even borrows money from his colleagues and steals from his boss. He takes the risk of going to her village where only Malay people lived and where Chinese people were threatened and treated badly. He becomes a very romantic character, genuinely loving his girlfriend, being very worried to not get her disappointed or upset, and willingly risking everything for his love. He finds her in her house and a dramatic scene follows: Ah Qiu discovers a picture of a man, and she says nonchalantly that it is her husband, only to have him later breaking in together with other Malay men; Ah Qiu gets then beaten, humiliated, and robbed by them.

After this betrayal and this violent encounter, Ah Qiu gets sick. He tries to pay back his debts by stealing from the counter of the shop, and gets caught by his boss. His boss beats him cruelly, and the next day turns him to the police to be put in jail.

This novella presents the Nanyang dream of love and lust, that takes naïve Ah Qiu on a journey of self-discovery from a sexual point of view, and on a path that leads directly to romantic disillusionment. This comes in line with the new subjectivity and introspection practiced in modern Chinese literature, that was concerned with the same issues of sexuality, voyeurism, passion and

[29] One of the spellings for *Allah* present in the book, in Latin script, as shown in chapter 2.

so on. Eventually the dream proves to be a cruel illusion: the beautiful Malay girls are as shallow and materialistic as they could be to trick a young infatuated Chinese boy, and he pays for his love and lust with his own integrity, safety, money, and freedom. The Nanyang world is thus presented to the Chinese readership as a place of delusional passion.

The Rose from the Rubber Plantation

The novella starts with the same narrative technique as *A Night of Heavy Rain*, by introducing first the current state of the problem and then unfolding the history behind: several Chinese workers from a rubber plantation in Sumatra discuss the suicide of a 19 years old boy, Yisheng. The dreadful supervisor of the plantation, a former Chinese coolie worker nicknamed the Nineth Uncle (Jiu Shugong 九叔公), complains cold-heartedly only about the fact that he had to report this death to the Dutch owner of the plantation and was punished for not treating well his workers. Yi Niubo 奕牛伯, the narrator-character and Yisheng's uncle, slowly unfolds the story for his colleagues.

Yisheng's trajectory is representative for the coolie laborers arriving in the Indies. He had been forced by his life circumstances to leave China (he had had a poor peasant life in a Chinese village, living only with his mother, in a context of social instability) and try his luck in Nanyang. He left for Sumatra together with his uncle, full of hope for attaining wealth. Here, the dynamics of coolie labour is elucidated for the reader:

> It was exactly at the time when the Dutch have been intensely exploiting for several years the wastelands in Eastern Sumatra, cultivating rubber and tobacco; but the locals here are dumb and lazy from birth, they can't be taken for farming buffalos. The Dutch understood very clearly that we Chinese have this enduring nature of slaves, so they used people from the coast of Fujian and Guangdong, they tempted them with the promise of great profit, or intimidated them with impressions of authority and fake government registries, so every year there are thousands of peasants tricked into coming to this waste island that is torrid like a town on fire, only to become lifelong piglets. (Zheng 1929, 125-126) (annex 2, 5.1)

Zheng Tufei exposes here the mechanisms of human trafficking in China and the exploitation of labour force by the Dutch plantation owners. Yisheng and his uncle were sent to Deli to a rubber plantation, and initially everything was fine, Yisheng was surrounded by his

uncle's protection and his colleagues' friendship. However, their supervisor displaced Yisheng to another plantation. The daily life of the workers[30] is illustrated for the reader, giving a glimpse of their hardships:

> At this time, the hot rays of sun were incessantly burning the earth like true fire, glistening golden rays were rising from the ground, and waves of hot wind were incessantly blowing forth the stink of rubber and the tragic yet melodious music of lives moaning under the poisoned whips, fists, and feet. (Zheng 1929, 131) (annex 2, 5.3)

However, it is not because of the tough plantation life that Yisheng had killed himself, but because of a love misadventure with a girl. He had fallen in love with Rose (whose name is transliterated as 羅絲 but also in Latin script),[31] a Javanese girl who was in a relationship with the Javanese supervisor of the plantation. Yisheng's deeds (being in conflict and getting humiliated by Javanese people, committing suicide etc.) were bad not only in themselves, but stained the honour of his family and of the whole Chinese community, as Yi Niubo and Nineth Uncle say. Yisheng was not seen as an individual, but as part of a whole community for which he is responsible, according to the Confucian system of thought. Initially, Rose, who was a Javanese *femme fatale* desired by everyone around her, didn't take him seriously. There is an interesting presentation of the late colonial Javanese relationships culture for the Chinese readership:

> Javanese people's vision of marriage is not very deep: if today they are happy then they live together, if they are not happy then next day both of them go their own way. Their vision of chastity is very poor too, however their jealousy can be really strong sometimes: once it's aroused, it often gets to murder; playing with daggers and seeing blood is their indulging habit. (Zheng 1929, 133) (annex 2, 5.4)

Nanyang secai is also very present in this text, with depictions of the local climate and landscape (with "south wind", extreme heat, coconut trees and so on), and with descriptions of the Javanese culture (clothing, customs related to relationships).

[30] They are called along the texts as: *kuli* "苦力" (*coolie*), *zhuzai* "猪仔" (*piglet)*, but also with the referring to their ethnicity and status in the Indies: *xinke* "新客" (*sinkeh*).

[31] The fact that Rose used an English name can be seen as an indicator of the ambitions of emancipation of young Indonesians in the late colonial period by means of borrowing Western elements, such as language and names, and can be compared with other texts that were written in the same period in the Dutch East Indies who criticized the ambitions of modernization of young Indonesian women and accused them of superficiality and frivolousness.

Yisheng has always felt inferior towards the Javanese, knowing that Rose, like all the Javanese girls, despised the Chinese. The image of Chinese men in the eyes of Javanese women is cruelly deployed by the narrator: they were despised because of their ignorance of Malay, they were considered unattractive, unrefined, dirty, ungenerous, their sexual life is also criticized. He thus started to work towards improving himself and winning her heart, and the process of change is narrated: he put a lot of efforts into learning Malay, enduring his colleagues' mockery, then he learnt Malay love songs, even if he used to sing very well Chinese love songs in China in order to impress girls. These can be seen as a moral betrayal of his own culture – despising and abandoning his own idiom and love language, alongside the fact that he shifted his reason of hard work from helping his poor mother in China to seducing his girl in the Indies. He improved his appearance with new accessories, just to look better than the Javanese, and finally approached Rose, with a romantic and passionate attitude, adding one of the Malay songs he had learnt: a song in four verses about a love story happening under the coconut trees. The fact of placing here the translation of the song into Chinese adds to the cultural layer and the *Nanyang secai* of the book. Rose is finally conquered, and Yisheng dedicates his whole energy and incomes to her. He even went into gambling in order to earn more money and satisfy her materialistic needs, and suffered physical and moral decadence. The tight dependency of love on money is visible in Rose's materialistic behaviour with Yisheng, but Yisheng never doubts her supposed feelings and honesty, even if he knew she was living with her Javanese lover. Here, the questionable moral quality of Javanese girls, in spite of their beauty, is revealed to the reader.

Just like Ah Qiu in *Brother Ah Qiu*, Yisheng finally went to his lover's village, risking his safety because the locals were hostile to Chinese people. He was confronted with Rose's coldness and humiliation, followed by the arrival of her boyfriend. After a scene of despair and sentimentality, Yisheng fought with both of them, blinded by betrayal and anger. Next day, he ended his life by hanging himself, because he couldn't stand the heartbreak and the humiliation anymore, moreover he couldn't see any way out of his debts and of the coolie life.

The novella depicts also the bad living conditions for the coolie workers: bad food, working in extreme heat, poor clothing, disrespectful and violent treatment from the (Chinese) supervisors (the main oppressors of the Chinese coolie workers are still their own nationals). It is shown how at the basis of the plantation industry and labour exploitation are the Dutch, but the actual oppressors of the workers were still Chinese people. There is an interesting game of power on the

plantations: Nineth Uncle, a former coolie worker himself who had probably gone through hardships and humiliations as well, "advanced in rank" and became a plantation supervisor, taking revenge on other coolie workers and showing absolutely no mercy. His inhumane nature is described through dialogues (fiercely scolding and threatening the coolies), actions (violence, separation of family members on purpose), attitudes (despising the lives of coolie workers, caring only about his own position), and physical appearance (a frightening, fierce appearance, bursts of anger). In this way, Zheng Tufei portrays the prototype of Chinese supervisor as unambiguously bad, showing no tolerance towards his actions.

The Dutch plantation-owners are also presented in a negative way, because, even if they developed the agriculture, they tricked or forceed Chinese people into work in bad conditions on their plantations. Other tricks are displayed as well, through the advice given by Niubo to his nephew, as if the author was determined to expose the system for the Chinese readers, adding to the anti-colonial layer of the book. However, in spite of all these, the protagonist doesn't commit suicide necessarily because of the harsh life, but mostly because of his devastating heartbreak.

In both *The Rose from the Rubber Plantation* and *Brother Ah Qiu*, the local girls (Malay and Javanese) are portrayed for the reader as inescapable seductive beings, enjoying an alluring beauty and complete freedom in their social contacts. Nevertheless, they are cruel beings who rely only on the satisfaction of their material needs, with no concern for feelings. The young Chinese who become infatuated with their beauty and seductiveness are very sentimental and honest, capable of pure love, but their hearts and lives are finally shattered by their passions. Yisheng's passion is described with quite a lot of attention to the progression of his thoughts and feelings, which were still under the umbrella of innocence and naivety. He proves to be a very romantic character, just like Ah Qiu: he puts his loved one on the highest place among his priorities and concerns, showing adoration and attachment for any little thing belonging to her, never doubting her morality and feelings, rushing to satisfy any of her needs even if that means committing crimes or enduring humiliations, being willing to sacrifice everything for her like a true troubadour who admits dying for his adored far-away woman. Interesting to compare, similar romantic male attitudes had increasing popularity in the Chinese New Literature, inspired by Western literature, but appeared to be quite inexistent in Sino-Malay literature, in the Indies society.

Where Are You Heading to

This novella starts in the same way as the previous ones: very abruptly, directly with the tragical ending – the reader witnesses the inhumane punishment of a certain Ah Fu 阿福 by the supervisor of the plantation where he was working and from where he had tried to escape, with very explicit violence, awaiting death (to be buried alive).

Ah Fu's story is then developed from the beginning of his journey from China to the Dutch East Indies. Forced by a precarious life and the lack of opportunities in Shantou, he decided to head to the Indies to become a coolie worker and earn money to send back to his large family. His departure from home is dramatically described, showing the sorrow of separation and the affection between the members of the family.

Ah Fu was tricked by a Chinese businessman, Ren Guibo 仁貴伯, who was involved in the coolie business, and got transported together with other people all the way to Hong Kong, British Malaya, and finally the Dutch East Indies. Their journey by land and by sea occupies most this text and is extensively narrated, showing the fragility of their fates which were now in the hands of other people, alongside the description of the inhumane conditions of transportation. In this atmosphere of tension, uncertainty, physical discomfort, the hundreds of people squeezed together were on the point of fighting among themselves and losing their humanity, but finally a spirit of community was created – all of them regained their faith in the prospect of having a good life and returning home soon, wealthy and happy. But these beautiful hopes were shattered by a young man who revealed to them the cruel reality of coolie life, and then committed suicide, because he knew he had no other chance of escaping the system. The journey continued for the others, going through Hong Kong and Singapore which are both described in interesting ways: Hong Kong as a modern place that is deemed forever inaccessible to the poor workers, Singapore as a place where threats already start to emerge, symbolized by the chaotic waves of the sea and the first contact with foreigners, who were there to select workers. The travellers were sent separately to different employers. Ah Fu got sent to Deli, where he was appointed on the tobacco plantation of a Dutchman.

In a few months' time, Ah Fu, who was already in his 40s and feeling too weak for the tough physical work and hostile heat, felt overwhelmed by hardships. Violence, lack of medical help, hostile climate, heavy work, and above all no prospect of returning home brought him to a state of despair. He accused the Heaven for his unfortunate fate, and tried to flee the plantation

after getting beaten up by his supervisor. He was found starving by other people and brought back – this is where the story comes back to the starting point of the novella, with the terrible punishment.

All along the novella, it is still Chinese people who turn against their own compatriots, betraying each other, oppressing each other, fighting with each other. Even if the plantations are owned by Dutch people and the whole system is motivated by their demand of labour, the violence is executed by Chinese, with absolutely no compassion for their poor compatriots. In this way, the oppression is directly enforced by the Chinese human traffickers and plantation supervisors (as we could see in previous stories as well). The Chinese supervisor who persecutes Ah Fu is portrayed in a frightening way, with explicit descriptions of violence, leaving no doubt that he is the evilest character of the story:

> "Beat him to death! Beat to death this son of a bitch! Today you must beat to death this son of a bitch! I wanna see how skilled can he be, where can he escape? Hey, you dumb bulls, what you staring at, come on and beat him to death." The supervisor was so angry today at Ah Fu, who had tried to flee but had been caught, that all the veins on his head were swollen to explode, his face turned frighteningly red, his eyes were almost out of orbits; but there was nothing special about that, he always got angry when a piglet tried to escape and got caught back. (Zheng 1929, 157) (annex 2, 6.1)

Zheng Tufei elucidates once again the mirage of going to Nanyang with hope of becoming rich: there was an entire industry of Dutch-appointed Chinese who attracted workers, sometimes even loaned them money and forced them into this in order to pay back their debts, sold them and sent them away to the south on steamboats. The Nanyang dreams turns into a Nanyang nightmare.

> As soon as we arrive in Nanyang, we see that there's gold all around, there are even some Chinese who already got rich, but there will never be our turn to have a share of this dream, we get trapped in the wastelands as soon as we arrive here. The torrid weather of Nanyang, just like a town on fire, rich people sitting in their tall buildings and still complaining about the weather, while we're working naked in the terrible sun… You can see how unfortunate is our life here. Many of our fellows can't bear the hardships, a lot of them get sick, but the supervisor doesn't seem to know this word called "illness", he says we just act lazy and he puts us to work with his leather whip even when we're sick, that's why many people die – half of them die because of illnesses, the other half die because of that poisoned whip; my father was beaten to death after less than three months after he arrived, just because he was old and couldn't work that hard. (Zheng 1929, 171-172) (annex 2, 6.2)

The title, "Where Are You Heading to", is a rhetorical question, addressed to the poor Chinese who were heading to Southeast Asia with the vain hope of earning money and returning home soon, but also to the workers who already arrived there and were doomed to never be able to escape.

The Sorrow of the New Jews

The reader is once again introduced directly in a tumultuous atmosphere since the beginning of the text, with the aid of atmospheric descriptions where people and nature are both disturbed and tense:

> The work on the tobacco plantation stopped all over, and people were approaching little by little a rubber tree. The sounds of people screaming and running in mad chaos were breaking through the beautiful quiet morning.
>
> Sparrows were hiding in the trees, the sun was watching from amid the coconut leaves, with a gloomy lusterless appearance.
>
> Suddenly, a crow came out flapping its black wings, flew round a tree for a few times, and all of a sudden, as if hurt, stretched out its head and cried mournfully, then disappeared again whirling amid the trees. (Zheng 1929, 181) (annex 2, 7.1)

Since the first page, a tragical event is presented, with an explicit description of the violence over the human body: the death of a Chinese woman, who had been raped and killed by the owner of the plantation, a Dutchman whose name is transliterated as Bodehasheng/Baidehasheng 伯德哈生. Her husband, Ah Gong 阿恭, and the other Chinese workers find her corpse under a rubber tree – symbolizing colonialism and its abuses. There is a Malay man, identified by his specific clothing in the mass of Chinese people, who elucidates the cause of her violent death, because he had witnessed the whole fight between Bodehasheng and the woman and tells them what had happened, with the same narrative technique of storytelling practiced by one character for the others.

He had seen a Chinese girl being chased on the plantation by Baidehasheng. The Dutch is interestingly identified by his "white Western clothes" (Zheng 1929, 187) and his "rubber whip" (Zheng 1929, 187). The scene of rape is narrated on detail on a few pages, showing the humiliation and violence supported by the poor woman, just to be killed afterwards. The Dutch is presented in

a grotesque appearance and behaviour. The Malay man didn't find his courage to go and save her, and was now overwhelmed by remorse and anger, while he anticipated to be accused himself of murdering the girl, because he had been spotted by the Baidehasheng.

The story ends and the listeners are all caught by anger and sorrow. Knowing that they couldn't find justice for this case or for previous abuses, they decide to rebel against the Dutch straight away, with bare hands, invading his residence. Nevertheless, Baidehasheng and the supervisor of his plantation, here not identified by ethnicity, who represent the two evil instances of these anticolonial stories, simply order the guards to kill them all. The supervisor is first killed by Ah Gong, but then the guards shoot all of the rebels, putting an end to the protest. The final scene of the story and of the volume is that of the massacre of the Chinese and Malay workers, who are thus deemed to remain forever silent and powerless in front of the colonial oppression, with the Dutch flag triumphing above everything.

The novella has a strong anticolonial theme, presenting in very critical terms the Dutch plantation owners. Not randomly chosen to be the last one of the volume, *The Sorrow of the New Jews* incites to revolution and national awakening:

> At this point, the flame of anger, shivers, and revenge rose up to the sky in smoke; the grief and humiliations piled up for centuries were now ready to explode, and the fuse was in the hands of this brown-skinned[32] Malay. (Zheng 1929, 186) (annex 2, 7.2)

> the flames of grief and anger broke through people's hearts; nothing could stop anymore the thirst of revenge.
>
> "Let's go take our revenge! Why should we endure all that? If we die, we die together; if we live, we live together; what's there to be afraid of!?" yelled with fury a young bloody man. (Zheng 1929, 192-193) (annex 2, 7.3)

For the first time in the book, there is shown a moment of strong solidarity between Chinese and Malay people, deciding to fight together against the common enemy, the Dutch plantation owner. All along the book, Zheng Tufei puts a lot of emphasis on the distinction between ethnicities and cultures, making sure to state clearly the ethnicity and status of the characters and explain aspects of different types of lives. The boundaries of ethnical segregation are transgressed

[32] *Zong* "棕" (*brown*) is typed wrongly, as *zong* "稷" (unit of measure of grains; a type of cloth).

in this novella: Chinese and Malays, immigrants and locals gather together, in spite of their different statuses and cultures, and invade together the Dutch zone, trying to undermine their authority. It is also remarkable that here, the Chinese and the Malay call each other "friend" (Zheng 1929, 184). The title is rather peculiar though, comparing the plantation workers with "new Jews"; Zheng probably associated the situation of the Sinkehs in the Indies with the oppressive treatment of Jews in Europe, proving his familiarity with the issue, but to what extent did this comparison speak to the Chinese reader?

On the whole, the conclusion of this text is clearly anticolonial, but Zheng Tufei still shows pessimism towards Indonesia's possibilities of attaining independence and justice for the native people. The last two sentences of the novella represent a statement of the situation in the Dutch East Indies, with no prospect of justice for the oppressed people, with a clear opposition in the imagery of the triumphant colonizer and the thoroughly defeated colonized:

> The dark smoke ceased at this point. The sun was shining over the piles of dead bodies from the ground – a confused and frightening mass of blood and flesh.
>
> A gust of wind moved sonorously the three-colour national flag from the top of the house, and brought forth a bloody odour from the ground. (Zheng 1929, 195) (annex 2, 7.4)

The main ideas promoted by Zheng Tufei through this book are clearly and unambiguously expressed. They promote anticolonialism in the Dutch East Indies, support for the lower classes, support for emancipation in love and marriage, deconstructing the Nanyang dream, introducing Indonesian/Malay culture to the Chinese public.

Zheng Tufei presents an exotic space for the Chinese readership, in a complex manner, questioning the exoticizing gaze that existed before, through characters that are initially attracted by everything from Southeast Asia, only to discover the dark sides of it. Zheng Tufei offers cultural information as well as descriptive passages full of *Nanyang secai*, all contributing to the depiction of the Indies world. He doesn't stop at describing facts, nor does he limit his interest to intercultural love stories and cultural aspects of the Indies society – he adds two other valuable layers to his narratives: one is to make a historical account of the coolie life, the other one is to expose colonialism, both of them sharing the aversion against the class of the oppressor, be it Dutch or

Chinese. In all these aspects, Zheng is strongly engaged, and works towards transmitting a realistic image of the issues.

As regards the title of the volume, the coconut trees are meaningful motifs across the stories: they appear often in the book, in description and narration, hiding secrets and mysteries, but also being the frame of bad omens. On the whole, the presence of coconut trees always anticipates bad things that are going to happen, instead of the exotic dream of wealth and lust that was represented by Nanyang.

Conclusion

The Coconuts proves to be a very complex book, touching different layers of the lives of Chinese people in the Dutch East Indies. Most importantly, it represents a testimony of the time and spaces where it is anchored: the Dutch East Indies and China in the 1920s, with their respective socio-political problems and phenomena.

The five elements of analysis offer a multifaceted understanding of the book, in its relation with the surrounding socio-political situations but also with the intellectual contexts that influenced the creation. The artefactuality of *The Coconuts* provides us an insight on its physical form and on its rather modest edition, as well as on formal, graphical elements of writing. An analysis of its historicity proved to be rather unnecessary when looking at the historical development of the texts in different editions (journal and volume), because of the very similar versions. However, the historical engagement of the narratives is of great importance, meaning the historical situations they are set in, and this aspect was developed in the chapter of contextuality. Zheng Tufei's place in the tumultuous history of the Dutch East Indies and China in the 1920s is proven by his engagement with the socio-political problems of the two countries through his novellas: colonialism, plantations, Peranakan society, gambling, revolts in the Dutch East Indies, social emancipation in China, the coolie issue. Zheng's contacts with different bodies of literature show different reflections in his texts, drawing him closer to the literary developments of China than to those of the Dutch East Indies, and situating him in an important place in the nodal segment of Nanyang literature. Finally, in the chapter of interpretability, the main themes and ideas promoted across the book are revealed with the aid of passages from the texts: a blend of leftist and anti-colonialist objectives – strong critiques of the oppressors' class (Dutch colonial government and plantation owners, Chinese plantation supervisors and business owners) and support for the lower classes (mostly coolie workers, but also poor fishermen, poor school teachers etc.); he joined the fight against Confucianism and tradition in what concerns marriage, love, family relations, but also school education (with his numerous references to the pressure of Confucianism and conservative mentalities); he approached the Nanyang trope in an ambivalent way: on the one side, he introduced and presented it to the Chinese reader as a fascinating exotic

space, full of *Nanyang secai*; on the other side, he deconstructed this Nanyang dream, showing its dark sides (the coolie trade in China and the coolie life in the Dutch East Indies).

There are (failed) revolts all across the book: the workers' hatred and subversive actions against the abuses of the Chinese plantation supervisors and business owners, leading to tragical consequences; the evil beings' horrid reactions against the constructions in Batu Pagar, which left the colonial authorities unbothered; Ah Qiu's passage to sentimental and sexual liberation only to be severely punished; Wang Bingde's feeble struggles under the oppression of the conservative Confucian family and Peranakan society. All these situations are not merely the personal revolts of individual characters, but speak in the name of greater categories: the coolies, the colonized people from the Indies, the young lovers from a Chinese cultural background. The book presents social and political revolutions in the making, and incites to revolution itself, through the characters' radical discourses. However, an impenetrable layer of hopelessness is shed over the book, as in the end no prospect of betterment is allowed, and the characters are destined to complete powerlessness in front of the oppressing instances.

Focusing a lot on a specific category of people, the coolie workers, the book also provides a valuable historical account for the Chinese migration to the Dutch East Indies in the late colonial period. Zheng Tufei is dedicated to revealing different facets of it: the system of coolie labor trade from its roots to its results, the sea transportation in inhumane conditions, aspects of daily life, hardships and abuses at work, hierarchy, but also inquiries in the workers' psychological developments – he presents different types of human relationships in the plantation environment (friendship, enmity, love, kinship), and approaches complex aspects such as sexual (self-)discovery and cultural shock. The theme of coolie life was not only a novelty for the Chinese literature of that time (and probably for other bodies of literature as well), but it was an issue of both spaces that Zheng was related to, China and the Dutch East Indies, so it represents a crossroads standing point for Zheng in the history of the two spaces.

Many of the human relationships in the book are related to love, each novella refers to a love story, in a more or less detailed manner. While the last two novellas only mention in passage these relationships, the others focus lot on love stories, and *Brother Ah Qiu* and *The Rose from the Rubber Plantation* are almost fully dedicated to this theme. Love is unbearably tragic in Zheng Tufei's book: the protagonists suffer heartbreaks, restrictions, betrayals, humiliations, decadence, violence, rape, widowhood, death. There are also moving depictions of joy and tenderness, as well

as romantic chivalry deployed by male characters, but these are all expressed in a fragile, melodramatic atmosphere, being destined to be eventually shattered. Love is a theme in itself in Zheng's book, but it should be seen as complex as it is, being intertwined with the other themes: cultural shock, colonialism, coolie life, Nanyang, anti-Confucianism, being eventually the innocent victim of all the issues stated in the book.

Zheng Tufei's book *The Coconuts* was remarkable in its time, because it was one of the first realistic fictional writings to present Southeast Asia, more precisely the Dutch East Indies, to the Chinese readership. Zheng differentiated himself not only from contemporary Chinese and Indonesian writers, but also from his fellow *Huaqiao* writers at Qiuye She. He partially joined the communal support for China's problems and struggles, by bringing to the discussion one issue of the lower classes, otherwise not discussed (the coolie trade and migration), but he reached further than China's borders: he presents an issue of a category of people in China in a global context, showing the involvement of Dutch, Malay, and Javanese people in it, and the development of this issue in another geographical space than China.

Another very important factor that differentiates Zheng Tufei from his colleagues (and also from other writers of his time) is the fact that the place he chose to depict is not China, but the Dutch East Indies, which represent the narrative background of *The Coconuts* and the cultural space presented to the reader. He unfolded great cultural information for the Chinese public, explaining customs, traditions, superstitions and beliefs, introducing exotic foods and specific clothing, describing landscapes in Java and Sumatra, even including the translation of a song.

Zheng thus blends two spaces into one book. Not only his characters are mixed (Chinese – Sinkehs and Peranakans, Malay, Javanese, Dutch) and often dealing with cultural shock and cultural appropriation themselves, but he blends the Dutch East Indies as theme and narrative background with China as style, character typologies, and ideologies. His book doesn't share many common features with Indonesian literature, it comes closer to Chinese literature instead, but it is not entirely Chinese. From the beginning till the end, he stays loyal to his "Indies' cause", showing a great deal of pessimism but inciting nevertheless the reader to stand on his side and join the spiritual revolt. Unfortunately, his supposed allies would only be well-educated Chinese people who probably never engaged in coolie labor and couldn't make a change, and not actual residents of the Indies or Chinese coolie laborers – as the latter were most often uneducated peasants, and there is no information whether his book ever even reached the Indies. He might have attempted a

change through his radical, engaged book: a step further in Indonesia's struggle for independence, preventing Chinese people from getting tricked by their own fellows into coolie labor, breaking the Nanyang illusion of wealth and lust. Unfortunately, it doesn't look like he reached these objectives, as these goals were high, but the audience small. He struggled to make himself a way in the literary world, making connections with important people and getting involved in many activities, but he couldn't reach further, and soon he took his leave, apparently abandoning his creative career. There is no consistent information on the reception of the book, there are no traces of a great impact on the readership; an eventual change in mentalities or, even further, in the actual social and political problems is unlikely. On the other hand, even if the strong ideas of the book would conduct the reader to think that all the objectives above stood behind the process of creation, it must be remembered that, in lack of evidence, it is also possible that Zheng Tufei simply narrated a series of aspects from the Indies society, with no hope of betterment – given the pessimistic ending of all the texts.

Zheng Tufei should not be overlooked in the literary history of both Indonesia and China: his work could be considered as belonging to both spaces – it cannot be taken out neither of Indonesian literature because the Indies were his place of origin and source of inspiration, nor of Chinese literature because he adhered to its trends and China was the place where he wrote and published. He was a pioneer in many aspects: he was a pioneer in presenting Nanyang in a realistic and complex way, with a lot of attention to the negative aspects even, he already demolished the Nanyang illusion at a moment when it had just started to be approached through literature, he was an engaged supporter of the Indonesian anti-colonialist struggle, exposing directly the abuses and violence, he depicted the terrible coolie life which hadn't been discussed in literature before, and, last but not least, he made a cultural presentation of the Dutch East Indies for the Chinese readership. He probably didn't reach a large audience and couldn't make himself a solid literary career in China, but his book, *The Coconuts*, remains as a testimony of engagement and solidarity. Solidarity with coolie workers who died trying to earn money for their hopelessly destitute families, with young boys who had their romantic dreams shattered by cultural shock and superficial girls, with innocent lovers who were forced to separate because of the conservative Confucian society, with plantation workers endlessly persecuted by their supervisors, and with the oppressed population under the colonial system.

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