

Tales from Nanyang: Folk Beliefs and Women's Fate in Lee Yoke Kim's Fiction

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Abstract The novel *Yimeng Zhi Bei* 《遗梦之北》 written by Lee Yoke Kim (Li Yijun), a Malaysian Chinese writer, was nominated as one of the top ten Chinese novels in 2012 by the Yazhou Zhoukan journal [Asia Weekly]¹. Set in a small town in Malaysia, the story gives a lucid account of the living environment of the Chinese who immigrated to Nanyang, and keeps record of the folk beliefs and living practices among the people of that era. The novel follows the fate of several generations of women from the Ye family, describing their internal worlds, their sorrows and joys, and how they pursue a profound level of spirituality in life. This paper explores the deep impact of polytheism and the notion of predestination,

¹ Lee Yoke Kim was born in Penang, Malaysia, and is originally from Wenchang, Hainan Province. She is currently the Vice President of the Malaysian Chinese Writers' Association and writes mainly fiction and prose. She has won the first Malaysian Outstanding Young Writers Award (马来西亚优秀青年作家奖), the Shuangfu (双福) Novel Excellence Award, and the first prize in the first Singapore Fang Xiu (方修) Literature Award for prose. She has published several books, among them the novels [Spring and Autumn on the Move] 《春秋流转》, [The Three Sections of the Mirror] 《镜花三段》, [North of Lost Dreams] 《遗梦之北》; the short story collections [Pining Lovers] 《痴男怨女》, [Collected Writings of Li Yijun] 《李忆著文集》, [The Beach of Dream Sea] 《梦海之滩》, [Woman] 《女人》; and the prose collections [Hardships of Passed Days] 《去日苦多》, [Heedless] 《漫不经心》, [City People] 《城市人》, [Until the End of Time] 《地老天荒》, [Gallant Years] 《岁月风流》, [The Earth's Red Dust] 《大地红尘》, [Times of Sound] 《年华有声》, [Falling in Love With A River] 《爱上一条河》, and others. In 2012, she was awarded the 12th Malaysian Chinese Literature Award (马来西亚华文文学奖).

situating the mysteries and realities of the novel's female protagonists' lives in the context of the history of Chinese women in Nanyang.

Keywords Lee Yoke Kim; Li Yijun; *Yimeng Zhi Bei*; Malaysian Chinese Literature; Mahua literature; Chinese diaspora; folk beliefs; women's fate.

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Introduction

Malaysian Chinese (Mahua 马华) literature has mainly been known for a couple of famous writers, such as Li Yong Ping 李永平 and Chang Kuei Hsing 张贵兴 who have been based in Taiwan for several decades. However, these writers are not originally from West Malaysia but from East Malaysia (Sarawak), which is why there have been academic debates about whether their work should be counted as Mahua literature (Chai 2018). More recently, female-authored Mahua literature has gained increasing attention in Malaysia and internationally. The translation of Li Zi Shu's novel *Gaobie de niandai* 《告别的年代》 into English under the title *The Age of Goodbyes* (Li 2022) marked an important milestone. This paper shall focus on another accomplished female Mahua writer named Lee Yoke Kim (Li Yijun 李忆著) and her full-length novel *Yimeng Zhi Bei* [North of Lost Dreams]. In 2012, the novel, which portrays the characteristics of social customs in Nanyang,¹ was in the top ten selection of Chinese novels by the journal *Yazhou Zhoukan* [Asia Weekly] (Sinchew 2013).

Against the background of a marriage alignment between the Jin and the Ye family, two Chinese families who settled in Nanyang, *Yimeng Zhi Bei* revisits the history of British colonialism, the competition between the Kuomintang and the

1 Nanyang (南洋), sometimes translated as 'South Seas', is a Chinese term that refers to South East Asia, especially the region of today's Singapore and Malaysia.

Communist Party in Malaya, the Japanese Invasion, the history of the Malayan Communist Party, the implementation of the New Village policy,¹ and Malaysia's transition to independence in 1957. Covering Malaysia's history from the 1930s to the 1970s, the novel deals with social changes over four decades and how, during this time, the local Chinese's customs and thinking changed.

The Ye family's business starts to go downhill after the second generation's breaking up of the family. All three Ye brothers get divorced from their wives, and by doing so, fulfil the common saying that it is the fate of Chinese families that their "wealth does not last for three generations." The Ye family's third generation, especially the family's women, who do not have the protection of the family, begin to integrate into the local life. This is highlighted by various common scenes of life in the background of the novel, such as Chinese schools, temples, dumpling wrapping at the Dragon Boat Festival, the Chinese New Year Festival, bus and ferries rides, playing *majiang* (麻将), and buying *zihua* (买字花).²

In this novel, Lee consciously expands the historical background of the story, based on the memories of her childhood. The scenes, which can be described as a panorama of the Chinese community's life in Malaysia, are rich and delicate, and are characterised by a collective feeling of distress about the great historical changes and life being beyond grasp.

Relevant previous research on *Yimeng Zhi Bei* includes Ma Feng (2017), who argues that in the novel hallucinations and dreams are often interspersed, creating a mysterious and peculiar atmosphere with both real and unreal situations, which he refers to as "dream narrative" (梦幻叙事) (Ma). This dream narrative, according to Ma, runs throughout and frames the whole story. Comparing it to the dream narrative in *Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦), Ma argues that the "dream" symbolism in *Yimeng Zhi Bei* is both a metaphor for individual fate and of an entire ethnic group (Ma 2017, 47).

The present paper shall extend the study of the meaning of individual and collective fate by investigating how the destiny of three generations of women in

1 The New Village policy was part of a resettlement program by the British colonial government, who wanted to decrease communist influence. The resettlement program was part of the so-called Briggs Plan, a strategic military plan drawn up by Sir Harold Briggs. By 1953, up to half a million squatters, most of them ethnic Chinese, had been moved to so-called New Villages (Lee 2013, 1981).

2 *Majiang*, a Chinese tile-based game, is more commonly known by its Cantonese pronunciation *mahjong*, *mah-jong*, or *mah-jongg*. However, this paper uses Hanyu Pinyin (汉语拼音) as a general standard for the romanisation of Chinese characters. *Zihua* (literally: lucky draw) refers to a gambling game that used to be common among Chinese communities.

the novel is related to the unique concepts of folk belief prevalent in the Malaysian Chinese society. Regarding literary representations not only as closely embedded in their historical and socio-cultural context but also offering alternative insights into history, it aims to draw a connection between the female protagonists' experiences and women's role in the Malaysian Chinese community, which underwent drastic changes in the four decades spanned by the novel. The detailed realist descriptions of religious practices and rituals as well as the female protagonists' lived experiences make the novel especially valuable for such a project. Thus, the paper offers important new data on the connection between the history of the Chinese diaspora in Malaysia's late colonial and early post-colonial era, practices of Malaysian Chinese folk religion, and the lived realities of Malaysian Chinese women within these processes.

From China to the South Seas

The centre of the story is in Kulim, a town situated in the northern part of Malaysia in today's Kedah state. Thus, the meaning of the term "north" in the novel's title [The North of Lost Dreams] is twofold. First, from the perspective of Southeast Asia, Yunnan Province in China lies to the north of the Malay Peninsula; second, from the perspective of the Malay Peninsula, the location where the story is set (Kulim) lies to the north of the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. However, the characters' activities reach beyond Kulim, including Thailand and other towns on the Malay Peninsula, such as Hualing, Penang, Muar, Malacca, and Kuala Lumpur.

The two protagonists of the novel, Ye Shuijing and Ye Shuiling, are cousins. Their great-grandfather (Jin Shawan), originally a practising lama from Zhongdian, China,¹ became a divine sorcerer, making a living by casting spells and interpreting curses after falling in love with a girl. As a consequence, he is cursed and hunted by other Buddhist schools of thought for breaking his vows. Thus, he brings his wife and his daughter (Jin Qingke) south. They travel along the border of Central Burma and through Thailand, settling on the northern edge of the Malay Peninsula at Padang Besar (Malay for "vast fields"). Later they move to Sungai Petani (Malay for "river of farming") and finally settle in a small town called Kulim,² where they live in seclusion, running a grocery shop, and leading a mundane life.

After settling in Kulim, Jin Shawan still feels the curse of his enemies haunting him and his descendants. In order to break his ties with the country of origin, he

1 Zhongdian (中甸), which is located in China's Yunnan province became famous by the name Shangri-La (香格里拉) (Yang 2018, 190).

2 Kulim is also the name of a tree (Kulim tree, scientific name: *scorodocarpus borneensis*).

arranges a marriage for his daughter Qingke with Ye Anping, the son of a local merchant named Ye, hoping that his daughter's secular marriage will dispel the misfortune he carries. The Jin couple indeed lives to an old age. When they pass away, they leave their only daughter a string of Buddhist beads made from red sandalwood.

At that time, Jin Qingke is 33 years old, already has three sons and two daughters, and is living a married life in the Ye family. Just after Jin Shawan's death, Qingke senses that she has inherited her father's energy. She experiences a mysterious force that opens her mind's eye and gives her the ability to foresee future blessings and disasters, causing her to live in a state of unexplainable fear and helplessness. The first disaster comes when her 11-year-old daughter Ye Xiaoxiu, who has suddenly gone mad, jumps into a river and dies. This is the first time Qingke faces the cruel ordeal of her destiny. She fights through her grief to raise her remaining children to adulthood until they get married and have their own children. Her husband Ye Anping passes away before her. When she has already reached an old age, she starts looking beyond the mundane world by setting up a Buddhist temple at home, chanting sutras, and praying to the Buddha all day long. She barely leaves her house anymore and does not interfere in the lives of her children and grandchildren. When her three sons split up, have affairs, divorce, and fail in business, she just watches indifferently.

Three generations of the Ye family's women inherit the mysterious power of their maternal ancestors' Tantric religion. They have the gift to foresee the destiny of family members, which is continuously fulfilled. This causes them distress because they are not able to prevent any of these events in their lifetime. However, they try to change their destiny and free themselves from the curse of predestination, which is one of the themes the novel addresses.

Ye Huaiqiu, the only daughter of Jin Qingke, autonomously chooses to marry Cheng Yingkun, a car driver, and lives an ordinary and uncomplicated life in the city. After old Mrs. Ye has reached a high age and starts to make sincere offerings to Buddha, the family's psychic ability suddenly shifts to Ye Huaiqiu, who at the time has a premonition that her husband will be killed in a car accident. Old Mrs. Ye has a good idea of the misfortune that will befall Ye Huaiqiu, but there is nothing she can do about it. She can only ask someone to send Huaiqiu the family's Buddhist sandalwood beads, hoping that they will help her get through this difficult time in her life. However, Huaiqiu fails to dissuade her husband from driving out to deliver goods, and when the news of his tragic death in a car accident reaches her, she begins to question the gods that she has always worshipped. Unable to cope with

the mental pressure, she finally goes insane, and lives out her last days in a mental hospital, cutting off her perception. This is how the women of the Ye family's second generation try to resist their predestination, each of them in their own way. Although their resistance may appear faint and powerless, these women's actions are brave and heroic.

After Huaiqiu having gone insane, the family's divine sense is once again handed down to the next generation. This time, it is passed to Ye Shuiling in the third generation. Shuiling has inherited the traits and wisdom of old Mrs. Ye and is fully aware of her mission. Having experienced the divorce of her parents and the unexpected death of her first love, she has been thinking about her life and destiny at a young age already. Later she rejects the love of a boy from the same village, studies Buddhism, and decides to become a nun. She aims at returning to the religious realm, thereby redeeming herself for her ancestors' sins, hoping that the family's destiny will end in her own generation. At the same time, Ye Shuijing, also a woman of the family's third generation, is adopted by her paternal aunts Ye Huaiqiu and Long Yueqiu, as well as a maternal aunt after her parents' divorce. In the end, Shuijing manages to leave her resentment towards her mother behind in the north. She heads south to Kuala Lumpur to reunite with her mother, start a new life, and realise new life goals and dreams.

Folk Religion and the Malaysian Chinese Diaspora

In the novel, *Jitong* (e.g. Chen Bo) and *Lingmei* mediums (e.g. Aunt Lian Hua), fortune tellers (e.g. Ah Liang), and card reader fortune tellers (Indian) are the mediums of communication between humans on the one hand and the gods and ghosts on the other.¹ They can use their own bodies to bridge the gap between the mundane world and the realm of the gods. As a result, it is common for temple shrines to have consultation functions such as bamboo sticks fortune telling (求签), divination (卜卦), mediumship (起乩), rice asking (问米), and drawing charms (画符). When the inhabitants are faced with a difficult situation in their lives or feel uncertain about the future, they let the gods decide their course. They trust the gods' instructions and believe that disobeying them will bring misfortune.

This is in line with recent research that has pointed out the significance of Chinese folk religious practices among the Chinese diaspora in Malaysia up to this day. As Tan Chee Beng notes, the term "Chinese folk religion," which is also referred to as "Chinese popular religion" refers to "the complex of Chinese beliefs and practices involving the worship of ancestors, deities and ghosts, in contrast to

1 *Jitong* and *Lingmei* are different kinds of spiritual mediums in Chinese folk religion.

Buddhism and Taoist Religion” (Tan 2). Overall the Chinese in Malaysia, according to Tan “have been free to practise their traditional religion” (Tan 2018, 1), thus various Chinese folk religious practices survived and some of them (further) developed locally (Tan 2018, 4–5). Eric Cohen points out that in “[c]ontrary to classic modernisation theories, spirit mediumship cults proliferated with economic development and growing prosperity in mainland Southeast Asia” (Cohen 94). In Malaysia, Chinese (mostly Hokkien mediumship) practices are most common (Cohen 91). Accordingly, Daniel P.S. Goh argues that Chinese religion in Malaysia should not be regarded under the concept of tradition versus modernity, as the range of phenomena “described under the rubric of Chinese religion” exceeds “the dichotomous imagination of ‘modernisation’” by far (Goh 107–108).

The concept of a Chinese diaspora has led to controversial debates for various reasons. For instance, Wang Gungwu highlights that there is not one single Chinese diaspora, but many different Chinese diasporas (Wang 170), and Shih Shu-mei argued that “diaspora has an end date” and everybody “should be given a chance to become a local” (Shih 45). In the case of the history of the Malaysian Chinese community and their religious practices, the concept has proven useful, as it helps to frame the connection between the community’s past and present. As Letty Chen points out, diasporic communities are closely shaped by the memories of previous generations which are inherited to following generations as “postmemory” or “prosthetic” memory, which manifest as nostalgia, longing, search for identity etc. (Chen 53).

Throughout their history, ranging from drifting to settling, the Chinese diasporic community in Nanyang has experienced repeated challenges, setbacks, and fears. However, over the time of several generations, its members have found confidence through the worship of multiple gods, sustaining them in their hardships and in facing the unknown in these foreign lands. Coming from different provinces in China, they retained the customs and beliefs of their hometowns as a central component of their lives. Thanks to the tolerance of the local people, who have allowed and respected worshipping multiple gods, the various faiths have been able to coexist peacefully to this day.

In such a multi-ethnic and multi-deity environment, the local people of Kulim believe in a wide range of folk legends, which not only explain disasters and misfortunes, but are also an important precondition for ethnic groups living together in peace. The majority of Chinese living in Kulim are Hakka and Hokkien people. But there are also Teochew, Guangxi, Cantonese, and Yunnanese people. The local people make their living from farming and are intermixed with Indians,

Malays, Thais, and local natives. In addition to Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Catholicism, and Islam, the Chinese also worship Hindu gods, Siamese gods, and local Malay gods. Furthermore, there are various temples and shrines scattered in all corners of the town such as the temple of the goddess Guanyin (观音庙), the temple of the Great Uncle Gong (大伯公庙, Datuk Gong), the temple of the Three Dharma Masters (三法师公坛), the temple of the Maoshan Masters (茅山师公坛), the temple of the Three Ching Masters (三清师公坛), the temple of the Nezha's Three Crown Princes (哪吒三太子坛), and others. But there are even more deities worshipped in these temples, such as Guan Gong (关公), Sun Dasheng (孙大圣), Jigong (济公) and Mazu (妈祖). The temples also accommodate Nichiren Buddhism (日莲正宗), Yi Guan Dao (一贯道), the True Buddha School (真佛宗), and Tantric Buddhism (密宗). Some of the gods have their roots in multiple religions. For instance, Great Uncle Gong, who is widely worshipped by Malaysian Chinese, originally was a merger of a Malay and a Chinese *shen* (Chinese for god/spirit) (Chin and Lee 385–286).

In the area known locally as 'North Malaysia' (north of the Malay Peninsula), there is a widespread belief in spirits and peoples' lives are embedded in a strong religious atmosphere. The author portrays the spiritual life of the New Village and small-town people living in a multi-religious environment from multiple angles—both in terms of the transmission of traditions and the integration of local beliefs. The novel is set in a small town full of superstition and an uncanny atmosphere, where people link the strange events and misfortunes that occur in the town to the gods, explaining all the phenomena in a rousing and fanciful manner.

In the novel, the people of the small town are accustomed to trying to make sense of all kinds of misfortunes and calamities that occur in their daily lives to be able to sleep soundly and live peacefully. They interpret mysterious or anti-rational signs as punishments or hints, turning them into a persistent insistence on life. For instance, the third chapter begins with a frog fight in early May 1969, followed by an ethnic clash on May 13 in the same month. In hindsight, the villagers see the frog fight as a warning that something unfortunate is bound to happen if left unattended. One could even say that they have a spirit of exploration with bold assumptions, not avoiding the gods but rather approaching them with a devotion. This kind of spirituality formed a life norm among the entire community, a common shared destiny.

The religious beliefs of the inhabitants of both the novel's New Village and the small town originate from their ancestors. In their world, the dogmas and instructions of the gods are far superior to the laws and ordinances of the mundane

world. The gods are regarded as invisible overseers and the inhabitants believe that even if they manage to escape the law, they could not manage to escape the final judgement of the gods. They also believe that the gods' blessing of the pious is tantamount to a code of conduct for themselves. They are convinced that it is an unquestionable law that where there is a cause, there is a consequence, and that those who commit trespasses will be punished. It is also due to this understanding that the people of the town have their own standards of right and wrong and do not judge based on worldly ideas.

Whenever the New Village residents have doubts about their lives, they feel that the most practical way to deal with the issue is to worship and ask the gods. They hope that they can ask the goddess Guanyin, the Goddess of Fortune, the Goddess of the Three Princes, or the God of Good Fortune, commonly known as Great Uncle Gong, to see how to avoid bad luck. These miracles, which mysteriously seem to exist, make the villagers feel that the blessings from the gods are close at hand, and that all the doubts that haunt them are immediately resolved through the instructions of the gods. Notwithstanding whether the gods' instructions are good or bad, they are convinced that this is 'fate'. And since it is decreed by fate, no one can change the outcome, and no one can be saved.

Thus, in the novel, we see all kinds of religious places, temples, and shrines in all corners of the New Village. but also psychics (通灵的), rice askers (问米的), sciomantics (扶乩的), prophecy tellers (预言的), fortune tellers (算命的), poker card readers (算扑克牌的), and medicinal magic figure drawers (画符药方的). The fact that all religions have their own place reflects the fact that on the Malayan (later Malaysian) soil, there is a mixture of religions, beliefs, and cultures, which intersect with each other, creating a special ecology in which everyone has different views and ideas about faith, yet peacefully living in the same land. When the protagonists face difficult questions in life, their different ideas of faith lead them down different paths, yet sometimes, they would turn to the gods of other ethnicities.

The villagers believe that the gods also punish Daoist practitioners with evil intentions. For example, in the case of Chen Bo, the master of the Jigong altar, who usually helps people to get rid of calamities and prevent them from danger but is unable to remove his own family's bad luck. His two daughters die of illness and his two sons have a motorbike accident at a bend in the road that leads into the New Village, and both meet a violent death on the spot. The deaths of the Chen sons and daughters are so strange that people cannot help but speculate based on all the signs that the family's successive tragedies must be linked to the frog fight in front of the

temple. However, this does not seem to suffice to explain the four Chen children's bad luck. When they cannot find the cause, an inexplicable fear rises in their hearts, and they have a vague feeling that the events are related to the cycle of karma of the people involved. Thus, following the suggestion of the rice asker, Aunt Lian Hua, they trace the root of the matter. The vague clues attribute the entire blame for the bad karma to Chen Bo. In order to make a living, he did not shy away from faking his powers as a medium, only pretending to be in contact with the supernatural world to cheat people for their money. Thus, the gods brought punishment to his family.

Aunt Lian Hua, has a community altar in her home, dedicated to some great gods such as Guanyin, Buddha, Jigong, and Nezha. She provides sciomantic (planchette writing) services to communicate with the gods, and advises Ye Shuijing to worship the gods often to receive their blessings. Ah Lian, a mute girl, is Aunt Lian Hua's niece. She is a devout believer and very close to Aunt Lian Hua, who treats her like her own child. She even prepares her to be her successor. Ah Lian is in love with Shuijing's second cousin An Xiang, a young man with a literary and artistic talent, a gentle temperament, and a friendly attitude. One day, the kind-hearted Ah Lian is raped and murdered, and her body is dumped by the roadside. What kind of heavenly justice is this? The person grieving the most is Aunt Lian Hua, who has lost a descendant who would have died for her. Full of hatred, she wants to dress Ah Lian in red, enter the hall with her, and let her turn into a powerful ghost in order to take revenge on the person who killed her. It is only after the crowd discourages her that she gives up this plan. If Chen Bo suffered bad luck because of his false mediumship, then didn't Aunt Ah Lian's deliberate act of leading the villagers to expose him also deviate from the proper path of a Daoist and bring misfortune to her own family? According to the notion of karma, which people of the community believe in, Daoist practitioners are not excluded and will also be punished for deviating from the path.

The people of the town are most interested in finding out about the accuracy of the gods of various temples. Thus, they will travel thousands of miles to a certain place to ask the gods there about their fortune. In the first chapter of the novel, in which the Ye brothers split from the family, Wang Li'e, the third daughter-in-law, chats with her sister-in-law, Ye Huaiyun, who says: "The Ye family is doomed, no one can save it." She is referring to the fact that she had asked a fortune teller at a temple in Kulim about her husband Mingbin's fortune many years ago. The fortune teller said that the family was going to split up. People believed in fate in the sense that one's destiny was predetermined, and that the gods' function was not only to

make choices for them, but also to explain their karma and destiny to them. Long Yueqiu recalls that many years ago, she had asked for her fortune at the Guanyin temple in Penang, and the lottery ticket said: “The leaves of the Wutong tree have fallen, and there is no one to depend on.” The person who interpreted the sign said that when the leaves of the Wutong tree fall, the family would eventually fall apart, and the husband would abandon his wife and children. She took these words to heart, and they provided a basis for what happened afterwards. The novel also mentions the Yishan, a public tomb, which is located next to a Great Uncle Gong temple. Every year, on the 15th day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, the Hungry Ghost festival (Yulanpen festival) is celebrated there,¹ and on the eighth day of the Mid-Autumn Festival, a performance is staged to thank the gods and comfort the spirits. This illustrates the inseparable relationship between the town’s inhabitants and its traditional customs.

A Supernatural Gift and Curse of a Family’s Women

The phenomenon of “yin and yang” eyes, which is believed to allow people to see things that are not seen by normal people, to foresee the future, and to communicate with the spiritual world, often runs in a family, or the given person has ancestors who were mediums or psychics. In the novel, the ability is inherited only by the family’s women. Old Mrs. Ye, Ye Xiaoxiu, Ye Huaizun, and Ye Shuiling all possess this ability. They can see psychic phenomena and foresee the future. The eleven-year-old Ye Xiaoxiu is too young to understand what she is sensing and probably so frightened by what she sees that she jumps into the river, which is regarded by others as ‘sudden madness’. Old Mrs. Ye is aware of the bad fortunes of her family members, but she cannot reveal the secret, nor can she prevent such misfortunes from happening in the future. Consequently, people are bewildered by her abilities.

Ye Huaizun takes over her mother’s supernatural powers. When she receives the call that her husband, Yingkun has died in a car accident, she breaks down and cries out in a frenzy: “I told you a long time ago, Yingkun. I told you not to go, but you just didn’t listen to me. What should I have told you in order for you to believe me? I had a premonition of what was going to happen. I could even see how it was going to happen. Would you have believed me if I told you this?” However, what was going to happen was going to happen anyway. Ye Huaizun cannot accept the misfortune that has happened. Losing her senses, she turns to the statue of the

1 The Yulanpen festival (盂兰盆节), also known as Zhongyuan festival (中元节) or “Ghost Festival,” takes place on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month and is dedicated to the wandering hungry ghosts (Tan 2018, 83–84).

goddess Guanyin on the altar and says: “Why didn’t you bless me? Why didn’t you save me? I offered you incense every day. I kowtowed to you, and I begged you every day. I begged you to save me, because otherwise I would have definitely gone crazy. Seeing all those things, how can I be a human being? But now Yingkun is already dead. You must have forgotten me; forgotten how sincerely I offered you incense and bowed down to you every day. You don’t even remember me, do you?” From these words, we thus learn the secret of the women of the Ye family: Huaiyun can see spiritual things and could foresee that her husband would lose his life in a car accident. However, she can neither stop it, nor can she speak of it, because no one would have believed her. In fact, when Mrs. Ye hears that Huaiyun is pregnant at an advanced age, she also has a premonition. She is worried a lot, but apart from giving Huaiyun the Buddhist beads, which she considers to be her lifeblood, in the hope that they can avoid this calamity, she cannot do anything. In the end, Huaiyun is unable to overcome this, and she cannot accept the fate she has to face. Thus, she throws the family statue of Guanyin to the ground, cursing the heavens and complaining that she did not receive the gods’ blessings despite worshipping them day and night.

The phenomenon of Ye Shuiling of the Ye family’s third generation possessing special powers is described in Chapter 2 through Ye Shuijing’s perspective. When Shuijing talks to her cousin Shuiling, Shuijing often feels that Shuiling is in a trance, often gazing into a certain direction, and when Shuijing tries to follow her gaze, she cannot see anything in particular that would warrant such an intense gaze. The only time Shuiling is sure that her cousin is acting strangely is one night when they are travelling home on the ferry between Penang and the North Sea. Shuijing is half leaning over the railing of the ferry looking down when Shuiling suddenly grabs her shoulder and says in an almost shouting voice: “You want to die, don’t you?” Shuiling’s eyes are frozen somewhere unfocused, and she looks as if she is experiencing a *déjà vu*. Then Shuijing sees “the sea breeze blowing, and Shuiling’s long hair dancing in the wind, like a thousand wisps of willow fluttering. Suddenly Shuijing sensed a wave of sadness, a sadness that seemed to be caused by Shuiling, yet at the same time seemed to be caused by herself. She gazed at Shuiling’s figure and at this moment, Shuiling resembled a solitary ghost. A nightmarish and eerie atmosphere pervaded around her. Shuijing felt as if she had fallen into a confused dream (...)” (Lee 301, transl. by the authors). At this point in the novel, there is no doubt that Shuiling, like Huaiyun, is another member of the family with an exceptional gift, the ability to see a world that others cannot see. However, her nature is similar to that of Old Mrs. Ye, who does not speak out during her lifetime.

Shuiling buries her secrets deeply and does not reveal them easily. Only someone as sensitive as Shuijing can detect that Shuiling possesses some mysterious ability.

Although several generations of women in the Ye family have “yin and yang eyes” and precognitive abilities, only Huaiyun draws attention to herself by exposing her psychic abilities, which she cannot control when faced with bad luck. Consequently, she lets the community know that she can receive hints from another world. This kind of ability is referred to as “sensitive constitution.” The author grew up in an environment in which she often heard about this phenomenon from friends and relatives in casual conversations. However, since it was not possible to explain this, and since such supernormal capabilities were regarded as ominous and unlucky, and were consequently often avoided as an anomaly, people did not readily admit these capabilities. The fact that the author ascribes this phenomenon to three generations of women in the novel makes it all the clearer that folk beliefs and legends have a profound impact on women’s lives, sometimes more than they can bear.

The female characters in the novel appear like real women because of their ordinariness: their conversations are as cordial and chatty as normal neighbours, and the details of their lives are described very vividly. After the decline of the Ye family the rats leave the sinking ship.¹ The women who have married into the family leave, have no more connection with the Ye family’s past wealth and prosperity, and return to their roles as common people. All of the Ye family’s women experience hardships, some of them go mad, some become nuns to search for enlightenment, and some return to an ordinary life. In a new era, they slowly recall the family’s past and link it up with the future.

The fact that only women inherit the supernatural power, which is, at the same time a curse, hints to the historical discrimination of women in patriarchal societies, in which women’s abilities are often being regarded as a lack rather than a strength. The following section shall draw a connection between the fate of the Ye family’s women and the history of Malaysian Chinese women.

Women’s Role in an Age of Transition

Three generations of blood-related women experience different eras of Malaysia history, thereby witnessing the transformation of Malaysia from a British colony to an independent nation state in 1957. The transition to independence goes hand in

1 树倒猢猻散, literally ‘When the tree drops the monkeys on it scatter’ is an idiom that expresses that the opportunists disperse when an influential person loses their power. In English a similar idiom is ‘the rats leave the sinking ship’.

hand with Malaysian Chinese women's social position in different eras. The destiny of the women of the first generation (pre-independence era) is fully depending on men, which means they are relying on their husbands and have no agency over their lives. In the second generation, although they do not have the opportunity to receive a new-style education yet, the women are able to make some of their own choices in life. By the third generation, women generally receive a new-style education. Consequently, they become more self-conscious and decide over the course of their own future. This transition from obedience, to calling certain norms into question, to self-determination corresponds with the novel's main theme—the transition from a nostalgic feeling (lost dreams) towards searching for dreams. This searching for dreams can be read as the rise of an anti-hegemonial consciousness, that is anti-colonialist on the one hand, and fighting for women's rights on the other.

The increasing awareness of women's rights after the country's independence is, thus, no coincidence. As Cecilia Ng points out, in Malaysia “nationalist movements against foreign domination simultaneously spawned debates about women's roles in the workplace, their right to formal education and their participation in political organisations” (Ng 17). However, it is to be noted that interpreting these movements as “feminist” is contested in this context, as feminism is often regarded as a Western concept, which does not fit the context of East and Southeast Asian countries. However, Ng develops the concept of a “Malaysian feminism”, defining its characteristics. She detects four phases of Malaysian feminism: anti-colonial struggles; post-independence consociationalism; developmentalism and the rise of identity politics; and its post-*Reformasi* realignment. Each phase, according to Ng et al. has a “dominant feminist consciousness and strategy for mobilisation, although some types of feminism can straddle various phases” (Ng 10).

Karen Teoh (2014) argues that women's education played a crucial role in the emergence of women's rights. Besides, the debate on “who represented ‘true’ overseas Chinese womanhood and cultural status” she argues “often eclipsed questions and fears about the emancipatory or modernising effects of female education.” Correspondingly, processes of modernisation in colonial Malaya in the early twentieth century “placed formal female education in the spotlight.” As a consequence, women's education became a symbol of progress and “an arena for contestation over the role of women in empire and nation.” By the mid-twentieth century, Chinese women in Malaya “had the option of paid and socially respectable work outside the home” (Teoh 2014).

Lee Yoke Kim manages to condense the centuries-old vicissitudes of two families, the Jin and Ye, into this novel, using the life paths of the two families'

women as a point of reference. Furthermore, these women's destinies are put at the centre of the Malaysian Chinese community's history of drifting across the ocean from China to Nanyang, and then settling and taking roots. Retaining a strong sense of local religion and folk beliefs, the novel presents the unique social landscape of "cultural Malaysia" as experienced by the author while growing up. These details of the life of the people in a small town, such as the worship of the gods and the festivals, are common memories of many Chinese Malaysians.

There is a string of sandalwood Buddha beads that runs through the entire novel, from the beginning to the end, and links the relationship of four generations of women's destiny. The Buddha beads are originally a family heirloom of Jin Qingke's father, Jin Shawan, and are given to Jin Qingke (Old Mrs. Ye) by Old Mrs. Jin to keep after the death of Mr. Jin. Old Mrs. Ye gives the Buddha beads to Ye Huaiyun when she is pregnant at an advanced age. Ye Huaiyun later returns them to Old Mrs. Ye, who in turn passes them on to Ye Shuiling, who then passes them on to Ye Shuijing after she becomes a nun. In the following, we shall elaborate on the meaning of these Buddhist beads.

The Buddhist beads seem to represent a legacy of the Jin and the Ye family. At the same time, they are a talisman, or a family symbol, which can protect the spiritual women in the family from bad luck. The beads appear at different points in time, all at the end of an era. In each generation, the women have diverging interpretations of their destiny and make different choices. It is rumoured by outsiders that the decline of the Ye family is the result of their ancestors' curse. Besides, it is assumed that the fact that Jin Shawan, formerly a lama, returned to laity and got married, planted a sinful karma that would not be ended by himself but would be repaid by future generations. The beads seem to be a token of magical power. In their shelter, Jin Qingke enters a state of deep meditation (*chan*),¹ and withdraws from the secular world. Even when her youngest daughter goes mad, jumps into a river, and dies, her three sons get divorced, and her granddaughter becomes destitute and homeless, she can still bear the pain and remain silent until her life comes to an end. Sensing her daughter Huaiyun's impending distress at an advanced age, she gives her the Buddha beads in the hope that she will be able to avoid bad luck. However, Huaiyun does not understand and returns the pearls to her mother, after which her husband dies in a car accident. After her husband's death, Huaiyun goes mad. The beads are then passed on to Ye Shuiling, who is able to cultivate her spirituality and eventually decides to become a nun, finding a way of life in which she no longer needs the protection of the Buddha beads. With the beads

1 In English *chan* (禪) is better known by its Japanese term *zen*.

in her possession, Ye Shuijing leaves home to start a new life in Kuala Lumpur. Thus, the end of the novel does not seem like the end, but like the beginning of a story.

The storyline of *Yimeng Zhi Bei* flows smoothly, and as the narrative moves forward along with the time, it also diverges at different points in the story. The recollections and flashbacks in the storyline allow the content of the story to string together the conditions and evolution of folklore in Malaysia society, making the narrative's branches and knots more abundant. The characters that are most written about and best portrayed in the novel are the female protagonists. Some of these women have an ordinary fate and common personalities. For instance, Long Yueqiu, the eldest daughter-in-law of the Ye family, who is portrayed as having a bold and straightforward character, and whose identity after divorce turns from being a young house lady to being the owner of a canteen without losing her kind-hearted nature. Or Shuijing's mute friend, Ah Lian, who has an exquisite mind, is gifted in understanding others, and has a talent for writing. Ye Shuijing is the central character in the second half of the novel. She is abandoned by her family as a child, in consequence grows up as a foster child, and develops a sentimental personality. Shuijing's aunt, the wife of her mother's oldest brother, is a woman who liked to gossip and nag. At the same time, she has the gentleness and kindness of a loving mother, as it is common in the neighbourhood.

Concluding Remarks

As the novel portrays the coming of age of several generations of Malaysian Chinese women, the Buddhist beads may be read as an allegory for the knowledge and wisdom passed down from generation to generation of women, helping them go through hardships and turmoil. The story starts unfolding from the Ye family's ancestral home when the family's influence and prosperity are at its height and Ye Shuijing is still an innocent and unaffected child. At the end of the story, Shuijing is already 22 years old, has experienced the divorce of her parents, has grown up as a foster child, and has experienced her aunt going mad and her cousin becoming a nun. Finally, she decides to go south to reunite with her birth mother. The novel's end leaves much room for readers to ponder on the question whether Shuijing will continue to carry the fate of the Ye family or whether she will cut ties with her family's history once she arrives in the south in Kuala Lumpur, leaving the hardships she has experienced behind in the north.

These questions resonate with the uncertainty about the social and political role of Malaysian (Chinese) women in the near future. Although women's rights

have consistently and significantly improved over the past few decades, gender inequality and other inequalities continue to exist, as in most societies globally. *Yimeng Zhi Bei* interweaves Chinese immigrant families' history and a multicultural environment—an environment in which various gods and ghosts coexist. It also presents a blueprint for future generations of Malaysians to actively contribute to a harmonious and inclusive coexistence regardless of people's gender, ethnicity, or religious practices.

In her afterword, the author states that she grew up in an environment full of ghosts and spirits, and that she heard many magical stories from her elders from a young age. These fabulous tales were an important inspiration for her writing. In *Yimeng Zhi Bei*, the author draws on her own memories, describing what she heard and saw while growing up. Many of the local people are labourers, most of them poorly educated, but they have a great respect for the gods and spirits—in the popular consciousness, both ghosts and gods are regarded as deities. Everyday life is inextricably linked to the instructions of the gods. No matter if it is a marriage, a funeral, a long trip, a school trip, a move, a renovation, sickness, a quarrel, or even the naming of a new-born child, the gods are always consulted to ask for peace and guidance.

In contrast to other historical novels by Malaysian Chinese authors, such as Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory*, which deals with Malaysia's history of communism through the perspective of a young man's memories of his father, who used to be a member of the Malayan Communist Party (Fan 2013), *Yimeng Zhi Bei* focuses on the spiritual world and destiny of the family's women as an entry point into historical events. These women are born into the Ye family innately possessing a predestination, having no choice but to inherit the unfinished mission of their forefathers. They must experience the most ordinary sorrows and joys of life and use their wisdom to explore life's deeper spiritual dimensions. *Yimeng Zhi Bei* can be understood as a story that "explores the dream of the soul." This dream is vague, concealing various mysteries and unknowns. Whenever the women of the Ye family look back, they fall into a state of confusion. The entire novel attempts to unfold the 'story' of several generations of the Ye family's life in a small town.

Thus, *Yimeng Zhi Bei* is a novel that concerns the transition from the past to the present. On the surface, the novel tells the story of a family's fate. However, on a deeper layer, it is the history of "searching for dreams" not only on an individual, but also on a collective level. The dreamland bridges the destiny of several generations of women and the stories that surround them. Through their special ability of foreseeing the future, the Ye family's women actively engage in working

through some of their family's and the entire community's suppressed dreams and (post)memories. The rich descriptions of the beliefs and religious practices in northern Malaysia serve as an entry point into the history of the Malaysian Chinese community and their position in a country that has undergone immense transformations in the second half of the twentieth century.

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