

ABSTRACT

The persistence of memory as a trope in works by Chinese writers in Southeast Asia demonstrates that the sense of identity among Chinese in this area is constantly being interrogated and re-negotiated. This paper argues that literary texts are one important constituent factor of collective cultural memory, a purposeful activity undertaken to influence social reality. Even as they foreground the issue of an individual's memory of Chinese culture, they are themselves a type of memorializing practice which seeks to preserve certain types of cultural memory and thus shape the individual's identity. In comparing the works of Singaporean and Malaysian writers, I find a rather stark contrast between the figures used to conceptualize China, Chinese culture, and memory. I argue that Singaporean writers use certain figures to reify Chinese culture and determine its unchanging essence, whereas Malaysian Chinese often have a more fluid view of culture. I then consider some of the ramifications for the use of natural metaphors by the Malaysian writers, which I see as participating in a type of wishful colonial mentality, quite distinct from the historical reality of indentured labor and political disempowerment of the ethnic Chinese in the modern nation state of Malaysia. I conclude by proposing the use of "trunk" as a metaphor for cultural memory and identity formation.