林參天：希臘人
The Man from Greece

By Lin Cantian
Translated by Cheow Thia Chan

Translator's Introduction

'Xila ren' 希臘人 [The man from Greece] is a short story written by Lin Cantian in 1937. It was first published in March 1938 in the Singapore Chinese newspaper *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 星洲日報 [Sin Chew Daily]. Though the text has fallen from critical scrutiny and the general reading horizon, it was the subject of a historically significant debate in Malaya (which includes present-day Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia) in 1939 regarding the true essence of literary realism.[1] While some contemporaneous local readers appreciated it for its focus on the representation of Malayan social realities, others criticized the work for its naturalistic portrayal, or more specifically, for its indulgence in objective descriptions and neglect in making future projections about the broader social milieu.

Today, Lin is best known as the author of *Nongyan* 濃煙 [Thick smoke], published in 1936 and commonly regarded as the earliest novel of modern Singapore and Malaysian Chinese literature. Besides depicting the conditions of diasporic Chinese education, *Thick Smoke* also dramatizes the messy ramifications arising from multilingual sociality in a small town located on the east coast of Malaya. Together with 'The Man from Greece', both of these texts with autobiographical traces evoke the author's teaching and living experiences in the Malayan state of Terengganu in the late 1920s as a new immigrant from China. They represent Lin's perceptive observations on interracial and

[1] The literary debate is documented in Fang Xiu 方修, ed., *Mahua xinwenxue daxi er—lilun piping erji* 馬華新文學大系（二）——理論批評二集 [The compendium of modern Malayan Chinese literature, vol. 2, theory and critique II] (1971; repr., Singapore: Dazhong shuju, 2000), pp. 472–544.

intercultural contact in *Nanyang* 南洋 (the 'South Seas', the customary Chinese term for geographic South-east Asia) in the early decades of the twentieth century, of which translation is an inevitable aspect.

In 'The Man from Greece', a newcomer from China who teaches in a local school in Malaya encounters an elderly Chinese Muslim convert. The story gradually reveals that the Chinese Muslim is a migrant from north China living in Malaya among Malays and fellow Chinese migrants from south China under British colonial rule. The two characters converse in *guoyu* 國語, the freshly ratified and promulgated national language of China at that time. As he recounts his life trajectory, the old man shares that his proficiency in *guanhua* 官話—the antecedent term for the lingua franca in imperial China, which is conventionally rendered as 'Mandarin'—enabled him to be hired by local Chinese schools that no longer used Chinese southern topolects as their media of instruction. The prevalent impression—one which is shared by the teacher (also the implied author)—is that *guanhua* and *guoyu* are both based on topolects of north China.[2] From this perspective, one can understand why the two terms are used interchangeably in the story.

A clear sign of the Chinese Muslim's linguistic acculturation is his incorporation of lexical items such as *shalong* 紗籠, the sarong, which is the skirt-like garment made out of a long strip of cloth worn round the waist and even the chest by both men and women in Malaya; *toujia* 頭家, or towkay, the term for 'boss' that he likely picked up from the *nanfang ren* 南方人 (people from south China) with whom he interacts daily; and *niaoniang* 嬝娘, which refers to the Nonyas, the Malay-speaking Chinese women born locally to earlier Chinese migrants.

Later in the story, when the teacher inquires his interlocutor's native place, the Chinese Muslim claims to have forgotten and says he has decided to follow what the local Malays call him and adopt the label '*Xila ren*' 希臘人 (the man from Greece). Remarkably, the implications of the Greek reference were lost on Malayan Chinese literary circles in the 1930s. The appellation probably belongs to a larger folk taxonomy of places mobilized by the Malays to differentiate between original Chinese Muslims and those who later converted to Islam.[3]

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[2] See Jerry Norman, *Chinese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 136.

[3] Cheow Thia Chan, 'What is a "Man from Greece"?—The Micro-dialectics of Ethnicity in 1920s and 1930s British Malaya', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2018), pp. 536–575.

In turn, the Chinese Muslim appropriates the Greek affiliation to tacitly resist his interlocutor who insists on calling him a 'man from China', which reveals the newcomer's mentality of viewing all Chinese migrants in Malaya as nationalist sojourners perennially looking toward the mainland state. Such thought-provoking negotiations of situated Chinese identities amid a multi-ethnic and multilingual milieu indicate how Chinese settler cultures adapt and evolve through nuanced strategies of localization.

It is also worth noting that the troubling opacity in the original ending lingered in Lin's mind years after the short story was first published in 1938 in Singapore. When it subsequently appeared in the prominent Shanghai journal *Lu Xun feng* 魯迅風 [Lu-Xunesque] in 1939, as well as in *Toujia he kuli* 頭家和苦力 [The boss and the coolie], an anthology of fictional works by Nanyang writers published in post-war Hong Kong, the tale ended by merely stating from the teacher's perspective 'Hence I returned to school'.[4] But Lin restored the sense of perplexity in the tale's imperfect denouement when he published his own short story collection *Yu'ai* 餘哀 [Lingering grief] in 1960 in Malaya.[5] For the local reading audience, he emphasized once again that the teacher ultimately left the Chinese Muslim's hut 'still preoccupied with the puzzle concerning "the man from Greece"'.

Two final notes on the selected source text. Because most sections of the original 1938 version preserved on microfilm are not fully readable, this translation is based on the more accessible 1960 Malayan version. The title could have been alternatively translated as 'The Greek' or 'The Greek Man'. In deciding on the rendition 'The Man from Greece', this translator submits to Anthony Milner's observation that Malays traditionally tend to identify communities by coupling people with toponyms.[6]

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[4] The full bibliographic data of the interim versions are respectively Lin Cantian 林參天, 'Xila ren' 希臘人 [The man from Greece], *Lu Xun feng* 魯迅風 [Lu-Xunesque] 16 (1939), pp. 229–232, and Lin Cantian, 'Xila ren', in Han Meng 韓萌, ed., *Toujia he kuli* 頭家和苦力 [The boss and the coolie] (Hong Kong: Chidao chubanshe, 1951), pp. 1–13.

[5] The version that is selected for this translation is Lin Cantian, 'Xila ren', in *Yu'ai* 餘哀 [Lingering grief] (Singapore: Qingnian shuju, 1960), pp. 18–32.

[6] Timothy Barnard, 'Afterword: A History of Malay Ethnicity', in Timothy Barnard, ed., *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, National University of Singapore, 2004), p. 250.

The evening sun appeared weary as it moved slowly down toward the western mountains. The clouds in the western sky were flushed with a layer of vibrant colours, their thick clusters overlapping, like an impressionist oil painting. Twilight gradually extended itself, the earth cooled down, and the beating of a huge drum emanated from the mosque on Beach Road, its dull and heavy reverberations unsettling the lonely Port T. Standing inside a pavilion sheltered by the roof of the mosque, the Muslims raised their voices to sing the lyrics of the evening prayers. The song's plaintive air resounded throughout the peaceful space, following which the Malays living in the jungles and the wilderness also began humming the Qur'an. On this evening redolent with religiosity, one could also hear the chanting of the same scripture inside an attap hut to the left of my school. Every time I heard these melodious and sorrowful voices, I would think of that old Muslim in Chinese garb.

To the left of my school was a piece of wilderness, where weeds grew more than a foot high. Here and there, coconut and rubber trees grew randomly. Growing around the yard was a frail bamboo fence with bright green leaves and slim branches drooping to either side, as if they were bending forward performing bows. A decrepit and leaning attap hut crouched quietly under a large sago-tree. The hut was raised about three feet above ground, its wooden pillars already crooked, its walls on all sides made from thin bamboo strips, with attap leaves covering its roof. Leaning on one side of the hut, a small bamboo ladder led the way up to an entrance. There was a papaya-tree and some banana-trees, as well as a small bitter gourd trellis in the open space in front of the hut. At the back in a corner of the fence was a huge cluster of green bamboo, and every evening, the sparrows hiding there would chirp incessantly. Thin white smoke from the kitchen would escape through the crevices in the bamboo walls and between the leaves of the roof, feebly and haphazardly dissolving into the vastness of the twilight.

The old man would have returned by that time. He was very tall, with a wizened and haggard face, and a gleaming shaved head, along with a few whiskers for a moustache. Long and thin, his countenance wore a solemn and resolute expression. Dressed in Cantonese-style clothes, he held a small rattan basket in one hand and tucked a paper umbrella under the other arm, as he took his time to cross through a gap in the fence and ambled toward the dilapidated dwelling. Soon, the sound of the old man singing his evening prayers would emerge from the hut. If it was still not too dark after the prayers, he would usually clear the withered branches and weeds at the entrance. Sometimes, he would also take his children for a walk in the wilderness.

I usually saw his hunched-over back either early in the morning or in the evening. He spoke Malay and recited the Qur'an, sometimes donning a small white cap shaped like a bowl with ornate borders on his shaved head. (This could only be worn by Muslims who had been to Mecca for the hajj.) I always found it strange every time I saw him: why did this old Malay man like to wear Chinese clothes so much? Only after asking a student later did I learn that he was an old Chinese sojourner in Port T.

There were a few times when I thought of visiting the sojourner, but invariably felt constrained by the language barrier. Once, I mentioned this matter casually to a student, hoping to engage him as my interpreter. He smiled gently upon hearing my request and said:

'He can speak *guoyu*.'

'He can speak *guoyu*?' I asked, shrugging my shoulders, pleasantly surprised.

'Yes, but he doesn't speak it very well.'

'That's great! Then I won't need you to translate for us.'

In my view, it was truly a miracle that the old man could speak the 'national language of China'. It had just been more than twenty years since Port T set up schools and taught *guoyu*. The majority of the young people in the port still could not speak the language, but an old man who was almost seventy years old—where did he learn it? Why was it necessary to learn *guoyu*? This miracle bemused me the more I thought about it.

One evening after dinner, I was strolling along the left corridor when I saw the old man, his back hunched, carrying two coconuts on his shoulders and some bananas in his hand as he walked toward the attap hut. When he reached it, a smile of gratified comfort suddenly lit up his wrinkled and haggard face.

He deliberately coughed once, and two children—a boy and a girl—immediately ran out of the hut, smiling widely while they stood near the top of the ladder at the entrance and repeatedly called him 'father'. The children strove to be first to climb down the bamboo ladder and rushed forward to stand in front of the old man. They jabbered in Malay, after which the old man unloaded the coconuts from his shoulders, removed the strings tying them together, and gave them to the children. They turned sideways as they carried the coconuts up into the hut. As if he had relinquished a great burden, the old man followed them up the bamboo ladder.

Based on my daily observation, after the beating of the drum in the mosque subsided and the old man finished his evening prayers, he would always stand in front of the entrance to take a rest or do some work.

I went back to my room to put on a shirt. Carrying two cans of lychee in syrup, I walked over to the wilderness to visit the old man.

When I walked into the area rife with overgrown vegetation, the old man was indeed standing in front of his hut's entrance, using some branches and string to repair his bitter gourd trellis. He nodded amiably when he saw me, but continued with his work.

I walked up and stood beside him, inquiring in an earnest manner:

'Uncle must be very busy now, I suppose?'

He turned around and looked at me, seemingly ready to respond, yet he said nothing. He must have been a little puzzled in his mind, but eventually a rather stiff northern vernacular issued from his mouth:

'No, no, I am not busy. There's nothing to do, so I thought I would repair this broken trellis. Have you taken dinner already, sir?'

He spoke extremely slowly, resorting to compose some sentences as he processed them in his mind. His pronunciation was also quite inaccurate. This was obviously due to inadequate daily practice.

'I've had my dinner. What about you?'

'I haven't.' As he said that, he stopped his work and turned around to face me.

'You speak *guoyu* very well. When did you learn it?'

'How can that be considered speaking it well? I was just throwing words around. Except for the students, people here seldom speak *guoyu*. The people I meet daily are all Malays or from south China. I rarely have the chance to

speak *guoyu*. It's easy to forget a language if one doesn't use it daily, so I now speak *guoyu* only with great difficulty. Hahaha!' He started laughing after his remarks and I smiled along with him.

'It is indeed easy to forget how to speak a language if one doesn't use it often. It is already very commendable that you are still so fluent.' I deliberately praised him in order to encourage his brave attempts at speaking.

'How can that be called fluent? It's really embarrassing.' He too was rather pleased with himself.

'When did you learn *guoyu*?' I thought that he hadn't answered my previous question, so I raised it again.

'It is actually my native language and I've known it since I was little. Because I could speak Mandarin, I even taught here for a bit.' Reminiscing about the time of his youth, a prideful smile crept onto his face.

'You actually taught before?' I was even more incredulous. However, I instantly suppressed this abrupt change of emotion so that he would not discern it. I went on, 'Then we are colleagues in education.'

'Now you are making me even more ashamed. Frankly, I was only passing myself off as …' At this point his words broke off and I became more aware that the old man was someone of vast experience. After a while, he spoke again, 'Not only was there not a single school here thirty years ago, there wasn't even an old-style private school. Later, Kang Youwei 康有為, an exiled high-ranking official of the Qing dynasty, came here and encouraged the establishment of schools in Java and Penang. It was not until then that the Chinese sojourners here began to pay attention to educating young people. But who could teach them? They simply couldn't find anyone suitable. Because I had studied in an old-style private school and was acquainted with a little Chinese traditional learning, they engaged me to be the instructor at the primary school. I knew very well that I was unqualified, but for the sake of survival, I had no choice but to do it, perfunctory though it was. This went on for two years. They later found a licentiate for the position—inviting him through a recommendation from Singapore—and dismissed me. I then switched professions. But after the Republic of China was proclaimed, Mandarin was promoted again and there was a niche for me once more. I taught Mandarin for a few years, and subsequently a school was set up here, which is your school. I taught in your school for half a year and then resigned again.'

'Why did you resign?'

'Sir, teaching is a difficult job. My temperament was not disposed toward the vocation. Please do not laugh at me. At the time I had lofty ambitions to be a great towkay.' He started laughing uncontrollably after his explanation.

'To which profession did you switch subsequently?'

'I taught myself to be a physician of traditional Chinese medicine and opened a medicine shop. Life was excellent! It allowed me to make a small fortune. I found a wife and we had a child. I had a perfect family!' Recalling the glorious times during the prime of his life enabled him to set aside his present straitened circumstances. He spoke with great delight, as if he was intoxicated by the bliss of family life.

'What happened later?'

Reacting to my question as though awakened from a dream, his face turned quickly into a forced smile, and he said very slowly:

'Bad luck! Misfortune pushed me into this state! My shop was razed by an inexplicable fire. My wife died from an illness! And I couldn't even provide for my only daughter. …' The old man was clearly grieved by these painful memories. His forced smile gradually dissipated and turned into an expression of sadness mixed with indignation. The wrinkles all over his face started twitching visibly and his throat seemed to choke a little. He could no longer continue talking.

It was after quite some time that I asked, 'What happened to your daughter?'

Reverting to his previous composure, the old man spat on the ground and said:

'Given to a Malay as a child-bride to be his family's daughter-in-law.'

'Why didn't you ask someone to adopt her?'

'She was too little, not even a year old. How could anyone possibly want to adopt her? The Malays love girls, so I gave her to them.'

'She must have grown up already, hasn't she?'

'She's over twenty this year, very pretty and fair, with a slim figure, and is already married.' Speaking of this he became cheerful all of a sudden. A smile lingered on his wrinkled face.

'I would have loved to meet her. What a pity that she is not home.' I also expressed my admiration after hearing him offer such praise of his daughter.

'Oh, what a coincidence! She just returned yesterday!' He raised his head quickly and shouted out a few words in the direction of the hut.

An affectedly sweet female voice responded right away from within the hut, and shortly thereafter a woman wearing a black Malay dress appeared smilingly at the door. The woman was indeed very beautiful. She had the eyes of a Malay but her complexion was Chinese, which led me to suspect that the late wife of the old man was Malay.

The old man spoke to his daughter in Malay for a bit, and the attractive woman nodded slightly in my direction. She was not afraid of me, nor did she avoid me. She just smiled and leaned against the door, listening intently to my conversation with her father.

At this moment two small children suddenly emerged from the dark interior of the hut. The boy was around nine years old, appearing a little foolish with his swollen face. His head was completely shaven, and his stomach protruded like that of a spider. Naked from the waist up, he was wearing an old sarong to cover the lower half of his body. The contours of the girl's face resembled that of a boy, her thick lips like those of African aborigines. She looked dishevelled, her face dirty and oily. She also wore Malay clothes, was slightly shorter than the boy, and was probably around seven or eight years old. Each of them had in their hands an enamel plate filled with yellow and glistening curry rice, which their hands scooped up to their mouths repeatedly, smearing their lips with curry. The girl sat at the top of the stairs, her eyes fixated on me. The boy continued eating as he walked down the stairs and stood before us.

The old man looked at the children with affection, saying, 'This is my eldest son. He is nine this year. The one sitting at the top of the stairs is my younger daughter. There is another one in the hut, a baby, not yet one year old.'

'Is this wife of yours now Chinese?'

'No, she's Malay.'

'Why didn't you marry a Chinese woman?'

'Ah!' The old man uttered a sigh and said slowly, 'Those Nanyang Nonyas are impossible to marry without money. When I used to be rich, of course there wasn't any problem in marrying one, but now that I'm poor, who will marry me? Malay women love to marry Chinese, as long as one is willing to convert.'

'So you converted to Islam in order to get married?'

'That's right.'

'I heard that one has to go through a circumcision ritual before getting accepted into Islam. Is that true?' I inquired curiously.

The old man's face broke into a smile, exposing a little of his blood-red gums and damaged front teeth. He said:

'That's not a big deal.'

'Based on your current situation, isn't your family a huge burden?'

'What else can I do? One must have a family regardless! One will always feel a little empty without a family when one grows old. As the ancient books say, "There are three forms of unfilial conduct, of which the worst is not to produce descendants." So, although circumstances are difficult, one should have a son.'

I nodded upon hearing this, but not because I agreed with his views. It was more because I could imagine his conservatism. Even after leaving his home country for so many years, the reverential attitude toward procreation characteristic of the Chinese patriarchal clan system was still deeply rooted in his mind.

'In my opinion, one can't do without children. Having too many, however, will naturally lead to being overburdened. What do you think?' I was very concerned for the old man. For a man nearing the age of seventy to have a child who has yet to reach his first birthday, problems in the future clearly would not be easy to resolve.

His viewpoint, however, was completely different from mine. Not only was he not thinking about birth control, he was actually proud of his fecundity. He said:

'I don't share your opinion. Though poor people don't make a lot of money, having more children for them is a good thing. As the saying goes, "Sons will alleviate one's anxiety about poverty." Sons are assets to poor people.'

Based on this exchange, I felt that the old man's ideas were completely those of old China. Whether a man as old as he was could live to enjoy such assets, however, was hugely questionable.

'Poverty is not a big problem,' he continued. 'One must first be contented and refrain from having impractical dreams. If one desires too much and the environment cannot satisfy those desires, one will feel great agony. For instance, I am now living under these difficult and impoverished circumstances, and if I were to compare my life to that of a rich family, it would only lead me to suicide, so I definitely must not think along those lines. Allah created the world not solely for rich people; poor people undoubtedly have lives to lead too. As long as poor people can be content with indigence and come to terms with their destinies in life, they will naturally not feel pain in their lives.'

I wanted to rebut him: why did the world that Allah created make only the rich happy but the poor suffer? But I did not say it, for I believed if I raised the question, except by citing 'destiny' in response, he would be incapable of grasping that the situation was the outcome of an artificially dysfunctional social system.

I thus changed the topic again and continued to ask him:

'What business are you in now to support your family?'

'I have gone back to my previous occupation—practising medicine. I go out very early every day and return only at night. When the Malayan economy was prosperous in the past and local produce fetched good prices, one could make one or two dollars a day. But now times are bad and it's hard to do business; my daily income ranges from twenty to thirty cents, or forty to fifty. Sometimes, I can't even bring in a single dime.'

'Isn't your daily life tough if you don't earn any money?'

'That we are not worried about. Even if I earn no money, I can still bring home grain, rice, bananas, sweet potatoes, and coconuts. Nanyang people lead simple lives and can get by each day without much.'

Displaying no sign of fatigue, the old man became more and more voluble. Not only did he not seem tired, he looked sharper and heartier. After a while, he called his second wife to come out to meet me. That Malay woman was a truly ugly shrew, her messy hair falling every which way to her shoulders, her round bloated face wearing a hideous smile, and her big yellow front teeth protruding like those of an orangutan, as if they were ready to rush forward and swallow me entirely. She was as fat as a pig, her dark skin riddled with pockmarks. Her sarong was tied very high above her waist. Thick bulging veins were visible on her legs covered with scars and boils, which were oozing filthy pus. Standing at the entrance and nodding her head toward me repeatedly, she looked around thirty years old. If I had met her at night, I would definitely have been frightened out of my wits.

After a while, I pressed him further:

'Which province of China is your family from?'

'I can no longer remember clearly. The Malays here all call me "the man from Greece", hence I also recognize myself as a "man from Greece".'

'Man from Greece?' I was perplexed. 'Isn't that a mistake? Greece is in Europe. They belong to the white race.'

'Then does China have a place called Greece?'

I lifted my head to think for a moment and said:

'No. There isn't anywhere in mainland China that has such a name. It is likely that you are mistaken.'

'It can't be wrong. I can write it down for you.' As he said that, he squatted down, picked up a coconut stalk, and wrote on the light-greyish loose soil 希臘人 (*Xila ren*), the three Chinese characters corresponding to 'the man from Greece'. The characters were decently written. He smiled again and said, 'I guess I must have written the strokes incorrectly?'

I lowered my head to take a look. The strokes were perfect. I praised him profusely.

'I haven't written Chinese characters for a long time, so to write them unexpectedly today makes me realize how unfamiliar they have become. They look both correct and incorrect, and I can't decide if these three characters are ultimately correct or not. As the old saying goes, "It takes merely three years of neglect for a person of learning to regress into an illiterate." It has been more than twenty years since I set my pen aside.'

'You write very well and the characters are correct. However, you are actually Chinese, not Greek.'

'I am also aware that I am Chinese, but the Malays all call me "the man from Greece" and I let it be.'

'How is that said in Malay?' I probed the pronunciation in that language.

'*Tuo'erke*,' he enunciated it slowly.

'*Tuo-er-ke*?' I looked down and contemplated the word for a good couple of minutes, then slowly experimented with homophones, before finally reaching a solution.

Could '*tuo'erke*' be a transliteration for 'Turkey'? Turkey was also an Islamic country, and most Malays belonged to the Islamic faith, so perhaps they had a special affinity for this term and decided to address him by it. However, he was not a Turk either.

I thought it would be impossible to go on debating and to verify this term with him tonight, so I directed the conversation toward another topic:

'You must have been living in Nanyang for a long time, haven't you?'

'I cannot remember this clearly either. I recall leaving home with my uncle when I was eleven. We only came to Nanyang after drifting about on the mainland for a few years. Our first year in Nanyang wasn't over when my uncle

died. After that, I drifted from place to place on my own. I have been staying in this port for nearly forty years. In the town some say I'm from Yunnan, others claim I'm from Shandong, yet the Malays call me "the man from Greece". I myself am not clear where I am from.'

But after listening attentively to his pronunciation, I decided that Shandong was more probable. Furthermore, he could speak Mandarin from a young age. The northern vernacular languages were basically closer to Mandarin.

Dusk was falling rapidly. The distant mountains and forests faded to become dim shadows, and a murky smoke shrouded the earth. The noise of clamouring sparrows in the bamboo groves subsided slowly. From time to time, a bird would flit past the roof, chirping as if looking for her young ones in the nest, after which the faint sound of flapping wings diminished in the silence of the twilight. A kerosene lamp had already started to illuminate the interior of the hut, and tremulous rays of light emerged from between the strips of its thin bamboo walls. The scenery in the wilderness became hazy as well. It struck me that the old man still had not taken dinner and was perhaps already hungry. I hurriedly bade him goodbye and offered the boy the two cans of lychee that I had brought over. He accepted them immediately with an ingenuous smile:

'You even brought gifts! How can we accept these?'

'They are just some something sweet for the children to snack on.'

On the way back, my mind was still preoccupied with the lingering puzzle concerning 'the man from Greece'.