

## **A Philological Approach to a Modern Sino-Indonesian Book: *The Coconuts* by Zheng Tufei<sup>1</sup>**

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*Philology as a discipline in the sphere of humanities has recently lost ground in favour of other approaches, but it nevertheless has the potentiality of exploring literary texts in their inner structures and outer connections as well, bringing rich information in the discussion. While being traditionally used in the study of old manuscripts, philology is deemed efficient and informative in the case of modern, printed books as well. The present paper elaborates a case study of a philological approach to the prose volume *The Coconuts* published by Sino-Indonesian author Zheng Tufei in 1929 in Shanghai, emphasizing analysis of formal levels as well as contextualization and intertextuality.*

Keywords: *Sino-Indonesian literature, philology, Sinophone literature, modern literature*

### **1. Reflections on methodology**

Is philology still relevant nowadays? Philology is reputed to be used in the case of ancient texts, with special attention to script, physical form, deciphering of its meanings. But how is it relevant for modern literature, which is written in a relatively standardized form, printed in technologically advanced typographies, containing a language somewhat similar to the contemporary speaking? What contribution can philology bring to the analysis? Especially when we talk about a modern text, created in the era of print culture, produced in the midst of rich historical conditions, we can analyze it through various lenses which actively engage history and society: postcolonial studies, diaspora studies, literary

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<sup>1</sup> The present paper draws on my MA dissertation defended at Leiden University, Faculty of Humanities, in 2023, with the title: *Zheng Tufei and The Coconuts: Revolution, Coolies, and Heartbreaks in Nanyang*. It can be accessed in the open repository of Leiden University Library.

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sociology, and so on. While philology is commonly associated with the practice of close reading and might be correlated with a structuralist or formalist approach, could it actually provide larger insights than the mere stylistic analysis of the texts (not to say that a pure stylistic analysis is not worthy of consideration)? We start from the text, from the edition, from the style, but could the analysis go beyond these levels?

Firstly, the edition (the materiality of the text) is conditioned by its historicity, by its placement in its own technological and aesthetic time. This is how by the mere sight of a book's cover and of its print we would be able to roughly locate it in time, among other books of similar print style, similar design, similar cover aesthetics. Secondly, the writing style is intricately related to its intertextuality and contextuality: references, influences, themes, as well as subjects of interest and ideological tendencies are all proof of a text's relation with other works, and, more than that, with the societal developments.

Then, what type of philology is applicable for what texts? The fundamental study of texts (that is, philological) follows similar fundamentals in different textual traditions: its main objectives are to elucidate the form, to relate or translate it to the modern understanding, and to elucidate its meanings for the contemporary public. However, several nuances are present in different traditions, according to the times and to the finality of the study: for example, to make the text intelligible to the masses, to make it ready-to-use for the intellectual elites, to perpetuate its spiritual content, and so on.

For this paper, the case study for a philological application is the prose volume of a Sino-Indonesian writer: *The Coconuts* (《椰子集》 *Yezi ji*) published by Zheng Tufei 郑土飞 in Shanghai in 1929. It is a curious book in itself, due to the lack of information around the author's biography and to the hybrid context of its creation. The author was a *Huaqiao* 华侨<sup>3</sup> student majoring in Western literature and law at the *Huaqiao*-oriented Jinan University (暨南大学 Jinan Daxue) in Shanghai. He came from an exotic space for the Chinese: Southeast Asia, more precisely the Dutch East Indies, nowadays Indonesia. His book is rich in descriptions of the land, cultural aspects, and interethnic love stories, but in spite of that, instead of the dream-like Nanyang 南洋<sup>4</sup> which had been popularized in the

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<sup>3</sup> The term *Huaqiao* “华侨” is traditionally used for people of Chinese ethnicity residing in another country than China who keep their status of Chinese nationals, translated in English as “overseas Chinese”, cf. Suryadinata 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Culturally-charged Chinese term designating Southeast Asia; literally translates as the “South Seas”.

Chinese imaginary,<sup>5</sup> 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 tried to enter the literary scene of Shanghai, but around the time of publication of his only book, *The Coconuts*, he left China and headed towards British Malaya, and soon his footsteps were 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.

Due to these peculiar circumstances, and to the fact that Sino-Indonesian literature is comparatively underresearched, a philological approach paired with endeavors of literary history would be necessary as a fundamental introduction of *The Coconuts* and other similar pieces of writing,<sup>6</sup> while further research might focus more on contextualizing or comparison. I deemed useful to employ a theoretical approach implying both traditions that the book is related to: Chinese philology and Indonesian philology, but also the tradition that I was raised in: European/Western philology<sup>7</sup>. By means of philology, understood 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, I aim to achieve a complex understanding of the ideas conveyed within this literary work and of the reasons lying behind them, but also to define the book's position in the history of literature, by integrating it among comparable works from one or more bodies of literature.

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<sup>5</sup> See Bernards 2015.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Sino-Indonesian authors Hei Ying 黑嬰, A Wu 阿五.

<sup>7</sup> My initial formation of Romanian philology is presently considered as part of a European/Western tradition. Moreover, the main stage of study of *The Coconuts* was done in Leiden University in 2021-2023, with access to a wider tradition of (Western) practice of philology, and the central theoretical work for this study was the work of Dutch researcher Ben Arps, *Tall Tree, Nest of the Wind. The Javanese Shadow-play Dewa Ruci Performed by Ki Anom Soeroto* (2016).

### 1.1. Philology in the past and nowadays

Philology has existed as a discipline for a long time, in all parts of the world, having different practices and different degrees of authority across the eras and the areas. There have existed different terms for philology in different languages and cultural areas (and, implicitly, variations in practice), but the discipline has existed everywhere in one way or another, because it was used wherever there were texts to be found, even before it became theorized and conceptualized (Pollock 2015, 12-21). James Turner argues that (ancient) philology represents the origins of the nowadays disciplines called modern humanities (Turner 2014, 3-5). Nowadays, philology, even if modern, has been long discarded in the Western academia, especially in Western Europe and the United States, and it was left behind other sciences and approaches (Pollock 2015, 9).

However, philology is still extensively practiced and seems to have more authority in East Asia (China, Japan and Taiwan) than in the West, because of the long, authoritative philological tradition that has been alive in this area (Pollock 2015, 11), and Michael Lackner argues for the integration of the non-Western (more specifically Chinese) philological practices in the general field of philology, calling it “world philology”; he also promotes a broader definition for philology: *the universal endeavor to deal with problems arising from codified texts* (Lackner 2015, 139), which would allow to include in the history of philology the practices from different, non-Western cultures. Benjamin Elman also stands for a decentralizing view on philology and knowledge authority in general, arguing that the inner intellectual developments in East Asia constitute equally important parts of history as the Western developments, and can lead to reciprocal influence and inspiration (Elman 2015, 225).

Chinese philology has an extremely long history, dating back to the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 AD) “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. There also existed the practice of historical grounding for understanding a text, but it was lost in the course of the history, in favor of a mostly linguistic approach (Lackner 2015, 137-139). Philology had an extremely important role in classical China, being institutionalized and officially regulated by imperial authority (Elman 2015, 226), because the classical texts themselves were of a crucial importance in the governing of the empire and in the social dynamics.

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 in Indonesian philology (Lubis 1996, 22-23). Nabilah Lubis makes an account of the beginnings of the philological studies done by other peoples on Southeast Asian literature, and more specifically (but not restricted to) Indonesian literature. The first philological activities 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 became broader: it was not limited only to the functional study of the language, but also directed towards publishing, editing, textual criticism (Lubis 1996, 48-51).

Indonesian philology puts a lot of emphasis on textual practices such as correcting errors, elucidating ambiguous meanings of words, and it is carried out on classical, premodern manuscripts related to the religious (Islamic) sphere (Lubis 1996, 22-23). 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. The “task of the philologist” of Indonesian literature is then to shed light on classical texts and make them accessible to the greater public, through fundamental enterprises such as edition, unifying the script, transliteration, translation, but also through interpretation (Robson 1988, 10).

To sum up, the act of using diverse philological traditions is not meant to imply a blend of different traditional practices specific to different kinds of texts, but instead it is precisely intended to make full use of the common ground and of the similar principles of these traditions, and show how they complement each other.

### **1.2. Ben Arps's Philological Approach in *Tall Tree, Nest of the Wind***

A specifically concrete philological method is proposed by Ben Arps in *Tall Tree, Nest of the Wind. The Javanese Shadow-play Dewa Ruci Performed by Ki Anom Soeroto*, where he makes reference to the philological theories of Sheldon Pollock

and James Turner (Euro-American philology). The general philological approach to texts is summarized in the following way: *[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). However, Ben Arps shows from the beginning that he does not intend to apply this approach in its entirety, but to focus on the five fundamental characteristics of philology's object of study, proposed by James Turner, which are: artefactuality, interpretability, intertextuality, contextuality, and historicity (Arps 2016, 27-29).

## **2. *The Coconuts* through philological lenses**

### **2.1. Artefactuality**

The fundamental 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 previously vaguely-used word (Arps 2016, 43-46).

The analysis of *The Coconuts* will be started 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. Even if artefactuality is most efficiently applied to old, unique documents, such as manuscripts, it can also be applied to *The Coconuts*, with concern for the printed edition: in order to analyse the cover of the book, the information about the writing of the novellas (the dates and other mentions written at the end of each one of them), and the different incongruities such as Chinese characters that are mistyped or impossible to find in dictionaries – as these features trace back the text to its process of (physical) creation, “proving” its artefactuality.

The book, published in 1929, has 196 pages and contains seven short stories: *Human Head* (《人头》 *Ren tou*), *Sharks* (《鲨鱼》 *Shayu*), *Brother Ah Qiu* (《阿逮哥》 *A Qiu ge*), *A Night of Heavy Rain* (《狂雨之夜》 *Kuang yu zhi ye*), *The Rose from the Rubber Plantation* (《橡园之玫瑰》 *Xiangyuan zhi meigui*), *Where Are*

*You Heading to* (《你往何处去》 *Ni wang he chu qu*), and *The Grief of the New Jews* (《新犹太人的悲哀》 *Xin Youtairen de bei'ai*). It does not have a preface or a 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, 95). The cover image reflects a blend of modern and traditional art: a kind of modernist ink painting, depicting in large ink strokes two trees (even if the title is *The Coconuts*, the trees depicted here look more like bamboo), on a vague background of diagonal shadows, with the illustrator's minimalistic seal on the side. This type of modernist design is in line with the fashionable cover designs of Shanghai print culture of that time.

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 (1929).

There are also several words written in Latin script. These are Malay words: usually names (of persons, of 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 into Chinese characters, for example *Rili* “日里” (Deli – town in the Indies), *jilisi* “吉力斯斯” (*keris*), *Yamen* “亚门” (*Amen*), and some are in both Latin and Chinese characters, like the name *Rose*, which appears written like *ROSE* and *Luosi* “罗丝” as well. 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 this book, usually in Malay or Javanese people's vocabulary (even if the common name *Zhongguo* “中国” also appears); there are two possible sources: either from Japanese language, where the same word was a derogatory term for China (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* “纱郎” instead of nowadays' *shalong* “沙笼” / “莎笼” (*sarong*), and words spelled differently across the book: *Aelah*, *Allah* and *Alah*, or *Sumendana* “苏门答纳” and *Sumendala* “苏门答腊” (transliterations for Sumatra). There exist across the book several doubtful characters, that might have been mistyped, based on homophony and/or on graphical resemblances, such as: *shufu*

typed “舒福” instead of “舒服” (*comfortable*), *he'ai* typed “和霭” instead of “和蔼” (*kind, nice*).

In lack of a preface or a postface, which 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 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, like *The Rose from the Rubber Plantation* (“橡园之玫瑰” *Xiangyuan zhi meigui*) dated the 28th of April 1928: *Seventeen, fourth, the twenty-eighth*. (*Shiqi, si, ganba ri*. “十七，四，廿八日。”) (Zheng 1929, 156), *The Grief of the New Jews* (“新犹太人的悲哀” *Xin Youtairen de bei'ai*) is dated the 22nd of February 1929: *Nineteen-twenty-nine, second, the twenty-second*. (*Yijiuerjiu, er, gan'er ri*. “一九二九，二，廿二日。”) (Zheng 1929, 195). Note the two different formats of the year, which are symptomatic for the oscillation between the traditional Chinese and the newly-imported Western ways of counting time (Lee 2000, 81-85). One inadvertency occurs in the date of Brother Ah Qiu (“阿逮哥” *A Qiu ge*), which 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), but the book itself was published on the 30th of May 1929. *A Night of Heavy Rain* (“狂雨之夜” *Kuang yu zhi ye*) 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 Zheng Tufei's letter correspondence with Lu Xun from November 1928, mentioned in Lu Xun's diary,<sup>8</sup> proving the fact that this text might have been reviewed by Lu Xun but, for whatever reason, the first draft was never edited and it got to be published in its initial form. This communication between Zheng and the acknowledged father of modern Chinese literature is an important indicator for the ideas and aesthetics that Zheng came into contact with. Incidentally, *A Night of Heavy Rain* is also the longest and the most complex among the stories,

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<sup>8</sup> It seems like Lu Xun and Zheng Tufei 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 of November that he gave him back the manuscript – see Lu 1981, 733. This could be precisely the manuscript of *A Night of Heavy Rain*, dated the 11th of November.

and visibly differentiates itself through the narrative technique and the types of characters.

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.

## 2.2. Historicity

The fact that historicity is included among the five fundamental aspects taken into consideration in a philological study on a text is caused by the fact that *the artefact [is seen] as a historical production* (Arps 2016, 59). Historicity means placing the text in the time and place where it was created, thus taking into consideration its conditions of production. Another element contained in the historicity of a text is the text's diachrony, that means: its changes over time or the changes that occurred in time in its process of creation. A related issue is the issue of confirming a text's authenticity and identifying a possible forgery (Arps 2016, 59-60).

Discussing the historicity of a literary work has been for a long time a central aspect of the philological work. Ever since the 17th century, philologists in Europe were concerned with historical transmission and possible corruption during this transmission of a text (Turner 2016, 61-62). James Turner also brings into discussion the unification of variants, where the historicity of a text comes closer to textual editing (Turner 2016, 159-163), and Nabilah Lubis affirms in her programmatic study that one of the main tasks of the philologist is to trace the transmission of a text over the ages, to make an account of the history of this text (Lubis 1996, 24).

A comparative approach between different versions of a text is more commonly used for the study of manuscripts, where many modifications (more or less intentional), omissions, added elements, commentaries occurred during the process of transmission, through the hands of copyists (Robson 1988, 22-23). 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 the case of *The Coconuts* and other comparable books, the concern for the texts' historical transmission consists in the comparative analysis of the first variants of the texts (first published in literary journals) and the book variant. Some of the novellas in *The Coconuts* were published first in the *Qiuye* journal, and then

in the volume. 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 gained access to the *Qiuye* versions of three texts: *Where Are You Heading to*, *A Night of Heavy Rain*, and *Sharks*. However, upon reading them in a textually and graphically comparative perspective, there was found almost no difference between the forms 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 mistyped characters, like “她” *ta* (*she*) instead of “他” *ta* (*he*) in specific contexts, survived from the journal edition to the book edition, without ever being corrected.

In conclusion, to make an analysis of the historicity of the texts in *The Coconuts* proved to not be relevant in terms of the historicity of the book in its physical form, because there were only two editions for the texts, both published in typographies, one edition in journal and one edition in book form, appearing a short time one after another; what is concluded from this analysis is, nevertheless, that there were no revisions made for the texts' publication in volume after the publication in journal.

### 2.3. Contextuality

Contextuality refers to the positioning of a text in a certain timeframe, space, and implicitly cultural context, in order to get a better understanding of it – an understanding that takes into consideration the actual situation surrounding the reception of the text. 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, 56-57).

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: she enumerates among the main goals of a philological study the fact of gaining more information on the history of a people through a text that is by and

about this people (Lubis 1996, 24), so it is not only the context that provides more information about the text, but also the text about the context.

The contextuality of a text should not concern only the society in which it is created and published – the general context, but it 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 multi-faceted 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's biography, concerning the specific places where he lived and studied.

The contexts that are deemed defining for Zheng's development and choices and consequently for his book are: the general context – the socio-political situation and cultural developments in China in the Republican era until 1929, especially the situation of Huaqiao students coming from Southeast Asia to China; the socio-political situation and cultural developments in the Dutch East Indies in the late colonial period, more specifically the 1920s and the situation of Chinese people in the Dutch East Indies (as an important and individualized part of the Indies society, that Zheng was part of), and the personal context – more specific aspects that Zheng Tufei himself came in contact with.

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 the 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 ethnic Chinese from the Dutch East Indies arriving in China, the dynamics of the coolie trade 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 section, with focus on literature itself.

## 2.4. Intertextuality

Intertextuality works mostly through connections between texts (where “texts” include also other forms of art than literature, such as music, because they all use a certain type of language in order to convey a message). The connection between texts is named “compositionality” by Ben Arps and refers to the things that were “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, 52-55).

Intertextuality is manifested in a text through the explicit references, allusions, quotations and implicit 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, 25). Thus, the fact that a text adheres to a certain genre is in itself a form of intertextuality.

*The Coconuts* might be correlated with the bodies of literature with which the author might have interacted.

Histories and anthologies of Indonesian literature tend to treat separately Indonesian and non-Indonesian 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, 8-11), 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 does not 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*.

Zheng Tufei visibly differentiates himself from Sino-Malay literature as well, focusing on different themes (coolie life, critiques of the colonial system), and approaching differently the topics that were popular in Sino-Malay literature. 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 Chinese authors from the Indies, who generally manifestly supported the traditional family and traditional mores.

Zheng Tufei’s writings come closer to the May Fourth modern literature from China, for stylistic, and ideologic reasons, besides the use of Chinese language and

script. A very important change of that period's Chinese literature was the passage from classical literature to vernacular literature, and Zheng was obviously a follower of this trend, using a very skilled vernacular Chinese, with much concern for authenticity in the characters' spoken word. From the very first sight, the formal level proves the fact that he was at the same pace with the linguistic reforms of the Republican era. 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, 163-164) 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.

Zheng Tufei can be easily associated with a minor genre literature in Chinese literature: Nanyang writings – literary works depicting Southeast Asia (Nanyang) through the eyes of the Chinese traveller, for the Chinese public. Even if Zheng Tufei was not in a position of a foreign traveller in the Dutch East Indies, his novellas are mostly centred precisely on this type of character and provide this kind of perspective: many characters in the volume are *totok/sinkeh*<sup>9</sup> Chinese who have just arrived in the Indies and are in the process of discovering this world.

The literary activity of *Huaqiao* Chinese coming from Nanyang to China is 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

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<sup>9</sup> Newly arrived Chinese immigrants.

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

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. 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. 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.

## 2.5. Interpretability

The interpretability in philology does not aim at gaining a direct and immutable grasp of the *absolute and impersonal meaning* (Arps 2016, 48), but it is about personal understanding of the text. However, this understanding of the text, even if called “personal”, does not depend on a simple or naive understanding of the common reader, but it relies on the scholarly authority on the subject; at the same time, there can be multiple interpretations for the same fact, issued by different scholars, and it remains the individual reader's personal choice which one to adhere to.

The interpretability of a text refers to its capacity of containing a meaning, an idea, which can be understood in different ways by its readers. There are scholars who take into consideration the original readership's possible understanding of the text, in the case where it would differ substantially from the scholar's understanding, because of reasons of time and space/culture differences (Arps 2016, 48-50). This is particularly specific to classical textual 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 in the case of more recent texts as well, because it is still relevant even if the difference between the scholar's and the text's *époques* (and spaces/cultures) is smaller.

James Turner includes among different types of philology the study of a text directed to achieving the most complete understanding of it, which comes closer to literary criticism. Decoding the meaning of a literary text works through interpretability and contextuality as well, interpretability is intertwined by contextuality in the sense that the historical context shapes the meanings of the text, but meanings also exist in themselves, independent in a certain manner from the context of writing and publication of the text (Turner 2014, 150). The most complex interpretation of a text comes after the understanding of its other features: its artefactuality, historicity, contextuality, and intertextuality.

Interpretability may also involve the author's intention. The author's intention must be seen as important, even if denied by certain theories, and it can be related to contextuality too: what context motivated the author to express certain ideas through his text? Context refers here to the general context and the personal context, as shown in the previous chapters, where the general context involves the trends of thought that circulated in the author's era as well. Intertextuality plays an important role too, anchoring the text in a network of literary trends, motifs, themes, and so on. The motivation of writing, being conditioned by the general and personal contexts, influences the ideas that are promoted through the text.

Nabilah Lubis shows that texts are conveyors of cultural aspects, and it is the philologist's task to reveal those aspects to the readers; thus, the "meaning" of a text must be understood according to its specific cultural surrounding (Lubis 1996, 25). This is part of the interpretability of a text, because the readers of a text are confronted with peculiar, unfamiliar things, that come from different areas and/or different eras, which they might interpret in a different way according to their own views. This can also be related to the author's intention, and in Zheng's case it is visible that his intentions and the cultural aspect were blended, because one of his goals – which he later expressed directly, in the *Mantuoluo* journal (Salmon 1988, 99) – 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 role of helping the reader know the truth, through a realistic mode of presenting the reality (Laughlin 2016, 40).

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, it could be said that there are academic interpretations of a text, in accordance with the period's ideologies and literary trends, 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 understanding the text in a different way and contribute to the richness of its meanings.

Zheng Tufei presents an exotic space for the Chinese readership – the Dutch East Indies – in a complex manner, questioning the exoticizing gaze that existed before, through characters that are 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 local flavour, all contributing to the depiction of the Indies world. He does not limit himself at describing facts, nor does he restrain his interest for 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.

### **3. Conclusions**

This kind of philological approach puts a lot of emphasis on the formal aspects of a literary book, while considering at the same time the extratextual information. For this reason, it could be seen as a thoroughgoing methodology, whose final stage is that of interpretability, after having collected information on all the other aspects. The formal levels are interrelated with the textual content and the extratextual context as well. The importance of the formal dimension of the book – seen as an artifact and as a historical product – should not be underestimated, as there are many things to be found at this level which constitute indices of the work's process of creation and integration in its own epoche. It becomes eventually a matter of extracting as much information as possible from all the details. Contextuality

represents a circular process of connecting textual content with the societal developments surrounding the book and the author as well – the text is a product or reaction to the context, and the context finds itself reflected in the text. Intertextuality works in a similar way, in what concerns the level of literary developments. In this way, philology is not limited to the boundaries of the text, but is deeply engaged to the extratextual environment and its specific problematics. Finally, interpretability offers a vast freedom of analysing and understanding, reuniting all the information that has been gathered in order to elaborate a thorough interpretation of the textual content.

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