

***Mahua wenxue*: The Chinese Malaysian Literary Polysystem and Its Chinese Connection**

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ABSTRACT

Mahua wenxue in this paper is regarded as a minor literature—a peripheral literature practicing a major language, though Chinese Malaysian writers also express their literary in English and Malay. The emergence of classical *Mahua* literature in the nineteenth century immigrant community was the result of contacts and interference between the source and target literary systems.

Likewise, as a dependent literary system, the vernacular *Mahua wenxue*, in its initial phase, modeled closely on modern vernacular Chinese literature, since the emerging literature was weak and young, without its own canon, repertoire, and norms. Such a Chinese connection helped the local Chinese literature flourish in the 1920's.

KEY WORD

Mahua wenxue [Chinese Malay(si)an literature]

Itamar Even-Zohar

Literary polysystem interference

Xinxing wenxue [emergent literature]



1. The *Mahua* Literary Polysystem

Examined in the context of world literature, *Mahua wenxue* 馬華文學, or Chinese Malayan/Malaysian literature is a Chinese literature existing outside of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau, in the manner of a minor literature, and hence exemplifying “a minor practice of major language” (Deleuze and Guattari [1975] 1986: 18). Linguistically speaking, it is a literature in the Chinese language that functions side by side with three other different literary polysystems, i.e., Malay, Tamil, and English literatures, within the same, and yet different, Malaysian community, in which together they form a multilingual mega-polysystem of Malaysian literatures, though the official discourse of Malaysian culture planners favors only writing in Malay as the National Literature, leaving the other three as minor literatures of communal nature.

To define *Mahua wenxue* solely from a linguistic aspect, however, is to delimit the reference of the term to literature produced by writers of the Mandarin speaking ethnic Chinese in Malaya or Malaysia. It fails to reflect the polysystemic characteristics of the literature. Moreover, such a language-oriented defining act misleadingly suggests that only writers from the Chinese community produce *Mahua* literary texts, and only Malay writers contribute to literature in the Malay language. In fact, the *Mahua* literary polysystem is constituted by the sub-systems of Sino-Malay, Classical Chinese, Vernacular Chinese, English, and Malay literatures. In other words, since its establishment the ethnic Chinese community has been producing a literary repertoire in different languages, as there are local Chinese writ-

ers who devote themselves to other linguistic media of expression. In the process of developing, certain system of the literature, however, has terminated its function and ceased to exist (e.g., Sino-Malay, or Straits Chinese literature), other have become peripheral (e.g., classical Chinese literature), while some remain marginal (e.g., English literature, Malay literature). The vernacular Chinese eventually becomes the dominant mode of literary expression, though the linguistic complexity is still what makes the *Mahua* literary polysystem distinctive.

2. The Vernacular *Mahua wenxue* and Its Chinese Connection

It is not necessary to postulate a Chinese connection between Chinese literature in China and *Mahua wenxue*, for their relationship has historically been recognized. Studies of *Mahua wenxue* generally agree that the emergence of a modern Chinese language literature in early Malaya was closely related to the new literature and vernacular movement in China. The Chinese “Xin wenxue” 新文學, or new literature, however, is viewed in this paper as a force of interference, changing the linguistic, generic, and stylistic norms of the emerging local classical Chinese literature.

Literary interference, as defined by Itamar Even-Zohar, is “a relation(ship) between literatures, whereby a certain literature A (a source literature) may become a source of direct loans for another literature B (a target literature)” (1990: 54). In the polysystem theory, a literary system that may need an external system to be a condition for its emergence and development is termed a “dependent” system. In exploring the inter-systemic literary relations, the polysystem theory pays particular attention to the conditions and process of a dependent literary system being interfered with by another literature (an independent system itself) and the consequent transfers of properties and norms from a source literary system to a target system. To formulate certain laws of interference, Even-Zohar (1978: 47-49; 1990: 59-63) posits that in principle, (a) literatures are never in non-

interference because “there is not one single literature which did not emerge through interference with a more established literature” (1990: 59); (b) in most cases interference is unilateral; and (c) between the geographically separated communities literary interference is not necessarily linked with other kinds of interference.

Interference often takes place under certain conditions via certain spaces (often peripheries). A literature contacts with another will create favorable conditions for interference unless there are otherwise resisting conditions. Specifically, according to Even-Zohar (1990), a literature may depend upon another literature owing to the following situations: (a) it is young, newly emerged; (b) it is in a critical state, turning point, or is faced with a literary “vacuum,” that is to say, lack of available repertoire to function; (c) it is peripheral, or weak. Under such conditions, a source literature may be selected because it is prestigious, established or dominant. However, in the actual process of interference, a repertoire selected from a source system may function differently in the target system, which, more often than not, tends to regularize, schematize, reformulate, and simplify the appropriated source patterns.

The existence of an overseas Chinese community in the nineteenth century Malaya was the precondition for the emergence of the *Mahua* literary polysystem. The existence of the community alone, however, might not lead to the emergence of a literary system. For a literary system to come to flourish and operate, a literary institution with the existence of patronage, producers, readers, and infrastructural factors of such is of crucial importance. The establishment of early Chinese schools and local newspapers, which provided space for the political refugees and men-of-letters from China to teach and write, contributed to the existence of a literary and cultural system comprising its own producers, consumers, products, institution, repertoire, and market. And the institution was reinforced by the emergence of a generation of Chinese-educated and China-educated (many of the locally-born Chinese went to China to further their university education) intellectuals as producers and consumers.

When Zuo Binglong 左秉隆, a man with rich knowledge in

both Chinese and European culture, arrived in Singapore in 1881 as the new Chinese consulate, he made it his task to promote Chinese cultural identity so as to lure the loyalty of the immigrants to the Qing government and subsequently to pool their wealth together for the building of the nation under the project of modernization. In 1882, Zuo organized a cultural society named *Hui xian she* 會賢社 [The society for the meeting of literary excellence] and held regular writing contests of prose and verse in the classical language. Obviously Zuo was aware of the role of literature in the formation of the early Chinese community.

Zuo Binglong wrote poems in the classical language during his terms as the consul, later consul general, in Singapore (and the Straits Settlements), many depicting the equatorial landscape or alluding to local background. Zuo can be considered as a pioneering producer of *Mahua* classical literature and a cultural planner in (re)connecting the peripheral community with China. His endeavor in promoting Chinese culture, and hence Chinese identity, eventually led to the re-sinicization of the overseas Chinese in particular Singapore.

Another pioneering producer of *Mahua* classical literature, Huang Zunxian 黃遵憲, Zuo's successor, paid equal attention to local Chinese cultural activity. After his arrival in 1891, he renamed *Hui xian she* the *Tu nan she* 圖南社 [The society for approaching the South], obviously emphasizing a sense of locality, as *nan* here refers to Southeast Asia. As Huang was himself a well-known poet and reformist in the late Qing period, his participation in the local classical literary system was not a surprise. In his famous collection of poems *Renjing lu shicao* 人境廬詩草 [Poetical sketches from the Mundane Cottage], many were about his experience in Singapore and his observation of the miserable life of China's overseas subjects. A typical example is the long narrative poem "Fanke pian" 番客篇 [An alien in the barbaric land].

Zuo and Huang, however, were sojourners. They had to return to China when their terms as consuls in Singapore and the Straits Settlements terminated. An important pioneer in composing classical poetry in the local scene was Khoo Seok Wan 邱菽園, a *jueren*, or

candidate of the provincial imperial examination, who spent most of his life in Singapore and died there. Khoo had been an avid supporter of the pro-Emperor Guangxu reformist movement, led by Kang Youwei 康有為 and Liang Qichao 梁啟超, before he withdrew from political activities and devoted himself to the developing of a literary career in 1901. He was the founder of various literary societies such as *Lize she* 麗澤社, *Yaoqun she* 樂群社 (1897) and *Xingzhou shitan she* 星洲詩壇社 (1924) and was in charge of *Huiying she* 會吟社 (1897). Such literary societies were important institutions in the early *Mahua* literary system when educational institutions were still in the embryonic stage. Literati gathered in a literary society, as if in today's writing workshop, to compose poetical texts and discuss each other's works. Khoo went bankrupt in 1907 and since then lived almost in poverty. Yet his poetical life continued until his death. Edwin Lee, in his introduction to a new edition of Song Ong Siang's *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (1902), praises Khoo as "the best writer of classical Chinese in the Nanyang" (1984: ix). As a major poet, besides prosaic works, Khoo wrote at least one thousand and four hundreds texts in various metrical forms of classical Chinese poetry.

Records and studies of classical Chinese literary works produced by members of literary societies during this early period are scarce. Apart from literary societies, major institutions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Malayan classical Chinese literature were the literary pages or supplements of various early Chinese newspapers. The famous *Lat Pau* 叻報 (1881-1932), for example, published classical verse in the literary column of its supplement. Besides verse, short narratives and essays were also published. When vernacular literature gradually gained its upper hand in the *Mahua* literary system, classical literature, especially poetry, was still active in the newspaper supplements. As Zhou Weijie 周維介 (1988) has noted, the "Xuehua" 雪花 [Snow flower] supplement, founded 1931 in *Sin Kuo Min Press* 新國民日報 [The new nationalist daily news (1919-39)] by the Nanming Poetical Society 南暝詩社, published more classical verses than modern poems in its eight issues.

Since the turn of the century, Chinese political changes had forced many intellectuals to escape to Southeast Asia, and the writers-in-exile among them served as intermediaries between the Chinese literary institution and the emerging local Chinese literary system. After the 1911 Revolution in China, when “a new kind of intellectual came to Malaya and Singapore to teach in the schools and to edit and write for the newspapers” (Wang Gungwu [1970] 1992: 206), the English-educated and locally-born Straits Chinese gradually became less prominent as cultural leaders, for the Chinese community was in a state of nationalistic ferment. Wang Gungwu also rightly points out another contribution of the Chinese sojourning intellectuals. He writes, “Among their students and their avid readers grew a small but vigorous locally-born generation of Chinese intellectuals” (Wang Gungwu [1970] 1992: 206), who formed the new intellectuals of the 1920s, when vernacular or modern Chinese literature began to develop in Malaya.

As a dependent literary system, the vernacular *Mahua wenxue*, in its initial phase, modeled closely on modern vernacular Chinese literature, as the source system had already established itself with such canonical works as “Kuangren riji” 狂人日記 [The diary of a mad man] and “A Q zhengzhuàn” 阿Q正傳 [The true story of Ah Q] by Lu Xun 魯迅. Scholars believe that Chinese literature during the late Qing period had already become a stagnant system, waiting for rejuvenation from the May Fourth Movement. Chow Tse-tsung, for example, has pointed out in his seminal study *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* that “Chinese literature . . . had become stereotyped and stagnant during the late Ch’ing period” (Chow 1960: 270). However, literary reform in China did not have to wait until the May Fourth Movement to take place or open fire on the traditional literary institution. Already in the turn of the nineteenth century there were advocacies of poetical and prosaic reforms by active political leaders such as Huang Zunxian, Tan Sitong 譚嗣同, Kang Youwei, and Liang Qichao, who were dominant social and political figures, at least before and during the Hundred Days’ Reform. Though relatively conservative in political stance, the

reformers “tried to bring into poetic writing some prose diction, new and Western terms, and the common words found in folksongs” and attempted to adjust the style of prose “to utilitarian purpose” (Chow 1960: 270).

Furthermore, there was a *baihua* 白話 [plain language or the vernacular] movement in the late Qing period. The trend of such a movement to establish *baihua* as a medium of literary expression eventually led to an official recognition of the vernacular as the pedagogical language. The movement was, in fact, a culture and language planning, emphasizing the role of literature in the building of a modern nation. In as early as 1915, after the founding of *Xin qingnian* 新青年 [New Youth] by Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 and Hu Shi 胡適, modern foreign (mostly European) literatures were introduced to the vernacular Chinese literary repertoire. Subsequently, debates on literary revolution were started, emphasizing the use of the vernacular in creating a living Chinese literature. Though the May Fourth student political and cultural movement was an intellectual revolution at large, it was of great importance to the new literary movement in popularizing the use of vernacular Chinese in writing, which marked the emergence of modern Chinese literature. Reciprocally, the new literary movement played a significant role in the 1919 intellectual reforms in spreading new thought and in changing the Chinese mind.

The *baihua* movement in China eventually interfered with the development of the classical literary systems in both China and Malaya. In Malaya while the producers, probably were themselves consumers too, of literary texts in the classical language were men-of-letters, mostly from China, those of the vernacular literature came from different walks of life and were more widely read, suggesting that there was, at least, a reading minority in the immigrant community.

Newspapers were founded to fulfill the immigrants’ desire to learn of current affairs in their distant homeland and to express their opinions on them. In addition, suffering from illiteracy themselves, most early settlers were eager to have their local born children educated. This mentality eventually helped reduce the rate of illiteracy

and resulted in the expansion of education. Since more and more schools were set up, more teachers had to be recruited from China. In the meantime, Chinese political reformers and revolutionaries fled from China to the *Nanyang*, and many of them became school teachers and editors to preach nationalism. With the arrival of this new generation of immigrants, more reading societies and literary clubs were formed. All these quantitative as well as qualitative changes made it possible for the existence of a literary institution and the emergence of local literary expression. The response of the Singapore-based *Sin Kuo Min Press* in October 1919 to the Chinese Vernacular movement by publishing articles in *baihua* marked the beginning of a new literature in Malaya (Fang Xiu 1974). However, the first literary supplement that devoted its entire space to publishing literary works in the vernacular appeared no earlier than 1925, when the *Nanfeng* 南風 [South wind] supplement appeared in *Sin Kuo Min Press*. The various newspapers supplements and literary societies founded subsequently thus operated as cultural semiotic aggregates and constituted as socio-cultural institution in the initial phase of *Mahua* literary history.

While the presence of the immigrant Chinese community in Malaya and the Straits Settlements was the result of British efforts, the arrival of Chinese intelligentsia (notably writers and editors) in the region, especially during the 1920s, was due to political controversy in China. When the Nationalist-Communist coalition finally fell apart in 1927, many intellectuals fled to the Nanyang so as to avoid imprisonment and political suppression. In the Chinese literary scene, after the May 30th incident in 1925 the *Chuangzao she* 創造社 [The creation society] began to turn radically left, advocating the popularizing of proletarian and revolutionary literature. The subsequent formation of *Weiming she* 未名社 [The unnamed society], *Taiyang she* 太陽社 [The solar society], and the League of Left Wing Chinese Writers 左聯 indicated a change of ideology in Chinese literary history.

The impact of such a change on the embryonic *Mahua wenxue* was obvious. It coincided with the need of the emergent *Mahua* liter-

ary system for a repertoire to function smoothly as an institution. Also as a target system, *Mahua wenxue* was in need of reinforcement to form a literary repertoire of its own, and thus became more open to interference. As Even-Zohar has suggested, “in a state of need, a target system generally becomes more open to interference” (1990: 125). Thus instead of investigating the influence or impact of Chinese left wing literature and literary movements on early *Mahua* writings, I deem it more significant to point out the transference of the ideological change in literary institution, especially norms and models, from the metropolitan culture to a geographically periphery institution. Such a transference suggests the interference of the proletarian/revolutionary *xinxing* 新興 [emergent] literature in China with the emergent literary system in Malaya. The arrival of Xu Jie 許傑 in Malaya serves well as an illustration for such an intersystemic interference.

Xu became the chief editor of *Yiqunribao* 益群日報 [Public benefit daily] in 1928 after he arrived in Kuala Lumpur. Soon *Kudao* 枯島 [Barren island], the literary supplement Xu edited for the newspaper, became an arena for budding Chinese Malayan writers to express their literary interest. Kuala Lumpur, now after Singapore and Penang, became an important base for producing and consuming literary texts. Promoting proletarian/revolutionary literature in *Kudao*, Xu, moreover, encouraged local writers to express their true feelings on local subject matter, projecting a joint effort of *xinxing wenxue* and literature of local color in establishing a new literary polysystem in the *Nanyang*. However, proletarian/revolutionary literature was met with the same fate in Malaya as in China. The British authorities in Malaya employed the Banishment Ordinance to deport those they deemed leftist sympathizers to China, especially between 1928 and 1931. Xu Jie the patron of *xinxing wenxue* left Malaya in 1929. Hence ended the movement in Malaya, though in the thirties Chinese writers continued to arrive in Malaya and Singapore, many of them, such as Yu Dafu 郁達夫, Hu Yuzhi 胡愈之, Ba Ren 巴人, Gao Yunlan 高雲覽, Lao She 老舍, Xia Yan 夏衍, and Yang Sao 楊驩, were recognized as important cultural figures from China who exerted their

influence on the local Chinese literary and cultural community before and shortly after the Japanese Occupation of the British colony.

3. Consequence of Interference

To some scholars, Wong Seng-tong, for example, *Mahua* literary products under the dominant ideology of the *xinxing wenxue* indeed expresses a “conformity to the proletarian trend at the end of the 1920’s” (Wong 1978: 64). Wong further insists that since Malayan Chinese literary products of that period resembled the works of “their counterparts in Mainland China in almost every aspect,” they were “nothing more than a by-product of China’s proletarian literary movement” (1978: 103-104). Thus interpreted, *Mahua wenxue*, at least before 1941, is being projected into a geographical oriented term, signifying the production of writings in Chinese by (mostly leftist) Chinese writers who, for some economic or political reasons, happened to live or sojourn in Malaya and Singapore.

Mahua wenxue, however, is more complicated than a by-product of Chinese literature because its relation with the source system, i.e., *Zhongguo wenxue* 中國文學, is not a question of simple cross-cultural transmission, but one that involves the emergence of a Chinese literature of an immigrant community within a multicultural society of foreign tongues and within a Western colonial, political and administrative institution. Moreover, as a young, weak, and peripheral emerging literary system, it was necessary for *Mahua wenxue* to receive the transference of a selected canon, repertoire, and norms from the already established Chinese literature in China. The Chinese connection helped the local literature to flourish in the 1920s, but it was also during this period that a nationalized movement was launched to advocate a literature of local color and identity, forming an interference-resisting force in the periphery of the *Mahua* literary polysystem.

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