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Poetic Record of Local Customs: Bamboo Branch Verses of Singapore (1888-1941)

采风南洋：竹枝词与新加坡社会（1888-1941）

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Abstract

During the colonial period, Chinese poets in Singapore frequently adopted the short poetic genre called "Bamboo Branch Verse" to depict local customs, cultures, and their diasporic experiences. This genre has a folksong origin, and is traditionally used by literati writers to describe local folkways and secular love in exotic places. Li Qingnian's *Nanyang zhuzhici huibian* shows that no fewer than 4,197 pieces were published in Malaya and Singapore from 1888 to 1950. Based on Li's compilation yet adopting a more critical approach in handling his source materials, this article studies the content and generic style of Singapore's *zhuzhici* and its relation to local society, from 1888, the year the first set of *zhuzhici* poems was published, to 1941, before Singapore was occupied by the Japanese army. It first reviews the tradition of *zhuzhici* writing and attempt to clarify its generic distinctiveness, so as to link the *zhuzhici* in Singapore with its origin and to point out what is new and unchanged. Second, it examines how writers used the miniature form of *zhuzhici* for social criticism and to respond to the colorful, complex Nanyang cultures. Finally, it focuses on Khoo Seok Wan's poems to explicate the relationship between *zhuzhici* and print culture, his attitude toward local customs, and how he applied local languages, cyclic form, and explanatory notes in the genre.

摘要

殖民地时期，新加坡旧体诗人喜以"竹枝词"形式描写本地风俗、文化及离散经验。这种源自民歌的诗歌体裁，一向被传统文人用来书写边远地区的风土与艳情。李庆年的《南洋竹枝词汇编》，收录了从 1888 至 1950 年出版于马来亚和新加坡的 4, 197 首竹枝词。但该书所录不无过滥之处，本文在其基础上，以更为严谨的文本处理方式，专研竹枝词的内容与文体特征及其与新加坡社会的关系。时限以 1888 年的第一组竹枝词起始，至 1941 年新加坡沦陷为止。文章首先回顾竹枝词的写作倾向与文体特征，以看出新加坡竹枝词对传统的继承与新变。之后剖析竹枝词作者如何利用这种精简的诗歌形式，在作出道德批判之

余，反映南洋复杂多彩的社会风貌。最后以邱菽园的竹枝作品为例，探讨竹枝词与出版文化的关系、邱氏对本地社会风俗的看法，和他怎样在作品中运用本土语言、联章与注脚等写作手法。

Keywords

zhuzhici, Chinese society in Singapore, Nanyang customs and practices, Khoo Seok Wan, immigrant writers

关键词

竹枝词、新加坡华人社会、南洋风俗、邱菽园、移民作家

Introduction

> Bamboo Branch Verse, the only trace of Chinese culture here,
> Embodies Nanyang customs in its tuneful lines.
> Exotic flowers, peculiar birds, how wonderful they are,
> Pity that few generalists can manage them all.
> 华夏文明剩竹枝，南洋风物被声诗。蛮花鴂鸟多佳处，恨少通才作总持。
> (Kang 1996: 117)

After the failure of the Hundred Days Reform (1898), the late-Qing great thinker and politician Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858-1927) eventually fled to Singapore, in 1900. There he was warmly received and supported by Khoo Seok Wan 邱菽园 (1874-1941, named Weihuan 炜菱, Seok Wan was his style name, which he preferred to use), Singapore's leading businessman and most influential literatus at that time. Following the common practice of traditional poets, they often wrote poems complimentary to each other as tokens of friendship. However, the quatrain by Kang quoted above expresses two regrets. First, that Bamboo Branch Verse (*zhuzhici* 竹枝詞) seems to be the only visible form of Chinese civilization in Nanyang. Second, even if there are many wonderful objects to write about, only a few people have the all-round writer's ability to record them thoroughly in poetry. In Kang's eye, Khoo Seok Wan was the right person to undertake such an important task, and Khoo indeed did not let him down. Throughout his eventful life, Khoo composed a considerable number of *zhuzhici* poems to delineate and comment on local customs and social practices.

To say that *zhuzhici* was the only vestige of Chinese civilization in Singapore would be to exaggerate, but the poetic genre did start to flourish around that time with the rise of the merchant-literati class and the founding of Chinese newspapers. Thanks to the promotion of

Chinese culture and the establishment of literary societies by the two Qing consuls general Zuo Binglong 左秉隆 (1850-1924) and Huang Zunxian 黄遵宪 (1848-1905), the previously uncultured Chinese community in Singapore underwent significant change to become more literate. Li Qingnian 李庆年 speculates that about 50,000 pieces of poems were published in Malaya and Singapore from 1888 to 1950, and no fewer than 4,197 pieces were categorized by him as *zhuzhici* (Lee 1998: 27; 2012: 7). These *zhuzhici* not only present us with a vivid poetic record of the Nanyang lifestyle and the social-cultural milieu of colonial Singapore, but also greatly facilitate our study of classical Chinese poetry in overseas-Chinese communities. Several hundred writers are included in Li's *zhuzhici* collection, but many of them are unknown to us except as likely first-generation immigrants from China (no significant local-born or Peranakan writer is found). Some belonged to poetry societies, but as was the case in other Chinese communities, overall they were a very loose group of writers from varied social echelons, and did not present any clear agenda about or competing styles of *zhuzhici* writing. The obscure background of the authors nevertheless indicates that *zhuzhici* were especially welcomed by common poets, who took them as a convenient vehicle of literary expression. Also with such a gigantic number of poems, the genre was surely popular among general readers, and editors would be very much willing to publish it.

These diasporic writers may deem themselves to be *huaqiao* 华侨 (overseas Chinese), who still considered China as their homeland and dreamt of returning one day. Yet they also realized that, living in the host society, they had to redefine their social identity and to adjust their lifestyle and mindset in accordance with the new environment. In his study of the new literature movement in Singapore, David Kenley succinctly summarizes the attributes of diasporic communities by saying that they "can at times exhibit nationalistic fervor, while other times they seem to separate themselves from the politics of the homeland. Diasporas often retain and pass on traditional practices and customs, while other times they assimilate the characteristics of their adopted home." (Kenley 2003: 11). Although the nationalistic fervor of Chinese immigrants never seemed to have lessened, some did start taking Nanyang as their second home and became increasingly localized, while still aware of their status as "outsiders" or having a sojourner's sentiment. The tension between being diasporic Chinese and being local was always there, but it was a matter more of compromise than of conflict. These contrasting diasporic traits can be found alongside one another in the work of Khoo Seok Wan and many other Singaporean poets, who often expressed their concerns for the mainland yet also paid attention to Nanyang affairs and ways of life.

Thus the study of *zhuzhici* supports an important viewpoint about overseas Chinese experiences, that most of the *huaqiao* were committed to the maintenance of the homeland, while they also had a sense of separation from it and attempted to acclimatize to some indigenous practices (Kenley 2003: 165, 182). However, it may also revise some existing orthodoxies in literary study. First, the description of Nanyang life was not, as many scholars thought, only seen in vernacular literature but also in classical-style poetry, especially *zhuzhici*. The major difference

was that traditional writers did not consciously promote the idea of Nanyang literature or construct any literary discourse about it, as the vernacular writers did. Some modern ideas and themes, such as the welcome of technology progress, attacks on inequity, the emancipation of women and an emphasis on education, which Kenley found abundantly in Singapore's vernacular literature, were also commonly present in classical-style writings (Kenley 2003: 115-132). In his review of Singapore's May Fourth Movement, Kenley aptly confirms the continuity in literary development, stating that "the use of the vernacular language … was not as widespread as might be expected." As late as 1922, traditional forms of writing in the *Lat Pau* 叻报, the first Chinese newspaper, still outnumbered vernacular essays (Kenley 2006: 11-12). The classical-style essays of Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873-1929) and many "progressive" journalists in Singapore proved that new Western ideas were not first introduced and advocated in Chinese society solely through vernacular literature. The latter's role as a pioneer of enlightenment was somewhat exaggerated by literary theorists and historians.

"Literary supplements" in newspapers were basically the exclusive outlet of *zhuzhici* publication, since only wealthy merchant-literati like Khoo Seok Wan could publish their own poetry collections. These newspapers supported certain political agendas (Kenley 2003: 36-38; Choi 1993: 4-44). Yet however different their political viewpoints, all these newspapers published *zhuzhici*, and did not seem to have a preference for one type of work above the other. Some newspapers apparently published more *zhuzhici* than others. This was largely owing to the editors' decision. Under the editorship of Khoo Seok Wan, a significant number of *zhuzhici* were published in *Zonghui xinbao* 总汇新报, *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商报, and later *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 星洲日报. As for readership, it is difficult to pinpoint who read these works, but writers and readers of traditional literature would have a circle of readers of their own, and Khoo Seok Wan, as the leader of this circle, certainly would have exerted a profound influence on them when he took up the editorship of these newspapers.

Based on Li Qingnian's compilation, yet adopting a more critical approach in handling his source materials, this article studies the contents and generic style of Singapore's *zhuzhici* and their relation to local society, from 1888, the year the first set of *zhuzhici* poems was published, to 1941, before the Japanese occupation.[1] First, I review the tradition of *zhuzhici* writing and attempt to clarify its generic distinctiveness, so as to link the *zhuzhici* in Singapore with their origin and to point out what is new and unchanged. Second, I examine how writers used the miniature form of *zhuzhici* to voice social criticism and to respond to the colorful, complex Nanyang cultures. Finally, I focus on Khoo Seok Wan's poems to explicate the relationship

[1] Some literary features and social functions of *zhuzhici* have been briefly mentioned by Zhao Ying (Zhao 2015: 178-185). However, apart from the need for close reading, much more research can be done about *zhuzhici*'s generic characteristics, authorial mentality, and Singapore's socio-historical context and print culture, which were important factors in the production of these poems.

between *zhuzhici* and print culture, his attitude toward local customs, and how he applied local languages, cyclic form, and explanatory notes in the genre.

I. *Zhuzhici* tradition and its generic distinctiveness

A type of seven-syllabic folksong originating in Tang-dynasty Sichuan, *zhuzhici* were refined and popularized at the hand of Liu Yuxi 刘禹锡 (772-842), while he was banished to the region (Liu 1983: 492). Like many poets influenced by moralistic Confucian poetics, which proposed that one of the functions of poetry is to "record local customs" (*caifeng* 采风) or to "observe local customs" (*guanfeng* 观风), Liu Yuxi apparently intended to record the social mores of local society in his *zhuzhici*. Through such poems, it was said that the ruling class would be able to comprehend the social condition of a specific region and adjust their policies accordingly. Liu's imitation of the folksong eventually established *zhuzhici* as a unique poetic genre, setting an excellent model for later poets to follow and develop extensively.

In the Ming-Qing period thousands of *zhuzhici* poems appeared with specific toponyms or themes added to their titles to highlight their geographical and thematic uniqueness. In the case of Singapore *zhuzhici*, the titles are also marked with Nanyang toponyms, such as various "Xingzhou zhuzhici" 星洲竹枝词 (Bamboo Branch Verses of the Star Island). Some name local attractions, such as Pan Shengnan's 潘生楠 "You xiaopo xinshijie zhuzhici" 游小坡新世界竹枝词 (Bamboo Branch Verses about the Excursion to the New World Amusement Park at Small Slope); (*Nanyang Siang Pau* 23 July 1929: 22; Li 2012: 158-159);[2] or reference festive dates, such as He Yugu's 何渔古 "Benpo xinnian zhuzhici" 本坡新年杂咏竹枝词 (Miscellaneous Bamboo Branch Verses of the New Year in Local Singapore) (*Lat Pau* 15 February 1910: 11; Li 2012: 23).

Following the popularization of *zhuzhici* one can imagine the theme and style of the genre expanding and diversifying, causing some debates and confusion regarding the generic characteristics of the form. In his study on the *zhuzhici* in Qing-dynasty Taiwan, Weng Shengfeng 翁圣峰 prefers a more inclusive approach to handling the issue. As long as the works are about local customs or have a specific theme, they can be listed as *zhuzhici* or seen as quasi-*zhuzhici* poems (Weng 1996: 5-6, 30-39). In contrast, Ching Chung Shan 程中山 only includes works that match the following three criteria: first, the form is a seven-syllabic quatrain; second, it is clearly titled *zhuzhici*; third, the content is specifically about local customs. Ching also expresses his disapproval of the kind of *zhuzhici* that resemble doggerel (*dayoushi* 打油诗), arguing that this violates the genre's traditional style (Ching 2013: 6, 26).

Some Qing scholars had already attempted to define the generic distinctiveness of *zhuzhici*. Both Liu Daqin 刘大勤 and Xie Jinluan 谢金銮 (1757-1820) set *zhuzhici* apart from the more refined

[2] Small Slope refers to the area north of the Singapore River (Wang 1997: 2-10).

and upper-class *shi* poetry, and asserted that humor and rusticity (if not vulgarity) are allowed and even prized:

> Bamboo Branch Verse takes local scenery and customs as its subject matter. Frivolous and jocular tones can all be used. In general it favors humor and is utterly different from the quatrain 竹枝咏风土，琐细诙谐皆可入，大抵以风趣为主，与绝句迥别 (Liu 1983-: 990 above).

> Five and seven-syllabic poetry is modeled on classical elegance and controlled beauty. But Bamboo Branch Verse mixes local scenery and customs in its writing. Even local dialects and rustic sayings can be put in the form. This still follows the practice passed down by the Airs of the States. 五、七言诗，以典雅丽则为宗。唯竹枝杂道风土，虽方言里谚皆可以入则，犹国风之遗也 (Xie "Preface" to *Taiwan zhuzhici*, in Weng 1996: 141).

Xie maintains that the use of folk language is in fact inherited from the Airs of the States, the foremost category of poetry known particularly for its veiled satire in the *Shijing*. This constructed lineage implies that the seemingly humble and unrefined *zhuzhici* is endowed with the higher purpose of moral education and political criticism. In the postscript to his "Gusu zhuzhici" 姑苏竹枝词 (Bamboo Branch Verses of Suzhou), Yuan Xuelan 袁学澜 (1804-1879) explicates more clearly the socio-political function of *zhuzhici*:

> The aim of writing *zhuzhici* is to record the extravagance and frugality of the local, and to manifest the vice and goodness of people's practices. They are prepared to be selected by the folksong collectors. 竹枝之作，所以纪土风之奢俭，表民俗之邪正，以备采风者之取择 (Zhao 2001: 561).

The folksong collectors (*caifeng zhe* 采风者), according to ancient legends, are those who presented songs to the ruling class as evidence of social mores.

Apart from the use of the seven-syllabic quatrain, another formal characteristic of *zhuzhici* is the adoption of a cyclic form. Rarely would an author compose *zhuzhici* with only a single piece, as it could not sufficiently record and describe diverse social practices in just four lines. The number of pieces in a *zhuzhici* cycle may vary from a few to several hundred. They usually do not have a clear sequential order, and seem to be written randomly following the spontaneous thoughts of the authors. Some cycles may have a preface, an introduction, or a concluding piece to elucidate the authorial objective. But overall, the pieces are loosely connected to each other in terms of content (Weng 1996: 159-164).

After the Ming dynasty, some *zhuzhici* authors started to add explanatory notes to their work. This practice prevailed in the Qing as many *zhuzhici* poems were about exotic regions or subject matter little known to general readers. The author, wishing that his works would be read as a useful document of local history and social practice or included in such historical records as gazetteers (*fangzhi* 方志), would voluntarily append detailed notes to his *zhuzhici* poems (Weng 1996: 47-49). In a foreign place such as colonial Singapore, where indigenous, ethnic, and

Western cultures were unfamiliar and overwhelming to immigrant poets and readers alike, annotations seemed especially indispensable in writing *zhuzhici*, as we will see in Khoo Seok Wan's excellent examples.

Based on the above discussion, we may itemize the generic characteristics of *zhuzhici*: they are usually written in cyclic, seven-syllabic form; they are mainly about local flora and fauna and the social customs of a specific region (also conspicuous is the description of erotic love); their tone can be humorous, jocular and sometimes satirical, with occasional use of local dialects or different languages; explanatory notes are sometimes added by authors to elucidate unclear passages in the verse. These features suggest that *zhuzhici* were a popular and highly adaptable poetic form, and relatively accessible to general readers. Their content and style may vary and expand in accordance with different social and cultural contexts. Any stricter definition seems inadequate.[3] In the following discussion, I focus on poems that are closely related to Nanyang society.

II. Nanyang in the eyes of *Zhuzhici* Writers

Sojourners and immigrants were the major force of *zhuzhici* composition in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Once setting their feet on alien soil, they were surrounded by unfamiliar physical environments and local practices. They might feel displaced, alone, disoriented and out of tune with local residents, who spoke different languages and acted differently. As newcomers, their own cultural values and social identity were under challenge. A clash of different cultures--what we now call "culture shock"--and negotiation were in play in various border cities and diasporic Chinese communities. Singapore was typical of such communities, a place where ethnic and Western cultures as well as cultures of different Chinese dialect groups mingled and confronted each other, creating a cultural hodgepodge in which one would easily get excited, lost, or be estranged or assimilated. The *zhuzhici* in Singapore are vivid and complex representations of the various facets of Nanyang society as well as of Chinese immigrants' collective experiences and feelings. To a great extent, the Singapore *zhuzhici* can also be taken as useful historical references.

1. Social criticism

[3] Li Qingnian's criteria for *zhuzhici* are apparently less strict, and he also includes many poems that are not about Singapore or Nanyang. In the 525 sets of poems collected in his compilation, more than 70 sets are about China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan. There are also 40 to 50 sets with the title "Expressing feelings" or "Miscellaneous feelings," and 8 sets called "Doggerel." Among the 187 sets titled "zhuzhici," only 25 sets are specifically related to Nanyang. Nevertheless, many sets not under the "zhuzhici" rubric have clear associations with local society. All these pieces are in seven-syllabic form.

Inculcated with Confucian literary principles, Chinese literati in Singapore believed that poetry was an important medium for readers to "observe" social customs, and could help transform social mores and the mind of the people. Their models were Qu Yuan 屈原, Liu Yuxi, and many other ancient poets, who did not forget their literary "duty" even if banished or forced to move to remote, "barbarous" areas. In some ways, they were also guardians of Chinese civilization, disapproving of various indecorous practices and criticizing fellow Chinese for betraying their own culture, as the following two pieces show:

> How could I use a diamond to show off my luxury?
> After all I have something else in mind.
> I want to state my mind, a stone that cannot be rolled about,
> Be surprised, I can read and know how to tune the pitch.
> 岂凭钻石炫多金，毕竟侬家别有心。欲写我心非转石，居然识字解调音 (Khoo Seok Wan, *Zonghui xinbao*, 8 February 1902: 3; Li 2012: 22).

> A braided queue, long and hanging, after all he's a worthy man.
> Though illiterate, he's staunch and loyal.
> Better than he who forgets his origin, his forebears,
> And boasts himself a British subject.
> 辫发垂垂毕竟贤，虽无知识也贞坚。胜他数典竟忘祖，自侈臣于不列颠 (Wen Daheng 文大衡, *Lat Pau*, 30 June 1924: 16; Li 2012: 101).

The first piece by Khoo Seok Wan, titled "Shiliuye jishi zhuzhici" 十六夜即事竹枝词 (Impromptu Bamboo Branch Verses on the Sixteenth Night, seventh of twelve pieces), satirizes women who make extravagant display of their diamonds in the evening after the first full moon of the year. The preface to this four-poem series notes that in the past, people used the term "throwing stones" (*zhishi* 掷石) to compliment the spotless white skins of the Singaporean women who went out for excursions at night. Now this custom had changed; women simply adorned themselves with diamonds on the street to show off their wealth, and Khoo questions their motives. In the poem quoted above, Khoo commends instead a learned woman who despises materialism and remains faithful to her lover. In stark contrast to the dazzling, transferrable diamond, she is "a stone that cannot be rolled about" (line 3), a phrase borrowed from the *Shijing* poem "Boat of Cypress Wood" (Bozhou 柏舟), which describes a woman's unaltered love despite difficult circumstances. Interestingly, the turnable stone, *zhuanshi* 转石, is also a pun on "diamond," thus the woman's contempt for material wealth is even more strongly affirmed. The second poem by Wen Daheng, titled "Nanyang zhuzhici" 南洋竹枝词 (seventh of twelve pieces), chides those who abandon their national identity and claim loyalty to British rule. Contrarily, the uneducated Chinese was honored as a "worthy" man on account of his unalterableness, like the woman in Khoo Seok Wan's piece. But from another angle, it is also because of his illiteracy, particularly in English, which prevented him from entering "high"

society.[4] One of the "Da Pili zhuzhici shishou" 大霹靂竹枝词十首 (Bamboo Branch Verses of the Greater Perak, fourth of ten pieces) by Zhang Yaojin 张耀金 also criticizes the "traitor":

> Chinese people don't understand Chinese language.
> No longer preserving the native dialects and Mandarin.
> Laughable, that round fat big-tummy merchant,
> He's willing to be the child of the other race.
> 中华人不识中文，无复乡音国语存。笑煞团团大腹贾，甘心他族作儿孙 (*Penang Sin Poe*, 18 March 1915: 10; Li, 2012: 32).

Again, the merchant was probably a Peranakan Chinese, who made a fortune because of his good connections with the British. Although this type of satirical poems is not as common as other themes, it nevertheless expresses some Chinese immigrants' concerns about the need to preserve their own culture.[5]

There were many social vices such as opium smoking, gambling, gang (*bang* 帮) violence, and prostitution rampant in the Chinese community (Turnbull 2009: 71-72, 80-81, 101-014, 127, 143, 150). In one of the poems in the series "Xingzhou zhuzhici" (sixth of six pieces), Khoo Seok Wan had the following to say about opium smoking:

> In a smoking cessation center, bed benches are set;
> The addicts queue up, like schools of fish in several rows.
> When desire is quenched, everything will be calmed down.
> No prescription more perfect than this for giving up smoking.
> 戒烟设社备横床，鱼贯烟人列几行。戒得心来万事稳，更无绝妙戒烟方 (*Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 14 August 1932: 15).

Dull as it may be, this didactic poem expresses the truth that the best "prescription" for quitting opium smoking is to quench the heart's desire. Himself an addict when he was young, Khoo was eager to warn others not to follow suit. Apart from this poem, he also offered his admonitions in two entries of his miscellaneous notes (*biji* 笔记) (Khoo 1898: *juan* 1, 12b; *juan* 2, 17b-18a).

Some Chinese poets, notably Khoo Seok Wan, were themselves patrons of prostitutes. Some adopted a third person's voice to describe brothel life in their *zhuzhici* poems, while others were aware of the pernicious influences of prostitution and offered admonitions to the addicts:

> Fragrant clothes, shadows of the hairdos, invite everyone to stay.
> Before the flower that can speak, the dust from the road is cleansed.
> Meandering, the singing voice, whence does it come?

[4] The Straits Chinese maintained good relationships with the British colonial authority. They valued British citizenship for the protection it offered in visiting China or travelling abroad, and frequently displayed their loyalty to the British Empire (Turnbull 2009: 115-116).

[5] See also Hong Yulian 洪玉莲, sixth of seven pieces, "Fuloshan bei zhuzhici" 浮罗山背竹枝词 (Bamboo Branch Verse of Balik Pulau), *Penang Sin Poe*, 23 June 1922: 4; Li 2012: 90.

Standing tall in Chinatown are the labyrinths.
衣香鬓影每人留，解语花前涤客愁。宛转歌声何处起？牛车水矗是迷楼 (Mei Songbo 梅宋博, *Zonghui xinbao*, 26 June 1909: 3; Li 2012: 22).

Today the steamship anchors alongshore,
How many new guests arrived through the wind and dust?
My man, you know well the perils of the sea,
But easier in the water of Chinatown you may drown.
今日轮船泊海滨，几多新客历风尘。我郎但识航洋险，水向牛车更溺人 (Zhu Xuan Shi 祝轩氏, *Thien Nan Shin Pao*, 10 August 1903: 3; Li 2012: 19).

Prostitution had been common in Singapore since the 1860s, and visiting prostitutes was still prevalent among Chinese laborers in the early twentieth century, as many came to Nanyang without their families or female partners (Warren 2003). In the first poem, titled "Xingpo zhuzhici shiwu zhang" 星坡竹枝词十五章 (Fifteen Pieces of the Bamboo Branch Verses of Singapore, ninth of fifteen pieces), Mei Songbo presents a lively, carnal scene at the beginning, yet abruptly dismisses it in the concluding line, which states that one could easily go astray in Chinatown, where many brothels were located. Similarly, Zhu Xuan Shi in his "Xingzhou zhuzhici" (second of six pieces) highlights the danger of frequenting Chinatown in the second piece, adopting a female's voice to warn those just arrived not to frequent brothels. "The wind and dust" in line 2 happens to be a pun on "prostitute" in classical Chinese, suggesting that the immigrants not only experienced the hardship of the voyage but also the temptations offered by prostitutes in Singapore. These examples show that, while it was a traditional practice for male Chinese literati to visit brothels, here some poets did attempt to play the role of moral educator in their poems, which have, in the words of the *Shijing* exegete, "emerged from the affection yet do not go further than moral principles."

2. Domestic life

Being alone in a foreign country, many Chinese immigrants undoubtedly still missed their families and loved-ones back home. Here is Lin Huitong's 林会同 "Fuzhou Nantai zhuzhici" 福州南台竹枝词 (Bamboo Branch Verses of Nantai in Fuzhou) about a woman in China. Again it is written in the female's voice, but addressed from the hometown instead of from Singapore:

I am just like a stone of the bridge;
You are gone, as under the bridge the water flows;
A piece of stone, year after year I gaze on the river.
But how sad it is, with no end the water flows.

妾身好似桥头石，郎去真如桥下波。片石年年江上望，波流无定奈愁何 (*Lat Pau*, 29 March 1888: 5; Li 2012: 8).[6]

Like Khoo Seok Wan's piece about diamond wearing, it uses the stone metaphor to describe the unalterable feelings of the woman toward her lover, while the man restlessly wanders like flowing water. Other pieces related to China show a strong patriotic sentiment, mostly concerning China's political turbulence, its natural disasters, and its war with Japan. This type of *zhuzhici* differs from the traditional work in the way in which the authors are always looking back to the imagined spaces of their home country instead of describing the virtual places in which they reside or which they visit. This is a new form of *zhuzhici* arising from modern diasporic experience. It shows that not only the geographic but also the thematic realms of *zhuzhici* have been greatly expanded.

Yet there is not much local flavor in such nostalgic, patriotic *zhuzhici* poems. From the Singaporean perspective, perhaps the most significant works are those depicting the complex, diverse domestic society, where one can fully observe the sophisticated feelings of sojourner-writers in regard to their Nanyang experiences. To adapt to alien cultures, these writers at times had to *alter* their lifestyle and mentality, although such an alteration was sometimes mixed with a sense of resistance and disapproval. Nevertheless, they often found Nanyang congenial in various respects. Xiao Han Zi 笑罕子 (penname of the reputable journalist Yap Quee Hoon 叶季允 [1859-1921]),[7] for example, in his "Xingzhou zhuzhici" (second and eighteenth of nineteen pieces) considers the weather in Singapore pleasant and its local products copious:

Best is the climate in Nanyang;
At noontime it's scorching, but cool in the evening.
The mink coat, tattered, worry not, it can't last long.
When paying the New Year call, we still put our summer clothes on.
天时最好是南洋，日午炎炎晚又凉。貂敝漫愁难卒岁，拜年仍着夏衣裳。

Durian, mangosteen, betel nut, and coconut;
Growing pineapple is better than any kind of melons.
Vegetables and fruits keep yielding all seasons,
What things in life can compare to the banana plant?
榴莲山竹及槟椰，种得黄梨胜种瓜。蔬果四时皆不绝，生涯何物似耕芭 (*Lat Pau*, 1 and 3 August 1903: 8, 5; Li 2012: 18-19).

[6] Currently this is the earliest set of *zhuzhici* found in Singapore.

[7] Yap Quee Hoon was the chief editor of *Lat Pau* since 1881 and served in the newspapers for forty years. He was extolled as the "First Journalist of Nanyang" 南洋第一报人 (Tan 1983: vol.2, 397-410).

"Paying the New Year call" in the first piece is the traditional visit Chinese people pay to their friends and relatives during the Lunar New Year to convey their good wishes. The weather then is cold in Mainland China, but it is still summer in Singapore. Thus one can forget about his mink coat. The second piece provides a list of Nanyang fruits, showing how affluent life is on this tropical island. On the other hand, the poet-monk Ven. Rui Yu 释瑞于 (ca.1867-1953) shows his interest in Nanyang food in his "Xingzhou zhuzhici" (seventh of eight pieces):

> Malay flavors, I tasted with joy for the first time;
> I eat durian daily—the good smell lingers in my mouth.
> In food and drink, one should do as they do:
> Blend the sour and spicy to make broth and soup.
> 马来风味喜初尝，日啖榴莲齿颊香。饮食也须投俗好，调酸和辣作羹汤 (*Zonghui xinbao*, 25 December 1922: 4; Li 2012: 91).

This could be an example of how much Chinese immigrants have become localized. "Do as they do" (or, in Western idiom, as the Romans do) would be taken as a motto to indicate their willingness to alter their lifestyle and adopt Malay people's customs, and the words *tiao* 调 and *he* 和 (together they mean "blending") in the last line would also serve as a metaphor for racial harmony. One should note, however, that local cuisine is but one of the surface manifestations of an ethnic culture, though it may also have a deep social meaning. All in all, the poem merely expresses the poet's partial acceptance of local culture, as it is in *food and drink* that one should follow what local people do.

As they lived longer in Nanyang, many ethnic practices that looked bizarre at first sight might gradually seem commonplace to Chinese immigrants. A poet called Bu Mo 不磨 in his "Nanyang zhuzhici" (second of five pieces) even advises that one may drift along with local customs, doing as they do, at least in terms of clothing:

> Women put on wooden clogs and men wear sarongs.
> Every day on the streets, they bustle against one another in profusion;
> It is a common sight, so take no notice of it.
> Sail with the stream and you can be one among them.
> 女郎着屐汉穿裙，每日街头攘往纷。见惯司空不经意，随波流逐可同群 (*Nanyang Siang Pau*, 26 September 1925: 18; Li 2012: 110).

Bu Mo appends a detailed note to describe the attire of the Malays, elaborating on things that the short poem cannot possibly cover. For example, men and women in the tropical region do not like to wear socks. And the cost of shoes varied greatly, with women's embroidered sandals selling for five to six *yuan* and the cheapest wooden clogs for commoners just eight to nine cents. Bu Mo goes on to comment that at first sight the sarong skirts worn by Malays and Peranakan women seemed to offend social mores, but once accustomed to the scene, it was nothing special.

Such an opinion indicates that between different ethnic groups, some differences in daily practice can be tolerated, if not fully welcomed. The question is, by saying that one should not pay attention to such an exoticism but at the same time also describing it so painstakingly, doesn't it mean that the author still observes the other race with a wary eye and, by appealing to join in "their" group, in fact accentuates the cultural differences between "I" and the "other"? This paradoxical attitude suggests on the one hand Chinese immigrants' desire to adapt to local culture and on the other the possibility of disagreement and conflict.

Appreciation and imagination aside, Chinese immigrant poets still had complaints about Singapore and Nanyang. Differences in cultural practice were no doubt the root cause of the aversion and resistance toward other races. Fortunately not many discriminatory remarks are seen in *zhuzhici*. After all, the newspaper editors might censor any works liable to disrupt racial harmony, and the moral principle of traditional poetry instructed poets to educate rather than condemning local people, and show sympathy to their afflictions.

Contrasting with the exotic indigenous practices was modern and Western civilization, which is also described by *zhuzhici* writers. Museums, tap water, electric light, motor vehicles, cricket pitches, racecourses, Western schools, movie theatres, and amusement parks come together to present a different cultural spectacle of Singapore. Together with the use of Nanyang nomenclature, such as "curry," "salon," "durian," "betel nut," and local languages and expressions, *zhuzhici* as a traditional poetic form effectively shows its stylistic adaptability to different cultural environment, just as the immigrant writers do. As for the contents, except for a few that reprove the unrestrained demeanor and extravagance of modern women, most poets welcome the technologies and recreational activities introduced by Westerners. Mei Songbo, for instance, describes a cricket game as follows ("Xingpo zhuzhici shiwu zhang," second of fifteen pieces):

> The sun is setting on the cricket pitch.
> Cars and carriages busy, like dragons electric and swift;
> Chinese and Westerners, guests and hosts, one after another in good mood;
> Men and women gaily dressed, eager to show off their new fashions.
> 抛球场内已斜阳，车马如龙逐电忙。宾主中西相迭好，红男绿女斗新装 (*Zonghui xinbao*, 26 June 1909: 3; Li 2012: 22).

This is indeed a magnificent event, in which the members of the Western and Chinese upper classes join together, presenting a symbolic picture of harmonious racial coexistence. However, poor, uneducated laborers were of course excluded from such a context. There are indeed works that illustrate the various social vices (like the poems on opium smoking and prostitution read earlier) and the destitution of common people. Here is a poem from Huang Zhenxuan's 黄振璇 "Xingzhou zhuzhici" (sixth of eleven pieces) about the economic depression that badly affected Singapore during the early 1930s:

> Business slumps, year after year;

Rubber and tin industries both go for nothing.
Alas, after the ocean had turned into a mulberry field.
Former dreams and prosperity all vanished like mist.
商业凋残年复年，树榕锡市两徒然。可怜沧海桑田后，旧梦繁华已化烟 (*Sin Kok Min Jit Pao*, 5 July 1933: 4; Li 2012: 194).

The Great Depression hit Singapore heavily. The colonial government had to slash salaries, dismissed many officials, and cut back on public works and health services. Singapore was a depressing place at that time as many laborers were unemployed and businesses collapsed (Turnbull 2009: 146).

Many *zhuzhici* writers are basically unknown to us, as they used sobriquets or pennames under which to publish, such as "Lay Buddhist of the Bamboo Garden," "Drunkard from Jiangnan," and "Silly Man." Even the backgrounds and social status of some writers who may have used their real names are not evident. They were either minor authors, perhaps only known within their own small circles, or authors who wanted to conceal their identities for different reasons. For example, writers who reported such socially disapproved conduct as visiting brothels or having relationships with prostitutes would prefer using pseudonyms. Anyhow, the social backgrounds and experiences of the *zhuzhici* writers must have been quite varied and complex. Some, like Khoo Seok Wan and Yap Quee Hoon, were celebrated leaders of their literary circle, while a great many others were most likely from the middle to lower echelons of society, remaining obscure and unrecognized for all their lives. Yet they joined together to present a collective narrative of Nanyang customs by using the same literary genre. Although they might not have known each other, they somehow formed an "affective community" of *zhuzhici* writing, through which they could communicate and share their feelings and experiences regarding Nanyang with fellow writers and interested audiences.[8]

Within the domain of classical literature, *zhuzhici* is a relatively popular (*su* 俗) genre. Technically it is not too demanding, so ordinary writers were able to use it to produce instant literary sketches about quotidian subjects. The target readers were supposedly the common people, but it is also possible that the technical simplicity and commonplace expression of *zhuzhici* were merely a pretense. The elite tradition of using folksong to satirize and to carry out moral education suggests that some writers might have considered *zhuzhici* to be a serious literary genre under the cloak of secularism. Among the Singapore writers, Khoo Seok Wan was perhaps the best representative in this respect.

III. Khoo Seok Wan's Bamboo Branch Verses

[8] "Affective community" is a term used by Maurice Halbwach. It refers to people who use different means of communications and expressions to interact with each other about their experiences or feelings regarding the Holocaust (Halbwach 1980: 30).

Khoo Seok Wan was born in Haicheng 海澄, Fujian province. In 1894 he passed the Imperial Civil Service Examination at the provincial level and was awarded the title of *juren* 举人, the only Singaporean Chinese to have obtained such an honor. A follower of the late-Qing Reform Movement, Khoo contributed generously to Kang Youwei's Chinese Empire Reform Association. After the downfall of the Qing, he supported the new Republic, and remained a patriot all his life despite considering Singapore his home. An exceptionally rich merchant and philanthropist, he went bankrupt in 1907 due to his extravagant lifestyle and poor management of his business. Afterward he served as director or editor of several local Chinese newspapers, and as a secretary to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (*Zhonghua zongshanghui* 中华总商会). His health began to deteriorate in 1930 because of leprosy, and he died in 1941 at the age of sixty-eight, leaving behind approximately one thousand four hundred poems (Yang 1969: 98-118).

Hailed as the "Poet Master of the South" (*nanguo shizong* 南国诗宗), Khoo Seok Wan's poetry covers a wide variety of subjects, including Chinese history, Buddhist beliefs, the description of Nanyang scenery and life, reflections on his own personal life, and his relations with courtesans. One of the most prolific writers of *zhuzhici* in Singapore, Khoo published various sets of *zhuzhici* poems and two other sets that can be seen as the variants of the genre, adding up to a magnificent total of one hundred and forty-four pieces.[9] These include: "Shiliuye jishi zhuzhici" (four pieces; 1909), which we discussed earlier, "Yuanyue shiliu Xinjiapo jishishi bingxu" 元月十六夕新嘉坡即事诗並序 (Impromptu Poems on the Sixteenth Night of the First Month in Singapore, with preface; five pieces; 1914), "Huanleyuan zayong" 欢乐园杂咏 (Miscellaneous Chants on the Happy Valley Amusement Park; six pieces; 1924), and several issues of "Xingzhou zhuzhuci" published in *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (one hundred and twenty-nine pieces in total from 1932 to 1933). Initially Khoo Seok Wan might not have thought to promote the writing of *zhuzhici*, but later he seemed to realize the effectiveness of this popular genre in moral education and in rendering the Nanyang way of life. Thus he took advantage of his position as editor to publish his own *zhuzhici* and other popular poems.

Before bankruptcy, Khoo founded the *Thien Nan Shin Pao* 天南新报 in 1898 to drum up support for Kang Youwei's reform movement. Adopting a relaxed selective approach, Khoo published a large amount of classical-style poetry of his own and almost any work submitted to him. But he himself had not yet published any *zhuzhici* (Li 1998: 135-138, 149). From 1910 to 1913, being impoverished, Khoo served as editor of the literary column of *Zonghui xinbao*, in which he had published his first set of *zhuzhici* earlier, in 1909. As we have seen, this series criticizes the extravagant behavior of women who liked to show off their diamonds during their outings on the

[9] Included in Li Qingnian's compilation are two other sets of one hundred and eighty-two poems about the Anti-Japanese War by Khoo. The titles are "Kangzhan yunyan" 抗战韵言 (Rhyming Words of the War of Resistance; published between 1938 to 1939 in *Sin Chew Jit Poh*) and "Xianwu tuiyun" 献物推运 (Donate Materials and Motivate Transportation; 1938, also in *Sin Chew Jit Poh*). (Li 2012: 223-234).

sixteenth night of the first lunar month. He also published a few sets of *zhuzhici* by other poets during his tenure as editor.

While editor of *Cheng Nam Jit Poh* 振南日报 (1913-1920), Khoo invited some of his well-known poet friends to contribute work. He himself penned another set of poems ("Yuanyue shiliu Xinjiapo jishishi bingxu") about the sixteenth night in 1914. The following is the third of the five pieces:

> Their laughter, mixed with jests, is heard through the fragrant wind.
> Comparing their hairpins and rings secretly, they leave their lean fingers bare.
> On this distant island, they frolic in spring and greet the first full moon;
> And in the bright moonlight, ten thousand flowers bloom.
> 笑和谐谑透香风，暗斗钗环露指葱。绝岛嬉春展元夕，万花开向月明中 (*Cheng Nam Jit Poh*, 18 February 1914: 5; Li 2012: 30).

The poem conveys the ebullient atmosphere of the Lunar New Year. Yet just as in the first series, Khoo Seok Wan criticizes women's intentional display of jewelry (second line), and sighs that this shallowness of character is due to lack of education. No wonder that when he was still rich, he helped establish the Singapore Chinese Girls' School in 1899 with a donation of three thousand *yuan* (half of the total amount of the starting fund) to promote the education of Chinese women.

Khoo Seok Wan printed his quasi-*Zhuzhici* series on the Happy Valley Amusement Park in *Lat Pau* in 1924, the year when he became editor of the newspaper's literary supplement "Club of *Lat Pau*" (*Lebao julebu* 叻报俱乐部). The first such park in Singapore, Happy Valley was founded by the wealthy businessman Lim Teck Kim 林德金 (1882-1938) in 1921 (and was closed down in 1928) (Fu 1951: v. 2, 223; Wu 1981: 94). Located in Tanjong Pagar, the park was not only known as a recreation place but was also notorious for its gambling. Khoo Seok Wan noted this in his poem (third of six pieces):

> Bet for a thousand rounds, the game easily ends;
> Defeat is nothing to do with stupidity, winning not a success.
> Pitching to the pot, one only knows laughing toward the sky,
> Gain or loss, let others talk about he who missed his bow.
> 纵博千场局易终，败原非拙胜何功。投壶但识撩天笑，得失由他论楚弓 (*Lat Pau*, 21 June 1924: 16; Li 2012: 101).

Rather than censuring gambling, Khoo pondered the contingency and elusive nature of gain and loss in the tone of a Daoist philosopher. Winning the game had nothing to do with skill or tactics, but depended merely on luck. Obviously Khoo was not just talking about gambling but the ups and downs of fortune. He knew full well that wealth could come and go easily, since he had gone through that dramatic change himself: his affair with the business world did not end easily. The last line referred to a tale in Liu Xiang's 刘向 (ca. BC77-BC6) *Shuo yuan* 说苑 (Garden of Persuasion), which explains how the King of Chu lost his bow on a hunting expedition but

decided not to search for it: the bow would be found by his own people in the country, so he felt it had not really gone missing. The allusion may convey Khoo's acceptance of the volatility of fate and his opinion of wealth. As optimistic as the King of Chu, he did not think that his money had vanished into nothingness but had merely been transferred, temporarily, into someone else's hands.

A year after the publication of the Happy Valley series, Khoo Seok Wan took up the editorship of "Shangyu zazhi" 商余杂志 (Leisure Time of the Journal of Commerce), the literary supplement of *Nanyang Siang Pau*, where he continued to publish works by members of Tan She 檀社, a poetry society founded by him and Ven. Rui Yu (Li 1998: 353-354). Although Khoo had not written any Bamboo Branch Verse for *Nanyang Siang Pau*, some Tan She members did compose a few sets, such as Rui Yu's "Xingzhou zhuzhici." It should be noted that *Nanyang Siang Pau* was one of the most active newspapers in terms of *zhuzhici* publication. After the Second World War, the newspaper became virtually the only print media where one could find *zhuzhici* poems.

In 1929, Khoo Seok Wan became the editor of the literary supplement "Fan Xing" 繁星 (Array of Stars) of the newly founded *Sin Chew Jit Poh*. Later he initiated another literary supplement called "Youyichang" 游艺场 (Amusement Column) in the same newspaper, to publish what was in effect almost exclusively his own poetry (Li 1998: 459). It was in this column from 1932 to 1933 that he issued a magnificent total of one hundred and twenty-nine pieces of *zhuzhici*. Unlike his three early sets, which mildly criticize the extravagant life of Singaporeans on special occasions, these poems cover an exceptionally wide variety of subject matters that no individual series ever written in Singapore can surpass, and incorporate almost all the features developed earlier by local writers. They also effectively demonstrate the use of the cyclic form and explanatory notes in *zhuzhici* writing. Li Qingnian is correct in asserting that, in his later years, Khoo Seok Wan's attitude toward poetry had changed significantly. He used to prefer the rigorous elite style, but in "Youyichang" he "condescended" to the more popular *zhuzhici* and doggerel because he had come into closer contact with the realities of life and was mindful of the imminent national crisis (Li 1998: 462).

Li Qingnian divides Khoo Seok Wan's *zhuzhici* in *Sin Chew Jit Poh* into two sets. The first, consisting of twenty pieces, was published under the pseudonym Yuan Gong 猿公 in July and August 1932 in four different issues (*Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 17 and 24 July; 7 and 14 August). Checking the original newspaper, however, I found that two pieces are in fact under the title "Liulian zhuzhici" 榴梿竹枝词 (Durian Bamboo Branch Verse), which contains another three pieces not included in Li's compilation (*Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 24 July 1932: 15). This "durian" series (the first piece is about jack fruit), as the title suggests, mainly focused on the fad of eating durian. Yet Khoo Seok Wan apparently was not fond of it, and cautioned his readers against the harmfulness of overeating, especially when consuming it together with alcohol:

Following others he drinks some brandy,
And satiates himself with durians; both slaked his thirst and hunger.
"This is nourishing," for these words he misbelieves.
His old bone, truly at great risk.
学人饮下勃兰池，饱饫榴莲慰渴饥。补字为它迷信误，个条老命实而希。

Khoo Seok Wan provided his readers with a detailed note on the harmful effects of durian. He pointed out that eating durian with alcohol would greatly increase body temperature, and eventually cause incurable disease and death. It was a big mistake, he concluded, for Chinese immigrants to take durian as a nutritious fruit. (Present knowledge indicates that one of the side effects of eating durian is an increase in the blood sugar level, and people with diabetes are advised to avoid the fruit altogether or to eat it sparingly. There is no proof, however, that eating durian with alcohol causes serious problems). The piece revealed that Khoo Seok Wan was concerned for the wellbeing of his fellow countrymen, even if he may have been biased against durian.

The poem is written in a sardonic, jocular tone, but its cautionary annotation is serious and seemingly matter-of-fact. From Khoo's example one can see clearly that the two aspects had separate literary functions. While the poem is mainly for emotional expression, the annotation provides background information and the author's further opinion, so that the two together form an organic whole conveying both lyrical and narrative statements to the reader. In fact, many *zhuzhici* poems, full of exotic elements, would be indecipherable without the help of explanatory notes. Previously Khoo only provided a very brief annotation to a *zhuzhici* poem in the Happy Valley series, though there are prefaces to the two sets of poems about the sixteenth night. It was not until his editorship of *Sin Chew Jit Poh* that he appended detailed notes. Afterwards, every single piece of his *zhuzhici* poems was enhanced with longer or shorter annotations, a major change showing his eagerness to make his work more accessible to general readers, or his desire to pass them down to posterity as historical documents.

The "durian" series as well as others demonstrates how Khoo Seok Wan applied the cyclic form to his writing. Except for the first piece, each poem in the series deals with a specific aspect of the fruit. Separately, each individual piece still stands on its own, but presents only a fragmentary depiction of the subject matter, whereas a number of pieces together give a more complete picture of the whole.

Khoo Seok Wan's "second set" of *zhuzhici* in the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* contained more good examples of the use of explanatory notes, and a few more in cyclic form. Consisting of one hundred and six pieces, this set was published under various pennames or style-names. They were also published in twenty-nine different issues in the newspaper (from 4 September 1932 to 29 October 1933). [10] The use of the cyclic form is most salient in a four-piece series about food

[10] However, Li Qingnian put them all together in his compilation as a group under the single name Khoo Seok Wan (Li 2012: 179-191).

published on 14 May 1932. It begins with an insightful preface that serves not just as an introduction to the series itself but may be taken as Khoo's own summary for his *zhuzhici* production as a whole:

> This island is a complicated society. Each of the prevailing customs, honest or dishonest, is different. Every year I use the *zhuzhici* form to write about them. So varied and mingled are they that even if I have exhausted my ink bottle I cannot describe to the full their scenarios. It is simply as if one does not know from which point to start talking about the Twenty-Four Histories. Now I just dip my brush on eating, the surface and the ostensible of these phenomena, and use my fellow Chinese immigrants and myself as examples. I have four pieces finished. If by chance there is someone who collects folksongs for a history of the common people, perhaps he would adopt them as well.
> 本岛社会复杂，风尚情伪，亦各殊焉。年年以竹枝写之，千态万彙，既竭吾墨而未穷其形，亦如一部廿四史从何处说起矣。顷就其表面显著之吃字落墨，以侨胞及余为模特，得诗四章，倘遇民史采风者，其亦有取乎尔 (*Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 14 May 1933: 15).

Khoo acknowledged that one is unable to describe everything about local society through the writing of *zhuzhici*, although the authorial tradition of the genre emphasized its social and historical value in recording local customs. Still, the conclusion of the preface expressed the customary wish to have the poems collected by historians as evidence of social mores. The poems in the series themselves all have subtitles indicating the food they described, including durian, sweet potato, curry, and butter. There was also a dominant theme in the explanatory notes about whether the practice of eating these foods was "fashionable" (*modeng* 摩登) or not. Khoo also provided some explanations for the terminologies. In the last piece, for example, he explained that the correct translation of butter (*niuyou* 牛油) should be *niunaiyou* 牛奶油 because it is made from milk, not cow's fat as *niuyou* falsely suggested. The abbreviation of the term was as misleading as people transliterating "modern" as *modeng*, for its original meaning should be "improvement of the time." Such comments demonstrate Khoo's scholarly training and his elite attitude toward popular practices.

Khoo's familiarity with Nanyang culture and the function of explanatory notes in *zhuzhici* writing are again manifested in the first series of the "second set," which is specially written with the transliteration of Malay language into Minnanhua (one of the Fujian dialects). [11] It is genuinely creative and replete with exotic color, showing Khoo's good command of local language and his adaptation and acculturation to Nanyang life. For ordinary Chinese readers, however, the whole series is almost illegible without the help of annotation to explain the Malay words. For example:

> Makan and Mabok have a banquet gathering;
> Mali and Main enjoy it to the fullest.

[11] Khoo was not the first to apply Malay language to writing classical-style poetry. For example, Lai Buhong 赖浦泓 had published a four-piece series "A Sojourner's Feelings at Late Autumn" (*wanqiu lügan* 晚秋旅感) in *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 3 December 1926: 22.

Don’t run riot after a bout and squabble with Maki.
Why should not the three horses (*Ma*) share the same manger?
马干马莫聚餐豪，马里马寅任乐陶。幸勿酒狂喧马己，何妨三马吃同槽 (*Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 4 September 1932: 15).

If one follows the Chinese texts, one might think that the poem is about several people called Makan, Mabok, Mali, Main, and Maki having a fight after a drink, and it is unclear why there are only three Mas (in Chinese, horses) left at the end to share the food. Thanks to Khoo Seok Wan’s own annotation and Li Qingnian’s supplementary note on Malay spellings, we understand that these names are actually Malay terms: Makan means “to eat,” Mabok “drunk,” Mali “to come,” Main “to play,” Maki “to revile,” and the three horses are Sama, which means “together.” Thus the piece would be retranslated as follows:

To eat and get drunk in a banquet gathering,
Come to play and enjoy it to the fullest.
Don’t run riot after a bout and squabble.
Why don’t we share the same dish (manger) together?

Beneath the playful tone was a demand for harmonious relationships among people. As usual, even in a comic poem such as this, Khoo did not miss a chance to play the role of moral educator.

The interweaving of different languages and dialects, including Malay, English, Hindi, Tamil, Mandarin Chinese, Hokkienese, Cantonese, and Teochew, made Singapore an interesting and sophisticated society. One might easily become excited or baffled by such a multi-lingual environment, and there were often misunderstandings and friction. Khoo Seok Wan was acutely aware of the improper use of different languages and the problems that arose from translation or transliteration. In his *zhuzhici* poems, he criticized new Chinese immigrants for picking up the foul language of Malay (*Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 16 October 1932: 15). He realized that the English words “doctor”, “coolie,” “chief,” and “comprador” would have funny meanings when transliterated into different Chinese dialects (for example, “doctor” sounds like “camel” in Minnanhua) (*Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 23 October 1932: 15). All in all, he exclaimed that it was difficult for one to understand so many different languages and to make proper translations.

The coexistence of different races in Singapore was evident not only in the auditory but also in the visual aspect. In the following poem written after the Malay language series, Khoo Seok Wan described people of different skin colors on the streets of Singapore:

Yellow, red, brown, white, and black, all follow one another,
A display of them comes together on this island.
Just take a look at the crossroad,
People from the five continents, all show their figures.
黄红棕白黑相因，展览都归此岛陈。十字街头聊纵目，五洲人种各呈身 (*Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 2 October 1932: 15).

Khoo's annotation to this poem further notes that although Singapore is a tiny island, immigrants of different races had amassed there, a phenomenon rarely seen in other places; it is no exaggeration to call it "an expo of human species." More complicated than the surface disparities of language and skin color are the differences in cultural practices. One of these was the celebration of New Year on different dates according to each ethnic tradition, as Khoo Seok Wan observed in a poem of another series:

> New Year for each ethnic group is new to themselves;
> *Tahun Bahru* does not necessary fall in spring.
> Regardless of astrology or lunar divination, the earth keeps turning,
> All of us, round and round, are people on the globe.
> 各族新年各个新，兜温麻汝不须春。占星候月球公转，都是团团大地人 (*Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 7 May 1933: 15).

Tahun Bahru (line two) is "New Year" in Malay. By stating that people of different races all live on the same planet, Khoo Seok Wan was ahead of his time in adopting a seemingly global perspective which aimed to eliminate the cultural boundaries among different ethnic groups in Singapore.

The influx of immigrants and the crowded living conditions led to the emergence of various social problems such as a deterioration of public order and health and insufficient education and available work, while the economy of Singapore was severely hit by the recession in early 1930s. All these Khoo Seok Wan recorded in his *zhuzhici* poems, with critical comments.[12] At times, he expressed his and the Chinese immigrants' concerns about their homeland, and their hopes that the war of resistance against Japanese aggression would be successful.[13] Yet in general he enjoyed the natural scenery and unique lifestyle of Nanyang, and possessed what Ko Chia-Cian called "the consciousness of double townships," a term used to describe Chinese immigrants who considered Nanyang and China both to be their homes (Ko 2010: 384). Spending most of his life and his last days in Singapore, Khoo apparently had no wish to return to China, even if he still cared about its fate, as one of his *zhuzhici* poems declares:

> Adorn the southern wild, open up its great wasteland;
> What a good view here in this place.
> Eight more attractions are added, splendid, the lakes and hills.
> For a long time, I have taken the Star Island as my hometown.

[12] For the works about public order and health, see *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 19 February 1933: 15 (first, second and fourth pieces); for education, see the third piece of the same series and 20 August 1933: 15, second piece. For economic recession, see 16 October 1932: 15 (third piece) and 26 March 1933: 15 (second piece). Khoo also wrote about gang fights in a poem published on 13 November 1932: 15 (first piece).

[13] See the second of four pieces, *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 19 January 1933: 15; also a poem about the national flag of the Republic of China, 18 June 1933: 15 (third of four pieces).

点缀南荒破大荒，居然本地好风光。平添八景湖山壮，久把星洲作故乡 (*Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 26 February 1933: 15).

Khoo Seok Wan recalled in the explanatory note that thirty years before (in 1902), he had proposed eight scenic attractions of Singapore and solicited writers to contribute poems about them. Now he wondered if eight more attractions could be suggested to double that list. The poem shows his decision to make Singapore his home, however remote and undeveloped in his mind it was, and his effort to make it a more pleasant place to live in. It was precisely such a pioneering spirit among early immigrants that helped Singapore become what it is today.

Conclusion

As this paper shows, Singapore's Bamboo Branch Verses present us with a wide spectrum of subjects regarding the sophisticated Nanyang society of the colonial period. They vividly record and illustrate the sojourner experiences of early Chinese diasporic writers and their mixed attitudes toward local customs and practices, and at times express the writers' desire to correct improper social mores and to treat their own works as historical documents. We also observe from these poems some generic characteristics of *zhuzhici*, including the use of local languages, explanatory notes, and their cyclic form. In short, in applying *zhuzhici* to record the exotic elements of Nanyang, immigrant writers effectively demonstrated the genre's adaptability and flexibility in handling new content and neologisms. Such writing practices may be interpreted as the writers' simultaneous adherence to traditional culture (the form) and adaptation to foreign customs (the content).

Occasionally these poems also reflect historical and political affairs of the time, such as the anti-Japanese War in China and the economic depression in the 1930s, while social problems like opium smoking, gambling and prostitution are similarly depicted to different extents. Yet however rich and varied, one should note that these *zhuzhici* poems were by no means complete and general records of local history and society. After all, these poems were not historical writing or formal social documents of Singapore (further research about the relationship between classical-style poetry and the historical, social, and cultural affairs of Singapore will be done in separate papers). Nevertheless, such a limitation does not diminish the social and literary significance of their work, which can be seen as valuable records of the collective experiences and practices of indigenous people and Chinese immigrants, and perhaps also help form a unique poetic tradition of Nanyang.

From a broader perspective, the writing of *zhuzhici* poems was a common literary phenomenon in different overseas-Chinese communities as well as in peripheral regions of China such as Hong Kong and Taiwan. While works in all of these places reflected their own local characteristics and folkways, they also shared many similarities in terms of literary style and authorial approach. It would be especially meaningful to compare them further in respect to the

transregional study of the Chinese diaspora and the study of classical-style poetry in modern times.

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