

# Forming Social Bonds Through Poetry: The Tanshe Society in Colonial Singapore

## Introduction

Poetry was an effective social vehicle for Chinese people. In the *Confucius Analects*, it is said that, apart from other functions such as arousing one's emotions, observing social practices and expressing resentment, poetry can help one get along with people (*shi keyi qun* 詩可以群)<sup>1</sup> For centuries, Chinese poets have followed this saying, and used poetry to communicate with new and old friends. In regular or occasional literary gatherings, poems would be written on given topics, sometimes using the same rhyme pattern and prosodic form. One of the earliest and most famous examples was the Orchid Pavilion (Lanting 蘭亭) gathering during the Spring Purification Festival (or Shangsi 上巳, on the third day of the third month) in the year 353. The participants included the great calligrapher Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303-361) and the prime-minister Xia An 謝安 (320-385). A collection with thirty-seven poems was compiled, introduced by Wang's well-known calligraphic preface.<sup>2</sup>

Poetry societies (*shishe* 詩社) of different scales and natures flourished since the Song dynasties, some with strong political objectives such as those formed by Song, Ming and Qing loyalists.<sup>3</sup> Members of these societies attempted to construct a collective loyalist identity and to express their lament for the fallen dynasties through group compositions; while the Nan She 南社 (Southern Society) aimed at overthrowing the Qing regime.<sup>4</sup> Some *shishe* proposed clear literary agendas, and could be viewed as literati factions, such as the Xuannan 宣南 Poetry Societies of early nineteenth century Beijing.<sup>5</sup> Many others, however, did not present significant literary or political ideas. The purposes of this latter type societies included social networking, career development and entertainment, aside from the creation of poetic works. Whatever their aims, many poetry societies were loosely knit, short-lived local groups, whose members were acquaintances, hometown fellows, neighbors, teachers and

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<sup>1</sup> Yang Bojun 楊伯駿, *Lunyu yizhu* 論語譯注 (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), p. 185. For further discussion of this concept, see Wei Quan 魏泉, *Shilin jiaoyou yu fengqi bianqian* 士林交遊與風氣變遷 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2008), pp. 16-25.

<sup>2</sup> For a brief description of the Orchid Pavilion gathering, see Shengqing Wu, *Modern Archaics: Continuity and Innovation in the Chinese Lyric Tradition, 1900-1937* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, distributed by Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 168-169.

<sup>3</sup> For a study of the Moon Spring Poetry Society (Yuequan yinshe, 月泉吟社) formed by the Song loyalists, see Jennifer W. Jay, *A Change in Dynasties: Loyalism in Thirteenth-Century China* (Bellingham, Wa.: Centre for East Asian Studies, Western Washington University, 1991), pp. 162-164; for poetry society of the Ming loyalists, see He Zongmei 何宗美, "Qing chu yongshang yimin jieshe luekao" 清初甬上遺民結社略考, in his *Ming mo Qing chu wenren jieshe yanjiu xubian* 明末清初文人結社研究續編 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006), pp. 342-352; for poetry societies formed by Qing loyalists, such as the Chao She 超社 and Xu She 須社, see Shengqing Wu, pp. 181-191, and my book *Canghai yiyin: Minguo shiqi Qing yimin ci yanjiu* 滄海遺音: 民國時期清遺民詞研究 (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2012), pp. 276-313.

<sup>4</sup> For a study of the Nan She, see Lin Hsiang-ling 林香伶, *Nanshe wenxue zonglun* 南社文學綜論 (Taipei: Liren shuju, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> See James M. Polachek, *The Inner Opium War* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Council on East Asia Studies, 1992), pp. 39-50.

their disciples, classmates, colleagues and relatives. They would meet on special occasions such as festivals to commemorate seasonal changes, anniversaries of the birth or death of cultural celebrities, and gatherings to welcome or bid farewell to acquaintances and to appreciate paintings or antiques.<sup>6</sup>

Shengqing Wu puts emphasis on the *fengya* 風雅, or elegant, characteristic of Chinese poetry societies. The term (originally two major sections in the *Classic of Poetry*) in dictionary definition refers to exquisite taste, a leisurely literati lifestyle, and an unrestrained, artistic spirit. She argues that in the face of dislocation and anxiety caused by unprecedented historical change, poetry societies of the Republican era, in addition to the continuity of the *fengya* tradition, “became alternative venues for exorcising pent-up emotions and obstructed energy through poetry writings, creating a collective aesthetic, and facilitating and strengthening emotional, intellectual and social ties among members.” She thus adopted the term “affective communities” to describe these societies, a term used by Maurice Halbwach (1877-1945) for people who use different means of communication and expression to interact with each other about their experiences or feelings regarding the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup>

No matter what purposes and functions they had, the activities of classical poetry societies genuinely exemplified Confucius’s saying that poetry can help one associate with others. Members would use poetry as friendly tokens to establish and strengthen social bonds with fellow writers, and share with each other their literary, political viewpoints or life and emotional experiences. They would follow the instructions of the literary assignments given by the society (*sheke* 社課), composing poems in similar styles or trying to influence or compete with each other. Poetry societies thus provided members a channel to learn, to sharpen their writing skills, and to create a cultural space and spiritual, social network of their own. Stephen Owen thus avers that Chinese poetry is “a companionable art, for private and social use,” and in the process for a poet to find a *zhiyin* 知音 (the one who knows the tone), writing poetry “becomes a way to create community.”<sup>8</sup> Especially in a time and social environment unfavorable to the survival of classical-style poetry, *shishe* played a vital role in assembling hitherto isolated poets, sustaining members’ enthusiasm for writing poetry, continuing the *fengya* tradition of Chinese literati and making a collective voice to announce their existence.

As a colonial society where Chinese culture was considered second-class, Singapore was presumably not favorable soil for the promotion of classical-style poetry, which also faced challenges from the newly flourishing vernacular literature. However, many resident or sojourner literati from China continued to write classical-style poetry, since most of them had received traditional education and found it the most effective vehicle for literary expression. They published a considerable number of poems in newspapers, a phenomenon also seen in

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<sup>6</sup> See Shengqing Wu, p. 166.

<sup>7</sup> Shengqing Wu, pp. 166-168. For the discussion of affective community, see Halbwach, *Collective Memory*, translated from French by Francis J. Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditté (New York: Harper Colophon, 1980), p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Owen, “Poetry in the Chinese Tradition,” in Paul Ropp, ed., *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 295-6.

Mainland China and other overseas Chinese communities.<sup>9</sup> This confirms Kenley's study that even after the new literature movement in China, "the use of the vernacular language ... was not as widespread as might be expected" in Singapore; as late as 1922, traditional forms of writing in the *Lat Pau* 叻報, the first Chinese newspaper in Singapore, still outnumbered vernacular essays.<sup>10</sup> Concomitant with the burgeoning production of classical-style poems was the formation of various poetry societies, of which the Tanshe 檀社 (Sandalwood Society) was perhaps the most outstanding, and deserves detailed study.

The formation of the Tanshe marked the maturity of traditional literary community in Singapore. After decades of effort by Qing diplomats, resident writers and journalists to promote classical writings, aided by the increase of educated immigrants from China, there emerged a stable group of poets who regularly published their works in newspapers and responded to the call of poems for special occasions and poetry contests. These poets also had Khoo Seok Wan 邱菽園 (1873-1941), the "Master Poet of the South" (*nanguo shizhong* 南國詩宗), as their leader. When still rich, Khoo was an organizer and major sponsor of poetry contests and literary clubs, as well as founder or editor-in-chief of a couple of newspapers. Even after bankruptcy in 1907, his influence did not lessen. He continued to serve as editor for several newspapers, making a significant impact on Chinese society through writing and community service, and was one of the founders of the Tanshe.

The group compositions of Khoo Seok Wan and the Tanshe members can be seen as the products of a close social bond forged among resident- and sojourner-poets. They attempted to preserve the *fengya* tradition of their ancestors in a foreign country, using poetry to mould and maintain their relationships, to enhance each other's literary skill, and to share their feelings and perspectives about Nanyang society and being diasporic Chinese. Theirs was thus an "affective community" in the sense of people from different backgrounds sharing communication through poetic interaction. In their poems about China and Nanyang, there were both a sense of displacement and, to use Svetlana Boym's words, "a new understanding of time and space," revealing the immigrant writers' efforts to use literature as "a strategy of survival" in the foreign land.<sup>11</sup> Sharing their individual narratives with fellow members, the Tanshe poets constructed a collective memory or multiple narratives of the homeland, while

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<sup>9</sup> Li Qingnian 李慶年 speculates that about fifty-thousand classical-style poems were published in the Chinese newspapers of Malaya and Singapore from 1888 to 1950. See Li, *Malaiya huaren juitishi yanjinshi* 馬來亞華人舊體詩演進史 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1998), p. 27. Zuo Shunsheng 左舜生 reports that in the 1920s, the number of new literature readers was quite small. None of the new literature periodicals could sell more than twenty thousand copies. See Zuo, "'Women de kanfa' 我們的看法, in *Changye* 長夜, 1928 (1), quoted from Kuang Xinnian 曠新年, 1928: *Geming wenxue* 1928: 革命文學 (Jinan: Shangdong jiaoyu chubanshe, 1998), pp. 80-81. In San Francisco Chinatown, classical-style prose and poetry was still preferred to vernacular literature. See my article, "Gold Mountain Dreams: Classical-Style Poetry from San Francisco Chinatown," in Grace S. Fong ed., *Hsiang Lectures on Chinese Poetry*, 7 (2015): 69-72.

<sup>10</sup> David Kenley "Singapore's May Fourth Movement and Overseas Print Capitalism," *Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series*, No. 70 (Singapore: Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 2006), pp. 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), "Introduction," pp. XVI, XVII.

exchanging opinions about present situations and speculating on the many potentialities and possibilities of the future through poetic correspondence.

Previous studies about the Tanshe are rather incomplete or with bias. Li Qingnian, in his seminal work about classical Chinese poetry of Singapore and Malaya, dismisses the Tanshe as an organization indifferent to China's political situation and the sufferings of the overseas Chinese, and merely pursuing the *fengya*, leisurely way of life of the traditional literati, since most of its members had settled down in local society. He maintains their works had nothing special, simply indulging in Buddhist philosophy and the idea of escaping social reality.<sup>12</sup> Yeo Mang Thong 姚夢桐, on the other hand, recognizes Tanshe's contribution to local Chinese literature, as its work delineates the unique Nanyang landscape, expressing the evolution of the members from being sojourners to gradually becoming localized. Yeo, whose analysis can be more detailed and systematic, focuses on the publication of Tanshe's poetry collection *Tanxie shiji* 檀榭詩集 (*Poetry Collection of the Sandalwood Pavilion*) and lauds Khoo Seok Wan's selection criteria.<sup>13</sup> Bing Wang also adopts a more balanced view about the Tanshe and attempts to render it as one of the many literary organizations that helped construct and develop the cultural space of Singapore. Some of his arguments, however, may not be well-founded,<sup>14</sup> in addition to lacking textual analysis.

Applying the Confucian concept of *shi keyi qun* (詩可以群 poetry can help one get along with people, or poetry can form a community) to modern and diasporic circumstances, in this chapter I conduct a thorough study of the Tanshe and its members' use of classical-style poetry to establish social bonds and share their homesickness (or concerns about the motherland), religious beliefs and Nanyang experiences with each other. I first review the development of traditional literary societies of Singapore before the Tanshe. Next I introduce the founding of the society, its members and the publication of the *Tanxie shiji*, following with an analysis of the works in the poetry collection. Through this discussion, I shall reexamine the social functions of poetry writing and poetry society in the Nanyang context.

## I. Literary Societies before Tanshe

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<sup>12</sup> Li, *Malaya huaren jiutishi yanjinshi*, pp. 288, 353-354.

<sup>13</sup> Yeo Mang Thong, "Shidai de yinji: Qiu Shuyuan Tanxie shiji de chuban jiqi yiyi" 時代的印記: 邱菽園《檀榭詩集》的出版及其意義, *Huaren wenhua yanjiu* 華人文化研究, 1 (2014): 135-147.

<sup>14</sup> For example, he claims that unlike the literary societies formed by the Qing envoys, those "established by Khoo were ground-up efforts that lacked long-term planning; hence, many of them did not function for long." (p. 53) The fact is that almost all traditional literary societies, including those formed by government officials, were short-lived, without any long-term plan. In another passage Wang maintains, "China's literati are usually scholar-bureaucrats or career writers, meaning that composing literature is their way of making a living. Hence, their writing is motivated by the practical purposes of earnings, promotion, and so on. In contrast, Singapore's literati are people from all walks of life for whom literature is a hobby, a pastime, and a medium to express their emotions." (p. 57) For Wang's study of the Tanshe, see his *Classical Chinese Poetry in Singapore: Witnesses to Social and Cultural Transformations in the Chinese Community* (Lanham, MD.: Lexington Books, 2018), pp. 54-59.

Imperial consuls were the initiators of literary societies in Singapore. Their official duties were not just to treat with the colonial government in diplomatic matters, but also to oversee local Chinese communities and to win support for the Qing regime. For them, the objectives for founding literary societies were twofold: in the cultural realm, they helped enhance the educational level and transform the social mores of overseas Chinese; from the political point of view, local Chinese would be more aware of their national identity and remain faithful to China through the study of Confucian classics and traditional values.<sup>15</sup> In using poetry to nourish the racial cohesiveness of local Chinese, the imperial consuls would likely have recalled Confucius's saying that poetry can help people associate with each other.

The earliest literary society in Singapore was called Huixian She 會賢社 (Society for Congregating Virtues), founded in 1881 by Tso Ping-Lung 左秉隆 (1850-1924), the first consul. Its name clearly shows Tso's intention to bring local talents together to promote moral education. Monthly writing assignments (*yueke* 月課) included essays and poetry, with the former mostly related to Confucian teaching, and the latter on various topics such as homesickness and modern technology such as battleships.<sup>16</sup> Based on the list of the winners and the themes of writing, Leung Yuan Sang concludes that a sizable "group of scholars" had emerged in the 1880s in Singapore, and their mindset and literary training was essentially the same as traditional Chinese scholars. They were mostly from the "honored classes," born in China or Singapore. Some were teachers, others were offspring of businessmen.<sup>17</sup> The different backgrounds of the members proved that Tso's initial plan to unite the local elites was successful.

In March 1889, Wang Huiyi 王會儀, founder of the Chinese school Yulan Shushi 毓蘭書室, held a couplet competition, with a requirement that each line of the couplet should start with the name of the school *yu* and *lan* respectively. Tso Ping-Lung was invited to be the judge. Seeing that the event received warm response, Tso established the Huiyin she 會吟社 (Society for Assembling Chants) to carry on the upswing of couplet writing. The society followed the model of the Huixian She, with its monthly topics and results published in *Lat*

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<sup>15</sup> The Qing consuls also had the economic tasks, raising funds from overseas Chinese for purposes such as disaster relief, or to sell honours or official ranks to local leaders. See Yen Ching-Hwang, "Ch'ing's Sale of Honours and the Chinese Leadership in Singapore and Malaya, 1877-1912," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 1.2 (1970): 20-32. For the objectives of founding literary societies by Qing consuls, see Ko Chia-Cian 高嘉謙, "Diguo, siwen, fengtu: Lun zhuxin shijie Zuo Binglong, Huang Zunxian and Mahua wenxue" 帝國, 斯文, 風土: 論駐新使節左秉隆, 黃遵憲和馬華文學 (Empire, Consuls and Customs: Imperial Chinese Consuls in Singapore and Mahua Literature), *Taida zhongwen xuebao* 臺大中文學報, 32 (2010): 363-365, 367.

<sup>16</sup> The topics of the assignments and some of the outstanding works were published in *Lat Pau*. Copies of the newspaper are archived at the National University of Singapore. However, those before July 18, 1887 are lost. From 1887 to 1891, there were 514 winning entries in *Huixian she*'s monthly essay assignments. Excluding the repeated winners, 219 names remain. See Leung Yuan Sang 梁元生, *Xinjiapo Huaren shehui shilun* 新加坡華人社會史論 (Singapore: Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore, 2005), pp. 21-22. A list of essay topics and winners is also included in the book (pp.10-15). For the themes of poetry writing, see Li Qingnian, *Malaya huaren juitishi yanjinshi*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>17</sup> Leung Yuan Sang, pp. 25-26. Bing Wang called this group of people quasi-scholar (*leishi* 類士) because some of them worked in professions other than teaching or writing, and they did not intend to take up officialdom in China. See Wang, *Classical Chinese Poetry in Singapore*, p. 41.

*Pau* as well.<sup>18</sup> Its eighth assignment, for example, required participants to incorporate the characters *you* 友 and *peng* 朋 (both mean “friend”) in a couplet, perfectly accorded with the Confucian idea of making friends through poetry. Tso composed two couplets as examples for this assignment. One of them adopted lines from the *Confucius Analects*:

He who is not as virtuous as oneself truly should not be friends (*you*);  
All those come from afar can find their companies (*peng*).  
不如己者真無友，自遠方來皆有朋。<sup>19</sup>

The society continued to operate under Tso’s successor Huang Zunxian 黃遵憲 (1848-1905) and later Khoo Seok Wan.<sup>20</sup> In acknowledging Tso’s contribution, Li Zhongjue 李鍾珏 (1853-1927) commented that before Tso came to Singapore, students only concentrated on eight-legged essays (*zhiyi* 制藝) to prepare for the imperial examination, then the “consul encouraged the establishment of a literary society...so that gradually there was a vogue of literary writing.”<sup>21</sup>

Huang Zunxiang, after succeeding Tso Ping-Lung as consul general, founded another literary society called Tu’nan She 圖南社 (Association of Journeying to the South) in January 1892. The name was adopted from Zhuangzi’s “Xiaoyao you” 逍遙遊 (Free and Easy Wandering). As a poet Huang was more renowned than Tso, having gained some repute in China as the pioneer of the “new style poetry” (*xinpai shi* 新派詩), which applied modern terminologies and themes in poetry writing. Unlike the Huixian She, the monthly essay assignments of the Tu’nan She, twenty-four altogether, are said to have been more focused on current political and social issues, such as prostitution, the Chinese Exclusion Act in America and how to educate the local born Chinese, while poetry assignments were more concerned with Nanyang customs.<sup>22</sup> About half of the winning essays were published in *Lat Pau* and *Sing Po* 星報, but only two poetry assignments, including the *Xinjiapo zhuzhici* 新加坡竹枝詞 (Bamboo Branch Verses of Singapore), were published.<sup>23</sup> Huang’s aim to establish the society can be seen in his “Preface to the Tu’nan She,” containing the following passage:

I humbly hope that several years later, talents would be rising like clouds to respond to the appearance of the heavenly patterns, and to be employed by our country. 竊冀數年之後，人材蔚起，有以應天文之象，儲國家之用。<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For the couplet competition of the Yulan School and a complete list of the winning works of Huiyin She’s fourteen couplet assignments in 1889, see Yeap Chong Leng 葉鍾玲, “Zuo Binglong and Huiyin She” 左秉隆與會吟社, *Zhongjiao xuebao* 中教學報, 27 (2001): pp. 116-128.

<sup>19</sup> September 17, 1889, *Lat Pau*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Li Qingnian, p. 103.

<sup>21</sup> 近年領事官倡立文社……稍稍有文風矣。Li Zhongjue, *Xinjiapo fengtu ji* 新加坡風土記 (Singapore: Nanyang bianyishuo, 1947), p. 10b.

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed study of the Tu’nan She and a list of its monthly assignments and winners, see Yeap Chong Leng, “Huang Zunxian and Tu’nan She” 黃遵憲與圖南社, *Yazhou wenhua* 亞洲文化, 15 (1991): 121-140.

<sup>23</sup> Li Qingnian, *Malaiya huaren jiutishi yanjinshi*, p. 106.

<sup>24</sup> January 1, 1892, *Lat Pau*, p. 5

Several days after the publication of the preface, *Sing Po* printed an enthusiastic article, asserting that the society would achieve three good deeds: honoring the emperor, respecting Confucianism and showing compassion to the poor scholars. The last point would be especially welco

med by the literary immigrant, as the writer said that they would find it difficult to exhibit their talents and survive in the colony, and the rewards donated by the consul, though small, would be a great encouragement for them.<sup>25</sup>

Imperial consuls were the most appropriate persons to kickstart literary organizations in the early era, as they held privilege positions in the immigrant society. Wealthy businessmen then came in to succeed them with their financial affluence. While the Huixian She and the Tu'nan She had strong official support, those formed in later periods were completely run by private funding, and their most important patron was Khoo Seok Wan. Khoo 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* 舉人, the only Singaporean Chinese to obtain such an honor. Then he gave up his pursuit of a public career and came to Singapore in 1896 to inherit a fortune from his deceased father Khoo Tock Xin 邱篤信, a leading rice merchant. In the same year he sponsored the Huiyin She, then founded a new poetry society called the Lize She 麗澤社 (Society for Mutual Learning) in October. In December 1897, the society was renamed Lequn Wenshe 樂群文社 (Literary Society for Joyful Partnership) to expand the scope of writing to essays. Both names showed the founder's wish to bring people together to study literature.

The aim and activities of the Lize She, as well as some members' works were recorded in Khoo Seok Wan's literary notes. He mentioned that Singapore and Nanyang were remote and uncultured. Once he formed the Lize She, people responded with thousands of poems, and nine out of ten were by local immigrant writers.<sup>26</sup> At the beginning, the Lize She mainly focused on the composition of poetry and couplets. Khoo Seok Wan alone sponsored the monetary award, with the first prize being twelve dollars. The topics and the winners' lists of the monthly or quarterly assignments were published in *Lat Pau* and *Sing Po*.<sup>27</sup> However, other than couplets, only a small number of poems were published in newspapers; and Khoo Seok Wan's plan to compile a collection of the society did not come to fruition.<sup>28</sup>

Malaysian scholar Tam Yonghuei conjectures that the late inclusion of essay writing in Lize She's literary assignment was meant to show that the society also cared about moral principles other than the idle descriptions of "wind, flowers, snow and moon," and that it was the true heir of the reputable Huixian She and Tu'nan She. Yet the number of essays assigned was still fewer than poetry. Tam also made a comparison of the winners' lists of the Lize She

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<sup>25</sup> January 6, 1892, *Sing Po*, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Khoo Seok Wan, *Wubaishi dongtian huizhu* 五百石洞天揮麈 (Guangzhou: s.n. 1898), *juan* 2, pp. 28a-b; *juan* 11, p. 23a.

<sup>27</sup> Tam Yonghuei 譚勇輝, "Zaoqi Nanyang Huaren shige de chuancheng yu kaituo" 早期南洋華人詩歌的傳承與開拓 (Nanjing: Nanjing University, Ph.D. dissertation, 2014), pp. 127-130.

<sup>28</sup> Khoo, *Wubaishi dongtian huizhu*, *juan* 2, p. 28b; Li Qingnian, *Malaiya huaren juitishi yanjinshi*, p. 130.

and the Huixian She, and found that some writers had already long settled down in Nanyang as they were included in both lists. Nevertheless, from pen names such as “Nanyang Envoy,” “Sojourner of the Southern State” and “Marine Guest from Quanzhou,” one can tell that many of the writers still did not plan to put down their roots in Nanyang for good.<sup>29</sup>

The Lize She seems to have ceased operation in 1901, probably because Khoo Seok Wan was in an emotional depression after he stopped supporting Kang Youwei’s 康有為 (1858-1927) Chinese Empire Reform Association. The latter was accused of filling his own pockets with the money that Khoo donated; Khoo also claimed that he was afraid of being censured and was no longer as passionate about writing poetry as before.<sup>30</sup> Thus, like the Chinese idiom says, that “there is no banquet in the world that would not come to an end,” the literary community formed by the Lize She members dispersed, and none of them appeared later in the Tanshe list except Khoo Seok Wan. Some of them passed away in Nanyang, such as Yap Quee Hoon 葉季允 (1859-1921) and He Yugu 何漁古 (1862-1914),<sup>31</sup> while others might have returned to China.

## II. Background Information of the Tanshe

### 1. The Founding of the Tanshe

The Tanshe, or Sandalwood Society, was founded in spring 1924, more than twenty years after the Lize She disbanded and 17 years after Khoo Seok Wan became bankrupt. He made a living by serving as editor for *Zonghui xinbao* 總匯新報 (1910-1913) and *Cheng Nam Jit Poh* 振南日報 (1913-1920) as well as being a professional writer (1920-1924). He and Kang Youwei reconciled when Kang revisited Singapore in 1910. By this time, Khoo had also become a devoted Buddhist and made a pilgrimage to Rangoon in 1911.

Since the 1910s and the 1920s a “new generation” of poets emerged, although some of them were no younger in age than their predecessors, and most were also immigrants or sojourners like those of the Lize She.<sup>32</sup> None of the forty-three members had been enlisted in earlier literary societies. This complete change of personnel indicates the fluidity of the

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<sup>29</sup> Tam Yonghuei, pp. 133, 123, 134-135. For more discussion about the activities and works of individual members of the Lize She, see pp. 138-154.

<sup>30</sup> Khoo, *Huizhu shiyi* 揮塵拾遺 (s.l.: s.n., 1901), *juan* 5, p. 6a. For the argument between Khoo and Kang, see Chiou Sin Min 邱新民, *Qiu Shuyuan shengping* 邱菽園生平 (Singapore: Seng Yew Book Store, 1993), pp. 65-69.

<sup>31</sup> 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.” See Tan Yeok Seong 陳育崧, “Ye Jiyun xiansheng: diyi baoren” 葉季允先生: 第一報人, in Tan, *Yeyinguan wencun* 椰蔭館文存 (Singapore: Nanyang xuehui, 1983), vol.2, pp. 397-410. He Yugu, named Yingyuan 應源, was also an editor of *Lat Pau*. See Tam Yonghuei, p. 148.

<sup>32</sup> Among the forty-three poets included in Tanshe’s poetry collection, only Liang Rushan 梁如山 (1881-?) was known to be born in Singapore. He returned to China, however, when he was only three years old, and moved back to Singapore at the age of thirty-nine. See Bing Wang 王兵, “Zhanqian Xinjiapo Tongji yiyuan jiuti shiren qunxiang kao” 戰前新加坡同濟醫院舊體詩人群像考, in *Zhongguo wenxue yanjiu* 中國文學研究, 3 (2018): 95-96.



Chinese community in the early days, at least in the sector of the educated class. As the only remainder of the “older generation,” with his prestige and seniority, Khoo Seok Wan naturally became the leader of the Tanshe. However, he was not the initiator.

Khoo Seok Wan disclosed that it was the poet-monk Rui Yu 瑞于 (ca.1867-1953) who first called for a poets’ gathering to form the Tanshe. Those who were present elected Khoo to be the chairman.<sup>33</sup> In his preface to the *Tanxie shiji*, Khoo wrote that,

“The Sandalwood Society in Singapore commenced its refined gathering of literature and drinking since the early spring of 1924, and, for the time being, stopped at the late spring of this year (1926). It has been three years from the beginning to the end. The poems received from many a friend are more than one thousand seven hundred pieces altogether.” 星洲檀榭之有文酒雅集也，發軔於甲子初春，暫截至今歲丙寅暮春，首尾三年，共得諸友來詩一千七百餘首。<sup>34</sup>

Chen Bonian 陳柏年, then principal of the Chongzheng 崇正 School, also claimed that he co-founded the society with Khoo Seok Wan and Chen Yuxian 陳愚仙, and the location of their gathering was at Tanjong Pagar.<sup>35</sup> Despite this, his name was absent from the members’ list and he was not mentioned in any document about the Tanshe. Bing Wang was probably correct to surmise that Chen actually did not take part in the society’s activities, and was excluded due to his antipathy towards a number of local literati and businessmen.<sup>36</sup> At any rate, Chen only stayed in Singapore for a very short period, and was deported to China in late 1924 for the charge of “assisting unlawful organization.”<sup>37</sup>

## 2. The *Tanxie shiji* and its Authors

In terms of social nature and ways of operation, Tanshe was very much the same as the Lize She and other traditional poetry societies. Poetry writing was a pastime for its members, without obvious political agenda or literary proposition. However, it was the only poetry society in the early twentieth century that had compiled a group collection. This was the *Tanxie shiji* edited by Khoo Seok Wan. The collection was published in December 1926, chiefly sponsored by Tan Ean Kiam 陳延謙 (1881-1943) the banker-cum-poet, and the person in charge of the publication was Rui Yu.<sup>38</sup> Previously, taking advantage of his editor’s

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<sup>33</sup> Khoo Seok Wan, “Zhizhang yishi xu” 紫杖遺詩序, in Chen Qi 陳頤, *Zhizhang shiji* 紫杖詩稿 (Singapore: Sun Shinan, 1958), p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Khoo Seok Wan ed., *Tanxie shiji* 檀榭詩集 (Singapore: Tanshe, 1926), “preface,” p. 1a.

<sup>35</sup> Chen Bonian, *Tieti xia zhi Xinjiapo* 鐵蹄下之新加坡 (s.l.: Zhongguo jingji yanjiuhui, 1926), p. 37. Chen was appointed principal of the Chongzheng School in January, 1924. See *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商報, September 23, 1924.

<sup>36</sup> Bing Wang, *Classical Chinese Poetry in Singapore*, pp. 55-56. Chen slates Wang Huiyi and the Tanshe member Kang Yanqiu 康研秋 in his memoir about Singapore. See his *Tieti xia zhi Xinjiapo*, p. 32.

<sup>37</sup> Because of his criticism of the colonial government in the newspaper *Sin Kok Min Jit Pao* 新國民日報, Chen was put into prison in September 1924. See Chen, “Xinjiapo ruyu shimo ji” 新嘉坡入獄始末記, pp. 59-92.

<sup>38</sup> Khoo Seok Wan, *Tanxie shiji*, “preface,” p. 2a. Bing Wang mistook Tan as the son of Chen Qi, who is listed in the *Tanxie shiji*. However, Chen was only about ten years older than Tan. See Wang, *Classical Chinese*

position, Khoo Seok Wan published a large number of the Tanshe poems in the *Lat Pau* and *Nanyang Siang Pau*.<sup>39</sup> Then he was entrusted with the task of selecting nearly four hundred pieces (actual number 376) into the *Tanxie shiji*.<sup>40</sup> Thereafter, the Tanshe basically discontinued its activities.

In his preface to the *Tanxie shiji* Khoo Seok Wan explains the process and aims of selection. He starts with an apology for the delay of the selection, claiming that there were three difficulties he had to face. First, it took a long time for him to collect the pieces from his friends, because they came freely for the purpose of recreation and might finish their works at different time. Second, he had to set the standard of selection carefully, whether it should be relaxed, stringent, harsh or indiscriminate (*kuan, yan, ke, lan* 寬嚴苛濫), since his friends all counted on him for the task. Third, he needed to distinguish local poets from visitors, and make sure that their own works were excellent, like securing the fence (*zigu fanli* 自固藩籬), so that they would not be ridiculed in the future. However, he also proposed three reasons that the project could not be postponed. Firstly, many of the authors had left Singapore. Without the poetry collection compiled, there would be no record of their “wonderful gatherings.” Secondly, if he failed to accomplish the task, he could not repay the kindness of the many sponsors who ardently supported the project. Lastly, there were a large number of poems published in various newspapers in response to Tanshe’s poetry assignments, but their quality varied. Thus a poetry collection would preserve the “true face” of the society.<sup>41</sup> Obviously, for Khoo there was still a difference between insiders and outsiders, although he was pleased with the impact that the Tanshe had exerted in Nanyang.

Another aspect that set the Tanshe apart from other poetry societies was its quite strong Buddhist characteristics. From its poetry assignments, one can find titles such as “Praising the Buddha,” “Lotus Flowers” and “On the Painting of the Buddha Lotus.”<sup>42</sup> (See Table 1 for the complete list of titles) Initiated by Rui Yu, the name of the society may also have had Buddhist implications, given that the word *tan* (sandalwood) is a short form of *dāna* 檀那, which in Buddhism means to offer, to donate or to bestow. In the Chinese language, *dāna* is usually translated as *bushi* 布施, meaning to spread the Dharma to others. The sandalwood is also nicknamed the Bodhi tree, and incense materials made with sandalwood are commonly used in Buddhist worship, meditation and ceremony. As for the members’ religious background, besides Rui Yu the poet-monk, Khoo Seok Wan, Chen Yuxian, Kang Yanqiu 康

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*Poetry in Singapore*, p. 56. Wang probably misread Khoo Seok Wan’s preface to Chen’s poetry collection, in which Khoo mentions that Tan Ean Kiam asked him to write an essay to celebrate his father’s birthday. Khoo tried to look for a calligrapher to copy his essay, and found that Chen Qi was actually very good at calligraphy. See Khoo, “Zhizhang yishi xu,” *Zhizhang shiji*, p. 6.

<sup>39</sup> Khoo temporarily took up the editorship of *Lat Pau*’s literary supplement “Lebao julebu” 叻報俱樂部 (Clum of *Lat Pau*) in 1924, and became editor of the literary columns “Shangyu zazhi” 商餘雜誌 of *Nanyang Siang Pau* in 1925. He also edited for *Nanduo ribao* 南鐸日報 (*Southern Press*) its literary supplement “Liming” 黎明 sometime between 1923 and 1925, but only a few poems by Tanshe members were published there. See Li Qingnian, p. 348, 353, 320.

<sup>40</sup> Khoo, *Tanxie shiji*, “preface,” p. 1a.

<sup>41</sup> Khoo, *Tanxie shiji*, “preface,” pp. 1a-2b.

<sup>42</sup> Khoo Seok Wan, *Tanxie shiji*, *juan 1*, pp. 11a-12a, 25b-26b; *juan 2*, pp. 7a-9a.

研秋 (?-1927), Chen Qi 陳頌 (1872?-1932), Li Peh Khai 黎伯概 (1872-1943) and Li Hua 李華 were known to be lay Buddhists. In other words, poetry was again a medium for community construction. This time it combined people with not only literary but also religious interests.

The Tanshe members were from different walks of life, including journalists, teachers, physicians,<sup>43</sup> businessmen, artists and a monk, a phenomenon common to overseas poetry societies past and present.<sup>44</sup> Unlike their counterparts in China, which recruited members more easily from similar social backgrounds during the Republican era--such as Qing loyalists, local elites, journalists, or teachers and students<sup>45</sup>--overseas poetry societies tended to welcome all sorts of people, as the number of interested participants was relatively smaller. By the same token, the places of origin of the Tanshe members were also quite varied, with most of them from Fujian (24), while others from Canton (6 from Teochew and 2 from Hakka), Jiangsu (3) and Sichuan (1). This proportion was also similar to the population ratio of the Chinese dialect groups of Singapore at that time. Table 2 is a poets' list of the *Tanxie shiji*, showing their occupations, places of origin and number of works. From the list one can see that, among the forty-three poets, only eleven of them (including Khoo Seok Wan and Ven. Rui Yu) had more than ten pieces being selected into the collection, and twenty-three had fewer than five pieces. These figures in effect show which members were more active or seen as better writers in the eyes of Khoo Seok Wan than others, although they might have larger number of poems published in newspapers. According to Khoo, at least ten of them had left Singapore before the publication of the *Tanxie shiji*. Some returned to China, others moved to elsewhere.<sup>46</sup> Their departures revealed once again the frequent relocation of the Chinese immigrants. Many of them had indeterminate hometowns or social backgrounds.

Other than Khoo Seok Wan, several members also published their own individual poetry collections. These include Rui Yu, Chen Qi 陳頌 (ca.1872-1932), Hong Junqing 洪俊清 (Jinghu 鏡湖, 1878-1964), Li Peh Khai, Shi Zugao 施祖皋 (Bomo 伯謨, 1881-1940) and Sun Shinan 孫世南 (ca. 1896-1982). They can be seen as the backbones of the Tanshe, or were more fortunate than others because they had sponsors or descendants to help them publish

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<sup>43</sup> There were six physician-poets. Three of them once worked at the Thong Chai Medical Institution. As Bing Wang explains, many physicians could write classical-style poetry because they also received traditional education. See his "Zhanqian Xinjiapo Tongji yiyuan jiuti shiren qunxiang kao."

<sup>44</sup> Taking Khoo Seok Wan, Rui Yu, the Buddhist businessman Lee Choon Seng 李俊承 and the journalist Yap Quee Hoon (the so-called Four Talents of Singapore) as examples, Bing Wang notes that theirs was an overlapping relationship, since they were scholars who had either the same occupation or religious beliefs. But it was through poetry that they formed a cross-boundary social bond. See Wang, *Classical Chinese Poetry in Singapore*, pp. 59-69.

<sup>45</sup> For example, the Chao She 超社 in Shanghai was formed by Qing loyalists. See Shengqing Wu, pp. 181-191. The Baixue Cishe 白雪詞社 (White Snow *Ci* Society) was formed by Yingxing 宜興 county's local elites. See my article, "Xiangbang chuantong yu yimin qingjie: Minchu Baixue Cishe jiqi changhe" 鄉邦傳統與遺民情結: 民初白雪詞社及其唱和, *Journal of Chinese Studies*, 60 (2015): 261-297. Xi She 希社 in Shanghai was formed by journalists and the Qian She 潛社 in Nanjing by professors and students from the National Central University. See Tang Dongli 唐冬菰, "Minguo chunian jiuti shici jieshe yanjiu: yi 1912-1937 nian Shanghai, Nanjing liangdi weili" 民國初年舊體詩詞結社研究: 以1912-1937年上海、南京兩地為例 (Singapore: National University of Singapore, Ph.D. dissertation, 2018), pp. 77-135.

<sup>46</sup> Khoo, *Tanxie shiji*, "preface," p. 2a.

their works.<sup>47</sup> While Li Tiemin 李鐵民 (1898-1956) and Zhang Shu'nai 張叔耐 (ca.1895-1939) did not pass down their poetry collections, they were influential journalists.<sup>48</sup>

Rui Yu's lay name was Huang Xingcun 黃杏村, style name Chi Chan 癡禪 (Foolish Chan). Formerly a *xiucai* 秀才 student who passed the imperial civil examination at the county level, at twenty years old he was ordained as a Buddhist monk at Longxi's 龍溪 Southern Mountain Temple in Zhangzhou 漳州. Three years later he was appointed as instructor of the Bodhi Institute at Penang's Kek Lok Si Temple 極樂寺. He returned to China in 1903 but soon came to Singapore and became the abbot of Hong San See 鳳山寺 (Phoenix Hill Monastery) for a short period. In 1905 Khoo Seok Wan solely sponsored the construction of the Seng Wong Beo 都城隍廟, or the City God Temple, for Rui Yu to reside in and conduct religious practices. Playing a key role in the Tanshe, Rui Yu's poetry won him some fame before ordination. In his preface to Rui Yu's poetry collection, Khoo compares him to two poet-monks. One was Bao Fa 寶筏 in Guangzhou's Haichuang Si 海幢寺 (Ocean Stone Pillar Monastery), the other Ji Chan 寄禪 in Hunan's Mount Heng Monastery 衡嶽寺. He considered them the most magnificent poet-monks he knew in recent years, with Rui Yu to be counted as the third.<sup>49</sup>

Chen Qi, style name Zizhong 梓仲, was a medical doctor skilled at both poetry writing and calligraphy. He joined the Tanshe with his son-in-law Sun Shinan 孫世南 (ca. 1896-1982), who belonged to the society's younger generation and was very possibly the last surviving member. Sun moved to Nanyang in 1919, and married Chen's daughter in spring 1924, the year the Tanshe was established. He taught at the School of Industry and Commerce, and took refuge in Indonesia's Karimun during the Japanese occupation. After the war, he became a successful businessman.<sup>50</sup>

Hong Junqing studied at Xiamen's Yuping 玉屏 College and the Provincial Normal School of Fujian. He moved to Singapore in 1918 and went into business. On the eve of the Japanese occupation, he burned most of his earlier works and, like Sun Shinan, later fled to Karimun.<sup>51</sup> The most significant part of his poetry collection is perhaps the "Daoyi ji" 島噫集 (Sighing on the Island), about the fall of Singapore.

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<sup>47</sup> See Rui Yu, *Rui Yu shangren shiji* 瑞于上人詩集 (Singapore: 1939); Chen Qi, *Zhizhang shigao*; Hong Jinghu, *Jinghu yinchao* 鏡湖吟草 (Singapore: Nanyang yinwu gongsi, 1958); Li Peh Khai, *Mingyi Li Bogai xiansheng shiwen ji* 名醫黎伯概先生詩文集 (Singapore: Zhonghua shuju, 1977); Shi Zugao, *Shuoguo zhai ci* 碩果齋詞 (Shanghai: Guoli jinan daxue nanyang wenhua shiyebu, 1933); Sun Shinan, *Xue'an shigao*, (Singapore: 1957). Huang Baoguang 黃葆光 (?-1952) and Lin Shugou 林庶溝 had their poetry collections published in *Nanyang Siang Pau* in 1925 from January to November respectively.

<sup>48</sup> For Zhang and Li's brief biographies, see Kua Bak Lim 柯木林 ed., *Xinhua lishi renwu liezhuan* 新華歷史人物列傳 (Singapore: Jiaoyu chubanshiyong youxian gongsi, 1995), pp. 111, 48.

<sup>49</sup> Khoo, "Shi Rui Yu fashi shiji xu" 釋瑞于法師詩集序, in *Rui Yu shangren shiji*, prefatory page, 2a.

<sup>50</sup> Hong Jinghu, preface to Sun, *Xue'an shigao*, prefatory page, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Hong Jinghu, "Jinghu yinchao zixu" 鏡湖吟草自序, in Hong, *Jinghu yinchao*, prefatory page, 4.

Li Peh Khai, named Dingxiang 定祥, was a tribute student (*gongsheng* 貢生) in Canton, preparing to take examinations for admission to the civil service. Yet he quit and took up medical study instead. He moved to Singapore in 1900, and became the principal doctor at the Thong Chai Medical Institution for five years, before starting his own clinic. He founded the Singapore Chinese Physicians and Medicine Association with others in 1929 and served as its chairman.<sup>52</sup> He left behind more than a thousand poems and some essays about Chinese medicine. The historian Hsu Yun Tsiao 許雲樵 (1905-1981) concluded that in writing poetry, Li felt ashamed to follow the Tang-Song models, preferring to have his own ideas and expressions, and also liked to invoke science and modern technologies just as he did in his essays.<sup>53</sup>

Shi Zugao was exceptional among the Tanshe members as he was from the province of Jiangsu, a typical “person from other provinces” in the eyes of Cantonese and Hokkienese. He moved to Penang in 1919 to establish a textile factory, but the project was not accomplished. He then was hired by the Zhonghua Book Company in 1921 as a branch manager. In 1923, he became a part-time teacher of classical Chinese literature at the Chinese High School (present Hwa Chong Institution). Although he left within a year, he taught with passion and composed many pieces of *ci* lyric as samples for his students. He returned to Shanghai in 1929 due to illness, and published a memoir of Nanyang as well as a *ci* collection which included the pieces he wrote for teaching purposes.<sup>54</sup>

Works found in *Lat Pau* and *Nanyang Siang Pau* show that there were other authors who were not included in the *Tanxie shiji*. Among them Wang Song 王松 (style name Youzhu 友竹, 1866-1930), who had frequent correspondences with Khoo Seok Wan, was from Taiwan.<sup>55</sup> Indeed the contacts among poetry circles in Singapore and those in other regions of Southeast Asia or China were frequent. The Xianlai Ge 閒來閣 (Pavilion of Coming at Ease) and Yingbi Xuan 映碧軒 (Veranda of Reflecting Green) from Rangoon, Myanmar, for example, submitted over three hundred fascicles of couplets to *Sing Po* in 1893, inviting Huang Zunxian to be their judge, and the result was published in July the same year.<sup>56</sup> This transregional interaction of poets was yet further sound evidence that poetry was a vehicle for social bonding.

### III. Poems in the *Tanxie shiji*

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<sup>52</sup> Kua Bak Lim 柯木林 ed., *Xinhua lishi renwu liezhuan*, p. 211.

<sup>53</sup> Hsu Yun Tsiao, preface to Li, *Mingyi Li Bogai xiansheng shiwen ji*, prefatory pages, 1-2.

<sup>54</sup> Prefaces by Shi Zugao and Liu Shimu 劉士木 to Shi's *Shuoguo zhai ci*, prefatory pages.

<sup>55</sup> Wang only submitted one piece to congratulate Khoo Seok Wan on his birthday. See *Lat Pau*, December 11, 1924, p. 16. For correspondence between Khoo and Wang, see Li Qingnian, “Yinhun yeye dao Xingzhou: Qiu Shuyuan yu Taiwan shiren Wang Song” 吟魂夜夜到星洲: 邱[淑]園與台灣詩人王松, in Li's blogger “Nanming Wenzhai” 南溟文齋, website: [http://kenglian46.blogspot.com/2012/05/blog-post\\_13.html](http://kenglian46.blogspot.com/2012/05/blog-post_13.html), posted May 13, 2012, viewed on April 11, 2019.

<sup>56</sup> See *Sing Po*, July 3, 1893, p. 9.

The *Tanxie shiji* is divided into two fascicles (*juan* 卷), which contain thirty-six poetry assignments (eighteen in each *juan*) with three hundred seventy-six poems by forty-three poets (at least forty others published their works in newspapers but were not included in the *Tanxie shiji*). In addition to Buddhist beliefs, nostalgia for homeland and concerns about local life are both prominent themes of the collection. It would be inaccurate to focus just on one theme and ignore the others. The Tanshe members were not indifferent to current affairs of China, or simply indulging in Buddhism. They welcomed indigenous practices but also expressed reservations. When studying them as a group, one should also note that there are multiple viewpoints on or preferences for certain topics.

Nostalgia--a theme generally present in the works of immigrant writers--was one of the major themes in the *Tanxie shiji*. An opinion in the current Sinophone study rejects the nostalgic kind of writing which “looks back to China as its cultural motherland or the source of value,” taking it as an expression of China-centrism or Han-centrism.<sup>57</sup> Yet the historical and cultural backgrounds of nostalgic writing are too easily neglected, and the significant aspect of nostalgia *per se* unexamined. During the colonial period, Chinese immigrants almost unequivocally held China as their motherland, as they were still Chinese citizens in terms of national identity.<sup>58</sup> In an attempt to continue their usual way of life back home, they brought with them traditional practices of all kinds to Singapore. Yeo Song Nian 楊松年 aptly observes that, from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia generally chose to maintain their cultural heritage and practices, in areas such as journalism, literature, education, religious beliefs and even architecture. It is erroneous to ignore or minimize the influences from China, especially in literary writings, although the notion of Nanyang color was advocated.<sup>59</sup>

Nostalgia indeed could be a social disease if one continuously indulged in the past and refused to look into the future. Yet as Svetlana Boym argues, nostalgia “can be retrospective but also prospective.” In her opinion, prospective nostalgia, unlike melancholia, “does not confine itself to the planes of individual consciousness,” but “is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory.”<sup>60</sup> She also proposes the concept of creative nostalgia in that “[o]ne is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been.”<sup>61</sup> In their group compositions about China or nostalgia, the Tanshe poets shared with each other their longing for the past and hope for the future, their multiple viewpoints of the distant

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<sup>57</sup> Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2007), p. 31.

<sup>58</sup> This was in stark contrast with the Straits Chinese, who received English education and deemed themselves British subjects. See Lee Guan Kin 李元瑾, “Xinjiapo huaren shenfen rentong de zhuanbian” 新加坡華人身份認同的轉變, in Lee ed., *Xinma huaren chuantong yu xiandai de duihua* 新馬華人傳統與現代的對話 (Singapore: Centre for Chinese Language and Culture, Nanyang Technological University, 2002), pp. 65-66.

<sup>59</sup> Yeo Song Nian, “Shengming yu wenhua: cong Dongnanya huazu yiminshi shuodao wenxue bentuxing de neihan” 生命與文化: 從東南亞華族移民史說到文學本土性的內涵, in Li Xuanlou 李選樓 ed., *Xinhua wenxue 50 nian lunwenji* 新華文學 50 年論文集 (Singapore: Singapore Literature Society, 2015), p. 262.

<sup>60</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, “Introduction,” p. XVI.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 351.

home and the ideas of returning, developing a kind of cultural intimacy among themselves that could be rendered as spiritual support in words and lyrical expression.

For early Chinese immigrants, “localization” was perhaps not to acculturate with other racial groups, becoming one of them, but simply sinking their roots in the foreign soil within their own, somewhat enclaved, community which preserved many of the traditional practices.<sup>62</sup> The Tanshe was a miniature of such a community. Only members of similar ethnic background and cultural interests could join. The members might have become “localized,” striving to survive in the real world of colonial Singapore, but emotionally, and literally, they would identify themselves with traditional literati of ancient times, a gesture of longing for temporal and spatial freedom. In the second poetry assignment in the *Tanxie shiji*,<sup>63</sup> a poem written by Wu Hengwei 吳恆偉 shows how he connected the members’ gathering with that of the ancient poets, echoing with a literary community across time:

Best is the purification while spring is not late;  
Talking metaphysics, we used drink to crack a smile.  
Writings at all time, no difference of new or old;  
Our practice now is to love the ancients steadfastly. (excerpt)  
修禊最宜春未老，談玄欲借酒開顏。文章自古無新舊，風氣於今愛古頑。(1.10b)<sup>64</sup>

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, spring purification had been a traditional occasion for poets’ gathering, with its most famous example, the Orchid Pavilion, found in the Eastern Jin dynasty. While abstruse talk, *tanxuan* 談玄, with its discussion focused on Daoist principles, was also popular among the intellectuals at that time. The second couplet of the excerpt suggests that new or old forms of literature could be valued equally, but the Tanshe members preferred the traditional one. Below I will discuss four major themes in the Tanshe poems, to see how the members used classical-style poetry to depict and share their overseas experiences, religious thinking, and to establish social bond.

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<sup>62</sup> The Chinatowns in North America were ghettoized communities, in which Chinese immigrants seldom communicated with the mainstream society, or stepped out from the Chinatown areas. Restaurants and hand laundries were the two main occupations for Chinese immigrants. In his study of early Chinese immigrants in New York, John Kuo Wei Tchen maintains that hand laundry “became both a means of protecting Chinese from the prejudice of the larger society and a constrictive space that kept Chinese disconnected from the world around them.” They were therefore also “increasingly treated as an undesirable and unassimilable race of people.” See Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776–1882* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 252, 259. In colonial Singapore the situation was quite different, as Chinese people were the major racial group aside from the Malays. Yet immigrants maintained much of their heritage practices, meanwhile adopting some local customs.

<sup>63</sup> In fact, this was the third gathering of the Tanshe. See Li Zhifang 李芷芳, “Tanshe disan ci yaji xijian fenyun de zi zi” 檀社第三次雅集席間分韻得子字, *Lat Pau*, April 11, 1924, p. 16.

<sup>64</sup> Hereafter poems cited from the *Tanxie shiji* will be indicated with the fascicle number and page number in the main passage.

(this passage will be moved to the introduction of the book manuscript) Yeo Song Nian 楊松年 aptly observes that, from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia generally chose to maintain their cultural heritage and practices, in areas such as journalism, literature, education, religious beliefs and even architecture. It is erroneous to ignore the influences from China, especially in literary writings, although the notion of Nanyang color was advocated.<sup>65</sup> In fact, besides the very behavior of writing, which were greatly influenced by the stylistics and rhetoric of Chinese writers (ancient or modern), many literary practices in overseas Chinese community also had their original models from China. In regard to political identity, Lee Guan Kin 李元瑾 stresses that before World War II, Chinese immigrants, especially intellectuals, unequivocally held China as their motherland. No matter which political party was in power, they genuinely wished that China would become strong.<sup>66</sup>

### 1. About Nanyang

Four poetry assignments in the *Tanxie shiji* specifically related to the Nanyang context, namely, “Mixed Feelings about the Star Island” (No.7), “Miscellaneous Poems about the Happy Valley Amusement Park” (No. 8), “Drinking Iced Water” (No. 18) and “Relieving the Heat of Summer” (No. 27). Another two assignments, “Viewing the Sea” (No. 4) and “Sea Crane” (No. 33), may also be included in the thematic series, but the content of the poems seem to be too general that they can equally apply to any coastal regions. Occasionally poems in other thematic groups also contain Nanyang features: for example, Rui Yu’s piece written for the first exercise, “Spring Sentiments,” concludes that “The Malays do not understand the matter of rise and fall. / Ten acres of coconut trees [lying] on the other side of the water.” 馬來未解興亡事，十畝椰林水一方。(1.6b). He probably refers to the Malay people’s indifference to political change, not caring who the sovereign is as long as they can have their own way of life.

The most intriguing topic among the four assignments is undoubtedly “Mixed Feelings about the Star Island.” Eighteen pieces by five poets are included in the *Tanxie shiji* (1.17b-20b).<sup>67</sup> Among them the physician-poet Li Peh Khai alone contributed ten pieces. The strategic location of the island city, urban bustle and excitement, toils of the laborers, tropical scenery, homesickness, social and ethnic issues are presented hither and thither, indeed

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<sup>65</sup> Yeo Song Nian, “Shengming yu wenhua: cong Dongnanya huazu yiminshi shuodao wenxue bentuxing de neihan” 生命與文化：從東南亞華族移民史說到文學本土性的內涵, in Li Xuanlou 李選樓 ed., *Xinhua wenxue 50 nian lunwenji* 新華文學 50 年論文集 (Singapore: Singapore Literature Society, 2015), p. 262.

<sup>66</sup> This was in stark contrast with the Straits Chinese, who received English education and deemed themselves British subjects. See Lee Guan Kin 李元瑾, “Xinjiapo huaren shenfen rentong de zhuanbian” 新加坡華人身份認同的轉變, in Lee ed., *Xinma huaren chuantong yu xiandai de duihua* 新馬華人傳統與現代的對話 (Singapore: Centre for Chinese Language and Culture, Nanyang Technological University, 2002), pp. 65-66.

<sup>67</sup> I cannot locate when this topic was printed in newspapers. Two pieces by Li Langkun 李琅焜 are compiled in Li Qingnian’s *Nanyang zhuzhici huibian* 南洋竹枝詞匯編 (Singapore: Jingu shuhuadian, 2012), p. 107, and the source is *Nanyang Siang Pau*, May 28, 1926.



reflecting the members' "mixed feelings" about Singapore as the title suggested. The following is the third of the ten pieces by Li Peh Khai:

Dotting reds and yellows, leaves are like flowers,  
What a joy to see often these good views and scenes.  
Warm all year round, heaven blessed its beauty;  
Industrious, the many races, praiseworthy their efforts.  
Ways of transport, coming from sea and land,  
Nothing is unused, even mud and sand.  
Still more the means of traveling, so surprisingly swift,  
And the cost is cheap; everyone can have a ride on cars.  
點染丹黃葉似花，賞心疊見好風華。一年溫暖天全美，百族辛勤力可嘉。  
道有運輸來海陸，物無遺棄到泥沙。交通更覺驚神速，賤價人人坐汽車。(1.18a)

This is a paean to the pleasant environment, liveliness and prosperity of colonial Singapore. Especially notable is line four, which approves the diligence of the different ethnic groups, while the second half of the poem enumerates the geographical advantage and technological advancement of the port city. Rui Yu offered similar praise in the second of his two pieces:

One star shines bright in the south—the island stands alone.  
Out to the sea, a different abode with defensive blocks.  
Precious torch, thousands of them—river banks never darkened;  
Fishermen live together; the waters are their rice field.  
Shoulders and wheels crowded—such a prosperous place.  
Business thriving, vehicles running in the old resident market.  
Don't be surprised that here they miss not their homes,  
Coming early, long they've chanted the "Happy Border" piece.  
一星南麗島孤懸，海外藩籬別有天。寶炬千竿堤不夜，漁家雜處水為田。  
肩摩轂擊繁華地，服賈牽車古市廛。莫訝此間思蜀少，歸來早賦樂郊篇。(1.19b)

Rui Yu also commended the strategic location, modern technology and economic affluence of Singapore. So pleasant was the living condition here that immigrants would forget about their homeland, since they had found the happy border or place to live (*lejiao* 樂郊), an allusion adapted from the *Shijing* poem "Giant Rat," which expressed the wish to escape from oppression. Poems like these delineated a bright future for the immigrants, while vowing to shun the past and the thought of returning home, where life was indeed miserable in the early twentieth century.

The Happy Valley Amusement Park was founded by the business tycoon Lim Teck Kim 林德金 (1882-1938) in 1921 (closed in 1928).<sup>68</sup> Located in Tanjong Pagar, the park was not only known as a recreation place, but also notorious for its gambling activities.<sup>69</sup> The Tanshe poems (1.20a-23a) mostly marveled at its bustling atmosphere and various forms of entertainment, including music performances, rides and games, martial combat, dining and none other than gambling.<sup>70</sup>

The “Drinking Iced Water” series contains only five poems (1.34b-36a).<sup>71</sup> Among the five authors, Li Peh Khai stands out again with his detailed description of this special drink in Nanyang. He starts the poem with the following lines:

My mind, peaceful before;  
Why should I claim I’m hot-blooded?  
For long, I’ve lived in the equator,  
Suffered so much the scorching heat of wind and sun.  
吾心本平和，不必誇熱血。久居赤道間，風日苦炎熱。(1.35a-b)

He then narrates how iced water can help quench the heat, and the two different ways to drink: either mixed it with the western alcohol, or with syrup and cookies. After describing the different sizes and forms of the ice, and the ingenious design of the European ice maker, he continues:

Iced stores everywhere in the market,  
Never absent day and night.  
Drinkers of iced water in Nanyang  
Are common, not special at all.  
Once I used ice to treat illness,  
Much better than acupuncture.  
It can complement the medicine manual,  
No need for me to wag my tongue.

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<sup>68</sup> See Fu Wumun 傅无悶 et al. eds., *Nanyang nianjian* 南洋年鑑, volume 2, “Singapore” (Singapore: *Nanyang Siang Pau* chubanshe, 1951), p. 223; and Wu Hua 吳華, *Shicheng zhanggu* 獅城掌故 (Singapore: Jiaoyu chubanshe, 1981), p. 94. The news report about the closing down of the park is seen in “Huanleyuan xuangao tingye” 歡樂園宣告停業, *Nanyang Siang Pau*, May 1, 1928, p. 3. For Lim Teck Kim’s biography, see Kua Bak Lim 柯木林 ed., *Xinhua lishi renwu liezhuan* 新華歷史人物列傳 (Singapore: Jiaoyu chubanshe, 1995), p. 137.

<sup>69</sup> See “Shi dubo zhi bianxiang” 是賭博之變相, in *Nanyang Siang Pau*, March 5, 1924, p. 16; “Huanleyuan nei zhi dubodang” 歡樂園內之賭博檔, in *Nanyang Siang Pau*, August 20, 1925, p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Khoo Seok Wan and Rui Yu’s poems on this title were first published in *Lat Pau* in June and August respectively, 1924. A few more pieces by Li Qingqing 李青青 were published in *Nanyang Siang Pau* on June 30 the next year.

<sup>71</sup> Khoo Seok Wan’s piece was published in *Lat Pau*, January 17, 1925. There might have other pieces printed in the newspaper around that time.

街店多冰市，旦夕不曾缺。南洋飲冰人，普通非特別。  
亦嘗取治病，強於針刺穴。足補本艸經，無謂我饒舌。

The poem concludes with Li himself enjoying a cup of ice water under the moonlight. Although the tone tends to dull in translation, the original in ancient form is quite interesting, offering the reader a vivid picture of Nanyang life and referring to Li's own occupation as a physician. It seems that Li, like many Chinese immigrants, had adapted to the daily practices of local life, although culturally he might still behave and think in the traditional Chinese way.

Twenty poems by seven poets are included in the series of "Relieving the Heat of Summer." (2.12a-14b)<sup>72</sup> While the poets mostly accentuated the relaxed moments of summer and the lovely coastal scene in Nanyang, or took the opportunity to reveal the tranquil state of mind, at times they would express some disappointments. Rui Yu, for example, complained that unlike Lingnan (Southern China, particularly Canton), there was no lychee in Singapore (2. 12b). Goods and materials aside, the Tanshe members were not always approving of the social and cultural ambiance of Singapore, especially when considered from the Chinese perspective. The journalist Li Tiemin was one of the most critical poets, as the second piece of his four "Mixed Feelings about the Star Island" shows:

Indeed the parrot is crafty in words,  
It drills its broods with foreign tongues.  
Knowing nothing about the Han and the Tang,  
Surely they are the fishermen in the Peach Blossom Spring.  
果然鸚鵡巧於言，竟把佞盧教子孫。為語漢唐都不識，分明漁父入桃源。(1.20a)

The parrot very likely referred to the Straits Chinese who chose to receive English education and "betrayed" traditional Chinese culture. They are mocked as the fisherman in Tao Yuanming's tale "Peach Blossom Spring," venturing into a "Shangri-la" where people kept themselves away from the outside world and knew nothing about dynastic change. Obviously, theirs was a very different and even alien, unwelcome community in the eyes of the Tanshe members.<sup>73</sup> Li in the same series also moaned that many immigrants other than

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<sup>72</sup> More pieces can be found in *Nanyang Siang Pau*, between May and June, 1925.

<sup>73</sup> The Straits Chinese were often a target of criticism by immigrant poets. For example, a Bamboo Branch Verse by Wen Daheng 文大衡 sings praise to those who remained loyal to Chinese culture and censures the Straits Chinese with these lines: "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." 辮髮垂垂畢竟賢，雖無知識也貞堅。勝他數典竟忘祖，自侈臣於不列顛。"Nanyang Zhuzhici" 南洋竹枝詞 (seventh of twelfth pieces), in *Lat Pau*, June 30, 1924, p. 16. Zhang Yaojin 張耀金 also condemns the converted British subjects in the fourth piece of his ten "Da Pili zhuzhici shishou" 大霹靂竹枝詞十首. See *Penang Sin Poe*, March 18, 1915, p. 10. Similarly, Li Peh Khai was unhappy with the dominance of the English language in the colonial island, as he protests in the last piece of his "Mixed Feelings" that "prevailing in the world, literary writings are mostly the type of the 'giant crab'" 行世文章多巨蟹 (1:19a).

the Straits Chinese had forgotten their homeland and disapproved of the never-ending quest for profit.

## 2. About Homeland

Nostalgia was an essential part of the diasporic feelings and overseas experiences of the immigrant poets in Singapore. Many poetry assignments in the *Tanshe* provided opportunities for members to convey homesickness and the sense of displacement, including the “Mixed Feelings about the Star Island” studied above. In topics like “Spring Sentiments” (No.1), “Autumn Feelings” (No. 11), “Mid-Autumn Moon” (No. 12), “Climbing Height at the Double Ninth Festival” (No. 13), “Listening to the Rain” (No. 35) and in particular “Recalling the Plum Blossoms of the Hometown” (No. 34), the poets expressed their nostalgia for relatives and hometowns.

“Recalling the Plum Blossoms of the Hometown” (2.27a-28b) is noteworthy in the sense that the flower mentioned was not seen in Nanyang, forcing the author to look back to China and traditional literature for inspiration. More than thirty pieces were published in *Nanyang Siang Pau* between January and February, 1926, with the *xiang* 鄉 (hometown) rhyme assigned to poets to follow, but only seven pieces by seven members were selected to be published in the *Tanxie Shiji*. Here is Sun Shinan’s work:

I recalled having a flask of wine at West Lake,  
On the way home, fragrant snow covered my clothes.  
Then, riding a donkey I looked at the sparse shadow.  
Now, at the end of the world, separated from the faint scent.  
Far away, in my dream I yearn for its crisscrossed branches,  
Pondering on the wind and moon saddened my poem.  
Don’t think that a sojourner has no feeling,  
A pensive soul often returns to its hometown.  
曾記西湖醉一觴，歸來芳雪滿衣裳。當時驢背看疎影，今日天涯隔暗香。  
遙想橫斜勞夢寐，愁思風月惱詩腸。莫嫌客子無情緒，幾度癡魂到故鄉。(2.28b)

One of the symbolic emblems of Chinese culture (later the national flower of the Republic of China), the plum blossom stands for loftiness and resilience in Chinese tradition, since it can resist cold in winter. It had often been associated with Hangzhou since the Song dynasty hermit Lin Bu 林逋 (967-1028) composed a famous poem about the flower. Lin lived in seclusion on the Lone Island on West Lake, and his poem consists of an oft-quoted couplet in which the words “sparse shadow” (*shuying* 疎影, line 3 here), “faint scent” (*anxiang* 暗香,

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“Giant Crab” refers to Western ways of writing since they are written horizontally from left to right, while traditional Chinese is vertical from right to left.

line 4), “crisscrossed branches” (橫斜, line 5) later became metonymies of plum blossom, in addition to the “fragrant snow” (*fangxue* 芳雪) in line 2. The “donkey,” carrying the poet in the snowy weather, also often appears in poems about the plum blossom. As a native from Fujian, Sun Shinan was unlikely to have been to Hangzhou. Thus, part of his poem was probably drawn from imagination and imitation rather than real experience, as it adopted the stock phrases and floral imagery of many earlier poems. Yet from line 5 onward, a clear break occurs as the space and time shift to a faraway land in the present, where the sojourner utters his homesickness with the flower serving as his intermediary. Although this is not a highly original work in terms of theme and authorial tactic, it nevertheless shows the poet’s adherence to Chinese literary tradition, through which his emotional tie with his homeland is made clear.

Other poets in the series described the same nostalgic feelings created by the spatial distance, such as:

From afar, by the window, I long for the moon of old time.  
Deep at night it still shines on the village among water and cloud.  
懸想牕前舊時月，夜深還照水雲鄉。(Chen Qi, 2,27b)

My home garden, every part secluded and elegant,  
Thousand miles away I still care about it, never will I forget.  
家園隨處都幽雅，萬里關情總未忘。(Lin Jingqiu 林鏡秋, 2.27b)

Heartbroken, no messenger came to the south,  
Late at night, I cannot bear to hear “Thinking about My Hometown.”  
腸斷南天無驛使，夜闌怕聽念家鄉。(Li Langkun 李煥焜, 2.28a)

When can I read the Book of Change again in front of the flower,  
And fulfill my dream: purchasing a hill to become a recluse?  
何日花前重讀易，買山歸隱願能償。(Xie Xiaonan 謝曉南, 2.28b)

Yesteryear’s footprints in the snow had been gone,  
Today, turning to the wind, a broken heart in vain.  
If ever I can obtain the trees from Mount Luofu,  
I will transplant them in the south, to overwhelm the other flowers.  
當年踏雪成陳跡，此日望風空斷腸。乞得羅浮三兩樹，移栽南國壓羣芳。(Huang Youcheng 黃幼丞, 2.28a)

Using similar phrases (e.g. far away, thousand miles away) or allusions to plum blossoms (here *yishi* 驛使, messenger, and Mount Luofu<sup>74</sup>), these sojourner poets echoed each other with the same rhyme scheme, style and expression in a nostalgic ensemble, stating their wish to return to or concern for their home villages. Particularly noteworthy is Huang Youcheng's piece, which ends with a hope to transplant the flower to Nanyang, so that other (foreign?) flowers would look inferior. These are significant examples of diaspora literature, as they revealed the incessant dilemma of Chinese immigrants in their sway between roots and routes.<sup>75</sup> Returning to China, or more specifically, the home village (the root), was always their plan or wish even if it was delayed or did not happen in time, while in host countries (the route), varying degrees of localization in order to survive was taking place. The longer and deeper they set their roots in foreign soils, the less likely they would return. Meanwhile, in an attempt to make a home away from home, they transferred their original customs and practices to the new place, forming communities and social institutions with fellow countrymen of similar interests and backgrounds.

Many Tanshe members were not just concerned about their hometowns, but the current affairs of China with an awareness of national identity.<sup>76</sup> Terms referring to China such as *zhonghua* 中華, *zhongyuan* 中原 (Central Plain), *guguo* 故國 (former country) and *shenzhou* 神州 (Divine Land) can be found in their poems. Li Peh Khai, for example, even turned his face to the Mainland in the “Star Island” series:

For now, just take a shelter and dwell in the foreign land,  
Often, I stay close to the Southern Dipper, looking back to China....  
What I still keep is a pure thing from my hometown,  
At times I boil fresh water to taste the new tea.  
聊受一廬居外國，每依南斗望中華。...剩有故鄉清物在，偶烹活水試新茶。(excerpt,  
1.18a)

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<sup>74</sup> Lu Kai 陸凱 in the Southern dynasty sent a poem and a twig of plum blossom to his friend Fan Ye 范曄 in the north. The first couplet of his poem reads: “Plucking the plum blossom, I met a messenger from the post station / and asked him to bring it to the person at the frontier.” 折梅逢驛使，寄與隴頭人。It became a well-known tale of the flower. Mount Luofu in Canton was famous for its plum blossoms. Legend has it that Zhao Shixiong 趙師雄 in the Sui dynasty met a beautiful lady in a wine shop at Luofu. He was drunk afterward, and the next day when he woke up he found himself lying under a plum tree. See Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元, *Longcheng lu* 龍城錄, in Du Sijing 杜思敬 et al eds., *Yuanming shanben congshu shizhong* 元明善本叢書十種 (Beijing: Guojia tushuguan chubanshe, 2014), vol.6, p. 473-474.

<sup>75</sup> “Roots and routes” is an oppositional concept famously discussed by anthropologist James Clifford in his *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). It is frequently applied to diaspora study, in which roots refer to places of origin, past and memories, while routes the places of residence and travel, as well as future and things yet to know. For the application of Clifford's theory to Chinese diaspora literature, see Li Youcheng 李有成, “Xulun: lishan yu jiaguo xiangxiang” 緒論：離散與家國想像, in Li and Tee Kim Tong 張錦忠 ed., *Lishan yu jiaguo xiangxiang: wenxue yu wenhua yanjiu jijin* 離散與家國想像：文學與文化研究集錦 (Taipei: Yunchen wenhua, 2010), p. 31.

<sup>76</sup> Some scholars argue that until the mid-twentieth century, “home” for Chinese traders and colliers is often the village (*xiang* 鄉) instead of China the nation. See related discussions in E.K. Tan, *Rethinking Chineseness: Translational Sinophone Identities in the Nanyang Literary World* (Amherst, New York: Cambria Press, 2013), p. 7. Yet the educated class apparently would consider “homeland” in the broader sense.

The second line above was adapted from the second piece of Du Fu's 8-part "Autumn Sentiments," in which the original line reads: "Often, I stay close to the Northern Dipper, looking back to the prosperous capital" 每依北斗望京華.<sup>77</sup> Using the same rhyme *hua* 華 and similar wording, Li followed Du in the long tradition of patriotic writing in times of national crisis. At the end of the poem, he found comfort with the tea from his hometown, a talisman that brought him memories and perhaps also a spiritual lift, because it was "pure."

"Spring Sentiments" (1.6a-9b) and "Autumn Feelings" (1.26b-27a) are also apposite topics for expressing nostalgia, with the former consisting of twenty-five pieces in the *Tanxie shiji* but the latter only three. While "hometown" is still frequently present in these poems, the turbulent state of China also caught the members' attention. Here is the Jiangsu poet Shi Bomo's work, which also reminds us of Du Fu's war poetry:

To the great earth and my former country, spring is back.  
Beacon fire everywhere, paths hard to get through.  
Away from home, I know well the joy of the Peach Blossom Spring,  
At the end of the world, still recall the wheat flowers in the wind.  
Grass and woods, how amorous, in the South Fort green.  
Rivers and hills, like a dream, in the setting sun red.  
So much I care about the Divine Land,  
I try not to speak, but surprised by the Creator's work.  
大地春回故國中，烽烟四起道難通。也知世外桃源趣，還憶天涯麥秀風。  
草木多情南浦綠，江山如夢夕陽紅。關心多少神州事，予欲無言訝化工。(1.8a-b)

Similar to Du Fu's "Chunwang" 春望 (Gazing in Spring), written during the An Lushan Rebellion,<sup>78</sup> the supposedly joyful season did not bring joy to the poet, because his country was in chaos. The "wheat flower" in line 4 is an allusion to the fallen state, first mentioned in the *Records of the Grand Historian* in which the Shang descendant Ji Zi 箕子 was disheartened when he saw wild wheat growing on the ruins of his former state. Thus he composed the poem "Wheat Flowers."<sup>79</sup> Shi Bomo drew a stark contrast using the Peach Blossom Spring tale: the foreign land was a joyful place.

Rui Yu wrote so many poems on secular life that at times he seemed to be no different from other poets. Like the famous Chinese monk-poet Jing An 敬安 (1852-1913, also known

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<sup>77</sup> Qiu Zhao'ao 仇兆鰲 annotated, *Dushi xiangzhu* 杜詩詳注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), vol. 4, p. 1485.

<sup>78</sup> Qiu Zhao'ao, *Dushi xiangzhu*, vol. 1, p. 320.

<sup>79</sup> Sima Qian, "Song Weizhi shijia" 宋微子世家, *Shiji* 史記 (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1969), vol. 5, p. 1620-1621.

as Eight-Finger Monk), Rui Yu often expressed his deep concern about China's social and political affairs in his work, as a couplet in his "Autumn Feelings" states:

May the water of the Milky Way cleanse the armor;  
When can weapons and horses' hides be laid down?  
銀河堪洗甲，兵革幾時休。(1.26b)

These lines also paraphrase Du Fu's poem. In his "Xibing xing" 洗兵行 (Song of Washing Weapons), Du made such a wish, "How can I have the strong men to pull the Milky Way down / Cleansing the armor and weapons, and put them away forever?" 安得壯士挽天河，淨洗甲兵長不用。<sup>80</sup> This echo to Du Fu once again showed the Tanshe members' tribute to Chinese literary tradition. In series No. 16, "Resentment of the Soldier's Wife," Rui Yu condemned the warlords in a forthright tone:

Blood, stinking, in the battlefields flows,  
But far less than the tears in the bedchamber.  
The warlords, how unkind they are!  
Harming the people, willingly, as tyrannous generals they've become.  
沙場腥血流，莫抵深閨淚。軍閥太不仁，殃民甘暴帥。(1.33a)

Bedchamber resentment was one of the major themes in Chinese poetry. Here Rui Yu gave it a modern twist by identifying the warlords as the culprits of political unrest.

Nostalgia is "a result of a new understanding of time and space."<sup>81</sup> Sometimes the actual home is confused with the imaginary one, as Sun Shinan's poem of the plum blossom shows. Yet his was a common example of traditional poets expressing what they missed about their actual homes and the past through the use of conventional metaphors and symbols, although the external objects they described might be imaginary and not seen in their native places. The experience of dislocation overseas gave rise to a revision of traditional literary expression, and to a larger extent, a reconsideration of the values of Chinese culture and practice. From a distance, the poets might have a deeper understanding and fuller picture of the current state of their mother country. By adopting similar themes and expressions, responding to each others' longing and wish, they together constructed a collective memory of their homeland, and developed what is called "cultural intimacy" among the group through poetry writing.

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<sup>80</sup> Qiu Zhao'ao, *Dushi xiangshu*, vol. 2, p. 519.

<sup>81</sup> Svetlana Boym, p. XVI.



### 3. Buddhist beliefs

Research shows that Mahayana Buddhism was and still is the major religious belief of Singaporean Chinese.<sup>82</sup> Various Buddhist organizations were founded before and after the Japanese occupation. Concomitant with this religious fervor, apart from the building of hundreds of Buddhist temples and shrines, was the publication of a large quantity of Buddhist poetry and articles in newspapers.<sup>83</sup> As I have written elsewhere, the study of Buddhist poetry would greatly enhance our understanding of the religious, social and cultural milieu of the early Singapore Chinese community, allowing us to learn about individual writers' religious viewpoints, their personal connections with other laymen and sanghas, as well as their relations with the larger Buddhist society in Singapore and China.<sup>84</sup>

The poet-monk Rui Yu was the initiator of the Tanshe, and the society had strong Buddhist traits as many members were lay devotees. Several assignments in the *Tanxie shiji* particularly focus on Buddhist themes, such as "Praising the Buddha" (No. 3), "Lotus Flowers" (No. 10), and "On 'The Painting of the Buddha Lotus'" (No. 24). In the series of "Praising the Buddha" (1.11a-12a), the rhyme *mi* 迷 (confusion) was assigned to members.<sup>85</sup> Unlike the lyrical tone adopted in other series, here the work is highly didactic and philosophical, either affirming the poets' devotion to Buddhism, or manifesting their self-reflection and perspectives about the secular world. Khoo Seok Wan's piece is a good example:

People depend on Buddha to be awakened from confusion.  
Buddha found them still confused, despite awakened.  
Let's comprehend together the Great Pity, break away from the three realms;<sup>86</sup>  
Many births vastly transformed, ten directions be the same.  
Paths of words and thoughts are broken, how to praise him?  
The temporal and the real, each other pronounced, both wonders stated.  
Ashamed, my cultivation is blind, my enlightenment yet to come,  
Chanting *nāmah*, I long for the Pure Land in the West.  
群生依佛迷求悟，佛覺羣生悟不迷。同體大悲三界拔，多生宏化十方齊。  
言思路斷從何讚，權實相宣妙並提。愧我盲參緣待熟，南無有願切生西。(1.11a)

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<sup>82</sup> See Hue Guan Thye 許源泰, *Yange yu moshi: Xinjiapo dao jiao yu fo jiao chuan bo yan jiu* 沿革與模式: 新加坡道教和佛教傳播研究 (*Evolution and Model: The Propagation of Taoism and Buddhism in Singapore*) (Singapore: Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore / Global Publishing, 2013), p. xii.

<sup>83</sup> See Li Qingnian, *Malaiya huaren jiutishi yanjinshi*, pp. 288, 348-349.

<sup>84</sup> See my article, "Yishi hongfa: Dacheng Fojiao yu zaoqi Xinjiapo huawen jiutishi" 以詩弘法: 大乘佛教與早期新加坡華文舊體詩, in *Malaixiya hanxue kan* 馬來西亞漢學刊 (*Journal of Malaysian Sinology*), 2 (2018): 33-50.

<sup>85</sup> Six pieces by six poets were included in the poetry collection, but more pieces can be found in newspapers. These include Shi Bomo's piece. See *Nanyang Siang Pau*, May 1, 1925, p. 18.

<sup>86</sup> The three realms, or Trailokya, refer to the world of sensuous desire, form and formless world of pure spirit. See William Edward Soothill and Lewis Hodous, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*, webpage: <http://mahajana.net/texts/soothill-hodous.html>, viewed on May 6, 2019.

Khoo Seok Wan was said to have acquired profound knowledge of Buddhist canons in his later years, and often discussed Chan theory with Rui Yu, who noted that, as a result of enduring meditation and spiritual cultivation, Khoo's ears and eyes were still in good condition, and there was not a strand of grey hair on his head despite being over sixty years old.<sup>87</sup> The poem cited above effectively displays Khoo's conversance with Buddhist terminologies and his ingenuity in applying them in his work. For example, the "broken paths of words and thoughts" in line 5 is taken from the *Zongjing lu* 宗鏡錄 (*Record of the Axiom Mirror*), which criticizes people studying Buddhism caring only about words and thoughts.<sup>88</sup> Khoo commented that when these are abandoned, one would not find the way to praise the Buddha. Also of note is the first couplet, as it succinctly points out the ignorance or constant perplexity of the people. Khoo, however, is aware of his own shortcoming, professes in line 7 that he is blind in his cultivation and still has not attained enlightenment.

Khoo Seok Wan wrote "On 'The Painting of the Buddha Lotus'" to celebrate Rui Yu's forty-eighth birthday (2.7a-9a). A symbol of purity in Buddhism, the lotus flower grows from mud but is uncontaminated, thus representing the Buddha's transcendence of the mundane world. In many Buddhist paintings, the Buddha is depicted as sitting on a lotus flower pedestal. The painting celebrated by the poem was by Sun Xi 孫熙 (style name Peigu 裴谷), who came to Singapore in 1912 and found the Overseas Chinese Academy of Arts.<sup>89</sup> He achieved prestige as a painter after returning to China, and was the pioneer of the Lingdong School of Painting (*lingdong huapai* 嶺東畫派). There are ten poems by eight poets in the *Tanxie shiji*, including Rui Yu's responding piece.<sup>90</sup> In their poems, members sang praise to the purity of the lotus flower and the teachings of the Buddha, also wishing Rui Yu well and showing great respect for his mercifulness and profound knowledge in Buddhist learning. The Tanshe assignment is a typical example of how Chinese literati used poetry, as well as art work, for the purpose of social correspondence.

The wisdom eye not just rids of the real ego;  
A kind heart shows that you are the merciful man.  
慧眼豈惟無我相，婆心應是屬仁人。(Chen Qi, 2.7b)

Not stained with a speck of dust, a real gentleman,  
Versed in the Six Sutras,<sup>91</sup> you grasped the superior Chan.

<sup>87</sup> Postscript to Khoo's "Guanxin zizheng cheng ji sizhang" 觀心自證成偈四章, in Khoo, *Shuyuan shiji* 菽園詩集 (Singapore: s.n.1949), vol.1, *Juan* 6, pp. 18b.

<sup>88</sup> See Zhi Jue 智覺, *Zongjing lu*, in CBETA (Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association) 中華電子佛典協會, *Tripitaka in Chinese* 漢文大藏經, *juan* 43, [0667a26].

<sup>89</sup> See Yeo Mang Thong, "Shidai de yinji: Qiu Shuyuan Tanxie shiji de chuban jiqi yiyi," p. 147.

<sup>90</sup> A few more pieces were published in *Nanyang Siang Pau*, March, 1925. Two more were published much later in October the same year.

<sup>91</sup> The Six Sutras in Buddhism refer to the *Flower Ornament Sutra* 華嚴經, *Sutra on Understanding Profound and Esoteric Doctrine* 解深密經, *Sutra on Entering (the Country of) Lanka* 楞伽經, *Solemn Sutra of the*

Let not the colors share with you the material appearance,

But look forward to living forever in the Great Brahma.

一塵不染真君子，六籍能參是上禪。未許丹青共色相，相期長住大梵天。(Li Tiemin, 2.8a)

Rui Yu, whose birthday was on the twentieth of the eleventh month (three days later than Amitābha), humbly thanked his friends with a poem. He made a wish in the concluding couplet that: “Later I shall meet you, my literary friends in the poetry circle, / At the Western Assembly of the Saints to realize our former causes.” 後約騷壇文字友，西方海會證前因。(2.9a) Thus he and all the devotees would attain Buddhahood. Through this poetic communication, Tanshe members articulated together their understanding of Buddhist teachings, and also strengthened their fellowship in the spiritual domain.

#### 4. Poetry as Friendly Tokens

Other than the series congratulating Rui Yu on his birthday, there were three more occasions for Tanshe members to show friendly gestures, support and respect to their fellows. These include Series 9, written for Khoo Seok Wan’s poetry collection *Xiaohongsheng shicao* 嘯虹生詩鈔 (*Collected Poems by the Scholar Who Whistles at the Rainbow*, 1.23a-25b); Series 15, “Long Live the Plum Blossom” to celebrate Khoo’s birthday (1.30a-32b, also with a painting by Yan Yiyuan 顏怡園); and Series 25, about Huang Baoguang’s 黃葆光 *Jiehou shicun* 劫後詩存 (*Remaining Poems after the Disaster*, 2.9a-11b).

For a poet to have his work compiled in an individual collection is a significant achievement deserving to be celebrated. In colonial Singapore, only wealthy writers such as Khoo Seok Wan could afford the cost of printing. Before his bankruptcy in 1907 Khoo had published several of his poetry discourses at his own expense.<sup>92</sup> In 1922 the publication of his *Xiaohongsheng shicao* was sponsored by Luo Chang 羅昌 (1883-1956), Kang Youwei’s son-in-law and consul general from Republican China. The poems in this collection are entirely about women, especially prostitutes, with whom Khoo had close relationships. This rather immoral, Casanova-like behaviour was approved by traditional literati, who took it as a gesture of one’s unconventional temperament, and some, including Khoo himself, even defended it for its long association with the heroic knight-errant, or for its political implications established since the Chu elegies, in which a beautiful woman is often metaphorically allied to an ideal lord or one’s patriotism and moral cultivation. Sixteen pieces by nine poets, including Khoo’s own inscription, are presented in the Tanshe series,

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*Appearance of Buddha Merits* 如來出現功德莊嚴經, *Abhidharma Sutra* 阿毘達磨經 and the *Great Vehicle Secret Adornment Sūtra* 大乘密嚴經.

<sup>92</sup> These are *Wubaishi dongtian huizhu* 五百石洞天揮塵 (Guangzhou: 1899), *Huizhu shiyi* 揮塵拾遺 (Shanghai: 1901) and *Shuyuan zhuitan* 菽園贅談 (s.l.: s.n., 1897).

composed almost three years after Khoo published his collection.<sup>93</sup> The contributors indeed compared Khoo's work to the Chu elegies, and paired him with Du Mu 杜牧 (803-852) and Han Wo 韓偓 (ca.844-ca.923), the Tang poets known for their erotic verses and rakish conduct in the pleasure quarters, to whom Khoo often likened himself in his poems:

The fragrant plants and the Fair One, empty is the material appearance.

Ringing zither, flowing waters, the sound of silence.

Twenty years, for its former state the cuckoo's been shedding tears;

One chapter of the *Perfumed Dowry*, full of man and woman's feelings.

芳草美人空是色，鳴琴流水靜之聲。廿年故國杜鵑淚，一卷香奩兒女情。(excerpt, Rui Yu, 2.23b)

Du Mu's flowery poems, long acclaimed before,

The Fair One and the fragrant plants, how emotional they are!

Your good fortune and wisdom, vast in the beginning,

You spent all the gold, yet enjoy all the fame.

杜牧詞華早有聲，美人香艸忒多情。先生福慧原非淺，揮盡黃金享盡名。(Chen Yuxian, 2.25a-b)

Both Rui Yu and Chen Yuxian aptly summarized the sensual quality and allegorical meanings of Khoo's work. The Fair One and the fragrant plants are major tropes in the Chu elegies, while the legendary cuckoo (the metamorphosis of an exiled king) is a symbol of nostalgia for homeland. By applying these allusions, both poets made a defence of Khoo's erotic work, which was represented by Han Wo's the *Collection of the Perfumed Dowry* and Du Mu's "flowery poems." They each also suggested that being bankrupt ("empty," "spent all the gold") and influenced by Buddhism, Khoo had renounced his earlier lifestyle, but his fame as well as his concerns about China remained the same. As if agreeing with his friends, Khoo claimed in his own piece (1.25b) that he was temporarily entrusting his feelings to "the oriole and flowers" (euphemism for prostitutes), and attempted to "escape into the vacant space of cloudy things" (雲物本逃虛).<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Two more pieces by Huang Baoguang and Lin Shugou 林庶溝 are found respectively in *Nanyang Siang Pau*, January 9 and March 31, 1925.

<sup>94</sup> Khoo wrote two other prefatory poems which are included in his poetry collection. These earlier pieces are penned in a self-mocking tone, yet less apologetic like the one in the *Tanxie shiji*. See his *Xiaohongsheng shichao* (s.l.: s.n., 1922), prefatory pages.

As the leader of the Tanshe and local poetry society, it was no surprise that Khoo Seok Wan would be the center of attention, with more poems dedicated to him than other members. Like Rui Yu, he received a painting and thirteen poems as gifts for his fifty-first birthday. Yet Huang Baoguang (?-1952, style name Banchan 半禪), a calligrapher and lay Buddhist, also raised the attention of fellow members with his poems. A native of Jinmen, Fujian, Huang came to Singapore at the age of sixteen, and worked for Tan Kar Kee 陳嘉庚 (1874-1961) and several business companies. He had an unpublished, now lost, poetry collection called *Huamai'an shichao* 活埋庵詩鈔 (*Poetry Collection of the Buried Alive Studio*).<sup>95</sup> In 1924, his belongings, including the poetry manuscripts, were being stolen. Less than twenty to thirty percent of his poems were recalled by memories. He then published them in *Nanyang Siang Pau* from January to May, 1925, under the title *Remaining Poems after the Disaster*.<sup>96</sup> Four poets, including Khoo Seok Wan and Rui Yu, composed six poems about this incident in the *Tanxie shiji*, and Huang himself responded with six pieces to express his gratitude. Apparently, like Khoo Seok Wan, in his early years Huang was also fond of writing sensual poems about women, as he confessed in his second responding piece: “How many women, finely adorned, kept me company when I wrote poems?” 多少紅粧伴寫詩 (2.10b) Hong Jinghu also remarked in his first poem that “Following the style of the *Perfumed Dowry*, how colorful are the words! / Marvelous brush producing flowers, the lines, always unusual.” 香奩託體詞何豔，妙筆生花句總奇。(2.9b) Compliments such as this might not have special meaning for general readers, but the recipient would be greatly encouraged, since his work had found some *zhiyin*, true admirers or, the one who knows the tone. The first half of Hong Jinghu’s third piece also touches on the concept of *zhiyin*:

In the wild south I shortly stay, like those lodging in the barbarian’s place.

Luckily, some *zhiyin* are there who can talk about verse.

Getting old, my mind prefers things that are mild,

In leisure, friends seek unusual lines together.

南荒小住效居夷，幸有知音可論詩。老去情懷偏愛淡，閒來朋輩共搜奇。(2.10a)

For immigrants in the foreign land, companionship was equally important as material needs. There were different ways to establish social bonds, but it was through poetry in particular that Tanshe members in colonial Singapore built up a community of their own and provided spiritual accompaniment for each other. Adopting the same rhyme scheme of Hong Jinghu, Huang Baoguang also expressed the joy of meeting new friends in the concluding lines of his second piece: “Most delighted, new acquaintances are plenty. / Together we shall flow our wine cups in the pure stream.” 最喜新交多濟濟，何當共與泛清卮。The last line

<sup>95</sup> See Xu Jing 許敬, “Yi Huang Baoguang” 憶黃葆光, *Nanyang Siang Pau*, November 30, 1953, p. 11.

<sup>96</sup> See Huang Baoguang, “Jiehou shichun” 劫後詩存, January 6, 1925, p. 9. This is a preface to his works. Lin Jingqiu also mentions in his poem that “Because by mistake, they fell to the hand of a greedy wolf. / What a shame that one cannot see the leopard’s complete pattern.” 祇因誤入貪狼手，轉惜難窺全豹文。(2.10a)

refers to the literary game in the famous Orchid Pavilion gathering mentioned in the beginning of this article. The participants sat along a meandering stream and placed a wine cup in the water. Whenever the cup flowed to them, they were asked to compose impromptu poems. Those who failed to meet the requirement would be punished with three *dous* of alcohol. Tanshe members might not have followed the actual game of their ancestors, but the social gestures and significance of their literary gatherings were very much the same. Most remarkable was that this time-honored practice, and the Confucian concept of making friends through poetry, were relocated to overseas Chinese community.

## Conclusion

The discussion above showed that Nanyang (the host country) and China (the homeland) were both major sites of concern for immigrant poets. Writing about one place often involved the other with various cultural and emotional considerations. With its rapid economic development and political stability, colonial Singapore was at times described as the utopian Peach Blossom Spring, where Chinese immigrants could have the chance to escape from the turbulent and impoverished condition of China. Yet this did not mean that assimilation was easy. Differences in cultural practice, absence of families and friends as well as persistent sense of displacement, made localization a difficult task. On the other hand, China was still the motherland despite its backwardness and problems. In times of national crisis, Chinese immigrants unambiguously showed her their support and loyalty; and in times of personal depression, they would express the wish to return as a gesture to regain emotional strength.

Nostalgia might be an obstacle to localization. Yet it also pushed immigrants to introduce their own cultural practices to the host country in order to create a more familiar living environment in the unfamiliar place. The formation of various types and levels of social organizations was one of the most effective ways to construct cultural spaces and to sustain traditional practices in overseas Chinese communities. Poetry societies, like the Tanshe, were an elitist form of such organizations. Transplanted from China and with a long history, it fully utilized the social function of classical-style poetry, providing a channel for members to share their diasporic experiences, literary ideas and other social and individual concerns through group compositions. It allowed them to find *zhiyin*, who would appreciate their work and personal characters, in the foreign land. They would thus feel more at home, and find it easier to become assimilated although they were from different hometowns and spoke different dialects.

Like other earlier poetry societies, the Tanshe was largely a recreational organization without obvious political or literary agenda. It also had strong religious attributes since many of its members were Buddhist devotees. Yet they were not insensible to the political or social conditions in China and Singapore. Rather, from their works one can see that they often followed the Confucian literary principle that required poets to reveal and comment on social reality. Even when talking about Buddhist beliefs, they expressed the wish to bring salvation to the troubled world. There are other meaningful topics in Tanshe's poetry assignments apart

from the four mentioned above. Due to limited space, I cannot examine each and every of them here. The comments on Chinese historical figures, for example, including the Four Great Beauties (No. 31) and Lu Zhonglian 魯仲連, who prevented the Qin army's invasion of the state of Zhao in the Warring States Period (No. 28), showed the members' familiarity with the history of their motherland and the lessons they learned from the people described.

After the disbanding of the Tanshe, a couple of poetry societies were formed in the late 1920s. One was the Sanshan yinshe 三山吟社 (Three Hills Poetry Society), founded by the Tanshe member Yan Yiyuan and others, who published their works in *Lat Pau*. The other was the Yilin She 逸林社. Its poems can be found in the literary supplementary of *Nanyang Siang Pau* edited by Khoo Seok Wan.<sup>97</sup> No poetry society seems to have been established afterward until 1957, when a group of poets held a gathering in the Shuanglin Monastery 雙林寺 to celebrate the Double Fifth Festival and compiled a poetry collection for the event. A year later, they formed what has been the most long-lived poetry society in Singapore—the Xin Sheng Poets' Society 新聲詩社. More than sixty years later, many of its present members are descendants of Chinese immigrants. While a Singaporean identity has been well shaped and their works have become increasingly “localized,” an ambivalent perception of Chineseness and the emotional connection with China can still be found.<sup>98</sup>

The case study of the Tanshe, and in fact in general the study of the classical-style poetry in Singapore, indicates that the traditional poetic form had found a new soil to grow in. There would be a great lacuna if it were excluded from the general history of overseas Chinese literature. It also proves that the major concept of diasporic literature is still tenable, as nostalgia for the homeland and adjustment to new environment are both in play. In response to current debates about Sinophone literature, this article would contest with some of its principal arguments, such as the proposition that nostalgia articulates a China-centrism and that Han culture is a form of “hegemonic” culture. While the former disrespects the social and emotional experiences of Chinese immigrants, the latter may ignore the voluntary acceptance of Han-Chinese traditions by overseas Chinese and their descendants. The practice of classical poetry writing, no doubt a form of Han culture, in fact had been taken up by the onetime conquerors of China like Mongolians and Manchurians, as well as Japanese and other ethnic groups not under Chinese rule. Its transmission to overseas Chinese communities in the modern time was also not accomplished by means of colonization and coercive force, but simply because of its long celebrated literary value and aesthetic appeal. Like other forms of traditional arts, it serves as a universal language or a bridge to link

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<sup>97</sup> Li Qingnian, *Malaiya huaren jiutishi yanjinshi*, pp. 387, 427.

<sup>98</sup> For example, regarding the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Dispute, some members of the Xin Sheng Poets' Society apparently took the side with China and named China as their motherland. About the founding of the society and the discussion of the changing identity of its members, see Zhang Yu 張玉, “Lun Xinjiapo Xinsheng shishe jiuti shici zhong ‘Zhongguo yishi’ de zhuanbian: yi 1957-1985 nian Duanwu ‘shiran jie yaji’ weili” 論新加坡新聲詩社舊體詩詞中“中國意識”的轉變: 以 1957-1985 年端午“詩人節雅集”為例, in *Journal of Malaysian Sinology*, 2 (2018): 83-94; and Zhang Yuanlin 張園林, “Chuantong Zhongguo yu xiandai Xingzhou: Xinjiapo jianguo hou ‘Xinsheng shishe’ chuanzuo yanjiu” 傳統中國與現代星洲: 新加坡建國後“新聲詩社”創作研究, in *Journal of Malaysian Sinology*, 2 (2018): 69-82. Both authors are my Ph.D. students and their papers were written under my supervision.

Chinese around the world together, to build friendly relationships instead of causing conflict and hostility.