

## Introductory Note

By Cheow Thia Chan

While Malaysian Chinese-language literature in Taiwan (*zaitai Mahua wenxue* 在臺馬華文學) has received substantial attention due to the development of Sinophone studies, Singaporean writers' experiences on the East Asian island have remained obscured.<sup>1</sup> Except for a niche group of cultural insiders and academic specialists, few have noticed the literary youths from the South-east Asian island-state who sojourned in Taipei, Taiwan's capital city, in the 1980s. Like their Malaysian counterparts, they wrote creatively while studying as *liuxuesheng* 留學生 (study-abroad students) in the foreign locale.<sup>2</sup> However, none of them stayed on after their studies to benefit from Taiwan's vibrant cultural milieu, whereas several Malaysians progressed further to build illustrious writing careers there.

Besides its transient intersection with Taiwan, the exiguous Singaporean literary formation remains relatively unknown because the writers authored

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<sup>1</sup>To date, three monographs have explored in part the literary formation under the rubric 'Sinophone Malaysian literature': Alison M. Groppe, *Sinophone Malaysian Literature: Not Made in China* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2013); E. K. Tan, *Rethinking Chineseness: Translational Sinophone Identities in the Nanyang Literary World* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2013); Brian Bernards, *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The history of Singaporean 'study-abroad students', who majored in a variety of disciplines in Taiwan, goes as far back as the 1950s. See 'Fakanci' 發刊詞 [Foreword to a new publication], in *Xinjiapo liutai dazhuan xiaoyouhui chengli shizhounian jinian tekan* 新加坡留臺大專校友會成立十週年紀念特刊 [Tenth anniversary commemorative publication of the Alumni of Taiwan Universities and Colleges in Singapore] (Singapore: Alumni of Taiwan Universities and Colleges, 1990), p. 3. From 1980 onward, the Singapore government sponsored high school graduates and in-service teachers without tertiary qualifications to further their studies in Taiwan so as to enhance the quality of Singapore's Chinese-language teaching workforce. See Liw Pei Kien 劉碧娟, *Xinhua dangdai wenxue zhong de xiandaizhuyi* 新華當代文學中的現代主義 [Modernism in contemporary Singapore Chinese-language literature] (Singapore: Global Publishing and Singapore University of Social Sciences, 2017), p. 265.

mainly poetry and *sanwen* 散文, the unique category of Chinese prose essays, instead of fiction, the favoured genre of scholarly studies and literary publishing. This special section features the *sanwen* written by Quah Sy Ren 柯思仁, Yin Songwei 殷宋瑋 (the pseudonym of Lim Song Hwee 林松輝), and Chua Chim Kang 蔡深江, three writers who studied at the Department of Chinese Literature of the National Taiwan University in the 1980s, and lived through the last years of martial law on the island. The selected essays were written during or soon after the Taipei phase of their lives.<sup>3</sup>



College of Liberal Arts, National Taiwan University, 1987. Courtesy of Quah Sy Ren

<sup>3</sup> The bibliographic details of the selected pieces on which the translations are based are as follows: Quah Sy Ren, ‘Yifang tiankong de xiaxiang’ 一方天空的遐想 [Dreaming of a piece of sky], and ‘Wutai’ 舞臺 [The stage], in his *Xunmiao* 尋廟 [In search of the temple] (Singapore: Hwa Chong Junior College, 1988), pp. 35–41, and 61–65 respectively; Yin Songwei, ‘Yixiangren shouji’ 異鄉人手記 [Notes of a foreigner], ‘Fenggui’ 風櫃 [Fengkuei], and ‘Mu Xin paiju fawei’ 木心俳句發微 [Musings on Mu Xin’s haikus], in his *Ming keming* 名可名 [The name that can be named] (self-pub., Taipei, 1989), pp. 11–13, 15–16, and 45–51 respectively (the three pieces were rearranged when the Singapore edition of *Ming keming* was published by Hwa Chong Junior College in 1994: ‘Fenggui’ on p. 3, ‘Mu Xin paiju fawei’ on pp. 29–33, and ‘Yixiangren shouji’ on pp. 41–42); and Chua Chim Kang, ‘Cong yuyanbuxiang de jiaodu ziyuanqishuo’ 從語焉不詳的角度自圓其說 [A semi-coherent attempt at self-justification], and ‘Manbujingxin’ 漫步經心 [A ramble through the heart], in his *Huilang de shi* 灰狼的事 [The affairs of a lone grey wolf] (Singapore: MRI Publications, 1992), pp. 141–146, and 191–202 respectively. ‘Manbujingxin’ was first published in *Zhongguo shibao Renjian fukan* 中國時報人間副刊 [Human world, the literary supplement of *China Times*], 3 October 1990, p. 31.

The Malaysia-born scholar-poet Chan Tah Wei 陳大為, now based in Taiwan, uses the term *liutai* 留臺 to describe writers from his native place who spent formative years on the ‘Treasure Island’ (*baodao* 寶島) and later returned home.<sup>4</sup> Extending from Chan’s concept, I characterize the *sanwen* in this special section as part of *Xinhua liutaisheng wenxue* 新華留臺生文學, that is, the literature produced by Singaporean authors with study-abroad experiences in Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> Often reflecting deeply on the life-changing impact of Taipei on their creative subjectivities, the three featured writers continued to write about their place of sojourn while struggling to readapt themselves to living in Singapore. One scholar describes the common affinity from afar as indicative of a ‘Taipei complex’ (*Taipei qingyijie* 臺北情意結).<sup>6</sup> In the case of Quah, Yin, and Chua, going home meant that they never quite engaged with Taiwan literary circles. Still, they left creative traces of their times in the city. For instance, both Yin and Quah held their own in their peer group from various Chinese-speaking regions and were chief editors of the departmental student society’s literary magazine *Xinchao* 新潮 [Renaissance]. Before he graduated, Yin self-published a *sanwen* collection entitled *Ming keming* 名可名 [The name that can be named], which he deposited for sale at the then newly established Eslite Bookstore 誠品書店, a brand now synonymous with Taiwan’s soft power.<sup>7</sup>

Among the three writers who carved out this transregional dimension for *Xinhua wenxue* 新華文學 (Singapore Chinese-language literature), it was Chua who made the greatest impact on the Taiwan literary scene. In 1990, two years after he returned to Singapore, his work ‘Manbujingxin’ 漫步經心 (translated by Tan Dan Feng as ‘A Ramble Through the Heart’), which makes a remarkable pun through the malapropistic use of a Chinese idiom in its title, won the prestigious *China Times* Literary Award in the *sanwen* category. One of the judges, the renowned Taiwan poet and essayist Yu Kwang-chung 余光中, praised

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<sup>4</sup> Chan Tah Wei, *Zui nianqing de qilin—Mahua wenxue zai Taiwan (1963–2012)* 最年輕的麒麟——馬華文學在臺灣 (1963–2012) [The youngest kylin: Malaysian Chinese literature in Taiwan (1963–2012)] (Tainan: Guoli Taiwan wenxueguan, 2012), p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Besides the three selected writers, Tan Chee Lay 陳志銳 is also considered an important member of this Singaporean literary formation, but he sojourned in Taipei later, in the 1990s. See Liw, *Xinhua dangdai wenxue zhong de xiandaizhuyi*, p. 266.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Yin Songwei, ‘Xinjiapo ban houji’ 新加坡版後記 [Afterword to the Singapore edition], in *Ming keming* (Singapore: Hwa Chong Junior College, 1994), p. 86.

the poetic piece about innocence lost when children enter adulthood, commenting that ‘the author’s forlorn experience does not differ very much from that of other patients afflicted with nostalgia. What makes “A Ramble Through the Heart” unique and outstanding is the author’s exploration between imagination and reality, as well as his evocative language resembling a children’s tale.’<sup>8</sup> Chua’s essay was later collected in one of Taiwan’s most reputable literary anthologies, further marking its position among the island’s annual canon.<sup>9</sup> In terms of home reception, Chua exercised considerable influence over young Singaporean writers in the 1990s, several of whom emulated his style of irreverence toward stock expressions and similarly experimented with linguistic rhythm and novel figures of speech.<sup>10</sup> The other selected piece, ‘Cong yuyanbuxiang de jiaodu ziyuanqishuo’ 從語焉不詳的角度自圓其說 (‘A Semi-Coherent Attempt at Self-Justification’, also translated by Tan Dan Feng), can be read as an extended artist’s statement on his craft.

Collectively, the *sanwen* in this special section present self-portraits of three Singaporean young men with shared experiences of Taipei in the 1980s. The city may not be foregrounded in the works, and not every piece circulated in Taiwan’s literary space, but all the essays offer windows to understand the writers’ study-abroad experiences, as well as the sources of their creative ideas and artistic tastes. Yin’s ‘Yixiangren shouji’ 異鄉人手記 (translated by Elizabeth Wijaya as ‘Notes of a Foreigner’), written in the first year of his sojourn, conveys a newcomer’s ambivalent transition when he encountered Taipei’s rainy winter, strangers’ confusion about his native place, and the surprising assignment for one of his courses. Quah’s ‘Wutai’ 舞臺 (translated by Jeremy

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<sup>8</sup> Yu Kwang-chung, ‘Pingshen yijian: Yiyu he shenhua zhijian’ 評審意見：囓語和神話之間 [Jury’s comment: Between somnolence and myth], *Zhongguo shibao Renjian fukan*, 3 October 1990, p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> ‘A Ramble Through the Heart’ was included in *Qishijiunian sanwenxuan* 七十九年散文選 [A selection of prose essays 1990], ed. Hsiao Hsiao 蕭蕭 (Taipei: Jiuge chubanshe, 1991), pp. 290–299, quoted from Chan Tah Wei, ‘Bukun kualan rumeng de yang: Ping Cai Shenjiang sanwen “Manbujingxin” 不肯跨欄入夢的羊：評蔡深江散文〈漫步經心〉’ [The sheep that would not cross the fence to enter dreamland: A commentary on Chua Chim Kang’s prose essay ‘A Ramble Through the Heart’], *Xianggang wenxue* 香港文學 [Hong Kong Literary Monthly], no. 227 (November 2003), p. 36 n. 3. In the same year, Chua’s poem ‘Zhiyao haiyou yikeshu huozhe’ 只要還有一棵樹活着 [So long as one tree is still alive] was selected for *Qishijiunian shixuan* 七十九年詩選 [A selection of poetry 1990], ed. Xiang Ming 向明 (Taipei: Erya chubanshe, 1991), pp. 82–89, quoted from Liw, *Xinhua dangdai wenxue zhong de xiandaizhuyi*, p. 268, another sign that his literary talent was recognized in Taiwan.

<sup>10</sup> Liw, *Xinhua dangdai wenxue zhong de xiandaizhuyi*, pp. 269–270.

Tiang as ‘The Stage’) provides a vivid sense of the writer’s participation in extra-curricular activities beyond university classrooms. Through the depiction of his daily routine in ‘Yifang tiankong de xiexiang’ 一方天空的遐想 (‘Dreaming of a Piece of Sky’, another translation by Jeremy Tiang), one also learns about the topographical and urban landscapes in and around Taipei, the city’s air pollution problem, as well as the arboreal and human scenery on the campus of ‘Taida’ 臺大, the abbreviation for National Taiwan University. Drawing on the mode of romanization as an integral part of the expressive apparatus, the translator renders the place names in the Wade–Giles system instead of Pinyin, so as to better convey the feel of Taipei.

From the selected pieces readers will also become acquainted with Taiwan as a globalized Chinese cultural space at a specific historical juncture. On the one hand, Yin’s allusion to the early film of Hou Hsiao-hsien 侯孝賢 in ‘Fenggui’ 風櫃 (translated and annotated by Elizabeth Wijaya as ‘Fengkuei’) reminds us that Taipei in the 1980s witnessed the flourishing of local film production later dubbed as *Taiwan xin dianying* 臺灣新電影 (Taiwan new cinema). On the other hand, Yin’s ‘Mu Xin paiju fawei’ 木心俳句發微 (translated and annotated by Loo Jiaming as ‘Musings on Mu Xin’s Haikus’) is a testament to Taiwan’s role in the making of a trans-Pacific literary celebrity. Due to new global flows of Chinese literature from America to the East Asian island, Chua and Yin, two diasporic literary youths from Singapore, encountered the works of the China-born Mu Xin 木心 in Taipei in the 1980s, way before he returned to the mainland and became a cultural sensation in the mid-2000s.<sup>11</sup> Both of them were greatly inspired by

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<sup>11</sup> Mu Xin is the pen name of Sun Pu 孫璞 (1927–2011), a Chinese painter, poet, and writer. Born into a wealthy family in Wuzhen, he received a classical education that developed his mastery in Chinese traditional culture. He attended Shanghai Institute of Art in the 1940s. During the Cultural Revolution, he was incarcerated and sent to labour camps; most of his earlier manuscripts were confiscated and destroyed at that time. In 1982, he moved to New York City, where he gave a series of lectures to a group of artists on world literature. Four years later, his first collection of one-line haikus, *Qiongmeika suixianglu* 瓊美卡隨想錄 [Capriccio of Jamaica, New York City]—widely regarded as the hallmark of free verse in contemporary Chinese poetry—was published in Taiwan. He returned in 2007 to his hometown, Wuzhen, where he spent his final years. For a meticulous account of Mu Xin’s rise to fame in Taiwan, see Xia Chunjin 夏春錦, ‘Mu Xin de xiezuo “chengmingqi” 木心的寫作“成名期” [The phase of Mu Xin as an emerging writer], in *Mu Xin yanjiu zhuanhao* (2016): *Mu Xin meishuguan teji* 木心研究專號 (2016): 木心美術館特輯 [Series of special issues dedicated to Mu Xin studies: the 2016 edition, on Mu Xin Art Museum] (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2016), pp. 269–279.

Mu Xin's erudition, elegant wit, and aphoristic style. Recently, Yin disclosed his brief epistolary correspondence with Mu Xin himself, further enriching the transregional past of the Singapore Chinese-language literary archive.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> When Yin first published *Ming keming* in Taipei, he sent the book to writers he admired and was pleasantly surprised to receive responses from several of his literary idols, including Wang Ting-chün 王鼎鈞, Lei Hsiang 雷驥, Chiang Hsun 蔣勳, Xi Xi 西西, Hsiung Ping-ming 熊秉明, and Mu Xin. See Yin Songwei, 'Guanyu Mohanmode de yize gushi—"Wenqing shi zenyang liancheng de" zhi Mu Xin pian' 關於莫罕默德的一則故事——“文青是怎樣煉成的”之木心篇 [A story about Muhammad: The making of a literary youth (the Mu Xin chapter)], *Lianhe zaobao Wenyicheng* 聯合早報文藝城 [City of literary arts, the literary supplement of *United Morning Times*], 13 and 17 September, 2019, p. 6 and p. 5 respectively. He mentioned the book-gifting exercise in the Singapore edition of *Ming keming*, framing it as an act of performance art that involved an author selecting his own readers. See Yin, 'Xinjiapo ban houji', pp. 85–86.