

# Winds of Change:

## Three Pre-Independence Debates which Shaped Singapore Chinese Literature

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*In pre-independent Singapore, the development of literature in the Chinese language saw a tension between developing a literary voice rooted in the experience of the local and responding to the influence from “motherland” China. Tan Chee Lay from the Nanyang Technological University highlights the nuances of the three debates which shaped literary trends and schools of thought in local Chinese writing as Singapore’s Chinese literati sought to establish an authentic and unique voice.*

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Much like Singapore’s volatile struggle for independence, Singaporean Chinese literature went through a long journey towards discovering its identity. From British colonisation, to the Japanese Occupation, to the founding and building of the independent nation-state, Singaporeans’ self-identification has shifted from that of being immigrants to that of being locals, and finally to that of being citizens of a nation. Correspondingly, with political evolution and ideological changes, Singaporean Chinese literature has undergone a tumultuous and stirring journey in its responses to the era. This essay chronicles the pre-independence literary debates among writers and critics that shaped Singaporean Chinese literature, and how they reflected the tailwinds and turbulence of uncertain times.

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## The Beginning

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Singapore’s new Chinese literary works first appeared in the *Sin Kuo Min Journal*, a literary supplement of *Sin Kuo Min Press*, first published in 1919, just after the May Fourth and New Cultural Movements took

over China. The beginnings of Singaporean Chinese literature were closely related to these movements which local Chinese newspaper supplements followed faithfully. Unlike those of other languages, Chinese literary works and significant trends were covered in Chinese newspaper supplements.

During this period, Singapore was primarily an immigrant society, so the sense of diaspora was strong. The themes of the literary works were intensely influenced by places of origin (China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, etc.) and were largely nostalgic for a faraway motherland. However, as more Chinese immigrants settled in Singapore, the debates on literary direction slowly emerged.

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## The “Emerging Literature Movement” Debate

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With increasing Chinese newspapers and publications, the promotion of Nanyang (literally “southern seas”, a term used by the Chinese to refer to the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia) works grew and developed, and evolved into an “Emerging Literature” movement” around 1928. It took the primary direction of “promoting characteristics of Nanyang” and “advocating for emerging literature,” with local topics such as the plight of coolies, problems with education, economic depression, and the rich-poor divide.

Nanyang features were first officially promoted—and encouraged in the creation of literary works—by *Sin Kuo Min Press*’ supplement *Desert Island* in 1927. Its editor Huang Zhenyi and founder Zhang Jinyan issued a slogan to “incorporate Nanyang’s flair and characteristics into literature,” giving rise

to the question of what Nanyang literature was. In support, others like Zeng Shengti wrote “Literature in Nanyang” to highlight the existence of Nanyang literature. Zeng’s article “Wake Up! Singaporean Artists” criticised the “slogan-style literary work” and renounced “decadent literature”, urging writers to start by interviewing Malays to learn about their culture and understand the lives of immigrant Chinese and other races.

The Malayan Chinese Literary Independence Movement was a local movement that aimed to move away from Chinese-oriented expatriate literature towards Nanyang themes. However, “Nanyang” was an extensive and obscure concept. When editors called upon “Nanyang’s writers to use Nanyang as a battleground,” they were, in fact, referring to Malaya. Debates during this period included trying to pin down the terms “emerging literature” as well as “transplanted literature”. Interestingly, the renowned classical poet and calligrapher Yi Hong (the pen name of Pan Shou) was part of this debate, pointing out that “Emerging Literature is Proletarian literature”.

Following this, a new literary movement and trend emerged. The debate revolved around the direction of emerging literature, the relationship between it and Singapore’s society, and between literary and social change. This was essentially the seed that developed into the future discussion on the direction of Chinese literature in Singapore.

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## The Debate on “Local Writers” and “Localisation”

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As more Chinese immigrants settled down in Singapore, a new debate was sparked by Qiu Shizhen’s article, “Talk on Local Writers”. He posited that “we should not blindly attach importance to Chinese literary writers in Shanghai, but also value and recognise the local writers of Malaya”, citing 14 local writers he considered worthy enough to elevate Malayan literature. This assessment of Chinese writers in Shanghai and the consequent nomination of local writers invited great controversy. Even though the writers he put forward were debated upon, Qiu’s first statement regarding “Malayan local literature” was welcomed.

Fang Xiu’s later assessment of Qiu’s article was more balanced: “Qiu was the first author since Chen Lianqing to pay attention to the unique significance of local literature. In effect, both paved the way in establishing Malayan Chinese literature [...] Much of his insight was rarely acknowledged by the typical writers then”.

In response to Qiu’s opinions, other articles appeared in *The Lion’s Voice* in which most parties agreed on the concept of but disagreed on what constituted a “local writer”. Under the broad slogan of “Nanyang colour”, the concept of Malayan “local writers” as being specific and distinct from a geographical perspective was now introduced, taking the process of “localisation” of Singaporean Chinese literature a step further.

Subsequently, in March 1936, a year-long discussion on the “localisation” of literature was initiated, with “location-specific features” as the central theme. In Zeng Aidi’s article, “Malayan Literary Cartoons,” he criticised the bad “corpse removal” phenomenon in local literature which had writers merely borrowing and modifying writings from China. In the article, he expressed his belief that a “good” focus in local literature ought to be the exploration of local issues in Malaya. He emphasised that “Malaya should possess the life of Malayan literature.” His article caused an uproar. Many scholars opposed his view that literary works could be judged as good or bad this easily. The debate that arose was heated, but the outcome pleasantly surprised many in the literary world. Writers now realised that the Chinese in Malaya, along with other people living in Malaya, should work towards the progress of the local Malayan society. It was only with such a mindset that a writer could create works distinct from those in China.

In his 1936 article, Yi Qiao argued that the Singaporean and Malayan literary scenes should abandon the slogan of “Nanyang literature”, and adopt the concept of “Malayan’s Overseas Chinese literature.” Others further advocated theoretical and creative slogans on “neo-realist literature” and “anti-feudal, free and renewed literature of the nation,” including “learning from life’s experiences,” all of which further pushed the boundaries of local literature.

Forming and formulating these theoretical perspectives in the discussion of literary “localisation” suggested that people were no longer satisfied with the broad slogan of “Nanyang’s characteristics”, and demanded clearer geographical boundaries and more precise

characterisation in its definition. This might have been the progenitor of the later-accepted concepts of “Singaporean Chinese Literature” and “Malaysian Chinese Literature.” A name accepted by the community is undoubtedly a prerequisite for developing any literary identity.

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## The Debate on the “Uniqueness Of Malaysian Chinese Literature” and “Expatriate Literature”

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During the post-WWII period, a debate rocked the literary scene. It was more influential and involved more participants than all previous debates. This controversy significantly impacted the understanding of Singaporean Chinese literature and its development.

The post-war period saw two prevalent creative ideologies in the Singaporean Chinese literary community. One strove to depict Chinese themes, painting a deep and representative picture of immigrant and expatriate Chinese; the other endeavoured to depict the realities of local life in Singapore, emphasising the uniqueness of Malayan Chinese literature. The divergence between these two literary ideas had been long-standing. However, the escalation of the conflict between them during this time was not accidental.

Firstly, societal situations had changed. After World War II, there was a growing awareness of democracy and self-determination among all ethnic groups in Malaya, and a rising demand for freedom from

colonial rule. The war gave the Malayan Chinese society a new understanding that the destiny of its community was at stake, and that the Malayan Chinese literary movement should be integrated with the larger national liberation movement.

Secondly, there were changes in the Chinese community's perceptions and feelings toward China. Their views had changed from being "new visitors" with a deep attachment to their homeland to "old visitors" with a developing Malayan identity, akin to a shift in feeling from staying at an "inn" to making a "permanent home." This shift was reflected in literary works, and revealed the rising scepticism towards "expatriate literature," which described life in China's society.

In January 1947, a group of writers met at Singapore's Houjue Public School to discuss the future direction of Malayan Chinese literature, especially focusing on the question: "should Malayan Chinese literature be freed from its link to Chinese literature and be allowed to develop independently, adopting its unique characteristics?" More profoundly, the writers were asking a deeper question: why did they need to create their own literature?

Between March and November that year, newspaper supplements published articles on the "uniqueness of Malayan Chinese literature". Among them, notably, was "The Social Basis of Artistic Creation" by Qiu Feng. The controversy was intensified by the publication of Mahua's article "Malayan Chinese and the Political Struggle" and Zhou Rong's article "Talking about Malayan Chinese Literature" in the Kuala Lumpur-based newspaper *Warrior* in early 1948. Mahua's article suggested that the Chinese participate in the local fight for democracy and resolve to "break their ties with China." Zhou's article took on a sharper and more aggressive tone, referring to some who had migrated southward from

China as "expatriate writers" and "fugitive writers", which, unsurprisingly, provoked resentment among these writers.

It is important to note that at the height of the debate in early 1948, the famous Chinese writers, Guo Moruo and Xia Yan, who were in Hong Kong then, also expressed their views. In "Current Issues on Literature", Guo discussed "the question of 'Malayanisation,' "and argued that there existed two forms of literature: "expatriate literature," which was Chinese literature in Malaya, with an inclination toward mainland China, and "native literature," which had its roots in Malaya and which focused on present-day life. He said, "I am in favour of Malayanisation. That is, I favour Malayan Chinese youths creating native literature. Literature is a reflection on and criticism of life. Thus, Chinese writers in Malaya should take the expression of Malayan life as their principle."

This debate on the "uniqueness of Malayan Chinese literature" and "expatriate literature" had deep historical origins. As mentioned earlier, Malayan and Singaporean Chinese literature were heavily influenced by Chinese literature; this was indisputable. However, on the other hand, a sense of independence and innovation had always existed. Because of this historical and practical background, this debate swept through the entire Singaporean Chinese literary scene, signalling the rise of literary localism.

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## Conclusion

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The scale and impact of these three debates in Singaporean and Malaysian literature are an important part of our literary history. The first

“emerging” debate started because of a “new environment” when early immigrants first arrived on the unfamiliar shores of Nanyang. In contrast, the second “local writers” debate emerged when “new owners” of Malayan literature emerged. The third “uniqueness” debate erupted with a “new search” for identity in the post-war, anti-colonialism and Malayanisation struggle.

With each debate, the focal points became clearer and more centred on identity: “whether and why there is uniqueness in Malayan Chinese literature,” and “why such uniqueness is so crucial to Singapore literature.” The discussions became more in-depth and well-substantiated, as we can see in the many articles published from that period onwards. Significantly, a consensus was eventually reached after these debates: to follow the path of independent development, and to create a distinctive and original form of Chinese literature that is open, tolerant and inclusive.

Of course, it needs to be said that with Singapore and Malaysia’s separation in 1965, the paths taken by Chinese writers of the two countries grew further apart. Both nations diverged in their postcolonial, highly-localised political, social and language development. Singaporean Chinese literature has evolved into a national literature—an urban writing rooted in a modern city-state. Most Chinese literary works in Singapore, such as those in the genre of the well-recognised micro novel and flash fiction, are fast-paced and short, while poetry has become the most written and published genre in post-independent Singapore. At the same time, the number of younger writers writing in English has overwhelmingly surpassed those who write in Chinese, especially after 1987, when all Chinese-medium schools were phased out.

Malaysian Chinese literature, in contrast, has continued to grow, largely due to the large Chinese-

reading population educated by the over 1,300 Chinese-medium schools. Its literature has now become the tour-de-force of Sinophone literature, and the most read and researched Chinese literature outside mainland China and Taiwan. Many of its works embrace an underlying sense of diaspora, and are sometimes set in the tropics or the village. Even as the Singaporean Chinese literary community strives for sustained readership and a new generation of literary icons, the widening gap between the experiences of Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese in terms of identity, language, social, political and living environment, are undeniable. □

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## About The Author



Associate Professor Tan Chee Lay, PBM, has lived in Singapore, Taiwan and the UK. He received a BA (Chinese and Education, National Taiwan Normal University, under a Public Service Commission overseas scholarship), MA (English Studies, National University of Singapore), MBA (Leicester University) and PhD (Oriental Studies, Cambridge University, under a National Institute of Education (NIE) Postgraduate Scholarship). He was awarded the Young Artist Award by the National Arts Council, the Singapore Youth Award (Culture and the Arts), and the Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship and George Lyndon Hicks Fellowship at National Library. A former Executive Director (Research & Development) of the Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, he currently helps to oversee the Chinese, Malay and Tamil Divisions in the Asian Languages and Cultures Academic Group, NIE. Besides publishing almost 30 books of academic and creative writing in Chinese and English, he enjoys conducting research on Nanyang literati and artists, and runs a Facebook and YouTube page, *VeryNanyang*.

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**Appendix: List of original Chinese terms and respective English translations**

<b>English translation</b>	<b>Hanyu pinyin</b>	<b>Chinese</b>
<b>Essays/Articles:</b>		
“Current Issues on Literature”	Dangqiande wenyi zhuwenti	当前的文艺诸问题
“Literature in Nanyang”	Nanyang wenyi	南洋文艺
“Malayan Chinese and the Political Struggle”	Malaiya huaqiao yu zhengzhidouzhen	马来亚华侨与政制斗争
“Talk on Local Writers”	Difang zuojia tan	地方作家谈
“Talking about Malayan Chinese Literature”	Tan mahua wenyi	谈马华文艺
“The Social Basis of Artistic Creation”	Yishu chuangaode shehui jichu	艺术创造的社会基础
“Wake Up! Singaporean Artists”	Xingxingba, xingchengde yiren	醒醒吧，星城的艺人
<b>Institution:</b>		
Houjue Public School	Houjue gongxue	后觉公学
<b>Movement:</b>		
Malayan Chinese Literary Independence Movement	Mahua wenyi zili yundong	马华文艺自立运动
<b>Persons:</b>		
Fang Xiu		方修
Guo Moruo		郭沫若
Huang Zhenyi		黄振彝
Mahua		马华
Pan Shou		潘受



Qiu Shizhen		丘士珍
Xia Yan		夏衍
Yi Hong		衣虹
Yi Qiao		一礁
Zeng Aidi		曾艾狄
Zeng Shengti		曾圣提
Zhang Jinyan		张金燕
Zhou Rong		周蓉
<b>Publications:</b>		
Desert Island	Huangdao	《荒岛》
Sin Kuo Min Journal	Xinguominzazhi	《新国民杂志》
Sin Kuo Min Press	Xinguominribao	《新国民日报》
The Lion's Voice	Shisheng	《狮声》
Warrior	Zhanyoubao	《战友报》
<b>Terms:</b>		
“Corpse removal”	Banshi	搬尸
“Nanyang colour”	Nanyang secai	南洋色彩