Emotional and Ideological Transformations in Pre-war Mahua Poetry

Chong Zi Tong[*], Florence Kuek[**]
Department of Chinese Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya

Abstract

Pre-war Mahua literature reflects changing emotional and social experiences among the Chinese community in Malaya during a period of significant historical and political transformation. Drawing on Fang Xiu's *Selected Works of Pre-war Mahua New Literature: Poetry* as its primary textual corpus, this study examines how selected pre-war Mahua poems represent changing relationships between migration, local social experience, and political consciousness from 1919 to 1941. Through close textual analysis, the study identifies three interconnected areas of poetic expression: displacement and uncertainty, labour and social inequality, and emerging political and collective consciousness. The analysis shows that while attachment to the homeland remains an important element of the selected poems, the poetic subject increasingly engages with the social and political environment of Nanyang. This development does not indicate a complete or uniform abandonment of sojourner consciousness. Rather, it reveals a textual tendency in which emotional and social concerns expand from personal experiences of displacement toward local social realities and wider collective concerns. The study therefore argues that the selected pre-war Mahua poems contribute to an emerging localized literary consciousness by connecting individual experience with the social and historical environment of Nanyang.

Keywords: pre-war Mahua poetry, transformation of thought and emotion, Fang Xiu, construction of subjectivity, localization

[*] Chong Zi Tong, Master's student, Department of Chinese Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya.
[**] Florence Kuek, Senior Lecturer, Department of Chinese Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya. Email: florencekuek@um.edu.my

1.0 Introduction

The emergence of pre-war Mahua literature was closely connected to the experiences of Chinese migrants in Nanyang. From the early twentieth century, Chinese migrants who arrived in Malaya and Singapore brought with them cultural memories, literary traditions, and attachments to China, while encountering social and historical environments different from those they had left behind. The experience of migration therefore involved more than physical movement. It also raised questions of belonging, displacement, memory, and the relationship between the homeland and the place of settlement. These experiences found expression in Mahua literature, particularly in poetry, where questions of migration and belonging could be articulated through images, voices, and representations of everyday life.

Pre-war Mahua poetry provides a particularly useful body of texts for examining these questions. Rather than treating poetry as a direct record of the experiences of the Chinese migrant community, this study approaches poems as literary representations through which experiences of displacement, settlement, and social life are constructed. Attention is therefore directed not only to what the poems describe, but also to the ways in which poetic subjects position themselves in relation to the homeland and the environment in which they live. Such an approach allows the relationship between migration and locality to be examined at the level of literary representation.

Previous scholarship has approached pre-war Mahua literature from several perspectives, including literary history, migration, sojourner consciousness, local consciousness, and the social experiences of Chinese communities in Nanyang. Ko Chia Cian (2010), for example, discusses diaspora poetics, sojourner consciousness, local consciousness, and the relationship between Mahua literature and Chinese literature. Zheng Min and Liang Chu Ming (1989) examine the historical experiences and changing position of overseas Chinese communities, while Lim Buan Chay (1978) and Ho Nai Kin (2002) discuss the development of Chinese literary activities and Mahua literature within broader historical contexts. Together, these studies provide important foundations for understanding the historical and literary conditions in which pre-war Mahua literature emerged.

Fang Xiu's collection and organization of early Mahua literary materials also provided an important textual foundation for subsequent scholarship. His periodisation of Mahua literature into pre-war and post-war periods has, however, been reconsidered in later studies (Chou, 2021). Existing scholarship has consequently established substantial discussions of migration, diaspora, locality, and social experience in Mahua literature. Less attention has been given to how these concerns are negotiated within individual poems and across a selected corpus of pre-war poetry. In particular, the relationship between attachment to the homeland and engagement with the local environment warrants closer examination at the level of poetic representation. The present study therefore focuses on how migrant experience is represented in selected poems and how these

representations negotiate the relationship between homeland attachment and local engagement.

This study examines selected poems from Fang Xiu's *Selected Works of Pre-war Mahua New Literature: Poetry*, covering poems published between October 1919 and December 1941.

Table 1

Period	Author	Poem
1919–1925	Lin Dibu (林独步)	*Activities Are Happiness* (活动就是快乐, *Huodong Jiu Shi Kuaile*)
	Lin Dibu (林独步)	*In This Conservative Volcano* (在这守旧的火山里, *Zai Zhe Shoujiu de Huoshan Li*)
	Hu Jianmin (胡鉴民)	*The Free Man* (自由人, *Ziyouren*)
	Zi Chun (子淳)	*A Fragrance* (一阵香气, *Yi Zhen Xiangqi*)
	Shi Qiao (石樵)	*Whom Shall I Sing For?* (我将讴歌谁呢？, *Wo Jiang Ōuge Shui Ne?*)
	Wu Yi (无已)	*Waves in the Sea* (海里的波浪, *Hai Li de Bolang*)
	Wu Yi (无已)	*The Murmuring Sound in the Train* (火车里嘤嘤的声, *Huoche Li Yingying de Sheng*)
1925–1931	Yun Shan (云山)	*A Poem of Dedication* (献诗, *Xian Shi*)
	Yun Shan (云山)	*The Morning Star* (明星, *Mingxing*)
	Yun Shan (云山)	*Last Night and This Morning* (昨夜与今朝, *Zuoye yu Jinchao*)
	Can Hen (残痕)	*The Rickshaw Man's Elegy* (车夫的哀歌, *Che Fu de Aige*)
	Zhang Chong (张冲)	*The Pale Faces at the Cinema Entrance* (戏院门口的苍脸, *Xiyuan Menkou de Canglian*)
	Xiao Ou (啸鸥)	*The Train Gallops over the Iron Bridge* (火车驰过铁桥, *Huoche Chi Guo Tieqiao*)
	Yi Fu (依夫)	*The Haggard Rubber Tree* (憔悴了的橡树, *Qiaocui le de Xiangshu*)
	Yi Fu (依夫)	*Farewell, Dear Brothers!* (别了！亲爱的弟兄, *Bie le! Qin'ai de Dixiong*)
	Xi Hu (细胡)	*Sorrow at a Corner of the Earth* (地球一角的忧愁, *Diqiu Yijiao de Youchou*)
1932–1936	Wen Lang (文郎)	*A Crowd in the Corridor* (走廊里的一群, *Zoulang Li de Yiqun*)
	De Lu (德露)	*Who Doesn't Hope for a Change?* (谁不希望来一个变动, *Shei Bu Xiwang Lai Yige Biandong*)
	Da Bao (大保)	*The Weaver Girl's Curse* (织女的咀咒, *Zhinü de Zuzhou*)

Period	Author	Poem
	Pu Zhi (蒲之)	*On the Trading Line* (交易线上, *Jiaoyi Xianshang*)
	Li Sheng (力生)	*New Year's Eve* (除夕, *Chuxi*)
	Shi Jun (实君)	*Two Poems* (诗二首, *Shi Er Shou*)
1937–1942	Jing Hai (静海)	*You Say* (你说, *Ni Shuo*)
	Jing Hai (静海)	*Electricity* (电, *Dian*)
	Jing Hai (静海)	*The Sea* (海, *Hai*)
	Jing Hai (静海)	*Kapok Flower* (木锦花, *Mujinhua*)
	Yun Lang (蕴郎)	*Stars* (星星, *Xingxing*)
	Yun Lang (蕴郎)	*The Homeless Man* (亡乡人, *Wangxiang Ren*)
	Yun Lang (蕴郎)	*The Big Fathead's Family* (大肥头家, *Da Feitou Jia*)
	Yun Lang (蕴郎)	*Mr. X* (X 先生, *X Xiansheng*)
	Yun Lang (蕴郎)	*Roar! Wuzhi Mountain* (怒吼！五指山, *Nuhou! Wuzhi Shan*)
	Liu Si (刘思)	*The Cry of the Century* (世纪的呼喊, *Shiji de Huhan*)
	Liu Si (刘思)	*Farewell* (留别, *Liubie*)
	Liu Si (刘思)	*The Rickshaw Puller* (黄包车夫, *Huangbao Chefu*)
	Liu Si (刘思)	*Appeal for Winter Clothes* (代募寒衣, *Dai Mu Hanyi*)
	Liu Si (刘思)	*Sorrow of the Sea* (海愁, *Hai Chou*)
	Liu Si (刘思)	*The Cigarette Girl* (香烟女, *Xiangyan Nü*)
	Jie Qian (孑遣)	*At the Long Table of the Gathering* (在联欢会的长桌上, *Zai Lianhuanhui de Changzhuo Shang*)
	Jie Qian (孑遣)	*Once in Borneo* (当年在婆罗洲, *Dangnian zai Poluozhou*)
	Jie Qian (孑遣)	*The Road* (路, *Lu*)
	Chen Nan (陈南)	*Untitled Draft* (无题草, *Wuti Cao*)
	Dongfang Bingding (东方丙丁)	*Mother* (母, *Mu*)
	Dongfang Bingding (东方丙丁)	*The Pigeon* (鸽子, *Gezi*)
	Dongfang Bingding (东方丙丁)	*The Cage and the Bird* (鸟笼和鸟, *Niaolong he Niao*)
	Ni Nan (呢喃)	*The Quiet Singapore River* (静静的星洲河, *Jingjing de Xingzhou He*)
	Ye Qing (椰青)	*Burial* (埋葬, *Maizang*)
	Qing Cai (清才)	*Poetry Zither* (诗琴, *Shiqin*)
	Ye Huo (野火)	*Nocturne* (夜曲, *Yequ*)
	San Bian (三便)	*Wildfire* (野火, *Yehuo*)

From this corpus, the present study selects poems that are particularly relevant to the representation of displacement, local social experience, labour, inequality, and collective or political concerns. The selected poems are examined through close textual reading rather than treated as a comprehensive representation of all pre-war Mahua poetry. Instead, it provides a focused group of texts through which recurring tensions between migrant experience, homeland attachment, and local engagement can be examined through close reading.

The study addresses two questions: (1) How do selected pre-war Mahua poems represent migrant experience? (2) How do these poems negotiate attachment to the homeland and engagement with the local environment? The analysis proceeds through textual reading, with attention to the poetic subject, spatial imagery, emotional orientation, social experience, and forms of collective expression. Historical and literary scholarship is used to contextualize the poems, but the primary emphasis remains on the texts themselves. The study therefore considers not only the experiences represented in the poems but also how particular images, voices, contrasts, and situations shape the meanings of those experiences.

The phrase “from sojourning to localization” is used as an analytical perspective rather than as a claim about a fixed historical transition. It does not suggest that Chinese migrants as a whole moved from one identity to another, nor does it assume that attachment to the homeland disappeared as engagement with the local environment increased. Instead, the phrase draws attention to a tension that recurs across the selected poems: the poetic subject may remain emotionally attached to the homeland while becoming increasingly attentive to the social and physical environment of Nanyang.

The selected poems therefore do not necessarily present a linear movement from sojourning to localization. Some remain closely concerned with displacement, memory, and unsettled belonging, while others bring the poetic subject into closer contact with local social conditions. In some cases, experiences of everyday life open toward broader social or collective concerns. These differences do not amount to a single developmental sequence. Rather, they suggest an expanding field of poetic attention in which migrant experience becomes increasingly connected to the environment in which the poetic subject is situated.

The study thus argues that the significance of the selected pre-war Mahua poems lies not in demonstrating a completed transition from “sojourning” to “localization,” but in revealing the changing relationship between the two. Homeland attachment and local engagement frequently coexist within the same poetic field, while the representation of migrant experience increasingly extends beyond personal displacement toward the social world of Nanyang. “From sojourning to localization” therefore describes not the replacement of one identity by another, but a shift in the scope and orientation of poetic attention.

2.0 Literature Review and Research Gap

2.1 Studies on the Historiography of Mahua Literature

The study of pre-war Mahua literature has been closely connected to efforts to collect, preserve, and organize its early literary materials. Among these efforts, Fang Xiu's compilations and literary histories occupy an important position. His anthologies brought together a substantial body of early Mahua literary works and provided a foundation for subsequent research. At the same time, his organization of Mahua literary history represents a particular way of understanding the development of the literature rather than a neutral or definitive account.

This issue has been examined by Chou Wen Loong (2021), who discusses Fang Xiu's distinction between pre-war and post-war Mahua literature and draws attention to the historical and methodological assumptions underlying this periodization. Chou's discussion does not diminish the importance of Fang Xiu's work as a means of preserving and organizing literary materials. Rather, it suggests that the categories through which Mahua literature has been studied are themselves part of the history of its construction as a literary field.

Yeo Song Nian (2010) approaches the development of pre-war Mahua literature from a different direction by examining the emergence of local consciousness in Singapore and Malaya. His discussion shifts attention from the organization of the literary corpus to the relationship between literary production and the environment in which writers lived and wrote. This perspective is particularly relevant to questions of locality, as it draws attention to how literary works may register changing relationships with the place of settlement.

These studies establish two important points for the present research. First, Fang Xiu's anthology can serve as a valuable textual source while still being understood as part of a particular construction of literary history. Second, the study of pre-war Mahua literature requires attention not only to its historical categorization but also to the changing relationship between literary expression and the local environment.

The present study therefore uses Fang Xiu's *Selected Works of Pre-war Mahua New Literature: Poetry* as its primary textual source without treating its periodization as a predetermined conclusion. The focus remains on the selected poems themselves and on the ways in which they represent migrant experience and relations between homeland and locality.

2.2 Sojourner Consciousness and Local Consciousness

The relationship between sojourner consciousness and local consciousness constitutes another important strand of scholarship on Mahua literature. This discussion involves both historical studies of overseas Chinese communities and literary studies of migration, identity, and locality.

Zheng Min and Liang Chu Ming (1989) examine the historical experiences and changing position of overseas Chinese communities. Their work provides a broader context for understanding the continuing relationship between overseas Chinese communities and their homeland, particularly in relation to the historical experience of migration and settlement outside China.

From a literary perspective, Ko Chia Cian (2010) discusses diaspora poetics, sojourner consciousness, and local consciousness in relation to Mahua literature. His approach shifts the discussion from the historical condition of migration to the ways in which migration, identity, and locality are articulated as literary concerns. Rather than treating the relationship between homeland and locality as simply a matter of geographical movement, this perspective makes it possible to consider how such relationships are expressed through literary consciousness.

Guo Hui Fen (1999) further connects these historical and literary perspectives in her study of Chinese emigrant writers and the development of Chinese literature in Singapore and Malaya between 1919 and 1949. By situating literary production within the experiences of Chinese emigrant communities, her study demonstrates the importance of considering writers and literary works in relation to the social environments in which they emerged.

Taken together, these studies complicate a simple opposition between sojourner consciousness and local consciousness. Historical attachment to the homeland does not necessarily disappear when attention turns toward the place of settlement, just as engagement with the local environment does not necessarily indicate the complete abandonment of a sojourner orientation. The two may coexist within the same literary work.

This point is particularly relevant to the present study. Rather than using “sojourner consciousness” and “local consciousness” as fixed categories into which individual poems can be placed, the study treats sojourning and localization as analytical terms for examining the different orientations expressed within the selected poems. The question is not whether a poem belongs entirely to one category or the other, but how the poem negotiates the relationship between attachment to the homeland and engagement with the local environment.

2.3 Social and Historical Dimensions of Mahua Literature

Questions of migration and locality cannot be separated entirely from the social and historical conditions in which pre-war Mahua literature developed. Chinese communities in Malaya and Singapore experienced changes in patterns of migration, employment, urban life, and social relations, while literary activities developed within these changing circumstances.

Lim Buan Chay (1978) examines the activities and influence of Chinese writers in Singapore, drawing attention to the development of literary activities and their relationship with the broader Chinese community. Ho Nai Kin (2002), meanwhile,

provides a broader account of the development of Mahua literature across different periods. Although these studies differ in scope and emphasis, both demonstrate the importance of placing literary production within its historical environment.

Such historical approaches are useful for understanding the circumstances surrounding the production and circulation of Mahua literature. They also provide a context in which literary representations of migration, work, poverty, social relations, and political change can be situated. However, historical context alone does not determine the meaning of a literary text.

A poem does not simply reproduce the social conditions from which it emerges. Experiences of migration or social hardship are transformed through poetic language, imagery, voice, spatial organization, and emotional expression. The same historical condition may therefore acquire different meanings when represented through different poetic forms or perspectives.

For this reason, the present study uses historical scholarship primarily as contextual support rather than as a substitute for textual interpretation. The selected poems are not treated as transparent records of the historical experiences of Chinese migrants. Instead, historical and social circumstances provide a context for examining how those experiences are selected, shaped, and rendered meaningful within poetic texts.

2.4 History, Consciousness, and Social Context Together

The scholarship reviewed above approaches pre-war Mahua literature from different but related directions. Studies of literary historiography draw attention to how the corpus of Mahua literature has been collected, organized, and periodized. Studies of sojourner and local consciousness provide concepts for considering relationships between homeland, migration, and locality. Historical studies of literary production, meanwhile, situate these literary concerns within the social environment of Chinese communities in Malaya and Singapore.

These approaches need not be treated as competing interpretations. Rather, they operate at different levels of inquiry. Fang Xiu's work provides the textual materials from which the present corpus is drawn, while Chou Wen Loong's (2021) discussion encourages a critical awareness of the historical categories through which these materials have been organized. Yeo Song Nian (2010) and Ko Chia Cian (2010) provide perspectives for considering locality and consciousness, while Zheng Min and Liang Chu Ming (1989), Guo Hui Fen (1999), Lim Buan Chay (1978), and Ho Nai Kin (2002) help establish the historical and social context surrounding literary production.

Bringing these approaches together does not mean treating the poems as illustrations of pre-existing historical categories. Instead, it provides a basis for returning to the poems themselves and asking how these different dimensions become connected through poetic representation. In particular, the selected poems allow for closer examination of the relationship between migrant experience and the poetic subject's orientation toward homeland and locality.

This approach also avoids treating literary consciousness as a fixed developmental sequence. A poem may remain strongly attached to the homeland while engaging with the immediate social environment, and a poem concerned with local experience may continue to carry memories, emotions, or perspectives associated with migration. The relationship between these orientations is therefore better understood as a tension or negotiation within the text than as a simple movement from one consciousness to another.

2.5 Research Gap

Existing scholarship has examined pre-war Mahua literature from the perspectives of literary history, migration, sojourner and local consciousness, and historical context. However, less attention has been given to how these dimensions interact within individual poems. This study addresses this gap through close readings of selected poems from Fang Xiu's anthology, focusing on how migrant experience is represented and how attachment to the homeland is negotiated alongside engagement with the local environment. Rather than treating "sojourning" and "localization" as fixed or successive stages, the study examines how these orientations coexist and shift across the selected texts. "From sojourning to localization" is therefore used as an analytical perspective for examining changes in poetic attention, rather than as a claim of a completed historical transition.

3.0 Displacement and Uneasy Settlement

The movement of Chinese migrants to Nanyang in the early twentieth century formed an important historical context for the emergence of pre-war Mahua literature. Political instability and economic difficulties in China, together with the search for employment and economic opportunities, contributed to migration to Malaya and Singapore (Lim, 1978). Yet migration involved more than geographical movement. For those who left China, arrival in Nanyang could also involve separation from familiar social surroundings, uncertainty about one's place, and the need to negotiate an unfamiliar environment. These experiences provided material for literary representations of displacement and belonging.

Historical studies such as Lim Buan Chay (1978) and Ho Nai Kin (2002) help establish the broader circumstances surrounding migration and the development of Mahua literature. The poems examined in this chapter, however, are not treated as direct records of these historical experiences. Instead, the analysis focuses on how displacement and settlement are given poetic form through images of movement, spatial uncertainty, social difference, and the question of home.

This chapter examines two selected poems from Fang Xiu's anthology: Wu Yi's *Waves in the Sea* (海里的波浪, *Hai Li de Bo Lang*) and Can Hen's *The Rickshaw Man's Elegy* (车夫的哀歌*, Che Fu de Ai Ge*). The two poems present migrant experience from different positions. Waves in the Sea places the speaker within the movement of migration, using the sea as a central image of distance and instability. *The Rickshaw Man's*

Elegy, by contrast, places the migrant within the social and material environment of Nanyang after arrival. Reading the poems together makes it possible to examine how displacement changes when the migrant moves from physical separation toward direct encounter with the locality.

3.1 Drifting: Displacement and Uncertainty

Wu Yi's poem *Waves in the Sea* (海里的波浪, Hai Li de Bo Lang) represents migration through the image of movement across the sea. The poem does not simply describe a journey from one geographical location to another. Instead, the movement of the sea becomes closely associated with the speaker's uncertain emotional state:

> "The waves in the sea, tossing east and turning west; the state of my heart, likewise wandering in thought... But the waves in the sea are moved by the wind, while I do not understand what has caused the state of my heart." (海里的波浪，东翻西覆，我心里的情状，亦是东思西想。…… 但是海里的波浪是由风摇动的，我心里的情状欲不懂所致来呢。) (Fang, 1970, p. 19)

The opening parallel between the waves and the speaker's thoughts establishes a connection between physical movement and emotional instability. "East and west" in the description of the waves suggests direction without a fixed destination, while "east and west" in the speaker's thoughts turns geographical movement into a mental condition. The sea consequently becomes more than a space through which migration takes place. It provides the poem with an image through which uncertainty itself can be imagined.

The final contrast in the passage is particularly revealing. The waves have an identifiable cause the wind whereas the speaker cannot determine what has produced his own state of mind. This distinction gives the poem's uncertainty a different quality from the ordinary instability of the natural world. The movement of the sea may be explained physically, but the migrant's emotional condition remains difficult even for the speaker himself to understand. Displacement is therefore presented not simply as separation from a familiar place but as a difficulty in locating the source and direction of one's own feelings.

The poem also leaves the destination relatively indistinct. Although the speaker is situated within the process of migration, the poem does not turn immediately toward an image of arrival or settlement. Its attention remains on movement, distance, and inward uncertainty. The migrant subject is consequently defined less by possession of a new place than by the experience of being between places.

This condition can be understood through the concept of sojourning, provided that the term is not reduced to the simple expectation of returning to China. In the poem, sojourning refers more broadly to an unsettled relationship with the place toward which the migrant is moving. The speaker has physically entered the process of leaving, but the poem does not establish that the destination has become a secure site of belonging.

The significance of the sea therefore lies in its ability to hold departure and destination in tension. The migrant is moving away from the homeland, yet the homeland remains an important point of reference through which the experience of movement is understood. Rather than presenting migration as a completed transition, Waves in the Sea renders it as a condition of uncertainty.

3.2 After Arrival: The Question of Home in *The Rickshaw Man's Elegy*

If *Waves in the Sea* represents the migrant during movement, Can Hen's *The Rickshaw Man's Elegy* presents the migrant after arrival in Nanyang. The difference between the two poems is therefore not simply that one is about migration and the other is about settlement. More importantly, the second poem shows that arrival does not necessarily resolve the migrant's uncertainty about place.

The poem begins by directly questioning the conditions of the rickshaw puller's life:

> "How pitiful we rickshaw pullers are; why is our life so painful? Why do people have carriages to sit in while I have to pull? Oh, Heavens, what is the reason for this? I want to ask you!" (原凄怜啊，我们这班车夫；我们的生活怎的这般痛苦？人们怎的有车坐呀我怎着来拖？老天爷啊这是怎的情由？我要问问你！) (Fang, 1970, p. 37)

The opening "we rickshaw pullers" immediately places the speaker within a collective rather than presenting suffering as an entirely private experience. The repeated questions that follow create an agitated and confrontational voice. The contrast between those who "have carriages to sit in" and those who must pull them also places the speaker within an unequal social structure. Suffering is therefore connected to the speaker's position within the urban environment rather than presented solely as an individual misfortune.

The poem subsequently turns directly to the experience of arrival:

> "Newly arrived in a foreign land without a single friend; among the towering buildings and low 'Attap houses,' which one is my home? The people, black and white, are of different races than in China; sleeping under the 'five-foot way,' at the mercy of the rain and wind!" (初到异地没有一个亲朋；巍巍高楼低低"答屋"谁个是我家！黑的白的高低的人种不同中国；宿在"五脚砌"中任雨打呀任风吹！) (Fang, 1970, p. 37)

The question "which one is my home?" is the emotional centre of this passage. Unlike the speaker in Waves in the Sea, this migrant has already reached the new environment. Yet arrival has not produced a corresponding sense of belonging. The problem of displacement has therefore changed form. It is no longer primarily a question of physical distance from the homeland, but of finding a place within the locality that has been reached.

The spatial contrasts in the passage reinforce this uncertainty. “Towering buildings” and low “Attap houses” place different forms of habitation within the same urban landscape, while the speaker himself remains without a home. The city is visible, but it does not yet provide security or belonging. The environment is therefore presented through a tension between physical presence and social exclusion.

The reference to the “five-foot way” (五脚基, *wu jiao ji*) further develops this uncertainty. The speaker is physically present in the urban environment but remains exposed to “rain and wind.” The local environment is therefore experienced not as an abstract geographical space but through concrete conditions of housing, work, and social insecurity.

The description of people of different racial backgrounds further complicates the speaker’s relationship with the new environment. The phrase “different races than in China” marks the locality as socially unfamiliar as well as geographically different. The migrant encounters a world in which the visible composition of the population differs from the social environment associated with the homeland. Locality consequently becomes something that must be experienced and interpreted rather than something that can simply be assumed as a new home.

This is where the poem begins to complicate the relationship between sojourning and localization. The speaker is already physically embedded in Nanyang and participates in its labouring life, yet his question about home remains unresolved. Engagement with the locality therefore begins before a stable sense of local belonging has been established.

3.3 From Movement to Uneasy Settlement

Read together, Waves in the Sea and The Rickshaw Man’s Elegy present two related forms of displacement. In the former, uncertainty is associated with movement across the sea; in the latter, it persists after arrival within the social and material environment of Nanyang. The first poem represents displacement through movement without secure arrival, while the second represents arrival without secure belonging. Displacement therefore shifts from a condition of physical movement to an experience within the locality itself.

This shift also changes the poetic subject’s relationship with the local environment. In Waves in the Sea, the environment remains an expansive space through which the migrant is moving. In The Rickshaw Man’s Elegy, it becomes concrete and socially differentiated through work, housing, racial difference, and unequal social conditions. Yet greater engagement with locality does not eliminate attachment to the homeland, as shown by the question “which one is my home?” Physical presence and emotional belonging therefore do not necessarily develop at the same pace.

The two poems consequently complicate a simple movement from sojourning to localization. Rather than describing a completed transition, they reveal an expanding field of poetic attention: from the uncertainty of migration toward the social and material

realities encountered in Nanyang. This expansion provides the basis for the following chapter's discussion of labour, poverty, and inequality.

4.0 Suffering and Indictment: Labour, Poverty, and Inequality

The migrant experience represented in pre-war Mahua poetry extends beyond displacement and the difficulty of establishing a sense of belonging. Once the poetic subject becomes situated within the social environment of Nanyang, attention can turn toward the material conditions of everyday life, including labour, poverty, and unequal social relations. Ooi Suh Chen and Ching Thing Ho (2018), for example, observe that literary texts of the period represented contrasts between wealth and poverty and the struggles of lower-class communities through images of labour and social difference.

The poems examined in this chapter similarly shift attention from the question of where the migrant belongs to the conditions under which people live and work. Yet suffering is not represented in a uniform manner. In some poems, exploitation is rendered through the metaphor of an injured body; in others, inequality becomes visible through contrasts between labour and leisure, poverty and consumption, or different positions within urban space. These differences are important because they show that social suffering is not simply an abstract theme. It is constructed through particular images, spatial arrangements, voices, and contrasts.

This chapter examines four poems: Yi Fu's *The Haggard Rubber Tree* (憔悴了的橡树, Qiao Cui Le de Xiang Shu), Xiao Ou's *The Train Gallops over the Iron Bridge* (火车驰过铁桥), De Lu's *Who Doesn't Hope for a Change?* (谁不希望来一个变动, Shei Bu Xi Wang Lai Yi Ge Bian Dong), and Zhang Chong's *The Pale Faces at the Cinema Entrance* (戏院门口的苍脸, Xi Yuan Men Kou de Cang Lian). Can Hen's *The Rickshaw Man's Elegy* (车夫的哀歌, Che Fu de Ai Ge) is revisited because its representation of migrant experience also involves labour and material insecurity. Its appearance in both chapters is intentional. The poem demonstrates that displacement and social inequality are not separate stages but overlapping dimensions of migrant experience.

4.1 Labour, Exploitation, and the Costs of Development

Yi Fu's *The Haggard Rubber Tree* (憔悴了的橡树, *Qiao Cui Le de Xiang Shu*) provides a striking example of how labour and exploitation can be represented through metaphor. Rather than directly presenting a human labourer, the poem gives the rubber tree a voice and allows its physical condition to carry the language of exploitation:

> "Under the equator is our home... every time we export without stinginess, exporting the sap we painstakingly nurtured to feed the gluttonous people. ... Not until our bodies are covered with the scars of exploitation, and our bark shows uneven pits, do people finally stop." (赤道之下是我们的家……每次

> 我们都毫无吝惜地输出，输出我们辛苦培养的液汁，供给贪食的人们。……直至我们全身满布剥削的创痕，皮上呈着凹凸的不平，人们才肯罢手。) (Fang, 1970, p. 56)

The poem's personification is central to its representation of exploitation. The rubber tree speaks through the first-person plural, turning what might otherwise appear as an agricultural resource into a subject capable of describing its own condition. The repeated extraction of "sap" is then transformed into a bodily process, while the "scars of exploitation" make the consequences of extraction visible on the surface of the tree.

The language of the body is particularly significant. "Sap" is not merely a commodity but something produced from within the tree, while "scars" suggest damage that remains after repeated extraction. The poem therefore shifts attention from the economic value of rubber to the physical cost through which that value is produced. Production is represented not as an abstract economic process but as an activity that leaves marks on a living body.

The phrase "under the equator is our home" introduces another important dimension. The rubber tree's "home" is located in the tropical environment of Nanyang, and the first-person voice establishes a relationship between the tree and the local landscape. Yet this environment is also the site of extraction. The locality is consequently presented through a contradiction: it is a place of growth and production, but also a place in which the productive body is repeatedly exploited.

The poem does not explicitly identify a particular group of human labourers as the victim of exploitation. Its critique instead operates through the transformation of the rubber tree into an exploited subject. This indirect representation allows the poem to connect the natural and economic landscapes of Nanyang with the broader experience of labour without reducing the text to a literal description of plantation work.

Xiao Ou's *The Train Gallops over the Iron Bridge* extends the chapter's concern with material production toward the railway environment. The train and iron bridge provide visible signs of movement and technological infrastructure, but the significance of the image lies in what remains less visible: the human labour and material conditions underlying such structures. The railway can therefore be read not simply as an emblem of development, but as a reminder that physical infrastructures are produced through material resources and human effort.

Because the available passage does not directly identify the workers responsible for constructing the railway, the poem should not be treated as a straightforward depiction of railway labour. Rather, its significance for the present discussion lies in the way the image of infrastructure directs attention toward the material processes behind visible forms of development. In this respect, it can be read alongside The Haggard Rubber Tree: both poems encourage attention to what lies behind an apparently finished product.

The difference between the two images is nevertheless important. The rubber tree makes exploitation visible through the marks left on a living body, while the railway

presents a completed structure whose underlying labour is less immediately visible. One poem therefore foregrounds physical depletion, while the other invites attention to the hidden processes behind material development. Together, they complicate the assumption that development can be understood only through its visible products.

4.2 Poverty, Urban Space, and Social Inequality

While The Haggard Rubber Tree represents exploitation through the language of production, De Lu's *Who Doesn't Hope for a Change?* (谁不希望来一个变动, Shei Bu Xi Wang Lai Yi Ge Bian Dong) places social inequality within an urban setting. The poem constructs a contrast between workers who remain awake to labour and people in high buildings who are able to sleep:

> "The lights are dim and the night is hazy, eyes forced open to work. Friend, what time is it now? The people in the high buildings are deep in their dreams. ... Who doesn't hope for a change?" (灯光惨淡夜朦胧，强睁眼睛在做工。朋友，这是什麽时候了啊，高楼上的人儿梦方浓。……谁又不希望来一个变动？) (Fang, 1970, p. 72)

The contrast between workers whose "eyes [are] forced open to work" and people in the "high buildings" who are "deep in their dreams" creates two different experiences of the same urban night. For the workers, night prolongs the demands of labour; for those in the high buildings, the same period is associated with rest. Sleep thus becomes more than a description of physical activity. It becomes a marker of unequal social circumstances.

The poem's spatial arrangement reinforces this contrast. The workers are associated with labour below, while the people in the high buildings remain physically and socially removed from their exhaustion. The vertical distinction between "high buildings" and the workers below therefore carries a social meaning. Urban space becomes a way of making inequality visible.

The poem also shifts from description to questioning. The final question, "Who doesn't hope for a change?", changes the tone of the poem from observation to desire. The workers' condition is no longer simply something to be described; it becomes something that invites the possibility of change. The poem thus moves from the representation of suffering toward a more explicit questioning of the conditions that produce it.

Zhang Chong's The Pale Faces at the Cinema Entrance constructs inequality through another urban contrast. The poem turns its attention toward women and children living under conditions of poverty and places a mother sewing clothes outside a cinema associated with entertainment and consumption.

The contrast between the cinema and the street gives social inequality a spatial form. Inside the cinema, leisure and entertainment are available; outside, the mother continues to work under the streetlights in order to support her family. The two spaces exist beside one another, but they represent sharply different uses of time and resources.

The image of the mother sewing is particularly important because it makes poverty visible through repetitive and necessary labour. The desire not to be "driven by hunger" further shifts the poem from a general representation of poverty toward the basic question of survival (Fang, 1970, p. 45). Poverty is consequently represented not simply as an absence of wealth but as a condition that structures family life, labour, and access to leisure.

The poem's focus on the cinema is also significant. Rather than representing poverty in isolation, it places poverty beside consumption and entertainment. Inequality is therefore produced through comparison. The reader is asked to see two different experiences of the same urban environment at the same moment: leisure on one side of the street and necessary labour on the other.

Can Hen's *The Rickshaw Man's Elegy* adds another dimension to this representation of poverty by connecting material hardship with the migrant's attempt to understand the cause of his suffering. As discussed in Chapter 3, the rickshaw puller experiences insecure living conditions, physical exhaustion, and social marginality. His question concerning whether his suffering might be related to "sins in a past life" is significant because the explanation he considers is initially personal and moral rather than social or structural (Fang, 1970, p. 37).

This moment complicates the interpretation of the poem. The rickshaw puller clearly experiences material inequality, but he does not immediately articulate that inequality through a structural critique of society. Instead, suffering is partly interpreted through the language of fate and personal wrongdoing. The poem therefore reveals a tension between the social conditions that produce suffering and the explanations available to the individual who experiences them.

Taken together, these poems expand the representation of inequality from the conditions of production to the wider urban environment. Labour, rest, housing, family survival, leisure, and individual interpretations of suffering become interconnected aspects of social experience. The locality is consequently no longer presented simply as the place to which the migrant has arrived. It becomes a social space whose inequalities must be observed, experienced, and, in some cases, questioned.

4.3 From Suffering to Social Critique

The poems discussed in this chapter shift attention from displacement toward the material and social conditions of life in Nanyang. Through images of labour, poverty, exploitation, and unequal access to security and leisure, suffering is increasingly presented as part of a wider social environment rather than as an isolated individual experience.

This shift does not indicate the disappearance of sojourner consciousness. Rather, it shows a broader engagement with the locality, where the migrant subject becomes increasingly attentive to the social conditions surrounding everyday life. The desire for "a change" in Who Doesn't Hope for a Change? further suggests that suffering may lead to wider social questioning.

5.0 From Suffering to Political Awakening

The poems discussed in the previous chapter show how labour, poverty, and social inequality become visible within the local environment. Some of the selected poems, however, extend beyond the representation of suffering by asking how individuals and communities might respond to suffering and how local experience may be connected with wider political circumstances.

By the late 1930s, political and collective concerns became more visible in parts of the selected pre-war Mahua poetry. This literary development took place against a wider historical background that included the Sino-Japanese War and the rise of fascist forces. Guo Hui Fen (1999) notes that Chinese writers in Singapore and Malaya were involved not only in literary activities but also in social activities and forms of mobilisation. Such a context provides a background for understanding why some poems extended their attention beyond individual experience toward questions of collective responsibility and political conflict.

The poems examined in this chapter should not, however, be taken as evidence of a unified political consciousness within the Chinese community. Rather, they present different moments in which silence is questioned, suffering is connected with collective responsibility, and local experience is placed in relation to political conflicts beyond the immediate environment.

This chapter focuses on Li Sheng's *New Year's Eve* (除夕, *Chu Xi*), Bao Jun's *Sorrow in the Rainy Season* (雨季的邑犹, *Yu Ji de Yi You*), and *Spanish Sailor* (西班牙水手, *Xi Ban Ya Shui Shou*). Taken together, these poems demonstrate a further expansion in the scope of poetic attention. The concern with suffering found in earlier poems is not abandoned; instead, it is placed within questions of response, responsibility, and political struggle.

5.1 Awakening from Silence

Li Sheng's *New Year's Eve* provides an important example of how political awareness is represented as a possibility emerging from the experience of suffering. Rather than presenting political conflict through straightforward historical description, the poem constructs a dream-like space in which memory, suffering, silence, and the possibility of resistance intersect.

The poem juxtaposes the suffering of people in the homeland with the social environment in which the speaker is situated:

> "In the grand and magnificent buildings, there is the laughter of 'friendly nations' and the groans of compatriots from home. At this moment, perhaps someone has awakened, shouting 'Resist! My suffering brothers!' yet there is not the slightest echo." (在堂皇富丽的大厦里，有【友邦】人士的笑声，

> 也有故乡同胞的呻吟。这时也许谁觉悟了，【反抗吧！受难的弟兄们】有人这样地叫喊，但竟没有丝毫的回响。) (Fang, 1970, p. 82)

The opposition between "laughter" and "groans" establishes a contrast between the privileged environment represented by the "grand and magnificent buildings" and the suffering of compatriots. The contrast is not merely emotional. It establishes two different positions from which the same historical situation can be experienced.

More importantly, the appearance of the imperative "Resist!" changes the function of the poem's language. Earlier poems examined in this study often represent suffering through images of physical exhaustion, poverty, or exploitation. Here, suffering generates a verbal response. The speaker imagines a voice attempting to address the "suffering brothers" and transform recognition of suffering into collective action.

Yet the poem immediately interrupts this possibility with the phrase "there is not the slightest echo." The absence of an echo is crucial. It means that the call to resistance remains a solitary or imagined voice rather than becoming a collective response. Political awareness is therefore present in the poem, but it is represented as incomplete.

This tension distinguishes *New Year's Eve* from the poems discussed in Last part. In *The Haggard Rubber Tree* and *Who Doesn't Hope for a Change?*, suffering is represented primarily through material conditions and unequal relations. In New Year's Eve, suffering becomes connected with the question of what should follow recognition. The poem does not simply ask whether people are suffering; it asks, implicitly, why the recognition of suffering has not produced a response.

The poem's dream-like structure reinforces this uncertainty. Awakening appears within a space that is itself unstable between reality and imagination. The speaker can imagine someone "awakened" and calling for resistance, but the lack of response prevents this awakening from becoming an accomplished collective condition.

The significance of the poem therefore lies not in presenting a unified political community but in representing the moment at which silence is challenged. The isolated call of "Resist!" marks a change in the scope of poetic expression: poetry no longer merely records suffering but also gives language to the possibility of responding to it.

5.2 Local Experience and Consciousness

The development from social awareness toward collective consciousness becomes more explicit in Bao Jun's Sorrow in the *Rainy Season* (雨季的邑犹, Yu Ji de Yi You). The poem expands its frame of reference beyond Nanyang by connecting local experience with the anti-colonial struggle in Abyssinia (Ethiopia):

> "The rainy season in Abyssinia is something to yearn for, yet the rainy season in the Southland is forever a season for singing Keroncong?" (阿比西尼亚的雨季是令人神往的，而南国的雨季，長為唱 *KORONJONG* 的季节？) (Fang, 1970, p. 85)

The contrast between the two rainy seasons is not simply geographical. The same natural phenomenon is given different meanings in different political contexts. Abyssinia is associated with struggle, while the rainy season in the "Southland" is associated with singing Keroncong. The contrast therefore places local cultural life against a distant scene of political conflict.

The rhetorical question at the end of the passage is particularly important. Rather than directly declaring that the local community is passive, the poem poses the contrast as a question. The question invites the reader to consider whether a community can remain absorbed in ordinary cultural activity while people elsewhere are involved in political struggle.

This rhetorical structure shifts the poem away from the direct representation of local hardship. The locality is no longer treated as a self-contained environment. Instead, it is evaluated in relation to events occurring beyond it. The "Southland" acquires meaning through its juxtaposition with Abyssinia, and the local community is implicitly positioned within a wider political world.

The poem's transnational perspective becomes clearer when read alongside *Spanish Sailor* (西班牙水手, *Xi Ban Ya Shui Shou*):

> "Look at that Spanish sailor; he is yearning for his homeland in revolt. And for him, his country is exactly in a struggle between 'Light' and 'Darkness'; can he still wander leisurely overseas?" (你瞧那位西班牙水手吧，他在系念叛乱中的故国呢。而他，故国正是【光明】与【黑暗】斗争的时候，他还能在海外逍遥吗？) (Fang, 1970, p. 85)

The Spanish sailor provides a transnational figure through whom attachment to homeland is connected with political conflict. This is different from the earlier representation of homeland attachment as an emotional consequence of migration. The sailor remains physically overseas, yet his attention is directed toward a homeland experiencing political struggle.

The final question, "can he still wander leisurely overseas?", is especially significant because it connects geographical distance with moral and political responsibility. Physical absence does not necessarily produce emotional detachment. Instead, distance becomes the condition through which the sailor's relationship with his homeland is made visible.

The figure of the Spanish sailor also complicates a simple opposition between homeland and locality. Earlier poems in the article have shown how migrant subjects encounter Nanyang as a place of unfamiliarity, labour, poverty, and social inequality. Here, however, the poetic field extends beyond Nanyang. The homeland of another migrant figure becomes a site of political struggle, while the act of living overseas is evaluated in relation to that struggle.

Read together, Sorrow in the Rainy Season and Spanish Sailor broaden the geographical and political horizon of the selected poetry. The poems do not simply

abandon local experience for international politics. Rather, they use distant political conflicts to reconsider the meaning of local life and the responsibilities of individuals who live outside their places of origin.

This development is important for understanding the relationship between homeland attachment and local engagement. The earlier poems show that attachment to the homeland can coexist with an attempt to understand the local environment. The poems discussed here extend that relationship into a wider political field: homeland attachment becomes connected with political conflict, while the local community is asked to consider its position in relation to events elsewhere.

The selected poems should nevertheless not be treated as evidence that a uniform political consciousness had emerged among Chinese communities in Nanyang. Their political orientations differ, and the poems do not speak with a single collective voice. What they reveal instead is an expanding capacity to connect individual and local experience with political circumstances beyond the immediate environment.

5.3 From Individual Experience to Collective Expression

This poem development should not be understood as a fixed chronological sequence. The poems overlap in their concerns, and attachment to the homeland may remain present alongside increasing engagement with the local social environment. Spanish Sailor, for example, connects distant homeland with political responsibility, while New Year's Eve links individual awareness with the possibility of collective response.

The significance of this development therefore lies in the expansion of poetic attention: from individual migrant experience to the local social environment and, in some poems, to wider collective and political concerns. "From sojourning to localization" thus describes a shift in poetic attention rather than a completed transformation of identity.

6.0 Conclusion

This study has examined selected pre-war Mahua poems compiled by Fang Xiu through close textual analysis, focusing on the representation of migrant experience and the relationship between homeland attachment and local engagement. The analysis shows that the selected poems represent migrant experience in diverse ways. Some foreground displacement, uncertainty, and belonging, while others place migrant experience within labour, poverty, social inequality, and wider political concerns. These dimensions are not presented as separate stages but often overlap within individual poems, showing that migrant experience in pre-war Mahua poetry cannot be reduced to a single emotional or ideological position.

The study further shows that attachment to the homeland and engagement with the local environment coexist throughout the selected corpus. The phrase "from sojourning to localization" therefore refers not to a completed historical or identity transition, but to

a widening of poetic attention. The selected poems increasingly connect individual experiences of migration with the social and political environment of Nanyang, while retaining emotional and imaginative connections with the homeland. The study thus contributes to existing scholarship by bringing migrant experience, homeland attachment, and local social engagement into a single textual analysis, showing how their relationship is negotiated across the selected pre-war Mahua poems.

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