

The background image is a photograph of a Singapore cityscape. On the right, a tall, modern skyscraper with a grid-like window pattern dominates the skyline. To its left, several other modern buildings of varying heights are visible. In the foreground, there is a construction site with a large area of earth and debris, a crane, and a truck. The sky is overcast and grey.

**An Anthology
of Singapore
Chinese Literature**

新华文学作品选

**Edited by
Wong Meng Voon
Wong Yoon Wah**

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Singapore Association of Writers

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Preface

To enable non-Chinese readers to obtain a better perspective of Singapore Chinese Literature, and to promote an exchange of literary works between the various language streams in Singapore, the Singapore Association of Writers decided to embark on a bold endeavour in 1979, i.e. to translate some good examples of writing by its members, and to publish these in book form. This project was keenly supported by the members of the Association.

However, two important problems had to be resolved before this project could get under way: these were the problems of translation and funds.

In Singapore today, there are many people who can translate literary works from English into Chinese, but not many who can translate the other way around. Furthermore, those in the latter category are usually too busy to embark on such a formidable project as ours, as they are, by and large, full-time workers who have their own duties to perform. To overcome this difficulty we decided to let the individual writers make their own arrangements for translation. The selected writings could be translated by the authors themselves, or by someone chosen by them. The translations were then coordinated and edited by the Editors of this anthology. This arrangement, unfortunately, solved only part of the problem. It is regretted that there are still many other members of the Association who were unable to submit their outstanding writings as a result of the difficulty in finding suitable translators.

We are glad that the Singapore Arts Council has kindly consented to bear the total cost of publishing this anthology. This has resolved our second problem. The Council also suggested that the original writings in Chinese be included in this anthology — hence the publishing of this bilingual edition.

There are certain points that need to be further clarified here.

First, since the writings included in this anthology have been translated by different people, it is to be expected that the methods they have used vary in style. Thus, some translators follow the

original texts very closely, while others do so very loosely. The Editors are not in a position to re-translate the entire text. It is therefore advisable for the reader to treat this anthology more as a collection of literature than as an instrument for learning a language.

Second, the writings have been arranged, not according to the literary genres, but in alphabetical order, based on the authors' names in Hanyu Pinyin. Those authors who use their own names rather than pen names have these names in their original spelling included in parentheses. A brief biography of each author is given at the beginning of his writing(s).

Third, the characters' Chinese names etc. in the text are all given in Hanyu Pinyin. However, in exceptional circumstances the original spelling is retained e.g. "Hokkien Mee" is used instead of "Fujian Mian" for the purpose of authenticity.

We wish to extend our sincere thanks to the Singapore Arts Council for covering the costs of publishing this anthology. We are also grateful to Ms Nallamma Winslow, Ms Marilyn Chin, Mr M Basri Sumanee, the various translators such as Ng Suan Eng, Winnie Ng, Choo Liang Haw, Yang Shunsheng, Tang Lingling, Wong Chow Keng, Lee Ting Hui, Tan Sen Kwel and others for their invaluable help in the translation, editing and publishing of this anthology. Our gratitude is also extended to Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd. and other publishers/organisations for permission to use material originally published by them. The Editors also wish to thank the councillors and members of the Singapore Association of Writers for their interest and assistance.

*Wong Meng Voon
Wong Yoon Wah*

1st August 1982

Introduction

Singapore Chinese Literature in the Post-Independence Period (1965-1977)

Huang Mengwen (Wong Meng Voon)

In the past, Singapore Chinese literature and Malayan/Malaysian (especially West Malaysian) Chinese literature were regarded as one single entity and known in general as "Malayan Chinese literature". However, since 1965 when Singapore broke away from Malaysia to set up an independent republic of its own, things have changed. Since then, the mass media has split up, resulting in each of the two countries printing and circulating its own books, periodicals and, in particular, newspapers. As a consequence, it has not been easy for the two peoples to have access to each other's literary publications and to know of the literary activities on the other side of the causeway. Except for the more famous ones, they do not even know who the writers are in each other's country. Although such a phenomenon goes against tradition and is not to our satisfaction, we cannot but recognize and accept it as a reality.

Singapore Chinese literature has since developed independently and become an important link in the chain of literature in the four languages of Singapore. Of course, as Singapore has a small population and a short history, its literary works, in terms of quality and quantity, cannot be compared to those of the literarily more advanced countries.

Briefly, the development of Malayan Chinese literature (including Singapore Chinese literature) can be divided into the following three stages:

1. from its debut until the end of World War II (i.e. 1919-1945);
2. from the end of world War II until Singapore's separation from Malaysia (i.e. 1945-1965); and
3. since Singapore's independence (i.e. 1965 to date) — it is still going on and will continue until the arrival of the fourth stage, if there is one. Of course, from 1965 onwards, Singapore Chinese literature and Malaysian Chinese literature should be discussed separately and not taken as one single entity (unless there are some unexpected major political changes in the two countries).

Most of the important works of the first stage have been included in *A Comprehensive Anthology of Modern Malayan Chinese Literature* compiled by Fang Xiu, and those of the second stage in *A Comprehensive Anthology of Singapore and Malayan Chinese Literature* compiled by the Singapore Island Society. The various introductory notes to these two anthologies give a detailed account of the historical background, writers and writings of the two stages. Therefore, there is no need for me to repeat them here.

Now, what this Introduction will discuss is mainly Singapore Chinese literature of the third stage up to the present moment, and I shall discuss it from the aspects of literary supplements, magazines and books which have emerged in Singapore over the past twelve years. As is generally known, the supplements of Singapore and Malaysian Chinese newspapers (be they purely literary ones or comprehensive ones which carry literary writings among other things) have all along played a very important rôle in pushing ahead the development of Chinese literature, especially before World War II when few books and magazines were published because of the inactive printing industry, the low purchasing power of readers, and for other reasons. The entire Chinese literary circle was then centered on the supplements. I do not think I am far wrong in saying that the present achievement of Singapore Chinese literature, however negligible it may be, can be chiefly attributed to the supplements.

After the War, more and more literary magazines and books were published. These books and magazines and the supplements have since become three equally important forces which motivated and shaped local Chinese literature.

By 1965, the flame of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism had already died out. The whole nation devoted itself to the building of a new state with a heavy emphasis on industrial and economic development, thus neglecting cultural activities for a while. Literary activities were then at a low ebb (especially during the first few years of Independence). However, in recent years, such activities have shown signs of picking up again.

To suit the taste of readers, newspaper supplements of the stage, i.e. the third stage, carry large quantities of kung-fu fiction or chivalrous sagas and Hong Kong/Taiwan styled love stories. Thus, the content and nature of the supplements have changed slightly. In fact, in the second stage, there was already such a phenomenon, but it grew more marked in the third stage.

Nevertheless, there are still a number of newspaper supplements

which adhere to the time-honoured tradition and continue to feature local literary works. Of these, the more important ones are "Literature", "Sunday Fiction", "Morning Stars", "Star-cloud" and "Culture" in *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (the last two are supplements of a comprehensive nature); "Youth Corner", "New Era", "Sunday Literature", "Off-Business Hours" and "Life" in *Nanyang Siang Pau* (the last two are supplements of a comprehensive nature); "New Wind" in *Shin Min Daily*, "New Generation" and "Camel" in *Min Pao Daily*; and "Flag" in *Chern Sian Pau*. Some of these supplements stopped publication not long after they were started, but were soon replaced by new ones under different names but with similar contents. All of them have contributed greatly towards the cultivation of a new force in the literary front.

On New Year's Day every year, *Sin Chew* and *Nanyang* usually carry an article of a summing-up nature on the development of Chinese literature in Singapore or Singapore-Malaysia in the preceding year, for the benefit of those who care for or who wish to study local literature. One of the special features of Chinese newspaper supplements is that they cater for the needs of all kinds of readers. For example, there are columns like "Culture" which publish mainly scholarly works (including literary criticism and research) of academicians and writers in the cultural field, and "New Era" which publishes mainly works of well known mature literary writers. There are also columns like "School Life" for college and secondary school students to practise writing and "Teenagers' Corner" and "Children's Corner" for younger students. With so many different columns, the newspapers provide an opportunity for almost everyone who is industrious and interested in writing to have his/her works published. In addition, there is "Women's Column" exclusively for women, and "Life" column which is chiefly for workers. In recent years, a "Bilingual Section" meant for language learning (especially Second Language) has also been added. When reading the literary works published in this column, with both the English and Chinese versions side by side, readers not only learn a second language but also enjoy reading the works. This is yet another special feature of Chinese newspapers.

About fifty literary periodicals have been published in Singapore since 1965, of which more than eighty per cent are of a purely literary nature while the rest are comprehensive ones which also carry literary works. Major literary magazines published during this period are *Island Literature*, *New Poetry Monthly*, *Hunter*, *Construction*, *Singapore Literature*, *The Mangrove* and *Literature*

Monthly. The last three are still in circulation now. *Singapore Literature* is a quarterly published by the Educational Publications Bureau and *The Mangrove* an annual by the (former) Nanyang University Poetry Society. *Literature Monthly*, as the name suggests, was published once a month (though it changed to twice yearly from 1978) by the Singapore Association of Writers. These three can be considered to be the most outstanding purely literary magazines (Chinese) in Singapore at present.

The literary magazines published during this period have at least the following salient features:

1. The published works are more varied in both content and form, and each publication is able to advance along its line and co-exist in harmony with other magazines of different literary schools (although in the late sixties there were heated arguments between some writers of the Realist School and those of the Modernist School). There are even cases of works of different styles and different schools appearing in the same publication. This seldom happened in the previous two periods.
2. Leftwing publications which dominated the local literary scene in the fifties and early sixties are on the decline. This is mainly because the reading taste of Singaporeans has changed considerably in the past ten years or more. Moreover, as such publications are usually "undesirable" in nature, most of them are banned or prohibited from circulation by the authorities.
3. More and more comprehensive periodicals are setting aside space for publishing literary works. These periodicals include the *Singapore Monthly*, *Struggle News*, *Courageous Herald*, *Citizens* and *The World of Knowledge* (now defunct). This shows that Chinese literature is now receiving much attention among some publishers in Singapore.
4. Of the approximately fifty literary magazines published during this period, fourteen (most of them being of a purely literary nature) are published by local secondary schools: these include *Excelsior* of the Catholic Junior College, *The Echo* of Chung Cheng High School and *Meadow* of Whampoa Secondary School. These publications have contributed immensely towards the promotion of a favourable atmosphere for study and the cultivation of successors on the literary front.
5. Magazines which carry articles in two languages (i.e. English and Chinese) have also been appearing in the literary world in recent years. *Prospect* and *Youth Monthly* are typical examples. This of course has relevance to the bilingual policy of the Govern-

ment, and magazines in the other languages are, perhaps, also moving towards this direction.

Of all the books published in Singapore in the post-independence period, the following two comprehensive anthologies are the most important:

1. *A Comprehensive Anthology of Modern Malayan Chinese Literature* – compiled by Fang Xiu and published by The World Book Company from 1970 to 1972. This anthology contains important Singapore and Malayan Chinese literary works published during the period 1919-1942. It consists of ten large volumes – two on (literary) theory and criticism, two on fiction, one on drama, one on poetry, one on essays, two on the drama movement and one on the historical data of publications – totalling 5,636 pages and about four million words.
2. *A Comprehensive Anthology of Singapore and Malayan Chinese Literature* – compiled by the Singapore Island Society and published by the Educational Publications Bureau from 1971 to 1974. This anthology contains important Singapore and Malayan Chinese literary works published during the period 1945-1965. It consists of eight large volumes – one on (literary) theory, two on essays, two on fiction, one on poetry, one on drama and one on historical data – totalling 6,996 pages and more than six million words.

In these two anthologies, Singapore and Malayan literary works were put together because in the past they were inseparable. In the future, any anthology of this type will probably have to be separated for the convenience of reading and research.

In all, 408 Chinese literary works consisting of poetry, fiction (both short stories and full-length novels), plays, literary theories and criticisms, essays, collections, etc. were published in Singapore during this period, as can be seen in the following table:

*Chinese Literary Books Published in Singapore (1965-1977)

Year of Publication	Poetry	**Fiction	Play	Theory/ Criticism	†Essay	††Collection	Total
1965	4	4	5	1	2	0	16
1966	2	5	1	1	3	1	13
1967	6	2	0	2	3	1	14
1968	11	5	1	1	4	0	22
1969	7	16	4	2	9	3	41
1970	15	10	1	4	7	3	40
1971	8	5	2	3	9	1	28
1972	10	8	2	3	15	3	41
1973	5	11	4	3	10	1	34
1974	8	3	4	4	9	2	30
1975	1	8	3	5	18	1	36
1976	4	15	0	5	14	4	42
1977	7	20	0	1	13	10	51
Total	88	112	27	35	116	30	408

* Including works of non-Singapore writers published in Singapore but excluding works of Singapore writers published outside Singapore.

** Including short stories, novellets and novels.

† Including travel accounts, critical essays (except theories and criticisms).

†† Including works of various genres written by one writer or several writers.

The above table shows that during the third stage, essays topped the list of publications with 116 books, followed next by fiction and still next by poetry, while there were comparatively fewer plays and collections.

If we compare the number of Singapore-published literary books in Chinese with that in the other three languages of the same period, we will notice that Chinese publications are in the lead in terms of quantity. Please look at the following table for a comparison:

Comparison of Literary Books Published in Singapore in the Four Languages (1965-1977)

	Chinese	English	Malay	Tamil
Poetry	88	26	4	4
Fiction	112	15	26	9
Play	27	4	2	0
Total	227	45	32	13

(Main source of statistics: Singapore National Library)

The above table shows that during this period the number of Singapore-published books in Chinese was more than double that

in the other three languages combined. In fact, the comparison has been confined to only the three main literary genres. If other genres such as essays, literary criticism and collections are taken into consideration, the disparity will probably be even greater. Of course, we are just speaking in terms of quantity. Quality-wise, we are unable to make any useful comparison because not many translations have been done thus far. A qualitative comparison is virtually impossible until and unless most of these works have been properly translated.

In my opinion, the reasons why Chinese literary publications far exceed the publications in the other languages in quantity are mainly as follows:

1. Chinese newspapers have put a great effort into encouraging literary creations, and have done so over such a long period that it has already become a tradition. English newspapers, on the other hand, have done very little in this respect. There are also literary supplements in the Malay and Tamil newspapers (appearing mostly on Sundays), but quantity-wise they can hardly be compared with the Chinese newspapers.
2. The price of a Chinese-language book is generally lower than that of, say, an English-language book. It usually costs not more than S\$2/- or even S\$1/-, and is well within the reach of students and low-income readers. One possible reason for this phenomenon is that publishers are aware that no profit can be expected from the sale of literary books. So, they keep the prices down. By so doing, they are seen to be contributing towards the cultural cause and not just thinking of profit. The books also serve as an advertisement for their own companies, and enhance their prestige and status in the cultural circle.
3. Many Chinese schools have formed literary societies to study, *inter alia*, the technique of creative writing. They also put up wall-bulletins and publish magazines to accommodate students' works. In addition, there are teachers-in-charge to give guidance and, from time to time, well-known figures in the literary field are invited to speak on the subject. All this has helped to raise the students' interest in reading and writing literary works. Schools in the other language streams seem to be less enthusiastic in this respect.

The writings of each of the three stages mentioned above have their own characteristics irrespective of whether they are published in newspaper supplements, magazines or in book form. Generally

speaking, during the first stage, the local literary world was almost entirely monopolized by writers who had migrated from China. Since the themes of their writings mainly revolved around personalities and events in China, their works are filled with feelings of nostalgia.

The second stage saw the budding of local writers who were just as good as the writers from China. Some of them even outdid the latter to emerge as the mainstay of the local literary world. Works of this period were mostly anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, anti-feudalistic and anti-yellow culture in content. There were also writings which exposed the darker side of society and reflected the life of the middle- and lower-income groups. Student and trade union movements also became popular themes of the time. There was a strong flavour of realism in the writing.

When it came to the third stage, local Chinese literature took on a new look. As the majority of the writers of this period were born and bred locally, they wrote purely from the point of view of Singaporeans, and their writing also showed changes in content. These writers not only curse darkness but also praise the brighter side of life — they praise nation-building in Singapore and the industrious people. “We Have Two Million Capable Brothers” (poetry) by Liu Beian and “I am a Little Artist of the Republic” (poetry) by Su Zaidun are typical examples. Some writers who were already known in the fifties, e.g. Lian Shisheng (deceased), Miao Xiu, Li Rulin, Zhao Rong, Li Guo, Zhou Can, Du Hong, Miao Mang, Xie Ke and Chen Fan, continue to write and publish books. During this period, there also emerged some writers who, under the strong influence of modern literary trends in Europe and America, are bent on using metaphorical, symbolic and abstract techniques to depict the complex spiritual aspects of modern man. Writers representative of this group are Wang Runhua, Dan Ying, Mu Lingnu, Xie Qing, Meng Zhongji, Zhen Zhen, Nan Zi, Wan Yanji, Ho Lanning, Wen Kai et al. There is yet another group of writers whose style of writing seems to lie between the Realists and the Modernists. At present, they appear to be still groping their way forward. I hope that they will one day produce some major works and bring fresh air to the literary circle of this tiny island state.

(November 1977)

Note: This monograph was written for and read at the Conference of ASEAN Writers held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 1st — 3rd December 1977.

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