

ESSAYS ON CHINESE LITERATURE : A Comparative Approach

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Essays on Chinese Literature

A Comparative Approach

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WONG YOON WAH



SINGAPORE UNIVERSITY PRESS
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

© 1988 Singapore University Press
Kent Ridge, Singapore 0511

ISBN 9971-69-109-4 (Paper)

Typeset and Printed by:
G. T. Printing & Trading (Pte) Ltd.
1092 Lower Delta Road #03-10/12
Singapore 0316. Tel: 2702639

PREFACE

序言

The thirteen essays collected in this book are studies of Chinese literature from a comparative perspective. The viewpoints adopted for the interpretation and methods of analysis are those of modern Western literary criticism, with due regard to the peculiarities of the Chinese literary tradition. In publishing this collection of essays, the intention is to introduce the comparative approach to the study of Chinese literature in Singapore with three purposes in mind: to bring fresh insights into Chinese literature, to place Chinese literature in a wider perspective and to make Chinese literature more accessible to non-specialists. I hope this approach will help to avert any trace of cultural chauvinism or parochialism.

The first nine essays included in this book are devoted to the study of twentieth-century Chinese literature. The essays entitled "The 'New Tide' that Came from America", "Imagism and Hu Shi's Programme for Literary Revolution of 1917" and "The Influence of Western Literature on China's First Modern Story" may serve as good introductions to modern Chinese literary ideas and trends because they show how China's traditional literature was combined with Western influences to create a literature of new values and consciousness for the Chinese people. Those who wonder whether the study of modern Chinese literature is worth the effort should read "The Study of Modern Chinese Literature in Japan Today". Each of the other four essays dealing with modern Chinese literature examines in depth a major fiction writer and his representative work. The works selected for analyses, including Shen Congwen's *The Border Town*, Qian Zhongshu's *Fortress Besieged* and Lao She's *Little Po's Birthday*, are representative of the strength and diversity of modern Chinese fiction. The lives and writings of Yu Dafu and Lao She are studied with special reference to Singapore.

The last four essays collected in this book are comparative studies of classical Chinese literature. These essays directly or indirectly attempt to demonstrate the common and sometimes unique qualities of Chinese and Western literary theories and practices. Students of comparative literature may find these essays interesting.

Without the help and stimulation of various people, it is certain that these essays would never have been written. My teacher, Prof. Chow Tse-tsung of University of Wisconsin, has given constant encouragement and provided invaluable counsel. Prof. C. T. Hsia, Mr. George Kao and Mr. Stephen Soong have offered thoughtful suggestions for some of the essays. Many of my colleagues and friends deserve my thanks. I am especially grateful to Prof. Edwin Thumboo, Dr. Kirpal Singh, Mr. Robert Yeo and Dr. Wong Meng Voon. I am also grateful to Miss Patricia Tay of Singapore University Press for her editorial work and Madam Tan Sah Mui who typed the manuscripts with dedication. My gratitude is also extended to *Chinese Culture, Renditions* and *Tamkang Review* in which the early forms of some of these essays were published.

National University of Singapore
1988

Wong Yoon Wah

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1

A Chinese Writer's Vision of Modern Singapore: A Study of Lao She's Novel *Little Po's Birthday*

The Least Known Work of Lao She

There are works of literature which can be understood and enjoyed whether or not we know anything about their authors or the non-literary background of the works. But there are literary works whose significance can best be gauged only by having knowledge of the authors' experiences or the socio-political backgrounds of the works concerned.

Thus, King Hu (胡金銓) in his *Lao She and His Works* (老舍和他的作品) pointed out that a good reader of Lao She (1899–1966)¹ must first know how to appreciate *dou zhier* (豆汁兒) and other Beijing regional dishes. *Dou zhier* is a favourite among Beijing's lower class people who are the main characters in Lao She's fiction. What King Hu wanted to stress was that a reader of Lao She must have some knowledge of Beijing's lower class society.²

Lao She decidedly belongs to the writers whose works fall under the second category. I also agree with King Hu's statement. However, among the works of Lao She, there is at least one exception. *Little Po's Birthday* (小坡的生日)³ which was written in Singapore in 1930 requires understanding of another kind of background.

If we believe that a good reader of Lao She's fiction should be someone who enjoys *dou zhier*, then I should say that only those who like durian can really understand *Little Po's Birthday*. Durian, the king of tropical fruits, is very important in the life of Malaysians and Singaporeans. The local people think that the durian is of such excellent taste that it surpasses all other fruits in the world. However, the smell of the fruit is offensive to foreigners. The outside rind of the fruit is

¹About the torture of Lao She by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution which caused his death, see "An Interview with Mrs. Lao She" (夜探老舍夫人), *Ming Pao Monthly* (明報月刊), No. 158 (February, 1979), pp. 65–71.

²See *Lao She and His Works* (Hong Kong: Culture and Life, 1978), pp. 1–2.

³*Little Po's Birthday* (Shanghai: Chen-Guang, n.d.). The quotations in what follows are taken from this text.

covered with thick, sharp-pointed, coarse spikes. The spikes make it a formidable object to hold and even more difficult to split open. No one seems to agree when describing the flavour, which has been likened to garlic, onion, dung, or rotten egg.

The taste and form of *Little Po's Birthday* may be compared to this strange fruit of the tropics. Readers in Singapore and Malaysia rate the novel highly. Elsewhere however, *Little Po's Birthday*, which remains Lao She's least known novel, is not as well appreciated.

Readers in this region may be disturbed to know what some Chinese scholars have said about *Little Po's Birthday*. C.T. Hsia (夏志清) dismisses the work lightly as "a fantasy for children".⁴ King Hu, among the most intelligent and erudite of Lao She scholars, considers the work to be too inferior to read because there is nothing new in the contents. As for its form, he says, it is neither a fantasy nor a novel.⁵ Ma Sen (馬森) showed more interest in the work than any other Chinese scholar. Comparing it with Saint-Exupéry's (1900–1944). *The Little Prince* (1943), he nevertheless considers *Little Po's Birthday* not the type of fantasy for adult readers.⁶

In the West however, *Little Po's Birthday* is treated more seriously, Ranbir Vohra and Zbigniew Slupski provide a number of insights into the novel, but their discussions of the theme and the Singaporean aspect of the novel are far from adequate.⁷

The Singaporean aspects in the novel are overlooked or misunderstood. The scholars so far cannot provide us with a broader and at the same time deeper insight into the novel simply because they are handicapped by a poor knowledge of the overseas Chinese in the South Seas (南洋, Nanyang). Setting the story of *Little Po's Birthday* against the background of the social transformation in Singapore, I have come to the belief that the details within the story and the precise arrangement of these have heavy social implications regarding local overseas Chinese

⁴C.T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), pp. 166–67.

⁵*Lao She and His Works*, p. 69.

⁶Ma Sen, "On Lao She's Fiction" (論老舍的小說), *Ming Pao Monthly*, No. 68 (August, 1971), pp. 41–42.

⁷See Ranbir Vohra, *Lao She and the Chinese Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 53–57; Zbigniew Slupski, "The Works of Lao She During the First Phase of His Career", *Studies in Modern Chinese Literature* (Berlin: Academic Verlag, 1964), pp. 77–95. [It is included in *The Evolution of a Modern Chinese Writer: An Analysis of Lao She's Fiction* (Prague: Oriental Institute in Academia, 1966).]

and Singapore. These implications of Little Po's story are not a separable part of the work.

Lao She's Singapore Experience

There is a close relationship between *Little Po's Birthday* and Lao She's response to the local society. This may be explained by looking at the non-literary background, provided here by a brief account of the author's life experience in Singapore.

The novel was written in 1930 when Lao She lived in Singapore as a high school teacher. The novel consists of 60,000 characters. He wrote the first 40,000 characters in Singapore, leaving the rest to be finished in Shanghai after his return to China. He recalls in 1935:

The first half of the day was spent completely in classes and correcting students' exercises. The weather in the afternoon was very hot, and one could not do anything till after four o'clock. I could only write a few pages after supper. I had to drive away the mosquitoes from time to time when writing.... The weather was hot and humid and I just didn't feel like working. It was a hard job for me to write a thousand characters at one time.... In four months, from the time I began to write till my departure, I had finished 40,000 characters only. I was unable to go any faster. The novel contains 60,000 characters. The last 20,000 characters were written during my stay as a guest in Zheng Zhenduo (鄭振鐸) house in Shanghai....⁸

We know very little about Lao She's life in Singapore. All we know today is based on his own account in an article entitled "How I Wrote *Little Po's Birthday*" (我怎樣寫小坡的生日).

In 1924 Lao She sailed to London where he taught Chinese at the School of Oriental Studies of London University. On his way back to China in October 1929, he spent six months in Singapore. While in Singapore, he earned a living by teaching in Nanyang Huaqiao Zhongxue (南洋華僑中學), better known today as Hwa Chong.⁹ When he was in London, he admired Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) whose novels and stories are based on his dramatic experiences in Southeast Asia. Lao She also wanted to gather material for a novel as Conrad had done before. However, his motivation was far different. He wanted to

⁸Lao She, "How I Wrote *Little Po's Birthday*", *Lao-niu po-che* (老牛破車) (Hong Kong: Universe Bookstore, 1935; 1969 reprint), pp. 26-27.

⁹See Lin Wan-ching (林萬菁), *Chinese Writers in Singapore and Their Influences* (中國作家在新加坡及其影響) (Singapore: Wan-li Bookstore, 1979), pp. 19-22.

write a novel about the Chinese immigrants who had done so much for the development of Southeast Asia:

As I left Europe, there were two factors which had decided my journey. First, I had enough money to travel to Singapore; second, I had desired to visit the South Seas (Nanyang) a long time ago. I wished to gather material for my fiction writing as Joseph Conrad had done before.... In his works, almost all leading characters are white men, while the Asians play the minor roles only. The latter are used for the purpose of decoration and of adding some exotic setting. I also thought of writing a novel, using the Chinese immigrants as the protagonists. In Conrad's novels the South Seas is the white men's poison. The jungle cannot be conquered by the white men who in turn are to be swallowed by it. I wanted to write a different story. The fact is that if it had not been for the Chinese, would the development of the South Seas have been possible? The Chinese can bear the greatest hardships....¹⁰

Teaching unexpectedly held him in the world of children. He had neither time nor money which were needed for travelling. Finally he dropped the idea of writing an historical novel on the overseas Chinese. Instead, he wrote a story with children whom he knew intimately as the main characters.

Giving up my ambitious project, I began to write *Little Po's Birthday*. I loved the kids and was interested in their activities. I had no time to study the daily life of the grownups in Singapore. However, the boys and girls in the street attracted me. I finally wanted to write what I knew best in the South Seas, using the children as the main characters. It is perhaps the smallest world of the South Seas.¹¹

On the novel's form and content, Lao She pointed out that "although children are its main characters, it is not a fantasy" because the work contains "ideas which do not belong to the world of children".¹² It is clear that Lao She used the form of fantasy to portray "the smallest world of the South Seas". The motive is clear in the story: he wanted to use a story of children to express his vision of Singapore society, of which Chinese emigrants comprise the great majority of the population.

When Lao She arrived in Singapore, he had a half-finished novel with

¹⁰*Lao-niu po-che*, pp. 23-24.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 27.

him. It was a love story of about 40,000 characters in length. He left it unfinished and it was never published.

The language was all right, but the theme did not satisfy me. If I were still in Europe, I could have completed it. Once I was in Singapore, it made me belittle a story of this kind.¹³

In other words, Lao She began to place more importance on ideas and social problems in his work than on any other elements.

Lao She's contact with local students is worth noting. He was astonished by the teenagers who were preoccupied with thoughts of revolution.

My students were teenagers of about fifteen or sixteen years old. What they said in conversations and in their essays surprised me. Their progressive thoughts and their earnestness to learn had never been found in the students during my five-year stay in other countries. I should admit that they were a little bit childish, but their words and actions stopped me from laughing at them. I began to realise that the new ideas were to be found in Asia, not in the West....

Today if you want to understand what is revolution, you had better come to Asia to study it. The reason is that the peoples of Asia have suffered all the kinds of oppression known to mankind. They really need a revolution. The students from the middle class families in the United Kingdom never thought of social and political problems. On the other hand, the middle class boys and girls in Singapore were only concerned with the social and political problems.... As soon as I met them I stopped writing the half-finished novel entitled *As It Is* (大概如此). My thinking had been greatly changed, and I couldn't continue the writing of the love story....¹⁴

Since the author had discarded his half-finished love story, it would be reasonable to assume that he would very unlikely write a children's story just for the sake of fantasy, which leads me to conclude that Lao She might have used the children's story as a clever disguise for some abstract ideas. Did the author begin with a theme he wanted to express in a story or with a story whose theme he gradually came to recognise? The answer to this question is of secondary importance in our reading of *Little Po's Birthday*. A matter that should be kept in mind in reading

¹³Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁴Ibid.

the book is what the children and society in the story represent. It is a story of the overseas Chinese and Singapore society in the 1930s.

Lao She's Vision of Singapore Today

The "smallest world of the South Seas" that Lao She wanted to write about is represented by Singapore. He chose Singapore mainly because it is the only place in the South Seas he had visited. Singapore was also the most well-known place in the South Seas for the Chinese, because it served as the springboard for the Chinese emigrants at the turn of the century. The scope of the story is limited to the daily life of a single protagonist, Little Po's or Xiaopo (小坡), who is the son of a Chinese businessman. The first half of the novel, which consists of 18 chapters, is a description of Little Po's conversations with his parents and sister and of him playing with his friends, going to school and so on. The second half of the book tells about his adventure in a long dream.

I did not have the chance to read *Little Po's Birthday* until I had taught for a number of years at Nanyang University in Singapore. In other words, I had a good knowledge of Singaporean society and its history before I read the novel. At my first reading, the garden imagery in the novel caught my attention. It seemed to suggest an additional level of meaning beyond the local reality. Chapters 4 and 5 of the novel are named "In the Garden" (在花園裏) and "Still in the Garden" (還在花園裏) respectively. The garden of Little Po's family also appears in other chapters. The Botanic Garden where thousands of exotic tropical plants still flourish today, appears in Chapter 10. The dream adventure of Little Po also takes place in an unnamed garden.

Modern Singapore: The Image of the Garden City

The garden setting in which the story of Little Po unfolds evokes the present day Garden City image of Singapore. Readers who know Singapore well would think Lao She rather farsighted because the novel was written in 1930. Since independence in 1965, Singapore has transformed itself into the cleanest and greenest city in Southeast Asia. Orchids, Frangipani, Bougainvillea, and Flame of the Forest trees have always been part of the city's beauty. Its aim to have as many trees and shrubs planted as possible to turn Singapore into a garden city has been achieved in the past few years. Recently the Republic announced that more money and energy would be expended over the next few years to turn the clean and green city state into a tropical "Garden of Eden".

When the project is completed in a few years' time, even the downtown area will have scented flowers and fruit trees which will bring back more birds and bees to the city.¹⁵

The similarities between Lao She's garden and today's Garden City are more than casual. Arriving from London — which had become a modern city, if not a concrete jungle — in the 1930s, Lao She, like anyone else, could have been deeply attracted to the luxurious vegetation of the tropical forest, and the flowers that bloomed all year round. In Chapter 3, the author introduces the world of Little Po as follows:

Singapore, the place where Little Po lives, is without four seasons. The weather is hot all year round. No matter whether they are evergreens or not, all the trees are green at all times. The flowers are always blooming and the insects are always crying.... During the New Year days of Little Po's, the dragonflies and butterflies are fluttered freely in the air.... (p. 23)

It is no wonder that Lao She had the vision that Singapore could be developed into a Garden City.

A Happy Multi-Racial Society

There are other meanings embodied in or implied by the garden setting. It is apparently designed to suggest that Singapore, a garden-like city island, is a multi-racial society.

Little Po's father, like most of the Chinese emigrants in the early days, came to Singapore in search of wealth and fortune, with no intention of staying permanently. He not only despised all non-Cantonese Chinese but was also prejudiced against the Malays and Indians. Little Po did not agree with his father because of his good heart and naivete. One day when his parents were out, he and his sister Xianpo invited two Malay girls and three Indian children home. Three others — two Fukienese and one Cantonese — were also invited. They spoke a common language and played happily. In the dream of Little Po, the same children of different races unite against a bad teacher.

The multi-racial children in the garden remind us of the popula-

¹⁵For the "Garden City" planning, see Alan F. C. Choe, "Public Housing, Urban Renewal, and Transformation of the Environment", *Towards Tomorrow: Essays on Development and Social Transformation in Singapore* (Singapore: N.T.U.C., 1973), pp. 25-40. See also "Bringing Singapore Closer to a 'Garden of Eden'", *Straits Times*, 11 May 1979.

tion of Singapore today which is 76 per cent Chinese, 15 per cent Malay, 7 per cent Indian and 2 per cent other minorities. The new Singaporean today, like Little Po, does not think of himself as a member of a race but rather, as part of a community.

Chapter 2 of the novel is entitled 'Racial Problems' (種族問題) in which Little Po solves the puzzle of racial problems. Little Po thinks that all children, no matter what ethnic group they belong to, belong to one family. "He who loves yellow wears a yellow face, people have dark skin because they like the dark colour. The face and body of a man can be changed at any time." In order to argue that children of all ethnic groups will grow up to be the same, he says: "Look at our chickens! They have changed colour, and now they're all black or red. Little children can change too" (p. 19).

Accepting the multi-racial and democratic way of life is the first step towards identifying with Singapore. Although the identification of the Malay, Chinese, Indian and other minorities with Singapore was essentially a post-World War II phenomenon, Lao She probably perceived the sense of a Singapore identity and discovered the characteristics of the new Singaporean among children of the younger generation in 1930.

Ideas of an Integrated School for Children of all Ethnic Groups

In Chapters 6, 7 and 8, the author exposes the absurdities in the educational system through the eyes of Little Po. Little Po, like present day Singaporean leaders, is strongly against the linguistically segregated schools of the colonial days. He strongly favours an integrated school for multi-racial children.

At the end of the one-month vacation, Little Po and his friends are separated because each of them has to go to a different school. Little Po is a Cantonese, so he is sent to a Cantonese school. His form teacher always falls asleep in the classroom. Little Po will then sneak out of the classroom to play and return before the teacher wakes up. Sanduo (三多), the Fukienese boy, remains at home because his father has hired an old tutor to teach him. Sanduo has to memorise the texts, the meanings of which he does not understand at all. Two Malay girls attend the Malay school. They arrive at the school at 11 o'clock in the morning and go home soon after meeting the teacher. Little Po thinks that the English school which his two Indian friends attend is better than the others because children of all races can play together in the same school.

Little Po just can't understand why Nanxing (南星) and he cannot

attend the same school. If we get together every day how wonderful it would be.... There are many things I just can't understand. All of us are students but we have to read different textbooks and go to school in different ways (p. 55).

The problems that bother Little Po also worry the policy makers of the Singapore Government. They have realised that letting the children of all ethnic groups play together, sharing a common content syllabus and integrated extracurricular activities are important in fostering the growth of a Singapore identity. When the children play together and grow up in the same school, the barriers between racial, communal and linguistic groups break down automatically.

The linguistically segregated schools of the colonial days have, over the years, given way to physically and educationally integrated schools which have been vaguely suggested by Little Po. The Singapore Government began to build integrated schools in 1959, bringing together in the same building children of different language streams. After 1965, effective bilingualism was implemented. Parents had a choice of one of the four official languages, which are English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil, as the medium of instruction for their children. In addition, they had to choose another as their second language. Thus the new Singaporeans not only possess at least one Asian language but are able to communicate directly with each other in English or in one other Asian language.¹⁶

Characteristics of the New Singaporean

The story of Little Po is told in the third person limited narration. In this technique, the story is told from the outside viewpoint by a narrator who is not omniscient. Little Po in the novel is a viewpoint character who is also the protagonist. The author's choice of this third person limited technique has obvious philosophical significance. Little Po, as a viewpoint character, symbolises the new Singaporean who is growing up. As we have seen in the preceding pages, we are told by the activities of Little Po and his friends that the children of the younger generation are more united, emotionally and psychologically prepared to build an equal and just society. This is one of the reasons which motivated the author to write the story of children. He says in "How I Write *Little Po's Birthday*":

¹⁶For changes in the Singapore education system, see A. Rahim Ishak, "The Educational Process and Nation Building", *Towards Tomorrow*, pp. 41-48.

After having lived in Singapore for half a year, I had yet to see, even once, a European child playing with the Asian children. I was rather bothered. So I wanted to bring all the Asian children together to one place to play. Perhaps in the future they will stand together and struggle for a common objective.¹⁷

The characteristics of the new Singaporean can be perceived in Little Po's words and actions. We have already noticed some of them in the above discussion. He has identified with Singapore by accepting a multi-racial society which is symbolised by the garden. He is full of love for everyone. He respects the Indian watchman and the Malay policeman. He disagrees with his father when the latter slaps the Indian watchman in the face for a trivial matter. He stops and carries parcels for old ladies in the street. In school, he protects the helpless and the weak. Whenever his innocent classmates are beaten up, they come to Little Po for help instead of going to their teacher. Little Po speaks Malay fluently and gets along well with the shopkeepers. His mother therefore brings him along to bargain whenever she goes shopping.

The novel was written in 1930 and Little Po is about fifteen years old. He belongs to the generation of the present day Singaporean leaders. The average age of the ministers of the first generation leadership is about sixty. We may assume that when Lao She was in Singapore in 1930 he might have seen many children in the classroom or in the street whom he thought could grow up to become the leaders of Singapore.

Conclusion

With such an approach to the story, it is easy to understand the author's statement that "there are ideas which do not belong to the world of children", by which he probably meant the social implications and the author's vision of modern Singapore. These additional levels of meaning suggested by the concrete experience of Little Po form the force that unifies the many diverse elements making up the work.

We can discover the full meaning of this neglected work of Lao She only by a thorough and responsive reading of the story. Such a reading requires knowledge of the work's non-literary background.

¹⁷Lao-niu po-che, p. 28.

2

Yu Dafu in Exile: His Last Days in Sumatra

Ever since Yu Dafu's disappearance in August 1945, numerous efforts have been made to learn the inside story of his last days in Sumatra. The first eye-witness account came out in 1945, one year after he was reported missing. Hu Yuzhi 胡愈之, a well-known Chinese intellectual, spent the greater part of his life in exile in Sumatra together with Yu Dafu. He was the leader of a group of Singapore refugees to which Yu Dafu belonged. Hu made his report in August 1946 after returning to Singapore, where he was editor-in-chief of the *Nanqiao Daily*. Hu's report, the fullest and most authoritative account of Yu Dafu's final days,¹ was followed by a number of accounts written by Yu's fellow refugees and local Chinese in Sumatra, including the famous Chinese writers Wang Renshu 王任叔 and Wang Jinding 汪金丁, who gave testimony concerning events of which they had full knowledge.² Though these materials contain minor errors, they provided the most complete version of the story available up to 1969. Our understanding of Yu Dafu's life in Sumatra is based chiefly upon these Chinese sources.

Many accounts of Yu Dafu's experience in Sumatra have been published in Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong during the last twenty years.³ Most of them are second-hand reports from interviews with people who had some contact with Yu, but few new facts were

This is a free translation of an article entitled "Yu Dafu's Exile in Sumatra as Reported in Chinese and Japanese Sources" 中日人士所見郁達夫在蘇門答臘的流亡生活在 *Essays on Chinese and Western Literary Relations* 中西文學關係研究 (Taipei: Dongda Book Company 東大圖書公司, 1978), pp. 155–68. The article was first written in 1968 and revised after the publication of Suzuki Masao's interviews with Japanese who had contact with Yu Dafu in Sumatra (see note 4). It was updated again before publication.

¹Hu Yuzhi, *Yu Dafu de liuwang yu shizong* 郁達夫的流亡與失蹤 [Yu Dafu's Exile and Disappearance] (Hong Kong: Chiyuan Shuju 悅園書局, 1946).

²Wang Renshu and Wang Jinding's articles are collected in Li Bingren 李冰人 and Xie Yunsheng 謝雲聲, eds., *Yu Dafu jinian ji* 郁達夫紀念集 [In memoriam: Yu Dafu] (Singapore: Nanyang Tropical Publishing House 南洋熱帶出版社, 1958).

³Many of these writings are also collected in *In memoriam: Yu Dafu*. For recent Chinese sources dealing with Yu Dafu's life in Singapore and Sumatra, see Wong Yoon Wah (ed.), 郁達夫卷: 郁達夫妻兒敵友關於其晚年之回憶錄 [The Inside Story