

NOTES ON
THE HISTORY OF
MALAYAN CHINESE
NEW LITERATURE
1920-1942

FANG XIU

Translated by
ANGUS W. McDONALD, JR.

THE CENTRE FOR EAST ASIAN CULTURAL STUDIES
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EAST ASIAN CULTURAL STUDIES SERIES, No. 18

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c/o The Toyo Bunko
Honkomagome 2-chome, 28-21, Bunkyo-ku,
Tokyo, 113 Japan

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The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies

Printed by
Hinode Printing Co., Ltd.

馬華新文學史稿

Fang Xiu is an authority on the history of Malayan Chinese literature. Born in Swatow, Kwangtung Province, China, in the early 1920s, he finished his education at a teachers' training school before moving to Singapore on the eve of the outbreak of the Pacific War. He has since become a Singapore citizen. Over the years, he has worked on a number of Chinese newspapers in Singapore and Malaysia and, since 1951, has been editor of the Malaysia edition of the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and of one of its supplements, *Culture*. He has been also a part-time lecturer at the University of Singapore, teaching the history of Malayan Chinese New Literature, the history of Chinese new literature and seminars on the works of Lu Xun, etc. He is author of *A Brief History of Malayan Chinese New Literature*, *Changing Aspects of Malayan Chinese Literary Tendencies*, *The Tradition of Realism in Malayan Chinese New Literature*, *Five Years of Malayan Chinese Literature*, etc. He also edited *Collected Works of Malayan Chinese New Literature* and *Collected Works of Malayan Literature*. None of these works has yet been translated into English.

Angus W. McDonald, Jr., received his Ph.D. in Chinese history from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1975. He completed this translation while writing *The Urban Origins of Rural Revolution: Elites and the Masses in Hunan Province, China, 1911-1927* (University of California Press, 1977). He teaches at the University of Minnesota.

PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

The English translation of my book, *A Draft History of Malayan Chinese New Literature*, is now being published. Mr. Shigeru Ikuta of the Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies, who is responsible for its translation and publication projects, wrote from Tokyo, asking me to write a preface to the present translation. Having no particular aptitude for drafting such things as prefaces or postscripts, whenever I am asked to attempt it, I feel much as the Chinese writer, Yu Da-fu, must have felt when he wrote the following line in one of his poems: "I used to grumble, but now I'm tired of that. / I'm afraid it gives me away." Nevertheless, I am happy to write a few words to the readers of this English translation.

The original Chinese edition of the present work is in fact not a literary history, or a collection of materials. It is, rather, a mixture of descriptions of publication activities, writers and their works, and events, movements and controversies in the literary world. I called it *A Draft History*, since I believed that it had the character of an outline, tracing the development of Malayan Chinese New Literature during the twenty or so years prior to the outbreak of the Pacific War. I hoped that it might help others to carry the task further and write a "definitive" history. Extremely rough as the picture I drew was, it was well received because it was quite a novelty to the readers at that time. Naturally it is very premature and is not to be compared with the works of Southeast Asian history being produced in Singapore and Malaysia now. Study and research of Southeast Asian history has been proceeding for decades, while the study of the history of Malayan Chinese New Literature has just begun.

The English translation which is now coming out is not all the same in its contents as the original Chinese edition. It is much

more refined than the original. This is due to the wholehearted devotion over a number of years of Dr. Angus W. McDonald, Jr., translator, and of Mr. Ikuta, Miss Beverly Nelson, and Miss Tsuguko Morita of the Centre, who have been editing the translation and preparing it for publication. The maps and index are also not to be found in the original. If readers of the present English translation find it easy to read and are able to finish the volume with pleasure, it is really due to the efforts of those mentioned above.

I began drafting the original Chinese edition in the early 1960s. It was produced under really unsatisfactory circumstances. As I understand it, the work of writing of a literary history in other countries is done only after many volumes of the literary works themselves have been published, after the writers have become well known to readers and their evaluation firmly established. This was not at all the situation in Singapore and Malaysia in the early 1960s. The political realities at that time required us to make a preliminary summing-up of the Malayan Chinese literary movement during the period prior to the Pacific War. However, it was very hard to find even a single copy of the early works of our older writers. Moreover no one knew anything about the history of Malayan Chinese New Literature, when it began, how it developed, who the important writers were or what the main works were. Most of the works of Malayan Chinese literature before the Pacific War were published in newspaper supplements, a few in periodicals. Only two or three collections of stories were published. Destroyed in the war or simply lost over time, nine out of ten of these important publications could not be found. A number of books had been long out of print. What was left was only a few old newspapers preserved in some school libraries, and as they often were part of special collections of these libraries, it was not always easy for a person from outside to gain access to them.

At that time no library had copying machines or automatic microfilm equipment. Consequently, all material had to be copied by hand. Every day I went out to libraries which were miles away from home. I copied the Chinese characters one by

one. As the capacity of a single person is limited, I asked my friends to help in copying. To locate a single item often took several months. The hardships and joy of this kind of work, if I may say so, can be understood only by those who have experienced it. Stories and dramas of considerable length could not be copied *in toto*, so I usually copied only the few passages I thought I would need, or asked the library to make photocopies for me. Consequently, the collection and checking of material is far from complete. Adding to the difficulties, I was also at that time preoccupied with my own personal affairs; my household had no savings at all. This made it impossible for me to devote myself completely to sitting in libraries for long periods at a time reading and copying. Forced by these extremely unfavorable circumstances to curtail my earlier more ambitious plan for a complete history, I wrote the draft history, basing it only on the tables of contents of a few supplements and the passages I was able to copy from the works I had stumbled upon, and the few photocopies which I was able to arrange for libraries to make. Thus readers of the original Chinese edition probably sensed that many parts were incomplete. I am afraid that many such shortcomings also mar the present English translation, and I must assume responsibility for them. It is the author who is to be criticized and not the translator who was not in a position to improve on the original.

Mr. Ikuta assumed responsibility for this translation in the early 1970s. Since then I have explored more deeply the relevant materials and published a few new books like *Changing Aspects of Malayan Chinese Literary Tendencies*, *A Brief History of Malayan Chinese New Literature*, etc. I believe that they are somewhat better than *A Draft History*, and I once proposed to Mr. Ikuta that if possible *A Brief History* should be translated instead. But he said that the original plan to translate *A Draft History* could not be altered, since the translation work was almost finished. He also argued that *A Draft History*, a product of my earlier life, is imprinted with the passion of youth and thus would draw the affection of readers. I know that this last argument must be discounted as nothing but a kind compli-

ment and that it really is not true, but now, after consideration, I do think that for people in neighboring countries who want to study the Malayan Chinese New Literature Movement, an English translation of *A Draft History* might serve as well. It is no use to waste time and energy making another translation. If our readers understand Chinese, I invite them to consult the above-mentioned *A Brief History*,* in which some of the shortcomings in *A Draft History* are eliminated.

Finally, I would like to tell the readers of the present English translation that in Singapore and Malaysia, especially in the period prior to the Pacific War, there was not a single so-called professional writer. At that time most writers were journalists, teachers, students, or ordinary workers. They did not write for the sake of writing or for fame. They wrote only because they had sentiments and desires that needed expressing. The colonial realities caused them dissatisfaction and discontent. They wrote because they were exploding with strong love and hate, and because they wanted to reform and advance their society. They had no intention of becoming professional writers, nor did they ever imagine that after a few decades someone would try to collect their works and write a literary history. On the contrary, they hoped that their works would disappear together with the suffering of that terrible time. Intended for practical use, their creative works were somewhat hastily composed. From the viewpoint of the present they may seem not to be very well crafted. However, I sincerely hope that the readers, fully understanding the situation, will try to comprehend the substance of this literature and not be bothered by its occasional roughness.

Fang Xiu

March 1977
Singapore

PREFACE TO THE ORIGINAL EDITION*

In early 1960 I began gathering a rather complete collection of materials relating to pre-war Malayan Chinese literature. By the end of that year I had begun writing this book, planning to make a systematic, if not schematic, introduction to the Malayan Chinese literary publications, writers, and events of the twenty years preceding the outbreak of the Second World War. I hoped that this would be of use at some later time in the writing of a complete history of Malayan Chinese literature. Four years later, after much drafting and writing, I found I had written a work of some half a million characters. It was published serially in *Nebula*, the literary supplement of the *Singapore Daily*, and in bound form in three volumes by the Singapore World Press. The first volume deals with the first two periods in the history of the Malayan Chinese New Literature Movement, the Period of Sprouting (1920–25) and the Period of Leafing (1925–31). This volume was completed by the end of 1961 and published in 1962. The second volume concerned the Period of Blight (1932–36). The draft was completed at the end of 1962 and it was published in early 1964. The last volume covers the Period of Flowering (1937–42). It was completed and published at the end of 1964.

I want to call this a “draft history” because, while it may have laid the groundwork in this area of research, it can make no claim to be a definitive work. In the first place, I have hardly begun to discuss the historical background or the thoughts and personalities of the various writers. My purpose in compiling this “draft history” was only to provide some future historian with materials that would make his task easier. Because I want to see a proper and complete history of Malayan Chinese literature appear some day, I have included many quotations from original material, that I thought were especially important

to preserve. The shortcomings of my book should be seen as due to the limitations of time and energy. Another problem with my book is that the materials which I have been able to collect are not sufficiently complete. There are several important periodicals which I could not find, a number of writers whose careers I was unable to research, and other writers whose quoted works are not truly representative. Many, many difficulties stand in the way of overcoming these limitations, and one person is simply unable to do it. I hope that others who come after me will make further efforts.

During the past four years, aside from making visits to a physician, my entire time has been devoted to the compilation of this draft. There are many good books which I have lacked time to read, many motion pictures which I have missed, and even some plans for studying Malay which, although earlier contemplated, have been given up. This does not matter to me. However, many letters that I should have written or replied to have remained unwritten, many friends I should have visited I have not, many affairs of business have been neglected; from beginning to end I have worried about these things and regret them. I hope that those concerned will accept this book as an expression of my apology.

Finally, I was greatly assisted in the collection of materials for this book by my friend, Mr. Lin Xu-dian. Mr. Li Ting-hui also contributed much. These debts are here acknowledged with special thanks.

FANG XIU

November 1964

Singapore

EDITOR'S AND TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The present translation was made by Dr. Angus W. McDonald, Jr., by arrangement with the author and is based on the original Chinese edition (『馬華新文學史稿』) published in three volumes in 1962, 1963, and 1964 by the World Press (世界書局) in Singapore. The text was edited at the office of the Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies. With only a few important exceptions, all quotations and lists of the contents of literary supplements, which take up a considerable part of the original work, are omitted. Also omitted from this text are comments of contemporary literary historians. An attempt was also made to eliminate repetitiveness and duplication.

All Chinese personal names are transcribed according to the *pin-yin* system, but tonal signs are omitted. As for geographical names, we follow the *Times Atlas of the World*. In the Index there is a complete list of Chinese proper names with the original Chinese characters. All titles of books, newspapers, supplements, articles, etc., as well as the names and slogans of literary movements and controversies are translated into English. A complete list of the original titles or names in Chinese characters appears in the Index.

Those who have further interest in Malayan Chinese New Literature may consult the collection of literary works (『馬華新文學大系』) in ten volumes compiled by the author and was published by the World Press in 1972.*

The editor and translator express their deepest gratitude to those who assisted them in the course of translation, especially Mr. and Mrs. Toh Lam-seng, of the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (*Singapore Daily*), who arranged the communication with the author.

CONTENTS

	Page
Preface to the English Edition	ix
Preface to the Original Edition	xiii
Editor's and Translator's Note	xv
Introduction	
Origins and Periodization	3
Part One: Sprouting, 1920-1925	
Chapter I. Publications, Writers and Their Works	13
Publications	15
Writers and Their Works	19
Part Two: Leafing, 1925-1931	
Chapter II. Publications	27
First Stage, 1925-1926	27
<i>South Wind—Star Shine</i>	
Second Stage, 1927-1928	34
Supplements Published in Singapore—Supplements Published in Penang	
Third Stage, 1928-1931	41
Supplements Published in Singapore—Supplements by Youths—Supplements to the <i>Singapore Daily</i> — Supplements Published in Penang	
Chapter III. Writers and Their Works	56
First Stage, 1925-1926	56
Second Stage, 1927-1928	58
Third Stage, 1928-1931	62
Chapter IV. Literary Movements and Controversies	71
Anti-Feudalism and Anti-Aggression	71
New Literature Movement	75

Literary Criticism, Local Color, and Literary Groups . . .	81
Literary Criticism—Local Color—Literary Groups	
Other Controversies	87
Several Opinions—Psychologically Revolutionary Literature—Translation of Poetry	

Part Three: Blight, 1932–1936

Chapter V. Publications	99
First Stage, 1932–1934	99
Major Supplements—Minor Supplements—Supplements Published in Penang	
Second Stage, 1935–1936	112
Chapter VI. Writers and Their Works	118
Writers in Central Malaya	118
Writers in North Malaya	122
Short-Story Writers	124
Journalists	126
Critics and Commentators	131

Chapter VII. Literary Movements and Controversies . . .	141
Basic Themes	141
Drama Movement	146
The Problem of “Local Authors”	153
Language of the Masses Movement and the Anti-Revivalism Movement	158
Language of the Masses Movement—Anti-Revivalism Movement	
Controversies over “Reading Old Books” and “Several Supplements”	168
“Reading Old Books”—“Several Supplements”	
The Debate concerning “Several Problems Facing Malayan Chinese Literature”	174

Part Four: Flowering, 1937–1942

Chapter VIII. Publications	187
Supplements to the <i>Singapore Daily</i>	191
Supplements to the <i>South-Sea Commercial News</i>	197

Supplements to the <i>New People's Daily</i>	206
Supplements to the <i>Singapore Chinese Daily</i> , the <i>New World News</i> , and the <i>World News</i>	212
Magazines	217
Other Publications	220
Chapter IX. Writers and Their Works	225
Morning Star Group	225
Lion's Roar Group	235
Poets	236
Essayists	243
Short-Story Writers	246
Drama Workers	247
Critics and Commentators	249
Chapter X. Main Currents and Literary Movements ...	252
Main Currents	252
Resistance, Save-the-Nation—Resistance Literature—South-Sea Wartime Literature	
Major Literary Movements	266
Movement for the Popularization of Literature—The Literary Communication Movement—Poetry for the Masses Movement—Malayan Chinese New Enlightenment Movement	
Chapter XI. Minor Literary Movements and Controversies	287
Minor Literary Movements and Controversies in 1937	287
The Direction of Our Pens—Intellectuals' Save-the-Nation Activities—Literary Criticism—Organizational Activities—Contribution and Fund Raising	
Minor Literary Movements and Controversies in 1938	301
Southward Flight of Literary Men—Crisis Facing Malayan Chinese Writers—Why Has the South Seas Not Produced Great Literary Works?—Popularization and Condescension	

Minor Literary Movements and Controversies in 1939	312
Several Issues—Pragmatism and Cronyism	
Minor Literary Movements and Controversies in 1940 and 1941	324
Malayan Chinese Cultural Pragmatism Move- ment—Against the New Style of Wind-Flower- Snow-Moon Vapidity— Anti-Aggression Litera- ture Movement	
Chapter XII. Drama Movement	334
Trends	334
Scripts with South-Sea Local Color	340
<i>Flight of the Orioles</i>	347

Notes

Index

1. Authors
2. Titles
3. Newspapers, Supplements, and Magazines
4. Movements, Societies, and Other Proper Names

Glossary

INTRODUCTION