The Belated *Mahua* Modernist Literary Polysystem and the Case of Tan Swie Hian*

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ABSTRACT

The textual products of the *Mahua* polysystem from the 1930s to the 1950s reflected a process of nationalization. But a systemic and functional change took place in the early sixties, when some *Mahua* men-in-the-culture belatedly launched a Modernist movement to set their works off from the local Chinese literature of Social-Realim. Through the efforts of the Genaration of 1968, the editors of the *Chao Foon Monthly* in Malay(si)a and Liang Meng Kwang, the editor of the literary supplements of the *Nanyang Siang Pau* in Singapore, Modernist literature gained an important position in the *Mahua* polysystem. *Mahua wenxue* eventually turned from a monocentered institution into a double-centered literary polysystem. The present paper describes this process of modernization, or autonomization of nationalized literature, from a polysystemic aspect and places Tan Swie Hian, the leading poet of the Generation of 1968, as a major figure in initiating the Modernist project.

KEY WORDS

mahua wenxue
Generation of 1968
Polysystem Theory
Tam swie Hian

I. Functional Differentiation in the Emergent Literary System

In this paper I argue that *Mahua wenxue* [Malay(si)an Chinese literature] from the 1930s to 1950s underwent a process of nationalization. Following this thesis, the textual products of this period are regarded as national or nationalized literature, for it was during these two decades that the *Mahua* men-in-the-culture launched several literary and cultural movements to localize the emergent literature, which had depended heavily on the modern literary system of China since the early 1920s. National or nationalized literature as used in this context therefore refers not merely to a corpus of texts appointed or selected by the governmental institution to manifest the official values or ideology and reflect a cultural uniformity and totality. Instead, a national literature is constituted by the products of the sociocultural codes in a literary system. However, in the process of literary modernization and denationalization, or autonomization of national literature, would ultimately take place.

Explicating the functional change in a literary system, Lucie Robert suggests that "on distingue alors deux corpus d'oeuvres: la littérature nationale, dont l'intérêt est d'ordre historique et sociologique, et LA LITTÉRATURE, dont l'intérêt est d'ordre esthétique" (142). When literary norms change, especially during the later period, nationalized literary products which follow the sociocultural codes may be challenged by a different group of men-in-the-culture and eventually lose its dominant position to products following other codes, normally that of the LITERATURE. The underlying

principle here is that of decanonization. It is thus not surprising to find that since most writers in the 1930s chose to embrace the socio-cultural codes to fulfil the cultural function of literature, rarely had *Mahua* texts of the period been able to achieve the position of LITERATURE, as complained by some critics of the younger generation.

Looking back in anger, Ng Kim Chew (1992), for example, accuses the *Mahua* literary history for its lack of "classics," referring obviously to the absence of aesthetic quality in *Mahua* literary works of the past decades. Ng's most daring argument on this issue, however, is expressed in his earlier article entitled "Mahua wenxue de yunniangqi?: cong jingdian xingcheng, yan/wen fenli de jiaodu chongtan Mahua wenxueshi de xingcheng" [The embryonic stage of *Mahua wenxue*?: Reexamining the formation of *Mahua* literary history from the perspectives of canon formation and the seperation of classical Chinese from the vernacular] (1991). In this redesigned program he divides the forming process of *Mahua* literature into four stages: (1) the domination of foreign (i.e. Chinese) literature, (2) the rise of local consciousness, (3) the establishing of the subjectivity of LITERATURE, and (4) the establishing of local uniqueness in literary expression. According to Ng, the first and second stages belong to the "pre-historical" period and literary texts from this period have nothing to do with aesthetics at all. While the third stage functions as the point of departure for the *Mahua* literary history, the fourth marks the taking shape of a literature which stands firmly on its own feet. For him all the stages preceding the last one are but "the pre-forming periods in the literary history of *Mahua wenxue*" because they have not produced enough masterpieces or classics to make up a literary history (*mahua wenxue* 42]). Only in the last stage can a literature flourish.

The outline of Ng's paradigmatic program of rewriting *Mahua* literary history presents a critic/story-writer's attempt to reexamine the past *Mahua* corpus from an aesthetic point of view,[1] emphasizing especially the exploration of literary language in fiction writing. While it is possible to relate the program diachronically to the development or modernization of *Mahua* literature, it is equally evident

that the literary products of the second stage in Ng's program correspond to the codes of national(ized) literature. Likewise, the third and fourth stages in Ng's outline of the development of the overseas Chinese literature are equivalent to the process of the autonomization of national literature, referring to literary products which employ the aesthetic codes.

When the boundaries are shifted from the nationalized to the autonomized, a conflict of codes arises. Whereas nationalized *Mahua* literature was the result of the contact of the imported Chinese system with the local cultural and social institutions, the autonomized system can be viewed as a product of the contact of nationalized *Mahua* literature with Western literature, particularly Euro-American Modernist literature. There is, however, a free-floating of the literary codes in an individual writer's shifting of paradigms because they are by no means static and closed systems. Nationalization and autonomization are therefore not chronological or lineal stages of a literary process. More often than not the two are conflicting phenomena existing concurrently and contradictorily in the same institution, or a polysystem of double-institutions, and are always interfering with one another. A writer may switch to an alternative or a formerly discarded code when a different function is assigned to an act of writing.

The modernization of *Mahua* literature illustrates the changing relations between literature and society in a literary system when the autonomization of national literature occurs. In the nationalized stage, literature functions as the "imaginary realm in the construction of the state" (Jusdanis xi). The cultural nationalism represented manifests the role of literature in promoting a local or national consciousness and the building of a community or nation. The function of national literature, in Gregory Jusdanis's words, is "to homogenize differences within their territorial and symbolic spaces" (1). The *Mahua* "Aiguo zhuyi wenyi" [Patriotic literature] of the 1950s is a typical example of a literature that intends to serve the function of the nationalized discourse. For example, just one year before Malaya gained her independence in 1957, the Singapore Cultural Association held a meeting of Singaporean men-in-the-culture in supporting the independent

movement and concluded with a "Manifesto." Magazines such as *Renjian* [Human world] also hosted forums to discuss the issue of patriotism and literature.[2]

The autonomization, or rather, aestheticization, of national literature, however, becomes indispensable after the formation of the imagined cultural or national identity. Writers upholding the sociocultural codes still produce national literature, but their paradigm no longer dominate the production of literature, for such a literature cannot satisfy those (writers and readers included) who enjoy the writerly pleasure of the text. In literary history normally those who feel dissatisfied with the traditional codes are the avant-garde members of the younger generation.

II. The Belated Modernist Movement and the Generation of 1968

The processes of nationalization and autonomization of literature reflect the changing positions and relations between literature and society within a polysystem. In the case of *Mahua* Modernist literary system, its emergence indicates the transformation of the function of literature in the changing social and political environment of Malaysia and Singapore from its nationalized instrumentality to an emphasis on the writerly-role oriented self-expressiveness.

To the postwar Chinese- or China-educated *Mahua* intellectuals, whose Chinese cultural inheritance was deeply inscribed in their life and literary repertoire, the fact that China turned Communist in 1949 was significant partly because books and magazines from China were prohibited by the colonial government for fear of Communist subversion. As a result the transmission of new literary products from Mainland China to these neighboring communities became impossible. The official termination of Chinese cultural and literary interference had forced the local emergent literary system to break away from the literary codes of China and seek for alternative models from elsewhere. Like their English-educated counterparts, the Chinese language writers also turned to European Modernism in order to develop

a new paradigm.

In fact, Chinese literary Modernism in Malaysia has rarely been studied in details by scholars and literary historians.[3] The first serious attempt at a historical description of the belated movement remains Lin Ye's "Jiefang de xin shijie: Xinma xiandai wenxue de fazhan" [A liberated new world: the development of Modernist literature in Singapore-Malaysia] (1972). As a historical document, Lin's study, however, is not well documented and at times suffers from brevity. Still, it provides a general view on the development of *Mahua* Modernist literature from its embryonic stage in the early sixties to a period of good harvest after 1967, when some structural changes in the literary system took place. In 1978, Woon Swee Tin wrote a conference paper entitled "Mahua xiandai wenxue de yiyi he weilai fazhan: yige shi de huigu yu qianzhan" [The significance and future development of *Mahua* Modernist literature: a historical retrospect and its prospect], in which he argues that the rise of *Mahua* Modernist poetry suggests a reaction not against Realism but the conservative poets who imitated Chinese poets of the May Fourth era. Comparing Modernist poetry to "xinshi," or new poetry, Woon concludes with a New Critical view:

> Presenting a greater density in language, Modernist poetry is obviously more condense and richer in form and content. Moreover, in contrast to the loose prosaic structure of "xin shi," Modernist poetry endeavors in merging language with experience of paradox. Above all, it emphasizes an imaginative unity with which amorphous, heterogeneous, and contradictory elements are reconstructed as an organic whole. (87-88])

Both Lin and Woon agreed that the emergence of local Modernist literature in the late 1950s and the early 60s had much to do with the new and open editorial policy of the *Chao Foon Monthly* [Jiaofeng yuekan] and the *Student Weekly* [Xuesheng zhoubao] (both were published by the Malayan/Union Press) and their dissemination of the Modernist perception of reality and the self. Whereas in Singa-

pore, an important headquarter of the *Mahua* literary system of that period, literary products in Chinese were more or less similar to those of the prewar period in style, theme, and technique, though ideologically they were new due to their authors' newly developed and promoted sense of Malayan consciousness, as opposed to the China identity expressed in sojourners' literature. Only when Liang Meng Kwang (whose pseudonyms include Li Sao and Wanyan Jie) took over the editorship of a literary supplement in the *Nanyang Siang Pau* can we say that Modernist writing had occupied a space of its own in the local nationalized and Realist-Naturalist oriented literary institution.

Indeed during the 1960s the two main forces in the *Mahua* Modernist literary movement were the *Chao Foon Monthly* in Malaya and the "Wenyi" [Literature] and "Qingnian yuandi" [Youth's corner], the literary pages of the *Nanyang Siang Pau*, edited in Singapore by Liang Meng Kwang from 1967 to 1970. The *Student Weekly*, a sister magazine of the *Chao Foon Monthly*, and other little magazines published by supporters of the Modernist movement also contributed to the building of a Modernist repertoire in *Mahua* literature. The movement culminated in 1968 with the establishment of the May Publishers by the "Generation of 1968" (whose members include Tan Swie Hian and other Modernist poets in Singapore), the publication of the new series of *Chao Foon Monthly* in August 1969 and the founding of "Wencong" [Literary miscellany], a literary supplement of the *Nanyang Siang Pau* co-edited by Liang Meng Kwang and Tan Swie Hian, in July 1971.

Around 1960 the *Chao Foon Monthly*, founded 1955 as a fortnightly in Singapore, began to publish articles on Modernist poetics and poems with techniques and style different from those of the vernacular "xinshi." In August 1960, the magazine's editorial board published an article entitled "Jiaofeng dui xinshi chuangzuo suocai de lichang" [*Chao Foon's* stance toward new poetry] to clarify its editorial policy and its aim of publishing a poetry supplement in the form of a booklet. The editors wrote:

> Our new literature is still in its initial stage, with no particularly outstanding works. . . . Unless our young poets can surpass the older generation in terms of poetic form and content, they will win no applause from the readers. We therefore show our sympathy and encouragement toward the young poets who are willing to experiment with their art. (The Editors, "Jiaofeng" 25)

In the following years discussions and debates on crucial topics of Modernist literature appeared and helped disseminate the new literary concept. Beginning from 1964, however, the literary magazine changed its editorial policy by (re)publishing quite a number of Modernist texts by Taiwanese and Hong Kong writers. This editorial attitude continued until 1967 when its editors re-adopted a Malaysianized policy. Also in 1964 Bai Yao began to write a series of "Xiandaishi xianhua" [Random notes on Modernist poetry] in defense of his Modernist stance.

Bai Yao himself has been regarded by some critics as the first Modernist poet in *Mahua* literary history for his "Mahe jingli" [By Muar River I silently stand], published 1959 in the *Student Weekly*. From 1961 onwards, the weekly magazine published various discussions on Modernist literature. Its "Shi zhi yie" [Poetry page] was an important space for local budding poets, especially after it was edited and renovated by the poet Zhou Huan in 1965. In 1964, the novelist and editor Huang Yai published in the weekly his "xiandai wenxue xinshang" [Appreciating Modernist literature], a series of talks introducing Modernist literary ideas. In the 1960s, Bai Yao, together with Huang Yai and Yao Tuo [Yew Hong] of the Malayan/Union Press, the patron of the *Chao Foon Monthly* and the *Student Weekly*, were three important men-in-the-culture responsible for the modernization of *Mahua* literature in Malay(si)a. Under their influence, many literary societies were set up and little magazines appeared throughout the newly independent federation, forming a constellation of Modernist literary movement.

The year 1962 is significant for the development of Modernist

literature in Malaya. Under the influence of the *Chao Foon Monthly* and the *Student Weekly*, Modernist literary circles, such as Yinxing [Silver star], Xinchao [New tide], Huangyuan [Waste land], and Haitian [The Sea and the sky] were formed throughout the peninsula. The supporters of the Modernist movement established small presses, published little magazines, and edited poetry pages for newspaper supplements. The "Yinxing shikan" [Silver star poetry page] supplement of *Guanghua ribao*, for example, was edited by the Yinxing team, and was recognized as "the first literary page that published Modernist poems and discourse on Modernist poetry" (Li Jinzong 380).

In 1969, the *Chao Foon Monthly* once again announced its new appearance as from the issue number of 202. This act of renovation was important in many aspects. First, its editorial board now included Bai Yao, Yao Tuo, Lee Yu Cheng [Li Cang], and Tan Swie Hian, marking the joint forces of the most outstanding *Mahua* writers and editors from Singapore and Malaysia at another attempt to promote local Modernist literature. Secondly, though it did not emphasize any Modernist doctrines, the monthly distinguished itself as a magazine that would always "transform and progress in the dynamic course" (The Editors, "Fengxun" 92). It is this open-minded editorial policy that encouraged the monthly to present five important special issues subsequently in the first three years of its new series. The five issues are (1) No. 205 (Nov. 1969): Poetry Number; (2) No. 211-212 (June/July/August 1970): Fiction Number; (3) No. 217 (Jan./Feb. 1970): Drama Number; (4) No. 220 (April/May 1971): Malay Writings Number; and (5) No. 224 (Sept. 1971): Tan Swie Hian's Special Number. Thirdly, the monthly provided a space of close encounter for writers from Singapore and Malaysia—the two once-united regions became two separate political entities since 1965.

In Singapore the Modernist movement was launched by Liang Meng Kwang in the second half of the 1960s. In the postwar Singaporean *Mahua* literary scene, literary supplements of newspapers, notably the *Nanyang Siang Pau and Sin Chew Jit Poh*, played more important role than literary (little) magazines and small publishing

houses. In 1967 Liang succeeded Yang Shoumo (also known as Xing Ying) as editor of "Qingnian wenyi" [Youth literature], the *Nanyang Siang Pau's* literary page, and he soon changed its name into "Wenyi." In the same year he was assigned the editing task of "Qingnian yuandi," another literary page of the paper. From then on to 1970, when Liang's colleagues took over the editorship, the two supplements were important fields for Modernist writers of Singapore and Malaysia to cultivate their literary talents. In Singapore the Modernist movement had never been supported by big publishing firms such as the Malayan/Union Press in Malay(si)a. Yet, as a major Chinese-language newspaper, the *Nanyang Siang Pau* was able to attract a larger and more popular readership and thus helped spread Liang's influence and his dissemination of avant-garde literary concepts. Many budding writers from both sides of the causeway contributed to Liang's literary pages and a number of them later became outstanding writers in the *Mahua* literary scene.

Liang, a graduate in English and modern literature from the Nanyang University of Singapore, was able to support his firm Modernist stance with strong theoretical discourse. In 1968 he published two articles of *tour de force* to express his Modernist literary taste as well as to promote Modernism in the *Mahua* literary institution. One of the two important local Modernist documents, "Liubanian diyisheng jiti de shihou" [The first dawn in 1968], can be read as a Modernist manifesto. Liang expresses through the voice of a jobless artist his following view:

> Even if I express myself with pen and ink, I would not follow your way. My subject and form would be as fresh as the morning paper. . . . I will find my way out of the corrupted content and obsolete form. I will construct my own vehicle, and use it to carry the load of my own products. I have to write, before our human heart is replaced by the artificial one, in order to rescue language from being deprived of its function of expressing human mind. . . . Twentieth century English writers such as Conrad, Woolf,

> Lawrence, Forster, Huxley, and Joyce did not give up writing because there were already great works produced by Dickens, Austen, and Scott in the past centuries. Instead, they constructed their own vehicles and created their own contents. . . .
> The first dawn of 1968 will witness more and more people who endeavor in experimenting, experimenting, and reexperimenting with their craft, more and more people shooting new movies, writing new fiction, new prose, and new poetry. ("Liubanian," *Tianya* 137-38)

Liang's other longer piece, "Kaige chuang, kankan chuangwai, ruhe?" [What about open the window and see what's outside?], provides a panoramic view of the development of Euro-American modern literature and the works of Modernist writers, both major and minor, guiding the readers through a personal and reliable literary journey. This article begins with a parody of the social-realistic poetry and proceeds with an anonymous man introducing the world of modern Western literature outside the window to a self-conceited conservative local poet. Through his mouthpiece Liang defines the concept of modernity as below:

> Modern life has caused literature of our time to modernize its contents and techniques of expression, proving the impossibility of separating techniques from contents. . . .
> We should not define the term "Modern" literally. During the May Fourth era, while Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, and Lu Xun were advocating a new literature expressing the *Zeitgeist* of the times, those who opposed the new literary movement, Lin Qingnan, for instance, were still writing their works to represent the *Zeitgeist* of the past. Hence Lin was not qualified to be called a "modern writer of the May Fourth era." . . . Likewise, a twentieth century writer living in the present time of 1968 is not a modern writer either if he expresses the content of the nineteenth century. Besides

> writing about the indispensable experience and sensibility of modern life, a truly modern writer must resort to new approaches of expressing his feeling and emotion, for life is now much more complicated than before. . . . ("Kaige," *Tianya* 106)

Liang cites many poets and writers from contemporary Western literary scene in the essay. Among them, poets like Rafael Alberti, Paul Celan, Nicanor Parra, Jean Laude, Pierre Oster are still unfamiliar names for many local readers today. Moreover, Liang does not limit his introduction of Western literature to Euro-American writers; writers from Russia, Africa, and Latin-America are also mentioned and quoted in the inspiring and monumental discourse on Modernist literature.

The introduction of these new names to the local literary scene reminds us of another important contribution of Liang's supplements to the *Mahua* literary institution in the late 1960s. Many writers from both Euro-American and the local Malay (Malaysian and Indonesian) worlds were introduced, through translation, to the Chinese readers for the first time. The translated texts, as Lin Ye comments, "especially Malay writings, have greatly enriched the 'Wenyi' literary page, and helped the Chinese-language writers to understand the different stylistic features of literature from the two peoples" (34). Liang himself had translated prolifically Western writers from Malamud, Calvino, Beckett to Bradbury and many others into Chinese. He was, for that matter, the first Chinese-language translator of Joyce's *Ulysses*, though he failed to complete the translating project.[4]

During the three years when Liang was the editor of the two literary pages, the most talented writer was Tan Swie Hian, who later co-edited, with Liang, "Wencong," the literary page of *Nanyang zhoukan,* a Sunday supplementary magazine of the *Nanyang Siang Pau*.[5] In all these supplements, Tan's talent was fully expressed through his poems, short-stories, translations, and illustrations. "Wencong" functioned as an important Modernist site of Western literary interference with the local Chinese literary system in the early

1970s as well as a continuation of Liang's earlier endeavor in launching the Modernist literary movement in "Wenyi" and "Qingnian yuandi." Besides Tan, other regular contributors of "Wencong" included such major *Mahua* poets as Moy Sook Ching, Woon Swee Tin , Zi Yi Si, Xie Qing, and Piao Bei Ling. While in Malay(si)a no distinct personalities of the *Mahua* Modernist program had appeared, the leaders of the movement in Singapore were obviously Liang Meng Kwang and Tan Swie Hian.

In those years when the Generation of 1968—Liang, Tan, and their talented friends from the May Publishers—devoted themselves to the art of poetry, the poets signed no manifestoes. In fact, neither Tan and his friends nor Liang and his contributors intended to form a literary school. Not even their counterparts in the peninsula had such an intention. The widely used catchword "Mahua xiandaipai" [*Mahua* Modernist School] was an abusage invented by some conservative and traditional critics, who upheld the social-realist literary codes, to attack on the new generation who began to turn away from the polemical nationalization of literature. Joining in a poetical revolt against the forefathers, Tan and his Modernist contemporaries in those days shared a common pursuit in poetry and art at large—a pursuit detached from social and political engagements inspired by the Chinese Cultural Revolution on the one hand and Euro-American students or civil right movements on the other. As members of a literary community, rather than a school, they published collections of poems and short-stories, and gathered regularly on weekends for informal literary discussions. For them, Modernism was precisely an aesthetic taste and belief in literature. It served as an alternative model, rather than a doctrine, for their generation to seek an autonomized aesthetics of their own.

The Generation of 1968—so called because in that year the first May Publishers was established,[5] Tan's monumental *Juren* [The giant] collection was published, and it was in that year, in Liang Meng Kwang's phrase, the Modernist literary scene in Singapore saw "the first dawn." Members of the Generation canonized themselves later by publishing an anthology: *Xinjiapo shiwu shiren xinshiji* [New po-

ems by 15 Singapore poets], edited by He Lanning in 1970.[6] Though the poets signed no manifestos, they had something to say about their poetic concepts in the general preface to the anthology; each of them wrote his or her own preface, whose length varied from one paragraph to several pages. Here are two samples by Tan and Liang respectively:

> *Tan Swie Hian*: "Today poetry (just like fiction, prose, and drama) parasites on politics and religion poorly. People can simply make use of whatever tools they deem more efficient to achieve their aims. In such a time and place that human intellect has matured and superstition demystified, poetry will refuse to be confined within a small boundary, and the original functions of poetry, to entertain, for example, will be illuminated. . . . Until then, the poet would want to cultivate his own garden independently. 'Modernist poetry' is by no means poisonous weeds, just like 'Realist poetry' can no more affect the public with sugarcoated poison. "Poetry is entertainment. To entertain is one of the multifarious functions of poetry. . . . " (He Lanning, ed. 10-11)
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> *Liang Meng Kwang*: "The trouble with poetry is its highly symbolic techniques. Yet symbols are not demons; they are meant for representing reality, a reality which is the inner mindscape of the poet's vision, produced after the physical reality is filtered through the poet's mind. Poetry is the highly symbolic product of such a mindscape." (He Lanning, ed. 14)

Interestingly, in expressing their views on the nature and function of modern poetry, the group of poets cited Western poets such as Milton, Blake, Eliot, Valery, Pedro Salinas more than Chinese poets or theorists. No modern Chinese poets, except Ya Xuan and Zhou Mengdie of Taiwan, were referred to in passing remarks. This indicated the strong interference of an alternative Western poetic system

with the local Modernist poetics.

Compared to the three literary supplements edited by Liang, the *Chao Foon Monthly* had more than a whole decade to promote Chinese literary Modernism in Malay(si)a. In other words, its Modernist project should have a longer duration. Still it was generally an incomplete project due to various reasons. It assumed a clear *local* Modernist stance only after Huang Yai, its former editor, left the Union Press. However, the magazine never openly declared its Modernist editorial policy. It defended at most innovative techniques in literary creation. Non-Modernist texts were still published even after Tan and his team took over the editorship of its new series. As it lacked a radical and systematic culture planning in its editorial policy of promoting Modernism, the magazine failed to meet the challenge of cultural and social ideological transformations in the dynamics of the local literary field in the 1970s. Many local writers, who had been disciples of Modernism, failed to create a new wave for the Modernist trend due to limitation in individual talents and changes in the literary milieu.

In Singapore the Modernist movement slowed down its pace and eventually died away after the three supplements edited by Liang ceased to exist. For some personal reasons Liang himself stopped writing for years in the 1970s. Leading writers such as Tan turned wholeheartedly to painting and religious meditation in the early 1970s and became less enthusiatic about literary creation. While some poets of the Generation of 1968 reembraced the nationalized code, others practically abandoned their literary career after the Seventies.

III. Tan Swie Hian the Poet

Tan Swie Hian, whose father was a native of Nanan, Fujian, China, was born on Pulau Halang, Sumatra, Indonesia in 1943. His family later moved to Singapore, but he became a citizen of the republic only in 1973. When he was about seventeen, he began to learn the craft of Chinese painting, calligraphy, oil painting, and modern poetry writing. From 1964 to 1968, Tan was a student of the Depart-

ment of Modern Languages and Literature of Nanyang University (the *Nantah*), majoring in English and English literature. He started contributing literary works to local newspapers in 1964, and three years later, "Mulingnu," or "Merino," Tan's *nom de plume*, became the main force of the Modernist movement launched by Liang Meng Kwang in the literary page of the *Nanyang Siang Pau*. After his graduation in 1968, Tan joined the French Embassy in Singapore as press secretary. In the same year the May Publishers was established by Tan and his Modernist comrades, and *Juren*, Tan's first collection of poems, was published. In 1969, Besides publishing *Mulingnu xiaoshuoji 1964-1969* [Ten short stories and one short novel], his first collection of stories, he became one of the editors of the Petaling Jaya-based *Chao Foon Monthly*. In 1971, *Mulingnu shierji* [Poems of Merino: volume two], his second poetry collection, was published by the May Publishers and *A Special Number: Mulingnu's Writings* was published by the *Chao Foon Monthly* as a topical issue of the literary magazine. In the same year Tan also co-edited, with Liang Meng Kwang, the *Wencong* literary supplement of the *Nanyang Siang Pau*. On the other hand, apart from earlier translation of texts by various writers, from 1970 onwards he has translated and published, in book form, works by Samuel Beckett and Henri Michaux (with Cedric Anthony), Jacques Prévert (with Jean-Marie Schiff),Vaslav Nijinsky (with Hao Xiaofei), Aldous Huxley, Latiff Mohidin (with Moy Sook Ching), and Marin Sorescu. His paintings first appeared publicly in a 1972 group show and from then on he seemed to have devoted entirely to painting and produced fewer literary works. He virtually stopped writing (and painting) in 1973 for meditation but resumed several years later. He has become one of the most important Asian artists of polymedium since the late 1970s and 1980s. In 1993 the five-volume *Chen Ruixian xuanji* [Selected works of Tan Swie Hian] was published in Wuhan, China, so far the most comprehensive edition of Tan's literary products. But the 1992 *Chen Ruixian shiji: 1964-1991* [Collected poems of Tan Swie Hian: 1964-1991] remains the definitive edition of his poetical texts.

My objectives in providing the above biographical notes on

Tan Swie Hian is not just to give an account of his literary career. A description of the emergence of Tan in the *Mahua* literary scene of Singapore and Malaysia and the development of his literary career not only helps explain why and how the *Mahua* Modernist repertoire and institution took shape, established, and being recognized but also illuminates the role of Tan as a leading writer in the emergent Modernist system. I will gloss with annotations and reception documents on certain important aspects manifested in Tan the producer of local Modernist repertoire and the significance of his production to the *Mahua* Modernist movement.

Tan's life story and intellectual data also evident a significant relationship between the poet and the development of *Mahua* Modernist literature. Such a close tie helps justify my placing of Tan as a leading figure in the context of *Mahua wenxue*, though he is now a citizen of the Republic of Singapore. In fact, it is impossible to draw an exact boundary between the literatures of Malaya and Singapore before the early seventies, as most newspapers of the two countries shared the same literary supplements. Moreover, Malaysian-Singapore writers contributed their manuscripts to literary outlets regardless of their places of registration. Even semi-official literary magazines like *Xinjiapo wenyi* [Literature of Singapore] (a quarterly founded in 1976) published also works by Malaysian writers. In the case of Tan, when he joined the editorial board of the *Chao Foon Monthly* in 1969, he was only a resident in the island-republic, not a citizen of Singapore.

What the brief biographical notes on Tan Swie Hian attempt to represent, however, is the polylingual background of a Nanyang Chinese. First of all, as a Hokkien, Tan naturally speaks the dialect of the southern Fujian Province of China, which is a common Han dialect of the Chinese community in especially Singapore, Melaka, Penang, and Indonesia. Secondly, being Indonesian-born, Tan is fluent in Bahasa Melayu (Malay/Bahasa Malaysia/Indonesian) since Malay is not only the *lingua franca* of the Malay Archipelago but also the national language of Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and Indonesia. Mandarin Chinese, on the other hand, is both his mother tongue and the pedagogical

medium in Tan's primary and secondary education, as for many Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese of his generation. What's more important is that Chinese also serves as Tan's language for literary creation. Furthermore, he majored in English and studied French as a foreign language when he was an undergraduate of the Nanyang University, and the two European languages have become his professional and working languages since his graduation. Interestingly, as a polyglot who is fluent in at least five languages and dialects, Tan has written almost only in Chinese, with the exception of short stories such as "The Porcupine" and "Ries the Flutist," an unpublished short story, and the recently published *Fables*. As Tan wrote in 1994:

> Chinese has always been my creative medium. I choose to write in Chinese simply because it is my mother tongue. Just like Issac Singer, who wrote in Yiddish, a language with only a small audience, in no other languages can I express my thinking and sentiment as fluently and precisely as I use my mother tongue. (8-9)

In his case the mother tongue is, of course, Chinese. Nevertheless, as a Modernist *Mahua* writer, the other languages have been equally important in shaping his literary and cultural perception and influential to his writing, both form and style. It is therefore justifiable to say that without such a polylingual, or polyphonic, background, Tan would not have been able to produce those rich, original, and outstanding poems and narratives, which are monumental in the *Mahua* literary system in Singapore and Malaysia.

Chinese, on the other hand, is Tan Swie Hian's target language in translation. The other languages, to his advantage, serve well as his source languages. From 1965 onwards, he has translated texts of various genres from English, French, and Malay into Chinese. In fact, as a region with different migrant communities, Singapore-Malaysia has long provided many European and Asian linguistic and cultural traditions with a "field of difference" to converge and encounter each other. In such a field, translation becomes an important intermediary

among the many lingual-cultural differences. Thus it is not surprising to know that the first contribution from Tan Swie Hian to "Wenyi," the *Nanyang Siang Pau* literary page edited by Liang Meng Kwang, in 1967 was not his own creative work but a translation: "Variation 3," Boris Pasternak's short poem from *Themes and Variations*. Like other translated poems such as T. S. Eliot's "Hollow Man," the poem probably had been translated years earlier.[7] In his preface to the definitive collection of Tan's selected poems published in 1992, Liang wrote:

> In the 1960s, when I was the editor of "Wenyi," a literary page of the *Nanyang Siang Pau*, the first piece of poem I published was Pasternak's "Variation 3," translated by Tan Swie Hian (as "Xing zai jixing" [Stars were racing]). It was the first seed of Modernist poetry planted in the garden of "*Wenyi.*". . . Tan's translation of the poem was a pathfinding endeavor, which contributed greatly to the project of promoting Modernist literature in the supplement. (Tan, *shiji* ii])

A year later, in another preface to Tan's collection of fiction and drama published in the Wuhan corpus, Liang restated the importance of the short Pasternak poem translated by Tan: "The translated poem Tan published in 'Wenyi' had indeed opened out new way for the Chinese Singaporean Modernist poets to practice their art" (Tan, *xuanji* vi). Interestingly, the diction chosen for the translated poem and its images show some reminiscence of Tan's own early "Juren" poems. For example, in the first line of the second quatrain, "the Colossus's blood" is rendered as "juren Gelushe de xue." Furthermore, the last two lines "Candle swam. The draft of the 'Prophet' /Was drying, and day on the Ganges rose" suggest the result of "stars were racing" and "thoughts were racing," announcing the end of darkness and the beginning of a new age, a theme and an image similar to that of the three "Juren" poems.

There are all together three poetical texts entitled "Juren" in

Tan's 1968 collection, suggesting the poet's fondness for the giant image. The first "Juren" was written in 1964. Chronologically, "Juren" (1964) was not Tan's first product of that year, but it was arranged as the first text in the volume, indicating the poet's intention to begin a book of Modernist poetry with the grandeur image of the giant. The poem is in the first place a song anticipating and celebrating the coming of a hard but great epoch. In local politics, 1964 was the second year the peoples of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah worked together to build the Federation of Malaysia as a multiracial and multicultural democratic state, under the confrontation of Indonesia, the opposition of the Philippines, and the threat of racism and Communist guerrillas. For Tan 1964 was also a significant year because in that year he graduated from the Chinese High school and entered the Nanyang University to receive his academic training and was thus provided an opportunity to practice various artistic exercises on campus. Also in that year he started contributing literary works to the supplementary page of the *Nanyang Siang Pau* (then edited by Xin Ying), marking the beginning of his career as a writer in local literary scene. Secondly, "Juren" (1964) is also a calling for and portraying of "the name-of-the-father." Tan provides the following intertext in "Mulingnu biji" [Merino's notes], portraying the image of his father:

> Father came to the Nanyang when he was twenty and worked in the outskirt of an island. He had a pair of strong arms. . . . Three years later he returned to Nanan, his hometown in China, to get married. The wedding took place in January and in April he left for the Nanyang again. By the time he stepped on the island, he found that it had once again become a desert island. . . . It was on this island with almost no other human footprint that he rebuilt his own home. Yet this was only the beginning of the story of the man with a big heart and a great soul. Unfortunately, my pen fails to depict the slightest detail of the events in his life. (*Mulingnu* 79-80)

Apparently, "Unfortunately, my pen fails to depict the slightest detail of the events in his life" can be read as an echo of the line "It is difficult for me to depict your grandeur image" from "Juren" (1964). "The name-of-the-father" becomes a source for poetry to motivate.

"Juren" (1966) shows a wider perspective. It is not merely the praising of "the actualization of a great personality" by "children of the sea," but a poem in elevated language portraying an age when "our shoulders upon the incomplete construction/along the great wall of history." The poem proceeds from a time of lost and "overflowing directions" to a declaration:

> Our song is fluid
> Rising for you, with warm blood
> Refresh your palm, as majestic as the glorious coast.[8]

The lines present the completion of a nation-building project, suggesting the significance of time and history. While both "Juren" (1964) and "Juren" (1966) present "you" as the audience/listener/reader of the persona "I" or "we," "Juren" (1967) is Tan's "song of myself." The concluding lines "I am a giant/born in the modern" echo the declaration of "we" in Tan's "Kaoyue huo" [Moon-grilling fire] (1964): "We are moon-grilling giants." From "Juren" (1964) to "Juren" (1966) and "Juren" (1967), the focus in the poems changes from "the name-of-the-father" to "we" and "I." The significance of the first "Juren" is to be revealed only when we come to the other two poems of the same title.

The lines "I am a giant/born in the modern" from "Juren" (1967), which remind us of the poet's joining Liang's Modernist camp in the same year by translating Pasternak's short poem, can be read as Tan's declaration of his devotion to Modernism. In fact, *Juren*, Tan's first collection of poems, has been recognized and canonized as the first *Mahua* Modernist poetry collection, as evident in some brief notes on 1968's publications appearing on several magazines and newspapers of that year. Here are two examples:

> (1) "Mr. Mulingnu is an avant-garde and Modernist poet in Singapore-Malaysia. He has recently published a collection of poems entitled *Juren*, the first volume of local Modernist poetry." —*Qianfeng ribao* (June 14, 1968)
> (2) "Published by the May Publishers, *Juren*, Mr. Mulingnu's collection of poems, is the first local publication of Modernist poetry." —*Xinshe wenyi* (June 1968)

In the newspaper literary pages, Bai Qiu, Zhou Can and Moy Sook Ching's reviews are sample reception documents showing a change in the norm system of poetry consumption and the recognition of Modernism in *Mahua* literary polysystem in the late 1960s. Bai Qiu's review article appeared on "Luyuan" [Meadows], a supplement of the *Nanyang Siang Pau* for readers of northern peninsula Malaysia. He suggests that Tan's first collection of poems, like a large fingerprint, intends to shape the poet's individual identity by foregrounding the image of the giant (1968). Though somewhat reserved in praising Tan's Modernist texts, Zhou Can, a well-known local poet of the vernacular Chinese who emerged in the late 1950s, mentions that the works of Modernist poets such as Tan and Yeng Pway Ngon are "indeed rich in imagination, and we can always find lines of innovation, sparkling in front of our eyes as if they are precious stones" (6). In pointing out the poems' shocking effect, lively images, empathic sensibility, and diversified style, Moy Sook Ching (1968), herself an outstanding *Mahua* Modernist poetess from Penang, excitingly alludes Tan's poetical collection to a cactus in the local sterile literary desert.

Lin Ye, in his pioneering study of the rise of Modernist literature in Singapore-Malaysia, also writes about the collection's reception:

> In May 5th, 1968, the May Publishers brought out its first collection of poems—Mulingnu's *Juren*. The volume . . . was indeed a heavy blow to the so-called "realist" writers in those days. Despite the fact that more than half of the

> total 38 texts were published before 1967, as the first collection of Modernist poetry in Singapore-Malaysia, it is still well received by today's young readers. (42)

Likewise, Liang Meng Kwang, praising the collection as the first volume of the Modernist poetical product in the local literary field, views it as "a manifesto declaring the establishing of the Modernist poetical repertoire in Singapore" (Tan, *shiji* ii). Lin and Liang have indeed pointed out the significant position of *Juren* in the history of *Mahua* literature as the first Modernist text that marks the interference of modern Western literature on a generation of local Chinese poets in the 1960s. Woon Swee Tin, in his retrospective paper on the development of Chinese Modernist literature in Malaysia, also lists Tan as a major writer of the Modernist front and points out that when Tan's works first appeared in the 1960s:

> The literary communities of Singapore and Malaysia were entirely shocked by his queer diction and the innovative structure of his sentences. When a new piece of his work appeared, it was received with both praise and attack from the readers. Mulingnu's daring and creative endeavor fully represents the Modernist writers' experimenting spirit in making language new. He has always been a controversial figure in the local literary scene. (91)

Tan was obviously conscious of the ideological struggle between the two camps of literary production in the Sixties, as evident in Tan's preface to his own selected poems in *New Poems by 15 Singapore Poets*. He wrote "Jiqi" [Sacrifice for the banner] in 1967 to express his gesture of launching a Modernist battle against his enemies. Here are the last two stanzas:

> Within the range of projectiles
> To sacrifice or not is the immediate concern.
> He lays bare his iron-like back muscles, holding arms.

He sings a song of avant-garde
Wandering, where to find the bolt of tomorrow's door.
With door opens enter marvelous rays from the rising sun.
Where to find the bed of idealism
When hope produces no more the embryo of despair.

Now the sky is blue
Now the battle horn is swirling with swearing words.
He burns his poems as sacrifice for the banner
And raises his own flag high.
The banner of brightness, the banner of a new era
He knows where hundreds of flowers go.
They return to the ruined garden of poetry
Where the Muse has been kidnapped.

(Tan, *shiji* 49-50)

The poem suggests a spirit of battling. In the darkness before dawn, the persona is ready to fight and sacrifice for his ideal world: the song of avant-garde—Modernist poetry. "Sacrifice" in the second line of the first quoted stanza echoes that of the "sacrifice" in the second quoted stanza, suggesting that the Modernist poet remains optimistic amidst the local poetic wasteland.

While the canonizing effort of *Juren* from Tan's friendly contemporaries suggests an act of reaffirmation of the militant Modernist movement in *Mahua* literary system, the predominant social-realist camp, however, reacted with bitter attacks, trying to denounce the Modernist endeavor of innovatory and, above all, resist interference from Western literature. The leftist/conservative men-in-the-culture certainly had a reason to do so. In fact, until the mid-1970s, there were three poetic trends in the Singaporean-Malaysian literary scene, namely, social-realism, avant-garde or Modernism, and the middle-way. Supporters of the first and second trends had been struggling to gain the upper hand in the hierarchical positions of the *Mahua* literary polysystem since the 1960s. Those who chose the middle way gradually assumed a center position after the mid-1970s as the local Mod-

ernist movement failed to reinforce itself with sufficient repertoire and the conservative social-realist school produced only stereotyped works, which had either lost touch with reality or failed to reflect the important issues in the age of social and racial instability.

When Tan began his writing career, he chose a middle way. His subject matters, especially those of his fiction, were quite social-realistic, but his techniques were innovated, expressing much of his idea through an abundance of metaphorical rhetoric. Interestingly, his early works were published by the late Xing Ying in "Qingnian yuandi," a literary page of the *Nanyang Siang Pau* and an important forum for the social-realist writers. When Tan's works appeared on the literary page more frequently, those who upheld the realist/leftist literary code responded with words of complaint. They did not realize that Tan's works of the period were more nationalized texts expressing the grand narrative of family story and national building than Modernist works. What made his poems difficult were the rich metaphors, not their themes. Tan's making use of the social-realist code was also an act of proving the better function of the Modernist repertoire than the traditional Realist doctrines in reflecting reality and investigating the inner life of modern men. This was a firm belief of the Generation of 1968.

When Tan and the Generation of 1968 emerged in the literary front, the Modernist repertoire of *Mahua wenxue* was rather weak. Though the *Chao Foon Monthly* and its constellation had played a patronizing role for Modernist writers in Malaysia and Singapore and provided a space for them to publish their works, the harvest was not really fruitful even after a decade's experimenting effort. Obviously there were no major authors, and canonized masterpieces were relatively few. In short, it was still an institution without a canonical or canonized repertoire. They therefore resorted to modern Western literature for help. It is in this context that translated literature interfered with the modernization of *Mahua* literature.

Here lies the difference between the Modernist system in Ma-lay(si)a and the Singaporean Modernist movement. The Chao Foon Press set in as a Modernist patronizing institution in the early Sixties,

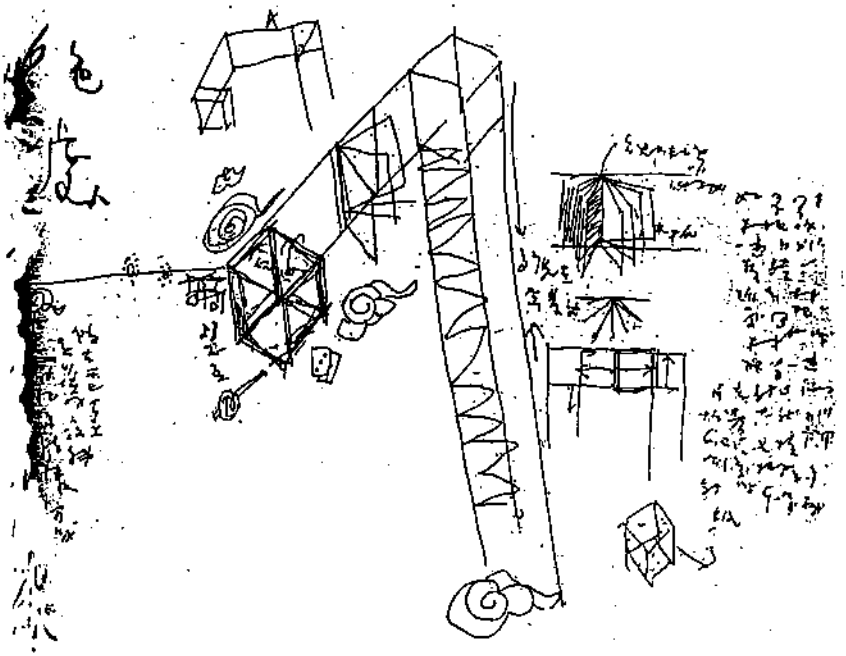
but for a few years the monthly published by the press introduced more Taiwanese texts than translated Western literature. The Modernist models of the new poetics transplanted from Taiwan have since played an important part in the *Mahua* literary system.[9] Only after Tan joined the editorial board in 1969 that the literary monthly began to emphasize a cross-cultural program. In the four special numbers of poetry, fiction, drama, and Malay writings, most of the pages were devoted to translated texts. But when Liang began to edit the two literary supplements of the *Nanyang Siang Pau* in 1967, he placed equal emphasis on both created and translated literary texts. More importantly, unlike the editors of the *Chao Foon Monthly* of the early Sixties, Liang himself translated prolifically.

In Tan's translating project, poetry translation is of foremost importance. Besides the poetical pieces collected in the translation volume of his *Selected Works* (Wuhan 1993), he has published three translated volumes of selected poems by Prévert, Latiff, and Soresco respectively, and Michaux in a collection of modern French literature. Among the scattered translated pieces of works by different foreign writers, the poems of T. S. Eliot and Rilke are the most influential. Apart from Eliot's "Hollow Man" (trans. 1966) and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" (trans. 1969), Tan has rendered also Muriel C. Bradbrook's essay on the "Rhapsody" poem and Henri Peyre's article on Baudelaire's "Correspondances," both in 1969, tracing Eliot's indebtedness to the French poet.

In a preface to Tan's translation volume of the *Selected Works*, Teo Han Wue even suggests that Eliot has served as a model for Tan to follow in artistic creation and practice (Tan, *yizhujuan* xi-x). As a matter of fact, Eliot has remained the most frequently quoted Western Modernist poet in the *Mahua* literary scene. *The Waste Land* and his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" have long been recognized as an important asset of the Modernist canon. Tan also translated at least five poems by Rilke and von Salis portrait of the poet. This suggests that Tan has read major poets like Eliot and Rilke closely by translating their works and critical studies on them.

After the 1970s, however, Tan's poems turned highly individu-

another as the poet is also an artist. Typical examples of Tan's such poetic performance are "Jiechu" [Desperation], "Yige shiren de fangjian" [The room of a poet], and "Telisha" [Sister Theresa]. The three samples actually represent Tan's different modes of thinking in terms of such intertextual attempts of representation and expression.



Drawing by Tan Swie Hian (1971). Title plate for Tan's poem "Juechu," *Chao Foon Monthly* 224 (Sept. 1971): 42.

"Juechu," for example, can be listed among Tan's difficult poems of the 1970s. When it first appeared in the September 1971 issue of the *Chao Foon Monthly*, the special number on Tan's writings, on the opposite page of the word-text was a title page with Tan's "illustration," configuring the narrative temporality of the poem in space. Resembling an architectural drawing, Tan's pictorial text, however, does not provide the reader with the visual and aesthetic effect of an illustration; instead, it functions here as a graphic expression of the poet's vision. In other words, the poet is not illustrating with lines and shapes the imagery and philosophical insight of the poem, making it a supplement to the word-text. On the contrary, he is expressing his ideas through a medium of semi-verbal/semi-non-verbal communication, because there are still words on the pictorial text (title of the poem and explanatory notes in handwritten form). Moreover, read otherwise, the poem interestingly becomes a modern form of "tihuashi" [poem inscribed on painting], illuminating the picture instead of the other way around. Words become an explicating tool of the pictorial signs. In short, words come from pictograph, as shown in the history of writing.

In cases like "Juechu," however, the interference of verbal sign-system with our reading of the pictorial sign-system is evident from the barely legible handwritten words, which form part of the symbolic meaning of the non-verbal text. We move to the lines to find the printed form of the words and phrases that are recurrent in both texts. Though there is no one-to-one correspondence between the two texts, we tend to read the pictorial lines by our interpretation of the verbal lines of the poem. In this aspect, the verbal text has delimited our understanding of the "illustration."

Thematically, the poem is a reflection on the question of "self," through an imaginative move. Its philosophical inquiry begins with the biological definition of the *homo sapiens*:

> Calling "me" a living thing
> With blood bank, sensory system
> Human.

"I" sit,
Clouds and rocks rolling, on top of a dead large cube.

The cube shooting sky-high
A long cement board with breadth equivalent to its height
Heart, cold from overheating,
Stretches out horizontally,
Joining
The left section of the cube and "me"
With the same section
Of a square post
Of equal length and breadth, its height reaching
Somewhere.
The ground perhaps?
On the cube, "I" am
Clouds, disturbing, not a devil on the post.

The Chinese word "sida" [dead large] is obviously an Anglicized innovation, using the character "si" to modify "da." And together they form an adjective, modifying the cube. Owing to linguistic difference, the form of "wo" [I] remains the same throughout the Chinese poem, but in English it has to be rendered as "me" and "I" cases respectively to suit the syntactical context. Similarly, the objects of "joining" was given immediately. But the Chinese original text places the object of the verb "xianjie" four or five lines after it, achieving a sense of suspense. In other words, the Chinese self, whose innermost being is crystalized by the cube, remains unchanged; only his perception moves vertically toward the sky, but is being stretched horizontally by reality. Furthermore, the cube also symbolizes a small box and the self is a prisoner in it (that is, "Juechu," the desperate place). The mind, thus, is struggling to free itself from what forces it into such a desperate condition. The last stanza reveals the vision of the self:

But "I" am on the cube

An enormous mass of cloud, eyes staring
The cloud clumsily pushes the wooden boards.
Iron butterflies moaning
The sound of a thousand pieces of wooden boards.
History is odorless
A corpse, an infant, each dashes by my left and right.

The infant and the corpse are both the others of the self. Meditating on the question of "self" is indeed a matter of life and death. Or rather, the left and right sides of the self are the borders of life and death. Moreover, the poet's juxtaposing of the two images also leads to the association of the Chinese stock phrase "juechu fengsheng" [life out of desperation] with the poem. The desperate point is also a point of departure.

The poem serves also as a point of departure for Tan's creation of the pictorial text. We can therefore contend that Tan's pictorial text is simply an illustration of the poem and may find it possible that such a reading is delimited by the non-verbal text. But then we have to find a way to read the illustration, which seems unreadable from the outset, before we can make use of what we have learned from it to apply to the poem. Such a reading, however, evidences the hermeneutic circle in the act of understanding and interpretation.

"Juechu" indeed exemplifies Tan as a visionary poet-painter. In an interview with Marin Sorescu, Tan revealed to the late Romanian poet what poetry meant to him:

> Everything starts with a vision of the world. . . . I have ideas and images in my mind. They materialize according to their specific aspects. Actually, they fall into places by themselves: some become poems, other become paintings or sculptures. . . . Writing poetry is finding a footnote to the ultimate knowledge of life and the universe. (Sorescu 2)

In another interview Tan explained how he thought about poetry and

painting: "Painting and poetry are but two of the many manifestations of *the same Goddess*" (Elena Bulai 14). Or should we change the last phrase to "of Tan Swie Hian?"

In the early 1990s, however, Tan re-embraced the communicative function and the intelligibility of poetic language by choosing the middle-way. For example, in "Lianghe" [Two rivers], he writes intelligibly:

> Singapore is a river
> The world is a river
> Where the two rivers meet
> Is a land of fertility.
> Yellow is a river
> Black too is a river
> When the two rivers meet
> The colors of hybridity are more beautiful.
> You are a small river
> The Milkyway is a big river
> The sky where the two rivers meet
> All clouds are flowers
>
> (*Shige/yayanjuan* 223)

The poem, obviously a nationalized text, employs no complicated metaphors and does not express any subtle idea. It seems that Tan has abandoned the autonomized function of Modernist poetry writing and is able to shift freely to and fro among different codes of literary expression, since he now thinks that "the colors of hybridity are more beautiful" than black or yellow alone. The space occupied by big or small rivers may be different, but "all clouds are flowers."

The case of Tan Swie Hian has shown the role of a leading writer in the emergence of a literary system. As a major poet, Tan not only wrote and published his own works prolifically but also established a publishing house to propagate the works of the Generation of 1968. Besides, he has translated works of different genres from Western literature to enrich the local Modernist repertoire. Furthermore,

Tan was one of the editors of the *Chao Foon Monthly* from 1969 to 1971, and he co-edited with Liang Meng Kwang the "Wencong" and "Kafeizuo" [Café] supplements of the *Nanyang Siang Pau* in the early Seventies. As an editor, he played the role of the promoter of Modernist literature in Singapore and Malaysia. His own works of various stages and styles have exemplified the richness and multiplicity of such a literature in a different Chinese literary polysystem.

NOTES

* This paper is the revised version of a chapter from my dissertation "Literary Interference and the Emergence of a Literary Polysystem," diss., National Taiwan U, 1997.

[1] Ng is himself a Malaysian story-writer devoting to the aesthetic codes of post-Modernism.

[2] A discussion of the *Mahua* patriotic literature can be found in "Aiguo zhuyi wenxue zuotanhui" [Literary forum of patriotic literature] in Zhao Rong (ed.) 107-12.

[3] Li Jinzong (1984) devotes most of the pages of his survey of the development of postwar *Mahua* literature to the discussion of the local Modernist movement. Li, however, does not provide his readers with a convincing historical/historiographical view.

[4] Liang's translation of *Ulysses* first appeared on "Special topic: *Ulysses*" in the Fiction Number of the *Chao Foon Monthly* 211-212 (1970): 197-218.

[5] Legally speaking, there were three Wuyue chubanshe, or the May Publishers. The first, which published *Juren*, was registered by the poet Yeng Pway Ngon as its sole-proprietor at North Bridge Road in 1968, and was closed down in 1969. In the same year, Qiu Liuchuan registered a second Wuyue, which published Tan's short-story collection and the anthology *New Poems by 15 Singapore Poets*, under a new English company name at Jalan Jambu Ayer; it lasted until December 1971. In the following year a third Wuyue was reregistered by Tan's wife Hao Xiaofei at Geylang and it legally ceased to exist in December 1981. The third Wuyue published mostly works of differ-

ent genres by Singaporean budding writers.

[6] The fifteen poets are Tan Swie Hian, Liang Meng Kwang, Qiu Liuman, Qiu Liuchuan, Lin Fang, Xie Qing, Ling Dian Ling, Wen Kai, Wu Weicai, Shen Bihao, He Lanning, Xia Zhifang, Mo Xie, Nan Zi, and Liu Chuan. For some reasons Yeng Pway Ngon was not included. Actually the editing, selecting and proofreading of the anthologized poems were done by each poet. And each had to pay for a portion of the printing cost. The editor was in fact a co-ordinator between the printing house and the poets. In comparison, a similar anthology of the Modernist texts by Chinese-Malaysian poets appeared, rather belatedly, only until 1974, when *Dama shixuan* [Selected works by Chinese-Malaysian poets], edited by Woon Sween Tin, was finally brought out by the Sirius Publishers. The Malaysian poets anthologized are Wong Yoon Wah, Fang Bingda, Fang Ezhen, Ai Wen, Lee Yu Cheng, Li Muxiang, Jiang Zhenxuan, Sha He, Zhou Huan, Zhou Qingxiao, Lin Lu, Chen Huihua, Dan Ying, Huang Hunxing, Moy Sook Ching, Hei Xinzang, Woon Swee Tin, Wen Ruian, Yang Jiguang, Lai Swee Fo, Lai Jingwen, Chia Yong Chew, Xie Yongcheng, Lan Qiyuan, Gui Yan, and Piao Bei Ling. The list has included exclusively the active poets of the late 1960s and early seventies who followed the Modernist doctrine. The two anthologies symbolize the self-canonizing act of the Modernist poets in Malaysia and Singapore.

[7] Tan's earliest translation is an abridged text from the work of Albert Schweitzer collected in the Wuhan selected anthology of the poet's works.

[8] In this paper the English translations of quoted texts are my renditions.

[9] Influence of Taiwanese literature on *Mahua* Modernist literary system should not be underestimated. In fact, it was obvious in several aspects. In the first place, many writers, including Bai Yao and Zhou Huan, were graduated from universities in Taiwan, though not all of them were literature majors. Secondly, in the late Sixties and early Seventies, "Wenxing congkan" [The Apollo series] and "Lanxing congshu" [The Blue Stars Series], among other books from Tai-

wan, were common in some local Chinese book stores. The style and writing techniques of Modernist poets from Taiwan such as Yu Kwang-chung and Zhou Mengdie were enthusiastically imitated by many young local poets. Thirdly, texts of Taiwanese writers, though not all belonged to Modernist works, were (re)published in the *Chao Foon Monthly*, especially during the years when it was edited by Huang Yai. In fact, during the Sixties there was a close literary relations between *Mahua* literary system and that of Taiwan. Some Taiwanese writers, Ya Xuan, for example, sent their manuscripts to *Chao Foon* for publication.

APPENDIX

A List of Tan Swie Hian's Literary Publications

1968 *Juren* [The giant] (Singapore: Wuyue chubanshe).

1969 *Mulingnu xiaoshuoji* [Ten short stories and one short novel] (Singapore: Wuyue chubanshe).

1970 *Faguo xiandai wenxue xuanji* [Contemporary French writers I]. Trans. with Cedric Anthony (Singapore: Service culturel, Ambassade de France).

1970 *Yake Buliewei shixuan* [Contemporary French writers II: Selected poems of Jacques Prévert]. Trans. with Jean-Marie Schiff (Singapore: Service culturel, Ambassade de France).

1971 *Nijinsiji riji* [Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky]. Trans. with Hao Xiaofei (Petaling Jaya: Chao Foon Press; Taipei: Yuanjing chubanshe, 1990).

1971 *Mulingnu zuopin zhuanhao* [Writings of Merino]. Topical issue. *Chao Foon Monthly* 224 (Sept.): 4-109.

1971 *Mulingnu shierji* [Poems of Merino: volume two] (Singapore: Wuyue chubanshe).

1973 *Meigong he: Ladifu shiji* [Sungai Mekong: antoloji sajak Latiff Mohidin / Mekong River: collected poems of Latiff Mohidin]. Trans. with Moy Sook Ching. Bilingual ed. (Petaling Jaya: Chao Foon Press).

1983 *Chen Ruixian wenji* [Essays of Tan Swie Hian,1968-1983] (Singapore: Singapore News and Publications).

1983 *Chen Ruixian shi* [Poems of Tan Swie Hian] (Singapore: Zhili chubanshe).

1992 *Chen Ruixian shiji: 1964-1991* [Collected poems of Tan Swie Hian: 1964-1991] (Singapore: Zhili chubanshe).

1993 *Chen Ruixian xuanji* [Selected works of Tan Swie Hian]. 5 vols. (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe).

1993 *Bali mo* [Magic of Bali]. (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian).

1995 *Suoliesiku shixuan* [Selected poems of Marin Sorescu]. Trans. (Singapore: Shi chubanshe; Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1996).

1996 *Fables*. Bilingual ed. with French trans. Elisabeth D. Prasetyo (Singapore: Asiapac).

1996 *Chen Ruixian yuyan* [Fables of Tan Swie Hian] (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe).

1996 *Chen Ruixian xiaoshuoji: 1964-1984* [Collection of Tan Swie Hian's short stories] (Singapore: Kuashiji zhizuocheng).

1998 *Chen Ruixian xuanji* [Selected works of Tan Swie Hian] (Singapore: Singapore Literature Society).

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