



From Association to Fellowship: The Work of the Contemporary Malaysian Chinese Poet Fraternity

DING Seong Lin*

Abstract

Chinese immigrants to Malaysia brought with them the tradition of literary creations. To date, a number of writers have produced literary works in the form of short stories, novels, poems, plays, and essays to reflect their experiences of life in their adopted home. Apart from creative works, Malaysian Chinese writers have formed literary groupings to further their interests. The earliest of these were established in the late 1960s and 1970s. One of the primary aims of these groupings was to encourage literary workers to channel their energies to work together for the larger interests of Malaysian Chinese literature.

This paper discusses the manner of fostering literary groupings among the fraternity of Malaysian Chinese poets and to examine the activities of selected poetry societies and a poetry performance event called Dongdiyin. It will explore the changes as experienced by these poets in their attempts to sustain and develop this phenomenon over the past 40 years. It will also consider the significance of Dongdiyin as an informal fellowship of Malaysian Chinese poets and its social impact.

Key words: Sirius Poetry Society, Divine Land Poetry Society, Dongdiyin, informal fellowship

Introduction

Literary writings among the Chinese of Southeast Asia began soon after their mass immigration into the region in the nineteenth century. This literary history has been grouped under three periods, namely, the immigrant literature of the nineteenth century, Overseas Chinese literature between 1903 and 1955, and contemporary Chinese literature from 1956 (公仲/Gong Zhong, 2000: 456). This broad periodization is superficial and treats the subject with inadequate understanding. Up to the period of Japanese Occupation under which all of Southeast Asia except Thailand was subjected and which came to an end in 1945, Chinese literary creations were inspired by the traditions in China and based largely on themes related to China. Chinese literature was then viewed as a sub-genre of the literature of China. It was only from 1945, with the birth of local consciousness and identity, that a form of Malaysian

* Dr. DING Seong Lin is a senior lecturer in Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya. E-mail: slding@um.edu.my

Chinese literature (Mahua literature) began to emerge when the Chinese began to identify with their countries of residence (see 方修/Fang Xiu, 1971; 李廷辉/Lee Ting Hui, 1971; 潘碧华/Fan Pik Wah, 2009).

Chinese literary writings found a rich and invigorating environment to flourish in the Malay Peninsula from the end of Japanese Occupation when many young writers began to compose works to record their experiences in their adopted home. This tradition has continued since and have resulted in a fine corpus of Mahua literature comprising various genres of works including short stories, novels, poems, plays, and essays. These writers were working as a separate ethnic entity in a colonial setting. Writing in Chinese, their compositions were regarded in official circles as vernacular works and very much outside the mainstream society comprising the British colonial administrators and upper Malay class and Straits-born Chinese in the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Penang and Melaka. Internally Chinese society was sub-divided into the Straits-born and immigrant communities, each being in turn differentiated according to their education background in the Chinese or English medium. Mahua literature is the unique product of the Chinese-educated. It has never received official encouragement and, since the colonial period, been denied official recognition. In a society where literacy is low and, despite the variety of literary works, the status of Mahua literature in this society is at best modest. Hence the struggle for recognition among Chinese writers for their works is a case of self-help and self-promotion and undertaken under trying circumstances.

Apart from literary creations, attention was also devoted to the promotion of Mahua literature in the form of various “literary organizations”. Some of the earliest ones include the Southern Malaya Literary Research Association formed in 1969, the Writers’ Association in the Chinese Medium of Malaysia formed in 1978, and the Sirius Poetry Society in 1973 (李锦宗/Li Jinzong, 2004). Besides the objective of promoting Mahua literature, a major reason for the establishment of these organizations was to overcome the persistent disunity among literary workers and to encourage them “to plan and work together so that the social obligations of Mahua literature may be more thoroughly fulfilled” (碧澄/Bi Cheng, 2004: 157). The activities of the larger associations called *hui* have been examined (孟沙/Meng Sha, 1997) but smaller societies or *she* deserve more attention because they too play distinctive roles in the history of Malaysian Chinese literary organizations in the country.

Several poetry societies were established from the late 1960s. Some of these had their origins outside the country or were inspired by similar efforts in territories such as Taiwan. These early societies were formed to take cognizance of the trends, initiated by the larger poetic movements in the flourishing literary environment of Taiwan, towards the “emotional ties” to China and modernism in literature. This study will discuss the changes experienced by the community of Malaysian Chinese poets in the various societies and gatherings during the past 40 years. The activities and significance of Dongdiyin, a Chinese poetry recital performance event born in Malaysia, will be examined. This event was a ground-breaking initiative binding the fraternity of poets in an informal fellowship to raise the social relevance of poetry and as an



effective means to articulate their many concerns. Earlier studies of Dongdiyin have focused largely on the twin aspects of the poems per se as recited by the poets and as viewed from the perspectives of poetic or non-poetic sense, and on the presentation of this literary form on stage. The study will also touch on the possible significance of this initiative as an attempt to seek identity and social relevance in Malaysian Chinese literary tradition and socio-political recognition, and to the future development of and impact on the prospects of Mahua poetry.

From Association to Dissolution: The Sirius and Divine Land Poetry Societies

The poetry associations of Malaysia were the products of efforts by a select group of budding poets who received their education in Chinese schools. From the 1950s, a constant stream of Malaysia students from these schools was attracted by opportunities for tertiary education in Taiwan. The appearance of poetry organizations in the early years after the formation of Malaysia in 1963 was not without its influence from the connection with Taiwan. The works of Taiwan poets were also widely disseminated and popularized by the Malaysian Chinese press. Hence in 1963, Wong Yoon Wah, Zhang Qi Qing (also known as Biluo) and others who were then university students in Taiwan were inspired to establish the Constellation Poetry Society in Taipei (孟沙/Meng Sha, 1997).¹ In 1969, *The Sarawak Vanguard* carried a literary supplement called *The Constellation* contributed by a group of Sarawak Chinese poets who subsequently established the Sarawak Constellation Poetry Society in 1971 (周翠娟/Zhou Cuijuan, 2013). Two years later, the Sirius Poetry Society was set up by Woon Swee Ting, who was then a teacher in the small town of Kampar in Perak (李锦宗/Li Jinzong, 2004: 186).

Of these poetry societies, the Constellation Poetry Society formed by Wong Yoon Wah and others was more westernized while the other two were more heavily influenced by Yu Guangzhong, widely regarded as the doyen of modern Chinese poetry.² Indeed, the Sirius Poetry Society was named after a long poem of the same name by Yu Guangzhong. According to Ng Kim Chew (黄锦树, 2005), the Sirius Poetry Society accepted not only Yu's emotional attachment towards China but also his very own style of modernism in Chinese literature. In the words of Woon Swee Ting (温任平, 2012: 4), this was a trend towards a renewed China awareness and “Western-styled avant-garde”, with special preference for existentialism because it was perceived as a philosophy that could best reflect a certain kind of solitary and absurd situation.

The strong sense of “Chineseness” tendencies is clearly reflected in the works of members of Sirius Poetry Society. The writings of Woon Swee Oan indicated an inclination for literary fellowship and the learning of martial art or *wuxia* that was drawn from his own images of iconic features in China. His *Shanhe Lu (Writings About Mountains and Rivers)*, presented a collective portrayal of definite images of China in the form of place names such as Chang'an, Jiangnan, Changjiang, Huanghe, Emei, Kunlun, Shaolin, and

Wudang. These names have been widely popularized in martial art tales and provided the inspirations for the sub-titles in *Shanhe Lu*. Lin Yaode (林耀德, 1990) gave due recognition to Woon Swee Oan for having completed the lyric in the same mould of “the large river poetic model”. The fact that he had never been to Chang’an, Jiangnan, Changjiang or Huanghe did not prevent him from conceiving imageries of a land uncluttered by issues of the real and contemporary China (陈湘琳/Ding Seong Lin and 伍燕翎/Ng Yean Leng, 2011: 142). Therefore, the language and vocabulary mobilized by Woon Swee Oan such as *jianghu* (the world at large), *changjian* (long sword), *baodao* (precious falchion), *yanyu* (misty rain), *kudeng* (flickering lamp), *qin* (harp), *baiyi* (white garment), or Jiangnan (south of Yangtze River) are but images of *wuxia* that stem from the classical world of China. Whether as an observer or a narrator, what Woon Swee Oan searched for was the nostalgic sense of an ancient age rich in poetic beauty and feelings that accorded with his conceptions of classical China. Hence all that is real today must be placed in the context of the time and space of ancient China and to assume meaning only symbolically. In the case of Woon Swee Ting’s poetry and prose,³ the imprints of the influence of Yu Guangzhong and Yang Mu were evident (鍾怡雯/Choong Yee Voon, 2009: 96, 84).

From its formation in 1973, the Sirius Poetry Society was led by Woon Swee Ting, but the presence of the young Woon Swee Oan was always felt. In fact, the genesis of this Society was built on the Oasis Society that was founded by Woon Swee Oan and several of his classmates such as Li Zongshun, also known by his pseudonym of Huang Hun Xing, back in 1969. Their comradeship was so close that in 1970 Woon Swee Oan and six others became sworn brothers, vowing “to delve into both literature and martial art as well as to delightfully deal with gratitude and revenge” (李锦宗/Li Jinzong, 2004: 185). In 1976, having withdrawn his membership from Sirius Poetry Society several years earlier, Woon Swee Oan founded the Divine Land Poetry Society, not in Malaysia but in Taiwan.

The Divine Land Poetry Society has been euphemistically likened to the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), in that the road to the “divine land”, whether in reality or in spirit, was a road of no return. It would end up like the CPM, banned by the government and retreating to the Malaysia-Thai border. While the CPM has faded into history, Divine Land Poetry Society has come to typify the attitude of the poets: expressing their concerns over the political realities of the country or making known these concerns in their literary works, but seeking always to survive the times. From the historical perspective, Divine Land Society was something of a symbolic reminder of the dilemma of the Chinese in general (鍾怡雯/Choong Yee Voon, 2010).

In comparison with the Divine Land Society, the Sirius Poetry Society was in an analogous but more dignified position. Writing the “informal history” of Sirius Poetry Society, Woon Swee Ting (2012) had recalled reading an article by Yue Hengjun on the



tragic end of the heroes of Liangshanbo in their failed attempt to change the political *status quo* of Song dynasty China as portrayed in the celebrated classic entitled *Water Margin*.⁴ He was overwhelmed by a shocking reminder that the Sirius Poetry Society was merely pursuing an utopian existence. The 108 Liangshanbo heroes were the “others” to the ruling elite that dominated the court of the Song emperor. Members of Sirius Poetry Society were similarly situated in a less privileged social position at the fringe of the political mainstream. He had on several occasions advised Woon Swee Oan to “make it a point to read it in detail, chew on it and gain a deep appreciation” (溫任平/Woon Swee Ting, 2012: 6-7). In retrospect, instead of viewing the “circuitous relationship echoing in the distance” (鍾怡雯/Choong Yee Voon, 2010) between the CPM and Divine Land Poetry Society, a utopia similar to Liangshanbo ought to fit in better with Woon Swee Oan’s imagination of the world of “wuxia”, and should have certain impact on the manner in which he established and managed Divine Land Poetry Society. As he looked back years later, it dawned upon Woon Swee Ting that, in comparing Sirius Poetry Society to Liangshanbo, “the fate of the utopia is one of vulnerable and ultimate demise”, and accorded with the fate that Yue Hengjun had foreseen with uncanny prescience (溫任平/Woon Swee Ting, 2012: 7 and 13).

Regardless of the manner in which these poetry societies met their final fate as the “divine land” or that of a utopia, it was indeed an unavoidable eventuality. Their demise was perhaps not unrelated to the manner of association among members of Sirius Poetry Society and Divine Land Poetry Society. A major feature of these societies was that each was dominated by a “leading light” whose words and actions had a decisive influence on its members. In each case, it was the founding president who assumed this role. Indeed, it may be said that the initial flourishing and eventual dissolution of the two poetry societies were somehow related to the personalities of their respective presidents.

In the case of the Sirius Poetry Society, its major activities were those of its president Woon Swee Ting. The records of these activities were treated as the major entries in the society’s annual programme. It was the president who would decide and declare what state of existence the society was in, whether it was enjoying a “resurgence” or suffering from a decline (李錦宗/Li Jinzong, 2004: 193 and 195). Trivial matters pertaining to the timing of the decisions of members to further their studies in Taiwan did not escape the president’s attention. Those who left before the pre-arranged date were deemed to be “neglecting the affairs of the society” (溫任平/Woon Swee Ting, 2012: 13). It is clearly evident that the society was like a one-man show. Not surprisingly, the president himself looked upon the function of the society in the manner of a teacher-student relationship where the members were subjected to his influence as well as that of Woon Swee Oan in action and thought. The Woon brothers were truly regarded as the leaders of the society (溫任平/Woon Swee Ting, 2012: 2). In 1986, Woon Swee Ting, then a secondary school teacher, was transferred from Kampar to the state capital of Ipoh that was situated a

short distance away. Without the presence of Woon, the society slipped into a state of abeyance. Three years later, when Woon moved to the federal capital in Kuala Lumpur to find a living, his move was to lead to the folding up of Sirius Poetry Society (温任平/Woon Swee Ting, 2009).

Such a trend of development was equally obvious in the case of the Divine Land Poetry Society. The role of its founder Woon Swee Oan in this society was overtly dominant. In his literary works, Woon Swee Oan created a world of the “wuxia” of ancient China. The characteristic feature of “wuxia” was the spirit of righteousness and the readiness to confront injustice with one’s life. It is a throwback to an imaginary romantic past in which the *daxia* or great hero was always ready to put things right. Evidently, Woon Swee Oan in his works was presenting himself in the image of the “daxia”. Like the concept of the “mask” in Western ancient theatre, the reader might at times equate the “narrator” in the literary works with the “writer” who created the works, though the “narrator” and the “writer” were in fact keeping a certain distance apart. This is because the “narrator” is just a “mask” created by the writer’s imagination to serve a function under a certain context in order to achieve a specific effect (Abrams, 1990: 238-239). In what turned out to be tragic for Divine Land Poetry Society was that Woon Swee Oan as the “writer”, due to his strong “emphatic feeling” for the “narrator” in his works, ultimately became indistinguishable from the “narrator” himself. The “great hero” in the poems and novels and the “big brother” in real life had overlapped to become the same entity. Henceforth, Divine Land Society was basically Woon Swee Oan’s make-believe world of “wuxia”. So dominating was he that all other members were subordinated to his style and leadership. He was “the divine” being, a supreme leader in the world of “wuxia” in the divine land (鍾怡雯/Choong Yee Voon, 2010). In 1980, Divine Land Poetry Society came to an abrupt end when Woon Swee Oan, then a student in Taiwan, had a brush with the law of the land.⁵

Human World Poetry Society and Dongdiyin: The Beginning of Poetry Fellowship

The Human World Poetry Society was formed in the early 1970s by a group of poets including Shaqin, Mei Shuzhen, Ho Khai Leong and others. Some of its members were prominent poets whose number accounted for almost “half of the community of poets in the Malaysian Chinese literary scene”. Its members kept a low profile, very much like the “literary purists”, in sharp contrast to the much publicized activities of Sirius and Divine Land societies. Membership in the Human World Poetry Society nurtured an informal fellowship among poets (张锦忠/ Tee Kim Tong, 2012: 10). Significantly, despite the tumultuous years and uncertainties of the 1970s, there were still poets who aspired to build their vocation in poetry per se rather than to pursue other more fashionable careers. Regretfully, as a low profile purist literary group, the lack of enthusiasm among its members had restricted its overall impact on



the literary scene.

Two poets whose works came under the influence of the Sirius and Divine Land societies were Shaqin and Zi Fan (popularly known by his pseudonym of You Chuan). Their poems were selected by Woon Swee Ting for inclusion in the book *Malaysian Chinese Literature*. However, both treaded completely different paths in their association with fellow poets. Zi Fan maintained frequent interactions with members of Sirius Poetry Society and his poems often evoked a cultural nostalgia of China that appeared almost inseparable for many Malaysian Chinese poets then.⁶ He published three books of poems in the 1970s: *Shoes* (1975), *Vomit* (1977) and *Echo* (1979). These works appeared soon after the establishment of the Human World Poetry Society and presented a refreshingly different approach to the writing of modern poems. His poems in *Echo* witnessed a change in his attitude in confronting the social reality of the day. The collection portrayed his response to two issues of the times. The first was the disturbing ethnic clashes that broke out in Kuala Lumpur on May 13 that followed shortly after the general elections of 1969, and the other was his empathy with the shift in style from impenetrable obscurity to lucid clarity that was evident among modern poems in Taiwan then (张锦忠/Tee Kim Tong, 2012: 7). In this regard, the comment by Ye Xiao is particularly perceptive.⁷

Inevitably, members of Human World Poetry Society or poets such as Zi Fan and Ye Xiao worked in relative isolation and solitude. In comparison with the glittering sights of the make-believe world of “wuxia” as created by Divine Land Poetry Society and the high-pitched galloping sounds drummed up by Sirius Poetry Society, what had been done by poets such as Zi Fan and others would perhaps be considered as mere “trivial grumblings”.⁸ Nevertheless, a stage performance called “Dongdiyin” that emerged subsequently was way beyond what Zi Fan could ever imagine then.

The phrase “Dongdiyin” is derived from an untitled poem by Lu Xun (鲁迅, 1881-1936) in 1934:

Amid the brambles ten thousand gloomy faces hide. Their sorrow songs shatter the
earth day and night. Bound to my homeland's conditions my mind finds no rest. In silence
I hear shattering thunder arrests (Kong, 2012).

One of the most renowned modern Chinese writers of the early twentieth century, Lu Xun was overwhelmed by the prolonged sufferings of his country and people and wrote about them with satirical and critical sharpness. Dongdiyin is a celebration of the song to prompt the people into “earth-shaking” actions and the intention to speak honestly with regards to current issues (see 林春美/Lim Choon Bee and 张永修/Zhang Yongxiu, 2004).

In 1988, Zi Fan and Poh Seng Titt met for the first time. In the same year, the innovative “24-season drums performance” was staged at a “Duanwu Poetry Festival” event. This inaugural performance subsequently blossomed into a new cultural item that is now officially recognized as part of the national culture. Poh Seng Titt (2011: 77-78) was moved to declare that:

We are all travelers in the midst of raging storm: Your music, my literature, and even the cartoon drawings of Xiaoman as well as the comic dialogue performance of Yao Xinguang, are different facets of art that have the same boiling blood and racing pulse. Yes, we are all travelling on the road, and like many others who toil the land and sow the seeds in silence without clamouring, we rely on some physical warmth shared to sustain ourselves through an excruciating journey.

To appreciate the sense of mission felt by this “old” generation of poets,⁹ the declaration of Poh Seng Titt (2011: 93) that “history has reached a turning point; we must plan and work together to create a new scenario, was clearly inspirational to prompt the literary fraternity into action.” The exhortation recalls the “Declaration of Establishment” of The Writers’ Association of Chinese Medium of Malaysia back in 1978. In this instance, the collaboration among You Chuan, Poh Seng Titt and others was not in the form of “association” or “society”. Instead, it was rather similar to the gathering of sworn brothers dating back to the early 1970s. And so they were: the poets were no more satisfied with merely making “trivial grumblings” but to make a big presence in the form of Dongdiyin.

From the outset, Dongdiyin appeared to be the outcome of the “concern for the current situations and care for the country” felt by poets such as You Chuan, Poh Seng Titt and others:

The reality is but stormy. Faced with issues in aspects ranging from ethnic groups to the nation, from culture and education to politics and economics, we can no longer close our eyes, shut our ears, stay detached and unperturbed while keeping aloof with empty ideals. We want literature to dance with caring pulses in the eyes of the readers; we also want our voices to echo in the ears of our audience the sound of our boiling blood. We had therefore planned the Performance of Voices in late 1988; and with the same objectives, we launch Dongdiyin this year (Dongdiyin 1989).

Interestingly, these poets and artists were addressed as “old” (*lao*), a term of endearment and respect, with a tradition that goes back to the Tang and Song dynasties. Poets then gave nicknames to each other such as “old poet”, “old debater”, or “old mute”, as they gathered and rejoiced in wine drinking, composed poems and offered commentaries. The companionship was free of formality or status consciousness, but more as a form of fellowship (*tongren*) of the like-minded. Despite the habit among the poets and artists who were involved in Dongdiyin to address themselves as “lao”, the concept of fellowship was probably never in their minds.

Dongdiyin was first staged in 1988 in Kuala Lumpur and showcased the works of six local poets. This inaugural performance attracted an audience of 250. Subsequent performances were staged in the next two years in eight different towns in the country. These featured the works of 32 and 14 poets in each year and before larger audiences. After a lapse of several years, the show was revived with a tour of 20 towns throughout the country (Table 1). Dongdiyin fostered a spontaneous feeling among the poets of a loose form of fellowship, in contrast to the

Table 1. Presentations of Dongdiyin, 1988-2014

Name/Type of Performance	City/Town	Year	No. of Poets Involved	Size of Audience
The Performance of Voice: Recitation of Modern Poems by You Chuan and Poh Seng Titt	Kuala Lumpur	1988	6	250
Dongdiyin: Recitation Tour of Modern Poems	Johor Bahru, Pulau Pinang, Kuala Lumpur, Kelantan, Melaka	1989	32	3,450
Gandanxing: Recitation of Modern Poems 1990	Kota Bahru, Klang, Kuala Terengganu, Sibul, Kuching	1990	14	3,000
Dongdiyin 99: Recitation tour of Poems	Kuala Lumpur, Alor Setar, Sitiawan, Pulau Pinang, Ipoh, Kota Bahru, Kuala Terengganu, Kuantan, Seremban, Melaka, Petaling Jaya, Kota Kinabalu, Kuching, Sibul, Miri, Kajang, Johor Bahru, Klang, Sekudai, Labis	1999	13	6,940
Dongdiyin in Remembrance of You Chuan: Recitation of Poems, Songs and Dance Performance	Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Kuching, Sekudai, Alor Setar, Seremban, Kelantan, Klang, Pulau Pinang	2008	44	10,400
Youth Dongdiyin in Remembrance of You Chuan	Kuala Lumpur	2009	3	690
Spring Thunder Dongdi Poems and Musical Drama	Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Pulau Pinang, Klang, Batu Pahat, Kulai, Seremban	2010-2011	28	10,070
Dongdiyin in Remembrance of You Chuan, Yao Xinguang, Tan Hooi Song and Chin Yong: Performance Tour of Poems Recitation, Songs and Dance	Nilai, Petaling Jaya, Jenjarom, Kampar, Kuala Lumpur, Pulau Pinang, Melaka, Johor Bahru	2012	58	7,750
The Performance of Voice/Dongdiyin	Petaling Jaya, Kajang, Melaka, Kuala Lumpur	2014	26	1,090
Taipei Dongdiyin	Taipei	2014	18	n.a.
Singapore Dongdiyin	Singapore	2014	n.a.	n.a.

Source: 傅承得/Poh Seng Titt, 2014

previous association of “brotherhood”.

It was the death of You Chuan in 2007 that prompted the revival of Dongdiyin in 2008 and in what became known as the new version of the show. The opening decade of the twenty-first century had been a testing time for the fraternity of Mahua literature as the leading literary figures and artistes began to leave the scene one after another. Among them were Yao Xinguang who died in 2004, You Chuan in 2007, Tan Hooi Song in 2008, Yao Tuo in 2009 and Chin Yong in 2011. The departure of a prominent personality was nothing but a normal state of affairs, but that of several in quick succession was emotionally disturbing and evoked a strong sense of loss.

A fresh series of performances has since been initiated, of which that of 2012 was staged in dedication to the memory of You Chuan, Tan Hooi Song, Yao Xinguang and Chin Yong. Unwittingly, this new series has been instrumental in forging a new community of poets.

The New Dongdiyin: Emergence of the Community of Malaysian Chinese Poets

In 2012, Chen Lin Loong compiled an anthology of poems which contains the works of 18 poets participating in Dongdiyin and published it in 2013 as *Voices of An Era: Self-selected Poems by Dongdiyin Poets*. This event seems to remind one of past literary experiences in the formation of poetry societies in the 1970s and similar gatherings of literary enthusiasts in the local universities and colleges (温任平/Woon Swee Ting, 2012: 18). However, on this particular occasion, a new community of poets and a different publisher were involved. The publisher was in a position to gather together, “through the pure idealism of literature”, a group of friends sharing similar interests and aspirations, to learn from and, at the same time, compete against each other in the spirit of fellowship (黄锦树/Ng Kim Chew, 2012a). The community of poets, numbering 18 in all and born between the 1940s to the 1980s, was much larger than the active members in earlier organizations.

The Sirius Poetry Society in the early 1980s had “attempted to tread a highbrow path”, composing songs with modern poems as lyrics for duplication in records and cassettes. In collaboration with the Malaysian Chinese Cultural Association, it held a conference on modern literature and a performance on modern poetry-songs to “promote modern poetry through the medium of the sounds and melodies of music” (温任平/Woon Swee Ting, 2012: 14-17). Whereas the Sirius Poetry Society set out to be an elitist and exclusive “poetry society”, the poets and artists in Dongdiyin shared a spontaneous passion for presenting their works to the grass roots. The appeal of Dongdiyin was expressed in terms of its “performance” rather than in poetic writings. The publication of selected poems, commercial marketing, stage performance with poetry recitation and songs, dances, music or even wine drinking added to the furtherance of the popular image of both poets and poetry.

Despite the attraction of Dongdiyin, it was not without its share of criticisms. Some questioned the quality of some of the poems selected for presentation and felt they were “poetic



forms of slogan shouting” or were “non-poems”, and some were even considered as “coarse and vulgar” (黄锦树/Ng Kim Chew, 2012b).¹⁰ Such criticisms had been voiced before Dongdiyin was launched. Back in 1978, You Chuan, under the pseudonym of Zi Fan, had with remarkable prescience remarked thus:

To write sober and lucid poems takes much courage. You have to be brave enough to discard the flowery language, the complicated images as well as the twists and turns of the metaphors.

Another criticism was that the crisis of everyday life had been painted as a crisis of poetry per se by a kind of “bare all writing” of a poetic nature. The attempts to exploit the theatrical elements of the stage, space, settings, sounds as well as public enthusiasm were meant to salvage the poetic sense of the selected works (黄锦树/Ng Kim Chew, 2012b: 14). What was presented was not the poetic quality of the works but the “critical exposure of current issues”. The language of poetry had been lowered to the level of comprehension of the public. In short, the transmission of issues, ideology and concepts was achieved at the expense of poetry.

The last word on the role of Dongdiyin, whether it was a case of “poetry being brought into the society” or “society being brought into poetry” remains to be said (辛金顺/Sen Kim Soon, 2012: 11-14). The intention of the discussion here is not to determine whether poems should be presented as genuine poems, or to manoeuvre a clear demarcation between “sober and lucid” poems and those that are “coarse and vulgar”, but to examine three pertinent issues associated with Dongdiyin, namely, its potential for stage presentation, its effects on the popularization of Mahua poetry, and its social impact.

The quality of the stage performance of Dongdiyin depends on the suitability of the selected works for presentation. It is relevant to refer to the listening and reading of poems as two distinct literary activities. The aesthetic feelings derived from listening to poems are different from those of reading these poems. Between the performers and the audience as well as among target groups of audience, there is an emotional ambience through mutual influence that gives rise to a strong “sense of on-site involvement” (王兆鹏/Wang Zhaopeng, 2004: 51-52). In order to adapt to the ambience during the performance, the members of Dongdiyin tried to go beyond the printed format to display their “poetic” works with different forms of theatrical aids. In their aim to arouse public interest, they might have deemphasized the production of poems per se to highlight “poetry” as a mass performance art. In this case, are “listening to poetry” and “reading poetry” in conflict? Or will the two-way exchange between “reciting” and “listening” to poems endear poetry to listeners and the audience, and hence to stimulate a deeper interest in poetry among the uninitiated? From the size of the audiences of Dongdiyin, it is apparent that its various performances have exerted a certain catalytic effect on society. The question is: does the popularization of poetry among the grass roots constitute “a crisis of poetry”?

On the issue of promoting the popularity of poetry, the objective of the early Dongdiyin event was to enable poetry to reach out to the people and to let them realize that literature was

part of everyday life and not dreamy works of romance and decadence (周若鹏/Chiew Ruoh Peng, 2014). In short, as the medium by which to stage “popular performance”, the event had served to promote general interest of Mahua poetry among the grass roots, in particular among students. It had also played a substantial role in furthering interest in and enriching the history of Mahua literature.

The performance aspect of Dongdiyin and its popular appeal were methods adopted to serve the needs of poetry but more crucially was the social impact ensuing from the considerable number of performance in different parts of the country. The initiators of Dongdiyin were concerned with arousing the awareness of the Chinese community of various issues that confronted them. Poetry provided an excellent medium to allow deeply submerged frustrations to surface lest they were forgotten or dismissed by general ignorance or indifference. Hence Dongdiyin provided a legitimate platform for the outpouring of feelings and emotions both subtle and blunt before target audiences, and to focus attention on a range of social, political, cultural or historical issues. It created the extra space and opportunities to enable the community of poets to articulate their views on crucial issues with critical and searching perspectives. The community in general and the audience in particular were then able to connect with issues that affected their lives and their future.

Conclusion

Featuring prominently in the history of Mahua poetry in the last four decades was a literary movement by which the fraternity of poets had gathered together initially through formal societies and eventually in a loose form of fellowship. The early poetry societies of the 1970s began a movement that added a new dimension to the history of Mahua literature. Unfortunately, they proved to be unsustainable largely on account of their domination by their founders. This was particularly so with the Sirius and Divine Land poetry societies. The deliberate adoption of an elitist image and their aloofness from the community resulted in their social irrelevance and eventual dissolution. On the other hand, an informal fellowship of the like-minded pioneered an innovative poetry performance on stage under the banner of Dongdiyin. It has managed to survive through its appeal to the grass roots and constitutes a model that integrates a literary activity with the everyday life of the people. It is by highlighting the spirit of poetry in its intervention into the real world that marks the significance of Dongdiyin.¹¹

Between the initial version of Dongdiyin led by You Chuan and Poh Seng Titt and the new version of the post-You Chuan period,¹² the event has witnessed many changes over the years. The success of the informal “fellowship” of individuals from different backgrounds and inclinations will ensure Dongdiyin a role in the literary history of the Malaysian Chinese community. Despite the expected divergence of interests among fellow poets, mutual criticisms and encouragement as well as communications and collaborations will safeguard the continued existence of the movement for the benefit of Mahua poetry and the influence of the new



community of poets. More importantly, the significance of this community of poets lies not in the concern of the suitability of the stage performance of poetry or in popularizing their works, but whether they themselves are able to persist with their involvement with sufficient passion and commitment to consolidate the unity of purpose through the informal fellowship of a like-minded group of individuals.

From its initial staging in 1988 and its continuation until today, Dongdiyin is no longer a transient phenomenon but has earned itself a place not only in the history of Mahua literature but that of the literature of the Chinese overseas. The mission of the fraternity of poets is to keep the flame of poetic passion burning for the larger interest of Mahua poetry in its pure form as well as for stage performance. In the final analysis, there is a rightful role for a complementary literary event such as Dongdiyin to serve as a platform for established and budding poets to voice their ideals and concerns, to arouse awareness, to highlight the plight of society, and to call for efforts to work towards a better future for all.

Appendix 1. Chinese Names of Persons mentioned in the Text

Biluo	毕洛
Chen Lin Loong	曾翎龙
Chin Rong	陈容
Ho Khai Leong	何启良
Huang Hun Xing	黄昏星
Li Zongshun	李宗舜
Mei Shuzhen	梅淑贞
Poh Seng Titt	傅承得
Shaqin	沙禽
Tan Hooi Song	陈徽崇
Wong Yoon Wah	王润华
Woon Swee Ting	温任平
Woon Swee Oan	温瑞安
Wu An	吴岸
Xiaoman	小曼
Yang Mu	杨牧
Yao Tuo	姚拓
Yao Xinguang	姚新光
Ye Xiao	叶啸
You Chuan	游川
Yu Guangzhong	余光中
Yue Hengjun	乐衡军
Zhang Qi Qing	张齐清
Zi Fan	子凡

Appendix 2. Chinese Names of Terms and Place Names

24-season drums performance	廿四节令鼓
<i>Baiyi</i>	白衣
<i>Baodao</i>	宝刀
Chang'an	长安
<i>Changjian</i>	长剑
Changjiang	长江
Constellation Poetry Society	星座诗社
<i>Daxia</i>	大侠
Divine Land Poetry Society	神州诗社
Dongdiyin	动地吟
Duanwu Poetry Festival	端午诗节
Emei	峨嵋
Huanghe	黄河
<i>Hui</i>	会
Human World Poetry Society	人间诗社
<i>Jianghu</i>	江湖
Jiangnan	江南
<i>Kudeng</i>	枯灯
Kunlun	崑崙
Liangshanbo	梁山泊
<i>Mahua literature</i>	马华文学
<i>Mahua poetry</i>	马华诗歌
Malaysian Chinese Cultural Association	马来西亚华人文化协会
Oasis Society	绿洲社
Old debater	辩老
Old poet	诗老
Old mute	默老
<i>Lao</i>	老
Performance of Voices	声音的演出
<i>Qin</i>	琴
Sarawak Constellation Poetry Society	砂朥越星座诗社
<i>Shanhe Lu</i>	山河录
Shaolin	少林
<i>She</i>	社
Sirius Poetry Society	天狼星诗社
Southern Malaya Literary Research Association	南马文艺研究会
<i>Tongren</i>	同仁



Wudang	武当
Wuxia	武侠
Writers' Association in the Chinese Medium of Malaysia	马来西亚华文作家协会
Yanyu	烟雨

Notes

- 1 Where information is available, local writers are known by their officially registered names, otherwise the Pinyin version is used instead.
- 2 On the influence of Yu Guangzhong and other Taiwanese poets such as Yang Mu on Mahua poetry, see 锺怡雯/Choong Yee Voon, 2009; 陈大为/Chan Tah Wei, 2009.
- 3 Some of Woon Swee Ting's works include *Stormy Road*, *Harp Without String*, *Gods of the Masses to Yellow Skinned Moon*, and *Living In Exile Is A Kind of Injury*.
- 4 The article is penned by Yue Hengjun entitled "The making and disenchantment of Liangshanbo: on the tragic mockery of Shui Hu", cited in Woon Swee Ting, 2012.
- 5 In 1980, Woon Swee Oan was arrested and jailed in Taiwan for three months on suspicion of involvement in banned political activities. He was later expelled from Taiwan.
- 6 For instance, the poem "When the Mouth Is Opened" is an obvious example: "When the eyes are opened/We have been born here/But are still standing at the same place/When the mouth is opened/We always talk like the rolling Changjiang and the surging Huanghe dashing over thousands of miles.....". See You Chuan, 2007: 164.
- 7 In 1974, Ye Xiao questioned the over-emphasis of "consciousness about China" in the poems of some members of Sirius Poetry Society. He pointed out that such poems did not "reflect life in the Malaysian society". Three years later, he published another critical essay in which he gave recognition to the poetic views of Zi Fan that stressed on "inheriting the previous trend of using lucid language, emphasizing clarity and expressing a poetic style graced with rhythms and rhymes." See Ye Xiao, 1974 and 1977.
- 8 Zi Fan has said in his poem "Vomit": "Sometimes, it is good to grumble/So that my toes dare not pop their heads out of the shoes to look around/So that my younger brothers and sisters dare not take more vegetables with their chopsticks/Or gulp more rice from their bowls/So much of/Reality has been swallowed/How do you expect the stomach to digest?". See You Chuan, 2007: 84.
- 9 The word *lao* (old) is used as a term of endearment for close friends or the elderly. You Chuan addressed Poh Seng Titt as "Fu Lao" (Fu the elderly) when they first met in 1988 out of respect for the person and as a poet. Yao Xinguang and Yao Tuo were also fondly known as "Yao Lao". See Ding Seong Lin, 2012: 82.
- 10 Ng Kim Chew (2012b) was of the opinion that since the pre-war period, new Mahua poetry had "this yelling form of poetic sense that continued until many years after the formation of a nation (such as Wu An, Dongdiyin)" and "poems by You Chuan are mostly of this same type; our existence is shown to be heavy but the poems are vulgar."
- 11 See <http://poetry.culture.gov.tw/download/DM.pdf>
- 12 Poh Seng Titt was the key organizer of Dongdiyin that was held in 1989, 1999 and 2008. From 2012, he remained active mostly in the background. His "withdrawal" from active involvement coincides with the initial shaping of the "fellowship" among the new community of poets.

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