

The Shuyuan Poems from the Perspective of the Scenery and Society of Singapore and Malaya

Gek-Suan Khor * and Qingwei Xiao **

To cite this article: Gek-Suan Khor and Qingwei Xiao (2025). The Shuyuan Poems from the Perspective of the Scenery and Society of Singapore and Malaya. *Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies* 14(1): 53–69. [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202506_14\(1\).0004](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202506_14(1).0004)

To link to this article: [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202506_14\(1\).0004](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202506_14(1).0004)

Abstract

This article explores the themes in *The Collection of Shuyuan's Poems* (菽园诗集) from the perspective of Singapore and Malaya. The Shuyuan Poems are a unique collection of poems about the scenery and society of Singapore and Malaya cover Southeast Asia's climate, geographical environment, scenery, natural products, human society, and architecture. These themes are infrequent in classical Chinese poetry and mark the nascent stage of Malaysian Chinese literature, leaving behind impressions of the contemporary landscapes of Singapore and Malaya as the collective heritage of future generations.

Keywords: The Shuyuan Poems, landscape, climate, peoples, Singapore and Malaya

Introduction

This study discusses the themes in *The Collection of Shuyuan's Poems* (菽园诗集) by Seok-Wan Khoo (1874–1941). The collection may be referred to as the Shuyuan Poems after Khoos' courtesy name. The poems were inspired by the poet's imaginations and perceptions of the local physical and social features and other phenomena of Singapore and Malaya.¹ Khoo was born in Haicheng District, Fujian Province, and moved to Singapore with his father at the age of 8 and, at age 20 took and passed the provincial examination to earn the title of *Juren* (举人, a successful candidate in the imperial examinations at the provincial level). After failing the imperial examinations in Beijing, he participated in a patriotic movement but returned to Singapore

following the failure of the public petition to the Emperor.² He became a bankrupt in 1907 and subsequently travelled to various parts of Southeast Asia. In his later years, he became devoted to Zen meditation and Buddhism until the last days of his life (Qiu, 1993).

Khoo was a celebrated poet living in Singapore between 1874 and 1941 in an era of massive immigration of immigrants from south China. His intention was to spread and promote Chinese culture in Singapore and Southeast Asia among the Chinese community. His poems carry themes that introduce and describe the scenery such as the landscape, climate and weather, natural products as well as buildings, architecture, and the societies and culture of Singapore and Malaya (Chen, 2019). The purpose was to enable the growing Chinese community of the time to understand the local conditions of Singapore, Malaya and the whole of Southeast Asia.

The earliest study on the Shuyuan Poems was completed by Cheng-Tzu Yang in 1969. However, there was little attempt to analyse the poems in relation to the real-life situations of that era. Khoo's poems also deal with the historical and cultural aspects of Singapore and the Malacca Straits region including the use of Malay Language, scenery and social life of Singapore and Malaya (Tham, 2016). The Shuyuan Poems introduced into Chinese Literature new subject matters such as the scenery, the built environment, and the people of Singapore and Malaya. This study will further analyse the historical and geographical background of the poems in the Shuyuan Poems and to understand the motivations behind as well as the value of his creations. This is not a study in literary appreciation, the analysis of the Shuyuan Poems is not concerned with the literary style or meaning of the poems but with the interpretation of their overall contents and their significance in understanding the land people of Singapore, Malaya and Southeast Asia in general.

Singapore as Its Environment

The greater part of Khoo's life was spent in Singapore which became the base to observe and learn about the people, events, and things of Singapore and Malaya. This background and experience were to exert a strong influence on the themes and subject matter of his poems.

In contrast to the war-torn situation and uncertainty of China, Khoo found in Singapore and Malaya a peaceful and stable environment to lead a meaningful life (Chen, 2019). The new environment provided new and different experiences relating to the people and events that were not seen in China. Grateful for living away from the war in his homeland, Khoo expressed his love towards Singapore and neighbouring territories. It is not surprising that the Shuyuan Poems are rich in the descriptions of the peoples, events, climate, and landscape of Southeast Asia. The poems about the scenery and culture of Singapore and Malaya include descriptions of the local geography, climate, natural products, human life, and architecture.

Khoo was exuberant in his admiration for its people, events, and things of Southeast Asia.

His works confirmed that Singapore and the Southeast Asia region was a “paradise” in the same image as the traditional *Tao Yuan* (桃源) or a secret land of peace and serenity as understood in Chinese literature. For example, on his friend Zheng Cangting’s travel to Southeast Asia to solicit donations to produce a print edition of the *Four Book Depositories of Classics Treasuries*, he looked forward to his success and to bring back the classics to the land of Peach Blossom Land which is a euphemism for the land of joy and serenity (Khoo, 1949a). To Yu Yonghao, he wished him luck in entering paradise and be far from the smoke of war to be among saintly people (Khoo, 1949a).

Situated in the tropics and the Malay Peninsula, Singapore is vastly different from China. Khoo’s perceptions of the local geography and peoples are clearly reflected in his poems. As an island situated between the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea, Singapore became one of the world’s most important trading ports. Khoo’s poems *Xingzhou* (Singapore Island) and *Xinjiapo Ditu* (the Map of Singapore) were accounts on the geographical environment of Singapore. *Xingzhou* provides a detailed description of Singapore’s geographical location and surrounding environment.

《星洲》

连山断处见星洲，落日帆樯万舶收。
赤道南环分北极，怒涛西下卷东流。
江天锁钥通溟渤，蜃蛤妖腥幻市楼。
策马铁桥风猎猎，云中鹰隼正凭秋。
(Khoo, 1949a: 42)

Xingzhou

Mountains connect and break to reveal Xingzhou,
As the sun sets, myriad ships gather.
The equator circles south, dividing the northern pole,
Waves rage west, rolling eastward.
The vast expanse above the river is the key passage to the South China Sea,
This place is so marvelous that it seems like the breath of a giant clam could
transform into a city of towers.
As the whip drives the horse across the iron bridge, the sound of the wind
rustling the flags can be heard. It is in autumn that brave men emerge.

The poem reveals Khoo’s knowledge of the geography of Singapore and Southeast Asia. There are the mountain ranges in the Malay peninsula, of which the Titiwangsa Range being the main one and forms the backbone of the peninsula until tapers off in Singapore. The port is a bustling

scene of modern Singapore sitting astride a strategic geographical location between the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea. Khoo's poem further depicts Singapore's position on the equator and experiences raging waves of the surrounding seas.

《半岛》

半岛连星岛，长堤隐暮霞。

峡分泥异色，桥压浪仍花。

蜃气嘘山市，鲛人曳雾纱。

村村生事足，四望绿云遮。

(Khoo, 1949c:122)

The Peninsula

The peninsula connects the island of Singapore,

Long causeway between Peninsula to Singapore fades in the evening glow.

The different straits at Peninsula and Singapore make both muddy difference,

Foaming waves like flower beneath the bridge.

Shimmering haze rose upon the city on the mountain,

Like Mermaids dragging the Silken mist.

Each village content with stories and matters,

Every side wrap with green mist.

The poem on the Malay Peninsula describes the geography of Malaya, recognising that Singapore is part of Malaya but different from it. The description of Penang Island is perceptive, stressing its hilly topography which is in sharp contrast to that of Singapore.

The “Rain” in Singapore and Malaya

The climate of Singapore is vastly different from that of the coastal regions of southern China. The climate is hot and humid throughout the year. Being on the equator, Singapore is also a very rainy region, with an annual rainfall of approximately 2,200 millimetres (Meteorological Service Singapore, 2010). The rain is one of Khoo's sources of creative inspiration. The Shuyuan Poems feature more than ten compositions on the rain written between 1898 and 1940. Among these, *Events in the Sunshine and Rain* vividly describes the summery, windy, and rainy scenes of Singapore.

《晴雨即事》（二首）

时雨南行忽阻前，截将南北昼晴天。

由来一望原无界，陡觉中分自有边。
艇女踏沙寻锦贝，牧童手线纵风鸢。
何须寒暖随朝暮，燥湿同时感自然。
(Khoo, 1949c: 55-56)

Events in the Sunshine and Rain

The southern rain suddenly halts the way ahead,
Daytime remains clear between the north and south.
From ancient times, the horizon was boundless,
Yet now it feels as if it's naturally divided.
Boatwomen tread the sand in search of colorful shells,
While shepherd boys let their kites soar in the wind.
Why follow the warmth and cold of morning and evening,
When dry and wet seasons are felt naturally at once?

These works describe the frequent rainy days which impede daily life, the island's environment as an island composed of hills, and scenic beaches which are popular with those searching for beautiful shells. *The Climate on the Southern Island* is a vivid portrayal of the rainy season and its cooling effect in dissipating the oppressive heat and refreshing the air. The pioneers who have migrated from China to contribute to the development of the island would be reminded of the pleasant autumn season in China after the rains. Khoo was highly observant of changes in the surround, as indicated by his remarks on the foggy and low temperatures of the morning and the discernible drop in temperature at night because of the mist at night. He noted a noticeable change in the climate in September. This was a time when the northeast monsoon begins to blow, bringing heavy rainfall and causing the temperature to drop sharply, making it very cool. Another his perceptive comments was one on the phenomenon of the daily convectional rainstorms caused by the churning of moisture from the evaporation of water and the inevitable heavy downpours in the afternoons.

《年来南岛气候九月渐凉矣》
孰把炎威逐，怜渠守故常。
自从侨辟土，渐觉候如唐。
海日蒸朝雾，园柯饱夜霜。
三时终雨季，九月倏秋凉。
(Khoo, 1949c: 83)

The Climate on the Southern Island in September Gradually Cools This Year

Who dispels the fierce heat;
 Pity him for faithfully keeping to the old ways.
 Since we pioneered this land,
 it gradually feels like the autumn climate in Tang.
 The sea sun steams the morning mist;
 The branches in the garden are full of night frost.
 The rainy season ends after three months;
 September suddenly turns cool.

These poems were instructive to the general public on the nature of the tropical to understand the climate of Singapore and Malaya as a phenomenon that was rarely encountered in China. Also the foggy scenery was the result of the rain and heat in contrast to that in China during winter which does not exist in Singapore and Malaya.

Natural Products of Singapore and Malaya

The Southeast Asian region with its tropical climate is rich in natural products and unique fruits. Among the diversity of native plants and fruits are the coconut trees and different fruits such as bananas, durians, pineapples and various animals. Southeast Asia is a crossroad between the eastern and western hemispheres. The period of colonial rule has witnessed several important exotic plants introduced into the region to enrich its potential agricultural resources. Among the important crops were coffee, rubber, and oil palm. He was keenly aware of the unique environment and draw inspirations from the natural landscape and products in his poetic creations, something that is missing in classical Chinese poetry (Chen, 2019).

In the Shuyuan Poems, Khoo wrote about and praised different types natural products in *Coconut Trees*, *Rubber Trees*, and *Four Fruit Soup*. Khoo was fascinated by the palm's majestic and upright appearance.

《椰树》

分行拨地碧丛丛，长爰疏椰夕照中。
 老笔双松垂直千，遥情百尺起孤桐。
 润含雨气连宵月，凉送潮声近海风。
 比似淇泉千亩竹，南方嘉树正葱茏。
 (Khoo, 1949b: 4)

Coconut Trees

Rows of green clusters spread across the ground,
 Tall and sparse coconut trees in the evening glow.
 The old brush dips twin pines straight down a thousand feet;
 Distant feelings rise a hundred feet; a lone phoenix.
 Moist with rain's breath throughout the night,
 Cool breezes send tide sounds near the sea.
 The bamboo groves by the pond are like thousands of acres,
 Southern fine trees stand lush and green.

He likened the coconut palm to a “lone phoenix” rising majestically a hundred feet into the sky. The palm is a native plant that thrives in the tropical rainforest climate nourished by cool breezes and abundant moisture, and in growing in luxuriant splendour by the sea. Tall and slender from a distance, it adorns the landscape to add to the lush and vibrant atmosphere.

Unlike the coconut palm, the rubber plant was an introduced species that quickly became the dominant economic plant in the Malaya Peninsula and the Dutch East Indies during the colonial period. Struggled into England by Henry Wickham from south America in 1876, some seedlings brought to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Singapore, with a few brought to Kuala Kangsar in 1877. The rubber tree thrives in humid environments and rubber planting diffused throughout Southeast Asia rapidly. The British botanist H. N. Ridley introduced a viable rubber tapping technique to extract latex and henceforth to turned Malaya into the world's centre of rubber production from the early 20th century (Voon, 1976). The rapid spread of rubber cultivation coincided with the rise of the automobile industry in the West and the demand for tyres. Rubber was also an excellent material for waterproof products such as raincoats, boots and a variety of products.

《橡胶树》

异栩偏名橡，殊棉可代衣。
 蛮山青不断，赤道绿成围。
 傅物如胶漆，柔工胜革韦。
 四时殷种植，千岛斗芳菲。
 木性培林易，金行导体违。
 名随新记著，质物故材挥。
 西海根何远，南洋土自肥。
 寄言人造品，相禅莫相非。
 (Khoo, 1949c: 117–118)

Rubber Trees

The extraordinary tree bears the name of rubber,
 Its peculiar fiber can substitute cloth.
 In the wild mountains, the green never ends,
 Encircling the equator with lush greenery.
 Its adhesive nature like glue and varnish,
 Softness surpassing leather and hide.
 In every season, it's diligently cultivated,
 Across a thousand islands, competing in fragrance.
 Its wood nurtures the forest with ease,
 Though guiding metal through it defies its nature.
 Fame rises with new records,
 Its quality surpasses common timber.
 The roots extend far into the Western seas,
 The soil in the Southern Oceans is naturally rich.
 Words of advice to synthetic creations,
 Coexist in harmony, without discord.

Khoo also encouraged the development of the rubber industry for business through this poems. It was his belief that the rubber trees had great economic potential and social utility, deserving of significant cultivation (Chen, 2019, p93). Indeed, this introduction generated great economic activity in the resource-scarce Southeast Asian region, which improved the people's living standards to a great extent. It was the rubber industry that boosted the trade of Singapore and Malaya raised the income of the people. It was the rubber industry that served as a catalyst to the development of the Malaya and the trade of Singapore throughout the 20th century.

In Li (2019) discusses how Khoo's poetry, which often involves themes of his hometown, is not always forceful and stirring. The poet is also adept at extracting warmth and charm from his local environment. Li Jia uses the poem *Four Fruit Soup* as an example. *Four Fruit Soup* is a popular dessert in the Southeast Asia region, suitable for quenching thirst in the summer. Ingredients like red beans, green beans, barley, and lotus seeds give it a sweet, refreshing, and cooling taste. In the poem, Khoo writes in the inscription:

序曰：莲实、枣肉、桂圆、红豆、栗子、杏仁、糖瓜、干柿，随举四味，
 合成甜羹，号曰四果汤，从闽称也。按：四果名出佛典，于此借用，语殊
 雅驯。予也赁庑远市，食无兼味。各物采办以时，藏蓄可久，以伴茶酒，
 颇饶别趣。

Preface: Lotus seeds, jujube flesh, longan, red beans, chestnuts, almonds, candied melon, and dried persimmons—these eight ingredients are combined to make a sweet soup called 'Four Fruit Soup,' a term from Fujian. Note: The name 'Four Fruit' comes from Buddhist scriptures, and its usage here is particularly refined and elegant. I live far from the market, so I have no access to such diverse flavours. Each ingredient is collected seasonally and stored for a long time, serving as a delightful companion to tea and wine (Li, 2019: 52).

This passage directly conveys Khoo's refined enjoyment of his local dessert. The poem links the *Four Fruit Soup* with Laba Congee," a traditional Buddhist dish made during the Laba Festival which falls on the 8th day of the 12th lunar month. The reference to enjoyment of the sweet dish by the monks is particularly innovative. This shows the familiarity between these two beverages as they taste the same but their ingredients were different. Furthermore, the soup was a refreshing drink in the tropical climate. This poem is an early reference to the Chinese communities of Singaporean and Malaya to adapt to the heat and oppressive day-time weather by creating different types of cuisine or beverages to sooth the spirit. Khoo was not just writing about a new type of drink but also on the importance of the local Chinese attempt to mitigate the stifling effect of the tropical weather on daily life.

《四果汤》

种来瓜豆亦何功，橡栗疗饥足御穷。
别借佛名调四果，讳谈粥食号双弓。
春华秋实风前拾，夏水冬汤火候中。
荷露走盘相的烁，枣帘记曲剧玲珑。
书留丹叶摹盈菊，宴启芳林缀满丛。
湔雪肝肠飧玉法，霏香齿颊串珠工。
翻匙长爱浮浮白，炙轘能生粲粲红。
酒熟茶温怀净饭，鸟残猿献检行僮。
腐儒供给三升饱，上相家常二韭丰。
自是寂园甘啜寂，斋筵腊八笑僧同。
(Khoo, 1949b: 24)

Four Fruit Soup

What use is there in planting melons and beans?
Oak and chestnuts can stave off hunger and poverty.
Borrowing the Buddha's name to balance the Four Fruits,

Avoiding talk of porridge dubbed the 'double bow.'
 In spring and autumn, blossoms and fruits are gathered by the breeze,
 In summer's water and winter's heat, their flavours are perfected.
 Lotus dew sparkles on plates,
 The jujube curtain recalls melodies, delicate and intricate.
 Books are marked with red leaves, chrysanthemums are plucked,
 Feasts begin in fragrant groves, adorned with clusters.
 Washing away sorrows with jade-like meals,
 Aromas fill the mouth like pearls threaded on a string.
 I love the spoon's slow rise, carrying the pure white,
 Grilled on the hearth, they turn a brilliant red.
 Wine is ready, tea is warm, recalling the purity of rice,
 Birds pick the remnants, monkeys offer what's left, a servant's duty.
 Scholars live on three meals a day, content,
 While high officials enjoy abundance with just two chives.
 In the Silent Garden, I savor the quiet sip,
 At the Laba feast, monks smile in shared simplicity.

Indigenous Life in Singapore and Malaya

The lifestyle and habits of the people in Southeast Asia, especially the indigenous peoples, are vastly different from those in China. This is due to the social setup, climate, geography, and natural products. Khoo was acutely aware of this difference and was inspired to use these differences as a theme that is almost absent in classical Chinese poetry. His poems were a means for Chinese immigrants to understand the indigenous communities and their life.

Among the poems which record the daily lives of indigenous peoples include *Passing by the Abodes of the Indigenous People*, *Looking Far from the Riverside Pavilion*, and *The Merfolk*.

《过野人居》

两三水竹近江沙，二五鸡豚野老家。
 日曛檐阴栖鹄鸽，风凉庭角系匏瓜。
 中衣单袷无冬夏，南食堆盘有兔蛙。
 天气自殊云物异，秋桐拂拂又生芭。
 (Khoo, 1949a: 51)

Passing by the Abodes of the Indigenous People

A few water bamboos near the river's sands,
 Two or three pigs and chickens at the old farmer's home.
 In the sun's warmth, doves and cranes rest in the eaves' shade,
 In the cool breeze, gourds hang in the garden's corner.
 Simple clothing is worn year-round, no distinction between
 winter and summer,
 Southern dishes fill the plates, with rabbit and frog.
 The weather differs, the clouds and surroundings change,
 As autumn's sycamore gently brushes, new banana leaves unfurl.

In *Passing by the Abodes of the Indigenous People*, Khoo refers to the indigenous inhabitants who live along rivers. Historically, the indigenous peoples have traditionally lived along riverine villages for easy access to sources of food, water and domestic use. Khoo was aware that the livelihood of these communities primarily revolved around paddy and subsistence farming, producing fruits and engaging in simple production, and hunting and gathering jungle products to maintain a self-sufficient lifestyle. Khoo noted that, despite the harsh living conditions, the indigenous people persist in pursuing their simple lives. The natural environment and climate have a strong influence on the house types, daily necessities, dietary habits and way of life. To many of the recent immigrants to Singapore and Malaya, the life of the indigenous peoples was indeed different, simple, and somewhat laid-back.

Another poem that depicts the daily lives and habits of the indigenous peoples living by the sea.

《鲛人》

鲛人生事足，少小狎风波。
 沿岛收螺壳，分崖摘燕窝。
 椒姜家熟釜，葛布户鸣梭。
 穿井能逃税，开山未起科。
 斗鸡风自武，咒鳄术疑魔。
 今古容相接，桃源乐事多。
 (Khoo, 1949c: 55)

The Merfolk

The merfolk's life is abundant,
 From a young age, they are familiar with the waves.

Along the islands, they collect conch shells,
 From the cliffs, they gather swallow nests.
 In the home, the pot simmers with ginger and pepper,
 In the household, the loom sings with woven cloth.
 Digging wells, they avoid taxes,
 Opening mountains, they escape levies.
 Their cockfights are naturally fierce,
 The art of charming crocodiles seems like sorcery.
 Throughout the ages, their ways remain unchanged,
 In this paradise, joy is plentiful.

Khoo was keen to learn about the lives of the indigenous people. He expressed his interest in “The Merfolk,” a poem on the indigenous peoples living by the sea. The poem portrays the economic activities and production methods of the coastal inhabitant who were engaged in gathering shells and climbing cliffs to harvest bird nests for sale. Khoo described the indigenous past-time of cockfighting as a gamble in which participants placed their roosters to fight against each other, with bets placed on the outcome (Chen, 2019). There was also the widespread belief in crocodile exorcism. Strange as they might seem to immigrant societies, these habits and practices had remained unchanged through the ages but had instead been sources of joy in this land of paradise. The poem reflects Khoo’s keen interest on the indigenous communities and his intention to help the reader to see the simplicity of life of the indigenous communities and a lifestyle that is happy and free of pressure as compared with life in China.

Buddhist Temples in Singapore and Malaya

Apart from the geography, climate, natural products, and local lifestyles of Singapore and Malaya, Khoo was impressed by the unique architecture of the Buddhist temples that he had visited in his extensive travels around Southeast Asia. The sights and experiences that he was were vastly different from those in his travels in China (Qiu, 1993). Arising from the diverse cultural background of multi-ethnic environment in Southeast Asia, their architectural styles were naturally different from those seen in China. Besides, Indian and Arabic styles had a strong influence on the traditional buildings in this region.

His poem on the *Kek Lok Si Temple* of Penang was an important composition. Located in Air Itam, Penang, this is the largest and most magnificent Buddhist temple in Southeast Asia. It was founded in 1891 and fully completed in 1904. The temple’s establishment symbolises the spread of Chinese Buddhism in Southeast Asia and serves as a cultural link between China and overseas

Chinese. From 1910 to 1912, Khoo travelled through Myanmar, Penang, and Kedah. It was during this period that he visited *Kek Lok Si Temple* and composed a poem in the same name and expressing praise on its beauty in the setting of an imposing hill of Penang. The temple was established with donations the Chinese immigrant community, including Master Monk Miao Lian and community leaders such as Cheong Fatt Tze and Chung Keng Kooi. The temple became a religious and cultural link between the Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia and China.

《极乐寺》

水石巉岩曲径幽，华鬘涌现佛光楼。
飞来香雨知泉活，分到层湖拟月流。
物力卅年征盛日，晴光二月似清秋。
凭栏试极潮音目，孤岛乾坤共一沍。
(Khoo, 1949a: 70)

Kek Lok Si Temple

The rocky peaks and winding paths are secluded,
where ornate garlands emerge, and a tower radiates Buddha's light.

A fragrant rain arrives, knowing the spring is alive,
and it pours into tiered lakes that seem to flow like the moon.

Thirty years of effort have brought about a day of prosperity,
the clear light of February resembling that of autumn.

Leaning on the railing, I gaze as far as the eye can see,
where the sound of the tides reaches the lonely island,
and heaven and earth merge into a single bubble.

Khoo composed *The View of Kek Lok Si Temple in Penang* in celebration of describes the temple's architecture and scenery. The first stanza describes the temple's resplendent buildings, which enhance its solemnity and indicate the spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. The next stanza highlights the temple's charm, bringing positive energy to a once desolate island and making the glittering temple stand out. The entire setting of the temple has a calming effect the visitors and followers. In the last stanza, Khoo did not forget the political turmoil the anti-Japanese war in China.

《槟屿道中望极乐寺四首》

(一)

布金自助佛庄严，却借金容起众瞻。
西域劫灰空极乐，薪传香火又南炎。

(二)

离岛荒荒夜气寒，金银宫阙涌云端。
诸天欢喜游人颂，点缀南溟得大观。

(三)

崇福僧通入世心，红尘岁月伴丛林。
居然民力营台囿，欢乐同输极乐金。

(四)

佛时日月故山川，何许南无九品莲。
争遣征车回望眼，旃檀宜灶善财天。

(Khoo, 1949a: 146)

Four Poems on the View of Kek Lok Si Temple in Penang

(I)

The golden adornments enhance the Buddha's majesty,
yet it is the golden image that draws the gaze of many.
In the Western lands, the ashes of calamity empty out the Pure Land,
but the sacred flame passes on to the southern regions.

(II)

The island is desolate and cold at night;
the golden and silver palace rises to the clouds.
The gods rejoice and the visitors praise,
embellishing the South Seas with a grand view.

(III)

The monks of *Chongfu* Monastery connect with the hearts of the world,
and the years of the mortal world accompany the secluded forest.
Surprisingly, the efforts of the people build up the terraces and gardens,
and their joy contributes to the Pure Land's gold.

(IV)

In the Buddha's time, the sun and moon still shone on these ancient mountains
and rivers,
yet where is the southern vow of the Nine-Rank Lotus?
Who sends back the chariots of conquest, longing for home,
while sandalwood incense fills the hearth and wealth flows from the heavens?

In 1911, he made a visit to Myanmar, a land well known for Buddhist pagodas of varying sizes featuring Indian architectural styles. One of his poems is entitled *Composing a Poem on Visiting the Great Dagon Pagoda in Yangon* where he describes the spectacular view of the Great Dagon Pagoda and its golden spire that seemed to emit light constantly, like the sun.

《游仰光大广塔感而成咏》

嵯峨积塔压层冈，屹立中尊耸上方。
跨海未随鳌背去，缭云犹认刹竿扬。
金花竭国多僧腊，薛荔连山暗女墙。
赢得游车惊壮筑，同瞻合顶射光芒。

(Khoo, 1949a: 143)

Composing a Poem on Visiting the Great Dagon Pagoda in Yangon

Majestic and towering, the pagodas pile up, pressing down on the ridges,
with the central statue standing tall, rising above all.

Though it has not crossed the sea on the back of the giant turtle,
it still pierces the clouds, with the spire proudly raised.

Golden flowers exhaust the wealth of the nation,
as countless monks reside beneath; the climbing roses cover the mountains,
darkening the walls of the nunnery.

The travelers in their carriages are amazed by the grand construction,
together gazing at the top radiating light.

Conclusion

The Shuyuan Poems represent the first attempt by a Chinese immigrant to create poems in the classical style of the Tang Dynasty. Like thousands of Chinese immigrants to Singapore and Malaya, Khoo Seok Wan too was motivated by the search for a better life. He seemed to have found a place very different from the conditions of his homeland and what was to him almost like a “paradise.” He expressed his admiration for his new destination and future “home” in a series of poems in praise of common sights, the natural environment, native products, the indigenous communities, unique buildings and structures including famous temples, and other features. These subjects became the source of inspiration for Khoo’s lifelong devotion to his appreciation of all that was new and novel in Singapore, Malaya and Southeast Asia in general. Remarkably, Khoo wrote most of the poems in a financial state of bankruptcy (Chen, 2019). His efforts were remarkable in contributing to development of local study and to stimulate awareness in the Chinese community of their new environment and society (Chen, 2019).

Khoo not only documented his observations but also indirectly informed readers about the development of contemporary Southeast Asia. Penang and Singapore were rightly labelled as major port towns in Southeast Asia. As a result, Singapore and Penang were more developed compared to other parts of Malaya. Khoo’s creative ingenuity on the indigenous communities and their lifestyles provided later generations with vivid images and unique features of contemporary native life. From this perspective, Khoo’s poems about the sights and sounds of Singapore and Malaya are not just ordinary literary works but valuable accounts of the natural and social environments of Southeast Asia (Chen, 2019). Khoo’s contribution would have been more valuable if the subjects of his poems had included the lives of other non-indigenous groups such as the Europeans, Indians and others.

Poetic creations devoted to the tropical rainforest climates and geographical environments are almost absent in Chinese classical poetry. The Shuyuan Poems are of special relevance as a point of reference on the landscape and societies of Southeast Asia. The poems relate certain environmental issues and the existing social system and lifestyle in Singapore and Malaya, and special features of the humans-land relations. Notably, Khoo demonstrated an advanced awareness of environmental protection as early as the early 19th century (Chen, 2019). Hence, the Shuyuan Poems contribute significantly to Chinese classical literature by documenting contemporary Southeast Asian society and its sights and sounds.

* Gek-Suan Khor [许玉萱] is a PhD student of the Institute of Minnan Culture Research, Minnan Normal University, China. Email: pbkhorgekuan@usm.my

** Dr. Qingwei Xiao [肖庆伟] is Professor, School of Liberal Arts at Minnan Normal University, China. Email: xqw@mnnu.edu.cn

Notes

- 1 Although Singapore was administratively distinct from British Malaya, it was often considered part of the broader Malayan region due to its economic interdependence and cultural similarities.
- 2 This Movement occurred in 1895 with the submission of a collective petition to the Emperor.

References

- Chen, Q. [陈琼莲] (2019). 丘菽园研究: 南国谈华化, 星洲得菽园 [*Study on Qiu Shuyuan and his commitment in spreading and promoting Chinese culture in Singapore and the whole Southeast Asia*] [Doctoral Dissertation]. Minnan Normal University.
- Khoo, S.-W. [邱菽园] (1949a). 菽园诗集上编 [*The Collection of Shuyuan Poems (Vol.1)*]. Singapore.
- Khoo, S.-W. [邱菽园] (1949b). 菽园诗集中编 [*The Collection of Shuyuan Poems (Vol.2)*]. Singapore.
- Khoo, S.-W. [邱菽园] (1949c). 菽园诗集下编 [*The Collection of Shuyuan Poems (Vol.3)*]. Singapore.
- Li, J. [李佳] (2019). 南国诗宗: 丘菽园旧体诗创作风貌论 [*Southern nation's poetic tradition: A study of Qiu Shuyuan's classical verse style*]. *Academic Journal of Liyun*, Beijing Normal University. 2: 49–68.
- Qiu, X.-M. [邱新民] (1993). 邱菽园生平 [*The biography of Qiu Shuyuan*]. Singapore: State publisher in English translation. <https://www.shwedagonpagoda.com/>
- Tham Y.-H. [谭勇辉] (2016). 邱菽园诗歌的南洋地理文化底蕴 [*The geocultural foundations of the Nanyang region in the Khoo Seok Wan poetry*]. *Journal of Chinese Verse Studies*, 2: 65–??
- Voon P.-K. (1976). *Western Rubber Planting Enterprise in Southeast Asia, 1876-1921*, Kuala Lumpur, University of Malaya.
- Yang, C.-T. [杨承祖] (1969). 丘菽园研究[A study of Ch'iu Shu-Yuan 1874–1941]. *Nanyang University Journal*, 3: 98–118.