

## IN SEARCH OF MODERN IDENTITY: YENG PWAY NGON, CHIA HWEE PENG AND CHINESE SINGAPOREAN POETRY

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This paper explores the topic concerning cultural identity and self-identity expressed by Yeng Pway Ngon (英培安, b. 1947) and Chia Hwee Peng (謝惠平, b. 1957), two leading figures of Chinese Singaporean poetry. By employing textual analysis, contextualisation and theoretical intervention, this paper is an attempt to examine how they come to terms with the questions of modernity, globalisation, and identity politics, and furthermore, to re-evaluate the cultural implications they may bring about while addressing these issues. In view of the critical role played by Yeng and Chia in the emergence of literary locality, the paper seeks to, here, open a dialogue, a critical inquiry on the focuses of Chinese Singaporean literature.

**Key words:** Yeng Pway-ngon, Chia Hwee-peng, cultural identity, self-identity, hybridity

### **Introduction: Questions of Modern Identity**

The 1960s witnessed the rise of modernist poetry in Chinese Singaporean literature. Since dominant discourse at that time was realism-oriented, the “literary modernism” was doomed to struggle for its legitimacy. Two representatives of the modernist generation, Yeng Pway Ngon and Chia Hwee Peng (with the penname Xi Ni-er 希尼爾) abstract some researchers’ attention with an emphasis on aesthetics, the latter prevails in current scholarship, more or less. This tendency is justified by the conventional wisdom that a lyric should be represented as an ideal genre to express the author’s subjective feelings, personal experience, and even mysterious fantasy. According to Theodor W. Adorno (1903 – 1969), however, lyric poetry is more than an expression of individual impulses and experiences; it also attains the “universality” pertaining to the socio-cultural dimension, and therefore, toward an implicit critique of the modern world.<sup>1</sup> Later, Paul de Man (1919 – 1983) argues powerfully, that lyric poetry, compared with other literary genres, seems to be a more appropriate

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<sup>1</sup> ADORNO, T.W. On Lyric Poetry and Society. In ADORNO, T.W. *Notes to Literature*, Volume 1, pp. 37 – 54.

medium to ponder on the vicissitudes of modernity.<sup>2</sup> While Yeng and Chia's poetry is an indispensable resource for those interested in Sinophone literature, I also wish to take up large issues of cultural identity and self-identity both from a viewpoint of critical theory and from an overlapping context of the local, the regional, and the global. Thus instead of applying the New Criticism approach, it is imperative to re-examine lyric poetry through contextualising and theorising it. By using critical terms from the sociology of migration, cultural studies and even political philosophy, the paper is more aimed at launching an in-depth exploration of the subjects with relation to modern identity recurring in the lyric poems by Yeng and Chia.

For the purpose of exposition, a brief account of theoretical discourses on identity is offered, and then, this paper will turn to Chinese Singapore literature. Undoubtedly the study of modern identity has been gaining currency since the 1960s. As Stuart Hall (1932 – 2014) rightly points out, that identity, as a matter of fact, is closely associated with the subject; moreover, he distinguishes three types of conceptions of identity: those of the Enlightenment subject, the sociological subject, and the post-modern subject. As for the Enlightenment subject, it “was based on conceptions of the human person as a fully centred, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action, whose centre consisted of an inner core which first emerged when the subject was born, and unfolded with it, while remaining essentially the same – continuous or identical – with itself through the individual's existence. The essential centre of the self was a person's identity”.<sup>3</sup> Based on the notion of the sociological subject, the inner core of the subject still exists, to some extent; nevertheless, not being self-sufficient or autonomous, it was formed through the relation to “significant others”. In this respect, the making of identity depends on the interaction between self and society by and large; no matter how abstract it may sound. Yet, what intrigues us is the conception of identity resulting from the post-modern subject conceived as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity. Then, a few questions arise: in what ways, does this identity come into existence? How to describe it in postmodern context? Hall expounds it as follows:

*Identity becomes a 'movable feast': formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surrounds us. It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent 'self'.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> de MAN, P. Lyric and Modernity. In de MAN, P. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, second edition, pp. 166 – 186.

<sup>3</sup> HALL, S. The Question of Cultural Identity. In HALL, S., HELD, D., MCGREW, T. (Eds.) *Modernity and Its Futures*, p. 275.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

In addition, five great advances in social theories and human sciences occurring in the second half of the twentieth century, as Hall forcefully argues, have produced main effects on the de-centring of the Cartesian subject, to name them here: Marxism, Freud's discovery of the unconsciousness, Saussure's structuralist linguistics, the knowledge-power-discourse theory by Michel Foucault, and, last but not least, feminism both as a theoretical critique and as a social movement.<sup>5</sup> In the modern world, national culture as "imagined communities" is one of the principal sources of cultural identity. Allegiance, loyalty and identification contributed to tribe, region, and religion in pre-modern societies, are currently transferred to national culture, becoming a powerful source of meanings for modern cultural identity.<sup>6</sup>

When it comes to late-modern society, the "self-identity", as suggested by Anthony Giddens (b. 1938), is closely linked to the so-called "life politics":

*Life politics is a politics of lifestyle. Life politics is the politics of a reflexively mobilized order – the system of late modernity – which, on an individual and collective level, has radically altered the existential parameters of social activity. It is a politics of self-actualization in a reflexively ordered environment, where that reflexivity links self and body to systems of global scope.*<sup>7</sup>

And yet, Charles Taylor problematises the most widely-accepted notion about modern identity by focusing on three major facets of it instead: "First, modern inwardness, the sense of ourselves as beings with inner depths, and the connected notion that we are 'selves'; second, the affirmation of ordinary life which develops from the early modern period; third, the expressivist notion of nature as an inner moral source."<sup>8</sup> The question that Taylor's observation poses is that self-identity defined by moral commitments, nations and traditions, offering a frame for humankind's values; otherwise, the "identity crisis" is likely to emerge.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, the arguments cited above provide a theoretical basis for further discussion of the questions concerning cultural identity and self-identity depicted in Chinese Singapore literature.

In the wake of *Wusi xinwenhua yundong* 五四新文化運動 the May Fourth Cultural Movement, Chinese Singaporean literature came into being. Retrospectively, a variety of literary debates occurred, for example, *Nanyang secai* 南洋色彩 "The Nanyang Colors" in the late 1920s, *Difang zuojia* 地方作家 "The Local Writers" in the early 1930s, the debates about *Qiaomin wenyi* 僑

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 285 – 291.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 291 – 92.

<sup>7</sup> GIDDEN, A. *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, p. 214.

<sup>8</sup> TAYLOR, C. Preface of TAYLOR, Charles. *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity*.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

民文藝 “Sojourner’s Literature” and *Mahua wenyi dutexing* 馬華文藝獨特性 “The Uniqueness of Malaya Chinese Literature” in 1946 – 1948, *Aiguo zhuyi wenxue* 愛國主義文學 “The Patriotic Literature” in 1956, last but not least, *Jianguo wenxue* 建國文學 “The Nation-building Literature” in the 1980’s, etc. All of these discursive practices have so profoundly shaped Chinese Singaporean Literature’s ‘locality’, one of the most sought-after goals. In other words, by challenging the Sino-centralism to defence localisation, these literary discourses are supposed to pave a new path for subsequent Chinese writers, the most brilliant among them, are Yeng Pway Ngon and Chia Hwee Peng. Arguably they have been obsessed with the topics of modern identity through their creative works in the past decades, inviting thoroughly academic treatment in the era of globalisation.

### **The Turn of Cultural Identity: From “Imaginary Nostalgia” to “the Lure of the Local”**

In terms of the post-modernist theory, cultural identity is not stable, fixed, unitary but time/place-based, mainly subject to historical, cultural contingencies, and constantly undergoes transformation, as Stuart Hall speculates:

*The concepts of identity deployed here is therefore not an essentialist, but a strategic and positional one. That is to say, directly contrary to what appears to be its settled semantic career, this concept of identity does not signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without changes.*<sup>10</sup>

Then, how is the “cultural identity” constructed in Yeng and Chia’s literary world? The following passages would investigate the traces of cultural identity reflected by Yeng and Chia through a close reading of selective poems as well as putting relevant issues back to the intertwined context of the local, the regional and the global.

### **The Myth of Consanguinity**

For most Chinese Singaporean, “China-homeland” functions both metaphorically and realistically. Departing from China for various reasons, the ethnic Chinese of an early generation longed for returning to their native land. In the pre-independent period, no matter what difficulties Chinese sojourners may have encountered, they insisted on identifying themselves with far-away China rather than the colonial Malaya even if where they dwelled for so many years. Not surprisingly, both national identity and cultural identity of these

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<sup>10</sup> HALL, S. Introduction: Who Needs “Identity”? In HALL, S., du GAY, P. (Eds.) *Questions of Cultural Identity*, p. 3.

Chinese people are unequivocally projected in “China” as the main source for meanings and values. This is evidenced by historical events, for example, Chinese overseas’ fund-raising for their compatriots struck by catastrophes; returning to join the great war against the Japanese invaders in the 1940s, or to strengthen socialist China in the 1950s – 1960s. All of these are, in Benedict Anderson’s term, aroused by “long-distance nationalism”. With the independence of Singapore in 1965, the “national identity” of the citizen with Chinese-ethnicity shift from China to Singapore naturally; nevertheless, it is until the early 1980s that Chinese-language authors begins to embed their “cultural identity” in Singapore.

Singapore-born writer, Yeng was educated in the Ngee Ann College and made debut as a modernist poet in the late 1960s. He spent most of his life in Singapore except one-year extirpating as free lance in Hong Kong around 1995. Yeng, like many other radical intellectuals, engaged in civil society passionately: founded the Grassroots Bookroom selling leftist books, made acquaintance with political dissidents, and established literary journals including *Cha Zuo* 茶座 Teahouse, *Wo-niu* 蝸牛 Snails, *Chien-wei* 前衛 The Avant-Garde, which, finally, leads to his four-month imprisonment under the notorious “Internal Security Act” in 1978. During Yeng’s second poem collection *Wugen de xian* 無根的弦 The Rootless Chord, his imaginary of China is highlighted in a nostalgic manner:

*Then, the Straits Times is in the Raffles Place  
The twilight is spilled  
upon a British-styled, iron bridge  
The Indian’s laughter  
and the faint smell of coffee  
emitting over the slightly damp  
Street. A piece of formless  
cloud is embroidered  
alongside the tree  
behind the Victorian Theatre*

*Tell you how lonely I am  
(it is in the evening)  
I stay with  
a white pigeon of strange land  
close reading a headline of international news  
suddenly recalling the Historical Records,*

*The Book of Songs  
and the Oracle Bones in the dust-laden study room.*<sup>11</sup>

The above excerpts are drawn from the poem entitled “The Rootless Chord”. *The Straits Times* is an English-language news paper established in colonial Singapore. The Raffles Place, the iron bridge with British style, and the Victorian Theatre are all local landscapes featuring Singapore as a post-colonial nation-state. The “Indian” in this poem signifies the multi-racial identity, and, “the slightly damp street” implies the tropical atmosphere of this country. All these images, composed of visuality, sounds and odors, loom typically in the temporal-spatial axle of the living world, appealing to the hidden subject with historical memory inspired subtly. Ironically, the local-born “I” does not produce the intimate sense of place, instead, he himself feels lonely like a stranger. While reading a piece of news related to his ancestral fatherland, he suddenly thinks of China, the time-honored civilisation. As such, the myth of homeland is coming around the corner. More landscapes with “North China Colour” appear in the first and second stanza of this poem, including “northern frontier sandstorm”, “the town with galloping horses”, “the gourd or red corn hanging from the eaves” which is reminiscent of the poems by Ya Xian 痲弦, “folk song with accompaniment of clappers”, and, “the donkey hoof”, etc. At the last lines, the persona utters a sigh that he cannot return to native land any longer, what he only could do is just “playing the sick guitar” to pay homage to the imaginary fatherland. That is all there is to it. Furthermore, appears quite a few images with diasporic implication: “rootless chord”, “desolate shoe”, “formless cloud”, “white pigeon from strange land”, “faraway place choked with sobs”; paradoxically, Yeng has not ever been to China! In David Der-wei Wang’s term, what expressed here is “imaginary nostalgia”, not so tracing back to the past completely as re-creating and re-imagining it based on the present.<sup>12</sup>

It is no doubt that Yeng’s cultural identity is strongly linked to the notorious Chinese-ness, the latter, is even crystallised as “the sense of orphan” and “the myth of consanguinity”.<sup>13</sup> One more example is taken from *Xiangzhou* 鄉愁 “Nostalgia” (1974).<sup>14</sup> During this poem, the “migratory bird” refers to the Chinese overseas who returned to the P.R. of China in the 1950 – 1960s, call the local youths to follow in their footsteps. It is so difficult for the lyrical self in the poem to make a decision that he feels himself profoundly like an abandoned

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<sup>11</sup> YENG, Pway Ngon 英培安. The Rootless Chord. In his *Wugen de xian* 無根的弦 [*The Rootless Chord*], pp. 44 – 45.

<sup>12</sup> WANG, D. Imaginary Nostalgia: Shen Congwen, Song Zelai, Mo Yan, and Li Yongping. In WIDMER, E., WANG, David Der-wei (Eds.) *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and film in Twentieth-century China*, pp. 107 – 132.

<sup>13</sup> The “myth of consanguinity” is a term coined by CHOW, Rey in her *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> YENG, P.N. *xiangzhou* 鄉愁 Nostalgia. In his *Wugen de xian* 無根的弦 [*The Rootless Chord*], pp. 55 – 56.

infant, who can do nothing but to look northward at his China-mother and imagining her body temperature and complexion from afar. During stanza four to six, the inner monologue in the preceding lines is replaced by the dramatic situation:

*In the evening, a song-girl is singing  
a melody,  
adapted from Tokyo chansonnette; the air is polluted by  
The Yamamoto stereo tape recorder,  
While the Honda motorcycle is roaring past and running over  
the monument in the memory of the victims,  
everyone is forced to utter their last voice*

*Lonely and angrily, you  
wandering  
in every page of familiar historical books  
talking about poetry and fencing  
pretending to be drunk  
with disheveled hair, you play the zither<sup>15</sup>*

A number of auditory images such as “Tokyo Chansonnette”, “Yamamoto stereo tape recorder”, and “Honda Motorcycle” suggest the flooding of Japanese commodities in 1970s Singapore. Ironically, contrary to these noises, the monument in memory of victims during the Japan-occupied period in the downtown stands silently all the time. By using these metaphors, the author not only criticises neo-colonialism which is reincarnated from previous imperialism, but also satirises the Singaporean’s amnesia of historical memory. “Shangnv buzhi wangguohen/Gejiang youchang houtinghua” 商女不知亡國恨，隔江猶唱後庭花 *The songstress knows not the grief of a captive king/By riverside she sings the song of parting spring*, two famous pieces composed by Du Mu (803 – 852) in his Yebo qinhuai 夜泊秦淮 *Moored on River Qinhuai at Night*, is brilliantly paraphrased as the sub-text of Yeng’s poem, followed by inserting P.R.C’s national anthem, combining the author’s thinking about cultural identity with his post-colonial critique. Yeng seeks to introduce China and Japan as “the other” while addressing Singapore’s cultural issues, and hence makes a triangular interacted structure in which a tensional dialogue comes into being. In the last stanza, the persona emerges as the traditional Chinese madman, he cannot help bursting into tears.

Cultural identity speculated by Chia is linked to the “China-homeland” even if the latter lacks a straightforward utterance like Yeng Pway Ngon. Born by the side of the Kallang River, Chia belongs to the second generation of immigrants from China. Although this river is not well-known in historical records, it is still

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

a “mother river” as it sees Chia’s teenager years. In addition, various historical events occurred along the Kallang River in the (pre)colonial period, as viewed in Chia poem, “*the entire root of history once resided here/printed by the Kallang people’s footmark/stayed the diasporic figures of the Bugis people/casted by forefather’s fishing-nets/swept by the remaining waves of Raffles’ fleet/cleaned/by the blood of the Samurai’s sword*”.<sup>16</sup> In other words, what these lines represent are “the narrative of the nation”, as elaborated by Stuart Hall, “it is told and retold in national histories, literatures, the media and popular cultures. These provide a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols and rituals which stand for, or represent, the shared experiences, sorrows, and triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation”.<sup>17</sup> At the beginning, the imaginary nostalgia is depicted remarkably through a vivid picture of the Kallang River:

*As running on so,  
a river, unfolds its dragon claws  
from north to south, expanding toward both sides  
day and night, sobbing and humming  
insisting on a fluid skin colour  
In the forefather’s memory  
countlessly in dream he is called to return  
floating with numberless sorrows of both sides’ silts  
with the water level rising  
with the changing of sweater, blood and tears  
To find a way out of swirls and backwater  
it never has heroic looks of rushing vigorously  
a river, told by history, should flow in reverse  
with the earth’s colour  
flowing toward great expectations day and night*<sup>18</sup>

It is worthy of observation that the viewpoint here is from the “ethnic” rather than the “national”. Since the early nineteenth century, the mass exodus from Southern China moved beyond national boundaries, sailing toward Nanyang 南洋 the South Seas. Largely scattered at Penang, Malacca and Singapore, these diasporic Chinese are called “Xinke” 新客 *Sinkeh*, opposed to the Straits-Chinese (“Peranakan”). After migrating and dwelling by the side of the Kallang River, some of them had to toil and moil for making a living, then, the link between the ethnic and the landscape is established firmly. In the above

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<sup>16</sup> CHIA, Hwee Peng. Jialeng he 加冷河 The Kallang River. In his *Bangjia sui Yue* 綁架歲月 [The Kidnapped Years], pp. 38 – 39.

<sup>17</sup> HALL, S. The Question of Cultural Identity, pp. 293 – 295.

<sup>18</sup> CHIA, Hwee Peng. The Kallang River. In his *Bangjia sui Yue* 綁架歲月 [The Kidnapped Years], pp. 37 – 38.



poem, the historical memory of Chinese diaspora is characterised by the tropes including “the fluid skin colour”, “hesitation”, “sobering”, “sorrows”, “blood and tear”, and so on; the Kallang River’s geological and hydrographical changes caused by the atmosphere are delineated metaphorically. The “forefather” attempts to seek the way out, but they are summoned in dream by the river to return to the “homeland”. No heroic appearance of rushing down vigorously makes the Kallang River feels inferior, and it is solemnly informed by history: great expectations is supposed to be achieved solely through its flowing in reverse! Apparently, the cultural identity here is interlinked with the ambiguous Chinese-ness, displaying a problematic, haunted myth of consanguinity. Nevertheless, as powerfully examined by Hall, it is totally unrealistic for the diaspora’s longing for returning to the origins, roots, homelands, whatsoever sincere it may sound.<sup>19</sup> Ien Ang suggests that popular discourse on diaspora hinders a more truly transnational cosmopolitanism, “the trans-nationalism of Chinese diaspora is actually nationalistic in its outlook because no matter how global in its reach, its imaginary orbit is demarcated ultimately by the closure effected by the category of Chinese-ness itself”.<sup>20</sup> In this respect, Yeng and Chia’s imaginary of China-homeland, seems embedded in an essentialist horizon, no matter what significance they may produce.

### **Modernity, Globalisation & Cultural Identity**

It is the Second World War that spurred the flowering of nationalist, de-colonisation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Consequently Malaya broke away from British colonialist dominance in 1957. After being expelled from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore was forced to announce independence. The homepage paid by the local-born Chinese shifts from Britain to Malaya and then to Singapore. Most Chinese immigrants and their offspring chose to reside here permanently, obtaining their new citizenship and national identities,<sup>21</sup> with the strengthening of national consciousness, the deconstruction of ‘China-homeland’ and re-shaping of cultural identity appeared unavoidably. Afterwards, *Qiaomin yishi* 僑民意識 “the sense of sojourner” gives its way to ‘the lure of the local’.<sup>22</sup>

In 2009 Chia composed a poem *Nanfang de duoluo* 南方的墮落 “the degenerate south” in which “the return of the local” is highlighted significantly:

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<sup>19</sup> HALL, S. *New Ethnicities*. In DONALD, J., RATTANSI, A. (Eds.) *‘Race’, Culture and Difference*, p. 258.

<sup>20</sup> ANG, I. *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West*, p. 13, p. 77.

<sup>21</sup> CHOI, Kwai Keong 崔貴強. *Xinma huaren guojia rentong de zhuanxiang* 新马华人国家认同的转向 1945 – 1959 [The Turn of National Identity of Ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia 1945 – 1959], rev. edition.

<sup>22</sup> The concept ‘the lure of the local’ used here is borrowed from LIPPARD, Lucy R.’s monograph *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*.

*On the tail of a steamship's fate  
South China Sea monsoon hurtles him  
on towards the Malay Peninsula's southernmost tip  
On an island's south river bank he  
sets foot. In a wooden hut on the river he  
rests, adapts, ekes out a living  
He becomes as emaciated as a reed  
perpetually drooping over the water surface  
gazing beyond the receding shore where the occasional crocodile lurks  
Like Han Wen Gong's clansmen, exiled to the South  
Watchful, lonely, ill-starred  
A drifter among men, leaving behind a  
tough hide*

*A nation in the south, but the heart lies north  
unable to form any coherent attachment  
to the island, yet the yearning for the home village  
is always in sharp relief, the waves of longing  
perfectly pitched  
Years later, he chose to end his wanderings  
a thicket of mangrove trees in the marshy river  
marked the spot of my accidental homeland. In dreams  
memories of the Great River of the North coil around  
the homesickness he takes pains to conceal, buried  
on disputed soil in the Tropic of Cancer<sup>23</sup>*

According to Chia, it is written specifically to commemorate the pioneer diasporas like his father who moved to Southeast Asia after the Second World War, and, is also to respond to the latest debates with regard to new immigrants by representing the mindset of his father as an old immigrant living a hard life in Singapore a few decades ago. Chia's ancestral homeland is Jie-yang 揭陽 of Guangdong 廣東, situated by the Rong River (榕江) and crossed by the Tropic of Cancer. It is a starting-point from that his father advanced southward into Singapore and dwelled on by the side of the Kallang River where Chia was born many years later. In human being's imagination, river and sea is eulogised as the origin of life and the ancestor's sanctuary. The "logic of imagination" (in T.S. Eliot's concept) consists of the 'Rong River' and the 'Kallang River' both as birthplaces and as literary landscapes, through which the poem is organised thoroughly. The father ("he" in the poem) was once longing for homecoming, but eventually, he decided to root in the South Seas (南洋) instead of wandering

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<sup>23</sup> CHIA, Hwee Peng. Nanfang de duoluo 南方的墮落 [The Degenerate South]. In THUMBOO, E., KAMARI, I. et al. (Eds.) *FIFTY on 50*, p. 65. English version of this poem is translated by Clarissa Oon.

aimlessly. Even if “he” conceals his homesickness willfully, he is still haunted with the homeland’s river in his dream, which, to the extent, results in his emotional entanglements. Unlike father, “I” do not hesitate to identify the Kallang River with homeland whatever “I” display sympathy for father’s diasporic experience. When coming to the last stanza, there are at least three levels of connotations signified subtly in this statement ‘*shrinking emotional terrain*’: first, it suggests that ‘I’ bid farewell to youth, entering the stage of middle-age; second, it implies that ‘my’ lifestyle is changed forever: not leading a wandering life on the river like father, but rooted into the soil like a bitter gourd; third, it also reveals the shift of cultural identity from China (symbolised by the Rong River) to Singapore (with reference to the Kallang River), namely, “I” made up my mind to spend a lifetime in the Degenerate South, living a humble yet indomitable life like a bitter gourd. Moreover, as for the formation of cultural identity, what Stuart Hall eloquently elaborates in his remarkable essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, may provide an insightful framework:

*Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past*<sup>24</sup>

As such, the cultural identity of Chia in particular, and of Chinese Singaporean in general, is far from stable, fixed, unitary, but undergo constant transformation, and is brought into being by all kinds of historical, cultural, and political trajectories.

With the shift of cultural identity, Chia finds it fascinating to depict the diversity of local cultural practices. The elder generation of Chinese Singaporean, ethnically the Hokkien福建人, Cantonese廣東人, Hainanese海南人, Teochew潮州人, and Hakka客家人, brought to overseas their folk beliefs, local knowledge, and various customs, which, in a sense, maintain their ethnic identity effectively. So, for the cultural practices in the age of globalisation, what destiny should they be confronted? Chia’s *The Kidnapped Years* expresses his mourning for the decline of folk culture. Let’s take some examples. In the *Choushen xi* 酬神戲 “folk theatre 1”, the persona is an actor who is absent-minded, messy-footworked, presenting his inner monologue in a sentimental manner as the play is greeted with tepid applause. As for the

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<sup>24</sup> HALL. S. Cultural Identity and Diaspora. In RUTHERFORD, Jonathan (Ed.) *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, p. 225.

*Choushen xi* 酬神戲 “folk theatre 2”, the viewpoint is from an old audience whose personal memory of happy childhood is aroused, but finally, it surrenders to the dominance of transnational capitalism, as witnessed by an ironic event in the last lines, “at this time/the folk theatre is coming again/walking beside the stage/the children pull and drag this way or that/always nagging for KFC”.<sup>25</sup> Provoked by a news paper photo, the shorter poem *Difang xi* 地方戲 ‘local opera’ is about the fading of traditional Chinese performance: a popular drama *Bawang bie ji* 霸王別姬 *Farewell My Concubine* is on the stage with only one viewer!<sup>26</sup> In another piece *Guo gushen miao* 過故神廟 “passing through an old temple”, Chia writes, a temple once worshipped tremendously by believers, is currently receiving awfully fewer visitors, which deeply offended him.<sup>27</sup> The same theme recurred in Chia’s second poem collection *Qingxin moyi* 輕信莫疑 *Credulity* (2001). By using a parodic style, the poem *Rangwo dianran zuihou yizhuxiang* 讓我點燃最後一炷香 “let me burn the last incense” tells that Fuk Tak Chi, a former Tua Pek Kong temple, is obliged to relocate to somewhere else under the Land Reclamation Scheme in 1998. In the past centuries, this temple united the strength of Chinese overseas, and saw their noble sentiments of long-distance nationalism; however, now facing the rampant force of modernity, it has no other choices but retreat from downtown in a rush. The persona sighed over this scene, wishing some years later people will approach it.<sup>28</sup> Undoubtedly, Chia responds to modernity and globalisation by singing a pathetic elegy for the disappearance of local things, as Giddens discusses:

*The modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from all traditional types of social order, in quite unprecedented fashion. In both their ex-tensionality and their intensionality the transformations involved in modernity are more profound than most sorts of change characteristic of prior periods. On the extensional plane they have served to establish forms of social interconnection which span the globe; in tentional terms they have come to alter some of the most intimate and personal features of our day-to-day existence.*<sup>29</sup>

Notwithstanding Chia’s vivid yet sorrowful depiction of the declining things, we cannot exaggerate the significance of locality. According to Appadurai, the “locality should be viewed as primarily relational and contextual rather than as

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<sup>25</sup> CHIA, Hwee Peng. *Choushen xi* 酬神戲 [Fork Theater]. In his *Bangjia sui Yue* 綁架歲月 [The Kidnapped Years], pp. 130 – 131.

<sup>26</sup> CHIA, Hwee Peng. *Difang xi* 地方戲 [Local Drama]. In his *Bangjia sui Yue* 綁架歲月 [The Kidnapped Years], pp. 32 – 33.

<sup>27</sup> CHIA, Hwee Peng. *Guo gushen miao* 過故神廟 [Passing through an Old Temple]. In his *Bangjia sui Yue* 綁架歲月 [The Kidnapped Years], pp. 30 – 31.

<sup>28</sup> CHIA, Hwee Peng. *Rangwo dianran zuihou yizhuxiang* 讓我點燃最後一炷香 [Let Me Burn the Last Incense]. In his *Qingxin moyi* 輕信莫疑 [Credulity], pp. 60 – 63.

<sup>29</sup> GIDDENS, A. *The Consequences of Modernity*, p. 4.

scalar or spatial”<sup>30</sup> This argument echoes in Kevin Robins’s study: “we should not the local, however. We should not invest our hopes for the future in the redemptive qualities of local economies, local cultures, local identities. It is important to see the local as a relational, and relative, concept. If once it was significant in relation to the national sphere, now its meaning is being recast in the context of globalisation”; ‘the local should be seen as a fluid and relational space, constituted only in and through its relation to the local’.<sup>31</sup> The locality as a way of judgment is obviously linked with spatial/positional politics, provided that it is pushed to the extreme, likely leading to notorious xenophobia. Thus, as far as locality is concerned, we might keep reflections on it as well as extolling it while dealing with Chia and Yeng’s poems.

### **Which Culture? Whose Identity?: Between the “Ethnic” and the “National”**

Paradoxically, as Yeng and Chia embrace enthusiastically the locality instead of China-homeland, their confusions and entanglements in relation to cultural identity seem more intense than ever. Why? Generally speaking, cultural identity signifies a sense of belonging or emotional attachment to certain values, symbols, knowledge, and beliefs, so on and so forth. On this spectrum, however, special cases exist occasionally. One example is Singapore where conflicts as well as collaboration between the ‘ethnic’ and the ‘national’ were remarkable. Even in some situations, it is through questioning national culture that some Chinese Singaporean identifies with their cherished ethnic culture, which is established firmly as their structure of feeling. Therefore, while addressing the issues concerning cultural identity of Chinese Singaporean literature, the researcher should bear in mind that: is it about the identity of “national culture”, or, that of “ethnic culture”? Viewed in this context, for Yeng and Chia, what matters is to narrate this unique cultural phenomenon.

#### **1. Language, Power, Subject**

As a matter of fact, with the disillusion of myth of consanguinity and the concomitant returning to the local, there are two challenges that Yeng and Chia had to face: on the one hand, it is the impact of modernity and globalisation on Singapore, which is already discussed in the precedent chapter; on the other hand, under radical educational policies in the 1970s, English becomes Chinese people’s first language, their mother tongue degraded to a school subject other than teaching medium. Furthermore, all the “Chinese schools” (華校) were closed down one by one, the class of 1986 is called “last generation of Chinese

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<sup>30</sup> APPADURAI, A. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, p. 178.

<sup>31</sup> ROBINS, K. *Tradition and Translation: National Culture in Its Global Context*. In CORNER, J., HARVEY, S. (Eds.) *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture*, p. 35.

graduates” (末代華校生). It is compulsory for the teachers originally offering lessons in Chinese for primary/secondary students to undertake training courses in order that they could teach in English, who are labelled “the converted teachers” (變流教師). All the graduates from Chinese schools are repressed, disempowered and marginalised by the state; they suddenly lost subjectivity, desperately found them standing a weak chance in job market. What this phenomenon reflects is unequivocally concerned about the dialectics of language, power and subjectivity; unavoidably the tension between the Chinese community and the state is strengthened greatly, resulting in the crisis of cultural identity.

Since 1965, the Singapore government implemented a series of measurements: political, economic, social, cultural, etc., aiming to de-colonialise the nation-state and re-build a new ‘national identity’. Facing up to these challenges, some Chinese authors expressed their unsettled feelings by writing the so-called ‘Scar Literature’.

The closing-down of Nanyang University (“Nantah” 南大) in 1980 is largely due to the conflicts between the ethnic and the national. Financially supported by the Chinese overseas all over Malaya, Nantah was established in 1955 to provide higher education for local Chinese youth. During its heyday, some students engaged in civil society by taking part in lots of political campaigns that alerted the government. Many Chinese writers delivered their nostalgic memories over the disappearance of Nantah. See what is implied in Yeng’s poem *Shu 樹* ‘Tree’:

*Now I know  
why bird nested on  
your shoulder, why cicada sings  
on your palm, why squirrel  
hops on your chest  
Thank you, tree  
Thank you for providing me with rich night, sweet  
fruits; thank your warm leaf vein  
your shade’s coolness. As I chew  
every piece of poem you prepare for me  
every novel, every  
law about your being and mine. I tell you,  
tree, tell you, I’m not sacred any longer  
I know the logger is coming sometime  
The tinkle is echoing below my feet (I heard it, heard it.)  
Tree, I know you will teach me  
will offer me strength*

*ask me to learn as you  
falling down, with calm and smile*<sup>32</sup>

By using subtle words and delicate images, the poem makes a lyrical intimacy between the persona and the tree. With deep roots and luxuriant branches, the tree provides happiness, comforts and safety for human beings and animals, also provoking the author's inspiration for creative writing. In addition, it is endowed with lots of virtues: perseverance, compassion and tolerance, all of which are core values of traditional Chinese culture. This poem should be read as an anthem to Nantah and the Chinese culture that it represents ("the kindling") which consists of a powerful source of ethnic identity for Chinese diaspora. Meanwhile 'I' feels upset as this tree will be cut down soon, looking forward to meeting someone who would preserve the 'kindling' of fire. It is apparent that the conflict between the ethnic ("I") and the national (the "logger") surfaces clearly, the disorientation of cultural identity is conveyed in a touching style.

Radical educational policies contributed to the following phenomena: English is becoming hegemonic language for the local Chinese; Chinese education is receiving less attention than ever, traditional culture is lost in fashionable Westernisation. In recognition of this, almost every Chinese writer grieves over the crisis of cultural identity. Compared with Yeng, Chia has more poems talking about this theme. Yeyang ge 夜央歌 "The Dawn of Night" points out, the light of Chinese culture has been shining for five thousand years, now it is solely resisting pressures yet not going out as someone is expected to keep watching it in the dark until the dawn is coming.<sup>33</sup> "I" lingered at the memorial site of Nantah campus, recollecting the hardship of founding it and subsequent efflorescence, cherishing the epoch's mark; This is the 'old granny's only beautiful memory kept in her life, disappeared now, only leaving behind the ruins (Cengjing 曾經 "Once").<sup>34</sup> The editor of Wuyue Shikan 五月詩刊 *The May Poetic Journal* received a senior writer's submission, the envelop the contributor used is stamped with the words "Nantah" that disappeared many years ago, his mind is overcome with emotion right now (Yifeng cong yaoyuan shikong jilaide xin 一封從遙遠時空寄來的信 "A Letter Mailed from afar").<sup>35</sup> After radical educational policy is carried out, Chinese schools' graduates are rejected ruthlessly by society no matter how hard they worked, consequently, the road to success they have been pursuing is blocked completely (Kouguan 叩

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<sup>32</sup> YENG, Pway Ngon. Shu 树 [Tree]. In his *Richang shenghuo* 日常生活 [Daily Life], pp. 34 – 35.

<sup>33</sup> CHIA, Hwee Peng. Yeyang ge 夜央歌 [The Dawn of Night]. In his *Bangjia sui Yue* 綁架歲月 [The Kidnapped Years], pp. 124 – 125.

<sup>34</sup> CHIA, Hwee Peng. Cengjing 曾經 [Once]. In his *Bangjia sui Yue* 綁架歲月 [The Kidnapped Years], pp. 126 – 127.

<sup>35</sup> CHIA, Hwee Peng. Yifeng cong yaoyuan shikong jilai de xin 一封從遙遠時空寄來的信 [A Letter Mailed from a Faraway]. In his *Qingxin moyi* 輕信莫疑 [Credulity], pp. 76 – 77.

關 “Knocking at the Gate”).<sup>36</sup> The majority of Chinese Singaporean, self-conscious or not, are undergoing the process of degeneration and transformation, no longer the “heirs of the dragon” from now on (Huozhe long zu 或者龍族 “Maybe the Dragon’s Descendants”; Xia xiang 蝦想 “The Shrimp’s Random Thoughts”).<sup>37</sup> Succumbing to the tendency of Westernisation, traditional Chinese’s values declined seriously, living world is addicted to materialism and utilitarianism, leading to the persona’s encounter with eschatology.<sup>38</sup>

## 2. Cultural Hybridity and The Third Space

When Yeng and Chia calls for back to origins of Chinese culture through the exercise of literary imagination, they stir into self awareness, matching “the lure of the local” against the “imaginary nostalgia”, and indulging them into a world filled with cultural memories including but not limited to myths, totems, rituals, symbols, historical figures, etc. However, they unanimously view cultural identity as a fixed, unitary and seamless “being”, rather than as a fluid, changing and multi-directional “becoming”. Hall argues persuasively that cultural identity is not stable since,

*Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, identities are actually about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves.*<sup>39</sup>

In view of Hall’s critical analysis, we might as well raise one question: whilst facing the impacts from modernity, globalisation and radical educational reforms, is it still possible for Chia and Yeng to develop a critical, non-essentialist thinking way about cultural identity, aside from the self-righteousness they posed?

Historically Singapore is a post-colonial nation-state boasting of its multi-racial and multi-cultural prominence. Since the world-wide termination of British colonialism, Singapore becomes a global city overwhelmingly relying on its economic miracles by virtue of immigrants’ endeavors. Seen in this

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<sup>36</sup> CHIA, Hwee Peng. Kou guan 叩關 [Knocking at the Gate]. In his *Bangjia suiyue* 綁架歲月 [The Kidnapped Years], pp. 122 – 123.

<sup>37</sup> CHIA, Hwee Peng. Huozhe long zu 或者龍族 [Maybe the dragon’s Descendants]; Xia xiang 蝦想 [The Shrimp’s Random Thoughts]. In his *Bangjia suiyue* 綁架歲月 [The Kidnapped Years], p. 128, pp. 132 – 133, respectively.

<sup>38</sup> CHIA, Hwee Peng. Moshi siwei 末世思維 [Eschatological Thinking]. In his *Qingxin moyi* 輕信莫疑 [Credulity], pp. 100 – 102.

<sup>39</sup> HALL, S. Introduction: Who Needs “Identity”? In HALL, S., du GAY, P. (Eds.) *Questions of Cultural Identity*, p. 4.



socio-cultural context, Singapore's national culture is a culture of hybridity. As Wolf suggests, we would better see "culture" as a series of processes in which cultural materials are re-constructed and dismantled; the fixed, unitary, and bounded concepts of culture must give its way to a sense of fluidity and permeability about cultural sets. Based on this speculation, Kevin Robin asserts that "it is no longer meaningful, to hold on to older senses of identity and continuity".<sup>40</sup> Take Yeng and Chia as examples. We should realise, that it is a perfectionist illusion of trying to restore a pure, stable, authentic Chinese culture "iced" in timeless space. In the age of globalisation, it is urgent to re-narrate national culture, really find a new way of being Singaporean. As for the relationship between cultural identity and globalisation, Hall's insightful analysis should be introduced here:

*It may be tempting to think of identity in the age of globalisation as destined to end up in one place or another: either returning to its 'roots' or disappearing through assimilation and homogenisation. But this may be a false dilemma. For there is another possibility: that of 'Translation'. This describes those identities formations which cut across and intersect natural frontiers, and which are composed of people who have been disposed forever from their homelands. Such people retain strong links with their places of origin and their traditions, but they are without the illusion of a return to the past.*<sup>41</sup>

In other words, the "hybrid in-betweenness" of Chinese Singaporean's cultural identity is neither from the actual West nor from the factual Chinese-ness; instead, it is a kind of flexibility between them. Robert Young believes, hybridity is a crucial term as it always implies the impossibility of essentialism whenever it turns up. Let us turn to Yeng and Chia. Having moved to Singapore a few decades ago, their (grand)fathers as Chinese diasporas resided here permanently, what they possess is a "translated", "hybrid" culture which necessarily lost its purity, different from both Chinese culture in mainland China and the indigenous culture in Malaya, and even the assimilated Western culture, actually it is Homi Bhabha's "the Third Space".<sup>42</sup> For Chinese Singaporean, if tempted to (re)shape their cultural identities, they cannot detach themselves from other racial/ethnic communities, never dream of returning to the essentialist past and to the fixed, unitary, "uncontaminated" origin. What they should bear in mind, is, that they must recognise the following realities: cultural hybridity of Singapore as a global city, the impurity of all cultures, and the permeability of all cultural boundaries. In

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<sup>40</sup> ROBINS, K. Tradition and Translation: National Culture in Its Global Context. In CORNER, J., HARVEY, S. (Eds.) *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture*, p. 43.

<sup>41</sup> HALL, S. The Question of Cultural Identity. In HALL, S., HELD, D., MCGREW, T. (Eds.) *Modernity and Its Futures*, p. 310.

<sup>42</sup> BHABHA, H. The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha. In RUTHERFORD, J. (Ed.) *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, pp. 207 – 221.

this respect, a broad, non-essentialist presupposition about cultural identity, namely, “together-in-difference”<sup>43</sup> is supposed to re-imagine. It is a pity that such dialectical thinking is absent in Yeng and Chia’s literary imagination. We can expect, the younger generation of Chinese writers in Singapore, will be able to open up a new dimension for these critical issues?

### **Daily Life, Self-identity, the Ethnics of Authenticity**

The first two anthologies of poems by Yeng Pway-ngon are *Shoushutai shang* 手術臺上 *On the Operating Table* (1968) and *Wugen de xian* 無根的弦 *The Rootless Chord* (1974). Some pieces of them, for instance, *Shoushutai shang* 手術臺上 “On the operating table”, *Siyue* 四月 “April”, *Muxuenei* 墓穴內 “Inside the grave”, *Tianzhushu aige* 天竺鼠哀歌 “An elegy for Cavia Porcellus”, *Chengnianren de youxi* 成年人的遊戲 “The adult’s game”, are surely influenced by English poet T. S. Eliot (1888 – 1965) and Taiwanese author Ya Xian (b. 1932). These poems feature an emphasis on sentimental feelings of youth and love, and the sins of modern civilisation; the lyrical ‘self’ is often depicted as a solitary, depressed and fragmental image. Bidding farewell to sentimental lyricism since the 1990s, the middle-aged poet Yeng tends to express his strong confidence in literary enterprise by poetically representing his emotional attachment to everyday life. The pieces are included in his third anthology *The Daily Life*.

### **Individual Subject and the Sense of Freedom**

*The Daily Life* displays the lyrical subject’s identification and commitment to self, and the second half of it is full of wisdom and bliss. The following is excerpted from the piece named “the daily life”:

*He is in the earth  
regardless of sunny or cloudy weather, his  
scene is beautiful as always, everyday is ok  
for his labour, dripping with sweat; for his pushing door to exit  
reminds him to remember every flower, every  
grass, every big tree along the way*

*And remember to settle different accounts  
of everyday: complete or incomplete  
human nature, social mores, laws of things  
as trivial yet true as light perspiration on his forehead,  
as all kinds of landscapes  
as changing complexion*

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<sup>43</sup> ANG, I. *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*, p. 43.

*viewed on his departure and return  
Every footprint of the predecessors, every feeling of  
the soil; every page of  
thought marked forcefully with pen  
every line of  
exciting head-note<sup>44</sup>*

At this moment Yeng is confused neither by the identity crisis that happened in his early life nor by the betrayal of friends or oblivion from the masses, now he returns to daily life, intoxicated in reading and writing that is what he is dedicated to pursue. Yeng knows much about the queries: “who I am”, “where I am”, “what’s meaningful life”, “how we should live on”, to the extent, he restores the inner depth and richness of everyday life, therefore achieving a sense of direction in moral space. It is impressive that resent and sentimental feelings recurring in his early career are now replaced by a calm and peaceful mind. Undoubtedly the discovery of and commitment to ‘the self’ is a topic which he would like to represent again and again, sometimes the former is expressed creatively by re-writing of the literary classics. For example, *Ruguo zai dongye yige lvren* 如果在冬夜，一個旅人 “If on a winter’s night a traveler”,<sup>45</sup> the title of which is borrowed from an Italian writer Italo Calvino (1923 – 1985). In this poem, there is a “wanderer” who is always on the way of wandering, encountering strangers, but he insists on his exploration of future, never yielding to night’s coldness and the suffering of insomnia. One more example is *Bucunzai de qishi* 不存在的騎士 “the nonexistent knight” inspired by Calvino’s same-title novel, yet signifying a new meaning, that is, the re-discovery of and commitment to ‘the self’ as the source of creativity:

*The knight is nonexistent  
as other knights are busy  
attending the king’s banquets, reciting their fabricated  
genealogies of clan  
presenting medals with each other*

*The nonexistent knight  
not incorporated into the royal army  
you cannot see him  
except the armour with which he fights the evils anytime  
except the solitary yet complete soul  
inside the armour. The knight is*

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<sup>44</sup> YENG, Pway Ngon. *Richang shenghuo* 日常生活 [the Daily Life]. In his *Richang shenghuo* 日常生活 [The Daily Life], pp. 53 – 54.

<sup>45</sup> YENG, Pway Ngon. *Ruguo zai dongye yige lvren* 如果在冬夜，一個旅人 [If on a winter’s Night a Traveler]. In his *Richang shenghuo* 日常生活 [The Daily Life], p. 65.

*nonexistent, except his  
sprit, principles, his love for axiom  
and justice.*

*The knight is  
nonexistent<sup>46</sup>*

Unlike major knights who easily submit to the temptation of fame and wealth, ‘the nonexistent knight’ (repeated four times in the poem) is endowed with some noble virtues: self-esteem, idealistic personality, and unyielding enthusiasm for his career goal, looking much like a Don Quixotic figure. This avant-garde persona symbolises Yeng’s life story in particular and all the ill-fated writers in general, and is also reminiscent of other ‘stereotypes’ of poet: hero, prophet, martyr, madman, all of those who witness the conflict between the individual and the modern world.<sup>47</sup> Then, for the individual subject, what is the significance of the ‘self-identity’? Charles Taylor’s study sheds light on it:

*And this situation does, of course, arise for some people. It is what we call an ‘identity crisis’, an acute form of disorientation, which people often express in terms of not knowing where they are, but which can also be seen as a radical certainty of where they stand. They lack a frame or horizon within which things can take on a stable significance, within which some life possibilities can be seen as good or meaningful, others as bad or trivial. The meaning of all these possibilities is unfixed, labile, or undetermined. This is a painful and frightening experience.<sup>48</sup>*

The existence of self-identity makes individual subject produce a frame or horizon within which he/she could fulfill a sense of direction in moral space, having the faculty to determine and think independently in the living world. Accordingly, with the rise of “daily life”, “if on one winter’s night a traveller”, “the nonexistent knight”, Yeng reveals his views on life: ego is at once the source of creativity and the ethical principle for one to maintain modern identity.

### **Self-Identity and Ethics of Authenticity**

In August 1993, Yeng composed a lyric named *Wuti* 無題 “Untitled Poem” in which the fascination and richness of everyday life is invoked in a delicate style:

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<sup>46</sup> YENG, Pway Ngon. *Bucunzai de qishi* 不存在的騎士 [The Nonexistent Knight]. In his *Richang shenghuo* 日常生活 [The Daily Life], p. 67.

<sup>47</sup> RUSSELL, C. *Poets, Prophets, and Revolutionaries: The Literary Avant-Garde from Rimbaud through Postmodernism.*

<sup>48</sup> TAYLOR, C. *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, pp. 27 – 28.

*I'm used to enter the secluded  
alley at midnight. I'm familiar with it, just as with my  
lonely heartbeat; flourishing vanilla, leaves  
fluttering firefly. At midnight I'm used to  
knocking gently at your unlocked door, visit you, in your  
corridor made of words  
speculate with you, explore and share  
your modest and maturity,  
my tenacity*

.....

*I also know, at this moment  
you are in the morning seaside  
looking at a changeful cloud  
a fleeting sea bird, amazed and  
stunned; just as I'm restless  
in the starry night, struggling  
to pursue, to capture, to reconstruct  
a series of floating poems<sup>49</sup>*

Two dramatic situations, one is set outdoor and the other indoor, is conceived significantly in this poem. Whenever the narrator visits the familiar abbey, he feels an intimate experience established between him and the scenery. In spite of strong loneliness in daily life, he finds this secret place to relax and enjoy what he encounters in it. As it coming to midnight, the persona stays restless to indulge in his literary writing, imagining of and yearning for “you” (artistic ideal or heights). It is evident that Yeng gets used to solitude, and desperately refuses to ask for understanding and appreciation from the multitude; what he firmly holds, is his confidence in the creative potential of the ego, and his unyielding pursuit of literary enterprise. With regard to the latter, he reinstates it in his collection *The Daily Life*.

Relying on the pursuit of literary enterprise and the sense of achievements to maintain the self-identity is what Anthony Giddens calls “life politics”. For Yeng, the self is a being with inner-depth, the identification of and commitment to it is the source of meaning, all these leading to the awareness of direction in moral space, as implied in his poem *Wo dui ni de guzhi* 我對你的固執 “My Persistence on You”, the last piece of *The Daily Life*:

*My persistence on you is formed in ancient times. In the dark  
womb, in the embryo as its breath  
is just heard, before*

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<sup>49</sup> YENG, Pway Ngon. Wuti 无题 [Untitled Poem]. In *Richang shenghuo* 日常生活 [The Daily Life], pp. 49 – 50.

*learning tears and blood, while beginning to read, to write you  
I'm so scared of forgetting  
the metaphors in your skin, language' structure  
although your body smell cannot be simulated  
like the first drip of rain knowing my body temperature afternoon*

*I wander aimlessly like being at strange land, leaving, coming  
coming, leaving, I'm so tenaciously  
looking for you, tenaciously  
remembering your sound and face, just as remembering  
my homeland. I'm horribly worried that  
desire and glory might devour my  
memory, gradually eroding and misting  
my perseverance on and love of you<sup>50</sup>*

In September 2003 Yeng was awarded the Cultural Medallion, the highest honour in Singapore, as a recognition of his excellence in literature, soon after that, he was interviewed by *Lianhe Zaobao* and *Radio Singapore International*, along with many other awards and honours. Yeng may console himself with the “belated justice”. The above piece, composed on 26 October 2003, is a response to the pressures that the awards brought about. Even if in the beginning of life, “I” (the mask of the author) am dedicated to pursue “you” (literary enterprise, or ideal, or heights). This persona confesses that he has been travelling in literature as homeland for many years, like a stranger leaving and coming again without end. However, the persona is not fully complacent about his awards or pride of his achievements, instead, he is afraid that desire and honour is likely to “erode” his moral sentiments: will the “nonexistent knight” be hurrying for the king’s banquets, then, a latecomer incorporated into the “royal army”?

Notwithstanding the stance that Yeng takes while resisting the temptation of wealth and fame, one question arises here: how can we understand the narcissism and self-isolation implicated in these poems? Is it possible to provide a solid foundation for maintaining self-identity? As is spoken, self-identity is related closely to individualism and modernity, ironically the latter is so rampant in Singapore, and thus, we shall attempt to find a new theoretical thinking to reflect on it. A brief sketch of Charles Taylor’s articulations may be offered here. According to him, there are three malaises about modernity: “the first fear is about what we might call a loss of meaning, the fading of moral horizons. The second concerns the eclipse of ends, in face of rampant instrumental reason. And the third is about a loss of freedom”.<sup>51</sup> As a result, Taylor says, people lose a heroic dimension to life, no longer have a sense of

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<sup>50</sup> YENG, Pway Ngon. *Wo dui ni de guzhi* 我對你的固執 [My Persistence on You]. In his *Richang shenghuo* 日常生活 [The Daily Life], p. 73.

<sup>51</sup> TAYLOR, C. *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 10.

higher purpose, and suffer from a lack of passion, “this loss of purpose was linked to a narrowing. People lost the broader vision because they focused on their individual lives. ....in other words, the dark side of individualism is a centering on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society”.<sup>52</sup> In view of this, Taylor suggests a new concept “the ethics of authenticity”, which was born at the end of the eighteenth century, and is something relatively new and peculiar to modern culture. Taylor believes, authenticity is a facet of modern individualism, and the ethnics of authenticity features a dialectical relation: on the one hand, it emphasises the moral principle of “being true to myself” which means being true to my own originality, “not only should I not fit my life to the demands of external conformity; I cannot even find the model to live outside myself. I can find it only within”,<sup>53</sup> on the other hand, individualism as a moral principle must offer some view on how the individual should live with others, therefore, “the ideal of authenticity incorporates some notions of society, or at least of how people ought to live together”.<sup>54</sup> In other words, for the self-identity, what lies at the centre of the ethics of authenticity is something like the politics of recognition: “my discovering my identity does not mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internalised, with others. That is why the development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives a new and crucial importance to recognition. My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others”.<sup>55</sup>

Let us turn to Yeng’s *The Daily Life*. Evidently the concept of ethics of authenticity offers a new vision to speculate Yeng’s literary imagination. Yeng links his literary enterprise with the Sinophone community in Singapore to secure his cultural identity, in so doing, what he received is the sense of moral self-satisfaction. Nevertheless, the self-identity is unlikely to be fulfilled completely in a vacuum, a self-isolated and narcissistic condition, instead, the individual subject must think of how to live together with people, only through dialogue with meaningful others, self-identity can be fully realizedrealised. In the post-modern world where “All the solid melts into air” (in Marshall Berman’s term), what the individualism really needs is “the ethics of authenticity”.

### **The Concluding Remark**

Yeng and Chia’s thinking on historical memory and modern identity originates from a primary concern: how we should live? What is meaningful life? For Singaporean, this is an existential anxiety. In summary, first, Yeng and Chia

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>55</sup> TAYLOR, C. *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, p. 34.

highlight the centrality of cultural identity that works its way from “the imaginary nostalgia” to “the lure of the local”; second, they reflect on the far-reaching conflict between the ethnic and the national by representing the dialectics of language, power and subject after the implementation of radical educational policies in early 1980s; finally, Yeng proposes to return to individualist “daily life”, speculating how to realise self-identity, the sense of direction in moral space. As for the above critical issues, it is undoubted that Yeng and Chia present their insights as well as their blindness impressively through modernist imaginary, meanwhile implicitly suggesting us to conduct further exploration of these large issues.

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