

Evolving Representations of Chinese Laborers in Mahua Literature (1930s–1940s): The Case of “Shisheng”, a Supplement to *Nanyang Siang Pau*

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Abstract

This paper focuses primarily on the Chinese laborer-themed short stories published in the “Shisheng”, a supplement of *Nanyang Siang Pau*, to examine the representation and transformation of Chinese laborers in Mahua literature during the 1930s and 1940s. The portrayal of Chinese laborers in “Shisheng” went through two phases. The earlier era primarily depicted the deplorable conditions of Chinese laborers and the wealth gap after the outbreak of the Chinese resistance against Japan in 1937. It demonstrated a pronounced socialist consciousness by criticizing societal injustices and articulating aspirations for social reform. In contrast, the next phase redefined the image of Chinese coolies as patriotic vanguards by emphasizing their generous donations and enthusiastic participation in the boycott of Japanese goods. This resulted in a patriotic portrayal of Chinese laborers imbued with a strong “national salvation” ethos. The portrayal and evolution of Chinese laborers in “Shisheng” encapsulate the ideological shifts within the Mahua literary scene of the 1930s and 1940s, reflecting the profound influence that leftist and anti-Japanese national salvation literature had on Mahua society.

Keywords: The “Shisheng” supplement to *Nanyang Siang Pau*, Left-wing literature, Mahua counter-Japanese national salvation literature, The representation of Chinese laborers

1. Introduction

In the first half of the 20th century, the Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaya were primarily composed of laborers, becoming a typical immigrant society. According to the occupational population statistics released by the Malayan government in 1931, the distribution of Chinese laborers in various sectors was as follows: agriculture (including rubber plantations), mining, commerce, transportation, and free professions accounted for 35%, 20%, 16%, 6%, and 13%, respectively (Overseas Chinese Studies Association, 1950, pp. 10-11). These laborers mainly worked in plantations, mines, and factories, engaging in physically demanding labor such as mining, rubber tapping, and portaging. These jobs were grueling, with meager salaries. Meanwhile, laborers often suffered from exploitation, oppression, and mistreatment by employers. Therefore, pre-war Singapore and Malaya were usually perceived as “a moonless night of the soul” or “a shadowed universe” (Jin Cai, 1937). This not only truly reflected the living conditions of the lower classes but also stimulated their desire for change and resistance consciousness. In the preface to “Xingguang,” the supplement of *Lat Pau*, Yunshan (1926) raised a poignant question: “If this darkness continues indefinitely, how will we ever know when this endless night will give way to dawn?” This question marked the awakening of a collective yearning for change. During this period, Chinese leftist literature was introduced to the region by visiting intellectuals from China, thereby adding a distinct “leftist” perspective into the “change-seeking” discourse of the Mahua (Malayan and Singaporean Chinese) literary world.

How could one escape from a moonless night of the soul? The leftist literature offers a compelling answer: resistance. In the 1930s, numerous works depicting the plight of Chinese laborers were published in Chinese-language newspapers throughout Singapore and Malaya. These texts constructed a diverse range of working-class figures imbued with a hazy sense of resistance and nascent revolutionary consciousness. In July

1937, the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War heightened the sense of diaspora identity among the Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaya, interrupting Mahua writers' path to social transformation. Under the influence of the Chinese War of Resistance to Japan, how would the representation of the Chinese laborers in Mahua literature transform? This paper analyzes Chinese laborer-themed short stories featured in "Shisheng," the supplement of *Nanyang Siang Pau*, as the primary sources. It aims to explore the evolution of the representation of Chinese laborers in Mahua literature from the 1930s to the 1940s, while examining the ideological and logical underpinnings of these transformations.

2. Literature Review

Given the scope of this study, the literature review focuses on two main areas: first, existing research on "Shisheng;" and second, studies concerning Chinese laborers in Nanyang (Southeast Asia) during the first half of the 20th century.

2.1 Literature Review on "Shisheng"

Established by the Fujianese tycoon Tan Kah Kee on September 6, 1923, *Nanyang Siang Pau* emerged as one of Singapore's most influential Chinese-language newspapers during the first half of the 20th century. Its most prominent supplement, "Shisheng," launched on January 21, 1933, and published until early 1942, served as a crucial historical source for the study of pre-war Mahua literature. However, existing research on "Shisheng" remains relatively limited, with most studies focusing primarily on archival compilation rather than in-depth critical analysis.

Significant contributions in the realm of material compilation include Fang Xiu's *A Draft History of Mahua New Literature (Volume II)*, Miao Xiu's *A History of Mahua Literature*, and Yeo Song Nian's *A Study of the Supplement "Shisheng" of Nanyang Siang Pau*. These works primarily explore the layout, editorial staff, publication objectives, and related aspects of "Shisheng." Among these, Yeo's book is currently the sole academic work exclusively dedicated to studying "Shisheng," proving particularly invaluable for this study. Yeo (1990, p. 3) posits that the editorial purposes and policies constitute pivotal determinants of a supplement's nature and development direction. Therefore, he structures the chapters according to the editors' tenure, publication purposes, literary characteristics, and principal writers.

At present, there are only three academic research papers on "Shisheng." Cheang Khai Xian's "The Women and Youth Issues in Pre-War Singapore and Malaya Society: Centered on the Study of 'Shisheng' of *Nanyang Siang Pau* (1933–1941)" primarily utilizes "Shisheng" as its principal source material to explore issues of love, marriage, education, and employment confronting women and youth in the Chinese communities of Singapore and Malaya, shaped by the interplay of Eastern and Western cultural influences and the pressures of the economic crisis. Additionally, Deng Lequn has contributed two significant papers: "The Multidimensional Perspective of Pre-War Chinese Literature in Singapore and Malaya—A Micro Study of Yeo Song Nian's *A Study of the Supplement Shisheng of Nanyang Siang Pau*" and "'Shisheng' and the Development of the Chinese Literary Movement in Singapore and Malaya." These papers mainly employ "Shisheng" as a historical source to examine the evolution of pre-war Mahua literature. The latter study specifically utilizes "Shisheng" as a documentary source to delineate the trajectory of the pre-war Mahua literary movement, tracing its progression from advocating for local and popular literature to promoting nationalist patriotic literature (Deng, 2001, p. 78).

The collection and organization of historical materials are the fundamental prerequisite and foundation of all academic research. Although "Shisheng" holds considerable value as a historical source for pre-war Mahua literature, it has received relatively limited scholarly attention, leaving notable gaps that merit further investigation.

2.2 Literature Review on Chinese Laborers in Singapore and Malaya in the First Half of the 20th Century

Research on Chinese laborers in Southeast Asia during the 19th and 20th centuries is extensive. However, for aligning with this study's focus, the literature review mainly centers on Chinese laborers in Singapore and Malaya in the first half of the 20th century. A comprehensive review of existing literature reveals that the pertinent research can be categorized into the following aspects:

Firstly, the contributions of Chinese laborers to the development and infrastructure of Singapore and Malaya. From the 19th through the first half of the 20th century, the labor force in Malaya's tin mining operations, rubber plantations, and agricultural sectors predominantly consisted of Chinese laborers. They surmounted numerous challenges and collaborated closely with local communities to develop resources, making significant contributions to the region's national liberation, economic, and cultural advancement (Peng, 1984; Guo, 1986; Wang, 1992; Li & Huang, 1999). They are frequently acclaimed as "the unsung heroes of Malaya's development"

(Huang, 2009, p. 13). The Southeast Asian historian Victor Purcell (1946, p. 128) contends that “without the Chinese, modern Malaya would not exist.”

Secondly, the causes for Chinese laborers’ migration and their living conditions in residence countries. Most Chinese laborers originating from southern China’s coastal regions, came to Singapore and Malaya primarily through mechanisms of coolie trade, debt-bonded labor, and legal recruitment. Their large-scale migration is connected to various factors, such as the disintegration of the rural economy, persistent banditry, and political turbulence in China (Nian, 1986, p. 7-13; Zeng, 1984, pp. 18-29). These laborers primarily engage in manual labor, which is strenuous, meagerly remunerated, and led to deplorable living conditions (Peng, 1980; Zhu, 1990, p. 139). From the late 1920s to the early 1930s, the global economic crisis precipitated a dramatic decline in rubber and tin prices, and leads to widespread unemployment across Singapore and Malaya. (Note 1) Yeo Song Nian’s *The Lives of Chinese Laborers Reflected in Pre-War Mahua Literature* sheds light on the hardships and suffering endured by Chinese laborers in pre-war Malaya, while also addressing the adverse effects of the global economic crisis of the 1930s on their working conditions and daily lives.

In summary, although substantial research has been conducted on Chinese laborers in Singapore and Malaya, issues such as insufficient depth, repetitive studies, and homogenized conclusions persist. Moreover, most existing studies approach the subject from sociological and historical perspectives, with relatively limited scholarly attention paid to literary analyses—particularly regarding how Mahua writers construct the representations of Chinese laborers. “Shisheng” published a significant corpus of short stories on Chinese laborers, providing valuable insights into their living conditions and political identity in pre-war Singapore and Malaya.

3. Methodology

This study employs two primary research methodologies:

Firstly, close textual analysis. Examining the construction and evolution of the representation of Chinese laborers in “Shisheng” requires meticulous textual evidence. Moreover, the limited exploration and a dearth of specialized studies on these texts within current scholarship mandate a focus on textual interpretation as the core approach of this research.

Second, interdisciplinary analysis of literature and history. This encompasses two complementary approaches: historical contextualization of literature and literary interpretation of history, with this study primarily emphasizing the former. The fundamental principle that literature reflects social realities within literary studies establishes a theoretical foundation for analyzing literary texts through historical lenses, a widely accepted and frequently employed approach. Adopting this widely accepted method, the research investigates the historical milieu informing the revolutionary and patriotic Chinese laborer representations of “Shisheng.” Through an integrated analysis of literary and historical dimensions, this study examines the ideological forces and underlying logic that shaped the shifting representations of Chinese laborers in Mahua literature during the 1930s and 1940s.

4. Findings and Discussion

Divided by the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, “Shisheng”’s depiction of Chinese laborers evolved through two distinct phases. The first phase primarily highlighted the deplorable conditions faced by Chinese laborers and the economic disparity, criticizing societal injustices while advocating for social reform, thus reflecting a distinct leftist ideology. In contrast, the later phase redefined the representation of Chinese coolies as patriotic vanguards, emphasizing their generous donations and active participation in boycotting Japanese goods. This narrative underscored their unwavering commitment to the national salvation movement.

4.1 Representation of the Revolutionary Chinese Laborers

The discovery of “human” served as the intrinsic impetus behind the May Fourth New Culture Movement and also emerged as one of the major themes of the May Fourth New Literature. The “human” here denotes an autonomous individual characterized by freedom and equality in character and dignity. The emergence and development of leftist literature in China and the Mahua literary world were also made possible by the discovery of “human.” In contrast to May Fourth New Literature’s focus on the individual as a free, equal person, leftist literature recognized the “class” nature of the “person.” It examined why some individuals couldn’t be regarded as “human” from a class standpoint and blamed the oppressive upper classes. Subsequently, it sought explanations for the lower classes’ resistance. In left-wing literature, the lower classes are portrayed as suffering and oppressed, while the upper classes are depicted as indulgent, exploitative, and oppressive. Society is shown as evil and unjust, and the social system is fundamentally defective. This provides the essential premise for

constructing the ideological landscape of leftist literature and simultaneously serves as the intellectual framework behind “Shisheng”’s portrayal of Chinese laborers with leftist consciousness. Before 1937, “Shisheng” released numerous left-wing literary works centered on Chinese laborers. These works shaped the perception of Chinese laborers who were beginning to develop a resistance consciousness and revolutionary thought from three main perspectives.

Firstly, “Shisheng” creates the portrayal of Chinese laborers with class consciousness by depicting their tragic destinies, underscoring the hardships of social transformation. Ge Kong’s short story “The Fate of the Poor” (1933) tells a “dehumanizing” tale. In their desperate attempt to treat Jiang Wanli’s seriously ill mother, he and his wife, Jufen, pawn all their possessions, but to no avail. Driven to despair, they turn to Jufen’s wealthy aunt for help. However, the aunt refuses financial aid and commands her servants to drive them out. Unable to bear seeing her mother suffer, Jufen chases after the aunt’s car in the heavy rain, pleading for mercy. Ultimately succumbing to exhaustion, she collapses and is struck by a speeding car, her legs crushed. Despite being rushed to the hospital, her condition was deemed irreversible, resulting in her demise. Overwhelmed by the sudden loss of her daughter-in-law, Jiang Wanli’s mother is consumed by grief and subsequently passes away in the hospital. Confronted with the simultaneous loss of two beloved family members, Jiang Wanli, in his extreme sorrow, erupts into drunken laughter and wails to the heavens, “I want to be a person! I can no longer endure such suffering!” (Ge Kong, 1933)

At this moment, Jiang Wanli’s cry for becoming a person transcends the May Fourth ideal of pursuing an independent individual characterized by freedom and equality. It is instead a dirge for the impoverished masses condemned to tragic destinies and an accusation of the grossly uneven distribution of wealth and grave economic injustice in society. In left-wing literature, the concept of “personhood” is intrinsically intertwined with class. Jiang Wanli’s exclamation, “I want to be a person” (Ge Kong, 1933), functions as a powerful clarion call, signaling both the awakening of class consciousness and the embryonic emergence of resistance. By contrast, Jufen’s dying accusation is even more explicit: “In this society, the affluent, resembling walking corpses, indulge in hedonistic revelry and unrestrained decadence, whereas the impoverished languish in starvation and perish in unrelenting agony.” (Ge Kong, 1933) There is an obvious political undertone to Jufen’s portrayal of the starkly different living conditions of the privileged and the impoverished. The story’s ideological orientation is evident in the stark contrast between the conditions of the two classes and the injustice inherent in these conditions. It exemplifies left-wing literature that emphasizes class struggle and advocates for social reform.

Secondly, by juxtaposing the upper and lower classes, “Shisheng” expresses its dissatisfaction with the inequities inherent in the unequal economic system while simultaneously portraying Chinese laborers as individuals who are becoming increasingly conscious of resistance. In Yu’s short story “Little Brother—The Death of Ligen” (1933), the enormous distinctions between “people” in a class society are rendered through multiple contrasts, subtly foreshadowing the inevitability of resistance. The story centers on the divergent life trajectories of Ligen, a child laborer at a sawmill, and Linna, the factory owner’s daughter, with particular emphasis on the tragic circumstances surrounding Ligen’s death. The narrative hinges on two contrasts: First, the difference in their identities—Ligen, a child laborer at the sawmill, represents the lower class, while Linna, as the daughter of the factory owner, belongs to the upper class. Second, their divergent fates—Ligen spends every day commuting between home and the factory, his time entirely devoted to the factory production line, ultimately crushed by a saw blade at work, whereas Linna lives a leisurely life, surrounded by countless novelty toys and beautiful clothes, carefree. The sharp contrast between the two highlights the enormous gap in the lives of the rich and the poor, expressing sympathy for Ligen as an embodiment of the oppressed lower class and intense resentment towards the upper class. When Linna learns of her father’s imminent return, she hastily urges Ligen to depart, saying, “My father disapproves of me associating with children who go barefoot.” (Yu, 1933) In this context, the “children who wear shoes” and the “children who go barefoot” symbolize the upper and lower classes, respectively. The paternal prohibition against Linna’s interaction with the “children who go barefoot” alludes to the irreconcilable contradiction between the two classes. At the story’s conclusion, the Chinese laborers witness Ligen lying amidst a sanguine pool, and they cry out in protest:

“—My God, this is our blood!”

Their horrified and pale expressions were as frightening as those of the native Africans mourning their kin whom lions had killed. After a moment of contemplation, the crowd surrounding the saw blade began to roar again, enraged and frenzied!

—This monster, this mechanical beast that devours living corpses!

—The living corpses are us! Us!

—Crush it, crush it! (Yu, 1933)

This passage is characterized by ideologically charged rhetoric. For example, the pairs of words— “Ligen’s blood” versus “our blood,” “this mechanical beast that devours living corpses” versus “the monster,” “us” versus “the living corpses”—form a striking contrast. The shift from “Ligen’s blood” to “our blood” signifies that the Chinese laborers in the sawmill have recognized their shared fate through the death of Ligen. They realize that the machine that devours living corpses is the culprit devouring their lives, thus awakening a sense of resistance—“Crush it, crush it!” (Yu, 1933) The machine that devours the living dead represents modern industrial civilization. While the development of modern industrial civilization engenders the capitalist system of private ownership of the means of production. In this sense, the machine that devours living corpses refers to a metaphor for the capitalist system. Instead of attempting to destroy the inanimate saw blade—the machine that devours living corpses—the workers at the sawmill are attempting to destroy the capitalist system it symbolizes. This creates a vivid portrayal of a group of Chinese laborers who have become aware of class consciousness and developed a sense of resistance.

Finally, “Shisheng” delineates the oppression of the lower class by the upper class, presenting scenes of class conflict and directing the animosity of the lower class. Yao Ping’s short story “Authority” (1935) serves as an example of this. The well-dressed young heir, with a fierce and intimidating glare, shouts loudly at the rickshaw puller, demanding to be taken to the train station two miles away within ten minutes, and promises to give extra money for timely delivery. Exhausted from a long day of labor, the rickshaw puller, driven by the need to support his family, drags his aching legs and runs desperately. However, by the time he gets there, the train has already departed. Filled with rage, the rich young man scolds the rickshaw puller for delaying his trip. He refuses to pay the fare and beats the rickshaw puller. The short story describes it as follows:

He (the wealthy young man) wears a ferocious expression as he glares at the rickshaw puller, then swings his cane with full force at the man’s back, cursing him with every blow. The cop’s attention is drawn to the cacophonous noises. The rickshaw puller is utterly spent, his clothes cling to him, soaked as though he has just walked through a storm. He endures the agony of the severe thrashing because he has no courage to argue further with the customer. With his head hung low and spirits crushed, he leaves the train station like a criminal. As he walks away, he can not help but secretly shed tears. (Yao Ping, 1935)

Because of his strong economic status and the high social standing, the rich young man behaves haughtily toward the rickshaw puller. The rickshaw puller, on the other hand, is weak because he fears “authority.” How terrible and ludicrous that the diligent rickshaw puller was not only unpaid but also brutally beaten. A similarly terrible portrayal of an elderly worker is likewise created by Wen Nong (1935) in the short story “A Businessman’s Ten-Day Diary.” A wealthy and powerful factory owner, enraged by the commotion caused by his concubines, has nowhere to vent his anger, so he take it out of the laborers. He unintentionally kills an elderly worker in a fit of rage, yet everyone has become so accustomed to such occurrences that the old laborer’s death causes no stir. These stories both reveal the depressing reality that the low-income individuals are worthless. Fortunately, the beaten rickshaw puller had some degree of reflection, unlike the elderly worker who passes away silently. He attains a profound realization regarding the oppressive nature of “authority”—the upper class—and understand that “countless competent individuals in this world have been sacrificed, swallowed alive by their merciless claws” (Yao Ping, 1935). This suggests that the once weak rickshaw puller had, at least quietly, become aware of his status.

Notably, “Shisheng,” consistently employs the same strategy in its construction of the portrayal of Chinese laborers, irrespective of the particular narrative perspective adopted. It gives these characters a “left-wing” tint through short internal monologues or epiphany-like realizations. Jing Zhang’s short story “The Hardworking Father” (1933) presents the tragic story of Man’er’s father, a dockworker, who is forced to sell his daughter to repay the debt after he becomes indebted and faces persistent harassment from creditors. Man’er’s mother drowns herself because she cannot accept this fate. With much sorrow, the father recounts this painful experience to Man’er, condemning the evil in society, and concluding by encouraging him: “... Now is not the time for us to be pessimistic or despairing. We must bring the working class together and radically change this harsh society. We must struggle and make sacrifices. Man’er, I believe that the working class will eventually succeed if we forge ahead.” (Jing Zhang, 1933) Such philosophical discourse and subtle reflections are not the kind of speech an illiterate laborer would make. Instead, they are more likely the underlying aspirations of the Mahua writers, who are adamant about changing the colonial Malayan society.

In the 1930s, the global economic crisis led to a sharp decline in the prices of primary products in the Nanyang

region. A large number of factories and shops closed down, unemployment soared, and the Chinese community—composed primarily of laborers—was severely affected. These socio-economic upheavals also had a profound impact on the Mahua literary scene. During this period, numerous literary works emerged that vividly portrayed the widespread unemployment and the harsh living conditions of the lower classes. As Khor Teik Huat (2015, p. 85) observes, one major reason realism achieved overwhelming success in the prewar Mahua literary world was that it “effectively channeled and expressed the laboring class’s and immigrant society’s deep dissatisfaction with their lived realities.” This argument also holds in reverse: the survival struggles of the lower classes not only provided abundant material for realist literary expression, but also offered critical opportunities for literature to engage directly with social realities. In this context, “Shisheng” depicts Chinese laborers with vague revolutionary and resistance consciousness based on local social conditions, aiming to awaken the local Chinese immigrants’ awareness to transform Singapore and Malayan society. However, “Shisheng” presents class consciousness and resistance among Chinese laborers in a rather rudimentary manner, revealing the inherent limitations of Mahua literature and underscoring the profound influence exerted by revolutionary literary ideals—particularly those championed by China’s *Taiyang* Society and later *Chuangzao* Society—on the Mahua literary scene. Concepts like “literature is a tool” and “literature is essentially propaganda” are vigorously championed by proponents of Chinese “revolutionary literature.” These concepts are largely embraced by Mahua writers, who prioritized thematic exploration while often neglecting (or perhaps lacking capacity) to develop character arcs. In other words, within specific historical contexts, Mahua writers tended to ascribe to literature the functions of moral instruction, enlightenment, and even political mobilization, while overlooking its cultural potential as a space for independent expression. This functionalist view of literature, to a certain extent, constrained its own developmental possibilities and simultaneously prefigured the narrative direction and ideological logic behind the construction of the “national salvation” laborer figure in post-1937 Mahua literature.

4.2 Representation of the Patriotic Chinese Laborers

After the outbreak of the War of Resistance Against Japan in 1937, the Mahua literary community launched a large-scale literary movement in support of China’s counter-Japanese efforts. Aimed at contributing to China’s victory, this resistance literature primarily focused on portraying the realities of counter-Japanese struggles both in China and within the local context of British Malaya and Singapore. It also explored how literature and art could be mobilized to inspire the masses and enhance the political efficacy of literary practice under new historical conditions. Mahua writers widely recognized the significance of literature in the war effort, advocating its use as “a weapon for national salvation” and calling for literary activities to be “unified under the overarching goal of resistance” (Ye, 1972, p. 5). The fusion of wartime politics and literature further amplified the functional role of literature in society. Against this backdrop, “Shisheng” also adjusted its editorial direction in the selection and publication of literary works. In his editorial statement of July 31, 1937, Liulang (1937), then editor of “Shisheng,” emphasized that a primary criterion for literary selection was to reflect current realities, while also promoting anti-Japanese resistance and the defense of world peace. This editorial strategy was maintained by Zhang Chukun, You Qiu, and Wang Jiyuan, who published a substantial body of literary works aimed at furthering the resistance movement and the cause of national salvation. From this perspective, Mahua’s counter-Japanese national salvation literature derives its significance from its ability to harness literary expression to galvanize tangible resistance. Central to this mission is the shaping of the patriotic Chinese laborer as a powerful and symbolic figure. The representations of Chinese laborers in “Shisheng” during this period, therefore, are imbued with a distinct and urgent “national salvation” tone (Note 2).

Ji Fen (1939) provides a highly representative portrayal of a patriotic Chinese worker in the short story “What use is money if one is a slave to a conquered nation?” This laborer is deeply concerned about China’s wartime situation, and despite earning meager wages, he consistently contributes substantial portions of his income to the war relief fund. This portrayal stands in sharp contrast to wealthy business people possessing considerable wealth, who would resort to pretexts to avoid making financial contributions. The worker’s frequent repetition of the line, “Is money useful if we become slaves to a fallen nation,” reflects the intense sense of urgency and patriotic fervor that defined Mahua literature. The author laments the regret that this powerful sentence comes from a small laborer making just eighteen shillings a month rather than from affluent merchants. A profoundly patriotic Chinese laborer is shown in this short story. Both his patriotic deeds and the author’s comparison of him with the miserly wealthy men who decline to donate demonstrate his patriotism. After 1937, this technique of portraying a patriotic Chinese laborer became quite common in “Shisheng.” The laborer is shown as a symbol of sacrifice and solidarity and a critique of the capitalist class for its indifference to national crises. This contrast between the patriotic laborer and the selfish wealthy class emphasizes the nobility of the laborer’s character. It highlights the moral and ideological difference between the two classes when facing a national disaster.

Therefore, “Shisheng” utilized such figures to inspire a sense of responsibility, furthering the cause of anti-Japanese resistance within the Chinese community in Singapore and Malaya.

This also applies to Gao Zili’s short story “The Plasterer Cai Jiu” (1939). The story primarily revolves around Cai Jiu, a plasterer deeply concerned about the fate of his homeland, who donates all the wealth he has amassed over the years. He successfully persuades a coffee shop owner, initially reluctant, and, to demonstrate his commitment, pledges to donate a portion of his monthly earnings. Cai Jiu holds a set of simple yet sincere patriotic beliefs, expressing the hope that every Chinese person would love their motherland, contribute their labor if they have the strength, and donate money if they lack it, firmly believing that the nation will ultimately prevail. Despite hardships, Cai Jiu is a generous contributor to the war relief fund while the wealthy coffee shop owner hesitates. This contrast further highlights Cai Jiu’s profound patriotism. The story not only demonstrates the patriotism of the working class but also sharply contrasts it with the self-interest and indifference of the wealthy. This contrast emphasizes the nobility of the laborer’s character and strengthens the notion that the entire nation should contribute to the defense of the country, regardless of individual economic standing.

Under the historical backdrop of the Chinese War of Resistance Against Japan, donating to the Anti-Japanese relief fund was undoubtedly a typical manifestation of patriotism, representing the gentlest and most direct love for the country. Conversely, in Zuo Songwen’s short story “The Eve of Light” (1938), patriotism is portrayed through a more radical form of resistance. The story centers on more than thirty Chinese laborers working in the mines. When they learn about the raging warfare and widespread devastation in their homeland from newspapers, they experience a sudden awakening. They realize that they should no longer toil like beasts of burden for the imperialist, extracting resources that would ultimately be used as tools to kill their own compatriots. Determined to awaken others, they resolve to reveal this truth to fellow miners. The narrative poignantly captures this awakening with the line: “The boundless darkness is brewing the light of tomorrow; the seemingly lifeless mine is on the verge of stirring.” The term “light” carries a strong symbolic meaning here, representing the awakening of over three thousand miners who will rise up and resist the overseers. Through this narrative approach, the short story depicts patriotic Chinese laborers who demonstrate their patriotism through collective rebellion. It is evident that “hatred”—directed at both the imperialist and their collaborators who oppress the people—serves as another means by which “Shisheng” portrays the portrayal of the patriotic Chinese laborer. This radical opposition constitutes an additional layer of resistance, complementing the relatively passive patriotic behavior depicted in short stories such as “The Plasterer Cai Jiu.”

In response to the anti-Japanese goods boycott movement, “Shisheng” created a series of patriotic Chinese laborer representations, reflecting the core theme of hatred toward the Japanese. As a significant component of the Mahua Chinese anti-Japanese resistance effort, the anti-Japanese goods boycott movement aimed at reducing the import of Japanese goods and weakening the Japanese’s economic power, thereby promoting the sale of domestic products in the local market. “Japanese goods” were frequently described as “enemy goods” in Mahua literature, which was why they had to be resisted without hesitation. Consequently, many patriotic shop assistants were portrayed in “Shisheng,” who were willing to take the risk of unemployment and expose the behavior of shop owners selling enemy goods. Ziyan’s short story “Determination” (1937) is a typical representative of this theme. The story tells of a shop assistant named Yougen who is deeply dissatisfied with his employer selling Japanese goods and is determined to expose the shop owner’s treacherous behavior and collusion with the Japanese, even though it means losing his job. Similarly, in Lianpin’s “The Shop Owner’s Secret” (1937), the protagonist is also an employee who discovers that his employer collaborates with the Japanese and sells Japanese goods. He quits his job to back China’s War of Resistance against Japan, exposing the shop owner as a traitor and committing treason against the country. These stories emphasize the patriotism that transcends individual interests and depict the patriotism of resisting Japanese imperialism as a collective responsibility. This sense of duty extends beyond the wealthy and powerful to regular people who are motivated to make profound personal sacrifices. The theme of hatred towards Japanese goods and those who trade them highlights the moral and emotional depth that “Shisheng” invests in depicting Chinese laborers during times of turmoil.

The contradiction between “love for nation” and “love for family,” “conscience” and “livelihood” presents a dilemma. However, many Chinese laborers in Mahua literature almost immediately choose the former. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that during the 1930s and 1940s, the global economic crisis and its aftermath caused massive unemployment in Singapore and Malaya, making jobs more scarce and precious. As a naturally existing group, Chinese laborers have their flaws and times of uncertainty when faced with the task of existence. Only by depicting their internal struggles and their process to overcome doubt can the portrayal of patriotic Chinese laborers become more realistic, vivid, and convincing.

“Foolish Foreman Li” by Ziyan (1937) is among the few pieces that effectively convey this intricacy. The story describes the conflict that foreman Li experiences after his employer, Boss Chen, orders him to pick up a shipment of British goods at the dock. When Li inquires as to why he purchases British goods rather than promoting home ones, he is mocked. His boss dismissively replies, “It is none of my business... that is a national matter” (Ziyan, 1937). Standing at the warehouse door, Li is torn and unsure of what to do. This story compares the profit-driven speculators with the struggling laborer. The former has no national righteousness and is only driven by interests, while the latter oscillates between ideals and reality. Although Li still hesitates at the end of the story, the final word, “foolish,” subtly hints at his eventual choice. By portraying this internal conflict and Li’s ultimate moral decision, Ziyan depicts the laborer’s emotional journey of workers from confusion to awakening, not only deepening the character image but also reinforcing the theme of patriotism. This wavering state vividly portrays the difficult choices ordinary people make between personal survival and national righteousness, providing a nuanced and relevant perspective for understanding this moral dilemma.

It is noteworthy that “Shisheng” consistently portrays Chinese laborers, representative of the lower class, as embodiments of patriotism. Despite their financial difficulties, they generously and selflessly support the nation’s cause. The shop owners, capitalists, and entrepreneurs, on the other hand, are portrayed as being stingy, avaricious, and unconcerned with the nation. Can it be said that only the Chinese working class was patriotic during the 1930s and 1940s in Singapore and Malaya? Could it be that the more affluent capitalists, entrepreneurs, and employers have no sense of patriotism? In hindsight, the answer is clearly negative. The portrayal of the patriotic Chinese laborers and the portrayal of the upper-class figures as *hanjian* 汉奸 (turncoat) and *maiguozei* 卖国贼 (national traitor) by Mahua writers may have been influenced by the historical reality at that time. However, these depictions carry the distinct class consciousness and ideological color of left-wing literature. In the narrative of left-wing literature, the upper class is consistently portrayed as selfish, decadent, cruel, and weak—pretty much every bad quality imaginable. On the contrary, the lower class is depicted as being selfless, impoverished, passionate, revolutionary, and endowed with many positive traits. This preordained set of values form the foundation for the stark contrast between the upper and lower classes in Mahua counter-Japanese national salvation literature.

These portrayals illustrate the profound influence of left-wing literary ideology on the Mahua literary scene before World War II, where the class struggle between laborers and capitalists functions not merely as an ideological undercurrent but as a deliberate literary strategy to evoke nationalistic resistance. In “Shisheng,” the idealized depictions of patriotic Chinese laborers stand in stark contrast to the corrupt and cowardly capitalists, emphasizing this ideological antagonism. This contrast reveals that class struggle was not only a central political concern of the time but also the core thematic focus of Mahua writers’ literary vision and creative practice.

5. Conclusion

The construction and transformation of Chinese laborer representation in “Shisheng” reflect social reality in the Singaporean and Malayan Chinese community during the 1930s and 1940s, as well as the ideological changes experienced by the Mahua literary scene. Between 1925 and 1936, Mahua literature underwent a challenging process of localization, progressing through three key phases: the nascent period of Nanyang (Southeast Asia) characteristics, the period advocating for Nanyang characteristics, and the period emphasizing Nanyang localism (Yeo, 2001, p. 139). During this period, the number of Chinese-language newspapers proliferated, such as *The New National Daily*’s supplement “Nanfeng”, *The Lat Pau*’s supplement “Xingguang”, and *Penang Sin Poe*’s supplement “Kuangtao.” These supplements all focus on the issues related to Mahua society, attempting to promote social change with a strong sense of local awareness. Therefore, the construction of the portrayal of revolutionary Chinese laborers in “Shisheng” is rooted in reflections on the local society and continues the Mahua literary circle’s aspiration, articulated since the late 1920s, to reshape Southeast Asian society. However, the onset of the Chinese War of Resistance Against Japan led to a significant interruption in the flourishing of local consciousness development in Mahua literature. The writers’ political identification with China was once again provoked and strengthened, as evidenced by “Shisheng”’s portrayal of patriotic Chinese workers.

It is important to note that the portrayal of Chinese laborers in “Shisheng” is influenced by both Mahua writers’ observations and their understanding of the workers’ actual lives. However, the narrative is primarily driven by literary imagination. These writers were mostly educated intellectuals engaged in professions such as teaching or newspaper editing, rather than manual labor themselves. In contrast, the Chinese laborers in these texts were largely illiterate, with few possessing the ability to produce or even read literature. Deprived of channels for artistic self-expression, they had to rely on the pens of Mahua writers to represent and construct their images. From this perspective, the image of Chinese laborers was both shaped and interpreted, with changes in their portrayal reflecting Mahua writers’ responses to shifting historical circumstances.

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Notes

Note 1. In her article “Chinese laborers’ social and labor conditions in Perak during the Great Depression, 1929–1933”, Tan Ai Boay draws upon official archives and contemporary Chinese-language newspapers to examine the economic and social conditions of Chinese communities and mine workers in Perak, Malaya, during the Great Depression from 1929 to 1933. She argues that the development of Malaya’s tin industry was heavily dependent on the global market, and that the industry’s downturn during this period led to a sharp rise in unemployment among workers, which in turn contributed to increased rates of crime and suicide. See Tan (2006) for details.

Note 2. The evolution of political identity within the Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaya is gradual and complicated. Prior to World War II, the Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaya generally maintained a strong diasporic consciousness, characterized by deep attachment to their native places, patriotic sentiments, and political identification with China. During the Japanese invasion of Singapore and Malaya, the local Chinese—together with other segments of the population—joined forces to resist the occupation. This collective resistance gradually fostered a sense of local identity and prompted a shift in their postwar political identity. After World War II, particularly from the 1950s onward, the shifting political landscapes in both China and Southeast Asia prompted the Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaya to gradually reorient their political identity—from allegiance to China toward increasing identification with their host countries, driven by the imperative of survival and development. See Choi (1994), Ku (1994), and Wang (2007) for details.

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