

A Poison and A Cure: The Writing of Nanyang Nostalgia in Xiao Cun's Prose

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Abstract

Xiao Cun (萧村), born in Singapore, is a prolific returned overseas Chinese writer. After returning to China in 1950, he resided in Liaoning for an extended period. Against the stark contrast between the north and south, Nanyang (the South Seas/Southeast Asia) remained a recurring scene in his literary works. Based on this, nostalgia, as a contradictory entity with both “poison” and “cure” characteristics, became the core perspective for analysis. This paper takes Xiao Cun's three essay collections rich in nostalgic emotions—Haunting the Nanyang (《魂萦南洋》), Malay Love Song (《马来恋歌》), and Sentiments of Singapore (《新加坡情思》)—as the main research objects, combined with the emotional atmosphere of Chinese society in the post-Cold War era, to explore what unique writing patterns were fostered by Xiao Cun's repeated transregional experiences between Nanyang and China. Specifically, it focuses on analyzing Nanyang nostalgia and its evolution as revealed in Xiao's prose texts, deeply pondering how this emotion is presented and why it is presented in such a manner. From the perspective of emotional presentation, the Nanyang nostalgia in Xiao Cun's prose is not a simple one-dimensional expression. In Xiao Cun's literary oeuvre, elements such as Nanyang's streets, markets, and folk customs are endowed with vibrant vitality, becoming carriers of emotional attachment. From the perspective of emotional evolution, as time passed and life experiences grew richer, Xiao Cun's nostalgia for Nanyang quietly changed. In short, the nostalgia for Nanyang and its evolution in Xiao Cun's essays are the result of multiple factors working together. It reflects both the emotional atmosphere of Chinese society during a specific historical period and Xiao Cun's rich and unique life experiences. Through an in-depth analysis of this emotional theme, we can not only better understand Xiao Cun's creative style and artistic characteristics but also feel the powerful force of

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cultural exchange and integration, as well as the significant role of nostalgia in the spiritual life of returned overseas Chinese writers.

Keywords: Xiao Cun, Returned Overseas Chinese Writer, Post-Cold War, The Writing of Nanyang Nostalgia, *Haunting the Nanyang*, *Malay Love Song*, *Sentiments of Singapore*

1. Introduction

Xiao Cun, originally named Li Junzhe (李君哲), was a native of Jinjiang, Fujian Province, and was born in 1929 in Choa Chu Kang, Singapore. In the mid-1930s, Xiao Cun returned to his ancestral home with his unemployed parents due to the Great Depression, where he remained until completing his secondary education. In 1946, to escape the fate of being forcibly conscripted into the military, he was compelled to go overseas again, making his way back to Singapore. He worked as a peddler and teacher in Singapore and Malaya. He gradually embarked on his literary career with the encouragement and support of senior writers in the local literary circle. In 1950, the British colonial authorities in Malaya accused Xiao Cun of involvement in leftist activities and imprisoned him in a detention camp in Ipoh. Subsequently, he was deported, and together with six to seven hundred overseas Chinese, sailed from Port Klang back to China, becoming a “returned overseas Chinese” (guiqiao). Shortly after his return, Xiao Cun was admitted to the Department of Economics at Renmin University of China. After graduation, he worked in factories and government offices in Liaoning Province, where he became a naturalised citizen of the People’s Republic of China (PR China). He gained fame for his research on Southeast Asian economics, as well as his work on the history of overseas Chinese communities. Xiao Cun was a prolific returned overseas Chinese writer who regarded literary creation as a lifelong pursuit, beginning with his early literary debut in Nanyang. Although he chose to study economics after returning to the PR China in 1950, this did not interrupt his literary path, which was in stark contrast to that of fellow returned overseas Chinese writer Sun Ru (孙儒). The following section shifts focus to the academic research concerning Xiao Cun.

In 2022, Zhang Songjian (张松建) published “A Returned Writer of the Cold War Era: Nanyang and China in the Works of Xiao Cun” (〈冷战年代的归侨作家：萧村作品中的南洋与中国〉) in *Asian Culture*, primarily exploring Xiao Cun’s literary writings during the Cold War. Through close reading of these texts, the article analyses how Xiao Cun responded to the historical changes in Nanyang and China during that period, focusing on three interconnected dimensions: first, the realism and nationalism manifested in Xiao Cun’s literary works during the late 1940s, when the writer resided in the Nanyang; second, in the late Cold War period, when the Cultural Revolution in PR China also ended, Xiao Cun’s literary works from this period reflect the tensional interplay between the trauma experienced by returned overseas Chinese during the Cultural Revolution and the nationalist embrace evident in his earlier writings from the period of residence in the Nanyang; third, in his later years, Xiao Cun’s long novel *Coconuts Fat & Cardamom Fragrant* (《椰子肥豆蔻香》) marked a return to leftist orientations and a revisit to the Cold War-era Nanyang, revealing the contradictions and

complexities in the writer's ideological evolution. (Zhang, 2022, pp.50-51) In the same year, Ng Kim Chew (黄锦树) wrote "From Shanba to the Homeland" (〈从山芭到故国〉), a commentary that, while combining Xiao Cun's life experiences and literary works, falls short in depth compared to Zhang Songjian's analysis, yet provides a clearer understanding of Xiao Cun as a returned overseas Chinese writer. (Ng, 2022, pp.112-115)

In 2021, Tan Xin Ning (陈欣宁) and Teoh Hooi See (张惠思) co-authored "Social Injustice in the Early Post-war Era in Singapore and Malaysia: Characters Illustrations in Xiao Cun's Shanba Sanji (Sketches of the Countryside)" (〈新马战后初期的民间况味: 萧村《山芭散记》的人物类型刻画〉), which centres on Xiao Cun's essay collection "Shanba Sanji." Using a research strategy employing the cross-validation of literary and historical sources, the study examines and categorises the distinctly Nanyang-inflected local character types depicted in Xiao Cun's leftist literary writings. (Tan & Teoh, 2021, pp.118-119)

In 2019, Wang Chengpeng (王成鹏) from Nanyang Technological University, under the guidance of Dr Zhang Songjian, completed his thesis "The Studies of Images of Chinese in Xiao Cun's Literary Works" (〈从漂泊到还乡: 萧村笔下的华人形象〉). The author employs the "diaspora perspective" to explore the overseas Chinese community in Xiao Cun's writings, further extending the analysis to examine overseas Chinese identity, ethnicity, class, and nationality. (Wang, 2019, p.30)

A review of previous studies reveals that the Nanyang experience left a profound imprint on Xiao Cun's mind. However, no researcher has specifically explored the Nanyang in Xiao Cun's memory from a memory-based perspective. This paper aims to use the concept of "nostalgia" as a starting point to investigate the Nanyang narratives in Xiao Cun's writings.

2. Nostalgia as "Poison" and "Cure"

The term "nostalgia" has existed since ancient times, present in both Chinese and Western contexts, although their original connotations differ. In Chinese discourse, "nostalgia" emphasises temporal significance. For instance, as Ban Gu (班固) writes in "Rhapsody on the Western Capital" (Xidu fu, 《西都赋》), "I wish my guests to unfold the long-cherished sentiments of the past and to evoke the subtle emotions inspired by the contemplation of antiquity" (Ban, 2007, p.18), highlighting temporal reminiscence. In Western discourse, "nostalgia" tends to emphasise spatial significance, equating it with homesickness—a conclusion drawn from tracing the etymology of "nostalgia." Originally

associated with illness, “nostalgia” was perceived as a condition spreading amongst soldiers far from home, manifesting as an intense desire to return. Despite differing original connotations in Chinese and Western contexts, both have expanded their semantic scopes through social development and cultural integration. Chinese nostalgia has broadened its spatial dimensions, while Western nostalgia has extended its temporal dimensions, ultimately forming increasingly convergent “nostalgia” concepts in contemporary global contexts.

Viewed from a temporal perspective, the term “nostalgia” reveals that, across both Chinese and Western historical contexts, regardless of whether its original semantic emphasis falls on lamenting the passage of time or mourning the dislocations of space, its deeper significance consistently points to a profound longing for—and pursuit of—a lost sense of belonging. As Walter Benjamin argues in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” within the modern condition,

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

(Benjamin, 2007, pp.257-258)

As depicted by Benjamin, the past is no longer imagined as an ideal realm to which one can completely return; rather, it emerges as a historical landscape of ruins, marked by ruptures, traumas, and unfinished possibilities. The image of the angel is polyvalent: it signifies both the modern subject suspended between the past and the future and a mode of reflective historical consciousness. The angel gazes toward the past like a nostalgic subject, turning back to what has vanished, been destroyed, or forgotten, in an attempt to preserve and redeem its fragments. However, the storm of “progress,” unleashed from Paradise and driven by modernity, leaves the angel unable to remain in the past, forcing it forward into a future to which it turns its back. Through the angel’s astonishment, Benjamin discerned the overwhelming destructive power of modernity and came to recognize that history unfolds through fragments, with the future constructed upon the

ruins of the past. In the wake of such historical ruptures, the modern subject gradually loses an integral and stable relationship with the world, leading to a persistent quest for lost experiences and absent homelands. Nostalgia thus becomes the means by which the subject negotiates the relationship between the past, present, and future, endowing forgotten historical experiences with new significance in contemporary contexts.

As the systems of meaning sustained by traditional orders gradually collapse, the modern subject becomes increasingly unable to find a stable sense of existential belonging in the world. It is precisely within this context that, in *The Theory of the Novel*, Georg Lukács introduced the pivotal concept of “transcendental homelessness” while examining the proposition concerning “the end of the epic age and the emergence of the novel.” (Lukács, 1971, pp.40-42) He argues that once the “natural unity of meaning” between the subject and the world disintegrates, art loses the very “home” in which it had once been grounded. (Lukács, 1971, pp.40-41) This state of “transcendental homelessness” manifests in three dimensions: first, the modern world is no longer a unified, harmonious, or comprehensible whole but rather fragmented, fractured, and heterogeneous; second, individuals can no longer naturally affirm their own meaning within the world, leaving the subject devoid of spiritual belonging; finally, based on the above two points, the epic as a literary form becomes obsolete, while the novel—by most profoundly capturing the fragmentation of the modern world—emerges as the most representative literary form of the age. Following this line of reasoning, “nostalgia” becomes a structural emotion internal to modern society.

The title of Svetlana Boym's treatise, *The Future of Nostalgia*, operates as a deliberate semantic double entendre, revealing a dual implication: it not only indicates that the future itself is permeated with nostalgia but also raises questions about the future direction and significance of “nostalgia.” Boym contends in this book that “nostalgia can be both a social disease and a creative emotion, a poison and a cure.” (Boym, 2001, p.354). Specifically, the Nanyang nostalgia writing of returned overseas Chinese writers is not merely a simple recollection of the lost Nanyang homeland; rather, it constitutes a literary attempt in which the modern subject, situated within the condition of “transcendental homelessness,” reconstructs the lost Nanyang homeland through nostalgic narration. These writings may either lapse into an idealised mythologisation of the Nanyang (poison), or function as a creative mechanism for repairing subjective fractures, reflecting on China's reality, and reevaluating transregional experiences (cure). To delve deeper into the intricate texture of Nanyang nostalgia, it is necessary first to clarify and differentiate the internal typology of the core concept of nostalgia.

Nostalgia, as a unique psychological experience, can be categorised into distinct types such as “individual versus collective nostalgia,” “authentic versus simulated/virtual

nostalgia (also termed direct versus indirect),” “material versus cultural nostalgia,” and “simple nostalgia—reflective nostalgia—eternal identification nostalgia.” These categories may overlap in literary texts, with no absolute exclusion between them. A single passage might exhibit both individual and material nostalgia, differing only in the emphasis placed on specific dimensions of nostalgia.

First, nostalgia can be categorised into “individual nostalgia and collective nostalgia” based on the scope of its subjects. (Davis, 1979) Individual nostalgia primarily stems from personal perspectives, representing exclusive memories of events from one’s own surroundings. This intensely personal form of nostalgia often exhibits privacy and individuality, manifesting differently in each individual. For example, many bloggers today enjoy documenting childhood snack memories. Different individuals may reminisce about different snacks, or the same snack might evoke completely contrasting feelings depending on the person. In contrast, “collective nostalgia” typically involves a group, where the nostalgic subject shifts from isolated individuals to larger social entities. Such nostalgia is usually shaped by significant societal events, forming collective memories that influence an entire generation or group. It’s crucial to note that while individual and collective nostalgia differ, they are not mutually exclusive but closely interconnected. Collective nostalgia isn’t merely a simple aggregation of individual nostalgia, but rather a synthesis formed through the collective experiences of many individuals. Conversely, individual nostalgia can find its own niche within the collective narrative.

Second, nostalgia can be categorised into “material nostalgia” and “cultural nostalgia” based on its focus. (Holak & Havlena, 1992) As the terms suggest, “material nostalgia” centres on tangible objects—such as nostalgia for hometown cuisine, dwellings, or modes of transportation. “Cultural nostalgia,” however, tends to lean toward spiritual dimensions, typically manifesting as a longing for culturally significant symbols. More precisely, it reflects an attachment to the cultural ethos embodied in these symbols. Examples include folk songs sung by farmers during fieldwork and cultural artifacts, such as illustrated magazines and postage stamps, preserved from a specific historical period.

Third, according to the different sources of nostalgia, we can divide nostalgia into “authentic nostalgia and simulated/virtual nostalgia.” (Baker & Kennedy, 1994) The so-called “authentic nostalgia” refers to a sense of longing for things one has personally experienced. For example, when we return to the high school we once attended and sit in the familiar seats, memories of our past studies there may come flooding back to mind. The so-called “simulated/virtual nostalgia” is the opposite, where the nostalgic objects and past events are not directly experienced but constructed through one’s imagination as an indirect form of nostalgia.

Finally, based on different levels of nostalgia, nostalgia can be divided into “simple nostalgia,” “reflective nostalgia,” “eternal identification nostalgia.” “Simple Nostalgia” originates from “absolute dissatisfaction with reality,” thus “desiring to return to the past and re-experience past life sensations” (Zhao, 2009, p.352). “Reflective Nostalgia” is more profound than “simple nostalgia,” pointing to “acknowledging the irreversibility of the past while maintaining spiritual independence in real life” (Zhao, 2009, p.352). “Eternal Identification Nostalgia” reaches a higher level, “recognizing the inevitable replacement of the past by reality, seeking to integrate the past into present and future spiritual life to achieve self-continuity” (Zhao, 2009, p.352). It should be emphasised that these three distinct nostalgia levels are not mutually exclusive, nor are they fixed in specific nostalgic practices. In other words, these three levels of nostalgia can coexist within a single writer or even a work. Moreover, when a particular work by a writer reaches the stage of “eternal identification nostalgia,” this does not imply that the writer’s other works will not revert to “simple nostalgia” or “reflective nostalgia.” Instead, the writer may continuously oscillate amongst these three nostalgia levels.

This article aims to explore the nostalgic writing of Xiao Cun, a returned overseas Chinese writer, in a more detailed and rigorous manner. Therefore, only three essay collections published after his settlement in the Chinese mainland in 1950—*Haunting the Nanyang*, *Malay Love Song*, and *Sentiments of Singapore*—are selected as the primary focus of investigation and discussion.

The question arises as to why these three essay collections were selected. As noted in *Haunting the Nanyang*:

Half a century has passed since my last visit to Nanyang, and forty-five years have resided on the banks of the Hun River (浑河). Yet, I remain constantly preoccupied with and deeply attached to the Nanyang. In this world, no love or hate exists without cause! The Malay Peninsula still bears the traces of my great-grandfather’s toil in transporting tin, while in the villages of Luzon, the memory of my grandfather tending coconut groves lingers. In the dusky waters of Manila Bay wanders the ghost of my late father; in the red earth north of Singapore lie the remains of my eldest uncle. On the once-bustling wharves of Singapore, my uncles and maternal aunts toiled under the scorching sun, and in the districts of Surabaya today, my elder sister endures an uneasy old age..... How, then, can one ease such sorrow, how express such longing? Deprived of Du Kang (杜康, the literary expression of wine), I can only pour the myriad tangled emotions into the tip of my pen.

(Xiao, 2000, p.291)

Amid the global ideological confrontation of the Cold War, the returned overseas Chinese who had once embraced the ideal of contributing to the construction of PR China were endlessly othered due to their “overseas affiliations,” becoming a marginal group excluded from the category of “pure Chinese.” Within this context, their nostalgia for Nanyang (the South Seas) carried the pathological undertone inherent in the very etymology of “nostalgia,” compelling them to linger in memories of their tropical past. Yet, in the tension between memory and reality—and in the recognition of the impossibility of returning to the bygone days of Nanyang—this longing was transformed into literary texts through which the returned overseas Chinese writers sought to alleviate the pain of their homesickness for Nanyang. As the title suggests, *Haunting the Nanyang* captures Xiao Cun’s enduring nostalgia for the Nanyang after years of separation. The essay collection is permeated with Xiao’s profound longing for the Nanyang, where he once grew up. Similarly, *Malay Love Song* and *Sentiments of Singapore* convey Xiao’s deep attachment to his birthplace in the Nanyang. Published during the post-Cold War and post-Cultural Revolution eras, these three collections reflect Xiao Cun’s social consciousness and cultural context, offering profound insights into his creative intentions. Through analyzing the nostalgic themes in these works, the study examines the evolution of Xiao Cun’s emotional landscape. While focusing on personal nostalgia, the research avoids collective nostalgia and indirect nostalgia (so-called “simulated/virtual nostalgia”), concentrating instead on direct nostalgia as the primary subject.

3. Material and Cultural Nostalgia in Xiao Cun’s Nanyang Narratives

Choa Chu Kang, situated in the western part of Singapore, is Xiao Cun’s birthplace, where he also spent much of his childhood. The place where one’s early years were lived—transformed over time and now altered beyond recognition—is often the most evocative site of nostalgic recollection. As Jacques Lacan noted in his theory of “The Mirror Stage”:

This development is experienced as a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the formation of the individual into history. The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation—and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic—and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development. Thus, to break out of the circle of the

Innenwelt into the Umwelt generates the inexhaustible quadrature of the ego's verifications.

(Lacan, 1977, p.93)

Because people instinctively pursue the state of life's fulfilment, nostalgia becomes a primal human instinct, and "homesickness" turns into an eternal longing. The distinctive life experiences of returned overseas Chinese writers, particularly those born in the Nanyang region, profoundly shaped their literary sensibilities. After resettling on the Chinese mainland, shifts in foreign policy during the Cultural Revolution rendered it difficult, if not impossible, for them to revisit their homeland in Nanyang. This temporal hiatus deprived them of any direct, lived perception of the changes occurring there. Whether or not they later managed to return, the Nanyang homeland can only remain an irrevocably absent past for them, becoming an imagined homeland transformed into a spiritual sanctuary for their nostalgia.

From the material dimension of nostalgia, the article "The Small Fishing Village of My Childhood" (〈童年的小渔村〉) describes the birthplace of Xiao Cun, Choa Chu Kang, in detail. This description not only involves the natural landscape but also pays great attention to human culture and folk customs.

The stilt houses and "attap" huts of my memory had vanished without a trace, replaced by orderly arranged public housing blocks and neatly arranged villas. Straight, smooth asphalt roads had replaced the once bumpy, ochre-coloured bullock-cart paths. The Indian Uncle's creaking iron-wheeled carts had become relics of history..... Yet the banyan tree at the village entrance remains lush and verdant.

Once, Choa Chu Kang was a small multiethnic kampong (the Malay spelling of "village"). The Chinese cultivated cassava and tapped rubber; the Malays made their living by fishing, and the Indians drove carts for transportation. My parents worked at Tan Kah Kee's rubber shoe factory. The entire village lived in poverty. We dug wells for water and lit our homes with coconut oil lamps at night. We had to travel several miles to Bukit Pahang town to buy oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar, matches, and soap; as well as sell fish, shrimp, and local specialty products. My father would ride his bicycle, carrying me to the Chinese Primary School, which was far from home, to study.

(Xiao, 1996, p.45)

The disappearance of “attap” huts and the transformation of bumpy roads into asphalt-paved paths left only the grand banyan tree at the village entrance, which became the catalyst that stirred Xiao Cun’s nostalgia for the bygone Choa Chu Kang. The coconut-oil lamps at night, the diverse livelihoods of different ethnic groups, and the long journeys between school and home—all these childhood memories etched in Xiao’s mind remained indelible, forming an unconscious presence. Upon returning to his Nanyang homeland, even though the landscape had long since changed, the catalyst (the banyan tree) reawakened these memories long buried in his heart. These recollections sprang vividly to the surface, finding expression on the page, and further solidifying and reconstructing the Nanyang homeland as a spiritual space. This unique realm could be revisited and savored at will.

As the apples on the Liaodong Peninsula blush with autumnal red, my mind wandered to the tempting mangosteen in Mandai Orchard (Singapore). Gazing at the returning sails dotting a fishing village in Dalian, I recalled the “kelong” (a type of fishing installation used by early Singaporean fishers) scenery of Choa Chu Kang in the past. When innocent children from Ning Shan Primary School parade past my window, I think of the simple, earnest youths of Qingyun Chinese School in Shanba (a term widely used by Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaysia to refer to remote, undeveloped forested or rural areas). Strolling through the snack food stalls at Beixing Farmers’ Market, I reminisced about the bustling morning market of the old “pasar” (the Malay spelling of “market”). Visiting the ancient architecture of the East Tomb (Dongling) in Shenyang, I couldn’t help but think of Singapore’s Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (Wan Qing Yuan), Ee Hoe Hean Club (Yi He Xuan), and Haw Par Villa (Tiger Balm Garden).....

(Xiao, 2000, p.87)

The nostalgia for his homeland in Nanyang is no longer confined to local catalysts within the Nanyang region; even sites in China can also evoke Xiao Cun’s memories. This may indirectly indicate that Nanyang, as a spiritual homeland, has already been constructed in his mind. It is a reflection made after returning to the Nanyang field and realizing that the Nanyang homeland in memory can no longer be physically reached, representing a deeper evolution of nostalgic consciousness.

Turning to the dimension of “cultural nostalgia,” two aspects merit attention: first, the yearning for simple and natural friendships between different ethnic groups within the pluralistic and hybridised local context of the Nanyang; second, the cherished bonds of mutual aid and solidarity amongst the Chinese diaspora in Nanyang. As Xiao Cun wrote

in "Recalling Lion City (Singapore)" (〈忆狮城〉): "The Lion City in my memory holds both shocking nightmares and bitter, melancholic traces, yet also harbors sincere and profound friendships as sweet as honey." (Xiao, 1990, p.8) This illustrates that deep-rooted interpersonal bonds form the bedrock of Xiao Cun's "cultural nostalgia." As Xiao Cun portrayed in "Sentiments of Singapore" (〈新加坡情思〉):

Half a century ago, in the season when durians ripened, I was born in a kampong (village) in northern Singapore. Nestled along the azure Johor Strait, the majestic roar of the waves became my natural lullaby. Here, diverse ethnic communities coexist harmoniously, each finding its rightful place, cultivating fertile virgin land with wisdom and toil.

(Xiao, 1990, p.1)

In Xiao Cun's perspective, the "majestic roar of the waves" is not mere noise but a lullaby. This transformation from harshness to gentleness imagery precisely illustrates the beautifying function of nostalgia. Similarly, the idyllic image of "harmonious coexistence amongst different ethnic groups" in Xiao Cun's memories of the Nanyang starkly contrasts with the bloody anti-Chinese movements in Southeast Asia during the latter half of the 20th century. Why, then, does Xiao Cun's memory of the Nanyang form such a paradoxical relationship between imagination and historical reality? It is plausible that, on the one hand, Xiao Cun himself did not directly experience the brutal anti-Chinese violence; on the other hand, the cherished recollections of cross-ethnic friendship made him reluctant to disrupt this nostalgic vision of Nanyang, which was constituted through the aggregation of human ties. Meanwhile, Xiao Cun vividly recounted a story that a Malay boy named Ali saved "me" (the narrator in this story) from peril:

Amidst the soft, downy grass, I drifted into a deep sleep. How long I had slept, I could not tell, until a sudden shout startled me awake. I found myself surrounded by a three-foot-long brown python coiled around a nearby tree. Its triangular head reared up, its crimson tongue flicking out as it lunged toward me. My whole body trembled, legs buckling like cotton bales, unable to move. At that critical moment, Ali, thinking swiftly, drew his stag-horn knife and plunged it

boldly toward the python's head. Wounded, the snake recoiled, and he seized the opportunity to lift me onto his back and sprinted away with all his might.

(Xiao, 1990, p.2)

From that moment on, a brotherly bond grew between Ali and “me” (the narrator), and the two families began to maintain frequent contact. Moreover, when “I” (the narrator) left Singapore with my parents in the 1930s due to the global economic downturn and returned to China, “I” (the narrator) gave Ali my personally worn “silver Bagua amulet.” In return, Ali gifted me his “stag-horn knife” as a lasting memento to commemorate our friendship. Thus, the exchange of tokens ensured the bond between Ali and “me” wouldn’t fade with time. Perhaps this also explains why Xiao Cun, even aware of the bloody anti-Chinese incidents in Southeast Asia, still preserves an idealised vision of cross-ethnic friendships. For this reason, after the Cultural Revolution, when Xiao Cun returned to the land of Nanyang, he still insisted on walking through every street and alley in the town to find his childhood friend, Ali.

In addition to depicting cross-ethnic friendships in the Nanyang, the description of mutual aid within the Chinese community there constitutes another vital aspect of Xiao Cun’s cultural nostalgia:

The kind-hearted “tou jia niang” (proprietress) took pity on me, a struggling educated, and freed up a bed in her staff dormitory for me to stay without charge. She also lent me several hundred Straits dollars to purchase equipment and supplies for my stall. The accountant, formerly a pastry chef, taught me how to stir-fry “Mee Teh” and simmer mung bean soup. The secretary of the hometown association intervened on my behalf with the local gangster, so that I was exempted from paying the protection racket for six months.

(Xiao, 1990, p.3)

The kind-hearted proprietress, the accountant, and the secretary of the hometown association provided the narrator with unconditional assistance during his hardships, showcasing the united spirit of overseas Chinese communities. This serves as an essential component of Xiao Cun’s panoramic vision of Nanyang nostalgia. To repay debts, the narrator in Xiao Cun’s prose braved the sweltering tropical heat to sell his homemade sugar-and-mung-bean drink. Overcome by the oppressive heat, he suffered from heatstroke, and it was only through the intervention of the “tou jia niang” and “Zhang a shu” (Uncle Zhang), who performed Gua Sha, that his life was spared.

The writing of Nanyang nostalgia in Xiao Cun's prose intertwines and coexists on both material and cultural dimensions, constructing its unique spiritual homeland. On the material dimension, centring on his birthplace, Choa Chu Kang, Xiao Cun's writing foregrounds both the disappearance of concrete material objects—such as “attap” huts, bullock-cart paths, and coconut oil lamps—and the persistence of mnemonic triggers, such as the banyan tree. Together with the activation of memory through analogous landscapes encountered in China, these elements reveal Xiao Cun's imaginative reconstruction and perpetual pursuit of the Nanyang homeland as a returned overseas Chinese writer separated from it by temporal and spatial distance. This form of “material nostalgia” is not merely a replication of childhood scenes of everyday life, but also an instinctive yearning for a fulfilling state of life, as well as an effort to consolidate and imaginatively dwell within a spiritual space amid historical and material transformation.

Culturally, it focuses on two profound bonds: first, the simple, natural, and life-and-death friendship between different ethnic groups, exemplified by the relationship between the narrator and the Malay boy Ali; this bond was rendered enduring through the exchange of keepsakes, and even after becoming aware of the history of anti-Chinese exclusion in Southeast Asia, Xiao Cun continued to preserve and idealise this memory of human affection, allowing it to constitute the warm emotional undertone of his nostalgic imagination. Second, the mutual aid and solidarity demonstrated amongst Nanyang Chinese communities, such as the kind-hearted “tou jia niang” (proprietress), the accountant, the secretary of the hometown association, and members of clan businesses, during the narrator's hardships. These two bonds collectively form the core of Xiao Cun's “cultural nostalgia,” endowing its Nanyang memories with emotional and spiritual depth and warmth beyond their physical manifestations, creating a complex yet heartwarming spiritual homeland—one marked by both shocking nightmares and sorrowful trajectories, as well as sincere, profound friendships as sweet as honey.

4. Nostalgia for Nanyang amid an identity crisis

According to the current policy framework of the PR China, “returned overseas Chinese” refers to overseas Chinese who have returned to settle permanently in their ancestral homeland (China). As a population group of considerable size and social influence, the formation and development of returned overseas Chinese represent a significant social phenomenon in China since modern times. Their historical trajectory can be broadly divided into three phases: the formation period in the late Qing Dynasty, the development period during the Republic of China era, and the expansion period following the establishment of PR China. The population of returned overseas Chinese

after the founding of PR China can generally be further divided into “earlier-generation returned overseas Chinese” and “later-generation returned overseas Chinese.” The former specifically denotes “overseas Chinese who voluntarily returned to China in the 1950s to participate in socialist construction.” In comparison, the latter refers to “overseas Chinese who voluntarily returned to work or start businesses after the 1990s.” (Huang, 2005) Xiao Cun falls under the category of “earlier-generation returned overseas Chinese.”

When these earlier-generation returned overseas Chinese resettled in their ancestral homeland, driven by the revolutionary ideal of building a socialist New China, they encountered the intertwined effects of multiple historical factors: the ideological fervor emphasised by nations during the Cold War, and the persistent political campaigns in China from the 1950s to the 1960s—particularly the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution—which left these returned overseas Chinese, who had identified themselves as “orphans abroad” during their time in Southeast Asia, without the anticipated sense of “return home.” Moreover, the “preferential treatment” policies implemented by the Chinese Communist government toward returned overseas Chinese under specific historical circumstances objectively exacerbated their alienation from the general populace. (Peterson, 2012) Consequently, what was intended as an act of “returning home/to their place of origin” ultimately undermined its original meaning, plunging the community of returned overseas Chinese back into profound confusion about the true location of their “place of belonging.” Xiao Cun’s novel *In Search of Dreams of Home* vividly illustrates this point through the stories of three Chinese youths—Li Dongsheng, Liu Hanli, and Li Ziping—who were expelled by British colonial authorities in Malaya due to their left-wing political stance and returned to their ancestral homeland (China). However, upon their return filled with fervor, they all faced varying degrees of political suspicion and persecution under the label of “overseas relations” (hai wai guan xi): Li Dongsheng resolutely chose to leave Beijing and was assigned to teach English in Dai County, Shanxi, where he ultimately died while preventing a bank robbery; Liu Hanli was falsely accused of rape during the “Rectify the Class Ranks Campaign” (qing dui yun dong); Li Ziping was erroneously labelled a “British spy” amid the escalating far-left turmoil of the Cultural Revolution and endured prolonged imprisonment. As Xiao Cun notes in the novel’s postscript,

As the term itself suggests, most returned overseas Chinese—particularly amongst young students returning from abroad—were raised overseas, and many had never set foot in their ancestral homeland, nor witnessed a single flower, blade of grass, grain of sand, or pebble there. Nevertheless, they all returned to their homeland (China), leaving behind their families and livelihoods, driven by

dreams in search of a homeland imagined as beautiful, vibrant, and resplendent, as well as tender, warm, and suffused with affection.

(Xiao, 2008, p.1402)

The novel vividly portrays the arduous journey of the three protagonists as they continually reshape their memory landscapes amid identity dislocation—or, more precisely, a spiritual breakthrough emerging from their confusion about self-identity.

In 1976, the “Cultural Revolution” ended, and Chinese society promptly entered a new era of reform and opening-up in the 1980s. This period can be broadly termed the “post-Cultural Revolution era” in the realm of ideology and culture. By the 1990s, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the conclusion of the Cold War, the international landscape shifted from a bipolar to a multipolar structure, and globalization accelerated, leading to profound transformations in PR China’s socio-cultural context. Under the intertwined historical influences of the “post-Cultural Revolution” and “post-Cold War” eras, Chinese literature exhibited several distinctive phenomena, amongst which “scar literature” (shangheng wenxue) and “root-seeking literature” (xungen wenxue) were the most representative. The former brought the traumatic experiences of the Cultural Revolution into the public discourse; writers, with the courage to confront history, revealed collective trauma memories previously obscured by ideology and profoundly exposed the physical and psychological suffering endured by countless individuals—including returned overseas Chinese—during political movements, providing an outlet for venting and reflecting on long-suppressed historical memories. The latter, in response to the challenges posed by modernization, turned to the deep roots of national culture in search of spiritual resources, re-examining fundamental questions of cultural identity such as “Who am I?” and “Where do we come from?” This cultural pursuit resonated deeply with the identity dilemmas faced by returned overseas Chinese. For elderly returned overseas Chinese like Xiao Cun, who had personally witnessed the era’s turmoil, the gradual easing of political restrictions enabled their long-suppressed memories of Nanyang to be articulated, allowing their quest for identity to transcend ideological constraints and shift toward a profound exploration and reinterpretation of individual life experiences. It was precisely within this specific cultural context of the era that Xiao Cun embarked on his nostalgic narrative about Nanyang. Through writing as his medium, he retraces the Nanyang homeland embedded in the depths of memory, seeking to piece together a set of spiritual coordinates of the self within a fractured landscape of identity. Such writing is not merely a retrospective return to personal nostalgia or a romanticised longing for Nanyang culture; rather, it constitutes a memory practice characterised by Benjaminian “dialectical imagery”—one that juxtaposes and superimposes the folds of

multiple temporal dimensions within the tensional field formed by historical ruins and the sprouts of the present.

As Xiao Cun states in “Days at Shing Chung School in Sungai Siput” (〈在兴中的日子里〉),

The waters of the Sungai Siput (Malay for “snail river”) flow gently outside our School, while across the river stood, sparsely but proudly, the stilted “attap” huts—the houses of our Malay and Indian brothers. Though I never crossed the river to visit these harmonious neighbours, I often greeted them from afar—at the first blush of dawn or the fading light of dusk—waving to the Malay elders wearing haji caps, or to the Bengali herders tending their cattle. Watching children of different skin tones playing freely on the open grounds, their innocence unspoilt and their bonds unshadowed by suspicion, filled me with a quiet, inexplicable joy. Beside the stilt house, coconut palms and durian trees stretched their arms toward the river’s northern bank, intertwining silently with the ancient banyan, supporting one another through countless trials of uprooting and devastation. From our classrooms at Shing Chung School, we once used this scene as a metaphor, sowing seeds of friendship and invoking the spirit of solidarity.

(Xiao, 1990, pp.27-28)

Implicitly, the text primarily invokes a spirit of solidarity and harmonious relations amongst diverse ethnic communities. On the opposite bank of the river reside Malay and Indian brethren, whom “I” (the narrator) have never crossed to meet, yet “I” (the narrator) still wave to them whenever “our paths” chance to meet. This reveals an intriguing phenomenon: the description that “across the river reside the Malay and Indian brethren” implies that “the Chinese live on this side,” and this spatial separation by the river, marking the residences of Chinese and non-Chinese, seems to indicate an underlying racial divide. However, at the break of dawn when labour begins and at sunset when people return home, I would greet the Malay elders and the Bengali herders, demonstrating proactive goodwill toward other ethnicities. This intentional approach aims to bridge distances rather than foster hostility. The depiction of mutual trust and natural camaraderie amongst Chinese, Malays, and Indians in the text is precisely the author’s nostalgic idealization. Considering the post-World War II bloody anti-Chinese campaigns in Southeast Asia and the various stigmatizations imposed on returned overseas Chinese during the Cultural Revolution of PR China, Xiao Cun’s nostalgic reminiscence of this harmonious, unguarded ethnic landscape in Nanyang might originate in an escape from reality—a desire to return to a “ideal” past, reflecting a simple nostalgia. This idealised

vision of Nanyang's past functioned much like a form of spiritual opium (poison), trapping Xiao Cun in an unending nostalgia for a lost homeland, whilst simultaneously deepening his confusion and disorientation regarding his present identity as a "Chinese," particularly in its political sense.

However, when Xiao Cun's creative horizon moved beyond the threshold of this distanced nostalgia for Nanyang and became grounded in the lived experience of returning to his Nanyang homeland, his nostalgic writings on the Nanyang homeland underwent a paradigm shift—from "simple nostalgia" to "reflective nostalgia"—as recounted by his work "Dreams of the Homeland" (〈故土梦〉),

I wandered dreamily along Telok Ayer Street, North Bridge Road, and South Bridge Road—spacious, level, and spotless; the former roughness, crowding, and filth had vanished without a trace. For a moment, I thought this was a fleeting illusion. But then, the familiar Tian Hou Gong (天后宫) with curling incense and flickering candlelight, and the long-unseen Sri Mariamman Temple (amongst the local Chinese in Singapore, it is popularly referred to as Jining Temple, 吉宁庙) with its gilded mountain gate and a thousand Buddha statues in the niches, instantly dispelled my illusion.

The Cheng Hoon School buildings where moths would flutter to the flame, the teachers' dormitories nestled amongst bamboo groves, the Tua Pek Kong Temple where devoted men and women bowed in reverence, and the Hainanese kopitiam where we took our meals—all had vanished without a trace. With a heart heavy as fallen flowers beyond remedy, I stood in stunned silence beneath the towering durian tree, surrounded by fragrant grass and wildflowers..... Farewell, Cheng Hoon School, farewell, Mandai; in this life, our reunion can only take place in dreams. As the car continued its journey, I closed my eyes in contemplation. The decline of rural towns and village schools might be an inevitable part of the island nation's industrialization. Still, the act that recalls the saying, "Today you bury the flowers, and people deem you foolish," was nothing more than a deep love for the familiar soil of my homeland, devoid of any ulterior motives.

(Xiao, 2000, pp.89-90)

The road has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from its former bumpy and congested condition to a broad and smooth thoroughfare. At the same time, the Hainanese kopitiam, an integral part of the narrator's daily life, has completely disappeared. Upon his return to Singapore after decades of absence, the narrator grapples with the ephemeral

nature of memory, finding that recollections of his past have dissipated like smoke, leaving no tangible residue. Thus, the narrator expresses a profound sense of loss by stating, “I suspect this is an illusory dream.” The childhood memories and imagined recollections of a distant Nanyang homeland once cherished in China inevitably give way to a sense of disorientation when the narrator finally returns, only to find that the place has been transformed beyond recognition. This disorientation evolves into what he terms “reflective nostalgia,” marked by a deeper contemplation of the past. Through this reflective lens, the narrator recognises that the decline of rural towns and village schools is an inevitable byproduct of the island nation’s industrialization. In other words, the narrator’s reflection on Nanyang nostalgia within the text substantiates the claim that Xiao Cun’s longing for the Nanyang of memory is profoundly dialectical: recognizing that the idealised homeland of Nanyang remains irretrievable, one finds the courage to bid farewell to the past, while simultaneously drawing on that very past to shape the present. This constitutes a mode of nostalgia that destroys in order to reconstruct. In other words, within this mode of writing, Xiao Cun’s Nanyang nostalgia, through a renewed interrogation of his transregional experience, seeks to construct a new equilibrium of identity within the cultural tension between “China” versus “Nanyang.” Hence, “Nanyang nostalgia” may also be understood as a kind of cure, one that prevents Xiao Cun from becoming further absorbed in a unidirectional fixation on a lost homeland, and instead turns towards a search for reconciliation between the present and the past.

In “Homesickness Deepens at Year’s End” (〈岁暮倍思乡〉), Xiao Cun again engages with memories of his old friend Ali.

The neighbour, just a stone’s throw from my home, was Ali’s stilt house. Loneliness and solitude made Ali and me kindred spirits, inseparable companions. He taught me to climb coconut trees and speak Malay, while I taught him kite flying and Minnan dialect. The pure and innocent affection of the children brought the two families into close contact, allowing them to bask in the boundless springtime of inter-family harmony. What remains most indelibly in my memory is Ali’s swift, decisive strike with a bamboo pole at the cobra’s crucial “three inches” at the very brink of danger, through which I narrowly snatched life from the jaws of death.

(Xiao, 2000, pp.144-145)

The recurring motif of Ali rescuing “me” (the narrator) in Xiao Cun’s literary works reveals how deeply this event remains etched in his memory, becoming an essential thread in his nostalgic reflections on his Nanyang homeland. While the deep bond between “me” (the narrator) and “Ali” is undeniable, the Malayan Ali’s symbolic presence in Xiao’s

narrative serves as a poignant critique of post-war colonial authorities' unjust persecution of Chinese communities in Southeast Asia (the Chinese Exclusion Act), along with their deliberate attempts to exacerbate ethnic tensions. The concluding passage further captures this sentiment: "I yearn to meet Ali again before I die, yet I dread a chance encounter with this childhood friend, for in that surreal era of the Cultural Revolution, a cruel fate stole his cherished token, and an endless sense of guilt has accompanied me to the edge of life." (Xiao, 2000, p.145) Therefore, the Nanyang becomes Xiao's unique literary lens for reflecting on the Cultural Revolution, while its Nostalgia for Nanyang forms a discursive device/space that serves as a cure for writers with cross-cultural experiences, such as Xiao Cun, helping to heal psychological wounds and resolve identity crises. This allows Nanyang nostalgia to transcend the confines of a mere reflective space for contemporary Chinese reality, elevating it into an eternal identification nostalgia. In doing so, it interweaves the spatial-temporal coordinates of China and Nanyang, thereby constructing a multilayered, culturally syncretic model of identity for Xiao Cun.

5. Conclusion

In the modern context, Lukács's notion of "transcendental homelessness" inevitably leads to the spread of "nostalgia" in society. Research on the nostalgic writings of overseas Chinese writers can better help us understand their sentiments toward Nanyang, the evolution of these sentiments, and the underlying reasons behind this transformation. This article provides a brief examination of three essay collections by Xiao Cun, tracing the nostalgic sentiments reflected in his literary works. Through comparative analysis, it is evident that the Nanyang depicted by Xiao Cun is a product of beautified memory. Meanwhile, when the historical realities faced by Nanyang Chinese clash with Xiao Cun's idealised imagination of Nanyang, "Nanyang" forms a unique literary space embedded in his texts, serving as a vessel for memory and a voice denouncing the unfair treatment of Nanyang Chinese. Additionally, in the post-Cold War and post-Cultural Revolution era, "scar literature" and "root-seeking literature" were widely popular in China's literary circles. The nostalgia for Nanyang people, events, and objects was also used as a remedy to heal the psychological trauma and spiritual crisis caused by the Cultural Revolution.

Xiao Cun's nostalgic writing serves as a response to the anxiety of cultural identity in the era of globalization. Amid the clash and fusion of heterogeneous cultures, he attempts to trace the past of Nanyang in order to rediscover the cultural roots and identity that have gradually faded during modernization. This narrative not only excavates individual memories but also collectively reaffirms the cultural identity of the Chinese diaspora in Nanyang. Through Xiao Cun's writing, Nanyang becomes a poetic utopia

brimming with warmth, transcending the chaos and struggles of reality to provide a spiritual sanctuary for wandering souls. Simultaneously, this nostalgic writing reveals a profound respect for cultural diversity, reminding us that in pursuing modernization, we must not forget the essential elements and memories that constitute our cultural identity. In essence, this nostalgic writing is not merely a tender reflection on bygone years but also embodies a deep exploration of identity and an unwavering pursuit of cultural roots. The Nanyang world constructed by Xiao Cun through his words serves both as a preservation of personal memories and a collective reconstruction of shared historical experiences amongst the Chinese diaspora. Within this literary space, Nanyang transcends mere geographical coordinates to become a symbolic existence carrying complex emotions and cultural memories—serving as both a refuge from real-world hardships and a spiritual shore seeking cultural belonging.

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