

Chineseness and its Diversion: Chia Yong Chew's Poetic Forms

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Abstract

In breaking nearly thirty years of silence, Malaysian Chinese poet Chia Yong Chew (1950-) re-emerges into the literary arena with three short articles: "Notes on Poetry (I, II, III)" on contemplations of poetry, and a new publication of a poetry collection: *Chia's SeEds: Shades of Time* (2013). The publication of the three articles on poetry that convey Chia's fruitful thoughts over the essence of poetry's subject makes the poetry collection, *Chia's SeEds*, an exemplification of his own theories. Both the articles and poetry book serve as a counterevidence to prove the credibility and validity of each other. The phenomenon of frequent publications, in only three years, from 2011 to 2013, can be seen as a sign of a change in Chia's state of mind, namely from a long process of contemplation, to a sudden eruption of composition. The blooming of ideas and the limited capacity of poetry as a genre provokes Chia to adjust his form of poetry. Therefore, the first part of this article seeks to examine the creation of new forms, in terms of genre, in Chia's poetry that are caused by the predicament of the urge to speak out. In "Notes on Poetry (I, II, III)", Chia advocates the importance of "Chineseness" in poetry, therefore the second part of this article examines the radical influence of Chineseness to Chia, in composing poetry and creating poetic aesthetics that centralises the shapes and sounds of Chinese characters. Thirdly, to draw a comprehensive poetic form in Chia's works, this article points out the foreign elements in Chia's works that dilute the Chineseness aforementioned.

Keywords: Chineseness, Malaysian Chinese Poetry, Chia Yong Chew, Poetic Form

1.0 Introduction

Chia Yong Chew (1950-) could be classified as a Bornean Poet, as in his latest publication *Chia's SeEds: Shades of Time* (2013), the self-introduction demonstrates a state of mind full of geopolitical self-awareness. "(I'm) born in the Borneo Island," says Chia. "In 1950's 'Salawake Kuchen'" (Chia, 2013a: flyleaf). The peculiar terms, "Salawake Kuchen" also being used in an interview in a literary supplement (Zhang, 2012: D14). In using non-conventional, unofficial yet rather foreign words "Salawake" (萨拉瓦克) and "Kuchen" (库琛), to indicate the places now known as Sarawak (砂拉越) and Kuching (古晋), Chia claims to have traced the most upstream of genealogy of Chinese naming for where he belongs. As a poet, it is justifiable that he uses Hong Zhong's (洪钟, 1915-2003) poetry collection *Tides* (海潮集, 1953), instead of a historiographic approach or an academic archive as his historical evident (Hong, 1953, p.93), to prove that the names seem to be prevalent in the 1950's, even before Malaysia was founded. This is a poetic tradition in recurring poetry to prove history. The interest towards local history reveals the solicitude of self-identity, where he can be classified as a Bornean poet. Despite local identity classification, in using the Malaysian Chinese literary conventional approach to classify literati, namely to engage a writer with generational and seniority by age in a decade, Chia has been grouped in the "Fifth Generation", as he is born in the 50's (Du, 2013, p. D14).

Chia Yong Chew was in his twenties in 1970, when he and his poetic contemporaries founded the "Sarawak Constellations Poetry Society". The Poetry Society served as a poetic platform for Sarawakian literati, especially poets, to demonstrate their literary talent, including Chia's. Due to its geographical location and the deficiency of communication technology in that era, the society was confined in its own geographical area, divided by the South China Sea from the Peninsular Malaysia. From the name of the society, it shows an awareness to serve only "Sarawak" as its effective range, yet they were not self-contented, but rather bold in exploring poetic and aesthetics modernism in the 70's. As Li Muxiang states, "The Chinese poetic circle in Sarawak gives an ingrowth, sterilised from factions and cloistered impressions to others, but the truth is, ever since Malaysia has been founded, many of them are writing under the shield of Malaysian flag." (Li, 1972, p.103) This is not a patriotic assertion to uphold a politically-correct stand, but to affirm the cutting-edge approach of the Poetry Society, namely the Poetry Society does not rest on its own laurels, albeit its geographical isolation. Hence, the Sarawak Constellations Poetry Society was the disciple of literary Modernism, from its only publication in 1972, entitled *Anthology of Sarawak Modern Poetry Volume 1*, we can see the demonstration of modern poetry in Sarawak during the early 70's. This was even before the founding of the renowned Sirius Poetry Society in the Peninsular Malaysia founded in 1973.

Started as a modernist, Chia set out his poetic career with the Sarawak Constellations Poetry Society in 1970. In a retrospection, by quoting Qin Guan (1049-1100), a writer and poet in the Song Dynasty, Chia reveals his state of mind in that particular period. Often he felt “life’s prime and pretty flowers for youth would never stay, ceaseless sorrow just comes this way”; “It was the bewildered young years with high ardour for poetry” that kept him going (Zhang, 2012, p. D14). Therefore, in echoing the summoning of solitude, he became the “deserter like the ordinary people” (Zhang, p. D14) by quitting the Poetry Society, and walking towards solitude to pursue his own poetic beliefs. All these have set a distinctive solitary tone in his works. Back in 1973, Li Muxiang has already seen through the loneliness that the narrative sets forth, “Chia as if a pole without any flag on,” says Li. “Solitude and bareness are his portrayal, seems to be dimmed and unilluminated, but perhaps the kernel has a firm-self and its own purpose” (Li, 1972, p. 19). Forty years later, Ng Kee Ong quotes Chia’s poem to conclude his solitariness in her study, similar to Li Muxiang, Ng says Chia is “a vine that blossoms and grows along itself” (Ng, 2012, p. D14). On solitariness, Chia responds in one of his articles on poetry, “Notes on Poetry III”: “The insights are perhaps too advanced, the ambitions are maybe too high to grasp, the recipients have an imagination too low to reach, they fail to ascend the hill of mine just now, but time will come for them to catch up” (Chia, 2013, p. D14). Therefore, on solitude, Chia entrusts his hope in time, he believes or hopes to have an era of better understanding to come in the future. Transcending his early sheer solitary, Chia infuses his solitude with universal values and the universalism is the distinctive point to distinguish his new style, which he portrays in *Chia’s SeEds: Shades of Time*.

Being a poet, juggling with rhythms and pronunciations, the book title “*Chia’s SeEds*” is reminiscent of “Chia seeds” which contains high nutritional values, despite this, humoring the homophonic analogy of “Chia’s Seeds”, which also indicates the outcome of his, Chia Yong Chew’s, thoughts. Chia names his work of thoughts “shī xiǎng” (诗想), “Thoughts In the Poetry Form”, instead of the normal way of saying it, which is, “sī xiǎng” (思想), “Thought”. Emphasising in thoughts, believing in universal values, it is not a coincidence that starting from 2011, although in a slow pace, Chia seems to be re-emerging in the literary scene, with 3 articles conveying his contemplations over poetry. This was followed by the poetry collection, *Chia’s SeEds: Shades of Time*. The result of Chia’s deliberations and thoughts, be it in the form of poetry or essay seem to be overflowing. Therefore, this article seeks to compare these two texts, “Notes on Poetry (I, II & III)” and *Chia’s SeEds*, for us to approach Chia’s literary world as a whole. In discussing the unique presentation of poetry forms in *Chia’s SeEds*, this article then evokes Ng Kim Chew’s theory, “Chineseness-Modernism”, one of two archetypal literary forms in Contemporary Chinese Literature, which Chia’s manifestations would fit into.

2.0 Predicament of Poetry Forms: Style Expansion

Ever since Chia Yong Chew publishes *Zhànkǎ* (站卡) in 1985, his independent works could only be seen sporadically in literary supplements. Without major literary actions being taken over many years, finally in 2011, Chia comes out with three serialised and compact articles, “Notes on Poetry (I, II, III)”¹. With the tempo of an article a year, it ceased in 2013. Moreover, in celebrating a poetry festival in June 2012, *Nanyang Siang Pao*’s literary supplement, “Nanyang Literature and Arts”, conducted a featurette interview to celebrate Chia. It did not cease there, Chia’s literary actions over these years culminate in late 2013, when *Chia’s SeEds* was finally released. This was after 28 years since *Zhànkǎ* had been published. After a silence of nearly 30 years, Chia comes back with a series of literary movements. It differs from his previously slow and frugal style in publication; Chia has three articles and a book published within three years. Therefore, in taking the whole series of events in these three years as a phenomenon, Chia demonstrates a high functional state of mind in pondering and composing poetry, his highly thriving mind seeks to speak out on a substantial scale, this in turn leads to a series of literary events that take place between 2011 to 2013.

The chronological series of events show the reemergence of Chia back into the literary scene. It also suggests that after years of deliberations and dwelling on poetry issues, he has come to the maturity of his views, hence it pushes Chia to be in “the urge of utterance” status quo. However, we could also engage Chia’s writings and its fashion of forms to assert that “the urge of utterance” was taking place, in other words, despite the series of publication events, we shall set the discussion back to the texts, which are Chia’s poems to further support the assertion.

Amongst all the literary genres, poetry consists of short and compact attributes. To quote Chia in referring poetry’s form in a literary imagery, poetry serves to be the “Nano” of them all. “As a unit of length, one Nano (nm) equals to 0.000001 millimeter (mm),” Chia asserts. “It is similar to one thousandth of a hair’s diameter; whereas as an element, Nano has high heat-resistance and it is stainless, it also is a metallic glass which is self-purified.” (Chia, 2012: D14). High elasticity, tenaciousness and self-purification are the features Chia wishes poetry to have, in other words, his own works should consist of what is to be believed. Therefore, in a rather tiny capacity, Chia endows poetry to have an enormous vocation, because he believes poetry should bear “the truth, the goodness, and the sublime”, it also has to be “meticulous and far-fetching” (2012, p. D14). In endowing considerable expectations in poetry, Chia seems to have forgotten about the micro capacity of a poem. Moreover, if poetry is a metallic glass, that according to Chia, could self-purify itself, this scarce and precious ability sets poetry free from impurities, and this sublimation and deification of poetry as a genre could in turn restrict Chia from jeopardizing the divinity of this genre.

Hence, in the heyday of Chia's "poetry thought", the ideas and ideals of poetry are imminent. This, therefore, forms a confrontation in between the urge of utterance, with the limited capacity of poetry. The limited capacity of poetry and its endowed self-purification feature render Chia with the anxiety of utter-ability. In other words, the urge of utterance with the concern of omission. Chia is at the stage to poise, if not compromise, this writing dilemma. In his search to break through this dilemma, Chia seeks for an adjustment of poetry's form, which is an "exploitation of form", in order to indulge the fruitful thoughts and ideas of poetry conceived over years.

Firstly, Chia engages the essay as his new writing form specially to incorporate his fruitful thoughts on poetry over these years. As a result, he publishes "Notes on Poetry (I, II & III)" accordingly. "Notes on Poetry" consist of an ambiguous attribute in its form, because it is not a conventional prose, nor does it sound as eloquently as a literary essay, or critique, would normally do. It hovers in between prose and critique, yet it is written in a poetic narrative fashion.

However, the essay set to contain assertions on poetry in a broad sense. By this Chia has settled half of his urge of utterance, the other half left are the minor trivial fragments which ought to be delivered by poetry, and yet the triviality clashes with the notion that any encumbrances in poetry shall be purified, in order to maintain the feature of being the "Nano" of them all. Browsing through *Chia's SeEds*, the distinguishing feature of the form is the footnotes of the poems. They form a heteroglossia poetic discourse; where simultaneously we have the poems and the footnotes explaining bits and pieces about the poems, never mind if it is explicitly or otherwise. In terms of the proportions in between poem and footnote, take "Letters" (p. 90-92) and "For Example Aloe Vera & Rose" (p. 106) for instance, the primary poem itself has a smaller scale to the footnotes that follow afterwards. This unconventional form provokes the priority of text in the poetry reading experience. However, the footnotes are not the demonstration of metanarrative, one of the postmodernism writing skills, but an extension of the poem, the variant of the poem, and even a derivative organ of the poem. It serves to load and assimilate those particular "untellable" fractions produced by each poem and which have been purified from within.

The non-proportionate ratio of poem and its footnotes indicate Chia was at the stage pushed by the urge of utterance, but due to the limitation of poetry forms, and the restriction of the given attributes of poetry, rendering Chia to widen his poetry forms, in the premise of lowest deformity of poetry's "Nano-ness". Chia develops two derivative

¹ "Notes on Poetry" is a makeshift translation, taken from its whole idea of poetry discussion. Original text "诗享笔记" (shīxiǎng bǐjì) literally means "Notes on Poetry to be Shared" or "To be Enjoyed", it plays with double twist of homophone words which has been substituted. The prototype of this variant is "思想" (sī xiǎng), simply means "Thought", then "诗想" (shī xiǎng) literally means "Ponderation About Poetry" or "Poetry Thought", then it eventually evolves into "诗享" (shī xiǎng) which is Chia's original creation.

variants of forms, they are the essays “Notes on Poetry (I, II & III)” and the footnotes of poetry. They serve, respectively, the consideration on poetry both in the macro and micro sense. The validity of calling them the variant forms of “poetry” is on the basis of their poetic style, regardless of their non-poetry forms. Take for example, firstly, in “Notes of Poetry I”, Chia prospects a better future and a higher peak for poetry that ought to be achieved “by the rope ladder being tied in squares and grids to ascend” (Chia, 2011, p. D14). Despite its height and ascending by climbing as a normal analogy, it also employs the imagery of one of the ancient Chinese characters inventory activities, which is “knotting cords to keep records and events” (结绳记事). The images inspired or simply transformed, eventually, into Chinese characters, that are also known as the “square words” (方块字). Therefore, the “rope ladder” in analogies of “squares and grids” in the sentence suggest implicitly that Chinese poetry shall form, if not rule, the future of poetry. Secondly, in one of the many footnotes, instead of showing what a footnote should achieve, Chia goes even further in analogies to explain his concept of divide and rule: “Human nature as if the corner of a package marks ‘tear here’.” Chia continues, “The breach of ‘divide and rule’ curves like the soft ribs and tears apart in one fell swoop, people will get what is long being coveted” (Chia, 2013a, p. 22). The abovementioned examples represent the notable poetic style both in Chia’s essays and footnotes. To argue that these carefully weighted words and the complex poetic imageries they bear, set the ambiguity of them ostensibly being poetry, but actually not. This is what this paper argues, they are the derivative and variant forms of poetry.

The density of style in the essays and footnotes is directly proportional to the actual poems. Therefore, in a critique about “Notes of Poetry”, Lin Wucong says that they are “too high in density, too concentrated to even dissolve” (Lin, 2012, p. D15). But in understanding the urge of utterance, and the limitation of poetry form, we would understand and appreciate the formation of the density, albeit it goes beyond the conventional structure and fashion of essays and footnotes. This is to say, that poetry as the superstructure in Chia’s consciousness, brings about poetry as the primary, and forms as the secondary consideration, therefore the usual fashion of an essay and a footnote is no longer a priority. These extended organs of poetry are bound to be written in poetic form.

In order to uphold the “Nano attributes” of poetry, Chia can’t help but to reinvent new forms, which are the poetic essays on poetry and the poetic footnotes from poetry, to accommodate his, both macro and micro, excessive urge of utterance. To invoke an allegory by Taiwanese novelist Chu T’ien-wen (1956-) in *Witch’s Brew* (2007) to explain this phenomenon, Chia’s poetry creation as a whole is as if an “alchemy gets porcelain” at the end (Chu, 2007, p. 73-76). The allegory derives from the accidental but groundbreaking discovery of white porcelain in 1709 in the West, by German alchemist Johann Friedrich Böttger (1682-1719) during his painstaking endeavor in trying to create gold by purifying other elements. In this context, the alchemy’s gold is poetry and the porcelain as the acquired bonus are Chia’s poetic essays and poetic footnotes.

3.0 Obsession of Words: Embrace of “Chineseness”

We have discussed the form of Chia Yong Chew's poetry in terms of its settlement in between genres, and now the discussion should dwell on the presentations of the words that show the style of his poetry, which in turn demonstrates the ideology underneath that has driven Chia in his writing.

In “Notes on Poetry I”, Chia kicks off his discussion on poetry by inquiring about its future. Chia believes that Chinese poetry would:

Become more delicate and bolder, depicting zeitgeist with the special genetics in Chinese characters. The special genetics are, firstly, Pictogram, where lines of objects being drawn (i.e. fish [鱼] *yú*, that consists of head, body and tail); Secondly, Ideogram, the combination of pictograms and symbols (i.e. dawn [旦] *dàn*, with sun laying on the horizon); Thirdly, Compound Ideograph, the combination of several words or symbols (i.e. see [看] *kàn*, by putting a hand on top of an eye); And fourthly, Phono-semantic Compound, the philharmonic combination of meaning and sound (i.e. lake [湖] *hú*, by left half indicates water and right half indicates the pronunciation; porridge [糊] *hú*, by left half indicates rice and right half indicates the pronunciation; butterfly [蝴]蝶 *hú(dié)*, by left half indicates insect and right half indicates the pronunciation; and, beard [鬍]鬚 *hú(xū)* by upper half indicates body hair and lower half indicates the pronunciation)- perfectly coupling together. (Chia, 2012, p. D14)

Chia conjures up the ancient four (out of six) principles for composing Chinese characters to predict the future of modern poetry. This seems to be anachronistic, but it shows that the suggestion of Chinese characters should be the essence of poetry. Therefore, driven by an obsession about Chinese characters, Chia celebrates the indestructible structure of Chinese characters by putting them in an experimental phase, namely to re/deconstruct them in his poetic favours, based on the idea of switching ideographic, symbols, phono-semantic and other features of Chinese characters. Take for example, where Chia plays with the trick of dismantling the word “诗” *shī* (poetry) into two characters “言寺” (言 *yán*, speech; 寺 *sì*, temple) which literally means nothing when they form an adjacent word, but the expanded version of “诗” for visual impact. In poetry, Chia goes even further:

方方正正，自自
然然，跟根深探讨

犬吠鸟鸣羊咩牛哞蛙哇

fāngfāng zhèngzhèng, zìzì
ránrán, gēn gēn shēn tànǎo
(Square, Naturally,

Follow the root to explore deeply)

quǎnfèi niǎomíng yángmiē niúmóu wāwā
(Dog barks bird chirps sheep bleats cow
moos frog croaks)

夜夜晚晚劝阻宵小逾矩翻越潜入 *yèyè wǎnwǎn quànzǔ xiǎoxiǎo yùjù fānyuè qiǎnrù*

(Night after night to dissuade the thief not to transgress, cross and sneak into)

(Chia, 2013a, p. 19, 37, 67)

In association with the theories asserted in “Notes on Poetry I”, we can see that Chia engages words with similar structures to array litanies of his poetic aesthetics. In the second stanza cited above, the radical of the verbs “口” (mouth, *kǒu*) indicates the sound of the animals, with the verb (i.e. 吠, bark, *fèi*) simultaneously carrying the structure of its noun (i.e. 犬, dog, *quǎn*), namely the sound (i.e. 咩, bleat, *miē*) that one particular animal (i.e. 羊, sheep, *yáng*) makes. The poetic aesthetics generates from the visual and auditory impact, it moves the reader’s structure of feeling towards the words, and leaves the reader to contemplate the different senses it engages, by which the poetry achieves its poetic value. In the latter example, not to mention the repetition of “夜晚” (night, *yèwǎn*) to indicate that the incident takes place in nightly basis, Chia paves the way subsequently for a rather intriguing word game; “宵小” and “逾矩” in the sentence, serve as two independent terms, “宵小” (*xiǎoxiǎo*) in classical Chinese means “night thief” but it is no longer being used in the modern context, and “逾矩” (*yùjù*) means transgressing. By using a rather unfamiliar term “宵小” adjacent with “逾矩”, it forms “小逾” (*xiǎo yù*) which is meaningless as a term, but it highly resembles “小偷” (*xiǎo tōu*), a modern term of “thief”, that modern readers, namely Chia’s contemporaries, would have been more familiar with, and this is what Chia would like to achieve.

“The profundity of Chinese characters provokes ponderation and admiration” (Chia, 2012, p. D14), Chia declares his obsession with words, and suggests that Chinese poetry shall not deviate from its words. With this dedication, he then transforms what he believes into his works. From what we have seen, a cultural manifesto underlies his poems; which is the refusal to being translated by other foreign languages, by firmly entrenching and manipulating the features of Chinese characters. Chia admits that the ideal condition of Chinese poetry is to free it from being exiled in Western pattern, namely to free Chinese poetry from a diasporic form (Chia, 2012, p. D14). Chia meant to create obstacles for foreign readers to perceive the poetic, and to achieve poetry that would be “lost in translation”. In accomplishing the idea of obsession with Chinese characters, it is not surprising that Chia is conservative when it comes to the usage of simplified or traditional Chinese characters. “Regardless of formality,” Chia sets a rhetorical question, “in private and in favour of writing for ourselves, shouldn’t poetry be written, when necessarily, in traditional characters like calligraphy?” (2012, p. D14)

Chia’s obsession with the “square words”- the Chinese characters has laid the ontology of his works. This ontology leads us to the considerable Chinese cultural logic that supports his ideology, that also endows the feasibility to put Chia’s poetic aesthetics into practice. Chinese characters appear to be the physical images that reflexes Chia’s

obsession, by this Chia endeavors to build up his modern Chineseness poetic aesthetics. In his article, "Notes on Poetry I", it has been conveyed in an obscure fashion: "Poetry should thrive from the classical cultural connotations," writes Chia. "By means of ultimate truth, optimal goodness and the 'golden mean', poetry shall attain its height." (2012, p. D14) The specially quoted "golden mean" is worth the attention. It means the ideal moderation "middle" point between two extremes. Whereas the original Chinese text is "中"看 (*zhōngkàn*) which literally means "behold from the 'middle'". The ambiguity endows the poetic license of interpretations, it can, therefore, mean moderation "中庸" (*zhōngyōng*), or in this case, more appropriately the "middle" serves as the subtext of "中国" (China, *zhōngguó*) or "中华" (Chinese, *zhōnghuá*) because traditionally it always literally indicates that China is the "Middle Kingdom". This is where Chia's indication gains its validity, so "poetry should thrive from the classical cultural connotations," in other words, "by means of ultimate truth, optimal goodness and upon 'Chineseness', poetry should attain its height." (2012, p. D14)

The "China", "Chinese" or even "Chineseness" that Chia refers to then has to be identified. In "Notes of Poetry I", Chia asserts that poetry should "innovatively engage allusions to enhance poetic capacity and tension" (2012, p. D14). For readers that are familiar with the history of Modern Chinese Literature, they would know that this is an opposite to the famous modern literary manifesto made by Hu Shih (1891-1962), who was one of the most influential leaders during the May-Forth Movement in 1919 that has brought a paradigm shift to Modern Chinese Literature. In his article "On the Reformation of Literature", he proposes "Eight Don'ts" in order to improve modern writing style. In the sixth, Hu advocates that modern writing shall discard allusions as Classical Literature does. By refuting Hu Shih, Chia shows an inclination to breakthrough Modern Chinese Literature, and to be a pilgrim of Classical Chinese Literature to nourish Contemporary Chinese Poetry.

Modernisation brings along westernisation which had taken place during the cultural and sociopolitical movement in 20th century China. It also penetrated into literature, hence to deny it completely would be anachronistic, after all Chia uses nothing but modern poetry, not classical, as a form to compose. Chia suggests that contemporary Chinese poetry shall move on from the "western imitation pattern" (2012, p. D14), therefore a counteraction that causes the embracement of its antithesis, namely the Chineseness, is inevitable. We can say that three elements: the ultimate truth; optimal goodness; and the Chineseness, that Chia suggests are the hopes of poetry, or conversely the "ultimate truth" and "optimal goodness" that Chia asserts are bound to be the "Chineseness". Only Chineseness, its classical connotations, culture, characters, features, shall lead Chinese poetry to a new pinnacle.

Chia is intrigued by Chinese characters, his poetic inspiration arouses from within, and Chinese characters as part of the cultural elements provoke a Modern Chinese Poetic Aesthetic. This resembles the "Chineseness-Modernism" advocated by Ng Kim Chew in

his treatise “Chinese Modernism: An Unfinished Plan?” (Ng, 2003, p. 21-57). Ng takes Yu Guangzhong (1928-) as an example, to conceptualise “Chineseness-Modernism” as a faction in contemporary Chinese literature that upholds the “pure Chinese usage” which demonstrates especially by Yu, where he denounces the “vicious westernisation” of Chinese language, and even wants to “half-mast the May-Fourth Movement” (Ng, 2003, p. 26-30) to deny modernism in Chinese language. This is all too familiar to Chia’s assertion that poetry in future shall move on from the “western imitation pattern” and be saved from cultural exile. Only Yu is more radical but Chia does it with subtlety. It is not a coincidence that Chia corresponds with Ng’s assertion of “Chineseness-Modernism”. It shows a style prototype and a literary phenomenon driven by an ideology. Coincidentally, Taiwanese novelist Li Yongping (1947-) from Borneo sets his fiction in Borneo also, he is similar to Chia, an experimentalist of Chinese words and a devotee of “pure Chinese”.

If we take Sinocentrism into consideration, Chia, like many other Malaysian Chinese writers and poets are regarded as overseas Chinese. Therefore, the pursuit of the essence of Chinese words, namely the prudence of usage over words that shows the inclination of Chineseness, can be regarded as an act of fetishism, with the “square words” as objects to be obsessed with, driven by cultural identity recognition forces. However, despite the form, Chia’s works do not show a distinctive tendency on cultural identity declaration in its content. Chia’s literary act of “square words obsession” is certainly a pursuit of poetic aesthetics, but beyond that, whether or not it is a manifesto or the explicit pursuit of his cultural matrix are not within the scope of this discussion. Therefore, back to poetic and aesthetic consideration, any form of possible jeopardy to the essence of words would be taken with anger, this is what Li Yongping, Yu Guangzhong and Chia have in common. Despite that they are all obsessed with Chinese words for the sake of art, or literary aesthetics, they also show an anger at the western form invasion, to the extreme of the urge to arouse the “reactionary and correction... for the unadulteration and dignity of Chinese characters” (Li, 1995, p. i).

In order to keep away from the western form, Chia suggests that poetry in the future should “achieve a new style after the pinnacles of Tang Poetry, Song Lyrics and Yuan Songs” (Chia, 2011, p. D14). This, again, is an indication to wish that modern poetry shall nourish from the classical features. The distinctive difference between modern and classical poetry above mentioned is its rhythm- classical poetry with strict rules of rhythm and rigorous form, whereas modern poetry is to deconstruct the former, it is free from any form. Chia’s demonstration of this “new style” is not metrically full scale as classical poetry would do, as that would be anachronistic, nor can it be in a western form. This absolute nature of binary is what Chia wishes his peer poets, or himself to breakthrough, in order to achieve the “new style”. Chia’s endeavor to create a poetic new style lies in the rhythm, this is the other dimension of modern Chineseness poetic aesthetics:

就说下南下南漂，
北上北上撒，掉
东西，西东西东团团团团转

.....
倾听淅淅沥沥淅淅沥，读
滴答滴答滴答答，听

(Chia, 2013a, p. 37; emphasis added)

牙牙耳语
迎来换装花季
一件又一件
漂漂亮亮美丽
安琪安琪你
囡囡囡囡
咿呀咿呀小米奇
一跔跔唐老唐老鸭
摇动卡通卡通卡
啪啪，爬爬爬。

.....
小嘴儿不熟悉
慢吞吞慢慢吞
餐盅一口糊
配搭一口淘气
它们湖泥糊你
糊出格外去
脸上的糊趣
一天天，糊甜
糊大黏高黏蜜
加重你。

jùshuō xiànnán xiànnán piāo, yáo
běishàng běishàng chē, diào
dōngxī, xīdōng xīdōng tuán tuán tuán
tuánzhuàn

...
qīngtīng xīxī lìlì xīlì xīlì, dú
dīdā dīdā dīdādā, tīng
(just say drifting and swaying down, down south
retreating and turning up, up north
spinning round, round and round east and west,
west and east

...
listen to the patter pattering, read
ticking tic-tacking, listen)

yáyá éryǔ
yínglái huànzhuāng huājì
yījiàn yòu yījiàn
piàopiàoliangliang měilì
ānqí ānqí nǐ
nānnān jiǎnjiǎn
yīyā yīyā xiǎomǐqí
yīzhuǎizhuǎi tánglǎo tánglǎoyā
yáodòng kǎtōng kǎtōng kǎ
pāpā, pá pá pá.

...
xiǎozuǐer bù shúxī
màntūntūn màntūntūn
cānzhōng yīkǒu hú
dāpèi yīkǒu táoqì
tāmen húní hú nǐ
húchū géwàiqù
liǎnshàng de hú qù
yītiāntiān, hú tián
hú dà nián gāo nián mì
jiāzhòng nǐ.
Baby babbling
welcoming a clothes changing season
one after the other
neat bright and pretty
you, you angels

little boys and girls
babbling babbling little Mickey
Donald duck swag walking
swinging cartoon cartoon-car
pops, crawl crawl crawling
...
Little mouth not used to this
slowly swallowing slowly
a mouth full of congee in a bowl
mix it with mischief
they are muddy, smearing on you
smears out from the grid
the muddy congee face
day after day, sweet
big tall muddy
sticky honey
would put weight on you.

(p. 101-103; emphasis added)

怎么捕捉微熏和和冷寒
举目的塔塔玉米棒
又如何粒粒者为窗排排是楼
再数晨蚁如何脚踏脚踏车
沙沙沙沙沙列队而过

zěnme bǔzhuō wēixī héhé lěng hán
jǔmù de tǎ tǎ yùmǐbàng
yòu rúhé lìlì zhě wéi chuāng páipái shì lóu
zàishǔ chényǐ rúhé jiǎotà jiǎotàchē
shā shā shā shā shā shā lièduì érguò
How to capture dim glow and bleak
towers of corn cobs above eyes sight
why are windows in rounds and buildings in rows
counting the morning ants pedal bicycles again
rustling rustling rustling, in lines they pass

(p. 53; emphasis added)

Repetition of onomatopoeias: “淅淅沥沥淅淅沥沥” (*xīxī lìlì xīlì xīlì*, pattering), “滴答滴答滴滴答答” (*dīdā dīdā dīdādādā*, ticking), “咿呀咿呀” (*yīyā yīyā*, babbling), “沙沙沙沙沙沙沙” (*shā shā shā shā shā shā*, rustling); repetition of actions and things to create rhythm: “下南下南漂, 摇 / 北上北上撤, 掉 / 东西, 西东西东团团团团转” (*xià nán xià nán piāo, yáo / běi shàng běi shàng chè, diào / dōng xī, xī dōng xī dōng tuán tuán tuán tuán zhuàn*), “安琪安琪” (*ānqí ānqí*, angel angel), “唐老唐老鸭” (*tánglǎo tánglǎoyā*, Donald Donald Duck), “卡通卡通卡” (*kǎtōng kǎtōng kǎ*, cartoon cartoon-car) and so on. Chia repeats using words upon different occasions, these carefully crafted rhythms are not similar to Chinese folk art allegro (快板). For instance, in the “End of the Year”, repetition of pattering and ticking sounds indicates a long wet rainy season, together with the poet’s pet dog spinning round and round in excitement just like other

dogs would do in chasing their tail. In "This Child: Lullaby", Chia creates repetitions to imitate the baby's babbling in order to poeticise tooth language. These repetitions are one of the ways to create modern poetic rhythm that actually is free-versification. Chia's versification contains the features of poetic musicality and rhythm known as the "burden" (复沓) and "refrain" (叠覆) that generate the "incremental repetitions" (反复回增) suggest by Chen Shixiang (1912-1971), when Chen engages "motif" (兴) in classical poetic studies as a source of Chinese Lyrical Tradition. (Chen, 1998, p. 142-178) Chia uses words that are similar in form and sound in crafting his poetry. In this regard he puts Chen's poetic theories- "burden" and "refrain" into practice, and by which Chia creates a modern poetic "incremental repetition" to eventually achieve the lyrical of poetry.

Modern poetry has long discarded strict classical forms and versifications. "Apart from that," says Milan Kundera. "The primary intention of modern poetry is not to prosify poetry! Free verse sets poetry free from the entanglement of forms, in order to create a more natural and rich musical form" (Kundera, 2009, p. 134). Chia balances in between outmoded forms and tedious prosification, these talents are a credit to Chia's understanding and familiarity of Chinese characters, and using the poetic license to transform them into modern poetry. Ever since Chia participated in the Sarawak Constellations Poetry Society, the modern nature of this poetry society has set Chia in pursuing his modern pieces. His obsession with Chinese words comes later, although it stretches to a pursuit of "Chineseness" in a grand cultural sense, but it definitely pushes his poetic aesthetics achievement to the another height.

4.0 Diversion of the "Chineseness": Foreign elements

Under the form of Chineseness and the inclination of language purification that comes with it, like Li Yongping and Yu Guangzhong suggest, Chia Yong Chew shows a broader acceptance than the former by expanding the capacity and tolerance of Chineseness to accommodate foreign elements, including languages, to create more poetic sparks. Compared to Li Yongping who had acquired Taiwan citizenship, as a local Malaysian Chinese, Chia's Chineseness pursuit of poetry is based on poetic aesthetics, at the same time, Chia's Borneon complex is not based on "imagined nostalgia", but on universalism that reveals the same quality of solicitude and contemplation in adapting foreign elements in his poetry. This is when Chia diversifies himself from the pure Chineseness faction.

Chia shows a great interest in topography and local history, especially street naming in his works. The earlier part of this article has mentioned Chia's usage of "萨拉瓦克库琛" (Salawake Kuchen) instead of the conventional and official "砂劳越古晋" (Sarawak Kuching) to indicate where he is from, and it shows his local concerns. In his poem "Roaming and Reading in Wayang Street's Transliteration" (p. 12-16), we can see the same quality. Wayang Street in Kuching Sarawak was founded in 1891. "Wayang" in

Malay language means “movie”. The local Chinese take its sound and transliterate to “花香” (*huāxiāng*, flowers fragrance), and Chia re-transliterates and reinterprets it to “花一样” (*huā yī yàng*, flowers-like). From Wayang Street, the poet meanders through the thanksgiving stage in front of the Fengshan Temple that was founded on 1897, to the modern cinema at the other end of the street, that was build a century after that. In fact, the poet goes through the history of “stage performance” from “wayang”- also means the shadow play in 1891, to the thanksgiving stage for the Chinese deity in 1897, until the modern cinema in the 20th century. This is a temporal and spatial variation through time that official history would overlook, but poetry could provide for.

Chia tends to meander in the middle line of the official Malay/English street names and the unofficial but widely used colloquial names amongst local Chinese. He uses poetry to resolve the weight of history. In “Black and White Picture” (p. 82-86), the poet continues roaming in Kuching’s old streets, “马提斯路” (Mathies Road), “大石路” (Rock Road), “亚答街” (Atap Street, palm fronds thatch street), “海唇街” (Main Bazaar, in Chinese “Sea Lips Street”), “花香街” (Wayang Street) and so on. The slight difference in between official names and Chinese names is as if a crack in history which stores up an era of collective memories. These names pass on from generation to generation orally. It evokes the poet to use “a local rustic perspective” (p. 84), that “can almost behold his ancestors to see through their far-away homeland illuminated by the flame in their overseas fireplace” (p. 84). Chia tries to figure out the nostalgic feelings of his ancestors who came to a foreign land, now the poet’s homeland, from China. But at the same time, this nostalgic feeling has long gone.

The integration of language shows that Chia tries to invoke not only Chineseness but also with a touch of locality and internationality by using a variant of English. This is the universalism that Chia wishes to acquire in his poetic career. It dilutes down the Chineseness in his Modern Poetic Aesthetics, which gives him a unique stand in modern poetry, that has a strong but diverted Chineseness in Modern Poetic Aesthetics.

5.0 Conclusion

After almost 30 years of silence, Chia Yong Chew not only has broken it but has shown an active mind in contemplating poetry issues. The blossoming state of mind causes the urge of utterance, but it faces a difficulty of limitation in poetry as a genre. Therefore, Chia comes out with the variants of poetry, namely the derivative organs of poetry, these are the short articles and footnotes for poetry. Apart from the form of the genre, Chia’s obsession with Chinese characters brings him to craft his poetic aesthetics based on the material features of Chinese words, which are the visual impact, namely the shapes and outlines of words, and the auditory attributes, also known as the phonetic features of Chinese words. Chia’s high dependance on the nature of Chinese words results from the Chinese cultural logic, but for Chia it is more of a poetic pursuit than a

cultural identity manifestation. In practice Chia combines the shape and sound of words to carefully craft a cutting-edge style that could lead Chinese modern poetry to another height. He displays a form with “burden” and “refrain” that generate the “incremental repetitions” for its rhythm. This makes Chia a pursuer of “modern Chineseness poetic aesthetics”, but due to Chia’s universalism beliefs, his poetic accommodation of Malay and English into Chinese poetry has diluted the radicalistic nature of “modern Chineseness poetic aesthetics”, Chia is rather a diverted pursuer of “modern Chineseness poetic aesthetics”, which makes his poetry form more playful, flavourful and, most importantly more valuable in the history of Malaysian Chinese literature.

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