

Remaking the Tongue: Linguistic Standardization and Chinese Identity in the Post-May Fourth Nanyang Diaspora

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This article examines the transregional dissemination and localization of the post-May Fourth linguistic reforms—specifically Vernacular Chinese (*baihua*) and the National Language (*Guoyu*)—within the Chinese diaspora of Malaya and Singapore (Nanyang). Moving beyond the traditional "impact-response" paradigm, this study argues that the adoption of the vernacular was not merely a passive cultural importation from mainland China, but an "active fabrication of identity" necessitated by the complex realities of British colonial rule and severe internal dialectal fragmentation. By analyzing early Chinese press materials, such as the *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh*, and local educational records, the research traces the tangible trajectory of this linguistic transformation. It first highlights the role of newspapers as media vanguards that transitioned from reprinting mainland literature to cultivating local vernacular expression to discipline oral traditions. Subsequently, it investigates the institutionalization of *Guoyu* in formal schools and grassroots night schools, which served to educate the laboring classes and dismantle provincial boundaries. Ultimately, the "remolding of the tongue" in Nanyang facilitated the construction of a transregional *Zhonghua* identity, demonstrating how language standardization functioned as a profound tool for social reorganization and diasporic integration.

Keywords: Vernacular Chinese (*baihua*); National Language Movement (*Guoyu*); Nanyang Diaspora; May Fourth Movement; Identity Construction; Malayan Chinese Press; History of Chinese Education

Introduction

The New Culture Movement (*Xin wenhua yundong* 新文化運動), which advocated for Vernacular Chinese (*baihua* 白話) and the "New Literature," (*Xin wenxue* 新文學) undoubtedly represents the most iconic cultural reformation of the May Fourth era. From a macro-historical perspective, while the "May Fourth Movement" (*Wusi Yundong* 五四運動) and the "New Culture Movement" were not entirely overlapping chronological events, they exhibited a high degree of isomorphism in their spiritual aspirations and social impacts. Both embodied a profound critique of traditional cultural structures and an earnest expectation for a modern civil society, leading intellectuals to progressively integrate the two into a unified historical construct. The genesis of the Chinese New Culture Movement is generally traced to the 1915 founding of *La Jeunesse* (*Xin qingnian* 新青年). Chen Duxiu (陳獨秀, 1879-1942) and Hu Shih (胡適, 1891-1962) utilized this journal

to advocate for intellectual enlightenment among the youth and championed the ideals of “Democracy and Science,” establishing it as the primary vehicle for ideological transformation. Notably, Hu Shih’s 1917 publication, “Some Tentative Suggestions for the Reform of Literature,” explicitly proposed the replacement of Classical Chinese (*wenyan* 文言) with the vernacular, thereby laying the practical foundation for the New Literature Movement. Subsequently, in 1919, as students moved from campuses to the streets to protest foreign intervention, the rise of “commoner politics” (*pingmin zhengzhi* 平民政治) caused the May Fourth Movement to become the historical nexus where patriotism and cultural iconoclasm converged. Stakeholders in literature and education responded fervently to this tide; consequently, the vernacular—as the linguistic tool of literary and ideological revolution—was widely adopted, eventually becoming a central linguistic symbol for constructing national subjectivity and modernity in modern China. The linguistic reforms driven by the May Fourth Movement spread widely, if unevenly, across Chinese diaspora communities. However, its dissemination in Malaya and Singapore (hereafter Maxin) manifested in a historical context distinct from that of mainland China.¹ As a diasporic community, editors across various political factions in the Maxin Chinese press enthusiastically echoed China’s literary revolution and patriotic sentiments. Yet, simultaneously, the Chinese community had to navigate the complex realities of colonial politics and linguistic practice. Within this historical framework, the spread of the vernacular was not merely a passive cultural importation but a process of “localized reinvention.” While the New Culture Movement emphasized using colloquial language to express modern thought—aiming to dismantle the classical linguistic regime and dialectal barriers to make literature and education more accessible—the transition for Maxin Chinese schools was far from instantaneous. The existing linguistic environment, cultural backgrounds of teachers and students, and the scarcity of educational resources all served as significant friction points in the practical implementation of the vernacular.

This article aims to explore how the ideals of the vernacular and linguistic reform advocated after May Fourth were operationalized within Maxin society and the Chinese educational system. It first focuses on press propaganda and the formation of literary discourse, subsequently examining the gradual acceptance of the vernacular and the “National Language” (*Guoyu* 國語) in Nanyang Chinese schools. While linguistic modernization in mainland China emphasized the replacement of the classical with the vernacular to foster mass education and modern national consciousness, the export of this paradigm to Nanyang encountered a primary hurdle: the contradiction between regional dialects and the National Language. This tension reflects the evolving linguistic and orthographic practices of the post-May Fourth era. Studying the transregional dissemination of the vernacular and national language is not merely an extension of mainland New Culture Movement studies; rather, it is crucial for

¹ Maxin 馬新 or Xinma 新馬 is a common Chinese portmanteau for Malaya and Singapore, widely used in the local historical context. This terminology sometimes overlaps with the broader concept of Nanyang 南洋.

understanding linguistic shifts within the grassroots strata of Maxin society.

A brief clarification of terms is necessary here, since the argument that follows moves deliberately across several closely related but distinct registers. Vernacular (Baihua 白話) refers primarily to a written style—the replacement of classical wenyan with prose modelled on modern speech. Guoyu (the "National Language") is used in this article in its historically specific sense: not merely a spoken standard, but the state-driven standardization project that, following the founding of the Republic of China, sought to extend a unified national pronunciation (zhengyin 正音)—and with it a particular national identity—to Chinese communities both at home and across the diaspora. Huayu, in turn, designates the localized form in which that standard was actually received and used by the Chinese of Malaya and Singapore: a variety synchronized with, yet distinct from, the metropolitan Guoyu.

The alternation between these terms throughout this article is therefore deliberate rather than careless. As the following discussion will show, the Nanyang Chinese were shaped by the National Language Movement and were conscious of their status as overseas Chinese (*Huaqiao* 華僑), yet they remained subjects of British colonial rule. In this setting the very notion of a "national language" (*Guoyu*) was ambiguous, for it raised the unavoidable question of which nation such a language was meant to serve. To avoid this ambiguity, this article adopts *Huayu*—or, where it reflects contemporaries' looser usage, "Mandarin"—as its default term for the standardized spoken Chinese under discussion, reserving *Guoyu* for those moments where the Republican state's linguistic standard, its claim upon national identity, or its Guomindang ideological framing is specifically at issue. This distinction is not merely terminological housekeeping: the central argument turns precisely on the interaction of these planes—the written vernacularization carried by the press (*baihua*) and the spoken standardization pursued in the schools (*Guoyu* and its local realization as *Huayu* 華語)—which converged in Nanyang so that the "remaking of the tongue" operated in both senses at once, reforming what was written while reorganizing what was spoken. In Maxin under British colonial rule, the "dialect problem" was a critical factor during the introduction of the vernacular, presenting facets markedly different from those in China. The "north-to-south" top-down dissemination of the vernacular movement and linguistic standardization encountered structural challenges. Specifically, many teachers remained accustomed to classical pedagogical modes and felt alienated by the composition and expression of new-style teaching materials. Students, originating from diverse linguistic backgrounds, predominantly used regional dialects as their primary medium of communication, rendering the teaching of the vernacular exceptionally challenging. Consequently, the vernacular in Nanyang faced a dual challenge: externally, it had to contend with English—the dominant language of the colonizer—and internally, it had to overcome the fragmentation caused by dialects. Thus, the vernacular was not only a tool for cultural innovation but also a key catalyst for the integration of the Chinese diasporic community.

Media Vanguard:

The Promotion of Vernacular Chinese in Newspapers and Periodicals

The May Fourth Movement provided a critical discursive stimulus for the Chinese diaspora in Maxin, yet its impact was characterized less by simple patriotic resonance than by a profound drive toward social and cultural reorganization. While the movement in mainland China focused on the critique of traditional cultural systems and the pursuit of modern civil society, its transmission to Nanyang necessitated a process of “localized reinvention” to navigate the complexities of British colonial politics and diverse linguistic practices. For the Maxin Chinese community, the movement acted as a catalyst for re-examining the internal fragmentation of the diaspora. The spiritual aspirations of May Fourth—specifically the emphasis on intellectual enlightenment and the dismantling of old hierarchies—offered a framework for local intellectuals to address the “dialect problem” that had long paralyzed effective communication and social cohesion within the community.

This transition from abstract intellectual critique to concrete social practice centered on the “disciplining of the tongue”. Within the *Maxin* context, the adoption of the vernacular was driven by a pragmatic imperative: to solve the contradiction between entrenched regional dialects and the need for a unified “National Language” capable of fostering a modern collective identity. Rather than a mere extension of China’s literary revolution, the promotion of the vernacular in Nanyang represented a deliberate construction of identity designed to bridge dialectal divides and facilitate social integration. Because this linguistic transformation required a public field for dissemination and imitation, the Chinese press emerged as the primary vanguard. It was through the press that the “wild” and diverse oral traditions of the Nanyang diaspora were first subjected to the standardization and modernization inherent in the post-May Fourth linguistic reform.

Following the pivotal rise of the press in early twentieth-century Nanyang society, the cognitive frameworks of the Chinese diaspora were deeply influenced by information disseminated via media channels from mainland China. As the New Culture Movement underwent distinct transformations in the wake of the May Fourth Movement, these currents of cultural and literary reform met with a swift and enthusiastic response from Nanyang intellectuals.

After the outbreak of the May Fourth Movement in 1919, editors of the Kuala Lumpur-based *Yik Khuan Poh* (or *Yi Qun Bao*) 益群報 immediately expressed their alignment with the advocacy for a “literary revolution” and the promotion of the vernacular emerging from Beijing,² encouraging Nanyang society to

² *Yik Khuan Poh* was founded in Kuala Lumpur on March 24, 1919, just weeks before the outbreak of the May Fourth Movement in Beijing. Established by Wu Dunmin (Goh Tun-ban 吳鈍民) with the financial backing of local businessmen and Chinese nationalists, it quickly became the most influential Chinese-language newspaper in pre-WWII Kuala Lumpur. The publication actively supported the May Fourth protests and the anti-Japanese boycotts. Its swift endorsement of the “literary revolution” and vernacular Chinese reflects the paper’s broader progressive editorial stance, which championed nationalism, social reform, and the intellectual enlightenment of the diaspora in British Malaya. See Ye Zhongling [Yeap Chong Leng 葉鐘鈴], Wu Dunmin yu Jilongpo Yiqun bao” 吳鈍民與吉隆坡《益群報》 [Wu Dunmin and the Kuala Lumpur *Yik Khuan Poh*], in *Xinma Huazu wenshi luncong* 新馬華族文史論叢 “Essays on the history and literature of the Chinese in

emulate these developments. Simultaneously, the *Kok Min Jit Poh* (or Guomin Ribao) 國民日報 announced that it would only accept submissions of “New Literature and Arts” (*xin wenyi* 新文藝),³ no longer entertaining traditional genres such as classical poetry or encomiums. While literary supplements (*fukan* 副刊) had appeared in Nanyang newspapers prior to 1919, many submissions at the time consisted of traditional fiction and classical verse; for instance, a cursory review of the *Chin Nam Poh* (or Zhen Nan Bao) 振南報 circa 1915 reveals a complete absence of vernacular or modern creative elements. Xie Zhengda 謝征達 further observed that after 1919, Chinese periodicals in the region gradually transitioned to a hybrid model, intermingling classical prose with vernacular writing.⁴

Among the various Malayan and Singaporean periodicals, the *Sin Kuo Min Magazine* (or Xin Guomin Zazhi) 新國民雜誌—a supplement to the *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh* (or Xin Guomin Ribao) 新國民日報—is regarded as a crucial site for vernacular creation. The *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh* itself was established as a direct successor to the *Kok Min Jit Poh* (Guomin Ribao) after the latter was suppressed and banned by British colonial authorities due to its radical political posture. Zhou Weijie (Chew Wee Kai) 周維介 critiqued early Chinese newspapers for being “semi-classical and semi-vernacular” and of low literary quality, asserting that it was only with the emergence of supplements like *Sin Kuo Min Magazine* that “a significant volume of vernacular writing surfaced, introducing diverse literary genres and content, which allowed a concrete literature to finally coalesce and established a foundational starting point.”⁵ Compared to the *Lat Pau*, the *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh* exhibited a greater concern for post-May Fourth developments. Its supplements and sections, such as “Current Commentary” (*shiping lan* 時評欄) and the “News” section, featured a significant number of vernacular articles imbued with new thought and a new spirit, marking the inception of Malayan

Malaya and Singapore”, ed. Chen Rongzhao (Tan Eng Chaw) 陳榮照 (Singapore: Xin she chubanshe, 1999), 269–286.

³ *Kok Min Jit Poh* functioned as the official organ of the Singapore branch of the Guomindang. Founded in 1914, the newspaper served as a primary ideological vehicle for disseminating the “Three People’s Principles” and mobilizing the diaspora to support the Republic of China’s nationalist agenda. See Liang Jiajing 梁家逕, *Wusi zai Nanyang de sixiang guiji: yi Xin guomin zazhi (1919–1923) wei tantao duixiang* 五四在南洋的思想軌跡：以《新國民雜誌》(1919–1923) 為探討對象 [The intellectual trajectory of May Fourth in Nanyang: A study of the *Sin Kuo Min Magazine* (1919–1923)], *Malaixiya Huaren yanjiu xuekan* 馬來西亞華人研究學刊 [*Journal of Malaysian Chinese Studies*] 23 (2020): 33–56.

⁴ Xie Zhengda[謝征達 Seah Cheng Ta], *Xin guomin ribao zhong ‘Minguo’ yuansu zai Xinma de yingxiang yu chuanbo* 《新國民日報》中「民國」元素在新馬的影響與傳播 (The Influence and Dissemination of “Republican” Elements in the *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh* in Malaya and Singapore), *Minguo wenxue yu wenhua yanjiu jikan* 民國文學與文化研究集刊 9 (2021): 153.

⁵ Zhou Weijie [周維介 Chew Wee Kai], “Yizuo yuanlin de chengzhang: suxie Xinma Huawen wenxue” 一座園林的成長：速寫新馬華文文學 [The Growth of a Garden: A Sketch of Malayan and Singaporean Chinese Literature], in *Xinma Huawen wenxue sanlun* 新馬華文文學散論 [Essays on Malayan and Singaporean Chinese Literature] (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 1988), 43.

Chinese New Literature history.⁶

The magazine contained a wealth of vernacular fiction, prose, and poetry, consistent with the cultural direction then advocated by the Chinese literary scene. In his inaugural editorial, Editor-in-Chief Zhang Shunai (張叔耐, 1895-1939) explicitly articulated his advocacy for the vernacular:

“Newspapers are instruments for the enlightenment of social customs; they must be made accessible and intelligible to everyone. If they are filled with the ‘archaic particles’ (*zhi hu zhe ye* 之乎者也) of the classics and the moralizing of Confucius and Mencius, they merely please the traditionalists while alienating the progressives—a stance that is ultimately ill-timed. Furthermore, if we merely employ new terminology to discuss equality and freedom for the sake of appearance, we are preaching to the upper classes who already understand such things, while the lower classes remain unenlightened. This does not address the immediate priorities. Our pages should focus on essential and accessible discourse. Given that the nation is in a state of peril, we must advocate for patriotism to awaken the people... The use of the vernacular in this piece serves precisely this purpose.”⁷

Zhang Shunai did not appear to take a definitive stance between the “old” and “new” factions here; rather, he adopted a neutral position, arguing that journalistic language must be simple and direct to benefit the masses. Implicitly, however, as the vernacular is a written language based on the spoken tongue, Zhang was signaling his support for vernacular reform, hoping to leverage the momentum of the May Fourth Movement to further its application in Nanyang. Intellectuals in Nanyang chose this moderate approach to express their positions, partly to reduce resistance from conservative forces and partly because the Nanyang social environment lacked the fervent literary reform climate and the vanguard of intellectuals present in China.

This disposition is also evident in other articles within the *Sin Kuo Min Magazine*, where editors skillfully acted as intermediaries to propagate vernacular literature. In “Western Press on the Efficacy of Vernacular Chinese,” the journal cited the *China Weekly Review*, asserting that vernacular periodicals were indispensable tools for enlightening the public and stimulating national consciousness to save the country from ruin. The author leveled sharp criticism against conservative bureaucrats for suppressing the vernacular to maintain autocratic rule, noting that classical Chinese was both difficult and disconnected from the international community. Only the accessible vernacular, the author argued, could attract the masses—including workers—to understand national affairs. The reported circulation of these publications (between ten and fifty thousand copies) reflected the emergence of a formidable social force, suggesting that the popularity of vernacular periodicals represented the hope for

⁶ Fang Xiu 方修, *Mahua xin wenxue jianshi* 馬華新文學簡史 [*A Brief History of Malayan Chinese New Literature*] (Kuala Lumpur: Malaixiya Huaxiao Dongshi Lianhehui, 1986), 1.

⁷ Zhang Shunai 張叔耐, “Liyan (si xu)” 例言[四續] (Introductory remarks (part 4)), *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh* 新國民日報, October 6, 1919, 2.

China's modernization and survival.⁸ The magazine also featured series such as "The Influence of Vernacular Chinese in Society," introducing the movement in China and validating the positions of cultural leaders like Hu Shih and Chen Duxiu.⁹ Chinese scholar Li Zhi described the struggle between the classical and the vernacular as a "quiet literary revolution"—a marathon-like competition.¹⁰

Generally, when examining early Nanyang Chinese newspapers, the specificity of their content sources cannot be ignored. During its early years, the vernacular content published in the *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh* was not entirely the work of local authors. A significant number of pieces were "reprints" (剪稿, *jiangao*) directly lifted from Chinese New Literature journals such as *New Youth* (*La Jeunesse*) and *The Renaissance* (*Xin Chao* 新潮). These included works like Hu Shih's *Wenxue gailiang chuyi* 文學改良芻議 "Some Tentative Suggestions for the Reform of Literature" or Zhou Zuoren's (周作人, 1885-1967) vernacular translation of the Russian author Fyodor Sologub's (1863-1927) *Tiequan* 鐵圈 "The Hoop".¹¹ This indicates that the local reception of the vernacular and the construction of linguistic consciousness in Nanyang were closely "synchronized" with the dissemination of the New Culture Movement in mainland China, with early linguistic styles largely reflecting an imitation and transplantation of Chinese New Literature.

Adopting the perspective of Chinese linguistic history in Southeast Asia, Diao Yanbin selected the early Singaporean Chinese newspaper *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh* as a case study to trace the initial development of Chinese in the region. Diao noted that despite the prevalence of reprinting and imitation, a comparison of the

⁸ "Xibao lun baihuawen zhi gongxiao" 西報論白話文之功效 [Western press on the efficacy of vernacular Chinese], *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh* 新國民日報, January 26, 1920, 14.

⁹ "Baihuawen zai shehui zhi shili" 白話文在社會之勢力 [The influence of vernacular Chinese in society], *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh*, January 21, 1920, 14; "Baihuawen zai shehui zhi shili (xu)" 白話文在社會之勢力[續] [The influence of vernacular Chinese in society (cont.)], *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh*, January 22, 1920, 14; "Baihuawen zai shehui zhi shili (zai xu)" 白話文在社會之勢力[再續] [The influence of vernacular Chinese in society (part 3)], *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh*, January 23, 1920, 14; "Baihuawen zai shehui zhi shili (san xu)" 白話文在社會之勢力[三續] [The influence of vernacular Chinese in society (part 4)], *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh*, January 24, 1920, 14.

¹⁰ Li Zhi 李志, "Guojing zhiwai de Wusi xin wenxue 'geming'——lun Nanyang diqu Huawen wenxue zhong de 'wenbai zhi zheng'" 國境之外的五四新文學「革命」——論南洋地區華文文學中的「文白之爭」 [The "revolution" of May Fourth New Literature outside the borders: On the "struggle between classical and vernacular" in Nanyang Chinese literature], *Wenye lilun yu piping* 文藝理論與批評 [Literary theory and criticism] 6 (2001): 43.

¹¹ Hu Shih's "Wenxue gailiang chuyi" 文學改良芻議 [Some tentative suggestions for the reform of literature] was published between June 29 and July 17, 1922, while "Tiequan" 鐵圈 [The hoop] appeared on October 22, 1919. Regarding this, see Xu Defa[許德發 Khor Teik Huat], "Zai 'Zuoyi Luxun' lunshu yanbi xia——chulun 1920 niandai Mahua wentan zhong de 'Wusi Luxun'" 在「左翼魯迅」論述掩蔽下——初論 1920 年代馬華文壇中的「五四魯迅」 [Under the shadow of the "Left-wing Lu Xun" discourse: A preliminary discussion on "May Fourth Lu Xun" in the 1920s Malayan Chinese literary world], *Taida wenshi zhhexuebao* 臺大文史哲學報 [Bulletin of the College of Liberal Arts, National Taiwan University] 102 (2024): 112; see also Fyodor Sologub, trans. Zhou Zuoren 周作人, "Tiequan" 鐵圈 [The hoop], *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh* 新國民日報, October 22, 1919, 14.

linguistic landscape between the early 1919–1920 period and 1933 reveals a distinct localized evolution in Nanyang Chinese, even as it “followed the lead” of the mainland. Diao categorized this development into “four trends”: neutralization, dialectalization, Europeanization, and standardization. Specifically, these localized changes signaled the budding of a native “Huayu” (language of the Chinese 華語) spurred by the National Language Movement.¹²

Over time, linguistic features derived from the Fujian and Guangdong dialects began to permeate the written language. Diao points to the use of terms uncommon in standard Mandarin, such as employing *you* 幼 for “fine/slender,” or non-standard lexemes like *zhugong* 豬公 and *zhuniang* 豬娘. Furthermore, Europeanization—manifested through code-mixing between Chinese and English—was also observed. In sum, Diao identified within the *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh* a “dynamic view of the formation and development of Huayu,” a “synchronized view of early Huayu and early Guoyu,” and a “localized view of Huayu development.” This suggests that while early Nanyang Chinese was significantly influenced by the “reprint” dissemination of the Chinese New Literature Movement, by the 1930s, it had absorbed elements from dominant local dialects and foreign languages to form a distinct linguistic variant—one synchronized with modern Chinese in China yet possessing clear Nanyang characteristics.

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, the May Fourth Movement of 1919 did not immediately implant New Culture concepts into the Nanyang world and its local society. It could be argued that the social context and historical milieu of the time did not provide Nanyang literati with sufficient “nourishment”—concepts such as “enlightenment,” the “distinction between old and new,” “vernacular Chinese,” or “New Literature”—to fully grasp the May Fourth construct they were attempting to build. Consequently, the New Culture ideas that coalesced after May Fourth did not instantly migrate to Nanyang along with the movement’s patriotic fervor; instead, they gradually cultivated an atmosphere for exploring these discourses through periodicals.

Qiu Kewei (邱克威 Khoo Kiak-wee)’s research observes that newspaper advertisements in the 1910s utilized a style that mixed semi-classical prose with regional dialects, a widespread social writing habit in Malayan and Singaporean society that reflected the enduring influence of dialects.¹³ However, this situation improved significantly after 1925. The emergence of literary supplements in the Chinese newspapers of Malaya and Singapore between 1925 and 1933 propelled the development of literary creation. The surge in the number of Chinese newspapers and supplements during this phase, along with a marked improvement in literary quality, was closely linked to the popularization of vernacular Chinese.

¹²Diao Yanbin 刁晏斌, “Dongnanya Huayu chuqi fazhan bianhua kaocha——yi Xin guomin ribao wei li” 東南亞華語初期發展變化考察——以《新國民日報》為例 [An investigation into the early development and changes of Southeast Asian Chinese: A case study of the Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh], *Global Chinese* 7, no. 1 (2021): 77.

¹³ Qiu Kewei [邱克威 Khoo Kiak-wee], “Er-zhan qian ‘Guoyu yundong’ zai Xinma shehui de kaizhan yu puji” 二戰前「國語運動」在新馬社會的開展與普及 [The development and popularization of the “National Language Movement” in Malaya and Singapore society before WWII], *Global Chinese* 6, no. 1 (2020): 117.

Nevertheless, the introduction and promotion of these periodicals represented only the first step in linguistic transformation. Once the seeds of the vernacular had been sown in Nanyang soil through the press, the question remained: how would local intellectuals transition from mere readers and reprinters to creators capable of using this new language for ideological expression and identity construction? This leads to the critical pivot from media propaganda to literary practice.

Literary Practice: Stylistic Transformation from Imitation to Localization

The prevalence of “reprinting” in early *Maxin* newspapers was fundamentally rooted in the nascent state of the local literary environment. Scholars of Malayan and Singaporean Chinese literature generally define the genesis of this field as occurring around 1919 or 1920.¹⁴ This suggests that the fervent New Culture Movement in China coincided with the embryonic phase of *Maxin* Chinese literature. Consequently, even when local intellectuals sought to respond actively to the May Fourth Movement, they often lacked the necessary capacity. Beyond a small stratum of well-educated individuals, the majority of the local diaspora consisted of the laboring classes engaged in manual work, who possessed neither the time nor the requisite skills to participate in literary movements, let alone contribute to the construction of literary theory.

After 1919, however, the frequency of vernacular Chinese in genres such as fiction, prose, poetry, and drama increased significantly within new-style periodicals. Among these, prose emerged as the earliest genre to mature and became the dominant literary form during the foundational period of *Maxin* Chinese literature—particularly political commentary. Compared to pure literature, the writing techniques required for such topical commentary were more accessible; unlike the construction of rigorous literary theory, it did not demand highly systematic logical frameworks. Thus, prose became a prolific medium that served both the expression of sentiment and the critique of contemporary social issues.

In addition to prose, vernacular fiction served as a vital vehicle for promoting and disseminating *Maxin* Chinese New Literature. The Kuala Lumpur-based *Yik Khuan Poh* was a major stronghold for vernacular fiction; the *Xin xiaoshuo hui* 新小說會 “New Fiction Society”, founded on August 16, 1919, is regarded as the starting point for vernacular fiction in the Nanyang region. According to scholarly statistics, between 1919 and the end of 1924, the *Sin Kuo Min Magazine* published over three hundred fictional pieces, with vernacular fiction accounting for

¹⁴ Fang Xiu (1922–2010) points out that if 1919 is taken as the starting point for the history of Malayan Chinese New Literature, it is based on the publication of the *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh* and its supplement, the *Sin Kuo Min Magazine*, which marked the emergence of a substantial volume of vernacular prose imbued with new thought and a new spirit. If 1920 is taken as the starting point, it is based on the publication of pure literary works. For details, see Fang Xiu 方修, *Mahua wenyi sichao de yanbian* 馬華文藝思潮的演變 [The evolution of Malayan Chinese literary thought] (Singapore: Wanli wenhua, 1970), 27; see also Fang Xiu 方修, *Mahua xin wenxue shigao* 馬華新文學史稿 [A draft history of Malayan Chinese New Literature] (Singapore: Shijie shuju, 1975).

approximately 75% of the total.¹⁵ During the same period, the proportion of vernacular fiction in *Yik Khuan Poh* reached nearly 88%.¹⁶ While these works offered sharp critiques of reality, vernacular fiction faced the dilemma of robust creative output coupled with weak theoretical foundations, leading to a state of “malnutrition” in the revolution of literary language, which ultimately hindered its sustained development.

These locally produced literary works frequently exhibited a potent Chinese consciousness and patriotic fervor, which reflected the authors’ underlying identity. For instance, in an editorial published in the press, Editor-in-Chief Zhang Shunai observed:

“Though we reside here in Nanyang, our roots ultimately remain in China. We are, after all, of the Han ethnicity and citizens of the Republic of China. Although we currently work within the territories of the British and the Dutch, we are essentially guests in a foreign land... As the ancients aptly said: ‘A tree may grow a thousand feet high, but the falling leaves always return to the roots.’ If it is so for a tree, how much more so for a man?”¹⁷

Consequently, when China’s interests were compromised, leading to the outbreak of the May Fourth Movement, these Chinese residents in Nanyang felt a profound obligation to support the student movements in their homeland. On the other hand, these works also reflected an increasing emotional attachment among the immigrant intelligentsia toward their local surroundings. They grew progressively concerned with Nanyang’s social issues and spiritual life, critiquing local feudal conservatism and colonial rule while expressing sympathy for the hardships faced by the lower-class diaspora.

Wang Fansen notes that “the May Fourth Movement ignited a trend of concern for national affairs and ‘new thought,’ precipitating a reading revolution. The number of readers of books and newspapers surged, and the ability to read new publications became a marker of a new orientation; it also profoundly influenced the life and behavior of the youth, who often derived new attitudes and modes of conduct from the New Literature.”¹⁸ However, literature remained the domain of a literate elite. While the May Fourth New Culture provided a direct impetus for the birth of Malayan Chinese New Literature, the grand vision of “remolding the tongue”—the implantation of a new standardized language into the oral memory of the broader Chinese youth—could not rely solely on the appeal of literature. It required more coercive and institutionalized means: formal school education. Yet, as this linguistic revolution migrated from the printed page to the classroom, the resistance it encountered was no longer abstract cultural debate, but the tangible

¹⁵ Li Zhi 李志, “Jingwai de xin wenxue yuandi: Wusi shiqi Nanyang diqu wenyi fukan *Xin guomin zazhi* yanjiu” 境外的新文學園地：五四時期南洋地區文藝副刊《新國民雜誌》研究 [New literature grounds outside the borders: A study of the literary supplement *Sin Kuo Min Magazine* in Nanyang during the May Fourth period], *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan* 中國現代文學研究叢刊 [*Modern Chinese Literature Studies*] 6 (2001): 217-231.

¹⁶ Li, “Guojing zhiwai de Wusi xin wenxue ‘geming’”, 43–54.

¹⁷ “Shelun” 社論 [Editorial], *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh* 新國民日報, October 1, 1919, 1.

¹⁸ Wang Fansen 王汎森, “Wusi yundong yu shenghuo shijie de bianhua” 五四運動與生活世界的變化 [The May Fourth Movement and changes in the lifeworld], *Ershiyi shiji* 二十一世紀 113 (2009): 47.

barriers of dialectal habits and a scarcity of qualified teachers.

Educational Transformation:
From Dialect-based *Sishu* to National Language Schools

Throughout, the May Fourth Movement is treated less as an absolute origin than as an intensifying catalyst and, in retrospect, an organizing framework. Several developments traced here — late-Qing educational reform, the founding of Chinese schools, the introduction of 'standard pronunciation' (zhengyin), and the rivalry of reformist and revolutionary networks — clearly predate 1919. The post-May Fourth vernacular movement did not create these trends so much as accelerate, radicalize, and retrospectively unify them under a single reformist banner. Zheng Liangshu (鄭良樹, Tay Lian Soo) posits that the rivalry between the Royalists and the Revolutionaries in Nanyang during the late nineteenth century undoubtedly served as a catalyst for the development of Chinese education. For instance, the Confucian School in Kuala Lumpur, funded by Loke Yew (陸佑, 1846–1917), was once commemorated with a poem by Kang Youwei. While Zheng expresses reservations regarding claims of Kang's direct participation in the founding of numerous schools, he acknowledges that Kang's Royalist disciples, such as Liu Shiji (劉士驥, 1857–1909) and Ou Jujia (歐桀甲, 1870–1911), were instrumental in the establishment of the Confucian School.¹⁹ Conversely, although Hu Hanmin publicly stated that Sun Yat-sen lacked the resources to found schools in Nanyang, Zheng views the efforts of Sun and the Revolutionaries—encompassing newspaper publication, book distribution, public speaking, and theatrical performances—as a new impetus for Nanyang Chinese education.²⁰ Furthermore, the involvement of the Revolutionary party and the United Chinese Library (*Tongmenghui* 同盟會 affiliates) in the affairs of schools such as the Chinese Girls' School, Nan Hua Girls' School, Nanyang Girls' High School, and The Chinese High School is affirmed by Zheng, who even asserts that “the influence of the Revolutionary faction far exceeded that of the Royalists.”²¹ However, a deeper analysis of the historical context reveals a more nuanced reality: Nanyang society provided a space where the Revolutionaries could more freely extend their influence, given their inability to establish schools openly in mainland China or Hong Kong. Consequently, these early Nanyang schools were, to some extent, products of political competition between late-Qing factions.

Nevertheless, these early schools, spurred by political dynamics, faced a severe practical challenge in their daily operations: linguistic fragmentation. Early Nanyang Chinese society was composed of multiple dialect groups, and the medium of instruction in schools was predominantly the respective regional dialects. This led to a situation where “the lack of a common tongue resulted in mutual misunderstanding. Due to these cognitive barriers, boundaries between

¹⁹ Zheng Liangshu [鄭良樹 Tay Lian Soo], *Malaixiya Huawen jiaoyu fazhanshi* 馬來西亞華文教育發展史 [History of the development of Chinese education in Malaysia], (Kuala Lumpur: Malaixiya Huaxiao Jiaoshihui Zonghui) vol. 1, 119–122.

²⁰ Zheng, *Malaixiya Huawen jiaoyu fazhanshi*, vol.1, 130–140.

²¹ Zheng, *Malaixiya Huawen jiaoyu fazhanshi*, vol.1, 143–145.

provinces, counties, and villages remained rigid, like heavily fortified fortresses.”²² This linguistic divide prevented effective internal communication among various dialect groups, making the selection of a common language essential for resolving communicative impasses.

In seeking a *lingua franca*, Nanyang Chinese had to weigh external colonial realities against internal cultural preservation. The educational choices of Nanyang Chinese were not driven solely by a commitment to National Language *Guoyu* education. From a pragmatic standpoint, as noted in a late-nineteenth-century editorial in the *Lat Pau*:

“People in this settlement often prefer their children to study English, while neglecting Chinese. Many send their children to *yishu* 義塾, “charity schools” to recite Chinese texts only because they are too young to begin English studies. They send them there for a few years to instill some discipline or perhaps to acquire a rudimentary knowledge of Chinese characters; in truth, their aspirations for their children lie with the former, not the latter. While it is said that English is currently most esteemed—especially as this settlement is located abroad under British jurisdiction—being Chinese, one should regard Chinese as the foundation. To abandon this in pursuit of Western learning alone is to ‘discard the root and chase the branch.’”²³

Consequently, local Chinese began to recognize the importance of returning to their “ancestral language” (祖語 *zuyu*). Notably, one of the primary advocates for this was Lim Boon Keng (林文慶, 1869-1957), a Baba who originally spoke no Chinese.²⁴ Through public lectures and articles, Lim encouraged the Straits Chinese to engage with Chinese culture. He personally established Chinese language classes in his home and called upon various clan associations (會館 *huiguan*) to offer such courses,²⁵ not just for regular students but for the general public. Thus, “commoner education” (平民教育 *pingmin jiaoyu*) became pivotal for local Chinese in promoting a de-factionalized ethnic language education.

²² “Guoyu yu tusheng” 國語與土生 [National language and the local-born], *Lat Pau* 叻報, May 8, 1922, 2.

²³ “Yidian zhangcheng yi shan wei zhengdun shuo” 義塾章程宜善為整頓說 [On the proper reorganization of charity school regulations], *Lat Pau* 叻報, January 19, 1889, 1.

²⁴ The term “Baba” (峇峇), also known as Peranakan Chinese or Straits-born Chinese, refers to the descendants of early Chinese immigrants who settled in the Malay Archipelago—particularly in British Malaya (such as Malacca and Penang) and Singapore. Over generations, they assimilated with the local population, adopting elements of Malay and Indonesian customs, cuisine, and dress, while still retaining traditional Chinese religious and familial beliefs. Culturally and linguistically distinct from the newly arrived, China-born immigrants (Xinke 新客), the Babas typically spoke a unique creole known as Baba Malay or were English-educated under British colonial rule. Also see Xu Weixiong [徐威雄 Ser Wue Hiong], “Maxin Huayu de lishi kaocha: cong shijiu shiji mo dao 1919 nian” 馬新華語的歷史考察: 從十九世紀末到 1919 年 [A historical investigation of Malayan and Singaporean Chinese: From the late nineteenth century to 1919], *Malaixiya Huaren yanjiu xuekan* 馬來西亞華人研究學刊 15 (2012): 101.

²⁵ Li Yuanjin 李元瑾 [Lee Guan Kin], *Lin Wenqing de sixiang: Zhong-Xi wenhua de huiliu yu maodun* 林文慶的思想: 中西文化的匯流與矛盾 [The thoughts of Lim Boon Keng: The convergence and contradiction of Chinese and Western cultures] (Singapore: Xinjiapo Yazhou yanjiu xuehui, 1990), 65–66.

Simultaneously, the press began calling for the dismantling of dialect barriers and the establishment of a unified linguistic standard. One author passionately argued in the newspapers: "Whether it be essays, books, newspapers, magazines, fiction, advertisements, or primary school textbooks—all must be written in *Guoyu*. Thus, what is written will be candid, and what is read will be refreshing."²⁶ In this context, *Guoyu* referred to the vernacular; given the large numbers of lower-class diaspora members engaged in manual labor, the accessibility of the vernacular made it more acceptable to them. Over time, *Huayu* and the vernacular came to be recognized by the grassroots as a viable "ancestral language."

This yearning for a unified language was gradually institutionalized within the formal education system of Nanyang following political shifts in China. The "New Policies" (*xinzheng* 新政) of 1904 not only transformed the linguistic landscape of mainland China but also influenced the "standard pronunciation" (*zhengyin* 正音) in Nanyang society. Liao Xiaojing (廖小菁 Liao Hsiao-ching) notes that under the influence of the 1904 *Guimao* Education System, some schools began replacing dialects with "Chinese standard pronunciation" (later known as *Guoyu* or *Huayu*) as the primary medium of instruction. This shift influenced the ethnic politics of the Nanyang Chinese community and further consolidated the Chinese collective identity. Interestingly, contrary to traditional narratives, Liao observes that the foundations of the modern Chinese educational model in Nanyang emerged from the collision between the Nanyang Confucian Movement and new/old cultural trends. Scholars such as Zheng Liangshu, Liao Xiaojing, and Zhang Xiaowei (張曉威, Teoh Hooi-see) all agree that the Chung Hwa School in Penang was the first in Malaya to adopt Mandarin, *Huayu* 華語, or standard pronunciation as its medium of instruction.²⁷

As early as 1904, in the same reformist climate as the *Guimao* system, the Nanyang merchant tycoon Zhang Bishi (張弼士 Cheong Fatt Tze, 1840-1916) held a convention in Penang and resolved to utilize the Pingzhang Town Hall 平

²⁶ "Lun Guoyu de yaosu" 論國語的要素 [On the elements of the national language], *Lat Pau* 叻報, March 15, 1920, 2.

²⁷ Zheng, Malaixiya Huawen jiaoyu fazhanshi, vol. 1, 90-112; Liao Xiaojing [廖小菁 Liao Hsiao-ching], "Jindai Nanyang de Kongjiao yundong yu Huawen jiaoyu: yi Binlangyu Kongshengmiao Zhonghua xuexiao wei zhongxin de kaocha (1904-1923)" 近代南洋的孔教運動與華文教育——以檳榔嶼孔聖廟中華學校為中心的考察 (1904-1923) [The Confucian movement and Chinese education in modern Nanyang: A study centered on the Chung Hwa School of the Confucian Temple in Penang (1904-1923)], in *Wusi yundong yu Zhongguo zongjiao de tiaoshi yu fazhan* 五四運動與中國宗教的調適與發展 [The May Fourth Movement and the adaptation and development of Chinese religion], eds. Lu Miaofen 呂妙芬 and Paul R. Katz 康豹 (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica 中央研究院近代史研究所, 2020), 194; Zhang Xiaowei 張曉威 [Teoh Hooi-see], "Shengjiao nanji: Wanqing Binlangyu Zhonghua xuexiao de chuangban jiqi yingxiang" 「聲教南暨」：晚清檳榔嶼中華學校的創辦及其影響 [Spreading education and culture to the South: The establishment of the Penang Chung Hwa School in the late Qing dynasty and its influence], in *Qiaomin jiaoyu yanjiu lunwen ji* 僑民教育研究論文集 [Collected essays on overseas Chinese education studies], ed. Xia Chenghua 夏誠華 (Hsinchu: Center for Overseas Chinese Studies, Hsuan Chuang University, 2005), 117-136.

章公館 to establish a school teaching in standard pronunciation..²⁸ Meanwhile, the Tsui Ying School 萃英書院, which had been a traditional private academy using the Four Books and Five Classics as teaching materials from 1854 to 1912, attempted reforms during the Republican era but was eventually supplanted by the rising tide of *Huayu* and *Guoyu*.²⁹

However, linguistic habits do not change overnight; in the practical implementation of *Guoyu*, dialects continued to play a significant role. Utilizing the *Nanyang lüxing ji* (*Travels in Nanyang*), a record of an investigation conducted in the summer of 1919 by Hou Hongjian (侯鴻鑒, 1872–1961), then-principal of Jimei Normal School 集美師範學校, Xu Weixiong organized Hou's experiences visiting Chinese schools across Malaya and Singapore.³⁰ He found that while over half of the visited schools had a *Guoyu* curriculum, Hou observed that some schools still used dialects for instruction in lower grades.³¹ For instance, at the Thong Shin School (同善學校), "first year class was explained in Hakka"; at the Eok Chye School (育才學校), "first and second year classes were explained in Hokkien";³² and the Chong Cheng School (崇正學校) in Singapore retained entirely dialect-based instruction.

Despite these lingering dialectal remnants during the transition, the establishment of the Republican system and the post-May Fourth promotion of the vernacular eventually rendered *Guoyu* instruction a powerful tool against sectionalism (*bangpai zhuyi* 幫派主義). Following the founding of the Republic of China in 1912, most Chinese schools in Nanyang were influenced by contemporary educational reforms, switching to *Guoyu* as the medium of instruction and gradually replacing classical texts with vernacular textbooks. This was a prerequisite that allowed Nanyang to synchronize its vernacular reform with China's May Fourth Movement. By the 1930s, Chinese schools in Malaya and Singapore had largely implemented *Guoyu* instruction—at a pace even faster than some schools in China.³³ Crucially, this shift was driven not merely by nationalist sentiment but by practical local considerations. Nanyang educational groups actively promoted *Guoyu* to dilute the isolation and lack of coordination between different dialect factions. Previously, overseas Chinese education was fragmented by dialects: Hokkien emigrants founded schools for Hokkien students, and

²⁸ Liao, "Jindai Nanyang de Kongjiao yundong yu Huawen jiaoyu", 196.

²⁹ Xu Suwu [許甦吾 Koh Soh Goh], *Xinjiapo Huaqiao jiaoyu quanmao* 新嘉坡華僑教育全貌 [A comprehensive view of Chinese overseas education in Singapore] (Singapore: Nanyang shuju, 1949), 16.

³⁰ Hou Hongjian 侯鴻鑒, *Nanyang lüyou ji* 南洋旅遊記 [Records of travels in the South Seas] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1920), vol. 1, "Xuyan" 緒言 [Introduction], 1b.

³¹ Xu Weixiong, "Zhanqian Maxin Huayu de tuiguang yu chuanbo" 戰前馬新華語的推廣與傳播 [The promotion and dissemination of Mandarin in pre-war Malaya and Singapore], *Global Chinese* 6, no. 1 (2020): 99-114.

³² Hou, *Nanyang lüyou ji*, 31b.

³³ Lu Hu 魯虎, *Xinma Huaren de Zhongguoguan zhi yanjiu* (1949–1965) 新馬華人的中國觀之研究 (1949–1965) [A study of the Chinese outlook of Chinese in Malaya and Singapore (1949–1965)] (Singapore: Bafang wenhua, 2014), 40.

Cantonese emigrants served their own dialect group. Singapore's five major dialect groups began creating schools through their respective clan associations, such as the Ying Sin School (Ka Yin), Tuan Mong School (Teochew), Tao Nan School (Hokkien), Yeung Ching School (Cantonese), and Ai Tong School (Hainan).

When Tan Kah Kee (陳嘉庚, 1874–1961) founded the Tao Nan School 道南學校 in Singapore, he sought to break this tradition; after 1916, he hired a non-Hokkien (Cantonese) principal, Xiong Shangfu 熊尚父, and invited numerous non-Hokkien teachers.³⁴ In June 1929, during an education conference in Shanghai involving overseas Chinese, a proposal for the advancement of overseas Chinese education was introduced, emphasizing that these schools should use *Guoyu* as the medium of instruction to dismantle provincial and factional mentalities.³⁵ Here, the promotion of the vernacular became a key factor in encouraging Chinese people to view *Guoyu* and the vernacular as a link to national sentiment; “Huayu” thus became the internal *lingua franca* of the overseas Chinese community.³⁶ While the diaspora had previously identified themselves primarily by their provincial origins, the advent of vernacular *Huayu* made the identity of “Chinese Overseas” (*Huaqiao* 華僑) more distinct. The critical factor in accelerating this national identity in Nanyang society was the penetration of *Guoyu* education into the laboring classes.

Social Penetration:

Night Schools, the National Language Movement, and National Identity

Had the National Language Movement remained confined to formal schooling, its impact would have been limited to the elite or school-aged children. To achieve a genuine shift in identity within Nanyang society, *Guoyu* education had to permeate the vast laboring classes. Xu Weixiong observes that following the May Fourth Movement, the learning environments for the National Language Movement expanded from a minority of young students in schools to the general public, primarily through night schools, tutorial classes, and national language training centers. These programs were organized not only by schools but also by clan associations, book societies, and temples. While these courses varied in scale and professional rigor, they collectively functioned as extracurricular supplementary education, aiming to enable Chinese people beyond the student population to achieve proficiency in *Guoyu*.

However, *Huayu* education in these settings still relied heavily on regional dialects for explanation. For instance, the Kwong Siew Free School 慶肇義學 in Kuala Lumpur specified that its introductory courses would be explained in Cantonese while the texts were recited in the national pronunciation. Their motivation was not a bias toward dialects but a consideration for English-educated

³⁴ Yan Qinghuang 顏清煌 [Yen Ching-hwang], *Haiwai Huaren shijie: Zuqun, renwu yu zhengzhi* 海外華人世界：族群、人物與政治 [The Chinese overseas world: Ethnicity, biography, and politics] (Singapore: National University of Singapore; Bafang wenhua, 2017), 102–103.

³⁵ “Benpo gexiao dui Nanyang Huaqiao jiaoyu huiyi zhi tian” 本坡各校對南洋華僑教育會議之提案 [Proposals from local schools for the Nanyang Overseas Chinese Education Conference], *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商報, May 20, 1929, 22.

³⁶ Xu, “Maxin Huayu de lishi kaocha,” 120.

Chinese,³⁷ echoing Lim Boon Keng's advocacy. Thus, the emergence of these National Language classes in Malaya and Singapore was designed to accommodate Chinese descendants from English schools, as evidenced by the similar mission of the Seng Cheong Night School 晨鐘夜學 in Malacca.³⁸

While analyzing recruitment advertisements for night schools and “popular schools” (通俗學校 *tongsu xuexiao*) across the region, Xu Defa (許德發 Khor Teik Huat) notes not only how the prevailing trend of teaching *Guoyu* drove the National Language Movement in Nanyang, but also how these popular schools manifested a “pro-laborer” ideological tendency characteristic of the post-May Fourth era.³⁹ Xu further identifies a neglected metric of the vernacular and National Language movements in Southeast Asia: the method by which the May Fourth enlightenment reached the grassroots. In Southeast Asian society, this was achieved by providing educational opportunities to the laboring classes, with night schools and preparatory schools serving as the primary conduits.⁴⁰

In October 1919, a report (likely an advertisement) titled “Chinese People Should Pay Attention to the National Language” appeared in a Penang publication.⁴¹

“The languages of our nation are indeed fragmented, rendering us unable to link our sentiments; though residing in the same house, we view each other as strangers. To rectify this ill today, it is essential that schools nationwide adopt a common pronunciation—a method that grasps the core of the issue. Nevertheless, progress outside the academic sphere remains slow. We must establish specialized National Language night schools to facilitate learning during public leisure hours, which neither interferes with one's livelihood nor hinders the goal of popularization. From then on, our countrymen shall never suffer from emotional estrangement.”

“We have heard that Mr. Yin Chuande, a talented youth from Jiangsu, currently serves as a professor at a commercial school with excellent character and scholarship. Having been raised in the capital, he is exceptionally skilled in the National Language. He has now selflessly established a course at the Aik Thee School to teach *Guoyu*; since its commencement, it has flourished daily. As enrollment is limited, those aspiring to learn should not miss this opportunity.”⁴²

³⁷ Xu, “Maxin Huayu de lishi kaocha”, 104.

³⁸ Xu, “Maxin Huayu de lishi kaocha”, 106.

³⁹ Xu Defa 許德發 [Khor Teik Huat], “Wusi shiqi Malaiya Huaren shehui de 'zouxian diceng' yundong yu tongsu xuexiao zhi xingqi” 五四時期馬來亞華人社會的「走向底層」運動與通俗學校之興起 [The “going to the grassroots” movement and the rise of popular schools in Malayan Chinese society during the May Fourth period], *Jiaoyu yanjiu jikan* 教育研究集刊 70, no. 3 (2024): 99.

⁴⁰ Xu, “Wusi shiqi Malaiya Huaren shehui de 'zouxian diceng' yundong yu tongsu xuexiao zhi xingqi”, 100.

⁴¹ Xu Weixiong 徐威雄, “Zhanqian Maxin Huayu de tuiguang yu chuanbo” 戰前馬新華語的推廣與傳播 [The promotion and dissemination of Mandarin in pre-war Malaya and Singapore], 101–102. It should be noted that Xu misidentifies the date of the relevant article as October 3, 1919; the actual report appeared on October 13, 1919. Furthermore, rather than being a mere commentary calling for the establishment of night schools, this material was an invitation for non-student readers to attend the Tse (Xie) Family Yuk Choi (Yucai) School 謝氏育才學校 to study under Yin Chuande 殷傳德, a teacher from Jiangsu.

⁴² “Zhongguoren yi zhuyi Guoyu” 中國人宜注意國語 [Chinese people should pay attention to the

Such efforts to popularize *Guoyu* through night schools yielded significant results, as documented by contemporary observers. Chinese individuals traveling or working in the south noted the efficacy of National Language instruction in their travelogues: “Presently, *Guoyu* is used everywhere. Merchants and students alike can speak fluent Mandarin, and thus the barriers between different dialect groups are gradually being dismantled.”⁴³ Similarly, the Buddhist scholar Liu Renhang (1881–1938) stated in his travelogue: “The rigorous implementation of National Language unification has swept away tribal dialects, which acted as barriers to emotion.”⁴⁴

Furthermore, during his 1919 tour of Nanyang, Hou Hongjian visited schools of various factional backgrounds, such as the Khek-led (Hakka) Qifa School—directed by Chen Shoumin (1893–1986), a participant in the Second Revolution—as well as the Yeung Ching School 養正學校 and Nan Hua Girls’ School 南華女校 (Cantonese), and the Tuan Mong School 端蒙學校 (Teochew).⁴⁵ He noted that these schools had uniformly switched to *Huayu* as the medium of instruction. Regarding the Qifa School 啟發學校, Hou observed: “This school was originally founded by people from Dabu; thus, there are twenty-two students of Dabu origin, yet the faculty has collectively switched to Mandarin for instruction. This change was implemented following Principal Chen’s arrival.”⁴⁶ Evidently, these dialect-based schools had aligned themselves with the National Language Movement after the founding of the Republic. Students began studying “National Literature” (*guowen*) and receiving “National Education” (*guomin jiaoyu* 國民教育), simultaneously reshaping their identities and connecting to the post-Republican concept of national belonging.

While the vernacular movement in post-May Fourth China served as a means for the populace to enter social discourse, the parallel National Language Movement in Nanyang performed a more specialized role in ethnic integration amidst provincial fragmentation. Wu Xiao-bao (吳小保 Goh Siew Poh)’s research highlights a critical transition in Nanyang Chinese society at the turn of the century: Chinese immigrants, originally from different provinces and divided by dialectal barriers, underwent a transformation. Driven by the promotion of a “common Chinese language” and the dissemination of political ideologies by Chinese reformers and revolutionaries through schools, newspapers, and associations, they gradually transcended traditional boundaries based on dialect groups. This process culminated in a collective identification with the Chinese state, completing the shift from local communal groups to a national community.⁴⁷

National Language], *Pinang Sin Pao* 檳城新報, October 13, 1919, 6.

⁴³ Liang Shaowen 梁紹文, *Nanyang lüxing manji* 南洋旅行漫記 [Casual records of travels in the South Seas] (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1933), 32.

⁴⁴ Liu Renhang 劉仁航, *Nanyang youji* 南洋遊記 [Records of travels in the South Seas] (Singapore: Nanyang bianyi she 南洋編譯社, 1935), “Xu” 序 [Preface], 2.

⁴⁵ Hou Hongjian, *Nanyang lüyou ji*, vol. 2, 8–11.

⁴⁶ Hou Hongjian, *Nanyang lüyou ji*, vol. 2, 10.

⁴⁷ Wu Xiaobao [吳小保 Goh Siew Poh], “Guoyu yundong de duo-chongxing: Ma, Xin Hua Wu yuwen jingying de yuyan linian fenxi” 國語運動的多重性：馬、新華巫語文菁英的語言理念

Whether in terms of linguistic or cultural development, the literature and vernacular of Nanyang—while imagining nationalism—combined with local societal developments to facilitate a transregional nationalist sentiment, which served as a catalyst for reform within the Nanyang diaspora. However, behind the cultural movements led by mainland Chinese intellectuals lay a desire to build China into a modern nation-state. In contrast, the internally complex Nanyang Chinese intelligentsia, living under British colonial rule in Malaya, had to address local issues while professing “patriotism” through the vernacular and New Literature. This tension between “Chinese national identity” and “Nanyang local survival” ensured that the popularization of the vernacular in Nanyang was not merely a linguistic standardization movement, but a profound exercise in complex social reorganization. This arguably constitutes the unique historical structure presented by Nanyang society in its engagement with grand discourses such as May Fourth, modernity, and the New Culture.

分析 [The multiplicity of the National Language Movement: An analysis of the linguistic ideologies of Chinese and Malay language elites in Malaya and Singapore], *Taiwan Dongnanya xuekan* 臺灣東南亞學刊 [Taiwan Journal of Southeast Asian Studies] 11, no. 2 (2016): 131.

Conclusion

Through the preceding investigation, we are able to re-examine the cascading impact of the May Fourth New Culture Movement in Nanyang. When discussing the genesis of Malayan Chinese literature, previous scholars have often relied on a linear “impact-response” paradigm, focusing on the attitudes of a small elite toward vernacular Chinese. In doing so, they have neglected a more fundamental physiological and social reality: the popularization of the vernacular in Nanyang was, at its core, an arduous remolding of the “tongue.”

This movement was not merely a substitution of written language; rather, it constituted a unifying disciplining of the intricate dialectal ecology of Nanyang. From the initial press media practices of “reprinting” Chinese articles and imitating their stylistic forms, to literary creators beginning to articulate local sentiments, and ultimately to the institutionalized promotion of *Guoyu* education in Chinese schools and night classes—the native, “wild,” and diverse dialectal tongues of Nanyang Chinese were mobilized by post-May Fourth New Culture ideologies through these superimposed layers of social penetration. These once freely growing dialectal tongues were ultimately integrated within the tide of modernization and standardization. As we have observed, this linguistic pivot was not undertaken solely for literary reform, but more importantly, to construct an imagined modern nation-state.

However, this “remolding” unfolded within a highly specific temporal and spatial context: Malaya under British colonial rule. Chinese intellectuals here confronted a dual pull: on the one hand, they sought to respond to the distant Chinese aspiration of building a modern nation-state by correcting their tongues and vociferating “patriotism”; on the other hand, their physical reality and the colonial context of Nanyang compelled this newly remolded tongue to narrate local stories and address complex local social realities.

This ‘Chinese’ (*Zhonghua* 中華) identity was neither singular nor uniform. The label gathered several overlapping and at times competing affiliations: political identification with the Republic of China, a broader cultural Chineseness, overseas-Chinese (*Huaqiao*) solidarity, enduring dialect-group loyalties, and an emergent local Nanyang subjectivity shaped by colonial conditions. Linguistic standardization did not dissolve these into a homogeneous whole; it supplied a common medium through which they could be negotiated. The ‘transregional *Zhonghua* identity’ described here is therefore best read as a layered and contingent formation, unevenly distributed across class, education, dialect background, and political orientation.”

Therefore, the so-called “Nanyang New Culture” was not a simple replica of the Chinese May Fourth Movement. Instead, it was an active fabrication of identity undertaken by local Chinese to bridge dialectal divides and cohere the diaspora. As growing numbers of Nanyang speakers acquired a more unified mode of articulation, a transregional “Chinese” (*Zhonghua*) identity began to take tangible, if uneven, shape through this historical experiment of the oral and the auditory.

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