

# Introduction

Shakespeare's Ferdinand lamented that all his linguistic learning went to waste on the isle on which he was shipwrecked: "My language? Heavens...I am the best of them that speaks this speech, Were I but where 'tis spoken" (*The Tempest*, act 1, scene 2). Some sentiment approaching this must have been harbored by the many cultivated Cantonese literati as they strove to win careers as scholar-officials in the foreign linguistic environments of the dynastic capitals of imperial China. For all their credible book learning, they labored under the social disadvantage of being stamped as culturally backward and racially distinct southerners by a refined northern coterie of insiders. Ethnic prejudices and cultural barriers, as much as linguistic handicaps, had to be surmounted by the would-be southern entrant to the world of Chinese officialdom.

In spite of all of this, Cantonese literati, especially in the later imperial periods of the Ming and Qing dynasties, produced much scholarship on classical exegesis, bibliography, history, religion, and moral and political philosophy, as well as creative contributions to belles-lettres. In another dimension, the same Cantonese character that fueled the intellect in the world of scholarship was evinced by their common country cousins who contributed much to the opening up of both the American West in the nineteenth century and the closed Chinese society in the early twentieth. This type of character, as manifested in traditional Chinese poetry, is described by Paul W. Kroll as a type of "shareable vitality" through "the force of language."<sup>1</sup>

Cantonese poetry, written in the traditional literary language, is expressed through favorite literary images that form what I call the Southern or Cantonese Muse. This muse in turn informs all of the poetry devoted to the Southern Garden Poetry Society, the subject of this book.

This Southern Muse, as the voice of the collective verse produced about Guangdong, gradually created what we may call an "epic of Guangdong." Viewed historically as a set of poems composed by various authors across time and centered on a particular region, such an epic functioned diachronically much like the geographically linked poems in

the *Shijing* did as a more synchronous grouping. It formed, in the words of Pauline Yu, “miniature chronicles of the states from which they were said to originate.”<sup>2</sup> Yu suggests that such a regional grouping of poems in the *Shijing* “comes close to creating the functional equivalent of the epic in the West.”<sup>3</sup> Her definition of epic is worth applying to the case of poetry on Guangdong: “An epic is an extended narrative that can provide origins, structure, and meaning to a culture.”<sup>4</sup> That we have to formulate such an epic by reading these poems as an entirety does not invalidate the way they function as a grouping; it just makes the process of reading a wide-ranging journey of exploration instead of a convenient perusal of an individual text. We may also view these scattered poems as part of the canon of Cantonese literati, for, as Martin Kern queries: “Where is the cultural memory, as a social construction of the past, located? In a text-centered culture, it can be preserved in a canon of writing....”<sup>5</sup>

As an initial foray into an epic of Guangdong, or the poetics of traditional literati from Guangdong, I have chosen to focus on one of the most potent literary themes in the region: the Southern Garden Poetry Society, in all its revivals throughout history.<sup>6</sup> Sun Fen 孫蕢 (1335/38–1390/93), the first major poet of the city-port of Guangzhou, founded this literary club headquartered on the banks of the Pearl River. The circle of like-minded literati he gathered earned a reputation throughout China as one of the five leading schools of poetry at that time. Sun’s collection of poetical works was considered fine enough to be published in the imperial compendium of the Qing dynasty, the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書. In the eyes of informed connoisseurs, then, Sun was the father of poetry in Guangzhou.

The periodic revival of this poetry society through the Ming, Qing, and Republican periods is a feat unique in Chinese literary history. As such a long-lived entity, it forms a convenient and almost automatic framework for focusing attention on worthy exponents of the Southern Muse. Nevertheless, the various problems of social interaction and literary composition call for a bipartite approach; this work is therefore in two parts.

Part One, “Literary Culture,” provides an overview of notable Cantonese literati and the prominent themes and imagery that informed their poetry before the founding of the Southern Garden Poetry Society during the late Yuan (Chapter One). This includes most prominently Zhang Jiuling 張九齡 (678–740), Yu Jing 余靖 (1000–1064), Li Maoying 李昉英 (1201–1257), and the Three Great Masters of Lingnan: Qu Dajun 屈大均 (1630–1696), Chen Gongyin 陳恭尹 (1631–1700), and Liang Peilan 梁佩蘭 (1632–1708). Then follows an introduction to historical poetry societies

in China, from Tang to Qing, and a broad survey of local Cantonese poetry societies (Chapter Two). This chapter clarifies the mechanics of literary gatherings and illustrates how sociality operates. It also introduces the five founding figures of the original Southern Garden Poetry Society. Part One concludes with an examination of poetry written about the garden and the literary gatherings held within (Chapter Three) and the private use of the garden by individuals (Chapter Four).

Part Two, "Social Memory," examines the historical reconventions of the Southern Garden in the mid-Ming, late Ming/early Qing, late Qing, and Republican periods (Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven); the focus is treating the poetics of the Southern Garden. A key element is seeing how time-honored themes and imagery from the mainstream literary tradition are interwoven with the local themes and images isolated in Part One. The result is poetry that both creates a local literary tradition as well as justifies pride in a regional identity.

Let me explain my use of the terms "literary culture" and "social memory." Treating so many revivals of the same literary club over 500 years, I came to realize that often very different modes of social interaction were adopted by the different renewals of the society. The Southern Garden occasionally functioned as no more than an ideal image to stimulate poetic composition or to represent poetic excellence; it did not always have an actual existence in the real world of South China. But the existence of the garden was true for those who actually participated in one of the periodic revivals of the storied poetry society and hence wrote verses recalling actual activities in the garden. The garden was equally true for those who were merely inspired by it to recreate an idealized evening in the literary garden through imaginative verse. Perhaps of equal importance, as a sporadically functioning social entity over time, the Southern Garden Poetry Society today helps to serve as a minor index of social interaction of Cantonese literati at various historical stages. For those who convened in its physical precincts for social entertainment, professional interaction, and poetic composition, it offered a tangible springboard for celebrating the delights of southern history, ecology, and culture. For later readers, it affords an enticing entrée into the world of the Cantonese literary landscapes, real or imagined. For all of these reasons then, I use the term "literary culture" to refer to that nexus of literati who socialized together, to the nature and setting of their socializing, and to the body and texture of literature they created for one another.

"Social memory" refers to how the literary culture of one generation

was perceived by later generations of poets and to how it was appropriated for the literary, cultural, or political purposes of these later generations.<sup>7</sup> For literature, again according to Paul W. Kroll, is one means of transferring this “living past” across time:

A unique frame and field of the living past inheres in each separate mind. And literature is one means—possibly, the most magical—of transferring that impalpable life of one’s present pasts to other minds, in the future, thereby ensuring the continued survival of both that specific prospect of actuality—let us call it history—and some portion of one’s own intangible pith and essence. Hence the truth of the dictum, that all creation in letters is re-creation, *time out of mind*. That creation is, as we know, continual and contingent on every author, every next reader, so that much of literature proceeds, as it were, “in search of lost time”—or “of a stone, a leaf, an unfound door, and of all the forgotten faces”—of we would add, those made lunacies of private recollections and re-shifted realities that otherwise would go to immemorial dust.<sup>8</sup>

Synchronically and diachronically then, the “living past” of the Southern Garden will reveal much about traditional poetic practice, literary attitudes, and the opportunities and constraints of contemporary social reality.

But, as the editors of a recent anthology of historical essays muse, “Historical memory itself is no simple text to be recalled at will. Individual memory and shared history have no fixed or predictable relationship; they produce one another in configurations that themselves change across time.”<sup>9</sup> Wide-angle vision will be necessary to encompass the various “configurations” of the past of the Southern Garden, whether recalled or imagined, all equally valid in terms of how they were utilized to serve the present. For an imaginary garden was just as useful when created from the past as the memory of an actual garden. After all, as Stephen Owen puts it, “the act of remembrance” could often be “more vivid than the object of memory.”<sup>10</sup> In this regard, Tobie Meyer-Fong’s work on Yangzhou in early Qing is salutary; she characterizes her book as being “about place and memory, at a time when imagined architecture was more important than wood and walls.” She continues, “It is about the creation of a sense of connection among local elites....It is thus a study of the self-conscious building of community and culture as expressed through the metaphor of physical reconstruction.”<sup>11</sup> My project, even though focused merely on one garden and its historical poetry gatherings, is also an attempt to describe the building of a community of literati and the transmission of culture through the metaphor of the reconstitution of a specific club on a particular, time-

honored site. A specific site such as a garden club or an academy creates a sacred space that, to paraphrase Linda Walton, can enable and support an ideal, in this case the ideal of southern literary culture, that focuses on the lives of exemplars of the past in a “landscape of historical memory.”<sup>12</sup> Many Cantonese worthies contributed their unique individualities to this southern literary culture that was itself enabled by the prism of the poetry focused on the Southern Garden.

When participating in a poetry society is viewed as a ritual act, another link to the past is uncovered. For, as Paul Connerton says, “All rites are repetitive, and repetition automatically implies continuity with the past.”<sup>13</sup> But beyond the generic nature of literary rituals were some actual ritual sacrifices: a shrine to Wen Tianxiang 文天祥 (1236–1283) and other Song martyrs was on the site of the garden, as was one to the Five Masters. The Five Later Masters held a sacrifice in the garden, as did the Later Southern Garden Poetry Society in 1911. These and other specific ritual acts in the garden will be examined in this work.

Regional literature can be approached from various angles, including how regional voices differ from more normative literary voices at the center of political or cultural power such as the national capital; how they attempt to access the center; and how they view themselves in the context of local traditions. Guangdong until the Ming dynasty had been the haunt of demoted and exiled officials, with a miasmatic climate that was positively hazardous to one’s health; it offered little of the cultural amenities that made life pleasurable and few of the social connections that made bureaucratic success possible. Cantonese poets lived and most often worked on the very fringes of the Chinese cultural world. Being Cantonese, even for a poet, was to be known as being backward, parochial, and socially inept until proven otherwise. Instead of attempting to analyze how poets from Guangdong attempted to defend, downplay, or entirely discount their southernness, this work concentrates on how poets utilized their local literary traditions to define themselves. The recent work by Stephen B. Miles will prove very useful in this regard, especially in terms of how “localist texts” were produced to create a local cultural identity, and often either stimulated or maintained through trans-local networks of literati.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, this work focuses on the process of legitimizing local literati culture, even though the reverse process of attempting to overcome cultural marginalization on the part of the national center was equally strong historically and perhaps of more interest for some readers. The irony in studying regional literature is that in the attempt to overcome marginalization, local poets often adopted

literary themes of national interest to align themselves so closely with central poetic trends that their most famous literary productions hold scant interest for students of regional literature. To prove themselves poetically, they almost had to abnegate their authentic poetical souls. Their native voices ring truest when they write for themselves and their colleagues at home. It is necessary to point out that the poetry and prose treated in the present work will not necessarily be the most well known in our poets' *oeuvres*.<sup>15</sup> The guiding thread is to trace the Southern Muse, not to align our poets in some sort of pecking order of fame according to national reputations.

My occasional use of the term "Cantonese poetics" refers to the modes, purposes, themes, and especially imagery used by poets from Guangdong to write in the traditional literary language; it does not refer to poetry composed in the Cantonese dialect.

Apart from the usefulness of the Southern Garden for its insights into literary networks and the social use of poetry, it is my hope that the present work will also make a contribution on another, less pragmatic, level. I refer to the many delights of the natural ecology, human presence, and cultural heritage of Guangdong that can be accessed through the medium of English translation and evaluation. The richness and pungency of Lingnan 嶺南—"South of the Ridges"—in all its botanical splendor and geological variety, is too variegated to be encompassed in mere words, even those manipulated by native sons and daughters in such a supple and sensitive language as classical Chinese. Still, it is just such a riot of sensory perceptions, transmitted in poetry, that allows us to access part of the past, for as Paul Cohen notes, "the experienced past is grounded in the senses."<sup>16</sup> Despite the unavoidable gap between poem and English translation, traditional sensibilities and modern assumptions, I offer this work in the attempt to provide access to some of the sensory experience of social poetry in a southern garden as a tribute to a great people and an ever-fascinating local culture.



Figure 1. Map of Qing period Guangzhou. From Qiu Juchuan 仇巨川, *Yangcheng guchao* 羊城古鈔. I have added the characters for the Southern Garden on the approximate historical site, indicated by an asterisk marked below the Wenming Gate 文明門. The garden was two *li* south of this gate.



Figure 2. Yuexiu Hill, site of the Terrace of the King of Yue, with the Tower for Quelling the Sea in the background.



Figure 3. Tower for Quelling the Sea



Figure 4. Qu Dajun



Figure 5. Liang Feilan



Figure 6. Sun Fen



Figure 7. Chen Zizhuang



Figure 8. Painting of Zhang Erqiao by Rui Jinlai 瑞金頼, who copied an anonymous original.



Figure 9. Sea of Learning Academy (Xuehai tang), on the site of the Southern Garden, painted by Huang Peifang 黄培芳 (1779–1859).



Figure 10. Zhang Weiping



Figure 11. Chen Li



Figure 12. Qiu Fengjia