

Representation and symbolism of *Huaixiang* in Ji Xian's nostalgic poetry

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This paper aims to examine the representation and symbolism of *huaixiang* 懷鄉 (“homesickness”) in the nostalgic poetry of Ji Xian 紀弦 (1913-2013), with a specific focus on the symbolism of trees. Ji Xian was among the Chinese writers who relocated to Taiwan in the late 1940s. On the island, he played a pivotal role in the diffusion of modern poetry, advocating for a modernist movement through the publication of poetry magazines and the establishment of a Modernist School, which attracted more than a hundred poets. Ji Xian's theories and poems mainly promoted the introduction of Modernism to Taiwan through the incorporation of Western literature and experimentation with new imagery, language and style. However, amidst Ji Xian's writings, one also finds several nostalgic poems that reveal the poet's distress upon leaving Mainland China and the alienation and loneliness experienced on his arrival on the island. His nostalgic poetry features new symbols often related to Chinese and Taiwanese vegetation. Trees of different species, such as the Acacia and Wutong trees, as well as the Betel palm, become carriers of his homesickness or self-referential symbols through which he expresses the hardship of settling into Taiwan and the complex process of establishing roots in a foreign land.

Keywords: poetry; nostalgia; tree symbolism; Sinophone literature; post-war Taiwan.

1. Introduction

Ji Xian 紀弦 (1913-2013), a poet and painter from Mainland China, is amongst the Chinese writers who followed the Nationalist Party to Taiwan in the late 1940s to escape the Civil War (1945-1949). On the island, he strongly contributed to the development of poetic Modernism, introducing the modern poetic theories, techniques, and themes he learned in Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s, where he worked with prominent authors such as Shi Zhecun 施蛰存 (1905-2003), Du Heng 杜衡 (1907-1964) and Dai Wangshu 戴望舒 (1905-1950).

Many of Ji Xian's poetic theories promoted Modernism and modern poetry in Taiwan and aimed to create a new generation of poets. In 1953, he published a poetry magazine titled *Xiandai shi* 現代詩

(“Modern Poetry”) to encourage the introduction of Western literature and experimentation with new language and style. Additionally, in 1956, he established the *Xiandai pai* 現代派 (“Modernist School”), which marked the beginning of Taiwanese Modernism.

However, throughout his life, Ji Xian also wrote nostalgic poems, which never truly caught the attention of critics, who instead have historically focused more on Ji’s Modernist verses. As Yang demonstrated (2017), Ji Xian’s poetry collection contains numerous *Xiandai xiangchou shi* 現代鄉愁詩 (“Modern Nostalgic Poems”), which were written in two defining moments: in the 1950s when he left his homeland to move to Taiwan, and in the 1970s when he settled in the United States.

In Taiwan, as well as in the West, studies on Ji Xian have mainly examined the author’s role as the pioneer of Modernism and the poetic theories he postulated, such as the renowned *Heng de yizhi* 橫的移植 (“Horizontal Transplantation”) on the introduction of elements of Western poetry into local poems.¹ Few studies, mostly carried out by Taiwan scholars (Yang 2017; Ying 2011), have examined to some extent the subject. These scholars analyze various poems written by Ji Xian in the 1950s, which seemingly feature fascinating and peculiar attributes, albeit referring to the Anti-Communist literature launched by the Guomindang in post-war Taiwan. Ji Xian addresses the theme of *huaixiang* 懷鄉, which could be defined as “the yearning for one’s native place” or “homesickness,” in a rather conventional way, drawing from classical poetry and well-known images often associated with the subject. However, concurrently, he explores new and subjective symbols, which, as a contemporary poet, he seeks fervently throughout his lifetime. Particularly, he demonstrates a keen interest in the vegetation of Mainland China and Taiwan and appears to find symbols and carriers of his nostalgia in various plants and trees.

This paper aims to rediscover Ji’s nostalgic poetry through an analysis of the *huaixiang* representations in his work, drawing particular attention to the symbolism of trees often employed by the poet. Specifically, it examines poems written from the 1950s onwards, revealing how the author’s nostalgic writings provide further insights into his own poetry production and a better understanding of the complex process of settling into a foreign land, which is a process experienced by many Chinese mainlanders who moved to Taiwan in the post-war era.

¹ For Ji Xian’s *Heng de yizhi* 橫的移植 (“Horizontal Transplantation”) and other poetic theories, see Xu (2011) and Ji (1954).

2. The origin of Ji Xian's nostalgic poetry

Lu Yu 路逾, best known by his pen name Ji Xian, was born in Baoding city, Hebei, on April in 1913. His father, Lu Xiaochen 路孝忱 (1888-1932), also known as *Tiger Lu*, was a general of the Nationalist Party who took part in the Xinhai Revolution and witnessed the first Republic of China's establishment in 1912. With the following rise to power and dictatorship of Yuan Shikai, Sun Yat-Sen's exile and the persecution of Sun's followers, Ji Xian's family fled from Hebei in search of refuge in different parts of the country. The family began a life of predicament that greatly affected Ji Xian, who would eventually reveal he never completed a school semester before the age of eleven, until they finally settled in Yangzhou (Ji 2001a: 24-31). The city assumes a pivotal role in his poetry, as the author later associated feelings of safety and peace with Yangzhou, recalling this period as a very joyful time in his life. It is indeed in the city where he composed his first poems at the age of sixteen and decided to become a poet (Ji 2001a: 21). The first part of Ji's autobiography, published in three volumes in 2001, focuses on his life in Mainland China (*Dalu shiqi* 大陸時期 1913-1948) and contains many references to Yangzhou, a city that Ji establishes as his first *guxiang* 故鄉 (“hometown”). The poet states that he is a *Yangzhou ren* 揚州人 (“a man from Yangzhou”) and he forged an emotional bond with the town, which he evokes in his memoirs and poetry nostalgically and fondly (Ji 2001a: 16).

In 1928, Ji Xian moved to Wuhan with his father and enrolled in the Wuchang Fine Arts Academy,² where he attended only one semester before returning to Jiangsu to join Suzhou Fine Arts Academy, eventually graduating in 1933 (Ji 2001a: 21-31). He pursued his studies on art in Japan at Waseda University for a short period, but because he failed his second art exhibition in Suzhou in 1934, he ultimately decided to focus primarily on poetry. He then moved to Shanghai, where he published his first modern poems under the pen name *Luyishi* 路易士 (“Louis”), entering local poetry circles and starting his literary and editorial career. His verse appeared in the famous magazine *Xiandai* 現代 (*Les Contemporains*), edited by Shanghai's Modernist School, and he became acquainted with local Modernists like Du Heng, who introduced him to Dai Wangshu and Shi Zhecun. Ji was particularly interested in Dai Wangshu's symbolist poetry, which seemingly inspired him to compose his own free verse poetry (Manfredi 2014: 33-37). Ji's poems are highly evocative and rich in symbols drawn from his life experience, Western literature, Baudelaire's work, and modern Chinese poetry. Additionally, he

² *Wuchang meishu zhuanmen xuexiao* 武昌美術專門學校 (“Wuchang Fine Arts Academy”), currently *Hubei meishu xueyuan* 湖北美術學院 (“Hubei Institute of Fine Arts”), is among the oldest and most famous art academies of China.

often resorts to astronomy, a subject of which he was deeply fond, finding new poetic images in stars and constellations.

In Shanghai, the poet published several collections of modern verse and collaborated in creating poetry magazines. In 1936, he contributed in producing *Xinshi* 新詩 (“New Poetry”) with Dai Wangshu, Bian Zhilin 卞之琳 (1910-2000), Feng Zhi 馮至 (1905-1993), Sun Dayu 孫大雨 (1905-1997) and Liang Zongdai 梁宗岱 (1903-1983). In 1944, during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), he launched a magazine entitled *Shi lingtu* 詩領土 (“Poetry Territory”), demonstrating his dedication to diffusing and developing modern poetry, along with his aim to pursue the reflection on new poetic style, content and language started by *Xiandai* and *Xinshi*, even in such a difficult time.

Due to his continuous traveling and relocation to different places, Ji Xian’s life in Mainland China is permeated with a sense of non-belonging, alienation, and discontentment. Nonetheless, when reading his autobiography and poems, one can detect an attachment to three cities: Yangzhou, Suzhou, and Shanghai. It is in these very cities that the author made the pivotal decision to pursue a career as a poet and painter. Although critics have drawn more attention to the poet’s connection with Shanghai, Taipei, and San Francisco, all serving as background of the three main periods in Ji’s lifetime and literary production, scholars, such as Zhu (2020: 116), instead claim that Yangzhou and Suzhou also contributed to the poet’s literary and artistic growth. In Yangzhou, Ji Xian finally settled down after an endless flee and developed an interest in poetry, while in Suzhou, he attempted to publish his first verses and held his first art exhibitions.

In November 1948, Ji Xian moved to Taiwan with his wife, children, and close friend Du Heng. On the island, he began a new life and thus a new phase of his literary career under the famous pseudonym Ji Xian (Xu 2011: 58). In his memoirs, he recalls the hardships of his first years. The author’s sense of nostalgia and loss was deepened by the difficulties of adapting to a new environment and the responsibilities of caring for a newborn son, which necessitated working multiple jobs simultaneously (Ji 2001b: 27). Upon his arrival in Taiwan, Ji could not dedicate himself to poetry. Although, from the 1950s onwards, he wrote and published a considerable number of poems inspired by two literary trends: Modernism and Nostalgic Anti-Communist literature. The latter, established in 1949 and strongly supported by the Nationalist government, disseminated the three principles of Anti-Communism, Nationalism, and Traditionalism that allowed the new Nationalist rulers to seize power on the island and keep a close watch on literary and cultural production. This trend, also known as *Huaixiang wenxue* 懷鄉文學 (“Nostalgic Literature”), *Fangong wenxue* 反共文學 (“Anti-Communist Literature”), or *Zhandou wenyi* 戰鬥文藝 (“Assault Art and Literature;” Passi 2007: 58), encouraged

realist novels and poems to propagate Nationalist ideology. However, it also allowed people to process the trauma of Chinese diaspora and the defeat of the Guomindang in the Civil War. Such works are often permeated with nostalgia for Mainland China and reveal the suffering of those writers who left their country. The topic of homesickness, though, also had a political implication, as it supported the Nationalist goal of reunification with the Mainland.

Although Ji Xian was an outspoken Nationalist, as stated in his memoirs (Ji 2001a: 84), he seemingly began publishing nostalgic Anti-Communist poems primarily to win conspicuous monetary awards established by the Nationalist government for writers who foster mainstream literature and collaborated in spreading the Guomindang's political agenda. The author was awarded repeatedly for political poems that supported the Nationalist ideology, such as *Nuhou ba Taiwan* 怒吼吧台灣 (“Roar Taiwan”), *Xiangchou* 鄉愁 (“Nostalgia”), and *Geming, geming* 革命, 革命 (“Revolution, Revolution”), which obtained the Fourth May Award from 1950 to 1954 (Xu 2011: 58-59). Due to winning said awards, he was able to launch his literary and editorial career on the island and devote himself to Modernism with less political involvement (Yeh 2000: 125).

Ji Xian labelled his nostalgic Anti-Communist poems as *Zhengzhi shi* 政治詩 (“Political poems”)³ to distinguish these works from his Modernist poetry published in apolitical magazines (Yang 2010: 73). However, among his *Zhengzhi shi*, one can still find poems with a milder political tone, where the topic of the *huaixiang* goes beyond the purposes of mere militancy. Instead, Ji Xian's nostalgia is indeed primarily associated with other feelings, such as loneliness, sadness, and the sense of non-belonging experienced after being forced to leave his homeland. His nostalgic poetry uses a modern structure unconstrained by fixed rhymes and prosody. Yet, it differs significantly from the poet's Modernist compositions in terms of images, symbols, and content, as he often refers to the more conventional and familiar repertoire of classical poetry.

As Yang claims (2017), Ji Xian evokes nostalgia with symbols and patterns drawn from masterpieces of old poetry, like the *Shijing* 詩經 (“Classic of Poetry”) and the *Gushi shijiu shou* 古詩十九首 (“Nineteen Old Poems”), as well as Tang poetry. The poet's *huaixiang* for Mainland China is conveyed through the description of natural beauty in his native country, the frequent and conventional

³ Some of Ji Xian's nostalgic Anti-Communist poems, such as *Nuhou ba Taiwan* 怒吼吧台灣 (“Roar Taiwan”), were collected in Ji's (1951) *Zai feiyang de shidai: fangongkang'e shiji* 在飛揚的時代: 反共抗俄詩集 (“In the Rising Era: Anthology of Anti-Communist and Anti-Soviet Poems”). The anthology helped in introducing Ji Xian to the literary circles of the time and allowed the poet to win several prizes. See Ji (1951).

reference to autumn, and the depiction of sorrowful sunsets. Additionally, Ji Xian brings life to the *huaixiang* through the image of his eyes fixed on the moon or a picturesque horizon, where he attempts to catch a glimpse of his homeland.

Yun he yue 云和月 (“The Cloud and the Moon”) is an example of a conventional description of *huaixiang*. In the poem, Ji Xian imagines transforming into a white cloud and floating back to his country. He then changes shape, transforming into the moon looking at his own reflection in the Danshui river in Taiwan and in the Yangtze (Yang 2017). As Cai claims (2007: 210), the round full moon in Chinese poetry “often carries connotations of unity and family togetherness,” thus it makes the poet think of home, becoming a symbol of homesickness. Yet, seemingly, in the poem the *huaixiang* is best conveyed when the poet reveals to the cloud and moon that he spends his days looking toward the West, hoping to see a glimpse of his beloved China across the Taiwan Strait.

In other poems, Ji’s nostalgia surfaces while recalling childhood places, as we may note in *Fahaisi* 法海寺 (“Fahai Temple”) or *Wuting qiao* 五亭橋 (“Wuting Bridge”). Both works refer to Ji Xian’s *guxiang*, i.e. Yangzhou, through the depiction of the city’s attractions at sunset, using the traditional pattern of the poet admiring a touching sunset that amplifies the yearning for home (Ji 2001b: 237-9).

Thus, it’s not far-fetched to suggest that Ji Xian’s nostalgic poetry seems to stand in a transitional space between old and modern poems, as the author often employs the classical repertoire that he would repudiate in his Modernist works. However, it is noteworthy that he assigns new meanings to some of the symbols he draws from classical poetry. The image of the floating cloud in “The Cloud and the Moon,” for example, is associated with Ji Xian’s desire to return home. Yet, it also echoes the floating clouds in Baudelaire’s poetry, which refer to the need to escape reality. The symbol of the cloud appears in other works as well, such as *Ai yun de qiren* 愛雲的奇人 (“The Eccentric Cloud Lover”), written in 1935. In the poem, Ji Xian dreams of being a white cloud and fleeing from reality, leaving behind those who criticize his poetry. He directly addresses Baudelaire, calling him the first “Eccentric Cloud Lover,” and proclaims himself as the last poet in this category of misunderstood geniuses, and, consequently, as the heir of French Symbolism (Ji 2001a: 89-90).

Ji’s recurring references to classical poetry could be attributed to two main reasons. First, although he was a Modernist who advocated for a renovation of poetry, Ji received a traditional education and was a connoisseur of the *jiushi* 舊詩 (“old-style poetry”). Second, echoing classical poetry, resorting to well-known imagery, and therefore maintaining cultural ties with the homeland could have also been a strategic move to meet the audience’s expectations while also satisfying the government’s expectations, thus allowing him to win poetry contests sponsored by the Nationalist

regime in the 1950s. Promoting Traditionalism was indeed one of the three principles of the Nostalgic Anti-Communist literature launched by Chiang Kai-shek and a key element in the ideology of the Guomindang, which aimed to preserve and restore classical culture and tradition in Taiwan to legitimize Chinese rule over the island (Chang 1993: 25), as well as to oppose the communist government of Mainland China that was about to destroy this cultural heritage.

However, albeit the predictability of themes and references, along with the “undying love for China” shown by the author (Yeh 2000: 125), Ji’s nostalgic poems also appear to be a space to experiment with new symbolism and meanings, as we saw in *Yun he yue*. This happens more often when the poet employs the symbolism of trees.

3. Tree symbolism in Ji Xian’s nostalgic poetry

The most fascinating and innovative feature of Ji Xian’s nostalgic poetry is the symbolism of trees. The poet pays particular attention to Mainland China’s and Taiwan’s vegetation, resorting to trees of different species to convey his *huaixiang* and other emotions. As he affirms in *Shu* 樹 (“Trees”), a poem written in 1985 in California (Ji and Ding 2008: 68-69), trees play a fundamental role in his poetry. On one hand, they are potent symbols that represent the *guxiang* and sorrowful separation from his country; on the other, they are also the witnesses of the distress, loneliness, and hardship experienced in his first years in Taiwan.

The trees mentioned most often by Ji Xian are the *Huaishu* 槐树 (“Acacia tree”), *Yushu* 榆树 (“Elm”), and *Wutong* 梧桐 (“Wutong tree” or “Chinese Parasol tree”). These plants, typical of Chinese vegetation, refer to Ji Xian’s cultural and geographic roots, as is the case in *Yi pian huaishuye* 一片槐樹葉 (“The Acacia Leaf”), a well-known composition written in 1954. Ji Xian (2001b: 63) considers this specific work to be “the most touching and beautiful poem among his nostalgic poetry.” The poet recalls his native land through the image of an Acacia leaf found in an ancient book of poetry, where it had been kept in hopes of preserving a memory of his homeland (Ji 2001b: 63-64). To his great surprise, the Acacia leaf is still intact, much like his memories of Mainland China and his deep affection for the country. It has a grey yellowish colour that recalls autumn leaves, evoking a season typically associated with nostalgia. The Acacia leaf is “precious and delicate” (Ji 2001b: 63). Yet, at the same time, it arouses the painful memory of leaving his homeland, which is amplified by the presence of native soil on the leaf.

In the second stanza, Ji Xian directly mentions the *guxiang* as he wonders about the leaf’s origin point. He quotes famous rivers and mountains in Mainland China, such as the Yangtze (which

traditionally refers to the whole country, as in the aforementioned poem *Yun he yue*). Marijnissen (2008: 29) examines the choice of the Acacia tree as a symbol of *huaxiang* from a linguistic point of view as well due to the homophony between the word Acacia, *Huai* 槐, and the term *huai* 懷 (“to long for”) in *huaxiang*. Additionally, the term *huai* 懷 also appears in the last stanza in the expression *huaibao* 懷抱 (“to cherish, carry in the arms”) when Ji Xian describes his country as a loving mother, imagining returning to her bosom. In the final stanza, the poem reaches its climax as the author wonders if he will ever return to his homeland to admire the beloved Acacia trees in blossom. The poem thus conveys the suffering experienced by the mainlanders who were unable to reunite with their homeland for a long time.

故國啣，啊啊，要到何年何月何日
才能讓我再回到你的懷抱裡
去享受一個世界上最愉快的
飄著淡淡的槐花香的季節？(Ji 2001b: 63-64)

Ah, motherland, what day, what month, what year,
will you allow me to return to your bosom
to enjoy the most joyful season in the world
permeated with the delicate scent of Acacia flowers?⁴

Ji’s use of trees as nostalgic symbols echoes classical poetry. Although there seems to be no relevant imagery associated with the *Huashu* and *Yushu*, the symbolism regarding the Wutong could rather be traced back to the *Shijing*, where Wutong trees are often related to music and can be a metonymy for zithers manufactured from their wood. At the same time, the Wutong is associated with the phoenix and carries a legendary connotation, as the auspicious bird of Chinese mythology is often depicted while perching on that tree (McCraw 1988: 84-86). Among the numerous poetical references to Wutong trees, their significance for Ji Xian may be due to the association between the tree and autumn sadness and melancholy. This connection is often found in Tang poetry, such as Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770)’s *Qiu xing qi ba* 秋興其八 (“Autumn Meditations, No. 8”) or Su fu 宿府 (“Night at the Headquarters”), and Du Mu 杜牧 (803-852)’s *Qi’an ou ti* 齊安偶題 (“Casually Inscribed at Qi’an”). In the latter, the Wutong’s dejected

⁴ If not otherwise mentioned, all translations are made by the author. For the English translation of the whole poem, see Marijnissen (2008: 27).

moaning in the last line amplifies the poet's grief about departing (McCraw 1988: 84), but it is not clear whether he has left his hometown or perhaps one of his lovers. The Wutong also appears to be an emblem of sorrowful love in Tang and Song poetry, as is the case in a few of Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084-1151)'s *ci* poems addressed to her dead husband, such as *Sheng sheng man* 聲聲慢 (“To the Tune ‘One Beat Followed by Another, a Long Tune;’” Cai 2007: 273-274). Ji Xian, however, does not seem to give such significance to trees, which are instead purely representative of the love felt for his homeland. On the other hand, his poetry may also lead one to recall the Wutong symbolism in Li Yu 李煜 (937-978)'s *Wu ye ti* 烏夜啼 (“To the Tune ‘Crows Call at Night’”), whose lone trees in the first stanza allude to the “speaker's loneliness, confinement and aging” (Cai 2007: 248).

Ji Xian was likely familiar with the Wutong imagery, as demonstrated by his memoir, in which he references poetry related to the subject, such as Du Fu's *Autumn Meditations* (Ji 2001a: 25). However, the Wutong trees in his poems are not merely an ideal symbol invoking *huaixiang*, solitude, or sadness, but rather a direct indication to the specific Wutong trees he used to play with when he was a child. For example, in *Chongyang yu* 重陽雨 (“Rain on the Double Ninth Festival,” 1975) (Ji and Ding 2008: 64-64), *Wutong shu* 梧桐樹 (“The Wutong Tree,” 1976), *Zai Taiping yang yaoyuan de na yibian* 在太平洋遙遠的那一邊 (“On the Other Far Side of the Pacific Ocean,” 1986), and *Yangzhou, Shanghai he Taiwan* 揚州、上海和台灣, (“Yangzhou, Shanghai, and Taiwan,” 2002), they are directly associated with the poet's time in Yangzhou, seemingly serving as witnesses to Ji Xian's childhood and adolescence. In the poems, the author recalls the courtyard at his old house and describes the beauty of the mighty Wutong trees planted in the garden, revealing that he carved his name on them as wishing to leave a shred of his identity in Mainland China with these cherished trees.⁵

However, Ji Xian's tree symbolism is not limited to the aforementioned Acacia, Elm, and Wutong trees. The poet explores various species of palms, including the Betel palm, and assigns them new significances in his work. The Betel palm, also known as Betel nut palm or *Areca catechu*, is an innovative symbol that Ji Xian selected from the tropical vegetation of Taiwan to evoke his homesickness, as well as feelings of non-belonging and alienation. As we read in several poems from the early 1950s onwards, the tree also becomes a self-referential symbol of Ji Xian who associates himself with the palm because

⁵ For the poems mentioned in the text, *Wutong shu* 梧桐樹 (“Wutong Tree,” 1976), *Zai Taiping yang yaoyuan de na yibian* 在太平洋遙遠的那一邊 (“On the Other Far Side of the Pacific Ocean”), and *Yangzhou, Shanghai he Taiwan* 揚州、上海和台灣 (“Yangzhou, Shanghai, and Taiwan”), see Ji (2020).

of the thin and slender shape of the plant, which is similar to his tall, slim physique. As Ying noticed (2011, 279), Ji Xian defined himself as “the Betel palm of the local literary circles” and published a series of poetry anthologies under the pseudonym *Binglangshu* 檳榔樹 (“Betel Palm”). One of the first poems regarding the Betel palm is *Binglangshu: wo de tonglei* 檳榔樹：我的同類 (“Betel Palm: My Counterpart”), written in 1951. The five-stanza poem is about Ji Xian's first years on the island. He talks to the Betel palm, a “lonely creature” (Ji and Ding 2008: 28) with anthropomorphic features, which seems to share and understand his feelings of loneliness. The palm whispers its grief to the poet by gently swaying in the wind and delivers a monologue that arouses Ji Xian's longing and alienation.

In the second stanza, the author ponders on the feeling of non-belonging through a comparison to the Betel palm: the plant has solid roots in its native land and could never be taken away from it, whereas the poet seems destined to a life of “endlessly wandering from city to city” (Ji and Ding 2008: 27). His *huaixiang* is mainly conveyed in the third stanza: Ji Xian, exhausted from his constant wandering, appeals to the palm to let him lean on its trunk and rest. Then he starts singing a *Huaixiang de diaozi* 懷鄉的調子 (“Nostalgic melody”) and reveals that he is on an “autumnal island” (Ji and Ding 2008: 28), evoking homesickness once again through the imagery of fall.

The Betel palm provides a new symbol to reference the *huaixiang* and the author's feelings. Nonetheless, he also resorts to conventional images, such as the “autumnal island” in the third stanza and the touching sunset that appears at the beginning of the poem.

In the short composition *Wo: binglangshu* 我：檳榔樹 (“Me: A Betel Palm”), also written in 1951 (Ying 2011: 284), Ji Xian states the choice of the palm as a self-referential symbol. In the work, he is standing under the moonlight, tall and slender like a Betel palm, which whispers when the wind blows between its leaves. The *huaixiang* is conveyed through the symbol of the plant, yet the tree is also the personification of the poet who is looking at the moon and thinking of his homeland, echoing the poetic motif found in *Yun he yue*, which also seems referring to Li Bai 李白 (701–762)'s famous poem *Jing ye si* 靜夜思 (“Quiet Night Thoughts”).

Self-referential symbols play a significant role in Ji Xian's poetry, particularly in his early works from the 1930s. He employs a pipe and a black walking cane as symbols that reflect his personal interests and everyday experiences. Ji Xian, indeed, enjoyed pipe smoking and long solitary walks. The pipe and the walking cane also portray the author as a gentleman and seem to imply his will to be recognized as a modern man and poet. In *Zai diqiu shang sanbu* 在地球上散步 (“Walking on Earth,” 1937), for example, Ji has a bizarre walk on the surface of the Earth, when suddenly he decides to plant his black cane on the ground as a symbolic gesture of self-affirmation and assertion of his status as a

modern man and poet (Ji and Ding 2008: 12). As for the pipe, Ji likely drew inspiration from his mentor Dai Wangshu, who in turn heavily borrows from the symbolist work of Francis Jammes, as Lee claimed (1989: 164), referring to the pipe mentioned in Dai's poem *Qiutian* 秋天 ("Autumn"). However, given Ji's background as a painter, it is highly probable that he was influenced by Modernist art, drawing inspiration for his literary and artistic creations from surrealist paintings in particular. This is the case for his 1942 poem *Fei yue de quan* 吠月的犬 ("Dog Barking at the Moon"), which clearly recalls Miró's homonymous painting, and of his 1952 self-portrait *Sishi sui de kuangtu* 四十歲的狂徒 ("A Forty Years Old Madman"). The latter depicts a tired Ji Xian staring coldly at the audience, with dark sunken eyes and a pipe between the lips, similar to Dalí's self-representation in his 1921's "Self-Portrait" (*Figueres*). Both Manfredi (2014: 68) and Liu (2000: 279-80) noticed a possible connection between the two paintings, which may also suggest that Ji Xian had been influenced by pipe representations in Surrealism.⁶

Resorting to the Betel palm is, in fact, also not accidental. The poet's choice of the tree is certainly due to the palm shape. However, once in Taiwan, Ji seemingly acquired the local habit of chewing Betel nut, which is used as a stimulant in several Asian countries.

The same symbol also appears in *Tiaowang* 眺望 ("Looking into the Distance"), a poem written in 1952. The tree personifies Ji Xian, who looks to the clouds in search of solace and thus becomes the poet's emblem, namely the "Eccentric Cloud Lover" who escapes reality by dreaming of transforming into a white floating cloud. The tree-poet then fixes his gaze on a sorrowful horizon, looking into the distance to catch sight of his homeland (Yang 2017). In another poem from 1952 entitled *Ai de binglangshu* 哀的檳榔樹 ("The Sad Betel Palm"), Ji Xian reveals that he finally returned to oil painting (Ji 2020), driven by the desire to depict the beautiful palm.

In 1976, Ji Xian decided to leave Taiwan and move to the United States, where he once again experienced the well-known feelings of nostalgia, loss, and non-belonging that permeate his literature. He spent his final years in San Francisco, where he primarily wrote poetry, collected and published old poems, and began writing his memoirs. He also continued writing nostalgic verses, whose *huaixiang* is now two-fold. Other than remembering Mainland China fondly, the poet also reveals his longing for Taiwan, which he would define as his second *guxiang*. The island is often evoked through the beloved

⁶ It's not far-fetched to evoke the idea that another source of inspiration for Ji's poetic creation was perhaps surrealist painter Magritte, whose works recurrently show pipes, trees, and clouds, which are symbols we find very often in Ji's poetry. However, at least in Ji's diary, there is no clear evidence that the poet took inspiration from the French author, nor are there paintings which demonstrate any direct borrowing from Magritte's art.

Betel palm symbol, which assumes a new meaning in his latest poems and shows that the poet indeed established roots in Taiwan, eventually overcoming the feeling of non-belonging that he felt in his early years in the island.

In Ji Xian’s late nostalgic poetry, trees remain the dominant symbols used to express his *huaixiang* and remind him of his two homelands. In 1985, at the age of seventy-two, he wrote the aforementioned poem “Trees,” which explains the recurrent tree symbolism in his nostalgic works. In the poem, he mentions the different species of trees found in his poetry, namely the Betel palm and other palm species which refer to Taiwan, as well as the Wutong, Acacia tree, Elm, and other deciduous plants which are instead associated with Mainland China. In the five-stanza poem, Ji Xian wishes to see the beloved trees for one last time and embrace them in a symbolic gesture of reunion with Mainland China and Taiwan. The poet affirms that he would cry for weeks thinking of those trees to prove that, albeit old, he is still capable of showing his deep affection for his homelands (Ji and Ding 2008: 69). In the opening two verses of the poem, we read:

在我還有一大把可以哭的能力時，
快讓我回去看看那些樹吧！ (Ji and Ding 2008: 68-69)

As long as I still have the strength to cry,
let me go back to see those trees!

4. Conclusions

Although associated with Taiwan 1950s Nostalgic Anti-Communist literature, Ji Xian’s *huaixiang* poetry appears to go beyond the sole purpose of expressing a shared feeling of homesickness. Even if many of his *Xiandai xiangchou shi* are written to recall Mainland China and convey an undying love for his motherland, his poems employing tree symbolism focus primarily on the hardship of settling into Taiwan and the complex process of putting down roots in a foreign land. The longing for a sense of belonging and a place to call home is a recurring theme in Ji’s poetry, undoubtedly influenced by his personal life experiences. Bearing this in mind, I believe one can finally identify the symbolism of trees found in Ji Xian’s nostalgic poetry. Beyond the reference to some connotations of the Wutong in classical poetry, Ji’s trees principally represent the poet’s sense of rootlessness and desire to belong somewhere, as if he were a tree firmly rooted in its native land. The 1951 poem “Betel Palm: My Counterpart” presents a significant example of this, as the author compares himself to the Betel palm and appears to envy the tree that, unlike him, will never bear the sorrow of leaving its homeland.

Furthermore, the *binglangshu* can arguably represent the uniqueness of Ji's nostalgic poems. Among the trees he mentions, the Betel palm is chosen to be a self-referential symbol and is the result of Ji's pursuit of new and subjective imagery to employ in modern poetry. This suggests that Ji's *huaixiang* poems were also part of his Modernist agenda and therefore are worth considering to further the understanding of the poet's Modernist production. The search for new symbolism is a key element in Ji's poetic theory, as the author's ultimate goal was to promote more intellectual poetry where feelings and thoughts are evoked in a detached and rational way. In doing so, he aimed to surpass lyrical sentimentalism and Romanticism (which still influenced written poetry in post-war Taiwan) and promote Modernism as an alternative path for the development of new poetry.

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