

# Kites in the sky over Singapore

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*A Report on the International Conference on Chinese Literature, 13-19 January 1983.*

The year opened with an event of cultural importance which, unfortunately, found no echo in the international press. The International Conference on Chinese Literature was held in Singapore in the middle of January. It was sponsored by local Chinese language organizations, in particular by the Sin Chew Jit Pok Daily (Xing Zhou Ri Bao) and the People's Association, a society closely connected to the educational and cultural interests of the government. The scant attention paid to this meeting can be explained by the lack of foreign journalists in attendance, and the almost exclusive use of Mandarin without any system for translation. (One afternoon session devoted to the local English, Tamil and Malaysian literatures was conducted in English.)

While the Conference centered on the East Asian Pacific Region, it was very much one of an international nature, bringing together some twenty writers of very different backgrounds. Along with a number of participants from the host country, there were 3 from the People's Republic of China, 3 from Taiwan, 4 from the United States, 3 from Hong Kong, 2 from Malaysia and one each from Korea, the Philippines and Japan. The participants were, for the most part, novelists and poets who are involved in the literary struggles of our time. The presence of the one non-Chinese, Masami, the Japanese sinologist, should be noted. He has for the past few years specialized in the literature of Singapore and Malaysia.



## BEYOND IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

The local Chinese language newspaper, Xing Zhou Ri Bao, dedicated two full pages each morning to the Conference.

The English daily, the Strait Times, offered a short synopsis of the day's events, chiefly of a political interest. The press coverage, however, could offer but a pale reflection of the friendly spirit of exchange that existed among the participants. What began as the site of a human communion bubbling with vitality and informed by poetry became in a few short days a wellspring of literary creation.

Nor were those days lacking in gestures of sympathy. Certainly the most sought after writers were Ai Qing and Xiao Jun, both septuagenarians from the Republic of China. Ai Qing was in poor health and spoke little, but he smiled kindly as he autographed his works so great was the demand that his arm became numb from the effort. Xiao Jun won everyone's sympathy with his gruff appearance, his frankness and his heart of gold. The poetess Rong Zi, Taiwan's "Evergreen Tree", in presenting him with her collection of juvenile literature, declared that he had the heart of a child. The Japanese sinologue Masami was spoiled like a Prodigal Son. Nie Hualing, the novelist and literary critic, found herself sitting on the same panel with Dr. Masami. Evoking the memories of her youth, she could not help but recall the hardships suffered during the Japanese occupation of Hankou and her hatred for Japanese imperialism. But suddenly, cutting short the nightmare of her past, she rose to her feet and presented two of her most recent works to Masami pledging her affection and friendship.

This atmosphere of friendship rediscovered was born on the very first day from a spontaneous gesture made by Taiwan's poet Luo Fu. When Xiao Jun, upon taking the floor, took from his pocket a large cigar, to the amazement of the Singaporeans present (smoking is a social sin in Singapore), Luo Fu quickly rose to his feet and offered him a light to the applause of the whole assembly. Towards the end of the meeting, this rediscovery of lost friendships was given poetic form. Lou Fu contemplating Ai Qing sitting behind a basket of green plants scribbled a poem which he then recited to him on the spot. On his part, the Chinese American poet Zheng Qiuyu also wrote a poem entitled 'The Kite' which he dedicated to Xiao Jun.

Separated for so long a time by the tragedies of history, these men and women of raw sensibility and refined delicacy had much to say to each other and they said it in their own fashion.

#### ACTORS AND WITNESSES IN THE DRAMA OF A CENTURY

Most of the writers present brought hearts made heavy by the burden of past suffering, hearts torn by oppression and exile, uprooted

and transplanted in alien soil. The presence of Ai Qing, frail in body, blind in one eye, bore singular witness to those long years of suffering. In 1932, having completed a course of study at Beau-Arts in Paris, he returned to China where he was arrested by the Guomindang police, charged with having leftist leanings and imprisoned in Shanghai. A few years later, he fell victim to the Communist Part anti-rightist campaign and was sentenced in 1958 to two years of hard labour in Xinjiang Province. But he suffered his most abject experience during the Cultural Revolution when he was confined for five years to a dark hut where he lost the sight of one eye and was assigned as his daily task the cleaning of toilets. At the age of 72, he recovered his reputation as a great poet, and today is considered by some to be on par with Guo Moruo as one of China's greatest poets.

A life of wandering and turmoil was also the fate of Nie Hualing. At the Sunday morning session which was held in the Mandarin Hotel, she spoke of her youth in Hankou, of the murder of her father by Communist soldiers, of her exodus from Chongqing and her years in Taiwan, where she worked with Hu Shi. Leaving her beloved Taiwan in 1964, she emigrated to America. There she married Paul Engel and founded an international centre for writers in Iowa. To date, over 400 writers have passed through a period of formation in her centre, a third of them Chinese, Chinese principally from the People's Republic but also including many from Taiwan. This shared experience among writers has produced other miracles as well, for at the Iowa centre one can also see Israeli and Palestinian writers working side by side.

### THE UNIVERSAL MISSION OF CHINESE LITERATURE

Up to our time, the global literary scene has been dominated by Western writers. Shakespeare and Dickens, Victor Hugo and Romain Rolland, Tolstoi and Gorki are all better known in China than are the great Chinese writers in Europe. In our own time, it is enough to examine the honours list of the great international awards. They contain the names of few non-Western writers.

Why this failure of the outside world to appreciate Chinese literature? This question was raised at the Conference in Singapore. The Chinese writers are very conscious of the universality of their message. In their writing, they question man and his destiny, and what they have to say springs from the very tissue of existence. The characters of their novels pass through the great crises of contemporary society, experiencing its deepest longings and its most profound disarray.

They require that humanity transcend the barriers of ideology, politics and race. Chinese literary art, in its different forms, is rich in symbol and dramatic expression. It flows from poetic sources. Zheng Qiuyu has summed it up in a few words: "Poetry is like the pistil of a flower. The novel along with the other literary expressions are its petals, all of which are destined to wither and die. It is poetry that renews them."

However, the Chinese language remains inaccessible to a great part of humanity. Composed of thousands of ideographs whose complex juxtaposition provide it with grammatical structure. The question of its translation into other languages was raised in Singapore in very practical terms. Nie Hualing underlined the necessity for more English translations. Her concern was seconded by another Chinese writer from America. Yu Lihua spoke of the necessity to make "the East known to the West and the West to the East."

Masami invited the Singaporeans to bring the advantages of their multi-lingual education to bear on the task of translation into English, Japanese and other languages. Moreover, he invited the Chinese press to publish more book reviews of Chinese works.

Such suggestions, briefly noted, gave one the feeling that what was lacking was a general, overall survey of contemporary translation centres and schools specializing in contemporary Chinese literature. No allusions were made to foreign language publications from Beijing or translations done in Europe. As for book reviews and commentaries, it would have been heartening to have heard mention of the significant contributions being made in reviews and journals from Hong Kong.

The Japanese Masami brought into relief another aspect of the influence of literary Chinese, namely, the fact that more and more non-Chinese are studying that language. Using Japan as an example, he mentioned that Tokyo has 7 or 8 Chinese libraries, and that over 100,000 Japanese are now able to read Chinese. For the past few years, the number of Chinese language graduates has reached 10 to 20,000 per annum. There was a lesson to be learned from this by writers of South-East Asia for whom such a market of readers is of crucial importance.

#### VITAL SIGNS FOR LITERATURE IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC

Present hopes for the Chinese writers of South East Asia, Japan, Korea and the United States are born from a new blossoming of literary

life in China itself. Whatever be the controls on creative freedom arising from a concern for political and social discipline, the situation there has improved considerably during the past three years. Within this short span of time, hundreds of new literary magazines have seen the light of day. According to Gao Ying, the wife of Ai Qing, in a discreet intervention made during the discussion, the present problem is not one of restriction but rather the abundance of work whose quality often leaves much to be desired. The writers from China who came to Singapore did not attempt to give an overview of recent developments there. Rather, they entrusted Xiao Qian with the task of presenting only one specific area of Chinese literary work, that of literary journalism.

This choice was well suited for the people of Singapore. The development of the literature of Nanyang has always been closely associated with the regional Chinese press. Almost all of the local authors have had their start in writing for literary supplements. Also, Xiao Qian was familiar with the cultural milieu of the English language, having spent seven years in London and Cambridge during the Second World War. Numbered among the many friends he made there, are some of the present leaders of Singapore. Xiao Qian's paper was a history of literary journalism as it has been practised for the past 30 years in China. He characterized the genre as a literary expression focused on the event but also capable of bringing out the human dimension in an artistic way. Thus, literary journalism is situated halfway between reportage and the art of short story writing.

Certain participants were concerned about the present possibilities in China for creative literature. From her frequent association with writers from that country, Nie Hualing was able to give an optimistic response. She pointed to the quality of some recent work, among others the work of the novelist Dai Houying, the author of 'Man, Oh, Man'. The author, who is a professor at Aurora University in Shanghai, captures the mentality of students today. Work of this kind flows from the deep vein of inspired Chinese humanism. The crucial experiences of the recent past have caused a passionate resurgence of this concern for a humanism so deeply anchored in the Chinese soul.

### SINGAPORE, CENTER OF EAST WEST EXCHANGE

The vast perspectives opened up by the Singapore Conference doubtlessly exceeded the expectations of the organisers. In his opening address, the Minister of State Lee Khoo Choy expressed the political importance of the occasion: "At present, we try to promote the use of



the Mandarin language because we do not want the Chinese race to forget its roots. We want the Chinese population to continue to draw its inspiration and wisdom from the Chinese language milieu." On their part, the local Chinese press had hoped that from this Forum would come new inspiration for local writers and an opportunity for their voices to be heard outside their own country.

These aims, while somewhat self-centered, have been realized with some degree of satisfaction. However, the future of local Chinese literature remains in doubt, threatened as it is by the continuing evolution of Singapore society towards English usage, the almost total disappearance of traditional Chinese schools, and the decline of the Chinese media. (The amalgamation of the two great Chinese language Daily newspapers took place in March, only two months after the International Conference on Chinese Literature.) And yet Singapore has showed herself still capable of attracting an international meeting with significant participation by China. While China has previously been represented in this international cross roads by her artists, sportsmen, opera troupes, commercial exhibitions, films, and publications of a non-political nature, the welcome given to Chinese writers now broadens the field of exchange not only between China and Singapore, but also between China and the rest of the world.

Considering the circumstances, Singapore's leaders have been well compensated for their ability to go beyond their own political fears. The writers from abroad were unanimous in their praise of the quality of life found here, the beauty of this green island, the graciousness of its people, and the technical achievements in effecting modernization. The wife of Ai Qing, Gao Ying, and the wife of Xiao Pian, Wen Jierou, promised to spread the word in China about the success of modernization achieved through the efforts of a largely Chinese population. They noted the numerous signs of cleanliness and public hygiene, and they were touched by the obliging nature and amiability of the Singaporeans.

Going beyond this local interest, the Conference of Chinese writers represents a precious contribution to international dialogue and peace. Xu Shixu (Se Wook Huh), the Korean author of a Chinese literary work, was sent into ecstasy by the warm, friendly relationships that developed among the Chinese writers from Beijing, Taipei and the Americas, seeing in them signs of hope for the development of a dialogue between the North and South in his own country.

At a time when China and other countries are entering into

difficult international negotiations, which sometimes take on aspects of diplomatic or commercial warfare, these Chinese writers are striking a human cord. They invite us to once again take a breath of fresh air and raise our eyes to more distant horizons. Their meeting in Singapore happened to coincide with an international kite-flying contest. The Sunday session was abruptly interrupted, much to the despair of the Japanese sinologue who had to cut his talk short to allow the writers to go out and view the kite flying.

These strange birds, alive with colour, fluttered under the grey clouds of the monsoon high above the massive concrete jungle of Singapore. As this most disciplined city treated herself to a breath of fresh air, the poets of the Chinese world once again took flight.

