

## CHEN JO-HSI: Memories and Notes

By RICHARD M. MCCARTHY



CHEN JO-HSI

FORTHRIGHT is the first word that comes to mind when I recall Chen Jo-hsi as I knew her in Taiwan almost twenty years ago. A petite, self-assertive undergraduate at National Taiwan University, she was very much conscious of her Taiwanese birth in an intellectual community still dominated by mainlanders, and appeared surprised to find herself, as a carpenter's daughter, in attendance at an institution of higher learning at all.

Foreigners who met her in those days were likely to describe her as "spunky"; older Chinese might tend to regard her as a bit brash. Both would agree on two points, however. The first was that Lucy, to use her "foreign name" for the first and last time in this recollection, had a mind of her own. Second, there was agreement that she had undeniable writing talent.

Actually Chen was one of what is in retrospect a quite remarkable group of young writers, some barely in their twenties, who were studying at NTU in the late fifties and early sixties. Pretty much ignored by most of their elders in the literary establishment, they created their own outlet by founding the bimonthly *Modern Literature* (現代文學), which offered hospitality not only to their own work but that of other young fiction writers and poets whom they believed merited a hearing.

This group was interesting to the foreign observer, not only for their multiple talents, but because they were young Taiwanese and mainlanders allied in a single cause. If they had a quarrel with anybody, it was with a generation of largely indifferent elders. This is not to suggest that they entirely

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lacked support and recognition; the distinguished editor of the *Literary Review* (文學雜誌), the late Professor T. A. Hsia (夏濟安), for instance, gave sympathetic encouragement to rising young talent.

Several other established writers and critics also promoted a wider hearing for the *Modern Literature* group. I recall that I became acquainted with Chen and her colleagues through a project supported by the U.S. Information Service to translate some of Taiwan's contemporary fiction and verse into English under the capable guidance of Wu Hung-tso (吳鴻藻), the essayist and critic who writes under the name of Wu Lu-ch'in (吳魯芹). Without conscious design this project over the course of several years focused increasingly on the product of young writers such as Chen. Thus she had an English translation of her story "Spirit Calling" published in *New Voices*, "A Morning for Chiao-Ti" in *Eight Stories by Chinese Women*, and finally a collection of her work in *Spirit Calling and Other Stories*.

The undergraduates of the early sixties who banded together to bring out *Modern Literature* are scattered now. Pai Hsien-yung (白先勇) whose formidable talent has already earned him a secure place in contemporary Chinese letters, is teaching at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Hung Chih-hui (洪智惠), who writes under the name of Ouyang Tzu (歐陽子) and who is married, the mother of four and living in the U.S., published an anthology of stories from *Modern Literature* in Taipei last year.

Now a professor at NTU, Wang Wen-hsing (王文興) is the author of *The Runaway* (家變), a novel which attracted great attention and considerable controversy in Taiwan several years ago. Wang Chen-ho (王禎和), a native of Hualien on Taiwan's east coast, is working in Taiwan television after advanced study at the Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa.

Chen Jo-hsi followed a more tortuous path. After her graduation from National Taiwan University, she headed first for the prestigious Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa, which has been host to at least a dozen Chinese writers from Taipei and Hong Kong. After a brief time, however, she decided that Iowa City was not the right place for her, and moved on to Mt. Holyoke College, and then to Johns Hopkins University in 1963. There she met Tuann Shih-yao (段世堯), who was completing his work on a doctorate in engineering. Their wedding in Baltimore (in 1964 if memory serves me correctly) was the last time I set eyes upon Chen for more than thirteen years.

In 1966 the couple departed quietly for the People's Republic of China and arrived in Peking just in time to witness the start of the Great Cultural Revolution. Seven years later they emerged in Hong Kong, somewhat the worse for wear, but richer by two children born in China.

During those seven years one can guess at the private struggles that Chen endured to come to terms with a reality which did not correspond to her expectations. But in terms of her chosen calling her experience in China was an unanticipated gift; it provided a whole new world of material with which to work as a writer. To anyone who knew Chen when she was first testing her talent, it comes as no surprise that there is little trace of indignation or resentment in the handling of her material. Her stories take the stuff of seven years as

matter of factly as if she had been born in the society she writes about. Which is one reason why the impact of some of the stories in *The Execution of Mayor Yin* can be so suddenly chilling.

In *New Voices*, published back in 1961, appears a brief biographic note prefacing the story by the young Chen Jo-hsi represented in that collection. It informs us that Chen "likes bridge and traveling and is eager to meet people. Her ambition is to establish herself as a writer and to go around the world." She has yet to circle that world, but the work she has published since her return from mainland China testifies eloquently that she has achieved the first of her two ambitions.

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To a reading world hungry for a "Chinese Solzhenitsyn", Chen Jo-hsi made her timely albeit low-key appearance in June 1978. *The Execution of Mayor Yin and Other Stories from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* (Indiana University Press) won for its author instant international recognition. The English translation was the joint work of Nancy Ing, Editor of *The Chinese Pen*, and Howard Goldblatt, a sometime contributor to this magazine (see *Renditions* Nos. 4 and 7).

Simon Leys, who has written in *Chinese Shadows* about his own experience in the PRC, contributed an Introduction to the book in which he calls Chen "the only Chinese creative writer of major stature to provide us with literary testimony on the Cultural Revolution era . . . at the grass-roots level." Mr. Leys has made a French translation of *Mayor Yin*, and Dr. D. W. Fokkema collaborated on a Dutch one, both scheduled for publication in 1979. Other foreign-language editions—German, Japanese (by Prof. Minoru Takeuchi 竹内實 of Kyoto), Spanish, Swedish, Norwegian, and even Hungarian—were in preparation.

But Chen Jo-hsi's first and most avid readers were her compatriots, in Hong Kong, Taiwan and all over the world. The *Yin hsien-chang* 尹縣長 stories originally appeared in the periodical press, mainly *Ming Pao Monthly*, Hong Kong, between 1974-76, and were published in book form by the Horizon Press 遠景 Taipei, in 1976. Within two years it ran through two editions and 16 printings. This was followed by a second collection of stories, *The Old Man* 老人 (Linking Publishing Co. 聯經, Taipei, 1978), from which two have been translated into English for this issue of *Renditions*. She then wrote her third book, an autobiographical novel entitled *The Repatriates* 歸, before turning to non-fiction, drawing upon her recollection of events during the Cultural Revolution.

Perhaps some of the most pertinent comments on Chen Jo-hsi's achievement came from other Chinese writers of her generation, who, critics now generally recognize, have revived and furthered the creative spirit of the May 4th Movement. The poet Wai-lim Yip 葉維廉 writes: "In *Mayor Yin* there is hardly any trace of the beauty, wit and poetic language that may be found in her earlier stories. Her style now . . . is almost that of reportage, unalloyed with whatever subjective viewpoints." Pai Hsien-yung, a classmate of Chen's at National Taiwan University, whose deeply understanding and compassionate portraits of mainlander types in Taipei are in their way as artistically effective as her mainland-rooted characters, points out that Chen Jo-hsi's stories all seem to bring us this message: "that in a society in which every person lives in trepidation, life itself becomes an unbearable burden."

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