

Two Stories by Chen Yingzhen

Translated by Lucien Miller

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

TO NUMBERS OF Chinese living in or outside Taiwan today, Chen Yingzhen is a legend in his own time. He is not simply one of the more important contemporary Chinese writers, but *the* intellectual godfather to many artists and critics. For some of these he epitomizes the socially concerned writer—one who has suffered imprisonment for his convictions and who continues to address social ills in writing published after his release. Both sympathetic critics and detractors note the presence of an ideologue within the godfather as well—a person whose passionate commitment to ideas sometimes appears to be more important than their artistic expression. But many readers find that it is the very intensity of Chen Yingzhen's vision which establishes a unique empathy with character and event and gives his writing its aesthetic strength. For the Western reader unfamiliar with the author, a few salient facts about his life and the development of his fiction are necessary to understand his importance as writer and social critic in contemporary Taiwan. Such information will also enhance reflection on the relation between artist and ideologue in the two stories which appear here for the first time in English translation.¹

For the record I should state that the exact accusations which led to Chen's arrest were never made public, although rumours abound.² The author was charged with "subversive" activities by the Taiwan Garrison Command in a secret military

¹My book of translations of Chen's short stories is awaiting publication.

²While they lack evidence, some fantasize that Chen may have belonged to a study group interested in social problems and critical of the government, and that there was some informer within the group. Knowing that Chen reads Japanese, others conjecture that the authorities found Japanese translations of

materials which looked vaguely "Communist" in his house. One rumour has it that the author was jailed for writing about disillusioned lower-middle-class intellectuals. Perhaps the wildest but most entertaining opinion is that the word "red" (*hong* 紅) was caught by the censors—in "A Race of Generals" pigeons are taught to fly by the waving of a "red flag" (*hong qi* 紅旗).

trial. His original ten year sentence which began in June of 1968 was commuted through an amnesty honouring the death of General Chiang Kai-shek, and Chen was released in September of 1975 after serving seven years. My own impression is that there is a kind of "Dance of Intellectuals" always going on in Taiwan which at least partially explains the author's plight, a dance which one may find in any country in the world where martial law is the norm. Persons of differing political persuasions are ever dancing in some great ballroom to the same well known patriotic song. The rhythm may shift suddenly or the lyrics blare, depending on the whim of the maestro and the boys in the band. The dancers are mostly dressed alike and imitate one another making identical movements, but just on the outskirts of the circle some couples wear bizarre clothes and try to see just how far they can go creating new dance steps of their own while still keeping the basic beat. A few get so carried away that they forget where they are and dance themselves out of sight on an adjoining verandah. Such is the game played by socially concerned intellectuals in Taiwan. They try to press as far as they are able, given the specificity of political regulations and the obscurity of their enforcement. Magazines and newspapers are periodically closed by the government and re-emerge later under some new rubric. Voices are silenced and perhaps disappear altogether, never to be heard again, but others may take their place. Somehow or other, Chen danced too fast or too slow and was noticed too much. Whether he actually did something "wrong" we will probably never know. The important thing is that he is writing again.

Chen's social concern and his passion for ideas may be at least partially attributed to his experience of material poverty and human degradation as a child. A native Taiwanese, he was born November 19, 1937, in Zhunan, Taiwan, and his early childhood years were spent in Yingge or Banqiao, both small villages in the district of Taibei. His family of six brothers and two sisters was so poor that at an early age he was sent to live with a childless uncle. During his youth two shattering events occurred which were to have a bearing on his later years; aspects of both events are explored in his fiction.³ One was the death of his twin brother at age nine which brought about an identity crisis that lasted for several years. The other was Chen's witnessing of the sale of a twenty-year-old neighbour by her destitute parents. She had been like a beloved big sister to him. As we see in the two stories which follow, female enslavement and child prostitution are recurring motifs in Chen's writing.

Still another subject from Chen's past which occasionally appears in his writing—one that seems oddly unfamiliar in the context of modern Chinese fiction—is religion. In "Poor Poor Dumb Mouths" the hypocrisy and superstition of a Christian minister are parodied, while in "A Race of Generals" folk beliefs in an afterlife receive reverential treatment. The author describes his father as being a deeply religious Christian whose faith made a lasting impression, and he speaks gratefully of the influence of persons such as Albert Schweitzer on his youth (an influence which may also be traced in his own writing).⁴ But while noting the religious ele-

³See Chen's brief autobiographical essay, "Whip and Lantern", "*Pianzi he tideng*" 鞭子和提燈, in *The Biases of Intellectuals, Zhishiren di pianzhi* 知識人的偏執, by "Xu Nancun" 許南村 (pseudonym of Chen),

Taibei: Yuanjing, 1976, pp. 19-28.

⁴"*Pianzi he tideng*", p. 27.

ment in a few of Chen's stories, I believe it is important to dismiss the speculations of persons such as Yu Tianzong, an editor, writer, and friend, who allege that the author's incarceration was the result of the Taiwan government's failure to understand his Schweitzerian idealism.⁵ Such an assertion is more likely a fantasy intended to defend Chen against charges of being "socialistic", a taboo ideology in Taiwan.

Lastly, a central formative experience of Chen's youth was his discovery, around the time he was in the sixth grade of elementary school, of a collection of writings by the irascible twentieth-century Chinese short story writer and satirist, Lu Xun. Chen does not mention Lu Xun by name, since the latter's works have long since been banned in Taiwan along with many other modern mainland Chinese writers, but there is no question whom he is referring to. As a matter of fact, students in Taiwan commonly read such proscribed mainland authors, although surreptitiously. While Chen says that he did not understand every story, his repeated reading of the collection had a dramatic impact:

... this tattered volume of short stories ended up becoming my most intimate and profound instructor. It was then that I knew the poverty, ignorance and backwardness of China, and that that China was me.⁶

He was especially touched by an unnamed character whom we easily recognize to be Lu Xun's "Ah Q," a peasant buffoon and misfit whose fantasies of power and self-deception symbolize diseased Chinese society. In all probability this early reading of Lu Xun fostered in Chen the hope that literature might be light against darkness—a hope that proved to be somewhat premature if not naïve. Lu Xun himself bitterly admitted being frustrated in his aspirations for social change through literature. And in contemporary Taiwan, as is generally true elsewhere, media such as radio and television are more influential than writing, and students and intellectuals are typically more interested in material well-being than in social reform.

Chen's personal experiences of poverty and loss, his youthful exposure to the power of satire in Lu Xun, and the influence of Western literature and social and religious thought, gradually sensitized him to issues in Chinese society. And of course the seven years of forced "exile", as his imprisonment is euphemistically termed, represent a period of sobering silence and reflection. The evolution of his consciousness and of his own self-awareness is reflected in his essays or implicitly embodied in the twenty-two stories he wrote between 1959, when his first work appeared in print, and 1967, the year he published his last story before being imprisoned in 1968. In the half-dozen or so stories written after the author's release in 1975, the relation between the individual and oppressive social conditions is made more explicit. The narrative voice sometimes reminds us of the didacticism of a Theodore Dreiser or a Lao She rather than of the distant aesthetic stance of an Eileen Chang or Flannery O'Connor. Occasionally, there is a certain ideological tendentiousness which overshadows the prose as in the post-imprisonment piece

⁵Yu Tianzong 尉天驄, "Muzha shujian" 木柵書簡, in *Chen Yingzhen xuanji* 陳映真選集, ed. Joseph S.M. Lau, Hong Kong: Xiaocao, 1972, p. 429.

⁶"Pianzi he tideng", p. 26.

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ILLUSTRATIONS by children of Lo-tsu village arts and crafts programme, Taiwan, led by Father Ron Bocchieri, Maryknoll priest.

entitled "White-Collar Worker". On the other hand, the consciousness which directly informs "Big Brother", another story published recently which is set in the Vietnam war era, is precisely what makes its social message enormously appealing.

In the earliest of the pre-imprisonment stories we generally encounter idealistic individuals whose aroused social consciences swiftly turn nihilistic once they find they are no match for the status quo. Towards the end of the pre-imprisonment period, the point of view is more that of the pained onlooker who has a cool view of society and whose attitude is one of sad mockery or even sarcasm. The two stories translated here, both published in 1964, fall between the poles of romantic nihilism and parody of the pre-imprisonment era. "Poor Poor Dumb Mouths" moves more clearly in the direction of skepticism and social criticism, while the tone of "A Race of Generals" is both humorous and tender.

Soon after his release from prison in 1975, Chen collected many of his short stories in two separate volumes, *My First Case* and *A Race of Generals*. Incidentally, the latter volume from which I have selected two stories for translation was proscribed in Taiwan immediately after its publication for reasons which remain obscure, but probably as a form of harassment. At any rate, Chen wrote an introduction to both volumes under the pseudonym of "Xu Nancun", entitled "On Chen Yingzhen".⁷ As a kind of apologia in disguise, the essay provides a critical account

⁷ See "On Chen Yingzhen" (*Shilun Chen Yingzhen* 試論陳映真) by Xu Nancun, in *Jiangjun zu* 將軍族 (*A Race of Generals*), Taipei: Yuanjing, 1975, pp. 17-30. Also in *Diyijian chashi* 第一件差事 (*My First Case*), Taipei: Yuanjing, 1975, pp. 17-30.

of the writer by a supposedly disinterested commentator. Under the guise of a pseudonym, Chen assumes what is to my mind a somewhat affected remorseful persona and dismisses his earlier writing as being naïve. What is implied is that there will be no more depressed intellectuals, guilt-ridden romantic nihilists, and idealistic reformers who are prisoners of a short-sighted individualism. This introduction is in effect a declaration which gives Chen a fresh start as a writer after a seven-year silence, and it may also be meant to be a kind of response to those who would accuse him of writing “socialistic” fiction—the reader is informed that these earlier stories reveal the author’s ingenuous belief that failure and disillusionment were simply the plight of the poor lone individual.

The protagonist in “Poor Poor Dumb Mouths” accords with a typical pre-imprisonment story pattern—he is a young lower-middle-class (“petty bourgeois”) intellectual who suffers from a sentimental emotionalism and an ignorance of the connection between his sick self and a sick society. His world is a nightmare in which repressive human relations and the violence of murder and slavery are but aches and obscure memories. His release from the hospital is a rather routine and mechanical form of escape. In reality there appears to be no cure for personal and social ills. What distinguishes “Poor Poor Dumb Mouths” from earlier pieces is its belated expression of hope—the hero echoes Goethe’s deathbed wish when he pleads in a dream: “Open up the window, let the sunlight come in!” The world briefly appears to brighten, but as a whole the light is faint and its presence feels somewhat forced. The individual is undone by the weight of self and a morbid fatalism, and is helplessly unable to bring about a new world or effect any change.

As a matter of fact, even prior to his incarceration in 1968, Chen’s awareness of a growth in his own social consciousness led him to criticize much of what he and other writers in Taiwan had published during the 1960s.⁸ To brand the writing of this period “socialistic” would probably seem critically naïve to the author, if not politically malicious, since the relation between the individual and society is left undeveloped. The change in consciousness that we do see in the pre-imprisonment short stories and essays is a gradually deepening social concern and an awareness of personal responsibility which are later most clearly articulated in Chen’s post-imprisonment stories. What is more significant for our understanding of the context of the stories translated here is that in the pre-imprisonment essays there is a more direct exposition of the position of the writer in Taiwan society. Chen speaks of an orphan mentality, a feeling of exile, and an escapist attitude which must be overcome.⁹ Many Taiwanese educated in Japan during the era of Japanese colonialism (1895-1945) were cut off from modern China and their own native Taiwanese roots, and this privation has left its legacy, claims the author. The separation from mainland Chinese literature of the 1930s coupled with the inundation of Western

⁸See Chen Yingzhen, “Modernism Rediscovered: Random Thoughts After a Performance of *Waiting for Godot*” (*Xiandai zhuyi di zai kaifa* 現代主義的再開發), in *Chen Yingzhen xuanji*, p. 20, “Preface”.

流放者之歌), in *Chen Yingzhen xuanji*, pp. 381-390. Essay first published in *Wenxue jikan*, 1967. For the orphan theme, see Chen Yingzhen, “*Shiping Yaxiya di guer*” 試評亞細亞的孤兒, in *Taiwan wenyi* 台灣文藝, No. 58, March, 1978, pp. 245-256.

⁹See “The Song of the Exile” (*Liufangzhe zhi ge*

values and culture have fostered the sense that the Taiwanese writer is living in exile. In a story such as "A Race of Generals" we detect the felt need for the appreciation of native roots, both Taiwanese and mainland, a need which must be expressed in the face of an escapist mentality which the author finds prevalent among modern young Chinese intellectuals. And in both "A Race of Generals" and "Poor Poor Dumb Mouths" we find suggested something which is made more explicit in the essays—a criticism of those who have buried their capacity to care about their own people, who are embarrassed by poverty and lowliness, and whose one desire is to "go abroad". As the mental patient's student friend says in "Poor Poor Dumb Mouths", "we are all rootless people." There is a kind of "patriotism" embodied in this criticism which readily reminds us of Lu Xun—a desire to grow new shoots as well as to uproot a false consciousness.¹⁰

Central to the appreciation of "A Race of Generals" is our understanding that it is written in a reflective mode which provides the possibility of transcending its dominating existential ambiance. It is possible to view "A Race of Generals" as a triumph of transcendence and thus ultimately a work of comic vision, once we are sensitive to what montage and point of view call forth from us. In the story, Chen Yingzhen juxtaposes conversations with reflections, and thereby sets forth a whole series of acts of recognition between the characters so that the ending of their lives strikes us as a conversion rather than a tragedy.¹¹ The characters discover they are misfits—she is a teenage Taiwanese who is forced into prostitution while he is a middle-aged mainland Chinese who was formerly married. Despite age and ethnic differences, they come to share nicknames and to recognize personal idiosyncrasies—a particularly duck-like raspy voice, a way of sucking on a cigarette. In the end their bodily postures in death suggest they have become familiar with one another as persons set off from the rest of the world.

On the other hand, for the college student in "Poor Poor Dumb Mouths" who has been a mental patient for a year and a half, isolation and the concomitant inability to communicate have become conditions of human existence. He seems to find it necessary to be private, to lie back from the world, simply in order to survive mutilated inter-personal relations. For him, the distance between language and feeling is nearly absolute. He admires the bodies of Taiwanese railroad workers glistening with sweat—unconsciously translating them into art objects—but their toil is unintelligible to him. For a brief moment his isolation seems ended when in describing the disfigured body of a young prostitute he suddenly recalls Mark Antony's depiction of "sweet Caesar's wounds, poor poor dumb mouths". But he does not guess that the girl's wounds, like Caesar's, might speak of a general social malaise of which his mental disease is but a part. The fundamental disquiet he experiences leaves him feeling uneasy but unchanged. His consciousness has expanded, but his conscience is yet unformed.

Once we become aware of our own affirmation of a growth in both consciousness and conscience in "A Race of Generals", we begin to understand why we accept

¹⁰See "Whip and Lantern," p. 26, for Chen's allusion to Lu Xun's patriotism.

Marcel's terminology and philosophical reflections in *The Mystery of Being*, 2 vols., Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1950.

¹¹The existentialist approach here follows Gabriel

so readily the peaceful sleep of Three Corners and Little Skinny Maid. Their deaths are testimony to a mutual faith, a native belief and openness which involves a pledge to follow with all of one's being.¹² There is a dominant mode of inter-subjectivity which is altogether absent from "Poor Poor Dumb Mouths". Lastly, as we consider the element of light which illuminates "A Race of Generals" we find still another contrast. The light-against-darkness motif found throughout "Poor Poor Dumb Mouths" denotes a blindness to social ills and a fear of personal death. In the ending of "A Race of Generals", the coruscating trumpet and flashing baton symbolize an opening to joyous life. Through their mutual recognition Three Corners and Little Skinny Maid share a form of purification which leads to their final radiance in death.

If these deaths are a testimony of faith and affirmation of a certain sort, what does such witness say about the world? In the last analysis, Three Corners and Little Skinny Maid are "Generals" who share a victory. They are what Gabriel Marcel calls "persons in exile" who have lost their way and are strangers to themselves until they discover one another.¹³ But what they both come to recognize is the impossibility of their relation in this life. Thus their triumphant end and peaceful sleep have an otherworldly quality. Their option for "the next life" where they agree they both will be "pure as babes" may be read as social criticism. As outsiders, we are left with the sense that there is no place in the Taiwanese world for this odd couple and that theirs is a fitting death. We are witnesses to a simple radiant faith which causes us to join in their triumph even as it separates us from their milieu. They are indeed a ludicrous pair.

Clearly, there is an intimate relation between Chen's personal experiences of hardship, his reading, and the growth of a social consciousness. The fact that he is a native Taiwanese who sees his writing as part of the Chinese literary tradition is central. He does not view himself as a regional writer and laments a separatist mentality. But he does steep himself in his Taiwanese roots and is concerned with what the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins terms "inscape", the particular interior pattern or design of an individual thing which makes it what it is. For Chen Yingzhen as a fiction writer, the "thingness" with which he is concerned is the pattern of character which unfolds in a particular society—the atmosphere of time, place and event in Taiwan which transforms consciousness. In "Poor Poor Dumb Mouths" and "A Race of Generals", the conscience of protagonist, writer and reader begins to bud if not to flower.

¹²*Mystery of Being*, Vol. 2, p. 84.

¹³Richard Hayes, introduction to *Gabriel Marcel: Three Plays*, New York: Hill & Wang, 1965, p. 16.