Inside Li Yongping's World

"Outsider" in Taipei--Li Yung-ping 1998 July

By Elaine Chen/tr. by David Mayer

The first Malaysian-born Chinese to win a prize for literature in Taiwan, Li Yung-ping is one of the most controversial figures in Taiwanese society. Is he destined to be an "outsider" just like his hero, Albert Camus?

Li Yung-ping lives in an apartment in Hsimenting, the old part of town on Taipei's west side. By his own description, the neighbors are a collection of "barmaids, dance hall girls, and scruffy street characters of every description."

We have agreed to meet in front of Lai-Lai Department Store, in the middle of Hsimenting. I arrive at the appointed time to find the store hidden behind scaffolding. I've seen a picture of Li before, and begin looking for him.

When he appears with briefcase in hand, I recognize him immediately, like an old friend, and wave. Looking ever-so-slightly uneasy, he hands me his latest novel, Zhuling Manyou Xianjing (Zhuling in Wonderland). It was just published two days before. Handing him my card, I avoid formality: "Ah, the true hermit chooses the city!"
"I was up all last night working on a translation. My eyes are probably all bloodshot, huh?"

I look closely, shake my head, and laugh. His longish hair makes him look like a lion, though the beard is shaven.

He seems satisfied, and takes me to a small coffee shop next to a movie theater. We find a table near the street. The five-o'clock sun isn't right for a photo, but it's great for an interview.

Showing off in front of the masters?

"Is Zhuling in Wonderland the sequel to Hai Dong Qing?
"The two books are written in very different literary styles. Although the main character is the same person, Zhuling in Wonderland is not really a sequel."

Li Yung-ping divides a writer's career into three phases. In the

first period, the writing is straightforward, unadorned by literary artifice. What you see is what you get. In the next phase, an author seeks to create a style of his own. Everything has a hidden meaning. Hai Dong Qing was written during this period. In the third phase, however, one tries to recover a simpler style in which, once again, what you see is what you get. This is the style of Zhuling in Wonderland.

"I didn't want to get trapped in the 'everything has a hidden meaning' style of writing, which is why I intentionally avoided writing a second volume of Hai Dong Qing. There isn't going to be one." Li orders a Heineken and slips into thought. His lips protrude like a child's, and the thick lines on his big-featured brow, more reminiscent of an aggressive businessman than a man of letters, vanish.

"The critic Wang Der-wei once said that the symbolism in Hai Dong Qing was extremely complex, and that your literary style was elaborate to the point of being contrived. Would you agree with that assessment?"

"When I was working on my Ph.D. in comparative literature, I noticed that many writers never get beyond the second phase." Li recalls that after Hai Dong Qing was published, Taiwan University Chinese literature professor Wu Hung-yi complained during a meeting of writers: "I had to use an 300-year-old unabridged dictionary just to read your book."

The remark hit home. "I'm an overseas Chinese who majored in foreign languages. I never studied Chinese seriously until I came to Taiwan, and yet I was trying to show off in front of the true masters of the language."

On the other hand, it is no easy matter to throw off the literary style one has created and start again from the beginning. For Li Yung-ping, it meant that he had to get closer to real life-to add new details. He quit his "ivory tower" job as an assistant professor at Chungshan University and set up shop as a freelance translator amidst the hustle and bustle of Hsimenting.

Witness to the times

"Besides its literary style, Hai Dong Qing attracted attention for its political content. Have you once again included your political views in Zhuling in Wonderland?"

Li is not as ready with an answer as I expected. Frowning in thought, he replies: "I don't even know myself whether my novels advocate reunification or independence." According to Li, the weekly magazine The Journalist once described the novels Hai Dong Qing and Lang Tao Sha as the most notable political novels in favor of reunification and independence, respectively. For Li, however, the guiding principle of his writing where politics are concerned is what professor Yen Yuan-shu told him 30 years ago: "Don't worry about taking a political stand. Just record life as you see it."

The mention of Professor Yen stirs deep feelings. One of the leading literary figures of his day, Yen happened to read Li's "Lazi Fu" ("The Aborigine's Wife"). Yen went to chat for an afternoon with Li. He talked about a novelist's responsibility to serve as a witness to the times, about his views of society, and about literature as philosophy in the form of drama. As the chat was concluding, Professor Yen patted Li on the shoulder and gave him encouragement: "If you work at your writing, I'm sure you'll see a certain degree of success."

"I had been planning to switch majors to international trade, but that one fateful bit of encouragement put me on the literary path for good. It's been a rocky road, let me tell you." He was speaking so softly that I had to strain forward to hear him above the music and general hubbub.

Li returned to the subject of politics: "Writers are not some sort of great men passing judgment on right and wrong. That's for Buddha and Jesus. We're just as confused as everybody else." "Sometimes I ask myself, 'Just who do you think you are?' I wish I could steer clear of politics, but that's impossible unless you write novels about romance, martial arts adventures, or something else completely fanciful."

After the publication of Hai Dong Qing five years ago, a friend said to him: "You write a novel and you get attacked by absolutely everybody. Those in favor of reunification, those for independence, the communist party in the mainland-they all find something they don't like in your novels. How are you going to get by in life?" That is why Zhuling in Wonderland does not focus too heavily on current politics in Taiwan. "It's a modern fairy tale. A very scary fairy tale."

According to Li, Alice in Wonderland, with all its ghosts and goblins, is actually a scary fairy tale, but Zhuling in Wonderland is

even scarier because the goblins can be found in real life.

Li states without a hint of jocularity: "This novel is certain to be very controversial. I told an older man with a bad heart that he had better be ready for the worst if he planned to read this book."

On the literary path for good

"How would you classify your writing? Is it Malaysian-Chinese literature, Chinese literature, or Taiwanese literature?"
"I've been an ROC citizen for a long time now. Look." He fishes out his national ID card and shows me. "My ID card shows Malaysia as my place of birth, though."

He tells me that he was at first inclined to turn down this interview because the topic was Malaysian-Chinese literature. He states that none of his works except for his first collection of stories have anything to do with Malaysia, and that most critics are not even aware that he was born in Malaysia.

"Albert Camus was born in Algeria, but except for The Outsider and a few other early works set in Algeria, little of his writing has anything to do with his place of birth." Li first came to Taiwan at age 19. Although he has spent six of the 34 years since then in the United States, he has been back to Malaysia only twice. Malaysian-Chinese writers are disgruntled with him, and accuse him of turning his back on his homeland.

"I grew up in Malaysia. The place is in my bones, and I naturally have a very special feeling for it, but national identity is a different matter." Suddenly this big, burly man of 53 suddenly chokes up and sheds a tear.

I badly want to reach out and comfort him in his loneliness. But I restrain what may be an improper impulse, and change the subject. "What do you think about the new generation of Malaysian-Chinese writers?"

"I would urge them not to follow in my footsteps. It's too painful." Li orders another Heineken. It may not be a very strong drink, but he's still having a bit of trouble holding his emotions in. "I hope they'll go back to Malaysia and write good literature-concentrate on Malaysian themes."

Taipei dreams

"Why is that?"

"Because my case is out of the ordinary. They have lives to describe. There is no reason they should write about Taiwan, as I have. As an author, you should write about what you know best, otherwise you're just asking for trouble. I've gone and gotten myself on this path, but how many of us can be like Camus? Besides, Camus struggled in France for a long time. It wasn't until he won the Nobel Prize that he was accepted as a French novelist. Just like Camus, a Malaysian writer in Taiwan has to work twice as hard, otherwise people will say, 'Li Yung-ping, what makes you qualified to write about Taiwan?'"

So why did he choose such a difficult path?

During his first year as a university student, Li took a course on literature appreciation taught by Wang Wen-hsing, a young professor who had just returned to Taiwan. The first class was on Andersen's fairy tales. Word by word and line by line, Professor Wang illuminated the hidden meaning of the fairy tales. It was an eye-opener for Li, who came to appreciate the artistic depth of novels. He later wrote "The Aborigine's Wife" and had it published in a university magazine. It was included by the noted critic Yin Ti in a collection of the best short stories for that year. Yin Ti was very impressed by the 19-year-old from Malaysia, and encouraged Li to continue writing. He spoke to Li of Camus, and said: "I'm convinced that you are capable of writing at least one novel set in Taipei." The author Chu Yen also said to him: "It's no big deal for a person from Taipei to write about Taipei, but you, on the other hand, could write something very different."

"That's what encouraged me to write Jiling Chunqiu (A Tale of Jiling Village), Hai Dong Qing, and Zhuling in Wonderland. It's been one long search for Taipei. Zhuling was my guide to Taipei. She brought me to this city, but now she's disappeared and left me stranded here. You say 'the true hermit chooses the city,' but in reality I'm trapped here." He takes another big gulp of Heineken.

A new cradle of Chinese literature

I pour myself a glass of orange tea and dispatch it in one big drink.
"A number of Malaysians are pursuing writing careers in Taiwan. What

do you feel is the significance of their work to the Taiwanese literary community?"

With a nod, Li gives a very positive assessment. "President Lee has talked about making Taiwan a new cradle of Chinese civilization. Well, what will it take to do that? Besides a strong economy, what it takes is culture. If Taiwan could attract Chinese writers from throughout the world and have them publish their works here, we would achieve what President Lee was talking about. In China's long history, the only time this has ever been achieved was during the Tang dynasty. Did you know that the poet Li Bai had some foreign blood in his lineage? That kind of thing can't happen in the mainland today because there are too many political restrictions. It can only happen in Taiwan."

I take a look at my wristwatch. It's already 6:30. I'm usually on my way home by now, but here I sit in Hsimenting talking with this offbeat writer about somber subjects.

I close my notebook, and we walk out together to find a taxi for me. As I prepare to get into the taxi, I shake his hand tightly. It's the touch I wanted to give him earlier, when I saw his tears.

The interview is published by Taiwan Parnorama

Interviews

Listed below are only some interviews with Li Yongping in Chinese language. If you know of other work that should be included in this listing, please contact the site.

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