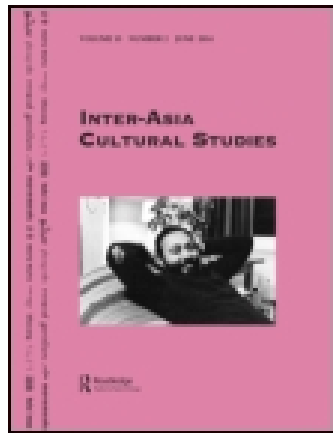


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## Editorial introduction: Chen Yingzhen and his time

Kuan-Hsing CHEN<sup>1</sup>

Chen Yingzhen (1937–) is the foremost writer and thinker on the left in postwar Taiwan. In the past half century, as a novelist, a critic, an editor, a publisher, and a political activist, he has accumulated a body of locally grounded works, addressing a wide range of issues at the center of the postcolonial conditions of intellectual life. Among his highly valued writing practices, literary forms are his most powerful mode of expression. His novels and prose go beyond the limits of his often argumentative and penetrating essays to touch on the unspeakable experiences of human life and to move and motivate his readers regardless of political tendencies. It is in the articulation of the intimate relation between “literature,” “thought” and “history” that we find Chen’s work making unique contributions.

Although Chen’s works have been widely read in East Asia and the Chinese speaking world, *Exiles at Home* (1986), a collection of his earlier literary works, is the only volume available in English, and *L’île verte: nouvelles* (2000), in French. Over the past decade, there has been a serious effort to revisit and construct the postwar political and intellectual history via re-reading Chen’s work in the wider contexts of Taiwan, mainland China and East Asia. Research, interviews, workshops, exhibitions, public forums, study groups, teachings, conferences and publications across borders were conducted and organized around Chen’s work and his political activities since the 1960s. Against this background, we are producing this special issue, centering on his literary productions, to introduce Chen Yingzhen to the readers of *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. We hope more will be done in the future to bring the important works of

writers and thinkers in the region to the center of intellectual attention.

Born in 1937, eight years before the end of half-century-long Japanese colonialism, Chen was among the generation of intellectuals living in transition towards *resinicization* on all levels. The transition in the moment of decolonization was already a difficult task but was further complicated by the CCP-KMT Civil War, which gradually intertwined with the global Cold War. When the KMT regime retreated to Taiwan in 1949, a state of emergency was declared, which eventually became the longest period of martial law in human history; it was only lifted in 1987. It was in this messy intersection that Chen grew up. Japanese was his learned language in his early years. He witnessed old Japanese soldiers losing the battle, unwillingly leaving for home. Around the same time, he suffered the first personal tragic loss—his beloved twin brother passed away at the age of nine. In memory of this elder brother, Chen adopted as a pseudonym his brother’s name “Chen Yingzhen” instead of his own name (Chen Yongshan) when he began to publish literary works. He has, since then, carried his twin brother with him throughout his life. He then oversaw the February 28 Incident of 1947 when the KMT army clashed with local civilians. In the early 1950s, during the “white horror” era of the red purge, he witnessed the arrest of the brother and sister from the mainland living next door, and also his teacher in the elementary school being taken away by military police.

Chen was ill-prepared to understand all these unhappy experiences in his childhood until he encountered Lu Xun’s *Na Han* (Call to Arms, 1922) in his junior high school years, and the banned work of Lu Xun

became his underground spiritual teacher of thought. Through Lu Xun, he not only discovered the power of the literary world but was also reconnected back to early modern Chinese intellectual tradition, while at the same time he was acquiring quite an early understanding that the backwardness of China was like one's own mother in crisis; it required one's devoted love to overcome all the difficulties and forge a new life.

In 1959, during the second year in college, Chen published his first short story, and another six in the following year, followed by yet another four in 1962. By then, he had established himself as a promising young writer. Writing in this early period meant for him a release of the burning contradiction between the impossibility of inner longing for the socialist ideal and the reality of an anti-communist, oppressive political environment. But when his highly nuanced expressions reached readers, it was read beyond the codes into all possible directions of the melancholic mood of the day. Many of the young intellectuals found Chen's writing articulating their own troubled existence under martial law; the impact of his literary works was far reaching beyond the left and the right.

1964 was a crucial moment. Asai Motofumi (1941–) was a young Japanese diplomat coming to Taipei for internship training and became friends with Chen. Out of convenience, Chen and his close circle of friends (including Wu Yaozhong, whose paintings are featured in this special issue) formed a "study group" at Asai's residence to read and discuss prohibited materials, including Japanese sources on contemporary China. As it turned out, the study group became the first grouping since the red purge in early 1950s to restart left-wing thought. It is also in this gathering that the seeds of a sense of internationalist solidarity were cultivated. Having found the "organization," Chen began to move out of the earlier "modernist" phase of agony in isolation to write in a mode critiquing the cultural scene surrounding him, such as the intellectual's pro-American self-colonization. Needless to say, the study group was already

under surveillance. In 1968, members of the group (except Asai who had left) were jailed for forming the subversive "Taiwan Democratic Alliance," a paper organization drafted by Chen.

Sentenced to 10 years in prison, Chen finally encountered the *history*. Hundreds of political prisoners (underground communists, sympathizers, or innocent people) arrested in the late 1940s and early 1950s became a living memory of the suppressed past. It was in the Taiyuan Jail in Taidong that Chen became the "designated inheritor" of the earlier generation of leftists and communists. It was also here where he inherited the sentiment and understanding that, under the severe conditions of struggle in the civil war between KMT and CCP, Taiwan's only chance to become a socialist territory was to reintegrate with the CCP revolutionary state, and the mission of the surviving leftists was therefore to continue to cultivate socialist thought among people and to prepare the moment of reunification to arrive. This conviction had by and large defined the direction of Chen's actions after he was released in 1975, three years earlier than his full sentence, due to the special amnesty because of Chiang Kai-shek's death.

Once out of jail, Chen initiated the publication of the magazine, *Xiachao* (*China Tide*) in 1976. Seen retrospectively, although banned quickly in 1979, the magazine was recognized as the moment of rebirth of left-wing thought and politics. In addition to bringing alternative worldviews via the magazine, he was also actively involved in the political debate over the *xiangtu* (home soil) literature, in response to the anti-communist literary establishment. His own literary writings became more systematic in this period. The "Washington Mansion" series (1978–1982) documented the psychic condition of the first wave of transnational corporation's landing in Taiwan in the context of industrialization and rural–urban migration. The "Bell Flowers" series (1982–1987) began to bring out the taboo histories of the life and afterlife of the 1950s' leftists (and their families) he met in prison.

In 1985, when political and social movements began to surface, Chen worked with a group of young intellectuals to publish the first photo-based monthly magazine, *Renjian* (*Human Space*). Investigative reportage and photo journalism as a means to tackle social problems in humanist terms made *Renjian* highly influential at the time in helping reawaken social consciousness. The magazine was also a vehicle to begin to incorporate perspectives from and to build connections with the Third World. For instance, the magazine reported the changing conditions of democratic struggles in South Korea in the 1980s, which was the first time such an issue entered the horizon of intellectuals in Taiwan. For financial reasons, *Renjian* was suspended in 1989, but its legacy has lasted up to today. Moreover, members of the *Renjian* group who carried the critical ethos into different fields, including documentary, theatre, literature, etc., have created a visible leftist cultural scene to slowly regain (to use Chen's expression) the "left side of the eyes" cut off in postwar Taiwan.

The lifting of martial law in 1987 opened up the possibilities for political involvement. Chen was at the forefront of left leaning political and cultural movements throughout the 1990s. He participated in drafting the constitution of the Worker's Party. He became the founding chair of the Alliance for the Unification of China in 1988, and subsequently visited the mainland to push for interactions across the Taiwan Strait. He took the lead in investigating the suppressed history of the leftists from the 1950s onward. He turned *Renjian* magazine into a publishing house, producing pioneering works such as the seven-volume series of Taiwan's Political Economy Studies, which laid the groundwork for reconstructing the modern history of Taiwan. To combat Taiwan's separatist movement, he was not only the leading voice in related debates but also organized the Society of Taiwan Social Studies to theorize the nature of Taiwanese history. Since 1994, he was a leading member in the organization of the long-

term solidarity project, "East Asian Cold War and State Terrorism Conference," in collaboration with leftist movement circles in Okinawa, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. There are many more important activities to add to Chen's enormous contributions, but it is sufficient to say that in this post-martial law period his energies were devoted to political actions at the center of the left, and his writings were largely political essays and commentaries. He did not resume his literary until the late 1990s and early 2000s when he published stories known as the trilogy of the "Loyalty and Filiality Park" series (1999–2001). He continued to write essays until 2006 when he fell into paralysis and was hospitalized in Beijing.

For half a century, Chen's writings and practices have formed a set of documentations upon which the leftist intellectual history in contemporary Taiwan can begin to be narrated. Taking as a whole, his novels, written from the standpoint of their moment of writing, provide an entry point to postwar social, political and psychic history. As a self-conscious organizer, his political practices become a nodal point for the next generation to begin to map and reconstruct the network of strategic relations of the left. He also functions as a figure of mediation, through whom the left was symbolically connected back to the early critical intellectual tradition of Lu Xun, and then reconnected to the suppressed generation of communist movement of the 1950s; he further built linkages with wider formations in the mainland and East Asia. Committed to a Chinese nationalism in the tradition of anti-imperialism, his embodiment of the Third Worldist internationalism opened up the nationalist horizon of thought to reach out to the ex-colonized parts on the earth.

This special issue selects and translates some of Chen Yingzhen's important writings. "Back alley" (1993) is an autobiographical account of Chen's work and thought. In this touching essay, he critically situates his creative works in the trajectories of his life located in the context of contemporary political history. The essay not only offers a

writer's own penetrating reflections on culture and politics but also provides the most valuable guide to date for those who hope to read his work more systematically. "My father" (2000) is one of his most well-known pieces of prose, written in memory of his father, Chen Yanxing, a primary school principal and later a Christian minister, who passed away in 1996. Chen had a very close relationship with his father. Unlike his other dissident friends, he was very lucky to have such a senior interlocutor to share the development of his thought, from adolescence onward, and to back up his political beliefs and practices even after he was sentenced to jail. From the essay, the sources of the Christian component of his thought, his generous personality, and his respect for culture and tradition all fall into place.

"Life and death" (2004), his latest prose, is an exercise of his known literary style—"death as method"—to push a living subject to the limits in order to create a condition of possibility for critical reflection. The tension between his early Christian formation and his commitment to Marxism is played out when he experienced a moment of being close to death and then returning to life, during cardiac surgery in 2002. Confronting the end of life, the writer poses honest questions to himself without being able to arrive at a final resolution regarding his doubts. "When red stars fall into Qigulin Mountains" (1994), revisiting the site of the last stage of the underground armed struggle in the 1950s, is an exemplary work of his literary reportage. We chose to include this essay to demonstrate Chen's genuine efforts in recovering the lost history and reconnecting with the communist ideals.

As noted earlier, "Loyalty and Filiality Park" (2001) is Chen's last novel to date. A telescopic mapping of modern history, this work challenges our inability to critically engage with the past. The novel was written in the middle of, and finished right after, the change of political regime when the Democratic Progressive Party's Chen Shui-bian became President in May 2001. It

was a time when ethnic conflict as a means of political mobilization was at its peak, and peace across the strait was in check. In the midst of the heated confrontational mood, Chen resumed his fictional writing to engage in dialogue. In this novel, he traced the present crisis of the two main protagonists all the way back to the Japanese empire's control over Manchuria and Taiwan in the 1930s. He followed the trajectories of their lives to show the readers the troubled conditions of the present as a result of the unresolved problems of political history. The implication is that reconciliations between ethnic groups and between Taiwan and mainland are only possible with a mutual understanding of each other's suffering in, and as a result of, history.

We have also translated a chronology of Chen's works to provide a better sense of the timeline. In addition, we include two important critical essays to account for Chen's contributions. The author of two recent books on Chen Yingzhen (Chao 2011, 2013), Chao Kang, a sociologist and social theorist, offers what he thinks as the most important reasons to study Chen's thought and literature. Zheng Hongsheng, a writer and cultural historian, analyzes the long lasting impacts Chen's works generated in the 1960s, surfacing and resurfacing again in the present.

We thank Mr. Chen Yingzhen and his wife Chen Lina for the generous support and for granting translation rights. We also thank all the dedicated translators for their hard work, as well as Mon Wong for his meticulous copy-editing labor.

## Note

1. Note on spelling: except for the author's name, all Asian names in the text are presented in the Asian order: last name first.

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