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James Na

Panel: Writing from Where I Stand

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James Na

Good afternoon everyone.

I have submitted two articles, entitled “Chinese Poetry in Southeast Asia” and “Some Facts on Philippine-Chinese Literature.” Due to time limitations, I will only touch on some important points of the first report and concentrate more on the second report.

As the title of the first report, “Chinese Poetry in Southeast Asia,” indicates, we must first know which countries belong to “Southeast Asia.” These countries are: Myanmar (Burma), Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines and Timor-Leste.

Chinese literature in these nations began when the Chinese started immigrating to these countries, which was as early as the late-eighteenth century. For a more detailed discussion of the history of Chinese Literature in these countries, when it started, how it grew, what its influences were, and other historical details, please read my report posted on the IWP website.

During the early years of immigration, the Chinese considered their stay in these Southeast Asian countries temporary. Naturally, events that happened in China during these times greatly influenced Chinese Literature in these countries. I enumerated six events in my report. They are:

1. The May Fourth Movement in China in 1919;
2. The Japanese Invasion of China and other Asian countries from 1937 to 1945;
3. The Rise of Contemporary Poetry Movement in Taiwan in 1956;
4. China’s Open Door Policy in 1978;
5. Regionalization of Chinese Literature in Southeast Asia, and
6. The Establishment of the Pen Club of Southeast Asia Chinese Poetry Writers.

Details of the above events, as well, can be read on the IWP website.

Let’s continue to a brief discussion of my second report, entitled “Some Facts On Philippine-Chinese Literature.”

In my first report, I mentioned that there were two contemporary Chinese literary magazines published in the Philippines in 1934. If we use the appearance of these two magazines as a reference point for the development of Philippine-Chinese Literature, then we have more than seventy years of history to discuss. Although seventy years is not long, I am afraid we would

have to work overtime if we were to discuss everything in detail. So my discussion will concentrate on “some facts,” as the title indicates. These facts include the hibernation of Philippine-Chinese Literature, Philippine-Chinese Literature under the guidance of the mass media, and new avenues for the development of Philippine-Chinese Literature.

1. The Hibernation of Philippine-Chinese Literature:

There were two historical events that led to the hibernation of Phil-Chinese Literature: the invasion of the Philippines by Japan in 1941 that lasted through the liberation of Manila in 1945, a period of four years; and the declaration of martial law by then-President Ferdinand Marcos from 1972 to 1981, a period of nine years.

In these two periods, Chinese literary activity in the Philippines was totally absent. Needless to say, during the Japanese occupation, no Chinese newspaper or magazine was allowed to circulate. During Marcos’ martial law, a single Chinese newspaper was selected and allowed to be published. In order to avoid any trouble, this Chinese newspaper did not have a Literary Page or any other sections that gave free expression to writers.

The phenomenon that emerged after these two hibernation periods is what we are left to ponder: the reawakening of Philippine-Chinese Literature. The environment of oppression and struggle that characterized these two hibernation periods pushed the creativity of Philippine-Chinese literature writers to new heights. The outstanding literary works produced after these hibernation periods fully compensated for the deficiency caused by the silent intervals. Why?

Generally speaking, during both hibernation periods, although many writers lost interest in writing, many of them still held on to their love for and devotion to the literary arts. The period of inactiveness enabled the writers to settle down and silently hone their skills, waiting for the moment when their talent could be unleashed.

Particularly, in the first hibernation period during World War II, when Japan invaded China, many Chinese literati and writers immigrated to the Philippines. This was just a few years before Japan invaded the Philippines and other Asian countries. During this time, the standard of Chinese education in the Philippine was high.

In the second hibernation, a long period of nine years under martial law, more complicated situations arose. During this period, the standard of Chinese education fell, due to defects in the system of Chinese education in the Philippines. The defects were that:

- a. The low salary of school teachers discouraged the younger generation from considering teaching as a profession, resulting in a lack of new teachers;
- b. Chinese schools were only allowed two to three hours a day to teach the Chinese language;
- c. The use of Chinese language in everyday life was limited;
- d. Parents' attitudes toward the education of their children were wrong, their motive for sending their children to a Chinese school only being for them to "Speak and write a little Chinese so their roots won't be forgotten";
- e. The use of impractical and outdated text books, and rigid and inflexible methods of teaching in the Chinese schools in the Philippines.

In light of these negative factors, why then was there an upsurge of Chinese Literature in the Philippines after nine long years of silence? One of the reasons is the presence of "immigrants."

Although some staunch supporters of Chinese literature belong to the 50s and 60s, many new immigrants from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong had arrived in the Philippines by the end of martial law. Among these immigrants were writers and scholars and, compared to the local Chinese, their level of education was very high! In this period, the Chinese literary circle was full of these "transplanted writers"!

2. Philippine-Chinese Literature under the guidance of the mass media.

Since most of the works of Chinese writers are carried by Chinese newspapers, a brief analysis of the Chinese population and Chinese mass media in the Philippines is needed.

- a. The population of the Philippines is approximately eighty five million;
- b. The population of the Chinese, naturalized and of Chinese descent, is approximately 2% of the Philippine population – approximately one million, seven hundred thousand;
- c. Daily circulation of all Chinese newspapers combined is approximately forty thousand copies, presuming that every newspaper reaches three readers, a total of one hundred twenty thousand readers, or approximately 8% of the Chinese in the Philippines read the Chinese newspaper daily;
- d. Readers of the Chinese literary page hardly exceed 5% of the total number of newspaper readers, this means only around three thousand readers read literary works daily;
- e. At the same time, readers of Chinese literary works have their own literary biases and political convictions, thus discriminating against certain writers. If a literary work is read by five hundred readers a day, the writer is quite lucky!

Dear friends, are you content to have your work read by a mere five hundred readers? I believe

your answer is a definite “No.” In my second report, I state that: “Chinese literary writers should not confine themselves within the small circle of the Chinese community, they should take the initiative to schematically and systematically induct Philippine-Chinese literature into the mainstream of Philippine literature.” This leads us to the third fact:

3. Staying With the Times: New Avenues for Development.

Advances in technology have led some Chinese writers in the Philippines to explore other channels of publication, such as the Internet.

In my report, I gave two examples of how writers have taken advantage of the Internet by setting up a website: “Friends of World News Literary Page” and “Society of Contemporary Arts and Literature.” Both of them have fully utilized the power of the Internet in exploring new possibilities to have their literary works read by more readers around the world. The E-Book, too, deserves mention as an economical and very effective way of circulating a writer’s work.

To summarize and conclude: the development of Philippine-Chinese literature in the Philippines is characterized by two periods of destructive, forced hibernation and a constructive movement in search of new methods of writing and publication.

Although Chinese literature in the Philippine belongs only to an ethnic group, and in spite of its being forced to hibernate twice, it had the ability to bounce back and push its creativity to new heights, totally compensating for all the years lost. This reawakening is surely rooted in the resilience, determination and cultural background of the Chinese ethnic group as a whole.

It is my sincere hope that Philippine-Chinese literature will steadily grow and develop in spite of the difficulties imposed on it by its environment.