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Independent Chinese Cinema: Filming in the "Space of the People"

Lung Yingtai, *Da jiang da hai - 1949* (Big River, big sea. untold stories of 1949) and Chi pang-yuan, *Ju liu he* (The River of Big Torrents)

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- 1 Lung Yingtai, *Da jiang da hai* - 1949 (Big River, big sea. Untold stories of 1949), Hong Kong, Cosmos books, 2009, 440 pp. and Chi Pang-yuan, *Ju liu he* (The River of Big Torrents)
- 2 The year 1949 was a momentous one. It marked the beginning of the “great divide” between Nationalists and Communists following the Civil War (1946-49). With the victory of the Communists and the founding of the People’s Republic, the “losers” withdrew to Taiwan and became *wai sheng ren* 外省人 (outsiders) and refugees on the island. Their side of the story needs to be told. The simultaneous publication of two major works, both by writers with a mainland background, has created quite a stir. One is by Lung Yingtai 龍應台, a cultural celebrity; the other by a retired professor, Chi Pang-yuan 齊邦媛, who is little known outside Taiwan. Both works are available in Hong Kong bookstores. The former is a bestseller; the latter is not easily found (though also a bestseller in Taiwan). To date, neither book has been allowed to be published in China, for obvious reasons.
- 3 The publication of Lung’s book, *Da jiang da hai -1949 (Big River, Big Sea – Untold Stories of 1949)* is a timely event, as this year is also the 60th anniversary of the founding of the PRC. I suspect Lung intentionally timed it this way – perhaps rushing it into print – in order to tell us a different story of the “losers”; not Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist Party, but the countless ordinary Chinese people who lost their lives or who barely survived war and revolution. To borrow the title of another book about Japanese feudal culture, it could almost be called the “nobility of failure.” The Chinese proverb *yi jiang gong cheng wan gu ku* — 將功成萬骨枯 (a general triumphs at the expense of 10,000 bones)

easily comes to mind, except that the “dead bones” came to millions. This is indeed the stuff that great classics as well as bestsellers are made of.

- 4 As a book aimed at a popular readership, it is a resounding success. Ever since it was formally launched in October, it has become the talk of the town. By the time I managed to get hold of a copy, all my friends had read it. Several have told me that they were deeply moved by the stories of suffering and heroism – stories that are not so familiar to most Hong Kongers, including former refugees from Shanghai and their offspring.
- 5 In fact, I myself have been moved by the author’s sincerity, indeed nobility of purpose, as well as by some of the stories she has chosen to tell. Still, the book does not live up to my high expectations. The problem lies in the author’s overambitious intent to write a testimonial saga of mammoth historical scope – all in 450 pages or 150,000 words. It should have been three times that size. Lung claims that she put in 400 days (and most nights) of hard work. May I suggest that even a genius would need more time to write such a book.
- 6 If comparison is needed, it took Tolstoy five years to write *War and Peace*, a novel of more than a thousand pages (two thick volumes in the most recent translation). Had it not been rushed into print to capitalise on this commemorative year, I am sure that, given more time to digest the sundry materials, a writer of Lung’s talent and intelligence could have produced a masterpiece – a monumental work that does full justice to the historical memory of a people who are victims of this Great Divide.
- 7 I can think of no other writer or public intellectual more qualified to write such a book than Lung. I applaud her stamina; the emotional toll on her must have been overwhelming. (Iris Chang, the author of the best-selling book on the Nanjing Massacre, suffered severe depression and committed suicide.) But the historical and moral significance of the book’s subject matter must not be trifled with. Here I have to agree, to a large extent, with *Muse’s* editorial director Perry Lam 林沛理 - one of the few critical voices in Hong Kong - that the book suffers from “over-writing” and over-sentimentality (see his two column pieces in Chinese in *Yazhou Zhoukan*, November 15 and 22).
- 8 For me it’s a problem of how to organise the materials so that they speak to present-day readers. Lung is fully aware of this and chooses to put herself out front, a narrative position that assumes a commanding presence as befits a celebrity writer. There are both pros and cons for such a device. On the positive side, it serves to bring readers into her fold as friendly listeners, disarming any reservations they might have harboured. Lung also adopts an informal and intimate tone of friendly persuasion: the narrative is framed as a story told to her son Philip. Some might find it endearing, but I find it condescending and irritating, as if she were preaching to us.
- 9 Let me be fair. Readers of different ages and backgrounds react differently. Lung’s story-telling mode may make a deeper impression on her admirers in Taiwan, especially those with a mainland background, whose long-repressed “*ressentiment*” is now voiced and vindicated. It was they who experienced the trauma of dislocation, not the native

Taiwanese. (In order to strike a balance, Lung also includes stories of some aborigine soldiers who were commandeered to fight for the Japanese during World War II and for the Kuomintang in the subsequent Civil War.)

- 10 The book also presents some grim facts: in wars there are cruelties on both sides. The Chinese Communist Army's siege of Changchun, which caused massive starvation and death (partly by blocking ordinary people from fleeing the city), was as inhuman as the German siege of Leningrad, Lung implies. She also resolves a few "unanswered questions" about the Nationalist takeover of Taiwan in 1945. For instance, why did the Kuomintang soldiers look so shabby and sick upon landing, hugely disappointing the welcoming Taiwanese crowd? Answer: they were suffering from years of battle fatigue and physical under-nourishment, being ordered to move from one place to another, and they were all terribly seasick. The underlying message Lung tries to convey is that they were all victims: the native Taiwanese from Japanese oppression, Nationalist soldiers from careless military manoeuvres by their commanding generals.
- 11 But the "downtrodden" in Lung's account did not lose their dignity. Lung also sings the praises of quite a few heroes from the Nationalist camp, including those who died during the Pacific and Civil Wars while demonstrated their loyalty and moral integrity under severely trying circumstances. Through interviews, archival and internet searches, and sheer serendipity, Lung presents a kaleidoscope of human dramas, some more harrowing than others. Especially touching is Lung's account of her mother, a model of stamina and resilience whose survival instinct was typical of countless Chinese women of that period (including my own mother). How she left her infant son with her mother as the train was leaving, and how years later she returned to her hometown only to find the whole town sunk under water – this first chapter of the book reads like the script from a movie. The narrative is made all the more vivid and emotionally charged because it assumes the subjective position of the mother herself. However, the same cannot be said of a few other stories retold by the author/narrator, sometimes accompanied by an intentional appeal to emotion. ("Don't cry, don't cry!" says the interviewer in one instance). The emotional spontaneity is lost; the interview reads as contrived. Perhaps this is what Perry Lam calls "over-writing."
- 12 Lam's view is that a writer should be more humble in the presence of her historical material, that humility and discipline are necessary. Lung may well counter with a different argument – also by necessity: in this day and age, when memories of war and suffering are erased by collective amnesia, any effort to put such memories into words must be "manipulated" in order to give it readability and sufficient emotional intensity. Of course, it doesn't hurt if the writer is a well-known public intellectual. In other words, this book has to be a bestseller in order to make an impact. Thus the author must use her celebrity status to "interfere" with her material, while preserving the overall authenticity and integrity of the record. After all, it is a book of real stories, not a history textbook.
- 13 These are two opposing approaches, and I think Lung has consciously deployed her unique writing simstyle and worked very hard to give her book a personal imprint: this is not just another historical account, but Lung Yingtai's version of what happened before and after 1949. Like "meta-fiction," the author wants to lay bare all her narrative devices on the surface, together with her own sentiments. Lung certainly does not hide her technique, or her emotions. In fact, she makes sure that we see so we

can get the full impact. She describes how excited she was – she couldn't resist shrieking for joy – when a friend called her to say that a certain key witness had been found. She reproduces her mail and written letters of inquiry for authenticity. At the end of the book, she expresses profound gratitude to the many friends who have helped her in a spirit of collective sharing.

- 14 The book's form of organisation is what I would call "mosaic." It consists of many stories and story fragments woven together by a careful hand. Lung uses this device in order to pinpoint her thesis: that all the victims, named or nameless, shared the same historical fate. Whether winners or losers, they were caught in the same historic moment and on the same battleground. To drive home this point again and again, she employs the technique of "synchronicity": at the same time as Mr. A. was here, Mr. B. was also caught in the same spot, though they did not know each other and belonged to opposing camps. Sometimes, the soldiers willingly or unwillingly changed sides and put on different uniforms. Only with hindsight or from God's point of view, as it were, can the actions of these people be seen as "synchronised." That takes consummate skill, and Lung does not always succeed. A story can be introduced in one chapter and then picked up in another. Episodes are left incomplete and dangling, leaving mysteries unsolved and causes unexplained.
- 15 For instance, Lung interviewed Xiao Wanchang 蕭萬長, Vice-President of Taiwan, who kept talking about a doctor who was executed together with a group of Taiwanese representatives – by whom? Why so? We don't have a clue. Nor does Lung reveal all sources. Her footnotes are scarce. One reads about an officer in the Nationalist Army who shouted at Leftist students who were well fed but still went on anti-hunger demonstrations. Who told this story? From what source? An historian would feel exasperated by such a cavalier attitude. To me, a fairly complete listing of sources is more important than a complete listing of names of people who have helped her.
- 16 I wish I had more positive things to say. In a way I am surprised by my own reactions, for I come from a similar background to Lung; my parents went through similar trials and tribulations during the Sino-Japanese War and became wandering refugees before my family ended up in Taiwan. And my own childhood – I was born under Japanese gunfire in the poverty-stricken Henan countryside during the last years of the Sino-Japanese War – was less happy and secure than Lung's in southern Taiwan. Thus I was ready to embrace this book. Perhaps I expected too much. The publication of another "River" book – *Ju liu he* 巨流河 (literally *The River of Big Torrents*) by Chi Pang-yuan – around the same time as Lung's book is sheer coincidence. Chi, a retired professor of English from Taiwan University who is now 85, took four years to write her autobiography. Like Lung, she was assisted by devoted friends and students. Totalling 603 pages, it is a longer book, yet it tells the story of a single person. The first half, devoted to the years before 1945, tells a similar story of wandering, as Chi left her hometown in Manchuria as a child during the Japanese invasion. She first joined her parents in Beijing

(called Beiping at that time), then moved to the “great hinterland” together with teachers and fellow students of her high school. She entered Wuhan University, which had been relocated to western Sichuan during the War years, to study English literature under a number of prominent professors, and graduated just as the Civil War broke out. She was luckier than most victims described in Lung’s book because she made the right choice to come to Taiwan in 1947, where she found a steady teaching job, got married and settled down to the life of a typical academic.

- 17 So why did this plain and straightforward memoir become a bestseller and create a stir in Taiwan? Precisely because of its unadorned and unmanipulated presentation – in short, by plain honesty. Reading it proved effortless, but also rewarding. Juliu River is a real river in Manchuria, not a historical metaphor, and the book is an old-fashioned, real – not fictional – autobiography without fancy technique. It recounts the author’s life in chronological order, giving special attention to her father (who was a patriotic educator and leader). The author portrays herself, somewhat modestly, as a girl of average talent who was reluctantly drawn into the vortex of war and chaos. Yet even such an ordinary person, when forged by such experiences, matured into a brave and resourceful woman and intellectual. That is the book’s simple message – a message that goes directly to the depths of my heart. While reading it I was thinking of my own mother who, albeit 10 years older, shared many aspects of Chi’s educational experience. I was also thinking of two other major works with similar themes: *Wei yang ge* 未央歌 (*Songs before Dawn*) by Lu Qiao 鹿橋 and *San Sheng San Shi* 三生三世 (or *San Sheng Ying Xiang* 三生影像 in its expanded Hong Kong edition) by Nie Hualing 聶華苓. Well-written memoirs or novels by and about wartime intellectuals are rather few in modern Chinese literature. Chi’s unassuming memoir joins their ranks, as it were, by surprise, since she has never considered herself a writer.
- 18 I know Professor Chi as a respected friend and colleague. Unlike the flamboyant Lung Yingtai, Chi strikes me as rather demure and correct, if not over-serious. Thus I was surprised to read about her first romance with an air force pilot and a Christian, before he died in battle. Not knowing how to describe this platonic affair, Chi reproduces one of his long letters in its entirety. I was moved close to tears by the sincere sentiments in it. Did such a person – perfect in every way – really exist? The author’s plain prose makes me believe so. How was such an ordinary girl capable of such lofty idealism? The answer, as Chi clearly implies, is war – and the exceptional circumstances created by eight long years of the Sino- Japanese War (called the “war of resistance”). It purified the souls of that generation just as it brought the Kuomintang government to the pit of corruption. Chi’s portrait of her university education in wartime Chongqing and western Sichuan reads like an idyllic novel from nineteenth-century English literature, one of the subjects she studied and later taught. And she frequently resorts to English romantic poetry –

by Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats in particular – or to classical Chinese poetry to describe her lyrical emotions when her own descriptive power seems to fail. If Lung's book feels over-written, Chi's is just the opposite. The second part of the autobiography becomes more familiar and shorn of eventful happenings. Chi finally arrived in Taiwan without incident or obstacle, married a trustworthy man and settled down. A quiet life without sound and fury (and despite the author's relatively narrow and biased political perspective — she hardly has anything good to say about the Chinese Communist Revolution), it acquires a cumulative emotional force. As a teacher and a student of literature myself, my attention was naturally drawn to a few memorable details, such as when Chi found herself the only student in a seminar on Dante taught by a young professor who had just returned from Italy; she went to the professor's house for class and read the *Inferno* while holding her professor's newborn baby. She also studied English poetry with no less a master than Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜, the great aesthetician and translator of Croce and Vico. I envy her good fortune. This remarkable saga of education was also made possible by war, as leading Chinese intellectuals became refugees but continued with their teaching despite poverty and danger. In fact, the more trying the circumstances, the higher the morale. Chi's memoir can be taken as a small testament to a truly heroic age – an age of innocence and idealism that will never return.

- ¹⁹ This review originally appeared in *Muse Magazine*, Issue 35, December 2009