**Chen, Yingzhen (1938--)**



**Jing Tsu (Yale University)**

Chen is a prolific writer and influential cultural critic from Taiwan. Born Chen Yongshan in Miaoli County, Chen started to publish fiction in 1959 while majoring in English at the Tamkang College. From 1963, his works began to appear in *Modern Literature*. His earlier works, published between 1959 and 1965, are often melancholic and autobiographical. In 1967, Chen published an essay criticizing modernist works’ for prioritizing form over content and called, instead, for a literature with a high social consciousness. In 1968, he was apprehended by the Taiwanese Garrison Command and charged with promulgating Communism. He was imprisoned for seven years.

Following his release in 1975 he converted to a realist standpoint and wrote works with moralistic and socialist overtones. He advocated a China-leaning nationalist writing in the Nativist Literary Debate in 1977-1978. He was arrested again shortly before the Formosa (or Kaohsiung) Incident. From 1967 to 1982, he published several stories in *Literature Quarterly* (*Wenxue jikan*). His works from this period tackled the problem of the capitalist economic exploitation of the Third World. In 1983 and 1984, Chen published several political stories to highlight the incompatibility between socialist ideals and the increasingly materialistic orientation of society. From 1985 to 1989, Chen was in charge of the magazine *Human World* (*Renjian*), which was known for its exposé of social problems. Chen’s writing overall is profoundly concerned with Taiwanese history and society. He remains consistent in his pursuit of an agenda of unification with mainland China in his criticism of colonialism and imperialism. Chen’s overriding ideological concerns sometimes win him the reputation of being more of a social critic or intellectual dissident than a writer.

**Timeline of Major Works Published**

**1959 1972 1975 1975 1979 1983 1984**

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*“The Noodle Stall” Selected Works of My First Case A Race of Night Freight Clouds Wanshang Dijun*

*Chen Yingzhen Generals*

**1984 1985 1987 1998 2001**

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*Mountain Path Selected Fiction of Zhao Nandong and Chen Collection of Chen Collection of Chen*

*Chen Yingzhen Yingzhen’s Short Essays Yingzhen 15 Vols. Yinzhen’s Fiction 6 Vols.*

Major themes that run through different stages of Chen’s writing include the spiritual degeneration of intellectuals and the lives of marginal characters. The former usually revolves around the death of an idealistic or socialist character, as can be found in “My Kid Brother Kangxiong” (Wode didi kangxiong, 1960), “Country Teacher” (Xiangcun jioashi, 1960), “My First Case” (Diyi jian chaishi, 1967), *One Afternoon* (*Moyige riwu*, 1973), and “Mountain Path” (Shanlu, 1983). The latter expresses itself in Chen’s concern with marginal characters, which lead him to explore the mental burden of those who suffer from war trauma. Good examples in this regard include the mainlander soldier in “Documents” (Wenshu, 1963) and the tormentor who performed his duties during the Nationalist White Terror period in “Zhongxiao Park” (Zhongxiao gongyuan, 2001). In both stories, the characters are fugitives of their own past. Hallucination, insanity, and death serve as common metaphors for the impact of wars on an individual’s wounded psychology.

Due to Chen’s own Protestant background, Christianity is featured in his earlier works. In “My Kid Brother Kangxiong” for instance, the nihilistic Kangxiong takes his own life partly because of his inability to live up to the demands of Christian morality. His death symbolizes a rebellion against authoritaty, such as religious morality, patriarchal oppression, and even his own utopian beliefs. In “The Story of Judas Iscariot” (Jialueren youda de gushi, 1961), a reconstruction of Judas’s betrayal of Christ, Christianity is appropriated to highlight the futility of revolutionary ideals, as represented by Judas.

Also noteworthy are Chen’s juxtaposition of modernist and realist devices (especially in his earlier works) and his use of literature as a means of social critique. “A Race of Generals” (Jiangjun zu, 1964) illustrates how Chen employs the stream of consciousness technique and symbolism to express the inner feelings of two downtrodden entertainers while offering a pungent exploration of the depressing reality with which the characters must battle daily. “Night Fright” (Yexing huoche, 1978) gives a trenchant social commentary on Taiwan’s economic dependency on America. In the story, a native Taiwanese white-collar worker resigns in protest of his American boss’s disrespectful attitude toward the Chinese people and returns to Taiwan’s countryside with his second-generation mainlander Chinese lover. In addition to the potential reconciliation of ethnic tensions, the story indicates an emphasis on one’s native values and a rejection of the world system of hegemony.

Despite Chen’s modernist phase before mid-1960s and his appreciation of certain works by modernist writers who were associated with *Modern Literature*, he regarded Taiwan’s modernism as a second-rate imitation of the West. This view resonates with his continued resistance against American cultural imperialism. Ideology plays a critical role in his appraisal of modernism in Taiwan.

Selected bibliographies

*Chen Yingzhen zuopinji* (Collection of Chen Yingzhen, 15 volumes) (1998). Taipei: Renjian.

Chen Yingzhen xiaoshuo ji (Collection of Chen Yingzhen’s Fiction, 6 volumes) (2001). Taipei: Hongfan.

Miller, Lucien (1986). *Exiles at Home: Stories by Ch’en Ying-chen*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.

References and further reading

Kinkley, Jeffrey (1990). ‘From Oppression to Dependency: Two Stages in the Fiction of Chen Yingzhen’, *Modern China* 16: 243-68 (argues Chen’s thematic change is related to his own psychological progress).

Miller, Lucien (1980). ‘A Break in the Chain: The Short Stories of Ch’en Ying-chen’, *Chinese Fiction from Taiwan: Critical Perspectives* Jeannette L. Faurot, ed., Bloomington: Indiana UP, pp. 86-109 (applies Gabriel Marcel’s existentialist philosophy to read Chen’s works).

Riep, Steven (2012). ‘Piecing Together the Past: The Notion of Recovery in Fiction and Film from Taiwan’, *Modern China* 38, 2: 199-232 (deals in part with how Chen uses the form of detective fiction to represent the White Terror of the early 1950s in “Lingdang hua” (Bellflowers) and “Mountain Path”)

Robinson, Lewis S. (1989) ‘The Treatment of Christianity in the Fiction of Chen Yingchen’, *Ching Feng: Quarterly Notes on Christianity and Chinese Religion and Culture* 32, 1: 41-81 (examines the impact of Christianity in Chen Yingzhen’s works).