**Qideng Sheng (1939--)**

Born Liu Wuxiong in Miaoli of Taiwan, Qideng Sheng is an important modernist writer in Taiwan. Graduating from Taipei Normal College, he published his debut work in 1962 in the *United Daily* (*Lianhe bao*) literary supplement. In 1966, he co-launched the magazine *Literary Quarterly* (*Wenxue jikan*). From 1964 to 1972, he published several experimental works in *Modern Literature*. He attracted great attention with his short story “I Love Black Eyes” (Wo ai heiyanzhu, 1967). Qideng Sheng eventually left *Literary Quarterly*. He returned to his hometown in 1970, publishing extensively before turning to photography in 1981. He has published sporadically since the 1990s and announced that he would not write more when *Complete Works of Qideng Sheng* was published in 2003.



Qideng Sheng is celebrated for his portrayal of an artist - a self-centred and uncompromising loner - based on his own image. He practices this belief by leading a reclusive life. His works explore the tension between social order and individual freedom. They challenge narrow-minded morality and shy away from conventional narrative forms. They are usually philosophical while eschewing a coherent plotline, which make his works both abstruse and aesthetically challenging for critics.

**Timeline of Major Works Published**

**1962 1967 1969 1970 1972 1976**

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*“Unemployed, Poker, “I Love Black Eyes” Quandary The Mouse that Giant Crab The Sad Song*

*Fried Squids” is Set Free from Sandy River*

**1978 1980 1985 1986 1991 1998**

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*Strolling to the Wings over the Letters from Returning to Two Styles-The Whisper of*

*Black Bridge Silver Waves Tanlang Sandy River Death of Aping Love*

**2003 2012**

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*Complete Works My Insistence: Best Works*

*of Qideng Sheng of Qideng Sheng*

One salient example of Qideng Sheng’s modernist style is his appropriation of an existentialist discourse in “I Love Black Eyes.” The story starts with the protagonist Li Longdi on his way to meet his wife. They miss each other. On his way home, Li is caught in a flood in which he condemns those who fight for survival. He offers assistance to a prostitute but refuses to recognize or to help his wife who is also trapped in the disaster. Throughout the story, there are long passages in which Li tries to rationalize his behavior while criticizing people’s selfishness. The absurdist plotline stirred up a debate about the morality in his work and what the flood in the story symbolized.

Defending the piece, Qideng Sheng argued that Li rescued the prostitute because of his good nature, and the theme of the story is St. Francis-like compassion and love for all. The flood, according to Qideng Sheng, symbolizes the unbridgeable gap between the reality in which Li lives and his ideal self-image as Ya Zibie - an identity Li assumes when his wife seeks help from him. The image of Ya Zibie, like ‘black eyes’, hints at a defiant artist’s philosophy in which being true to oneself and making one’s own choices are of paramount importance.

The image of an artist as loner reappears in *The Sad Song from Sandy River* (*Shahe beige*, 1976). It depicts the protagonist Li Wenlong strolling along a river alone at night to reflect on his self-chosen exile and sense of inferiority, which is attributed to his inability to find a respectable job that is expected of him. Toward the end of the story, Li Wenlong reassures himself of his career as a musician. This not only endows art with a high value, but also underlines the significance of artistic self-fulfilment. Li Wenlong gives expression to Qideng Sheng’s inner struggle of being torn between idealism and self-deprecation. In his later works such as *Letters from Tanlang* (*Tanglang de shuxin*, 1985) and *Whisper of Love* (*Simu weiwei*, 1998), Qideng Sheng employs an epistolary style, as he continues to forge an artist’s image through naked self-examination.

In addition to his thematic avant-gardism, Qideng Sheng’s linguistic style is also the object of much criticism. He uses long and translation-inspired sentences that follow the style of foreign languages. He also is fond of omitting grammatical particles, in order to best capture the complexity of his own thoughts or present the inner feelings of his characters. He considered the flow of imagination far more crucial than grammatical correctness. The reception of his linguistic innovation was inevitably polemical. Critics have given his works high praise as well as condemned his style as ‘infantile paralysis’ (Joseph Lau).

In an interview held in 2012, Qideng Sheng referred as an example to his short story “Red Eyes” (Mukong chi, 1987)—about a mentally deranged man who was not understood by others—where he also commented on his own pursuit of individualism over the past few decades. He added that modernism is concerned with individual existence, a topic that had not been previously acceptable, given the patriotic atmosphere controlled by the Nationalist government. The situation has since changed. Qideng Sheng was a recipient of the National Award for Arts in 2010, which signalled a wider recognition of his modernist aesthetics.

Selected bibliographies

*Qideng Sheng quanji* (Complete Collection of Qideng Sheng’s Works) (2003). Taipei: Yuanjing.

*Weihe jianchi: Qideng Sheng jingxuan ji* (My Insistence: Best Works of Qideng Sheng) (2012). Taipei: Yuanjing.

*Qideng Sheng ji* (Selected Works of Qideng Sheng) (1993). Zhang Henghao, ed. Taipei: Qianwei.

“I Love Black Eyes” (1976), Tr. Timothy Ross and Dennis T. Hu. In Joseph S. M. Lau, ed., Chinese Stories from Taiwan: 1960-1970. New York: Columbia UP, pp. 63-73.

References and further reading

Wang, C. H. (1980) ‘Fancy and Reality in Ch’i-teng Sheng's Fiction’, *Chinese Fiction from Taiwan: Critical Perspectives*. Jeannette Faurot, ed., Bloomington: Indiana UP, pp. 194-205 (one of the earliest English essays on Qideng Sheng’s writing).

Chen Li-fen (1992). ‘Form and Its Discontent: A Rereading of Ch-i-teng Sheng’s Fiction’, *Modern Chinese Literature* 6 1/2: 179-202 (an essay focusing on Qideng Sheng’s literary form).

Yvonne Sung-sheng Chang (1993). ‘Appropriations of Literary Modernism’, *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance*. Durham: Duke UP, pp. 53-62 (an analysis on Qideng Sheng’s avant-gardism and appropriation of existentialist discourse).