From Oppression to Dependency
Two Stages in the Fiction of Chen Yingzhen

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For the past decade or two, Chen Yingzhen (born in Taiwan in 1936, of native Taiwanese stock) has been considered by many Chinese readers and critics in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas to be Taiwan’s greatest author. Some of his partisans think him China’s foremost living writer (Miller, 1986: 1-2). The People’s Republic (PRC) naturally does not accord him such honors, but he is much appreciated and studied there, as he has been for some time on American and European campuses. A book and more of Chen’s fiction has been translated into English for publication outside Taiwan (Lau, 1976, 1983; Miller, 1986); Huang Chunming and Li Ang are the only other non-emigré Taiwan writers of which that can be said. In 1988, a fifteen-volume compendium of all Chen’s writings was published, weighted down with enough annotations, prefaces, and critiques to raise the specter of Chen Yingzhen as the Lu Xun of Taiwan—and Lu Xun’s works were only collected posthumously. Also in 1988, the University of Hong Kong, with the University of Chicago as co-sponsor, convened an international research conference on “Chen Yingzhen’s Fiction and Nonfiction.” Seldom has a single living modern Chinese author, or even a dead one, been the subject of such a grand and genuinely academic symposium. The intellectual, moral, and artistic expectations created for Chen Yingzhen are now extremely high.

Yet Chen Yingzhen’s artistic stature remains moot. Joseph S. M. Lau, who does regard Chen’s writing highly and probably rates him

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above all but a handful of the best contemporary mainland authors, once wrote, “Chen Yingzhen may not be a great writer; his output is relatively small and his style is at times embarrassing, yet he is a very important writer . . . . Almost alone among his contemporaries, he addresses himself to some of the most sensitive problems of his time” (Lau, 1976: 28). Lucien Miller similarly notes that many Chinese consider Chen Yingzhen “a legend in his own time,” but “immature” as an author (Miller, 1986: 2).

Chen Yingzhen enjoys these images of himself. Stressing the moral, political, and intellectual side of his mission, as do most writers across the Taiwan Strait, he pretends to disdain fine matters of technique that might deflect him from the tasks at hand. The technical roughness in some of his works lends this pose some credibility, but it is really quite a misleading introduction to Chen Yingzhen the novelist. Most of his fiction is technically sophisticated — with ambiguous, reflective characters who behave unpredictably; complex plots which invite readers to reconstruct “reality” in its original sequence for themselves, in the classic manner of Lu Xun’s “Medicine” in the early works (Dolezelová-Velingerová, 1977), and later in a more alienated, modernist spirit; symbolism, including tropes ranging from the canonical (Judas Iscariot) and the concrete (repulsive images of parts of the body) to the ineffable (“the green migratory bird” in the story of that name); and many-sided social referents, such as allegorical mainland and Taiwanese characters whose identities are not really derived from their native place. One scholar regards Chen as a deft compositor of multicultural literary pastiches of the postmodernist type (Paradis, 1987).

The idea of Chen Yingzhen as a moral intellectual first and a creative writer second has taken hold particularly because of two other factors. Chen has more than paid his dues as a dissident. In a secret trial of 1968, the Taiwan Garrison Command had him sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment for “subversive activities.” It is unclear what precisely was the cause or the pretext for this injustice, but Chen suspects that it had to do with his participation in Marxist study groups. Released in 1975 through the amnesty proclaimed after the death of Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kaishek), Chen Yingzhen promptly resumed his
role as writer and social critic, while supporting himself through work in the Taiwan pharmaceuticals plant of a U. S. transnational corporation.

Second, most critics have found a heightened "tendentiousness" in Chen Yingzhen's later works. Hence, "immature" or not, the early and middle stories have remained the focus of analysis for critics such as Lau and Miller. The author himself takes pride in the changes in his writing. As he puts it, his works acquired a higher social consciousness after 1966-1967 (Chen, 1988: 9.3-13). In fact, critics have sorted his fiction into as many as three or four periods: from 1959 to 1965; from 1966 until 1968 (the year Chen became a political prisoner); and from 1975 (his release) into the 1980s, which I shall occasionally refer to as his "later" period, without meaning to imply that it is his final period (Lau, 1983: 102). Ye Shitao sees a new period beginning already in 1983 (Chen, 1988: 1.19-22); works written in those years are beyond the scope of this essay.

But does Chen Yingzhen's tendentiousness mean that he subscribes to a full-blown ideology? He has always left that entirely vague, even in his essays, probably as a matter of considered wisdom. Yet, his facile use of radical left-wing slogans—in his essays—certainly suggests that much of his political and social analysis is ideologically derived, though not absolutely ideologically bound. This leaves one in a quandary when analyzing the relationship of his ideology to his fiction. Despite the many clues that his ideology is real enough, it can only be deduced, and what can be deduced from the whole of his oeuvre is far more complex than any ideology.

No doubt Chen Yingzhen was on the left before his imprisonment, having been a devout Christian in high school and then taken up trendy campus philosophies like existentialism (such fads as he satirizes in "The Comedy of Narcissa Tang"; Chen graduated from Tamkang College in English in 1960). Today he avows that in the late 1960s he felt hope for the society Mao Zedong built on the mainland. Although the closeness he once felt to the PRC has cooled in recent years, that is partly because he feels that it, too, has now compromised with the world capitalist system (Chen, 1988: 6.8). To Xiao Qian, who met Chen Yingzhen at the University of Iowa, Chen seemed more Marxist than most of the writers visiting from the PRC (letter to Kinkley).
However, the differences between Chen Yingzhen's early and later fiction do not reflect any conventional Marxist change in social consciousness. Classes remain hazy and class consciousness is muted throughout his oeuvre. And, far from abandoning bourgeois characters in favor of proletarian ones in his later works, Chen, if anything, writes less about poor people and more about miserable folk who, appropriately in view of Taiwan's economic progress in the 1970s, have good salaries and, even if they are lowly secretaries, motorcycles to ride home on (like Rita in "The All-incorporating Business God").

A final paradox is that, although Chen Yingzhen is a native Taiwanese and a political radical, which gave him a two-fold affinity with the xiangtu (nativist) literary camp against the Guomindang during the polemics that rent Taiwan's literary and intellectual scene in the late 1960s and 1970s, his views and his creative practice contradict the essence of nativism. Not only does Chen oppose Taiwan independence, he yearns for the reunification of Taiwan with the mainland under a mainland-based regime. Moreover, although in the abstract he proclaims the now unfashionable virtues of nationalism and applauds "third world" nationalisms almost indiscriminately (because they resist world capitalism), when commiserating with his own Taiwan as a dependent region, he makes it seem interchangeable with other dependent entities, rather than a unique case with peculiar Taiwanese characteristics. In other words, although Chen in principle wants to defend local values against the cosmopolitan world system, in practice the representative local values in his fiction are so abstract and generalized ("third-world Asian," as opposed to Taiwanese), or so shot through with globalized values (Christianity, humanitarianism, and resistance to cosmopolitanism as such) that they collapse, for utter want of local content. Nor does Chen exploit the riches of Taiwan dialect like the other nativist writers. To be sure, theories of imperialism are themselves often charged with denuding "third world" countries of their individuality, by naming the "first world" as the prime mover in their histories. But, even as Chen's views of oppression are not just simple expressions of ideology, his depictions of the Taiwan culture that is in jeopardy are more neutral than any internationalist banner requires.
The result is that Chen Yingzhen’s stories, again like Lu Xun’s, are not notable for local color or indeed nationalism — Chinese or Taiwanese. They embody an interiorized, intellectual alienation from all forms of authority that is as meaningful to nations that think themselves fully “rooted” as to nations still trying to define their roots. Thus, even when Chen uses fiction to make a tendentious case for the liberation of Taiwan from the world capitalist system, psychological, humanitarian, moral, and Christian overtones reverberate along with the standard economic argument. This complexity, which supplements the generalized world economic theory, is what makes Chen’s later writing so meaningful to “first world” readers, and to “third world” readers outside of Taiwan (who should be immune to most of the charms of Taiwanese local color, unless from feelings of fraternal obligation). It is certain threads of this complexity, I believe, which link Chen Yingzhen’s later creativity to his earlier stories.

But this article will take, as its primary task, analysis of the difference between Chen’s early and later fiction. It begins with the premise that Chen Yingzhen’s fiction, early and late, sympathizes with the downtrodden and miserable of the world. This bedrock social stance, influenced early on by Christianity and more socially conceived anti-capitalist value systems, by May Fourth literature (particularly Lu Xun’s, Chen says), Western fiction and philosophy, science, traditional Chinese culture, and a host of other factors (Robinson, 1986: 246ff), has not altered. The basis of human misery as portrayed in Chen Yingzhen’s fiction is what has changed, from the distant and sometimes abstract webs of social, cultural, and psychological oppression familiar to us from Lu Xun’s stories, to a more modern and integrated pathology of dependency. Chen’s later downtrodden characters inhabit a different society than the earlier ones. They also experience a different human condition.

**THE EARLY FICTION**

Chen Yingzhen’s social commitments cannot be deduced from his early fiction, for few of those works are didactic, although they present
a quest for human dignity and the overcoming of personal and social barriers through idealism and love. Chen was brought up in what became an energetically evangelical family, following the death of his twin brother at the age of nine (Robinson, 1986: 246). But even his early works subject the faith to a scrutiny that would be objectionable to most Taiwanese Christians, who are typically conservative and congregationally minded. Conversely, when Chen’s fiction presents Christianity as a positive social phenomenon, it appears in a guise that is uncharacteristically ecumenical, sometimes even as an abstract, impersonal, leveling sort of value system. Yet, the most explicit references to social activism (e.g., “nihilism”) as an alternative to Christian love appear in some of Chen’s earliest stories, too, when he was closest to his Christian past. “The Story of Judas Iscariot,” an early story but still written after Chen’s Christian faith was shaken (Judas’s soul-searching leads him to reject Christ in favor of social revolution, as probably had the author), in the end affirms the transcendent “message” of Christ against the flawed mundane social “program” of Judas. So much for any simple attempt to link ideologies in Chen’s fiction to the chronological progression of ideologies in the author.

The outstanding constant social trait of Chen Yingzhen’s early stories is their focus on the predicaments of oddly marginal persons from the lower reaches of society. It is in this way that Chen’s early stories resemble Lu Xun’s, along with syntax occasionally influenced by classical Chinese, themes of cannibalism, mental illness, and aberration, and above all a yearning for the “love and sincerity” (“truth and love” in Chen’s formulation) that Lu Xun found lacking in Chinese society (Lyell, 1976: 60, 160, 223, 305; Chen, 1988: 9.20). Neither Lu Xun nor Chen Yingzhen is noted for fully rounded characters, yet their caricatures of people on the edge are more memorable than the problematic plots that bring them to life. Kangxiong, Wu Jinxiang, the madman of “Poor Poor Dumb Mouts,” Three Corners and Little Skinny Maid, Emmy and Barney, are as evocative as Kong Yiji, the intellectual in the wineshop, Runtu, the “madman” diarist, and Sister Xianglin.

How is this social marginality of Chen’s characters to be defined? Not primarily by their poverty and powerlessness, I find, even in the case of the early stories. (A Marxist writer might indeed deny that the
lower classes are in any sense “marginal.”) But suffering from historical and material oppression is something which most of the characters share. This conventional kind of wretchedness clearly locates them in their society, and gives them something in common with the sympathetic human subjects of most left-wing modern Chinese literature. The social deficits of Chen’s characters, in class terms, are, however, noted with great subtlety—often with just a brief tag of a line or a sentence. The more dignified are the characters’ attempts to transcend their handicap or curse, the more economical is Chen Yingzhen’s narrative art. Let us begin with “Kangxiong” as a spokesman for the dispossessed, a young man whose oppression is nevertheless mediated by psychological and intellectual factors rather than directly determined by social forces. He is a spokesman, but quite alone.

Kangxiong is the hero—dead at the time of telling—of “Wo de didi Kangxiong” (My Younger Brother Kangxiong, 1960), the first work of Chen Yingzhen’s to win critical notice. The tale is a philosophical reminiscence (it cites Biblical history and Boileau) by Kangxiong’s sister, who narrates the tale two years after his death. She frequently quotes from Kangxiong’s diary, so often digressing about the course of his life and her own that her retrospective reconstruction reads very nearly like a diary of her own.

The brother’s diary was composed over many years; the sister’s reading of it took her all of the two years since. After her brother’s death she was about to emulate his rejection of worldly values by abjuring a loveless arranged marriage to a socially prominent Christian. But she took the vows anyway, four months after Kangxiong’s funeral. Hence there are really four personalities: the living and the posthumous brother, known through his words and his diary, and the sister, before and after Kangxiong’s diary altered her understanding of his life—though not enough for her truly to understand herself.

Chen Yingzhen’s treatment of time is necessarily complex. The sister’s narrated musings skip back and forth between consideration of the validity of Kangxiong’s professed nihilist philosophy, how well he in his poverty lived up to it, her brother’s influence upon her, and her internal emotional changes since she married. This gives the story a disjointed feel, and Kangxiong’s emotional life was chaotic to begin with. He was an anarchist until he fell in love, lost his livelihood, gave
up his sexual innocence, and then, feeling unable to escape the psychological demands of Christian morality after accepting free lodging in a church, judged himself a sinner and took his life.

"My Younger Brother Kangxiong" is thus a dark and intellectualized reflection on fallen ideals and lost opportunities, showing many affinities with Lu Xun. Enigmatic crows fly across the horizon, as in "Medicine." Indeed, like "Diary of a Madman," the Chen Yingzhen story is the retelling of a diary by a sibling (in this case a sister rather than a brother) who turns out in the end to have false consciousness. In Lu Xun's "Diary," it is an opening statement that the subject was mad but is now cured that is controverted by the subsequent narrative. In Chen's short piece, the sister's role as an "inadequate narrator" is revealed by a twist at the end. She mischievously decides to honor her brother by rebuilding his gravesite, to "make it luxurious."

Despite his unattractiveness as one who was sexually "defiled" and then committed suicide, Kangxiong in death is sympathetic, a martyr. However insufficiently, the sister realizes that his life was sacred, a reproof to her and the marriage that has caused her "Cinderella-like metamorphosis," for she confesses to having forsaken her true love (an artist) to go through with it. That betrayed Kangxiong's wishes for her happiness. In the end, she seems to have lost her capacity even to grieve for Kangxiong.

And Kangxiong is in rebellion not just against the system (even in death, for a French priest refuses to give a Catholic burial to this suicide), but against his father, the oppressor of both brother and sister. It was the father who wanted the sister to marry upward, and Kangxiong's death that left her unprotected against the father's will. Kangxiong the martyr also feels himself under a sentence because of his sexual sins. He is reduced through torment to the same equality of all men under God that he had espoused in his godless anarchism. Ultimately, he becomes a rejected and misunderstood Christ figure. At Kangxiong's funeral, his sister has a vision of his body upon the cross, although, if he died for her sins, she does not know it.

In conventional social terms, Kangxiong was poor; he worked to stay poor, and tried to keep his sister from the allure of social advancement. He ends up as an intellectual, of sorts, but a self-made one — or, better, a failed one with no place in society, like Kong Yiji — or even
as an outcast, half-mad and with no place to be buried, like Sister Xianglin. Still, poverty and powerlessness are not the more important roots of Kangxiong’s marginality, but rather an inner existential wretchedness. He is in rebellion against Authority, against his father (hence, Chinese culture), and ultimately against himself—against fragments of foreign and native culture that he has internalized. This psychologically rich and ambiguous dissection of the private side of his life gives the story a modern feel; it locates the work in the mainstream of the Western (“first-world”) literary tradition (Jameson, 1986: 71). So, of course, does the Christian symbolism, and so might the anarchist references, although most Western readers do not know what to make of them (Miller, 1986: 35).

Christian referents in many of Chen’s other early stories confirm the impression that Chen’s characters are, to be sure, poor and weak—oppressed by society in the conventional sense—yet even more sorely oppressed by transcendent biological and even cosmic existential forces. Often, Chen Yingzhen’s sympathetic downtrodden characters are “slaves” or “sinners”—or both, like prostitutes (whom Chinese socialism considers “feudal”)—or, the insane, beloved of Christ, a category whose existence Chinese socialism used barely to acknowledge. These socially downtrodden types are the wretched of the earth in a metaphysical sense because they are nearly outside of society. They are orphaned, like Chen Yingzhen the author (at an early age), or abandoned, like Jesus on the cross, even by the institutions that have cast them down. God, the oppressive father, the social structure, all authority, is offstage—remote, or in the past. Thus Kangxiong has successfully escaped the control of his father and his conventional values, only to find the seeds of his oppression taking root again within his own mind. Little Skinny Maid of “A Race of Generals” is really not a slave but a former “slave” (sold into prostitution) who has run off and is held in check by her past. Barney, the protagonist of “Roses in June,” though a free black American man who holds life-and-death power over peasants in the Vietnam War, is still rendered frail by the memory that he is descended from slaves. And the Country School Teacher in the story by that name is an ex-conscript, as Mrs. Ji, of “The Green Migratory Bird,” is a former servant. It is with a metaphysical threat to their being that these wretches must struggle, a wound to their
dignity, rather than an imminent threat from present social oppressors. In their present times, Chen’s downtrodden have no one left to struggle against but their own deformed selves. Here, Chen Yingzhen differs from Lu Xun. In the latter’s stories, one witnesses Runtu embarrassed before the narrator, hears Sister Xianglin ostracized by her employers, watches Kong Yiji and the lecherous moralist of “Soap” tormented by the ridicule of little children in a present, unrelenting society.

Lucien Miller, noting the alienation of Chen’s characters, has struck the interesting note of “exile.” He finds the characters to be rootless; Taiwanese cannot control their island’s political destiny, nor link up with the mainland, which holds the key to their history. Hence the characters, like Chen himself, are “exiles at home” (Miller, 1986). This insight is important, but I would deracinate Chen and his characters still further, for I believe that Chen’s tortured souls, and perhaps the author himself, would be spiritually in exile even in a strong, democratic, industrialized China controlling both sides of the Strait from Beijing.

Many of the miserable social characters in Chen Yingzhen’s stories of the early 1960s are in fact doubly handicapped, economically and physically, with the latter symbolizing and intensifying the former. In “Sizhe” (The Dying), the grandfather is poor, deaf, and illiterate; he has outlived his sons, and was long ago abandoned by his wife, who could not stand the poverty and drudgery. The main protagonist Lin Zhongxiong himself is the son of a child-abusing and profligate mother—but now orphaned and without any family of his own. Society is, once more, far removed, as if the creator had stepped away from his creation. Grandfather exudes the stench of death, ready to leave this world forever; Lin Zhongxiong, reflecting that he does not belong to the family by blood, is alienated even from its curse, “the old family disease” (liver cancer). Nor can he force himself to indulge in the other family curse, much as he desires to—he cannot engage in an illicit love affair. Paradoxically, release comes to him only from the dying, for it was the surviving remnants of his adopted family that had intensified his self-pity for being an orphan.

Chen Yingzhen’s more intellectual protagonists, too, fall very low, and even so come to be alienated from the lower classes as well as cut off from the social creator that has misshapen them. These characters,
above all others, are forsaken, lower than the merely poor because they have fallen from grace. Thus Wu Jinxiang, the hero of “Xiangcun de jiaoshi” (The Country Teacher), son of a poor tenant farmer, becomes an outcast—unmarried, drunken, and misunderstood by the poor villagers among whom he lives. The Japanese war that separated him from the body politic (drove him to Borneo) but started him in his quest for ideals is over and forgotten by all save him. Even his reputation for idealism is shattered when, in a drunken daze, he confesses to having practiced cannibalism during the war (at which point “Borneo,” the land of headhunters, takes on new meaning).

But Chen Yingzhen’s most famous social lepers are the protagonists of “Qican de wuyan de zui” (Poor Poor Dumb Mouths) and “Jiangjunzu” (A Race of Generals). The hero of the first is literally a madman, struggling to cope with the meaningless of the world. Having been institutionalized, he is in the most total sense proletarianized, stripped of his property—beginning with his own clothing. He ponders the proposition that mentally ill people “are victims who are crushed and ground up by society.” And yet, “Christianity cannot help but perceive human sin in the very midst of oppression” (Miller, 1986: 90).

“A Race of Generals” is about two unattractive, low-level entertainers with no home or relations. They are, moreover, fugitives from their pasts, not of necessity but due to inner personal burdens. They are oppressed by society, but in a wholly impersonal, “unfeudal” way—a way which is not seen, but rather internalized. Since oppression comes from society, the cosmos, and the self, the Oppressor becomes diffuse. One cannot even reinforce one’s identity through Him; one is alone.

Let us conclude with Chen Yingzhen’s most programmatic early work about the cause of the oppressed, “Jialüeren Youda de gushi” (The Story of Judas Iscariot, 1961). In this reconstruction of a possible motive for Judas’s betrayal of Christ, Judas’s great mission is depicted as convincing the rebellious Jews that they must save all the oppressed people of the world, not simply the Jews under Roman rule (not simply the Taiwanese under mainlander rule). Furthermore, the Jews must be liberated not only from the Romans, but from their own Jewish upper classes. The story turns to analyze the fascinating questions of what to do when Christianity ignores social oppression for what it considers...
to be transcendent values—and what to do when the proletariat does not in fact want "what objectively the proletariat is [i.e., ought to be] in favor of." In the story, as in ancient history, the Jesus-loving rebellious masses forswear the social revolution that might have been theirs under Jesus's leadership.

Chen poses the Christian and socialist roads as alternatives, but never a third road of local (Taiwanese) self-determination (which Chen would later castigate, seeing it not as a new nationalism but as "separatism"). Chen Yingzhen steadfastly refuses to focus on the Taiwanese as a chosen people; his concern is with the "oppressed," not the tribally "subjugated," or those who as a people have a master race, or a God, to struggle against, as opposed to a primordial social-cosmic order. In Christian terms, Chen's concern is with the oppression of the New Testament, not the Old Testament. It is in Chen's later fiction that we shall find an Old Testament problematic—but still, no trace of the, to Chen, evidently reactionary idea that each nation, or any nation, is unique.

**CHEN YINGZHEN'S LATER FICTION: 
"THE WASHINGTON BUILDING" SERIES**

In much of Chen Yingzhen's post-imprisonment fiction, notably the "Washington Building" series of stories and novellas, the social setting has been updated to reflect a prosperous urban Taiwan—always Taipei—that is well along in the process its government likes to call modernization, and also that of severance from its traditional cultural roots. (This new society took a great leap into being during Chen's eight years in prison.) The immediate setting is the familiar one of the large modern corporation, which is busy imposing its English- and businessese-speaking, white-male-run "corporate culture" on all employees (in this case Chinese), and seeking to expand its influence throughout the world by unifying itself internally, undercutting competition from other corporations, and sinking deeper "roots" in society through diversification and new kinds of cultural symbiosis of its own creation. Whether Chen Yingzhen's portraits of a greedy and obsessive transnational business culture are to be taken as realistic, satiric, or
perhaps parody, neither a nativist nor a cosmopolitan can argue with
the truth in his depiction of Asian nationals being subordinated,
culturally neutered, and often corrupted by an external and culturally
alien juggernaut. The works display no Marxist rhetoric, however, and
little class consciousness, so they are apt to strike an American
intellectual reader straight off as schematic portrayals of the “depen-
dency” syndrome.

Chen Yingzhen, in 1984, wrote a long diatribe against one “Yufu”
for having called Chen’s Yun (Clouds) collection an “obvious” argu-
ment for “dependency theory.” Although not unsympathetic to Chen’s
writing, Yufu refuted the tenets of dependency theory point by point,
adding in a stinger at the end that “theories come and go, but values
are forever” (Yufu, 1984). Chen Yingzhen’s angry denial is quite
understandable if he sensed that he was being classed as a trendy
intellectual hanger-on of bourgeois academic America. His detailed
polemic nevertheless reveals that he had after all done some reading
in dependency theory, considered its economic grounding more deeply
than the ordinary man of letters, and gone on to accept its basic thrust,
as well as whatever charges against rich nations any economist of a
poor nation might care to allege (Chen, 1988: 12.71-120).

The difficulty in more concretely matching Chen’s ideological
commitments to dependency theory is twofold. Chen embraces no
ideology publicly, and dependency theory itself is uncodified, to say
the least. A “match” can be deduced only from Chen’s evident belief
in a world system of capitalism as the major determinant of the past
and present of the less developed countries, in “the development of
underdevelopment,” in the proposition that the cultural impact of
capitalist hegemony is as powerful as its economic thrust, and in a
“Taiwan Under American Control” (his title for volume 13 of his
collected works), a concept he considers valid even, or particularly,
today, though the G.I.s have long since departed. Chen’s essays do not
in any case argue the finer points of theory, they mainly build a legal
“brief” against the world system. Therefore I shall skip the essays and
their individual, mostly disaggregated, political accusations. It is
through Chen Yingzhen’s broader tropes of cultural and psychological
dependency—which are doubtless related to his conception of eco-
nomic and political dependency, but more nuanced than anything we
can glean from the polemical essays—that I hope to throw light on Chen's later fiction.

Two stories from "The Washington Building" may briefly exemplify Chen's obsession with "enslavement" and the dissolution of native culture in a small country's (Taiwan's) dependency relationship with North American capitalism. "Yexing huoche" (Night Freight, 1978) depicts three well-paid Chinese characters luxuriating in the employ of an American-owned transnational corporation. They have adapted; they have "traded up" from their native tastes, language, and morals, to Dunhills, colloquial English, and "modern" secret affairs. "J. P.," the best adapter, studies the special off-color humor of his American boss in order to imitate it, but dares not divorce his wife lest he sacrifice his new promotion within the company, as "Linda" (her English name), his mainland mistress, perceptively complains. For such reasons, she scolds the Chinese men of the office for having a "slave mentality"—they speak English not only with their American bosses but with each other, to confirm their status, and swallow their pride when white males make passes at their girlfriends. But everyone is on the road to success, and to America—except that, in this degrading chain of bowing and scraping, all communication with America must go through Japan first.

Linda's affair with the rising J. P. is itself a pathological dependency. She knows he does not love her, but cannot leave him until she meets Zhan Yihong, a Taiwanese who is closer to his southern roots. Zhan is moody and alcoholic—a loser—yet Linda gets pregnant by him. He realizes that she has transferred her "clinging" from J. P. to him, and, in a climactic scene, Linda tries to seduce Zhan once more, while he is drunk. Psychologically speaking, Zhan the native is the means by which Linda may hope to be rescued from her alienated status as a mainland (by birth), and perhaps strike a blow against the parents whom she rejects. Zhan, on the other hand, feels completely emasculated for the opposite reason, because he is Taiwanese—"enslaved" (again, his word) by the failure of his father, who was humiliated by the mainlanders rulers during their notorious 1947 massacre of Taiwan locals. He is also embarrassed to belong to the less prestigious ethnic group on Taiwan—the ones who act like clowns on television for every mainland to see, and who must listen to
foreigners’ patronizing promises to save their little island from “being wiped off the map.”

Chen concludes the story with a heavy didactic hand. A seeming national slur (the words “fucking Chinese”) by an American boss at Linda’s farewell party drives Zhan to rebel. He renounces his job and “rescues” his woman by proposing elopement to the countryside. This must be counted a successful “resistance to the world system,” a happy and rather political ending. Yet the recurrent images linked to going south, of voyaging to a vast desert (seen in Linda’s dreams), and of freight cars on a night train rumbling south from Taibei, have a slightly foreboding flavor that lends some ambiguity to the “message.” Because of their provenance, the freight cars could easily be chilling symbols of alien invasion, like the pods of the body-snatchers. The most interesting touch, perhaps, is Chen’s decision to cast his Taiwanese native hero as such a misfit, and the mutually redeeming marriage of mainland woman and Taiwanese man as having come from a most unhealthy courtship. These are motifs from Chen’s earlier stories, and indeed “Night Freight” is first in the “Washington Building” series.

A more typically pessimistic story, “Shangbanzu de yi ri” (A Day in the Life of a White-collar Worker, 1978; second in the series) ends with the opposite outcome. Its hero, “Olive,” cannot get up the gumption to quit his job with an American transnational and return to the calling of his idealistic youth, cinematography. His initial resolve to resign is gradually eroded by a series of trips up Ren’ai Lu and down memory lane (representing the bourgeois and the “native”), by the silence of his empty life, and by constant entreaties from his Chinese supervisor, “B. Y.,” to return to work. On the day when he first skips work, Olive telephones his old classmates. They, too, work for megacorporations, or wish they did, for capitalist economics is cruel to those without a transnational benefactor.

In this story, the world system is explicitly cast as an omniscient power, in a mechanical image: “The whole world was a huge and powerful, well-meshed machine which he could not comprehend. The world followed the machine’s revolutions, never stopping for a second . . . ” (Chen, 1988: 3.148; tr. Miller, 1986: 179-180). Even the hero’s favorite hobby, movie-making, is skewed into a metaphor of
direction from above. Olive comes to see himself as a bit actor in a drama directed by his boss.

Olive is in fact a "slave," to routine and to his desire to move up the corporate ladder. He has no time to direct his own life and, in any case, learns that he has lost the capacity to enjoy it when he tries to savor his freedom. He is habituated to air conditioning, feels he must take cabs instead of buses, and is locked into paying off a hefty mortgage on his condominium, though he was far happier years ago, when he lived with his wife in poverty and could not yet afford a mistress. He comes to realize all this, and yet still cannot quit. He cannot give it up even after the collapse of his ultimate self-deception: That if he can just be promoted one rank higher, he will at last have the time to be his own man again.

If Chen's pre-1966 stories present a quest for the equivalence of all human beings, in poverty, oppression, sin, and death, the later stories recoil from the absoluteness of an irksome new human equivalence enforced by dependence on the exterior force. The quest is to go back to the family, to tradition, and to national pride, though any tradition or nationalism will do.

Moreover, like his early fiction, Chen Yingzhen's later fiction operates on a mythic plane. Chen's new protagonists are not "oppressed" by the economy—far from it. Even while at the bottom of the corporate heap, saddened that they cannot be promoted, they are pampered and rewarded into a state of cultural and moral anesthesia—made dependent upon a false god (or devil) of rational, multinational, acultural, emotionless, valueless, infinitely relativist, modernity. This god is not only stronger, but more rational, more all-embracing, more nurturing than thou. His evil inheres in a host of corporations, and perhaps in transnational corporate Christianity, too, but the many satanic manifestations are in competition and will one day swallow each other, leaving just one characterless monolith, one false monotheism to shape the values and personalities of all men and women on earth. Human beings struggle with this god more than with any mundane social structure, for he directs society, by brainwashing it.

Hence Chen Yingzhen's later stories do not evoke the New Testament dilemma of Jesus on the cross, alone and seeking resurrection for all oppressed sinners. Rather, they recreate the Old Testament
image of Job. The supreme transnational corporate intelligence will not abandon us; he is inevitable, always testing, luring, teasing, torturing us, and yet we are both attracted to and repelled by him. Chen offers no vision of escape.

“Wanshang dijun” (The All-incorporating Business God; 1982), so far the culminating work in the “Washington Building” series, provides the fullest portraits of Chen’s transnational corporation as the new god of modernity. Moffit & Moore International, the transnational of this novel, proclaims itself shaper of a new world, fulfiller of needs, protector of small nations like Taiwan. Chen Yingzhen gives the corporation full rein to speak in its own ritual language, catechize its novices with concepts like “Management by Objective,” conduct confirmation classes for higher-level managers, and lead witnesses in prayer that its greater will may be done. At the end, it convenes a synod (or congress; the Leninist metaphor is equally appropriate) to ratify, but never determine, its global strategy.

Although the image of a big American-run corporation reaches the point of parody in this novel, most components of the satire are as authentic as Chen’s citations of management science jargon and the textbooks by Peter F. Drucker. Office rivalries, cliques, and conspiracies are convincingly constructed. Each character is introduced with a brief assessment of his or her English-language abilities in comparison to those of peers. This lends the narrative voice a metaphor for executive one-upmanship and makes a pointed comment on the hierarchical “bilingualism” of the transnational. The corporate sociology of office space, desk size, and company perquisites is exposed even more fully in the last chapter, when a participant’s diary ranks company subdivisions according to the floor they occupy in the hotel hosting the corporate conference. Since the corporation has no goal except sales, it enjoys perfect flexibility to shift sales strategies (the corporate surrogate for truth-telling) to meet local needs and perceptions. Moffit & Moore is even possessed of prophetic vision. It plans to co-opt China’s socialist revolution itself, by getting the PRC to join Moffit & Moore in capitalist ventures instead of promoting those annoying revolutions.

The novel goes on to present visions of all Taiwanese, down to the farmers, becoming dependent on the new master. Cat food (perhaps
with catnip) is the banal but ultimately terrifying symbol of it. Once cat owners are attracted to the company product, “Cativite,” by commercials touting its nutritiousness, the cats become addicted. Then come phase-II commercials celebrating the dependency itself (Chen, 1988: 4.174-175). In like manner, the company plans to addict Taiwan’s most isolated villagers to imported barbecue stoves. This novel also presents an economic articulation of dependency that is rare in Chen’s fiction. A Taiwan native realizes that it is premature for Taiwan to develop the tastes of a mass consumer society before it has a fully developed industrial base, but his American boss explains that this is part of the world system: “The apparently ‘foreign’ industry of the developed nations, through the mediation of multinational corporations, serves as the basis of mass consumer societies in underdeveloped and developing nations” (Chen, 1988: 4.115-116).

In fact, Chen Yingzhen’s portrait of the corporation is realistic and provocative enough to evoke its own arguments against dependency theory — whether Chen intended this or not. In “A Day in the Life of a White-Collar Worker,” which some readers have found too didactic, Chen Yingzhen has already begun to transcend dogmas about the “rational” transnational corporation. Despite its omnipotent exterior, the company in that story is corrupted by nepotism, padded expense accounts, falsified bookkeeping, and rounds of favors traded in the subsequent cover-ups, since each employee has something on his boss. One new corporate man even puts pleasure ahead of job security, although he is an exceptional case, being a foreigner who falls because of his homosexuality. But, if sex scandals can shake the North American juggernaut both personally and corporately, its invincibility is revealed as a myth. It is such unpredictable goings-on in this otherwise realistic, if monotheistic, universe, that keep the story interesting.

Contradictions in Chen’s moral view of the transnational are still more apparent in “The All-incorporating Business God.” Chen shows how insidious it is that the transnational identifies and meets consumer needs, lulling the people into complacency. But is it not good to raise living standards? Until one-world culture is established, the corporation will cynically adapt to local customs and taste. But is not assimilation to native values good as well? Moffit & Moore ultimately will unify the world, abolishing “nationalism” to end the unproductiveness
of war—and civil war (Chen, 1988: 4.171-190). But does that not allay a great threat to humankind’s, and notably Taiwan’s, very existence? This god would surely crush both the aggressive, intervening American nationalism (“imperialism,” as in the Vietnam War) and the Taiwanese nationalism (“separatism,” the nascent Taiwan national liberation movement) that Chen abhors.

The evil of the new godhead is moral rather than economic or political. It lies in modernization’s utter relativism, instrumentalism, hypocrisy, and lack of ties to other genuine human values. It is style without substance, Chen’s constant bugbear in art as in life. In fact Moffit & Moore’s most diabolical plot is to adapt the appeals of Taiwan’s nativist literature movement to its own ends. Yet the nativism thereby destroyed would not be Chinese nationalism, but the Taiwanese nationalism Chen fears. And small wonder that Chen’s own writing does not stress “nativism,” if he thinks it can so easily be turned around to serve the imperialist enemy.

Chen depicts the modern transnational corporation as so rational and color-blind that we are tacitly reminded that its idealism is false and never achieved. This realization, which we may have to bring to the text ourselves, makes Chen’s vision of the leviathan all the more terrible. Ironies begin to color his metaphor. Modernity’s presumed rationality is really only its own self-image.

Take, for instance, Chen’s claim that transnational corporations are devoid of national characteristics, or “internationalist—they have lost the country-specific character of the enterprise.”

In real life these people speak English and are moreover multilingual. In their life of management, they concentrate on working together to fulfill the aims of their internationalist enterprise. They are always coming and going on international flights, thinking about the market problems of large regions (such as North America, Central and South America, or the Far East) rather than single nations. Ethnicity and nationality become tools for marketing and selling. And as they create a unified national market, they make themselves into monolithic, international personalities [Chen, 1988: 6.37].

It is but a historical accident that America is at the fulcrum and that its English is the international language; any other country and any other language infected with the doctrine of profits above all would do the
same. The empty shells of old nationalisms are catered to through an Ah-Q sort of hierarchy: Thailand and Indonesia are beneath the Philippines, which is beneath Hong Kong, which is beneath Taiwan, which is beneath South Korea, which is beneath Japan—but Japan is subject to United States leadership, and content to dominate the others (Chen, 1988: 4.170).

Yet, when American-owned multinationals promote their own interest, are their conceptions of it not influenced by (often misguided) conceptions of the American national interest? And do not Japanese-owned transnationals frequently serve Japan, Inc.? The giant corporation seems omni-competent and omni-rational because it identifies the general interest with its own. It does confuse itself with God. Herein lies the real power of the metaphor.

Ultimately, psychological and cosmic images of the new business god crowd out the economic linkages. Because the new false god creates dependency, it is in essence a narcotic, like “cativite”—an opiate of the masses. In historical terms, too, the citizens’ thirst for consumer satisfaction appears as a new opium forced on China by the West, just as surely as real opium was exported to China by force in the nineteenth century.

Much more can be said about “The All-incorporating Business God.” It is both epic and topical, with extended episodic subplots about the comparative psychologies of Taiwanese and mainlanders, the plight of Christianity, the descent into madness of an ex-farmer, Lin Dewang, and the Gaoxiong Incident. Chen’s observations of hierarchic economic relations often mask trenchant analyses of ethnic and cultural relations. One of the mainlanders’ “grievances” against the Taiwanese, for instance, seems to be that, in their sinfully successful adaptation to changing times and collaboration with foreign capital to build prosperity on their island (much faster than the mainlanders could have done, evidently, on the mainland or on Taiwan), the Taiwanese have sold out “Chinese culture,” “just like the Southeast Asians”—meaning, just like the other Southeast Asians, in the paranoid mainlander view. How mad of the Taiwanese chauvinists to call themselves sons of the Malayo-Polynesians instead of the Han, thinks C. C. Chen, but this evidently is something the mainlanders, too, suspect. It adds a jealous, racial edge to their prejudice against the
Taiwanese. And now the Taiwanese are linking up with foreigners to overthrow the hoary Han-Chinese political Way (Chen, 1988: 4.110, 125-126).

The new Job is Lin Dewang; he means well, but the all-incorporating business god is continually testing and tormenting him. In the first two chapters, he struggles with the god’s unfathomable languages—English and management science acronyms. That he cannot understand their deeper meanings gives the words still more power as incantations. Lin then strains to understand cliques in the corporate cosmos, the Big Idea behind it all. He fights first to get himself invited to meetings, then simply to be known to his boss, that he might have a chance to rise in the corporation and join the elect as a manager. After his inability to cope is detailed in chapter three, chapter four provides, through flashbacks, his life story. It is a history of trials by foster fathers and bullies, of failure to live up to the expectations of his seniors, and finally, inability to achieve the financial success necessary to maintain the life-style of a manager. Ultimately, as his paranoia with delusions of grandeur turns to madness, Lin sees himself as a god incarnate, as the All-incorporating Business God himself. But his image of the god is his own creation, a Sino-Western hybrid which illuminates his cultural confusion. The Chinese name of the god, and the painted image of him, bespeak the Taiwan folk religion in which Lin Dewang’s family has dabbled since his childhood. Yet the icon wears a Western necktie, and his other name is Manager; a Christian contribution is the halo over his head. Lin Dewang’s madness has, of course, captured the truth that business, in its twentieth-century incarnation, aspires to be God; that the new godhead is rationality, the social engineer and Manager of the world; and that self-deification, self-gratification, and the will to power are the bases of the false new divinity. But, as we see from this story and others, that is the modern condition of both the corporation and the self. The corporation is not so alien after all. Its evil is within every one of us. To embrace the corporation is a form of narcissism.

The church is similarly damned. Evangelical Christianity (not to be confused with Christ’s teaching), too, may be subsumed under the metaphor of the dependency-creating corporation. The church is a tool by which white people exercise paternal control over Asians—a
forerunner of the transnational corporation, which, after all, claims a mission civilisatrice of its own; or so it seems, from the patronizing title of the book Rita never had time to read, The Church and Asian People. An employee of a church and of Moffit & Moore, Rita is made to appear psychologically aberrant. She entered the church by transferring to Jesus a possibly latent homoerotic love of a beautiful woman convert named Qiong. Then she let “the Lord” direct her life, and evidenced a compulsive need to convert others. In the end, Chen Yingzhen suggests equivalence between Rita’s mainstream faith and Lin Dewang’s mad belief by having Rita pray to her own Lord in front of Lin’s image. Looking on at their false dependencies and bearing witness to the social tragedy is a spiritually authentic Madonna and Child: A poor Taiwanese woman and her boy infant.

THE TRANSITION IN CHEN YINGZHEN’S FICTION

One particularly well-known story written in 1967, shortly before Chen Yingzhen went to prison, marks a transition between what I have called his early and later fiction. The story is “Liuyue li de meiguihua” (Roses in June). It shows characteristics of both periods.

The two major protagonists are model oppressed characters from Chen Yingzhen’s early period. Both are descended of slaves, and both are children of prostitutes. One is Private (later Sergeant) Barney Williams, a black American who grew up fearing to walk the streets of the white man. The other is Emmy Huang, a bargirl prostitute who feels too inferior to dream of marriage to an American. Emmy, too, has unfashionably dark skin. As in some of Chen’s other early stories, the two misfits, being far from home and able to forget the world of society, are able to come to a mutual accommodation, if not a mutual understanding.

Yet the story also shows stirrings of the dependency theme with all its ramifications. Barney is captive of an illusory dream, of being promoted within a paternal white man’s army that promises world peace and deliverance. Instead, he dies in battle; Chen Yingzhen delights in the irony of U. S. propaganda proclaiming that Americans fight to deliver foreign peoples from “slavery” (communism). Emo-
tionally disturbed by guilt for having massacred a village of Vietnam-
ese, Barney himself becomes "dependent" on a Chinese doctor, says
the narrator; one suspects that Barney's solicitude for the Chinese
bargirl is also an act of psychological atonement. Emmy, meanwhile,
is dependent on "high-class," or just potentially high-class, people like
Barney for a sense of self-worth.

But the more insidious dependency relation is one which Barney
wants to establish. He would turn his relationship with Emmy into a
marriage that would inevitably become a microcosm of the world
dependent relationship between American imperialism and Asian
villagers. Chen foreshadows this with several hints that Barney is
prejudiced against "Orientals," as when he takes advantage of his
doctor's imperfect English to call him "Duck" instead of "Doc." Then,
as Barney's relationship with Emmy matures, he imagines himself to
be an African prince in her presence: "'You are the prince's Little
Sparrow,' he told her. 'You are his favorite concubine, the only lucky
lady who gets to attend him on his vacation.'" Replies Emmy, "I want

Because the American oppressor is not the usual white master, but
a black, this image must be particularly shocking to the Chinese reader,
who so often harbors a severe racial prejudice against blacks. Above
all, Chen Yingzhen has forsworn familiar historical and national
content (white over yellow), in order to present a more general case,
of color over color. This, perhaps, indicates his commitment to gen-
eralization, and to ideology.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined but one of Chen Yingzhen's intellectual
and artistic journeys: His shift from studies of oppression to studies
of dependency in the course of a lifelong concern with problems in
Taiwan's society. Some might view the change as having accompanied
a shift in focus from the traditional, slowly modernizing Taiwan that
Chen knew in the 1960s, to the rapidly industrializing and relatively
internationalized Taiwan that suddenly loomed before him (and for
which he went to work) when he was released from prison in 1975. I
consider such a biographical explanation too simple, for Chen’s stories bear a good deal of complex intellectual baggage in both his earlier and later periods. A reductionist literary tracing of socialist, Christian, or existentialist themes in his works will not do, either (for a sensitive, nonreductionist analysis of Christianity in Chen’s works, see Robinson, 1986). If a biographical approach is to be attempted, perhaps psychology will reveal the most interesting results. For in Chen Yingzhen’s movement from a world in which “God is Dead” to a world in which the godhead is man’s tormentor may lie a statement about his own psychological progress from foster child to man under (Guomindang) surveillance. But the tasks of both criticism and biography are daunting. Chen Yingzhen penned satires in the years 1966-1967 that are largely removed from the works and tendencies presented in this article, and most recently he has written novels about the 1950s, in some ways continuing that other stream of development.

Moreover, Chen Yingzhen’s views on life and literature are never static, and he has not necessarily closed his career as a creative writer. The temptation to stop writing and pursue political concerns will be great now that Taiwan has so liberalized its terms for political participation. On the other hand, men of Chen’s generation, like those of Liu Binyan’s on the mainland, could well discover that their long-standing intellectual “importance” can quickly be overtaken by events and new generations. Even if advocates of Taiwan Independence do not gain the upper hand in Taiwan’s opposition, the new freedoms could just as easily find Chen Yingzhen pushed aside and politically frustrated again—ready to begin a wholly new, third career, still perhaps basically as a realist writer.

Taiwan will surely continue to have many kinds of misfits for him to analyze. As Chen’s magazine Ren Chian (Renjian, The Human World) has emphasized, the industrial pollution of Taiwan guarantees that many future Taiwanese will be literally deformed and handicapped. (Regrettably the magazine ceased publication in the fall of 1989.) Meanwhile, the image of Taiwan in “The Washington Building,” reliant on North America rather than East Asia, is already dated. But “The All-incorporating Business God” may yet have staying power as literature. Even its social critique is relevant today. I speak not of the specific critique of “Taiwan under American control,” but
of the larger critique, of “the industrialized world under corporate control.” Chen Yingzhen has shown the pitfalls of the post-industrial society that lies not in Taiwan’s past, but in its future. One could even say that his major contribution has not so much been to “third-world” (nationalist) or “second-world” (socialist) literature, as to the “first-world” corpus. This is intended neither as praise nor disparagement, though it inevitably will cause Westerners to ask: Is that why his works have so easily entered our canon? And if so, what does this say about our canon? Indeed, does this have any bearing on Chen’s popularity in Taiwan?

NOTES

1. A character in “Night Freight” (Chen, 1988: 3.101) virtually equates Taiwan’s countryside with that of the Philippines—hardly a “xiangtu” attitude: “She was now looking at a piece of carved Philippine mahogany hanging on the wall behind him. Before low thatch houses, a farmer, apparently on his way to work, was leading a water buffalo; Lin Jung-p’ing once told her that it was an almost perfect replica of a scene from the Taiwan countryside—if only the farmer were wearing a coolie hat” (tr. by James C. T. Shu in Lau, 1983: 106.) These words are not out of character with Chen’s own views.

2. Kangxiong’s diary says, inexplicably, that “Poverty itself is the greatest evil...it inevitably debases and sullies a person to some extent.” I believe he means that poverty is evil because of what it reduces a person to doing in order to escape it. Or perhaps the sister has quoted the phrase out of context, to console herself. All translations of this story quoted are from Miller (1986).

3. The passage quoted here begins with an image of Olive as abandoned, like an orphan. This hearkens back to a theme found in Chen’s earliest stories.

4. The mainlander faction, headed by C. C. Chen, is called the “C. C. C. Clique,” an evident satirical reference to the C. C. Clique of Chen Guofu and Chen Lifu, one group of “enforcers” of the old Nanjing regime.

5. One brand of Taiwan chauvinism does make much of the idea that Taiwanese are better at world trade than Japanese, Chinese, and Americans (as would be apparent if only Taiwan were independent). Hence one could argue that Chen Yingzhen’s theoretical support of “Taiwan local values”—which, on close inspection, show little traditional Taiwanese content—inadvertently represents the true basis of Taiwan nationalism today.

6. Here, at last, is an instance of traditional Taiwanese “local culture” in a late story by Chen Yingzhen.

REFERENCES


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