

PREFACE

The late T. A. Hsia (Ts'i-an Hsia 夏濟安, 1916–1965) was my teacher in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Taiwan University. He was respected by his colleagues and worshipped by his students as both a specialist in Anglo-American literature and a *savant*. Little did we expect, however, that years later he would become a researcher in modern Chinese literature and politics in America. As a research fellow first at the Modern Chinese History Project at the University of Washington and later at the Contemporary China Institute at Berkeley, he wrote a number of seminal essays that have now become classics of the field. His sudden death at the age of 49 cut short a second career of which I was also a direct beneficiary. For both personal and professional reasons, therefore, I welcome the re-publication of this collection of essays, which was first published by the University of Washington Press under the title of “The Gate of Darkness”—a title whose latent meaning alludes both to an essay by Lu Xun and an incident in a classical Chinese novel.

The original edition of this book already carried two prefaces—a preface by Franz Michael (Head of the Modern Chinese History Project at Washington) and an introduction by the late C. T. Hsia, his younger brother. (The two Hsia brothers are now reunited in Heaven.) To add a third would seem redundant. The following “superfluous words” are meant to bring a personal remembrance and a latter-day perspective to bear on these essays so that a new generation of readers may be acquainted with them.

T. A. Hsia was a unique man among his generation of Chinese intellectuals and teachers. As a scholar he was trained in Western,

particularly English, literature, but was propelled by the force of circumstances to chart a new career that was not necessarily congenial to his background and literary taste. His prominent role as a professor and editor and critic in Taiwan is already mentioned in the first paragraphs of his brother's Introduction to this book. As a student in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Taida (National Taiwan Univ.), I naturally became one of Hsia's students. But I soon sensed that his heart was not always in his teaching but in his other activities. He devoted more time and energy to the journal he had founded *Wenxue zazhi* 文學雜誌 (*Literary Review*), which championed a serious and sober realism as opposed to both official anti-communist propaganda and popular sentimentalism. His journal in turn served as the model for my fellow students Bai Xianyong 白先勇, Wang Wenxing 王文興, Chen Ruoxi 陳若曦, to found our own journal, *Xiandai wenxue* 現代文學 (*Modern Literature*). As a fringe member of this literary group I naturally fell under his spell, but I was too worshipful and intimidated by his broad learning to approach him directly for advice, as some of my more sophisticated fellow students (such as Joseph Lau 劉紹銘 and Wai-lim Yip 葉維廉) did. To my youthful mind he was always a unique "man of letters" who was willing to share his broad and profound knowledge and insight at the spur of the moment, especially when we visited him after class in his own utterly disorderly lodging. His conversations never stopped at the issue at hand, as Franz Michael later observed in his Preface to the original edition of this book: "There was always the problem of holding to the topic at hand this brilliant and sparkling mind which was forever looking beyond the issue of the discussion." It was a great tragedy that his prodigious talent as a scholar and critic was cut short by his sudden death in 1965. Had he lived longer, he would have left a much larger body of work in several fields. Still, his legacy is immense and, for myself at least, far more momentous than that of his brother.

I did not become T. A. Hsia's disciple until after we both landed in America—I as a graduate student of modern Chinese intellectual history and he as "research associate linguist" at University of Washington and UC Berkeley. Although I had read many of his critical essays written in Chinese in Taiwan, it was his English writings on modern and contemporary China that made the deepest impact on me. They are not, strictly speaking, literary writings but scholarly essays on Chinese Communist

literary policy and ideology written with a humanistic sensitivity. Though published in some of the leading journals of the field, such as *The China Quarterly* and *The Journal of Asian Studies*, they do not conform to the usual academic mode of scholarly writing but establish a distinct “genre” of its own. C. T. Hsia, quoting the work of Jacques Barzun, called it “cultural criticism”, a form of essay that fuses the skills and styles of biography, history, and criticism. I think it’s more than that. To put this term in a more concrete context of Chinese studies in America at that time, Hsia’s essays represented nothing less than a formalistic “rebuttal” to the then current mode of “China-Watching”, a product of the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s. Since “Communist China” was barred from entry, a researcher could only “watch” it from afar (the nearest place was Hong Kong), by poring over a medley of documents, both reliable and unreliable, including English translations of Chinese newspapers provided by CIA-funded agencies. Most researchers of this ilk had only rudimentary training in the Chinese language and very shallow knowledge of Chinese culture, and hence could only focus on politics on the elite level. Needless to add, Communist China was regarded as an enemy whose threat to American security was a constant background factor. To write against this American ideological grain took courage and talent.

T. A. Hsia’s essays present a direct and refreshing contrast. Though his own political stance was anti-communist, he never allowed it to intrude upon his writing. On the contrary, he wrote with a high degree of humanistic compassion. The central theme of this book on the Leftist Movement in China is, as he himself wrote in a draft preface, the tragic fate of individuals—or individual intellectuals, to be more precise—in a collective political movement. “Courtesy will be extended even to the Communists, who, if treated as individuals, seem to be also capable of thoughts other than political.” In order to draw out the “thoughts” of these leftist intellectuals, most of whom were dead, Hsia had to piece together a more personalized narrative from the same documentary sources used by fellow scholars and “China-watchers” and many more others. For instance, works by and on Soviet Russian writers. As far as I know, he was the first to introduce the Russian term “*partiinost*” (Party spirit) into the Chinese academic vocabulary. Another angle of comparison for him were the Anglo-American leftists who became disillusioned with Communism, such as Arthur Koestler (*Darkness at Noon*). These

comparisons served to cast a new light on the Chinese leftists: they were mostly young (with the exception of Lu Xun) and “tender-hearted”, though full of revolutionary fervor. They had become victims to the power-game due to their naïveté and idealism. The five young leftist writers executed by the Guomindang known as the “Five Martyrs” make perfect examples, and no less so for Ch’ü Ch’iu-po (Qu Qiubai) and Chiang Kuang-tz’u (Jiang Guangci). As writers they do not measure up to Hsia’s high literary standards, but there is hardly any trace of condescension in his humane treatment of them. This remarkable trait, if I could humbly suggest, makes an interesting contrast to the tone and method of his brother’s *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (first published in 1961). I recall when the famous Czech Sinologist Jaroslav Průšek was a visiting professor at Harvard, whose seminar I was fortunate to take, he had just been engaged in a scholarly debate with C. T. Hsia over the latter’s *History*. I told him I was once a student of T. A. Hsia’s. To my surprise, Průšek spoke in warm praise of the elder brother and his work. A tribute from an East European Communist scholar! To me it speaks volumes.

T. A. Hsia reserves his most profound insights for Lu Xun, the foremost modern Chinese writer and the acknowledged doyen of the leftist literary scene. The two essays on Lu Xun in this book can be considered classics of the field for all time. Here I may as well acknowledge again that my own work on Lu Xun was a direct offshoot of Hsia’s pioneering study. I hope it is not inappropriate to delineate my own intellectual debt to T. A. Hsia.

But my narrative has to take a little digression into Hsia’s other writings on contemporary China not contained in this volume. When I resumed contact with him in America in the early 1960s, he was at Berkeley’s Center for Chinese Studies as “research associate linguist”. I can still recall the excitement when I chanced upon an essay by him on “Heroes and Hero-Worship in Chinese Communist Fiction” (1963). I was then a beginning graduate student at Harvard taking my first seminar on “Contemporary Chinese Politics” with my mentor Professor Benjamin Schwartz. With his consent I wanted to write a paper on the dissident Yan’an writer Xiao Jun (蕭軍). At this crucial moment I decided to seek advice from my former Taida teacher. I wrote him a letter about my decision and my tentative ideas about Xiao Jun: I considered him basically a revolutionary romantic who cast himself as a

hero but was forced to obey Party discipline. Hsia's essay, though on a different subject, was quite relevant. He replied immediately in a long and solicitous letter in which he also discussed his own research on the Leftist movement and on Chinese Communist "terminologies". The latter was published as a series of pamphlets.¹ (Was this project given to him since his official position was "research linguist"—or vice versa, that his Berkeley sponsors had to find a proper job title for his research project? I never knew.) I read them with a sense of astonishment, for they were unlike anything ever written by "China-Watchers": Who would ever think of finding "metaphor" and "myth" in the "semantics" of sloganeering terminologies?

My astonishment was transformed into awe when I read his two Lu Xun essays: "Lu Hsün and the Dissolution of the League of Leftist Writers" (1959) "and "Aspects of the Power of Darkness in Lu Hsün" (1964). Suffice it to say that without them I would not have been able to write my own book on Lu Xun.² The first essay was tough reading for me then, because it dealt with the complexities of politics and ideology in the League of Leftwing Writers, of which Lu Xun was the nominal head. This was the first work that painted Lu Xun as a tragic figure, a leftist "fellow-traveler" caught in the internecine strife of the Leftwing League. It should be reminded that this inner story was told entirely from Hsia's research in American libraries. He did not have the benefit of interviews or access to archival materials in China. There were no written testimonies or memoirs available. In some cases Hsia had to rely on his own judgment and guesswork. For instance, in the so-called "Battle of the Two Slogans", Feng Xuefeng, one of Lu Xun's closest disciples, was sent as a Party "go-between" to persuade Lu Xun to conform to the Party line headed by Zhou Yang but eventually chose to side with his old master. The issue was murky and hidden, and the materials available did not tell the full story. Hsia could only make a calculated guess, and he guessed it right. Even more difficult is the final

1 *Metaphor, Myth, Ritual and the People's Commune, A Terminological Study of the Hsia-fang Movement, and The Commune in Retreat as Evidenced in Evidenced in Terminology and Semantics.*

2 *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987).

note of confession by Qu Qiubai before his execution, called “Superfluous Words”. Is it a true or falsified document? Hsia pronounced it genuine, because the sentiments contained are in accord with the intellectual profile that emerges from his analysis. It is a verdict now generally accepted by most scholars.³

Hsia’s portrait of Lu Xun’s last years is masterful and deeply compassionate. He blends history and biography by placing the political in the context of the personal as if he were writing a short-story from a subjective point of view—that is to say, “inter-subjectively”, because Hsia as researcher/narrator somehow manages to enter into the tormented mind of his protagonist without, however, losing his objective grasp of the larger picture. I simply don’t know how he achieved this feat. It must have something to do with his unique essay-style.

He was *not* writing a dry academic paper but a “personal” essay almost on behalf of Lu Xun, to the point that even the trivial details of his daily life (based on Lu Xun’s diary) are not spared from Hsia’s scrutiny. When the essay finally comes to an end, it is with these simple words:

“On October 17 he caught a cold. On October 19 he died.”

More than forty years later, I can still remember and recite them. Now I realize that it also serves as a sober antidote to the formulaic purple prose found in countless eulogistic biographies of Lu Xun in China. Yet it remains one of the most deeply moving portraits of this great writer in any language.

The other chef-d’œuvre is of course “The Power of the Aspects of Darkness in Lu Hsün”. I can’t remember how many times I have read this mesmerizing essay. In fact, my entire book on Lu Xun is built on its premises. In this seminal essay Hsia goes directly into Lu Xun’s own prose and discovers a complex relationship, both intellectual and aesthetic, between his avowedly modern writing and the burden of Chinese tradition. Hsia finds in Lu Xun’s famous essay “How Do we Behave as Fathers” a hidden allusion to the hero of a historical romance

3 For the most recent study, see Cheung Lik kwan: *Suicide, Elan Vital, and the Way of the Bodhisattva: on Qu Qiubai and the Formation of the Modern Chinese Intellectual* (in progress).

who shoulders a heavy “gate of darkness” in order to give passage to the young princes to safety. In Hsia’s analysis, the metaphor takes on a new symbolic meaning as Lu Xun’s self-image. As a literary scholar Hsia singles out Lu Xun’s classical poetry and prose poetry for special praise and treats them almost as one genre. “In these private compositions, he was more than satisfying a whim: he was indulging in the ‘vampire’s optimism,’ or, sometimes, pessimism, in a ‘dead language.’” In Hsia’s analysis, that “dead language” comes alive in some of the best specimens of prose poetry on the theme of death and sacrifice—a perennial obsession. Hsia treats the slim collection of Lu Xun’s prose poetry, *Yecao* (野草 *Wild Grass*) with special care and subjects it to a thorough analysis. His conclusions were original then as they are valid today.

“... Lu Hsün might have carried Chinese poetry, even in its classical form, into a new realm, to give formal rendering to a kind of terror and anxiety, an experience which we might call modern, since it is hardly found among the themes of traditional Chinese poetry, rich as its contents are. Instead, he wrote in prose, but in a style which, highly personal in its jerky rhythm and stark images, had a salutary effect on the *pai-hua*.... He let *pai-hua* do things that it had never done before—things not even the best classical writers had ever thought of doing in *wen-yen*. In this sense, Lu Hsün was a truly modern writer.”

Re-reading this passage I am again awed by Hsia’s stylistic grace and power. Again I remind myself that this and many other insights come from a sensitivity to the Chinese language “from within” and not from any linguistic theory. For him, language is naturally linked with thought, as can be seen in his analysis of the prose-poem, “Inscriptions on the Tombstone”, in which a dreamer is confronted with his own ghost that is metamorphosed into a poisonous snake who “does not bite others but only himself.” The ghostly figure then speaks from the backside of the dilapidated epitaph in dignified *wen-yen* interspersed with the command in *pai-hua*. This juxtaposition, in Hsia’s view, “places the past and the present on the same plane. It mingles sight (reading) with hearing; it also vividly suggests the possibility that the command is coming from the dead. The theme is a variation on that of cannibalism in the *Diary of a Madman*... but the imagined fear of the *Diary* is here turned into the quasi-reality of a nightmare.” Such meditations have

gone beyond analysis, and beyond the theoretical confines of New Criticism which he knew so well. With essays like these, he can rest assured that this book is a classic—and in a class of its own.

This year (2015) marks the 50th anniversary of Tsi-an Hsia's untimely death at the age of 49. Less than two years ago, his brother C. T. Hsia also died at the age of 93. The first volume of the two brothers' correspondence (covering the years 1947–50) has just been published. From them we have an inkling of their intellectual affinities as well as differences, though the two brothers remained personally very close. For students of modern Chinese literature in the West, C. T. Hsia remains one of the two founding fathers of the discipline (the other being Průšek); his scholarly fame seems to have overshadowed that of his elder brother. For myself at least, though I respect C. T. and admire his scholarship, I feel more deeply indebted to T. A. Hsia. I have been lucky to count myself as a member in the large circle of their former students and disciples, though not always an obedient one. In writing this small tribute to T. A. Hsia on the occasion of the re-publication of his book, I hope to repay in a small way my infinitely large debt to him. Though I was never close to him in person, among all his disciples I probably have learned and benefited the most, by following in the same path he once blazed. For me the Hsia brothers are the two scholarly giants who have opened the “gate of darkness” of our ignorance with the illumination of their wisdom, in order to give free passage to us all.

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