

THE INFLUENCE OF CHINESE CULTURE–POETRY TO SOUTHEAST ASIAN ETHNIC CHINESE WRITERS

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ABSTRACT

The poet James (Teng Choon) Na characterized the unique feel of Filipino Chinese literature as traceable to its Southeast Asian roots. He discussed the hibernation of Philippine-Chinese literature, Philippine-Chinese literature under the guidance of the mass media, and new avenues for the development of Philippine-Chinese literature. He concluded with an optimistic note that Philippine-Chinese literature will flourish despite the challenges of the times.

Keywords: *Philippine-Chinese literature, Chinese poetry, Chinese writers in the Philippines*

Chinese Poetry in Southeast Asia

First, before we discuss the influence of Chinese literature, in Southeast Asia, we have to know which countries belong to Southeast Asia. These countries are: Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines and Timor-Leste.

Chinese literature in these nations began when the Chinese started migrating to these countries, which was as early as the late eighteenth century. During the early years of their migration, the Chinese considered their stay in these Southeast Asian countries as temporary. Naturally, events that happened in China during these times greatly influenced Chinese literature in these countries. These events were:

1. the May fourth movement in China in 1919;
2. the Japanese invasion of China and other Asian countries from 1937 to 1945;
3. the rise of contemporary poetry movement in Taiwan in 1956;
4. China's open door policy in 1978;
5. the regionalization of Chinese literature in Southeast Asia; and
6. the establishment of the Pen Club of Southeast Asia Chinese Poetry Writers.

These events are properly subject of history, and I leave it up to you to read up on these.

Some Facts on Philippine-Chinese Literature

There were two contemporary Chinese literary magazines published in the Philippines in 1934. If we use the appearance of these two magazines as reference for the development of Philippine-Chinese literature, then, we have more than seventy years of history to discuss. My discussion will just concentrate on "some facts," which are: the hibernation of Philippine-Chinese literature,

Philippine-Chinese literature under the guidance of the mass media, and new avenues for the development of Philippine-Chinese literature.

1. The Hibernation of Philippine-Chinese literature

There were two historical events that led to the hibernation of Phil-Chinese literature: the Japanese invasion of the Philippines in 1941 up to the liberation of Manila in 1945 and the declaration of martial law from 1972 to 1981.

During these two periods, Chinese literature in the Philippines was totally absent. Needless to say, during the Japanese occupation, no Chinese newspaper or magazine was allowed to circulate. During martial law, only one Chinese newspaper was allowed to be published. In order to avoid any trouble, this Chinese newspaper did not have any literary page or any other section that gave free expression to the writers. The phenomenon that emerged after these two hibernation periods can be coined as ‘the reawakening of Philippine-Chinese literature.’

The oppressive environment and struggles that characterized these two hibernation periods pushed the creativity of Philippine-Chinese literature writers to new heights. The outstanding literary works produced after these hibernation periods fully compensated for the deficiency caused by the silent intervals. Why?

Generally speaking, during both hibernation periods, although many writers lost interest in writing, a lot of them were steadfast in their love and devotion to the literary arts.

The period of inactivity enabled the writers to settle down and silently hone their skills.

2. Philippine-Chinese Literature Under the Guidance of Mass Media

Most of the works of Chinese writers are carried by Chinese newspapers. A brief description of the Chinese population and Chinese mass media in the Philippines is thus needed.

- a. The Philippine population is approximately 85 million;
- b. The Chinese in the Philippines, both naturalized and of Chinese descent, is approximately 2% of the Philippine population – approximately 1.7 million;
- c. Daily circulation of all Chinese newspapers is approximately 40,000. Assuming three readers for every newspaper, there will be a total of 120,000 readers. In other words, approximately 8% of the Chinese in the Philippines read Chinese newspapers;
- d. Readers of the Chinese literary page hardly exceed 5% of the total number of newspaper readers. This means only around 6,000 readers read literary works daily;
- e. At the same time, readers of Chinese literary works have their own literary biases and

political convictions, thus discriminating against certain writers. If a literary work would be read by 500 readers a day, the writer is quite lucky!

Dear friends, will you be contented with a readership of only 500? I believe your answer is a definite “No.” Chinese literary writers, thus, should not confine themselves within the small circle of the Chinese community. They should take the initiative to induct Philippine-Chinese literature into the mainstream of Philippine literature.

3. Staying with the Times: New Avenues for Development

Advances in technology have led some Chinese writers in the Philippines to explore other channels of publication such as the Internet. For instance, there is the “Friends of World News Literary Page” and “Society of Contemporary Arts and Literature.” Both utilize the power of the Internet in exploring new possibilities for a wider readership. The e-book is also an economical and very effective way of circulating a writer’s work.

Despite having been forced to hibernate, Chinese literature in the Philippines clearly has the ability to bounce back. It is my sincere hope that Philippine-Chinese literature will steadily grow and develop in spite of its environmental difficulties.

About the Speaker: “The fruit does not fall far from the tree.” Mr. James Na proves this adage true, and more. Coming from a family of Chinese literary artists, Mr. James Na followed the footsteps of his forebears and served as contributor, editor, and publisher of the literary pages of different Chinese newspapers and magazines such as Chinese Commercial New, Jianseng Daily, and the World News. But more than these, he has brought and developed Chinese poetry that reflects the Filipino Chinese experience. His works have been cited by the Union of Filipino Writers to be reflective of “the unbreakable ties of overseas Chinese to their roots and memory.” They show his extraordinary devotion to his craft while finding commonality in the deep but universal experience of humanity, nature, and beauty. In his capacity as literary editor to various local and foreign Chinese literary publications, his extensive membership in literary organizations, and in his fellowships and visiting lectures in the Mainland and in international literary academies, he has both distinguished himself and ably represented the Philippines and the Filipino-Chinese community.

Editor’s note

This lecture was delivered on July 18, 2012 at the Ateneo de Manila University Ricardo Leong Center for Chinese Studies Conference room.