

Meng Yao. A Tribute

by

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On August 30, 1961, the satirical essayist Bo Yang wrote in his regular column in the *Independence Evening Post* (Zili wanbao) that he could not understand why officials continued the practice of donating sets of the *Twenty-four Histories* or some similar collection of reprinted works to those countries with which Taiwan had cultural exchange agreements. Apart from "putting the Post Office in the way of doing a little business," he said, it was of as little use as the presentation to the Chinese of the works of the great writers of ancient Greece. But worse still, it implied that Chinese culture ceased when the Qing dynasty came to an end and that nothing of any consequence had been produced since then.

Bo Yang's remarks must have been noted in the right quarter, for donations of the works of modern writers living in Taiwan began to be made to universities abroad with departments or schools of Asian Studies. One of the universities which benefited while I was resident in Australia (1962-1965) was the University of Melbourne. The Baillieu Library suddenly acquired a large number of works of fiction from the pens of those writers whom the Taiwan critics considered to be the best in their field.

Alongside this collection of modern Chinese fiction was the September 1963 issue of *The China Quarterly* which was devoted exclusively to the Taiwan scene. Though the author of the article on Taiwan's contribution to the corpus of modern Chinese literature expressed major reservations about the quality of that contribution,¹ it nevertheless provoked me to make an in-depth study of one of the leading novelists mentioned in the article, the woman writer, Meng Yao, whose works were very much in evidence on the shelves of the Baillieu Library.

After reading the novels that were published between the early 1950s and 1965, I decided to make Meng Yao and her novels, as well as the cultural, historical and political background against which her characters operated, the starting point for a major study of the literary scene in Taiwan.²

I am greatly indebted to Meng Yao herself who graciously answered my queries; for the gift of several of her works of fiction both in the 1960s and in 1989, and for her permission to translate *Talk of the Town* (Man cheng fengxu). This novel first came out in 1977, but by 1984 it had been reprinted four times.³

Meng Yao, *nom de plume* for Yang Congzhen, was born into a well-to-do family in Hankou, Hubei Province, on May 29, 1919, eight years after the successful revolution of 1911, which brought an end to the Qing dynasty and saw the founding of a republic.

The revolution was very much part of her family history since members of her family were involved, and as a child she was regaled with the stories of their exploits. These she filed away in her memory to become the font from which she drew when writing about that period so many years later.⁴

The ancestral home of the Yang family was Qingshan in Wuchang, to which she and her family returned annually for Tomb Sweeping Day (Qingming Festival) in early April.

Meng Yao's grandfather was a learned doctor of the Chinese school who used his skills for the benefit of the people in his village. He was also noted for his filial piety, which earned him a tribute from the government in the shape of a tablet on which were inscribed the characters "Upright by nature" (Tianxing chundu).

Meng Yao's father was an only child. Though spoiled and pampered, he worked hard, and the declining family fortune began to prosper again under his management.

With the success of the Northern Expedition in 1927, which swept Chiang Kai-shek to power and led to the establishment of Nanjing as capital, Meng Yao's father moved to Nanjing on obtaining a government post. Only her mother, Meng Yao herself, and a younger brother accompanied the father to Nanjing. Her two elder brothers and a younger sister remained with the grandparents.

Compared to Hankou, Nanjing was backward and old fashioned, and her mother never got over her dislike of "drinking water from a well, lighting paraffin lamps, and walking along pot-holed roads."⁵ But for Meng Yao Nanjing was a fascinating place. She loved the creaking of the water-cart, and the clatter of the looms, which produced the famous brocade in the textile factory behind the house in which the family lived. She enjoyed the sound of

the laughter of the women as they tended the silkworms, collected mulberry leaves and drew silk from the cocoons.

The sound of the oars and the flickering lights on the Qinhuai River; the babble of voices at the Confucian temple; the donkey rides up the mountain or the gathering of water-lilies made an indelible impression on the young Meng Yao.

By the time Meng Yao reached school age the education of girls had become socially acceptable, and she received her primary education in the Experimental Primary School of the Nanjing Girls' Middle School. She was admitted to the same school for her secondary education, but did not complete her middle-school studies in Nanjing, for her mother died of cancer and was taken back to Qingshan to be buried there.

Her father was transferred to a new post in Wuhan and remarried. Meng Yao and her brothers consequently returned to Hankou where she was enrolled in Hankou Municipal Girls' Middle School.

The years that Meng Yao was at school saw great changes in the political arena in China. The country was far from united under Chiang Kai-shek. Factions within his own party, the challenge from the Communists, and Japanese encroachment on Chinese territory all served to blight the hopes of those who longed for a strong China that could hold her own in the community of nations in the twentieth century.

Meng Yao remained in the Hankou Municipal Girls' Middle School until she had passed her senior middle-school exams. This coincided with the Marco Polo Bridge Incident on July 7, 1937, when Japanese troops on manoeuvre ten miles west of Beijing invented an excuse for drawing the Chinese garrison into an exchange of fire, thus precipitating an undeclared war between China and Japan. Meng Yao's school-leaving Ceremony was therefore marked by the weeping of her fellow-students as they took leave of each other, not knowing what the future held in store for them.

Nanjing fell to the Japanese in December, 1937, and Chiang Kai-shek moved his capital to Chongqing, Sichuan. Schools, universities, factories and other establishments in the occupied areas were encouraged to migrate to the hinterland. But the tremendous influx of refugees who had to be housed, fed and educated presented an enormous problem for the government. Universities which had moved their laboratories, libraries and equipment had

to be combined or re-organised, and an educational programme to suit the needs of the country had to be worked out.

Wuhan did not fall to the Japanese until a year later. In the meantime Meng Yao had sat her university entrance examination and gained admission to the Department of History, National Central University. As the university had already moved into the interior, Meng Yao and her two elder brothers were sent on ahead to Chongqing while her father made preparations to follow with the rest of the family. Thus Meng Yao became one of the fifty million who migrated from the war zone or Japanese-occupied areas to China's hinterland.

Despite all the upheaval and difficulties, despite air-raids and bombing, the weeks before the university semester started were "a golden period"⁶ for Meng Yao and her two brothers, for they lived as if they had not a care in the world, and they spent every night at the opera. Once the semester started, however, Meng Yao had to lead a more disciplined life, but opera was to be a lasting passion.

This passion had been kindled when, as a child, she had accompanied members of her family to the local theatre. She became so familiar with many of the roles that she became quite an accomplished amateur performer, and it was her love of singing and her large repertoire of arias which brought about the friendship with and ultimately marriage to a young student in the Aeronautical Engineering Department of the Faculty of Engineering. He accompanied her on the Chinese violin.

Meng Yao graduated from university in 1942. She was married the following year and had her first son in 1944. But life after marriage was far from happy, so she went alone, with her son, to teach at the Jianyang Girls' Middle School where she remained until the end of the war. The family was then reunited and moved to Shanghai.

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If she had hoped to get a teaching position there, she was to be disappointed, for Shanghai was overcrowded, with too many people chasing too few jobs.

The economic situation was deteriorating; commodity prices kept on rising, and the remedies applied failed to rectify the situation. The war with Japan was over, but the

struggle for power between the Communists and the Nationalists was resumed. It ended in 1949 with the collapse of the Nationalist government and its removal to Taiwan.

By the time her second son was born in 1948, Meng Yao and her family had already left the mainland.

Considering the large number of refugees from the mainland who were looking for means to support themselves, Meng Yao was fortunate to find a teaching position in Taizhong. Suffering from depression, she found relief in the writing of essays which were published in the Woman's Weekly Supplement of the *Central Daily News* (Zhongyang ribao).

The publication of her first manuscript entitled "Frailty, Thy Name is Woman" (Ruozhe, nide mingzi shi nuren) was written under the pen-name, Meng Yao, a designation (hao) chosen for her by her father and which she was to use hereafter.

The only essays to survive are "Essays to Young Women" (Cei nuhaizide xin), a series of letters of advice to young women, which were later published in book form.

As Meng Yao's publications met with success, so her confidence grew. Though she had had no formal training in writing, she had always had a facility with the pen. Indeed, she had started to "play with the pen" (wuwen nongmo)⁷ while still in primary school. Though fairly dismissive of her childhood attempts, she admits that the creative urge was within her long before she reached adulthood.

From essay writing Meng Yao moved to the writing of fiction. Her first novel, *Rainbow* (Meihong), which first appeared in the journal *Free Youth* (Ziyou qingnian) in 1950, traces the lives of three women who had met as students in Chongqing, and whose paths later cross in Shanghai and finally in Taiwan.

Rainbow was followed in 1953 by *Garden of the Heart* (Xin yuan), a love story with a difference, which proved an outright success with the reading public. By 1960 it had run into seven editions. Thus she began to win the attention of the literary world, and this in turn spurred her on to greater efforts. Once she started to write she could not stop. Working round the clock, she turned out novel after novel.

Meng Yao's marriage broke up in 1955 and she went north to Taipei, where she became a lecturer at the National Taiwan Normal University. Despite the divorce, or maybe

because of it, she was very productive, and at least four minor novels came off the press in 1955.⁸

In 1959 Meng Yao was promoted to Associate Professor, and in 1962 she was invited by Nanyang University in Singapore to become Associate Professor of Chinese. There she lectured on fiction and drama.

In that same year four further novels were published, of which *Floating Clouds and White Sun* (Fu yun bai ri), 384 pages long, stands out. The novel is designed to waken the moral and social conscience of its readers, and to stimulate them to reconsider the traditional values which Meng Yao believes still to be valid, though re-evaluated.

While she was in Singapore, yet another major novel came off the press. *Before Dawn* (Liming qian), 780 pages long, in which she relates all the major historical events that have taken place in China since 1909 to one family or clan, showing the reaction of its various members to, and their participation in, these events. It won the Education Department's Literary Award in 1962.

Meng Yao's stay in Singapore was marred by student unrest and other difficulties within the university, so in 1966 she decided to return to Taiwan. Apart from the novels which appeared during her stay in Singapore, Meng Yao used her lecture notes on fiction and drama as the basic ingredients for *A History of Chinese Drama* (Zhongguo xiju shi) and *A History of Chinese Fiction* (Zhongguo xiaoshuo shi). She thus fulfilled the hopes of Liang Shiqiu⁹ and Yu Dagang¹⁰ who, prior to her departure for Singapore, had suggested to her that she should write a history of Chinese drama because they were impressed by "her passion for and knowledge of Chinese drama" and by her "flowing, elegant style."¹¹

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Back in Taiwan Meng Yao joined the staff of the Chinese Literature Department of National Zhongxing University in Taizhong, where she taught history, the history of Chinese literature, and lectured on creative writing.

The year after her return to Taiwan saw the publication of yet another long novel, *The Twins' Story* (Luanshengde gushi), 638 pages long. It spans a twenty-year period, beginning with the Japanese attack on Shanghai on January 28, 1932, and ends approximately in the

years 1952-53. It traces the lives of twins who are separated from each other during the Japanese attack and are brought up in two totally different environments. One is fostered by a government official while the other is sold to a theatre company. By spanning these two different worlds, Meng Yao can draw on her own experience of the war years as well as her intimate knowledge of the theatre. Two important questions are raised in *The Twins' Story*: Where do family obligations end when it comes into conflict with national interests? and: Is it possible to become a traitor by accident?

In 1975 Meng Yao became Head of the Chinese Department of National Zhongxing University, where she remained until a serious illness forced her to take early retirement in 1980. She did not think that she would live to write another novel, but a period of complete rest with her son and his family in the United States put her on the road to a slow recovery.

Although Meng Yao maintained that she no longer drove herself as hard as in the past, at least seven works of fiction were published after she took up her pen again, two of which dealt with her impressions of the Chinese community in the United States and the identity crisis suffered by many Chinese adolescents who want to be American while their parents want them to remain Chinese.¹²

Among the seven or eight novels written after Meng Yao's recovery is her largest work to date, *Women, Women* (Nuren, Nuren), 928 pages long, which was published in 1984. It deals with the emancipation and changing role of women in Chinese society from pre-revolutionary days to the present, and is set first in Beijing, then Chongqing, and finally in Taiwan.

The 52 or so novels Meng Yao has written were first serialised in literary journals and newspaper supplements and subsequently published in book form.

Although Meng Yao has a couple of collections of short stories to her name, it is in the long and medium-length novel that she excels, for she needs space in which to manoeuvre and develop her characters.

Meng Yao's early works of fiction were sometimes criticised for being "overly imaginative" or "fanciful".¹³ She took this very much to heart and brooded upon it. When she was at her lowest ebb an article in a newspaper she was reading had the effect of stimulating her into action, and *The Alienated* (Luanli ren), published in 1959, was the

result. In this novel Meng Yao deals among other things with mainlanders living in exile, the effects of a broken home, juvenile delinquency, and the public's attitude towards non-academic youth.

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However she has expressed herself, Meng Yao has always been concerned with the portrayal of the human psyche in its infinite varieties. She never judges people by appearances or takes them at face value, but strives to look behind the mask people put on in public. She strives to discover the motivations behind people's actions. To her, no situation is simple, black or white. There is a variety of subtle and not so subtle pressures on people which make them behave in certain ways. These she explores. She is fascinated by the strong personality which is at war with itself or is its own worst enemy. She writes with compassion of those who are faced with moral choices and make the wrong choice, or whose lives are wrecked because of a momentary weakness.

Many of Meng Yao's works of fiction are peopled by characters who have jettisoned traditional attitudes and assumptions, without replacing them with a philosophy of life consistent with what she regards as the best of China's past and her national psyche. They also deal with the problem of coming to terms with a rapidly changing society, in which competition for jobs is fierce and the pace of life has accelerated beyond measure.

Although many of Meng Yao's novels are set on the mainland of China, the majority are set in Taiwan and therefore mirror Taiwan's changing circumstances over a forty-year period. But where her characters are mainlanders, the mainland is always there as something remembered in anguish, delight or nostalgia, or as a vague childhood memory or received information only.

Meng Yao is very modest about her enormous output. When she was asked by the publisher, Liming wenhua shiye youxian gongsi, to provide biographical details to go with the collection of her short stories it wished to publish, she replied that recording the history of her writing would "make her perspire in embarrassment."¹⁴ Down-playing her writing further, she concluded, "... If Providence will grant me the energy I had before 1961 so that I

may have three or more useful years, I shall then work hard to produce works of some consequence, and make up for my former mistakes."¹⁵

The latest information on Meng Yao is that despite her years, she is in good health. But she now finds it difficult to write.

In view of her vast output, some fifty-two novels, a couple of collections of short stories, and histories of fiction and drama, she is entitled to rest on her laurels.

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NOTES

¹ See Chen, Lucy, "Literary Formosa" in Mancall, Mark, ed. *Formosa Today*, New York, London, Praeger, 1964, pp.131-141.

² See Lancashire, E. "The Novels of Meng Yao" in *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language & Literature Association*, No. 34, November, 1970, pp. 212-240; and Lancashire, E. *Concord and Discord in the World of Literature in Taiwan, 1949-1971, A Selective Study of Writers' Associations, Literary Movements, and Controversial Writers*, Ph.D. Thesis for London University, 1981.

³ Meng Yao, *Man cheng fengxu*. Taibei, Chun wenxue chubanshe, 1981. Translated by Lancashire, E. as *Talk of the Town*, London, Minerva Press, 1997.

⁴ See *Liming qian*, Chang cheng chubanshe, 1963; and *Nuren, Nuren*, 2 vols. Zhonghua ribao she, 1984.

⁵ Meng Yao, *Meng Yao zixuanji* (Collection of Literary Works Chosen by Meng Yao Herself), Taibei, Liming wenhua shiye gufen youxian gongsi), 1979, p. 2.

⁶ Ibid. p. 3.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *Jifan fengyu* (Storms of Life); *Liu an hua ming* (Willow Trees and Bright Flowers); *Qiong xiang* (Poverty Lane), and *Wei Yan* (Dangerous Precipice).

⁹ Liang Shiqiu, (1902-1987) an eminent Shakespearian scholar and translator, who also translated western Classics into Chinese.

¹⁰ Yu Dagang, the then Professor of Drama in the College of Chinese Culture.

¹¹ Yu Dagang, Preface to *Zhongguo xiju shi*, first published by Wen xing shudian, and subsequently published by Chuanji wen xue.

¹² See *Penzai yu pingcha* (Potted Plants and Cut Flowers), Taipei, Liming wenhua shiye gufen youxian gongsi. September, 1981; and, *Wang xiang* (Gazing Homeward), Taipei, Zhongyang ribao chubanshu, December 1981.

¹³ See Postscript to *Luanli ren*, (The Alienated), Taipei, Minghua Shuju, 1959.

¹⁴ See biographical details on Meng Yao in Wang Pumin and Kuang Baiman, eds. *Taiwan yu haiwai zuojia xiaozhuan*, Fuzhou, Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1983.

¹⁵ Ibid.

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