Foreword to the Special Issue
in Memory of Tzeng Ching-wen

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Tzeng Ching-wen (September 16, 1932–November 4, 2017) was an outstanding Taiwan writer who devoted his entire life to writing fiction and children’s literature. He developed a unique style of writing that reflected the changing society of Taiwan and the vicissitudes of the common people’s lives during the half century after World War II. He died of a heart attack in 2017 winter at the age of 85.

Tzeng Ching-wen was born in a rural area of Taoyuan Prefecture during the period of Japanese rule. He was born into the Lee family, but at age one was adopted by his maternal uncle, who lived in Hsinchuang district on the outskirts of Taipei City, thus becoming a member of the Tzeng family. He attended a Japanese public elementary school in Hsinchuang at age seven, starting his Japanese education. In 1945, he entered the Taipei Junior High School and started to learn Chinese. After graduating from Taipei Business Occupational High School, he was admitted to the Department of Business at National Taiwan University in 1954. After graduating in 1958, he worked at Hua Nan Commercial Bank for over forty years, all the while engaging in creative writing.
whenever he found spare time. He retired from the bank in 1998. Most of his works were published in newspaper supplements and literary magazines; his numerous publications include over 300 short stories, three novels, and five children’s story books, as well as documentaries, essays, and translations. He turned his attention to children’s story writing in the later years of his life, stressing the importance of cultivating children’s creative imagination. He published five volumes of children’s stories, including Yanxin guo [The Swallow’s Heart Berry], Tiandeng, Muqin [Heavenly Lantern, Mother], Cai tao ji: Tzeng Ching-wen tonghua [Picking Peaches: The Children’s Stories of Tzeng Ch’ing-wen].

Tzeng Ching-wen published his first short story, “Jimo de xin” [The Lonely Heart], in 1958 at the age of twenty-seven. In 1965 came the first collection of short stories, Boji gu [Dustpan Valley]. In 1970 his first novel, Xia di [The Gorge], appeared. In 1987, he was awarded the Wu Sanlian Award for Literature in the Fiction category. In 1998, Rye Field Publishing Co. in Taiwan published Zheng Qingwen duanpian xiaoshuo quanji [Complete Short Stories of Tzeng Ching-wen] in six volumes plus a separate volume about the author and his literature. That same year, the Modern Chinese Literature from Taiwan series, published by Columbia University Press, also included an English translation of Sanjiao ma [Three Legged Horse]. In 1999, he became the first Taiwanese author chosen to be a Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book Prize Laureate. Tzeng is one of the most consistent, persistent, and resistant writers in Taiwan’s literary history, as Prof. Sylvia Li-Chun Lin pointed out in her “Book Review: Cheng Ch’ing-wen’s Three-Legged Horse in English Translation”:

Cheng Ch’ing-wen is one of the most consistent and persistent writers in Taiwan’s literary history: persistent, because his writing career, which began in the early 1960s, spans four decades, while production by many writers of his generation waned; consistent, because his themes,
tracing the social and political changes in Taiwan, seldom vary. Cheng is also one of the most resistant writers, never swayed by ever-changing popular tastes and whimsical literary trends. All these characteristics are comprehensively represented in *Three-Legged Horse*, the second volume in Columbia University Press’s *Modern Chinese Literature from Taiwan* series.

In 2005, Tzeng Ching-wen received the 9th National Culture and Art Foundation Literary Award. In June, 2006, an International Conference on Tzeng Ching-wen was organized by Prof. Baochai Chiang of National Chung Cheng University, Taiwan, in collaboration with Prof. Jenn-shann Lin of the University of Alberta, Canada, with a book published after the conference, entitled *Shu de jianzheng—Zheng Qingwen wenxue lunji* [The Witness of the Trees—Collected Literary Essays on Tzeng Ching-wen]. Tzeng Ching-wen’s status as one of the most representative writers of modern Taiwan literature has thus been well recognized.

In 2005, at the invitation of the Center for Taiwan Studies, University of California at Santa Barbara, Tzeng Ching-wen served as writer in residence for two months, from August to October, as part of the “Taiwan Writers in Residence Program.” The Center for Taiwan Studies at Providence University, Taiwan, also hosted an International Literature Conference on Tzeng Ching-wen on December 8–9, 2018. Accordingly, *Taiwan Literature: English Translation Series* has planned a special issue on Tzeng Ching-wen to commemorate this outstanding Taiwan writer who passed away in 2017.

The main settings for Tzeng Ching-wen’s writing are the two “Old Towns” where he grew up, while the events and characters are drawn from his two childhoods. The “Old Town” often mentioned in his stories actually refers to Hsinchuang, where he lived during his childhood. As he says in his essay,

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“Dashui hepan de tongnian” [Boyhood on the Banks of the Grand River], “I was born in the countryside around Taoyuan, but grew up in Old Town. Because of this, I enjoyed two boyhoods, and two home towns.” He saw the hard work of peasants in Taoyuan and witnessed the diligence of common folk in Old Town (Hsinchuang). These people became the main characters in his stories. Old Town only had one long street, with the Grand River (Tamsui River) passing through to the south. Tzeng has observed, “Every river has an unending flow of stories that forms a grand history. In comparison, Old Town offers but a short interlude. Actually, my boyhood was also all about that river. And in fact, almost everyone in Old Town lived a life in close relationship with the Grand River.” We have therefore included the article “Boyhood on the Banks of the Grand River” as evidence of Tzeng Ching-wen’s passionate dedication to his role as a representative native writer of Taiwan.

There has been much scholarly attention devoted to the characteristics and styles of Tzeng Ching-wen’s storytelling. Due to the unique circumstances of his early life, his literary nourishment did not come from traditional Chinese literature. Rather, he was deeply affected and cultivated by Japanese translations of Western literatures and creative theories. His writing is also much informed and inspired by Western authors. Any critical analysis of his work would inevitably mention that he often employs concise, unadorned language, and evinces the mental complexity of his characters with subtle, delicate strokes. Such a writing style is heavily influenced by Ernest Hemingway’s “iceberg theory.”

In “Zhuixun—Lun Zheng Qingwen de wenti” [Pursuit: On Tzeng Ching-wen’s Style], Ch’en Yuan-san invokes an interview article, “Chengshi yu hanxu de gushi” [The story of honesty and simplicity] by Hung Hsing-fu in the 1970s, to explain Tzeng Ching-wen’s idea of creative writing. “First, I don’t like flashy words or flowery diction. Second, I think a simple word has its own merit. Because it’s simple, it’s more implicit.”
In the interview article, “Fengge de chuangzaozhe” [The Creator of Style], by Huang Wu-chung written in the 1980s, Tzeng Ching-wen clearly acknowledged that “There are shadows of Hemingway and Chekhov in my works.” Hemingway famously stated that “The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water.”¹ This is reflected in Tzeng’s writing style. His diction is simple, sentences concise, and the dialog is in plain speech. More often than not, he uses simple conversation to develop the plot instead of a detailed description and explanation of his characters’ appearance and action. All these factors contribute to his unique writing style.

As stated in his article “Ouran yu biran—wenxue de xingcheng” [Accidental and Inevitable—The Formation of Literature], Tzeng Ching-wen’s enlightenment as a novelist, as well as the formation of his fictional world, were both accidental and inevitable. The accidental was the opportunity to write, and the inevitable was the gift of his talent. His endowment, or talent for creative writing, lay in his boundless imagination, purified language, keen observation, and skillful conception of how to tell a story. His works are profoundly thoughtful, and ripe with human concern and compassion. He makes excellent use of metaphorical devices and suggestive symbolism, and possesses a high level of artistic flexibility as well as a gentle, honest attitude toward nature and life.

As he recounted in reference to his days as an avid reader of the great literary works, “It (literary inspiration) probably happened after entering college. I often visited used book stores looking for books, which mainly were in Japanese…. A book entitled Three Russians, published by Shinchōsha, introduced me to Gogol, Chekhov and Gorky and was a great influence on my

¹ From Death in the Afternoon.
career as a writer.”

In the book, there was a story, “The Ravine,” by Chekhov that had a profound impact on him. As he notes:

“In the process of my development as a writer and as a person, that book provided much nurture. From it I gained understanding of what a short story was, what literature was, and learned that people required empathy.”

“In his discussion of Chekhov’s work, another Russian author, Nabokov, comments that Chekhov wrote of good people, but those good people were unable to do good.

“Why weren’t they able to do good? Was it due to personal factors? Or societal factors?

“Chekhov has a very short story entitled “Sorrow.” It tells of a carriage driver whose son has died. He tells the people riding in his carriage that his son has died. No one cares what he is talking about. In the end, he tells his horse that his son has died. When a good man is unable to do good, it is truly sad.”

From this we can understand the archetype for Tzeng Ching-wen’s fiction. Most of his works depict the life of common folks, their sadness, powerlessness, and his sympathy for them. These are the themes that he explores repeatedly in his fiction, and which have formed the spiritual core of his belief in literature.

However, Chekhov’s story “The Ravine” seemed to resonate with deeper symbolic significance for Tzeng Ching-wen in his life experience and on his career path to be a novelist. He once noted: “The overall situation in Taiwan was like a ravine surrounded on all sides by mountains. Taiwan was surrounded by ocean, but Taiwanese people could not go near the ocean. Two-thirds of

2 Quoted from *The Witness of the Trees.*

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Taiwan is mountains, but in order to go into the mountains, you had to apply for a special permit. Nor could you enter or leave Taiwan freely.

“I wrote of ravines, and of lakes, and of reservoirs. I wrote of bridges and tunnels. Those were the channels by which you could gain limited access to the outside world.”

No wonder, the title of his second story, “Boji gu” [The Dustpan Valley], published in 1959, was set against the backdrop of a valley. His first novel, *Xiadi* [The Gorge], published in 1970, takes the valley as an analogy, and so the title of his biography written by his daughter, Ku-yuan, carries the subtitle, “Zouchu Xiadi: Zheng Qingwen de rensheng gushi” [Walking out of the Gorge: Tzeng Ching-wen’s Life Story], which takes the metaphor of going out of the gorge/valley as the goal of life.

In 1960, Tzeng Ching-wen was discharged from military service and married Chen Shu-hui of Guishan Township in Taoyuan County. They had two daughters and one son, all of whom have the Chinese character “gu” (valley) in their names: Gуйин (Valley Echo), Guhuai (Valley Mind), and Gуйuan ³ (Valley Garden). One of his pen-names was “Guba,” which literally means “Dad of Valleys,” humorously implying that the writer’s mind and heart are nestled among the green hills and the grand valleys of Taiwan that he cherished.

Regarding Tzeng Ching-wen’s skill as a creative writer, as mentioned above, he was much influenced by Hemingway. He liked to write with a simple structure, narrate in plain language, and imply a deep significance in his works. Readers have often complained that his writing is “simple but incomprehensible.” Nevertheless, he firmly maintained his belief in this principle to the end. So, although his works seem simple, they in fact conceal

³ In practice, Tzeng’s daughter, Ku-yuan, prefers to use Wade-Giles romanization (Ku-yuan), rather than pinyin (Guyuan) for her name.
deep psychological nuances. On the other hand, he always bore in mind Chekhov’s assertion that: “A writer does not act as a judge, but only serves as a witness.” Therefore, he strove to represent the tragedy and sadness of the world and human life as fully and realistically as possible in order to provoke sympathy and compassion in his readers.

Generally speaking, his works present observations of human life and society in an objective, calm manner in order to convey the truth without passing judgment. He often makes use of objects or phenomena from nature as metaphors that reveal profound meaning, philosophy, and understanding. His diction is simple and concise, not exaggerated or embellished, and his language is natural and unaffected. But his subtle words are often deeply suggestive. Some readers complain that his works are so “obscure” that they do not appeal to public taste. Both his technique of expression and the messages expressed seem to me highly artistic and closer to poetry. They are simple but profound, thought-provoking, and pregnant with meaning.

Based on my understanding of the theories of Symbolism and Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) in poetry, in their expression and suggestive tone, Tzeng Ching-wen’s works share many similarities with poetry and can be called “Poetic Fiction.” This is the term I used in an article written in 1972 on Kawabata Yasunari’s fiction. In Tzeng Ching-wen’s fiction, and in his poetic view of symbolism and objectivity, I see many characteristics which he shares with Kawabata. I therefore believe that the artistic achievement of Tzeng Ching-wen’s works deserves further exploration and in-depth study.

For this special issue, we are thankful to Angela Ku-yuan Tzeng for her assistance in recommending representative stories for translation and for her essay, “A Storyteller—In Memory of Tzeng Ching-wen,” in memory of her father. Like father, like daughter. No one understands the father better than the daughter, and indeed her essay reveals an intimate understanding of the writer’s
life and personality. This is also evident in her book, *Coming out of the Gorge—Life Stories of Tzeng Ching-wen*, which is the most complete, realistic, and sincere biography of the writer to date. For the essay, “Boyhood on the Banks of the Grand River,” we appreciate expert assistance from Joseph R. Allen, the author of *Taipei: City of Displacements*, a comprehensive study of Taipei with regard to its geographical changes and historical development in terms of cultural space.

Once more we have enlisted longtime contributors to our journal, Howard Goldblatt, Sylvia Li-chun Lin, John Balcom, and Yingtsih Hwang. Their contributions are very much appreciated. My co-editor Terence Russell and copy editor Fred Edwards, together with my assistants Angela Borda and Raelynn Moy, all have tried their best to keep to the deadlines as they edited the manuscript. Their cooperation and efficiency deserve my sincere appreciation. The editorial assistance of the UCSB Center for Taiwan Studies, as well as the unfailing support of the chief editor, Mr. Tang Shih-chu, and the editor, Isabel I-ting Su, of the Taiwan University Press, have been indispensable for the publication of this issue. Herewith, I dedicate my sincere thanks.

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