Literature and Social Concerns

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Social concern is a universal theme in literature, and Taiwan literature is no exception. The relation between a writer and the society, in general, indicates various degrees of involvement or concern with the world, depending on whether the writer's attitude is accepting or renouncing it. In the Chinese literary tradition, the Confucian view of literature tends to accept the world, taking literature as a vehicle for the Way, and writing as a great undertaking of the state and a grand achievement of immortality. Buddhist and Taoist views of life tend to renounce the world and stand aloof. Concerning writing, Chinese Zen Buddhists emphasize enlightenment and independence of language, because “in words the Way falls short, and the process of mind is the cessation of truth” (yen yü tao tuan, hsin hsing ch’u mieh). The Taoist aesthetic view emphasizes a meaning beyond words; beyond words is where the interest is seen to exist. This view maintains that verbal expression has value in literary works when one “does not fall into the trap of words” (pu lo yen-ch’üan), “one forgets the words when he has the meaning” (te i wang yen), and “achieves all the effect without writing a word” (pu chu i tsu, chin te feng-liu). These dicta have to do with the effectiveness of verbal communication and literature; as different people voiced different views over the years, they have expressed a variety of viewpoints regarding this one proposition on literature and society.

If the function of verbal communication and the social significance of human behavior are completely denied, there can be no literature. Since literary works have existed in all ages in China and other countries, there must be a certain social relation between literary expression and a writer’s thoughts and actions. As a member of the society, a writer cannot divorce his thoughts and behavior from the society, and his works will inevitably reflect certain social phenomena, and will appeal to his readers, who must be his contemporaries, to have a strong sympathetic response to the social concerns expressed in his works. However, in expressing social concerns, a writer may adopt two different attitudes: One is direct involvement, expressing straightforwardly his subjective belief and criticism on realities in the society; the other is by implication, using literary rhetoric and verbal skill to imply in the plot and characterization the author’s intended social concerns. The former presses forward to express a theme, emphasizing social significance, while the latter takes pains with the technique of expression, emphasizing artistic quality. Excellent literary works will certainly have integrated both the social significance and the artistic quality.

Thus a great writer’s outlook on life accepts the world, and his works express his humanitarian concerns with the society and his sympathy for the people. Dickens’s solicitude for the poor and children, Balzac’s exposing the avarice of capitalist society, Zola’s denunciation of social injustice, and Tolstoy’s criticism of the Russian old society all demonstrate a strong social consciousness, deriving from
humanitarian social concerns, by which their masterpieces were inspired. The remarkable novels of the Ming and Ch’ing dynasties in China also magnificently reflect social realities with the intended social criticism of the authors, not to mention the works of Tu Fu as a Confucian sage-poet.

However, literature is nonetheless an art of verbal expression. By depending on the artistry of verbal expression, superior work of literature necessarily surpasses the social significance of reflecting reality, and only then can transcend the particular time and society described, so as to convey the common experience of human life through the ages and thereby acquire a universal and lasting value. The masterpieces of every nation, in addition to reflecting social realities of the time, describe the human conditions of life and give insight into human nature by means of superior artistic expression, and thus transcend national language and culture, turning themselves into the classics of world literature to be appreciated by all human beings.

In this issue, we took social concerns as the theme, and selected particular works that deal with various social problems in Taiwan and display the authors’ social concern and insight into life. Taiwan society exhibits various social issues, such as domestic crises, extramarital love affairs, juvenile delinquency, problems of retired veterans and aboriginal peoples, teenage prostitution, child labor, public hazards, market competition, and the suffering of political victims. Within our limited pages, we cannot include works covering all these problems. For the critique section, we selected the writer Cheng Ch’ing-wen’s “Wen-hsüeh tso-p’in te she-hui-hsing yü i-shu-hsing” (The Social Significance and Artistic Quality of Literary Works). From his knowledge and understanding of literature as a writer, Cheng affirms these two attributes of literature—the social and artistic—and, in comparing the works of Wu Cho-liu and Li Ch’iao, he points out the subtle nature of literature, i.e., when a writer creates a literary life for his works, the secret of his success consists in integrating his concerns for the society and the times and at the same time transcending any particular society and time.

For the fiction, we selected Huang Ch’un-ming’s recent work “Szu-ch’ü huo-lai” (Dead Again?), Li I-yün’s “Nite Hsien-ch’ang tso-p’in No. 1” (Your Live Show, Opus No. 1), and Hung Tsu-ch’iung’s “Mei-li” (Beauty). These three pieces, as they touch upon social concerns arising from the situation of the elderly, the vagabond life of charlatans in the lower society, and the vicissitudes in the life of a mentally retarded girl, cannot help but strike a sympathetic chord in the heart of the reader. For essays, we selected Ch’en Lieh’s “T’ung-pao” (Compatriots) and Huang K’o-ch’üan’s “Lao Yü-tai, wo wei ni hsieh-hsia” (Old Mainlander, for You I Write), which deal with the aboriginal people and retired veterans, the neglected minorities in the society of Taiwan. Five of the selected poems describe the poets’ thoughts and feelings about social events and laborers’ hardships in life. Among them, Liu K’o-hsiang’s “Tsang hua” (Burial of Flowers) and Hsü Hui-chih’s “Chai-fan” (Maigre Fare) are particularly notable. The former is a prose-poem about the February 28 incident of 1947, describing the suffering and relief from pain of a son of a political
victim during the White Terror period under martial law. There are a good number of works on the subject, in both prose and poetry, but this poem, allusive and profound, shows a remarkable fusion of social significance and artistic quality. The latter takes a portrayal of the Nobel Peace Laureate of 1991, Aung San Suu Kyi, as a departure for transcending egoistic concerns and relating to the fate of all mankind through the selfless redemption of the Bodhisattva, whose mercy and compassion brings all living things to salvation. This kind of religions outlook by which a Taiwanese poet’s social concern is able to span the society of Taiwan, and extend its reach to the world is rarely found in Taiwan literature and should be valued. Finally, for studies, we selected two articles by Li Jui-t’eng and Ch’en Wan-i, one concerning the situation of old people and the other on the subject of retired veterans who came originally from the Mainland, so that the reader may have a better understanding of the literature in these areas.

Our knowledge is limited, and so we would like to ask scholars and experts in the field to assist us by recommending superior works for translation. For this issue, we are indebted to Professors Jack Jenn-Shann Lin and Hsü Chün-ya for recommending Huang Ch’un-ming and Ch’en Lieh. Regarding translation, the eminent translator Howard Goldblatt lent us his hand so that Hung Ch’un-ming’s works have one more piece of excellent translation in English. In addition, from the brief introduction of the translators, you will find that we have enlisted a vital new force endowed with real ability in Chinese and English. It is our sincere hope that more and more scholars and translators will join us and that, in selection and translation, we will be able to do a better job to introduce Taiwan literature to the English-speaking world.