

Rethinking JOSA(H)

In these short pieces, scholars reflect on the impact of articles published in the Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia, now the Journal of the Australian Society for Asian Humanities.

All this was Poetry: Reflections on A.J. Prince's "The Countryman in the Life and Works of Shen Ts'ung-wen" (1978)

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Anthony John Prince's "The Countryman in the Life and Works of Shen Ts'ung-wen" (1978) represents a pioneering and influential approach to the study and appreciation of a seminal twentieth-century Chinese literary talent. The article's observations and conclusions have proved important and enduring, though Prince himself went on to explore rather different fields of scholarship. Paradoxes of hiatus, revisitation, and redirection abound.

Begin with the literary subject. Shen Congwen, as we spell his name today (he lived 1902-1988), was a major New Culture Movement writer of fiction and other prose. His name was prominent in Republican-era biographical dictionaries and Kaiming Press in the 1940s published and republished a multivolume series collecting his best-loved works, some of which were translated into English, French, and Japanese; Shen's *Biancheng* (Border town) appeared in two English versions (1936, 1947). After 1949, however, Shen Congwen mostly disappeared from China's literary scene, as Prince indicates in his article. The Chinese writer was forgotten by scholars and lovers of literature almost everywhere else as well, until C. T. Hsia extolled his achievements in his *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (1961). It was Tony Prince who then wrote the first Ph.D. dissertation on Shen Congwen in any language, "The Life and Works of Shen Ts'ung-wen" (University of Sydney, 1968). His mentors were A. R. Davis and W. P. [Wei-ping] Liu.

Prince's research on Shen Congwen came into print for the first and last time only a decade after that, in the 1978 article below. (Pure speculation: Did A. R. Davis or someone else at Prince's alma mater in Sydney, where the young scholar returned to teach after six years' study and teaching in Taiwan and Japan, grab Prince's dissertation off his desk to ensure that at least a portion of it was published, as John K. Fairbank had done with David Tod Roy's dissertation on Guo Moruo a few years earlier?) The *JOSA* article below extracts from the dissertation primarily Prince's biographical analysis and exploration of the "countryman" theme in Shen's writings. These perspectives stimulated those who went on to study Shen and his works in the 1970s, me among them, although we specialists read the full dissertation

(on microfilm back then; today it can be read online). A biographical, regional, and local-colour approach became dominant also in China's own studies of Shen in later years, but that research and criticism proceeded from different wellsprings and was facilitated by much easier access to Shen's writings than Prince or any scholar in China enjoyed in the 1960s or 1970s.

Outside China, there had been, by 1963, an ideologized debate between Jaroslav Průšek and C. T. Hsia about literary history methodology and who belonged in the modern Chinese literary canon. The place of Lu Xun and more orthodox leftist writers was of greater prominence in the two scholars' original polemics than the place of Shen Congwen, but Hsia's noteworthy esteem for Shen and Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing) had a greater impact as time went on. Impassioned methodological debates continued in back-to-back 1974 symposia at Harvard and Dedham, Massachusetts, which were academically star-studded and led to the founding of what later came to be called the *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* journal, databases, and information networks. Historical, sociological, and contextual analyses of modern Chinese literature (called by some the Harvard school) were opposed by a "cite nothing outside the literary texts" tendency favoured by many thematic, New Critical, and structuralist scholars. (Poststructuralism had not quite arrived yet in English-language Sinology.) Active in Dedham on the pure-textualist side was William L. MacDonald, who had written the world's second dissertation on Shen Congwen: "Characters and Themes in Shen Ts'ung-wen's Fiction" (University of Washington, 1970). It, too, discusses the countryman motif. Unfortunately, MacDonald's dissertation never became a book either. Prince's study bridges the two methodological "camps." In fact his dissertation, more than MacDonald's, continues C. T. Hsia's interest in Sino-European comparative literature perspectives. Prince's 1968 work compares Shen Congwen and D. H. Lawrence.

Another inspiration and challenge in related scholarship was Hua-ling Nieh's *Shen Ts'ung-wen* (Twayne's World Authors Series, 1972). It begins with biographical chapters based on the immortal *Congwen zizhuan* (Congwen's autobiography) that gave Prince and all us later researchers our start; Nieh's renderings of it benefited from research and translations by her collaborators, the Hong Kong poet Wan Kin-lau (Wen Jianliu) and Filipino novelist Wilfredo Nollo. Her subsequent chapters of original literary criticism then discuss Shen's countryman persona, likening it to Camus' *Stranger*. Probably Nieh had not read Prince; existentialism had been a significant intellectual trend in 1960s Taiwan literary circles. Prince in his 1978 article cites Nieh's book and the 1973 encounter between Shen and Kai-yu Hsu (Xu Jieyu), who discovered that the time for interviewing Shen and filling in gaps about his life and work had not yet arrived; the ex-writer was very guarded in speaking about his literary past, even with Hsu, his former student. Prince in the revised pages below does not mention C. T. Hsia. That was probably not a political judgement, for the dissertation does include him, along with a smattering of China's own largely perfunctory and derogatory left-wing commentary on Shen Congwen, up to but not including that of later literary historians such as Wang Yao. Although Hsia emphasized echoes of Daoism and more abstract religious and moral concerns in Shen's fiction, matters of religion and philosophy could not have been

been an issue between Hsia and Prince. A career-long element of Tony Prince's own story is his interest in such subjects, notably Buddhism.

We get a glimpse of Prince's Buddhist erudition in footnote 79 below, and at greater length already in his 1968 dissertation, in which he traces the origins of story plots in some of Shen's fiction to particular Jataka tales and Buddhist scriptures. Prince perused the religious texts in English and Japanese translations. Among Tony Prince's major publications in later years are his annotated cotranslated book with Adrian Buzo titled *Kyunyŏ-jŏn: The Life, Times and Songs of a Tenth Century Korean Monk* (Wild Peony, 1993), *The Dawn of Enlightenment: The Opening Passage of Avatamsaka Sutra with a Commentary* (Taipei: Kongting, 2006), and *Universal Enlightenment: An Introduction to the Teachings and Practices of Huayen Buddhism* (Taipei: Kongting, 2014; 2nd ed., 2020). At the University of Sydney, Tony Prince taught Chinese language, literature, and thought for 28 years, until his retirement in 2000. He did not abandon his interest in modern Chinese literature. He joined Naikan Tao as cotranslator in *Eight Contemporary Chinese Poets*, whose subjects range from Haizi to Xi Chuan (Wild Peony, 2007), and again with Tao and Mabel Lee in Lee's edited book, *Poems of Hong Ying, Zhai Yongming, and Yang Lian* (Vagabound Press, 2014).

Tony Prince's article below is unmatched for its analysis of Shen Congwen's "countryman" persona, and also for Prince's moving renditions of the colourful prose in *Congwen's Autobiography*. To this day that work has never been fully translated into English. The article below is notable for integrating Shen Congwen's full range of overtly autobiographical writing, including his later essays and even his confessions, with self-revelatory material from the author's stories and essays. The result is a stimulating picture of Shen Congwen that has been filled out but not greatly modified by subsequent research and new materials. Prince's writing is a window on his meticulous scholarship. It is also a reminder, suitably present through its near-absence in this particular incarnation, that Buddhist narratives once inspired Shen Congwen.

About A.J. Prince

A.J. Prince (Tony Prince) began his Chinese studies at the University of Sydney under the recently appointed Professor A.R. Davis and Mr. (subsequently Dr.) Liu Wei-ping 劉渭平. Having completed a B.A. course with honours in Chinese, as well as three years of Japanese, he began to undertake postgraduate research on the 20th century Chinese writer Shen Ts'ung-wen 沈從文 ('Shen Congwen' in Hanyu Pinyin). He submitted his Ph.D. thesis on "The Life and Works of Shen Ts'ung-wen" in 1968.

A couple of years after receiving his Ph.D. degree, while attending a conference at the Australian National University in Canberra, he was introduced to the Buddhist nun and artist Ven. Hsiao Yun 曉雲 (Cantonese romanization 'Hiu Wan'), who invited him to teach at her Institute of Buddhist Studies 佛教研究所 in the College of Chinese Culture 中國文化學院 (subsequently Chinese Culture University 中國文化大學) in Taiwan. He spent three and a

half years in Taiwan, during which time he began to take an interest in the Huayen School 華嚴宗 of Chinese Buddhism.

On leaving Taiwan, he moved to Japan with a view to improving his Japanese and perhaps finding an opening in the field of Buddhist Studies there. He failed to discover any such opening, but by sheer coincidence, he happened to encounter Prof. Davis again in Osaka. Not long after this, a vacancy was advertised in the Department of Chinese Studies at the University of Sydney, for which he submitted a successful application. After spending a couple of months travelling through various countries in South and Southeast Asia, he returned in 1977 to Sydney University to take up the advertised post of lecturer in Chinese.

The following year an article based on his Ph.D. thesis, "The Countryman in the Life and Works of Shen Ts'ung-wen", was published in the *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia*. Subsequently two other articles by him appeared in the same journal: "The Concept of Buddhahood in Earlier and Later Buddhism" (Dec. 1970) and "The Hua Yen Vision of Enlightenment" (1983-4).

In the 1990s he presented a paper at a conference on 'Religion and Biography in China and Tibet' which was held at the Australian National University in Canberra. This paper, "Everyday Miracles", on the miraculous or supernatural element in Buddhist hagiographies, was included in a book published under the same title as that of the conference by Curzon in 2002, and republished by Routledge in 2013. Meanwhile he had collaborated with Adrian Buzo on a book about an early Korean Hwaeom (Huayen) text, *Kyunyŏ-jŏn: The Life, Times and Songs of a Tenth Century Korean Monk* (Wild Peony, 1993). At the same time he was working with Naikan Tao and Mabel Lee on translating works by some contemporary Chinese poets; the results of this collaboration appeared in two books: *Eight Contemporary Chinese Poets* (Wild Peony, 2007), *Poems of Hong Ying, Zhai Yongming, and Yang Lian* (Vagabond Press, 2014).

In the late 1990s he returned briefly to Taiwan to speak at a conference organized by Huafan University, which had been founded some years earlier by Ven. Hsiao Yun. The title of this talk was "Patterns of Heaven and Earth: The Significance of Poetry in the Chinese Tradition". After his retirement in the year 2000, he returned to Huafan University to deliver another talk, entitled "Perceiving Reality: Learning and Meditation According to the Huayen School".

Subsequently two Huayen-related books were published by Kongting Press 空庭書局 in Taiwan: *The Dawn of Enlightenment*, a translation of the opening section of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, together with an oral commentary by the present-day Huayen master Ven. Haiyun Jimeng 海雲繼夢; and *Universal Enlightenment: An Introduction to the Teachings and Practices of Huayen Buddhism*, an attempt to explain the Huayen teachings as a coherent system of doctrine and practice leading to Enlightenment, rather than as the abstruse school of Buddhist 'philosophy' commonly depicted in histories of Chinese Buddhism. A reformatted and enlarged edition of *Universal Enlightenment* was later published as an e-

book. Tony Prince is still studying and writing about the Huayen teachings, but he now lives in Sri Lanka.