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# Notes made in China in May 1990 for an hour-long BBC radio documentary

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Gregory B. Lee. *URGENT KNOCKING*, China/Hong Kong Notebook, May 1990.

*Notes made in China in May 1990 in connection with the hour-long radio documentary The Urgent Knocking: New Chinese Writing and the Movement for Democracy which I was making for the BBC and which was broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1990 to coincide with the 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the massacre at Tiananmen.*

*My Urgent Knocking notebook is somewhat cryptic. I was worried about prying eyes, and the notes were not made in chronological, or consecutive order, but scattered throughout my notebook. Probably, I was hoping that their haphazard pagination would withstand a cursory inspection. The terse jottings were more easily re-constituted into a narrative than they are now, nearly 30 years later. The Hong Kong interviews were tape-recorded, so I didn't take extensive notes by hand; I hope to transcribe and publish the Hong Kong interviews in the near future. While in Beijing, in order to protect those interviewed, or mentioned in interviews, I used initials rather than full names. Also, it would have been highly imprudent to make recordings in mainland China, so, apart from a recording of Mang Ke reading a poem, I made none.*

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*Notes, dated 3 May 1990, of comments made by the writer Xiao Qian 萧乾 (1910-1999), who had been one of the signatories of the 'Open Letter' initiated by Bei Dao 北岛 (13.02.1989) calling on the government to release the dissident Wei Jingsheng 魏京生 imprisoned since 1979. Xiao Qian's autobiography Traveller without a Map had just been published in the UK. Verbatim comments appear in quote marks.*

3.05.90

'I had some trouble in the beginning.'

---

Picture was shown on TV [in the wake of 4 June].

---

Different from '50s and '60s. Toeing party line now means not opposing, then it meant 100% support.

---

'It's different from the 50s and the 60s. Now we are allowed to keep silent. Then we were forced to argue.'

---

Worse for the younger generation, they were such idealists in the 60s/70s.

---

'It's better than the 50s and the 60s — we couldn't have contact like this.'

---

Re: 33 petition.

'I don't regret it'

---

'I have always kept my distance from the party, never applied to join, never attended meetings.'

---

What about writing?

— 'Hard to say. Just read a few classics and write some memoirs and wait.'

---

On reading last paragraph of introduction to DWS [*Dai Wangshu: The Life and Poetry of a Chinese Modernist*]:

'I agree.'<sup>1</sup>

---

[Xiao Qian] knew DWS well in HK while literary editor of « 大公報 ».

---

YXY\* refused to retract 3 times.

\*[ Yang Xianyi/Yang Hsien-yi 楊憲益(1915-2009) the celebrated translator who had denounced the authorities actions on June 4<sup>th</sup> 1989 on BBC radio]

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CY [abbreviation of the name of the playwright Cao Yu 曹禺 (1910-1996) ]

"If I were to write a novel about the life of 20thC Chinese intellectuals I would call him the 'arch-opportunist'.

He called me an eel

But later had a bad conscience saying he had been the party's watchdog long enough.

Once in recent years he stood up at a copyright meeting and started ranting about the need for democracy."

---

<sup>1</sup>I had given Xiao Qian a copy of my book *Dai Wangshu* which had appeared in October 1989. The optimistic, and discursively heroic, words I'd written were: 'As this book goes to press, China is once more in turmoil. The limited and fragile intellectual freedoms and human rights that China has enjoyed since the end of the Cultural Revolution have been suppressed. And yet ultimately the voice of the people, like the voice of the poet cannot be silenced indefinitely. As Dai Wangshu wrote in 'New Year blessing' during a previous period of adversity:

*Staunch people, brave people,  
Tribulation will bring freedom and liberation.*

The common decency that Dai Wangshu stood for all his life, a decency inherent in the Chinese people, will surely triumph.

---

*Note dated 5 May, written after I visited the poet Mang Ke 芒克 in his Beijing flat during the night of 4-5 May 1990:*

At school, same class, with Maotou.<sup>2</sup> Chadui with Maotou.<sup>3</sup>

---

Scathing about opportunistic, self-promoting poets.

---

[Writing] Novel. New volume of poetry.

---

*Notes made in Shanghai, dated 7 May, of comments made by Shi Zhecun 施蛰存 (1905-2003)*

SZC 7/5

People in Peking don't want to say if their offspring were lost at the Square for fear of being labelled a counter-revolutionary household.

---

Only a little better than in 50s/60s.

---

No good government is possible here.

---

Traditional pattern: clampdown then slacken off gradually for next three years, then clampdown again.

---

7 May '90

书林 [杂志 literary magazine]

Shulin told to stop publication in March and not give reasons and not publicize the fact. Wenhui yuekan [文汇月刊] told to stop in June.

---

Huadong [华东师范大学 East China Normal University] — three grabbed, not yet out.

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<sup>2</sup>猫头: literally 'cat head' was a playful sobriquet for the poet Duo Duo 多多 alluding to his prematurely greying hair.

<sup>3</sup>插队: an obligatory stint for urban youth in a rural production team during the Cultural Revolution.

LZF<sup>4</sup> was asked to go back.

---

Those over 70 have nothing to fear.

---

*Notes/impressions of Shanghai 7 May 1990*

SHANGHAI

7 May

American and British music including George Michael and Phil Collins is popular with disco-goers, but Taiwan and Hong Kong popular music is the general favourite. The most popular is Zhang Xueyou [張學友 Jacky Cheung] — a Hong Kong-based singer whose music is widely available here — COVER VERSION OF “NIGHTS IN WHITE SATIN” [昨夜夢魂中 1988. ] Meanwhile the same young people (in their early 20s) who enjoy Phil Collins also get to see semi-officially released Western films. While I was in Shanghai Rainman had just been screened for the privileged few and My Beautiful Launderette seemed a favourite. Meanwhile the award-winning Chinese film director Chen Kaige had decided to return to China.

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*Hong Kong, 9 May 1990: Interviews with academics*

INTERVIEWS [Hong Kong, 9.05.1990]

廉維叶  
Wai-Lim Yip\*

YA XI

也斯/ 梁秉鈞

PhD San Diego  
5777506

Wednesday  
afternoon ? near HKU

[\* I noted down Wai-Lim Yip's name since he'd been P.K. Leung's PhD advisor at San Diego]

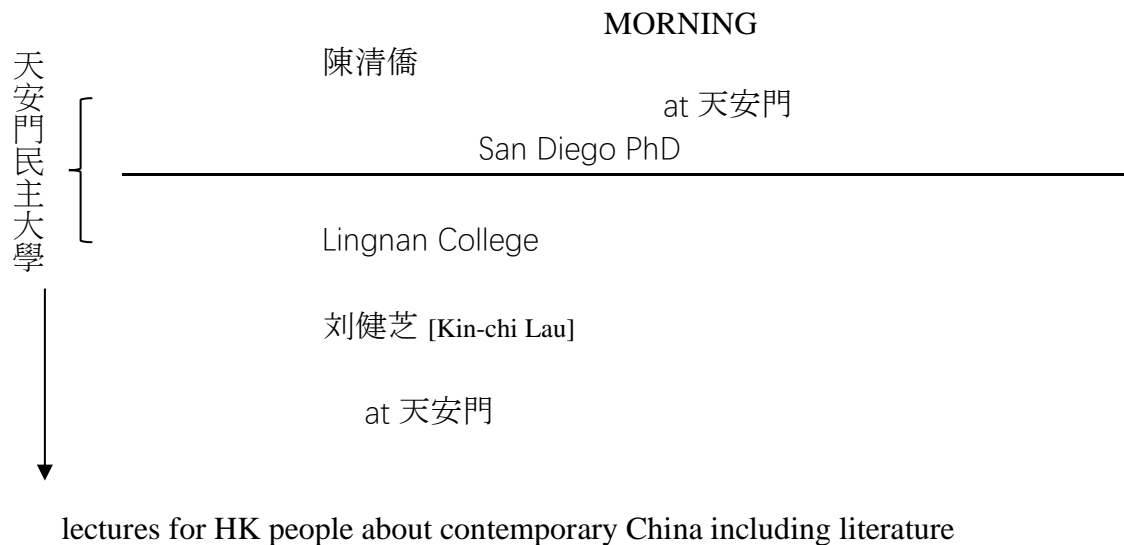
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Stephen Chan

Wed

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<sup>4</sup> Liu Zaifu 刘再复, Director, Institute of Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences supported students at Tiananmen and had taken refuge in the USA.]



*Notes, dated 9 May 1990, taken while interviewing poet Ya Xi 也斯/P. K. Leung 梁秉鈞 at Hong Kong University; includes details of detentions of mainland Chinese literary figures:*

#### YA XI'S INFORMATION HK 9.5.90

##### Arrests in March

四川 成都 [Chengdu, Sichuan]

周倫佑 [Zhou Lunyou]

↓ 島子 [Daozi]

↓  
Illegal publishing – sentenced to 3 years

11 seized last month (i.e. APRIL)

for staging a poetry reading event – distributing [poetry] broadsheet

Shanghai — a well-known lit theorist seized

— And a poet

Beginning of the year 宋琳 [Song Lin b. 1959]

李劫 [Li Jie b. 1955]

Poet and teacher at East China Normal University

*Notes for a BBC Radio Times magazine article to promote the programme. They were written after my visit to Beijing and Hong Kong in the first half of the month of May 1990.*

[ ? 10-11 May 1990]

Radio Times

While Eastern Europe has seen democratic rights and intellectuals' freedoms flourish over the past year, China has taken a huge step back. Once again, as on so many occasions over the past 40-year history of the People's Republic of China, it is China's intellectuals.

And in particular, her writers and artists who bear the brunt of the political clampdown. Many Chinese writers taking advantage of China's relatively more open policies in the 1980s travelled abroad and found themselves overseas when the 4<sup>th</sup> Massacre took place last year and were able to take sanctuary from what the Chinese poet Duoduo described during the CR [Cultural Revolution] as 'the urgent knocking of red terror'.

Those writers now in exile such as Duoduo and Bei Dao, both interviewed on the programme, suffer from other hardships. They are separated from their culture, their language, their families. The focus of attention last summer, they are now finding survival difficult both materially and creatively. But for those exiled within their small soulless flats in Peking, there is only the comfort of

Writing alone in an atmosphere of apprehension and uncertainty that China's Communist system creates, with the hope of one day seeing their work being published. The writers I spoke to were convinced that the truth about the political repression and the massacre in Peking would one day be told.

And people are writing.

The old writers in their memoirs recount their experience of 40 years of Communist rule and the deceptions and disillusionment that they have lived through. Meanwhile, the younger less well-known writers who took up their pens after 4<sup>th</sup> June find themselves the most in danger.

In Sichuan 11 poets were recently detained for organizing and attending a poetry recital. In Shanghai, today a vibrant, colourful city with a thriving, fashion-conscious popular material culture, a poet and a literary critic were picked up by authorities earlier this year and their fate is as yet unknown.

~~Those writers who are safely outside China are trying their best to keep Chinese creativity alive~~

In Hong Kong, writers and academics try to keep track of such occurrences and publicize them, knowing such Communist literary policies may apply to them in 7 short years when the British colony finally reverts to China. Sadly, the impact of Peking's cultural and political policies is already being felt, with a number of literary personalities and academics unwilling to talk and be named on the programme for fear of future reprisals.

But what of the future of Chinese writing? Can the "boom" that occurred after the death of Mao in 1976, be resuscitated? Can China's fledgling contemporary literature flourish in exile? Only time will tell. But I am convinced that those who remain are drawing on an inner creative strength which will produce a powerful literature when it finally emerges.

In China, I asked one prominent writer [the poet Mang Ke] what he thought of his fellow-writers exiled abroad.

~~The reply: "Give them my regards". There was some irony in his remark. While resenting the~~

~~While resenting what he saw as the unwarranted fame achieved abroad by a number of contemporary writers by a few, he also pitied the exiles. "As a writer," he said, "how can you be separated from your native soil?"~~



~~He has embarked on a~~

He remains indoors day and night and writes his novel. Perhaps the novel that will finally lay to rest the ghosts of the Cultural Revolution and the Maoist legacy. Did he have any message for his exiled fellow-writers? “Give them my regards,” he replied.

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