Prologue: Chinese Overseas Writers and Nativism[1]

Chen Ruoxi

Definition of "Chinese Overseas Writer"

I first came across the term *overseas writer* in 1975 when *China News Supplement* (*Zhongguo shibao fukan*) editor-in-chief, Gao Xinjiang, invited me to submit a manuscript. He sent me a bundle of blank manuscript sheets with the words *Overseas Column* (*Haiwai zhuanlan*) printed on the top. As it turned out, he was labeling all writers living outside of Taiwan and mainland China "overseas writers" and even publishing our works in a separate column of the supplement. The only exception he afforded me was the double status of being both a Taiwanese writer and an "overseas writer."

At first, I looked askance at this term *overseas writer*. Always adhering to the principle "Born a Chinese person, die a Chinese ghost," I have never veered from the intention to write in Chinese, about Chinese people, and for Chinese readers. Understandably, I was quite dismayed at being categorized as an outsider from "over" the China "Sea" when my native Taiwan lay nestled well within the confines of that bit of ocean. Nonetheless, as time passed, I began to reconsider the practical value and objective reality of the notion of the term *overseas writer* and gradually made peace with the idea.

At the beginning of the eighties, the Hong Kong Joint Publishing Company introduced a book series entitled *Overseas Literary Collections*,[2] to which I gladly added my novels.[3] Over the past two years, the terms *overseas writers* and *overseas literary collections* have cropped up on the mainland with increasing frequency, sometimes appearing beside "Taiwan-Hong Kong Writers" and sometimes including the latter

category. In 1987, I and several other women writers founded the Overseas Chinese Women Writers Friendship Association.[4] At that time, the definition I put forth for *overseas* was "any area outside of the Chinese territories." To my knowledge, this criterion has yet to encounter any objection, and is perhaps at present the most widely accepted definition of the term.

The Current Profusion of What Has Long Existed

The term *overseas writer*, though it is often considered a phenomenon of the seventies, can be traced back to the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. According to historical documents, there were two literati during the late Ming dynasty, Zhu Shunshui and Chen Yuandai, who fled to Japan and left their mark on the field of poetry there. When Japan invaded China in the late 1930s, many writers fled to Southeast Asia. They were active in literary circles in Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong. Some, such as Yu Dafu, were even buried in foreign countries.

At that time, the term *exiled writers* (*liuwang zuojia*) was more commonly used. This was probably attributable to the refugee status of many of the writers and the inevitable sense that this was a transitory phenomenon.

After World War II, China's civil war began, and soon there was a face-off across the straits. Following these events, the number of overseas writers outside both the mainland and Taiwan skyrocketed. By the early seventies, they had scattered around the globe, and there was no faraway place they could not be found. However, the largest concentration relocated on the American continent, with the United States serving as the main base. Most, of course, came from Taiwan, but among them were many who originally came from the mainland. These writers, already long renowned, continued to use Taiwan as their center for publication and were active in Taiwan's literary circles, sometimes even bringing about a situation in which the guests were playing host to the hosts. Thus, a decade ago, Taiwan's two main newspaper supplements were accused by native writers of having "become overseas writers' territorial holdings."

Unlike writers banished from the Soviet Union, the majority of these writers were not prohibited from returning to their homeland, nor did they suffer from political oppression there. Their decision was akin to that of many Taiwanese students who choose to study abroad. In a country rife with troubles and unpredictable changes in govern-

ment, many who leave the country to further their studies often stay abroad, contributing to what is commonly known as "brain drain" (*xueliu*).[5] The impetus for settling down in one of the European countries, the United States, or Canada is primarily the attraction of material prosperity and democratic freedom.

Today, the number of overseas writers is still growing. The end of the seventies marked the end of a decade of political upheavals in mainland China. As the Cultural Revolution's isolationist mentality began to crumble, a new openness to the outside world developed. Since then, the tide of emigration and overseas study has risen steadily. On the heels of such a great exodus of talent, many literary figures decided to settle overseas as well, and it is anticipated that those numbers will continue to swell by the day.

To adapt to their new environment, the majority of people who migrate overseas adjust their ambitions, giving up their ideals and changing careers. However, of the writers who settled down overseas permanently, most refused to adjust in this way. Though they had to take menial jobs in order to survive, they persisted in writing, and it became their greatest emotional outlet. In one incident, over thirty years ago, an overseas science student committed suicide because of his inability to adjust to his new environment in the United States. This kind of thing has happened frequently; yet among writers there has not been a single known case reported. Writing, it would appear, is a great pacifier of the psyche.

Many overseas Chinese intellectuals do, however, share an internalized psychological conflict. Although they do not wish to grow old and die in a foreign country, they are still unable to tear themselves away from their current situation. This is known as the "Chinese emotional knot." Typically very lonely people, they often compare themselves to travelers or wanderers, feeling isolated to the extent that after gaining citizenship in their host country they still hold on to a "resident visitor" mentality. Because of their traditional homeland-centered attitude, no matter how good things are for them, they still feel, "I know it's beautiful here, but it's not my home." Chinese people are eternally entangled, heart and soul, in their place of origin. Homesickness is as old as the sky and as enduring as the earth.

Overseas writers do not enjoy these feelings of loneliness. They are fortunate in that, with a flick of a pen, they can transform the deepest homesickness into an essay and send it back to their homeland to be published. Homesickness thus evolves into a cornucopia of

creative works, with even the process of submitting the manuscripts serving as a tenuous maintenance of ties with their homeland.

Not only do their works form a special category in their homeland, but their usefulness is unique as well. For example, during the seventies, a large number of overseas students were just beginning to return to Taiwan. Some of them returned to temporary teaching positions; others settled down there permanently. Long before this tumultuous wave began, overseas writers had already assumed a responsibility that overseas students should have shouldered but never did. Both directly and indirectly, they introduced American and European ideas to Taiwan through their literature. From the May Fourth Movement on, these writers played the role of transmitters of Western learning to the East. The use of their literature as a bridge between East and West is one of the many reasons their works have been so successful and lasting in the homeland.

Overseas writers enjoyed another run of good fortune after the mainland opened its doors. By virtue of their third-country citizenship, they were permitted to shuttle back and forth freely between the straits. Their impressions shone through their writing, and as their literature was published in both China and abroad, their works took on a mediating function. In this age of political division in China, it is apparent how useful these writers have been as a bridge between poetics and the reader.

We cannot emphasize enough the function these works have served in discourse and mediation. In China, freedom of speech is a right the people are still fighting to attain. There is a saying, "Foreign monks love to chant verses." A greater amount of government criticism will be accepted or endured by the government if it comes from the pens of overseas writers. There has been a steady stream of Chinese writers serving time in prison for their works.[6] Overseas writers serving prison terms, however, are a rarity. The main reason, of course, is that they hold foreign passports. Overseas writers often hear such accusatory gibes as "clinging to the West for self-respect" or "The moon is rounder overseas." However, in that moment when the cell door is shut, the public outcry and moral support overseas writers are able to generate make up for much of the perception that they have deserted their colleagues at home.

This unique function, taken on by an innumerable throng of overseas writers, has no precedent in Chinese history or in the history of the world. It is no wonder that, in the seventies, the editors-in-chief of Taiwan's literary supplements finally settled on the title *Overseas Writers* (*Haiwai zuojia*).

What Is Nativism?

For a writer to be called an "overseas writer" requires more than mere geographical separation from Taiwan or the mainland. It also involves a feeling of separation in the psyche. Yet the reason overseas writers can be grouped together and are able to fill a single place in two separate literary scenes is that their works all share certain special characteristics. They all revolve around China, Chinese people, and Chinese things. Likewise, the contents of their works are often very similar to those written by native writers. Because it has this Chinese nativistic character, many people consider overseas Chinese literature to be peripheral Chinese literature. Some flatly assert that overseas literature, as well as the much-ballyhooed "Taiwanese literature" of recent years, is all an integral part of Chinese literature.

No matter how future history draws the lines, overseas and native Chinese literature are thoroughly intertwined. It would not be exaggerating to say that the connection is one of flesh and blood. It was the possibility of popular exposure in the land of their heritage, where everything from printing to publication was available, that gave overseas writers a conducive environment in which to write in the first place. The greatest concentration of overseas writers, for example, exists in the United States and includes many well-known Chinese writers. Yet, of all their Chinese works, virtually none have been published in the United States.

If nativism is the essence of overseas literature, then what exactly does nativism really consist of? How does one carry on nativism? This has become a point of great contention among writers. In the mid-eighties, the *China News* (*Zhongbao*) invited a number of representative Chinese-American writers to attend a conference in New York entitled "The Nativism of Chinese Overseas Writers."[7] Though the participants talked up a storm without reaching any definitive conclusion, their discussions clearly demonstrated the importance of nativism abroad.

Homeward Longings

It is my belief that nativism comes part and parcel with an overseas writer's motivation to write. Why do people write? The answers writers give are often eloquent and lofty. In 1985, the French magazine *Liberté* took an international survey of four hundred writers to ask why they write. Some comments were "Because I like it," "So I don't die, to survive," and "For human liberty, and to fight inequality, corruption, poverty, and ignorance."

When I received a phone call for the survey, I likewise gave a very proper reason. Thinking about it afterwards, though, my reasons for writing are really very primitive. Quite simply, it is impossible for me not to write. If I refrain from writing, I just don't feel right.

Early in my college career, one of my professors took an informal survey of our class. It turned out that a large number of the manuscripts students submitted were done to earn money. Some were done in hopes of critical acclaim or to satisfy the desire to be published. Very few harbored any sense of mission to mirror reality, recreate society, or other such things. This is not to say that overseas writers do not have these motivations for writing; however, I do not believe that they are the primary reasons.

My son used to think that having a writer for a mom was really something to be proud of. One day he asked me, for all the time I spend hunched over working at my desk, how much money did I earn? Once he found out that for a whole day of climbing shelves I earned about as much, on average, as a manual laborer makes in an hour, he couldn't contain his disbelief and howled, "Mama! Are you crazy? If I were you, I'd rather die than be a writer!"

Aside from Chinese writers, even American-born writers have to have an insane determination to attempt taking up writing as a profession. According to a report published in an English-language newspaper a few years ago, the average writer's annual income in the United States was $5,000, less than the poverty line. For many writers, it is essential to take a second job just to survive.

This situation is very much like that in Taiwan. Writers by profession, who live solely on their writing income, only started to surface some ten years ago. Now professional writers are gradually growing into a significant group. However, the Chinese mainland is another matter entirely. There professional writers work for a fixed salary. They have writers' relief organizations to take care of their basic needs. They belong to a privileged class; if they go several years without producing any work, they still get to keep their jobs, as always. Apart from the problem of political movements, the treatment of Chinese writers makes one immensely envious.[8]

Things are different for writers overseas. Overseas Chinese writers all have amateur status. Although they live in what people believe to be the land of plenty, the United States, and although the number of Chinese-language publications here is exceeded only by China and Hong Kong, the knowledge that publishing is a losing enterprise here has so far kept any class of professional Chinese writers from developing. Certainly, there are a few unusual cases of writers living off their

writing income, but often they have to write insincere political commentaries under assumed names, submitting their manuscripts to publications who receive financial support from unspecified sources.

Overseas writers here are a minority: few in number, small in voice. Overseas writers do not fantasize that their works will stir up political reform in the homeland. They hardly envision themselves on such a mission. Some writers with a burning social consciousness often eye improving overseas Chinese communities, admonishing them for being rootless drifters, and calling for a greater struggle toward political power and achievement. These kinds of writers are few.

To my knowledge, most people write because they cannot help it. They write to console the homeward longings in their own bosom. People always have feelings for the place where they grew up, and once they leave, they begin to miss it. These feelings can be heavy or light, sometimes hidden and sometimes expressed, but they are always revealed sooner or later. Literary types are sentimental, and when it comes to their hometown and homeland, their thoughts and feelings cut even more deeply. Their feelings become so intense that it is like carrying a "profound regret that lingers unceasingly." Many writers spend the first two years overseas writing about the old days they miss, and then move on to comparing the new land with the old. However, this "old" never gets cut away and left behind. Simply stated, without homeward longing, there would be no overseas literature. It is the very essence of nativism.

Nativism as the Mark of Culture

There are some writers who write in a foreign language but whose works cannot take leave of the people and affairs of China. For example, Lin Yutang wrote a series of expository writings in English contained in *My Country and My People* (1935) that are widely recognized as a great contribution to the dissemination of Chinese culture.[9] There is also Chiang Yee, who wrote the travel journal *The Silent Traveler in San Francisco* (1964), also in English.[10] These volumes of writing drew much attention among English readers, helping the Western world understand Chinese culture and the Chinese peoples' philosophy of life. Cultural essentialism was thus merely a different form of nativism in these works.

Chinese people who are born and raised overseas are also deeply influenced by Chinese culture. Many writers do not realize this, and often proudly proclaim that they are free of "homeward longing" and don't need to carry the cross of four thousand years of Chinese history

on their backs. They embrace the land of their birth and upbringing, describe life in that country, write in that country's language, and participate in that country's literary circles. To put it briefly, they will have nothing to do with Chinese literature. However, in reality, though they may not be seeking their roots, they cannot cut the umbilical cord of culture. In the seventies, Maxine Hong Kingston rose up into the American literary scene, writing novels depicting the experiences of the older generation of Chinese-Americans. The mark of Chinese culture in her work remains its distinguishing characteristic.

If we examine the reasons foreign-born overseas writers rise in the American literary scene, it is not hard to see that, besides their abilities with the language and the literary craft, what draws people to them the most are the Chinese elements in their work. Jewish writers, born and raised in the United States, are even more this way. The Jewish writer and Nobel laureate Saul Bellow wrote almost every one of his stories about Jews living in America. Japan is also no exception. Chen Shunchen, a best-selling writer on the Japanese market who is of Taiwanese descent, made a special point to travel to the Chinese mainland in search of writing material.

It should be pointed out that culture emerges in literary works in many ways. Honorable traditions have never been able to compete with strange customs for drawing people's attention and interest. For example, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* decried the feudal backwardness of old China's marriage traditions. During the fifties, the novel *Flower Drum Song* by K. Y. Lee achieved popularity for a while. Their works usually centered on the themes of conservatism, the generation gap, and life in Chinatown.[11] There are also many other works that touch upon erotic fetishes for hairstyles, bound feet, concubines, and others. One can imagine why, based upon the traditional notion that "foul odors in the family are not to be fanned outside," these writers have received a great deal of censure. Fortunately, on the heels of China's progress and rise in stature, this sort of shameful portrayal is becoming much less common.

The Evolution of Nativism: New Land and Homeland

Since nativism is intimately involved with the creative work of writers, the relative strengths and weaknesses of nativism take on great significance for their work. Homeward longing is the impetus for writing, but as the original departure from village and country recedes day by day into the distant past, memories inevitably fade. A person cannot live in the past; a writer, especially not.

A writer is most at home writing about familiar people and things. Overseas writers, having chosen a new land and settled down there permanently, inevitably develop feelings for the place as time passes and gradually become familiar with their surroundings. Through this process, nativism expands to take on a double meaning, one for the new land and one for the old.

For example, as the duration of overseas Chinese writers' residence in the United States grows, they turn increasingly to the sensations and conditions of Chinese-American society for their basic material. Some writers keep their emphasis on the Chinese mainland or Taiwan; some describe both sides of the Pacific, flying back and forth like space people. In the end, though, the proportioning of the material is just a way of giving order to the fusion of the new and old land.

Being an overseas writer has its advantages and disadvantages. Living abroad, one's field of vision is wider and one has greater freedom of expression. This no one denies. However, after leaving the homeland far behind, one cannot help but feel estranged from it after a while. Even if one maintains intimate connections with the homeland and returns to visit regularly, one's life still necessarily draws farther and farther apart from it. A common sentiment shared by many overseas writers is that, as this gulf widens, they feel they are rendered helpless, futilely reaching for something that is lost or disappearing.

Since the release and publication of their literary works often take place in the homeland, overseas writers have yet another difficult bottleneck to break through. The billion or more people on both sides of the straits have a limited appetite for literature that describes the life of Chinese abroad. Curiosities from strange lands can always draw big crowds, and such things will probably always have a market. However, ultimately their contents depart from reality and lose the cutting edge of realism, so people cannot easily relate or sympathize with them. Overseas literature has never lacked in quantity, but it has also never exactly been the mainstream on either side of the straits. It is because of these particular circumstances that only in the last twenty years has terminology like "literature of Chinese students overseas" (*liuxuesheng wenxue*), "literature of the wanderers" (*youzi wenxue*), or finally "overseas literature" (*haiwai wenxue*) come into current use.

These drawbacks have not caused overseas writers to falter. Not only have the numbers of overseas writers not fallen, but they have actually continued to rise. Considering the peculiar muddled nature of Chinese history and politics, I feel that we can now anticipate a long period in which overseas writers will continue to flourish, and those

writers will maintain their function as both voices of public opinion and bridges between the divided camps.

Overseas writers should feel optimistic, and even pleased with themselves. It is common knowledge that literature is the study of people. Writers may live in different regions or in completely disconnected realms, but the focus of all literature remains people. One need only write well of people, and people will be moved and affected by one's work. Literature that breathes life within its lines to Chinese people residing on all corners of the globe is Chinese literature. Thus, "Chinese overseas literature" is, I believe, simply Chinese literature itself.

Notes

1. "Chinese Overseas Writers and Nativism" ("Haiwai zuojia he bentuxing") was translated by Hsin-sheng C. Kao with the permission of the author and publisher, and is published here in English for the first time. The original appeared in *Hong Kong wenxue* (September 1988): 18–21. All notes listed hereafter are provided by the translator.

2. This collection contains over forty publications, including anthologies of fiction, poetry, and prose, as well as many individual works. Writers included are Cau Youfang, Chen Ruoxi, Cong Shu, Fei Ma, Guo Songfen, Lan Ling, Li Li, Li Oufan, Liu Shaoming, Ma Lingshi, Nie Hualing, Qian Ge, Qin Song, Shi Shuqing, Shui Jing, Wang Yu, Liu Daran, Ye Weilian, Ye Zi, Yi Li, Yu Lihua, Yu Liqing, Yuan Zenan, Zhang Cuo, Zhao Shuxia, Zheng Chouyu, Zhuang Yin, and others.

3. This refers to her three novels: *Tuwei* (*Breaking Out,* 1983), *Er Hu* (*The Two Hus,* 1986), and *Zhihun* (*Paper Marriage,* 1987).

4. In July of 1989, Chen Ruoxi and her colleagues expanded this association and founded an international organization called "International Chinese Women Writers Overseas Organization." Chen was the first president (1989–91) of this organization, and Yu Lihua is currently the president (1991–1993).

5. Literally meaning "learn to stay abroad," Chen is referring to the many overseas Chinese who try to find any legal way to stay in this adopted new land rather than return to China.

6. This refers to Taiwanese writers who were opponents of the Guomindang. Writers such as Chen Yingzhen, Wang Tuo, and Yang Qingshu were arrested in 1979.

7. This refers to the symposium entitled "The Nativism of Chinese Overseas Writers," sponsored by *Zhongbao* (*China News*), on December 16, 1985, in New York. The participants included Chen Ruoxi, Cong Shu, Hong Mingshui, Li Yu, Tang Degang, Yang Mu, Zhang Cuo, and Zhang Xiguo. Chen's speech was called "Gutu yu xintu" ("Homeland and New Land").

8. In reference to Chinese writers' livelihood, professional salaries, and manuscript payments from 1949 to the 1980s, see Perry Link, *Roses and Thorns: The Second Blooming of the Hundred Flowers in Chinese Fiction, 1979–80* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 25–29.

9. Lin Yutang (1895–1976), the son of a Presbyterian minister, earned himself a M.A. from Harvard (1920) and a Ph.D. from the University of Leipzig (1923). During the 1930s and 1940s, he was regarded as the most prominent and prolific Chinese writer in the United States. He was the author of more than fifty books with a wide range of subject matter, including novels, essays, translations, and biographies.

10. Chiang Yee was both a painter and a writer. Besides *The Silent Traveler in San Francisco* (1964), he also wrote *The Silent Traveler in Lakeland* (1937).

11. For a comprehensive analysis of Chinese-American writers and their works, especially works about the older-generation Chinese-Americans in Chinatown, see Liu Shaoming's "Tangrenjie de xiaoshuo shijie" ("The Fictional World of Chinatown"), in his *Shangdi, muqin, airen* (*God, Mother, and the Beloved*) (Taipei: Siji, 1981), pp. 97–121.