



CULTURAL
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LIM HUNG CHANG (LIN GAO)

Lim Hung Chang (Lin Gao) (b. 1949) was educated at National Taiwan University and Huazhong Normal University in Wuhan, China. Today, he is a leading figure in the promotion of Chinese literary culture in Singapore.

Lim explores themes such as the state of contemporary society and the enigma of human nature. His varied writings testify to his versatility. His short stories in *The Caged Heart* (1997) contemplate the disorientation which mankind experiences in the modern world. In a series of creative essays collected in *Lin Gao: A Selection of Works* (2009), he meditates on the source of humanity. More recently, Lim's critique of Singaporean poetry in *Poetic Encounters by Lin Gao* (2015) provided greater insight into his perspective on the past, humanity, and self-realisation.

Lim's contributions to Chinese Literature extend beyond his writings. Besides co-editing a short story quarterly from 1992 to 1996, he served as Chief Editor of two magazines devoted to children's literature, *Firefly and Lark*, from 1997 to 1999. He also initiated the publication of the literary magazine *Afterwards* with a group of young writers. These magazines were published by the Singapore Association of Writers, for which Lim served on the Executive Committee from 1992 to 1998, and as Vice-President from 1998 to 2000.

Lim shares his expertise as a writer and his belief in the value of Chinese Literature generously with the wider community. From 2006 to 2008, his literary commentaries were published in the monthly column *Saleable Attractions* in *Lianhe Zaobao*. Since 2012, his column *Literature Highlights*, which recommends micro-fiction and flash fiction by local writers, has been featured in *Yuan*, a magazine published by the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations. In conjunction with the Golden Point Award 2013, Lim led a Chinese short story writing workshop, which was part of a series of sessions organised by the National Arts Council (NAC) and National Book Development Council of Singapore for budding creative writers. More recently, Lim was a speaker in Words Go Round 2015, a programme which brings writers into schools to interact with students and teachers in the lead-up to the Singapore Writers Festival.

Lim was the recipient of a residency award jointly offered by the NAC and the Toji Cultural Foundation in Korea in 2013. In 2014, he was awarded the Singapore Literature Prize in the Fiction category for *Lin Gao Wei Xing Xiao Shuo*.



Lim Hung Chang (Lin Gao): An Exceptional Literary Marathoner

By Dr Tan Chee Lay

**Writing is
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If Lim Hung Chang were to be characterised as the literary equivalent of a marathoner, then one might say that he belongs to that exceptional class of athletes whose pace only quickens the further they run.

However, Lim would be the last person to depict himself in these terms. He prefers to describe himself rather self-deprecatingly as someone who started late at different stages in his life. He entered and graduated from primary school later than other children his age; and when he attended university at the age of thirty-two, he was the oldest in his class. In his academic life he would say that he was a late bloomer. Furthermore, his first book, *The Man With No Reflection* (1974), was published when he was twenty-five years old: a somewhat delayed entry into the literary world by contemporary standards perhaps, given the growing number of teenage authors in recent years.

This seemingly perennial sense of things being delayed might have been taken to forebode the immense exertion which Lim would have to invest in order to keep up with others. However, Lim does not give the impression that he has been in any hurry, or that he has been grappling with any frustration. Instead he has been quite content to make progress at his own rhythm and



Photo courtesy of Lim Hung Chang (Lin Gao)

pace, taking big strides along his chosen path with leisurely steps. Members of the contemporary literary world can sometimes seem preoccupied with making haste to achieve fame at an early age. In contrast, Lim has sought to pave his literary path at a slower, more composed, and more deliberate pace, in the interest of sustaining the longevity of his literary career and shaping the complexion of that career in a way that is truly unique.

As a student at Kong Yiong High School, Lim was awarded Second Prize in a national essay-writing competition organised by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Subsequently, at Dunman High School, he served as Chief Editor of the literary magazine *Yi Lin*. Despite these early forays into literary activity, Lim maintains with characteristic modesty that he had virtually no literary proficiency when he was younger.

After releasing *The Man With No Reflection* (1974) and *Pao Zuan Ji* (1978) in his early years as a teacher, Lim invested thirteen years in diligent literary study and reflection. His approach to learning during this important period could be characterised in a number of ways: he was, simultaneously, like a child learning to walk, an ascetic monk trekking a difficult path to enlightenment, a readily absorbent sponge, and steadily fermenting wine. In a nutshell, learning virtually became a process of storing up cultural and intellectual reserves, for Lim sought to deepen his understanding of literature, culture, and the nature of human life before embarking on literary projects again. Part of those thirteen years was spent studying at the Chinese Department of National Taiwan University, during which time Lim was disciplined enough to restrain the impulse to return to creative writing while he still felt that there was more learning yet to do. He chose instead to spend this golden period of scholarship focusing on his intellectual growth, almost reverently studying classic works of Chinese poetry, and allowing himself to become engrossed in Eastern philosophy, particularly the thoughts of Laozi, Zhuangzi and Confucius. Such perseverance in and dedication to his intellectual pursuits were precisely the qualities which enabled Lim to keep a firm footing and go the distance, despite starting his literary marathon late.



Photo courtesy of Lim Hung Chang (Lin Gao)



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Poetic Encounters by Lin Gao (2015)



Micro-Fiction by Lin Gao (2013)

It was not until the 1990s, which saw a period of remarkable prolificacy, that the literary world came to enjoy the fruits of those thirteen years of scholarship and reflection. Many of Lim's well-known works were successively published during this time: *The Cat's Fate* (1991), *To The Hills* (1992), *Lin Gao Wen Ji* (1995), *The Caged Heart* (1997), *The Feeling of Being Chased* (2000), *Life is Made of Numbers* (2003), *Lin Gao Juan* (2009), *Reading By The Window* (2012), *Pin Du* (2013), *Shang Du* (Volumes 1 and 2) (2014), the children's picture book *Has The Lizard Gone Home?* (2013), *Lin Gao Wei Xing Xiao Shuo* (2013), and *Poetic Encounters by Lin Gao* (2015). In the twenty years which have passed since the 1990s, Lim has been able to publish more than a dozen literary collections. Not only do the quantity and range of his literary output testify to his creative prowess, they also provide strong evidence of his stamina on this literary marathon.

His prolificacy has only been matched by the diversity of literary modes he has employed. His formal versatility as a writer is evidenced by the level of comfort with which he negotiates anything from book-length fiction, short stories, and creative essays to children's literature and poetic criticism. He has also explored different themes in his writing: from more personal experiences of life at school, in marriage, and with his family in the earlier days of his career, to broader themes concerning human civilisation, society, current affairs, and the profound existential issues which mankind faces. In terms of literary style, Lin has been a shape-shifter as well, moving from the linear narratives of his earlier works to more challenging storytelling approaches involving flashbacks, digressions, stream-of-consciousness narration, and other experimental methods. There has been a palpable evolution in tone as well from the realism of his early writings to the grim humour and acerbity of more recent works. Whatever the turn this intrepid writer has taken on his literary path, he has persuaded his readers to follow quite happily.

One thing which certainly has not changed about Lim is his sincere interest in self-examination. For him, writing is a way of mining the deepest recesses of the human heart. Literary critic Shi Ming captured the distinguishing quality of Lim's work even more precisely and perceptively when he described it as writing which 'has as its foundation the existential cares and struggles of humankind, consists of images and illusions which reflect life like a mirror, and achieves an utterly composed form of poetic narration'. For Lim, who counts the literary classic *Dream of the Red Chamber* among his favourite books, literature is, fundamentally, the study of humankind.

In addition to the fact that his powers of literary creation have strengthened and deepened over the years, Lim has long been quietly carrying out the work of sowing literary seeds. He served on the Executive Committee of the Singapore Association of Writers from 1992 to 1998, and as Vice President from 1998 to 2000. Today he remains an Honorary Member of the association's Executive Committee, in addition to being the Director of the Singapore branch of the International Short Story Research Federation. He has mentored many eager students in Chinese creative writing, and has been the Writer-in-Residence in many schools. Over the past number of decades, Lim has emerged as a leading figure in the promotion of Chinese literary culture in Singapore. He has served enthusiastically as the editor of literary publications, including a short story quarterly which was highly popular in the 1990s, and two magazines devoted to children's literature, *Firefly* and *Lark*. He also initiated the publication of the literary magazine *Afterwards* with a group of young writers. Not only has he been involved in a variety of literary ventures, he has also been tireless in his efforts to nurture the next generation of writers.

Though now a retiree past the age of sixty, Lim continues to plough on assiduously along the long literary path he began paving many years ago and continues to outdo himself. He was the recipient of a residency jointly offered by the NAC and the Toji Cultural Foundation in Korea in 2013. In 2014, he was awarded the Singapore Literature Prize in the Fiction category for *Lin Gao Wei Xing Xiao Shuo*. His plans for the future include building up Singapore's repository of literary criticism and analysis, a vital aspect of the local literary landscape in great need of development. To some, Lim may have attained success late in life, but the scale of his achievements has been hearteningly complemented by a generosity of spirit particularly attuned to the needs and potential of Singapore's literary scene.

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About the writer

Dr Tan Chee Lay is the Deputy Executive Director of the Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, Nanyang Technological University.

WORDS OF APPRECIATION

“I receive the Cultural Medallion with much honour and gratitude. I would like to thank the National Arts Council for recognising my efforts in Chinese literature. I would like to thank Dr. Tan Chee Lay for nominating me for this award. I believe that receiving this award will spur me on in my future endeavours, as I feel more driven than ever to build on my current contributions to the arts community.”

I recall my very first teaching experience at Thomson Secondary School in 1981, where I had the pleasure of meeting the late Mr. Zhuang Zhiqiang – the senior school assistant at that time. He strongly recommended me to receive the Public Service Commission Scholarship, under which I had an amazing opportunity to study in National Taiwan University. My stay in Taiwan nurtured my literary expertise and was a major turning point in my writing career.

I would like to thank my teachers, especially the handful I have met in National Taiwan University, for shining a light on and igniting my passion in Chinese literature.

I would also like to thank my friends and my readers for their unwavering support.

To my family: I thank them for understanding the vast amount of time I have invested in reading and writing literature after work. It is my privilege to have their devoted attention to my life and my achievements.”



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