

Professor Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth – Biographical Sketch

Siu Lien Ling Wong Visiting Fellow 2010/2011, Chung Chi College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

"I know not how love grows, but my love is determined and profound." A famous quotation from the immortal masterpiece *The Peony Pavilion* by Tang Xianzu, the Master of Yumingtang, and the most apt summation of the life, imbued with love and sensibility, led by Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth. Professor Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth is a novelist, an essayist, a critic, and a playwright, and has devoted his entire career to creative endeavours in literature. He writes to assert his views, promote culture, and save fast vanishing literary genres from extinction. He is firmly committed to the business that he is about, and nothing less than an absolute perfectionist. Once he has taken up a task, he spares no effort, labouring day and night until its flawless completion materialises. His commitment is, as noted before, determined and profound, and his resolve is unmovable, greatly to the admiration of all who know him.

Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth was born into an illustrious military family in Nanning, Guangxi province, in 1937. His father, the General Pai Chung-hsi, was a soldier of immense renown. General Pai was famous for the stern uprightness of his character and his military distinctions, in particular the triumphs achieved in the Battle at Longtan during the Northern Expedition against the warlords, and at Taierzhuang, a spectacular episode of the Battle of Xuzhou, a major event in the war against Japanese aggression. His mother, Madam Ma Pei-chang, was a woman of extraordinary courage and understanding, most remarkable among ladies of rank in her era. It was under the virtuous and benevolent influence of his parents that Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth grew up: his unswerving firmness of purpose and indefatigable steadfastness would have come from his father, and his passionate love for life and the living he would have inherited from his mother. With such a fine personality in which firmness is tampered by tenderness, and with the gift of a most outstanding intelligence, Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth, dedicated as he was to his studies, had the foundation of his prominent literary career laid early in his life.

In 1946 the war against Japanese aggression was won, and Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth moved to Shanghai with his family. The Pai family had a brief sojourn in Hankou and Guangzhou in 1949, and then settled in Hong Kong. Between 1950 and 1952 he was a pupil first at Kowloon Tong Primary School, and then La Salle College. He moved to Taiwan in 1952, and enrolled at Jianguo High School in Taipei. In 1956 he was admitted into the Department of Hydraulic Engineering at the Cheng Kung University, Taiwan, but his love for literature prompted him to join the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures of Taiwan University in 1957. In 1958 his first novel, *Madame Chin*, was published, and a lifelong, colourful and love-filled pilgrimage in literature commenced.

In the spring of 1960 Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth joined his fellow-students Ouyang Tzu, Wang Wen-hsing and Chen Jo-hsi in founding the magazine *Modern Literature*. The magazine evolved to be the most influential literary journal in Taiwan during the 1960's, and served both catalytic and pioneering functions in the development of Taiwan literature. From that time on, new ground was broken on the Taiwan literary scene which admitted of no specific schools or barriers, but which welcomed with open arms young writers of good literary promise and creative potential. Many of the early works of Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth were published in *Modern Literature*, and most of the great names in the Taiwan literary community that would emerge in subsequent years had some form of association with the magazine. Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth once observed that the founding of *Modern Literature* ranked topmost among his personal literary achievements, and critics rightly recognize him as the "torch-bearer of modern literature."

In 1963 Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth went to the United States to further his studies and entered the Writers' Workshop at University of Iowa. He received his Master's degree in 1965, and then proceeded to the University of California at Santa Barbara to teach Chinese language and literature. He has since made his home there.

The literary cosmos of Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth is magnificent and expansive, and this originated from the influence of classical Chinese literature that he received in his youth, which gave him an acute sensibility for the dream-like transience of life, the unpredictability of human affairs and the fleeting passage of one's youth and prime. His migration from the mainland to Taiwan with his parents made him a first-hand witness of the mutability of affairs of the state, and the displacement of the old order by the new. The sea changes in recent Chinese history had also had tremendous impact on him, and this interacted with the influence of western civilization, after he settled down in the United States, to develop in his psyche a growing, melancholic nostalgia and an anxiety about his native country. With a timeless cosmic vision and a grey-tinted purview of human existence, he began to write *New Yorkers* and *Taipei People*, within an ethos of the integration of the Chinese and the western, and the continuation of the ancient in the modern.

The works of Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth are known for their refined diction and impeccable structure. All characters in his works, whatever their station in life, appear with the greatest vividness and verisimilitude. By deploying the techniques and spirit of modernism, Professor Pai chronicles historical happenings as well as human feelings, providing for the finest delineation as well as the grandest magnificence. Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth possesses great empathy for human feelings, and at the same time he reserves the greatest commiseration for the beauty of life. However, feelings and beauty are both transient, and can be captured only through well-wrought language which gives eternal meaning to the short-lived and the momentary.

The literary creations of Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth are distinguished by a beautiful variety. From *New Yorkers* and *Taipei People* which first earned him literary immortality, to the epic *Crystal Boys*, and the essays *Mo Ran Hui Shou (Suddenly Turning Back)*, *Even Trees Wither* and *The Sixth Finger*, and countless other writings and speeches, we find literature of a very high order that is truly worthy of the highest praise. In addition, his novels have often been adapted for the stage, television, and the cinema, giving diversity and a three-dimensional aspect to his *oeuvre*. His influence has been extensive in Taiwan, on the mainland and in Hong Kong, as well as in other countries in the world. At present there is an ongoing and enthusiastic interest in research on Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth's works. In the past three decades the mainland saw the publication of three books, close to 200 theses and over 10 special chapters in various histories of literature dedicated to the study of Pai's works. In Taiwan there were four books, a collection of critical essays, close to a hundred critiques, and over 40 master and doctoral theses on his literary output. In 2003, Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth's achievements were crowned with the Seventh National Literature Award in Taiwan. The publication of the collected works of Professor Pai has been a thriving industry over the years, and reached its pinnacle in terms of scale and volume in 2008 with the release, by Bookzone Publications in Taiwan, of *The Complete Works of Pai Hsien-yung* – a veritable gathering of the entire family of Pai writings. The works of Professor Pai have, by now, been translated into English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Czech, Dutch, Hebrew, Spanish and Serbo-Croatian.

In 1994 Professor Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth took early retirement from the University of California to devote himself completely to creative activities and cultural promotion, in particular, that of *kunqu* opera. Since his youth, Professor Pai has been deeply charmed by *kunqu*, and on his first return to mainland China, in 1987, after a lapse of 39 years, he was much moved by the fact that *kunqu*, a literary and operatic gem which he believed to have long met its demise, was still in healthy existence. The emotional upsurge soon translated into action, and it became his avowed intent to restore and promote this art form, in which literature, dance and music are integrated into a unique and coherent whole. In 2001, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) declared *kunqu* to be the first Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. This gave fresh impetus to the efforts of Professor Pai to conserve the art form. In 2004, Professor Pai returned to Taiwan to concentrate on the production of the *kunqu* classic, *The Peony Pavilion*. Those who took part in this staging of the great work, whether the cast or the production team, were professionals of the first rate at the time. While he respected the classic, Professor Pai was not confined by its conventions and, through an appropriate and by no means excessive application of modernist techniques, he created *The Young Lovers' Edition of The Peony Pavilion*. The "intimacy and ultimacy" of love in the original were expressed in the fullest terms in this adaptation, and *The Young Lovers' Edition of The Peony Pavilion* has been staged over a hundred times in various parts of mainland China. It made its American debut in 2006, drawing packed audiences and rave reviews. In 2008 the opera was presented in a number of British cities as well as in Athens, all to very high critical acclaim. In 2009 it travelled to Singapore. By this time *The Young Lovers' Edition* has been staged 166 times worldwide and received the highest accolades wherever it went. Its appearance has touched a collective awareness deeply inherent among Chinese people all over the world, and triggered off a cultural nostalgia. At the same time it won the heartfelt appreciation and sincere praise of foreign audiences. Further to the success of *The Peony Pavilion*, Professor Pai is actively engaged in the production of *The Jade Hairpin*, another *kunqu* classic of the Ming Dynasty. Through Professor Pai's sincere and tireless effort, *kunqu* blooms in all its radiant splendour on the world stage.

Professor Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth has maintained a long and fruitful collaboration with The Chinese University of Hong Kong. In 2000, the Chinese-English edition of *Taipei People* was published by the Chinese University Press, and Professor Pai attended the launch and gave a seminar at the University. In the Global Youth Chinese Literary Award for the New Century organised by the Faculty of Arts in 2000, 2003 and 2006, Professor Pai served as an adjudicator for the Fiction Class and gave very encouraging comments to the young participants. A DVD set recording the rehearsals and production details, right up to the 100th performance, of *The Young Lovers' Edition of The Peony Pavilion* was produced by Professor Pai and released in 2007, and the Chinese University was the beneficiary of part of the proceeds from the project.

Throughout his outstanding literary career Professor Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth never sought rest. While he has written masterpieces that are now universally revered as classics, he also demonstrated the foresight of the pioneer and, in his twenties, became the founder of *Modern Literature*, an undertaking that launched nothing less than an entire literary movement. At the age of 30 he produced the stage play *Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream* and initiated an innovative style of dramatic presentation. He soldiered on, having passed his sixtieth year, by taking up the cause of *kunqu*, and the result was the restoration of this prototype of all regional operas in China to its former youth and glory. The sheer will to overcome myriad difficulties, and the selfless dedication he demonstrated in his efforts, have both been extraordinary and beyond the capability of lesser mortals. In recognition of his distinguished achievements in literature, and in the revival and promotion of Chinese culture, The Chinese University of Hong Kong conferred the degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, on Professor Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth, in 2009.

The Biographical Sketch is extracted from the Citation of Professor Pai Hsien-yung, Kenneth, Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, at CUHK Sixty-sixth Congregation for the Conferment of Degrees in 2009. The last paragraph is edited for the adaptation to this newsletter.