

TWENTY-SEVENTH CONGREGATION

Conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Literature honoris causa

A Citation

Mr. Li Fei-kan (Ba Jin)

Exactly eight decades ago, a strong-headed and unusual child was born to an old official's family in Cheng Du in Western China. Growing up in the midst of loving parents and siblings, decadent clansmen, old traditional culture and radical new thoughts, he developed into a fighter against oppression and injustice, with a strong, independent character. He left his disintegrating family at nineteen for studies in Shanghai, and responding to the beckoning of the home of revolution, went abroad to France four years later. By the side of the Pantheon, in the tolls of the Notre Dame and in a squalid apartment in the Latin quarters, he became immersed in the spirit of great writers such as Rousseau, Hugo, Tolstoy and Gorky. Agony, solitude and passion began to rush off his pen, and a life-long career of writing has thus taken root in him.

After returning to Shanghai, he day and night, in an empty room, "forgot himself and forgot all that surrounded him", only feeling "the turbulent stream of life rushing forward", compelling him to write non-stop of the many only too familiar people and events swirling in his head, and to let out the maddening love and hatred, joy and agony pent up inside him. Just like that, within the short span of four to five years, this young man who was not quite thirty published no less than ten novels and novelettes, which enthralled the new generation of intelligentsia and put the contemporary literary circle in a stir. Among these works were Destruction and New Life which were searches for the road to revolution, Autumn in Spring which was an accusation against pre-arranged marriage, and Fog, Rain and Lightning which were on the Trilogy of Love, but the best known and most powerful was his auto-biographical novel Family, which was an attack on the traditional social system. The young man was no other than Ba Jin, a dominant figure on the modern Chinese literary scene and for sixty years the most conscientious author who never gave up on his writing.

The guns of January 28 at Gate North shattered the calm of everyday life, and also brought political pressure. From then on, Ba Jin travelled frequently to Beijing, Tienjin, Guangzhou and Hong Kong, and for the time being he had to channel his energy to short pieces and translation. After full-scale war with Japan broke out on July 7, 1937, he resumed work on novels, completing the last two of the Turbulent Stream Trilogy, Spring and Autumn, and then made his way to the rear area in the South West, where he wrote the War Trilogy Fire. War and travels broadened his view and deepened his thoughts, and he completed three more novels around the time when victory finally came: Leisure Garden, Ward

Number Four and Cold Nights, all of which were written under difficult circumstances, in tea houses in Guiyang, under faint candle-light in a wayward inn in Beipei, using Chinese ink ground on tea cup covers and writing on rough reed paper. All in all Ba Jin produced within two decades no less than twenty novels and novelettes, more than ten volumes of short stories, travels and essays, more than twenty volumes of translated Russian and other foreign works, particularly the novels of Turgenev, which totalled up to more than four million words. Indeed a golden harvest has come of his long toil.

Ba Jin's novels were not only immensely popular but also had an impact on students and the intelligentsia matched by few others. This was not only because of a very direct and highly emotional style of writing, but also because he was writing on the most urgent concern of his readers: their bewildered and anxious search for a way out of crumbling traditional institutions, and their angry protest against a disintegrating social system, the injustice of which was becoming increasingly obvious. Thus his work sprang directly from a search for the meaning of life, and he was striving to be true to his subjects, not just to be artistic. However, there could really be no division between truth and beauty in the final analysis, and perchance that is where the moving power of Family, Leisure Garden and Cold Nights really lies.

Apart from writing, Ba Jin has also made important contributions towards the modern Chinese literary movement through his publication activities. Together with friends he founded the Culture and Life Publishing House in 1934 and served as its chief editor, in which position he saw to press a large number of Western literary works in translation, and discovered and helped along a great many young writers, some of them like Cao Yu, He Qifang and Hiao Qian have long since become renowned in their own right. He also helped to establish the Ping Ming publishing House in 1949 and was active in its work until the mid-fifties.

After the inauguration of New China in 1949, distinction and honour came to Ba Jin: he was elected first a Member and then a Vice-Chairman of the All China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, a Vice-Chairman of the Association of Chinese writers and also a Delegate to the First, the Second and the Third National People's Congresses; he had also been on foreign visits many times as the head of Chinese delegations of writers. In 1957 together with his good friend Jin Yi he founded and edited the bi-monthly Harvest, which soon became the major literary magazine of China. He did not let his pen rest either, and published many volumes of short stories, essays and translated works. Yet it was not easy to turn around "the pen that was used to writing of darkness and agony, to write instead of new people and their deeds, and to sing of the victory and joy of the common people." He did make visits to mines, villages and the troops, in order to gain first-hand experience with workers, peasants and soldiers. But his many capacities and activities made life too busy, and he never felt he had enough time for gaining the intimate experience and insight necessary for dealing with these subjects which were new to him. Thus the pace of his output unavoidably slackened.

Besides, to move forward, China had yet to go down a winding path. The Cultural Revolution brought unprecedented catastrophe to the people of China, and an author of Ba Jin's renown naturally would not be spared the blunt of its impact. He was repeatedly "struggled against", was forced to castigate himself, and to denigrate every single one of his own works and even his own person, was packed off to the ranks of "demons and monsters", imprisoned in "cowsheds", sent down to cadet schools, all that time witnessing the struggling on and falling down by the way side of his friends and relatives, even the one closest to him. But Ba Jin had strength and determination, and he endured those ten seemingly endless years in silence and disgrace without falling down.

He did not merely lived on, but actually rebuilt confidence and regained courage through reflection and soul searching. Soon after the end of the Cultural Revolution, he already had his pen in hand and openly discussed the outrages of those ten years by examining his own record with a critical, unsparring eye and relentlessly analysing what led to the catastrophe. In unmistakable terms he called for courage and determination from everyone to speak the simple truth, to squarely face past wounds and mistakes, and to fight for justice and one's rights. Starting with 1979, his Random Thoughts is being serialized in the newspaper, and by now has also appeared in four published volumes; his Reminiscences of My Works was published in 1981; he is now also able to push forward in earnest the task of translating Herzen's My Past and Thoughts written during the reign of Nicholas I, which he first secretly began in the attic of his house back in 1973. These are words of tear and blood straight from his heart, and they are indeed the cry of the conscience of China which had just taken such a painful lesson. "Audacity, more audacity and always audacity!", so cried the French revolutionary Danton, and these words deeply moved Ba Jin when he was in his twenties. He is now already eighty, but looking back upon the long, hard journey he has made, can one find any better words to sum it up?

Ba Jin has now stood up again. He is the Chairman of the Association of Chinese Writers, a Vice-Chairman of the National Federation of Literary and Art Circles, the Honorary Chairman of the Federation of Literary and Art Circles of Shanghai, a Delegate to the Fifth People's Congress and also a Vice-Chairman of the Fifth People's Political Consultative Conference. Publication of the bimonthly Harvest which he founded was resumed in 1979. His works especially Family and Cold Nights have been translated into many foreign languages, including English, French, German, Italian, Japanese and Russian. He was awarded the Dante International Award by the Dante Alighieri Society of Italy in 1982, and also the Commandeur of Legion d'honneur by President Mitterrand of France in person in 1983. These are but a measure of the honour and respect with which he and his works are now being held in China and abroad. Ba Jin had visited Hong Kong many times during the thirties, and has also stopped over here since the War, so he is no stranger in this port city of the south. It is indeed a great honour for The Chinese University of Hong Kong that he can be present here with us today at this Congregation, and surely the people of Hong Kong do also feel heartened and honoured to have his presence amongst them.

Mr. Chancellor, in recognition of Ba Jin's immense contribution to the modern literary movement of China throughout the past sixty years, in recognition of his moral courage and life-long search for truth, and in recognition of his powerful call upon the Chinese people for improving themselves and keeping up with this rapidly changing age, may I request your Excellency to confer upon Mr. Ba Jin the Degree of Doctor of Literature honoris causa.

October 18, 1984.