

WEN I-TO. By Kai-yu Hsu. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980. 247 pp. Preface, Acknowledgments, Chronology, Notes, References, Selected Bibliography, Index. \$13.95.

This volume is the first full-length biography of Wen I-to in English; and, to date, the most comprehensive and balanced treatment of the poet and scholar in any language. Professor William Schultz, editor of the Chinese Authors series, is to be congratulated for adding it to the Twayne World Authors. One could hardly find a more qualified biographer to introduce Wen I-to to the Western world than Professor K.Y. Hsu (1922-1982), who, like Wen, was himself a poet, artist, scholar and interpreter of Chinese culture. Moreover, Hsu had firsthand knowledge of Wen, with whom he had studied for three years in Kunming during the last years of the War of Resistance against Japan.

Wen I-to's dynamic personality and erudition must have made such an indelible imprint on his students, that a few years later in the United States as a graduate student in Chinese literature at Stanford, Hsu chose his former teacher as the topic for his dissertation, 'The Intellectual Biography of a Modern Chinese Poet: Wen I-to (1899-1946),' (Stanford University, 1959). A less meticulous writer would have published his dissertation much sooner, with possibly some minor revisions. K.Y. Hsu, however, spent twenty more years polishing, revising, and augmenting it with additional information gathered through further research, and through correspondence and personal interviews with Wen's friends in Taiwan and relatives in the People's Republic of China. During his 1973 visit to Peking, Hsu had hoped, in vain, to obtain permission to read Wen's one hundred seventy-one hand-written manuscripts and personal papers locked up in the National Library of Peking (p. 7). Nonetheless, he decided to publish his work. Had he waited longer, the world might have been deprived of this fine critical biography, now that the biographer's own life has been cut short by a freak of nature.

The book consists of eight chapters, a Prologue and an Envoi. Hsu traces the development of Wen I-to's intellectual life and growth from early childhood to his untimely death at the hands of assassins. The chapters are arranged chronologically, stage by stage, into seven periods: 1) childhood and early education, 1899-1912; 2) life at Tsing-hua School in Peking, 1912-1922; 3) studying in the United States, 1922-1925; 4) life associated with the Crescent Society of poetry, 1925-1928; 5) returning to the Classics, 1928-1938; 6) revival of early interests, 1938-1943; 7) political crusade, 1943-1946. Chapter 8, the Conclusion, contains Hsu's assessment and summation of Wen's many literary contributions and philosophical and political oscillations in the context of the storm and stress of twentieth-century China.

Biographies, even of famous figures, can be dull reading. Hsu's Wen I-to, replete with documented information and rich in anecdotal details, is as interesting and as fascinating as the best of fiction. This is partly due to the unique personality of the poet and partly due to the biographer's imaginative presentation. Hsu has recaptured the poetry and drama not only in Wen's life, but also in his death. The cinematic quality of the narrative is seen in the Prologue, in what could be an eye-witness account of Wen's assassination:

The eucalyptus trees of Kunming, the mile-high capital of Yunnan province, great perpetual cool breeze with songs whose moods change from morning to night, but not much from winter to spring. They are cheery at daybreak, nervy by noon, but--it was five o'clock in the afternoon that day, July 15, 1946--a bit disquietingly melancholic toward dusk.

On Fu-yung-tao, a short but rather wide terrace near the northwestern corner of the old city, the stone pavement glistened under a setting sun. No one was there to be seen; only a scrawny stray mutt sniffled against the wall where peddlers of breakfast snacks had long

cleared away their booths for the day. It looked up furtively at the sound of muffled footsteps, tensed, and instantly darted into a side alley and disappeared (p. 15).

The poetic setting with its natural elements of beauty and peace provides a dramatic irony and contrast to the hideous crime--the assassination of one of China's most noble poets of the century. The imagery of the sniffing mutt is no idle embellishment; it both anticipates and symbolizes the hired assassins who acted mindlessly like dogs for their pay:

Several men in short jackets walked up the incline, eyeing the alleyways left and right, and exchanged silent glances. They circled back down the incline and split into two groups before disappearing into two separate alleys (p. 15).

K.Y. Hsu was not present at the scene. Having lived for three years in a rooming house only one block away from the site of the murder, however, Hsu was able to reconstruct the scene in his mind's eye (p. 187n). The actual eye-witness account is extracted from Wen I-to's eldest son, who was wounded by the assassin's bullets but survived to tell of the tragic event:

He (Wen Li-ho) saw his father, face already blackened and distorted, in a pool of blood, and a short distance away those short-jacketed men stood in a row, the muzzles of their guns still spitting fire . . . (p. 16).

The death scene of the poet in the Prologue, accompanied with two other dramatic presentations, turns the life story of Wen I-to that follows into a series of flashbacks highlighted with lively anecdotes and poetry.

To many Chinese intellectuals of Hsu's generation, Wen I-to was an enigma, because there seemed to be many contradictions and inconsistencies in the poet's life and philosophical views. Until the publication of this book,

the facts of his tragic death were not fully known. Even now, the Nationalist Government still denies its complicity in the crime. It took unusual courage on Hsu's part to probe this open secret, since he had relatives and friends in Taiwan. Hsu took the task of explaining this highly controversial character and multi-dimensional personality --poet, artist, academician, literary historian and critic, political activist and pamphleteer, and finally martyr for his cause--because he felt an obligation to posterity and to the poet to whom he was indebted. 'My debt to the dead . . . must be paid,' said Hsu in his Acknowledgments, in which he addresses his 'beloved teacher' in these impassioned words:

So here's to my happy memory of the three years in Kunming, listening to your lectures, talking with you about your poetry studies and my immature exercises called verse, working with you on oral interpretation at the interpreter's training institute where you saw me off to the army . . . (p. 10).

Yet personal affection for his teacher did not seem to influence Hsu's objectivity or blind him to the tragic flaws in Wen's character, flaws which contributed to his tragic end. However, it was not Hsu's role as a biographer to minimize or magnify Wen's patriotic passion or volatile disposition, or to cover up or to indict the Chungking Government for its involvement in the killing of intellectuals with dissenting voices. His role was to explain Wen I-to the man and the poet who shifted from the Western concept of aestheticism and 'creative idealism' of the Crescent School to academic research into Chinese classics, and who finally became a political activist and spokesman for the Democratic League. The pieces of the puzzle seem to fall into place with K.Y. Hsu's convincing interpretation that 'underlying the many changes in his intellectual outlook were two constants, or absolutes: a belief in the beauty of Beauty and in the beauty of China's cultural traditions' (p. 180). Here is Hsu's explanation:

His quest for ideal beauty led him first to pursue the perfection of color, form, and imagery in poetic and graphic expression that could arouse man's noblest sentiments . . . . When he returned to classical Chinese literature, he identified this abstract concept of ideal beauty with the aesthetic values of the Chinese classics, and with the 'mysterious beauty' of Chinese culture . . . . Finally, as he turned to political pamphleteering, he also identified his sense of ideal beauty with the beauty of the land . . . and with the impoverished but lovable people, who were victimized by continuing chaos (p. 10).

Although not as political as Wen I-to because of the distance in time and place, Hsu could fully empathize with Wen in his belief in China's cultural traditions and had great admiration for Wen's poetic genius. A poet in his own right, Hsu understandably laid special emphasis on Wen's contributions to modern poetry and poetics. To this reviewer, the most interesting section of this book is the part which covers Wen's life in America and his creative life as a member of the Crescent Society. Although Wen had experimented with modern poetry in pai-hua (the vernacular style first introduced by Hu Shih) during his last years at Tsing-hua (p. 43), two-thirds of the poems in his first anthology, Red Candle (1923), were written during his years in the United States (1922-25); and most of the poems in his other poetry collection, Dead Water (1928), were written during the period of his close association with the Crescent School of poetry, which he helped to found.

As mentioned earlier, Hsu has given us a perceptive interpretation of his mentor's life. But it is in introducing Wen's poems that Hsu was at his best. An expert translator, Hsu also exhibited his own poetic qualities, his mastery of the English language, and his sensitivity to the visual and auditory beauty of the original poems. Witness the first two verses of the title poem in Dead Water, in which he preserved the imagery, rhythm, and rhyme pattern as well as the feeling and tone of the original

lines:

Here is a ditch of hopelessly dead water.  
 No breeze can raise a single ripple on it;  
 Might as well throw in rusty metal scraps,  
 or even pour left-over food and soup in it.  
 Perhaps the green on copper will become emeralds.  
 Perhaps on tin-cans will peach blossoms bloom.  
 Then, let grease weave a layer of silky gauze,  
 and germs brew patches of colorful spume.  
 --(p. 101)

The same meticulous concern for Wen's insistence on form, rhyme, and imagery is conveyed in his renderings of such poems as 'Perhaps--A Dirge,' in commemoration of the death of the poet's little daughter, and part of which reads:

Perhaps you hear earthworms turning dirt,  
 Perhaps you hear grassroots sucking water,  
 Perhaps prettier than man's cursing voice  
 Is this kind of music you now hear.

I'll let you sleep, yes, let you sleep--  
 Close your eyes now, tightly,  
 I'll cover you gently with yellow earth,  
 And tell paper ashes to fly lightly.  
 --(p. 111)

The book includes more than fifty of Wen's poems in translation, most of them superbly rendered, and strategically placed to highlight the various twists and turns of Wen's intellectual journey. In addition, there are also a number of poems by others paying tribute to the dead poet. Notwithstanding Hsu's special interest in Wen's poetry and poetics, he did not overlook Wen's invaluable contributions to scholarship. Through his close scrutiny and critical analysis, Wen made some startling discoveries of past philological errors in ancient Chinese transcriptions and errors in the traditional commentaries of the Book of Poetry (Shih-ching) and the Songs of the South (Ch'u Iz'u). Though Wen's fresh interpretations of ancient China had raised some controversies from conservative

quarters, he proved to be correct, and has been recognized by contemporary scholars as an authority.

As a literary biography, the book does credit to both the author and the subject of his book. Scrupulously researched and carefully documented, it contains copious notes and references, and an extensive bibliography at the end. Moreover, it is almost free from typographical errors. The only ones this reviewer could find are 'still lives' on p. 118, which according to the context should read 'still lifes' (referring to objets d'art on Mr. Wen I-to's desk); and 'solitude' on p. 147, which should be 'solicitude' (as it is in the quotation of Legge's translation ' . . . their solicitude about their husbands' honor')(emphasis added).

But this book is more than a literary biography of one man. It is a rich source of information on many cultural and literary aspects of China. It is hoped that Hsu's excellent study of his 'beloved teacher' will inspire some of his own students to do a comparable study of their teacher, who shared Wen's ideals and beliefs, and who dedicated his life to building a spiritual bridge between China and the West through his writing and his teaching.

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