

Community history, Chinese

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Artists and intellectuals

Mabel Lee (b. 1939)

(Adapted from Diana Giese's *Astronauts, Lost Souls and Dragons*, University of Queensland Press, 1997 and interview with Mabel Lee, ORAL TRC 3152, 1994, *Post-War Chinese Australians* project, National Library of Australia)

'The Chinese human environment has always been harsh, with all sorts of oppressions,' Mabel Lee observes. 'Beautiful poetry that has come down through the centuries could have been written by an official lamenting his miserable fate after being exiled to the frontiers. Often this was the only way for him to gain a sense of personal freedom.'

'Daoist philosophy is the spirit behind the Chinese literature of the self, in which the self is totally free. Those who tap into this pure self and have the ability to write, have created China's vast treasury of literature. For those without an education, writing wasn't an option, but a similar sort of personal freedom was achieved through singing folk songs or playing music, both of which generally resonate with sadness. Chinese poetry is very sad, and that is the way the Chinese environment has been for many centuries. But these means to personal freedom do not help to establish infrastructures which lead to freedom as a right.'

She continues that 'in modern times the political reality of the entire Chinese environment worsened, and this profoundly traumatised the scholar class. The military superiority of the industrialised West and Japan resulted in encroachments on the territorial sovereignty of the Manchu-Qing Empire. This was humiliating for the scholar class that had seen their civilisation as representing the civilised world, and anything beyond as barbarian.'

‘By the turn of the twentieth century, Western thinking, especially its political philosophy, gained momentum in China. Scholars and a younger cohort of intellectuals who were schooled in “Western learning” came to embrace notions of democracy and individual freedom as a means to saving the nation, but it was highly dangerous to agitate for such changes. Many were forced to flee with a price on their heads to nearby Japan, which became a hotbed for breeding political revolutionaries.

‘Then came the revolution of 1911 that ousted the Manchu-Qing rulers who had proven to be “incompetent and inept, as well as insincere in their measures to establish a constitutional monarchy”. The revolution saw the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912, but little else changed, and intellectuals who had only just become aware of the self had to put it aside for patriotic reasons. Before long, in the early years of the Republic, Marxism subsumed strong anarchist tendencies amongst many of the revolutionaries, who were joined by a growing proletariat in the cities. Self-sacrifice tendencies and Marxism escalated with the general disillusionment of all thinking Chinese over the “sell-out” of China by the so-called democracies at the Paris Peace Conference that ended World War I.’

Mabel Lee was founding Head of the School of Asian Studies, University of Sydney. She is co-founder of the independent publisher Wild Peony Books.
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She has facilitated the careers of many of the most celebrated Chinese writers, artists and performers, including 2000 Nobel Prizewinner Gao Xingjian, whose work she translates. Her academic research is on modern Chinese intellectual history and literature.