

Preface |

President S R Nathan

Republic of Singapore

The publication of this book *A Scholar's Path* is a labour of love by Mr Peter Chen and his brother Michael—sons of the author, the late Chen Qing Shan, who died 50 years ago in 1960.

It is a compilation of 60 classical poems and 3 prose compositions written in classical Chinese, by the late Mr Chen over 35 years, from 1925 to the time of his death. *A Scholar's Path* reflects much of Mr Peter Chen's father's literary passion, his relationship with his family and friends, his philosophy of life, and not to mention his unattained ideals and ambitions. More importantly, they show his pure and irrepressible joy when indulging in Chinese poetry.

During his life, the late Mr Chen had witnessed and lived through the vicissitudes of the last days of the Qing dynasty, the early Republican era in China, and the Japanese Occupation in Singapore and Malaya. The poems in this book should therefore provide readers a glimpse of those eras past through the poet's eyes. Older readers will readily identify with the context within which these poems are set.

Published in both Chinese and English editions, it should cater for a wider readership. Younger Chinese Singaporeans,

who may not be inclined to read anything written in Chinese, especially the Chinese classical poetry could find the Chinese edition rather intimidating. However, they have recourse to the English edition which explains in English the allusions and sayings found in the book and traces them back to their sources. This could help to open for them the doors to the treasure trove of Chinese language and literature.

For readers with a good command of Chinese, the Chinese edition contains a rendering of the poems in modern Chinese and is profusely annotated by Associate Professor Chan Chiu Ming of the National Institute of Education. Regardless of which edition, I am confident readers will find this an absorbing book, given the range of topics covered by its 63 chapters.

I share the hope of Mr Peter Chen and his brother that this publication in Chinese and English will be an important contribution towards the encouragement of the enjoyment of Chinese literature by our younger generation of all races brought up as they have been in a bilingual environment.

Preface II

Dr Ng Eng Hen

Minister for Education and Second Minister for Defence
Republic of Singapore

The publication of *A Scholar's Path* has come at an opportune time. The Ministry of Education is continuing its review to refine the learning and teaching of Mother Tongue Languages, for instance, for the learning and teaching of the Chinese Language, the objective is to help our students learn the language. The challenge is to enable our students to learn the Chinese Language in a fun way and to use it in daily life.

The collection of poems and prose written in classical Chinese by the late Mr Chen Qing Shan is a fascinating read. The works are a reflection of the sentiments and experiences he had at different points in his life—when he was separated from his family for an extended period of time, and when he was reunited with his family eventually, or when he was commemorating special events, like a birthday or a farewell. There are also poems that show his ardent affection for his wife.

Mr Chen's knowledge of and love for classical Chinese literature is manifested in his allusions to the classics throughout the collection. The background of each poem gives the reader a glimpse into the circumstances the author was experiencing. The additional elucidation on the use of references from clas-

sical Chinese literature allows readers to better understand the author's intentions and savour the essence of his emotions. For those of us who may not be well-versed in the Chinese language, the collection of poems comes with an English edition which explains the allusions and their sources, thus allowing more readers to enjoy the beauty of the Chinese language and literature.

I am sure *A Scholar's Path* will be a welcome addition to the local Chinese literature scene. I hope, too, that the book will be an encouragement to all learners of the Chinese Language to rediscover the joy of learning the language.

Preface III

Professor Wang Gungwu

Chairman of the East Asian Institute,
National University of Singapore

When Peter Chen told me that his father had published a poem to my father, I was both surprised and delighted. He had found the poem (Chapter 29 in this collection) in the 1 March 1952 issue of *Kin Kwok Daily News* (*Jianguo Ribao* 建国日报), the Chinese newspaper of Ipoh. I did not know that Chen Qing Shan and my father had been “literary friends (文友)” for some twenty years before that. Only when I saw the poem did I realise that there had been a deep relationship and that the poet understood my father pretty well.

Peter told me that he and his brother Michael were preparing a collection of his father’s poems and plan to have them published, both in the original and in translation, in 2010 in memory of his passing 50 years ago. He wanted more information about my father so that he could describe the background to the poem more fully. It so happened that I had produced in 2002 a revised edition of a memorial volume of my father’s writings to mark the 40th year of his death. This was 王宓文纪念集 *Wang Fo-wen jinianji* (Wang Fo-wen, 1903–1972: a memorial collection of poems, essays and calligraphy). That volume contained relevant information about my father’s life in Ipoh

from 1931 till 1952, and I gave Peter a copy. I really admired Peter for making great efforts to locate his father's poetry, following every connection he could find. In contrast, mine had been a much simpler task because my father had done an earlier collection of his pre-1945 poems. When he died, my mother and I found his later writings among his papers and put them all in the volume that was printed in 1972.

But I still had no idea how ambitious the Chen brothers were going to be with their collection. Only when he showed me what was done and asked me to write a preface for the work did I realise that he and Michael were not content merely to publish the poems with English translations. What they set out to produce was a comprehensive presentation of all aspects of the poems that would enable them to be widely appreciated. They were determined that these poems be read and, in order to do that, they went far beyond a translated collection. They invited Associate Professor Chan Chiu Ming of Singapore's National Institute of Education to help them research, render the classical verses into modern Chinese, and annotate every poem. This was to ensure that each of the poems would be fully understood even by those who knew little Chinese. The final work, both in Chinese and English translation, is so thorough that the work can serve as a valuable teaching text. It is one that can be used to capture the very mixed feelings of the Chinese sojourners (*huaqiao* 华侨) who came to British Malaya during the first half of the 20th century, especially those who had decided not to return to China after all.

The poems and a few prose writings are grouped in four sections. Each represents a set of emotions that most sojourners harboured and would have articulated if they could. Chen Qing Shan, like my father, belonged to a generation in China that was transiting from a civilisation in decline to a new nation in danger of being still born. That they were observing the trauma from afar in a foreign land that was itself undergoing transformation from colonial rule to independence made their

condition doubly difficult to endure. They also shared a common experience as teachers of children of Chinese migrants dedicated to inculcating the desire to understand their origins in China. This was a delicate operation at the time, between 1930 and 1960, when local conditions were often conflict-laden if not hostile, and developments in China tumultuous if not despairing. Both had finally decided not to return to Mao Zedong's China. My father avoided political issues in his writings while Chen Qing Shan did express his dismay at what was happening to the values he found so precious in the culture he grew up with. Behind the joy in words and images in all his poems, that concern shines through in all four sections of the volume.

Nevertheless, deep sentiments rooted in the Chinese poetic tradition remain, the sense of family, the conventions of mutual caring, the wonder of friendship and the need for longer perspectives to think about the inner meaning of this life, are all there. With every word and phrase explained in both Chinese and English, these sentiments are made to reflect different aspects of the era's social adaptations, political mutations and cultural affirmations. Most are refracted through the eyes of one man and his relationships across the South China Sea.

When Peter and Michael decided to go so deeply into their father's heart and mind, they were going well beyond an act of filial piety. They were no less conscious of the state of Singapore society today and in the future. Can the people deal with the demands of modernity without forgetting what their fathers believed in? Should they be content to leave all things past in the untouched dusty pages of archives and historical collections? This volume of poems is the Chen brothers' answer. Without passing any kind of judgement, it uses extensive explications to outline the layers of change and response among those who lived through so much. It rejects the know-all certainty that successes today are forever. It affirms the capacity in each one of us to accept progress while remaining true to what is

worth preserving. To be asked to write this preface has given me a chance to re-learn that simple truth. I thank Peter and Michael for the privilege and hope others who read the book will share my sense of fulfilment.

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