

Cho Tu ZAW

Poetry, prose and a novel fragment

I.

The river bathers

We took off our clothes
and jumped into the river, river of silence, silence of fear.
Yet that current
ruined our banks,
took away our newborns
took away our pregnant mother.

20 years

20 years may have been just enough time
for the songs that were sung.
Instead, the list became classical.
Once, the young guys made a decision,
indeed a great decision
to change their little town
to bring in more water, more flowers, more beauty.
So, a townie of 20 years laughed and said;
Boys! Towns always match the town people.
No one couldn't do anything more.
No one, no more.
He said and laughed,
laughed and cried
and went off, disappearing in tears.
The guys were left
with anger
with disappointment.
After that,
some ended dead
some ended lost,
some sank into marriage, social life,
and some ended by liquor and drugs.
Then, the 20 years were over,
their songs turned old
but the guys never changed anymore,
they grew to love their olds.

They couldn't listen to hip-hop and rap songs of the next guys
'cos the next guys are bored by their songs.
But while the olds are hearing
the melodies of the hip-hops of the nexts
they feel angry, yearning and happy
and remember everything.
For those rappers, those next young guys,
said how they feel.
They said, their town has no beauty
and they want to change things.
So the old guys laughed again,
with tears.

The Star-lover

There, in the dark sky
behind the black clouds,
the stars are gleaming anyway.
In this timeless time
the night was occupied by the dark
the moon was teased by the night
the dark and the dark
then again the dark,
the dark only, all round.
But at that moment,
The stars,
those stars
gleamed for an instant,
for a moment, for a very short time.
But surely they shone their light
against the dark.
All stars are suns.
They make the world,
build the universe,
and make the light
that warms people.
A star-lover looking into the dark sky,
tells the stars' stories
and sees:
there in the dark sky,
behind the black clouds
the stars are gleaming away.

Half the world in midnight

(dedicated to Min Ko Nai, Ko Ko Gyi, Mya Aye and the whole '88 generation of student leaders in jail)

Do not forget the dark
Do not forget to light
Be aware!
There are snakes.

A moment at the river

After grandpa, my father continued.
After my father, I continued.
And after me, my son will.
Blood flows more easily than water,
history is an ever-moving river.
20 years before and after.
Past, present and future
may be a long time in perspective
but the years pass through the self so quickly
time is running fast, like a current
yesterday, today and tomorrow
running like current .
That stone grandpa couldn't move out of our way,
father also tried,
and I also tried,
then my son will.
What we never wait for is time.
All we do is always to try and try,
all of our time, all of our life.
Father never saw that grandpa couldn't
and I also never saw that he couldn't
then my son will not either.
Go on , go on, try, my son
Push, to move the stone out of our way
and drop it into the abyss,
never ever to block the path like this.
Like many stars in the sky,
Like Mufasa staring at Simba,
grandpa, dad and I are gazing down at you
try your best. We will smile.

II.

Democracy: running on the street

I will always remember when my dad tried to get a permit to buy a copy of the Newsweek magazine under the socialist government in Burma. In that time, for an ordinary teacher like him, the permit to buy the foreign news magazines was not simple and easy. But he didn't give up easily. He was very patient and after many weeks and months, nearly a year later, he got a notice that he received the permit to buy the magazine every week.

Although the government allowed a few people to buy and read those magazines, the officials always censored it first and so distributed it late; some weeks they decided to not distribute at all. But we had no choice. Citizens in this kind of country needed to obey every rule, as instructed. However, I also got a chance to touch and read a distant news magazine from a different world.

The first experience of my life of touching a free media gave me a shock. Wow! This is amazing. I'd never read any articles critical of the president and his government, and also never, ever read free style writing about the people, events, everything and anything. Before that, all the news I'd read were about the ministers or some authorized persons of the government going to somewhere, maybe an opening ceremony of a factory, road or bridge. And the international news we used to watch, listen and read about were about the casualties of the wars, disaster damages and heinous crimes in other countries, so that having watched the evening news on the state TV my 80-year old grandmother would always conclude by saying "our country is the best." That was a fruit of the tree they planted, a perfect outcome destination of their hard work, the real goal of their media.

In one of the years during the 1980s, I thought about a Newsweek article my father had read, then retold me, about a Chinese scholar studying in US. The student had written a letter to his government, saying that he had been selected by his country and given enough money to take the time to study. But western people eat four times a day, differently from the Chinese who only eat three times daily; in fact, just two times was enough for him. So the main thing he wanted to tell his government was to send another scholar student like him to the US immediately. My father compared this to our Burmese students who saved the money the country gave them to study abroad, then bought a car with what they saved on their way back home. Reading that news I realized that unlike that Chinese student, or others elsewhere, our Burmese people had never eagerly participated in building the nation by any ~ism.

Another news article I will always remember was about the 39th US president, Jimmy Carter. President Carter had a habit of running outside, in the streets, in the early mornings. One day he got a cramp in his leg while running and fell. So another runner took care of him, then helped him back to the White House. My father showed me the news photos and noted that if U Ne Win, the then-dictator of Burma, were in the place of Jimmy Carter, no one would never help him to get back home. Rather, everyone would just step over him.

That was simple news, but a magnificent image of democracy, for it offered a clear sense of what it is and how it works. Here, though, I want to pause and note that today the street in front of the White House is blocked. I feel sad, for whatever it is that is happening, this is a sign of democracy's decrease. All right, moving on.

Burma, our country is moving toward democracy. According to the newspapers, radio and TV, we are changing into a democratic country. A free and fair election will be held soon. I am remembering some of the articles I'd read from the old days and I think, if it is indeed democracy, who will be running in our streets? Will it be the representatives, or maybe the elected president, or maybe the ministers of the newly elected government? As for me, I am afraid that no one will help me, and am certain everyone will step over me.

The Moody Conference

When I was young, cinemas often showed trailers and news before the real film. Usually, the trailers were about the films coming soon, and news which today's youth have never seen, mostly Soviet news and Soviet sports. Sometimes, West German documentaries were also shown but those were very rare. As a socialist country, the government was very fond of Soviet films.

I remember those films. They were very different from today's colorful films. Dry, unattractive and boring. The conferences in them included a lot of people. News producers had a fondness for showing a lot of people: we watched a lot of people marching, a lot of people meeting, a lot of people hugging each other, a lot of people shaking hands, and a lot of people clapping at various ceremonies.

Sometimes, the news would show a great harvest in the corn or wheat fields. Sometimes, there would be molten iron liquid being poured here and there in a factory. We always watched those things before the real film, which is what we really came to see.

I didn't understand why they'd be screening such boring things, and I still don't. Having become a movie director, I seriously care about tempo in a film, since audiences don't like to watch constant long shots. Moreover, a wonderful thing I realized is that the Soviet Union and all East European countries' leaders had, amazingly enough, the same moody and grumpy faces. For example Mr. Brezhnev, do you remember Mr. Brezhnev? As a child, I thought he was always sleepy. The others wore the same grumpy sulk whether clapping, hugging or introducing each other. They looked like hosts welcoming a guest reluctantly, as there wasn't enough food in house. That was in the cold war days. Do you remember?

Their conferences were usually full of people. The streets were full of people. The halls were full of people. And another wonderful thing was that they were very fond of big. In particular: their leader's photos were big, their leader's slogan signboards were big. Big, big, big. How big do you think? Some needed to be lifted by a crane. Picture this in your head: a lot of people with moody faces lifting their leaders' moody photos. It's not funny. It really did happen in the world. OK, that is all behind us, no ?

In our country, the evening news I watch, the faces in the news didn't change, like the old days. Especially in events like the teacher training course completion ceremonies at Phaunggyi, I see the same fully dressed and fully uniformed grumpy faces and stiff bodies listening to the dignitary heads talking. I feel suffocated, and remember the moody conferences of the cold war.

Once, when the Democratic candidates were canvassing for votes, I showed the news photos of Obama and Hillary Clinton to a twenty year old university student with no interest in politics and asked her who the future president would be. The girl looked at the two features for a moment, then chose

Obama. When I asked why she chose Obama, she replied that his face was clearer and more radiant. And, she continued, she liked his smile.

That means the young people choose their leaders by their features, like entertainers. And what do you think about entertainment, especially music, in that kind of country. Before and after the evening news, you can watch songs about a dam, a bridge or a factory, composed from government's slogans. Oh, it is so very disappointing to hear the songs-not-songs. I don't understand why they broadcast songs like those. There is no need for it.

The truth is, if you really are working hard, you don't need to popularize yourself. Once upon a time in China, every street, every light-post was behung with loudspeakers which were broadcasting songs about smoking factories and ripening-yellow paddy fields. Next to them, all the listeners wore the same blue uniform.

In today's China, both the faces of the leaders and of their people have changed. The clothes are colorful and varied. "Whether the cat is black or white, the most important thing is to catch rat." "Rich is better." With these sentiments, and the path change by their leaders' wise initiatives, no more gloomy hungry faces ever again. The new history of China teaches us that if you want a wise change, you should be brave, bold and lucid. Lucid means that you'll have to leave your old style, old theories and old ways. The era is going to change. If you really change, the people are always ready to follow.

To a better living

One day I met one of my writer friends and he said: Hey! I've read your political articles. Well! Do you have any intention to run for office, too?"

This is what I told him:

"Have you read the article 'What it means to be a pure writer.' I published it in (the journal) *Pyi Thuu Khit'*."

"Yes, I have"

"Then everything is clear. I have already written up my intention in the article. I never want to be a candidate in any election."

To which he said, "Then why are you causing so much trouble? Mind your own business. Others are doing things with an intention. What do you want?"

Considering his question, I smiled. What do I want? As a middle-aged man, I am satisfied with my life as a writer even if I am not rich. And I never want to be a member of the parliament, a minister or a president. I think those non-free life styles are very different from a freelance writer's life.

And I asked myself the question 'what do I want?' I have an exact answer myself. All our writers are writing about our opinions, criticism and visions for a better society. We want a society built by wisdom. So we all try to build that by writing. Now our country is changing into a democratic nation. Many positive suggestions, advice and commitments are needed. I am also writing for this. But he continued to ask me again,

OK. What are you going to do when the change is completed?

The answer is very clear. If it's completed, I'll continue my writing. Sometimes I'll make a video, sometimes a film. If asked "Hey! What are you doing now?", the answer is "Yes, I'm doing the same things now." But I think there will be a difference between now and that time. After we achieve democracy, in other words in the democratic society, we all simply believe that we can live better and

work better. In fact, this belief, this hope is the same belief and hope for a better life that most have people believed in and struggled for over the ages, since the beginning of mankind and even of history.

Monarchy began like this: a hero who led and protected the people from natural disasters, attacks of other tribes and threats of the wild animals was elected as a ruler. In that way, man created the king and the system of monarchy. As a result, a hero became the king in many historic stories and myth. After the kings' demise, his next generations were the easy successors. But it was not certain that his successor would be a hero or a fair king. So the monarchy was not really suitable for mankind. When a king couldn't face the crisis, he demanded that people help him. In turn, people were requesting the right to freedom as their reply. As the advent of Magna Charta shows. Thus, man re-made the rule of monarchy into parliamentary government. But at that time the parliament was a government building that only consisted of the king, his relatives the lords, the nobles, and the powerful landlords. In every age power rested on the system of economy; the landlords who owned a lot of fertile land became powerful, as they possessed the main asset the agricultural economy. The king and his government ruled oriented to them, and the parliament made laws to protect their profit. In that age, the principal class or people were the landlords, and that age was named feudalism. From there the industrial revolution emerged. It began with a person named James Watt who boiled a water kettle and thought. Had his king and his landlords foreseen that event, they would have made a law forbidding anyone to boil any kettle. In that age, the capitalists took the place of the landlords; laws were established to protect them. The government, the parliament and the army protected them. To get raw materials and to sell finished products, many unfair laws were established. By growing this greed, colonialism was finally born. By its means the colonizing countries robbed and ruled the primitive nations with fabricated reasons. At the end, their greed moved toward the extreme with Fascism and Nazism, and a world war broke out.

As another hope of escaping from oppression, people created socialism and communism. The goal was for every farmer to have a farm, for every worker to have decent work and fair pay; but putting class in its role, party in its role, a leader in its role destroyed the individual freedoms. However, they cancelled out justice; they caused many injustices and made many extreme mistakes. At last, that extreme system fell too. That means that it too was not suitable for mankind. Reading history, we can determine that mankind's search for better living in every age. It is still on, but has not reached its point.

I was born in 1968. When I was six years old, a little child, there were sounds of people going to the 1974 referendum and polling booths. "To build a tranquil and honest society" was the slogan to which they marched. But it was never reached.

When I watched a Chinese movie *To Live*, directed by Zhang Yimou, I saw what he wanted to show, that the people throughout the ages, and especially people of the lower class struggled to survive. The story is about a rich man whose life is ruined by gambling, at which point his wife leaves. He comes to regret this, relives again as a puppet master. But during the civil war, the Kuomintang requisitions him and forces him to perform puppet shows in the army. Ancient heroic warlord shows were much favored by the Kuomintang officers. In a battle, he is captured by the Red Army. So he entertains Mao Zedong's Communists instead. At that point, the warlord stories come to an end and he has to play shows dedicated to workers'

However the revolution was going on, and according to the Chinese tradition, a freedom. After serving the people's freedom revolution, he is allowed to go back home. Fortunately, he is reunited with his son, daughter and wife. And then they continue their lives, adapting to the system as defined by the party. His wife's words are very touching: "Whatever, however, to live together without hunger is important." son-in-law must be found for their mute and dumb daughter. At last they find a young crippled party cadre leader. The young party cadre leader also liked their daughter very much and

respected them, though his rank was higher. He gave them a special present for the wedding. What was his present? Awfully, the groom's wedding present to his in-laws is a photo of chairman Mao Zedong. But, the couples saw each others' meaning of "to live."

Whatever and however the government system changes, the only real thing people want and need is "to live." A government should simply serve and protect them. In reality, people have no adhesion to a party, a system or a leader. The persons who hold the power need to place people in that role, must not let them be hurt, must protect them, give them full opportunities and remain benevolent toward them.

The bad feudalism and capitalism in the past that protected only a group of people should never be revive on this earth. I understand that the free market economy system is different from capitalism. Capitalism simply preferred and protected capitalists only. But in the free market economy, market is the principal feature of the system. So, what is this "market"? In economics, "market" is defined so that that it equals "people." "People" means customers or consumers. As the slogan of merchants goes, the customer is always right. If all the governments obey that slogan like the merchants do, people will live better.

III.

The opening page from ***Once upon a time in Ganges:***

BC 260, the Ganges Delta, Bengal.

The fields are full of death. Bodies and body parts are fragmented. The stench of death and bloodshed is overwhelming. Soldiers are carrying bodies from here to there. They separate the bodies of the enemies from theirs. The aged, children and women coming out of the fortifications are crying and shouting in their loss. Vultures hover in the sky.

The bloodstained king is gazing at the scene, with a spear in his hand.

"Your majesty" the chief minister, fully armored beside the king, says.

"Yes, my lord"

"The war is over, your majesty"

The king does not respond. A bitter sneer appears on his face. The chief minister is aware of the king's expression and gaze. He continues: "Asoka's invading troops have been defeated, finally, your majesty. The noble land Ganges Marla is safe now. Our people can live peacefully again. This is the victory of the noble people, the Aryans. This is the victory of the Ganges Marla. This is your victory, my king"

He is stopped by the king, who waves his hand to silence him. The chief minister is mute and waiting. The king stares into his chief minister's eyes and speaks word by word, carefully.

“ He will come back again, lord, if not next year or the next two years, certainly he will come back. Although he retreated now, he will attack again and again, until he conquers us. Don’t you think, my lord?”

The chief minister is quiet but after a moment he replies.

“However they attack to occupy our nation, they will never get to your majesty.”

“Why do you think that?” asks the king.

“Because they do not deserve even a single piece of this land, your majesty.”

“So, we are the deservers, right my lord?”

“Yes, your majesty. This noble land belongs to us, to the noble Aryans only.”

“This noble land and this noble people-- which is nobler do you think, my lord? If the noble Aryans must serve with their lives for this noble land, how many more lives must we serve it? If all our Aryan nobles need to pay our lives for this spiritless land, this spiritless land you all valued as the noble land will be only a graveyard, to bury your noble bodies.”

When the king has finished, a chariot arrives. The king gets in and leaves the battlefield. The chief minister is left with his thoughts.
