

Bi Feiyu

Prolific young Chinese writer visits Iowa, now translated

Bi Feiyu is one of China's most prolific and talented fiction writers to emerge in the last decade. His novels and short stories have been published in over 20 book volumes, with translations in French, German, and several other languages. Bi Feiyu's first book published in English, *Moon Opera*, was recently released by Telegram Books of London.

Bi Feiyu was a writer in residence in Iowa's International Writing Program (IWP) for three months in the fall of 2006. The unique IWP, which was co-founded in the 1960s by the important Chinese author Hualing Nieh Engle, has brought hundreds of published writers from countries all around the world to Iowa City every year to experience the United States, be provided time to write in their own languages, and share their experiences with the other writers also in residence. Over 80 writers from the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong have participated over the last 40 years.

I visited with Bi Feiyu during his visit to the United States. He explained to me the importance of nature during his childhood in the countryside of northern Jiangsu Province during the Cultural Revolution. "It was at the time I formed a connection to nature. I did not have much toys. The sounds of the river were like toys for me. "For me, the real pain came with my entrance to college. After I entered college, I started reading. I realized a big difference

between what is depicted in books and reality. That is the reason I became a novelist. Not everyone has had psychological self-deconstruction and reconstruction, a shift in the mind. In the countryside, I understood only Mao and filial ways. In college, I was exposed to a new world.”

Since graduating from college in 1987, Bi Feiyu has lived and written in the historic former capital Nanjing. While in the United States, Bi Feiyu wrote speeches, “but not a word on my novel. I didn’t plan to do any writing here.... I wanted all my time here experiencing and meditating about life in America. For me, meditation on life is the most important, even more important than writing.”

Bi Feiyu did write several interesting speeches as part of his IWP participation. In the following excerpt, for example (translated by Li Guo), he discusses his thoughts on fantasy and reality: “The glory of being an artist resides in the fact that he is able to depict the real world by transcending reality itself. In this regard, fantasy is not a ‘style,’ or an artistic approach. Fantasy is, above all, a faculty of understanding. It is a precise, vibrant, mind-blowing ability for understanding, driven by desire and imagination. Born with wings, fantasy is more specific, more alive, and closer to the nature of reality. However, I will argue that on most occasions, an artist is inclined to make a mistake. That is, he may pay too much attention to the feathers of fantasy to notice its two feet. Yes, fantasy is born with feet. Born in real life, it ultimately returns to reality, and by doing

so, it turns our dreams into truth.”

To close the IWP 2006 residency, each participant was asked to publicly share his or her impressions of America. Bi Feiyu’s presentation consisted of singing a traditional Chinese song about missing home. “You know why?” he asked me. “Because everyone must say something, and I don’t speak English.”

Before he came to Iowa, other writers told him, when you come to Iowa, you will feel lonely. He did find “a unique loneliness in America.” He said he missed home and called home to talk to his wife and son every day. Bi Feiyu does not think he will immediately write directly about his experience in the United States, but the experience will be “a positive influence that will permeate my writing experience in the future just like water.”

Text and photos by Mark Anderson-Wilk.