

Remembering Manong Frankie

Robert Yeo

I cannot remember when I first met Francisco Sionil José, the Filipino novelist, and short story writer. Very likely in the late 1970s, at a conference in Malaysia. As I got to know him better, I discovered he did so many other things besides writing fiction: he owned a bookshop called *Solidaridad*, located in Ermita in the Philippines capital Manila, and a publishing house of the same name. The bookshop became a center for writers, intellectuals and activists from around the world to meet, and they provided articles for the magazine, *Solidarity*, which he edited.

Frankie invited me to a conference organized by the Philippine Centre of International PEN to be held in Manila, 14-17 December 1981. The topic was “Literature and Social Justice” and the conference attracted about 70 delegates from twelve countries, with the largest number of foreign visitors coming from South Korea. As well, there were Peter Elstob, the secretary of International PEN headquarters in London; Mochtar Lubis from Indonesia, Sulak Sivaraksa from Thailand, Ismail Hussein and Cecil Rajendra from Malaysia, Thomas Polin from *Asiaweek*; and from Singapore, Dudley de Souza, Wong Meng Voon, Goh Poh Seng, Kirpal Singh, and myself.

Given the international reputation of PEN, I was not surprised that the conference would end with resolutions. The conference was, after all, titled “Literature and Justice,” and the president of the Philippines was Ferdinand Marcos, widely regarded as a dictator.

Resolution Number 2 read:

“At the same time, the Conference expresses concern over the continued detention, including solitary confinement, of some writers in prison; the continuing threat to rearrest writers who have been provisionally released, and the reports that at least one poet-journalist has disappeared under mysterious circumstances.

“The Asian Writers Conference, therefore, appeals to his Excellency, the President of the Philippines, to release writers in prison against whom no charges have been filed, to transfer to civilian courts the cases of those against whom charges have been filed, and to effect their speedy trial, to accord humane treatment to, and put an end to the solitary confinement of writers still in prison, and to conduct a thorough inquiry into the case of the writer who has disappeared under mysterious circumstances.

“The Asian Writes Conference further appeals to His Excellency, the President of the Philippines, to assure the freedom of expression of writers in the Philippines without the threat of arrest and imprisonment.”

There was a South African delegate present, Siphso Sepamla, director of the Federated Union of Black Artists (now the FUBA Academy of Arts), and it was not surprising that a resolution was passed, No. 3, on South Africa:

“The Conference notes with great concern the continuing flagrant repression of the basic human rights of the black African people in South Africa, and the freedom of black African writers, artists, and intellectuals.

“The Conference expresses its strong sense of solidarity with the black African people, writers, artists, and intellectuals in their struggle for human freedom and dignity, and appeals to all writers, artists, and intellectuals in the world to help and support their struggle in South Africa.”

As our host, Frankie was very kind to my wife and me. Both his wife Tessie and him always said we were welcome to his home whenever we visited Manila, but on the occasion of the Conference, he had obviously too many guests to allow him to attend exclusively his home to us. On November 25, 1981, he wrote,

“I am glad that you finally got word from Asia Foundation. At our general meeting this week, Krip Yuson agreed to take you to his house for the duration. This is the arrangement with the Asia Foundation; their grantees will stay with writers. But you did not mention your wife coming with you, which is of course wonderful.

“I am sorry that I cannot ask you to stay with us; the house will be full. Tell Esther I am sorry that I will not be able to take care both of you as I will be so damn busy going around and I hope you will understand.

“We will make a reservation for you in one of the hotels close to the bookshop, which is actually the PEN Secretariat, too, so that in case you need help it will not be difficult for you to get to me. I will see to it that the place is not expensive and of course, Esther should register also as a Singapore delegate, and why not? Poh Seng is coming on his own and he will be booked at the Philippine Plaza. The price (special) for delegates is US\$25 a day, single. Let me know as fast as you can if you want to stay there, too, for the duration of the conference and then move to a cheaper place after. It is all up to you. If my houseguests shall have gone by the time, you can even move in with us. But let us see how it will turn out.

“See you on the 18th or earlier. But let me know your arrival date so that you will be met at the airport. It is a mess out there, not like Changi.”

On January 19, 1982, he wrote again:

“Hello Robert. Sorry I was not able to attend to you more. Next time, just remember there’s a room in the house for you and Esther!”