

FEATURE ARTICLE

An International Poetry Festival in China

Early in August, I took part in the first Qinghai Lake International Poetry Festival. It was held in Qinghai Province, western China, in and around the provincial capital of Xining. I flew initially from Melbourne to Beijing, and from there joined a 2½-hour domestic flight to Xining.

Qinghai, with an average elevation of about 3000 metres above sea-level, lies in the north-eastern part of the Tibetan Plateau. The Yellow River has its source in the province, as do the Yangtze and Mekong. The population of more than 5 million includes Han Chinese (55 percent), Tibetans (21 percent), Tu, Hui, Salar and Mongols. Xining itself has a population in excess of 2 million.

There were more than 200 poets at the festival, from various parts of the world: Austria, Brazil, Czech Republic, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Macedonia, Mexico, Mongolia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Scotland, Serbia, Slovakia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, Uzbekistan, USA, Venezuela. The great majority of poets attending were Chinese, from both Qinghai and other parts of the country. I was the sole Australian.

All poets invited to participate in the festival were required to submit in advance two poems and an essay, the latter to reflect on the festival theme, 'Man and Nature: A Harmonious World'. These pieces were translated into Chinese and published, along with each poet's photograph and biographical note, in the 500-page festival anthology, *A Door Open to the World*, a copy of which was presented to all of us (in a 'showbag' containing various other goodies) on arrival at the Qinghai Hotel in Xining. A number of poets, myself included, were invited to read their essays following the opening ceremony on the first day; with each presentation, the Chinese translation was read out from the festival anthology. The day concluded with an evening banquet hosted by the provincial government.

The program for the three remaining days of the festival was crammed with events and activities. On two of the mornings we boarded a convoy of buses and travelled, behind a police-car escort with flashing lights, out of the city and into different parts of the province, some of our destinations taking several hours to reach. Among the places on our itinerary were the dramatic Yuhuang Pavilion at Guide and the nearby Stone Garden; the Tu People's 'Custom Village' at Huzhu (with a colourful traditional dance performance, lavish dinner and 'bonfire party'); the famous Ta'er Monastery; the Liuwan Painted Pottery Museum; and Xining's Tibetan Medicine Museum, opened in 2006. As the official centrepiece of the festival, we were taken to Qinghai

Lake, the largest in China, where, after a concert by a full symphony orchestra – with music by Shostakovich, Mussorgsky and a number of Chinese composers, and featuring several impressive vocal soloists – the poets undertook a collective signing (with thick coloured textas on a large, metres-long scroll) of a declaration embodying the ideals of peace, global harmony and human dignity, and affirming the pursuit of these ideals as part of ‘the duty of poetry and the mission of poetry as well’. The signing was accompanied over the loudspeakers by the theme from The Magnificent Seven.

The main poetry reading took place outdoors on the third evening, in a plaza outside a large Xining hotel, in front of a sizeable audience; it was billed as the ‘Poetry Recitation Evening Party’. Intermittent drizzle that fell through the latter part of the evening didn’t seem to dampen the festive atmosphere of the event, which, apart from a wealth of poetry in many languages, this time without translations, included a lightshow and (briefly) fireworks, and was presided over by television cameras supported by floodlights mounted on high scaffoldings erected around the plaza. We were told that the proceedings were being televised by three national networks! Australia take note.

The organizers were of course very keen to make their overseas visitors feel welcome and important, and to show China in the best possible light. The publicity value of the festival, ahead of the forthcoming Olympics in Beijing, was not lost on us. The places we visited on our excursions and the local people we encountered were colourful, friendly and hospitable. Naturally, we were mindful of the problems the country faces, and of the great issues yet to be addressed on various fronts. But for the festival’s duration we experienced, through the love of literature we all shared, a sense of common purpose and the bridging of gulfs. Accordingly the festival ended, on the evening of the fourth day, with a gala variety concert in the auditorium of a local television station: a kaleidoscopic theatrical presentation of music, poetry, song and dance, each item showcasing one of the cultures of the world. This spectacular production climaxed with a rousing full-cast finale of Beethoven’s Ode to Joy.

My week in China, incorporating brief sojourns in Beijing on the way to and from Xining, held many highlights. Needless to say, some of my fondest memories of the festival will revolve around the people I met and the friends I made. There was much exchanging of books among the poets, and for me this has continued in a more limited way by post – not to mention all the email communication (and electronic picture-sending, for I managed to take some 900 photos throughout the week-long adventure!). Since my return I’ve been in contact with new friends and fellow-writers in Glasgow, Brasilia, Belgrade, Navan (Ireland), Berlin, Vienna, Tashkent, Hong Kong, and Beijing. It’s a splendid way of extending one’s poetic horizons!

Alex Skovron

Alex Skovron was born in Poland and came to Australia during his tenth year. He is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *The Man and the Map* (2003), and a prose novella, *The Poet* (2005), joint winner (with Kate Grenville) of the FAW Christina Stead Award for fiction. His first book, *The Rearrangement* (1988), won the Anne Elder and Mary Gilmore awards. Other awards have included the Wesley Michel Wright Prize, the John Shaw Neilson Award, and the ABR Poetry Prize. His book-length collection of prose-poems will be published this year, and a volume of short stories is in preparation.