

Ma Jian chooses exile to preserve integrity

Clarissa Oon

An exiled writer's capacity to influence developments in his country may be limited, but leaving a repressive society is also the only way to keep his integrity.

Acclaimed Chinese writer Ma Jian, who has lived in exile for 26 years, made this point at a Singapore Writers Festival discussion last Saturday evening on the topic, *The Writer In A Country's Intellectual Life*.

Singapore poet Alvin Pang, Malaysian writer Dina Zaman and Korean novelist Kim Young Ha were the other authors featured on the panel.

Those living in countries where critical discourse is open, like Dina, said they felt a responsibility to raise the intellectual tenor of political debate. The hour-long discussion at Singapore Management University, attended by about 100 people, was one of more than 40 panels held during the 10-day festival's opening weekend.

Ma's books, including his latest novel *The Dark Road* (2013) about the impact of the country's draconian one-child policy on village women, have been banned in China since 1987, when he fled Beijing for Hong Kong and then London, where he now lives.

Five of his books have been translated into English and they have drawn rave reviews from the likes of *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*.

Explaining why he chose exile, the outspoken former photojournalist, 60, spoke about the "literary inquisition" that has prevailed in China against writers from the Song Dynasty to the present.

He said that in the past year, the Chinese government has imprisoned more than 40 underground writers for being critical of the establishment.

He drew a parallel with the past half cen-



(From left) Moderator Kwok Kian Woon with Kim Young Ha, Dina Zaman, Alvin Pang, Ma Jian and a translator. PHOTO: SINGAPORE WRITERS FESTIVAL

tury of political turmoil in Latin America, resulting in numerous writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Pablo Neruda going into exile. "In situations like these, only exiles can comment meaningfully on a state of affairs in a country."

Criticising the self-censorship of authors in China, where one-party rule and breakneck economic growth have spun off various social and environmental problems, he quipped: "In a place like China where even the air is politicised, it's very hard not to write about politics."

"Chinese writers get around this by saying, 'We write about life and humanity, not politics.' Their attitude is not one of resistance, but escape," he argued.

Sociologist Kwok Kian Woon, who moderated the discussion, asked the other writers what they thought of the intellectual health of their respective countries, and got very different responses.

Pang, 41, an award-winning poet who also edits a public policy journal *Ethos* published by the Civil Service College, said candidly of Singapore: "We don't have a

healthy, critical intellectual life."

In such a situation, he felt that writers can contribute "imaginative insights and a great sense of humanity and compassion. We should have the intellectual courage to put that on the table".

A literary star in his native South Korea whose novels and stories have been made into movies, Kim, 45, felt his country has had a robust intellectual culture since the 1990s. That was when a functioning liberal democracy kicked in after a few decades of military dictatorship.

As for Dina, 44, a published author and columnist for online news site *The Malaysian Insider*, she noted Malaysia's vocal "kopitiam culture" where people "have an opinion about everything". But she was concerned at how social media has led to "ranting" that is not backed up by research.

"When you talk about politics and religion, you cannot have too much anger. You need to detach," said the writer of *I Am Muslim* (2007), a collection of articles about being Muslim in Malaysia.

The discussion gave some in the audience food for thought, though others felt parts of it were lost in translation. Ma spoke in Mandarin through a translator; the others spoke in English.

Nonetheless, marketing consultant Laura Chen, who is in her 30s, felt it was a "very dynamic panel from different countries with different points of view". She said: "The issue of a country's intellectual life is something very relevant to Singapore, as it is to all countries that have, with affluence, started to look at their spiritual and intellectual needs."