

UDK: 821.581

COPYRIGHT ©: MAJA LAVRAČ

## China's New Poetry or Into the Mist

Maja LAVRAČ\*

### Abstract

The late 1970s and early 1980s represent a period of important innovation in the development of contemporary Chinese poetry. As this was highly personal and experimental, it soon became characterized as being “misty” or “obscure”. A new generation of young poets questioned the Chinese cultural tradition and expressed the need for its re-evaluation. They tried to re-examine the meaning of literature, and while doing so, they based the foundation for their poetry on the tradition and the spirit of personal freedom and democracy of the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement (1919), having been at the same time strongly influenced by the Western modernist poetry, in which they found alternative fresh ideas.

**Keywords:** misty poetry, obscure, *Today*, Bei Dao, Gu Cheng, Yang Lian

### 1 Introduction

The late seventies and early eighties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century represent a period of important innovation in the development of contemporary Chinese poetry. As this was highly personal and experimental by nature, it soon became characterized as being “misty” or “obscure”. But, in fact it was simply new, a new embodiment of the Chinese spirit, which was born out of a strong need and desire to challenge the orthodoxy of the entire post-1949 era.

Since the Tian'anmen incident in 1976, known also as the April 5<sup>th</sup> Movement, poetry began to tell the truth. In December 1978, big character posters appeared in three places in Beijing: on the wall at Xidan, known as Democracy Wall, on the wall of the Ministry of Culture, and on the gate of the offices of the official

---

\* Maja Lavrač, Associate Professor, Department of Asian and African Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. E-mail: [maja.lavrac@guest.arnes.si](mailto:maja.lavrac@guest.arnes.si)

magazine *Poetry*. A year later, these posters were transformed into a magazine form entitled *Today*. It was a non-official literary journal founded by a new generation of young poets, and featuring poetry, prose, literary criticism and translations of foreign literary works.

These poets, Bei Dao, Mang Ke, Shu Ting, Gu Cheng, Yang Lian, just to name a few of them and probably the most important of them lived through the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution and became highly disillusioned by it. Though *Today* was banned after a few months of its founding, they went on with their writing, and today many of them are living and publishing their work abroad. They can also be called a “Lost Generation” since they lost their youth during various ideological campaigns that were waged throughout the eighties against “Spiritual Pollution” (1983) and “Bourgeois Liberalism” (1986) to discredit the writers and other artists and their works.

The new poets demand freedom of expression, i.e. the creative freedom of the poet.

Unfortunately, their demands have been constantly suppressed. They emphasize the independence of literature from politics. For them, literature is no longer a tool for class struggle, but a mirror with which to see oneself. They are explorers of restricted areas in art and politics, they explore relationships between individuals and society, dive into the human nature and investigate the self. That does not mean they do not respect the ancient master poets, on the contrary, they do respect them very much, yet they do not continue with their ancient methods. In general, they question the Chinese cultural tradition and express the need for its re-evaluation. They try to re-examine the meaning of literature, and while doing so they base the foundation for their poetry on the tradition and spirit of personal freedom and democracy of the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement (1919) being at the same time strongly influenced by the Western modernist poetry in which they found alternative fresh ideas. Indeed, in foreign models, they discovered a rich source of self-renewing creative power. In this way, their poetry represents a new stage of pluralistic creative experiment, and can be thus also called alternative poetry. It is namely very original and experimental in everything, in language, syntax, structure as well as in imagery. The poets actually create their own world, a world full of authentic inspiration and passion. Their poetry is beyond doubt a voice of a new modern generation; it is expressing its needs and ideals and thus speaking for itself. Indeed, these poems vibrate with the feeling and spirit of their times.

The new poetry is real. It moves from the objective reality to the subjective reality. The poet turns from the external reality and looks inwards, forming his images in accordance with his own feeling and sensibility. This poetry is not misty at all, but is rather an awakening or a refreshing revival of an aesthetic consciousness. In this sense, this new kind of poetry can also be called a revolution.

The following statements of some famous “misty” poets are the best descriptions of their poetry.

Bei Dao:

I try to apply the cinematic device of montage to my own poetry in order to produce the effect of imagistic collision and swift transition. (Yeh 1991: 79)

Gu Cheng:

When perceiving or expressing something, the poet has little use for logic, judgement, classification, and casual relationships. He forgets connections between things instantaneously like electricity. (ibid.)

Yang Lian:

Poetry does not explain; it simply is. (ibid.)

After years and years of domination by Maoist ideology, the new Chinese poetry finally succeeded to return to art, i.e. to rediscover its sense of artistic value, to become itself – to be literature. It symbolizes the alienation and frustration experienced by the young poets after the Cultural Revolution, and their poems are permeated with their struggle for hope, survival and human dignity. They are portrayals of their fears and doubts and helplessness.

For these new poets, poetry is a medium for the revelation of the soul. They sometimes express their feelings and emotions very directly since they see the significance of poetry in recovering the human self. Or according to Gu Cheng, what makes this new poetry so new is that there appears in it a “self”, a self with the special features of modern youth. He believes that this new “self” is born precisely on the ruins of the old.

The new poets advocate a self with a modern character, since they believe in human rights, human free will and that man should be his own master. This is a truly vital self, one endowed with dignity, intellect and a complex inner life.

According to them, this new kind of poetry is important not because of its content but primarily because it discloses the poet's feelings. And when a poet can communicate his feelings to the reader, he has succeeded in fulfilling the purpose of his work.

As innovators or walkers on new paths, the "obscure" poets have developed an individual, private symbolism by allowing themselves an unlimited freedom of expression. They are not afraid to lay open sensitivity towards their own needs and to show their critical spirit. By emphasizing the relationship between the poet and the outside world and by disclosing the internal contradictions in life they have endowed their poetry with the complexity of life.

As mentioned before, this new generation of poets was distinctly influenced by Western modernism, i.e. by the current literary trends in Europe as well as in the United States. They were very fond readers of such poets as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarme, Heine, Yeats, Pound, Eliot and Amy Lowell, just to name a few of them. Besides, they had the courage to deny the old revolutionary poetic tradition and to break with its techniques and modes. In order to disclose the fundamental truth of human existence, they engaged in search for a new poetics. They reintroduced a free verse which can be found in the poetry of the thirties, yet clearly under a strong Western influence. There is a lot of ambiguity in this new poetry. Compressed images of indirect, dreamy nature are often unclear, and they are supposed to be that way in order to stimulate the reader's mind, to arouse his imagination. In fact, the meaning is supplied by the reader and his ability or inability to interpret a certain poem.

Also the technique is new. It is based on symbolism, and the poems obviously reveal a certain abstract composition, and quite often look like a random association of ideas and images. Form is nothing less but an extension of content. Rhythm and rhyme are usually neglected, and the use of irregular lines and frequent omission of punctuation simply represent the vibration of the poet's feelings, thus emphasizing his original diction.

"Misty" poetry has often been attacked and criticized for being obscure, i.e. difficult to understand, or even incomprehensible. The established poet Ai Qing argues that it does not serve the people and that it fosters spiritual pollution like individualism, alienation and self-expression, and thus represents a great threat for the younger generation. Obviously, he is worried that the so called obscurity could be nothing else but simply a mask for criticizing the present government. Not to

mention the most severe opponents who went so far as to accuse the new poetry of being too westernized proclaiming it a betrayal of the Chinese cultural tradition.

Yet any more open-minded reader would agree that the problem is not obscurity or difficulty in understanding. The meaning of this new kind of poetry namely can not and should not be easily understood when reading it for the first time. As we all know, it has never been easy to understand poetry or man. When reading a “misty” poem, the reader often finds himself in a situation when he has to figure out for himself the unspoken implications of unclear, mysterious lines, i.e. he has to or should be able to see the moon through the mist. And this is precisely why the poems of this new generation of younger poets are so challenging and thought-provoking.

On the following pages, I would like to introduce three prominent figures among the “obscure” poets, namely Bei Dao, Gu Cheng and Yang Lian, and discuss briefly the fundamental features of their work.

## 2 Bei Dao (1949– )

Bei Dao is a pen name of Zhao Zhenkai, a co-founder of the unofficial literary journal *Today*, whose work after 1986 could not be published in China. He is probably the best known figure and one of the most controversial authors among the new poets. Being aware of the constant repressiveness of the Chinese political regime, he rejected it and became an outsider.

His reaction to the political and social pressures embodies the central force behind his poetry which is permeated with bitterness, despair, and steadily deepening pessimism. His poems are not so much politically engaged as they are honest statements of his personal concerns endowed with humanist philosophy like respect for basic human needs and human relationships, belief in man’s dignity, identification with the lost and the suffering, etc. In searching for the self and trying to disclose the true nature of the self, his poems carry universal meaning.

Indeed, Bei Dao displays great courage while speaking with his own voice about his hopes and fears, and thus clearly breaking with the tradition of the post-1949 era. For him, art (poetry) is the only possible way of transformation or solution for his painful suffering.

**Requiem** for the victims of June Fourth

Not the living but the dead  
under the doomsday-purple sky  
go in groups  
suffering guides forward suffering  
at the end of hatred is hatred  
the spring has run dry, the conflagration stretches unbroken  
the road back is even further away

Not gods but the children  
amid the clashing of helmets  
say their prayers  
mothers breed light  
darkness breeds mothers  
the stone rolls, the clock runs backwards  
the eclipse of the sun has already taken place

Not your bodies but your souls  
shall share a common birthday every year  
you are all the same age  
love has founded for the dead  
an everlasting alliance  
you embrace each other closely

in the massive register of deaths

(McDougall and Chen Maiping 1991: 11)

Bei Dao is a culture hero. The young educated Chinese see their own personal griefs and skepticism embodied in his poems. They share his concerns about the life and death of the human spirit. In *Requiem*, however, written a few days after June 4<sup>th</sup>, there is a sense of faith and hope: it was hard for anyone in those days not to believe that this brutal use of terror must soon bring about the downfall of its perpetrators. (McDougall and Chen Maiping 1991: xi)

### 3 Gu Cheng (1956–1993)

During the Cultural Revolution Gu Cheng was exiled to the countryside. While working as a swineherd for four years, he started to write for himself and decided to become a writer. He published his first poems in *Today* in 1979. He, too, could not escape being a target of various campaigns against “spiritual pollution” and “bourgeois liberalism” since 1983. He moved to New Zealand where he also died. Once he said that all he wants is peace and a chance to be a shepherd.

Gu Cheng’s poetry is highly personal and experimental. He likes to experiment with diverse poetic forms and themes, from the political to the lyrical to the mystical. For him, poetry and life are one and the same, and the more man knows, the greater becomes his despair. He started writing poetry out of a political experience of his country, and though there is a political content in his early poems which made him famous, he does not consider himself to be a political poet since this is not the main intent of his work. Most of the time, he is on a search for the roots of the Chinese individual trying to find words for what can be felt but can not be said.

#### Far and Near

You

now look at me,

now look at the clouds.

I feel  
you are very far when you look at me,  
very close when you look at the clouds.

(Yeh 1991: 82)

The poem is one of sadness and loneliness. We can feel there is a certain distance and lack of communication between the two of them, the speaker and the unidentified “you”.

It is clear that their relationship is withering away. The poem reveals a paradox embodied in the image of clouds. Usually, clouds appear to be far away, but not in this poem. Here they appear to be near. On the other hand, the “you” appears to be far away and not close to the speaker what we would normally expect. This paradox together with the juxtaposition of two opposite perspectives endows the poem with unique character.

#### 4 Yang Lian (1955– )

Yang Lian started to write poetry in 1976. Eleven years later, in 1987, his works were banned, and in 1989 he emigrated to New Zealand. Since 1993 he is living in London.

He is strongly committed to history and regards the individual self as the basis for the interpretation of history of which the individual is an integral part. In other words, in his eyes, each individual is a part of the history of mankind. Therefore, he regards poetry as a medium for the disclosing of the soul. His poems, greatly inspired by Nietzsche and his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and Lu Xun's *Wild Grass* as well as by his own generation and their optimism for love and hope amid bleak Chinese reality, are direct expressions of the heart's rhythm. According to him, life is a forest surging defiantly out of filthy soil and flowing in a raging torrent towards the sea.

In his collection of poetry entitled *Masks and Crocodile*, Yang Lian is exploring a new set of ideas and developing new techniques in a highly personal voice. The collection encompasses two parts of thirty poems, each of them compressed into six short lines. Endowed with powerful, haunting and grotesque



images, the poems reveal the complexity of thought and many layers of meaning. Yang Lian believes that language can be made to serve the author. And this is precisely what he is trying to achieve in his work. For him the innovative use of language is one of the most important factors for the conscious act of poetry. Indeed, his poetry may well be considered poetry about poetry.

In the preface to *Masks and Crocodile*, Yang Lian wrote:

I wonder whether or not I actually wrote these poems? These words, mysterious Chinese characters, are each and every one an old house and within their four walls countless time has ebbed away. I go to say something but on the page of white paper there are the reverberating echoes of someone else. Poets have confronted poetry in this way for a thousand years.

Perhaps poetry never exits. It is only an expanse of loneliness, like the quiet loneliness of birds singing at dawn. Words are born in this way and thus have silence as their ultimate brilliance:

The myriad phenomena is blue

The blue of when I no longer exist.

Perhaps the poet can only like a phantom perpetually wander from word to word and from mask to mask, forever in search for the other self awaiting in another time and in another place.

When I can no longer recognize my own face, I recognize all other faces; when all words recede far into the distance, a line of poetry remains in my hands. (Lee 1990: 40)

From *Masks and Crocodile*:

## **MASKS**

### **1**

Masks are born of faces

copy faces

but ignore faces

masks are born on blank pages  
cover the blankness  
but still there is only blankness  
(Lee 1990: 41)

### **CROCODILE**

**13**

Sitting alone deep at night  
many crocodiles steal onto the bank  
like intangible poems  
  
crawling between fingers  
under masses of grass and leaves  
unknowingly you are being eaten

(Lee 1990: 93)

### **References**

- Cheng, Guangwei (2003) *Zhongguo dangdai shige shi. (History of Contemporary Chinese Poetry)* Beijing: Beijing Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe.
- Duke, Michael S. (1985) *Contemporary Chinese Literature. An Anthology of Post-Mao Fiction and Poetry.* New York, London: M.E. Sharpe Inc., Armonk.
- Gu, Cheng (2003) *Gu Cheng de shi. (Poems by Gu Cheng)* Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe.
- Lee, Mabel (1990) *Yang Lian. Masks and Crocodile. A Contemporary Chinese Poet and His Poetry.* Sydney: Wild Peony PTY LTD.

- Liu, Xiang (2003) *Naxie rizi de yanse. Zhongguo dangdai shuqing shige. (The Colours of Those Days. Contemporary Chinese Lyric Poetry)* Shanghai: Xuelin chubashe.
- McDougall, Bonnie S. and Chen Maiping (1991) *Old Snow. Poems by Bei Dao.* New York: New Directions Books.
- Tang, Tao (1993) *History of Modern Chinese Literature.* Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.
- Yan, Yuejun (2002) *Menglong shixuan. (Misty Poetry. Selected Poems)* Beijing: Chunfeng wenyi chuban faxing.
- Yeh, Michelle (1991) *Modern Chinese Poetry. Theory and Practice since 1917.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Zhang, Qinghua (1998) *Xin shiqi wenxue. (New Era Literature)* Guangdong: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe.