

Youth, Patriotism and Liberation: The Social Role of Poetry in China

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Abstract

Chinese poetry is closely associated with the Confucian notion that literature is primarily informative and didactic, serving a social and moral purpose, as reflected in the proverbial saying “shi yan zhi” [poetry expresses intent]. In the early twentieth century, Chinese vernacular poetry emerged as a crucial part of Chinese intellectuals’ elaborate efforts to meet the enormous challenge of combining the external imperatives of national salvation with the internal prerequisites of enlightenment. Anti-traditionalism was a principal notion in this genre’s formative period. This paper considers the social role of poetry in China. It argues that the quest for emancipation from the traditional ethics of subordination and submissiveness is manifest in modern Chinese poetry, but this genre does not completely depart from tradition.

Key words: Chinese poetry, moral education, social role of literature

1. Introduction

Traditionally, poetry and formal essays were assigned to the highest literary genres because they were supposed to be the only serious conveyors of the doctrines and moral principles of the Confucian sages. On the other hand, other genres like fiction and drama were excluded from the elite canon because they were doggedly considered merely for entertainment with no didactic value, despite the fact that most of them expressed strong veiled ideological messages. When China faced the degeneration of her traditional heritage and a cultural predicament in the early twentieth century, youth represented the new vigour for a revitalised China. Attempting to strengthen China’s global position through enlightenment and education, leading figures of a New Culture Movement (*xinwenhua yundong*) brought out new vernacular poetry for the purposes of educating the young and celebrating youth. A shift in values accompanied the advent of revolutionary beliefs. In Mao’s China, poetry became a tool to propagate a singular statist ideology. A large amount of verses were closely linked with various political campaigns and movements. After Mao’s death, a small group of young poets took a quite radical turn, characterised by an anti-establishment stance, challenging both the Confucian and Communist authority in their works. This paper focuses on these changes, examining three distinctive periods: the May Fourth era in the early twentieth century; Mao’s socialist phase from 1949 to 1976; and the post-Mao “new era” from 1976 to 1989. These changes have to be understood in China’s historical and socio-cultural contexts.

2. May Fourth era

The high status of poetry was undermined by political, social and educational changes in the late Qing and early Republican periods. However, from 1918 onwards, following Hu Shi’s lead, many supporters of the language reform movement started experimenting with writing verses in the new vernacular, and the revival in poetry saw this genre once again become an important source of moral cultivation. Like many other genres in modern Chinese literature, the new poetry was written in a style much more accessible to young readers than the traditional verses. They were generally short and intended for recitation. More so than fiction stories, which played an important role in attacking the old thought, old ethics, old values and foreign imperialism as well as examining and analysing specific social problems, the new poetry was particularly capable of cultivating new virtues, establishing new values, sketching out new dreams, and setting up ideals.

In the traditional Chinese society dominated by the Confucian ethics and values, intellectuals were “superior men” (*junzi*), and they were role models, and had the absolute moral authority, responsible to Heaven (Fang & Bi, 2013). Despite the attacks launched in the early twentieth century by young intellectuals of Western education background against the traditional literati elitism, the concept of the leading role of intellectuals in society was so deeply rooted that most Chinese still regarded their moral credence immutable. In a rapid changing world, these Western influenced intellectuals were further entrenched as the embodiment of enlightenment. The power of the contributors to early vernacular poetry over readers became even more overwhelming, because these people were among those known as the leading literary figures, the best philosophers and greatest scholars of that time, founders and leaders of political parties and, most significantly, the profoundest thinkers of all time in China.

Almost unanimously shared by all the leading May Fourth poets was the advocating of the emancipation of the individual from the repression of the traditional forces, singing the praises of freedom and glorification of life and human values (Bi, 2012). However, beneath this unanimity, there is a wide divergence in opinion on the issue of socio-political relevance. Many texts reflect their authors’ faith in a progressive evolutionary premise and the social function of literature. Additionally, along with these intentions, some poets tactfully publicised their response to the apocalyptic message of the Russian Bolshevik Revolution as a cosmic act of mass liberation. Viewed in the historical and intellectual context, the texts by May Fourth leading literary figures all epitomise their own political and moral ideals and their dreams for the future of the nation. What is more striking is the power of the imagery of youth, revitalisation and freedom from corruption in contributing to a “New Culture Movement” in a society that had glorified an awesome antiquity throughout dynastic history.

Patriotism is exemplified in these works by the call to arouse the general population, which is often typified as numb, ignorant and indifferent, and unaware of the national crises. These works implicitly affirm the traditional Confucian notion of elitism, which integrates knowledge with social responsibility of educated people, but in a way, it is also a chronological reversal of Confucianism, because these poets esteemed youth over age and innovation over the established authority. In these verses, Chinese youth were to lead and educate their elders. In the context of the very low literacy level of that period, those able to read at all would be regarded as educated, and these poems would remind these readers that it was their moral obligation to conduct patriotic education services to the masses. To awaken the general population and alert them to the danger of being ruled by the foreign imperialism is one of the key messages of the explicit patriotic poetry, in which it is the young who were passionately engaged in the battle to rescue the nation from its agony as the victim of foreign imperialism. Although they all agreed, despite their ideological differences, that *jiuguo* [national salvation] depended first and foremost on a commitment to *jiuren* [the salvation of the people] from the traditional morality. In the course of the development, advocates of enlightenment had to constantly ally themselves with those who regarded national salvation as the most urgent. Xu Zhimo’s poem duly reflects the complexity of emotions of youth about their never-ending pursuit of truth and love in this perplexing era:

I don’t know,
Which direction the wind is blowing –
I am in a dream,
Her tenderness, my fascination.

I don’t know,
Which direction the wind is blowing –
I am in a dream,
Sweetness is the glory of the dream.

I don’t know,
Which direction the wind is blowing –
I am in a dream,
Her betrayal, my depression.

I don't know,
Which direction the wind is blowing –
I am in a dream,
Heartbreaking in the gloom of the dream.

I don't know,
Which direction the wind is blowing –
I am in a dream,
Dimness is the glory of the dream. (Xu Zhimo, 1928)¹

The increasing revolutionary radicalisation was intensified in the 1930s when many young writers gathered in Shanghai. They were attracted to the most industrialised city in China because its “foreign concessions” offered them some freedom to express their dissenting views against the Nationalist (KMT) government. As these young writers gradually committed themselves to a leftist position, they began to shift their focus from their own personal experience and individual views to ideological and revolutionary themes. Revolutionary verses, like Confucian children's books, used art and literature as an instrument for moral and social persuasion and ideological indoctrination. Contrastingly, they were used as a political weapon aiming at radical social change rather than social harmony promoted by Confucianism, as well as social equality through armed struggle rather than the Confucian notion of maintaining a social hierarchy through obedience. Their audiences were the poor and disadvantaged, not the elite. The child was a steel soldier of the future, moulded sternly for a revolutionary purpose, and was always ready to be told what ought to be done for a new China.

3. Mao's socialist phase

Unfortunately, when a “new China” was finally established with the Communist victory in 1949, Maoist cultural guidelines alone governed and controlled literature to propagate a singular statist ideology. A large amount of verses were closely linked with various political campaigns and movements. Their main purpose was not necessarily to educate the young politically or morally, but to mobilise the whole population to engage in these movements. As part of the propaganda work, these publications encouraged children's involvement in various campaigns and movements, and their involvement would help promote the mobilisation of the whole nation. Many songs, poems, short stories, and short plays were hastily produced in large quantity. They were usually of poor quality, often likened to a tide, as after a while, they disappeared completely. Repetition was also common. Before a first campaign was completed, the next one had already commenced. These works were designed for mobilising the whole nation, including children, and some of them were later used in Chinese language readers for children. The following are some examples of the three main campaigns in the 1950s:

3.1. Resisting U.S.A. and Assisting Korea

Valiant and high-spirited
we cross the Yelu River
to maintain peace and defend the motherland
That is the way to safeguard our hometown
The fine sons and daughters of China
Be united with one heart
to resist America and assist Korea
We are determined to defeat America
who is like a cruel-hearted wolf²

There were many songs of the same theme known to almost every Chinese citizen in those years. The best-known ones were from feature movies, *Shang Gan Ridge* and *Heroic Sons and Daughters*.

¹ The English translation is taken from <http://library.thinkquest.org/C0111522/english/poem.php?id=7> (January 29, 2013).

² Author unknown, quoted in primary school reader, *Yuwen*, vol. 4, Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, Beijing, 1964, p. 85.

3.2. Eliminating the Four Pests

The scab-head suffers a lot in June
Flies like to land on it
and mosquitoes like to bite it
The people's commune now calls on us
to kill "the four pests"
That is a very important task
The scab-head doesn't have to worry any more³

The four pests were identified as mice, sparrows, flies and mosquitoes in the directive issued by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in January 1958 (Liu Xia, 1994, 24). Later, the Chinese authorities attempted to rewrite this part of history by replacing "sparrows" with "bed bugs" as one of the four pests, because of the disastrous consequence of eliminating sparrows, which upset the ecological balance and enabled crop-eating insects to proliferate.

3.3. The Great Leap Forward (three poems)

We don't need oil for a light
We don't need oxen for a plough
Fruit falls in our lap
Fish leap into our net
Under the great red flag
We are the masters of our future⁴

The flower that I want to wear is a big red flower
The horse that I want to ride is capable of running a thousand *li* a day
The song that I want to sing is the song of the Great Leap Forward
The words that I want to hear are the words of the Party⁵

The people's commune is like a ship
The east wind impels the sails of the ship
We have Chairman Mao to steer our ship
to ride the wind and weather the storm going straight forward⁶

3.4. Cultural Revolution

In the so-called Cultural Revolution, singing "The East is Red", "Sailing the Sea Depends upon the Helmsman" and "To Wish Chairman Mao an Eternal Life" became a part of daily-enacted rituals, performed in the morning before work or study commenced or before the opening of a meeting.

The East is Red
The East is red, the sun is rising,
Mao Zedong appears out of China,
He brings great happiness among us,
He is our great saviour...
The Communist Party is like the sun,
Wherever it touches, it brings light.
Wherever there is a Communist Party
There shall be liberated people.⁷

³ Author unknown and untitled. This translation is based on the recollection of Zhang Deyu, whom I interviewed on January 24, 2007, in Shanghai. The interview was tape recorded.

⁴ Author unknown and untitled. This translation is based on the recollection of Zhang Deyu, op. cit.

⁵ Author unknown, quoted in primary school reader, *Yuwen*, op. cit., p. 15.

⁶ Author unknown, quoted in primary school reader, *Yuwen*, op. cit., p. 16.

⁷ The English translation is taken from Fang Xiangshu and Hay, T., *East Wind, West Wind*, pp. 97–98.

Sailing the Sea Depends upon the Helmsman
 Sailing the sea depends upon the helmsman
 Everything's growth depends upon the sun
 Rain and dew nurture the healthy rice seedlings
 Making revolution depends upon Mao Zedong Thought
 Fish cannot live without water
 Melons cannot grow without vine
 The revolutionary masses cannot do without the Communist Party
 Mao Zedong Thought is the sun which never sets⁸

To Wish Chairman Mao an Eternal Life
 Beloved Chairman Mao is the red sun in our hearts
 Beloved Chairman Mao is the red sun in our hearts
 We have so much to tell you
 We have so many songs to sing for you
 Tens of millions of hearts are pounding excitedly
 Tens of millions of smiling faces turn to the red sun
 We sincerely wish you an eternal life, an eternal life.⁹

The Mao cult produced countless songs like these in the early years of the Cultural Revolution. Literature was cannibalized by a distortion of the educational theories that had nurtured it.

4. The Post-Mao era

After Mao's death in September 1976 and the arrest of the so-called "Gang of Four", including Mao's widow, the Cultural Revolution came to an abrupt end. Deng Xiaoping, the new paramount leader, decided to permit a degree of freedom of expression. The populace responded with enthusiasm, writing wall posters to strongly criticise the policies and leaders they disagreed with. More importantly, the ex-Red Guard generation, who had grown up under Mao Zedong's socialism after 1949, had been used by Mao to overthrow his opponents and had then been sent off to remote countryside for re-education, began to search for a new set of values in the post-Mao wasteland.

In China, more than anywhere else, poetry and politics have gone hand in hand. At a time of disillusionment, people looked to poets, writers and artists, instead of the discredited Party and its hired propaganda machine, for enlightenment and fresh hope. Unhappy with the control of the Party, many poets started producing their own unofficial publications, which witnessed some brilliant works not seen for three decades since 1949. One of the prominent poets, Bei Dao (real name Zhao Zhenkai) was one of the founding members of the unofficial magazine *Today*. Bei Dao was one of the most respected new poets, not with the establishment, but with youth and students (Barmé & Minford, 1989, 16). His poem "The Answer" (*Huida*) was published in *Today*:

Baseness is the password of the base,
 Honour is the epitaph of the honourable.
 Look how the gilded sky is covered
 With the drifting, crooked shadows of the dead.

The Ice Age is over now,
 But why is there still ice everywhere?
 The Cape of Good Hope has been discovered,
 Why do a thousand sails contest in the Dead Sea?

I come into this world
 Bringing only paper, rope, and a shadow,
 To proclaim before the judgment
 The voices of the judged:

⁸ My own translation.

⁹ My own translation.

Let me tell you, world,
I—do—not—believe!
If a thousand challengers lie beneath your feet,
Count me as number one thousand and one.

I do not believe the sky is blue;
I do not believe in the sound of thunder;
I do not believe that dreams are false;
I do not believe that death has no revenge.

If the sea is destined to breach the dikes,
Let the brackish water pour into my heart;
If the land is destined to rise,
Let humanity choose anew a peak for our existence.

A new juncture and glimmering stars
Adorn the unobstructed sky,
They are five thousand year old pictographs,
The staring eyes of future generations.¹⁰

Literary critics began to discuss the meaning of the “new poetry” of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Xu Jingya wrote a long essay “The New Poetry: Door to the Soul” to defend their right of creativity:

Feeling is the soul of poetry. The single most important characteristic of these poems is that they vibrate with the spirit of their times. The new poets stress the subjectivity and individuality of poetry; they call on it to witness the whole variety of life’s emotions. For the young poets of the 1980s, poetry is a mirror with which to see oneself: it is the history of human soul. The poet creates his own world. This is the new manifesto.... The result is not mere poetic imaging, but the poet’s instantaneous response to reality. Once the door of the soul and the door of nature have been opened, the world is no longer monotonous and drab; the richness of the soul imbues it with a renewed splendour.¹¹

When critics were no longer content to criticise the past leaders and began to make adverse comments about the present leaders, including Deng himself, Deng decided to reverse his early decision. Unofficial journals were ordered to cease publications, and some of their authors were arrested and received severe prison terms. Under duress, Xu Jingya was obliged to make an abject self-criticism in March 1984 on his long essay “The New Poetry: Door to the Soul” :

Recalling the writing of my essay, I feel that I came to make all these errors because during that period, liberalism was rampant and I neglected the study of Marxist theory. And later I did not promptly grasp the essence of a whole series of Party instructions on literature and art. For a long time after writing the essay, I was not aware of the erroneous viewpoints it contained. As a result, some of my uncorrected errors spread again in theoretical and poetic circles, doing harm to the cause of literature and art. From now on, I will consciously expend more efforts on the study of Marxist theory of literature and art, will firmly take the socialist road, will go deep in life, close to the people – this is the resolution that has formed in my mind.¹²

For a decade, “new poetry” was pushed underground or channelled into less political arenas. Poets continued to experiment and search for new models of self-expressions. The imagery of ruins appeared again and again in Yang Lian’s poetry. One such example is his “Random Thought on the Ruins of Gandan” (*Gandan si suixiang*):

¹⁰ The translation is taken from Barmé and Minford, p. 236, with alteration of a few words.

¹¹ Translated and cited in Barmé and Minford, p. 242.

¹² Translated and cited in Barmé and Minford, p. 243.

Everywhere
stone pillars
erect wings spread to fly
Everywhere
solitary crenellations
unfathomable paths and voices of wind
A rough stillness has frozen the shapes of violence
This high peak, trapped by death,
backdrop to a small stage

September
my autumn barren as this
Save for that azure blue
which would recede at a touch
The sun unfolds, on an emptiness
scrawled with a calligraphy of ruins
Breakers of rubble
disintegrating hate and sorrow
Dusk, pack of dogs
poke wet noses into history
Sniffing out the broken images beneath the earth
(Yesterday never passes, it is enfolded in today
The stars revolve, a single glance and primordial terror
Tumbles out of darkness
All things complete at the same point of departure)¹³

On the other hand, Yang Lian's poetry reflected hope as well as a desire to go beyond the confinement of the Party's orthodox Marxist theory on literature and art, revealing the ferment beneath the surface, as shown in his poem "The Festival of Torches" (*Huobajie*):

Many have sung the praises of the torch
Eulogised those days of light
Stars of hope

Today I come here
No language but my heart
No road but my heart
The head of the sierra sinks into night
The forest grows quiet and still
Like love slowly cooling
Bare rock, buck wheat rippling
My heart leaping, searching – on this festival night
To find a fellow glimmer of light upon this earth¹⁴

Deng Xiaoping's rule allowed strong measures for economic growth, but he continued to be wary of a significant change in ideology. He instead launched a series of campaign against "spiritual pollution", "wholesale of Westernisation" and "bourgeois liberalisation". While repression continued against those who spoke of democracy, Deng Xiaoping's slogan "to get rich is glorious" stimulated the growth of small private enterprises. When these small private enterprises sought to expand, they needed the approval from the local government. Local officials were also among the first group of people, together with those private entrepreneurs, to become rich. Corruption became serious and widely spread. Anti-Deng doggerel became increasing common. One example, sung to the tune of "the East is Red", previously a hymn to Mao, went:

¹³ The translation is taken from Barmé and Minford, pp. 434–35.

¹⁴ The translation is taken from Barmé and Minford, p. 247.

The West is red;
The sun has set.
A Deng Xiaoping has come.
He serves the privileged very well,
And tells the rest to go to hell.¹⁵

It was this common issue of corruption, plus a bout of souring inflation, caused in part by the move toward price reforms in the late 1980s, that made students of Beijing feel that it was their historical mission to speak on behalf of the masses. In the spring of 1989, huge students' protest erupted in the national capital. The protest started modestly in April with a parade honouring the recently deceased Hu Yaobang (1915-1989), viewed as the strongest voice for political reform in the government. Buoyed by the support from Beijing residents, student leaders gradually escalated their activities. They called for a number of political goals, including democratic government, making officials disclose their income and assets; the removal of the use of mass political campaign; the abolishment of the prohibition against street protest; permit journalists to report students' demonstrations; and end corruption. Many students evoked the ideas of the May Fourth movement, claiming that China had still not achieved science and democracy.

Humiliated, Deng Xiaoping called students' actions "counterrevolutionary turmoil", but students did not tone down their rhetoric. A couple of thousand demonstrators staged a hunger strike to testify their sincerity and determination. Their moves were free and daring, widely supported by the Chinese people. One student wrote on May 22nd, 1989:

I didn't know that before the Cultural Revolution there had been a May 4th;
I didn't know that after the Cultural Revolution there would be an April 5th;
I didn't know that today would come before tomorrow;
I don't know if there will be a tomorrow after today.¹⁶

On the early morning of June 4th, troops and tanks of the People's Liberation Army stormed into central Beijing, opening fire at the mass of unarmed peaceful student demonstrators, killing and wounding thousands of China's newest generation of educated youth. In December 1991, a poet from Chengdu, Zhou Lunyou declared "A Stance of Rejection", in response to what he saw as the cultural capitulation that had followed the 1989 Beijing massacre. He called on his fellow poets and indeed all artists to resist the blandishment of the regime. He wrote:

[I]n the name human decency, in the name of the absolute dignity and the conscience of the poet, and in the name of pure art we declare:

We will not cooperate with phoney values system –

- Reject their magazines and payments.
- Reject their critiques and acceptance.
- Reject their publishers and their censors.
- Reject their lectures and "academic" meetings.
- Reject their "writers associations", "artists associations", "poets associations", for they are all sham artistic *yamen* [bureaucracy] that corrupt art and repress creativity.¹⁷

5. Conclusion

Modern vernacular poetry emerged in an era in which there was constant political upheaval, and in which intellectuals and writers presented themselves as enduring a constant state of cultural and emotional crisis regarding the imminent destruction of the nascent Chinese nation. Patriotic Chinese writers created monstrous images of foreign imperialism and spinelessly corrupt Chinese government officials in the new poetry to instil in the young minds a sense of urgency for the survival of the nation. An important feature of these patriotic works is the inclusion of patriotic slogans.

¹⁵ The translation is taken from Dreyer, p. 129.

¹⁶ Translated and cited in Barmé and Minford, p. xxi.

¹⁷ Translated and cited in Barmé (2000), pp. 198–99.

The language in these works is explicitly political and sometimes very passionate and even violent. These poets were fully aware of the moral predicament they were in, wrestling most consciously with the Confucian notion of the role of the traditional ruling intelligentsia and their self-styled image of leaders of the enlightenment movement, which attacked the traditional elitism of the literati. However, they retained their conviction that it was their epic historical mission to save China from extinction through saving the young. Being trained in the Confucian education system to be moralists when young and later benefitted from modern Western education in a modern scientific point of view, either at home or abroad, these pioneers of modern vernacular poetry were all concerned with the welfare of the masses of the common people and were among the first to become conscious of the problems of their nation. They all believed in the connection between literature and the fate of the nation, which was often manifested in their obsessive radical stance. They were convinced that they collectively represented the quintessential spirit of modernity – the impatience with the established and the impulse to create the new. They looked upon themselves as the vanguard of society and believed that they could lead the whole nation in the march to a new China. The language they used was invested with strong emotion. Words like society, nation, mass education, emancipation, national salvation, uplifting national strength, science, democracy and patriotism became the key words of their daily rhetoric.

In spite of its most vicious attack against the ills of the time, modern vernacular poetry was, ironically, the beneficiary of the time. It emerged and developed between phases of traditional authoritarian Confucianism and Mao's totalitarian socialism. The weak central government and the chaos caused by the civil wars among warlords for supremacy, and the humiliation of foreign concessions resulting from foreign imperialism granted this period with an unprecedented amount of freedom for speech, expression and publication. It was in this context that modern vernacular poetry in its early years emerged, like a little river, twisting and turning along its lengthy journey through the yellow earth, all the way longing to meet the "blue ocean" of cultural globalisation for maturity.¹⁸ It has passed the test of Mao's cultural isolationism, which not only denied young people proper intellectual nourishment, but also reduced it to the part of a pure ideological weapon that treated children as adults, and adults as children. However, in the long run, it may be that no one will be able to stop it from merging into a genuine artistic world for the young. This goal is becoming increasingly feasible, because nowadays, even children, stepping up from their previous roles of being powerless infants fed with a prescribed formula, have already become enthusiastic patrons of modern network of communication with their own choices.

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¹⁸ This metaphor is used in *Heshang* [River elegy], a six-part documentary series aired in June 1988 in China.