

徐敬亞：崛起的詩羣——評中國新詩的現代傾向

## A Volant Tribe of Bards

### — A Critique of the Modernist Tendencies of Chinese Poetry

By Xu Jingya

Translated and adapted by Ng Mau-sang

I SOLEMNLY BESEECH poets and critics to remember the year 1980 in the same way that sociologists remember the ideological thaw of 1979. 1980 was a time of important innovation for our New Poetry, an artistic watershed. It witnessed the disintegration of the old monolithic and monotonous way of writing poetry, a way that had prevailed since 1949, and saw the emergence of a new richness and variety, of a poetry with strong modernist overtones.

The first officially published poem to proclaim the new movement was Bei Dao's 'The Answer', printed in *Poetry* (Shikan), March 1979, at a time when the praises of the heroes of the April 5 Incident of 1976 were still ringing in the air:

#### The Answer

*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.*

#### 回答

卑鄙是卑鄙者的通行證，  
高尚是高尚者的墓誌銘。  
看吧，在鍍金的天空中，  
飄滿了死者彎曲的倒影。

*Xu Jingya is a young poet and critic who was born in 1951 and graduated in 1982 from the Chinese Department of Jilin University in N.E. China. In 1979 he became a member of the Jilin branch of the Writers' Association. After graduation he was assigned to the editorial staff of Shenhua 蓼花, a magazine devoted to popular or folk performing literature. He is married to the poet Wang Xiaoni, and they have a young daughter.*

*His controversial essay 'A Volant Tribe of Bards' was first published in Xinye 新葉, a Liaoning student magazine, early in 1982, and was reprinted in Dangdai wenyi sichao (Contemporary Literary Trends) 當代文藝思潮, 1983:1. This translation represents only a fraction (approximately one tenth) of the lengthy*

*original. Nearly all of the detailed discussion of individual poems and of poetic technique has been omitted. Some twenty extracts are here linked together, to give the reader a general idea of Xu's argument.*

*The English title is taken from one of Wordsworth's sonnets:*

A Volant Tribe of Bards on earth are found . . .

*A more literal translation—'A body of emergent poetry'—is given by Bonnie McDougall in the introduction to Notes from the City of the Sun.*

*For an anthology of Misty poetry, see below, pp. 181-270.*

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

冰川紀已過去了，  
爲什麼到處都是冰凌？  
好望角發現了，  
爲什麼死海裏千帆相競？

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

我來到這個世界上，  
祇帶着紙、繩索和身影。  
爲了在宣判之前，  
宣讀那些被判決的聲音：

*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.*

告訴你吧，世界，  
我——不——相信！  
如果你腳下有一千名挑戰者，  
那就把我算作第一千零一名。

*I don't believe the sky is blue;  
I don't believe in the sound of thunder;  
I don't believe that dreams are false;  
I don't believe that death has no revenge.*

我不相信天是藍的；  
我不相信雷的回聲；  
我不相信夢是假的；  
我不相信死無報應。

*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.*

如果海洋註定要決堤，  
就讓所有苦水都注入我心中；  
如果陸地註定要上昇，  
就讓人類重新選擇生存的峯頂。

*A new juncture and glimmering stars,  
Adorn the unobstructed sky.  
They are five thousand year old pictographs  
The staring eyes of future generations.<sup>1</sup>*

新的轉機和閃閃的星斗，  
正在綴滿沒有遮攔的天空。  
那是五千年的象形文字，  
那是未來人們凝神的眼睛。

By 1980, this kind of modernist poetry was being widely published and attracting a lot of attention both among poets and with the public at large. It already had a strong following among the young in China.

What was the nature of the impact which these poems had?

Feeling is the soul of poetry. The single most important characteristic of these poems is that they vibrate with the spirit of their times. Stoical calm in the midst of intense suffering, equanimity in the face of cold hostility, the tragedies and joys of an epoch are here transformed into a threnody, a lament in monologue form. Here are ordinary members of modern Chinese society, feeling and experiencing life from a perspective that differs utterly from that of their predecessors.

Since 1949, Chinese poets have adhered to the principle of realism, of 'art as representation of life'; their dogmatism has turned their poetry into mere description. The new poets stress the subjectivity and individuality of poetry, they stress the dynamic role of the aesthetic subject, they call on poetry to witness an experience of the kaleidoscopic emotions of life . . . . [The old poetry was] a mirror held up to the external world. For the young poets of the 80s 'poetry is a mirror

<sup>1</sup>Bonnie McDougall's translation, from *Notes from the City of the Sun* (Cornell, 1983), p. 38. Xu himself does not quote the poem, as he would assume that his readers knew it anyway.

with which to see oneself', 'it is the history of the human soul'; 'the poet creates his own world.' This is the new manifesto. 'Poetry is a special means of communication between the human heart and the external world.' Poetry that merely reflects the external world is not art. This conception has distanced the new poets from the simple and mimetic poetic practices of their predecessors . . . .

For example, when a new poet writes of the landscape, he dwells entirely on his own personal feeling. He has immersed himself totally in the scenery he describes. One 'reads' therefore not only rivers and mountains, but also the unsettled emotional world of the poet. Landscape has thus been 'humanized', and 'poetry is a mirror with which to see oneself.' Some of Gu Cheng's poems<sup>2</sup> (many of which focus entirely on the poet's personal feelings) have been labelled 'misty'; this is because of their psychological nature. The majority of Bei Dao's poems use external imagery to symbolize the poet's own psyche, and the images are organized in stark fashion. The poetic 'leaps' of Jiang He and Yang Lian are even more a direct expression of the heart's rhythm . . . . For these young poets poetry is a medium for the unfolding of the soul. They merge the subjective with the objective, and fuse a fresh and vibrant emotion with the world around them. In so doing, they have discovered a poetic perspective quite different from that of their immediate predecessors. By stressing the aesthetic quality of poetry, they have dissociated themselves from the mimetic description of classical poetry, or the intuitive lyricism of romantic poetry. They strive to transcend the confines of realism, and are intent on forming a new entity between the self and the external world. The poet turns from external reality and looks inwards, forming his images in accordance with his own feeling and sensibility. Such are the principles according to which Bei Dao, Shu Ting and Jiang He create their poems . . . . The result is not mere poetic imagining, 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. One and the same stream acquires a hundred colours, a hundred different shapes of motion. This departure from the old pictorial aesthetic, this new merging of the temporal and spatial in art, has taken poetry into a new and wider domain, has rekindled the very life of poetry.

Many, finding the broken images, the apparently disjointed structure, and the seemingly end-less ending of these poems unpalatable, have cried 'I can't understand this!' Bereft of those elements they are used to seeing in poetry—a distinct story line, a logical sequence, whole incidents, complete images, the poet exerting himself at the end of the poem to achieve a heightening effect—bereft of all this, the reader is at a loss and cries out in protest, 'This is plain bad!' This demonstrates a divergence in the whole conception of poetry. To the young poets themselves, poetry is a radiation of the life-force, an unbosoming of emotion. The importance of a poem rests not with its plot or its concrete content, but with the poet's feeling. When a poet succeeds in communicating his feeling to the reader, he can be said to have achieved his purpose.

<sup>2</sup>For a selection of poems by Bei Dao, Gu Cheng, Jiang He, Shu Ting and Yang Lian, see 'Mists', below pp. 195-248.

### *Footprints of the Younger Generation*

It is precisely because Chinese society has undergone such an extraordinary experience that its poets have produced such 'extraordinary' poems, poems which have transcended the boundaries of our tradition. Looking at their poems, one can see truthfully and distinctly the mental contours of a generation . . . . As Comrade Xie Mian aptly pointed out in his essay 'After Losing Equanimity', the young poets' response to the life they have experienced can be summed up in four words: 'I do not believe.' Their attitude towards the future is one of yearning and aspiration, the keynote of their poetry is one of hope and determination. What I want to say here is that these poems are the footprints of a whole generation of young people, of a decade, footprints of restless wandering, of depression, of defiance and passionate indignation, of contemplation and aspiration . . . . In these poems we see the image of youth that has been injured and insulted, but that no amount of oppression can crush or deceive.

#### Bei Dao: All

*All is fate  
All is cloud  
All is a beginning without an end  
All is a search that dies at birth  
All joy lacks smiles  
All sorrow lacks tears  
All language is repetition  
All contact a first encounter  
All love is in the heart  
All past is in a dream  
All hope carries annotations  
All faith carries groans  
All explosions have a moment of quiet  
All deaths have a lingering echo*

#### Shu Ting: This, Too, Is All

A reply to a young friend

*Not all trees  
are broken by the storm;  
Not all seeds  
are left rootless in the soil;  
Not all feelings  
dry in the deserts of the heart;  
Not all dreams  
let their wings be clipped.*

*No, not all  
Is as you say!*

#### 一切

一切都是命運  
一切都是煙雲  
一切都是沒有結局的開始  
一切都是稍縱即逝的追尋  
一切歡樂都沒有微笑  
一切苦難都沒有淚痕  
一切語言都是重復  
一切交往都是初逢  
一切愛情都在心裏  
一切往事都在夢中  
一切希望都帶着注釋  
一切信仰都帶着呻吟  
一切爆發都有片刻的寧靜  
一切死亡都有冗長的回聲

#### 這也是一切

不是一切大樹  
都被暴風折斷;  
不是一切種子,  
都找不到生根的土壤;  
不是一切真情  
都流失在人心的沙漠裏;  
不是一切夢想  
都甘願被折掉翅膀。

不, 不是一切  
都像你說的那樣!

*Not all flames  
consume themselves alone  
do not shed light on others;  
Not all stars  
point only to the dark  
do not announce the dawn;  
Not all singing  
brushes past the ears  
does not stay in the heart.*

*No, not all  
Is as you say!*

*Not all appeals  
lack reverberation;  
Not all losses  
are beyond repair;  
Not all abysses  
spell destruction;  
Not all destruction  
falls upon the weak;  
Not all souls  
can be trampled underfoot  
to rot in the mud;  
Not all endings  
are stained with blood and tears  
and joyless faces.*

*All present is pregnant with the future,  
All in the future grows from its yesterdays,  
Hope, and the struggle for it—  
Bear this all on your shoulders.*

*tr. Bonnie S. McDougall*

不是一切火焰，  
都只燃燒自己  
而不把別人照亮，  
不是一切星星，  
都僅指示黑夜  
而不報告曙光；  
不是一切歌聲，  
都掠過耳旁  
而不留在心上。

不，不是一切，  
都像你說的那樣！

不是一切呼籲都沒有回響；  
不是一切損失都無法補償；  
不是一切深淵都是滅亡；  
不是一切滅亡都覆蓋在弱者頭上；  
不是一切心靈  
都可以踩在腳下，爛在泥裏；  
不是一切後果  
都是眼淚血印，而不展歡容。

一切的現在都孕育着未來，  
未來的一切都生長於它的昨天。  
希望，而且為它鬪爭，  
請把這一切放在你的肩上。

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Two poems, 'All' by Bei Dao, and 'This, Too, Is All' by Shu Ting, epitomize this image of youth. Many see these two poems as representing two types of young people. This is a misreading of the poems and a misunderstanding of the poets themselves. These two poems are typical of all the works of the young poets; they are two refractions of a unifying belief of our young people: their outright rebellion against falsehood and ugliness, and their single-minded aspiration towards beauty, truth and perfection. Together these two refractions form the thematic foundation of the new poets . . . . Bei Dao negates the old world, while Shu Ting affirms her belief in humanity. Theirs is clearly a different expression of a single feeling . . . . In the hearts of the younger generation and in the works of the young poets, the feelings of negation and aspiration are closely aligned, inseparably mingled like milk and water. Bei Dao affirms his belief with brows tightly locked, while Shu Ting continues her quest with a smile . . . .

### *The Expression of the Self*

In their poems the young poets advocate 'a self with a modern character', believing this to be the 'content of a modern poetry'. They consider that the self proclaimed by the poetry and art of the past (i.e. since 1949) was a sort of non-self, 'a grain of sand', 'a pebble for paving the road', 'a gear wheel', or 'a screw'—not a human being with human feelings, thoughts and doubts. The young poets voice their opposition to this 'religious self-abnegation'; they firmly believe in human rights, human free will and all the just demands of a human being; they believe that man should be his own master, so much so that the lyrical persona in their poems is often an individual being pure and simple . . . . Through the first person narrator, who is a real existing entity, they recite to the world, to the reader, or to nobody in particular, their muted interior monologues—strong yet calm, melancholy and steadily paced . . . . The poems of Bei Dao, Jiang He and Yang Lian all deal with a common theme from the perspective of the 'self' . . . . Because they stress the relationship between the poet and the outside world, between the 'person' and the 'thing in objective reality', because they expose the internal contradictions in life, their work constitutes a striking contrast to the poems of the past, which either simple-mindedly illustrate life, or glorify its positive elements, or condemn its negative aspect. The new poems reflect to a greater extent the complexity of life, its many facets.

### *Complexity of Theme*

The complex experiences and feelings of a generation have determined the complexity of their poetic themes. In this they have broken away from the poetic formula of the 50s and 60s (still widely prevalent)—namely, description at the beginning, followed by elaboration in the middle, and elevation at the end . . . . As far as poetry is concerned, this change is sure progress.

Thus there emerges in poetry multiple meaning and indirect treatment of theme . . . . Because such modernistic poems stress expression through implication, the theme is frequently a synthesis of several trains of thought, and creates at times a feeling of apparent contradiction . . . . To deal adequately with such themes, the poets have found an appropriate technique, a mode of expression based on symbolism. These poems thus tend in general to show a certain abstraction, a certain surrealism, a random association of ideas.

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Bei Dao: Life

生活

Net

網

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This is the most succinct of symbolist poems. It uses the image contained in the monosyllabic Chinese character *wang* (網, net) to symbolize the disyllabic title, *shenghuo* (生活, life). Without going into detail as to whether this is a poem of the first order, one can safely say that from an aesthetic point of view the associations triggered by it exceed those of a thousand mediocre poems put together . . . .

**The Path of Poetry**

A nation, in order to achieve greatness, must develop from its own foundations. This is also true of a literary form. What then is the most immediate foundation for modern Chinese poetry? It is not classical poetry, nor is it folk ballads; it is the fine tradition established since the May Fourth Movement (1919), under the influence of western poetry. This is the new poetry's 'own foundation' . . . . The poetic mainstream of the future flows from the May Fourth tradition (especially as seen in the poetry written before and during the 40s); to this can be added a modernist technique, with an emphasis placed on critical learning from foreign modernist poetry. On this foundation, we can build a truly diversified and pluralistic poetic structure.

**Conclusion**

The young poets of today have a glorious but difficult task. The future and its new art are largely dependent on their present efforts. Our admiration (and our compassion) go out to them. They must continue to carve out a new path through innumerable difficulties . . . . There is nothing ahead of them, not a single footprint. They must continue on their journey, must turn back from time to time to explain themselves to those behind them, must slow down because of the 'drag' from behind. But nothing can stop them. Their quest is predestined. The beginning has already been made. They will move forward to success, carrying their mission with them . . . . The earth will receive their fruits, the earth will record their names—this Volant Tribe of Bards!

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徐敬亞：時刻牢記社會主義的文藝方向

Postscript: Xu Jingya's Self-criticism in the *People's Daily*  
 "Keeping the Socialist Orientation of Literature and Art Constantly in Mind"

*Original editor's note:*

Comrade Xu Jingya is the author of one of the so-called Three Volant Essays, which have attracted much attention in poetic circles. His long essay, 'A Volant Tribe of Bards', published in Contemporary Literary Trends (1983.1), advocated a series of erroneous ideas departing from the socialist orientation in literature and art. These ideas cover the relationship between art and politics, between poetry and life, and between poetry and the people; and some problems of fundamental principle, such as how to treat our country's classical and ballad

poetry, and how to treat the revolutionary tradition of New Poetry since the May Fourth Movement. The essay provoked incisive criticism from the general reading public and in literary and art circles. The Jilin Provincial Party Committee and Jilin literary and art circles also repeatedly gave the author serious criticism and patient assistance. Recently, Comrade Xu has to some extent realized the error of the views he advocated and has written this self-criticism.