

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!

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.

MY 'VOLANT TRIBE OF BARDS' has since its publication been severely criticized by theorists, critics and poets. During this time, I have read many critical essays and taken part in a series of conferences and forums. Being a young student fresh from college, I am lucky to have obtained instruction and help of this kind from theorists and leaders of the older generation as well as from my teachers, lucky to have received their earnest criticism both in written and spoken form. I have benefited a great deal from this. In receiving their criticism I have often re-examined, dissected and analysed my former viewpoints. I have had a deepening recognition of my errors in departing from the socialist orientation and have acquired a greater understanding of the socialist orientation of the new poetry and in literature and art in general. During this time, I have also had the opportunity to recall the course of my growth. I have summed up my experience, and clarified my orientation. In my short literary experience, this discussion will live forever in my memory.

'Volant Tribe of Bards' is an essay I wrote at university in 1980 and early 1981. At that time, my discontent at the monotony and the formulaic nature of poetic creation during the devastating rule of the Gang of Four, and my excitement at the experiments that were taking place, led me to make these observations on the orientation of the new poetry appearing in 1980. However, the rampant trend of capitalist liberalism influenced me so deeply, that my own explorations and observations took a wrong direction, and I made great errors on a whole series of matters of principle. In my essay, I cursorily negated the cultural tradition of our classical poetry; I played down and even negated the development of the revolutionary poetry of the past decades; I negated the realistic principle of poetic creation; I blindly recommended Western Modernism in the arts, praised some younger poets as a Volant Tribe of Bards, and made an inappropriate evaluation of their work; I propagated idealistic literary viewpoints such as 'anti-rationalism' and 'self-expression' etc. It is especially serious that in my analysis of the conditions for the development of artistic schools, I advocated the need of a 'unique social outlook which can even be discordant with the concerted main voice of society'; and that I erroneously used the words 'I do not believe' to

sum up the poets' attitude toward the past. This is not merely a literary mistake, it is a political one. After its publication, my essay had a very bad effect in literary circles. Today, when I read it from a new point of view, I am shocked. I have often asked myself, 'Why did it happen?'

I AM A YOUNG writer who embarked on a literary career after the smashing of the Gang of Four. In my university years, along with the movement for ideological liberation, came some erroneous trends of thought. I was greatly influenced by the trend towards capitalist liberalism for a period of time, and became confused and both ideologically and artistically lost. I slackened my efforts to remould my world view, and was quite uninterested in the study of Marxist literary theory. I regarded as rare treasures Western modernist capitalist theories in philosophy, aesthetics and psychology, theories such as existentialism, intuitivism and psychoanalysis, which were pouring in at that time. And I indiscreetly passed judgement on some important issues in China's new poetry, using the limited knowledge of Chinese literary history (of the recent past and of the contemporary period) which I had just acquired. Thus, as a result of my ideological confusion and the heterogeneous nature of my artistic training, I dashed off the essay with only a smattering of knowledge of some important theoretical issues, and an incorrect ideological inclination crept in. This distorted my discussion of a serious artistic question and was responsible for the deviation from the correct socialist orientation in my discussion of the relation between art and politics, poetry and life, poetry and the people. I made many irresponsible observations which contain serious mistakes in political standpoint. Reading some of the critical articles and my own essay together, I now feel that there are many good lessons I should draw. Just as many comrades have pointed out in their critiques, my 'Volant Bards', seen as an overall view of the orientation of our new poetry and of its artistic development, fails to be guided by Marxist theory and is permeated with the idealistic view of art and the metaphysical way of thinking. The absence of correct ideological guidelines led to its deviation in the analysis of life and art, and hence to the inevitable failure to explicate literary phenomena in a scientific way. Recalling the

writing of the essay, I feel that I wrote such an erroneous piece because during the period when liberalism was rampant 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 the writing of the essay, I was not aware of the erroneous viewpoints contained in it. In the struggle against capitalist liberalism in the fields of literature and art, a struggle led by the Party, I did not promptly examine myself in a critical light, and as a result many ideological and artistic errors remain in 'Volant Bards'. After the 12th Party Congress, the Party Central Committee resolved to build a socialist spiritual civilization with communist ideology as its centre; but I still failed to examine my essay in the light of the Party's resolution, and still less did I correct my viewpoint by approaching the problem from the higher level of a socialist orientation in literature and art. I was still too engrossed in the minute artistic analysis of detail, and consequently made the mistake of allowing the essay to be published in January 1983. As a result, some of my uncorrected errors spread again in theoretical and poetic circles, doing harm to the cause of literature and art.

Whether as a writer or as a young person, I should not for a moment depart from the socialist direction. Exploration without a correct direction is dangerous.¹ In the early stages of the discussion of my essay, I came to realize some of its artistic and academic faults—but that was all. It was only after the subsequent help I received from organizations and comrades at various levels, especially after several large-scale forums and serious, conscientious, practical, realistic, word-by-word, paragraph-by-paragraph, point-by-point analysis and criticism, that I began to realize the seriousness of the matter. During this time, many of my colleagues, friends and teachers talked with me in a spirit of friendship and reason, with patience and restraint. Some older literary comrades compared the errors in my essay with their own in the 50s, and praised with deep feeling the Party's policy on literature and art, and the lively cultural situation since the Third Plenum of

the Eleventh Central Committee. All this filled me with a variety of emotions. While receiving this severe, but calm and comradely criticism, I went through my essay and dissected it thoroughly, and came to realize that it does indeed deviate from the cardinal principle, in literature and art, of serving socialism and serving the people. This whole discussion woke me up with a jolt. Climbing the ladder of knowledge is not an easy matter. Criticism is a kind of remoulding, a process of learning which causes pain and shame, and self-criticism is a similar process of self-correction and self-moulding. Our artistic growth took place during the devastating rule of the Gang of Four, and the younger generation of writers like myself have never experienced the normal life of artistic criticism. During this discussion, I realized, from the transformation of my own perception, that artistic criticism is as necessary to the cause of literature and art as washing is to the human face. Constant criticism and self-criticism are the effective guarantee of a correct orientation in literature and art.

Here I would like to mention in passing that while 'Volant Bards' was being criticized in literary and artistic circles within China after its publication, some foreign scholars took pleasure in it and commented on it with ulterior motives. I think that they know nothing about the concrete situation of Chinese poetry today. Their motives are completely different from ours. They do not share our desire to debate the rights and wrongs of an issue so that artistic creation may prosper. Our discussion is entirely part of the normal order of things in the literary and artistic life of our society. To adhere to the truth and to correct mistakes, these are also scientific principles that everyone engaged in artistic creation and research should follow. As for those foreigners who take pleasure in sowing discord and stirring up trouble, the less said about their deeds and motives the better. Perhaps they will never be able to understand the weapon of criticism and self-criticism as it functions in our revolutionary literature and art.

Since I graduated from university, I have been involved in a considerable amount of popular cultural work. And during two years of work as an editor, I have also had the opportunity to read quite a few poetic works written in the vein of

¹ Editor's note: Exploration *with* a 'correct direction' is surely a contradiction in terms!—J.M.

classical poetry and folk ballad—which I attacked in my essay as ‘that same old stuff, awkward and difficult to read’, and as ‘feudal pastoral’. In my leisure time, I too came to feel the bias of my former viewpoint. My contact with many amateur writers made me feel all the more the serious harm done to poetry by the erroneous views of ‘Volant Bards’. The whole debate has clarified many of my confusions and rectified my ideological direction. Our country, our people, the rapid economic development of our society, our unique national spiritual life, all require our literature and art to take the socialist road, the Chinese socialist road. It is imperative that we take this road; it is unimaginable to be without the guidance of Marxism, the leadership of the Party and without the thousands of years of our cultural heritage, the decades of the more recent revolutionary tradition in literature and art. The tendency in artistic creation to break away from life and the people, and the theoretical ideas that support this tendency, jeopardize the normal development of literature and art. Life is already teaching and warning us all.

Recently, after studying the *communiqué* of the Second Plenum of the Twelfth Central Committee, and Comrade Deng Xiaoping’s talk on eliminating spiritual pollution, I felt clearer about the duty of every literary worker; and at the same time, I felt sorry for the harmful effects of my

past mistakes. What is done cannot be undone. The road ahead is still a long one, and I will take this opportunity to examine myself carefully, to eradicate the influence of capitalist liberalism, and to keep forever in the forefront of my mind the socialist orientation in literature and art. I have recently reflected that although ‘Volant Bards’ was written only three years ago, and although my own experience as a writer, and my exposure to erroneous thought, were not of any great duration, the incorrect viewpoints expressed in the essay, and other confusions not verbalized, but implicit in it, have intrinsic causes and social roots that must not be overlooked. Therefore my own ideological and artistic study and remoulding will be a long-term task. Today’s self-criticism still needs to be continuously deepened, the freshly established and correct viewpoint needs to be gradually consolidated. From now on, I will consciously expend more effort in the study of Marxist theory of literature and art, will firmly take the literary road to serve socialism and the people, will go deep into life, close to the people—this is the resolution that has formed itself in my mind. And also, I believe, through this discussion, our new poetry, and the cause of literature and art, will surely develop more healthily along the socialist road.

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