

Voice of Protest: Political Poetry in the Post-Mao Era*

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I

Poetry in the People's Republic of China during the past 30 years has been dominated by works intensely political in nature – a kind of poetry known by the name *zhengzhi shuqing shi* (*political lyric*). The function of this poetry was to eulogize current political movements and to generate public support for them. This phenomenon reached its height during the *xin mingde yundong* (*New Folksong Movement*) of 1958 when millions of peasants were mobilized to write poetry to praise the Great Leap Forward and the people's commune.¹ Even when the Great Leap backfired and a widespread famine ensued, poetry was still boasting of “commune members piling rice all the way to the sky.”² The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–76) proved a greater disaster than the Great Leap Forward, hence, the greater need for poetry to supply optimism. It was also a time of personality cult and *xiandai mixin* (*modern superstition*); poetry was therefore obliged to provide eulogies. To meet these demands, large quantities of what poet Gong Liu called “*huanhu shi*” (*hail-to-the-chief poems*) flooded the market. Many of them were considered to be little more than “rhymed lies.”³

In the post-Mao era, political poems still constitute a sizeable portion of the poetry being produced, but the nature of these poems has undergone a significant change: instead of eulogy, they voice protest and criticism. The event that marked the beginning of a new era was the Tian'anmen Square mass poetry movement of 1976, also known as the April Fifth Movement. On that day, a crowd estimated at more than two million strong congregated at the Tian'anmen Square in the centre of Beijing to pay tribute to Premier Zhou Enlai who had passed away in January of that year. As befitting their literary heritage, these people mourned their beloved premier with poems. They also denounced Madame Mao (Jiang Qing) and her three cohorts – who collectively later came to be known as the “gang of four.” These poems of grief and indignation were the first voice of the people coming out of China in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. Their spirit of protest set the tone of the poetry that followed.

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1. For a study of this mass-produced poetry, see S. H. Chen, “Multiplicity in uniformity: poetry and the Great Leap Forward,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 3 (July–September 1960), pp. 1–15.

2. *Hongqi geyao* (*Songs of the Red Flag*), edited by Zhou Yang and Guo Moro (Beijing: Hongqi zazhishe, 1959), p. 218.

3. Gong Liu, “*Shi yu chengshi*” (“Poetry and sincerity”), *Wenyi bao*, No. 4 (1979), p. 37.

The death of Mao Zedong and the fall of the “gang of four” in the autumn of 1976 officially marked the end of the Cultural Revolution, but not of the Maoist rule. The late Chairman’s “left” errors were seen to be continued by the new Chairman, Hua Guofeng, who promoted the policy of “two whatever’s” – whatever policy decisions Mao made and whatever instructions Mao gave must be strictly adhered to. Thus, the Cultural Revolution was still hailed as a great revolutionary achievement, the Tian’anmen Incident was still labelled a “counter-revolutionary” activity, and those arrested during the Incident remained behind bars. During this period of Maoism without Mao, poets voiced their protest by eulogizing the heroes who had fought against the “gang of four.” Veteran poet Ai Qing’s “Zai langjian shang” (Atop the waves,” 1978) is a representative work. The poem is about Han Zhixiong, a young worker who was imprisoned in connection with the Tian’anmen Incident. Han is portrayed as a dauntless freedom-fighter who tells his captors: “I am willing to stay in prison for one thousand years!”⁴ Ai Qing couples his praise of the hero with a demand for democracy:

Don’t depend on the mercy of the spirits,
 Don’t wait for the handouts of God.
 People demand the right to live,
 Democracy should not be just window dressing (p. 369).

He also addresses a question that was very much on the mind of many people – the rehabilitation of those wrongly accused during the Cultural Revolution. His rallying cry is: “All policies must be put into practice, / All unjust verdicts must be righted” (p. 369). As a timely composition voicing the pressing concerns of the people, this poem was a favourite in the poetry recitals, but it is not one of Ai Qing’s more successful works. Other than his rather ingenious description of the Cultural Revolution as a time when “Conscience walks into the house of auction, / . . . Justice is bound and paraded in public, / Truth is being blindfolded” (pp. 359, 360), both his imagery and language lack freshness and originality. For example, Han Zhixiong is compared to a petrel braving the storms – an image that is repeatedly used by other poets on similar subjects (see note 5, below). Zhou Enlai’s indispensability is likened to “the air, the sunlight and the water” (p. 362). The poetic feeling of the poem is further diluted by many slogan-like exhortations such as “Han Zhixiong, fly bravely, / Look, the Party is beckoning to you” (p. 370).

The general formula of praising the hero, denouncing the “gang of four,” and appealing for justice and democracy is repeated in several other poems about other heroes.⁵ In one of them, the poet sounds a

4. *Ai Qing shixuan (Selected Poems of Ai Qing)* (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1979), p. 366. Subsequent citations to this publication will appear in the text. An English translation of this work has just been published by Indiana University: *Selected Poems by Ai Qing*, edited with an introduction and notes by Eugene Chen Eoyang, translated by Eugene Chen Eoyang, Peng Wenlan and Marilyn Chin.

5. Shao Yanxiang, “Zhi Dou Shoufang tongzhi” (“To comrade Dou Shoufang”); Ye Wenfu, “Leiyu zhong de haiyan” (“A petrel in the storm”); Lei Shuyan, “Ta

warning that must be on the mind of every Chinese: “Don’t allow another “gang of four” to appear again!”⁶

Besides the heroes, the martyrs were also the object of the poets’ adoration. Among the numerous martyrs produced by the Cultural Revolution, the case of Zhang Zhixin aroused the greatest indignation. Because of her anti-“gang of four” views she was arrested, imprisoned for six years, and finally sentenced to death. Her last words testify to her sense of duty as a Party member:

If we do not struggle to defend the truth, to defend the interests of the Party, or if we see something wrong but do not press for reform, how can we be called Communists! . . . If the day comes when our class brethren question us: “We have provided you with a good education, and you enjoy so many privileges, why did you not discover the problems, and after having discovered them, why did you do nothing about them as if they did not concern you? Whose cadres are you and what kind of Party members are you? Are you people only good at consuming rice?” At that time, what should our reply be?⁷

She was executed in 1975. To prevent her from speaking up, her executioners had her throat cut before she was shot.

Her violent death and her extraordinary courage inspired a wave of poems praising her martyrdom.⁸ One poet sees her death as an irony: “A gun of the brand of ‘proletarian dictatorship,’ / Pointed at the chest of a woman Communist Party member.”⁹ But all agree that she died for a worthy cause. A short poem entitled “Zhongliang” (“Weight”) affirms the significance of her death:

She put her bloody skull
On the scale of life;
And made all who live in dishonour
Lose their weight.¹⁰

Lei Shuyan’s “Xiaocao zai gechang” (“Little grasses are singing”) is an award-winning poem on the same subject. Like the other poets, Lei praises Zhang’s courage. In a country of “eight hundred million people” and “thirty million Party members,” it was a woman who “holds up her slender shoulders, / To shoulder the beam of the nation.” Her courageous act makes the poet ashamed of himself, who, as a

gechang zai baofengyu de qianbian” (“He sings in front of the storm”). All in *Shikan*, No. 1, 1979.

6. Shao Yanxiang, “To comrade Dou Shoufang,” p. 66.

7. Quoted in Han Xiao, “Chentong de huiyan” (“A heavy-hearted reply”), *Shikan*, No. 6 (1980), p. 44.

8. For some of these poems, see Yu Ke, Xu Gang, Sun Guizhen, “Xiangzi Zhang Zhixin lieshi” (“Dedicated to martyr Zhang Zhixin”), *Shikan*, No. 7, 1979; Xiong Huojiong, “Qiangkou duizhun le Zhongguo de liangxin” (“Gun pointed at China’s conscience”), *Shikan*, No. 8, 1979; Man Rui, “Juebie” (“Farewell”); Liu Shahe, “Ku” (“Weep”); He Xianquan, “Shengdai” (“Vocal chord”), the above three all in *Shikan*, No. 9, 1979; Shu Zhiyan, “Zhencheng” (“Sincerity”), *Shikan*, No. 8, 1980.

9. Xiong Huojiong, “Gun pointed at China’s conscience,” *Shikan*, No. 8 (1979), p. 24.

10. Han Han, “Zhongliang” (“Weight”), *Qing ming*, No. 2, 1979; quoted in *Xinshi de xianzhuang yu zhanwang* (*The Present Situation and Future Prospect of New Poetry*) (hereafter abbreviated as *Present Situation and Future Prospect*) (Nanning: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1981), p. 81.

soldier, was not able to stop that evil bullet. Her death also fills him with thunderous rage:

I dare say:
 If justice is not served,
 The red sun
 Will no longer rise from the east!
 I dare say:
 If crimes are not punished,
 The earth
 Will also lose weight!¹

However, what distinguishes this poem from many others is not its expression of outrage, but its use of evocative imagery – the grass that grows on the execution ground. Lei was probably inspired by a line of Lu Xun’s poem, “ blood soaks the central plains and nurtures sturdy grasses.” The grasses in Lei’s poem are also nourished by martyr’s blood, and they in turn provide comfort and support for the martyred heroine. In the days when law has become “ a scrap of waste paper,” and justice is “ too weak to exert itself,” the little grasses are the only upholder of justice:

Only the little grasses are sturdy and strong,
 They hold up her body,
 And caress her gun-shot wound.
 They plant white and red flowers
 In front of her bosom.
 Day and night, in the wind and in the rain,
 They comfort her with their song (p. 22).

Even with the passage of time, the little grasses will not forget her, for they have become one:

Only the little grasses will not forget,
 For that dark red blood of hers
 Has already seeped into the ground;
 For that dark red blood of hers,
 Is already emanating delicate fragrance in the flowers (p. 19).

The grass, as pointed out by one critic, symbolizes the people. Like the little grasses, the people are helpless and being trampled on, but they are a witness to history.¹² The lowly grass is also a symbol for durability, as has been established in both classical and modern Chinese poetry. In choosing the grass imagery, Lei Shuyan is protesting the people’s downtrodden state and celebrating their endurance at the same time.

II

Lei Shuyan’s poem was published in 1979, as were many other protest poems. That such works were allowed to appear only with the blessing of the Party is a matter of course. The turning-point was the Third Plenum

11. *Shikan*, No. 8 (1979), pp. 22–23.

12. Chen Min, “ Xuewo zhongyuan fei jingcao – du ‘ Xiaocao zai gechang ’ ” (‘ Blood soaks the central plains and nurtures sturdy grass: reading ‘ Little grasses are singing ’ ’), *Shikan*, No. 8 (1979), p. 73.

of the CCP Central Committee (18–22 December 1978). During this important meeting, Party leaders put forward three points that reflected a more tolerant attitude towards artistic creation: “ emancipation of the mind ” (*jiefang sixiang*), “ seeking truth from facts ” (*shishi qiushi*), and “ practice is the sole criterion for verifying truth ” (*shijian shi jianyan zhenli de weiyi biaojun*).¹³ The call for the “ emancipation of the mind,” in particular, liberated Chinese writers from the restraints that had been placed upon them during the Cultural Revolution and earlier, with the result that 1979 was the most productive and exciting year in literature since the founding of the People’s Republic.

Another event that contributed to the “ thaw ” of 1979 was the reversal of the “ counter-revolutionary ” verdict on the Tian’anmen Incident by the Beijing Municipal Party Committee in mid November, 1978. This decision was a great stimulus to the subsequent Democracy Movement which carried on the political protest that first erupted on 5 April 1976. The poetry associated with this movement went further than the Tian’anmen poems in demanding freedom and human rights for the people.¹⁴ The writer of a poem entitled “ Renmin ” (“ People ”) expresses the hope that the time will come when the word “ people ” will no longer be associated with subjugation:

At that time, people
Will no longer be so many feeble hands
Raised to accept unconditionally
The dictator’s demands.¹⁵

From abject passivity the people will rise to write a new chapter in history. The day will come when

Democracy will no longer be a sinister fraud,
Human rights will no longer be illusions,
The flower of people’s will
Will cover the earth like multi-coloured clouds (p. 32).

This new era will be ushered in by the Xidan Democracy Wall.

The high hopes generated by the “ Beijing spring ” were short-lived. The brief fling with freedom of expression during this period ended when it no longer appeared to serve the interests of the Party leaders. When Deng Xiaoping was trying to defeat his conservative rivals, the demands for bureaucratic reform made by the wall-posters on the “ Democracy Wall ” suited his purpose. Once he was firmly in control, continued expression of discontent became a nuisance, an embarrassment, and even a threat to his authority. The Sino-Vietnamese border war of February and March 1979 provided him with a pretext to clamp down on the Democracy Movement. Wei Jingsheng, a leader of the movement and an outspoken critic of the regime, was arrested in late March on charges of

13. These three points are contained in the “ Communiqué of the Third Plenum ” adopted on 22 December 1978 and published in *Renmin ribao*, 24 December 1978.

14. For a study of the poetry associated with this movement, see David S. G. Goodman, *Beijing Street Voices: The Poetry and Politics of China’s Democracy Movement* (London and Boston: Marion Boyars, 1981).

15. *Jintian (Today)*, No. 3, pp. 30–31.

selling military secrets to foreigners. Following his trial and conviction, most of the unofficial publications that grew out of the wall-posters were closed down by the authorities. The “Democracy Wall” and the movement it symbolized also ceased to exist.

Against the background of this new spring chill, a young man who signed himself “Ling Bing” (“Icicles”) wrote a poem bidding farewell to the Democracy Wall. It is full of regret over unfulfilled dreams and reminiscences of a happier time when he was first drawn to the Wall and wrote “red fires” on its grey surface. However, even as he faces the prospect of “sitting beneath a window surrounded by iron bars,” he still holds out hope for the future:

I believe:
 You will not disappear,
 You will not die.
 In the children’s frightened eyes,
 On the grown men’s bowed heads,
 In every living human heart,
 I can see you,
 You, towering above the mountain peaks,
 You, roaring in the boiling sea.
 Remember,
 So long there is human race, there’ll be your presence.¹⁶

The rousing ending of this poem is at once heartening and pathetic. The poet knows in his heart that he is hoping against hope. His poem is a poignant comment on the Chinese people’s search for an elusive goal.

Elusive as it may be, democracy was the major current of 1979. Demands for democracy were not only made by dissident organizations in their publications as represented by the two poems cited above, they were also voiced in official journals. One poet argues that although to practise democracy entails many troubles, it is by far superior to the “extreme simplicity of dictatorship.”¹⁷ The validity of his observation has been borne out by the political events of the past 30 years. The Chinese people have also learned a lesson from their bitter experience. Bai Hua sums up this lesson thus: “Thirty years have congealed into a huge pearl, / Its name is: awakening.”¹⁸ And the awakened people want democracy. The reason for this is pointed out by another poet: “If a class depends on sticks and clubs to save itself, / It means it is politically beyond hope.”¹⁹

The close relationship between democracy, law and China’s drive for modernization are stressed by several poets. One notes that “Without law, / Democracy can still be raped by dictators, / Without democracy, / The ‘Four Modernizations’ are but empty talk.”²⁰ Another states that

16. *Jintian*, No. 4, p. 6.

17. Cai Qijiao, “Lei sa dadi” (“Tears sprinkled on the ground”), *Shikan*, No. 2 (1979), p. 34.

18. Bai Hua, “Zhenzhu” (“Pearl”), *Shikan*, No. 10 (1979), p. 13.

19. Sun Shaozheng, “Juexing de yidai” (“The awakened generation”), *Shikan*, No. 4 (1979), p. 36.

20. Li Zhousheng, “Huo” (“Fire”), *Shikan*, No. 1 (1979), p. 84.

China must “make up” the missed lesson in democracy and law before she can hope to realize her goals of modernization.²¹ These views are shared by activists of the Democracy Movement. Wei Jingsheng, for example, regarded democracy as the “fifth modernization,”²² and one of the unofficial publications had as its title “Kexue, minzhu, fazhi” (“Science, democracy, and law”).

Another important aspect of democracy – the people’s right to dissent – is the subject of Liu Zuci’s poem, “Wei kaoju he buju de shoubi gechang” (“Sing the praise of raised and unraised hands”),²³ in which he argues that to practise true democracy, the people’s right to say “yes” (raised hands) and the right to say “no” (the unraised hands) are both essential. He further points out that had the people been given the right to disagree, the disaster of the Great Leap Forward, and the “three-thousand-six-hundred-and-fifty dark days and nights” would have been averted. The message of this award-winning poem seems to have been lost on the authorities who often equate the right to dissent with undermining “stability” and “unity” and deal with dissidents as if they were criminals.

III

The relatively relaxed political atmosphere of the post-Mao era, especially the feeling of euphoria generated during 1979, brought about the revival of an idea first put forward during the “Hundred Flowers Movement” of 1956, namely, literature should actively “intervene in life” (*ganyu shenghuo*). The chief object of this “intervention” in poetry, as in other branches of literature, is official corruption. Even though it is said that modern Chinese poetry is going through a reception crisis – there are more people writing poems than people who read them²⁴ – poems criticizing bureaucrats or bureaucratism never fail to elicit a great deal of public response. Ye Wenfu’s “Jiangjun, buneng zheyang zuo” (“General, you can’t do that”)²⁵ is a notable example. In his introduction, Ye tells how he came to write this poem. A high-ranking

21. He Xinghan, “Wei minzhu zhengbian” (“The case for democracy”), *Shikan*, No. 4 (1979), p. 30.

22. See *Beijing Street Voices*, p. 5.

23. *Shikan*, No. 11, 1980.

24. For some views on this “crisis,” see the following articles in *Present Situation and Future Prospect*: Ai Qing, “Xinshi yinggai shoudao jianyan” (“New poetry should be subjected to inspection”), Gong Liu, “Cong ‘shige weiji tanqi’” (“Beginning with the ‘Crisis in Poetry’”), Liu Denghan, “Xinshi de fanrong he weiji” (“The flourishing growth and crisis of new poetry”). Ai Qing does not agree with the assessment that there are more poets than readers. As for the “crisis,” it was the result of the politicization of poetry that prevented poets from telling what was really in their hearts. For poetry to pass the “inspection” of the people, poets must tell the truth and speak up for the people. Liu Denghan thinks that the current “crisis” resulted from the public’s higher expectation of poetry. He agrees with Ai Qing that the poor showing of modern Chinese poetry during the past 30 years was mainly due to political reasons. He calls for a revival of the legacy of May Fourth poetry: to absorb nourishment from western poetry and to restore the poet’s “self” in poetry. Gong Liu is also of the opinion that the “crisis” has been exaggerated. Good poetry still has readers. He concedes that the good name of poetry has been tainted by too many “rhymed rumours and rhymed lies.”

25. *Shikan*, No. 8 (1979), pp. 50–55. References to this work will appear in the text.

general, who had been persecuted by the “gang of four,” upon his reinstatement, ordered the demolition of a kindergarten to make room for the building of his residence. The house was furnished with modern luxuries, costing several hundred thousand dollars in foreign currency; and yet this general was a hero of the Long March. Ye’s poem is not just a denunciation of the general’s misdeed but a study of his degeneration. The crossing of the Dadu River is used to great advantage to contrast the general’s former and present self. Forty years ago Dadu River was his threshold to glory; today it is the river of desire into which he is about to be drowned. Forty years ago, his thoughts were: “Let our posterity all live a happy life” (p. 51); today, he thinks only about himself. For his “modernization,” he will even go so far as demolishing a kindergarten, “thinking nothing of the future generation” (p. 54). The general’s transformation from a selfless revolutionary to a selfish bureaucrat is a sad commentary on how revolutionary ideals are traded for material comfort; it is also a classic example of how power corrupts. Ye’s poem touches on a serious problem in Chinese Communist bureaucracy – cadres who are supposed to serve the people yet only serve their own interests. But Ye’s righteous indignation and earnest “remonstrance by poetry” (*shijian*)²⁶ were not well received by the authorities. He was accused of “viciously attacking old cadres.”²⁷ The leadership of a certain government department demanded to know whom he was writing about.²⁸ At the award ceremony for poetry produced between 1979–80 held in Beijing in the spring of 1981, the judges voted Ye’s poem the best entry but had to withdraw the award under pressure from the authorities. Ye’s patriotic poem “Zuguo a wo yao ranshao” (“O motherland, I want to burn”) was given a prize instead. The controversies over “General” illustrate the limits of criticism allowed by the new leadership. Although the government has been conducting an anti-corruption campaign of its own, it was taboo for writers to criticize high-ranking officials, especially the powerful generals.

Ye Wenfu, who is attached to a military unit and knowledgeable about the generals, seemed determined to break this taboo. Undeterred by the furor over his “General,” he published another poem, entitled “Wo shi fei’e” (“I am a moth”),²⁹ in which he reiterates his resolve to expose darkness and to search for light. He is even prepared to sacrifice his life to bring about the birth of a new China. Just as Guo Moro described in his poem “Fenghuang niepan” (“The nirvana of phoenix”) 60 years ago, Ye also envisages a China rising from the ashes. To realize this vision, he kept up his criticism of the power-abusing generals in yet another poem, “Jiangjun, haohao xiyixi” (“General, you’d better take a bath”).³⁰ This time a general mobilized a whole army

26. The term “*shijian*” was coined by Yang Kuanghan and Yang Kuangman in their article, “Shilun shitan xinxiu” (“Tentative evaluation of the new talents on the poetic scene”), *Present Situation and Future Prospect*, p. 73.

27. Quoted in *ibid.* p. 83.

28. See Ye Wenfu’s account of the reaction to this poem in *Yalu jiang*, No. 11, 1979.

29. In *Shiyue* (October), No. 3, 1981.

30. This poem was published in *Lian chi* (Lotus Pond), No. 1, 1981. Parts of the poem

construction company to build himself a luxurious underground shelter that could withstand a nuclear explosion and a ninth-degree earthquake. A bath tub in this subterranean palace alone costs 10,000 *renminbi*. A critic dismisses this story as fabrication and accuses Ye of vilifying old Party cadres and distorting the image of the Party.³¹ Whether this particular story is based on fact or hearsay is immaterial; cases of cadres appropriating public funds for their personal use are well documented. The current campaign against economic crimes is an indication of the seriousness of the situation. In a speech delivered to Hubei Provincial Party Committee, Wang Renzhong, a member of the Secretariat of the Party Central Committee, admits that although some improvements have been made, the Party's style of work has not yet taken a fundamental turn for the better.³²

Xiong Zhaozheng's "Qing juqi senlin yibande shou, zhizhi" ("Please raise your forest-like hand, stop that")³³ is another exposé poem in the company of Ye Wenfu's "General." It describes the conditions of an old Soviet area in the new socialist era. Three people are singled out to represent the common lot of the people in this former revolutionary base: a revolutionary's mother, a martyr's son, a blind old soldier of the Red Army. The first is driven out of her village to live as a beggar because she committed the crime of raising three hens. The second is confined to a cowshed because he is guilty of keeping an old gun in the house. The third is destitute but cannot get any relief from the county officials. As these cases demonstrate, the hardships of the people are not only the results of uncaring cadres but also of ultra-Left policies. (Raising chickens, for example, would be classified as "taking the capitalist road" during the Cultural Revolution.) The poet, however, is careful not to put the blame on the Party but on the "new aristocrats" who fatten themselves at the expense of the people. The disparity between the people and the officials is brought out by a series of contrasts: the cobweb covered granaries with lavish banquets, the poor brides' tattered clothes with the dancing girls' silk skirts, the old people's hunger groans with the bumper harvests reported in the papers. But what makes the people feel even more wretched is the fact that they had given everything they had to help bring about the victory of the revolution and thereby placed themselves in their present situation. The poet asks: "Should revolution repay your kindness with hunger and poverty?" (pp. 21-22). His indignation moved him to write this poem to let the Party know that:

were quoted in Zhou Shenming's article, "Cong 'Jiangjun haohao xiyixi' kan Ye Wenfu de chuanguo qingxiang" ("Ye Wenfu's creative tendencies as seen from 'General, you'd better take a bath'"), *Wenyi bao*, No. 23 (1981), pp. 26-29.

31. *Ibid.* p. 26.

32. Wang's speech is carried in *Hongqi (Red Flag)*, No. 5, 1982. An abridged translation appears in *Beijing Review*, 5 April 1982.

33. *Changjiang wenyi*, No. 1, 1980; rpt. in *Yixie you zhengyi de zuopin (Some Controversial Works)* (no date or place of publication), pp. 19-29. References to this work will appear in the text.

On this land soaked red
 By martyrs' blood,
 There are several hundred thousand pairs of
 Sad and angry eyes (p. 29)!

If Ye Wenfu's poems about the generals are an indictment of the bureaucrats, this poem is an indictment of the revolution itself. By making an old revolutionary base as his setting, and three most "revolutionary" people as his principal characters, Xiong Zhaozheng brings his theme into sharp relief.

The publication of this poem caused quite a sensation. Readers from all over the country wrote to the editor to show their support of the poem, calling it the "spokesman" for the people of old Soviet areas.³⁴ The office of the Hubei provincial secretary, however, found the poem to be "a work with serious shortcomings and mistakes."³⁵ Xiong has indeed violated two unwritten "laws" of literary creation in the post-Mao era: first, while it is all right to criticize the misdeeds of the "gang of four," the writer should take pains to show that the present leadership is beyond reproach; secondly, while it is permissible to write about the dark side of society, one should stress brightness over darkness, and point out that forces are already at work to eliminate undesirable conditions. In Xiong's poem the followers of the "gang of four" continue to exist despite the fall of their masters, and the Party's concern for the people cannot penetrate the thick net of corruption spun up by these bureaucrats who are "worse than bandits." As a result, the old Soviet area today is still, according to Xiong, a "pit of hell." The article from the Hubei provincial secretary therefore accused Xiong of not distinguishing between what happened during the time of the "gang of four" and what happened after their fall, and of not showing the proper balance between the bright side and the dark side. It also takes Xiong to task for not following the Party leadership and not considering the social effects his work might have. Xiong's defenders, on the other hand, commended him for exposing the dark side of life and speaking up for the people.³⁶ So, at issue are some of the old but still unresolved problems that have plagued Chinese literature since Mao's "Yanan talks": should literature serve politics? Can the writer write about the dark side of society?

From Xiong Zhaozheng's poem about the failures of the revolution we come to Sun Jingxuan's "Yige youling zai Zhongguo dadi shang youdang" ("A spectre wanders in the land of China") that probes the cause of the Cultural Revolution. Sun revealed that his poem was the

34. Kuangman, "Wei renmin gu yu hu - du 'Qing juqi senlin yiban de shou, zhizhi!' " ("To be a drummer and crier for the people: reading 'Please raise your forest-like hand, stop that!'"), *Wenyi bao*, No. 6 (1980), p. 52.

35. "Yipian you yanzhong quedian cuowu de zuopin" ("A work with serious shortcomings and mistakes"), *Changjiang wenyi*, No. 11, 1981; rpt. in *Zhongguoxiandai dangdai wenxue yanjiu (Studies of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature)*, No. 6 (1981), pp. 30-33.

36. For some of the opinions for and against, see the discussions of this poem carried in *Changjiang wenyi*, Nos. 11 and 12, 1980; Nos. 1 and 3, 1981. Rpt. in *Studies of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature*, Nos. 4, 6, 8, 1981.

result of his contemplation about this catastrophic event. He came to the conclusion that Lin Biao and the “gang of four” were able to perpetrate their “Fascist” rule because China’s democratic revolution was not thoroughly carried out and feudalist thoughts still held sway in many sectors of the Chinese society. He therefore wanted to expose the pernicious influence of feudalism.³⁷ In his poem, feudalism is the “wandering spectre” that roams the country at will and exercises absolute power over the life and death of the people. This “spectre” assumes many forms: in the past it appeared as emperors, gods and spirits; in the socialist era, it is the new god of the land. As can be surmised from the context of the poem in relation to recent history, this new god is none other than Chairman Mao, whose portrait has replaced the images of gate guardians, god of prosperity and kitchen god in every household. And Sun Jingxuan’s “spectre” is the personality cult of Mao Zedong. The irony of replacing one feudal order by another, old gods by a new god is pointed out again and again:

With our blood and sweat, with our hard work,
We thought we were building the edifice of socialism,
But it turned out to be another frightening church.

We pushed the three big mountains off our backs,
Is it for the purpose to erect another temple?
We burned the images of the god of prosperity and Buddha,
Is it for the purpose of hanging the portrait of a new deity?³⁸

Besides voicing his feeling of betrayal, Sun pleads for more personal freedom and human dignity. This he does by describing the machine-like existence of the Chinese people. They are like “screws” on a giant machine, black and white chips on a chess board. They are the numbers in the statistics, and an “abstract noun.” They have a brain but cannot express their ideas or thoughts. And their situation will not improve until they are liberated from that omnipresent “spectre.” In pointing a finger at Mao’s “ghost,” Sun Jingxuan shows uncommon courage to tell it as it is. More than anything else, Mao’s personality cult was the single most important cause of the immense suffering of the Cultural Revolution. Whether it was power struggle, class struggle, or line struggle, they were all carried out in the name of the infallible Chairman. Today the Chinese people are still living in the shadow of his ghost. Sun’s poem is a brave attempt to exorcise that “ghost.”

The official reaction to Sun Jingxuan’s “Wandering spectre” was predictably unfavourable. By this time (the spring of 1981), the Party authorities had decided vigorously to enforce the “Sixiang jiben yuanze,” the Four Basic Principles of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, socialism, the proletarian dictatorship, and Party leadership. Criticism of Bai Hua’s controversial filmscript *Kulian (Unrequited Love)* for violating these “Four Principles” began in April. Sun’s offences

37. Sun Jingxuan, “Weixian de qingxiang, shengke de jiaoxun” (“Dangerous tendencies, profound lessons”), *Wenyi bao*, No. 22, 1981.

38. *Chang’an*, No. 1 (1981), pp. 8, 9.

were similar. The Sixth Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the CPC (27–29 June 1981) marked the end of the more liberal policy towards literature and art set forth in the Third Plenum in late 1978. Now both Hu Yaobang, the new Party chairman, and Deng Xiaoping, vice-chairman of the Central Committee, favoured stronger Party leadership over ideological work. Sun wrote in his self-criticism that after the Sixth Plenum, it was widely rumoured that he was singled out by the Party Central Committee as a major target of criticism to be conducted in his home province.³⁹ At the forum on “ideological front” called by the Sichuan Provincial Party Committee in October, he was indeed criticized, and had to issue a self-criticism, in which he admitted having committed “serious mistakes.” His two major “mistakes” were: first, he identified Mao as the “new god” and the symbol of “divine power” and “imperial power,” thereby damaging the images of the Chairman and the Party; secondly, he showed the tendencies to pursue capitalist freedom and to stray from Party leadership. Significantly, these tendencies were also attributed to Bai Hua, who also referred to Mao as a god, the Buddha in this case. Sun gave four reasons for committing these errors: he was chafing under previous wrongs done to him; he mistakenly believed that literature should not serve politics; he wished to gain fame by writing “explosive” works; he distanced himself from the workers, peasants and soldiers. He also reports that after his trip to the Gezhou Dam arranged by the leadership, he has become a new man, reformed by the rousing spirit of the workers he saw at the dam.⁴⁰ It seems that Mao’s old formula of remoulding one’s world view by learning from the masses had worked a miracle again.

The official criticism conducted against Sun reveals the present leadership’s ambivalent attitude towards Mao. Even though they have no love for him, they feel obliged to defend his good name. Mao’s name is synonymous with the Chinese Communist Party itself; to carry out a de-Maoification in the manner of de-Stalinization would risk the destruction of the Party and themselves. Therefore, even as they endeavour to eradicate the influences of Mao’s radical policies, they continue to pay lip-service to his “greatness.” This ambivalence is reflected in the resolution adopted by the Sixth Plenum which admits that Mao made serious mistakes during the Cultural Revolution, but still hails him as “a great Marxist and a great proletarian revolutionary.” The 12th Party Congress held in September 1982 took a more positive step to erase Mao’s bad memory. It explicitly forbids personality cult in any form and abolishes the chairmanship, with which Mao was identified. Whether this move will eliminate personality cult in the future, only history can tell. Sun Jingxuan reminds the Chinese people in his epigraph of a quotation from Santayana: “All those who forget the past are doomed to repeat their old mistakes.”⁴¹

39. Sun Jingxuan, “Weixian de qingxiang, shengke de jiaoxun.”

40. *Ibid.*

41. This quotation is translated from the Chinese version provided by the author.

IV

When open criticism becomes too hazardous, writers can resort to the time-honoured tradition of satire. The re-emergence of satirical poetry since 1978 provides another means for social criticism. The earliest such poems to appear usually poked fun at the followers of the “gang of four.” Noted satirists Chi Bei’ou and Liu Zheng both have sketched four types of these political opportunists: the “fence-sitters,” the “sneakers,” the “shakers,” and the “cover-uppers.”⁴² The “fence-sitters” are those who change their stand with the political wind. Their ever changing allegiance is represented by the saying “*you nai bianshi niang*” (“whoever suckles me is my mother”). The “sneakers” are those who hide their true identity in order to beat a retreat, like the “slippery eels” or “cicadas sloughing off their shells.”⁴³ The “shakers” are the rebels who delight in overthrowing everything. The “cover-uppers” are the ones who try to cover up their crimes.

But by far the biggest target of satirical poems is “*tequan*” or special privileges. Yi Heyuan, another leading satirist, observes that the old saying “money can make the ghosts turn the millstone for you” is no longer valid in the new society, for power has taken the place of money. And having power is to have everything. He sums up several guidelines for this game of power. “Seeing power but not loving it, it’s a crime, / Having power but not using it, it’s a waste,” and “Having power but not using it, / It will expire before you know it!”⁴⁴

Poet Chen Xianrong also tries to singe the power-abusing bureaucrats with his sizzling “*Lajiao ge*” (“Songs of hot peppers”). In one of these songs, he calls attention to the practice of free-loading by high-ranking cadres: while an ordinary soldier has to pay 30 cents for a bowl of vegetable soup, the cadre pays nothing for his 10-course banquet.⁴⁵ Not only the cadres enjoy special privileges, their families and relatives claim the same treatment. This is the kind of “fringe benefit” known in China as “*qundai feng*” or “the wind of kinsman nepotism.” In another of his “Songs,” Chen describes how this wind can secure various benefits for the relatives of the cadres, from choice goods from the shop, to jobs in the factory, to Party membership.⁴⁶ Under this prevailing “wind,” “everything depends,” as another poet observes, “on connections.”⁴⁷

While the bureaucrats are experts in cultivating “special relations” they are woefully short on other skills. Our “Hot Pepper” Poet pokes

42. Chi Bei’ou, “Feng, liu, zheng, wu, sipai renwu lianpu” (“The facial make-up of four types of characters: the fence-sitters, the sneakers, the shakers, and the cover-uppers”), and Liu Zheng, “Jie chou siyun” (“Four poems to uncover the villains”), both in *Shikan*, No. 4, 1978.

43. Chi Bei’ou, “Four types of characters,” p. 47.

44. Yi Heyuan, “Xin you yuzui” (“Intoxicated heart”), *Shikan*, No. 2, 1979.

45. Chen Xianrong, “Hei sanjiao” (“The black 30 cents”), *Shikan*, No. 2, 1980.

46. Chen Xianrong, “Qundai feng” (“Wind of kinsman nepotism”), *Shikan*, No. 3, 1981.

47. Zhang Shuji, “Miao xiao shenling da” (“The temple is small, but its power is big”), *Shikan*, No. 2 (1981), p. 35.

fun at the cadres' ignorance in a delightful ditty that capitalizes on the various associations with the word " door ":

He never enters the door of the workshop,
 He never steps inside the door of an evening school,
 He hasn't found the door to industrial management
 Nor the door to science and technology.
 Don't say he doesn't know any door,
 He specializes in the backdoor.
 If you depend on him for the " Four Modernizations,"
 You've really got the wrong door!⁴⁸

Besides ignorance, procrastination is a major cause of inefficiency. Liu Zheng's " Chunfeng yanyu " (" The swallows' conversation in the spring breeze ")⁴⁹ is an ingenious treatment of this bureaucratic disease. The whole poem is composed of dialogues between a pair of swallows as they discuss where to build their nest. One swallow convinces the other that the bureau chief's desk would be an ideal place because even if the nest is discovered the 10 associate chiefs will not agree on what to do about it. By the time the report journeys through all the departments, " the earth will have revolved around the sun for a complete circle."

Qu Youyuan's " Da hulu huiyi " (" The snoring meetings ")⁵⁰ examines another phenomenon of the bureaucracy – the perennial problem of having too many meetings. This was also a problem that Liu Binyan described in his story, " Our paper's inside news," more than 20 years ago. While the subject is not new, Qu's humorous treatment is. As the participants snore away while the leading cadre delivers his tirade, we are reminded that endless meetings are indeed a special product of the communist system. Qu quotes the popular saying " The Nationalists' taxes, the Communists' meetings " (*Guomindang de shui, Gongchandang de hui*) to prove his point. He also credits Mayakovsky's 1922 poem " In Re Conference " as the inspiration for his own composition.⁵¹ As noted by one commentator, in establishing this link, the author has pinpointed a stubborn disease in the political life of socialist societies.⁵²

Inefficiency is not always caused by procrastination or too many meetings. Sometimes, it is due to the need to learn the intentions of the leading cadres before any work can be started. We recall that a newspaper editor in Liu Binyan's " Our paper's inside news " waits for the telephone call from the chief editor to start his daily work, and that the head of a construction brigade in Liu's other story, " On the bridge construction site," does nothing to save the bridge threatened by flood

48. Chen Xianrong, " Zhuanmen lindao " (" Special leadership "), *Shikan*, No. 2 (1980), p. 35.

49. *Shikan*, No. 5, 1979.

50. *Shikan*, No. 4, 1979.

51. See Qu's introductory remark to his poem, *ibid.* p. 64. English translation of this poem can be found in Herbert T. Marshall (trans. and ed.), *Mayakovsky* (London: Denise Dobson, 1965).

52. Gong Mu, Zhu Jing, " ' Chizi chi xin ' – du Qu Youyuan de zhengzhi shuqingshi " (" ' Having the heart of a newborn baby ': reading Qu Youyuan's political lyric "), *Wenyi bao*, No. 10 (1980), p. 38.

but is most anxious to get a telephone call through to his superior. Almost a quarter of a century later, the situation remains unchanged. The cadres are still afraid of taking on responsibility; they rather take orders from their superiors than to rely on their own initiatives. In a poem entitled “ Mo jingshen ” (“ To find out the intention ”), Yi Heyuan analyses the mental state of the cadres as they face the momentous task of finding out the intentions of their superior. The poem combines psychological insight with gentle satire. It is quoted in full below:

What is the intention of the boss?
We must try to find it out,
Before we make a thorough investigation,
There's no way we can get to work.

Is his intention to be found in the official documents?
That's what people say,
But what is the meaning between the lines,
This, we cannot be sure.

The boss's intentions are in his head,
He's talked about them: one, two, three, four,
But what is the implication that's not said?
We still need to deliberate some more.

We must guard against making mistakes,
Work can be put aside for a while.
What is his intention?
We continue to search for an answer.

Consider and reconsider,
Guess and guess again,
The more we look, the more we're baffled,
Our efforts come to naught!⁵³

The cadres' ignorance, inefficiency, and even abuse of power, though serious, are, in the communist parlance, matters of “ work style ” (*zuofeng*) and therefore not of primary concern to the Party. Their motives for joining the Party, however, should be a matter of fundamental importance. Qu Youyuan exposes the ulterior motives of some of the prospective Party members in his poem “ Guanyu rudang dongji ” (“ On the motives for joining the Party ”).⁵⁴ Xin Xiangdang (homonymous for “ Heart belongs to the Party ”) wants to solve his “ Organization problem ” so his sweetheart will marry him; Wei Geming (homonymous for “ The false revolutionary ”) wishes to obtain a “ Party ticket ” (*dangpiao*) so his daughter will have an envious “ social relation ” to put down on her résumé; Lu Xiantui (homonymous for “ The correct line ”) joins the Party for official

53. *Shikan*, No. 3 (1980), p. 48.

54. *Shikan*, No. 7, 1979. References to this work will appear in the text.

promotion; Dou Buting (homonymous for “ The never-ceasing struggle ”) is worried because he has not been admitted to the Party.

To all these people, Party membership means private cars, new houses and higher positions. It is also an inheritance to be passed down to their children, for “ The hereditary Party membership, / Is taken for granted ” (p. 22). The universality of these motives can be seen in the allegorical names of the characters. This complete corruption of principle prompts the poet to comment: “ People only know that the species of potatoes may undergo mutation, / Little do they suspect that mutation can also take place in the motives for joining the Party ” (pp. 23–24).

As the Communist Party evolved from an underground organization to the party in power, the motives for joining the Party have indeed “ undergone a mutation.” For many would-be Party members, the once sacred Party membership has degenerated into “ party ticket ” – a ticket to acquiring power and special privileges. And Party members have become the privileged class in a supposedly classless society.

While political satires constitute the bulk of satirical poetry written in the post-Mao era, they are not the only kind. Social behaviour occasionally also comes under the poets’ scrutiny. Huang Yongyu, the well-known painter who also writes poetry, is perhaps the leading practitioner in this field. His satires have the terseness and wit of the epigram. The following are a few samples from his “ Notes ”:

Nap: Daily waste of two billion hours in the most Oriental manner.

Watch: Time is money; no wonder it is so hard to buy one.

Hat: To wear a hat is a big invention; to make others wear a hat is a great invention.

Ignorance: Definitely a virtue proven by history, it affords the feeling of satisfaction and self-contentment.

Purchasing power: The amount of energy you expend in humbly accepting the shop assistant’s or service personnel’s test of your patience.

Iron: A kind of metal, but is often reflected on people’s faces.

Clapping: Sometimes the audience becomes too emotional, because they have finally come to the end of an ordeal.

Tomb inscription: In this person’s life, his merits plus his mistakes equal zero.⁵⁵

Chinese political poetry in the post-Mao era has undergone a qualitative change from its predecessor of the past 30 years. Instead of being a docile tool of politics, it now exposes the maladies in the political system and political life under communism. It has revealed a reality very different from the myth manufactured in the poetry of the past. From “ rhymed lies ” it has become “ rhymed salt ” that rubs into the wounds of the nation.⁵⁶ The appearance of this “ new ” poetry has

55. Huang Yongyu, “ Liqiu yanshu renzhen sikaode zhaji ” (“ Notes from the most serious and careful thinking ”), *Shikan*, No. 2 (1982), pp. 33–34.

56. “ Rhymed salt ” was the title of a poem by Zhang Xinqi and He Mengfan, *Shikan*, No. 4 (1979), p. 26.

reversed the trend to whitewash life with cheap optimism and empty slogans. It also challenges the long-held belief that poetry should eulogize, not criticize. As a voice of protest, it is carrying forth a time-honoured tradition of Chinese literature since *Shi jing* (*The Book of Poetry*): to speak up for the people.