

Relationship between the Revolutionary Poetry of the 1920s and Its Social Context

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Abstract: The revolutionary poetry of the 1920s, though long mentioned in modern literature history, has never received comprehensive, in depth research. The revolutionary doctrines and romantic poetic style which prevailed in the 1920s constituted the social context of the revolutionary poetry of the 1920s and shaped the prominent historic character of revolutionary poetry.

Keywords: Revolutionary Poetry; Social Context; Historic Character

The 1920s was the historic period during which China's new poetry began its slide into a crisis. During this particular period of time, the earlier vernacular poetic style was replaced by the romantic lyrical style, the new poetry exhibited a tendency of frivolity and overrunning, and the emergence of symbolic poets and new metrical poets created a gleam of hope for the new poetry to break out of the crisis. This historic situation of the new poetry of the 1920s is common knowledge and requires no further elaboration herein. However, we're bewildered by the fact that modern poetry researchers examining the evolution of the new poetry of the 1920s seem to have been oblivious to the tide of the "revolutionary poetry" of the 1920s. Although it has long been mentioned in modern literature history^①, the tide of revolutionary poetry has never subjected to comprehensive, serious and in depth research. This paper only examines the relationship between the emergence of revolutionary poetry and its cultural context, with a view to stimulating scholarly interest in the revolutionary poetry of the 1920s.

I.

In the 1920s, during which the Chinese National Revolutionary Movement emerged, “revolutionary” publications, such as *China Youth* and *Republic Daily*, carried a lot of revolutionary poems conveying “revolutionary sentiments”, and many influential revolutionary poets appeared, forming a poetic tide sharply different from the earlier vernacular poetry, romantic poets and symbolic poets.

China Youth, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Youth League, was launched in Shanghai on October 22, 1923, aimed at bringing youth to “the path of activities”, “the path of vigor”, and “the path of substance”^②. This paper was edited by communists Yun Daiing, Deng Zhongxia and Xiao Chunv. They were the leaders of youth and labor movements; they paid close attention of social problems and revolutionary work, opposed “sentimental” literature, and pushed for revolutionary literature that stimulated a nationalist revolutionary mood. Therefore, *China Youth* strongly favored sensational and rebellious revolutionary poems and frequently carried poetic creations by young revolutionaries such as Liu Yisheng, Zhu Ziqing, Shao Wu, and Wu Yuming.

Among these writers, Liu Yisheng was the most prominent revolutionary poet. He was originally a student of Fudan University with progressive thoughts and a strong interest in literature and arts. During the National Revolution, he joined the revolution in Guangzhou and fled abroad following the purge within the Nationalist Party. Liu’s poems exuded passion and vigor, completely free of the prevailing “sentimental” mood of the poetic community. His poetic works, notably *Vows of Slaves*, *Revolutionary March*, *Poem of Vows* and *Our Vows*, used short and brisk rhythms to convey strong revolutionary willpower and passion. For example, the opening section of his *Revolutionary March* reads: “To save ourselves, we embark on the revolutionary path; to exterminate our enemy, we take up sharp knives; for

a bright future world, we frantically wave the fiery flags!" Liu's poems sounded as strong as war drums and conveyed obvious and straightforward messages, but demonstrated high expressive art skills. He was adept at using metaphors and odes to create a magnificent, enthusiastic poetic style, and skilled in selecting the right form of rhythms to set the tone of his poems. For instance, his poems, such as Song in Commemoration of the May 30 Movement and October Revolution, used gentle poetic rhythms to present affectionate "hymns" which combined the expression of motions and narration.

Starting from the second half of 1924, the Cultivation and Consciousness supplements of Republic Daily vigorously pushed for revolutionary literature and carried a lot of revolutionary poems, ushering in an initial period of prosperity for the creation of revolutionary poems. Cultivation was launched on May 20, 1924, with Mao Dun serving as the editor in chief, who was succeeded by He Weixin. Cultivation first published Zhuang Hou's revolutionary anthology Blood Flower in installments and subsequently set up the "Red Flower" poetry column, which reprinted poems with "revolutionary spirit" from other newspapers and magazines. From October 1924 to January 1925, Cultivation carried nearly 30 "revolutionary poems". These poems fall into two categories: in the first category are poems calling upon workers and peasants to join the revolution to literate themselves, such as Blood Flower, Red Flower, A Severe Test of Fire, and The Internationale; and in the second category are poems that eulogize youth's bravery and determination to take part in revolution, such as Ode to Liberty, Messages for the Youth, and Encouragement for the Youth, and Slogans of the Youth. These revolutionary poems are characterized by a prominent romantic style and exude simplicity, passion and lucidity.

Most of the revolutionary poems published in the supplements of Cultivation are reminiscent of "compositions with an assigned topic"; such poems include Red

Flower, Endeavors, Encouragement for the Youth, and Song of Cultivation. These creations are related to the following factors. The first factor is the influence of the “Red Flower” and “Blood Flower” columns in Cultivation, which gave rise to the undesirable tendency to create poems according to the columns’ requirements. The second factor is the impact of revolutionary movements on poem creation; the “boom” of revolutionary poems in Cultivation coincided with the historic period during which Shanghai’s labor movement surged; these poems were mostly the works of revolutionary youth, with almost half of them created by Shanghai University students. They converted their fiery emotions into poems to convey the revolutionary spirit of bravery and pressing ahead against all odds. All in all, with the running of revolutionary poetry columns in the supplements of Cultivation and the upsurge in Shanghai’s labor movements, in 1925 or so, the creation of revolutionary poetry started to flourish.

It’s noteworthy that the “Red Flower” column of Cultivation published a few poems in memory of Huang Ren. On October 10, 1924, Huang, a student at the Sociology Department of Shanghai University, attended the Shanghai National Assembly with his fellow students and was beaten to death by thugs hired by the right wing of the Nationalist Party. Following his death, the Sichuan Students Association at Shanghai University published a special issue in memory of Huang. He Bingyi, Huang’s classmate and fellow townsman, wrote four long poems titled “Mourning Martyr Huang Ren”, which were subsequently published in Guide, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party. Republic Daily also published a “Huang Ren Memorial Issue”, which carried Mourning the Victim, written by revolutionary poet Jiang Guangci. The supplement of Cultivation published poems by Shanghai University student Meng Chao and staff member Lou Jiannan, which conveyed the resentment towards imperialism and warlords and the resolve to press ahead with the revolution. These mourning poems fully demonstrated that the cooperation between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party had promoted the

integration of revolutionary poetry creation into practical revolutionary life, and that revolutionary poetry creation had become increasingly reflective of social reality.

Poems appearing in the supplement of *Cultivation* were mostly works by Shanghai University students, whereas contributors to *Consciousness* were primarily members of the Spring Thunder Society. The society's most influential member was Jiang Guangci, a self-proclaimed "revolutionary poet". Jiang had returned to China from Russia in August 1924 to pursue his ambition to become an advocate for the oriental revolution. His poetic creation earned him the support of Shen Zemin and Qu Qiubai, as well as the admiration of some students at Shanghai University. Jiang had begun writing poems while he was studying in Russia. Before heading back to China, he sent a collection of his poems written in Russia to Shanghai Bookstore for publication. After arriving back in China, this romantic-natured poet was offered a teaching job at Shanghai University upon recommendation by Qu Qiubai. At the university, he made a number of literary friends, such as Shen Zemin, Wang Qiuxin, and Meng Chao, with whom he often discussed literature. After becoming editor in chief for the *Consciousness* supplement, Shen Zemin published many of Jiang's works, helping him to earn a reputation in the new literary community. By April 1925, when he departed for the north, Jiang had published 20 poems in *Consciousness*.

Jiang's poetic creation expanded the room of imagination for revolutionary poetry. His poems, notably *In Memory of Byron*, *Mourning Lenin* and *My Mind*, reflected his admiration for the great revolutionaries and alluded to his lofty ambitions. His other poems, including *The Meaning from the West* and *Seeing off Xuan Lu on His Way Home*, conveyed his honor in fulfilling the mission of drawing upon Russian experience for Chinese revolution and exuded passion which stimulated the revolutionary will of his peers. His some other poems, such as *Song from Moscow*, *Girls of Huaidu* and *Listening to the Sing of Tartar Daughters*,

conveyed his yearning for love during his studies in Russia and breathed fresh life into revolutionary poetry. Furthermore, some of his poems, such as *Grieving over China*, *Strike* and *We're All Proletarians*, reflected the darkness of Chinese society and laborers' willpower to revolt and revolutionary sentiments. Jiang had a tender heart and the typical sensitivity of a poet, and his poems were focused on his own mental world, but he lacked the artistic expressiveness typical of outstanding poets and the artistic attainment to convert his own emotions into poetic images; as such, his poems had not only overtly revealing themes but also loose structures.

Poems written by other members of the Spring Thunder Society didn't have much of an impact. Shen Zeming had quite high literary accomplishment and his poems featured refreshing imagery and compact structures, though he didn't write many poems. Wang Qiuxin, who zealously pursued revolutionary literature, wrote poems which had short and strong tempos but were superficial and detached from life and lacked delicateness and freshness. Nevertheless, Wang was an avid literature enthusiast, devoted to creative revolutionary writing.

In a nutshell, thanks to the strong push for revolutionary poetry by *China Youth* and *Republic Daily* and the enthusiastic facilitation by publications such as *New Youth* and *Literary Weekly*, the creation of revolutionary poetry boomed around the May 30 Movement, reversing the "sentimental" tendency of the new poetic community. Due to constant changes in revolutionary politics and situations and the accompanying adjustments of the editorial philosophy of publications such as *China Youth* and *Republic Daily*, the upsurge in the creation of revolutionary poetry gradually subsided after 1927, giving way to the rising tide of proletarian novels.

Another significant creator of revolutionary poetry in the 1920s was the "Consciousness Society", the first revolutionary literature group in China's modern

literature history. The Society was founded in Hangzhou in May 1924 or so by Xu Jinyuan, Jiang Keng and other Zhejiang University students. It called upon young people who loved literature to push for “revolutionary literature that meets the needs of the present China.”^③ At the end of 1924, they launched *Consciousness Monthly*, published by the communist-run Shanghai Bookstore; they also collected and compiled revolutionary anthologies. It’s a pity that the author of this paper has so far failed to find any copy of *Consciousness Monthly* or the *Revolutionary Anthology* that they compiled, thus unable to find out about their creation of revolutionary poetry. However, one thing is sure - the *Consciousness Society* was the first to echo China Youth’s push for “revolutionary literature”, playing an instrumental role in the rising tide of revolutionary poetry.

II.

The 1920s of China was marked by an extraordinary revolutionary awareness. The anti-imperialism and patriotic emotions unleashed by the May 4 Movement and the May 30 Movement and the anti-feudalism emotions stoked by the national revolutionary movement gave rise to the revolutionary tide in China in the 1920s. In particular, the national revolutionary movement jointly launched by the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party saw unprecedented “social mobilization and public enthusiasm for involvement in politics”^④. To advance the national revolution, both the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party published a significant amount of revolutionary publicity materials and launched Shanghai University and Huangpu Military Academy, both of which were based for developing revolutionary talent. The steadily rising revolutionary awareness and revolutionary movements disrupted the “ideological enlightenment” context created by the May 4 New Culture Movement; as a result, the sentiments of the 1920s shifted from “personality liberation” to “social revolution”, the revolutionary center was relocated from Beijing to Guangzhou, and going to Shanghai University for

education and “Huangpu” for revolution became the most significant ambition of young people.

In the midst of the swelling tide of the “revolutionary culture” in the 1920s, anarchism became another popular theory along with communism and the “Three People’s Principles”. The anarchist movement in China was initiated by overseas Chinese students who had returned to their homeland. The “Huiming Academic Society”, founded by Li Sifu and other people in Guangxi in 1912, was China’s first anarchist group. Following the May 4 New Culture Movement, the anarchist movement flourished. Statistics show that at that time, China was home to more than anarchist groups and over 70 anarchist publications^⑤. Although the social influence of anarchism had diminished after the May 30 Movement, the “revolutionary ideas” that no person was superior or inferior to another person, all people should work, and that all people were equal and free, remained social ideals that excited the revolutionary sentiments of young people. The ideas gained acceptance among many revolutionary writers, including Jiang Guangci and Xian Xingcun. Many of the revolutionary remarks made by Lu Xun during his stay in Guangzhou also exude anarchism. All in all, Chinese anarchists’ ideological promotion among the young people, along with the modern “enlightenment” theory of the May 4 New Culture and the national revolutionary movement co-launched by the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party, constituted the cultural context of the revolution of the 1920s and were the historic roots of the germination and rapid rise of revolutionary poetry.

Given this “revolutionary” cultural context, the fact that revolutionary poetry became a tide of new poetry creation in the 1920s was not just the result of the appeal of revolutionaries. Most modern literature researchers argue that the rise of revolutionary literature and revolutionary poetry can be attributed to the advocacy of early communists such as Deng Zhongxia, Shen Zemin and Xiao Chunv. This

argument ignores the influence of the revolutionary cultural context of the 1920s on the tide of revolutionary poetry and diminishes the impact of “revolutionary theories” such as the “Three People’s Principles” and anarchism on revolutionary poetry. As a matter of fact, the revolutionary poetry of the 1920s should be seen as the product of the “revolutionary sentiments” of that era and as the expression of individual emotions by young revolutionaries, just as Red Flower reads: “Where does the red flower blossom?/The red flower should blossom in the poet’s heart//Where does the red flower bloom?/The red flower should bloom on the poet’s chest//When will the red flower blossom?//When lightning flashes, thunder roars, rain rages, and gale bellows.” Chinese modern new poetry researchers’ insufficient attention to and inadequate understanding of the trends of the revolutionary poetry of the last century may lead to two unfortunate outcomes: one is the neglect of the historic ties between new poetry creation and the trends of the times and the tendency to regard China’s new poetry simply as poets’ expressions of their individual emotions or the as the manifestation of the influence of foreign poetry; and the other is the dismembering of the actual history of the development of new poetry in the 1920s and the fabrication of the changing logic of the shift of the new vernacular poems from social “crisis” to metrical and symbolic verses^⑥. These flaws and deficiencies of China’s research on new poetry have raised questions and drawn criticism in recent years.

If the various “revolutionary theories” gaining popularity in the 1920s were taken as the cultural context of the era during which the revolutionary poetry of the 1920s emerged, then the romanticist poetic style prevailing in the 1920s should be deemed to have constitute the literary context of the means of expression for revolutionary poetry. The 1920s was the period of time during which the romanticist poetic style of China’s new poetry boomed. This poetic style was heavily influenced by Guo Moruo’s Goddess and his poetic notion of “spontaneous overflow of feelings”. Creation Society writers, Lake poets, the “verset” school, and

Tsinghua Literature Society all followed the romanticist poetic style marked by “spontaneous overflow of feelings” and “expression of individual emotions”. Revolutionary poetry arising from such a literary context was naturally influenced by this poetic style. From the very beginning, revolutionary poetry had been marked by romanticism; many poetic works, whether they were Verses of Red Tide and Iron Flower by Qu Qiubai or poems by Liu Yisheng, Jiang Guangci and Wang Qiuxin, demonstrated a natural, passionate and cheerful Romanticist style. All of their works had a passionate and lively tone and a dynamic and forceful tempo; they changed the “ruthful” mood and the “sentimental” tendency of other romanticist poetry schools of the 1920s, but had overtly revealing themes and lacked an elegant posture.

The context characteristics of the “revolutionary theories” and “romantic poetic style” of the 1920s gave rise to the prominent character of the revolutionary poetry during that era. The revolutionary poetry primarily took the national revolutionary movement as its subject matter and employed a romantic poetic style to convey the revolutionary sentiments of the era; it largely reversed the rising tendency of the May 4 new poetry towards “superficiality and boredom”^⑦ and spearheaded the efforts of China’s modern new poetry to reflect revolutions, society and other “grandiose subjects”. Therefore, this character of the revolutionary poetry of the 1920s was not only the inevitable outcome of its dual social contexts, but also a salvaging force for China’s new poetry when it was stuck in a crisis in the 1920s.

Notes:

Manuscript of China’s New Literature History (Kaiming Bookstore, 1951) written by Wang Yao mentioned the creation of revolutionary poetry by Qu Qiubai, Liu Yisheng and Jiang Guangci. China’s Modern Literature History compiled by Guo Zhigang and Sun Zhongtian (Higher Education Press, 1989) also

made a reference to revolutionary poems appearing in Republic Daily·Consciousness and written by the “Consciousness Society”.

Opening Message, China Youth, Issue 1, 1923.

Xu Jinyuan, Revolutionary Literary Movement, Republic Daily·Consciousness, June 2, 1924.

China’s Modernization History, compiled by Xu Jilin and Chen Dakai, Shanghai: Sanlian Bookstore, 1996, p. 402.

c.f. Research on China’s Anarchism by Tang Tingfang, Beijing: Legal Press, 1991.

The few influential monographs on “new poetry research” published since the 1980s all suffer this defect, failing to incorporate the tide of revolutionary poetry into the new poetry history of the 1920s for the examination of the changes in the new poetry.

After 1922, the new literary community’s criticism of new vernacular poetry increased. “Winter Night” and “Grass” Review (1922, Tsinghua Literary Society) by Wen Yiduo and Liang Shiqiu, Defensive Warfare of Poetry (May 1923, Creation Weekly, Issue 1) by Cheng Fangwu, A Blow to New Poets (December 1, 1923, China Youth, Issue 7) by Deng Zhongxia, and Presentation to New Poets (December 22, 1923, China Youth, Issue 10) all criticized the tendency of new vernacular verses towards “superficiality and boredom” in the expression of emotions and artistic form.

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