

WALT WHITMAN IN CHINA

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MODERN CHINESE LITERATURE, which looks to the May Fourth Student Movement in 1919 as its starting point, is usually called "New Literature." As its herald, New Poetry first broke away from both the written classical language as the poetic medium and traditional restrictive verse forms and prosodic rules. Apart from all the intrinsic social and literary factors which caused these changes, the impact of Western poetry and its appropriation by Chinese writers played an important role. Poets of different countries, periods and schools vied with each other in exerting influence on modern Chinese poetry. Yet the choices by Chinese translators and the preference of the reading public showed a predilection for those poets who could help them express their desires for democracy and freedom and turn the semi-feudal, semi-colonial China into a modern nation. Walt Whitman's poetry seemed to be especially commensurate with the spirit of the time. Since Chinese new poets considered themselves to be part of a world New Poetry Movement pioneered by Whitman, they, and a great number of their readers, naturally turned to him for inspiration.

I.

In July 1919 Whitman was first introduced to the readers of *The Young China* by Tian Han, a Chinese student studying in Japan who later became a famous playwright. The title of his work, "Commemorating the Centenary of the Birth of Whitman—the Poet of the Common People," indicates the occasion, yet the author was breathing into the fermenting nation some new ideas represented by Whitman. "Common People" was an issue of the time, that is, whether poetry should be "of the common people" or "aristocratic." Vehemently arguing that the greatness of Whitman lay in the fact that he was "but an ordinary man, an American of the New World and a child of Adam," Tian equated Whitman's Americanism with democracy and humanism. He was equally impressed by Whitman's originality in creating free verse: "He never knows what art poetique is nor diction for the sake of rhyme." Thus, from the spirit to the form of expression, Whitman offered what the iconoclastic new poets had been looking for. Tien went so far as to liken the Chinese New Poetry to *Leaves of Grass*, claiming both to be a "barbaric yawp," a "drunk's songs." So he concluded his exuberant article:

Once Whitman's ship of democracy navigated into the Pacific, she startled the so-called Dragon King of the East Sea, stirring up countless demons and stormy waves alike. Now the Pacific knows no peace any more. Can the ship ever reach our East Asian continent? That's a

question. However, fellows! Fellows of the Young China! This ship is bound to carry us Asian people—let alone Chinese compatriots—with her. Those of us already aboard should ‘steer then with good strong hand and wary eye, O!’ Long live Walt Whitman! Long live the Young China!¹

An even more important pioneer of New Poetry was Guo Moruo (Kuo Mo-jo), the mainstay of the Creation Society, a very influential romantic literary group of the day. While studying in Japan, he was captivated in the autumn of 1919 by *Hangyakusha* [*Rebels*], written by Arishima Takeo (1878–1923). The book was about Rodin, Millet and Whitman.² *Leaves of Grass* provided Guo with a volcanic outlet for his pent-up emotions. As he later admitted, he practically “went crazy.” “That completely unconventional style of Whitman’s is very much in harmony with the stormy and progressive spirit of the May Fourth era. I was thoroughly overwhelmed by his vigorous, uninhibited and sonorous tone.”³ According to his account, he rendered many of Whitman’s poems into Chinese while copying them in Japan and sent them back to China for publication. Unfortunately all his “rigorously selected” translations were lost.⁴ However, his early poems, like “Hymn to the Bandits,” “Good Morning,” and “Shouting on the Rim of the World,” reveal the unmistakable influence of Whitman. It is no exaggeration to call Guo Moruo the Chinese Whitmanesque poet:

Good morning! Washington’s grave! Lincoln’s grave! Whitman’s grave!
O Whitman! Whitman! The Pacific Ocean-like Whitman!⁵

Though different in temperament from the Creation Society, poets of the Crescent Society, another important literary group, were no less attracted to Whitman. Xu Zhimo, whose name is almost synonymous with modern Chinese poetry, shared Whitman’s features, such as sensuous inclusiveness, verbosity and excessive cataloguing in his early poems, all in the service of expressing his tempestuous emotions as “an incorrigible individualist.”⁶ In 1924 his translation of “Song of Myself” appeared in *The Short Story Monthly*, the first journal of *belles lettres* after the initiation of New Literature, launched by the Literary Study Society.⁷ Wen Yiduo (Wen I-to) was an out-and-out nationalistic poet and very much against indiscriminate transplantation of foreign poetry. Yet these beliefs did not prevent this renowned poet and literary theorist from appreciating the merit of Whitman. Wen made a study of Whitman together with other American poets when studying in the U.S. in the early 1920s. Later he was heard telling his students that Whitman’s poetry, outwardly unlike poetry, was genuine poetry. Once he could not help uttering his praise for “On the Beach at Night”: “How well it is done,” he said, and encouraged his students to try to put it into Chinese.⁸ Liang Shiqiu, still another noted man of letters from the same society, translated “Tears” under his pseudonym *Qiu Lang*.⁹

Despite the fact that disputes of various sorts went on throughout the

1920s and the first half of the 1930s among different groups in the Chinese literary arena, Whitman seemed to be enjoying a warm welcome by all the major societies: he was held in great esteem by the Creation Society, appreciated by the Crescent Society, and introduced favorably by the Literary Study Society (for instance, Shen Yanbing wrote "Whitman in France" and Zheng Zhenduo included him in *The General Outline of Literature*.)¹⁰ It should be pointed out that reputable as he was, the presentation of Whitman was far from complete. Only a few poems were translated and published in journals and newspapers. Comments came in the form of short notes; monographs did not exist. There were, however, a few translations of articles on Whitman by foreign critics.

It might be useful to glance at a sampling of what some of these pieces were telling Chinese readers about Whitman. The Chinese learned from John Irvine that "another 500 years and Whitman would become what Chaucer was in England 600 years ago," and that Whitman, while not a genius on the same plane with Shakespeare and Milton, "was almost there."¹¹ Zheng Zhenduo wrote that Whitman was a writer of the world, not just an American monopoly, and that he helped secure American literature a seat as "God's favored son" in modern literature of the world.¹² Zeng Xubai regarded the birth of Whitman as "one of the glorious pages in the history of American literature," and believed the poet "wove his whole life into an excellent poem."¹³ All in all, Whitman, "the sworn poet of every dauntless rebel the world over," set an example for the Chinese trying to voice the spirit of a turbulent age in an unconventional way. As a poet put it explicitly in his article "What Should We Learn from Whitman?": "Our time, in a way, is similar to that of Whitman. Therefore Whitman's poetry is what we need. . . . Let's learn from Whitman. The more, the better."¹⁴

II.

Modern Chinese poetry underwent tremendous changes as China waged her war against Japanese aggression in 1937. In answer to the call for the mobilization of the whole of the people, flute gave way to bugle and harpist turned into drum-beater. It is under these new circumstances that Whitman found his way into the hearts of the Chinese people greatly agitated by the war. He even helped change some young poets' outlooks and life attitudes. Mu Mutian, a poet from Northeast China, which first fell victim to Japanese encroachment, was prompted by Whitman to say: "Shame on poets playing upon [the themes of] wind, flowers, snow and moon, in such a critical moment for the nation! . . . Poets should raise their voices to call forth the people to embark on the national salvation. . . . Aren't we now in need of poets such as Du Fu,¹⁵ Milton, Whitman, Hugo and Shelley?"¹⁶

Despite the adverse circumstances such as the fall of cities, the suspension of the sources of foreign literature, the separation of the *literati*, and the scarcity of publishing facilities, the Chinese interest in Whitman, far from

being dampened, reached a peak around 1942 when the war entered the most critical phase. Among Whitman's translators were Chu Tunan, Xu Chi, Yuan Shuipai, Zou Jiang, Zou Difan, Chen Shihuai, Jiang Xun, etc. The most noteworthy was Chu. Under the pen name of *Gao Han*, he started translating Whitman while in jail in the early 1930s "in order to oppose the Fascist reign of terror."¹⁷ In the midst of the war he felt that the Chinese people were also "on the beach at night" and urged them to follow Whitman's suggestion, to endure and be patient, and believed that "the dark night shall not long be victorious, and the stars shall shine out again!"¹⁸

The most popular representative poet during the war with Japan was Ai Qing. When Ai studied in France as a young man, Whitman attracted his attention. It is generally agreed that Whitman's influence is felt in the features of Ai Qing's poetry, such as prose-like verse and insistent repetition.¹⁹ Ai's poems written during the war upheld the torch of democracy and freedom, a bright light, kindling the zeal of many, many ardent young patriots.

The dire reality of the war and the bitter life of the people "opened the eyes and the soul" of another noted poet, Xu Chi. He turned away from his interest in obscure modernism and produced many fiery poems in addition to numerous translations of Whitman's poetry. Xu Chi contended that the tradition in American poetry is none other than Whitman's tradition of democracy. Interestingly enough, he drew "a historical parallel" between two pairs of poets and political leaders: Whitman and Lincoln, and Mayakovsky and Lenin.²⁰ On a later occasion he deified Whitman by proclaiming that Whitman, Lincoln and Mark Twain "embodied the spirit of America like an ever illuminating Trinity."²¹

In the mind's eye of the Chinese people, the name of Whitman is a symbol of freedom and the banner at daybreak. On the 50th anniversary of Whitman's death, a writer remembered, "not knowing nor caring about what other people might be doing," to translate a Japanese article on the poet (possibly the only thing suitable in his possession) so as to pay his "long-cherished homage in a humble way."²² The heartfelt words on that rough, delicate strawboard paper bear witness to the deep love and great respect shown by the Chinese people for the American poet in those unforgettable years.

III.

Right after the end of the war with Japan, Dr. John K. Fairbanks, then cultural attaché in China, proposed to some Chinese associates that a series of American literature books be translated and published in China. Chu Tunan was entrusted with the translation of *Leaves of Grass*. After many twists and turns, the series, 18 volumes in all, managed to come to light in 1949, the year of the founding of the People's Republic. The U.S. government, because of its role in the Chinese Civil War, became an arch-enemy, and "reactionary" American literature was suddenly an anathema. Zhao

Jiabi, the enthusiastic editor, with anticipatory discretion had altered the general title of the series from "American Literature Series" to "World Literature Series."²³ As might be expected, *Leaves of Grass*, making this ill-timed appearance, was consigned to oblivion.

For many years after 1949, poetry was set the task of depicting solely the proletariat and the broad masses of the laboring people, while the introduction of foreign poetry—and foreign literature as a whole—followed strictly the policies laid down by the Party. Translation of American literary works was confined to those of Communist, progressive, and/or realistic writers like Dreiser, Howard Fast, Jack London, Langston Hughes, Mark Twain, etc. Late in 1955, Whitman surprisingly came back in the spotlight. The centenary of the publication of *Leaves of Grass* was marked (together with Cervantes' *Don Quixote*) in a big way, with the Soviet Union's influence behind it. Invitations to the commemorative meeting were sent to Paul Robeson, Samuel Sillen and other progressives; Zhou Yang keynoted Whitman's "revolutionary character," "the progressive significance" of his poetry, and "the most wonderful contribution" he made to the world culture.²⁴ The vacant seats reserved for the American guests were made conspicuous to show to the world that the Chinese people were proud to be "the worthy, posthumous comrades of Whitman," "the upholders of liberty, democracy and independence," and "the faithful practitioners of the principle of peaceful-coexistence among different nations" while, in contrast, John Foster Dulles and Joseph McCarthy and the like were "the traitors" to the American tradition of democracy and "the discreditors" of Whitman.²⁵

In response to the request of the World Peace Council, Chu Tunan republished his *Selections from Leaves of Grass*. He said in his preface that Whitman is "the most distinguished poet of realism and democracy" because of his strong opposition to slavery, his aversion to racial discrimination, his love for the laboring people, and his deep sympathy for the oppressed, and what is more, his recognition of the hypocrisy of bourgeois democracy and his extolling of the European revolution and the struggle of the proletariat.²⁶ The revisionary work was assisted by Professor Wang Mingyuan of Peking University. The translation of the 58 poems included was found "faithful to both the form and content of the original."²⁷ Meanwhile, a number of articles, memoirs, and critical biographies by Chinese poets and translators as well as by Soviet Russian and East European critics were published.

Setting aside the political complications behind the scene, Whitman, as usual, was an inspiring source for the Chinese people. This can be seen in the words of the poet Yuan Shuipai: "When we are reading the poems in which he believed that mankind would reach a better state, we feel intimately as if he were our contemporary. As he imagined a century ago, we feel that his spiritual hand, transcending time and space, was touching our bodies softly."²⁸

During the disastrous years of the "cultural revolution" (1966–1976), all

foreign literature was condemned and banned. Not only was the voice of Whitman strangled, but also almost none of the living translators of Whitman and the poets who bore his influence were able to escape criticism and chastisement for having praised a eulogist of bourgeois democracy. The Chinese once again exercised their patience and remembered Whitman's words, "I may again return."²⁹

Not long after the end of the "cultural revolution," translations and studies of foreign literature were restored and experienced an unprecedented upsurge. In 1978 among the first books of American literature to come off the press after the lifting of the ban was the republication of Chu Tunan's *Selections from Leaves of Grass*.³⁰ With the restoration of comparative literature studies in China, papers on Whitman's beneficial influence on the development of modern Chinese poetry, and on Guo Moruo in particular, came in no small number. Professor Zhao Luorui, of Peking University, made a trip to America to do research on Whitman, and the result of this trip is a new translation of *Leaves of Grass*. Her new efforts in rendering Whitman faithfully and stylistically have won the acclaim of critics.³¹ She also translated some of Whitman's prose, "Whitman on Lincoln."

Under the present Communist leadership, China has taken the path to modernization with characteristics peculiar to itself. There may be zigs and zags ahead, but one thing is sure: in the Chinese endeavour to conduct socialist construction, to perfect socialist democracy, and in the Chinese people's determination to draw on foreign experience, literature and culture included, Walt Whitman will continue to be cherished as a positive factor. The answer to Whitman's question "who learns my lesson complete?" can be found in his warm reception by hundreds of millions of people in China today:

It is no lesson—it lets down the bars to a good lesson,
And that to another, and every one to another still.³²

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NOTES

1 Tian Han, "Commemorating the Centenary of the Birth of Whitman—the Poet of the Common People," *The Young China*, 1, No. 1 (July 1919). Full references to this and other Chinese works on Whitman will be found in my "Selected Bibliography of Walt Whitman in Chinese, 1919–1984" elsewhere in this issue.

2 David Tod Roy, *Kuo Mo-jo: The Early Years* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 79.

- 3 Guo Moruo, "My Experience in Writing Poetry," in *Collected Works of Moruo* (People's Literary Press, 1957), 7:143.
- 4 Guo Moruo, *Collected Foreign Poetry Translated by Moruo* (Shanghai: Jian Wen Bookstore, 1947).
- 5 Guo Moruo, "Good Morning," in *Collected Works of Moruo*.
- 6 Julia C. Lin, *Modern Chinese Poetry: An Introduction* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972), p. 110; Wang Yao, *The History of Modern Chinese Literature* (Shanghai: Wenyi Press, 1982), p. 87.
- 7 Xu Zhimo, *The Short Story Monthly*, 15, No. 3 (March 1924).
- 8 Xue Chengzhi, "Wen Yiduo and Foreign Poetry," *Studies in Foreign Literature*, No. 3, (1979); also Huang Wu, "Whitman and Wen Yiduo," *Wen Hui Bao*, 12 December 1956.
- 9 Qiu Lang, *The Peking Morning Post*, 5 December 1934.
- 10 Shen Yanbing, "Whitman in France," *Short Story Monthly*, 12, No. 3 (March 1921); and Zheng Zhenduo, "American Literature" in *The General Outline of Literature*, serialized in *Short Story Monthly*, 15 (1926).
- 11 Wang Jing, translator, "American Literature" by John Irvine, *The Eastern Miscellanies*, 18, Nos. 22-23 (November 1921).
- 12 Zheng Zhenduo, "American Literature."
- 13 Zeng Xubai, "Walt Whitman," in *The ABC of American Literature* (The World Book Co., 1929).
- 14 Huan Ping, "What Should We Learn from Whitman?," *Shanghai Post*, 25 April 1934.
- 15 Du Fu (712-770) was a great poet of the Tang Dynasty, whose poetry portrays the miseries of the people and exposes the staggering social contrasts.
- 16 Mu Mutian, "I Stand for More Learning," in *Literature and I* (Shanghai Life Bookstore, 1934).
- 17 Chu Tunan, "Preface," in *Selections from Leaves of Grass* (People's Literary Press, 1955).
- 18 Gao Han, *Wen Yi Shen Huo*, 2, No. 1 (1942).
- 19 Julia C. Lin, p. 172.
- 20 Xu Chi, "The Tradition in American Poetry," *Zhong Yuan*, 1, No. 1 (June 1943).
- 21 Xu Chi, "About American Literature," *Wen Lian*, 1, No. 3 (February 1946).
- 22 Jing Wen, *Poetry Creation*, No. 10 (30 April 1942).
- 23 Zhao Jiabi, *Past Things Remembered as Editor* (Sanlian Bookstore, 1984), pp. 493-508.
- 24 Zhou Yang, "In Memory of *Leaves of Grass* and *Don Quixote*," *Literary Gazette*, No. 13 (1955), 28.
- 25 Yuan Shuipai, "The Evergreen Leaves of Grass," *People's Daily*, 5 February 1955.
- 26 Chu Tunan, "Preface."
- 27 Angela Chin-ying Jung Palandri, "Whitman in Red China," *Walt Whitman Newsletter*, 4 (September 1958), 94-97.
- 28 Yuan Shuipai, "Evergreen Leaves."

- 29 Sculley Bradley and Harold Blodgett, eds., *Leaves of Grass*, Comprehensive Reader's Edition (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 506.
- 30 See Mark Cohen's review, "Whitman in China: A Revisitation," *Walt Whitman Review*, 26 (March 1980), 32-35.
- 31 Shi Xianrong, "American Literature in China," *Fan Yi Tong Xun (Translation Journal)*, No. 12 (1983). See also David Kuebrich, "Whitman in China," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 1 (September 1983), 33-35.
- 32 *Leaves*, p. 394.