

One Country, Two Poets

In the early 1980s, Hong Kong was very active as a distribution point for the exciting new writing that was coming out of the Mainland. One example was the group of poets known as the Misties (menglong shiren, 朦朧詩人), who re-introduced some of the basic elements of modernism into Chinese literary life after the so-called Cultural Revolution. Among the best-known of these poets were Bei Dao 北島, Gu Cheng 顧城, and Yang Lian 楊煉. Their work, which had quickly acquired great notoriety in the Mainland, was published, recited and translated in Hong Kong. When they came to Hong Kong to read their poems, the local poetic fraternity (including such writers as the young Leung Ping Kwan 梁秉鈞, then teaching at Hong Kong University) greeted them with open arms. There was a strong sense of renewed optimism, a shared belief in the healing power of literature, especially literature in its purest and most condensed form, i.e. poetry.

These new developments were always threatened by a string of political campaigns (against Spiritual Pollution, etc), but it was the catastrophic events of June 1989 that

finally brought this fruitful springtime to an end. Many of the leading poets went into exile. Their words had been recited and carried aloft on Tiananmen Square. Gu Cheng, perhaps the most naturally inspired of them, came to a tragic end in New Zealand some years later, when he axed to death his wife Xie Ye 謝燁 (herself a poet), and then hung himself from a tree. It was a black day in the annals of 20th-century Chinese literature. Bei Dao and Yang Lian have since then become the most visible of the exiled poets.

Late last year in Hong Kong, by a strange co-incidence, there were two poetic events on the same day: December 1st. In the late afternoon, Bei Dao was talking at Hong Kong University. This was rather a solemn, humourless retrospective, a somewhat pretentious musing on the historical significance of the group of Misties who had published the short-lived magazine *Today* 《今天》 in the years after the end of the Cultural Revolution. It was almost as if Bei Dao's words (from his 1976 poem 'The Answer') were still ringing in the air:

Listen to me, world:

I — do — not — believe...

Let humanity choose a new mountain for survival.

An unobstructed firmament

Lit with glimmering stars,

A new turning:

The hieroglyphs of the ages,

The staring eyes of the future.

告訴你吧，世界，

我——不——相——信……

就讓人類重新選擇生存的峰頂。

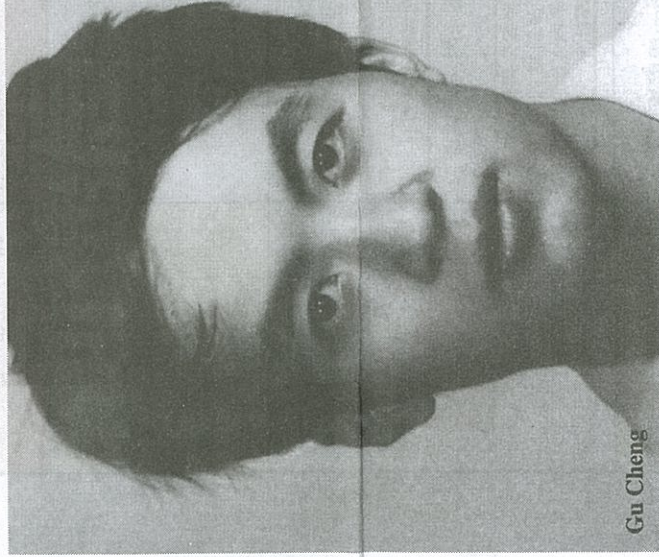
新的轉機和閃閃的星斗，

正在綴滿沒有遮攔的天空。

那是五千年的象形文字，

那是未來人們凝神的眼睛。

(回答, 1976)



Gu Cheng



Bei Dao



Leung Ping Kwan

At the Hong Kong U gathering there was an air of reverence. Everything took place in Mandarin. There was a certain condescension to the audience, coming as they did from the Cultural Desert of Hong Kong. The figures on stage seemed strangely like exiled cadres caught in a time warp, nostalgically recreating a Mainland political meeting from the old days.

Later that same evening, down towards the harbour, on the top floor of the Western Market, another, very different poetic event took place. Leung Ping Kwan, now one of Hong Kong's pre-eminent writers, and a group of friends gathered to read his poetry, in Chinese (Cantonese, of course), in English and even in Arabic. The atmosphere was very relaxed and good-humoured. There was a generosity of spirit. Good wine was shared. People wandered around the rooftop site, chatting and looking at the various objects on display in the communal art venue Habitat. There was poetry in the air. Poetry about food, short poems that celebrated everyday life, bittersweet evocations of relationships that had gone astray, cameos of the Hong Kong fashion world, pensive reflections on the Tsunami, wry protests at the pompous rignarole of politics. There were ironic references to the 1997 Handover; not a heavy-handed retrospective, but a private reluctance to use the 'counterfeit coinage' in circulation. (I have taken this image from 'Performances', a poem

written in 1977 by Mu Dan, perhaps China's greatest poet of the 20th century:

Countless hearts of gold have been betrayed,

A counterfeit coinage circulates,

Buying, not a true response,

But numb indifference, beneath assumed

applause.

Leung's poetry, which in one sense continues the tradition of Mu Dan (he has written at length about his work), poses a quietly repeated question to the authorities:

Your proclamations sit heavy on the stomach,

Destroy the appetite;

The table is altogether overdone.

May I be permitted to abstain

From the rich banquet menu,

To eat my simple fare, my gruel, my wild

vegetables,

To cook them, to share them with you?

(from the poem 'Cauldron')

飽啞詔令有傷脾胃，食具也太沉重
我可否放棄盛宴的肥膩改進素羹
煮我的野菜與你一爐共治？可會
調整你的威嚴逐步變出新的紋飾？

《周鼎》

Leung's poems and the readings at Habitat were an integral (if inconspicuous) part of the rich texture of Hong Kong cultural life — despite the traffic sounds from the flyover just outside the window, despite the lack of overt importance and the apparent absence of a Party Secretary to spy on the political leanings of those present.

China has a grand poetic tradition, one of the greatest in the world. The Chinese twentieth century has seen almost every branch of human endeavour twisted by politics, not least that difficult, sensitive activity that calls itself poetry. It is here that Hong Kong has so much to offer, in the quiet preservation of that 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'.

John Minford