CHAPTER SIX

PERSONALITY IN STYLE: ABUSIVE CRITICISM AND
ZENG JINKE

The person of the author in Chinese literary criticism

In the previous chapter, I have worked towards a definition of style as a specific configuration of formal and linguistic elements. At the same time, I have noted how, in the particular case of poetic reforms in the late 1910s, such configurations were linked with other, broader intellectual preferences and lifestyles. As a result, authors like Liu Bannong were not completely free in their stylistic choices, but limited by the norms of the community with which they associated themselves. In this chapter, I intend to forge an even closer link between literary form, language and content on the one hand, and the person of the author on the other. I demonstrate this link by drawing on examples from literary criticism appearing in journals of the 1920s and 1930s. My main focus is on the pervasive custom of abusive criticism, because it brings out most clearly a widely held view according to which both writer and text were valid objects of interpretation and criticism.

The idea that reading literature is not just reading texts, but rather getting to know intimately the author of those texts, has a very long history in Chinese literary thought. It has been most succinctly described by Stephen Owen, commenting on the traditional Chinese view of poetry or shi 詩, as follows:

The shi is not the 'object' of its writer; it is the writer, the outside of an inside. (Owen 1992:27)

In his commentary on the essay ‘Lun wen’ 論文 (Discourse on Literature) by Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226), Owen elaborates the argument further, saying that “the powerful intuition of personality in style was a historical fact and a deeply held value” (63). This is much more than just a common-sense observation that every author has his or her own style. What it means is exactly the opposite: that every style has its own author. The literary text is the medium through which author
and reader engage in high-level communication. Such communication is the essence of the literary experience. Literature is endowed with a social function that operates on the aesthetic level and that can also be performed by other, non-textual literary activities, such as holding poetry parties or organizing literary societies.

During the Republican period, some of the most popular Western literary theories that influenced modern criticism were equally concerned with the author, but from a very different perspective. In the 1920s, for instance, critics of leading literary groups of widely varying orientations (the Literary Association, the Creation Society, the Critical Review group) displayed strong interest in the naturalist criticism of Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804–1869), whose method of inquiry was summarized by Literary Association member Zheng Zhenduo in 1922 in the following way:¹

[Sainte-Beuve] tells us that, when we research a work [...] we must have read the author's entire oeuvre; moreover, we must research the author himself, and when we research an author, we must examine the author's family, paying special attention to his mother. If he has brothers and sisters, children and grandchildren, we must investigate them closely as well. We must pay special attention to his 'original environment', i.e. the environment when he first entered the literary scene, when he wrote his first poem, story or essay; his friends and his contemporaries also need to be researched. We should also research the secular influences that he underwent, and we must view the author both through the words of his admirers and his opponents. When we draw together the results of all this research, then the truth will appear, and we shall be able to define this author's special talent. (Xidi 1922:5)

Although both views quoted above are similar in their stress upon the relevance of knowledge of the author for a correct understanding of the work, they differ in their method of obtaining that knowledge. In the traditional Chinese critical ideal, the author is known primarily through the text; in naturalist criticism, systematic research on the author is carried out separately from textual research. The attraction of such presumably scientific methods for Republican-era critics is understandable. On the one hand, they endowed criticism with the authority and objectivity of Science, and helped support the establish-

¹ For a reference to Sainte-Beuve in the criticism of members of the Critical Review group, see McDougall 1971 (45). For a discussion of Sainte-Beuve by Guo Moruo 郭沫若, the leading member of the Creation Society, see McDougall 1971 (240 passim).