CHAPTER FOUR

HIDDEN POETS AND POETRY GROUPINGS

1. The Choice of Paths for Poetry

In the 1940s, left-wing poets demanded that poetry have a more direct connection with China’s turbulent society and that emotionally and linguistically it expand beyond the narrow scope of the individual. Left-wing poetry did become the strongest current in poetry circles. The influence of liberated area poetry was expanding by the day, and primarily consisted of poetry based on folk songs and narrative poems describing changes in agricultural village life, like Wang Gui and Li Xiangxiang’s “Tale of Catching the Train,” and Immortal. At the same time, the artistic thinking of some important poets who had previously been critical of left-wing poetry became more radical. In 1948, Zhu Ziqing stated that “today’s poetry is primarily for recitation”—this was not merely a reference to “pattern,” but more indicative of how poets handled language and their stance on reality: “we” replaced “I,” and language about “us” replaced language about “me.” Around this time, Feng Zhi also pointed out: “Today’s poets have discarded feelings of privilege, they are conscious of being ordinary people, and speak for the ordinary people, and only with this does [their poetry] become real poetry.” However, during the late-1940s, there were still many possible roads for poetry writing to travel. The poets who had work published in Poetry Creation and China’s New Poetry expressed strong inclinations to “firmly master the life of people in the contemporary world,” but also steadfastly refused to use poetry as a political weapon or a tool of propaganda.

In 1950, the Literature & Arts Press started a column featuring exchanges on “issues in new poetry.” The poets featured in it seemed more

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3 Literature & Arts Press, vol. 1, no. 12 (March 1950). Those who participated in the column included Xiao San, Tian Jian, Feng Zhi, Ma Fantuo, Zou Difan, Jia Zhi, Lin Geng, Peng Yanjiao, and Li Yang. Essays published around this time by Bian Zhilin, Tian Jian, Ai Qing, and He Qifang, among others, can also be seen as contributions to this conversation.
concerned about formal matters, such as the rules of free-verse form and folk song form, and the architecture of lines in poetry. This probably concealed a common understanding on this, as well as other issues, such as the “status” of poets and “subjectivity” in poetry writing. However, on the matter of the choice of the line for Chinese poetry, careful expressions of concern can be discovered. One was with regard to the tendency to give emphasis to old poetry and the folk song forms so as to negate the new poetry “tradition” since “May Fourth.” Lin Geng believed “today’s poetry movement has for the most part moved into the tradition” of the five- and seven-line forms of classical and folk poetry, but “there is absolutely no form that can be boundlessly used, just as there is no tradition that can be received intact and untouched.”

He Qifang spoke relatively clearly on this point: He opined that “because there are deficiencies in some of new poetry’s forms, all new poetry since ‘May Fourth’ is written off, or the attempt is made to simply stipulate that one form be used to unify the forms of all new poetry.” “They forget that new poetry since ‘May Fourth’ is already a tradition.” However, He clearly restricted this call for “pluralism” to the area of form: “The foundations of form may be pluralistic, but the content and goal of art work can only be unitary.”

As regards the choice of “tradition” and the establishment of the line for new poetry, although the circumspect questioning of Bian Zhilin only dealt with “technique,” the other aspects it entailed were relatively complex: “Is it necessary to completely discard the technique acquired over various developmental stages of learning to write poetry in our country under the influence of western bourgeois poetry in order to serve the people, having grown up purely within folk literature is it also necessary to not want to study some of the skills developed in intellectual poetry of the past?”

During the 1950s, although it was stressed that folk and liberated area poetry were the most direct “traditions” of contemporary poetry, poetry since “May Fourth” was still valued as an important “resource.” Of course, by this time new poetry had already been analyzed and classified. This analysis is reflected in a representative fashion in the essay “An Outline of the Development of New Poetry Since May Fourth” by

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