CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A DIVIDED LITERARY WORLD

1. The Public World of Poetry

Owing to the special socio-political situation during the “Cultural Revolution” period, the literature of this time was in reality split into differing parts. One part was public (public literary activities and openly published materials) and was the mainstream literature of this period; another part was hidden, secret, and dispersed. The latter was the heterodox force of contemporary literature, was richer in vitality, and later proved to be a preparation for and harbinger of literary change in the “post-Cultural Revolution” period.

In the public world of literature, the most important position was occupied by theater, with “revolutionary model opera” at its core. By comparison, the other forms of literature, such as poetry, fiction, and prose, appeared muted. During the first few years of the “Cultural Revolution,” the poetry of professional writers was rarely published and most published work was that of “red guards” and “worker, farmer, and soldier writers”. From 1972, a succession of poetry collections was published. According to statistics, between 1972 and 1975, a total of 390 poetry collections were put out by publishing houses throughout the country. Most of these were collections of works written by “worker, farmer, and soldier writers” in coordination with political campaigns at the time. Examples of this were Songs in Praise of the Cultural Revolution and Songs of War Castigating Lin Biao and Confucius.¹ As regards poetical form, the powerful influence of the political lyrics of the 1950s and 1960s continued, and the political campaigns and political slogans promoted during the “Cultural Revolution” period were the direct basis of the themes and subject matter of this poetry. Taking the effect of literature and arts as political tools into consideration, the organizers of

¹ See Ji Ge, ‘Poetry comes from Struggle, Struggle needs Poetry’, People’s Literature, no. 2, 1976.
literature and arts circles during the “Cultural Revolution” period probably felt that song had greater “power”. Therefore, “songs of the masses”, including the quotations and poetry of Mao Zedong and Lin Biao’s ‘Preface to the Republication of The Quotations of Chairman Mao’, were composed and circulated widely. Many of these songs had a frankness and extreme rhetorical form not seen in any other period.  At the time, any tactfulness, indirection, or obscure mode of expression was seen as lacking in “fighting spirit”. Poetry writing also developed in this direction. Jiang Qing frequently engineered the writing of “revolutionary folk songs” and “revolutionary children’s songs” in direct concert with political campaigns. Of these, the most famous was “Little Jin Village poetry”—a rhymed text of political propaganda written in doggerel and accompanied by story-telling clappers. Under these conditions, poetry composition was entirely unrelated to the expression of individual experience. The “intrusion” of the language of rigid political symbolism into poetry made it impossible to pass on the language and the imaginative sensitivity of the individual poet. A typical example was the publication of Zhang Yongmei’s long poem ‘War over the Xisha Islands’ as a piece of socio-political commentary. The intention of the composition, the viewpoint expressed, and the artistic form of this long poem, termed a “poetry report”, was the same as Hao Ran’s ‘Sons and Daughters of the Xisha Islands’: It was entirely in line with the exercise of contemporary political power. ‘War over the Xisha Islands’ also “created” a unique form of distribution in China’s new poetry: The political newspaper Enlightenment Daily printed the start of the poem on the first page and devoted several more pages to its full publication. Soon afterwards, the People’s Daily and papers in cities and provinces throughout the country reprinted the poem. Aside from paramount political intentions, this form of publication was intended to act as a “model” for

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2 Such as the following widely popular songs during the “Cultural Revolution”: “Take up the pen, as a sword or gun, and concentrate your fire on the black gang; Who dares say the Party’s no good, we’ll send him to meet the King of Hell”; “The Great Cultural Revolution is great, it’s great, it’s great!”, and so on.

3 Little Jin Village (Xiaojin Village) is located in Baodi County in Tianjin. Jiang Qing often travelled here and organized poetry writing and other activities. Poetry collections published at the time included Little Jin Village Poetry Selections (Tianjin People’s Publishing House) and A Force Twelve Typhoon Can’t Blow It Down (People’s Literature Publishing House).