

Drama-tic Synthesis: Time, Memory, and History in the Writings of the Nine Leaves Poets

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We hope we can have a hope,
Then, humiliation, pain, struggle, and death,
Because there is courage rushing through our shining blood,
Yet in the middle of courage: bewilderment.

We hope we can have a hope,
It says: I am not beautiful, but I will no longer deceive
Because we see in the eyes of the dead
The flames of tears flicker in our despair.

...

We only hope that we can have a hope as revenge.

我们希望我们能有一个希望，
然后再受辱，痛苦，挣扎，死亡，
因为在我们明亮的血里奔流着勇敢，
可是在勇敢的中心：茫然。

我们希望我们能有一个希望，
它说：我并不美丽，但我不再欺骗，
因为我们看见那么多死去的人的眼睛
在我们的绝望里闪着泪的火焰。

。 。 。

我们只希望有一个希望当做报复。

—MU DAN, “Shigan sishou” 时感四首



The Nine Leaves poets (Jiuye shiren 九叶诗人) were a group of “self-conscious modernists” 自觉的现代主义者, representing the “newborn generation of poets” 诗的新生代, in the words of Tang Shi 唐湜 (1920–2005), a poet and literary critic of the Nine Leaves school.¹ The school took its name from *Jiuye ji* 九叶集 (Nine Leaves collection), a collection of works by nine representative poets of the group published in 1981. Among these nine poets, four of them, Mu Dan 穆旦 (1918–1977), Du Yunxie 杜运燮 (1918–2002), Zheng Min 郑敏 (b. 1920), and Yuan Kejia 袁可嘉 (1921–2008), started to establish themselves as modernist poets when they attended college at Southwest Associated University (Xi’nan lianda 西南联大, 1938–1946) in Kunming, where they came into contact with the Western modernist poetic tradition. The other five members, Xin Di 辛笛 (1912–2004), Hang Yuehe 杭约赫 (1917–1995), Chen Jingrong 陈敬容 (1917–1989), Tang Qi 唐祈 (1920–1990), and Tang Shi started their poetic careers in various geographical locations during the war era, but were drawn together by their shared poetic sensibilities and gathered in Shanghai in the late 1940s to start publishing poetry journals. It is generally believed that the Nine Leaves school was formed when the journal *Shi chuanguzao* 诗创造 (Poetry creation, July 1947–June 1948) was published and that the school matured during the publication of another journal, *Zhongguo xinshi* 中国新诗 (Chinese new poetry, June 1948–October 1948), which created an opportunity for the poets of the Southwest Associated University to join their Shanghai counterparts in poetry writing and publication.

The Nine Leaves poets emerged during the tumultuous years of war and social instability in the 1940s, when the literary scene of China was dictated by the policy on literature and art articulated by Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893–1976) at the Yan’an Forum in 1942 that emphasized the importance of political demands over artistic merits.² Many writers and poets in 1940s China were committed to writing socially engaged works in response to the surging fervor of nationalism as well as the leftist emphasis on the sociopolitical function of literature. The dominant trend of New Poetry in the 1940s, in the opinion of another poet and literary critic of the Nine Leaves school, Yuan Kejia, was toward “the didactic and the sentimental” 说教的或感伤的, and the poems lacked “poetic qualities” 诗的素质.³ Reacting against the contemporary prevailing trend of New Poetry, the poets of the Nine Leaves school made a conscious effort to strike a balance between aesthetic value and social commitment in their poetic diction, as they employed Western modernist poetic

1 Tang Shi, “Shi de xinshengdai,” 29.

2 Mao Zedong, “Zai Yan’an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua,” 847–879.

3 Yuan Kejia, *Bange shiji de jiaoyin—Yuan Kejia shiwenzuan*, 68.