

THE POLEMICS OF POST-MAO POETRY: CONTROVERSY OVER
MENG-LUNG SHIH

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In the November 1981 issue of Ch'ī -shih nièn-tài (The Seventies) published in Hong Kong, there appears an article titled "The Entangled Warfare Raging in the Poetry Arena of the Mainland," subtitled "Catastrophy Triggered by Méng-lúng shih," 朦朧詩.¹ Albeit its journalistic tendency is toward sensationalism and the use of hyperbole, the article pointedly describes a current literary phenomenon that has been a growing concern in China since the fall of the "Gang of Four." With the warming trend in China's political climate following the Conference of the Third Plenum of the CCP Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978, the cultural aspects of China have experienced a new burgeoning, especially in the literary field.

As early as January 1979, Geramie Barme observed in his "Flowers or More Weeds?--Culture in China since the Fall of the Gang of Four":

Flipping through any of the major or even local literary gazettes or reviews produced in the People's Republic during the last year, one not uncommonly comes across the names of authors unseen in print for ten or even twenty years. Some of these authors, even as recently as eighteen months ago, were still regarded as being "enemies of the people," "right elements," "unreformed bourgeois intellectuals," or some other category of abuse reserved for the victims of the literary and political struggles of the mainland. The reappearance of many old writers, artists, actors and arts administrators has, during 1978, become an intrinsic part of the new

"literary spring" and "blooming of a hundred flowers" as the present cultural revival is referred to in the Chinese press.

Indeed, veteran poets, such as Ai Ch'ing, Tien Chien, Tsang K'o-chia, and a host of others, who were thus branded during the Cultural Revolution and survived the national disaster, are back in public life, with their former positions reinstated or new titles bestowed upon them. Despite the years of mental suffering, physical labor, and imposed silence, these poets have quickly regained their verbal facility. Some use poetry to release their pent up emotions, announcing to the world the wrongs committed against themselves and against the people; some are unwilling to forget the sad memories of past sufferings, transforming their bitterness into songs of hope for a brighter future based on their faith in the country's new leaders and the national policy of Four Modernizations. However, amid the elevating, edifying new songs of the mature and familiar voices, discordant notes are heard from poets of the younger generation who grew up during the Cultural Revolution, whose trusting nature had been twisted by political events, and whose faith in the future had been shattered. The traumatic experiences they suffered during their formative years must have left on them deeper scars than on those who had been toughened by age or fortified by the spiritual reserves of a healthier past. At any rate, these younger poets seem to harbor more resentment at having been cut off from any contact with the outside world, and at having been deprived even of their rightful literary heritage of the May Fourth era. But the years they spent in the bleak cultural desert may have sharpened their sensibilities and fostered skepticism toward party leadership and a restored trust in the individual self as an independent entity. With only their intuition and creative talent to rely upon, some of the younger poets have developed an aversion to any poetry that is reminiscent of or calls to mind formulaic political propaganda in verse form. Once allowed the freedom to

exercise their creative energy and literary imagination, these young poets strive to bring art back to poetry. Some try to forge new imagery or fresh metaphors out of their own perception or inner vision; some experiment with new poetic techniques or search for new modes of expression in the vistas opened on to the Western world.

In sharp contrast to the poetry written by the more established poets of the earlier generation--a poetry more transparent in meaning and more orthodox in form and style--this new poetic expression, for the most part, appears to be ambiguous in meaning, difficult to understand, and sometimes downright obscure. For this reason, it has been labeled by its critics as méng-lúng shih. The primary, etymologic meaning of méng-lúng means "blurry," like flowers veiled in mist or viewed in the moonlight, leaving much to the reader's imagination, thus "ambiguous" or "obscure." But for want of a well established English translation of the term, I have rendered méng-lúng shih as "opaque poetry," or "poems of opacity," because it seems to me that opacity suggests a quality which is in contradistinction to "transparency"; moreover, it is not as derogatory as the term "obscurity," which is not always the case with all the méng-lúng shih. In this paper I prefer to use the Chinese term, for no translation could convey its full import and implication.

The so-called méng-lúng shih may have had its genesis in the T'ien-ān-mén shih-ch'ao (a collection of poems of protest or of mourning over Chou En-lai's death, clandestinely preserved since the T'ien-an-men Incident on April 5th, 1976) which was proscribed by the government until the end of 1978, when it was officially sanctioned for publication. Its appearance may have helped in the Democratic Movement. But the suppression of the Democracy Wall in the spring of 1979 may have enhanced the development and popularity of opaque poetry.

In his Beijing Street Voices, David S. G. Goodman states, "Poetry has in fact been an integral part of the Democracy Movement activities . . . this may well have been because poetry is both more popular in China than in the West, and also traditionally more political."³ Poetry indeed has always had more serious utilitarian purposes in China than anywhere else in the world. Since time immemorial folk songs and street ditties were collected by the government and used as a form of Gallup poll to determine the pulse of the people. However, except for the state sanctioned political propaganda verse of the last three decades, now labeled as pàng shī ("gang verse"), the political intent in poetry in the past has been more often than not stated by implication, concealed in metaphors or symbolic language. Ping Hsin, the most celebrated Chinese woman poet of this century, believes that the rise of opaque poetry is due to the reluctance on the poet's part to openly comment on matters concerning the state, current events, or private love affairs. Under such circumstances, the poet is inclined to adopt certain means to create ambiguity with which to conceal his intention either to protect himself or to safeguard others.⁴

When the Democracy Movement came to an end with the arrest of the political dissidents in 1979, most of the radical poets remained active. However, their writings seem to have become more opaque. Thus, the first charge leveled against opaque poetry was obscurantism because its message is not clear, its language difficult, or its mode of expression outlandish and unconventional.

Pei Tao, a frequent contributor to the defunct (suppressed?) magazine Jīn t'ian [sic] (Today) has this to say of his own poetic techniques which have been under attack:

The form of modern Chinese poetry is facing a crisis. Many of the old, worn, threadbare means of expression are no longer appropriate to convey the rapid changes of the present-day world. . . . I attempt to introduce the cinema technique of montage into my poetry in order to create a swift shifting of juxtapositions, a rapid succession of thematically related images that show different aspects of the same idea or situation . . . to stimulate the reader's imagination and force him to fill the blanks with his personal responses through his own imagination. In addition, I pay special attention to the capacity and compression of poetry; I also try to capture the subconscious⁵ and the instantaneous sensations

Perhaps as the result of his using this kind of technique, Pei Tao's "Notes from the City of the Sun" stirred up a furor in China's literary arena. The verse which drew much adverse criticism bears the title: "Living," and its content consists of a single line, or word: "A net."^{6(a)} The poet Ai Ch'ing has made at least two references⁷ to this verse in his talks to poets and reporters. Once he even accused its author of plagiarizing part of his own lines ("Living is an empty net, / Spread open to catch me"), from his early long poem Huo-pa ("The Torch"). Technically, this is not exactly plagiarism, but a derivation, a conscious or unconscious borrowing. In Pei Tao's defense, it may also be said that by alluding to the famous lines of Ai Ch'ing, the younger poet is perhaps trying to pay homage to the elder poet whose views on life he shares and admires.

Pei Tao is not the only one whose experimentation with new modes of expression produces opaque poetry. Liu Tzu-tz'u, one of the thirty-five poets who received the National Poetry Award in the 1981 poetry contest, writes in an article about his own process in

achieving an opaque quality in his poetry. He claims that since the collapse of the "Gang of Four," he has published more than a hundred poems in the more familiar style that he was used to; that is, in the language of the people, using mostly direct statement and simple rhymes. But after traveling from province to province, attending poetry workshops and discussing poetry with other poets, he became dissatisfied with his own flat and stilted poetic style. He has since allowed abstract concepts and sentiments to be distilled and translated into concentrated, concrete forms of natural imagery. Instead of explaining everything to the reader, he has left much unsaid so as to invite the reader's participation and interpretation. Rather than adhering to any specific stanzaic forms or rhyming folksong metre, he lets the rise and fall of his inner emotions govern the rhythm and cadence of his new poetic style.

The poet who has received the most scrutiny on account of his "opacity" is Ku Ch'eng, a young worker in his early twenties. According to his father, the well-known poet Ku Kung, the younger Ku was able to compose startlingly imagistic verse even before he knew how to write. In a note prefacing his poems published in Shanghai wen-hsüeh Ku Ch'eng speaks of his love for beauty, "especially the pristine beauty of a baby's eyes, for its freshness"; that he "lives to create," and that his goal in life is to search for beauty and express it in his poems.¹⁰ But the beauty expressed in his poems is not always beautiful in the conventional sense. Witness his Gothic, surrealistic sketch of the Yangtze River, possibly during the construction of the Yangtze Bridge:

The blasting has stopped,
The River banks are piled high
With Giant-skulls.

Sailboats wearing deep mourning
Move slowly along
The unwound brownish shroud.^{11(b)}

This morbid imagery shocked his own father and provoked the anger of Kung Liu, a well-established, celebrated poet. "Why could he [Ku Ch'eng] not depict the boulders with the imagery of giant eggs instead of giant skulls?" demanded his father. "How dare he denigrate the Yangtze River, the lifeline of China, by describing it as a dirty shroud!" exclaimed the outraged Kung Liu. Why, indeed. The answer could be found in one of the young Ku's own poems:

A flash of sunlight in the skies
Was swiftly buried by black clouds.

Violent storms and deluge
Developed the negatives of my soul.^{12(c)}

This poignant confessional verse clearly sums up the negative attitude developed during the tender years of the poet's life. Although he speaks in symbols, it is not difficult for anyone to comprehend what the sun and the clouds stand for in the political context of China in those traumatic years. But besides his thinly disguised comment on political issues and events, Ku Ch'eng reveals in this poem other objectionable tendencies that are loosely associated with the me'ng-lung shih, namely negativism and decadence. Yet, despite disapproval from communist authoritative critics, Ku Ch'eng's poetry is appreciated and admired by many for its implicitness and its apt, sharp and clear imagery which is reminiscent of the imagist verse of T. E. Hulme and that of the early Pound, and founders of the School of Imagism, which, ironically, was inspired by Pound's partial knowledge but ardent admiration of classical Chinese poetry. The crosscurrent of literary influences and convolution between East and West seems to have come to a full circle in the space of sixty years.

Another name that is frequently associated with me'ng-lung shih is Shu T'ing, possibly because she was one of the seventeen young poets that participated in the poetry workshop, Ch'ing-ch'un shih-hui, sponsored

by Shih-k'an (Poetry Journal) editors and spokesmen in Peking, July, 1980. Shu T'ing is the only woman among the thirty-five award winners of the National Poetry Contest in 1981. Although the poem which won her the award, Tzū-kúo, wō ch'in-ai-te tzū-kúo! ("O Motherland, My Dear Motherland") as the title suggests, is far from being opaque, some of her poems are alleged to be méng-lúng shih, not so much for the opacity of their language as for the opacity of her thoughts and ideology. She has been criticized for her subjectivity, especially for her overconcern for the individual in a selfless society. In the prefatory note to her "Three Poems" that appeared in the October 1980 issue of Shih-k'an, Shu T'ing makes her plea for understanding from her critics:

Understand me please, humans. I never expected to be a poet; I know also I can never be a thinker (no matter how much I wish). Only through self-searching have I become aware firmly of this truism: Today, it is imperative that people must have mutual respect, trust, and warm affection. I only wish to use poetry to express my deep concern for every human being. Barriers must be removed; masks must be thrown off. I believe that there can be mutual understanding between us, because we can find the avenue that leads straight to the heart.¹³

Despite her emphasis or alleged emphasis on subjectivity and individualism as imperative to a poet's creative imagination, Shu T'ing is a poet with definite social commitment. She has deep social concern, but it is a universal concern for all humanity that goes beyond classes, Party lines and national boundaries. One poem that particularly demonstrates her intense concern for human lives is entitled "After the Storm." It was written in commemoration of the seventy-two laborers who perished on the off-shore drilling rig named Po-hai No. 2, which sank in a relatively mild tempest. Although she does not openly lay blame on anyone specifically for the mishap, the

tone of the poem seems to imply that perhaps the disaster could have been averted had there been more concern for the value of human lives than for material gains. Is she blaming the authorities for mismanagement or neglect? Or does she accuse the capitalist country which sold the defective goods? As to who was responsible for the tragedy she does not say. She casts doubts and leaves the conclusions for her readers to draw for themselves. As the poem is sixty-six lines long (divided into seven stanzas), I quote only in part as follows:

I

In the Gulf of Po-hai
Where the leaden clouds above hung their epitaphs
Are the remains of my seventy-two brothers.

On the thoroughfare of life where spring comes
every year
Icy waves and retreating winter collided
To stop the breaths of seventy men.

.....

.....

IV

The typhoon had dissipated long ago,
But the distress call of the seventy-two
Through the labyrinth of linotypes and teletypes
Finally wound its way to the microphone
and struck upon the resounding wall of
righteousness,
Now amid the heat of mid-summer
Millions of hearts
Suddenly grow cold

.....

.....

VII

I only wish that when the whistle summons me
 My mother need not be stricken with fear;
 I wish the treatment I receive
 Would not warp my children's spirit;
 I wish to live and to labor
 For humanity but also for myself;
 I wish that when I die
 No one's conscience needs to twitch.
 I earnestly wish:
 You, future poets
 No longer share my powerless outrage,
 When the seventy-two pairs of eyes
 Sprouting seaweeds and red coral
 Fix their stares on your pen.^{14(d)}

In a more low-key poem, "April Dusk," she expresses her fears for the more outspoken youths and cautions them to tone down their protests:

In the April dusk
 Are suites of green melodies,
 Whirling in the gorges,
 Circling in the skies.
 If your soul flows over with echoes,
 What is the point of arduous searching.
 If you have to sing, then sing, but please,
 Softly, gently . . .

April dusk,
 Like a memory lost and recovered,
 Perhaps a promised trust
 Has not been kept till now;
 Perhaps a passionate love
 Can never be allowed.
 If you wish to weep, then weep, let the tears
 Flow, flow, silently . . .^{15(e)}

Shu T'ing's implicit fear seems unfounded. So far the government has not taken drastic actions against any new literary tendencies that have arisen

since the late 1970s. If anything, there has been a visible encouragement of literary activities, if we may judge by the freedom of the literary journals to publish poems of all forms and styles. In addition, many government approved public readings, poetry workshops, and roundtable discussions have been frequently conducted during the last two years. The National Poetry Contest of 1980 was another government sponsored effort to improve the quality of modern poetry.

Among the practicing poets and literary critics, however, reactions are widely varied regarding the ultramodern lyricism and "decadent" concept of l'art pour l'art represented by méng-lúng shīh. They range from outright condemnation short of censorship to superlative praise for the innovations of the young in their search for new directions. Advocates of these new experimentalists consider the revival of subjective lyricism as a courageous act, a liberation of art from a political straightjacket, a return of humanism and of individuality to poetry. Opponents, on the other hand, charge that méng-lúng shīh encourages hermeticism, elitism, egocentricity, and individualism; that it flows against the mainstream of the socialist, proletarian literature instituted by Mao Tse-tung four decades ago. They object to the use of ambiguous or outlandish metaphor or imagery; to its indiscriminate borrowing from Western literary theories and techniques; to its abnegation of Chinese native tradition. If poetry cannot be easily understood by the masses, they argue, it has failed its primary function, which is communication. They also object to poets who are obsessed with the self, with subjective feelings and dreams and with personal happiness and love between the sexes which is divorced from the socialist goals set by the Party. Most all, they object to the overemphasis on aesthetic qualities in poetry at the expense of its utilitarian, nationalist purposes. Ironically, some of these critics had themselves been branded as rightists, unreformed intellectual elitists, no so long ago.

It seems that the controversy over méng-lúng shīh is but a red herring. There is a far more serious and fundamental issue that is at stake, an issue involving the Marxist literary principles set down by Mao Tse-tung at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942. According to Lenin-Marx-Maoist theories, literature and art should be cogwheels in the political machinery of the state, and they should have no independent existence in a communist society. "There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics," announced Mao in his talks to the poets and artists in 1942. Indeed, most of the leftwing writers who belonged to the revolutionary stage of China had adhered to these principles. Even though they have personally suffered at the hands of those extra-leftists who carried Mao's policies to the extreme, they are, for the most part, still loyal to Maoist thought, trying to preserve the basic tenets of Mao's literary dictums. But not so the wayward young poets who have nothing to look back on but disillusionment and lost hopes. With historical evidence on their side, they want to advance new literary principles which challenge the validity of the old.

Currently poetic polemics have engaged the critical insights of both generations of poets. Their debate has shifted from the pros and cons of méng-lúng shīh to form versus content, to the weighty questions centering on the purpose and function of poetry: e.g., the responsibility of the poet towards society and to himself. Opinions are divided as to what extent poetry should adhere to the party line, to what degree aesthetic considerations should be given to poetry; they are also at odds concerning such related questions as whether Chinese poets should adopt Western literary concepts, or recharge themselves with the rich legacy of their traditional past. While no one explicitly disagrees that poetry in a socialist society must retain its utilitarian purpose and altruistic goal and not be detached from the service

of the people, no consensus has yet been reached in regard to the degree of subjectivity to be tolerated, or how freely the poet may voice his views regarding the affairs of state, current events, and social justice. These questions perhaps cannot be answered to everyone's satisfaction, but as long as there is free exchange of opinions, and tolerance of dissension and diversity, there is hope for true poetry to flourish.

Chairman Hu Yao-pang said not too long ago that the poets must impose on themselves a forbidden zone.¹⁶ Put it in another way, poets are free to write what they please, so long as they are within the bounds of reason. But where are the clear demarcations of the bounds? And by whose reason? There are only vague speculations, but no obvious answers. This is perhaps why poets and critics, young and old, are either fearlessly or fearfully trying to determine for themselves the boundaries of their freedom and to establish literary norms acceptable to themselves and to the socialist state. The tragic events of the recent past are still vivid in the minds of both politicians and poets. In a talk given at a poets' forum, Ai Ch'ing told his audience, "Political democracy is the crux. Without it you cannot begin to talk of artistic democracy."¹⁷ And when he was asked by a Shih-k'an reporter, "How can a hundred flowers bloom in poetry?" Ai Ch'ing's answer was: "That depends on the political climate."¹⁸ Currently there is a folk ditty which goes:

Fear no heaven; fear no hell;
Only fear that the government reverses gear. (f)

May the government stay in top gear and speed toward its goal of Four Modernizations, without trampling down the literary flowering along the road.

Aside from political considerations, the controversy regarding the future of modern Chinese poetry continues, and, as far as I know, méng-lúng shīh

remains at the center of the controversy. A more balanced attitude toward méng-lúǎng shīh still comes from Ai Ch'ing, who voices his opinion in an article, Mí-hūn-yào ("Hallucinogenic"),¹⁹ that there is room for méng-lúǎng shīh, "so long as it is well written, so long as it is beautiful; but one must not elevate méng-lúǎng shīh above all else, consider it to be the only direction of modern Chinese poetry, and insist that opacity is the law of poetry."²⁰ Whether or not méng-lúǎng shīh is a passing trend, or it is the new direction of modern Chinese poetry, only time will tell.

NOTES

¹ Su Li-wen. Ch'ī-shīh nién-tài, 142 (Nov. 1981), pp. 34-44.

² Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs, No. 1 (Jan. 1979), pp. 125-133.

³ David S. G. Goodman, Beijing Street Voices (London & Boston: 1979), p. 17.

⁴ "Interview with Ping Hsin," Shīh-k'an, No. 1 (Jan. 1981), pp. 43-45 *passim*.

⁵ Shānghāi wén-hsūeh, No. 5 (May 1981), p. 90.

⁶ The poem was first printed in the unofficial journal Chīn-t'ian (Today), No. 3 (April 1979), p. 40; English version by Goodman in Beijing Street Voices, p. 117, and in Johnathan D. Spence, Gate of Heavenly Peace (New York: Viking Press, 1981), pp. 369-370. (a) (b) (c), etc., refer to the Chinese glossary which follows these notes.

⁷ Quoted in Ch'ī-shīh nién-tài, *op. cit.*

⁸ "Drawing Experiences of Others, Inventiveness and So On," Shīh-k'an, No. 12 (Dec. 1980), pp. 29-31, *passim*.

⁹ Ku Kung, "Two Generations," Shīh-k'an, No. 10 (Oct. 1980), pp. 49-50.

¹⁰ Ibid., No. 10 (Oct. 1980), p. 28.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 49.

¹² Quoted by Sha Ou in "Poets' Correspondence," Hsing-hsing, 55 (June 1980), p. 96.

¹³ Shīh-k'an, No. 10 (Oct. 1980), p. 11.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁵ Chīn-t'ian (Today), No. 3 (1979), pp. 36-37.

¹⁶ Talk given at Playwrights' Forum on Feb. 12-13, 1980. Quoted in Shānghāi wén-hsūeh, 42 (Mar. 1981), pp. 4-22, *passim*.

¹⁷ Chinese Literature, No. 1 (Jan. 1982), p. 16.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁹ Ai Ch'ing, "Mí-hūn-yào," Kwang-ming jih-pao, (Dec. 20, 1981), pp. 4-5.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 4

CHINESE GLOSSARY

(a) 生活
網

(b) 崩坍停止了，
江邊高壘着巨人的頭顱。

戴孝的帆船，
緩緩走過，
展開了暗黃的尸布……

(c) 陽光在天上一閃，
又被烏雲埋掩。
暴雨沖洗着
我靈魂的底片。

(d) 暴風過去之後。
——紀念“渤海二號”鑽井船遇難的
七十二名同志

在渤海灣
鉛雲低垂着挽聯的地方。
有我七十二名兄弟

在春天每年必經的路上
波濤和殘冬合謀
阻斷了七十二個人的呼吸

四

颱風早已經登陸。
可是，七十二個人被淹沒的呼籲
在鉛字之間
曲曲折折地穿行
終於通過麥克風
撞向了正義的迴音壁

盛夏時分
千百萬顆心
驟然感到寒意

七

我希望，汽笛召喚我時
媽媽不必為我牽掛憂慮
我希望，我受到的待遇
不要使孩子的心灵畸曲
我希望，我活着並且勞動
為了別人也為了自己
我希望，若是我死了
再不會有人的良心為之顫栗
最後我衷心地希望
未來的詩人們
不再有這種無力的憤怒

當七十二雙
長滿海藻和紅珊瑚的眼睛
緊緊銜住你的筆

(e)

四月的黃昏里
流曳着一組組綠色的旋律，
在峽谷低迴，
在天空游移。
若是靈魂里溢滿了回響，
又何必苦苦尋覓？
要歌唱你就歌唱吧，但請
輕輕，輕輕，溫柔地……

四月的黃昏
彷彿一段失而復得的記憶，
也許有一個約會

至今尚未如期；
也許有一次熱戀
永不能相許。
要哭泣你就哭泣吧，讓淚水
流啊，流啊，默默地……

(F) 天不怕，地不怕
就怕領導又變卦。