THE POETIC THEORY AND PRACTICE OF AI QING: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

By Angela Jung Palandri

Among contemporary China's veteran poets who have survived the Cultural Revolution, Ai Qing is perhaps one of the most popular and enduring. Having been branded a rightist in 1957, during the first political storm that crushed the blooming of the "Hundred Flowers," Al Qing disappeared from the scene for nearly twenty years. Many of his admirers feared for his life. But after the fall of the Gang of Four, Ai Qing returned from his long exile and has since made several appearances abroad. His writings too have appeared in several literary periodicals that have been revived in recent years. One of these is **Shi Kan (Poetry Magazine)**, of which he was once associate editor.

Although his recent poems seem to lack the vitality of those written during the anti-Japanese War era, such as "The Bugler" (1938) or "He Died a Second Death" (1939), they are nevertheless significant and representative of this particular phase of his creative activity. That he has regained his voice at all after two decades of forced silence is in itself a literary miracle and a poetic triumph. Ai Qing's popularity is due to his long dedication to poetry, and to his unswerving commitment to social ideals. This is not to say that his poetic style has not changed. Indeed, his poetry has gone through a series of changes and modifications because of various external literary influences and political pressures. But like the cliff of which he sang in a poem by that title,

Though its face and body are scarred
[and marred
As if carved by axes and knives
It remains standing there
Smiling, and looking toward the
[sea....[1]

Like the cliff, Ai Qing remains constant to his commitment to poetry, which is dedicated to the social problems of China, and to the betterment of the lives of the Chinese people. Although he has long been recognized as a revolutionary poet, little has been said of his maintaining, in theory, and perhaps in practice, the literary tradition that goes back to the classical poets of the neo-**yuefu** school, such as Du Fu, Yuan Zhen, and Bai Juyi, who risked their lives to speak out against social injustice.

Ai Qing, whose real name is Jiang Haicheng, was born in 1910 to a family of landed gentry in Yiwu, Zhejiang province. For some unspecified reason, for the first five years of his life he lived at the home of his nurse, **Dayan Ho** (called after the name of a river), whom he honored later with a long lyrical poem by that title. According to Ai Qing, because he suckled the milk of the peasant woman Dayan Ho, in his "veins flows the blood of those who till the land," and, consequently, he possessed empathy for the downtrodden peasant class.

He grew up during the high tide of the May Fourth Movement, when iconoclasm toward traditional values was pervasive. After graduating from high school, Ai Qing attended the Art Institute in Shanghai briefly and sailed for France in 1927 to study painting. In Europe he was drawn more and more to the world of letters and came under the influences of romanticism, decadence, and symbolism. He returned to China shortly after the Japanese invasion of

Manchuria in 1931. Equipped with patriotic fervor and Apollinaire's "reed pipe," he had hoped, with his poetry, to comfort and uplift the spirit of his motherland in distress. But, upon his arrival in Shanghai in 1932, he was arrested by the Nationalist secret police for "harboring dangerous thoughts," and was imprisoned for three years. It was during his imprisonment that he wrote the poem "Dayan Ho, My Nurse," whose publication in 1936 brought him fame as a poet. After his release, Ai Qing traveled in northern China and wrote his long poem, "Northland," in 1937.

When the war broke out between China and Japan in July of that year, Ai Qing was teaching in a college in Shaanxi. He went to Xian and joined the Propaganda Corps for the United Literary Front, and in 1938 a mission took him to Hankou. The year 1941 found him in Yanan, where most of the left-wing writers congregated during the war years. He was present at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art in May, 1942. In the following year he joined the Communist Party. Despite the early dedication of his poetical genius to the war effort, and despite his advocacy of proletarian literature by the people and for the people, he fell into disfavor with the communist government in the fifties because of his "intellectual background and individualistic and idealistic tendencies." He was deprived of his literary duties and was dispatched, in 1957, to the remote regions of either the northwest or northeast, until his "rehabilitation" in 1977. His crime? He refused to subjugate poetry to the dictates of politics, especially when there was a clash between politics and truth.

In his **Ars Poetica** or **Shi lun**[2], Ai Qing clearly states his theories regarding the function of poetry, the poet's mission, and the

poet's relation to society, as well as giving practical pointers on the writing of poetry. Intrinsically an idealist, Ai Qing observed in his **Shi lun** (1938-39): "Truth, goodness, and beauty are three expressions of the unanimous will of mankind, and poetry must serve as their connectives"; "Truth is our knowledge of the world; it gives us faith in the future. Goodness is societal altruism; its criterion was gauged by the welfare of the people. . . ."; and, "All that which elevates mankind to progress upward is beautiful and good, and is also poetry."[3] To Ai Qing poetry is not his vocation or avocation, but his life: "I live, therefore I sing," a declaration which is a take-off from Descartes' "I think, therefore I am." For Ai Qing, "The rhythm of poetry is the rhythm of life; the meter of poetry is the pulse of life. . . . and the more fully one tastes life, the more can he produce true poetry."[4] In other words, to Ai Qing life and poetry are inseparable, and his own poetry, too, is inseparable from his own life, and from truth. But politics and truth are not always compatible, because poetry is allergic to hypocrisy, while politics thrives on it. "Poetry and hypocrisy are irreconcilable. As soon as the poet comes in contact with hypocrisy, his poetry is doomed to failure."[5] The harmonious notes from the "reed pipe," which Ai Qing brought back from Europe, were transformed during the war years into a rousing bugle call, summoning the masses to fight against the national enemy. As a poet, he was committed to "bravely fight against tyranny, parasites and hypocrisy. As long as they exist, mankind will suffer."[6] But how is the poet with social commitment to perform his meaningful act? He must be able to translate the people's common will, wishes, and demands into language.[7] Thus, for a poet to possess rich sensitivity alone is not enough; he must have a strong power of

thinking and imagination, and, above all, the ability to synthesize.[8] But, first of all, "he must find the imagery for his ideology and his emotions"; "Political poetry is the poet's declaration concerning a certain matter; it is a clarion call of the poet hoping to inspire people to better understand the matter; it is the exposé of the deceivers and a warning to the deceived."[9] The poet must be able, through the creative act, to translate the wishes and demands of the people into language, and to create "new images for the new ideas, new form for the new subject matter, new language for the new form and content."[10]

In an essay entitled **"Shide xingshi wenti"** ("Problems of Poetic Form"), Ai Qing begins, "In Chinese poetry today there are some problems concerning the matters of form and content; but the most central problem is the tendency toward formalism. This tendency, when reflected in the creative work of art, is due to emptiness of content and the blind pursuit of form. Theoretically, this tendency reflects a series of misconceptions about form, and these misconceptions or confused ideas tend to obstruct in different degrees the process of creativity. I believe it would be difficult to develop regular social, realistic poetry without first overcoming the tendency toward formalism."[11] Yet Ai Qing himself was accused of having a formalist tendency by a fellow poet, Feng Zhi, in a lengthy article, "On Ai Qing's Poetry" (**Lun Ai Qing de shi**):

> Ai Qing has, during the anti-Japanese War, produced some excellent poems, which have definite purpose and progressive ideas. But in the new China under the leadership of the working class, amid the great social revolution, the poems he wrote have fallen

> into the quagmire of reactionary formalism, lacking revolutionary fervor and heading in a direction opposed to his own poetic theory.[12]

Is there any truth in Feng Zhi's charge? A close reading of Ai Qing's poems written after 1945 may indeed show certain stylistic changes that contrast with his early works. But I believe the changes in Ai Qing's poetry took place shortly after the Yanan Forum in 1942, when he attempted to put into practice Mao's directives, by suppressing his own idealism, by adopting a more proletarian outlook, by trying to write for the masses, and by imitating the folksong style. In the introduction to the 1951 edition of **Ai Qing xuanji**, the poet acknowledges, "The Talks of Chairman Mao at the Yanan Forum in 1942, and the rectification campaign between 1942 and 1945, wrought tremendous changes in me. I must forever be grateful to China's Communist Party and to Chairman Mao for my reform. I became acquainted with some heroic characters of the working class. . . . I wrote reportage; I also learned to write poetry in the meter and style of folksongs . . . ."[13] Besides the folksong form which he adopted for several of his long narrative poems, such as **Wu Manyou**, Ai Qing also modified his customary free verse of Whitmanian abandon by using end-rhymes, more regular line-lengths (of five or seven characters), and quatrain-like stanzas which he labeled **Doufu-gan shi** ("dried-bean-curd style"). Such poems as "Panegyric to Stalin" and "The Kremlin" in the collection, **Baoshide hongxing (Jewel-like Red Stars)**, are cases in point.

But Ai Qing denies the allegation that he is structurally formalistic. He insists that he prefers free verse because it is less restrictive and is convenient for expressing one's thoughts and feelings. Moreover, its greater flexibility makes it more suitable for the constantly changing flux of our times. And he claims that most of what he considers his successful long poems, such as "Dayan Ho, My Nurse," "Toward the Sun," and "The Torch," are written in free verse; for the free verse "tends to follow the intrinsic rhythm produced by the cadence of emotion."[14] Here he seems to have in mind the organic or inner form. Possibly it is to refute Feng Zhi's charge when he said, "Form must fulfill the need of content. . . . Man creates form; form does not create man. Why then bind oneself to the forms that are created by others? We must not let any form enslave us."[15] This is a reiteration of his earlier dictum in the **Shi lun**: "A definite form contains a definite subject-matter"; and again, "The poet must change the form to suit the content like changing the clothes to suit the weather."[16] Was it because of the political climate that Ai Zing adopted the formulaic stanzas when he wrote the panegyric on Stalin, and the poems in praise of the Communist Party and Chairman Mao? Or did he try to employ the traditional verse form to give the semblance of poems to works which he felt lacking substance? Indeed, in this category must be included most of Ai Qing's occasional pieces written under pressure.

In a broader sense the cult of form may also include language and diction, and, of course, imagery and metaphor which Ai Qing calls the soul of poetry. The characteristics of Ai Qing's poetic style, even before his "reform," have always been simplicity of diction and vividness of imagery. His metaphors are always consistent and clear, and his symbols are derived for the most part from nature and are universal in meaning. Therein lies Ai Qing's popularity, and he has been called the

proletarian poet, despite his intellectual background and Western orientation. Only in his early poems, such as "The Reed Pipe," "The Death of the Nazarene," "Marseille," or "Paris," can one detect the foreign influence which he had tried to rid himself of after his Yanan days. But his impressionist, aesthetic sense for color, design, and details acquired through the trained eyes of a painter, are visible in most of his poems. Sometimes he writes as he paints, not photographically or graphically, but with poetic imagination blending the external object with his subjective feeling, so that the end product, partaking of the personality of the poet, is fresh and vivid imagery. Thus, a simple country road under the sun is not only "gilded" by the sunlight, but a symbol of unity and hope joining the past and the present endeavors of mankind, leading towards the future:

> That road goes on and on
> Toward the never ending edge of heaven
> That road is paved by millions of
> [footprints
> And smoothed by thousands of wheel
> [marks
> That road strings
> One village to another
> That road goes on and on
> Climbing one slope after another
> And is now gilded with sunlight...[17]

"The poet must have the swift and accurate reflective sensitivity of a mirror and the painter's ability to design and blend the object with his own emotions," says Ai Qing. "The process of creating imagery is the process of the poet's understanding of things, events and reality. . . . And when the poet understands the things or events imagistically, then he explains them to his audience through images. The degree of his understanding is expressed

in the degree of clarity of the imagery he reveals."[18]

Among his critical writings collected in the volume of **Shih lun** is an essay on "Writing Poetry" (1950), in which Ai Qing offers much practical advice to aspiring young poets. Like the emotive theorist, he tells them that poetry must have genuine emotion, but that emotion is not to be equated with sentimentality. Like Ezra Pound, Ai Qing insists on stylistic compression and economy of expression; but most of all feeling must be fused, and this fusion must be expressed in a suitable language."[19] By suitable language, he means the terminology, diction, imagery, and metaphor coined or forged by the poet himself through his own experience, observation, and research of the external world, and distilled through his emotional responses to them. To emphasize concrete imagery and metaphorical language is to demand from the poet an accuracy in his observation. Only when he has sought out the nature and characteristics of the object can he concretely and vividly describe and relate his personal, emotional experience about events, objects, or matters in such a fresh and clear manner that it may be realistically and vividly transmitted to the reader, leaving a deep impression in his memory.[20]

At the same time, Ai Qing acknowledges that abstract language or direct statement is not absolutely unusable in poetry; in fact, sometimes it is unavoidable. But it should be kept to a minimum. A poem with too much abstract generalization tends to be dull and dry, and it loses the power to move. On the other hand, metaphorical language is the radical process by which the internal relationships peculiar to poetry are achieved, because it distinguishes the poetic mode of vision and

expression from the logical and discursive modes.[21]

At its best, Ai Qing's poetry illustrates his poetic theory in the manipulation of imagery and metaphorical language. He achieves this only when his inward passion matches the external "objective correlative" (to borrow a term coined by T. S. Eliot) in the fusion, as seen in the following lines from "Toward the Sun" (1938):

> Thus my breast
> Was torn open by the fingers of flame
> And my putrid soul
> Was exposed on the river bank;
> Only then I regained faith in the
> [rebirth of mankind[22]

Witness also the impressionistic imagery that concludes "The Bugler":

> The glossy brass surface of the bugle
> Reflected the bugler's blood
> And his pallid face.
> It also reflected
> The advancing soldiers
> Their continuous struggles
> And the neighing horses
> Their thunderous chariots . . .
> And the sun? The sun
> Glittered still on the glossy brass of
> [the bugle.[23]

Yet despite his adept craftsmanship, his rich imagination, and his mastery of the language, during his middle years (i.e. 1945-1955) Ai Qing produced some rather insipid poems with prosaic generalities and dull platitudes devoid of concrete imagery, the very kind of versification that he had rejected in others and enjoined others not to write. Most of the poems

in the volume **Chuntian (Spring)** belong to this category. Take for instance the lines in "To the Afro-Asian Alliance Conference":

> I am Chinese, I remember clearly
> Our harbors were also occupied
> (Even now, we have been liberated for
> [five years)
> And the U.S. is still infringing on
> [Taiwan . . .
> Be they Asians or Africans
> None are born slaves
> All the mothers in the world
> Wish the children they rear not to be
> [bullied . . .[24]

Or the meaningless verse here:

> The people praise Stalin--
> They do not praise Jehovah
> They do not seek pity
> They do not desire paradise;
>
> People praise you, Stalin--
> Because you are loyal to the people,
> Your glorious actions,
> Realized Lenin's ideals[25]

It may be said that these were written under extraordinary circumstances, at a time when keeping silent could have been construed as reactionary. But having been exposed to the influence of the symbolist school in his youth, Ai Qing had not forgotten the efficacy of symbolic language. His subtle symbolic meaning could elude detection by the less sensitive critics. Even Feng Zhi, despite his reputation as a metaphysical poet, had overlooked, or refused to see, Ai Qing's implied political commentary, and took the following lines as merely superfluous embellishment:

The ground is covered with sea-shells
There must have been a high tide last
[night.[26]

The use of the tide to signify political change, and of the sea-shells to portray victims of political tempest, is too obvious to need explication. Similarly, most of Ai Qing's symbols are taken from nature. For example, the sun is his recurrent symbol for hope, passion, warmth, victory, and the bright future; spring for hope, rebirth, youth, and love; storms and hail for violence, disaster, despotism, and tyranny; winter for poverty, death, and suffering; and so on. All of these are elemental, archetypal symbols, not only rooted in the Chinese tradition but of universal significance. Rarely does Ai Qing use private symbols to signify his personal experiences, as he does in a recent poem, **"Lishi de zunyan"** ("The Dignity of History"), in which he records the tragic event of the Cultural Revolution. He may have had Jiang Qing in mind when he wrote:

Like the eyes of Medusa
Whomever they stared at stopped
[breathing
Even the wise turned to idiots
Their mouths gaping, emitting no
[sound.[27]

This is not Ai Qing at his best. Despite the memorable mental imagery, the poem lapses into journalistic recording, and ends with an emotional editorial comment. A more successful poem about the devastating effect wrought by the Gang of Four is "The Hailstones," written in 1979:

Riding along gales and storms
Hidden behind blackening clouds

Like swarms of locusts in the skies
Hissing their killing cries

Assisted by lightning
And roaring thunders

Suddenly they came
As suddenly they melt into thin air

What remains
Are sad memories of the calamity

Stripped bare branches
Shuttered window panes

Extinct street lights
And people's curses and sighs[28]

This is a more effective poem, because the tone is controlled; it embodies some universal truth transcending the particulars, which are for the historians to record. Poetry should have continuity, a permanent relationship between the poet and his reader. If it responds only to the political changes of the hour and becomes dogmatic, then it is analogous to political propaganda and assumes the temporal quality of slogans. The reason that Ai Qing has endured is that his poetry for the most part speaks universal truth: "What is false cannot endure . . ."[29] And when he was forced to perform in the role of a revolutionary poet under adverse circumstances, he refused to use his true voice so as not to betray the true spirit of poetry. When he was not allowed to remain mute, he could not but mimic the slogan shouters, a way to mock his oppressors. To the discerning ear, his mockery is a passive form of protest, the only recourse left to a true revolutionary poet caught in the flux and reflux of his times. In an earlier poem titled

Shidai (Epoch), Ai Qing had forecast his own fate in its concluding lines:

> No one suffers more than I--
> I have been faithful to the epoch and
> [have devoted myself to it
> Yet I am silenced
> Against my will, like a captive
> Silent before taken to the execution
> [ground.[30]

In a recent talk, "On Poetry to Poetry Lovers,"[31] at the Workers' Cultural Palace in Beijing, Ai Qing reiterated his early conviction that "the poet must speak the truth."[32] And for that conviction he had suffered twenty years of imprisonment and hard labor.

Robert Payne, in introducing Ai Qing to the Western readers, wrote in 1947, "He was the first to perform the essential poetical and surgical operation of completely separating Chinese poetry from its roots in the past and transplanting it in the soil."[33] This could be only partially correct. Did Ai Qing, in separating Chinese poetry from its roots in the past, uproot himself from China's centuriesold poetic tradition? Ever since the compilation of the first volume of poetry anthology in China, the **Shi jing** (12th-6th centuries B.C.), Chinese poetry has been traditionally defined as the true utterance from the heart of the poet: **"Shi yan zhi."** It seems that Ai Qing has continued the best of China's literary tradition by insisting on telling the truth. It has also been the tradition of the best of Chinese poets to tell the truth veiled in metaphorical language or implicit allusions.

NOTES

1. Cited in Feng Zhi, **"Lun Ai Qing de shi,"** (On Ai Qing's Poetry), **Wenxu yanjiu**, No. 1 (1958), 11.

2. **Shi lun** (Shanghai: Xinwen yi chubanshe, 1953). All citations are based on this edition.

3. **Ibid.**, pp. 122-23.

4. **Ibid.**, p. 142.

5. **Ibid.**, p. 178.

6. **Ibid.**, p. 180.

7. **Ibid.**, p. 126.

8. **Ibid.**, p. 139.

9. **Ibid.**, p. 128.

10. **Ibid.**, p. 191.

11. **Wenxu yanjiu**, No. 1 (1958), 9.

12. **Ibid.**, p. 10.

13. **Ai Qing xuanji** (Beijing: Kaiming shudian, 1951), p. 8.

14. **Ibid.**, p. 6.

15. **Renmin wenxue**, No. 5 (1980), 5.

16. **Shi lun**, p. 149.

17. **Ai Qing xuanji**, pp. 96-97.

18. **Shi lun**, pp. 165-66.

19. **Ibid.**, p. 7.

20. **Ibid.**, p. 48.

21. **Ibid.**

22. **Ai Qing shixuan** (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1955), pp. 236-37.

23. **Ai Qing xuanji**, p. 101.

24. **Chuntian.** (1956; rpt. Hong Kong: Sawen chubanshe, 1978), pp. 77-79.

25. **Ibid.**, p. 97-98.

26. **Wenxue yanjiu**, No. 1 (1958), 11.

27. **Shi kan**, No. 3 (March 1980), 4.

28. **Shiyue** (October), No. 3 (March 1979), 1.

29. **Shi lun**, p. 9.

30. **Wenxue yanjiu**, No. 1 (1958), 20.

31. **Renmin wenxue**, No. 5 (1980), 3-9.

32. **Shi lun**, p. 181.

33. Robert Payne, ed., **Contemporary Chinese Poetry** (London: George Routledge, 1941), p. 22.