

Touching the “Transparent Sorrows”: Misty Poetry and the Identity of Post-Cultural-Revolution

Poets

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The dark night gave me dark eyes,  
 But I use them to seek the light.  
 —“A Generation” (*Yidairen*)<sup>1</sup>

This two-line poem, published in 1980 by Gu Cheng instantly became one of the best known verses in the history of modern Chinese literature. Today, ample readings and analysis have sought to unravel what Gu Cheng was trying to convey within those two lines. The obscurity of the poem’s meanings and the lone and volatile images of “darkness” and “light” have brought about a plethora of different interpretations. Some believe that “darkness” refers to the suffocating reign of terror during the Cultural Revolution while “seek[ing] the light” implies the poet/speaker’s unfaltering determination to find hope within this darkness.<sup>2</sup> Some think that “dark eyes” reveals the post-colonial theme of the poem, which reasserts and celebrates an oriental, and more specifically, a Chinese identity.<sup>3</sup> Yet others suspect that the poem is an early hint of Gu Cheng’s mental and psychological breakdown (“darkness”) that eventually led him to brutally murder his wife before committing suicide.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, despite his fame and controversial personal life, Gu Cheng was only one of many poets in his time that were well-known for both their creative genius and unique personalities. Numerous contemporaries of Gu Cheng, whose works have been canonized since their publications, also tended to leave open a wide interpretive space for readers and scholars through the obscure imagism and ambiguous themes in their poetry. It thus poses a worthwhile question as to why these poets, known today as the Misty or Obscure Poets, would not only adopt an “Obscure” way of versifying but also oftentimes lead a life of eccentricity, which contrasted starkly with their Cultural Revolution

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<sup>1</sup> Gu Cheng, Seán Golden, and Chu Chiyu, *Selected Poems*, (Hong Kong: Research Centre for Translation, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1990), 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

precursors.<sup>5</sup> This paper will seek to answer this question by first contextualizing the birth and development of the poetic trend of Misty Poetry, particularly focusing on how it was fostered by such events as the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen Incident and the economic reforms of the 1990s. The paper will then argue that these historical conditions have pushed Misty Poetry as a cultural-literary movement to appropriate—in various ways—predominantly Western ideas as a way of forging a new artist’s identity.

Perhaps the most unusual feature about Misty Poetry that distinguishes it from many other literary movements was the abruptness of its birth, which only makes sense when viewed in relation to its immediate precursor, the Cultural Revolution. Unlike such literary movements as British romanticism, for example, which developed slowly and gradually from 18th-century sentimental poems and Gothic fiction into lyrical verses, Misty Poetry appeared almost out of nowhere, with no literary predecessors—at least in the Chinese literary landscape—to look back upon. Before Misty Poetry announced its presence in 1976, the final year of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese literature was controlled by the central government to the extent that only writings that served the ideological and political interests of the Communist Party were sanctioned.<sup>6</sup> It was not until the end of the Cultural Revolution that Misty Poetry started entering the literary scene such unprecedentedly obscure, irregular and evocative verses of poets like Beidao:

Debasement is the password of the base,  
Nobility the epitaph of the noble.

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<sup>5</sup> See Li Zehou 李泽厚, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang shilun* 中国现代思想史论 [On Contemporary Chinese Thoughts], (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2008), 256-257. Cultural Revolution poets, notably Tianlan, Lu Li and Ai Qing were known for their eulogies of revolution and self-sacrifice for socialist cause.

<sup>6</sup> Michelle Yeh, “Nature's Child and the Frustrated Urbanite: Expressions of the Self in Contemporary Chinese Poetry,” *World Literature Today* 65, no. 3 (Summer, 1991), 405. A pivotal incident that led to this control during the Cultural Revolution was Mao Zedong and Jiang Qing’s “Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art” which advocates for “literature with political aims”. See Steven Jiang, “China’s Xi Jinping Causes Alarm with Mass Student Trips to the Country,” *CNN*. May 4, 2019.

See how the gilded sky is covered  
 With the drifting twisted shadows of the dead.  
 —“The Answer” (*Daan*)<sup>7</sup>

Like many other Misty Poems, the imagery in “The Answer” primarily consists of generic concepts and objects of nature that do not seem to explicitly convey any moral or political message—a characteristic unseen in the literary works of the Cultural Revolution. As literary scholar Michelle Yeh notices, this trait constitutes a significant break from the styles of the strictly politically censored materials of the Cultural Revolution; the Misty Poets’ emphasis on individual and evocative expression was so prominent that their poetry clearly stood in a directly antithetical relation to the overarching socialist-realist themes of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>8</sup>

According to Chee Lay Tan, another scholar of Misty Poetry, the immediate emergence of the Misty Poetry after the Cultural Revolution and its apparent stylistic and thematic contrast to the latter’s literary productions clearly indicate that Misty Poems such as “The Answer” were reactions to the Cultural Revolution, whose shadow still vividly loomed above the country.<sup>9</sup> The agreement among literary scholars on the contrast between Misty Poetry and Cultural Revolution verses, from a politico-literary perspective, was founded on plausible reasons. Take the example of the poem *No Title* by Tianlan, a poet during the Cultural Revolution:

No need to rest,  
 I shall take my leave:  
 I shall follow the struggles of history;  
 I, from a singular individual  
 Shall walk towards the people.  
 I,  
 Shall nothing to I hold.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Beidao and Bonnie S McDougall, *The August Sleepwalker* (New York: New Directions Books, 1990), 33.

<sup>8</sup> Yeh, 405.

<sup>9</sup> Chee-Lay Tan, “Constructing a System of Irregularities: The Poetry of Bei Dao, Yang Lian and Duoduo” (Phd diss., University of Cambridge, 1992), 1, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Tianlan 天兰, “No Title,” *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang shilun* 中国现代思想史论 [On Contemporary Chinese Thoughts], (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2008), 256.

Despite being evocative and following a rhythmic pattern that is irregular throughout, the poem differs from Misty Poems such as Beidao's *The Answer* in at least two respects. First, it highlights a dichotomy of the individual versus the collective, with the clear inclination to emphasize the priority of the collective goal, the "people". This thematic characteristic contrasts Beidao's poetic ideal where evocation is a way to let the "self" speak and avow its liberation from the ideologies of collectivity during the Cultural Revolution. Second, Tianlan appears to receive inspirations from the Marxist discourse on history and society as he vows to "follow the struggles of history", an idea that echoes the marxist notion of historical materialism that believes in socialism as a societal form that is destined to be born following the "struggles of history."<sup>11</sup> Again, Tianlan, by incorporating Marxist discourses into his poem is clearly endorsing the state narratives—something the Misty Poets, whose found themselves living amidst "the drifting twisted shadows of the dead", were opposed to.

The Cultural Revolution however, is not the only impactful event that contributed to the development of the Misty Poetry. After the new poets of post-Cultural Revolution have enjoyed about a decade of relative freedom of publication, the June-4th Incident of 1989, also known as the Tian'anmen Square Incident led to a resurgence of governmental control of the press. The government brutally suppressed the student-led protest for democratic reforms at Tian'anmen Square in Beijing and writers who expressed similar criticisms and hopes of reforms were likewise censored. The Misty Poets were no exception. Some writers like Bei Dao and Gu Cheng, who were staying abroad at the time of the incident, were even denied access back to

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<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, "The Communist Manifesto," *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 151.

China and were forced to wander in foreign lands.<sup>12</sup> The incident was yet another trauma for the Misty Poets, who, prior to the event, were relatively established in China despite their limited access to public-sanctioned publication resources. Misty Poets became increasingly associated with an identity of the “exiled”. Some were literally exiled by the country—an experience to which Beidao lamented “I always wandered and always failed”<sup>13</sup>—and some became so disillusioned with the prospect of Chinese literature that they internally alienated themselves from the country represented by the Communist Party.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the Cultural Revolution and the June-4th Incident that functioned as major politico-historical forces shaping the Misty Poets, the Economic Reform of China under Deng Xiaoping following the end of the Cultural Revolution was unequivocally the major material reason that the Misty Poetry was able to experiment their creative poetics. According to Tan, the Open Door Policy of Deng increasingly made more accessible various contemporary foreign literary works in China.<sup>15</sup> For Lo Kwai-Cheung, a specialist on Misty Poetry, the influence of such policy was so prominent and essential to the development of Misty Poetry that it may well be the case that the “obscure” element of the Misty Poetry was a mimicking or appropriation of western trauma literature that arose at the end of WWII.<sup>16</sup> Although one may reasonably challenge the position of Lo, a primarily Western critic who followed the same post-colonial theory of Homi Bhabha and Spivak that not all third-world literary creations need to be mimicry

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<sup>12</sup> Michelle Yeh, “‘The Cult of Poetry’ in Contemporary China,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol.55, no. 3 (Feb., 1996), 63; Tan, 4. Beidao was attending a conference in Berlin when the incident happened, and he was denied access to China when he attempted to return to the country after the conference. Gu Cheng was then staying in New Zealand and was not able to return until his eventual suicide.

<sup>13</sup> Beidao, interviewed by Danxiangkongjian, Beijing, July 2016, transcript.

<sup>14</sup> Yeh, 62. Chen Dongdong and Gu Cheng are good examples of this disillusionment as they became increasingly obsessed with pure aestheticism and poetics following the June 4th Incident.

<sup>15</sup> Tan, 18.

<sup>16</sup> Lo Kwai-Cheung, “The Paths that Lead Nowhere: Chinese Misty Poetry and Modernity,” (Phd diss., Stanford University, 1996), 30-31.

in nature, it was clear that without Open Door Policy and its introduction of contemporary Western writings, much of new Chinese literature would not break from its older traditions as readily as it did at the time. Chinese literary scholar Wu Gefei points out for example, that in the 1980s, China experienced a period of “Sartre Craze” when existentialist writers like Sartre, Camus and Heidegger were newly introduced to Chinese readers.<sup>17</sup> Beidao himself even admitted that it was the existentialist notion of “hollowness” prompted him to rebel, not against any institution or state, but the essential conditions of humanity.<sup>18</sup>

Economic Reform did not simply encourage the growth of Misty Poetry however, as it also complicated the overall literary landscape of China, hence the situation of the Misty Poets. For one, Misty Poetry appeared to be more marginalized as the result of marketization. According to Tan, the economic reforms created such unprecedented market forces and capitalization that the publication industry became heavily market-oriented. As a result, “writers became increasingly pressured to submit marketable works, such as fantasy and romance, to popular journals, which were unlikely to publish ‘elite’ Misty poetry.”<sup>19</sup> In the mid-1980s, Cheng Weidong, once a Misty Poet himself at college, famously wrote an article titled “Goodbye, Shuting and Beidao!”, advocating for more down-to-earth topics and rejecting the “high” tastes of the Misty Poets, who distanced themselves from the general public of a new era of China.<sup>20</sup> Elitism and a lack of marketability were certainly not the only criticisms of Misty Poetry at the time. As the Open Door Policy brought increasing Western attention to Chinese literature, some Misty Poets were attacked for deliberately catering to the tastes of Western readers, thereby

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<sup>17</sup> Wu Gefei, “Sartre's Encounter with China: Discovery and Reconstruction of the Human Paradigm in New-era Chinese Literature,” *PKn*, vol.30, no.1 (June, 2017): 138.

<sup>18</sup> Chantal Chen-Andro et Claude Mouchard, “Entretien avec Beidao (novembre 1992),” *Po&sie* 65 (1993): 70.

<sup>19</sup> Tan, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Tan, 16-17.

losing their original visions. Beidao was perhaps the most fervently criticized in this regard, receiving similar criticisms from both Western literary scholars and contemporary Chinese poets. He was criticized for example, for invoking the famous anti-statist Ezra Pound to criticize the Chinese government, an act with which many liberal-democratic readers and self-identified poets and rebels outside of China found appealing.<sup>21</sup>

Although a general historical context may explain why and how the Misty Poetry existed and developed, it does not show the full picture. The “mistiness” of the Misty Poetry, a trait born and developed predominantly in the western literary traditions hints at the strong presence of Western discourses among the Misty Poets. Why did these poets choose the Western discourse related to the poetic feature of mistiness? How this choice was tied to the historical circumstances of the poets? The rest of the paper will give a nuanced analysis of the significance of the idea of “mistiness” to the Misty Poets in their particular historical conditions. There are in general three dimensions in which the significance of “mistiness” will be examined: 1) Misty Poetry’s formal and thematic reaction to the Cultural Revolution and the official narratives of the Communist regime, 2) Misty Poetry’s methodological “convenience” in making political commentaries and 3) Misty Poets’ desire to reforge a Chinese artist’s identity that continues the lineage of the May-4th tradition.

With respect to the first dimension, it has already been pointed out earlier that the styles and themes of Misty Poetry was directly antithetical to the literary trend of the Cultural Revolution. However, the ways in which the Misty Poets reacted to the revolution were more than political opposition; oftentimes it involved the evocative reflection of the poets’ personal and emotional experiences within the past decade. Many literary criticisms today inadvertently

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<sup>21</sup> Stephen Owen, “The Anxiety of Global Influence: What Is World Poetry?” *The New Republic*, (November 19, 1990), 28-32; Tan, 18.

assume a Foucaultian attitude towards literature, conceiving any literary production as inevitably conveying certain political message. Although this idea is not without justification, focusing exclusively on the political aspect of literature reduces literary works into covert political works and thereby neglect the irreducible emotive dimension of them. The same goes for Misty Poetry, which Stephen Owen saw as deeply and self-consciously political.<sup>22</sup> For critics like Owen, Misty Poems such as Beidao's "The Answer" naturally lend themselves to political interpretation. Yet as Michelle Yeh warned us, Misty Poetry's usage of emotive and evocative imagery and lyricism is simply too rich to be subsumed under any political meta-narrative.<sup>23</sup>

Looking at Beidao's "The Answer" again:

I don't believe the sky is blue;  
 I don't believe in thunder's echoes;  
 I don't believe that dreams are false;  
 I don't believe that death has no revenge.<sup>24</sup>

Although the repeated exclamation of "I don't believe" may imply the speaker's oppositional stance towards political oppression, it may very well be seen as an emotional outburst and a cathartic moment that is entirely individualistic and emotive. This emotional self-expression demonstrates a strong presence of Western romanticist ideas that further illuminates the importance of Western literary discourses in Misty Poetry. As Michelle Yeh points out, Misty Poetry continues the trend of Western romanticism, especially the British variant, in focusing on natural imagery and individual emotive expression.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the importance of emotive expression, Misty Poetry, as Owen argues, is still rather susceptible to a political reading—a point yet again complicated by the fact that the ways

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<sup>22</sup> Owen, 28-32.

<sup>23</sup> Yeh, 406.

<sup>24</sup> Beidao and Bonnie S McDougall, 33.

<sup>25</sup> Yeh, 57.

in which Misty Poets made political commentaries were highly covert, even to the point of remaining a primarily theoretical speculation. Chee-Lay Tan illustrated this point most clearly when she mentions how the style of “mistiness” by nature refuses any easy interpretation on behalf of the speaker/poet’s intent.<sup>26</sup> As such, politically-minded readers of such poems as “The Answer” are left with no other evidence for a political analysis but the poem’s temporal proximity to the end of Cultural Revolution. Whether or not readers will still proceed to read the poem politically—a move that modern critics would tend to regard as dangerous and ethically unsettling—remains the concern of literary analyst. We may still point out however, as Tan already did, that “mistiness” as a style of writing is ideal for dodging censorship, which intentionally or not, constituted an appealing literary style to politically minded writers.<sup>27</sup>

The last and most elaborate point of this paper is the idea that “mistiness” and its Western origin were essential components of the project of post-Cultural-Revolution poets to reforge a new Chinese artists’ identity. The notion of identity-constructing in the new era of China necessarily connected back to what happened during the Cultural Revolution. As Chinese scholar Li Zehou mentioned, the literary projects of the Misty Poets echo the rebellions of the Jews against their Roman oppressors, where the dominated groups sought self-liberation by forging a new set of ideals that directly contrasted with the dominators.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, the literary ideal of the Misty Poetry advocated precisely the opposite of the official ideology during the Cultural Revolution. Instead of eulogizing the country, calling for self-devotion for the party’s sake and advocating for “literature for politics,” which were all major narratives of the PRC during the Cultural Revolution, the Misty Poets sought to praise the individual, liberate the self, and

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<sup>26</sup> Tan, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Tan, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Li Zehou 李泽厚, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang shilun* 中国现代思想史论 [On Contemporary Chinese Thoughts], (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2008), 270.

embrace “literature for literature’s sake.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, the Misty Poets were seeking to construct new narratives on how to think about literature and even the purpose of life by precisely advocating for the opposite of what they had been hearing for the past decade.

Asserting an antithesis was not the only way of forging this new identity. Misty Poets also looked for other literary and cultural models that they could strive for in constructing a more desirable narrative. According to Lo, in searching for materials by which they could proceed with their project, Misty Poets primarily found themselves appealed to by the Western tradition. Lo thinks that the reason in appealing to the West was two-fold: for one, it was the desire to look for alternatives and specifically those different and more liberating than the PRC’s. For the other, it was a desire to “re-enchain to the incomplete project of modernity inaugurated by modern Chinese poetry from the May-Fourth era”, namely to continue the unfinished project of May-Fourth writers to further incorporate western thinking into their own writings.<sup>30</sup> To illustrate the first reason, it is worth noting that Misty Poetry was often seen as having appropriated predominantly the romanticist and symbolist ideas of Western poetry.<sup>31</sup>

My pain is the pain of seasonal birds  
 Only spring understands such passion.  
 Endure all hardships and failures,  
 Always fly toward a future of warmth and light.  
 Ah, the bleeding wings  
 Will write a line of supple verse  
 To enter deep within all souls,  
 Deep into all times.  
 All my feelings  
 Are a gift from earth.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Li, 270-272.

<sup>30</sup> Lo, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Yeh, 66.

<sup>32</sup> Shu Ting, and Eva Hung, *Selected Poems : An Authorized Collection*. (Hong Kong: Research Centre for Translation, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1994), 270.

For example, Shu Ting's "Gifts" possesses features of romanticism in its emotive self-expression and rich description of nature and it is also symbolist for the highly metaphoric nature of its imagery and obscure meanings. The fact that Misty Poets have found romanticism and symbolism particularly appealing was certainly not arbitrary. Other literary traditions of the West, such as neo-classicism and 19th-century realism emphasized less individual expressions and emotions but rather resembled the tendency of PRC narratives to conduct moral teachings and critique social reality. As such, Misty Poets naturally adopted romanticism and symbolism as the more "liberating" ones among Western literary thoughts.

In addition, as a significant part of his dissertation, Lo argues that Misty Poets have taken it upon themselves to finishing the incomplete project of their May-4th predecessors.<sup>33</sup> In fact, Beidao himself hinted at this ambition among the Misty Poets:

Chinese life is intrinsically linked to history. It has to bear the burden of history. The word "History" in my poems can have an ironic connotation. Poets must try to settle on the problem of this burden. It is a word which circulates in China among the intellectuals. A word that comes out easily from their mouth...It is necessary to come out of this position. There is not an objective history. This is a thing that one is always remaking.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps the Misty Poets, in seeking to construct a new identity distinct from their Cultural-Revolution counterparts, resorted to the past. They resorted, more precisely, to that moment in the past (May 4th) when "modernity," embodied by avid studies and appropriation of Western thoughts, began.<sup>35</sup> Li Zehou, in agreement with Lo's claim, also pointed out the relative depth and progress that Misty Poetry has achieved as compared to May-4th writers. According to him, the Misty Poets, after the arduous ordeals of the Cultural Revolution, has acquired a newer understanding of what it meant to "live"—"men and women had to pay so much to live, to love,

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<sup>33</sup> Lo, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Chantal Chen-Andro et Claude Mouchard, 72.

<sup>35</sup> Lo, 48.

to liberate, to express.”<sup>36</sup> What Beidao is referring to here is the significance of the traumatic experience that the new generation of Chinese writers following the Cultural Revolution has been through: learning the West is not just an expedient way to strength ourselves but a step to unburden the emotional debts from the immediate past.

In all, Misty Poetry was highly influenced by the Cultural Revolution and its subsequent end. As a collective effort of a new generation of writers, it carried the hopes, desires and ambitions of people newly unfettered from the burdens of the Cultural Revolution. It engaged itself in a dialogic process with its own past and with the external alternatives by appealing to Western thoughts. Yet despite these arguments for the connections between Misty Poetry and its relevant history, this paper should by no means constitute an assertion of truths. In its most ideal form, Misty Poetry envisions itself as immortal and embodying of the ultimate truth and beauty, a view in direct confrontation with the purpose of this paper—to historicize Misty Poetry as if it ought naturally to be a product of history. As historian Gail Hershatter calls it, this paper merely seeks to make a “good enough story” about the Misty Poets and their works.<sup>37</sup> Literature by nature requires interpretation; that is, its accounts do not seek to present precise and accurate truths, but rather open up an interpretive space that we as readers and thinkers fill in with our imaginations and critical contents.

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<sup>36</sup> Li, 276.

<sup>37</sup> Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 3.

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