

FROM OBSCURE POETS TO THE SACRIFICED LAMB OF THE KINGDOM OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE POETRY

YE RONG

Foreign Languages Institute of Southwest Jiaotong University, Chengdu, China

The aim of this study is to point out the impact of the biblical themes on the poetry of Hai Zi (1964-1989), one of the most productive and influential poets of the Chinese literature of the time after the Cultural Revolution. He was a mythopoeic poet and his poetry presents a good paradigm of Sino-Western and Sino-Hebrew interliterary process in China of the 1980s.

1

Since the Nestorians came into China during the Tang Dynasty, the missionaries have never stopped their work on Chinese translations of the Bible. The oldest manuscripts we can see today are from the translation works of two Roman Catholic missionaries: Jean Basset (1662-1707) and Louis de Poirot (1735-1813). The latter used the Mandarin language. However, their missions refused to publish either man's manuscript, saying there was not enough reverence in their translation styles. As a result of the violent impact of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom revolution in the second half of the 19th century, the missions working in China finally recognized that the Mandarin Bible was more powerful than the classical Chinese. Thus they began to step up the work of translation and publishing on the Mandarin Bible. The Union Versions of the New Testament and the whole Bible were published respectively in 1905 and in 1919 (Zetzsche J. 1999: 133-134, 402-403).

The pioneers of the New Culture Movement (around the time of the May 4th Movement in 1919) considered that the spirit of Jesus could redound to ameliorate the national Chinese character, and so they introduced and popularized the Bible energetically. Contemporary literature writers also directly used the language style from the Union Version for reference to drive the movement of writing in vernacular Chinese. Moreover, their writing also benefited from the Bible stories and its type of literature. However, before long the intellectuals of the "May 4th Movement" woke up to the fact that the spirit of Christianity was merely a shape of one fantasy sun (an empty dream) for their ambition to save the nation. (Ma Jia 1995: 249). After the People's

Republic of China became established, writers no longer set their feet in the field of Christianity because of governmental policy.

After the translation of the Bible in the vernacular, the literary writers of the first half of 20th century used it as a reference for their writing, but lost their idealism that Christianity could save their nation. However, the situation had some change in the last period of 20th century: after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the Chinese writers who had once suffered a 10-year calamity, looked back on their sufferings and the resonance of Christianity burgeoned (Ye Rong 2003: 73). From the poems of the so-called *menglong shiren* 朦胧诗人 (obscure poets) we can see this kind of change. And a later obscure poet Hai Zi 海子 (1964–1989) is an outstanding example of an obscure poet, who used biblical ideas to create his own poetry god and his own belief system.

The “obscure poets” appeared to the Chinese literary world after the Cultural Revolution had finished. The well-known Chinese theologian Dr. Liu Xiaofeng 刘小枫 (1956 –) has commented on this generation of poets: They had suffered the loss of their idealism and belief during their growing process. In their innermost being they kept the immense disbelief of the whole of society. And along with the Western Modernism swarmed into China as a tidal wave, these young and inquisitive poets drank from this fountain thirstily. From sincere belief they woke up to sincere disbelief (Liu Xiaofeng 1989: 37 – 40). The representative verses of this ‘disbelief’ is Bei Dao’s 北岛 (1953 –) *Huida* 回答 Answer:

I don’t believe that the sky is blue;
I doubt the reecho of the thunder;
I feel doubt that the dream is sham;
I distrust there is no retributive justice after death
(Bei Dao 1983: 89)

The suffering made the poet wish for retributive justice after a man dies. We can also see some lines from another famous obscure poet Shu Ting’s 舒婷 (1953 –) *Fuhuo* 复活 Resurrection:

Arthur who went on the Cross
Stepped down and had become Jesus, but
In two thousand years there was only one happening
(Shu Ting 1994: 288)

Here, “Arthur” was known very well to the Chinese reader as a sacrificed revolutionary of Ethel Lilian Voynich’s (1864 – 1960) novel *The Gadfly* (Li Liangmin: 1983). In the past, the poet had trusted in the revolutionaries’ struggle to liberate the toiling people as the saviour of the New China. But now she wonders if the savior’s coming “in two thousand years there was only one happening”.

Shu Ting had also cited *Hebrews*, 11, 6 of The New Testament as a motto for her poem *Zuihou de wange* 最后的挽歌 (The Last Dirge):

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. --- . (Shu Ting 1997: 144)

In this poem, Shu Ting expressed the aspiration for the soul's salvation as shown in the verses as below:

The clam cannot express its suffering
Waiting for the death to redeem in its integrity
Forgetting to pray
Is it stopping
Awe of God
Everyday go through the diploid decease from both flesh and word
How could the soul avoid those rolling stones
And be on tiptoe successively

Gu Cheng 顾城(1956–1993) is another well-known obscure poet. He had always used the conception of “the Kingdom of Heaven” to describe his idealism, his love, and his odd life with two “wives” afterwards. In his posthumously published work *Ying'er* 英儿 The Kingdom of Daughter, he alleged that in the matter of the soul, he believe in the existence of God (Gu Cheng & Lei Mi 1995: 20). And in this novel he subconsciously acted as Jesus by assimilating his “self-slaughter” to the others to “crucify” both him and Jesus (Ye Rong & Benická 2003: 201).

We can see here that those foremost obscure poets had no longer taken the pragmatic attitude to the Bible like the writers of the “May 4th Movement”; yet in their works there seems to be a kind of expectation to God.

2

The latter obscure poet Hai Zi appeared in contemporary Chinese poetry in the middle of 1980s, and was called “bel-esprit” in Beijing University. Hai Zi's poetry and life were full of divinities; until he went to his death the Holy Bible was accompanying him. His good friend Luo Yihe 骆一禾 (1961-1989) had commented about his poem, saying his epic *Taiyang's* 太阳 The Sun absorbed the experience of the Holy Bible, that his *Shi* 弑 Patricide has some imprints of the Kings, *Misaiya* 弥赛亚 (Messiah) traced the Song of Songs and Lamentations, *Fushide* 浮士德 Faust has also some traces of the Book of Job (Xi Chuan 1997: 863). Henceforth the number in the brackets will always indicate the pages in the book *Hai Zi shi quan bian* 海子诗全编 The Complete Poetry of Hai Zi. For more about Hai Zi see Gálik 2004: 67-69 and Wang Benchao 王本朝 2000: 245-253.

Reading Hai Zi's poetry we can see that he used the Bible as an artistic conception everywhere, for example:

阿尔的太阳——给我的瘦哥哥：凡·高
(The Sun of Arles – to my thin brother Van Gogh)
Invite everyone who pulls his chestnut out of the fire
Do not paint again Christ's olive garden
Paint the harvest of olives in case you want to
Paint the violent fire regiment

Instead of the Father of heaven
Cleansing the lives (5)

海上婚礼 (Wedding on the Sea)
Perhaps like the way of the legend
We are the first
Two people
Living behind a cliff of the faraway Arabia
In an apple garden
The snake and sunshine fall into the beautiful river
At the same time (37)

让我把脚丫搁在黄昏中一位木匠的工具箱上
(Let Me Put My Toes on the Toolbox of a Carpenter at Dusk)
At the time I was nailed to be a Cross
At the door of my hometown
Let me stop for a rest in a shed for horses
If it is not by reason of the bad time
I was divided with a carpenter's saw, and shaped to be his son's
Cradle. Cross (124)

Hai Zi was wandering in a magnificent framework of the Hebrew legends. He was deeply attracted by those fantastic stories, he was singing with rejoicing:

In *Putao yuan zhi xi de huayu* 葡萄园之西的话语 (Words at the West Side of Vineyard) we read:

Solomon's poetry
One reel after another
Rolling down to the mountainside
Like a fountain
Beating on my back (127)

3

Hai Zi hailed from the countryside and loved mother earth deeply. He said to himself:

Maidi yu shiren 麦地与诗人 (Corn Field and Poet)
Poet, you cannot compensate
The love from the corn field and the light a kind of dream
A kind of goodness
You cannot compensate (355).

Corn field is certainly a biblical topic (*Matthew*, 12, 1; *Mark*, 2, 23; *Luke*, 6, 1). Hai Zi felt very sad that the countryside was losing its simplicity, goodness and traditional values within the modern era. When he visited his hometown for the last time and came back to Beijing, he talked to his friend sadly: "You can no longer find the things you were familiar with. In your own homeland you became

a total stranger.” (924). As a young boy with an extraordinary talent, Hai Zi was enrolled by Beijing University – the most famous in China – when he was 15. From then on he left his remote village and lived in Peking until he went to his death. However this impecunious peasant’s son was incessantly excruciated by mental apathy and overweening capital, he sang in his poem disconsolately:

Oh Homer, we are sitting on the earth and fingering our
poem musical instrument

We are both stabbed blind by the reality of survival (774).

This desolate reality made the poet find it difficult to find his inner peace and happiness. Xi Chuan 西川 (1963–) summarized that: “Hai Zi had lived quite secluded.” (924). The ten years that Hai Zi had lived in Beijing (1979–1989) is just the time which Liu Xiaofeng had mentioned as a period when “the Western Modernism swarmed into China as a tidal wave” (Liu Xiaofeng, 1989: 37–40). Hai Zi was also the same as other obscure poets, who “drank from this fountain thirstily”. And like Gu Cheng’s driftage on a deserted island, the fantasy of happiness did not come singly, but in pairs; as Hai Zi faced the doleful reality that he had actually fantasized the same kind of happiness. Hai Zi sang about this dream in his poem: *Mian chao dahai, chun nuan hua kai* 面朝大海，春暖花开 (Facing the Sea, during the Warmth of Spring When All the Flowers Bloom)

From tomorrow, to be a happy person means
Feeding horses, chopping firewood, traveling across the world
From tomorrow, I shall care for foodstuff and greenstuffs
I shall have a house, facing the sea, during the warmth of spring
all the flowers bloom (436).

But our poet had not found out the time to actualize his dream, and the tremendous desperation “had already pressed him walking towards the life circumstances similar to Vincent van Gogh (1853 – 1890), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) and Friedrich Hölderlin (1770 – 1843)” (Zhang Fu, 1997: 872 in Luo Yihe: *Hai Zi shengya* 海子生涯 Career of Hai Zi). Hai Zi himself described his feeling as:

That time I have already
Walked to the vanishing point of human beings,
That time I’ve already arrived to the equator
That time I’ve already been sawed asunder by time
Bleeding through top to the end
Having been sawed into pieces (775)

Thus the poetry became his only spiritual refuge, and became his god. Hai Zi said that he was longing “to raise the poetry to heaven” (897).

4

In the epic *Taiyang wang* 太阳王 (King the Sun), we can see that Hai Zi was creating his god of poetry in his own way. He chose “the Sun” to visualize the god of his poetry and declared that:

I am just, just the Sun
Just the Sun. Either you grow up to be the same as me
Or to subordinate yourself to me
Let me leaving you going my way my own way
My way upon the earth
Let the three sorrow-stricken stomachs start burning
(Jesus Buddha Muhammad) (777).

Here Jesus, Buddha and Muhammad are all the setoffs of the god of poetry – the Sun. Facing the Sun they have to imitate him or to be subordinate to him, otherwise they can only feel the burning sorrow.

Hai Zi worshipped his god of poetry with all his works and his own life. The last part of his great epic *Taiyang qibu shu* 太阳·七部书 (The Sun A Book in Seven Parts) was named as *Taiyang misaiya* 太阳·弥赛亚 (The Sun Messiah), and was written between the end of 1988 and March 1989. This is the last epic that Hai Zi created before he went to his death. He wrote in the opening lines:

Consecrate this Sun to the new era! To the truth!
Consecrate this epic to his new poem god who is about
to be born (801).

At the end of this epic Hai Zi drew a lovely picture:
The heavy snow in the heaven drop straight
into the eyes of the blind
Full of brightness
Full of the brightness of birth

Loudly sing the Elders
Elders

The voice of chorus, the heavy snow in the heaven
The odes of the blind
The odes of the blind that saw the sunshine (866)

These verses present a picture of the birthday of Jesus Christ. Hai Zi's epic poetry stopped here. When after Hai Zi's death Xi Chuan edited *Hai Zi shi quan bian* 海子诗全编 (The Complete Poetry of Hai Zi), he deemed that this epic poem "was not finished" (866). Here I want to say that the actual "end" of this epic is the "loud crash" (4) of the poet himself on 26th March 1989. He died on that day. We should pay attention to the manner of Hai Zi's suicide. He carefully chose a rail of a slow train, lay down across the rail and let the train cut his body into two parts through his waist. His body and the rail were shaped as a Cross – a Cross leading to the Kingdom of Poetry! Hai Zi's great epic poetry had been finished there, the god of poetry was born then. He himself ultimately became the sacrificed lamb of his own poetry. Since then many young people who love Hai Zi's poetry believed in Hai Zi's resurrection, which, of course, never came true.

Hai Zi used the Bible for reference to construct an impressive *oeuvre* for his own god of poetry. Not only Luo Yihe noticed that his epic poetry was structured as the Holy Bible. Xi Chuan also considered that “Hai Zi’s road was from the New Testament to the Old Testament” (Xi Chuan 1997: 6 *Huainian* 怀念 Cherished Memory). And Hai Zi himself denoted this too in his poem he wrote:

First part of the Holy Bible is my wings, which is matchless bright
Sometimes it’s also like a cloudy today.
Second part of the Holy Bible is vigorous but joyous
Sure it’s also my wounded wings

My empty earth and sky
Is the combination book of both parts
Of the Holy Bible, that is my body cleaved again
Streaming rain, snow and tears in February (440-441)

About the character of his poetry, Hai Zi claimed that his compositions are not the poems but a religious work of his kingdom of poetry. For instance, the epic poem *Taiyang misaiya* 太阳·弥赛亚 (The Sun Messiah) constituted of *Taiyang* 太阳(The Sun) and *Yuanshi shishi pianduan* 原始史诗片断(Slices of the Primeval Epic) (796-866), or the whole *Taiyang qibu shu* 太阳·七部书 (The Sun Seven Parts) (481-866). This assertion is, of course, unquestionable. His lyric pieces are the specimens of the mythopoeic poetry, where the Holy Bible represents one of the most important sources. There are, of course, many others, too. Let us say, his highlighting of the Sun can hardly be regarded as a weighty biblical element, where it was not worshipped, with the exception of the reign of King Manasseh of Judah after 696 B.C. up to King Josiah in 623 B.C.

Hai Zi chose the Sun or *Taiyang wang* 太阳王 (King Sun) to make a god of his poetry. All the poets that he adored throughout the history were, according to him, the prophets of the kingdom of poetry: Homer, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), Friedrich Hölderlin (1770 – 1843), Alexander Pushkin (1799 – 1837), Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca. 339-278 BC), Li Bai 李白 (701 – 762), Wang Wei 王维 (701 – 761), Li He 李贺 (790 – 816), and others.

Hai Zi presented himself as a Messiah with his poems in the kingdom of poetry. He wrote in *Yesu (sheng zhi gaoyang)* 耶稣(圣之羔羊) Jesus (Lamb of the Lord):

From Rome returned to the mountains
Bronze lips turned into flesh
On my body bronze lips flew away
On my body flesh lips are revived

Here the poet left the Christian scriptures (“Rome”) and came back to his own reality (“mountains”), then he felt the mission of “the Lamb of the Lord” had fallen on him. So the “bronze lips” of the Jesus statue had changed to be “flesh lips” “on my body”. Thus the poet had started to preach his gospel of the

kingdom of poetry. This, at least, is my understanding of this piece. One of his poems ended with these words: "I wrote down my lection in the gloom, the world turned to be bright again" (413). At another occasion he presented his own vision of the bright future of mankind in the poem *Wuyue de maidi* 五月的麦地 (The Corn Field in May)

Brothers in all over the world
Will embrace each other in the corn field
The East, the South, the North and the West
The brothers in the corn field, good brothers
Looking back the yore
Recite their poetry
Will embrace each other in the corn field (353)

These lines are reminiscent of the visionary words of Prophet Isaiah about God who "will settle the disputes among great nations. They will hammer their swords into ploughs and their spears into pruning-knives. Nations will never again go to war, never prepare for battle again" (Isaiah, 2, 4). The vision of everlasting peace will be realized in Hai Zi's kingdom of poetry!

Hai Zi called himself "the King" many times. Here are few most typical examples:

A bright night
I came in the rose garden
Got off the crown of poetry
And the corselet of the heavy land (363).
He declared that he himself is the Sun:
The Sun is my name
The Sun is my life...
The millenary kingdom and I shall
Ride on a five-thousand years old phoenix and a dragon ...
The poetry and the Sun will certainly triumph
Facing the fate of "the sacrificed lamb", he said:
As the King I cannot endure patiently
On this distant road
The sacrifice of myself (469)

Here the poet tasted to the marrow the suffering that Jesus experienced before he went to the Cross. Jesus had prayed in Gethsemane before he had been arrested: "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." (Mark, 14, 36).

Jesus resurrected from death after three days, as he predicted, and Hai Zi, the Chinese poet who died in 20th century will also resurrect, as he predicted, and make "the dead cave or village" "bloom with wild flowers in my (i.e. his, Y.R.) cavern" (245).

It is not difficult to understand why Hai Zi sang about death again and again, since death is the precondition of the Messiah's resurrection. Just among the

117 lyrics he wrote in 1983 – 1986, death is mentioned 96 times; and in the 125 lyrics he wrote in 1987 – 1989, there are 167 references to death. He said about himself: “This is a child of night, immersed in winter, inclined to death” (470). No wonder his good friend Xi Chuan commented on him: “Hai Zi was a person who had a predisposition for suicide” (922).

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It is a pity, and one may say, a very painful reality for the contemporary Chinese literature, that Hai Zi, one of her greatest talents, died so early, after only more than six years of creative work. Especially his unfinished epic “The Sun A Book in Seven Parts” might have become one of the best poems in Chinese literature of the 20th century (Cf. Gálík 2004: 67-69).

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