

“The God of War Is Cleaning His Boots”—Analysis of Yaxian’s Work “God of War”

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Yaxian was forced to live far from his home and family since he was young because of the war. He lived in exile with losing his youth in the war. Therefore, the memories of war have deeply rooted in Yaxian’s mind, and these life experiences will also be integrated into his creation. In this light, war should be an important and profound topic in Yaxian’s poetry, and his war poetry is worth exploring.

Keywords: Yaxian, god of war, the war

Introduction

Yaxian’s creation time is not long, started around 1951 and ended in 1966 with about 14 to 15 years. His poems were mainly written before the age of 35, and were grouped in a collection of poems called “The Abyss”. Although only one book of poetry has been published, Yaxian has a highly respected status in the world of modern Chinese poetry. Bide Long called Yaxian as “A sleeping volcano of modern poetry”. Talking about Yaxian’s premature exhaustion of creative life in his book *A Concise History of Taiwanese Literature*, Jitang Gu expressed his views quite objectively:

Although not publishing a new book for many years, he hasn’t been forgotten, it may be because of the quality of his poetry and the fact that his position as an editor-in-chief of the supplement of United Daily News has also contributed to his fame and status. (2002, p. 327)

Therefore, this article explores the traits of Yaxian poetry by taking the poem “God of War” as an example.

“God of War” was written in 1957 and is recorded in Volume two of the poetry collection “War Time”. From the title, it is a character poem describing the “God of War”. Originally, the god of war refers to the heroes in ancient mythology. In Chinese mythology, Chiyou, Xingtian, Lvshang, and Erlan are referred to as the god of war, while, in Greek mythology, Ares, the son of Zeus and Hera, is the god of war. Generally, Chiyou and Xingtian are the embodiment of wisdom and courage, and Ares is not only bloodthirsty and a symbol of strength and power, but also the embodiment of human disaster. Therefore, based on the poem’s narration and thematic expression, we can speculate that in the poem “God of War”, the god of war should be Ares, the embodiment of the human scourge. In fact, what the poet really wants to express is not only the description of the “God of War”, but also the purpose of writing the cruelty of war through the “God of War”, so “God of War” is more of a war poem.

The Influence of Western Culture

The period that Yaxian published extensively and became an influential poet was when he emigrated from China mainland to Taiwan. Regional isolation, political separation, and cultural rupture made him only face the West to find spiritual support and artistic paradigm from Western philosophy, Western poetry, and Western culture. Moreover, the modernist poetic style was already very strong in Taiwan in the 1950s (Long, 2006). The influence of Westernization spirit on Yaxian cannot be ignored, and, as Yaxian himself said,

He likes things from the West very much, and he is full of fantasy, even adoration, for western literature, and has been going westward in creation, like a pilgrim, worshiping the West and enthusiastically embracing the works of Western modernism. (Yaxian, 1982, p. 2)

Leave aside the influence of poets like Rilke and Luca on Yaxian’s poetry writing skills, one can see that Yaxian has absorbed many of the nutrients of Western culture from the words in “God of War” alone. For example, the poem consists of five sections. In the first section, the words “Cross” and “V” have been used. As we know, the “Cross” is the symbol of Christianity. Originally, it was used as a torture device; however, it was given a new meaning—love and redemption, later, because Jesus died on the cross. While, “V” stands for “Victory”. The third section of the “Damaslege Dao”, originated in ancient India, is the weapon of countries, like India, Arabia, Persia, and so on. The word “Waterloo” in Section IV clearly refers to the town of Waterloo in Brussels, and of course to Napoleon’s heroic battle, the Battle of Waterloo; “Copper spurs” were used in Europe for the heel of a rider’s boot to stimulate a horse to run faster in the Middle Ages.

It can be seen that the above words are derived from some western or exotic vocabulary. However, Yaxian deftly uses these words in poetry, so that “east” and “west” quietly meet in one poem, and thus evoke a remarkable “chemical reaction”. All these give poetry a deeper meaning, full of poetry philosophy, read to the endless charm.

“Drama” in Poetry

Some researchers have pointed out that Yaxian’s poems are “dramatic”. For example, Yaxian’s poems have been deemed to “dramatic”, “ideological”, “localism”, and “cosmopolitan” by Mo Zhang in his *Anthology of the Top Ten Contemporary Chinese Poets* (1997). Guangzhong Yu also said, “Yaxian’s lyrics are almost always dramatic. In addition, Eugene Eliot said that the best modern lyric poetry is dramatic, and in China, his words apply equally well to Yaxian” (Yu, 1978). Of course, Yaxian’s dramatizations are not limited to lyric poetry; one can also feel the dramatic tension contained in war poetry after having read “God of War”.

Next, I focused on the dramatic plot structure of the poem “God of War”. In the first stanza, it gives an account that the time of the poem is “night”, the place is “sick clock tower”, and the objects described are two sisters—“hour hand and minute hand”. After having the time, place, characters, and other elements necessary for a story, the author then renders it: “night” is “the night of many black crosses”, “bell tower” is “sick”, and “two sisters” is “dead”. The hour hand and minute hand have stopped turning, like two “cold arms”, in the shape of a “V”. The writing of the first section has created a solemn, dark, and terrifying atmosphere, just like the stage setting in a drama performance. It first leads the readers into an emotional atmosphere, establishes the emotional tone of the whole poem, and gives the readers more space for imagination.

The second, third, and fourth sections continue to unfold the plot within an atmosphere of near-death silence. Section 2 and Section 3 describe the situations after the war. Winner and loser are opposites of a war,

but did the “winner” really win? Yaxian said it was a “black victory” because it brought death. The premature death of young children, leaving behind the beloved skirt, only leaves their helpless mothers “crying out for her soul”. The battlefield left after the war was bloody. Although the “Wine capsule”, “Damascus knife”, “horn”, “torch”, “Shield”, “Residual flag” are “silent”, the poet uses the static display dynamic writing skill to describe the horrors of yesterday’s battlefield, which are the most telling evidences of the cruelty of war. They are the most powerful evidence of the cruelty of war. Everything is silent but except “the groans of women”, which is an imaginary space created by the poet for readers between movement and stillness: The battlefield filled with blood in the past is horribly silent, and only the women who lost their children are groaning. The striking contrast between moving and static makes the woman’s groan more strident, and doubles the sense of tearing and desolation.

The poem comes to the fourth verse and finally comes to the “God of War”, who ceaselessly drives his horse across the field to Waterloo wearing boots with copper spurs, as if he had just been through a serious battle. Yaxian creates an image of war god by adequate listing of locations and describing the god of war’s actions. Interestingly, what’s about the last line of the verse is that the god of war is polishing his boots. In a scene full of blood, the god of war seems to be taking a leisurely “cleaning his boots”. It can be understood that the god of war takes great care of his boots, because they are the physical evidence of his military career, but it seems that the poet is more of a satire on the god of war: His ambition is the initiator of the war, which leads to the death of children and the groan of their mothers, but he seemed to have no regard for the loss of life and the calamity brought upon. So, what seems to be an understatement is an ordinary action description, but it contains a different meaning.

Yaxian’s creative use of “dramatic skills” was not only affirmed by Guangzhong Yu and Mo Zhang, but also specially mentioned by many scholars later, like Guohua Xiong, who said:

Yaxian is adept at borrowing and using techniques and expressions of drama and fiction in poetry. He developed the “dramatic scene” and “dramaturism” advocated and tested by early new poets such as Yiduo Wen, Zhilin Bian and Kejia Yuan to an unprecedented new height, greatly enriching the expressive means and skills in modern poetry. (1994, pp. 68-72)

Focusing on the Existence of “Man” From a Historical Perspective

The poem “God of War” is almost entirely about the past. Yaxian revisits history from a modern perspective, standing in the present. By writing about past events, acquainting oneself with history and reality, reflecting on the present, reminding the world, and expressing his concern for reality, it was an expression of Yaxian’s historical consciousness in poetry.

In the poem “God of War”, Yaxian did not choose to present the theme of war in a grand vision, but instead focused on depicting individuals’ survival in war context. The “people” in the poem include “mother and child” and “woman and baby”. In the years of famine caused by the war, mothers lost their children and cried out in pain. In the bloody battlefield, full of women’s groans, nearby were the corpses of babies wrapped in the remnants of war flags. Through the poet’s description, we can almost hear the mother’s cries behind the words and feel a mother’s hard pain.

Yaxian focused on women and children in war. In fact, they are like the epitome of millions of “people”. In the state of war, “people” are like ants, and no one thinks about their life or death. Battlefields are places where warmongers fight as well as the places of nightmares of countless ordinary people. Of course, there is

another character that cannot be ignored in this poem—the god of war. However, “the God of War is wiping his boots”. The cruel war has taken away many fresh lives, and people have no time to care about life and death, while the warlike god of war wipes his boots leisurely! The depiction of this action is a kind of satire, and it is also the poet’s deconstruction of the image of the god of war.

Through a few words, Yaxian evoked images of women, children, and the god of war in a war. Through delicate descriptions and comparisons of their living status, readers appreciate the callousness and bloody cruelty of war.

“God of War” is a poem about war and death with a heavy topic. The poem conveys the feeling of cruelty and aversion to war. In addition, the poet absorbs Western culture and uses dramatic skills hatred in the process of creation, showing the poet’s concern for people and his care for life.

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