

The Artistic Characteristics and Historical Responsibility of “Silk Road Poetry” During the War of Resistance*

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During the War of Resistance, Northwest poetry, influenced by the May Fourth New Literature tradition, exhibited a distinct spirit of “enlightenment” and “struggle”. Poets inherited the realist tradition, using poetry as a weapon to expose the atrocities of the enemy and puppet forces, awaken public consciousness, and call for national salvation. At the same time, they made significant progress in the direction of “nationalization and popularization”, creating poems that were sincerely emotional and uplifting in style, reflecting both the lives and struggles of borderland people and the belief in the inevitable victory of the war of resistance and the revolutionary ideals of the proletariat. Northwest poetry, in its specific historical context, fulfilled the practical functions of serving the war through literature and educating the people, provided valuable experience for the popularization of new poetry, and established the unique poetic charm of Northwest poetry, demonstrating its sense of responsibility to the era.

Keywords: Silk Road, poetry, era, popularization, enlightenment

In those smoke-filled years, as the homeland fell, the Nationalist government relocated westward, and the coastal newspaper industry moved inland in large numbers. Many progressive individuals and literati also migrated to the far northwest rear, leading to the rapid development of newspaper literature in Gansu and Xinjiang. Supplements such as “Life Route”, “Grassland”, and “Poetry Pages” of the Gansu Republican Daily, “Oasis”, “Practice”, and “Border Corner” of the Northwest Daily, as well as Northwest Youth, New Northwest, Women’s Biweekly, Modern Review Platform, War Signal, the “Literary Monthly” supplement of Xinjiang Daily, and publications like New Sprout, became the main literary fronts in the far northwest rear. These publications released a large number of poems, which not only reshaped the frontier spirit and presented the unique style of poetry literature in the rear areas, but also reflected the contemporary responsibility of frontier poetry. However, existing research has not yet examined Gansu poetry and Xinjiang poetry during the years of war in conjunction. Therefore, this study hopes to make a modest contribution for the readers’ appreciation.

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Inheriting the Literary Tradition of “Enlightenment” and “Struggle” Since the May Fourth Movement

Since the May Fourth Movement, modern poetry has served as the vanguard of the literary revolution, constantly adapting both its content and form to the demands of the New Democratic Revolution and undergoing a profound transformation. It has consistently maintained the spirit of anti-imperialism, anti-feudal enlightenment, and struggle. Under the call of the era for democracy and liberation, vernacular poetry broke out of the constraints of classical literary aesthetics and the tonal rules of traditional poetry, freeing itself from the narrow confines of “aristocratic literature” and “entertainment literature”, thus opening a new era for Chinese poetry. Modern poetry became a tool for progressive intellectuals to criticize the ugliness and evil of dark realities, expose the suffering caused by feudal warlord rule to the people, and express the people's desire for democracy, freedom, and liberation. After the “September 18 Incident”, propelled by the leftist literary movement, the mainstream of modern poetry further expanded in both content and form, beginning to connect deeply with the working masses, reaching fields, factories, and streets, effectively playing the role of a cultural vanguard in “enlightening thought” and “inspiring struggle”.

During the Anti-Japanese War, “modern poetry was the dominant ideological tendency, consisting of combatant revolutionary poems written by realists, revolutionary romantics, or proletarian poets, fully reflecting the spirit of the 1930s” (LAN, 1984, p. 273). Although poets on the frontier were far from the flames of war, most of them were itinerant writers who had traveled across much of China, progressive youths influenced by Marxist theory and revolutionary thought, soldiers who had fought on intense battlefields and shed blood against the enemy, or Northeast-origin poets who had suffered greatly under enemy forces. All of them, through the baptism of war, personally experienced and deeply perceived the cruelty of invaders and the peril of the nation; some witnessed the attitudes and understandings of people regarding the war in different regions and environments; others perceived, through what they heard and saw, the disasters facing their homeland and the hopes for the nation. Their perspectives broadened, their understanding of life deepened, their ideological awareness rose, and their creative passion intensified. They abandoned the self-focused, solitary poetic self-construction, adhered to the revolutionary realist tradition of struggle, rallied for the disaster-stricken nation, and began to shout for the sacred liberation war of China, producing many emotionally rich poems with “enlightening” and “combative” qualities, representing the resounding call for national salvation from the frontier communities. For example, Li Guangxin of Dihua Provincial Second High School, in his work “Support to Become an Anti-Japanese Warrior” (LI, 1936), passionately called for the awakening of the people:

My fellow countrymen! My fellow countrymen!
Do not continue to be numbed by wealth and paper.
The tense clouds have already enveloped the entire nation,
And boiling blood wets the sleeves of the anti-imperialist fighters.
They are protecting our beautiful rivers and mountains from destruction,
Fighting bloody battles!
To realize the longings of their warrior spirit.
Fellow countrymen, fellow countrymen!
Do not delay any longer, do not linger.
We have suffered the sorrow of a fallen nation under iron heels,
Our 400 million masses will become slaves;
Hurry to strengthen your spirit!

Waiting to soar together with the helping hand,
We must join them and share the same boat. (LI, 1936)

The author uses repeated artistic techniques and shouts to summon the self-esteem of the nation, inspire the people and the motherland to work together, “those who have money contribute and make strong contributions”, and support the determination to support the War of Resistance and defend the country. Although there is no gorgeous rhetoric and lacks the charm of poetry, the whole poem is full of affection and passionate style, containing the pure feelings of ordinary people who are loyal to the country, and are highly appealing. Such an attractive poem also includes Yaqin’s “Dear Puppet Army Brothers”, a mournful poem, “It regards you like dogs / It regards you as heartless / It regards you as cheaper than chickens and dogs / Dear puppet brothers / The devils drive you to the battlefield / And gang rape your wives, children ...and sisters”, revealing the brutal face of the enemy and the puppet, empathizing with the painful experience of the puppet soldiers under the enslavement of the enemy and puppet regime. “... In the countryside in July in the south, / wildflowers bloom brightly, / The water of the creek flows more clearly into the distance. / It was the time of the Wuque Bridge in the mythology of previous years, / but now it has also been swallowed up by the voice of the times, / The women in the village are busy sewing the soldiers' clothes... / The children playing next to the stone bridge, / Waving the national flag of the motherland with their naked arms, / And angrily shouting “Fight Japanese imperialism”! / Strong grow to adulthood in July, / You already know who is the enemy of our generation! / Our July, / Here it comes! ... / The great fields of the east, north, and south of the motherland, / How many warriors who fought for freedom, / With the blood of the river, / with the heroic death, / ... / to carve the stele commemorating July, / to complete this epic praising July (Donna, 1939, p. 13). These poems not only let the readers feel the impact of the suffering and humiliation brought about by the fall of the country, but also like a loud trumpet from the front line, urging people to rise up and resist at the critical moment of life and death. Poetry in this style also includes “The Fields of Urumqi” and “We Want to Counterattack”, the poem “Expel the Japanese Imperialism” by Han Shifang, a third-year student at Dihua Girls’ School, and “Changed, Changed” by Thorn Sheng, etc., are all raising flags and shouting for the awakening of the people and the national war.

Poems such as “Torrent” by the pen name Weak, “Our Heart” by Leiyu, “Iron Horse” by Qianyao, “Life” by Fury Tao, and “I Soar on the Top of Kunlun Mountain” by Shizhi praise the heroism and indomitable national spirit of the whole people in bloody resistance to the enemy, and express the ideal and belief that the war of resistance will be won and welcome the light. Leng Blooded made an oath of “fighting” in “Waving Our Weapons”: “To this day/For the survival of the motherland/Brothers who have died a lot - soldiers/The blood shed/Written on the ancestral land/The words ‘continue to fight’/Sacrificed heads/Put down the support of killing the enemy/The slaves will one day raise their heads/“As long as the struggle is forever”/... Reflect the sins of the oppressors / The pen of the pen / Swing it / Put our weapons / On the line of struggle / Give all our strength”. (Cold-blooded, 1939). They are like daggers and guns that are as powerful as throwing guns to expose and criticize the darkness and sins of real society, call for justice, truth and light, and play a fighting role in uniting and educating the people and fighting against the elimination of enemies and puppets.

Significant Development in the Aspects of “Nationalization and Popularization”

After the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War, in order to make literature and art better serve the new democratic revolution and closely align with the needs of the anti-Japanese struggle, the “National Literary and Art Association for Resisting the Enemy” proposed the slogan “Take literature to the countryside, take literature

to the troops". Literature and art, in both content and form, were to serve the general public, and promoting the "popularization of literature and art" became the main task of the literary world. In October 1938, in his article "The Position of the Communist Party of China in the National War", Mao Zedong put forward the correct direction for the development of literature and art: "fresh and lively, in a style and manner that the Chinese people enjoy and appreciate". This became the guiding principle for the new poetry movement. Progressive poets in the Xinjiang poetry scene responded promptly, drawing nourishment from folk forms and traditional poetry while actively and effectively exploring the nationalization and popularization of new poetry. Songs, short tunes, recitation poems, narrative poems, and free-form poetry all reflected the trends of nationalization and popularization, achieving certain results.

In the early period of the War of Resistance, some poems with symbolist colors appeared in newspapers and periodicals in Xinjiang, such as Han Yan's "Sunset", Wu Shiguo's "The Decline of the Fly", Nu Tao's "Eagle", Yu Chuan's "Blazing Fire", and Liu Shui's "Sun", reflecting that the literary and artistic circles in Xinjiang were also deeply influenced by symbolist poetry. However, in terms of content and artistic style, they demonstrated their uniqueness. As early as the 1920s, Chinese modern poets and scholars had translated and introduced a large amount of Western symbolist poetry and theory. "In 1925, the publication of Li Jinfa's poetry collection 'Drizzle' marked the entry of symbolist poetry into an entirely new period" (MI, 2002, p. 115). The main themes of the poetry were lamentations over tragic fate, hesitation between ideals and dreams, expressions of longing and the pain of disappointment, filled with tones of melancholy, decadence, and sadness. After the outbreak of the War of Resistance, poets responded in accordance with the times amid the torrent of the war, and the style of poetry began to change. Progressive poets in Xinjiang also raised the banner of realism in the tide of the War of Resistance, reasonably utilizing traditional forms for poetic creation. Symbolist poetry was no longer just a pessimistic, world-weary chant or a hazy, mysterious reverie; in terms of content, it made use of rich imagination and suggestion to create symbolic artistic conception or imagery, vividly expressing noble moral qualities, progressive consciousness, and complex real-life relationships, revealing the bright prospects before the Anti-Japanese War and inspiring the people's faith in resistance, as seen in Liu Shui's "Sun" or Yu Chuan's "Blazing Fire". Some poems condemned fascist atrocities, invoking the destruction of Japanese imperialism as well as traitors and collaborators, such as Wu Shiguo's "The Decline of the Fly" and Han Yan's "Sunset". Others praised the heroic and great spirit of outstanding sons and daughters unwilling to be national slaves, denouncing surrenderists and their lackeys for betraying their ancestors and seeking personal gain, as in Nu Tao's "Eagle". From an artistic and aesthetic construction perspective, the previous obscure and grotesque style was also replaced by a robust, high-spirited, and exuberant emotional tone, presenting a completely different artistic style.

Secondly, reasonably utilizing the fine elements of old poems familiar to the public and presenting them in forms, rhythms, and tunes that people enjoy has become one of the directions in exploring the popularization and simplification of poetry. Some poets imitated the forms and structures of mountain songs and folk songs, using lively and powerful language familiar to the masses, and created a batch of poems that were both easy to understand and catchy, reflecting a new national style and carrying a new national spirit. Encouraged by the high patriotic enthusiasm of the entire nation during the War of Resistance, poetry was used as a weapon to participate in the sacred liberation war, revealing the cruelty of fascism and expressing the people's inner desire for light and freedom, as well as their determination and fighting spirit against invasion. Below is a folk-style poem by

Hanzhang, “Mountain Song of the War of Resistance” (Hanzhang, 1940):

On the high mountains, we plant cabbage.
 Cabbage flowers bloom all over the hills.
 Men, women, old, and young all rejoice,
 But suddenly the devils invade.
 Rape and slaughter are truly cruel.
 Our hometowns turn into disaster,
 ...
 Why should we suffer oppression?
 Young and old unite together.
 Pick up the knife and gun and fight. (Hanzhang, 1940)

Although the entire poem does not convey a grandiose sweep of emotion, its style is simple and its form concise, using colloquial language to express the most sincere feelings. Within a commoner-oriented aesthetic, it possesses strong affinity. People’s tranquil and peaceful pastoral life cannot escape the tragic fate of being trampled, looted, and raped by invaders, and feelings of sorrow and indignation permeate the lines. The poet, though nostalgic for the past peaceful village life, does not retreat or fear in the face of the grim reality of destroyed homes and shattered mountains and rivers, but bravely confronts it. “We are not old sheep, why are we oppressed?” is the people’s painful and angry cry, a burning fire of vengeance in their hearts. It positively portrays the sons and daughters of heroes who do not wish to be slaughtered lambs or become slaves of a vanquished nation, awakening men and women, old and young, amidst the flashes of knives and blood. It shows their determined fighting spirit to take up arms, defend the homeland, cleanse humiliation with blood, and safeguard national dignity. The whole poem adopts the form of folk songs loved by the masses, is easy to read and recite, and has musical chanting characteristics.

The following is a poem by the author using the pen name Shan, titled “Miscellaneous Thoughts on Mid-Autumn” (Shan, 1940p. 44):

When the moon is full in the sky, the people on earth reunite,
 It should be a time to celebrate reunion, yet how times have changed.
 Who has no parents at home? Who has no brothers?
 Just because the enemy invaded, we are separated to east and west.
 ...
 Year after year, day after day,
 Hatred deepens with time, suffering intensifies with the years.
 When will this hatred end? When will this grievance disappear?
 I hope all my fellow countrymen unite to destroy the Japanese invaders.
 Next Mid-Autumn Day, may it be a time of reunion,
 ...

Using China’s traditional festival—the Mid-Autumn Festival—to express emotions and ambitions, this poem depicts the spiritual trauma of countless families torn apart by the ravages of war, reflecting a sorrow that grows from never being able to return to the peaceful homeland. It stirs patriotic enthusiasm among the people to rise up and defend their country, expressing the heartfelt desire: “I hope all my fellow countrymen unite to destroy the Japanese invaders”. Although the ending leaves a feeling of incompleteness, the artistic impact of the poem is undeniable. In terms of aesthetic art, it follows the traditional Chinese poetic form—the five-character

regulated verse—retaining the formal beauty of balanced sentence structure, tight and harmonious rhythm, varied intonation, and natural rhyme. It skillfully applies techniques of metaphor and allusion and uses popular language to express emotions through objects.

Beneficial Explorations to Enhance “Ideological Depth” and “Artistic Merit”

Of course, the “popularization” and “improvement” of literature and art do not mean opposing the artistic and propagandistic aspects of poetry. “Popularization” and “improvement” can be unified. During the Anti-Japanese War, education in Xinjiang was developing rapidly, but raising the overall cultural level of the public, enhancing ideological awareness, and cultivating Marxist-Leninist theoretical literacy was a relatively long-term process. A widespread enlightenment movement was urgently needed at that time. Literary and artistic works had to appear in forms easily accepted by the people and be close to people’s lives in order to be more effective in propaganda. However, it is undeniable that the most emotionally compelling artistic works are also the most effective in dissemination. Literature reduced to mere slogans, although directly addressing the theme of propaganda, in fact weakens the power of propaganda due to the lack of artistic quality, and thus fails to achieve the true purpose of ideological mobilization and educational promotion.

Since the War of Resistance, Xinjiang poetry has embarked on a new direction combining poetry with the masses. The popularity of folk songs, the development of recitative poetry and street poetry movements, and the establishment of workers’ and peasants’ poetry groups have all progressed rapidly. The literary circle has actively worked toward the goal of nationalization and popularization, continuously conducting meaningful explorations. However, in the practice of poetry creation, authors have never ceased their exploration of ideological and artistic aspects. Tian Man’s “Brief Discussion on the Methods of Poetic Expression” aims, in terms of expression, to make simple sentences more vivid and accessible. Literary theories such as Su Liu’s “Brief Discussion on Contemporary Chinese Poetry”, Xu Wei’s “Miscellaneous Talks on Poetry”, Yang Feng’s “Casual Talks on New Poetry”, and Ye Huo’s “How Poetry Should Be in the Future” have all conducted valuable explorations on the artistry of poetry. Among them, Yang Feng, in discussing the content and form of poetry, believed that one should not be constrained by form, just as binding an innocent child restricts the display of their liveliness. Because the rhythm of poetry expresses the rhythm of our emotions. Moreover, as Gorky said, “Poetry does not need to show beauty on the surface, but the internal quality is what matters”. The content of poetry should be substantial, and the imagery vivid, but it should never be obscure, vague, or mystical; rather, it should be in harmonious rhythm, rich with emotion. Xu Wei, in “Miscellaneous Talks on Poetry”, mentioned that poets should possess passion derived from life. Regarding content and form, he also believed that “content is the record of the most fulfilling and passionate reality of life”. In terms of form, ‘do not take cramped and broken forms as something novel. “Rhythm should not become a constraint on the freedom and expansiveness of poetry, and one should avoid ‘rhyme for the sake of rhyme’” (Xu, 1941). In Chen Jiying’s theory of recitative poetry, idealized poetry has the following characteristics: “(1) the language should be absolutely accessible—spoken; (2) the content must be realistic; (3) to suit the education of the masses, dialects may be used; (4) the rhyme should not yet be abandoned” (Jiying, 1937). His views were largely consistent with those of leftist literary theorists. These theoretical discussions undoubtedly promoted both the subject and the forms of poetry.

These lyric poems, often with a “melancholy” or “sentimental” tone, generally share the following traits: either describing scenes to express feelings directly, using symbolism to convey emotion through objects, or embedding narrative and reasoning within lyricism. They are sincere, moving, and emotionally intense. Some,

influenced by classical poetry, combine realistic and symbolic artistic techniques, strongly conveying a sense of reality. They depict a collective image of heroic sons and daughters arduously and extraordinarily resisting invaders, shining with the noble and pure revolutionary ideals of the proletariat. They mark a departure from past poetry that focused on self-expression, carried a pessimistic and negative tone, escaped reality, and pursued aestheticism.

Compared with the poetry of the early period of the War of Resistance, the works by Feiyi, such as “The Three-Dimensional Defense Line at the Rear”, and by Nutao, such as “To the Northeast Volunteer Army”, “Life”, “Take It Back”, “We Are at the Rear”, and “Ah! Parasites Hey”, as well as Qifan’s “Drive the Enemy Out of the Yalu River to the East”, and Heitan’s “Send Them Back Home”, feature straightforward and natural language, simple and unified in style. The poets skillfully employ artistic techniques such as metaphor, allusion, repetition, pun, and exaggeration, blending lyricism with narrative, stirring blood and passion, and inspiring action. These vibrant songs born in extraordinary times are tearful denunciations of Japanese aggressors’ atrocities, vivid portrayals of the nationwide enthusiasm for resistance, and inevitable demonstrations of the historical law that light triumphs over darkness and justice over evil. Poetry that appeals to both cultured and popular tastes includes Zhong Ling’s “Air Raid Song Couplets” and Duansun’s “Songs of the Resistance”. Although some poems lack artistic refinement and may be somewhat conceptual or slogan-like, they all display a vigorous, bright, and uplifting style, concise, plain, and fresh. Through these poems, one can clearly see the visage of an era of resistance. Han Yan’s poem “Sunset” (Han Yan, 1936) reads:

Sunset!
 Do not expect a sudden storm to lash your body to pieces.
 Do not wait for a gale to blow you away without a trace.
 Because we have long seen that Death has already gripped your throat.
 All you people shrouded in darkness!
 We need——
 We need light——the light of the morning sun.
 We need life——the life of the morning sun.
 We need creation——the creation of the morning sun.
 Everyone rise——!
 Quickly send this dying sunset into the bottomless abyss,
 Replacing it with a brilliant morning sun. (Han Yan, 1936)

This poem uses the artistic techniques of analogy and symbolism to compare the cruel, decayed, declining, and dark feudal old society to the “sunset of aging and death”, exposing the evils of the old society and old system, as well as the physical and spiritual oppression, exploitation, and trauma it brings to the working people. The author expresses his aspirations through objects and fully vents the people's hatred for the old era. “The Grim Reaper has already gripped your throat” symbolizes the imminent demise of the old society, while it conveys great anticipation for a “bright and splendid” new era, calling on the people to pursue new light, a new life, and innovation. The entire poem is lively in form, rich in emotional freedom, and profound in meaning, giving readers a feeling of exhilarating immersion. Rui Sun’s “Song Without a Moon” is a highly rhythmic recitation poem. It draws on the artistic elements of folk clappers, making the poem brisk in rhythm, well-rhymed, fluent in language, easy to understand, bright in style, cheerful, and humorous, with a catchiness that appeals to the public. Its content is rich, centered around the war of resistance. Comparatively, this poem retains the lively and vivid beneficial elements of the folk clapper art form, while its content elevates the ideological essence of the spirit of resistance,

achieving a harmonious balance between artistic quality and ideological depth.

In order to promote the war of resistance, poems were recited on the streets, in the form of “the most popular, the most powerful, the clearest” short poems. Poetry recitation gradually moved to the streets, giving rise to a new poetic form—the “street poem”. Authors such as Han Zhang and Leng Xue, as well as the literary supplement of Xinjiang Daily, played significant roles in the development of the poetry movement in the Xinjiang region. Young poets in Xinjiang, inspired by the call of the national liberation war, picked up their pens and created a large number of works that were content-rich, ideologically positive, emotionally full, and also aesthetically refined. Xu Li’s poem “The March on the Night of May 30th” is filled with the heroic and impassioned spirit of anti-imperialist fighters within its stirring songs.

Conclusion

Northwest poetry during the War of Resistance, at the critical moment of national crisis, awakened the people, encouraged resistance against the invaders, and demonstrated a clear sense of responsibility for the times. Poets immersed themselves in life on the frontier, drawing from folk forms such as ballads, mountain songs, and recitation poems, promoting the popularization and nationalization of poetry, and creating an artistic style that was both accessible and passionately moving. Although some works tended to be formulaic or slogan-driven, they made valuable explorations in unifying ideology and artistry, producing pieces that were sincere in emotion and high in spirit. Northwest poetry not only effectively served the propaganda of resistance and the education of the populace, but also accumulated valuable experience for the popularization of new poetry, forging a unique poetic cadence and spiritual character under the smoke of the Silk Road's battles, becoming an unforgettable heroic song in the history of modern Chinese poetry.

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