

易言：評《波動》及其他

Postscript: Yi Yan's Critique
of 'Waves' in *Literary Gazette*

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THE LONG STORY 'Waves' has attracted the attention of a large number of young readers. Its author, comrade Zhao Zhenkai, is a young writer, who during recent years has published much poetry, and somewhat less fiction. The first draft of this story, written in 1974, during the devastating rule of the Gang of Four, circulated widely among young people in hand-copied form. The editorial department of the magazine *Changjiang* 長江 asked the author to revise the story, and has now published it for the general public, to give more people an opportunity to read and comment upon it. This is a welcome decision.

The story's exposure and criticism of many of the social problems of the Cultural Revolution is rare and commendable. From today's vantage-point we can see that the author's observations of the reality around him and his overall view of life were limited by the period within which he was living, were naive, sometimes even erroneous; but we cannot therefore deny or underestimate the impact his story made on young readers, the enlightening effect it had upon them. Especially when we recall, with bitterness, the prevailing social circumstances and remember that the author was only young and inexperienced, then his undeniably keen insight into life and his valuable inquiring spirit will enable us to understand and tolerate the naivety, bias, and errors manifested in the story.

1

THE STORY IS WRITTEN in the 'misty' style, and the author has adopted the 'stream-of-consciousness' technique. The fragmented leaps, the complicated and confused psychological impressions, the intricate and obscure philosophical sermonizing are all stamped with the brand of the age. The excessive 'mistiness', obscurity and fragmentation create a sense of total confusion. One has to read the story three or four times to make any sense of it, and even then a great deal remains unclear. The plot develops along two lines. On the one hand we follow the misfortunes and tragic love story of Yang Xun and Xiao Ling; on the other the intricate relationships between Lin Dongping, Wang Defa, Lin Yuanyuan and Yang Xun. The former describes the thoughts and mental questioning typical of the younger generation in a time of great catastrophe, revealing the painful process of spiritual crisis brought by confrontation with a new reality. The latter deals mainly with the struggles and personalities of various middle-ranking cadres during the Cultural Revolution. The two are not really extended parallel lines: they intersect in the underworld society of which the hooligan (*liumang* 流氓) Bai Hua is the centre. It is Bai Hua who links together the two 'drop-outs' (*tianya lunluo ren* 天涯淪落人) Yang Xun and Xiao Ling on the one hand, and the disintegrating family of Lin Dongping and Lin Yuanyuan on the other.

We must concede that the author's description of the young people and their fate is realistic. Whether they belong to the category of Yang Xun, or Xiao Ling, or Bai Hua, or Lin Yuanyuan, they are all twisted, crushed, branded by life. Yang Xun has experienced a certain amount of hardship, but he still manages to preserve a fairly firm set of beliefs, and is relatively optimistic. This is the result of his social position. Xiao Ling is a talented girl from a well-educated family who has come down in the world. She has degenerated into a loose woman, and is living far from her home city. Her lonely and isolated life and the cruel, unfeeling social reality she encounters are responsible for the sense of solitude and despair she feels in her soul. Bai Hua has already sunk into the underworld, and the only protest he can make against the political 'evils' of society is a totally destructive one. Lin Yuanyuan once felt the impact of the 'waves' of society, but the conditions of her life have improved, relatively speaking, now that her father has been restored to his prominent position. But then she too comes to see the dark, contemptible side, in her father; disgusted with his hypocrisy, she seeks freedom from convention and eventually runs away from home.

As can be seen, through these characters 'Waves' reflects the misfortunes and psychological crisis of our intellectual youth during the late 60s and early 70s. The aftermath of the Second World War saw the appearance in America and throughout the Western World of the phenomenon known as the 'beat generation'. They detested war and the whole capitalist system, and suffered from a sense of spiritual depression. After the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution, there was a similar disintegration, a similar change in our own younger generation. Some of them became pessimistic and lost their faith in the socialist system; nihilism began to spread. This is the process of psychological crisis described in 'Waves'. With his insights and philosophy, the author attempts to awaken his contemporaries, who are either still intoxicated with revolutionary slogans, or else aware (though only faintly so) but demoralized. But the onesidedness of the author's understanding of social life, and his shaky world outlook lead to the philosophical confusion and errors present in his work. In other words, it is commendable that a young man under such conditions should have embarked upon an independent inquiry into the life of his society, should have sought to express his objection to, his anxiety about, his protest against the feudal, fascist dictatorship of the Gang of Four; but regrettably his inquiries have not reached a correct conclusion.

The author creates in Xiao Ling a character embodying his own philosophical ideas. She has a cynical attitude towards life, towards her own future, towards her country. She thinks of herself as a 'foundling' of her society and her country, and the future fills her with bleak despair. Her survival consists in her having sufficient 'inertia'. She has no goal, no hope, no ideal, no tomorrow. In short, she no longer believes in anything but her own 'existence'. Her life story is roughly as follows. Her parents are hounded to death one after the other by the 'revolutionary activities' of the Red Guards. This first and fatal blow, sustained by an innocent girl, ignorant of the ways of the world, decisively changes the course of her life. Afterwards, at school, she herself encounters 'mass dictatorship', is placed in solitary confinement and interrogated. Then she becomes a fugitive from school, and in the waiting-room of a railway station receives help from a kind old man. She goes to the country, is seduced, becomes a worker The blows fall one after another, they undermine her spirit. She no longer believes that justice, truth and friendship exist in the world. Revolution has become an empty word to her. She even mocks sacred words like 'her country' and 'duty'. She speaks of 'her country' as an 'out-dated tune', a 'lollipop' to tease children with. She protests: 'This country's not mine. I don't have a country.' It is clear that so far as 'her country' is concerned Xiao Ling's thoughts are confused and nihilistic. It is not naivety that makes her feel lost in this way; it is an expression of despair, the result of a hailstorm of misfortune. Her torment has caused her to hate even her country. She says: 'Our country, huh, none of these ultimate playthings last, it's just those yes-men pretending to be emotional, they need a kind of cheap conscience to reach some sort of cheap equilibrium.' Leaving aside for the moment the author's strange, incomprehensible expressions, I would like to ask:

How can our 'country' be the product of those 'yes-men pretending to be emotional'? To any normal person, what an incomprehensible attitude this is! All of us who have gone through the Cultural Revolution, old, middle-aged, or young, have been hurt and persecuted in varying degrees. Not only do we not share this feeling toward our country, we cannot even understand it. We have no right to demand that the author should describe Xiao Ling as a character with a clear understanding of the social upheaval occurring around her. That would be inconsistent with the principles of historical materialism and of realism. But through her mouth the author unscrupulously lays all the filth at the door of 'our country', confusing the fascist acts of the Gang of Four with 'our country'. This definitely betrays a new nihilism of thought. In those hard times, our country, our people and our party went through purgatory. The country cannot be blamed. The author lacks a critical attitude toward the character of Xiao Ling. The way he writes the dialogue between her and Yang Xun can perhaps be seen as an implicit criticism of her character. But Yang Xun, a person with similar experiences to hers, not only fails to touch the crux of the matter in his criticism of her, he is very soon attracted to her side; she becomes his goddess. When he writes about Xiao Ling's nihilistic attitude toward objective reality, the author stubbornly affirms and praises her humanity (*renxing* 人性)—the 'existence' of her 'self'. He spends a whole section describing a scene where she and Lie Tiejun, the head of the Red HQ Brigade, are checking people at a sentry post. Li amuses himself by killing an innocent youth, 'without batting an eyelid'. Xiao Ling shouts hoarsely, turns and runs away, tears blurring her eyes: 'You, you butcher, bastard!' Another example is when the drunken Bai Hua is accompanied by Xiao Ling back to his den in an anti-aircraft shelter. After throwing out a slut called Number Four, he suddenly blurts out his admiration for Xiao Ling, stabs his palm with a dagger and lets the blood drip into his wine cup. At this moment, Xiao Ling is so noble and kind-hearted. She says, 'You're mad!' and helps him to dress the wound, beginning to philosophize about the stars. At this moment she no longer wears her cold, cynical face, but is a veritable angel, with absolutely authentic feelings. It can be seen from the author's descriptions that his idea is simply this: reality is hideous, cold, indifferent and wretched, while people's inner feelings are noble, fine and full of human compassion 人性. He wants to resolve this contradiction and to save the world through inner perfection, through the 'existence' of the self. Is this correct?

2

IN 'WAVES' the author advocates the philosophy that 'cowards create their own cowardice, and heroes make heroes of themselves' (Jean-Paul Sartre). Through his descriptions he is telling us: life is absurd, solitary, the world is tragic; but man is free and man's essence (*benzhi* 本質) is determined by his acts. Human essence, human meaning, human value reside in the inner world of this group of people, whom life has so contorted.

Xiao Ling is a character who puts up a fierce but futile fight for her own human value in this absurd world. In solitude she gradually grows cold. She longs to have a 'home', but what this means is not clear. Maybe it means a family to give her warmth, maybe it means death; it is hard to tell. Yang Xun attempts to warm her almost frozen heart with his love; once he succeeds in reviving her confidence, he restores her human feelings, her human essence. She admits it herself: 'It's you who changed my life. I'm also willing to believe that happiness belongs to us.' But her beautiful dream once more comes into conflict with reality. Yang Xun's mother, a high-ranking cadre, does not want a woman who has lost her family status, a woman moreover who already has a daughter of her own, to marry into her family. Yang Xun has no social prejudice about her family background, but he too is loth to take on the illegitimate child and forsaking her, returns alone to Peking. Tragedy pushes her once again toward the abyss of cold indifference and despair. Once more her heart is shrouded in disillusionment, emptiness, indifference, and solitude.

Her efforts to shake off the bonds of life have failed. She can only wrap herself in sorrow and misery, tighter and tighter, isolating her heart from the outer world and returning to Floodwater Valley, the village which once deceived her and in which her own flesh and blood, the little daughter forsaken by her father, still lives.

Lin Yuanyuan's path is also imbued by the author with the same dominant idea. She seeks human 'freedom', and human 'essence'. By chance she discovers in a letter evidence of her father's despicable hypocrisy, and resolutely runs away from her family (a family not lacking in warmth); she would rather live Bai Hua's kind of life, the life of a hobo. I do not exactly know why the author lets this character of his develop in this way. Her running away has nothing to do with the social turmoil created by the Gang of Four, nor is it the inevitable outcome of the development of her character. It is deliberately conceived by the author, according to his own subjective intention Perhaps he thinks this is the only way his characters can conform with the principle that 'heroes make heroes of themselves'.

Bai Hua is a predominantly cruel and wild character. His acts are destructive. The author does not criticize Bai Hua's destructive acts as he should; instead he affirms in them some sort of chivalry, which, as it appears in various situations, highlights his heroic character. For example, he helps a little girl abandoned by her stepmother in the waiting-room of a railway station; he also gives generous help to Lanzi, a girl who has no one to fall back on and has to sell her body for her livelihood. The author describes these various acts in such a positive light that it is very difficult to reconcile Bai Hua's character—the shining morality—with his ruthless, fierce behaviour. He can cut Cheekbone on the shoulder with a chopper for appropriating the slut Number Four; he can also jab a knife into his own palm, without flinching, merely to create a favourable impression on Xiao Ling! The author describes him as a strong character, a man who still has some conscience left in him. It is clear that the author, in working up his subject matter and developing his themes, is only concerned with the conflict between human existence and the objective world; he does not place the characters in an environment influenced by the fluctuations in social circumstances. And therefore he cannot perceive, let alone put into words, the existence of people who are making useful efforts to propel society forward.

Solitude, anxiety, depression, pain, despair, cruelty . . . these are not just isolated psychological elements; they are the key note that runs through the whole story, and a telltale sign of the author's ideological inclination. This gloomy and pessimistic tone is precisely the literary reflection of the nihilistic trend rampant in our society. It arises from weariness with the strain of the prolonged class-struggle, from disillusionment with revolutionary ideals. This trend denies the rationality of the realistic life order. True, the critical attitude of this trend toward the ultra-leftist line (and toward the reality of the 'evils' created by that line) has its progressive side; but it does not guide people on to the correct Marxist road. Instead, blindly and without restraint, it seeks free development of individual character, and rejects without exception anything which does not accord with or hampers this development. This trend seeks rational humanism, it strives for 'true human worth', it calls upon men to confront an absurd reality. It is true that its opposition to the fascist brutality of the Gang of Four, its endeavour to restore sincere relationships between people, are not without their positive side. But to set universal compassion, human nature 人性 and humanism 人道主義 against the Marxist world view is without question erroneous. This kind of philosophy is incompatible with our revolutionary-realistic literature, with our ideal of a socialist literature whose guiding ideology is the Marxist world view. Revolutionary realism requires the writer to bring to light social contradictions; at the same time it requires him to suffuse life with a glow of idealistic glory. It forbids him to lead the reader to pessimism and despair.

3

'WAVES' IS NOT an isolated literary phenomenon. Its appearance reminds me of the existentialist trend in philosophy and literature following the Second World War. I am not saying that we already have an influential school of existentialist literature in China. But among young people interested in literature there are *some* who are influenced by the existentialist trend in thought and literature, and who have produced works permeated with this thought

A common characteristic of these works is that they take as their guiding ideology the philosophy that reality is absurd and man is free; they adopt a nihilistic attitude toward the objective world and stand for the perfection of man's spiritual nature, attempting to substitute universal human nature and humanism for the Marxist world view.

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