

Birds and Stars: Tagore's Influence on Bing Xin's Early Poetry

By John Cayley

BING XIN'S early collections, *A Maze of Stars* and *Spring Water*, are interesting and important for a number of reasons: because of their position in the history of modern Chinese poetry; because of their relationship with non-Chinese literature, specifically the work of Tagore; because of their influence on later Chinese poets; and, not least, for their intrinsic worth.

Bing Xin began – shyly, reluctantly – to take her place as a pioneer of radical changes in the very nature of Chinese poetry during the period immediately following the May Fourth Movement. She was in her late teens. Bing Xin had a long-standing involvement in traditional poetry and felt instinctively that its characteristic combination of formal beauty and traditional themes constituted the essential Chinese poetry. From her writing about her early collections, it is clear that she was less certain about the status of her own work and that of other writers using the vernacular in a poetic mode and it is also clear that the very idea of the “New Poetry” caused her some anxiety. In any case, she was primarily a writer of short pieces, mainly fiction, and this remained her first love. She did, however, have confidence in the quality and worth of many fragments she had been collecting for some years. Once she had been exposed to certain types of foreign literature which had acknowledged authority and which seemed to have a marked formal similarity with some of the things that she was writing, she began to publish. Her work was soon seen in terms of the so-called “mini poem” and she is credited by some with the virtual creation of the genre. This she chooses to deny in her own accounts. Instead, she suggests that many writers experimented with fragments as the literary revolution extended to poetic writing. Certainly the form became instantly fashionable. It was seen as a modern correlate of the brief (most often twenty or twenty-eight syllable) traditional Chinese quatrains *jueju* 絕句, with some influence from Japanese *tanka* and *haiku*.

However, all these earlier forms are clearly highly structured in traditional ways. It is fair to suggest that the mini poem was something of an easy way out for the writer faced with formal problems in trying to use the poetically immature medium of the vernacular. We can admire Bing Xin's honesty in resisting the tendency to apply the word "poetry" to a form of writing at this stage of its development. Besides, when we look at the antecedents of her collections in particular, we can see that their relationship to poetry is itself somewhat problematic.

As Bing Xin says in her own story of the writing of *A Maze of Stars* and *Spring Water*, it was the influence of certain writings by Rabindranath Tagore which first encouraged her to publish her poetic fragments. She says (contradicting her 1921 preface to *A Maze of Stars*) that she was initially introduced to Tagore's poetry through translations, from English into Chinese, by the great scholar, bibliophile and man-of-letters, Zheng Zhenduo. One particular collection attracted her, a book which Tagore put together in English while travelling to Japan in the summer of 1916. The book's title was *Stray Birds*. For many of his most famous books (of which *Stray Birds* is not one) Tagore had made his own translations or adaptations from his earlier works in Bengali. Although *Stray Birds* is basically an English text it is, in some part, translated from a collection called *Kanika* which Tagore had published in 1900.¹ The meaning of *kanika*, "sawdust and chippings of a workshop", gives a clear indication of the nature of these writings. They are epigrammatic fragments and notes, not finished poems; and while *Stray Birds* cannot be identified with *Kanika*, neither does it amount to a transformation of the original fragments into finished poetry.

In the summer of 1922 Zheng collected his translations from *Stray Birds*, which were brought out by the Commercial Press in Shanghai.² For this translation to have been a direct influence on her work, Bing Xin must have seen at least part of it before publication, and perhaps also had access to a copy of the original. Zheng's translation was, even in 1922, incomplete. He had then rendered 257 of the 325 fragments in Tagore's collection. Uncertainty about the exact form of the influence from Tagore makes it difficult to unravel the confusion she seems to have felt about the nature of the pieces in *Stray Birds*. In the preface to his translation Zheng Zhenduo says that, "Recently 'mini poems' have flourished widely, and, for the most part, their authors have been directly or indirectly influenced by this collection."³ Bing Xin's own collections were considered to be models of the new genre and in her prefaces and later explanations she has always frankly acknowledged the antecedent which Zheng Zhenduo affirms. Still, in her most complete statement, she says that, while she understood that the Bengali originals for most of Tagore's English lyrics were examples of highly structured "folk poetry", she is even now unclear as to

¹Edward John Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 141. *Stray Birds* was first published in New York, London and Toronto by MacMillan in 1916.

²A revised and enlarged edition of *Fei niao ji* was reprinted in Hong Kong by Jianwen shuju in 1959.

³*Ibid.*, p. III.

whether *Stray Birds* had a similar origin.⁴ All we can say is that Tagore's writing did lend her work authority. She saw it as poetic, modern, effective and as having enough formal similarity to her own fragments to warrant their publication.

Despite her claim that she was uncertain about the poetic status of Tagore's fragments and despite her later assertion that she was anxious about her supposed contribution to a new poetry, it is interesting to note that Bing Xin's verses have more of the "structured" look of Western poetry than either Tagore's originals or Zheng Zhenduo's translation. Tagore's *Stray Birds* are set as prose epigrams. They are normally single sentences, allowed to run onto new lines in the style of prose – the line break on the page is not determined by the author. If there is more than one sentence they are sometimes composed in paragraphs. Slightly more often, additional sentences are set as new lines with indentation. This is the only concession to a more "poetic" style of typography. Zheng Zhenduo follows Tagore's style scrupulously in terms of lineation. By contrast, Bing Xin's fragments are arranged in short lines with a seemingly elaborate system of indentation.⁵ Typically, her line corresponds to a phrase or clause, and whereas individual poems in *Stray Birds* more often than not come out as single Chinese lines in Zheng Zhenduo, Bing Xin's fragments average four or five of her shorter verses. It is also worth noting that typographic line division as one of the marks of poetry was largely a Western import. Its use in China was more or less self-conscious and mannered and was part of what signalled "New Poetry" to the intelligentsia.

Neither Tagore's nor Bing Xin's poems can properly be called epigrams in the sense of short poems "leading up to and ending in a witty or ingenious turn of thought". "Epigram" and "epigrammatic" are applied loosely to the collections of both writers, for their forms are free and the intention of many fragments is simply to convey a poetic impression, feeling or experience, rather than encapsulate some pithy nugget. There are real differences in the general effect of Tagore's model and its pioneering Chinese imitations. Bing Xin praises the "poetic feeling, artistic insight and philosophical understanding" of Tagore's fragments,⁶ but in her own work she tends toward poetic feeling while Tagore tends more toward philosophy and insight. There is greater wit and knowingness in *Stray Birds* – probably as much a function of his grander and simultaneously more ironic sense of himself as of anything else. Often, his fragments are openly aphoristic and intended to impress. Tagore's vague pantheism and aestheticism, his hopes for a better, wiser world, do amply display themselves in his collection, but there are also sharper words: "The cobweb pretends to catch dewdrops and catches flies." (*Stray Birds*, 161). Tagore is aware, and slows it in this fragment, that there is often a sharp critical tenor to his writing, while Bing Xin's work is more concerned with pleasant and sentimental

⁴See "How I Wrote *A Maze of Stars* and *Spring Water*", pp. 88-91.

⁵The poems as printed in *Chen bao fukan* are not indented as they are in later editions. They are printed in vertical columns, with modern lineation, but each line nearly always comes to the top of a column. This was probably a compromise for newspaper publication.

⁶See pp. 88-91.

impressions. When she is sharp, she may still undermine her own authority. In this she shows more humility and self-irony than her adopted mentor. Compare her use of the image of the spider's web in *Spring Water*, 57:

*Little spider
Stop your work,
Your web only catches a little dust.*

Nonetheless, similarities in the sensibility of both poets are reflected in their work. Some of Tagore's epigrams are clear precursors of the typical Bing Xin fragment. She might almost have written them herself: "The trembling leaves of this tree touch my heart like the fingers of an infant child." (*Stray Birds*, 257). In the work of both poets, almost exclusively natural imagery is used to invoke the most intimate and innocent of human relationships and emotions. In both, these images of nature are gentle and animate. They touch the poet and reader, and participate metaphorically in the relationships which have been expressed:

*Night rain,
Silk, silk threads which cross the strings of the poet's heart.*
(*A Maze of Stars* 56)

In both a certain melancholy derives from their giving such intimacy a quite explicit location which is shut away from or outside the clamorous world of human society. Their ensuing sense of alienation is, for both, the wellspring of their more philosophic and critical fragments, while the similarity of their inspiration leads to results that point back to their characteristic differences. Tagore's critical fragments are sharper, more magisterial and occur with greater frequency. Bing Xin's philosophic wit is milder, more tentative and less obtrusive. It is also more closely allied to a political and social project. As with the rest of her paradoxical generation, romantic alienation was allied to the struggle of the new Chinese intellectual:

*Intellectuals,
Throw away those petals of dream in your hands.
They are vacant, ethereal, vague
and part you from the lights of spring in your eyes.*
(*A Maze of Stars*, 137)

There are stylistic correlates of the two poet's differences. Tagore expresses himself in a carefully measured, rhythmic, poetically-heightened prose. It moves with the meditative stride of a cloistered monk. His grasp of a calm, masterful tone is sure. His only mannerism is the use of the pronoun "thee". In a sense, he does not need the additional authority of poetic form for this work. Bing Xin's shorter lines and especially her frequent use of the apostrophized subject (often with accompanying exclamation point) gives an impression of far less stylistic self-assurance. This is

only to be expected. Bing Xin was young and the literary language she had adopted was even more adolescent. Neither would her use of the apostrophe (though it is not a traditional Chinese poetic figure) have had the same overblown effect which it has in English. Nonetheless, it is possible to re-work the Tagore fragment quoted above and put it into a form which might have appeared in either of Bing Xin's collections. This may give some idea of the effect of her differing arrangement and style:

*Trembling leaves of a tree!
 – They touch my heart
 Like the fingers
 Of an infant child.*

As a final curious reflection on the way Bing Xin has used the text which inspired her, it is interesting to note that she took titles of both her collections from the first words of two pieces which she duly set at their respective heads. We find that "Stray birds" are the first words of Tagore's first epigram. There also seems to be a suggestive relationship between Tagore's final epigram and Bing Xin's sweet, punning, conceptual ending to *A Maze of Stars*. This is Tagore: "Let this be my last word, that I trust in thy love." (325); and here Bing Xin:

*My friend –
 Let's part.
 The last leaf,
 I leave you.*

with A LAST LEAF printed on the book's otherwise blank last page. The two endings share a trust in a "second person". Tagore's gesture is expansive, ambiguously invoking deity, audience or individual beloved. However, it is also possible to read his words as self-centred, as directed towards or at least centred on the poet. Bing Xin's gesture is unambiguously outward moving, humble, challenging, drawing the reader into her enterprise in a way which, if it now seems mannered to us in the West, must have appeared as quite startling in its original context.

The influence of Bing Xin on younger Chinese poets will have been moderated by her limited poetic output – a function of her later concentration on prose – and also, for the new generation of writers in the post-Mao era, by her having been an early revenant towards the end of the Cultural Revolution. Still, she must be given some credit for the fact that the "mini poem" form has survived in the new Chinese poetry and recently, moreover, experienced a revival and revitalization in the work of certain so-called "obscure" or *menglong* poets. *A Maze of Stars* and *Spring Water* constituted a popular and authoritative collection of what might otherwise have become mere poetic trifles: diversions or mistaken turnings on the road to the development of a true vernacular poetry in Chinese. As contemporary Chinese poetry now opens itself up to world literature in ways which have been unheard of since the time of the New Culture Movement, there are signs of a re-assessment of the poetic pioneers and early translators. Bing Xin will find a vital place in any such

reassessment. Her work contained the “translation” of a partially foreign sensibility, one which appears as relatively individualistic and aesthetic when set against that underpinning the bulk of modern Chinese poetry. However, pervading this individualist expression there is the undeniable sense of a subtle, poeticized patriotism and a social and political engagement. This is an early romantic precursor of a position and sensibility which has only just become once more a public possibility for those post-Mao poets who are consciously moving away from the obligation to subordinate their poetic intentions to politics.

There are difficulties in making an explicitly comparative critical assessment of Bing Xin’s poetry collections. Ideally it would be desirable to set them in the context of “world poetry”. This is, of course, massively problematic. What, for instance, happens to “world literature” and the status of comparative statements or judgments of value when we consider the difficulty, in the West, of understanding or appreciating *any* modern Chinese poetry? Generally speaking, Western literary critics have been unable to approach a significant proportion of the recent poetry of China in translation of sufficient literary quality and faithfulness to develop any criteria of judgment. Moreover, what *has* come over into Western languages – often simply as material for social science – has been unpalatable to Western sensibilities either because it seems (especially in translation) a pale reflection of outdated Western models, or because it is politically charged along lines with which the Western literary establishment has, traditionally, been out of sympathy.

However, Bing Xin’s fragments can be read with pleasure in translation. They are not great poetry, as the poet herself would have been the first to admit. They openly declare a specific Western model for their form, but avoid becoming merely derivative because they have been created out of personal observation and experience. There is certainly no question of simply following a literary fashion. They are engaged with the events of their times, but this engagement is subtle and individually felt. It is an engagement which accords, more easily than other work from socialist societies, with liberal Western ideas of the way the writer expresses his or her social and political concerns. What a Western reader finds most difficult in these poems is their sometimes extreme sentimentality, their emotional attachment to childhood and filial affection. Often, even Tagore seems too saccharine for our present sophistication, focused too softly to convey the harder edges of his vision. Bing Xin is “sweeter” still. But they can both surprise us with a coolness and intellectual engagement which is enough to keep us on our toes and make us return gratefully to the otherwise overly sentimental beauty of their natural images.