

高行健：現代技巧與民族精神

Contemporary Technique and National Character in Fiction

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I

WHAT IS usually meant by national form in Chinese literature? As far as poetry is concerned, it is more or less clear: it means primarily the tonal patterns and rhyme schemes of classical poetry, and the form of the folk ballad. National form in poetry refers to these two different poetic traditions. In Chinese fiction, we have, strictly speaking, only the traditional “linked-chapter” (*zhanghui* 章回) style, which very few novelists of today still employ. The fictional form which most Chinese writers have used since the May Fourth (1919) Movement is largely derived from the Western fictional tradition of the 18th and 19th centuries.

What traditional Chinese techniques has modern Chinese fiction continued to use after it relinquished its traditional “linked-chapter” style? The most talked about technique in classical Chinese fiction is the method of “direct-portrayal” (*baimiao* 白描)—a term borrowed from painting: sketching the outline with clearcut and simple strokes, and then adding the finishing touches to bring the work to life. As a way of writing fiction, this method is certainly unique. The writer interrupts his narration at a high point, having aroused the interest of the reader, who then has to wait for the outcome of the action in the next chapter.

Some novelists successfully employ this traditional fictional technique. Some use it, but simultaneously adopt other techniques learnt from the Western realistic tradition. The adoption of Western technique does not necessarily deprive a work of national character. The question is this: have those writers since the May Fourth Movement who have *not* used the traditional direct-portrayal method as their chief means of expression (and they are by no means a minority), by abandoning tradition in this way, thereby lessened or even obliterated the national character of their work? The answer is clearly “no”.

This extract is taken from Gao's book A Preliminary Discussion of Contemporary Narrative Techniques
現代小說技巧初探, Huacheng Press, Guangzhou, 1981,

pp. 111-17. For more on Gao, see Geremie Barmé's introduction to the play *The Bus-stop*.

II

WHAT THEN is national character in literature? Turgenev spoke well when he said that his "nation" was the Russian language. A writer creates through language; the national character of his work derives first and foremost from his ability to exploit the artistic potential of that language.

China is a country of many nationalities, where *Hanyu* (the language of the Han people) is most commonly used. We may say that any literary work written in *Hanyu*, or in the languages of the other ethnic groups, reflects in varying degrees the character of the nation.

Language is a medium through which we think and convey our thoughts. A piece of work written in the native language of a nation will naturally reflect that nation's cultural tradition, way of life and mode of thought. Irrespective of how a Chinese writer may borrow from foreign techniques, inasmuch as he writes in good, typical Chinese, his work will definitely have a national flavour. The more he grasps the essence of his national culture, the more distinctive will be the national character of his work. The Italy depicted by Gorky will remain Italy-in-Russian-literature. The same is true of the United States as seen by *émigré* Chinese writers. Their delineation differs fundamentally from that of their American counterparts.

III

AS LONG AS a writer depicts national life in his native language, the more vivid his portrayal, the richer the national character of his work. The kind of technique employed is beside the point.

The Goddess, an anthology of Guo Moruo's early poems, was obviously composed under the inspiration of Walt Whitman. Nobody however thinks these are foreign poems. The simple, free verse style of Ai Qing has not only taken nourishment from the impressionist and symbolist school, it also reflects the poet's conscious effort to break away from the Chinese poetic and folk ballad form. Lu Xun was even more extreme in advocating the "principle of taking whatever is useful" (*nalai zhuyi* 拿來主義). In his fictional and poetical writings are blended the techniques of western critical realism, romanticism, impressionism, symbolism and even surrealism.

In his "Kuangren riji" (The diary of a madman), Lu Xun anticipated Kafka; he borrowed from Gogol the technique of the grotesque. His prose-poem "The Passer-By" differs little in form from the plays of Pirandello, and was written several years before the plays of Ionesco and Beckett. He used the technique of symbolism in his "Medicine" and "Revenge"; of impressionism in his "The story of the good", "Snow", "The beggar" and "Autumn night"; and of surrealism (which had only then begun to emerge in the West) in "Dead fire", "The epitaph" and "Vibration". Even the way in which "The true story of Ah Q" was written has no precedent in classical Chinese fiction. Because Lu Xun focussed on the suffering and spirit of resistance of the Chinese people, their vacillation and cries of woe, and because

of his superb mastery of the language, his work radiates a modern spirit—the revolutionary spirit of a people awakened from sleep, intent on liberating itself from the fetters of imperialism and feudalism.

IV

THE MOST distinguished modern Chinese novelists, Mao Dun, Ba Jin, Lao She and Ding Ling, have all blended western fictional techniques to form their own individual styles. The depth and breadth of reality reflected in their work, and the vivid depiction of characters from different strata of society far surpassed the achievement of those writers who closely adhered to the traditional way of writing. In the process of artistic creation, as long as the writer depicts social reality and characters vividly and realistically, he will automatically represent the social customs, the spiritual world and mode of thought of his nation. His work will have a distinctive national, or indigenous, character. The kind of technique used is beside the point.

Indigenization should not merely follow one singular pattern, just as a national language is not confined to a single style. National language is derived from the literary language of writers with the most character and stature. Once a writer has formed a style of his own, he will contribute to the national literature.

V

WHEN LU XUN wrote his “The story of Ah Q”, he might not have been consciously seeking a national fictional form. However, his uniquely sober tone, which blended sympathy with satire, enabled him not only to recount the life and soul of a destitute peasant, but also to reflect the life and spirit which pervaded the semi-feudalist and semi-colonial society of the time. When Romain Rolland, steeped in Latin culture and brought up in an entirely different society from that of Lu Xun, read this story, he was moved to tears. Ba Jin’s *Family*, which dwells on the destiny and aspirations of Chinese youth before and after the May Fourth Movement, also aroused the sensibility of many Western readers. This shows that if a writer succeeds in truthfully describing the life of the people, readers from other nations can equally be affected, can equally comprehend.

The appeal of a national literature lies in its ability to depict the life of the people as it truly is. Let us hope that the quest for a national form will not surplant this quest for truth.

(Sections VI, VII and the first paragraph of section VIII have been left out in this translation.)

VIII

ARTISTIC TECHNIQUE transcends national frontiers. It is not the monopoly of one particular nation. The spirit of a nation has its own long and distinctive history, much stronger and more lasting than the relatively short lifespan of a technique. It is the sum total of the nation's cultural tradition, social customs, psychological modes, aesthetic tastes and ways of thinking (as formed by the national language). The pursuit and absorption of new techniques is never an obstacle to the healthy development of a nation's literature.

The search for artistic devices and methods does not always bear fruit. If we are thwarted in our search, let us admit our failure. Almost all great artists and writers have experienced the bitterness of defeat. They do not consider that all their works will become classics and be handed down to posterity. There are indeed great works which, when first published, were not given recognition by society. History however holds the balance. Even if a work becomes a classic, it will be better if it serves as a stepping-stone for posterity, rather than a weight on their shoulders. This is the attitude one ought to take on the matter of tradition and innovation.

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THE GREAT WALL,
by Yin Guangzhong 尹光中.