

楊煉：傳統與我們

Tradition and Us

By Yang Lian

Translated by Ginger Li

IT EXISTED LONG ago, it exists now, it will continue to exist into the future. It is more than a word, more than that river, that never-ending mountain range some people claim it to be. It is a solution within our very blood, a component of our every cell, a part of every tremor of our spiritual being. It is formless, but potent! It is a constant reminder to us that nothing we do today can be a negation of yesterday. Yesterday was, and will not perish. In the gradually receding eye of the future, yesterday and today are a sequence, each a sign of its time.

This is tradition, the tradition that none of us can cast off. We are rooted in a common culture, in the unique linguistic form of a psychological structure. It is a form, in that it never determines the modernity of the subject-matter, but instead dictates certain peculiar modes of feeling, thinking and expression. It commands our obedience in each act of artistic creation. I believe that no individual artist in his creative work can betray his tradition. Either consciously or unconsciously, every artist's work, his "individual entity", is to a greater or lesser degree permeated with the "intrinsic elements" of his tradition. This is the premise of his very existence. Tradition should be seen as a series of such "individual entities", independent of each other and yet at the same time linked by the continuity of these "intrinsic elements". It is like a train held together by invisible couplings. It lives in the way we individually forge our links with it. Through the specific essence of individuals it reveals the national quintessence.

"Intrinsic element" and "individual entity" are terms I have proposed in the course of my inquiry into tradition. The former denotes those qualities by virtue of which tradition continues to be tradition after all its incidental characteristics have been stripped away. The latter denotes the individual artistic styles that different writers of different times have created for themselves out of a variety of elements. For instance, when we study the "individual entity" of the great Chinese poet Qu Yuan, we observe the various unique artistic characteristics that distinguish

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1981 he became a member of the Peking branch of the Writers' Association. This short essay appeared in the Guizhou journal Shanhua 山花, September 1983. For a selection of Yang's poems, see below, pp. 249-255.

WOODEN FIGURE, Early Western Han dynasty; excavated in 1982 at Liuyuangang, Guangzhou; in the collection of the Guangzhou Municipal Museum.

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him from contemporary and subsequent poets, but we also observe the common ground. To be specific: Qu Yuan, in his poems "Tian Wen" 天問 and "Li Sao" 離騷, expresses with vigour and passion man's aspiration towards a direct mastery of nature, society and self; he succeeds moreover in furnishing this aspiration with a complete symbolic system embodying the Chinese national quintessence; he also succeeds in creating a feeling of overwhelming aesthetic delight; in all this he has essentially fulfilled his mission of rediscovering tradition. It is precisely his most original (individual) and transforming quality that brings him closest to the tradition: his (radical) use of that most compelling myth of Chu culture, the "intrinsic element" of Shamanism.

Similarly, in our own time, several thousand years after Qu Yuan, it is still the task of every artist to form the "individual entities" that link the "intrinsic elements" of tradition. To emphasize the significance of tradition is not to propose it as a sole artistic criterion. Actually, no single standard of the "past" can ever be used to measure the things of "today". To emphasize tradition is to emphasize "historicity"—a familiar term, but one that has not attained a full creative manifestation. It is to emphasize the need for a clear resolution of the creative dilemma: which parts (of the tradition) should be discarded, and which retained? This in fact is to emphasize the "present". It is only through a comparison with the "past" that the "present" can attain a precise meaning. But this fundamental issue is so often avoided by the blind and the timid. Some issue indiscriminate condemnations of the "abandonment of tradition", while others make pretentious claims for their own "anti-traditionalism". Both attitudes betray the same ignorance and lead to the same

end-result. He who inherits only the outer garment of our great ancestors is a clown, not a true successor; while the endless imitation of external influence only makes a writer the stupid slave of that *other* tradition. Both camps are engaged, simultaneously but from different directions, in the process of self-annihilation.

What is it that we want to build for ourselves today? We must ponder this question, *now*.

We must create a new synthesis. The power and inner life of poetry derive from the accumulation of a diversity of human experiences. The poetic tradition can grow at an orderly pace only if radically new creative work can be inserted organically into it. It is the easiest thing in the world to affirm or negate indiscriminately. But the great masters of past and present, of China and the world, have bequeathed us a more formidable task, of a quite different nature.

We must try every possible means to acquire the knowledge, to equip ourselves with the basic resources for analysis and comparison; we must confront and master our ever-changing and developing national spirit, and the thread that runs through all of its changes; we must rediscover, explore and secure once again those things in our history that answer our own aspirations; we must pick out from the numerous and diverse sources the "inner core" that is still strong and vital; this is the vitality and strength that Yeats called mature wisdom. Wisdom is not intelligence, the essential difference between them being that intelligence moves from the simple to the shallow, while wisdom moves from the complex to the profound. Intelligence may dazzle for a while with innate flair and novelty; but the origins of wisdom lie in breadth of experience, and its fruit grows through painstaking pursuit to firmly structured conception. Without this inner substance, so-called feeling seems to me to be an illusion. It is only in the works of those comparatively few artists who have matured in this way and who possess this firm consciousness, that bright imagery is endowed with a precise and emotionally convincing meaning. This is the only real kind of "creation".

When we talk of analysis and comparison, what we are proposing is a "critical spirit". A poet should possess a sensitivity towards his own needs, but he must also be able to select, if he is to draw the knowledge that will satisfy those needs. An artist is a true artist only when he can discern the "inner gravity" of the work through the superficial effects of language. That is why Repin¹ endlessly praised Mayakovsky, why Rodin was so fond of Phidias², while Eliot evolved a whole artistic philosophy out of Dante's poems—these masters of entirely different styles were connected by their profound sensitivity to the essence of art. Then we often see how some poets, having produced spectacular works in their early career, "dilute" themselves through endless duplication. This is another manifestation of the lack of critical spirit. This spirit is essential to the poet's own growth. The life of a poet should be a life of self-rejuvenation; he should be unafraid of destroying the existing equilibrium, should forever seek a new equilibrium at a higher level. The "critical spirit" is the premise that validates the "nourishment" (guarantees its authenticity), while "self-rejuvenation" is the prerequisite of creativity. Substance and void are

¹Ilya Yefimovich Repin, 1844-1930, Russian painter of historical subjects.

²The Chinese text must surely refer to the famous 5th century B.C. Athenian sculptor.

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OIL, 110 x 90cm, 1981, Qu Leilei (born 1951).

each irreplaceable, and together contain the whole mystery of the poet's growth.

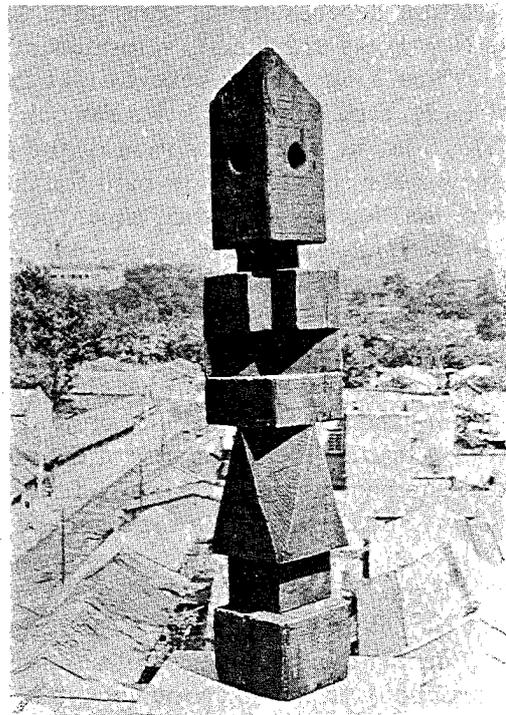
Looking at the current poetic scene, I must say that some of those who flaunt their fidelity to "tradition" do not seem to understand what that "tradition" is. They seem happy to voice a dying echo of yesterday's thunder. Those, on the other hand, who rely solely on individual intuition, and mistake that for "anti-traditionalism", will soon wither on the very soil they despise, because they lack roots firm enough to sustain healthy growth. These two groups forget that the "self" is not confined to the individual instinctive impetus, nor to the collective general principle, but is a blend of the two. The artist's calling demands the simultaneous embodiment of individuality and of the entire tradition.

So, what steps should we take if we want to sustain our tradition? In my view, the poet must first conceive his position clearly, know where he stands. Let us imagine a co-ordinate series, with the poet's own cultural tradition as the vertical axis and the human civilization of the poet's time—philosophy, literature, art, religion, etc.—as the horizontal axis; the poet (having located himself) can look back continuously on his own tradition from the vantage-point of the latest achievements of the global civilization of his time. In this way, his vision embraces much that he was previously unaware of, because the level of his understanding was lower. This is "rediscovery". For example, when we seek to create a "poetic world" that resonates with and yet defies the real world, we can see our endeavour "validated" by the great example of Qu Yuan. That lode of genius lying deep within the literary works of our ancestors reveals its lustre, its true value, afresh. Our poems, situated at our "point of intersection", will then possess a certain awareness, a sense of breadth and profundity. The interpenetration of the two areas (of each axis) bestows a quality that is at the same time Chinese and contemporary.

This essay is too short to discuss in any detail the specific nature of the “intrinsic elements” of our tradition. However, as relevant constituents of the Chinese cultural tradition, I would propose several items:

- (1) China’s own unique symbolic system—as far as I know, nobody has ever investigated the *Book of Changes* 易經 closely in this respect;
- (2) certain repeatedly emphasized themes in traditional Chinese philosophy, art and religious belief—the objectivity, the tendency to synthesize, the transcendental tradition (transcending utilitarianism);
- (3) the poetic conception of nature, nature imagery—the unique visual language of Chinese poetry, that is, a consciousness of multi-gradational concrete imagery;
- (4) the “unconscious impetus” which appeals to the reader not through words but through mental conception;
- (5) the organic compound structure of the poetry of Qu Yuan;
- (6) typical oriental modes of thinking such as “enlightenment” 悟 and “tranquility” 靜, which in the past were hastily dismissed as mystical and metaphysical (玄學).

Tradition is an eternal present; to neglect it is to neglect ourselves. We should, in the course of creation and criticism, begin from an exploration of the “intrinsic elements” of tradition, absorb them into our poems, and then enrich that tradition with our creations. In this way the poetry itself will contain a truly *poetic* feeling and strength. The more of tradition we can lay claim to in this way, the more distinct will be our realization of our own creative and innovative mission, the greater will be our place in history.



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