

王璞：散文兩則

Two Prose Pieces

By WONG Pok

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Experience in Letters of Appeal
申訴信經驗

When I first came to Hong Kong, I once met with a group of writers. “What type of writing do you specialize in?” they asked. I knew they were referring to fiction, prose, verse, et cetera, but I couldn’t help blurting out, “Letters”. Everybody giggled, and said, “You mean love letters?” What they would never have thought of was the words I had deliberately swallowed—“of appeal”.

Our generation of phrase-mongers who have managed to survive the Cultural Revolution can be generally described as having learned our trade by writing letters. Ever since we learned how to write a composition, we’ve known how to write letters of allegiance, commendation, self-criticism, complaint, accusation and exposure. If we were to classify this generation into different categories, I think they could roughly be grouped into those who wrote letters of allegiance, exposure and criticism and those who wrote letters of appeal and self-criticism. The most representative example of the former type would be ‘On Long Live the Rebellious Spirit of the Proletarian Revolution III’ that rocked the whole nation during the early years of the Cultural Revolution. Reportedly, quite a few of the makers of this masterpiece achieved great fame as writers in the seventies and eighties. Indeed I can still detect the smell of the ‘On Long Live the Rebellious Spirit of the Proletarian Revolution

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III' in the works of a contemporary prose-writer greatly renowned on both sides of the Straits.

But the second group seemed to have no particular showpiece. Works like "Legend of the Tianyun Mountain", "Trees for Greening", et cetera, which were in its direct line of descent and had inherited its secret formula, could at best be regarded as its tributaries. The real letters of appeal and complaint were written by the hapless ones who had been persecuted or overwhelmed by adversity. And who would want to make their own pitiful entreaties public?

I think I myself should belong to this second type. I was rarely ever acclaimed for my fiction or prose pieces. But my letters of appeal have met with applause, if not sweeping success, wherever they have gone.

Of course it wasn't plain-sailing right from the beginning. At the age of fifteen or sixteen I had already started writing letters of appeal to the higher authorities concerning my father's being branded a Rightist. To tell the truth, I wrote those letters not out of filial determination to save my father at all costs, but simply for my own survival. The reason was simple—according to the logic of the time, if a man was a Rightist, his daughter would never get a job. It was with such grave grievance that I took out my writing pad and started to pour out all my sorrows on paper. And before I knew it, I had written a letter of thousands of words and over a dozen pages. Yet when it finally got into the mail box, it was like a clay ox entering the sea—never to be heard of again.

I then realized that I needed to seek advice from an expert. There was a ringleader of the street management office living downstairs, so I took my appeal letter requesting a job to him for advice. He gave a snigger after reading it, and said, "No one is going to read a letter like this."

"But why?" I was surprised.

"It's too long, and wordy," he said. "You have to go straight to the point, understand? You have to persuade people right from the first sentence that it's an important, moving and urgent matter."

It took me more than twenty years to realize that this is the so-called 'inverted pyramid' writing style. The introduction is the essence of the whole letter. You've got to get the sympathy of the readers right from the beginning, and only then go on to make your play. No wonder, then, that when I wrote an appeal letter in accordance with such rules in the early seventies to the United Front Department of the Kulunbor League, it received immediate attention and I was called in for an interview the next day.

The interviewer was a middle-aged woman. She was amazed when she saw me. "My gosh, you're so young. I thought that you were an old graduate of some department of journalism!"

“Relatively speaking, your family’s problem isn’t serious at all,” she said. “Your father, after all, is still alive, and so are the rest of you. The reason why we chose to see you first was solely because of your letter—it’s so well written. Did you write it yourself?”

“Yes,” I replied, trying to figure out whether I should tell her how many letters of appeal I had written over the years and how much effort I had made in this area. You’ve got to be heart-rending without discrediting Socialism; you’ve got to convey a sense of injustice without revealing the slightest degree of discontent. You have to be vague in details but clear in your message; you have to be circuitous but still be to the point. It’s hard to explain how much I’ve learned of the process of writing.

But this woman didn’t seem to be interested in exchanging views with me about writing. She just sighed and said, “We will definitely refer your letter to the higher authorities. So don’t lose heart, just keep trying.”

Did she mean that I should continue to rush about campaigning on my father’s behalf? Or did she mean that I should continue to improve my skills in writing appeal letters? It was difficult to tell. Fortunately the two meant effectively the same thing for me. As I had no trees, big or small, to lean on, nor could I grab a stone and throw it at Heaven, I had to fall back on racking my brains and setting my wits to writing my petitions and having them sent up from one level to another. This is the traditional form of resistance used by ordinary people in China.

The history of my life from age fifteen to thirty was, in retrospect, a history of writing appeal letter after appeal letter. In searching my memory of past events, most of what comes to mind are scenes such as burning the midnight oil just over the choice of a word, or getting up in the middle of the night when a brilliant narrative angle suddenly crossed my mind. Appeal letters have won me far more admirers than my fiction has ever done, even though in the end they all shook their heads, expressing regret that there was nothing they could do to help. But the sincere sadness and sympathy in their eyes somewhat satisfied my vanity. Maybe that was what later gave me the courage to take up writing as a career.

The only time my appeal letters brought me any practical benefit was in the mid-eighties, by which time I had more or less ceased the activity. I had again run into some unexpected trouble, and I had no choice but to go back to my old trade and pick up a pen to write to the mayor. My skills, as it turned out, had not rusted at all. The next day I received a call from the mayor’s secretary asking me to come in for a word with him. He promptly gave me an approval letter from the mayor, saying that the problem had now been resolved and instructions had been given accordingly. He then looked me up and down, asked me if I had finished my high school during the first three years of the Cultural Revolution. I said yes. “No wonder your appeal letters are so remarkable,” he said. *

On Forbearance 也說寬容

Lu Xun said shortly before his death, "Let them be resentful. I shall not forgive any one of them." Some followers of Christianity have found these words unpalatable, thinking that they are too harsh. But they seem to have forgotten that even Jesus never forgave Judas.

Forbearance and forgiveness is indeed a virtue. But in practice there must be some pre-conditions. And what might they be?

Once when I was on a train from Shenzhen to Changsha, I went to the dining car for a meal. While I was eating, I felt somebody staring at me from the table opposite. I gave a quick glance in that direction, and sure enough, the face looked familiar. It took me just a split second to recall who it was—it was my high school classmate.

Yet over the next half an hour or so, from when the food was served to when I finished my meal, I never bestowed another look on her. I could feel her piercing eyes on me when she passed by my table after her meal, but I never raised my eyes. The reason was simple—I didn't want to acknowledge her.

There was another occasion, some years back, when we had come across each other at a friend's place. We sat face to face, but I never looked at her, not even a glance. Afterwards the friend came to relay a message from her, "I never offended Wong Pok, I can't see why she snubs me so."

"Try to be more forbearing," advised my friend. "You may run into each other again, who knows? So what's the point?" He continued, "You said you could not forgive her for cutting off a teacher's hair in the Cultural Revolution. But many people made this sort of mistake during the Cultural Revolution. Haven't they all come through fairly well? Do you expect these people not to have friends any more?"

I didn't utter a word, there was nothing to say. Even now, after more than ten, twenty years, there is still nothing to say to defend my position. Yes, there is no shortage of high-sounding arguments that would leave me without a leg to stand on. As a girl of fifteen or sixteen, she had taken up a pair of scissors at the height of the Revolution and cut off half of the head of hair of a teacher who had always treated her like a loving mother. It would be difficult to explain her behaviour satisfactorily by saying that she had been 'hoodwinked and deceived'.

Yes, had I not been there to witness the scene, had I not been there to see the tear-streaked face of the teacher, as well as observe the fiendish look of the girl, I might have been able to nod to this woman who has now become a graceful and elegant lady as if nothing had ever happened, and say, "How are you?"

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WU Tsui Ying, Lilian 胡翠瑩

I'm Thinking . . ., 1992.

Etching, 22 x 16.5 cm.

Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennial Exhibition 1992.

But I was there amidst the hellish flames and uproar, witnessing with wide open eyes this girl, normally so dainty and mild, ferociously chopping at the grey hair of the teacher. The teacher cried: "I'm not a spy, I'm your teacher!" But the girl countered, "You old spies should go to hell!" Malice and viciousness had turned her face hideous. It was a face one would never forget once one had seen it.

Once I went to Shanghai to visit a revered old writer. We talked about a woman writer who used to be a bully in the Rebel Camp but had then become a champion of ideological liberalization. He said, "Rationally I can forgive her, but emotionally I cannot accept her. Herzen once said that only the courageous can be forbearing. Is it that I'm not courageous enough?"

I thought to myself: would Herzen be able to shake hands and be pally with the military police who had searched his house, confiscated his property and then kicked him out of St. Petersburg? And let's not forget that those military police did not whip him like an animal and then kick him out, shouting, "Get the hell out of here!"

When the girl kicked the teacher, I felt something in my heart had broken forever. Ten years later, I told people, "I can forgive anybody but the thugs—because they are not human."

It was an occasion when old classmates were organizing a reunion. A classmate said to me, "Even the teacher herself doesn't seem to mind now. She has agreed to come. See how broad-minded she is."

That reunion did take place. A classmate showed me group photos taken at the function. To my surprise, they showed quite a crowd of some twenty-odd people, with the teacher sitting in the middle. What's more, sitting just next but one to her was this girl who had used a pair of scissors and a whip against her. Everybody was smiling, as if nothing had ever happened among them.

"Let bygones be bygones!" Some people seemed to have preached. Yet it seemed the same group of people had also chanted, "Forgetting the past means betrayal."

Obviously people interpret the term 'past', or 'bygone' for that matter, quite differently when it's framed in different contexts. Or can it be that differences in circumstances and backgrounds have led them to different perceptions of 'past' events and persons? That day on the train when the old classmate brushed past me, it became even more apparent to me what a subtle difference this could make.

Probably people always apply double standards in their interpretation of any term: one for measuring others and one for measuring one's own self. We can only try to integrate the two standards in our interpretation. Taking 'forbearance' as an example, whether it's applied to ourselves or others, we can only forbear with faults

or mistakes. But if it's a personality defect, it would not be possible to treat it with 'forbearance'.

Movements like the Cultural Revolution tend to bring out the barbarity in people. People who are more barbarous by nature tend to display more barbarity while those who are less so tend to display less. After the movement we can believe the self-criticisms of those who have exposed their barbarity, to the effect that they were just 'deceived and tricked'. But it is still a fact that barbarity is very much their nature, and that cannot be eradicated no matter what they say. Come another movement, their barbarity will still come to the fore. That's why I can never tolerate thugs in any form.

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YUEN Kwok Chung 袁國聰

Look to the helmsman when seafaring.

Acrylic on canvas, 122 x 246 cm.

Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennial Exhibition 1996.