

WHITMAN IN CHINA

Gay Wilson Allen in his *New Walt Whitman Handbook* (1975) noted not without regret that little had been known about the Chinese interest in Whitman and that only a selected translation from *Leaves of Grass* “raised the bamboo curtain slightly.” The tremendous changes that have taken place since 1976 when Chairman Mao died and the so-called “Gang of Four” was deposed and especially since 1978 when Deng Xiaoping assumed the leadership make it possible for me to actually open the door on the subject. A brief account of the reception of Whitman in China will show that this great American poet has not been a solitary singer among his Chinese admirers and his voice has never failed to find echoes in the hearts of the Chinese.

At the turn of this century, “Turn to the west for truth” was a prevailing slogan among the Chinese radicals who endeavoured to usher in “Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science” so as to transform the semi-feudal, semi-colonial China into a modern nation. Modern Chinese literature has been influenced by Western literature almost from its inception. The impact of Western poetry played an important role in the formation of modern Chinese poetry, which is also called New Poetry.

During the era of the May Fourth Student Movement in 1919 a group of Chinese youths were studying in Japan and there they were attracted by the poetry of Whitman, “the sworn poet of every dauntless rebel the world over” as Whitman called himself. The Chinese youths found his ideas especially congenial to the iconoclastic spirit which characterized their turbulent time. Years will not stop the appeal of the great immortal poet. Whitman made his debut in China when he was a hundred years old. In July 1919, a popular radical journal, *The Young China*, carried a long article by Tian Han, a student in Japan, who is remembered today in China as a giant in the New Culture of the May Fourth era and the founder of modern Chinese drama. The title of his article was “Commemorating the Centenary of the Birth of Whitman — the Poet of the Common People.” Tian Han argued enthusiastically that the greatness of

Whitman simply lies in the fact that he was “but an ordinary man, an American of the New World and a child of Adam.” The author was deeply impressed by the American poet’s belief in democracy and humanism. At the end of this effusive article, Tian Han says,

Once Whitman’s ship of democracy navigated into the Pacific, she startled the “Dragon King” of the East Sea, stirring up countless demons and stormy waves. Now the Pacific knows no peace any more. Can the ship ever reach our East Asian continent? That’s a question. However, fellows! Fellows of Young China! The ship is bound to carry us Asian people with her — let alone Chinese compatriots. Those of us already aboard should ‘steer then with good strong hand and wary eye, O!’ Long live Walt Whitman! Long live the young China!

This Chinese expression of longevity used to be the exclusive address to emperors. We must not forget that the last emperor was overthrown only a few years before by the 1911 Revolution led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen. So when “the poet of the common people” was placed by the Chinese on the “throne,” Whitman must have seen the people beginning their landmarks as history makers.

The most important pioneer of Chinese modern poetry Guo Moruo was then also in Japan. According to his later recollections, *Leaves of Grass* provided him with a volcanic outlet for his pent-up emotions. After his encounter with Whitman’s poems, Guo said, almost every day for three months on end, he was being visited by poetic inspiration. He said, “that completely unconventional style of Whitman’s is very much in tune with the stormy and aggressive spirit of the May Fourth era. I was thoroughly overwhelmed by his vigorous, uninhibited and sonorous tone.” Guo started copying Whitman’s poems and rendered a number of them into Chinese. His early poems reveal the unmistakable influence of Whitman. Here are the two lines from his poem “Good Morning!”:

Good morning! Washington’s grave! Lincoln’s grave!
Whitman’s grave!
O Whitman! Whitman! The Pacific Ocean-like Walt Whitman!

It is small wonder that Guo Moruo was called by many the Chinese Whitman.

Throughout the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s, in the Chinese literary arena, different groups of men of letters had been engaged in continuous disputes. On many issues the coteries were hostile to one another. Nevertheless, Whitman seemed to be accorded a warm reception by all the major literary societies. Many leading writers and critics from these groups either translated his poems or wrote about him favorably. In his *General Outline of Literature* (1926) Zheng Zhenduo claimed Whitman to be a great poet of world stature. He wrote that Whitman was a writer of the world, not just an American monopoly. Zhu Fu, another critic, said, “as Homer represents Heroic Greece, Dante Medieval Europe, Shakespeare Elizabethan Age, Whitman represents the rising America.” Because the Chinese new poets believed that Whitman offered both the spirit and the form of expression they had been looking for, they considered themselves to be part of a world movement pioneered by Whitman. As early as 1923, Liu Yenling wrote that Whitman was not only the forerunner of American new poetry, but also the founder of a worldwide movement. He warned those who opposed Chinese New Poetry not to go against this world trend.

In 1937 China waged her eight-year old war against Japanese aggression. It was under the war circumstances that Whitman found his way into the hearts of the Chinese people greatly agitated by the urgent necessities for national salvation. After his hometown fell into Japanese occupation, Mu Mutian, a poet, felt guilty in reviewing his former poetic production. He said, “shame on poets playing upon the themes of wind, flowers, snow and moon in such a critical moment for our nation! . . . Poets should raise their voice to call forth the people to participate in the national salvation . . . Aren’t we now in need of poets such as Du Fu, Milton, Whitman, Hugo and Shelley?”

Despite the adverse circumstances such as the fall of cities, the suspension of the sources of foreign literature, the separation of the literati, and the scarcity of publishing facilities, the Chinese interest in Whitman even reached a peak around 1942 when the war entered the most critical phase. From time to time, translations of Whitman’s

poems, such as "On the Beach at Night," "Song of the Banner at Daybreak," "To a Foil'd European Revolutionaire" and "Years of the Modern" were printed on the rough, delicate straw-board paper of literary journals to inspire the people across the land with courage and confidence. Among Whitman's translators at the time was Mr. Chu Tunan. He started translating Whitman's poetry while in jail in early 30s "in order to oppose the Fascist reign of terror." In a short post-script to a translation, Chu urged the Chinese people to follow Whitman's suggestions, and believe that "the dark night shall not long be victorious, and the stars shall shine out again!"

In the mind's eye of the Chinese poets, the name of Whitman became synonymous with freedom and liberation. Xu Chi, a noted poet, deified Whitman by proclaiming that Whitman, Lincoln and Mark Twain "embodied the spirit of America just like an ever illuminating Trinity." Whitman was looked upon as "the best example for our poets who are blowing the battle bugle," showing how to "integrate the militancy and enthusiasm of a poet with the progressive, political struggle of his time."

During the same period, Whitman was also treated favorably in the Communist-held Yenan region. The title of an important literary journal, *Leaves of Grass*, is believed to have been borrowed from Whitman. In 1941 Zhou Yang, who held an important position in propaganda, in an article to eulogize the above-mentioned pioneer of the Chinese New Poetry Guo Moruo, made a favorable comparison between the American poet and his Chinese counterpart. Zhou Yang praised Whitman as "the representative man of the bourgeoisie on the rise, cheerful and confident, robust and broadminded," "pleased with everything and containing multitudes."

After the Chinese victory over the war against Japan in 1945, John Fairbanks, then cultural attaché in China, proposed that a series of American literature books be translated into Chinese. Mr. Chu Tunan was entrusted with the rendition of *Leaves of Grass*. This selected translation of Whitman's poems, together with the others of the series, managed to be published in 1949, the year of the founding of the People's Republic. The U.S. government, because of its role in the Chinese Civil War and later in the Korean War, became the

arch-enemy, and accordingly, American literature became an anathema. As a result of making this ill-timed appearance, the translated *Leaves of Grass* were ignored.

For many years after 1949, poetry was assigned the task of serving politics. The introduction of foreign poetry, and foreign literature as a whole, followed strictly the narrow-minded policies laid down by the Party. Late in 1955 the much-forgotten "American bourgeois poet" Whitman surprisingly came into the spotlight. The centenary of the publication of *Leaves of Grass* was marked in a big way in response to the request of the World Peace Council with the obvious influence of Soviet Union behind. In Peking a grand celebration conference was held and invitations were sent to Paul Robeson, Samuel Sillen, and others. Because these American guests were said to be denied visas by their government, the seats reserved for them remained vacant to show the world that the Chinese people are "the worthy, posthumous comrades of Whitman," "the upholders of liberty, democracy and independence" while, in sharp contrast, John Foster Dulles, Joseph McCarthy and the like were "the traitors to the American tradition of democracy and the discreditors of Whitman." One writer, after he translated "On the Beach at Night" for the third time in his life, hastened to add: "O Whitman, you American poet of democracy, buried at Camden, may you rest in peace. Tonight the ravaging clouds still spread in the sky over America, but as you said, they are but an apparition, and shall not be long victorious."

Setting aside political complications behind the scene, Whitman was as usual an inspiring source for the Chinese people. Though Zhou Yang's keynote speech at that conference was inevitably stereotyped (e.g., he pointed to Whitman's "revolutionary character," his "progressive significance," and his "bourgeois limitation"), his admiration for Whitman was as genuine and sincere as his praise for him fifteen years earlier in Yenan. Zhou recognized "the most wonderful contributions to the progressive culture of the world" made by Whitman's poetry. Mr. Chu's *Selections from Leaves of Grass* was republished. A large number of articles were published in Whitman's memory. Yuan Shuipai expressed the feelings shared by Whitman's lovers in China when he wrote: "We feel intimately as if he were our contemporary. As he imagined a century ago, we feel that his spiritual hand, transcending time and space, was touching our bodies softly."

Unfortunately, this prominence that Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* enjoyed in China in the midst of the so-called "bloom of a hundred flowers" literary policy did not last long. During the disastrous years of the cultural revolution (1966-76), almost all foreign literatures were condemned and banned. As Whitman predicted, those who go with him should be prepared to stake their lives at any moment. Not only was the voice of Whitman strangled, but also none of the living translators of Whitman and the poets who bore his influence were able to escape punishment. Zhou Yang, once known as a Marxist and Maoist literary theorist, became overnight "a double-faced counter-revolutionary." He was accused, among other things, of "fanatically lauding the American bourgeois poet as a paragon for the Chinese people," as evidenced in his 1955 speech and 1941 article as well. In those years when prisons, handcuffs, iron necklaces, exile, and reformatory "cadre schools" did their work, Whitman's Chinese followers remembered his words, "I may again return."

Soon after the end of the "cultural revolution," translations and studies of foreign literature were resumed and experienced an unprecedented upsurge. In 1978 among the first books of American literature to come off the press after the lifting of the ban was the republication of Chu Tunan's *Selections From Leaves of Grass*. With the restoration of comparative literature studies in China, papers on Whitman's beneficial influence on the development of modern Chinese poetry came in no small number. Prof. Zhao Luorui, of Peking University, despite her venerable age, has taken upon herself to translate the complete *Leaves of Grass*. In 1979 the Chinese compiled the first concise history of American literature. Whitman is given the most prominent position in this history: "Whitman gave voice, *forte fortissimo*, to his time with his songs." "It is beyond doubt that his poetry belongs to 'the democratic cream' of American literature and the world literature." The past ten years have witnessed not only the rehabilitation of the senior followers of Whitman, but also the recruitment of myriads of new readers. Whitman's poems found their way into our college and middle-school textbooks. The most well known and frequently studied are "O Captain! My Captain!," "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," and the canto "The Runaway Slave Came to My House and Stopt Outside."

Recently a number of promising young poets have come to the

fore. Their sometimes controversial works — "misty poetry" — have been praised by many as the "awakening of new aesthetic principles." Yet in this new generation, the influence of Whitman and other Western poets can be clearly perceived. Gu Cheng, an outstanding representative of this young group, openly acknowledged his debt to Whitman. Gu was born in 1956 and grew up in the "cultural revolution" when culture actually did not exist. He said he had been a hermetically sealed person. But one morning in 1983 when he was reading Whitman, "an agonizing electric current" melted his "lead coating." He recalled, "Whitman's voice dropped right from the sky and hit hard upon me, every hour and every moment. . . . I was overwhelmed. . . . For a whole day, I listened to the dropping of the rain." What a striking similarity between this new poet's feeling and that of Guo Moruo sixty years ago when the two came into contact with Whitman! How deeply rooted the seeds Whitman cast in the soil of the Chinese mind have become today!

The Chinese people have finally taken the path to modernize and democratize their nation under the present leadership. China is changing rapidly. But we need Whitman and his poetry more than ever. It will be interesting to see the future of Whitman in China. It may be accidental, but earlier this year, a man in his eighties was elected vice-chairman of the People's Congress — the highest legislative body in China. He is none other than Mr. Chu Tunan, Chairman of the League of Democracy, who made the greatest contributions in introducing Whitman and his ideas and poetry to China. The old generation of Whitman's comrades in China have come a long way. We are far from our destination. The relay torch has now been handed down to the younger ones. So it may be appropriate to conclude this talk with a short poem of our young poet Gu Cheng:

Perhaps I am a blind person
I can only reach you by sound
I can only spread my poems like palms
Toward you
My brothers on the other side of the Atlantic
My red, light-colored, blue, black
Flowers beginning to shed tears on the other side of the
Atlantic
That sound of voice cut through boundless void.