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The Face of Emotion in Early Communist China: The Loyalist vs. the Bourgeois Anti-Hero

This paper examines several novels from the early Communist period in China (“Story of New Heroic Sons and Daughters” (1949), “Bitter Herb” (1958) and “Morning in Shanghai” (1958)) and the capacity of their protagonists to form healthy emotional attachments. While the authors of these novels do their best to make the Communist ideal of ‘comradeship’ look attractive, they succeed only in creating one character after another with the same psychopathology. These ‘ideal’ citizens are incapable of either erotic or parental love, and are unafraid of private loss or even death. Meanwhile bourgeois villains depicted in these novels are unique in their passions. Now let’s analyze the text to trace these differences.

The “Story of New Heroic Sons and Daughters” (1949) by Yuan Jing and Kong Jue is focused on depicting two peasants, who are illiterate and engaged in hard work in the country – a young man Niu Dashui and a young girl Yang Xiaomei. Their portraits are very brief and emphasize physical strength. Niu Dashui was [quote] “*thickset, broad-shouldered, with big hands, hard-working*” [1, p.1]. Female character is as strong as a man which makes her equal to him. Yang Xiaomei [quote] “*was short, but very sturdy built. One could usually see her walking fast carrying a bucket full of water*” [1, p.3].

The novel “Bitter Herb” by Feng Deying shows revolutionary struggle of the peasants in the countryside and demonstrates similar trend in depicting female characters; they have masculine features of appearance and behavior. Female portrait here is a hymn to exceptional physical abilities and love for hard work. One of the main female characters Juanzi is described as follows [quote]: “*Since childhood she liked to climb mountains, she knew what labor was; if you don’t let her work she will cry. When she was 6-7 years old she could pasture cattle and transport the harvest. Thanks to physical labor she grew up strong and sturdy built... She was no less strong than boys of her age*” [2, p.1]. Another female character Zhao Xingmei is described with such words [quote]: “*White linen shirt on Xinmei’s back was already wet with sweat, her short black hair with reddish tint quivered with every strike of the hoe, black trousers were turned up to knees, opening firm bronzed legs...Her entire body was full of energy and strength*” [2, p.8]. Apparently, the only feature of female beauty in the novels is big bright eyes.

A psychological portrait of a character is even more important than the description of his or her physical appearance. A typical intention of the authors at those times was to show changes

that took place not only in the life of people after 1949's Liberation, but also in their mentality. Liberation had brought an understanding that one's own actions could help to improve his or her life. As life of ordinary people gradually gets better, they become more and more conscious about the world around them and try to take part in shaping their own lives – in so called “*revolutionary struggle*” with enemies (villains) who oppose these new changes. However the authors' attempts to depict radical changes in their heroes' mentality do not seem to be very convincing. As a rule, radical turns are meant to be stipulated by some significant events or actions. Participation in armed struggles and resistance to an enemy's tortures are those milestones in the novels that are supposed to bring fundamental changes in the mentality of people. However, the aforementioned authors fail to reveal deep psychological reasons behind their heroes' behavior, reorientation of their thoughts and moral values under the influence of circumstances. Good comrades and ideal workers are incapable of presenting typical human instincts, such as self-protection, fear of loss and death. One of the chapters of “The Story of New Heroic Sons and Daughters” describes guerilla operation against Japanese soldiers. Niu Dashui, Yang Xiaomei and other comrades (male and female) take part in that operation. They barely survive being killed by the enemy and witness a murder for the first time in their lives (which is obviously supposed to be hard to bear, even if it is a murder of an enemy). However they are not depicted as deeply shocked. They, by contrast, return home feeling joyful and content just as if nothing special happened. In the novel “Bitter Herb”, the main protagonist – a 16 year old female soldier – kills a man with a gun in cold blood. There is descriptive action, but the author fails to depict pangs of adjustment to a new life experience. As we have noticed, writers give little consideration to the reality of human death. Friendship is substituted with comradeship between people who share equal ideals, mainly ideological. Love is also presented as one of the forms of comradeship (*class love*) and the emotional experiences of characters are very superficial. Let's have a look at some more examples from the novels.

Niu Dashui and Yang Xiaomei from “The Story of New Heroic Sons and Daughters” had been acquainted for a long time. According to her mother's wish, Yang Xiaomei marries a local gangster who serves Japanese invaders. When Niu Dashui finds out that Xiaomei is not happy with her husband who beats and humiliates her, he feels disappointed. He thinks: [quote] “*But Xiaomei is a stranger to me now, there is nothing I can do*” [1, p.17]. Then he gradually comes to the conclusion that Xiaomei is his comrade, and that he feels obligated to help her. Later the girl runs away from her husband's house and starts to work for propaganda together with Niu Dashui. They both agitate their fellow villagers against Japanese invaders. Then their comrades decide that

Niu Dashui and Yang Xiaomei would make a good couple and convince them to get married. Niu Dashui and Yang Xiaomei agree, but when they are together they speak exclusively of their duties at work: [quote] “*Both recalled that they were having a wedding soon and both felt shy that they walked side by side*” [1, p.199]. This is one of very few demonstrations of feelings between a groom and a bride in the novel. Their wedding ceremony is depicted not as one of the most significant events in the peoples’ lives (like it used to be in old China) but rather a work duty; a forced break between meetings of Communist party members and guerilla warfare. As we may assume, this happens not only due to the fact that there is no time or opportunity to hold great ceremonies during wartime. There is evidence that the author intentionally minimizes the significance of this event in the heroes’ lives. Later when Niu Dashui finds out that his wife and son are subject to examination by the Japanese, his reaction is worth noting: [quote] “*his heart started beating fast,.. he felt anxious, but he forced himself to restrain his temper and not to think of this*” [1, p.254]. His reaction is subdued because he knew he would have to prepare his soldiers for a military assault. The abstract monomania of such model Communists – i.e. their obtrusive obsession with a sole idea of serving the party – leaves them incapable of feeling true love, affection, suffering or sorrow.

The characters of the aforementioned stories can be either positive or negative (no “*men in the middle*”) and the reader can easily distinguish between them. The positive heroes are workers, peasants and soldiers. The villains are landlords, Japanese invaders, and Chinese soldiers of puppet forces. A typical villain has *small eyes, yellow face, sparse moustache and hair, fat belly, sly grin*, etc. When the author describes behavior of heroes and villains, the contrast is very obvious. Positive heroes act *easily, smoothly, quickly, and decisively*. Villains, by contrast, are constantly *grinning, mumbling, looking sideways, and fawning* upon authorities. These descriptions never intersect and a reader can always rely on them to determine the type of character being portrayed. If an exception from the general rule occurs, a reader must suspect that something went wrong: perhaps this character is an enemy, a turncoat or a hypocrite. For example, Dai Yu – one of the male characters of the novel “The Song of Youth” (1958) by Yang Mo – tries to ingratiate himself with a female student Lin (the novel’s protagonist who works hard helping to resist Japan’s invasion).

However, the last novel to be analyzed in this paper is not that conventional. Zhou Erfu’s “Morning in Shanghai” portrays the relations between workers and owners of a cotton mill in the early part of 1949 when communists came to power in Shanghai. The task of the author is quite obvious: the novel was meant to show the difference between mentalities of both groups (i.e.

classes) of people. The novel shows how the workers learn to be politically conscious and to assert their rights. As to capitalists, the novel, on the one hand, reveals their sins: corruption, deceit, greed and other kinds of moral degradation, and in this sense they are portrayed as “*anti-heroes*”. By contrast, some of the novel’s capitalists take the side of the workers, supporting the workers union and starting to share some Communistic ideals. If we analyze the novel within the literary process of China at that time (China of 1950s), we can say that the author succeeded in fulfilling his tasks¹. However, if we try to appreciate the literary qualities of the story today, we see that the workers in the novel are two-dimensional and hackneyed versus the bourgeois manufacturers who seem more appealing to a modern reader. The bourgeois anti-heroes may cause different, sometimes contradictory feelings in a reader: from interest and compassion to antipathy. But there is only one sole impression that a reader may get from party loyalists described in this book: they all look as irreproachable, staunch and flawless as they used to look in countless Chinese stories of that time. Ironically, if we intentionally juxtaposed party loyalists from all these novels, a reader would probably not notice any difference. A reader would see all the same types of poor, but proud proletarians whose language is rich in ideological slogans and clichés. This seems to be a portrait of the faceless masses.

Let’s use a description of a love affair between two capitalists as an example of bourgeois character portrayal in the novel. Lin Wanzhi is a concubine of the owner of the cotton mill in Shanghai, and Feng Yongxiang is a young fellow from a noble, but not rich family. When they first meet by chance in her husband’s house, Feng Yongxiang feels shy and uncomfortable in the presence of such a beautiful woman: [quote] “*It occurred to him that the Western woolen suit he was wearing today had always seemed nice to him, but today it looked extremely wretched... He clumsily plumped into the armchair and kept gazing fascinatingly at her face and motions... But the very moment he heard her ringing voice he lost all self-control*” [3, p.75-76]. Lin Wanzhi apparently likes being attracted to him: [quote] “*Feng Yongxiang enjoyed the twinkle of her eyes – clear as limpid water... Lin Wanzhi noticed it and gave him an intent unembarrassed look*” [3, p.78]. When leaving the house, Feng Yongxiang shook the girl’s hand and [quote] “*suddenly drew his hand back as if touched fire*” [3, p.80], then he swiftly left the house and [quote] “*hid in a corner of his car feeling embarrassed, closed his eyes and dreamt of the woman in a green dress*” [3, p.80]. The whole chapter of the book depicts this one scene that allows a reader to enjoy different emotions that these characters produce: adoration, embarrassment, admiration, a wish to

¹ According to the official criteria that were applied to the works of art and literature in China of the 50s, the literary works had to fulfill political objectives, serve the interests of workers, peasants and soldiers (*the masses*) and reflect the *class struggle*; *socialist realism* was approved as the only creative method.

flirt and to be attracted, etc. On the contrary, the workers in this novel look pretty much the same as in the previous novels that we have discussed. They mostly hide their feelings under the cover of common party slogans that they have learnt and it's hard for a reader to understand what they really sense when saying those words.

Summing up what has been said, the authors do their best to create positive models of ideal communists within the literary style of *socialist realism*. But eventually they only produce a literary conveyor system that transports all the same shallow stereotypes from one story to another. These two-dimensional characters are '*thousands of people wearing the same mask*' (千人一面) in the words of one Chinese critic of our times [4, p.42]. They lack the complicated personality of real people and are incapable of forming true attachments to anyone or anything beyond being loyal to the idea of Communism. Love between party loyalists is always and everywhere a function of the social body and also of the wider responsibilities of the individual to that body and never of individual idiosyncrasies. Such an abstract, dehumanized ideal of the proletarian revolutionaries contradicts portrayals of bourgeois "villains" who are all unique in their passions – for women, money, power and so on – and in their all-too-human, complex, contradictory ways even represent an indirect celebration of capitalism. By depicting these passions, the authors intended to prevent the readers of the 1950s from following the examples of Capitalist anti-heroes. However, for a modern reader, they tend to seem much more appealing than those ideal heroes whose feelings are never allowed to trump the primacy of sacrifice in the name of the revolution.

Literature

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