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Cyril Birch

CHAO SHU-LI: CREATIVE WRITING IN A COMMUNIST STATE

IN MAY 1943 there was published in the Communist areas of northwest China a short story called "Blackie Gets Married." This event can now be seen, in retrospect, as possessed of both literary and political significance in the modern history of China: indeed, however strongly one may object to the Marxist concept of literature as a functional thing, an essential weapon in the class struggle, it is impossible to divorce the literature of the last forty years in China from its political context.

The leaders of the Chinese Communists in 1943 were very conscious of the need for creative writing which would be specifically associated with their cause. It was not so much a question of propaganda for the peasants. They had plenty of propaganda: people everywhere in the "Liberated Areas" were applauding patriotic plays, reciting newly-coined ballads and jingles, pasting up topical woodcuts, dancing the *yangko*. No: literature, genuine creative writing, had a more ambitious part to play. It was to win for the "New Democracy" the imagination of the intelligentsia, the wide educated classes over the whole of China whose support was almost as vital as that of the peasants themselves. These classes for years to come would provide recruits to the leadership; and to these classes, however reluctant the Communists might be to admit this, the crude propaganda fed to the peasants would make no appeal.

The Communists did in fact need a new literature because they had rejected the old. They had rejected the work of the men of the 1920's and '30's almost as categorically as the progressives of those years had rejected the traditional classical literature, and

for the same reason: because, as they saw it, it perpetuated the cultural disunity of China, left unbridged the gulf between the literatus and the unlettered peasant. To the Communists this was not merely a regrettable feature of national life: it was a political peril.

A year before "Blackie" appeared, there had been a grand rally of writers and art-workers in Yen-an, the dusty wartime capital of the Communists in the remote northwest. In his lengthy addresses to the rally, Mao Tse-tung himself had told the writers just what he wanted from them. They were to write for a triple entity whose Chinese abridgement might be rendered as "wor-peasol"—workers, peasants, soldiers. Since an industrial proletariat was to be found only in the urban centres outside the Liberated Areas, in Kuomintang- and Japanese-occupied China, and since the soldier was no more than a peasant in uniform, the "wor-peasol" could be taken as three in one and one in three, as the peasant simply. The life of the peasant was to be the stuff of the new writing—a new departure, for the peasant had previously appeared only in the pages of Lu Hsün (d. 1936) and of a handful of other writers.

By the life of the peasant was meant, of course, public activity rather than private, political rather than personal. In specific terms, the peasant was to be instructed in his role in the class struggle, taught to recognize his class enemies, shown, in the phrase of the time, how to dig up his 'root of poverty.' That was one task: it was to be contemplated by celebration of the successes already achieved, under the leadership of the Party, in resisting the Japanese and in establishing social justice.

To be effective, work done for the peasant must be in language he could understand, which meant in his own language, and not in the artificial, cosmopolitan "plain language" of the previous years. How did one write in peasant language? The answer given by Mao's expositors was emphatic: not by touching up one's work with the odd picturesque phrase overheard in conversation and carefully recorded in a notebook, but by becoming a peasant,

by living and working among the people until one thought and articulated as they did.

One great point of it all was left unspoken: the intellectuals were to write for the peasants, but no one was to write for the intellectuals. In the interests of national unity, what pleased one must please both. The standard of work must be a new kind of standard, but it must be a high one.

The task probably seemed impossible. One sympathizes with the writers of the time, seeking to translate Mao's words into practice, busily learning a new language, trying to rid themselves not only of all the subtleties and delicacies of the esoteric tradition, but of much that they had learned from the West as well. Many, in later years, were sent "into the country," to endure discomfort and unutterable boredom in backward villages in the endeavour to "become one with the people."

Then, "Blackie Gets Married" appeared. People read it with joy: it was the answer. It pleased the literate; and the peasants, to whom it was read aloud, greeted it with the excitement of the woman who sees her husband on television. For there they were, in print, it was every man's own son and daughter and neighbours, involved in an action which meant something to them all. Here was the old hag, the bogus fortune-teller, who lived in every village. Her name was "Auntie Three the Witch"—it is difficult in translation to get clear of the characters Dylan Thomas created in *Under Milk Wood*:

One day Chin Wang's father was ill and went to see Auntie Three to get guidance from the spirits. Auntie Three squatted behind the incense table intoning while Chin Wang's father knelt listening before it. Hsiao-ch'in (Auntie Three's daughter) was only eight then. She was spending the morning soaking the husks off rice. She had put the coarse rice in the pot of water, but when she heard her mother mumbling away she decided the sound was worth listening to, and so she stood by the incense table listening and forgot all about the rice. Before long Chin Wang's father had to go out to relieve himself, and Auntie Three seized her opportunity: "Go and pull the rice out,

quick! It'll be soaked through and ruined by this time!" To her dismay however she was overheard by Chin Wang's father, who spread the story about when he got home. Ever after this the jokers of the village when they saw Auntie Three would deliberately turn to each other and ask, "Are you sure your rice isn't soaked through and ruined?"

The story is a gay and triumphant assertion of the right to freedom of choice in marriage. Every ardent lad could identify himself with Blackie, and his girl was every likely village lass:

Blackie was the younger son of Chu-ko Liang the Second. He had killed two Japs in the resistance and held the certificate of Distinguished Marksman. When it came to good looks, it wasn't just in Liu-chia-chiao that Blackie's name was known. Every New Year when the play groups went out, it didn't matter what village they went to, all the girls' eyes followed Blackie.

Hsiao-ch'in is described in the same sort of way. It is a peasant speaking, and he is concerned less with cataloguing her charms in a sonnet than with showing her through the eyes of the villagers, as a favourite of the people:

Hsiao-ch'in was seventeen that year, and the village gossips agreed that she was a great improvement on her mother at the same age. The lads were always going to have a chat with her, whether they'd anything to say or not. As soon as Hsiao-ch'in went to do her washing, all the lads decided they had something to wash too, and as soon as Hsiao-ch'in went climbing for crabapples, they all decided they'd go climbing too.

There are two types of villain in the story. One type is personified by Auntie Three the Witch (mother of Hsiao-ch'in), and by Chu-ko Liang the Second. The latter is the father of Blackie, and a cunning old rogue—the original Chu-ko Liang was the supreme strategist of the wars of the Three Kingdoms. They are both superstitious-minded peasants, backward but fundamentally harmless. It is part of the moral of the fable to show how this type

of person can be re-educated ('development of character' here directly meets political requirements): at first putting obstacles in the path of the young lovers, in the form of partners chosen by themselves, they are brought by the force of public opinion to a more enlightened view, and end by giving their blessing.

The second type of villain is more dangerous, and is dealt with quite differently. It is the type of the rich young bully, who wants Hsiao-ch'in for himself, and abuses his power in the attempt to secure her. He is the class enemy, identified with the Kuomintang and the collaborators with the Japanese. His machinations are exposed on the intervention of the Communist local authority (after the lovers' application for a marriage license), and he is punished: for him, the class enemy, there is no redemption.

It is not an ambitious work. But the simplicity of its presentation, so well becoming the ingenuous story, reveals the meticulous craftsman of fiction. The *dramatis personae* are presented in turn, the steps leading to the lovers' predicament are trodden one by one as first Blackie is presented with a fiancée and then Hsiao-ch'in is promised to an old man. The young bully engineers the arrest of the lovers. So on, step by step to the dénouement, until at last the personages descend in turn from the stage—the metaphor from the theatre is inescapable.

The style of writing shows a similar studied simplicity. The economy and polish recall Lu Hsün, who in an essay relates how he began to fashion a colloquial style. It was in the early days of the revolt against the classical written language. He would write down the words he would have used in speaking about an incident, and then go through what he had written, cutting out every word which was not absolutely essential to convey his meaning. The language of "Blackie" is more likely to be sprung from the old countryman narrating an incident in his terse, matter-of-fact way, rather than from the conscientious pruning of the academic. But the style which results is a written Chinese which captures the rhythms of speech as the "plain language" of the foregoing

years did not. Forceful but fluent, earthy but precise, it is a lineal descendant of the language of the great old colloquial novels. Not only aesthetically, therefore, but for nationalistic and sentimental reasons as well, it is a language which suits the temper of the times.

Below the title of the story appeared the name Chao Shu-li. We know what the many enquirers would learn of him at that time, from the reminiscences of friends who basked in the light which suddenly and dramatically flooded him. When allowance has been made for hero-worship and the desire to create a prototype for the New Democratic Writer, Chao still emerges as a genuine man of the people. He writes stories of peasant life in peasant language because he is a peasant, as the Chinese phrase goes, in his own body. "His peasants," writes Mao Tun, major pre-war novelist and present Minister of Culture, "are real peasants, not bourgeois intellectuals dressed up in peasant clothes." His stories are peopled by his own family, relatives, neighbours—Chu-ko Liang the Second, Chao himself tells us, is his own father. He describes his family as "middle peasants, forced down into poor peasant status by the old oppressive land system"—a statement as from a Marxist text-book, but probably true for all that, since his passionate involvement in the problems of land reform has its roots in something more than theory.

At the time of "Blackie Gets Married," Chao Shu-li was editing a popular journal, *The Chinese*, for local circulation in Japanese-occupied areas. It was practically a one-man show. He wrote the editorials, and gingered up each issue with stories, poems, playlets, anecdotes. He drew the illustrations, he even set up the type. He was a popular man among his colleagues and the people of that Shansi neighbourhood, gay, fond of jokes, fond of singing and playing the fiddle but (true to the monastic Communist tradition) too poor to buy one.

Chao's story was read and praised by P'eng Te-huai, then deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Red Army. Thirty to forty thousand copies were sold from local bookstalls in Shansi alone,

and a folk-opera version of "Blackie" was performed all over the Liberated Areas.

Six months after "Blackie," Chao Shu-li published the story, in the popular short-novel form, by which as an author he stands or falls: *The Ballads of Li Yu-ts'ai*.

Since the war there have been a good many changes in the village of Yen-chia-shan, and as these changes have taken place Li Yu-ts'ai has composed new ballads about them. As a matter of fact it was because of his ballads that he got himself into trouble. I thought of saying a word or two about these changes, and copying down a few of the ballads which accompanied them, to give everybody a bit of amusement, and that was how this little book came about.

This is how Chao puts himself into direct personal contact with the reader, after an opening section on his village and its social set-up which is a masterpiece of brief and effective description. In this story of the land-reform and the problems it poses for the people of Yen-chia-shan, Chao Shu-li marries the humour of "Blackie" with the insight into the working of the old landlord system (which he was later to draw on again for the much longer *Changes in the Li Family Village*). Li Yu-ts'ai is not one of the main protagonists in this struggle between oppressive landlord and inexperienced Communist *kanpu* ("cadre"—the latter, after initial defeat, being helped out by a more capable man from area headquarters). Yu-ts'ai is the village ballad-monger, and his part is to be driven out after lampooning the landlord's dishonesty in measuring his land for re-distribution. Later he is recalled by the man from area, and a string of new ballads reveal the way in which the young land-reform *kanpu* and his helpers have been hoodwinked by the landlord.

There is effective symbolism in this centering of the story on the ballad-monger. He is the spokesman of the people: through him the wrongs they bear reach the ears of the new authorities, through him the truth comes to light. Through him also, as instrument, the villagers are organized, for the invitation to join

the Agricultural Committee is circulated via his ballads to the poor (and therefore honest and "democratic"), but kept from the ears of the oppressors, who do not hear his ballads because they do not share the life of the people.

The ballads themselves, such is Chao Shu-li's virtuosity, have the air of authentic folk-poetry, and are genuinely witty. The following piece of doggerel loses much of the effect of the original, but may still give an impression of Li Yu-ts'ai's satire on the permanence of the landlord as village headman:

Our head is Yen Heng-yüan,
His hand blots out the sun.
Since headmen were invented,
Ten years the only one.

Every year an election,
But when the voting's done,
Names proposed and rejected,
Still it's Yen Heng-yüan.

Why don't we make a big board,
Carve his name thereon,
Every year at election time
Just mark it with your thumb.

Save them the trouble of writing
Every year the same one.
You could use it then a hundred years
Before it was finally done.

The personages of *Li Yu-ts'ai* should be the stock figures common to the moral fable. Here are the wicked old landlord, the callow *kanpu* ignorant of the district, Villager One corrupted by the landlord after election as a *kanpu*, Villager Two the coward, Villager Three the landlord's lackey, Villagers Four and onwards the honest and ardent young progressives, and last, the old hand sent down from area, the *deus ex machina* who clears up

the whole muddle. They should be stock figures, of the sort which are repeated in a hundred land-reform stories; but they are not. They are individuals, imaginatively conceived. The landlord himself, though his blackness is unrelieved, is at least credited with more brains than most of his kind. His scheme for measuring his land is genuinely cunning, and his cynicism is consistent: when Yang, the old *kanpu*, arrives and insists on getting to know the people, "Send him to the poorest," says the landlord, "he'll soon get tired of eating husks and come running to us."

Chao's experiment with the full-length novel form was, for him, a failure, and has not so far been repeated. *The Changes in the Li Family Village* has been praised by the critics, Mao Tun and Chou Yang and others, for the correctness of its ideology, but even they find the literary merits of the work difficult to extol. Chao wrote *The Changes in the Li Family Village* after his return to his home village in Shansi when the Japanese war ended: the home-coming of Chang T'ieh-so in the novel is based on this event. Since 1940, and indeed much earlier, the village had been in and out of the hands of Japanese, of pro-Japanese Kuomintang troops, of the Communists, of the warlord Yen Hsi-shan. Chao was profoundly moved by what he saw and heard of the years of misery, and he conceived the idea of writing in fiction form a history of the village which in fact covers the years 1928-46. But his passion was too raw, the tortured body of his village still twitched before his eyes. There is nothing of the sanity of *Li Yu-ts'ai*; there is certainly no room for humour in this grim tale. The landlord of the Li Family Village, obliged to co-operate with the Communists when that was Kuomintang policy, turns on them as soon as he safely can. In the reaction eyes are gouged, hands cut off, the temple runs with blood, a *kanpu* is buried alive. After liberation comes revenge: the landlord is torn limb from limb by the incensed villagers, and a wrenched-off arm is brandished before the eyes of his lackey. The Communists in the book disapprove of the action, but one sees the bulge of the tongue in the cheek.

None of this of course necessarily implies a bad novel. But Chao lost his hold on his craft when he attempted a full-length work. The action is jumpy and disjointed, there is no unity. Chang T'ieh-so promises to furnish a centre of vision, but he leaves the scene half-way through the story, just as he is beginning to come to life. If a character, by making his exit as an ignorant, sadly-wronged but helpless peasant and reappearing as an ardent, efficient *kanpu*, may be said to have been "developed," then Chang T'ieh-so is the only character in the novel who is developed.

It is a sad waste of talent to grind out a turgid novel on an ambitious theme, when in a few short sentences you can achieve the effects of a story like "Lucky." When Lucky, pressed by the money-lender for repayment, gives up his land, no more is needed than this:

"... but you're still seven dollars short on last year's interest, if you're not going to work for me you'll have to produce that now." "You might as well have my land straight off!" was Lucky's reply. "Which-ever way I farm it I can't get enough for what you want."

It was just as simple as that. A day or two later Lao-wan sent his men along with a load of manure.

Lucky had worked for some years to get his paths and dykes neat and straight, and now someone else was doing the planting there. If he didn't see it he didn't worry about it, and so he never felt like going down to the fields any more.

In 1949 Chao Shu-li moved to Peking. The best thing he has yet done there is the story "The Heirloom." His theme here is again the emancipation made possible by the new régime, but this time he turns from landlord-tenant relations to the status of women. To illustrate his theme he uses a quarrel between a peasant woman of traditional outlook and her daughter-in-law, a young progressive. The older woman, whose proudest boast is that she has never in her life had to buy shoes or clothing, is embittered by the unwomanliness and extravagance of Chin-kuei, the daughter-in-law. She, a labour-heroine now elected a *kanpu*,

defends her "unwomanliness" as the outcome of hard, well-paid work at a man's job in the fields, and interprets her "extravagance" in terms of a raised standard of living. But as the quarrel develops, it becomes clear that the real point at issue is the exercise of authority within the family. Deeply angered by her mother-in-law's imputations, Chin-kuei hands over control of the purse-strings. The conflict is resolved when the old woman, in hopeless confusion over the new paper currency and the dealings with co-operatives and mutual-aid groups and the like, hands the lot back to her daughter-in-law and returns, with a good grace, to her sewing.

The subject-matter of the story inevitably evokes the women's magazine. In its social context, however, "The Heirloom" is a valuable piece of work. There is true sympathy in the treatment of the older woman. Her scale of values is clearly defined, and is justified in terms of the old social order. It is represented by a commonplace object such as Chao often uses for symbolic value: an old and decaying black box containing needles and thread and odds and ends of material. This, the heirloom itself, the old woman had from her mother and planned to hand down to her son's wife in turn; but Chin-kuei has left the old treadmill of "women's accomplishments," and has no use for it.

Although all of Chao Shu-li's stories have been written since the establishment of Communist power, first in the Liberated Areas, later in the whole of China, the mass of his material is taken from the old days. His constant theme is the faults of the old order: only at the close of a story do we catch a glimpse of the new. Then, mass meetings, victory parades and all the paraphernalia of the New Democratic circus embellish the obligatory happy ending.

Chao's function has been to expose the old evils. Of late the critics have been calling an end to the "literature of exposure," and trumpeting the entrance of the "literature of glorification." It will be interesting to see whether Chao Shu-li can once again deliver the goods.