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ENGL 105

### The Answer by Bei Dao: Analysis

Bei Dao is the pen name of the Chinese-American writer Zhao Zhenkai, who is among the most acclaimed Chinese-language poets of his generation and has been repeatedly nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Born in Beijing a mere two months before the formal creation of the People's Republic of China, Bei Dao served as a Red Guard in his youth during the Cultural Revolution. However, the brutality of the Cultural Revolution gradually woke him up. He participated in the 1976 Tiananmen Incident, which was violently suppressed, and co-founded an influential literary journal, called *Jintian* (*Today*, 今天), that came to be officially banned in China. Inspired by his experience in the late Cultural Revolution, he wrote what became his most famous poem, "The Answer," which has been compared to Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" for its impact on a generation of Chinese (Ratiner, 2018).

Although people might disagree on the understanding or evaluation of the poem, "The Answer" should undoubtedly be viewed as "the first poem" of "a new era" (Zhang, 2016). "The Answer" became a paradigm for a long time in terms of both the theme and expression. Of course, the significance of its paradigm is not just that the poem offered catchy aphorisms like "Debasement is the password of the base, / Nobility the epitaph of the noble." The recognition of its "first" contains a kind of historical evaluation. Because of "The Answer" and some other poems, Bei Dao enjoys a special status in the

contemporary new poetry in China. It has been commented that "Bei Dao, the symbol of the new poetry era in the history of the 20th-century Chinese poetry", "[Bei Dao] is a powerful link connecting the preceding and the following, and a milestone that cannot be ignored." These views are not based purely on poetics, as the slogan of a new generation of poets after him (the third generation) directly referred to him - "PASS Bei Dao." (Zhang and Dai, 70-71)

The poem was originally composed in 1973 titled "Let me tell you, world." The revised version was later posted in the "four five" poetry movement in 1976. Although it was posted in a barely noticeable corner, it still had some repercussions. Later, the poem appeared in the inaugural issue of *Jintian* (*Today*, 今天) in 1978, and was widely read with this famous "underground publication". But it was not until 1979 that "The Answer" was first published in a major official poetry publication, the March issue of *Shikan* (*诗刊*). This publication was a watershed. With the further publication of many poems following "The Answer", which were later called "Misty Poetry", the poem marked that Misty Poetry went from underground to the mainstream (Qi, 2017).

"The Answer", along with other early works of Bei Dao, bear strong personal heroism and self-expression. This poem's language is particularly sharp with a clear reference to the society Bei Dao lived in - the upside-down society during the Cultural Revolution. At the very beginning, the author used a paradoxical aphorism to denounce the absurd era in "Debasement is the password of the base, / Nobility the epitaph of the noble. / See how the gilded sky is covered / With the drifting twisted shadows of the

dead." The despicable people took their debasement as a passport that allowed them to live unimpeded, yet the noble people were killed for their nobility and integrity. Images and metaphors filled the entire poem, which is also the major characteristics of the Misty Poetry, enhancing the sense of contradiction and absurdity. "The gilded sky" represented the hypocrisy and fakeness of the "achievements" that the authorities bragged about. Under those "achievements", the author saw the "drifting twisted shadows," which represented the blood and spirit of the noble dead who were twisted by the authorities and were forgotten by the people. The twisted humanity and the blur of the right and wrong at that time were like "a thousand sails contest the Dead Sea"; a generation of poets felt lost and perplexed - felt like "ice" after the "Ice Age". The "Ice Age" here represented the age before the enlightenment. The author was questioning why unreasonable chaos and disorders still filled the world despite humans had entered the age of reasoning.

Then the author moved on to create a figure of "I", who refused to be manipulated and decided to rebel and to "proclaim" his own "judgment" with "only paper, rope, a shadow". This referred to him being a poet who would use his words and connections to speak the truth even in the underground. He then shouted out to the world "I—do—not—believe!" This was a powerful statement straight from the heart. He didn't believe the unjust world was not changeable and he chose to rebel, to challenge. Even "if a thousand challengers lie beneath your feet, / Count me as number thousand and one." The entire fifth stanza used parallelism to strengthen his negation and doubt - "I don't believe that dreams are false; / I don't believe that death has no revenge." In the sixth stanza, grand

images like sea breaching the dikes and land rising again were referring to incoming major changes in the society and he believed that these changes were "destined". It also showed his confidence and sense of responsibility. "If the sea is destined to breach the dikes, / Let all the brackish water pour into my heart." If the Nirvana of the country required sacrifices, then "I" would take up that responsibility. In the last stanza, the author expressed his yearning and belief in a bright future. The "glimmering stars" in the "unobstructed sky" represented grim but resilient hope and a belief that a civilization of five thousand years of history will endure.

The reason why Bei Dao's poetry can become trendy and even phenomenal is that the conflicted period of history gave a generation of people a similar brutal experience. In the extreme lack of spiritual sources, a book or a poem could be extremely influential and powerful. This influence would not disappear because of repression but would instead rise tenaciously under the exclusion of authorities. Bei Dao's poems were the product of the intensification of this contradiction. The longer people were suppressed, the stronger the momentum was. Even now, we can still appreciate Bei Dao's charming spirit.

Works Cited

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