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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 in terms of both its themes 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 groundbreaking nature is linked to its connections with history. Because of "The Answer" and some other poems, Bei Dao enjoys a special status in contemporary

new poetry in China. It has been suggested that "Bei Dao [is] the symbol of the new poetry era in the history of the 20th-century Chinese poetry." This status is in part due to the poet's historical role: "[Bei Dao] is a powerful link connecting the preceding and the following, and a milestone that cannot be ignored." Even the next generation of poets recognized his status and regarded him a figure to surpass, directly referring to him in their main slogan - "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 as part of the "four five" poetry movement in 1976. Although it was posted on informal bulletin boards, 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. It was followed by the further publication of many poems, which were later called "Misty Poetry." "The Answer" marked the moment when Misty Poetry went from underground to the mainstream (Qi, 2017).

"The Answer," along with other early works of Bei Dao, speaks to 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. The poem opens a paradoxical aphorism to denounce the absurd era: "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" represents the hypocrisy and fakeness of the "achievements" that the authorities bragged about. Under those "achievements," the author saw the "drifting twisted shadows," which represents 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 – it felt like "ice" after the "Ice Age." The "Ice Age" here represents the age before the enlightenment. The author was questioning why unreasonable chaos and disorders still filled the world even though humans had entered the age of reasoning.

Then the author moves 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." The suggestion is that a poet can use his words and connections to speak the truth even in the underground. He then shouts out to the world, "I—do—not—believe!" This powerful statement challenges the idea that the unjust world is not changeable. Even "if a thousand challengers lie beneath your feet, / Count me as number thousand and one." The entire fifth stanza uses parallelism to strengthen this sense of resistance: "I don't believe that dreams are false; / I don't believe that death has no revenge." In the sixth stanza, grand images like the sea breaching the dikes and land rising anticipate incoming major changes in society. The lines also suggest the speaker's 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 wellbeing of the country requires sacrifices, then "I" will take up that responsibility. In the last stanza, the speaker expresses his yearning and belief in a bright future. The "glimmering stars" in the "unobstructed sky" represent the resilient hope and a belief that a civilization with five thousand years of history will endure.

Bei Dao's poetry speaks to the conflicted period of history that gave a generation of people a similar brutal experience. In such extreme circumstances, a book or a poem can be extremely influential and powerful. This influence need not disappear because of repression but can instead rise tenaciously much like the expressions of resistance offered by "The Answer." Bei Dao's poems were the product of the intensification of this contradiction. The longer people were oppressed, the stronger the momentum became. Even now, we can still appreciate Bei Dao's charming spirit.

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