

# A Performative Modernity: Re-thinking *Menglong* Poetry

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*Menglong* poetry (Misty Poetry, 1978-1983) has been regarded as avant-garde poetry and has been associated with the inauguration of the Chinese literary modernism movement in the post-Mao period. But whether *Menglong* poetry is conscious modernism or deformed romanticism is an unsettled case. In this essay, rather than considering whether *Menglong* poetry is or is not modernist poetry, I suggest that *Menglong* poetry be read as verbal actions through which *Menglong* poets act as being, or perform to be, modernists.

First of all, studying *Menglong* poetry's development and literary criticism in 1978-1983, particularly the debate of modernism inaugurated by *Menglong* poetry, I demonstrate that *Menglong* poetry is performative. *Menglong* poetry can be traced back to the early 1970s when the former Red Guards established literary salons, reading forbidden books such as Chinese Modern literature and Western Literature, and exchanging their poems. On April 5th 1976, many young poets along with a large number of other people gathered together at Tian'anmen Square, mourning the death of former president Zhou Enlai by reciting their own poems. This movement was suppressed as an anti-revolutionary event. Soon after that, in December 1978 Bei Dao and Meng Ke established an unofficial magazine called *Jintian* (Today) and published the inaugural issue at the Democracy Wall in Beijing. *Jintian* mainly published poems from the underground literary salons, and included a few short stories, literary criticism, essays and translations of Western literature. It totally generated nine issues and four collections before it was officially closed at the end of 1980. In 1979 Bei Dao sent a copy of *Jintian* to Shao Yanxiang, an editor of *Shikan* (Poetry). Shao thought these poems were written in a new style. With his recommendation, Bei Dao's "The Reply" ("回答"), Shu Ting's "To the Oaks" ("致橡树"), and Gu Cheng's "A group of Poems in Geleshan" ("歌乐山诗组") were respectively published in the issues of the third, fourth and tenth. In 1980, more poems selected from *Jintian* were published in *Shikan*. As a result, *Menglong* poetry got to be known to the wider Chinese reading public.

It needs to be pointed out that *Shikan* was closed during the Cultural Revolution. In 1976 when it was resurrected, it presented revolutionary romanticism as its feature. As Bonnie S. McDougall observed, most poems in *Shikan* were long political lyrics with repetitive language and hyperbolic vocabulary such as "ten thousand", "millions of people" etc. The dominant images were the red color, sun, sea, blood, and fire. The attitude toward nature was exclusively positive (1978: 76-124). These had been the typical features of contemporary poetry after Chairman Mao's "Talk on the Yan'an Forum of Literature and Arts" (1942). In this talk, Mao advocated that the primary function of literature is to serve as instruments of the proletarian revolution. Literature should be written in the language of the masses and only for workers, soldiers and farmers. Mao also set up a formula of "one, folk song, second, classical poetry" for poetry per se. Based on these principles, socialist realism and revolutionary romanticism were formulated and dominated Chinese literature from 1940s. *Shikan* maintained the feature of revolutionary romanticism till 1979 when it launched reformation in order to respond the policy of "one hundred flowers blooming" mandated by the Third Plenum in 1978.

Recounting this history of publication, I would like to point out that the emergence of *Jintian* and *Menglong* poetry from the underground to the surface is the consequence of particular social and political discourses. *Menglong* poetry from its beginning was tightly bound up with politics. Moreover, *Menglong* poets held an ambiguous attitude toward this tie. They tended to believe the New Era provided them opportunity and the dream of being social elites by their poems. However, they resolutely resisted the Maoist discourse and challenged the restraint of the then-current politics. This ambiguity is frequently reflected in *Menglong* poets' performance in the debate.

*Menglong* poetry possesses distinctive features from revolutionary romanticism. Most *Menglong* poetry adopted short lyrics (Tay, 1985: 134). Four-sentence and two-sentence poems appeared, for example: “Ruts left on my body/by the reversed wheels of history” (Cai Kun, “Wrinkles”) and “The Black night has given me black eyes,/Yet I use them to search for light” (Gu Cheng, “One Generation”). The shortest is a one-word poem entitled “The Life,” written by Bei Dao: Net.

In addition, a passive attitude toward the life permeates *Menglong* poetry by the repetitive motif of silence (Yeh, 1992: 382-383) and imageries of “lost,” “death,” “loneliness,” “dream,” “shadows,” etc. For example, “The silence is still the Oriental story” (Bei Dao, “The end and the Beginning”), “Perhaps/we should shout out suffering as a whole/but keep silence over personal grief” (Shu Ting, “Perhaps”), “Hiding in my lifting dream, How lonely my shadow is” (Shu Ting, “A night in the Deep Autumn in Beijing”), “One lonely wolf goes into, the dust where no one gets lost” (Jiang He, “China, My Key Has Been Lost”), and “Look how the gilded sky is covered/with the drifting, crooked shadows of the dead” (Bei Dao, “The Reply”).

What is more, the red color, associated with the frantic and crazy Cultural Revolution, is condemned. In contrast, colors of “gray,” “white,” and “black” are frequently used. For example, “In the white light of the death” (Bei Dao, “The end”) “Clouds are gray” (Gu Cheng, “A Walk in the Rain”), and “Mom, I saw the white wall” (Liang Xiaobin, “The White Wall”).

These idiosyncrasies both in form and content were regarded “as direct result of influence of Western modernism” (Yeh, 1992: 385). Thereby, these poems gave rise to controversial debate among the readers and poets. In 1980, Zhang Ming coined *Menglong* as an ironical name, criticizing that Du Yunxie's two poems were incomprehensible (*Shikan*, 8th 1980:10). In Chinese *Menglong* has multiple meanings: it is obscure, misty, eccentric, bizarre, and incomprehensible, but “it is also used to describe objects like the flowers viewed in the mist, or a ferry crossing in the moonlight haze” (Gu, 1993: 176). Despite its ambiguity, this term was employed by *Menglong* poets and their defenders to represent what they believed as new aesthetic principles: aesthetics should be independent of sociology and “man,” an enlightened individual, rather than the collective subject “people,” should be expressed as a subject in poetry (Sun, 1989: 108-109). In 1980, *Shikan* published more than twenty articles respectively presenting the two kinds of conflicting opinions. Later, hundreds articles concerning *Menglong* poetry were produced in the other main Chinese core newspapers and journals as well as local ones.

The debate centers around whether poetry should reflect the small self — the private feeling and emotion, or the big self — the people. The opponents argued that self-expression was one of the reasons that resulted in its ultimate obscurity and was a consequence of imitating Western modernism, and therefore it was counter-socialism modernization. For example, Ai Qing criticized that Bei Dao's “The Life” presented an ambiguous imagery and expressed the narrow private feeling which deviated from the interest of people (*Shikan* 10th ,1980: 33). Feng Mu recounted his failed attempt at imitating T. S. Eliot, warning *Menglong* poets of the danger of repeating the first modernist movement, the May Fourth movement. He advocated that innovation should not deviate from “socialism modernization, the general direction of country and people” (*Shikan* 10th , 1980: 44). Zang Kejia fiercely attacked *Menglong* poetry as “back stream” and a deviance from people (Zang, 1989: 75). Since both self-expression and ambiguous imagery presentations were believed to be fundamental aspects of the Western modernism, the discussion later focuses on *Menglong* poetry and its connection with modernism.

Interestingly, *Menglong* poetry is firstly associated with modernism not by attackers, but by *Menglong* poetry defenders (Cheng, 1991: 146). In 1980, Xie Mian published the first article defending *Menglong* poetry. He claimed that “one group of new poets is emerging. They are not refrained in one style. They boldly adopted expression in Western modernism, writing some 'eccentric' poems” (Xie, 1989: 9). In the same article, he pointed out that the main factor that prevented the New Poetry from developing is that Chinese poets stop learning from Western

poetry. In his later essay, he asserted that “modernism can also be found in Li He and Li Shangyin” (Xie, 1989: 12). Sun Shaozhen admitted that Shu Ting’s poem is largely influenced by modernist poetry, particularly imagism and impressionism (Sun, 1989: 22). Sun Shaozhen also praised that *Menglong* poetry embodied a new principle of aesthetics (Sun, 1989: 24).

At the same time, *Menglong* poets did not resist to be labeled as modernists. Gu Cheng proclaimed that “the purpose behind portraying the world is to portray ‘the self’...only if the self participates, resists life-alienating forces, and reforms the world, will art emerge, will a great torrent of schools pour forth, will beautiful planets and the Milky Way come into being...” (Gu, 1985: 13). Although here he didn’t directly identify himself as a modernist, by advocating self-expression he identified himself as a modernist.

Thus, rather than passively being labeled as a target of criticism, *Menglong* poets and defenders positively declared their identities of being modernists through their repetitive statement regarding self-expression. Such declaration seems to be strange if “modernism has always been a subject mentioned only to be condemned” (Pollard, 1985: 642). However, as argued below, these declarations contribute evidence of the performative nature of the *Menglong* poets.

The Chinese modernist movement in the post-Cultural Revolution, in my opinion, was heralded not by Chinese intellectuals but by the Chinese government. At the Third Plenum (on December 18th 1978), Deng’s government proclaimed the coming of the New Era (1978-1989). It decided to stop using “classical struggle,” affirming that the emphasis of communist party has been shifted into building socialist modernizations in national defense, industry, agriculture, techniques and science. With its aim, Chinese government encouraged to communicate with the West and learn the advanced techniques from the West. The “Four Modernizations” excludes modernization in the realms of literature, culture and thought. As for literature, in March 1978, the policy of “hundred flowers blooming” was written into the Chinese constitution (Kinkley, 1985: 6). Later, the Third Plenum set up another principle: “emancipation thoughts.” In 1979, the Chinese government explicitly announced the end of the policy that “literature and arts were submitted to politics” in Maoist discourse, promising that the Party would not interfere with the creation of the arts and literature.

Responding to the movement of socialism modernization, particularly the literary policies, Chinese intellectuals embarked upon a wave of modernism. A large number of books on Western thought and philosophy were translated and introduced into China. Chinese intellectuals, particularly writers and poets, enthusiastically learned modernist literature. For example, Gao Xingjian held seminars introducing modernism to writers in 1980. By the early 1980s, *Menglong* poets were already familiar with Western modernism (McDougall, 1997: 334). At the same time, Wang Meng introduced stream of consciousness into fiction. Chinese films and paintings also adopted some so-called modernism elements such as montage and impressionism. As for literary criticism, modernism and modernist was a heated topic (Li, 1990: 128), and a large number of articles discussed modernism. During 1981, there were 32 articles concerning modernism, and by 1982 there were over 300 such articles (Pollard, 1985: 643). “Modern” became a fashionable term and “its unusually high frequency [was] rivaled only by the term ‘class struggle’ in the Cultural revolution” (Li, 1990: 128). In addition, “four modernizations,” “new era,” “new psychology,” “modern,” “openness,” “emergence,” “new principle,” “reformation,” “new wave of thought,” etc, were a series of words indicating the newness and modernism that entered the fabric of Chinese daily and media language. This is the New Era, “an invention of Deng’s government” (Zhang, 1999: 36). Stimulated by this modernization in the New Era, writers and poets more or less connected to the word “modernism” due to different concerns. Ai Qing pointed out when he criticized *Menglong* poetry, “what is the feature of the time? Modernization.” Gao Xingjian criticized that “the discussion concerning Modernism is a ‘non-debate’ because of ignorance about modern Western literature” (Gao, 1980: 44 ). Li Zhun in his “Modernization and Modernism” raised the question: “is there necessarily a link between

modernization and modernism?” Xu Chi employed Marxism theory to study modernism, declaring that China's future was socialist modernist which was “based on the combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism” (Li, 1980: 47).

These statements, questions, and critiques demonstrate the confusion and dilemma of Chinese writers and poets when they interpret the policy of the Third Plenum, particularly the relationship between the collectivism, individualism and modernism. Some writers and poets, such as Ai Qing, Feng Mu, Li Ying, and Zang Kejia, who established their writing career before the Cultural Revolution, held an orthodox interpretation of the policy of the New Era, believing that literature should serve for socialist modernization. For the young *Menglong* poets, “they, the older generation as a whole, have fallen behind the time” (Pan, 1985:199). Poetry, having long been enslaved by politics and it is the time for them to emancipate the poetry from the political chain. Modernism draws them as does a magnet. Declaring to be modernist is an action to disassociate oneself from the old, the irrational, the obsolete, and all that was wrong in the Maoist time.

In addition, employing “new principles,” “progression,” “emergence,” “modernism,” “young generation,” “breaking the old aesthetics system,” “courageous attempt,” “the wakening of a new aesthetics” etc. in their announcements, *Menglong* poets act as or perform the social elites. This performative is linked with politics and rides the popular trend. As Bei Dao explicitly declared in the inaugural issue of *Jintian*: “History has finally given us a chance, allowing our generation to sing out that which has been buried in our hearts for ten years” (Yeh, 1985: 382). Gu Cheng more explicitly pointed out that *Menglong* poets were pioneers who sacrificed for the nation in the seeking for a new road in the arts.

The performative of *Menglong* poetry is clearer if we examine what kind of modernism it presents and whether it fulfills the intention of the poets. Next I conduct textual interrogation of *Menglong* poetry to demonstrate that the performative declaration of modernism does not describe or report that *Menglong* poetry is modernist poetry both in the sense of high modernism and self-expression.

I illustrate this point by comparing Gu Cheng and Pound. Gu Cheng is the most controversial poet in 1980s mostly because his poems are more similar to imagism.

For example, consider Gu Cheng's “One Generation”:

The Night has given me dark eyes  
But I use them to look for light.

This two-sentence poem reminds readers of Pound's “In a Station of The Metro.”

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

However, the similarity is limited to its form. By juxtaposing the images of nature and the human world in “Metro”, Pound draws the interpretation of the poem from the surface of imagery into the inward realm of human emotions. As Pound pointed out this poem captured “a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective” (Yip, 1969: 60).

On the contrary, Gu Cheng's poem is in fact very simple, superficial and political. The night refers to the Cultural Revolution. The black eyes not only represent Chinese, but also symbolize one generation that lives in blindness since the cultural desert and does not enlighten under the control of ideology. Light refers to the bright future, good life, or the light of the life in this generation. Particularly, in his poem, the “I”, as its title indicates, is not only the poetic self but also the collective “we.” Gu Cheng<sub>4</sub> represents the feeling for the whole generation.



It is the critique to the Chinese reality and an expression of wandering, loss and waiting in hope. Thus, this poem largely is a political allegory, rather than individual expression. It does not fall neatly within the genre of modernism as that term is used in the West.

Similar political implications and collective self can be found in other *Menglong* poetry. For example, the subject of Jiang He's poems is exclusively "people". Shu Ting's "Motherland, My Beloved Motherland" and "To the Oaks" explicitly express her patriotism. Particularly, in Bei Dao's "The reply", the collective subject is more evident:

I tell you the world, I don't believe!

...

I don't believe the sky is blue,  
I don't believe in the sound of thunder,  
I don't believe that dreams are false,  
I don't believe that death has no revenge.

(McDougall, 1997: 433)

In my opinion, this poem can be read as an answer of Bei Dao and his generation to Chairman Mao's words "the world is ours, and also yours, but after all it is yours" in the Tiananmen Square when he interviewed Red Guards. After the Cultural Revolution, confronted with the ruins of their revolutionary idealism, they reply "I don't believe!"

To sum it up, *Menglong* poetry is capable of being read against the poets' intentions of self-expression, although expressing the self other than representing the people is *Menglong* poets' and its defenders' main argument for their modernist movement. However, as shown above, *Menglong* poetry does not fulfill the self-expression intention of *Menglong* poets. Instead, these poems repeatedly offer evidence of an authoritarian poetic self who represents the whole generation. For example, Bei Dao admitted that his poems represented the oppressor speaking to autocracy. This made his poems fall into the similar mistake and danger of totalitarianism.

The power of *Menglong* poetry lies in its performativity, considering it in the framework of Chinese literature and culture. By declaring modernism *Menglong* poets introduce "man", the category in the Western civilization, into the Chinese socialist discourse. This category and what it represented, individualism, disturb the stability of socialist ideology and its value system.

In addition to the political aspect, this performative declaration, directed to individualism, also challenges the cultural paradigm based on socialist ideology. Self-expression, the main stated theme of *Menglong* poetry, embodies the beginning of seeking identity and individuality outside the political ideology, particularly, country, and the Party.

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