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**A Bountiful Solitude in Not Writing for Trends: On the Poetry of Cai Qijiao**

by Tian Hao

Time relentlessly pans for gold, and so do judgments about art. Time has taken away the life of the poet Cai Qijiao but left us the crystallization of that life – his poetry. Sidelined by mainstream literary history, this poet had a unique understanding of his own creative process: “Why should a writer write? Basically, he hopes that people live better lives, hopes their spirits improve, that people with a new character will soon emerge. He is not writing for a certain editor or a certain trend.”1`

In his eyes the act of creation is incomparably sacred. “Except for the way it works together with the life force, literature should not be driven by some particular goal.”2 And so, in a career of nearly seventy years, what emerges from Cai Qijiao’s poems is a heart sounding cords of joy and suffering. Though the theme of his poetry never left the collective language and sentiments in praise of revolution, in praise of “Man” with a capital M, his pursuit of a purely poetic art and his reverence for the heart made him a solitary figure within the turbulent world of modern and contemporary poetry. Because the poet’s solitude emanates directly from the fundamental purpose of his poetic writing and from his inborn personality, it is a joyous and bountiful solitude.

1. **Consciously Pursuing an Original Aesthetic Intuition**

To follow life, to follow one’s conscience, to follow an initial aesthetic intuition – these are the tenets of Cai’s poetic creed. Deep in his soul there lay a kingdom of poetic freedom. Throughout the years of the anti-Japanese war, the decade of mindless chaos (1966~76), and the collective carnival of the “Obscurist” poets, Cai always began with this original aesthetic impulse, unmoved by trends, expressing himself obstinately within the boundaries of this poetic kingdom.

Within this solitude, Cai Qijiao’s poems always maintained a longing for beauty and freedom. He believed that “creation requires freedom; freedom and beauty are inseparable. Without freedom there can be no beauty, and beauty is art itself.”3 With this longing for freedom, he crossed the ocean to return to his homeland. Although he had the same revolutionary experience as Ai Qing and Tian Jian, he was never as popular as they were. For a long time, he occupied a marginal place in literature. But persevering in his creative principles and following that original aesthetic impulse, he put all of his life’s passion into the pursuit of beauty and freedom. This pursuit and longing inspired his poetry and put him in the crosshairs of many a political movement.

In 1957 the Central Literary Workshop was dissolved and Cai, whom leaders had designated an “internal Rightist,”\* came to work at the Yangtze River Regional Planning Office. On the steamboat to Xiangyang, he wrote “The Han River under Fog”:

Thickets on both banks rise like grassland in mid-air;

an oxcart on the dam skirts the horizon;

cargo boats bound upstream can emit only

the heavy sounds of oars through the dense fog.

All my eyes can see are boat trackers who have

conquered the river for thousands of years

with legs naked, bodies straining forward

breathing in icy vapor on winter's shoals. . . .

The morning sun, which has a hard time rising,

can't bear to watch the trackers' painful trudging,

covers its face with a kerchief of fog

and drops blood‑red tears into the river.

The poem poignantly conveys the endless tread of the boat trackers and depicts the eternal struggle of the human spirit. It leads one to question real suffering from a historical perspective, to take the measure of life from the viewpoint of human nature. This realistic depiction, which discards the

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\*An “internal Rightist” is someone whom Party leaders know is a counter-revolutionary, but they don’t publicize their finding. Thus, they spare him humiliation while giving him a chance to exonerate himself.

colored glasses of political ideology and preserves life in its original state, highlights the poet’s proletarian consciousness and aesthetic conscience in the midst of the contrivance and fabrication prevalent in the poetry of the time. But as soon as the poem was published, it was deluged in criticism. The critics believed Cai was saying that physical labor was harsh and called for tears. This sentiment ran counter to the Great Leap Forward and was anti-Mau revisionism. Under enormous pressure, the poet was forced to denounce himself and to say that his poems had “wrong tendencies” and “misrepresented the times.”4 Despite his misfortunes, the poet did not change his original creative impulse or direction. He “would not lean on others’ fences / but believe in the patterns I recognize” (“Yanyu’s Tide Pavilion”) and would “explore life through intuition / convey understanding and express emotion” (“Writing”).

In the deeply troubled year of 1962, he wrote “Waves,” which revealed a longing for spiritual freedom. During the Cultural Revolution, when personal freedoms were severely restricted, he wrote “Jade Splendor Cave” in opposition to darkness and oppression, and “Prayer,” calling for the return of normal life and emotions. Even in his old age, he managed to produce “Lhasa,” a critique of modern superstitions. The pursuit of freedom damaged Cai’s health but transfigured his spirit and perfected his poetry. These excellent poems allowed him to leave his unique footprint on literary history.

Holding on might take strength, but letting go takes wisdom. Cai’s letting go of the New Folksong, as well as his distancing himself from the Obscurists, showed his willingness to follow his own aesthetic intuition. In 1958, in collaboration with the Great Leap Forward, the poetry community launched the New Folksong campaign. Cai also participated in collecting folk songs, but he soon discovered that the New Folksong, which was supposed to “open up a new century of discovering folksong and of Chinese poetry,”5 was deeply cast within the shadow of propaganda slogans. It lacked innovation both in ideas and form and could not express the true feelings of individuals. Therefore, he decisively abandoned the New Folksong, turning his sights instead toward the Chilean poet Neruda. Under the influence of Neruda’s *The Heights of Machu Picchu*, which depicted the history and contemporary realities of South America, his creative tendrils touched home soil. By writing poems like “Nine Trout Falls,” “Cai Creek,” “Double Rainbow,” and “Waves,” Cai truly brought poetry to the people. These poems glisten with the poet’s contemplation of nature, history and contemporary reality.

Cai Qijiao was closely involved with the Obscurist Poets for quite some time during their early development. The love of Whitman, Neruda, Baudelaire, the resistance to vacuous and phony trends, the rebellion against sloganeering poetry, the fidelity to images, and the preference for subtle, veiled expression – all of these produced a strong resonance between Cai and the Obscurist Poets in the ’80s, and brought them together as natural allies. He channeled his passion into the Obscurist Poets, guiding the young Shu Ting in her study of foreign modernists such as Baudelaire and Neruda, an apprenticeship that led to Shu’s becoming one of the representative Obscurist Poets. Cai also had frequent contact and exchange with Bei Dao, Gu Cheng and Yang Lian. His poems “Remembrance” and “Landscape” appeared in the first volume of *Today (Jiantian)*. In a sense, he was the backstage sponsor of the Obscurists. But as a pure poet, he believed that “a true poet does not talk about himself. He always tries hard to avoid any matters related to himself. Poetry should reveal one’s private personality without pursuing one’s private interests.”6 “Poetry is only poetry, art is only art.”7 He did not advocate poets getting involved in politics. When his stance against participating in or orchestrating political events put him at odds with the Obscurists, when certain people who had only the form but no true feeling wrote pseudo-Obscurist poetry to make a name for themselves, he intuited the crisis and resolutely removed himself from the banquet at its height, to walk alone once more. Because he could not stomach any work that went against aesthetic intuition, he always chose solitude rather than hypocrisy. Letting go was how he held on to his independent character and poetic standards.

1. **A Solitary Recording the Heart’s Joy and Pain**

Maybe because life is too full of pain  
the heart is always chasing joy  
in Nature, in clouds and water  
in flowers and grass, in the charm of all shapes  
 (“Self-Portrait at Seventy”)

Poetry contained for Cai Qijiao all life’s joy and sorrow; it supported the framework of his spirit and was an essential part of his life. Cai believed that the poet’s destiny was creation, to “turn joy and sorrow into spiritual riches.”8 His poems were about the joy and sorrow of others, and even more so about his own. Following an inner feeling, he searched for the true import of creativity. He did not follow current fashion and expressed a unique individuality. But it was this very individuality that relegated his work to a long period of isolation.

For Cai, the act of creation was the most joyous, most benevolent momentary impulse brought on by real experience. In the turbulent ’50s and ’60s, the poet broke through numerous barriers to boldly sing of love and beauty. In the early ’50s, Chinese poetry was a chorus of praise for the leader and the homeland. As a poet coming out of the communist wartime base, Cai naturally joined in the tide. He traveled from the East China Sea to the South China Sea, from Zhejiang to Fujian, and between winter and early spring of that year wrote quite a few poems about the sea. There was “The Dike of the Straits” in praise of building up the motherland and “Song of the Sailors” in praise of navy sailors. But amid this chorus there were some dissonant solo notes. It was these dissonances laden with expressive individuality that defined Cai’s style and aims and displayed the values of his creation. In a time when millions of people were wishing the leader long life, he cried out, “Long live stars! Long live girls! / Long live love and youth!” (“Red Bean”).

In a time when personal feelings were absent from literature, he exposed the universe of his feelings. He expressed his tender feelings and sweet intentions through dark grief: “fearful of flowers’ early wilting, fearful of the trees’ sorrow” (“Acacia and Pomegranate Flower”). He expressed tender feelings in an age when one loses one’s freedom to love. Even during the time when he lost his personal freedom because of his love for a woman, he had not changed his respect and concern for beauty. He wrote “Remembrance,” which is full of rich emotion, and “Life,” which sings the praises of youth and living. These bold statements and confessions emanate from the poet’s Islamic bloodline, and even more from his independent, well-considered understanding of his work. After the threshing of time, these “dissonant” notes of joy allow us to make out the poet’s unmistakable imprint.

Cai said, “To write poetry, one must have inner pain.”9 In a time when most people were immersed in the joy of transforming Nature, the poet acutely foresaw the environment thrown out of balance, and he called out alone and painfully for the protection of Nature. From the 1950s to the 1980s, humankind was tremendously successful in conquering Nature. Social productivity increased, the standard of living rose, and the riches that Nature offered up to Man blurred mankind’s vision. In 1982, the poet walked into Shennong Jia National Forest full of longing for the primeval forest. Yet “all the trees large and small were cut / clean as a shaven head”; “Spider monkeys have made their homes far away / even rabbits cannot remain” (“Question and Answer in Shennong Forest”). Shennong Jia was like an abused slave, its body covered with scars. The exposed vines and forest cover revealed a history of atrocities. The bleak state of the primeval forest pained and disturbed Cai, who loved Nature. He acutely felt the seriousness of the problem and used satire to expose it:

coming to the heart of the forest

why does Cypress Pine Township

have neither pines nor cypresses?

. . .

Once ancient trees covered the sky

Now all small grass and flowers

Cars lined up

for a big party

Isn’t it grand?”

In a time when no one was paying attention to the degradation of the environment, Cai’s poem addressed environmental problems and the need for environmental protection. It examined the ignorance of humanity and the problems of civilization, social development and local interest. At the time it was written, this poem, full of prescient awareness and post-Enlightenment implications, circulated among the editors of many journals around the country, and not one of them would publish it.

The poet’s acute vision, profound thought and sincere love isolated him once again at a time when “all the world was drunk, and I alone sober.” But the indifference of the world did not throw the poet’s off course. With stubborn will and indomitable spirit, he wrote nature poems such as “Flower Market,” “Flower Stream Without Flowers,” “Mandarin Duck Lake,” and “Carp Stream,” in which he reflected deeply on the aggressive nature of humankind. He sounded the voice of reason to “steward Nature with impartial love /… / Protect and further our co-existence” (“Mandarin Duck Lake”). He expressed fond hopes for

a state of Oneness giving rise to springtime

free water for fish, leafy shade for birds

in the harmony of life and life

is prosperity.

(“Carp Stream”).

Today, as environmental problems receive more attention, the poet’s vast, universal sympathy becomes evident.

**Fervently Accepting the Responsibility of Poetry**

Cai Qijiao said, “We are born to observe, /duty-bound to record wind and rain, seek out the light” (Song of East-West Pagoda). Poems can “renew the human heart, cultivate and give form to feelings of beauty, truth and goodness, and advance and improve one’s mind.”10 A poet is the conscience of society. Having braved turbulent waves and a hail of bullets to arrive at Yan’an, Cai never used poetry as a way to fame or fortune, but saw writing as “a difficult career, a sublime career, a chance to reshape oneself, uplift oneself so as to attain joy, attain happiness.”11 He consciously, quietly took the responsibility of poetry upon his shoulders.

His poems expressed concern for the fate of his country. In 1941, with the anti-Japanese war at a stalemate, Cai wrote “Native Soil” to reflect the homesickness of people driven from their homes by Japanese invaders. He also wrote “Burial” in praise of those martyred by the enemy’s sword. These two poems were his debut. From the very beginning, Cai linked his own fate to that of the nation. This link represented the conjunction of national disaster and personal pain. It expressed virulent hatred for colonialist war and longing for peace and freedom. It was the voice of an era and of a nation, suffused with its blood and tears.

His poems depicted the upward-striving spirit of the people. Life is the source of writing, but life alone does not give one the capacity to feel and to refine. Life is scattered, superficial. Only through deeply knowing the inner meaning of life can poetry attain an eternal vitality that transcends space and time. In Cai Qijiao’s mind, writing had a mission – to serve the people. The elder poet, who had personally experienced the Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature, had his own unique interpretation of the maxim, “Serve the People.”

“Each of us has an aspiration in writing. This aspiration is to serve someone. Though we say we are serving the people, it’s better to say we are serving a person. To serve a particular person is to serve the people.”12 In order to serve the people, he insisted on experiencing the stormy winds of life. In 1953 he joined the East China Sea fleet and lived with sailors, artillerists, propaganda troops at the broadcast station, at all times recording the uproar and calm of the sea, the words and impressions of the soldiers, and his own joys and sorrows as the raw material of poetry. Based on these notes he wrote “Song on the Sea” “Song of the Sailors” “Artillerymen in Blue”, “The Sound of Waves”, “Soliloquy of Tides” and “The Dike of the Straits”. These poems, full of the breath of life and the rhythm of the times, reflected the upward-striving national spirit of the time.

Poetry should not only reflect the dynamism of life, but also enter one’s heart, enlarge one’s spirit, purify one’s soul. The poet has his own understanding of life experience.

“What is life experience? In my understanding, it is none other

than research and investigation. But the object of research is

not a quantity, but one’s own heart.”13

Cai wrote these words in August 1957, in the afterword to his poetry collection *The Sound of Waves*. During those years of the Great Leap Forward, to make one’s heart the object of experience—

and to make this the focus of lyric expression—returned poetry to its essence, and corrected the ideology-driven literary theory of the time. Without an independent literary personality like Cai’s, it is unimaginable that anyone could have spoken so boldly and sincerely during this period of all-encompassing collective mind control.

The writing of poems is language finding its way toward the heart. Cai Qijiao made “exploring the heart of the common person, expressing the hopes and passions of the common person” the eternal aim of poetry,14 and he pursued this vocation in his unique way. In the mid-’50s, the young Cai, who deeply loved the sea, went to experience the life of sailors, and heard the soldiers say that “the idea that the sea is beautiful is a writer’s lie. He has never experienced the hardships and dangers of life on the sea. Let him live with us and experience the wind and waves. Then let’s see whether he still calls the ocean beautiful.” Moved, Cai wrote poems like “Wind and Sailors” and “Soliloquy of Tides,” hoping that after reading his poems, the sailors “could keep those images in their minds. In the midst of the difficult voyage, may they remember them and may they be relieved from the suffering of the elements.” He hoped that his poems could enter the hearts of the soldiers and that joy could overwhelm the hardships of the sea. Cai himself lived a rocky life, but he never complained of the unfair treatment he received, and never gave up writing despite all suffering and disappointment. He “covered his own sorrow in that of others / pain rising as tears of compassion” (“To –-”).

In order to bring light and joy into the world, to hope that men and women would not collapse and sink under the weight of hardship, one must have a faith that overcomes obstacles and a firm belief in the future. Cai wrote “Magnolia” for a woman who was surrounded by difficulties. His descriptions of the magnolia tree standing firm amid the frost, alone on the horizon, “Tall amongst the clouds,” gave her unbounded spiritual support. These kind spirits enter the heart like the tender fingers of the Madonna healing wounds, like the resounding voices of Nature surrounding us on every side, taking away pain with an eternal vitality.

In the poetry of Cai Qijiao, we feel the springtime of youth, the calm of Nature, the heat of the impassioned shout, the burden of thinking. The waves of the sea, the charm of one’s hometown, the shade of the feminine, and the quest of reason all infused Cai’s span of life and nourished his poetry. “Warmth that extends an entire lifetime / yet full of the taste of sleepless nights” (“Between Black and White”) – these lines embody an image that truly epitomizes Cai’s life work.

**End Notes**

1 Cai Qijiao, “Reading and Writing” in Cai Qijiao, *The Two Rails of Poetry* (Fuzhou: Straits Art and Literature Press, 2002), 95.

2 Cai Qijiao, “My View of Poetry” in *The Two Rails of Poetry*, 3.

3 Cai Qijiao, “Reading and Writing” in *The Two Rails of Poetry*, 97.

4 Wang Binggen, *Long Live Girls – The Poet Cai Qijiao* (Fuzhou: Straits Art and Literature Press, 2004), 97.

5 Zhou Yang, “New Folksong Opens A New Path for Poetry”, *Red Flag*, 1958.

6 Wang Binggen, 280.

7 Wang Binggen, 268.

8 Cai Qijiao, “In Search of the Deep Sea,” in *The Two Rails of Poetry*.

9 Cai Qijiao, “On Writing Poems—from the Guilin Forum on Poetry” in *The Two Rails of Poetry*.

10 Cai Qijiao, “The Space of Poetry—*Fujian*” in *The Two Rails of Poetry*.

11 Cai Qijiao, “Reading and Writing” in *The Two Rails of Poetry*, 99.

12 Cai Qijiao, “Reading and Writing” in *The Two Rails of Poetry*, 93.

13 Cai Qijiao, “Opening the Heart’s Door – *The Sound of Waves*” in *The Two Rails of Poetry*.

14 Cai Qijiao, “The Space of Poetry—*Fujian*” in *The Two Rails of Poetry*, 123.

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