

On the Influence of Walt Whitman's Poetry in China

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Abstract. Walt Whitman is one of the most world renowned poets whose poems exert great influence to the poets worldwide, including Chinese poets. This thesis here tries to analyze the influence that Whitman has exerted to both literature and social structure in China. On the whole, the thesis starts with introduction of the great poet and then talks about three representative poets whose works have been greatly influenced by Whitman. They are Tian Han, Guo Moruo, and Hu Shih. Tian is the first person who introduced Whitman to China; Guo wanted to get rid of the old form and to try something new in style; Hu was one of the leading vanguards in the May-Fourth Movement. In addition, due to the influence of Whitman, some poetic schools were created which celebrated the ideology of democracy and freedom. The thesis here mentions three poetic schools: the Revolutionary Poetry School, the July Poetry School, and the Crescent Moon Poetry School.

Keywords: Walt Whitman, poetry, influence.

1. Brief Introduction of Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman, an American democratic poet, was born into a working-class family on May 31st, 1819, in West Hills, New York, a small village near Hempstead, Long Island. "*Leaves of Grass*" has been widely accepted by the readers both home and abroad as his most famous work, being edited and revised continuously until his death. In his poems, he did not apply traditional poetic forms to express his thoughts and emotions but free verse instead in his works, which was an unrhymed verse without a consistent metrical pattern. Whitman was not only a singer for the ideals of equality and democracy but also an advocate for human dignity. He devoted lifelong time for the advocacy of the self-reliant spirit and the joy of common American laborers. As a matter of fact, the American greatest poet's poems went a lot far beyond American subjects to deal with the universal themes of nature, fertility and mortality. His writing style of free verse and advocacy of democracy impacted not only the poets and writers in his own country and times but also other places in the world, including China. His works, so far, have been already translated into more than twenty-five languages, including Chinese language. Even today, some elements of his writing style still can be seen in the works of many poets throughout the world. Many foreign researchers proclaimed with strong confidence that Walt Whitman was the greatest of all American poets.

2. Celebrities Influenced by Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman influenced many Chinese celebrities both in ideology and writing style. Here I'd like to talk about three of them in this thesis, and they are Tian Han, Guo Moruo, Hu Shih.

2.1. Tian Han

Tian Han (1898-1968) was the first person who introduced Walt Whitman's poems to the Chinese readers in accordance with the study of the famous scholar Li Yeguang [2]. Presumably, it is the first time for some foreign experts, researchers, and scholars to hear Tian Han who composed the lyrics of Chinese national anthem. In order to mark the 100th anniversary of Walt Whitman's birth, a Walt Whitman craze gradually came into being in Japanese literature. Inspired by "the craze for Walt Whitman" in Japan, as an overseas student at the time, Tian Han released an article entitled "*Memorial of Poet Whitman a Civilian*" in "*Youths' China*" in July, 1919, calling for all the Chinese people to



better understand “the American Spirit” advocated by Whitman, to cultivate “the Chinese Spirit” and “the Civilian Art” as well, and thus laid a solid foundation for the recommendation of Walt Whitman’s free-style verse [4]. The article of “*Memorial of Poet Whitman a Civilian*” marked the beginning of the introduction of Walt Whitman and his poetry to the Chinese people. In the above-mentioned article, with about ten thousand words, Tian Han enthusiastically introduced this great American democratic poet to the Chinese readers. It not only commented on the poetic style and themes of Walt Whitman’s poetry but also translated some excerpts from Whitman’s “*Leaves of Grass*”, such as “*Song of Myself*”, “*I Sing the Body Electric*”, “*Too long, too long, America*”. During the period of studying in Japan, Tian read a lot of Whitman’s poetic works, and the themes advocated by Whitman attracted Tian deeply. With similar growing experiences and living backgrounds, Tian was crazy about Whitman and his works. Without any doubt, Tian made a great contribution to the wide spreading of Whitman’s ideology and his poetic works in China.

2.2. Guo Moruo

The second person whom I’d like to mention is Guo Moruo who was one of the founders of the Chinese New Poetry and the Historical Dramas. Guo was born in Leshan, Sichuan, in the year 1892. In his early years, he went to Japan for further education where he was significantly influenced by the thoughts of Benedictus Spinoza, Walt Whitman and so on, thereafter, he gave up the ideal of becoming a doctor, and turned to literary writing. Guo appreciated Whitman’s free-style verse, especially the unconventional and unrestrained poetic language. Like Whitman, Guo showed strong hatred on the poets who just applied literary imagination to convey the ideal of freedom, so he would like to create a new poetic form that differed from old Chinese poetry on the basis of imagination and creativity. What’s more, Guo inherited the features of Whitman’s poetry, such as passion, enthusiasm, positiveness, bravery, democracy and so forth, and inputted these features into his own poetic works. It is so hard to find great men as in hymns of the old world in Whitman’s poems, and what we can find in his poems are those in lower social classes. Guo accepted the idea of singing for the populace. His representative work is “*Goddess*” which fully embodies the poet’s piety to his idol—Walt Whitman [1]. Guo was influence by Whitman and his poetry not only in democratic and free style but also in the consciousness of “*Myself*”. “*Myself*” in the book is destined to revive. The revival will be obtained after suffering and torturing, and must be revived based on the whole destroy of “*Myself*”. “*Goddess*” is regarded as a classical work in Chinese literary creation. Today, some literary critics in China even call Guo Moruo as “China’s Walt Whitman”.

2.3. Hu Shih

Hu Shih (1891-1962) is the vanguard and advocate of Chinese new poetry [1]. Hu once had been an overseas student in the United States of America over the period of 1910-1917 when the free-style verse advocated by Walt Whitman gained great popularity. Because of the great impact from Walt Whitman, Hu feverishly dug into the poetic works by Whitman. After a large multitude of reading, Hu strongly and firmly believed the liberation of the literary style, and was the pioneer of “1919 New Culture Movement”. As one of the leading vanguards of “New Culture Movement”, he labeled “New Culture Movement” as the liberation for language and style. Whitman’s free verse poetry impacted Hu’s vernacular poetry a lot. Both vernacular poetry advocated by Hu and free style advocated by Whitman shared similar historical context. Both of them appeared at the entrance of a new literary transformation, and shoulder the historical mission of welcoming the new and getting rid of the old. The aim of Hu pushing vernacular poetry was to overthrow the classical Chinese literature and to establish vernacular Chinese literature. The same thing happened to Whitman. He’d like to break through the binding of English literature, and to establish in accordance with the requirements of American independent poetry. In the interpretation of vernacular poetic theory, Hu was inclined to the freedom of Whitman’s free verse in the freedom of segment, sentence-making and the advocate of prose poetry. However, due to the inner factors of vernacular poetic development process, there was no obvious evidence in terms of the acceptance of Whitman’s poetic imagery and style. Hu published his first book of vernacular poetry called “*Attempted Collection*” in 1920 [2]. He bravely

tried new elements in the language, form, poetic style of his own vernacular poetry. It was a poetic innovation which was different from the previous poetic revolution, though not prominent but profound in meaning. Hu's pre-May 4th vernacular poetry acted like a bridge between the old Chinese poetry and the new, which put an end to the classical form of Chinese poetry [1]. It initially established a new artistic form of Chinese poetry, transformed the classical and modern themes of Chinese poetry, and thus started a great "New Poetry Era". After decades of evolution, the structure of Chinese lyric poetry has undergone an overall sharp change, and all this began with Hu Shih's "*Attempted Collection*" which was composed greatly under the influence of Walt Whitman's spirit of free verse and democracy.

3. New Schools of Poetry

Due to the significant influence of Walt Whitman's poetry, the Revolutionary Poetry School, the July Poetry School, and the Crescent Moon Poetry School came into being.

3.1. The Revolutionary Poetry School

After the mid-1920s, the most significant change in Chinese poetry was the the arrival of revolutionary poems [3]. As for the cause of the phenomenon, it was mainly due to the tumult of the political and social situation at that time. The content of revolution and liberation was widely read in the poems created during that time of period. One of the leading members in Chinese Poetry Community called Pu Feng once said that as a response of the air attack he wrote a poem full of passion in the way Walt Whitman once did. Under the impact of the enthusiasm and democracy of Whitman, poets worrying about the fate of the country started to create poems that aimed to wake up the sleeping Chinese people at that time to stand up, to take up weapons and to fight for equality and democracy. Pu Feng's poems were imbued with momentum and pride, like a river surging forward. While reading, the lyrics of the poems, "*Fire! Fire! Fire! Heart Fire! Burn, burn, burn...*" , without any doubt, left a deep impression on all the readers. To some extent, the revolutionary poems literally conducted a push to the Chinese social transform.

3.2. The July Poetry School

Another poet group in China in the 1940s we have to discuss here was the July Poetry School which gained its name after the magazine of "*July*". It gained great popularity in the 1930s and 1940s and it was a very important realistic poetry genre in Chinese modern literature. The July Poem Parties emerged in the war against the Japanese invaders and crossed two historical periods of Anti-Japanese War and Chinese Liberation War. According to the critics today, there is no doubt that the July Poetry School is the longest and most influential literary school in China [3]. The representative poets of the July Poem Party were Ai Qing, Tian Jian, Zeng Zuo, Niu Han and so on. Through a deepening and continuous growth, the above-mentioned July Poetry School generally can be divided into three consecutive periods. The first period of time, ranging from Sept. 1937 to Sept. 1941, was marked by the establishment and final publication of the magazine of "*July*". The poets in the school of July conveyed the resentment against the enemy on witnessing the devastation of the whole country and people and were eager to stand for a fight. The second phase was from Wan'nan Incident (New Fourth Army incident) to the founding of the magazine of "*Hope*" in 1945. During this period of time, writers in the Kuomintang controlled areas were in extreme adversity. Poets in the July Poetry School mainly published their works in publications such as "*Half Moon Literature and Art*", "*Poetry Creation*", "*Poetry Reclamation Land*", whose headquarters were located in Guilin and Chongqing. Though difficult, the July Poetry School tried to explored more aspects of poetry and art. "*Hope*" magazine was founded in January 1945, and the July poetry school duly commenced the third phase. Chengdu's "*Ant Collection*," "*Breath*," and "*Wild Chicken Collection*" became three important peripheral publications of the July Poetry School after the "*Hope*" magazine ceased publication in 1946. But due to the political situation, literary works during this stage shifted gradually from optimism to pessimism. Though the poetic writing style of the July Poetry School has undergone changes

dramatically in three different periods, its fundamental creative theme has always been consistent and everlasting, trying to focus on the combination between poetry and the Chinese people. Under the influence of the American great poet Walt Whitman, poets of this school always created works with both a strong historical sense and the spirit of democracy and freedom. They were, without any doubt, the firm practitioners of the free-style verse. They paid special attention to the application of free language, special interest in the liveliness, brightness, abundance of colloquial expressions, and thought highly of the beauty of power. Though the poets in this school might be a little bit different in details in the composition, but they shared common features as well: advocate the tradition of revolutionary realism; integrate all the aesthetic fight, people's social responsibility and revolutionary task together; highlight the subjective spirit to take actions to transform the reality; apply free verse to pursue the beauty of poetry.

3.3. The Crescent Moon Poetry School

Another very influential poetry group in modern literature in China was the Crescent Moon Poetry School. Some critics said that poets in this group had close connections with Walt Whitman in writing style. The world-renowned poet Xu Zhimo accepted Whitman's poems and seriously started to learn [4]. Gradually, Xu started to try to translate some stanzas of Walt Whitman's "*Song of Myself*", though not that much in quantity, the translation indeed marked the commencement in studying Whitman and his poems as well. The translation of 1924 was not complete or perfect from today's perspective, but it was a step forward in history to study Whitman and his works. Because of the influence and inspiration from Whitman, Xu composed the "*Poetic Collection of Zhimo*". Another representative poet of this group was Wen Yiduo who highly appreciated Whitman's poems. The reason that Wen's poems were influenced greatly by the American poetry should be traced to his staying for overseas study in America. When he was in America, he paid close attention to the dynamic trend of the American literature and informed his domestic friends of the knowledge by letters. In the year 1923, he chose two literary courses as optional ones in Chicago Fine Arts Academy: "*Modern American and English Poetry, Alfred Tennyson Baron and Robert Browning*". His poetic life thus started by getting to know the American literature. Some people once said that Wen Yiduo was a milestone, who integrated Chinese and western in the poetic world. It was unavoidable that Walt Whitman's poetry impacted young Wen Yiduo whose writing style was not mature and fixed at that time. Under the influence of western literature, Wen's creation became more poetic and modern and Whitman's poetry made Wen from purely poetic to popularized and non-poetic. While studying in America, Wen established a journal called "*He Tu*", and in the second issue, the portrait of Whitman can be found there. So it is not hard to see that Whitman impacted him a lot. To some extent, Walt Whitman was the idol of Wen Yiduo.

4. Conclusion

Walt Whitman exerted great influence in China and his poems impacted not only the ideology of the people at that time but the life as well. Whitman's poems aroused people's aspiration for freedom and democracy. The poets at that time in China started to create Whitman-style poems with free verse technique [5]. The poems by Whitman gave hope to those who were in despair, gave strength to those who were in danger, and gave determination to the those living in injustice. The lyrics of Walt Whitman's poems unfolded an endless, revolutionary image before the Chinese people.

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