

## ESSAY

# Contemporary Technique and National Character in Fiction

By Gao Xingjian

**H**AT is usually meant by national form in Chinese literature? As far as poetry is concerned, it is more or less clear: it means primarily the tonal patterns and rhyme schemes of classical poetry, and the form of the folk ballad. National form in poetry refers to these two different poetic traditions. In Chinese fiction, we have, strictly speaking, only the traditional "linked-chapter" style, which very few novelists of today still employ. The fictional form which most Chinese writers have used since the May Fourth (1919) Movement is largely derived from the Western fictional tradition of the 18th and 19th centuries.

What traditional Chinese techniques

this way, thereby lessened or even obliterated the national character of their work? The answer is clearly "no".

**II** WHAT then is national character in literature? Turgenev spoke well when he said that his "nation" was the Russian language. A writer creates through language; the national character of his work derives first and foremost from his ability to exploit the artistic potential of that language.

China is a country of many nationalities, where Hanyu (the language of the Han people) is most commonly used. We may say that any literary work written in Hanyu, or in the languages of the other ethnic groups, reflects in varying degrees the character of the nation.

Language is a medium through

**L**anguage is a medium through which we think and convey our thoughts. A piece of work written in the native language of a nation will naturally reflect that nation's cultural tradition, way of life and mode of thought. Irrespective of how a Chinese writer may borrow from foreign techniques, inasmuch as he writes in good, typical Chinese, his work will definitely have a national flavour. The more he grasps the essence of his national culture, the more distinctive will be the national character of his work.

has modern Chinese fiction continued to use after it relinquished its traditional "linked-chapter" style? The most talkedabout technique in classical Chinese fiction is the method of "direct-portrayal" - a term borrowed from painting: sketching the outline with clearcut and simple strokes, and then adding the finishing touches to bring the work to life. As a way of writing fiction, this method is certainly unique. The writer interrupts his narration at a high point, having aroused the interest of the reader, who then has to wait for the outcome of the action in the next chapter.

Some novelists successfully employ this traditionalfictional technique. Some use it, but simultaneously adopt other techniques learnt from the Western realistictradition. The adoption of Western technique does not necessarily deprive a work of national character.

The question is this: have those writers since the May Fourth Movement who have not used the traditional direct-portrayal method as their chief means of expression (and they are by no means a minority), by abandoning tradition in

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**III** AS LONG AS a writer depicts national life in his native language, the more vivid his portrayal, the richer the national character of his work. The kind of technique employed is beside the point.

The Goddess, an anthology of Guo Moruo's early poems, was obviously composed under the inspiration of



The new Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian poses next to one of his paintings, 19 October 2000, at the Art of Paris exhibition in the Carroussel du Louvre.

- AFP PHOTO

Walt Whitman. Nobody however thinks these are foreign poems. The simple, free verse style of Ai Qing has not only taken nourishment from the impressionist and symbolist school, it also reflects the poet's conscious effort to break away from the Chinese poetic and folk ballad form. Lu Xun was even more extreme in advocating the "principle of taking whatever is useful". In

his fictional and poetical writings are blended the techniques of western critical realism, romanticism, impressionism, symbolism and even surrealism.

In his "Kuangren riji" (The diary of a madman), Lu Xun anticipated Kafka; he borrowed from Gogol the technique of the grotesque. His prose-poem "The Passer-By" differs little in form from the

plays of Pirandello, and was written several years before the plays of Ionesco and Beckett. He used the technique of symbolism in his "Medicine" and "Revenge"; of impressionism in his "The story of the good", "Snow", "The beggar" and "Autumn night"; and of surrealism (which had only then begun to emerge in the West) in "Dead fire", "The epitaph" and "Vibration". Even the way in which "The true story of Ah Q" was written has no precedent in classical Chinese fiction. Because Lu Xun focussed on the suffering and spirit of resistance of the Chinese people, their vacillation and cries of woe, and because of his superb mastery of the language, his work radiates a modern spirit-the revolutionary spirit of a people awakened from sleep, intent on liberating itself from the fetters of imperialism and feudalism.

**IV**

THE MOST distinguished modern Chinese novelists, Mao Dun, Ba Jin, Lao She and Ding Ling, have all blended western fictional techniques to form their own individual styles. The depth and breadth of reality reflected in their work, and the vivid depiction of characters from different strata of society far surpassed the achievement of those writers who closely adhered to the traditional way of writing. In the process of artistic creation, as long as the writer depicts social reality and characters vividly and realistically, he will automatically represent the social customs, the spiritual world and mode of thought of his nation. His work will have a distinctive national, or indigenous, character. The kind of technique used is beside the point.

Indigenization should not merely follow one singular pattern, just as a national language is not confined to a single style. National language is derived from the literary language of writers with the most character and stature. Once a writer has formed a style of his own, he will contribute to the national literature.

**V**

WHEN LU XUN wrote his "The story of Ah Q", he might not have been consciously seeking a national fictional form. However, his uniquely sober tone, which blended sympathy with satire, enabled him not only to recount the life and soul of a destitute peasant, but also to reflect the life and spirit which pervaded the semi-feudalist and semi-

colonial society of the time. When Romain Rolland, steeped in Latin culture and brought up in an entirely different society from that of Lu Xun, read this story, he was moved to tears. Ba Jin's "Family", which dwells on the destiny and aspirations of Chinese youth before and after the May Fourth Movement, also aroused the sensibility of many Western readers. This shows that if a writer succeeds in truthfully describing the life of the people, readers from other nations can equally be affected, can equally comprehend.

The appeal of a national literature lies in its ability to depict the life of the people as it truly is. Let us hope that the quest for a national form will not surplant this quest for truth.

(Sections VI, VII and the first paragraph of section VIII have been left out in this translation.)

**VIII**

ARTISTIC TECHNIQUE transcends national frontiers. It is not the monopoly of one particular nation. The spirit of a nation has its own long and distinctive history, much stronger and more lasting than the relatively short lifespan of a technique. It is the sum total of the nation's cultural tradition, social customs, psychological modes, aesthetic tastes and ways of thinking (as formed by the national language). The pursuit and absorption of new techniques is never an obstacle to the healthy development of a nation's literature.

The search for artistic devices and methods does not always bear fruit. If we are thwarted in our search, let us admit our failure. Almost all great artists and writers have experienced the bitterness of defeat. They do not consider that all their works will become classics and be handed down to posterity. There are indeed great works which, when first published, were not given recognition by society. History however holds the balance. Even if a work becomes a classic, it will be better if it serves as a stepping-stone for posterity, rather than a weight on their shoulders. This is the attitude one ought to take on the matter of tradition and innovation.

Translated by Ng Mau-sang  
Courtesy: Renditions

## BOOK REVIEW

# Bridging East and West

By Star Culture Desk

IT is a wonderful poetic attempt to make a bridge in between the philosophy, cultural affinities, ideals and thinking of the East and the West by a long time journalist overnight turned to be a poet Mr MA Rahman, who has a philosophic mind with the ideals for fighting for the poor and the oppressed which once, imbibed him to join hands with the freedom fighters for the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. In his earlier writings he upholds the principles of love for humanity above all castes, creed and dogmas. He believes in universal brotherhood of mankind irrespective of colours, beliefs and region and the main theme of the poems in "Poetic Bridge" reveals the truth of his ideals.

Poetic Bridge is an attempt to acquaint the readers in the West with the lyrical verses of the East, depicting the inherent mystical philosophy of life of the Asians specially the people of Bangladesh. It is probably one of the few complete books of poems by an Asian ever published in the USA. The poet has tried to portray the social, cultural and secular lifestyle of the people in Bangladesh. Two stanzas are quoted from the poem, "Apology" for the understanding of the critics:

"Our society is of enlightened simple people being influenced by Sufis and Mystics."

having taught to have faith in creator. They have been spiritual but not cynics." "We have honor in values of life, but we are not fanatics or fundamentalists. Our society is based on secularism."

No hatred, mistrust in between sects." In another poem, "About my Guru" the poet also tries to unearth the teachings of mysticism in our day to day life. The same philosophic theme is also in his poems, "Love Detached", "To my Lord", "Love in Nature", "The Cycle of Life", "Pangs of the Dead" and also in other poems.

The poet is disgusted and mortified to see the lack of moral responsibilities of the youths in the western world, much influenced by the Freudian dictum, is revealed in his several poems like "Broken Heart", "Let there Be Light", "The Virgin Mother Mary", "Devil and Man", "Child Abandoned", "The Mississippi", "Colorado" and other poems too. In his poem, "Broken Heart", Catherine, a beautiful young lady of eighteen is allured by her neighbors son Gohin Brown with his romantic gesture and in a church they are married. Days pass on in love and frivolities, a child borns to them. Catherine has lost her bodily charms and Brown neglects her and ultimately marriage is broken by court with alimony and other costs for Catherine. Here the poet questions with pathos:

"Can the law mend her broken heart?"

Does the law return back her beauty?

Her youth, charms and the days lost?

Society must come to punish the naughty."

In the poem, "Let there Be light" The poet exposes the deceitful character of modern Romeo's."

"They are everywhere beyond the Atlantic crossing the Pacific at the coast of the Indian Ocean. Wherever are they not?"

The poet suggests the remedies:

"The world is full of Jungles, Jungles of ignorance, dis-respect to ethical values in life, only the moral discipline is the remedy. Let there be light"

In the poem, "The Virgin Mother Mary," The poet puts the question:

"But what would happen to hundreds of virgin mothers all over the world? How could They give their child legal name?"

In the poem, "Devil and Man," the humiliated lady urged to her Romeo,

"Don't leave me, please, in wilderness urged the lady, ashamed, being naked But you did, you a carnivorous, It was not that what I wanted"

The poet asked a pertinent question in his poem, "Child Abandoned," to the civilised society world over to save the humanity:

"Virgin mothers must come out with courage and unmasked Those criminals to the society and book them to law."

But who are the fallen?

The faultless abandoned to the night.

Looked as fallen

But

the faulty fallen who abandoned the faultless child

looked as true sons of the soil."

In the poem "The Mississippi" and "Colorado" the poet recalls the days of torture and annihilation of the native and the black by the settlers:

"Tradition still here in America but in a different form. Lady-killers looked around



Poetic Bridge  
By M. A. Rahman  
170 PP, New York, USA  
Writers Club press \$11.95

allured and live-together  
Ran off and left women  
grumbling at delivery table."

The poet feels sad for the Bangladeshi boys legally or illegally staying in the United States of America. Mostly doing odd jobs with no holiday or recreation. The only object is to earn money and to obtain "Green Card" so that they can bring their wives, off-springs or can marry the lady-love left in Bangladesh. The poet, in his several poems namely, "Pains", "Sakina", "A Sweet Dream", he shares their pains, pathos and sorrows. To quote a few lines from his poem "Pains" he readers would also share the woes of the Bangladeshi

"She is now at sixteen  
Looking for me often  
Thinking and weeping for me  
while at bed at night.  
But I am in United States  
far away from her,  
for years together."  
In his poem "Sakina," the poet suggests that only the unmarried persons should be

allowed to go abroad for job seekings. "Sakina a village maid in Bangladesh almost mad to get his news, hundreds of Sakinas in Bangladesh

silently suffering from deluge."

In the poem, "A Sweet Dream," the poet shares the hopes and aspirations of a Bangladeshi young man having degree in Chemistry from Dhaka University washing dishes in a hotel, wishing to be immigrant. To quote a few lines,

"A few more years  
needed to be a citizen.  
I will have honour  
being a Bangali-American."

The poet having been connected with the war for liberation of Bangladesh has narrated the reasons for the arms struggle against the Pakistani Occupation Forces in his poems, "My grandma" and also the ambush of our valiant freedom fighters depicted in the poem "A tale of a Freedom Fighter" and also our struggle for nationhood in his poem, "Nationhood-To Be Earned." A few stanzas are being quoted from the above poems by grandmas."

"Bangladesh, your daughter, is my mother How can I tell a tale?  
My heart bleeds, trembles in anger,  
My hands stifle for a rifle."

"As the time fast passes on  
We realized mothers robes are stolen,  
Thunderous voice from Mujib coming on  
Commanding us all to be stiffen."

"The Pakistani witch with her hordes,  
plundered everything to my mother  
belongs what a shame for all of us!  
Naked mother is seen by sons."

"We are ashamed not for her.  
But for ourselves to break shackles  
of Pakistan to free our mother  
Three million died for driving jackals."

"A Tale of a Freedom Fighter," is a ballad the tragic episode of a valiant fighter sacrificed his lady-love for the country to quote a few heart-breaking words of the valiant fighter,

"I did not attend victory march,  
not even accept honor.  
Saleha is my Bangladesh  
I love her and be with her till death."

In the poem, "Sakina," the poet suggests that only the unmarried persons should be

"Life is to ensure peace and  
happiness for the generation to come."

In his poem, "The Concept of Life," The poet looks forward optimistically to the new concept of value of life due to the onward march of science to discover truth in men and matter. The new concept of value revealed in the following stanzas of the poem:

"Men now think of nuclear fission,  
fossils, new world in planets  
Scientific method of verification

the poet describes the phases of the movement to infuse cultural affinity of the people of Bangladesh to be united to have the spirit of nationalism and with a heavy toll a sea of blood, we earned nationhood. To quote an stanza the reader would understand what the poet wants to say.

"Nationhood is not a commodity purchasable  
nor a charity to be begged.  
Even it is not automatic  
but to be earned

"It is not as easy as  
bed of roses strewn over  
It is long struggle fiercely deadly."

The poet is an optimist, sincere in admitting the short comings of the eastern thinking and lack of knowledge in Physical Science and Technology. The poet urges the West to teach us modern science and technologies and offers them the eastern philosophy of moral code to make this planet an abode of peace and happiness. The optimism of the poet reveals in several of his poems like "The Earth Beyond", "An Appeal", "Life", "Concept of Life" and also in other poems. The following stanzas are quoted from "The Earth Beyond"

"Bothering nothing of what you say  
In delirium, I am sure,  
I would visit the galaxies, once  
visited by Moses, Jesus and Mohammad."

In the poem "An Appeal" the poet is enchanted with the scientific development of the West so that the people in the East can enjoy its fruits:

"In past centuries the West specially  
the USA made tremendous strides  
in physical science  
brought the USA to highest  
pinnacle of technology."

What we had read in Aesop's Fables and in Arabian Nights in our infancy, now seemed to be true as the Demons are slaves of Technocrats."

In the poem "Life," the poet describes the life as sweet an applejuice, lips of a lady-love, a baby laughs at a cradle, but also the life is action-struggle for survival. It is like a game of Matador or Radio. So quote a few lines the seadlers would understand what the poet wants to say.

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unmasked fundamentalists reactions to reality.

Physical science would teach men to live on reality and help to be self-reliant in material needs and happiness."

The poet believes in absolute freedom of man and woman along all social barriers and the philosophy of life is to love-love for humanity. There is nothing above man and man is the builder of his own destiny. This is the theme which more or less expressed in all his poems of "Poetic Bridge." The poet in his poem, "Woman" he tries to portray the history of womenfolk from prehistoric period to all civilizations and the struggle for emancipation in