Postmodernity of HAN Dong's Poetry*

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With the influence of postmodernism, "Third Generation" poetry rushes out of elite literature and makes Chinese new poetry focus on everyday life of common persons. As one of the most important representatives of "Third Generation" poets, HAN Dong has created many distinct postmodernist poems. Rejecting metaphor and symbolization, he takes an oral language of original ecology as his poetical discourse mode to affirm the everyday life of here and now, and then both deconstruct metaphoric and symbolic writing of "Misty Poetry" and construct a writing mode of "aestheticization of life". HAN Dong's poetry can be taken as a kind of construction in deconstruction.

Keywords: HAN Dong, poetry, postmodernity, "Third Generation" poetry, "Misty Poetry"

Introduction

HAN Dong is not an idealist and what he tries his best to do is to "show common people's everyday life, grasp their changes of emotions and feelings, portray their anger, joy, sadness, and happiness so as to express his deep understanding and sympathy" (CHEN & TAN, 2002, p. 51). Essentially, his writing belongs to postmodernist one which means "disillusionment of arts' sublime" and "an aestheticization of life (or everyday things and events)" (Yip, 2004, p. 28). Rejecting metaphor and symbolization, HAN Dong takes an oral language of original ecology as his poetical discourse mode to affirm the everyday life of here and now and then create his writing principle of "aestheticization of life".

Rejecting Metaphor and Symbolization

In China, "Misty Poetry" carries forward modernist poetry's tradition on images and its most important contribution is "to introduce image as a writing mode and give Chinese new poetry a vivid vitality"; "Misty Poetry" displaces "clear expression or narration" with "metaphor or suggestion of images" (XIE, 1990, p. 1). But images in "Post-Misty Poetry" becomes some kind of patterned signals of ideological discourse and loses their life impulsion. As one of the most important representatives of the "Third Generation" poets, HAN Dong,

* **Acknowledgements:** A project supported by Scientific Research Fund of Sichuan Provincial Education Department: Comparative Study on Chinese and American Postmodernist Poetry's Occurrence (16SB0224) and Chongqing program of postgraduate innovative research: Comparative Study on Postmodernist Poems of the Third Generation and the Beat Generation (CYB14065).

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through rejecting metaphor and symbolization, manages to discard this image writing so as to reconstruct a new writing style which aims to reach directly the thing itself. In this way, HAN Dong is able to stand out of the mainstream ideology and express freely everyday life.

You Have Seen Sea can be seen as a writing model of "aestheticization of life".

You have seen sea / You have imagined / sea / You have imagined sea / then saw it / just so... // You have seen sea / You have imagined sea too / You do not want / to drown in the water / just so / Everyone is like so. (HAN, 1996, p. 59)

In a really long poetical tradition, especially in "Misty Poetry", "sea" is always metaphor and symbolization of big words such as "freedom", "sublime", "vastness". In this poem, however, "sea" is out of any kind of metaphor and symbolization. "You have seen sea / You have imagined / sea" repeats with rhythm, which makes the reader approve from their deep heart the poet's idea: "You" as a common person can just imagine or have a look at "sea"; no matter through direct everyday experience (see sea) or through fictional actions of metaphor and symbolization (imagine sea), "sea" is "sea" and "you" are "you". There is not any change of essence. In order to prevent the reader from seeking the "meaning" behind of the "image", the poet emphasizes again and again: "just so", "at best it's so", "everyone is like so". In a word, sea exists only as a thing, a scenery at best. And, if "you" want to enter "sea" because "you" like it, the end is that "you" "drown in the water"—"this imagination is more horrible than 'see' and 'imagine', for it means that reaching the truth is death itself, in fact, between 'you' and 'sea', there is no real relationship" (LONG, 2003, p. 468). "You do not want / to drown in the water / just so / Everyone is like so" is a kind of humorous irony, which belittles those literatus' romantic reverie about "sea" and highlights everyday life of common people. Moreover, narrative tone of the poem subverts symbolic and metaphoric expression of "Misty Poetry".

HAN Dong's famous poem *About Giant Wild Goose Pagoda* (HAN, 1993, p. 240) was written in 1982 when "Misty Poetry" has grasped the attention of the reader all over the country. Recalling the writing process of the poem, HAN Dong said:

Before arriving at Xi'an, I have just read YANG Lian's epic poem "Giant Wild Goose Pagoda". In this boastful poem, Giant Wild Goose Pagoda is golden, glorious and elegant. At first, my disappointment focuses on Giant Wild Goose Pagoda itself. Then I come to understand it's because of YANG Lian's poem. In the simple field of vision at this very moment, Giant Wild Goose Pagoda is only a grey profile under the northern sky. Its simple form and restraining spirit gets to touch me. This is an important period when my aesthetic view comes to take shape. (HAN, 1998, p. 156)

Indeed, embodying HAN Dong's aesthetic turn from imitating metaphoric and symbolic writing mode of "Misty Poetry" to the writing model of "aestheticization of life", *About Giant Wild Goose Pagoda* is the poet's first brave attempt on dispelling historical deepness and cultural symbol of Giant Wild Goose Pagoda and "heroes". It is safe to say that the poem indicate aesthetic turn of the whole "Third Generation" poets and it "may be considered as the writing 'Charter' of the new-born generation, which deconstructs 'holy words' and has some kind of postmodernist implication" (CHEN, 1999, p. 892).

The first two lines of the poem—"About Giant Wild Goose Pagoda / what can we really know more"—have a questioning tone which seems to express that Giant Wild Goose Pagoda do not have any deep historical meanings which are just imposed on it. "Many persons comes from a long long place / for climbing up / to become a hero for one time", Giant Wild Goose Pagoda at this moment is not a colossus which symbolizes

culture, nation, and tradition, but a tool for some common person to “climb up” and “become a hero for one time”. “Those frustrated persons / those getting-fatten persons / all climb up / to become a hero for one time / then come down / and enter this street / disappearing in an instant”, those persons who “climb up” to “become a hero for one time” only wants to make a daydream of being a “hero” and then comes back into mediocrity of everyday life. But what about those who do not want to make this kind of daydream and “come down”? “Sometimes, some gutsy one jumps down / and draws a red flower on the steps / then a real hero appears / a contemporary hero”. Not wanting to “come down” but “jump down” to kill himself and become “a contemporary hero”, “some gutsy one” is not a brave hero in the meaning of sublime but an unnecessary and meaningless person who are wandering in an extremely painful depression for he can not find his place in the real society. Hence, in the second section, “We climb up / to have a look at the scenery / then comes down”, the poet seems to highlight that we as the common people climb up Giant Wild Goose Pagoda to be not “a hero for one time” or “a contemporary hero” but be ourselves who go up to the Pagoda for the scenery and then “come down” to the solid land. We are doomed to return back to everyday life, even though it is not so glorious as those Utopian historical imagination.

Highlighting Oral Language of Original Ecology

Rejecting metaphor and symbolization and subverting aesthetic view of sublime so as to construct aestheticization of everyday life of postmodernist poetics need to be implemented in language. Because written language embodies the deepest sedimentary deposits of culture and tradition, HAN Dong pays great attention to use those oral language of original ecology without much metaphor or symbolization so as to reach the thing or event itself.

In *About Giant Wild Goose Pagoda*, the poet does not use those big words and complicated figures of speech. Instead, he has made a simple narration with everyday oral words, such as “come”, “climb up”, “getting-fatten”, “some gutsy one”, and so on. These oral words are effective to dispel metaphor and symbolization out of the sign of language and express the thing itself. Critic CHENG once made a semantic analysis on the poem:

As an objective adverbial modifier, the semantic relationship of “About Giant Wild Goose Pagoda” is ironic. “About” is at will, which weakens the rich implication of the noun behind... “What”, “know more”, “can”, “we”, all these words have different property and different signifier scope, which are enough to make the reader get many different interpretations on the “real attitude” of the poem. (CHENG, 1990, p. 124)

Anyway, the poem has deconstructed the symbolic and metaphoric system and sublime of Giant Wild Goose Pagoda through a kind of writing of oral language of original ecology, which provides a writing mode for “Third Generation” poets’ common life narration since 1980s.

In the same way, the poem *You Have Seen Sea* can be considered another typical writing which makes the best use of oral language of original ecology, especially on its phonic practice. Some oral words, such as “have seen”, “have imagined”, and “just so”, are used over and over, which makes a simple, slow, and circulating rhythm so as to displace the vast, mysterious, deep, and lofty sea with the sea as a common thing without cultural or historical symbol and metaphor.

In fact, when the two poems deconstruct those historical and cultural symbols or metaphors which prevent the common persons to find their own thoughts and feelings, they really “create another kind of dignity and beauty for they identify with the real part of everyday life of common persons, confirm those specific humanity

and do not let those paradoxical, absurd and ambivalent background destroy the spirit of human beings" (WANG, 1993, p. 212). This can be taken as a kind of construction in deconstruction.

Postmodernist View of Time and Space: Now and Here

As to time and space, postmodernism highlights now and here for history is not a whole one but full of trivial and artificial histories. In China, history and culture are always huge and lofty. To "Misty Poetry" poets, history and culture means metaphor and symbol; their digging this metaphoric history deeper and deeper only leads to dream for a better future. In this way, life itself is in a fake shape for it is trapped into a double fantasy of a more meaningful past and a brighter future. This view of time and place is what HAN Dong aims to subvert for he focuses on every life's instant feelings, action and thoughts of now and here.

Darkness in the Airport is good poem with this kind of postmodernist view of time and space.

Gentle time has gone, today / I face the darkness of the airport / Busy sky has disappeared, lonely and heavy fog / geometrical bleakness, just like / denying the reason of past events / diffuse fog follows me / like forgetting / the beloved at hand or the only stranger // ...mature one needs safe life / perfect body has risen and gone / but humble soul is still creeping on the ground... (HAN, 2002, p. 250)

In the beginning, the poet highlights that gentle time has gone and so today "I" have to face up to "geometrical bleakness" with no time and space: "the darkness in the airport" and "heavy fog" have made the boundary of time and space unrecognizable and so "I" deny "the reason of past events" in the latitude of time; "the only stranger" may be "the beloved at hand", which is a paradoxical but real feeling: Without boundary of time and space, a stranger can psychologically be the beloved. Moreover, the poet's loneliness is portrayed through this paradox. However, even though facing up to this painful but unspeakable loneliness and the disappearing "perfect body", the "humble soul" which rejects symbolic history and culture is "still creeping on the ground" and leads an everyday life of now and here.

Conclusion

With the influence of postmodernism, "Third Generation" poetry rushes out of elite literature and makes Chinese new poetry focus on everyday life of common persons. As one of the most important representatives of "Third Generation" poets, HAN Dong has created many distinct postmodernist poems which both deconstruct metaphoric and symbolic writing of "Misty Poetry" and construct a writing mode of "aestheticization of life".

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