

1. Father and His Poems

He is not a poet, yet his heart abounds with poetry.

— a note to the title (2001)

I sculpted a portrait of Father for his 66th birthday. That was six years ago. He was an ordinary intellectual, and this sculpture was only an expression of my special affection for him as a son. This sculpture was later cast in bronze:

This is a real life portrayal, but more significantly, it is the Father framed in the depths of my memories. Since I began remembering things, I rarely saw my parents smile. Mother was always frowning with worries. Among seven of their children, I was the fifth child. Father was the sole breadwinner of the family. In 1967, Father, with a black placard hung on his neck, paraded the streets with a group labelled “Cow Monsters and Snake Demons”¹ who wore hats, for a public persecution. However, fortunately, he was not bound and forced to crawl on the streets, like some others were. At a rally of denouncement, Father stood on the stage as a Red Guard read out his “crimes”, to which he did not bow his head in shame. Instead, I saw him getting in line every morning in front of the statue of Chairman Mao to “seek forgiveness”.

In the hot summer of 1969, on his 40th birthday, Father wrote while he was wrongly accused and tortured in the “cowshed”²:

*For 20 years, I have been loyal and faithful,
Devoting myself to education without any sloth.
Calamity befalls and I have been turned into a devil,
I sit in the cowshed, scorning at the cold harsh reality with bitter hatred.*

At that time, Father wore a black cord cotton coat, cotton trousers and a hat. Due to his persecution, I was also vilified and discriminated against by classmates when I was in Elementary Grades One and Two. In the harsh winter of 1969, Father was ordered to go to the countryside and the whole family followed him. My 80-year-old grandfather, grandmother, 4-year-old

¹ A term used to vilify landlords, rich farmers, anti-revolutionaries, rightists, intellectuals and any that were perceived to be inclined to capitalism during the Cultural Revolution.

² A place where “cow monsters and snake demons” were imprisoned.



brother and 6-year-old sister all became new peasants. Because of this order, Father was delivered from the hardships of persecution. He devoutly learned from the poor and lower-middle class peasants and saw the simplicity and sincerity in them. He decided to reform himself thoroughly, often singing the song *We Advance on the Broad Road*. He also got up early in the morning to see the sun rise over the vast land. All my elder sisters and brothers dropped out of school to work as peasants. They dug rivers and collected dung in winter, harvested crops and generated green manure in summer. Father experimented to produce this “920” pesticide and reared 100 chickens, which became news in the neighbourhood. Unexpectedly, when the movement of “One Attack and Three Oppositions”³ started, Father became the “live target” in this movement. The work group portrayed him as a typical example of capitalism. Later, his superior transferred him to learn at one of the “May 7 cadre schools”⁴, and he was spared from being persecuted again. Not long after, Father was summoned to return to school to teach. With gratitude to the Communist Party, he worked with zeal and passion. He was childlike and upright, but vulnerable, sensitive and emotional. Becoming a teacher again, he joyfully wrote:

*Blurring the line of truth and error is absurd in itself,
Talking about it, I am inflicting hurt on myself.
Rain suddenly pours from the sky,
Making withered vines, wild grass and elms rejoice.*

During this period, he wore a dark blue Chinese tunic suit.

In the mid-70s, everyone in the country followed Zhang Tiesheng (张铁生) to hand in unanswered examination scripts, but Father always urged us brothers to study, and read poetry. He made little booklets, copied classic poems, verses and aphorisms in it, and let us memorize and recite them. He woke up at 5 am, prepared lessons and recited poems under a kerosene lamp. By 7 am, the corners of his lips were filled with saliva. He loved reading *Li Sao*, talking about the *Dreams of the Red Chambers*, discussing Li Bai (李白) and Du Fu (杜甫), admiring Wang Bo (王勃), eulogising Su Dongpo (苏东坡).

³ To attack counter-revolutionary activities and to oppose corruption, engagement in speculation and extravagance.

⁴ Set up in late 1968, in accordance with Mao Zedong’s May 7 Directive, which was released on 7 May 1966. In this directive, Mao suggested setting up farms, later called cadre schools, where cadres and intellectuals, “sent down” from the cities, would perform reformative manual labour and undergo ideological re-education.



He particularly liked those tragic patriotic poems, wailing and weeping when he recited portions that were spirited or intensely deep. He was also good at cutting newspaper articles and making them into scrapbooks, showing great concern for current affairs and closely following the situations outside. He held Lu Xun (鲁迅) in high esteem, filling the house with hangings of his handwritten works of Lu Xun's poems and famous quotes. All these enabled youths like us who, at that time, could only learn from textbooks and poems and verses of Mao Zedong (毛泽东), to be nourished with some traditional culture, and to understand the standard-bearers of the New Culture Movement at an earlier time. The *Bronze Sculpture of Lu Xun* which I later made, as part of the series of sculptures of China's historical and cultural figures, had inner connections with the early impact of Father on me. One very deep impression I had was this: on a summer night, Father called me into a mosquito net and read to me *On Detailed Description*. This article seemed to be the work of Wu Diaogong (吴调公), which was published in *Xin Hua Daily*. I was in lower secondary then. He instilled in me some literary theories, emphasized the "class nature" of literary, which mainly came from the *Speech by Mao Zedong at the Literary Symposium in Yan An*. He was full of understanding and passion as he talked about this.

In 1978 and 79, I failed twice in the college entrance examination, later entering Wuxi Industrial Arts School to learn clay sculpture, hopes of entering college dashed. I was lost and discouraged. Father wrote a poem to encourage me, sending me across the river to the foot of Mount Hui, where I began my scale to the peak of art:

*Laughing at obstacles despite the failure to enter college,
The journey of art commences without delay.
Looking at the sky from the bottom of the well invariably leads to a narrow view,
Sailing across Yangtze River opens up new vista.*

For many years, I took this as a form of motivation. Whenever I think of this, the spectacular scene of crossing Yangtze River from northern Jiangsu province comes to my mind — the boisterous waves, surging to the east....

In 1982, Father retired. With the regrets of unfulfilled ambitions, he lamented, "Though the flesh is weak, the spirit is willing. How could I bear to forsake my ambition? I hope to be restored in future, visiting the beautiful land again."

At that time, I had graduated from the arts school. Unemployed at home, I made a portrait of Father with bamboo brushes and ink. This portrait was well preserved even till now, but the newspaper articles had turned yellowish. From the spirit of the portrait, he kept the sages of old in his heart, often reciting "Leaning on lonesome pine, I linger on". The corners of his lips



were tightly sealed and sagging, revealing his inner world of “starting from scratch to gallop speedily with great ambition”. Not long after, he sighed at being “a sick horse wailing in the manger”, immediately thinking of “reviving the ambition”, thus setting up the “Soaring Education Centre”. “Soaring” delivered good results in the yearly college entrance examination. Elated, Father regained the fighting spirit of the past, and wrote a highly spirited “Song of Soaring Education Centre”: “Hong Bridge in Yankou is clad with the splendour of spring. This is where palatial ‘Soaring’ educates its students. It is gratifying to see the abundance of talents mushrooming. It is my great pleasure to nurture students through running this centre. The soaring of China relies on these talents.”

During this period, my siblings and I were all working and hence my parents had no financial burden. The unfair political treatment and mental stress which Father suffered for many years were all gone. Through setting up the education centre, Father found his value in his old age, redressing all the suppression he experienced in the past.

On hindsight, Father’s experience mirrored, to a certain extent, the fate of a generation of ordinary intellectuals. I was born in 1962, amid the onslaught of natural disasters which lasted for three years. It was told that when Mother gave birth to me, the only nourishment she received, during her confinement month, was the soup boiled using a few small fishes. My parents did their best to raise us. Now among us siblings, some become workers, civil servants, doctors and university professor; some changed occupations midway, but all worked conscientiously in their own vocations. This had much to do with Mother’s life examples of honesty, simplicity and diligence and Father’s poetry education which was filled with passion and reason.

Now my parents are old. Father wrote a poem in October 1998, on Mother’s 70th birthday:

*Sharing weal and woe for 50 years,
I witness your virtues and faithfulness through the storms of life.
Now enjoying the fruits of having raised our children,
We, the humble couple, rejoice in this occasion.*

The thoughts and feelings were so perfectly expressed in this poem. Though Father was then already 72, he was still childlike. It seemed that the glow of dreams was only a step away from him. He pursued it every day, gaining new hopes every day. When he came to Nanjing, he enjoyed visiting historical sites along Qinhuai River, strolling in the old campus which he once studied in, talking about those professors who taught him before when he was in university: Chen Shouzhu (陈瘦竹), Zhu Tong (朱彤), Zhu Zugeng (诸祖耿), Meng Shengrui (蒙圣瑞)... He missed those good old





Soul of the Nation — Sculpture of Lu Xun (partial view), 2006. Bronze

Sculpted with knife, it is hard and cool.
In simplicity, I seek accuracy, forming the image with sculpting knife.
With swift and sharp strokes, the spirit comes into being.
This is the hardest skull —
The pillar of our nation.



days, often remembering my great-great grandfather Gao Yedong (高也东) who was then an imperial scholar, my great granduncle Gao Ershi (高二适) and Professor Zhao Jiwu (赵继武) who was the son of the sister of my maternal grandmother. Father's self-confidence and pride were unconsciously exuded when he related to the cultural heritage of the family. In particular, Gao Ershi, with his influence on China's modern and contemporary era as a master of culture, also aroused in Father a deep sense of attachment to the early education he received from him. "The excellent literary talent of Gao Ershi leave him great honour in the annals of history, he is known to the world as a star in the sky."

Now, he pinned the hope of fulfilling this cultural ideal on the third generation. This was not only due to the common traits of the elderly, but also the habitual thinking mode and responsibility of educators. Among his several hundred poems, this portion of content glitter with the light of love marked by "humanity" — it was an ode to the true meaning of life. His goals of education encompassed "love": love the country, love the people, and love the career...the core was to love the country. This was how an upright intellectual really felt. Father could not be regarded as a poet, but his heart was filled with poetry. He used poems to express his ideals and passion for life, which were very genuine. Some poems related to the political situation at that time, which were not purely art or literature, but under the guiding principle of creative writing where "content determines the form", it was inevitable that an ordinary intellectual be influenced and manipulated. This was exactly a true record of his life and feelings. He has also written lots of idyllic poems. The home-bound sails, smoke from kitchen chimneys, aquatic birds that dwell along the shore and hilly woods once described by ancient poets had been redefined with new meanings in these poems. These complemented those political poems as a more complete revelation of his spiritual state, which was natural, relaxed and free-spirited.

The sound of a vertical flute gives a distant feeling, seemingly coming from ancient times, yet appears to flutter in the boundless void of future. Its melodious and rhythmic tunes resemble Father and his poems....





Soul of the Nation — Lu Xun, 2006. Bronze

"Abundant thoughts are linked with vast universe while shocking thunders are heard in places of silence."

I love reading Lu Xun's poems since young. When I was a child, my house was filled with hangings of Father's handwritten works of Lu Xun's poems. Imagery of a few decades has turned into an immortal soul towering over Earth.



Soul of the Nation — Lu Xun (side-view of full body), 2006. Bronze

"Forbearing to watch my friends turn into ghosts, I angrily face the crowd holding knives, seeking the little poem."

This figure becomes the everlasting memory of all who seek the soul of the nation, just like a monument that perpetually moves forward.





The Independent and Boundless Gao Ershi, 1998. Bronze. Now at Gao Ershi Memorial in Jiang Yan.

Gao Ershi is an outstanding modern poet, scholar and calligrapher of our country.

Treading the literary arena in a spirited manner and with an air of scholarly refinement.

