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From the Shadow-Shooter in the Shijing
to Shadow-Shooting Literature in the
People's Republic of China

FROM THE SHADOW-SHOOTER IN THE SHIJING TO SHADOW-SHOOTING
LITERATURE IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

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The ghostly presence of Yu 蜮, the river demon, also known as 'shaying' 射影 (shadow-shooter), has loomed here and there throughout the literature and historiography of the People's Republic of China down to the present day. Old tradition has it that it lurks in rivers with the mischievous intention of spewing with sand the reflections in the water of unsuspecting passers-by who then invariably fall ill or even die. 'In the shape of a tortoise, with a mouth like a crossbow' was the epithet applied by Chen Shuyu 陈漱渝 in the article entitled 'Diabolic Intrigues' in the 'Renmin Ribao' (People's Daily) of the 5th December 1977. In addition to a sketch of the legendary animal, Morohashi's 'Great Chinese-Japanese Dictionary' (Tokyo 1955) notes the following characteristics of 'eyeless head with feelers, acute hearing, three feet, and an armour-plated winged back'.

China's oldest anthology, 'The Book of Songs', ostensibly compiled by Confucius, contains a reference to the legendary Yu. 'Were you a spirit or Yu you could not be caught hold of' is written in the ode 'What kind of a man is that!' (he ren si 何人斯) in which, according to the traditional Chinese interpretation of the poem, the author accuses an old friend of apparent calumny. About a thousand years later there appear the following lines on the subject of Yu: 'Sand shot from the mouth onto the shadows of people brings illness upon them, but its real cause remains a mystery.' Thus begins the fourth of five poems on the 'Reading of Historical Works' (du shi wu shou 讀史五首) from the pen of Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846) who with over 2800 poems to his credit counts as the most prolific of the over 2200 poets of the Tang era (618-907). Here he is pondering over the fate of four victims of devious intrigues famous in Chinese history.

One story Bai Juyi is alluding to finds its origin in the book

'Han Feizi' compiled after the death of the famous legalist Han Fei 韓非 (280-233 B.C.). The king of Wei donated to the king of Chu a beautiful woman. The wife of the king of Chu feigned a great affection for that woman. Thereby she succeeded in convincing her husband that she was free of any feelings of jealousy towards the newcomer who on her side came to place great trust into the king's wife. At this stage, the king's wife confided in the new concubine to the effect that the king loved everything about her except the shape of her nose and that therefore she should cover her nose whenever the king appeared. The concubine followed this advice. Later the king asked his wife why his new love always covered up her nose. The wife answered that she had recently been told by that concubine that she disliked the body odour of the king. Upon this, the king was so furious that he ordered the nose of that beautiful woman to be cut off. This was the end of her love story at the court of the king of Chu. Just as the mythical shadow-shooter attacks only the shadows of men passing the river, the wife of the king of Chu succeeded in eliminating her rival through clandestine slander. In both cases, the victims are unaware of the reasons for their sudden misfortune.

Whereas in earlier literature secret villains had occasionally been revealed as shadow-shooters, from the mid-sixties in the People's Republic of China, certain literary works themselves were suddenly denounced as vehicles of shadow-shooting. In fact, the 'crime of shadow-shooting' (yingshezui 影射罪) numbered among the most pernicious grounds for prosecution of the 'literary inquisition' (wenziyu 文字獄) prevalent during the Cultural Revolution. 'Those authors caught in the cross-fire of criticism were arbitrarily accused of shooting at the shadows of first this and than that target', writes Hao Bing 郝兵 in his essay 'A Few Thoughts on the Question of 'Shadow-shooting'' ('yingshe' wenti xiao yi 影射問題小议) in the Peking bi-monthly magazine 'Literary Review' (Wenxue Pinglun 文学评论) No. 1/ 1979. It is the contention of Hao Bing that literature tends to allegory and this invariably presents hard-pressed critics with the opportunity of tracking down an

intended shadow-shot even in narratives of a most innocuous nature.

Imperceptibly Yu shoots the shadow of the passer-by; the literary shadow-shot too, avoids perception. Whether the allusion secretly finds its target or conversely, a literary work or part there of is revealed to be a shadow-shot, -in both cases only a twisted logic achieves the object.

It is a 'direct target' (ming bazi 明靶子) which comes under direct and open fire, and this is in the form of some kind of negative symbol, representing the shadow spat at by the 'Yu'. The man on the river bank is the 'indirect target' (an bazi 暗靶子) of shadow-shooting literature. It is not the shadow or 'direct target' which is brought down by the shooting sand, but the man on the bank, the 'indirect target', without his becoming aware of the surreptitious attack and being able to defend himself. The ultimate target of shadow-shooting literature is therefore not the 'direct', but the secret 'indirect' target.

The direct and indirect targets should be similar but not exactly identical. This is to provide the author with an escape route in view of the social conditions forming a prerequisite for shadow-shooting literature, namely: 'absence of democracy and of freedom of speech in addition to a lack of personal security'. It is in these terms in any case that Hao Bing qualifies the environment which previously gave rise to Chinese shadow-shooting literature. The author hovers between hope and trepidation: between the earnest desire that the reader might understand his message, while on the other hand in fear of an unpropitious discovery.

In this contingency there is a still more devious form of shadow-shooting open to him: an attack on the 'indirect target', not in the form of criticism of a literary negative symbol, but on the contrary, in the guise of praise, of affirmation. The 'direct target' in this case of a thoroughly positive poetic assertion, is usually an innocuous symbol of the opposite of that which is under attack, namely the 'indirect target'.

'In the infinite universe nothing is purely unequivocal', acknowledges Yu Tingying 虞挺英 on the feuilleton page of 'Renmin Ribao' of 11th July, 1979. 'That is why the possibility can never be completely excluded that intentional distortion can be proved on the flimsiest of evidence.'

During the Cultural Revolution 'natural descriptions were interpreted as shooting at the shadows of actual social phenomena; general comments on life in society invited the accusation that one was shooting at the shadows of the Chinese Communist Party and Socialism'. This is the complaint of Yang Shu 杨述 (Guangming Daily 22. December 1978) and he should have known. In 1962 he published the column 'Spring Talk' in the 'Peking Evening News', his very first contribution to which was a reflective piece under the title of 'Longing for Spring' (wang chun 望春). The very title came under attack in the published denunciation of Yang Shu's column in the 'Guangming' of 7th June 1966 as a shadow-shot aimed at the socialist revolution, for in socialist China there is no longer any necessity to wait for Spring. 'Longing for Spring' can therefore only be interpreted as a desire for the restoration of capitalism.

Similarly in 1962, Tao Zhu 陶铸 (died 1969, rehabilitated end of 1978) published a collection of essays which ran to 26 editions and 1 500 000 copies in record time. The criticism to which this bestseller was subjected in 1967 is censured by Ma Qi 马奇 in a long article ('Guangming' 15 December, 1978). One of the essays was, for example, dedicated to the 'Nature of the Fir Tree' and described how its branches 'keep off the burning heat of the summer sun and afford relief for men under its green shade'. From these lines the cultural revolutionary critic managed to derive a shadow-shot aimed at Mao. For 'nothing can withstand the sunlight radiating from the thoughts of Mao Zedong'.

The Shanxi opera 'Ascending the Peach Mountain Three Times' (san shang Taofeng 三上桃峰), performed at the North Chinese Drama Festival in 1974, was reviewed in the 'Renmin Ribao' of 28 February, 1974. The opera describes how members of the

Apricot Mountain Brigade sell a sick horse to the Peach Mountain Brigade on the false pretence that it is healthy. Later the head of the party unit of the Apricot Mountain Brigade uncovers the deception. He goes three times to Peach Mountain in person to return the money and make his apologies. One of the charges of the 'Renmin Ribao' culminated in the assertion that the authors of the play had resorted to the low trick of 'spewing sand on shadows' (han sha she ying 含沙射影), for after a vigorous ride the sick horse 'breaks out in sweat over its whole body, its four legs begin to tremble, it falls to the ground and dies'. The action takes place early in 1959. 'That was the very time when our people, under the leadership of the revolutionary line of Chairman Mao, were triumphantly advancing, holding high the three revolutionary red banners of the general line of socialist construction, the Great Leap Forward and the People's Communes. In such a chronological framework the authors present a 'parable' over a 'sick horse'! Can there be any doubt at whom the point of the spear is directed?...'

This shadow-shooting witch-hunt in the afore-mentioned regional opera is now ridiculed by Jiang Yuanming 蒋元明 ('Guangming', 29. October 1978). It is also a matter of notoriety today that this clique which during the Cultural Revolution accused others of shadow-shooting, for their part had been veteran shadow-shooters, proponents of their own brand of 'shadow-shooting historiography' (yingshe shixue 影射史学). This allegedly culminated in the mid-seventies in the so-called campaign against Confucius. According to present-day Chinese interpretation in numerous pamphlets, Confucius was however merely promoted as the 'bright target' in order to a camouflage attack against 'dark targets' such as Zhou Enlai and other contemporary Chinese political figures.

To take one example, some anti-Confucian pamphlets of Yang Rongguo 杨荣国, the author of 'History of Thought of Ancient China' (first edition Peking 1954, second edition Peking 1973) among others, are analysed as belonging to the species of 'shadow-shooting historiography' by Shi Jun 史钧 in the 'Renmin

Ribao' of April 19, 1978. In the autumn of 1975, Yang Rongguo allegedly attacked Confucius because in 485 B.C., he 'sprang up from his sickbed' in order to urge Duke Ai 哀 of Lu 魯 to send a punitive expedition against Tian Chengzi 田成子 who had killed Duke Jian 簡 of Qi 齐, the 'boss of the slaveholder class'. According to the correct historical records, so states Shi Jun, Confucius asked Duke Ai of Lu to attack Qi in 481 B.C., not as Yang Rongguo puts it, in 485 B.C. In 481 B.C. Confucius was not ill at all, writes Shi Jun who conjectures that Yang Rongguo falsified history only in order to 'shoot at the shadow of Prime Minister Zhou who, although suffering an illness, nevertheless, with typical courage and determination, persevered conscientiously with his work'. This is one of the several verdicts given by Shi Jun in his article entitled as 'Critical Remarks on the Shadow-shooting Historiography of a certain Professor'.

However, as seen from the dialectical point of view which is predominant in the official thinking of the PRCh, shadow-shooting is not absolutely bad but has, as everything in the world, a dual nature. 'The phenomenon of shadow-shooting is a positive feature of Chinese literary history', asserts the afore-mentioned Hao Bing, and he cites as an example the Tang poet Li Shangyin (812 until approx. 858). Shadow-shooting literature will also continue to exist in the People's Republic of China, for, as Hao Bing concludes his reflections on the question of 'shadow-shooting': "The first question to ask on encountering any shadow-shot in a literary work must be: 'Against whom is it directed?' If it is aimed at real grievances or actual rogues, how could such a shadow shot be anything but beneficial?"

Selected sources

Abbreviations: GMRB = Guangming ribao 光明日报

RMRB = Renmin ribao 人民日报

WXPL = wenxue pinglun 文学评论

ZXYJ = zhexue yanjiu 哲学研究

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