

# Free literature review on ethical messages in modern chinese literature

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China has long been something of a mystery to the western world. Every time the western media or scholars think they understand the nature of China and the Chinese, something new and different emerges and changes their analysis of China and the Chinese. In reality, China is a massive place; the population, while not as diverse as it is elsewhere in the world, is definitely mixed and multicultural. Since the Cultural Revolution in China, there have been a great many changes to the society, both good and bad. Today, China is beginning to come into her own after many years of confusion, oppression, and economic strife. The artists and thinkers who are emerging from this new China have much to say about the pain of the past that China is still living with today, and also about their worries for the future of one of the world's most populous nations.

It is common for the western world to want to see China as a monolithic entity, unified in its philosophy and art, without dissent, but this is merely the face that is presented by the Chinese media. There is dissent and dissatisfaction in China, and there is art and scholarship that reflects this dissatisfaction. However, it would be a fallacy to state that China has recovered from the problems that she faced in the past, and Ding Ling, Beidao, and Liu Xiabo all handle this painful reality in a slightly different manner, with varying degrees of success.

Bei Dao, one of the famous dissenting poets of the 1980s and onward, chooses to address the problems in the People's Republic of China through the creation of poetry. His poetry is full of dark images and violence, interspersed with the traditional symbolism that is used by the government of the People's Republic of China.

In one of his poems, entitled "Declaration," he writes: "I will not kneel on the ground/Allowing the executioners to look tall/The better to obstruct the wind of freedom/From star-like bullet holes shall flow/a blood-red dawn". The image of the star-like bullet holes and the blood-red dawn are allusions to the flag of the People's Republic of China; the five yellow stars present on the flag are meant to represent a different subset of society that contributes to the Communist Party's success, but Bei Dao has adopted the imagery and twisted it for his own means. In his poem, each "star" of the flag is a bullet hole, representing the violence of the PRC, or perhaps the death of the dissenters; it certainly gives new meaning to the propaganda spewed by the Communist Party during the time when this poem was written.

Bei Dao's poetry is also rife with references to heroes and heroism. His obsession with the concept of heroism links back to the cultural climate of China in the mid-1980s; it was a tumultuous time, a time before the massacre at Tiananmen Square, a time when many individuals in China still believed that China's course could be changed and led away from the violence and horror of the Cultural Revolution and Mao's Great Leap Forward.

On the subject of heroes, in the poem entitled "Declaration," Bei Dao writes: "I am no hero/in an age without heroes/I just want to be a man." In another poem entitled "Another Legend," Bei Dao writes, "dead heroes are forgotten/they are lonely, they/pass through a sea of faces/their anger can only light/the cigarette in a man's hand" This discussion of heroes and heroism is both interesting and haunting; it makes sense that Bei Dao should want a hero to come and save him from the pain of what he is witnessing in

his beloved homeland, but the knowledge that wishing for a hero is futile echoes heavily through his poetry. He, himself does not yearn to be a hero; instead, he states that he just wants to be a man. This statement echoes with the frustration that many of the other great thinkers of the day seemed to feel-- the feeling that their government and their society was taking away their humanity bit by bit over time.

If the average man in China faced a nearly untenable plight during the Cultural Revolution, the plight of women and children during this time period was decidedly worse, as it usually is during times of upheaval and war. Ding Ling, a scholar and author that wrote extensively about the Cultural Revolution and the plight of women during this time, wrote a short story entitled, "When I was in Xia Village" In this piece, Ling Ding writes about the way in which a woman who is captured by Japanese soldiers is treated, first by the Japanese and then by her own family upon her return, from the point of view of an outside visitor to the village. Various characters repeat the refrain: "It's a real tragedy to be a woman, isn't it, Zhenzhen?" But the woman, Zhenzhen, who is a victim of all the suffering, does not seem to see her womanhood as a true tragedy. She says,

members of my family are just the same. They all like to steal looks at me. Nobody treats me the way they used to. Have I changed? I've thought about this a great deal, and I don't think I've changed at all. If I have changed, maybe it's that my heart has become somewhat harder. But could anyone spend time in such a place and not become hardhearted? People have no choice. They're forced to be like that!

This is essentially the same sentiment that was espoused by Bei Dao in his

poetry; the speaker is undeniably a victim of circumstance, first at the hands of her Japanese captors then at the hands of her family; but she just craves being treated as a human being. This desire to be treated humanely by the members of his or her society and by his or her government is a sentiment that echoes across many Chinese artists', writers', and thinkers' works during the time period following the Cultural Revolution.

Liu Xiabo is a slightly more contemporary figure in the world of Chinese literary and artistic dissent. He is an open activist, and has been put on trial for encouraging subversion of state power, a crime that he was convicted of in late 2009. He is a very outspoken, well-known figure, and has written many influential pieces on various aspects of the Chinese government and their policies that he disagrees with. While his work does not have the hollow, echoing despondency of Bei Dao and Ding Ling, he instead makes do with a measured tone that belies anger at the policies of the Chinese government simmering very close to the surface. In his essay "To Change a Regime by Changing a Society," he sketches out the major pillars that define a society as a totalitarian society, effectively calling out the Chinese Communist Party for their totalitarian, one-party rule of the country since the Cultural Revolution.

This type of writing would have been unwise during earlier eras. Because of the growth of the Information Age and the widespread availability of the Internet, Liu Xiabo's fame protected him from the true brunt of the Chinese Communist Party's wrath. With the eye of the world turned to the trial, the Communist Party could not participate in the type of violence against Liu that they have been known for in the past, or risk an international incident

and outcry on the topic of human rights.

On the subject of the lost and kidnapped children of Shanxi, Liu writes, “ Moreover, when parents fail to find their children after so long a search-- then to see them found, not by police, but by journalists--it is clear that the public security organs are at best grossly negligent and at worst deliberately looking the other way.” This brazen criticism of the Chinese Communist Party marks a serious change in the way that citizens interact with their government in China. Although problems remain, there is anger and finger-pointing there now, where before the dissent was careful and measured. The anger and righteous outrage at injustice that is palpable in Liu’s essays is a major departure from Chinese literary dissent tradition.

Liu writes prolifically and extensively about the ways in which authority in China is abused and its citizenry are taken advantage of. Liu’s work is impassioned and the issues that are reported are so outlandish it is impossible not to take them seriously. Liu gets straight to the heart of the problem many times, writing: “ The main reason officials at all levels in China are so coldhearted and irresponsible is that they are appointed within a system where public power is monopolized in the hands of a private group, the Communist Party of China.” It seems strange to associate a political group with private power, but there certainly is nepotism and favoritism at play within the party that makes the group private rather than public.

China still has many issues to face before she becomes a nation that respects human rights and liberties, but the Chinese have taken up the cause to protest on their own behalf. However many scandals that come out of China, there are people like Liu and the journalists he mentioned standing

on the shoulders of dissenters like Ding Ling and Bei Dao, reaching towards a better future for all of China and all of the Chinese.

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