

The Poetry of Ho Chi Minh

E. San Juan, Jr.

In August 1924 Ho Chi Minh, then known as the Vietnamese patriot Nguyen Ai Quoc, was arrested by the Kuomintang police on his way to Chungking to represent the Vietminh Front and win support for it from the Chiang Kai-shek Government.

In retrospect, the incident was a fine ironic lesson for the poet. Ho was subsequently confined in numerous filthy jails, starved and humiliated. By some uncanny dialectic twist, his predicament begot enduring works of art: Ho's prison poems. His places of confinement—Tsingsi, Nanning, Kweilin, Liuchow, etc.—mark the stations of the heroic spirit of Ho Chi Minh. They incarnate in their sordid and outrageous existence the triumphant revolutionary will of the Communist leader who led the courageous people of Vietnam—the masses of workers and peasants—to victory.

Practical Application of Materialist Dialectics

Ho's poems written in prison entitled *Prison Diary* (published in English translation by Real Dragon Press, Berkeley, 1971, with a preface by Phan Nhuan) reveal the essential humanity of this great fighter for socialist democracy and human liberation. His poetic interpretation of experience embodies in dramatic and lyrical forms the fundamental truths enunciated by Chair-

man Mao, such as: 'The people, and the people alone, are the motive force in the making of world history'; 'Revolutionary culture is a powerful revolutionary weapon for the broad masses of the people'; 'Revolution is the main trend in the world today,' and so forth.

Ho Chi Minh's *Prison Diary* exemplifies in structure and substance the main objective of the lucid and seminal guidelines established by Chairman Mao concerning art and literature in his widely-read 'Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art' (May 1942). Intensely subjective and moodily introspective, *Prison Diary* subsumes the private consciousness of the poet in the fictive persona of Ho the prisoner. Ho's poetic method validates the ego's insights by focusing it in the typical figure of the poet who then speaks for all the mute victims of colonial injustice and imperialist oppression. Consequently the subjective appeal is qualified and included in the larger design of the representative and typical consciousness of the revolutionary agent.

In effect, Ho's poetry exhibits the practical application of materialist dialectics in transforming personal experience into moving and persuasive universal works of art.

The Poem as Revolutionary Weapon

Ho's poems are charged with the au-

thentic vibrations of moral revolt against colonial exploitation. They are singularly animated by the complex sensibility of a man with an abundant love for his suffering fellowmen and an enormous gusto for life. In 'Autumn Night', the poet subdues his distress poignantly:

*. . . My dream intertwines with sadness like
a skein of a thousand threads.
Innocent, I have now endured a whole year
in prison.
Using my tears for ink, I turn my thoughts
into verses.*

But these verses are not merely self-indulgent exercises; rather, they serve the prime function of collective protest because they are conceived in the full awareness of the historical demands of the class struggle:

ON READING 'ANTHOLOGY OF A THOUSAND POETS'

*The ancients used to like to sing about
natural beauty:
Snow and flowers, moon and wind, mists,
mountains, and rivers.
Today we should make poems including iron
and steel,
And the poet also should know how to lead
an attack.*

Ho kept the immediacy of the class struggle and the national democratic revolution spearheaded by the proletariat in the forefront of his mind. He elaborated frequently on the theme of revolutionary dedication:

AT THE POLITICAL BUREAU OF THE FOURTH ZONE OF RESISTANCE

*I have travelled the thirteen districts of
Kwangsi Province,
And tasted the pleasures of eighteen different
prisons.
What crime have I committed, I keep on
asking?
The crime of being devoted to my people.*

The poet's ordeals in jail, a subject liable to sentimental exaggeration by self-centered petty-bourgeois writers, receive a homely but powerful metaphoric repre-

sentation. Ho's technique of analogy recalls the Oriental tradition of the Japanese *haiku*, the Malay *pantun*, and the Filipino *tanaga*:

LISTENING TO THE RICE-POUNDING

*How much the rice must suffer under the
pestle!
But, after the pounding, it comes out white
like cotton.
The same thing often happens to men in this
world:
Misfortune's workshop turns them into
polished jade.*

That is why, as the poet claims in 'Seriously Ill,' amid his intolerable afflictions, 'instead of weeping, I prefer to keep singing.'

Toward a Marxist Poetics

Social being or social practice determines the consciousness of men. This principle Ho embodies in his reflections on the educational value of suffering. In the time-honoured fashion of freedom fighters everywhere, Ho believes that experience forges the character of men and tempers the iron in the soul. But the sufferings, privations, anguish and pain are not tolerated or accepted merely for their own aesthetic merit. On the contrary, they are re-shaped and assimilated in the poet's ideological outlook. Ho regards his prison-stay not as a necessary ritual for ascetic sainthood—a goal alien to Marxist humanism. On the contrary, his agonising ordeals serve in the final analysis to heighten man's spontaneous and creative appreciation of the world.

A mature realistic perspective emerges from the poet's totalising assessment of his sojourn in prison conveyed in 'At the End of Four Months':

*'One day in jail is equal to a thousand years
outside it . . .'
How right were the ancients, expressing it in
those words!
Four months leading a life in which there is
nothing human*

*Have aged me more than ten years.
 Yes: in a whole four months I have never
 eaten my fill,
 In four months I have never had a comfort-
 able night's sleep,
 In four months I have never changed my
 clothes, and in four months
 I have never taken a bath.
 So: I have lost a tooth, my hair has grown
 grey,
 And, lean and black as a demon gnawed by
 hunger,
 I am covered with scabies. Fortunately
 Being stubborn and patient, never yielding
 an inch,
 Though physically I suffer, my spirit is un-
 shaken.*

He confronts the truth of his particular condition with a mixture of stoic fortitude, anxious detachment, and constantly renewed militant daring. Thus he refuses to be resigned, instead he vows to strengthen his determination in combating wayward thoughts, ultimately hoping to vanquish the enemy that incarcerates his body.

One memorable testimony of Ho's dialectical vision of the revolutionary experience is found in 'Advice to Oneself':

*Without the cold and desolation of winter
 There could not be the warmth and splendour
 of spring.
 Calamity has tempered and hardened me,
 And turned my mind into steel.*

The poet's conviction of the positive value of suffering informs a majority of the poems in *Prison Diary*. It underlies his conception of man's worth as unfolded and guaranteed in class war, especially in the revolutionary strivings of the oppressed peoples against imperialism and for national liberation.

The philosophy of Marxism-Leninism—historical and dialectical materialism—provides Ho's art with a correct, dynamic and progressive orientation. For example, Ho recognises that labour creates everything of value in this world ('Road Menders', 'Prison Life', etc.). Man's nature is shaped by changing historical

circumstances while man himself endeavours to alter or modify these circumstances. Ho affirms this thesis in 'Midnight':

*Faces all have an honest look in sleep.
 Only when they wake does good or evil show
 in them.
 Good and evil are not qualities born in man:
 More often than not, they arise from our
 education.*

History is presented as a purposeful record of the colonised people's struggle against the decadent forces of imperialism and its local running dogs. The traditional image of the dragon invests the didactic thrust of these lines with sensuous immediacy and classic dignity:

*. . . People who come out of prison can
 build up the country.
 Misfortune is a test of people's fidelity.
 Those who protest at injustice are people of
 true merit.
 When the prison-doors are opened the real
 dragon will fly out.*

(from 'Word-Play')

In 'The Eleventh of November', Ho captures graphically the evolving panorama of the war against Japanese fascism in epigrammatic strokes, summing up thus:

*. . . All over Asia flutter the anti-Japanese
 flags:
 Big flags or little flags—they are not all the
 same.
 Of course, big flags we must have, but we
 need the little flags, too.*

Compare this with the poem 'Alert in Vietnam', notable for its austere simplicity of utterance, a style which functions as the vehicle of a recurrent emotional tension:

*Better death than slavery! Everywhere in
 my country
 The red flags are fluttering again.
 Oh, what it is to be a prisoner at such a
 time!
 When shall I be set free, to take my part in
 the battle?*

Only By Human Effort Can Man
 Liberate Himself

In 'A Milestone', Ho chooses a common object to symbolise the progressive motivation that propels history. Using the same dominant image of the road, the poem 'On the Road' allegorises the truth of social practice as the test of ideas, theory, hopes, plans, aspirations:

*Only when out on the road can we take stock
of our dangers.*

*After we climb one mountain, another looms
into view:*

*But, once we have struggled up to the top
of the mountain range,*

*More than ten thousand li can be surveyed
at a glance.*

The metaphor of the way or path of struggle recurs in 'Hard Is the Road of Life' as a counterpointing motif to the static condition of imprisonment. But here the personal vicissitudes of the poet-prisoner are sublimated, dwindle in importance as a special category, and become simply an instance of a general but historically defined occurrence. The tone and framework of parable used by the poet evokes a peculiar response in us, a response akin to what Brecht calls 'Alienation Effect'—an illusion of distance resulting from the gestural and reportorial cast of the whole poem. Hence, quantity of facts undergo a qualitative change—a transmutation mediated by Ho's sensibility:

I

*Having climbed over steep mountains and
high peaks,*

*How should I expect on the plains to meet
greater danger?*

*In the mountains, I met the tiger and come
out unscathed:*

*On the plains, I encountered men, and was
thrown into prison.*

II

I was a representative of Vietnam

*On my way to China to meet an important
personage.*

*On the quiet road a sudden storm broke
loose,*

*And I was thrust into jail as an honoured
guest.*

III

*I am a straightforward man with no crime
on my conscience,*

*But I was accused of being a spy for China.
So life, you see, is never a very smooth
business,*

And now the present bristles with difficulties.

A Commitment to the Human World

Throughout his incarceration, Ho never yielded to despair, for the simple reason that he never abandoned the concrete sensuous reality around him. That is, he never surrendered himself to the temptations of futile idealism and utopian romanticism—a common malady of intellectuals in crisis, as attested to by the lugubrious confessions in *The God That Failed* and other shameless apologetics. 'Twilight' confirms this loving commitment to the world in motion:

*Now the wind's edge is sharpened on moun-
tain rocks.*

*The spear of cold pierces the branches of
trees.*

*The gong from a far-off pagoda hastens
The traveller's steps, and boys are playing
flutes*

*As they drive the buffaloes home across the
twilight.*

Opposing forces in the world unite and struggle together, just as contradictory forces in society unite and impel social development on to a higher historical stage. 'Arrival at Tienpao' witnesses the morning's splendour framed by the edge of a cesspool. Changes in the material environment register the meaning of time and space in the response of living persons:

MORNING SUNSHINE

*The morning sunshine penetrates into the
prison,*

*Sweeping away the smoke and burning away
the mist.*

*The breath of life fills the whole universe,
And smiles light up the faces of all the prisoners.*

In life, appearances deceive but the man who grasps the truth of objective reality based on man's mode of production, a reality that transcends private notions and impulses, is sustained by a knowledge on which the efficacy of revolutionary practice is based. Two poems indicate Ho's radical and impassioned faith in the existence of a law-governed reality containing the limits and possibilities of action:

MORNING

I

*Every morning the sun, emerging over the wall,
Darts its rays against the gate, but the gate remains locked.
Inside the prison, the ward is shrouded in darkness,
But we know outside the rising sun has shone.*

II

*Once awake, everyone starts on the hunt for lice.
At eight o'clock the gong sounds for the morning meal.
Come on! Let's go and eat to our heart's content.
For all we have suffered, there must be good times coming.*

NIGHTFALL

*Wearily to the wood the birds fly seeking rest.
Across the empty sky a lonely cloud is drifting.
Far away in a mountain village, a young girl grinds out maize.
When the maize is all ground, the fire burns red in the oven.*

This latter poem exhibits in an oblique manner Ho's commitment to the Marxist principle that man's productive activity conditions ultimately and in the long run

the relations among men and the cultural or ideological milieu of a given society at a certain historical period.

Dialectic of the Imagination

Throughout his reveries and meditations on his plight, Ho repudiated escapism to an ivory tower of metaphysical idealism. He repudiated the tendency of petty-bourgeois individualists to succumb to desperate fantasies. The whole of *Prison Diary* implicitly attacks petty bourgeois alienation and opportunism. Consider Ho's strong attachment to the inescapable demands of objective reality:

NOON

*In the cell, how lovely it is to have a siesta!
For hours we are carried away in a sound sleep.
I dream of riding a dragon up into heaven . . .
Waking, I'm brought abruptly back into prison.*

A wry and sometimes sardonic humour characterises many poems consisting of notations of prison life: 'No Smoking', 'Leaping', 'The Charges', 'The Inn', 'The Dog-Meat at Paosiang', and others. Ho records the restrictions of prison life as absurd and anti-human disruptions of the human moral order actualised in revolutionary action. While sharply critical of the degrading conditions of prison and the brutal treatment of prisoners by the vicious Kuomintang soldiers, Ho refrains from abstract generalisations.

Ho's virtue principally inheres in his consistent application of Lenin's dictum concerning dialectics as 'the concrete analysis of concrete conditions.' This may be illustrated by the poem 'Mr Mo, the Head-Warder':

*The head-warder at Pinyang has a golden heart.
He buys rice for the prisoners with his own money.
At night he takes off the fetters to let us sleep.*

He never resorts to force, but only to kindness.

Here Ho perceives the exceptional case—the negation of the negation, so to speak. In actuality, Ho simply pursued his vocation as a sincere revolutionary artist, exercising a strenuous but discriminating sympathy within the limits of the virile discipline imposed by the partisan stand of Marxism-Leninism.

From Knowledge to Pleasure

Accompanying the poet's warm generosity of spirit, compassion, and solidarity with the oppressed is a knowing detachment required of the artist who seeks to transcribe the complex process of objective reality. Ho can thus afford the luxury of ironic witticism in poems like 'Something to Smile At', or 'Wife of a Conscript Deserter':

*One day you went away, not to come back again,
Leaving me alone in our rooms, with sadness for companion.
The authorities, having pity on my loneliness,
Invited me to live temporarily in the prison.*

In 'Writing a Petition for a Jail-Mate' where Ho helps a fellow prisoner draw up a petition, aping officialese jargon, the poet is astonished by the exuberant gratitude of his friend. Man can remain human in prison, Ho asserts, so long as he adheres firmly to his identity as a revolutionary protagonist. Even prison is dominated by the corrupt business practices of the bourgeoisie, as Ho critically points out in 'Entrance Fee' and other pieces. In 'The Leg-Irons', Ho describes how people readily sacrifice freedom for the comfort and security of unthinking servitude. Even in prison, the rich and the poor are treated differently, as Ho observes in 'Imprisoned for Gambling'.

Beyond the Charity of Absolutes

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Ho, in trying to comprehend the exigencies of the prison system, forgave his enemies and (like Tolstoy, for example) failed to resist what men generally hold as remediable historical evils. On the contrary, Ho vigorously denounced the anti-people tyranny of the Kuomintang bandit-gang and, by implication, the monstrous abuses of the colonial exploiters. Ho raged intensely against the deprivation of freedom as an insufferable violation of the natural process, of life's primordial rhythm:

RESTRICTIONS

*To live without freedom is a truly wretched state.
Even the calls of nature are governed by restrictions!
When the door is opened, the belly is not ready to ease itself.
When the call of nature is pressing, the door remains shut.*

Amid and beneath the contradictions of the social process, the struggle of the poet's mind proceeds with the inevitability of the season's maturation:

AUTUMN IMPRESSIONS

I

*At about ten o'clock the Great Bear tops the mountain.
The cricket's song, rising and fading, announces autumn.
What does the prisoner care for the changing seasons?
Only one change he dreams of: his liberation.*

II

*Last year at the beginning of autumn I was free.
This year autumn finds me in the depths of a prison.
As for services rendered my country, I surely may claim
This autumn has been just as productive as the last.*

Style and Ideology

What is probably the most distinguished quality of Ho's poems which may be identified with the tradition of classical Japanese and Chinese poetry is sensitive attention to the flux of natural phenomena. This is deepened and complicated by Ho's visionary but paradoxically realistic rendering of psychological responses and impressions. This style can be explained by Ho's revolutionary faith, his vision of socialist equality and prosperity arising from the concrete grasp of objective material reality. A profound belief in the truth of material reality, as mirrored for instance in the modulation of the seasons, manifests itself in the calm and assured statements of 'Fine Weather':

*Everything evolves, it is the cycle of nature:
After the rainy days, the fine weather comes.
In an instant, the whole world shakes off its
damp clothes,
Thousands of li of mountains unfurl their
brocade carpet.
Under the warm sun and the clean wind, the
flowers smile.
In the big trees with branches washed clean,
the birds make chorus.
Warmth fills the heart of man, and life re-
awakens.
Bitterness now makes way for happiness.
This is how nature wills it.*

Characteristically, Ho achieves a quiet and subtle expression of his emotions by a constant fidelity to what is happening around him, as in 'On a Boat for Nanning'. Describing the swift gliding of fishermen's boats around him while his legs are manacled, Ho suggests the anti-natural injustice of his plight. His materialist poetics succeed in fusing the impulse to freedom and the obedience to the order of a humanised nature. It succeeds also in harmonising the will of the revo-

lutionary and the objective demands of socio-historical existence, as many poems confirm.

But, as in all revolutionary poets, nature is there not to be worshipped but to be understood and transformed in revolutionary practice. Nature acquires significance only because man interacts with it in the social process of making a living.

In 'Morning Scene', Ho notes how the prison-cell bars the sunlight from penetrating into his quarters. This fact is, however, only a temporary accident, not a permanent condition. Indeed the force of nature and life—the live of the working class, in particular—cannot be suppressed.

Ho's Example Today

On May 10, 1969, Ho Chi Minh drew up his testament affirming among others his faith that 'Our rivers, our mountains, our people will always be; the American aggressors defeated, we will build a country ten times more beautiful.' His prison poems anticipate Ho's declaration of unshakable faith in the Vietnamese people's indomitable will, in the victorious destiny of the mass line.

Ho's materialist poetics brilliantly fulfill what Chairman Mao in his Yenan lecture asserted as the purpose of culture: 'All our literature and art are for the masses of the people, and in the first place for the workers, peasants and soldiers.' Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary practice in art and in life serves today as a mighty weapon, an inexhaustible inspiration to all artists and intellectuals in Asia, Africa and Latin America who are today waging the ideological and armed struggle against US imperialism, for the cause of national democracy, freedom, equality, and socialist liberation.