

# From “the Past” to “Thoughts”: Ba Jin’s Translation of *My Past and Thoughts* and the 1980s<sup>12</sup>

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## Abstract:

After the Cultural Revolution, Ba Jin “came back” as the translator of Alexander Herzen’s *My Past and Thoughts*. Through his translation, he tried to retrieve his anarchism belief on the individual from his past and express his condemnation on the Cultural Revolution. However, this condemnation became invalid while he introduced Herzen’s memoir into the “anti-feudalism” discourse, which was largely exhausted by the official historiography and reused by the authorities of the 1980s. In order to break these limits, Ba Jin in his *Random Thoughts* raised the issues such as “telling the truth”, “independent mind” and “confession”, and turned his condemnation to the intellectuals and himself. As a result, he not only paradoxically made the intellectuals scapegoats of history but also trapped himself into the reflective attitude. Meanwhile, through his moral cries, he made himself (along with intellectuals like him) and literature dynamic agents of transitional justice, and subjects that took the responsibilities of the history and the future.

**Keywords:** Ba Jin, Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, *Random Thoughts*, translation, the 1980s

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## I. “A Letter”: An Invitation to *My Past and Thoughts* and the 1980s

On May the 25th, 1977, an article titled “A Letter” was published in *Wen Hui Bao*, an official literary newspaper in Shanghai. The author of this public letter is Ba Jin, who was ranked the fourth of six most important writers in the literary Pantheon of contemporary mainland China, and the only one of them who not only lived through the 1980s but also kept writing on contemporary issues. After eleven years silence since 1966, this letter was the first piece that announced Ba Jin’s “comeback”. As one of the many articles that celebrated the 35th anniversary of Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art”(1942), this article, in the form of a letter to an uncertain comrade, accused “the Gang of Four” for how they ruined Chairman Mao’s “Two Hundred Policy” and abused the author; moreover, it mentioned a secret work that the author did during the cultural revolution, the translation of Alexander Herzen’s *My Past and Thoughts*(1870), says:

Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and their confederates in Shanghai expelled me from the literary circle, and just allowed me to work on some translations. [...]I got my strength and confidence by recalling how diligently Mr. Lu Xun had introduced masterpieces of world literature to China. Forty-one years ago, I told Mr. Lu Xun that I would translate Herzen’s *Memoir*, if I could fulfill my promise before the end of my life, it will be my utmost honor. The first several volumes of the *Memoir* depicted the rule of Nicolas I, Tsar of Russia. As my translation moved on, I felt that the “Gang of Four” were quite similar with Nicolas I, who suppressed the Decembrist Revolt. I translated just several hundred characters everyday, and I felt that I was walking with Herzen in the dark night of the 19th century Russia, I cursed the Fascist dictatorship of “Gang of Four” in the way that Herzen cursed Nicolas I. I believed that their days to ride roughshod over the people could not be longer. (“Letter” 516-517)

According to *Wen Hui Bao*’s editor Xu Kailei, Ba Jin’s article received tremendous responses. Thousands of letters wrote by common readers and some other survived intellectuals flooded to the editorial board, created a historical event in the editor’s career (117). Although this depiction of the editor was perhaps a result of the official rhetorical conventions, we could still recognize that writers

and literature hold an important position in the beginning of the 1980s. Of course, literature was always important in modern and pre-modern China, however, in the 1980s, literature and literati once played a heroic role: with its dynamic mediality and its power to bring cultural shock, literature gave the intellectuals the first and foremost ground for pursuing and practicing autonomy, hence the position to intervene politics. Therefore it was not surprising that the Tian'anmen Incident of 1976 which preceded the end of the Cultural Revolution was a poetry campaign, and in the beginning of the 1980s, people rushed to buy translations of foreign literature, especially European literature of the 19th century; also we should remember that the Misty Poets was celebrated as mentors and heroes by their fans in poetry reading sessions; and almost all the fevers in the 1980s, such as "Satre Fever", "Marques Fever", "Root-seeking Fever" and "Cultural Fever", were launched by literati and literary scholars. Because of the astonishing energy of literature, we could name the 1980s a "Literary Age".

With the idea of "Literary Age" in mind, we should notice three interesting points of "A Letter", which were also important characteristics of the 1980s. First, the astonishing reaction caused by Ba Jin's letter was largely coming from not only the identity of literature or literati, but also from its bold condemnation on the Cultural Revolution. Actually, we could say that the heroic role of literature at large in the 1980s relied mostly on its power of memorizing and reflecting the misery experiences of the reading public. Second, in order to bring up his condemnation, Ba Jin turned to Lu Xun and (more importantly) the pre-1949 era, an era (his own "past") in which he won his fame and prospect, and now in the 1980s gave him the seniority to speak. It is well known that literati in the 1980s were easily find themselves companions of the May-fourth generation, and view the history between the pre-1949 period and the 1980s as a deprived age. Third, for the same reason, Ba Jin also turned to his translation of Alexander Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts*, a world literary work among many written in the 19th century which were often read and discussed in the 1980s.

The condemnation of the Cultural Revolution, the pre-1949 era, and world literature: these three points make "A Letter" an invitation to Ba Jin's new literary agenda as well as to the literary age, and a gate for us to inspect the possibilities for the intellectuals to engage the political milieu of the 1980s with (world) literature. With this invitation in hand, we could recognize that Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts* as a join point of Ba Jin's life as a writer, a translator, and a highly politicized intellectual.

However, when mentioning Ba Jin, scholars in Mainland China are easily

separated into two camps, loosely based on their “majors”: scholars who work on Modern Chinese Literature regard Ba Jin as a writer, do researches on his ideas and thoughts, and treat his translations as less-important materials and drop them to researchers from the field of Comparative Literature or Foreign Literature; on the contrary, the latter mainly handle those materials that are attributed to translator Ba Jin, do some fact-check works and provide more details about his translations, without considerations on his literary thoughts and practices.

Therefore, the main body of the studies on Ba Jin’s post-Cultural Revolution era focus on his *Random Thoughts* (Sui xiang lu, 1980-1986), such as Hu Jingmin’s *Studies of Ba Jin’s Random Thoughts* (2010), Zhang Jing’s *Ba Jin’s Confession Consciousness in Random Thoughts* (2015), Chen Sihe’s *Essays on Ba Jin’s Thoughts in His Later Years* (2015) and Zhou Limin’s *On Random Thoughts* (2016), but the deep linkages between this work and Herzen’s memoir are largely neglected. On the same time, the studies on Ba Jin’s translation, such as Zhou Qiong’s *Herzen and China* (2009) and Xiang Hongquan’s *Studies on Ba Jin as a Translator* (2016) easily separates this translation from Ba Jin’s whole literary life. This separation leads to at least two interrelated consequences: first, the deep meanings of this translation for Ba Jin’s literary life and his post-Cultural Revolution thoughts are neglected; second, without reviewing his writings and thoughts, translation researchers are easily exaggerate Ba Jin’s life-long favorite of Herzen, since he himself announced that for several times in the turn of the 1970s and the 1980s.

In consideration of this situation, this paper will set Ba Jin’s translation of *My Past and Thoughts* back into his literary life, and explore how the translation empowered Ba Jin to retrieve his beliefs from his early years, articulate his traumas about the Cultural Revolution, and at last bring out his new thoughts in the 1980s. Based on this exploration, this paper will also examine the energy as well as restrictions that literature in the 1980s received from some discourses, such as “independent”, “confession” and “humanism”.

## **II. The Shifting Faces of *My Past and Thoughts*: From Anti-fascism to Anti-feudalism**

The way that Ba Jin paralleled the “Gang of Four” with Nicolas I as a fascist in “A Letter” is very interesting, if we compare it with the first postscript of his translation written on Sept. 17th, 1978 (after one year and several months since “A Letter” was published). In that piece, Ba Jin added something new into that parallelism. He says: “Some people may think that there is no parallelism between Nicolas I and the ‘Gang of Four’, because feudalism has disappeared in our country.

I would not explain. The book is here, please read it, and you will know whether the ‘Gang of Four’ are in it or not.” (“My Past” 294) It is obvious that the “fascist” had been changed to “feudalism”. After this postscript, Ba Jin began to talk about anti-feudalism at various venues and no longer mentioned “fascist”.

Many scholars in mainland China, particularly the “new left” critics have discussed the anti-feudalism trend as the first cultural, political and ideological trend occurred in the 1980s. For them, anti-feudalism discourse in the 1980s was an ideological equipment to draw parallelisms between the May Fourth Movement and the New Era, and also between Imperial China and Socialism China, thus a collaboration between the intellectuals and the authorities to open China for the global capitalism and modernization (He 6-8). However, the anti-feudalism here Ba Jin exploited was quite understandable, and may not be that complicated and need to be read symptomatically, because for Ba Jin, the anti-feudalism was maybe a merely safe harbor that he had known well.

Herzen’s memoir was not the only text that be taken as an anti-feudalism text by Ba Jin. If we take a look at Ba Jin’s discussions on his own representative work, *Family* (1933), we could also find a shift on the issue of anti-feudalism. Even before 1949, Ba Jin had get used to anti-feudalism discourse while revising *Family*. Among all the important novels of modern China, Ba Jin’s *Family* is famous not only for its artistic or political achievement but also its frequency of revision, which is eight times. In the beginning, Ba Jin had always argued that the family of the protagonist Gao, which is the core image of the novel, is a capitalist family, however, in the 1940s, he begun to explain that Gao’s family is feudal landlord family or bureaucratic landlord family according to the left ideology and historiography which was largely influenced by Stalin’s *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (1938).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, during the Cultural Revolution, *Family* was accused to be “poisonous grass” along with Ba Jin’s other works. These experiences could explain why Ba Jin embraced the anti-feudalism discourse enthusiastically even after the Cultural Revolution. On August 9th, 1977, in the postscript of the reprinted edition of *Family*, Ba Jin says: “Even my best work is just a diagnosis from a doctor who was not smart enough. I have seen the illness of the old society, but I cannot bring up a remedy. [...] In nowadays, my works have fulfilled their historical mission, and it is better for the readers to forget them. [...] however,] They may help the readers to understand the situation in the feudal society.” (“Postscript” 455) After one year later, on Nov. 26th, 1978, in the preface of his *Torch Fire* (Jue huo ji), Ba Jin says: “I

3 On Ba Jin’s revision of *Family*, see Jin (59-106); on feudalism in CCP’s historiography, see Dirlik (*Revolution* 95-136; “Universalisation”; “Social”).

said that my work has fulfilled its ‘historical mission’. It was not a lie. But I did not understand it. Today I know I was wrong. The specter of county magistrate Gao is haunting everywhere, I have to admit my ignorance and blindness.” (“Preface” 474)

What happened between the two paratexts? The most important cause was the ambiguous political atmosphere in 1977-1978. The period between 1977-1978 is sometimes called “two years of hesitation” in the official historiography in mainland China. The “hesitation” reflects not only the “hesitation” of the authorities but also the self-confrontation of the intellectuals who could and would speak of the Cultural Revolution. Because of the influence of “Two Whatevers” (两个凡是 Liang ge fan shi), the will for reformation could not be pushed forward promptly. As a maneuver, the reformers launched the “Movement of Discussing the Criteria of Truth” in the spring of 1978, and then published one talk of Mao Zedong dated on Jan. 30th 1962, which mentioned how to deal with the mistakes of Mao himself and the Central Committee. In that talk, Mao Zedong says that if he could not acknowledge his own mistake, he was worse than the feudal emperor Liu Bang (Mao 2). The talk was published on *People’s Daily* on July 1st, 1978, and also was broadcast on the air to the whole country. On the same day, Ba Jin wrote in his diary: “Got up at seven. Listen to Chairman Mao’s talk in 1962 broadcast.” (*Works Vol. 26* 258) After then, various articles began to discuss feudalism as one of the main causes and crimes of the Cultural Revolution, so did Ba Jin in his writings on *Family* and Herzen’s memoir.

It could be tell that the anti-feudalism discourse opened a certain space for Ba Jin and other intellectuals (even the new authorities) to criticize the Cultural Revolution. But the problem was that this discourse maybe not so handy as Ba Jin and some intellectuals like him wished. As Arif Dirlik termed it, “Feudalism” in contemporary Chinese historiography was not merely an economical and political concept, but a “conceptual trap”: as a concept that endured almost a century-long exploitation by the authorities and intellectuals, “feudalism” had already been a signifier just signifies some old things unwelcome by the authorities, and the concept has lost its function to depict the reality and form questions (“Chinese” 119-121). In this sense, the concepts of “feudalism” and “anti-feudalism” were exploited again in the 1980s by the authorities and the intellectuals with carelessness and willfulness. In Ba Jin’s pieces, “feudalism” was pointed to the political persecution, the destroy of cultural works, and the unpleasant family systems and conventions, so on and so forth. In other words, one does not have to define what does he or she mean by “feudalism”, but just “anti” it.

Ba Jin himself soon realized the danger of the “trap”. In May 1981, Tse-tsung

Chow interviewed Ba Jin and raised a question: “In oversea Chinese communities such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan, people praise traditional Chinese culture highly, however, the evil legacy of feudalism that people in China are talking about nowadays, have not led to catastrophes that are similar to the Cultural Revolution in those communities. Therefore, [...] is there any other causes?” (Ba, “Talk” 567) Then Ba Jin gave a vague reply: “The feudalism issue and Confucianism is hard to explain, because I have not done enough researches.” (567) Chow’s question and Ba Jin’s replay indicated the core problem of anti-feudalism discourse, and Ba Jin obviously knew that the “feudalism” discourse was far from enough to carry on the reflections on the history and the responsibilities to build a better future. Therefore, after some equivocations, Ba Jin began to talk about the independent mind of intellectuals, while completely forgot the anti-feudalism issue.

When Chow visited Ba Jin, the latter had dropped his translation, and turned to his own work, *Random Thoughts*. Actually, at the time when “A Letter” was published in 1977, the translation of the first two volumes had already been finished (and got published at last in 1979). After that, Ba Jin went on his translation of the third volumes for a short time, and then abandoned it for his own writing thoroughly. In *Random Thoughts*, Ba Jin had scarcely talked about “feudalism” and “anti-feudalism” issues, instead, he did often raise the questions of the independence and confession of the intellectuals, deepened his critiques and reflections on the Cultural Revolution. What was more, in the whole volumes of *Random Thoughts*, Herzen and his memoir (the work that Ba Jin said in “A Letter” that it would be his “utmost honor” to translate) gradually vanished, while Leo Tolstoy gradually took the height as a mentor who could symbolize the notion of “confession”. Hence the questions here should be: Did Ba Jin really viewed Herzen in the way of anti-feudalism, so when he abandoned the issue, he abandoned Herzen altogether? If the answer is not, what did Herzen contribute to Ba Jin’s new “thoughts”?

### **III. Belated Anarchist Ba Jin and His Interpretation of Herzen**

Indeed, Herzen did not vanish from Ba Jin’s mind or new works, and Ba Jin did not just take Herzen’s memoir on the anti-feudalism ground. He announced that *Random Thoughts* was the byproduct of his translation (Ba *Random* 124). It was in this “byproduct”, Ba Jin turned from anti-feudalism issue to new issues such as “confession” and “independence” of the intellectuals, and if we stand back and take a distant look at Ba Jin’s life long relationship with Herzen, we could clearly see that Herzen in someway had inspired Ba Jin’s new thoughts.

In the postscript of his translation, Ba Jin says: “*My Past and Thoughts* is my

mentor. The first time I read it was on Feb the 5th, 1928. At that time, my first novel was yet to complete. My experiences were simple, but I got the fire inside of me. It was burning. I had feelings, love and hate, blood and tears. I need to turn them into lines. Unconsciously, I was influenced by Herzen.” (“My Past” 292) Like this postscript, Ba Jin introduced frequently his encounter with Herzen in the 1920s, or his promise to Mr. Lu Xun in the 1930s. However, if we take a look at Ba Jin’s literary life, we would be surprised that Herzen perhaps was not so important to young Ba Jin than he announced later. Back to the 1920s, Ba Jin has translated various political and literary works of Russia writers, and the two most important writers for his was Turgenev and Kropotkin, not Herzen. Hence in Olga Lang’s famous biographical study of Ba Jin, *Pa Chin and His Writings: Chinese Youth Between the Two Revolutions* (1967), the author discussed many Russia writers who have influenced Ba Jin’s thoughts and writings, only with Herzen missed (232-245).

The relationship between Ba Jin and his mentor (or mentors) should be set back to Ba Jin’s young ages, when he was not a novel writer, but an enthusiastic anarchist. Born in 1904, Ba Jin was a son of the magistrate of a county in Sichuan, far from those big cities like Shanghai and Peking, he got to know anarchism from magazines and pamphlets that were spread after the May-Fourth Movement. At the age of 16, Ba Jin devoted himself to the writings of anarchists like Peter Kropotkin, Leopold Kampf, and Emma Goldman. Just one year later, Ba Jin began his own writing on social issues and anarchist thoughts, and got contact with an anarchist organization named “均社”(jun she), which means the society of equality. In 1923, at the age of 19, Ba Jin went to Shanghai, and later Nanjing, to attend middle schools with his older brother. From this year on, Ba Jin became highly activated in translation and writings of anarchist materials, and even wrote letters to Emma Goldman, whom Ba Jin named his “spiritual mother”. Shortly, as a young student, he was involved in the heated debates between anarchists, communists and nationalists in the revolutionary atmosphere of the late 1920s (Li 516-520).

However, people in the 1920s would witness the downfall of Chinese anarchism. As Arif Dirlik (1991) has shown with rich details in his book, before the May-Fourth Movement, Chinese anarchists like Shi Fu, Liu Shipei and He Zhen, had spread anarchism thoughts for more than 15 years and cultivated the soil for various revolutionary discourses. When Ba Jin came to the stage in 1925 as a graduate of the middle school, the heyday of Chinese anarchism had largely passed, and it was now the Nationalists and Communists leading the way. Sakai Hirobumi notes that as a keen follower, Ba Jin at that time was not able to join in any actual anarchists’ activities but just writing and translation, and kept his anarchism as a conceptual



ideal (“Chinese” 54). For Sakai Hirobumi, this explains why Ba Jin would choose to go abroad to France in Jan 1927, when the Northern Expedition was pushed forward successfully. Sakai says: “When the unwelcome revolution was proceeding, it left Ba Jin no other choice, but leave this unpleasant country and exile himself, in order to keep the purity of his thoughts and critical position.” (“On *Destruction*” 63)

Though it is difficult for us to know the exact reasons for Ba Jin to go abroad, Sakai’s explanation reveals us a reasonable remote cause for it. As a reachable sacred land, France had a great attraction for Ba Jin. However, the problem was that he was not good at French, and as a poor tuberculosis patient, he felt gloomy and lonely soon after he arrived France. To soothe himself, Ba Jin began to write a novel titled *Destruction* (1929), with an anarchist, nihilist, and terrorist hero who committed suicide for his ideal. As Saikai Hirobumi has pointed out in his study of this work, literature was a depressive but at the same time a proper way for Ba Jin as a belated anarchist (“On *Destruction*” 65).

At this very point, Ba Jin encountered Herzen in his transformation from an idealized anarchist to a novelist. Though Herzen was versatile figure, or a “fox” in Isaiah Berlin’s term, for “liberals and radicals, populists and anarchists, socialists and communists have all claimed him as an ancestor” (523), in the beginning of the 20th century, Herzen got to be known by Chinese intellectuals mainly as a nihilist revolutionary, and at that time, the most famous work of him for Chinese readers was his political novel, *Who is to Blame?*(1846). We could not be sure when and how did Ba Jin get to know Herzen for the first time, but according to what did he say afterward, it was perhaps through Peter Kropotkin’s *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (1889) and *Russian Literature: Ideals and Realities* (1905), and the time should be before his leaving from China (Zhou 132). In 1928, when lived in Château-Thierry, Ba Jin bought an English version of *My Past and Thoughts*, translated by Constance Garnett; and in the same year, he wrote a long essay on Herzen, titled “Herzen and Westernizers”. Several years later, this essay was inserted into Ba Jin’s volume *The History of Russian Social Movement* (1935), and Herzen in here was not viewed as a soul-stirring writer, but “the most outstanding figure among the waken Russian youths”, “mentor of the youth movement in Russia”, and a “desperado” (“The History” 560). In other words, Ba Jin at this time recognized Herzen as a comrade of Bakunin and Kropotkin, and one of his many spiritual mentors during his depressive spiritual exile.

In 1929, when Ba Jin came back to China as a rising novelist, he began to translate a part of Herzen’s memoir, and titled it as “Death of My Mother”, which is a short piece selected from the fifth volume of the English version of the memoir

that depicts the death of Herzen's mother. Ba Jin may find his own condolences from this part, for his mother died in pain when he was only 10 years old. Later, after Ba Jin had established his identity and fame as a young novelist who was a symbol of emotion and passion, he translated another piece from this volume in 1936, and combined the two pieces together with other parts of this volume and published it in 1940, titled "The Story of a Family Drama". It seems that the fifth volume of Herzen's memoir attracts Ba Jin very much, for it is the most miserable and passionate part of the whole book. According to Isaiah Berlin, the events and scenes in this volume, including the affair between Herzen's wife and his friend, the death of his mother, son and wife, were the original drive for Herzen to write his memoir (511). However, this private volume was deleted from the memoir and published posthumously. In the preface of *The Story of a Family Drama*, Ba Jin says that "this is a 'study of the psychology of passionate emotion', or in the author's words, 'a psychopathological story'" ("The Story" 206).

We could see that there was a divergence between the anarchist Ba Jin's studies of Herzen and the novelist Ba Jin's translation of the memoir. In his studies, Herzen was a thinker and activist in social movement, while in his translation, Herzen was an individual with psychological depth and personal emotions. If we locate this phenomenon into the literary life of Ba Jin, we could find that this divergence did not come out occasionally or unintentionally, but a result of long-term spiritual and identical transformation. Chen Sihe has argued that because the democratic space for China had been more and more narrow from May Fourth Movement to the 1940s, and also because the social movement had totally failed, writers of Ba Jin's generation concerned more about their vocation as literary writers, rather than intellectuals on the square like Lu Xun ("From"; "The Significance"). This argument is rightful enough, if we narrow the scope to those writers who were outside of the communists' camp of left-wing, as Ba Jin was. This transformation could also be seen in Ba Jin's novels, "from advocating revolution to sympathy for nonentity" (Chen "The Significance" 9).

From this point, we could easily understand why Herzen could be the choice for Ba Jin during the Cultural Revolution. Of course, among all Ba Jin's idols like Kropotkin or Turgenev, Herzen was a relatively safer choice. After all, Herzen was not really conspicuous in the political spectrum of mainland China even during the Cultural Revolution, while Kropotkin or Turgenev were accused as poisonous grass. In 1951, Lenin's *In Memory of Herzen* was translated into China by Cao Baohua. In this article, Lenin praised Herzen as a great writer who helped the preparation of Russian revolution (76). This article was reprinted again and again along with

some other articles on literature and art by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, hence gave Herzen a safe place. But the concrete reason for Ba Jin to choose Herzen again may be his personal experiences of the Cultural Revolution. In “A Letter”, Ba Jin mentioned that “Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and their confederates in Shanghai” allowed him to translate. This should be dated back to the late period of the Cultural Revolution, After Ba jin’s wife, Xiao Shan’s miserable death in 1972 which was a knockdown destruction to Ba Jin. And then Ba Jin was released from the Cadre School in suburban Shanghai and returned to his home. In 1973, Ba Jin himself asked to translate Herzen’s Memoir, and got the permission. The miserable death of his wife which was vividly depicted in his famous essay “In Memory of Xiao Shan”(1978) may sent him back to his “past” along with Herzen’s touching depictions of the death his mother, son and wife, and at last made Ba jin to restart his translation.

Therefore, Herzen for Ba Jin in and after the Cultural Revolution was not really a figure who promoted “anti” any “isms”, but a wounded individual and sympathetic old friend, who could be retrieved from Ba Jin’s own past as well the political history. Ba Jin valued Herzen’s own words on his memoir: “the reflection of history on an individual who had occasionally set foot on the history’s path” (“Translator’s” 281). If we read the paragraph below from the memoir, we may find what Ba Jin felt in the late period of the Cultural Revolution:

All that is personal soon crumbles away, and to this destitution one has to submit. This is not despair, not senility, not coldness and not indifference: it is grey-haired youth, one of the forms of convalescence or, better, that process itself. Only by this means is it humanly possible to survive certain wounds. (Herzen xlviii)

The “means” here for Herzen was writing this memoir, and for Ba Jin at that moment, it was translating, which helped him to “bury everything personal and return to his youth” (Herzen xlviii). Here is another paragraph:

Life...lives, peoples, revolutions, beloved faces have appeared, changed and vanished between the Sparrow Hills and Primrose Hill; already their traces have almost been swept away by the pitiless whirlwind of events. Everything round me is changed. (Herzen xlix)

Obviously, on this path of history, Ba Jin believed Herzen and himself as fellow

travelers, witnesses and victims who had promoted, participated in and wounded by revolutions, and through his translation, Ba Jin was trying to revive his belief of the individual that was supposed to be the real agent of history. For Ba Jin, his sense of “individual” and his/her relationship with the total history was the real lesson that he got from Herzen, and that “individual” was inevitably an “intellectual”, whose responsibility in the 1980s was to take the burden of historical reflection on the Cultural Revolution, and even the responsibility of the history itself. To take over this burden and responsibility, Ba Jin stopped his translation to begin his own writings on history, that is *Random Thoughts*. From this point, we could tell that Herzen was still living in Ba Jin’s new issues of the intellectual in *Random Thoughts*.

However, the next question is, to what extent, this “individual”, or the discourse of “individual” in the 1980s could bring out the reflections on history, like Herzen did to Russia in the 19th century?

#### **IV. From *My Past and Thoughts* to *Random Thoughts***

The work *Random Thoughts* was written between 1978 to 1986, which is a compilation of almost 160 short pieces written on history, memories of friends, daily news, travel experiences, comments on social and cultural events, so on and so forth. Of course, although the topics were chosen “randomly” based on the daily news, matters and thoughts, most of these pieces are meant to draw some reflections on the Cultural Revolution.

As Ba Jin’s term “byproduct” indicated, the linkage between the two texts is very important, but has been somewhat neglected by researchers in mainland China who read Ba Jin as mainly a Chinese novelist and essayist, rather than an intellectual who was both a writer and a translator. Hence we should stop for a few seconds at the titles of the two works. The first Chinese title of Herzen’s memoir employed by Ba Jin in 1940 was “我的过去与思想 (wo de guo qu yu si xiang)”, which was a literal translation of the English title “my past and thoughts”. However, in 1977, Ba Jin employed a new title, “往事与深思 (wang shi yu shen si)”, which means “the past and contemplation”, or “the past and deep thoughts”. Compare to the earlier title, this one is more lyrical, rhetorical, and even nostalgic, and it suggests that the author would express his serious thinking and deep feelings. And then, after “A Letter” was published, some other intellectuals who were translating or were just interested in Herzen’s memoir got to know this news, and they not only wrote to Ba Jin to appreciate his hard-working, but also mailed their drafts or materials to him. One of them was Zang Zhonglun, a translator who at last

completed the whole translation from where Ba Jin ended, and published the whole translation along with Ba Jin as a co-translator. Zang suggested that considering Herzen's versatility and improvisations, maybe "random thoughts" was better than "deep thoughts". Ba Jin accepted the suggestion, and thanked Zang for inspiring him to title his own work as "Random Thoughts" (Zang 4).

Actually, the inspiration for Ba Jin was not only a matter of the title, but also a method to articulate his thinking responsibly and properly. Being trapped in various concepts, idioms and doctrines that are largely shaped in the history which Ba Jin could hardly recognize, Ba Jin and intellectuals like him who survived the Cultural Revolution may feel frustrated and dangerous to bring out the so-called "deep thoughts", and by contrast, "random thoughts" maybe an easier and more ambiguous choice, which gave Ba Jin more space and flexibility to write and (maybe more importantly) to don't-write. Therefore, the shift from "deep thoughts" to "random thoughts" may be read as a symptom of the way of Ba Jin's thinking on the Cultural Revolution and the total history.

In the preface (1987) of the bound volume of *Random Thoughts*, Ba Jin says that during the writing, he "did not have the confidence for himself. To be honest, I felt exhausted, like one stuck in the half-way, and does not move forward or backward. [...]I tried to find self-comfort by keep telling myself: just have a try." (*Random* 1) From these words, we could easily tell the author's difficulties of attempts to express and the biting-back of his words at the same time. For the reasons of these difficulties, Ba Jin says in this preface that he got many passive criticism on his writings, while felt more stronger desire and more necessities to write, but yet hard to figure out the ins and outs of the Cultural Revolution. So, how to solve this problem? Ba Jin finds a personal way: "dissect myself", and then "tell the truth".

By "dissecting himself", Ba Jin at one hand induced the idea of "individual" which got from the translation and later understanding of Herzen to his new writings on the Cultural Revolution, and at the other hand, he exchange the image of the individual from the one who was wounded by history to one who was not only wounded but also responsible for the wound. Of course, the "individual", was definitely an "intellectual", like Ba Jin himself. And by this tactical exchange, Ba Jin carefully shifted his target of critique from the subject who (such as the "Gang of Four" whom he condemned in "A Letter") may be truly responsible for the Cultural Revolution to the intellectuals. That was why when Tse-tsung Chow raised the question on the shortage of "anti-feudalism" discourse, Ba Jin turned to issues such as the independent mind of intellectuals. After all, while there were no possibilities to raise deep critiques toward history and reality, to reset the target to

the dependency and obedience of the intellectuals maybe a handy maneuver.

However, without the “deep thoughts” of the real subject who should take the responsibility of history, his reflections would always be unable to answer the questions that haunted him over and over, and while his reflections and confessions intensified, the pain and desperation of himself would also be raised. As a result, his writings and reflections were largely a text of self-scapegoating and self-torturing. In the preface of *Random Thoughts* that was cited above, Ba Jin depicts his “dissection” with creaturely vividness:

These 150 articles are all about the feelings of a nonentity. I called them ‘feeble howl’, but they are really pus and blood from the open wounds. [...] To know myself, I have to dissect myself. I thought it would be easy, and it could at last reduce the pain, however, I was so clumsy to use my pen as a scalpel to cut my heart again and again. I could not do it, for it was so painful. I used to say that to treat myself harshly, but yet soft-handed while stabbing myself. I dared not to do deeper. On every page of these five volumes, there is blood, which was almost pus and blood from the wounds of the 10 years. Nevertheless, I knew that if I could not clean out the pus and blood, it would poison the whole body. (*Random* 1-2)

In this passage, Ba Jin brings the motif of “wound” that echoed the one in Herzen’s memoir, and adds the creaturely elements similar to Christian martyrdom. Such martyrdom, leveled the morality of the whole volumes up, and turned the reflections or critiques to moral cries. However, the problem was still there: without reflections on the foundations, subjects and limitations of the “reflection”, while Ba Jin stressed on the necessities of “reflection” harder and harder, the moral cries were more and more desperate. At last, as the words “feeble howl” that Ba Jin exploited shows, such kind of moral cries may not bring out “deep thoughts” on the history, for the author unexpectedly yet predictably turned the sufferer to some kind of power or capital to write and reflect, and the result was no more than an image of a suffering individual in the text, and a new idol of intellectual in the contexts of the 1980s. By this time, he was trapped, again, but into his own conceptions. We could say that Ba Jin had shown the highest morality of reflection and independence in the 1980s, rather than reflection and independence themselves.

The way that Ba Jin raised his moral issue was not unusual in the 1980s. We should notice that when Ba Jin’s translation of the first two volumes of *My Past and Thoughts* along with the first volume of his *Random Thoughts* was published in

1979, the debates on “humanism”(人道主义) had been launched by writers, literary scholars, and some Marxism theoreticians. “Humanism” at large in modern China is certainly a trans-lingual issue, but the 1980s’ understanding of it was quite local and temporal. In 1993, Ba Jin wrote a short piece titled “No Gods” for Writer’s Publishing House edition of *Random Thoughts*, says:

I obviously remember that I transformed into a beast, but someone told me it was just a dream that last 10 years. Would we dream again? Why would not? My heart is still aching and bleeding. But I would not to dream again. I will not forget that I am a human being, and I decided not to transformed into a beast again. No matter who flog me on the back, I would not fall asleep again. Of course, I will never believe in any nonsense!

While there were no gods, there would be no beasts. We are all human beings. (*Random 1*)

These words has shown the common understanding of “humanism” among the intellectuals in the 1980s: the Cultural Revolution was inhuman and beast-like, therefore we need “humanism”, to treat human as human, to value and cherish humanity, that were largely belong to humanists, i.e. intellectuals. Unfortunately, such a pursuit for humanism was basically a passive reaction to history, rather than a active intervene into that history. Even we could say that the “humanism” discourse was basically a result of incapability of historical intervene, just as Ba Jin’s case has shown. “Humanism”, along with Ba Jin’s “reflection” or “independence”, were turned to be moral cries, and would always become “traps” for the intellectuals themselves.

However, we should also note that in the last line of “No Gods”, Ba Jin stressed out that the “beast” was brought or created by “gods” or the cults of “gods”. This sentence is printed in front of the “preface” cited above, should be read as radiocontrast agent for the implicit meanings of his esoteric writings. In this sense, those moral cries of the intellectuals did entrust literature to play a heroic role in the 1980s, and give not only intellectuals but also the authorities and the reading public to negotiate. Around literature sphere, there was a sense of autonomy (rather than real autonomy) that let the intellectuals viewed themselves active agent to restore order, energy and sympathy to our collective memory, hence a leadership for this country to heal itself and foster the transitional justice.

## V. Conclusion

Bei Dao argues that after 1949, “the profession of translating foreign literature became a haven under the severe pressure of the dictatorship. Many writers could hide within it to evade the threats and the harassment posed by the official discourse, and thereby partially satisfy their own creative desires. This enabled translation style to develop as a marginal form.” (61-62) He even named the “translation style” during the 1950-70s as “a quiet revolution” (64). Here we may regard the translation of *My Past and Thoughts* as a “haven” for Ba Jin, both politically and psychologically, and also it was one of those revolutionary translations which paved ways for the 1980s.

At last, we may get a better understanding of Ba Jin in the 1980s and his translation of *My Past and Thoughts*. With limited competence of Russian, Ba Jin’s translation may not be a good one, not to mention he never completed it. But it was a translation that Ba Jin employed to translate his past to the 1980s, translate his feels and thoughts of the Cultural Revolution to words, and translate the experiences of history to future generations. As a life-long anarchist, he was always searching for a sense of autonomy through political or literary writing and translation. By using the universalized concept “anti-feudalism”, Ba Jin revived his identity as a writer and find a way to articulate his condemnations on the Cultural Revolution, while trapping himself into the narrow space of the anti-feudalism discourse. With the issue of “individual”, “independent mind”, he was trying to break the limitation of anti-feudalism discourses, and bring out a kind of intellectual autonomy in the moral sense of self-discipline and confession. Although since there were no possibilities to raise “deep thoughts”, such self-discipline and confession was a sort of self-mutilation and self-sacrifice, which unintentionally made himself and the intellectuals scapegoats of the history. However, at the same time, he made himself and the intellectuals, as well as literature to be a new agent of history, to take the responsibilities of the history and the future, and made the 1980s a “Literary Age”, an age full of intellectual vigor.

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