

Candidate 3

To what extent did the change to communism in China affect the views of
love in poetry

There is significant evidence to support that communism caused many problems such as famine. However, one problem it solved was gender inequality in China. Before the China Communist Party (CCP) came into power, from 1912 China was ruled by the Kuomintang Party (KMT). The CCP was formed in 1921 in Shanghai and came into power in 1949¹. Until 1949, the main roles women had in society were either a wife, concubine or prostitute. A man could have multiple wives, sometimes the first being cruel to the next and so on. In the late 1940s, due to economic depression, families were selling their daughters to brothels. Beggars would exchange their daughters for food. In 1938, when the Japanese occupied Nanking, many women worked in "houses of comfort" as prostitutes. Many women were starved and committed suicide.²

¹ Encyclopedia Britannica Chinese Communist Party

² Holding Up Half The Heavens: The Effect Of Communist Rule on China's Women

A cruel tradition of feet binding would also decide a woman's fate. Men saw women who had tiny feet and were in immense pain, stumbling around instead of walking, as attractive. This made them feel powerful³. Many women were, and remain, grateful for Mao Tse-Tung, the founder of the CCP. This mentality change is shown in love poetry. The three poems analysed in this essay are 落叶的爱 by 张爱玲, 一颗花开的树 by 席慕容 and 致橡树 by 舒婷.

张爱玲 was born in Shanghai in 1920 and died in California, America in 1995. She was a novelist and a screenwriter and much of her work deals with tensions between men and women in love. When communism became the main ideology of China, her career as a writer was struggling and her work was forbidden in mainland China. This is because much of her writing contradicted and criticised Mao's ideology. Therefore in 1952 she moved to Hong Kong and then later to the United States⁴. Despite that, her poetry was very popular in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

In her poem 落叶的爱, there is a status difference between the leaf and the shadow which shows that they are not equal in their love for one another:

“迎上来迎上来” (张爱玲, 1956, line 10)

³ Holding Up Half The Heavens: The Effect Of Communist Rule on China's Women

⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica Zhang Ailing

The shadow is going to greet the leaf and shows its excitement, however as only one comes to greet the other instead of both of them, this shows that the leaf has higher status. “迎上来” is repeated which serves to emphasise the shadow's excitement and eagerness.

The ending of the poem almost symbolises death, the end a journey. It can also represent the falling of the nationalist government to communism⁵:

“秋阳里的

水门汀地上

静静地睡在一起

它和它的爱

(ibid., 1956, lines 19-22)

The short lines help to create a pause; it seems as if the leaf is thinking about the life it has led as it comes to an end. It symbolises never-dying love as they sleep in the cement together. The poem shows the stages of life: spring represents childhood; summer represents adulthood; autumn represents old age, and winter represents death. Since the leaf is falling it shows that there is a transition from autumn to winter. As it falls it remembers the life it led and realises that the shadow has been with it throughout its life. “秋阳” links back to the first line, “大的黄叶子掉下”, this helps to establish that it is set in autumn. The conclusion of the poem shows that everything has love, even the smallest things.

⁵ China Knowledge

Another poem that doesn't show equality is “一颗花开的树” by 席慕. 席慕 was born in Sichuan, China in 1943. In 1949 she moved to Hong Kong with her family, in 1953 they moved to Taiwan⁶. She did not grow up in mainland China or experience a communist society. Because of this it is assumed that she was brought up with traditional views that men are above women in the social status.

In her poem “一颗花开的树” there is a clear status difference between a tree and a human, where we assume that the tree is a woman. The poem overall is about an unrequited love:

“如何让你遇见我” (席慕容, 1978, line 1)

This portrays that the narrator has a lower status and that there is a non-distinguished relationship. It starts the poem dramatically and demonstrates severe desperation. Because of the clear status difference, it is obvious that 席慕容 has no belief in communism. Since the poet is female and the narrator has a lower status, using begging like language, it can be assumed that the narrator is a woman. Until communism came into power in mainland China, women were preferred if they spoke in a soft voice, begged to be loved and were delicate.

Further evidence to show the desperation and the status difference is the tree's use of fragile, begging, careful language:

⁶ PIP Poetry Blog

“当你走近

请你走近”

(ibid., 1978, lines 11-12)

This kind of language helps to emphasise the delicacy a woman was required to have. Before communism women needed permission from their husbands to do anything and were still treated badly⁷. These lines help desperation and also the traditional mentality. Because she is seen as a Taiwanese author, this essentially projects that Taiwan still has this traditional mentality even after the Kuomintang leader fled to Taiwan.

The concluding line of the poem uses beautiful, delicate yet strong language to show the daintiness and desperation of the narrator:

“朋友啊，

那不是花瓣，

是我凋零的心。”

(ibid., 1978, lines 15-17)

The flower petals are being used as a metaphor for the speaker's hearts and the use of strong word choice to conclude the poem after continual use of fragile language makes the poem more beautiful. Flowers are meant to be beautiful and symbolise happiness and life, however here they symbolise fragments of a broken heart. Trees usually symbolise strength, stability and they

⁷ Holding Up Half The Heavens: The Effect Of Communist Rule on China's Women

can weather anything, however in the poem it is seen to be fragile and dependent. This shows the fragility and dependence of love and in something as strong as a tree.

In comparison to the previous poets, 舒婷 grew up in mainland China. She was born in 1952 in Jinjiang, Fujian province and grew up with the communist ideology. "致橡树" was published in 1978⁸. By this point in her career, communism would be fully in place and it shows in her writing.

Women in today's society in China do not have to beg for love. In her poem "致橡树", we can see that the traditional submissive women no longer exist in Chinese society:

"我如果爱你——" (舒婷, 1978, line 1)

The narrator shows that there is a possibility that she may not love him so it hints that he has to prove his worth or beg for her love. This goes against traditional Chinese beliefs as the woman is meant to beg, not the other way around. This indicates that she has power over him and that she is going to give reasons why he should love her. This line is repeated twice which shows that she also has power in the relationship. "如果" is repeated twice in the beginning of the poem and shows uncertainty, almost as if it is a hypothesis. She uses it as an indication that she is proving her worth. This shows the communist mentality that both men and women are equal because if it were traditional, she would be lowering her status as in the previous two poems⁹.

⁸ Revolvy

⁹ Office of the Historian

In order to prove her worth, she describes herself with beautiful, decorative language:

“我有我的红硕花朵，

像沉重的叹息，

又想英勇的火炬”

(ibid., 1978, lines 24-26)

She uses beautiful language not only to describe herself, but to also describe the ever burning passion. She makes herself look dainty by describing herself as a flower but also strong when comparing herself to a flame torch. She puts herself on the same pedestal as him. This again shows the new mentality of China since the communist government has been in power.

As part of proving her worth, she brags about their love being the best:

“这才是伟大的爱情” (ibid., 1978, line 31)

She shows that she is proud of their love and calls it the best love there is, this indicates that she is proud to be with him and that he is worthy of her, but more importantly that she is worthy of him. During the Qing Dynasty and when there was a nationalist government, women had to use soft delicate language and if a man thought he was not being spoken to properly then the woman would be beaten¹⁰. Bragging in Chinese culture is looked down on and is shamed. Even

¹⁰ Holding Up Half The Heavens: The Effect Of Communist Rule on China's Women

in communist China, because everyone is equal and arrogance is putting others down. This line shows the change in the way women can speak, however it still goes against communist values. Throughout the poem there is no self-doubt or lowering one's status.

In conclusion, there are clear differences between the three poets and they each represent different eras of Chinese history. "落叶的爱" and "一颗花开的树" show clear signs of status difference whereas "致橡树" shows equality. Overall all three poems show the chronological change in China and how Taiwan is still very traditional. It is clear that the role of women in Chinese society has changed drastically for the better.

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