

Document 11.8: Excerpt from “Snow Falls on China’s Land,” a poem by Ai Qing, 1937

Born in 1910 in Zhejiang Province, Ai Qing is regarded as one of the finest modern Chinese poets. He was nineteen when he moved to France to study painting. After studying the works of Western poets, however, he decided to write his own. In 1932, he returned to Shanghai and joined the League of Left-Wing Writers. Shortly thereafter the Guomindang imprisoned him for having “incendiary ideas.” He was released in 1935 and traveled from city to city as the war with Japan intensified. In 1958, he once again ran into trouble with the government. This time the Communists accused the poet of being a “rightist” and exiled him to work in Manchuria and later Xinjiang. He could not publish his poetry until two years after Mao Zedong’s death in 1976. Ai Qing died in 1996.

Snow falls on China’s land;
Cold blockades China....

I have lost the most precious days
Of my youth
In roaming and in prisons
My life
Like yours
Is haggard.

Snow falls on China’s land;
Cold blockades China....

On the river of this snowy night,
One small oil lamp drifts slowly
In a rickety boat with a black canopy.
Who sits in there
In the lamplight, head bowed?

-Ah, it's you,
Tousle-haired and grubby-faced young woman.
Wasn't it
Your home
-Warm and happy nest!
That was burnt to the ground
By the brutal enemy?
Wasn't it
A night like this
Bereft of the protection of a man
That, in the terror of death,
You were teased and poked by enemy bayonets?

On such cold nights as tonight,
Our countless
Aged mothers
Huddle together in homes not theirs-
Like strangers
Not knowing
Where tomorrow's wheel
Will take them.
And China's roads
Are so rugged
And so muddy.

Snow falls on China's land;
Cold blockades China....

Passing over the prairies in this snowy night,
Over regions chewed raw by the beacons of war,

Countless, the tillers of the virgin soil
Lost, the animals they nurtured;
Lost, their fertile fields.
They crowd together
In life's hopeless squalor:
On famine's earth,
Gazing at the dark sky,
They reach out, trembling,
And beg for succor.

Oh, the pain and misery of China,
As long and vast as this snowy night!
Snow falls on China's land;
Snow blockades China.

China,
The feeble poem I write
On this lampless night,
Can it bring you a little warmth?

Translated by Marilyn Chin

Source: Ai Qing, "Snow Falls on China's Land," trans. Marilyn Chin. Lau, Joseph S. M. and Howard Goldblatt, eds. *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. 519-520.