

Document 12.6: “Dead Water,” a poem by Wen Yiduo, 1928

Wen Yiduo¹ was one of the generation of young poets who came of age in the first years of the fragile Chinese Republic. He studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and Colorado College, and in the late 1920s became a professor of English and American literature. In 1932, he took a teaching post at Qinghua University in Beijing, his alma mater.

When the Japanese occupied most of eastern China, Wen went to Kunming to teach at Southwest United University. As the Guomindang-Communist conflict intensified, he became increasingly angered, especially by the corruption within the army. Even though he considered himself a “bookworm,” Wen did not shy away from speaking out. “If I don’t do anything about it, nobody else ever will!” Wen exclaimed.²

In 1944, Wen joined the Democratic League, a movement composed largely of Western-style liberals critical of the government. As his speeches began to draw larger and larger crowds, he was blacklisted by Chiang’s secret police. On July 15, 1946, five hours after speaking at a memorial service for an assassinated friend, another leader in the Democratic League, Wen himself was gunned down. As Kai-yu Hsu writes in his biography of the poet, Wen Yiduo’s story is “not a story of just one man, but of a whole generation of Chinese intellectuals whose footprints criss-cross the pages of modern Chinese history.”³

Although this poem was published in 1928, all the political parties and “players” in the Civil War of 1945–1949 were alive and politically active.

¹ Spelled Wen I-to in the Wade-Giles transcription system

² Hsu, Kai-yu, *Wen I-to* (Boston: Twayne, 1980) 156-157.

³ Hsu, 7.

Dead Water

Here is a ditch of hopeless water,
The fresh breeze would not even raise half a ripple.
One might as well throw in a few more tins and scraps of metal
And why not pour in your left-over food and gravy.

Perhaps the green of the copper will turn into emerald,
Rust on the tin cans emerge as petals of peach blossom;
Then let grease weave a layer of patterned muslin,
And bacteria brew vapours of coloured clouds.

Let the dead water ferment into a gully of green wine,
Floating pearl-like crowds of white foam;
The laughter of small pearls will change them to large pearls
Broken by mosquitoes to steal the alcohol.

Even a ditch of hopeless dead water
Can boast of some ornaments.
If the green frogs can't bear the silence,
Then we can say that the dead water can sing.

Here is a ditch of hopeless dead water,
This cannot be a place where beauty lives,
Better let ugliness cultivate it,
And see what kind of world comes of it.

Source: Wen I-to. "Dead Water." *Red Candle: Selected Poems*. Trans. Tao Tao Sanders.
Red Candle: Selected Poems by Wen I-to. London: Jonathan Cape, 1972. 34.