

The Origins and Historical Development of the Modernist Poets

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The Modernists (Xiandaipai 现代派) were a group of poets who espoused a style of pure poetics relatively early in the development of what is now called Chinese New Poetry (*xinshi* 新诗).¹ Their work came to prominence in the early 1930s, found its apogee during the middle years of the same decade, and quickly receded shortly thereafter. The “Modernist” name comes directly from the literary arts journal *Xiandai* 现代 (Les contemporains, or “The Modern”), where the poets’ work was first published. The journal was founded by Shi Zhecun 施蛰存 (1905–2003) in January of 1932, immediately following the Japanese invasion of Shanghai, and it ran under the coeditorship of Shi and Du Heng 杜衡 (1907–1964) for a period of two and a half years. Shortly after the journal’s founding, Shi proclaimed that *Xiandai* “does not risk politics,” and “always takes a middle road.” The journal’s primary motivation, in other words, was commercial rather than political and, in an effort to meet all tastes, it became nearly kaleidoscopic in nature. Thus, the poems published in *Xiandai* were stylistically not entirely consistent. However, from both the philosophical

1 Editors’ note: This article by Lan Dizhi was composed in 1983, then revised and published in 1985, a moment in Chinese literary history when the rigid, ideologically inflected policies of artistic expression in place since the founding of the People’s Republic were finally giving way to more nuanced and in-depth readings of Chinese writing. This relatively liberal moment, however, was quickly followed by a conservative backlash, and “modernism” was one of the major points of contention between those who wanted, in essence, more autonomy and freedom of expression in the arts and those who were determined to maintain a strict communist line. We can see in Lan’s essay both forces contending, with sometimes overly enthusiastic praise for modernist writers followed by seemingly contradictorily negative readings of the movement as a whole. Nonetheless, the work is an important step forward in critical discourse concerning literature in general and modernist poetry in particular toward the end of the twentieth century. As a product of that era, the citation style of the original article is different from current expectation. Thus, some differences in citation, such as the omission of page numbers for footnoted items, reflects this earlier style.

and artistic points of view, the poems did share enough commonality that a single critical term for describing them, “Modernist,” came into being.²

Other journals were also involved in publishing writing of this style. The poetry that appeared in the literary magazine *Huoxing* 火星 (Mars, October 1934 to March 1935) edited by Bian Zhilin 卞之琳 (1910–2000) was similar to *Xiandai* in its push for a new wave of poetic development. In October of 1936, Dai Wangshu 戴望舒 (1905–1950), with participation from Bian Zhilin, Feng Zhi 冯至 (1905–1993), Sun Dayu 孙大雨 (1905–1997), and Liang Zongdai 梁宗岱 (1903–1983), began editing *Xinshi* 新诗 (New Poetry) magazine, bringing a modernist poetic style to its highest point of achievement. At about the same time, numerous other journals appeared, for instance *Xiandai shifeng* 现代诗风 (Modern poetry style), *Xiandai wenyi* 现代文艺 (Modern literature and art), *Shizhi* 诗志 (Poetry intent), and *Xiaoya* 小雅 (Elegentia), all demonstrating the spread of this new poetic style. Responding to such a development, Lu Yishi 路易士³ (1931–2013) put it this way:

The years 1936 and 1937 were the Golden Age of Poetry after the beginning of the May Fourth Movement. During that period, poetic activities in all quarters were lively, and writers of great talent and creative productivity gave rise to a kind of cultural renaissance. Apart from Shanghai, others in Beijing, Wuhan, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and such cities all saw relatively small-scale poetry journals and poetry-centric journals that focused on pure literature.⁴

The style of these various literary journals was actually relatively consistent. In a reference note, *Xiaoya* editor Wu Benxing 吴奔星 (1913–2004) observed: “for many years, our poetry circles have been desolate beyond belief, the poem’s form becoming a kind of poetry-cum-prose, a bent-out-of-shape creation. But in 1936, a group of pure poetry advocates took an art for art’s sake position, opening up the field of poetry to something very different from the years before.”⁵ From the point of view of literary development, 1936 and 1937 were the pinnacle of poetic maturity in modernist poetry and indeed an important stage in the entire history of poetry in modern China. However, the “Golden Age” of Chinese modernist poetry was also completely cut off from the surge

2 Sun Zuoyun, “Lun Xiandaipai shi.”

3 This is the pen name of Lu Yu 路逾, who in the 1950s, writing under the new pen name of Ji Xian 纪弦, became editor of the influential *Xiandaishi jikan* 现代诗季刊 (Modern poetry quarterly).

4 Lu Yishi, “Sanshi zishu.”

5 Wu Benxing, “Shezhong renyu.”