

From Du Fu to Rilke and Back: Feng Zhi's Modernist Aesthetics and Poetic Practice

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Feng Zhi 馮至 (1905–1993), one of modern China's greatest poets, conceived of nature as an “open secret” that could be revealed only by a deeply perceptive artist able to craft “living images of the objective world.”¹ Writing about the life and work of Goethe (1749–1842) in 1985, in the final decade of Feng's life, Feng celebrates Goethe's capacity to see “the grand in the minuscule, overall oneness within each individual element, infinity in that which is finite, and eternity in a single instant” (“Thoughts,” 77). Feng's emphasis on this particular approach to the art and practice of poetry is no accident; it represents the condensation of a lifetime spent thinking about and creating modern poetry. In his collection of essays titled *Lun Gede* 論歌德 (On Goethe), which he composed at two very different times in his life, from 1941 to 1947 and from 1978 to 1987, Feng draws numerous parallels and connections between the German Romantic thinker Goethe and the Tang dynasty poet Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770). Particularly in his critical essays “Gede yu Du Fu” 歌德與杜甫 (Goethe and Du Fu) and “Gedanken zu Goethes Gedichten” (Thoughts about Goethe's poetry), which he published in German in 1985, Feng emphasizes the inner resonance between these two poets' aesthetic-intellectual philosophies, life experiences, and lyrical modes of expression. The way in which Feng understands and interprets Goethe by relating him to Du Fu in these analytical works is, I argue, fundamentally informed by his own poetic credo and the influences he had received from Rainer Maria Rilke's (1875–1926) modernist poetics. The reflections recorded in *On Goethe* connect to poetic ideas Feng had initially expressed in his article titled “Li'erke: Wei shi zhounian jiri zuo” 里爾克：為十周年祭日作 (Rilke: On the tenth anniversary of his death) in 1936, his “Gei yige qingnian shiren de shi fengxin yizhe xu” 給一個青年詩人的十封信譯者序 (Translator's introduction to *Ten letters to a young poet*) in 1937, and the 1941 preface to his *Shisihangji* 十四行集 (Sonnets, 1942). He later articulated similar poetic-philosophical ideas in a 1987 article titled “Wailai de yangfen”

1 Feng Zhi, “Gedanken zu Goethes Gedichten,” 66. All translations of this German-language essay herein are my own.

外來的養分 (Nourishment from abroad). In what follows, I present an analysis of key themes in Feng Zhi's poetic thought and delineate his intertextual relations and indebtedness to Rilke, Goethe, and Du Fu, among whom he perceives a correspondence of poetic ideals and practice. This study contributes to existing scholarship about Feng Zhi's modernist poetics by shedding light on Feng's philosophical arguments concerning poetics in *On Goethe*, and tracing how this modernist Chinese poet envisioned a syncretic fusion of classical Chinese aesthetics (Du Fu's poetry), European Romantic impulses (Goethe's thought), and modernist poetic practice (Rilke's experimental innovations). I argue that Feng Zhi, similar to Rilke, Goethe, and Du Fu before him, seeks to transcend the surface of concrete objects to bring to light the invisible substrata of deeper consciousness that informs our lives. He achieves this by writing "thing-poetry" and employing the Rilkean techniques of "turning point," "transformation," "sublimation," and "pure contradiction." A reading of Feng Zhi's *Sonnets* in relation to his mature poetic-philosophical thought and Rilke's *Sonette an Orpheus* (*Sonnets to Orpheus*, 1923) illuminates the unique modernist traits of Feng Zhi's art.

1 The Thing-Poem in Rilke's Poetics

Feng Zhi was, like Rilke, concerned with developing a new conception of the relationship between subject and object by presenting an interior landscape in which subject and object are suspended in an indeterminate, fluid space of an all-encompassing, organic whole that subsumes both the "I" and "other" of external reality. By thus projecting the poet's psyche onto the exterior world, both Rilke and Feng Zhi destabilize received notions of fixed subjectivity and instead propose the idea that sensory perception is critical in the constitution of any idea of self.² The lyric form that both poets choose to metaphorically depict this precarious, aesthetic form of self-knowledge is the modernist thing-poem in which the "subject is both observing its own soul and entering the soul of objects."³

The purpose of Rilke's "thing-poem" was to describe with utmost clarity a great variety of physical objects and to focus especially on "the silence of their

2 This idea is related to the simultaneous evolution of early psychology as well as the thought of Henri Bergson (1859–1941), who convinced many thinkers that immediate experience and intuition are more significant than rationalism and science for understanding reality. See Judith Ryan, *The Vanishing Subject*, 10–12.

3 Ulrich Baer, *The Poet's Guide to Life*, xviii.