

The Classical Echo in Chinese Poetic Modernism

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Shiyi 诗意 [poetic-ness] is inexplicable.

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No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.

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“Don’t imitate the ancients” is the second of the eight proposals that Hu Shi 胡适 outlined in his “Wenxue gailiang chuyi” 文学改良刍议 (A modest proposal for literary reform), an essay that appeared in the journal *Xin qingnian* 新青年 (New youth) in 1917.¹ Hu’s essay was the first clarion call for a literary revolution that would give birth to Chinese vernacular poetry known as New Poetry (*xinshi* 新诗). The central argument behind Hu Shi’s proposal is the idea of the contemporaneity of literature, that is, literature must respond only to the time of its creation. The way new literature and particularly New Poetry responds to its time, Hu Shi believed, is a radical departure from classical Chinese poetry. This position not only motivated early experimental authors writing in the vernacular, but also was often repeated by later poets and critics of New Poetry. For example, Shi Zhecun 施蛰存, editor of the influential literary journal *Xiandai* 现代 (Les contemporains) and a prominent proponent of modernism in the 1930s, defined “modernist poetry” as poetry that “reflects a modern ethos that modern people experience from modern living, and as one poetic form of expression that is arranged with modern diction.”² It is this

1 Hu Shi, “Wenxue gailiang chuyi.”

2 Quoted in Zhang Taozhou, *Xiandai Hanyu de shixing kongjian*, 120.

anxiety over contemporaneity that has been driving Chinese writers to build the tower of Chinese poetic modernism with mostly Western-inspired theories and aesthetic strategies. While the opposition between classical poetry and New Poetry has been an enduring topic in the history of modern Chinese literature, which is often fraught with political and ideological implications, it is a simplistic formation that New Poetry was a total rupture from Chinese literary tradition. That the new poem is what the classical poem is not may be good advocacy, but it has never proved to be the case in the real life of the new poem. My argument here is that the classical has existed, and in some cases has thrived, in the actual practice of poetic modernism throughout the twentieth century. Tradition has lost its luster, but it lives its “afterlife” as an echo off the wall, a sort of aesthetic presence that is indispensable to our experiences with the modern and the vernacular poem.³

If we describe “the classical” as ideas of writing and reading poetry from China’s past, it not only has never disappeared from modern Chinese poetry, but also has often served as a stabilizing force in the latter’s search for legitimacy as a new literary genre. Evidence of the classical is found in many critical “building blocks” of Chinese poetic modernism such as *yixiang* 意象 (image), *qihe* 契合 (correspondences), *huise* 晦涩 (opacity), *yinhua* 音画 (word-music/picturesqueness), and *shiyi* 诗意 (poetic-ness). These tropes all have Western origins ranging from the French Symbolists to English Modernism, yet they also show creative Chinese renderings infused with certain dimensions of classical poetics.⁴ Throughout the history of modern Chinese poetry, such infusions have happened in more tangible ways than critics have accounted for, in part because the genre identity of modern poetry has always been uncertain or even polemical.

“Poetic-ness,” the last of the five tropes for aesthetic innovation in the New Poetry movement, is where we shall begin. Every poem must strive for its own “poetic-ness,” which defines poetry as a legitimate form of literature that offers a unique and substantive aesthetic experience. The question of “poetic-ness”

3 Perhaps it is worth pointing out that, although this chapter connects in spirit with the study of “old-style” poetry in modern China in the English language, which includes Jon Eugene von Kowallis’s groundbreaking study of Lu Xun’s poetry (*The Lyrical Lu Xun: A Study of His Classical-Style Verse*, 1996), Shengqing Wu’s thematic analysis of the genre in the early twentieth century (*Modern Archaics: Continuity and Innovation in the Chinese Lyric Tradition, 1900–1937*, 2013), and a few other translations and readings of individual poets including Mao Zedong, it also differs substantially from such studies because of my different treatment of the old-style form itself: I think the classical echo lingers despite a deliberate collective effort by modern Chinese poets to abandon the old-style form, not because of it.

4 Zhang Xin, *Ershi shiji Zhongguo xinshi shi*, 102–129.