

Xia Yu and the Modernist Tradition in Taiwan

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This chapter offers a study of Xia Yu (Hsia Yü) 夏宇 (b. 1956), who many consider one of the most innovative poets writing in Chinese today. Beyond a textual analysis of her work, the chapter will contextualize her appearance on the scene in what I call the modernist tradition of Chinese poetry from the 1910s to the present. By situating Xia Yu in this tradition, I highlight two salient features of her work: relentless artistic experimentation and a distinctly modernist sensibility.

1 Modernisms in Chinese Poetry

To the extent that literary modernism is a revolt against tradition and a self-conscious quest for the new, modern poetry in the Chinese language is, by definition, “modernist” since its inception in the 1910s. Self-declared as New Poetry (*xinshi* 新詩), it rose against the millennia-long classical poetry, disparaged as old poetry (*jiushi* 舊詩), much like David taking on Goliath. The emphasis on newness is manifested in all aspects: language, form, imagery, use of allusion, and literary models, as laid out by Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) in his “Ba bu” 八不 (Eight don’ts).¹

However, it is necessary for us to go beyond this broad definition of modernism since modern Chinese poetry did not develop in an exclusively Chinese context. From the beginning, it has drawn on world poetry, mainly from the United States, Europe, and Japan. As Hu Shi readily acknowledged, his own “experiments” were inspired by his translations of Anglo-American poetry, which he studied as an international student in the United States from 1910 to 1917.² Hu’s case was representative rather than unique. When we look at the history of modern Chinese poetry as a whole, a large number of poets have either spent time abroad or engaged in translations of world poetry during their careers. What this means is that modern Chinese poetry is by nature

¹ For a listing and brief discussion of Hu Shi’s “Eight Don’ts,” see Michelle Yeh’s introduction to Michelle Yeh and N. G. D. Malmqvist, *Frontier Taiwan*, 2–3.

² For relevant passages, see *Hu Shi riji quanji*.

transnational and transcultural. It is exposed to and often does appropriate models from a broad array of movements of global currency, from romanticism and symbolism to modernism and postmodernism.

This fact complicates the way we discuss modernism in that the modernity of Chinese poetry is the umbrella under which different strands of modernism may be discerned and studied. Historically, we may identify six distinct moments when modernism is embraced as a literary paradigm. The first and earliest moment is the emergence of the group of writers revolving around two journals, *Xiandai* 現代 (Les contemporains, 1932–1935) and *Xinshi* 新詩 (New poetry, 1936), including such important poets as Dai Wangshu 戴望舒 (1905–1950), Bian Zhilin 卞之琳 (1910–2000), Liang Zongdai 梁宗岱 (1903–1983), Sun Dayu 孫大雨 (1905–1997), and Feng Zhi 馮至 (1905–1993). Although these poets had affiliations with various groups at one time or another, their poetry and translations all exhibited a Symbolist-Modernist orientation.³

The second moment in Chinese modernism is the formation of Le Moulin Poetry Society (Fengche shishe 風車詩社, 1935–1936) in Taiwan under Japanese occupation. Founded by Yang Chichang 楊熾昌 (1908–1994), Le Moulin advocated French Surrealism as mediated by Japan. This group has received scant critical attention for several reasons: it was small, it was geographically marginal, and its aesthetic position ran counter to the mainstream at the time. Finally, it was short-lived. Although all the poetry was written in Japanese, I consider Le Moulin to be the first in the history of modern Chinese poetry to advocate Surrealism as most of the members were Taiwanese.⁴

The third moment of modernism finds articulation by the young poets at the Southwest Associated University in Kunming during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). Under the tutelage of the preeminent British literary critic William Empson (1906–1984), they studied contemporary English poetry and were especially drawn to W. H. Auden, whose modernist poetry and social engagement inspired them. Among the students, Mu Dan 穆旦 (1918–1977), Yuan Kejia 袁可嘉 (1921–2008), Du Yunxie 杜運燮 (1915–2002), and Zheng Min 鄭敏 (b. 1920) were to be retroactively banded together with five other poets from the New Poetry group and dubbed the Nine Leaves school (Jiuyepai 九葉派).⁵ In post-Mao China, the Nine Leaves, Mu Dan in particular, exerted a significant influence on the new generations of poets. As an editor and

3 For critical studies, see Lloyd Haft, *Pien Chih-lin*; Gregory Lee, *Dai Wangshu*; Xiaojue Wang, *Modernity with a Cold War Face*, chapter 5 on Feng Zhi.

4 Michelle Yeh, "Ranshao yu feiyue," 33–63.

5 Wai-lim Yip, *Lyrics from Shelters*.