

## Measure Words Not for Measure: a Linguistic Experiment in Modern Chinese Poetry

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To many modern poets, the key to modernism is nonconformism in the use of language. As exemplified by the French surrealists' practice, words can be a springboard to upset the mind and unveil its inadequacy. Many linguists also consider the use of language to be vital in defining poets and poetry. For example, to Roman Jakobson, "a poet is a conscious enthusiast for language," and Habel (one of Jakobson's interlocutors) sees the very nature of poetry in its relation to the structure of language, for "it is only the application of the verbal material, not the content found in it, that constitutes the difference between poetry and prose."<sup>1</sup> Taking an interdisciplinary approach, this chapter will investigate how modern Chinese poets have experimented with a specific linguistic component, measure words, and in what ways their innovative use of it has contributed to Chinese modernism.

The issue of the verbal medium is of prime importance to the Chinese literary scene because it posed a double challenge, both linguistic and literary, to early twentieth-century China. Hu Shi's eight tenets in "Wenxue gailiang chuyi" 文學改良芻議 (Some modest proposals for the reform of literature), published in 1917, can be summarized as a quest for a new written-colloquial medium and a living literature in the vernacular.<sup>2</sup> Although the use of the spoken language for writing is not brand new, it was unprecedented that Chinese intellectuals saw language reform and literary revolution as part of a nation-building project. Their aim of adopting a living tongue in the writing system

1 Roman Jakobson, "On Poetic Intentions and Linguistic Devices in Poetry," 93.

2 Hu Shi's essay was published in *Xin qingnian* 新青年 [New youth] 2.5 (January 1917). The eight tenets are "1. Writing should have substance; 2. Do not imitate the ancients; 3. Emphasize the technique of writing; 4. Do not moan without an illness; 5. Eliminate hackneyed and formal language; 6. Do not use allusions; 7. Do not use parallelism; [and] 8. Do not avoid vulgar diction," as quoted in Denton, *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*, 123–124. In April 1918, Hu further elucidated his ideas in an essay titled "On the Building of a Literary Revolution": "Our aim in the literary revolution is merely to create in China a literature in the national language. A national language may be established only after we have produced a literature in the national language." For a discussion, see Tse-tsung Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*, 277.

and thereby fueling the progress toward freedom of expression and democratization of education demonstrates the social and political implications of the movement. In 1921 and 1922, the Ministry of Education decreed the introduction of textbooks written in the vernacular to primary and secondary schools.<sup>3</sup> Intellectuals committed to the literary revolution hoped that the vernacular would become an effective medium for the development of a new literature that was accessible to the public, and, through popular education and a raised level of literacy, people would be enlightened and develop a modern worldview.<sup>4</sup>

After the advent of language reform, linguistic studies of the Chinese vernacular developed rapidly in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Wang Li 王力 (1900–1986) admitted that the early formulation of the Chinese grammar system was largely influenced by Western models. From Ma Jianzhong's 馬建忠 (1845–1900) *Mashi wentong* 馬氏文通 (Ma's basic principles for writing clearly; 1898) to Wang Li's *Zhongguo xiandai yufa* 中國現代語法 (Modern Chinese grammar; 1943, rpt. 1949), for half a century Chinese grammar studies was circumscribed by ten parts-of-speech categories shared by Indo-European and Sino-Tibetan languages. Confined by this Western framework, early grammar studies overlooked a significant element of the Chinese language—"measure words."<sup>5</sup>

This study of modern poets' experiments with the verbal medium will center on measure words, a specific part of speech commonly found in spoken Chinese that actually falls outside the ten-category model borrowed from the West. According to He Jie's 何杰 research, measure words did not play a significant role in Chinese writing before the vernacular movement of 1919.<sup>6</sup> There was a substantial increase in the number of measure words in written Chinese when intellectuals began to experiment with "my hand writes as my

3 Franz H. Michael and George E. Taylor, *The Far East in the Modern World*.

4 This goal of the new literature and new thought movements was first proposed by Huang Yuanyong 黃遠庸 (1885–1915) in 1915. In his letter to the editor of the *Tiger* monthly in Tokyo, he writes: "As to the fundamental salvation [of China], I believe its beginning must be sought in the promotion of a new literature. In short, we must endeavor to bring Chinese thought into direct contact with the contemporary thought of the world, thereby to accelerate its radical awakening" (Tse-tung Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*, 272). Hu Shi translated the letter into English in his essay "The Literary Renaissance" (Tse-tung Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*, 440).

5 Wang Li 王力, *Zhongguo xiandai yufa*.

6 For an overview of the early definitions of measure words, see He Jie's *Xiandai Hanyu liangci yanjiu*, 1–10.