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**New Chinese Poetry under the Influence of Western
Poetics: The Origins, Development and Sense of
Nativeness**

西方诗学影响下的中国新诗：

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起源、发展与本土意识

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Preface

There are two great poetical traditions continuing now in world history, the English and the Chinese, and the relations between them have been a focus of interest and scholarly discussion for a considerable time. The development of new forms of modern literary expression in the West has been part of a complex upheaval in cultural practice that has become known as Modernism; and the parallel or consequent upheavals in Chinese literary history have reflected, as well as influenced, a series of radical changes in twentieth-century Chinese social and national evolution. The interactions between these two Modernist tendencies were further complicated by the pivotal part played by certain major poets of American origin who became international figures in an Anglo-American aspect of European Modernism more widely considered; and the influence of English-language poetic innovation on Chinese poetic Modernism is yet further complicated by a French influence on English-American poetic exploration and also directly on Chinese literary experiment. In the Chinese context these extremely complex strands of development have also to be seen against the background of a radical severance from the deep-rooted and long-standing traditional forms of poetic composition; and of course the political history of modern China has played a decisive part in shaping and interrupting the social development of literary practice. All of this is indeed a complex history, hard to unravel and to see clearly and to investigate with accurate

knowledge from both sides: Anglo-American, and Chinese.

This monograph by Dr Li is a pioneering work, attempting a synoptic overview on the basis of a literary judgment well-tuned in both languages and with a close understanding of very diverse forms of textual practice. I must confess to some extended personal involvement in this investigation, since Dr Li's supervisor of research, Professor Ou Hong, was himself a student of mine at Cambridge on the nomination of his teacher and my friend and colleague Professor Dai Liu-ling, before Dr Li followed in his teacher's footsteps to work with me at Cambridge to complete the preparation of this study. Dr Li has also benefited from the earlier research of Dr Xie Ming, who preceded him in working with me at Cambridge on the production of his subsequently published Cambridge Ph. D. thesis. I also find myself, somewhat to my own initial surprise, a subject of part of Dr Li's review of contemporary English poetry in its recent development.

Only a reader who has attempted to disentangle the confusions and part-knowledge of the twentieth century development of modern Chinese poetry, against its Western background, will be able fully to appreciate the significance of this study in projecting a clear, orderly and convincing framework. This much is a conspicuous service to literary-historical understanding. But also beyond this framing perspective Dr Li has presented two closely analytic case studies which greatly extend the range of this work; showing specific kinds of response to the challenge of poetic modernism by Chinese poets wrestling with problems of Western forms and innovations, working out the capacities of the Chinese language for novel kinds of expression that should even so retain and explore the power of the native language to implicate distinctively native forms of cultural experience.

Indeed the historical argument about a speech-based language for modern poetry in China, by analogy with Western innovatory practice, became as Dr Li shows a polemic strand in the quarrel of language (*Wenyan* vs. *Baihua*) and in the emerging strong predominance of literary prose.

These two major case histories display Dr Li's own critical acumen and insight into new experiments with form and imagery and poetic imagination. They demonstrate the deeply individual variations to be found in response to a wider cultural challenge. They give to the experience of reading and tracing the evolution of New Chinese Poetry a distinctive poetical aspect: this is not a general cultural history with add-on poetic flavor, but is deeply committed to understanding the implicit forms of poetic imagination during a very rapid succession of major shifts and changes. Poetry is made by poets and consists of poems, made from the language that poets make from the itself contested native stock of speech and writing in the world around them; and Dr Li brings a strong sense of these aspects to the argument of this study.

With an adroit turn of his treatment Dr Li then explores how the traffic of influence was by no means all in one direction; and sets out the many strands (some of them based on by now celebrated misconceptions) of Chinese influence on Western Modernism. And then further to emphasize the concern with writerly practice, he has conducted interviews and collected responses from scholars and poets from several different countries, to assemble a background of live current working; attitudes and perspectives and diagnostic conclusions that place this study firmly within the continuing attempt to grasp the contemporary realities of poetic development in China, its

most recent past running forward into the possibilities for its future.

There is much for the reader of this study to learn, by active scrutiny of these discussions and reconsideration of earlier part-perspectives and part-understandings. There is a keen sense of commitment to the project of a modern poetic advancement for China that will also be understood correctly by critics and readers and by the poets themselves; so that a coherent future prospect may emerge from earlier prolonged diagnostic confusions. The outlook is optimistic, claiming a serious place for innovation in Chinese poetry that will continue to discover new connections with its traditional roots as well as with the larger international world of literary practice in all its energetic diversity. Each part of this study rests on firm foundations, of knowledge and judgment; the parts are worked into a dynamic balance, of analysis and clarification; so that by a striking combination of Chinese and Western scholarly aptitudes the result is a substantial step forward in our critical and imaginative understanding.

J. H. Prynne

Guangzhou, 19th June 2005

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My learning experience at Cambridge University owes greatly to Mr. Prynne who kindly smoothed the way for me to “crack” all sorts of academic “hard nuts” and generously showed me the way into the wonderful Cambridge academic tradition symbolized by Freedom, Equality and Individualism. Mr Prynne had always encouraged the free expression of my views, granting me complete academic equality with him so that tête-à-tête discussions could go on between us, which often clarified or inspired my mind. Another Cambridge teacher to whom I owe a lot is Dr Rathmell, whose regular meeting with me greatly deepened my understanding of English poetry.

During the process of my investigation of the current situation of New Chinese Poetry and Western poetry, a lot of people provided me with precious help. They are Prof. Huang Xiuji, Prof. Nie

Zhenzhao, Prof. Sun Yushi, Mr. Kevin Nolan... to mention only a few. And in the finalization of this thesis, Prof. Li Gengzhou, Prof. Mao Sihui and Prof. He Hailun offered me invaluable advice.

Despite so much help I have obtained from my teachers and friends, there still might be some defects in this thesis, which are certainly all mine.

And finally, I shall express my gratitude to the people of the Division of Science Research of Guangzhou University who kindly provided necessary funds for the publication of this thesis.

May, 2002

Introduction

Chinese poetic tradition began its journey thousands of years ago and has accompanied the full development of Chinese culture, making a major contribution to the whole nation in many respects. However, contemporary Chinese poetry is in a very embarrassed situation, with a radical decline of its readership in the last ten years, or indeed during the twentieth century at large. Contemporary Chinese poets are at a loss and poetry critics are speechless. The only way to clarify the situation is a thorough examination of the relationship between New Chinese Poetry and Western poetics, because the former took its shape under the direct influence of the latter and has been closely following it ever since. ①

The twentieth century witnessed many dramatic changes in China, including the cultural movements, with the May Fourth Movement of 1919 as their symbol, advocating an overthrow of all traditional Chinese cultures into the “Historical Bins”. However, one cannot live without culture; since many of the Cultural Reformers severely criticized and firmly refused Chinese cultural heritages, the only way for them to survive was to import ideologies from over-

① New Chinese Poetry is a term applied in contrast to Traditional Chinese Poetry. It refers to all Chinese Poetry written after 1917 that is obviously different from Traditional Chinese Poetry. This paper deliberately adopts the adjective NEW instead of MODERN, as some people have done, because there was a Modernist School in China in the 1930s as a result of the introduction of Western Modernism into China.

seas, the West as a main source. This is the background that promoted the germination of New Chinese Poetry.

During the cultural movements with New Poetry Movement as the most active part, not only was traditional Chinese poetry cast away, but Chinese traditional literature was also put down as a whole. Even the traditional literary language Wenyan (文言) was cast out and replaced by Baihua (白话), the vernacular Chinese that was suddenly introduced into literary writings and was very much influenced by foreign linguistics, such as Western grammar and phraseology. Some translators at that time, Lu Xun (鲁迅) for example, would insist on a word-for-word translation method because they believed that it was urgent to import some foreign literary models for the new-born vernacular Chinese literature. Some people, such as Hu Shi and Lu Shuxiang, went so far as to propose to abdicate the Chinese Ideographic Characters as a whole and establish another system of Pinyin Chinese in Roman alphabet, following the suit of Western languages. "The third Word-revolution (to use Pinyin to replace Chinese characters, keeping the vernacular) will finally be achieved." ①

There have occurred many experiments in almost all the branches of Chinese culture, either radical or moderate, of which some were failures, others successes, while, at the same time, many were and have been mysteries causing endless disputes and arguments up to now. New Chinese Poetry is, more or less, such a mystery. By a careful examination of the mystery, one can find that most of its

① Hushi, *Hu Shi's Talks on Literary Changes* (Shanghai: Shanghai Classic Publishing House, 1999), p. 60.

problems are caused by the importing of Western poetics into Chinese Poetry, that is to say, many problems concerned with New Chinese Poetry are caused by the problematic relationship between inheriting from the Chinese tradition and learning from the West. In order to clarify the relations between New Chinese Poetry, Traditional Chinese Poetry and Western poetry, this thesis is to trace back to the very beginning of the formation of New Chinese Poetry with a careful examination of the social and academic backgrounds in those days in China. Then, it will follow the development of New Chinese Poetry up to the present time, with concentration on its Western characteristics, presenting the accompanying problems; the two famous Chinese poets Xu Zhimo and Gu Cheng are to be taken as two representatives and studied in detail. To have a dialectical understanding of the poetical relationship between China and the West, this thesis will apply the theory of "Sense of Nativeness" and examine the Chinese poetical influence in the West, focusing on the study of two prominent Western poets, Ezra Pound and J. H. Prynne. Then, in order to have a good understanding of the current situation of contemporary Chinese and Western poetry, the result of my investigation that is based on interviews, questionnaire, and research work on printed materials, will be presented; and some general conclusions will be drawn to provide reference for the development of New Chinese Poetry. Finally, the thesis will carefully discuss the major problems concerned with New Chinese Poetry; and as a result, some suggestions will be offered to New Chinese Poetry.

Part One

The Historical Backgrounds for the Germination of New Chinese Poetry

Chapter One

The Social Background

摇摇 China had developed independently, not sharing any characteristic of Western culture, until her formal contact with the West in 1840 when England waged a war against the Qing Dynasty government, thus commencing the Modern Age in China. Obviously the connotation of the term “Modern Age” in China differs enormously from that in the Western sense. And the New Chinese Poetry Movement is also completely different from the Modernism in the West, as the former took shape mainly under the influence of the latter. To understand it more clearly, we shall examine the social and academic background of the occurrence of New Chinese Poetry in this and the next chapters, and then trace the origin of New Chinese Poetry, the Western Modernism, in the last chapter of this part.

After China as a unified nation was founded by the first Chinese Emperor Qin Shihuang (259 BC ~ 210 BC), who conquered all his rivals and put an end to the Warring-states Period in the Chinese history, China had remained as a relatively tranquil nation that spent most of its ages in peace, except for the limited short-period inter-