Modern Chinese Poetry
An Introduction

Julia C. Lin

我們走到郊外
像不同的河水
融成一片大海
有同樣的警醒
在我們的心頭
是同樣的運命
在我們的心頭

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Modern Chinese Poetry:
An Introduction

by

Julia C. Lin

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With deep gratitude and affection
this book is dedicated
to my two professors,
Vincent Shih and Hellmut Wilhelm

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Preface

The first significant collection of modern Chinese poetry was Hu Shih's *Experimental Verses*, published in 1919. A series of events in the second half of the nineteenth century had brought China into direct contact with the outside world; the painful experience of military defeat by foreign forces resulted in a popular realization of China's comparative backwardness and a desire to modernize the country by emulating certain aspects of Western civilization. The Literary Movement of 1917 urged a ~~break with~~ tradition and an exploration of new forms of expression.

This process of reform was given direction and stimulation by Hu Shih, whose numerous essays established the principles of new poetry. Following Hu's instructions to avoid the forced, artificial, and monotonous elements of traditional verse and to use the vernacular language in treating more commonplace themes and emotions, subsequent poets turned the years 1917–37 into a period of extremely active experimentation. Poems were written in such Western verse forms as the sonnet, limerick, and free verse. Works of certain Formalist poets echoed the Western Romantics, Keats and Shelley, while Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarmé gave rise to the Chinese Symbolist school. But the second Sino-Japanese War brought experimentation to an end by turning Chinese poets to patriotic, war-oriented themes; and the Communist regime has molded current poetic expression into a rigidly proletarian literature.

The purpose of this book is to make the new poetry more accessible to readers in the West. The material currently available on the subject consists mainly of a few introductions in poetry anthologies and brief surveys in studies of Chinese literary history. This study examines the rise and development of the new genre, from 1919 to the present, by focusing on the period's major poets, and lesser talents when they are significant. In my discussion of each poet, I have tried to convey a sense of his style, themes, characteristic techniques, faults and virtues, major concerns, and important contributions. The main sources for my study were necessarily the works of the poets, for few biographical or critical essays, English or Chinese, exist. As few English translations of the works have been published, almost all of the translations are my own; I hope that these poems and my analyses of them will serve the twofold purpose of both introducing and evaluating modern Chinese poetry.

It has been common for scholars of modern Chinese poetry to regard every instance of similarity to Western poetry as a sure sign of indebtedness to the West. To my mind this is an oversimplification, ignoring the possibility that such parallelism could result simply from the affinity of poetic minds, whereby similar characteristics could develop simultaneously in two different cultures. In fact, it may well have been the nostalgically familiar elements in Western poetry that attracted the young Chinese poets. This is by no means to deny the tremendous influence of the West on modern Chinese poetry, but it is an argument for a more balanced critical stand in our evaluation of it. Indeed, to insist on the singular dominance of one source of influence is not only to ignore the fruitful interplay of diverse literary influences, but also to rob the poets of their own sensitivity and creative power.

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J. C. L.

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Part I: Before 1917

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Tradition

Modern Chinese poetry provoked more hostile criticism and fierce opposition than any other form of modern Chinese literature. But this abuse was not without justification. The new poetry, especially in its early days, was disappointing: when compared with the great legacy of the traditional poets, it appeared awkward, crude, and immature. However, one must bear in mind that the new poetry was not built directly upon the old, as were modern Chinese fiction and drama, both of which had a long and remarkable vernacular tradition in their favor. The new poets, in rebellion against tradition, had rejected not only the literary language, *wen-yen,* as their poetic medium, but all the conventional verse forms and prosodic rules as well. *Pai-hua,* the vernacular, was elevated to being the only acceptable means for the new verse. And so apart from the usual problems faced by any poetry in revolt, these poets were further confronted with the predicament of mastering a new medium in order to create a prosody suitable to it.

During the early decades of the present century, when the impact of the West was beginning to be felt in China, poets naturally turned in that direction for inspiration and instruction. Western influence, however, did not mean that Chinese traditional poetry ceased to play a significant role. On the contrary, it continued as an important force throughout the development of the new verse.

Wen-yen, unlike the literary languages of many countries, is far from being only the artificial tongue of dead poets. Since the sixth century B.C. it has been the common written idiom for all the dialects in China. It is a language with a rich and extensive literature, "a language which has played in eastern Asia a part comparable to that of Latin and Greek in Europe."[1] By no means dead, it continued to be used in government documents, news dispatches, and business or personal correspondence long after *pai-hua*, the vernacular, was officially proclaimed as the "national language" by the government in 1921.[2]

The most striking surface feature of the Chinese language is the character, whose pictorial and ideographic nature has long piqued the imagination of Western writers. In fact, while it is true that some Chinese characters were originally direct representations of objects or ideas, they are not strictly ideographs or pictographs. Even as early as the Shang dynasty (1766–1123? B.C.), many characters were already symbols of particular words in the language. Moreover, a great number of the pictographs have been so reduced in strokes for convenience' sake through the years that they are now past recognition. Other characters, even in modern form, remain expressive through the inherent concreteness and suggestiveness of their unique structure. The structure of Chinese characters has changed comparatively less than the sound of the language. The most ancient forms of writing are those found on shells and oracle bones of the Shang dynasty, to be followed then by the Chou (1112?–256 B.C.) inscriptions on bronzes and stones. By the Ch'in dynasty (221–207 B.C.) writing was standardized, and since that time there has been little basic change in structure.

The evolution of Chinese characters produced four main categories, or methods, of formation.[3] The earliest characters are simple pictographs representing concrete objects, such as *jih* 日 "sun" (ancient form ⊙), *yüeh* 月 "moon" (ancient form

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[1] Bernhard Karlgren, *Sound and Symbol in Chinese*, p. 1.

[2] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1967, s.v., "Chinese Language."

[3] Originally there were six principles, two of which were concerned not with the formation of new characters but with their extended use. These two are omitted here. See James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, p. 5.

☽), and *mu* 木 "tree" (ancient form 𣎳). Next come the simple ideographs, or symbols of ideas: *i* 一 "one" (ancient form 一), *shang* 上 "above" (ancient form 二), *hsia* 下 "below" (ancient form =), *chung* 中 "middle" (ancient form Φ). In the third group are the compound ideographs. These are formed by linking together two or more simple characters, the combined meaning of which suggests the quality or condition to be expressed. Thus we have *lin* 林 "woods" (ancient form 𣏟), denoted by two trees; *ming* 明 "brightness" (ancient form 朙), sun and moon;[4] *tsou* 坐 "sit" (ancient form 㘸), two men sitting on the ground.

By far the largest category is that of the phonetic compounds. A phonetic compound consists of a simple character (called the phonetic) suggesting the sound and another (called the signific) indicating the meaning of the new compound. For example, *k'u* 枯 "wither" has two constituents—the phonetic, *ku* 古 "ancient," gives the approximate sound; the signific, *mu* 木 "tree," suggests its meaning. Frequently a phonetic also contributes to the meaning of the new word. The character *p'ing* 評 "to discuss, to criticize" has *yen* 言 "to speak" for the signific and *p'ing* 平 "level, equal, fair" for the phonetic, which further implies that "to speak fairly" is "to discuss or criticize." Again, when the same phonetic, *p'ing*, combines with *t'sao* 艸 "grass" and *shui* 氵 "water," the result is *p'ing* 萍 "duckweed," a water plant noted for its level leaves.

The Chinese written language is undoubtedly more concrete and suggestive because of its imagistic potential. An abstract word like *ming* 明 "brightness," with its latent images of sun and moon, is at once more tangible and buoyant than its English counterpart. It is natural then that traditional Chinese poets often display a strong visual imagination. The very architecture of the language fosters the concrete, the suggestive, the concentrated; it is an invitation to pure imagism.

Aurally, the Chinese language is distinguished by its tones and "monosyllabic" nature; both are integral to Chinese metrical patterns. The common assumption that the language is entirely monosyllabic arises from a confusion of terms. A Chinese character contains only one syllable and appears more often than not as an independent word-unit. Many characters, however, have meaning only in combination, that is, as words. A Chinese word consists of one, two, three, or even more characters, or "syllables," and is therefore polysyllabic. The word *ying wu* 鸚鵡 "parrot," for example, is a disyllabic word of two characters. In *wen-yen* there are numerous disyllabic words, or compounds, many of which are alliterative (*ts'en tz'u* 參差 "uneven," *p'iao p'o* 漂泊 "wandering"), or rhymed compounds (*miao t'io* 窈窕 "graceful," *p'ai huai* 徘徊 "pacing back and forth"), or reduplicative (*ch'i ch'i* 淒々 "sad," *ch'ing ch'ing* 青青 "green"). Disyllabic compounds are often onomatopoeic too and piquantly descriptive. They were lavishly used by the traditional poets for subtle verbal effects and descriptive force.

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[4] The original form of the character *ming* 朙 "brightness" is composed of two pictographs—window and moon—instead of the sun and moon components in the present form.

Every Chinese character has a specific "tone," so that characters otherwise phonetically identical can be distinguished by the rise and fall of the voice. In China the tone system, like the phonetic system, has undergone various changes with the result that the actual number of tones differs among modern dialects. Classical Chinese has four tones: (1) *p'ing* or "level" is fairly long and maintains the same pitch; (2) *shang* or "rising" is short and rises slightly in pitch; (3) *ch'ü* or "falling" slowly falls and then rises slightly in pitch, as in a doubtful, hesitating "Ye-es"; (4) *ju* or "entering" is short and abruptly arrested, like an emphatic "No!" in English.

For prosodic purposes the first tone is designated as "even" while the other three are "deflected." These tones, with their modulation of pitch and variation of duration and movement, are basic to the melodic patterns in China. In early Chinese poetry, writers depended only on natural modulation, but all the meters that emerged after the Tang dynasty (seventh to tenth century A.D.) demand strict adherence to fixed tone patterns. Two such patterns used in the regulated verse of this period are given in the chart below.[5] The symbol (—) designates a level tone, (+) a deflected tone, (R) rhyme, and (/) pause.

Pattern 1: Five-Syllabic Regulated Verse	Pattern 2: Seven-Syllabic Regulated Verse
——/—++	——/++/+—— R
(or, ——/++— R)	(or, ——/++/——+)
++/+—— R	++/——/++— R
++/——+	++/——/—++
——/++— R	——/++/+—— R
——/—++	——/++/——+
++/+—— R	++/——/++— R
++/——+	++/——/—++
——/++— R	——/++/+—— R

The basic principles involved here are repetition and contrast of tone sequences within the poem. The resulting tone patterns invariably decide the verse movements, which are predominantly musical. This innate musical quality of the language is the basis for the remarkable sense of tone color and musical nuance developed by traditional poets, and may explain why there is so much exquisite lyricism in traditional Chinese verse.

The Chinese language, especially the literary language, though it possesses inflexible elements, is basically uninflected. It is grammatically organized into a regular structure of word formation and word order: verb-object, subject-predicate, adjective-noun. A Chinese poet, therefore, enjoys greater freedom from the linguistic fetters of tense, case, number, and voice. Even connectives, prepositions, auxiliaries, and articles can be dispensed with readily, so that the poet can concentrate on essentials while ridding his verse of irrelevancies. The literary language is unquestionably a perfect means to secure compression and concision of form. It is no accident that traditional poets favor the short forms and that some of the best traditional poetry is written in these forms.

[5] Liu, *Art of Chinese Poetry*, pp. 26–27.

A Chinese word seldom has one arbitrary definition: it is surrounded by clusters of meanings, some of which may even be mutually exclusive. The ensuing obscurities and ambiguities in works of expository prose have kept research scholars in rice for centuries. For the poet, however, dealing as he is with a nebulous world of implication and association, the complexities of meaning are a treasure-trove.

In a traditional Chinese poem, it is the number of characters, not stresses, in each line that determines its meter. The earliest verse in China is in the four-character (or four-syllable) form used in the *Book of Odes* (ca. twelfth to seventh century B.C.), the first anthology of Chinese poetry. Generally believed to have been edited by Confucius himself, the *Book of Odes* was sanctioned in 136 B.C. as one of the Five Classics of the Confucian canon. The anthology contains poetic narratives celebrating the heroic founding of the Chou House, elegant court songs, ceremonial hymnals of great dignity, and numerous folk songs of astonishing vigor and simple lyric charm. Many of these verses, religious or secular, were originally sung or recited to the accompaniment of music and dance. This musical affiliation was to remain a vital spark in the subsequent period of poetic development.

The four-character verse form is so called because its lines consist of a standard number of four characters. These metrical lines are arranged in stanza units, with end rhymes commonly occurring in even-numbered lines (i.e., lines 2 and 4). Although there is no prescribed tone pattern, musical effects are preserved by devices like alliteration, assonance, internal rhymes as well as end rhymes, and a natural modulation of tones.

Generally, verse forms having a fixed number of characters produce a staccato rhythm which becomes mechanical and tiresome. The monotony is the more conspicuous in longer poems and in poems with few characters in the lines. When handled right, however, such forms create remarkable incantatory effects especially apposite to poems that are liturgical in character. Their formal regularity adds an air of austere

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