

A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature 1900-1949

VOLUME 3

The Poem

EDITED BY

Lloyd Haft

E.J. Brill

A SELECTIVE GUIDE TO CHINESE LITERATURE 1900-1949

VOLUME III
THE POEM

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PREFACE

For an account of the aims, scope and organisation of the European Science Foundation Project on Modern Chinese Literature 1900–1949 the reader is referred to the Preface to Volume I of this series.

The editorial advisors for Volume III (Leonid Cherkassky, Lloyd Haft, Yves Hervouet, N.G.D. Malmqvist and David Pollard) are responsible for the selection of material presented in this volume. The selection was greatly facilitated by the extensive list of poetry collections presented by the Project Director.

Among the scholars who have been engaged in the editing of this volume Lloyd Haft has carried the heaviest load. Apart from writing the Introduction and the Bibliographical Note he has offered much valuable advice concerning both the content and the style of the contributions. The editorial policy in general has been to make as few changes as possible in the individual contributions.

The cut-off date for systematic inclusion of bibliographical references is 1984.

Much of the poetry discussed in this volume has long since sunk into oblivion. I very much hope that this volume will help to regain for the poetry of this period the attention which it so justly deserves.

The oeuvre of the gentle Wanxian poet Yang Jifu (1904–62) was published posthumously and has therefore not been discussed in this volume. In order to compensate for this omission, which was dictated by the format of these publications, verses by Yang Jifu have been chosen to adorn the Prefaces to these volumes.

小菜初上市來，
叫賣的聲音是新鮮的。

When the vegetables first reach the market
the voices of the mongers sound so fresh.

N.G.D. Malmqvist
Project Director

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

For a listing of bibliographies and other relevant reference works, including Chinese-language sources, the reader is referred to the excellent Bibliographical Note prepared by Milena Doleželová-Velingerová for Volume I of this series.

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

From the start, the vernacular Chinese poetry of the twentieth century has had to struggle for its own existence as a viable literary genre. Perhaps ironically, this battle for survival has been necessitated by the very richness and diversity of the literary and extra-literary traditions which have been the new poetry's main tributaries. The beginning of modern Chinese poetry is usually associated with the cultural ferment of approximately the period from 1917 to 1920, during which *baihua* or "plain language"—a generic term for various written styles modelled upon, though not identical with, modern spoken Mandarin—partially displaced the classical Chinese written language in social usage, notably as the language of school textbooks and as the vehicle of identifiable new literary genres. By the 1930s, the practitioners of *baihua* poetry had built up a substantial but uneven corpus of so-called New Poetry in which the vocabulary and allusive resources of Chinese poetry since antiquity were joined in a creative but uneasy marriage to the entire gamut of western poetry, philosophy and aesthetics as these became accessible to educated Chinese in the early decades of the century. The resulting poetry—at times crude, at times sophisticated, sometimes original but sometimes embarrassingly derivative—enjoyed at best an erratic reception in China. Even among the most cosmopolitan readers, New Poetry was most often judged by comparison with Old—that is, classical-language—Poetry, and the latter tended to win. The established excellence of classical Chinese verse, together with its prominent extra-literary functions in Chinese culture and society, made it difficult for readers to take the New Poetry seriously.

Though seven decades have elapsed since the infancy of New Poetry, this situation has continued to a remarkable degree. In the People's Republic of China, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, the national press devoted prime space to an exchange of classical-style poems between Mao Zedong and the same Guo Moruo 郭沫若 who in 1921 had daringly introduced the forms and rhythms of Walt Whitman into Chinese poetry. Even as late as the 1970s, some of the most widely read and quoted poetry was still being written in the time-honoured classical forms and idiom, or in a "New Folk Song" mode that was often described by theorists as a popular parallel to the classical tradition rather than as a sub-genre of New Poetry. As for the writers of New Poetry, even in the early 1980s they were being repeatedly challenged to demonstrate the artistic value and meaning of their forms, vocabulary and images, though in many cases the elements concerned were scarcely distinguishable from those used more than half a century before by vernacular poets.

With regard to Chinese poetry written outside the Chinese mainland, rather different circumstances have prevailed. Specifically, there have been fewer explicit political restrictions upon the far-reaching assimila-

tion of New Poetry to frankly western styles and standards. Even in these parts of the Chinese-speaking world, however, Chinese writers have usually been reluctant to allow their linguistic distance from the classical tradition to deepen into fundamental alienation. Their persistent admiration for classical images, themes and turns of phrase has led to a wide variety of personal styles, many of which remain of dubious validity in the eyes of large sections of the reading and writing public.

From the vantage point of the 1980s, it is clear that twentieth-century Chinese poets of whatever place and period have had to write within a climate of great uncertainty as regards the degree to which vernacular Chinese poetry should be:

- 1) specifically *modern* versus *classical* in vocabulary, formal premises, themes and characteristic imagery, and
- 2) specifically *Chinese* versus *cosmopolitan* in these same senses.

The problem of modern poetry's reception in society is not, of course, limited to the Chinese case. In the West, most poets have long since abandoned the attempt to strike a tone that could combine the highest artistic refinement with general accessibility and appeal to a broad readership. The difference is, perhaps, that modern Chinese *baihua* literature was, in its inception, strongly allied to extra-literary reformist trends aimed at the rapid and radical transformation of existing social structures. Unlike the twentieth-century western poet, who has accepted, almost as a professional necessity, rejection at the hands of non-specialist readers, the modern Chinese writer has tended to have a stronger sense of social mission, seeing the development of new cultural forms as merely one aspect of the general reconstruction of Chinese civilisation. When E.E. Cummings wrote, "The poems to come are for you and for me and are not for mostpeople—it's no use trying to pretend that mostpeople and ourselves are alike"¹, he had clearly given up all hope of becoming one of Shelley's "unacknowledged legislators of the world". What would he have thought of the modern Chinese writer Lu Xun 鲁迅, who claimed to have given up a medical career for writing because he felt that writing would be a more effective means of serving his countrymen? Or of the early Chinese Symbolist poet Li Jinfa 李金髮, who deliberately published highly personal love poems in the hope that they would prove of educational value to his tradition-bound contemporaries in China?

Yet Lu Xun, in the long run, wrote only one thin volume of vernacular prose-poems, turning instead to stories and essays for the pursuit of his mission. And Li Jinfa has remained an isolated figure in the development of modern Chinese literature. These examples point to a third problematical dimension, or a third area of ambiguity, facing the modern Chinese poet:

- 3) whether modern poetry, as opposed to other genres of modern

literature or even to extra-literary fields of activity, could be the most adequate channel for the effective pursuance of the aims of writers in the modern Chinese context.

For all the diversity of its expressions, then, modern Chinese poetry has continued to reflect tensions: (1) between modern and traditional elements within the world of Chinese linguistic and cultural forms, (2) between Chinese and foreign cultural values and artistic modes and (3) between traditional and modern concepts of the role of the poet in society. The following discussion will be organised in the form of an enquiry into these three basic polarities.

Studies of modern Chinese poetry often present this substantial body of literature as lending itself to analysis in terms of time (chronological development) or space (the lateral relationships among various "schools" or writers' cliques). The temporal and lateral approaches are often combined; the schools are then seen as succeeding each other in an orderly development.

This method has produced a number of valuable studies, notably including Kai-yu Hsu's introduction to his *Twentieth Century Chinese Poetry* (1963), which remains an exceptionally informative, perceptive, and well-balanced introduction to this field. But given the increasing passage of time, it is clearly necessary to widen the scope of our study to comprise a larger number of poets including many who, though failing to achieve lasting "major" status, made significant contributions in their own generation. In this wider perspective, the notion of linear chronological development tends to break down, while the horizontal inter-relationships among poets and schools become so diffuse as to be unmanageable.

The difficulty involved in the chronological concept is that modern Chinese poetry can now be seen to have followed, not a single line of orderly development in time, but rather an erratic, stuttering course in which it has been necessary to rediscover discoveries long since made, to re-establish aesthetic and theoretical positions long since established, and to lay aside promising developments because they were incompatible with extra-literary pressures in a given period. Though this pattern has been especially exacerbated since 1949, the stresses which have beset the art of poetry in the People's Republic of China can be regarded, on the whole, as logical extensions of processes already at work in preceding decades.

In the brief period between the "Literary Revolution" of 1917 and the successes of the Crescent Society poets in the late 1920s, modern Chinese poetry had already seen the development of a rich palette of stylistic and technical possibilities. These ranged from the untrammelled free verse of Guo Moruo to the rigorously structured quasi-European stanza forms of Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 and Wen Yiduo 聞一多; from Liu Fu's 劉復 technical exploration of the Chinese folk song tradition to the deliberate obscurity and fragmentation of Li Jinfa's French-inspired verses.

Both inside and outside the People's Republic of China, at various times the artistic validity of each of these styles has been subject to serious argument among Chinese readers and critics. But even before the Second World War, it may be questioned whether any particular stream of modern vernacular poetry ever gained acceptability in the eyes of more than a limited portion of the reading public. It is as if all the varied achievements of the early period were never assimilated as equally relevant parts in an eclectic and generally recognised whole.

Nor is the lateral relationship between schools, or between individual poets, much more useful as an organising principle. One obvious problem in this approach is that some of the most important poets cannot be satisfactorily categorised as belonging to this or that "school". This is true, for example, of Zang Kejia 臧克家 and Ai Qing 艾青, both of whom are among the most influential Chinese poets of this century. An analysis in terms of "schools" can also be misleading in that some of the early (and perhaps tentative) characterisations have tended to stick, and to be dutifully repeated through all the subsequent literature, though they may give a completely distorted impression of the various poets' development and later affinities. Yet another problem is that in the absence of data on the reception of the various schools by the reading public in specific periods, it is difficult to say much about the relative importance or unimportance of a given school.

But if neither the "chronological" nor the "schools" approach is a secure guide, how are we to determine the main stream, or points of importance, in the development of modern Chinese poetry? The answer may be that the question itself is wrong: that there is no reason whatsoever why a "main" track should need to be identified at all. To be sure, Chinese scholars inside China, operating in a particular social and political context, have often felt it necessary to structure their work along such normative lines. There is no reason why students outside China should impose similar pressures upon themselves.

It is probably more useful to admit that there simply is no "main" line, nor even a "main" (in the sense of accepted by consensus) corpus. In other words, there is really no such single, well-defined entity as "modern Chinese poetry". What we call "modern Chinese poetry", or New Poetry, or *baihua* poetry, is really a generic term for a wide variety of literary forms and styles which differ so greatly in their technical, thematic and intentional premises as to seem at times almost separate art forms. To admit this is not in any way to reach a negative conclusion as to the value, vitality, or lasting importance of what modern Chinese poets have produced. On the contrary, the very diversity of this poetry, its constant state of indeterminate tension and ferment, and its remaining in a permanently inchoate condition, have guaranteed its health and survival. If modern Chinese poetry had allowed itself to be "codified" at an early stage into a restricted set of definite conventions easy to follow

and plain to all, it is not difficult to imagine the artistic and thematic ossification that could have resulted. Like modern *baihua* fiction, twentieth-century vernacular poetry has found room for the occasional aesthetic high point appreciated only by the few, while serving in another dimension as a catalytic medium of social consciousness and protest. Viewed in this light, the apparent formal indeterminacy of the genre, and its lack of irreversible orientation toward any particular aesthetic tradition whether Chinese or western, must be seen as definite assets.

The three basic polarities which have been identified—the modern versus the traditional, the Chinese versus the foreign, and traditional versus modern concepts of the role of the poet and of poetry—will be examined below. In each case, an attempt will be made to indicate some of the outstanding solutions found by twentieth-century Chinese poets.

I. THE “MODERN” VERSUS THE “TRADITIONAL”

1. *Poetic Forms and the Language of Poetry*

In the classical Chinese tradition, extending into the early years of the twentieth century, there was no single word corresponding exactly to the modern western concept of “poetry”. Though the word *shi* 詩 occurred as an element in such combinations as *shiren* 詩人 “poet” and *shiyi* 詩意 “poetic sentiment”, it was in itself a technical term referring to a definite type of poetry as distinct from other types. Poems were regarded as belonging to specific genres, such as the *shi* and *ci* 詞, which were distinguished on the basis of formal characteristics. These formal characteristics were rigid, explicit, and known to all. The primary element which made a given piece of writing a “poem” (more exactly, a *shi* or *ci*, etc.) was that it fulfilled the formal requirements of the given genre.

Taking as examples the *shi* and *ci* (undoubtedly the two best-known classical Chinese poetic forms), we may summarise their basic formal features as follows:

- 1) The form was fixed, allowing little scope for innovations by any given author. Though there were certain allowable variant forms within each type, there would have been no general acceptance for idiosyncratic or impromptu poetic forms.
- 2) Within each form, there were strict rules governing the number of syllables in each line. In the most commonly used forms of *shi*, for example, every line throughout the poem was to be of the same length—either five or seven syllables, each written as one written character. This formal feature was so obviously identifiable that *shi* anthologies were organised into sections according to the “five-word” and “seven-word” categories.
- 3) The prosodic structure of the poetic line was determined by features

inherent in the musical forms with which the genres had originally been associated, and by the phonemic and tonemic features of the words used (as they were pronounced centuries ago, when the rules of prosody were codified), but not by stress, vowel quality, or other aurally prominent features of the words as used in ordinary speech. Rhyme was an inflexible requirement, but rhymes could not be reliably assigned on the basis of the contemporary pronunciation of the words concerned. In the case of both the *shi* and the *ci*, certain formal rules required the division of all words into two opposed classes according as their tonemes were “level” or “oblique”. Like rhyme, this phenomenon was no more than approximately evident in the modern spoken pronunciation of words, and whatever may have been the acoustic features which earned for this distinction such prominence in the rules of classical poetry as originally formulated, by the twentieth century the distinction had become so obscure that some linguists hypothesized an earlier association of “level” or “oblique” tone with some other aurally prominent feature—stress, length, or absolute pitch—which subsequently, as the pronunciation of the language changed through the centuries, had lost its value as a defining element.

From the viewpoint of the modern poet, a complicating factor in prosodic matters was that the classical forms were to be written in the classical language. In classical Chinese, on the whole, each individual syllable corresponded to a semantic unit or “word”. By contrast, the modern vernacular language was composed of semantic units of varying length, “words” of one or two characters being unquestionably in the majority, but with large numbers of even longer elements. Though linguists might differ as regards the exact method of determining word boundaries, there was no denying the fact that the vernacular usually required more syllables, hence more written characters, for a given passage than would have been used in classical Chinese.

Consequently, once the classical language was abandoned as the medium for poetry, the question arose as to whether the time-honoured principle of prescribed line-length could still be meaningfully applied. In the monosyllabic classical language, the poetic line corresponded to a grammatical sentence or clause; the resulting lines, even those as short as five characters, combined a strongly expressive syntactic compactness with very obvious rhythmic symmetry. In the modern vernacular language, owing to the varying number of syllables per word and the complexity of such factors as stress, elision and assimilation, sentences of similar grammatical structure could differ greatly in length, intonation contour, and number of written characters. Upon what, then, was the line-by-line prosody of modern Chinese verse to be based?

Many poets bypassed this problem by the simple expedient of writing