

Introduction to the Special Issue on Modern Chinese Lyric Classicism

It is an honor to guest-edit this FLSC special issue on Modern Chinese Lyric Classicism. In terms of subject matter, the contributions to this issue span the twentieth century, on the temporal axis, and China to the USA, on the geographical axis. All, however, deal with a topic of particular importance, namely, the continuous writing of verse that follows or at least was inspired by classical-style literary conventions. This topic is long overdue for “mainstream” academic attention. We propose to refer to this type of poetry as “classicist poetry” to etymologically demonstrate that it is part of China’s literary modernity, as the suffix “-ism,” or *zhuyi* 主義 in Chinese, suggests it to be a modern academic parlance. It is a strong term referring to the author’s deliberate choice among various available genres, a choice that is further related to the author’s conscious or unconscious understanding of the purpose of his or her literary practice.

The term “classicist poetry” emerged during an international symposium, “Back into Modernity,” that I organized in Frankfurt, July 2014, which examined intellectual transition in modern China through analyzing classical-style poetry produced during the twentieth century. Galvanized by the discussions, I proposed the term at the end of the symposium, and the other participants agreed to endorse its use. The name of the symposium itself referred to Walter Benjamin’s “Angel of History.” Drawing upon Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus* (1920), Benjamin describes an angel propelled relentlessly by the wind of progress into the future, his gaze fixed on the ongoing demolition of the past:

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling up wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.¹

The angel’s unblinking gaze refuses to distance itself from, rationalize, or aestheticize the horror instigated in the name of progress. Instead he insists upon experiencing it in its reality and immediacy, as an unfolding event. This is an

¹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), IX, in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257.

image that symbolizes many modern classicist poets' experience of modernity. Their poetry records the destruction of China's cultural past, as represented by her native elite lyric traditions, which are blown unrelentingly into the future—in this case, embodied by the modern written vernacular. A good cause always unites. Our symposium, like its ancient Greek predecessor, paid homage both to Apollonian rationality and to Dionysian camaraderie. Verses flew, and spirits were high—so high, indeed, that we agreed to put together not only a conference volume, but also a special journal issue, both to be compiled within a year. On the proverbial next morning, we realized what a daunting task we had just assigned ourselves. I sincerely thank all contributors to this volume who shared their commitment to raising awareness of the “forgotten poets” of modern China. It is time for literary institutions to recognize their poetry as an inseparable part of modern Chinese literary reality and reincorporate it into historiography.

In using the term “horror” to describe “the wind of progress,” I do not mean to delegitimize modernity due to my ethical convictions or emotional attachments to an imagined past. The advent of modernity, as well as a written vernacular in China, may well have been inevitable, even necessary. Rather, what I object to is the equivalency between the “new” and the “good,” a legerdemain that shirks critical inquisitions into the consequences brought about in the name of “progress.” This conceptual confusion also lay at the root of the waves of radicalization that ravaged China throughout the 20th century. Beginning with foundation of the New Culture Movement in 1917, the call for thorough vernacularization was associated with the just causes of freedom and democracy. Its proponents, themselves the finest products of the classical tradition, believed that the elite language, cultural practices, and the social hierarchy that they implied should be abolished to save the Chinese nation from permanent subjugation under an imperialist international order. To do that, the vernacular language needed to be recognized as not only useful, but also beautiful; as fitting not just for didactic prose, but also for aesthetic verse. Only then, they reasoned, would the gap between the elite and the masses be obliterated. With the victory of the proletarian revolution in 1949, the primacy of “plain speech” (*baihua* 白話) over “embellished language” (*wenyan* 文言) was finally sanctioned by political authority.

Today, almost a century after 1917, we can finally begin to reflect upon the price paid, lessons learned, and traditions lost in the process of vernacularization.

As I have argued elsewhere, the modern curriculum for the history of Chinese literature has been deeply influenced by the Darwinian view of “literary evolution.” According to this view, Chinese literature of different historical periods, especially since the Tang dynasty, is represented by the genre that was

the “most advanced” during the respective historical age, and each genre’s position in the chain of evolution is measured by its degree of vernacularization. This narrative was first constructed by May Fourth intellectuals, Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) in particular. It has been developed, modified, and challenged, but has nevertheless maintained its normative power and is now deeply engrained in the pedagogic practice of Chinese literature across literary departments in mainland Chinese universities.² Recognizing classicist poetry as part of modern Chinese literature means banishing the specter of evolutionism from literary historiography. A new scholarly consensus is urgently needed to undertake this daunting task, and the contributions to this volume are concrete steps toward the establishment of a new paradigm.

My fellow contributors to this volume include established senior scholars like Jerry Dean Schmidt (University of British Columbia, Canada), Eugene Jon von Kowallis (University of New South Wales, Australia), and Zhang Hui 張輝 (Peking University, China), as well as younger scholars like Frederik H. Green (San Francisco State University, USA) and Lam Lap 林立 (National University of Singapore, Singapore). Below is a brief summary of their contributions.

Jerry Schmidt’s article was originally delivered as the keynote speech at the Frankfurt Symposium and has been reworked into an essay that gives an overview of the state of our field. A pioneer in the field of Late Qing poetry, Schmidt in this essay looks back at his scholarly career and traces the development of the field through the last two decades before sharing his predictions about its future development. As he describes, his fascination with late Qing poetry drove him to challenge the literary canons established by May Fourth scholars. His research on Zheng Zhen 鄭珍 (1806–1964) and Huang Zunxian 黃遵憲 (1848–1905) demonstrated how nineteenth century poets negotiated a changing world order and perceptions of time.

Green’s article examines late Qing ekphrastic poetry, especially poems inspired by Western- or Western-style paintings. These poems were often written by poets living in political or cultural peripheries; their works thus show greater intellectual liberty and curiosity than the late Qing ideological orthodox allowed. As products of transcultural communications, these highly creative poems often revealed their authors’ opinions on cultural conventions or western aesthetics, which were fundamentally different from the traditions with which they were familiar.

Yang Zhiyi’s 楊治宜 article examines the modern transformation of ancient-style poetry (*guti shi* 古體詩) and argues that the relative prosodic

² See Zhiyi Yang, “Introduction” to *Back into Modernity: Classicist Poetry and Intellectual Transition in Modern China*, conference volume, under editing.

freedom of this genre allows various lyric experiments to accommodate modern diction, syntax, thoughts, and images. Her article examines, in particular, several poems written in the sub-genre *gexing* 歌行 to see how, in the hands of modern classicist poets from Huang Zunxian to Liu Yazhi 柳亞子 (1887–1958), the boundaries of classical generic conventions have been pushed to their limits and a new semi-classical, semi-vernacular style seems to have been born.

Kowallis' previous work on the Tongguang Poets and on Lu Xu 魯迅 (1881–1936) has revealed the modernity of the former, usually considered literary and political “conservatives,” and the influence of Chinese classical literary traditions on the latter, dean of the New Literature. His article in this volume offers a careful analysis of English translations of Lu Xun's classicist poems. He argues that a good translation needs to pay as much attention to cultural conventions as to context, a task that, contrary to the claims of some contemporary Chinese scholars, is often more faithfully accomplished in translations by Western scholars.

Zhang Hui's article discusses the Germanic scholar Feng Zhi's 馮至 (1905–93) admiration of Du Fu 杜甫 (712–70), arguably the greatest poet of premodern China. The paper demonstrates how a Europe-educated modern poet sought inspiration and emotional support from China's native traditions, especially in times of personal and national distress. Tracing the fine nuances in Feng Zhi's changing views of Du Fu, the article subtly suggests that Feng's scholarship on Du Fu can also be considered commentary on the contemporary intellectual climate and political ideologies.

Last but not the least, Lam Lap's article examines the poetry of Tung Pok Chin 陳松柏 (Songbo Chen, 1915–88), a Chinese laundry worker, “paper son,” US Navy veteran, memoirist and self-educated classical-style poet raised in New York's Chinatown. In various ways, Chin's unusual life was also representative of the lives of many other Chinese laborers in the diaspora. His poetry exemplifies their struggles and hopes. Written in classical Chinese, Chin's poetry further illustrates his efforts to reconnect with his cultural roots. The alterity of a classical gentleman provides Chin with the resources to construct a cross-cultural identity.

Taken together, these articles suggest that the classical literary tradition remains vibrant and essential to modern Chinese cultural life. Today, classicist poetry is increasingly gaining attention in China online, in print, and in popular culture. Various online literary forums provide poets with less censored outlets; journals dedicated to classical *shi* or *ci* poetry enjoy a sizable readership; literary prizes are occasionally granted; and lyrics inspired by classical poetry are becoming popular hits. When the waves of cultural radicalism recede, it is time

for reflection. We therefore hope that this little volume will contribute to the ongoing redemption of classicist poetry's position in modern literature and to renewed scholarly attention to its contemporary transformations.

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