

The Transformation of Chinese Poetry from Tradition to Vernacular

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ABSTRACT

This thesis mainly focuses on the transformation of Chinese poetry from the ancient time to modern China. It depends on comparing several different poetry anthologies produced by Chinese poets from different periods of time to reveal the transformation of poetry from tradition to vernacular. In the history, this transformation is referred to as the literary revolution of 1917 (orality), suggesting their lyricism's desire for the vernacular and its attempt to approximate everyday speech in literary Chinese. My study asks what went into the making of this poetic shift or transformation. It discusses the Chinese precursors who once broke the ancient tradition and led to the rise of modern Chinese poetry. It highlights the major differences between traditional Chinese poetry and modern Chinese poetry. My larger comparative claim is to discover the history, the awakening of the poets themselves and other reasons behind this transformation to reveal how it happened around one hundred years ago. I call this literary revolution as the transformation which not only brought the liberation of literature forms to China, but the liberation of thought.

Keywords: *The transformation of Chinese poetry, Fei Ming, Gu Cheng, Nineteen Old Poems, no. 1, Vernacular, the literary revolution of 1917*

1. INTRODUCTION

The beginning of modern Chinese poetry can be traced back as early as the literary revolution of 1917. However, the boundary between twentieth-century poetry in Chinese and its ancient predecessors' traditional Chinese poetry didn't simply dissolve.

In January 1917, Hu Shi (1891-1962) who was the founder of modern Chinese poetry pointed out eight main points toward his anticipated new poetry in the manifesto. He advocated colloquial language to distinguish it from the refined, elegant, allusive rhetoric style of Chinese classical poetry. He promoted a free form instead of only following the rigid rules of structures and rhymes in traditional poetry. However, these revolutionary claims faced with fierce opposition. While modern Chinese poetry was still in the experimental stage and continually faced with difficulties, some poets already had been awakened and were aware of the changes of modern life.

2. The Differences Between Chinese Traditional Poetry and Modern Poetry

For example, Fei Ming's Jie Tou (Street Corner) [6] captures the fundamental features of modern Chinese poetry pretty well:

²*when I walk to the street corner,
a car passes by me;*

*hence, the mailbox is lonely.
mailbox P O
hence, can't recall
the car's number X,
hence, the arabic number is lonely,
the car is lonely,
the street is lonely,
human is lonely.
行到街头乃有汽车驶过，
乃有邮筒寂寞。
邮筒 PO
乃记不起汽车号码 X，
乃有阿拉伯数字寂寞，
汽车寂寞，
大街寂寞，
人类寂寞。 [6]*

Obviously, this is a pure Chinese modern poem which we can't find any classical aesthetic belongs to classical poetry [9, pp. 162]. The direct line break, optional numbers of words in each line, structures and punctuation used in this poem were first introduced from the west in the early twentieth century which were never used in the traditional Chinese poetry before.

However, what's even more important than all the factors mentioned before should be the use of contrast which clearly distinguishes this poem from classical Chinese poetry. Here, Fei Ming portrays a scene with the poet standing on a street corner in Beijing. In front of his eyes, a mailbox is located on the street. Suddenly, a sense of loneliness rises in his mind with a speeding car passes him. The emotion which is presented by Fei Ming is not from a

pre-defined subject or theme, but from a sense of loneliness by standing in the street corner [7, pp. 137-138]. According to Chung-To Au, Fei Ming's loneliness "arises from his bewilderment at the material conditions of the modern world, captured in the paradox that the hustle and bustle in the external world instills in him only a deep sense of isolation and helplessness" [12]. As a result, the speed of the car is more representing a fast-paced life in modern China while the mailbox standing still is more about a slow pace of life in the past. His bewilderment was caused by the contrast between the car and the mailbox in the street corner even though these two things originally do not have any particular property or characteristic that is generally known to all. This contrast reminds the poet a sudden realization of the inherent paradoxes of modern life ----- the coexistence of human progress (normally represents the development of the society and the convenience) and loss (in terms of connection and communion between each other) [11, pp. 84]. The sudden change of times and society makes the poet confused, and this confusion belongs not only to the poet himself but also to all people who were in the alternating period of the old society and the new society. Therefore, the composition of the whole poem has achieved a transformation from concrete (specific objects) to abstract (the feeling of loneliness) which means his loneliness is expressed by the contrast between random specific objects [10, pp. 128].

As a result, the sense of loneliness in this poem can be interpreted as a derivative feeling which derived from the poet's alienation from the material conditions of the modern world (the car can be seen as a monster in Fei Ming's opinion which he finds difficult to understand) [8, pp. 126]. From a broader perspective, not only it reveals the feeling of loneliness belonging to Fei Ming, but also it reveals the essence of human existence which is the loneliness [5, pp. 39].

Comparing Fei Ming's poem with one of the classical Chinese poems written in Han dynasty, the difference between modern Chinese poetry and traditional Chinese poetry can be more clear:

Nineteen Old Poems, no. 1
Burton Watson's Translation
On and on, going on and on,
away from you to live apart,
ten thousand li and more between us,
each at opposite ends of the sky.
The road I travel is steep and long;
who knows when we meet again?
The Hu horse leans into the north wind;
the Yueh bird nests in the southern branches:
day by day our parting grows more distant;
day by day robe and belt dangle looser.
Shifting clouds block the white sun;
the traveler does not look to return.
Thinking of you makes one old;
years and months suddenly go by.
Abandoned, I will say no more
but pluck up strength and eat my fill.

古诗十九首第一

行行重行行，与君生别离
 相去万余里，各在天一涯
 道路阻且长，会面安可知
 胡马依北风，越鸟巢南枝
 相去日已远，衣带日已缓
 浮云蔽白日，游子不顾反
 思君令人老，岁月忽已晚
 弃捐勿复道，努力加餐饭 [13]

Here, the poet points out the gradually longer distance between the wandering man and the woman at home (his lover). This long distance not only represents the space or physical distance between these two lovers which is getting farther and farther, it also represents the elapse of the time. Therefore, by presenting the constant widening of the distances and the passage of the time, the emotion of the wandering man's unlimited longing for his hometown and his lover was clearly demonstrated in the whole poem. Even though both these two poems are using the technique of contrast to express one's inner feelings, the way to use it is different in Nineteen Old Poems, no. 1 compared with that of Fei Ming.

The use of contrast is showed in the seventh line "The Hu horse leans into the north wind/ the Yueh bird nests in the southern branches". Based on Chinese history, the words "Hu" and "Yueh" not only simply represents two distinct places, but they represent more about a general reference to people of the north and south which also is the implication of estrangement and antagonism. In addition, the words "horse" and "bird" also form the contrast. However, "horse" in this poem is not only the representative of a type of animals, but it's more related with the characteristics of people in the north which they are very similar to the ferocious and powerful characteristics of a horse. "Bird" here also not only represents the bird itself, but it's more related with the characteristics of the people in the south which they are very similar to the characteristics of a bird such as its gentleness. Here, when the bird nests in the branches and enjoys the warmth in the south, the horse is still bearing the cold in the north wind. Through this contrast, the poet is using the differences between these two metaphors the "Hu horse" and the "Yueh bird" to point out the far distance between his lover and him, and therefore emphasize his unlimited thinking.

However, the images in Fei Ming's poem (the moving car and the still mailbox) which form the vivid contrast have no historical meaning at all. The relationship between these two objects is defined by the poet himself which is a random choice made by Fei Ming. This change of the use of contrast gives readers more chances to actively participate and therefore creates more possibilities for different interpretations.

As a result, the discernible absence of traditional poetic strategies in Fei Ming's poem seems to imply the starting point of the development of modern Chinese poetry, a new attitude toward poetry, and a new way of writing and

reading [11, pp. 87]. The important differences between classical Chinese poetry and modern Chinese poetry go beyond the superficial differences in structure and languages which this point is frequently ignored.

3. The Historical Background and Experiences of the Origin of Modern Chinese Poetry.

Traced back to Qing dynasty, a group of reformists started the literature revolution in newspapers by translating the ancient Chinese to vernacular Chinese. Unfortunately, this cannot be seen as the starting point of revolution since the purpose of those reformists is to help more and more general public to read newspapers, comprehend the traditional thoughts of ancient scholars and have a better understanding toward national politics. As a result, the real literature revolution began during the May 4th Movement when Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu, who are the pioneers of this movement, respectively published *The Attempting Discussion of Literary Reform* (《文学改良刍议》) and *The Theory of Literary Revolution* (《文学革命论》) which boldly go against with the mainstream influences and the position classical Chinese once occupied.

Except a group of scholars who awakened and pursued this revolution, the dispute between classical and vernacular poetry was intensified stronger by the spreading of the western culture, especially the western poetry. Most of pioneers of modern Chinese poetry were educated in western countries, and therefore it is understandable for them to give up their own traditional rules of poetry writing and study from the western paradigms. Subsequently, the major western trends of thoughts including romanticism, realism and even surrealism were gradually introduced to China and triggered more and more Chinese poets' interests [11, pp. 89].

One step further, since a growing number of Chinese people started learning from western science and technology, modern life has become increasingly fragmented and urbanized which makes the poetry become a smaller and more private landscape which its functions and values cannot be recognized universally. As a result, when a growing number of Chinese poets suffered from the fragmented and urbanized society, many of them tended to pursue freedom to fill in their own goals, engage in a return to their own souls and discover their own internal worlds through poetry in order to find their own existence in the society. Gu Cheng's (1956-1993) *Road* [4] is one of the examples.

².....time
in my heart
slowly ran over
under the thin and broken ice
mud was pouring out again-----
the ancient blood
I lay, I was silent
since I was the road

*I was predestined
to be trampled
.....时间
在我的心上
缓缓碾过
破碎的薄冰下
又涌出了泥浆-----
陈旧的血
我躺着, 沉默着
因为我是路
命里注定
要被践踏* [4]

If traditional poets write a universal paradigm which is confirmed, then the modern poet has created a world that is entirely internal and private. Here, the image of the road is used to represent the poet himself. Gu Cheng was suffering from the influences of cultural revolution that he was forced to drop out of school at the age of twelve to raise pigs. Then both his father and him were forced to work at an army farm for five years. Therefore, there is a huge distance between the life he experienced in the childhood and the glass-like world he imagined and pursued. Generally speaking, the fantasies which are created by him are constantly being broken by the reality. Such a dilemma is not unique to Gu Cheng while the other Chinese poets may suffer the same experiences at that period of time. As a result, the idea of road, one that implies the suffering experiences which Gu Cheng has undertaken, makes the whole society reflects the difficult situation of a group of poets in China. This metaphor road here reveals not only the poet's fate, but also reveals his internal world that he is destined to be trampled in that period of time. Therefore, Gu Cheng is describing an external world (the road), but such an external world is also a projection of his inner thoughts. Does the road really can experience a painful feeling? Does the road can lie down and be silent? Through these questions, the ambiguity of whether the road in this poem truly represents Gu Cheng himself becomes clear.

As a result, this is the value of modern Chinese poetry that it makes the poet's soul manifest and show a true face of the modern life since it pays more attention to the revelation of Chinese people's inner demands and spiritual world.

4. Conclusion: The Challenges Modern Chinese Poetry Has Faced

Perhaps the greatest challenge for modern Chinese poets is that today a growing number of poets gradually lower their own requirements of poetry writing which dissatisfy a large number of readers since there is no specific rule to define the differences between vernacular poetry and vernacular. At the same time, this is also the main reason that the general public mistakenly think such a transformation or literature revolution is a failed

movement.

Compared with modern poetry in the west, modern Chinese poetry actually makes a more radical breakthrough to transform from the tradition since the differences between classical Chinese poetry and vernacular one is much greater than that between traditional western poetry and modern one. However, As what has been mentioned in the beginning, this transformation not only brought the liberation of literature forms to China, but also brought the liberation of thoughts. This is precisely what Chinese people and society need under the oppression of traditional Chinese culture and Confucianism. As a result, even though the impact of this movement has frequently been controversial and the development of modern Chinese poetry still are facing many challenges, there is no doubt that modern Chinese poets have ushered in a new era by new attitudes and the liberation of thoughts which fundamentally distinguish them from those of the past [11, pp. 105].

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