

楊牧：新詩的傳統取向

## The Traditional Orientation of China's New Poetry

By Yang Mu

Translated by Xiang Liping and John Minford

STRICTLY SPEAKING, New Poetry in Chinese literature has a history of no more than seventy years. But in a broad sense it is a part of a timeless pattern. Every generation has its share of poetic genius; and every talented writer, however lofty his ideals and aspirations, however infinite his resource and skill, realizes that ultimately what he endeavours to do is more than just an incomplete and imperfect part of that timeless pattern. His transmission of the past is meaningful only by virtue of his determination to explore new frontiers. Mere compilation and collation are hardly the chosen mode of expression for the transcendent wisdom or profound passion of a genius. So, at the threshold of each major era, we may say that literature depends for its continuing forward impetus on the pioneering efforts of its New Poets, the literary reformers of their time.

Wen Yiduo 聞一多 believed that the historical significance of the Four Masters of Early Tang (Wang Bo 王勃, Yang Jiong 楊炯, Lu Zhaolin 盧照鄰 and Luo Binwang 駱賓王) lay in their redemption of the prevalent 'court style' 宮體. They opened up a new realm, created a new path for the poets of the new empire to explore. They were the New Poets of their time, forerunners of the subsequent Golden Age of Li Bai 李白 and Du Fu 杜甫, Wang Wei 王維 and Meng Haoran 孟浩然. After the Mid-Tang, when the poetry of Yuan Zhen 元稹 and Bai Juyi 白居易 was so popular, its influence spreading even beyond the confines of China, it was the young Du Mu 杜牧 who took a lone stand against this poetic fashion, and resolved to rescue poetry from what he saw as a decline. He was the New Poet of *his* age. The limitations of his time and of his own ability prevented him from setting a new poetic fashion and from extending the boundaries of the art. But his aspirations and his dedication were lofty, deriving as they did from a firm resolve to establish something markedly new. We do not judge a hero by the extent of his success: it is this creative dedication that we respect and emulate as the true mark of the New Poet.

From this pattern of continuity and growth in Tang literature we can observe that New Poetry is indeed a broad term, and one which we would like to see recurring frequently in the annals of any literature. The very frequency of its recurrence is testimony to the splendour of a tradition. It recurs time and again in the history

---

*Yang Mu 楊牧 is the pseudonym used by C.H. Wang 王靖獻 when writing as a poet and essayist. Though now a professor of Chinese and Comparative Literature at the University of Washington, Seattle, he was and is first and foremost a creative writer. In 1983, he was voted one of the top poets in Taiwan by his fellow poets of a younger generation, and continues to be prolific as scholar and critic. Perhaps the following selection of titles from his many publications illustrates best his awareness of the heavy responsibility of his generation in carrying forward the tradition into the future 繼往開來.*

The Traditional and the Modern 傳統的與現代的 (*essays in Chinese, 1974*)

The Bell and the Drum: "Shih Ching" as Formulaic Poetry (*University of California, 1974*)

"Chou Tso-jen's 周作人 *Hellenism*" (*Renditions No. 7, Spring, 1977*)

"Ch'en Yin-k'o's 陳寅恪 *Approaches to Poetry: A Historian's Progress*" (*CLEAR, Vol. 3, No. 1, Jan. 1981*)

---

of Chinese literature. English literature, with its relatively shorter but equally rich history of one thousand years, consists in effect of a series of such New Poetry movements, each with its rise and its fall, one leading into another in a continuous succession to the present. In German literature the long, dark and dismal centuries between the Middle Ages and the end of the eighteenth century produced hardly anything worthy of special mention. It was not until the stormy entrance of figures like Goethe and Schiller upon the scene that the true soul of Germanic Europe was manifested. Herein lies Goethe's significance as a New Poet.

When we talk of New Poetry in China today, we refer specifically to the kind of poetry which originated on the eve of the May Fourth Movement (1919). This poetry underwent the various experiments of the twenties and thirties, it tested out new grammar and rhyme, it grappled with new themes, it earnestly explored the very essence and scope of art in all its aspects; and after the gradual process of condensation and introspection of the 40s, it was on the verge of attaining a distinctive identity of its own. At precisely that juncture (1950) it disintegrated—for political reasons—to resurface later in Taiwan and the Chinese 'diaspora'. Subsequently, ideological interference reduced poetry in Mainland China to a convenient propaganda tool, in the process making it perhaps more popular, but depriving it of its depth and artistic quality. At the same time in Taiwan, there was an obvious literary discontinuity—similarly for political reasons. It was impossible for many of the fine Chinese works of the 40s, or even the more successful earlier experiments, to gain acceptance. The existing 'tradition' in Taiwan was one of a rather exquisite, sentimental style of verse, an immature exoticism and a kind of vernacular poetry 白話詩 written by native poets in coarse Chinese during the days of the Japanese occupation.

Material not available due  
to copyright restrictions.

HAN DYNASTY POTTERY FIGURE  
of a folk performer.

Recent observation indicates that now, after more than thirty years of turbulence, New Poetry on the Mainland is re-emerging, rediscovering its sense of artistic value. But things are only just beginning to change, and since the lack of information makes accurate assessment difficult for the moment, I have chosen to leave this new development undiscussed here. It is in Taiwan, and in the Chinese 'diaspora' which looks to the Taiwan literary scene as its centre of gravity, that the bold development of the New Poetry is a palpable and incontrovertible fact. Its progress has been sometimes slow and circuitous, sometimes sudden and dramatic. This New Poetry is rooted in the specific geoculture of Taiwan. It recognizes Taiwan's past and simultaneously looks to her future. It has inherited the positive spirit, alive from the May Fourth years until the 40s, has held fast to it, and finally surpassed it, to establish a complete literary system of its own. We shall discuss the traditional orientation of the New Poetry with reference to this particular branch of the great tree of Chinese literature.

Central to the traditional orientation of China's New Poetry is its creative spirit. This seeming paradox is essential both to a meaningful understanding of the New Poetry and to a positive affirmation of tradition. Tradition is the accumulated achievement of history. In the realm of literature, it is a composite of the finest writings through the ages. It is what we often call 'The Classics'. The total corpus of tradition is at once pluralistic and unified, background and prospect. It is a daily increasing stock of inspiration derived from the classics—sublime, weighty, vast in extent. But how is it that such a literary tradition can perpetuate itself for three thousand years without degenerating or losing its vitality, can indeed continue to build, wave upon wave, into a magnificent, surging torrent? I have already suggested that this very longevity of tradition is the fruit of the constant creative experimenta-

tion of dedicated men of letters, of their vision, their spirit of exploration, their persistent craftsmanship.

Take the currently denigrated Rhyme-prose of the Han dynasty. Mei Sheng 枚乘, Yang Xiong 揚雄 and Sima Xiangru 司馬相如, in a spirit of the utmost enlightenment and objectivity, chose the basic mode of *The Songs of the South* for their poetry; and then, in a spirit of bold inventiveness, proceeded to integrate into this mode the rhetorical style of the political strategists of the Warring States period. It was only by dint of endless technical experimentation, through infinite exploitation of verbal resources, out of an astonishing breadth of knowledge in the natural sciences, that these poets could forge a style that was free and dynamic, variegated and supple, and could finally create an imposing body of literature and establish for the mighty Han Empire its most appropriate literary genre, in whose all-embracing and expansive features can surely be seen a reflection of China's very unity. However, from the Six Dynasties onwards, the Rhyme-prose degenerated, and its place in the literary vanguard was taken by other genres. And this chain of literary transmutation has continued through the past thousand years.

China's achievement in literature is due to the creative innovations of generations of New Poets. They select the finest part of the classical tradition and discard its dross, guided by a total sense of literary historicity and exercising at the same time their individual judgement and invention to the fullest. They are witnesses of their time. The pioneers of modern poetry in this century are the poets who have mastered this creative spirit inherent in our cultural tradition.

Innovations and breakthroughs in poetry derive from the lessons of tradition. In the empirical craft of writing, the New Poets may have broken with the techniques and modes of their immediate literary tradition; but spiritually they have proved that creation is the only way to keep a great tradition from falling apart.

'Poetry voices intent.' This is the basic definition of poetry in the Chinese tradition. 'The intent arises within the mind, and issues forth in verbal form as poetry.' It is a definition that cannot be questioned. The alternative formulation of poetry, 'growing along with emotion', amounts to much the same thing. Or, if we wish to draw a fine line between 'emotion' and 'intent', we may say that the traditional concept of poetry is that it is an artistic product growing along with emotion in the voicing of intent. It may take on numerous forms—delicate and graceful, bold and rousing, simple and solemn. In short, the intent is the fruit of emotional impact, the crystallization of thought: when actualized in a literary process, it is what we call theme, the long gestated burden of the poet, the deep conception crying out for birth.

Our study of Chinese and Western literature tells us that such literary themes are actually limited in number. Despite the tomes and tomes of literature that have been written, there is very little 'new matter' to be expressed. The variety of themes is rather small. Strictly speaking, all literature and art revolves around two subjects—love and death. Such large-scale matters as the confrontation between man and heaven (or nature), and the relationship between an individual and his state, as well as such smaller-scale attachments as exist between men and women, between parents and children, between friends, and even such poetic topics as plants and animals—all these have to do with feeling; whereas matters such as spiritual and bodily des-

truction, the despair that numbs the soul, the degeneration that arises from ignorance, these can all be subsumed under death. Writers may handle these themes of love and death with supreme insight, they may go on to explore lack of love, transcendence of death, their techniques may be new, but their basic themes remain unchanged.

Since the New Poetry movement began, poets have certainly been producing works which differ from the classics in appearance; but these very poets have been working within the Chinese intellectual tradition, in their themes, in their search for the salvation of man and society, in their doubts and affirmations. We are all familiar with the works of the period up to the 40s; but even the modern poets of the past thirty years in Taiwan have generally been working with traditional themes. Understandably, most modern poets are no longer content with such traditional topics as 'Grief for the Past' or 'Sorrow at Parting'. Instead they have turned inward to describe the inner world of the human psyche and its undulations. They are more interested in the portrayal of the fears and doubts, the various states of helplessness created in the twentieth-century industrial and commercial world. We may say that the modern poets have not only recognized the positive meaning of traditional literary themes, but have also tried to unfold its 'negatives'. They wish to reveal more fully the causes, the images and the nature of love and death. They are not only continuing the traditional themes, enlarging and extending previous discoveries, they are also hoping to surpass their predecessors through the insights gained from their own altered perspective. It would be rash of us to pass judgement on their attempts. If ultimately they are deemed to have succeeded, they will be considered 'classics'. They will then have become part of the tradition.

The radically new perspective, the rejection of traditional modes and the opening up of new paths are all methods employed by the modern poet to create a new literature, the 'avid pursuit' of modern form. Old forms and ways of thinking, imperfect inferential principles and stereotyped imaginative patterns (imagery, metaphor etc.) all need to be seriously examined, and the dead wood discarded. Otherwise the New Poetry will be too weighed down to grow effectively. After the May Fourth Movement, we adopted the vernacular as the major poetic medium, broke the myth of language and rejected the authority of the classical mode of expression, *wenyan* 文言, and the rhetorical parallelism that went with it. We believe the vernacular language has the potential to express modern man's consciousness. Despite this, the New Poetry still has very much a traditional orientation in matters of language. Many leading New Poets introduce classical grammar and a classical flavour into their vernacular. They can even transform classical rhetorical patterns with ease. Among the New Poets in Taiwan today, the leading masters of language are generally those who adopt the vernacular as their basic style, at the same time embellishing it with a refinement taken from the classical language and borrowing extensively from the best of foreign languages. They borrow, they synthesize, so as to meet the demands of modern expression.

This change in language has determined the form of the New Poetry. When 'vernacular poetry' was first introduced into Taiwan, it was for a time referred to as 'free verse'. This did not mean that it was undisciplined or wild. The term was used specifically to indicate a new variety in form, a freedom in relation to the

Material not available due  
to copyright restrictions.

A REPRESENTATIVE WORK  
by the Taiwan sculptor Lin Yuan 林淵.

long-established prosodic rules of the 'old-style' and 'regulated' verse, even to the relatively loosely-organized metres of the 'lyric' verse (*ci* 詞 and *qu* 曲). It is the New Poet's belief that in order to portray effectively the complexity of the modern world, Chinese poetry must be freed from its traditional forms. To avoid the habitual ways of thinking and imagining, it is permissible for Chinese poetry to abandon its own traditional forms and to borrow from the West. For even if a Chinese modern poet writes in the sonnet form, he is unlikely to feel restricted and confined by this ultimately *alien* European tradition. On the contrary, he can through such limited imitations transfuse new artistic qualities into the bloodstream of Chinese literature. Time has proved the significance of the poetic experiments of the 30s. Over the past three thousand years, the New Poets, the poets with radical ideals and creativity, have frequently turned to other countries in the process of reform, drawing on foreign artistic methods and philosophical concepts. So when the New Poet of the twentieth century occasionally follows in the footsteps of Western masters, he is not really straying away from tradition, he is simply following a natural spiritual tendency. Since the 50s, the New Poets in Taiwan have occupied themselves more vigorously than ever with experimentation, imitating and transmuting the various modern poetic forms which emerged in Western literature after the First World War. They have successfully proved that foreign literature, like foreign science and technology, can be applied in China to serve China's own ends.

Over the last decade, however, the demand has been for New Poetry to return to the Chinese tradition once again. This reflects a concern for matters of style and form. New Poetry has gone through the stage of being free and Western, and has largely attained its maturity. The cry is not so much for a wholesale return to the ancients, but for a new mastery of the classical literary spirit, a new transformation

of the classical poetic models. In my view, the modern poet should concentrate on learning from the poetry written in the classical period before Shen Yue 沈約 (441-513). For structural principles, he should even study the organic prosody of the *Book of Songs*. This new emphasis on classical quality, this attempt to transmute classical prosody, are not to be confused with the restoration of classical poetry. They merely constitute one of the most immediately effective manifestations of the New Poetry in its traditional orientation.

In brief, during the past seventy years, China's New Poetry has outgrown its exploratory stage, a stage of many innovative achievements in both form and content. The courage and self-confidence of the New Poets derive from their extensive reading in both Chinese and Western literature, from their understanding of literary history and its inevitability. The extent of their success actually depends on their traditional orientation, an orientation which varies only in degree, which may be either deliberate or unconscious. The New Poetry as it has developed in Taiwan over the past thirty years or so has beyond doubt established its own artistic identity which distinguishes it not only from the literatures of other countries, but also, fundamentally, from the New Poetry written in Mainland China during the same period. Creative writers must appreciate the lessons of history, evaluate the heritage of their own tradition and draw on foreign resources. They must also be concerned for the society in which they live. Above all, they need a reasonably free environment. It is in Taiwan that China's New Poetry has been able over the past thirty years to develop a unique style and philosophical content; this is because the majority of poets have felt a sense of cultural mission. With a strong will, in the face of many attacks and much mockery, they have been able to sustain their artistic beliefs, experimenting and exploring, destroying and rebuilding. The modern poetry of Taiwan is quite distinct from its Mainland counterpart in this same period, because the most dedicated poets in Taiwan are willing to recognize the reality of Taiwan's geoculture, are able to understand the destiny of the island. Taiwan's past, present and future have to find their appropriate expression in poetry.

Twenty years ago, some people had the mistaken notion that the New Poetry had to be a product of an anti-traditionalist spirit. There have also been those who have advocated 'horizontal transplantation' 橫的移植 as a means of accelerating the modernization of the New Poetry. Events have shown that throughout its process of modernization, the New Poetry has always had a correct traditional orientation. Dante cast aside the elegance and archaism of the Latin language; using the vernacular Italian as his medium, with his emotional roots firmly planted in the soil of Florence, he evolved from folk poetry a completely new form and rhyme. In his *Divine Comedy* he transmitted the Christian teaching on the relationship between God and man. He was the great New Poet of his time, the most effective harbinger of the Renaissance. And yet Dante too was, in absolute terms, oriented towards his tradition. He said that all of his creative achievements, in literary consciousness, in artistic skill, could be traced to a writer who used Latin, a writer who considered his model to be the Homeric epics, a Roman writer totally ignorant of Christian culture, the 'man of Mantua', the great Virgil.

We wait for a Dante to appear among the ranks of our New Poets.

November, 1983