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Classicism 2.0: The Vitality of Classicist Poetry Online in Contemporary China

Abstract In this paper, we examine the various approaches toward literary classicism among contemporary Chinese poets. If “poetry of the establishment” features ideological conservatism and aesthetic populism, then its opposite is the online scene of classicist poetry which represents an innovative continuation of the poetic tradition. Here such innovations are discussed in terms of theme, language, and form. Thematic innovations include further that of ideology, worldview, and urbanity. In particular, we argue that a major distinction between contemporary online classicist poets and their premodern predecessors is in their cultural identity. Unlike a traditional literatus who is a poet, scholar, and bureaucrat, contemporary poets often endure economic, intellectual, or political marginalization; or at the very least, writing in the marginalized genre of classicist poetry is a skill that can no longer be readily translated into career success. This new type of poetic identity, in addition to their modern education, has given rise to fresh interpretations of our living world unseen in premodern poetry. Despite their broad spectrum of intellectual persuasions and aesthetic preferences, most of the poets have demonstrated an audacity to experiment, which, coupled with full versatility and virtuosity in the classical poetry tradition, creates outstanding poems. The highly original works of a few leading classicist poets like Lizilizilizi (Zeng Shaoli), Xutang (Duan Xiaosong), and Dugu Shiroushou (Zeng Zheng) will be examined in depth.

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In the last decade, the most noteworthy phenomenon in the field of Chinese poetry has been the rise of online classicist poetry. The establishments of contemporary literature—including academia, prize-giving bodies, and publishers—still largely ignore poetry which follows classical styles and genres, though the situation has begun to change lately under the current administration’s call to restore “traditional values.” Verses that adhere to classical genre conventions continue to be published in print media (local newspapers for example), but they tend to be conventional, reflecting jaded literary tastes or ideological views. The rapid popularization of the Internet, however, provides abundant opportunities for classicist poets of the digital generation. To distinguish it from the classicist poetry written throughout the twentieth century, we therefore call it “Classicism 2.0.”

If the waves of ideological radicalism in the twentieth century were reflected in literature as the increasing marginalization of the classical traditions, the digital revolution of the twenty-first century empowers individual poets to gather their creativity and speak in a collective voice beyond the limits of the literary establishment. Since around 1997, on various Internet forums, blogs, and social media, classicist poets (who previously lived in isolation) began to convene on a few virtual literary platforms.¹ And from BBS to Sina Weibo to WeChat, every shift in technical terrain brings with it new channels and forms of expression. The great majority of these poets publish under pseudonyms. If writing under pseudonyms has a long history in classical Chinese poetry, then publishing online gives the greatest potential exposure to their anonymity. A few poets, such as Xu Jinru 徐晉如 (alias Huma 胡馬; b. 1976) and Zeng Shaoli 曾少立 (alias Lizilizilizi 李子梨子栗子; b. 1964),² have stepped out into the spotlight for a select audience. However, many remain “hermits” behind a screen, their real names still unknown,

¹ See Duan Xiaosong (alias Xutang), *Wo de wenyan shiyan guan*.

² Xiaofei Tian has discussed Zeng Shaoli’s poetry in a published article. See Tian, “Muffled Dialect Spoken by Green Fruit.” Tian introduces him as from Hunan province; in effect, his hometown is Ganzhou, Jiangxi province.

giving the impression of being part of an underground literary scene.

Given the relatively uncensored nature of the Internet, online classicist poetry often shows rebellious characteristics. In terms of style, it defies the institutionalization of modern Chinese literature as vernacular literature (given that textbooks on modern Chinese literature refer exclusively to vernacular literature). In terms of content, it further defies the dominant (in terms of quantity) type of classicist poetry—recognized by state cultural institutions and mainstream media—which represents the interests of the establishment. In this article, we will first map the contemporary scene of Chinese classicist poetry to position “the poetry of resistance” against other genres and styles. Then we will discuss three aspects of the innovations of representative online poetry: namely, topic, language, and form. Finally, we will explore the increasing divergence among this group and offer some bold speculations on its future development.

Poetry of the Establishment

Since the 1917 New Culture Movement, vernacular literature has been elevated to become the accepted standard of modern Chinese literature. Though Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) proposed that this new written vernacular should absorb ingredients of classical literature (indeed, his own vernacular poetry often appears to be modeled upon classical genres), generally speaking, this modern vernacular, from vocabulary to syntax, is a highly Westernized one. Similarly, institutionalized modern Chinese literature has been greatly influenced by Western literature (Soviet literature included). Textbooks on the history of modern Chinese literature have paid exclusive attention to the transformation and milestones of this modern vernacular literature, and major literary prizes have thus far only been awarded to its writers.

But this does not mean that classical-style poetry—or in our terminology: “classicist poetry”³—has entirely relinquished the stage. In actual fact, it still retains a broad base of writers and readers. For instance, *Zhonghua shici* 中華詩詞 (*Chinese shi and ci Poetry*)—the official monthly journal of the Chinese Classical-Style Poetry Association 中華詩詞學會 (founded in 1987 and

³ See Zhiyi Yang et al., “Frankfurt Consensus.”

published since June 1994)—boasts a regular print run of 25,000 copies per issue, which makes it the most-read poetry journal in China. As Stephen Owen notes, the first issue of *Contemporary Classical Poetry and Song Lyrics* (*Dangdai shici* 當代詩詞, a local Guangzhou journal) had a print run of 36,000 copies, with the second issue dropping down to 33,600—still “enough to make any publisher of a journal of contemporary poetry envious.”⁴ Owen makes a compelling remark:

Despite its nearly complete institutional dominance, the new poetry often feels embattled in a struggle for domestic acceptance even more than for international recognition.⁵

Many national and local newspapers publish classical-style poems from time to time. The published classical-style poetry on these traditional media, however, tends to conform to the ideological mainstream. For example, the December 2014 issue of *Zhonghua shici* contains poems about the APEC (2014 Beijing), the *Communique* of the Fourth Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the CPC, Chairman Xi Jinping’s 2014 speech on an arts conclave, and so forth. These poems, published under the authors’ real names, succeed the politicized classical-style poetry tradition in post-1949 China. This tradition was largely inspired by Mao Zedong’s later poems (which are highly colloquial and strewn with political slogans), as well as by the eulogistic poetry such as that of Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978). As Huang Wanli 黃萬里 (1911–2001) wrote in a satirical short story in 1957, these poets were really “Goethes” (Goethe’s name is transliterated as *gede* 歌德 in Chinese, literally “eulogizing the virtues”) and “Dantes” (Dante’s name is transliterated as *danding* 但丁, homophonic to *danding* 但丁, or “closely gazing [at the party leaders and following whatever they do]”).⁶ Even though they abide by classical genre conventions, the language of such poetry is usually plain,

⁴ Stephen Owen, “Stepping Forward and Back: Issues and Possibilities for ‘World’ Poetry,” 544.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Huang Wanli, better known as a prominent hydrologist, was also a classical-style poet. This story, titled as *Huacong xiaoyu* 花叢小語, was reported to Mao and intensified Huang’s persecution. See Dang Zhiguo 黨治國, “Kexue de liangxin: Jinian Huang Wanli laoshi” 科學的良心：紀念黃萬里老師 (The conscience of science: In the memory of Teacher Huang Wanli), in *Jiyi: Wangshi wei fu hongchen*, 282.

laced with popular slogans of the time, and their meters and rhymes are, in general, loose. Since they reflect the literary taste of established interests in a hierarchical political order largely inherited from the Mao era, this style is commonly known in China as “Old Cadre Style” (*laoganti* 老幹體). This pejorative moniker has even entered academic writing,⁷ partly perhaps for the lack of a better term. The popularity of this moniker aside—since writers of this style are not limited to old communist cadres—we suggest calling this style “the poetry of the establishment,” a style defined by its ideological conservatism and aesthetic populism.

The state-centered power structure in China’s literary and publishing establishment has encouraged opportunism. For instance, Sichuan poet Zhou Xiaotian 周嘯天 (b. 1948) was recently decorated with the Lu Xun Poetry Prize (2014). This was the first time in contemporary China that a classicist poet was awarded the prize of in a mainstream literary competition (instead of a “traditional poetry” competition). This decision became a media event, however, largely due to the content of Zhou’s poetry. One of his most-derided poems, on China’s first successful nuclear weapons test in 1964 in Lop Nor, Xinjiang, reads:⁸

炎黃子孫奔八億 不蒸饅頭爭口氣 羅布泊中放炮仗 要陪美蘇玩博戲	The eight billion descendants of the Yan and the Huang emperors are fighting for their dignity, not for steamed buns. They blow up a big “firecracker” in the Lop Nor, to play a game with the US and the Soviet hegemons. ⁹
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Or as another couplet that elaborates upon Deng Xiaoping’s 1962 saying

⁷ See e.g., Jiang Yin 蔣寅, “Zhongguo shishi de fajue yu shenmiao” 中國詩史的發掘與深描 (Archaeology and thick description of Chinese poetic history), in *Zhongguo shixue de silu yu shijian*, 256.

⁸ All the poems cited in this article will be published in print in *Wangluo shici sanshijia*, edited by Prof. Ma Dayong 馬大勇. Since the relevant page numbers in the forthcoming publication are yet unknown, this article will not provide their reference in the footnotes. As they were all first published online, interested readers can simply search for their authors’ online collections or blogs.

⁹ See Zhou’s blog post on the “linguistic art” of this poem, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_530c247d0102vobg.html, accessed March 23, 2015.

about the necessity of economic reform states:

會抓老鼠即為高	Whichever can catch the mouse is a superior cat.
不管白貓同黑貓	regardless of its being white or black. ¹⁰

Though these poems may not represent the artistic achievement of Zhou's poetry in general (Zhou himself cites favorable comments in his own defense),¹¹ the fact that he has included them and other similar poems into his published anthology speaks of the values that the poet chooses to endorse. And since only one of the eleven members of the committee claims any authority in classical-style poetry, the taste of this committee member—a retiree from the publicity department of Shanghai municipal government—dictated the outcome. The reasons for the selection include the fact that Zhou's poems reflect contemporary life and social events, and that his poems abide by metrical rules of classical-style poetry (no small achievement, note, among the contenders for this prize).¹² While the former reason shows an interesting orientation among contemporary classicist poetry, especially that which is published online, the latter betrays a rather embarrassing state of affairs.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the committee chose a classicist poet for this prize against all odds. It thus reflects the political establishment's rekindling its interests in the Chinese cultural tradition after decades of anti-traditionalist governance. Traditional values are being invited in to adorn the current ideological landscape, as long as they conform to, instead of challenge, the status quo. Such a motivation has also resulted in a boom of pro-traditional rites, education, fashion, and entertainment.

The classicist poems that we are going to discuss here, however, represent a different breed. Despite their lack of "mainstream" recognition, they show their authors' high degree of virtuosity—not just in the classical tradition, but also often in modern literature and philosophy. They also show a "grass roots" viewpoint which is alien to the interests of the establishment.

¹⁰ Ibid., http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_530c247d0102v0lo.html, accessed March 23, 2015.

¹¹ Ibid., http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_530c247d0102v0a7.html, accessed March 23, 2015.

¹² Ibid.

Thematic Innovations

Traditional Chinese poetry shows remarkable thematic stability, if not conventionality. History, landscape, objects, banquets, and life at the entertainment quarters, for instance, are predominant topics. However, the twentieth century brought rapid changes to China, in every aspect of human, social, and political lives, as well as in ways of thinking and of experiencing the world. Depicting this new world required a series of thematic, linguistic, and formal innovations. This section will focus on thematic innovations, including four major themes: political liberalism, metaphysical reflections, the representation of an urban space, and, its counterpart, the romanticizing of a lost countryside.

1. A Liberal Orientation

Traditional literati poetry has a proud tradition of voicing the suffering of the common people. Though it may share some similar concerns with modern democratic thinking, the inherent perspective is different. If the traditional literati adopted an elite sense of responsibility for a kind of suffering that they did not necessarily experience, then contemporary online classicist poets often endure economic, intellectual, or political marginalization, which makes them the natural allies of the lower social classes. Their call for greater political liberty, moreover, contains democratic claims—a notion which differentiates “the poetry of resistance” from that of the establishment. While the latter tend to speak from the perspective of power, in ways sanctioned by mainstream media, the former give voice to the disempowered.

An extreme case of the establishment’s insensibility to human suffering is a lyric song by Wang Zhaoshan 王兆山 (b. 1946), Vice Chairman of the Writers’ Association of Shandong. In May 2008, thousands of children died when their poorly built countryside schools crumbled and fell during the Sichuan earthquake. The devastating collapse was caused by inferior building quality resulting from embezzlement and corruption. Following the tragedy, Wang published a lyric song to the tune of *Jiangchengzi* 江城子 in *Qilu wanbao* 齊魯晚報 (Qilu evening news).¹³ The first stanza depicts how the government

¹³ June 6, 2008, see page A26.

leaders bestow their concerns; then he imagines that “the concern of the Party, the love of the State” 黨疼國愛 will pierce the ruins so that the dead will “feel happy,/ even as ghosts” 縱做鬼 / 也幸福. The second stanza ends with a vision that television screens will be set up in front of their graves, so that they can watch the Beijing Summer Olympic Games and join the nation’s cheer.¹⁴ Despite the author’s respectable job title, the tone, sentiment and technical standard of the poem seem appalling.

In stark comparison to such works published in state-run traditional media, the online response offered apposite artistic catharsis. The archaic poem “Elegy” (*wanci* 挽辭) by Gui Qian 睦謙 (alias Bohunzi 伯昏子), for instance, speaks in a voice of cosmic mourning, while the tetrasyllabic poem “Fairytale, or the Children (Died) on the May Twelfth” (*tonghua ji Wuyi’er de haizi* 童話及五一二的孩子) by Tianxuezhai 添雪齋 (real name unknown), is a tender song that envisions how nature might recover without the children. “Ways of Folding a Paper Kite, no. 5” (*zhiyuan zhefa 5* 紙鳶折法 5) by Huolizigao 霍里子高 (real name unknown), as translated below, achieves an artistic balance between mourning and social criticism.

春雨其蒙	The spring rain is coming under a darkened sky;
在晝猶昏	the day is as dim as the dusk.
平陸失據	A landmass loses its foothold;
天海隱淪	the heaven and the ocean disappear.
願言思子	I’d say that I miss you;
悵悵良深	my sorrow and resentment are so deep.
彼墟將覆	Those edifices are about to collapse—
八萬群氓不得生	eighty thousand common folks will die.

春雨其零	The spring rain is dripping,
積水盈庭	and puddles are brimming in my courtyard.
圓渦相界	The raindrops form circle after circle;
草色濕青	the grasses are wet and lush.
願言思子	I’d say that I miss you;

¹⁴ The newspaper’s original online page is no longer available. An image of the original page can be found on http://news.ifeng.com/society/2/200806/0612_344_593774.shtml, accessed March 23, 2015.

悵恨何勝
 彼墟之覆
 八萬群氓不得生

my sorrow and resentment are unbearable.
 Those edifices are collapsing—
 eighty thousand common folks are dying.

春雨止矣
 檐滴猶聞
 子其遠矣
 杯觸猶溫
 願言思子
 悵恨實深
 彼墟已覆
 八萬群氓不得生

The spring rain has stopped,
 but I still hear water dripping from the eaves.
 Oh, you have taken your departure—so far away!
 But the cups are still warm from your touch.
 I'd say that I miss you;
 my sorrow and resentment are truly deep!
 Those edifices have collapsed—
 eight thousand common folks have died!

This poem consciously adopts the style of the *Book of Odes*, which gives it an elevated voice to establish a proper register for the scale of the mourning. The slight variations in the first lines describe the progress of the spring rain, symbolizing the poet's deepening sorrow. The repetition of the last two lines in each stanza, with the sole variation in the time adverbs, subtly hints that the massive death count was more the result of shoddy construction and less so nature's doing. Yet, aside from using the word *hen* 悵, a multivalent word that can mean either “regret” or “resentment,” the poet's rage is never explicit. This results in a delicate tension between the poet's private domestic sphere and the cosmic imbalance, as well as of that between personal grief and public mourning. The mourning is thus expressed under a guise of gentleness, attesting to a classical criterion in the criticism of the *Book of Odes*, namely, “grief without being excessive” (*ai er bu shang* 哀而不傷).¹⁵

Given its linguistic difficulty, subtlety, and limited circulation, classicist poetry is much harder for authorities to censor. Thus, as well as sharp responses to social events, these poems also comment upon historical figures or current political systems. Li Da's 李達 (alias Banxiangshi 班香室) poem “Arriving at Shaoshan” (*Zhi Shaoshan* 至韶山) on the Mao era, Shen Shuangjian's 沈雙建 (alias Chense yijiu 塵色依舊) poem “On Lin Zhao's Tomb” (*Ti Lin Zhao mu* 題林昭墓) on the martyr who was executed for her

¹⁵ See *Analects*, 3.20.

opposition to Mao's authoritarianism, or Chen Liren's 陳立人 (alias Tiantai 天台) poem "Song of Peng Dehuai" (*Peng Dehuai ge* 彭德懷歌) about the prosecuted founder of the People's Republic, for instance, all respond to the official memory of China's modern history. One poet known for his audacious lyric style—and eccentric mannerisms—is Xu Jinru, Associate Professor of Chinese literature at Shenzhen University. A poem that he wrote (apparently in Spring 2011), titled "Last Spring" (*Qusui chunri* 去歲春日), laments China's missed chance in the worldwide events of 2010. In another, "Mr. Y Invited Me to Drink in a Sichuan Restaurant" (*Y xiong zhao yin Sichuan jiujiu* 兄召飲四川酒家), he uses the case of Confucius' supposed authorship of *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, known for its subtle commentary on social events to satirize contemporary society. The following poem, "I Greatly Lament" (*Julian* 劇憐), expresses his understanding of twentieth-century politics.

劇憐思想誤蒼生	I greatly lament that a Thought wreaked havoc among a populace;
民主人權說未能	democracy and human rights were talks and not deeds.
漫道興亡天作孽	Please do not say that prosperity or decline is Heaven's mischief;
從來政治鬼吹燈	politics has always been discreet like ghosts blowing out lights.
清談夷甫悲難訴	We like Wang Yan indulge ourselves in refined talks—how unspeakably sad!
歌舞萊公意可憑	Or like Kou Zhun, only singing and dancing occupy our minds.
轉念前朝余涕泗	A thought of the previous reign makes my tears fall
當時只合腦如冰	— the heads back then should have been ice cold.

According to the poet's own exegesis,¹⁶ the "Thought" refers to Mao Zedong Thought, and the poem is about the leftist radicalism which caused catastrophe in China. The fifth line refers to the story of Wang Yan 王衍

¹⁶ Private correspondence between Xu Jinru and Zhiyi Yang, March 24, 2015.

(256–311), a Western Jin Prime Minister who was indulged in refined talks (*qingtan* 清談, a kind of philosophical symposium), and whose *laissez-faire* governance caused the country to decline into chaos. The sixth line uses the allusion of Kou Zhun 寇準 (961–1023), a Northern Song Prime Minister who was fond of singing and dancing but whose lavish lifestyle did not hamper his great political achievements. Together, this couplet suggests that, despite their ambition, intellectuals can only indulge themselves in useless talks or seek solace in popular entertainment. The last line alludes to a poem by Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936). In 1934, the yellow press reported that this well-known polemic had suffered from brain fever and could no longer write—a rumor he refuted by writing a classical-style poem which said that his head was ice cold.¹⁷ By using this allusion, Xu seems to suggest that intellectuals should have inherited Lu Xun's spirit of criticism—namely, that they should keep their heads cold instead of sharing the national fever of “the previous reign.”

Fluid syntax, erudition, and mixture of classical and modern diction is a style commonly seen in the early twentieth century, particularly in the poetry of the Southern Society (Nanshe 南社, active 1909–23).¹⁸ A trained literary scholar, Xu Jinru is a researcher on the poetic traditions of the Late Qing and Republican periods. In his poetry, and that of other poets with a scholarly penchant, we find a strong urge to succeed the late imperial lyricism in order to “overcome” the break with tradition in the second half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, their poetry already embraces the modern world and engages in its debates.

2. Philosophical Poetry

Another important thematic innovation is in philosophical poetry. Traditional Chinese poetry also has works which feature a Confucian, Daoist, or Buddhist

¹⁷ See Lu Xun, “Baozai huan naoyan xizuo” 報載患腦炎戲作 (A playful composition after reading the news report of my catching brain inflammation), in Lin Wei, *Lu Xun shige zhuxi*, 144–45.

¹⁸ Xu Jinru has shown his admiration for the Southern Society spirit, as well as its poets, in a number of poems; lately, however, he only acknowledges his admiration for the Tongguang School—an erudite late Qing school—which many leading Southern Society poets saw as their political and literary enemy, but which had nonetheless influenced many other Southern Society poets. See Zhiyi Yang, “The Tower of Going Astray: The Paradox of Liu Yazi's (1887–1958) Lyric Classicism,” 174–221.

worldview. In particular, Zhuangzian Daoism and Chan (or Zen) Buddhism have exerted great influence on poets' understanding of the metaphysical aspects of human existence. "Poetry on the Learning of Principles" (*lixue shi* 理學詩) by Song Confucian scholars, though usually seen as rhymed, bland arguments, may represent a kind of experiment in abstract poetry. The influx of Western philosophical schools in the twentieth century, however, brought new possibilities of seeing and experiencing the world. Given the classicist poets' in-depth training in the Chinese traditions, their digestion of Western philosophies leads to novel expressions.

Philosophical poetry that operates purely on the platform of Western philosophy is rare. "Waiting" (*deng* 等), a poem by Baitian 白天 (real name unknown), clearly betrays the influence of Beckett's play, "Waiting for Godot" (1953). It begins with:

我為等死者	I am one who waits for death,
復為等生人	and am one who waits for life.
等生長苦惻	The waiting for life is a long stretch of sorrow;
等死焉歡欣	but has the waiting for death any joy, instead?

The poet implies that life is marked by events, primarily birth and death, while the rest of the time is spent waiting, in a state of emotional neutrality, for something to happen. If this understanding bears similarity to the modern absurdism, the ending is obviously Buddhist:

是矣今日等	Yes, the waiting of today;
是矣明日等	yes, the waiting of tomorrow.
是矣過去等	Yes, the waiting of the past;
是矣未來等	yes, the waiting of the future.

The high degree of repetition, semi-vernacular phrases, and designation of time show a deliberate effort to emulate medieval Chan *gathas*.

Such a mutual blending of European and Chinese philosophies is common, even among poets who have clear intellectual convictions. Xu Jinru, for instance, is a conscious successor of traditional literati (*shidafu* 士大夫, or "scholar-official") poetry. His "Lute Song of a Confucian Gentleman" (*Junzi*

cao 君子操) consists almost entirely of quotes from Confucius. Yet, he also shows familiarity and even admiration for Western liberalism. This kind of broad intellectual scope is similarly shown in the following poem by Hu Yunfei 胡雲飛 (alias Huseng 胡僧; b. 1977). The title, “Song of the Great Changes” (*Taiyi xing* 太易行), betrays the influence of Song *lixue* (known in the West as Neo-Confucianism) philosophy. The first part of the poem expatiates on a universe that is derived from “the Body of the Way” (*daoti* 道體), as well as the interaction between *yin* and *yang* forces. After a long narrative on the history of the revelation of “this Mind and this Principle” (*cixin cili* 此心此理), he addresses China’s contact with the West and argues that Marx or Freud is simply “the movement of the Breath” (*qi zhi dong* 氣之動)—namely, secondary phenomena and not the manifestation of the eternal Principle. Ultimately, however, he ends with a Buddhist tone:

于戲抉余二目

懸之宇宙亙古開

坐看人之為類成劫灰

Alas! I will dig out my two eyes

and hang them on the eternal gate of the
cosmos,¹⁹

and see that the *genus* of mankind turn into *kalpa*
ashes.

Kalpa is a Buddhist term referring to the cosmic destruction at the end of a cyclical period of time. The potpourri of philosophical persuasions, while making the poem intellectually inconsistent, gives it a grand scope of vision and lofty register of argument.

The chemistry of philosophies leads to many interesting poems, the concrete ingredients of which are hard to determine. The experimental poetry of Duan Xiaosong 段曉松 (alias Xutang 噓堂; b. 1970), for instance, is featured for its esotericism and abstraction. Duan was once a tonsured Buddhist monk; having left the order, he now works in the media instead. Few of his poems are explicitly Buddhist, but the technique of his poetry appears to have been subtly influenced by Buddhist literature. The following

¹⁹ Wu Zixu 伍子胥 (d. 484 BCE), an ancient general, was slandered, and the King of Wu ordered him to commit suicide. Wu Zixu asked his personal attendants to dig out his eyes and hang his head on the city gate so that he could see the enemies entering the capital. See Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 66.2180.

pentasyllabic poem, called as “A Free Bright Day, No.1” (*Ziyou zhi bairi* 自由之白日), is a marvelous example of his experimentation.

自由之白日	A free bright day—
秘密我已悉	I've known all its secrets.
自由之秋天	The fall of freedom—
炎陽猶赫赫	the summer sun remains scathing.
樓道靜懸鐘	In the corridor quietly suspends a bell;
眩暈復沉溺	I feel a vertigo and then sink underneath.
若有偷窺者	As if under the gaze of a peeper,
收聽而返視	I turn my hearing and see back onto myself.
既已厭葳蕤	I'm already tired of the lush green;
誰其辨五色	who will tell the five colors apart for me?
連空蟬聲疲	Filling the emptiness, the cicadas' cries wear me out;
呻吟猶可抑	but they help to drown out my groans.
裸婦肌勝雪	A naked woman's skin whiter than the snow—
想象於禁閉	I'm imagining her in my solitary seclusion.
樹葉轉欲黃	The tree leaves are about to turn yellow,
暫停內分泌	as the trees have halted the secretion of endocrines.
偶爾閃微光	From time to time when the leaves shimmer,
莊嚴如悲劇	it's as solemn as a Greek tragedy.
觀眾固無言	The audience are made speechless,
悲傷或戰慄	as they either grieve or shiver in fear.
悲傷我不能	Yet it's beyond my capacity to grieve;
戰慄亦乏力	nor do I have the energy to fear.
我在自由中	I live in the midst of freedom;
自由獨寂寂	and freedom is so lonely, so lonely!
乃入地下室	Thus I enter an underground chamber,
轟響發我側	where thunders roll from all sides.
七彩球碰撞	The seven-colored balls collide into each other—
一局斯諾克	a game of snooker.

The symbolisms and sensibility of the poem seem to derive from religious esotericism. The poet claims to know all the secrets of freedom and finds it unbearable. So he imprisons himself in seclusion, which may refer to his

談笑依然不妥	but jovial chat still feels wrong.
是誰在	Who is the one,
跋涉長河	trekking along a long river?
是誰在	Who is the one,
投奔大火	throwing oneself into the Great Fire?
太陽呵	Oh, you, the sun
操縱時鐘	holds the clock in your control;
時鐘操縱我	and the clock holds me in its control.

If the first few lines read Buddhist, the next few couplets present a gaze of divine grace upon human suffering. The river and fire in the second stanza allude to the giant Kuafu 夸父, a mythological figure who died running along the Yellow River and chasing the sun. In the last stanza, the poet relates himself to Kuafu by letting the sun, the object of Kuafu's chase, take control of the temporal dimension of his existence. He calls such poems "lyrics of the humankind" (*renleici* 人類詞),²⁰ an ambitious term that implies his own hybrid philosophy.

3. Urban Poetry

In Xiaofei Tian's article "Muffled Dialect Spoken by Green Fruit," she praises Zeng Shaoli's poetry for conveying the "local flavor of modern-day Beijing;"²¹ namely, the disconnected imagery in Zeng's urban poems that has been influenced by modernist poetry. Other classicist poets have made similar attempts to describe the combustible mixture of the hybrid fragments in a postmodern urban space. We will focus our discussion on Zeng Zheng 曾嶧 (alias Dugu Shiroushou 獨孤食肉獸) and his "Rock 'n' Roll in regulated meters" (*gelü yaogun* 格律搖滾).

Zeng Zheng's poetry appears to be heavily influenced by *avant-garde* art. His poems have mentioned impressionism, Rock 'n' Roll, Salvador Dali, Allen Ginsberg, and jazz, thus revealing his more modern tastes. Many of his poems describe train travel or urban encounters in a highly visual fashion. A lyric song called "Fashion Impressions, 1999" (*Jiujiu liuxing yinxiang* 九九流行印象), to the tune of *Zhu Yingtai jin* 祝英台近, for instance, begins with a brief

²⁰ See Zeng Shaoli, "Jishou renleici de zijian."

²¹ Tian, "Muffled Dialect," 29.

encounter:

黑胸針	Black brooch,
銀手袋	silver handbag—
傘底眼神怪	strange eyes under an umbrella.

This strange woman casts a glance at the poet from under an umbrella that is decorated in the mourning colors of black and silver. She is clearly not the lady “like a branch of clove-flower” walking under an oil-paper umbrella from Dai Wangshu’s 戴望舒 (1905–50) “Rainy alley” (*Yuxiang* 雨巷)²² but a sister of the “fugitive *beauté*” in Baudelaire’s Paris.²³ This encounter, however, does not stir romantic longing. Instead, the poet proceeds to describe other fragmented images of the city’s rainy street—a prudish choice that sacrifices lyric intensity for cinematographic effects.

The strength of Zeng Zheng’s poetry, therefore, is often also his weakness. The montage technique is masterfully employed to produce a palette of colors, but often there is no consistent narrative to unite them. The following lyric song, “Last Images before the Millennium” (*Qianxi qian zuihou de yixiang* 千禧前最後的意象) to the tune of *Niannujiao* 念奴嬌, has an extraordinary first stanza:

火柴盒裡	From inside a match box,
看對面 B 座	I gaze at the B-Tower in front of me—
玻璃深窈	glasses deep (with reflections).
冬雨舊城流水粉	The winter rain washes the old city with
	watercolors,
樹色人形顛倒	the tree colors and human figures are all
	reversed.
達利莊周	Dali and Zhuangzi
恍然皆我	seem both me—
午夢三微秒	in those three milliseconds of my midday nap.
石榴血濺	Blood spurts on the pomegranate—
花間蝴蝶尖叫	among the blossoms, a butterfly shrieks.

²² See Dai Wangshu, “Yuxiang” 雨巷 (The rain alley), in *Dai Wangshu shiji*, 28–30.

²³ See Charles Baudelaire, “À une passante,” in *Les Fleurs du mal*, 126.

The poem seems to grow out of a white-collar office worker's midday break. He stands up and takes a look at the B-Tower in front of his window; then he looks down at the reflections of trees and pedestrians in the puddles on the street. It is another humdrum day. Yet, in his "three milliseconds" of daydreaming, he becomes one with Salvador Dali and Zhuangzi. The last couplet is connected to the previous one through the image of a butterfly—which in Zhuangzi's original dream becomes indistinguishable from his real self.²⁴ The shrieking butterfly among blood-red pomegranate flowers, however, is a surrealist image that evokes a Dali painting. Such intensity, however, is not followed up in the second stanza (which the poet revised a few times in dissatisfaction). His fondness of pictorial surrealism is further reinforced in a poem on a 2003 Dali exhibition in Wuhan, entitled "The Dead Sea: Eternal Memories" (*Sihai—Yongheng de jiyi* 死海——永恆的記憶) and written to the tune of *Huan xisha* 浣溪沙:

羸馬馱鐘叩冷關	A feeble horse carries a clock to knock at a deserted fortress gate;
夜垂藍靨蝕星癢	the night lowers its blue cheeks, pockmarked by stars;
遺燈默待古航船	and a forgotten lamp silently waits for an ancient ship.
死海味知魚淚苦	From the taste of the Dead Sea I know that fish tears are bitter;
珍珠光鑿蚌心寒	the shining pearls reflect the coldness in a clam's heart;
恆沙無際月如磐	upon the boundless eternal sands hangs a rock-like moon.

This is an ekphrastic poem inspired by Dali's paintings. The reader recognizes many typical Dali elements, such as Don Quixote's skinny horse, a deformed

²⁴ Zhuangzi once had a dream that he was a butterfly. When he woke up, he found himself to be Zhuangzi again. So he did not know whether he was Zhuangzi who had dreamed that he was a butterfly, or a butterfly now dreaming that he was Zhuangzi. See Guo Qingfan comment, *Zhuangzi ji shi*, 2.112.

clock, lamp, sand, and so forth. But the poet does not limit himself to mere description. The “bitter” taste of fish’s tears and the “cold” heart of the clam are synaesthetic associations inspired by the images of the Dead Sea and the shiny pearls. Postmodern as this poem is, it also reminds the reader of certain lines by the Tang poet Li Shangyin 李商隱 (813–ca. 858), such as:

滄海月明珠有淚

藍田日暖玉生煙

Upon a vast ocean shines a bright moon—pearls
have tears;

on the Blue Field hangs the warm sun—jade emits
mist.²⁵

In Zeng Zheng’s poem, we find Li Shangyin’s images reimagined to achieve a heightened degree of intensity and synaesthesia. What he recreates, however, is not just a Tang Dynasty poet’s imaginary landscape, but a pictorial space in an urban gallery conjured up by a Spanish painter. Thus, the global art scene is brought into a surprising dialogue with Chinese lyric tradition, expanding the latter’s exegetical horizon. Jorge Luis Borges has noted the similarity between Kafka and Han Yu’s 韓愈 (768–824) passage on the unicorn, as well as other seemingly unrelated texts; so, even though there is no direct influence between the authors, Borges regards Han Yu as Kafka’s literary predecessor. He argues that “each writer creates his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.”²⁶ We may similarly argue that, through Zeng Zheng’s poem, Li Shangyin has become Dali’s precursor, and Dali has given us a new way to understand Li Shangyin.

4. A Lost Countryside

Regardless of their place of birth, many of these online classicist poets have received a college education in one of China’s major cities. For those born in the countryside, this meant leaving their homes when they came of age and, perhaps, after graduation, settling in a metropolitan city. Where this was not possible, when a return “home” was the option, given China’s rapid pace of

²⁵ Li Shangyin, “Jinse” 錦瑟 (An adorned zither), in *Li Shangyin shiji shuzhu*, 1. The Blue Field, or Lantian, is a county in Shaanxi famous for its jade production.

²⁶ Jorge Luis Borges, “Kafka and His Precursors,” in *Other Inquisitions*, 108.

urbanization and their level of education, the likelihood is that they will still have ended up working in an urban center and not the village they grew up in. Life in the countryside thus becomes a childhood memory. This is the case for Zeng Shaoli. After having “floated” in Beijing (*beipiao* 北漂) for many years as a civil engineer, he has now returned to his hometown in southern Jiangxi—not, however, back to the small mining village where he grew up, but rather to Dayu 大余, a burgeoning county with 300,000 residents.

Urbanization and the changing demographic are both factors which are transforming the tradition of Chinese landscape poetry. In premodern China, many poets came from countryside gentry families; they studied at home until they earned an advanced degree in civil examinations (normally at an age far older than the modern college-entrance age). As their families and clans would have continued to live in the villages, even those who left for their careers would have still stayed at home for extensive periods during retreats or even permanently after retirement. The countryside was not only their ultimate home, but also a constant source of financial support. Most of them, however, did have actual experience of laboring in the fields. The financial investment required for educational success meant that their families had to have had above-average wealth. Their poetry, therefore, is the countryside poetry of gentlemen.

With the destruction of this gentry class, growing up in the countryside in late twentieth-century China meant material deprivation and physical labor—though in lesser forms for children. The would-be poets thus formed a close relationship with the mountains and fields. Once away from home, the loss of this connection made their memories of the countryside all the more innocent and as if somehow frozen in time. This is something strongly articulated in Zeng Shaoli’s poems about his hometown, particularly in the series he named “Countryside Cinema” (*Shancun dianying* 山村電影). Inspired by the open-air cinemas often played in the village during the harvest season, he attempted to write in a highly visual style, using a third-person narrative and with fictive characters.²⁷ The following lyric song, written to the tune of *Fengrusong* 風入松, presents a peaceful and yet fantastical picture of a village evening through the eyes of a child.

²⁷ Zeng Shaoli, “Cong siren zuopin guankui wangluo shici butong xiangdu de xinbian.”

炊煙搖曳小河長
柴垛壓風涼

那些月亮和巫術
砍山刀
聚在山場
麻雀遠離財寶
山花開滿陽光

旱煙杆子谷籬筐

矮凳坐爹娘
鐵鍋雲朵都紅了

後山上
祖墓安詳
老樹枝頭歲月
粗瓷碗底村莊

The cooking smoke sways; the tiny river winds;
and the piled firewood pushes down the wind's
coldness.

Oh, those moons and witchcrafts!
Mountain cleavers
are gathered in the mountain's yard.
Sparrows keep their distance from treasures;
mountain flowers bloom fully into sunshine.

Tobacco pipes and wicker baskets for harvested
rice—

mom and dad sit on a low bench.
The iron pot and evening clouds are both
turning red.

On the backside of the mountain
our ancestors' graves rest in peace.
Months and years on an old tree's branches;
a countryside village below a coarse ceramic
bowl.

There is no deeper meaning to this poem than what it simply states. The village is not a scholar-official's virtuous retreat home, it is not a microcosm for cultivating the All-under-Heaven, and nor is it a realm of metaphysical pleasures. It is a village as magical as a child can imagine—or as an adult, far removed from the toils and intricate neighborhood relations, can remember.

The poet's distance from a lost childhood utopia is more pronounced in the following lyric song, also to the tune of *Fengrusong* and apparently written in the suburb of Beijing.

南風吹動嶺頭雲

花朵顫紅唇
草蟲晴野鳴空寂

在西郊
獨坐黃昏

A southern wind shuffles the clouds on top of
the hills;
the red lips of flowers tremble.
Insects in the grass sing in the emptiness upon a
sunny field.

At the western suburb,
I alone sit under the dusk.

種子推翻泥土
溪流洗亮星辰

Seeds push open the soil;
streams wash bright the stars.

等閒有淚眼中溫
往事那般真
等閒往事模糊了
這餘生
我已沉淪
楊柳數行青澀
桃花一樹緋聞

In a short while tears are warming in my eyes;
affairs of the past seem so vivid!
In a short while the past is blurred again.
For the rest of this life
I am fallen.
The willows stand in a few lines of green
innocence;
the peach blossoms blow a tree of romantic
scandals!

If the first stanza, with the poet sitting alone in the dusk surrounded by nature, reminds the reader of the magical countryside of his childhood, the second stanza tells us that no return is possible for a now “fallen” adult. The “green innocence” of willows appears shy in the face of the aggressive, pink “scandals” of peach blossoms, just like this small patch of nature is overshadowed by the looming skyline of Beijing. The romanticized countryside is a home forever lost.

Linguistic Innovations

Admittedly, if poets honestly convey their thoughts as modern men and describe their modern lives, then innovations are necessary. However, the degree to which they do it is a matter of taste. Generally speaking, thematic innovations are harder to avoid, as the poets’ lifestyles, daily affairs, and ways of thinking have undergone irreversible changes. Yet the “traditionalists” in this group would nevertheless attempt to use more “classical” vocabulary and abide by more regulated genre conventions to describe this modern life. Chen Liren, Chen Chuyue 陳初越 (alias Chizhi 持之; b. 1973), Gui Qian, Hu Yunfei, Li Da, Lu Qingshan 盧青山 (alias Pengbi zhaizhu 碰壁齋主; b. 1968), and Xu Jinru, to mention a few, show such propensities. In contrast, there are also “modernists” among the classicist poets who venture to combine highly contemporary diction, vernacular syntax, and imagery montage with

relatively regulated meters and genre conventions. Representative poets of the latter group include Duan Xiaosong, Jin Hui 靳暉 (alias Xiangpi 象皮; born in the early 1970s), Kunzai 困哉 (real name unknown; b. 1980), Tianxuezhai, Yang Qiji 楊棄疾 (possibly an alias; b. 1972), Yao Ping 姚平 (alias Wuyi Weiming 無以為名; b. 1965), Yu Xingchang 于幸長 (alias Zha 詐), Zeng Shaoli, and Zeng Zheng.

“Traditionalists” tend to use euphemisms, code names, or figures of speech to disguise the contemporaneity of their poetry. One case in point is Gui Qian’s April 2008 poem written in response to the news that a Chinese millionaire paid ninety one thousand US dollars for a nude photo of Carla Bruni, the French First Lady.²⁸ Despite its straightforward title, “Bruni’s Nude Photo” (*Bulūni zhi luozhao* 布呂尼之裸照), the poem borrows classical diction to depict the event.

西方有佳人 傾城迷國主 肌膚沁寒香 婷婷無片縷 中土有佳客 巨金置一影	In the West there is a beautiful woman, whose beauty, enough to fell a city, enchants the king. From skin to bone she exudes a cold fragrance; on her graceful body hangs not a single thread. In the Middle Kingdom there is a dashing guest, spending a lavish price for a likeness of hers.
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The first couplet is an apparent parody of a Han Dynasty poem attributed to Li Yannian 李延年 (d. 87 BCE) which begins with: “In the North there is a beautiful woman” 北方有佳人.²⁹ Like Lady Li 李夫人, eulogized in the original poem, who enchanted Emperor Han Wudi 漢武帝 (157–87 BCE; r. 141–87 BCE), Carla Bruni’s beauty has enchanted a ruler of the state. However, Nicolas Sarkozy is clearly not a hereditary emperor who literally “owns” his country (as implied by the Chinese term *guozhu* 國主), but a democratically elected president who, in theory, serves his electorate. Using the term *guozhu* in reference to Nicolas Sarkozy, therefore, sacrifices accuracy for linguistic traditionalism. The same deliberate traditionalism is also evidenced

²⁸ See the Telegraph’s report on April 10, 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1584734/Carla-Bruni-nude-portrait-sells-for-45000.html>, accessed March 26, 2015.

²⁹ See the biography of Lady Li, in Ban Gu, *Hanshu buzhu*, 97.1650.

by terms like *hanxiang* 寒香 (cold fragrance) for Bruni's cool sexual appeal, *zhongtu* 中土 (Middle Kingdom) for China, and *jujin* 巨金 (literally, a large lump of gold) for electronically transferred money.

Among “modernists,” who in general call things by their current names, there are also different orientations. Xiaofei Tian has already noted a few poems by Zeng Shaoli on the urban space, the power of which “comes from the negotiation of traditional poetic form and decidedly modern sentiments, vocabulary, and imagery.”³⁰ Zeng Shaoli's intensive use of the vernacular to create poems (which, were it not for their classicist form and metrics, almost resemble contemporary vernacular poetry), has influenced other poets. One poem which illustrates the “thoroughly modernist” approach is by Yu Xingchang. It is a lyric song to the tune of *Qingpingle* 清平樂.

盲之蝙蝠	A bat of blindness
黑暗中成熟	comes to age in darkness.
命運怎麼能屈服	How could he yield to fate?
側耳傾聽風速	He pricks up his ear, listening to the speed of wind.
聲波指點迷藏	Sound waves guide me through a labyrinth;
內心自有陽光	inside my heart there is sunshine.
看我風中起舞	Look, I dance in the wind;
自由自在飛翔	I fly in freedom and untrammelled ease.

The knowledge that bats are blind and guided by ultrasound waves was unknown to premodern Chinese poets. That the bat will not yield to fate and will instead fly in freedom further shows the influence of Western literature and philosophy. The syntax is also almost vernacular. However, the poem completely abides by the metrical requirement of *Qingpingle*, using four oblique rhymes in the first stanza and three level rhymes in the second stanza. It tells a full story in a mere forty-six characters and the fluid style fits the lightness and elegance called for by the *Qingpingle* tune.

Another approach to linguistic innovation is represented by Duan Xiaosong's poetry. Duan terms his approach as “experiments in the classical literary language” (*wenyan shiyan* 文言實驗); he proposes to use plain modern diction, but to blend them with archaic style and syntax. As he

³⁰ Tian, “Muffled Dialect,” 37.

admits, his poetry consciously emulates the pentasyllabic “archaic style” (*gufeng* 古風) of the early period.³¹ In “A Free Bright Day, No.1,” translated previously, contemporary words like “the secretion of endocrines” or “snooker” are used in a surprising fashion to create a mysterious, almost religious mood. Given the relatively free meters of the archaic style, in comparison to either regulated poetry or lyric songs, there are fewer barriers in his integration of modern dictions. The first section of “A Free Bright Day, No.5,” written on his birthday, further illustrates the point.

誰在木雕上	Who is, on a wooden statue,
撫慰一面龐	tenderly stroking a face?
在夜行車裡	Inside of a racing night bus,
見某種燈光	I see some kind of lights.
石鹽已在水	Rock salts are already melted in water;
底片泛微黃	the negative films start to turn slightly yellow.
萬物皆影像	The milliard things are all silhouettes,
沉浸於暗房	immersed under water in a dark room.

The esoteric images and subdued mood, together with the sutra-like rhythm and syntax, give the poem an overall impression of archaism. Upon closer inspection, however, the poem turns out to be radically modern. The first, second, and third couplets have no obvious relation to each other—aside from their unspeakable melancholy. Either these images are juxtaposed by montage, or the first and second couplets are both snapshots emerging on the negative films in a dark room (as depicted in the next two couplets). The impressionism of his narrative is also shown in his changing of “silver salt” (*yinyan* 銀鹽) to “rock salt.” Of course, only silver salt can be used to develop negatives, but perhaps because “silver” is bright and shiny and would change the color palette—and consequently the general mood of the poem—the author changes it to “rock.” The muted color and weight of “rock” forms a delicate balance with the contextual images of light, water, yellow negatives, and a dark room.

Linguistic traditionalism and modernism both have their advantages and can be employed to achieve different artistic effects. In Gui Qian’s poem cited

³¹ See “Zuoye weishuang chuduhe” 昨夜微霜初渡河, an interview, <http://www.poem100.cn/onetext.asp?id=425>, accessed March 26, 2015.

above, the traditionalism is deliberate to achieve irony. In other and less interesting cases, as Zeng Zheng and Zeng Shaoli have recently criticized, the traditionalism could be an empty “pose.” Examples include the numerous mention of words such as “lute,” “flute,” “sword,” or “horse” in contemporary classicist poems, when the author probably has never touched any of these objects and is only posturing in a stereotypical fashion.³² To be fair, this type of stereotyped language is a staple feature of traditional Chinese poetry through the ages, and “posturing” may be one of the licensed vices of lyric romanticism. Yet, there are also indisputable cases when these terms are merely conventional. Trading these terms for modern names and images will not only make the poem more interesting, but will also demand greater technical virtuosity. In these cases, the proposal to call things as they are is a commendable antidote against “kitsch.”

Formal Innovations

The experiments that we have discussed show that the boundary between classicist poetry and vernacular poetry could be as thin as the classicist genre convention itself. Therefore, the space for formal innovation is limited, since for many poems the disintegration of the traditional form would make them freestyle vernacular poetry. Nevertheless, there are some noteworthy attempts. The aforementioned “Song of the Great Changes” by Hu Yunfei, for instance, has developed the classical *gexing* 歌行 genre to include extreme metrical variations. This attempt succeeds the poets from the Late Qing and Republican periods who explored the expressive space of *gexing* to include multisyllabic dictions and to present nuanced arguments.³³ Here, we are going to analyze a highly unusual poem, “Mourning for the Shiver, or King of Pop” (*Zhanli zhi dao* 顛慄之悼, King of Pop), by Kunzai, to show a new kind of musicality inspired by modern pop music.

踢踏！

黑皮鞋，白襯衫

嘶！

Tap, tap!

Black leather shoes, white t-shirt.

Ssss!

³² See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_53c443730102viiia.html, accessed March 26, 2015.

³³ See Zhiyi Yang, “The Modernity of the Ancient-Style Verse,” 551–80.

隆起秘銀壇
 踢踏！
 爵士帽，九分褲
 嘶！
 一束光獨舞
 搖擺而吶喊
 激塵燃火焰
 漫行步太空
 俯瞰正黑暗
 一把聲激烈
 一個人飄閃
 揚髮猙獰且高歌

 舞臺之外何可念
 踢踏，來吧！
 繁華即黑白
 印刻一張臉
 嘶！傾斜！
 沸騰裏軀幹幻化

 旋轉裏光影綻豔
 踢踏！
 地標在手中
 踢踏！
 腳下星成點
 踢踏！踢踏！
 唯有燈光
 唯有尖叫氾濫
 嘶！嘶！
 午夜是舞臺
 舞臺已暗淡
 踢踏！踢踏！嘶！
 發光手套
 華麗戎裝
 盛大雕像獨輝煌

A mysterious silver platform emerges.
 Tap, tap!
 Jazz hat, cropped pants.
 Ssss!
 In a single beam of light he dances alone.
 He sways and shrieks;
 the dusts are stirred like burning flames.
 A stroll on the stage is like a walk in space;
 he peeps down into the darkness.
 There is just one voice, clear and sharp;
 there is just one person, swift and agile.
 His hairs are flying, his face fierce, his singing voice
 high;
 aside from the stage there's no other thought.
 Tap, tap! Come!
 The most exuberant colors are black and white;
 his face is etched like a seal.
 Ssss! Lean!
 Amid a boiling crowd the body becomes a
 transforming illusion;
 in its swirling turns, lights and shadows bloom.
 Tap, tap!
 A landmark held in his hands.
 Tap, tap!
 Spotlights of stars under his feet.
 Tap, tap!
 Only lights are left;
 only thrilled screams flow like a flood.
 Ssss! Ssss!
 Midnight is his stage;
 and on the stage lights are out.
 Tap, tap! Ssss!
 Shimmering gloves,
 lavish armory,
 like a grand statue bathing alone in his

輝煌故遠望
 晝夜灰茫茫
 舞臺外行屍
 舞臺外荒涼
 畫面已淒厲
 破損帷幕掩愴慌
 行走夢不真
 停靠涼冷牆
 手中維尼熊
 身上米奇裳
 黑髮斑駁垂
 眼瞳永燙傷
 陽光最高拍
 擊穿黑鏡框
 嘶！
 舞者與歌者
 高聲或低唱
 燦爛曾盛放
 忽爾今夏殤
 嘶！踢踏！
 寂靜中響起
 長街蕩鏗鏘
 嘶！踢踏！
 大地漸抖動
 顫慄玻璃窗
 踢踏！踢踏！嘶！
 窗臺閑坐彼得潘
 遠望陽光正軟黃
 玩具堆棧遍長廊
 風鈴輕輕敲樂章

magnificence.
 The magnificence has become a distant memory;
 days and nights blend into endless grey.
 Oh, a walking corpse off the stage;
 oh, desolation off the stage.
 The picture turns forlorn;
 a battered drapery hides a panic-stricken man.
 When he walks he feels like in an untrue dream;
 he stops and leans against a chilly wall.
 Winnie the Pooh in his hands;
 Mickey Mouse on his clothes.
 His pitch-black hair raggedly covers his forehead;
 the pupils of his eyes are eternally burnt.
 The highest beat of the sunlight
 hits through his blackened glasses.
 Ssss!
 Dancers and singers
 on their highest pitch or lowest croon.
 The exuberance that once blossomed
 suddenly takes its departure this summer.
 Ssss! Tap!
 The music rises from dead silence,
 blaring down a long street.
 Ssss! Tap!
 The earth slowly starts to tremble,
 and glass windows quiver with anticipation.
 Tap, tap! Ssss!
 On the windowsill leisurely sits Peter Pan,
 gazing at the soft and yellowish sunshine.
 His toys pile up in a long corridor,
 and wind bells gently chime for him a song.

Written in 2009, this poem was an elegy for of Michael Jackson. The first part of the poem limns a typical Michael Jackson concert, with him personifying the “King of Pop”; the second part depicts his decline into something of a

freak as he fell out of the spotlight; the final part mourns his death and suggests that, despite his fame and notoriety, the fallen star was, at heart, a Peter Pan, a boy who refused to grow up. Stylistically, the poem combines lines with three, four, five, and seven syllables—standard meters in premodern Chinese poetry—but also adds monosyllabic and disyllabic onomatopoeia (“Ssss” and “tap, tap!” in particular), to recreate the musicality of a pop concert performance. And though most couplets have two lines sharing the same length, which is standard in classical poetry, there is also one couplet: “only lights are left;/ only thrilled screams flow like a flood,” that combines two lines with four and six syllables in each. Another segment, “shimmering gloves,/ lavish armor,/ like a grand statue bathing alone in his magnificence,” brings together three lines with four, four, and seven syllables in each. Both are unusual metrical segments as judged by the standard of premodern Chinese poetry.

The development of Chinese poetry in its two millennia of history was often stimulated by musical changes. The rise of *ci* poetry, for instance, was a result of the influx of foreign music from the Western regions. We can therefore expect that more attempts to write experimental classicist poetry to the beat of contemporary music—be it pop, Rock “n” Roll, or jazz—may bring out further formal innovations.

Conclusion

Online classicist poetry has gained increasing attention in the last few years and a few literary prizes have been set up with the sole aim of encouraging its development. However, these tend to be small-scale and short-lived prizes. The Qu Yuan Prize 屈原獎, set up to promote *shi* and *ci* poetry by young poets, was only held twice (2008, 2010)³⁴ before being cancelled for unspecified reasons.³⁵ Its social influence was also rather limited. Other classicist poetry prizes suffer from a similar lack of funding or attention. Nevertheless, in recent years, there has been more institutional support for

³⁴ See <http://baike.baidu.com/view/4233621.htm>, accessed March 27, 2015.

³⁵ According to Zeng Shaoli’s private communication with Zhiyi Yang, the main reason was the withdrawal of funding, though it might also have been subject to certain external pressures.

high quality classicist poetry. The contest for institutional recognition, however, might have contributed to rising tension among different “schools.” The conflict between the “traditionalists” and the “modernists” came to the fore in the selection process of the first Qu Yuan Prize. For the first time, the committee included respected online classicist poets, including Zeng Shaoli, Zeng Zheng, Xu Jinru, and other poets featured in this article. The “modernist” poets that some committee members highly recommended, however, received an extremely low credit—as low as one or two points in a one hundred-point scale—from Xu Jinru, which led to their failure.³⁶ Xu has since proposed to return to “scholarly poetry” to promote what he perceives to be the moral orthodox of the Chinese tradition.³⁷ Among the “modernists,” Zeng Shaoli’s intensive use of vernacular has also been criticized by Duan Xiaosong as being too “rustic” (*libai* 俚白) and “clever” (*nongqiao* 弄巧).³⁸ Yet, even conflicts may also have positive consequences. When a generation comes of age, they will naturally develop diverging convictions. Their disagreement is therefore a sign of maturity as well as vitality.

In Chinese lyric history—from tetrasyllabic to pentasyllabic and to heptasyllabic, from *shi* to *ci* and to *qu* poetry—new genres appeared over time. However, none of the later genres completely replaced the former genres in the way of “literary evolution” that the May Fourth proponents of vernacular poetry imagined. All the genres coexisted and continued to be written, as shown by the great variety of classicist genres included in this article alone. We therefore have reason to believe that classicist literary genres and vernacular poetry will continue to coexist in the future and, hopefully, will all be recognized as indispensable parts of Chinese literature. Moreover, just like classicist verse can gain from modern vernacular poetry, vernacular poetry could also gain from the classical tradition. Ultimately, the convergence of the old and the new may give birth to novel styles or even genres. To achieve this purpose, we need to first reverse the ideological bias that gives institutional dominance to modern vernacular poetry and that

³⁶ Xu Jinru defended his action in the following interview: <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-no02-212112-1.shtml>, accessed March 27, 2015.

³⁷ See Xu Jinru, “Dangdai xuerenshi niaokan.”

³⁸ See “Zuoye weishuang chuduhe.”

favors the classicist poetry that represents the establishment. Only then, will “the poetry of resistance” become a new norm.

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——Zhiyi Yang

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