

# Muffled Dialect Spoken by Green Fruit: An Alternative History of Modern Chinese Poetry<sup>†</sup>

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## Prologue: Poetry in Transit and Translation

In early 1882, the poet Huang Zunxian (1848–1905), who was serving as assistant to the Chinese ambassador to Japan at the time, was appointed as Chinese consul general to the United States in San Francisco. Huang departed from Japan by sea on the eighteenth of the first month (March 3) and arrived at San Francisco on the twelfth of the second month (March 30). During the long ocean voyage, he composed a series of quatrains, collectively entitled “Various Responses on an Ocean Voyage” (Haixing zagan). As befitting someone traveling to a foreign land whose tongue he does not know, in no. 13 of the poetic series, Huang muses on the issue of language and communication:

拍拍群鷗逐我飛  
不曾相識各天涯  
欲憑鳥語時通訊  
又恐華言汝未知

Flapping and fluttering their wings, gulls fly after me;  
we do not know each other, each at the edge of sky.  
I wish to convey a message by way of birds' talk,  
but then again I fear that you do not understand  
Chinese. (1963: 125)

Birds have always acted as messengers in Chinese poetry. The third-century

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poet Ruan Ji (210–263) wrote in “Singing of My Cares” (Yonghuai) no. 36:

寄言東飛鳥	I send word by the eastward flying bird,
可用慰我情	it may console my feelings. (1987: 317)

Sometimes the bird rejects the poet’s supplication, as in Cao Pi’s (187–226) “Ballad of Qiuhu” (Qiuhu xing):

寄言飛鳥	I want to send word by a flying bird,
告余不能	it tells me it cannot. (Lu 1995: 396)

In the nineteenth-century quatrain cited above, Huang Zunxian is caught, however, in a particularly modern dilemma: he fears the birds in his poem may not be able to act as messengers because they do not speak Chinese, and this is not a concern that would trouble the earlier poets. At first glance there seems to be a discrepancy between the two categories of “birds’ talk” (*niaoyu*) and “Chinese” (*huayan*), for the natural counterpart of “birds’ talk” should be “human talk”; and yet, it is in this discrepancy that the irony of the poem lies. Since as early as in the second century, “birds’ talk” had been used to refer to the language or languages spoken by the non-Han Chinese people in southern and southwestern China. Fan Ye’s (398–445) *The History of the Latter Han* mentions that an able magistrate of Xuancheng (in modern Anhui) forced “all people who lived in the distant forests, bound their hair in a single bun like a pestle and talked like birds” to relocate, and as a result “there were no more bandits and thieves in the territory” (1965: 1286). The phrase was used again in “The Biographies of the Southern and Southwestern Barbarians,” referring to the non-Han people as “the species living in caves like animals and talking like birds” (Fan 1965: 2860). The commentary to *History of the Latter Han* explains that the language those people spoke “sounds like the twittering of birds.” In the quatrain written during his ocean voyage from one foreign country to another, Huang Zunxian seems to be playing with

the double meanings of *niaoyu*: the squeaking of gulls and the equally incomprehensible non-Chinese language. The true irony, of course, is that Huang Zunxian, coming from a Guangdong Hakka family, would have been considered a *niaoyu* speaker himself by the northern Chinese who hailed from the heartland of China.

The birds in Huang's poem are not just any birds: they are gulls, a species that had acquired a particular meaning in the Chinese poetic tradition. Any educated premodern Chinese reader would immediately recognize in these lines the story from the fourth-century Daoist work *Liezi*. In the story, a man living by the ocean played with gulls every day until one day his father told him to catch one. On that day, when the man went out to sea, the gulls circled above his boat but would not come down to him (1987: 67–68). He did not have to speak a single word or even do anything: the loss of innocence and the presence of a motivation were enough to keep the birds away. In Huang Zunxian's poem, gulls are "following" the poet, not, however, because of his innocence, as there is plenty of worrying and calculating on his part, but because of the blocked communication caused by a linguistic barrier. The *Liezi* story assumed an intuitive understanding between man and nature; in Huang Zunxian's poem, that innocence is lost. Any poem is a linguistic construct; this particular poem is the product of a fallen world of confused tongues.

This observation is poignantly relevant to Huang's poem as the poet continues to play word games in the second half of the poem by placing *huayan* in the corresponding position of *niaoyu*. *Huayan*, the Chinese language, also means "flowery language"; *flower* and *bird* are a common pair of "matching terms" in a parallel couplet, the most characteristic device in traditional Chinese poetry. Yet the effect is completely lost in English translation, just as the *Liezi* echo would be lost to a modern Chinese reader of average education. As Huang Zunxian's poem travels across the Pacific Ocean, it painfully straddles several overlapping borders.

Puns, however, are dangerous. *Huayan*, the Chinese language/the

flowery and splendid language, can also refer to “fancy talk”—ornate but insubstantial, beautiful but insincere. The deadlock opposition of patterning, *wen*, and substance, *zhi*, is almost as old as the Chinese cultural and literary discourse itself, but in Huang’s poem it acquires a new meaning: in the context of the *Liezi* allusion, *huayan* is not “embellished language,” but language that has become *hua* in the sense of “superficial” and “superfluous.” In the context of Chinese–English and premodern–modern crossings, however, Huang Zunxian’s clever word game is rendered meaningless and, again, superfluous. This is a poem about language, and it turns out that the poet is no longer in control of language and indeed has never been. Educated in the traditional belief in the fundamental superiority of Han Chinese culture, and yet living at a time when that belief was profoundly shaken by coming into contact with a powerful and complicated cultural Other—the West—the poet does manage, in the end, to convey a sense of deep ambivalence by his ironic use of the terms “bird talk” and “flowery language.”

Huang’s poem, written during an ocean voyage in the late nineteenth century, is allegorical. Although it is true that traditional Chinese poets were often on the move, traveling from one place to another, Huang Zunxian was the first major Chinese poet to have traveled extensively across the globe—from East Asia to Southeast Asia, from North America to Europe. He wrote poetry in transit and about transit in both spatial and temporal terms, as the vast watery space of Pacific Ocean—undifferentiated nature—is marked by national and international territories as well as by the International Date Line. His concern that the seagulls encountered during his voyage on the Pacific Ocean do not speak Chinese captures the quintessential problem faced by a modern Chinese poet: namely, the problem of understanding, communication, and translation.

### **Constructing Stories of Modern Chinese Poetry**

For a long time, the history of modern Chinese poetry has been articulated

in a binary framework. The story is simple enough: the New Culture Movement had done away with traditional culture, and new-style poetry—poetry in the vernacular—had vanquished old-style poetry, that is, poetry in traditional forms such as “regulated verse” (*lǚshi*) or quatrains in the five- and seven-syllable line. It is a militant, black and white, and yet very effective narrative—as black-and-white narratives tend to be. It is worthwhile, however, to trace the origin of such a narrative, and to examine it against reality.

China went through profound sociopolitical and cultural changes in the early twentieth century. The revolution in social life and the public sphere found its parallel and expression in literary revolution. The narrative of vernacular poetry being fundamentally antagonistic to, and eventually taking the place of, poetry in traditional forms was constructed out of an ideological necessity; it was part and parcel of the revolutionary discourse of the day. Old-style poetry was seen as the worst enemy of new-style poetry, and became so by virtue of the adversarial position adopted by many advocates of new-style poetry. Hu Shi, for example, wrote that one of the central characteristics of new literature, in stark contrast to old-style poetry, was that it is free in form and unconstrained by regulation, and that this formal freedom would lead to a spiritual freedom that was critical to China’s cultural renewal.<sup>1</sup> Nearly a century later, there can be no doubt that new-style poetry has won out: it occupies an illustrious position in literary and scholarly establishments, is part of school textbooks and university curricula (although no course is ever given on modern old-style poetry), and, most important, has achieved aesthetic success with an array of excellent poets and great poems.

The beautiful simplicity of the narrative culminating in the final victory of new-style poetry is marred, however, by one simple fact: nearly a hundred years after the Literary Revolution, old-style poetry is alive and well, enjoying a large readership in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese communities. There are journals devoted to old-style poetry;

<sup>1</sup> See “On New Poetry” (1919) (Hu Shi 1991).

anthologies of old-style poetry are compiled and published; clubs, societies, and groups of fans of old-style poetry are formed in physical and virtual reality, and poetry websites, which have attracted a huge audience in the past decade, either give separate space to old-style poetry or are exclusively dedicated to it. Indeed, in recent years, more and more scholars of modern Chinese literature have come to recognize this curious phenomenon, and a number of studies of modern old-style poetry, in the form of books and articles, have appeared both in China and abroad.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For books and articles on modern old-style poetry, see, for instance, Hu Yingjian 2005; Jon Kowallis 2005; Shengqing Wu 2004 and 2008. For anthologies of old-style poetry, see, for instance, Qian Liqun and Yuan Benliang 2005. *Zhonghua shici*, a journal devoted exclusively to old-style poetry, boasts the largest print run (25,000 copies) of poetry journals in mainland China today.

<sup>3</sup> I have cited this remark from the report made by one of the anonymous readers of this essay.

Could it be a battle with no winner or loser? Or, to put the question another way: was there ever a battle in the first place? If, to borrow the words of a scholar of Chinese literature, “as we now understand, the ‘newness’ of new literature and poetry is an artificial construction on the epistemological break,”<sup>3</sup> then perhaps the imagined contestation between “old” and “new” also needs to be revisited, because the temporal distance from the vested interests and heated debates in the early part of the twentieth century no longer have to get in the way of a more clear-headed perspective. Perhaps the time has come, as a number of Chinese scholars have begun to realize, for a different sort of history of modern Chinese poetry, one that incorporates both new-style and old-style poetry (Huang 2002; Chen 2005).

It is important to emphasize, however, that such a history should not be a simple-minded glorification, motivated by nationalistic sentiments, of a “native form.” Although it is true that old-style or classical-style poetry has a longer history than new-style poetry, it is not a more privileged site for an elusive and artificially constructed “Chineseness” than new-style poetry is. The attempt to identify old-style poetry with “Chineseness” is flawed for the simple reason that “Chinese culture” must be understood historically as a process of happening and becoming, not as a static set of essentialized characteristics and traits. Nor should this new history of modern Chinese poetry be a polemic in an ideological battle pitching the new style against the old. The battle was created to serve a practical

need in the revolutionary discourse of the early twentieth century; it is long over, despite some passionate efforts to continue or resurrect it. It is easy to argue one's position in such a battle, however passé it is, because battle narratives are more often than not constructed on the basis of good and bad, progressive and backward; it is much more difficult to reconcile oneself with the gray zone that is the reality of modern Chinese poetry and to sort out the complications created by the love-hate coexistence and mutual dependence of "old" and "new."

Whereas the current debate in Chinese academia still largely centers on the question of whether a history of modern literature should include old-style poetry, it is quite clear that such a history is essential to a fuller picture of Chinese modernity. Still more important, we should go beyond the generic compartmentalization that continues to characterize most Chinese literary histories. That is to say, a literary history that neatly lists modern old-style and new-style poetry side by side, although a step forward, is still theoretically inadequate to account for the complex phenomenon that is modern Chinese poetry. The key to understanding this phenomenon is to bear in mind that not only was new-style poetry created in reaction against old-style poetry, but the presence of new-style poetry has changed the writing of old-style poetry as well. Here I am not speaking of any visible influence of one form on the other in terms of style, theme, diction, or imagery; for, in truth, while new-style poetry was struggling to establish its own position and identity against old-style poetry in its period of early formation, old-style poetry seems to have remained more or less unperturbed by the existence of new-style poetry—and in many cases even by the experience of modern life in general. A great number of the old-style poems written in the Republican era, or even today, can hardly be distinguished from the numerous old-style poems produced in imperial times. By saying "the presence of new-style poetry has changed the writing of old-style poetry," I mean that to write old-style poetry in modern times becomes a willful choice in the face of a rapidly changing social order as

well as of the rising new-style poetry. To write old-style poetry in modern times, in light of the changed circumstances, is to self-consciously cultivate a separate space and, as new-style poetry establishes itself as the *official* modern Chinese poetry, to engage in an increasingly intensified private and personal undertaking that is entirely severed from the traditionally public realm occupied by *shi* poetry. This, of course, is not to say that new-style poetry is *not* a “personal and private undertaking” in terms of articulating the poet’s private experiences and feelings; but in terms of getting publicly recognized in literary and scholarly establishments, in terms of possessing a history, a canon, old-style poetry in modern times definitely yields its place to new-style poetry. Moreover, compared with old-style poetry produced in premodern China, old-style poetry in modern times becomes a much more limited form of cultural capital; it is practiced largely as a gesture of resisting or withdrawing from, not participating in, the public discourse. It is in this sense that I describe modern old-style poetry as a private and personal undertaking.

Just as new-style poetry is produced and articulated against old-style poetry, old-style poetry in modern times is a reaction against new-style poetry. Old-style and new-style poetry are thus closely intertwined, each existing and struggling in the other’s shadow, so much so that it is virtually impossible to give a fair analysis of the landscape of modern Chinese literature without taking both—and their complex interrelationship—into consideration. A new, alternative history of modern Chinese poetry should therefore not only incorporate both old-style and new-style poetry but also examine the two forms *in relation to one another*, within the larger Chinese cultural context and the context of world literature.

In this essay, I do not presume to give an overview of the development of Chinese poetry in the past century following the model provided in this brief introduction of the theoretical framework for an alternative history of modern Chinese poetry. Instead, I single out some important moments in the writing of old-style poetry in modern times, and discuss the issues



emerging in these moments. First, I consider the role played by old-style poetry in the modern world and its dynamic relation with new-style poetry and modern life; two poets, Huang Zunxian and Nie Gannu (1903–1986), are discussed as primary examples. Then I move to contemporary times, and focus on a new kind of poetry dubbed “New-Old Style” (*xinjiuti*), represented by an Internet poet, Lizililizi (1964–; subsequently Lizi). It is a postmodern hybrid form straddling old style and new style, and is largely read, circulated, and even directly produced on the Internet. This new form brings together a number of issues that concern today’s writers, critics, and scholars alike, namely globalism and localism, world literature and national literature, translation and the impossibility of it.

Before I go into a detailed discussion of the three poets, a few words are called for to briefly explain why I chose these three in particular to each represent an important moment in modern Chinese cultural and poetic history. There are many poets in modern times who write poetry in traditional forms, in some cases exclusively in these forms; but few, perhaps with the single exception of Mao Zedong (1893–1976), have had a significant following. Mao Zedong is a political figure, however, and it is doubtful that his old-style poetry would have obtained cult status had he not been who he was. In contrast, Huang Zunxian, Nie Gannu, and Lizi are first and foremost writers and poets; the case of Lizi is particularly remarkable in that he has established a reputation for himself purely by writing old-style poetry on the Internet. All three poets fortuitously write at a critical junctures in modern Chinese history: in the late nineteenth century, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and at the turn of the twenty-first century when China is undergoing economic and social transformation. The three poets eloquently express their experiences during these turbulent times as they try to make sense of the turmoil of the world around them through the craft of poetry.

## The Case of Huang Zunxian

If we allow the term “modern Chinese poetry” to include both new-style and old-style poems, then Huang Zunxian, an important figure in the so-called “Poetic Revolution” in the late nineteenth century, stood at the very beginning of the history of modern Chinese poetry. This is less because of his literary innovation than for the great tension between his experience of foreign life—which, as said before, was virtually unknown to premodern poets—and the traditional poetic forms and language deployed to convey his experience. In other words, Huang Zunxian’s poetry was “new” not because he brought about a revolution to traditional poetic forms or language, but because his poetry represented a classical poet’s attempt to come to terms with the modern world. It is true that Huang Zunxian stretched traditional poetic vocabulary as much as possible; yet, primarily because of his deep involvement in the old cultural world, he never broke away from the poetic tradition in which he was writing. In fact, for Huang Zunxian as well as for many other turn-of-the-century men of letters who continued to write old-style poetry, the familiar allusions, tropes, images, and vocabulary of classical poetry permitted them to inscribe a radically changing world order in the sort of language that made sense to them. This was even truer when later on the writing of old-style poetry, as discussed in the previous section, became a conscious choice rather than the only available form of poetic expression, as it had been throughout imperial China.

In his analysis of Huang Zunxian’s writing on foreign life, J. D. Schmidt (1994: 96) uses the term “exotic allusions” to designate “references drawn from earlier Chinese writings about foreign cultures”; he also uses the term “transfer allusions” to refer to poetic devices that “involve the transfer of purely Chinese cultural or historical allusions into poetry that describes foreign cultures” (98). And yet, the so-called “exotic allusions” had become so standard in classical Chinese writing after centuries of repeated use that they were longer “exotic.” Instead, what we have are *accepted* terms

with which to talk about foreign life, and these terms make the foreign comfortably knowable and familiar. For instance, when Huang Zunxian uses conventional synecdoche such as “curly beard” and “emerald eyes” to describe any foreigner regardless of the person’s actual looks, he evokes a familiar cultural discourse that helps dissolve foreignness, because “curly beard and emerald eyes” were standard terms to depict a non-Han person or a *hu* (Huang 1963: 141). Even his well-known set of poems, “Modern Parting” (Jin bieli), tropes on the established *yuefu* title “Ancient Parting” (Gu bieli); and everything “modern” in these poems, such as train or steam boat, telegraph, and photograph, is described in relation to “how things used to be,” so that the poet and the reader are placed in a privileged position of mutual understanding and shared sociocultural memory (Huang 1963: 185–187).

“Moved by Events” (Gan shi) No. 1 gives an account of a grand party at Queen Victoria’s court, written when the poet was serving as assistant to the Chinese ambassador to England between 1890 and 1891. The poem begins with a stanza that shows the poet surrounded with splendid luxury objects:

酌君以葡萄千斛之酒	I pour you, my lord, the grape wine in a thousand goblets;
贈君以玫瑰連理之花	I present you, my lord, with roses joined at roots.
飽君以波羅徑尺之果	I satisfy your appetite with the foot-long fruit of pineapple;
飲君以天竺小團之茶	I quench your thirst with small tea-cakes from India.
處君以琉璃層累之屋	I house you in a many-storied building with windows of glass;
乘君以通幃四望之車	I provide you with a carriage with curtains on the four sides;
送君以金絲壓袖之服	I dress you in a robe with golden silk threads covering the sleeves,
延君以錦幘圍牆之家	I invite you to a residence with brocade lining its four walls. (Huang 1963: 188–189)

This stanza evokes the famous opening of the early medieval poet Bao Zhao's (414?–466) "Hard Travel" (Xinglu nan) No. 1:

奉君金卮之美酒	I present you, my lord, with ale in a golden goblet;
玳瑁玉匣之雕琴	a carved zither in a jade case decorated with tortoise-shell;
七彩芙蓉之羽帳	feathered bed-curtain embroidered with lotus blossoms of seven colors;
九華葡萄之錦衾	a brocade coverlet with the pattern of lush grapes.

(Bao 1972: 53)

Framing one's poetic lines in the verbal paradigm of early poetry is a rhetorical strategy of familiarization, even as it calls attention to the elements that have been changed. In this case we notice the exotic nature of the luxury objects—grape wine, roses, pineapple, Indian tea, glass windows, and wall hangings. These objects, however, are accepted codes of foreignness; they do not threaten, especially when enclosed within the structure of a famous earlier poetic text.

The following lines of Huang's poem plunge into a dramatic representation of the extravagant gathering of royal personages, lords and ladies, and foreign emissaries. Images of paradise and immortals abound, again with echoes of earlier poetry such as the Tang poet Li Bai's (701–762) well-known "Visiting Mt. Tianmu in a Dream, Presented upon Parting" (Mengyou Tianmu yin liubie), in which the poet stumbles on a grand gathering of gods and goddesses during his dream-visit to Tianmu Mountain.

<sup>4</sup> "No-restriction assembly" (*wuzhe dahui*) is a large Buddhist gathering open to all people. It was first held in China by Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty.

<sup>5</sup> This line is taken almost verbatim from Li Bai's "Visiting Mt. Tianmu in a Dream, Presented upon Parting" (Li 1980: 899).

紅氍貼地燈耀壁	Red carpet covers the floor, lamps shine on the wall;
今夕大會來無遮	tonight's grand assembly has no restriction. <sup>4</sup>
褰裳攜手雙雙至	Gathering up their dresses, holding hands, men and women arrive in pairs,
仙之人兮紛如麻	a multitude of immortals descend to earth, numerous as sands. <sup>5</sup>
繡衣曳地過七尺	Embroidered robes trail on the ground, with a train of over seven feet;

白羽覆髻騰三叉	white feathers decorating the chignon rise up like a trident.
襜褕乍解雙臂袒	Taking off their capes, the women expose two bare arms,
旁綴纓絡中寶珈	on the side wearing tassels, in the middle precious jewels.
細腰亭亭媚楊柳	Small, delicate waists, more charming than willow branches,
窄靴簇簇團蓮華	a throng of slender boots like lotus blossoms.
膳夫中庭獻漣乳	Butlers serve sherbets in the courtyard,
樂人階下鳴鼓笳	musicians play drums and pipes below the stairs.
諸天人龍盡來集	All the devas, humans and n gas have come together;
來自天漢通銀槎	coming from the Heavenly River on a silver raft. <sup>6</sup>
衣裳闌斑語言雜	Wearing colorful clothes, speaking a motley of languages,
康樂和親權不靡	the crowd are joyful and agreeable, merry, though not boisterous.

<sup>6</sup> This couplet refers to the foreign diplomats who were present at the gathering.

Just as the lengthy description of the assembly culminates in the “joyful and agreeable, merry though not boisterous” crowd, a high point both for the poem and for the grand party itself, the poem abruptly ends with a note of melancholy:

問我何為獨不樂	You ask why it is then that I alone am unhappy,
側身東望三咨嗟	turning to the side, gazing east, and heaving many sighs?

The ending couplet comes unexpectedly, and because of this, intensifies its affective power. The description of the splendid, joyful party becomes a foil to the melancholy sense of alienation felt by the poet.

The following two poems under the same title reveal the source of the poet’s melancholy: the traditional Chinese sense of the world order has been shaken by the newly gained knowledge of “various great nations,” and the poet urges his countrymen to forsake the “empty talk” (*xu lun*) of “Confucian scholars of the Song and Ming” (*Song Ming zhu ru*) for a

true understanding of this brave new world:

古今事變奇到此	The changes from past to present— they are so very strange indeed!
彼已不知學毋恥	If we remain ignorant about them and us— would not it be a shame? (Huang 1963: 191)

In some ways, the “empty talk” Huang Zunxian denounces echoes the “flowery language,” the phrase he uses to refer to the Chinese language in the quatrain written during his voyage to San Francisco. By the time Huang wrote “Moved by Events,” he was already a much more experienced world traveler than when he embarked on his ocean crossing. Still trapped in the painful awareness that China was at the center of a crumbling world, he nevertheless exhorted his countrymen to better understand foreign civilizations. What deserves note in this series of poems is that “strangeness” (*qi*) is used to describe the situation in which China found itself: China no longer occupied the position of the superior Central Kingdom, and had to come to terms with the “various great nations” of the world; and yet, Huang represents the “various great nations” in a familiar form and vocabulary, in a poetic language that helped the poet—and his readers—make sense of the new world order.

Underlying Huang’s poetic language is a whole system of explicit and implicit social laws and codes, beliefs and values that clashes with the new and alien world it seeks to represent. A striking example is Huang’s long, pentasyllabic poem on American presidential elections, entitled “An Account of Events” (*Jishi*). Shocked and dismayed by what he considered regrettable infighting among the American people, Huang Zunxian used traditional Chinese terms of monarchy to represent a political system he did not fully understand:

烏知舉總統	Who would expect to see these strange events
所見乃怪事	during their presidential election?
怒揮同室戈	Angrily brandishing halberds at members of the

憤爭傳國璽	family, they struggle with one another for the imperial seal. .....
究竟所舉賢 無愧大寶位	I wonder if the worthy man being elected in the end would indeed deserve the position of "Great Treasure"?
倘能無黨爭 尚想太平世	If only they could do away with factional rivalry, one could well imagine a world of prosperity and peace. (1963: 134-35)

The phrase "Great Treasure" (*dabao*) comes from the "Commentary on Appended Phrases" in *The Classic of Changes*: "The great treasure of the sage is called [his] position" (Ruan 1955: 166). "Imperial seal" is the emblem of imperial power and legitimate rule, passed on from one emperor to another and sometimes from one dynasty to another. By resorting to the vocabulary of vying for the imperial throne, he not only sets up a familiar frame of reference for his contemporary Chinese readers, but also effectively distorts the meaning of election and the nature of the presidential office. The high register of the poetic language, which requires variations of the plain descriptive term "presidential office" (*zongtong wei*) combined with the poet's misinterpretation of an alien political system, yields a skewed picture of a foreign phenomenon (foreign in every sense of the word); nevertheless, this foreign phenomenon is made comprehensible to native readers and domesticated through rhetorical device.

To familiarize the unfamiliar was a primary motivation that drove many twentieth-century poets to continue to work in old poetic forms. For those poets, just as for Huang Zunxian, writing poetry in old forms was a way of dealing with and making sense of the radical changes China was undergoing in the late Qing and early Republican eras. This may help explain why extreme public and personal circumstances, such as war, imprisonment, and exile, always worked like a catalyst for writing old-style poetry. National and personal disasters, of course, had always been a stimulant for premodern poets; the difference, however, is that modern

poets have an option: they could write in either new or old forms. Many choose the latter. A good example is Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967), one of the first writers to experiment with new-style poetry. When he was imprisoned as “a traitor to the country” after the Sino-Japanese war, Zhou Zuoren wrote about 150 poems in jail, all in old-style verse (Zhou 1995: 291). In a colophon written in prison to his *Miscellaneous Poems of the Tiger Bridge* (Tiger Bridge was where he was imprisoned in Nanjing), Zhou Zuoren makes an interesting disclaimer: “These poems, on the one hand, are not ‘old poems’ (*jiushi*), and yet they observe the restriction (*jushu*) of the number of characters [per line] and rhyme schemes; on the other hand, they are not ‘vernacular poems’ [*baihua shi*], and yet I can use them to express myself freely and casually” (277). This is almost an allegory of Zhou’s condition: both being confined to prison and retaining the freedom of thought and speech. And yet, whereas physical imprisonment was not Zhou Zuoren’s choice, the linguistic “imprisonment” (*jushu*) was. But Zhou Zuoren was not an isolated case. According to the contemporary scholar Hu Yingjian (2005: 274–279), of the more than 2,000 extant poems composed by “revolutionary martyrs”—that is, those who died during the White Terror period in the 1920s and during the Sino-Japanese war and the Civil War between the 1930s and 1940s, most are old-style poems and can be roughly divided into two categories: prison poetry and poetry written before execution.<sup>7</sup>

Closely related to the familiarization of the unfamiliar is the intensely social nature of old-style poetry. By “social nature” I do not refer to the numerous old-style poetry societies and clubs that sprang up and flourished across China in the twentieth century, for literary societies and clubs were, after all, just as important in the production of writings in new forms;<sup>8</sup> instead, I refer to the everyday social occasions where old-style poets are called upon to write poems: festivals, banquets, partings, birthdays, and so on. Traditional festivals as well as the birthdays of contemporary luminaries continued to be favorite occasions on which writers of old-style poetry composed verses together, sometimes using the same rhymes; and

<sup>7</sup> The Japanese scholar Kiyama Hideo published a series of essays on the topic of old-style poetry (written mostly from the 1940s through the 1980s) in the journal *Bungaku* of Iwanami Shoten between 1996 and 2001 under the collective title “The Purgatory of [Chinese] Kanshi.” These essays often call attention to the poets’ prison experience and their poetic expression (Kiyama 2003: 259).

<sup>8</sup> In recent years, there have been several excellent studies on the subject of modern literary societies in Chinese and English. See, for instance,



one could easily cite many examples from each of the first four decades of the twentieth century (Hu 2005: 18–19, 22–23). The social situations in which poets compose old-style poems are often quite different from those in which poets compose new-style poems, although in recent years new-style poets have begun to consciously adopt the practice of old-style poetry, such as inviting fellow-poets to write on the same topic.<sup>9</sup> Such a practice, though quite ordinary in premodern China, is not a practice one commonly sees in Western poetry, and new-style poets make it clear that they have drawn their inspiration from the native tradition. Whereas new-style poets sometimes make the poet's solitude and loneliness a positive value, old-style poetry tends to speak to a community and within a community in a language that seeks to familiarize the unfamiliar and normalize the abnormal.

Writing at a time when the world as he knew it was turned upside down, Huang Zunxian made the most of old-style poetry in his painful negotiations with the new world order. In the following poem, the familiar and the unfamiliar converge and clash, and the form of old-style poetry is stretched to its utmost limit. This poem, simply entitled "My Little Daughter" (Xiaonü), was written in 1885. After his sojourn spanning tens of thousands of miles and eight years, the poet was spending some quiet time with his long-separated family:

一燈圍坐話依依	My family sat around a single lamp, having an intimate chitchat;
簾幕深藏未掩扉	deeply hidden behind the drawn curtains, a door not yet closed.
小女挽鬚爭問事	My little daughter caressed my beard, constantly asking me this and that;
阿娘不語又牽衣	then she tugged at the sleeves of her mother, who had fallen silent.
日光定是舉頭近	"The sun, so bright, must be very close— one can see it by just raising one's head;
海大何如兩手圍	you say the ocean is big, but what if I cup it with both hands?"

Chen 1997; Hockx 2003; Cheng 2005; Luan 2006; Wu 2008. The most recent publication is Denton/Hockx 2008. Also see the online project *Literary Societies in Republican China*, constructed and edited by Denton and Hockx, at <http://people.cohums.ohio-state.edu/denton2/publications/research/litsoc.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> A contemporary new-style poet, Li Shaojun, an advocate of the "Grassroots New Poetry," posted a poem on the Internet entitled "Flowing Water" (Liushui), which aroused great interest and controversy and reportedly received more than 200,000 hits within a week. Later he invited twenty poets to write to the same topic. In a recent newspaper interview, he said he was planning to collect these poems into a small volume: "In the past, poets often wrote poetry to the same topic in response to one another, a practice I find fascinating. I feel we should recover this tradition." The interview is published in *Hainan ribao* (Wei 2008).

欲展地球圖指看      I was about to unroll the map of the world  
                                         and point at it for her to see,  
夜燈風幔落伊威      a breeze slipped into the curtains,  
                                         flames flickered, and a moth fell. (Huang 1963: 151)

The poem delineates an enclosed space: the family sits down in a circle around a single lamp—it is evening, perhaps after dinner—and the curtains are drawn. It is a domestic space that belongs to daily life and to womenfolk, represented by the silence of the wife and the chatter of the daughter. The poet establishes a boundary from the very beginning, separating inside from outside, family from the world, the women’s domestic space from the man’s public space. The former is intimate, warm, and peaceful: even the unrolling of the world map must be interrupted because it does not fit in such a feminine space of wife and daughter—they are so small, so fragile, compared with the world outside.

And yet, the boundary is not rigid, and there are cracks everywhere. In the second line of the poem, the poet tells us that a door is left open. Wind slips in, lamp flames flicker, and a moth falls. The intimate, warm, and peaceful scene ends in a small act of violence and death. The outside world looms as a threatening force, a sudden gale blowing in from darkness. Even before this climax, the outside world is already intruding, as the poet’s little daughter is eagerly asking him about all sorts of things and showing her intense curiosity about the world: How far is the foreign land compared with the sun? But surely I can cup the ocean if I use both of my hands? What strikes us is the contrast between the infinite smallness of the poet’s “little daughter” and the immense largeness of the ocean. The little girl’s innocence and complete lack of experience seem touchingly fragile before the vastness and hardness of the world. The dynamics would have been completely different if the poet were talking about his son: a boy will grow into a man, go out into the world, and soar like a *peng* bird, like his father; but a girl in nineteenth-century China had no such great expectations. Her mother’s silence, in this context, becomes much more

intriguing and revealing: it is an eloquent silence that coincides textually with the ultimate silence of the dead moth.

Suddenly, the poet seems awkwardly out of place in this domestic space. He himself represents the force of the outside world, even as he seeks refuge in his family home from the wind and waves of his ocean journeys and of national and international politics. He is an intruder into the space of the women, a stranger after an absence of eight long years. His masculinity is inscribed everywhere: his beard, caressed by his little daughter; his world map, rolled up in the suitcase. He is no Odysseus, there are no suitors for him to slay, but he certainly has disturbed the domestic order by bringing back with him new knowledge, charts, maps, tall tales about the ocean and the brave new world. It is interesting that he intends to show his little daughter the world map, and the word he uses is *zhikan*: to “point” at it for her to “see.” He seems to be implying that only by “seeing” it for herself can she comprehend the vastness of the world; but the wind blows in, the flames flicker, and a moth dies. The man is locked up in the loneliness of his newly acquired knowledge of the world that he finds impossible to communicate to the people “back home”—his neighbors, relatives, wife, and daughter—just as the woman is locked up in the loneliness of her domestic existence, and the girl in her innocence.

In the past, a distinction was made between *jia* and *guo*, home and state; but now it must become *jia* and *shijie*, home and the world. In many ways, the family home of the poet, the enclosed domestic space described in the poem “My Little Daughter,” is an allegory of China on the eve of an age of nationalism and internationalism. But the powerful, enigmatic image at the end of the poem, the burned moth falling from the lamp flames and interrupting the unrolling of the world map and distracting the little girl: *that* belongs to poetry, poetry of the best kind, and intervenes between the poet and the foreign world he encounters.

## The Case of Nie Gannu

The two characteristics of old-style poetry—familiarization of the unfamiliar and active participation in a socioliterary community—come together in unexpected ways in the poetry of Nie Gannu, a cultural and political figure who led an unusual life. Born in Hubei in 1903, Nie Gannu was one of the earliest students of the Huangpu Military School, where he got to know Zhou Enlai (1898–1976). After graduation, he was sent to Moscow Sun Yat-sen University, where he was classmates with Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), Jiang Jinguo (1910–1988), and many other Chinese Communists and Nationalists. In 1932, Nie joined the League of Left-Wing Writers, and was one of the pallbearers at Lu Xun’s funeral in 1936. From the 1940s on, he worked mainly as a journal editor. In the mid-1950s, because of a close friendship with the literary critic and poet Hu Feng (1902–1985), whose literary views and cultural values he shared, Nie was implicated in the campaign launched by the Chinese Communist Party against Hu Feng and a group of writers associated with him (known as the “Hu Feng clique”).<sup>10</sup> Although he managed to survive the ordeal, soon afterward he was labeled a Rightist and sent to a farm in Beidahuang, the Great Northern Wilderness in northeast China, to do hard labor. This was 1958. Nie came back to Beijing in 1962, only to be sentenced to life imprisonment as a counterrevolutionary during the Cultural Revolution. He was released in 1976 and died ten years later in Beijing (Zhou 1987; Nie 1998).

Nie Gannu was a well-known essayist, but his literary fame is also largely built on his old-style poetry. He had written some new-style poems and a few old-style poems in his early years, but started to seriously write old-style poetry only in 1959. It began as, in his own words, “obeying commands” during the “national poetry-writing movement,” which was the literary parallel of the Great Leap Forward designed to rapidly increase Chinese industrial and agricultural production (Nie 2005: 8–9). During this movement, people in cities, towns, and villages were asked to write poetry in large quantities. Nie Gannu recorded the event in a series of quatrains

<sup>10</sup> See Denton, “The Hu Feng Group: Genealogy of a Literary School” (Denton/Hockx 2008: 413–466).

entitled “Collective Poetry Writing” (Jiti xieshi). The following is the first of them:

整日田間力已疲	Laboring in the fields all day was exhausting enough,
下工回屋事新奇	things became curiuser and curiuser when we came back from the fields:
解衣磅礴床頭坐	taking off clothes, sitting in bed, a majestic phenomenon indeed:
萬燭齊明共寫詩	we all wrote poetry together under ten thousand bright candles. (Nie 2005: 135–36)

Nie Gannu continued to write old-style poetry even after the movement was over and throughout the 1960s and 1970s. His poems were first published in Hong Kong under the title *Three Drafts* (Sancao) in 1981 and soon afterward in Beijing under the title *The Poems of Sanyisheng* (Sanyisheng shi).<sup>11</sup> These poems not only gained recognition in the Chinese intellectual community but also were well liked by common readers for their distinct “Gannu Style” (*Gannu ti*).<sup>12</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, Huang Zunxian dealt with pressures on traditional life by writing old-style poetry. Because the socialist revolution between 1949 and 1976 was yet another profoundly debilitating and traumatizing event in the life of modern Chinese intellectuals, the writing of old-style poetry again became a way of resisting as well as of constructing meaning in these “curiuser and curiuser” political movements. Many of Nie Gannu’s best poems are septasyllabic regulated-verse poems about life in the Great Northern Wilderness. The most prominent characteristic of these poems is their ingenious mixture of traditional literary references with modern vernacular terms, in his description of the unglamorous daily life on the farm; the incongruity creates irony, and the irony is both accentuated and mitigated by the poet’s humorous attitude toward the hardship he was put through. A good example is a poem entitled “Cleaning the Toilet: In Reply to Meizi” (Qingce tong Meizi) No. 1:

<sup>11</sup> “Sanyisheng” was the name of one of the ministers of King Wu of Zhou. Nie Gannu split the name apart and explicated it as follows: “being useless and laidback (*san*) is suitable (*yi*) to preserving life (*sheng*)” (2005: 12).

<sup>12</sup> *Nie Gannu shi quanbian zengbu ben* includes a number of articles on Nie Gannu’s old-style poetry by, among others, the writer Shu Wu (1922–), the scholar Cheng Qianfan (1913–2000), the writer Shi Zhecun (1905–2003), the poet Peng Yanjiao (1920–), and the scholar Xu Chengbei (1942–) (Nie 1999: 495–630). About “Gannu Style,” see Lin Shu, “Shuo ‘Gannu ti’” (“On ‘Gannu Style’”) (Nie 1999: 536–545).

君自盃來僕自挑	You, my dear sir, scoop, and I'll carry;
燕昭臺下雨瀟瀟	At the King of Yan's terrace, a drizzling rain.
高低深淺兩雙手	High or low, deep or shallow: two pairs of hands;
香臭稠稀一把瓢	Sweet or stinky, thick or thin: one and same ladle.
白雪陽春同掩鼻	White snow or sunny spring: in either, cover your nose;
蒼蠅盛夏共彎腰	Blue flies in high summer: backs bent in unison.
澄清天下吾曹事	It's the task of such as us to clean up the whole world:
污穢成坑便肯饒	How, then, could we spare one filthy stall? (2005: 19–20)

<sup>13</sup> Although no mention of “King of Yan’s terrace” is found in early records, the legend is an old one that can be traced back to the second century and that subsequently became a popular allusion subsequently (see Xiao 1994: 1875; Li 1990: 231).

“The King of Yan’s terrace” is also known as “Yellow Gold Terrace” (Huangjin tai) and refers to the legendary terrace on which King Zhao of Yan (r. 311–279 BC) placed gold to attract worthy men to be his advisors.<sup>13</sup> If the poet had used “Yellow Gold Terrace,” it would have equally fit the prosodic scheme of the second line; but here the suppression calls attention to what is being suppressed: a metaphoric “gold” that matches the king’s gold in color and in agricultural value. These worthy men—the poet and his friend—were indeed collecting the “yellow gold,” although Mao Zedong was not quite like the King of Yan. The last couplet contains a reference to the Eastern Han minister Chen Fan (d. 168), who did not like cleaning up his room. When his guests asked why, he answered: “A real man should clean up the world—why just bother with a room” (Fan 1965: 2159). The phrase “such as us” or “people like us” (*wuca*) recalls the proud self-designation of the closed circle of premodern scholar-officials, and yet the jarring circumstances—cleaning up not one’s room but a public toilet stall, traditionally unthinkable for the cultural elite—induce tongue-in-cheek irony.

Another poem records the experience of chasing a runaway horse:

馬逸 Horse Running Away

脫韁羸馬也難追	Even a nag is hard to catch, once it gets free of the reins;
賽跑渾如兔與龜	Our race was like the one of hare and tortoise.
無誇無嘉無話喊	There was no “whoa!,” no “giddyup!” in fact I had nothing to shout to it at all;
越追越遠越心灰	The more I chased, the further it ran, the more I was in despair.
蒼茫暮色迷奔影	In the gray light of dusk I lost its galloping shadow;
斑白老軍嘆逝驄	An old soldier, hair streaked with white, sighed for steed gone away.
今夕塞翁真失馬	This evening the old man on the frontier has truly lost his horse—
倘非馬會自行歸	unless it picks up a pal and comes home of its own accord. (2005: 16)

The race of the tortoise and the hare is, of course, from Aesop's fables; what I have translated as “whoa” and “giddyup” are “e” and “jia”—characters borrowed for the sounds made by carriage drivers to make the horses stop or pick up speed. The last couplet refers to the *Huainanzi* story about an old man living on the frontier who has lost his horse (Liu 1981: 598–599). The old man was first upset but then overjoyed when the horse returned with other horses. Hence the saying: “Old man on the frontier lost his horse—how do you know it is not a blessing in disguise?” This delightful mixture of modern colloquialism, traditional cultural reference, and Western literary echo is characteristic of Nie Gannu's old-style poems. The crucial line of the poem is the sixth: “An old soldier, hair streaked with white, sighed for steed gone away.” Xiang Yu (232–202 BC), the powerful opponent of Liu Bang (256–195 BC), the founding emperor of the Han dynasty, had a fine steed. On the eve of his final defeat by Liu Bang, Xiang Yu reportedly composed an air, which begins as follows:

力拔山兮氣蓋世	My strength uprooted mountains,
	my spirit topped the world;
時不利兮騅不逝	but the times are against me,
	and yet my steed would not go away.
	(Sima 1959: 333)

The great general's tragic air is deflated in the sigh of the modern poet, a mere "old soldier" with white hair, over the fact that the steed *does* get away and that he is unable to bring it back. But any self-pity is offset by the earlier reference to the fable of the tortoise and the hare (the former, though slow, wins the race) and the concluding allusion to the old man on the frontier, who acquires not one but several horses.

Sometimes Nie Gannu rises to lyrical eloquence, as in "Wheat Stacks" (Maiduo):

麥垛千堆又萬堆	One thousand, ten thousand stacks of wheat—
長城迤裡复迂回	a Great Wall that spreads and stretches, winds and coils.
散兵线上黄金满	All along a line of troops, yellow bullion abound;
金字塔边赤日辉	a red sun glows by the golden pyramids.
天下人民无冻馁	If all the people of the world could have no cold and hunger,
吾侪手足任胼胝	what matter if such as us have callused hands and feet?
明朝不雨当酣战	No rain will fall tomorrow—perfect for battle in the fields:
新到最新脱粒机	we have newly got the newest model of threshing machine. (2005: 30–31)

Portraying man's war with nature for food and survival, this is the quintessential socialist song. It celebrates manual labor even as a sense of bleakness prevails in the grim military images of war and death—the Great Wall of wheat warding off the attack of hunger, troops on the battlefield, the pyramids commemorating the deceased, and the cold, hard piece of modern machinery—all in the glaring light of a blazing red sun. Again Nie Gannu uses the phrase "such as us" (*wuchai*, a variation of *wucaao*)



to refer to himself and his fellow-intellectuals sent down to do physical labor in the countryside; the echo of the traditional scholar-elite class, juxtaposed with callused hands and feet in a socialist pastoral song, takes on an unmistakable irony.

One salient feature of Nie Gannu's old-style poetry is his ingenious linguistic maneuvers, which do not lend themselves easily to translation. For instance, "Working the Millstones" (Tuimo), another poem about life in exile:

百事輸人我老牛 惟餘轉磨稍風流	Always second to everyone else—me the old ox; Only in working the millstones have I some panache left.
春雷隱隱全中國 玉雪霏霏一小樓	Spring thunder resounds over the entire country; Snow, as white as jade, falls thick and hard in this one tiny house.
把壞心思磨粉碎 到新天地作環游	Grind and crush bad notions into very fine powder; I shall make my merry-go-round in a brand-new universe.
連朝齊步三千里 不在雷池更外頭	From one morning to the next I plod my three thousand miles; And yet not even one step ever goes beyond the Thunder Pool. (2005: 14–15)

This is an immensely rich and ironic poem. An old ox is slow in moving, and yet the poet declares he still has "some panache left" in working the millstones, *zhuanmo*, which in northern Chinese dialect also means "going round and round and not knowing what to do." "Snow as white as jade" refers to ground flour. Figuratively, the poet is saying that he alone is being punished (weathering the cold snow) while the entire country is enjoying springtime revival. The poet then declares he is determined to grind all his "bad notions" into fine powder: instead of using the phrase *huai sixiang*, "bad thoughts," which is serious and straight, he chooses *huai xinsi*, "wicked ideas or notions," which is much more colloquial and even has a mischievous air. This choice is likely conditioned by the metrical rule (the fourth position in this line demands a word of level tone, which would

not have been fulfilled by *xiang*, a word of deflected tone), but the effect is an unexpectedly lively and naughty line. The last couplet reworks a set phrase, “do not go beyond the Thunder Pool by one step”; the phrase comes from a letter written in the Eastern Jin (317–420), a dynasty famous for its panache (*fengliu*), and means “not going beyond the prescribed limit” (Fang 1974: 1918). The irony of the poem lies in the poet’s determination to be integrated into the “brand-new universe” of the socialist regime, and yet all he can do is to go round and round in a circle, a merry-go-round instead of a “Great Leap Forward.” He observes the rule of not going beyond the Thunder Pool, so there is no transgression; but there is no progress either. The poet is, after all, a *laoniú*, an old ox, a compound that can also be taken as an adjective meaning “stubborn” or “arrogant.”

This poem best illustrates the charm of the witty, ironic, darkly humorous “Gannu Style.” The irony and humor come in no small part from the use of old poetic forms, as the poet deftly negotiates between the discourse of a traditional cultural elite and life in the “brave new world” of socialism. Nie Gannu was, however, a member of the last generation of the old Chinese social and cultural elite. He died in 1986; soon afterward, China entered a new era of market economy and commercialization.

The past two decades have been a crucial stage for the development of both new-style and old-style poetry. New-style poetry from the 1990s has turned away from the Misty Poetry of the 1980s, which was deeply indebted to Euro-American Modernist poetry, to a call to portray events in daily life and to return to Chinese cultural tradition. Old-style poetry, which had tended to be more down-to-earth than new-style poetry in its close connection with current social events and incidents of daily life, is pulled in two directions: one direction is represented by conservative poets who insist on using traditional poetic language and militantly oppose any new terminology; the other is represented by the so-called New Old Style Movement.<sup>14</sup> The most important and certainly most innovative member of this movement is an Internet poet known as Lizilizilizi, to whom we return

<sup>14</sup> By “down-to-earth” I refer to certain poetic topics that are commonplace in old-style poetry but rarely make an appearance and indeed would seem absurd in new-style poetry. For instance, a modern old-style poem is entitled “On the Evening of August 15, 1980, My Son, Guang, Called Me Long-Distance and Asked for a Tape Recorder under the Pretext of Studying English; I Wrote This Poem to Admonish Him.” *Dangdai shici* 4 (1984): 42.

in the last part of the paper.

It should be pointed out that Nie Gannu's poetry is impossible to enjoy in English translation without copious notes. This is not because Nie Gannu was an erudite poet employing many dense allusions; in fact, an average educated Chinese reader would have no problem "getting" the poems cited here without the help of a glossary. What remains untranslatable is his exuberant play with language, which is especially evident in his well-crafted parallel couplets, an important poetic device in old-style poetry that requires every word/phrase to form a perfect parallel with the word/phrase in the corresponding position in the pairing line. In a well-known parallel couplet such as the following:

口中白字捎三二	From her mouth she let slip two or three words mispronounced;
頭上黃毛辮一雙	on her head she wears her yellowish hair in a pair of braids. (2005: 33)

"mispronounced words," literally "white characters," forms a perfect parallel with "yellowish hair."

Or in a poem on wild duck eggs:

明日壺觴端午酒	Tomorrow, with a jug of wine fit for Duanwu Festival;
此時包裹小丁衣	for now they are nicely wrapped up in Little Ding's jacket. (2005: 32)

"Duanwu," the name of the festival, forms a parallel with the name "Little Ding": *wu* and *ding* are both terms of the Heavenly Stems and Early Branches used to designate dates in the Chinese lunar calendar.

This famous couplet catches the gist of Chinese intellectuals' painful experience in various political movements of socialist China:

文章信口雌黃易	It is easy to wag one's tongue freely in one's writings,
思想錐心坦白難	but it is hard to come clean about one's thoughts. (2005: 144)

The rather bland couplet that emerges in the translation obscures the pleasure of the original text, which lies in the ingenious juxtaposition of *cihuang*, orpiment used in ancient times to erase writing, and *tanbai*, “come clean” or “make a full confession,” with *huang* (yellow) and *bai* (white) forming a contrast.

In his paper on Internet poetry, Michel Hockx keenly observes that compared to a U.S. poetry website, “on the PRC [poetry] website the issue of skill and discussion about the right word in the right place are much less prominent, although they do appear in the forum dedicated to those in the classical style” (2005: 686). Hockx explains this phenomenon by pointing out that old-style poetry has “very strict prosodic rules.” Strict prosodic rules are certainly pertinent to the writing of regulated poetry (*lüshi*); and yet, many of the discussions of old-style poetry do not focus on prosodic rules per se. Perhaps one may attribute the phenomenon of paying close attention to words and lines to the long-standing tradition in Chinese poetics of “crafting words” (*lianzi*) and “crafting couplets” (*lianju*).

Finely chosen words and phrases can get lost in translation, but images couched in similes and metaphors are more easily translatable, just as visual art possesses an aura of immediacy and transparency for its audience. In the context of globalization, when translation into a hegemonic language such as English means international recognition, old-style poetry increasingly becomes a local phenomenon enjoyed by a large native audience but unable to go beyond national borders. It is against this background that the Internet poet Lizi emerges, whose innovative poetry epitomizes these existing problems and opens up new possibilities.

### The Case of Lizi

Lizi’s real name is Zeng Shaoli. A native of Hunan, he currently lives in Beijing. With a college degree in engineering, he has worked as engineer, teacher, and editor of a science journal. He began writing old-style poetry in 1999. Lizi is a true Internet poet: he not only composes his poems on

the Web but also discusses them with readers online, and his revisions are often based on readers' feedback and suggestions. In this way, the Chinese Web has re-created the traditional poetry community in which authors, readers, and critics are often one and the same.<sup>15</sup> Many of Lizi's poems appear in multiple versions and show a clear track of revision. By now he has not only cultivated an avid following on the Chinese Web, which remains a burgeoning space for literature, but has also begun to make a name in academic circles.<sup>16</sup>

Lizi writes both *shi* poems and *ci* lyrics, and excels in the latter. Perhaps more than any other contemporary Chinese poet, he effectively conveys the local flavor of modern-day Beijing, a sprawling metropolis struggling with its past and present, covered with freeways, high-rise buildings, construction sites, immigrant workers' temporary huts, and countless fortune seekers, like Lizi himself, coming from the provinces to make it in the city. A *ci* lyric to the tune title "Commanding Fire" (He huo ling) reads:

日落長街尾	Sun sets at the tail-end of a long boulevard,
燕山動紫嵐	Mount Yan shimmers in a purple haze.
繁華氣色晚來羶	The busy colors of hustle and bustle turn into smell of mutton at evening.
旋轉玻璃門上	On the revolving glass doors
光影逐衣冠	light and shadow chase cap and gown.
買斷人前醉	I've bought up all the public drunkenness,
飄零海上船	a lone boat is tossed on the sea.
高樓似魅似蹣跚	Skyscrapers are like goblins, shuffling along with unsteady steps.
一陣風來	A gust of wind rises,
一陣夜傷寒	the night suffers from typhoid fever,
一陣星流雲散	stars flow past, clouds are scattered,
燈火滿長安	lights filling up the city of Chang'an.

It is difficult to explain why this little poem is touching. It is simple enough: the poet goes for a drink; he gets drunk; after coming out of the bar, the skyscrapers become wobbly. Perhaps it is the purple haze of Mount Yan

<sup>15</sup> In a printed edition of an Internet poetry anthology, which includes both new-style and old-style poetry, one of the editors, Xiangpi, relates how he no longer felt lonely after he discovered many fellow lovers of old-style poetry on the Internet (Chen/Xiangpi 2002: 426). His experience is representative of the numerous lovers and practitioners of old-style poetry.

<sup>16</sup> I first encountered Lizi's poems in an article in *Zhongguo shige yanjiu tongxun*, published by the Center of Chinese Poetry Studies at Capital Normal University (Tan 2003). The poems cited in this essay appear on the following two websites: <http://www.poetry-cn.com> and <http://w0.5ilog.com/cgi-bin/sys/link/wenji.aspx/lizilizi.htm>.

in the distance and the smell of the Mongolian hot pot permeating the twilight streets that so powerfully evoke the atmosphere of Beijing; perhaps it is the juxtaposition of the revolving glass door and the skyscrapers with such old terms as “cap and gown” (*yiguan*) and “the city of Chang’an.” Capital of the Han and Tang dynasties, Chang’an in all its ancient glory haunts the modern metropolis like a ghost who refuses to go away. For a brief moment, during the hazy twilight, Beijing seems to disappear into Chang’an, and what the drunken poet sees around him—the towering skyscrapers of the city of Beijing, the unmistakable signs of modern life—fades into a ghostly presence and becomes unreal.

Many of Lizi’s poems intentionally blur the boundary between old-style and new-style poetry. He sometimes incorporates allusions to new-style poetry by contemporary poets.<sup>17</sup> For instance, the Misty Poet Gu Cheng (1956–1993) wrote a famous poem entitled “A Generation” (*Yidairen*):

<sup>17</sup> For this point, also see Tan Zuowen’s detailed analysis (Tan 2003).

黑夜給了我黑色的眼      The dark night gave me dark eyes,  
我卻用它尋找光明      But I use them to seek light. (Gu 1998: 26)

The poem is transformed into a line of Lizi’s *ci* lyric to the tune title “Picking Mulberries” (*Caisangzi*):

夜色收容黑眼      the color of night gives shelter to these dark eyes.

Haizi, who was born the same year as Lizi and who committed suicide in 1989, seems to be Lizi’s favorite poet. The following couplet makes reference to the title of one of Haizi’s best-known poems, “Asian Bronze” (*Yazhou tong*):

革命無關菠菜鐵      To change a life has nothing to do with spinach iron;  
埋人只合亞洲銅      To bury a person: only Asian bronze is fit for it.

What I have rendered as “to change a life” is *geming*, which as a compound simply means “revolution.” Placing *geming* opposite *mairen* (to bury

a person) in the following line, however, forces the reader to read the two lines as a parallel couplet; in other words, the reader must take the compound apart and read it as a verb-object construction—*ge ming*—in parallel with the verb-object construction *mai ren*. In such a reading, *ge ming* takes on the literal meaning of “changing/transforming a life.” Spinach, which contains rich iron, is almost *the* vegetable hated passionately by children across cultures perhaps exactly because parents so often exhort them to eat it for its nutritional value. Lizi seems to be saying that *geming* in the sense of “revolution” performs the very opposite function of the life-nourishing vegetable, because so many people have died in the name of “revolution.” The second line of the parallel couplet would hardly be comprehensible to a reader not familiar with Haizi’s poem, the first stanza of which reads:

亞洲銅，亞洲銅  
祖父死在這裏，父親死在這裏，我也會死在這裏  
你是唯一的一塊埋人的地方

Asian bronze, Asian bronze  
Grandfather died here; father died here; I, too, will die here.  
You are the only place to bury a person.

Compared with Haizi’s poem, Lizi’s couplet is ironic and darkly comic, which is one of the hallmarks of Lizi’s style.

Some of Lizi’s poems are effectively “new-style poems written in old forms,” such as the *ci* lyric to the tune title “Music of Clarity and Peace” (Qingping yue):

白牆之屋	A room with white walls.
陌路遙聲哭	Strangers on street, sobbing from afar.
鬼影三千能覆國	Ghostly shadows, three thousand, can overturn a state;
生死那般孤獨	life and death: what lonely affairs.
鐵中顫響寒風	Cold wind quivers and sings in the iron;

燈如朽夜蛆蟲  
我把眼簾垂下  
封存一架時鐘

a lamp is like a maggot in the decaying night.  
I lower the curtains of eyelids  
to seal up, and preserve, a clock.

The lyric reads like a new-style poem because of the disconnectedness of images and the lack of a clearly discernible narrative sequence. To compare a lamp to “a maggot in the decaying [corpse of the] night” is a novel move that can find no easy counterpart in classical *ci* poetry, which tends to conjure up a romantic atmosphere instead of one of “the flower of evil.” In the last two lines, closing his eyes is likened to drawing curtains over the windows of a room (one thinks of the room with “white walls” mentioned in the opening of the poem)—a metaphor that is not very original in itself, but the implicit comparison of his aging body to a ticking clock is, and echoes the image of the decaying corpse of the night in the previous lines.

Another good example of “new-style poems written in old forms” is the second stanza of the lyric to the tune title “Remembering the Maid of Qin” (Yi Qin’e):

滿天星斗搖頭丸  
鬼魂搬進新房間  
新房間  
花兒疼痛  
日子圍觀

Stars fill the sky: Head-shaking Pills—Ecstasy.  
A ghost has just moved into a new room.  
New room—  
flowers in pain,  
the days are a bunch of onlookers.

<sup>18</sup> Seeing “flowers in pain,” a reader familiar with the Chinese poetic tradition may recall the Tang poet Du Fu’s (712–770) famous line, “Moved by the times, flowers splash with tears” (*Ganshi hua jianlei*), but in this line the agent is human—it is the poet’s tears that splash on the flowers. Even if we take the tears to be wept by flowers in sympathy with the poet’s misery, the tears can be logically explained away as dewdrops.

Because classical Chinese poetry is an empirically grounded poetry, lines such as “flowers in pain” and “the days are a bunch of onlookers” would have been impossible.<sup>18</sup>

A seven-syllable-line quatrain entitled “Subway” (Ditie) makes an allusion to Ezra Pound’s (1885–1972) famous poem “In a Station of the Metro”: “The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough.”



笑吾家國驀升華	I laugh at the sudden sublimation of my home and nation:
百丈紅塵一落差	a hundred yards of the red dust, a drop in the elevation.
大黑茫茫奔不脫	It's just this huge, expansive darkness one cannot outrun;
鐵枝幸似老梅花	fortunately, there are iron branches that look like aging plum blossoms.

Lizi appends a note to the last line explaining the allusion (again a typical practice in Chinese poetic tradition), although it is hardly necessary in this case.

Tiantai, a loyal fan and austere critic of Lizi's poetry on the Internet, comments on this poem: "the way in which words are put together is bizarre, and yet the conceptual scene is profound. . . . I feel Lizi has arrived at a turning point in his writing." Lizi's answer is intriguing: "If I continue to write like this, it would become new-style poetry. So my question is: if so, why not simply write in new style? I don't understand this myself."<sup>19</sup>

The answer, I think, is that the very charm of Lizi's poetry lies in the conjunction of old and new; in other words, the juxtaposition of old poetic form and traditional poetic language with the modern vocabulary and the modern context. The negotiation creates a tension, an irony, that neither purely traditional style nor purely new style possesses. Take, for example, the following lyric to the tune title "The Beautiful Lady Yu" (Yu meiren):

屏前寫得相思巧	Facing the screen, I wrote clever words about love longing;
轉覺刪除好	on second thought, it's better to delete them all.
今生只個夢中人	In this lifetime, no more than a person of my dreams:
惆悵紅云如袂草如裙	feeling down over red clouds like her sleeves, grass like her skirt.
樓台市火高明滅	Lights of high buildings and marketplaces go on and off;
夜遠隨天絕綠	night recedes into distance, vanishing with the sky.

<sup>19</sup> See URL: <http://w0.5ilog.com/cgi-bin/sys/link/home.aspx?logname=lizilizi>.

數聲雁唳過燕山 Cries of wild geese pass over the Yan Mountain:  
為你傳真一字報秋寒 to fax you one word to report this autumn chill.

“Screen” (*ping*), whose function is to partition space, to enclose, and to conceal, is a hackneyed image in classical poetry, but here, of course, it refers to the computer screen. The poet stays up all night composing an e-mail message to his beloved only to delete it all. Human writing is displaced into nature’s writing in the sky: “Cries of wild geese pass over the Yan Mountain / to fax you one word to report this autumn chill.” *Yizi* is a clever word play: it means “a single character” (“one word”) and “the character for one,” *yi*. The wild goose is the traditional letter-bearer; but instead of bearing a letter, which the poet finds impossible to write, the birds form a line that represents the single word “one.” Wild geese flying south indicate autumn—all the poet asks them to report to the beloved in the warm south is “autumn chill,” both a state of the weather and a state of emotion. The compound *chuanzhen* means “fax,” but literally means “conveying the truth.” Truth, or authenticity of feeling, consists in the suppression and substitution, just as the second stanza of the Southern Song poet Xin Qiji’s (1140–1207) famous *ci* lyric to the tune title “Ugly Slave” (Chou nu’er) tells us:

而今識盡愁滋味 But now I know the taste of sorrow all too well,  
欲說還休 I am going to speak of it, then stop,  
欲說還休 I am going to speak of it, then stop,  
卻道天涼好個秋 And say instead, “Cool weather—what a nice  
autumn.” (Tang 1965: 1920)

Lizi’s lines about wild geese as messengers, autumn chill, blocked desire and blocked communication, and the power and failure of language belong to a long tradition of *shi* and *ci* poetry that even a modern Chinese reader would find hard to miss.

The hybrid nature of Lizi’s poems is attested to in the following lyric to the tune title “Washing Creek Sand” (Huanxisha):

買斷清歌濁酒杯	Buying all the clear songs and many glasses of cloudy beer,
一棹舊事一徘徊	I lingered every time I recalled something of old;
雨餘燈火滿城隈	after rain, all lights lit up at city's edge.
忽而手機來短信	Suddenly a text message came through:
有人同醉在天涯	someone was drunk like me at the world's edge—
只言相識未言誰	It just said "I know you," but didn't say who.

This poem is filled with verbal echoes of the Northern Song poet Yan Shu's (991–1055) lyric to the same tune title:

一曲新詞酒一杯	One new song lyric, one cup of ale;
去年天氣舊亭臺	Last year's weather, former pavilion and terrace.
夕陽西下幾時回	Evening sun sinks to the west: when shall it come back?
無可奈何花落去	What could you do about flowers falling?
似曾相識燕歸來	Swallows return—I seem to know them from before.
小園香徑獨徘徊	In the little garden, on the fragrant path, I linger alone. (Tang 1965: 89)

The similarities and differences of the two poems are striking. The earlier poet, lingering in the garden and facing the same scenery and the same weather of the previous year, is touched by the bland repetition of nature and the irrevocable passing of human life—*his* life. In an attempt to find something distinct and individual in the anonymous world of nature, he looks to the swallows and fancies he recognizes them (although this is not quite possible because swallows all look alike). In the modern poem, the song and the beer are still there (though the beer has turned cloudy), time is again twilight, and the poet is also lingering: he is contemplating “something of old,” the personal past that is not repeatable. The vague recognition of the swallows is echoed in the mysterious text message: someone who claims to know him is likewise drunk “at the world’s edge”—but he does not know who that person is. Communication succeeds and

yet fails again: the world remains anonymous around him.

Some of Lizi's *ci* poems begin with conventional lines commonly seen in classical poetry but then move abruptly in a different direction, such as the first stanza of another lyric to the tune title "Washing Creek Sands:"

誤入人間走半程	By mistake I entered the human realm; now halfway through;
銀蟾嚙我齒痕青	silver toad nibbles at me, Tooth mark still blue;
皮囊多氣易飄零	this skin-bag is full of air, easily blown off in the breeze.

The opening line is ordinary enough, and the "silver toad" of the second line is a trite poetic expression for the moon (so called because of a toad who by legend lives there), but to be "nibbled at" by the "silver toad is startling. The blue tooth mark evokes the image of a new moon. The poet is speaking of the waxing and waning of the moon and of the process of aging. "Skin-bag," here referring to the human body, is again a traditional phrase, Buddhist in origin; the poet combines it with the image of a balloon blown about by the wind, and we know all too well what is going to happen if the "silver toad" keeps nibbling at the "skin-bag" full of air.

From all these examples, we must conclude that Lizi is writing an altogether new kind of poetry: an old-style poetry that belongs to the twenty-first century. Its very power comes from the negotiation of traditional poetic form and decidedly modern sentiments, vocabulary, and imagery. Just like modern China itself, it is a hybrid entity. Lizi's poetry powerfully demonstrates to us that we cannot disassociate modern Chinese old-style and new-style poetry in our critical discourse. They are the two sides of one coin: their existence is mutually dependent and mutually contingent. They both are modern, and their uneasy relation is the essential story of modern Chinese poetry. Their explicit interaction in recent years is the natural consequence of their strange intertwining growth; the true dynamic force of modern Chinese poetry, however, lies precisely in the

clash and traffic between the two forms.

### Coda

Lizi's poetry nicely illustrates the issue of local and global literature. Lizi is a provincial writer who lives in Beijing. Even though he is always at "city's edge," his poetry travels on the Internet, a space bringing together authors and readers across vast regions—even across the Pacific Ocean and to the United States. And yet, his kind of poetry will always lose in translation, because it affords too much "pleasure of the text"—echoes of classical and modern literature, cultural lore, contemporary colloquialism and slang, exuberant word play, or well-crafted parallel couplets. International readers expect a certain amount of annotation when reading classical Chinese poetry, because it is not only from another cultural system but also from another age; but modern poetry is supposed to be more "transparent": its only challenge should be to the reader's imagination. Old-style poets do not aspire to international fame; they often do not consider themselves "poets" (Chen/Xiangpi 2002: 426), and they are writing a poetry, so to speak, "for internal consumption" (Owen 2003: 546). Only in recent years, as nationalistic sentiments rise, do they begin to enjoy a higher profile in the national arena—though regrettably not always for the right reasons. Lizi or Nie Gannu's poetry exists on "the world's edge," even as it is loved by numerous native Chinese readers. We think of Huang Zunxian, the poet who is trapped on the deck of his boat crossing the Pacific Ocean, alone, in transit; he is surrounded by gulls—which he narcissistically assumes are chasing him—that do not speak Chinese, *huayan*. The "flower language" is transformed into "fruit language" in a strangely beautiful line in one of Lizi's *ci* lyrics about the mountain village where he grew up:

隱約一坡青果講方言     Over the slope of a hill, green fruit  
speak a muffled dialect.

In the case of Huang Zunxian, Nie Gannu, and Lizi, the muffled dialect requires some considerable effort to learn and understand, but the result seems to be worth it.

As we continue to write and rewrite literary history, perhaps an alternative history of modern Chinese poetry should not only reconsider the past, that is, the twentieth century, in which old style and new style must be treated together; but should also look to the present and, more important, to the future. What we see is a scene of hybrid vigor: new-style poetry keeps on evolving, achieves remarkable aesthetic success, and is being represented by poets who have made bold attempts and gone far beyond their predecessors; at the other end of the spectrum, in the hands of a poet such as Lizi, old-style poetry is finally escaping from being a dead form that keeps recycling the age-old vocabulary used by Tang and Song masters. Or, to put it another way, the form of old-style poetry is preserved, but is used in such an original way that it is neither “old” nor “new” anymore. The negotiation of “old” and “new” is in many ways also what new-style poetry itself is practicing. Just as Lizi began a “New Old Style,” new-style poets, by paying close attention to the “everydayness” and “grassrootsism” (*caogen zhuyi*) of poetry and adopting the practice of writing to the same topic and in response to one another in a community, may very well have launched an “Old New Style” as well. The coexistence of new and old, traditional and modern, is not unique to Chinese literature,<sup>20</sup> but in China the “old” has been proclaimed “dead” so vehemently that it may be a little embarrassing for critics to see it still alive and kicking. It is perhaps only fitting that practice remains one step ahead of theory; but today, the task for scholars of premodern and modern literature is to try to catch up with what the poets are doing, talk to each other, and develop an alternative critical discourse and an alternative way of thinking about Chinese literary history.

<sup>20</sup> One thinks of Japanese *haiku* and *waka*, and of the Urdu *ghazal* (Kiyama 2003: 260; Owen 2003: 543).

## Glossary

"Caisangzi"	采桑子
Cao Pi	曹丕
caogen zhuyi	草根主義
Chen Fan	陳蕃
Cheng Qianfan	程千帆
"Chou nu'er"	醜奴兒
"Ditie"	地鐵
Du Fu	杜甫
e	譌
Gannu ti	紺弩體
"Gan shi"	感事
ganshi hua jianlei	感時花濺淚
"Gu bieli"	古別離
Gu Cheng	顧城
Haixing zagan	海行雜感
Haizi	海子
"He huo ling"	喝火令
hu	胡
Hu Feng	胡風
Hu Shi	胡適
huai sixiang	壞思想
huai xinsi	壞心思
"Huanxisha"	浣溪沙
Huangjin tai	黃金臺
"Ji shi"	紀事
"Jiti xieshi"	集體寫詩
jia	嘉
jia guo	家國
jia shijie	家世界
"Jin bieli"	今別離
jushu	拘束
Li Shaojun	李少君
Lizililizi	李子梨子栗子
lianju	煉句
lianzi	煉字
Lin Shu	林書
Liu Bang	劉邦
"Liushui"	流水
lushi	律詩
"Maiduo"	麥垛
"Mengyou Tianmu yin liubie"	夢遊天姥吟留別

Peng Yanjiao	彭燕郊
"Qingce tong Meizi"	清廁同枚子
"Qingping yue"	清平樂
"Qihu xing"	秋胡行
Sancao	三草
Shi Zhecun	施蛰存
Shu Wu	舒蕪
"Shuo 'Gannu ti'"	說紺弩體
Song Ming zhu ru	宋明諸儒
Tiantai	天臺
"Tuimo"	推磨
wen	文
xiang	想
Xiang Yu	項羽
"Xiaonü"	小女
xin jiuti	新舊體
Xin Qiji	辛棄疾
"Xinglu nan"	行路難
Xu Chengbei	徐城北
xu lun	虛論
"Yazhou tong"	亞洲銅
Yan Shu	晏殊
Yan Zhaowang	燕昭王
"Yidairen"	一代人
"Yi Qin'e"	憶秦娥
"Yonghuai"	詠懷
"Yu meiren"	虞美人
Zeng Shaoli	曾少立
zhi	質
Zhongguo shige yanjiu tongxun	中國詩歌研究通訊
zhuanmo	轉磨
zongtong wei	總統位

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