

Xiaofei TIAN

“Each Has Its Moment”: Nie Gannu and Modern Chinese Poetry

Abstract Nie Gannu 聶紺弩 (1903–86), essayist and poet, had begun his literary career as an avid advocate of the New Culture and New Literature Movement of the early twentieth century; but later in life, he became well-known for his classical-style poetry. This paper examines the paradox of old and new in Nie Gannu’s writings by juxtaposing classical-style with new-style poetry for a comparative analysis. In contrast to new-style poetry, classical-style poetry with its prosodic requirements and formal conventions has a strong technical aspect. Nie Gannu’s preference for the regulated verse in the seven-syllable line is a deliberate embrace of this technical aspect of classical-style poetry: On the one hand, the absorption in poetic skills and craftsmanship was therapeutic for him in the traumatic years of the socialist revolution; on the other, the restraint of the form and the use of parallel couplet afforded him linguistic resources unavailable in the new-style poetry, so that he was able to express emotional complexity, ambivalence, and an irony that is, in his own words, “both there and not quite there.” Nie Gannu’s case demonstrates the importance of understanding the new and old verse forms in each other’s context. Rather than considering the mapping of modern Chinese poetry as following a linear line of progression from classical-style to new-style, this paper proposes a spatial model of configuring the relationship of the two major verse forms in modern times, as mutually defining and constricting.

Keywords Nie Gannu, classical-style poetry, new-style poetry, modern Chinese poetry

Xiaofei TIAN (✉)

Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA

E-mail: stian@fas.harvard.edu

In the past I wrote new-style poetry;
 now I write classical-style;
 Twice sitting on the back of a donkey,
 I have received your appreciation.¹
 You ask: Is new-style better, or classical-
 style?
 I chuckle—each has its moment . . .

昔作新詩今舊詩
 兩回驢背受君知
 問新詩好舊詩好
 笑此一時彼一時

Nie Gannu, “To Zhong Jingwen”
 ——聶紺弩,《贈鍾敬文》²

Nie Gannu 聶紺弩 (1903–86), essayist and poet, had begun his literary career by coming under the influence of the New Culture Movement, and was an avid admirer and follower of the iconoclastic Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936), “father of Modern Chinese Literature.” Later in life, he nevertheless became well-known for his classical-style poetry—the very kind of literary form denounced by the New Culture Movement and disapproved by his younger self.³ This paper examines the paradox of old and new in Nie’s writings by

¹ Li Yuzhong 李育中 (1911–2013) gave a humorous anecdote about Nie Gannu and Zhong Jingwen 鍾敬文 (1903–2002) to explain this line, in an effort to offer circumstances (*benshi* 本事) for poetry interpretation. See Li Yuzhong, “Guaike qishi Nie Gannu,” 558–59. I do not wish to dispute the veracity of the anecdote, nor is it possible to know whether, had the story been true, Nie had indeed thought of it when he was writing this line many years later. Yet, “sitting on the back of the donkey” is an age-old, hackneyed reference to being a poet and acting poetically, and here Nie may be simply saying that he acted as a poet twice, once writing new-style poetry and once writing classical-style poetry, and each time Zhong appreciated his poetry.

² Nie Gannu, *Nie Gannu shi quanbian (zengbu ben)* (hereafter *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*), 288.

³ In this essay I choose to use the term “classical-style poetry” rather than “classicist poetry” to indicate *jiuti shi* 舊體詩 because Nie Gannu is an ambiguous case among the modern *jiuti shi* writers: Unlike many *jiuti shi* writers who consciously resisted the literary and political radicalism in the twentieth century, Nie embraced the May Fourth generation’s radicalism, and his choice of the classical poetic form was, as will be demonstrated in this essay, circumstantial rather than ideological.

placing classical-style and new-style poetry for a comparative analysis. It begins with a “translation” of a new-style poem into a classical-style poem by Nie Gannu, and proceeds to a discussion of Nie’s profound ambivalence toward classical-style poetry and of the characteristics of the two major verse forms as brought into focus by each other. Rather than considering the mapping of modern Chinese poetry as following a linear line of progression from classical-style to new-style, this paper proposes a spatial model of configuring the relationship of the two major verse forms in modern times, as mutually defining and constricting.

Translating a New-Style Poem into Classical-Style

In Nie’s *Beihuang Cao* 北荒草 (Draft of Northern Wilderness), there is a quatrain entitled “A Timorous Question” 怯問:⁴

怯問檢尺小姑娘
我是何材幾立方
努嘴崖邊多節樹
彎彎曲曲兩人長

Timorously I ask the young girl who scales logs:
What kind of timber am I? How many cubic meters?
Pursing her lips, she signals to a knotted tree
growing by the cliff:
Warped, twisted, about the height of two men.

In the logging industry, a log-scaler measures the cut trees and determines its volume and quality for use in manufacturing. Referring to a talented man (*cai* 才) as a timber (also *cai* 材) has had a long history in the Chinese literary tradition. In this poem, the poet with some trepidation tries to find out what kind of “timber” he is, only to be told that he is a knotted tree: Though tall, it is warped and knotted, thus having no use and value—he is, in logging terminology, a “cull lumber.” In the preface to his poetic collection, *Sanyisheng shi* 散宜生詩, published in 1982, Nie Gannu indeed describes himself as the worthless tree in *Zhuangzi*: Exactly because it is useless as timber, the tree is not cut down by lumberjacks and thus gets to live out its

⁴ *Beihuang cao* was printed by Hong Kong’s Yecao Press as part of *Three Drafts* (*Sancao* 三草) in 1981; then, in 1982 *Three Drafts* was printed as *Sanyisheng shi* by Renmin wenxue chubanshe, but some of the poems in the original *Three Drafts* are not included in *Sanyisheng shi*. For this quatrain, see *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 33.

natural lifespan.⁵ It is a particularly nice touch that the log-scaler is a young girl: In the premodern tradition, where the metaphor of talent/timber originated, her gender and age would have rendered her completely powerless as opposed to the male cultural elite whom she now measures and declares to be worthless. It is a classical-style poem with an age-old metaphor, but the configuration of social relations in the poem is completely new.

Beihuang, “Northern Wilderness,” refers to the Great Northern Wilderness 北大荒, the cold, harsh northeastern frontier land in Heilongjiang province. In the 1950s, many Rightists had been exiled there to do hard labor. Nie Gannu was condemned as a Rightist in 1957, but unlike many other Rightists who were sent to Beidahuang, he had reportedly volunteered to go, and spent three years there.⁶ Life on the Beidahuang farm became the material of his poems in *Beihuang Draft*.

Contrary to Nie’s statement to his friend, “Life is the source of creative writing,” the quatrain cited above is not based on Nie’s personal experience. Many Rightists were forced to become lumberjacks in Beidahuang, and quite a few lost their lives cutting trees.⁷ Nie, who was a fragile 55-year-old at the time, was spared from this dangerous task. His quatrain was “translated” from a new-style vernacular poem composed by a younger writer.

In 1958, the year after he came to Beidahuang, Nie Gannu was made an editor at *Beidahuang Literature and Art* (*Beidahuang wenyi* 北大荒文藝), and received a manuscript submission entitled “The Log-Scaler” 檢尺 from an author named Ma Li 馬力. Nie Gannu was delighted that he had discovered “a good work” and had it published in the 12th issue of the magazine.⁸

⁵ Nie Gannu, “Zixu,” in *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 11.

⁶ According to his fellow exile Dang Peijia’s 黨沛家 (b. 1937) remembrance, Nie had “himself asked to follow the others to come here and engage in physical labor” 自己要求隨大家來此勞動。When Dang pressed Nie for a reason, Nie reportedly said, “Life is the source of creative writings. I want to write about you all and experience life here; if I don’t come here myself, how do I write? Besides, since I am made a Rightist, if I don’t experience the life of a Rightist, how do I deserve my name” 生活是創作的源泉，我想寫寫諸位，看看這裡的生活，要是不來可怎麼寫？再說我既然當了右派，要是不體驗一下右派生活，豈不徒有其名！Dang Peijia, “Yi Nie Gannu tongzhi zai Beidahuang,” 66. Also see *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 592.

⁷ Translator and writer Li Huangwu 李荒蕪 (1916–95) wrote a series of moving essays, *A Lumberjack’s Diaries* 伐木日記, about the extreme physical hardships and psychological sufferings of the Rightist lumberjacks at Beidahuang.

⁸ Wang Guanquan 王觀泉 (b. 1932), “Wo jiyi zhong de Lao Nie,” 72.

I remember that, in the old days, on the shooting range,
My commander stood next to me.
Though my hands were steady and strong,
My heart couldn't help feeling flustered.

I remember that, in the old days, on the battleground,
The ammunition man squatted next to me.
Though I fired my machine-gun so bravely, so fiercely,
My heart was more and more nervous.

Today, those two kinds of feelings are mixed together,
Yet they are completely different from before,
Because the person standing next to me
Is a young girl who scales logs.

The girl follows me around and takes careful measurement
Of my battle scores, every time I cut down a huge tree.
Every time I cut down a huge tree,
She always raises an axe to help me, without saying a word;
There is only the sound of the axe chopping the branches—
Thunk, thunk—each time it is like knocking on my heart.
Ah, that girl. . . .

Wielding my axe and my saw, I charge deep into the forest,
And I try not to think of anything else,
But whenever she appears by my side,
I become so nervous.
Yet, if she walks away from me,
My heart feels like missing a machine part—
Ah my heart! What sort of malfunctioning is that!

One day, I finally mustered my courage and opened my mouth:
“Please take your measurement of me, young lady,
Tell me what grade I am as a timber,
And please calculate—

How many cubic meters this heart of mine might be missing?”

Her face reddening she lowered her head without looking at me.
Thump! She stamped her embossing seal on a red pine of eight
meters tall:

“What a fine, first-grade timber! Just . . . not straight enough!”

Ah! Look at her—what a girl. . . .

[Written in November 1958 while cutting trees]⁹

The cutting of the tree is, and is represented as, an act of violence, as the speaker, who is an ex-soldier, refers to his lumbering accomplishments as “battle scores.” Thus, when he compares himself to a felled tree awaiting her evaluation, the man dishing out violence suddenly becomes a victim of a different kind of violence—that of his own passion.

Again, we see identification of tree and man, but the situation is purely romantic. The man wants to know how the woman log-scaler would evaluate him as a “tree,” and in her reply she adopts his metaphor even as she criticizes him for being metaphorical: That is, on the surface she complains of the red pine under examination as not being “straight” enough, but in fact she is alluding to the indirectness of his speech.

In an author’s note appended to the poem, Nie Gannu acknowledges Ma Li’s poem as the source of “A Timorous Question”:

This poem uses the idea of the story-writer Ma Li. Ma’s work has a great deal of feelings, but this poem only has jesting—this is the so-called “turning stone into iron [rather than gold].” I hear that Mr. Ma has passed away, so I respectfully keep this piece [in my collection] in memory of him.¹⁰

襲小說家馬力意，馬文極有情致，此但嘲諷，所謂點石成鐵也，聞馬君已故，

⁹ The original text of the poem is too long to be included here. See *Nie Gannu juitishi quanbian zhujie jiping* (hereafter *Nie Gannu juitishi quanbian*), 80–81.

¹⁰ Ma Li committed suicide in the Cultural Revolution. Nie Gannu received this information from their common friend Wang Guanquan. Wang Guanquan, “Wo jiyi zhong de Lao Nie,” 72.

敬留此示念。

But Nie’s poem had not always appeared as the quatrain cited above. In a manuscript copied out by Nie’s good friend and writer Shu Wu 舒蕪 (1922–2009), it is a “regulated poem” 律詩 of eight seven-syllable lines, entitled “By the Cliff” 崖邊:¹¹

怯詢檢尺小姑娘	Timorously I query the young girl who scales logs:
我是何材幾立方	What kind of timber am I? How many cubic meters?
臂痛凌風擊枝葉	Arms ache: rising above the wind to cleave branches and leaves;
腿酸沖雪送壺觴	Legs are sore: braving the snow to bring kettle and cup.
仰天半晌忽狂笑	She looks up at sky for a long while, and suddenly bursts into wild laughter,
向我周身重打量	Then once again she gazes at me, sizing my body up.
努嘴崖邊多節樹	Pursing her lips she signaled to a knotted tree growing by the cliff:
彎彎曲曲兩人長	Warped, twisted, about the height of two men.

In the two middle couplets, both the speaker and the log-scaler are given a more explicit and vivid depiction than in the four-line version cited earlier. The man’s arms ache from chopping branches but are also somehow figured as branches because of the connecting phrase “rising above the wind” in the syntax, even as the next line seems to belie his identity as lumberjack (that is, he is acting merely as someone bringing food and drinks to the lumberjacks). The girl’s reaction to the man’s question is more elaborate and dramatized. By discarding the middle couplets in its final version, the poem becomes minimalist, the terseness of the poem being reflected in the girl’s wordless response that appears even more dismissive.

Some essential elements from the source text are preserved but completely transformed. We still have a lumberjack and a log-scaler, and their dialogue. Like the red pine in the source text, the tree “by the cliff” is tall but warped. We also see a new detail added by Nie Gannu: The tree is full of

¹¹ Nie Gannu *jiutishi quanbian*, 485.

knots. Tree knots, also known as burls, grow where branches have died; they are a tree's scars. They may be considered beautiful by many, but the knots are weaknesses in a tree that can make it unusable as construction lumber. Nie's tree has suffered, and its suffering contributes to its uselessness.

Both versions of Nie's poem are remarkably shorter than the source text by Ma Li; their most notable difference from the source text is the displacement of romance. Self-doubt as a potential lover becomes in Nie's versions something more fundamental: an identity crisis. There is no amorous intention that can be detected in the lumberjack's inquiry; nor is there any affection in the log-scaler's wordless answer, only disdain and condescension. The source text may be long and intricate, but the sentiment therein is straightforward; Nie's poem is ostensibly short and simple, but is tinged with a painful sense of irony and self-consciousness, as the speaker watches himself being examined and evaluated by a figure of authority who also happens to be a *xiao guniang*, literally "a little girl."

In many ways, Ma Li's poem and Nie Gannu's translations embody some profound differences between new-style poetry and modern classical-style poetry. One is explicit, modern in verse form and subject matter (a lumberjack's love for a young woman log-scaler), and charming in its rambling; the other is terse and withholding (especially the four-line version), and its appreciation demands much cultural knowledge—the age-old identification of timber (*cai* 材) and talent (*cai* 才), and the poignancy of the "useless tree" image. Ma Li's poem can be enjoyed on its own, and we don't need to know who wrote it and if the poet really experienced what he wrote about in the poem; but in Nie's case, if we know nothing about its author and the circumstances of its composition, the poem's interest would be diminished. Ma Li's poem translates easily into a foreign language and a different social and cultural context; Nie's poem does not—it requires footnotes. Juxtaposed with each other, new-style and classical-style poetry throw a certain light on each other, even as they each press the other into a certain shape that accentuates and augments their defining characteristics.

Why Classical-Style: Its Functions and Meanings in Modern Times

He [Nie Gannu] was a man of few words; when he did

speak, he never explained himself fully, and his speech was so mixed with humor and irony that it was often hard to understand him.¹²

—Dang Peijia

The very statement, “to write classical-style poetry,” as opposed to simply saying “to write poetry,” reflects the schism that opened up in poetry-writing in the early twentieth century: A modern Chinese poet has options—new-style or classical-style?—that were unavailable in premodern times. To write classical-style poetry in the modern era is “a willful choice.”¹³ It means different things to different people at different times.

Nie Gannu would have been horrified had he lived to see the contemporary fad of writing classical-style poetry both in the academic circles and among the general public. He was a child of the May Fourth New Culture Movement. As those who knew him long and well had said, “He fundamentally disapproved of writing classical-style poetry”;¹⁴ and, “In his late years he became known for classical-style poetry—I am afraid this was not his original intention.”¹⁵

In an earlier article I posit that the familiarization of the unfamiliar was a powerful motivation that drove many twentieth-century poets to work in classical verse forms. I also argue that for Nie Gannu the writing of classical-style poetry was a way of resisting ideological pressures and constructing meaning.¹⁶ But there might have been another facet of this “classical turn” that should be explored in greater detail.

It is revealing to listen to what Nie Gannu himself had to say about his poetic practice. In his self-preface to *Sanyisheng shi*, dated November 16, 1981, he thus describes his youthful tendency: “I advocated Vernacular Chinese and

¹² “他言語本不多，而話又不說盡，幽默冷雋間而有之，常不易理解。” Dang Peijia, “Yi Nie Gannu tongzhi zai Beidahuang,” 67. Also in *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 594.

¹³ Tian, “Muffled Dialect,” 7.

¹⁴ “他是根本不贊成寫舊體詩的。” Shu Wu, “Yifen baijuan: Guanyu Nie Gannu de Beihuang cao,” 47. Also in *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 506.

¹⁵ “晚年竟以舊詩稱，自問恐非初意。” Peng Yaojiao 彭燕郊 citing Zhong Jingwen’s mourning couplet for Nie’s funeral service, in “Qianggu wenzhang weijin cai: Gannu de jiuti shi,” 10. Also in *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 523.

¹⁶ Tian, “Muffled Dialect,” 15, 21.

opposed Literary Chinese; I absolutely would not write in classical style” 擁護白話文，反對文言文，根本不作舊詩。¹⁷ In a letter to his old friend Gao Lü 高旅 (1918–97), he said, “In the past, I had worked a little bit on new-style poetry, for I felt contempt or distaste for classical-style poetry” 過去有時搞搞新詩，有看不起或厭惡舊詩之意。¹⁸ In another letter addressed to Peng Yanjiao, he said,

All my life I had laughed at Lu [Xun], Guo [Moruo], Mao [Dun], [Yu] Da [fu], and so on, because they denounced Literary Chinese on the one hand but composed classical-style poetry on the other hand. I prided myself for having never been conflicted like they were. I had not expected that, when I lived to sixty years of age, I would have started writing [classical-style poetry] myself, and indeed more intensely than they did

平生每笑魯、郭、茅、達……一面反對文言一面作舊詩，自詡平生未如此矛盾，不料活到六十歲時，自己也作了，比他們更作得厲害了。¹⁹

Nie attributes his change to his experience at Beidahuang, where he and his fellow-Rightist exiles suddenly received a command one night that everyone must write poetry in response to a call “from above” to increase literary output across the country.²⁰ He chose to write in classical style. He thus explained his choice in the self-preface to *Sanyisheng shi*:

Speaking of myself, several decades ago I had studied a little bit the metrical rules of classical-style poetry, such as parallelism and tonal balancing, but I had never formally composed any. I advocated

¹⁷ Nie Gannu shi quanbian, 8.

¹⁸ Gao Lü was the penname of Shao Shenzhi 邵慎之, newspaper editor, journalist, and writer. Quoted in Gao's preface to *Sanyisheng shi*. See Nie Gannu shi quanbian, 6, 494. Peng Yanjiao recalled that in the 1940s, Nie had participated in a round-table discussion with Mao Dun 茅盾 and Peng himself, hosted by the editor of a journal *Poetry Writing* (*Shi chuanguo* 詩創作) based in Guilin. Mao Dun insisted that new-style poetry must learn from classical poetry in terms of form. Nie said, “Those [verse] forms are mostly dead. It is difficult to revive them, nor is it necessary.” Peng Yanjiao, “Qianggu wenzhang weijincai,” 11. Also in Nie Gannu shi quanbian, 524.

¹⁹ Peng Yanjiao, “Qianggu wenzhang weijincai,” 12. Also in Nie Gannu shi quanbian, 526.

²⁰ Nie Gannu, “Zixu,” Nie Gannu shi quanbian, 8.

Vernacular Chinese and opposed Literary Chinese; I absolutely would not write in classical style. But this time, our leader told us to write poetry, and for some reason I suddenly thought of composing classical-style poems. Maybe it was because the more I was outside the literary realm, the more I only regarded classical-style poetry as poetry; it involves conventions and habits, even issues of native form and “new wine in old bottle,” and so on and so forth.

且說我，幾十年前，學過一點舊詩的格律，如對仗、聲韻之類的，不過不曾正式做過。擁護白話文，反對文言文，根本不做舊詩。這回領導要做詩，不知怎麼一來，忽然想起做舊詩來了，大概因為越在文壇之外，越是只認為舊詩是詩，其中有傳統、習慣甚至與民族形式、舊瓶新酒之類有關。²¹

It is notable that Nie Gannu would only consider old-style poetry as poetry because he was outside the literary realm—in other words, within the literary realm classical-style poetry is not really poetry. He discusses this in a more direct manner in a letter to Gao Lü, dated March 3, 1962:

You commented that for a Chinese poet to learn from foreign poetry is like throwing away one’s own golden bowl and going around begging. This is an apt comment and I seem to have applauded it before. But there is another side to this. Of the new-style poems produced after the May Fourth Movement, those fine pieces have truly opened up a new realm in literature, and that has much to do with learning from foreign poetry. Today new-style poetry and classical-style poetry coexist but are in fact two different things, and each is hostile to the other. It is not an easy task to compose classical-style poetry in popular language, for if its language is too popular, then it is no longer classical-style; thus, even if one has great strength, one cannot return classical-style poetry to the realm of literature and place it in the same category as fiction and drama. In contrast, even if new-style poetry has its imperfections, when all is said and done, it is still one of the literary forms. There are many reasons for this, and there is much worth discussing. It is a pity that there is no one around to discuss this with.

尊論中國人學外國詩為拋金碗叫化，論極痛切，前此似曾贊為知言。然另有一面，即因五四後新詩，其佳者確在文學上闢一新境界，此與學外國詩頗有關

²¹ Ibid.

係。至今新舊異體並存，實為兩物，各不相能，而舊詩終以難為通俗，通俗太過，又已不成其為舊詩，故雖有大力，亦不能使之重歸文學與小說、戲劇同科。新詩則儘管有不可人意者，卻終為文學形式之一。其中原因非一，可談者亦多，惜無人談之耳。

These remarks, made to a good old friend, are forthright and lucid, without the caustic sarcasm permeating his self-preface. It throws plenty of light on his later comment that he had only considered classical-style poetry as poetry because he was outside the literary realm. Thus, his writing of classical-style poetry at Beidahuang fell, in his words, under the category of “literature of following orders or accepting orders” (*fengming wenxue* 奉命文學 or *zunming wenxue* 遵命文學),²² and the choice of a verse form that he considered as being outside the literary realm was a gesture of resistance to the demand to produce poetry.

But things took an intriguing turn when Nie discovered the joy of the parallel couplet. According to himself, at Beidahuang, he gradually found that “writing parallel couplet was a lot of fun” 對對子很好玩, and switched from old-style verse to regulated verse.²³ He claims to have “formally” (*zhengshi* 正式) started writing regulated verse only after he returned from Beidahuang to Beijing, echoing the earlier statement in the preface that he had “never formally composed” classical-style poetry in his youth.²⁴ Most, if not all, of the poems in *Beihuang Draft* was composed between 1960 and 1964.²⁵ Interestingly, of the 53 poems included in *Beihuang Draft* in *Sanyisheng shi*, all but one are regulated poems in the seven-syllable line (*qiyan lüshi* 七言律詩).²⁶ The only exception is the quatrain “A Timorous Question,” which

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 9. The difference between the two forms lies in that regulated verse (also called “recent-style verse” in the Tang dynasty when the form came into maturation) requires tonal balancing and the use of parallel couplets in the middle section of a poem.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ According to Gao Lü, the 200-plus poems in *Three Drafts* were mostly composed between 1960–64, which Nie had sent to Gao, who resided in Hong Kong, when he first composed them.

²⁶ The collection includes 49 titles, but some titles have 2–3 poems each. It is to be noted that the *Beihuang Draft* in the *Three Drafts* version published in Hong Kong contains a series of seven quatrains entitled “Collective Poetry Writing” 集體寫詩. Nie *Gannu shi quanbian*, 205–6.

nevertheless started as a regulated poem in the seven-syllable line. Nie Gannu might have deleted it altogether from the collection if not for the purpose of commemorating Ma Li, who committed suicide in the Cultural Revolution.

Nie Gannu’s penchant for regulated verse in the seven-syllable line deserves some reflection. A seven-syllable line has a larger capacity than a five-syllable line, and for a poet who likes to incorporate contemporary phrases and slang in his poetry, this is a natural choice. But if we follow this line of thinking, old-style verse, which does not require the use of parallel couplet and tonal balancing and can run on for several hundred lines or more, would seem to be a perfect venue for the depiction of Nie Gannu’s tumultuous life, and its relative metrical freedom should have appealed more to a writer of long new-style poems like Nie Gannu.²⁷ But Nie Gannu chose to write most of his classical-style poems in regulated verse, and in many ways the required use of parallel couplet may have contributed to his choice.

In a letter to Gao Lü dated March 15, 1961, he said, “Writing [classical-style] poetry has an entertaining nature, and that is where its attraction is” 作詩有很大的娛樂性，吸力亦在此。²⁸ In a letter to legal scholar and advisor to the State Council Yang Yuqing 楊玉清 (1906–95) dated November 1980, he said, “People like us write poetry only for self-entertainment, not trying to crawl into the history of poetry standing shoulder to shoulder with Li [Bai] and Du [Fu]” 我輩做詩，旨在自娛，非想爬入詩史，比肩李杜。²⁹ The “entertaining nature” largely derives from the technical aspect of the writing of parallel couplets: the crafting of words and lines, which can be so absorbing that it functions like a meditation exercise enabling the poet to forget about the world around him, and the hard-earned, happy coincidence of a perfectly paired couple of lines and the poet’s sentiments. As Nie himself said, “Sometimes what I want to say I cannot fit into a line; sometimes, because of tones and metrical rules, one or two wonderful lines would take me by complete surprise” 有時心裡想說的話，湊不成一句，有時由於格律聲韻之類的要求，卻自來一兩句連自己也想不到的好句。³⁰

²⁷ Hu Feng 胡風 (1902–85), one of Nie’s best friends, once said disapprovingly of Nie’s new-style poems: “I don’t understand why he likes to be so wordy” 不知道他為什麼要寫那麼多。See Peng Yanjiao, “Qianggu wenzhang weijincal,” 11. Also in *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 524.

²⁸ *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 494.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 485.

³⁰ Letter to Gao Lü, *ibid.*, 491.

In the years between his return from Beidahuang (1960) and his incarceration (1967), Nie Gannu was obsessed with two things: writing regulated verse, and practicing calligraphy—another technical skill that requires complete concentration and takes one’s mind off things. Nie supposedly said in 1964: “Earlier, for a few years I did not know how to live without writing poetry; for the recent couple of years I don’t know how to live without practicing calligraphy” 前幾年不做詩就不知怎麼過日子，這幾年不寫字也不知怎麼過日子。³¹ In a poem addressed to his painter friend Huang Miaozi 黃苗子 (1913–2012), he writes, “Only in my old age do I begin studying poetry in addition to studying calligraphy” 老始學詩兼學字。³² Nie Gannu had always had an addictive fascination with playing chess, but whereas one needs a partner to play go, poetic composition and calligraphic practice were solitary, self-sufficient activities that afforded him a space away from the oppressive political atmosphere, a means of surviving the environment. As Nie quite rightly said, in his postface to the 1985 annotated edition of *Sanyisheng shi*, “My composition of [classical-style] poetry is no more than a word game. To put it in more decorous terms, it is a cultural entertainment that does not need to bother other people and gives myself pleasure in private” 我寫詩只是一種文字遊戲，說得漂亮一點，是一種不須驚動別人而自得其樂的文娛活動。³³

Nie Gannu’s compositional habit is noteworthy:

The way I write poetry is to come up with a line, and then come up with

³¹ Nie’s remarks recorded in his legal case file, cited in Yu Zhen, *Nie Gannu xingshi dang’an*, 397.

³² *Nie Gannu juitishi quanbian*, vol. 2, 639. In fact, when he practiced calligraphy, he often wrote out his own poems and circulated them to his friends. As he said in the self-preface to *Sanyisheng shi*: “Composing poems, I don’t know why I loved copying them out to show people [and for the sake of copying out my poems to show people, I thought my calligraphy was too dreadful, so I studied it for a while, all the way until I went to prison during the ten-year calamity].” *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 9. As the political pressures became intense on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, he worried that poetry might get him in trouble, and so he would ostensibly practice calligraphy by copying out Mao Zedong’s poems but inserted some of his own poems between the lines of Mao’s poems. Yu Zhen found two “lost poems” by Nie that had never been collected into his poetry collection. Yu Zhen, *Nie Gannu xingshi dang’an*, 283–85, 289. For a detailed discussion of the political pressures exerted on Nie Gannu on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, see Jie Li, “‘Are Our Drawers Empty?’ Nie Gannu’s Dossier Literature,” 275–95.

³³ *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 164.

a parallel couplet. When I am successful, then I will see what views this couplet can express, and then I will look for a topic for it—of course, I am referring to the usual case here; it is not to say that I have never first got a topic and then composed lines—therefore, the middle two couplets are usually satisfactory, but the first and last couplet are offhandedly attached [to the middle two couplets], and once I attach them, I stop giving any further thought to it.³⁴

我作詩就是湊句湊對，湊成了，看可以表示什麼意見，然後找題目。當然是說經常情況，並不是說從未先有題後造句的事，因此往往頸腹兩聯尚可觀，首尾隨便安上，安上後就很少考慮。

What he describes remarkably resembles the practice of Li He 李賀 (ca. 790–ca. 816), the Tang poet whose poetic collection Nie copied out by hand in those years.³⁵ It also evokes the late Tang poets who were deeply engaged in poetic craftsmanship and absorbed in refining the parallel couplets of a regulated poem.

Nie’s classical-style poems are full of exuberant word play: puns; borrowed lines from premodern poetry (*jieju* 借句); and the liberal use of the device known as “borrowed pairing” (*jiedui* 借對).³⁶ In the last case, the two lines of a parallel couplet may not look like a perfect matching at first glance, but their matching depends on drawing on homophones or multiple meanings—especially the literal meaning—of a word or phrase. In all these cases, Nie Gannu’s poems present an insurmountable obstacle to successful translation into a foreign language.

I discussed such a parallel couplet by Nie Gannu in an earlier article:

文章信口雌黃易 It is easy to wag the tongue freely and talk at will
in one’s writings;

³⁴ Letter to Gao Lü. *Ibid.*, 494.

³⁵ Gao Lü in his 1980 preface to *Three Drafts* relates that Nie hand-copied Du Fu’s collection and Li He’s collection after he returned to Beijing from Beidahuang (and before he was incarcerated in 1967). *Ibid.*, 5. Nie had once produced a *jiju* 集句 poem entirely consisting of lines from Li He’s poems. *Ibid.*, 354–55.

³⁶ He Yongyi 何永沂 offers a lucid analysis of the devices of *jieju* and *jiedui* in Nie’s poetry in two articles: “Nijing zhong de youxi—‘Jiedui’” and “‘Jieju’ yeshi chuanguo.” *Ibid.*, 603–11.

思想锥心坦白难 When it comes to one's thoughts, how hard to
pierce one's heart and come clean!³⁷

Another famous example is:

青眼高歌望吾子 With the black pupil of my eye, singing loudly,
I gaze at you, dear sir;
紅心大幹管他媽 With a red heart, you throw yourself into it—
who bloody cares!³⁸

The first line is taken verbatim from the Tang poet Du Fu's "A Short Song Presented to Rectifier Young Master Wang" 短歌行贈王郎司直. "The black pupil of one's eye" refers to the eccentric poet Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–63), who looks at people normally (with the black pupil of his eye) when he sees people he likes but, when he sees people he scorns, he shows them the white of his eye. *Qingyan* (lit. "black eye") forms a perfect parallel with *hongxin*, "red heart," indicating a revolutionary spirit. *Gaoge*, "sing loudly," parallels *da gan*, a popular contemporary verbal phrase used in *da gan geming* 大幹革命, "carry on the revolution whole-heartedly." *Guan ta ma* is an abbreviation of *guan ta ma de*, a vulgar interjection whose literal translation should probably read, "who motherfucking cares." *Guan* is a verb like *wang* in the same position in the first line; *ta ma* (lit. "his mother") matches perfectly *wu zi* (lit. "my son"), which in classical Chinese is a form of address between men indicating respect and intimacy. Classical elegance and allusiveness, contemporary vulgarity, and socialist jargon are surprisingly bound together in a perfect parallel couplet; the tension is ironic, comic, and provocative.

In a poem entitled "Quail" 斥鷃, written after he was released from prison in late 1976, Nie Gannu writes:

放諸四海誠皆寤 Let it go to the four seas—truly it will be ill at ease
everywhere;
不下五洋焉得歸 If not going into the five oceans first, how can it

³⁷ Tian, "Muffled Dialect," 28.

³⁸ From a poem entitled "Zhong san Siqing gui" 鍾三四清歸, included in *Zengda Draft* 贈答草. Nie Gannu *shi quanbian*, 68.

return home?³⁹

The first line is based on a classical phrase, *fangzhu sihai er jie zhun* 放諸四海而皆準, which means “applying [a principle] to the four seas as a universal standard.” Mao Zedong used it to describe Marxism and Leninism in his famous 1949 speech, “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship” 論人民民主專政.⁴⁰ Here, *jiōng* 窘, ill at ease or constrained, sounds like *zhun* 準. The second line alludes to a line by Mao Zedong, “One can go into the five oceans and catch the tortoise” 可下五洋捉鱉.⁴¹ The original line appears in a context in which the poet states that anything is possible as long as one has the willpower. Nie, however, transforms it into a statement that stresses home-coming as the ultimate purpose of going into the five oceans. “How can it return home” can be also translated as “how can it capture a turtle”—*gui* 歸, return, puns with turtle, also *gui* 龜.

These parallel couplets all contain word play. The poet is having fun with language, and fun is, when all is said and done, the essence of art. It might very well have been this absorption in craftsmanship that helped him survive the traumatic times.

“A Certain Quality of Feeling”: The Dialectics of Old and New

But for Nie Gannu there was yet another facet of the attraction of classical-style poetry: its ability to convey an emotional complexity.

This is where I find classical-style lovable, just like that. It is both there and not quite there, decipherable yet not entirely decipherable. If you say it can entirely express the poet’s feelings, it is far from it; but if you say it cannot at all express the poet’s feelings, it is basically quite close in terms of mood and tone. Sometimes what I want to say I cannot fit into

³⁹ Included in *Nanshan Draft* 南山草. *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 119.

⁴⁰ Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong xuanji*, vol. 4, 1475.

⁴¹ From Mao’s *ci* lyric, “To the Tune of Shuidiao getou: Once Again I Ascend Mount Jinggang” 水調歌頭/重上井岡山, written in May 1965 and published in the first issue of the poetry journal, *Shi kan* 詩刊, in 1976. See Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong shici quanbian*, 281.

a line; sometimes, because of tones and metrical rules, one or two wonderful lines would take me by complete surprise. All this is more attractive than essays and vernacular poems.

我覺得舊詩可愛的地方也正如此。若即若離，可解不可解。說能完全道出作者心情，卻距離很遠；說簡直不能道出，氣氛情調卻基本上相近。有時心裡想說的話，湊不成一句；有時由於格律聲韻之類的要求，卻自來一兩句連自己也意想不到的好句。這都比散文和白話詩更迷人。⁴²

In his self-preface to *Sanyisheng shi*, written on October 16, 1981, he states:

I believe classical-style poetry is suitable for the expression of a certain quality of feeling. For over twenty years, I happened to experience that very quality of feeling, which then came out as poetry.

以為舊詩適合於表達某種情感，二十餘年來，我恰有此種情感，故發而為詩。

In other words, for Nie Gannu, classical-style poetry was occasioned by special historical circumstances and served a special historical purpose. It is not for everyone or for all times. But how exactly do we understand and evaluate this “certain quality of feeling”?

Nie wrote a poem about his Beidahuang experience, “I Wounded My Hand when Cutting Seed Potatoes” 削土豆種傷手.⁴³ To plant potatoes, one needs to first cut a seed potato into pieces, each piece having at least one “eye”—a dimpled area from which buds emerge and will grow into a new plant.

豆上無坑無有芽	Not a single dimple on the potato does not have a bud;
手忙刀快眼昏花	My hand is busy, the knife sharp, and my eyes dim.
兩三點血紅誰見	Two or three drops of blood: who'd see their red?
六十歲人白自誇	This man of sixty years old brags about himself in vain. ⁴⁴
欲把相思栽北國	I wish to plant the “love bean” in the north country,
難憑赤手建中華	But it is hard to build the Middle Kingdom

⁴² Letter to Gao Lü, *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 491.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

⁴⁴ “In vain,” *bai* (lit. white), matches “red” in the same position in the preceding line.

with a pair of bare hands.

狂言在口終羞說	Some wild words in my mouth, I am too embarrassed to speak out loud:
以此微紅獻國家	I shall dedicate this little bit of red to my motherland.

Potato, *tudou* (lit. “soil bean”), is dyed red by the poet’s blood, thus turning into a *hongdou*, “red bean” (i.e., red mung bean or *adzuki* bean). In classical poetry, the red bean is a symbol of lovesickness. The Tang poet Wang Wei’s 王維 (ca. 699–ca. 761) famous quatrain, “Love-Longing” 相思, is behind the fifth line:⁴⁵

紅豆生南國	The red bean grows in the southland;
秋來發幾枝	In autumn, on how many branches?
勸君多采擷	I urge you to pick as much as you can,
此物最相思	For this best expresses love-longing.

The irony in Nie’s poem is of course that the “love bean” is going to be planted, not in the south, but in the north, where the climate is not at all suitable for its growth. *Chishou* 赤手, bare hands, literally means “red hand(s)” —the poet’s bleeding hand—and in this line evokes the common phrase, *baishou qijia* 白手起家, to make one’s fortune with a pair of bare [white] hands, that is, start from nothing to build an enterprise. Playing with “white/bare hands” and “red/bare hands,” the poet states that one cannot build a country with a sixty-year-old man’s bleeding hands. Surely those hands would have much better suited to other tasks than cutting seed potatoes.

Different critics have different takes on Nie’s last couplet. Many find it sincere and touching in its patriotic sentiment, and feel that it is sad, or an expression of the poet’s resentment, that such loyal sentiments should be deemed “wild words.”⁴⁶ Yet, the hyperbole of spilling “two or three drops of blood” on a potato for the sake of one’s nation is indeed nothing but “wild.” The incongruity is ironic, though the irony is not, as surmised by one critic,

⁴⁵ Wang Wei *ji jiaozhu*, 410.

⁴⁶ See comments by Shang Gong 尙弓, Luo Fu 羅孚, Yang Jiuru 楊九如, Lu Ge 魯戈, Wang Qi 王琦, Fang Yinzong 方印中. *Nie Gannu jiu tishi quanbian*, 23–25.

directed at himself;⁴⁷ rather, it is directed at the situation, that an aging intellectual like Nie Gannu is forced to contribute to his country only by cutting potatoes. The poet does love his country, and he cuts potatoes with whole-hearted seriousness—“When he was engaged in labor, he never tried to goof off, and always gave his all” 他幹起活來，從不要滑，總是竭盡全力;⁴⁸ but he is also keenly aware, with painful amusement, just how disproportionate his “sacrifice” of a few drops of blood is to the noble purpose of serving one’s country. The disproportionateness is brought out most poignantly, albeit humorously and even comically, by a thinly disguised allusion to his teacher and idol, Lu Xun, whose famous quatrain “Inscribed on My Portrait” 自題小像 is filled with romantic verbiage and echoes of *Li sao*, and is completely devoid of irony:

靈台無計逃神矢	This numinous tower has no means to escape from the divine arrow; ⁴⁹
風雨如盤暗故園	Wind and rain like boulders darken my homeland.
寄意寒星荃不察	I entrust my feelings to the cold star, but the Fragrant One does not understand; ⁵⁰
我以我血薦軒轅	I shall dedicate my blood as a sacrifice to Xuanyuan. ⁵¹

In contrast to such impassioned outcry, Nie Gannu’s poem about cutting potatoes, the most homely of all vegetables, is poignant yet comical, serious yet ironic.

Another poem, the first of *Beihuang Draft*, sings of making straw ropes:

⁴⁷ Yong Wenhua 雍文華, “Jiedu Nie Gannu shi” 解讀聶紺弩詩. Ibid., 25.

⁴⁸ Dang Peijia also recalls, “Whatever task he undertook, he always took it completely seriously, even comically so” 無論做什麼事，他總是一絲不苟，甚至認真到令人發笑的地步。“Yi Nie Gannu tongzhi zai Beidahuang,” 64. Also in *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 589.

⁴⁹ *Lu Xun quanji*, vol. 7, 447. The numinous tower refers to his heart. The divine arrow refers to Cupid’s arrow that can make a person fall in love. Contrary to some scholars’ interpretation that this alludes to Lu Xun’s unhappy marriage arranged by his mother, I believe the poet is saying that he cannot help feeling love for his country, even though his country is being so darkened by wind and rain.

⁵⁰ The last three words are taken from *Li sao*: “The Fair One does not my innermost feelings” 荃不察余之中情.

⁵¹ Xuanyuan is the Yellow Emperor, the ancestor of the Han Chinese race, here a metonymic reference to the Han people.

冷水浸盆搗杵歌	We soak them in the cold water basin, singing while pounding;
掌心膝上正翻搓	In one’s hands, on the knees, rotating and twining.
一雙兩好纏綿久	A fine pair in love, clinging to each other long and sweet;
萬轉千回纏綵多	Through ten thousand twists and turns, they remain inseparable.
縛得蒼龍歸北面	It can tie up the dark dragon and force it to face north; ⁵²
縮教紅日莫西矧	It can yank the red sun and stop it from lowering in the west. ⁵³
能將此草繩搓緊	If only we can make these straw ropes tight and strong,
泥裡機車定可拖	The locomotive mired in mud can surely be pulled out. ⁵⁴

The poem describes using straw to make ropes by hand. The straws are first flattened with a pestle, and then one twines a bundle of straws with one’s hands, rolling them on the leg rather than twisting between thumb and finger. Since dry material tends to slip, the straws are dampened by being soaked in cold water.

The poem is widely acclaimed for its two middle parallel couplets.⁵⁵ In the second couplet, the strands of straw twined together are figured as a pair of lovers who stay conjoined to each other; the third couplet, however, balances out the romantic evocations with more virile images of overpowering the dragon or halting sun’s progress. But the last couplet undermines these romantic, larger-than-life hyperboles. Perhaps nothing

⁵² Facing north means to surrender. This alludes to Mao Zedong’s lines in a *ci* lyric, “To the Tune of Qingpingyue: Mt. Liupan” 清平樂/六盤山: “Today we have the long rope in our hand, / When shall we tie up the dark dragon” 今日長纒在手, 何時縛住蒼龍. The poem was published in *Shi kan*’s first issue in 1957. See Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong shici quanbian*, 128.

⁵³ To tie up the sun and halt or slow down the progress of time is an age-old cliché in the classical poetic tradition.

⁵⁴ Nie Gannu *shi quanbian*, 13–14.

⁵⁵ See Nie Gannu *jiutishi quanbian*, 15–16.

symbolizes modernity better than the train; yet, the train to Beidahuang is mired in mud, requiring men to pull it out with cordage made by hand—a primitive technology. “Surely,” *ding*, is the crucial word in the last line: On the surface it expresses confidence and certainty; but it is also an adverb of speculation and wistful longing, self-consciously deployed. The poet sings praise of cordage-making in the most lyrical terms possible, but the last couplet complicates, though not necessarily compromising, the lyrical praise.

In many ways new-style verse form is more straightforward, and tends to be single-dimensional, in its expression of grief, passion, anger, sarcasm, or tenderness. Its language accommodates a wide range of modern vocabulary; line lengths and poem length are capable of infinite expansion. In contrast, Nie Gannu’s favorite verse form—regulated verse of eight seven-syllable-lines—is extremely constraining. The poet has at his disposal 56 characters, 28 of which must be arranged in two parallel pairs. Form shapes, even produces, content.

A comparison of new-style and classical-style poems is edifying, especially when the classical-style poem is rewritten from the new-style poem, which we find often in Nie Gannu’s poetic collection.⁵⁶ In 1950, Nie Gannu wrote a new-style poem, “The Insomniac Owl” 失眠的貓頭鷹, published in Hong Kong.⁵⁷ The poem is unequivocal about the target of its satire:

一個新國家誕生	A new nation is born,
使你嘗到了亡國喪家的滋味，	And so you know how it feels like
	to lose country and home.
別人的慶祝的歡呼	Others’ congratulatory shouts
和你在苦難裡的呻吟應和。	Are mixed with your cries of suffering.
生與死，	Life and death,
榮與辱，	Glory and humiliation,
苦與樂，	Suffering and joy,
是與非，	Right and wrong:

⁵⁶ Apart from the example cited earlier in this paper, Nie Gannu is fond of rewriting Lu Xun’s prose poems into classical-style poems. See “Rewriting Seven Pieces from *Wild Plants* into Seven-syllable Regulated Poems” 改野草七題爲七律, *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 157–58; also “Dead Fire” 死火, 256; and “The Lost Good Hell” 失掉的好地獄, 342.

⁵⁷ *Nie Gannu quanji*, vol. 5, 507–12.

你陷於與一切人相反的處境，	You are in a situation
你的見解也正這樣。	where everything
	is opposite from everyone else,
	And so are your views.
滅亡者！	You who are destroyed!
你的心情，	Your feelings
像失眠的貓頭鷹所有。	Resemble those of an insomniac owl.

The poet then goes on for more than 100 lines of describing the owl's miserable wait for darkness, which, for the owl, will be its “dawn.” The poet drives the lesson home in the last stanza:

滅亡者！	You who are destroyed!
你就是那失眠的貓頭鷹，	You are that insomniac owl,
這心情我理解。	Your feelings I understand.
假如有什麼不同，	If there is any difference,
那就是：	Then that is this:
它的“白天”會來，	Its “day” will come again,
你的卻永不復返了！	But yours never will!

In 1966 Nie sent this classical-style poem, “On Owl” 詠貓頭鷹, to his friend in Hong Kong:

當是黑貓插翅翔	You must be a black cat,
	finding a pair of wings to fly around;
無端小獸儼禽王	For no reason at all, a petty beast
	turns into the king of birds. ⁵⁸
一天月色昏黃久	Moonlight all day—
	the duskiness has lasted too long;
五夜歌聲怨慕長	During the fifth night-watch,
	the sound of your wretched singing draws on.
詩向鷗鴉能混賬	Poems such as “The Owl”

⁵⁸ In “An Insomniac Owl,” the poet describes the owl as “the king of night in the forest” 那森林裡的夜之王者. *Ibid.*, 508.

are capable of giving a messy account;
 友如蝙蝠慣騎牆 Your friends are bats and their like,
 who are used to sitting on the fence.
 梟雄世有劉玄德 For the “owl-like hero”
 there was Liu Xuande—
 暗弱劉璋汝暗強 Benighted and weak was Liu Zhang;
 you are benighted, though strong.⁵⁹

The second couplet is a 14-character condensation of the new-style poem of 100-odd lines.⁶⁰ To the owl’s “distorted” perception, daylight means darkness, and the owl resents how long it lasts. The fifth night-watch is the last of the night watches right before dawn; the owl, sensing the imminent daybreak, cries woefully. The third couplet pairs an ancient Chinese poem and an ancient Greek fable, both denouncing owls and their nocturnal associates.⁶¹ The last couplet is pure wordplay. Liu Xuande (Liu Bei 劉備, 161–223), the founder of Shu Han during the Three Kingdoms period, was described as an “owl-like [i.e., fierce] hero.” His courtesy name Xuande literally means “Dark Virtue.” He took Sichuan from Liu Zhang, a warlord characterized as “benighted and weak” 暗弱. Here the poet plays with the meanings of *an* (benighted; dark) and hints at the owl’s nocturnal habits. The poem is quite upfront and uncomplicated among Nie’s classical-style poems, and is clearly satirical. But even so, when we compare it with the earlier “owl” poem written in new-style verse with its unmediated sharpness, we find the regulated poem incredibly restrained, with more than a little of playfulness undercutting its sarcasm.

In 1939, Nie Gannu wrote a new-style poem, “The Harvest Season: Written

⁵⁹ Nie Gannu *shi quanbian*, 332.

⁶⁰ Hou Jingtian 侯井天, who is usually very good at interpreting Nie’s poem, makes a mistake here by believing *yitian* 一天 means “all over sky.” In the corresponding position of *wu ye* (lit. fifth night [watch]) in the preceding line, *yitian* means “one day/all day.” Nie Gannu *jiutishi quanbian*, vol. 3, 819.

⁶¹ The first line of the third couplet refers to a *Shijing* poem, “Owl” 鷗鷗, in which a mother bird protests that an owl has snatched her young. The second line is an allusion to Aesop fable, in which a bat survives two attacks by first claiming to be a rat and then claiming to be a bird. *Ibid.*

for the Three-Year Anniversary of Lu Xun” 收穫的季節：為魯迅先生三年祭作。⁶² It begins with a loving description of the autumn fields after harvest; he ends with vowing that the harvesters will not forget Lu Xun, the one who has planted the first seeds.

1.

收穫的季節：

秋風吹過稻田，

稻田是赤裸裸的；

夕陽檢閱著高昂的隊伍，

高粱、黍子、向日葵；

累累的葡萄

從烏柏樹枝上垂下，

山谷、原野，一片濃綠，

仁愛的地母

正擠著一年中最後的奶水……

'Tis the season of harvest,

Autumn wind blows over the
rice paddies.

The rice paddies are naked.

The setting sun is reviewing the
high-spirited troops:

Sorghum, millet, and sunflowers;

Heavy bunches of grapes

Hang down over the branches
of candleberry trees.

The valley, plain, are a dark green.

The benevolent earth mother

Is giving her the last milk of the year. . . .

[Sections 2–5, of more than 350 lines, are omitted.]

6.

秋風吹過田野，

夕陽檢閱著雜糧，

烏柏樹垂著累累的果實，

滿山遍野的濃綠……

是收穫的季節了！

Look,

The autumn wind blows over the fields,

The setting sun reviews the various grains,

The candleberry trees are laden with heavy
fruits,

A dark green all over the hills and plains. . .

'Tis the season of harvest!

⁶² The version here is in *Nie Gannu quanji*, vol. 5, 347–68. A revised version appears in *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 388–404. This poem is included in *Shanhu* 山呼, a collection of Nie Gannu’s new-style poems, which he had selected and edited himself in 1983. The collection was never published on its own, but is included, along with Nie’s preface, in *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*. In the preface, Nie says that he had begun his literary writing career with new-style poetry. *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 359.

播種人囉，	Planter of seeds, ⁶³
放心吧，	Be at ease,
我們會千倍萬倍地	We will a thousand times, ten thousand
	times,
收回你播下的種子！	Take back the seeds you have sown!

About twenty years later, the poet wrote a regulated poem, “Passing by the Field of Cut Sunflowers” 過刈後向日葵地：⁶⁴

曾見黃花插滿頭	In the past I have seen you with many yellow flowers in your hair, ⁶⁵
孤高傲岸逞風流	Lonely and noble, full of pride, you showed your panache.
田橫五百人何在	Tian Heng’s five hundred men: where are they now? ⁶⁶
曼倩三千牘似留	Manqian’s three thousand wooden strips seem left behind. ⁶⁷
赤日中天朝懇摯	An audience with the blazing sun

⁶³ In the version revised in 1983, Nie Gannu inserted a line after this line: “Although you were not the only one [seed-planter]” 雖然不只你一個。Nie Gannu *shi quanbian*, 404. It is an important insertion. The poet admired Lu Xun all his life, but did not want to idolize him as “the only” or “the most. . .”

⁶⁴ Nie Gannu *shi quanbian*, 41.

⁶⁵ “Yellow flowers” refer to chrysanthemum; the image of having chrysanthemum flowers in one’s hair upon celebrating the Double Ninth Festival (the ninth day of the ninth month in late autumn) is from a poem by the Tang poet Du Mu 杜牧 (803–52) but recurs in many classical poems; it is an image of a free and wild poet. For instance, Lu You’s 陸游 (1125–1210) “I Went on a Boat Outing to the Nearby Village, Then I Left My Boat and Walked Back Home” 小舟遊近村捨舟步歸 reads: “I don’t know what is this thing called ‘sorrow,’ / East and west, I am seen roaming leisurely on footpaths through the fields. / The kids all say the Master is drunk— / He snaps many yellow flowers and wears them in his hair” 不知如何喚作愁，東阡西陌見閒遊。兒童共道先生醉，折得黃花插滿頭。

⁶⁶ Tian Heng (d. 202 BCE), the last king of Qi, committed suicide after he was vanquished by the founding ruler of the Han dynasty; subsequently, his five hundred followers all killed themselves.

⁶⁷ Manqian was the courtesy name of Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (fl. first century BCE), a Western Han courtier and writer serving Emperor Wu of Han (r. 141–87 BCE) and known for his wit and humor. He reportedly wrote a long memorial to the throne using three thousand wooden strips.

秋風落葉立清適 齊桓不喜葵瓜子 肯會諸侯到爾丘	mid-heaven, honest and true; Autumn wind, among fallen leaves, you stand with a refreshing strength. If Duke Huan of Qi did not like sunflower seeds, Why would he assemble all the feudal lords on your hill? ⁶⁸
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The classical Chinese tradition has a long history of using the *kui* 葵 plant facing the sun as a figure of a courtier loyal to the ruler, even though the native *kui* in the premodern tradition is mallow, an edible vegetable, not sunflower, which is a New World product and was not known in most of Chinese history until the eighteenth or even nineteenth century. Nevertheless, in Nie’s poem, the first couplet firmly establishes the sunflower, once in its full bloom, as a personification of a free and proud *shi* 士, a member of the cultural elite. Then the third line turns to a dark picture of the group suicide of Tian Heng’s five hundred retainers, and the fourth line implies that, after the flower heads are cut off, only the bare stalks—like the wooden strips used by Dongfang Shuo to write his long letter to the famous autocratic Emperor Wu of Han—are left. The third couplet continues the courtier metaphor, with *chao* serving double purposes: It is a verb simply meaning “facing,” but its root meaning and perhaps also more popular meaning in Classical Chinese is “having an audience with the sovereign lord or going to court.” Everyone knows what the “red sun” is—the emperor in the premodern tradition, and the great leader praised in “East Is Red” in the socialist China.

In the early 1960s, perhaps any reader of Nie’s poem in his small circle of friends would think of Hu Feng, the man who addressed a report to the Politburo of the CPC, also known as “the 300,000-word letter” 三十萬言書, protesting the CPC’s contemporary culture and art policies. After that, Hu Feng was denounced as a counter-revolutionary, imprisoned, and exiled;

⁶⁸ Duke Huan of Qi (d. 643 BCE), the hegemon lord in the Spring and Autumn period, had gathered many feudal lords at Kuiqiu 葵丘 (in modern Henan) for swearing a covenant in 651 BCE. The *kui* in the place name Kuiqiu is most definitely not sunflower. Whether the poet knew this or not, he was using the word to refer to sunflower.

thousands of intellectuals were implicated in a national anti-Hu Feng campaign, labeled as “a member of the Hu Feng clique” 胡風分子. Nie Gannu exchanged many poems with Hu Feng through these difficult years. In one of the poems to Hu Feng after they both returned to Beijing, he wrote: “For ten years under cold window, you lived in an iron house, / Upon homecoming there is but some residual breath. . . / Throughout the winter the garden has nothing but bare sunflower stalks— / Bony and tough, withered and tall: I am too lazy to get rid of them” 十年寒窗鐵屋居，歸來氣息已殘餘……一冬園圃光葵桿，瘦硬枯高懶未除。⁶⁹ In 1966, in three poems entitled “Blood Pressure” 血壓, sent to Hu Feng in Sichuan, Nie explicitly refers to his “300,000-word letter” in each poem, and in the third poem compares Hu Feng to Xingtian 刑天, the mythical hero who in battling with the Heavenly Emperor had his head cut off but continued to fight: “Even though your body is still there, your head is gone: / In your old age you are a Xingtian, all like a dream” 爾身雖在爾頭亡，老作刑天夢一場。⁷⁰ Yet, this is not to say that the sunflower poem must refer to any specific individual; rather, it is a group portrait of the times.

It is a disturbing scene—a field of decapitated sunflowers, which, though headless, are still standing upright, evoking headless heroes who died for their cause and their belief. The last couplet tries to diffuse the dark tension by making a light-hearted joke. When first published in *Three Drafts* in Hong Kong, the last couplet reads:

手抓一把葵花子
齒頰生香過爾丘

Grabbing a handful of the sunflower seeds,
A fragrance lingering between my teeth, I
pass your hill.⁷¹

Speaking of eating the fruits of a harvest and using a vivid phrase to

⁶⁹ Nie Gannu *shi quanbian*, 277. Hu Feng was imprisoned from 1955 to the end of 1965, and then was sent into exile in Sichuan in early 1966. Nie’s poem was written when Hu Feng was first released. It later appeared in *Sanyisheng shi*, with only slight modification, under the title of “Responding [to Myself] on Behalf of Old Woman Zhou” 代周婆婆答 after Nie himself was imprisoned for nearly ten years (1967–76). *Ibid.*, 91–92. Hu Feng’s “response poems” matching the rhymes of Nie’s original poem were written in April 1966, when he was already in Sichuan. *Ibid.*, 279–80.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 275–76.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

physically describe the aromatic flavor of the sunflower seeds, the original version, even more than the revised version, makes light of the dark scene of the headless sunflowers. Its tone, cheery, even frivolous, offers a striking contrast with that of the preceding lines. The revised version, with its reference to Duke Huan of Qi, is equally incongruous, and even leads some critics to believe that the feudal lords congregating at Kuiqu are a metaphor of the “talented people” gathering at Beidahuang.⁷² This is an ingenious but unlikely association, for the bare stalks of the beheaded sunflowers are a much more apt reference to the “talented people” gathering at Beidahuang. I find the original version quite telling of the poet’s true intention, which is to subvert and dissolve the darkness and earnestness of the preceding lines by adding a humorous Nie Gannu twist. Nie endows the poem with an emotional complexity, not by the content of the line, but by the very attempt to diffuse tension.

Such emotional ambivalence and complexity of the tone are largely missing in some of the most remarkable new-style poems on sunflowers. The famous “Misty” poet Mang Ke’s 芒克 (b. 1950) poem, “Sunflower in the Sun” 陽光中的向日葵, is a striking example.⁷³

你看到了嗎	Have you seen—
你看到陽光中的那棵向日葵了嗎	Have you seen that sunflower in the sun
你看它，它沒有低下頭	Look at it: it does not bow its head
而是把頭轉向身後	But turns its head around
它把頭轉了過去	It turns its head around
就好像是爲了一口咬斷	As if it wanted to bite off
那套在它脖子上的	The rope around its neck
那牽在太陽手中的繩索	The rope held by the hand of the sun

你看到了嗎	Do you see
你看到那棵昂着頭	Do you see that sunflower raising its

⁷² See Shu Wu and Fang Yinzhong’s 方印中 comments, in *Nie Gannu juitishi quanbian*, 102–3.

⁷³ Mang Ke’s poem was published in a mimeographed collection entitled “The Sunflower in the Sun” in 1983. I accessed it online at the official website of *Today*, a journal first created in 1978 by a group of “Misty” poets including Mang Ke, <https://www.jintian.net/today/html/32/n-18632-2.html>.

怒視着太陽的向日葵了嗎
 它的頭幾乎已把太陽遮住
 它的頭即使是在沒有太陽的時候
 也依然在閃耀着光芒

你看到那棵向日葵了嗎
 你應該走近它
 你走近它便會發現
 它的生命是和土地連在一起的
 你走近它你頓時就會覺得

它腳下的那片泥土
 你每抓起一把
 都一定會攥出血來

head
 And glaring angrily at the sun
 Its head almost blocks the sun
 Its head still glows
 Even when there is no sun

Do you see that sunflower
 You should approach it
 When you approach it, you will see
 Its life is connected to the earth
 When you approach it, you will
 immediately feel
 The soil under its feet
 Every handful of the soil
 If squeezed, will bleed

The poet does not mince words when he vents his anger with the sun, which is figured as a slave-owner trying to control the sunflower with a rope—quite the opposite of the classical imagery of tying up the sun with a rope to slow down time’s progress, as in Nie Gannu’s “Making Straw Ropes” poem. The sunflower in this poem is an unusual one, trying to rebel against the sun’s tyrannical control. Typical of new-style poetry, the poem is loquacious and deliberately repetitious. Its highly rhetorical series of questions, “Don’t you see,” evokes the same type of opening *Jun bu jian* 君不見 in a *yuefu* poem in the classical tradition, which tends to be long, chatty, and colloquial, and often represents a commoner’s point of view. It throws into light Nie Gannu’s chosen verse form, the regulated poem, with its 56 characters and parallel couplets. Yet, Mang Ke’s impassioned, angry poem also does exactly what it protests: It instructs and commands, coaxes and coaches; it even prescribes what you will/are supposed to discover (便會發現) and how you will/are supposed to feel (你頓時就會覺得). There is no humor, ambivalence, playfulness, or evasiveness. It is as stubborn as the rebellious sunflower, as tyrannical as the sun it denounces.

It is not clear if Mang Ke was aware of Nie Gannu’s poem on the decapitated sunflowers. But a contemporary soldier-poet Zhu Zengquan 朱

增泉 (b. 1939), who won some state-sponsored literature prizes, seems likely well-acquainted with Nie Gannu. He wrote a poem entitled “Sunflowers in the Fields” 田野上的向日葵, which celebrates none other than the sunflowers at Beidahuang.⁷⁴

A vast patch of sunflowers in the fields at Beidahuang
Before harvest, took off their loose robes
Only their upright backs and all the fruits of their thought remain
Facing the same direction, they stand solemnly
In mourning
The sunflowers are holding an important ceremony
Grieving for predecessors, leaving instructions to late-comers
Giving thanks to the earth
Giving their blessings to the sun
This scene
Shakes me
It makes me reconsider the meaning of maturity and harvest⁷⁵
I reminisce how every single green leaf has swayed in the breeze
Every blooming flower head
Watched over hope as if watching over a small child
Everyday they greeted the sun leaping up in the east
Everyday they guarded the sun’s safe return to the hills
The sun is the child the earth has entrusted to the sunflowers
The sunflower straighten their backs all their life
Standing in the fields
Spending all their lives protecting the sun
The sunflowers now have completed their mission
With such a solemn ceremony
Asking every seed to remember its mission
And safeguard the sun’s healthy growth

⁷⁴ First published in *Shi kan*, no. 1, 2008; also included, slightly modified, in Zhu’s poetry collection, *Youyu de Ke’erqin caoyuan* 憂鬱的科爾沁草原 (Chengdu: Sichuan wenyi chubanshe, 2013). The version used here is the *Shi kan* version, accessed online at *Shi kan*’s website: <http://www.365essay.com/shikan/shka2008/shka20080102.html>.

⁷⁵ “The meaning of” are deleted from the version in Zhu’s poetry collection.

The sunflowers' stubbornness
 And passion
 Shake me⁷⁶

北大荒田野上的大片向日葵
 收获前，卸去了宽大的服饰
 只留下挺直的腰杆和全部思想果实
 朝着同一个方向，全体肃立
 默哀
 向日葵们在举行一个隆重仪式
 悼念先辈，嘱托来者
 感恩大地
 祝福太阳
 这场景
 令我震撼
 这使我重新思考成熟和收获的含义
 回想起每一片宽大的绿叶如何在风里摇动
 每一个盛开的花盘
 像共同照看一名幼童般照看着希望
 天天迎接太阳跃然东升
 天天护送太阳平安落山
 太阳是大地交给向日葵照看的孩子
 向日葵们毕生挺直腰杆
 在田野上站立
 终生呵护着太阳
 向日葵们完成了毕生使命
 才以如此隆重的方式
 嘱托每一颗种子务必牢记使命
 照看太阳健康成长
 向日葵的执著
 和深情
 令我震撼

⁷⁶ These last three lines are deleted from the version in Zhu's poetry collection.

The sunflowers in this poem are on the eve of harvest. They “took off their loose robes”—this evokes a line from Nie Gannu’s “The Harvest Season”: “The rice paddies are naked.” Loose robes are always worn by those who do not engage in manual labor, and in premodern times was a metonymic reference to the elite. The solemn ceremony described by the poet looks like a funeral service, though we don’t know who exactly the sunflowers are “mourning”—their “predecessors” or themselves, or both. Nevertheless, there is little darkness in the poem, only mawkish benignity. Rather than the loyal followers or unwilling slaves of the sun, these sunflowers are figured as guardians and child-minders, willingly sacrificing their lives for the sun’s “healthy growth.” The infantilization of the sun is interesting: the sun is not held responsible for anything; instead of nourishing the sunflowers, the sunflowers must care for it and ultimately die for it.

The two new-style poems discussed above accentuate the restraint and the complexity of Nie Gannu’s regulated poem on sunflowers. But the new-style poems, conversational and serious, also depend on their fundamental difference from the tradition to demonstrate their uniqueness. The two verse forms, co-existing, are co-dependent in the sense that the new-style is a fundamentally negative form—it is defined against classical-style poetry, allows a poet to write in any form except in the form of five- or seven-syllable-line (its claim to being “free verse” thus proving not entirely accurate), and strives to be everything classical-style poetry is not. That classical-style poetry depends on the new-style is less obvious but no less true, for the presence of new-style presses classical-style into an ideology that it had never represented in the premodern period, deprives it of a certain range of expressions, and turns it into this “other form” that is ever self-conscious about “not being the new-style.” They thus thrive in being distinguished from each other, “each having its moment.”

In a preface he had volunteered to write, and insisted on writing, for *Sanyisheng shi*, Hu Qiaomu 胡喬木 (1912–92), Mao Zedong’s one-time secretary and a Communist hard-liner in charge of ideological matters in the 1980s, declares, “Although the author had lived through unimaginable suffering, he has never expressed any negativity and pessimism; he has always felt pleasure, even a sense of humor, about life, and has always

harbored confidence in the revolutionary prospects” 作者雖然生活在難以想像的苦境中，卻從未表現頹唐悲觀，對生活始終保有樂趣甚至詼諧感，對革命前途始終抱有信心。⁷⁷ Hu clearly understands the power of the poems and attempts to control their protean meanings with his preface.⁷⁸ His is an infinitely simplifying description of Nie Gannu’s classical-style poetry, whose very power lies in the mixture of real feelings and intense self-consciousness, earnestness and irony. Hu’s comment seeks to make transparent a poetry that deliberately remains opaque with its emotional complexity.

Aside: Nie Gannu’s Take on the Sun

Nie Gannu once wrote a new-style poem, “Sunrise” 日出, in 1949, celebrating the founding of the People’s Republic. In 1983 he revised it. The revisions are mostly modest (except for an added stanza), but significant. Here are the ending stanzas of the 1949 version:

我們要絕望了!	We were about to despair.
誰知,	Who’d know,
就是現在,	It is now,
卻真地日出了!	The sun really rises!
我們真看見了太陽!	We have really seen the sun!
[...]	[...]

⁷⁷ Nie Gannu *shi quanbian*, 3. Hu’s preface is dated July 14, 1982.

⁷⁸ Nie Gannu tries to counter this comment in his postface to the 1985 edition of *Sanyisheng shi*, written in the summer of 1983. He states that his is not really “humor” but rather “Ah Q mentality,” a phrase from Lu Xun’s “The True Story of Ah Q” referring to someone who does not accept reality as what it is and instead seeks psychological triumph in the face of failure. In implicit contrast to Hu’s comment, Nie writes, “If there is anything special about my poems, I believe that first of all it is because they write about manual labor. . . . The ancients also sometimes wrote about labor. . . . However, I engaged in labor myself and along with others; I have also watched others labor, but I was not sympathizing [from a higher status like the premodern poets]; rather, I was singing praises. *I struggled to sing praises, and sing with ‘Ah Q mentality.’* Not only did I sing praises of others, but I also sang praises of myself” 我的詩如果真有什麼特色。我以為首先在寫了勞動..... 古人也有寫勞動的..... 我卻是自己勞動，和別人一起勞動，也看別人勞動，但都不是同情，而是歌頌，勉強歌頌，以阿 Q 精神歌頌。不但歌頌別人，而且歌頌自己 (*my italics*). Nie Gannu *shi quanbian*, 165.

告訴你一句真的夢話:	Let me tell you this real example of dream-talk:
那太陽	That sun
就是	Is
我們自己!	Ourselves! ⁷⁹
[...]	[...]

And here are the ending stanzas of the 1983 version, with the added lines in italics:

我們幾乎絕望了!	We were <i>almost in despair!</i>
誰知,	Who'd know,
就是今天,	<i>It is today,</i>
就是現在,	It is now,
卻真的日出了!	The sun really rises!
我們真看見太陽了!	We have really seen the sun!
真是真的麼?	<i>Is this really real?</i>
[...]	[...]

告訴你一句真的夢話:	Let me tell you this real example of dream-talk:
那太陽	That sun
就是	Is
我們人民	<i>We the people</i>
自己!	Ourselves! ⁸⁰
[...]	[...]

The question added to the original version—“Is this really real?”—is at once rhetorical and literal, doubt cast in retrospect. He also wants to make sure that his reader understands precisely what the sun is: It is not a sovereign ruler or a great leader; rather, it is the people themselves, including the poet.

⁷⁹ Nie Gannu *quanji*, vol. 5, 335–36.

⁸⁰ Nie Gannu *shi quanji*, 437–39.

Classical-Style and New-Style in the Twenty-First Century

If during the political movements in socialist China the writing of classical-style poetry was the means of resisting ideological pressure and surviving trauma, then in the twentieth-first century it has been cleverly coopted into the nationalistic agenda encouraged and heavily financially sponsored by the Chinese state. There are regularly held national classical-style poetry competitions, one of which is even named after Nie Gannu. As early as 1982, Nie Gannu had already expressed his displeasure with Hu Qiaomu's directive to publish an annotated edition of his classical-style poems, believing that the younger generation (for whom the annotations were directed) should not have to read his poems; he also voiced his disapproval of how "people always regard the official cap as the horse's head" 世人以紗帽爲馬首 (i.e., following the lead of an official).⁸¹ He would have been immensely disappointed had he lived to see such conservative ideology behind the writing of classical-style poetry in the academic circles and among the wider public today. For Nie, the writing of classical-style poetry was occasioned by special historical circumstances, which he had never expected or desired to experience in the first place.

But Nie might have approved of the Internet because of its democratic nature. While it is true that interest groups fragment the Web, new-style and old-style share the same space side by side and are visible to all who care to look; poets need not seek the approval of literary establishments, and anyone can publish whatever she or he wants to publish on the World Wide Web. The fact that the common folk can publicize their poems widely and easily has brought new-style poetry closer to classical-style poetry in unexpected ways.

Contrary to the claims of the early twentieth-century literary reformers, traditional poetry was not always an essentially elite form, despite being used by the elite. The prescribed verse forms were not difficult to master. Classical poetry could be erudite and densely allusive, but it could also be so simple

⁸¹ He expressed these views in his letter to Shu Wu dated October 25, 1982. *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 488. Also in his postface to the annotated edition. *Ibid.*, 163–65. Shu Wu gives a clear, insightful elucidation of Nie's position on the issue of classical-style poetry in his "Yifen baijuan: Guanyu Nie Gannu de *Beihuang cao*," 47–48. Also see *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 506–8.

and direct in diction that even an illiterate person or someone with basic school education could understand.⁸² That a poem should by definition resist easy interpretation is itself a modern notion. The topics of classical poetry are also rooted in everyday experience and have an earthiness to it that is lacking in much of the new-style poetry in the twentieth century. However, in the age of the Internet, new-style poetry has become more and more popularized as well as earthy, so much so that there have been many outcries about how poetry has lost its sacredness and become vulgarized. The angry, fearful critics seem to forget that classical poetry itself had often been written on the walls of taverns, brothels, waystations, and temples for everyone to see, and that anyone who mastered its prescribed verse forms could engage in it.

The Internet gradually closes the gap between new-style and classical-style poems in the sense that both function as cultural forms enjoyed by a large social group that has gone far beyond members of the literary, intellectual, and scholarly establishments. Differences nonetheless remain. In the discussions of classical-style poetry online, there tends to be an intense awareness of poetry-writing as a craft and skill and a more detailed critique of a poem down to a line and the choice of a word; both are quite absent in the discussions of new-style poetry. Some may think this is due to prosodic requirements of classical verse forms, but the discussions are not limited to prosody. Rather, they imply a perception of poetry as a craft that can be

⁸² A case in point is a simple poem like Wang Wei's "Love-Longing" cited earlier in this paper, or a poem like "Jingye si" 靜夜思 attributed to Li Bai 李白 (701–62) ("Bright moonlight in front of my bed / Looks like frost on the ground. / I raise my head to see the bright moon, / I lower my head and long for my home"), or any of the poems included in popular eighteenth-century anthologies such as *Three Hundred Tang Poems*, still immensely influential in modern times. An illiterate or a rudimentarily educated person's understanding of the simpler forms of classical poetry was rooted in, and conditioned by, their familiarity with oral, popular literary forms. In late imperial times, drama and vernacular fiction would both employ poems liberally. Even today, arias and spoken dialogues in regional operas use a simple register of Literary Chinese (*wenyan wen* 文言文). Other popular literary forms such as "precious scrolls" (*baojuan* 寶卷), "lute ballads" (*tanci* 彈詞), and drum lyrics (*guci* 鼓詞) all use rhymed lines that evoke the rhythm of classical poetry. Couplets (*duilian* 對聯) and "Spring Festival couplets" (*chunlian* 春聯), employing the principle of parallel couplet in regulated verse, grace the doors of temples, shrines, and rural or urban homes. China's popular culture is indeed filled with traces of classical Chinese poetry.

perfected by oneself and by taking others' suggestions, poetry as a social enterprise. That perception is in direct contradistinction to the modern romantic notion of poetry as divinely inspired or as a private, solitary pursuit, poetry as "written for oneself only."

Modern classical-style poetry and new-style poetry are always segregated; yet, the Internet brings them together into a space where they are more visibly practiced than ever, and this has consequences for both forms. For classical-style poetry, the communal space in which it always thrives is widened beyond national borders, although it seems fated to be the new local poetry in the global market of literature because of its attention to national language. Although it *can* often be translated successfully, it is not poetry written, or suitable, for translation, and the pleasure of the poet, and of the reader, lies in the well-crafted phrases and lines.

New-style poetry must bear the weight of representing China to the outside world, and yet, the numerous poetry-writers posting or directly composing their poems on the Internet complicate its values and voices. Certainly, many still hold on to the familiar notion that poetry must strive for a beauty absent in everyday language and should be difficult to comprehend, but more new-style poems are being composed casually and in an off-handed manner, and are becoming increasingly like classical-style poetry in its down-to-earth quality; readers are also enjoying it casually rather than treating it as a sacred aesthetic object to be revered. Classical-style poetry, in contrast, because of its prosodic requirements and millennia-old poetic vocabulary and imagery, in some ways is becoming more "aestheticized" and, in its stiffness and triteness, more distant from daily life except in the hands of its most gifted practitioners, who remain few and far between. Thus, in a strange development, classical-style poetry and new-style poetry are switching places.

Looking back at Nie Gannu, we can see many of these issues about classical- and new-style poetry being played out in his own practice of both verse forms. His preference for regulated verse is a deliberate embrace of the technical aspect of classical-style poetry: On the one hand, the absorption in craftsmanship was therapeutic for him in the chaotic, traumatic age; on the other, the restraint of the form and the use of parallel couplet afforded him linguistic resources unavailable in the new-style poetry, so that he was able

to express emotional complexity, ambivalence and, most important, an irony that is, in his own words, “both there and not quite there.” Nie Gannu’s case demonstrates the importance of understanding each verse form in each other’s context, and “each has its own moment.”

Nie Gannu often tried to be dismissive about the classical verse forms as well as about his practice of writing classical-style poetry. “This thing called regulated verse,” he said to his good friend Shu Wu, “is a simple little literary form, a little word game, which allows one to articulate some small feelings, small psychological state and small principles of things; it is difficult to use it to express intricate, deep, and subtle things.”⁸³ Conversely, he felt a particular affection for his new-style poetry. In the preface to his new-style poetry collection, he wrote: “They express more of my feelings than my essays do. In this regard, to me, they *truly are poetry* [真是詩]; when I was writing them, *sometimes I was indeed a poet*” (my italics).⁸⁴ He felt them to be “not too bad” 不算太壞. It would be a mistake for us to compare the best examples of one kind of poetry with the mediocre examples of another kind of poetry, as some critics are wont to do in support of their personal aesthetic preference and literary agenda; but Nie Gannu is doubtless much better known for his classical-style poetry than for his new-style poetry. When he was writing classical-style poems, he might not have been a true poet according to his own and the modern romantic definition of a “poet,” but many of the poems are “true poetry” [是真詩].

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⁸³ “律詩這東西，是個小而簡單的文學形式，發揮一點小感情、小心理狀態及物理狀態的小文字遊戲。對於曲折深微的東西就很難表達。” *Nie Gannu shi quanbian*, 487.

⁸⁴ “它比散文更多地表達了我的感情。這一點，它在我，又真是詩；我在寫它們的時候，有時也真是詩人。” *Ibid.*, 361.

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