

MODERNISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Taiwan Literature in the 1960s

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In February 1953 the poet Ji Xian (Chi Hsien) founded *Xiandai shi jikan* [Modern poetry quarterly], for which he was chief editor. In the inaugural editorial, Ji emphasized:

We think all literature belongs to its time. Only when it is the work of its time will it have permanent value. That is to say, we give equal emphasis to the social significance and artistic quality of poetry; above all, we demand the expression and promotion of the spirit of the time so that it becomes modern poetry with its own characteristics, not ancient poetry removed from today's society. Moreover, it should not be old foreign poetry!

What we want is modernity. We think in poetic technique we are still backward and naive. . . . Only when we look to the international poetry scene, learn new modes of expression, so that we can get up and run and catch up with it, then can our so-called New Poetry be modernized.

Although the name of the journal had been changed from *New Poetry* to *Modern Poetry*, the emphasis was on the modernization of new poetry, not modernism. The significance of the new literature is stated by Hu Shi, the "Father of New Poetry," in "A Constructive View on the Literary Revolution": "First, the modes of Chinese literature are inadequate and cannot serve as our models; second, the modes of Western literature are more adequate and better than our own and should be modeled." Therefore, the only way to improve, according to Hu, was to "translate the classics of Western literature as fast as we can." What Ji Xian refers to above as "the international poetry scene" is obviously not the poetry of India or the Philippines but that of Europe and the United States. In essence, his remarks are but an extension of a simple economic idea to the cultural sphere, namely, that technologically backward countries should learn from their technologically advanced counterparts. Therefore, although Ji

emphasizes a "modern poetry with its own characteristics" and "the expression and promotion of the spirit of the time," he qualifies "the spirit of the time" or "modern" in terms such as "technique" and "new modes of expression." Unlike the advanced nations of Europe and the United States, technologically backward nations could not possibly have their own "spirit of the time" or their characteristic "expression and promotion" of that spirit!

At the time, the "modernity" that Ji Xian advocated did not seem to refer to modernism. In his *Xinshi lunji* [Essays on new poetry], compiled in 1955 and published in 1956, he pointed out in a piece entitled "All Literature Is 'Modern'": "All literature, especially poetry, must be 'modern' vis-à-vis the time in which it is written. Otherwise, it is not poetry, nor does it belong to any category of literature. Anything that imitates those who live in an earlier time is not creation and therefore is not literature." Drawing on such examples as Qu Yuan (Ch'ü Yuan), Dante, Li Po, and Shelley, he arrived at the following maxim: "Anything that is 'modern' is eternal; only when it is 'modern' can it belong to the 'classical.'"

The significance of the essay lies not in its advocacy of modernity but rather in the fact that it harks back to T. S. Eliot's notion in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that modern and classic are different yet complementary. The works of classical Chinese poets become classic exactly because in their own time they are "modern" and are the "masterpieces."

In July 1961, Yü Guangzhong (Yü Kuang-chung) wrote an essay entitled "Welcome the Chinese Renaissance," which summarized the recently concluded "Debate on Chinese versus Western Culture" and discussed developments in literature and the arts—including modern poetry, modern art, and modern music—which had emerged five or six years earlier. The subtitle of the essay comes from Wang Wei's famous couplet: "Walk to the end of the river / Sit down to watch the clouds rise." Evoking Li Changji (Li Ch'ang-chi)'s essay on the May Fourth movement, Yu advanced the following view:

The pinnacle of modern Chinese literature and art has to be the intersecting point of Western and Eastern cultures. When that time comes, not only will the modern movement in literature and art be successful but a renaissance will come about and we will have a satisfactory response to our classical literature and art and those of the May Fourth period.

Therefore, our ideal is that to advance the Chinese Renaissance, young and middle-aged artists must walk out of the Chinese classical tradition, be baptized in the Western classical tradition and modern literature and art. Then they must return to China to claim and further develop their own classical tradition. The result is the establishment of a

new and living tradition. In other words, the destination of our journey from Changan to Paris is not Paris. Paris is only a stopover. Our final destination is still China. Maybe we learn alchemy in Paris, but the real pure gold is still buried in Chinese mines, waiting for us to return to excavate.

Although Yu's metaphors of alchemy and gold mining are similar to Hu Shi's notion of learning from Western literary modes and Ji Xian's looking to the international poetry scene, Yu emphasizes inheriting Chinese classical tradition and further developing it. Therefore, the Chinese Renaissance that he envisions truly is "a new and living tradition." He opens the above essay with this prediction: "The cultural scene of 1962 will be colorful." Is such modernity, conceived as classical plus modern or traditional plus modern, the modernism of the 1960s?

On January 15, 1956, Ji Xian called the first annual meeting of the Modernist School in Taipei. Organized by a nine-member committee, the meeting announced the official founding of the school. The cover of issue no. 13 of the *Modern Poetry Quarterly*, published in February of the same year, listed the "Tenets of the Modernist School":

- No. 1: We are a group of Modernists who selectively embrace the spirit and features of all the new poetry schools since Baudelaire.
- No. 2: We believe New Poetry is [the fruit of] horizontal transplantation, not vertical inheritance. This is the general idea, the basic starting point, for the development of theory and practice of creative writing.
- No. 3: [We engage in] adventures on the new continent of poetry and explorations of the virgin land of poetry: expression of new contents, creation of new forms, discovery of new tools, invention of new methods.
- No. 4: We emphasize intellectuality.
- No. 5: We pursue the purity of poetry.
- No. 6: Patriotism. Anti-Communism. Support of freedom and democracy.

Obviously, the modernism that Ji Xian had in mind was broad and vague, because it included "all the new poetry schools since Baudelaire." Hence, the temporal or contemporary nature of the so-called modernism was far more important than the concrete "spirit and features" of the poetry schools. When we consider whether it is possible to subsume the new poetry schools under the notions of "intellectuality" and "pure poetry," the tenets come across as rather one-sided, as does Ji's rejection of modern-

ism's "tendency toward the sickly fin de siècle" and his advocacy of developing "the healthy, the progressive, and the uplifting." If modernism can be dubbed "sickly" and "fin de siècle," how can we extract from it "the healthy, progressive, and uplifting"? Further, whether it emphasizes intellectuality or the pursuit of pure poetry, it has nothing to do with being sickly or healthy, fin de siècle or progressive. These concepts are unrelated to each other.

By the same token, once we impose the criteria of intellectuality and purity, the so-called "adventures" and "explorations" are delimited. Besides, it is not clear how "all the new poetry schools since Baudelaire" fit Ji Xian's definition: "We think New Poetry must be true to its name: making it new from day to day. Poetry that is not new does not deserve to be called New Poetry. Therefore, we emphasize the word 'new.'" If we look at it from this viewpoint, then it is all relative. New for whom? For what tradition? Consider Ji's notorious emphasis on horizontal transplantation. Some of the spirit and features "new" to the Western tradition may in fact be "old" for the Chinese or Eastern tradition. By the same token, what seems "old" to the West may turn out to be "new" to China.

The problem was that Ji Xian and others were not steeped in the great tradition of Western literature, much less in the great tradition of Chinese poetry from the *Shijing* or *Book of Songs* onward. When he talked about classical Chinese poetry, he mentioned only Li Bo, Du Fu, Tang poetry, Song songs, and Yuan arias. When he talked about "national essence," he only referred to "Tang poetry, Song song lyrics, and the like." This suggests his ignorance about classical Chinese poetry of other periods.

The result was predictable. Although Ji Xian emphasized intellectuality and purity, his poems show that personality determines literary style. "Solitary Wolf" compares himself to a wolf whose "shri!ll and long howls . . . shake Heaven and Earth as if in malaria." In "Days on the Wagon," he says, "I . . . aim those empty bottles at the cement wall far far away" and "two by two I throw them to create a bing-bang sound. . . Isn't that also a great kick?" This kind of "new" poetry gives release to feelings of boredom and aimlessness, which is actually reminiscent of Yuan arias.

Qin Zihao (Ch'in Tzu-hao) wrote such intellectual poems as "The Existence of a Jar":

Not an idol, it has no face
Not a deity, it has no doctrine
It is an existence, of stillness, of beauty
Embodied in imagery, visible, sensible, yet uncertain
It is the existence of another world
The order of dream, born of the fusion
Of the Classical, Symbolist, Cubist, Surrealist, and Abstract

