

The Classical as the Utopic: processes of transition in texts between Chinese pre-modern, Western modern lyricists and Chinese “old-style” poetry in the 20th and 21st century.

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The discovery of “the Chinese written character as a medium of poetry”, first publicly pronounced by Ezra Pound through his 1919 edition of Ernest Fenellosa’s (1853 - 1908) equally entitled manuscript, has accelerated a process of transition in lyrical styles among Anglo-phone and, to a lesser degree also among Germanophone and Francophone lyricists, which ultimately resulted in hitherto inconceivable concepts of poetic form, culture and language at the heart of the modernist movement between the world-wars. The post WW II era saw another generation of excellent and highly influential translations and free adaptations inspired by the vision, almost common among Western intellectuals, of Chinese lyrical art as embodiment of classical language unconstrained by the discontent with “tradition” in a world, which was increasingly perceived through radical breaks and abrupt leaps.

At the same time the modernist and anti-traditionalist movement spiralled to its height in China, many lyricists among its spear-heads. Sinologists concerned with literary history in the 20th century only reluctantly acknowledge that so-called “old-style poems” (舊詩, *jiu shi*) not only continued to be produced in great number and quality and often by the same authors, who were perceived as leaders of the New Culture Movement (新文化運動, *xin wenhua yundong*) or later modernist ideologies, but also constitute a successional layer of lyrical voices in vital interaction with the dramatic social and political events of the times. In a most recent study on old-style poetry of the first half of the 20th century, Haosheng Yang considers that “Modern authors of old-style verses ... threaded their political visions and attitudes into their poetic creations. Their opting for the traditional genre itself becomes a subtle commentary on the tempestuous Chinese modernization and its authorized vernacular voice.” (Yang 2016, p.7)

In the post-modern Western world, translation and imitation of classical Chinese lyricists – mostly from the Wei-Jin to the Song period (3rd to 13th cent. AD) – continued to be most influential among poets of North America. Fenellosian-Poundian misconceptions of the poetic nature of written Chinese have proved irreversible fruitful by contributing to the unfolding of a diversity of “contemporary poetry and poetics: Objectivists, Black Mountain, Beats, the San Francisco Renaissance, Williams, Zukofsky, Rakosi, Oppen, Reznikoff, Olson, Duncan, Levertov, Creeley, Cage, Ginsberg, Snyder, Silliman, Bernstein...” (Saussy 2009, p. 34) However, in more recent works like those of the poet, translator and sinologist David Hinton (born 1954) it seems that a much better knowledge of the source-language interacts with ecopoetic and quietist spirits.

Otherwise, poets like Lizilizilizi (Zeng Shaoli, born 1958) represent the so-called “New Old Style Movement” popular in the Chinanet since the late 1990th. This movement appears inspired by a revival of the traditional Chinese intellectuals’ fondness for crafted, highly allusive verse, which has turned, in Xiaofei Tian’s words into a post-modern “‘pleasure of the text’ – echoes of classical and modern literature, cultural lore, contemporary colloquialism and slang, exuberant word play, or well-crafted parallel couplets.” (Tian 2009)

This project ventures a comparative investigation into the transitional processes Chinese lyrical classics have stimulated in major lyrical works of the 20th and 21st century. The modern literary utopia of the Classical will be explored in a series of three essays as a source of highly ambiguous inspirations conditioned by different social, ideological and cultural contexts.

The objectives of the essays:

1. Evoking the Shadow of History: Old-style Poetry and New Old Style Movement in the PRC
2. Classical Chinese Lyricism and Modernist Poetry in the West

Ecopoetic and Contemporary Translation of Classical Chinese Lyricists