

# National Myth and Global Aesthetics: Reading Yeats alongside Chinese Poetic Modernism

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## 1 Introduction: Yeats's Modernism from the Margins

One of the conundrums of modern Chinese literary studies is how to navigate the tortuous road through the particular cultural heritage from which it arises, global trends such as modernism, and the individual creative voice. Some scholars take the position that indigenous cultures and Westernization are mutually exclusive. Others emphasize the need to view Chinese modernism as part of a global trend in which cultural and national specificities are at best superficial, cosmetic, and incidental. In carrying out such discussions, scholars in the first camp tend to eschew comparative discussions of Chinese and Western authors. Scholars who are more internationalist in their approach embrace such comparisons. Underlying the broad assumption is the subtle, or sometimes not so subtle, attitude that those who readily adopt from the West are not authentically Chinese, and that those who exclusively tap their own tradition for creative inspiration must be antagonistic to modernism. In investigating this problem, it helps to look at the one true model from English poetic modernism who blended the broad panoply of images from the mainstream European cultural reservoir with the more particular and idiosyncratic mythic lore of his Irish homeland: William Butler Yeats (1865–1939).

Of the three towering figures of modernism in English poetry—William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound (1885–1972), and T. S. Eliot (1888–1965)—it was not solely years that separated Yeats from the latter two. Of course, as the one who preceded the others by about a generation, Yeats indeed was different from Pound and Eliot in terms of age. As such, he served not quite like a contemporary but as more of a transitional figure between the Victorian era (he actually referred to himself as one of the last Romantics) and the Modernist era. But what really distinguished him was his country of origin and the way the vexing relationship between his Irish national identity and his residence in the more cosmopolitan, and politically powerful, London, still the seat in the early twentieth century of a vast empire, weighed upon him. Yeats's Ireland may have been fertile ground for the poetry of myth and richly bucolic scenery. It was

close to a third world entity, however, existing in the shadow of the wealthy and militarized British empire. Pound and Eliot, despite whatever disappointment or contempt they may have held for the United States, perceived at the time as devoid of the kind of cultural sophistication that Europe held, were fleeing a rising political power that was on the threshold of global dominance. Yeats could legitimately argue that he hailed from a politically weak and, in fact, colonized state, and several scholars in the past generation have remarked upon this.

Yeats's insecurity with respect to national identity in the face of the transnational literary phenomenon that modernism came to be is much closer to the experience of non-Western poets such as Aimé Césaire, Chinua Achebe, Derek Walcott, Pablo Neruda, and Mahmoud Darwish than to that of Pound and Eliot.<sup>1</sup> I argue here that the same can be said of modern Chinese poets: the sense of the abject in the face of an expanding global, Western/capitalist social envelopment that paralleled modernism, and the resultant paradoxical and confused relationship with "the tradition" that this genuinely new phenomenon forced upon Chinese intellectuals of the twentieth century had some affinities on both the thematic and formal level with William Butler Yeats. From the beginning, Yeats was preoccupied with fine technique, and it could well have been this fact that prompted Pound to opine that Yeats was the only poet in London of interest when he arrived there. "Adam's Curse," published in 1904 as part of a collection of poems generally thought to mark the transition between his early and middle poetry, chooses the Biblical allusion of Adam's fall as a metaphor for the labor one must undertake in order to bring beauty to poetic expression. It is not exactly clear why that allusion worked for Yeats, but perhaps it is because bestowing knowledge on humans, as the Biblical story goes, became a burden for them. The toil the craft of poetry presents, which Yeats laments in the lines "I said, 'A line will take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught,'" is "certain," because "there is no fine thing / Since Adam's fall but needs much laboring."<sup>2</sup> All fine things are begotten from the hard work of forging them, and poetry is no exception. Helen Vendler, one of the most prolific scholars of poetic form in recent decades, invokes this poem to illustrate how "the poet's sedulous stitching and unstitching" became a blueprint for Yeats's development over the balance of his career: "It is in the later poetry [of Yeats] that the verse that seems but a moment's thought becomes

1 See in particular Martin McKinsey, "Classicism and Colonial Retrenchment in W. B. Yeats's 'No Second Troy,'" 181.

2 Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 204–205.

sovereign.”<sup>3</sup> Anticipating this comment, Sonjoy Dutta-Roy averred that it was out of this “laborious ‘stitching’ and ‘unstitching’...[that] true beauty is born, and the sorrow inherent in love.”<sup>4</sup> The transition from human experience to poetry, transporting the corporeal to language, requires an arduous “distillation” (Dutta-Roy, “Adam’s Curse,” 185) that allows us as readers to regard the “temporal” in “a higher, timeless, and impersonal order” (187). But if Yeats were merely a wordsmith, he might not have garnered the attention of serious poets and may have been relegated to the larger grouping of good, but not great, poets, of whom there were many contemporaries.

The critical quality that epitomized the Yeatsian imprint was the “Janus face,” as David Lloyd describes it, a “combination of modernization and archaism, its condensations of political within sexual desire.”<sup>5</sup> I would add that Yeats expertly wedded the topical problems of Ireland’s political destiny with the tightly wrought verse he created, verse that displayed precise word choice, wonderful rhythm, clever melding of classical, Irish mythic, and historical references, and other exemplary forms of poetic technique. Merging artful technique with expressions of the insecure and unstable status of his native Ireland is what “puts him in the company of other poets of decolonization” (David Lloyd, “Nationalism and Postcolonialism,” 181). The overriding tone, Lloyd continues, is one of “ambivalence,” and most crucially the image “of an object that remains unattainable and leaves the desiring subject perpetually unsatisfied” (“Nationalism and Postcolonialism,” 186). One can see this ambivalence and frustration inherent in the embroidered myth of Yeats’s short narratives featuring Red Hanrahan, and in the related poem “Red Hanrahan’s Song about Ireland,” written in 1894. The “unappeased desire” that Lloyd detects in these tales binds together the visceral and sexual with the political. As Elizabeth Butler Cullingford proposes in an essay on Yeats and gender: “By rendering masculine erotic abjection indistinguishable from religious and political devotion, ‘Red Hanrahan’s Song about Ireland’ taps into a powerful psychological force field in which masochism provides the major affective thrust.”<sup>6</sup> Red Hanrahan embodies several things at once: he is a country schoolmaster, a middling poet, and a “doomed” wanderer, to use Edward Hirsch’s description.<sup>7</sup> Yeats, in the persona of Red Hanrahan, presents the reader with

3 Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, 108–109.

4 Sonjoy Dutta-Roy, “Adam’s Curse,” 182–183.

5 David Lloyd, “Nationalism and Postcolonialism,” 181.

6 Elisabeth Cullingford, “Yeats and Gender,” 171.

7 As Hirsch states, the emergence of the notion of an “original author” who “owns his own text” is a problem for one who wishes to tap into his native folkloric tradition. “One response to this problem is for the writer to attempt to situate his work in the world by supposedly

vivid and tempestuous images of the Irish landscape, with such phrases as “old brown thorn-trees break in two,” “bitter black wind,” “the thunder on the stones,” “noisy clouds,” “the wet winds are blowing out of the clinging air,” and “heavy flooded waters our bodies and our blood” (Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach, *Variorum*, 207–208). Yeats’s penchant for synesthesia, evidenced by such images as “noisy clouds” and “black winds,” creates a foreboding mood that is only relieved, and then only in part, by the appeal to the mythic figure of Cathleen, “the daughter of Houlihan,” and perhaps the deliverer of Ireland from its woeful condition as a subservient state. Referring to this state of mind as a sort of “masochism,” Cullingford pinpoints a governing mood of weakness and abjection that pervades the early and mid-career Yeats, a mood that best epitomizes his sentiments regarding his native land (see especially Cullingford, “Yeats,” 179–182). Sharon Gallagher, in turn, sees Hanrahan as “the voice of Ireland’s past calling out in the present to rejuvenate a nation and let her take pride in herself again.”<sup>8</sup> Rather than an indulgence in that past, though, she concludes that Hanrahan is “a new hero for a nation on the brink of independence created out of the old tales but allowing space for creating a new, distinctive literature” (Sharon Gallagher, “Yeats’s ‘Red Hanrahan,’” 40). Thus, what Cullingford calls “abject,” “weakness,” “masochism,” is precisely the emotional impetus required by Yeats and his national brethren to see the colony and subsequent fledgling state through to independence and strength.

By the time we get to “No Second Troy” (1908), Yeats has begun to shift his mood and adopt, in Martin McKinsey’s words, “the characteristic high Modernist move into the ‘masculine’” (“Classicism,” 184). According to McKinsey, the “fighting poetry” that is better “suited to the skirmishes and standoffs of a nation being born” (“Classicism,” 184), “for the first time brings ancient Greece into an important poetic dialogue with Modern Ireland” (174–175). The lesson from the classical allusion is that Ireland will not end up like Troy did at the hands of the Greeks. Although in this poem what becomes of the “misery” that “filled my days” and the femme fatale who “would of late have taught ignorant men most violent ways, / Or hurled the little streets upon the great” is not disclosed, we still have the rhetorical question at the end, “Was there another Troy for her to burn?,” and the title “No Second Troy” to indicate the distinction that Yeats draws between classical source and contemporary situation. It is not that Ireland is similar to the classical example, but precisely that it is dissimilar. As Yeats moved forward in his poetry, and as the political status of Ireland edged closer toward the Irish state, Yeats grew more assertive

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rooting it in the communal oral literature of an empirical folk.” See Hirsch’s “And I Myself Created Hanrahan,” 880–893, esp. 881 (for quote) and 890.

8 Sharon Gallagher, “Yeats’s ‘Red Hanrahan,’” 40.

in the political undertones of his poetry. But despite the shift, the “interplay between politics and poetic form” (Martin McKinsey, “Classicism,” 175), in this case the appropriation of classical allusion, never dissipated.

Politics and poetic expression can never be too far apart for William Butler Yeats, despite the decidedly highly aesthetic nature of his verse. What we see in him as a colossal figure of English (language) modernism is a poet painfully and persistently aware of his national identity in the otherwise cosmopolitan world of the global urban nexus at a time when the particularities of national identity were not supposed to matter much anymore. Despite his status as vaguely first world, in a sense, because after all he was a well-educated, white male living a comfortable life mainly in London, his resultant affinity with the poets who could not so easily shed the tincture of their national identity is highly revealing. As Chinese poetry made its epochal conversion from the classical poetry that, in its various prosodic forms, would eventually become the free verse of vernacular, modern Mandarin, it too had to confront notions of national weakness, humiliation, and abjection. In this essay, by providing a discussion of such Chinese poets as Wu Xinghua 吳興華 (1921–1966), Luo Fu 洛夫 (1928–2018), and Xiao Kaiyu 萧开愚 (b. 1960),<sup>9</sup> each representing a different generation, I advance the view that it is precisely the ability to mine the native landscape, transforming it into the rejuvenated imagery of a modern form, combined with the self-conscious anxiety of the new nation(s), that makes at least some contemporary Chinese poets modernist in style and outlook. Yeats shows us that it is not only Asian authors who bridle against the converging trends of modernization and Western imperialism. Facing a predicament similar to Yeats in the second half of the twentieth century, some Chinese poets similarly have turned to the Chinese tradition with its history, legends, and stories and used it as a reservoir for their artistic endeavors as well as core national beliefs. Of course, one clear distinction and a caution against too forced a comparison is that with Yeats there is a big difference between the dredging of local myth from Irish lore and the appropriation of classical allusion. Though certainly disparities in the status of myth and historical references exist in the Chinese tradition, due to more demonstrable linguistic continuities between early and modern China, there is more overarching unity between them than there is between Ireland and Greece, or at least so we are expected to think.

9 Wu Xinghua flourished in the late Republican period; Luo Fu, though born in mainland China, lived most of his adult life in Taiwan and is associated with poetic activities there; Xiao Kaiyu is a mainland poet of the post-Mao era. Xiao's name often appears as 肖开愚 in China, even though the correct writing of his surname is 萧.

## 2 The Lonely Road of Mid-Century Classical and Western Amalgams: Wu Xinghua's "Xi Shi"

Poems of Wu Xinghua, such as "Xi Shi" 西施 (1941), bespeak the multilayered and multivalent sentiments of the modern author in China. Wu Xinghua was nearly unique in mid-century Chinese poetry as an advocate and practitioner of modernist poetry, or, more precisely, highly dense yet innovative and vernacular verse that appropriated from early Chinese myth and displayed the influence of Western Modernist poets such as Yeats and Eliot. Wu Xinghua translated some Yeats into Chinese, and in his time was arguably better known for his literary scholarship than for his poetry. Wu was one of the first poets to borrow freely from the Western literary tradition while still working to craft a new poetic idiom in China, mainly out of free verse. His poetry in some ways was indebted to the ancient style (*gushi* 古詩) of Chinese poetry, a somewhat looser idiom than the tight prosodic laws of recent style (*jintishi* 近體詩). He also was not afraid to employ allusion.

Wu's poem "Xi Shi," invoking the classic Chinese beauty, crystallizes the problem of refashioning Chinese poetry into a new form both with respect to stylistic and thematic issues:

Immersed in thought, the universe was too small;  
At the corner of her lips hung the fates of Wu and Yue.  
Oblivious to success and failure, human emotions  
Would only generate cold response from her.  
She sought for things that were long lasting and  
More mysterious—or nonexistent at all.  
Curious people often ask: after the fall of Gusu,  
Xi Shi and Fan Li, where did they drift to?  
Only beauty undisturbed could count as complete.  
A word spoken would lessen her manifold charm.  
Since she was not born from this heavy Earth,  
Why should she be concerned about changes in roles?  
From the lofty Queen to the wife of a drifting  
Commoner, she kept her silence, accepted  
A different embrace with the same sad mood.  
Daily she breathed the foreign air of this world.  
Not once did she not feel to be a passer-by.<sup>10</sup>

10 This is Ping-kwan Leung's translation, based in part on an early rendering by Wai-lim Yip. See Leung, "Modern Hong Kong Poetry," 225. I have made some slight adjustments primarily to emphasize the literal meaning of the original Chinese.

沉淪在思維裡，宇宙範圍還太小，  
 因為就在她唇角關係着吳和越。  
 成敗就在她所漠然的，人世的情感  
 得到她冷淡的反響而以為滿足；  
 她的靈魂所追逐的却是更久遠  
 更神秘的事物——或許根本不存在。  
 好奇的人們時常要追問：在姑蘇  
 陷落后，她和范蠡到何處去流浪？  
 不受擾亂的靜美才算是最安全，  
 一句話就會減少她萬分的嬌豔。  
 既然不是從沉重的大地裡生出，  
 她又何必需關心于變換的身世？  
 從吳宮顰眉的王后降落為賈人  
 以船為家的妻子，她保持靜默，  
 接受不同的擁抱以同樣的愁容，  
 日日呼吸著這人間生疏的空氣，  
 她無時不覺得自己是一個過客。

The legend of Xi Shi, an astounding beauty given by the State of Yue 越 to the stronger State of Wu 吳 as a tribute, but actually a sort of Trojan horse because she and others served to beguile King Fuchai of Wu 吳王夫差 (r. 495–473 BCE), should be known to all Chinese. The poem thus obviously invokes the legendary story of the famous Chinese beauty from the fifth century BCE who was sadly given away by the Yue kingdom to ensure peaceful relations with a more powerful rival. The question is why Wu Xinghua would write a poem about Xi Shi in Republican China? There are several possible explanations for this. First, as a proponent of “neoclassicism,” as Edward Gunn explains, Wu’s expressed desire was to reintroduce the web of intertextual relationships of classical poetic allusion for which Chinese literature was well known, and which in the early part of the twentieth century were purged as anathema to a modern vernacular literature by such reformers as Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962).<sup>11</sup> Wu was “unimpressed by his elders in the new poetry movements” and only “credit[ed] Bian Zhilin 卞之琳 (1910–2000) and He Qifang 何其芳 (1912–1977) with respectable verse,” disdaining the others as “scholars or fools who don’t understand Chinese” (Edward Gunn, *Unwelcome Muse*, 194).

11 Gunn places Wu Xinghua in the context of war-era writers from Beijing and Shanghai, the latter of which were hostile to the previous generations’ effulgent expressions of romanticism. Writers like Qian Zhongshu, Yang Jiang, Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang), and Wu Xinghua were more tempered and inventive in their portrayal of Chinese social problems. See Edward Gunn, *Unwelcome Muse*, 193–198.

Although many of his poems, in particular the early ones, link to a “classical world,” which “was in many instances obscure to all but the most highly educated Chinese” (Edward Gunn, *Unwelcome Muse*, 195), poems such as this one were at least on a superficial level accessible to the ordinary reader. Wu sought to reconstitute modern Chinese verse in the vernacular, but in a manner that brought it back into the literary tradition of China.

Examining this excerpt from the poem in more detail, we discover several things about Wu’s depiction of Xi Shi, all of which must have been invented by the author: her beauty of course gave her power and the status of a *femme fatale*, whether she liked it or not; she put no stock in success and failure (成敗), human emotions (人世的情感), or other such emblems of the mundane world that did not interest her; but there was a longing, a yearning for something beyond the corporeal and beyond immediate gratification. The poem also comments on the fate of Xi Shi, a ravishing beauty who enjoyed (one could question whether it was “enjoyable”) the position of a queen but whose outcome was as “the wife of a drifting commoner” (賈人以船為家的妻子). The fall from such a height, according to Wu, did not matter to her. She simply accepted it with the same “melancholy” (my word; 同樣的愁容). This indicates that Wu Xinghua saw Xi Shi as a stoic soul whose fate was not in her own hands, someone who was blessed with great beauty but was always the object of the political machinations of men. She experienced wealth and luxury, but “drifted off” (so the legend goes and so the poem indicates) on a boat with her lover Fan Li 范蠡 (517 BCE–?), never to be heard from again. She dealt with her circumstances with a sense of sad resignation and equanimity. The last two lines of the poem suggest she lived the life of an exile, one of the crucial signposts of Western modernism: “She forever felt herself a passer-by” (她無時不覺得自己是一個過客). But why would Wu Xinghua, writing in the early 1940s, wish to use this well-worn classical legend as a way to convey a sense of exile and drifting?

Wu Xinghua was writing in war-torn China when Chinese throughout the country were experiencing great upheaval, forced evacuations, and migrations. “Xi Shi” could easily function as a far-flung allegory for the internal diaspora of Chinese during the dangerous and heady times of warlord China, divided between radically opposed political factions and carved into separate power bases, as well as China besieged by Japanese incursion. Wu’s highly literary experimentations inhabited the calm center of this political maelstrom. Like Yeats, Wu employs the image of the woman as a figure related to national identity. She may not *stand in* for the nation, but she is absolutely closely connected with it. The ubiquity of the Xi Shi allusion guarantees that there is no mistaking the identity of this reference for literate Chinese. Xi Shi is not a figure



whom many Westerners would know. She is part of the Chinese legendary lexicon. Wu is busy reconstituting Chinese poetry in the modern age in such a way that it may employ its own classical allusions but more or less according to the principles put in place by Western modernism: the complication of classical images for the purpose of a contemporary world.

Linguistically, we see that Wu certainly did not wish to ingratiate himself back into the traditional Chinese poetic in the same way as such poets as Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927), who was famous for his Song *ci* 宋詞 lyrics. Wu was committed to using the modern vernacular in new, poetic ways, but fusing the language of expression in his poems with classical images native to China. Reading this poem is like reading the evolution of modern Chinese poetry in flux: it is an unfinished project. The poetry is admittedly carefully crafted and tightly worded. The images are sagaciously chosen and are assembled in a very specific way. The idea of the dispassionate woman is carried throughout the section. But the language is spoken Chinese, and there is no identifiable rhyme scheme to it or consistent rhythm, except that the lines are generally close in length (though there are not exactly the same number of characters per line). Most important, the feeling of exile, alienation, rootlessness, drifting, and diaspora at the end is precisely the feeling of Chinese intellectuals such as Wu during the turmoil in which they lived. Wu had no idea what the future would hold, and it turned out that for him it was tragic, as he was one of the first victims of the Cultural Revolution. But the “fusion of Chinese and Western elements,” as Michel Hockx calls it, is something that would be irreversible for Chinese poets going forward.<sup>12</sup> This “binary opposition” of “traditional vs. modern, Chinese vs. Western, *wenyan* 文言 vs. *baihua* 白話, form vs. content, regulation vs. freedom, collective vs. individual” would not recede (Hockx, “Wu Xinghua,” 323). Wu’s rendering of the Xi Shi legend, in contrast to that of Li Bo, Su Dongpo, or other classical poets, was unmistakably modern: “The modernity of Wu’s poem lies not so much in the description of modern topics or in formal innovations as in its psychological insight, unusual perspective on characterization, the device of defamiliarization of well-known subject matter, and the subtle variations within a moderate form” (Leung, “Modern Hong Kong Poetry,” 226). I would extend that list of modern attributes to include the sense of exile, alienation, and even abjectness. While Xi Shi herself was controlled by politically very powerful men, in turn the power she held was used by men against men. But even as this callous instrumentality worked, Xi Shi, in Wu’s imagination, was unmoved and untarnished. She maintained a certain

12 Michel Hockx, “Wu Xinghua,” 321.

inaccessible emotional interior that even those from her native land of Yue could not touch, could not tap, and could not change.

### 3 Transience, Timelessness, and Tragedy in Luo Fu's Intertextual Poems

A generation after Wu Xinghua, writing mainly in Taiwan but not originally from Taiwan, the Modernist poet Luo Fu 洛夫 (also spelled Lo Fu) was appropriating generously from the classical tradition as well. In addition, he was breaking up the lines of modern Chinese poetry to form something that was essentially unprecedented in the modern vernacular. Although richly allusive, like Wu Xinghua's, Luo Fu's poetry was far more slender and limber. While the isolation, alienation, and sense of the wandering exile present within Wu Xinghua's "Xi Shi" is equally or more prominent in the work of Luo Fu, in the latter poet it is as something that has already occurred. Although some have called him a "Taiwanese Modernist,"<sup>13</sup> Luo Fu in fact was born in mainland China, and his pining for the homeland is a leitmotif in his poetry. Like several of Luo Fu's poems, "Changhen ge" 長恨歌 (Song of everlasting sorrow) is both a conjuring of a historic event in ancient China of monumental proportions and a dialogue with a poet. This one, of course, is with the Tang poet Bo Juyi, but others are with Li He, Li Bo, and Wang Wei. "Everlasting Sorrow" is a reprise of Bo Juyi's narrative poem of Empress Consort Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (719–756), companion to Tang Xuanzong 唐玄宗 (685–762), noted for her tragic fate in the wake of the An Lushan Rebellion (755–763). Bo Juyi's original poem is remarkable for readability, and it is still often memorized by schoolchildren. Luo Fu's poem of the same name is even more limpid in its diction and syntax, but what Luo does with the language is reduce it to its most descriptive elements:

She is the  
White flesh  
On the first page  
Of the Yang genealogy  
A rose in a mirror

13 This is the general characterization that Au Chung-to uses in her book on modernist aesthetics in 1950s Taiwan, although all the poets with whom she deals were born in mainland China. To characterize Luo Fu and the others as "Taiwanese" is to conflate location with ethnicity, and it also obscures one of the critical creative features of his poetry: exile in an alien land.

Blossoming under the most tender caresses  
 Heaven-sent beauty  
 Bubbles  
 On the Flower Pure Pool  
 Waiting to be raised up  
 In two hands  
 Music of the immortals  
 Drifts from Li Palace  
 Mingled with wine and bodily perfume  
 After imbibing, the lips  
 Just moan  
 And the bodies on the ivory bed  
 Are mountains  
 And rivers  
 One river sleeping soundly in another  
 The subterranean flow  
 Rolls  
 Across ten thousand miles  
 Till a white song  
 Sprouts, breaking the soil

她是  
 楊氏家譜中  
 翻開第一頁便仰在那裡的  
 一片白肉  
 一株鏡子裡的薔薇  
 盛開在輕柔的拂拭中  
 所謂天生麗質  
 一粒  
 華清池中  
 等待雙手捧起的  
 泡沫  
 仙樂處處  
 驪宮中  
 酒香流自體香  
 嘴唇，猛力吸吮之後  
 就是呻吟  
 而象牙床上伸展的肢體  
 是山  
 也是水

一道河熟睡在另一道河中  
 地層下的激流  
 湧向  
 江山萬里  
 及至一支白色歌謠  
 破土而出<sup>14</sup>

This contemporary retelling of the Tang Xuanzong and Yang Guifei tragedy is more sensuous and suggestive than Bo Juyi's from the Tang dynasty. Perusing the modern poem and reading the classical Chinese one naturally elicit fundamentally different reactions from the reader. With the modern one, we are all too aware of what happened: the sexual excess of the emperor, the political vulnerability and decay, the attempt to overthrow the dynasty, the execution of Yang Guifei, and the ultimate crushing of the rebellion. All this is understood in the modern era and allows Luo Fu to proceed in a far more elliptical fashion. This oblique style is not solely an issue of subject matter. Luo Fu's lines are short, light, and evocative. This depiction is a sketch of the delicate beauty of Yang, nothing more. Luo Fu pares back the narrative to its basic elements, taking advantage of the fact that the story of "Everlasting Sorrow" is known to almost all Chinese. Such an allusive poem would have been scorned during the May Fourth period, but for Luo Fu the relationship between the modern poet and the classical is a challenge, something to meet head on, and to flaunt. His ability to stand shoulder to shoulder with his classical predecessor hinges completely on his ability to summon a creative version of the story. He does this through the use of highly sensuous imagery and by doing such radical things as eliminating punctuation. The result is a truly lyrical rendition, despite the poem's length. Politics is important, but it is fused together with the passion of the two in highly explicit instances in the poem, such as this: "Rivers / Still burn between two thighs / War must be fought / It was a national affair" 河川 / 仍在兩股之間燃燒 / 不能不打 / 征戰國之大事. The doubling of double entendre in these lines—"thighs" (股) could also suggest a geographical formation and "burn" (燃燒) could refer to battle or to sexual passion—is a neat marriage between the personal and the political, most likely unimaginable to Bo Juyi. This fusion is echoed later in the poem in the lines "A war in her flesh A small, unbrewed storm / in her hands" (一場戰爭在她的體內 / 一個猶未釀成的小小風暴 / 在她掌裡. By now, the personal feeling in her body is one of foreboding, for like the reader she can sense the inevitable. She will be

14 I have used John Balcom's exquisite translation in Luo Fu, *Stone Cell*, 95–100. The original Chinese is found in Luo Fu, *Luo Fu shige quanji*, 341–353.

executed. The not yet “brewing” small storm is both the feeling in her heart and the act of violence that awaits her.

For Luo Fu, we have to ask: What is the motivation for engaging such a famous poem and seeking to recast it for the modern audience? Luo Fu is a prolific poet who does not shy away from classical subject matter. Along with his close friends with whom he came of age in 1950s Taiwan, he was an exile from mainland China living in Taiwan, a place of unstable national identity where at least Mandarin Chinese was the main medium for communication. As a political subject, he was highly marginalized, even if the Mainlanders in Taiwan controlled the political reins for several decades. The literary figures, by and large, were ignored by those who ran the government. On the one hand, this turned out to be fortunate for them, as it allowed them to ply their literary trade with little interference. On the other, it made an overtly political poetry from the 1950s to the early 1980s almost entirely impossible, and it led to rifts between themselves and the local population of intellectuals and literary figures (a complicated issue best left for a separate essay). But on the level of national allegory, the tragedy of Yang Guifei was still something that reverberated in the marrow of the exiled Mainlander poets in Taiwan in the Chiang Kai-shek era. In Taiwan, they had no political voice; however, they could see what was happening not too far off across the Taiwan Straits in the People's Republic of China. In Mao's China, they definitely would not have fared well. Leaving aside the fact that many of them were retired members of the Nationalist military, an inconvenient truth in mainland China, many also were landowners or at least from a fairly comfortable middle-class upbringing that included a college education. Any literary efforts in which they may have engaged in the PRC in the 1950s and 1960s would have been pressed into the service of the Chinese Communist Party. Cultural or literary allusion to such things as the An Lushan Rebellion of the Tang dynasty or to Tang poets like Bo Juyi would have been untouchable.

What we have with Luo Fu and his peers, then, are those who have the freedom to engage political issues in an allegorical fashion, the ability and latitude to reimagine the structure and parameters of modern Chinese verse, and the basic economic security to pursue nearly pure literary endeavors. The regrettable aspect of this relative freedom, though, was not the need to steer clear of explicit political issues alone. Flourishing in Taiwan carried with it a certain tincture in the larger scheme of the Chinese literary tradition that is as muddled as it is unfair. There is nothing at all wrong with coming from Taiwan. In fact, it is in many ways a model society that supports culture and the arts. But, the Mainlander generation of poets had their formative experience in mainland China. Few of them, if any, learned to speak the local Hoklo 福佬

language. They initially were unfamiliar with the history and culture of Taiwan, and the fact that the ancestors of the majority population of *bensheng* 本省 (native) Taiwanese originally came from Fujian Province and were ethnically Han Chinese actually masked the fact that in critical ways they were quite different from these recent émigrés. The result was a profound sense of exile and alienation. One way to assuage that sense of alienation was through the discursive means of suturing their work into the broader tradition of Chinese literature by ignoring the specificities of their life in Taiwan, with some notable exceptions, and the political vagaries of mainland China under Mao Zedong.<sup>15</sup> Considered in this regard, the elliptical quality of a poem like “Song of Everlasting Sorrow,” which requires reader participation, actually was a way for Luo Fu to weave his work together with that of the tradition and mollify his feelings of exile. Allusion, in other words, became a remedy for political exile. “Luo Fu is concerned with the abstract and metaphysical,” as John Balcom states in his analysis of Luo’s “Yu Li He gongyin” 與李賀共飲 (Sharing a drink with Li He), “but more so with Chinese literary tradition and history as well as his personal history and how it represents that of China.”<sup>16</sup> It is poems such as this modern meditation upon Yang Guifei that make Luo Fu “fairly certain ... of his place in modern Chinese letters” (Balcom, “To the Heart of Exile,” 78).

#### 4 Ancient Peregrinations and Lost Friends of Old: Xiao Kaiyu’s Ironic Invocations of the Chinese Past

This discussion of nationalism, difference, and poetic expression brings us to the restless, sinuous poetry of Xiao Kaiyu, one of the leading poets in the past two decades in what might be called, for lack of a better term, a new intellectualism.<sup>17</sup> Xiao’s poetry is made difficult by three fundamental features: the diction is unusual and often displays catachresis; the syntax is frequently

15 Although I have some quibbles with the way Au Chung-to situates the poetry of Luo Fu and other Mainlander Modernists who settled in Taiwan after the war, her notion of “imagined literary community” is similar to what I am stating here with respect to the fact that Luo Fu uses allusion as a method of installing himself in the Chinese literary tradition. See Au Chung-to, *Modernist Aesthetics in Taiwanese Poetry since the 1950s*, 141–192.

16 As the authoritative translator of Luo Fu’s verse, Balcom’s succinct treatment is the best. He surveys the career of Luo Fu from the early years until around 2007. See his “To the Heart of Exile,” 77.

17 Many terms have been used for the poetry that emerged in the post-Obscure era in China, by poets who in general are well educated and write difficult, challenging work: academic poetry; intellectual poetry; elevated poetry. None of these monikers quite captures what

disjointed or convoluted; and the subject matter often exhibits a collision of the banal with classical or historical references. Dissatisfied with what he considered the naive transparency of the poetry in the immediate post-Mao era, Xiao began writing in the late 1980s. But it is his poetry from the 1990s, after the Tiananmen crackdown, that has gained the most attention. Poems of this era have left readers puzzled but beguiled, as Xiao and some of his associates began to rebuild Chinese poetry into a more difficult, challenging, and allusive frame from that of his immediate predecessors in mainland China. One of the most extreme examples of this is “Xi’an fujin” 西安附近 (On the outskirts of Xi’an), a poem that buckles under the weight of interminable layers of historical allusion.<sup>18</sup> Reading the poem in Chinese is an exhausting exercise, and in English the poem is opaque to all but the most conversant in Chinese history. One can scarcely think that the goal could have been anything but to repel the reader. Why, then, would Xiao write such an obscure poem? The simple answer is that in exhausting the reader with multilayered historical allusion, Xiao creates an ironic effect that performs for the reader the burden of China’s history. As the title denotes, the description basically remains close to Xi’an and its general vicinity, one of the most historically leavened places on earth. The poem appears to depict a trip through the Wei River Valley, as it also makes reference to the various historical sites in ancient China such as prehistoric Banpo 半坡 (6700–5600 BP), to cultural icons such as the Tang poet Bo Juyi 白居易 (772–846), and practically everything in between. The poem begins deceptively, reading almost like a guidebook:

On the way from Banpo to the Qin tombs,  
 We arrived in the era promised by the oracle bone inscriptions.  
 This deep, dark forest epitomizes China,  
 Its beauty and starvation, spurred people to mount the back of  
 Lions and elephants, from east to west, from east to west,  
 Dropped off in the bland and antiquated evening,  
 The tribal chieftains, fresh blood and a carved staircase.

自半坡去秦陵的中途，  
 我们到达甲骨文允诺的时代。  
 黑暗的丛林描绘着中国，  
 艳情，饥饿，催人上狮

---

they are doing, and, in any event, they are not necessarily as unified as it would seem. I asked Xiao Kaiyu about it, and he resisted all of the general descriptions.

18 Xiao Kaiyu, *Xiao Kaiyu de shi*, 191–196.

和大象的背脊，从东  
到西，从东到西，  
堕入单调而古老的夜晚，  
酋长，鲜血和雕花楼梯。

XIAO KAIYU, *The Poetry*, 191

From the most ancient times of China's prehistoric past to the earliest times of its written history, there is a "promise" made to the traveler, a promise that is dark and beautiful, but bloody and containing the starving souls of those who attempted to tame nature but in the course of establishing a civilization were from the beginning violent. Images of war, destruction, military figures, invasions, conflict between Han Chinese and "barbarians," and the harnessing of animals crowd the poem; the cascading historical images create an alienating effect. No narrative other than the historical narrative to which the poem refers is possible. The poem is a concatenation of events and historical figures, enough material from which to write a textbook of Chinese history. But the tone is not a proud one. At times, there is the hint of contemplation:

How do the fierce and atrocious from the west transform  
Into the supple and slick from the west, how did Cao Cao transform  
The west into the north? This city,  
The vacancy after its loss, is an answer to the sojourner.  
...  
Don't repair the temple anymore, hastily become a monk.  
The grey tombs plucking the golden caps of the western people,  
Shining the leisure of the dead, the salt merchants  
And those who have moved the capital linger on the exhausted road.  
The people here are surrounded by grave mounds,  
Festooned with wreathes of flowers, and they submerge  
The baked buns into mutton stew. The rainbow shirt from the northwest  
wind  
Brings with it a belt. Intense desire gives both the poor  
And the wealthy cases of sciatica.

来自西方的威胁怎样变成了  
来自西方的滋润，曹操怎样  
变西方为北方，这座城市  
消失后的空虚回答着游客。

。 。 。



不再修庙，匆匆当和尚。  
 灰色陵墓摘下西方人的金冠，  
 炫示死者的悠闲，盐商  
 及迁都人留在疲劳的路途，  
 这里人们被高高土丘  
 扎的花圈环绕，把羊肉汤  
 泡烧饼碎。西北风字霓裳  
 递来裙带；强烈的愿望  
 使穷人和富人都害上腰病。

XIAO, *The Poetry*, 195–196

Here, “the west” is not to be mistaken for Western civilization. Rather, it means west of Xi’an, presumably the wild and “barbaric” regions against which the Chinese fought. The sojourner’s only answer to the question of how China’s civilization evolved, “transforming” “the fierce and atrocious” from the west into “the supple and slick,” Cao Cao’s conversion of “the west into the north,” seems to indicate the progression of history. That supposition is supported by the general fact that the poem begins in prehistoric China and the references move more or less chronologically. But the answer to this question of transformation is found only in the “vacancy” after the loss of the city, a lament that so-called historical progress in China was made possible only by the destruction of cities and civilizations.

The final stanza intimating that it is useless to continue to repair the old temples and that one should merely “hastily” become a monk supports the notion that society hardly progresses in its movement through history. Rather, it may become more hopeless with each passing historical epoch. By the end of the poem, “leisure” is found only in death, and those who move the capital (China’s capitals were often moved with the shifts in political power) “linger on the exhausted road.” The “intense desire” mentioned in the penultimate line of the poem cuts across class lines and leads only to a bad case of sciatica, a sort of back ailment. The burden that is China’s history with load upon load of war, court intrigue, betrayal, arrogance, famine, flood, and so on is quite reasonably met with a painful condition to the lower lumbar region. Like the writer of this poem, contemporary Chinese people are overburdened and weighed down by their history.

Given that the structure of the poem is free verse, with no discernible rhyme scheme, lines that are somewhat of a similar length but not rigidly so, and stanzas that are roughly equivalent to each other but, again, not uniform, the poem is clearly modern. The historical references may all be to dynastic

Chinese history, but the “sojourner” seems unmistakably rooted in the present. The syntax is that of modern Mandarin Chinese. Although there are no references to Western civilization, the form of the poem itself implies an indebtedness to the West. It could be that the overriding tone of violence, destruction, and death, the crucible out of which the history of Chinese civilization was forged, is only possible in the face of Western civilization, which for Chinese intellectuals coming of age in the post-Mao era carries its own burden. Xiao Kaiyu is somewhat coy on this point. Some of his poems are situated in the West, particularly in Germany. But this could be attributed to the coincidental fact that he was living in Germany at the time that he wrote those poems. He seldom brings images of the West together with images of China. But that he is influenced by Western modernism is clear from the way he formulates his poems.

The most sustained example of Xiao’s articulation of the burden of history, but in particular the stresses of contemporary life in China, is his tour de force “Xiang Du Fu zhijing” 向杜甫致敬 (Homage to Du Fu). This poem of about fifty pages is almost as opaque as “On the Outskirts of Xi’an,” but it is in no way as laden with historical allusion. Rather, the poem is obsessed with the crowded present of contemporary China:

This is another China.  
 For what does it exist?  
 Nobody answered, not even an  
 echo of an answer either.  
 This is another China.

It’s the same, three generations to a room,  
 living in reduced privacy amounts to  
 a performance; the next generation  
 is fashioned from a certain measured cruelty.  
 Dozing is a much-appreciated  
 shared time for mother and father  
 to learn the skill of pleasure, but it’s like a teacher  
 reciting from the textbook in a string of bellows;  
 Alas, it’s the same, people and oxen  
 in the field pulling the plow, tilling the land.  
 Life is like enduring.

This is another China.

To speak Chinese only to be ashamed.  
 When we are like beer, with ancient words  
 frothing up, it's just  
 that there's no sense of humiliation, and no honor either.  
 Toothpaste, meat pie, the text  
 of new words and the essence of humanity  
 are idiotic titles just to swap out the taste  
 in the mouth. Who can say for sure  
 that this is not just a cheap trick?

这是另一个中国  
 为了什么而存在？  
 没有人回答，也没  
 再用回声回答  
 这是另一个中国。

一样，祖孙三代同居一室  
 减少了私生活  
 等于表演；下一带  
 由尺度的残忍塑造出来  
 假寝是向母亲  
 和父亲感恩的同时  
 学习取乐的本领，但如同课本  
 重复老师一串吆喝；  
 啊，一样人和牛  
 在田里拉着犁铧耕耙  
 生活犹如忍耐；

这是另一个中国  
 讲汉语仅仅为了羞耻，  
 当我们像啤酒，溢出  
 古老语言的泡沫，就是  
 没有屈辱感，也没有荣耀。  
 牙膏，馅饼，新名词  
 引文和人类精英  
 之类蠢头衔换掉了嘴巴的  
 味觉，谁肯定呢，  
 这不是勾践的诡计？

XIAO, *The Poetry*, 197–201

Firmly ensconced in the present, “Homage to Du Fu” causes one to wonder what exactly the poem has to do with the renowned Tang poet. Du Fu, it must be remembered, was one of the great social satirists of his day. Du Fu’s poetry was filled with political commentary intermingled with lamentations of the severe personal reversals that beset him. Xiao’s “Homage” is not an homage in the sense that he writes of his precursor’s life or accomplishments themselves. Rather, Xiao seeks to emulate Du Fu in his exposure of the things wrong in his own contemporary world. But it is not a world parallel to premodern China. This is “another China”: a China that brings with it, according to the poet, shame and cruelty. With people living practically stacked upon one another, the contemporary China is not considered to be any better than the glory days of the empire. What might be viewed as cultural heritage is not something that is delicately nurtured and passed down from generation to generation. Rather, it is like “beer,” “with ancient words frothing up.” This unusually quotidian, almost humorous image of the Chinese language and its storied past is a source of neither humiliation nor pride. The stress of overpopulation, the lack of privacy, the denuding of civilization, have deadened the senses to both pride and humiliation. It is difficult to think of this view toward China without implicit reference to Western civilization and the inferiority complex that infects non-Western intellectuals, including some Chinese. Xiao Kaiyu goes on in such poems as “Women de shirenmen” 我们的诗人们 (Our poets) to situate Chinese intellectuals as the analysand, discursively eviscerating themselves in full view of those whose profession it is to analyze them (namely, Sinologists). He even has an acerbic poem titled “Hanxue jia” 汉学家 (The Chinese studies specialist) that shines the light of his critique upon the analyst. In fact, critique of all kinds pervades Xiao’s poetry. His sense of history is highly complex and fraught with contradictory emotions.

In a final poem of Xiao’s that we will consider, “Zhongjiang xian” 中江县 (Zhongjiang County), we see him mix references to ancient China, the historical iconography of Maoist China, and the contemporary era, all in one poem that is set in his home county:

#### Zhongjiang County (1991)

1

The county seat is waiting  
for the holiday to transform the street.  
It used to be a battleground,  
a theater of heroes prostrating and dead,

their bodies inlaid with bullets, just like Huang Jiguang,  
Red martyrs of 1968.

The stylish lady understands the value of the times.  
She arranges her youth in middle school.  
She invites her art teacher to dinner;  
She invites him to use his magical powers to preserve her glamour.  
The moon shines through the window illuminating her nude body.

2

The Kai River greets the dawn and the wizened washing ladies  
through the fissures between willow branches and leaves.  
The river absorbs  
the most beautiful women.  
They ask their sons to retreat from  
humiliation, until glory overlaps.

When the riverbed cracks, displaying long scrolls  
of silk-screen artworks, when the population mongers  
die under the locust trees, when desire  
struggles free from the shackles of propriety,  
the county magistrate from Dujiangyan buys water  
to be used for the boat races of the Dragon Boat Festival.

3

The highway from Chengdu goes all the way to Santai.  
The highway from Deyang goes all the way to Suining.  
There's also a highway that goes to Mianyang,  
but no travelers linger.  
At night the local men and women engage in amorous fun.

The population increases, but dreams decrease.  
The youth retold their elders' yearnings,  
"Mechanization, ah, mechanization."  
The storm of famine swept away  
the makeup table and the beauty of youth.  
The earth and the people are preparing for the next storm.

## 中江县 (1991)

## 1

这座县城等待着  
节日改造街道。  
原来就是一座战场，  
剧场里平躺着死去的勇士。  
身体嵌满子弹，像黄继光，  
1968年的红色烈士。

时髦女士懂得时光的价值，  
把青春安排在中学。  
邀请美术教师就餐，  
邀请他的魔力留住她的魅力，  
月亮从窗户照耀裸体。

## 2

凯江从柳树枝叶的缝隙  
迎来黎明和苍老的洗衣妇，  
这条江接纳了  
最美好的女性。  
她们请求儿子从屈服  
退却，直到与荣誉重叠。

当河床干裂展示出长卷  
丝网花，当人口贩子  
在槐树旁憋命，当欲望  
挣脱礼貌的捆束，  
县长从都江堰买水  
来赛舟庆端午。

## 3

来自成都的公路通往三台，  
来自德阳的公路通往遂宁，  
另有一条公路通往绵阳，  
但没有旅客逗留，  
夜间本地男女欢爱。

人口增加，梦想减少。  
青年重诉前辈的憧憬，

“机械化，呵，机械化！”  
 饥饿的风暴刮走了  
 梳妆台，和春色。  
 土地和人民为下次风暴而准备着。

XIAO, *The Poems*, 79–81<sup>19</sup>

The poem references four historical moments, including the present time of “highways,” when “population increases” lead to the “decrease” in “dreams.” The contemporary, post-Mao era of this poem does not proffer the sort of economic comfort and sustenance that the propaganda of the Deng Xiaoping regime touted. The poem is not simply set in contemporary times, and certainly not arbitrarily. It is, to an extent, a meditation on the 1990s, insinuating that although progress is the governing ideology of the times, China’s past burdens weigh heavily now and hinder it from moving forward. The poem moves between references to the ancient times of Qu Yuan, the poet-statesmen who legend has it committed suicide in the face of bureaucratic neglect, and the Maoist era hero. Qu Yuan’s birthday is commemorated during the Dragon Boat Festival, the occasion for the poem’s writing. But in the first stanza, the poet arguably takes some risks by raising the issue of both the Cultural Revolution and the crowd gathering for the holiday festivities on the street, once a battlefield of dead “Red Martyrs” from 1968. Clearly, in the center of this town from which the poet hails, there was some sort of violent confrontation, likely between the military and the Red Guard, who eventually were deemed too unwieldy even for the Maoists.

Adding a level of ambiguity, the poet compares these dead “Red Martyrs” to the bona fide “revolutionary” martyr Huang Jiguang (1931–1952), who died fighting against the “Imperialists,” the Americans and their South Korean proxies during the Korean War. To Chinese, the Korean War is viewed as part of the

19 It may only be a coincidence, but the Communist-era poet and political apparatchik He Jingzhi alluded to the heroism in a poem of his own called “Lei Feng zhi ge” 雷锋之歌 (The song of Lei Feng). In this 1963 poem, revolutionary martyrs such as Lei Feng and Huang Jiguang were lauded for their ability to embody the spirit of Mao Zedong. Certainly, the tone of Xiao Kaiyu’s poem is far removed from that. As I suggest, part of the reason he would select Huang Jiguang as a subject is because he comes from the same hometown. Additionally, choosing a revolutionary era icon underscores the irony of the consumerism depicted in Xiao’s poem. Published two years later, another poem by He Jingzhi 贺敬之 (b. 1924), “Huida jinri de shijie: Du Wang Jie rijì” 回答今日的世界：读王杰日记 (Answering today’s world: Reading Wang Jie’s diary) also alludes to Lei Feng and Huang Jiguang, as well as Wang Jie 王杰, all iconic figures of the Maoist period. For “The Song of Lei Feng,” see He Jingzhi, *He Jingzhi shixuan*, 351–398; for “Answering Today’s World,” see also He Jingzhi, *He Jingzhi shixuan*, 407–412.

continuing revolution against imperialism, not as a border dispute or fight for regional dominance. The Korean War is the major sore spot, historically speaking, between the PRC and the United States, as the casualties from this war are viewed as heroes who fought against the encroaching global power that the United States was and still is. In recent decades, China and the United States have had a more nuanced relationship, particularly complicated by the status of North Korea, China's buffer from the West but also an embarrassment and nuisance for China. Chinese much prefer now to vacation in and do business with South Korea, but they remain steadfast in their alliance with the North. Huang Jiguang was one of a few notable soldiers who gave his life in the war and secured a battle victory for the Chinese. Unknown in the West, the artistic renderings of him are part of the pantheon of martyrs from the "War against American Aggression," and a memorial was built for him in Zhongjiang on the thirty-fifth anniversary of his death. But mixing the image of this revolutionary martyr, someone clearly to be revered, with the Red Guards and the death and destruction associated with them, on top of the classical antecedent of Qu Yuan, all together in a self-conscious meditation on the present condition of China makes these historical allusions enigmatic and their significance underspecified and subject to interpretation.

The significance of the "stylish lady" in the second stanza is equally unclear, but the fact that she values the way she looks and is made up, and is entertaining her former teacher at dinner, does seem at variance both with the notion of heroism from the first stanza, and from the implied critique of social unrest as embodied in the Red Guard. Perhaps she is a person of the times, since in the 1980s, and especially in the 1990s, the contemporary in the poem was a period of consolidation for the Dengist regime after ten years of profound economic change and one season of intellectual dissent in 1989. The early 1990s was a moment when Chinese people turned inward, because they knew that outward protest would land them in prison. The dominant trend in the 1990s was to accentuate the unthreatening vacuity of material gain and acquisitiveness: for the first time in decades, people were able to buy large televisions, stereos, refrigerators, and even cars. Although China still has profound economic disparity today, especially geographically, it was in the 1990s that Chinese in the cities at least began to become accustomed to a modicum of luxury.

In this stanza, teachers are now used not to bestow knowledge but to help the attractive woman preserve her glamour. Highways are built everywhere, but "no one lingers." People are too busy in their hectic lives, existing in a new world of free market values; they do not have the leisure time to linger. The economic modernization of the Deng Xiaoping era did not necessarily lead to a better life for people in countryside settings like Zhongjiang County. Of



course, Xiao Kaiyu had to be careful in applying any critique to the Chinese State, particularly in the wake of the Tiananmen crackdown. So, instead of using the word for “modernization” (*xiandaihua* 现代化), he uses “mechanization” (*jixiehua* 机械化). “Mechanization” could be a veiled critique of Dengist modernization, since so much of the reform era was invested in industrialization and the creation of a factory economy of inexpensive labor from which China could undercut other manufacturing economies and establish a strong foothold in the global economic system. “Mechanization” could also indicate a kind of Weberian routinization, or even a Marxian reification of human behavior and consciousness, in the contemporary capitalist world where profit motive and an assembly-line social structure have replaced the collectivist ideal of the Maoist era. But whatever the case is, one thing is certain: the future is not necessarily sanguine. The conflicts that take place on the town square and lead to carnage, along with the wars ostensibly against imperialism, and, in fact, even the protests of neglected officials in ancient China, all seem to channel into a violent end. History, in this poem, is a series of turbulent events, and “the earth and the people are preparing for the next storm.” There is no question another storm will come. We may not know what form it will take. But what is a certainty, or at least an expectation on the part of the people—and even the earth—is that there will be a “next storm.” “Zhongjiang County” does not present an optimistic view of the Chinese future. The reform era in China has its own challenges, and the author indicates that only the surface structure of the conflicts changes. That there will be continued conflict down the line, essentially a dystopian view, is a foregone conclusion.

## 5 Conclusion: Yeats, Modern Chinese Poets, and Modernism beyond the West

Like W. B. Yeats, Chinese poets of the twentieth century endeavored to bring their own verse into the global light by intersecting with themes of interest in modernism, such as urban culture, the vagaries of war, ambivalent attitudes toward sexuality, ambiguity in religious and ethical values, and, in their cases, hesitancy toward their own statuses in the face of a long and illustrious literary tradition. They were not alone in this. Many other distinguished Chinese poets of the twentieth century sought to do the same, most of whom are discussed in this volume of essays in different ways by the other contributors. Thus, Wu Xinghua, Luo Fu, and Xiao Kaiyu are not different from them; they typify this trend. But that does not mean the poetry of these various artists was interchangeable. Each forged his or her own style. Yeats made ample use

of his own folkloric tradition from Ireland, largely unknown in mainstream English-speaking circles, to distinguish his own work and to write himself back into his native tradition while simultaneously ensuring himself a place in the broader English tradition. Wu, Luo, and Xiao also have dealt extensively with the past, through allusive dialogues with major cultural and historical figures, geographical artifacts, and often elliptical, enigmatic, and yet lovely, lyrical phrasings that capture the original images and cast them anew. The “Janus face” nature of their work, to borrow once again from David Lloyd, provides us with a complex, multifaceted articulation of each of their own situations in the modern world, and it is not without its insecurity or frustration.

The portrait that develops from this reading of three modern Chinese poets is one of entangled, even conflicted, feelings toward the modern predicament that are best articulated through a hybrid style that, without foreswearing the indigenous past, is still receptive to the innovations, circumstances, and conditions of a modern, global social milieu. The implications for this micro-reading resonate beyond the specific poets whom I discuss. It is an effort, nevertheless, to reveal fruitful points of comparison between the modern Chinese poets and the self-conscious, exilic status of W. B. Yeats. Rather than asserting a simplistic thesis that the latter group of Chinese authors are influenced by the Western bard in a schematically causal sense, I believe that in some ways their situations were similar, their grievances were shared, and their thoughts resounding with a certain amount of affinity. They all possess a desire to express themselves in the somewhat controlled linguistic idiom of verse rather than in a more expansive narrative mode. Thus, I have not engaged in a taxonomic effort to delimit those Chinese poets who are most tightly grouped with a Yeatsian style. Nor have I been interested in arguing that they are part of a unified movement. Least of all have I been intent on perforce proving empirically that Yeats directly influenced them in concrete ways. I merely have hoped to illustrate how certain echoes of Yeats’s work, preoccupations, and methods of resolving his troubles in writing have some kinship with those of these three modern Chinese poets.