

Chinese Language Reform and Vernacular Poetry in the Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract

In the early twentieth century, Chinese vernacular poetry emerged as a crucial part of Chinese intellectuals' elaborate efforts to meet the enormous challenge of combining the external imperatives of national salvation with the internal prerequisites of enlightenment. This study considers the role of language reform in China's New Culture Movement in the early twentieth century in relation to the birth of this new form of poetry. It argues that this vernacular poetry did not completely depart from tradition, as contemporary and later critics claimed, but instead relied heavily on the past, in spite of the fact that anti-traditionalism was a principal notion in this genre's formative period. It concludes that the emergence of this genre reflects the quest for emancipation from the traditional ethics of subordination and submissiveness and that vernacular poetry was brought out by patriotic intellectuals to freely express new ideas and thereby to educate the young.

Key words: Chinese language reform, vernacular poetry, moral education

1. Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, China suffered numerous humiliations after it was defeated by Western powers and Japan. It had to cede territories such as Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. The sense of social responsibility and historical mission made Chinese intellectuals launch the May Fourth New Culture Movement in the early twentieth century as a crucial part of their endeavours to meet the huge task of national salvation through enlightenment. It was in this context that new vernacular poetry was brought out by patriotic intellectuals for the purposes of educating the young and celebrating youth: the new vigour for a revitalised China. This study considers the role of language reform in China's New Culture Movement in the early twentieth century in relation to the birth of the new vernacular poetry, and also to the movement for increasing literacy, which was highly pertinent to the imperative of popular enlightenment, mass education, children's literature and the formation of a genuine modern nation. This study addresses the link between the crucial aspects of China's national salvation and the moral and political content evident in the new vernacular poetry, especially in its formative period, from 1916 to 1926. It investigates why new vernacular poetry, commencing from its "infancy", is closely and intricately related to political themes and nationalist sentiments.

This study analyses works by influential figures such as Hu Shih, Zhu Ziqing, Bing Xin and Guo Moruo, examining various notable remedial ideas for national salvation that are constructed within these texts. This article argues that the emergence of vernacular poetry represents the exigencies of social and political problems of the time, a conflict between the rise of modern nationalism and the critique of the native cultural heritage, and a disparity between adopting Western learning as a social remedy and resisting foreign imperialism. It further argues that the creators of the new genre were fully aware of the moral predicament they were in, wrestling most consciously between the Confucian notion of the role of the traditional ruling elite intelligentsia and their self-styled image of leaders of a new culture, as they called themselves the "new youth" or the "new tide". These people were convinced that their historical epic mission of saving China from extinction could only be accomplished through the moral task of saving the Chinese people from the spiritual lethargy derived from the Confucian cult of ritualised subordinations.

2. The language reform

The *baihua* [vernacular] movement was launched by Hu Shih's (1891–1962) famous article “Tentative Suggestions about Literary Reform” published in *New Youth* in 1917. “Reform” might not be an accurate term for the vernacular movement replacing the classical literary language. It was more like a “revolution”. In an earlier letter to the editor of *New Youth*, Hu Shih used the phrase “literary revolution” (Hsia, 1971: 1). In his typical style of caution, Hu Shih refrained himself from using the explosive term in his new article, which was more like an address written by a member of the literati in the classical literary language (*wenyan*) to another member of the literati, discussing the ways through which to write more clearly, more pithily and more realistically. The *baihua* movement countered traditional Chinese education, which had preserved the form of Confucian writings as well as their content. The classics were written in an abbreviated style known in Chinese as *wenyan* [classical written language], and used a different syntax and vocabulary from those of the spoken language.

This disjunction can be traced to the development of *wenyan* through the growth of its use in politics, administration and history. Throughout it has retained its abbreviated form and distinct structure, while continuously becoming more removed from the living spoken language. Traditional education in China did not only require the memorising of thousands of characters, but also knowledge of this classical written language and its special forms of expression. Because of its independence from everyday speech, it was thus extremely difficult to learn. This was particularly the case in conjunction with the authoritarian and uncritical manner in which literacy was imparted through rote learning. Here, the classical literary written language encouraged the copying and repetition of what had been written before. It preferred implied meanings rather than the explicit and grammatical relations between words and phrases which were often abstractly left to the reader's intuition. Writing was thus intended to be read by audiences who were in tune with the writer, who shared enough experience and assumptions to be able to understand the author's meaning without clues (Jenner, 1994: 212–213). Schwarcz (1986) comments that the traditional intelligentsia proclaimed that it was their “mastery of this classical written language”, which, similar to a code, demanded a lifetime's apprenticeship in learning, as well as the “mastery of Confucian classics”, that “accounted for their social eminence” (77–78).

Long before Hu Shih's “tentative suggestions”, there had already been a general consensus among reform minded intellectuals in the late nineteenth century, namely that China's problems needed a linguistic solution. Liang Qichao's statement on why such a solution was crucial to the quest for national strength was very typical:

If the people are intelligent, the country will be strong. How can a people be intelligent? If everyone in the country can read and write, then the people will be intelligent. (1958 [1898]: 7)

What made Hu Shih different from his predecessors and colleagues was his “revolutionary” approach. While the late nineteenth-century proponents of language reform regarded the vernacular as one of many mediums to popularise literacy and political education, Hu Shih argued that the vernacular language was *the era's* major form of literary expression. According to Hsia, Hu Shih was “the first to assert its (vernacular language's) dignity and importance” in literature (1971: 7). With solid scholarship in his research of vernacular fictions hallmarked by his pioneering study of the eighteenth-century novel *The Dream of Red Chamber*, Hu Shih demonstrated, among other findings, how rich the social fabric was in that particular vernacular novel. Hu Shih further pointed out that, in the past millennium, mainstream Chinese literature was not to be found in works written in the classical literary language, but rather in vernacular language. Notably, Hu Shih talked little about “destroying” the old culture and tradition: it was not so much the *destruction* of the old but an additional *construction*. If he had to use the term “literary revolution”, he preferred to call it a “constructive literary revolution” or “Chinese Literary Renaissance”. Hu Shih (1918 [1991]: 28–31) argued with great conviction that a new vernacular body of literature, far from being a radical departure from the literary tradition, was the only guarantee for its continuity and renewal. He also provided a very concrete plan for literary reform and he listed eight “tentative suggestions” to be incorporated into the new literature:

1. What you write should have meaning or real substance.
2. Do not imitate the writings of the ancients; what you write should reflect your own personality.
3. Follow literary grammar.
4. Do not write that you are sick and sad when you do not feel sick or sad.
5. Discard stale, time-worn literary phrases.
6. Avoid the use of classical allusions.

7. Discard the parallel construction of sentences.
8. Do not avoid using commoners' words and phrases. (1991 [1917]: 3)

Insofar as Hu Shih's personal objective is concerned, the language reform was an astounding success. De Francis claims that the victory of Hu Shih's vernacular movement was made possible "by its identification with the cause of Chinese nationalism" (1950: 11). At the end of World War I in 1919, the Versailles Conference ruled against China, awarding the former German leasehold of Qingdao in Shandong to Japan. On May 4th 1919, thousands of university students took the streets of Beijing to protest against the warlord government's submission to the decision reached at Versailles. After the outbreak of demonstrations on May 4th 1919, the vernacular language came to be used in all the new literary journals which as a consequence had flourished – over four hundred newspapers and journals appeared within a short time, all using the vernacular. The new writing style became a tool for and symbol of the new nationalism. In 1921, the Education Ministry was compelled to decree the introduction of primary school textbooks composed in the new writing, and in 1922 this decree was extended to secondary schools. From this time onwards, the new writing became the vehicle of Chinese education, and book publishers began to accept it as "the national language" (Michael and Taylor, 1964: 231).

Furthermore, as predicted by Hu Shih, the vernacular movement culminated in "a literary flowering that was one of the most creative and brilliant episodes" in the history of Chinese literature (Goldman, 1977: 1). It was in this context that reform minded and revolutionary writers, fully aware of the common people's literacy level and the significance of reading in terms of improving their literacy level, began to create a new vernacular literature, using simple standard modern Chinese language.

3. Hu Shih's Experiments of vernacular poetry

After fighting strong conservative opposition, *baihua* [the vernacular] was officially vindicated when the Ministry of Education prescribed the use of *baihua* in all schools in 1921. Meanwhile Hu Shih also proposed that China's modern writers should create an entirely new body of literature. This would involve the end to the tradition of classical phrasing and historical allusions. He encouraged writers to directly express their feelings in the modern vernacular (Grieder, 1970: 75–80). Not only did Hu Shih meet strong opposition from the traditional literati, but these complaints were echoed throughout the wider population, who were unsure of the effectiveness of the vernacular as a literary medium. Thus, Hu Shih believed, conducting experiments was the only way to verify his vernacular language theories, which could be treated as a hypothesis awaiting proof, based on his notion "boldness in hypotheses, to be verified by solicitous evidence" (Chou, 2003: 300). He tried his hand at drama, short stories and, most importantly, poetry, the field in which classical tradition had been most entrenched, and produced a pioneering volume of vernacular poems called *Experiments*, wishing to encourage more to follow suit.

There is no doubt that the birth of modern vernacular poetry could be directly attributed to Hu Shih's role in the literary revolution. In *Experiments*, the poem "Butterflies" (*Hudie*) written in 1916 while he was studying in the United States, is often praised as the very first vernacular poem for children in China (Jiang Feng, 1988: 4). It first appeared in *New Youth*:

Two yellow butterflies flew up in the air.
We don't know why one didn't return.
Now there's only one poor butterfly in despair
It does not want to fly up again,
Up there, it still wouldn't be in a pair.¹

The words "poor" and "not in a pair" reveal the romantic connotations of the poem. The poem entails more than just friendship. It is a poem about separation anxiety. The one "yellow butterfly" is anxious about being apart from the other "yellow butterfly", possibly referring to Hu Shih's own period of living away from China in the United States. The colour "yellow" can be read as a symbolic representation of the ethnicity of the two "butterflies". The poem is open to a wide range of interpretations, given the poet's own background of having studied overseas.

¹ Unless otherwise specified, all translations in this paper are my own.

This line of interpretation would be further strengthened with an association Chinese readers would instantly draw upon: the connection between the poem and the ancient folklore story of butterfly lovers, *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*,² a kind of historical allusion which was ardently rejected by the poet. The poem is written in simple language that clearly expresses an emotion, to the point where even a child's interests and curiosity could be captured, asking questions along the line of why one butterfly didn't return, what it was doing up there, and why the other butterfly didn't want fly up there again. Therefore, it is able to inspire a child's imagination, hence benefiting their cognitive and psychological development.

“A Raven” (*Lao ya*), another poem from Hu Shih’s *Experiments*, was also selected by Chinese children’s literature editors as being appropriate for children (Jiang Feng, 1988: 9). The first stanza is as follows:

I get up early in the morning
And stand on someone’s roof, crowing.
Annoyed, people say I’ve brought them bad luck,
But I just can’t force myself to twitter and pretend to be charming!

This poem is commonly read as Hu Shih’s self-portrayal as an advocate of the modern vernacular, struggling against conservative views. The poem succinctly expresses his contention in his well-known essay “Why I Write Vernacular Poems” published in *New Youth*, May 1919. As a pioneer of vernacular poetry, one of the main challenges Hu Shih encountered was the harsh questioning of the particular poetry form. Classical poetry forms like *shi* and *ci* had already enjoyed thousands of years of traditional acceptance, and most readers were so familiar with these traditional forms that they simply couldn’t accept anything else as poetry. Moreover, he did not only face the obstacle of deviating from a long history of certain forms of poetry, but sheer numbers opposed Hu Shih, as he had almost single-handedly implemented this experiment in vernacular poetry. The unconventional choice of a raven being the poet’s ideal of self-representation was a signifier of the poem’s innovative nature. Thus, in the very action of writing modern vernacular poetry, Hu Shih deliberately intended his readers to focus on the uniqueness of this experience. In “A Raven”, the individuality of the subject is further reinforced in the last line: “But I just can’t force myself to twitter and pretend to be charming!” This was Hu Shih refusing to conform to more traditional forms of poetry.

4. Zhu Ziqing’s debut poem

Zhu Ziqing (1898–1948), one of China’s best-known writers,³ began to write poetry in emulation of Hu Shih while studying at Peking University. In 1919, Zhu Ziqing submitted his first work, a poem entitled “Sleep Little One” (*Shuiba, xiao xiao de ren*), to the periodical *Study Light*, which was specifically written for students. Included under the poem’s title was a note of explanation that Zhu Ziqing had written this vernacular poem after viewing a foreign picture of a Western woman singing a lullaby to a child.⁴ The poet’s affection towards the foreign child is expressed in the first part of the poem:

Sleep, little one
Your head covered with lustrous hair, golden blond
Your eyes slightly open,
Revealing a pair of irises, emerald green
Your breathing is the breath of life
Oh, bathing in the moonlight
You are a child of brightness

² The Chinese folk-lore tells the story of the lovers Lang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, who studied together, with Zhu disguised as a boy, her identity unknown to her friend Liang. Their period of study together was a happy one, which came to an end when Zhu was compelled to return home. At home, she defied her father, who had arranged a marriage for her. Meanwhile, Liang decided to pay her a visit and only then found out that she was a girl about to be married. Liang then realised the nature of his affection for his former companion. Liang died, the victim of despair, and Zhu, on her way to her wedding, stopped at her lover’s tomb, which burst open, and she leapt into it. The story ends with a metamorphosis – Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingta emerged from the tomb as a pair of butterflies, flying up together, never more to be parted.

³ Zhu Ziqing (also spelt as Chu Tsu-ch’ing) was to become a most prolific writer in China, creating volumes and volumes of works, a total of 1.9 million Chinese characters, including poetry, prose, and academic reports.

⁴ The lyric is selected in Jiang Feng (1988: 4–5).

Life is celebrated through the poet's attention to the child's beauty: his "lustrous hair, golden and blond", "irises, emerald green", with the child's "breathing [being] the breath of life". From the metaphorical turn in "bathing in the moonlight" and "a child of brightness", the poet shifts his focus from the child to the surroundings:

Moonbeams
And the perfume of flowers
Safely wrap you up
Silently, in the nature's cradle, you are asleep
No evil spirits dare to disturb you!

Here, nature is venerated not only as simple images of poetic beauty, but as a powerful force, capable of protecting a defenceless child against any "evil spirits". Then, in the last stanza, the poet begins to elucidate the source of this all-embracing power:

Let us sleep
Sleep in the embrace of God
He opens His fatherly loving arms
And hugs us tight
His shining lips kiss us
With peace of mind, let us all sleep
Sleep in His embrace

At the end, the poet dramatically introduces both the subjective speaker and audience through the pronoun "us". He dexterously serialises three images of the subjective speaker standing in front of an oil painting of a Western woman singing a lullaby to a child. First, he directs the audience to a close inspection of the child's eyes and hair and in doing so, he himself cannot help but show his wonderment and admiration of the beautiful child. Then, an overall view of the whole picture, to appreciate the beauty of nature, is portrayed. Finally, the poet shifts his vision away from the painting and turns around to describe the world around him as being the revelation of God's divine power. Present in the poem is the strong symbolism of the West and youth (the blond haired child and God of Christianity) as the promise of a better future for China.

Although there is no evidence sourcing any strong Christian influence on Zhu Ziqing's writings, the message of Christianity is nonetheless unmistakable in his debut work "Sleep Little One". This is quite opposite to the xenophobic stance he took just six years later when he wrote an article called "White People – God's Proud Favourite" and his well-known refusal to accept US relief food (Mao Zedong, 1949). Consequently, the significance of Zhu Ziqing's affirmation of Christianity in the poem can be seen as twofold. Firstly, it indicates the poet's longing for an ever powerful moral force to fill in the vacuum created by the declined faith in traditional Confucian ethics; and secondly it reflects a trend amongst educated young Chinese at the time, proposing "Christianity for national salvation", a typically utilitarian approach of May Fourth intellectuals, who "judged religions in terms of their utility" (Chow, 1960: 321).

5. Bing Xin's philosophy of love

Bing Xin's (1900–1999) poems and essays are full of praising of maternal love, glorification of sea and other natural scenes, and they are most welcomed by children. For nearly a century, Bing Xin's works have avidly been read by hundreds of millions of Chinese children and have been a fundamental force, shaping modern Chinese children's literature. Bing Xin's family background and childhood has always attracted attention from literary critics, not only because it is an obvious source of many influential events, but also because fond memories of childhood constantly appear explicitly in her writings, as shown here in one of her short poems (Poem #2, *Stars*):

O childhood!
You are the reality in dream,
The dream in reality,
The faint tear stained smile in remembrance.⁵

⁵ The English translation is taken from Lin (1972: 52).

Bing Xin's father, a loving father, a devoted husband and a dutiful navy officer, influenced her tremendously. She worshiped her father, his colleagues, his career, his professionalism and his heroism. All of these were later embedded into one symbol in her literary creation, the sea, as is shown in the following two short poems:

O Dad!
Come out and sit in the moonlight,
I want to hear your story about your sea. (Poem #75, *Stars*)

Around the age of six or seven, Bing Xin would sit on the beach for hours, watching the sea. She loved blue, because it was the colour of the sea, and she loved grey and white, because they were the colours of the warships (Poem #113, *Stars*):

O Father!
How much I love you,
As how much as I love your sea.

Bing Xin often used the possessive case for the sea, like “your sea” and “his sea” in her poems. To her, especially during her childhood, the sea was her father’s, and indeed, her father was the sea: vast, deep and full of unexpected excitement. A man of few words in public, her father provided her with crucial moral and spiritual guidance, metaphorically speaking, just like a lighthouse: remote but timely, sometimes directing her towards her dreams, and sometimes bringing her back to reality from her dreams.

Bing Xin’s contribution to the vernacular poetry was the introduction of magnificent images, such as the roaring sea and the vast starry sky, which were virtually unknown to traditional women’s poetry in China. She also addressed a broader range of topics, including the relationship between parents and children, humans and nature, ideals and reality and poets and the world. Like Tagore’s 326 short poems in *Stray Birds*, Bing Xin’s 164 poems have no titles, but are numbered. This is Poem #1:

A myriad of stars twinkle,
In the deep blue sky,
Has anyone heard their conversation?
In silence,
Amid pale lights,
They exchange praises of each other.⁶

Stars are one of the central images in Bing Xin’s poetry, and are closely related to the sea. When Bing Xin was a little girl, her father often took her to the ship’s mast at night to watch stars, teaching her how to identify them according to their position. Time and again he told her that those stars, so small and far away, were crucial in guiding sailors. Bing Xin’s poems often reflect her positive attitude towards life, which was often symbolised by the sea, stars and flowers, like this one (Poem #131, *Stars*):

O Sea,
Which star is not bright?
Which flower is not fragrant?
Which thought of mine does not ring
With the pure sound of your tides? ⁷

Bing Xin’s constant reference to stars alludes to her need for guidance, as she felt lost in life, as if she were sailing at night. However, the night depicted in Poem #1 is not pitch dark, for the myriad of stars radiate in “pale lights”. From the very beginning she attempts to set up a positive undertone of hope in the volume of *Stars*. She achieves this in Poem #1, by using words like “myriad”, “twinkle”, “conversation” and “praises”. Free-verse fragments became the best way to express her delicate, philosophical and spiritual sentiments, often inspired by trivial objects, randomly encountered, which led her to ponder their metaphysical relation to herself. For example, in Poem #52:

⁶ The English translation is taken from Yeh (1992: 36-37).

⁷ The English translation is taken from Yeh (1992: 21).

The flowers and rocks beside the railroad tracks!
 In this instant
 You and I
 Chance to meet among the infinite beings,
 Also bid our last farewell among the infinite beings.
 When I return,
 In the midst of the myriads of our kind,
 Where can I ever find you again?⁸

Bing Xin's portrayal of maternal love is part of her emotional shelter, as she describes in Poem #159:
 Mother!

When the rainstorm comes from the sky,
 Birds hide themselves in the nest;
 When the rainstorm comes to the heart,
 I can only hide myself in your bosom.

Bing Xin often drew upon the golden memories of her own happy childhood, as evidenced in Poem #2 discussed above. She celebrates childhood as a holy symbol in Poem #35:

Tens of thousands of angels
 Are starting to extol a child:
 A child!
 A tiny body
 Holds a huge soul.

Further poems centring on the theme of childhood include Poem #74, where Bing Xin idealises the infant as a great muse, the source of her poetic inspiration:

An infant
 Is a great poet.
 From his incomplete speech
 Come the most complete poetic lines.

In Poem #14 she claims that “we are all infants of nature, lying in the cradle of the universe” and in Poem #99 she describes all humans as infants on the same boat:

We are all infants born on a boat in the ocean.
 We don't know
 Where we came from,
 Nor where we are going.

From this theme, it can be seen that Bing Xin emphasises the commonality and totality of all human beings, drawing from her understanding of Christianity as saving “innumerable others in the universe” through “universal love”. This universal love appears to start with children, who possess the qualities symbolising true love, which Bing Xin claims in her poem “The Lovable” (1921): “Except for the universe, only children are forever lovable.” The broad scope of Bing Xin's poems, apart from the abovementioned themes, also includes some echoing sentimental traditions, like the following example, which explores the relation between the poet and the world:

At midnight –
 The whole universe is fast asleep!
 I am the only one awake.
 Am I a character in a dream?⁹

Her sentimentalism was derived from self-pity and self-affection, and occasionally it can be observed in the collection of her miniature poems in *Stars*.

⁸ The English translation is taken from Hsu (1970: 21).

⁹ The English translation is taken from Hsu (1970: 21).

Except for the sentimentalism revealed in the above example, her poetry, on a whole, is distinguished by its candid probing of the multiple dimensions of universal love, natural beauty and pursuit of truth as positive moral values.

6. Guo Moruo's celestials

Guo Moruo (1892–1978), who turned to Marxism a few years later in the mid-1920s, was exuberant about his own creative powers. This is demonstrated in poems like “The Hound of Heaven” (*Tiangou*), which Guo wrote in 1919:

I am the light of the moon,
I am the light of the sun,
I am the light of all the planets.
I am the light of x-ray,
I am the total energy of the entire universe.¹⁰

Guo had some very specific ideas in regard to poetry for young readers. For example, he wrote that poetry “should be as clear as the unclouded moon in the autumn sky, but not like a sheet of blank paper”, and it “should be as translucent as a crystal gem, but not plainly transparent like a piece of glass” (1988 [1922]: 89–93). He further explained that a clear night sky with a *mondsichel*¹¹ and myriads of stars would offer boundless space for developing the power of the children audience’s imagination, therewith purifying their minds. In this manner he expressed the importance of astral symbolism (the night sky, stars, the moon, planets and other celestial bodies) as a key literary device in encouraging creative imagination. Written in October 1921, and included in his collection of vernacular poems *Xingkong* [Sky of stars], his poem “Celestial Street Market” (*Tianshang de jieshi*)¹² fits well with his ideas about poetry for the young.

In a distance, street lamps ignite
 like countless stars twinkling in the sky
In the sky, shining stars come into sight
 like numerous bright lights along the street

I think in that sky, distant and mysterious
 there must be a beautiful street market
Goods shown in that market
 must be inimitable in this world, rare and precious

Look! The shallow Milky Way
 surely is not that wide
The Herd Boy and the Weaving Girl separated by the river
 must be able to cross it on the back of their buffalo

I think they, at this very moment
 must be wandering leisurely in the celestial street
Don't you believe me? Please look at that meteor
 I am sure they are walking with a lantern

The technique of parallelism and the use of couplets are typical in classical Chinese poetry, and this is most obvious in the first stanza, with a symmetrical pattern of seven-character-long odd lines, and nine-character-long even lines. The regularity is also evident in the grammatical structure, with the first two lines mirrored in the third and fourth lines. This traditional technique serves the poet very well in emphasising the similarities between streetlights and stars in the sky, visually achieving the effect of narrowing the distance between the sky and the earth, while also producing a certain merger of the natural realm of stars with the human realm of modern street lamps.

¹⁰ The English translation is taken from Spence (1991: 312).

¹¹ German – crescent moon, printed in German script in the original.

¹² Guo Moruo's poem “*Tianshang de jieshi*” [Celestial street market] was originally published in his collection of poems *Xingkong* [Sky of stars]. Shanghai: Taidong shuju, 1923. It is selected in Jiang Feng (1988: 49–50).

Notably, the rigid pattern of parallelism in the first stanza vanishes entirely in the second stanza. From the platform built on the resemblance between the two worlds in the first stanza, the poet unleashes his imagination, bold yet logical through the repetition of the word “must” (*dingran*). From goods displayed in their market, the poet shifts his focus to celestial characters in the third stanza. As the poem progresses, the language becomes increasingly colloquial, and acquires the form of an informal conversation between the poet and the audience. The story of the herd boy and the weaving girl is well-known among Chinese children. The story is part of traditional Chinese mythology in which the herd boy sets off after his wife, a fairy, who had married the herd boy without the approval of her grandmother. Before he can reach her, her grandmother draws a line in the sky with her magic hairpin. The line becomes a raging river between them, the Milky Way, with the herd boy as Altair and the weaving girl as Vega. Finally, it is decreed by the celestial court (*tianting*) that the separated lovers can only be re-united once every year in autumn, on the seventh night of the seventh moon. On that night, all the magpies fly up to form a bridge across the Milky Way and the herd boy goes across and visits his wife.

However, Guo Moruo wrote a different ending to the story, affirming the creative powers of his artistic imagination. The poet is celebrating the use of creative licence in changing what is fixed in the traditional story. Guo Moruo anticipates his young audience to challenge his story, so he provides evidence: the meteor, leaving behind a lingering imagery of the two affectionate lovers, lantern in hand, window shopping down the celestial street leisurely and showing absolute contempt for the celestial authorities.

7. Conclusion

The movement to promote *baihua* liberated the Chinese language and literature from the monopoly of a small elite group, making this language a “tool” for the broad masses to acquire knowledge from vernacular books and to express their thoughts and emotions in vernacular writing. The first group to benefit was children and students, and soon, language reform was supported and praised by the majority of the population. The new literature emerged in China to challenge the traditional leading role of the traditional literary elite. It aligned itself closely with its simple standard language and realistic themes. It attempted to change the conventions of writing, and in the end, proved to be a catalyst in arousing the self-consciousness of the hitherto dormant elements of Chinese society, so as to instigate broader social change.

Traditionally, poetry was written with a Confucian notion in mind that literature is primarily informative and didactic, serving a social and moral purpose. This tradition was still evident in the new genre. Vernacular poems all express a conscious motive: to promote emancipation of the individual from the bondage of traditional values. In this new genre, extensions of such ideas can be seen as forming the foundation of common themes that feature in modern Chinese poetry: the defence of freedom and reason; condemnation of old values of passivity, submissiveness, acceptance of fate and maintenance of the *status quo*; and the celebration of individual expression and innovation. Indeed, these themes were the new moral values that modern Chinese writers sought to instil in their readers. They retained the conviction that it was their duty to shift the focus of education from the Confucian dictum of “teach and nourish the most talented individuals” to educate the common people. Viewed in the historical and intellectual context, the texts analysed here all epitomise their own political and moral ideals and their dreams for the future of the nation. Conversely, these verses, similar to Confucian children’s books, used art and literature as an instrument for moral and social persuasion and ideological indoctrination. Their reluctance to base the genre free of didacticism, imposed by the dictates of society, is by no means unique to China, and certainly not during this period of world history. What is striking, however, is the power of the imagery of youth, revitalisation and freedom from corruption in contributing to a “New Culture Movement” in a society that had glorified an awesome antiquity throughout dynastic history.

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