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THE STUDY OF EARLY 20TH-CENTURY CHINESE NEW POETRY

O.Ochilov*Doctoral Candidate, PhD, Associate Professor Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, Uzbekistan***Qiao Xue (乔雪)***Doctoral Candidate, Institute of Language and Literature Lanzhou University, PRC, Uzbekistan*

ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: The late Qing dynasty marked a period of significant transformation in Chinese society, which directly influenced literary expression and the emergence of new poetic forms. The Poetry Revolution, a key movement during this time, played a crucial role in shaping modern Chinese poetry. While the connection between the Poetry Revolution and modern new poetry has been widely debated, existing research lacks a comprehensive analysis of the transition process. This study examines the historical context, linguistic innovations, and thematic shifts that contributed to the development of modern Chinese poetry. By analyzing key figures such as Liang Qichao and Huang Zunxian, as well as the broader literary trends of the time, this research aims to clarify the role of the Poetry Revolution in bridging traditional Chinese literature and modern poetic expression. The findings suggest that while modern new poetry was influenced by Western literary forms, the Poetry Revolution provided a foundational framework that facilitated its development. This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Chinese literary evolution and the factors that shaped modern poetic identity.

INTRODUCTION

During the late Qing dynasty, significant changes took place in Chinese society, profoundly impacting literary creativity of the time. As a result of these transformations, a Poetry Revolution emerged, introducing not only numerous modifications to traditional poetic forms but also a deep reevaluation of poetic content and themes.

Although extensive research has been conducted in recent years on the Poetry Revolution of the late Qing period, debates and research gaps still persist regarding its overall significance, place in literary history, and connection to modern new poetry. In particular, clarifying the relationship between the Poetry Revolution and modern new poetry requires a detailed study of the internal characteristics of poetry, its transformations, and the evolution of its expressive forms to reach reliable conclusions.

Most studies on the Poetry Revolution of the late Qing period focus on the developments of the early 20th century. The initial research primarily concentrated on the historical background of the Poetry Revolution and its key figures, such as Liang Qichao and Huang Zunxian.

Over time, as research perspectives and methodologies became increasingly rich and in-depth, scholars began to focus on the changes in poetic form and content within the Poetry Revolution. Notable examples include the studies of Guo Shaoyu and Qian Zhongshu .

There are two main perspectives within academic circles regarding the relationship between the Poetry Revolution and modern new poetry:

1. The first perspective argues that the Poetry Revolution directly influenced the emergence of modern new poetry and served as its foundation. According to this view, the linguistic and formal changes that arose during the Poetry Revolution of the late Qing period provided a solid groundwork for the development of modern new poetry.

2. The second perspective, however, contends that there is no direct lineage between the two and that modern new poetry was more influenced by Western poetry. According to this view, modern new poetry was shaped primarily by ideas and techniques borrowed from Western poetry, rather than being directly impacted by the Poetry Revolution of the late Qing period.

Each of these two perspectives is supported by its own set of evidence and research, highlighting the influence of different factors on the development of modern new poetry. The question of the Poetry Revolution's impact on modern new poetry remains at the center of academic debates and discussions. The position of late Qing literature, and modern literature as a whole, in the history of Chinese literature is somewhat ambiguous. This period's literature is often regarded merely as the final stage of ancient literature rather than being recognized as an independent literary phase. This perspective is evident in many historical works on ancient Chinese literature.

For instance, in the four-volume *History of Chinese Literature* , edited by Yao Guoen and others, the literature of this period is viewed as the conclusion of the separation process from ancient literary traditions. Similarly, in *History of Ancient Chinese Literature*, edited by Guo Yuheng, modern literature is mentioned as a stage of Qing dynasty literature. However, in practice, this section is largely overlooked in the analysis of Qing literature.

On the other hand, works on the history of modern literature typically begin with the New Culture Movement around 1917, which hinders the formation of a continuous link between ancient and modern literature. As a result, modern literature is often perceived as an entirely separate domain, unrelated to ancient literature. This creates a misleading impression among readers that modern literature is disconnected from or even opposed to ancient literary traditions.

However, the emergence of modern literature as an independent discipline helps bridge this gap, serving as a link between the history of ancient and modern literature. It not only brings late Qing

literature—often overlooked in traditional literary studies—into the scope of research but also legitimizes its existence as a distinct academic field.

"In the preface to *The Development History of Modern Chinese Literature*, Guo Yuanli states:

'Modern Chinese literature is both the continuation and culmination of ancient literature, as well as the foundation of contemporary literature, signifying an organic continuity. It represents a crucial stage in the history of Chinese literary development, shaped over 80 years by writers facing national tragedies and influenced by international cultural shocks. This has resulted in a literature that is open and constantly evolving.

Although this evolving literature has yet to be fully recognized as mature and has not produced major literary masterpieces in Chinese literary history, the transformations and complex literary phenomena that occurred during the transition from ancient to modern literature hold significant research value. The successes and failures in its development must be carefully analyzed by literary historians. However, despite its importance, there are still very few specialized studies that comprehensively examine this period .

The shortage of scholarly research on this period not only highlights the importance of studying modern Chinese literature but also reveals general gaps in the study of this literary era. In our view, this situation should be seen as a new opportunity for future academic research. In other words, the shortcomings and deficiencies in these studies actually open up significant possibilities for future scholarly exploration. By addressing these gaps, researchers can achieve new and important findings. This should be considered a new direction for future academic activity and research. For example: The literature of the late Qing period exhibits clear evolutionary characteristics in terms of both content and form. This literature inherits the traditions of ancient literature while also demonstrating trends toward modern literary transformation. Ignoring it would make it difficult to understand the crucial transition from traditional to modern Chinese literature.

During the late Qing period, Chinese society underwent major transformations, and as a part of social culture, literature reflected the social ideas and changes of that time. Therefore, studying late Qing literature helps to fully comprehend the social transformations of that historical period.

The emergence of modern literature as an independent discipline not only bridges the gap between ancient and modern literature but also contributes to the deepening of literary studies and the development of the field. This process reflects the dynamic changes in the interdisciplinary structure and reorganization of literary research.

Overall, the literature of the late Qing period, particularly modern historical literature, should not be overlooked in the history of Chinese literature. It represents not only a crucial stage in the transition from ancient to modern literature but also serves as a key to understanding the overall trajectory of Chinese literary development.

A thorough study of this period's literature allows for a deeper understanding of the historical progression of Chinese literature and its internal logic. Such research helps bridge existing gaps in contemporary academic studies and introduces new perspectives and methodologies for the further development of Chinese literary history research.

Shortly after the New Culture Movement, several works on literary history emerged, showing great interest in modern historical literature. In February 1923, Shenbao newspaper published Hu Shi's article *The Last Fifty Years*, which was later renamed *The Last Fifty Years of Chinese Literature*." "In this article, the overall landscape of literature after 1872 was analyzed. However, a certain degree of subjectivity is evident, as Hu Shi aimed to promote literature in the baihua (vernacular) language and

advocate for the literary revolution. Consequently, he placed greater emphasis on the historical significance of the literary revolution after 1917, regarding earlier literature as merely the 'final mature creative stage' of classical literature.

However, examining the New Culture Movement within the context of what is referred to as 'modern historical literature' is essential for confirming their intrinsic connections and laying the foundation for future large-scale research.

A few years later, Chen Zizhan's work *The Changes in Modern Chinese Literature: A History of Chinese Literature Over the Last Thirty Years...* "...was published. Unlike Hu Shi's views, this work does not merely repeat his arguments but instead presents independent perspectives, affirming the unique significance of modern historical literature.

According to Chen Zizhan, 'This period is one of the most important in literary history. During this time, all aspects of literature underwent significant transformations, setting it apart from previous eras'. According to him, the fundamental purpose and essence of literature changed during this period. Chen Zizhan concludes that, after 1894, literature began to reflect the demand for a new type of literature suited to modern individuals.

The literature of this period is distinguished by its modern characteristics—unlike traditional literature, it aligns with the needs and life experiences of contemporary people. Through this conclusion, Chen Zizhan highlights the modern features of Chinese literature after 1894. In his view, this period's literature is modern in nature, introducing new ideas, new themes, and new modes of expression.

These modern characteristics differentiate it from previous literature and establish its connection with contemporary literature. Thus, Chen Zizhan's research and conclusions vividly demonstrate the modern attributes of Chinese literature after 1894 and highlight its organic link with modern literature. As a result, literature after 1894 is regarded as a crucial stage in the formation of modern Chinese literature.

Qian Jibo, in his *History of Modern Chinese Literature*, includes poetry revolution leaders such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao in the "new literature" section, comparing their significance to that of Hu Shi. These leaders' efforts in the poetry revolution—the movement to modernize poetry—highlight their crucial role in the development of modern Chinese poetry.

Zhu Ziqing, in his *Series on New Chinese Literature: An Introduction to Poetry*, explicitly demonstrates the inheritance relationship between the poetry revolution and modern new poetry:

"The 'new poetry' they created consisted mainly of using new terminology. In other words, they attempted to modernize the language of poetry by incorporating new words and expressions. Only Huang Zunxian made significant progress in this direction. His work went beyond merely using new vocabulary; he actively promoted writing poetry in plain language ('my hand writes what my mouth speaks'). By doing so, he emphasized the importance of composing poetry in the vernacular. He also sought to introduce new ideas and new subject matter into poetry ('things and places unknown to the ancients').

Through these early literary history studies, we can see that modern historical period literature is not only a crucial stage in the transition from ancient to modern literature but also plays a significant role in understanding the overall development of Chinese literature. These studies provide us with rich historical data and theoretical foundations, allowing us to better comprehend the transition process from traditional to modern Chinese literature.

In the 1980s, significant changes took place in Chinese literary research. As a result, modern historical period literature (1840–1917) transformed almost overnight from a "timid swan" into a "swan," becoming the center of attention. In other words, this period's literature emerged from previous neglect and became a subject of intense academic discussion, particularly playing a crucial role in modern literary studies.

In the 1980s, social, political, and cultural changes in China, the emergence of new literary theories, the desire to restore historical justice, the necessity of understanding the roots of modern literature, and international cooperation led to a sharp increase in the study of modern historical period literature. Since research on this period was crucial in shaping and developing modern Chinese literature, scholars and researchers began to pay significant attention to it.

During the process of rewriting modern literary history, the relationship between modern historical period literature and contemporary literature was reassessed, and their mutual influence was studied more deeply. It was confirmed that modern historical period literature served as a foundation for the development of modern literature, highlighting their interconnectedness and reciprocal impact.

Many specialists and scholars conducted research to reevaluate modern historical period literature and determine its influence on contemporary literature. This period of literature, previously overlooked in earlier studies, has now become a subject of intense discussion and investigation. As a result of these studies, it has been established that modern historical period literature is a vital source and foundation for contemporary literature.

We can see that researchers such as Chen Pingyuan, Liu Na, Wang Dewei, Qian Zhengang, and Yang Lianfeng have conducted extensive studies on this topic. These scholars examined the literature of the Late Qing period from the perspective of modern literature, placing significant emphasis on identifying its modern characteristics.

In their research, they analyzed how the literature of this period influenced modern literature. The results of these studies can be observed in the following findings:

These experts have clearly emphasized the discovery of modernity in Late Qing literature from the perspective of modern literature and its significance in the transition to modern literature. They studied the new ideas, themes, and expressive methods of this period's literature in connection with modern literature.

Their research provided essential sources and comparative foundations for present and future studies of modern literature and literary history. These studies enabled researchers to gain a deeper understanding of modern literature and analyze its developmental process more comprehensively. However, a general assessment of these experts' findings also reveals that their primary focus has been on Late Qing novels. Chen Pingyuan's work, *The Transformation of Narrative Models in Chinese Fiction*, provides a detailed analysis of the transition and characteristics of modernity in Late Qing fiction. This study is of great significance in understanding the development of modern Chinese fiction.

Wang Dewei's work, *Enforced Modernity – New Perspectives on Late Qing Fiction*, also focuses primarily on the novel genre. His research has made a significant contribution to the study of the concept of modernity through Late Qing novels.

Qian Zhengang's work, *A Historical Perspective on Late Qing and Minguo Novels*, is also dedicated to this topic and analyzes the transition of novels from this period toward modernity. Similarly, Liu Na's *Transitions – Chinese Literature from the Xinhai Revolution to the May Fourth Movement* is a comprehensive study of the transition to modern literature, though it dedicates very little space to the discussion of poetry.

Yan Lianfeng's work, *From the Late Qing Dynasty to the May Fourth Movement: The Modernization of Chinese Literature*, also provides a comprehensive analysis of the transition to modern literature, but the examination of poetry is largely overlooked. It becomes evident that researchers have focused extensively on late Qing novels while showing relative indifference to poetry. This could be attributed to their personal academic interests, but it may also stem from an insufficient recognition of the distinct characteristics of poetry. Nevertheless, this gap presents a significant opportunity to rediscover and redefine the modernity within late Qing poetry. Furthermore, the theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and findings from the study of late Qing novels could serve as valuable comparative foundations for analyzing the unique aspects of poetry from the same period.

Naturally, studies on late Qing poetry, particularly the Poetry Revolution, do exist. However, researchers have largely focused on the period itself while overlooking its connections to modern literature. This oversight hinders a deeper exploration of the relationship between the Poetry Revolution and literary modernity. For example, in Zhang Yunfang's collection *The Poetry Revolution and Literary Changes*, the articles primarily examine the role and contributions of individuals involved in the Poetry Revolution, while giving less emphasis to its long-term impact.

Guo Yanlin's work *The Development History of Modern Chinese Literature* provides a detailed analysis of the evolution of mid-modern poetry, including key writers, works, trends, and ideas. Similarly, Li Zikai's *The History of Mid-Modern Chinese Poetry* follows a similar approach. While both works acknowledge the influence of mid-modern poetry movements, including the Poetry Revolution, on modern poetry, their analyses remain broad in scope. This generalization has limited a deeper examination of the intrinsic elements of poetry.

In recent years, there has been a growing reconsideration of the relationship between late Qing poetry and modern new poetry. Wang Guangming, in the first chapter of his work *A Century of Evolution in Modern Chinese Poetry*, focuses on the "Poetry Revolution," considering it the starting point of "a century of Chinese poetry." This new perspective indicates that the author correctly evaluates the significance of the Poetry Revolution in the development of modern poetry and has decided to explore its impact more deeply.

However, while assessing the place of the Poetry Revolution in literary history, the researcher reveals certain gaps and contradictions. Specifically, the author asserts that late Qing poetry played a role in the emergence of the concept of "new poetry," later serving as an important reference point for modern Chinese poets in their pursuit of modernity. Furthermore, he acknowledges that this was the first step in China's search for a modern poetic form.

Despite this, he also emphasizes that the language of the Poetry Revolution remained traditional, likening it to "pouring new wine into an old bottle." As a result, he ultimately denies that the roots of new poetry can be traced back to this period.

The author's views on the Poetry Revolution are complex and contradictory. On the one hand, he acknowledges its significance in the development of modern new poetry; on the other hand, he considers its language outdated. While he regards the Poetry Revolution as the starting point of modern poetry's evolution, he simultaneously denies this notion, creating an inherent paradox in his assessment.

Rong Guangqin's doctoral dissertation, *The Emergence of Modern Chinese Poetry: From the Late Qing Dynasty to the May Fourth Movement* and Lai Yuhang's dissertation, *The Language of Poetry from the Late Qing Dynasty to the May Fourth Movement* each stand out with their unique perspectives in terms of subject matter, theoretical approach, and depth of analysis.

Rong Guangqin explores the interplay between poetic language, form, and personal experiences within the context of modernity. His research primarily employs methods of textual, linguistic, and formal analysis of poetry. In contrast, Lai Yuhang focuses on the creation process of the new poetic language, examining changes in form, the impact of experimentation, emotional expression, new poetic techniques, and the dynamic relationship between modernity and classical influences.

Although both dissertations begin with the Poetry Revolution, they devote minimal attention to it, instead concentrating on broader aspects of poetic transformation during this transitional period.

The studies primarily focus on analyzing poetic language, yet they do not sufficiently engage in a comparative analysis of the relationship between the Poetry Revolution and the emergence, development, and transformation of modern Chinese poetry. This gap hinders a comprehensive understanding of the Poetry Revolution's significance in the evolution of modern poetry.

The authors acknowledge that discussions on the formation of modern poetic genres are largely limited to changes in language and artistic conventions. However, they concede that these discussions alone are insufficient to provide a definitive answer regarding how modern poetic forms were shaped. Additionally, they emphasize that the topic of "the origins of modern Chinese poetry" remains unresolved, and their research should be considered only as an introduction or a preliminary guide rather than a conclusive study. It is evident that efforts to find a definitive answer regarding the formation of modern poetic genres remain insufficiently explored. This subject requires deeper and broader research, making it an essential and necessary area of study for researchers.

Of course, studies on the general literary activities of Poetry Revolution leaders such as Liang Qichao and Huang Zunxian exist. Examples include Xia Xiaohong's "Awakening the World, Leading to the Future – Liang Qichao's Literary Path", Liang Yantang's "Liang Qichao and the Literary Revolution of the Late Qing Dynasty" and Liu Bingbing's doctoral dissertation "Between Tradition and Modernity – A Study of Huang Zunxian's Poetry". While these valuable studies explore the overall literary contributions of key Poetry Revolution figures, they do not place the Poetry Revolution at the center of their analysis. As a result, there is still a lack of extensive and in-depth examination of the Poetry Revolution itself.

The issue of the modern transformation characteristics of the Poetry Revolution and its influence on the emergence of modern Chinese poetry remains insufficiently studied. Although Yan Zhangju's research is one of the few works in this field, its main conclusions are not supported by sufficient evidence and fail to fully clarify the position of the Poetry Revolution between tradition and modernity. Therefore, further expansion and deepening of research and discussions in this area are necessary. In particular, a detailed analysis of the fundamental elements of the Poetry Revolution—such as language, meter, rhythm, imagery, and poetic genres—from the perspective of modernity is required. This would not only help to better understand the essence of the Poetry Revolution but also provide a clearer picture of how it influenced the formation of modern Chinese poetry.

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- 10."古人所未知的事物和领域" - This phrase refers to things and regions that were unknown or unexplored by people of ancient times. It encompasses concepts, discoveries, and territories that were beyond the knowledge, experience, and understanding of past generations. For example: New technologies: Innovations and technological advancements that were incomprehensible or yet to be discovered by ancient people. New scientific discoveries: Knowledge and findings emerging from scientific progress that were unknown to ancient civilizations. New social and cultural phenomena: Social and cultural developments that did not exist in ancient times or were not understood by people of that era.
11. Unknown territories in ancient times: Geographical regions: Lands and areas that had not yet been discovered or explored by ancient people. Cultural and ethnic regions: Communities or nations that were unknown or not understood by ancient civilizations. In literature, this phrase signifies the introduction of new themes, ideas, and forms of expression. It reflects the desire of poets and writers to explore unconventional and novel subjects. These new elements enrich literature and bring it closer to modernity.
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