

# The Subtle Revolution

Poets of the "Old Schools" during  
Late Qing and Early Republican  
China

JON KOWALLIS

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# The Subtle Revolution

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China

JON EUGENE VON KOWALLIS

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# Preface

Conventional approaches to Chinese literature have presented the late nineteenth century as an era in which the traditional literary forms, particularly classical-style poetry, ground to a halt, having petered out like the political fortunes of the “moribund” Qing dynasty. Only the infusion of new images from abroad and ultimately the language and ideas of the West, it has been held, served to propel Chinese poetry in the direction of the “modern.” In this study I have attempted to question the objectivity of that view, arguing that poetry in the classical language could and did serve its writers and their intended readership as a vehicle to articulate a complex and sophisticated understanding of as well as reaction to the entry of modernity.

Focusing on representative figures from three different schools of poetry prominent in the years roughly between 1871 and 1914 (some arguably influential for much longer), I have seen Wang Kaiyun (1833–1916), Fan Zengxiang (1846–1931), Yi Shunding (1858–1920), Chen Yan (1856–1937), Chen Sanli (1852–1937) and Zheng Xiaoxu (1860–1938) as poets with an active relationship to their readers who addressed vital issues central to the maintenance and survival of a threatened culture in time-honored literary forms. Originally aimed at an elite audience, such verse is to be judged not according to twentieth-century standards of readability or imported notions of how poetic expression operates, but rather by the standards of Chinese critical reception at the time. When re-set in their proper historical and literary context, these poets emerge as the voice of a generation which straddled the chasm between the traditional Chinese world-order and the Darwinian state of affairs which came upon the Third World by the mid-to-late nineteenth century.

For the most part neither political sloganeers nor aloof, disinterested aesthetes, these literary figures produced a body of poetry which articulated both the individual and the cultural dilemma

they faced as citizens of a nation in the throes of a life-and-death struggle, not only against outside forces, but also against itself, and did so in a language which was capable of drawing on the vast resources of a remarkable literary tradition poised tragically on the brink of annihilation. Their success provides a lasting testimony to everything that is great within the Chinese tradition as well as the resilience of the human spirit amid even the most devastating of circumstances.

I would like to thank Professors Cyril Birch, C. T. Hsia, Samuel H-N. Cheung, Yeh Wen-hsin, Zhuang Qubing, Irving Lo, and Qian Zhonglian as well as Ma Mingtong, Lao Zhang, and my former colleagues at the Foreign Languages Press in Beijing and Charles University in Prague for their guidance and help with various portions of this manuscript. Thanks also to Qian Zhongshu, Leo Oufan Lee, David Holm, Mark Elvin, Wolfgang Kubin, Barbara Hendrischke, Hans Hendrischke, David Palumbo-Liu, Randy and Joanna Ho Trumbull, Marion Eggert, Adam Chau, and Chen Tong for their valued advice and encouragement.

Special thanks to Joanne Sandstrom, managing editor, and Susan Stone, sometime assistant editor at the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, as well as the CSCPRC, NEH, and ARC for their generous funding of my fieldwork in China and subsequent write-up of the material, both in the United States and in Australia. Needless to note, any errors in interpretation are my own.

With these things said, I would like to dedicate this study to my parents, my teachers and my friends, and especially to the memory of my father and three late friends, Marston Anderson, Helmut Martin, and Bohdana Würflova.

Love is all we have, the only way  
That each can help the other.

—Euripides, *Orestes*

# Introduction

The final decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the beginning of a cultural transformation in China, the scope and depth of which have been unprecedented in modern times. The last of the great non-Western powers to remain independent of and largely unaffected by the technology, culture, and ideologies of the West was, as the result of trading pressures and the military vulnerability of its coastal defenses, forcibly drawn into a Darwinian age of nationalistic competition for *Lebensraum*, sovereignty, and colonies for which it had little taste and even less advantage. As Fairbank has described it,

The Chinese culture that came under stress from modern changes was the most distinctive, separate, and ancient, the most self-sufficient, balanced, and massive, of any culture known to history. China's intermittent revolution, fitfully gathering steam during the last hundred fifty years, is therefore by far the most deep-going and large-scale social change ever required by history.<sup>1</sup>

The implications of such a situation for the study of literature ought to be self-evident, particularly because the traditional literary genres underwent profound changes during this era and were, to some extent, eventually uprooted or at least displaced by their more "modern" counterparts. And indeed there has been no shortage of studies in the past of how this uprooting and displacement came about. Deterministic scholars, Western and Chinese alike, have vied to explain the historical factors that brought about the "inevitable" rejection of classical (read "native") forms and language and its substitution with "modern" texts based on the Western models and written in vernacular or spoken language. I am referring here and throughout this study primarily to what

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<sup>1</sup> John King Fairbank, *China Watch* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 22-23.

happened with poetry, although the "evolution" of other genres followed a similar pattern.

This is not to imply that the many sincere and enlightened patriots who advocated, in their day, writing in a form more accessible to the broad masses of the Chinese people were the inadvertent dupes of Western cultural expansion (although they were undeniably under the influence of Western learning and notions of the historical "progression" of language and literature).<sup>2</sup> Nor is it to suggest, as members of the *Xueheng* group<sup>3</sup> once argued, that they were responsible for the debasement of an entire tradition in *lettres* that, once gone, could never be restored. Rather, I am simply putting forth an argument for the necessity of

<sup>2</sup> The whole problematic set up by the deterministic approach to literature with regard to China ought rightly be the subject of a study in and of itself. One major influence on Chinese scholars' orientation toward the "natural progression" of literatures was the Danish literary historian Georg Brandes (1842–1927), with his many accessible and in those days much-celebrated studies of romanticism and realism in the European tradition, as well as his numerous writings on Eastern Europe. Brandes saw himself as an opponent of romanticism and a champion of realism. His work greatly influenced the Japanese-language scholarship being read on literature by Chinese students in Japan at the turn of the century. It seems clear that both Lu Xun and Liang Qichao came at least partially under this influence. Compare the tone and approach in Brandes' *Hovedstroemninger i det 19de Aarhundredes Litteratur* (Main currents in nineteenth-century literature) (6 vols., 1872–1890), with Lu Xun's 1907–1908 treatise *Moluo shi li shuo* (On the power of Mara or "satanic" poetry") in *Lu Xun quanji* (The complete works of Lu Xun) (16 vols.; Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1981), 1:63–100. Hereafter cited as *Lu Xun quanji*.

<sup>3</sup> A coterie of conservative intellectuals active primarily during the 1920s, well educated for the most part in both the Western and Chinese intellectual traditions, this group founded in January 1922 a journal entitled *Xueheng* (the masthead bore the English version of the title *The Critical Review*), which continued publication until 1933, quite a lengthy life span for a Chinese periodical in those troubled times. Central figures were Mei Guangdi (1890–1945), Wu Mi (b. 1894), Hu Xiansu (b. 1894), and Liu Baiming. The *Xueheng* group provided the most important cohesive and organized intellectual opposition to the spokesmen for the May Fourth movement, such as Hu Shi (1891–1962), Chen Duxiu (1880–1939), and Lu Xun (1881–1936). Most of the major figures in *Xueheng* were Harvard-educated and influenced more by the Anglo-American response to cultural radicalism than by native Chinese intellectual currents. Central to their cause was the preservation of the "national heritage" (*guocui*—adopted into Chinese from the Meiji neologism *kokusui* or "national essence"). As Richard Barry Rosen has summarized, "The 'national heritage' of China, as defined by these conservatives in the early 1920s, was the *cultural legacy as constituted in her enormous history of traditional literature*" (emphasis mine). See Rosen, "The National Heritage Opposition to the New Culture and Literary Movements of China in the 1920s" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1969), pp. iii, 127.



## CHAPTER ONE

# Wang Kaiyun, Deng Fulun, and the “Neo-Ancient” School

During the period between the late Daoguang reign era and the early Xianfeng reign era (i.e., the years around 1850), the poetry of mid-Qing masters such as Yuan Mei (*zi* Zicai, *hao* Jianzhai, alt. Suiyuan Laoren; 1716–1798), Zhao Yi (*zi* Yunsong, *hao* Oubei; 1727–1814), and Shu Wei (*zi* Liren, *hao* Tieyun; 1765–1816) still held sway in terms of popularity and influence.<sup>1</sup> Theirs has been typified as an individually oriented and creative, though disinterested, poetry geared primarily toward the entertainment of its writers and the diversion of its gentry readership. It was against such a literary backdrop and after China’s defeat in the Opium War that Wang Kaiyun together with Deng Fulun and Deng Yi, two brothers from Wugang; Long Rulin from You *xian* (county); and Li Shourong from Changsha formed the Orchid Grove Poetry Society (Lanlin shishe) in 1851. These “Five Talents of Hunan” eventually began to work toward a revival of both “recent” and ancient-style verse as a vehicle for serious poetic comment. In Jiangxi, where the influence of rival schools was particularly strong, Gao Xinkui from Hukou, Fan Yuanheng from Dehua, and Xu Zhenyi from Fengxin are said to have “responded to the poetic impetus” of the Lanlin shishe.<sup>2</sup>

In his youth Wang Kaiyun had studied the *Lisao* and developed a strong admiration for the poems of the Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties. He regarded the movement for a return to ancient

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<sup>1</sup> Kurata Sadayoshi places Wu Songliang (the author of *Xiangsushanguan shiji*, pub. 1843) in the position of Zhao Yi and Shu Wei in his assessment of Wang Kaiyun’s predecessors. But Wu was, in fact, a less prominent figure at the time. Cf. Kurata, p. 207.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207. Qian Jibo (1986), p. 39, gives the name as Lanling cishe (Orchid Hill Lyric Society).

## CHAPTER TWO

# Fan Zengxiang and Yi Shunding: Late-Qing Allusionists

The whole problematic set up by the question of “formalism” in the poetry of the late Qing is one that should, theoretically at least, come to a head in the evaluation of such poets as Fan Zengxiang (1846–1931) and Yi Shunding (1858–1920), representatives of a school generally but rather imprecisely known as the *Zhong-wan Tang shi pai* or “poets in the mid- and late-Tang tradition,” most commonly thought of as the embodiment of florid verse, widespread allusion and, more often than not, of degenerate, irrelevant, and insipid content.<sup>1</sup> But through an examination of their views on poetry, their works, and the authentic reception they were accorded at the time, I shall focus on this “formalism” and inquire whether it did present a serious obstacle to dealing with the modern situation in literature in a meaningful way.

Chinese literary critics in the past have, almost invariably, treated Fan Zengxiang and Yi Shunding together because of their stylistic affinities and personal acquaintance, the standing they held in the literary world of their day, and their influence on contemporaries.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, Chen Yan underscores the positive

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<sup>1</sup> Liu Yazhi has an oft-quoted line of denunciation: “The licentious cries of Fan and Yi throw the notes of orthodox poetry out of cadence.” See his *Lun shi liu jueju* (Six quatrains on poetry) in Hu Pu’an, comp., *Nanshe congxuan* (Selected poems of the Southern Society) (Shanghai: Zhongguo wenhua fuwu she, 1936), 4:597. Strange to see the “revolutionary” Liu Yazhi as a self-appointed watchdog of “orthodox” poetry. Wu Mi writes off Fan Zengxiang’s poems as “singing for the most part of wine, women, actors, and actresses” and continues, “I therefore find little worth adopting from them” although he later concedes that there is considerable value in Fan’s *Caiyun qu* as “a model for the infusion of new material into old forms.” See *Wu Mi shiji* (Collected poems of Wu Mi) (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1935), final *juan*, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> A number of their poems were “written in response” (*he*) to one another’s verse.

## CHAPTER THREE

# Chen Yan, Chen Sanli, Zheng Xiaoxu, and the "Tong-Guang Style"

The figures discussed in this chapter are considered by many authorities to have exerted "the strongest literary influence within the field of orthodox poetry"<sup>1</sup> during the years of the late Qing and early Republic. In other words, it has been suggested that they, more than any other group, ought to be perceived as the real center of gravity within the realm of classical poetry during the period on which we are now focused. My purposes in this inquiry are not to attempt to refute these claims but rather to examine the poetic activities of this school within the broader literary context in which it existed.

To begin with, the term "Tong-Guang style" (Tong-Guang *ti*), like the generalized concept of a "Song school of poetry" or "Song revivalist school" (Song *shipai*) existing in the late Qing has always been at least somewhat misleading. Ostensibly, the name "Tong-Guang" is designed to inform the reader that such a group of poets flourished during the Tongzhi (1862–1874) and Guangxu

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<sup>1</sup> The unlikely source of this statement is the Great Leap Forward-era compilation by the Department of Chinese at Peking University under the title *Zhongguo wenxue shi* (History of Chinese literature), 5 vols. (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1959), 4:276. Kurata Sadayoshi seems to agree, beginning his study with the "Song school" in the lead position. Much of what Qian Jibo wrote in the 1930s also confirms this assessment: see his *Xiandai Zhongguo wenxue shi* (History of modern Chinese literature) (reprint, Changsha: Yue-Lu shushe, 1986), pp. 235–275, esp. p. 236, 264, 268, where he adopts Chen Yan's views verbatim as his own. More recently Andrew Hsieh, in his entry for the "T'ung-Kuang T'i" in the *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), qualifies this, saying that these poets "represented one of the dominating forces in Chinese poetry for at least three decades before the emergence of modern vernacular poetry in the 1920s" (p. 840). Also see the dissertation by Rhew Hyong Gyu, "Ch'en Yen (1856–1937) and the Theory of T'ung-Kuang Style Poetry" (Princeton University, 1993).

# Conclusions

Literary historians on mainland China have divided modern Chinese literature into three basic periods: the *jindai* or "recent [historical] period" (1840–1919), which begins with the First Opium War (1839–1841) and ends with the May Fourth Movement of 1919; the *xiandai* or "modern period" (1919–1949), beginning with or slightly before the May Fourth and running up until the Communist military victory in the civil war against the Nationalists in 1949; and the literature of the *dangdai* or "contemporary period" (1949–present).

Western scholars, as well as their colleagues on Taiwan and in Hong Kong, have tended to view traditional Chinese literature as petering to a halt sometime in the early twentieth century and being finished off at the end of its internal "decline" by the iconoclastic May Fourth Movement, which marked the beginning of the "modern" period. One obvious problem with both these schemata, aside from the heavy element of coincidence, is that they focus on surface political events, ignoring the more subtle literary developments which were already in progress before (and after) the cut-off dates. Recently Western scholars such as the Czech scholar Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, the American Theodore Hutters, David Der-wei Wang from Taiwan, and others have begun to reexamine the late Qing novel and have found it to be less "traditional" than had been previously concluded. With this inquiry I have proposed that much the same may be true for poetry in the traditional styles over roughly the same period, and perhaps even earlier. The renewed interest of Chinese scholars such as Qian Zhonglian, Huang Lin, Ma Yazhong, and Wang Xingkang in poetry of this period tends, in itself, to confirm this hypothesis, although they stop short, possibly for political or historical reasons, of confirming these conclusions. Nevertheless, as Stephen Owen has observed:

When we read a Ch'ing poet writing of Ch'ang-an in certain

# Chinese Texts

## 鄧輔綸

### 聽雨軒坐秋

文簾泛清光，柔颺引玉塘。陰連荷氣潤，夢墜葉聲涼。  
晚照多為影，閑庭過一香。芙蓉今自可，憐爾閱秋霜。

## 王闔運

發祁門雜詩二十二首寄曾總督國藩兼呈同行諸君子

### 其 三

群盜縱橫日，長沙子弟兵。但能通大義，不廢用書生。  
地盡耕耘力，人驚壁壘精。後來司馬法，應見寓農情。

### 其 十

慟哭勤王詔，其如社稷何。至今憂國少，真悔養官多。  
四海空傳檄，書生豈荷戈。蕭蕭易水上，立馬望山河。

### 其 十五

寂寂重陽菊，飄飄異國蓬。孤吟人事外，殘夢水聲中。  
書卷千年在，親知四海空。莫嫌村酒濁，醒醉與君同。

# Glossary of Chinese Terms

*Ai lian shuo* 愛蓮說

*ao ti* 拗體

*aoju* 拗句

*baihua* 白話

*Baixiangting shiji* 白香亭詩集

*bianhua* 變化

*boli* 博麗

*bu zhuan yun* 不轉韻

*bu zhuan zong sheng Tang zhe* 不專  
宗盛唐者

*bu shang sheng* 不尚聲

*bu de zhi* 不得志

*bu ke yi shi* 不可一世

*buzhengshi* 布政使

*buzhengsi* 布政司

*Caiyun qu* 彩雲曲

*caizi* 才子

*Canglang shihua* 滄浪詩話

*changyuan* 暢遠

*chao* 超

*chaya* 槎牙

*chengyu* 成語

*chenyu youfen* 沉郁幽憤

*Chou'an hui* 籌安會

*chu yi* 初意

*Chu ci* 楚詞

*ci* 詞

*dangdai* 當代

*diao xin* 調新

*die yun* 疊韻

*du panghuang* 獨彷徨

*duizhang* 對仗

*er* 爾

*fei Yishan suo neng* 非遺山所能

*Feng* 風

*feng yu* 諷諭

*fengchen* 逢辰

*fengdu* 風度

*fengqing wanran* 風情宛然

*fengya* 風雅

*fu chang* 敷鬯

*fu gu yundong* 復古運動

*Fubao* 復報

*gao* 高

*gexing* 歌行

*gongbu* 工部

*gongsheng* 貢生

*Gongyang* 公羊 (傳)

*gu ge* 古格

*gu* 古

*guang* 廣

*Guangyatang wenda* 廣雅堂問答

*Guliang* 谷梁 (傳)

*guochi* 國恥

*Guoshang* 國殤

*Guoshiguan guanzhang* 國史館館長

*guti* 古體

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Chen Yan 陳衍, comp. *Jindai shichao* 近代詩鈔 [Compendium of recent poetry]. 3 vols. Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1923/1935. A Taiwan Commercial Press reprint exists (dated 1961) of the 1935 Shanghai edition which was entirely reset in metal type from the 1923 *xianzhuang* edition in 24 traditional volumes (double leaves). Important as an “apolitical” although somewhat formalistic work, this anthology contains several thousand poems selected from the oeuvre of 370 different poets, beginning with the works of Qi Junzao (1793–1866), He Shaoji (1799–1873), Zheng Zhen (1806–1864), Zeng Guofan (1811–1872), etc. and ending with Chen Yan’s own contemporaries such as Chen Sanli (1852–1937), Huang Jie (1873–1935) and Jin Tianyu (1873–1947). In the main, however, the compiler has focused on poems composed between the “early Xianfeng reign period” (1851–1861) and the final years of the Qing dynasty. The works of Zheng Xiaoxu (originally occupying 37 double leaves in vol. 13 of the 1923 edition) were expunged in 1935 due to his role as premier of the Japanese client state Manchukuo. ii, 1726 pps.

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*"The Subtle Revolution* tackles a most challenging dimension of Chinese literary modernization. By examining the resurgence of classical-style poetry at a time of radical transformation, Jon Kowallis has ushered us into a world beyond the conventional boundary of the modern. This is a world in which all forces now might employ hitherto incompatible resources and by so doing, renew Chinese literary imagination. Kowallis's readings of select poetry schools and poets are most insightful, and his critique of the extant paradigm prods us to rethink the uncanny conditions of Chinese modernity."

David Der-wei Wang, Harvard University

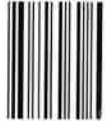
"Challenging the received view that the late Qing classical poetry stood at the end of a long glorious tradition, Jon Kowallis argues that it actually marked the beginning of the modern era. Providing sensitive readings and fine translations of some of the major poets, this book makes an important contribution to the ongoing reexamination of Chinese modernity."

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