

Guo Moruo's *The Nirvana of the Feng and Huang* (1921) as a Chinese modernist poem that reinvigorates traditional myths and legends

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Author Biography

Jiayi Luan is currently a junior studying at Dulwich College Shanghai Pudong in China who is interested in studying history, literature, and political science. She is interested in studying the intersections of these subjects which provide insights into the societies in question. Currently, she is taking IB courses with Higher Levels in History, Geography, and English Language and Literature, aiming to deepen her understanding of global dynamics and cultural contexts. She is particularly fascinated by the symbiotic relationship between literature and history, as shown in this research paper.

Abstract

This research paper explores the intersection of modernist poetry and Chinese cultural revival during the early 20th century, focusing on the poetry of Guo Moruo (1892-1978), a prominent figure in modern Chinese literature. It delves into the adaptation of Western modernist techniques in Chinese poetry as a means of critiquing and rejuvenating traditional cultural forms in the face of social and political upheaval. Guo Moruo's engagement with Western influences, particularly through his translations of Walt Whitman, exemplifies the broader movement among Chinese intellectuals to seek new modes of self-expression and challenge the rigid structures of Chinese society. Examining Guo Moruo's poem *The Nirvana of the Feng and Huang* (1921) as a case study, the paper analyzes how modernist poets reanimated ancient Chinese myths and legends to convey contemporary social and political commentary. Through the voices of the mythical Feng and Huang, Guo Moruo critiques the oppressive conditions of late Qing society while expressing a fervent desire for change and rebirth.

Keywords: Modernism, contemporary Chinese poetry, poetry, Chinese literature, Guo Moruo, May Fourth Movement, social movements, reanimation, myths, Fenghuang, identity, 20th century

Introduction

By the twentieth century, even literary traditions that were previously closed off to Western influence began to engage with the literary forms of Western modernity. While in some cases this threatened to overshadow more traditional cultural forms, it was also often a means of reinvigorating them.

Although modernism may be of Western origin, it has developed its characters and forms in China. Chinese modernists used the idea of self-expression to voice their disappointments against the rigid structures of Chinese society and sought a new mode of literature.

Guo Moruo (1892-1978), a prominent Chinese poet, writer, and historian, was a significant figure in modern Chinese literature. His writings, often introspective and contemplative, were heavily influenced by modernist movements. Guo read and translated Walt Whitman's works, which he believed matched the core concepts of the Chinese May Fourth Movement in 1919 (Huang, 1998). He was also a prominent critic and theorist of modernism in China, arguing that it was a way of life that rejected traditional values, fostering experimentation and innovation.

What is modernist poetry?

Modernism, a literary movement in the early 20th century, rejected traditional forms and techniques, focusing on unconventional structures like free verse and enjambment. Influential poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound aimed to capture the fragmented nature of modern life through collage-like structures and imagism, emphasizing clarity and directness. Modernist poetry transcended geographical boundaries and developed unique characteristics in different countries. The movement embraced experimentation, innovation, and a desire to break away from traditional forms.

Chinese openness to the West

When China opened to the rest of the world towards the end of the 19th century, the Western world

surprised it with a “gift.” Much like Pandora's box, this “gift” brought its share of good and bad to the Chinese: fear, death, opium, but most importantly, the dawning realization that their empire was incredibly backwards, and the perception that it was unassailable was merely a figment of their own imaginations. However, there was also hope. The introduction to Western culture and literature gave hope to people longing for change or escape from the rigidity of Chinese society, especially from the impenetrable class hierarchy, something that kept the rich richer, and the poor even poorer.

The May Fourth Movement (1919) was one that emerged as a response to China's weakness and corruption, as well as the influence of Western culture and ideas. It sought to modernize China and make it a more equal and just society. Many young intellectuals involved in the movement expressed their ideas and critiques of society through literature and art. The Chinese New Period (traditional Chinese: 新詩; simplified Chinese: 新诗; pinyin: xīnshī) poetry movement was a product of this social movement. It refers to the post Qing dynasty poetry (1644 to 1912) that challenged the traditional themes of nature and the court found in classical Chinese poetry, instead focusing poetry on the everyday lives of ordinary people (Goldblatt, N/A). Many believed that Chinese modern poets wanted to reform classic poetry because they believed that traditional forms of poetry had become stale and outdated, but was this the case?

Out of the various forms of classic Chinese poetry, the most widely regarded and the most revered were Tang Shi and Song Ci. There were differences among them: Tang Shi (of the Tang Dynasty, 618–907 ce) is more structured and concise, expressing a myriad of ideas such as socio-political commentary, philosophy, and religion; Song Ci (of the Song Dynasty, 960 to 1279 ce) on the other hand was more musical, free, and was composed mainly for the expression of personal experiences, such as love, sorrow, and nostalgia. (Jevid, 2023) Both were produced prolifically in their dynasties. Their impact could not be limited simply to those who write literature, but more so upon society, where they created an ability to appreciate beautiful things and the want to express deep emotions through artistic ways. As a result, originality was celebrated.

That is, the Chinese modernist poets of the early 20th century never wanted to denigrate the Tang Shi and Song Ci, which had a profound impact on Chinese literature and were deeply ingrained in Chinese culture.

At the time, poets like Hu Shi considered the classical verse of the late Qing period to be a “degenerate epigone” of the Tang and Song poetry (McDougall, 1994). Why was the poetry of the late Qing period so criticized? Firstly, since the Tang Shi and Song Ci were considered to be the pinnacle of Chinese poetry, any works produced subsequently had to fit the impossibly high standard or be written in the mainstream way in order to be considered good poetry. Anything that did not meet standards was considered “out of touch”, in a way that did not fit the mainstream success criteria (Hu et al., 2020). Secondly, the economic state of the late Qing could in no way compared to the prosperity of the Tang dynasty. The unstable economy could not allow for prolific poetry publication since there were many fewer poets and fewer works churned out. The Chinese society then was not at an age for the appreciation of the arts, as people struggled for their own subsistence. The quantity and quality of the poetry were considered so pathetic that most people considered the period to be the decline of Chinese literature. Poetry and its significance seemed to fade out of prominence in society.

People thought that Chinese literature at the time reflected the pervasive phenomenon of classism. Only the elites had access to great works of art and literature, as they were written in complex language no proletarians (members of the working class) could decipher.

This is because the Chinese written language and spoken language were very different at the time, hence the inability of less educated or uneducated individuals to understand them. In classic Chinese poetry, each word was commonly expressed by a single syllable (Hu et al., 2020). They are heavily abbreviated (in comparison to the spoken Chinese language), and yet they often express subtle, nuanced meanings. Furthermore, due to the late Qing dynasty being a period of political and economic uncertainty, the amount of background studies required to compose a single “appropriate” classical Chinese poem was not accessible and affordable to everyone, thus making the

craft an activity for the elites/rich.

So, in a search for “real” self-expression for Chinese poets, modernists turned to baihua or vernacular language. In a conversation between Hu Shih (1891-1962) and Lu Xun (1881-1936), both renowned Chinese philosophers and writers that contributed to the Chinese language reform: Hu Shih said, “A dead language cannot produce a living creature.” Lu Xun added, “To renovate or reinvigorate Chinese fate, we must try first to reform Chinese literature” (Wang, 2014).

Unfortunately, the vernacular was never considered appropriate for its use in Chinese poetry. It was never fully accepted. Rather, many of those modern poets are still considered literary “hooligans” to this day due to their use of vernacular language, believing that the modern poets tainted the sophisticated, celestial beauty of classical Chinese poetry.

All the above is inseparable when evaluating and considering Guo Moruo’s *The Nirvana of the Feng and Huang* (1921), since like many other poems written of the New Period, it is a critique of the degeneracy of Chinese society and literature then.

One of the most significant characteristics of the poetry of the period was an attempt at reverting back to the prime of literature – the Tang Shi and the Song Ci – and poets like Guo Moruo sought to achieve this by reanimating the legends and myths that proliferated during the era. Most importantly, it called for an appreciation of the past forgone that was obscured by the corruption of the period.

Reanimation of legends and myths

Guo Moruo is perhaps most known for his poetry collection named *Goddess* (1921). The most “thematically emblematic” poem is “*The Nirvana of the Feng and Huang*” (“*Fenghuang Niepan*”), which represents both the “spirit” of the collection and that of the May Fourth Movement. According to Yi Zheng, “The literary revolution of early twentieth-century China, the height of which was usually marked by the 1919 May Fourth Movement, is noted in modern Chinese literary history for its antipathy to tradition and passion for rebellion.” (Zheng, 2018).

The Fenghuang are the characters that guide us through the poem. The Fenghuang in ancient Chinese folklore were creatures who resided upon the faraway Mount Danshe, perched on wutong trees, drank sweet wine, and ate bamboo.

In the notes Guo wrote before the poem, he explains that the idea of rebirth, or “niepan” in Chinese, was not a known trait of the Fenghuang. Instead, Guo had said himself that he borrowed the idea from ancient Arabia. It could also be traced back to origins such as Greek mythology.

This poem is divided into various songs: a preface, the Song of the Feng, the Song of the Huang, the Choral Song of the Birds, and finally, the Rebirth Song of the Feng and Huang. It tells the story of a pair of Feng and Huang preparing for their death and rebirth.

Song of the Feng

The ancient folklore does not elaborate upon the Feng’s personality, so it is safe to say that the poet reanimates this ancient legend by instilling in it both rationality and a strong sense of indignance. He comes alive as a legend and symbol of the glorious past, and curses the world that he finds himself in, stating that, “To exist in the mire and gloom of this world/would cause even a diamond sword to rust.” (Guo, 1928) He is not only describing a world so oppressive that the sharpest swords could not penetrate, but also a world that forces everyone to assimilate, ridding each individual of their individuality, and uniting people in a streamlined approach that somehow resembles the cyclical nature of the Fenghuang: there is no escape in life or death; after life there is death, and after death comes life.

Furthermore, the fact that Guo likens the situation to a “mire” shows the helplessness of Chinese modernist writers. This shows the inflexible minds of the Chinese people towards accepting new, pioneering ideas. Their reluctance makes the Chinese modernist writers appear like a singular force trying to maneuver across a mire. Similarly, Guo uses the imagery of a world full of chaos and destruction to emphasize the modernists’ hardships and despair:

We fly westwards:
the west, alike, is a slaughterhouse.
We fly eastwards:
the east, alike, is a prison.
We fly southwards:
the south, alike, is a grave.
We fly northwards:
the north, alike, is a hell.
Living in such a world
we can but learn from the lament of the sea.
(Guo, 1928 translation)

The Feng sees the world (presumably the late Qing dynasty) as it was: a mess in need of repair. He leads people to believe that he is a pessimist, which is understandable considering he describes the world as “cruel as iron,” “somber as lacquer,” and “rank as blood.”

However, the Feng looks for hope in every situation: they travel westwards, eastwards, southwards, and finally northwards, looking for a place that is not eroded into ruins, looking for hope, and find the opposite. The Feng is sorrowful, but he is not pessimistic. He finds the world as a slaughterhouse, a prison, a grave, then a hell. There is a gradual exacerbation in the severity, from a slaughterhouse to hell, a metaphor for the state of the country that could hardly be remedied. Astounded and disappointed, but the Feng did not lose hope.

I raise my brow and ask of Heaven,
but Heaven is reserved and aloof, and has no
knowledge of these things.
I bend my brow and ask the earth,
but the earth is dead, it has no breath.
I look out and ask the sea,
but the sea is raising its voice in grieving.

This section describes the world at its breaking point. The Heaven appeared distant and unresponsive, which could reflect the sense of isolation or detachment the Chinese revolutionists felt from spiritual powers. Guo was perhaps trying to highlight their despair by illustrating the fact that fate and luck were not on their side. The earth was lifeless. The ground that once provided people with stability was silent and immobile. The earth represents the past societal structure that once glued them all together. However, as time revealed much of its flaws, more and more called for a revolution. The constraints of

existence in the ‘Old Society’, as modernists and revolutionists like to call it, could no longer answer the existential inquiries that arose from people as a result of exposure to Western culture. In literature particularly, people questioned the way poets wanted to recreate the classic poetry of Tang Shi and Song Ci instead of experimenting with new forms of poetry.

But more significantly, people inquired about the potential of Chinese writers and Chinese literature. Modernists, especially scholars studying the West, thought the current ‘earth’ or societal structure that held people together limited creative freedom, as it preserved the idea that literature was sacred and restricted to a certain class of people. Writers like Guo looked towards Western poets like Walt Whitman and Ezra Pound, and how their work was so unrestricted and accessible. Guo said it himself, “Whitman’s poetic spirit which seeks to do away with everything old and restrictive is especially suitable for the Sturm and Drang of May Fourth, I am completely shaken by his majestic and unconstrained tone.” (Zheng, 2018). So, people wondered, what would Chinese literature look like if it was similar to Western poetry and accessible to the wide majority? This question was left open in the poem, leaving the answer for the reader to discover.

The undying spirit of the Feng reflected the spirit of modernist poets in China. Even in desolate times, the Feng did not give up hope, seeking for an answer that even the Heaven does not behold. The Feng was the epitome of the fervent passion and fieriness of young writers during the May Fourth Movement, their fearless expression of self that resulted in an outpour of thoughts and feelings – “volcanic”, as Guo described himself – that could not be deliberately replicated by successors.

Song of the Huang

Compared to the Feng, who is more aggressive and strongly expresses his disdain at the current state of the world, this section of the poem was written in a more slow-paced, melancholy elegy.

The Huang portrayed the corruption of the late Qing rule did irreversible damage to the Chinese identity and culture. She sings about her ‘Unceasing flow of tears/filth that cannot be washed away/flame of

passion that cannot be extinguished’. When juxtaposed with the past Chinese historical periods, the ‘stain’ stands out conspicuously. However, it could not be washed clean regardless of how much people lament and regret. The opening of this section introduces the Huang as a modern feminist character who challenges the convention that female characters are only capable of shedding tears. Huang realizes that her tears cannot wash away the “filth” but instead fuel the “flame” of her intense passion.

Rather than the physical barriers that seemed to trap the Feng, the Huang touches more upon the psychological:

Ah, this shadowy, drifting life of ours
is like a drugged sleep on such a dark night as this.
Before us is sleep,
Behind us is sleep.
We come like a gust of wind,
We go like a whisp of smoke.
Coming like wind,
going like smoke,
sleep behind,
sleep before.
In the midst of this sleep
we are but a fleeting breath of smoke.

Ah!
What sense is there in it?
What sense is there in it?

The Huang becomes a sort of an observer in this stanza, floating above and watching. “Sleep” becomes synonymous with death – Guo famously said, “Life and death are on the same line. Life is struggle, death is rest; life is activity, death is sleep.” Sleep and death, in this case, appear in a “lifelike omnipresence”. (Zheng, 2018)

“Sleep” could be found weaving through this stanza, creating this circular loop that was inescapable. “Sleep” was all-encompassing. It was used in a way that does not provide comfort and relaxation to the readers, but rather in a way that evoked urgency, as it becomes an entity that was always looming behind and before.

Guo is suggesting that the minds of Chinese modernist writers were asleep and numb. Through the melancholy croon of the Huang, Guo expresses his

feeling of loneliness as a modernist writer. Another Chinese modernist novelist Lu Xun captured this sentiment perfectly in an enduring metaphor in his short stories, *Call to Arms*:

“Imagine an iron house without windows, absolutely indestructible, with many people fast asleep inside who will soon die of suffocation. But you know since they will die in their sleep, they will not feel the pain of death. Now if you cry aloud to wake a few of the lighter sleepers, making those unfortunate few suffer the agony of irrevocable death, do you think you are doing them a good turn?” (Lu Xun, 1923)

Lu Xun wrote this in 1923, and it is entirely plausible that Guo was referring to this then-immensely popular idea. It is the story of being the only one awake in a room filled with people asleep, trapped in a room of iron, on the course to death. Would it be better to keep your silence, or to rely on the scanty hopes of waking people up and making an escape? The answer that Lu came to, according to Evan Osnos, was that “Silence [...] was tempting but inexcusable; awakening even the few might also save the others. And so [Lu Xun] wrote, in order to “encourage those fighters who are galloping on in loneliness,” as he put it, in the introduction to “Outcry,” his first collection of stories.” (Osnos, 2020) To put this in context, Guo was talking about the difficulty and unlikelihood of persuading Chinese writers to distinguish themselves from the degenerative and constrictive thinking of the late Qing Chinese society. The “drugged sleep” also translates to a “sweet dream”, and the poet suggests that people were reluctant to distance themselves from the deteriorating society and the malfunctioning government because they simply chose to ignore those faults and live their lives in pretended complacency. Guo expressed his disdain for the people who chose to live an overtly sugarcoated version of life.

For a minute, however, the Huang seemed to succumb to this ‘drugged sleep’. It seemed to conform to the status quo of keeping silent despite its obvious dissatisfaction. It describes its own presence (or the spirit of Chinese modernist writers) as just as easily forgettable and negligible as a “gust of wind” or a “whisp of smoke”, so, what would be the use of struggling against a system that was deep-rooted in society? But the Huang struggled against this idea, questioning the senselessness of the world. She was

stronger than merely a ‘gust of wind’ and showed no signs of relenting. Guo also changes “whisp of smoke” to “breath of smoke” near the end to suggest that the purpose of Chinese modernist writers would be to revitalize the spirit of Chinese people, just like breathing air into them. The scale of their influence did not matter as much. Just like Lu Xun wrote, “But if a few people are aroused [replied Ch’ien], you can’t say absolutely that there is no hope of destroying that iron house.”

Despite conspicuous differences between the Feng and Huang, they unite upon many traits. For example, they were both portrayed as rebellious figures: when facing a world that confines its prisoners in a claustrophobic cell, they did not choose indifference and conform to the prescribed standards. Even though the Feng expresses his resentfulness intensely, and the Huang sobs through her sorrow, in the end, they come to terms with the harsh reality and aspire for change instead of burrowing themselves in anger and sadness. Their awareness was reinstated in the fact that they were willing to pay the price of burning in the scorching fire for the price of rebirth. In their final songs, they sing together as a completed pair ready to set off to the new world stressing the importance of a united front. The resilience and free-spirited self-expression that they embody serve as an inspiration for not only the young writers of the May Fourth movement but also people generations to come who are dissatisfied with the status quo.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the revitalization of traditional myths and legends in modernist poetry from China serves as a powerful tool in the nation-building project of both countries. Through the exploration and reimagining of these ancient narratives, poets have successfully instilled a sense of cultural pride and communal identity among their people. By intertwining the past with the present, modernist poets not only pay homage to their rich historical heritage but also present an innovative approach to literature that encourages societal reflection and progression.

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