

China's First Great Modern Poet

By Dorothy Trench Bonett



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Dorothy's translation of Alexandre Dumas pere's *Charles VII at the Homes of His Great Vassals* was published in 1991 by the Noble Press. The New England Poetry Club awarded her an Honorable Mention for the Der Hovanessian Translation Award in 2006, and she has won prizes for her original poems.

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On the banks of the river Cam, near a willow tree, there is a place of pilgrimage. In July 2008, a monument of Beijing marble was placed there, inscribed with the first and last lines of a poem and the name of poet. The poem, "Second Farewell to Cambridge," was written eighty-six years ago. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese tourists come to this spot each year; a million are expected in 2015.¹ Why? What is so special about this poem? Who is this poet?

Xu Zhimo, often called 'China's first great modern poet', was an important figure in the May Fourth Movement, which began in 1919. On that date in that year, the people of China rose up in nation-wide protests, and a great cultural shift that still marks the nation today began. The immediate cause was the settlement at the Treaty of Versailles. It gave defeated Germany's "interests" in China to Japan—valuable territory that included railways and mines and the Qingdao Port—and marked the culmination of "the century of humiliation," in which the Western powers used unequal treaties to strip China bare and piece it out among themselves, in spite of the wishes of the inhabitants. China had actually been on the side of the Allies in the Great War, but at Versailles, the European powers had shown that it still counted for nothing in their eyes. Changes would have to be made before the "Middle Kingdom" that had once dominated their known world could take a place in the modern family of nations as an equal. And the changes were going to involve learning from, and learning more about, peoples that the Chinese still regarded as barbaric.

Why had the Chinese not realized the necessity of this before? It was more

than seventy years since the Qing Manchu forces had been defeated by the British in the Opium War and forced to submit to the first unequal treaty. During these seventy years, Japan, initially also defeated, had made itself a power to be feared with a great push towards European-style modernization, but the Chinese had barely deigned to even consider the idea of studying Western "yong" (literally "usefulness," or technology) while continuing to retain Chinese "li" (literally "essence," meaning their ancient native traditions). This had not been simply because of arrogance and xenophobia. Unlike the Japanese who, 1500 years before, had learned everything that they knew of civilization by imitating them, the Chinese had never before come into a contact with equally advanced civilizations. Not just the Japanese, but the Koreans as well had seemed very primitive upon first contact. The Chinese did acknowledge that India, the home of Buddhism, was a place of culture. But it was far away. The peoples closer by had always been handled in one of two ways—either they became "sinicized" and were absorbed into the Celestial Empire, or they retained their independence, but became one of the tributary states.

Of course, China was not always superior to every group that they came into contact with in every way. Some peoples, Genghis Khan and his Mongol horde, for example, and more recently, the Manchus, had had better military technology. Both peoples had conquered China. That fact, however, made no difference in the end, for the Mongols and the Manchus also, over time, learned to do things in the superior Chinese way. Why should the Europeans prove different?

Those who came to China during the nineteenth century did not seem any different from previous barbarians; they did not spend their time introducing the Chinese to Gothic cathedrals or Renaissance art, but were simply greedy and destructive. So the Chinese, unaware that there was such a thing as “Western civilization,” did as they had done before in similar situations. They defended themselves when they could, made the compromises that they had to, and waited for the benefits of Chinese culture to become obvious, aware that it takes generations to transform a Genghis Khan into his descendant Kubilai (a proper Chinese emperor).

The failure of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 (as well as Japan’s startling defeat of Russia in 1905) gave them incentive, finally, to begin to try to learn from Europe. The age-old empire fell, and a shaky Republic was founded. Some moves were made towards other changes. However, it was not until May Fourth that it became stunningly evident indeed to everyone that drastic changes had to be made quickly, in order to meet the West on equal terms. But once this decision had been made, there were difficulties. It was not easy to even decide what changes it was most necessary to make. Reforming a five thousand year old society is not easy. One thing, however, was very clear: there was going to have to be drastic reform to the written language.

Any nation that wishes to function in the modern, industrialized world needs a literate population. At the beginning of the twentieth century, China did not have that. The vast majority of the population was illiterate, because of the nature of the written language. China’s elite (the literati class, or the “scholar-gentry”) used what is called *wenyanwen* or “classical Chinese” to communicate with one another and to write their enduring works of literature. *Wenyanwen* differs as much from

spoken modern Chinese as much as, or more than Latin differed from the vernaculars of Europe at the beginning of the Renaissance. It was by no means a dead language in 1900 (as is often wrongly stated), nor had it stultified, and it is a superbly elegant means of communication that had the advantage, in a country like China where many languages are spoken, of being independent of the pronunciation of the words. It could even be, and was, used by peoples like the Japanese and the Koreans, who do not speak even remotely related languages.

However, it is not only completely different from everyday speech, or the vernacular, but abstract to the point that it is unintelligible to anyone who has not studied it for years. Full of references and allusions to classical texts and poems, it requires the memorization of a complex set of ideograms, many of which have different meanings according to their contexts, or else have changed their meaning over time. Members of the literati class had the money and leisure to spend years on the education required to expert in this difficult means of communication. This was not usually possible, however, for anyone else. And if writing prose was difficult using this medium, poetry was even more demanding. A poet needed a dictionary by his (or her) side to know what words *used* to rhyme a thousand years before and also to know whether they had “rising” or “falling” tones, to fit them into the complex rhythms of the traditional, highly structured forms of verse. And poetry, for reasons that I will explain later, has always been essential to the Chinese.

Even before May Fourth, as early as 1915, scholars who felt that changes needed to be made to Chinese culture had stressed the necessity of beginning to use the vernacular or *baihua* in written works, so that it would be possible to promote literacy among all

classes of society. The center of these calls for reform was “Peking” University (the standard Romanization nowadays is “Beijing” University, often shortened to “Beida”). Reform-minded scholars Cai Yuanpei, Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, and especially Hu Shi all held positions there. May Fourth made their demands more urgent; their leader, Hu Shi, wrote an article in 1919 entitled, “Suggestions for a Reform of Literature.” Then, in 1921, the brilliant Lu Xun published “The True Story of Ah Q,” the first piece of modern prose fiction in the vernacular. Newspapers began to proliferate, and to be widely read, using *baihua*. However, all attempts at *baihua* poetry were failures. Hu Shi himself wrote a book of poems in 1920, called “Experiments,” and several others also tried, but simply gave ammunition to the traditionalists who insisted that the vernacular and poetry were incompatible. And then a little book came out, entitled “Poems of Zhimo.”

“Zhimo” was the “courtesy” name that Xu Zhangxu had chosen for himself. The young man who literally turned Chinese poetry upside down with his little book of poems had been born in 1897 in Haining, Zhejiang province, to a literati family. His was the kind of the background in which traditionally, sons were educated carefully and at great length to take the civil service examinations, which had been the gateway to wealth, influence and power for over a thousand years. By 1905, though, when Xu was seven years old, these examinations had been abolished forever. He did study the classics as a child (his poetry shows that he studied them in great depth), but by the time he entered Hangzhou High School, he was learning from the new European influenced curriculum and had begun to study English. It was clear by that time to even the most conservative of gentry families that these were the kinds of studies their sons would need, in their changed world.

When he graduated from Hangzhou, Xu was sent to Peiyang (“Beiyang” nowadays, but the name has been changed to “Tianjin”) University to study law. He received his degree from Beida, though, because the two institutions had merged their law departments. This was in 1918; that same year, the 21-year-old Xu became a father. He had been married in 1915, to a girl named Zhang Youyi—an arranged match, as gentry marriages always were. The Xu parents wanted to make sure that there was a male heir before they sent their only son off into the unknown to learn more of the necessary “foreign” knowledge. It is doubtful that it was Xu himself who decided that he was going to go to America later that year, to attend Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, and continue his studies in law and economics. It was probably Xu himself, though, who decided to transfer to Columbia University in 1919. And he was the certainly the one who decided, after that, that he was going to leave America (which he found uncongenial) to study at Cambridge in England. He had decided that philosophy interested him more than economics, and since he admired Bertrand Russell (who had recently toured China) he wanted to attend Trinity College, which Russell was associated with. Once in England, though, Xu matriculated at King’s College, not Trinity. And there he fell thoroughly in love.

Xu fell in love with English civilization. It was to be a life-long passion, and one that he would eventually pass on to many of his Chinese readers. Ironically, he had gone abroad to acquire the *yong* of the despised barbarians and discovered that they also had *li*, which he greatly desired. At Cambridge, of course, the glories of England are on display, in the historical architecture (King’s, built in 1441, seems historic even to a Chinese); in the beautiful ancient grounds; in the leisured pace and refinement of life that existed still even after the

destructive 1914 war. Xu soaked everything in, and soon realized that he had a special love for English literature, and for English poetry in particular. His favorites were the great romantics, but he was fascinated by living poets as well. Like a fan seeking out his rock star idols, Xu made sure that he met such luminaries as Thomas Hardy and Katharine Mansfield in person (he would later write elegies for both of them). He worked hard at figuring out how English verse worked by translating it into Chinese, careful to preserve what he called the essence as well as the forms and the meanings of the words. He made attempts at his own verse (almost all destroyed). And he meditated on the poet’s role in modern society—a draft survives of a poem written at Cambridge in which he explored this subject.

Xu had to think about this because in traditional Chinese culture, poetry had had a definite place, moreover a place not solely literary. Confucius had written about the role of the poet and was believed to have edited the “Book of Songs,” which contains poetry dating, in some cases, back to the 11th century BCE. The great philosopher found the “songs” important because they were the way in which the common people expressed their feelings, and their superiors needed to know these in order to know best how to serve them in the reciprocal relationship that was the ideal in traditional politics.

Poetry was not usually written by commoners, though, in later times. The elite wrote it. When the great statesman Qu Yuan, who has remained the model of the ideal counselor, drowned himself as a protest against tyrannical rule in 278 BCE, he left behind the “*Li Sao*” (“Encountering Sorrow”), a seminal poem exploring the feelings of a man of virtue forced into an untenable position. Sima Xiangru, the great innovator in the *fu* style, was an official under the Western

Han—the list of political figures that were poets is long. But poetry was also the foremost way in which the literati class expressed their emotions, sentiments, opinions. It was never kept rigidly separate from prose—in the great novels and in the historical masterpieces, passages of poetry alternate with prose, and both were held to be important. It had even been necessary to know the great poems of the past in order to pass the official examinations. This was why the important May Fourth reformers knew that their job was just half-done, and that the vernacular would never be truly accepted, so long as it could not be used for poetry.

So, half a world away, Xu worked at perfecting a new kind of poetry while keeping up with events back at home by talking to other students, through letters, and by reading the new journals. Meanwhile, there was a crisis in his personal life: his family sent his wife to live with him in England. They probably felt he was straying far from the original purpose of his study abroad, as of course he was. His ideas had changed in ways that even he may not have been aware of until he was forced to live once again with this woman that he barely knew. Going against millennia of Chinese tradition, Xu soon decided that he wanted a Western style divorce. (One did not divorce in China—one simply took another wife or concubine). The divorce drew the maximum of publicity since Xu published articles justifying his actions that were read and highly admired by young Chinese also trying to chart their way between the customs of two very different societies. Soon afterwards, Xu returned home, escorted Bengali Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore around China, published his first books of poems, cementing his celebrity—and married again. This second marriage was highly publicized as well; in fact, his romantic life still remains a subject of intense interest to Chinese. Any movie or book with Xu

Continued on page 22

Continued from page 17

and his three women as a subject (there was a lady during the period in between divorce and remarriage who refused him) is always overwhelmingly popular.

Xu was like a movie star in his appeal to the youth of his time, but if this had been all that he was, he would not be of interest today. Even at the time, people cared what he did because he wrote so beautifully, in language that seemed as if it was completely colloquial, such as anyone might use in daily speech—but somehow managed to be strikingly lyrical and indelibly memorable. This was true even of his prose, but his poetry was transcendent. He managed to merge the English literary tradition and classical Chinese verse so that Chinese sentiments and European form were melded into something that was like neither, but completely new and original. He brought Chinese vernacular stunningly to life, using English, in the same way that Chaucer had managed to do centuries ago for our language, using forms borrowed from the Italians.

Although Xu's poems were deeply influenced by the West and most often used Western poetic forms and structure, he also retained a uniquely Chinese sensibility, using age-old imagery, allusions to myths and places, and symbolism. His accomplishment is astonishing considering that he died, tragically, in 1931, before his thirty-fifth birthday. He remains an enormous influence in China today, and deserves to be better known outside of it.

Notes

1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PfrWP8zLqAs> (retrieved May 5, 2014)

2 Trench-Bonett, Dorothy, trans. *Delos: A Journal of Translation and World Literature* 12. 1-2 (Summer-Winter 1999) 59.

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Second Farewell to Cambridge²

I came to you softly, Cambridge.
And softly I say goodbye.

I wave a hand in a soft farewell
To the clouds in your Western sky;

The gold willows on your river's banks--
Are the twilight sun's new brides,
And their lovely shadows in the lights of the waves
Move in my heart like its tides.

In the soft mire under the water,
Green plants swagger luxuriantly
In the gentle waves of the river Cam
I gladly a plant would be.

That pond in the shadow of the elms
Not a clear spring, but heaven's rainbow--
Colors crumbling in algae white as milk
Drizzling rainbow dreams below;

Looking for dreams?--grasp a punting pole
And through green grass punt upstream,
Stars' radiance will fill your boat
In those stars' refulgence--sing--

But I hear no flutes, no pipes tonight
And I have no voice to sing.
Even the insects seem struck dumb
On this summer's evening--

In silence I came to you, Cambridge,
In silence I say goodbye;
I shake my sleeve as I say farewell,
And I take not one cloud from your sky.

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许志摩诗全编, 浙江文艺出版, 1996 *Xu Zhimo Shi Quan Bian* (Xu Zhimo's Complete Poetical Works), Zhejiang Art Press, 1996

Note:

There has not been a biography of Xu Zhimo (sometimes still romanized as Hsu Chihmo) in English to date. It is possible to find very brief biographies on the internet, and there are also translations of his poems online. Cambridge

University Press has published a collection of his poems (from internet sources), which are of varying quality. My translations of his poems have appeared in *Delos, A Journal of Translation and World Literature* (Volume XII, Number 1-2, Summer-Winter 1999, pp54-60; *Lighted Corners, The Literary and Arts Magazine of Mount Saint Mary's University*, in the years 2004-2007, 2010 and 2011; and won an Honorable Mention for the Der-Hovanessian Translation Award given by the New England Poetry Club in 2006.

Chang, Pang-Mei Natasha *Bound Feet and Western Dress*, Bantam, 1996 is a biography of Xu's first wife, Zhang Youyi (Chang Yu-i) which does contain information about Xu from his divorced wife's point of view.