

New Shijing: Poetic Classicism and the Making of Modern China



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The Shijing (詩經)

The Shijing is a collection of 305 poems composed during the ancient Zhou dynasty (1072-776 BCE). It contains poems about courtship and love, war and statecraft, ritual and song. Most are written in a folksy, unadorned style. It is likely that the poems were originally set to music and dance and were performed for an audience. During the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE), the poems became an important part of the canon of Confucian texts. Scholars compiled authoritative interpretations of the poems that corresponded with the Confucian ideology of the time, and the poems became seen as the ultimate source of moral living. Often these interpretations extended beyond the texts of the poems themselves, imparting moral significance and allegory. Over time the Shijing became one of the Five Confucian Classics.

Since Han times, the Shijing's poems have been among the most important ancient Chinese texts. Many chengyu (成語), four-character phrases that contain a story or a moral lesson and are part of Chinese cultural knowledge, originate from the Shijing. Scholars throughout Chinese history found novel ways to interpret the poems, but the fundamental sanctity of the text as an authoritative inheritance from a mythic past was always present. New interpretations reflected contemporary issues but were always in dialogue with prior interpretations going back to ancient times.



New Shijing (新詩經)

In the early 20th century, China was in the midst of a reckoning with the so-called modern world. Chinese students studied in universities abroad, returning home with new ideas. Western writings were upending established traditions of medicine and science. Western literature was influencing Chinese writers, who were publishing their works in newspapers and periodicals born from the new and vibrant culture of print media. China had an old and authoritative literary tradition, but it was facing new challenges from the foreign artistic movement known as modernism.

Most scholarship on modern Chinese poetry emphasizes what makes it different from poetry of previous eras, namely the discarding of stanza and line form and radical innovations in style. Yet many modern poets speak to contemporary concerns using traditional models. The Shijing, with its canonical place in the Chinese literary tradition, was a popular choice for such poets. They developed a genre of poetry known as New Shijing (新詩經).

New Shijing poems usually reference one or more of the poems from the Shijing, whether they change just a few characters or depart almost entirely from the original material. They usually stick to a formulation of four characters per line, as was conventional not just in the Shijing but in many ancient poems. Ancient understandings of statecraft and gendered morality are transplanted and transfigured to fit a 20th century context.

New Shijing poems are a mirror for Chinese society and Chinese concerns in the first half of the 20th century. They reveal a tension at the core of Chinese identity that persists today: how to reconcile thousands of years of tradition with radical and foreign elements of modernity. These poems, conservative in style and form, embrace the modern ideas of gender, politics, sexuality, and science while revering and respecting China's ancient literary traditions.



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Making the Chinese Nation

In the early 20th century, China's political class was inspired by Western ideas of representative government. When the last emperor was overthrown in 1911, the "realm" under the rule of a supreme monarch was replaced by a "nation" of the Chinese people. Poetry became a battleground for what form this Chinese nation would take.

滴滴民脂
Drip, drip goes the blood of the people

匪撈不晞
Without a ladle it will never dry

厭厭仕宦
Happily the officials [drink]

不飽無歸
Till all are full there is no retiring

(1932, 叟王, 松報 Pine Press)

湛湛露斯
Heavy, heavy lies the dew

匪陽不晞
Without the sun it will never dry

厭厭夜飲
Happily we drink till late at night

不醉無歸
Till all are drunk there is no retiring

(湛露 "Heavy Dew")

Many Chinese were angry about government corruption, which was rampant in this time. In the 1930s, the notoriously corrupt Kuomintang (國民黨) nominally governed a unified China from Shanghai, but much of the country was under the control of local warlords, who were also corrupt. This poem, published by a Kuomintang-controlled newspaper, critiques corruption using visceral, quasi-Fascist imagery of a bleeding Chinese nation.

"Drip, drip goes the blood of the people"

Modern Beauty,

家有細巾
Our home has a soft cloth

白沫包之
White foam clings to it

有女懷馨
The woman cherishes the aroma

吉士遺之
A gift from a gentleman

綾有薄縹
The silk has fine embroidery

家有絲絡
Our home has a washcloth

白沫純漚
White foam pure for bathing

有女如玉
She shines like a gem

(1940, 憶芝, 澄光醫藥季刊 Chengguang Pharmaceutical Quarterly)

Soap, a technology at first imported from the West and later produced domestically, radically changed conceptions of not only health and cleanliness, but also sexuality and beauty. Soap advertisements touted not only the extraordinary cleaning power but also the aromatic scent that would linger on the body and make one more desirable.

This poem, which is a very creatively written advertisement for a company's soap, promotes the soap's aroma and says the soap can help a woman attain a classical ideal of beauty.

Soap was a foreign technology. The idea that a modern product could help one attain a traditional ideal of beauty was appealing to conservative ideas that new innovations had to serve the old traditions.

"She shines like a gem"

Modern Love

喁喁細語
[Couples] speaking in soft low tones

交頭接耳
Whispering in each others' ears

語者伊誰
Who is speaking?

一男一女
One man, one woman

喁喁細語
[Couples] speaking in soft low tones

乍吐乍止
First speaking, then falling silent

恐垣有耳
Afraid the walls have ears

(1928, 世炎, 月宮 Palace of the Moon Periodical)

The 20th century in China was the century of electric light. Among the many wonders on display along the vibrant streets of the electric city were cinemas, which brought scenes of war, romance, and nature to life through new motion picture technology.

These cinemas, which showed films in dark rooms to closely packed rows of audience members, also became places for young lovers to convene and share private moments in a public space. Conservatives lambasted this free love and living as yet another sign of moral decline."

Perhaps they were simply jealous. This poem published in 1928 depicts lovers whispering to each other in the "Moon Temple Cinema;" the poet is moved by these displays of affection. In a separate prose explanation, the poet says that she sees "quiet people in pairs, unmarried young folk, married couples" and that she "really was very jealous of them."

"I really was very jealous"

Medicine and Science

肅肅兔鳩
Rabbits and turtles doves arrayed

捉之針針
Injected with a poke poke

咻咻生物
The organisms cry out

試驗昌明
The experiments are successful

(1940, 憶芝, 澄光醫藥季刊 Chengguang Pharmaceutical Quarterly)

One company published a series of classical-style poems advertising their drugs. These poems promoted the scientific method the company applied to drug testing by reinterpreting Shijing poems.

In the original poem, the rabbit-trapper is compared to a reliable and trustworthy soldier, a protector of the prince. In the modern version, the rabbit-trappers are instead rabbit-testers, portrayed as reliable and trustworthy scientists, vendors of life-saving medications. By adopting the language and allusions of classical poets, the poet presents 20th-century pharmaceutical products as continuations of China's ancient traditions, reliable like ancient wisdom.

肅肅兔置
The rabbit traps arrayed

椽之丁丁
Hammered with a ding ding

赳赳武夫
That stalwart, martial man

公侯干城
Shield to his prince.

(兔置 "Rabbit Nets")

"The experiments are successful"



KEY

New Shijing Poem

Original Shijing Poem

憶 Similar to original

憶 Same as original

Conclusion

Despite their conservative approach to style and form, New Shijing poets displayed significant creativity in adapting ancient verses to modern subjects. Moreover, New Shijing poems exemplify the continuity in China's meeting with modernity. Through these poems, we understand how educated Chinese squared new ideas like feminism, nationalism, and the scientific method with often conflicting ancient knowledge. The evident cultural legibility of these ancient allusions even in the 20th century testifies to the extraordinary and enduring legacy of the Shijing. More research should be done to examine poetic classicism in modern Chinese poetry because it reveals how poets applied their literary past to envision a political and social future.