Lu Xun’s Classical Poetry

Jon Kowallis
Williams College

WORKS CITED

English-language works:


Chinese-language works:


Japanese language works:


Since the editors of CLEAR first asked me to review Huang Hsin-chyu's *Poems of Lu Hsün* (1979) some years ago, there have been several more book-length attempts to render Lu Xun's (1881-1936) classical-style verse into English, as well as a flood of books on the same subject published in Chinese. Given that my efforts thus far to entice other scholars into reviewing some of these have been in vain and since I am not willing to presume to pass judgment on all of them, the editors of CLEAR have granted me the opportunity to discuss a number of the more influential older works in Chinese together with the newer English ones and to discuss some of the general issues involved in the annotation and translation of Lu Xun's classical verse.

Lu Xun's "poems in the old-style" (*jiuti shi* 舊體詩 as they are called in Chinese) are mostly *shi* 诗 poems written after the styles of the Tang and Song (*lūshi* 倫詩 or "regulated verse" and *jueju* 踞句, or "quatrains"), as well as a few which might be called *guti* 古體 ("ancient style") and *saoti* 詩體 (influenced by the style of the *Chu ci*). Unlike Mao Zedong (1893-1976), Lu Xun produced mostly contemplative, melancholy *shi*, eschewing the *ci* 詩 or "lyric" form in which Chairman Mao cast his more bombastic and grandiloquent outpourings.

There are some sixty-four of Lu Xun's old-style poems extant today, not all of which Jenner translates. Wu Juntao, despite the flaws in his English, tries to give a fuller selection, but for some reason also omits certain poems, although he includes such controversial items as the verses for Ding Ling and Yao Pengzi (father of "Gang of Four" stalwart Yao Wenyuan).

Jenner's renderings, hailed by Ruth Weiss (who, by her own admission, is still unable to read Chinese after fifty years of living in China) and foreworded by the late Professor Wang Yao of Peking University, are done into a rather wooden style of plain verse and are seemingly presented as literal translations. Although Jenner tells us: "The end-notes on the poems draw heavily on the expertise of the Foreign Languages Press editors and on a number of Chinese editions and studies of the poems. My debt to these I gladly acknowledge...." (p. 25), he does not actually cite any of the sources upon which he is basing his interpretations. Aside from my own poor M.A. thesis (1978), then, the only attempt at a complete rendering of Lu Xun's classical-style poetry into English is the rhyming translation by David Y. Ch'en (Chen Ying 陈瑛), whom William Schultz describes in his foreword as "a specialist in modern Chinese literature" at The Ohio State University.

1 See CLEAR, (3.1) (January 1981), pp. 183-188.
3 As a disclaimer, Jenner warns: "The conciseness and balance of the originals must in large part be lost in translation, as must the play on the literary and historical associations of words that is one of the features of classical Chinese poetry in recent centuries. These resonances cannot survive the rendering of the poems into an alien language, and can only be partly suggested in short commentaries. The reader is therefore asked to take much of their quality on trust." (p. 21).
It should be stated from the outset that one of the problems in translating and annotating Lu Xun's poems is that many of the more important ones are written in a particularly allusive style influenced by the Chu ci and, in terms of elliptical language, closely approximate to the style of the late Tang poet Li Shangyin (c.813-858). All well and good then, one might reply, let us approach them simply as aesthetic creations. But this is not as easily achieved, as Jenner implies when he tells us: "I have tried to convey only the necessary minimum of information needed for a reader to begin to enjoy the poems. I have also tried to avoid the overinterpretation that in unhappier years tried to turn all Lu Xun's poems of the 1930s into posturing mock-militancy" (pp. 25-26). Of course, no one wants to read too much into a poem, but the 1930s were complicated times of censorship and death-squads. And, by the logic of Jenner's argument, things published in China after the fall of the "Gang of Four" should have been relatively free from "overinterpretations". Yet this is not the case either, judging from what has been printed over the last ten years.

The earliest book-length study in Chinese of Lu Xun's classical-style verse that I have seen was published in Chungking shortly after World War II. It is a small volume and, for those of us who have had high hopes for a pre-1949 exegesis, disappointing in the arbitrary and sketchy nature of its running commentary.

The next was written in Hong Kong and published in Canton in 1959 by Zhang Xiangtian, a pseudonym of Zhang Bingxin. This was a one-volume study and was reissued in a second edition in 1962. Subsequently, it was again re-done into a two-volume version in 1972-3 which was published in Hong Kong as a revised, greatly expanded and largely re-written version of the above title. In terms of textual commentary, this work is the most thorough by any one author to date. Explanations are detailed and accessible, but the introductory sections for many poems are far too

---

4 Compare with David Y. Ch'en's more tempered approach, as articulated in his introduction (pp. 30-31).
5 The back cover of Jenner's book still insists: "His [Lu Xun's] later pieces in particular [i.e. these same poems of the 1930s] exposed the role of imperialism and the Chiang Kai-shek government, expressed sympathy for the suffering of the masses and praised the revolutionary cause of the proletariat." Given that these may be the words of the FLP editors and not his own, we need look no farther than Jenner's own introduction to see that Lu Xun in Shanghai of the 1930s is described as: "... a professional writer committed to the revolutionary cause. The threat of arrest and murder hung over him and over those who were in touch with him. He had caused so much offence over the years with his polemical writing..." (p. 22) or that "...in the lament for the young writers [Lu Xun's] expression is direct and passionate, there is no playing with allusion, and the poem is immediately accessible to readers." (p. 24).
6 Sikong Wuji, Lu Xun jiushi xinquan [A new look at Lu Xun's old poetry] (Chongqing: Wenguang shudian, 1947). There is a copy in the library of the Lu Xun Museum in Peking and its text has been newly reprinted in Lu Xun yanjiu xueshu lunzhu ziliao huibian #4, comp. by the Zhongguo shenhui kezue yuan wenxue yanjiu suo Lu Xun yanjiu shi (Peking: Zhongguo wenlian chuban she, 1987). Another apparently earlier commentary exists by Yi Shan 耶山 under the title Lu Xun jiushi xinhua 新迅君新话 [New talks on Lu Xun's old-style poetry], brought out by the "Mud [Literary] Society" (Nitu she) in the mid-1940s (?).
7 Zhang Bingxin, the son of a protestant minister from Mukden, became a high school teacher in Hong Kong and was eventually deprived of his job for his involvement with the student protest movement at Sacred Heart. He published essays in the leftist newspapers Xin wanbao 新晚報 [New evening news] and Dagong bao 毛派 [Le Imperialist] of Hong Kong under the pen-name of Bing Gong 明公 and lived on the proceeds until his death there in 1986. His 1959/62 annotations and commentaries on Lu Xun's verse are still generally well-regarded by specialists on Lu Xun in mainland China and the 1972-3 ("Cultural Revolution" era) edition remains important, even though it should be used with caution.
ponderous. Zhang's paraphrased baihua versions of each poem can be helpful at
times, yet at many points (in the 1972-3 version) stray from the original or tend to
pad it. I actually prefer a number of the baihua versions of the 1962 edition, as
these are more concise.

Zhang Xiangtian is best known in Lu Xun studies circles for having put forward
the theory that the term shenshi 神矢 (divine arrows) in the poem commonly referred
to as Zi ti xiao xiang 自题小像 (Personally inscribed on a small picture)\(^8\) refers
not to “Cupid's arrow” (as had been previously explained by Xu Shoushang 許壽裳
and Xi Jin 謝金) but to the means by which Byron's character Lara (in “The Corsair”)
had met his death by means of “a flying shaft which pierced his chest” (fei shi lai
quan qi xiong, sui si 飛矢來貫其胸，遂死) — as Lu Xun phrased it in part four of
his 1907 essay Moluo shi li shuo (On the power of Mara poetry).\(^9\) Whether or not
the reader agrees with this analysis, it is certainly one of the more creative readings
of this widely-disputed poem. Generally speaking, it is safe to say that Zhang
Xiangtian's exegeses have done more good than harm.

This is not necessarily true for his immediate successor, Zhou Zhenfu. Whereas
I find it a useful approach to assume that most of the innuendo in Lu Xun's poetry
of the 1930s is directed at the senseless cruelty of the Kuomintang government in
the areas it controlled, Zhou Zhenfu tries, at every possible turn, to drag in the
civil war with the Communist military forces and/or to find positive lines about
the Communist base areas in the hinterland. The most ludicrous examples occur
on pp. 77-80 of the 1962 ed. of his book, in which he distorts Lu Xun's tragic
tone in the poem Xiang ling ge 湘靈歌 (Ode to the goddess of the Xiang River)\(^10\)
into an optimistic victory chant cheering on the Red Army's counter-offensive
against the “Encircle and Annihilate” campaign of the Nationalist government and
on pp. 141-144 of the 1980 edition where he reads the untitled poem of December
31, 1932 (beginning Dongting mu luo Chu tian gao 洞庭木落楚天高; lit. “Lake
Dongting's trees have shed their leaves 'neath a towering Chu sky...”),\(^11\) containing
the line mei dai xing hong wo zhan pao 眉黛猩紅戰袍 (lit. “Traces of kohl and
blood-red stain warriors' robes...”) as a paternalistic counsel to Yu Dafu not to
let his infatuation with Wang Yingxia distract him from the weighty tasks ahead
on the road to a burgeoning career as a writer for the revolution (interpreting “traces
of kohl” as eye make-up and “blood-red” as the color of lipstick).

Zhou Zhenfu was distinguished as a commentator by his copious notes on
Chairman Mao's poetry. For this reason, it comes as no surprise that Jenner's FLP
English versions seem to rely most heavily on him.\(^12\) Zhou states that he was working
on the draft when the first edition of Zhang Xiangtian's (1959) book came out and,

---

\(^8\)Text in Lu Xun quanj; [The complete works of Lu Xun] (Peking: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1981),
VII, p. 423.

\(^9\)Lu Xun quanj; I, p. 76. Also see Zhang Xiangtian (1962), pp. 27-36.

\(^10\)Text in Lu Xun quanj; VII, p. 146. Note that this poem was probably written out for Matsumoto
Saburo 松元三郎, not Katayama Shogen 片山松元, as the Lu Xun quanj; states.

\(^11\)Lu Xun quanj; VII, p. 148.

\(^12\)After all, the most important thing going on in the 1930s (in the minds of the octogenarian leaders
of the Party and, as a result, of the so-called “Chinese 'editors’” at the FLP) was the civil war and the
most important parts of China were the Soviets or revolutionary base areas. But that was not necessarily
Lu Xun's perspective. He was involved in a struggle on a completely different front and level.
feeling that his annotations differed significantly from those of Zhang, he thought he might do well to subject them to the reader's scrutiny and judgement (p. 186). But based on the large number of exegeses taken verbatim from the 1961 annotated edition of *Lu Xun quanjii* [The Complete works of Lu Xun], I cannot suppress the guess that this was a Zhou Yang era attempt at producing an official analysis of Lu Xun's poetry, as opposed to the previous "independent" treatments by Sikong Wuji, and Zhang Xiangtian. There is a revised edition of Zhou Zhenfu's book (1980) from the same publisher. Disappointingly, new portions consist, by and large, of attempts to refute his critics.

A more appealing work is the anonymous *Lu Xun shi jian xuanji: fu shigao* [An Annotated selection of Lu Xun's poems: with reproductions of the hand-written manuscripts], an aesthetically intriguing book with a preface by Guo Moruo. Overall, this is a less politically-colored work that provides some original insights. Literary allusions and many poetic terms are scrupulously documented in its traditional interlinear commentary. If I were ever to teach a course on Lu Xun's verse, this would be an attractive first text.

For its sheer usefulness in introducing the reader to the various debates, a commendable work is that by Zhang Enhe 張恩和 entitled *Lu Xun jiushi jijie* [A compendium of divergent views on Lu Xun's classical verse]. This lengthy compilation has excerpted often contradictory quotations from various Chinese commentaries and treats all of Lu Xun's extant classical verse. Occasionally the compiler offers his own views under the heading 便箋 *jin an* ("a note from the editor"). Zhang Enhe includes a 42-page bibliography of books and articles on, and related to, Lu Xun's classical poetry.

Aside from these, at least ten separate titles have been published in mainland China since 1978 dealing exclusively with Lu Xun's classical verse. Are these poems really worth all this attention? Jenner tells us: "The classical poems Lu Xun wrote in the 1930s were nearly all responses to particular occasions. Sometimes he would be asked for a poem or a piece of his calligraphy by a friend, or by a stranger through a friend. Many of those who asked for his writing were Japanese." (p. 21). But the Japanese scholar Takata Atsushi observed some years earlier:

> Although, as a friend, Lu Xun would present poems written out in his own calligraphy to people, there were also poems which had no direct connection to the person[s] for whom he had copied them out. To say that these are poems which were merely written in response to requests from people is nothing but a superficial observation. There were instances in which the composition of the poem had been inspired [by something else] and it was [later] brought out in response to a request by some acquaintance.\(^{13}\)

In other words, to construe much of Lu Xun's classical-style poetry as occasional verse is an oversimplification, even in view of the disclaimers he himself was wont to attach. After all, Lu Xun was a vociferous advocate of writing in the new style (baihua) and he could not appear publicly to endorse wenyan. But privately, he wrote otherwise:

---

I think that there are basically two types of scripts, the type that can be set on a stage and the type that can be set on a desk. Doubtless, the former is superior to the latter. Similarly in poetry we have the type that can be read aloud, and the type that can only be read in silence. Again, it follows that the former is the superior of the two. It is lamentable, therefore, that in China our “new poetry” must find itself in this latter group, since a poem lacking in both rhyme and rhythm does not lend itself to recitation aloud, and is hence less easily committed to memory. It is for this reason that the “new poetry” has never succeeded in displacing the old forms. In the minds of the people, the position of the old has never been supplanted.  

One of the chief problems with the “occasional verse” approach is that it tends to trivialize what were meant to be, if not acerbic, then certainly critical poetic lines. Of poems which were, on the surface, occasional verses, Lu Xun himself once remarked in a letter to Cao Jinghua dated February 7, 1935:

Getting anything published here is sheer disaster. Some of these “men of letters” who have made it up to the rank of censor seem to act with total disregard for reason. Toward the end of last year a friend collected some old writings I had done but never published before into a volume entitled Collection of the Uncollected (Ji wai ji). When he submitted it to the censors, they banned ten pieces straightaway. Even stranger to relate, the writings proscribed include some correspondence dating from ten years back, before the present “National Government” had even come into existence. Moreover the content had nothing to do with politics. Yet the Collection includes a number of classical-style poems quite vitriolic in tone (po jile phenomena), which the censors did not choose to touch. 

If, in the process of translation and annotation we ignore Lu Xun’s own statements concerning the nature and implications of these poems, choosing to interpret them primarily as “occasional” verse, celebrating a visit, an outing, or a dinner, then I would think we are doing a disservice to his work as literature.

On the question of “occasional” verse, then, let us examine Lu Xun’s two untitled poems written out on December 31, 1932 for Doctors Tsuboi and Hamanoue: 

無題二首

故鄉暗暗鎖玄雲，
遲夜遲遲隔上春。
歲暮何堪再慷慨，
且持疏酒食河豚。

其二

浩渺雲旗唱柳枝，
酒闌人靜暮春時。
無端書夢破殘醉，
獨對燈陰憶子規。

14 From his November 1, 1934 letter to Dou Yinfu. See Lu Xun quanji, XII, p. 556.
15 Lu Xun quanji, XIII, p. 47.
16 Text in Lu Xun quanji, VII, p. 438.
Wu Juntao (p. 57) translates:

I

My native place is overcast with dark clouds brooding on,
And Spring is barred by the very night lasting long.
How can I keep in low spirits still when it's the year's end?
Let me enjoy the dish of globe-fish with a goblet in hand.

II

'Tis a night in late spring when wines're drained and voices cease;
A Suzhou girl sings her Willow Songs and white are her teeth.
From drunkenness I'm sobered by dreams coming from nowhere;
In the shades of light alone I think of the cuckoo somewhere.

In Jenner's (p. 61) rendering the poems run:

I

When black clouds smother the land with darkness,
And long nights make the spring seem far away,
Let not the old year's misery increase:
So raise your wine-cups and we'll feast on globefish.

2

The white-toothed southern maiden sings a ballad
In a late spring silence when the wine is gone.
Then, for no reason, an old dream makes one sober;
Alone and out of the light I think of sorrow.

And David Y. Ch'en (p. 99) gives us:

Homeland, dark and gloomy, lies under a blackening overcast.
In the prolonged night, early spring seems far, far behind.
At year's end, how could I still have a troubled mind?
For now: a cup of wine and globe fish for a delicious repast.

A maiden from Wu with snowy teeth sings a "Willow Branches" lay.
The banquet's over, voices subside, as springtime wears away.
An old dream dispels my lingering drunkenness for no reason at all;
Alone facing the shadow of the lamp, I remember the cuckoo's call.

One basic problem with all these renderings is that they fail to preserve the somber mood which permeates the texts of the originals. Instead, they focus on the wine, women and song which are, in reality, only a backdrop for the brooding emotionality of the verses. The speaker in verse one is depicted as eating fugu 鳗, a Japanese delicacy—a fish with poison entrails which has the potential to kill the diner if improperly prepared. If read within the framework of the "world" constructed by the combined images of the first and second poem, it becomes clear that these are more than occasional lines celebrating the event of a dinner on the town with Japanese acquaintances. They speak of a poison in the entrails of the poet as well as the fish, one born of the sadness/disconsolation (chouchang 慮悶) of the previous line.
The lines of a Chinese poem work together, directly or antithetically. They are not each a separate entity, as David Y. Ch'en's punctuation seems to suggest. Even if eating fugu is intended as an activity suggestive of revery, it still takes on a bitter edge, given the context: "Why are we subjected to such circumstances in China?" (suggested by xianyun 玄霧 “dark clouds” and yaoye 遠夜 “long nights”) the speaker in the poem asks; "Who has produced them? Is their outcome not clear? How can a temporary respite provide any real escape?" These are the actual questions being posed by the speaker in the poem to the intellectual communities of China and perhaps, by extension, Japan.

Wu Juntao gives the reader no notes at all for either of these poems. David Y. Ch'en's endnotes (p. 231) do not mention the above images or their implications. Jenner tells us that "globefish...contain deadly poison," but does not seem to see any metaphorical value in its use here. Yet Takata Atsushi entitles the chapter of his book Rojin shiwa which deals with this poem: Fugu no kanashimi (The sorrow of [i.e. symbolized by] fugu). He suggests that eating fugu in this context might indicate a degree of defiance something akin to a death-wish (p. 148) in the poet.17

Without reference to the Chinese originals, at first glance, Jenner's translation would appear to be the one which has the greatest likelihood of following the original most accurately. But in the first line of poem #1 he translates suo... (to lock up) as "smother," eliminating the possibility of double entendre19 while doing nothing to strengthen the line. If we want to make the opening couplet sound like a poem, I would translate it:

My old home locked in murky clouds,
so dark, yet ever darkening;
On, drag on, unending night
that hinders the coming spring.

Jenner seems to think tiaotiao 迴迴 refers to the spring, but grammatically it modifies yaoye 遠夜 .19 Why translate guxiang 故鄉 literally as "old home" here, as I have done, when it is probably being used as a metaphor for the poet's country? — Of course, but why spell it out when that sort of information can be put in a footnote and the original metaphor (which more-or-less works in English) preserved? For one thing, the poet was not abroad at this time; for another, a literal rendering into English here serves to heighten the sense of outrage: opposition poets have a claim on their country, too; in fact, a more authentic one than government lap-dogs. Lu Xun is every bit as Chinese as their paid apologists even though he pens acerbic columns damning the authorities and goes out for drinks with Japanese doctors. The right-wing has no monopoly on patriotism, the speaker in the poem tells us, as do the essays he penned in this period.

17 Cf. the views of the anonymous commentator in Lu Xun shijian xuanji: ju shigao (p. 92).
18 Such as the play on words implied with phrases like suoguo 鎖國 (to lock up/close the country) or be ren suo qi lai 把人鎖起來 (to lock up or imprison people).
19 See Takata Atsushi, p. 148; Zhang Xiangtian (1962), p. 116. Cf. Zhou Zhenfu (1962), pp. 112-113. Jenner is following Zhou Zhenfu's baihua (top of p. 113): "This is to say that the dark period of reactionary rule was still not over, that they were still very far removed (yaoyuan) from the glorious years when spring would revitalize the earth. This reveals the poet's longing for [the day of] Liberation."
In verse # 2, both Jenner and Ch’en translate the term wudun 無端 as “for no reason” or “for no reason at all” and Wu Juntao renders it “coming from nowhere.” This is a word which has specific poetic usage and might be best expressed indirectly in English. I would render it, if required to do so, as “inexplicably.” The last line of the poem, Jenner translates as: “Alone and out of the light I think of sorrow . . .” which might have been clever in that he avoids the words of the enigmatic conclusion yi ziguí 憧子規 (lit. “recalling the cuckoo”), translating it “I think of sorrow,” except that the speaker is not “out of the light,” but rather “facing the shadows.” This is quite clear. Of course, the speaker in the poem is sad (that is also my point in writing all this) and Jenner is right to tell us that. But the Chinese original works in another way and of these three translators, only Ch’en (p. 231) ventures an explanation:

The bird name tzu-kuei 子規 (“cuckoo”) in Chinese literature suggests onomatopoeia. The cuckoo’s call is interpreted as “Better go home!” (pu-ju kuei-ch’ü 不如歸去). Notice that the character kuei 喀 puns on its homophone kui 喀, meaning “return.” Heard in late spring, it is traditionally associated with melancholy and nostalgia. The bird assumes several other names popular in Chinese verse . . .

In China the cuckoo is a bird whose name is rife with symbolic value and associated legends. It is said that the bird’s woeful cry “buru gui gu” (“Would it not be better to return!”) can inspire acute longing and homesickness in the heart of any traveler. The fact that Lu Xun here chooses the less-common name ziguí, embodying the homophone gui (“to go back”) rather than the more common word dujuan may strengthen the association of the bird as a symbol for a desire to return somewhere. Lu Xun shijian xuanji: fu shigao (p. 92) suggests the poet still entertains a desire to return to Peking. Others might read this as Japan. However, both Ni Moyan (p. 152) and Zhou Zhenfu (p. 113) feel that Lu Xun is using the cuckoo with the same symbolic import as Qu Yuan in the Li sao with his line:

I fear lest the cuckoo should cry forth,
causing the hundred grasses to loose their fragrance.

Ni and Zhou explain that the cry of the cuckoo causes fragrant grasses to wilt and wither, that is to say, good men to come to harm or misfortune. Zhou concludes that the poet is sighing over the trampling down of talented men by the reactionaries, whereas Ni says the line is in commemoration of slain revolutionary martyrs. Interesting enough as a contrast, Zhang Xiangtian thinks the subject of each line in this quatrain to be the sing-song girl herself, rather than Lu Xun. This is where Jenner gets his observation (p. 140): “Another interpretation is possible: it could also be the singer who turns away from the light, suddenly sobered up.” Zhang Xiangtian feels the concluding line expresses a mother’s longing for the return of her child, lost in the hostilities during the January 28th Conflict with Japan. A fifth opinion is expressed by Jiang Tian, who believes the use of a cuckoo here is an allusion to the story of Du Yu, ancient ruler of Shu (now the Sichuan region) during the Zhou era. According to legend, King Du was changed into a cuckoo which

20 By contrast again, Takata Atsushi (pp. 149-152) entitles his entire chapter Hotochis o oku (Recalling the cuckoo).
Wept tears of blood. The Southern Song poet Wen Tianxiang (1236-1283) wrote a line using this image as an expression of tragic heroism:

Would that I were transformed into a cuckoo,
that flies [toward his goal] trailing blood.22

From this Jiang Tian opines that the cuckoo here is symbolic of "the martyrs' loyal souls."23 No matter what the referent may ultimately turn out to be, it is not justifiable to skirt the use of this image and its ambiguity by translating the line as "Alone and out of the light I think of sorrow..." when yi zigu (recall/think of a cuckoo) is clearly an allusion. Secondly, du dui deng yin 獨對燈陰 (lit. "alone facing the shadows [cast by a] lamp") does not mean the speaker is "out of the light" as Jenner puts it. If we want to rhyme, I would suggest translating the last two lines:

A tipsy mood now chased away
as dreams lurch from the past;
Alone, recall a cuckoo's form
'mid shadows the lamp's cast.24

This leaves the subject unspecified, as in the Chinese, and preserves some of the feeling of enigma engendered by the original lines. One might argue that the cuckoo's cry, not form, is alluded to here, but the poet does not tell us that. Perhaps the speaker, facing the shadows, imagines that he makes out a form in their midst and this engenders in the reader's mind the symbolic associations with the bird's melancholy cry.

Just how allusive and metaphorical Lu Xun's poems can be is easily illustrated by a look at one of his earliest extant verses, commonly referred to as Zi ti xiao xiang 自題小像 ("Personally inscribed on a small picture"), which was probably composed in the spring or summer of 1903.25 This is perhaps the one poem by Lu Xun most frequently quoted in its entirety, yet its meaning is subject to a wide variety of interpretation, its dating is uncertain, and even its most commonly used title was assigned to it by someone other than the poet himself.26 The great significance placed upon this poem in mainland China is attributable to the fact that it has often been cited as evidence from which to pinpoint chronologically the beginnings of Lu Xun's "revolutionary" consciousness.27

23 By "martyrs" he is referring to activist writers slain by the Kuomintang. See Jiang Tian (1974), p. 67.
24 Here "lamp's" = "lamp has". Cf. the plain verse rendering I offered in CLEAR 3.1, p. 187.
25 See Ni Moyan, pp. 35-39. Here Ni reviews some older theories on the dating and concludes that at the earliest, the poem was written in March of 1903, but is most likely to have been composed during the summer of that year.
26 Ibid., p. 37.
27 This was not always the case. One Lu Xun biographer, presupposing a relationship between the poem and Lu Xun's decision to take up the study of medicine upon graduation from the Kobun (Japanese Language) Institute in 1904, wrote of how the poem expresses the young Lu Xun's determination to save his people by aiding in the introduction of medical science as a cure for their ills. This was Wang Yeqiu, Min yuan qian de Lu Xun (Lu Xun in the pre-Republican era) Shanghai: Emei Chubangonsi, 1947), pp. 81-82. A vastly different version comes from Xi Jin, who insists that Lu Xun's wife explained (to Xi Jin) in 1941 the meaning of the poem's various obscure terms and passages. According to Xu
Most of the standard interpretations of this heptasyllabic quatrain followed the guidelines set down by Lu Xun's old friend and fellow-provincial, Xu Shoushang (1882-1948):

The [poem's] first line speaks of the intensity of the stimulus one received studying in an alien land. In the next [the poet] describes how grave the stormy state of affairs in our homeland looked from abroad. The third tells of how our compatriots had not yet awakened and [how he consequently] could not overcome the feeling of isolation. The concluding line is an outpouring of his commitments; it is a motto he would set out to live up to throughout his entire life.21

But Xu Shoushang's various statements about the time, circumstances and place of composition of this poem are contradictory.29 They are also inconsistent with information in the rewritten copy of the poem made by Lu Xun much later in life, which ends with the problematic statement: “Composed when I was twenty-one sui [a Chinese term designating 'years of age' but not indicative of whether age is being reckoned according to the Chinese or Western fashion]; written out in my hand on February 16, 1931 at fifty-one sui.”30 Because of these contradictions, we cannot assume all Xu's statements on the poem to be definitive. It would seem to me justifiable to accept as fact, however, that at some point during their study abroad in Japan, Lu Xun did write out, for Xu, a copy of this heptasyllabic quatrain on a photograph of himself, and that this photo was one of the same pose that Lu Xun sent to his middle brother Zhou Zuoren. The picture was taken in March or April 1903, after Lu Xun had cut off his queue, symbol of submission to Manchu rule over China.31 Thus in William Lyell's view this poem “represents a turning point in his view of his role in society.”32 A good deal of the controversy over this poem's interpretation stems from the ambiguity of its archaic diction and allusions.

Guangping, Xi Jin contends, this poem expresses Lu Xun's consternation at having had to submit to an arranged marriage. But, it was not until 1907 that Lu Xun's mother, under pretext of illness, called her son back to Shaoxing from Japan for this purpose. See Xi Jin, “Lu Xun shi ben shi” [Stories behind Lu Xun's poems], Wenzue Yuekan [The Literature monthly], Nov. 1956, p. 9.


29 For example, in 1936, Xu wrote, “Lu Xun was matchless in his dedication to the cause of national liberation [from the Manchu yoke]. In 1903, when we were studying in Tokyo, he presented a small picture to me and later was to add a poem to it, which went....” Ibid., p. 4. The same year, Xu added: “In 1903 when he [Lu Xun] was twenty-three sui, he gave me the poem ‘Personally Inscribed on a Small Picture’ in Tokyo.” Ibid., p. 24. In 1944, Xu reiterated: “Personally Inscribed on a Small Picture’ was given to me when he was twenty-three sui.” Ibid., p. 83. But in a work dated 1947, Xu spoke of the days when Lu Xun had already left Tokyo in 1904 (instead of 1903, as he had previously dated the poem) for the small provincial Sendai Medical Academy, saying: “After he had gone, he mailed me a picture, on the back of which there was a heptasyllabic quatrain inscribed....” Xu then quoted the concluding line of this poem. See Xu Shoushang, Wangyou Lu Xun yinxiang ji [Impressions of my departed friend Lu Xun] (Shanghai: E mei chubanshe, 1947), p. 18.


32 Lyell, Ibid., p. 58.
David Y. Ch'en and Wu Juntao are mistaken in translating *Zi ti xiao xiang* as “Inscription on My Photograph” and “Inscribing (sic.) on a Photo of Myself” because, as I have said, the poem was originally untitled. The “title” in current use was assigned to it after the fact by someone other than the author himself (Xu Shoushang). The text of the poem runs:

豈不言許通神矢
風雨如夢時故園.
寄意寒星荃不察，
我以我血講軒轅

My own (1978) attempt at a “literal” version reads:

Personally Inscribed on a Small Picture

In the spirit tower is no plan

to elude divine arrows;

Wind and rain, like giant flagstones,

darken the old garden.

Entrusting intentions to a lone, cold star,

...the Fragrant One considers them not.

I take my blood and offer it up

to Xuan Yuan [the Yellow Emperor].

If the same poem, Wu Juntao (p. 19) makes:

Inscribing on a Photo of Myself

There's no way for my heart to shun the Cupid's arrow-head,

And stormy clouds, like millstones, darken our motherland o'erhead.

I ask the meteor to carry to my people my pray;

Although they ignore, I'll offer my blood to my Cathay.

Jenner (p. 31) gives us:

On a Photograph of Himself

The tower cannot avoid the god's sharp arrows;

Dark is the ancient garden crushed beneath the storm.

Unrecognized, I put my hope in an ice-cold star

While offering my blood to the Yellow Emperor.

and David Y. Ch'en (p. 65) has:

Inscription on My Photograph

My hallowed heart fails to escape the sacred arrow’s aim.

A rock-like storm is darkening my native land.

A message via cool stars, the grass roots don't understand.

I sacrifice my blood in the Yellow Emperor's name.

Of course, since the understanding of all the Chinese commentators, translators and interpreters (as well as my own) of the poem is incomplete, there are problems with all these versions. My attempt at presenting the reader with a "literal" rendering had to be laced with footnotes (nine in total) explaining the terms and accompanied by a prefatory statement. Discounting the questions engendered by my poor rendering, let us begin with Wu Juntao's version. Wu translates lingtai (spirit tower) as "heart," as does Takata Atsushi in his Japanese gloss ("Sore wa Rojin jibun no kokoro o iU"). This is not without justification, as the term lingtai appears in the "Gengsang chu" chapter of the book of Zhuangzi, where it is used to refer to the mind or the heart in its function as the seat of the intellect. The original passage in Zhuangzi reads:

Use things to nourish your body, withdraw into an unworried state and in this way give life to your mind. If you do this and yet are still beset by things that plague you, then these are the doings of heaven and not of man. They will not be able to disturb your accomplishments and must not be allowed to enter the lingtai. The lingtai has its guardian but unless you know this guardian, it cannot be guarded.

The above passage is relevant to the extent that it explains the "spirit tower" as a mind which is subject to conscious decision. By making a conscious and deliberate decision to join the ranks of the anti-Qing cause, the speaker realizes that he is putting his life on the line and may have to "bear the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" as a consequence. If the dynasty so desired, its agents could apprehend him in Japan and conduct him back to China for trial and possible execution. Thus, with the first line he could be saying his own self-preservation as an individual is no longer at issue.

But it is also possible to explain lingtai as the Sacred Terrace of King Wen of the Zhou (in Mencius), built for him by his faithful subjects to show their appreciation for an exemplary monarch. In this case, it may be contrasted ironically with the Yi He Yuan or new summer palace built by Empress Dowager Ci Xi (1835-1908) with funds originally allocated to modernize the Chinese navy. Thus when the poet says it wu ji tao shen shi ("has no plan to escape divine arrows"), he means the

---

34"Here it refers to Lu Xun's own heart." See Takata, p. 17.
35This does not extend to David Y. Ch'en's "my hallowed heart," a horrid turn of phrase which makes the speaker in the poem sound like an ego-maniac. Similarly, his rendering of quan as "the grass roots" reminds me more of the initial period in the ill-fated 1972 McGovern presidential campaign than an allusion from classical Chinese poetry.
38Mengzi, book one on Liang Hui Wang (King Hui of Liang); see James Legge, The Chinese Classics (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960, 11. p. 128. Legge translates lingtai as "marvellous tower."
extravagances of the Empress Dowager have rendered the nation indefensible. This is Zeng Minzhi's argument.\textsuperscript{39}

There is also an ancient ruin just outside Lu Xun's hometown of Shaoxing referred to as the Xuanyuan Tai or "Terrace of Xuanyuan," Xuanyuan being the personal name of the legendary Yellow Emperor, thought to have been the progenitor of the Han race. Thus lingtai may represent the poet's home and, by extension, his fatherland. The fatherland endangered may be the gist of the first line. This leads logically into the second, which speaks of fengyu (lit. "wind and rain," i.e. storms) bearing down on the guyuan ("old garden," i.e. old home), but skirts the exegesis of shenshi (lit. "divine arrow[s]").

Most commentators base their explanations of the term shenshi on Xu Shoushang's belated (1944) interpretation:

The shenshi in the first line is borrowed from the story of the god of love in Roman mythology; that is to say, it is an allusion from a foreign land.\textsuperscript{40}

The general conclusion arrived at from the above comment is that "Cupid's arrow has inspired a fervent love for his country in the breast of the young Lu Xun." (Ni Moyan, pp. 40-42). But Cupid's arrows always brought on an erotic love between individuals, not feelings of patriotism or aiguo ("love for one's country") as it is termed in Chinese. The image of the cherub loosing a shaft to inspire a willingness to die for a nation or revolutionary cause seems quite incongruous, especially in view of the story that little Eros had such disdain for fighting and weapons that he caused Apollo to become obsessed with Daphne specifically because he found Apollo's pugnacious inclinations distasteful. Lu Xun, who at the time was studying "the poems of Byron, a biography of Nietzsche, Greek and Roman mythology, etc." in all probability knew this detail.

This is where the explanation put forth by Zhang Xiangtian comes in. He suggests this shenshi image may have been derived from the death of Byron's Lara in "The Corsair".\textsuperscript{42} It is clear from Lu Xun's 1907 essay Molo shi li shuo (On the power of Mara poetry) that he identified with the "satanic" powers of non-conformity and revolt which he saw in such poets as Byron and the figure of Lara: "one who put his might into resisting an inevitable fate."\textsuperscript{43} Zhang Xiangtian feels that the sort of arrow mentioned in the Lu Xun poem is one just like that which shot, unpredictably, out of the clear blue to pierce Lara's chest. So, according to Zhang, the connotation of the character shen in the shenshi is not "divine," but rather "engimatic, wondrous, unfathomable, unpredictable..." (p. 35). Maybe this is where Jenner gets "sharp.

Wu Juntau is not wrong to translate hanxing as "meteor," as this is one of its glosses in classical sources. The whole line about the hanxing (lit. "cold star," by extension "lone star" and also "shooting star") is reminiscent of a verse from the Jiu bian (Nine arguments) section of the Chu ci [Songs of the state of Chu] which

\textsuperscript{39} Reproduced in Zhang Enhe, pp. 58-60.
\textsuperscript{40} Xu Shoushang, Wo suo renshi de Lu Xun, pp. 83-84.
\textsuperscript{41} Xu Shoushang, Wangyou Lu Xun yinxiang ji [Impressions of my departed friend Lu Xun] (Shanghai: E me chubanshe, 1947), p. 5.
\textsuperscript{42} See Zhang Xiangtian (1962), p. 35.
\textsuperscript{43} Lu Xun quanji, 1, p. 76.
uses the term *liuxing* ("shooting star") instead of the *hanxing* employed in Lu Xun's verse. David Hawkes translates a relevant line from that section:

> I wished to send my message by a shooting star,
> But he sped too fast, and I could not catch up with him.**44**

Wang Yi's second century A.D. commentary on the *Chu ci* says that "shooting star" is a metaphor for decent people who still remain in the government, through whom the exiled and spurned poet Qu Yuan might have conveyed a message to the deluded monarch of his home state Chu, while he wandered "abroad."**45** In Lu Xun's verse I would take the *hanxing* to be a similar metaphor for sincere, reform-minded loyalists to the Qing dynasty, living in Japan and elsewhere overseas, who might serve as go-betweens for progressives, communicating their vision for renovating the nation to the emperor, or in this case, the power holders at the imperial court in Peking.**46** Thus the line may indicate the vanity or futility of all such efforts.

Rather than harp on "my pray" (which should be "prayer") and "Cathay" (forced rhymes are endemic in Wu Juntao's work), time would be better spent on Jenner's translation, which again appears to have the most potential to remain close to the original. In the third line *quan bu cha* (lit. "The Fragrant One does not consider/look into...") originates in the *Li Sao* where *quan*, the name of a fragrant grass, is used as a metaphorical stand-in for the poet's sovereign. David Hawkes writes:

> The Chinese word used here is the name of a flower generally identified with some kind of iris or flowering rush. In this context it is usually taken allegorically to mean the poet's king...
> *Li Sao* obviously does contain allegory of some kind. The angry iris here, the backsliding pepper and orchid in 1.163, the guileful pepper of 1.160, and the irises and orchids who have turned into rushes in 1.155 are all quite meaningless except as allegory...
> To my mind there is little doubt that in this context [quan] refers to the poet's king...**47**

Lu Xun might have had the then all-but-deposed Guangxu emperor in mind, but I rather think him to be referring to the powerholders in China, in general. There is clearly a comment on politics or at least the ethics of governance intended here, therefore Jenner's rendering: "Unrecognized, I put my hope in an ice-cold star" is not only skewed syntactically, but also shifts the force of *quan bu cha* (which Jenner translates simply as "unrecognized") onto the poet, making it sound as though he is Angst-ridden about a lack of career success. The "while" commencing line four then upsets the time-sequence because, grammatically speaking, line four comes about as a result of or at least directly after line three, not coterminously.

The poem, up to now couched in archaic phraseology, in its final line suddenly bursts into near-vernacular Chinese with the phrase *wo yi wo xue* ("I'll use my own blood to..."). This stark contrast jolts the reader and drives home its import.

---


**45** *Chü buzhu (Sibu beiyao ed.),* 8.13a.

**46** Cf. *Lu Xun shijian xuanji: ju shi gao*, pp. 4-5.

word wo ("I"), intrudes to make abstract referents take on the new immediacy. Speaking of the poetic techniques employed in this type of verse, the jueju, Hawkes long ago observed:

As seems to be the case in other languages too, the shortness of the poem increases the emphasis on the last line. Chinese poets writing a chüeh-chu aim to make the last line striking or haunting or even puzzling, so that the mind of the reader will continue to ponder and savour it long after he has finished reading.48

Thus the last line may well prove the key to interpreting the other images. When in doubt, it is best to look for clues from within a composition itself as a poem ultimately contains its own structural-topical integrity.

There are numerous such instances in Lu Xun's poetry which cannot be singled out one by one for discussion here. The above have been offered only as examples of what makes Lu Xun's poetry "difficult" in David Y. Ch'en's term (p. 30). Looking at the three different English-language treatments under review, one thing that strikes this reviewer is that Wu Juntao's work, for all his flaws in English, and David Y. Che'en's work are both labors of love. This is hard to say about Jenner's book, especially when he asks the reader to take "the quality [of the poems] on trust" (p. 21), calls Lu Xun's early work a "pastiche" of lines from other poetry (p. 19), over-simplifies in his translations and then seems to throw up his hands when confronted with the array of differing interpretations ("controversy drags on..." p. 127) which exist.

By contrast, I enjoyed the feeling of enthusiasm toward the subject David Y. Ch'en's book conveys. But his grouping of the classical-style poems by form (he sees them as falling simply into either one or the other of two categories: "ancient style" and "regulated style") are not, strictly speaking, necessary and tend to confuse the reader by mixing up the chronological order. The reader will wonder, for example, why the 1932/3 poems "Potpourri of Professors" 49 directly precede "Farewell to My Younger Brothers" (compositions of the year gengzi or 1900) without any intervening explanation. Ch'en's rhyme, moreover, while certainly less forced than Wu Juntao's, at times appears facile and tends to make the brooding, darkly emotional classical-style sound trite. An example is the translation of the untitled poem written out on May 30, 1934 for Nii Itaru:

## 無题

萬家塗炭最難為，
敢有歌吟動地哀。
心事茫茫連廣宇，
於無聲處殤驚雷。

Ch'en's version (p. 135) reads:

Thousands of faces, doomed with gloom, into the wilds submerge;
Who would dare to shake the earth with a wailing dirge?
My heart with immense concerns has this vast land to enwrap.
Where silence reigns, listen for a startling thunderclap.

---


49A horrible translation of the title Jiashou zayong sishou 教授雜咏四首 (lit. "Four Miscellaneous Vers on Professors"). If we want to be funny I would render it "Diverse Versifying on Professors."
Out of fairness to Ch'en, Wu Juntao's version (p. 95) is less accurate and sounds even worse:

Thousands of people fall down in the wilds;
    They are tattooed and condemned to death.
Yet who dares to show his grief profound with wails
    And laments that would shake up the great earth?
How vast and remote my heart turns over,
    That to the universe it straight wanders.
Now in the dead silence I hear ever:
    Come swelling the roaring rumbles of thunders!

And Jenner's rendering (p. 87), though eschewing rhyme and singled out for special praise by Ruth Weiss,\(^{50}\) still tends to trivialize the tone of the Chinese poem.

The gaunt-faced commoners are buried by weeds;
    None dares to sing a dirge to move the earth to grief.
When thoughts spread wide to fill the whole of space,
    Amid the silence comes the crash of thunder.

Nowhere does Lu Xun's original text contain anything close to the word "commoners". This is purely Jenner's addition, uncomfortably reminiscent of those "unhappy years" when "oversimplification... tried to turn all Lu Xun's poems of the 1930s into posturing mock-militancy."\(^{51}\)

David Y. Chen's translations of the "new style" verses are, I believe, more successful than his renderings of the "old style" poems. Ch'en's English is much better than Wu's and his introduction deals more directly with the formalistic concerns of poetry and translation than Jenner's work.

The principle problem with Jenner's volume is that it reads like a made-to-order book, one that he might rather not have done at all, and this calls to mind the way the FLP of Peking was operated for years; as a "closed shop." Books are contracted out to scholars and translators who may not have an affinity or even a liking for them, simply because the authorities feel it is time to publish a certain work in English. These are usually political decisions: Jenner is not normally a bad translator. Ultimately his book will probably be more widely available than the other two and be regarded by some readers as the "official translation," but at some level we have to ask ourselves if this is not part and parcel of what I will term the whole "trivialization process" which Xu Guangping and others have charged has been carried out by state organs in China since the 1950s on the Lu Xun legacy. If Lu Xun's social and cultural critique embodies implications which are still too far-reaching to be comfortable for the authorities, then the best route in dealing with him appears to be simply to trivialize the issues addressed and his means of addressing them.

From a non-Western perspective, it is interesting to note that both David Y. Ch'en and Wu Juntao have employed rhyming verse in their English translations, even though this will inevitably put a number of readers off at first glance. Since Arthur Waley's free verse renderings became immensely popular in the 1920s, most other translators followed suit and readers in the English-speaking world have come

\(^{50}\)Lu Xun: A Chinese Writer for All Times, op. cit., p. 276.

to think that all renderings of Chinese verse should sound like his. Such sentiments, however, have proven totally unacceptable to many Chinese scholars who read and write English and they insist on continuing to attempt to convince us of the great importance of form in the originals by producing rhyming translations in English at any cost. Perhaps we would do well to take note of this because an objection based on cultural values seems to be implicit.

This being the case, one wonders, however, why Chinese-controlled publishing concerns as major as the Commercial Press, Ltd. (Hong Kong) have embarked on expensive ventures such as their "A New Translation" series which publishes translations of Du Fu by Wu Juntao and similar projects by other translators from mainland China without having anyone edit their English. By contrast, the same Commercial Press of Hong Kong has retained important scholars such as Zhang Longxi to go over translations of famous European letters into Chinese from English for the benefit of their Chinese readership. An editor at CLEAR once suggested to me that it is possible they don't believe there is anyone out here who actually reads their English publications against the Chinese. By now I'm beginning to think they wouldn't care.

52 The Shanghai Foreign Languages Edition Publishing House claims to have brought out 20,000 copies of Wu Juntao's Lu Xun Selected Poems in the first print run. Most of these were sold, ironically, to young Chinese readers eager for bilingual texts from which they can learn English.

53 Mingren shuxi yibai feng 名人書信一百封 [One hundred letters from famous personages] (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1986); published as part of their new Yibai congshu ("100" series).
Chinese Literature
Essays
Articles
Reviews

Volume 13

EDITORIAL

ESSAYS AND ARTICLES
Wei-qun DAI, "Xing Again: A Formal Re-investigation"
Robert F. CAMPANY, "Ghosts Matter: The Culture of Ghosts in Six Dynasties Zhiguai"
Xiaolian LIU, "A Journey of the Mind: The Basic Allegory in Hou Xiyou ji"
Gloria DAVIES, "The Problematic Modernity of Ah Q"
Jonathan CHAVES, "Forum: From the 1990 AAS Roundtable"

REVIEW ARTICLES
Eugene EOYANG, "The Forest and the Trees"
Robert E. HEGEL, "Inventing Li Yu"
Jon KOWALLIS, "Lu Xun 's Classical Poetry"

REVIEWS OF BOOKS
William C. HANNAS, Visible Speech: The Diverse Oneness of Writing Systems, by John DeFrancis
Andrew LO, The Brush and the Spur: Chinese Culture and the Cockfight, by Robert Joe Cutter
Charles HARTMAN, La valeur allusive, by François Jullien
John MARNEY, Popular Songs and Ballads of Han China, by Anne Birrell
Stephen R. BOXENKAMP, The Poetry of Han-shan (Cold Mountain), by Robert G. Henricks
Kathleen TOMLONOVIC, The Road to the East Slope, by Michael A. Fuller
Kathleen TOMLONOVIC, Nature and Self, by Vincent Yang
Ch'iu-ti Judy LIU, The Complete Ci-poems of Li Qingzhao, by Jiaosheng Wang
Daniel BRYANT, Five Hundred Years of Chinese Poetry, 1150-1650, by Yoshikawa Kojiro
Adela Austin RICKETT, Notes on Poetry from the Ginger Studio, translated by Siu-kit Wong
Timothy C. WONG, The Travels of Lao Ts'an, translated by Harold Shadick
Cecilia Z. SHICKMAN-BOWMAN, The Russian Hero in Modern Chinese Fiction, by Mau-sang Ng
David ARKUSH, Legacies of Childhood, by Jon L. Saari
Joseph R. ALLEN, Dai Wangshu: The Life and Poetry of a Chinese Modernist, by Gregory Lee
Lydia He LIU, I Myself am a Woman: Selected Writings of Ding Ling, edited by Tani E. Barlow with Gary J. Bjorge
Yu-shih CHEN, The Odyssey of Shen Congwen, by Jeffrey C. Kinkley
Kang LIU, Between Fact and Fiction: Essays on Post-Mao Chinese Literature and Society, by Kam Louie
Philip F. WILLIAMS, Waves: Stories, by Bei Dao
Yuejin WANG, Between Silences—A Voice From China. Phoenix Poets, by Ha Jin
Wendy LARSON, Contemporary Women Writers: Hong Kong and Taiwan, edited by Eva Hung
Anne E. McLAREN, The Story of Hua Guan Sao, translated by Gail Oman King
Robert E. HEGEL, Literary Migrations: Traditional Chinese Fiction in Asia, edited by Claudine Salmon
D. E. POLLARD, Classical, Modern and Humane: Essays in Chinese Literature, by David Hawkes

BRIEF NOTICES

December 1991