

A Boat without a Rudder: Zhu Xiang as a Tragic Poet

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ABSTRACT

Modern Chinese poetry exhibits evidence of a writing in profound crisis—a crisis both within the writing itself and about this writing in response to times of uncertain change. As the agent and the bearer of new aesthetic values, the modern Chinese poet unabashedly writes his troubled consciousness into the construction of a viable genre and the enunciation of a literary identity. Under this historical context, this paper treats Zhu Xiang (1904-1933) as a shining example of the dispossessed modern poet. Taking into account the poet's personal temperament, the author argues that the image of Zhu Xiang as a tragic poet, in art as well as in life, reflects the generic instability that governs the poem as well as the poet throughout the New Poetry movement. Zhu Xiang's mythical suicide, therefore, crystallizes, in a symbolic way, the identity crisis heightened by the uncertain relationship between the poet, his poetry and the world.

KEY WORDS

mission
estrangement
displacement
regulated verse
poetic convention

orientation
nostalgia
ideal form
folkloric voice
generic identity



Hope is only man's mistrust of the clear foresight of his mind. Hope suggests that any conclusion unfavorable to us must be an error of the mind . . . [T]housands of young writers and young artists have died, and idealism is barely surviving, deeply stricken, and called to account for its dreams.

—Paul Valéry¹

The short history of modern Chinese poetry is full of rarely told stories, and one of the most pregnant ones is that of Zhu Xiang (朱湘 1903-1933). Once widely admired for his talent and craftsmanship as a young poet, particularly his studied experimentation with new forms and styles as well as his insightful criticism on the poetics of the New Poetry, Zhu Xiang was until quite recently relegated to little more than a footnote in the history of modern Chinese poetry after his death.² Most literary historians found little value in the poet's youthful mood swings, divergent views of life, and formal irresolution in his versification, and were particularly puzzled over his almost mythical suicide at the promising age of twenty-nine. Yet it is precisely those conflicts and contradictions in Zhu Xiang which often cross over from his life to his poetry that make this unique poet a fascinating subject of study in the identity crisis of the modern poet. An unfortunate event as it was, Zhu Xiang's suicide—the first suicide by a prominent modern Chinese poet—afforded a sort of catharsis for his fellow poets, somehow bringing forth the dilemma for the men of letters in the changing cultural landscape of modern China.

Using Zhu Xiang as a primary example, this paper discusses the

issues of self and society in the personal identity crisis of the modern Chinese poet, which is construed as an important component of the crisis of modern Chinese poetry. In the following pages I will try to reconstruct the life story of Zhu Xiang as a dispossessed modern Chinese poet, presenting a narrative on the making and unmaking of this tragic modern intellectual who struggled as much in life as in art. Taking a social-political approach to literary texts, I read Zhu Xiang's biography alongside his poems, which inform as well as explain one another. By doing so, I hope to bring into focus the poet's epic failure in containing various clashing elements within the aesthetic space of prosody, a space imagined in terms of the native, the foreign, the personal, and the social.

The first part of the title for this paper comes from one of Zhu Xiang's poems. "A boat without a rudder" is a poignant self-portrait that undercuts Zhu Xiang's short life as a poet and critic, husband and father. The quotation occurs in a Petrarchan sonnet dedicated to Qu Yuan (屈原 340?-278 B.C.), a master of romantic sentiments whom "Zhu Xiang liked the most."³ The whole poem is as follows:

The river, half-dry, is still Miluo,
 Its inhabitants are perhaps like these of yore.
 The white sun in the clouds of the late Autumn
 Still shines. Your ghost—where is it?
 You have left a source of "greatness" for me to celebrate;
 I also celebrate your death for a just cause,
 Like these tortuous waves on the lake
 With a determined goal on a crooked journey.

Where you were born, I came to the earth wailing;
 I am a red leaf, a boat without a rudder.
 I drift with the intentions of Autumn waters and winds.
 The spirit of poetry (which is my master, my emperor)
 Does not know its own destiny—
 It has given itself to fish, duckweed.⁴

Qu Yuan, as we all know, is the father in the tradition of fantasy and exuberance in classical Chinese poetry. A minister whose loyalty to the king of Chu remained steadfast throughout slander, censure and banishment, Qu Yuan's legendary status in Chinese culture was magnified many times over by his suicide, in protest and despair, by drowning in the Miluo River, an event that has been commemorated in the annual Dragonboat Festival until this day. Zhu Xiang was not the first modern poet to pay tribute to Qu Yuan's high ideals and sacrifice, but differed from many in unabashedly writing himself into the legend of Qu Yuan. In a short and restrictive verse form borrowed from the West, Zhu Xiang skillfully juxtaposes the past and the present in the story of Qu Yuan to effect a self-identification with the familiar cultural hero. This self-identification should not be taken as occasional or cursory. Rather, as my discussion will reveal, it reflects the poet's troubled mind that was rapidly turning the goal of the aesthetic pursuit of Qu Yuan's image into a self-fulfilling prophecy in his real life.

The Pursuit of Death: Writing About a Displaced Self

Living in times of great political upheaval and social change, Zhu Xiang's short life was full of unfortunate events. He was born in Hunan into a big family of twelve children and was the youngest of five male siblings. The Zhu family had produced a number of prominent officials known for integrity and righteousness in the Qing court, but by his father's time the family was already in a steady decline in status and affluence. Zhu Xiang's mother died when he was three, leaving a permanent wound in his emotional world. Zhu Xiang then developed an affectionate relationship with one of his sisters-in-law, a widowed woman of good education and considerable literary talent from whom he would seek support, emotional and financial, in times of need throughout his life. His own brothers, however, were anything but a source of love in Zhu Xiang's childhood. Their ugly rivalry for the dwindling family fortune intensified after the death of their long absent father, and the young Zhu Xiang became a victim of the greed

and cruelty of his grown siblings.

Zhu Xiang left home at the age of eleven and never returned. Western-style education in boarding schools introduced him into a world vastly different from his oppressive childhood. This was the time that the May Fourth Movement was having a sweeping influence on the mind and life of a generation of educated youth. Eloquent writing in the *New Youth* (新青年) quickly convinced Zhu Xiang of the future of the New Literature. In the autumn of 1919, he entered Tsinghua College, a gathering place for ambitious young intellectuals, where his interest in the New Poetry was properly nurtured and expeditiously developed. He enthusiastically participated in various literary activities on campus, joined the influential group "The Literary Research Society," and associated with many of the prominent figures in the New Cultural Movement such as Wen Yiduo (聞一多 1899-1946) and Liang Shiqiu (梁實秋 1902-1987). In 1922, he published his first work in the leading literary journal *Xiaoshuo yuebao* (小說月報, The short story monthly) — a short poem entitled "Feiyuan" (廢園, A ruined garden):

In windy days the white poplar stands desolate;
 In windless days the white poplar stands desolate.
 There is nothing audible beyond desolation.
 Wild flowers blossom silently;
 Wild flowers wither silently.
 There is nothing in the garden beyond silence.

Stylistically, this maiden composition predicts the direction of Zhu Xiang's versification—open stanzaic structure, regulated lineation, exact rhyme scheme, and orderly patterns in symmetry and rhetorical repetition. This is also a vernacular poem profoundly indebted to classical Chinese poetry in imagery and ambience that recalls many "Zen" moments in the poetry of Wang Wei (王維 701-761), one of Zhu Xiang's favorite subjects in his writings on classical poetics. The most striking aspect of the poem is its bleak mood—it is remarkable that such a young poet would choose to couch his youthful voice in

images of desolation and silence.

"A Ruined Garden" and twenty-five other poems comprise Zhu Xiang's first collection *Xiatian* (夏天, Summer), published in 1925, which firmly established the poet among the rising stars of the New Poetry. In the preface, Zhu Xiang indicates that the title signifies the end of his youth and the beginning of his adult life, deploring in a subdued tone of self-criticism his "wandering life" in the past.⁵ This statement can be construed as a premonition of short "summer" that lies ahead for the poet, and a reflection of his attempt to find order and meaning in a world of disorder and confusion. In *Summer*, many poems emit the strong influence of Western romanticism, impressionism, and symbolism, imbued in a classical Chinese attitude towards the relationship between man and nature. For an example, take "Kuaile" (快樂, Happiness):

The clouds in the evening sky
Turn from golden to purple;
And would, it seems, turn further
Unprepared for engulfment by the dark.

Or this one entitled "Niao ci lin" (鳥辭林, The bird leaves the wood):

The bird leaves the wood,
The soundless, empty wood;
Joy quits my heart,
O desolate, my heart.

The setting for Zhu Xiang's nature poems is Jiangnan (江南), the region south of the Yangzi River, traditionally associated with all the charm and beauty that mother nature has to offer a literary mind. Jiangnan is also the place that Zhu Xiang called home, but of which he had more unpleasant recollections than fond memories. This split feeling towards Jiangnan enables him to develop from the natural images of rivers, birds, the sky, rain, and snow a new sensibility

steeped in grief and melancholy. The consistent self-image of the poet that is interpolated into the serene landscape is that of one overwhelmed with estrangement and loneliness, desperately wanting to return to his displaced home:

The sea is my mother,
Towards whose bosom I flow.
Someday
She will hold my tired body
And rock it in her arms
While she hums a lullaby.
My soul will turn into a light cloud
That, drifting, rises in the sky,
Then, transformed, falls to earth—
Drawn by her love.
In a lasting spring drizzle
A distant brook will come alive.

The image of a tired traveler locked in a perpetual journey takes a central place in *Summer*. Sometimes, it simply becomes a prosaic declaration for the need of friendship: "I am a tired traveler, / Limping in the vast plain; / I struggle forwards, followed by my shadow, / Along with the woeful wind of the late Autumn." Other times, the image is seamlessly planted in the composition of the landscape, animated by a wealth of natural metaphors whose dark lining harks back to the speaker's profound sadness, such as in this long poem called "Nangui" (南歸, Returning south):

I am a lonely baby wild goose
Freezing to near death in the Northern snow;
The friendly spring sun in one morning
Warms up again my cold heart.

....

I take the chance and fly southbound
To that home I dare not dream about.

The early spring wind is sharp as a knife,
 But a good death is better than this sad life.

The wild goose as a migratory bird is a stock symbol for the traveler in Chinese classical literature. Zhu Xiang's descriptions of Jiangnan's lush scenery in four seasons through the eyes of the bird in the rest of the poem demonstrates the poet's faculty of synthetic imagination but it does not represent a high level of originality. The interest of the poem is the twist in the ending. Having relished the beauty of Jiangnan, the goose unexpectedly states in the last stanza: "Time flows fast, the hot summer is suddenly here, / It's time to go, you swallow of Art! / It's time to go, you eagle and crow! / This is not the place to linger . . ." To a discerning reader, this abrupt ending may be wanting in elegance and subtlety, but it nevertheless suggests the poet's complicated relationship with the idea of home that seems to cause both desire and fear as he writes about it.

When *Summer* was published, Zhu Xiang had already left Tsinghua College without graduating. The circumstances surrounding Zhu Xiang's departure are indicative of his eccentric character, which would hinder his social relationships throughout his life. The college required a roll call every morning in the cafeteria, a practice the free wheeling Zhu Xiang hated. In his third semester, he quickly accumulated three no-shows, which became grounds for his dismissal. Zhu Xiang may have done this on purpose, for he began to dislike the rigidly regulated student life on campus, particularly all these required courses that had nothing to do with poetry and literature.⁶ Zhu Xiang's life after Tsinghua was anything but smooth and pleasurable. His newly acquired spiritual freedom was often constrained by financial difficulties: the possibility of making a living by writing poetry was an illusion that dissipated quickly. For several years, Zhu Xiang drifted from place to place unable to find regular employment and living on the edge of starvation. His marriage with Liu Nijun (劉霓君) in 1925 brought a brief turn-about. The marriage had been arranged before the couple's birth by their fathers, close colleagues at the Qing court. Literary historians differ in their accounts of Zhu Xiang's mar-

ried life. Besides a half-dozen poems dedicated to Liu Nijun, Zhu Xiang wrote ninety or so letters to his wife while studying in the United States, which were collected into a book entitled *Haiwai ji Nijun* (海外寄霓君, Overseas letters to Nijun) published posthumously in 1934. While Zhu Xiang obviously cherished his marital bliss and described in vivid detail his longing for passion and love, these letters are ripe with evidence of misunderstanding and suspicion between the ill-matched couple. It was also known among Zhu Xiang's close friends that marital stress was a contributing factor to the poet's suicide.⁷

The story of Zhu Xiang's troubled marriage may serve as a useful backdrop for his many poems on romance and love. In an article on the writing of poetry, he argues that ideas for his poems came from inspired imaginations originating in actual events. The example he gives is the poem "Kenqiu" (懇求, Request in earnest), a very sensual piece full of the suggestive language of sexual lust. Zhu Xiang recalls a walk he once had with a beautiful woman on a moonlit night, a perfect occasion that gave rise to the poem in question. He then puts in parenthesis the following words: "But I am already a father and a husband. Guilt! Guilt!"⁸ Whether or not Zhu Xiang was aware that his little digression undermined his argument and pointed, instead, to the limited relationship between the "real" event and the poem it inspired, his guilt complex derived from social obligations sometimes inhibited the writing of love poems dwelling on carnal pleasure. The majority of his poems on this subject pursue the theme of ideal love with a symbolism that highlights intellectual reflection as commonly practiced by many modern Chinese poets. Take, for example, this well-known poem called "Reqing" (熱情, Passion), in which the speaker questions a series of celestial bodies about the meaning of love:

Why can the million of stars
 Revolve through eternity without clashing?
 Attraction, it is attraction that binds them—
 Isn't love the strongest attraction of all?

....

We hang up nine suns—
 One in the middle, eight lights in all directions:
 We rid the world of coldness
 And give darkness light anew.

The ending stanza of the poem invokes the resplendent scene of a meteorite shower that symbolizes the fulfillment of love and passion:

Joy explodes in our hearts,
 Blowing us up into specks of dust.
 Behold, they are like splendid meteors,
 Petals showering down from midair.

Despite such dazzling images and sensual language, Zhu Xiang's vision of ideal love is more Platonic than carnal because it is devoid of agency and subjects, not relying on the objects of sexual desire; it is built upon cosmic imagery informed with new connotations. As a symbol of love, the image of the star with its dual implications of permanence and transience "elevate love to a transcendental level, to a perfect state of being that the poet strives for and holds higher than life itself."⁹

In July 1927, Zhu Xiang caught the trend of studying abroad and went to the United States. He enrolled in Lawrence University in Wisconsin to study Latin, French and English literature. Barely a semester passed when Zhu Xiang became outraged by a reference in his French textbook to the Chinese as "monkeys," and transferred to the University of Chicago—where he spent even less time because he was outraged again by a professor's suspicion that he kept a borrowed book to himself. The last school Zhu Xiang attended was Ohio State University, where he spent the spring term of 1929, but by this time he had become disillusioned with American education and his interest in an advanced degree had waned. Unlike most Chinese students in the United States, Zhu Xiang returned home without a gilded diploma to show off. Once again, Zhu Xiang became a victim of his own hy-

persensitivity and eccentric behavior.

As he was struggling in American universities, Zhu Xiang's poetic reputation in China was on the rise due to the publication of his second poetry collection *Caomang ji* (草莽集, The wilderness) in late 1927. The thirty-four poems in the collection, written during a time span of four years, represent Zhu Xiang's conscientious attempt at regulated verse and the maturation of his poetics of regulation. The poet was quite confident of a positive reception, as is indicated in his overseas correspondence.¹⁰ *The Wilderness* continues to offer the sounds and scents of the natural landscape cultivated in *Summer*, such as this pleasing piece called "Yujing" (雨景, Rainscape), the only example of unrhymed free verse in the whole collection:

My beloved rainscapes are so many—
 The pattering at the window in a spring time's dream,
 The swift drops beating on plantain leaves,
 The drizzle caressing my face like fog
 The thundering rain pouring down in lightning flashes—
 But my favorite is the sky before the rain.
 Though gray, it is transparent
 Pregnant with silent anticipation.
 Then somewhere from the misty clouds
 Comes the crisp chirping of a bird.¹¹

Such innocent delight in the beauty of nature, however, is an exception. In comparison with *Summer*, the themes of nature in *The Wilderness* are broader and deeper and offer a more general reflection on human emotions, particular emotions of disaffection and loneliness, which dominate the pastoral vista presented in well-crafted images. The self-image inserted seamlessly into the lyrical narrative is wrought with tensions between hope and despair, darkness and light. In the poem entitled "Ci ye ti" (雌夜啼, The hen's night cry), the hen expresses her desire for the cover of the dark night and anticipates the visit of the hunter. The speaker in "Guangming de yisheng" (光明的一生, A life of light) equates his idea of illumination to the lasting

image of the moonlight over tomb weeds. There are moments that the purity of beauty—the bedrock of Zhu Xiang's aesthetic pursuit in the writing of poetry—is cast into serious doubt, as in “Dangpu” (當舖, The pawnshop):

Beauty runs a pawnshop
That specializes in human hearts.
When the time of redemption comes,
The doors are closed fast.

Zhu Xiang continues to be obsessed with the idea of death. The macabre beauty displayed in anticipation of death may be the ultimate form of beauty that the poet found so lacking in the real world. Of these poems associated with the motif of death in *The Wilderness*, two are the most revealing. In “You yizuo fenmu” (有一座墳墓, There is a grave), the poet offers a vivid description of a graveyard. Here are the last two stanzas:

There is a strange bird
Hidden in the shade of a giant tree;
There is a strange bird
Whose cry is wild and free.

There is a hook of yellow moon,
Peeping behind the dark clouds;
There is a hook of yellow moon,
Suddenly sinking behind the hill.

Notice the first and the third lines in each stanza are the same. This is just one more example of Zhu Xiang's attention to rhetorical repetition, which not only gives the poem a singing cadence but also highlights the animated atmosphere of the grim scene. The desire for death comes in even more forthright and stronger forms in the poem “Zang wo” (葬我, Bury me):

Bury me in a lotus pond,
 Where I'll hear worms trailing by.
 On the lantern of green leaves,
 Fireflies switch on and off.

Bury me under the acacia blossoms,
 Where I'll dream an eternal sweet dream.
 Bury me on the peak of Mount Tai,
 Where the wind wails with the lone pine.

Else burn me into ashes
 And scatter me over churning spring water.
 I'll drift with the fallen petals
 To a land that no one knows.

This poem may have been inspired by Wen Yiduo's "Yexu" (也許, Perhaps).¹² Both poets give death an aura of mystery and bring out its seductive power. In sharp contrast to Wen Yiduo's light impulse and gentle lyrical mood, Zhu Xiang celebrates the approach of death with uncontrollable euphoria and envisions it as the realization of unity with nature, and as the opening up of a new realm of possibilities otherwise inaccessible to him in life.

Zhu Xiang's life in the mundane world continued to run a rugged course. With Wen Yiduo's help, he obtained a faculty position at Anhui University upon returning to China. His relatively peaceful life in the next two years was frequently interrupted by family strife and financial problems. Then Zhu Xiang suddenly left the university over a minor dispute with the president about the name of the department he chaired—his preferred "English Language and Literature" versus the president's choice of "English Literature." For a year or so, Zhu Xiang resumed his roaming life, relying on the charity of a few friends and relatives and then finally, on December 5, 1933, he jumped overboard into the Yangzi River from a passenger ship that was sailing from Shanghai to Nanjing. The exact place of Zhu Xiang's drowning is where, legend has it, the great Tang poet Li Bo (李

白 701-762) tried to scoop up the moon from the water.

Zhu Xiang's suicide stunned the literary world in China. But when the commemorative activities, including a well-publicized campaign to collect donations for Zhu Xiang's widow and children, were finished, the initial shock was replaced with a subdued reflection on the difficulty of living, for a rebellious poet like Zhu Xiang, a reflection that arose among concerned writers and poets in a mood more of resignation than outrage, as poignantly summarized in Wen Yiduo's comment: "Zhu Xiang has chosen a rueful end. But who is to say that his difficult living would be less painful than death?"¹³ "I am really an odd man," Zhu Xiang wrote in one of his more somber moments, "but I have succeeded in being neither a bookworm nor a person adjusted to this world."¹⁴ In the end, there may not be one single explanation for Zhu Xiang's suicide: it was probably the climax to a tragic life and rooted in his frustrations in his aesthetic pursuit, social indifference, his eccentric personality, and his failed relationships.

Zhu Xiang's Poetic Voice and Its Forms

In his short poetic career, Zhu Xiang maintained a high level of visibility in the literary scene in the 1920s and early 1930s. He was known for his prolific poetry writing, eccentric social behavior and outspoken criticism of certain prominent poets.

Discounting its widely acknowledged significance for the development of the New Poetry, Zhu Xiang once labeled much of Hu Shi's (胡適 1891-1962) poetry as "sheer nonsense" and decided that *Experimental Verse* was "shallow in content and juvenile in technique."¹⁵ While Hu Shi had many critics among both conventional and vernacular poets, Zhu Xiang's merciless jab was rare. When it came to any poet he disliked, his criticism would be equally stinging, if not more so. Such annoying honesty earned Zhu Xiang few friends among his contemporaries, and he remained a "disassociated" poet despite the fact that literary schools were numerous and it was common for a writer to join one or more of them. For a brief period in his early days, Zhu Xiang was linked with the Literary Research Society,

having several of his works published in the society's series, but his ideology and aesthetics were too different for him to be considered a formal member of this association, which promoted literature of realism. His association with the Crescent School, a group of poets devoted to the writing of regulated verse, extended over several years but it was marred by personality conflicts and theoretical squabbles, particularly his on-and-off relationship with Wen Yiduo and his public split with Xu Zhimo (徐志摩 1896-1931).¹⁶

The reason that late literary historians and anthologizers classify Zhu Xiang as a Crescent poet is based on their shared concern with the form of vernacular poetry. As regards the poetics of regulated verse, Wen Yiduo was a spiritual father to Zhu Xiang. The latter's scattered writings on the genre did not surpass the former's famous principles of "three beauties" (三美) in terms of theoretical prowess. Zhu Xiang excelled at the composition of regulated verse and his extensive experimentation brought in new techniques as well as expanded the concept of discipline and regulation. Like many new poets of the day, Zhu Xiang was an aggressive advocate for the creative use of foreign literature. As a college student in Tsinghua College, he translated a volume of Romanian folk poetry, which was published in 1924. His second volume of translation, entitled *Fanshiliu ji* (番石榴集, The foreign myrtles), was unprecedented in its selection of quality poems from all over the world. Based on his superb command of Western poetry, Zhu Xiang introduced a host of poetic forms into China, an effort widely recognized among his contemporaries. One long part of his third collection of poetry, *Shimen ji* (石門集, The stone gate), primarily contains his experimental writings using the foreign poetic forms such as couplet, ballad, triolet, villanelle, roundel, and sonnet.

Occasionally, Zhu Xiang's zealous insistence on rigid regularity in character-count and in lineation earned him the dubious distinction of being known as "the master of 'Beancurd verse' (豆腐塊詩)," but in his better moments, Zhu Xiang subtly infused his formal discipline into the overall structure of a poem. As an example of his technical perfection, let me quote the poet's own explanation on how he applied

appropriate word-sounds to reflect changes of mood. The poem he used as an example is called "Hunge" (婚歌, Wedding song), which describes scenes at a traditional wedding. "The poem begins with a *tang* (鎗) rhyme, which is a loud, wide sound," Zhu Xiang wrote, "and it ends with a *xiao* (簫) rhyme, which is a low, deep sound. My intention here is to simulate the blaring gongs and drums at the climax of the ceremony, and the gentle bamboo flute when the newlyweds retreat to their chamber, as well as to capture the intense mood winding down to a serene joy in the process."¹⁷ This is just one case where Zhu Xiang, as an "exquisite craftsman," to use Cyril Birch's words,¹⁸ demonstrated his mastery of the Chinese language. Zhu Xiang's attention to the musical quality in his prosody and his conscientious experimentation in this direction constitute his most important contribution to the development of modern regulated verse. However, behind his perfectionist pursuit for the harmony of poetic sound resides Zhu Xiang thematic disunity, or the cacophony in his poetic voices as a nature poet, a folklorist, and a philosophical thinker. One can take these different poetic personas as a reflection of the poet's uncertainty and struggles with the ideal form he envisioned and the self-image he created by writing, but on the other hand, one can also discern in them a multitudinous presentation of the mood of melancholy that culminated in the pursuit of death that unifies his life and poetry.

First of all, the idea that Zhu Xiang was a nature poet is immediately confirmed in the large number of poems that take nature as their subject. These poems reveal the working of an imaginative nostalgia that is inspired more by the poet's knowledge of the classical tradition than by the real Jiangnan landscape in his childhood. Indeed, many of Zhu Xiang's natural scenes read like a re-writing of classical nature poems in modern vernacular language. In an article on Zhu Xiang's short poems, the prominent critic Zhao Jingshen (趙景深 1902-?) presented abundant examples of the similarities between Zhu Xiang and a number of Tang poets, most noticeably Wang Wei, on whose poetic art Zhu Xiang had authored a lengthy essay.¹⁹ Needless to say, Zhu Xiang's skillful re-writing was an achievement in itself

when vernacular poetry was actively seeking the help of the classical tradition to enhance its own status as a legitimate genre. But one should not let the question of imitation dominate one's reading of Zhu Xiang's nature poems, for his ingenuity, while writing about a new self by re-writing a well-established genre, lies precisely in the gray area where imitation and creation cross each other.

Shen Congwen's (沈從文 1902-?) reading of Zhu Xiang is a case in point. According to Shen Congwen's observation, Zhu Xiang's poetry demonstrated a unique quality of tranquillity mirrored in his "plain description, youthful thinking, and innocent singing," and his achievement in presenting "innocence and dainty beauty" was comparable to the best poets of the time.²⁰ But Shen Congwen was quick to point out that this version of Zhu Xiang's poetic persona ran counter to his public image as an erratic, neurotic and restive young man. This puzzling phenomenon led Shen Congwen to conclude that Zhu Xiang's poetry, while embodying the best that classicism and aestheticism had to offer, was entrapped in "a situation of failure in its lacking the spirit of the age."²¹ Granted, Shen Congwen's comments are marked by a tone of concern and care and his critique sounds like a friendly chide rather than a heavy-handed accusation, yet his is nevertheless a misreading of Zhu Xiang in the sense that the meaningful split between Zhu Xiang's public image and poetic persona as a nature poet is left unexplored. I have already discussed the centrality of the image of death dominating Zhu Xiang's nature poems in the first section of this chapter, but let me point out here that Zhu Xiang's poetic landscape is constructed in language of simulated imagination and almost always submits itself to an informed reading of symbolism in the construction of the self. This rendering of the poet's self rich in sentiments of estrangement and loneliness revealingly points to Zhu Xiang's troubled public persona. With his adept control over aesthetic tranquillity and existential agitation, Zhu Xiang presents a good example of the complex relationship between the modern Chinese poet and his poetry.

The explanation for Zhu Xiang's choice of classic conventions as one form of his poetic voice may lie in his poor opinion of modern

men who labor for material possessions while remaining content with poverty of the spirit and mind. "The busy modern men have announced that they do not need poetry," he once observed. "So if one wants to pander to their tastes, one need not write poetry; if one does write poetry, one has to disregard their tastes."²² Such contempt for modern men sometimes developed into a mildly misanthropic view in Zhu Xiang's poetry: "You may search all places in Heaven— / From the birth of the sun to its death, / And you may light a candle to guide your search: / But you will find nothing but hypocrites." In some way, the classical form—its power is in its remoteness—became for Zhu Xiang a figure of opposition to the oppression of this world with which he was so much at odds. It is in the same context that we should understand Zhu Xiang's voice as a folksong poet.

A folksong-like quality is another marked characteristic of Zhu Xiang's poetry, displaying the poet's celebrated achievement in the musical beauty of his prosody, which is most noticeable in the syllabic units and lineation. This is the least controversial part of Zhu Xiang's poetic art in regulated verse and some of his best "folksongs" have survived the anthologizing of different periods in the history of modern Chinese poetry. Zhu Xiang's folksongs feature a controlled alternation of long and short lines, refrains, repetition and parallelism, all of which help to maintain a regularity of rhyme and rhythm. Usually, the idea of folksong in the vernacular poetry movement invokes a native tradition that is separate from the literati culture of classical poetry, but in Zhu Xiang's case, influences also include inspiration from the Chinese *ci* (詞) poetry tradition and European folk poetry, as indicated by his early interest in translating folksongs from Romania, for instance.

Two of Zhu Xiang's best-known simulated folksongs are "Yao-lan ge" (搖籃歌, Cradle song) and "Cai lian qu" (采蓮曲, Song of picking lotus seeds). The former is a four-stanza lullaby of hypnotizing cadence with very symmetrical imagery and repetitious syntax. The latter has an identical composition in that it features five longish stanzas with exactly the same pattern of lineation. The poem describes scenes of young women picking lotus seeds in the lake, which

has long been an emblem of Jiangnan charm, and a symbol of the idyllic life, for that matter, in the literary imagination of the traditional literati class. Zhu Xiang believed that "poetry without music is like a flower without fragrance, a beautiful woman without eyes."²³ Both poems are a successful exercise in the creation of wordmusic in poetry. An attempt to translate either one of them would prove futile, for their melodious effects based on the tonality of the Chinese language will be impossible to reproduce in English. To help the reader get an idea of just how effective Zhu Xiang's prosody is, let me quote here one critic's response some sixty years ago:

At a poetry reading I listened to the poet's own reading of this poem ("Yaolan ge"). Its syllables were soft and light, giving one an unnamable sense of sweetness and harmony, as if one's soul were flying with their elastic musicality, gently and quietly, gliding into a dreamland. As he finished his reading, people suddenly woke up from their dream-like state. Some even gave out loud yawns. I heard that "Cai lian qu" was scheduled to be read at a gathering, but I couldn't be present for the pleasure of the ears. According to my observation, this poem has melodious syllables throughout, exhausting the pleasure of singing and humming. As one reads it, one is led into the lotus lake: the fire-red lily petals, the undulating green waves, and numerous young girls shuttling among the flowers in their tiny boat. . . . I can't say enough about the attractiveness that this ancient Eastern life style, so elegant and so tranquil, has for modern men.²⁴

As tantalizing as the idea may be, Zhu Xiang's seemingly disinterested play with wordmusic upholds his aesthetic ideals of "pure" poetry that was an important part of his life-long artistic pursuit. It is not difficult to detect a trace of escapist inclination in the composition of wordmusic in such a remote and rustic landscape of the Jiangnan region. It is also evident that Zhu Xiang's folkloric voice works its

powerful magic, as the above reader's passionate response reveals, on the modern realization that pastoral life was just an unreachable object for nostalgia. Thus, writing and reading pastoral folksongs becomes another way of affirming the permanence of "this wretched life."²⁵

Zhu Xiang was not particularly in favor of the so-called *zheli shi* (哲理詩), or philosophical verse, a very popular sub-genre in the formative years of vernacular poetry, thanks to Hu Shi's advocacy of it. In an essay on Xu Zhimo's poetry, Zhu Xiang expressed his displeasure with Xu's philosophical poems. They are "stiff and shallow," argued Zhu Xiang, because Xu Zhimo tries to force philosophy into poetry, without realizing the incompatibility of the two. According to Zhu Xiang, "philosophy speaks about eternity, poetry speaks about the present; philosophy is the crystallization of intelligence, poetry imparts emotions."²⁶ Zhu Xiang's unfavorable view of philosophical verse may have been tainted by his personal bias against Xu Zhimo; or he perhaps had different ideas about the sub-genre from what he saw in Xu Zhimo's poetry. In any case, Zhu Xiang himself wrote a considerable number of poems that may be called "philosophical verse" in the sense that they present ideas based solely on the discursive power of his language rather than on the construction of imagery and symbolism as seen in his nature and folkloric poems.

Zhu Xiang's philosophical voice is powerfully present in many late poems collected in *Shimen ji* (The stone gate), his third and last volume of poetry, published posthumously in 1934. Many of these poems are set in an increasingly bleak and reflective mood in which Zhu Xiang shifted the objects of his description, with few exceptions, from the world of nature to the world of men. The poet appeared to be profoundly affected by the immense social disturbance in his recent life and the perceived capriciousness of fate. Consequently, Zhu Xiang felt compelled to make somber commentary on the human condition and he did it by blending anger, anguish, satire, nonconformity and even nihilism. In the poem "Xingfu" (幸福, Happiness) the poet expresses an unusually straightforward and potent bitterness:

Happiness, never
Have I seen your face,
Except at times of suffering, when
Those carefree days of the past bring a sweetness.
Then you reveal your true self,
Saying, freedom from care is the highest happiness.
And after that, vanishing in mist again.

Sometimes I look at the sky
As I stomp toward the Star of Hope.
On the way I amuse myself by
Allowing my deceiving fancy to form
A bliss not belonging to this world.
At journey's end there are only foul birds
In the wilderness laughing at my labor.

Why prolong this life even by an instant
If no happiness is in store for the years to come?
Yet the future is a mystery
That doesn't tell what novelties it holds.
Who wouldn't like to see them?
So, as long as I remain discontent,
I will not close my eyes and sleep for good.

Another example is the Sonnet No. 8 in the Shakespearean style, a dreary exposition on the joylessness and monotony of human life. It begins: "Stupid is the human race, requiring architects / To construct its rain gear, clothes and houses /, . . . So says the duck, relying on its down / That keeps the water out and keeps it well. / Alleged to have unlimited power, the god human worships / Never has one hundred hands . . ." and concludes "Imperfect is man by nature, feeble and weak, / How can he be master of the world." Poems like this need little explanation. Zhu Xiang's misanthropic view was not new to his readers, but it seems to me that the poet had reached an emotional breaking point so that "preaching" is brought in at the expense of

artistic appeal by suggestion.

Seventy or so sonnets make up the main body of *The Stone Gate*. Although Zhu Xiang himself considered them "the most valuable part of his works," these sonnets were not well received when they first appeared in literary journals before the poet's death. A group of sonnets addressed to figures in western culture, such as Hawthorne, Dante, Shaw, Homer and Don Juan, manage to show certain eloquence and elegance, thanks to Zhu Xiang's immense knowledge about the subjects of his poetic imagination. The rest, however, are bogged down by a philosophical voice unable to deliver any clear message due to the expanse as well as the superficiality of the musings. Neither is Zhu Xiang's voice helped by the sonnet form itself. The poet's formalist inclinations required him to create extensively enjambed lines to achieve the "architectural beauty" that was no longer the mainstay of modern regulated verse. While other poets had achieved a certain degree of success with the form, Zhu Xiang's sonnets pale in comparison and were ridiculed as examples of "Beaucurd verse."²⁷ It is quite ironic that Zhu Xiang's diligent search for an ideal poetic form ended with the sonnet, a translated form with which he was evidently not comfortable. The case of the sonnet may well summarize Zhu Xiang's perpetual struggle with his poetic voice and its forms: the more formalistic the poet's voice turned, the more elusive the ideal form he was after became.

Zhu Xiang's suicide, which has been used as a fulcrum for my reading of his life and poetry, if not an inevitable end to his difficult struggle with the self and its poetic forms, can be taken as an emblem for the futility of the search for discipline and order in times of change and uncertainty marking the lives of early modern Chinese poets. Life and death define each other, and there is nothing more pertinent to the meaning of life than the act of voluntarily choosing death over life. Although the tragedy of suicide is not a prominent theme throughout the history of Chinese poetry, it nevertheless lurks in the corner of Chinese writer's consciousness, working as a reminder of either an unreachable aesthetic ideal or a poignant commentary on social and political injustice. Fortunately, from Qu Yuan

to Zhu Xiang to the contemporary poets Hai Zi (海子 1963-1989) and Gu Cheng (顧城 1956-1993),²⁸ Chinese poets who commit suicide are few, but when such rare tragedies do occur, it is always followed by puzzlement and shock, by commemoration and lionization, and most importantly, by a compelling urge to rethink the relationship between the poet, his poetry and the world. The life and poetic stories of Zhu Xiang will stand the test of time as one of the most memorable event in modern Chinese literature pointing towards the problematic positioning of the poet, a poignant issue that have traversed all aesthetic orientations and historical periods.

NOTES

¹ Paul Valéry, *An Anthology*, ed. by James R. Lawler (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1977) 97.

² The references to Zhu Xiang in studies on modern Chinese poetry have been scarce and scattered in both English and Chinese sources. Since 1983, when the fiftieth anniversary of the poet's death was marked with much fanfare in China, there has been considerable interest in "rediscovering" the value of Zhu Xiang, as seen in a number of articles on him as well as in the re-publication of his collections of poetry and essays.

³ Luo Niansheng, "Xu" (Preface), in *Zhu Xiang xuanji* (Selected works of Zhu Xiang), ed. by Sun Yushi (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1985) 4.

⁴ Zhu Xiang, "Sonnets in the Italian Style, No.21," first published posthumously in *Shimen ji* (The stone gate) in 1934, reprinted in *Zhu Xiang shi quanbian* (Complete poems of Zhu Xiang), ed. Wu Fang and Yue Ning (Hangzhou: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 1994) 360.

⁵ Zhu Xiang, "Xiatian zixu" (A preface to *Summer*), in Chen Shaowei, ed., *Zhongguo xinshiji xuba xuan 1918-1949* (Selected prefaces and postscripts of Chinese new poetry collections; Changsha: Hunan wenyi chubanshe, 1986) 149.

⁶ In a letter to a friend, Zhu Xiang wrote: "You ask me why I left

Tsinghua College, to which my simple answer is, the life at Tsinghua is inhumane. A worthy life is a striving one, but Tsinghua knows but grades; a worthy life is a changing one, but Tsinghua offers only monotony. . . . The ultimate purpose for the life at Tsinghua is nothing but faking and pretending." See "Ji Luo Niansheng" (To Luo Niangsheng), in *Zhu Xiang shuxinji* (Letters of Zhu Xiang), ed. by Luo Niangsheng (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1936) 147.

⁷ See Luo Niansheng's account of events preceding Zhu Xiang's death in his "Xu" (Preface), in *Zhu Xiang xuanji*.

⁸ Zhu Xiang, "Shi de chansheng" (The production of poetry), in *Zhu Xiang shi quanbian*, p. 424.

⁹ Michelle Yeh, *Modern Chinese Poetry: Theory and Practice Since 1917* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1991) 41.

¹⁰ Zhu Xiang, *Haiwai ji Nijun* (Overseas letters to Nijun; Taipei: Hongfan shudian, 1977), Letter No. 81.

¹¹ For the translation, I have consulted Michelle Yeh, *Anthology of Modern Chinese Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1992), 26.

¹² For a translation of "Yexu," see Michelle Yeh, *Anthology of Modern Chinese Poetry*, 15-16.

¹³ Wen Yiduo, private correspondence, cited in Sun Yushi, "Zhu Xiang chuanlu jiqi zuopin (The life and works of Zhu Xiang)," in *Zhu Xiang xuanji*, 276.

¹⁴ Zhu Xiang, *Zhongshu ji* (Miscellaneous writings; Shanghai: Shenghuo shudian, 1937), second edition, 168.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 358-364.

¹⁶ The fact that Zhu Xiang only had a marginal relationship with the Crescent School is supported by Liang Shiqiu, a core member of the group. In one of his memoirs, Liang Shiqiu wrote: "Now people often list Zhu Xiang in the Crescent School, but in fact he had nothing to do with the school." Liang Shiqiu, "Yi Xinyue" (The Crescent remembered), first published in 1963 and reprinted in Fang Rennian, ed., *Xinyue pai pinglun ziliao xuan* (Selected materials on the Crescent School; Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1993) 19.

¹⁷ Zhu Xiang, "Caomang ji de yindiao yu xingshi" (The tone and

form of *The Wilderness*), first published in 1929, cited in Fang Rennian, *Xinyue pai pinglun ziliao xuan*, p.301.

¹⁸ Cyril Birch, "English and Chinese Meters in Hsü Chih-mo's Poetry," *Asia Major* 8.2 (1961) 262.

¹⁹ Zhao Jingshen, "Zhu Xiang's duanshi" (On Zhu Xiang's short poems), first published in 1928, reprinted in Fang Rennian, *Xinyue pai pinglun ziliao xuan*, 181-183.

²⁰ Shen Congwen, "Lun Zhu Xiang de shi" (On Zhu Xiang's poetry), first published in 1931, cited in *ibid.*, 190.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 197.

²² Zhu Xiang, "Beihai jiyou" (A visit to the Beihai Park), in Sun Yushi, *Zhu Xiang xuanji*, 170.

²³ Zhu Xiang, "Lun Wen Yiduo de shi" (On Wen Yiduo's poetry), quoted in Li Fuxing, *Zhongguo xiandai xinshiren lun* (A study of modern Chinese poets; Ji'nan: Shandong jiaoyu chubanshe, 1991) 113.

²⁴ Su Xueline, "Lun Zhu Xiang de shi" (On Zhu Xiang's poetry), first published in 1934, cited in Sun Yushi, *Zhu Xiang xuanji*, 265.

²⁵ Zhu Xiang, "Sihang" (Quatrains), No.2, *Zhu Xiang shi quanbian*, 302.

²⁶ Zhu Xiang, "Ping Xu jun Zhimo de shi" (On Poetry of Xu Zhimo), first published in 1926, cited in Fang Rennian, *Xinyue pai pinglun ziliao xuan*, 110.

²⁷ As Bian Zhilin has pointed out, the problem with Zhu Xiang's ideas about poetic forms was his consistent belief that modern vernacular is still single-syllable based on the case in classical Chinese. This mistaken belief seriously affected his lineation, which features a forced regularity in character count at the expense of natural cadence. I should hasten to add that Zhu Xiang did not follow his own theory in all cases, and in fact his folkloric poems known for their musical effect are prominent exceptions. See Bian Zhilin, *Ren yu shi: Yijiu shuoxin* (Man and poetry: Remembering the old and talking of the new; Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1984) 190-2.

²⁸ The poets Hai Zi's death in 1989 and Gu Cheng in 1993 brought the question of suicide to the fore in contemporary Chinese

literature. In the intervening four years, there have been at least fourteen young poets who ended their lives by their own hands. For a good discussion on the subject, see Xi Chuan, "Siwang houji" (After death), *Shi tansuo* (Poetry exploration) 15.3 (1994): 88-97 and Michelle Yeh, "The 'Cult of Poetry' in Contemporary China," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55.1 (1996): 51-80.