

The Short Lyric in Modern Chinese Poetry

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"I want to gather all the spring scents,
I want to capture all the lights that fly by, flow by . . ."

Ch'en Ching-jung, "Wild Fire"

The short lyric [*hsiao-shih*] is an important subgenre in modern Chinese poetry. While traditional poetry abounds in miniature forms, I shall argue that the short lyric, which emerged in the early twentieth century and has consistently been written since, embodies a notable departure and exhibits significantly different characteristics from the classical tradition of the *shih* and the *tz'u*. As such, it represents one of the achievements of modern poetry.

The term "*hsiao-shih*" was used as early as 1917. In the twentieth century, there was an increasing number of poems using *hsiao-shih* for or in the title, by poets such as Chu Tzu-ch'ing, Liu Pan-nung, Tzung Pai-hua, Wang T'ung-chao, Hsu Yu-no, Mu Mu-t'ien, etc. There are also numerous sequences of short lyrics such as *Miscellaneous Poems on Returning to the North* [Pei-yo tza-shih] by Yu P'ing-po, *Floating Clouds* [Liu-yun] by Tzung Pai-hua, "Traces of Tear" [Lei-hen] by Liu Ta-pai, etc. The entire volumes of Ping Hsin's *Spring Water* [Ch'un-shui] and *Myriad Stars* [Fan-hsing] contain short lyrics, no fewer than one hundred and eighty-two of them in the first volume, and one hundred and sixty-four in the second. Besides those bearing the term "*hsiao-shih*" in their titles, there are also short lyrics that are given similar titles such as "Miscellaneous Lines" [tza-chu], "Fragments" [tuan-chu, or tuan-chang], or simply "Two Lines" [Liang-hang] and "Four Lines" [Ssu-hang]. This is why critics such as Ts'ao Ju-jen, Chou Po-nai, etc. refer to the twenties as "the Age of the Hsiao-shih." However, these same critics who noted the *hsiao-shih* as a new form also held

that the subgenre declined after the twenties and, as such, merely represented a brief stage in the development of modern Chinese poetry. For instance, in outlining the major schools in early modern poetry, from the 1910's through the 1940's, Sun Yu-shih uses the term "*Hsiao-shih* Movement" [Hsiao-shih yun-tung] to designate the period 1921-1925, after which, he claims, short lyrics virtually disappeared (10).

This view, shared by many critics, seems to be based on a rather narrow definition of the *hsiao-shih*, represented by the extremely popular works of Ping Hsin and Tzung Pai-hua, all of which were published in the early 1920's and did inspire a large following among fellow poets at the time. However, such an appraisal ignores an important historical fact; that is, the term *hsiao-shih* had been used at least five years before the appearance of the above mentioned collections. The very first modern poets, such as Hu Shih, Yu P'ing-po, Liu Pan-nung, etc. had already used this title for their poems before Ping and Tzung. Secondly, in identifying the subgenre almost solely with Ping and others of the early twenties, those critics confine the *hsiao-shih* to a very narrow scope, seeing it merely as a poetic trend inspired by the Indian poet Tagore (who visited China in 1922) or by the Japanese haiku introduced slightly later. While it is true that these two foreign models were well received by Chinese poets, there are other causes, both intrinsic and extrinsic, behind the popularity of the *hsiao-shih*, which will be discussed later.

To limit the *hsiao-shih* to the twenties, then, to me is premature and hasty; for the short lyric has continued to be written ever since. While mostly long narrative poems were written on the mainland after 1949, poets in Taiwan produced many short lyrics. Since 1978, when more creative freedom was given back to the writers, there has been a resurgence of short poems on the mainland. For example, to the 1979 issue of the reinstated poetry journal, *Hsing-hsing*, Ai Ch'ing contributed twenty-one short poems, most of which had two lines, while one had only one line. The "Misty Poets" [Meng-lung shih-jen], a younger generation of poets who arose around the same time, have written many short lyrics (some of which will be discussed later), including a poem consisting of only one word by Pei Tao, entitled "Life," which contains the word "Net." In fact, we may even say, in recent years, there has been a sustained interest in short lyrics, as indicated by the "one-line poems" [*yi-hang-shih*] in Taiwan, promoted by the *United Daily* [Lien-ho pao], one of the largest newspapers on the island, and a regular section devoted to short poems in major Mainland

journals such as *Poetry* [Shih-k'an].

As a poetic subgenre, the *hsiao-shih* first attracted critical attention in the twenties. The earliest discussion was written by Chou Tzo-jen. While he recognized that the ancient folksongs of China were often limited to very few lines and, later, the quatrain [*chueh-chu*] and many forms of *tz'u* were similarly short, Chou felt that the *hsiao-shih* in the modern era was more inspired by foreign poetries, in particular Tagore and Japanese poetry, than by their Chinese predecessors. In fact, Chou himself translated Japanese tanka (a poem of 31 syllables divided into five lines) and haiku (a poem of 17 syllables divided into three lines) as well as Greek epigrams, thus introducing alternative models to Chinese poets.

Another important discussion of the *hsiao-shih* was written nearly half a century later, by Lo Ch'ing, when he edited two volumes of short lyrics entitled *Three Hundred Short Poems* [Hsiao-shih san-pai shou]. In the "Introduction," Lo concurred with Chou's thesis but at the same time also made an effort to connect the subgenre to the folk tradition in Chinese poetry. Drawing upon these two critics, I would like to examine the intrinsic nature of the modern *hsiao-shih* from two aspects, in terms of its relationship to the traditional quatrain on the one hand, and to foreign counterparts on the other.

Before we begin, however, a word about definition. Chou began his treatise with this definition: "The so-called *hsiao-shih* refers to a new type of popular poetry ranging from one to four lines" (Compendium 7: 3011). However, he did not explain the rationale behind his criterion, since poems using *hsiao-shih* for their titles often had more than four lines. In his brief chapter on the subject, Chou Po-nai describes the *hsiao-shih* as "mostly no more than three to five lines, some even of one line" (47). Lo Ch'ing gives yet another definition of the *hsiao-shih* as a poem of up to sixteen lines; according to him, this criterion is based on the traditional "regulated verse" [*lu-shih*], with two lines in a modern poem roughly corresponding to one line in a classical poem (38). Using the *lu-shih* as the model, Lo casts the net so wide that it tends to blur the quintessential qualities of the modern *hsiao-shih* in contradistinction from other forms. The equation of two modern lines with one classical line is also very arbitrary. Further, his differentiation between the *hsiao-shih* (up to sixteen lines) and the "*luan-shih*," literally "short poem," of "twenty or thirty some lines" (40) is vague and unnecessarily confuses the issue. In our present discussion, then, I shall use the term "*hsiao-shih*" to refer to a poem of *approximately*

four lines. There is admittedly still some arbitrariness in limiting the number of lines to four; however, I feel the practice can be justified in two ways. First, since there is no generally accepted definition of the short lyric in any literary convention or critical canon, my designation merely provides a workable definition which does not claim to be either definitive or prescriptive. Second, the number four corresponds to the quatrain, which is the most dominant miniature form in traditional poetry. The number four, however, needs not be strictly imposed, as the division of lines in modern poetry is more arbitrary and even idiosyncratic (a point on which I totally agree with Lo); it is not unusual in modern poetry that a line contain only one word. Thus, while most of the poems to be discussed in the following are under four lines, there are exceptions.

One of the first examples of the modern *hsiao-shih* is "A Short Poem for P'ei-hsien" [Hsiao-shih ch'eng P'ei-hsien] (1917) by Yu P'ing-bo:

A slightly tired man
a slightly blushed face
in the slightly warm windy dusk
passes by in the slightly hazy street light.

(Compendium 34)

The most noticeable features of this early example of the *hsiao-shih* are: the simplicity of language and the use of repetition. Syntactically, there is only one complete sentence, stated straightforwardly. However, within the four lines, the word "slightly" [wei] is used four times. The adverb not only lends unity to the poem but, more importantly, evokes, through repetition, an ambience of tentativeness and elusiveness. The poem does not *say* anything (it would be virtually impossible to explicate the poem); it merely presents a set of images that suggest a certain (unnameable) mood or feeling-state.

Or, let us look at another poem from the same period by Kuo Shao-yu:

Clouds in the sky,
man on the ground;
Shadow on the water,
shadow on the clouds.

(Compendium 55)

Syntactically, this poem is even simpler than the first poem. Instead of a complete sentence, we have four noun phrases giving us four images. Repetition is also used in the poem, of the preposition "on" [shang], which, in the original, also appears in line 1: literally: "... on the sky." At first glance, there seems to be a parallel between lines 1 and 2, and between 3 and 4. However, a closer look reveals that the parallelism is neither exact nor interesting here, the way it is in traditional poetry. "Shadow on the water" and "shadow on the clouds" do not quite form a parallel construction as the word "shadow" is used twice. What is interesting and what distinguishes it from traditional parallelism is the pure play of visual images here. The man's shadow is both on the water and on the clouds because the latter is reflected in the former. Thus, we have a double superimposition, of the clouds on the water and of the man on the clouds. Clouds also lead us back to the first line, to the very first word of the poem. The way the images are linked to one another through the play of light is what the poem is about. Like "A Short Poem for P'ei-hsien," this poem is virtually devoid of intellectually graspable content, the way an Impressionistic painting is only interested in the qualities of light and refraction at the expense of theme.

Visual play as a prominent characteristic of the modern *hsiao-shih* is also illustrated by the following poem, "Fragments" [Tuan-chang] (1935) by Pien Chih-lin:

You stand on the bridge and watch the scenery;
 He who views the scenery is watching you from a building.
 Tomorrow decorates your window;
 You decorate another man's dream.

(Pien 33)

Two perspectives are overlapped: the first person who is viewing the scenery and the second one who's watching the scenery with the first person in it. The same overlapping takes place in the second stanza: "you" is decorated (by tomorrow) as well as decorates (someone else's tomorrow). While we may read some conceptual significance into it (e.g., the relativity of perspectives), it is extraneous and secondary to the interplay of two visual angles in the poem.

A recent *hsiao-shih* (1980), by the Misty Poet Ku Ch'eng, employs the same technique with a twist:

You
 now look at me,
 now look at the clouds.
 I feel
 you are very far when you look at me,
 very close when you look at the clouds.

(Misty Poetry 125)

Not only is there a juxtaposition of different perspectives, but the two perspectives form a paradox. What should be far away (the clouds) is close; what is close (the person beside you) becomes far away. The provocative paradox reveals something about the state of the relationship between the two people, intimating psychological distance and, more importantly, the inability to shorten that distance. The correlation between the "you" and the clouds is also significant. It is as if the "you" can identify with the clouds better than with the "me" close by. The association of emptiness and lack of direction with the image of clouds are thus transferred to the *you*. Unlike the earlier examples, Ku's poem uses the interplay of visual perspectives to suggest, to project a state of mind.

The language of paradox is also used in another poem by Ku called "A Generation" [Yi-tai jen] (1980):

Dark night gives me dark eyes;
 But I use them to look for light.

(Misty Poetry 122)

The contrast in color (between darkness and light) is meant to be metaphorical, conveying both irony and hope. The irony is expressed through the paradox of using something for a purpose contrary to its ostensible nature, while the hope is suggested by the idea that a negative condition can breed positive results.

Do the poems we have looked at thus far bear similarities to the traditional quatrain? Or, are they more different than similar? In terms of repetition, in the folk tradition of lyric songs, subsumed under the name "Music Bureau" [*Yueh-fu*], repetition is commonly used. For example, this poem about spring from the sequence, "Midnight Songs: the Four Seasons" [Tzu-yeh ssu-shih ke] (A.D. 4th century) reads:

How charming are the flowers in the spring woods!
 How sad are the spring birds!
 How loving, too, is the spring breeze,
 Blowing up my gauze skirt.

(T'ien 9)

The key word here is "spring," which takes on a deeper meaning as it appears repeatedly. The flourishing of nature is an occasion for wistfulness because it makes more poignant the loneliness of the female speaker in the poem. The erotic connotations of spring or spring wind, in particular, further suggest that her yearning for love is aroused, like her skirt flapped open by the wind. The other word that is repeated throughout the poem is "tuo," literally "much" but here translated as "how" to achieve emphasis. It reinforces the overwhelming presence of spring — nature in her prime — and thus drives home the pitiful situation of the speaker, alone and pining for love.

While it has been clearly established that the quatrain was derived from Music Bureau songs, like the one cited above, particularly those originated in the Southland (Wu) and Ch'u (today's Hu-pei Province) (Suzuki; T'ien), by the time it reached full maturity in the eighth century, it has grown considerably away from its precursors. Their differences can be summarized as follows. First, the Music Bureau songs are almost all about love, but this is clearly not the case with T'ang quatrains. Secondly, puns are a common feature of the songs (e.g. lotus [lien] for "love"; stone tablet [pei] for "sadness"; etc.). While the quatrain in its early stages in the Six Dynasties was a literary pastime, in the form of linked verse [lien-chu] (Chang 138-44), puns are not a significant device in T'ang quatrains. Thirdly, as mentioned earlier, repetition is often used in the songs, whether originals or later imitations by the literate, but it is not common in T'ang quatrains. For the more refined and typical quatrain, let us look at two examples in the following.

The first one is the well known "Vernal Sleep" [Ch'un-mien] by Meng Hao-jan (689-740):

Unaware in vernal sleep, I wake up to dawn.
 Everywhere I hear birds singing.
 Last night, the sounds of wind and rain —
 Who knows how many flowers have fallen?

(Selected Classical Poems 151)

In the poem, we note a progression of time and the process of thought that is embodied therein: on a glorious spring morning after a night of sound sleep, the poet recalls the raging rainstorm of the night before and wonders about the state of the flowers. There is a feeling of serenity and coziness about the poet's private world, which seems sheltered from and exists beyond the menacing forces of the external world. The positing of the question at the end of the poem "who knows . . ." is both a causal extension of, and an ironic play on, the word "unaware" [pu-chueh] in the first line. Soundly asleep, the poet understandably did not know what happened to the flowers. However, he *does* know there was a storm and consequently assumes that flowers must have been thrashed. So the question can be taken as a genuine inquiry (a thinking out loud) as well as a rhetorical question, an exclamation of pity at the ravaged state of the flowers. Both being acceptable and co-existing with each other, the latter reading adds a note of concern and compassion to the poem. Beyond the literal level, the poem reveals the self-containment of a recluse spiritually above the bitter strife of the world, especially the world of politics, as well as his humane concern for those who are still enmeshed in it (possibly his friends in the capital).

Within the four lines, Meng succeeds in creating a fairly complicated thought process through imagistic contrast (between birds singing and fallen flowers; soothing sleep and rainstorm; morning and night). The remarkable degree of compression and unity is typical of the traditional quatrain.

Or, let us look at the following, equally well-known, quatrain by Ts'en Shen (715-770), entitled "Thinking of our Old Home in Ch'ang-an after a Nine-day March" [Hsing-chun chiou-je ssu ku-yuan]:

I try to get myself to ascend to the height —
 No one to bring me wine.
 I grieve for the distant chrysanthemums of home;
 They should bloom by the battle field.

(Selected Classical Poems 164)

Whereas "Vernal Sleep" accomplishes great condensation of time, the above poem encompasses spatial expansiveness. As the title indicates, the poem is written after nine days of marching away from Ch'ang-an where the poet's home is. The intense longing he is experiencing makes him want to ascend to a high place to look at or, more likely, toward his home. Yet he recoils

from doing that after all for the ostensible reason that there is no one to bring him wine. This reason and the image of chrysanthemums in the next line allude to T'ao Ch'ien (365-427), who, on Double-Ninth Day, was sitting alone by the chrysanthemums in his garden when, to his pleasant surprise, his friend showed up with wine. However, the allusion is not essential to understanding the poem; the poet simply evokes the notion of wine as a means to forget his homesickness. That he is afraid to climb to a height reveals his intense homesickness; to see home, or, rather, to be reminded of it, would only make it more aggravating and unbearable. In the last two lines, chrysanthemums are juxtaposed with the battlefield; across the miles the poet visualizes the flowers blooming in a most unlikely place. The juxtaposition is based on contrast; the positive connotation of the flower (a synecdoche for home) contrasts with the negative connotation of military duty away from home. The word "should" conveys a sense of poignancy and bitterness; the poet well knows that it is impossible for the flowers at home to be transplanted to the battlefield, thus the impossibility of relieving his homesickness.

The two classical examples discussed above serve to demonstrate a few prevalent features of traditional Chinese poetry in the quatrain form. Both poems command a strong sense of structure through several devices. First, there is usually a temporal or spatial progression. In Meng's poem, it is the progress from night to dawn (which then recalls night). In Ts'en's poem, it is a mental trajectory between home and the battlefield, between where he wants to be and where he is and has to be. Secondly, the poetic structure can be further described as one of bifurcation, with the couplet as a structural unit; the structure of arising [ch'i], following [ch'eng], turning [chuan], and, concluding [ho], prescribed in traditional Chinese writing, may be further identified. Finally, contrast is employed, in both cases, to create the optimum semantic density.

Returning to the modern *hsiao-shih*, we recognize at least one notable similarity to its classical predecessor. That is, contrast is also a major device in the modern poems. Besides those discussed earlier, yet another example by Feng Hsueh-feng (1921) illustrates this:

I love small children, puppies, little birds, young trees, and
tender grass.
Therefore I love writing short poems too.
But when I eat rice, I choose big bowls,

When I eat meat, I choose big chunks.

(Compendium 156)

The poet uses the word “small” six times in the first two lines (which, unfortunately, cannot be completely reproduced in the translation). It is obviously contrasted with “big” in the last two lines. There is a touch of childlike innocence expressed by the poet’s spontaneous affection for small things in nature, and also by the pseudo-causal statement: because I love small things, “therefore I love writing short poems (literally, “small” poems), too.” This innocence re-emerges in his frank, unaffected admission of a “big” appetite for food. When it comes to food, the poet has no qualms about giving up his “logic,” which cannot but bring a knowing smile to the reader’s face.

Or, we find contrast in color in this *hsiao-shih*:

Sky is grey
roads are grey
buildings are grey
rain is grey

in a sheet of deathly grey
walk two kids
one in bright red
one in pale green

(Misty Poetry 127)

The contrast is visually powerful: against the prevailing grey background, two fresh, bright dots are highlighted. Whereas one could read metaphoric meanings into the lines, such as children suggest hope in a dismal world, the impact of the poem comes almost solely from the visual juxtaposition, and in this juxtaposition lies the *raison d’être* of the poem. It makes perfect sense that the poem is simply called “Feeling” [Kan-chueh], since the poet is interested primarily in creating an image-group that exerts the maximum visual impact; the metaphoric dimension is peripheral.

Contrast is also employed for other sense modalities than sight, such as taste:

The taste of today’s sorrow
is stronger than bananas from the Southland.

(Compendium 186)

If kisses taste bitter,
There must be some sweetness on reflection.

(Yu-ssu 49)

and smelling:

Odorous fertilizer on the shoulder,
Sweetness of rice in the heart.

(Compendium 191)

While in its use of contrast, the modern *hsiao-shih* resembles the traditional quatrain, and, as previously pointed out, its use of repetition harks back to traditional folksongs, the functions these devices serve and the overall effect they aim at differ significantly from those of the traditional poems. For instance, rather than presenting a well-structured temporal progression or spatial structure, the modern *hsiao-shih* tends to concentrate on a single impression or a single moment. Rather than moving back and forth in space and time, the modern *hsiao-shih* tends to consist of a single image or image-group that creates a certain impression or mood with a lingering or expansive effect. The effect can be of a purely emotive nature and thus difficult to paraphrase or explicate, or it can have metaphorical connotations. Several poems we have discussed illustrate this.

To give yet another example of the difference between the traditional quatrain and the modern *hsiao-shih*, let us look at "Moon Night" [Yueh-yeh] (1918) by Shen Yi-mo:

Frosty wind blows *hu hu*
Moonlight shines bright
I stand next to a tall tree
But I'm not leaning on it

(New Youth 4.1)

The subject is an extremely weathered one in classical poetry, the moon. However, in the modern poem, there is no homesickness, no thinking of one's faraway friend or lover, no loneliness, and no mention of any of those common allusions to the moon (e.g., Ch'ang-o, Moon Palace, etc.). The poem is of and about the moment; there is a biting wind, there is a bright moon, there is the poet standing by a tree. The directness and spontaneity

is the essence of the poem.

At its most concentrated, this kind of *hsiao-shih* echoes the Japanese haiku which frequently embodies a moment of epiphany, of a sudden insight into the inner nature of a thing. For instance, here is a famous haiku by Basho (1644-94):

How heart-appealing, on the mountain-pass,
Are wild violets hidden in the grass.

(Stewart 30)

Here, the wild violets do not warrant an identifiable metaphoric meaning; the poet is suddenly, spontaneously attracted to a beautiful though unassuming flower that can be easily overlooked by a passer-by. The feeling of being moved when one least expects it comes across naturally and powerfully. There is very little discursiveness; the poem only gives us a simple narration of the moment in its barest, most straightforward form.

Another haiku by Basho conveys almost an identical feeling:

As I seek a bower,
weary from travel, I find
a wisteria flower.

(Yasuda 184)

This quality of being totally occupied by a trivial or prosaic object or experience in life is characteristic of Japanese haiku. The term "immediacy" has been used to describe it, and, within the Japanese context, it has often been related to Zen enlightenment in particular. As one critic puts it: "each true haiku is a swift record in words of one moment of satori, of the sudden flash of Enlightenment which grants us a transcendent insight into the suchness of things" (Stewart 122). While the Chinese *hsiao-shih* does not claim any affinity with the religious sentiment, the effect of an epiphanic moment is achieved by many of them.

This aspect of the *hsiao-shih* was already observed by Chou in his article cited earlier. As he put it,

... our daily life is full of such intense and equally true feelings; they suddenly arise and suddenly fade away without lasting long enough to be crystallized in a literary masterpiece.

However, they are deservedly representative of the changes in our inner life from one moment to another. In one sense, this is our real life.

(Compendium 7: 3011)

In the same vein, Chou Po-nai attributed the emergence and popularity of the *hsiao-shih* to the modern man's responding to a fast-paced, noisy, complicated life (46). The swiftness with which the mind moves is recorded in such short poems. Both views also help to explain the appearance of *hsiao-shih* sequences, which we noted at the beginning. They are mental notes of those shifting moods and fleeting moments in life, recording the feelings and thoughts of the poet and relatively unmediated by intellectual analysis.

Let us look at another example of this type of *hsiao-shih* by Chu Tzu-ch'ing (1924):

"Do you smell the fragrance of plum blossoms?"
Sauntering amidst mountain-aura and water-glow,
all of a sudden we understand.

(Compendium 61)

What exactly is understood by the company does not quite lend itself to verbalization. Yet, it has a lot to do with the directness of the moment, the sudden awareness of the fragrance of plum blossoms surrounding the poet and his friends, through which the vast landscape is brought to an intimate level, made immanent to/in the human subjects.

Compare Chu's poem with "Mattina" ("Morning") by the Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti (1933):

M'illumino
d'immenso
(I flood myself with light
of the immense)

(A Poem Itself 311)

The two-line poem records an intense feeling of vastness and exuberance that comes from the poet's contact with the physical universe on an ordinary morning. In both Chu's *hsiao-shih* and Ungaretti's poem, the poet opens

himself up to the external world and, in doing so, experiences a oneness that is "immense" and leaves him short of words. Thus, the miniature form underlines the limitation of words by embodying a moment beyond words.

Or, let us look at this poem entitled "Autumn" [Ch'iu] by Lin Heng-t'ai:

A rooster
 thinking on one foot
 its crown is thoroughly red
 therefore,
 autumn is deep

(Poetry of the Sixties 48-9)

The imagery cannot be sharper or more focused: a rooster, the red crown of a rooster, the red crown of a rooster standing on one foot as if in deep thought. In that quiet, contemplative, self-assured image we read autumn. There is no conceptual baggage that we usually attach to autumn, such as the decay of nature and its imminent death, or transience and its concomitant sadness; the poem only conjures up a mood, a nuance of a mood without the manipulation of ideas. The rooster cannot be a metaphor for autumn without making it ludicrous. The bright red color of the crown could be evocative of maple leaves, but it would hardly support a convincing context in which to ground itself. The poem simply presents an ordinary moment which nevertheless reveals something quintessential of autumn in a spontaneous, direct, non-conceptual way.

The above poem somewhat reminds us of William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1923):

so much depends
 upon
 a red wheel
 barrow
 glazed with rain
 water
 beside the white
 chickens

(Imaginations 138)

It is a still life composed of ordinary objects; the combination of a red wheelbarrow and white chickens in the rain, on a farm where Williams was visiting a patient, creates a feeling of stability and wholeness because everything seems to stand still in the picture. As one critic has pointed out, the poem, along with other short pieces, exemplifies Williams' urge "to rival in word the painter's and photographer's art of selecting and minutely fixating percepts on a two-dimensional pictorial plane" (Collins 267). Nothing really depends on this still life in the sense that it does not do or change anything; yet, for the poet-doctor who finds himself in a thorny situation (nothing he could do about the patient), the moment is soothing and reassuring, thus, everything.

This kind of juxtaposition is also found in the poem "Fire-bright Day" [Huo-yao-ju] by Lin Ling:

Like rainbows. Layers upon layers of colors.
Skirts. Of girls.

(Poetry of the Sixties 41)

Two images, rainbows and girls' skirts, are juxtaposed to give a feeling of dazzling colors. But the syntactic fragmentation (instead of "girls' skirts" we have "Skirts. / Of girls") creates a much stronger visual impact by disrupting the normal perceptual and cognitive process and thus allows the reader to perceive and receive the images more directly, with less intellectual intervention.

The poem also leads to another important characteristic of the *hsiao-shih*. That is, it is often composed of an analogy or analogies. In fact, because of the limited space, a *hsiao-shih* is often nothing but an analogy. For instance, "Eyebrows" [Mei] by Shang Ch'in:

only wings
a bird with no body
hovering unceasingly
between crying and smiling

(Poetry of the Eighties 259)

Through personification, the eyebrows are animated with a life of their own; they smile and cry. Human joy and sadness are thus concretely described by the fluttering up and down of a bird's wings. The ingenuity

of the analogy is what makes the poem interesting and memorable.

Or, the poem "Little Boat" [Hsiao-chou] by Fang Ch'i:

Lonely boats are moored at a slant
 It's like this on every beach of the world
 Like heads at a slant
 Which are full of sorrow

(Responding to the Moon 391)

Again, the comparison is explicit and straightforward. Boats are moored when they are no longer in use, hence, lonely. By the same token, heads aslant must be due to loneliness, too, hence, sadness. The analogy is couched in a language so precise that we would be hard put to rewrite it without losing most of its impact.

The same can be said of "Time Quietly Passing" [Ching-ching tzo-kuo de kuang-yin] by Lin Fan:

Time is a naughty
 red-haired lad
 swishing into
 the reeds across the shore
 making faces

(Spring Blossoms 135)

The personification of time as a nimble, playful kid connotes a light-hearted, yet by no means frivolous, view of time. Like an agile, active kid, time escapes you blind and likes to pull tricks on you. However, the humor of the playful imagery underscores a sense of helplessness and resignation (what can you do about the mischievous little pranks of young boys?) which man experiences when faced with time. Style-wise, like the swift-paced boy and time, the poem moves quickly, holding the reader's attention completely for the duration of the moment.

Here is another intriguing metaphor from the poem "Mountain" [Shan] by Chung Shen-wen:

a dumb kid
 several times shaved his head
 several times his hair grown back

(Responding to the Moon 33)

The title informs us that the poem is a metaphor. At the first reading, the metaphor of a young monk for a mountain may sound far-fetched. The key word here is “dumb” [pie], which in Chinese connotes a lack of worldly suaveness and a rather pleasing naivete. The monk is dumb because, young and impulsive as he is, he cannot make up his mind whether to stay a monk or to return to lay life. Thus, he has gone back and forth again and again. Hair suggests trees on the mountain. Its being shaved off stands for the falling of foliage in autumn, leaving the mountain bare, and its growing back, for the return of spring. When we consider the image of mountains in traditional poetry, we cannot but see the specialness of the modern sensibility. Not only is personification of nature much less common in classical poetry, but the humor in comparing a mountain to an innocent, indecisive Buddhist novice is unique.

In classical poetry, we can also find quatrains dominated by an analogy, whether a simile or metaphor. For example, “Since You Left” [Tzu chun chih ch’u yi] by Liu Chun (A.D. 5th century):

Since you left,
 Gold and emerald have lost their luster.
 Missing you is like the sun and the moon,
 Returning in cycles day and night.

(Ancient Origins 2: 24)

This song is imitated by many later poets, who always come up with a simile in the third line, such as “. . . I’m like the full moon/Losing its pure luster night after night,” etc. The analogy is always situated in an emotionally charged situation (in this case, languishing lovesickness) clearly given in the poem (“since you left”). The analogy is a figure of speech of better describe that concrete situation. However, in the modern lyrics we have seen, the poem is very often nothing more than a juxtaposition of the vehicle and the tenor, with no discursive context. In the case of “Mountain,” the entire poem is the vehicle, with the tenor given in the title. The comparison is more than a figure of speech used to describe something else; it is the poem.

In this aspect, the modern *hsiao-shih* is like the well-known Imagist poem by Ezra Pound, “In a Station of the Metro”:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.

(Selected Poems 35)

While Pound's method of juxtaposition of two analogically related images has been called the "ideogrammic method" (later used extensively in the *Cantos*), it is interesting to find a correspondence (not adoption or conscious imitation) in the other direction; the modern *hsiao-shih* can be described as Imagistic in the way it presents an analogy.

Finally, I would like to look at the high sense of drama that is achieved by the modern *hsiao-shih*. It is an especially challenging task, because drama usually takes space to develop and space is exactly what the miniature poem does not have. Nevertheless, some modern poets have achieved quite remarkable works of drama in the *hsiao-shih* form.

The first example is "Death" [Ssu] (1975) by Hsiung Hung:

Gently
 pick up the hat
 about to go
 many words
 only these:
 next life
 I still want to
 marry
 you

(Selected Poems 170)

Death is compared to an exit from a place, a home; he (assuming that it is a man) picks up the hat and is ready to leave. But before he leaves, he expresses the wish to be with the woman, to whom he is saying goodbye, in the next life. Contrary to the usual way death is portrayed in poetry, there is no morbidity or bitterness in the poem. It is a matter-of-fact as leaving one's home on a journey. There is a touch of sadness suggested by the silence ("many words / only these. . ."). But it is toned down and largely free of negative connotations. Death is not seen as frightening because of the bond between the two people, indicated by the express wish to be together again in the life to come. It is a simple, wholly confident affirmation of faith in love, in the enduring nature of love which transcends the physical realm. Cast in a highly dramatic setting (the last farewell), the

poem movingly articulates the belief in love which rises above time and change.

Also concerned with love but speaking more negatively is the next poem, entitled "Beyond Light Years" [Kuang-nien chi wai], by Yang Tse:

At night every star is a window
 I point at the distant past through an open window:
 "And there, my love,
 there is the loveless, long-dead Earth."

(Spring Blossoms 244)

The poem is projected in a time-frame "Beyond years of light," long after the earth died. The poet is apparently on another planet faraway, pointing out the earth to his love. The silent addressee in the poem is a necessary element, because it underlines the unstated theme, which is, love is essential to life; without it, life cannot continue for long. Thus, the presence of "my love" is contrasted with the loveless earth. The former assures us of life (testified to by the presence of the poet and his love); the latter ceased to exist millennia ago.

Both this poem and Hsiung's bespeak a profound belief in love as the key to happiness and life, though the two poets choose almost opposite styles to express this theme. For Hsiung Hung, "death be not proud" because there is no death that love cannot transcend; for Yang Tse, life without love is inevitably doomed. What the poems also have in common is the high degree of drama. Within the extremely restricted space of the *hsiao-shih*, both poets are able to project a scenario, personae, and a complex tonal quality.

Drama is found in traditional poetry, too, for instance: Ts'ui Hao's "The Ch'ang-kan Tune" [Ch'ang-kan ch'u]:

"Where do you live, Sir?
 I live in Heng-t'ang."
 I stop your boat to ask,
 thinking you may be from my hometown.

(Selected Classical Poems 152)

Or, "Miscellaneous Poem" [Tza shih] by Wang Wei (701-61):

You came from my hometown,
 Must know things in my hometown.
 The day you came, by the ornamented window,
 Were the winter plums in bloom?

(Selected Classical Poems 146)

Both poems are written in the dialogue form. While dramatic settings and personae are employed, they are much simpler than the modern examples we have seen in tone and theme.

Our discussion of the *hsiao-shih* from 1917 up to the present has made a few notable points about this subgenre. The first is that we have seen the highly visible presence of the *hsiao-shih* in modern Chinese poetry. The fact that it has continued to be written by many poets since 1917 proves that it is more than a transient fashion and deserves more serious critical study. Second, we have seen that several devices are recurrent in the modern *hsiao-shih*, such as: imagistic contrast and juxtaposition, repetition for the purpose of creating a mood, analogy as the form as well as the content, and drama with personae in an engaging setting. Relatively speaking, it departs from the traditional quatrain in its emphasis on visual play, registering of a moment or a mood, and use of drama and irony. While there may be some similarities to foreign counterparts (from Japan, America, Europe, etc.), except in a few instances (e.g. Ping Hsin's professed fondness for and imitation of Tagore), the *hsiao-shih* is not the product of direct foreign influences. The similarities are probably more the natural result of exploring new possibilities beyond the traditional quatrain than conscious imitation by the modern poets. In the course of seven decades of modern Chinese poetry, we have seen that the *hsiao-shih* has been evolving in various directions — the predominant preoccupation with recording an elusive mood or a fleeting moment, the search for precise, effective analogies, and the more complicated dramatic form in more recent works. Thus, from a historical perspective, the modern *hsiao-shih* can be rightly viewed as part of the evolution of miniature poems in the Chinese tradition.

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