The Difficulty in Painting Lies in the Spirit: An Exploration of Humanistic Spirit of the Modern and Contemporary Chinese Poetry

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Abstract. Contemporary China has been experiencing an extended phase of drastic changes and the May Fourth Movement and New Culture movement enhanced the change in the world of thought and culture. The good and righteous people and thinkers at the time worked to change the condition of social thinking which had been enriched in the late Qing Dynasty and the detached indifference of the masses. Humanistic spirit is the centre point as they attempt to base thought and culture on the true self of humanity. The change of poetry is especially noticeable in these times of breaking with the old and the creation of the new. Basing this discussion on the cultural theory and relying on philosophical resources, this paper will trace the roots, development and the major spirit of the humanistic in modern and contemporary poetry in a systematic manner. This paper has explored how the creative practices of the representative poets in various periods in history enhanced the traditional values of humanity and benevolence coupled with the unity of heaven and humanity and incorporated the resources of Western intellectual power to bring about creative change and progressive growth upon themselves. It also looks at their spiritual worth and culture of the modern world.

Keywords: Chinese modern and contemporary poetry, humanistic spirit, traditional culture, modernization, cultural confidence.

1. Introduction

The spirit cannot be caught in ink and color: this sentence may represent the universal problem of artists in a certain expression of inner nature of their subjects. However, in the environment of dramatic changes in modern Chinese life and mentality, poetry has also undertaken the task of grasping the soul of the epoch and remaking the national soul with the bluntness of the words used and the striking force of their feelings. Ever since the May Fourth Movement and the New Culture Movement the intellectuals, realizing the necessity of unleashing an ideological revolution, turned to modern poetry as one of the potent instruments of transforming the old and the new. They aimed to rehabilitate the literature to its spirit the human being, to authentic feelings and life. In such a way, poetry ended up experiencing a radical modern redefinition in its role: the helpless cry that painting is unable to understand its spirit to the actual exercise of poetry as an expression of emotion. Poetry has, therefore, become the fundamental content of discussing the development and the spirit of Chinese humanistic nature throughout the last century, making the two insects and complementary to each other. Thus, to research the influence of humanistic spirit on the progress of modern poetry is also vital in clarifying how the new humanistic spirit emerging in modern poetry has become critical to the continuity of Chinese civilization.

Research in the academic field has been relevant and has provided a sound groundwork. Research about the nature of the contemporary Chinese poetry has on the one hand been rather comprehensive, discussing its linguistic features (including the use of vernacular language and defamiliarization), its formal innovation (including the synthesis of the meanings, images and form). Conversely, other scholars of the past have also given significant theoretical insights of the humanistic spirit in the Chinese society. Through its cultural heritage, they have done sophisticated studies on the humanistic spirit of Chinese civilization- including the study of modernization of scientism and humanism. Nevertheless, the current studies tend to use poetry and spirit separately not applying the theoretical

background of humanistic spirit to the discussion of contemporary and modern poetry due to systematic manner. In the way humanistic spirit appears and develops in the aesthetic practice of poetry, in its traditional aspects like morality, self-cultivation, aesthetics, and transcendence, and in the way it blends with the Western learning, a clearly and regularly running thread is inaccessible. This paper is designed to fill this gap with references to the current research and a literature review methodology which is intended to provide an extensive analysis and systematized study of the humanistic spirit in modern and contemporary poetry.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Inner Spirit of the Humanistic Soul

2.1. Ideational Origins and Intrinsic Nature

Humanities are derived for a commentary on the *Judgments of the Bi Hexagram in the Book of Changes*: to observe the phenomena of the heaven and act as the modulator of the seasons; to observe the human culture and perfect the world. In this case, humanities mean ethical order and ritual-music system, the essence of which is the attainment of social harmony by means of education. This represents the pragmatism and moral disposition of Chinese humanistic spirit. The humanistic spirit of the Chinese empowered by Chinese values does not give primacy to the individual reason and free will as seen in Western humanism, but accents more on the individual in the relationship. It seeks a transcendence of the self that is now internal and one can go where his heart directs without transgressing limits. it does not entail chiaroscuro between the individual and the collective. Modern thinker Lou Yuli has condensed the essence of Chinese humanistic spirit to three marks including the cosmological vision of the unity of heaven and man; the moral outlook of harmony between the individual and the society; the pragmatic philosophy of serving the world through our knowledge [1]. All these three elements together constitute a value system in which the ultimate concern of the value system is the harmony of life and society wellbeing. Based on this ground the traditional humanistic spirit develops three-dimensionally, extending into four dimensions:

Traditional Chinese humanistic spirit focuses on being good at the moral plane by aiming at family and nation devotion. This comes out in the pity that Du Fu has towards the ordinary, when he says: All year long I worry about the common folk, and the spirit of self-sacrificing familiar with Wen Yiduo personified by the red candle. They are both a demonstration of the moral self-development and the prosperity of others. In self-cultivation, ancient sages sought wisdom by studying things and putting stern rules concerning their own behaviour. They stressed on demeaning themselves, simplicity, holding back of emotions and focusing on spiritual upliftment through the containment of lusts. Traditional Chinese humanistic spirit in aesthetic aspects focuses on developing artistic conception and combining form and spirit. They are the intangible nature of the poetry and paintings of Wang Wei and the lone greatness of the *Snow on the River* by Liu Zongyuan, which show a desire to seek the comfort of art. On the transcending dimensions, traditional humanistic idea aims to unify natural harmony of Daoism, awakening of Zen Buddhism and moral harmony of Confucianism, with the aim of gaining spiritual liberation in the real world.

2.2. Collisions in the Dilemma of Modernity

The predicament of functionalizing the traditional resources into modern counter substitutions and regional adaptation of the Western ideologies have been the two challenges facing the Chinese humanistic spirit ever since modern times. The movements during May Fourth concentrated on the process of repairing the national character during the dissemination of the Western education to the East as the intellectuals aimed at founding the nation after first founding the individual. Poetry became something that would be used to enlighten. *The Book of Attempts* by Hu Shih relieved the chains of the classical Chinese and *Goddess* by Guo Moruo declared personal liberation through pantheism. They both represented the shift of ancient benevolence to the different discussion of enlightenment in modern times [2]. When, however, the Western values of humanistic ideas, like the individualism of Romanticism, were imported into Chinese land, they became highly disruptive of the Chinese

principles of the idea of the harmony of the collective and the individual. The personalistic style of Guo Moruo through the aggressive and impetuous style of Guo Moruo to the reserved and delicate style of Dai Wangshu through *The Alley in the Rain* discourse became localized in its poetic derivation. The crisis of colonialism, the instrumental rationality and the globalization wave further weakened the very base of traditional values and gave rise to spiritual identity anxieties. *Wild Grass* by Lu Xun is paradoxical and the poetry by Li Jinfu is absurd, because the classical harmony is disintegrating and seeks the modern soul. Poetry is arguably a process of spiritual rehabilitation in the wake of adversity. Chang Yao reforms the sublime unity of heaven and humankind using the image of the giant spirit; Bei Dao responds to nihilism with the rationality of the text I do not believe; Hai Zi recovers the image of the homeland using the figure of wheat fields; and Zhai Yongming makes a female breakthrough using the text writing the body. The essential principles of the traditional humanistic spirit, like unity of heaven and humanity and harmony between the collective self and the individual one, have not just been preserved, but they have appeared as essential resources that fight against the disintegration of modernity. This has resulted in a creative shift of the tradition in which poetry represents aspirations so that poetry can bestow the modern man with a poetic response of settling the soul in the atmosphere of dismantling and rebuilding.

3. The Rebuilding of the Humanistic Spirit Map of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Poetry

Modern and contemporary Chinese poetry is the work of dynamic creation and deconstruction of humanistic spirit in a certain historical context. This quest has started with this discovery and enlightenment of humanity during the May Fourth Movement, internalization and deepening in the 1930s and 1940s, giving way to various explorations in the New Era, drawing clear spiritual map.

3.1. The Awakening of Humanistic Spirit under the Discourse of Enlightenment of May Fourth New Poetry

The May fourth period was the start of the blend between humanistic soul and modern poetry. The May Fourth period was characterized by the great message of the intellectual response through the vernacular poetry that aimed to escape the traditional model of literature as the means of declaring moral values and transferred the emphasis of the poetic compositions to the realization and freedom of human soul. Intellectuals used vernacular poetry as a strong weapon, trying to escape the ancient tradition of the literature as an expression of the moral values and turn the center of the poems to the wakening and liberation of the individual. Essays in the *Spirit of Experimentation* by Hu Shih is not merely the revolution of linguistics form [3], It will be the basic change of the roles of poetry, no longer to speak on behalf of the sages, but to express my personal aspirations. The vividness of his poem *The Dove* when he writes that it turns its back to the sun and its white plumes stand out in the blue sky is an expression of what a man tries to escape the old ways.

Guo Moruo gives the liberation of the individual a climax in his *Goddess*. The *Song of Rebirth* of *The Phoenix Reborn* combines the regeneration of individual life with the regeneration of national fate according to a pantheistic vision of the world: "We are reborn! We are reborn! “That is to say that, here, we represent not only the triumphant chant of subject life, but also the dawn of group life, creative model of the transformation of the convention of unity of heaven and humanity in an enlightenment form.

The short poems of Bing Xin make the spirit of humanism more enriched in another aspect. In her song *Stars* and *Spring Water*, which deals with the motherly love, childlike innocence and the nature, she turns around the old Confucian ethos of good will to all into the universal love of humanity. Lines like “Mother! Where the tempest plays in the air, the birds fly to shelter in their nest; where the tempest plays with my heart, I fly only to shelter with thy breast, fill the age of Enlightenment with kind and humanistic tint with subtle emotional stirrings.

3.2. Spiritual Dilemma of Modernism The Poetic Presentations in the 1930s

Having lost the hope of the Enlightenment ideology, the 1930s poets of the modernist movement started to turn inwards towards the spiritual quest. *The Alley in the Rain* by Dai Wangshu objectifies and aestheticizes individual certificate and the dejection of the times with its main image of a girl like a lilac, twisted with sorrow and resentment [4]. The lengthy and bleak rain-filled alley is not a mere physical locality, but a psychological terrain also, as it is the spiritual stinginess of the intellectual seeking enlightenment following the blockage.

The *Fragment* by Bian Zhilin is more complex in its philosophical reasoning to make the subject-object relationship complete again: You stand on the bridge looking at the scenery, the scenery-viewer looking at you on top of the tower. In this kind of inversion of perception, the verse demonstrates the relativity and intertextuality of the contemporary existence. It reiterates the old unity of self and object way of contemplating the world and gives it the spirit of skepticism that characterizes the modern philosophy [5].

3.3. Collective Expression of Psychological Burden in Wartime Poetry of the 1940s

The lifestyle of the war of resistance poetry combined the individual lives and the life of the country [6]. The snow in Ai Qing *Snow Falls on the Land of China* presents the picture of the snow to surround the whole landscape of misery in China: “Snow Falls on the land of China, coldness seals China in... In this case, land does not only mean a geographical idea but is also the carrier of the national spirit and morality.

The Enchantment of the Forest by Mu Dan reflects the relationship between technology and man in the era of modernity in a more diverse way. By veneration of the primitive power represented by the forest the poem is a critique of the anthropocentrist delusion, which continues the eco-logical know-how of the traditional image of unity between heaven and humanity. July School poets stressed a spirit of fight in the real world, poetry as a weapon of influence in interfering in the realities and creating a new citizenry.

3.4. Diverse Explorations of the Return of Humanistic Spirit in Contemporary Poetry

Everything that followed the new era has shown the trend of unification with varied differentiation and deep exploration of the human spirit of poetry. *To the Oak Tree,* by Shu Ting, proclaims on the ethic dimension that, I must be a kapok tree next to you, standing with you as a tree thus requiring an ethic of love that cherishes equality and independence. Iron by Zheng Xiaoqing however addresses the existential dilemma of modern workers in the machine era in terms of industrial ethics. At the patriotic emotion level, *I Saw the Snow* by Ji Dima entails ethnic collective consciousness into the human universal feelings of compassion by reviving Yi cultural memory. Regarding modern change in aesthetic sensibility, the *In the Mirror* by Zhang Zao offers a modern redefined way of looking at traditional aesthetics ideals in terms of the temporal folding technique: “Every time I remember about the regrets of my life / Plum blossoms fall. In general, the humanistic essence of modern and contemporary Chinese poetry has gone through a complicated path of enlightenment cries to inner search, and collective expression to the individual variety. It is the act of creating a persuasive adaptation of traditional fundamental values, as well as the engagement of the modernity conundrums [7].

4. The Humanistic Spirit as the Motive and the Reevaluation of Values to Develop the Chinese Modern Poetry

4.1. Creativity Transformation in the Contination of the Humanist Spirit in Chinese Contemporary Poetry

The umbilical cord of the modern and contemporary poetry with the coordination system of the traditional culture has not been ever broken. In the paradigm shift over the morals of the ethos of

poetic education to the poetics of the singular, the *Asian Bronze* of Hai Zi puts into place the question of individual existence in the geo-cultural context of ancient China, a complicated situation between the small and the greater self in the contemporary world [8].

The moon in the poetry of Li Bai was a ship of homesickness, in the *Alley in the Rain* by Dai Wangshu became a scenery of melancholy in the modern life, and in the works of Hai Zi it turned out to be a symbol of civilization immersed in the wheat field. This trend is the obvious sign of the enrichment and the enlargement of the centers of humanistic soul. Modern poetry has no longer been bound to the rigid principles of tonal balance and parallelism in regard to the elements of rhythmic aesthetics, but the rhythmic essence and soul of the poems still are pervasively impregnated with the spiritual flavour of the old aesthetics [9]. The mad beat of Guo Moruos Celestial Dog, and the monumental splendor of the western poetry by Chang Yao, both are characteristic of the creative metamorphosis of the traditional aesthetics in the context of verse.

4.2. Poetics of Breaking through the Barriers of the Dilemma of Modernity

Having to contend with the said triple predicament of instrumental rationality, value nihilism and cultural identity crisis, poetry, with its highly humanistic soul has become the tip of the exploration and criticism. Ouyang Jianghe, in *The Glass Factory*, de-mythifies glass which symbolizes modernity, as a manifestation of the human alienation in the industrialized civilization. *In the Mirror* by Zhang Zao creates a poetic logic she thinks that when I think of a regrettable moment in my life plum blossoms fall, this is the way to resist the ugliness of the world history but also the nihilism of the reality. This cannot be called evasion, but rather a re-created sense on the boundaries of a desert of values.

The writing of Ji Dima beautifully blends on both the traditional animistic thought of Yi people and the modern ecological issues, through the use of poetic language Ji Dima successfully managed to create a contemporary twist of the traditional humanistic soul. The achievement of cultural subjectivity in the current wave of globalization is a poetic paradigm.

4.3. Cross-Cultural Dialogue Spiritual Learning and Inspiration in Spiritual Mutual Learning

The modern and contemporary Chinese poetry has constantly rejuvenated the humanistic spirit by communicating with the world. The echo of the poem Hanshan created in the life of the Beat Generation in America provided an Eastern remedy to Western manufacturing civilization alienation with its natural philosophy and simplicity.

Pound, with his creative translations of classical Chinese poetry, found its use of aesthetics methods and made a direct contribution to Anglo-American Imagist poetry, and transformed the environment of West modern poetry [10]. This shows cultural soungthood and value of Chinese humanistic spirit that has been validated cross-culturally and brought back to the modern world. Modern poets are interacting in a more adult world with the discourse on a worldwide scale. It is this international writing of poets such as Ji Dima Jia that places the cosmological ideal of unity of heaven and mankind in the context of common predicament of humanity and the Chinese humanistic spirit emerges as a precious intellectual capital on handling challenges around the world.

4.4. The Humanistic Spirit Co-ordinates of Future Poetics

To enter the realm of the 21 st century when technological revolution penetrates even deeper, the humanistic spirit did not become outdated; instead, it provides the much-needed spiritual guidance with the progression of the new poetry writing. To begin with, when the artificial intelligence is starting to master the syntax and rhetoric tools used in poetry, the very essence of poetry, the stronghold that could not be taken over by the technologies, is its humanistic soul that implies rich experience in life, deep-seated moral interest, and historical awareness. It is in this context that many ecological crises around the world are becoming more serious with each passing day, that the ecological prudence that dwells upon the heritage of oneness between heaven and man bestows poetry

with abundant philosophical and aesthetic material resources enabling it to answer this significant question of an epoch.

Against this backdrop, as the global ecological crisis grows increasingly severe, the ecological wisdom rooted in the tradition of "unity between heaven and humanity" provides poetry with rich philosophical and aesthetic resources, guiding it to respond to this major issue of our time. Yu Jian and others' "Return to the Earth" writing seeks precisely to rebuild a new ethical relationship between humanity and nature. Moreover, in today's world where cultural pluralism has become the norm, the inherent philosophy of "harmony without uniformity" within the humanistic spirit provides a profound philosophical foundation and value framework for fostering the healthy coexistence and creative dialogue of diverse voices—such as poetry from ethnic minorities and women's poetry [11]. In summary, the three key dimensions of technological ethics, ecological care, and cultural diversity collectively form the core orientation of future new poetry within its humanistic spiritual coordinates. This ensures that, amidst an ever-changing era, it remains anchored to human values and the continuity of civilization. In today's world where cultural pluralism has become the norm, the inherent philosophy of "harmony without uniformity" within the humanistic spirit serves as the profound philosophical foundation for fostering the healthy coexistence of diverse voices and enabling creative dialogue. The vigorous emergence of diverse poetic voices—including ethnic minority poetry and women's poetry—is precisely a manifestation of this spiritual vitality.

5. Conclusion

"The spirit is hard to capture in ink and color", yet the century-long journey of modern and contemporary Chinese poetry is precisely a profound practice that uses language as its medium and humanistic spirit as its core, ceaselessly exploring, writing, and reshaping the soul of the times. This paper systematically examines the interplay between modern and contemporary Chinese poetry and the humanistic spirit, arriving at the following core conclusions: First, this study clearly outlines the dynamic lineage of the humanistic spirit's evolution and development within modern and contemporary Chinese poetry. From the enlightenment call for "establishing the individual" during the May Fourth Movement to the collective responsibility for the nation's destiny during wartime; from the diverse explorations of individual value in the New Era to the reaffirmation of cultural identity within the context of globalization, the humanistic spirit has consistently served as the central thread running through the development of modern Chinese poetry.

Second, this paper deepens the understanding of the mechanism of "creative transformation of tradition." Research indicates that modern and contemporary Chinese poetry does not merely transplant Western concepts. Instead, it builds upon traditional core values such as benevolence, the unity of heaven and humanity, and the harmony between the collective and the individual. By absorbing foreign intellectual resources, it has achieved a series of creative transformations—including the modernization of the tradition of "poetry expressing aspirations" and the contemporary revitalization of classical imagery—demonstrating the powerful endogenous dynamism and adaptability of traditional culture. Finally, this paper establishes the pivotal role of humanistic spirit as the "spiritual engine" driving the development of modern Chinese poetry. It not only provides critical intellectual resources and value anchors for poetry to respond to modernity's predicaments—such as instrumental rationality and value nihilism—but also offers a unique poetic solution for the spiritual settlement of modern individuals through aesthetic practice. At the academic level, this paper attempts to bridge the gap between studies on the essence of poetry and theoretical explorations of humanistic spirit, offering a new pathway that integrates "poetry" and "thought" for interpreting modern and contemporary poetry. At the level of cultural practice, this study reveals the profound value of poetry in shaping the humanistic literacy of citizens and constructing cultural identity, providing solid support from the field of poetics for the establishment of "cultural confidence." In short, from the lament that "painting cannot capture its essence" to the practice of "poetry as a vehicle for truth," modern and contemporary Chinese poetry has completed a great spiritual journey. It

reveals to us that beneath the upheavals and turmoil of any era, that profound concern for human dignity, the harmony of life, and the continuity of civilization remains the eternal beacon of poetic art—the humanistic spirit, seemingly simple yet profound, upholding the immortal soul of a nation.

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