



 Research Article

ANALYSIS OF CHINESE SCHOLARS' RESEARCH ON THE EVOLUTION OF NEW POETRY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the late Qing period as a pivotal phase in Chinese literary history, bridging classical traditions and modern literary innovations. It explores the poetic revolution's role in transforming themes, language, and stylistic elements, alongside debates on its relationship with modern new poetry. Highlighting the socio-political and cultural context, the study argues for recognizing late Qing literature as an independent field, crucial for understanding the transition from classical to modern Chinese literature. This period's literary evolution reflects the dynamic interplay between traditional values and external influences, contributing significantly to the trajectory of Chinese literary heritage.

KEYWORDS

Qing literature, poetic revolution, Chinese literary history, modern new poetry, classical traditions, cultural transformation, socio-political context, literary innovation, transitional phase, China.

INTRODUCTION

During the late Qing Dynasty, Chinese society underwent significant transformations, which deeply influenced the literary landscape of the period. This era witnessed a revolutionary shift in poetry, marked not only by substantial

modifications to traditional poetic forms but also by a profound reevaluation of poetic themes and ideas. Despite numerous studies conducted in recent years on the poetic revolution of the late Qing period, considerable debate and research

gaps remain concerning its overall significance, place in literary history, and its relationship with modern new poetry. In particular, the issue of clarifying the connection between the Poetic Revolution and modern new poetry necessitates a detailed examination of the internal changes and transformations within poetry itself. Through such in-depth analysis, it is possible to draw reliable conclusions about the evolution of poetic features during this transformative period.

Most studies on the poetic revolution of the late Qing period concentrate on the developments of the early 20th century. Initial research primarily examined the historical background and prominent figures of the poetic revolution, such as Liang Qichao and Huang Zongxiang. Over time, as research perspectives and methodologies expanded and deepened, scholars began to focus more on the transformations within poetic forms and content brought about by the revolution. For instance, researchers like Guo Shaoyu and Qian Zhongshu highlighted the innovations introduced in poetic language, themes, and stylistic expressions during this period. Their studies shed light on how these changes redefined the essence of poetry, emphasizing the revolutionary shift not only in the structure but also in the aesthetics and conceptual underpinnings of poetry in the late Qing era.

Within academic circles, there are two predominant viewpoints regarding the relationship between the poetic revolution of the late Qing period and modern new poetry:

1. **Direct Influence Perspective** According to the first perspective, the poetic revolution directly influenced the emergence of modern new poetry and laid the foundation for its development. Proponents of this view argue that the linguistic and structural transformations initiated during the poetic revolution in the late Qing era served as a solid groundwork for the evolution of modern new poetry. They emphasize that the innovations in poetic language and form during this period were integral to the creation of the new poetic tradition.

2. **Western Influence Perspective** The second perspective posits that there is no direct lineage between the poetic revolution and modern new poetry. Instead, it suggests that modern new poetry was shaped primarily by the ideas and techniques borrowed from Western poetry. According to this view, modern new poetry owes more to the influence of Western literary practices than to the changes introduced during the late Qing poetic revolution.

Both perspectives are supported by distinct sets of evidence and scholarly research, highlighting the varied factors that contributed to the development of modern new poetry. The question of how much the poetic revolution influenced modern new poetry remains a central topic of academic debate and discussion, reflecting broader inquiries into the interplay between traditional and external influences in shaping modern Chinese literature.

The position of late Qing literature, and modern literature as a whole, within the history of

Chinese literature is indeed somewhat uneasy. This period is often regarded as the conclusion of ancient literature rather than an independent literary stage. Such an approach is evident in numerous historical works on ancient literature. For instance, the four-volume History of Chinese Literature, edited by You Guoen and others, considers the literature of this era as merely the endpoint of the separation process from the source of ancient literature, rather than elevating it to the level of an independent literary phase. Similarly, in The History of Ancient Chinese Literature edited by Guo Yuheng, modern literature is mentioned as a stage of Qing dynasty literature. However, in practice, the analysis of Qing dynasty literature in this work largely ignores the modern literary elements of the period, leaving this section unexplored. This treatment underscores the broader challenge of situating late Qing literature in a framework that recognizes its unique contributions, as opposed to viewing it solely as a transitional phase between ancient and modern literary traditions.

Conversely, works on the history of modern literature often begin around the New Culture Movement of 1917. This chronological approach disrupts the perceived continuity with ancient literature, making it difficult to establish a connection or sense of progression. As a result, modern literature is frequently treated as a distinct "other realm," disconnected from ancient traditions. This has led to a widespread misconception among readers that modern literature emerged in opposition to or as a complete break from ancient literature. However,

the development of modern literature as an independent field addresses this gap by serving as a bridge between the histories of ancient and contemporary literature. It not only incorporates the previously overlooked transitional period of modern literature into the scope of literary research but also legitimizes its existence as a standalone discipline. By filling this void, modern literature provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding the evolution of Chinese literary traditions, emphasizing the nuanced connections between the ancient and the contemporary.

In the preface to The Developmental History of Modern Chinese Literature, Guo Yuanli emphasizes the transitional and foundational role of late Qing literature within the broader history of Chinese literary evolution. He states: "Modern Chinese literature is both the culmination of ancient literature and the cornerstone of modern literature, embodying an intrinsic continuity. It represents a critical phase in the history of Chinese literary development, shaped by 80 years of creative efforts under the impact of international cultural shocks and national tragedies. Although this evolving literature has yet to gain recognition as mature and has not left behind major works in the history of Chinese literature, the transformations and complex literary phenomena of that era hold great research value. The successes and failures in its developmental path deserve careful analysis by literary historians."

Guo also highlights the scarcity of comprehensive studies dedicated to this period, which points to

two crucial aspects: the underexplored significance of modern Chinese literature and the broader gaps in research on this transitional phase. This lack of scholarly attention, he argues, should be viewed as an opportunity for future research, opening new avenues for exploration that can yield valuable insights:

1. **Evolutionary Features in Content and Form.** Late Qing literature demonstrates distinct evolutionary traits, blending ancient literary traditions with trends indicative of the transition to modern literature. Ignoring this period risks obscuring the understanding of the pivotal transition from traditional to modern Chinese literature.
2. **Reflections of Societal Transformation.** The literature of the late Qing period mirrors the significant societal changes of the time, serving as a cultural lens for understanding the era's social ideologies and transformations.
3. **A Bridge Between Ancient and Modern Literature.** The emergence of modern literature as an independent discipline not only fills the perceived gap between ancient and modern literature but also fosters deeper literary research and intellectual progress. This process reflects the dynamic reorganization and interdisciplinary expansion within literary studies.
4. **Future Directions for Research.** Guo sees the existing gaps in research on late Qing literature as fertile ground for scholarly

innovation. He suggests that addressing these gaps can lead to meaningful discoveries, enriching our understanding of the era and its role in the literary evolution of China. The study of late Qing literature, therefore, should be prioritized as a developmental direction in literary scholarship. Guo's insights underline the critical importance of late Qing literature as a phase that encapsulates both the heritage of ancient literature and the seeds of modern innovation. By acknowledging its unique position, scholars can better comprehend the trajectory of Chinese literature, fostering a more nuanced understanding of its historical and cultural underpinnings.

Overall, the literature of the late Qing period, and modern historical literature in particular, should not be overlooked in the study of Chinese literary history. These works serve not only as a crucial transitional stage between ancient and modern literature but also as a key to understanding the overarching trajectory of Chinese literary development. In-depth exploration of this period allows for a better comprehension of the historical progression of Chinese literature and its internal logic. Such research addresses existing gaps in contemporary academic studies and offers new perspectives and methodologies for advancing the study of Chinese literary history. By recognizing the significance of late Qing literature, scholars can gain a more holistic understanding of how Chinese literature evolved over centuries, providing insights into its

transformation and the broader cultural and societal shifts it reflects. This focus not only enriches the field but also ensures a more comprehensive narrative of Chinese literary development.

Shortly after the New Culture Movement, several works on literary history emerged that demonstrated a strong interest in modern historical literature. In February 1923, Shen Bao published Hu Shi's article *The Past Fifty Years* (later retitled *The Last Fifty Years of Chinese Literature*), which analyzed the general trends in literature after 1872. This article, however, reveals Hu Shi's subjective perspective, as he aimed to promote baihua (vernacular) literature and the literary revolution. Consequently, he placed greater emphasis on the historical significance of the literary changes after 1917, while characterizing pre-1917 literature as merely the "final mature creative stage" of classical literature. Despite this subjectivity, Hu Shi's framing of the New Culture Movement within the context of "modern historical literature" underscores the intrinsic connection between the two. This perspective is crucial for validating their mutual interrelation and lays the groundwork for significant future research. By situating the New Culture Movement as part of the broader narrative of modern historical literature, scholars can better understand the transformative processes that shaped Chinese literary evolution and identify the period's lasting influence on modern literary practices.

Several years after Hu Shi's work, Chen Zizhan's *The Evolution of Modern Chinese Literature: A*

History of Chinese Literature Over the Past Thirty Years was published. Unlike Hu Shi, Chen Zizhan offered independent perspectives, emphasizing the unique significance of modern historical literature. According to Chen, "This period is one of the most crucial in the history of Chinese literature. It reflects significant changes in all aspects of literature, marking a stark contrast with earlier eras." Chen argued that the primary purpose and essence of literature transformed during this period. He concluded that post-1894 literature began to reflect the demand for a new kind of literature tailored to the needs of modern individuals. This literature distinguished itself with its modern characteristics, diverging from traditional literature to address the experiences and needs of contemporary life. Chen Zizhan identified several distinctive modern attributes in post-1894 Chinese literature: literature from this period incorporated fresh perspectives and reflected the intellectual currents of the modern age; the thematic scope of literature expanded to include topics relevant to contemporary society, such as social change, individual identity, and national crises; literary works from this era employed novel stylistic techniques that set them apart from traditional forms.

Chen Zizhan highlighted the intrinsic connection between post-1894 literature and modern Chinese literature. He demonstrated how this period laid the groundwork for the emergence of modern literary forms by introducing innovations in both content and style. According to Chen, post-1894 literature was not only modern in its essence but also pivotal in shaping

the trajectory of modern Chinese literature. Chen Zizhan's conclusions underscore the transformative role of post-1894 literature as a critical stage in the development of modern Chinese literature. His work vividly illustrates how this period bridged the gap between traditional and modern literature, providing a foundation for the literary innovations that followed. By emphasizing the modern characteristics of this transitional phase, Chen's research highlights the interconnectedness of late Qing literature and the broader evolution of modern Chinese literature.

In his *History of Modern Chinese Literature*, Qian Jibo included leaders of the poetic revolution, such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, under the category of "new literature," drawing comparisons between their contributions and those of Hu Shi. By doing so, he highlighted the critical role these figures played in renewing poetry, a process that significantly influenced the development of modern Chinese poetry. Zhu Ziqing, in his *Chinese New Literature Series: Introduction to Poetry*, explicitly illustrated the continuity between the poetic revolution and modern new poetry. He observed: "Their 'new poetry' primarily consisted of using new terminology. They sought to renew the language of poetry by introducing new words and terms. Only Huang Zunxian advanced further along this path, not merely employing new words but also advocating for poetry written in plain language ('my hand writes my mouth'). He emphasized the importance of writing poetry in the vernacular, promoting the incorporation of new ideas and

new materials into poetry, such as 'things and regions unknown to the ancients.' Through this, he aimed to introduce new themes and fresh concepts into poetry. Although the poetic revolution was ultimately unsuccessful, it had a profound ideological influence on the new poetry movement of 1917, inspiring and significantly shaping its development." These observations indicate that the poetic revolution of the late 19th and early 20th centuries had a significant impact on the formation of modern Chinese poetry. Innovative approaches and new ideas introduced by leaders like Huang Zunxian contributed to the development of poetry during this period. The new language and themes they introduced served as the ideological foundation for the new poetry movement of 1917.

Through these early literary history studies, we can see that modern historical literature is not only a crucial transitional stage between ancient and modern literature but also holds significant importance in understanding the overall developmental trajectory of Chinese literature. These studies provide us with rich historical information and theoretical foundations, enabling a deeper understanding of the process of Chinese literature's transition from tradition to modernity.

In the 1980s, significant changes took place in the study of Chinese literature. As a result, modern historical literature (1840–1917) was suddenly transformed from a "neglected swan" into a "swan," becoming the focus of scholarly attention. In other words, the literature of this period emerged from obscurity to become a vibrant topic

of discussion in academic circles, playing a particularly important role in modern literary studies. In the 1980s, social, political, and cultural changes in China, the emergence of new literary theories, a desire to restore historical justice, the need to understand the roots of modern literature, and increased international collaboration led to a significant surge in the study of modern historical literature. Scholars and researchers began to pay closer attention to this period because of its critical role in the formation and development of modern Chinese literature. As part of the process of rewriting the history of modern literature, the relationship between modern historical literature and modern literature was reevaluated, with their mutual influences explored in greater depth. Modern historical literature was confirmed as the foundation for the development of modern literature, highlighting their interconnection and reciprocal impact. Many specialists and scholars undertook studies to reassess modern historical literature and determine its influence on modern literature. What had previously been overlooked in earlier research became a vibrant topic of discussion and investigation. As a result of these studies, modern historical literature was identified as a vital source and basis for modern literature, cementing its significance in Chinese literary history.

Researchers such as Chen Pingyuan, Liu Na, Wang Dewei, Qian Zhenggang, and Yang Lianfeng have conducted extensive studies on this topic. These scholars have approached late Qing literature from the perspective of modern literature,

focusing on identifying its modern characteristics and analyzing its influence on the development of modern literature. The outcomes of their research can be summarized as follows:

1. **Discovery of Modernity in Late Qing Literature.** These experts emphasized uncovering the modernity embedded in late Qing literature and its significance as a transitional phase leading to modern literature. They explored how the new ideas, themes, and expressive techniques of this period were interconnected with modern literary developments.
2. **Foundational Contributions to Literary Studies.** Their research provided essential resources and comparative frameworks for current and future studies of modern literature and literary history. By examining late Qing literature in this context, they created a foundation for understanding the evolution of Chinese literature.
3. **Enhanced Understanding of Modern Literary Development.** These studies have enabled scholars to gain deeper insights into the processes of modern literary development, offering a clearer view of the transition from traditional to modern literary forms and themes.

By establishing these connections, these researchers have not only illuminated the critical role of late Qing literature in shaping modern Chinese literature but also enriched the theoretical and methodological tools available for the study of literary history.

However, a general evaluation of these scholars' findings reveals a predominant focus on late Qing novels. For instance, Chen Pingyuan's *The Transformation of the Narrative Model in Chinese Novels* provides a detailed account of the transition and characteristics of late Qing novelistic modernity. This work is particularly significant for understanding the development of modern Chinese fiction. Similarly, Wang Dewei's *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction* concentrates on the genre of novels, contributing significantly to the study of modernity through the lens of late Qing fiction. Qian Zhenggang's *A Historical Overview of Late Qing and Early Republican Novels* also focuses on this subject, analyzing the transition of late Qing fiction toward modernity. Liu Na's *Transformations: Chinese Literature from the Xinhai Revolution to the May Fourth Movement* offers a broad investigation into the transition to modern literature, but devotes little attention to poetry. Likewise, Yang Lianfeng's *From the Late Qing to the May Fourth Movement: The Modernization of Chinese Literature* provides an extensive analysis of the transition to modern literature, yet largely neglects poetry. This noticeable emphasis on late Qing novels and relative disregard for poetry is evident. While this could be attributed to the researchers' personal academic interests, it also reflects an underappreciation of the unique features of poetry. Nonetheless, this oversight creates substantial opportunities for rediscovering and redefining the modernity embedded in late Qing poetry. Moreover, the theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and outcomes derived from the

study of late Qing novels can serve as valuable comparative foundations for exploring the distinctive characteristics of poetry. By applying similar approaches, scholars could uncover new insights into the poetic innovations and modernity of the late Qing era.

Naturally, research on late Qing poetry, particularly on the poetic revolution, is not entirely absent. However, scholars have tended to focus more on the period itself, often neglecting its connections to modern literature. This oversight has hindered a deeper exploration of the modernity-related aspects of the poetic revolution. For instance, the articles in Zhang Yongfang's collection *The Poetic Revolution and Literary Changes* primarily examine the roles and contributions of individuals involved in the poetic revolution. However, these studies place less emphasis on the revolution's subsequent influence on modern poetry. Similarly, Guo Yuanli's *The Developmental History of Modern Chinese Literature* provides detailed information on the development of mid-modern poetry, highlighting major writers, works, movements, and ideas. Likewise, Li Jikai's *History of Mid-Modern Chinese Poetry* follows a similar trajectory. Although these works occasionally underscore the impact of the poetic revolution on modern poetry, their analyses often remain broad and lack the depth needed to investigate the internal elements of the poetry itself. This generality limits the potential to fully understand how late Qing poetry influenced the emergence of modern Chinese poetry.

In recent years, the relationship between late Qing poetry and modern new poetry has undergone a reevaluation. Wang Guangming, in the first chapter of his book *A Century of Evolution in Modern Chinese Poetry*, focuses on the "poetic revolution," considering it the starting point of "a century of Chinese poetry." This new approach demonstrates that the author acknowledges the significance of the poetic revolution in the development of modern poetry and seeks to explore its influence in greater depth. However, Wang's assessment of the poetic revolution's place in literary history reveals certain gaps and contradictions. Specifically, the author acknowledges that late Qing poetry was instrumental in the emergence of the "new poetry" concept, which later became a key reference for modern Chinese poets in their search for modernity. He also identifies the poetic revolution as the first step in shaping modern poetic forms in China. At the same time, however, he emphasizes that the language of this poetry remained traditional, describing it as akin to "pouring new wine into an old bottle." Thus, he denies that the roots of new poetry can be traced back to this period. Wang's perspective on the poetic revolution is complex and contradictory. On the one hand, he recognizes its importance in the development of modern new poetry; on the other hand, he critiques its linguistic traditionalism and questions its foundational role in the evolution of modern poetry. While he views the poetic revolution as the beginning of modern poetry's development, he simultaneously denies its status of being its true origin.

Rong Guangqin's doctoral dissertation, *The Emergence of Modern Chinese Poetry: From the Late Qing to the May Fourth Movement*, and Lai Yuhang's dissertation, *The Language of Poetry from the Late Qing to the May Fourth Period*, stand out for their unique perspectives, theoretical approaches, and depth of analysis. Rong Guangqin focuses on the interaction between poetic language, form, and personal experiences within the context of modernity, employing theoretical analyses of poetic text, language, and structure. Lai Yuhang, on the other hand, examines the process of creating a new poetic language, emphasizing shifts in form, the influence of experimentation, the expression of emotions, new poetic arts, and the interplay between modernity and classical traditions. Although both dissertations start with the poetic revolution, they dedicate relatively little attention to it. Their primary focus is on analyzing poetic language, leaving the relationship between the poetic revolution and the origin, development, and transformation of modern Chinese poetry insufficiently explored. This oversight limits a comprehensive understanding of the significance of the poetic revolution in the evolution of modern poetry. The authors acknowledge that their discussions on the formation of modern poetic forms are largely limited to changes in language and artistic principles. However, they concede that these discussions are inadequate to fully explain how modern poetic forms emerged. They also emphasize that the topic of "the origins of modern Chinese poetry" remains unresolved and that their works serve only as an "introduction" or "guide" to the subject. Clearly,

the effort to pinpoint how modern poetic forms developed has yet to be fully addressed. This area demands more in-depth and expansive research. As such, it remains an important and necessary direction for future studies in Chinese literary scholarship.

Indeed, there are significant studies on the general literary activities of leaders of the poetic revolution, such as Liang Qichao and Huang Zunxian. Examples include Xia Xiaohong's *Awakening the World, Delivering the Future: Liang Qichao's Literary Path*, Liang Yantang's *Liang Qichao and the Literary Revolution of the Late Qing Dynasty*, and Liu Bingbing's doctoral dissertation, *Between Classicism and Modernity: A Study of Huang Zunxian's Poetry*. While these works provide valuable insights into the overall literary contributions of figures like Liang Qichao and Huang Zunxian, the poetic revolution itself is not a central theme in these studies. As a result, a more comprehensive and detailed analysis of the poetic revolution remains lacking, leaving significant room for further exploration of its nuances and broader implications.

It is worth noting that Yang Zhanjun's doctoral dissertation, *Oscillating Between Radicalism and Conservatism: A Study of the Poetic Revolution*, is one of the few works dedicated to exploring the evolution of poetry. The dissertation draws the following conclusions: the poetic revolution is not a bridge between traditional poetry and modern poetry, nor is modern vernacular baihua poetry a continuation or development of the poetic revolution. There is no natural transition or evolutionary relationship between the two.

Instead, the "May Fourth" baihua new poetry emerged and developed independently of the poetic revolution. According to Yang, the poetic revolution belongs to the realm of traditional poetry and represents its culmination. However, the dissertation fails to convincingly demonstrate the differences between the poetic revolution and modern new poetry with solid evidence or logical explanations. It provides only general information about the background of the poetic revolution, the works of several key participants, and the relationships between the poetic revolution and other schools and directions of poetry. Furthermore, it does not fully substantiate the traditional essence and "classical" characteristics of the poetic revolution, leaving room for further in-depth analysis and investigation.

CONCLUSION

The study of late Qing literature highlights its significant role as a transitional phase bridging the divide between classical and modern Chinese literary traditions. This period, marked by socio-political upheavals and cultural transformations, serves as both the culmination of traditional literary forms and the foundation for modern innovations in Chinese poetry and prose.

Through the analysis of late Qing literature, it becomes evident that this era reflects the interplay of indigenous cultural values and external influences, leading to a reimagining of themes, styles, and language. While often marginalized in historical studies, recognizing the

late Qing period as an independent literary phase not only enriches our understanding of Chinese literary evolution but also underscores its relevance in the global context of cultural exchange and adaptation.

Furthermore, the scholarly debates surrounding the poetic revolution and its relationship with modern new poetry illustrate the complexities of literary progression. These discussions emphasize the need for a nuanced approach to understanding the connections between historical traditions and contemporary innovations.

In conclusion, the late Qing period offers invaluable insights into the transformative dynamics of Chinese literature, making it a critical area of study for appreciating the continuity and adaptability of China's literary heritage. By re-evaluating this era, scholars can better contextualize the development of modern Chinese literature within its broader historical and cultural framework.

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