

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18454/RULB.2020.24.4.29>**ПРАКТИКА ДЕКЛАМАЦИИ В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ КИТАЙСКОЙ ПОЭЗИИ И ДИХОТОМИЯ ЗВУЧАЩЕЕ – ПИСЬМЕННОЕ**

Научная статья

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Аннотация

В статье предпринимается попытка выявить важные особенности традиции представления поэтического текста в современном Китае, прочно основанной на эволюционирующем голосовом измерении китайской поэзии. Различные форматы аудиопрезентации текста проистекают из одной и той же линии декламационных поэтических практик, воспринимаемых как средство канализации гипертрофированных эмоций и / или как средство агитации и прозелитизма; они различаются выбором доминирующего пространства презентации и стилистическими ориентирами. Однако неофициальная поэзия современной КНР также даёт примеры нового типа поэтического озвучивания, претендующего на роль радикально современной практики, но одновременно являющегося данью уважения или, скорее, переосмыслением предсовременных практик. Это декламация под аккомпанемент, актуализирующая мелодику речи и подчёркивающая её просодию. Она фокусируется на озвучивании текстов с использованием гибридных форматов презентации, где сама структура стихотворного слова усиливает впечатление от поэзии во время декламационных выступлений.

Ключевые слова: голосовая поэзия, китайская литература, современная поэзия, поэтическая декламация, рецитация.

DECLAMATORY PRACTICE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE POETRY: THE AUDIAL/WRITTEN DICHOTOMY

Research article

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Abstract

The paper presents an attempt to figure out significant features of the contemporary tradition of poetic recital in China which is firmly based on the evolving voice dimension of Chinese poetry. Different formats of audial presentation stem from the same line of declamatory poetic practices perceived as means of conveying a hyperbolized emotion and/or as an agitation tool; they differ in the choice of the dominant performance platforms and stylistic guidelines. However, the unofficial poetry of contemporary PRC gives also examples of a new type of poetic voicing pretending to be a radically modern practice but being simultaneously an homage or rather a rethinking of the premodern practices. That is recitation with an accompaniment, which actualizes the melody of speech and highlights its prosody. It focuses on audio presentation of the texts using hybrid presentation formats, where the very structure of the versified words enhances the experience of poetry during declamatory performances.

Keywords: Chinese literature, contemporary poetry, declamation, poetry performance, recitation, voice poetry.

Introduction

The tradition of poetic recitation in China has a history of more than one millennium. Some of the earliest evidence is related to Chunqiu era (771–476 BC) and is associated with the description of the *fu shi* 赋诗 practice, i.e. recitation of texts associated with the tradition of the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shi Jing* 诗经). This public performance has been closely linked with both the court ceremonial and diplomacy which played a special role in the era of disunity: the ability to rely on a relevant quote from a well-known text corpus in one's arguments was seen as a sign of education and erudition [1].

Besides, education in traditional China up to the 20th century largely relied on expressive recitation (reading aloud), especially of poetry. That's no coincidence that the word "sound" *sheng* 声 has also the meanings of "voice" and "melody" [2, P. 684]. Recitation of classical poems, sometimes merged with singing, was probably the most common way to present a poetic text for the educated elite until the early dominance of the vernacular [3, P. 36]. Many formats of traditional poetry, that are close to vernacular literature, from the *yuefu* 乐府 song to the *ci* 词, *qu* 曲 and the whole family of prosimetric genres such as "recitation to the accompaniment of the drum" (*guci* 鼓词), have emerged and developed in close connection with their oral performance [4].

The modern tradition of poetic recitation in China (*shige langsong* 诗歌朗诵) is based on the evolving voice dimension of Chinese poetry. The history of its occurrence must be traced to the campaigns for language reform of the 1910s [5, P. 25]. The main goal of the movement was to make the language more accessible and flexible to ensure communication between the members of a modernized nation. The first proponents of the idea of poetry recitation in the 1930s' have adopted this ideology, especially those whose works demonstrate a strong left-wing bias. They wrote about the need to reject the traditional melodic

performance of classical poetry and the closed community of its practitioners in favor of a chanted or yelled verse, which was able to get out to the masses, to agitate and to awaken [5, P. 58].

This leftist populist tradition of poetry was finally established during the Second World War and was legalized in the 1950s and 1960s in the form of a politicized mass culture – dramatized presentations of poems associated with all-nation campaigns of the Mao Zedong era. It is impossible to overestimate the role that the phenomenon of recited poetry played during the Cultural Revolution and the ensuing democratic movement. Famous critic Tang Xiaobing 唐小兵 calls it the «lyrical age» [6, P. 171], the epoch of revolutionary utopian desires and passions, which found expression in the development of the poetry recitation practices. In the era of reforms an important role in this process was played by the so-called “Misty” or “Obscure” poets (*menglong shiren* 朦胧诗人), associated with *Today* journal (*Jintian* 今天), and those who were actively involved in samizdat and unofficial poetry circles as early as Cultural Revolution.

A striking example of such authors is the poet Huang Xiang 黄翔 (1942–). During the Cultural Revolution he lived in Guizhou in the attic of an abandoned Catholic church, which had become a meeting place for a group of aspiring writers – soon to become the “Wild Ducks Literary Salon” (*Yeya shalong* 野鸭沙龙) [7, P. 610–611]. In the early stages of the democratic movement Huang Xiang moved to Beijing. Huang is probably best known for his theatrical performance style – the voice of the poet breaks into scream, roar, he is crying and shaking his fists. This is recitation driven to the absolute.

For contemporary Chinese audiences this wild style of performance exemplified by Huang Xiang is much less separated from the officially approved manner than it seems to an untrained observer. Both stem from the same tradition of poetic recitation as means of conveying a hyperbolized emotion and as an agitation tool; they differ in the choice of their dominant stylistic and performance platforms. Many “unofficial” poets in contemporary PRC organize various spaces for the sounding poetry themselves – one can remember the “White Nights” (*Baiye* 白夜) bar in Chengdu owned by poet Zhai Yongming 翟永明 or Mo Mo’s 默默 “Coquette Academy” (*Sajiao shiyuan* 撒娇诗院). However, as a rule poetic recitation acts as part of a larger event: poetry festival, book publication, etc., while the association of poets with avant-garde or semi-official circles is quite stable [8].

As far as technique and performance style are concerned, the most interesting experiments in this area belong to the so-called poets of the “third generation” (*disan dai shiren* 第三代诗人). Already since the mid-1980s a new generation comes out on the Chinese poetic scene, their work was a direct reaction to the tradition of “Misty” / “Obscure” poetry and they defined the poetic landscape of the 1990s. For the most part, these authors were younger, better educated, and more open to the influence of world literature. Many were fluent in foreign languages. If Russian, French (Baudelaire) and Chinese republican tradition had the main influence on the “Misty” poets, most authors of the new generation were familiar with contemporary American poetry. At the same time due to their focus on the reformatting of the poetic language they worked more intensively with the tradition of classical Chinese poetry in an attempt to find there a starting point for creating the “voice” of the new poetry.

The quest for an adequate strategy of constructing the language is one of the most important aspects in the history of Chinese poetry of the past thirty years. It is on the basis of their approach to language that two different poles or two creative paradigms, which tend to certain authors, are singled out.

The first strategy can be labeled “intellectualist” (*zhishifenzi* 知识分子); it is related to construction of a complex subject, thereby the independent nature of the language itself is exposed. The second, “populist” (*minjian* 民间), is based on the idea of moving the language of poetry closer to everyday speech, of maximizing their syntactic and lexical similarity. Of course, the very structure of Chinese language, with its analyticity, its colossal amount of homophones and, as a consequence, increased dependence on the written sign for transmitting values creates a tension between the written word and the word voiced. The dichotomy of sound / sign is further complicated by the convention of the sign, the absence of its interrelationship with articulation, in part due to diachronic reasons. The paradox of Chinese poetic tradition is that despite the need to correlate recited text with the “libretto” it is precisely the voicing of a versed text laden with quotations, allusions, phraseology that is difficult to perceive by ear that turns into a central element of any performance, even drama, where calisthenics and music recede into the background. Despite the fact that most of the experiments of modern and contemporary poets are inseparable from the visible image of the word, they are consciously moving towards investigating the possibilities of poetry that finds an audible voice.

Among the most prominent representatives of this trend is the poet Hei Dachun 黑大春 (Pang Chunqing 庞春清, 1960–). At the beginning of the 1980s he, along with other writers and artists of Beijing, has founded the Poetry Society of Perfect Clarity (*Yuanmingyuan shishe* 圆明园诗社), located on the site of the ruins of the former Imperial Summer Palace (known as the Yuanmingyuan, “Gardens of perfect clarity”). As the embodiment of the lyrical voice of the bohème, he was one of the frequent authors in the unofficial journals published in Beijing and has performed with poetic readings. At the beginning of the 1990s when a group of new young poets and artists settled in the park, Hei continued to be an active participant in their activities. He writes poetry and gives recitals, concerts, combining music and verse. In 2006 he released his book *The Night is Black* (*Ye heihei* 夜黑黑) with an attachment of poetry performance on CD.

Hei Dachun’s performances in which declamation is combined with the accompaniment of his rock band “Vision” (*Muguang* 目光) explore the possibilities of Chinese sounded words. Despite the fact that Hei Dachun’s texts are difficult for literal apprehension through listening (because of the homophony of language, the complexity of poetic phrase loaded with long definitions), they have a melody similar to the melody of the traditional *ci* song as some critics say [9, P. 69]. For example, the poem *Beans* (*Dou* 豆, 1995) clearly falls into two quatrains – as it is customary in the *xiaoling* format (小令), a subspecies of the *ci* [10]. The even lines end in rhyme, with all the rhymes in level tones (*pingsheng* 平声), which is preferable in traditional Chinese regulated verse (*lüshi*, 律诗). In addition to that, the initial phonetic word of each quatrain also rhymes with line endings. All this reinforces the atmosphere of nostalgia, which prevails in the poem.

These features of verse structure, which are most clearly denoted by its voice presentation, are related to the tonal nature of Chinese language. When singing in Chinese a phrase's tonal pattern cannot be completely preserved due to the need of conforming to the tune. Recitation allows not only maintaining the original tonal unity, but also emphasizing and strengthening individual syllables by stretching the time of their utterance. It is in the voiced verse that the melody of speech is actualized and its prosody highlighted. It is no coincidence that Hei Dachun believes his work to owe much not only to rock music but to folk traditions of sounded poetry that can be traced back to the *Classic of Poetry*. In an interview he calls his art association, consisting of the poet and his accompanying musicians, “Declamatory group” (*Geshi Xiaozu* 歌诗小组), thus playing on the Chinese word for “poetry” (*shige* 诗歌, which literally means “poems and songs”) that by the simple permutation of syllables is converted into the phrase “to perform (chant) verses” [11].

An example of another variant of working with the sounded word is Yan Jun's creations. Yan Jun 颜峻 (1973–) grew up in the city of Lanzhou, where he studied philology at the Pedagogical University of Northwest China and worked as an editor until he moved to Beijing in 1999. Since then he has become the central figure of “underground” (*dixia* 地下) or unofficial (*feiguanfang* 非官方) music scene – as a critic, publisher and musician. Yan Jun also established himself as a poet, editor of the unofficial magazine *Letter* (*Shu* 书) and author of the book *Infrasonic Waves* (*Cisheng bo* 次声波), which included his poems written between 1991 and 2000.

On April 8, 2003 he gave a big solo “concert” in Beijing, where the work of audio and video artists acted as an accompaniment to his recitation. In collaboration with the electronic duo FM3 and multimedia artist Wu Quan 武权 he released a CD titled *Sub Jam 012* (no date, probably written between 2003 and 2004) based on the original live recordings.

The disk comprises 11 tracks. Yan Jun's recitation often deviates from the text of his poems (in the form in which they are included in the collection) on the lexemic and suprallexemic levels. For example, “spent all the money” (*yongguangle suoyou de jinqian* 用光了所有的金钱) replaces “used up all the semen” (*yongguangle suoyou de jingye* 用光了所有的精液) in the *Yellow Submarine* (*Huangse qianshuiting* 黄色潜水艇), and in the long poem *Against All Organized Deception* (*Fandui yiqie youzuzhide qipian* 反对一切有组织的欺骗), which occupies the central place in the original live performance, some passages are constantly redrawn and relocated [12]. This can be compared with the performance practice of the classic *ci* song, with its text never been considered untouchable to variation, with the only difference that the authors of songs (at least the male writers) never engaged in the performance of their own works.

With his strong, deep voice Yan Jun's audio presentation is fully focused on the sounding of his lyrics, through the use of visual and musical accompaniment creating the effect of a three-dimensional performance. The very structure of his verse, the interior of which is based on frequent repetitions, allusions and citations from sources familiar to the audience (such as *The International*, texts of John Lennon, Mao Zedong, Li Bai, etc.), contributes to the comprehension and the immediate experience of poetry during declamatory performances.

Conclusion

This use of hybrid formats of information presentation captures new ways of verbal interaction in the practice of rethinking of the tradition.

American poet Charles Bernstein in his essay-manifesto *Artifice of Absorption* (1987) [13] has pointed out that language should be in the center of poetic attention, but not substituting for what is said. This idea was readily raised on the shield by contemporary Chinese authors, captured by the element of experimentation that accompanied the poetry of the “new China” throughout its existence.

Despite the presence of a space of variations, in the classical period those variations inevitably turned out to be placed in the framework set by the predecessors. This presupposed reproducible patterns. The revolutionary character of the new type of poetry consisted in its adaptation of non-Chinese (mainly Western) aesthetic dominants – a kind of internationalist spirit. This ardor was also manifested in the iconoclastic, experimentalist mood, which contributed to the “great liberation of poetics”.

In practice, this meant that the language of modern Chinese poetry included a lot of heterogeneous elements. This gave the contemporary poet opportunities that were inaccessible to his counterpart in the premodern era and at the same time created the phenomenon of a “misty / obscure” text with its often deliberately complicated comprehension.

In the field of declamatory practice this becomes especially acute in connection with the general aspiration to the problem of the “living” or “sounding” word. This problem lies at the center of many works in poetics and linguistics. In Germany, a whole scientific trend (“Ohrenphilologie”, or “auditory philology”) was formed way back at the very beginning of the 20th century, headed by the famous linguist Eduard Sievers [14]. In the English and American science of verse, elements of sound have long been introduced into the analysis. In China scrutinizing the audial / written dichotomy in the field of poetry presents a constantly growing trend both in theory and poetic practice.

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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