

The Revival of Classical Chinese Poetry Composition: A Perspective from the New Liberal Arts

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ABSTRACT

For nearly a century, the composition of classical Chinese poetry had been on the decline, which was caused by the evolution of language and the transformation of education. However, the last decade has seen a rise in classical poetry writing. What most astounds the world is that younger generations have actively joined this writing movement. The objective of this paper is to examine the current phenomenon and the potential factors from the perspective of new liberal arts. Through general observations from students' works in the composition of Chinese classical poetry, this paper also makes a historical comparison of the education mode between the decline and revival period. The findings indicate that it is information technology that brings back the three-millennia-old artistic form to this new era. The enhancement of information technology has removed the obstacles to accessing poems and has aided the process of writing poems. The revival of classical Chinese poetry composition exerts a far-reaching impact on poetry education in the context of new liberal arts. The results of this paper highlight the necessity of more research in similar areas.

INTRODUCTION

China is an enthralling country with an extensive cultural heritage and a long history. As an essential part of cultural heritage, Chinese poetry has always been regarded with high respect. It is the dominant form of literature, incorporating the evocative elements filtered through the minds of writers. There are three significant periods in Chinese poetry. The early period was typified by folk songs constructed in repetitive forms. The classical period, which spanned from the Han dynasty until the fall of the Qing dynasty, saw the development of a wide range of forms. Throughout the modern period, westernized free poetry has emerged. According to Liu (1966), the term "classical poetry" primarily includes the following categories: 1) the five or seven-character ancient form (*gushi*), which does not have tonal or metrical regulations but is rhymed; 2) the five or seven-character regulated verse (*lüshi*); and 3) *ci* poetry in uneven lines.

In China, children as young as three years old begin memorizing ancient Chinese poems. By the time they start school, some children can recite several classical Chinese poems. Students have to learn approximately one hundred classical Chinese poems over their first six years of elementary school. Additionally, students are required to learn about one hundred classical Chinese poems in middle school. From primary school through university education, the tradition of

poetry instruction has been maintained, and it has a strong influence on the Chinese. When the Chinese write essays, they often cite lines from poetry. Moreover, they frequently use poetry quotations in their speeches. In some ways, classical Chinese poetry instruction serves as a means of lifelong education for all Chinese. The essence of Chinese classical poetry can fairly account for this Chinese legacy.

However, education in classical Chinese poetry has long been input-driven and content-based, resulting in the downfall of this wonderful artistic composition. Most students rarely practice the writing of regulated verse, as it is difficult for them to select rhymes, choose the level and oblique tones, and even do scansion on the metrical patterns. Though there has been a renaissance in classical Chinese poetry composition, little research has focused on the phenomenon of why this revival breaks out, and how the new information technology will affect the compositions of classical poetry from the perspective of new liberal arts. This paper attempts to elaborate on the process of classical Chinese poetry writing, from its decline to its revival, from the education mode to information technology. A qualitative method of general observation was used in this research. The findings will shed light on the crucial role that information technology plays in the sub-disciplines of new liberal arts, as well as provide a fresh research angle on the relationship between composing

traditional Chinese poetry and using modern technology devices in this new era.

LITERATURE REVIEW

At the intersection of Computational Creativity (CC) and Natural Language Generation (NLG), the integration of poetry with information technology has been a popular topic. There are a variety of automatic poetry generators available online in many languages. They are NLG systems that generate text with poetry elements including meters and rhymes, as well as some abstraction and figurative language. Oliveira et al. (2017) stated that many poetry generators have been invented and reported in the literature, which takes place in the domain of computer science. They are often intelligent systems that deal with various levels of language, from syntax to lexical choice and semantics. A set of semantic predicates, one or more seed words, a prose description of a message, or a larger piece of text, such as blog posts or newspaper articles, can all be used to generate poetry. Longer texts can be represented in poetry by the use of keywords, associations, phrases, similes, metaphors, dependencies, or semantic relations taken from them, and they can also express the same attitude or emotions. Poems are usually constructed from templates, which are either handmade or derived from human-produced poems, and then filled with data from the inspiration document. The subject has seldom been discussed outside of the realm of computer science. This is also true with automatic Chinese poetry generators. However, automatic poetry generators are not our concern in this paper, for, in terms of creative writing education, we are more concerned with computer-aided applications in the Chinese context.

Another area of research on poetry and information technology has been on how to use technology to improve poetry instruction. Indeed, there are some studies on the use of automatic poetry generators in poetry education. As it is universally acknowledged that students find poetry writing difficult, some scholars believe that digital writing and the use of automatic poetry generators can support students' poetry writing. With the support of AI-based co-creative tools, the learners perceived poetry writing as an enjoyable and easy task, while teaching poetry through automatic text generation was also feasible (Kangasharju et al., 2021; Kangasharju et al., 2022). However, the majority of studies are concerned with the use of multimedia as an auxiliary tool to improve poetry teaching which centers around poetry reading. Some scholars devoted themselves to the research on how to improve students' comprehension and memorization of classical Chinese poetry with the aid of augmented reality technology (Chen & Wang, 2021). Few researchers have studied the influence of computer-aided poetry writing applications and their relationship to the revival of classical Chinese poem composition which had been declining for about a century. This will be an inspiring topic to be discussed from the perspective of new liberal arts.

"New liberal arts" refers to the integration of new technology into humanities and social science courses to provide students with comprehensive interdisciplinary learning

(Zhang & Wang, 2022). It was first initiated by Hiram College in Ohio in October 2017. Lori (2008) once called on his faculty to equip students to be intellectually nimble and socially responsible thinkers and doers with: 1) a breadth and depth of knowledge rooted in the liberal arts; 2) experience offering meaningful solutions to real-life challenges; and 3) a demonstrated 21st-century academic skillset and mindset. The decline and revival of classical Chinese poetry writing are to be examined from a historical and technological perspective in the context of the new liberal arts movement that features information technology in ushering in a new paradigm to classical Chinese poetry education.

THE DECLINE OF CLASSICAL CHINESE POETRY WRITING

It is often believed that three factors contributed to the demise of classical Chinese poetry composition, namely, the transformation of educational systems, the evolution of the Chinese language, and the influence of the Western literary form (free verse). Classical Chinese poetry is presumably related to classical Chinese. A syllable can convey more meaning in classical Chinese than in modern Chinese, and this, along with the fact that classical Chinese is not as precise in its meaning as modern Chinese, makes classical Chinese a more difficult language to learn. It is widely considered to be a language in which each syllable has a distinct meaning. Modern Chinese people do not speak classical Chinese; instead, they speak modern Chinese. It is just as easy for the ancients to compose ancient poetry as it is for the present Chinese to write modern lyrics for songs. If modern Chinese poets wish to produce classical Chinese poetry, they must first learn to write in a language other than the one currently in use. Classical Chinese poetry prevailed, particularly throughout the reigns of the *Tang* and *Song* dynasties. The fact that there was not a significant divide between written and spoken language at the time meant that they were naturally able to produce classical Chinese poems with ease. The spoken Chinese language became unsuited for classical Chinese poetry after the *Song* dynasty, as expressions in the spoken language became longer and the usage of auxiliary words became more common as the language evolved.

On the other hand, when the imperial examination was at its prime time and classical Chinese poetry was part of the examination, scholars would devote a great deal of time and energy to classical Chinese poetry writing in classical Chinese. Since the establishment of modern education, scholars have been unable to devote as much time and effort to classical Chinese poetry as before, and consequently, the level of their poetic craft is much lower than that of the scholars in ancient times. However, owing to the exaltation of imperial examinations, scholars unwaveringly devoted themselves to classical Chinese poetry reading and writing. From the time of *The Book of Songs* to the present, classical Chinese poetry has evolved for more than 2,500 years. From the *Tang* dynasty to the *Qing* dynasty, poetry had assumed increasing importance as it constituted part of the subject of the civil service examination. Writing poetry had become a genteel accomplishment of the literati, and, at times, a man's poems could be valued

more than gold (Chia, 1998). Since the abolishment of the imperial examinations and the establishment of the modern education system, the unification of written language and spoken language has been emphasized. Based on the new educational system that advocated the “eradication of the Imperial Civil-Service Examination system”, modern ideas of the teaching of writing began to take their shapes gradually with the rise of the “Vernacular Writing Movement” during the period of the “May Fourth Movement”. Writings in classical Chinese predominated in ancient Chinese government documentation. Even though vernacular writings in folk literature had increasingly matured in the *Ming* and *Qing* dynasties, they were despised owing to unofficial usage, therefore students were trained to write in classical Chinese in formal education.

Furthermore, there was a belief that western literature, like science and technology, as well as freedom and democracy, was the panacea for China’s ailment. Some claimed that traditional Chinese writing was corrupt and powerless and that it was as out of date as an absolute monarchy. It was roundly ridiculed and attacked, to the point of distortion and fabrication, with claims that the style and attraction of classical poetry, as well as moral preaching in fiction and theatre, were to blame for the waning of the national spirit. With the influence of Western culture, some Chinese scholars had tried to seek a change in Chinese literature. And this westernization movement was represented by Hu Shi who advocated the “Vernacular Writing Movement” and the abandonment of classical Chinese poetry. He noted, “I believe that literary reform at present must begin with these eight items: 1) write with substance; 2) do not imitate the ancients; 3) emphasize grammar; 4) reject melancholy; 5) eliminate old clichés; 6) do not use allusions; 7) do not use couplets and parallelisms; and 8) do not avoid popular expressions or popular forms of characters.” (Shi et al., 2000, pp. 357-360). After the “May Fourth Movement” in 1919, vernacular Chinese gradually became the popular and official language in China, and modern styles and modern ideas of writing were established (Shum & Zhang, 2006). A new form of poetry- modern Chinese poetry (free verse) was promoted.

In China, the abandonment of classical Chinese, the transformation of educational systems, and the influence of Western free verse are all thought to be the root causes of the country’s collapse in classical poetry composition. Indeed, classical Chinese poetry is predominantly composed of classical Chinese; however, drawing the conclusion that classical Chinese poetry is exclusively composed of classical Chinese is problematic, because a significant amount of classical Chinese poetry was composed in vernacular Chinese.

When discussing the factors that lead to the downfall of classical Chinese poetry writing, most scholars have overlooked the technical factors. Consider the writing of *ci* poetry as an example. There are over eight hundred different types of *ci* poetry, each with its own pattern and set of prosodic requirements. Furthermore, there are numerous complicated restrictions on *shi* poetry writing, which may have deterred many newcomers from participating in the writing

of classical poetry. Another technical component that makes poetry writing a daunting task is the selection of appropriate words or expressions, for poetry is known as a literary form in which the best words are used in the best order. Due to advancements in information technology, these two major impediments regarding language and technology have now been removed.

THE REVIVAL OF CLASSICAL CHINESE POETRY COMPOSITION

Classical Chinese poetry writing has been on the decline for about a century. Nonetheless, as a popular art to express one’s emotions and ideas, it has been modestly practiced among the older generations, especially among the retired educated elite. What startles the world is that the younger generations have now joined this classical Chinese poetry writing movement, which is to be approached in the context of new liberal arts.

In the Chinese context, the concept of new liberal arts has also laid a foundation to connect the knowledge learned in soft science disciplines with the technology used in hard science disciplines. As a result, a new phenomenon emerged and the revival opportunities were brought into being. Naturally, the factors behind the revival of the classical Chinese poetry composition could be traced from the following two aspects.

First, the education level of the Chinese younger generations has greatly improved and their literacy level has been brought to a new height. Particularly, classical Chinese poetry education has been enhanced with over two hundred poems taught in elementary and middle schools. The overwhelming input of classical Chinese poetry has laid a solid foundation for the output of classical Chinese poetry. As the saying goes, if one learns 300 poems of *Tang* poetry by heart, he or she is sure to be able to write poetry.

Second, information technology has been effectively integrated into the reading and writing of classical Chinese poetry. With the advancement of information technology, readers now have easy access to classical Chinese poetry. In recent years, information technologies have been used to expand learners’ access to the knowledge of classical Chinese poetry via websites, movies, television, radio, and some digital libraries. This also demonstrates that learners place a high premium on having free access to a huge repertoire of classical Chinese poetry. Once writing classical Chinese poetry was traditionally restricted to a small number of the educated elite, but now this situation is changing as new information technology becomes available. There are numerous possible reasons for the fall of traditional Chinese poetry writing, but the most severe challenge to overcome is the strict constraints on regulated poetry. Additionally, the publication of accomplished works was beyond the reach of the populace. Both of these impediments have been efficiently overcome by information technology. There are a number of applications online where classical poetry writing beginners can easily choose the patterns and appropriate expressions that are suitable to express their ideas and emotions.

There are three kinds of data application software related to the composition of classical Chinese poems: poetry automatic generators (*Jiuge* and *Yuefu*), classical Chinese poetry prosodic pattern checkers, and computer-aided poetry writing apps such as *Zhixieshici* and *Shiciwuai*. They are the products of information technology. Different from poetry automatic generators, computer-aided poetry writing apps are of great significance in the creative writing of poems. *Zhixieshici* is a popular application that has been proven to be effective in poetry writing. It is configured with 16 *shi* poetry forms and 153 *ci* poetry tunes. When poetry writing beginners learn to write poems, they no longer have to memorize the forms, prosodic patterns, and rhyming words, and they don't have to worry about whether the poems they write are out of rhythm. The computer-aided apps can assist them in checking prosodic patterns. The apps provide easy copying and sharing functions, as well as viewing rhyme tables and examples. In addition, they can also search for examples through *Tang Shi* poetry and *Song Ci* poetry. With handy new media, the publications of classical Chinese poems are no longer limited to the paper version, but more widely pervade blogs, online forums, electronic magazines and other online platforms. Therefore, many netizens have become poets. The computer-aided poetry writing applications and electronic publications help classical Chinese poetry writing practitioners actively engage in poetry writing.

CLASSICAL CHINESE POETRY EDUCATION IN THE NEW ERA

An increasing number of people in the world have realized the unique beauty of classical Chinese poetry. China has a history of more than 5,000 years and created a splendid culture. Classical Chinese poetry is part of this great cultural heritage. From *The Book of Songs* to *The Lyrics of Chu* (*Chu Ci*), from the *Chu Ci* to the *Tang Shi* poetry, from the *Tang Shi* poetry to the *Song Ci* poetry, the ancients have left us a rich poetic cultural heritage. In this treasure house, *Tang Shi* poetry and *Song Ci* poetry are the two brilliant pearls, and two insurmountable peaks of Chinese poetic creation. Classical Chinese poetry, whether ideologically, artistically, or even in content, is unmatched by any other country or nation. It gives full play to the prosodic beauty of Chinese poetry. It is a great cultural heritage of the Chinese people and is an inexhaustible source of art for Chinese poetry. Inheriting this national culture is the undeniable responsibility of every Chinese, and it is also the only way for the Chinese to develop national poetry and enrich the poetry with Chinese characteristics. Especially nowadays, with the decline of modern Chinese poetry (free verse), it is of great practical significance to draw nourishment from classical Chinese poetry and enrich Chinese poetry as a whole. The significance of reading and writing classical Chinese poetry is mainly reflected in the following aspects (Zeng, 2017).

First, it is the obligation and responsibility of the modern Chinese to inherit and carry forward the poetic tradition of the Chinese. China is one of the ancient civilizations in the world and has excellent national cultural traditions. As a big country of poetry, there are countless poems created

over thousands of years. In terms of content and artistic values, they are incomparable in poetic creation in the world. In particular, *Tang Shi* poetry and *Song Ci* poetry have unique ideological and artistic values. It is therefore the Chinese responsibility to inherit and develop this excellent national poetic tradition. To keep this tradition, it is never too much to emphasize the significance of classical Chinese poetry.

Second, as an educational form with Chinese characteristics, poetry education occupies a pivotal position in the history of Chinese national education. Classical Chinese poetry education is one of the most effective educational forms that have been kept for about three thousand years. Poetry serves as “inspiration, reflection, communication, and admonishment” (Confucius). It is because of this role played by poetry that the Chinese inherit the traditional virtues of poetry education, carry forward the traditional education, and enhance the overall quality of humanity. In 1999, the Chinese Poetry Society, Peking University, the School of Economics and Management of Tsinghua University, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, and CCTV jointly sponsored and held a seminar on “Chinese Poetry Education on University Campus”. In reading classical Chinese poetry, one can really appreciate the ideological notions and emotions of the outstanding poets, the noble sentiments of being indifferent to fame and fortune, so as to unconsciously cultivate one's own sentiments, improve one's ideological and moral quality, and realize the function of “poetry in mind, elegance in sight.” More importantly, classical Chinese poetry, as a time-tested literary form, should be practiced and developed by output-based poetry education. For about a century, poetry education in schools has been input-oriented. Now it is time to combine input with output in poetry education in schools. Based on the characteristics and advantages of the Chinese language and information technology, this traditional literary form is to be enriched and developed to meet the demands of the people in the world, for Chinese is now being taught in an international context.

Third, classical Chinese poetry provides an important reference for addressing the predicament of modern Chinese free verse. Under the influence of Western literary thoughts, many contemporary poets have ignored the expressions of Chinese rhythm, rhymes, tones, and punctuation. They have been fascinated by the form of Western poetry and indulged in creating “contemporary free poems” that do not have specified requirements for the level of tones, rhymes, or Chinese rhythm. As a result, many modern Chinese poems do not read like poetry and few can be widely circulated. No wonder some scholars assert that Chinese poetry has run into a dead end. To change this situation, the most fundamental thing is to take nutrition from the soil of classical Chinese poetry and create and develop literary forms with Chinese characteristics, rather than solely pursuing fashion from Western literature. Classical Chinese poetry is one of the most fertile soils for us to absorb nourishment from. As a gem of Chinese culture, classical Chinese poetry should be cherished and developed properly. Even in the last century, some scholars had realized the charm of classical Chinese poetry. Jerry Kuan wrote two critical articles, “The Obsession of Modern Chinese Poetry” and “The Illusions of Modern

Chinese Poetry” in the literary supplement of *China Times* in 1972. In these two articles, he noted that “While poets like Ezra Pound and many most modernized ones have been inspired by classical Chinese poetry and further influenced world poetry, many modern Chinese poets should have ignored their own rich heritage and gone to the avant-garde of the West...” (Chi, 1990, pp. 57-68). The reason why classical Chinese poetry has been circulated for thousands of years is mainly that it has the unique rhythm and tonal characteristics of the Chinese language and is easy for readers to recite. This also can explain why it has been a literacy education device in China for over two thousand years. There are not many people who can recite an entire modern free poem, but there are countless people who can recite classical Chinese poems and have a great interest in them, which suffices to show the artistic charm and artistic vitality of classical Chinese poetry. Therefore, people are more likely to accept the beauty of classical Chinese poetry in the new era.

CONCLUSION

Classical Chinese poetry composition had been on the decline for about a century, and many factors had contributed to this downfall. The evolution of the Chinese language, the transformation of education systems and the Western influence are attributed to the decline. However, the recent decade has witnessed its revival which is elaborated on from the perspective of the new liberal arts. Information technology has changed the world and redefined the disciplines in the liberal arts. With the bliss of information technology, classical Chinese poetry, a three-millennia-old poetic tradition, has regained momentum in its development. As the Chinese language has become an international communication tool and has been learned worldwide, traditional poetry education will be reevaluated and practiced in international language teaching and cultural exchange context.

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