

# Whitmanism in Chinese New Poetry Movement

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## Abstract

The rise and development of May 4th New Poetry Movement is a process of modernization of Chinese poetry, the essence of which is the revolution of spirit and form. At that period, the traditional stylistic features and the spiritual core of Chinese poetry had been tremendously impacted by the foreign modern poetry movement, among which the most influential poet was Whitman. His spirit of “freedom and democracy” and his form of “free verse” in poetry perfectly corresponded to the desire of Chinese poets at that time. It is the time chose Whitman. From the above analysis, this thesis, starting with the analysis historical background of Chinese New Poetry Movement, intends to put an emphasis on the significance of Whitmanism in the development of Chinese new poetry so as to provide reference for the study of Whitman in the domain of Chinese poetry research.

## Keywords

Whitman; Chinese New Poetry Movement; Poetic revolution.

## 1. The Historical Background of the New Poetry Movement

During the May 4th Movement, the Chinese society was buffeted by social and political upheavals. In history, an unstable society will inevitably lead to the emancipation of mind and the reconstruction of meaning. The Chinese New Poetry Movement, as Vera Schwarcz claimed, being a collection of intellectual ideas and ideologies presented as “new culture” or “enlightenment” and being all wrapped up in the concept of “national salvation”, (Vera Schwarcz, 1920:20). was the byproduct of revolution and was a huge milestone in the development of Chinese literature. The occurrence of Chinese New Poetry Movement was substantially the modernization of Chinese poetry. It had a profound influence in and was deeply impacted by the political and cultural life at home and abroad. After the May 4th Movement of 1919, west literary theories started to spread widely in China. Whitman, the father of free verse in America, pumped much new blood into the poetry world in our country. The Chinese poets finally found out some long-awaited things between the lines of Whitman with their keen insight.

## 2. The Analysis of Whitmanism in the New Poetry Movement

There exists some inevitable complex ties between the Chinese new poetry and English poetry in that the May 4th New Poetry took place in the specific historical context of cultural communication and crash between the East and West. In the cultural exchange and collision, Whitman, who had an impact on the revolution and construction process of the May 4th New Poetry, left an eye-catching mark. Ranging from the leaves of grass to the American people, Whitman’s poetry was anchored in everyday experience from a content point of view. He had rhapsodized about the democracy and liberty. In terms of form, he broke the old metrical constrains of Victorian English poetry and created a free and unrestrained poetic style. He was not only the father of American free verse, but also the founder of modern poetry all over the world. He advocated the use of unrhymed writing, the reduction of superfluous words, and the

outlets of feelings through the cadence. These propositions were of great significance to the Chinese New Poetry Movement, which is to be explored in this section.

## 2.1. The Spiritual Revolution

*The Leaves of Grass*, written by Whitman in the 19th century, was like bright star in the sky of world literature, shining with the brilliance of democracy and human nature. Influenced by Whitman, Chinese new poetry poets cast away their ambiguous attitude towards the upper class and excessive reliance on the traditional theme. They evaluated poetry from a brand-new angle. The emphasis on the individual value, the yearning for the democratic life and the worship of nature had become the main themes in the modern Chinese poetry.

### 2.1.1. The Rising of Self-consciousness and Personality Liberation

For Whitman, being “self” means man could have unlimited creative power. Whitman responded to the calling of needs at his time, in *Song of Myself*, he writes “Creed and schools is abeyance/ Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten/ I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard.” (Whitman, 2014:121). He creates a subject who has rebellious spirit to disobey the “creed and schools” and question the right to free will. For a person who has been submissive to the backward and narrow traditional tenets for a long time, the awakening of personal consciousness means breaking up with the old values and norms and being convinced of his own thought. This inspired Guo Moruo to praise the creative power of man. In Guo’s *Phoenix Nirvana* the phoenix in the is energetic and red-blooded, it has the fiercest will to destroy the old world when it was in purgatory with fire.

### 2.1.2. Pantheism: Glorify the Value of the Individual

In Whitman’s poetry, all people live under the glory and blessing of God. They are blacksmith, tinkers, or the tailors. All the American people are entitled to bath the divine in nature so they have enough space to stretch both their body and soul. In *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman writes: “And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own, and I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own.”(2014:157). The poet makes full use of the Pantheism to inspire his citizen to transfer the survival pressure into the value expectations.

In fact, the real purpose of Whitman’s proposition of pantheism was to reduce the role of God and elevate man’s status. Under this influence of Whitman, the pantheism in Guo’s poetry also brought a new wind for the poetry world at that time. When creating *Heavenly Hound*, Guo has the strongest tendency to show his rebellion and disobedience. The combination of pantheism with his passion promoted the expressiveness and fierceness in his romantic works. Pantheism, as an abstract rational spirit, denying the so-called almighty God and advocated equality and liberty, deeply penetrated into Guo’s poetry. *Heavenly Hound* is about either “who am I” or “what will I do”. “I” has always been the subject throughout this poem. What the poet emphasizes is the value of the individual.

### 2.1.3. Democracy: The Dominant Tone in the Political Life

“Walt Whitman’s democratic theme is rich in meaning, which finds expression in the language and form of his poetry as well as in his prose. The democratic theme establishes Whitman’s reputation as a singer of democracy, who exerts powerful influence on later poets.”(Zheng Junshan, 2016:195). Aiqing, who was influenced quite a lot by Whitman, greatly showed his sense of democracy in his works. Although born in a landlord family, he cut the chain with his class and got involved in the cause of democracy. In *Rock*, he writes: “One by one the waves roll on/ breaking over the rock/ Yet they’re all broken to pieces/ and scattered at its feet/ It seems that its body and face/ have been cut by swords or knives/ But it still stands over there/ smiling and looking at the sea.”(1919:10). Confronting the scour marks left by the “waves”, the “rock” never knocks under. Instead it “stands over there” and “smile at the sea”. By “rock”, the poet designs to inspire the poor to defy brute force and struggle for a democratic society. The poet

calls on the laboring class to hope for light in the dark, look forward to the democracy in the autocracy, be patient in pain and rejoice in hope.

## 2.2. The Formal Revolution

Whitman concentrated on neither grand narration nor highbrow art. Instead he concerned with the close tie between the colloquial language and poetic language. In China, the poets in the New Poetry Movement were in the same predicament as Whitman, and the old style poetry still played a dominant role for the majority. In order to loosen the bonds of the Ancient Chinese poetry writing, more and more thoughtful voices proposed to create poetry with the vernacular language. Whitman's simple but revolutionary poetry, which broke up with the past, provided a good way for the struggling Chinese poets.

### 2.2.1. Colloquial Language

Whitman often painted a busy picture in which people all enjoyed the pleasure of life with vivid words. In "I Hear America Singing", the poet heard "the shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands/ the wood-cutter's song, the plowboy's on his way in the morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown." (2014:121). Whitman uses daily language to create poetry, which could be easily understood and widely accepted by the public. His poetry has a broad social base and audience.

The modern humanism, democratic thought, and the strong consciousness of social participation contained in the colloquial language of Whitman's poetry was largely consistent with the revolutionary poetic principles of Chinese New Poetry Movement. His advocacy and practice of "colloquial language into poetry" also played an important role for Chinese poets in the expression of social life and the presentation of the popular mood. Hu Shi paid great attention to the innovation of poetic style. "He was one of the first ardent advocates of, and enthusiastic experimenters in, writing poetry in the vernacular (Baihua)-shortly before 1919, the year of the May 4th Movement." (Bian Zhilin, 1982:152). His bold and wide use of colloquial language in his poetry has its similarity to that of Whitman. In *Butterflies* he writes: "Two yellow butterflies/ Flying together up to the sky/ Somehow or other/ Suddenly, back one did fly/ The other left alone/ Is pitiful and lonely/ Not willing to fly to heaven/ For it's too lonely in the sky." (Hu Shi, 1917:10). As the first Chinese vernacular poem, this poem reflects Hu Shi's view on colloquialism in poetry. He breaks with the past and employed daily language into poetry. The language is easy-going and the lines are coherent, which is the presentation of Hu Shi's proposition that "writing poetry is like composition".

### 2.2.2. Free Verse

For the tricky problem of poetry revolution, Chinese poets cast their desperate eyes at the western poetry world, longing for a literary model to get things improved. Facing a flood of western poetics, the Chinese poets all had a natural preference for Whitman, who enjoyed a good reputation for his free verse. Under the influence of Whitman, "Free verse is now accepted in good society, where rhymed verse is even considered a little shabby and old-fashioned." "In some ways, its reform campaign had already become too successful. Although traditional rhymed and metered verse and sentiments did not perish, they seemed hopelessly passé as more and more poets, young and old, adopted free verse a la mode." (Joseph Parisi & Stephen Young, 1912:36). Compared with classical and conservative metrical poetry, free verse is a new poetic style. The "free" in free verse refers to not only the freedom from fixed patterns of metre and rhyme, but also the embodiment of the poet's ambition to set the national spirit free. Free verse highlighted the freedom of poetry creation and had a strong feedback in modern Chinese poets. Take Dai Wangshu for example, in *My Memory* he writes: "My memory is loyal to me/ More loyal than my best friend/ It exists in a lit cigarette/ It exists on a pen painted with lilies/ It exists in an old broken powder-box/ It exists in the wood-fungi among ruins/ It exists in a half-emptied wine bottle." (1989:10). It is not hard to see the elimination of poetic diction and

the disappearance of classical poetic composition. Dai Wangshu uses parallelism to emphasize that memory, existing “in a lit cigarette”, “on a pen painted with lilies” or “in the wood-fungi among ruins”, can be found all around us. This adds this poetry an emotional depth, bringing readers a sense of familiarity.

Thus it can be seen that Whitman was considered as the liberator of old poetry and the founder of free verse because of his elimination of poetic diction and use of free rhyme. The critics reached an agreement that Whitman’s free verse had made a big difference to the Chinese new poetry.

### 3. Conclusion

Whitman’s poetic spirit had deeply inspired modern Chinese poets. Hu once claimed the Chinese New Poetry Movement was “a movement of reason versus tradition, freedom versus authority, and glorification of life and human values versus their suppression.”(Hu Shi, 1934:44). The democratic spirit in Whitman’s poetry further promoted Chinese poets to abandon the servility and flattery towards the powerful forces, and cast new light on the common people. The revolutionary spirit in Whitman’s Drum-Taps was a temptation for Chinese poets. In terms of individual value, the influence of Whitman to Chinese poets lied mainly in the praise of self-worthy, the unanimous reformation of spirit and body, and the affirmation of affective value and the liberation of personality.

In addition, the formative revolution of Chinese poetry also had something to do with Whitman. His free verse, which was fresh, simple, clear and plain, had driven a shift of Chinese poetic style. The Chinese poets took lessons from Whitman’s practice of the daily language into poetry and wrote poetry in vernacular Chinese instead of classical Chinese. Without Whitman, it would be difficult for modern Chinese poets to fulfill the transformation of poetry quickly.

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