Book of Heart and Ink
Rong-Fu Wu
Department of Chinese Literature, College of Liberal Arts, National Cheng Kung University
z7108004@email.ncku.edu.tw


A frequently asked question is whether it is significant to write classical poems in modern times. I would reply explicitly and affirmatively in the following way. While it is considered natural for science researchers who work with laboratories to present scientific results from lab experiments, literary researchers have to search for their own laboratories from everyday life and the wider universe. A poet is, of course, a literary researcher. To a poet in modern times, creative writing is a form of literary experiment, especially in the area of classical poetry. To some extent, that explains why “Selected Poetry and Writing Practice” features classical Chinese poetry as a required course for students in the Department of Chinese Literature at National Cheng Kung University (hereinafter NCKU).

When it comes to classical Chinese poetry, contemporary scholars are apt to articulate the meaning of it in flowery language with extravagance. They would think too much of working on things that had already been mulled over and examined by their ancient counterparts. No wonder Su Shi, a major poet of the Song Dynasty, once criticized, “Better to eat pork than to talk all the time about dragon meat.” His comment points to a universal problem from ancient to modern times that people would “keep their eyes high and hands low” and have things better said than done. Since I have long been experimenting with classical Chinese poetry, I am fully aware of the common problems students have with the course of Selected Poetry and Writing Practice. What have they learned from this course? How many misconceptions remain or are sown? Where are the blind spots for students? How do students resolve their problems? All these questions have been carefully considered and addressed, and thinking about such issues is helpful when I work on my research.

Book of Heart and Ink is composed of three volumes. The first volume covers the span of my life from 1968, when I began my complimentary education at a junior high school, to my graduation from National Cheng Kung University, from which I have excluded my writings and knocking-on-bowl poetry dating back to my private tutoring stage, but collected a number of works on everyday life. Take for instance the poem Going to School on a Rainy Day:

Caught, both clothes and face wet, in the pouring evening rain,
Yet my ambition unfulfilled, I have to withstand the pain.
Wait to see my streams overflow into the ocean of academics,
Make big waves to achieve a success as great as river and mountain.

(Professor Xiao Qiongrui said, *This Book of Heart and Ink* has already fulfilled your ambition of making big waves to achieve a success as great as river and mountain.)

At NCKU, I won Phoenix Literary Award five times. Especially on its eighth anniversary, I composed the following three poems of *Emulating the Untitled*.

(1)
The light rain in late spring drizzles flowers away,  
Like a lady with a facial makeup on one half.  
A colorful phoenix sings exclusively on an auspicious day,  
And the rhino remains speechless throughout its life.  
The concubines of Xiang had shed tears on the bamboos,  
And the pitiful emperor of Shu Han sought everywhere for a house.  
A romantic mood for a girl swimming in the Han River is but a dream,  
And the poet himself intends no evils.

(2)
Some birds in the far forest cry in deep sorrow,  
I feel sad and gloomy in the smoky rain.  
Where is the goddess of Mount Wu?  
Thinking of the goddess at the Rou water is only an empty dream.  
With flowers withered, riverside willows have grown in green,  
A lit candle continues to shed its blood tears to its end.  
A sunflower always looks silently to the sun,  
Not envious of the fairer southeasterly wind.

(3)
The past memory like smoke fades away,  
Only the silent orchid misses its old fragrance.  
A roll of lovesickness spreads from the buds of bananas,  
With sorrows like long slender branches of willows.  
One prays with a golden needle to a weaving maid for a match,  
I stay alone with a cowherd in straw shoes.  
The bridge of magpies falls apart with shadow remaining on the Milky Way.  
I will feel heartbroken till the end of heaven and earth.

As one of the judges, Professor Chang Meng-Chi commented, “The three poems of *Emulating the Untitled* are the most outstanding work in the final selection. Personally I would pick them as my favorite. The three untitled poems are syntactically flexible and full of literary wit and intellectual brilliance. The couplets such as ‘A colorful phoenix sings exclusively on an auspicious day, And the rhino remains speechless throughout its life’, ‘Where is the lady in Mount Wu? No spirit is around at Rou water and it is only an empty dream’, and ‘Withered flowers fail to compete with river willows green, A lit candle bears to see tears shed in red.’ take patterns after the poetic scenery of Li Shangyin, a poet of the late Tang Dynasty. It is worth my congratulation for you to have such a talented student.”
In the year when I graduated from NCKU, our class published a collection of my poems in *Ching-Chin-Shih-Chih* whose preface was written by Professor Chang Meng-Chi. At that time, Chair Tang Yi-Nan of the department went to him personally and asked, “You speak highly of Wu Rong-Fu in your preface. Is it a matter of truth or a matter of courtesy?” In reply, Professor said, “It takes three years to graduate a Master of Art. However, it may take thirty years or more to cultivate somebody like Wu Rong-Fu.” Afterwards, I was employed to work as a teaching assistant in the department. (It should be noted that I was not informed of this episode by Professor Chang until three years ago, and Professor Tang also confirmed the information.)

The second volume recounts the years during which I served as a teaching assistant, and continued to pursue graduate studies for master’s and doctoral degrees. In my capacity as a TA, I was assigned to take charge of Phoenix Poetry Society and Lanting Poetry Society. The assignment required me to take students to join national contests every year. In order to train them into well-prepared contestants as soon as possible, I was compelled to review my teaching approaches from time to time. As a result, I had developed an approach of shadowboxing to help students learn step by step the Pingze rhythm spectum. With more than twenty years of teaching experiments, I was quite confident that the approach could help students learn well.

Meanwhile, I had come up gradually with a self-conscious direction of writing from the experiment of poetic creation. I began to “use the old to create the new” in my efforts to write of modern times and new feelings. For instance, I composed the poem *Computer* to address the addiction of modern people to Internet surfing and Internet cafes.

So crazy are modern humans everywhere,
Busy with Internet surfing day and night.
They press the keyboard and move the mouse continuously,
Logging onto the Internet to look for any sheep lost.
Three cups would not suffice for a spiritual lift,
And remedy software programs are always modified.
I laugh at myself as a survivor from the Tang Dynasty,
Using old rhythms to have modern poems composed.

In compliance with the metrical and antithetic patterns of Chinese poetry, the poem presents an image of contemporary social craze.

On another instance, when the Tuntex Group, a business conglomerate in Taiwan, announced its plan to construct a steel industrial zone in the Cigu habitat for black-faced spoonbills, I was so concerned about environmental conservation that I composed the poem *Black-faced Spoonbills.*

A white-faced scholar looks adorably handsome,
A black-faced bird lives hard.
There are only five hundred of them in the world.
They find no shelter in a large sky.
At the mouth of the Tsengwen River,
Standing on fist-shaped feet against the northerly wind.
It has its neck hidden all day long,
And occasionally have its furs combed.
Taking a bite every ten steps,
In an attempt to seek a source of food.
So loathsome are the mean rich,
Eyeing the long bank of my homeland.
Too powerless is my blunt mouth,
To challenge the force of silver and gold.
Looking at the gloomy sea surface,
I feel more sorrowful and hopeless in my heart.

A third example is the poem *Taiwan 921*:

Taiwan 921,
Divine Gunggung head-butted the Buzho mountain.
An earthbull turned around and stood up,
Stretching its tongue to roll in high rises.
Huge mansions fell broken by halves,
Thousands of people slipped deep into its throat.
Spacious was its stomach with four compartments,
Allowing it to again and again ruminate;
As if it would swallow the whole island,
Trembling the universe with its aftershakes.
The scenes were vivid and frightening,
A feeling of sorrow in human sympathy was sensed.
Although a heavenly punishment was seemingly possible,
Human errors should be held accountable as well;
How can we comfort young orphans?
How can we settle old women?
When the Moon was clouded by wind and rain,
Who would care to think of the mid-autumn?

Also collected in this volume is the poem *911 Explosion of Twin Towers, New York, USA*.

Alas! How strange!
Was it a mistake that a silver hawk bumped onto the window?
Suddenly the skyscrapers began to smoke,
With ghosts and souls crying terrifyingly for unknown reasons.
Red flames stretched tongues out, scorch-licking the two pillars.
A hundred thousand men and women were in there,
Whose lives thousands of firefighters tried to recover.
The gargantuan structure collapsed from the sky,
A victim was seen jumping off like a falling horse.
One aircraft crashed and another followed,
Making trouble for the Pentagon.
When the news of a lost flight was heard,
The whole world went into a state of terror!
The disaster was gradually known,
As a result of crazy anger from Al-Qaeda.
They would not care to turn the living souls into ash,
And the financial center into a grave yard.
America, the world's greatest power, could never expect such a woe.
The innocent ran pitifully into this misfortune.
Which god could they appeal to for their justice?
Heard of was bin Laden wanted,
And Hussein targeted for his ammunition depots.
Three hundred thousand American and British soldiers were deployed,
With numerous fighter aircrafts and warships.
The war was seen coming near,
And the step of peace ceased to walk.
The world hurried to get even to a quick relief,
But none learned a lesson of reprisal breeding reprisal!
He who kills will be killed,
How many people can break free and find an exit?

Dean Chen Chao-Ming of the College of Liberal Arts read the poem, saying: “With its intense and vivid description, this poem is terrifying and shocking.” This is what I mean to write about modern times in the style of classical poetry.

The third volume is a record of my life from my graduation as a Ph.D. of Chinese literature from NCKU to 2007 when I first made it to the top of Mt. Jade, the highest mountain in Taiwan. During this period, I had keener observations and understandings about life and politics, as is illustrated in White Mouse (Guinea Pig):

Born of jade nature with a pitiful life,
How difficult it is to survive as a mouse!
Not only bullied by cats and barked by dogs,
But also threatened by eagles or snakes as a food source.
Willing to be used by Bianchuei in search of meridians,
And cut open by Hua Tuo for its liver and gall.
How many of those back to life would remember this little thing?
All beings of the same kind would feel chill.

The first four lines depict the pitiful life of a white mouse. It not only endures the bullying by cats, barks by dogs, and threats by eagles and snake, but also is sacrificed as a subject of experimentation for medical science. Owing to its sacrifice, millions of lives have been saved. However, “How many of those back to life would remember the little creature?” Such a passage describes critically how human beings tend to forget gratitude. But that is not the main point of the poem. The gist lies in the last sentence: “All beings of the same kind would feel cold.” Who is, one may ask, not the same as a white mouse? Thus,
Professor Wang Wen-Chin said, “This poem, written with refined and solemn diction which transforms semantically from time to time, is so great that it excites me to pound the table as an expression of admiration.”

On another occasion, I was assigned to grade tests for the college entrance examination for designated courses. Lest I should be late for the grading job, I arrived in Taipei one day earlier and took a trip to the township of Tamshui. Thus, I wrote the poem *A Tour of Tamshui On the Eve of Grading Papers for the College Entrance Examination for Designated Courses*.

    The examination for designated courses involved ten thousand examinees,
    I took a voyage to Tamshui for a spiritual lift.
    A floating light flashed over the ocean of yin and yang,
    The feeling of win and loss is hard to be removed from an ordinary mind.
    Going up and down on waves high and low,
    Flying free in the cloudy sky near and afar.
    The rulers of talent measure sizes with care,
    Lest it should have a sardine caught but a whale let go.

Classical Chinese poetry is a kind of solid scholarship that takes a lot of study and practice. A saying goes that an expert sees how people perform. A performance speaks for itself. An expert also knows to what extend one has learned. That is why an ancient saying runs, “Show your sword to a swordsman, and produce no poem to a non-poet.” Students often asked me: “Hu Shih advocated ‘Eight Nos’ and referred to meters, antithesis and rhymes as hand and foot cuffs, didn’t he?” I would ask them, “Don’t you think that the poetry produced in the Tang dynasty is regarded the best in Chinese history? The Song Ci poetry was much stricter than the Tang poetry. Both of them were hand-and-foot cuffed, why were they composed so beautifully? There must be a lot to learn from classical Chinese poetry.

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