

Trading Metaphors: Chinese Prose Poetry and the Reperiodization of the Twentieth Century

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¹ Genre as metaphor is discussed in Rosmarin 1986. Stephen Monte (2000: 24), critic of English and American prose poetry, writes that “genre is much more an interpretive framework than a category of classification.”

Literary periodization, like genre classifications, is at best an explanatory and exploratory metaphor.¹ It uses adjacencies in time and context to help us see connections between literary works: it is useful not just because it offers a shorthand for talking about groups of works, but because it gives us new ways to understand a literary work or group of works. This is similar to the sensation we might have, when told a particular subway line is a city’s “major artery,” of filling out the details of the analogy—the subway carries important things from one place to another, the health of the city depends on it, it branches and divides, it lies out of sight of the city’s surface. Calling a subway system a “web,” on the other hand, allows us to visualize the strands of its connections, statically, as if on a map, and emphasize the way a subway gives a city cohesion. Each metaphor provokes observations that are true; each has limits; the limits of each are recouped, to some extent, by the presence of other, equally useful metaphors. Just like subway metaphors, a good literary-historical period should be *apt*, namely a time categorization that groups together works possessing real similarities. Also like metaphor, there can be multiple ways to use periodization to understand one particular work: for instance, much

recent work on Chinese literature has centered on reading late Qing literary works as part of the modern period.² These works extend modernity back before the overthrow of the Qing government, and use that modernity as an interpretive metaphor to come to richer understandings of some kinds of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature. The perceptions of similarity occasioned by a modern period that is not demarcated by the fall of a dynasty supplement what historians, critics, and readers learn from a metaphoric periodization of Chinese literary history that divides works of the late Qing from those of the early Republican period.

The other boundary of the modern period, its end, has not been considered as deeply as its beginning. Over the past twenty years, a rough consensus has appeared among some Western scholars regarding the division of twentieth-century Chinese literature into historical periods. One representative example of this consensus is *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature*, which is divided into three political/historical periods: 1918–1949, 1949–1976, and “Since 1976.” The works from the middle period, 1949–1976, in both fiction and poetry, are almost exclusively from Taiwan.³ The introduction compellingly justifies this structure, citing the fact that during this period Mainland literature was “burdened with . . . ideological expectations” and that the society of the time was “a closed world in which individual voices were summarily stifled” (Lau/Goldblatt 1995: xviii). In this anthology, works from Taiwan fill a blank created by the perception of inferior or censored mainland work, and this practice provides a feeling of temporal continuity (because it includes works in Chinese from all parts of the twentieth century) at the expense of the cultural and spatial continuity of the 1949–1976 period.⁴ In putting this periodization into practice, *The Columbia Anthology* may have been influenced by ideas like those advanced in *From May Fourth to June Fourth*, a volume focused on the mainland and centered on “the question of whether and how Chinese literature since the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) shows continuity with what is commonly known as ‘May Fourth’ literature” (Widmer 1993: ix).

²Some examples of a very rich literature on this interstitial period include Link 1981, Wang 1997, Pollard 1998, and Gimpel 2001.

³The only exception in *The Columbia Anthology* is the work of Mu Dan, whose final poems were composed in 1976 and who may be more representative of poetry “since 1976” than earlier. There are also two works that periodize with a particularly careful eye to history: C. T. Hsia’s (1961) *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* creates divisions at the founding of the Nationalist government in 1928 and the start of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, and McDougall and Louie’s (1997) *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century* creates divisions at the start of the war, as well as the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1965. Each, however, stresses that very different works appeared in the same historical periods, Hsia by subdividing into literary groups and trends, and McDougall and Louie through direct mention, for example on page 5 where attention is drawn to changes in the literary world of the 1970s that are not reflected in the book’s chapter-level periodizations.

⁴There is also an argument to be made that this practice pulls the literature of Taiwan out of context, typifies Taiwanese literature as fully contiguous with mainland literature, underestimates the impact of prewar native Taiwanese and wartime Japanese-language literature, and artificially establishes 1976 as a year of significance to Taiwan.

Coeditor Ellen Widmer goes on to point out, though, that “the findings of both the conference as a whole and of several individual papers are that these apparent commonalities need careful qualification before they can sustain meaningful comparisons and that in many ways it is discontinuity, not continuity, that prevails” (ix). To reinterpret this assessment, the findings of the conference show that to define modernity as a period that proceeds from the late Qing to the end of the May Fourth movement, and then recurs somehow during the Deng period, is interesting and can be meaningful, but this metaphor needs to be balanced by other lenses and other periodizations, especially those that acknowledge and attempt to chart the discontinuities in literature between May Fourth and later work.

Some Chinese critics also practice a literary periodization that emphasizes continuities between May Fourth writing and literature after 1976. Their works are more likely, however, to be complete histories of *baihua* literature in the twentieth century, such as Zhu Donglin’s (1999) *History of Modern Chinese Literature*. This practice is different from the Western periodization just mentioned in that it includes and describes the early Communist and Cultural Revolution period, but the two create a similar continuity between May Fourth and the present. Significantly, however, Zhu Donglin’s history, and others like it, tend to divide modern literary history into two volumes, and the dividing line they most often use is 1949, indicating some kind of important difference between literature written before and after the founding of the PRC.

Many critics structure their works without recourse to periodizations that draw strong connections between works written before and after 1949: a list of such works would include those organized by thematic content, by region, and by ideology, all of which avoid a national historical periodization in favor of individual, idiosyncratic, tailored periodizations. In this essay, however, I examine one long-standing national temporal division: literary historian Hong Zicheng’s argument that the division of Chinese

literature into modern (*xiandai*, pre-1949) and contemporary (*dangdai*, post-1949), common in the Chinese academy since the late 1950s, is “still an efficacious viewing angle on the situation of literature in China during this century” (Hong 2007: xvi). This is identical to the practice in *The Columbia Anthology* just described, except that by refusing to create a period boundary in 1976, it argues or allows the argument of a certain level of similarity between Mao-era works and those that came after. Some scholars of Chinese literature writing in English have also begun to read works in a way that makes connections between pre-1976 and post-1976: Yibing Huang, whose book *Contemporary Chinese Literature: From the Cultural Revolution to the Future*, does some work in knitting the years before and after 1976 (Huang 2007); Michelle Yeh finds mainly Mao-period origins in what she calls the “cult of contemporary poetry” (Yeh 1996: 57 *et passim*); and Kam Louie’s (1983) article on “literary doublethink in post-Mao China” begins with Mao Zedong’s “Yan’an Talks,” which became a part of national literary policy when the Communists founded the Republic in 1949. These kinds of works, which focus on literary historical or aesthetic narratives that begin in or around 1949, are roundly outnumbered, however, by works that start with either May Fourth or 1976. With the understanding that these periodizations, like metaphors, are intended to be descriptive and are therefore not mutually exclusive, in the next two sections of this essay I examine the utility and explanatory power of applying Hong Zicheng’s “modern/contemporary” periodization to the history of mainland Chinese prose poetry (*sanwen shi*), a literary genre that has spanned the twentieth century and all regions of China, but which has not yet been fully integrated into multigenre literary histories or anthologies like the ones already listed.⁵ In the final section, I ask how the modern/contemporary periodization might limit or block our perception of Chinese prose poetry and reflect on the benefit of looking at the practice of periodization as an organizing metaphor rather than a canonical tradition to be upheld or overthrown.

⁵ One of the more striking pieces of evidence of the widespread reach of prose poetry in the twentieth century is Feng 1992, a sprawling eleven-volume anthology of prose poetry divided by province and including volumes from Inner Mongolia and Tibet; if the reader’s time is limited, a more practical choice is Wang 2008, a two-volume anthology of prose poetry and prose poetry criticism that stretches from 1918 to 2007. Meanwhile, however, Lau and Goldblatt (1995: 542) produce only one prose poem in their anthology: “Salt,” by Taiwanese poet Ya Xian, which they incorrectly break into poetic lines.

⁶ In this essay, I borrow most heavily from two literary histories of the prose poem—Huang 2006 and Wang 1987. They have differences in emphasis and analysis, and they pursue different authors and works, but both include the basic works I discuss. No Western author has yet written a literary history of prose poetry; studies have been limited to either May Fourth or post-1980 works.

⁷ This call is most firmly made by Guo Moruo, who considers pieces by Qu Yuan, *Zhuangzi* and the rhyme-prose or *fu* to be proof of a long tradition of Chinese prose poetry. See a reprint of his essay “Lun shi” in Wang 2008: 1243–1248.

Most Chinese critics and literary historians today read mainland Chinese prose poems as part of a tradition that spans the twentieth century.⁶ Generally resisting calls to place the origins of Chinese prose poetry in classical literature,⁷ they start with Liu Bannong, who first used the term *sanwen shi* in 1918 in the translation of an article from *Vanity Fair* and then translated several prose poems by Ivan Turgenev. Literary histories conventionally recount that the practice of composing prose poetry then spread through May Fourth poets and prose writers alike, reaching its height with Lu Xun’s *Wild Grass* (*Ye cao*), published in 1927. After *Wild Grass*, production gradually diminished until after the end of the War of Resistance Against Japan and the establishment of the PRC. In the 1940s, Guo Feng published many well-received prose poems, and in the 1950s, Ke Lan and Guo Feng both published prose poetry collections. After the 1950s, perhaps as a result of the end of the Hundred Flowers Movement and political accusations that leftist critics leveled at both Ke and Guo, there was very little prose poetic composition until the end of the Mao period. Several influential prose poems, including some affixed to the monument in Tiananmen to commemorate the death of Zhou Enlai in 1976, were written in the late 1970s; by the middle of the 1980s, a “prose poetry fever” (*sanwen shi re*) began that led to a proliferation of magazines, and critical works, whose influence continues today. This is a useful literary history, one that will doubtless persist well into the future: by beginning with Liu Bannong’s adoption of the concept and the form from English and Russian, the narrative emphasizes prose poetry’s transplantation and transnational character; by conceptualizing later prose poets as inheritors of Lu Xun’s practice in *Wild Grass*, it leads us to look for the qualities of *Wild Grass* in later works—for example, the mood that Lu Xun called *tui fei* (depressed or dispirited) (Lu Xun 2005: 4: 224) or his interest in Baudelaire, who as a result has been carefully studied by Chinese scholars and authors. Unlike the previously mentioned Western literary histories and anthologies, which ignore most work between 1949 and 1976, these histories always include

prose poetry of the 1950s, though like their Western counterparts they focus mostly on the May Fourth and the 1980s.

Historical narratives of Chinese prose poetry that begin with May Fourth and include the rest of the twentieth century make assumptions about the nature of prose poetry that can create significant confusion when applied to individual poems written during the May Fourth period. This is a work by Shen Yinmo that some critics consider to be the first original prose poem written in Chinese⁸:

Moonlit Night

A frosty wind whistles as it's blowing,
the moonlight shining so brightly.
A towering tree and I stand side by side,
but without touching.

月夜

霜风呼呼的吹着，
月光朗朗的照着。
我和一株顶高的树并排立着，
却没有靠着。⁹

When read as a prose poem, what is striking about this poem is that it is *lineated*: there are line breaks after the commas in lines one and three, something that would of course never happen in prose. This lineation, further, is not a mistake or the result of a prose sentence being forced to fit into a particular column width; each line in the original Chinese ends in the particle *zhe/zhao*, which provides a kind of sonic and visual return similar to rhyme. The use of the particle changes in the last line: *zhe* in the first three lines indicates a continuing action, but in the final line, because it appears after *meiyou*, a past action is implied. As such, the particle is likely pronounced *zhao* and serves as a grammatical indicator of a completed action, giving the poem a conclusion that is at once decisive and

⁸ For instance, Zou Yuehan identifies this poem by name as the earliest attempt at the form (in Wang Fuming 2008: 12), as does Huang Yongjian (2006: 10). After putting Lu Xun at the beginning of his anthology, likely because of his stature as a writer, Wang Fuming (2008: 13) starts his mostly chronological procession of works with a version of "Moonlit Night" from which the free-verse line breaks have been deleted. Du Ronggen (1993: 85) traces the view, which a plurality of Chinese scholars seem to hold, that this poem is the first true Chinese prose poem back to a 1922 essay by Kang Baiqing in that year's *Yearbook of New Poetry*. Du himself disagrees with this view, and instead chooses poetry by Liu Bannong, on whom more appears later in the essay. His analysis is likely drawn largely from Sun Yushi (2006: 228–229; originally written in 1982).

⁹ Zhang 1998: 77. My translation. For an alternate translation, see Hockx 1994: 31.

unequivocal as well as detached and modern; the breaking of the rhyme scheme in the final line suggests that this refusal to intermingle with nature is an intentional revolt against the theme of unity with nature so common to classical Chinese poetry. Viewing this work as a prose poem, which is to say ignoring its free-verse lineation and its rhyme play in favor of a focus on its prose sentences and paragraphs, however, suppresses this possible reading, ignores the poem's free-verse qualities, and makes the work look like a pair of oddly balanced but ultimately repetitive prose sentences.

Considering "Moonlit Night" as a prototypical example of the prose poem also de-emphasizes the poem's palpable classical heritage: like classical *jueju*, quatrains consisting of either five- or seven-character lines, it quickly sketches a scene, and then in a mysterious and challenging turn imbues the scene with the expression of a personal emotion. Additionally, this poem hinges on an allusion to Du Fu's poem of the same title, which ends: "When shall we lean together in the empty window, / bright twin traces of tears dried up?" "Moonlit Night" both belongs to and intentionally counters its lyric tradition, not least by rewriting the unanswerable question from the end of Du Fu's poem with a strong, cold declaration of independence. It makes sense, then, that the editors of Shen Yinmo's *Collected Poems* categorize it as a "new poem" (*xin shi*) (Shen 1982: 1). Although not every reader understands the poem strictly according to its generic status—Wang Guangming (1987: 13) believes it is a lineated poem, and Luo Kuang (1986) leaves it out of his anthology of prose poetry—its designation as a prose poem has led Wang Fuming (2008: 13) not only to include it early in his prose poetry anthology, but to reprint it without its lineation. In fact, all of Shen Yinmo's poems that were originally printed in *New Youth* (*Xin qingnian*) had idiosyncratic, almost haphazard lineation: the poems' lines, like those of classical poems, are always end-stopped (there is punctuation after the last word in the line, creating a pause), although Shen Yinmo uses the full range of modern punctuation to stop his lines, rather than relying on the rhyme to indicate an end-stop, as in the classical tradition.

Virtually no other rule is followed reliably enough to give the impression of a formal consciousness of the qualities and limitations of the free-verse line.¹⁰ That consciousness—important not because it defines prose poetry, but because it gave the form a particular character extremely common to prose poetry today—was extremely rare before 1949 but increasingly widely shared after.

Examining the prose poetry of the May Fourth period more critically reveals dozens, if not hundreds, of similar confusions. Two types seem to predominate: (1) certain works identified by prose poetry critics and anthologists as prose poems when their authors, and the majority of their readers, consider them to be examples of other literary forms; and (2) the phrase “prose poetry” (*sanwen shi*) used to label something other than a poem written in the form of prose. When May Fourth-era works in prose poetry anthologies are examined individually, educated readers, editors, and scholars frequently consider them to be examples of other forms. Bing Xin, who is often considered a prose poet, places in the prose section of her *Complete Works* (Bing Xin 1982) the pieces that Wang Fuming and Luo Kuang identify as prose poems in their respective anthologies. That Bing Xin herself wrote a preface to the *Complete Works* indicates a certain level of editorial control over its organization, and we can thus infer that she did not consider these works to be poems. Ba Jin and Mao Dun, both famous for their prose and fiction, appear in multiple anthologies of prose poetry, but Mao Dun’s putative prose poems appear neither in his *Collected Poems* nor in the poetry volume of his *Collected Works*: they appear instead in the prose volumes, alongside his essays and other prose compositions (Mao Dun 1985, Mao Dun 1982: 11: 61, 276, 305, 207; 12: 34). Works anthologized as Ba Jin prose poems come from his book *Dragon, Tiger, Dog* (Long, hu, gou); in his introduction to the collection, he calls them *duanwen*—short pieces—as well as *wenzhang*, essays (Ba Jin 1990: 343–344). Qu Qiubai’s prose piece “That City” (Nage cheng), which appears in prose poetry anthologies as a prose poem, is categorized in his

¹⁰ See, for example, Shen’s poem “Naked” (Chiluoluo) in *Xin Qingnian* (1918: vol. 6, no. 4). Its first line is short and ends with a comma, and the second is extremely long and consists of two sentences, stretching almost to the bottom margin, and then breaking on another comma. Line three is just four characters long and seems almost to be the overflow from line two, giving it a strong syntactical and rhythmic dependence on the previous line; both it and the final line end on rhetorical questions. None of the techniques from Chinese free verse appear in Shen’s work—enjambment, use of the line break as a kind of unstated punctuation, dramatic control over the impressions that can be made by long and short lines—but the poems cannot be called prose, in letter or spirit. They seem instead to be classical poems rendered in *baihua*, with an attendant rejection of all metrical and rhyme expectations that classical poetry entailed.

collected works as an essay on literature, or *wenyi zazhu* (Qu 1985). I have found no substantial evidence that any of these authors had read other works that we today consider prose poems with any particular attention to their form as prose poems, that they themselves set out to compose prose poems, or that they made any attempt to convey to readers that any of their works were prose poems (in the way that we understand the term today). This means that although histories of prose poems that begin with the May Fourth period may help us understand later authors who might have understood May Fourth works as prose poems, classification of these works as prose poems does little to help us understand these pieces in their original, May Fourth context.

Some May Fourth authors did use the term *sanwen shi*: Zheng Zhenduo and Guo Moruo both wrote critical essays that featured the phrase, and both advocated for what they considered to be prose poetry. Their understanding of the literary form, however, is quite different from what is represented in more current works of and about prose poetry. In “On Prose Poetry” (Lun sanwenshi, 1922), Zheng consistently opposes prose poetry with rhymed poetry, as, for example, when he writes: “The works of many prose poets have already shattered the article of faith that is ‘no poetry without rhyme’” (Wang Fuming 2008: 1197). He goes on to argue that “if an expression must have rhyme to be considered a poem, then can the works of poets Whitman, Carpenter, Henley,¹¹ Turgenev, Wilde, and Amy Lowell be considered poems?” Wilde and Turgenev wrote works that could, in a very strict sense, be considered prose poems; Lowell wrote what she called “symphonic prose,” which is very similar to what we consider prose poems; Carpenter called his works prose poems, but they feature some lineation; Henley seems to be a metrical poet with strong free-verse tendencies, and Whitman has mostly been considered a free-verse poet. That Zheng Zhenduo’s definition of poetry is not based on the presence or absence of lineation makes perfect sense in his milieu: classical Chinese poems were rarely printed with careful respect to the end of individual lines

¹¹ Carpenter possibly refers to Edward Carpenter (1844–1929), and Henley is most likely William Ernest Henley (1849–1903).

of verse, and it was instead rhyme, or occasionally rhythm, that indicated the end of one poetic phrase and the start of another. The difference between free verse and prose poetry, highly visible to Western readers used to Western lineation practices in the publication of poetry, would have been less important to Zheng Zhenduo. Whereas other critics used the terms *ziyou shi*, free verse, or *xin shi*, new verse, to indicate modern poetry unfettered by traditional rules, Zheng used *sanwen shi*. Chinese writing has long been divided into *yunwen* (with rhyme) and *wuyunwen* (without rhyme) or *sanwen* (metrically disorganized writing) categories, and it is reasonable to think that Zheng has applied the term *sanwen shi* to mean “poetry without rhyme.”¹² In fact, in this context, prose poetry seems to be defined against *yunwen*—to be the polar opposite of *yunwen*—and to have few if any positively defined qualities that are not terms in an argument against the hegemony of *yunwen*.

Guo Moruo had a similar attitude, but he applied it even more broadly to works originally intended as prose. He advocated for prose poetry and against the stricture of end-rhyme in the introduction to his translation of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which he considers a prose poem: “Recently some of my countrymen have been discussing poetry; what is surprising is that the debate over rhyme has been especially fierce and that prose poems have been slandered as somehow unsound” (in Denton 1996: 204–205). Prose poetry in these formulations is the poetic nature of all exceptional prose, as set against rhymed verse: it is identical to the term *wuyun shi* (rhymeless verse).¹³ Appropriately, in the case of both Guo Moruo and Zheng Zhenduo, works selected as prose poems by editors of prose poetry anthologies are not identified as such or distinguished from prose in their *Collected Works*; additionally, although Zheng Zhenduo’s works “Briar” (Jingji) and “Suffering” (Tongku) are collected as poems in his *Collected Works*, his piece entitled “Walking Towards Brightness” (Xiang guangming zouqu), anthologized as a prose poem in Wang Fuming’s anthology, appears as a short story in his *Collected Works* and a prose essay in his *Selected*

¹² Parts of the *Daode jing*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Guanzi* are written in rhyme; in the *Wenxin diaolong*, Liu Xie divides literature into seventeen rhyming types (which he calls *wen*, literature), and seventeen non-rhyming types (which he calls *bi*, writings). Although not all the rhyming types are obviously poems, most of those types considered poems or songs do rhyme—this is the traditional stricture against which Zheng and Guo are pitting their energy.

¹³ Michel Hockx makes this argument as well in Hockx 1994: 66, as does Huang Yongjian (2006: 43).

Works (Zheng Zhenduo 1998: 1: 382; 1990: 2: 249).

Because these types of compositions—essays, short prose works sometimes called *zawen*, *meiwen*, or *xiaopinwen*, short stories, and prose poems—are so visually and sonically similar, each being essentially a few paragraphs’ worth of prose intended to create an aesthetic reaction, and because the boundaries between them seem either arbitrary or nonexistent, one may ask why categorization of an individual piece is important at all. The answer is that, at least for many May Fourth artists, categorization of a piece as a prose poem *is not* important. Zhou Zuoren, in introducing his poem “Rivulet” (Xiao he), pointed out that a thing such as prose poetry exists but that his own lineated composition was probably not prose poetry, and then threw his hands up at the entire question: “perhaps it doesn’t count as poetry, we’ll never know; but this is irrelevant” (in Jia 1986: 443). In fact, identifying individual works from the May Fourth as the origin of the stream of prose poetry’s history *obscures* one of their important functions in the May Fourth context: a rebellion against the literary tradition, in general, and the rules of classical prosody, in particular. As with many rebellions, it may be more instructive to define them in terms of what they are pitted against, what they are not, than what they are. It was important to writers and readers in the May Fourth period that these poems were not traditional rhymed verse. Whether they are prose poems by more contemporary definitions is arguable—a relative lack of authorial intention certainly does not rule out the possibility that an author has written something we can call a prose poem—but to impose that label on them can distract attention from something that May Fourth writers *did* seem to want to do: smash the ancient tradition of rhymed poetry.

Among May Fourth writers who wrote in the form, there are those who called their compositions “prose poetry” and did not define that prose poetry solely as rhymeless poetry: Liu Bannong, Xu Zhimo, and Lu Xun. Michel Hockx (2000: 105) shows that at least by 1920 Liu Bannong had a grasp of Turgenev’s understanding of the term “prose poetry.”¹⁴ Although

¹⁴ It is notable that this is not the same period in which he begins to use the term: Hockx 2000 points out that Liu’s first use of the term in *Vanity Fair* is mistaken in several ways, and that his first translations of Turgenev’s prose poems are published in a fiction magazine.

the prose poetry community calls his work prose poetry, contemporary editors who republish Liu's shorter works call them *jingdao xiaopin* (penetrating sketches) (Liu 1995) or simply *xinshi* (new poetry) (Liu 1987), and Liu himself mixes lineated and unlineated poems freely in his self-edited collections. Xu Zhimo is the author of a 1929 essay on Aloysius Bertrand, whose work Baudelaire claimed was the prime inspiration for the invention of prose poetry (Xu 2005: 3: 295–298). His 1924 collection, *Zhimo's Poems* (Zhimo de shi), has four prose-poetic compositions grouped together into a series that shows his particular awareness of the formal detour he was making around his usual metrical and sonic rigor. He does not, however, call these works prose poems, even though they meet both May Fourth and more rigorous contemporary standards for categorization as such. Of "Poison" (Duyao), he writes, "I have a poem called "Poison"—a formless, cursing poem, that vented all my pent-up feelings" (Xu 1987: 139). Instead of using the phrase *sanwen shi*, he uses *bu chengxing de shi*, literally "a poem that has not achieved form." Because of Xu Zhimo's experience with foreign prose poetry, his formal brilliance, and his later writings, it seems in this case not that he was uninterested in or uninitiated into the world of prose poetry, but that he chose, on account of his readers, to use descriptive rather than taxonomical terminology.

Lu Xun, whose *Wild Grass* is still considered the masterwork of Chinese prose poetry, was also demonstrably familiar with prose poetry of other nations. He had read and translated Baudelaire,¹⁵ and in describing *Wild Grass* in an introduction to his selected works, he wrote, "I had some little emotional impressions, so I wrote short pieces, to exaggerate a bit they were *sanwen shi*, and later they were printed into a book I called *Wild Grass*" (Lu 2005: 13: 469). Like Xu Zhimo, Lu Xun here uses descriptive terminology, first calling the pieces in *Wild Grass* "little emotional impressions" (*xiao ganchu*), and only then, almost mysteriously, saying that one would have to "exaggerate" in order to consider them prose poems. This phrase indicates, especially when read in the context of May

¹⁵ When he translated Kuriyagawa Hakuson's *Symbols of Mental Anguish*. See Lu Xun 1959: 3: 48–49.

¹⁶ See, for example, Huang 2006: 64–65, where Huang Yongjian almost wishfully removes the lineation from “My Lost Love” and tries to read it as a prose poem.

Fourth authors’ poetic and prosaic practice and their use of terminology, that modern literary historians should not unequivocally consider *Wild Grass* the exemplary text of Chinese prose poetry. It tells us first that Lu Xun himself did not unequivocally consider *Wild Grass* a collection of prose poems: indeed, *Wild Grass* contains one lineated, rhyming poem called “My Lost Love” (Wo de shilian) and one piece in the form of a play called “The Passer-By” (Guoke). Neither can comfortably be called prose poetry by any but the most nebulous modern definitions, and modern critics spend no small effort arguing that they either are or are not prose poems.¹⁶ More important, however, Lu Xun’s own assessment of *Wild Grass* tells us that he did not care enough about categorizing the works to be particularly explicit or precise. If anything, he seems to interpret use of *sanwen shi* as a kind of overblown term of flattery, instead of as a literary genre worth examining or talking about. As Michelle Yeh writes, Lu Xun’s “choice of prose poetry was haphazard rather than conscious; it was more a matter of convenience than a conscious formal experiment” (Yeh 2000: 120). It is not so much that Lu Xun was not making conscious formal experiments—*Wild Grass* is full of new and innovative literary forms—it is that our current interpretation of the book as a collection of prose poems is a side effect of the innovations he was making. In the absence of authorial interest in the genre, the motivation for critics to expend energy on debates over the status of *Wild Grass* as prose poetry comes, at least in part, from the strength of the narrative that claims that what we consider Chinese prose poetry today is built firmly on the concept and practice of prose poetry between 1910 and 1940.

The strongest advocate of this narrative, and in some ways its innovator, is Sun Yushi, whose *Research into Wild Grass* is a fundamental text for those who read and appreciate Lu Xun’s 1927 work. He writes, “Because of the appearance of *Wild Grass*, modern and contemporary Chinese prose poetry began its march toward the summit of mature independence” (Sun 2006: 22). He also writes that *Wild Grass* “no longer drew on the support

of poetry's end rhyme, making prose poetry completely independent from new poetry" (251). Sun is the critic who most strongly identifies Lu Xun as a founding figure of Chinese prose poetry. But the content of Sun's analysis, centered in a chapter called "*Wild Grass* and Modern Chinese Prose Poetry," is almost entirely about the influence of previous May Fourth poets and prose writers on *Wild Grass*, and the book's later influence on the socialist struggle and youth culture. Not only do no authors writing after 1949 appear in the chapter—raising the question of whether *Wild Grass* really did have an influence on writers of prose poetry after the founding of the PRC—but only one author is cited as having received clear inspiration from Lu Xun's *Wild Grass* in the entire thirty-eight-page chapter.¹⁷ What Sun focuses on instead is the notable absence of prose poetic works in the thirty years after the publication of *Wild Grass*: "In the territory of the numerous artistic forms opened to cultivation by China's New Literature, prose poetry counts as some of the most barren land. Even after having undergone the diligent advocacy and practice of many, thirty years have not yet borne more plentiful or substantial fruit" (256). The problem is not with Sun's reading of poems or in his research—he sees, as do many other critics, that there has been no spate of works intimately tied to or even in the general form of the extremely unique *Wild Grass*—but in the underlying narrative that May Fourth prose poetry, and specifically Lu Xun's, had a direct bearing on what prose poetry would later become. The narrative therefore comes to center on the obstacles facing prose poetry, and the question becomes why these poems did not appear, which leads literary historians, critics, and readers far afield from reading the poems that actually have appeared.

In this way, linking prose poetic practice from before and after 1949 raises questions that might not be strictly relevant to the appreciation of individual poems. It can also, however, lead readers to overlook the terms by which individual poems operate. Here is a piece by Liu Bannong that is often anthologized as a prose poem:¹⁸

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 258. The poet is Tang Tao, who is little read today, but was in fact a contemporary of Sun's when he was writing in 1981 (making him, as Sun says, a "contemporary prose poet" by one estimation, even though he began his career before 1949). Huang Yongjian (2006: 80–81) says that his work was too idiosyncratic to really touch the spirit of his age, and notes that some critics such as Wang Guangming don't consider him and his contemporaries as a true "school" (*liupai*) of prose poetry.

¹⁸ It appears in Wang 2008: 20, Luo 1986: 15, and is collected as a "penetrating sketch" in Liu 1995: 9.

Rain

This is all in Xiaohui's words, I just took it down for her and linked it together, that's all.

Ma! Today I want to sleep—snuggle close to my mother and go to bed early. Listen! On the lawn behind you, there's not even a whisper; it's my friends, all snuggled up with their mothers and gone to bed early.

Listen! On the back lawn, there's not even a whisper; nothing but inky darkness! Scary! Wild dogs and cats cry from far off, don't let them come! Just the pitter-patter of rain, why is it still pattering out there?

Ma! I want to sleep! The rain that's not afraid of wild dogs or cats, it's still on the dark lawn, pitter-pattering. Why doesn't it go home? Why isn't it snuggled up with its mother, going to bed early?

Ma! Why are you laughing? You say it doesn't have a home? Yesterday when it wasn't raining, the lawn was all moonlight, where did it go? Does it have a mother?—didn't you say yesterday, the dark clouds in the sky, that's its mother?

Ma! I want to sleep! Close the window, don't let the rain in and make the bed wet. Give my rain jacket to the rain, don't let the rain get the rain's clothes wet.

雨

这全是小蕙的话，我不过替她做个速记，替她连串一下便了。

妈！我今天要睡了——要靠着我的妈早些睡了。听！后面草地上，更没有半点声音；是我的小朋友们，都靠着他们的妈早些去睡了。

听！后面草地上，更没有半点声音；只是墨也似的黑！只是墨也似的黑！怕啊！野狗野猫在远远地叫，可不要来啊！只是那叮叮咚咚的雨，为什么还在那里叮叮咚咚的响？

妈！我要睡了！那不怕野狗野猫的雨，还在黑黑的草地上，叮叮咚咚的响。它为什么不回去呢？它为什么不靠着它的妈，早些睡呢？

妈！你为什么笑？你说它没有家么？——昨天不下雨的时候，草地上全是月光，它到那里去了呢？你说它没有妈么？——不是你前天说，天上的黑云，便是它的妈么？

妈！我要睡了！你就关上了窗，不要让雨来打湿了我们的床。你就把我的小雨衣借给雨，不要让雨打湿了雨的衣裳。

This piece clearly has many qualities of a prose poem, including prose margins, organization by paragraph, and a certain lyricism of language; moreover, it was written by someone who was conversant with prose poetry, and appeared in one of his poetry collections alongside free-verse poems. If we read it as a prose poem contiguous with later works in this genre, however, we are likely to look for aspects that differentiate the work from regular prose—an irony, perhaps, or a particular strain of musicality that transforms the narrative, prosaic story into something else. For Liu Bannong, though, set as he and his May Fourth compatriots were against the poetic tradition, the poem's value may lie in other dimensions. In his preface to the collection in which "Rain" appears, Liu writes: "I am not a poet. This word 'poet,' originally it just meant a person who makes poems. But ever since it became a name, it hasn't been able to avoid acquiring the stench of 'professionalism.'" Later on in the preface, he describes his attention to form with a dismissiveness that is similar to Lu Xun's and Xu Zhimo's treatment of their own poems: "In regards to the form of poetry, I am one who is most capable of playing fresh tricks. The rhymeless poetry of the time, the prose poetry, and the use of dialect to imitate folk songs that came later . . . all these were things I attempted first." The idea that Liu Bannong's piece was not the start of a long tradition of prose poetry but was a "fresh trick"—that it was not an attempt, for example, to use heightened prose to get inside the mind of a child and describe that mental world, but the separate observation that everyday language and

experience can be as poetic as heavily worked regulated verse—would allow us to see the poem as a composition directed against formal poetry and the Chinese poetic tradition, rather than a revolution in the use and spirit of prose. Conceptualizing the poem as an argument for the poeticity of prose emphasizes the reality of the poem’s leaps—not as artificial and invented language, but as those naturally produced by a child’s mind on the edge of sleep—and the simple, daily transcendence that Liu, who identifies himself (perhaps disingenuously) as a nonprofessional maker of poems, has recorded for his readers.¹⁹

¹⁹ As additional circumstantial evidence, Liu Bannong really had a daughter named Xiaohui. She later wrote a book about her father (Liu Xiaohui 2000).

From one perspective, it is understandable that contemporary editors include this work alongside other prose: it is possible to read this piece as a demonstration that prose can be just as beautiful and meaningful as poetry, rather than as a very particular kind of poem. Whether we call this or any other piece a prose poem is, in Zhou Zuoren’s words, irrelevant. When we abandon categorizations that span the twentieth century and look at May Fourth as an individual and independent literary-historical period, though, it seems clear that writers of the time wrote formless, unrhymed, prose-influenced vernacular poems as a way to overthrow the ancient poetic tradition, and that they largely eschewed discussions of genre except as polemic tools to advance their revolution. This, as we will see, is considerably different from literary practice after 1949: literary histories that treat the two periods as fully contiguous can suppress that difference as well as mask definitions of prose poetry specific to the 1920s and 1930s. Critical differences that persist today, including contradictory positions about who wrote the first prose poems, about how to categorize short prose of the May Fourth movement, and what May Fourth poets meant when they said “prose poetry” could be vastly simplified by encouraging definitions specific to May Fourth that are different from the more fixed understanding of prose poetry that writers and critics have today.

If May Fourth prose poets were interested in revolting against the poetic

tradition, and accordingly saw all types of poetic or aesthetic writing outside the sphere of formal, classical verse as a way to destabilize the tradition of rhymed poetry, then we must look later for the first poets who self-consciously and rigorously constructed prose poetry as an independent genre intended to mix qualities of both poetry and prose. One poet of the 1950s, Ke Lan, is quite explicit about these goals. This appears on the first page, before the preface or the table of contents, of a 1981 reprint of Ke Lan's 1957 prose poetry collection, *Short Flute of Morning Mist* (Zao xia duan di):

This book is a collection of prose poetry. The author has selected meaningful scenes from life, expressed his own emotion, and with deep feeling sung the praises of the party's leaders, the socialist system, the magnificence of labor, sincere friendship and pure love, etc. Its language is elegant, and the poems' meanings are quite significant. (Ke 1981: np)

Besides the shrill and politically protective claim of Communist orthodoxy, which accurately reflects the tone of much of the work's content and ideology, what is interesting about this brief publisher's note is its unequivocal categorization of the work: this practice of foregrounding the formal distinction between prose poetry and other literary art is one that remains exceptionally popular today, when we have magazines called *Prose Poetry* and *The World of Prose Poetry*, as well as a proliferation of prose poetry anthologies and organizations that are devoted to the genre.²⁰ From the perspective of Ke Lan and his publishers, this categorization may serve a purpose similar to the political claims also made in the note: a disclaimer that this is aestheticized language and not, as Liu Bannong's poem seems to argue for itself, a direct report of real-life events. Contradictorily, however, the note indicates that the scenes of the book are drawn from life, "selected" (*xuan*) rather than created: the overall effect is of the poet caught between instructions to tightrope write realistically and his own

²⁰ *Prose Poetry* (*Sanwen shi*) magazine has been published in Yiyang, Henan, since 1985, and *World of Prose Poetry* (*Sanwen shi de shijie*) is an online and print magazine active since 2006. Many other prose poetry-only publications have started and stopped in the last thirty years. Anthologies are too numerous to mention; some examples are Feng 1992 and the yearly series of *Selected Chinese Prose Poetry* (*Zhongguo sanwen shi xuan*), published by the Changjiang wenyi chubanshe since 2005. Prose poetry societies (*xuehui*) are scattered across many of China's cities, and there exists an all-China society as well as a China-Foreign Prose Poetry Society (*Zhongwai sanwenshi xuehui*).

²¹ The objective or documentary nature of prose is also found in the period's fiction, which virtually always exposes or educates about a basic truth, even if the details are fabricated.

anxiety about making claims concerning the nature of reality. This tipping point, between the documentary nature of prose and the individual, invented quality of poetry,²¹ is one that the collection displays again and again, as in this poem, which could almost serve as a title piece:

Dawn Mist

Spring mornings, a rainbow mist appears over the lawn. These brilliant pearls, some say they are the tears of martyrs, are the pure source of spirit.....

Look look, the glittering morning mist, it looks like eyes that can speak, and have inexhaustible, unending words...

Ah, early mist, you should stop being silent! The sun has come out. The lawn's morning colors immediately become a million shining suns. The sun dives into the dewdrops.....

And so the tears of the martyrs are wiped dry. A mass of cavorting children gallops across the lawn, trampling the million shining suns, and now the children are the morning dew, they are the sun.....

—Written at the Hongqiao Nursery School

朝霞

春天的早晨，草地上出现了朝霞。这闪亮的水珠，有人说他是先烈的眼泪，是那圣洁的心灵的泉水.....

看着看着，这亮晶晶的朝霞，又象那会说话的眼珠，它却又有无尽的说不完的话.....

朝霞呵，不要再沉默了！太阳出来了。草地上的朝霞马上成了千万个发光的太阳。太阳进到了水珠里.....

于是先烈的眼泪被揩干了。草地上跑来一群玩耍的小孩，踏破了草地

上千万个发光的太阳，现在 孩子们就是朝霞，孩子们就是太阳.....

——写于虹桥保育院 (Ke 1981: 209)

The fundamental formal character of this piece is its emphatically prose structure: a straightforward temporal narrative about the sun burning off the dew and the beginning of a school day, it goes so far as to specify, in a kind of byline at the end of the poem, the location of the writer at a nursery school. This formal element, a prosaic “written at” or “written for,” is common in Ke Lan’s work. Paragraphs are the dominant division of the piece: nothing in it would be out of place in a personal letter. And yet, when this piece is placed next to Liu Bannong’s work “Rain,” its qualities as a poem become more apparent. Liu Bannong reports a child’s speech and never really stops reporting it: Ke Lan’s writer watches the nursery school lawn, and interacts with it, speaks to it, assesses it, names it. The prose assumption, the prose form—a short description of children coming out to the lawn to play—is invested with poetic qualities that are new to it, perhaps what Ke Lan’s editors call investment with “his own emotion.” The Chinese term for “lyric,” as in “lyric poetry” is “pouring out emotion” (*shuqing*), and although one might struggle to find how Liu Bannong feels about the content of his poem “Rain,” there is no question as to what Ke Lan feels. His feelings, which appear in every poem in this three-hundred-page collection, highlighted by liberal use of the ecstatic exclamation point, are the *shi*, the poem of these works; their form is the *sanwen*, the prose.

This is not a May Fourth–era understanding of these terms. To readers trained in classical literature, “scattered writing” (*sanwen*) indicates many types of writing that do not follow regular rules. Accordingly, for May Fourth authors, it does not indicate any kind of codified idea of prose; it is a blanket term to be opposed to “rhymed writing” (*yunwen*). In the early Communist period, however, *sanwen* is the official form in which reports, newspaper articles, political position papers, and letters are all

written: it is the literary form most strongly assumed to directly represent reality, and to imbue it with the lyric voice is particularly fraught. This is why, when discussing Ke Lan's work, Wang Guangming (1987: 171) writes, "He tells you: this lifeless object, really, it has life," or why Ke Lan himself says, "whether it is a lyric poem, or a long historical narrative poem, each must pass through the author's abundance of subjective passion in order to reflect objective reality" (Wang Fuming 2008: 1221–1222). Huang Yongjian (2006: 99–100) writes that the subjective position in this literary form opens up all prose poets of the Mao period to political criticism, which came first to Xu Chengmiao, a student of Ke Lan's, and then to Ke Lan himself, when he was criticized by Yao Wenyuan in the late 1950s. This historical fact helps make more sense of the editorial calisthenics at the start of *Short Flute*, as well as the absolutely fervent political orthodoxy the book strives for: the underlying organization of the form was to filter an objectivity often supplied by the state through a subjective, individual author, and one safe way to attempt that filtering was to ensure that the subjectivity in question was a strong proponent of the Party line.

Critics since the 1950s and 1960s have reached a kind of consensus on definitions of prose poetry. This is Ke Lan's definition, written in 1981:

To use simple language, [prose poetry] is poetry written through the use of prose, and not poetry created through the use of rhymed writing. Unrhymed poetry is called free verse, prose poetry is a variant of free verse. First, prose poems don't use verses that are lineated and made into stanzas according to the length of their phrases; instead, they are verse compositions that use prose in order to link together their parts, and please remember, no matter what the form, in the final analysis they should be poems, it's only in a formal way that they are different from poems. So you can say that it is an artistic form born from the school of poetry.

用简明的话来说，它是用散文写成的诗，而不是用韵文写成的诗。不用韵文写成的诗叫自由体诗，散文诗是自由体诗的一种变体。首先，它不是用长短句排列分行而成段的诗句，而是用散文写成的连接起来

的片断的诗篇，请注意，不管形式如何，它归根结底应该是诗，只是在形式上不同于诗而已。所以，可以说，它是从诗派生出来的一种艺术形式。(Wang Fuming 2008: 1221)

And here is the opening of Wang Guangming's encyclopedia entry on prose poetry:

PROSE POETRY. A lyrical literary style possessing special qualities of poetry and of prose. It joins the expressiveness of poetry to the various qualities of prose narrativity. With regards to its basic nature, it belongs to poetry, and has the emotion and fantasy of poetry, it gives readers a sense of beauty and imagination, but its content remains prosaic detail with poetic intent; where form is concerned, it has the exterior appearance of prose, and does not resemble poetry in regards to lineation and rhyme, although it does not lack the beauty of internal music and the feeling of rhythm.

散文诗。兼有诗与散文特点的一种现代抒情文学样式。它融合了诗的表现性和散文描写性的某些特点。从本质上看，它属于诗，有诗的情绪和幻想，给读者美感和想象，但内容上保留了有诗意的散文性细节；从形式上看，它有散文的外观，不象诗歌那样分行和押韵，但不乏内在的音乐美和节奏感。散文诗一般表现作者基于社会和人生背景的小感触，注意描写客观生活触发下思想情感的波动和片断。这些特点决定了它题材上的丰富性，也决定它的形式短小灵活。(Wang Guangming 1987: 82)

These writings—one by a poet, and one by a critic—are definitional rather than polemic, a far cry from the most common May Fourth practice, which generally asserted prose poetry as an agent in the debate between rhymed and rhymeless poetry. One of the technical advances that can be seen in these definitions is the attention to the importance and impact of lineation: May Fourth authors, especially those such as Shen Yinmo writing early in the period, had little practice in the world of typographically lined poems, and never conceptualized prose poetry as a variation on free verse

that eschewed use of the line break.

These contemporary definitions—developed in the 1950s and fully codified in the 1980s—are applied retroactively to the literary production of the May Fourth; they are the tools by which critics and anthologists have created a tradition of prose poetry. Without them, there would be no occasion to see a common generic thread linking Shen Yinmo’s “Moonlit Night” and Liu Bannong’s “Rain.” However, because they assume that they are inheriting, and not creating, a tradition and a set of practices, critics today are rarely sensitive to the fact that the real origins of these definitions is well after the May Fourth. Current scholarship only occasionally promotes the notion that writers of the 1950s and 1960s were founders of a new kind of prose poetry, and when it does, the discussion is usually limited to Hundred Flowers poets, especially Ke Lan, and their establishing of the form’s “independence” (*duli*). Du Ronggen does this, saying that “the prose poems in *Short Flute of Morning Colors*, short and flexible, most limited to less than 500 characters, have a very clear difference from lyrical prose, and contributed to turning prose poetry into an independent poetic form” (Du 1993: 92). Du identifies a Liu Bannong poem as the first prose poem, and he does so on the basis of that poem’s difference from lyrical prose (86), but this is an evolution that he apparently sees as firmly established only later with Ke Lan. In fact, the phrase “independent literary form” (*duli de shiti*), which Du uses to refer to Ke Lan’s work, appears in the title of Du’s chapter on prose poetry, even though poetry written before that independence makes up the vast majority of the works under consideration, including liminal pieces by Ba Jin and Mao Dun that are today often considered to be prose, as previously discussed. This is another case of a critic encountering evidence in poems, specifically the difference between Ke Lan’s prose poetry and previous works, but being unable to respond to that evidence because of an insistence on the notion that prose poetry exists in a single large period and that works of the 1920s have strong connections to later works.

The formation and particular nature of the categorization of prose poetry as an independent poetic form, and its definition as such, become clearer when seen in a post-1949, rather than May Fourth, historical and aesthetic context. In the “Yan’an Talks on Literature and Art,” Mao Zedong sets up an aesthetic system in which artists are personally responsible for transmuting or transforming daily life into art products. Bonnie McDougall interprets:

It may be argued that in Mao’s view, the mind of the writer (consciousness) is in any case determined by the social environment (being), but by discussing the whole issue in terms of “mind” rather than environment, Mao seems automatically to imply and encourage the personal response to life (the raw material of literature), and to allow considerable room for the play of individual imagination and technique. (McDougall 1980: 19)

An emphasis on the “play of individual imagination,” even in the midst of a dramatically limited ideological and aesthetic structure, can be seen throughout the “Talks,” although perhaps not in an internally consistent, ideologically pure way. Mao is explicit about the individual author’s responsibility not just for the politics in a work of art, but for its effects on the reader (82); in matters of form, because “feudal” forms are improper for socialist art, the artist is responsible for “restructuring them and filling them with new content” (28–29). This is very different from attitudes of the May Fourth artists outlined here who set themselves against classical forms; in Mao’s view, writers internalize the material environment around them (an environment often most directly described by prose) and use technique to work it into “processed forms of art” (69). The poetic transformation of prose forms, as well as the transformation of objective life through individual poetic subjectivity, are methods of conceptualizing art that are common both to Communist literary criticism and to some post-1949 Chinese prose poetry. Communist criticism also identifies one

²² In his search for a common thread to tie the collection *Wild Grass* together, Nicholas Kaldis (2000: 77) identifies “formal or generic qualities as playing a secondary role” in *Wild Grass* and “the poet’s unceasing attempt to project or discover psyche and self in every experience or observed event” as the collection’s unifying theme. Contemporary prose poetry may by contrast be described as that in which formal or generic qualities express the poet’s attempt to observe events through the lens of psyche and self.

important difference between contemporary prose poetry and May Fourth works or works from other earlier periods that are highly subjective: in the contemporary period, the subjectivity of prose poetry is expressed through “processing,” the technical work of the artist. Generic and formal distinctions and transformations become, therefore, increasingly important as an authorial means of self-expression.²²

By way of example, here is a prose poem written by Fang Wenzhu and published in 2004:

Kind of Like Pulling Out a Nail

Kind of like pulling out a nail, pulling out crabgrass, a flower in a mirror, the dark specks in love, the nightwalker’s lamp, brilliant dreams and fog, the net in the lake, tears in rain . . .

Kind of like pulling out a nail, getting rid of a sheet of paper, ink and excess words.

Me and silvery Chinese characters push forward together, we roll along.

Kind of like pulling out a nail, pulling a piece of grit from your eye, a thorn from flesh, the scars of grief in your bones . . .

Kind of like pulling out a nail, wrenching yourself loose.

象拔掉一颗钉子那样

象拔掉一颗钉子那样， 拔掉稗草， 镜中花， 爱情的暗斑， 夜行者的灯， 黎明的梦和雾， 湖中的网， 雨中的哭泣.....

象拔掉一颗钉子那样， 拔掉纸张， 笔墨和余的词语。

我和白银汉字一起向前， 滚动。

象拔掉一颗钉子那样， 拔掉眼中的沙子， 肉中的刺， 骨头的痛心的疤.....

象拔掉一颗钉子那样，拔掉自己。²³

This is clearly a modern poem, challenging, variable, and wide-ranging; juxtaposing it with the prosaic clarity of “Moonlit Night” or “Rain” only increases a reader’s feeling of dissociation and disorientation. With respects to May Fourth pieces of prose, it seems reasonable to ask, for example, what a poem means, what its message is, and how it is intended to change the reader’s attitudes or actions; but these questions seem somehow irrelevant to a poem such as “Kind of Like Pulling Out a Nail,” which moves fluidly and unpredictably from concept to concept, and never lets us know what, exactly, the list of similes are referring to. Reading it, however, alongside Ke Lan’s work as a reaction to prose, as a piece of prose that has passed through an individual, subjective process, makes the poem considerably more interpretable. The idea that this prose poem is focused toward or against prose leads readers to consider *what prose* the poem answers or reacts to. The refrain of this poem—“pulling out a nail”—derives from an educational parable that was popular on the Internet: although versions vary widely,²⁴ the basic story is that a father tells a young boy with uncontrollable anger that from now on, he can get into a fight only after he pounds a nail into a tree in the front yard. The boy discovers that after he pounds in a nail, he no longer feels the need to fight, at which point the father tells him he can pull out a nail every time he overcomes the urge to lash out at the people around him. Once all the nails are gone, the father shows the boy the holes that are left, and says that what he’s done to his friends will never go away. In this case, the poem seems to have been written in tandem with a definition of prose poetry much like that found in Wang Guangming’s dictionary entry: the connection between the original prose, the parable intended to morally educate children and parents, and the prose poem, the “emotion and fantasy” of a speaker describing what it would be like for an individual to undergo the process that the parable simply reports, is the key to understanding the piece in

²³ In Wang Fuming 2008: 867. My translation.

²⁴ The best way to find versions of this story is to search Baidu for “pull out a nail” (*badio yi ke dingzi*), but examples can be found in the following blogs: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4d970ac70100dtpq.html, <http://12883015.blog.163.com/blog/static/3176092920078811518953/>, http://wangyifeng888.blog.hexun.com/24885932_d.html, and http://hi.baidu.com/www_ysping1_com/blog/item/4eb791013af8ea0f1c95834d.html. The examples are each quite different: sometimes the protagonist is an American boy, sometimes Chinese; sometimes the nailing takes place in a tree in the courtyard, sometimes in the family’s wooden doorstep. The story changes, as well: sometimes the boy is allowed to remove a nail every time he helps a classmate, but more often simply when he is successful in controlling his anger.

full—much like Ke Lan’s process of passing a completely prosaic moment through his own mind and own language, and thus making it into a poem that is expressive of self.

Seen from this perspective, several feelings and attitudes become visible in “Pulling Out a Nail.” The first paragraph’s images are tied together loosely by their futility: crabgrass, or more specifically barngrass, a species that can ruin Chinese crops, returns almost as fast as it can be pulled out, and the “flower in the mirror” is an idiom for those things that seem to exist but in fact do not, like the moon reflected in water.²⁵ The phrase “dark specks” often refers to visual impairments from eye disease, something that cannot be simply “pulled out” like a piece of dirt. This sense of futility is contradicted by the “piece of grit” in the fourth paragraph, which centers on the satisfaction of ridding one’s self of painful exterior stimuli. Nets can be pulled from water, much in the same way that excess paper and ink can be disposed of: there is an ominousness, however, about removing a submerged net from water and trapping or killing an unknown number of fish inside, and this matches somewhat the lost language, derided as “excess” and summarily disposed of. The tone of the poem is one of ambivalence: the dictates of self-control are simultaneously impossible, frightening, satisfying, and self-destructive. The poem explodes the simple analogy of the original parable into a messy, human, and lyric experience. At the same time, however, it does not respond to the original’s conclusion directly, or oppose it in the way that a critical piece of prose might, instead transforming the original by bringing it into the subjectivity of the author. This upholds, quite directly, what Wang Guangming (in Wang Fuming 2008: 1250) considers the goal of Chinese prose poetry: “to make subjective thought and feeling correspond and mingle with objective image.” The way in which this poem differs from Wang’s definition is that what serves as the objective image, the shared truth, in this poem is a piece of pedantic prose.

That this poem turns on questions of language underlines how much

²⁵ The locus classicus for this idiom is a stone inscription from the Tang dynasty, and can be found in any suitably large dictionary under *jing zhong hua*.

has changed between certain May Fourth conceptualizations of prose poetry and contemporary practice. The May Fourth writers who had the most elaborate and studied views of prose poetry tended to describe their work in terms of its relationship to the world outside the poem: Lu Xun's "emotional impressions" (with "impression" here meaning "sensory or emotional contact with the outside world") or Xu Zhimo's "formless cursing" (the insinuated object of which is the outside world). To generalize, contemporary prose poetry is much more likely to be defined as a form in terms of other language acts or, as Wang Guangming puts it, a joining of "the expressiveness of poetry to the various qualities of prose narrativity." To use Fang Wenzhu's work as an example, the poem is physically and conceptually centered on "Me and silvery Chinese characters." That contemporary poets would, in addition to their poems, want to write and read about their formal choices, and have conversations about their methods that go past calling them "tricks" or claiming the discussion is "irrelevant" seems deeply connected to the meditations of contemporary poems; the subject and language interacting, rolling along.

Periodizing and comparing different groups of literary works in this way do not prove or attempt to prove that one or another group of literary pieces are or are not prose poems. Just as literary historical periodization is a metaphor, so are literary genres, and there are many ways in which any of the pieces discussed here can be considered a prose poem. From the preceding comparison, however, between the literary criticism and the poetry of the Republican era and those of the People's Republic, it seems possible to conclude that there is a way—and the indefinite article is crucial here, because this is *one* way among many to see prose poetry—in which prose poetry written before 1949 is very different from the prose poetry written after. This perspective is consistent with Hong Zicheng's estimation that the modern/contemporary periodization is an "efficacious viewing angle" for twentieth-century literature, as well as Widmer's discovery of "discontinuity" between the May Fourth movement and the June Fourth

period. Prose poetry of the May Fourth movement is conceptualized in opposition to rhymed verse; it does not attempt to distinguish itself from prose by using rhythm, rhyme, or particular forms of syntax; it includes both intentionally unlineated poems as well as poems whose writers were insensitive to or uninterested in poetic lineation. Prose poetry after 1949 is conceptualized in opposition to the supposed objectivity of prose; it is formally similar to prose but its poeticity is foregrounding by emphasizing individual subjectivity, using nonstandard language or syntax, or applying poetic techniques such as repetition and refrain. Prose poetry exists in a context of broad, although sometimes vague, consensus as to the nature of its form; authors often identify their own works as prose poetry, and works identified as such have a set of predictable similarities. To generalize broadly, May Fourth-period works are more likely to *take apart* classical poetry, whereas post-1949 works are more likely to *build* an independent and definable prose poetry on the foundations of poetry and prose. When we read May Fourth prose poems as part of a modern period, we may look first for a poem's relationship and opposition to traditional rhymed verse; when reading recent prose poetry as part of a contemporary period, we may look first for a poem's relationship to other prose works, forms, or language acts.

As with any metaphor of literary-historical periodization, there are important limitations to the division of the twentieth century into modern (pre-1949) and contemporary (post-1949) periods I am advocating. In *The Power of Genre*, Adena Rosmarin writes: "Genre, like metaphor, is powerfully persuasive not only because it leads us to perceive similarity but because it leads us to perceive that similarity in the midst of and in spite of difference" (1986: 46). She encourages attention to what is excluded by the use of genre classifications, as well as what is included, advocating that critics should avoid labels, which then become the object of contestation for approval and authority, and instead write in a way that engages in a rhythm

of schema and correction. Exchanging periodizations of prose poetry that run from May Fourth to the present (or from May Fourth to 1949, and then from the late 1970s to the present, as with *The Columbia Anthology*) with the modern/contemporary division described by Hong Zicheng is, in a similar vein, to trade one metaphor for another. Trading metaphors gives us new and, ideally, more apt ways to conceptualize categories and compare individual works and better ways to read works, but it can also result in the exchange of one set of critical, conceptual, and historical lacunae for another, a newly defined period or set of works for which the prospective metaphor is not apt. The study of these lacunae, according to Rosmarin, is an essential part of the power of genre studies, and can also be seen as one of the ways in which the exercise of periodization teaches us about texts and contexts.

In much the same way as a conceptualization of the history of prose poetry that begins with May Fourth and continues to the present suppresses differences between pre-1949 and post-1949 work, a periodic division that begins in 1949 and stretches to the present suppresses differences between work composed before 1976 and that written after 1976. In *The Party and the Arty*, Richard Kraus writes:

Over the course of a quarter century, a new politics of culture has taken shape, with greater openness, vastly diminished state supervision, and increased professionalism by artists. China has moved toward a new cultural order in fits and starts, interspersed with occasional retreats. The most obvious retreat followed the Beijing Massacre, which was reversed equally abruptly by a nationwide rush toward the market after Deng Xiaoping's 1992 inspection of South China. (Kraus 2004: viii)

The turn toward subjectivity and language exemplified by "Kind of Like Pulling Out a Nail" is dependent in many ways on the "vastly diminished state supervision" that was the Deng regime's on-again, off-again contribution to Chinese literature. Works that exemplify the indeterminacy

of language and its connection to the indeterminacy of the individual subject can rarely be counted on to espouse political ideals: under a prescriptive system of censorship, their indeterminacy and subjectivity are necessarily intertwined with politics—a fact that quite clearly motivates both Ke Lan and Guo Feng to energetically claim objectivity and orthodoxy while composing subjective, idiosyncratic, individualist works whose individuality, even if slight and hidden, makes them politically indeterminate. Under a proscriptive system of censorship that only expects works to avoid undesirable political speech, however, new space for indeterminacy is opened up. Although the definition of “undesirable speech” could and did change without warning, producing chilling effects that discouraged a certain amount of innovation, experimentation, and indeterminacy, it seems clear that many prose poems written after 1976—such as “Kind of Like Pulling Out a Nail”—could never have been published before 1976. Such dramatic differences in the limits of politically acceptable speech require different critical sensitivities, and different kinds of reading, and a modern/contemporary periodization does not clearly indicate the need for such difference. In some ways, the pre-1949/post-1976 periodization of Chinese literature practiced by *The Columbia Anthology* could serve as a more apt metaphor for describing differences in censorship among the various parts of twentieth-century Chinese literature, although the censorship pressures of May Fourth writers were again quite different from those experienced by post-1976 authors.

One possible motivation for the wide acceptance of the modern/contemporary division in the Chinese academy is its reification of state power, and the way it can be perceived as implicitly supporting the narrative of New China (“old society” versus “new society”) that was propagated by the new government after 1949. The association of post-1949 periodization with state power creates unpredictable and sometimes atextual positions in the interpretations of texts and in authorial and critical statements about literary forebears: it means, politically, very

different things for a poet to claim or perform the literary heritage of May Fourth, as compared to the literary heritage of the Mao era, and something else entirely for poets to reject, either in word or in deed, all influences they interpret as coming directly or indirectly from the state. Maghiel van Crevel identifies an intentional antiestablishment attitude as one of the ways in which contemporary avant-garde poets define and market themselves: "All avant-garde poetry since the groundbreaking unofficial journal *Today* continues to stand more or less in opposition to orthodoxy . . . but to say so has become flogging a dead horse since the avant-garde began to outshine the establishment in the mid-1980s."²⁶ The modern/contemporary periodization, and the way it encourages readers and writers to look for prose poetry's heritage in the 1950s, is for better or for worse intimately connected to the national "establishment" in van Crevel's sense. Indeed, as van Crevel (2000: 5) writes elsewhere, poets Xi Chuan and Yu Jian prefer to call some of their rhapsodic, unlineated lyric poems "long poems" (*changshi*) rather than "prose poems," preferring to invent new categories rather than carry on literary traditions. Although their motivations remain unclear, theirs is a possible example of how a modern/contemporary periodization overlapping with establishment narratives can tend to complicate, rather than simplify, the reading of individual works and authors' own commentary on those works.

Adding to these complexities, an important lacuna in the modern/contemporary periodization arises very directly from the way in which the heritage of the May Fourth movement persists in contemporary Chinese letters. The following are selections from a piece by famous painter and writer Huang Yongyu, from his illustrated book-length collection of aphorisms and wry dictionary definitions. They are explicitly not called poems, but instead titled "Reading Notes Wholeheartedly, Seriously, and Diligently Reflected Upon" (*Liqiu yansu renzhen sikao de zhaji*). Huang's preface echoes language that is similar to Zhou Zuoren's musings on poetic form or Liu Bannong's denial of the name "poet." Huang writes,

²⁶ Van Crevel 2008: 65. Van Crevel (5, 75, 110, 411) does, however, also point out the strong influence of Mao-era language and ideology, which seems to coexist with antiestablishment positioning.

²⁷ Huang 1990: np. Compare also a story Sun Yushi (2006: 250–251) tells about May Fourth poet Zhu Ziqing, who turned a lineated poem into prose because he couldn't afford to buy enough paper to recopy it in its longer version, divided into lines.

²⁸ For an article on one of his most famous paintings, see Eugene Wang 2000.

“One day, my buddy Zuo Houfan came by, looking for poems for a poetry magazine. There weren't any poems, so he took a few dozen of these, and published them, and gave them this weird title. Later they probably thought, these couldn't be poems, right? I myself understand that they're clearly not poems.”²⁷ The freewheeling approach toward form, as well as the fact that Huang's “prose poetry” is just one of the many artistic genres he practiced, has clear resonances with the May Fourth tradition. Huang's career spans the twentieth century; born in 1924, he began circulating his works in the 1930s and 1940s in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and then returned to the mainland in 1954. He was beaten and jailed during the Cultural Revolution for subversive content in his art. More recently, he helped create some of the calligraphic displays at the opening of the Beijing Olympics.²⁸ His life and work span the two historical periods created by the modern/contemporary divide, and Huang provides a valuable counterexample to the many poets whose careers were limited to one or the other period. He is an artist who is explicit about the importance of ethics and objective social experience in literature, and at the same time engages in subjective transformations of language:

Table

A tool for bringing people together in order to consume their youth. In Latin called “the grindstone that torments humanity.”

桌子

把人们聚在一起消耗青春的工具。拉丁文叫做『磨人的砂轮』。

Speed

The form of matter moving. For example, a bad person suddenly becomes a good person, so fast that even the lightning feels shamed and astonished.

速度

物质运动的形式。比如，坏人一下子变成好人，快的连闪电也颇感惭愧即是。

Donkey

What is most lovely about it was *not* first discovered by the painter Huang Zhou. Earlier on, when Napoleon pushed his armies from Egypt into Syria, he took great care to place two of the most lovely animals in a safe position amid the ranks. One was the scholar, and one the donkey. The former, to appraise cultural artifacts; the latter, haul them home.

驴

它的可爱之处并非画家黄胄第一个发现。早在拿破仑从埃及进军叙利亚时，就特别关照要把两种最可爱的动物安排在队伍中安全的部位。一，学者；二，驴。前者鉴定文物，后者把文物驮回去。

Ignorance

No doubt about it, history has long since concluded that this is a virtue, because it implies satisfaction and the ability to take pleasure in the self. What's brought us to this point is ignorance itself. (Huang 1990: 3, 1, 63, 31)

无知

毫无疑问，这是一种早为历史定评的美德，因为它具备了满足与自得其乐的内涵。促使成为如此现状的动力就是无知本身。

Visible here are many of the qualities of May Fourth prose poetry that pieces such as Ke Lan's "Dawn Mist" and Fang Wenzhu's "Kind of Like Pulling Out a Nail" lack. These pieces resolve into lessons, experiences, or even comedy; although they destabilize the meanings of common words, they do so in an attempt to redefine them, and that redefinition often has a more focused

²⁹ These two pieces from *Wild Grass* are collected in Lu 2005: 2: 198 and 217, respectively.

purpose than the experimentation of a poem such as “Pulling out a Nail” or the transcendence of “Dawn Mist.” In tone and intent, they better resemble the parables in Lu Xun’s *Wild Grass*, “The Dog’s Retort” and “The Wise Man, the Fool and the Slave”: humanist, sarcastic, with a sense of play that only lightly tempers the serious, sincere values that motivate the piece.²⁹ At the same time, though, they insinuate the slipperiness of language, the way it “rolls along.” The more wholeheartedly and diligently reading notes are reflected on, perhaps, the less the words seem to resemble their standard dictionary definitions, blurring the boundaries we expect them to obey, and becoming again something lively and imminent. The destabilization in these works, the undoing of dictionary certainty, and the way in which the works self-consciously deny the name “poem” are all qualities that would be less perceptible to a reader who insisted on categorizing them as contemporary works because they were written after 1949; as Ellen Widmer writes, in certain circumstances recent works can sustain “meaningful comparisons” with May Fourth works, and these comparisons are not an asset of a literary-historical periodization that starts with 1949.

Rosmarin (1986) recommends that when we categorize literary works, we enter into a rhythm of schema and correction. This recommendation de-emphasizes the need for our categorizing metaphors—in this case the metaphor that is periodization—to be singularly apt or ideally useful. Her theory emphasizes instead the act of trading, exchanging one critical categorization for another, referring constantly to artworks in an attempt to create periodic and generic divisions that enrich our understanding of the poetry, prose, or prose poetry that we read. Differences between May Fourth and post-1949 prose poems, concepts of prose poetry, and definitions of the genre, as well as an understanding of what work that *does* carry through certain May Fourth traditions looks like, all make the case that the modern/contemporary periodization should constitute a part of the way we read and think about Chinese prose poetry. Categorizing contemporary prose poetry as meaningfully separate from May Fourth

prose poetry allows us to see a great deal about the working definitions prose poets from each period used to compose works, their shifting conceptualization of and attention to the poetic craft and the subjectivity or intersubjectivity of language, and their attitudes toward tradition and innovation. However, the multiplicity of these differences, as well as the fact that the modern/contemporary periodization does not describe all the differences that we encounter when we read works from similar contexts and periods in the twentieth century, should strongly encourage us to persist in engaging in and exchanging these acts of categorization, correction, and recategorization.

Glossary

baihua	白话
bi	笔
badio yi ke dingzi	拔掉一颗钉子
bu chengxing de shi	不成形的诗
changshi	长诗
“Chiluoluo”	赤裸裸
dangdai	当代
Du Fu	杜甫
duli de shiti	独立的诗体
duanwen	短文
“Duyao”	毒药
Fang Wenzhu	方文竹
fu	赋
<i>Guanzi</i>	管子
Guo Feng	郭风
“Guoke”	过客
jingdao xiaopin	精到小品
“Jingji”	荆棘
jingzhong hua	镜中花
jueju	绝句
Kang Baiqing	康白情
<i>Liqiu yansu renzhen sikao de zhaji</i>	力求严肃认真思考的札记
Liu Xie	刘勰
liupai	流派
<i>Long, hu, gou</i>	龙虎狗
meiwen	美文
Mu Dan	穆旦
“Nage cheng”	那个城
Qu Yuan	屈原
sanwen	散文
sanwenshi	散文诗
sanwenshi re	散文诗热
<i>Sanwenshi de shijie</i>	散文诗的世界
shuqing	抒情
Tang Tao	唐弢
“Tongku”	痛苦
tuipei	颓废
<i>Wenxin diaolong</i>	文心雕龙
wenyi zazhu	文艺杂著
wenzhang	文章

“Wo de shilian”	我的失恋
wuyunshi	无韵诗
wyunwen	无韵文
Xi Chuan	西川
xiandai	现代
“Xiang guangming zouqu”	向光明走去
xiao ganchu	小感触
“Xiao he”	小河
xiaopinwen	小品文
xinshi	新诗
Xu Chengmiao	徐成森
xuan	选
Yao Wenyuan	姚文元
yunwen	韵文
Yecao	野草
Yu Jian	于坚
zawen	杂文
zhe/zhao	着
<i>Zhimo de shi</i>	志摩的诗
<i>Zhongguo sanwen shi xuan</i>	中国散文诗选
Zhongwai sanwen shi xuehui	中外散文诗学会
<i>Zhuangzi</i>	庄子
ziyou shi	自由诗
Zou Yuehan	邹岳汉

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