

British Romanticism in China: Revised in Reception

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Abstract

This paper first looks at the etymology and definition of the term ‘Romanticism’ in English and Chinese respectively to show their considerable disparity, and then traces the Chinese reception of British Romantic literature in the course of the twentieth century, focusing in particular on its late-Qing introduction, New Culturalist proliferation, suppression in Communist China, and post-1976 resurrection. This trajectory of the afterlife of Romanticism reveals at the same time the transformation the concept of ‘Romanticism’ went through in twentieth-century China. The paper thus shows that as both a concept and a body of literature, Romanticism had been received with drastically divergent or even contradictory responses in China while conflicting ideologies took turns dominating the Chinese cultural discourse. This reception process demonstrates the predominance of the national ideology over the aesthetic values of foreign literature, which reveals the essentially utilitarian approach China had taken to foreign literature, and British Romanticism in particular.

Keywords: British romanticism, literature, China, Western literature in Asia

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The reception history of British Romanticism in twentieth-century China unfolds as a drama of vicissitude, corresponding to the tumultuous course of Chinese national history and violently shifting literary politics. While all foreign literary texts or trends are reconfigured by their interaction with the national tradition, the afterlife of British Romanticism in China is distinguished by the radically divided and polarised responses it received in the past century. This paper first looks at the etymology and definition of the term ‘Romanticism’¹ in English and Chinese respectively and draws attention to their considerable disparity. It then traces the reception of British Romantic literature in the course of the twentieth century, highlighting in particular its late Qing introduction, New Culturalist proliferation, suppression under Communism, and post-1976 resurrection. With this trajectory of the afterlife of Romanticism, this paper unveils at the same time the peculiar transformation the concept of ‘Romanticism’ underwent in twentieth-century China. Focusing on several of the key aspects of the term, namely, radicalism, self-expressiveness, and nature-ism, I shall make the case that Romanticism, as both a concept and a body of literature, had been treated with drastically divergent or even contradictory stances in China along with the conflicting ideologies taking turns dominating the Chinese cultural discourse. The opposing attitudes towards the same authors or texts may suggest the oxymoronic qualities of British Romanticism itself, but they also demonstrate the preponderant influence of the national ideology over the aesthetic values of foreign literature in the reception process. Such an overwhelming ideological predominance reveals the essentially utilitarian approach China had taken to foreign literature, and British Romanticism in particular. This paper therefore contributes to the broader discussion of the re-centring of Western literature in Asia by looking into the process in which British Romanticism was substantially revised while being received and resurrected in China.

1. ‘Romanticism’ and *langman zhuyi*: Translation and Revision

The substantial revision can be seen by a comparison of the Chinese term *langman zhuyi* (浪漫

¹ Although adopting the general term ‘Romanticism’, this paper uses it to mainly refer to British Romanticism.

主义) with the English original, ‘Romanticism’. The English term is of course notoriously amorphous and has led to numerous debates among literary historians and Romanticists who, nevertheless, agree on at least certain core aspects of Romanticism. Many dictionaries, handbooks, and anthologies, for example, note the etymology of the word ‘Romanticism’ in the prefix *roman-* and discuss the close association of Romanticism with romance. Both *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* and *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature* remind us, “the Romantic is the sole period that is named after a literary form” (Lynch & Stillinger, 2012, p. 4; Chandler, 2009, p. 2). The genre of romance, as an antithesis to the realist novel, indicates a fascination with the fantastic realm and an escapist impulse to “fade far away” (Keats, 1978, p. 280) from reality. However, the evocation of the enchanting world of romance was inspired by contemporary political happenings, which encouraged a bold vision of infinite possibilities of the actual world. In this sense, the fascination with romance paradoxically suggests an active engagement with reality. Revolutionary France, for example, was “a country in romance” for Wordsworth (1979, p. 396). The origin of the word refers not just to the genre of romance, but the Romance languages as well. These vernacular languages emerged as a reaction against the authoritative and authoritarian Latin. The very word ‘Romanticism’, rooted as it is in both the genre and the language group, signifies a radical political stance. Other than the etymology, the periodisation of Romanticism reveals its political weight as well. Scholars have contended till this day as to where to locate the starting and finishing points of the Romantic era, and almost all the different dates they have suggested are of momentous political significance. The beginning of the era, often identified as 1776, 1783, or 1789, and the conclusion, be it 1832 or 1848, bookend the historical period of Romanticism with revolution and reform (Lynch & Stillinger, 2012, pp. 3–4; Chandler, 2009, p. 1).

The political energy of Romanticism informs the quintessentially Romantic self-expressive mode. Hazlitt in his famous essay on Wordsworth describes his poetry as “a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age”, which “partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age” (Hazlitt, 1930–4, pp. 86–7). *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* identifies the “chief emphasis” of Romanticism as “upon freedom of individual self-expression”

and describes it as a “literary rebellion” against neo-Classicism (Baldick, 2015, p. 103). Abrams’ (2015) *Glossary of Literary Terms* makes the revolutionary nature of Romanticism against Neoclassicism more evident by putting them together in one entry as “neoclassic and romantic”. He justifies his practice as “a more useful undertaking” than “single definitions of neoclassicism and romanticism”, which is “to specify some salient attributes of literary theory and practice that were shared by a number of prominent writers in the Neoclassic Period in England and that serve to distinguish them from many outstanding writers of the Romantic Period” (p. 236). Romanticism is what Neo-classicism is not.

Another signature quality of Romanticism is the prominence of nature as its poetic subject. Abrams (2015) points out in his *Glossary*: “external nature ... was described with an accuracy and sensuous nuance unprecedented in earlier writers” (p. 239). However, he reminds us, “[i]t is a mistake ... to describe the romantic poets as simply ‘nature Poets’”, because external nature is only “a stimulus” for the Romantic poet to turn to his/her internal world (*loc cit*). Romantic nature-ism, therefore, paradoxically suggests transcendentalism, which places emphasis on the power of the human mind. As Wordsworth (1979) famously puts it, “the mind / Is lord and master” (p. 430).

These core elements, political radicalism, self-expressiveness, and the prominence of nature, are among the most salient features of Romanticism. As with the English term, ‘Romanticism’ in Chinese can also be approached from its origins. The now-standard Chinese translation of ‘Romanticism’, *langman zhuyi*, started to appear together with its several other renderings, such as *luoman zhuyi* (羅曼主義), *chuanqi zhuyi* (傳奇主義), and *huangdan zhuyi* (荒誕主義), around the late 1910s in China (McDougall, 1971, p. 96).² The version that finally prevailed, *langman zhuyi*, was most likely borrowed not directly from English, but Japanese (Shi, 1997, p. 14). Many leading Chinese intellectual and cultural figures spent an important stage of their lives in Japan at the dawn of the twentieth century, when the Romantic wave in Japanese literature began to subside. Their first encounter with Romanticism almost certainly took place

² McDougall translates *chuanqi zhuyi* and *huangdan zhuyi* back into English as ‘novelism’ and ‘exaggerationism’ respectively. *Chuanqi* refers to the genre of tales of the marvellous, and *huangdan* to tales of the fantastic. Both terms, it seems, attempt to capture the connection between ‘Romanticism’ and the genre of romance.

in Japan and in the medium of Japanese.

Some of the earliest references to ‘Romanticism’ in Chinese seem to corroborate this speculation on the source of the Chinese term. Tian Han (1898–1968), a founding member of the Creation Society (*Chuangzao she*) who was then studying in Japan, discusses the problem with translating the term ‘Romanticism’ into Chinese in his long article from 1919, “The Poet and the Issue of Labour”.³ He first provides its Japanese translations both in kanji, as 浪漫主義, and in katakana, as ロマンチズム. The latter phonetic translation, he points out, is more commonly adopted in Japan. He therefore favours *luoman zhuyi*, the phonetic translation in Chinese, which, he indicates, “is disapproved of by many in today’s Chinese literary circles” (p. 23). He, however, disapproves of other current versions in China such as *chuanqi zhuyi* and *huangdan zhuyi* because they “fail to represent what the term ‘Romanticism’ involves” and easily incur misunderstanding (*loc cit*).

Tian was not alone among the Japanese-educated Chinese writers and intellectuals in using the term ‘Romantic/ism’ around the time, although not all of them preferred *luoman zhuyi* as Tian did. In several essays written in 1921, Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967), Lu Xun’s brother, who had also studied in Japan, describes himself (2000, p. 9) and his ideas (*ibid*, p. 24) as ‘Romantic’, in both cases using *langman*. In another essay, he puts *langman zhuyi* in parentheses after *chuanqi zhuyi*, indicating the two are equivalent (*ibid*, p. 32). Liang Qichao (1873–1929), who became an exile in Japan for more than a decade (1898–1912) after the failure of the 1898 Hundred Days’ Reform, calls an ancient Chinese poem by Qu Yuan (340–278 BC) *langman* in a 1922 essay (2009, p. 247).

From “A Discussion on the Translation of Literary Terms”, a column in a 1923 issue of *Fiction Monthly* (*Xiaoshuo yuebao*) edited by Xi Di (Zheng Zhenduo, 1898–1958), one can assume that the diversity of the Chinese terms for ‘Romanticism’ had by then become confusing. One of the contributors, Shen Yanbing (1896–1981), uses various Chinese versions of ‘Romanticism’ to make the point that specialised literary terms should have uniform translations (1923, p. 2). Yu Zhi (Hu Yuzhi, 1896–1986), another contributor, proposes a dictionary of

3 All translations from Chinese into English in this paper are the author’s unless otherwise indicated.

literary terms, where different translations of the same term can be provided in the order of their appropriateness. His example is ‘Romanticism’ as well: the dictionary entry should include its three translations, *luoman zhuyi*, *langman zhuyi*, *chuanqi zhuyi*, and in this order (1923, p. 4). He did not seem to be aware that two months before their discussion came to press, such a dictionary had been published. In this *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of New Culture*,⁴ the entry ‘Romanticism’ is translated as *langman zhuyi* (Tang, 1923, p. 823). The title of the dictionary, echoing its contemporary New Culture Movement, seems to suggest itself to be the dictionary of the age and thereby gives a sense of authority to *langman zhuyi*, which would indeed replace other translations by the end of the 1920s.

The survival of *langman zhuyi* over other Chinese versions of ‘Romanticism’ might very well be attributed to its hybrid source as a loanword that is nevertheless rendered in an original Chinese phrase. As a loanword of the Japanese kanji 浪漫主義, which are themselves a translation from English, the Chinese term is twice removed from the original. It is, however, also ‘the return of the native’ with the adoption of the same Chinese characters, albeit with an altered meaning. The latter half of the four-character Chinese term, 主義 (*zhuyi*), is the Japanese phonetic translation of ‘ism’ in English during the Meiji era. The kanji characters suggest a loose connection with the original Chinese term, which, in classical Chinese texts, means ‘moral principle’. The first half of the term, 浪漫 (*langman*), is returned to Chinese with its original meaning adapted. Shi (1997) cites Natsume Sōseki (夏目漱石) and Kuriyagawa Hakuson (厨川白村) as the originators of the Japanese kanji 浪漫 *rōman*, found in their respective works, *Theory of Literature* (1906)⁵ and *Ten Lectures on Modern Literature* (1912, p. 13). According to McDougall (1971), “[a]mong the Japanese writers on romanticism ... Kuriyagawa Hakuson had perhaps the largest following in China” (p. 108), Tian Han included. After a lapse of around a decade, the Japanese term was borrowed back into Chinese from its circulation among the Chinese students in Japan (Shi, 1997, p. 14).

⁴ The English translation provided by the dictionary itself puts *xin wenhua* (new culture) in its title as “new knowledge”. To highlight the echo of the Chinese original with the New Culture Movement, I have adopted the literal translation of the title.

⁵ Shi puts the date of *Theory of Literature* as 1916, but it was actually published a decade earlier.

The original Chinese phrase 浪漫 can be traced back to a poem written by Su Shi (1037–1101), a leading Song poet, titled “Visiting a Changzhou Monastery with Meng Zhen” (與孟震同遊常州僧舍): “Of late I have gradually felt that this life is but an illusion / and have again wandered in Sanwu area, *unbridled and aimless*” (年來轉覺此生浮，又作三吳浪漫遊) (2000, p. 316; emphasis added). Here *langman* means unrestrained, following one’s instinct, an attitude affinitive to the Daoist belief in the natural state of things. In modern Chinese, *langman*, similar to the lower-case ‘romantic’, means: 1) fanciful and idealistic, removed from reality; and 2) unrestrained and unconventional, especially in sexual relationships. Both meanings, rather than descending from classical Chinese, were more likely formed after Western Romanticism was introduced to China. With these elements put together, *langman zhuyi* is a double-layered loanword that at the same time taps into classical Chinese sources, hence sounding both exotic and native. The loan from the Japanese translation of the original English term suggests a progressive cultural stance that nevertheless has to be conveyed with echoes with traditional Chinese values.

Just as the formation of the term resulted from the interaction of neologism with classical Chinese language, which changed the meaning of both, so the definition of the Chinese term reveals the revision of the imported concept in its encounter with Chinese literary politics. Looking at three rather representative definitions of the term in the 1920s, 1960s, and 1990s, one will find not just their increasing departure from the original, but the drastic shift among themselves within the national context.

The above-mentioned *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of New Culture* provides one of the earliest definitions of the term. It defines Romanticism as rising from the clash with Classicism and, while noting its diversity across European nations, distils its central features into ‘subjectivism’, ‘liberalism’, and ‘emotionalism’ (Tang, 1923, p. 824). The overall definition is followed by three sections on the British, German, and French Romantic movements respectively and two sections on “Romanticism in philosophy” and “Romanticism in ethics and actual life” (ibid, pp. 825–30). In comparison with the English concept, one notes that neither the primacy of nature nor the political energy is highlighted. Instead, the focus is put on the emancipation of the

individual and recovery of the inherent, independent human spirit from the fettering traditions and classics, a focus that resonates with the tenor of the New Culture Movement.

In the highly influential 1963 *History of Western Aesthetics*, which remains a chief source of citation still today, Zhu Guangqian (1897–1986), a leading Chinese scholar on aesthetics, identifies Romanticism as having three common characteristics: subjectivity, Medievalism, and “return to nature” (1963, pp. 727–8). If the New Culturist Dictionary puts more stress on the intellectual and cultural aspects of Romanticism, then this one reviews Romanticism in a more political and ideological light. Absent in the former dictionary is a Marxist historiographical perspective from which these Romantic characteristics are seen as products of their socio-political circumstances. Subjectivity demonstrates “the individualism of the rising capitalist class” (ibid, p. 727). Medievalism reveals contemporary nationalist awareness and demands for democracy (ibid, p. 728). Nature-ism was a reaction against the capitalist urbanisation and industrialisation (loc cit).

The 1990 *Dictionary of Foreign Literature* suggests that such an ideological approach persisted to at least the end of the century. It gives two meanings for *langman zhuyi*: “1. the creative mode that is opposed to realism, characterised by its passionate language, extravagant imagination, and hyperbolic style, which has existed in literatures of all nations from ancient times; 2. the literary movement at the turn of the nineteenth century in the West” (Diao, 1990, p. 108). With the first meaning, the term can be loosely adopted to refer to the romantic elements in classical Chinese literature. This broadened meaning, however, uproots Romanticism from its historical specificity, which, as discussed above, very much defines its essence and thereby tones down its political and poetic radicalism. The second meaning in its elaboration evidently takes after the Marxist turn already found in the 1960s definition of Romanticism:

it is the consequence of the bankruptcy of the kingdom of Reason promised by the Enlightenment thinkers and the manifestation of the disillusionment with the social and political order established by the French Bourgeois Revolution. The intellectual sources of Romanticism are the detestation of the bourgeois way of life and the resistance to the capitalist mundane reality, spiritual barrenness, and egotism, the pursuit of

emancipation of individuality, and the longing for a world in harmony. (p. 108)

The Marxist vocabulary such as “the French Bourgeois Revolution” and the values engendered by ‘capitalism’ bespeak the Chinese revision of the English term. In a more recent monograph, the definition remains unchanged in its Marxist historiographical view: Romanticism is “a literary trend that developed from the rise of the bourgeois revolution and nationalist liberation movement at the beginning of the nineteenth century” (Wu, 2012, pp. 1–2). In these post-1949 definitions, all the core elements of the original term, political radicalism, self-expressiveness, and nature-ism, are there. Yet, in being subordinated to the historical context that is conceived in Marxist terms, they are essentially reduced to passive, subservient products of class struggle. This distinctively Marxist bent in the Chinese term *langman zhuyi* has to be traced back to the reception history of Romantic literature in China, in the process of which the key components of the concept ‘Romanticism’ were reframed and reinterpreted.

2. Introduction of Romanticism: Late-Qing Appropriation

Romantic literature entered China at the beginning of the twentieth century, when late-Qing intellectuals and Reformists were looking at Western learning for ways to rescue the collapsing Qing empire from its domestic unrest and threats from imperialist powers. Liang Qichao, a leading late-Qing Reformist, was the first figure who introduced Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley to China. In his essay published in *The China Discussion* (*Qing yi bao*), the journal he established in Yokohama, Japan during his exile, Liang (1900) makes a reference to Wordsworth (p. 2409). Byron’s and Shelley’s portraits first appeared in another journal Liang founded in Yokohama, *New Fiction* (*Xin xiaoshuo*), in the second (1903) and fourteenth (1906) issues respectively. In the third issue of the same journal is the translation of excerpts from *The Giaour* and “The Isles of Greece” in *Don Juan*, excerpts that Liang (1903) includes in his own political fantasy, *The Future of New China* (*Xin zhongguo weilai ji*) (pp. 42–6). In 1905, Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (*Sakexun jiehou yingxiong lue*) was published, translated by Lin Shu (1852–1924), the immensely popular late-Qing translator of many Western novels. Keats made his first entrance

into China in 1907 in an important early essay by Lu Xun (1881–1936), “On the Power of Mara Poetry” (*Moluo shili shuo*), but he is only mentioned in passing. The essay was first published in *Henan*, a radical journal established by overseas Chinese students in Japan.

These three figures’ divergent, if not opposed, political and literary stances give one a glimpse of the multi-facetedness of Romanticism, which lends itself to its Chinese readers’ active appropriation that developed in diverse directions. Lu Xun, a leading figure in the following decade’s New Culture Movement and the author of the first vernacular Chinese fiction, had a very different take on Romanticism from both Liang and Lin. Lin, the monolingual translator who rendered his bilingual assistants’ oral account of the novel in classical Chinese, would be regarded as a major conservative for his adamant defence of traditional language and culture against the New Culturist sweeping tide. Even though Liang and Lin were both key late-Qing disseminators of Western literature, Liang’s chief advocacy of political literature contrasts with Lin’s choice of popular, sentimental Western novels. On the other hand, however, Liang’s “highly politicized campaign for new fiction opens the space for Lin Shu’s translation by supplying a kind of *Dao*: national salvation becomes the contemporary *Dao*” (Y. Hu, 2016, p. 61).

These rather sporadic early appearances of Romantic authors and texts suggest a lack of an overall grasp of Romanticism as both a body of literature and a literary concept in the late Qing era. If Liang noted Wordsworth’s worship of nature, he put it into the traditional Chinese cultural framework of Daoism. Both Liang and Lin found in the Romantic literature to which they were exposed a vehement expression of the national identity, not the self. Among the three key components of Romanticism, political energy was their major interest, which, however, was reinterpreted as a means of national preservation. Both Byron’s poetic passages and Scott’s novel centre on the tension between one’s national identity and the foreign conquering and ruling power, a tension that parallels the antagonism of the Han Chinese towards the Manchu conquerors and rulers of the Qing Dynasty, and at the same time evokes the similar national crisis incurred by imperialist forces in China.

In Liang’s political novel where he alludes to Byron’s lines that lament the decline of Greece

from its past glory to its present subjugation, he demonstrates an essentially utilitarian view of literature which was shared by many of his contemporaries, even though their emphasis on the socio-political dimension of literature is not incompatible with Romantic radicalism. For Liang, Byron and his texts served an exigent political function, namely to awaken in the Chinese readers a sense of humiliation of living as the colonised people and the realisation of the imminent need to reform the empire. The immense popularity of “The Isles of Greece” in China reveals the same instrumentality of the Chinese reading of Romanticism. The four Chinese translators of the song, Liang Qichao, Ma Junwu (1881–1940), Su Manshu (1884–1918), and Hu Shi (1891–1962)—all leading intellectuals and poets of their time—unexceptionally embraced it for its sublime lamentation over the decline of a once-glorious civilisation and its rebellious energy in inspiring the oppressed nationalities. None of them, however, gave any heed to or showed interest in the satirical quality of this ballad or the complexity of the overall *Don Juan*.⁶

Lin’s rendition of the title *Ivanhoe* in Chinese as “A Heroic Tale after the Saxon Crisis” betrays a similar concern about China’s plight. As Lin (1914) writes in the preface to his translation, one of the key interests of Scott’s tale is how the Saxon hero kindles his people’s grief and indignation over the demise of their old kingdom at the hands of the Normans (p. 2). Lin does not need to spell out that his own ancient, dying country was caught in a similar precarious situation and in desperate need of heroic inspiration as well. This theme fits in hand in glove with the medium of classical Chinese Lin chose, with which he could rewrite the original text into his context. As Hu Ying (2016) observes, Lin “treats the source language text as open-ended, and the act of translation enters into this open space, establishing linkage between the text and contemporary politics” (p. 61).

Even without systematic knowledge about Romanticism, the late-Qing literati recognised the political energy of Romanticism, which, however, was reframed into their own cultural tradition of the Confucian loyalty to the country. In their urge to preserve the country by seeking

⁶ The popularity of the song has been well documented and will not be expanded on here. For details on the satirical quality of this song and the overall poem, see the author’s forthcoming article, “Romantic, Rebel, and Reactionary: The Metamorphosis of Byron in Twentieth-Century China”.

an immediate remedy for its crisis, the literariness of Romanticism would probably seem far-fetched and excessive. This instrumentalist approach they had taken to Romantic or Western literature in general was in essence an extension of the Self-Strengthening Movement (1860s–90s), which insisted on the preservation of Chinese learning as ‘the fundamental structure’, whereas Western learning would merely be borrowed for its ‘practical function’.

3. The Proliferation of Romanticism: The New Culturist Enthusiasm and Division

The desperate attempt to salvage the Qing empire from its ruins while keeping the traditional Chinese culture intact soon gave way to more radical political and cultural reforming efforts that ended up in the 1911 Revolution and the New Culture Movement (1915–1920s). The attitude towards Western learning experienced a similar shift, from a cautious, partial borrowing to an enthusiastic, wholesale embrace. This tendency can already be detected in the abovementioned essay written by Lu Xun (1996), a leading New Culturist, which focuses on the Satanic Romantics such as Byron and Shelley.⁷ His essay distinguishes itself from other late-Qing introductions to Romanticism in its celebration not of these Romantics’ heroic devotion to the glorious nationalist cause such as that Liang and Lin emphasised, but of their anti-heroic and often misanthropic iconoclasm. Its subversive power anticipated the anti-traditionalist New Culture Movement that took place in the ensuing decade, during which the importation of Romantic literature flourished. One of the most important New Culturist manifestos, Hu Shi’s (1891–1962) 1917 article, “Some Modest Proposals for the Reform of Literature” (1996), is obviously indebted to the manifesto of Romanticism, Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, although Hu does not refer to Wordsworth until later. The centennial anniversaries of the Romantics in the 1920s and 1930s encouraged further popularisation of Romanticism, when introductions, translations and commemorations of Keats, Shelley, Byron, Blake, Scott, Coleridge and Lamb were published between 1921 and 1934 in some leading Republican journals such as *Fiction Monthly*, *The Eastern Miscellany* (*Dongfang zazhi*), *Poetry* (*Shi kan*), *Morning Post Supplementary* (*Chenbao fukan*), and *Literature and Arts Monthly*

⁷ Lu Xun also discusses European Romantics, namely, Pushkin, Lermontov, Mickiewicz, Slowacki and Petofi.

(*Wenyi yuekan*). Among them, the special commemorative issue on Shelley of *The Creation Quarterly* (1:4, 1923), established by the Creation Society, and that on Byron of *Fiction Monthly* (15:4, 1924), edited by the Literary Research Association (*Wenxue yanjiuhui*), are the most elaborate and enthusiastic.

The flourishing Romantic literature was buttressed with a strong sense of affinity many New Culturists found in some central ideas encapsulated in Romanticism as an intellectual trend, in particular, the unleashed self and revolutionary energy, both literary and political. With a similar Romantic spirit, the New Culturists proposed a clean break with the traditional Confucian values and a thorough Westernisation, promoting the emancipation of the individual, including the liberation of women, from the oppressive Confucian ethics. Fully conscious that this revolution in the traditional culture could not have taken place without a revolution in language, they simultaneously launched the vernacular movement to replace classical Chinese. The radicalness of this cultural and literary revolution makes it not improper to regard it as a Chinese Romantic movement. Lee (1973), for example, labels some Chinese writers of the New Culture era “the Romantic generation”, because both the Chinese and the European movements

represented a reaction against the classic tradition of order, reason, schematization, ritualization, and structuring of life. Both ushered in a new emphasis on sincerity, spontaneity, passion, imagination, and the release of individual energies—in short, the primacy of subjective human sentiments and energies. (p. 292)

A closer look at this Romantic generation’s diverse programmes of the literary revolution and the literary polemics in this era, however, reveals a more complex picture. The New Culturists’ “campaign against cultural backwardness was presented first of all instrumentally”, because they believed that this cultural revolution would “exercise a determinative influence upon political change” (Furth, 2002, p. 88). In this sense, they were no different from their late-Qing Reformist predecessors. As Denton (1996) points out, “although they uniformly denounced the didactic concept of ‘literature conveys the Dao,’ May Fourth literary theorists proposed to use literature in much the same way” (p. 116). Their ‘instrumentalist’ approach is

manifest in their treatment of Romanticism as a particularly powerful means to achieve the end of an ideological revolution.

With this predominant ideological concern, two aspects of Romanticism that the New Culturists particularly championed, political radicalism and self-expressiveness, developed into almost mutually exclusive qualities respectively appropriated by individuals and literary groups with opposing values and tenets. This can be clearly seen in the case of Byron and Shelley, the most popular Romantics in this era. While Byron remained the most idolised Western Romantic in China since the late-Qing era, his Satanic, ‘destructive’ egotism celebrated by Lu Xun was carefully distinguished by his brother Zhou Zuoren (1922b) from Shelley’s ‘constructive’ idealism for the good of all (p. 1). Even Shelley himself received divided treatments despite many New Culturists’ common admiration of him. For the leftist Literary Research Association, which espoused realism, as famously expressed by their slogan of ‘art for life’s sake’, Shelley was chiefly a fiery idealist and political activist. However, for the Creation Society—which claimed itself Romantic before its later Marxist turn, their slogan being ‘art for art’s sake’—Shelley was primarily an acclaimed self-expressive lyricist. On Shelley’s centenary, Zhou Zuoren (1922a), a founding figure of the Association, chose to translate “A Song: Men of England” (p. 2) from Shelley’s explicitly political ‘popular songs’, and the same poem was translated in the same year by Zheng Zhenduo (1921), another leading Associationist, who published it on the eleventh anniversary of the 1911 Revolution, 10 October (p. 2). In the special issue of *The Creation Quarterly*, Guo Moruo (1892–1978), a leading Creationist, selects eight less openly provocative lyrics instead, including “To a Skylark”, “Ode to the West Wind”, “Mutability”, and “Stanzas Written in Dejection” (1923, 19-39). Although the Associationists and Creationists presented a different Shelley, they both appropriated Shelley to promote their own aesthetic and ideological vision.

In comparison with radicalism and self-expressiveness, the other key component of Romanticism, nature-ism, seemed almost effaced in these ideological contentions. Instead, it was reshaped by both proponents and opponents of the New Culture Movement to be incorporated into their conflicting literary discourses. Wordsworth, the passionate worshipper

of nature, was embraced by the New Culturists not so much for being a nature poet as the prefacer of revolutionary poetics, whose celebration of nature was subsumed into his expression of “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Wordsworth, 2013, p. 98) of the poet’s self. On the other hand, the more conservative *Critical Review* group (*Xueheng pai*) criticised Wordsworth’s Romantic manifesto but promoted his apparently more traditionalist poetry of nature, with which they evoked the classical Chinese *tianyuan* poetry⁸ and at the same time challenged their rivals’ thorough Westernisation and rejection of traditional Chinese culture.⁹ This group, however, was not composed of old-fashioned traditionalists as one might expect. Anglo-American educated, they mocked their radical counterparts’ shallow and crude understanding of Western culture. Wu Mi (1894–1978), a leading member of the group, studied under Irving Babbitt, whose anti-Romanticism must have influenced him. Same as the *Critical Review* group, Liang Shiqiu (1903–1987), another belligerent anti-Romantic figure and a loyal disciple of Babbitt’s as well, has penned perhaps the most militant attack on the Romantic excessiveness in China. Liang (1926) ridicules those who introduced Western literature to China as mere dilettantes who plunged the Chinese literary scene into “a Romantic chaos” (p. 59). According to him, “the New Literary Movement, as a whole, was a Romantic chaos” (loc cit). These anti-New Culturists, it seems, brought contemporary Anglo-American modernist reaction against Romanticism¹⁰ back to China, where the Romantic afterlife had just started thriving, an irony that is a consequence of the asynchronous nature of reception.

To further complicate the situation, even within the same literary group, tensions and contradictions can be found in its members’ complex stances towards Romanticism. The anti-Romantic Liang was a member of the Crescent Moon Society (*Xinyue she*), a prominent literary group during the era which had made remarkable contributions to the formation of the modern

⁸ *Tianyuan* poetry, literally poetry of ‘the fields and gardens’, refers to classical Chinese landscape poetry inspired by pastoral scenes.

⁹ For a closer discussion on the divided reception of Wordsworth, see the author’s upcoming article, “Two Chinese Wordsworths: The Reception of Wordsworth in Twentieth-century China”.

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, the leading modernist who championed impersonality against the nineteenth-century self-expression, was once a follower of Babbitt’s.

Chinese literary tradition, especially in the realm of New Poetry (poetry written in vernacular Chinese). With many of its members returning from Britain and America, Romantic poetry was a major shaping force for their creation of the new genre in Chinese. Hu Shi, the first experimenter of New Poetry, was inspired by Wordsworth's radical poetics and tried his hand at a translation of "The Isles of Greece". Xu Zhimo (1897–1931), who discovered Romantic poetry at Cambridge, translated and wrote extensively on Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley and Keats. His own poetry is profuse with images that are so recognisably Romantic that in hindsight they look almost derivative. At the time, however, his importation of the English metre as well as Romantic imagery into New Poetry was bold and (paradoxically) original. He was inspired by Romanticism not just as a poet but as a man, fashioning for himself such a romantic life¹¹ that in his case, being 'Romantic' and 'romantic' become almost indistinguishable. Wen Yiduo (1899–1946), another member of the Crescent Moon Society, alludes to Wordsworth in one of his most famous poems, "Dead Water" (1984, pp. 197–8), and dedicates a poem to Keats, paying tribute to him as "The Loyal Minister of Art" (ibid, pp. 99–100). Zhu Xiang (1904–1933) was labelled 'the Chinese Keats' for his frequent references to the English poet on top of being a major translator of Keats and other Romantics.¹²

Despite the unquestionable influence of Romantic poetry on these Crescent Moon poets, however, they did not necessarily share all the ideological concerns and aesthetic values of Romanticism. As with Liang Shiqiu, both Wen and Xu reacted against the extravagant, formless free verse ushered in by the radical vernacular movement. In place of the self-proclaimed Romantic Creationists' effusive, egotistically sublime new poems, they called for formalism and introduced metrical and stanzaic disciplines into New Poetry. Their poetic experiments and stylistic concerns, however, were attacked as being disengaged from social reality by the Creation Society and, later, by Lu Xun as well, in the late-1920s fierce debate on the relationship between revolution and literature. The Crescent Moon Society's ambiguous stance towards

¹¹ Xu had several passionate love affairs, which inspired many of his poems. Like the younger Romantics, he also died young, killed in a plane crash at the age of 34.

¹² For details about Keats's influence on Xu, Wen and Zhu, see Li (2016).

Romanticism, therefore, puts into sharp focus the complexities and tensions of both the original Romanticism and the New Culture Movement, this Chinese Romantic Movement.

The New Culturist Romantic fervour started to subside from the late 1920s onward, when the nation was plunged into a deep crisis with the falling-out between the Nationalist and Communist Party and the Japanese invasion. The celebration of radical iconoclasm and self-expressiveness was overtaken by the cause of national salvation and an increasing concern with the masses. Literary revolution, as the Associationist Cheng Fangwu (1996) famously phrases it, gave way to revolutionary literature (p. 269).

4. Revolutionised Romanticism: Communist China's Suppression and Revision

Drastic changes in the reception of Romanticism took place after Communist China was founded in 1949 and forged a totalitarian literary and cultural policy that demanded all literature and art be an instrument of the party. Several violent shifts can be observed in the post-1949 attitudes towards Romantic authors and texts. Byron and Shelley were still the most discussed and translated Romantics, but Shelley won the party's favour over Byron; the evaluation of Byron became warily dualistic. While being celebrated as a relentless rebel against the ruling classes and a champion of the downtrodden people, Byron was also critiqued for his aristocratic stand on class and bourgeois, egotistic heroism. Two older Romantics, Blake and Burns, enjoyed a particularly warm reception in post-1949 China, occasioned by their bicentennial anniversaries in 1957 and 1959. On the other hand, together with Byron, some Romantics fell into disfavour: Keats was degraded to a lesser Romantic, while Wordsworth and Coleridge were labelled as reactionary or passive Romantics.¹³

These shifts took place along with numerous political campaigns launched by the Communist Party, which had a rigid control over all literary and artistic activities in China. Before the Sino-Soviet split, the party's official stance towards Romantic authors and texts basically derived from the Soviet practice of dividing them into revolutionary or active ones and reactionary or passive ones, which was based on its theory of 'revolutionary Romanticism'.

¹³ See Yang, Wu & Zhao (1964), pp. 47–73; Wu (2012), pp. 130–35.

The Soviet theory was established at the First Congress of Soviet Writers (1934), where Maxim Gorky (1868–1936), President of the Union of Soviet Writers, and Andrey Zhdanov (1896–1948), the Soviet Communist Party’s Central Committee Secretary, both affirmed ‘revolutionary Romanticism’ as the standard in evaluating Western literature. Revolutionary Romanticism, which glorifies reality and thus serves the revolutionary cause, was subsequently accepted as the official doctrine of literary creation and criticism in the Soviet Union (Gorky, 1960, p. 244), a guideline that China later faithfully abided by. By this standard, Byron and Shelley were approved as revolutionary Romantics, whereas Wordsworth and Coleridge were condemned as turncoat reactionary Romantics. Keats, although categorised into the former group, was viewed with reservation for his escapist aestheticism.

For all its borrowings from the Soviet terminology, a rather crude politicised Chinese reading of Romantic literature was developed from a far more important document in China: Mao Zedong’s (1893–1976) “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art”, which, though delivered in 1942, became the official cultural guideline in Communist China. In his Yan’an Talks, Mao raises the central question about the class stand of authors, most of whom came from a bourgeois background. Their stand should therefore be fused with that of the masses of workers, peasants and soldiers. Accordingly, the literary form should also cater to the masses; hence the promotion of a more accessible, popular language and style. This may seem a natural evolution from the post-New Culturalist revolutionary literature in the 1930s, but Mao’s Yan’an Talks are “as much a legacy of the Chinese literary tradition as they are a product of Leninist influence of the CCP/Maoist desire for political and ideological hegemony” (Denton, 2016, p. 228).

More radically than his Soviet sources, Mao (1996) developed a literary utilitarianism that unequivocally viewed literature and art as “subordinate to the revolutionary tasks set by the Party in a given revolutionary period” (p. 474). In doing so, Mao exemplified a complex stance towards the New Culturalist legacy. On the one hand, in Mao’s China, literature and art were deprived of their autonomy, while literary and artistic autonomy was what the New Culture Movement endeavoured to establish. On the other, Mao’s utilitarian view of literature was

descended from Confucian didacticism as much as that of the New Culture generation, who also used the literary revolution to advance their political aims. The striking difference, however, lies in the fact that “Mao’s ideas were implemented by a state apparatus far more powerful and interventionist than any seen before in Chinese history” (Denton, 2016, p. 228).

The ‘revolutionised’ term ‘Romanticism’ experienced a more substantial revision by the state intervention during the 1958 Great Leap Forward Movement, Mao’s ambitious scheme to rapidly industrialise China that ended in failure and famine. The slogan that promoted the movement, ‘combining revolutionary realism with revolutionary Romanticism’, subsequently changed the meaning of Romanticism in China by associating the term with the Maoist romantic revolutionary zeal. Employed to legitimise Mao’s unrealistic scheme, Romanticism in China had taken a U-turn from its original political energy that challenged the powers that be. In an article published in *Poetry* in 1958 titled “We Need Romanticism”, the term, clearly differentiated from “passive, reactionary Romanticism”, means “active, revolutionary Romanticism” exclusively (Qing, 1958, p. 76). This Chinese or Maoist Romanticism gives license to “a fabricated plot”, “typical characters”, and “the most hyperbolic style”, so as to achieve its aim, to “demonstrate the great vision of our revolutionary struggle and to inspire the people to march towards a glorious future” (Qing, 1958, p. 76). The Great Leap Forward was accompanied by the New Folk Songs Movement, a cultural ‘leap forward’ Mao launched at the same time, which resulted in the mass production of ballads all over the country to eulogise the nationwide romantic fanaticism. It was in such a context that Blake and Burns became suddenly popularised, conveniently propagandised as people’s poets with their class stand as being with the masses and their use of the ballad form as an endorsement of the Folk Songs Movement.

Under this authoritarian rule, Romanticism had to be eradicated of its subversive originality in order to become subservient to the party propaganda. In turn, the key components of Romanticism—radicalism, self-expressiveness and nature-ism—underwent a drastically divergent interpretation. Prior to 1949, Romantic radicalism had been greeted as an inspiration for change, as evidenced in both the coincidence of the introduction of Romanticism with the decline of the Qing empire and the pervading call for reform, and the contemporaneity of its

heyday with the New Culture Movement that endeavoured to build a nation with a revolutionary vision. Under the Communist regime, however, Romantic radicalism became a threat to its authoritarian power and thus was rewritten into an anti-bourgeois, revolutionary class stand that served the socialist cause and advanced the party's political mission.

By the same token, Romantic self-expressiveness, completely at odds with a totalitarian power that suppresses the individual voice, was denounced as bourgeois egotism in essence. In 1964, a debate on the nature of Byronic heroism took place in a leading national newspaper, *Guangming Daily*, where an article written by Yuan Kejia (1921–2008), poet and scholar, on Byron's heroism (1964) provoked several replies by someone with the pen name of "Ye Zi".¹⁴ These replies, increasingly militant, speak with the party's authoritative voice against Byronic bourgeois egotism, which is declared to be the core of the Western literary legacy (Ye, 1965). A complete overturn had taken place since the New Culture Movement: in his "Mara Poetry", Lu Xun celebrates the iconoclastic Romantics' self-expressiveness and searches in vain for such individual geniuses in China; half a century later, Romantic selfhood, which had been embraced as anti-Confucian and emancipatory, was condemned for its dissenting power menacing the authoritarian rule.

Nature-ism was similarly denounced by this official discourse as escapist from the class struggle in reality and therefore politically regressive. The Lakers, Wordsworth in particular, were labelled as turncoat reactionaries, who first welcomed the French Revolution but later, frightened by Jacobinism, stood against the revolutionary cause. Their return to nature was decried as turning away from revolution and ridiculed as a consequence and sign of political spinelessness, which ended up in their indulgence in the feudal country life and glorification of the Mediaeval past. Before 1949, although not as admired as Byron and Shelley, Wordsworth was one of the most popular Romantics because of his affinity with the classical Chinese *tianyuan* poetry—misplaced as this affinity partially was. In the Communist rejection of nature-ism as reactionaryism, he was essentially dismissed and fell into oblivion. Translation of

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of this debate, see the author's forthcoming article, "Romantic, Rebel, and Reactionary: The Metamorphosis of Byron in Twentieth-century China".

Wordsworth's poetry practically disappeared until the 1980s.

5. Whither Romanticism: Post-1976 Resurrection and Counter-currents

Other Romantics besides Wordsworth had to wait till the late 1970s before they could be read again after the Cultural Revolution had suppressed all Western literary works. The post-Cultural Revolution decade saw a voracious readership eagerly embracing the republication of the translations of Romantic works as well as other Western literary classics. Among them, translations by Zha Liangzheng (1918–1977), pen-named Mu Dan, stood out with the poet-translator's remarkable prolificity and unimaginable perseverance. A major translator in Communist China of Blake, Keats, Shelley, Byron and Pushkin, he completed his masterly rendering of *Don Juan* while working under surveillance; he was charged as a 'historical counterrevolutionary' for his enlistment in the Chinese Expedition Force for Burma to aid the British against the Japanese during the Second World War.

Romantic studies, on the other hand, moved ahead more slowly, still haunted by the preceding decades' formulaic discourse, which continued well into the 1990s. An important achievement was made by Zha's fellow student at the National Southwest Associated University and lifetime friend, Wang Zuoliang (1916–1995), who authored *History of English Romantic Poetry* (1991), the first Romantic study in post-1949 China that is finally rid of the official sloganeering language. With the passing of this last generation of Chinese scholars who were versed in both classical Chinese and Western literature, the twenty-first century began to be taken over by younger generations of scholars who had more access to the current state of scholarship in the West. Many of them, however, have shown a greater interest in the more recent critical theories in the West than Romanticism, an apparently well-established field. Within the field of Romanticism, comparative studies on Romantics and Chinese writers have become a major area of interest. Both tendencies suggest a tension between an anxiety to catch up with the West and a keen awareness of one's own national identity, a consistent tension that has existed ever since Romantic literature was first introduced to China.

The reception history of Romanticism in China was essentially a continuous process of

recentring in the significant reconfiguration of the original authors and texts by the readers' constantly changing horizon. One wonders whether in the near future, further recentring will end up decentring Romanticism and other fields of Western literature in China. Today, with humanities in the West facing considerable difficulties and Western literary studies in China caught in a drastically shifting global and national order yet again, we can only "[look] at each other with a wild surmise" (Keats, 1978, p. 34).

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