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IMAGINING NEW CHINESE IN GUO MORUO'S POETRY

Paolo Magagnin

Life and career

Guo Moruo, the pen name of Guo Kaizhen, was born in 1892 in the Sichuanese town of Leshan, the son of a wealthy merchant family of Hakka origin. After receiving traditional schooling in his childhood and further pursuing his education in Jiading and Chengdu, he moved to Japan in early 1914 to specialize in medicine. It was during his Japanese years that, thanks to his proficiency in German, English, and Japanese, he first devoted himself to reading foreign literature and began his career as a writer and translator. By his own account, he began writing poetry in vernacular as early as 1916: his earliest poems were published in 1919 in the Shanghai literary supplement *The Lamp of Learning* (Xuedeng). In 1921, while in Tokyo, he co-founded the Creation Society, a literary association committed to the promotion of Romanticism, self-expression, “*l’art pour l’art*-ism,” and international literature. Among the founding members were other like-minded Chinese students and writers-to-be, such as Yu Dafu, Cheng Fangwu, and Tian Han. Shortly after his arrival in Japan, Guo also met a Japanese nurse, Satō Tomiko, who became his common-law wife despite a previous arranged marriage celebrated before his departure.

The years following his return to China in 1922 marked the beginning of Guo’s conversion to Marxism, made official in 1924, and the growth of his long-lasting left-wing commitment. In 1926 he enthusiastically embarked on the Northern Expedition led by Chiang Kai-shek; just after joining the Communist Party, in 1927, he took part in the Nanchang Uprising against the Kuomintang. Following the failed rebellion and the Nationalist reaction, he fled once again to Japan in early 1928. He remained there for almost a decade, devoting himself mainly to autobiographic writing and to the study of paleography, history, and archaeology. Back in China at the outburst of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), Guo Moruo was put in charge of propaganda work for the United Front: from then on, his artistic activity was permanently influenced – or obscured, depending on one’s perspective – by his ardent political engagement.

After the founding of the People’s Republic, Guo held several prestigious political and academic posts, becoming one of the most influential personalities of the New China and a close comrade of Mao Zedong’s. In particular, in 1949, he became the first President of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, a position he held for almost three decades until his death. However, at the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, not even his outstanding revolutionary pedigree was enough to spare him: criticism and personal attacks were launched against Guo and his family,

leading to persecution by the Red Guards and even to the death of two of his sons. After his full rehabilitation in the early 1970s, Guo Moruo died in Beijing in 1978.

Literary achievements

Few modern intellectuals can compete with Guo Moruo's multifaceted production and extraordinary range of interests. In addition to his career as a scholar of Chinese antiquity and a prominent statesman and cultural leader, in the literary field he gained a solid reputation as a poet and playwright, but also as a prolific translator, novelist, and essayist. Moreover, his inclination – especially in the early part of his artistic career – to draw from, absorb, and reinterpret a plurality of sources, both native and imported, traditional and modern, offers countless points of departure for analyzing his writing from a comparative perspective.

Guo's first and most famed poetic collection, *The Goddesses* (Nüshen, 1921), is heavily indebted to the imported models absorbed while in Japan – such as Whitman, Tagore, German Romanticism and Expressionism – but also taps into the classical Chinese tradition in which he had been educated in his youth. *Fallen Leaves* (Luoye), published in 1926, is one of the earliest examples of an epistolary novel in modern Chinese literature, clearly inspired by the *Werther* and by the writer's own life experience. Indeed, the novel is presented as a collection of letters written by a young Japanese girl to a Chinese student. Aside from its blatant use of Romantic models, the work reveals a series of themes that are typical of May Fourth literature, such as the impossibility of lasting love relationships, and the identification between the tragic fate of the individual and that of a whole generation. The war years witnessed Guo Moruo's growing interest in historical drama involving traditional settings and characters revisited through the prism of patriotism. His most famous historical play, *Qu Yuan* (1942), attracted immediate attention after its grand premiere in Chongqing. The eponymous Warring States poet, who displays the traits of a Faust, a Hamlet, or a King Lear, is innovatively portrayed as a patriot and a tragic revolutionary hero. Such a representation is largely the fruit of Guo's creativity, and is still standard today.

One cannot stress enough Guo Moruo's efforts as a cultural agent and intermediary. In 1919 he began translating Goethe's *Faust*, an enterprise he never completed but which occupied him for three decades. His 1922 translation of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* caused considerable stir among young intellectuals, helping shape the Romantic imagination of the time. The significance of Guo Moruo's contribution as a translator transcended the literary realm, particularly thanks to his partial translation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, begun in 1923. Although by no means the first Chinese intellectual to show an interest in Nietzsche, Guo made *Zarathustra* accessible to a much larger audience through his interpretive translation. Moreover, his Chinese version of Kawakami Hajime's *Social Organization and Social Revolution* (1924), an essay that had played a crucial role in his own conversion to Marxism, also fostered the development of a sharper left-wing consciousness in many young readers.

The masterpiece

Just like his personal career, Guo Moruo's literary output is extremely complex, wide-ranging, and multifaceted. Moreover, the artistic value of his literary achievements, or at least a part of them, has been an object of heated debate and even denigration up to the present day. Critic Achilles Fang's biting aesthetic judgment is frequently cited: “[h]umorless sincerity, death-seriousness, even deadly dullness, – traits one seldom finds in traditional Chinese poetry – mark [Guo Moruo's] poetry.”¹ Some critics have also noted “the immaturity of his creative work”

and the fact that “his later prominence in left-wing politics [. . .] kept his works in print longer than reader interest would have dictated.”² As a matter of fact, Guo's political engagement as a champion of Marxism, as well as the acclaim earned from critics acting solely on the basis of an ideological agenda, also tend to obscure the aesthetic aspects of his artistic expression. However, moving away from the equally inadequate perspectives of unfavorable criticism and hagiography, I feel naturally compelled to join those who identify *The Goddesses* as the peak of Guo's inventiveness and talent, as a work that set the standard for a modern poetry of the “I,” bringing together a broad range of sources of inspiration. In terms of impact and iconicity, its significance as a turning point in Chinese literature is incontestable, and the pioneering role of its author acknowledged even by his detractors. Indeed, the collection was celebrated as the true beginning of modern Chinese poetry, and established Guo as one of the most influential modern poets in China.

The Goddesses appeared in August 1921, but was mostly made up of verses already published in literary journals while Guo was a student in Japan: some of them had been composed as early as 1916, three years before the official outbreak of the May Fourth Movement. The collection comprises a poetic prologue followed by 56 poems, 4 of which are actually verse dramas.³

By making use of free metric forms and vernacular language, the poems reveal the heavy influence of imported models, but also tap into references to classical Chinese tradition, giving voice to a sentiment of powerful individualism, unrestrained vitality, and oneness with the cosmos. This range of elements creates a kaleidoscope of sources, themes, forms, and voices that Guo treats with great virtuosity, especially when it comes to the re-elaboration of preexisting models. Only two years after its publication, Wen Yiduo, a fellow poet with a radically different (and, it could be argued, much more sophisticated) aesthetic approach, and one who was otherwise quite critical of Guo's Occidentalism, praised the collection as embodying the spirit not only of the present times, but of the whole twentieth century.⁴ In addition to being a typical product of the enthusiastic, dynamic *Zeitgeist* of the May Fourth era, in the artistic field *The Goddesses* “is synonymous with the New Poetry movement's aspiration to the ‘new’ in form and subject.”⁵ In this sense, despite its aesthetic flaws and a certain degree of naivety, it set the course for the most dynamic poetry of the May Fourth era, lending its vigorous expressive force to new poets seeking a modern voice.

The Goddesses was followed by a number of other poetic works, including the collection *Starry Skies* (Xingkong, 1923) and the 42-stanza-long poem *The Vase* (Ping, 1928). Although some of them received critical praise, none of Guo's later collections was nearly as successful or influential as his first one. However, the flamboyant style of his early writing soon lost its glamor: the later period of his poetic creation was characterized by a gradual return to more traditional forms⁶ and more ideologically correct themes from a Marxist perspective.

Reconfiguring traditional into modern, native into foreign

Taking exception to the second half of Fang's above-mentioned statement, according to which “the emergence of [Guo Moruo] on the Chinese poetic scene [. . .] marked the end of tradition,”⁷ Lin points out that the poet “introduced a much-needed element, vitality, into the new verse, but he did not bring down the curtain on tradition;” on the contrary, “[t]raditionalism continued to play a meaningful part not only in [Guo's] poetry but in the poetry that followed.”⁸ Nevertheless, in his creative work, the treatment of his native tradition is always an imaginative one, a constant renegotiation of models and themes in the light of aesthetic and cultural modernity. Despite some attempts at downplaying the relation between Guo Moruo's output and other literatures,⁹ foreign models undoubtedly played an important role in shaping his eclectic

artistic expression and in his re-interpretation of tradition. This comes as no surprise, since modern Chinese poetry feeds generously on imported resources to the point of appearing “un-Chinese,” and represents “such a radical departure from Classical Poetry that it looks ‘foreign’ to many Chinese readers even today.”¹⁰

As a pupil, Guo Moruo received a typical traditional schooling in the Chinese classics. His early interest in classical Chinese literature and philosophy never faded: it emerges extensively in his early poetry (including *The Goddesses*) and represents a lifelong source of aesthetic and thematic inspiration for his literary production and scholarly work. In the literary field, Guo grew particularly fond of the early poetry represented by the *Songs of Chu* (Chuci) and the *Book of Odes* (Shijing), as well as of Tang poetry. Moreover, he found gratification in the poetic style of such Daoist works as *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi*; a few years later, he would broaden his philosophical vistas through the reading of Confucian and Neo-Confucian thought.

His encounter with Western literature, however, took place quite early on, through Lin Shu’s translations/adaptations: among these readings, Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* may have played a major role in the development of a sense of historicism that resurfaces in his later historical plays and scholarship.¹¹ In 1913, while attending a modern high school in Chengdu, the young writer came in contact with an author who seems to have made a deep impression on him, namely Henry W. Longfellow. According to Guo, Longfellow’s “The Arrow and the Song” was somewhat reminiscent of the ancient Chinese lyrical tradition exemplified by the *Book of Odes*.¹²

As a matter of fact, a classical sensibility resurfaces in many of Guo Moruo’s most reflective and measured lyrics – his so-called “small wave” verse, as opposed to the “great waves” of his explosive and vigorous poems. “A Clear Morning” (Qingchao, 1920) is a typical example: “Over the pond a few young willows, / under the willows a long pavilion, / in the pavilion my son and I sit, / on the pond the sun and clouds are reflected”¹³ (148). Although within a more flexible metric organization, the poem shows indebtedness to classical poetry in its traditional imagery and motifs – the willows and the contemplation of spring – but also in its use of repetition and parallelism. It also shows Guo’s preference for stanzaic structures, a scheme that recurs even in most of his free verse compositions.

As was naturally the case with foreign-educated Chinese students of the time, a genuine, full immersion in foreign literature only took place after Guo’s moving to Japan. There, as early as 1915, he had the opportunity to read Rabindranath Tagore in English or Japanese. The poet himself acknowledged the influence of the Bengali writer on the composition of *The Goddesses*, although it took some time for him to process it: Guo’s indebtedness towards Tagore’s composed lyrical style is clear in the contemplative verses written in 1919, such as “Parting” (Bieli) and “New Moon and White Clouds” (Xinyue yu baiyun), and more generally in the third section of the collection, variously inspired by Tagore’s *Crescent Moon*. On the thematic plane, Guo may also have drawn some inspiration from Tagore in the frequent mention of the sun as an object of praise and worship in many of his most energetic poems, and of the moon in other, more meditative verses. “Hymn to the Sun” (Taiyang lizan, 1921), with its eightfold invocation to the glowing body as a source of life and poetic inspiration, is only the most transparent example of the first category, “New Moon and White Clouds” of the second.

Tagore also proved crucial to Guo’s development of a pantheistic conscience, which is perceivable throughout the collection. It is probably through the reading of Tagore that Guo started to explore other thinkers and texts expressing pantheistic views, such as Kabīr and the *Upaniṣad*, but also the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. However, despite the admiration for Kabīr and Spinoza expressed in the poem “Three Pantheists” (San ge fanshenlunzhe, 1920), as well as in some essays, Guo’s pantheism presents no real religious implications. Rather, it serves as a poetic device; its philosophical roots should be sought in a broad native tradition that encompasses

shamanistic elements, the *Zhuangzi* (whose author, unsurprisingly, is also addressed in the poem), and the combination of individualism and communion with the cosmos of the Neo-Confucian thinker Wang Yangming.

The two literary figures that had the greatest impact on Guo Moruo's poetics while in Japan, after the early phase dominated by Tagore, are Walt Whitman and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Whitman is invariably cited, together with Tagore himself and Henrik Ibsen, as a major source of formal and theoretical inspiration for many May Fourth intellectuals. In Guo's case, this influence can be identified in the adoption of a number of formal features that had been introduced or revived by America's bard, such as the use of free verse, the recurrent presence of the poetic "I," the predilection for enumeration and repetition, and a general penchant for powerful, dissonant imagery, best embodied by his "Song of Myself." At the theoretical level, in addition to their common democratic convictions (although Guo's notion of democracy was rather hazy at the time), the two artists largely shared a vision of an epic pantheism and of an identification between the Self and nature. However, Guo's own pantheistic views excluded the idea of an omnipresent God at work in the world, an idea repeatedly evoked by Whitman; rather, they involve a godless, natural All. If a God exists in such a worldview, he is but an expansion of the poet's ego. Despite minor divergences, Whitman's poetics proved crucial to the formation of Guo's own aesthetics at the time, and continued to exert a conspicuous influence in later years.¹⁴

Guo Moruo's encounter with Goethe, mainly through his reading (and translation) of *Faust*, was equally decisive: it marked a turning point that notably shaped the composition of many of the poems in the first part of *The Goddesses*, encouraging Guo to try his hand at writing poetic dramas. Goethe's works triggered an adjustment of Guo's earlier pantheism, urging him to give special prominence to the creative power of the individual, as well as to the role played by human action in the progress of society. In this sense, Guo may have found a new mode of self-expression and a new perspective by exploring "Faustian-Promethean strains"¹⁵ hitherto unknown in Chinese literature. The impact of Goethe's masterpiece is especially noticeable in "The Nirvana of the Phoenixes" (Fenghuang niepan, 1920), but also permeates "The Rebirth of the Goddesses" (Nüshen zhi zaisheng, 1921): in the latter, the filiation is clearly marked by the insertion, by way of a prologue, of the *Chorus mysticus* from the closing section of the German *Faust*.¹⁶ I will provide below a more detailed analysis of the two poetic plays from the perspective of destruction and re-creation.

While in Japan, Guo Moruo read the Bible – probably inspired by his Japanese wife, the daughter of a Protestant minister – but also became acquainted with Greco-Roman and other mythologies. Echoes of the "Song of Songs" can be found in "*Venus*" (1919), despite the Latin reference contained in the title: "I would compare your loving lips / to a wine cup. / An inexhaustible, sweet liquor / that would keep me constantly inebriated" (130). Guo naturally became acquainted with Arishima Takeo's works, through which he became acquainted with the writings of many authors who would soon become his literary beacons – the most notable being Whitman, who enjoyed enormous popularity in Japan at the time. He also came in contact with such Japanese forms of fiction as the "I-novel" (*shishōsetsu*): the strong self-referentiality typical of this genre undoubtedly gave him – as well as his fellow Creationists, notably his then close friend Yu Dafu – a solid aesthetic point of reference.¹⁷

Guo Moruo also may have come into contact with the European avant-garde of Expressionism, Dadaism, and Futurism, either in their original forms or through Japanese reinterpretations. Expressionism, with its focus on subjectivity, subversion, and the centrality of emotional experience, found its natural place in the poet's artistic stance and modes of expression. An interesting study has been carried out that stresses the emphasis on onomatopoeia and the combining of images and words that are found in some of Guo's verses, e.g. "The Nirvana of the Phoenixes," which may point at Dada as a source of inspiration.¹⁸ Futurist motifs and images are easier to

detect, for example in the personification of the city in “Looking Afar from Fudetate Peak” (Bili shantou zhanwang, 1920): “Pulse of the great metropolis! / Surge of life! / Beating, panting, shrieking. . . / Spurting, flying, jumping. . .” (68). However, the Futurist exaltation of the industrial metropolis is absent from Guo’s poetic horizon, as is the modernist binary opposition between city and nature. Moreover, his concept of power and destruction has a specific connotation that, although similarly aimed at radical rejuvenation, is far removed from the blatant, right-leaning belligerence of Italian Futurism.

The osmotic symbiosis between diverse models and sources is a constant trait of Guo Moruo’s intellectual and artistic attitude. Even when confronted with the ubiquitous foreign suggestions in *The Goddesses*, it is important to note that “every occidental discovery is balanced in Guo Moruo by the reimmersion in the deepest current of Chinese national heritage.”¹⁹ The complexity of Guo’s intellectual universe stems precisely from this network of interliterary and intraliterary connections, woven together and reconfigured by the poet in a powerfully modern way.

The explosion of the Self

The resurgence of individualism, even in its most extreme and unabashed forms, is undoubtedly one of the main features of new Chinese poetry. As a matter of fact, the emergence of a modern poetry devoted to lending voice to the artist’s Self is intimately connected to the critical endeavor undertaken by Hu Shi, the eminent activist for language reform and the engineer of the literary revolution that took place at the end of the 1910s. Hu began to draw attention to the renewal of poetry as early as 1917, when his first vernacular poems appeared in *New Youth* (Xin qingnian). His artistic efforts were collected in 1922 under the title *Experiments* (Changshi ji), and were accompanied by a series of seminal theoretical essays on the innovation of poetic language and thought. In particular, “On New Poetry” (Tan xinshi, 1919) marked a turning point in the way poetry was to be conceived of and created for many years to come. Hu’s concept of new poetry involved the discarding of classical Chinese language in favor of the vernacular, the adoption of free verse and even prose-like metric forms, the revitalization of ideas and images, and a renewed attention to clarity and conciseness. His programmatic vision ultimately favored – much in the same way as Imagism was doing in Europe and America – an artistic creation based on concreteness and individual experience, against traditional literary models that Hu and his followers saw as ossified, overly formalistic, lacking authenticity and hindering genuine self-expression.

However, when it comes to the advocacy of spontaneity and subjectivity, it was not Hu Shi that left the deepest mark in the new poetry of the May Fourth era, but Guo Moruo. Furthermore, if we take 1916 as the composition date of the earliest poems that would later be gathered in *The Goddesses*, Guo seems to have incorporated such principles in his poetic creation about one year before Hu’s literary revolution. A celebration of unfettered self-expression and of the poet’s creative power, *The Goddesses* is the epitome of the Romantic subjectivity that was an essential feature of the May Fourth Movement. However, as widely discussed by his scholars, in Guo’s early poems the “I” has a cosmic significance and is embedded in a pantheistic vision that is unique to him.

This sentiment is ubiquitous throughout the collection, but reaches its peak in “The Heavenly Hound” (Tiangou, 1920): “I am the Heavenly Hound! / I swallow the moon, / I swallow the sun, / I swallow all the stars, / I swallow the entire universe, / I am I! / I am the light of the moon, / I am the light of the sun, / I am the light of all the stars, / I am the light of X-ray beams, / I am the total *Energy* [in English in the original] of the entire universe! / I race, / I shout wildly, / I burn, / I burn like blazing fire, / I shout wildly like the ocean, / I race like electricity, / I race, / I race, / I race, / I peel my skin, / I eat my flesh, / I suck my blood, / I gnaw my guts, / I race on my nerves, / I race on my spine, / I race on my brains, / I am I! / My I is about to explode!” (54–55).

The poet identifies with the Heavenly Dog of Chinese mythology, resonating with the legendary Norse wolves that cause the world to sink into darkness at Ragnarök. Here the poet's pantheistic Self becomes the incarnation of cosmic energy and one with the universe, in an everlasting process of creation and destruction.²⁰ The pounding rhythm of the poem, its free meter and explosive style perfectly epitomize the "great wave" verse that made him famous, and its powerful imagery taps into scientific knowledge "in an attempt to enrich and renew the current vocabulary of poetry."²¹

A very similar rhythmic pattern and imagery, as well as the same persistent "I" at the beginning of each verse, can be found in "I am a Worshipper of Idols" (Wo shi ge ouxiang chongbaizhe, 1920). The poet bursts forth "I am a worshipper of idols!," then goes on to itemize the objects of his worship – which include the sun, the mountain peaks, the ocean, life, death, light, darkness, the creative spirit, blood, the heart, bombs, grief, destruction, but also Suez and Panama, the Great Wall and the Pyramids – and ends with the verses "I worship destroyers of idols, worship myself! / I am also a destroyer of idols!" (99). By anaphorically using the pronoun "I," the poet's hyperbolic Self reviews the manifestations of both nature and humankind, from heavenly bodies to the products of human genius and creativity; and after shifting its gaze towards man and his violence, at the end it turns to itself once again, trapped in a solipsistic loop. Just as the I reaches the peak of its elevation it also reaches its terminal point: it subsequently collapses into self-referentiality, losing the ability to convey any message and – in "The Heavenly Hound" – finding an ultimate outlet only in an explosion.²²

The use of free verse and the fondness for diverse references – science, nature, and mythology, to name just a few – but also the ubiquity of an amplified "I," the catalogue technique, and the feeling of physical and spiritual oneness with the universe can be instantly traced back to Whitman, and especially to "Song of Myself" and the second stanza of "So Long." However, this prominent, all-encompassing Self is rooted not only in a Romantic and heroic subjectivity, but also in Nietzsche's philosophy of the *Übermensch*. The German thinker had already been given prominence by other May Fourth intellectuals, notably Mao Dun and Lu Xun, who emphasized the role of the Overman in overturning traditional – i.e. Confucian – morality. In his early verse, Guo pushes this idea of a powerful individual to its extreme consequences, making it a cornerstone of his poetics. Although Guo's interest for Nietzsche cooled in later years, the philosopher obtained an eminent place in his personal theoretical pantheon, as witnessed by the influential translation of *Zarathustra*.²³ Nietzsche is even celebrated, together with Copernicus and Darwin, as one of the "bandits of doctrinal revolution" in "Hymn to the Bandits" (Feitu song, 1919), with the poet praising his iconoclasm and addressing him directly in these terms: "Nietzsche, you mad advocate of the philosophy of the Overman, you who have humiliated gods and smashed idols!" (114–115). The hypertrophic and unrestrained Self found in *The Goddesses* is also evocative of the "extension of the Self" (*Erweiterung des Ichs*) theorized by Max Stirner, the father of anarchist individualism, who exerted a significant influence on many intellectuals of the time – especially Yu Dafu, who opened a 1923 article on Stirner with a discussion of this very concept²⁴ – and was seen by some of them as a precursor to Nietzsche's philosophy.

The celebration of self-expression, artistic creativity, and individual freedom that permeates *The Goddesses* hit the modern Chinese literary scene with unrivalled momentum. The collection proved crucial to the formation of a new poetic conscience and voice: echoes of the same individualistic sentiment, the presentation of the poet as a hero, and even some metric features of Guo's new-style verse can still be found, decades later, in an entirely different artistic and ideological context – e.g. in such "obscure" poems as "The Answer" (Huida, 1976) by Bei Dao.²⁵ Despite immediately earning Guo Moruo a legion of admirers and imitators, however, the exacerbated self-absorption and overwhelming rhetoric of *The Goddesses* proved hardly sustainable

in the long run. By the mid-1920s, most modern poets – including Guo himself – had already turned to other forms and sources of inspiration.

Destruction and rebirth

The celebration of annihilation and destruction in such poems as “The Heavenly Dog” or “I am a Worshipper of Idols” is self-evident.²⁶ In her discussion of the sublime in *The Goddesses*, Zheng goes as far as to declare that “[t]he sublime transfigured in Guo’s ‘new’ verse is a sublimity of the joys of destruction bordering on savagery.”²⁷ Elsewhere, the depiction of such themes shows more positive, even cheerful traits. This is the case, for example, with the final stanza of “Victorious Death” (Shengli de si, 1920), dedicated to IRA fighter Terence MacSwiney, with its apostrophe: “O solemn death! O death in a golden blaze! O death triumphant! / O victorious death! / Impartial, selfless God of Death! I thank you!” (122). The Romantic idea of death as “true liberation” (128) longed for by the poet is also patent in “Death” (Si, 1919).

However, it is in the poetic dramas “The Rebirth of the Goddesses” and “The Nirvana of the Phoenixes” that the celebration of destruction, and the subsequent call for the creation of a new world order, find their most accomplished poetic representation. In the former work, Guo revisits the myth of the goddess Nüwa mending the heavens at the time when the sky and the earth were in disruption, as related in several traditional sources. In his version of the myth, three anonymous goddesses, possibly symbols of the eternal feminine essence (*ewig Weibliche*) evoked in the motto from *Faust*, are put on the stage. Facing a turbulent world and an impending catastrophe, they disappear while announcing the advent of a new world, made of new light and warmth: “We will create a new sun, / We will no longer stay in these niches as statues!” (8). In the following verses, a bloody war between Zhuanxu and Gonggong – two mythical characters reminiscent of the warlords ravaging China at the time – leaves the world in ruins. The goddesses, now unseen and only heard, sing a song of welcome to the newly created sun, which has yet to rise. The voices of praise fade as the stage manager appears bowing to the audience:

Everyone! You must have grown tired of sitting in this fetid, gloomy world! You must be thirsting for light! The poet who composed this play has put his pen down. In fact, he has fled beyond the sea to create a new light and warmth. Everyone, are you waiting for the appearance of a new-born sun? You better create one yourselves! Till we meet again under the new sun!

(14)

The chaotic old world has undergone utter obliteration: “New-made wine / cannot be contained in old skins” (8), sings the Third Goddess. However, a rebirth, embodied by the new sun and sustained by the poet’s creative endeavor, is only hinted at in the stage manager’s closing statement – not without a hint of irony – and left to the efforts of the audience.²⁸

A more complex conceptualization of rebirth, following the demolition of the old order, is found in “The Nirvana of the Phoenixes,” perhaps the most accomplished poem in the collection, which tellingly opens its second section. Guo Moruo reimagines the myth of the phoenix, grafting the Near-Eastern bird that rise from its ashes onto the *feng* and *huang* of the Chinese tradition – respectively the male and female phoenix, whose appearance is associated with the advent of a righteous ruler. Through the representation of the cycle of death and rebirth, symbolized by the phoenixes, the poem captures the spirit of the May Fourth Movement and its yearning for a new life born out of the ashes of a collapsing world. In a solemn tone sustained

by repetition and parallelism, the "Prelude" describes a bleak world where the death by fire of the phoenixes is imminent: "The night is now deep, / the wood is now lit, / the *feng* is tired of pecking, / the *huang* is tired of flapping, / their hour of death is near!" (35). The pitch of the poem is then elevated by the intense song of the *feng*: "Universe, o universe, / I curse you with all my strength: / you blood-soiled slaughterhouse! / You gloom-filled prison! / You grave where phantoms shriek! / You hell where demons frolic! / Why do you even exist?" (38). The song of the *huang* introduces a more gentle and nostalgic note, in the awareness that the incoming death will put an end to the freshness and sweetness of youth, but also to the worries and grief of this life. While the couple is consumed by the fire, a flock of other birds approaches to witness their demise, mocking them and hoping to inherit a piece of the world they have left behind. The poetic play closes in a climax ushered in by the carefully orchestrated "Song of rebirth," in which the reborn phoenixes gleefully sing their own resurrection and the advent of a new world: a world dominated by the liberating force of fire – another incarnation of the pervasive image of the sun – and by the return to a pantheistic vision where "the One of the All is born again, / the All of the One is born again!" and "fire is you. / Fire is me. / Fire is him. / Fire is fire!" (43–44).

As is the case in "The Rebirth of the Goddesses," the political and revolutionary implications of this renewal are not developed or made explicit: such a change remains confined to the realm of a humanist idealism, tinged with utopian suggestions. In spite of a generally optimistic tone, the new world never seems to be fully realized, and the unambiguous certitudes of socialist realism are still nowhere to be found in *The Goddesses*. This said, one may see in this idea of renewal the seeds of the engagement that will dominate Guo's later life and artistic production, starting with his conversion to Marxism in 1924. However, Guo's political views were still blurry and hardly systematic at the time, and his enthusiasm still largely fashioned by Romantic models. His sympathy for certain left-wing principles is beyond doubt, but the famous claims expressed in the "Preface" (Xushi, 1921), namely "I am a proletarian" and "I want to be a Communist" (3), should not be overstated. Rather, it has been suggested that "The Nirvana of the Phoenixes" presents religious overtones, starting from the evocation of the concept of nirvana in the title. From this perspective, the regeneration brought about by May Fourth and allegorically staged by Guo may be seen as "not a mere historical event but a religious ritual, one that initiates the new youth into an ecstasy of total self-confidence and self-sacrifice."²⁹

In any case, the idea of rebirth is ever-present in *The Goddesses*: while it is not always formulated as explicitly as in the poetic plays discussed above, it is often hinted at in a number of ways. As already mentioned, one of Guo's favorite semantic fields associated with renewal includes sun, fire, light, heat, and energy in their various forms. In "Sunrise" (Richu, 1920), the dark clouds gathering in the sky are "all driven away by Apollo's mighty light" (62) while "the cockcrows all around play a song of triumph" (63). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the line "light and darkness are divided, as if cut with a knife" (62) is reminiscent of the beginning of the *Genesis*, which may reinforce the idea of (re-)creation and its religious associations. Moreover, in a game of internal reverberations, the song of the roosters – the only birds that refrained from mocking the dying *feng* and *huang* – also introduces the rebirth song of the phoenixes in "The Nirvana of the Phoenixes" by announcing "the light that died is born again. / [...] the universe that died is born again. / [...] the phoenixes that died are born again" (43).

The exaltation of the creativity of man – and especially the poet – is also intimately connected with the idea of rebirth. In "The Pyramids" (Jinzita, 1920), for instance, the sun is symbolized by the pyramids themselves, which in turn roar: "Create! Create! Create with all your might! / The creative force of humankind can rival that of the gods! / If you do not believe us, then look at us, we glorious constructions!" (107). The Romantic celebration of human creative power is exemplified by the feverish monologue of Qu Yuan in the poetic play "The Tragedy

at the Xiang River” (Xiang lei, 1920): “I follow the example of the spirit of creation, I create freely, freely express myself. I create magnificent mountains and grand oceans, I create the sun, the moon, the stars, I ride the wind, the clouds, the thunder, the rain, and though limited by my own body I break free, I can expand into the universe”³⁰ (22). This speech seems to encapsulate the universe of *The Goddesses* and its aesthetic mainstays: the celebration of creation and free self-expression, the identification of the poet with a demiurge, the expansion of the Self, and a pantheistic vision expressed in a language that is strongly reminiscent of “The Heavenly Dog” – besides the hammering presence of the “I.” Echoes of Dr. Faust’s euphoric lines clearly resonate in the words of the poet that Guo Moruo admired most. It comes as no surprise that Guo somehow elected Qu Yuan as his *alter ego*, just as Goethe did with Faust:³¹ a characterization that would be finally accomplished 20 years later, in the 1942 historical play of the same name.

The wealth of elements drawn from all disciplines and epochs, remolded by Guo Moruo’s talent to create a brand-new mythical universe, has earned *The Goddesses* the status of a masterpiece in modern Chinese literature. Because of its cross-cultural value, the collection should also be entitled to a first-rate place in the realm of world literature. Its role in the formation of a new aesthetic conscience and a new approach to poetic expression marks a milestone in the cultural history of China. Even though many of these forms and modes were more or less quickly abandoned, a world of artistic possibilities was opened that transcended both the continuation of tradition and the mere imitation of foreign models. From this perspective, *The Goddesses* paved the way for modern Chinese poetry and exerted an enduring influence for the decades to come.

Notes

- 1 Achilles Fang, “From Imagism to Whitmanism in Recent Chinese Poetry: A Search for Poetics That Failed,” in Horst Frenz and G. L. Anderson, eds., *Indiana University Conference on Oriental-Western Literature Relations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), 186.
- 2 Bonnie McDougall and Kam Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century* (London: Hurst & Company, 1997), 42.
- 3 The edition of *The Goddesses* used in this contribution follows that contained in the first volume of *Guo Moruo quanji* (Complete Works of Guo Moruo), published in 1982 by Renmin wenxue chubanshe.
- 4 Wen Yiduo, *Wen Yiduo quanji* (Complete Works of Wen Yiduo), vol. 2 (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 1993), 110.
- 5 Yi Zheng, “The Romantic Transfiguration of a Sublime Poetics,” in Caroline Baillie et al., eds., *Traveling Facts: The Social Construction, Distribution, and Accumulation of Knowledge* (Frankfurt am Main and New York: Campus, 2004), 112.
- 6 Lars Ellström, “Guo Moruo, *Nüshen* (The Goddesses), 1921,” in Lloyd Haft, ed., *A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature 1900–1949, Volume III: The Poem* (Leiden, New York, København and Köln: Brill, 1989), 108–114.
- 7 Achilles Fang, “From Imagism to Whitmanism,” 186.
- 8 Julia Lin, *Modern Chinese Poetry: An Introduction* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972), 198.
- 9 For instance, Hu Shi emphasized the supposed indigenous origins of the new genre, although his poetic thought had been essentially shaped by his education in the US and his immersion in Euro-American modernist poetry. See Kirk A. Denton, “Form and Reform: New Poetry and the Crescent Moon Society,” in Joshua Mostow, ed., *The Columbia Companion to East Asian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 366. On the attempt to obscure the interliterary and anticonformist aspects in Guo Moruo’s early poetry see also Wolfgang Kubin, “Creator! Destroyer! On the Self-Image of the Chinese Poet,” in *Modern Chinese Literature* (1996), vol. 9, no. 2, 252.
- 10 Michelle Yeh, “There Are No Camels in the Koran: What Is Modern About Modern Chinese Poetry?” in Christopher Lupke, ed., *New Perspectives on Contemporary Chinese Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 15.
- 11 Marián Gálik, “Guo Mo-jo’s *The Goddesses*: Creative Confrontation with Tagore, Whitman and Goethe,” in Marián Gálik, ed., *Milestones in Sino-Western Literary Confrontation (1898–1979)* (Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1986), 45.

- 12 Ibid., 44.
- 13 Guo Moruo, *Guo Moruo quanji* (Complete Works of Guo Moruo), vol. 1 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1982), 148. Further quotations from the Chinese text will be indicated by page numbers in brackets after the citation. All translations from the Chinese are my own.
- 14 See Liu Rongqiang, "Whitman's Soul in China: Guo Moruo's Poetry in the New Culture Movement," in Ed Folsom, ed., *Whitman East & West: New Contexts for Reading Walt Whitman* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 172–186; Ou Hong, "Panthestic Ideas in Guo Moruo's *The Goddesses* and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*," in Ed Folsom, ed., *Whitman East & West*, 187–196.
- 15 Marián Gálík, "Kuo Mo-jo's *The Goddesses*," 61.
- 16 Ibid., 59 ff.
- 17 See Christopher T. Keaveney, *The Subversive Self in Modern Chinese Literature: The Creation Society's Reinvention of the Japanese Shishōsetsu* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
- 18 Kin Pong James Au, "The Influence of Dadaist Poetry Works on Chinese and Japanese Poems from the Late 1910s Till the Late 1920s," *The Asian Conference on Arts and Humanities Osaka, Japan 2014 – Conference Proceedings 2014* (Nagoya: IAFOR, 2014), 600–612.
- 19 Anna Bujatti, "The Spirit of the May Fourth Movement in *The Goddesses* of Guo Moruo," in Marián Gálík, ed., *Interliterary and Intraliterary Aspects of the May Fourth Movement 1919 in China* (Bratislava: Veda, 1990), 104.
- 20 Marián Gálík, "Kuo Mo-jo's *The Goddesses*," 59.
- 21 Julia Lin, *Modern Chinese Poetry*, 209.
- 22 Richard Trapp, "'Modernism' and Foreign Influences on Chinese Poetry: Exemplified by the Early Guo Moruo and Gu Cheng," in Marián Gálík, ed., *Interliterary and Intraliterary Aspects of the May Fourth Movement 1919 in China*, 89. A groundbreaking investigation into the low-to-high, inside-to-outside corporal dynamics of "The Heavenly Hound" is found in Mi Jialu (Mi Jiyuan), "Zhangkuang yu zaohua de shenti: ziwu mosu yu Zhongguo xiandaixing – Guo Moruo shige 'Tiangou' zaijiedu" (The Insolent and Creating Body: Self-Fashioning and Chinese Modernity. A Reinterpretation of Guo Moruo's Poem 'The Heavenly Hound'), *Jiangnan xueshu*, vol. 35, no. 1, 13–21. For an intriguing reading of the obliteration of the Self as the sign of a longing for totality and a prelude to a conversion to collectivism, see Victor Vuilleumier, "Body, Soul, and Revolution: The Paradoxical Transfiguration of the Body in Modern Chinese Poetry," in Tao Dongfeng et al., eds., *Chinese Revolution and Chinese Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 57.
- 23 See Raoul David Findeisen, "The Burden of Culture: Glimpses at the Literary Reception of Nietzsche in China," *Asian and African Studies* (1997), no. 6, 79–81.
- 24 Yu Dafu, *Yu Dafu quanji* (Complete Works of Yu Dafu), vol. 10 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue chubanshe, 2006), 48–64.
- 25 Michel Hockx, "Introduction: The Making of Modern Chinese Poetry," in *The Flowering of Modern Chinese Poetry: An Anthology of Verse from the Republican Period*, trans. Herbert Batt and Sheldon Zitner (Montreal, Kingston, London and Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 17.
- 26 See Wolfgang Kubin, "Creator! Destroyer!" 252 ff., and Chu Zigang, "Lun Guo Moruo zaoqi shige zhong de siwang yishi" (On the Conscience of Death in Guo Moruo's Early Poetry), *Zuojia zazhi* (2012), no. 3, 32–33.
- 27 Yi Zheng, "The Romantic Transfiguration of a Sublime Poetics," 113.
- 28 See Anna Bujatti, "Lo spirito del 4 Maggio nella 'Rinascita delle dee' di Guo Moruo" (The May Fourth Spirit in Guo Moruo's 'The Rebirth of the Goddesses'), *Cina* (1980), no. 16, 265–272.
- 29 David Der-wei Wang, "Chinese Literature from 1841 to 1937," in Kang-i Sun Chang, ed., *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), vol. 2, 482.
- 30 Anna Bujatti, "The Spirit of the May Fourth Movement in *The Goddesses* of Guo Moruo," 103.
- 31 Marián Gálík, "Kuo Mo-jo's *The Goddesses*," 66.

Further readings

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