

THE STATE OF LONELINESS AS A SOURCE OF POETIC CREATIVITY IN FENG ZHI'S EARLY WRITINGS

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Modern Chinese literature is notably characterised by a conscious imitation and integration of Western literature and philosophy. A remarkable example of this are the writings pertaining to the years that witnessed the advent of modernisation and ‘Westernisation’ during the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, young and sensitive Chinese poets who lived under the influence of the May Fourth movement or the ‘New Culture Movement, as it was termed following the definition of the socio-cultural reform campaign by the editor of *New Tide* magazine in December 1919,¹ became increasingly inspired by Western lyricism.

This new form of literature allowed them to free themselves from the chains of the rigid versification forms that were typical of the Chinese literary tradition. Moreover, it also advocated a new literature written in the vernacular language about the people, with the latter’s contemporary concerns and their feelings taking centre stage instead of the ‘conventional themes and stock imagery’ of the classical poetic tradition.² In this context, it is worth noting, however, that the influence of Western poetry in China was predominantly based on the aesthetic experience that varied from poet to poet who could also not negate their identity or neglect their roots of traditional Chinese poetic aesthetics. In fact, modern Chinese lyricists and translators mainly chose Western poems for their close resemblance or implicit reminder of images, emotions and themes, which were also recurrent in the long Chinese tradition. The poetic themes of the early writings, such as that of ‘loneliness’ discussed in this article, and of the later collection of sonnets of the modern writer and translator Feng Zhi 冯至 (1905-1993), for instance, clearly manifest how the Chinese poet succeeded in merging the essence of European literature, mainly of Rilke and Novalis, with traits and themes also recurrent in classical Chinese tradition.

Following the spirit of the New Culture Movement, some Chinese poets dedicated their literary activity to the development of new forms and verses that could best fit the poetry in *baihua* 白话, the vernacular language; whereas other lyricists imitated and introduced poetic forms typical of the Western tradition. To the latter’s end, Feng Zhi, eminent Chinese poet and scholar of German literature and philosophy, is commonly

1 See Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement. Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*, Taipei: Rainbow Bridge Books, 1960, p. 194.

2 Michelle Yeh, ‘Modern Poetry’ in Victor H. Mair (ed.), *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, p. 453.

regarded as the most famous modern sonnet composer of China.³ His intellectual and literary creativity was even praised by Lu Xun in 1935, who defined Feng Zhi as “the best lyricist of China.”⁴

In line with such meaningful statement, the study and appreciation of Feng’s poetry gain great value when defining the significant impact of the author’s philosophical and poetic contribution to the refinement of modern Chinese literature. In fact, he is not only publicly acknowledged as a major spokesperson and interpreter of German philosophy and literature, having undertaken German studies in very renowned universities both in Beijing and in Germany, but he is also regarded as one of the foremost representatives of modernist Chinese literature as a whole.

Together with other young Chinese intellectuals, Feng Zhi mainly co-founded two literary associations, namely the Shallow Grass Society that through the journal *Shallow Grass Quarterly* contributed to the dissemination of modern Chinese literary writings between March 1923 and February 1925; and the Sunken Bell Society. The latter was established in 1925 and was reminiscent of the poetic fairy-tale drama *Die versunkene Glocke* (*The Sunken Bell*, 1896) by the German naturalist author and Nobel Prize winner Gerhart Hauptmann (1862-1946). The motifs of the German romantic fairy drama, embodied in the title of this influential Chinese literary association, are mirrored in the poetic themes that vitalised the articles published in the issues of its quarterly journal.

The profound emotional states and feelings conveyed in the verses of his mature poetic works and in his much acclaimed collection of twenty-seven sonnets, *Shisihang ji* 十四行集 (*Sonnets*, 1941), composed during his time in Kunming, root back to his exposure to German and romantic literature from Goethe to Rilke. It is as middle school student, thus earlier than his enrolment at the German Department of Peking University, where he embarked on the intensive study and analysis of German philosophical and literary works between 1923 and 1927, that Feng Zhi experienced his first and decisive encounter with Western literary writings and, more specifically, with German literature, thought and history. Through the teachings of his Chinese literature mentor at school in Beijing, the young student broadened his knowledge on Classical Chinese poetry and learnt about European literary and cultural movements. During these years of education at the Fourth Middle School of Beijing (1917-1921), Feng Zhi gave freedom to his feelings by expressing his ideas in verses and writing poems.

Among the themes that were closest to the poet’s heart and to his personal experience, those of loneliness and melancholy are the ones that mostly pervade the lines of Feng Zhi’s both first lyrical works and his more refined and mature writings, mainly the *Sonnets*. Feng Zhi’s lyricism and concept of loneliness cannot be merely

3 Despite being remembered as a prominent poet and translator of German works into Chinese, Feng Zhi also wrote a novel, essays and a lyrical narrative.

4 “中国最为杰出的抒情诗人” – Preface in *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi* (Compendium of Modern Chinese literature), Vol. 2, Shanghai: Liangyou, 1935.

regarded as a poetic expression of sentimentalism, but rather as the embodiment of the poet's self-reflection and aesthetic experience. From one of his writings, entitled *Haohua kaifang zai zui jimode yuanli* 好花开放在最寂寞的园里 [Beautiful flowers blossom in the loneliest garden], it is possible to perceive the poet's belief on the utter state of solitude that comes mightily upon humanity, where men become lonely from the time they are born and where even the beloved ones turn out to be only ephemeral relations and evanescent experiences. The poet realises that what only and always remains close and faithful to man is his own shadow.⁵ As he wrote: "There is no poet whose life is not lonely, and there is no poet who does not face up loneliness."⁶

The poetic idea and the aesthetic sense of loneliness, which pervade his literary and philosophical works, seem to have been deeply and firmly established since the earliest stage of the author's childhood and upbringing. In point of fact, Feng Zhi was born and raised into an impoverished family of north China. His father was away from home most of the time and Feng spent the springtime of his life alone and in close relationship with his mother, who 'tragically' died of tuberculosis when the boy was still nine years old. The unexpected and early loss of the mother left the young boy with an upsetting trauma that influenced his early poetic lyricism and ignited an unbearable feeling of loneliness that subtly pervaded the core of his early writings as well as his mature philosophical concept of interpersonal attachment and relationship.

This unendurable state of solitude is what gave rise to the poet's 'romantic' wanderlust and necessity of far-away wanderings, which he sang in his early poetry, prelude to his later works of Romantic and modernist lyricism. Some of Feng's early poems can be interpreted as allegories of the whole human race, a poetic form that narrates, from a mythical perspective, the experiences of humanity and its constant movement within the immensity of the cosmic space. Remarkably, the recurring motifs of his early poetic compositions also convey the young author's lyrical vision and early aesthetic perception of life that become increasingly relevant to the critical investigation and appreciation of his mature writings.

There are indications, as also remarked by Chinese scholar Dominic Cheung, that Feng Zhi began a prolific period of poetic activity at the age of fifteen in 1920, thus, much before his enrolment and reading at Peking University. According to various sources, Feng appears to have written more than a thousand poems that, as Prof. Cheung also points out, are all unpublished and only limited to private circulation among friends.⁷ Thankfully, the author published three of these undisclosed and mysterious poems in the "Creation Quarterly" in 1929: "Mailman", "Inquiring" and "Thus I sing".

5 Feng Zhi, "Haohua kaifeng zai zui jimode yuanli" in *Feng Zhi Quanji* (Complete Works of Feng Zhi), Vol. 3, Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999, p. 170.

6 Feng Zhi, *Fengzhi Quanji*, 1999, in David Der-Wei Wang, *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists Through the 1949 Crisis*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015, p. 132.

7 Cfr. Dominic Cheung, *Feng Chih*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979, p. 54.

Through the lines of the poem “Wo zheyangde gechang” 我这样的歌唱 (Thus I Sing), Feng attempted to disperse his anxiety and worries through the voice of a genuine man who wonders about life, conceived as an unceasing journey that men are bound to take in search for comfort from birth to death. As the poet puts it, men wander towards the bosom of a universe that is too spacious to even define its boundaries:

Leaving my mother's bosom
I run, towards the bosom of the universe!
Being on such a journey,
Thus I sing!

Just leaving my mother's bosom,
The universe seems too spacious,
Being on such a journey,
Thus I sing!

Seeking in vain for the bosom of the universe,
Anxiously, I am worried and confused.
Being on such a journey,
Thus I sing!

God reveals to me my lover's bosom,
Saying that it can lead my way.
Being on such a journey,
Thus I sing!

For the bosom of my lover,
Pensively I wander, everywhere,
Being on such a journey,
Thus I sing!⁸

It is worth noticing that this restless journey into the ‘mysterious’ unknown is what inspired many responsive and sensitive poets through the ages, specifically those stirred and influenced by the Romantic sensitivity in Europe and subsequently in East Asia, to embark on a philosophical quest for self-completion and search for sublimity. It is remarkable how the young poet succeeded in expressing his spiritual and emotional state through the use of imagery and motifs also readily associated with those of the European Romantic movement.

Right from the opening lines of the poem, the reader immediately discerns what appears to be strongly affecting the feelings and deeply stirring the heart of the poet: his profound state of loneliness and dire need for affective attachment. In fact, the use of imagery and the recurring theme of spatial and temporal distance particularly contribute to Feng Zhi's portrayal of men's loneliness and unceasing journey towards the “bosom of the universe”. As the poet repeats at the end of each stanza, it is the power of ‘singing’ that keeps him going farther. This core element takes the poem to a higher philosophical

8 Feng Zhi, “Thus I sing”, translated by Prof. Dominic Cheung in Cheung, *Feng Chih*, pp. 54-55.

realm, redefining the lyrical theme of the text and the poet's sublime activity. Anxiety and confusion pervade the mood as the poet wanders endlessly within the open cosmos. As the poet suggests, men start their journey from the moment they are born and leave their mother's bosom. The frailty of human life as a whole is particularly emphasised by the poet's awareness of the meaninglessness of this journey as men seek in vain the bosom of the universe. Thus, nature, represented by the cosmic infinity of the universe, and human life are transcendently brought into a meaningful striving for totality and affection.

This conception of universe reflects the lyricist's interiority and both his poetic activity and vain wandering can be seen as constructing image of the poet's inner growth or, from a more ample perspective, as a metaphor of life – a metaphysical journey within nature that connects the poet's origin within his mother's bosom with the far unreachable ever-lasting end of the unknown. The ultimate source of hope comes from a higher, powerful figure: the divine power of an omniscient God that can show men the right way towards their final goal. The heavenly figure, which Feng Zhi refers to in "Thus I sing", does not necessarily stand as a symbol for a deistic God or as the archetypal "divine immanent in the self"⁹ that is recurrent in the Romantic theology, but it rather epitomises a form of spiritual and emotional surrender to an omnipotent entity that overcomes and assists humankind.

The lover's bosom represents a form of refuge for the poet who strives for human interaction and affection. It is this fundamental depiction of love that gives the poet the strength to continue on his endless journey in the unknown and remain steadfast in his poetic activity of 'singing'. As the poet conveys in the verses reiterated at the end of each stanza, the suggestion and then identification of the lover's bosom as his fortuitous find can be regarded as a romanticised form of hope over his undeviating sense of wistful longing and *Sehnsucht*. If in the first instance the poet wanders aimlessly within the spacious universe seeking in vain the gentle feeling of fondness and comfort, his gaze is subsequently redirected to a more positive and idealised source of human interaction and heart's affection. The high philosophical realm of the poem is intensified by the choice of words that Feng Zhi employs in order to convey his deep conception of unattainability and ineffable mysteries of interpersonal relationship and affinity.

The lyrical 'I' is set on a journey towards infinity, a realm depicted by the Romantics as an unconceivable emptiness that stirs the heart of men. The solitude of the lyrical 'I' enables the poet to catch a glimpse of 'infinity' and experience the essence of the sublime. As Edmund Burke theorised, "another source of the sublime, is infinity [that] has the tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest effect of the sublime."¹⁰

9 Christopher John Murray (ed), *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era: 1760-1850*, Vol. II, New York and London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004, p. 1129.

10 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Mineola: Dover Publications, 2008, p. 53.

The second poem released in the journal *Creation Quarterly*, “Lüyiren” 绿衣人 (Mailman, 1921), is another example of the poet’s state of solitude and depiction of sorrow that follows from it:

A green dressed mailman,
Walking with his head drooped;
Looking occasionally at the sidewalks.
His face, very common,
His life, mostly content –
Bears no sorrow.
Who will notice his
Walking, daily, to and fro.
Yet his small hands are delivering
Reality to some dreams.
When he knocks at the door,
Who will take note and ponder –
“Here comes the receiver’s horrendous hour.”¹¹

This poem tells of the experience of an ordinary mailman in green dress in Beijing conducting his unvarying life and job in delivering messages. The colour green of his uniform appears as a symbolic sign, which relates the character with his status and confers on him a sense of belonging. Feng Zhi uses the image of a disheartened mailman to represent the tragic unfolding destiny of a man of ordinary status who walks keeping his head low and whose common life does not display any sense of grief nor obsequious sorrows. The drooping posture of a man walking with his head lowered down generally manifests his inner state of submission, driven by affection or fear, defeat or exhaustion. The mailman, for instance, is depicted as a conscientious diligent character who is often undervalued and neglected by others regardless of his relevant duty and attribute, despite his ‘small hands’, of bringing dreams to people’s fate. The image of the mailman as well as that of the ‘pedestrian’ (*xingren* 行人) is significant in Feng Zhi’s poetry and relevant to his recurring theme of ‘walking’, *xingzou* 行走. It is not a mere coincidence that Feng Zhi’s most significant novel, *Wu Zixu* 伍子胥, narrates of an important journey.

From a wider perspective, this portrayal of a mailman can also be seen as the poet’s self-portrait. In fact, Feng Zhi writes about his time in Beijing and describes the city as gloomy and grey. As he mentioned in an essay published in the *Poetry Journal*, *Shikan* 诗刊, in 1959, while in Beijing the writer saw the image of poverty and could even hear grieved and sorrowful voices echoing from corner of the city, where “no flower, no light, no love”¹² could be seen. Moreover, the writer recounts his frequent walks and continuous meanders through the city, which inevitably instilled into him a deep and abiding sense of solitude that made him capable of sympathising with a

11 This translation of *Lüyiren* is given by Dominc Cheung in Cheung, *Feng Chih*, p. 57.

12 “那时的北京城是一片灰色，街头巷尾，到处是贫苦的形象和悲痛的声音 [...] 没有花，没有光，没有爱” *Shikan* (Poetry Journal), Nr. 9, 1959, pp. 111-113.

mailman he saw on the street and even discerning his fate. Feng, hence, employed the image of a common mailman in green dress in order to convey his intimate state of solitude, personal experience and inner self. The climax of the poem occurs towards the end when the postman is about to knock at the door – the mood is suddenly filled with suspense and the heightened excitement foreshadows the symbolic juncture of the postman and the receiver's fate.

The use of common images and habits pertaining to the everyday life is characteristic of Feng Zhi's poetry. The ingenious adaptation of words and their deep symbolic meaning is what also characterises the style of his mature writings and, more specifically, the essential lyrical and philosophical concepts unfolding in his sonnets. It is the intimate experience resulting from the juncture of the self and the surrounding environment that the poet attempts to embody in his lyrical work: common objects and images, such as that of a postman and the messages that he carries, are attributed high philosophical concepts, which ultimately express the poet's existential gesture. The aesthetic experience of the self as well as its consequential reaction to the outer world conclusively leads to the poet's awareness of his state of loneliness. Both the postman and the message that he carries become symbols of the dreams and destiny of men. The psychological and emotional state of a person receiving a message unexpectedly is affected by a sense of anxiety and uncertainty that is typically felt when the "receiver's horrendous hour" has come.

Expressing one's own self by taking the role of others is another poetic means employed by Feng Zhi to convey his inner state of solitude. In fact, as Dr. Joseph Kotarba also maintains, the "self" is both something that one possesses and "something that constitutes a social process for symbolic interactions."¹³ The strive for social interaction that is characteristic of Feng's early and mature poetry is predominantly influenced by the poet's own experience and yearning for interpersonal relationship and affective attachment.

The lyricism of Feng Zhi's early poem collection, *Zuori zhi ge* 昨日之歌 (Songs of Yesterday, 1927) and of the lyrical narrative *Beiyou ji qita* 北游集其他 (Northern Journey and others, 1929), published in the *Sunken Bell Quarterly*, predominantly centres on the poet's experience of his engulfing melancholic state of solitude and on the portrayal of an adapting lyric strength and igniting will power that enable the poet to overcome loneliness. Since times immemorial, in fact, one of the most recurring themes in poetry of different nations and cultures has treated the expression of solitude; and one of the most emblematic poems of the collection *Songs of Yesterday* that best explores this strong expression of loneliness is "She" 蛇 (Snake):

My loneliness, a long snake,
Mute, silent.
If you, by chance, should dream of it,
Don't ever be afraid.

13 Joseph A. Kotarba, *The Existential Self in Society*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 25.

It is my faithful companion,
 Whose heart is sick
 with feverish nostalgia;
 It dreams of the luxuriant prairie –
 Your head's dark, thick hair.

Soft as the moonlight, it swiftly
 Glides to you,
 Bringing you a dream
 Like a pink flower held in its mouth.¹⁴

The poem strikingly opens with the writer's realisation of his state of loneliness, which Feng Zhi compares to a snake that is still and does not have a true language or words. The poem recalls the themes of pastoral songs and its suggestive and vivid imagery are borrowed, as Feng Zhi recalled, from one of the illustrations in black ink of the English aesthetician and writer Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), who, like Oscar Wilde, was also a leading figure in the Decadent movement in England towards the end of the nineteenth century. The illustration that drew Feng's attention also depicts a snake curling up and holding a flower in its mouth in front of a lady.¹⁵

The fawning image of the snake conceals sinister symbolic meanings in the West as much as it does in China. Nonetheless, as the poet clearly confesses in the opening verse of the poem, Feng Zhi's snake is the bodily representation and projection of his own state of loneliness, which is ingeniously exemplified on a philosophical and symbolic level that goes far beyond the ordinary suggestion of a slithering creature. In fact, the sensual, smooth and gentle movements of the snake epitomise the poet's yearning for affection and infatuation for his beloved woman. Moreover, the image of the snake is not only a physical manifestation of the poet's lust and passionate desire, but it also represents his fervid hope for an ideal and complete romance. The poet's aspiration for enduring expressions of romance is also evoked and further intensified by the revitalising image of the flower that meaningfully closes the poem. In fact, the flower that the snake symbolically holds in its mouth involves a system of traditional values, such as youth, life, passion and beauty that figuratively characterise the vehement desire of the snake. Thus, both the flower and the snake are manifested projections of the poet's predilections and inner poetic nature.

Although he was exposed to German literature and to Rilke's writings from a very young age, it was during his time of study at Heidelberg that Feng Zhi fully grasped and recognised Rilke's modern concept of philosophical engagement with a self-reflexive subjectivity. In fact, the metaphysical image of the snake is foreshadowed within the theme of loneliness depicted in his mature lyrical works of the 1940s, which provide a more complex and telling picture of the poet's deep philosophical introspection and an analysis of the state of subjective solitude that poetically recall Novalis's notion of self-annihilation and Goethe's art of relinquishing or renouncement [*Entsagung*].

14 Translation by Dominic Cheung, in Cheung, *Feng Zhi*, p. 34.

15 Cfr. Wang, *The Lyrical in Epic Time*, p. 135.

The continual search and gesture of love and affection are also vividly depicted in “Mantian Xingguang” 满天星光 (A Starry Sky, 1923), a poem also belonging to the former collection *Songs of Yesterday*, in which the poet transcends reality by flying towards infinity, surpassing the cosmic space with his lover and metaphysically rearranges the star patterns of the sky:

Into my bosom,
I gather all the stars;
With threads of love,
I string them up
Like drops of tear pearls;
And have them woven into an overcoat
To put on my lover.¹⁶

By virtue of his lyrical power of imagination the poet is able to transcend his earth-bound condition, gather all the stars of the cosmos to his arms and weave them into a celestial overcoat with threads of love for his beloved woman. The gratified sense of belonging to his lover confers the poet the transcendental power to fly over the infinite cosmos aiming towards “the end of the sky”. Together with his lover he can go beyond the range of reality and change the order of the starry patterns in the sky:

We sing to the classic immortals,
We fly to the end of the sky,
And spread out an overcoat
To rearrange the star patterns in the sky.¹⁷

It is the prevailing union in love and his heart's affection that not only console the poet, but it also enables him to reach out for infinity and overcome his frail and earth-bound condition.

It is also worth noticing that the idea of weaving in the universe has a long tradition in ancient Chinese mythology. According to a traditional stellar myth, the Heavenly Weaver Girl, daughter of August Sun, was the weaver goddess of the clouds who was given as spouse to Heavenly Herdsman, tender of the cattle of heaven. However, given their intense love and passionate care for each other, the two lovers were punished by the gods for neglecting their duties in the sky. So it happened because of their enduring love and heavenly punishment that the Weaver Girl, having become the star Vega, and the Herdsman, known as either the star Altair or the constellation of Aquila, are now found at the extremities of the cosmos and are separated by the river of the Milky Way. However, on the seventh night of the seventh moon of each year, magpies form a bridge across the Milky Way allowing the Weaver Girl to meet with her beloved husband.¹⁸

16 Cheung, *Feng Chih*, p. 58.

17 *Ibid.*

18 Cfr. David Leeming, *A Dictionary of Asian Mythology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 68.

The image of establishing and crossing over bridges, which metaphysically enable man to overcome his own state of loneliness, is a recurrent theme in Feng Zhi's early lyricism as well as remedy for the yearning interpersonal relationships that the poet sought in his later poetic works. The concept of bridges that connect points and people over space and time gains a philosophical approach and attention that is close to the poet's heart as well as to his aesthetic experiences.

German Romantic poetry, which Feng extensively read and analysed, also markedly uses nature motifs to evoke solitude and the lyrical conveyance of loss and memory. A remarkable example of this lyrical expression is Ludwig Tieck's poem "Einsamkeit" (Solitude, 1802), which instils into the reader's heart a striking sentiment of solitude, melancholy and isolation. Tieck is particularly acclaimed for his renowned collection of Romantic fairy tales, *Völksmärchen* (1797), among which his dark short novel *Der blonde Eckbert* (Eckbert the Fair) ingeniously depicts the unceasing and sinuous movement in space as well as the distinctive solitude of the characters:

Forest solitude
You console me,
So will you tomorrow as you do today
And for all eternity –
My consolation,
Forest solitude.¹⁹

The term 'forest solitude', which reduces the semantic connotation of the German word *Waldeinsamkeit*, originally employed by Tieck, vividly recalls the feelings of loneliness and melancholy that also affected the modern Chinese poet who, like the German Romantics, also sought comfort and the sublime by endlessly wandering within the far-reaching boundaries of nature – a theme that also became a recurrent matter in German Romantic painting.

Feng Zhi's romanticised concept of loneliness finds its roots in his early years as a child and adolescent. Notably, as he spent most of his childhood time alone, the lines of "Zuihou zhige" 最后之歌 (Swan Song), last poem collected in his *Songs of Yesterday*, are epitome of an emotional turmoil aggravated by his state of loneliness. As the poet recollects his mother's last prayers before her death, her words become for him the "last songs of life".²⁰ The description the poet gives of the moment when his mother took her last breath of life is noticeably filled with nostalgia, melancholy and sorrow:

The candle burned vehemently in the holder,
as if in the universe, there would be no tomorrow –

19 Ludwig Tieck, "Der blonde Eckbert", in Linda Siegel, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Age of German Romanticism*, Boston: Branden Publisher, 1980, p. 26.

20 "是一曲最后的" 生命之歌"

she left me the atmosphere of that moment,
and on my clothes the warmth of her hands.²¹

Feng Zhi's close emotional bond to his mother could be the cause and motivating factor of the little attention the poet gave on romantic love and affairs in his writings. An instance of this emotional attachment is conveyed in the essay "Laowu" ("The old house") that portrays the poet's affection towards his mother as well as his reaction to her premature death:

"When I raise my head, the "death" of my mother has already walked into the hallway. It seems to know me. It is silent like a shadow, solemn like a shadow. I cry out, "What a lonely 'death' of my mother!"²²

It is worth noticing, as also Chinese scholar Xiaojue Wang maintains, that the sudden maternal loss and separation seems to have triggered or increased a deep sense of loneliness, which pervaded the author's poetry and sensitivity until his last days.²³

The poetic motif of solitude and isolation that distinguished and permeated Feng Zhi's lyricism was particularly intensified during the time when the young scholar finished his studies on German philosophy and literature at Peking University in 1927 and provisionally moved to the northern city of Harbin. Short but significant extracts from his heart-stirring experience and laments over his profound state of loneliness fill the last verses of his long poetic narrative work *Northern Journey and others*, which poetically instils a romanticised need for attention and fondness:

"At that moment, the moon was like the gas light that was burning out,
So dim that it would vanish in my lap;
At that moment, the gas light was like the moon that was falling,
In my lap, in the room, in the universe, it was gloomy, gloomy."²⁴

The lyrical subject of these verses is found in a Japanese wine shop and becomes frantic and notably anxious because of his "lonely youth in the hostile foreign world."²⁵ To close the last verses of his poem and emphasise his unendurable feelings of loneliness, Feng had originally quoted the lines of a *haiku* dated 1812, which he later removed for the revised version of 1955, by the eighteenth-century Japanese poet

21 Feng Zhi, "Zuihou zhige", translation from Xiaojue Wang, "Fashioning Socialist Affinity: Feng Zhi and the Legacy of European Humanism in Modern Chinese Poetry", in Xiaojue Wang, *Modernity with a Cold War Face: Reimagining the Nation in Chinese Literature across the 1949 Divide*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London: Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 213.

22 Feng Zhi, "Laowu", translation from Xiaojue Wang, *Modernity with a Cold War Face*, p. 214.

23 Cfr. Xiaojue Wang, *Modernity with a Cold Face*, p. 213.

24 Feng Zhi, *Beiyou ji qita*, in Xiaojue Wang, *Modernity with Cold War Face*, p. 212.

25 *Ibid.*

Issa Kobayashi (1763-1827) whose poetry particularly reflected the small joys of life as well as the human state of solitude:

“Oh, is this my final dwelling?
Buried now in five-foot snow!”²⁶

The analogy with the Japanese *haiku* serves the poet to juxtapose images of his utter state of solitude with the feelings and lyricism of other poets emphasising the collective state of loneliness that engulfs mankind as a whole. Moreover, the extent of the poet's disconsolate fate in Harbin was such that Feng Zhi compared his surroundings and his experience to the image of Pompeii, the ancient and quintessential city of love and sin.

During his years of postgraduate formation and study in Germany, between 1930 and 1935, Feng Zhi was highly influenced by the philosophy of Goethe, Rilke and Novalis, whose literary works, as he emphasised during the ceremony of the InterNationes Kunstpreis in 1987, significantly contributed to the shaping of his emotional stance. While at the University of Heidelberg, he successfully defended his doctoral dissertation on Novalis.²⁷

Feng Zhi's conscientious reading and understanding of German eighteenth and nineteenth-century lyrical works, especially those of Novalis and Rilke, offer a valuable key to read, perceive and finally construe the poetry of his later and refined works, especially the verses of his sonnets collection.

After a critical analysis and examination of his *Sonnets*, it is possible to conclude that the Chinese poet did not propose a mere replication or garbled version of Novalis's and Rilke's works, but rather a careful re-elaboration of preconceived formulae and ideas followed by a sensitive interpretation and constructed analysis of values and ideals typical of the Romantic age and of the metaphysical and aesthetic experience of the *fin de siècle*. Feng Zhi's poetical development and new philosophical stance make him one of the forerunners of Chinese Modernism.

A few years after his return from Germany, the political and social instabilities produced by the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese conflict in 1937 caused various professors and scholars, including Feng Zhi, to roam the Chinese countryside. Feng Zhi's journey finally ended in 1939, when he finally settled at Kunming and was made professor at the National Southwest Associated University.²⁸ This was an enduring

26 *Ibid.*

27 Feng Zhi's doctoral dissertation, “Die Analogie von Natur und Geist als Stilprinzip in Novalis' Dichtung” (The Analogy of Nature and Spirit as a Style Principle in the Poetry of Novalis), was written in German under the supervision of Prof. Ewald Boucke and was defended in June 1935.

28 With the advent of the Sino-Chinese conflict in 1937, Peking University, Tsinghua University and Nanking University united forces and moved to Changsha and Kunming, establishing the National Changsha Temporary University (国立长沙临时大学 *Guoli Changsha Linshi Daxue*) and National Southwest Associated University respectively – 国立西南联合大学 *Guoli Xinan Lianhe Daxue*.

period of poetic and creative silence that lasted until 1943 when he wrote the article “Gongzuo er dengdai” 工作而等待 (“Worked and waited”), and which also culminated with the ‘aesthetic awakening’ that enabled him to write and publish his refined mature lyrical collection of sonnets.

The sonnets show Feng Zhi’s new tendency towards an enigmatic and existentialist attitude that addresses the close and mutual relationship between the individual and the surrounding community. The modernist idea of self-completion achieved through the full aesthetic realisation of the individual and his position within a systematic community characterise the poetry and the modernist form of the collection. It is by means of this aesthetic experience that the poet succeeds to overcome his limited condition of finitude and achieve a metaphysical state of infinity that could soothe and mitigate the poet’s state of loneliness. This aesthetic experience of self-completion sung in the later works leads the poet to a firmer realisation of his inner self and how this relates to a new other world. Imagination and self-realisation empower an increasing sense of longing for infinity, which is attained and quenched through a metaphysical experience that goes beyond the normal and physical level.

As a concluding remark, the lyrical verses of Feng Zhi’s both early writings and mature poetic compositions, which convey the poet’s state of loneliness and sense of melancholy, epitomise the decisive literary shift that took place during the first half of the twentieth century in China. In fact, ‘modernisation’ and, more particularly, ‘Westernisation’ became recurrent phenomena that characterised the poetic activity of the young Chinese intellectuals who lived under the charismatic influence of the New Culture movement of the May Fourth period. The concept of literary revolution, brought forward by Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu, also brought drastic changes in the society, giving rise to a new literature that awoke modern awareness, such as the emancipation of the individual, democracy, independence and individualism. Among those Chinese intellectuals who had a German education background, Feng Zhi encouraged an energetic life and national spirit through his literary work.

The few poetic lines examined in this article manifest the writer’s sensitive stance towards this major poetic shift in China. The examples shown manifest Feng Zhi’s poetic and philosophical approach with regards to one of the themes that is most recurrent in his early writings: a deep sense of loneliness. Through a series of aesthetic experiences, the poet succeeded in conveying his state of solitude reflected in his life, which he later expressed in his lyrical verses. In fact, the poet proposed a modernist concept of a spiritual and physical transcendence attained through the power of imagination, also particularly recurrent in Western romantic poetry, which he evoked in his early writings and further exploited in his *Sonnets*. This interpersonal, emotional and metaphysical experience enabled the modern Chinese poet to release his spirit and self from the burden of the ordinary realm and ultimately allowed his inner world to merge with the greatness of the cosmos, search for the sublime representation of a new outer world, the Elysian side of reality, and finally attempt to overcome his unquenchable state of loneliness.

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