Vassar College

Struggles in the Human Realm: Huang Zunxian's "New-Style" Poetry and the Question of Self-Positioning in the Late Qing Poetic Revolution

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by

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Introduction

Classical Chinese literature is a genre that encompasses most kinds of writing prior to the end of China's imperial rule but ceased to be produced and consumed on a large scale after the early twentieth century when the New Culture Movement advocated for its replacement by literature written in vernacular Chinese. Within this preliminary classification, classical poetry is a noteworthy subset because it had been the dominant as well as the quotidian expression for the literati class for thousands of years. Primarily confined to the elite circle of educated men, classical poetry was one of the main targets of the New Culture Movement and soon lost its foothold in Chinese literature. However, this does not mean that classical poetry was eradicated and faded into the past; surprisingly, there is a trend today to revive classical poetry in contemporary China.[1] The vitality of classical poetry is captivating, especially considering that it had gone through many transformations in history. The most recent attempt to reform classical poetry took place in the late Qing period. Identified as the "Late Qing Poetic Revolution" (*shi jie ge ming, 诗界革命*) by modern scholars, this movement was led by many progressive scholars including Liang Qichao and Huang Zunxian.

Compared to other Qing poets, Huang Zunxian was one of the few who received relatively more scholarly attention worldwide. In North America, the two leading scholars on Huang are Richard J. Lynn and Jerry D. Schmidt. However, Lynn's studies mostly focus on those poems Huang wrote in Japan, which were compiled into a separate anthology from his most famous

[1] Zhiyi Yang, and Dayong Ma, "Classicism 2.0: The Vitality of Classicist Poetry Online in Contemporary China," Frontiers of Literary Studies in China 12, no. 3 (2018): 527.

collection, *Poetry of the Hut Within the Human Realm* (*ren jing lu shi cao,* 人境庐诗草), that includes poems written throughout his life. Schmidt's book on Huang Zunxian is to date the most comprehensive analysis of Huang's life and poetry, but his book serves more to introduce the Western audience to late Qing literary history and Huang as a poet than to deeply analyze how the variations and nuances in Huang's pieces reflect his complex identity as a scholar, a diplomat, and a reformer. Given the sheer number of Huang's poems, Schmidt could only translate some of them and closely study even fewer. Although this paper borrows extensively from Schmidt's translation of Huang's poetry, these translations are not always accurate, possibly due to the difficulties in understanding classical Chinese as well as the poetic allusions. Because of Huang's close relationship with many Japanese scholars as well as his thorough investigation of Japan during his diplomatic stay, his life and literary works were also of interest to many Japanese scholars such as Noriko Kamachi. While Huang's poems on Japan excelled both in number and quality, they were written in a short period of time and were rather similar in style and spirit. Thus, they tell little of Huang's development later in life. In the Chinese academia, as Sun Ying noted in her review of the existing literature, Huang and his works have been studied vigorously from diverse angles since the 1980s.[2] However, these articles are generally short and focus on one specific achievement of him such as his political views, his cosmopolitan scope, and his attempts to reform classical poetry. Therefore, this paper attempts to provide a more comprehensive picture of Huang's identity and poems by incorporating

[2] Sun Ying, "A Review of the Studies on Huang Zunxian over the Past Century," Journal of Guangzhou University Vol. 3, no. 12 (December 2004): 7.

existing arguments together with my new insights in the hope of shedding some new light on this intricate but still understudied topic in a Western context.

This paper will specifically focus on Huang Zunxian's role in and contribution to the Poetic Revolution and argue that, first, Huang Zunxian's poetry was indeed "new" and ground-breaking in terms of its style, language, and spirit, and secondly, his poetry has more nuances beyond the mere innovative feature that concern his complex identity and struggle for self-positioning in the broader context of Sino-West conflicts in the late Qing period. As will be discussed in more detail below, Huang's poetry cannot be taken out of its historical context because his attitudes were quite contingent upon the political climate of the day and what events he was engaging in. Thus, this article will start with an introduction of the historical background and then proceed to an in-depth analysis of Huang's political and literary identity by grounding the discussion in his poetic works. The reason for doing so, to borrow Nan Z. Da's words in his book *Intransitive Encounter*, is that literature is a "media, in the specific sense of being agentic both in its content and in its physical manifestations."[3] In other words, literature conveys the agency of its author through both its content and form, which is what Da means by "physical manifestations." Therefore, to understand Huang Zunxian as well as the Poetic Revolution, it is crucial to rely on Huang's poetry as a first-hand source and to analyze both its content, which is largely occupied by Huang's experience and opinions, as well as its form, namely the style of classical poetry. Overall, this paper attempts to offer some new insights into the unfolding of the

[3] Nan Z. Da, Intransitive Encounter: Sino-U.S. Literatures and the Limits of Exchange (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019): 26.

Poetic Revolution and the understanding of Huang Zunxian as a diplomat, poet, and reformer who lived at the crossroad of China's traditional past and the modern future.

The Late Qing Poetic Revolution amid a Century of Sino-Western Conflicts

The year 1840 is generally believed by Chinese historians as the beginning of modern Chinese history as well as the start of a national humiliation that lasted for a century. This year, the British Parliament voted on the Graham motion, which was proposed to circumvent the issue of declaring war with Qing China and instead take a more peaceful stance on the opium trade. The Whigs who controlled the government at that time defeated this motion of the Tories by a tiny majority, and the First Opium War became unavoidable.

The outcome was predictable: as a closed agricultural civilization led by a centralized, imperial government, the Qing government was powerless against the highly industrialized British empire. While the Qing government still indulged in the illusion that the war was merely a conflict between invincible China and the Western "Barbarians," Commodore James Bremer was already stationed at the Port of Canton with the steam gunboats from the Royal Marines. Although the British troops faced difficulties in fighting a cross-continental war with the Qing empire, the natural advantages of the Qing government were negligible compared to the gap between China and the British Empire in terms of technological development and productivity. After the total defeat, the Qing government signed the Treaty of Nanking and ceded Hong Kong to the British Empire. From then on, Qing did not possess full sovereignty over its territory.

The First Opium War shattered China's self-perception as well as the Western imagination

of China. The Qing court became disillusioned with the fact that it could no longer maintain its dominant position in the world, and the West came to the realization that China fell short to claim its attraction as the mysterious, romantic empire in the far East. A century earlier, the British Commodore George Anson arrived at the port of Canton and recorded his vexation when dealing with the Chinese in his *Voyage Round the World in the Year MDCCXL, I, II, III, IV*. Although this popular travel account revealed the impotence of the Qing dynasty and rebutted the prevalent romanticism of China in the European world, its effect was not as far-reaching as witnessing the easy defeat of China by the Europeans themselves.

From the Opium War onward, the Western nations' attitude toward China experienced a reversal. Ever since the Age of Discovery, the West never initiated any substantial aggression or invasion of Chinese territory. Unwilling to engage in a full-scale war with China, the measures that were taken by the West to approach China had generally been peaceful and diplomatic. From the government level down to the public, the West had been willing to compromise some political goals for economic gains. The 1793 embassy of George Macartney who visited Emperor Qianlong in Beijing was an example of such an attempt. The goal of Macartney's mission was, in essence, to form a rapprochement between the British Empire and China so that both empires could communicate and trade with each other on an equal basis. However, given the Qing government's tribute system as well as the seclusion policies, this vision could never be realized. After Emperor Qianlong closed the other trading ports, leaving only the thirteen factories in Canton to do foreign trade, the conflict between the British Empire and Qing became irreconcilable. The factories, with the delegation from the government, held monopolies over the

pricing of goods. However, the emperor could not have imagined at that time that this temporary monetary gain would soon aggravate the discontent of the British and turn into a devastating war. After Anson and Macartney's journeys, the British Empire discovered, behind the facade of Qing's prosperity and vastness, the internal struggles of a moribund dynasty. The Qing Dynasty was more occupied with subduing the insurrections in its northern and western border regions than with vying for power with the West. Their negligence as well as deficiency in military development led the British Empire to win the war and broaden its influence and profit in China.

However, Qing's major defeat was not an utter disaster. Before the Opium War, the Qing government's seclusion policy and its peasant-based economy made the regime capable of self-sufficiency. As stability was ensured, neither the rulers nor the government officials had the motivation to reform the regime and engage Western nations in a broader global context. Unlike the Western maritime civilizations that heavily relied on industrialization and transnational trade, the Chinese society had relied on itself and functioned well for the past thousands of years. The emperor, the scholar-officials, the local gentries, and the peasant population were all guided by the principle of Confucianism, and this tight hierarchy had no room for the Western mercantile class, nor would it allow any Western nation to interfere with its sovereignty. However, viewing the history retrospectively, it was merely a matter of time for China to be integrated into the modern world. The Opium War was thus a catalyst that accelerated the awakening of the late Qing elites.

The campaign to destroy the massive amount of opium led by Lin Zexu was the spark that ignited the Opium War. Growing up as a brilliant Confucian scholar, Lin saw in his youth the

need to understand the world. He began to collect knowledge of the West and compiled them into *Geography of the World's Four Continents* (*si zhou zhi, 四洲志*), which was then translated and published as *Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms* (*hai guo tu zhi, 海国图志*) after the Opium War. This book was the first notable Chinese work on the West, and Lin was thus known as "the first person with a global vision." The Opium War along with the publication of this work awakened many more scholars and officials like Lin. They began to actively understand and learn from the West, following the guiding principle laid out in *Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms,* which was to learn the merits of the "barbarians," namely the West, in order to conquer them. Two decades later, these efforts were united into the Self-Strengthening Movement that lasted till the end of the nineteenth century. From the Opium War onward, Chinese scholars began to take as their responsibility the effort to reexamine the Confucian traditions, explore the unknown Western fields of studies, and find solutions to national salvation and reintegration into the modern world.

Meanwhile, the European nations seized the opportunity and waged the Second Opium War in 1856. Having achieved the first stage of trade success in China, the French and British desired China to open up further so that the trade could go beyond the coastal cities and reach the inland. This war was again a total defeat on the Qing side, as the British-French allied army overtook the capital Beijing. Consequently, the Treaty of Beijing and the Treaty of Tianjin were signed, opening more trading ports along the Yangtze River and ceding more lands in the northeast and southeast. The Second Opium War force the Qing dynasty to be more open to the Western influx of material as well as cultural influences.

The second defeat directly led to the Self-Strengthening Movement in the 1860s. Although some people proposed thorough Westernization of China, namely, to model the Western political institutions and economic system, the West the Qing government adopted eclectic measures to reform China. Because stability was crucial for the emperor's reign and the ruling class was not determined to cede power, this learning from the West was more occupied with learning the technology, products, and industry rather than the Western knowledge and its ways of thinking. Nevertheless, the Self-Strengthening Movement marked the first moment of collective awakening of the Chinese elite class.

After the Qing government quelled a few domestic uprisings such as the Taiping Rebellion and the Nian Rebellion, which were two peasant-led movements against the corrupt Qing rule and Western colonization, a major force began to take shape. This force constitutes of the Southern Chinese (as opposed to the Manchu ethnicity) officials who gained military power during the rebellions. For example, Li Hongzhang, who was also a major figure in the Self-Strengthening Movement, recruited his own militia against the rebel forces. While the Qing government was weakened by successive wars, Chinese governors with military power such as Li became crucial players besides the Qing rulers and the Western forces. These Chinese governors are the typical Confucian scholar-officials who emerged from the civil examination system. Compared to the ruling class that was preoccupied with maintaining power and stability, they were indoctrinated with the Confucian principle under which the scholars are responsible not only to the imperial house but also for the future of the entire nation. Therefore, during the Self-Strengthening Movement, these Chinese scholar-officials gained a deeper understanding of

the West than their Manchu counterparts. With their support, China not only opened to Western modern industries and technology but also gradually to Western thinking and culture. Especially in regions under their administration, Western literature and philosophy began to influence more and more Chinese scholars.[4]

Meanwhile, the Qing government established the Office for Management of Foreign Affairs as a result of the Treaty of Tianjin, which demanded China establish equal diplomatic ties with the West and install corresponding offices to manage foreign policies and ambassadors. Since then, China began to have its first band of modern diplomats, among whom Huang Zunxian was a famous example. Although these officials were elites in the Chinese society, they were frequently looked down upon by Western diplomats and became targets of derision and discrimination. For example, according to an anecdote, a Russian ambassador in China recounted an event in which he and a Chinese official named Wang exchanged money and gifts. He described this action as "giving a few pennies to a child to by buns."[5] For him, dealing with the Chinese was condescending because they were no more than incapable children in foreign affairs. Faced with this kind of prejudice, Chinese diplomats could hardly enjoy equal and respectful treatment in Western countries. This stark difference in their experiences within China and abroad created mixed psychological effects on them. It was difficult to find a sense of belonging in either place, and they began to assume a double identity: one as a Chinese

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[4] Huang Lin, Comprehensive History on Chinese Literary Critics (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2011) as cited in Long Yangzhi, Collection of Works of Huang Zunxian (Huang Zunxian Ji) (Guangdong: Guangdong People's Publishing House, 2018), 18.

[5] Ke Xu, The Collected Qing Anecdotes (Qing Bai Lei Chao), accessed April 4, 2022, https://wenku.baidu.com/view/e9ac4b1c59eef8c75fbfb3ca.html.

representative in the West, the other as a pioneer with transnational visions in China.

Three decades later, China was once more defeated in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895. After thirty years of learning from the West, China was still unable to defend itself against foreign invasion, even though China already built its own modernized navy, the Beiyang Fleet. This setback propelled Chinese scholars to rethink the direction of reform and the limitations of the Self-Strengthening Movement. In short, it became widely accepted that if the reform stopped short of reaching the root problem of China, partial development in technology and military power could not solve the crisis. Three years later, a group of radical reformers led by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao initiated the Hundred Days' Reform that aimed to transform China thoroughly into a constitutional monarchy like Britain. Supported by the passionate young emperor Guangxu, this attempt was a major step forward from the previous measures that discreetly did not harm the basis of Qing's reign. Besides political and military reform, the proponents also demanded thorough westernization in fields of industry, agriculture, education, rituals, and clothing. The Late Qing Poetic Revolution, which is the focus of this paper, took place around the time of this Hundred Days' Reform.

After years of reform and opening up, Chinese scholars directed their attention to traditional literature, particularly classical poetry, which was the dominant form of literary expression for scholars since Medieval China. What the Western colonizers brought to China was more than humiliating wars and modern technology. Slowly yet increasingly, Chinese scholars encountered Western philosophy, literature, and modern science. The importation of Western culture fundamentally, albeit slight at that time, changed the landscape of people's daily language

expression because new words, objects, and concepts were introduced. What's more, it changed people's perspective of the world and themselves as Chinese, not the old Chinese in seclusion but the Chinese as opposed to the foreigners. Consequently, the traditional literary expressions should also evolve to reflect the change in language. Therefore, the Poetic Revolution led by famous scholars such as Liang Qichao and Huang Zunxian started at the turn of the century. The aim was to reform the classical poetry so that it could dovetail with the modern language and better express the late Qing scholars' new aspirations at the crossroad of Sino-Western convergence.

A Brief Introduction to Classical Poetry and the Poetic Revolution

Among various forms of ancient Chinese poetry, this article is particularly concerned with what is called "classical poetry." This term was created in the May Fourth Movement, which happened around the 1920s, to distinguish the new, modern poetry modeled on the West from the traditional poetry in imperial China. Before such distinction was made, however, the term "poetry" (*shi,* 诗) unambiguously pointed to the latter category. Nevertheless, this twentieth-century invention neatly encapsulates this literary genre favored by the literati class in imperial China. Therefore, this essay will adopt "classical poetry" to describe the object of reform during the Poetic Revolution.

Classical poetry encompasses many subsets, but they are classified as one category because they all have strict prosodic rules regulating their length, rhyme, and tone. Therefore, they are

also called “poetry of forms and regulation” or “regulated poetry” (*ge lü shi,* *格律诗*). The most common forms are composed of four or eight verses, also called quatrains and octets, that are either all pentasyllabic or heptasyllabic. The last syllables of even-number verses must rhyme in level tones. Within each verse, tones also have to alternate between the level tones and the oblique tones.

Given these intricate rules, writing classical poetry was exclusively the function of the literati class. To be articulate in poetry and express one’s feelings while abiding by the rules made it nearly impossible for uneducated people to communicate by, or even understand, classical poetry. Even the literati themselves could not always balance the three, and thus only a few poems out of thousands are good enough to circulate and be passed down. The function of these regulations is to make poems sound more elegant and cadenced. However, the disadvantage is that poetry would often be dominated by formalism and hollow piles of rhetorical expressions that fail to convey anything meaningful. Especially in the government, writing responsorial poems among government officials and between the emperor and his ministers became a widespread political activity. Most of these works were merely praising platitudes that hardly say anything genuine about the author. In the history of Chinese poetry, poetic development was never linear; intermittent attempts to reform poetry often occurred when the style of the day became pretentious. By the late Qing, this phenomenon was noticed by many leading scholars, especially those who had made contact with the West. The modern language and literature from the West catalyzed their desire to reform. Having seen the bigger world, they felt poetry should be restored to its function of recording and expressing. Suddenly there were a

plethora of new terms that classical poetry was unfamiliar with, and the poets had diverse global ambitions that could not be known by their predecessors. Thus, a poetic revolution was necessary to fundamentally change the literary horizon of the scholars.

The "revolution" was first proposed by Liang Qichao, although whether this movement could indeed be called a revolution is in much debate (more on this point later). His earlier attempts, however, centered on adapting the language of Chinese and Western religious canons to classical poetry. Specifically, he believed that the specific terms in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity could be borrowed directly and put into poetry. These terms could be intermingled in one poem as well. In Liang's *Treaties on Poetry in the Room of Drinking Ice* (*yin bing shi shi hua, 饮冰室诗话*), he and other advocates agreed to "only use the language of the classics."[6] The major setback of his approach was that these terms are often transliterated from Sanskrit or English. They were incomprehensible to those without relevant knowledge at first glance. In the end, a poem could become a nonsensical collection of novel words confined to strict formal regulations. Such works could hardly spread beyond the tiny literary circle of the poet himself and thus soon lost their vitality. In short, Liang's first revolutionary attempt was narrowly directed toward introducing novel vocabulary alone.

Today's use of the term "Poetic Revolution" was, in fact, borrowed from Liang's revised definition a few years later. In 1899, he explicitly wrote in his *Journal of Hawaii*, "I think the realm of poetry has been fully occupied by those parrot-scholars for thousands of years...

[6] Yingbin Zhang, "Jiaying Poets and the Poetic Revolution," Journal of Jiaying University Vol. 19 No. 4 (August 2001): 101.

Therefore, either I completely desert poetry today, or if I do, I shall write like Columbus and Magellan in the poetic circle... To be Columbus and Magellan in poetry, one must have three qualifications: new spirit first, new lexicon second, and last incorporate them into the style of the ancients; thus it is poetry."[7]

As Liang's revolutionary successor, Huang Zunxian embodied the three points Liang mentioned in his poetry. Huang also proposed that classical poetry not only had to reform its form but also its content. In the preface for his anthology *Poems of the Hut Within the Human Realm,* he commented that "[t]oday's world is different from the ancient, so why must today's poets resemble the ancient ones?... The things unseen by the ancients, the places unexplored, and whatever I perceive today with my own senses, I will write them all down."[8] In practice, he experimented with alternating heptasyllabic verses with trisyllabic and tetrasyllabic verses in a poem. In a letter to a scholar friend with whom he shared his view of poetry, he advocated for a "timeless poetic tradition," namely that classical poetry should not be limited to ancient motifs and imagery.[9] He proposed that poets should faithfully write what they saw in the fast-changing world and be not afraid to introduce translated Western terms and concepts into poetry. More importantly, the reformed poetry should be open to the influence of Western philosophy and values instead of merely conforming to Confucian beliefs. Poetry should reflect a global, modern vision of the author, so the scholars must be open-minded and curious enough to learn

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[7] Liang Qichao, "Journal in Hawaii" (Xia Wei Yi You Ji), accessed March 27, 2022, https://www.zww.cn/baike/ebook/1/382459/382475.htm.

[8] Huang Zunxian, "Preface to the Poetry of the Hut Within the Human Realm" in Long Yangzhi, Collection of Works of Huang Zunxian, 58. 《自序》： "今之世异于古，今之人亦何必与古人同……以及古人未有之物，未辟之境，耳目所历，皆笔而书之。"

[9] Huang Zunxian, "Letter to Zhou Langshan" in Long Yangzhi, Collection of Works of Huang Zunxian, 198.

from the West in the first place. Otherwise, their poetry would merely have the reformed technicality but not the root, just like the Qing government could not become thoroughly modern by the superficial Self-Strengthening movement. In a poem written in his late years, possibly around the turn of the twentieth century, Huang expressed his gratitude for his friend for spending a month reading his "new-style poetry."[10] Thus, at least Huang himself regarded his lifelong pursuit of reforming classical poetry to be fruitful.

Huang Zunxian's Encounter with the West

Huang Zunxian was born in 1848 to a Hakka gentry family in what is today's Meizhou in Guangdong Province. As previously mentioned, Canton, the provincial capital of Guangdong, was the only port opened to the Europeans prior to the First Opium War. Consequently, it became the early center for the transmission of foreign goods and ideas to China. Since foreign trade was flourishing in Canton, Huang's family initially prospered through commercial activities related to the European merchants. It was not until his father that someone in his family passed the civil examination and served in the government. In Huang's youth, he had demonstrated talents in scholarship with his early successes at the lower levels of the civil examination. His ingenuity in classical poetry also began to show in his teenage years. These early poems, although not as mature as his later ones, already proved the author's desire for renewal in current poetic fashions and his capacity for critical thinking, especially toward the

[10] Huang Zunxian, "Response to Zeng Chongbo the Compiler" in Poetry of the Hut Within the Human Realm (Ren Jing Lu Shi Cao), 181. 《酬曾重伯编修》： "废君一月官书力，读我连篇新派诗。"

literati class. In the first poem he selected in his anthology, *Poems of the Hut Within the Human Realm,* which was written at the age of seventeen, he criticized the contemporary Confucian scholars for merely parroting the ancient sages and were seeking worldly benefits in civil examinations:

> "... They boasted to everyone that they had revived lost doctrines, which they really had stolen from Zisi and Mencius! Their lectures on the Way were eccentric and far-fetched; their discussions of affairs especially impractical. A thousand heads swarmed after position and face; all those fellows ever thought about was currying favor!"[11]

As an intrepid, ambitious young man, Huang was certainly going to stand out in the political circles. At age twenty-eight, he was noticed by Li Hongzhang, one of the leading figures in the Self-Strengthening Movement mentioned above, during an interview with him. Li Hongzhang praised him without sparing, calling him "an outstanding talent."[12] That was the first time Huang was introduced to China's modernizing reforms.

Just a year later, his career as a diplomat began. This was already after the Second Opium War, and China was forced to establish official diplomatic ties with the Western imperial forces. The first appointed ambassador to Japan was a fellow Cantonese named He Ruzhang, and he expressed his wish that Huang should follow him to Japan as his assistant. Despite opposition from his family, Huang decided to seize the opportunity to go abroad instead of continuing his study in order to pass the highest level of the civil examination. This decision was certainly not approved by many at that time because the newly established offices of foreign relations were

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[11] Huang Zunxian, "Meditations," translated by Jerry D. Schmidt in Within the Human Realm: The Poetry of Huang Zunxian, 1848-1905 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 7. 《感怀》： "……自诩不传学，乃剽思孟说。讲道稍僻违，论事颇迂阔。万头趋科名，一意相媚悦。"

[12] Jerry D. Schmidt in Within the Human Realm: The Poetry of Huang Zunxian, 1848-1905 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 18.

not regarded as a respected position by many scholars. The longstanding tradition of becoming a renowned Confucian scholar and then entering the government to serve the emperor was still dominant. Before one could reach that, however, scholars like Huang usually had to spend decades on some petty secretarial posts in local counties before getting a promotion into the central government. Having learned much about the outside world and the Western powers in his youth, Huang was determined to venture into the unknown world and see the foreign countries with his own eyes.

His decision proved to be very rewarding because Japan in 1877 was in the midst of the Meiji Restoration, which was the most influential event in modern Japanese history. This reform led to the downfall of the Tokugawa Shogunate, and the emperor, once again in power, decided to take advantage of the influx of foreign ideas and make Japan westernized. Japan's reformational attempts paralleled that of China but were much more radical and thorough. Although Japan had not seen the full plan carried out by the time Huang and his colleagues arrived, the emperor's determination and progress left great impressions on them.[13] Although there was another decade until the First Sino-Japanese War broke out, Japan was already encroaching on some of the Qing's vassal states and territories such as the Ryukyu Islands and Taiwan. Japan's rapid military expansion stood in stark contrast to the demoralized Qing troops, and Huang was further convinced that merely learning Western technology was far from sufficient. China must also imbibe Western ideas to reform its political and social structure.[14]

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[13] Huang Zunxian, "Preface" in Long Yangzhi, Collection of Works of Huang Zunxian, 47-48.
[14] Schmidt, Within the Human Realm: The Poetry of Huang Zunxian, 1848-1905, 25.

During his stay in Japan, Huang took the effort to learn the Japanese language so that he could communicate with the Japanese officials. Throughout his four years of stay, he befriended many Japanese scholars and exchanged responsorial poems with them. Furthermore, his command of the Japanese language enabled him to read many Western philosophical works imported there. Among these, he was particularly attracted to the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau and Charles de Montesquieu. He concluded that the political institution proposed by these two philosophers, namely a constitutional parliament, was superior to the imperial form of government.[15] These ideas later became his guiding political principles, and he repeatedly expressed the approval of democracy in several poems yet to be written in the future.

Huang's talent was soon recognized by the Qing court, and he received a promotion after spending four years in Japan. Before the Ryukyu Islands were seized by Japan, Huang had written many official reports and proposals on behalf of his supervisor, He Ruzhang, recommending the Qing court take corresponding measures to strengthen its national defense. His views proved to be very provident at that time as many of his predictions were realized. In leisure, he took the effort to acquaint himself with the Japanese society and compiled his thoughts and the materials into a book entitled *Treaties on Japan* (*ri ben guo zhi, 日本国志*), a comprehensive introduction to Japan under the Meiji Restoration and its applicability to Qing China. On the merits of all his diplomatic work, Huang was appointed the Chinese Consul General to the United States. This time, he would be in full charge of a section of Qing's diplomatic services.

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[15] Huang Zunxian, Chapter 12 in Monographs on Japan (Ribenguo zhi), 148.

Unlike the welcoming entourage he received in Japan, Huang arrived in the United States at the most tumultuous time. Two months after his arrival in San Francisco in 1882, Congress passed the Exclusion Act that banned Chinese immigration because the Chinese gold miners on the western coast were competing with local whites for jobs and other resources. California was flooded with anti-Chinese racist campaigns. Although the bill was apparently caused by practical economic concerns and an incentive to protect the local whites, the deeper reason was that China was regarded as "backward" and its people as "filthy" and "primitive."[16] In one poem titled "The Exiles," Huang voiced his indignation toward the Exclusion Act and documented the American impression of the Chinese workers: "Their (meaning the Chinese workers') houses are fouler than the kennels of dogs, their food more disgusting than the slop of pigs."[17] For the American public, Chinese people were not merely a nuisance but also a threat to their civility, and thus the term "Yellow Peril" was coined to express the attitude of repulsion and vigilance. As the Consul General, it was Huang's duty to deal with the local governments and police force to ensure fair treatment of the Chinese laborers. In one poem, he wrote that he "spent several years laboring for the sake of my compatriots."[18] Huang's arrival did alleviate the situation of the Chinese. He upheld his dignity in negotiations, and his reasonableness, as well as gentle demeanor, won him respect from the White officials and the confidence of his Chinese countrymen.

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[16] California Legislature, "Chinese immigration: The social, moral, and political effect of Chinese immigration. Testimony taken before a committee of the Senate of the state of California, appointed April 3d, 1876," 38, accessed March 9, 2022, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=moa;idno=AEX5872.

[17] Huang Zunxian, "The Exiles," translated by Schmidt in Within the Human Realm: The Poetry of Huang Zunxian, 1848-1905, 244. 《逐客篇》： "……居同狗国秽，食等豕牢薄。"

[18] Huang Zunxian, the twelfth poem of sixteen in "Thinking about Someone Continued" in Poetry of the Hut Within the Human Realm, 137. 《续怀人诗》： "几年辛苦赋同袍，胆大于身气自豪。"

If Japan's Meiji Restoration awakened Huang to the sad reality that China's modernizing attempts were doomed to fail, his experience in the United States revealed something even more disheartening. Although he is officially backed by the Qing court and stood equally with other nations' diplomatic officials, during times of crisis such as in the 1880s, he was left alone to defend the dignity of his country and his people. The Qing court was not only impotent but was unwilling to directly confront the Western powers for the sake of its people. In other words, if he gained any respect and advantage from the Whites, it was not because of his role as the Consul General of Qing but rather because of his personal ability and integrity. His identity transcended that of the political and became of personal significance to him. On one hand, he was closer to his political aspiration by undertaking the duty to represent the Qing court; on the other hand, he was disillusioned that having this identity alone does not automatically bring about the desired diplomatic outcome. He must reorient himself, producing a more complex and nuanced identity by internalizing his role as a middleman who could foster a peaceful exchange between two cultures. However, this process could not be immediate. This is probably why he did not write these poems concerning the United States until six years after he left this post.[19] Nevertheless, his attitude in these poems did exhibit part of the complexity of his identity, which will be examined in more detail later.

Huang's diplomatic career in the United States was interrupted by the death of his mother. Upon receiving the news, he, following the Confucian tradition which requires officials to take a three-year-long leave of absence upon the death of a parent, resigned from his post and sailed

[19] Schmidt, Within the Human Realm: The Poetry of Huang Zunxian, 1848-1905, 29.

back to China. After arriving in his hometown Meizhou a year later, he decided to take a break from politics and focus on compiling his *Treatise on Japan*. During this period of leave, he was invited by several senior colleagues to continue working as the Consul General in San Francisco or to take up a position in the Southeast Asian islands, but he refused these offers and stayed focused on his writing. In 1887, he finally completed the *Treatise on Japan*. This book was appreciated by many Chinese reformers because it provided an extensive account of a non-Chinese culture in diverse aspects such as geography, economy, political institutions, and laws. One of the reformers named Xue Fucheng, who was also the Chinese ambassador to England, France, Italy, and Belgium, had a high opinion of Huang after reading his *Treaties on Japan.* He then invited Huang to accompany him to Europe as the Second Secretary for the Ambassador in England.

They arrived in London in 1890. Huang's stay in England was both brief and hardly satisfying. Unlike his career in San Francisco during which he had more power and autonomy in quotidian diplomatic affairs as the only consulate general in charge, his role in England was rather secondary to that of Xue Fucheng. He had much fewer opportunities to directly interact with the British officials and hone his diplomatic skills. His tasks mainly concerned the routine, secretarial paper works. At the time of their arrival, there was neither any pressing political controversy that demanded the ambassador's direct involvement and attention. Nonetheless, the insipidity in government affairs did not hamper Huang's curiosity and thirst for understanding England. After witnessing Japan's Westernized imperial rule, reading about Rousseau's and Montesquieu's construction of democracy, and participating in the United States' policy-making

process, he now had seen another political possibility in England, namely a parliamentary monarchy. This realization had a huge impact on him, especially during his later years when he went back to China and participated in the various modern reforms. Upon serious consideration, he and many other scholars made their minds that a monarchy with checked power, such as the one adopted by England, was a better option for China than, for example, an American democracy because China had been ruled by an emperor for two thousand years.[20] This plan, moreover, does not require the full adoption of Western ideals or the rejection of Chinese traditions. The power and material opulence possessed by England also deeply impressed him, especially compared to the dire situation of Chinese workers he saw in San Francisco.[21] Politics aside, his position as a Second Secretary for the Ambassador also provided him with plenty of leisure time to investigate poetry and experiment with new poetic possibilities such as incorporating novel terms into the form of classical poetry and writing archaic-style long poetry.

Merely a year later, as the result of Xue Fucheng's recommendation to the Qing government, Huang was appointed Consul General to Singapore. This time, his stay was again interrupted by the passing of his father a few months after he arrived in Singapore. As with the case of his mother when he was in San Francisco, Huang had to again embark on a homeward journey. Nevertheless, he was able to come back and resume his post in 1892. Judging from the early poems he wrote in Singapore, Huang was obviously excited about this new post because he could again have more control over diplomatic affairs. However, he fell sick because of the

[20] Huang Zunxian, "Letter to Liang Qichao" (in June 1902) in Long Yangzhi, Collection of Works of Huang Zunxian, 268.
[21] Schmidt, Within the Human Realm: The Poetry of Huang Zunxian, 1848-1905, 31.

tropical climate and had to move to Malaysia. Before his illness, he did manage to do something for the Chinese citizens there under British colonial rule. Many Chinese workers migrated to South Asia to work in the tropical plantations, but they were frequently put at a disadvantage because of colonial discrimination on one hand and the lack of legal protection of their workers' status on the other. As the only ambassador in the Malay Peninsula, it was all dependent on Huang alone to fight for the rights of the Chinese workers. With the experience accumulated in the United States and England, Huang was more at ease when dealing with the local officials, and the relationship between the British colonizers, indigenous Malaysians, and Chinese workers remained rather peaceful after Huang's arrival.

Singapore was the last stop in Huang's diplomatic career. As mentioned previously, the First Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1894. As someone with extensive knowledge of Japan and Western powers, Huang was summoned back to China in 1895. From then on, he never left China and devoted the rest of his life to various reforms, such as the Hundred Days' Reform and the Poetic Revolution in late Qing. Unfortunately, as discussed earlier, the Hundred Days' Reform miscarried and so did China's other attempts to peacefully transition into a modern, democratic polity. Huang's last few years were spent in the gradually declining country, and he was unable to save China with either his knowledge or his vision. In 1905, he passed away in his hometown at age of fifty-eight.

Huang Zunxian's Poetic Interventions

As mentioned previously, long before Liang Qichao formally conceptualized the "Poetic

Revolution" in his writings, Huang had felt in his youth the need to reform classical poetry and rid it of the bad tendency of being platitudinous and lacking originality. The first two chapters of his anthology, *Poems of the Hut Within the Human Realm,* contained poems written before Huang started his diplomatic in Japan. During this period, Huang was either at home preparing for the civil examination or taking the exams with his father in Northern China. At his point, his study was mainly comprised of traditional Confucian classics because as an ordinary civilian, he could hardly get his hands directly on the Western books. Therefore, his poetic innovation during this period was centered on colloquializing classical poetry. Soon after he passed his twentieth birthday, he wrote a famous poem called "Mixed Emotions," which later scholars thought to represent the core principle of the Poetic Revolution: "...Foolish Chinese scholars all worship the ancients and spend their lives studying stacks of mouldy paper. Expressions not found in the Confucian classics are too risque for them to use in their poems... I intend to write in my very own language and refuse to be limited by ancient fashions. Even if I use the current slang of our age to compose the poems I intend to publish, people who live five thousand years from now will be utterly astounded by their hoary antiquity!"[22] The second-to-last verse, if read verbatim, translates to "my hand will write down what my mouth speaks," and was regarded by many scholars such as Hu Shi as the slogan for the Poetic Revolution.[23]

Huang's attempt to free classical poetry from the constraints of Confucian ideologies and

[22] Huang Zunxian, "Mixed Emotions," translated by Schmidt in Within the Human Realm: The Poetry of Huang Zunxian, 1848-1905, 224-225. 《杂感》："俗儒好尊古，日日故纸研。六经字所无，不敢入诗篇……我手写我口，古岂能拘牵。即今流俗语，我若登简编。五千年后人，惊为古斓斑。"

[23] Hu Shi, "Chinese Literature in Fifty Years," PDF version, 18.

refined expressions was probably influenced by his Hakka origin in Canton.[24] Unlike the Northern central plains which were mainly occupied by Manchus and Hans, Southern China like Canton was inhabited by many ethnic minorities that were indigenous to the place. They developed their own folk cultures, which were distinct from the dominant one in that they were less elitist and ascetic than what Confucianism would endorse. In a series of poems, he attempted to combine the artistic content of the Hakka folk songs with the artistic form of classical poetry. The fifth one reads: "Whenever one family's daughter prepares for her wedding, girls of ten other families study their faces in the mirror. The bridal procession's bronze gong beats time to a song, which echoes in the bride's heart and sings: 'Darling! Darling!'"[25] The romantic depiction of a wedding scene, especially the bride's bold expression of love for her new husband and the attitude of other unmarried girls, was a rare topic for classical poetry written by the Confucian literati because this theme would probably be deemed as "vulgar" and "immodest." Huang's innovation was partially aimed to counter the gentrification of classical poetry because, as he complained in an earlier poem, the seemingly elite scholars were mere parrots of the ancient sages, and their works did not possess any originality. Instead of carefully choosing his words and polishing the verses, Huang's works were realistic, albeit unadorned, portrayals of the quotidian life of the Hakka people. This particular poetic experiment challenged the longstanding tradition that poetry was solely reserved for the literati class and their "elegant" emotions. Reading this series of poems is like listening to the Hakka villagers

[24] Ibid., 19.
[25] Huang Zunxian, the sixth poem of nine in "Hakka Hill Songs," translated by Schmidt in Within the Human Realm: The Poetry of Huang Zunxian, 1848-1905, 225. 《山歌》： "一家女儿做新娘，十家女儿看镜光。街头铜鼓声声打，打着中心只说郎。"

singing themselves, and this is what Huang meant by "my hand will write down what my mouth speaks."

These folk songs modified into classical poems occupy but a tiny portion of Huang's poetry. This is not to say, however, that Huang hardly attempted to make classical poetry more colloquial. More frequently, he employed a format called the "poetic-song ballad" (*ge xing ti, 歌行体*) in more expressive poems.[26] Composed in the poetic-song ballad, such a poem is usually quite lengthy because it narrates a series of events by emulating the progression of a song. Commonly, toward the end of the poem or wherever he feels like making an exclamation with great emotions, the author would switch from the original pentasyllabic or heptasyllabic verses to a prose-like verse that does not have a fixed length. For example, in one responsorial poem written on the mid-autumn night in 1870, Huang gave a detailed account of how he met a new friend named Luo Wenzhong and the conversation he had. This poetic-song poem has four stanzas, and Huang ended three of them in irregular verses. This difference is hard to show in English translation, but it is obvious at the end of the final stanza that wrote "... I can't resign myself to being buried in this ramshackle hut! Alas! I can't resign myself to being buried in this ramshackle hut!"[27] The refrain and the interjection in this ending clearly resemble a song, and this natural flow of unrestrained feelings made the poem sound more colloquial as if the author was not merely writing but also chanting.

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[26] "Term Bases," Key Concepts in Chinese Thoughts and Culture, accessed March 27, 2022, https://www.chinesethought.cn/EN/shuyu_show.aspx?shuyu_id=3734.

[27] Huang Zunxian, "A Responsorial Poem to Luo Wenzhong Written in Autumn 1873 Recounting when I First Met Luo in a Small Hut at the Mid-Autumn Night in 1870 and Ascended the Moon Tower with Liang Jushi to View the Moon," in Poetry of the Hut within the Human Realm, 27, translation by the author. 《庚午中秋夜始识罗少珊文仲于矮屋中遂偕诗五共登明远楼看月少珊有诗作此追和时癸酉孟秋也》："……埋头破屋心非甘！噫嘻乎，埋头破屋心非甘！"

Contrary to many people's intuition, poetic-song poetry, although has some colloquial elements in it, is not a new form invented by Huang or other advocates in the Poetic Revolution. If one may say that his experiment with the Hakka folk songs was innovative under the Qing context and was precursory to the Vernacular Chinese Movement in the early twentieth century, his resort to the poetic-song poetry was rather a return to the ancient poetic traditions of the Music Bureau (*yue fu, 乐府*).[28] The poetic-song ballad is a variant of the so-called "archaic-style poetry" (*gu ti shi, 古体诗*). Judged from its name, it has a longer history than its popular successor, namely the regulated, more widespread quatrains and octets. It still belongs to the category of classical poetry, but it is more traditional in the sense that it dates further back to the Han dynasty. In Huang's Poems of the Hut Within the Human Realm, the archaic-style poetry is particularly favored by him, especially as he wanted to both narrate his observations and discuss his point of view. The difference between the archaic style and the poetic-song ballad is just that the latter has a few irregular verses while the former is completely uniform in the length of each verse. Therefore, these poetic-song poems of Huang represent his inclination to revive the ancient tradition rather than to be pioneering and explore new poetic expressions. This may sound self-contradictory at first because, on one hand, Huang did experiment with new elements of poetry and call for a new realm of poetry along with other reformers such as Liang Qichao, but on the other hand, part of his attention was directed to rediscover poetry's past, not the future. In other words, opposed to what the term "revolution" suggests, which is a

[28] Zhiyi Yang, "The Modernity of the Ancient-Style Verse," Frontiers of Literary Studies in China 9, no. 4 (2015): 559-560.

forward-looking movement directed at something new, Huang's revolutionary attempts here went in both directions on a historical timeline, if his works could be called revolutionary at all. A closer look at this apparent incongruity and Huang's "slogan" for the Poetic Revolution analyzed above reveals another perspective to look at this major literary movement in late Qing.

The Book of Songs, which was China's earliest collection of poetry and songs and dated back to at least the fifth century B.C., laid the principles of poetry. In its preface, the *Book of Songs* defined poetry as such: "The poem is that to which what is intently on the mind goes. In the mind it is 'being intent;' coming out in language, it is a poem."[29] In other words, poetry should be the expression of one's inner quality, intention, and feelings. Viewed in this light, Huang's advocate for "writing as if speaking" was in conformity with rather than opposition to this principle. The late Qing poetic circle depicted in Huang's poems was plagued by platitudes and stiffness resulting from the scholars' obsession with the authority of classical texts and their treatment of poetry as primarily a political tool to cultivate bureaucratic relationships. Imbued in this practice and situated in the gradually-declining Qing society, few poets would care to record what they saw and express their genuine feelings through poetry. Therefore, Huang's argument that poetry should be the medium for the contemporary world was actually a restoration of the original purpose of poetry. In this aspect, his attempt was similar to a poetic renaissance. In his book *Within the Human Realm*, J. D. Schmidt argues that premodern Chinese viewed "revolution" differently from our modern context. He points out that "revolution" as a modern

[29] Stephen Owen, Readings in Chinese Literary Thought (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), 40. 《诗经・大序》："诗者。志之所之也。在心为志。发言为诗。"

concept was heavily influenced by the West and Marxism, but in a purely Chinese setting, this word could be traced back to the Shang (ca. 1600 B. C.) and Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1100 B.C.), which was used to describe the overthrowing of preexisting dynasties and establish a new one in concordance with "the Mandate of Heaven."[30] Therefore, theoretically, "revolution" was more about the restoration of preexisting orders rather than their subversion. Moreover, Huang lived in a tumultuous time of Sino-West encounters and conflicts. On one hand, like many progressive scholars of his time, he showed an open-minded appreciation of Western cultures; on the other hand, it was neither possible nor desirable for him that he became thoroughly westernized in a few years. Therefore, when faced with the domination of the seemingly "superior" Western ideas, especially when violence was present in such domination, he naturally wanted to turn back to his cultural origin and traditions so that he could affirm his identity as a Chinese scholar against the broader, ongoing narrative that Chinese were "inferior" to the Westerners. By reemphasizing the traditional principles of classical poetry, he demonstrated that the problem with Qing's stagnation in poetic development laid not in the inherent inferiority of Chinese culture or the deficiency of Chinese poetry against the foil of Western literature; rather, it was because the ancient wisdom had been forgotten by contemporary scholars. Once poetry was revived to fulfill its original function, it could and should maintain its dominance among Chinese scholars as the primary means to express their responsible reflections and genuine feelings. When the Western cultures began to infiltrate deeper into Chinese society with each of Qing's military defeats, classical poetry was one of few grounds left relatively intact and on

[30] Schmidt, Within the Human Realm: The Poetry of Huang Zunxian, 1848-1905, 48.

which the scholars could still find comfort and mutual recognition of their values and identity.

Besides experimenting with diverse styles of classical poetry, Huang was better known for his frequent incorporation of modern vocabularies, including Western concepts and loanwords, into poetry. The most recent example would be the poem titled "The Exiles" cited previously (more on this later). In this work, Huang directly borrowed the transliteration of the words "Washington" (translated as "hua sheng dun") and "America" (translated as "mei li jian"). Written before the Poetic Revolution was formally conceptualized by Liang Qichao in 1899, this poem seems a timely response to Liang's earlier revolutionary agenda, which was to write classical poetry with novel terms directly transliterated from Sanskrit sutras of Buddhism and Christian texts in English. As discussed above, the problem with this approach was that it made little sense to those people who did not live in the same language context or who transliterated them differently. Moreover, the mere addition of these words compromised the aesthetic value of Huang's work because their abrupt appearance felt rather disconnected from the entire poem. Huang seemed to be using these proper nouns for their own sake.

Some of Huang's other poems, however, read more naturally and aesthetically intriguing. In a series of poems titled "Modern Parting," Huang skillfully portrayed four modern technologies, the train, telegraph, photograph, and steamboat, and situated them in the traditional poetic theme of parting between a wanderer and his lover back home. These poems had no base in reality because Huang wrote them while he was in London, and there is no evidence suggesting that he was alluding to his relationship with his wife. Meanwhile, a man's parting with his lover and his lover expressing her lovesickness had always been a popular theme in classical poetry.

Therefore, it was more likely that Huang wrote these poems as a literary experiment to combine traditional themes and style with modern technologies. The first poem about the train and steamboat reads:

> My thoughts whirl like a wheel, when it's time to part, turning at the rate of 10,000 RPM. My eyes watch wheels driving off in pairs, but they only multiply my heart's misgivings. They had mountains and rivers in ancient times; They also had a variety of vehicles and ships... Now, the steamships and trains of our modern age conspire to increase the parting sorrow of people. Every up-to-date fellow knows how his tight schedule forbids him to indulge in any lingering adieus... Nowadays a ship's rudder of thirty thousand pounds moves just as smoothly as the finger on your hand. The ocean hasn't run short of contrary winds, but people don't even quail at [the presence of Shi You]. Before the folks seeing you off have even got home, your ship's long vanished someplace over the horizon... But when in the future you actually do return, [I] beg you to fly back on a hydrogen balloon![31]

This poem creatively compares the ancient way of traveling with modern transportation technologies. It does so not by rigidly analyzing the pros and cons of each as Huang did in his other argumentation poems. Interestingly, Huang assumed the role of a sorrowful woman thinking about her traveling husband in her lonely boudoir. In his whimsical imagination, he likened the woman's enthusiastic yearning for her lover to the dazzling motion of the train wheels. At first glance, Huang seems to blame modern technology for intensifying the sorrow of a parting couple. This, however, is Huang's rhetorical expression of his astonishment at the sight of the fast technological development in England. From the woman's perspective, Huang commented on the striking contrast between the enormous rudder and its smooth, rapid movement. Although the entire poem was written in the archaic style, the most traditional

[31] Huang Zunxian, "Modern Parting," translated by Schmidt in Within the Human Realm: The Poetry of Huang Zunxian, 1848-1905, 269-270, modified by the author. 《今别离》：“别肠转如轮，一刻既万周。眼见双轮驰，益增中心忧。古亦有山川，古亦有车舟……今日舟与车，并力生离愁。明知须臾景，不许稍绸缪……虽有万钧柁，动如绕指柔。岂无打头风，亦不畏石尤。送者未及返，君在天尽头……所愿君归时，快乘氢气球。”

element in this piece is probably his poetic allusion to Shi You (石尤), which was the sylph of wind in ancient Chinese myths. It was said that a merchant named You married a girl named Shi, and he had to travel frequently by boat to do business in remote areas. After he had left for a long time, You fell ill due to lovesickness and soon passed away. While she was moribund, she lamented that because she could not prevent her husband from leaving, she would become a sylph of sea wind after death so that she could deter the traveling men for the sake of their wives who shared her fate. Later, people began to use the term "Shi You wind" to refer to the headwinds.[32] Because this allusion is less known today, Schmidt directly translated Shi You to mean "typhoon." However, the original reference must be pointed out because, on one hand, it shows Huang's adept mastery of ancient books, and on the other hand, it really dovetails with the theme of this poem, which is the parting of lovers. Huang skillfully connected a modern parting scene with an ancient romantic story by playing with the complexity of the allusion. Unlike the rigidity of language in the case of "Washington" and "America," Huang's discussion of modern things such as trains and steamboats is more elusive here. Instead of explicitly inserting the translation for trains (*huo che*) and steamboats (*zheng qi chuan*) into the poem, he referred to them with terms already familiar to his contemporaries, namely "wheels" and "rudder." With all these foreshadowing and blending of modern themes with traditional ones, his mention of the "hydrogen balloon" does not sound abrupt but rather lifts the spirit of the poem.

After examining the new (or traditional) style and new lexicon in Huang's work, we are still left with the third aspect of the Poetic Revolution, which, according to Liang Qichao, concerns

[32] "Shi You Wind," Sou Yun, accessed April 2, 2022, https://sou-yun.cn/QueryAllusion.aspx.

the "new spirit" of poetry. Because the revolution of the spirit is more abstract and elusive, I will divide my argument into two parts. In the first part, I will examine some of his more cosmopolitan works, which testify to Huang's complex identity similar to a world citizen under the broader context of Sino-West conflicts and cultural exchange. In the second section, I will examine the identity struggle faced by Huang and his oscillation between the reassertion of old identities and the adoption of new ones when he came closer to the realization that China's sovereignty was constantly threatened by the West.

During his early years, Huang had in general held a cosmopolitan view of China's position in the world. Unlike most other Chinese intellectuals who were more or less xenophobic because of the atrocities committed by European forces during the First and Second Opium War, Huang hardly expressed any feelings of indignation or repulsion in his poetry. While his contemporary scholars were concerned with protecting Qing's imperial rule against foreign humiliations and invasions, Huang was more attracted to the idea that China and the West could ideally benefit from each other and get along well. This was partially due to the fact that he was still a child in remote southern China during the Second Opium War, so the Sino-West conflicts barely had any negative impact on him. However, even when he witnessed the Margary Affair in his late twenties when he was in Beijing, he still sounded self-possessed and impartial in a series of four poems he wrote commenting on this incident. The Margary Affair was an unexpected clash between a British official and the native people in the Yunnan Province. After the Second Opium War, England sought to expand their market not only along the coastal cities but also in inland China. In 1875, England sent several officials to northern Burma and Yunnan, hoping to

establish a land trade route into China. Among them, there was an official named Augustus Raymond Margary who was killed by the local ethnic people on his way back to Shanghai. The tragedy was largely a result of miscommunication because Margary failed to notify the local government of his and the retinue's arrival beforehand, and the native people were indignant at the sight of foreign intruders. As a result, this incident became the cause for the signing of the Chefoo Convention, which gave England more trading advantages and diplomatic privileges as well as demanded China punish the criminals and send an official envoy of apology to England.

In this series of poems titled "Massive Imprisonment" (*da yu,* 大狱, translated by Schmidt as "The Margary Incident"), Huang expressed a desire for a rapprochement with England. In the first poem, he even blamed the native people for their impertinence: "They (the native people) wished their conspiracy to be successful; this is such a stupid plan for resisting foreign invasions!"[33] Attributing this incident solely to the "conspiracy" of his compatriots, he evidently supported the British claim. He most explicitly articulated his hope for a world in unison: "We can no longer promote the expulsion of foreigners, for East and West are one family now. Because our local officials took no precautions, we must send a delegation to beg their forgiveness. If our own ambassador had been on a mission, we would not have allowed foreigners to attack his party. Today a thousand nations have all become one, and China is no longer the center of the world!"[34] In this piece, Huang boldly envisioned a cosmopolitan world

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[33] Huang Zunxian, first poem of four in "Massive Imprisonment" in Poetry of the Hut within the Human Realm, 46, translation by the author. 《大狱其一》："……阴谋图一逞，攘外计何愚！"

[34] Huang Zunxian, fourth poem of four in "Massive Imprisonment," translated by Schmidt in Within the Human Realm: The Poetry of Huang Zunxian, 1848-1905, 19. 《大狱其四》："休唱攘夷论，东西共一家。疏防司里馆，谢罪使臣槎。诟我持英籥，容人击副车。万方今一概，莫自大中华。"

in which China and the West could live as one family. He also demonstrated his capacity to empathize with the loss of the British envoy, blaming the Chinese officials for their delinquency. At last, he contemplated the long-held sinocentrism that eventually backfired on China, leading to its people's reckless violence and their unwillingness to peacefully coexist with the foreigners. This poem stood out because it possesses what Liang Qichao would call a "new spirit." In this case, it is exemplified through Huang's self-positioning as a world citizen who transcended the narrow scope of Chinese nationalism. As a scholar-official, it was Huang's responsibility to reflect upon and be outspoken about China's limitations in dealing with foreign affairs. However, he did not merely frame such a discussion solely within the Chinese context, namely as a domestic political problem that needed to be addressed. Unlike other Qing poets such as Zhao Yi who positioned China at the center of the world and criticized the West for their "barbaric" customs, He was concerned with a more ambitious goal, that is, to change people's perspective about the West from an antagonistic one to a more inclusive one and resituate China into the modern world. This cosmopolitan perspective is quite conspicuous throughout Huang's poetry, although sometimes he was more inclined to recede into his original identity as a Chinese scholar-official, especially when his Utopian expectations were challenged by Western dominance.

In another poem titled "The Exiles" which I briefly mentioned before, Huang's tone as a cosmopolitan scholar was more explicit. This poem was written six years after he left the United States, but it is Huang's recount of his experience with the Exclusion Act which passed soon after he arrived in San Francisco. The Exclusion Act was a racist statute specifically targeting

the Chinese workers in the United States following the Gold Rush. Even before the bill was passed in 1882, furious sentiments against the Chinese had been in the air for a long time. Under this situation, the Chinese workers were frequently abused by the local government and the White Americans. Written in the archaic style, Huang gave a detailed account of the adversities faced by the Chinese people abroad. The first stanza tells the hardships the workers faced when they first arrived in a foreign country. The second stanza blamed the Chinese rebels who sought asylum in the United States for their evildoing, which led the American public to resent the Chinese race as a whole. The third stanza explained how the Exclusion Act came to be instituted and its implications. In the fourth and also the last stanza, which I will selectively quote below, Huang diverted from the sufferings of the Chinese people and discussed why this tragedy took place. He contemplated the weakness of Qing as well as the shallow racism of the United States.

The poem reads:

> I sigh when I think of America's George Washington and the noble ideals that this great leader upheld... The yellow, white, red, and Negro races would live on equal terms with the American people. But not even a century has elapsed since his time, and the government is not ashamed to dishonor his pledge... We are so far removed from the Age of World Peace, we pervert human knowledge just to conquer other nations... The American eagle soars up into the sky, clutching half our globe in its powerful talons... A nation like China that won't protect its people allows them to be slaughtered like sparrows in a bush... Our Celestial Envoy and the Yellow Race have become a laughingstock to all nations of the world... I embarked on my mission with dignity and pride but approached San Francisco vexed by anxiety. For even if we could pour out all the four seas' waters, We will never wash clean our national disgrace.[35]

In this section, he reflected on the founding of the United States and its promise to bring

[35] Huang Zunxian, "The Exiles," translated by Schmidt in Within the Human Realm: The Poetry of Huang Zunxian, 1848-1905, 246-247. 《逐客篇》：“慨想华盛顿，颇具霸王略……黄白红黑种，一律等土著。逮今不百年，食言曾不怍……今非大同世，祇挟智勇角……飞鹰倚天立，半球悉在握……有国不养民，譬为丛驱爵……皇华与大汉，第供异族谑……堂堂龙节来，叩关亦足躩。倒顷四海水，此耻难洗濯。”

about a multiracial, democratic nation. Instead of harshly criticizing a foreign country for its racial prejudices and unfair treatment of his compatriots, Huang's attitude was more of a lament for the erosion of the American ideals. Similar to his attitude toward the Margary Affair discussed above, Huang was never acrimonious toward the Americans even when they treated his fellow countrymen poorly. This stanza starts with a praise of Washington and the yearning for an American utopia, but he was soon disappointed by the American's rejection of the Chinese. In the first half of the stanza, he seemed to position himself not only as a Chinese man fallen victim to White discrimination but also as a world citizen who was qualified to offer an insider's critique of the United States' policy. He so genuinely cared about the past and the present of the United States that his painful feeling was not only a result of China's sufferings but also a result of witnessing the corruption of American ideals. He partially internalized the American identity as he was actively engaging with the American society: on one hand, he was attracted to the American invention of a democratic republican government, and on the other hand, he was observing American society with a critical eye.

Toward the end of this poem, he shifted from his newly acquired identity back to his original role: the Chinese ambassador to the United States. This last part is Huang's reflection on and critique of Qing's inadequate foreign policy and irresponsible handling of its citizens which resulted in their maltreatment in the West. Here, he is again a faithful Chinese official who represented the Qing government and was tasked with bringing glory to his country. He woefully commented that because of the sour relationship between China and the United States as well as his personal incompetence, the disgrace of his country could not be ignored.

Comparing the last part with the beginning, it might appear contradictory at first that Huang, as a Qing scholar-official, started with a genuine contemplation of the American promise of inclusiveness and then switched to resume his identity as a Qing representative whose fellow countrymen are under repression. However, to Huang, this identity shift was spontaneous and even subconscious. Opposed to the prevalent notion that the Chinese were an "inferior" race, Huang showed neither signs of self-abasement as presumed by the Whites nor blind arrogance as his predecessors. Judged from the tone of the poem, he regarded himself as equal to the Americans that he could freely express his political view in their land and criticize their government just like the American citizens. As a Chinese scholar-official, it was also his duty to reflect upon and point out Qing's shortcomings. Therefore, his identity here is not static; nor is this suggesting that he consciously shifted from a cosmopolitan identity to a separate Chinese identity. When he was writing the poem, his stance naturally flowed from the former to the latter, revealing that he had internalized both identities during his stay in the United States. When faced with the Chinese audience, Huang was a witness and a participant in American politics and thus was well qualified of making comments; when he was situated among the Whites, he reasserted his role as a Qing representative whose criticism of China stemmed not from prejudice but an insider's experience and insights. These two sides of his identity are not only compatible but also indispensable; without either he would not have the standing to fully express himself in the broader history of Sino-West conflicts. Whether he was a successful diplomat was beyond the scope of this paper, but he indeed rendered a cross-cultural perspective possible by adopting a hybrid identity.

The two examples above, "The Margary Incident" and "The Exiles," both express Huang's inclination to integrate China into the Western-dominated world. He was disappointed when China and the West could only communicate with each other through violent means because his ideal was to have the two cultures interact peacefully. He was not against Westernization, to say the least, because China would inevitably be shaped by Western ideas as an outcome of cultural exchanges. However, in some other poems, one can see Huang's faltering attitude toward the Westernized Chinese youths. In one poem titled "The Closure of the Educational Mission in America," Huang conveyed his conflicting feelings as he was both regretting the failure of the educational mission and being somewhat sarcastic toward the Chinese youths who forgot their Chinese traditions after they studied abroad. Part of the long poem wrote:

> The ignorant country lads, having seen little before, are easily swayed by such strange luxuries. When a letter comes from home, telling of poverty and asking "How are you Now doing?" The answer is "I eat two chickens a day; I recall not how you burnt the door to cook the hen for a parting feast. You say you have no more cereal; Well, why not just eat meat?"... Though they can use the foreign tongue to call one another to play... Yet, as for the Shanghai or the Canton dialect, they have forgotten and ceased to understand. Some even practice the Christian religion, follow people into churches to partake of the eucharist and to turn the leaves of the Scriptures... They have found the country of superb happiness; they are too happy to think of their fatherland."[36]

The educational mission was a program from 1872 to 1881 that brought one hundred and twenty teenage boys to study in Connecticut. As part of China's three-decade-long Self-Strengthening Movement, its goal was to let these young lads study from the West and come back to help reconstruct the war-torn Qing dynasty. However, the noble families and the literati class were

[36] Huang Zunxian, "The Closure of the Educational Mission in America," translated by William Hung in "Huang Tsun-Hsien's Poem 'The Closure of The Educational Mission in America,'" Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, June 1955, Vol. 18, No. 1/2 (Jun., 1955), 53-54. 《罢美国留学时感赋》：“乡愚少所见，见异辄意移。家书说贫穷，问子今何居。我今膳双鸡，谁记炊熛彦。汝言盎无粮，何不食肉糜？……互谈伊优亚，独歌妃呼豨。吴言与越语，病忘反不知。亦有习祆教，相率拜天祠。口嚼天父饼，手繙《景教碑》……此间国极乐，乐不故蜀思。”

generally hesitant to send their children to such a distant foreign country. Therefore, most of the boys came from a plebeian background, mainly attracted by the material benefits provided by the government. This poem vividly illustrated their livings in America, which were drastically different from their impoverished homes in China. However, Huang was being sarcastic here because these boys indulged themselves in material comforts to the extent that they not only failed to learn Western sciences and technologies but also forgot the sufferings of their fatherland. Two poetic allusions are employed here for the sardonic purpose: the verse "why not just eat meat" refers to the absurd Emperor Hui of Jin who told his subjects to eat meat when the entire country was in starvation; the last verse, which directly translates as "they are too happy to think of Shu," refers to the heartless young Emperor of Shu who soon forgot about his former state after he was taken captive by the enemy state. Both of these allusions insinuate one's indifference to the homeland, so it is obvious that Huang was particularly dissatisfied with the youths' ignorance of the traditional culture, including their own dialects and the Confucian teachings. As a scholar and a classical poet raised in the traditional manner, he might have felt that his Chinese identity and the dominance of the Chinese culture were threatened by the increasing presence of the English language and the Christian religion. Unlike the yearning for inclusiveness and cultural hybridity expressed in "The Margary Incident" and "The Exiles," Huang wavered in the face of the outcome of the educational mission. If the Margary Affair and the Exclusion Act mainly affected the lives of the underprivileged common people, especially the native minorities and the emigrated workers, and thus Huang could convey his message from a safe distance as an elite scholar-official, the failure of the educational mission dealt a major

blow to his faith in the solidity of the "Chinese root," albeit this time the Americans were not even being aggressive or discriminatory toward the Chinese. Merely seeing that the boys actively adapted to a Western culture was enough to awake him from the idealized vision that these young people would eventually acquire a hybrid identity that would allow them to simultaneously appreciate the strengths of China and the West, and this realization made Huang more inclined in this poem to reassert his inherent "Chineseness" than to explore his recently acquired identity as a cosmopolitan poet. In a letter to a friend, Huang acknowledged that he often had to "rely on the ancients" when his expressions were inadequate, and in this case, the making use of two historical allusions confirms this idea.[37] Although he advocated for peaceful cross-cultural interactions, he by no means wished to entrust China's future to these students who forsook their traditional identity and undertake entirely new ones, namely the identity produced within a Western-dominated environment.

As the above examples show, Huang's political views and self-perception had never been static. They were very much contingent upon the current events, Sino-West relationships, and most importantly, how these external factors swayed his identity and political views. Many years later, on his way from Hong Kong to London after being appointed the Second Secretary for the Ambassador to England, he wrote a poem while passing through the Indian Ocean. Many of the South Asian territories such as India and Sri Lanka (which was called "Ceylon" by then) were British colonies at that time. Touched by the fate of the colonized people, he wrote "The Reclining Buddha of Ceylon." In this piece, he dropped the cosmopolitan tone as someone

[37] Huang Zunxian, "Letter to Zhou Langshan" in Long Yangzhi, Collection of Works of Huang Zunxian,195.

familiar with the West and instead withdrew to his original role as an authentic Chinese scholar-official. Furthermore, he even resorted to the once-popular but outdated binary distinction between the Chinese race (*hua,* 华) versus the foreign "barbarians" (*yi,* 夷). In the last stanza, he wrote: "As for Asia, there is a great power occupying its center; It's been four-thousand years since the reign of Yao and Shun, after whom there were many generations of sages... Yet today we are invaded by the barbarians from all sides, and the frontier troops were summoned back. If Heaven blesses China, let the emperor rule with his gown drooping down... All would be in awe of the King of Heaven, and the uncivilized people shall send their envoys here."[38]

Judged merely from the wording, this poem hardly fits the criteria of the Poetic Revolution because neither its language nor its spirit is considered "new." Huang was reminiscent of China's allegedly glorious past in the face of Qing's vulnerable situation, but this past in which China was one of the world's leading civilizations is incompatible with the modern world that excluded China from the center. Only within the discourse of the past could China claim itself as the orthodox and regard anything foreign as "barbarian." However, it was precisely this kind of unrestrained fantasy that revealed a more comprehensive understanding of Huang's complexity and struggle. Only seeing Huang as a progressive reformer and a cosmopolitan poet is to reduce him to a flat official-scholar figure. Qian Zhonglian, which was the most prominent modern scholar on Huang, argued that "those who can only wave about the banner of innovation... are

[38] Huang Zunxian, "The Reclining Buddha of Ceylon" in Poetry of the Hut within the Human Realm, 118, translation by the author. 《锡兰岛卧佛》："念我亚细亚，大国居中央。尧舜四千年，圣贤代相望……到今四夷侵，尽撤诸边防。天若祚中国，黄帝垂衣裳……共尊天可汗，化外胥来航。"

even less able to understand Huang."[39] In reality, Huang's experience and intellectual journey were never smooth and linear. As an enlightened scholar, the cleavage between what he observed in the West and what China was trapped in produced much pain and anguish in him. On a more personal level, he was also constantly accepting and discovering new identities and struggling to find self-fulfillment in the ever-changing globe. While some of the poems testify to his global vision and insightful reflections, there are others that reveal his vulnerabilities and intermittent desire for a utopian China in which he could proudly serve as a Confucian literati without compromising the purity of his Chineseness or letting the authenticity of classical poetry be contaminated by foreign cultures. When he was a young diplomat, he was heartily attracted to Western ideas, sciences, and cultures. However, he was time after time disillusioned by American racism, European colonialism, and Japanese aggression. Neither the hostile West nor the impotent Qing regime could give him a sense of belonging, and hence he was reluctant to solely identify with either. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize both Huang's revolutionary ambition and personal struggles to understand the complex and even conflicting stance in his poetry.

To some extent, how Huang found a balance among the diverse identities was determined by the power dynamic at that time: when the West was not too much of a threat to China, he tended to be more tolerant and inclusive in his works; however, if the integrity of Chinese culture and sovereignty were overshadowed by Western hegemony, he would resort more to his

[39] Qian Zhonglian, "Preface to the Poetry of the Hut Within the Human Realm" as cited in Schmidt, Within the Human Realm: The Poetry of Huang Zunxian, 1848-1905, 53.

traditional upbringing to counter such dominance. In short, he would be more passionate about a certain aspect of his multi-identity when that aspect was facing a more compelling rival. This also applies to his attitude toward his native Hakka background. As analyzed earlier, he attempted to bring the marginal Hakka culture to the literary fore by integrating Hakka folk songs into classical poetry because once he took part in the civil examination, his Hakka identity was pushed to the side by his scholarly identity, which was defined by the dominant Han culture. As his role changed from a young, ambitious diplomat to a mature, practical Chinese reformer, he gradually became less cosmopolitan and passionate about the "world-in-unison" ideal, and this transition could be seen in the chronological order of his poems. From the Consul General in San Francisco, which marked Huang's heyday in his diplomatic career, to London and eventually to South Asia, he was also gradually removed from the center of the Western civilization and withdrew to his homeland which suffered from increasing Western aggression. Therefore, Huang had always been keen on the ways diverse cultures interacted with each other and was adept at deploying them under different contexts to get his message across.

Conclusion

This paper only examines a minor portion of Huang's poetry compared to his entire poetic collection, which amounts to at least a few hundred pieces. Thus, it only attempts to shed some light on the complexity, nuances, and transitions evinced in some of Huang Zunxian's more well-known poems. As the examples show, Huang not only attempted but also succeeded in putting Liang Qichao's theories of the Poetic Revolution into practice. Specifically, he not only

experimented with new formats, new lexicon, and new spirits, but he also incorporated them into the existing, prevalent literary genre of classical poetry. In other words, he reformed classical poetry without scrapping its foundation, and some of his attempts, such as restoring the purpose of poetry and resorting to more ancient poetic styles, had the effect of reviving Chinese traditions rather than discrediting them. Therefore, his role in the Poetic Revolution was both progressive as well as resurgent. Moreover, reading a diverse selection of Huang's poetry in conjunction with the broader historical context of Sino-West conflicts and unequal interactions renders a more complete picture of Huang. As one of the first Qing diplomats sent to Japan, the United States, Europe, and South Asia, Huang had a cosmopolitan vision that was rare among his contemporaries. However, he also struggled to find his position among different and sometimes even contradictory identities, some of which were inherent in him and some acquired later during his international traveling. Therefore, in a few poems, he expressed his uneasiness in light of the Western dominance and did not conceal his longing for reasserting his Chinese identity in the face of the marginalization of Chinese traditional culture and the compromise of China's political integrity. Nevertheless, such oscillation in poetry does not undermine the overall significance of the Poetic Revolution and Huang's contribution to this movement. The Poetic Revolution is now widely recognized by scholars as being the predecessor to the New Cultural Movement two decades later. Without a doubt, Huang's innovative experiments and theoretical propositions provided valuable insights and sources of inspiration for subsequent literary reformers such as Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu.[40]

[40] Ling Ke, "Rehearsing the May Fourth New Cultural Movement: the Poetic Revolution and Huang Zunxian's

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