

The Spiritual Pursuit and Formal Innovation in Xi Chuan's Poetry

Jie Su¹, Yalin Su^{2,*}

¹University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

²Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, China

*Corresponding author: Yalin Su, syl_move@sjtu.edu.com

Abstract

This paper examines Xi Chuan's poetry to explore its academic standing, spiritual essence, and formal innovation within contemporary Chinese poetry. Through analysis of his early representative works *Gazing at the Starry Sky* in *Haulage* and *The Distant Land*, combined with the context of his poetic creation and aesthetic characteristics, this paper argues that Xi Chuan is not only a leading figure among third-generation poets but also a quintessential representative of "intellectual writing" since the 1990s. His poetry, while inheriting the tradition of Eastern spiritual contemplation, integrates modern consciousness to form a unique artistic style and spiritual pursuit. Xi Chuan is virtually synonymous with the "academic school" in contemporary circles. Possessing a noble and unyielding spirit, he maintains a saintly devotion to traditional culture and the essence of life, consciously bearing the mission of rebuilding classical poetic spirit. His verse is solemn yet pure, harmonious yet profound, elegant yet restrained, journeying back along the path to the ultimate soul. The new poetry of the 21st century will inevitably be natural, as natural as 19th-century Chinese poetry. That 19th-century Chinese poetry died out quite naturally in the 20th century. For 21st-century new poetry to survive, it must become as natural as that of the 19th century. This is not a regression, but rather the culmination of our accumulated experience. The widespread misunderstandings about new poetry, carried over from the 20th century, will also come to an end.

Keywords

Xi Chuan, Contemporary Poetry, Academic School, Spiritual Pursuit, Formal Innovation

1. Introduction

Xi Chuan is a poet who is "daunting and elusive". Following the 1990s, he underwent a swift transformation, fearlessly composing verse that challenges readers' conventional tastes. He immersed himself in the international poetry scene, engaging in dialogue with the most influential contemporary poets abroad and guiding younger generations towards "broader horizons." Beyond his own poetic output, his work encompasses poetry translation and research into classical Chinese culture. The Tokyo Poetry Prize (2018) recognized him as a modern poet who possesses both a profound knowledge of classical Chinese literature and mastery of a foreign language. As a pivotal figure in contemporary Chinese poetry, Xi Chuan's work is renowned for its solemnity, purity, harmony, wisdom, and elegance. In his poetic practice, he not only explores individual life experiences but also shoulders the cultural mission of reconstructing classical spirit. Xi Chuan's poetic practice embodies the scholarly cultivation and moral responsibility of an academic poet. His work possesses intellectual depth alongside stylistic grace and aesthetic resonance, establishing a distinctive voice among third-generation poets and intellectual writing since the 1990s. This paper systematically analyses Xi Chuan's poetry through three dimensions: spiritual essence, formal characteristics, and thematic concerns. His poetry is expansive and inclusive, his pen striding towards a purely classical destination, trimming minutiae into eternal rhythm.

2. The Poetic Achievement and Intellectual Vision of Xi Chuan

2.1 Mastery of Poetic Technique and the Nature of Poetic Creation

Xi Chuan possesses a consummate mastery of fundamental poetic techniques, exercising meticulous control over imagery, with scarcely any instances of textual dislocation or logical self-contradiction within his verse. Simultaneously, Xi Chuan's verse carries profound rationality, where innovation in poetic imagery guided by reason far surpasses mere forced juxtaposition of words. He stands as the Chinese poet closest to the Nobel Prize in Literature. Poetry remains the most singular form of linguistic creation, where experience, emotion, delusion, hallucination, thought, belief and anti-belief, aesthetics and the appreciation of the grotesque, among others, converge upon language to form verse. Life evolves, artistic forms emerge, fade, or vanish, yet poetry continually redefines itself. Without this redefinition, it would inevitably dim and disappear—a matter of time. [1] Those who cherish established poetic sensibilities uphold tradition,

elevating its preservation to a moral imperative. Those unsatisfied with traditional poetic sensibilities, however, demand fresh ideas, novel rhetorical possibilities, and new avenues for feeling and expression.

2.2 Xi Chuan's Literary Identity and Historical Position

Xi Chuan stands out as an exceptional figure among the Third Generation poets and a representative poet of "intellectual writing" since the 1990s—not merely due to his academic background and identity, but more significantly because of his moral responsibility, intellectual depth, stylistic temperament, and aesthetic resonance. Xi Chuan's significance lies in occupying a complex intersection: he stands as a representative of the melancholic and critical writing of the early 1990s, the most dynamic and charismatic figure among academic poets, and a pioneer in the transition from youthful, rebellious writing towards professional and sustained literary practice. Simultaneously, he remains an individualized "solitary writer"—a poet whose singularity defies conceptual categorization. Gazing at the Starry Sky in Helga is not only Xi Chuan's breakthrough work but also a classic of modern Chinese poetry.

2.3 Aesthetic and Philosophical Significance of Gazing at the Starry Sky in Helga

By embedding the posture of "gazing upwards" and a humble spirit within the structure of new poetry, it sounded the initial clarion call for personalized expression in Chinese verse, holding significant literary historical meaning and value. Through contemplating the starry heavens, the poem articulates the poet's profound reflections on the cosmos, nature, and human existence. The poet recognizes humanity's insignificance and limitations within the cosmos, yet simultaneously senses a mysterious force that penetrates his soul, evoking profound reverence. Adopting a humble stance, he submits to the universe's baptism, articulating awe and devotion towards life, nature, and the cosmos. Xi Chuan is an "intellectual poet" who bridges ancient and modern, East and West. Though adept at the art of poetic instruction, he remains steadfast in his commitment to its principles. In his early years during the 1980s, he joined the ranks of poets in step with the era's currents, penning numerous influential and penetrating works that brought him early fame and success. [2] Now, in an era where poetry's influence wanes, Xi Chuan remains steadfast in the poetic realm like a knight, fiercely guarding his unadorned devotion to verse. Xi Chuan's extensive engagement with Western literature and philosophy, particularly the works of modernist poets like Ezra Pound and Jorge Luis Borges, laid the groundwork for his poetry's cross-cultural perspective and linguistic experimentation. His early works, highly aesthetic and lyrical, gained widespread public acclaim, offering him ample opportunity to remain comfortably within his established niche and reap its rewards. Yet he chose to challenge himself. Marked by his work *Tribute*, he abandoned his well-honed creative methods of the past, turning instead to a preference for hybrid, heterogeneous, and deviant themes. Through new forms of writing, he revealed to readers the absurdity, authenticity, and awkwardness arising from the collision of the spiritual world with reality. Scholars have noted that Xi Chuan's poetry embodies an unwavering commitment to the critical spirit of "intellectual writing".

3. Spiritual Vision and Formal Innovation in Xi Chuan's Poetry

3.1 New Spiritual Dimensions in Contemporary Poetic Expression

Xi Chuan has opened another complex spiritual space within contemporary poetry themes—namely, the spiritual quest of the "living" and the "present." His long poems such as *Tribute*, *Convergence*, *Misfortune*, and *Close-up and Distant View* offer prophetic and dramatic explorations of the spiritual world, real-life encounters, soul-searching conflicts, and emotional burdens of contemporary Chinese people, weaving together historical and traditional, concrete and metaphysical dimensions. Simultaneously, his formal diversity and inventiveness establish him as a preeminent figure among contemporary poets. The early works' refinement and precision, agility and startling insight, alongside the later pieces' expansiveness and openness, elasticity and free-flowing nature—their structural perfection and artful subversion—have bequeathed invaluable treasures to contemporary poetry's formal and aesthetic landscape. Moreover, his exceptional talent and profound cultivation have established him as a widely respected and internationally influential representative among China's contemporary poets. Xi Chuan's academic background provides a rich cultural foundation for his poetic creation. His works embody scholarly depth and professional rigor, while formally manifesting..

3.2 Formal Innovation, Aesthetic Evolution, and Poetic Craft

Exhibiting a high degree of rigor and restraint, Xi Chuan both inherits the Eastern tradition of contemplative meditation and, under the influence of modern sensibilities, pursues a "religious purifying force" within poetry. As Kretschmer observes, this "exceptional state of consciousness" not only brings spiritual tranquility but also enables the poet to attain an intuitive clarity. As a poet, Xi Chuan has always regarded language as an integral part of reality, advocating for a form of writing with "hardness". He has also stated that criticism must be "rigorous" and possess "substantive content", championing the exploration of contemporary Chinese's "forcefulness" while opposing the use of obscurity to fabricate false profundity. Poetry that is not obscure is unethical poetry. No matter how obscure a poem may be, the world will find its deconstruction; Much like physicians treating complex ailments, those who unblock arteries cure the disease; those who shake their heads like rattle-drums may well be dealing with terminal cases. The obscurity of poetry is merely a form of defamiliarisation; its elusive poetic quality is but the meaning unfolding into multifaceted realms. Such impenetrability can enhance poetry's infinite vitality, and interpretation can elicit readers' hearty applause—first for the poet's mastery, then for the critic's discernment—rather than feigned erudition cloaked in pretentious obscurity. In this era of poetry's gradual decline, Xi Chuan remains a knightly figure, steadfastly guarding the poetic realm and fiercely

preserving that unadorned devotion to verse within his heart.

3.3 Xi Chuan's Language Philosophy, Critical Ethos, and the Value of Obscurity

Xi Chuan's long poems-such as *Tribute*, *Convergence*, *Calamity*, and *Near and Distant Views*-pioneered new spiritual dimensions in contemporary poetry through their interwoven exploration of historical, traditional, real-world, and metaphysical themes. He examines the existential conditions of the "living" and the "present," probing the interplay between the individual and society, the material and the spiritual. In this creative endeavor, Xi Chuan embodies the moral commitment and profound cultural responsibility of the intellectual poet. It is readily discernible that he possessed the ability to swiftly grasp the transposition of imagery from numerous European poems within the cultural context of the 1980s, as rendered in Chinese translations. Through his own linguistic intuition and mastery, he wove this alienated yet revitalized landscape into the fabric of his verse. The saturation of imagery and the mastery of word choice may be somewhat compromised, yet the fervor with which a poetically impassioned youth composes verse is irreproducible in the later stages of life. [3] Here, rhythm does not serve a productive function; rather, having shifted roles, it becomes the adhesive binding language and illusion, a melody that stirs the spirit within the unique haze of linguistic intuition-this is the essential distinction between production and creation.

4. Xi Chuan on the Nature of Poetry: Language, Creation, and Cultural Transcendence

4.1 Poetry and Prose: Fragility vs Malleability

The reason prose poetry as a distinct category does not exist is that poetic sensibility may enter prose to form prose-like writing, yet its essence remains prose, retaining prose's fundamental structure and syntax; conversely, when the nature of prose enters poetry, the result ceases to be poetry, retaining only a semblance of poetic quality. From this perspective, poetry is more fragile than prose, for alchemy cannot be called such when tainted by too many impurities. Yet prose's expansive capacity broadens its malleability, allowing it to incorporate diverse forms of writing and explore infinite possibilities. He likely does not regard his own poems as manufactured. Yet even in the Tang dynasty, which he perceives as an era of manufactured poetry, people had long transcended grammatical constraints. They crafted their peak, hazy linguistic music within contexts more liberated than modern poetry-through inversion, repeated inversion, omission, neglect, and abstract expression. The imagery behind words possesses no fixed arrangement; the poetic resonance of a verse hinges critically upon its coupling with language. Yet this union defies both instruction and dissection-it is the very essence of creation, beyond explanation.

4.2 The Nature of Creation and Mastery in Poetry

The greatest sound is soundless; the greatest form is formless. True mastery lies in expressing complexity through simplicity. Xichuan gained international recognition precisely because he possessed the resources for translation and wielded symbolic power within cultural circles. Writing poetry, constantly taking risks, and continually challenging the limits of writing-this is commendable. Yet one must simultaneously recognize that, within this endeavor, one is nothing. One must constantly declare: I am not. Only with this awareness can one truly push boundaries through relentless daring. Emphasizing difference and individuality is essential, yet if its value lies solely in self-fulfillment, its energy remains limited. This obsession with self-realization ultimately devolves into narcissism rather than serving poetry.

4.3 Cultural Dialogue and Literary Influence

If one were to say that in his early years, Xi Chuan drew upon the modern literary traditions of Kafka, Borges and others, then today he seems to embody the spirit of an ancient scholar. He speaks with great enthusiasm about how poets of past dynasties composed their works, and attempts to present Tang poetry through the practice of 'chanting verse'. The linguistic units of his own poetry appear to mimic the very strokes of his brush. Xi Chuan remains ever attentive to the latest works of foreign poets, contemplating the cultural disparities between antiquity and modernity, East and West, and the connections that emerge from these differences. He perceives clearly that what sparkles in Chinese may not necessarily shine in another language, while elements that seem unremarkable in Chinese might radiate brilliance in foreign tongues. We stand outside history's walls. Yet this too is history. Poetry transcends its era; poetry is the Hundred Schools of Thought; poetry is the Warring States philosophers; poetry is pure lyricism. For humanity, two moralities present themselves: the morality of survival and the morality of culture. Desires run too deep, the sea too shallow. Fantasies are sustained by capital; let roses correct our errors, let thunder rebuke us. On this long journey, one must not question the destination; in the instant a moth plunges into flame, it is untimely to speak of eternity. To seek proof of a person's flawless integrity is a difficult task.[4]

5. Gazing at the Starry Sky: Transcendence and Innovation in Xi Chuan's Early Poetry

5.1 The Essential Difference between Poetry and Prose

As Xichuan's most widely recognized early work, *Gazing at the Starry Sky* in Margi reveals the poet's experience of awe within a specific spatiotemporal context. In the desolate western Chinese landscape, the poet's contemplative observation of the heavens evokes a transcendental sensation where "words fail to articulate the essence." Through restrained form, the poem conveys boundless emotion, placing readers within a realm where "heaven and earth unite in communion." This achieves poetry's function of hinting at both the earthly realm and another world. This writing embodies the Eastern tradition of spiritual contemplation, resonating with the Western philosopher Kant's reverence for

"the starry heavens above and the moral law within". This feeling is one of awe, not intimacy; of the sacred, not the mundane.

5.2 Language, the Inexpressible, and the Transcendent

In short, it is revelatory, not distilled through "refining meaning". Late at night, in the wild and desolate west of China, beside a "station the size of a broad bean", the poet gazes upon the Milky Way. Here he encounters language's predicament: that unseen world permeates his very being, yet "there exists a mystery beyond your command / You can only stand as an observer / Listening as that mysterious force sends signals from afar / Beams of light piercing your heart." This inexpressible essence entangles the poet, leaving him "seeking words, yet words fail him." He needs no subjective imagery, for any language would be superfluous, diminishing the transcendent vision in his heart and eyes. He need only "stand still / let the brilliant stars, like a billion feet, / tread my shoulders into an altar."

5.3 Pure Sensation and Cosmic Communion

This restraint in poetic sentiment paradoxically allows it to diffuse infinitely. By writing from a position beyond himself, the poet achieves a cosmic communion, what he terms "poetry hinting at another world through this present one." That world is silent, coldly pure and crystalline. This is a poem of pure sensation, bearing no specific meaning yet encompassing all meaning. Its lack of explicit allegory lies in its pure formal and aesthetic qualities, while its universal resonance stems from its evocation of the sacred, eternal cosmos—a counterpoint to the vulgarity and clamour of earthly existence. The "starry sky above and the conscience within" inspire the poet's reverence, echoing Kant's own contemplation.

5.4 Early Innovation and Stylistic Evolution

His early works were highly aesthetic and lyrical, earning widespread public acclaim. He could easily have remained within his comfort zone, basking in the rewards of his success. Yet he chose to challenge himself. Marked by his work *Tribute*, he abandoned his well-honed creative methods of the past, turning instead to a preference for hybrid, heterogeneous and deviant themes. Through new forms of writing, he revealed to readers the absurdity, authenticity and awkwardness arising from the collision of the spiritual world with reality. Scholars have noted that Xi Chuan's poetry embodies an unwavering commitment to the critical spirit of "intellectual writing". [5] From the 1980s to the present day, Xi Chuan has maintained the efficacy and significance of his writing. Through his personalized historical imagination and relentless pursuit of truth, he continually expands the boundaries of contemporary Chinese poetry. His complexity and distinctive style have garnered widespread recognition both domestically and internationally.

6. Xi Chuan's Poetic Mastery: Creativity, Absurdity, and the Interplay of Public and Private

6.1 Absurdity, Creativity, and Philosophical Depth

There exists a certain quality between absurdity and creativity; without it, the former cannot be transformed into the latter. They say a person full of vigor and striving daily could never comprehend the moon's sorrow. They are artists, dissatisfied souls, critics. But what sorrow could the moon possibly harbor—it possesses neither eyes nor navel. Those who speak of the moon's sorrow must surely be mad. Rich in content, vast in scope, profound in thought, and brimming with philosophy. His artistic mastery is evident in language of exceptional conciseness, emotions both rich and sombre, harmonious rhythm, and distinct cadence.

6.2 Integration of Lyricism, Narrative, and Drama

In epic works such as *Tribute*, *Misfortune*, and *The Eagle's Words*, lyricism, narrative, and drama are masterfully integrated. His acute critical awareness and profound humanistic depth elevate his work to an insurmountable peak in contemporary poetry. He engages with contemporaneity and realism, manipulates raw material, and masters contradictory rhetoric. He maintains sensory acuity and intellectual vitality, transforming these into creative energy for potent, authentically self-expressive writing. Xi Chuan's astonishing poems pierce directly to the heart of human and material predicaments. They are both impersonal and intimately familiar, sounding novel yet strangely recognizable.

6.3 Public and Private Interplay in Poetic Voice

An impressive voice—bold yet serene. Xichuan's poetry is a chorus of voices, a quintet, a private meeting within poetry's public hall. When images and glimpses drawn from his personal experience are stitched together, the complex interweaving of its public and private dimensions becomes profoundly resonant. Xichuan is a master at handling ordinary lyrical observations and declaring them within the norms of regional history and culture. Xichuan's astonishing verses pierce the heart and the predicament of things. They are both impersonal and intimate, sounding novel yet strangely familiar. An impressive voice—bold yet serene. Xichuan knows everything, yet treats everything with care, weighing possibilities with deliberation, never boasting of outcomes. Here is a figure of extraordinary vitality, invigorating and refreshing, who makes one imagine Homer before the first bonfire.[6] A man of immense stature yet capable of slipping through a pinhole, terrifyingly erudite, yet every line he writes conveys delight. As contemporary Chinese poet Xi Chuan's writing career has progressed, he has gradually forged a new literary genre, making it impossible to find adequate words to precisely describe what he is now achieving in his writing. Immersed in both traditional Chinese literary scholarship and Western literary traditions, he continually grapples with the most acute

questions posed to language by the world's finest poets, never permitting himself to become intellectually or stylistically disconnected.

6.4 Case Study: The Distance

In contemporary China, Xi Chuan has paid a considerable price to become one of the most prominent poets of his era. "The Distance" transports us on a dreamlike journey. This reverie begins with a snowy field in the cold, and birch trees within that field. Lonely, upright birch trees. Their image naturally overlaps with that of the resilient female poet, evoking a sense of the sublime in both visual and emotional terms. The poet's voice is confined within the hut, yet her resonant prayer remains distinctly audible. The future tense of "is about to" does not suffocate us with lingering external sound; instead, it builds explosive force. This is a guiding "North Star" illuminating the darkness, destined to fall like a tile in dark times. The poet uses "tile" as a metaphor for Akhmatova, discarded and buried, while the "North Star" affirms her luminosity. This paradoxical imagery brims with sympathy and regret for Akhmatova. Note how Xi Chuan opens with four consecutive "ones", followed by seven more instances throughout the poem. While pursuing elegant, harmonious rhythm, this repeated emphasis on "one" (singularity, uniqueness) serves to highlight the female poet's "loneliness" - a stance and quality of standing apart. This singular figure swiftly etches itself into the reader's mind.

7. The Evolution and Ethical Vision of Xi Chuan's Poetry

7.1 Continuous Innovation and Historical Imagination

From the 1980s to the present day, Xi Chuan has consistently maintained the efficacy and significance of his writing. Through his personalized historical imagination and relentless pursuit of truth, he continually expands the boundaries of contemporary Chinese poetry. His complexity and distinctive style have garnered widespread recognition both domestically and internationally. The poetry of the 1980s emphasized the purity of lyricism and a formal sense of balanced rhythm, writing of love, desire, and reverence for the unknown transcendent forces. [7]

7.2 Responding to Social and Personal Upheavals

The social and personal "upheavals" of the late 1980s profoundly impacted his writing, leading him to assert that "the gates of language must be opened." His subsequent poetry should be "humanistic poetry, poetry that accommodates, impure poetry": embracing life's "hybrid state" of good and evil, beauty and ugliness, while introducing paradoxical patterns to form a "pseudo-philosophical," "pseudo-rational" linguistic structure. [8] This is evident in long poems and collections such as *Tribute*. Xi Chuan's poetry demonstrates concern for ethical standards and transcendent spiritual values, emphasizing the profound cultural underpinnings of poetic creation.

7.3 Poetic Method and Stylistic Approach

The poetic method primarily avoids presenting details of things, instead employing meditation, recollection, fiction, and transcendence to connect sources of knowledge, emotion, and imagination across different times and spaces. The "erudition" and "classical scholarship" tone in the poetry constructs the narrator's unique "prophetic" stance. [9] Xi Chuan also dedicates himself to international poetry exchange activities and the translation of foreign poetry. Following a transformative period in the early 1990s, Xi Chuan recognized his own contradictions and developed a need for language to genuinely encompass life. Consequently, he opened himself to contradictions, paradoxes, irony, and the absurd, creating a linguistic effect that embraces both the refined and the coarse.

7.4 Life, Responsibility, and the Eternal Relevance of Poetry

He believes that social responsibility, moral duty, and the obligation to write cannot guarantee the effective continuity of a writer's life. [10] Only by relying on inner necessity can one continually unlock new possibilities. In youth, we are drawn to Rimbaud and Dylan Thomas; only with age do we grasp the mastery of Du Fu and Dante. Fireworks are indeed splendid, yet only after they have burst does the sky reveal its boundless expanse and profound darkness: mysterious sounds emanate from unknown sources, phantoms drifting, their origins and destinations unseen. For any individual or collective harboring the potential for enrichment, all arrogance and self-absorption must be discarded. Life evolves; diverse art forms emerge, fade, or vanish altogether. Yet poetry continually redefines itself. Without this redefinition, it inevitably dims and fades-a matter of time. [11]

8. Conclusion

As a significant representative of contemporary Chinese poetry, Xi Chuan's work holds considerable importance in terms of spiritual pursuit, formal innovation, and the intellectual writing tradition. His poetry not only embodies scholarly refinement and intellectual rigor but also achieves profound engagement with life, history, and reality within its texts. Analysis of works such as *Gazing at the Starry Sky in Helga* and *The Distant Land* reveals Xichuan's pursuit of a "religious-like purifying force" in his verse-a force that honors tradition while embracing modern sensibilities. His oeuvre thus possesses enduring influence and unique value within the contemporary poetic landscape.

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