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“Writing Poetry” and “Being a Person”: A New Perspective on Early Chinese New Poetry—A Review of *The Origins of Ego in Modern China and the Rise of the Early New Poetry*

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Abstract: Song Yeyu’s *The Origins of Ego in Modern China and the Rise of the Early New Poetry* transcends conventional genre-based approaches by centering “ego” as its primary analytical lens. Adopting idea of “cultural poetics”, the monograph focuses on the rise of early Chinese new poetry, situating it within the broad intellectual and historical framework of the May 4th Movement. It investigates the dialectical relationship between the emergence of early new poetry and the construction of the modern “ego,” thereby reconstructing both the ideological dispositions of May 4th intellectuals and the broader sociohistorical landscape of the era. In this work, the author operationalizes the notion of the “ego” through four interrelated dimensions: “ethic (nature),” “emotion,” “creation,” and “society”. The study culminates with an in-depth reading of Lu Xun’s *Ye Cao*, which serves not only as a thematic and structural conclusion but also as a powerful synecdoche for the inner world of May 4th intellectuals—marked by existential tension, profound melancholy, and an urgent commitment to social reform. Crucially, the book demonstrates how the evolving conception of the “ego” both catalyzed the rise and development of new poetry and, in turn, was continually reconfigured through the poetic process itself, giving rise to “ego”. This monograph not only offers a fresh, theoretically grounded perspective for studying early modern Chinese literature but also invites a critical re-examination and re-articulation of the May 4th Movement’s historical complexity and intellectual legacy.

Keywords: the Early New Poetry; ego; May 4th Movement

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题目：“作诗”与“做人”：从新视角论中国早期新诗——评《现代中国“自我”的起源和早期新诗的兴起》

摘要：宋夜雨的《现代中国“自我”的起源与早期新诗的兴起》打破单一的文类研究视角，以“自我”作为研究视角，采用了“文化政治”的诗学思路，聚焦于中国早期新诗的产生，并将早期新诗与“自我”放置于五四的宏观框架之下，探究早期新诗的产生与“自我”建构之间的辩证关系，勾勒出五四知识青年的思想状态和社会的历史图景。在该专著中，作者将“自我”落实到了“伦理（自然）”、“情感”、“创造”和社会的互动四个方面，并且以鲁迅的《野草》收束全书，最终呈现出了一幅在五四中知识青年内心的挣扎、苦闷又渴望投身社会改革的历史图景，“自我”的转换既催动新诗产生和发展，新诗不断生成新的抒情主体。该书不仅为我们提供新的研究视角，也让我们得以重新认识和梳理五四的历史面貌。

关键词：早期新诗；“自我”建构；五四

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The May 4th Movement was a significant turning point in modern Chinese history, not only in social structure, but also in people's thoughts driven by such shifts. Meanwhile, literature during this era took on distinctly modern features. The May 4th era was an age of enlightenment, in which May 4th intellectuals called for the introduction of Western literature to construct new Chinese literature and discard outdated old literary forms. In his "*Tentative Suggestions for Literary Reform*," Hu Shi argued that old literature lacked depth. He famously stated, "Each era has its own literature" (Hu, 2013, p. 7), emphasizing the urgency of literary reform. Poetry, as a stronghold of literary tradition, became a key target—Hu Shi and others hoped to use new poetry to convey the new spirit of China. However, due to the deep-rooted poetic tradition, creating new vernacular poetry proved remarkably challenging.

The book *The Origins of Ego in Modern China and the Rise of the Early New Poetry*, written by Song Yeyu and revised from his doctoral dissertation, breaks away from a single research perspective by adopting the "self" (ego) as an analytical lens to explore the dialectical relationship between early new poetry, the "self", and the May 4th Movement. Before the May 4th period, the "ego" was immersed in darkness; since the May 4th Movement, the "ego" gradually awakened. Song Yeyu (2025, p. 1) argues that the "ego" rose "from a passive, instrumental position to a subjective force with historical momentum". The "ego" is closely related to the rise of early new poetry, but their relationship is complex, characterized by mutual

interaction and mutual shaping. The author situates both the “ego” and early new poetry within the historical context of the May 4th era, viewing new poetry not only as a means of social transformation but also as a projection of young people’s inner “ego” at that time. This line of thought was common during the May 4th period—Chen Duxiu, for instance, in his “On Literary Revolution,” proposed the “Three Doctrines” of Literary revolution, criticizing servile and decadent old literature, and advocated for new literature to reform society (Qian Liqun, Wen Rumin, Wu Fuhui, 1998, p. 8). The author examines the “ego” at four levels: the ethical (natural), the emotional, the creative, and the social. Through these dimensions, Song explores how the “ego” enters new poetry, influences its expressive mechanisms, and how new poetry in turn promotes the development of the “ego”.

1. Transcending a Single Generic Perspective: The Dialectical Relationship Among the Ego, New Poetry, and the May 4th Movement

In his book, the author attempts to explore the interactive relationship between early Chinese new poetry and the “ego” from the perspective of the ego, while also examining, in conjunction with cultural politics, how early new poetry and the ego together delineate the cultural landscape of China’s May 4th Movement. Apart from the introduction and conclusion, the book *The Origins of Ego in Modern China and the Rise of the Early New Poetry* consists of five chapters. In the introduction, Song Yeyu (2025, p. 11) discusses the historical trajectory of the modern Chinese “subject”—from the “new people” to the “new youth,” from regarding the ego merely as a tool for social reform and national salvation to internalizing it as a pursuit of intellectual ethics and moral emotions. He also examines the relationship between new poetry and the ego, as well as the connection between these two and the social structure of the May 4th era. Chapters One to Four respectively address the interactive relationship between early new poetry and the ego from four dimensions: the ethical, the emotional, the creative, and the social. In the final chapter, the author deepens the inquiry by taking Lu Xun’s *Ye Cao* as a case study, exploring how, after undergoing an ideological crisis, Lu Xun turned to his “voice from deep heart”, abandoned the overly effusive romanticism of early new poetry, and shifted his focus to the issues of “life” and “death,” ultimately “murmuring alone” within his own poetic domain.

1.1 Why Could the Ego Influence the Emergence of New Poetry?

The well-known maxim “Know thyself” is inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi in Greece. In this book’s introduction, the author (2025) clarifies the concept of the “ego”. The connotation of the “ego” varies across different disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, and sociology, and is also shaped by different Chinese and Western cultural contexts. Within the Chinese cultural context, the “ego” is closely connected to Confucianism and was constructed for the moral system. Confucianism advocates “self-cultivation,” “family harmony,” “state governance,” and “world pacification,” with self-cultivation ultimately aiming at universal peace. However, during the May 4th Movement, intellectuals strongly rejected traditional norms, and the Confucian value system was on the verge of collapse. The connotation of the “ego” thus

underwent profound changes. Moreover, due to the influx of Western culture, Western “modernity” permeated “the value norms, ethics and morals, and emotional gaps of the ‘ego’”. Yet during this period, the “ego” was caught in the tension between the old and new value systems, and its construction remained immature. Yu Yingshi (2004) argues that since the Qing Dynasty, the Confucian system had been criticized, but a new cultural system had not yet been established, and the May 4th Movement could not completely break free from the control of tradition. Although Hu Shi championed individualism and freedom, he “still stressed the Greater Self, a traditional Chinese concept”. How did the “ego” influence the emergence of new poetry? In this work, Song Yeyu (2025, p. 19) argues that “the Literary Revolution” required practical implementation. The integration of the “ego” into new poetry enriches its connotations and promotes the innovation of its form. The May 4th youth needed to express their emotions, such as anguish, frustration, and idealism which were brought about by the era, and new poetry became the carrier of their “voice from deep heart”. New poetry in turn prompted intellectuals to explore their inner “ego” more deeply. The relationship between the “ego” and early new poetry is one of mutual entanglement and interactive influence.

In the first four chapters of the book, the author explores the “ego” from four dimensions: “nature,” “emotion,” “creation,” and social transformation. In Chapter One, Song Yeyu (2025) traces the evolution and differences in the concept of “nature” between China and the West. In modern China, “nature” acquired a material dimension while also referring to the inner “ego,” becoming a way of understanding the world and imagining the self. In Guo Moruo’s view, “natural expression” is both the lyrical mechanism of the Early New Poetry and the endogenous force driving formal innovation. He emphasized the natural expression of rich emotion, which not only released his inner “anguish” but also, after the emotional experience was refined through new poetry, reshaped the image of the youth. For Guo Moruo, natural expression facilitated the formation of the subjective self. The author examines Guo Moruo’s poetic writing experience. During his illness, Guo read Rabindranath Tagore’s poems. Suffering from mental anguish caused by neurasthenia, homesickness and romantic disappointment, Guo’s emotions were stirred by Tagore’s poetry, which eased his spiritual suffering. During his second existential crisis, he encountered *Faust* and began his translation work, through which he learned the lyrical method of “self-expression”. He integrated the emotional experiences and poetic techniques he absorbed into “natural expression” in his own work. In his poem “Earth, My Mother,” the influence of “natural expression” on his writing is evident, as he translated the emotional experience and lived experience into poetic creation. “Natural expression” serves as the core lyrical mechanism of the Early New Poetry. “Natural expression” is the method and means, while emotion is its content.

In Chapter Two, Song Yeyu (2025) focuses on elucidating the relationship between emotions and new poetry. The May 4th era was a period of social upheaval and intellectual turmoil, and young people generally experienced “anguish”. Poetry naturally became “an important means of alleviating anguish and expressing emotion”. This is evident in the works of poets such as

Guo Moruo and Tian Han. Tian Han advocated “Neo-Romanticism”. On the one hand, he was deeply immersed in personal anguish; on the other hand, he reshaped such sorrow to forge a new self. Song Yeyu (2025, p. 135) takes Wang Jingzhi’s *Hui de feng* as a case study to demonstrate that “emotion” is the creative mechanism of Early New Poetry. *Hui de feng* sparked controversy at that time. Critics like Hu Menghua argued that the love poetry of Wang Jingzhi and others violated prevailing moral norms. However, supporters like Zhou Zuoren and Lu Xun held that *Hui de Feng* spoke candidly, arguing that Wang Jingzhi had broken the shackles of traditional intellectual conventions, and that the sincere self inspired poetic creation while also enriching the emotional dimensions of new poetry. Thus, in his exploration of how the “ego” shaped new poetry, the author transcends the limitations of a single literary perspective, integrating the emotions, experiences, and intellectual dynamics of the youth to further elaborate the internal driving forces of new poetry’s emergence.

1.2 The Dialectical Relationship Between the Self, New Poetry and the May 4th Movement

As mentioned above, in this book, the modern Chinese “ego” gave rise to the Early New Poetry. Poets turned to literary creation to express the “ego” and the Early New Poetry in turn gave rise to a new “ego”. In Chapter One, Song Yeyu (2025) analyzes the relationship between the two from the perspective of landscape poetry. The “description” proposed by Hu Shi can achieve the effect of integrating the inner and the outer: description requires mobilizing the inner self to deeply depict the external world, while the subject observes and transforms social reality, which in turn reshapes inner feeling and returns to the inner self to affirm the subject. Taking Hu Shi’s poem “Night of November 24th” as an example, the lyrical subject’s illness is reflected in the poem. Autumnal imagery is used to depict the desolate autumn scene, and the declining landscape in turn shapes an unstable self-image. The landscape serves as the external manifestation of the self. The poet employs the technique of integrating emotion with scenery, returning to the inner self to affirm the subject’s existence and value.

The author introduces the concept of “politics of form”, situating the emergence of the Early New Poetry within the context of Chinese history to examine the relationship between the Early New Poetry and the “ego”. In the introduction, Song Yeyu (2025, p. 21) clearly expounds the dialectical relationship between the ego, new poetry, and the May 4th Movement. Since the May 4th Movement, the subject and the ego have undergone profound transformation. The subject expresses the ego through the form of the Early New Poetry, while new poetry presents visions of the world and social prospects. In a certain sense, the Early New Poetry and the “ego” also serve a function of social transformation. Therefore, the book *The Origins of Ego in Modern China and the Rise of the Early New Poetry* adopts a broader perspective and greater historical depth. The author transcends the limitations of a single literary perspective, exploring the interactive relationship between new poetry and the “ego” within the open social context of the May 4th Movement. As reflected in the author’s analysis of the Early New Poetry, the Early New Poetry was always caught in the tension between “literary autonomy” and “instrumentality”. Intellectuals pursued linguistic refinement and natural emotional expression in the Early New

Poetry, yet they could not avoid using literature to pursue national salvation and enlightenment. They hoped that literature could, externally, “transform temperament and reform society” (Lu Xun & Zhou Zuoren, 2006, p. 1), and internally, facilitate the transformation of the subject and the completion of self-construction. In Chapter Four, the author situates the Early New Poetry and the “ego” within the specific historical context of “social transformation”. In the early 1920s, after experiencing the birth pangs of the Early New Poetry, it instead fell into the predicament of excessive romanticism. The emptiness and artificiality of new poetry drew criticism from many intellectuals, who introduced life as a remedy. In the view of intellectuals at the time, new poetry and social transformation were closely bound together. Poetry should not be confined to a narrow self-centered world; it should move toward the people and society, breaking down barriers between individuals, generating a “universal emotion,” and thereby facilitating social transformation (Song Yeyu, 2025). Furthermore, the author elaborates on the issue of “labor” within the context of social transformation. Intellectuals at the time combined poetry and labor, using poetry as an intermediary. On one end, poetry engaged with labor issue; on the other end, it connected labor with the youth’s subjectivity, thereby facilitating social transformation through poetry. Labor provided poetry with content and meaning production. In Zhou Zuoren’s view, poetic creation was no different from farming. In his essay “My Own Garden,” Zhou Zuoren (2023, p. 46) wrote: “Our own garden is literature.” Labor transcended differences in identity and class, enabling equal communication with the masses. Thus, poetry and labor ultimately contributed to social transformation. Zhou Zuoren saw in new poetry and labor the possibility of building a “Poetry Republic”.

2. The Form of New Poetry and the Inner “Ego”

2.1. The Interaction Between Form and the “Ego”

During the Hundred Days’ Reform (Reform Movement of 1898), Liang Qichao proposed a “Poetry Revolution,” advocating “using old styles to contain new artistic conceptions”. Because the form of traditional Chinese poetry was deeply entrenched, he suggested replacing the content of traditional poetry with new content while preserving the old form. This approach, however, was one-sided and impractical, and could not achieve the goal of enlightening the masses. Hu Shi revised this approach by focusing on form. Hu Shi championed the Vernacular Literature Movement, because before the May 4th Movement, written and spoken language were sharply separated, and the right to acquire knowledge was monopolized by the scholar-official class. Through the Vernacular Literature Movement, a national language could be established, enabling the masses to acquire knowledge, achieving enlightenment, and consequently bringing about profound ideological transformation. Hu Shi (2013, p. 133) wrote in “Talking about New Poetry”: “The constraints of form prevent the spirit from developing freely and hinder the full expression of profound content.” In the book *The Origins of Ego in Modern China and the Rise of the Early New Poetry*, the author sorts out the formal evolution of the Early New Poetry revolution in Chapter One. Song Yeyu (2025, p. 43) argues that Hu Shi’s promotion of a “great liberation of

poetic form” contributed to the construction of the modern subjective self. Hu Shi believed that Ci poetry was a poetic form with natural language, characterized by free expression. The juxtaposition of “nature” and “freedom” also implied that language and personality were closely linked. By writing new poetry in accordance with natural expression, Hu Shi ultimately attained a realm of free existence. “Nature” needed to be realized in the practical creation of new poetry. “Natural syllables” was the standard Hu Shi established for new poetry. The author takes Kang Baiqing’s poem “Seeing a Friend Off at Huangpu” as a case study to analyze how the Early New Poetry exemplified “natural syllables”. Through various sentence patterns—parallelism, repetition, and structural organization—the poem “Seeing a Friend Off at Huangpu” constructs the emotional atmosphere and psychological state of farewell. What Hu Shi valued was not simply the “naturalness” of external form, but rather the internal organization of form—that is, the “layering, order, parallelism, structure, and syntax” of verse. Natural syllables are closely linked to the progression and shifting of emotion and thematic meaning (Song Yeyu, 2025, p. 49). As for Guo Moruo, he shifted from external form to internal rhythm, breaking down the binary oppositions between form and content, and between subject and object. Mobilizing his emotional experiences and poetic techniques, Guo Moruo allowed emotion to be released through poetic form. According to the author’s analysis of Guo Moruo’s “Earth, My Mother,” the apostrophes and repetitive sentence patterns in the poem are the means through which he achieves the “natural expression”, while also generating a renewed individual self.

The above discussion examines the relationship between new poetry and the “ego” from the ethical (natural) dimension. In Chapter Two, the author turns to the emotional dimension, analyzing how Zhou Zuoren adopted symbolic lyricism to forge a new “ego”. After the disillusionment of his New Village ideal around 1921, Zhou Zuoren devoted himself to translating and introducing Charles Baudelaire’s poetry. He identified inherent affinities between Western symbolism and traditional Chinese poetry. His appreciation of symbolic techniques marked a new aesthetic direction. Mu Mutian, in his “On Poetry: A Letter to Guo Moruo,” also elaborated on his views on new poetry creation. He argued that “poetry is suggestive and rejects explicit explanation” (Yu Dafu, 2014, p. 86), suggesting that Hu Shi’s poetic style was overly explicit. Mu Mutian’s viewpoints resonated with Zhou Zuoren’s attempt to reform new poetry through symbolism. Both thinkers were responding to the excesses of early romanticism and sought a new method to moderate the emotions of youth. Mu Mutian aspired to create a “pure poetry” while Zhou Zuoren aimed to convey emotions through imagery. In this book, the author notes that Zhou Zuoren favored, during illness, delicate and frail imagery. “The Fly,” “The Bowl of Arrowhead,” “The Little River”—these representative works from this period adopt rich symbolic imagery. These images—flies, arrowheads and brooks—symbolize his spiritual predicament. He established an equal spiritual bond with these images. Zhou Zuoren infused his emotions into these images, and after integrating the two, ultimately achieved the “reconstruction of the self”. The symbolic approach indeed broke away from overly explicit expression in early new poetry. The concealment of emotion signified a deepening of individual

inner experience. Thus, Zhou Zuoren drew spiritual strength from Baudelaire to confront his inner crisis, and through symbolic writing he completed the transformation of emotion, realizing the rebirth of the subjective self.

The author's analysis of the Early New Poetry also reflects the incompleteness of self-construction in this historical period. Hu Shi emphasized composing new poetry with "natural syllables" which functioned both as a technique and as a driver of emotion. However, the limitation of "natural syllables" lay precisely in its tendency to weaken poetic essence. "By definition, 'natural syllables' mean that the rhythm of poetic language resembles that of prose or other literary genres" (Li Zhangbin, 2017, p. 5). For Hu Shi, new poetry served as a means of breaking free from traditional poetic conventions. But once the old forms were dismantled, reconstruction proved difficult—resulting in the stagnation of new poetic creation. Because of such limited formal innovation, the construction of the "ego" remained confined to superficial ethical freedom, failing to reconcile it within the deeper contradictions between the individual and society. Guo Moruo's "natural expression" remedied the deficiencies in Hu Shi's new poetry, but it also fell into the trap of excessive romanticism. In Chapter One, Song Yeyu (2025, p. 72) explores the negative limitations of Guo Moruo's writing: new poetry focused excessively on lyricism, exhausting the agency of the subject and leaving it stagnant. Zhou Zuoren turned to symbolic writing after the disillusionment of his New Village ideal. During this period, he retreated into his inner world, to confront his own spiritual anguish. In the author's analysis, this shift indicates that Zhou Zuoren prioritized inner spiritual construction over engagement with social crisis.

2.2 The inner voice in *Ye Cao*

In Chapter Five, the author takes Lu Xun's *Ye Cao* as a concrete case study to further explore the interactive relationship between the Early New Poetry and the "ego". *Ye Cao* was written during the ebb of the May 4th Movement. It includes poems such as "Autumn Night," "The Passerby," and "The Departure of the Shadow". Unlike the wrathful, defiant Lu Xun of the previous stage, the Lu Xun portrayed in *Ye Cao* is one who, on an autumn night, hesitates between light and darkness, contemplating life and death. In this chapter, the author first traces the origins of Lu Xun's composition of *Ye Cao*. This exploration of the historical background helps us better understand why Lu Xun chose poetic form to express his ideas. Through his translations and introductions of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, M. Artsybashev's *Worker Sheviriov* and Vasili Eroshenko's works, Lu Xun emerged from his "second silence" and ultimately created *Ye Cao*. When he wrote "A Madman's Diary," Lu Xun translated the first three sections of the preface to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In these three sections, Zarathustra appears as a "superman" who "descends from the mountain" and "sets fire" (Song Yeyu, 2025, p. 277). Through this, Lu Xun emerged from his "first silence" and turned to "Call to arms." During his "second silence," Lu Xun retranslated the preface to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, expanding his translation to the tenth section. By this time, Zarathustra had transformed from the "superman" figure defined by "descending from the mountain" and

“setting fire” into a figure whose romantic ideals had been frustrated and who had failed to awaken the masses. Through translation and introduction of the preface of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Lu Xun identified certain similarities between himself and Zarathustra. He recognized the inherent flaws of the May 4th intellectual trends and the essence of national character and thus fell into a state of “eternal recurrence”. Through his translation and introduction of M.Artsybashev’s *Worker Sheviriov*, Lu Xun witnessed the disillusionment of the “Golden Age” and saw the futility of ideals and the sacrifices made for those ideals. Consequently, he adopted a critical stance toward the Golden Age and bid farewell to his former self. Vasili Eroshenko’s influence on Lu Xun operated on two levels: first, ideologically, he awakened Lu Xun’s “loneliness”—a loneliness born of “having nothing to love” and of returning to oneself to recognize one’s own limitations; second, at the formal level, Lu Xun discovered that prose poetry could better express the self, allowing himself to better “murmur in loneliness” on an autumn night.

After enduring his “second silence,” Lu Xun’s intellectual trajectory underwent a profound transformation. He turned from outward “calling out” to inward reflection. His desire to articulate the inner voice shaped the literary form of *Ye Cao*, in accordance with his earlier view in *On the Power of Mara Poetry* regarding the unity of “poetic power” and “voice from deep heart”. In his dialogue with the new poetry circle, Lu Xun clarified his stance toward new poetry. The monograph’s author therefore explores why Lu Xun chose the form of prose poetry to complete *Ye Cao*. Lu Xun’s stance on new poetry differed from Xu Zhimo’s. Xu Zhimo emphasized the importance of syllables, but Lu Xun clearly disagreed with this view. Lu Xun maintained that the “voice from deep heart” constituted the foundation of poetry, and that poetic form ought to stem from this inner voice. The voice Lu Xun spoke of was the true voice, the expression of his genuine inner self and his innocent heart. From Lu Xun’s editing of *Fen (The Grave)*, the author discerns that during the *Ye Cao* period, Lu Xun reawakened the poetic experience of the early “Mara poets”. In “On the Power of Mara Poetry,” Lu Xun introduced eight European revolutionary romantic poets, including George Gordon Byron, Sándor Petőfi, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, who used their most passionate poetry to confront the dark time. Lu Xun introduced their “heroic spirit” to save China’s semi-colonial and semi-feudal society at that time”. “A poet seizes the human heart; everyone’s heart contains poetry” (Lu Xun, 2024, p. 97). The poet’s responsibility is to speak out for the people. The “voice from deep heart” should be expressed through “poetic power”. In Chapter Five, Song Yeyu (2025, p. 331) explains the relationship between the two: “poetic power” can awaken the “voice from deep heart,” and through poetry’s affective power, our nation can achieve cultural revitalization. From the first piece of *Ye Cao*, “Autumn Night,” to the last piece, “A Sudden Awakening,” Lu Xun completed a journey of inner self-transformation. In “Autumn Night,” the line “One is a jujube tree, and the other is also a jujube tree” (Lu Xun, 2023, p. 6) is not merely a rhetorical device but manifests, through the act of “gaze,” the subject’s active process (Song Yeyu, 2025, p. 322). “The Shadow’s Farewell” presents an ‘I’ trapped in deep hesitation. In “The Beggars,” “I” detests beggars’

voices and my own. By “A Sudden Awakening”, Lu Xun finally achieved his “murmuring in loneliness”. In this prose poem, “I” witness death approaching and feels life’s presence (Lu Xun, 2023, p. 74). An airplane drops its bombs and flies away. “I” sorts through the manuscripts of young writers, but their deaths are vividly before his eyes. Suddenly, “I” remembers a copy of *Qiancao* that Feng Zhi sent him. The emotions in the poetry of *Qiancao*’s young writers are precisely what Lu Xun appreciated and promoted (Lu Xun, 2023, p. 76). Thus, Lu Xun completed his intellectual transformation through contemplating life and death. In *Ye Cao*, the “ego” construction of May 4th intellectuals was unstable and incomplete. They constantly questioned their inner selves. The absorption of external knowledge and the ever-changing social landscape could shake their resolve. Poetry enabled them to speak their inner voice aloud. The incompleteness of their selves precisely demonstrates their potential for self-transcendence.

3. Reshaping the Historical Landscape of the May 4th Movement

Traditional narratives of the May 4th Movement have certain limitations. Professor Yang Nianqun (2019) argues that scholars either regard the May 4th Movement solely as political transformation and social reform, in which grand narratives obscure individual suffering in society; or they view it as a liberal intellectual awakening, focusing solely on the pursuit of individual freedom and value, which “in effect narrows the spiritual significance of the May 4th Movement”. In his book, Song Yeyu introduces the perspective of the “ego”, situating the construction of the Early New Poetry and the “ego” within the context of the May 4th Movement. He explores the individual spiritual trauma and the ongoing reconstruction of the self. These wounds and emotions were then articulated through poetry, thereby advancing intellectual enlightenment. By introducing the dimension of “lyricism,” the author reveals the emotions of the youth that had been obscured by grand narratives. After the disillusionment of his ideals, Zhou Zuoren fell into personal anguish, a sentiment widely shared among young intellectuals of his time. New poetry became their outlet for emotional release. Moreover, this shared anguish gave rise to a unique mechanism of sympathy. When discussing this mechanism in Chapter Two, Song contends that the sympathy of May Fourth youth was neither hierarchical nor paternalistic, but rooted in equal, reciprocal interpersonal understanding. Through close readings of Zheng Zhenduo’s poems “Loathing” and “Two Stories,” the lyrical subject achieves self-reflection and unimpeded emotional communication with others. Lu Xun shifted from his May 4th cry of “Save the children!” to the meditation in *Ye Cao*: “When I am silent, I feel full; when I speak, I fall into emptiness” (Lu Xun, 2023, p. 5). He sank into hesitation amid the decline of the May 4th Movement. He saw the widespread spiritual apathy among the masses and a fractured bond with his brother, both of which deepened his despair. He “murmured in loneliness” on the one hand, while yearning for resistance on the other. These lyrical subjects are no longer simply the embodiments of the enlightened intellectual, but rather complex, multifaceted subjects struggling between tradition and modernity, social transformation, and personal introspection. In Chapter Three, the author offers a nuanced portrayal of Guo Moruo as a lyrical subject. He

underwent a spiritual transformation from “artist” to “creator” and finally to “revolutionary”. Initially, Guo Moruo adopted the lyrical method of “natural expression”. However, through translating and introducing Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s works, he reconstructed the traditional lyrical mechanism and forged “a new subjectivity characterized by ‘creation’” (Song, 2025, p. 187). Yet, when Guo Moruo sought to “create” the entire universe, he did not limit himself to abstract metaphysical speculations. Instead, he returned to the construction of cultural and human history, striving ultimately to establish a national lyrical mechanism. For this reason, he also stands as a revolutionary poet.

In China, the populace was transformed from oppressed subjects of feudal society into free citizens. Although China was no longer a feudal society during the May 4th period, a mere change of social system was not enough to achieve modernity. “Ah Q” characters (character from Lu Xun’s “The True Story of Ah Q”) still existed. The construction of the subjective self was equally important. Chen Sihe (2005) pointed out that the avant-garde spirit “demands intervention in society and the transformation of existing social conditions” (Chen, 2005, p. 10). The May 4th youth criticized old traditions that hindered social development and aspired to build a utopian new society. They directed their critique toward inner human nature. The May 4th Movement forged a subject with a strong spirit of rebellion and self-reflection—precisely what Zhou Zuoren defined as “human literature”. Song Yeyu’s monograph helps us understand the modernity of the May 4th Movement from another perspective. Modernity is no longer an abstract concept but is embodied in the relationship between the Early New Poetry and the “ego”. In this book, the author discusses the construction of the “ego” in the Early New Poetry from four dimensions: “ethics,” “emotion,” “creation,” and “society”. This reflects the diversity and complexity of May 4th modernity. Hu Shi directly took poetic form as the breakthrough point for new poetry practice, shaping a new self through “natural syllables”. Guo Moruo naturally expressed his inner anguish in new poetry. In landscape poetry, “external scenery and the inner self mutually inspire one another” (Song, 2025, p. 81). In Wang Jingzhi’s love poetry, there is a self that broke through traditional moral conventions. By understanding May 4th modernity through the relationship between the Early New Poetry and the self, we discover that it was not a singular enlightenment but a complex interplay of multiple forces. Moreover, lyrical subjects underwent transformations due to social upheaval and spiritual exploration. As the May Fourth intellectual trends receded, they recognized the failure of external self-construction and thus turned inward. Lu Xun, in *Ye Cao*, constantly murmured to himself about “loneliness”. The inherent limitations of the May Fourth intellectual trends remained; the legitimacy of new poetry was persistently questioned. We can also perceive the difficulty of May 4th modernity in the hesitation and uncertainty of lyrical subjects. Therefore, Song Yeyu’s monograph offers an insightful interpretation of May 4th modernity. He grounds the abstract proposition of modernity in the early new poetry and the construction of the “ego”, shifting focus from social reform to the inner world of May 4th youth. Modernity is embodied in individual souls—struggling, hesitating, and pursuing of social transformation.

Conclusion

There is a vast body of research on the Early New Poetry. Song Yeyu takes the “ego” as an intermediary. The “ego” constitutes the core content of new poetry while also driving the evolution of its form. New poetry and the “ego” share a dialectical relationship. The “ego” constitutes the inner driving force behind the emergence of the Early New Poetry, which in turn gives rise to a new lyrical subject and facilitates the reconstruction of the self. The author does not confine his gaze solely to the relationship between the Early New Poetry and the “ego”; instead, he situates both within the social context. The Early New Poetry evolved into a national poetic form with the ultimate aim of constructing an ideal society. Thus, the May 4th Movement marked both the starting point for the Early New Poetry and the emergence of the “ego”, as well as the ultimate goal of their construction. Song Yeyu interprets the construction of the “ego” from four dimensions: “nature,” “emotion,” “creation,” and social transformation. It was the “ego” within these four dimensions that explains why poets turned to the new poetry to express their inner world. The author explores the means whereby poets expressed themselves through close textual readings, including Lu Xun’s *Ye Cao*. *Ye Cao* presents the unity of “poetic power” and “voice from deep heart”, the very quality that defines Lu Xun as a “Mara poet”. Song’s book breaks through the limitations of traditional May 4th narratives, revealing the souls of young intellectuals obscured by grand narratives. These young intellectuals may be full of hope, or wander in hesitation, or sink into loneliness. Their “ego” construction remained incomplete. Yet it is precisely through analyzing the relationship between the Early New Poetry and the “ego” that the complexity of May 4th modernity is revealed. In this sense, this book reshapes and enriches the historical landscape of the May 4th Movement.

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