

A Brief Transcultural Reading of the Greek Myth of Orpheus and his Quest in the Modern Sonnets of Feng Zhi

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Abstract

It is inevitable that the story of Orpheus would undergo considerable changes in religion and poetry over time and space. This study examines traces of the Grecian Orphic myth in Feng Zhi's modern and mystic sonnet collection. Even though Feng does not make explicit reference to the myth of Orpheus, his collection of poetry contributes considerably to the story of modern Orphism through the transcultural Orphic expressions used and the concepts and themes adopted in modern Chinese lyricism. The myth of the Orphic descent found in Feng's sonnets enables the poetic persona to undertake an introspective journey of the self, exploring being, subjectivity and nature. The study of Orphic traces in the sonnets place Feng Zhi's poetry among the first attempts of modernist writings of the Republican Period (1919-1949) in China.

Keywords: Feng Zhi, Orphism, individualism, modern Chinese literature, mystic poetry.

The Hellenistic world, exalted by many as the pinnacle of Western civilisation and artistic accomplishment, finds lyrical and aesthetic re-evocation in reputable examples of Romantic and post-Romantic poetry. Explicit example of this trend is the introduction to Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man*, which serves to show how modern works regularly assimilate fragments of classical Greece. Hellenism and Greek mythology in fact are recurrently used to bridge models of antiquity with more modern concepts. A conspicuous number of lyricists ostensibly employ mythological images to

evoke and explain themes or philosophical concepts with the assumption that these are familiar to and accepted by the human psyche, even if the experiences described often transcend the physical self and familiar sense of place. That the history of neoclassicism and of Romantic Hellenism in the West chiefly emerged from the poet's predilection for far-away places is well documented in the journal entries and accomplishments of travellers, archaeologists, explorers, historians and scholars (See Webb, 1982: 3).

The critical study conducted in this article seeks to elucidate how traces of the Greek Orphic myth – itself a form of journey – find their implicit lyrical conceptualisation in the post-Romantic writings of modern Chinese poet and translator Feng Zhi 冯至 (1905-1993), notably the *Sonnets* or *Shisibangji* 十四行集 (1942). This critical approach to the demystification of the sonnets of Feng Zhi brings a new key to the reading and appreciation of the modern Chinese poems, which ultimately place the author among the first experimental intellectuals of modernist writing in China during the Republican Era (1919-1949).

Although never explicitly referred to in any of the sonnets, the philosophical and transcendental concept of the Orphic myth is reminiscent of Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry, which, as it can be seen from his literary production, the Chinese author extensively read and translated. The Orphic myth is also one of the most relevant keys to interpreting the mystic sonnets of Feng Zhi since its various Hellenic elements bear significantly on the other themes poetised in the sonnets. Notions of infinity, transcendence, as well as the descent into the inner world, among others, can for instance be re-evaluated when perceived as motifs embodied by Orpheus and his mythological quest.

According to classical mythology, Orpheus was believed to be an exceptionally talented musician and a poet with the ability to move anybody and anything with his music. In *Henry VIII*, when Queen Katherine orders one of her servants to play a lute song in order to alleviate her mind, Shakespeare confirms Orpheus's innate gift:

Orpheus with his lute made trees,
And the mountain tops that freeze,
Bow themselves when he did sing.
To his music plants and flowers
Ever sprung...
... Everything that heard him play,
Even the billows of the sea,
Hung their heads, and then lay by.
In sweet music is such art,
Killing care and grief of heart
Fall asleep, or hearing, die. (3.1.3-14)

The son of either a king or a god, Orpheus was able to enchant beasts, trees and rocks with a lyre given to him by Apollo and with music taught to him by the Muses. Upon his return from his voyage on the Argo – his poetic powers being necessary to avoid the bewitching fatal songs of the Sirens – Orpheus marries Eurydice and when she dies after being bitten by a serpent, he follows the advice of nymphs and deities and ventures into the underworld to retrieve his beloved.

This famous account centres on Orpheus and his historic quest to rescue Eurydice from the underworld back to living world. Aided by his music and poetry that delights even the heart of Hades and his wife, Persephone, Orpheus gains admittance and is granted the wish to allow Eurydice to follow him back to the world of the living upon the sole condition that Orpheus not glance at his wife while leading her outside the Underworld. However, on the very threshold of life, Orpheus anxiously looks back and loses Eurydice. What follows is Orpheus's desperation at having lost his only chance to be reunited in lie with his beloved. The image of Orpheus hence has become one of loss, longing and loneliness. Orpheus's loss of faith that his wife was in actual fact following him away from the Underworld is a relatable notion, which can be associated to the loss of faith or hope in one-self. In fact, as Walter Strauss claims "there are certain particularities in the Orpheus myth that make it eminently suited to a certain kind of modern mentality" (Strauss, 1971: 5).

The myth concludes with Orpheus being torn to pieces by the Thracian Maenads out of jealousy for the mortal's desolate grief over his wife. Orpheus's body is scattered over the soil at the foot of Mount Olympus; his head thrown into the River Hebrus with the lyre – both still singing as they drift into the sea. In an act of pity, Apollo bids Orpheus's head be silent in Lesbos and Zeus places the Orphic lyre in the firmament.

The Orphic myth has undergone a number of poetic transformations over time, and in the modern age it has become what Strauss refers to as the agony of poetry. Strauss further elaborates by stating that Orpheus's "metamorphosis is the change in poetic climate itself, placed against an ever-darkening sky in which poetry recedes more and more toward secret and unexplored spaces, spaces that are obscure and must be illuminated by constellations of the mind ever threatened by disaster and extinction" (Strauss, 1971: 17). Orpheus ultimately represents the fallible hero who attempts to merge "irreconcilable opposites and to bridge the gap between the possible and the forbidden" (Sword, 1989: 408).

The heroic quest of Orpheus, descending into the Underworld in search for his beloved Eurydice to bring her back to life, further exemplifies the symbolic image of an 'Orphic tree', an image recurrent in the modern Chinese poetry of Feng Zhi, with its roots characteristically extending down beneath the soil and reaching downwards into darkness. The Orphic myth substantiates the transtextual and transcultural evidence found between Rilke's poetry based on the philosophical notion of aesthetic experiences and Feng Zhi's lyrical voice.

Rilke and Feng Zhi seemingly went through a similar enlightening process that freed both spirits and united them with nature. Rilke admitted in fact to having written his *Sonnets to Orpheus* under very "mysterious" and "enigmatic dictations" while being at the Castle of Muzot in Switzerland, where the poet claims to have encountered the other side of nature. As he wrote to Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis upon completion of the elegies: "An incredible storm [raged], a hurricane in my mind and my spirit" (Metzger, 2004: 209).

Rilke's work *Die Sonette an Orpheus*, also bearing the subtitle *Geschriebenensein Grab-Mal für Wera Ouckama Knoop* [Written as a Grave-marker for Wera Ouckama Knoop], was written upon hearing of the news of the death of a friend of the author's daughter. Similar to how Orpheus is compelled to turn around and look at his wife, Rilke also felt that

Wera's ghost was "commanding and impelling" him to write. Prior to his writing of the sonnets, Rilke had been facing bouts of depression that led him to have existential and nihilistic thoughts. German philosophy of the time dismissed the idea of God and religion, while the emergence of psychoanalysis brought to light more complex aspects of human relationships other than love. Rilke's own experiences in love led him to concede the idea that love could be a driving force in life (Leeder & Vilain, 2010: 96-97). Rilke assumed that modernity concealed aspects of life that were considered unappealing to society. Death and thoughts related to death were often frowned upon, but Rilke supposed that it was important "to keep life open in the face of death" (Leeder & Vilain, 2010: 97).

Choosing the Orphic myth was therefore no coincidence as it portrays a living being trespassing the dwelling of the dead, being driven by love. Life and death are juxtaposed; death becomes another aspect of life that had previously been shunned by society, but which Rilke believed to be "the face of life that is turned away from us, not illuminated by us" (Leeder & Vilain, 2010: 98).

Rilke wrote the fifty-five sonnets in February 1922 as if under a divine "dictation" after the many years dedicated to the composition of the *Duino Elegies*. Although he had long mastered the sonnet form, the collection of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* represents his first and only sonnet sequence. Just like Feng Zhi's collection *Shisihangji*, the sonnet sequence can be regarded as a series of individual poems that are linked by common themes and by the same mastery. Both Rilke, influenced by the sculptor Auguste Rodin, and Feng Zhi, seemingly persuaded by Rilke's poetry and aesthetic experiences, developed a new style of lyric poetry in two different stages and times: *Ding-Gedichte* ("object poem") for Rilke and the sonnet for Feng Zhi.

Feng Zhi confessed to having undergone a transcendental experience during his study and visit at Heidelberg in 1935. The poet recounts his experience of walking surrounded by the hills around Heidelberg while reading a book that contained the verses of the poem "Song wukeshangren" 送无可上人 of Jia Dao 贾岛 (779–843), a poet of the Tang dynasty. Feng Zhi was particularly struck by the penultimate lines of the poem:

独行潭底影，数息树边身。
Walking alone, shadow under the pond
Resting for a few moments, body against the tree.

In fact, in his essay "Shanshui" 山水 (Landscape, 1935), Feng Zhi explains the contradiction that is found when a writer wishes to stroll on the mountains while carrying a book. The reason, as Feng Zhi puts it, is that if one lets his own heart sink into the book, he is bound to forget the bucolic beauty of the surrounding scenery; and if one does not wish to forget about the far-reaching plains and trees that unroll in front of his eyes, then it would also be very hard for him to concentrate his whole attention onto the book. Sometimes, as the writer continues, he wishes to sit on that marvellous bench made of stones and read *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Critique of Pure Reason, 1781) by Immanuel Kant while also letting the self experience the beauty of the scenery and find out whether man's pure reason is capable of blending therein. However, as Feng Zhi concludes, one day, while walking on a tree-lined path and reading those words from Jia Dao's famous

poem, he could feel the silent trees and see every word contained in the poem turning into every blade of grass and tree (Han, 1999: 23).

Both instances can be seen as the identification of the self with a natural object, a recognisable Romantic motif but also one, which sufficiently illustrates the concept of the Orphic tree, where the poet, reclining against it, establishes a cohesive existence with the plant. The body of the poet is thought to project and integrate with the body of the tree. The aim of the Orphic poet is to create a cohesive existence of his self and the surrounding environment.

Rilke is considered by Strauss an Orphic poet striving to achieve an integration of man's individual existence through poetry (Strauss: 141). During the ten-year period in which he composed the *Duino Elegies*, Rilke engaged with various themes, such as that of existence, creativity, destiny, poetry, death and affirmation with varying degrees of success. These themes also transtextually appear in Feng Zhi's sonnets. In sonnet 2, for instance, the modern Chinese poet writes about the frailty of human existence, the inevitability of death, and the following transformation into the environment. In the second elegy, Rilke also talks about the transience and incompleteness of the human being and beauty. He elaborates further about the role of man as a transient being in the ninth elegy, with the power of transformation achieved by entering a realm of consciousness (Kline: 130).

Interestingly, the Orphic poet succeeds in establishing a relationship between the inner self and the surrounding world. Analogous to Rilke's transcendental experience, who while reclining against the tree felt nature diffusing its spirit into his body, Feng Zhi could also comprehend the aesthetic experience of the tree's existence. The poet's inner self is thus in complete harmony with nature and can sense the invisible movements of the plant. The body leaning against the tree is an Orphic metaphor that Feng Zhi employs by quoting Jia Dao's couplet to convey the sensation of the tree drawing nutrients from the soil up to its branches and leaves the same way blood ebbs and flows inside the human body.

From the sonnets it can be seen how the appropriation of the Orphic myth enables the poetic voice to build a relationship with its surroundings. The now blurred liminal state between man and object, allowing the former to become one with nature, is a fundamental philosophical and Romantic concept. In "Shanshui", Feng Zhi makes frequent reference to the problem of boundaries, as mentioned in the 'couplet' [两句诗] section of the essay. Moreover, the image of the Orphic tree becomes the embodiment of fusion between the outer physical world and the inner invisible one. The roots of the tree are given high symbolical value as they subsist beneath the visible world, reflecting the Underworld of Hades, the realm of shades. Moreover, the visible physical part of the tree is divided into two parts: the trunk being the solitary component and a further section that may build ephemeral connections through its branches with other branches of other surrounding trees. Nonetheless, given its natural physiology, the trunk is bound to keep distance from other trees also out of sheer necessity in order to guarantee its own subsistence and endurance. An analogous exemplification of the 'Orphic myth' is discernible in the depiction of the Venetian lagoon sung in the fifth sonnet of the collection. Venice, "that water city of the West", is portrayed as a group of thousands of 'lonelinesses', introducing other elements

that further define the poet's perception and approach to modern individualism. In this case, in fact, rather than branches reaching out towards others on the surface, the reader finds bridges that are artificially built to connect the various islands together. Nonetheless, these connections are only a construct, transitory and impermanent, like the windows on an island that can allow brief glimpses of life visible from afar.

In the *Duino Elegies*, Rilke evokes the image and presence of angels, who, contrary to the Christian setting, appear though a complete transformation from the visible to the invisible. The German poet establishes a parallel with the Christian concept of the Garden of Eden. After the acquisition of knowledge, self-consciousness alienates man from the perfect harmony of his being one with nature, and turns back to the sacred moment of death (Leeder & Vilain: 84). Rilke seeks to establish "interactions between the angelic and humans" (Leeder & Vilain: 82) and discovers what alienates them from one another. The poetic self in the first elegy cries out, but fails to receive an answer. The angelic is depicted as being beyond man's reach. However, because they fail to answer, man is doomed to remain lonely because of his failure to reach unity. It is this constant quest for a connection between the invisible world, the soul and reality, which is at the core of human existence.

Furthermore, in the *Elegies*, Rilke highlights the suffering of unrequited lovers, heroes and children who die young. According to the German poet, adults are too preoccupied with daily struggles and lose complete sight of what is significant. Therefore, human beings are left to suffer because of the limitations and the boundaries of time, space, separation, death and isolation. (Leeder & Vilain: 84-85) The lover, whose passion is unreciprocated, interacts with this other form of consciousness, thereby seeking to overcome all limitations. This love is shaped into poetic forms, the vehicle of personal transcendence, changing death from end to beginning. In other words, as also exemplified in Feng Zhi's sonnets, loneliness becomes an essential human state for self-improvement and ultimate self-completion. The implied call would be that of attempting to accept it rather than escape from it. This poetic form is transculturally visible in Feng Zhi's own elaboration and perception of loneliness, as the Chinese writer repeatedly declared on different occasions.

The first poem in *Sonnets to Orpheus* gives the reader the image of a "towering tree within the ear!" It is strikingly surrounded by the same stillness echoing the theme of solitude that is on Feng Zhi's terms. Through its majesty, it attracts others, and builds for them a temple:

A tree stood up. Oh pure uprising!
Orpheus is singing! Oh tall tree in the ear!
And everything grew still. Yet in the silence there
Changes took place, signals and fresh beginnings (Rilke, 2005: 3).

The trees found in both Feng Zhi and Rilke's work both metaphorically represent the creative processes involved in poetry as well its transcendental force. Moreover, in his fourth elegy, Rilke evokes the Tree of Life, this time juxtaposing the idea of immortality exemplified by the never-ending cycle of the seasons with human mortality. Feng Zhi's sonnet three also portrays a "sky-piercing" tree, which the poetic subject beseeches to "build a solemn temple" of music in his ears:

You, jade tree that sighs in the autumn wind
 Are a melody in my ear
 That builds a solemn temple,
 Let me reverently enter.
 And you, tower that pierces the clear sky
 Rise before me so high,
 You resemble a holy body,
 And sublimate the clamour of the whole city.
 You, eternally shed your bark,
 Wither and manifest your maturity;
 In the intertwined paths of the countryside
 You are my guide:
 May you be eternal, as I wish to gradually
 Decay for the soil under your roots.

This particular sonnet also shows transtextual links with the lines of Rilke's poem "The Solitary" of the collection *Neue Gedichte* [New Poems, 1907]:

No! A tower shall arise from my heart
 And I be placed at the top
 Where nothing else is, neither one last hurt,
 Nor the ineffable, where the world shall stop; [...]

The image employed by the high-piercing tower can be compared to that of the eucalyptus tree, which is also depicted as a "tower" standing high before the lyrical subject. The aesthetic experiences gained by the poetic self are analogous in both poems.

As already mentioned, Orphism finds its exemplification in the image of a tree, which symbolises the human condition of loneliness: if interpersonal and conformed connections can be established on the surface, the roots highlight the separation of the being from the rest. This paradoxically indicates that loneliness is an essential and intrinsic part of the human experience, which provides self-fulfilment. In both sonnets, the tree appears to be immortal with god-like qualities. Feng Zhi also juxtaposes nature's eternal quality with the transient state of man who finally wishes to decay and provide nutrients for the solemn tree.

The fusion of all things, especially of the inner and outer worlds, occurs during moments of solitude, when the spirit of the poet fully merges with its environment and experiences, as the lines of the first sonnet suggest, the rushing wind and the coming of a comet:

We prepare ourselves to deeply receive
 Those unexpected wonders,
 Amidst endless years suddenly appears
 A comet and a rushing wind swiftly blowing [...]

The ineffability of the Orphic myth foreshadows an increasing sense of wanderlust, which leads the poet to the fulfilment of his existence by being lured into the unreachable and inexpressible infinite. There are many instances in the sonnets where the infinite space outside instils its own spirit within the poetic subject to establish a somewhat cohesive relationship with the lyrical self. As Feng Zhi described in "Shanshui", even the blood

seems to be transfused with the trees and the surrounding world. However, it is fundamental to note that Feng Zhi denies a complete union with nature at this stage: the merging of the self within nature is not a mere assimilation where the original self loses its own identity, but rather a situation where the self is aligned with nature and able to communicate on equal terms. In "Shanshui", Feng Zhi comments how in modern European literature many poets still sing about Narcissus, the young man who develops an obsessive attachment with his reflection in the water. The ancient Chinese could see their own nature being reflected in the coarse and rough water. The poet also creates an analogy between the "body leaning against the trunk of a tree" [身体靠在树干上] with the image of a butterfly resting upon a flower [蝴蝶落在花上] (Han: 24): the life of the butterfly mingles with the colour and fragrance of the flower as does the life of the man resting against the tree. According to Feng Zhi, the human body that reclines against the tree can feel its own blood circulating inside it as well as the tree absorbing its nutrients from under the ground which it then transports to its branches and leaves [输送到枝枝叶叶, 甚至仿佛输送我们的血液里] (Han: 24). In his writing, Feng Zhi compares his aesthetic experience to that of Rilke, who, as the Chinese poet claims, also wrote of an analogous aesthetic experience: a tree instilled its spirit inside the body of the poet as he approached it.

Moreover, Rilke suggests the hollowness of human existence and mentions the 'hero' in his first and sixth Elegies. The hero represents an opportunity for internal transformation, leading to a fuller life (Kline: 8). Feng Zhi also refers to the image of the hero in sonnet nine, presumably dedicated to a friend who had fought and died during the war. This soldier is depicted with timeless infinity who, as a classic immortal hero, can be as free as an aimless and "stringless kite":

At the edge of life and death you grow all year round,
 One day you will return to this degraded city,
 Hear its frivolous songs,
 You will be like a hero of ancient times.
 Who suddenly returns from a millennial past,
 Amidst this changed, degraded generation,
 You search for a loyal and genuine stance,
 Feeling distraught beyond expectation.
 In the battlefield, you are an immortal hero
 Turning towards another world in the skies,
 Freeing yourself, finally, as a stringless kite:
 But, of this fate you cannot complain,
 You have surpassed them, and they cannot
 Hold your flight, your infinity.

The narrating voice witnesses the transcendental Orphic journey of the soul of a soldier that relinquishes its earth-bound state to embrace immortality and infinity by ascending high and soaring in the sky like a stringless kite. The impression the narrator gives of the world is rather negative: humanity and its world are engulfed by sorrow and a state of utter confusion. The imaginary travel of the hero in Feng Zhi's sonnet can also be interpreted

as a comparable example of the Platonic ascent from the cave, where a teacher guides a chained prisoner from darkness into the light and truth, and as another example of the Greek Orphic myth: the soldier's soul travels like Orpheus from the dark world of mankind, or of shades, to a celestial and higher place. In fact, as in the case of the Orphic tree that obtains its nutrients from the darkness of the underworld, the nourished substance travels upwards along the roots and inside vessels inside the trunk until it reaches the above ground and clearer level that is exposed to the sun and light – another journey from the realm of shades to the world of the living.

The pre-modernist element in Feng Zhi's lyrical production centres upon the analogous modernist experimentation of Rilke. The realisation of a fragmented humanity filled the epoch of both writers. The constant reference to the past in both Rilke's and Feng Zhi's works can be interpreted as the writers' attempt to recuperate the expressive value of those traditions from the past and mould them into a new force. The Orphic myth has its mythic Greek hero descend into the underworld to rescue what needs to be brought back to life. In Feng Zhi's case, the reference to this temporal and spatial channel is animated by different elements within the sonnets, such as that of the singing voice that calls for man's destiny from far-reaching eras. With their visions and voices, Rilke's new Orpheus and Feng Zhi's aesthetic experiences in their respective sonnet cycles accomplish a unique mission in the modern world. Rilke's hero is not the Romantic Prometheus that rebelled in Goethe's poem and ended up enduring the eternal curse of the gods, but rather Orpheus, who is able to transform "the self and the world through sound and Orphic song" (Nelson, 2005: 34).

Rilke's sixth elegy starts with exalting the fig tree, which the poet uses as a symbol of life, that quickly comes to fruition and completion. In fact, the fig tree follows a somewhat distinct pattern in its fructification: it has no visible flowers on its branches. Fig flowers are densely concealed within the body of what is mistakenly called the fruit. The figs already appear in autumn but do not normally ripen until the late summer of the following year:

Fig tree, you've been so meaningful to me so long –
The way you almost completely neglect to bloom
And then, without fanfare, pour your purest
Secret into the season's determined fruit [...] (Rilke: 43)

Similarly, in his fourth sonnet, Feng Zhi exalts the edelweiss plant that clings to its identity and lives a minute life. Brevity is a theme shared by both authors, as it is the idea of self-completion, which Rilke refers to as fruition. In Feng Zhi's case, on the other hand, self-completion is achieved through loneliness in the same manner that the edelweiss achieves fulfilment through the brief lifespan of the flower:

At times, when I think of man's life,
I cannot resist praying to you.
You, bunch of white luxuriant grass
Your name have never let down.
But you hide from all names,
Live a short life,
And devoted to what is noble and pure,
Your cycle of life you quietly complete. [...]

While the *Duino Elegies* appear to have provided inspiration in relation to themes explored, it is the work of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* that appears to have had a bigger impact on Feng Zhi. This is particularly seen in the construction of the poems themselves and the use of the sonnet as an ideal means to convey his message, even though Zhi appeared to downplay Rilke's influence in this regard (Haft, 1996: 303).

The Orphic myth suggests that the power of poetry is not only limited to words and bound by thoughts, but it also has power over objects in the natural world and their behaviour. Feng Zhi's concluding lines of the last sonnet suggest the same lyrical power being bestowed onto poetry:

Could only these poems, like a flag,
hold things which cannot be held.

Orpheus is a creator in the traditional Orphic myth and the world is rescued by his sacrifice. Moreover, the Orpheus in Rilke's work represents the omnipresent poet within us, being present in everything and everywhere. Poetry becomes a consummate and indispensable blossom of the great tree of life; the sound and the essential purpose of the universe; the communicative means between the living world and the underworld. Poetry is no longer a bizarre and insignificant sentiment within the chaos engulfing the world, but the only medium by which mankind can be saved from its alienation.

Another significant Orphic motif appears in the first octave of Feng Zhi's sonnet 24, in which the poet interprets the function of the song. The theme of song, singing and music is presented elsewhere in Feng Zhi's poems, namely in sonnet 3, 9 and 12. In *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Orpheus is depicted as a singing god (book 1, sonnet 2) and as a teacher of songs (book 1, sonnet 3). The songs Orpheus teaches are songs of praise towards concrete things and, consequently, the song represents the Orphic theme of 'existence'. In fact, 'song' does not only stand for poetry, but becomes a "symbol of the Orphic form of existence as well" (Zhang, 1999: 152). Therefore, the song is manifestation of 'existence' in itself. Life 'sings' every time it regenerates at spring time after a rigid winter and songs such as those sung by Orpheus linger in creation. One of the most striking and vital ways in which the Orphic descent is conceptualised in the Chinese sonnets is the realisation and prophecy of man's fate being sung and echoing from ancient times. Employing such lyrical means, the poetic voice is found to embody an unprecedented oracular and mystical tone in its sublime invocation. In sonnet 24, the lyrical subject expresses how a song has already sung the forthcoming existence of man long before his birth. This song is said to be resounding everywhere and just like Orpheus's lyre, lingers in every green blade of grass and every pine tree:

Here, myriads of years ago
Everywhere, it seems
Our lives already existed;
Before we were born.
A singing voice already
From the changing sky,

From the green grass, the pine trees
Chanted our destiny.

The ultimate descent into the self is also particularly exemplified by the transcendental journey that the Chinese lyrical persona undertakes through time and space: far-away places are evoked and far distant moments unfold over time. Pack-horses are depicted as coming from remote places and even the wind is said to carry the sighs of voices and civilisations of far distant places:

Look, a team of packhorses
Carrying goods from faraway places,
Water can also wash their silt
From some unknown distant places,
The wind, from countless miles away
Can take the sighs of many faraway lands:
We've crossed countless mountains and rivers,
Now conquering them, now losing them again [...] (Sonnet 15)

The mental images seem to materialise before the reader's eyes through the power of the imagination, which finally enables the construed Orphic descent into the self. Throughout the journey, the poetic voice gives meaningful descriptions and meanings of objects found along the way and which represent his mood and state of mind:

Objects are set on the table,
Books are arranged on the shelf,
All day, amidst some silent things
We constantly meditate (Sonnet 25).

The Orphic mystery represents the "crystallization in ritual of man's mystic realization of the identity of his turbulent transitory Self with the divine eternal All." The Orphic myth thus allows poets and thinkers to focus on their existential self while meditating on mundane objects, far-reaching places and past events. Orpheus's journey down into the Underworld and the image of the Orphic tree reaching down the roots to reach for its nutrients ultimately symbolise man's yearning for a greater understanding of the self.

Feng Zhi thus experiments with new poetic forms with his continuous evocation of elements pertaining to nature and the human world. The Orphic myth re-emerges through different elements and reasserts the modern Chinese poet's position within a larger literary arena. The concept of the Orphic tree and its subtle cues of incumbent challenges derived from the poet's own aesthetic experiences with modernity enable further appreciation of Feng Zhi's lyrical production. Recurring traces of the Orphic myth redefine literary criticism of Feng Zhi's mature writings, notably the Sonnets, as existing between two distinct literary and cultural movements: Romanticism and Modernism. In fact, the experimentation of the Chinese lyricist's new poetic forms and themes, such as that of individualism and aesthetic approach to collectivity, are what best define Feng Zhi's pre-modernist understanding and poetic contribution.

The traces of the Orphic myth in Feng Zhi's sonnets redefine the poetic subject's relationship with the outer world and his final constructive perception of his position

within society, nature and the cosmos as a whole. In fact, the Orphic descent into the self is the type of journey that the modern poetic voice undertakes to catch a glimpse of the invisible and consequently merge these two contrasting yet complementary realms. Feng Zhi's poetisation of natural elements, such as that of the tree, finally reveals the effect of the various aesthetic experiences gained by the self when it makes contact with the world.

The critical elaboration and appreciation of this relevant transcultural element finally renders the modern poetry of Feng Zhi even more unique. While still retaining some components and inspirations of classical Chinese literature, the Chinese author places particular attention to the need of individualism and an understanding of inner self, which very much runs counter to the collectivist approach in mainstream Chinese literature.

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The Iconic Meaning of Hypostasis: Notes on a Definition of Icon

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The notion *hypostasis* (—literally from ancient Greek, “sub-stand”, an underlying reality or substance) performs a regulative function for iconic syntax, which is why the iconic image is built in order to uncover the *hypostatic identity* of image (visible) and prototype (invisible). Eastern patristics has not lost the distinction between two ontological principles, both existing indispensable to one another—nature (essence) and hypostasis. In brief, this duo means: hypostasis transcends nature and nature is obeyed to hypostasis, and in the same time no depersonalized nature is possible. Here we are going to concern this dialectics from an iconographic viewpoint.

1. A Being Otherwise than Individual Nature

The analytic historian of philosophy Alain de Libera argues the Heideggerian thesis on “oblivion of being” in order to explain a more important blind spot in history of ontology. Neither scholasticism nor modern philosophy has completely forgotten the question of being, but actually there has been a blind spot in history of ontology. Alain de Libera called this blind spot by the allusion “oblivion of hypostasis”¹. Likewise, Toma’s twofold ontology did not skip the question of being, and Schelling devoted his latest works on philosophy of existence. Opposing to Hegel’s essentialist ontology, Schelling introduced in his late works the concept “history of being” establishing the statement that the Olympian history of gods was a point of departure for a history of being, a statement foregoing the Heideggerian thesis.² Thence, de Libera concludes, there has not been an oblivion of being but an oblivion of hypostasis.

In ancient use “hypostasis” is one of names of the eternal essence. Chalcedonian Christology confirms a being otherwise than essence and nature. In a widely spread use it is synonymous with personality, face and image. I mean the purpose of this new notion is to bring together visible and invisible, bodily and spiritual, image and prototype, and in fact humanity and Divine. The hypostasis is a personal initiation by which man is able to ascend to God, and transform his own human nature, while in the same time God descends in a human nature, in an image of creation.

Edward Zeller in his *Platonic Studies* comprehended Platonic as a hypostasized notion: “...hier wird das Eins nicht mehr als Begriff, sondern als Ding behandelt”³. What does “hypostasized” mean in his interpretation? The hypostasized is said to be a mental process of turning or prescribing a notion into being. From his viewpoint, the most similar words to “hypostatization” are the notions “reification” and “individualization”. Often an individual nature is a misleading grasp as hypostasis, but the individual nature is the given or involuntary inherited, what comes into appearance without personal motion. However, reducing hypostasis to individual means the first one to be induced from the category *genus* as we found in the ontological “Porphyrian tree”. The genuine Christological meaning of hypostasis reveals the being, existence and essence, by a *face*. Hypostasis is the Face that is able to bring into being the essences, it is otherwise than essence, nature, genus etc. When hypostasis was reduced to individual one the face was defaced and was mixed with the *individual nature*. Vice versa, the face is a sign for a spiritual over-individual being, outside of logical genus–species distinction rules. Zeller’s reading of “hypostatization” just gives us evidence for the lost meaning of the Patristic notion “hypostasis”.

The reason of Monophysites’ misunderstanding of hypostasis comes from an indistinguishability between hypostasis and individual nature, because they were convinced that the nature was not separated from hypostasis. Thence the individual is nothing other but nature, or, more precisely, it is just an individual nature.

From etymological viewpoint, in Latin “hypostasis” was translated by *persona* which means a “theatric mask” (from the ancient-Greek *prosopon*), a synonymy that leads away from the genuine Christological meaning of hypostasis. On the other hand, neither the Latin translation of hypostasis as *persona* by Boethius did shed light on the independence of hypostasis from the individual nature. Boethius was aware of the lack of lexical capacity in Latin language for a more relevant semantic equivalent of the Greek word “hypostasis”. As the irrelevance of *persona* has been forgotten after Boethius, the controversial issues about the translation of hypostasis have remained.

2. St. John of Damascus on Hypostatic Identity: A Notion of Iconic Transfer

In his eminent work *Theology of Beauty*, the Russian Orthodox Christian theologian Paul Evdokimov claims the hypostasis is a hidden beholder behind the iconic surface. He reminds us how the Fathers were consolidated about the point that we see in icon of Christ is neither human nature, nor Devine nature, but His Personality or Hypostasis.⁴ In fact we see the both in one face. The main premise of his statement stems from a conclusion given by St. John of Damascus in his *Philosophic Chapters*: the icon is a hypostatic identity between an image and its prototype. Among the pages of *Philosophic Chapters*, there is a