

Document 8.4: Excerpts from “Why I Write Poems in the Vernacular,” Hu Shi, in *Xin Qingnian* (*New Youth* magazine), May 1919

New Youth, founded by Chen Duxiu (see A Closer Look at the end of Chapter 8) was the most influential journal of the Republican era. The purpose of the journal Chen wrote was to “prove to the world that the old China is not dead, but that a new youthful China is in the process of being born.”¹

In August the fourth year of the Republic (1915), I wrote an essay titled “How to Make It Easy to Teach Our Language,” in which I listed a few methods but had not yet proposed to replace classical Chinese with vernacular. However, even back then, I clearly stated that, “Classical Chinese is a half dead language and should not be taught using a methodology used to teach a live language.” I also stated that “so-called live language is a language that is used in daily life, such as English, French and vernacular Chinese. The so-called dead languages, such as [ancient] Greek and Latin, are not used daily, in other words, they’re dead. The so-called half-dead language is one that has elements that are used in daily life. For example, *quan* (classical Chinese for dog) is dead while *gou* (vernacular for dog) is live, or, *chengma* (classical Chinese for horse riding) is dead while *qima* (vernacular for horse riding) is live. Therefore, classical Chinese is called a half-dead language.” ...

Revolution in poetry should start with three issues. First, there must be a point to writing a poem. Second, the writing must be grammatical, and third, when there is a need to use a vernacular word, one should not avoid using it....

Literary revolution is not rare in our country’s history.... So, why doubt the literary revolution that I propose?... In one word, literary revolution reached its peak during the Yuan dynasty [1279–1368], during which lyric poetry, opera lyrics, plays, and novels—all

¹ Li Dazhao, “Youth,” *Xin Qingnian*, April 1918, 14. Qtd. in Benjamin Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961) 12.

written in colloquial language—were all first class literature. You could say the literature then was a “live literature.”

[T]he literary revolution that I propose is based on the current situation of Chinese literature and has little to do with the new literature movements in Europe and America. The reason that I sometimes quote Western literary history, (specifically the part when European authors began to write in their native languages three or four hundred years ago), is only because the need for vernacular literature in China today is very similar to the need in Europe then. If we study what those countries accomplished, we will reduce our conservatism and increase our courage....

There are eight rules in new literature:

1. Do not quote idioms;
2. Do not use set phrases;
3. Do not use couplet format;
4. Do not avoid vernacular words;
5. Do follow correct grammar;
6. Do not write claptrap;
7. Do not imitate ancestors;
8. There must be a point to the writing.

Source: Hu Shi, “Why I Write Poems in the Vernacular,” *Xin Qingnian* May 1919: 488-499. Trans. Nan Ye.