

Classic Poetry Series

Xu Zhimo
- poems -

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Xu Zhimo(1896-1931)

Xu Zhimo (January 15, 1897—November 19, 1931) was an early 20th century Chinese poet. He was given the name of Zhangxu and the courtesy name of Yousen. He later changed his courtesy name to Zhimo .

He is romanticized as pursuing love, freedom, and beauty all his life (from the words of Hu Shi). He promoted the form of modern Chinese poetry, and therefore made tremendous contributions to modern Chinese literature.

To commemorate Xu Zhimo, in July, 2008, a white marble stone has been installed at the back of King's College, University of Cambridge, on which is inscribed a verse from Xu's best-known poem, 'Saying Goodbye to Cambridge Again'.

Xu was born in Haining, Zhejiang and graduated from the famous Hangzhou High School . In 1915, he married Zhang Youyi and next year he went to Peiyang University (Beiyang University, now Tianjin University) to study Law. In 1917, he transferred to Peking University due to the law department of Peiyang University merging into Peking University. In 1918, after studying at Peking University, he traveled to the United States to study history in Clark University. Shortly afterwards, he transferred to Columbia University in New York to study economics and politics in 1919. Finding the States "intolerable", he left in 1920 to study at King's College, Cambridge in England, where he fell in love with English romantic poetry like that of Keats and Shelley, and was also influenced by the French romantic and symbolist poets, some of whose works he translated into Chinese. In 1922 he went back to China and became a leader of the modern poetry movement. In 1923, he founded the Crescent Moon Society.

When the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore visited China, Xu Zhimo played the part of oral interpreter. Xu's literary ideology was mostly pro-western, and pro-vernacular. He was one of the first Chinese writers to successfully naturalize Western romantic forms into modern Chinese poetry. He worked as an editor and professor at several schools before dying in a plane crash on November 19, 1931 in Jinan, Shandong while flying from Nanjing to Beijing. He left behind four collections of verse and several volumes of translations from various languages.

Chance

I am a cloud in the sky,
A chance shadow on the wave of your heart.
Don't be surprised,
Or too elated;
In an instant I shall vanish without trace.

We meet on the sea of dark night,
You on your way, I on mine.
Remember if you will,
Or, better still, forget
The light exchanged in this encounter.

Xu Zhimo

Saying Good-Bye To Cambridge Again

Very quietly I take my leave,
As quietly as I came here;
Quietly I wave good-bye,
To the rosy clouds in the western sky.

The golden willows by the riverside,
Are young brides in the setting sun;
Their reflections on the shimmering waves,
Always linger in the depth of my heart.

The floating heart growing in the sludge,
Sways leisurely under the water;
In the gentle waves of Cambridge,
I would be a water plant!

That pool under the shade of elm trees,
Holds not water but the rainbow from the sky;
Shattered to pieces among the duckweeds,
Is the sediment of a rainbow-like dream.

To seek a dream? Just to pole a boat upstream,
To where the green grass is more verdant;
Or to have the boat fully loaded with starlight,
And sing aloud in the splendor of starlight.

But I cannot sing aloud,
Quietness is my farewell music;
Even summer insects keep silence for me,
Silent is Cambridge tonight!

Very quietly I take my leave,
As quietly as I came here;
Gently I flick my sleeves,
Not even a wisp of cloud will I bring away.

Xu Zhimo