Chinese poetry “liberated” itself in the early 20th century by switching from the classical to the vernacular language, by giving up a proven aesthetic in form (regular line and poem length), structure (rhyme, tonal balance, parallelism) and substance (imagistic and evocative intensity) in exchange for greater breadth and flexibility of expression.

In part, turning from the classical to the vernacular medium marks a motion from poetry towards prose, for grammatical elements and longer constructions play a larger part in vernacular verse, which also loses some subtlety while becoming more explicit and expository.

Tonal, isolating and monosyllabic by linguistic nature, classical Chinese achieves musical, painterly and architectural beauty in poetry with relative ease. Diluted in intensity and divested of metrical advantages based on linguistic attributes, modern Chinese poetry is still striving to find a sustainable rhythm and true identity. One often finds broken prose set in different lines passing under the name of poetry.

This paper will explore some of the gains and losses in modern Chinese poetry during a century of exploration, as well as possible ways out of the quandary. Given the environment of the daily language, the future of Chinese poetry clearly lies with the vernacular, yet it needs to reintegrate some aesthetic features that capitalize on the intrinsic strengths of the language. Classical Chinese poetry will remain a vivacious “minority art”, if it can modernize itself in appropriate measure.