In the storied tradition of Chinese literature, poetry occupies a hallowed position. The scholarship on traditional Chinese poetry fills entire archives. But while modern Chinese literature has now established itself as a thriving field of inquiry, most of the critical writing on it is directed toward narrative. What has happened to poetry in the contemporary period? The development of modern Chinese poetry and contemporary Chinese poetry has had an uneasy history. In addition to the upheavals that have affected all Chinese over the past 150 years, the pressures put on Chinese poetry and poets have been especially heavy. The political tumult in China has often made it difficult to create. But this alone cannot account for the attitude toward modern poetry. Poetry in the modern era has undergone a vast transformation and now bears little resemblance to its illustrious forebears. For the sake of convenience, this volume refers to “contemporary” Chinese poetry. By that we simply mean poetry written after the mid-century war period. All the papers except Michelle Yeh’s, which sets the stage for the rest, focus on the postwar period. But even in the poetry of the postwar period, the development in writing Chinese poetry cannot be understood in neat rubrics. First, with the bitter end to the civil war, many poet intellectuals ended up in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Their development bears little in common with that of mainland China, where political repression and propaganda pervaded all realms, including literary creation. Whereas contemporary poetry in Hong Kong and Taiwan evolved in a manner reasonably clear of unwanted political attention, in mainland China poetry was pressed into the service of the state. Thus, despite the division of this book into two major sections, one representing contemporary poetry of Taiwan and the other that of mainland China, the time periods and time spans
are still quite different. That no one has devoted a chapter to the study of Hong Kong poets is a regrettable result not of our desire not to do so, but of the severe constraints put on the length of this pithy volume.

The book emerges from a large conference called “The Simmons International Chinese Poetry Conference,” featuring scholars and poets of contemporary China and Chinese studies, that took place on the campus of Simmons College in the fall of 2004. The organizer and inspiration behind the conference was Afaa Weaver, director of the Zora Neale Hurston Literary Center at Simmons and himself a well-known African American poet who has learned Chinese and is interested in promoting interaction between Chinese and American poets. What began as a wonderful idea to bring a few poets and scholars together ended up being a vast gathering of about seventy-five poets and scholars of modern Chinese literature from all over the world. This volume brings together some of the essays that grew out of the conference with a few additions. That it exists in the first place, and that this conference, which will reprise at Simmons College in fall 2008, is due to the vision and charisma of Afaa Weaver.

In his preface to our book, Professor Weaver investigates 诗, the ancient character for poetry, by comparing its structure to aspects of the geography of the Fens area in Boston where the conference took place. Shi’s composition of the scholar radical over the heart resembles the structure of the poetry award Professor Weaver gave at the conference, a glass decanter with a heart’s shape. Immediately outside the window of Simmons’s newly renovated third-floor conference center where the events took place wanders the Muddy River, so named due to the fact that the area was once marshland. Nowadays, a number of interesting birds inhabit the area, most notably a flock of Canada geese, who made it their project to occupy the street on the final day of the conference, a sunny Sunday afternoon when they felt the need to be oblivious to the world. Among other aspects of this comparison, Weaver likens the juxtaposition of the geese over the river to the victory of the mind over the heart in Zen poetry, specifically that of Han Shan.

Michelle Yeh’s chapter examines what exactly is modern about Chinese poetry and why that is good. Her chapter spans the twentieth century in its scope. It seeks to go beyond the long-standing dichotomy of tradition and modernity that underscored major debates and controversies throughout the past century. Addressing the issues of form and content, language, the new conceptualization of poetry, and