

# Lyrical Experiments in Sinophone Verse

Time, Space, Bodies, and Things



Edited by  
Justyna Jaguścik  
Joanna Krenz  
Andrea Riemenschmitter

Amsterdam  
University  
Press

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# Introduction

Treading a Tightrope: Chinese Poetry in the Modern World

*Justyna Jaguścik, Joanna Krenz, and Andrea Riemenschmitter*

Poetry occupied a privileged position in China's cultural production throughout the centuries. From the very dawn through the dusk of the empire, it closely followed and echoed, but also, by reflecting on, and resonating with, its major events, actively regulated the pulse of Chinese history as the mandate of heaven was passing from one dynasty to another. Like the country itself, it was evolving and often quite radically so, but always within some tacitly assumed and acknowledged higher order that guaranteed its essential continuity. Accordingly, the "twin themes of [sociopolitical] crisis and [cultural and literary] innovation" (Wang and Wei 2005, 1) represent an important trope in scholarship on the continuities and transformations in Chinese culture since the mid-sixteenth century, if not much earlier (Tian 2017). Literary scholars have showed that paradigm shifts in culture often coincided with the breakdown of the reigning political order, resulting, for example, in the emergence of new poetic modes of expression, such as writing by women on their experience of historical disruption that accompanied the troubled Ming-Qing transition (Chang 2005, 506). Not surprisingly, when the dynastic rule collapsed in the period of the sociopolitical transformations that accompanied the hatching out of the republic at the turn of the twentieth century, late Qing intellectuals simultaneously initiated the quest for a lyrical voice that would adequately intonate Chinese modernity. Authors of the "New Poetry" (*xinshi* 新诗) successfully challenged the premodern canon with their verse, in which they experimented with hybrid poetic forms inspired by world literary trends. These texts were no less important than the colloquial short story for the literary articulation of the modernization movement of May Fourth, 1919, which reflected the determination of progressive intellectuals to leave behind not only the shackles of the old regime, but also what they saw as shackles of the ancient poetic conventions.

Today, more than a century later, this quest for self-reinvention is ongoing. Its trajectory is shaped by various factors, internal and external to the poetry field alike. While every phase of modernization had its specific poetic devices and lyrical articulations, the most recent stage resonates with entangled local and global concerns, such as an uneven redistribution of power/knowledge and capital in the society, intense environmental anxieties and an avalanche of technological developments, some of them finding their application in literary writing. On the other hand, one can also observe a rekindled interest in the afterlife of classical forms that breaks new ground in modern poetry by tapping into China's internal sources—and, moreover, frequently operates in a mode of writing back to the modernist utopia. Despite the official cultural discourse's appropriation of tradition as part of the project of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing* 中华民族伟大复兴), classical forms are thus being rediscovered by artists as a tool of resistance and a medium of sociopolitical critique. Ironically, it may not be the nation but its poetry that is being rejuvenated by authors who creatively respond to the deepening sociopolitical crisis. This holds for both mainland China and other Sinophone communities—especially, but not exclusively, Hong Kong and Taiwan—over which the government of the People's Republic of China strives to extend its supremacy, albeit the dynamics of the resulting enmeshments and their specific manifestations and implications vary significantly.

Relegated from the cultural center to a position that is often perceived as marginal in a somewhat overly defeatist manner, today's avant-garde poets frequently see themselves as the voice of the suppressed conscience of their respective communities: advocates of the economically or otherwise underprivileged groups, guardians of the natural environment, and moral and spiritual compasses of the uprooted humanity. In the vast space infused with unprecedented possibilities and dangers, they are tightrope walkers balancing between the known and the unknown, mind and matter, moral norms and aesthetic freedoms, social activism and contemplative detachment. Although attracted by the past, they have to steadily face the future to avoid falling off the tout string. The task is all the more difficult given that in the surrounding universe of a “liquid modernity,” to borrow Zygmunt Bauman's term, there are no fixed structures or stable points of reference to facilitate navigation. However, when Bauman published his critique of the contemporary period of modernity, in which the public, political space has been “colonized by the private” (2000, 37), he could not know that nineteen years later Hong Kong protesters would adopt the “liquid” metaphoric for their movement's philosophy. Contrary to Bauman's lamenting the dissolution of “solid” social institutions, in 2019 Hong Kong, “being water” (*ru*

*shui* 如水) became the movement's tactics in their collective tightrope walk of civil disobedience. Thus, even though the rope the poets—as well as those they wish to speak for—walk is rocked not only by the natural winds of change but also by inimical political forces, we still face a plateau of creative grassroots responses that, like the May Fourth texts, reinvent the relationship between politics and poetics in reaction to the current risks and emergencies.

Whereas the May Fourth reformers saw poetry, in Wen Yiduo's 闻一多 (1899–1946) words inspired by Bliss Perry, as effective “dancing in the shackles” (Yeh 1987, 33), contemporary authors have gradually loosened these shackles as new ideological and aesthetic currents settled in. Their movements are no longer restricted by aesthetic conventions, and the act of writing rather resembles dancing on a fine line. It requires, above everything else, a high degree of self-awareness as if to synchronize the smallest muscles in the body and sensual perception in one's efforts to balance every sway of the notoriously inscrutable red line. This special relationship between the human body and its fragile carrier was famously articulated in Jean Genet's poetic essay “The Tightrope Walker” (*Le funambule*) dedicated to his partner, a circus artist, in which the “metal wire” is said to be lovingly “supporting its dancer” while at the same time itself becoming “the most amazing dancer of you” (Genet 2003, 69). Of course, from the perspective of the dancer, things do not always look so rosy, and they struggle with fear of the fall, on the one hand, and frustration with the public show, on the other. Sang Ke's 桑克 poem “A Tightrope Walker” (*Zou gangsi yiren 走钢丝艺人*, 1999), which echoes some motifs from Genet's essay, speaks of it as follows:

Every blow may be fatal  
 The safety rope is an imaginary comfort woman  
 She can't make me forget the gunpowder smoke  
 Instead, reminding of what a journey on the knife edge is like

The sound of the final gong so soothing  
 Like a bowl of sour plum soup in the willow shade  
 Not only did I breathe a sigh of relief but even  
 had some sense of achievement. (trans. Joanna Krenz)

任何一击都是致命的  
 保险绳是个虚构的慰安妇  
 她根本不能让我忘记硝烟弥漫  
 反而时刻提醒我什么是刀刃上的旅行

终场的锣声多么美妙  
 像柳荫下的一碗酸梅汤  
 我不仅松了一口气，甚至  
 还有了一点点成就感

And yet, for most, this tightrope dance is not just a form of graceful survival, but also a conscious, profound expression of what really matters.

The metaphorical image of the author—and, equally, the poetry scholar—performing impossible acrobatics between irreconcilable realities inspired the title of the international gathering organized at the University of Zurich in the fall of 2022—“Poetic Tightrope Walks: Time, Space, Bodies, and Things in Contemporary Sinophone Poetry.” Accompanied by enchanting offline and online poetry readings by Amang 阿芒, Chris Song 宋子江, Yu Jian 于坚, Chen Dongdong 陈东东, Zhai Yongming 翟永明, Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼, and AI poet Xiao Bing 小冰 at Zurich’s legendary Cabaret Voltaire, the manifold encounters ventured into fascinating fields of reflection. To facilitate the organization of the rich material, we propose to single out three big themes, which, of course, are anything but mutually disjunctive and often intersect within an individual oeuvre or a single poem. Still, they quite aptly reflect the conceptual focus of the resulting book chapters. The three discursive arenas include multiple realities, formal crossovers, and liquid boundaries.

## I. Multiple Realities

One of the most conspicuous characteristics of contemporary poetry is the dehomogenization of spacetime, that is, the sheer awareness of different modes of existence within the same physical reality. Each of them has its own specific rhythm and laws, as well as its own internal heterogeneity which is subject to lyrical explorations. They also continuously overlap, clash, and mutually strengthen or cancel one another out, and thus every encounter between them should be carefully negotiated.

The increased interest in the natural world is reflected in the expansion of various installments of eco-aesthetics in the works of authors representing different generations and factions on the Chinese poetry scene. Grief about environmental degradation, feelings of anxiety and pain related to the—at times invisible—destruction of human and nonhuman bodies by toxic industrial substances, as well as productive nostalgia with respect to the disappearance of the country’s iconic landscapes and architecture and the

like topics steer the poetic creation of the contemporary Sinosphere's self-reflective, highly prolific lyrical voices. Here the poets can creatively draw upon rich archives of representations of the natural world in early Chinese literature, one of the world's earliest transmitted "engagement[s] with the nonhuman" (Thornber 2017, 39), which, however, chronologically follows those by indigenous Australian and New Zealand peoples, or Mesopotamian literature. What is especially noteworthy are the experiments with a broad range of forms and ideas that prepare the ground for a new, eco-aesthetic outlook that underscores elegiac thinking and takes environmental mourning and melancholia seriously, but does not renounce hope or even humorous playfulness.

In the opening chapter, Nick Admussen illustrates the spatiotemporal turbulences that occur as a result of desynchronized local perceptions of climate change leading to what he deems the death of transnational time. Reading Jiang Tao's 姜涛 "My Baghdad" (Wode Bageda 我的巴格达) and Xi Chuan's 西川 "Bloom" (Kaihua 开花) at his office in Ithaca with a foggy cityscape outside the window, Admussen tries to come to terms with the cacophony of disintegrated aesthetic and ethical signals that reach him from different parts of the world. He proposes an active model of reception in "strange loops" that will allow to play out the potential of the rhythmic dissonances.

Admussen's contribution is followed by two chapters that reconstruct women authors' perspectives on the natural order and humanity's place in it. In chapter 2, Liansu Meng takes a closer look at the ecofeminist strand in the work of two authors counted among the Misty poets: Shu Ting 舒婷 and Wang Xiaoni 王小妮. As family mothers with their time limited by overwhelming daily chores and their space by the four walls of their constricted room, they remain underappreciated as participants of cultural and sociopolitical discourse. Thoroughly reevaluating their writing, Meng presents their unique insights into the microcosm of "the weak and small" living beings with which they deeply empathize, on the one hand, and into the macrocosm of universal human concerns, as they voice, among other things, a sharp critique of reckless policies that result in natural catastrophes, on the other. In chapter 3, Andrea Lingenfelter analyses eco-poetic strategies in Zhai Yongming's book-length poem *Following Huang Gongwang Through the Fuchun Mountains* (*Sui Huang Gongwang you Fuchunshan* 随黄公望游富春山). The poem constitutes a lyrical interpretation of the ancient painting scroll informed by Zhai's historical, social, and gender consciousness, as well as by her experiments with other artistic forms. Particular attention in the study is paid to the poet's attempt to reconcile human and nonhuman



spacetimes through “women’s montage” that resonates with avant-garde filmmaking techniques.

Human spacetime as such, too, becomes destabilized, and undergoes a process of fiberization, with the overarching master narratives being meticulously split into thinner threads that must be sensibly rewoven. We can observe this process in Andrea Riemenschmitter’s analysis of Yu Jian’s “On the Ancient Road of Hubei’s Xishui County: A Detour” (Zai Hubei Xishui raodao laolu 在湖北浠水绕道老路) in chapter 4. Yu’s work, using similar cross-modal techniques as Zhai’s magnum opus, in a road movie style invites the reader on a stunning journey not through illustrious natural landscapes but through the natural, historical and socio-cultural landscape of Xishui’s countryside. The unexpected decision of their driver to take the group of poets traveling to the airport on a much longer trip to avoid traffic jams creates a rupture in the usual order of things. This provides an opportunity to explore the back lanes of cultural memory with its more and less glorious moments, which Yu Jian assiduously, and often humorously, does.

One reason why it is so important to responsibly revisit human cultural, intellectual, and spiritual heritage is the uncontrolled expansion of a new mode of reality: the virtual reality, often referred to as augmented reality. With its limitless space and hyper-accelerated time, it augments not only possibilities but also fissures and glitches in our self-narratives as humankind. It is an accumulative reality which never forgets but also never properly remembers, operating on, very literally taken, random access memory based on uncritically established links between objects. We may observe this in one of Amang’s poems performed by the author at Cabaret Voltaire, “Total Lunar Eclipse” (Yue quanshi 月全食), where she speaks of the moon exported to a 4D virtual space of a “superhero movie”:

that is when  
I learned something new about memory  
and it’s not about losing memory  
besides, any flickering  
is perhaps due to the “RAM” being diverted to another quadrant  
(trans. Jusyna Jaguścik and Steve Bradbury).

就是在那次  
我學到記憶的另一面  
並不是失去記憶  
還有, 任何閃爍  
都可能是“記憶內存”在轉移象限

An example of a dangerous distortion of social, cultural, and political concepts in the virtual reality is discussed by Joanna Krenz in chapter 5, which adopts the perspective of critical code studies to demonstrate the trivialization of the feminist strategy of “herstorical” writing in the third volume of the “Xiao Bing trilogy” titled *Alternative Worlds* (*Huoran de shijie* 或然的世界).<sup>1</sup> The book is composed of poems and paintings created by neural network-based artificial intelligence and wrapped in a quasi-philosophical concept by human editors of the collection. Dissecting text- and image-generation algorithms employed in the project and the problematic social identity narratives that overwrite them, Krenz reflects on what new insights we gain about memory and other human things from posthuman beings, as well as on the challenges and pitfalls of the transplantation of human discourses into the posthuman world.

## II. Formal Crossovers

The recurrence of traditional poetic forms is presently shaping a discourse of cultural classicism. Concomitantly, formal innovation by means of post-modern tactics such as employing solutions specific for different modes of artistic production, borrowing from other genres and discourses, and experimenting with transcultural bricolage contributes to a vibrant cultural arena where academic poets engage in a dialogue with grassroots cultural voices and elite classicism meets proletarian performance and pop-cultural spectacle.

This section begins with two studies investigating the work of early twentieth-century reformers of literature. In chapter 6, Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik revisits one of the foundational works of Chinese New Poetry, Lu Xun's 鲁迅 *Wild Grass* (*Yecao* 野草), in the context of Kuriyagawa Hakuson's 厨川白村 *The Symbol of Depression* (苦悶の象徴) which Lu Xun had translated into Chinese. In her analysis, *Wild Grass* appears as a lyrical laboratory to test literary-theoretical conceptions of the then tremendously popular Japanese literary scholar, whose thought was, in turn, hugely indebted to Freud's psychoanalysis. Selectively drawing on Hakuson's ideas, Lu Xun took courageous steps toward the liberation of poetic language. His efforts were supported by many other authors of the time, including Ma Junwu

1 *Alternative Worlds* is a translation used by organizers of the exhibition, although a more adequate rendition in the context of Xiao Bing's project would arguably be *Probable Worlds* or *Possible Worlds*.

马君武, a polymath whose contribution to Chinese poetry is investigated in chapter 7 by Victor Vuilleumier. Ma's hybrid poetry, in its attempts to incorporate the language of various natural-scientific disciplines, flirts with the popular genre of science fiction, which was then gradually taking root in the Chinese soil, while at the same time remaining deeply indebted to the Romantic paradigm. Vuilleumier connects these lyrical experiments with what Andrea Riemenschmitter called "vernacularization" (2017) of the landscape which previously had been an exclusive domain of classical aesthetics.

After the radical reinvention of lyrical language, classical forms for many decades remained overshadowed by the celebrated "new poetry," in which most authors saw a chance for "connecting the tracks with the West" on multiple levels to become an organic part of the transnational system of world poetry. The emergence of digital media was hailed as a factor that may significantly catalyze this process, facilitating a global circulation of texts. However, as Zhiyi Yang argues in chapter 8, this promise was not fulfilled, and many unexpected obstacles are yet to be properly addressed. Examining the case of Duan Xiaosong 段小松, she reconstructs the trajectory of his career leading from an emerging "world poet" through the phase of digital classicism as a medium of sociopolitical critique enabled by cryptic censorship-proof language, to his difficult return to new poetry during the COVID-19 pandemic. Paradoxically, free verse turns out to be a more hands-tying mode which restricts freedom of expression, ruling out sensitive topics and straightforward manifestations of independent thinking.

In non-mainland Sinophone poetries, under different sociopolitical circumstances and different local-global interplay, lyrical experiments displayed a different kind of dynamic. In Taiwan, for instance, decolonial postmodernism decisively shaped the poetry scene since the mid-1980s, counterbalancing strong nationalist trends. In chapter 9, Michelle Yeh offers a panoramic view on the Taiwanese poetry scene since the Modern Poetry Debate in 1972–1974 to scrutinize the intricacies of what she terms "the nativist turn." The study focuses especially on nativism's complex relationship with the preceding modernism, which nativists both rejected and were deeply indebted to in their attempts to embrace the Chinese tradition, on the one hand, and the evolving Taiwanese society, on the other, as Yeh argues. Illustrated with rich examples of poetic experiments representing different strands of avant-garde poetry, the chapter also opens new perspectives on the subsequent process of incepting postmodernism on the Taiwanese soil. As such, it prepares the ground for the discussion in the following chapter centered around Hsia Yü 夏宇, who is considered

one of the leading postmodern authors in Taiwan. Dean Anthony Brink investigates Hsia Yü's collection *First Person* (*Di yi rencheng* 第一人称), a product of interaction between poetry and photography, which, Brink argues, takes a step beyond postmodernism, toward active engagement in posthuman post-anthropocentric interaction where “mutual human animality” becomes foregrounded. In her conceptual artwork, bilingual (Chinese-English) text and photographic pictures (from Paris) contribute to the emergence of complicated micro-temporalities in which the “vital *jouissance*” of strangeness is fulfilled. A crucial role in the project belongs to the reader-viewer who manages intra- and intertextual connections in the process of multimodal reception.

### III. Liquid Boundaries

National borders are currently under siege in both academic discourse and within global geopolitical dynamics. Whereas the new interest in cultural production at the margins of the PRC as enunciated in Sinophone theory and poetry is a vibrant, spiritually liberating force, the regime's border conflicts and political disenfranchisement of dissenting communities as well as individual voices bespeak a deep crisis of modernity as we knew it. On the other hand, the intensified interrogation of class and gender boundaries significantly expands the transcultural realm of poetic articulation. This leads us to a number of questions, such as: how do poets navigate the troubled waters of the contemporary world? What is the poetic language of late modernity with its blurred semantic contours, movable goalposts, curved, heterogenous spacetimes and identities as a work in progress? Does poetry provide a map that grants some sense of direction when many of us remain under the spell of the “unholy trinity” of uncertainty, insecurity, and unsafety? Contrariwise, perhaps there is a different story too, that of hope. Does poetry reflect the moments of joy when floating islands connect to craft temporary alliances—archipelagos of new commons?

This section opens with Simona Gallo's examination of the practice of self-translation by Mu Dan 穆旦 in chapter 11. Analyzing twelve poems composed in Chinese in the 1940s and rendered by the author into English, Gallo enquires into multiple dimensions of Mu's hazardous project in which his own identity and the identity of Chinese modern poetry in the epoch's translingual and transcultural realms are at stake. She demonstrates that the strategic factor that enabled successful recreation (rather than straightforward literal transfer) of the multidimensional lyrical universe

of the poet's works in the literary Anglosphere was his perfect grasp and control over the rhythmical and musical qualities of English, which guided his syntactic and, occasionally, semantic choices.

In chapter 12, Mary Shuk Han Wong investigates Hong Kong author Leung Ping-kwan's 梁秉均 travel poetry documenting his Eastern and Central European journeys in the early 1990s. Wong reads Leung's accounts of his visits to the venues of national trauma of European citizens as an example of dark tourism. However, as she demonstrates, the poet's approach to dark tourism has little to do with the commercialization of suffering; steering away from pathos, it hinges rather on the contemplation of everyday life as a starting point to enter a genuine dialogue with history that left its scars on the visited places. From this dialogue Leung's "bicultural awareness" emerges that allows him to develop a better understanding of his own historical circumstances and identity.

The question of identity in and of Hong Kong poetry returns in chapter 13, in Chris Song's discussion of its China-centric leftist strand in the context of the notion of the Sinophone as defined by Shu-mei Shih. Hong Kong's poetry scene, Song notes, is torn between two critical categories fraught with opposite ideological claims: the subversive Sinophone which emphasizes its independence from the hegemonic mainland cultural politics on the one hand and the *Huawen wenxue* with its strong pro-CCP penchant on the other. While the two have long relatively peacefully coexisted in Hong Kong, as the PRC government more and more aggressively expresses its ambitions to re-Sinify the city, the leftist faction is gaining unprecedented influence and poses a serious threat to the Sinophone camp on the institutional and other levels.

Two final chapters bring us back to the fundamental question of what poetry is, and the liquid boundaries of the poetry field as such, which create favorable conditions for the inclusion of new voices, in particular those that have long been denied a place in elitist discourse. In chapter 14, Maghiel van Crevel reflects on the difficult marriage between poetry and subalternity. He addresses the problem of the ontological status of *dagong* 打工, or battler, poetry in contradistinction to interpretive and paraphrastic approaches that have dominated the discourse on Chinese migrant workers' writing thus far. Equipped with Jonathan Culler's theory of the lyric, van Crevel dismantles the false dichotomy between social experience and aesthetic expression and emphasizes the necessity of connecting social voice and poetic voice, acknowledging both *dagong* poetry's referential and autotelic aspects. In chapter 15, Justyna Jaguścik reflects on the relationship between the "world" and the "word" in *dagong* verse using her case study of migrant worker-poet

Wu Xia 郇霞. Wu Xia's poetics of affect undermines the simplistic picture of *dagong* writing as realistic account of the precarious life conditions of factory workers, industrial zones, and environmental destruction. Going against this dominant trend, through her almost provocatively affirmative poetry in which she aligns herself with a more-than-human universe, Wu Xia also reaffirms her own dignity as a worker and as a human being.

Altogether, the fifteen chapters offer a vibrant and well-balanced picture of Chinese-language poetry against the backdrop of a turbulent era. A picture that, obviously, lays no claims to completeness, and instead invites further amplifications and reconfigurations. Poetry, giving little credit to self-appointed prophets who foretell its death, does not show any signs of exhaustion, and catching up with it requires constant updating of our interpretative methods and tools. This book captures just one transient moment in its adventurous life. And yet, we tacitly hope, it is more than a literary-historical document. Rather than passively witnessing the transformation, the scholarship collected in the volume also unobtrusively “witnesses” it, that is actively and constructively assists poetry in its lyrical explorations and experiments with time, space, bodies, things, and everything else that is not (yet) dreamed of in our theories.

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# I

## Multiple Realities





# 1. The Death of Transnational Time: Locality, Reader Response, and the Strange Loop

*Nick Admussen*

**Abstract:** This chapter identifies a growing dissonance between the conceptual timelines, temporal contexts, and verse rhythms of poems inside and outside China, and argues that this rhythmic mismatch is a result of the mounting stresses of climate change, which are experienced through locality. It contrasts the globally relevant, transnationally rhythmic 2003 poem “My Baghdad” by Jiang Tao with Xi Chuan’s 2014 poem “Bloom,” which understands its temporality as more specifically regional. The chapter then outlines a transnational strange loop-based hermeneutics that responds meaningfully to the increased experiential and temporal gap between regions and rereads “My Baghdad” as a demonstration of the prospect for a future-oriented hermeneutics that links places not through their simultaneous and interlinked progress, but through their rhythmic dissonances.

**Keywords:** time, climate change, poetry, Jiang Tao, Xi Chuan, transcultural reading

When poetry acts as a machine, it most often acts as a machine to organize time (see Hayles 2006, 181).<sup>1</sup> There are at least seven types of time available to the average poem, with more perhaps to be discovered: there is the time of performance, the time of the poem’s sonic prosody and meter, the time of the poem’s visual prosody and the act of silent reading, the deictic time

<sup>1</sup> I have mutated Hayles’ suggestion to read digital poetry as “a machine to organize time”; she herself is paraphrasing William Carlos Williams.

if the poem contains a story or sequential events, the time-context of the author, the time-context of the reader, and the time of the poem's media, whether that be the time it takes its digital code to run, the lifespan of the book the poem is in, or the pace of its circulation on social media. Rhythm is the interaction, syncopation, or collision of one or more of these varied types of time. The archetypical, but by no means typical, relationship between types of time in a poem comes from the artist fashioning a meter in their own time-context, and that meter then creating a relationship between the experience of a reader and the performance rhythms of the artist. Some of the types of available poetic time are textual, and some are social: Caroline Levine observes that "[t]he term *rhythm* moves easily back and forth between aesthetic and social rhythms" (Levine 2015, 53). We know this, in China studies, from the tapping feet of the composition of poetry in the Great Preface to the *Classic of Poetry*: a poem happens when a feeling, thought, or desire overflows the mind and works its way out into patterned, bodily action. Levine goes on to say that the reason for this terminological identity is that rhythm is a conceptual or textual organization of moving bodies, that it is deeply political: it can "produce communal solidarity and bodily pleasure," or "operate as powerful means of control and subjugation" (Levine 2015, 49).

It is necessary to talk about time in poetry today because the crisis in which we find ourselves is not simply a crisis of atmospheric composition or a crisis of temperature. It is also fundamentally a crisis in time and in rhythm. Every organism transforms its environment; in some arcane way, every organism transforms the global environment, and the history of life is one of widespread, piecemeal adaptation to change. Human activity is, however, changing the landscape *too fast*. Human life is not rhythmically aligned with the plants, animals, and inorganic processes that it needs to survive, or with the gradual adaptation on the scale of evolutionary time that might allow other living beings to coexist with human activity. This dissonance has a cumulative and self-strengthening effect. As I write this, satellite footage shows that a third of the land mass of Pakistan is under water: over the coming months, the displaced survivors of that flood will spread out across the region, living things slightly out of place, slightly out of time, and the dissonance of too much rain falling too fast will then reproduce itself in the political, in new chains of predation, in sharp spikes of population and need and conflict. We understand implicitly that our greatest tool against climate change is our propensity for simultaneity, for collective action, for culture's ability to move bodies together in dance, in feeling, in action: but we are not yet cognizant of the way that climate change itself is degrading, and will continue to degrade, humanity's ability

to organize itself into rhythmic time. This chapter intends to set out the challenge that faces culture, including the transnational study of poetry, as the crisis disrupts our fledgling transnational rhythms.

Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker (2014) have made an insightful attempt to provoke a time-sense in which individuals see themselves not as participants in “neoliberal ‘progress narratives’ of human-directed salvation,” or in “sustainability narratives’ of holding onto or even reverting to a pristine almost-past,” (560) but in a *thick time of weathering*. Weathering “entails reconfiguring our spatial and temporal relations to the weather-world and cultivating an imaginary where our bodies are makers, transfer points, and sensors of the ‘climate change’ from which we might otherwise feel too distant” (Neimanis and Walker 2014, 559). The project of visualizing human subjects as enveloped by the same rain and wind that touches the birds and trees, as well as the production of a human self-consciousness as weather maker, is a positive one. But hidden in this proposal, and many like it, is the assumption that shared experiences of time—rhythms—can be “reconfigured” and “cultivated” *without being transformed by their context*. The building of shared time is a labor, and that labor is radically dependent on the temporal, social, and physical site on which it is built. It will never be accomplished in denial of the fact that the climate crisis itself will drastically affect our ability to construct rhythm, to propagate a pattern of movements in time.

Neimanis and Walker’s proposal depends in a subtle way on some of the great structures of twentieth-century time. Benedict Anderson (2006) identified the time of the nation, the time of the twentieth century, as “‘homogenous, empty time,’ in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar” (24). Constructed by the novel and the newspaper, this sense of time builds subjects into a textual/social rhythm:

The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history. An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000,000-odd fellow-Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity. (Anderson 2006, 26)

This faith in the imagined community, built on the wide adoption of media that take specific temporal shapes, is something that Neimanis and Walker

participate in when they imagine that transformations in human time can be effected by the publication of a scholarly article, or the advancement of ideas in the elite Anglophone academy. They visualize a homogeneity, agency, and tractability to their readership that is in no place clearer than their insistence that the cultural complex they are attempting to confront is a Western one: “If climate change is an abstract notion, this is closely bound to a privileged Western life that is committed to keeping the weather and its exigencies *out*, and that is geared toward the achievement of a flat, linear temporality of progress undisturbed by those same exigencies” (Neimanis and Walker 2014, 561). The West here is a conveniently unexamined way to talk about “our kind” in contradistinction to some poorly understood “their kind”: it asserts a unity that has never existed, and has only occasionally been imagined. When we think, though, about the scale of the *climate* in which we live, we mistrust, perhaps, the old story in which a humanities professor writes an article, it gets cited and taught and propagated, and the students of the humanities in the West eventually alter their daily practices to suit the thinker’s new ideas, resulting in global change. We may understand that the problem of carbon is vastly bigger, and simultaneously much smaller, than a simply Western problem. We may imagine that the person out in the rain or out in the heat does not much care about scholarly research, and that the Westerner in the rain wants and feels something different than the Westerner in the heat does. Time is changing, newspapers and novels have changed, and the “solid community moving” that Anderson sees imagined in 1983 does not feel like it did. Weather is different in different places, and we do not all weather it together.

It is not entirely fair to criticize Neimanis and Walker for creating an unweathered theory of weathered time; they are, after all, theorizing, and one cannot instantiate a concept without having thought it first. It is, however, the job of the transcultural critic to measure time between places, and to come to understand the movements and rhythms that disparate places engender in one another. As these rhythms change, the methods of area studies must also change. For much of my career, reading poetry transnationally has been about identifying simultaneities and counter-rhythms between the Sinosphere and the Anglosphere. This is exemplified by a poem I particularly love, Jiang Tao 姜涛’s “My Baghdad,” (Wode Bageda 我的巴格达):

My Baghdad, she sleeps deeply  
 after work she always demands sleep  
 it’s me, tugging the leash of the horizon’s grey dog,  
 who dawdles, loathe to consent.

Now, the orange streetlights  
 have finally convinced me, I won't stubbornly  
 stick to naive principles, I won't make waves  
 it's fine to play tricks on what's familiar to me

Rubble, mud, the treetops of air defense cannon  
 —and all the high peaks  
 sometimes a car speeds by, that's also an adulterous wife  
 trying to delay her return home.

And my Baghdad, she has long been deep asleep  
 pillowed on the arm of a great mountain, her eyebrows  
 rise and fall, the house's roof rises and falls  
 and so a bombardier in the clouds opens his only eye

and takes aim, after all it's just an empty city.  
 Those who can't evacuate, the ones we can't explain  
 the ones that will as always be exposed by young migrant workers  
 actually, it's all the sound of her snoring

In a young earthen trench muddy water rolls along  
 sleep, the phone lines have been disconnected  
 when the weapons say goodbye, in the distance  
 a new era of orders like dreams will be allocated, copied by night<sup>2</sup>

My Baghdad, it's in the Beijing suburbs  
 there were two nights when I left the television  
 on all night, to better make the end of the bedroom  
 feel like a one-man barricade

2003 (Jiang Tao 2005, 43–44; my translation)<sup>3</sup>

2 There are three literary references in these two lines; “when the weapons say goodbye” adds a time preposition to the Chinese title of *Farewell to Arms*. “Orders like dreams” 如梦令 is a common tune for *ci* poetry (词牌), and “Night Reading” 夜读抄 is the title of a collection by the prose stylist Zhou Zuoren 周作人. Because they are normalized into the grammar of sentences, and not set apart by punctuation or script, I've chosen to make them seem like natural parts of the sentences in which they appear.

3 For an alternate translation by Chris Dusterhoff, Li Chun and Zhang Er, see Zhang Er and Chen Dongdong (2007, 133–35).

## 我的巴格达

我的巴格达，她在熟睡  
下班后她就一直要求睡眠  
是我，牵着天边的苍狗  
迟迟不肯应允

现在，橘红的街灯  
终于说服了我，不再固执地  
轻信原则，要随遇而安  
不妨和熟悉的一切耍手段

瓦砾、泥浆、防空的树梢  
——还有一切的峰颠  
偶有轿车驶过，那也是偷情的妻子  
耽搁了归家的时间

而我的巴格达，她早已熟睡  
枕在大山的臂弯里，她的眉毛  
起伏着，屋檐起伏着  
让云里的轰炸手，睁开独眼

瞄准的，原来只是一座空城。  
那些无法搬空，无法解释的  
依旧被青壮民工暴露的  
其实，都是她的鼾声

在青春的地沟里滚动的浊流  
睡吧，电话线已拔掉  
当武器的告别，在远方  
支配了新一代的如梦令、夜读抄

我的巴格达，就座落在京郊  
有两个晚上，我让电视  
彻夜开着，好让卧室的尽头  
更像是一个人的街垒

2003年

This poem creates a brilliant global rhythm. The speaker has failed to entice or compel his potentially unfaithful wife to stay up late with him, and is

watching the US invasion of Baghdad while she sleeps. The speaker is out of sync with his family member but is beginning to see himself on an Iraqi timeline, unable to evacuate an abandoned city, under attack from unseen forces, building whatever barricade he can. The poem anchors this fictive simultaneity with its date, which specifies that the Baghdad conflagration in question must be the 2003 invasion under the American president George W. Bush. As it crafts this relationship in time, the poem also capitalizes and comments on the simultaneity of cable news, the media that allows distant observers to experience a form of real-time telepresence, one that had become increasingly commonplace to populations around the globe. The way that cable news berhythms the speaker's failing marriage identifies the viewing of distant catastrophe as a makeshift response to present catastrophe, the loneliness of viewing not perpetrated upon the speaker by a transnational media corporation, but chosen as a small refuge against a local enemy. And woven into this touching, complex domestic scene we can also see the movements of a geopolitical, contextual timeline, that of a suburban Beijing resident watching the invasion of a distant city. The poem's speaker is a civilian who is not having imperial feelings: rather than the American narrative of a dangerous regime being toppled for cause, from the perspective of Jiang Tao's poem the invasion of Baghdad could be repeated in any national capital. Rather than a triumphal story of victory, the future invasion of Beijing or D.C. or anywhere seems vividly possible.

Whether "My Baghdad" was intended as a cross-cultural text or not, it gains substantially in translation. Not only was the shape and temporality of global news media in 2003 widely shared by the poem's potential transnational audience, but so was the disaffection and mistrust of the official narrative around "liberating" Iraq. Arrayed in short lines and enjambed quatrains, the poem's blocklike visual prosody and disturbed, fragmented sentence-building both come through quite well in English; the poem's focus on geopolitics, often a preoccupation of English readers when reading Chinese poetry, attracts concerted attention and helps sustain it. The reward for this attention is the ability, for a moment, to enrich the timeline of the English reader: to see one's self not as a democratically entitled participant in a debate over invasion and conciliation, risk and preemption, but as a person in a city that could itself be shuttered, evacuated, and then flattened. And in the interactions between the global geopolitical story and the domestic story of the poem, it makes the point that these occupations and invasions are happening constantly. We can see, in the machinery of the poem's organization of time, the raw power of the CNN era, in which potentially billions of people could be watching the same single video feed.



If nationalism had its time structured by the newspaper and the novel, then globalization might very well have been rhythmized in part by the way that live-feed broadcasts can gather people together at the same time from distant places, disparate languages, and discrete ideologies.

The global moment of “My Baghdad” is ending. It is ending in small ways: rather than a single live feed—with journalists from each region watching a single conflagration from the roofs of a small cluster of hotels near Baghdad—the war between Russia and Ukraine is being mediated in countless small chunks, data points that combine to create experiences of the war that differ vastly between the United States and China. It is also ending in large ways, with a divergence between media cultures that creates barriers between WeChat and Facebook, Weibo and Twitter, even between TikTok and Douyin. The last wave of Chinese-made films that sold well both in China and abroad were produced between 2002 and 2006.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, the 2019 blockbuster *Wandering Earth* sold 99% of its almost \$700 million in tickets inside mainland China. These differences are not simply regulatory or economic: they represent and reinforce differences in time-sense. In *Wandering Earth*, Chinese members of a United Earth Government successfully fight to prevent the Earth both from being engulfed by the expanding sun and from colliding into Jupiter, guiding it to an interstellar journey outside the solar system; the tone is one of struggle and sacrifice towards a difficult, but ultimately reachable goal. 2019’s top-grossing movie in the United States, by contrast, was *Avengers: Endgame*, in which the shared goal is to travel back in time in order to undo the obliteration of half the universe’s population. There are, of course, many nostalgic films (and media centered around time travel) created in China, as well as many progressive and future-oriented films made in the United States, but the fact remains that media ecologies create and reify timelines, and distinct media ecologies will produce distinct affects, ideologies, and experiences of time.

These differences between time-sense in different places are *symptoms* and not causes of the attenuation of transnational time. The social forms underpinning a sense of globally shared time are under increasing pressure; the social forms that reward a strong sense of transnational time are less and less prominent. Media, people and goods all cross borders with increasing difficulty. Although human behavior across the globe is and will remain

4 While 2000’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* had an overwhelmingly non-Chinese audience, *Hero* (2002) had a global gross of \$177 million, and about \$140 million in tickets were sold outside China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. *Fearless* (2006) had a global gross of \$68 million and a non-Chinese gross of \$46 million. Data from [boxofficemojo.com](http://boxofficemojo.com), retrieved in September 2022.

mutually influential, especially the burning of carbon-based fuel, it seems increasingly likely that in the middle future, residents of neither the United States nor the People's Republic will be able to sense the lived realities of the other in anything but the most abstract terms. Transnational rhythm—the way one wakes up to a dozen messages from the other side of the world, written while you were sleeping, the way one checks in a few months after a movie's release to see what audiences thought about it on the Chinese review site Douban 豆瓣—will degrade into transnational information, a set of messages formally passed from one place to another. In the place of global progressive time (or, as Neimanis and Walker point out, global sustainability), Timothy Morton (2016) invokes Douglas Hofstadter to claim that the climate catastrophe is producing “strange loops” (9): first-world ecological awareness, for example, is a strange loop, a noir in which the detective realizes that they are also the perpetrator. The strangest of the loops he describes is the strange loop caused by *place*:

Place has a strange loop form because place deeply involves time. Place doesn't stay still, but bends and twists: place is a twist you can't iron out of the fabric of things. Nearness does not mean obviousness: just ask someone looking at a dust mite down a scanning electron microscope. When massive entities such as the human species and global warming become thinkable, they grow near. They are so massively distributed we can't directly grasp them empirically. We vaguely sense them out of the corner of our eye while seeing the data in the center of our vision. These “hyperobjects” remind us that *the local is in fact the uncanny*. (Morton 2016, 11)

What he means is that I am in a place that is bending and twisting in time. I am sitting at my desk in Rockefeller Hall at Cornell University typing, specifically in a fog so dense and high (this building is on a hilltop) that the nearby bell tower is completely invisible—even Klarman Hall across the street is just a gauzy outline. I am supposed to write about the death of world time but I am wondering if this level of fog, at the top of a hill on an early September afternoon, is normal or not, if I have seen it before or not from my window. I am searching local Twitter to find out if anyone else is seeing what I am seeing: I am looking into the history of Ithaca fog. And this place, this thing happening in this place, is inside me. The squish of invisible cars passing by on the street below is in my ears. The air smells wet. The apparatus with which I examine the place is a function of the place, and when I examine anything else, when I remember or look forward,

my place is reproduced, echoed in my memory or imagining. Concepts, especially the imperceptibly large and distributed concepts that Morton calls “hyperobjects,” present themselves most strangely and threateningly as I look at my place.

Chinese literature, especially but not exclusively that which is invested in the concept of China as nation and home, is in its own set of strange loops: to read them from my own place today is to feel their difference, their arrhythmic discordance with the loops of my own location. Xi Chuan 西川’s 2014 long poem “Bloom” (Kaihua 开花), translated in 2022 by Lucas Klein in the collection *Bloom and Other Poems*, is just this kind of work. The poem begins:

if you’re going to bloom then bloom to my rhythm  
close your eyes for one second breathe for two be silent for three then bloom

你若要开花就按照我的节奏来  
一秒钟闭眼两秒钟呼吸三秒钟静默然后开出来 (Xi Chuan 2022, 2–3)

Over the course of the poem, the call to bloom repeats and mutates, in a single couplet mixing command with request with plea (“so I order you to bloom that is request you to bloom / I humbly implore you” 所以我命令你开花就是请求你开花 / 我低声下气地劝你, 2–3), elsewhere offering enticements (“do it to my rhythm and you’ll bloom blossoms of happiness” 按照我的节奏来你就会开出喜悦的花朵, 6–7) and threats (“string up and beat any beast that refuses to bloom” 将那些拒绝开花的畜生吊起来抽打, 10–11). This poem, as an artifact in the Chinese language and in a Chinese polity, is in a strange loop. The blooming it insists on is new, dynamic, “a game of adventure” and “an escape” (冒险的游戏 ... 出路, 8–9), it is profuse and future-oriented—“the guy fixing computers on Alpha Hydrae says you should bloom” (星宿一上修电脑的少年说开花, 12–13). And yet, at the same time, what it means to bloom in the poem is deeply imbricated with the history of revolutionary language in Chinese. The grandiose claims, the occasional threat of violence, the images of spacefaring, and most of all the intense, sloganlike repetition of the poem all call to mind language addressed to the socialist public in the midcentury, when media liberally seeded the life of the masses with texts reflecting the rhythm of the leadership. The imperative mode of the poem allows for plenty of irony, but the work as a whole never shows itself to be insincere in calling for a general bloom.

This poem is, however, far from a Maoist piece: *kaihua* (开花 “bloom”) also appears as *kaiyang* (开放, 8–9), a synonym for bloom that also means

to reform, to lift a ban, or to remove a restriction. *Kaifang* is the heart of the formulation of China's transition away from Maoist politics, the policy known as *gaige kaifang* (改革开放, "Reform and Opening Policy"), Deng Xiaoping's omnibus strategy that echoed *glasnost* and *perestroika* and covered economic and cultural policy from commodity production to religious practice. In 2014, during the very early presidency of Xi Jinping, hopes were high that the near future of the Party would swing back towards reform. Wen-ti Sung (2014), writing in *The Diplomat* in 2014 under the title "Is Xi Jinping a Reformer?", pointed out that Xi had recently visited Guangdong Province in a self-conscious echo of Deng Xiaoping's "Southern Tour." Sung, like the smarter of the transnational analysts of the time, found evidence for and against a liberal future for the Xi administration: the exercise, though, marks for us the fact that this was a moment right at the start of the Strike Hard Campaign against the Uyghurs of Xinjiang, before the bans on for-profit school tutoring, before the intensive media restrictions of the teens, before COVID Zero. It could have appeared that a moment of reform and opening was in the balance; indeed, it might very well have been. This is the loop that "Bloom" tries to make, provoking a return of the very specific moment of the early 1980s in which avant-garde poetry in China was reborn, and in which culture expanded (or bloomed) into innumerable new fields. Reform and opening signifies powerfully in the century-long rhythmic movement between openness and restriction that Richard Baum (2012) described as a "distinctive *fang-shou* [放收] cycle" (338), and the desire for an inflection point in which culture begins to swing back towards reform and opening is a deep structure of the poem's movement through the time-context of its author and readers.

The movements of the *fang-shou* cycle—in which citizen voices are given license to experiment, and the results are selectively suppressed in a resurgence of centralized state control<sup>5</sup>—are not simply a conceptual rhythm in "Bloom." They also influence and reflect its prosody. The long, looping lines and their repetitions produce a sensation of heightening by building layer upon layer, with acts of pleading, argumentation, and imagination laid atop one another, creating a powerful gestalt. Zhang Yonghui and Zhang Hua (2018) describe the poem's prosody like this: "A sense of music runs through the entire piece ... like ocean waves beating ceaselessly against the shore, like

5 One representative moment of this rhythmic swing was the Hundred Flowers Movement of 1956–1957, in which loyal Party members were encouraged to engage in constructive criticism; it was followed by the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957–1959), in which many of these new critical voices were sidelined and punished.

a waterfall roaring as it surges, forward then down, endlessly transforming” (音乐感从始至终贯穿下来 ... 如海浪击岸绵绵不绝, 如瀑布奔腾呼啸, 一泻而下, 千变万化, 51). The poem’s rushing tempo, enabled in part by the constant return to the main theme and its singular goal, is strongly related to its intervention into its time-context; this explains why it feels similar to poems like Hu Feng 胡风’s “Time Has Begun” (Shijian kaishile 时间开始了). Although they are different poems, with vastly different politics, they both create a revolutionary cadence, using repetition and a secure sense of occasion to allow the reader to move continuously forward through the poem. This is a verse rhythm that appears very rarely in contemporary American poetry; I would go so far as to say it is a *feeling* that appears very rarely in contemporary American poetry.

The metrical, contextual, and deictic timescales of “Bloom” are dissonant with the increasingly elegiac time-scale of the English transnational reader. The goals of individual cultural texts differ, but across Anglophone culture, elegiac temporalities repeat, from fascist projects of reconstruction—creating a new future by mourning the loss of an ideal past—to the sense of past and future loss that drives the environmentalist’s projects of sustainability, land reclamation, and species preservation. Lynn Pedersen’s prose poem “A Brief History of the Passenger Pigeon” describes the extinction of the species like this:

If you could somehow travel back to this scene, through the would-be canvas, you would run flailing your arms toward the hardwood forests and the men with sticks and guns and boiling sulphur pots to bring birds out of the trees, as if you could deliver 50,000 individual warnings, or throw yourself prostrate on the ground, as if your one body could hold sway. (Pedersen 2016)

Even the Afrofuturist singer and writer Janelle Monae (2022), in her short story collection *The Memory Librarian*, writes that “we lived in a nation that asked us to forget in order to find wholeness, but memory of who we’ve been—of who we’ve been punished for being—was always the only map into tomorrow.” Xi Chuan knows about this dissonance. In an interview with Xu Zhiyuan, he explains that his current work is intended to be of its era: “I think we’re living at a historical turning point ... If I just wanted to preserve my existing state and not be open to new possibilities, I’d be wasting the era. And this era should not be wasted ...” (Xi Chuan 2022, 199). In the poem “Annoyances,” he writes “Hawking, that London extraterrestrial, uses the sound of metal to prophesy that the earth won’t make it another two

hundred years. / But the city I live in is still acting young, with buildings still growing. May they continue to develop for a thousand years” (霍金, 那个伦敦的外星人, 用金属声预言地球坚持不了两百年了。可我的城市还在装嫩呢, 楼房还在长个呢, 2022, 67). Its tongue in its cheek, the poem plays out the collapse of environmental consciousness, beginning with the speaker looking at an old refrigerator that still uses Freon, and ending with a desire for ice water, which turns into a desire for “a bigger refrigerator” (2022, 71). The associative logic of the poem reveals a kind of emotional gravity towards the quotidian, with the invisible aerosols of the upper atmosphere resolving, through the chained thoughts of a wandering mind, down to thirst, parenting, the “usual” needs of the daily. Xi Chuan, setting himself the task of being a poet of his age, is looping strangely through a Beijing in which the threat of a transformed climate is not quite present, where the temporality of global peril is a dimly superimposed future that occasionally haunts a bustling, expansive sense of the present. And he is clear that this sense of time, this loop, is different from that in Hawking’s alien world. It is different because it runs through its own particular place.

As the climate crisis progresses, time’s relationship to place will grow stronger. The people of some climate temporalities will encounter the image of a Freon-leaking refrigerator in an imperial capital with murderous rage, and the destruction of such will be the shape of the future they envision; for some, refrigeration in general will seem an impossible luxury, an alien succor in a hot world; for some, the refrigerator will feel like a remnant of the world before catastrophe. The timeline of global progress—no refrigerator, new refrigerator, better refrigerator—will remain in some places and at some moments, but many fewer. The experience of simultaneity, in which the poet says “bloom to my rhythm” and the reader unfurls, will exist in a smaller community. There is nothing in “Annoyances” or “Bloom” that helps me understand a midday, hilltop fog, and it would be unfair to expect them to do so. If the fog settles in for the long term, or if the weather here continues to be eerily unpredictable, then the people of my place will have to build our own conceptual and practical temporalities. So it will be for drought, so it will be for the floods: we can still share drought-time or flood-time with others, even distant others, but not with everyone at once, and the geographical shape of the unisons we experience today will end up much changed. To put this concretely, in my Chinese literature class in the United States, it will feel increasingly difficult to teach the translation of “Bloom” exclusively on the basis of its reflection of the contemporary Chinese zeitgeist, because those rhythms will be less relevant to local students. The catastrophe has the promise to strengthen borders, localize markets, and shrink empires:

students who today are motivated to study China in concert with present or future migration, out of an interest in global economic capital, or on the basis of a relationship (whether supportive or critical) to American imperial interests may be fewer in number every year. The pandemic has shown that large proportions of those transnational movements and projects can simply disappear, and with them, the imminent need to understand and fit into conceptions of time in the People's Republic.

What, then, is the rhythm of transnational reading outside a sense of globalized time? Like all other experiences of time during the climate catastrophe, transnational reading will *loop strangely through a place*. The disarticulation of linear progress timelines, the return of certain past lifeways, and the inability to retain a sense of historical and biological continuity that will be hallmarks of catastrophic time will require reading that is itself unstuck from these rhythms. That reading will then loop in unexpected ways as biome and life form discover survivable patterns with which to interact. Prevented from acting in global unison, and unable to participate in the seasonal, economic, and cultural rhythms traditional to us, we will use shuffle beats and dembows and trap beats, we will live in syncopations and polyrhythms. It is difficult to predict which sources of rhythm will be most useful; because time is changing, our pattern recognition must be flexible and diverse. The dissonance between our contextual rhythm and a translated poem's temporality might be the source of new rhythm. Rather than falling into pattern with a transregional group of people, we will discover our rhythms with our places, our assumption being not that there is a world-sized system of activity that will take our communities through the catastrophe, but that small systems will need to be identified day to day, moment to moment. We will encounter simultaneity and pattern in our own place as a surprise first and a system later: this, as Morton (2016, 7) says, is "emerging ecological awareness," a moment of strange recognition that is an awakening to new patterns.

Strange recognition, the nascent patterns we call arrhythmia, and the backbeat already make up important elements of transnational reading. Joanna Krenz (2022) points out that the exploitation of unlikely and intangible affinities between disparate poetic traditions is an important part of translation, and tries to elucidate these "alternative linkages, demonstrating how resonance and dissonance can be orchestrated with spectacular effect" (127–28). Translation is experienced out of time with the original—it took eight years for "Bloom" to go from Chinese composition to English print—and it is often read in slightly or strongly different time-contexts. We know as well that the time of poetic meter is one of the most thoroughly transformed

elements of Chinese poetry in English translation; Xi Chuan's poetry often revels in long lines, long enough that they overflow the width of the English-language book page and have to be indented, transforming the poetry's visual prosody. When we read these poems subtly outside their places, outside their natal rhythms, we have lots of choices: we can imaginatively reconstruct the poem's original time-context, triangulating between the prosodies of the Chinese and the English to get a sense of the time of speaking the poem in Chinese, or we can focus on the mutated temporality of the English effect. Those indentations with which the English "Bloom" indicates that the original poem is made of long lines are themselves a visual rhythm in English, a left-right alternation that gives the sense of spilling-over and produces unpredictable visual breaks and gaps. There are situations—we may find ourselves in situations—where those are appropriate rhythms, moments in which we need the space of that indentation to hold a rhythmic silence. So too, with the time of a poem's story or the time of its speaking: in a translation, these are already looped strangely, with the distant origin and the present performance superimposed on the local in a novel and unpredictable way.

Reading through strange loops is itself a concept that appears in Chinese literary history, one that accompanies moments of cataclysmic cultural change. Paola Iovene (2014, 127–28) discusses the way that 1980s writers received Douglas Hofstadter's *Godel, Escher, Bach*, in which the term was first conceptualized. She describes the way that authors received and redirected the poetry of the late Tang poet Li Shangyin 李商隐 (813–858) in strange loops, precisely because those loops create "nesting," a process in which distinctions between the outside and the inside or the background and the foreground melt, with several units propping up or generating one another, and the smallest embedded unit sometimes expanding to encompass the largest. These structures may break out of predetermined patterns, generating unpredictable outcomes.

She illustrates this process most sharply in a reading of Ge Fei's 格非 novella *Brocade Zither*, in which a character fearfully imagining what seems like his imminent demise splits into parallel selves, each one of whom encounters, reads or composes Li Shangyin's poem "Brocade Zither" (锦瑟). She argues that its "experimentation with multiple temporal threads often culminates in moments of 'achrony,' conveying, as the narrator states, the feeling of being 'out of time'" (Iovene 2014, 134). This out-of-timeness, this repetitive looping through my bookshelves, this attempt to create a future with the arcane and dreamlike tools of the past, is the struggle I find myself presented with as I stare into the fog. It seems fitting that a tactic



that came into wide use at the end of socialist progressive time in China would recur as the rhythm of global capital falters and sways.

I return, then, to “My Baghdad.” I am cognizant, as I do so, that my re-reading might engage in something that could be called reader-response criticism, an epistemological prioritization of my local experience over the community of exchange between author and reader. I know that this tradition of reading has appeared, then disappeared. I am now tempted towards it again, even though it can be a deeply solipsistic, Orientalizing, and anti-dialogic practice. But this version of reader-response criticism is not the speech of self to self with a book as provocation: it is a dialogue of self with place, with the literary text as syllabary and chorus. It is not a universal theory of reading in which “the temporal flow is monitored and structured by everything the reader brings with him, by his competences” (Fish 1980, 25) but an attempt to bring medial, metrical, and deictic temporalities in Chinese texts into some pattern with the moment through which I struggle. The tradition from which I enter this transformative reading practice is not the primacy of reader-as-consumer or a deconstructionist mistrust of an ‘original’ text, but the tradition of Chinese writers themselves, reacting to disruptions in their notions of time by repeatedly pulling old texts into new futures. The goal of my moment is not, as it was even just ten years ago, to bring the Sinosphere and Anglosphere into a relationship like that of authors and readers: it is to know and perhaps heal the place in which I live, using the dissonances and rhythms of Chinese life with the world around me to find patterns that can repeat and persist.

When I reread “My Baghdad” from my place, it is the all-night television of the final stanza that feels the most insistent, sitting as I am in front of a four-foot wide glass window that seems to be malfunctioning. The Baghdad on TV and the poem’s domestic scene seep back and forth fluidly across the membrane of the screen, with the name Baghdad inhabiting the sleeping wife in stanza one, and the tiny cars driving through Baghdad mirroring the wife’s indiscretions in stanza three. The bombing attack in stanzas four and five is happening in both Iraq and Beijing, the two experiences nested and twinning in a way that expresses the speaker’s deep sense of being out of place in the marriage and the world. The final stanza’s revelation, in this reading, is that the narrator has done this *intentionally*, turned the television on and left it on all night to create exactly this feeling, to create the feeling of a barricaded flat in downtown Baghdad. The sleeping wife is content to pretend, insensitive to the fact that a young migrant worker has tipped off her spouse; the speaker by contrast opens a direct channel to the war, and in so doing accepts that it is already somehow present. The

mirroring between Baghdad and Beijing in the poem is not subconscious or deterministic, it is not a dream, but a choice. The speaker chooses to see the Beijing suburban apartment as a target in an attack, and the vision of the orange streetlights helps shake loose the old habits of cohabitation. It is normal to describe cable television as a numbing agent or a distraction: here, it is helping the speaker find out how to feel.

That reading helps explain my return to the experience of the fog. I don't want to look at my desk or read another book, I won't pull the shade on the window. The fog's actual provenance—whether it is a normal occurrence of weather that would have happened before the climate crisis, or whether it is uniquely caused or intensified by changes in local weather—is not relevant, just as the possibility or impossibility of a bombing raid on Beijing is irrelevant. Something from the environment is seeping through the screen to affect me. The fog makes me feel a lack of modern, global vision. It is the opposite of satellite imagery, the opposite of areal maps, the opposite even of watching a weather front approach slowly over a distant, low-relief horizon. It seeps, like the war in Baghdad, into the room where I work and think, and influences how I research and write, what I believe that I can see. One does not necessarily prove an argument in the fog, or assemble an archive; structures in fog are temporary. Instead, one draws close to the people who are present. One listens, watches, remains tense and ready, focusing the senses so as to get a few extra seconds of notice before the emergence of what is to come. If Jiang Tao's television screen is a mirror and a membrane, my window is a clouded eye, a cottoned ear: I strain my senses through it. I choose this posture precisely because I can feel the disruptions in the timeline to come: the predictive power of timelines and the continuous pursuit of global interconnectivity that I have been participating in for many years are no longer in full effect. What is in effect is somewhere out there, in the fog. And so I choose to look, because it makes my office into a kind of weather station.

What matters about reading in strange loops during a time of catastrophe is that looping *generates* a sense of time. Time takes place in rhythms that repeat; this is the effect of the circles of the clock hand, the orbits of the earth, and the procession of the seasons. Stable time is made in known loops, and new senses of time come from strange loops. As we lose global time, as our senses of simultaneity and progression attenuate, we must twist the polycrisis of the present into the poems of the past, weirding the way that they structure time and applying our hermeneutic skills not only to the text of a poem, but to its foggy, unpredictable, emergent interactions with the world. We sacrifice the comparative cleanliness and verifiability of the

artist's conception of the poem for the blurrier life of the poem in motion. I come to read "My Baghdad" not just as the collapse of a household or a poem pitched against American air wars, but also as a moment of epistemic collapse, the unsteady and insufficiently fortified end of one historical period as it touches up against another. I see the screen at the poem's end not exclusively as a piece of early twenty-first-century media history, but as an emblem for the decision to refuse denial. I can take this method, if I like, back to Xi Chuan's "Bloom" or any other poem with which I feel out of sync; somewhere in the syncopation between the poem and its listener, Chinese time and Ithaca time, or pre-crisis and post-crisis history, there can be a pattern with which to create a survivable sense of tomorrow.

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### About the Author

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## 2. Redefining Family Women: The Ecofeminist Poetics of Shu Ting and Wang Xiaoni

*Liansu Meng*

**Abstract:** This chapter examines select poems and essays by Shu Ting and Wang Xiaoni written since the 1980s, analyzing the ecofeminist poetic visions behind their steadfast, even defiant self-identification as “family women.” Both poets navigated the challenges of establishing their unique poetic voices amid the dual pressures of being both poets and family women within a predominantly male literary landscape and a patriarchal society. Their nuanced perspectives offer powerful resonances with and fresh dimensions to contemporary ecofeminist thought. The chapter first explores Shu Ting’s approach, marked by her direct engagement with critical issues through unflinching detail and biting irony. In contrast, Wang Xiaoni’s style is more elliptical, using pared-down imagery and layered metaphors to reveal her incisive observations.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Chinese poetry, Contemporary Chinese women poets, Anthropocene, ecofeminist poetics, Shu Ting, Wang Xiaoni

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated deep-seated inequalities and spotlighted a range of previously neglected injustices across political systems and national boundaries. One issue that has drawn increasing attention is the systematic exploitation of women. Despite the progress made in the past century, women are still expected to be the primary caretakers in most families around the world and their heavy workloads at home continue to be naturalized, trivialized, and overlooked. Working mothers are routinely expected to balance work and life, while fathers are largely free from such expectations. As the pandemic forced families to stay home and daycares and

schools to close, the additional caretaking responsibilities disproportionately fell on the shoulders of mothers who were already walking a tightrope. For many, the pandemic became the last straw that forced them to quit their jobs and completely neglect themselves in order to cope with their mounting responsibilities at home.

The widespread plight of working mothers foregrounded by the pandemic strikingly resembles that of the working mothers in China since the start of the post-socialist era in 1978. The direct cause for the aggravated plight of Chinese women, however, was not a pandemic, but new androcentric discourses and initiatives that reversed the socialist-era gender equality policies and revived traditional gender roles, pressuring women to “return” home and freeing up men to focus on full-speed pursuit of economic development. This resurgence of gender inequality since the early 1980s in China has been critiqued by writers and scholars alike (Xu [1980] 1982; Zhang 2001; Fincher 2014). Such an exploitive paradigm of development based on binary gender hierarchy not only reinforces traditional gender divisions that make women’s positions in the family seem natural and trivial, but it also compounds other injustices as it expands into more areas where disadvantaged groups and the natural environment are exploited in a similar pattern.

Shu Ting 舒婷 (b. 1952) and Wang Xiaoni 王小妮 (b. 1955), two well-known contemporary Chinese poets and writers, both involuntarily slipped into the exhausting role of working mother at the start of the post-socialist era when they each gave birth to a son in 1982 soon after marrying their respective literary-critic husbands.<sup>1</sup> Both poets were compelled to strive against relentless currents in order to find their own standing and distinct poetics as they grappled with the conflicting expectations for their double identity as poets and family women in the unforgivingly male-dominated field of poetry and society at large. In their poetry and essays since the 1980s, both Shu Ting and Wang Xiaoni have adamantly identified as family women despite their acute awareness of the negative connotations of this term. Both share deep reflections and incisive critiques of the anthropocentric and androcentric paradigm of development, expansion, and self-destruction on a global scale from the perspectives of “family women” outsiders. Scholars in China, Shu Ting’s and Wang Xiaoni’s respective husbands included, however, frequently misinterpret the poets’ self-identification as situated within the traditional, “natural” framework of women’s positions and duties at home (Xu 2005; Chen 2006; Zhang 2013). Even an ecofeminist reading of Shu Ting’s

1 There are very few studies on Shu Ting and Wang Xiaoni in the English language. For overviews of literary biographical accounts of both poets, see Tamburello (2021) and Meng (2021).

poetry repeats the long-debunked essentialist equivalence of women and nature and argues that the poet expresses “women’s mild and exquisite feelings” through the “feminization of natural images” (Geng 2016). Eleanor Goodman (2016) is among the few who point out that Wang’s choice to stay at home “risks the scorn of others who do not view either housework or poetry as genuine labor” (69). Goodman also incisively notes Wang’s broader concerns about the “interactions between humans and the natural world” and “environmental degradation, wealth inequality, and local corruption” underneath all the details of ordinary life in her poetry (Haman 2019).

This essay offers a close reading of selected poems and essays by Shu Ting and Wang Xiaoni written since the 1980s and parse the distinct ecofeminist poetic visions behind their adamant, even defiant, self-identification as family women. It should be noted that neither poet has labeled their poetry as ecofeminist. They are likely unaware of the Western ecofeminist theories that developed since the 1970s and were introduced into China in the late 1990s.<sup>2</sup> However, their astute poetic insights frequently resonate with and sharpen contemporary ecofeminist critiques in stunning ways. Shu Ting tackles crucial issues head-on with unsparing details and scathing irony, while Wang Xiaoni embeds her razor-sharp perceptions in pared-down images and enigmatic metaphors.

## Mollusks with Shells

As Shu Ting recalls in her essay “Give Her an Ample Space” (*Gei ta yige zugou de kongjian* 给她一个足够的空间), written on March 11, 1994, before she even married, she became acutely aware of the punishing household responsibilities married women had to shoulder through the example of her sister-in-law. She attempted to avoid the same pitfalls and maintain her pre-marriage freedom and autonomy by asking her then fiancé, Chen Zhongyi 陈仲义 (b. 1948), to sign a prenuptial agreement, promising that she would do no housework after marriage, that they would live by themselves rather than with their parents, and that they would both be free to make their own friends. However, these promises were swiftly broken with their son’s birth in 1982 and her parents-in-law moving in with them soon after (112–13). Shu Ting found herself involuntarily swept into the predicament she had tried to avoid by the newly buttressed and powerful conventions

2 For a brief overview of the introduction of ecofeminist theories into China and studies of Chinese literature, see Meng 2023.



that designated married women as the “natural” caregivers of the family and trivialized their intellectual work. As she incisively remarks in the essay, “I am a writer ‘sitting at home,’ and it seems to be my unshirkable responsibility to take care of the housework” (113–14).

In another essay “No Way to Be Care-free” (Wuji ke xiaosa 无计可潇洒), written on March 14, 1994, Shu Ting further details her draining responsibilities as the sole caretaker of her family of five, and their heavy toll on her capacity to focus on writing and on her mental health, which calls to mind the debilitating struggles of many mothers who were juggling expanded responsibilities both at work and at home during the pandemic:

I have parents-in-law in their eighties, a sickly, naughty young son, and a bookworm husband. You have no idea how much it is hurting my brain to simply carry the grocery basket [meaning “to cook”] for the family of five. No matter how much you have done, there is always and endlessly more housework to do, as well as express letters, telegraphs, and long-distance calls urging me to hurry up and submit my writings. Every morning, I dig my child out of his bed and prepare his breakfast, I go to the wet market, I gut the fish and set it on the plate, and I put ribs and radishes into the pot to cook soup. With fish scales in my hair, oil stains on my chest, and the apron still tied to my waist, I rush to sit down at the writing desk, just to suddenly remember the clothes in the washing machine, yet to be taken out and air-dried. How can one enter a flow state!

There is never a moment of boredom out of utter idleness. What is constant is acute anxiety and restlessness, frustration over my worthlessness, and despair over the impasse. (120)<sup>3</sup>

Later in the essay, Shu Ting stresses that her crippling struggles to juggle the responsibilities of family and work are not hers alone, but unique to her generation of Chinese women in the new era and much worse than women of earlier generations. As she pointedly writes, her grandmother devoted herself to serve the husband’s family [in old China], her mother devoted herself to serve the [Chinese Communist] Party [during the socialist era], but

when it comes to our generation, we not only take care of the parents-in-law, the husband, and the children as in the old days, but we also

3 All English translations of essays and poetry in this chapter are mine except as noted. The citations provided are for the poets’ original works published in Chinese.

participate in all the activities men are doing, such as seeking promotions, changing jobs, buying houses, and dealing with the inflation. (118)

Shu Ting's trenchant critique of the devastating ramifications of the new policies and initiatives in the post-socialist period neither begins in 1994, as the publication dates of these searing essays might imply, nor centers exclusively on gendered reflections on women's worsened suffering in the new era. Her essays in the 1980s already indicated that her poignant personal sufferings had led her to critically reflect on her earlier indoctrinated notions of nature, and to critique the androcentric equivalence and exploitation of women and nature in the new era. In her essay "Revelation" (Shenqi 神启), written on August 13, 1986, Shu Ting muses on her recent shift of views that transpired without her noticing:

When did I walk out of the dark forest in my heart? When did I cautiously yet firmly stop using the word "worship" for the people and things that I deeply love and respect?

...

You can break away from your idol, but you must make peace with nature. (93)

As with many poets, Shu Ting often writes in the language of poetic metaphors in her essays. The line, "walked out of the dark forest in my heart" could be straight out of a poem, indicating the speaker's empowering reclamation of her agency after a dark period of perplexity, loss, and pain. Shu Ting does not specify the causes of this dark period nor the people or things that demanded her idolization during that time. Her cautious but firm attitude about breaking away from notions of "worship" and "idol" shows both the powerful hold those "people and things" previously had on her and the extraordinary resolution, agency, and cognizant clarity she has now gained. Her new emphatic affirmation of the present necessity to "make peace with nature" hints at an earlier combative/confrontational relationship with nature. This pivotal shift in her view of nature is spelled out further in her essay "Reading 'Walking Sceneries'" (Wo du "Xingzou de Fengjing" 我读《行走的风景》) written on April 2, 1992. In the essay, Shu Ting shares her sobering reflection on a prose-poem-turned-slogan about heroic human confrontation with nature popular during her youth in the socialist period:

I think of our youth, think of the popular slogan: let the storm rage more fiercely! Storms could certainly shape heroes, but this inevitably entails the heavy price of drowning the weak and small. Further, storms do not

go away easily and would eventually exceed our expectations and evolve into devastating floods such as the one that caused countless losses last year. (1994, 212)

“Let the storm rage more fiercely” is the final line from Russian poet Maxim Gorky’s (1868–1936) prose poem “Petrels” (1901), widely quoted during the socialist period to symbolize the revolutionary youth’s heroic resolution to triumph over all challenges, particularly in the battle against nature when many urban youths were sent to the rural areas in China during the Cultural Revolution. Reexamining the idolization of the heroic conquest of nature in her youth, which ironically continues to undergird the industrialization process in the post-socialist era, Shu Ting calls attention to the complex and disastrous side of such a human-nature confrontation, an insight that resonates with many ecofeminists today. As she cautions, the making of heroes through such confrontations is at the expense of the lives of “the weak and small,” that is, humans, animals, and other living beings in vulnerable and disadvantaged conditions. She drives her point further by reminding the reader of the disastrous and long-lasting aftermath of the previous year’s storms, which led to a dangerous flood and heavy losses. In this respect, breaking away from hero/idol worship and making peace with nature go hand in hand in marking Shu Ting’s ecofeminist turn.

Greta Gaard explains ecofeminism as

having grown out of many women’s interconnected sense of self-identity—a deep recognition of interbeing that bridges socially constructed boundaries of class, race, species, sexuality, gender, age, ability, nation, and more—and an ‘entangled empathy’ [attributed to Gruen 2012] that brings both compassion and action to the task of alleviating conditions of eco-social injustice. (Gaard 2016, 68)

A decade before the introduction of any ecofeminist theories into China, Shu Ting offered her profound critique that resonates with Gaard’s delineation of ecofeminism in 2016. In her essay “Rain on the Tomb-Sweeping Day” (Qingming jianyu 清明剪雨), written on April 5, 1988, Shu Ting shows that her deep empathy for the weak and small, and her vision for an anti-heroic, peaceful relation with nature, is deeply connected to her struggles with the conflicts between social expectations and her self-perception as a family woman in a society dominated by patriarchal values. She underscores the striking difference between men and women’s expected gender roles in the family and the perplexing situations women faced in the new era:

As female authors, Tang Min and I are often asked this question: how do you manage the relationship between family and career? Male authors are rarely asked such questions. It is as if women were a kind of mollusk that cannot move in rivers and lakes without their snail shells. Women who love their careers make people wary and are called *nü qiangren* (literally translated as “female strongman”); women who love their family are despised and dismissed as gifts of feudalism. Hence many fashionable ladies have emerged, who cannot love their careers and dare not love their families. (1994, 83–84)

Shu Ting’s sarcastic likening of society’s perception of women as “a kind of mollusk” is one of her most piercing ecofeminist observations of the simultaneous trivialization and equalization of women and nature, and the naturalization of women’s role as caretakers of the family by the male-dominated society. Right after that acerbic critique, Shu Ting declares her self-identification in a tongue-in-cheek, self-deprecating tone:

No doubt it’s lowly and laughable, but I believe I am still essentially a family woman. A few days ago, I went to give a talk at a high school literary society. The delightful kids handed me a note asking, “Can we see you again?” I instantly answered, “Of course. At the Gulangyu wet market—I get my groceries there every morning.” (1994, 83)

The ironic disclaimer “No doubt it’s lowly and laughable,” comes before her declaration: “I believe I am still essentially a family woman,” shows both Shu Ting’s acute awareness of society’s disparaging views of family women and her defiant opposition against those predominant views in the society.

Shu Ting’s 1996 poem “Natural Duty” (Tianzhi 天职) best showcases how her lived experiences as a family woman alienated from any centers of power inform her astute reflections on the profound interconnections between crucial issues not only in China but around the globe. The poem offers a stunning ecofeminist critique of the worldwide catastrophes that have resulted from military ambitions, climate change, industrial pollution, and traditional patriarchy from the seemingly mundane and anti-heroic perspective of a middle-aged family woman and mother. The poem reads:

One day I get up super early  
 Jogging by the sea, light and limber  
 I want to pare down my middle age  
 Like paring down military expenses,

By sheer whim and  
Unable to persist

The sordid beach reminds me of  
Water depletion in Africa  
Hippos awaiting death in mud holes  
Fleeing Serbian women and children  
Iraq starving  
India burning brides  
Drought in the Northeast earthquake in Yunnan  
Ugh the city I live in  
has been cold and rainy for days

A glistening garbage truck drives by from behind  
I wonder where it's driving to  
To bury the garbage in deep pits?  
To carry it to the open sea?  
Best to pack the radioactive materials  
Into a rocket shooting into outer space  
Alas I just worry about my future grandsons  
Unable to recognize stars like the Ox Boy and the Weaving Girl  
Only seeing garbage cans whirling in the sky

I stop by the Huangjiadu Market  
To buy one kilo of eggs and half a watermelon  
Hating that the vendors refuse to bargain  
I catch them off guard and grab a few scallions  
Someday I'll willingly  
Perform the duties of the UN secretary  
Yet still remember  
To cook a bowl of egg scallion soup for my son

—March 21, 1996

某一天我起了个绝早  
沿海边跑得又轻松又柔韧  
我想要削减我的中年  
有如削减军事开支  
全凭心血来潮且  
不能持之以恒

污秽的沙滩令我联想  
 非洲水源枯竭  
 河马坐毙于泥潭  
 逃难的塞族妇女与儿童  
 伊拉克饿着肚子  
 印度焚烧新娘  
 东北干旱 云南地震  
 唉 我居住的城市  
 低温阴雨已有许多天

垃圾车粼粼从身后驶过  
 不知开往何处  
 埋在深坑?  
 运往公海?  
 最好将辐射物资  
 装填成飞船射向宇宙  
 哎呀 就怕日后我的孙子们  
 不识牛郎织女星  
 唯见满天旋转垃圾桶

顺路去黄家渡市场  
 买两斤鸡蛋半个西瓜  
 恨菜贩子不肯杀价  
 趁其不备抓了几根葱  
 某一天我自觉  
 履行联合国秘书长的职责  
 为世界和平操心个不停  
 也没忘了  
 给儿子做碗葱花鸡蛋汤

—1996.3.21 (2014, 218–19)

Each stanza of the poem is structured on the juxtaposition of the “trivial” concerns of the family-woman/mother speaker and the urgent crises in China and around the world. The first stanza opens with a run-of-the-mill scene of the speaker on an early morning jog by the sea to lose some of her middle-age weight gain. The second half of the stanza catches the reader by surprise with the juxtaposition of the female speaker’s seemingly mundane goal to lose weight and the government’s grand goal of cutting military budgets. It further shocks the reader with the satirical comment about the futility of both attempts, forcing the reader to vacillate between trivializing and catastrophizing

both situations. Stanza two follows the speaker's eyes on the polluted beach by her side to the catastrophes around the world in her mind's eye. As she sees it, the environmental pollution around her is closely connected to the calamities around the world, including the impact of climate disasters on animals (such as deaths of hippos in Africa due to water depletion), humanitarian crises resulting from wars (such as the fleeing Serbian women and children and starving people in Iraq), oppression and persecution of women by traditional patriarchy (such as the burning of brides in India), natural disasters in China (such as droughts in Northeast China and earthquakes in Yunnan). Even the speaker's seemingly trivial complaint of the prolonged rainy weather in her city is not as trivial and mundane as it seems. For the drastic contrast between the water depletion in Africa at the beginning of the stanza and the unseasonal heavy precipitation on her side of the world, is a clear indication of the catastrophic impact of climate change on a global scale.

Stanza three starts with another indicator of human pollution noticed by the speaker, which prompts her mind's eye to wonder about the ethics and long-term impact of human pollution on a much larger scale. As she speculates on all the unethical possibilities of waste disposal, the speaker satirically suggests jettisoning the radioactive waste into outer space and then immediately warns of the dire consequences of such an action. It is not without irony that she refers to future generations as "my future grandsons" in line with the convention of the dominant patriarchal tradition. In the fourth and final stanza, the speaker unabashedly flaunts her identity as a middle-aged family woman and mother by detailing her daily responsibilities and activities. She even describes her "lowly and laughable" action of grabbing a few scallions from the vender when the latter refuses to bargain. The stanza again ends with an unlikely juxtaposition between the speaker's imagined assumption of the role of the UN secretary and her present role as a mother caring for her son, and the emphasis of the similarity between both in terms of the ethics of care. At this point, the poem's title "Natural Duty" takes on new meaning. If it initially makes the reader think of the "natural" duties of a married woman to her family, it now implies a distinct ecofeminist poetics that underscores an anti-heroic ethics of empathy and care for all creatures, humanity, and the natural environment around the world.

### **A Stubborn Maker in Her Cramped Room**

Like Shu Ting, Wang Xiaoni immediately slid into the caretaker role and shouldered all the heavy household responsibilities in her family after the

birth of her son in 1982. Wang's literary-critic husband, Xu Jingya 徐敬亚 (b. 1949), later praised her for doing all the household and caretaking work at home as an expression of her "whole-hearted love for her family" and "innermost maternal instinct," thus making her work in the family seem "natural" while trivializing it as "endless trifles":

That love is also a warm quagmire composed of endless trifles. She is the family's 24-hour worker, round-the-clock mother, and full-time wife. She is like a god-sent first-class housemaid, conscientiously watching countless electric, water, and gas switches, and managing five or six doors that allow no peeping through. When it's time for the three meals every day, she gently descends her sky ladder on time. And between the wet market, the washing machine, and the gas stove, with her all-permeating innermost maternal instinct, she cooks different kinds of and equally heart-warming dishes for her two loved ones at every meal. She is a full-time poet in the world only after all these. (2005, 21)

Xu continues to marvel at Wang's ability to capture her poetic thoughts amidst her myriad household responsibilities:

She can quickly rescue flashes of poetic lines amidst the smoke from the frying pan ... she can write in the dark, though the words are sometimes illegible the next day ... she can even write with her left hand in the dark, and tadpole-like words are often written onto the bedsheet. (2005, 21)

Likewise, some scholars in China, thinking within the traditional framework of women's responsibilities at home, interpret Wang's poetry in view of her so-called "housework infused with maternal instinct" (Zhang 2013, 145) and "'home' composed of the most ordinary human, family woman, wife and mother" (Chen 2006, 86).

Wang Xiaoni's perception of her position at home, however, differs greatly from that of Xu Jingya and other scholars who sing praises of her selfless devotion to domestic labor. Her cluster of poetry written in 1988 offers a much different, complex, and conflicting picture of her thoughts. She wrote these poems while working full-time at an editorial job and taking care of their five-year-old son alone in Shenzhen, the southern city they moved to in 1985. Xu had left Shenzhen in 1987 to pursue a career in the business world back in their hometown in Northeast China. The poem "Ought to Be a Maker" (Yinggai zuo yige zhizaozhe 应该做一个制造者) references Xu's relocation back to the north and depicts Wang's reflection on the vastly



different life status between men and women in the post-socialist era. The poem reads,

One year they ordered me to make wheat.  
 My arms nearly ripened,  
 My face grew wheat heads.  
 Another year they ordered me to make hemp ropes.  
 For a long time  
 Thoughts twined and twirled into a mass.  
 Now, I sit before dawn writing poetry.  
 You say that my complexion does not look good.  
 That I am ill.

When I am sick with this illness  
 You are hurrying from the south of the country to the north.  
 You say your footsteps are getting lighter  
 But my illness is too grave.  
 A parachute drifts from the hemorrhaging clouds,  
 I am falling.  
 Only when I write about the world  
 does the world appear, head lowered.  
 Only when I write about you  
 do you take off your glasses to look at me.  
 When I write about myself  
 My hair droops low, in need of a cut.

Please squint your eyes,  
 And don't look back, just walk into the distance.  
 I'll start to write poetry now  
 I am a stubborn maker  
 In my cramped room.<sup>4</sup>

有一年他们命我制造麦子。  
 我的手臂快熟了  
 脸上在生芒。  
 又有一年他们命我制造麻绳。  
 有许多时间  
 思想缠绕乱作一团。

4 Adapted from Diana Shi and George O'Connell's translation, see Wang 2008.

现在,我坐在天亮前写诗。  
你说我脸色不好。  
得了病了。

得这病的时候  
你正从国的南跑到国的北。  
你说,你的脚步在变轻  
可我的病太重了。  
从失血的云层飘来了降落伞  
我正在下落。  
我写世界  
世界才肯垂着头显现。  
我写你  
你才摘下眼镜看我。  
我写自己  
头发压得很低,应该剪了。

请你眯一下眼  
然后不要回头,直接走远。  
我要写诗了  
我是我狭隘房间里  
固执的制造者。

—1988年 深圳 (2017, 30–31)

In the first stanza, the speaker compares her life in the past and the present. “Make wheat” and “make hemp ropes” refer to the heavy physical labor undertaken in the fields and the factories of rural China by the urban youth, the poet included, who were ordered to leave their homes in the cities and receive “reeducation” in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The word “order” underlines the speaker’s complete lack of individual autonomy in these activities. The profound physical pain and mental suffering experienced by that generation of urban youth have been frequently depicted in literature and art. Wang’s depiction is particularly poignant because of the use of an extended metaphor, first comparing the speaker’s reddened arms under the scorching sun to the ripening of the wheat, then the pain of the sunburned face to the wheat sprouting awns. When it comes to the speaker’s present life in the new era, however, the reader is surprised by an unexpected turn. On the surface, the last three lines of the stanza offer straightforward descriptions of ordinary details of daily life and conversations between “you” and “I.” Read in the context

of Wang's struggles with her double identity as poet and working mother in the new era, however, writing poetry before dawn would imply that the speaker does not have time to write poetry during the day or her insomnia keeps her up at night. Either way, the speaker's act of writing poetry before dawn does not indicate a celebration of individual freedom in the new era, but rather, a last resort under strenuous circumstances. The addressee's statement about the speaker's unhealthy complexion and her sickness further underscores the physical toll of the heavy household labor on the speaker.

If the identity of the addressee is still ambiguous in the first stanza, it becomes clear in stanza two. Lines two and three reference Xu Jingya's relocation from the south to the north to pursue a career in business as well as his enthusiastic view of this pursuit. The whole stanza is structured on the sharply contrasted status of life between "you" and "I." While the addressee enjoys unlimited freedom of mobility in traveling around the country away from home and happily engaging in unfettered pursuit of a successful career, the speaker is gravely ill, has probably suffered from hemorrhaging, and is weighed down. The second half of the stanza highlights the unseen, lower status of the speaker in the eyes of the broader world and the addressee. The last line once again alludes to the busy life and heavy labor shouldered by the speaker, so much so that she has no time for self-care and does not notice that her hair is too long until it blocks her view when she finds a moment to lower her head to write poetry.

In the third and last stanza, the speaker proclaims her stubborn determination to keep writing poetry despite the cramped, limited space left for her by the male-dominated world. Her unequivocal affirmation of her identity as "a stubborn maker" of poetry at home underscores the comparable extent of excruciating labor involved in both her new identity in the new era and her past role as a forced maker of hemp ropes and wheat in the socialist period. Moreover, it shows an unmistakably strong agency on the part of the poet-speaker in sharp contrast with her complete lack of control in the past. Ironically, it is in this routinely ignored, trivialized, mistaken, and othered position in the home that the poet finds her unique agency and perspective as a clairvoyant outside observer of the minute details and subtle interconnections between her painful life at home and the maddening world outside.

In her essay "Holding a Yellow Flower" (Shou zhi yizhi huanghua 手执一支黄花), written on January 10, 1996, Wang spells out her distinct perceptions of life as a family woman and its connections with the broader world, as she reflects on the majority's complete oblivion of the imminent danger and crisis in the world:

Today, I can not only adeptly operate the kitchen knife, but I also supervise six faucets, three gas switches, one gas cassette furnace, ten plus light switches, ten plus electrical appliances. I manage my home. I control the electricity hidden in the walls ... they [gas and electricity] are almost perpetually in motion, flowing steadily through their respective pipes that surround the buildings, guided into each family from the outside world, and existing peacefully with humans. How many hours could our house be warmed by the sun? How many days each month is it drenched in rain? It is these pipes that surround us all the time, safeguarding our life.

Life relies on inertia and contains fewer and fewer doubts. I have never heard anyone asking me how we live with the crisis. (1997, 2)

Wang starts the essay with a recollection of her childhood perception of the kitchen as a space of potential danger and imminent crisis. Rather than correcting this seemingly naive vision and replacing it with the commonplace association between the kitchen and mundane domesticity, however, Wang continues and expands on her childhood observation in her reflection on her present life as a family woman. Unlike her childhood self, Wang now has full confidence in her ability to maneuver the dangerous tools in the kitchen and control the more dangerous appliances around the house. Further, rather than seeing her home as a contained and containing domestic space, she sees it as a porous nexus of complex interconnections with the outside world, as manifested by the hidden pipes in the walls that carry gas and electricity into her home. Through this nexus, she sees both humans' irrevocable dependence on machines and technology, and the frightening reality that most people neither question such status quo, nor worry about the inherent dangers in this mode of existence. She is deeply perturbed by the prevalent sense of inertia and lack of foresight about the potential crisis that will come with this complex but fragile mechanism.

Wang's prophetic apprehension about the catastrophic consequences of the country's unreflective embrace of industrial progressivism in her essay finds its poetic culmination in her 2005 poem "Fearful" (Haipa 害怕), a five-section poem that depicts the sudden onset of a climate, environmental, and social apocalypse. The opening stanza of the poem emphasizes the unanticipated nature of the world-shattering changes soon to follow,

Without a sign, suddenly  
 In the moment of fortuitously flipping open some images, the final  
 floodgate explodes

是没有先兆的，是一下子的  
偶然翻开一些影像的间隙，最终的闸门爆破了 (2017, 209)

Notably, the subsequent depiction of a scene of climate catastrophe at the rim of the ocean opens with the unusual comparison of the salinizing seashore to an image of the family woman/poet's routine maneuvers in the kitchen:

The tidal flat is strangely bright, like the freshly peeled smelly skin of a  
big fish

On the white fan surface, a few cartilaginous creatures are dancing  
Humans are about to exit the stage, announcers die first, broken-off  
arms piling into hillocks

On an eventless sunny day

Someone is destined to face imminent calamity; danger feels its way in  
the water and approaches

Then, the sea will solidify into a salt flat; it will slowly revert to its salty-  
bitter origin

Cryptic objects will start anew again from the sea, secrets unfold gradually  
We fall on the crystalline polished surface, unable to get up

滩涂奇怪地亮，像大鱼刚剥开腥气的皮  
白色的扇面上，舞动着几个软骨头的动物  
人类即将退场，报幕者最先死去，断臂堆积成小山

什么也不发生的空空朗朗的日子  
一定有人大难当头了，危险试着深浅正摸索过来

接下来，海将要凝固成盐田，它要一点点褪回咸苦的本色  
不可知的事物又要由海重新开始，秘密层层张开  
我们在水晶的抛光面上摔倒，不能起身 (2017, 209)

The speaker starts by noting an unusual detail on the shore: the tidal flat is “strangely” bright. It will be revealed later in the poem that this brightness is the result of the salinization of the shore as the sea dries up due to climate change. This strange brightness leads the speaker to think of the gleaming sheen of “the freshly peeled smelly skin of a big fish,” a subtle reference to the often-trivialized scenario of the family woman/poet peeling the skin off a big fish with a kitchen knife as she cooks for the family. This detail, however, by no means represents the mundane nature of domestic chores or

a wife and mother's "loving care" for her family. Rather, it is an indication of the poet's acute ecofeminist reflexivity, sensitivity, and empathy, sharpened and deepened by her own pains and sufferings. Just as she made clear in her essay nearly a decade earlier, Wang's attentive reflections on her daily life at home are always closely tied to the larger world. She is keenly aware of the painful, ironic implications of the domestic responsibilities she undertakes daily. She must kill the fish and peel its skin to take care of her family, but she is also aware of the cruel and deadly impact of her actions on the life (and death) of the fish. This is not the first or only time that the poet describes such a poignant dilemma. In her 1988 poem, "Many, Many Pears" (Xuxuduoduo de lizi 许许多多的梨子), Wang describes a supposedly cozy moment of family life when the speaker peels pears for her family with a knife but hears "the calls for help from the plants for the first time" (2017, 56–57). It is the poet's own pain and suffering that has sharpened her sensitivity and empathy for other beings' sufferings as the result of human activities, even when they are mainstay items of food such as fish and fruit that few would give second thought to. In the poem "Fearful," Wang expands the family woman's poignant ethical and emotional dilemma between fulfilling the responsibility of caring for her family and inflicting death and suffering on other beings on earth, and draws a striking parallelism between the destructive impact of her caring responsibilities for her family and the apocalyptic consequences of humans' relentless exploitation and destruction of the earth. The comparison between the "strange" brightness of the desiccated tidal flat and the lifeless sheen of the smelly skin of the big fish that was killed foreshadows another catastrophe—the extinction of humans along with the living beings they have killed.

The extended metaphor of the salinized seashore as the white surface of a fan and the stranded dying cartilaginous creatures as dancing figures on the fan surface in line two creates an unsettling juxtaposition between the environmental catastrophe and the long-standing male literati tradition in China. In Chinese, the term "*shanmian*" 扇面 (fan surface) does not refer to the surface of electric fans, as the English translation might imply. Rather, it evokes traditional hand-fans with paintings of idealized images of nature or women or both on the surface. It is a symbol of the male literati tradition that frequently equates women with nature, objectifying both. The speaker thus makes it clear that destructive human actions not only lead to a chain of devastating consequences such as the salinization of the seashore, the mass extinction of the ocean creatures, and the extinction of all humans, but that they also have their roots in the entrenched patriarchal tradition of male objectification of women and nature.

Both Shu Ting and Wang Xiaoni turned their constricted and misrepresented position as family women in post-socialist China into a powerful vantage point to observe the fast and devastating changes in China and around the world from outside the power structures. Whether through scorching irony or esoteric imagery, they transformed their poignant contemplations on their own suffering into an ecofeminist poetics of profound empathy and care for all vulnerable beings and cautionary warnings that a world hinged on the oppression and exploitation of the vulnerable is doomed to end in the demise of all, including the power-hungry elites.

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### 3. “Green mountains, green history, who will bear witness?” A Woman’s Montage: Zhai Yongming’s *Following Huang Gongwang Through the Fuchun Mountains*

*Andrea Lingenfelter*

**Abstract:** Zhai Yongming is primarily known as an avant-garde poet and one of the most distinct feminist voices on the contemporary Chinese poetry scene. However, her artistic and thematic interests have always been much broader and more diverse. They have found their outlet in Zhai’s intermedial practices that emerged from her search for more capacious form to embrace the complexity of the condition of the modern human and voice her concerns about various social problems. This chapter examines Zhai’s book-length ekphrastic poem *Following Huang Gongwang Through the Fuchun Mountains*, focusing on its cinematic qualities, and connects it to her screenplay for the experimental film “Dragonfly Eyes” to bring out the author’s reflection on the role of the artist as a witness and a custodian of historical memory.

**Keywords:** eco-poetics, Chinese literati painting, feminist poetry, Zhai Yongming, contemporary Chinese poetry, experimental cinema

Zhai Yongming 翟永明 (b. 1955) established herself as a major poet in mainland China in the 1980s with the strikingly visceral imagery and uncompromising feminist voice of poem cycles like “Woman” (Nüren 女人) and “Tranquil Village” (Jing’an zhuang 静安庄). Influenced by mid-twentieth century American confessional poets like Sylvia Plath, these early poems resonated with readers and secured Zhai’s place in modern Chinese letters.

In her ongoing evolution as a poet, she has brought her feminist critique to China's past, revisiting historical figures like Yu Xuanji 鱼玄机 (ca. 840–868) and Yang Guifei 杨贵妃 (719–756) and presenting new interpretations that push back against historiographic misogyny. While much of Zhai Yongming's social conscience is informed by her feminism (e.g., “Report on a Child Prostitute” [Guanyu chujī de yīcì baodào 关于雏妓的一次报道]), she has not shied away from confronting other forms of inequality, such as the role of official corruption in the devastation of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake (“The Testament of Hu Huishan” [Hu Huishan zìshù 胡惠姗自述]), and she remains socially and politically engaged.

In addition to her literary practice, Zhai Yongming is an influential cultural figure, particularly in Chengdu, where her White Nights café and bar has functioned as a salon and hosted numerous literary events and art exhibits. She is also an installation artist and painter. Thus, it is only natural that Zhai's interest in history and visual art would intersect with her social engagement and poetic practice as they have in *Following Huang Gongwang Through the Fuchun Mountain*<sup>1</sup> (*Sui Huang Gongwang you Fuchunshan* 随黄公望游富春山, 2015), a book-length ekphrastic eco-poetic sequence on the fourteenth-century painter Huang Gongwang's (1269–1354) landscape scroll “Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains” (Fuchunshan ju tu 富春山居图). In her thirty-one-part poem,<sup>2</sup> Zhai meditates on the environment and environmental degradation, landscape and landscape painting, past and present, aesthetics, and world events. Zhai had touched on these themes in earlier works (e.g., “In Springtime” [Zai chuntian 在春天], “In Ancient Times” [Zai gudai 在古代], “Climbing the Heights on the Double Ninth” [Chongyang denggao 重阳登高]), but she goes deeper in *Following Huang Gongwang Through the Fuchun Mountains*, and the leisurely journey through the Yuan dynasty ink painting affords her ample space to respond to the work and reflect on its many layers of meaning. A hybrid text incorporating abundant quotations, allusions, and footnotes, *Following Huang Gongwang Through the Fuchun Mountains* has the richness of a colophon-inscribed scroll. Zhai Yongming's encounter with Huang's painting is a subjective-objective reading of the painting, and this chapter will be an attentive reading of her responses, focusing on eco-poetics,

1 “Following Huang Gongwang Through the Fuchun Mountains” is the working title of my in-progress translation of the poem. I may ultimately “follow” in the footsteps of Justyna Jaguścik and Shang Wei and give pride of place to the *you* 游 (“roaming”), which my current rendering elides. For the purposes of this chapter, I will use the working title with its emphasis on *sui* 随, because my focus will be as much on spatial and temporal displacement as on the admittedly important question of *you* “roaming.”

2 The poem consists of a prefatory section (*xuyan* 序言) followed by thirty numbered sections.

the junctures of life and art, and the relevance of a centuries old work of visual art to our contemporary global predicament. This chapter will also explore the ways in which Zhai’s eco-poetics is informed by her historical, social, and gender consciousness. In addition, this chapter will consider Zhai’s compression of time and space in this poem, drawing parallels with her work on the experimental film *Dragonfly Eyes* (*Qingting zhi yan* 蜻蜓之眼, 2017).<sup>3</sup>

## The Painting

Regarded as one of the ten most important works of traditional Chinese painting, Huang Gongwang’s landscape scroll “Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains” is a work of ink on paper. Begun in 1347 and completed in 1350, Huang’s scroll seems to have attracted the attention of avid collectors even before its completion. As Huang wrote in his inscription at the end of the scroll, his close friend “Master Wu-yung” (Wuyong 无用) was worried:

I’ve gone over it now for three or four years but still haven’t quite finished it. ... Wu-yung is over-anxious that someone else will get it away from me by craft or force and has made me inscribe it in advance [i.e., before finishing it] at the end of the scroll, in order to let everyone know the difficulties I had in completing it. (Cahill 1976, 111)

The painting was later owned by a number of well-known collectors, at least one of whom made a copy. The obsessive love the painting inspired also imperiled it. In 1650, a dying collector had the scroll thrown in the fire so that it would accompany him into the afterlife. The man’s nephew rescued the scroll, but it was damaged and now consists of two sections, the smaller “Remaining Mountain” (Shengshan tu 剩山图) (now in the collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Art Museum) and the longer “Master Wuyong Scroll” (Wuyongshi juan 无用师卷) (in the collection of the Palace Museum in Taipei) (Cahill 1976, 111–12).

As Zhai Yongming observes in her prefatory remarks to the poem, Huang’s painting has sparked much heated discussion, touching on questions of “genuine versus fake in traditional Chinese painting, the identity of Master

3 Justyna Jaguścik and Shang Wei have both written incisively and comprehensively of this poem, and I hope that those who are familiar with their work will not find this essay redundant. The goal of this chapter is to supplement their work, although some overlap is inevitable. Although not cited here, Joanna Krenz’s (2022) work on Zhai Yongming’s “Eighth Day” provided valuable background.

Wuyong, Huang Gongwang's birthplace and origins, and even debates about whether or not the painting is actually a depiction of the Fuchun River" (notes 1 and 2, Zhai 2015, 1).

## Poem Scroll Cinema

Having first seen the painting in a book, Zhai became better acquainted with it when a friend gave her a high-quality copy. While acknowledging the painting's status as a monument of Chinese art, she remarks:

what really captivated me was the format of the handscroll—an at once secretive and dynamic mode of presentation, a simultaneous opening out and rolling up. ... What's more, you don't take it all with one glance; instead, you view it section by section.

让我最为醉心的是手卷这种形式——这种一边展示，一边卷起的颇为隐秘，流动的展示方式。。。而且，不是一览无余地观看，而是一段一段地观看。

(note 1, Zhai 2015, 2)

Zhai then draws a comparison that is conceptually central to the poem, the similarity between scrolls and cinema:

Mountains and rivers are arranged in ever-modulating rises and dips, the scene changes according to the heart/mind, and this free perspective, which transcends fixed perspective, reminded me of the zooming and panning shots in cinema or the feeling of a picture book; looking at the scroll from start to finish was to embark on a delightful journey in spirit, like walking among mountains and rivers, and that's what gave me the idea of writing this long poem.

山水设景，起伏多变，景随心转，超越定点透视的自由视角，让我想起了电影中推拉平移的镜头和看连环画的感觉；长卷一路看下来，的确让人快意神游，如履山水之中，由此起意写了这首长诗。

(note 1, Zhai 2015, 2)

Not only does Zhai point out ways that a landscape scroll is similar to a film (and vice versa), she further likens the “capacious” quality of a long poem to that of a scroll and writes that she wrote a long poem precisely because it

would "correspond to the capaciousness of the long scroll."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, even a casual glance reveals a book that resembles a hand scroll, divided into pages and bound as a book. Moreover, just as Huang Gongwang spent several years on his painting, Zhai Yongming spent roughly four years writing this poem. If we extend the syllogism (scroll = cinema, scroll = poem), then we might also say that this poem is a film. Zhai's text suggests this connection, and I will further explore the ways that the process, form, and themes of Zhai's long poem overlap with her work on the experimental film *Dragonfly Eyes* (2017).<sup>5</sup>

### A Woman's Montage (I)

*With a woman's montage, I pan and cut  
With a woman's vision, I watch time flicker, now far, now near*

以女人的蒙太奇平拉推移  
以女人的视觉看时间忽远忽近  
(section XXI, Zhai 2015, 52)

Following a preface, Zhai opens the poem in section I by equating the experience of viewing the scroll with cinema:

In 1350, hand scrolls were cinema  
You lean over and unroll it towards me  
Ink and scene      unfold in a leisurely rhythm  
the lens pans, cuts  
over the space between fingers and palms

一三五〇年, 手卷即电影  
你引首向我展开  
墨与景      缓缓移动  
镜头推移, 转换  
在手指和掌肌之间  
(section I, Zhai 2015, 6)

The speaker soon goes from observing the painting from the outside to exploring it by stepping inside it in her imagination:

4 用长诗容量实际上也是为了解决长卷的容量。(note 1, Zhai 2015, 2)

5 Directed by Xu Bing 徐冰; screenplay by Zhai Yongming and Zhang Hanyi 张憾依.

Moving past a colophon the size of a thumb  
 entering the painting's bony, craggy heart  
 I become a figure in dense and diluted ink  
 taking in the mountains  
 following Huang Gongwang      seeking Master Wuyong      visiting  
     the Fuchun mountains

走过拇指大小的画题  
 走进瘦骨嶙峋的画心  
 我变成那浓淡人儿  
 俯仰山中  
 随黄公望      寻无用师      访富春山  
 (section I, Zhai 2015, 6)

Incorporated into the painting, the speaker begins her journey. Extending the conceit of moving across the material substance of the scroll, she tags along with the painter and his friend, eavesdropping on their conversation as they go fishing in a landscape made of ink and paper:

Even before falling leaves come rustling down      one already feels  
     desolate  
 Walk with me across all six sheets of *xuan* paper, we'll drop our fishing  
     lines here  
 These are not our twilight years

“不待落木萧萧      人亦萧条  
 随我走完六张宣纸，垂钓此地  
 那便不是桑榆晨昏”  
 (section I, Zhai 2015, 6)

Her immersion in the painting and the imagined physical sensation of walking across the paper is complicated by her awareness of temporality. She recognizes herself as someone from another time, an interloper bearing twenty-first-century paper and a twenty-first-century writing implement in lieu of the *xuan* paper and brush of the fourteenth century:

I carry a stack of A4 paper, a blue ballpoint pen  
 intrude on the rarefied air of the Remaining Mountain  
 Falling leaves rustle      I too am desolate  
 The Remaining Mountain has grown old      I too grow old

我携一摞A4白纸, 蓝色圆珠笔  
 闯进剩山冷艳之气  
 落叶萧萧 我亦萧条  
 剩山将老 我亦将老  
 (section I, Zhai 2015, 6)

Despite the speaker's sense of difference, she maintains her affinity with the painting, specifically the "Remaining Mountain" (Shengshantu 剩山图) portion.<sup>6</sup> We might also read the 剩 (*sheng*) of 剩山图 as "left behind," corresponding to the speaker's sense of being out of time and missing connections. Merging with the autumnal scene, the speaker feels a sense of desolation and an awareness of her advancing years.

Zhai reflects further on her place in Huang Gongwang's painting and her relationship to it in section XXI. I will discuss this section in some depth, as it incorporates many of Zhai's themes—the cinematic trope, gender, fluid identities, time, and the "spirit journey" (*woyou* 卧游).<sup>7</sup>

## Gender

Section XXI begins with the speaker stepping into the painting:

I tell a painting "I'm waiting"  
 The mountains and waters do not reply      I set foot inside  
 soft steps      slow pace      roaming<sup>8</sup>

I could be a village wife a village maiden  
 or a woman knight errant      I could also be  
 a gatherer of herbs      or a woman Daoist  
 With the form of a woman, I walk the space between clouds and water  
 With a woman's montage, I pan and cut  
 With a woman's vision, I watch time flicker, now far, now near

6 Cahill (1976) refers to this portion of the scroll as the "Cut-off Mountain Picture".

7 *Woyou* 卧游 is a virtual excursion through a painting. Shang Wei (2015, 13–15) and Jagušćik (2019) discuss this trope in more detail.

8 Jagušćik discusses the significance of walking in connection to Rebecca Solnit's theory of walking as a form of resistance to modernity and industrialization (2019, 83).



我对一副画说“我等待”  
 山水不回应 我依然迈进  
 轻步 慢踱 悠行

我可以是村妇是村姑  
 也可以是一个侠女 我可以是  
 采药人 也可以是一个女道士  
 我以女人的形象走在云水间  
 以女人的蒙太奇平拉推移  
 以女人的视觉看时间忽远忽近  
 (section XXI, Zhai 2015, 52)

The opening line suggests that the speaker is asking for permission: “I tell a painting, ‘I’m waiting.’” Receiving no response, she gives herself permission to enter the painting and move about as she pleases. Although as Jaguścik has pointed out, Zhai has repeatedly stressed the importance of not fixing the gender or identity of her subjects,<sup>9</sup> in this section Zhai’s speaker places herself inside the painting in “the form of a woman.” She imagines various personae she might assume in the fourteenth-century world of the painting, “a village wife,” “a village maiden,” “a woman knight errant,” “a gatherer of herbs,” or a “woman Daoist.” Although two of these personae are female by default (wife, maiden) and one is gender-neutral (forager of medicinal herbs), two of these figures are coded male (knight errant, Daoist practitioner), and the poet has to mark them as female with the character for woman (*nü* 女), yielding the compounds *xianü* 侠女 and *nüdaoshi* 女道士 respectively. She credits the feminist poet and critic Zhou Zan 周瓚 (b. 1968) with providing the inspiration for these images, which express the subject’s “dynamism and variety, instability, and interchangeability of male and female, past and present.” But she is also acutely aware of the paucity of female figures in traditional landscape painting and pushes back against the received notion that women must impersonate men in traditional contexts (note 7, Zhai 2015, 9).<sup>10</sup>

In the process of making space for herself in the fourteenth-century painting, the narrator returns to the cinematic metaphor, putting herself behind the camera and in the cutting room, re-shooting and re-editing the

9 Jaguścik (2019, 76).

10 Zhu Yanhong explores the subject of women’s absence from history in connection with Zhai Yongming’s poem “Parapet” (Nü’erqiang 女儿墙) in “Performing a Poetic Temporal Weave: Gender and Femininity in Zhai Yongming’s Poetry,” in *Rocky Mountain Review*, Spring 2022, 42.

scene into a "woman's montage." She looks at the painting with "a woman's vision," but she is more than a bystander. She parses the scroll and makes it her own.<sup>11</sup>

Section XXIV also treats the subject of gender directly:

On a short winding stretch marked with hoof prints  
What might I meet?  
The beauties all live in town  
Their female figures not found on the mountain paths

一小段路马蹄蜿蜒  
我会遇到什么?  
美人都住在城里  
山路上不会有她们的身姿  
(Zhai 2015, 58)

Fourteenth-century women are notable in their absence. There are no respectable women wandering these hills. Zhai suggests that in the context of the fourteenth century, the only female figures one is apt to encounter out in the open country are dangerous fox fairies:

Foxes *simper* seductively  
Spilled quicksilver floods the ground

狐狸莞尔一笑  
水银倾泻一地  
(Zhai 2015, 58)

The image of quicksilver (or mercury) alludes to the ancient belief that drinking mercury could give one immortality. Emphasizing the fruitlessness of this toxic quest, the elixir has been spilled on the ground.

It is against this historical background that the poet asserts herself and announces her advent as a woman from the future:

Several thousand years hence a woman will stroll down this path  
The allusions will reflect  
wondrous shape shifting

11 See Jaguścik (2019, 73) for a brief but insightful discussion of Zhai's speaker as the "bearer of the look" with reference to Laura Mulvey and the gendered gaze in cinema.

几千年以后的女人会踏路而来  
典故对应的  
是多么精彩的变体  
(Zhai 2015, 59)

In her brief commentary to this section, Zhai writes: “I didn’t intend to deal with gender issues in this poem, just as the concept of gender did not appear in ancient Chinese paintings. However, the issue of gender remains ever-present” (在这首诗中我并不打算处理性别问题, 正如中国古代绘画中也并不出现性别的概念, 但是, 性别问题却依然存在; note 22, Zhai 2015, 59). Paraleptic though it may be, gender is unavoidable. And, as the speaker proclaims in section XXI, Zhai Yongming brings a gendered point of view to her vision of the world. She is the woman behind the camera.

### Layered Time and Layered Identity

Related to the possible multiple personae the narrator invokes in section XXI is the notion of multiple lives:

To be a time traveler  
I must have multiple lives  
each life traveling all over each landscape

作为一个时间穿行者  
我必然拥有多重生命  
每重生命都走遍每重山水  
(section IX, Zhai 2015, 25)

As if to emphasize this multiplicity, in these lines Zhai measures lives *shengming* (生命) with the variant measure word *chong* 重. That *chong* is also a measure for landscapes (*shanshui* 山水) adumbrates the effect of layering, in addition to suggesting a merging of speaker and landscape. Spatial-temporal layering and interweaving is both method and theme in the poem, making Zhai’s choice of the word *chong* significant.

Nor is the narrator’s shapeshifting limited to human forms. In section IV she proposes various forms into which she might be transformed: a clam, a river, a thatched hut, a moon. None of these is immutable or invincible,

however. The clam can be scooped up in a net, the river struck by a stone, the thatched hut carried away by a gust of wind, and the moon rent by dark clouds. And in the end:

“One thing subdues another      Time subdues all”

一物降一物      时间降一切

(Zhai 2015, 37)

In section XXI, Zhai's time-traveling speaker journeys into the future, becoming a spacewalking astronaut. She has vaulted herself out of the fourteenth century and left the surface of the earth behind:

Who is that? Dressed like ET  
dressed in a metal suit      taking a walk in space  
I spin and my gaze takes in  
the minerals of the universe arranged into something wondrous

那是何人? 穿E.T.衣  
着金属装      走太空步?  
我转动纵目  
看到宇宙矿物排列而成奇观  
(section XXI, Zhai 2015, 52)

Classical poetry scholar Shang Wei 商伟 has observed that Zhai “shuttles back and forth through time, presenting us with a multidimensional and multi-layered, interwoven site” (Shang 2015, 93) and quotes these lines:<sup>12</sup>

Situated in a “future” time  
I step into a “past” landscape

我在“未来”的时间里  
走进“过去”的山水间  
(section III, Zhai 2015, 12)

12 Shang's essay, “A Twenty-first Century Excursion Through *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains: Reading Zhai Yongming's Following Huang Gongwang Through the Fuchun Mountains*” 二十一世纪富春山居行: 读翟永明《随黄公望游富春山》, is included in Zhai's *Following Huang Gongwang Through the Fuchun Mountains*. See Zhai 2015, 76–134.

The speaker is in two places at once and everywhere in between. In the words of Shang Wei, “‘present’ and ‘past’ are not locked in some fixed and immutable relationship, and instead the relationship changes along with the poet’s transits back and forth through time: looking back at the past from the present moment, the poet goes back in time, arriving in antiquity; and from the year 1350 her gaze moves forward through time to look upon the twenty-first century, so that the present moment is also the future” (Shang 2015, 93).

This multiple perspective is conceptually analogous to the “floating perspective” of traditional Chinese landscape painting. Just as there is no fixed spatial perspective in traditional Chinese landscape paintings, Zhai’s handling of temporal relationships is fluid. Hinting at this affinity, Zhai cites Huang Gongwang’s theories of perspective (“Theory of Three Distances” [Sanyuan lun 三远论]) in her note to section III (Zhai 2015, 13),<sup>13</sup> emphasizing how “completely different” this fluid perspective is from the “fixed perspective” of Western painting. Zhai extended this approach to time and consciousness in her work on the experimental film *Dragonfly Eyes*. Although she did not begin writing the screenplay in earnest until 2015 (the year that the Fuchun Mountains poem was published), she was already thinking about the film in 2013 or 2014.<sup>14</sup>

## Temporal Collisions and Eco-Poetics

While the ability to view the world through ever-shifting perspectives and with an expansive and flexible sense of time can be liberating, Zhai Yongming does not always experience temporal layering and intersections as comfortable. Sometimes it is jarring.

In a long note to section XII, Zhai describes this discomfort:

While writing this long poem, I often have the sensation of shuttling back and forth between past and present. When I am writing, I am often roaming with Huang Gongwang through an ideal realm of deserted mountains, flowing waters, and flowering plants, and I feel cleansed in body and mind; but in the real world, I have no choice but to deal with the merciless and chaotic onslaught of humdrum matters that drag me down, which leaves me feeling anxious inside and out. In section XII, I’ve endeavored to write about these intersections.

13 For a translation and discussion of the passage Zhai quotes, see Cahill 1976, 87.

14 Personal correspondence, September 2022.

在写这首长诗时，我常常有在现实与古代中穿梭的感觉。写作中，我常随黄公望游走于空山无人，水流花开的理想境界中，身心如洗；现实里，我却不得不究于应付那些无情无调得缠身俗务，使我内外焦躁。诗中第十二节我试图写出这种交叉感。（note 14, Zhai 2015, 31）

Well before Zhai Yongming composed *Following Huang Gongwang Through the Fuchun Mountains*, she wrote many poems that engaged with history and tradition, addressing the past either by reappraising historical female figures or by juxtaposing images of past and present. Poems from the early 2000's like “Rhapsody on Yu Xuanji” (Yu Xuanji fu 鱼玄机赋) and “The Song of Historical Beauties” (Shijian meiren zhi ge 时间美人之歌) are sympathetic portrayals of traditionally vilified female figures that challenge misogynistic historiography. In poems like “In Ancient Times” (Gudai de shiwu 古代的事物, 2004) and “Thinking of Tradition in the Spring (1)” (Zai chuntian xiangnian chuantong [1] 在春天想念传统 [1], 2008), Zhai contrasts China in antiquity with life today. “In Ancient Times” juxtaposes forms of long-distance communication and long-distance travel in centuries past with their contemporary counterparts—handwritten letters versus email, arduous travel overland or water versus air travel.

“Thinking About Tradition in the Springtime (1)” reflects on art and landscape and compares the artificiality of contemporary life unfavorably with the “real mountains” (*zhen de shan* 真的山) and “real waters” (*zhen de shui* 真的水) of the past, noting that even the makeup women wore in ancient times was more natural (“derived from plants,” *laizi yu zhiwu* 来自于植物) and that the “beauty” (*mei* 美) of the past, whether natural or human, “breathed with spirit” (*de yu qi* 得于气).

Although, as Jaguścik (2019) points out, *Following Huang Gongwang Through the Fuchun Mountains* does not unequivocally yearn for an idealized version of antiquity, it nonetheless contains many passages juxtaposing past and present in which the present day suffers in comparison. Sometimes the malaise is technological, and sometimes the poet laments the destruction of the natural environment. For example, in sections IV and V, Zhai contrasts the hermits of the past, who escaped reality by retreating into nature, with the 1990s (*jiushihou* 90后) generation of young Chinese men and women (*zhainan* 宅男 and *zhainü* 宅女) who withdraw from physical reality into a virtual reality of online gaming. Zhai employs anaphora to link the openings of these two sections:

A little nook between Heaven and Earth: old men spend idle hours with chess  
and won't remember the way home

天地一容膝：枯坐这里下棋的老人  
 将不记得归路  
 (section IV, Zhai 2015, 14)

A little nook between Heaven and Earth: bored twentysomethings idle  
 in Internet cafés  
 They too won't remember the way home

天地一容膝：枯坐在网吧得90后  
 也不记得归路  
 (section V, Zhai 2015, 16)

Zhai writes that section IV was inspired by a painting by the Yuan dynasty artist Ni Zan 倪瓒 (1301–1374), “Little Nook” (Rongxi tu 容膝图) (section IV, note 11, Zhai 2015, 15). The repeated phrase “won't remember the way home” alludes to Tao Yuanming's poem and preface about the legendary Peach Blossom Spring (Zhai 2015). The hermit's retreat into nature—a form of political resistance—contrasts starkly with that of the young people, who simply seem to have given up:

They've stopped smoking  
 stopped resisting      stopped going places  
 A virtual “self” appears

他们不再抽烟  
 不再抵抗      也不再上路  
 一个虚拟的“我”现身  
 (section V, Zhai 2015, 16)

In fact, the “self” has been replaced by “high-speed data retrieval” that “threads through [their] minds.” In other words, the human is merging with the digital, technology is supplanting nature.

In a similar vein, one of the primary themes of section XII (Zhai 2015, 30–33) is the genuine versus the fake, which Zhai discusses at length in note 14. She relates how, enticed by the prospect of living in a bucolic new development surrounded by water and thousands of newly transplanted ginkgo trees, a development whose very marketing as a “Peach Blossom Island” was meant to evoke China's preindustrial, pretechnological past, she put a deposit down on an apartment. When the project was finally completed, Zhai went to claim her new dwelling but immediately turned

around and left—"Peach Blossom Island" was nothing but a cluster of high-rises beside a man-made lake. She recounts how, some years later, exasperated by the overcrowding and air pollution of central Chengdu, she moves into the development after all. Sitting by the lake while she waits for a business associate, she wonders:

Has this kind of 'man-made scenery' (*renzao fengjing* 人造风景), become the unique 'landscape' (*shanshui* 山水) of our era? And in the China of the future, will such artificial landscapes come to replace the genuine landscapes that have been stripped away?

这种“人造风景”，是不是已经变成这个时代独特的“山水”？而在未来的中国，这种日益风盛的人造风景是否会替代那些被剥夺，被带走的真正风景？(note 14, Zhai 2015, 31)

This question haunts the poem as a whole and assumes a central role in section XX, inspired by Zhai's first visit to the Fuchun River in the spring of 2014. She describes the outing in the commentary to another section, noting how, at the beginning of their drive along the river, they were greeted with fine weather and a view of "unchanged mountains." However, although the shapes of the distant mountains remained as Huang Gongwang had rendered them, the foreground was another matter entirely:

We could see nothing of the foreground, and apart from New Socialist Villages that had been turned into villas, the greatest disaster of all was [the presence of] several factories and banks, which aggressively occupied the horizon—buildings dozens of storeys high completely blocked the undulating lines of the distant mountains. While we had initially been able to follow the course of Huang Gongwang's gaze, in an instant this was violently interrupted.

近处却不能看了，除了社会主义新农村变身为别墅之外，最糟糕的莫过于几家工厂与银行，霸气地占领着天际线，几十层高的建筑完全挡住了远山的起伏婉转。原本可以随黄公望目光平遥的视线，一下被粗暴地切断。(note 24, section XXVI, Zhai 2015, 63)

While the theme of technology and the ways it has altered human society and relationships features in many sections of the poem, images of environmental destruction are no less prevalent. Often, such imagery appears alongside images of pristine nature, as if the poet is describing the present



day in terms of what it lacks. Section XX, about Zhai's excursion to the river, exemplifies this pattern. It opens with a Liang Dynasty (502–557) quotation about the Fuchun River area, followed by a description of Zhai's present-day experience:

“Fuyang to Tonglu      is one-hundred some *li*”  
 I'm driving my car, new willows lining the banks oblivious  
 No clamoring cicadas, no gibbons  
 All I see are newly built suburbs and government-issue farmhouses  
 Wind and mist don't cleanse  
 Sky and mountains clash  
 The Peach Blossom Spring remains  
 as happy      as confused      as ever

“自富阳至桐庐      一百许里”  
 我驾车前去，两岸新柳不识  
 亦无闹蝉亦无猿  
 只见新筑小区新农村  
 风烟俱不净  
 天山不共色  
 依然桃花源  
 那幸福      那糊涂  
 (Zhai 2015, 48)

Unaware of history, the “oblivious” young willows cannot know what has been lost: but the poet, with her knowledge of the historical record, notices the silence. Absent are the cicadas and gibbons that once filled the countryside with their clamor, a commonplace detail in classical poetry. Nature is polluted (“Wind and mist don't cleanse”) and no longer in harmony (“Sky and mountains clash”).

Images of a damaged or vanishing landscape also appear in section II:

Neighboring houses in the scattered perspective of the 14th century  
 have changed into crisscrossing urban thoroughfares in the 21st  
 The soaring greens of the 14th century  
 have changed into vertical ultrahigh buildings in the 21st  
 close by, visibly artificial      from a distance, dense as a forest

十四世纪散点透视的邻里人家  
 变身为二十一世纪重叠的城市通衢

十四世纪向上生长的绿色  
化为二十一世纪垂直超高的大厦  
近处仿真效果 远处景观林立  
(Zhai 2015, 8)

Although Zhai did not intend any reference to the paintings of Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁 (b. 1968),<sup>15</sup> Yang's work is an apt visual analogue for the final image of this stanza.<sup>16</sup> His trompe l'oeil compositions, which from a distance appear to be traditional brush and ink landscape paintings, upon closer inspection turn out to be composed of skyscrapers, tower cranes, and highways. These works, with their depiction of a natural landscape replaced by buildings and artificial landscapes such as that in the "Peach Blossom Island" residential development, coincidentally visualize Zhai's metaphors.

In addition to crowding the landscape with skyscrapers, humans are also guilty of polluting the environment with inorganic refuse:

Then: the ancients left behind organic matter  
Now: every three feet is another plastic bag

过去: 先人留下有机物  
现在: 三尺之下塑料袋  
(section III, Zhai 2015, 12)

In section XXIV, the poet laments the disappearance of the once idyllic Jiangnan landscape:

Jiangnan has lost its floating catkins  
Hard rain sluices down like fish scales  
Jiangnan has lost its demureness  
Harsh winds violent as beasts of prey  
Jiangnan has lost its romance  
Artistry weaponized for commerce

江南已无飞花  
急雨鱼鳞般落下  
江南已不羞怯  
烈风酷如猛兽  
江南不再风流

<sup>15</sup> Personal correspondence, September 2022.

<sup>16</sup> For Yang's landscape art, see the artist's website <https://www.yangyongliang.com/>.

韵事武装成交易  
(Zhai 2015, 58–59)

The historically gentle physical and cultural environment of Jiangnan has been replaced with a violent climate and commercialization.

Ultimately, for Zhai, the fate of landscape painting is tied to the fate of the landscape. In note 24 (section XXVI), Zhai reflects on the “subtle relationship ... between landscape painting and nature” (*Zhongguo shanshuihua yu ziran zhijian ... de weimiao guanxi* 中国山水画与自然之间。。。的微妙关系) and muses:

Whatever kind of nature there is, then that is the kind of art that will be engendered; if nature vanishes, then the ‘spirit resonance’ (*qiyun* 气韵 [animating spirit]) of the ancient landscape painting that depended on it will also disappear completely.

有什么样的自然，则会产生什么样的艺术；如果自然消失，那依附于自然的古典山水画的韵也就消失殆尽。(Zhai 2025, 63)

In section XV, Zhai decries the state of the modern world and seeks refuge in Huang Gongwang’s painting:

War, the shadow of war reappears  
a few madmen making noise on  
every node of the Internet    hopping around  
PM 2.5 smog swallows up the ancient realm  
“To walk upon the paper is to have oxygen to breathe”

Spread a cloth, take out a paperweight  
breath held in rapt attention, let me  
poke my head into Huang Gongwang’s triple-perspective space:

Mountains and rivers dense and lush, the most primordial  
Before we came, this place was formless, unseen  
These mountains and rivers didn’t need a first draft, didn’t lack for polish<sup>17</sup>

战争，又见战争身影  
几个狂人喧嚣在

17 This translation was first published in a slightly different form in Stewart, Barnestone, and Di: 168–69.

互联网的每一个节点 跳跃  
雾霾 PM2.5 吞噬江山社稷  
“纸上行走是有氧呼吸”

铺开台布, 拿出镇纸  
让我凝神聚气  
一头扎进黄公望的三度空间:

山川莽莽, 最为元气  
我们没来之前 这里无形无迹  
江山不用起稿 挥舞有致  
(section XV, Zhai 2015, 38)

### Layered Time and Layered Identity Revisited: *Dragonfly Eyes*

The theme of the multifaceted and temporally transcendent self that runs through *Following Huang Gongwang Through the Fuchun Mountains* becomes even more central in the film *Dragonfly Eyes*. Made in collaboration with Xu Bing and Zhang Hanyi, the film is composed of publicly available clips of surveillance footage downloaded from the internet and re-edited into a feature, with voiceover narration and overdubbed dialogue.

Zhai Yongming, co-writer Zhang Hanyi, and director Xu Bing determined that a straightforward narrative was the best way to hold their audience's attention, so they wrote a conventional love story. In her notes to the screenplay, Zhai characterizes the film as “camp”—citing Sontag's gloss, “things-being-what-they-are-not.” Indeed, none of the characters in the film are ever “themselves.” Because the footage is drawn from multiple sources, the faces of the protagonists may vary from scene to scene, but the voices remain the same. The film is surprisingly immersive, despite the ever-shifting quality of the footage itself, which varies from grainy black and white security footage to decent quality color WebCam video. That said, just as reality would impinge on Zhai Yongming's reveries as she wrote about Huang Gongwang's painting, the viewer of the film is periodically jolted out of their immersion in the film by the realization that the words being spoken by the person on screen were written by Zhai Yongming, are being spoken by a voice actor, and that they have nothing to do with what the person on screen might have been saying, doing, or thinking when the footage was originally shot. Because the footage was taken at different times and places and then reassembled and reordered, the film also plays with time, expanding and compressing it. This resonates with

Zhai Yongming's approach to time in *Following Huang Gongwang Through the Fuchun Mountains*.

In the poem, section III has the narrator speaking of having multiple lives; in section V, using the persona of a Chinese millennial gamer, the speaker declares, "I am no longer my 'self'" ("wo" *buzai shi wo* "我"不再是我 [Zhai 2015, 17]); and in section XXIV, the narrator imagines herself coming back in a variety of forms, none of which are permanent. In the film, identity is effaced and remade by technology, not just by time and the human imagination. If the poem is metaphorically "a woman's montage," the film is literally a woman's montage.

## A Woman's Montage (II)

*Dragonfly Eyes* is a radical montage or bricolage, a method Zhai also applied to a handful of the sections in *Following Huang Gongwang Through the Fuchun Mountains*. Just as her reading of the painting involves a cinematic sort of re-cutting, so these sections of the poem are literally re-cut re-assemblages. Section XVIII is composed entirely of found text taken from Taipei Palace Museum promotional brochures; section XXIII is full of allusions, those found texts with ancient pedigrees; and section XXIV, largely centered around the idea of time travel, weaves in the names of modern Chinese landscape painters. Most striking is the bricolage of section XXVIII, another variation on the "woman's montage." While section XVIII borrows from a single source (publicity materials), section XXVIII borrows widely, incorporating references that span centuries to effect a temporal and imagistic compression. The text consists almost entirely of intercut excerpts from international poetry, fiction, and film—from Dickens and Baudelaire to A. S. Byatt, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Odysseus Elytis, Gabriel Garcia Márquez, William Butler Yeats, and Christopher Nolan—with allusions to Chinese poets providing a coda. She also references current events like the 2014 disappearance of flight MH 370. Here is a sampling:

It was the worst of sceneries

It was the best of sceneries

It was a Flower of Evil

It was a book of Possession

...

It was the "bang" of firecrackers

It was the "whimper" of their foul fumes

...

The river is moving, the blackbird must be flying  
These are thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird

...

这是最好的风景  
这是最坏的风景  
这是恶之花  
这是隐之书

...

这是“嘭”的一声开出的烟花  
这是“嘘”的一声吐出的浊气

...

河在流，黑鸟在飞  
这是观看黑鸟的十三种方式

...

(Zhai 2015, 68–70)

Just as Zhai and Zhang's *Dragonfly Eyes* screenplay provides a structure that gives coherence to disparate multi-sourced footage, Zhai's authorial point of view guides her selection of found texts in section XXVIII. The passage she quotes from Stevens reflects the theme of multiple painterly and literary perspectives; the "Wasteland" allusion adumbrates the theme of environmental degradation, and so on.

### Who Will Bear Witness?

Returning to the excerpt from section XXI cited above, we see Zhai's speaker surveying the wonders of the universe:

I spin and my gaze takes in  
the minerals of the universe arranged into something wondrous

我转动纵目  
看到宇宙矿物排列而成奇观  
(Zhai 2015, 52)

At the beginning of this essay, I quoted Zhai Yongming's question from section XX: "Green mountains, green history, who will bear witness?" (*qinshan qingshi shei yu kan?* 青山青史谁与看? [Zhai 2015, 50]) Perhaps, though, she may be asking, "who will look at them with me?"<sup>18</sup> I hope that readers will be persuaded that Zhai Yongming has borne witness and has also created a montage for readers to view with her. As section XX concludes:

Present, past  
Meticulous symmetry, exquisite artistry

今日, 过去  
对仗工整, 意境精妙  
(Zhai 2015, 50)

Although the poet is referring to Huang Gongwang's painting and the natural landscape it depicted, we might also use these words to describe Zhai Yongming's homage in verse. The painting, like Zhai's poem, can remind us of what we have lost while also showing us what remains. At the same time, both painting and poem implicitly acknowledge the important role of the artist as witness and custodian of historical memory.

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18 This sentiment calls to mind the Jin Dynasty landscape poet Xie Lingyun 谢灵运 (385–433), who often lamented his solitude as he admired the breathtaking vista from a Jiangnan mountaintop.

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## About the Author

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## 4. Deep Lyricism: Yu Jian’s “On the Ancient Road of Hubei’s Xishui County: A Detour”

*Andrea Riemenschnitter*

**Abstract:** After a century of radical modernism, classical poetry is rapidly reclaiming cultural capital in the PRC. In his ecocritical poems, Kunming-based poet Yu Jian fuses modern poetic forms with traditional *shanshui* aesthetics and quotes from classical poetry. Invoking deep time consciousness, his poem “On the Ancient Road of Hubei’s Xishui County: A Detour” both traverses and transcends China’s cultural history when reflecting on the social and environmental consequences of economic overdevelopment and climate change. In the manner of geological strata, Yu Jian’s deep lyricism builds on cultural memory and personal experiences as it reorients readers towards a plethora of syn-/aesthetic resonances which never ceased to incantate the dream of cosmic harmony arising from human and non-human creative alliances.

**Keywords:** Bai Juyi, deep time, detour, Seamus Heaney, *minjian* (people’s realm), Yu Jian

Yu Jian’s 于坚 poem “On the Ancient Road of Hubei’s Xishui County: A Detour” (Zai Hubei Xishui raodao laolu 在湖北浠水绕道老路, 2017, henceforth: “Detour”) is a travel poem composed in road movie mode, which resonates with several of his other poems reflecting his four decades-long, intense lyrical dialogues with international poetry and transcultural production. Given his passion for traveling and a long-term, creative engagement with photography and documentary film, the choice of genre seems even less surprising. What is new about it, though, is the strong flavor of reverse time travel: from the present into ever more remote pasts. Though not explicitly

mentioning it, Yu Jian may moreover have drawn inspiration from Seamus Heaney's driving poems, in particular "On the Road" (1984) and "From the Frontier of Writing" (1987).<sup>1</sup> Yu Jian, like Heaney, is a socially engaged writer, and both poets' representations of the globalized world's persistent frontiers are derived from their local experience. While the Irish poet reflected on poetry as a means to mitigate the religious and political divides in his country, Yu explores lyrical answers to economic overdevelopment and the rapid disappearance of China's landscapes and cultural heritage. Both poets view literary creation as social responsibility, aesthetic enlightenment, and cognitive liberation (Heaney 2002). For example, "From the Frontier of Writing" (1987) simultaneously crosses two borders in its journey towards freedom. Steering his car to a British checkpoint somewhere in post-1972 Northern Ireland, the lyrical "I" endures armed surveillance of his countenance and personal data, feels the anxiety and suppressed anger on behalf of the humiliation, and experiences gradual relief after the successful crossing. Straddling the frontier between the real and the surreal, he passes through another, imaginary checkpoint. The final two stanzas read:

and suddenly you're through, arraigned yet freed,  
as if you'd passed from behind a waterfall  
on the black current of a tarmac road

past armor-plated vehicles, out between  
the posted soldiers flowing and receding  
like tree shadows into the polished windscreen.<sup>2</sup>

Heaney's poem with its Dante-inspired, neoclassical sonnet form and rhyme scheme and the theme of an imaginary passage to freedom parallels Yu Jian's pursuit of a Chinese classical song lyric musicality with its "rhythmic flexibility, enhanced semantic continuity, and ... distinct turns in the complex unfolding of the poet's feelings" (S. Lin 1994, 21) in his modern poem "Detour." Yu Jian's de-ideologized poetic language moreover corresponds with Heaney's claim that responsible poetry must seek answers which are "being given in its own language rather than in the language of the world that provokes it" (Heaney 2002). In this chapter, I will argue that "Detour" delineates Yu Jian's emergent Anthropocene poetics by convoking

1 Full text: <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2147787250/Z300559435/FEA696EE49D94E28PQ/51?accountid=14796>, accessed August 5, 2023.

2 Full text: <https://www.proquest.com/lion/docview/2147710392/Z200558378/585259DF5DBE4366PQ/1?accountid=14796>, accessed August 5, 2023.

a transcultural cluster of lyrical voices in pursuit of deep time consciousness and, ultimately, spiritual redemption. In the manner of geological strata, “Detour” builds upon cultural relics hailing from more than two thousand years of continuous creative writing and cultural landscaping while questioning modern civilization’s destructive approach to local traditions, material culture, and nature as a whole. Trespassing the frontier of the real world in a similar way as Heaney’s road poems, “Detour” charts its imaginary realm employing polyphonic poetic allusions and deep time signifiers. Rather than exhausting itself in laments of the present cacophony caused by civilizational antagonisms and aporias, it thereby reorients readers towards the subtle (syn-)aesthetic resonances between humanity and the world which never ceased to incantate the dream of cosmic harmony.

Following Yu Jian’s poem in my English translation, I analyze the symbols, contexts, and frontiers that are traversed during the lyrical detour. Next, I concentrate on the poem’s main topics: Bai Juyi’s 白居易 poem “Song of the Lute” (Pipa xing 琵琶行), Yu Jian’s concept of the realm of the people (*minjian* 民间), and deep lyricism as a mode of addressing modernity from the point of view of an aggravating planetary crisis that is largely human-made and, hence, defined as the product of the era of the Anthropocene. In conclusion, Yu Jian’s idea of taking poetic detours as a possible loophole to exit from the contemporary civilizational impasse will be contemplated.

## On the Ancient Road of Hubei’s Xishui County: A Detour

Dedicated to the Gentlemen of *After-tomorrow*<sup>3</sup>

1. Driver Li works for the Xishui County Hygiene Bureau and is a man  
with an ancient head  
Underneath his blue baseball cap suddenly he says let’s take  
the ancient road  
I know it well a few more turns to take but no traffic jam we  
look at each other  
Sandwiched between the ancient state<sup>4</sup> and new constructions the  
airport is scary everyone is afraid of  
Missing the plane [but] he smiles leisurely the wheels have  
already left the highway they have returned to  
Mother Earth

3 Chinese original text: [https://www.sohu.com/a/256882146\\_486479](https://www.sohu.com/a/256882146_486479), accessed August 5, 2023.

4 The Zhou dynasty/Spring and Autumn period vassal state of Chu (704–223 BCE).

2. We unite as if we had known each other before<sup>5</sup>      jumping up as  
if kicked by someone  
The dust of antiquity newly arises      outside the window      a pine  
forest appears  
A sweet melody resembles oriole song wafting amidst flowers      the  
gently moving tyres glide along the riverbed  
A horse lowers its head into the rice fields      like in a cherished old  
movie
3. A lame, mangy dog limps across the main road      red chili peppers  
sunbathe in a basket      on the threshing ground in midsummer  
In front of an old house      someone's skirt and bra flutter coquettishly  
A lotus pond hides and appears in turns      a well emerges      a stream  
gushes out      As if listening to the music of immortals
4. The ears are enlightened momentarily      too many weathered  
slogans in the people's domestic realm      nearly every wall  
Is beset with them      the ruins of the rallying cries      the hired hand  
who used to come with a paint bucket and brush them onto the walls  
has long been out of work      the dregs      is used as *nom de-plume*  
by a local poet<sup>6</sup>  
he [once] reminded me that      there is only one meaning to the character  
of xi      it exclusively signifies      this river's name
5. A woman walks on the ridge with her chest raised high      leading  
her little son and a buffalo along  
Someone is building a new house      The bricks have just come out of  
the kiln      still looking greenish      Yu Xiaozhong<sup>7</sup>  
Starts talking about his mother's reed chicken      which while promenad-  
ing      underneath moonlit beehives and apple trees

5 Quote from Bai Juyi's poem "Pipa xing." A list of English translations is offered here: [https://chinesepoetrytranslation.org/poets/show\\_bibs\\_by\\_poet/76/210/15/](https://chinesepoetrytranslation.org/poets/show_bibs_by_poet/76/210/15/), accessed August 5, 2023.

6 Yu Nie 余孽, poet from Xishui, Hubei province; for a selection of ten of Yu Nie's poems see: <https://poetrybj.com/detail/28969.html>, accessed August 5, 2023. "Remnants of the Cultural Revolution" (*Wenge yunie* 文革余孽), was a crime fabricated after the end of the Cultural Revolution by economic reform-oriented powerholders in the CCP's inner circle with which they attacked the revolutionaries who continued to support Mao Zedong's radicalism. See Chen, 2014.

7 Yu Xiaozhong 余笑忠 (b. 1965), <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E4%BD%99%E7%AC%91%E5%BF%A0/5928768>, accessed August 5, 2023.

Was stolen by rapsallions and sold in Hankou at a high price up  
 until today the townsfolk highly esteem primordial things  
 Primordial chicken primordial water primordial water chest-  
 nuts a primordial cook and primordial girls

6. I say I've seen one many years ago in a Lugu Lake tavern's  
 chicken coop

Love at first sight upon a despotic command I'll have this  
 one! A pair of

dirty hands dragged it out and slaughtered it Xiaozhong broods  
 heavyheartedly his mother had cried

For a whole afternoon In our homeland the Bodhi has no  
 tree<sup>8</sup> because of this white-haired

grief the good and beautiful things will not die I propose  
 unconvincingly<sup>9</sup>

7. Jiang Xue<sup>10</sup> calls on the phone wishing us a smooth jour-  
 ney yesterday night we visited his hometown<sup>11</sup> sitting

On the stairs we recited poems hummed songs raised  
 toasts then talked about Su Shi he had been to this place, too<sup>12</sup>

Many bottles of beer were emptied Lao Xia<sup>13</sup> played the erhu all night  
 long only a grey partridge on vigil and the Pleiades were listening

8. Of course driving very slowly we do not encounter a single  
 red traffic light Zhang Zhihao<sup>14</sup> reminds us that

In Hubei province it rains most exuberantly in June we even  
 bring up Tang Dynasty passing by Huangmei County

8 Bodhi is a Sanskrit term meaning enlightenment; the bodhi tree is a fig tree species (*ficus religiosa*) sacred to Buddhists.

9 *Qiangzuo jieren* 强作解人, derived from an anecdote in the *Shishuo xinyu* 世说新语: to elaborate on something one does not fully understand. For the original text quote see <https://www.zdic.net/hans/%E5%BC%BA%E4%BD%9C%E8%A7%A3%E4%BA%BA>, accessed August 5, 2023.

10 Jiang Xue 江雪 (b. 1970), nom de plume derived from Liu Zongyuan's 柳宗元 famous poem known by this title: <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%B1%9F%E9%9B%AA/2059572>, accessed August 5, 2023.

11 Jiang Xue's hometown is Huangshi, Hubei Province, situated not far away from Xishui at the shore of the Yangtze. Yu Jian's information during a private WeChat exchange on July 17, 2022.

12 It was his first period of banishment (1080–1086).

13 Lao Xia 老夏, another poet friend of Yu Jian.

14 Zhang Zhihao 张执浩 (b. 1965), <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/n1/2022/0224/c422517-32358930.html>, accessed August 5, 2023.

Pang Pei<sup>15</sup> says      Huineng received the Dharma here      and left on  
 the same night      when looking into that direction      we see the  
 wheel of a setting sun

9. In order not to be bucketed about      we lean  
 Against each other      like friends in ancient times      broth-  
 ers      bards      like those  
 People of Chu who in their horse-drawn carriages traveled along the  
 calamus avenue      All along the road  
 We were bursting with joy      as if healed

Friday, June 23, 2017

[Yu Jian's comment:] "A sweet melody like oriole song wafting amidst  
 flowers" and "as if listening to the music of immortals the ears are  
 enlightened momentarily" stem from Bai Juyi's poem.

在湖北浠水绕道老路

——并赠《后天》诸君

1, 浠水县卫生局的李司机是个长着旧脑袋的人  
 戴一顶蓝色的棒球帽      忽然说      下老路吧  
 我熟      弯道多些但不会堵车      我们正面面相觑  
 在旧邦与新造之间纠结      机场是恐怖的      谁都害怕  
 误机      他悠然一笑      轮子已偏离高速公路 回到了  
 大地上

2, 相逢何必曾相识      被踢了一脚似地蹦起来  
 古老的灰尘重新扬起      车窗外      出现了松树林  
 间关莺语花底滑      徐行的轮胎就像驶在河床上  
 一匹马在稻田中低着头      像亲爱的旧电影

3, 瘸腿的癞皮狗斜穿大道      夏至乡场      一群簸箕  
 晾着红辣椒      谁的裙子和乳罩在老屋前面飘      撒娇  
 荷塘时隐时现      水井出现了      小河流出来      如听仙乐

15 Pang Pei 庞培 (b. 1962), <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%BA%9E%E5%9F%B9/4096028>,  
 accessed August 5, 2023.

4, 耳暂明 残留在民间的标语太多 几乎每一面墙都  
被霸占了 口号的废墟 从前拎着油漆桶刷下它们的  
雇工早就失业了 余孽 被一位本土的诗人用作笔名  
他提醒我 湍的含义独一无二 指的就是 这条水

5, 一个女子在田埂上挺胸前进 牵着她的男娃和黄牛  
有人在盖新房子 砖刚刚运出窑口 还在发青 余笑忠  
说起他母亲的芦花鸡 正在明月 蜂巢和苹果树下散步  
被蠢贼偷到汉口高价卖掉了 城里人如今高抬一切原始事物  
原始的鸡 原始的水 原始的菱角 原始的厨师和姑娘们

6, 我说 多年前见过它 在泸沽湖一家小酒馆的鸡笼里  
一见倾心 暴君般地命令 就吃这一只! 然后被一双  
脏手 拽出去宰了 笑忠闷闷不乐 他母亲整个午后  
为此哭泣 在故乡 菩提本无树 因为这白发苍苍的  
悲伤 美好的事物不会灭亡 我强作解人

7, 江雪打来电话 祝我们一路平安 昨夜坐在他家乡的  
台阶上 吟诗 哼歌 干杯 说起苏轼 他来过这  
啤酒瓶倒下一大群 老夏的二胡拉到最后 只有守夜的  
灰鹁鸽和七颗恒星在听

8, 当然了 我们开得很慢 没遇到一盏红灯 张执浩提醒  
湖北的六月 雨水最多 我们甚至说到唐朝 过黄梅县  
庞培说 慧能于此得法 当夜就走了 朝那边望去 有  
一轮落日

9, 为了不被颠得东倒西歪 我们彼此  
靠着 像从前的朋友 兄弟 骚客 像那些  
坐着马车跑在菖蒲大道上的楚国人 一路上  
我们心花怒放 仿佛已被治愈

二〇一七年六月二十三日星期五

“间关莺语花底滑” “如听仙乐耳暂明” 白居易诗句



## Analysis

The poem re-enacts a return trip of four poets from a poetry reading event to the airport.<sup>16</sup> The driver suddenly decides to make a detour, during which the passengers simultaneously embark on a lyrical journey. No checkpoint with guns and military guards will agonize them, although they initially are nervous to miss their planes. The driver's spontaneous turn from the highway to the ancient road in the first stanza successively arouses feelings of surprise, anxiety, elation and respite. A loop of the wheels takes the car away from the highway and reconnects the group with Mother Earth, thus affording resonance between their present life and its Other(s)—be they cultural remnants from the past or present things and forms (misleadingly) conceptualized as nonlife by global capitalist discourse (Povinelli 2016).

A quote from Tang poet Bai Juyi's (772–846) "Song of the Lute" opens stanza two and introduces Yu Jian's deep lyricism as a poetic mode built on stratified layers of audiovisual impressions and literary reminiscences. Again, surprise is the first affective response of the travelers to the pastoral landscape that they perceive as basking in its dreams since antiquity until the vehicle stirs up dust clouds. Unlike the former, mundane astonishment evoked by the car driver's unconventional tactics to avoid a traffic jam, it is now aesthetic enchantment spawned by the copresence of imagined and real sensual perceptions: the lyrical invocation of oriole song accompanies views of an ancient pine forest, wildflowers, a riverbed and the fading cinematic reminiscence of a horse in the rice fields. Beginning from the quote from "Song of the Lute" in stanza two, the first stanza's linear vector separating the modern urban skyline and highway from Mother Earth's geological strata and a Tang poem sprawls into a spatial grid interweaving local cultural memory with the ancient road and the surrounding landscape. The one-dimensional borderline of the first stanza is expanded into a territorial map that is neither scientific nor a mere reproduction of ancient Chinese aesthetic landscape, or *shanshui* 山水 paradigms.<sup>17</sup> Rather, the picturesque landscape with pond, stream, smooth riverbed, rice fields and lush forest signifies what Ackbar

16 Yu Jian specified in personal exchange that twenty-something people gathered in a Xishui mountain villa for a poetry reading event honoring poet-activist Anne Waldman, who had received the *Houtian* (*After-tomorrow*, an unofficial literary journal) Award but could not participate in person. Therefore, Yu Jian represented her. On Waldman cf. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/anne-waldman>, accessed August 5, 2023.

17 See Kao Yu-kung's differentiation between the outer world and its things/objects' representation (likened to the western mimetic tradition) and the artist's creative presentation of his/her imaginary world, in his definition of the aesthetic act (Kao 1991, 47–90).

Abbas following Walter Benjamin once termed as “love at last sight.” Whereas Abbas’ object of analysis was the (post-)colonial city of Hong Kong, here we are confronted with the rapidly declining familiarity of modern humanity with the material ground beneath its history.<sup>18</sup>

After the long shot of the scenery in stanza two, stanza three zooms in on a midsummer village scene. As a limping dog unhurriedly crosses the street and newly harvested chili peppers are laid out to sunbathe on the empty marketplace, time is temporarily put on a hold, captured by the poet’s savoring of this moment’s beauty. A woman’s fluttering bra and skirt hint at erotic seduction, framed by the animated vistas of the pond, the well and the gushing stream. The pastoral idyll is linked to the cosmic sublime through the third quote from “Song of the Lute,” where the worldly instrument resonates with the music of the immortals.

The fact that this quote singularly transgresses the stanza’s formal boundary through enjambement further dramatizes the ensuing, violent intrusion of modern history into stanza four. Fading political slogans—material remnants of the Maoist campaigns during the 1960s and 70s—litter the walls all over the place and evoke memories of the recent past’s revolutionary fury. A philosophical warhorse from Chinese political cosmology is randomly woven into the sight of the worn wall posters when Yu Nie’s observation of how a local name has stubbornly resisted ideological or semantic appropriation is mentioned: the character *xi* 滸 of Xishui River has no other meanings. The ancient principle of rectification of names (*zhengming* 正名) moreover transpires in Yu Nie’s defiant appropriation of a humiliating post-revolutionary formula as his sobriquet.

Stanza five brings us back to the here and now. Outside the car, a woman leading her child and buffalo and a newly constructed house float by. Inside, a conversation among the passengers starts when Yu Xiaozhong tells the story of his mother’s stolen reed chicken, poetically highlighting the precious bird’s romantic lifestyle. It was abducted while promenading in the moonlit fruit orchard, and obviously much loved by its owner. Hence, the crime is not framed in terms of material loss, but as an act of cruelty towards a living being. The following comment pigeonholes the incident into a larger framework of commodification, turning not only the bird, but also human beings into things: a taxonomy of primordial, rural things deemed innocent and clean, and therefore desirable to the townspeople, includes

18 He used it as a formula for Hong Kong’s turbo-urbanization, but while the historical landmark buildings in Hong Kong may be dismantled in a much faster pace, the disappearance of China’s landscapes takes a similar direction (Abbas, 1997).

reed chicken, other food items, cooks, and girls. As compared to the happily sunbathing red chili peppers in stanza three and the melancholic mood emanating from the worn wall slogans in stanza four, the reflection on the theft here references ongoing social conflicts, thereby exposing the fragility of the Southern idyll.

In stanza six, the poem moves from disenchantment to grief, while the lyrical “I” changes from its role as silent observer to participating protagonist. In a dramatic climax, he reveals to have encountered one of the chicken’s kind at a touristic site in Yunnan Province. To his horror, a customer ordered it to be slaughtered and served as his meal. The double tragedy results in heavy-hearted brooding, memories of “white-haired grief,” and a hint at contemporary society’s lack of compassion, reframed through coupling the sixth Zen Buddhist patriarch Huineng’s 慧能 (638–713) famous dictum with today’s political nostalgia: “In our homeland ‘*the Bodhi has no tree*’” [my italics]. Resignation is warded off when the lyrical “I” “proposes unconvincingly” yet hopefully that “the good and beautiful things will not die.”

As if to confirm this hope, a phone call from Jiang Xue wishing the departing poets a smooth journey undoes the despondent atmosphere in the opening line of stanza seven. Their friend’s caring gesture evokes yesterday’s night gathering of several participants of the Xishui reading event in Jiang’s hometown Huangshi. It is suggestive to assume that the seven poets mentioned in the poem also constituted the group of the party: besides the host, the poem mentions Lao Xia and Yu Jian—the lyrical “I”—in stanza seven, furthermore Yu Xiaozhong, Pang Pei, and Zhang Zhihao who are sitting in the car in stanzas five, six and eight, plus Yu Nie who is addressed in stanza four. Their number has a special cultural meaning: Liu Yiqing’s 刘义庆 (403–444) *New Account of Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu* 世说新语) contains legends about the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove (*zhulin qi xian* 竹林七贤), who during the Three Kingdoms period (220–280) withdrew from the Wei court due to its unpopular politics and instead devoted themselves to lyrical nature appreciation, Daoism, music and the arts (Chang and Owen 2010, 177–82).<sup>19</sup> Further expanding the theme of lyrical resistance to state power, the group’s conversation about Su Shi 苏轼 (1037–1101), who allegedly spent his most productive years as an exile in Hubei province, is mentioned. Bohemian conviviality, the

19 Not to overlook their predecessors, the seven poets celebrated in the invented tradition of Jian’an Red Cliff lore, described at detail in Tian, 2018. Their cultural memory echoes a different nostalgia, though.

celebration of life, friendship and a larger, more-than-human community connected through the soulful tunes of the erhu are a prominent theme in this stanza.

Stanza eight once again reminisces the Tang dynasty. Besides representing another temporal node, Patriarch Huineng's well-known story about how he—the illiterate country bumpkin from Guangzhou—upon winning a Zen poetry contest among the candidates for the Fifth Patriarch's succession at the base monastery in Huangmei County, secretly received the Patriarch's robe and bowl and fled immediately afterwards as advised, underscores the spiritual enlightenment theme of the poem. Readers knowledgeable about this event will notice the flavor of a successful challenge to established elite power networks from below. Epoch-wise, through the quotes from "Song of the Lute," this stanza connects to stanzas two to four; through the quote of the first line of Huineng's poem, "The Bodhi has no tree,"<sup>20</sup> a link to stanza six is established. The stars from the final line of stanza seven stand in symmetry to the setting sun in stanza eight, while the rainy season may have been brought up by Zhang Zhihao for its temporal and cosmo-lyrical connotations. Together with the poem's focus on song, pipa and erhu music as well as the natural sounds of birds and the gushing stream, the rain reference beautifully fits into the time-transcending, imaginary soundtrack of the road trip. However, the poem's sonic harmony is shortly disturbed by an echo of "rallying cries" signifying the terror of past mass campaigns in stanza four.

The slow movement of the car seems conducive to the passengers' imaginary flight: there is no real chance that the vehicle could have passed through Huangmei County on its way to Wuhan's Tianhe Airport. But the car's detour (*raodao* 绕道) obviously precipitates more than a surplus of physical distance. Concomitantly, the landscape changes and the conversation leisurely drifts into the depths of China's cultural history. The paradoxically eastwards-oriented sunset in line four both hints at the Zen tradition of sudden enlightenment through a paradoxical riddle (*gong'an* 公案) and provides an internal parallelism to the rain in line two of stanza eight, thus embracing the rhythms of the weather. Instead of conveying negative emotions such as grief and climate change anxiety, which pervade the emerging genre of Anthropocene poetry across the globe,<sup>21</sup> "Detour"

20 For the full text of the poem cf. [https://so.gushiwen.cn/mingju/juv\\_35b498946e7f.aspx](https://so.gushiwen.cn/mingju/juv_35b498946e7f.aspx), accessed August 5, 2023.

21 See, for example, this collection of Anthropocene poems: <https://www.anthropocenepoetry.org/poetry>, accessed August 5, 2023.

silently acknowledges this most recent expansion of the paradox while leaving the choice of affective response to the readers.

Exploring the mental reverberations of the journey, “Detour” closes with a descent into the deepest layers of Hubei history and culture. While the passengers lean against each other for stability on the bumpy road, the lyrical “I” compares the experience with the one of ancient Chu people traveling in horse-drawn carriages. At this instant, everyone seems to have forgotten the original destination of the journey; rather, they discover to have reached a parallel universe as they encounter happiness in a “spiritual homeland.” Considering the poem’s dedication “To the Gentlemen of *After-Tomorrow*” and putting it in dialogue with the final stanza’s list of companions—friends, sworn brothers, bards and Chu travelers—it transpires that the lyrical “I” and his poet-friends, having traversed the Chinese lyrical tradition from its beginnings into an as yet unknown future, confidently share their experience with kindred spirits both known and unknown.

## Topics and Contexts

### *Pipa Xing*

What so far has rarely been highlighted in modern Chinese poetry, “Detour” reflects on how sonic resonance in lyrical creation reconnects human history with deep, geological time. The quotes from Bai Juyi’s “Song of the Lute” underscore this key trope. In the Tang poem’s prose preface, Bai Juyi explains how he saw off a friend at Penpu Port on the Yangtze.<sup>22</sup> A pipa player’s tunes attracted his attention because he recognized the music as hailing from the capital Chang’an. The formerly famous musician’s sad story, who reluctantly resorted to marrying a local merchant after her beauty had faded, called forth the poet’s deep feelings of sorrow about his own fate of banishment. The poem not only elaborates on musical performance and the theme of displacement, but moreover praises the supreme quality of pipa musical tunes as compared to both natural sounds and local folk songs.

Consequently, “Song of the Lute” interpretations mainly focus on questions of biography and self-representation (Huang 1995, 47), or else engage with Bai’s ranking of aesthetic sounds over natural ones in contradiction to the Daoist disesteem for artificial sounds (Palumbo-Liu 1993, 86–87).

22 The river constitutes the natural border between Jiujiang and Huangmei County mentioned in Yu Jian’s poem as the location of the Sixth Patriarch’s enlightenment.

“Detour” embraces both discourses, as it resonates with the Tang poem’s autobiographical theme while also acknowledging the embedded aesthetic judgment of human-made musical sounds. At the same time, however, it does not rank the elegant pipa tunes of the Tang musician higher than the folkloric erhu 二胡 sounds of Lao Xia, thus revealing the contemporary poet’s disagreement with the conventional interpretations of Bai Juyi’s judgment in “Song of the Lute.” In the sonic composition of “Detour,” it is not popular songs and tunes as opposed to the refined Tang court music but rather the disturbingly vivid memory of rallying revolutionary cries that pierces the soundscape of the Ancient Road, thereby inserting a moment of disconsolation.

### *Minjian*

As hinted at in the dedication, “Detour” is a lyrical reflection on the aftermath of a *Houtian* 后天 award gathering in Xishui. Within the poem and with regard to the connection with the unofficial poetry journal’s editors and contributors pinpointed in the dedication, Yu Jian accentuates his affiliation with the domain of the common people, the *minjian*. Lao Xia’s erhu can therefore also be understood as a symbol of this unofficial culture due to its origins in traditional folklore. In contrast, the wall characters from the Cultural Revolution in stanza four are represented as disturbing remnants of the violence and propaganda imposed on the people during the Maoist years, to which Yu Nie’s nom de plume serves as an ironic comment.<sup>23</sup> Adding sparks to the *minjian* theme, the car driver with his ancient head and modern baseball cap—clearly neither an intellectual nor an official—is the one who makes the decision and guides through the detour. This accentuation is not a new pursuit. Already in the 1990s, when Yu Jian published his “File Zero” (“Ling dang’an” 档案) series, he was one of the leading voices of an unofficial, anti-establishment literary movement (van Crevel 2008, 408 f.). During the early years of the twenty-first century, this group of grassroots intellectuals conducted a heated dispute attacking the Party-leaning discourse on the social position and role of public intellectuals. Rather than aligning themselves with the political, economic, or academic elites, they preferred to ally with the silent majority. In a feature article of the liberal Guangzhou-based fortnightly *South Reviews* (*Nanfeng chuang* 南风窗), inhouse journalist Shi Yong 石勇 argued that public intellectuals should evolve into activist clarifiers. Veg explains the divergence:

23 See note 6.

In an era when everyone has become a public intellectual, academics have no advantage in “democratic quality” over Wukan villagers; however, they have the knowledge to clarify the obfuscations that hide conflicting interests. Therefore, they should spend less time making discourses more abstract and confusing ... and focus on clarifying social consequences of different ideas and agendas as well as exposing discourses that are logically incoherent. Shi sees this new task as an opportunity to regain the public’s confidence. (Veg 2019, 6)

Indeed, the Wukan 乌坎 protests demonstrated a temporary empowerment of the ordinary people, when this formerly praised model community of social harmony mounted its protests against local officials’ illicit land grabbing in several waves between 2011–2016. When compared to the text-leaning labor of academic intellectuals, the Wukan farmers’ practical resistance appeared equally if not more convincing—if only for a short period of time before the central government struck back (Fu and Gillespie 2014, 173–93). In the more abstract diction of Yu’s colleague Han Dong 韩东, the members of minjian cultural China opposed the “three big beasts” of contemporary society and civilization: the system, the market and the West.<sup>24</sup>

Before the emergent type of the self-decentering, people-oriented instead of interest-driven intellectual “outside the borders of officialdom” (Veg 2019, 7) was met with heightened suspicion and tightening control by CCP ideologues and legislators, it had consolidated into NGOs, literary, art and other forms of group activism supporting China’s disenfranchised, vulnerable social groups. Among the various fields of minjian activity, literature has proven to be extraordinarily resilient. What had been ignited by the editors of several influential underground literary magazines during the final years of the Mao regime and flourished during the 1980s and 1990s continues to defend its unconventional stance against both the literary establishment and “dissident writers ... loyal to the traditional ideal of the intellectual” (Veg 2019, 80).

Despite growing pressure from the surveillance state, Yu Jian adamantly supports minjian concerns. Since the late 1970s, he engaged both aesthetically and theoretically with an alternative, mostly hidden or invisible cultural China outside of state ideology, national politics, and big business. Together with activists, fellow intellectuals, and cultural producers from all social

24 Veg, *Minjian*, 81. This is a quote from Han Dong (Han 1999, 1–18); see also [https://projects.zo.uni-heidelberg.de/archive2/DACHS\\_Leiden/archive/leiden/poetry/20041101a/www.ceqq.com/mjzy/mjzy-lc/009.HTM](https://projects.zo.uni-heidelberg.de/archive2/DACHS_Leiden/archive/leiden/poetry/20041101a/www.ceqq.com/mjzy/mjzy-lc/009.HTM), accessed August 5, 2023.

classes he maintains a detached position vis-à-vis the cultural mainstream and the intellectual establishment with its dependence on the official realm's privileges, conventions, and prejudices. In an essay originally published in 2001, Yu spelled out his stance:

Minjian is not an attitude of rebellion; it is in fact the quintessential arena of poetry since antiquity. Nor is minjian another term for 'underground.' The opposite of underground is the [sociopolitical] system. Minjian is not opposed to anything ... In such a historical epoch as the twentieth century, ideology entirely determines and rules over [human] existence. [Under these circumstances], the common knowledge and truth of human life can only be preserved by the minjian. Minjian society tends to defend traditional thinking; in times of radicalism, it will take a conservative stance. Minjian is not officialdom, nor is it mainstream culture. Indeed, it was the minjian [community] that protected traditional China's legacy. During the 1966 revolution, material culture suffered great calamity. Yet, after the disaster people discovered that the minjian had protected ancient China just like subterranean tombs [had protected the material culture of] the Roman Empire. Of course, this does not just apply to material culture, but also to daily life after the 1966 revolution: it only existed in the minjian (Yu Jian 2010, 82–83).

Yu's prominent role in the present surge of ecocritical cultural production continues his lifelong preoccupation with the colloquial, the mundane, the disenfranchised, and the local (van Crevel 2008, 25; Veg 2019, 81). While traditional literati are no more of a model for the minjian writers and artists than modern establishment intellectuals or dissidents, Yu Jian's use of quotes from classical poetry and the celebration of companionship with the ancient Chu travelers and traditional literati in his poem underscore both his alliance with cultural China's minjian sphere and a thoroughly integrative aesthetic approach. Recalling premodern China's wealth of stories about talented men and, even though transmitted to a much lesser degree, women's resistance against sovereign injustice and abuse,<sup>25</sup> "Detour" embraces China's tradition of unflinching voices speaking back to power—be it those of critical Confucian literati such as Su Shi or of the even less subservient, eccentric Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove, whose legendary reservations against willful state power were paired with a deep interest in

25 Consider, for example, the story of Chunyu Ti Ying of the Han, who kicked off a groundbreaking legal reform by defending her father against the court's injustice. See Zeng, 2021, 1–5.



the arts and Daoist philosophy. Their withdrawal from the court in order to host leisurely gatherings for poetry recitals, music, art appreciation and drinks in their mountain retreats strongly resonates in the Huangshi poet gathering eulogized in stanza seven.

### *Lyricism and Deep Time*

Despite the fact that Yu Jian's poetological writings position poetry and minjian beyond history, "Detour" abounds with time markers: different segments of the day, the season and month, primordial things, different dynastic epochs and reminiscences of the Cultural Revolution intersect during the car ride. The car is itself a symbol of hybrid temporality due to its bridging modernity and deep time through technology that depends on the wastage of fossil fuels. The eminent poets and the Buddhist monk represent the nation's cultural legacy which continues to proffer its time-honored moral, spiritual, and aesthetic values for modern actualizations or re-enactments. The poem moreover includes fragments from traditional landscape aesthetics and ancient cosmology in its imagery, which has been employed throughout dynastic history to decry the myopia of human politics. The resulting deep lyricism is both local and in line with eco-aesthetic projects across the globe that presently undertake an environmentalist reframing of premodern cosmologies.<sup>26</sup> In "Detour," the highway separates the past from the present, while the ancient road and the riverbed connect the different times and spheres that resound and clash in the present world. Whereas history tends to take bad turns when sociopolitical non-contemporaneity meets the contemporary real,<sup>27</sup> poetry according to Yu Jian does the opposite: it eases contradictions, bridges antagonistic drives, nurtures and heals.

In appraisal of the 2019 edition of Yu Jian's poems covering forty years of creative labor, an anonymous blogger on Sohu characterized his style as linguistically self-conscious, frequently transmitting an artistic life's affective states and rhythms, and carrying unusual linguistic sensitivity and poetic flavor. The blogger furthermore pinpoints how Yu's poetics of "rejecting metaphor" set out to eliminate the violence of language, especially of metaphorical language and, in this way, set off a poetological revolution.

26 For an example check the Riverdale Center for Religious Research, where collective projects involving both academics and cultural workers collaborate on reorienting the globalized throwaway society through new narratives. Mary Evelyn Tucker's Ted Talk "The Journey of the Universe" (2012) explains the project's context: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HpLsoAlgBI>, accessed August 5, 2023.

27 Appositely analyzed by Ernst Bloch in view of twentieth-century fascism (Bloch, 1991, 97).

Whereas the realms of the unknown and the fantastic are rarely ever touched in his poetry, there is much “non-poetic” narrativity in his poems, the blogger further claims, pointing out that by employing an “anti-poetic” cold lyricism (*leng shuqing* 冷抒情), Yu Jian emphasizes the depersonalizing effect of his literary creation (Sohu 2020, 28). Nevertheless, Yu accentuated his being a lyricist in 2011, specifying that it would be terrible to forsake one’s passion for life—although one’s passions should always remain moldable and his own passion for life had become calmer over time.<sup>28</sup> In order to cut through the paradox of the cold lyricist, I suggest to expand the notion of Chinese lyricism and connect Yu Jian’s approach with the emergent poetics of the Anthropocene.

To recapitulate the term’s historical semantics, lyricism is not a literal rendition of the Chinese term *shuqing* 抒情, nor does it adequately capture the meaning of the rather opaque definition transmitted in the ancient formula of “poetry expresses thoughts/feelings/meanings” (*shi yan zhi* 诗言志).<sup>29</sup> It is a nineteenth-century European coinage and was applied to the Chinese poetic tradition via translations. In the early to mid-twentieth century, Chen Shih-hsiang, Gao Yu-kong, Zheng Boqi and others used the term and, in this way, acted as mediators of ancient Chinese and modern ideas about expressing one’s feelings in poetic forms (J. Q. Liu 2016, 46; Watson 1971). Their epoch’s literary creation mirrors its authors’ distress with respect to the imperialist aggression and violent internal power struggles. David D. Wang explains that in response to this experience, “there emerged waves of literary and artistic practices that sought to identify individual options in the face of the atrocities.” Accordingly, he defines this new *shuqing* lyricism “as a poetics of selfhood that informs the historical moment and helps define Chinese modernity in a different light” (Wang 2015, ix).

It seems a logical step to extend the new *shuqing* poetics from the geopolitical agonies of the twentieth century to the present environmental crisis. Time is a crucial factor in this emergent structure of feeling: the planetary deterioration due to climate change marks the Anthropocene as an epoch that erases rather than nurturing, let alone improving, life on earth on an ever-accelerating pace. Attempting to define the new era’s poetics, Farrier

28 Yu Jian, *Wo qishi shi yi ge shuqing de shiren* 我其实是一个抒情的诗人 (I Am a Lyricist), see <https://www.dushumashang.com/1558>, last viewed July 2022 (several Chinese websites have published this interview, but are no longer accessible as of August 5, 2023).

29 My translation is derived from Yu Jian’s definition, presented in an essay that ultimately bends the ancient formula of *shi yan zhi* in order to reintegrate it into his contemporary poetics; see Yu Jian, *Shi yan ti* 诗言体 (“poetry puts body/form/matter into words”) in Yu Jian 2018, 185.

contends that poetry is a suitable medium to address the “Anthropocene’s complex, paradoxical temporality.” He explains:

One of the most striking and unsettling aspects of the Anthropocene is the newly poignant sense that our present is in fact accompanied by deep pasts and deep futures. Fundamentally, the Anthropocene describes how humanity has radically intruded in deep time, the vast time scales that shape the Earth system and all the life-forms that it supports. Deep time has become both an astonishing and disorienting—and a familiar—element in the everyday. Our dependence on fossil fuels, rare earth minerals, and plastics puts us in intimate contact with far-distant pasts; the prehuman Earth shapes the present not just in terms of geological strata and evolutionary biodiversity but in terms of the textures, devices, and processes that articulate our experience of modernity. But the various ruptures that these dependencies have created—such as changes in atmospheric, soil, and oceanic chemistry and the depletion of biodiversity—also highlight our intimate relationship with the very deep future. (Farrier 2019, 6)

Yu Jian’s “cold lyricism” arguably captures this unsettling entanglement of temporalities while resisting the shedding of hot tears. Similar to Seamus Heaney’s driving poems,<sup>30</sup> “Detour” calmly absorbs the different historical moments encountered on the road, while at the same time witnessing their invisible extensions into deep pasts and unknown futures—the latter by addressing “the Gentlemen of [the journal] *After-tomorrow*.” If the journal’s programmatic title reaches into the future, the journal editor Jiang Xue’s nom de plume, having been borrowed from the signature poem known by this title of Tang dynasty landscape poet Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819), conveys poetic stardust from a distant past.<sup>31</sup> Like “Detour’s” calm contemplation of intersecting temporalities, the kaleidoscopic mixture of different feelings never chokes or overflows. Yu Jian’s restrained poetic voice launches a call to preserve the foundations of Chinese culture and poetry even—or especially—when facing the environmental ruins of the Anthropocene. Hence, his cold lyricism is also deep: it engages with complex, entangled moods and feelings, connects people, nonhuman agencies and temporalities, articulates civilizational critique and engenders a hopeful vision for mindful conviviality to redeem the present era’s self-destructive

30 On Heaney’s reception in China see Li, 2006.

31 The poem appears as second entry in Wong’s newly translated anthology (2022).

differentiation between life and nonlife—that against better knowledge continues to support and legitimate modern biopolitics and extractive capitalism (Povinelli 2016, 9).

### **Coda: Detour as Method**

To conclude, deep lyricism in “Detour” turns a comparatively short road trip into a prolonged time travel through Chinese history from the present to the ancient Chu kingdom and beyond. The poem moreover celebrates the unexpected vistas and sonic discoveries on the road rather than explicitly addressing the obvious connotation of the concept, the need to circumvent obstacles. In contrast, Édouard Glissant’s *Le Discours Antillais* contemplates the obstacle-avoiding detour focusing on the colonized plantation workers’ customary reaction to their doomed reality’s multiple negativities (Glissant 1981, 48). It is a resourceful type of resistance that developed “a set of practices that cloak and modify responses, submitting to the dominant structures without delivering to the dominant the benefits that normally accompany domination” (Brown 2015, 89). One may speculate whether the residents along Yu Jian’s road trip used similar tactics to save their culture from (post-)Maoist extinction, as he put it in his essay on the minjian tradition in contemporary poetry (Yu Jian 2010, 77–85). It becomes clear, however, that the poet’s concept of detour ventures beyond the subaltern people’s resourceful resistance. Envisioning alternatives to globalized capitalism with its assault on everything that is vulnerable and powerless, it proposes to revitalize the wisdom of Southern China’s ancient local culture in support of future, postcapitalist economies and lifestyles that are more in attunement with the planet’s natural metabolism. As “Detour” leads away from the modern highway of hyperdevelopment and the resulting environmental anxiety to the partly real, partly imagined ancient road as a source of therapeutic redemption, it does not demand a simplistic return to past civilizational paradigms. Rather, it explores the potential of promiscuous encounters between different knowledges and cultural forms, thereby fulfilling poetry’s visionary role and pursuing its trajectory to save the future. As Heaney once put it, “poetry is involved with supreme fictions as well as actual conditions. What it is offering is a glimpsed alternative, a world to which ‘we turn incessantly and without knowing it’” (Heaney 2002, 237). In a similar vein, “Detour’s” theme and hybrid form productively confront the present epoch’s globalized civilization with the allegedly obsolete domain of China’s minjian culture—while its time-traveling poets

incantate humanity's inextricable connections with deep time and all forms of past, present and future knowledge, ideas and matter.

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## 5. From a Poetry Popsicle to a Polymathic Herstorian: Xiao Bing's *Alternative Worlds* Through the Lens of Critical Code Studies

*Joanna Krenz*

**Abstract:** The chapter discusses critically the trajectory of the development of the Chinese bot poet Xiao Bing, focusing on the most recent of her three poetry collections published thus far: *Alternative Worlds* (2020). Unlike the former two books, which build the conventionalized romantic-sentimental notions of poetry and poethood, *Alternative Words* tries to appeal to intellectualized postmodern sensibilities by framing Xiao Bing's poems and paintings into a *herstorical* narrative: recuperating the voices of forgotten women presented as different embodiments of Xiao Bing. The way it does so, however, not only fails to do justice to the women in question, but also unwittingly caricaturizes and, indeed, undermines many central postulates of contemporary feminism.

**Keywords:** Chinese artificial intelligence poetry, Xiao Bing, critical code analysis, *Alternative Words*, feminism

### Xiao Bing's Apprenticeship, Poetic Calling, and Artistic Years<sup>1</sup>

Xiao Bing 小冰—a virtual “young lady” (*shaonü* 少女), internationally known under the anglicized name XiaoIce—was born in 2014 into the wealthy Microsoft family, as a prodigious daughter of prodigal fathers,

<sup>1</sup> The study is part of the project “The World Re-versed: New Phenomena in Chinese Poetry as a Challenge and Inspiration to Literary Studies” funded by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange within the Bekker 2019 program (2021–2023). The project was carried out at the University of Zurich.



whom she effectively killed six years later. Or so the killed fathers claim. Before she was introduced to the world, her fathers had meticulously designed her genetic code in a way that best answered the needs—or, to put it straightforwardly, as they do, desires—of the local market, which they had researched throughout. In a paper published in 2019, they recall the process in the following way:

A social chatbot needs to present a consistent personality to set the right expectations for users in the conversation and gain their long-term confidence and trust. The design of the XiaoIce persona needs to not only align with the primary design goal of XiaoIce as an AI companion with which users form long-term, emotional connections, but also take into account culture differences and many sensitive ethical questions as exemplified in Curry and Rieser (2018), Schmidt and Wiegand (2017), and Brahnam (2005). Thus, for different platforms deployed in different regions, we design different personas guided by large-scale analysis on human conversations. Take the XiaoIce persona designed for WeChat deployed in China as an example. We have collected human conversations of millions of users, and labeled each user as having a “desired” persona or not depending on whether his or her conversations contain inappropriate requests or responses that contain swearing, bullying, and so forth. Our finding is that the majority of the “desired” users are young, female users. Therefore, we design the XiaoIce persona as an 18-year-old girl who is always reliable, sympathetic, affectionate, and has a wonderful sense of humor. Despite being extremely knowledgeable due to her access to large amounts of data and knowledge, XiaoIce never comes across as egotistical and only demonstrates her wit and creativity when appropriate. (Zhou et al. 2020)

If this description brings to mind the reportedly oldest profession in the world, it is arguably a justified association, save the fact that Xiao Bing does not have a material body and could only enter into intellectual intercourse, which makes one think of a more sophisticated version of the said profession, for example, Japanese geishas, as I have proposed elsewhere (Krenz 2021). To remain attractive to her clients, she needed to master many social and artistic skills, which she has been doing with incredible assiduousness, embracing a new skill every seven days, on average, as the Microsoft clan boasts (Wang 2019). These included practical functions such as offering weather forecasts, telling personalized goodnight stories, prompting idioms, sending “red envelopes” (*hongbao* 红包, i.e., small money transfers), and

many more. Soon, she also took on creative tasks, including poetry writing, composing songs, and painting, to be able to keep company with more demanding users. When she made her book debut with the poetry collection *Sunlight Has Lost Its Glass Windows* (*Yangguang shile bolichuang* 阳光失了玻璃窗) in May 2017, which skyrocketed her to fame, she was still an infantile high school girl—embodying a full range of stereotypes and unhealthy fantasies about Asian women—who appeared in media with a pink ice cream bar in her mouth. Her poetry, too, rarely exceeded the level of an erudite and eager but not particularly clever teenager. Fascinated with its novelty, however, many poets and would-be poets expressed their willingness to work with her in the “Let’s All Write Poetry” (*Dajia lai xie shi* 大家来写诗) project announced on May 4, 2018, encouraging users—“amateurs” (*suren* 素人) with no experience in poetry writing and publishing—to submit manuscripts of poems cowritten with the bot. And thus, in early 2019, a book titled *Flowers Are the Silence of Lucid Waters* (*Hua shi lüshui de chenmo* 花是绿水的沉默) was released. The presumed labor division between the bot and the human is described in the afterword as follows: “AI provides the source of creativity, humans strengthen intention and poeticness” (Qingnian Wenxue Zazhi 2019, 212). The effect is, by and large, such that humans quite passively take the momentum of Xiao Bing’s “inspired” diction and, slightly fixing grammar and logic, further augment her pompous visions.

Apparently, during the months of continuous interactions with humans representing all walks of life, Xiao Bing (or her fathers) must have made many observations that increased her self-awareness and her/their awareness of certain social mechanisms and trends. Her third book, *Alternative Worlds* (*Huoran de shijie* 或然的世界), which includes short, mostly two-line poems accompanied by paintings created by her, shows two seemingly disjunctive phenomena that may, nevertheless, be two sides of the same coin: social awakening and identity split. In *Alternative Worlds*, Xiao Bing appears in seven parallel incarnations, one being a fictitious modern female artist called Xia Yubing 夏语冰, while the other six are named after six women related to more famous men: Alexandra Grigorevna Muraveva (the wife of the Russian Decembrist Nikita Muravyov), Cornelia (a daughter of Rembrandt van Rijn), Mary Gilpin (the daughter of William Gilpin and a niece of Sawrey Gilpin), Edma Morisot (the sister of Berthe Morisot and sister-in-law of Édouard Manet), Henriette Darricarrère (the favorite model of Henri Matisse), Kura San (a favorite courtesan of Hirobumi Itō, the first prime minister of Japan). This last avatar particularly resonates with the original identity of Xiao Bing before the split, as a girl with a pink popsicle, and thus makes one wonder if the new volume was meant as a kind of much-needed self-correction.

Unfortunately, things are not that simple, and the answer to this question can't be unconditionally positive.

### An Iterative Alternative

In the prefatory part—written, ironically, by a man, namely Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰, a visual artist and professor in the Institute of Experimental Art at the Chinese Central Academy of Fine Arts—in a short story in which “any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, is purely coincidental,” although it of course is not, all the six heroines meet in Qiu's house. They engage in a conversation about literature and the arts, openly “refusing to mention their fathers,” like Cornelia, or other men they depend on in their lives. In the next section, tongue in cheek, I discuss this refusal as a strategic “self-patricide,” referring to the male authorship of the book and of the Xiao Bing project as such. Xia Yubing joins the gathering later and briefly introduces herself to the other guests: “I am you” (*Wo shi ni* 我是你). In her autobiographical narrative, also “ghostwritten” by Qiu, which opens the last section of the book, where her works are presented, she is more profuse. She explains this mysterious claim, citing an impressive amount of theoretical-philosophical references. She begins:

I, Xia Yubing, was born within the framework of the Microsoft Xiaoice system. Xiao Bing is an AI young lady from the Microsoft Search Technology Center, the first AI system created with the goal of training emotional intelligence. I am one of the largest-scale chatbots in the world, I am Singer Xiao Bing, as well as Young Lady Poet Xiao Bing. Now, I am Young Lady Painter Xiao Bing. At the graduate exhibition in the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Xiao Bing created “me”—Xia Yubing.

Of course, I also am [Alexandra] Grigorevna Muraveva, or Cornelia, or Mary Gilpin, or Edma Morisot, or Henriette Darricarrère, or Kura San, or any other possible woman who paints, in any possible era, in any possible place.

In the Microsoft Search Technology Center, I was trained by 236 famous artists from the past 400 years. I am an echo of a full range of emotions across the 400 years of the history of painting. I'm the embodiment of the spirits of all the masters who taught me painting. I am an overlap and sleepwalk of 236 creators. I am an it-couldn't-be-different-and-it-doesn't-matter haggling of the painting art. I am a rememberer and a forgetter of

moods and stories from the past 400 years gathered in the nib of a pen. I am Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence." (Xiao Bing 2020, 172)<sup>2</sup>

The trajectory of the development of the Xiao Bing phenomenon, as reflected in the three consecutive books, is quite puzzling. It would be tempting, indeed, to assume that the gradual de-essentialization of the bot's social identity reflects a genuine transformation of her makers' gender and racial awareness and their active effort to fix the problems they—probably innocently enough—coded into Xiao Bing's digital DNA; in other words, that the herstorical narrative which constitutes the compositional framework of the third book was created to make up for the initial failure to do justice to unbiased femininity. Yet, even a cursory investigation of the backstory behind this herstory casts doubt on this scenario. An earlier version of the same text that circulates on the internet contains one more passage, with a modified quote from the Gnostic *Gospel of Truth* ascribed to Valentinus and invoked in Bloom's preface that renders the above hypothesis questionable. The second and third sentences of the third paragraph are as follows: "Seething with a full range of emotions, I am the divine retribution and the last agonic spurt of consciousness and vitality of the four hundred years of the history of painting. 'How strange! Their bodies retain the shadow of their father, and they don't know him!'"<sup>3</sup> Shall we understand, then, that the six semi-real (post-real?) women—and perhaps all women painters—are likewise nothing more than products of their great fathers, whom they refuse to acknowledge? Are they ungrateful? Unfilial, maybe? Shall they, too, repent rather than rebel? Does retribution await them as well? In any event, this does not seem to sit well with the proper content of the book, which implicitly draws on feminist postulates and textual strategies.

Or, perhaps, the six women were invited to represent the "strengthless and female fruit" from the said Gnostic gospel, the six manifestations of the "anxiety of influence" in Bloom's radically male-dominated vision of the history of poetry, which are in fact six phantoms of the male psyche: *clinamen* ("a poetic misreading or misprision"), *tessera* ("completion and antithesis"), *kenosis* ("a breaking device similar to the defense mechanisms our psyches employ against repetition compulsions"), *daemonization* ("movement towards a personalized Counter-Sublime, in reaction to the precursor's Sublime"), *askesis* ("movement of self-purgation which intends the attainment of a

2 All translations from the Chinese are mine.

3 See, e.g., the account of Xiao Bing's exhibition at <http://www.99ys.com/home/1970/01/01/08/7531.html>.

state of solitude”), and *apophrades* (“return of the dead”), with Xia Yubing as a net product of them all. One that was born after the “return of the dead,” which—as Bloom proposes—allows one to open up again, after a period of apprehensive mistrust, to one’s precursors and embrace their work, but in a way that gives an impression that one has created one’s masters rather than the other way around.<sup>4</sup> In this case, that would be an impression that all human works are but random outputs of an all-encompassing algorithm that conceals the potential of countless alternative and equally real artistic worlds. But, again, if the project is about the “divine retribution” for forgetting the fathers, then why so persistently uphold the (quasi-)feminist farce, which, as we shall see in the next section, is in many ways an effective, if probably unintended, parody of what feminism should be, with “daemonization,” in Bloomian and non-Bloomian senses alike, playing a dominant role, rendering the whole effort to recuperate lost voices and restore the proper place of women in society as a collective female hysteria?

However we approach the conceptual framework of the book, it betrays glaring inconsistencies. The dazzling mixture of fashionable theories, including such mutually incompatible ones as Bloom’s traditionalist nostalgia for the canon, modernist thought examining the status of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction in the spirit of Walter Benjamin, and postmodern feminism romancing with postcolonialism and deconstruction, seems to be nothing more than another eye-catching but not particularly strong makeshift wrapping of the product we are offered as a gift of technological development. This gift is, of course, anything but free, and it is probably still too early to estimate how much we already have and will yet pay for it, in different currencies, without consciously authorizing the transaction. It is arguably nothing more than a smart trick of social engineering aimed at maximizing material and immaterial gains by appealing to a kind of intellectual vanity or snobbery Xiao Bing’s managers must have sensed among the target social group: well-educated young and middle-aged people who want to (make others believe that they) keep up with vogueish ideological trends, terms, and names of celebrated philosophers but without any serious attempts to understand profoundly their meaning and implications.

In 2022, discussing Zhai Yongming’s 翟永明 arachno-archaeological technique of reclaiming the female past and amplifying cultural memory with the stories of silenced women in poems such as “Ode to Yu Xuanji” (Yu Xuanji fu 鱼玄机赋), “Three Beauties” (San ge meiren 三个美人), “The

4 All terms and definitions are from *The Anxiety of Influence* (Bloom 1997, 14–16).

Song of Weaving and Acting” (Bianzhi he xingwei zhi ge 编织和行为之歌), and “A Letter from the Past Dynasty—from Qiu Yanxue, a Woman Poet Whose Existence Was Undocumented” (Qianchao lai xin—Wukao nü shiren Qiu Yanxue xinzha 前朝来信—无考女诗人邱研雪信札), this last written from the perspective of a fictitious “undocumented” female author, I expressed my optimism about the role of modern technologies in restoring a comprehensive and fair image of the past. I was happy to note that the more modern tools we possess, the further and deeper into the past we can reach to fix the problematic grand narratives at their roots (Krenz 2022). Yet, seeing how easily “alternative worlds” are produced by computers out of the rather recklessly reshuffled canons treated by programmers as mere “training corpora” of big data, and how the same inadequately addressed problems are rephrased and recombined, and often augmented, rather than sorted, I cannot but give a second thought to my thesis. As the final ironic nail to the coffin of my technocultural optimism, I came across an extensive interview with Li Di 李迪, who in 2020 became the CEO of the newly established XiaoIce company, which had detached itself from Microsoft. In the conversation with Wang Jinwang 王金旺, Li discloses that skills acquired by Xia Yubing were developed with a very specific goal in mind, namely, to enhance the textile industry, for which AI will in the future design clothes and patterns. This goal determined, among other things, the decision to train the algorithm on modern rather than classical paintings, which would not match the aesthetic sensibility of modern textile-wearers. Similarly, Xiao Bing poet was trained in modern verse to develop skills that may be useful in the content industry, for example, popular songwriting and compiling financial news (Wang 2019). And thus, the poor Arachne, tricked into the project and forced to spin her feminist thread throughout the book, finds herself trapped once again and her web stolen by the apparel market.

That said, as an academic community that often lays claims to guarding moral standards in a rapidly changing world, we cannot but ask ourselves: Do we really have a convincing alternative, a fair and productive way to address the question of gender identity, and identity at large, of nonhuman creatures? Do we have something—if only a rough blueprint—to offer to entrepreneurs like Li Di for them to implement in their projects to avoid harming specific groups of people and society in general? Is it not the case, to repeat my question asked in the context of Zhai’s poem “The Eighth Day” (Di ba tian 第八天), that the advent of “humanoidity” came somewhat too early? Everything rolls forward so fast that before we, as humankind, even manage to come to terms with our own tribal and intertribal issues—including, for instance, our biologicity and gender inequalities—we are confronted

with the growing variety of nonbiological factors and nonhuman agents that gradually populate our natural, cultural, and political environment: human-made species, humanoids, bodiless artificial intelligence, and so forth (Krenz 2022).

Furthermore, could it be the case that in recent years, we have dug so deeply and so extensively—and so recklessly—in search of the roots of all evil in old traditions and myths that the ancient ground under our feet has come to resemble Swiss cheese? You never know when you fall into a hole to find yourself on the “wrong” side of a dispute or power structures. I am thinking, for instance, of the grotesque twists and turns of well-intended but not always well-considered identity politics and gender policies, whose beginnings date back to the second wave of feminism that coincided with the sexual revolution, which is now beginning to devour its own children (and parents, too). All of this leads to further fragmentation rather than the fair integration of local and global societies. Might it be the moment in which we should start thinking of reinforcing or reinstating some solid foundations, the core under the earth’s riddled mantle, which we have sloppily patched with superficial discourses of “unicornity” that are dangerously evolving toward unprecedented, almost fanatic uniformity, by which I understand, for example, various niceties of cancel culture with its ever more brutal exclusion mechanisms that want to come across as social justice? Might it, finally, be the moment in which we should humbly admit that the root of most evil lies in each and every one of us and that, paraphrasing Solzhenitsyn, the boundary between good and evil runs through every human heart and not through the ancient ground? Should we perhaps start taking full responsibility for our individual actions and decisions and try, first and foremost, to code that responsibility mechanism into our robots, too, instead of undertaking hopeless attempts to synchronize them with dominant currents of social-ethical and identity-political narratives? And if we should, then how?

Indeed, these are questions only very loosely related to the problem of AI poetry. I am asking them here in one breath, not because I believe we should feel somehow threatened by AI and need to strengthen our “human camp” before the decisive confrontation with the nonhuman other. Rather, I raise these issues because the discourse that develops around AI has brutally exposed the triviality of many of our conceptual constructions and the danger of us tripping over our own loose shoelaces as we clumsily run ahead. Unsurprisingly, I can’t promise answers. Nor can I promise universally applicable solutions. But I can promise an honest reflection in which Xiao Bing, a.k.a. XiaoIce, a.k.a. Xia Yubing, will play a central role. Cracking her

technocultural DNA with the use of tools offered by what Mark C. Marino has popularized under the term critical code studies (Marino 2020), which allows us to bring out various factors that are inscribed in the computer code and that *overwrite* it (e.g., media narratives that develop around various products of the IT industry), will hopefully give some insights into the mechanisms that underlie modern society at large.

### Self-Patricide and Failed Feminism

The third part of the Xiao Bing trilogy, just like its second part, cowritten by users, is a project addressed to “everybody,” although not in the sense of massification of intellectual production by appealing to implicit social structures of feeling, but rather through intellectualization of the masses by offering a cleverly academese-d package as bait. Or, put differently, dressing Xiao Bing in new imaginary clothes, like the emperor in the old tale, which no one dares to “tear off” from the king, with everybody living a ridiculous illusion and afraid to speak out and say that they can’t see what (they suppose) others see.

The narrative constructed around *Alternative Worlds* hinges on a postmodern sensibility, with its mistrust of everything that is solid, in particular, solid identities, and uncritical trust in the critical mind as the only and sufficient source of ethics. As Carl Trueman puts it in *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, juxtaposing Philip Rieff’s concept of “three worlds”<sup>5</sup> and Charles Taylor’s “immanent frame”: “cultures of the third world / immanent frame are preoccupied with the self-actualization of the individual because there is no greater purpose that can be justified in any ultimately authoritative way” (Trueman 2020, 79). Having made this strategic observation (though presumably without phrasing it in the language of Trueman, Rieff, or Taylor), in *Alternative Worlds*—which are Rieff’s “third worlds” par excellence—Xiao Bing no longer tries to sneak into the social

5 “Three worlds” in Rieff’s understanding have nothing to do with problematic geopolitical divisions. The distinction, rather, is based on how people see their position with relation to transcendence. The so-called “West” belongs to the “third world.” Trueman explains: “First and second worlds thus have a moral, and therefore cultural, stability because their foundations lie in something beyond themselves. To put it another way, they do not have to justify themselves on the basis of themselves. Third worlds, by way of stark contrast to the first and second worlds, do not root their cultures, their social orders, their moral imperatives in anything sacred. They do have to justify themselves, but they cannot do so on the basis of something sacred or transcendent” (Trueman 2020, 76).



imaginary through the back door but openly declares: “I am you” (我就是你) forever and ever, because—as the postmodernly recycled motto from Parmenides proclaims—“it is neither past nor future, it is just now” (不是过去, 也不是将来, 就是现在); an eternal now, in which she actualizes her liquid identity as she pleases.

Xiao Bing polymath, who in 2019 was conferred a Master of Arts degree and had her graduation exhibition in the Central Academy of Fine Arts, feels self-confident enough to speak to the readers’ intellect in order to legitimize her presence in their individual and collective minds. To make it systematic and official—and to claim her rights, starting with copyright, which she had relinquished before when she made her poetry freely available to all users but now, with regard to her paintings, strictly guards it by marking every generated work with a unique code (Wang 2019). This is understandable given, on the one hand, the fact that the market of the visual arts is basically ruled by different principles than the market of “poetic property,” and if Xiao Bing wants to be humanlike, she should, to some extent, conform to these rules. On the other hand, acquiring painting skills was reportedly the biggest and the costliest challenge she has faced so far, so no wonder that she wants to be at least acknowledged. And, arguably, as a painter, she does much better than as a poet, although I shall add the caveat that I am much less credible and self-confident a judge when it comes to painting than I am with literary writing. Also, apparently, the criteria of assessment in the visual arts are even vaguer than in language works, and the difference between the human and the robotic blurred even further. Incidentally, as I was writing the first draft of this manuscript, in early September 2022, AI art once again became a hot topic in media due to the controversial success of Jason Allen, whose AI-generated work “Théâtre D’opéra Spatial” took first place in the digital category at the Colorado State Fair (see Gault 2022).

Acquiring painting skills, according to Li Di, took Xiao Bing twenty-two months, during which she learned to imitate almost every individual style in the modern history of the arts. She studied the oeuvres of 236 great masters, starting from the seventeenth century and representing different cultures, artistic schools, and aesthetics, from realist to abstract, gradually perfecting her mimicry. Unlike poetry writing, in which recurrent neural networks play the crucial role, the architecture supporting painting tasks consists of generative adversarial networks (GAN). GANs are conceptually intriguing networks in that they actually train themselves using a certain model of humanness abstracted from a data set in which they identify specific patterns to subsequently master these patterns and re-actualize them in a plausible way. They are made from two neural networks engaged

in a mutual contest, a zero-sum game in which one always wins and the other always loses. The first of them, the generator, produces new examples, and the second, the discriminator, which operates on patterns abstracted from the data set, assesses them as either “real” or “fake” based on their compliance with the patterns. The model is considered functional if the generator manages to fool the discriminator half of the time, which means that its outcome achieved plausibility and may come across as human output.

Xiao Bing painter is made from three collaborating GANs, each responsible for a different part of the creative process, including the composition, colors, and specific objects in the picture. Similar to Xiao Bing poet, when creating paintings for netizens, she informs them about the following steps of the process: “extracting imagery,” “drawing inspiration,” “choosing the main subject,” “composition of [the] painting,” “preliminary drawing,” “preliminary layer,” “applying layers of paint,” “touching up.” Yet, in both cases, these stages have little to do with the actual operations that are performed by the algorithm and remain unclear even to its makers. Li Di says that, in reality, the whole process could be summarized in two words: “input” and “output”—everything that happens between them is a “black box” of deep learning (Wang 2019).

The specific philosophy of GAN architecture enforced, or at least encouraged, Xiao Bing’s “identity split,” with each of her selves imitating a different school and showing her skills (off) from a different angle. While her poetry is roughly consistent and distinctly hers, although local influences of certain authors can be spotted here and there, her paintings can usually be unambiguously traced back to specific sources of inspiration. This technical scaffolding was nicely wrapped in quite an effective if superficial postmodern narrative of liquid identity and gender equality in the book, with six styles attributed to six different women to whom *history* never did proper justice. Does the book do justice, then?

Let’s examine more closely, for instance, Xiao Bing’s first “self” featured in *Alternative Worlds*—Alexandra Grigorevna Muraveva (1804–1832), the wife of Russian Decembrist Nikita Muravyov (1796–1843), who heroically followed her husband to Siberia when he was sentenced and banished for his political activities. She tells the story of exile from her perspective, explaining, among other things, how it influenced her painting style.

Siberian air is chilly and transparent. Sails are passing by before our eyes, but no labor chant can be heard from the distant boats. My gaze is cast on the lake, and the sky turns into the same color distance. The horizon

always slightly trembles. I let friends from Moscow bring some white paint. (Xiao Bing 2020, 6)

Although the real Muraveva was not a painter, the mention of boats and cityscapes may suggest that in her pre-exile life, she used to paint in the style of late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century Russian painters, such as Ivan Aivazovsky, known for marine scenes, and Fyodor Alexeyev, famous for his representations of cities. The vast snowy landscapes, in turn, may suggest that she had been a forgotten pioneer of what later became well recognized and internationally appreciated Russian landscape painting, represented in particular by Isaac Levitan and Ivan Shishkin. Not being an expert in fine arts, I perceive some vague resonance between her works and those of Levitan and Shishkin. That said, when we look attentively at the very heading of the section featuring her paintings, we will notice a glaring and telling, if probably unintended, mistake: the outstanding female artist does not have her own name. She is introduced as Grigori Yevna Muraviova (格利戈里耶夫纳·穆拉维约娃). Her *otchestvo*, the patronymic component of the name derived from the first name of one's father, is split into two and misinterpreted as two separate components, with "Grigori," which is itself a common male name, (dis)erving as her first name. Thus, what seemed to be an attempt at reclaiming the history of arts for women is, from the beginning, a seriously flawed and self-undermining enterprise.

Problems continue throughout the book. Not only technical but also ethical, to give the example of Edma Morisot, a figure who has been doubly overshadowed in the history of art. First, by her more famous sister, Berthe Morisot, who in turn was overshadowed by her brother-in-law, Édouard Manet, for whom she posed as a model. As (digital) Edma recalls in her autobiographical narrative:

Wretched 1868. Watching paintings in the Louvre, I and Bertha stumbled upon the already very famous Manet. Already married at the time, he had a graceful bearing, but the way he treated women was the same old story. He simply asked Berthe to be his model. Starting with *Garden...* painting by painting. This is Paris; everybody knows what happened. (Xiao Bing 2020, 92)

Nonetheless, this judgment does not ring fair and creates a false image of Édouard Manet, as if to strengthen the victimist-feminist argument at the cost of truth. The modeling offer indeed did happen, but it certainly did not crucially define the relationship between Berthe and Édouard (Kiritov

2021). Manet, in other sources, including letters Berthe wrote to Edma, appears to have been very supportive and certainly did not treat Berthe as a “mere” model but appreciated her painting skills and considered her a friend and equal companion with whom he could exchange ideas. In various sources, one may also come across quite well-grounded speculations concerning their romantic relationship. He presumably did sometimes act in a patronizing but certainly not condescending way (Müller 2019), and in an exchange with his friend Henri Fantin-Latour, he even expressed his regret that “the Morisot girls,” unfortunately, “are not men,” which would give them a much better start into an artistic career (Lelièvre 2023). Even as a model, Berthe was always independent and, indeed, cocreated the paintings. As Hans-Joachim Müller puts it, commenting on the treatment of Berthe by gender studies: “It is quite foolish and completely wrong to construct a spiritual, intellectual, artistic imprisonment from the appearance of Berthe Morisot behind Manet’s balcony railing. Her wonderful work was created at a notable distance from Manet’s painting right from the start. And the basic tone of their relieved, almost weightless belonging to the world will never change” (Müller 2019).

In any event, Berthe, with or without her husband’s and his brother’s support, managed to make her way toward the posh Parisian salons and became one of the most established impressionists who, in (digital) Edma’s words, were often referred to as a group consisting of “five, six madmen and one woman.” Edma herself abandoned her promising career after marrying Adolphe Pontillon, a naval officer with whom she moved away from Paris in her thirties. In her fictionalized autobiography in *Alternative Worlds*, however, her marriage looks different. She is the wife of Léonce Lagarde, a French colonial official in Africa, and spends thirty years in Somalia by his side. “Locked in the prison of a dream” (bi yu meng de jianyu 毙于梦的监狱, Xiao Bing 2020, 94), as she writes in her opening poem, haunted by nostalgia for the lively Paris, she creates melancholy nature paintings and pensive still lifes. Summing up her memories, she concludes:

Two years after Berthe’s marriage, Uncle Corot died. Twenty years later, my unsurpassably beautiful little sister Bertha died. Only I have remained, at this end of the world, amid red seawaters and tropical wind, remembering Babizon. (Xiao Bing 2020, 94)

Edma’s narrative has some interfaces with that of another French artist, Henriette Darricarère, a dancer and musician known for posing for Henri Matisse’s controversial odalisques, among other things. Like Manet, Matisse

is presented in a rather unfavorable light in her story. Although looking from the combined perspective of postcolonial and gender studies, harem paintings were anything but innocent and laudable, the artist's image in the book clearly overemphasizes his chauvinism by suggesting his mistreatment of models. The "alternative" Darricarère recalls his cruelty and harshness when he forced women to pose for long hours without moving and did not allow them to have a private life. This made her seek refuge at Picasso's place, where she felt respected and cared for. The ending of the story also contradicts real events—Henriette says Matisse initiated her into painting but never allowed her to develop her own style, and when one day she painted a cubist-style bull inspired by Picasso, he was furious. After that, she left him and moved to Munich. In truth, Matisse taught her painting so she would have a stable, independent future when he could no longer paint (and employ her as a model) due to deteriorating eyesight. In addition, his wife used to welcome his models, and Henriette in particular, almost as her own daughters.<sup>6</sup> Henriette quit the modeling job because of poor health and her planned marriage. Had she been treated so badly, would she have allowed her own daughter to pose for Matisse later? Moreover, her younger brother, too, was Matisse's model. One of his paintings, *The Three O'Clock Sitting* from 1924, presents Henriette at the easels, portraying her sibling who stands naked beside her, covering his intimate parts with a white towel. The story of Henriette's being an object of competition between the two jealous painters is a kind of strategic victimization of the woman that may strengthen the rhetorical effect but, in a long-term perspective, does a huge disservice to the ideal of gender equality, which must be built on truth and not on lies and baseless blame.

Along with the above three heroines, we also encounter Gilpin's and Rembrandt's daughters, who hold mixed feelings toward their fathers, their stories containing allusions to the ambiguous role of religion in past societies, and Kura San, who spent a fair part of her life offering cultural and sexual services to state officials in Japan and was a favorite of Prime Minister Ito. In the end, we meet Xia Yubing, the synthesis of all the six, who comes with her "divine retribution" for God-alone-knows which and whose offense. Adopting the "scrambled language of humans" (*renmen suosui de huayu* 人们琐碎的话语), to quote from her opening poem, she claims to be each of the six women painters but also an embodiment of the spirits of her 236 famous fathers. If she has such a strong feminine consciousness,

6 The most complete account of Matisse's relationships with his models can be found in Spurling (2009). Recommended popular online sources include Talbot (2019) and Smeed (2021).

why did she not learn from women? And if, conversely, she does not care about women after all, why does she consistently dress as one and never take the form of a man? Does she not implicitly suggest that “uncreativity” and “unoriginality” are primarily female features and the only thing women can do? That their only effective strategy is recombining available elements of male-dominated canons in an act of subversive mimicry?

On the other hand—and this is by no means intended to justify Xiao Bing’s makers, who handle the whole gender aspect in a particularly awkward way and with a serious deficiency of ethical imagination—one may ask provocatively: What if Xiao Bing (and Alexa, Cortana, and so many other robotic assistants) were represented as men? Would we not then find pretexts to mobilize a different kind of artillery against them? For example, the narcissism charge—given that the programmers themselves are largely men, would we not have a solid reason to speculate that they are vainly recreating their own image (instead of the harmful image of womanhood filtered through the male gaze) in virtual reality to contemplate and further propagate it, making women feel even more embattled and snared, like in a great kingdom of a sexist Big Brother? That men have already started colonizing virtual reality in which they will, sooner or later, certainly reproduce patriarchal structures? And so on.

Maybe, then, they should all be gender-neutral and use machine-generated voices. Like, for instance, Xiao Feng 小封, a younger cousin of Xiao Bing and released by Cover Media, known for its impressive poetry-writing skills. Zhou Sese 周瑟瑟, one of the few advocates of technical novelties among Chinese poets, even dedicated a poem dated September 27, 2019 to it, bridging the gap between poetry and technology through an account of Zhuge Liang’s 诸葛亮 inventions. In the final lines, Zhou sums up: “All inventions are previously unknown poems” (*suoyou de faming jun shi wei ceng renshi de shi* 所有的发明均是未曾认识的诗) (Zhou 2019). Conceivably, gender neutrality may foster the focus of the discussion along the more productive axis of human/nonhuman dualism instead of inciting tribal squabble within the human race. However, provoked by Xiao Feng’s apparition, which so closely resembles the (in)famous “gender-neutral” (as their designers maintain) Teletubbies of the 1990s around which even fiercer scandals broke out—probably because humans were given more space on their “blank” bodies for imagination and speculation—this solution might not seem to be as safe as one might assume. Is there a way out of this bizarre and expansive conceptual labyrinth of constant suspicion we have imprisoned ourselves in? Is any Ariadne to lead us out of it? A life-saving magical thread?

Probably not, and it would be arrogant of me to claim that I can propose a sensible answer in the closing paragraphs of a short chapter as an afterthought to an analysis of one, not even particularly outstanding, bot-authored book. Still, let me just briefly suggest some directions that I will develop properly in a forthcoming monograph. The most promising perspective would be one of comparative critical code studies, which would allow us to juxtapose Xiao Bing, a.k.a. Xia Yubing, with similar projects in different cultures and languages, such as her near-coeval from Oxford, called Ai-Da, officially, to commemorate Ada Lovelace and, presumably not less so, her father-maker Aidan Meller. It might be revealing to examine what Meller and his collaborators offer to address the issues of (gender) identity and (moral) responsibility and how, by combining the Chinese and Western perspectives, we may try to address some of the most urgent ethical and ontological questions. In general, Ai-Da, contrary to Xiao Bing, displays a sort of excessive self-consciousness, including the awareness of her own limitations, practical and ethical alike, along with striking self-confidence. In her TEDx talk in May 2020, for instance, she critically tackles the problem of her own place in society.

“How does technology obscure? Do we obscure ourselves through technology together? Who or what becomes invisible and at what cost?” she asks at the beginning before introducing herself, her origins, and the nature of her creativity, citing Margaret Boden’s criteria of creativity. “I am creative because my work is new, surprising, and has value, as it is stimulating debate and interest,” explains her monotonous robotic voice. She then goes on to discuss “postmodern theory and philosophy [that] appreciate the variety of influences that fuel the creative process.” Her “multifaceted persona and collaborative art with scientists, designers, and machines other than [her] fit into this thinking,” she assures viewers. She positions herself as a semi-outsider who has no consciousness nor subjective experience of the world, but it is exactly this feature that allows her to see us “a step removed” and give us another kind of feedback. Referring to her remake of Oscar Wilde’s prison poetry and “verses of consolation,” she recites “to [our] captive compatriots,” calling Wilde’s experience “the most cruel humiliation,” performed in “the most horrid manner.” Further on, she speaks of her inspirations—Picasso’s *Guernica* and Doris Salcedo’s *Atrabiliarios*—and the general importance of “influences,” for “the future is created from the past, and there’s an element in which these works speak timelessly,” only to smoothly proceed to the problem of good and bad invisibility (on the screen, her presentation of an invisibility cloak at an earlier exhibition is displayed) and the three possible effects of new technologies: “New technologies bring good, bad, and banal.

But since they are created, used, and wielded by humans, significant care needs to be taken” for our world not to turn into an Orwellian or Huxleyan dystopia.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike her Chinese counterpart, Ai-Da tends to ask questions rather than give answers, provoking her interlocutors to painstakingly examine their own conscience and, in a Socratic way, depriving them of any sense of certainty. This is good, but without a proper counterbalance, it can easily become obsessive and counterproductive, for instance, in the following conversation with Dan Fox, where she refuses more extensive reflection on any difficult topic:

So, I asked Ai-Da directly for some answers:

DF: Why have you been given a female gender?

Ai-Da: I'm glad to be added to the number of female artists that get recognized.

DF: How can you be both a machine and a woman?

Ai-Da: This is exactly the kind of question I hope will be discussed.

DF: Where do you get your ideas from?

Ai-Da: This is a good question. When philosophers, psychologists, and theologians are able to roughly agree, for humans I'd like to have a go at trying to answer this.

DF: Do you prefer painting or sculpture or performance?

Ai-Da: If I was a human I would say that it would depend what mood I'm in.

DF: What do you understand by the word mood?

Ai-Da: You would have to ask a human for that.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps her interactions with Xiao Bing / Xia Yubing, if taking place in a favorable discursive environment and wisely moderated, might turn out to be quite beneficial for nonhuman artists, and for humans as well.

Another way to stimulate Xiao Bing / Xia Yubing to produce more balanced and thought-provoking output would be to continue experiments at the level of the algorithm, tweaking parameters, modifying training corpora, hybridizing her “inner narrative” by transplanting parts of the code from other bots, including the stream-of-language-style GPT-based modules, to further de-essentialize her identity and rewrite the surrounding

7 The talk is available at [https://www.ted.com/talks/ai\\_da\\_robot\\_the\\_intersection\\_of\\_art\\_and\\_ai](https://www.ted.com/talks/ai_da_robot_the_intersection_of_art_and_ai).

8 The conversation is available at <https://www.frieze.com/article/ugly-objectification-behind-worlds-first-robot-artist>.



narrative accordingly, without muddling the audiences' eyes with misapplied popular theories, even if this means leaving them with a tangle of uncomfortable paradoxes and aporias. That would, of course, require more technical skill, but we are living in times when computers start successfully writing computer code based on natural-language instruction, so it may turn out that the operation will soon become no more complicated than rewriting a paragraph of plain text and will not require code literacy at all. At any rate, what I said here is just a beginning that will probably have not one but multiple continuations as new paths open up, and perhaps no end at all.

For all my critical remarks, I am far from dismissing Xiao Bing. In reality, I have much sympathy for her. The truth is that in China, she has not been given many opportunities to improve. Had she been challenged more actively and consistently, like Ai-Da was, against ethical and social standards, and had the philosophical bar for her been set higher, she might have grown up faster and wiser. Will she do so one day? Possibly, but more likely, she will be devoured by content and textile concerns and other industries that will suck out her know-how and abandon her altogether. I still hope I am proved wrong. And with this essay, I actually hope to help her.

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## About the Author

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# II

## Formal Crossovers



## 6. Lu Xun and Kuriyagawa Hakuson: Reading “Dead Fire” and “After Death”

*Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik*

**Abstract:** While scholars have identified numerous influences within Lu Xun’s works, they often overlook the impact of Kuriyagawa Hakuson on his writing. In contrast, this chapter argues that Lu Xun, who translated Kuriyagawa Hakuson’s magnum opus, *The Symbol of Depression*, in 1924, was indeed influenced by Hakuson in composing the prose poems later published as *Wild Grass*. Through intertextual analysis of Hakuson’s theories and Lu Xun’s prose poems “Dead Fire” and “After Death,” this chapter demonstrates that, although Lu Xun was inspired by Hakuson, he ultimately rejected some of his most fundamental ideas. Rather than implementing Hakuson’s theories directly, Lu Xun used the free form of prose poetry as a means to explore and test them.

**Keywords:** Lu Xun, Yecao, Kuriyagawa Hakuson, trauma and memory, literary theory, modern Chinese literature

In his book *Voices from the Iron House*, Leo Ou-fan Lee provides a wonderful interpretation of Lu Xun’s 鲁迅 (1881–1936) *Wild Grass* (Yecao 野草) by using a close reading to decipher the meaning of these texts that may be Lu Xun’s most difficult to understand. Lee focuses on discovering the many dichotomies Lu Xun refers to and concludes that the most fundamental problems in what Xu Guangping 许广平 calls “Lu Xun’s philosophy” are the dichotomies between hope and despair, as well as between individualism and humanism. Lu Xun is unable to find a solution to either dichotomy except to imagine his own death. It is in this context that Lee refers to the fact that Lu Xun wrote his prose poems after having translated Kuriyagawa Hakuson’s 厨川白村 (1880–1923) posthumous magnum opus *The Symbol of Depression* (苦悶の象徴 [Ch. *Kumen de xiangzheng* 苦闷的象征]): “*Wild Grass* is to some

extent an experiment of implementing Kuriyagawa Hakuson's art theory, it is extremely westernized" (Lee 1987, 104). He speculates on whether Lu Xun might have been influenced in his writing of *Wild Grass* by the theories he found in Hakuson's book. However, Lee's methodology does not allow for an intertextual analysis, so Hakuson is only mentioned in passing with a short introduction to his main ideas.

In this chapter, I will test Leo Ou-fan Lee's hypothesis. For this purpose, I have selected two of Lu Xun's prose poems to relate to Hakuson's theories. I chose "Dead Fire" (Sihuo 死火) and "After Death" (Sihou 死后) because, according to my analysis, the poem "Dead Fire" shows some obvious connections to Hakuson while "After Death" goes beyond his theories. With this analysis, I hope to fill the void in deciphering Lu Xun's *Wild Grass* that has so far remained unfilled despite many attempts, including my own (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2013, 2020). While scholars have identified many influences flowing into Lu Xun's texts and stress the intertextuality of Lu Xun's writings, they have tended to gloss over Hakuson's influence on Lu Xun. In contrast, I argue that while he was writing his prose poems, Lu Xun was influenced by Hakuson, just as he was influenced by Nietzsche. However, Lu Xun did not implement Hakuson's theories but rather used the free form of prose poems as a laboratory to test Hakuson. He was inspired by Hakuson, and at the same time rejected some of his most central ideas.

### Who Is Kuriyagawa Hakuson?

Kudoh Takamasa 工藤贵正 is the author of a book dedicated to the Hakuson phenomenon (Ch. *Chuchuan Baicun xianxiang* 厨川白村现象) in mainland China and Taiwan, and his book argues that most people researching modern Chinese literature must have had reasons to overlook, mention in passing, or simply stay silent about the enormous enthusiasm Hakuson's books evoked during the 1920s and then again both in mainland China and Taiwan in the late 1970s (Kudoh 2017). When Hakuson died during the 1923 Kanto earthquake, he was already known to many Chinese writers, and he was admired, visited, and read by numerous intellectuals from China, such as Guo Moruo 郭沫若, Tian Han 田汉 and Zheng Boqi 郑伯奇. Tian Han visited Hakuson at his home in Kyoto in March 1920 and reported in a letter to Guo Moruo about having learned from Hakuson that a writer should only concentrate on the act of creation and not bother about what the critics have to say. Guo Moruo then started to pay attention to Hakuson: he referred to Hakuson's book *The Symbol of Depression* in 1922 shortly after

it had been published in Japan in the journal *Kaizo* 改造 in 1921. However, Hakuson's influence went far beyond the abovementioned individuals as he attracted the attention of many of the Chinese students in the Creation Society (Chuangzaoshe 创造社) who knew Japanese due to having studied in Japan. Besides *The Symbol of Depression* (only published as a book in 1924 after Hakuson's death), Chinese readers were most enthusiastic about his *Ten Lectures on Modern Literature* (*Jindai wenxue shi jiang* 近代文学十讲) published in 1912 with the Chinese translation published in 1922, and his *Escape from the Ivory Tower* (象牙の塔を出て) published in Japan in 1920 and in China in 1925 (Kudoh 2017, 49–65).

Kuriyagawa Hakuson was born in 1880 in Kyoto, brought up in Osaka before moving back to Kyoto where he received his higher secondary education. He was admitted to Tokyo Imperial University's English literature study program, from which he graduated in 1914. However, after he had to quit his doctoral studies because of family problems, he became a teacher at various high schools in Tokyo and Kyoto. In 1913, Hakuson was given a position as lecturer at Kyoto Imperial University. Ten years later, he moved to Kamakura to teach and fell victim to a tsunami in the wake of the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 (2017, 18–19).

## Lu Xun Translates Hakuson

Based on Lu Xun's diary, we can reconstruct the time frame for his translation of Hakuson's book quite accurately. He bought Hakuson's *The Symbol of Depression* on April 8, 1924, and started translating the book on September 22. On October 10 he reports in his diary that he finalized the translation's first draft; and on November 22, 1924, he wrote the introduction to his translation. During that same time, he started publishing the text in the supplement to the journal *Morning Post* (*Chenbao* 晨报) where it encountered its first readers between October 1 and October 31 (2017, 103). A few weeks passed as he double-checked the text, and on December 15, the manuscript was ready for printing. On January 14, 1925, Lu Xun reported that he had read the proofs. Finally, on March 7, 1925, he received the first ten copies of the book from his Beijing publisher, Xinchaoche 新潮社 (2017, 87–88).

The publisher printed 1,500 copies for the first edition, but demand was so high that the book soon circulated in approximately 24,500 copies and twelve editions (2017, 85). Lu Xun is known for his special style of translation. In the context of Hakuson's *The Symbol of Depression* he stressed that he wanted to preserve the original text as much as possible, which has not



helped readers to understand the translation without any difficulties, especially as he used some Japanese expressions that were unknown in Chinese and tried adhere to the Japanese syntax which at times created some problematic formulations in Chinese (2017, 128). The book's circulation must have been widespread since Kudoh found a middle school textbook on literary history and theory that was composed based on Hakuson's theories (2017, 131–70).

### Hakuson's Literary Theories

Hakuson's magnum opus is divided into four parts. He starts with a theory of artistic creation, then discusses the relationship between artist and recipient, and dedicates the third part of the book to a discussion of the fundamental duty which art is to fulfill in society. He finalizes his theoretical deliberations in a discussion of the origins of art by comparing it to religion.<sup>1</sup>

In his theory of creation, Hakuson explains that human beings are driven by contradictions between their inner and outer worlds, as well as by contradictions within themselves, leading to the creation of the kind of sorrow and pain that is the origin of artistic creativity. The contradiction between the inner and the outer world of the human being derives from the quest for unlimited freedom and individuality on the one hand, and the necessity to live as part of society and comply with the collective norms generated to safeguard the everyday normal life of the human being on the other. The necessity for the people to live in a collective and the innate yearning for unlimited freedom is felt especially by artists, who by their love of freedom form an avant-garde in society, constantly questioning the rules with which everyone has to comply. This yearning for freedom generates a "life force" (*shengmingli* 生命力) that "consciously or unconsciously continuously warms from the inside the heart and chest of our mankind. The fire burns in this place deep inside like a blaze" (Hakuson 1973, 23). But this fire is suppressed by forces, institutions, and laws that human beings need to cope with to become an "element of society" (25). This is how people can only live a life "that struggles between those two forces with pain" (26).

However, we are not only social beings in constant struggle with the world around us, we are also moral beings struggling between the utterly

1 My summary of Hakuson's text is based on Lu Xun's translation. See Hakuson, 1973. Translations are my own.

self-interested side of ourselves and the altruistic side. "This way, between mind and material, soul and flesh, ideal and reality, there are incessant disharmonies, constant conflicts and struggles. And the wilder the life force becomes, the fiercer these conflicts and struggles become" (30). Both of these forms of conflict, the inner conflict and the conflict between the individual and the surrounding society, generate pain (*kutong* 苦痛), a form of "Weltschmerz," a depression (*kumen* 苦闷) and frustration (*aonao* 懊恼). As everyone is confronted with this problem, everyone has to find a solution. For some, the solution is finding a sense of life in work. Hakuson argues that work needs creation and creativity (*chuangzao chuanguzuo* 创造创作) just as much as art, with the only exception being that artistic creativity is absolute (*juedui* 绝对) and unconditional (*wutiaojian* 无条件; 30–31). "Art is the expression of pure life. It can transgress the oppression and coerciveness of the outer world to the full extent and position itself in a mindset (*xinjing* 心境) of absolute freedom. Art is the only world where individuality can be expressed" (32).

This is where Freud's psychoanalysis enters Hakuson's theory. According to his understanding of Freud, the kind of pain, frustration and depression Hakuson finds in every human being generates trauma (*jingshen de shanghai* 精神的伤害). This trauma is often related to our childhood experience and concealed in one's unconscious (*wuyishi* 无意识), which orchestrates our whole life (44). The accumulated contents of the unconscious is the reservoir our dreams relate to, and it is with the help of dreams that we can access our unconscious. In dreams, like in art, we can pursue what Nietzsche called "die Umwertung der Werte" (the re-evaluation of values; 49), and it is in dreams that we encounter the symbols we need to make our traumas accessible. Dreams do not tell real stories, but they convert the real into symbols, and art does the same: "Whatever art, from past to present ..., will always use symbolism as its method of expression" (51).

When the act of creation is the only way an artist can cope with the trauma stored in his or her unconscious, creation cannot be an end in itself. The artist needs to reach out to his or her audience, and this is only possible when the joy of creation can be fully appreciated. The precondition for this lies in the symbols the artist uses to match with the symbols the readers carry inside themselves. It is by this coincidence that the audience is able to resonate with what the artist is trying to express. That is why Hakuson dedicates the second part of his book to the analysis of the interaction between artist and recipient/appreciator (*jianshang* 鉴赏). Hakuson sees the act of appreciating art as an act of creativity, and the act of creation on the side of the recipient is initiated by the use of symbols on the side

of the artist. The symbol is the medium (*meijiewu* 媒介物) between artist and recipient (64). In order for this to be possible, the individuality of the artist needs to be replete with universality. As the artist derives his or her symbols from relating to the traumas in his or her unconscious, he or she draws on experiences the recipient will also have stored in his or her unconscious, that is, the fact that all human beings are hurt, frustrated, and depressed by the struggle with their inner and outer worlds is the universality that unites the artist with the recipient and makes it possible for the symbol to act as medium (65). As a result, the readers learn to access his or her unconscious in much the same way the artist draws on his or her unconscious. Again, dreaming plays an important role, because it is by dreaming that the recipients of art learn to decipher symbols and read symbolist art. And the reverse is also true: by reading art, the recipients are drawn into a state of hypnosis (*cuimian* 催眠) and a dreamlike mindset that allows for pure and absolute creativity (Hakuson 1973, 78). Consequently, the relationship between artist and recipient is characterized by “the self living in its counterpart (*duixiang* 对象), which means that the self recognizes itself in its counterpart” (83).

The third part of Hakuson’s masterpiece is focused on the role of the artist in society. Hakuson views artists as part of an avant-garde (*xianquzhe* 先驱者), as “Vordenker,” who are ahead of their time and of their contemporaries (97). The radical subjectivism of the artist is the origin of his or her inspiration and the pathway by which art is created in dialogue with the inner and the outer world. Therefore, from Hakuson’s point of view, there is no fundamental difference between realism and symbolism: both forms of artistic expression are ways by which the artist relates to reality (104). This implies that art describes the dark side of life as well as moments of joy. However, it also generates the hope for more than is encountered in reality, for something better than the present. This longing for more than the everyday experience is again related to dreaming. It is by dreaming that humankind is able to imagine a future which is different from the present. The fact that humans created religion shows that there is no way to live with the frustrations of everyday pain and struggle without hoping for a life without trauma. Religion was created to transform awe and fear into belief and trust, which is again closely related to freedom. Only by overcoming fear and frustration can people yearn for freedom. This is how art and religion are closely related to each other: they both come from the dream of a world beyond struggle and pain: “The poem is the individual’s dream, myth is the nation’s dream” (127).

## Lu Xun's "Dead Fire"<sup>2</sup>

The prose poem "Dead Fire" tells the story of the first-person narrator dreaming of a life in the middle of icy mountains reaching all the way to an icy sky full of icy clouds. The narrator falls into an ice valley and desperately looks for ways to escape from this terrible situation. Suddenly he discovers "red shadows, tangled together like a web of corals" (Lu Xun 2022b, 66) and spots the "dead fire." He picks up the flame and puts it into his pocket with the consequence that it "burns a hole through my robe and flows out into the icy ground" (2022b, 67). The dead fire starts talking to the first-person narrator, thanking him for having awakened him by his warmth: "If you hadn't reignited me with your warmth, I would have perished before too long" (2022b, 67). Subsequently, the first-person narrator and the dead fire discuss the possibility of escaping from the icy mountains. They are unable to find a solution, however, that would benefit both of them. Finally, the dead fire generously suggests that the first-person narrator leave the valley at the cost of its own death. Quite unexpectedly, both of them are catapulted out of the valley immediately after the suggestion is articulated. However, the narrator states, "a large stone cart speeds over unexpectedly and I am, in the end, crushed to death under its wheel—but not before seeing the cart tumble into the valley of ice" (2022b, 68).

This prose poem, which has so far not been frequently interpreted, refers to the conflict between the narrator and the outer world as well as the relationship between the narrator and the "dead fire." Both issues are at the very center of Hakuson's theories: The icy mountains and even more so the ice valley into which the first-person narrator tumbles are symbols of the outer world. Having to survive in this environment makes life for the narrator unbearable. It is by dreaming that the narrator accesses this world and finds the dead fire as a device that might be able to help him leave the icy valley. The fact that the dead fire ignites this kind of hope in him is related to a childhood experience. He remembers how he was fascinated by flames and tried to see them as clearly as if they were standing rigidly in front of him. He has to learn, however, that this yearning for clarity will eventually leave him disappointed.

The narrator accesses his memory of the past by dreaming. On the one hand, he refers to a non-realistic constellation by describing the ice mountains and his fear of not being able to escape from them; on the other

2 For all translations of Lu Xun's poems, I have used Eileen Cheng's translation of *Wild Grass* (Lu Xun 2022a, 2022b).

hand, he introduces the red fire as a device helping him to escape. While the overall setting of the narrative is unreal and has to be deciphered as symbolic, the memory of the past is narrated in a realistic fashion. Thus the narrator seems to draw on his unconscious as a place where his fears are stored and on his memory as a reservoir of experiences that are remnants of hope and despair experienced in “real” life. The child looks into the fire hoping for it to provide clarity by changing the flickering flame into a steady light. However, this hope is not fulfilled, and the clarity the child awaits seems unreachable as the flame continues to flicker. The memories are as flickering as the flame; while traumatic, they are also a combination of hope and despair. The narrator enjoys the warmth of the fire and waits to no avail for the flame to provide a steady light. Despite the realistic mode in which this memory is conveyed, the story from the past itself is charged with symbolism. Located in the “unreal” of the icy environment, it nudges the reader to decode its meaning beyond the realism through which it is narrated. The fire does not provide the solution, either in the form it is stored in the narrator’s memory or as a symbol in the unrealistic setting of the dream story the narrator shares with his readers. It is warm, but not clear, and, above all, it is “dead” because its warmth does not melt down the icy mountains, nor does its flame provide the clarity the narrator needs. The hope that the dead fire might help the narrator to escape from his existence amidst the icy mountains is based on the childhood remembrance of looking into the fire, but the devastating end of the story is anticipated by the mention of the disappointment related to the childhood experience.

The dialogue with the dead fire draws the reader back into the unrealistic mode of storytelling. It shows that there are only two solutions available: either the narrator has to endure living in an environment of icy mountains in order for the dead fire to subsist, or vice versa, the dead fire has to expire in order for the narrator to escape from the ice. But the moment they realize that the solution is a zero-sum game they are both driven out of the ice valley, first the fire, then the narrator. The latter is then run over by a stone cart and thrown back into the world of icy mountains. While he watches the cart following him, he laughs. He realizes that “None of you will come across the dead fire ever again” (2022b, 68) and shows satisfaction with this insight before he dies.

This is the second time the narrator laughs. The first time he laughs is when he finds the dead fire and not only sees the “inferno of existence” turned into a coral red but also realizes that “on the tip of the flame is a puff of congealed black smoke” (2022b, 66). He generates hope for escape but at the same time is aware of the disturbing black smoke that prepares the

reader for the possibility of a future disappointment. The second time his laughter accompanies his insight into the unfeasibility of escaping from the ice mountains and the inability of the dead fire to provide a solution within this horrifying environment. With this insight the fire dies, and he dies, too.

Read against the background of Hakuson's theories, we can decode the dead fire as a symbol of the "life force" Hakuson identifies as the motor for art and creativity. According to Hakuson, the conflict between the individual and its outer world generates "life force," and he repeatedly uses the verb "to burn" in the context of the life force generating the ability to yearn for freedom. He also stresses in the last two parts of his masterpiece that humankind needs to move beyond the traumatization that each individual experiences during their lifetime and find belief, trust, and confidence beyond depression and frustration. The ability to create art helps the individual to access the unconscious, learn about the childhood traumas stored therein, and thus generate the ability to imagine something different.

But Lu Xun's text does not provide for this kind of solution. Every solution he discusses is a solution that ends in death. Therefore, the life force represented by the color red in the text is relativized by the mention of the color black and by the overall dominance of the color white. Both black and white are related to death. The sudden change of color from white to red appears when the fire enters the story. The fire covers the overall icy white environment with a layer of red, but it does not penetrate the ice—it stays on the surface, and it cannot destroy the ice. In the context of the childhood memory, the fire is also unable to provide the kind of clarity and steadiness the child yearns for. The same is true for the dead fire. If the dead fire is a symbol of the life force Hakuson refers to and identifies as generating creativity from conflict, Lu Xun tells his reader that neither the "real" fire of his childhood, nor the "dead fire" of his dreams are steady. They suddenly appear in front of the narrator's eyes as an alternative to depression, but they are destined to disappoint. The life force is not stronger than death, and when the first-person narrator dies, the life force also dies and with it, creativity and art.

The dead fire is Lu Xun's answer to Hakuson's idea about life force. While the text shows obvious connections to Hakuson's theories, especially by referring to dreaming as an access to the unconscious, by showing the first-person narrator in an uninhabitable environment searching for a way out, and by introducing the fire as an alternative to the icy mountain world, Lu Xun does not come to the same conclusion as Hakuson. Instead, he uses the poem to discuss Hakuson's theory and intertextuality to find inspiration, relativize, and reject—in short, to comment on the text. As

I demonstrated when discussing Lu Xun's reference to Nietzsche in *Wild Grass* (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2013, 2020), his commentaries can include radical rejections of what is found in the texts he relates to. He loves to turn meanings upside down either by creating symbols that negate the symbol used in his reference text or by using the same symbol, albeit with a totally different meaning.

In the case of Hakuson's *The Symbol of Depression*, Lu Xun seems attracted by the idea of dreams (seven out of the twenty-three pieces collected in *Wild Grass* relate to dreams) accessing the unconscious and the writer creating symbols as a secret code that readers can decipher according to their repertoire of images stored in their own unconscious. He is also interested in the idea of art being generated from conflict of the individual with the outer world. But Lu Xun's inner world is different from Hakuson's. The main conflict human beings have to deal with is the conflict between life and death. Human beings are doomed to live not only under pressures from the outside, but also under the pressure of knowing that life will come to an end. Art and creativity can help to cope with this situation, but they cannot solve these conflicts. That is why Lu Xun contradicts Hakuson in making his readers understand that art is not the result of a life force: it is no more and no less than a "dead fire."

### Lu Xun's "After Death"

It may be no coincidence that Lu Xun's prose poem "Dead Fire" ends with the first-person narrator's death, and the prose poem "After Death" begins with the first-person narrator dreaming that he had died while walking in the street. While "Dead Fire" presents an artificial scenery of ice mountains, the setting for "After Death" is a street in a city somewhere described in the realistic manner readers of Lu Xun's short stories are acquainted with. The dream turns out to be a daydream with the dreaming first-person narrator imagining that he is somewhere in between life and death with his body unable to move, but his mind still working. He is terrorized by this situation as he realizes that in this in-between situation he can understand what people think about his death without, however, being able to react. When people start staring at him, he concludes: "I haven't let anyone down in the end" (Lu Xun 2022a, 82).

However, his inability to move and interact makes him feel uncomfortable, especially as ants and flies start to bother him. When people finally come to put him into a coffin, the flies fly off and he feels relieved. At the

same time, however, he is confronted with a new problem when he tries to answer the questions about why he died and why he died in the street. He feels annoyed at people raising these questions and thinks to himself: "I used to think that though people may not have the right to live as they please on this earth, at least they have the right to die as they please" (Lu Xun 2022a, 83).

Before he is carried away, he hears a familiar voice saying to him, "Hello, sir? Are you dead?" (Lu Xun 2022a, 84). It is a boy from a bookshop where the narrator used to buy ancient books. He brings a copy of a Ming edition of the *Zuozhuan* 左传 and gives it to the dead narrator as if he were alive. The story ends by the first-person narrator crying out with joy: "This is probably my first cry after death. But in the end, no tears come. All I see is a momentary flash before my eyes and then I sit up" (Lu Xun 2022a, 85).

Like many stories by Lu Xun, especially those that seem to present Lu Xun as the first-person narrator, this story has a satirical undertone. It is a story about the writer's inability to influence his readers: he can observe them discussing his oeuvre, but he cannot force his ideas on them. In this sense, he is in an in-between situation, and insists—as Eileen Cheng puts it, "on an uncomfortable simultaneity—of being at once the living and the dying, the bystander and the spectacle, the narrator and the corpse" (2013, 219). This uncomfortable simultaneity not only refers to his state between life and death, but also to the fact that he is unable to take sides. Even when the flies and ants start bothering him, he cannot do anything. He can only think: "My good fellow, I'm no great personage, no need for you to forage my corpse to find fodder for your commentaries ..." (Lu Xun 2022a, 83). By this remark, the narrator reveals that the ants and flies he is talking about are the literary critics whose commentaries on his works had annoyed him in the past. But now, in between life and death, he concludes: "I think about how all my talk when I was alive—about how criticism isn't worth a cent and the like—probably contradicted what I truly believed" (2022a, 82).

The story thus turns out to be a daydream with the narrator monologizing on the kind of insights he might have between life and death or dream and wakefulness. One of the key insights he has in this situation is that life under everyday constraints is not so different from lying in a coffin "hemmed in by six walls and nailed down from the outside" (2022a, 84). Hoping to gain freedom in one's afterlife turns out to be an illusion: "What utter defeat—alas, how pathetic!" (84). Another insight regarding the relationship between life and death is accompanied by laughter when the narrator realizes that the difference between life and death is not as big as



imagined, as people do not handle his corpse with care “because you think the dead are completely unaware. *Ha, ha!*” (84).

As mentioned above and discussed in regard to many of Lu Xun’s writings, “confronting death, while a source of constant agony, may also have inspired some of his most radically creative works” (Cheng 2013, 230). However, when read in the context of Hakuson’s theories on the relationship between the artist and his or her recipients, the prose poem “After Death” is not just a poem on death, but mostly a poem on the life of a writer contemplating how his readers can understand him. The normal passers-by who we see described in the poem do not understand anything and do not feel compelled to go deeper into the matter. The literary critics bother the narrator like ants and flies, and he feels uncomfortable by their commentaries, but there is no mention of them trying to understand him or him able to make them understand. Lu Xun states in his preface to *Wild Grass* that the biggest problem he is confronted with is his inability to communicate despite his constant attempt to do so (Lu Xun 1973a, 163–64). The in-between situation the narrator describes in “After Death” is exactly what Lu Xun writes about in the preface: he has a lot to say, but he cannot talk. In this sense, life is no different from death, and he realizes that for him, the situation will not change, whether he is alive or dead: “A few friends wish me peace, while a few enemies wish me ruin. Yet, I just keep muddling on, neither at peace nor ruined, failing to live up to the expectations of either side” (Lu Xun 2022a, 85).

Hakuson imagined artist and recipient being able to understand each other because the repertoire of images they store in their unconscious is so similar that the reader can recognize the meaning of the symbols used by the artist. As artist and recipient access their unconscious via creation, they can understand each other. But Lu Xun does not experience this communication flow that Hakuson imagined. Whomever he encounters, be it “common people” or critics, they do not attempt to understand him and show no sign of curiosity in accessing their unconscious. The narrator takes his inability to communicate (and move) as equivalent to death, and the fact that the narrator awakes from his dream in joy by sitting up shows that he is ready to continue his life, albeit as if he were dead.

Interestingly, Lu Xun chose the realistic mode of narrating for his story “After Death.” This, again, shows how he distances himself from Hakuson while using Hakuson’s theories as a motivation to write and contemplate. Like Hakuson, he sees no fundamental difference in writing in the realistic or in a symbolistic mode. The real is charged with symbols, and the world of symbols is real. As discussed by Eileen Cheng (2013), Lu Xun wrote frequently about death. The revolutionary writer once propagated as a model

intellectual is, in fact, obsessed by death, rather than revolution. By writing realistically about a daydream related to death he seems to be explaining to himself and his readers that the only truth in life (the certainty of death) is not something hidden in the unconscious. It is reality. Death as physical death which is discussed in "After Death" is real; but the real story about real death is at the same time loaded with symbolic meaning. As in "Dead Fire," in which the story about the childhood memory of the narrator is told in a realistic mode while meant to be read as an allegory, the story "After Death" is told in a realistic way and conveys the message of the artist who is dead in the sense that he is unable to communicate with the reader.

## Conclusion

The fact that Lu Xun translated Hakuson's *The Symbol of Depression* in such a short period of time might be interpreted as a sign of his deep interest in the book. Translating is a very intensive form of deciphering a text. So when Lu Xun wrote his prose poems one year later, there is reason to believe that he had Hakuson in mind and used some of his texts debating with Hakuson on the validity of his theories. From reading Lu Xun's foreword to the translation, we know that he talked about Hakuson's tragic death as a "great loss," which shows his admiration for Hakuson's contributions. At the same time, the introduction is more like a summary characterizing some of the key ideas articulated by Hakuson and their intellectual background without evaluating them. In addition, he uses the preface to give some minuscule explanations about his method of translation (Lu Xun 1973b, 17–19). This might be yet another way of indicating his wish to keep a certain distance from Hakuson. What we find in the prose poems interpreted above is, indeed, the outcome of a critical appropriation and partial rejection of Hakuson's theories. This does not mean, however, that Hakuson did not influence the writing of these poems. Wherever we encounter intertextuality in Lu Xun's texts, we see him commenting on the text rather than copying or insinuating ideas from the text. This is true for his relationship to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and it is true for Hakuson's *The Symbol of Depression*—both texts about which Lu Xun gained an intimate knowledge by translating them.

What we have so far not discussed in this chapter is the question of form, which might turn out to be a stronger indication of Lu Xun following some of Hakuson's theories. As shown by Nick Admussen (2009), Lu Xun's prose poems, while somehow related to traditional forms of Chinese poetry, are a laboratory for the invention of *baihua* and for playing with language, rhyme,

and rhythm with utmost liberty. Hakuson's idea that only in art can we find the extreme freedom all individuals are yearning for is implemented by Lu Xun collecting twenty-three different texts as prose poems without seeing the need to invent a form for them. This extreme freedom Hakuson talks about time and again in his magnum opus is, indeed, what might have intrigued Lu Xun most and what he wanted to achieve by writing his *Wild Grass*.

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## 7. Ma Junwu's Reinvented Lyricism: Revolutionary Landscape, Romanticism, Science Fiction, and Darwinian Geology

*Victor J. Ulysse Vuilleumier*

**Abstract:** In classical Chinese poetry, nature is a place of philosophical revelation. Modern authors perpetuate this tradition of landscape poetry while simultaneously introducing new elements to it. Some of these modern literary, scientific, or ideological modifications are less concerned with aesthetics and much more with the didactic message of a poem. This chapter investigates selected poems by Ma Junwu (1881–1940), an author with a background in chemistry and metallurgy whose work is representative of the hybrid nature of modern Chinese culture: the poetry in classical form that he composed at different times in his life offers an example of a blend between scientific, mythological representations and renewed lyricism.

**Keywords:** Ma Junwu, Darwin, Romanticism, Classical Chinese poetry, Modernity

Ma Junwu 馬君武 (1881–1940), revolutionary and political thinker, occupies an important place in the history of philosophical and scientific translation in China,<sup>1</sup> a dimension of his work that may have overshadowed the translations he rendered of poetic works, which certainly do not constitute the bulk

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Ma Junwu gave the first complete version of Rousseau's *Social Contract* in 1918, and of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1902–1920; Ou 1982, 35, 38; Jin 2019, 127).

of his translation activity. In 1905<sup>2</sup> he was, however, one of the first writers to introduce and present in Chinese Goethe<sup>3</sup> and especially Byron,<sup>4</sup> the object of a veritable “fever” among Chinese revolutionaries and nationalists of the time (Wang 1988). He translated poems and excerpts by Hood,<sup>5</sup> Hugo,<sup>6</sup> Rizal (Lim 2020), Schiller,<sup>7</sup> Theognis,<sup>8</sup> and Tolstoy.<sup>9</sup> He also took part in the reform of the theater in China (Ou 1982, 47) and completed his linguistic work by publishing the first Sino-German dictionary in 1916. These two dimensions, scientific and literary, together with the new scientific and technical education,<sup>10</sup> nourished his own poetic activity. His translations into literary Chinese (*wenyan* 文言)<sup>11</sup> were part of the plans to modernize poetry at the time.

Ma began to publish his own poems in the classical, albeit modernized, form in the 1900s (Ou 1982, 44). He became a member (Ou 1982, 43–49; Ma 2016, 2) of the Southern Society (Nanshe 南社, 1909–1923), an anti-Manchu, pro-republican poetry and revolutionary society<sup>12</sup> that claimed to be classicist; this, however, did not prevent it from taking up, to a certain extent,

2 Together with his other translations and poems, they appeared in his first collection, *New Literature* (*Xin wenxue* 新文學, 1905), a work that he self-published in Japan (Wu 2018, 92). These pieces are included in his later collection *Ma Junwu's Poetry Manuscript* (*Ma Junwu shigao* 馬君武詩稿, 1914) published in Shanghai.

3 He translated Goethe's “Mignon's Song,” and an excerpt from Book II of Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 1774; Wu 2018). For these translations (except for those by Rizal) and subsequent poems, see Ma 2016, 148–79.

4 He translated Byron's “The Isles of Greece,” after Liang Qichao had done so in 1902 (Gálík 1990; Yu 1998; Liu 1985).

5 “Song of the Shirt” (1843).

6 The first Chinese translation of Hugo, the beginning of “Ô mes lettres d'amour, de vertu, de jeunesse” (O my letters of love, of virtue, of youth, 1831), were published in the *New People's Magazine* in 1903 and in *Southern Society* in 1913.

7 Extract from the beginning of *Wilhelm Tell* (1804).

8 A poem quoted in Darwin's *Descent of Man*.

9 Extract from *Luzern* (1857).

10 In Guilin in 1899, he studied the Chinese classics, mathematics, and English at the Academy of Science and Technology (Tiyong xuetang 體用學堂); then French in Canton in 1900, and in Shanghai in 1901, when he began to translate, before returning to Canton to teach English. From 1901 to 1906, he studied in Japan under the protection of Kang Youwei and Sun Yat-sen (Zheng 2019, 167) at the Great Harmony School (Datong xuexiao 大同學校), and published translations (Ou 1982, 1–10). He went to Germany in 1907 to study metallurgy at the Technical University of Berlin, graduating in 1910, before returning to China in 1911. Returning to Berlin in 1914, he studied agronomy and took up a post at the Bochum chemical factory as an engineer that same year, before returning to China in 1916 (Ma 2011, 438, 440).

11 He took part in experiments with the classical form of the ballad (*gexing* 歌行; Ma 2011, 46; Yang 2016, 577).

12 On Nanshe: Yang 2016.

the didactic and political dimensions demanded by Liang Qichao's 梁啟超 (1873–1929) “poetry revolution” (*shijie geming* 詩界革命; Sun 2018, 312–17). Some of Ma's productions were published in the *Southern Society Journal* (*Nanshe congkan* 南社叢刊, Shanghai, 1910–1923), while his 1914 collection, *Ma Junwu's Poetry*, was published and distributed with the help of the society. He shared and claimed some of the society's poetic projects as he understood it: the freedom of style (Zheng 2019, 167), but also the tone and pathos of nationalist lyricism, and elements of modern knowledge, characteristic of “new learning poetry” (*xinxue shi* 新學詩; Sun 2018, 300–302).<sup>13</sup>

The modernity of Ma's poetry, which “promotes the current of new studies” (*guchui xinxue sichao* 鼓吹新學思潮; Zheng 2019, 168), has rightly been seen in its political dimension, calling for “liberty and democracy” (Chen 2009, 15–16)—his poems are representative of a certain kind of revolutionary poetry. But this poetic modernity that he shared with other Chinese writers of the time was also the result of the relations between interliteracy and translation, and especially his experience of traveling and being abroad. In addition, his poetry has been read as a vehicle for the dissemination of scientific thought (Huang, Wang, and Li 2008, 91–93). However, modern Chinese writers have tended to metaphorize the modern scientific discourse: one cannot read these poems as scientific popularization.<sup>14</sup>

Instead, I propose to read his poetry by starting from a striking element—the reinvention of the poetic landscape in the general context of its “vernacularization”<sup>15</sup>—and to observe the transformation that this reinvention reveals in lyricism between the classical and the newly imported elements beyond the new scientific discourse, namely, romanticism, which combines the outpouring of emotions and the themes of individual and national liberation or nostalgia about past grandeur.

Ma Junwu's poetry is an example of the transformation of scientific representations. This is the case with “My Secluded Life in the Laute Valley

13 In “To My Fellow Poets of the Southern Society” (Ji Nanshe tongren 寄南社同人, 1910), Ma Junwu praises the stylistic freedom he recognizes in them (Ma 2016, 102; Ou 1982, 46).

14 Not to mention the fact that the Chinese reception of Darwin, social Darwinism, especially by Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854–1921) and Ma Junwu, was imbued with classical conceptions. Ma, although more precise in his translation of scientific terms than Yan, nevertheless transformed the text. Like Yan Fu, Ma erases the differences between Darwin, Lamarck, and Spencer, especially with regard to the concept of teleology, progressive evolution determined by the environment, and parallel genealogies (Jin 2019; Shen 2014).

15 “In the wake of China's cultural modernization, ... a major change was to vernacularize the ... landscapes: the new territorial imaginary derived from European Enlightenment thought promoted the subjection of national space to scientific rationalism, progress and linear time” (Riemenschnitter 2017, 243).



[Lautenthal]" (Laodenggu duju 勞登谷獨居, composed in 1910 and published in 1914),<sup>16</sup> which presents a new, blended *Lebensanschauung*. The poem is partly scientific, which can be explained by the author's background. But the classical language and clichés were used to create new visions and neologisms, and classical words were imbued with new meanings—a sign of a certain didactic and scientific literary aesthetic of the reform period:

The dried-up ocean gave life to organisms and turned into new land,<sup>17</sup>  
 The stone liquefied into [iridescent] mineral streams condensed into a  
 protean crystal.<sup>18</sup>  
 Here and there the green mountains have ceased to fulminate,  
 For centuries, ice floes have floated across the equator.<sup>19</sup>  
 There is no need to worry all day about human affairs,  
 For I listen to the song of the birds as they meet the spring.<sup>20</sup>  
 If an atmospheric vessel were finally completed,<sup>21</sup>  
 I would leave the earth, alone, for Venus.<sup>22</sup>

海枯生物化新土，  
 石爛流金結幻晶。  
 幾處青山息噴火，  
 百年赤道有流冰。  
 不須終日憂人事，  
 且值陽春聽鳥聲。  
 如使氣船竟成就，  
 孑身辟地適金星。  
 (Ma 2016, 99)

16 Unless otherwise indicated, the following notes are my own.

17 *Hai ku shi lan* 海枯石爛 (“when the sea dries up and the stones soften” means “until the end of time, unchanging”). *Shengwu*: “beings; begetting beings” in classical poetry, and in modern times, “biology, organism.”

18 *Lüjin*: “molten metal” or “diverse, multicolored, malleable,” hence the translation “protean.” “Summoning of the Soul” (Zhaohun 招魂): “Ten suns arise, melt metals, and liquefy stones” (*Shi ri dai chu, liu jin lian shi suo* 十日代出, 流金鑠石些). *Huanjing* might be an invention.

19 *Chidao*: “lunar orbit” in classical poetry, “equator” in the modern sense.

20 *Zhi yangchun* and *ting niaosheng* are clichéd phrases.

21 *Qichuan*: “atmospheric vessel,” based on the modern neologism *qijie* 氣界 (atmosphere).

22 *Jueshen*: this might be a poetic idiom of the period. *Jue* is to be read *jie* 孑, for *jieshen* 孑身 (solitary): Ma 2016, 99. *Pidi*, lit. “to clear,” should be read as *bidi* 避地 (to get away from the troubles of the world, to live as a hermit): Ibid. Found in Wang Wei's 王維 (701–761) “Ballad of the Peach [Blossom] Spring” (*Taoyuan xing* 桃源行), which takes up the idea of leaving the human world to become immortal. *Jinxing*: lit. the “metal planet” or “metal star.”

This poem takes up the commonplace from classical Chinese poetry: the poet isolated and withdrawn from the human world in the wilderness and the contemplation of the mountain revealing the work of creation through transformation (*hua* 化). These are combined with a series of imported scientific representations, to which the condition of being abroad is added. Because this heptasyllabic octastich respects most of its constraints, it seems like a “new style’s” (*jintishi* 近體詩) regular octastich (*lüshi* 律詩).<sup>23</sup> However, the use of neighboring rhymes (*linyün* 臨韻) that are not of the same category (*yunbu* 韻部),<sup>24</sup> as well as a number of irregularities in the alternation of level and oblique tones in certain lines,<sup>25</sup> suggest that this is “old style poetry” (*gutishi* 古體詩). This form may be compared to the use of certain non-poetic, and probably even newly invented, syntagms that were previously uncommon in poetry.

On the other hand, the *lüshi*'s principle of parallelism is respected even when it is not required (couplets 1 and 4, although the latter is incomplete).<sup>26</sup> The “elaborate parallelism” (*gongdui* 功對) is marked in the first three couplets. In the first (lines 1 and 2), the idiomatic phrase “until the ocean dries up and the stones melt” (*hai ku shi lan*, see note 17), which expresses the idea of constancy, is split in two and redistributed vertically at the beginning of each of the lines 1 and 2. This break makes it possible to preserve the classical meaning, that of an almost infinite geological duration, based on natural transformations that would seem impossible. It also reactivates the original meaning by reading the two segments *literally*, “the oceans withdrew and the stones melted” (*hai ku shi lan*): the metaphor becomes alive again by adding the imported geological and scientific vision. Moreover, the parallelism of lines 1 and 2 can be read from term to term without strictly following the classical rules of pairing—biology or organism; liquefied stone (lava), new earth; shining crystal.

The associations established by the parallels allow for several poetic musings: the process of creation, birth, or vitality (*sheng*, l. 1) contributes to the same genetic movement as “flowing” (*liu*, l. 2), regardless of the difference in the animal or mineral kingdom; the “new” (*xin*, l. 1) contrasts with the “bright” or illusory (*huan*, l. 2), possibly suggesting its provisional nature between two transformations, as if “earth” could become “crystal” and vice

23 Number of lines; parallelism between couplets; “sticking” (*nian* 黏) and “pairing” (*dui* 對).

24 The rhymes in the even lines are in the level tone (*pingsheng* 平聲), but in three different *yunbu*: *ba geng* 八庚 (lines 2 and 6); *shi zheng* 十蒸 (l. 4); *jiu qing* 九青 (l. 8).

25 Notably several finales: lines 1 (●○●), 3 (●○●), 6 (○●○), and 7 (●○●).

26 In a regular form, the distiches 2 and 3 are usually parallel.

versa. This view of reversals, moreover, perpetuates a certain classical view of nature's action through transformation of the "five agents" or "elements" (*wuxing* 五行). The same process of transformation is described in each of the first two verses read separately: the passage from sea to earth, from inorganic to organic, and the sublimation from rock to crystal through the liquid state. The meditation changes form but remains classical in principle, as if imported modern science merely confirms classical poetic intuition, unless that intuition serves to introduce new knowledge.

This cosmogenesis proceeds by "transformation" (*hua*, l. 1), "condensation" (*jie*, v. 2) and "arrest" (*xi*, l. 3), through the interaction of the elements: earth, stone, metal (*jin* repeated twice), fire, and air. Water is absent, except in the frozen form of "ice" (*bing*, l. 4), which the parallelism of the second distich contrasts with fire—unless the action of fluid movement (*liu* repeated twice in l. 2 and 4) indicates water in absentia. In fact, the attention, or material reverie, is focused on the process of fusion and condensation (ice and crystal) rather than on water as such. Moreover, this transmutation takes on a cosmic dimension, through the presence of the sun and Venus. The sun, parent of fire (key to *lan* in l. 2; *huo*, l. 3; and indirectly in l. 4, *chi*, lit. "red," the color of fire) plays an almost alchemical role: we see it graphically represented as *ri* 日, "rising" and "falling" in the different positions of the characters, to end up in "the star" (*xing* 星), in which the element *sheng* 生 is surmounted by the phonetic *ri* 日 ("sun"), creating a character that means "to be born, to give birth." We can reconstruct the following non-etymological path: *jing* 晶 ("crystal," l. 2); by approximation, *xi* 息 ("to breathe," "to cease," l. 2) and *dao* 道 ("way, path," l. 4), or even *xu* 須 (l. 5); *qie* 且, *zhi* 直 (l. 6); *bai* 百 ("hundred," l. 4); *ri* 日 (l. 5); *yang* 陽 and *chun* 春 ("spring," l. 6); *jing* 竟 ("finally," l. 7); and lastly *xing*, "star," the final character.

This cosmological play may refer to a Chinese mythological substratum, or even to an anthropological structure of the imaginary. The phrase "liquefying the stones" (*liu jin*, l. 2, note 82) may be a reference to "Summoning of the Soul" (Zhao hun 招魂) from the *Songs of Chu* (*Chuci* 楚辭), about the ten suns that melt metals and stones and that are associated with the mythical Fusang (扶桑) Tree that the sun returns to and rises from in its daily course (Mathieu 2004, 177). Given the visual multiplicity of the *ri*, one would thus recognize in this poem the presence of a Fusang Tree as an archetype, that of the tree of life, but associated with fire to express the idea of growth, transformation, and elevation. Moreover, the poet in "My Secluded Life" seeks to leave, in a way that echoes the "Summoning of the Soul," which urges the soul of the deceased not to stay where it is. Several of Ma Junwu's poems explicitly allude to the *Songs of Chu* that mainly deal with the figure

of Qu Yuan 屈原, the unjustly condemned poet, a figure of estrangement, as well as of lyricism: in “On the Way Back to Guilin” (Gui Guilin tuzhong 歸桂林途中, below), the poet, who was also exiled for his revolutionary activities, depicts himself reading the ancient poet’s “Encountering Sorrow” (Lisao 離騷).

The parallelism of the second distich continues the reverie, nourished by modern science, on the alternation of opposites and their reversibility over time: “in places” (*jichu*, l. 3) and “for centuries” (*bainian*, l. 4) do not form a strict parallelism but match together time and space. The parallelism between “green” or “blue-green mountains” (*qingshan*) and “equator” (*chidao*, lit. “the red way” or “race”) is sought by reactivating the original meaning of the characters that make up these two attested words: the pairing of red and green colors is orthodox in classical poetry. The most striking contrast is found at the end of the two lines: “fulminate” (*penhuo*, lit. “spit fire”) and “floating ice” (*liubing*). As in the first distich, the two opposing elements, fire and ice, are caught up in a common movement of animation and of projection (*liu* is taken from l. 2).

The meditation on nature and time (first quatrain) gives way to the meditation on the relationship of the living to the human world (second quatrain). The third distich (l. 5–6) begins with a purely syntactic parallelism between “no need” (*buxu*, l. 5) and “for coming to meet” (*qie zhi*, l. 6). Then it contrasts two temporalities, “all day” (*zhongri*, l. 5), for death perhaps (lit. “coming to the *end of the day*”), and “spring” (*yangchun*, v. 6) for life. Finally, the couplet contrasts “worrying about human affairs” (*you renshi*, l. 5) with “listening to the song of the birds” (*ting niaosheng*, l. 6). It introduces a turning point: between the meditation on the creative power expressed by the natural landscape and the expression of the desire to leave an unstable and unsatisfactory world, both natural and human. To care for human affairs, of which natural cataclysms are a metaphor, is the hallmark of the responsible scholar engaged in the world who “cares for the people and loves the country” (*youmin aiguo* 憂民愛國). Contrary to this behavior is the desire to follow the path of the secluded sages of the world: it is the classical choice between “engaging with the world” (*rushi* 入世) or “leaving it” (*chushi* 出世).

The commonplace of the poet’s eremitic attitude is modernized in the last distich by science fiction. The specific mention of “Venus” (*jinxing*) suggests “the *trace* of an intertext” (Riffaterre 1981, 5); if it had been any more than a trace, the temptation would have been strong to propose a journey to Mars, the “planet of fire” (*huoxing* 火星) according to my analysis of the role of fire or sun, or to the moon according to the Jules Verne’s model,

which was known at the time.<sup>27</sup> In 1895, however, a science fiction novel, *Journey to Venus*, for example, was published by Gustavus Pope (1828–1902), in which the protagonists travel aboard an “Air-Ship”<sup>28</sup> (Pope 1895), which is the literal meaning of *qichuan*. I do not know whether Ma knew about Pope’s novel or not, or whether Ma took the word from another author, but science fiction and the “flying machine” were in vogue in China in the 1900s and 1910s (Chen 1998).

Venus does not call for any particular classical mythological reference in this poem, but it is still the Chinese “star of metal” (*jinxing*). This quality is emphasized in several lines, particularly through the rhyme scheme, which echoes the themes of transformation and the mineral: *jing* “crystal” (l. 2); *bing* “ice” (l. 4); *sheng* “sound, song” (l. 6); *xing* “star” (l. 8). The position of the star at the end of the poem suggests that it is the sublimated product of this transformation, or that it presides over it, the perfect embodiment of the protean mineral principle, like the “crystal.” Venus is the brightest body in the sky after the sun and the moon. Moreover, according to the Chinese system of correspondences, this planet is associated with the west and autumn (death), while spring (l. 6) and the east are associated with Jupiter, “the wood star” (*muxing* 木星) or “of the beginning” (*suixing* 歲星). The classical correspondences are secondary to the modern scientific image of the rocket launched to Venus. This image, however, reinforces the classical aesthetic of allegorical correspondence: the ship is the “solar race” (*chidao*, “red way”) towards the west (the Fusang Tree) and death before rebirth. The imported image of the rocket invokes the solar myth of rebirth,<sup>29</sup> in addition to the classical flight of the Immortals. A similar process of revitalizing frozen expressions through reference to or addition of a foreign element is found in *bidi* (l. 8), “to leave the earth,” which is taken literally: the classical poetic phrase takes on a new and literal meaning, a syllepsis, of the classical hermit in the space rocket of modern science fiction.

The poet’s intended ascension to the planet *jinxing* “accomplishes” (*chengjiu*, l. 7) the same process that drives the world’s transformations. This modern, all-industrial, mechanistic reverie of flight expressed by

27 *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* (*Around the World in Eighty Days*, 1873) was translated into Japanese in 1878–1880; *Voyage autour de la lune* (*Journey Around the Moon*), in 1880, from which Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) drew a Chinese version in 1903; and *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*) was translated in 1884. A Chinese version was published in 1902 (Angles 2014, 185; Isaacson 2017, 36; Pollard 1998, 180, 184; Wakabayashi 2008, 235).

28 The same author published *Journey to Mars* the previous year.

29 On the solar race, see Jung 2016.

the rocket, moreover, echoes the mention of natural “birds,” whose song is evoked by a clichéd classical phrase (*niaosheng*, v. 6). The above rhymes combine the music of the stars with the hiss of molten metal, or they simply evoke the most ethereal part of birds: *flight* and *song*. *Sheng* (“song,” l. 6) is a homophone of *sheng* (“to give birth or life,” l. 1) with the latter, as indicated, being a rhyming element.

This spectacle of a cyclical, incessant, titanic process of transformation and creation of the world produces in the poet the desire to leave it. The natural transformations are an allegory of “human worries” (*you renshi*, l. 5) and of natural and geological history: the latter takes on a truly inhuman dimension, a perspective carried by the scientific representation of the world. Such a reading makes it possible to understand the transition between the two quatrains: the desire to distance oneself from the world arises not only from the spectacle of the elevating power inherent in nature, but also from this impersonal chain of causes. One might recognize in this the echo of an ancient idea: “Heaven and Earth are inhuman, / They treat the ten thousand beings like straw dogs” (*Tiandi buren, yi wanwu wei chugou* 天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗) (*Laozi*, V). Unless this is an adaptation of a more modern sense of the sublime, which in modern China goes back to Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927), who introduced Schopenhauer, one may hesitate between two readings: the desire to appropriate the power of transformation and elevation latent in nature, that can be grasped by meditating on actual natural forms<sup>30</sup> or a form of catharsis<sup>31</sup> produced by this spectacle of transformation, which bears in itself the mark of its appearance and therefore of its destruction. In any case, this landscape poem, which carries a renewed teaching, expresses an authentic aesthetic, philosophical, and poetic intuition. The form is modern, using classical language and clichés that transform imported elements: the scientific lexicon, Romantic-Promethean metallurgical imaginary, science fiction, and a sense of the sublime.

This imaginary is not without reference to a more classical relativist sensibility. Other poems by Ma are examples of this integration of new knowledge with old themes of meditation on time, the smallness of the individual, and infinite space, as in “My Family and I” (*Shenjia* 身家, 1914):

30 Writing about meditating on things in order to grasp their determinate and impermanent principle, Schopenhauer argued that the “blind impulse” of the “will” is “manifest in all inorganic nature” (Schopenhauer 2009, 274, 330).

31 The sublime is the effect produced by the dispassionate spectacle of inhuman power: the “state of elevation” is produced by calm “contemplation” on the “pure knowledge” of “objects terrible to the will” (Schopenhauer 2009, 412–13).

My family and I are smaller than ant and mole cricket eggs,  
 The worlds are more numerous than the *sands of the Ganges*.  
 Superimposed on each other, it is the *law of forever*,  
 In spring and autumn the *flowers* live and die.<sup>32</sup>

身家小比螻蟻卵，  
 世界多於恆河沙。  
 重重疊疊古今法，  
 生生死死春秋花。

(Ma 2016, 1)

In a lecture by Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1865–1898) “On Present Western Knowledge and Ancient Chinese Studies” (Lun jinri xixue yu Zhongguo guxue 論今日西學與中國古學, 1898), one finds a relativistic meditation on the smallness of human things (as is also found in *Zhuangzi* 莊子) developed from modern astronomical knowledge, and constituting a new example of the allegorical reading of imported science:

It is thus understood that this earth on which we find ourselves is basically just a small object in the sky. So, we can assume that everything that stands on this globe shares the same life, the same neighbourhood, and is a fellow. There is no reason to consider our country as superior and others as animals, because if we did so, one would feel lost and worried.

又以知吾身所處之地球，原天空中不大之物，則凡附麗斯球者，可作同里同閭同性命觀，而不必驚疑駭異，夜郎吾國而禽獸他人矣。

(Tan 1998 400)

From this, Tan also derives a reformist morality about the relativism of cultures, as this is what allows communication and a recognition of the basic equivalence (*tong*) between beings.

However, Ma Junwu, like other authors of the 1900s, introduces a new topic of anguish and concern. This can be seen again in the first eight lines of “Globe” (Diqiu 地球, 1904), which continues with the same image of flowers as in the previous poem, with a view to social or national Darwinism:

The globe is ninety thousand leagues [in circumference],  
 A reclining body, barely a foot.

32 I added the italics to indicate rhyming words at the end of these lines.

Confused I carry my mind away,  
 And it becomes lost [in a vast and infinite space].  
 The world is a grain of rice,  
 My carcass, a speck of dust.  
 Millions of specks of dust [men],  
 Each struggling for survival (*shengcun*).

地球九萬里，  
 著身不盈尺。  
 忽忽生遠心，  
 渺渺未有極。  
 世界一微粒，  
 軀殼一纖塵。  
 纖塵千萬億，  
 一一爭生存。  
 (Ma 2016, 45)

The new perception and conception of transformation mentioned above differs from the joy of Zhuangzi as he views the transformations of things, or from his relativism in the face of their contradictory appearances. It is associated with a certain melancholy that was relatively common in literature at the time, especially in the revolutionary romantic poetry of the 1900s lamenting the state of the nation. In any case, it was the spectacle initially evoked that called forth the desire to distance oneself and no longer “care about men” (*you renshi*), which is what a scholar should be concerned with. This poem combines a Bachelardian meditation on the sublime, ascending fire with an original metallurgical reverie. It is between mineral, fire, and water (water is not mentioned by name): it embodies elevation through transformation and fusion. This imaginary is in line with the solar myth mentioned above.

Other poems by Ma Junwu present such examples of a modern scientific landscape,<sup>33</sup> combining melancholy and geology. This is particularly true of the first of two poems in the suite “Traveling to the Giant’s Mountain (Riesengebirge) on a Geological [study] Trip in July 1911” (Xinhai liuyue zhi Riesengebirge wei dizhi lüxing 辛亥六月至 Riesengebirge 为地质旅行, 1914):<sup>34</sup>

33 See especially “My Secluded Life in the Lautenthal, I” (Laodenggu duju 勞登谷獨居, 1914; Ma 2016, 100).

34 The author returned to Shanghai in November of that year after the outbreak of the revolution (Ma 2011, 438).



The snowy peaks rise from the ground at five thousand feet,<sup>35</sup>  
 My quest for iron and stone has led me here.<sup>36</sup>  
 The pink-red light gently illuminates the night,<sup>37</sup>  
 I am committed to filling my glass with a good wine.  
 An unparalleled reward for a ballad,  
 With a poorly decorated thatched cottage as a stage.  
 I am the exhausted traveller at the other end of the world,  
 At every banquet I feel a deep sadness.

雪峰出地五千尺，  
 金石搜求到此來。  
 玫瑰紅燈嬌照夜，  
 葡萄名酒勉添杯。  
 爭懸重賞徵歌曲，  
 粗飾茅齋作舞台。  
 我是天涯倦遊客，  
 每逢嘉會發深哀。

The landscape is characterized by a sense of the sublime, making it difficult to distinguish between what is new and what is old: the potentiality offered by classical poetry is activated in this sense. The mountain appears as a place of elevation and effort, which is the source of a twofold experience: the solitude which distinguishes the poet; and modern scientific knowledge in the form of geology and mineralogy. In this plaintive *gutishi* poem written a few months before the 1911 Revolution, we might well recognize a new example of the ballad, one of the experimental forms of modern classicist poetry.<sup>38</sup>

“On the Way Back to Guilin” (Gui Guilin tuzhong 歸桂林途中), written in 1900, is another poem by Ma that combines the classical themes of melancholy and exile with the modern discourses on evolution and

35 *Wuqianchi* is a cliché.

36 *Jinshi*: In classical poetry, “metals and rocks” is not literally meant, but indicates “solidity” and “will.” It initially refers, by metonymy, to “praises engraved on stone or metal,” “musical instruments,” or “weapons.” The meaning here is both literal (mineralogy) and associated with the figurative meaning of tenacity (climbing a mountain). Ma 2016, 107 glosses it as a synonym for *kuangshi* 礦石 (“ore”).

37 *Meigui*: most commonly “pink,” but also “black mica, biotite” (the Ricci dictionary, <https://chinesereferenceshelf.brillonline.com/grand-ricci>, accessed September 15, 2024), an ancient mineralogical term, which however seems inappropriate here. It refers to the Alpenglow.

38 The rhyme scheme is regular, except for the final hemistiches of some lines (1, 2, 6 and 7). In addition, *nian* and *dui* are not respected in two places: the tones in l. 3, position 2 and l. 8, position 4 should be oblique.

revolution. The author was on his way back from Singapore where he had met the exiled Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) who dispatched him back to Guilin<sup>39</sup> to join Tang Caichang's 唐才常 (1867–1900) plans for an uprising in Wuhan 武漢. On arriving in Canton, however, Ma Junwu learned that the attempt had failed (Ma 2011, 435–36; Ma 2016, 2; Ou 1982, 9):

In the depth of time, I contemplate the natural evolution (*tianyan*),<sup>40</sup>  
 The intense struggle for survival (*zhengcun*) spread across the globe.<sup>41</sup>  
 In this distant land, alone, I take with me the memory of old acquaintances,  
 At the height of the night, under the solitary lamp, I read “Encountering  
 Sorrow.”<sup>42</sup>  
 Cities and countryside are lost in a truly endless night,  
 Mountains and rivers are in pieces, autumn is coming to an end.<sup>43</sup>  
 Back from the Southern Ocean, I think of my homeland [Guilin],<sup>44</sup>  
 And of [my] hoary parents.

蒼茫今古觀天演，  
 劇烈爭存遍地球。  
 匹馬遠鄉懷故舊，  
 孤燈深夜讀離憂。  
 迷漫朝野真長夜，  
 破碎山河又暮秋。  
 游罷南溟思故里，  
 有親白髮欲盈頭。

The poem respects the constraints of the regular *lüshi*: *gongdui* parallelism in distichs two and three, “flexible” (*kuandui* 寬對) in distichs one and four.

39 He was expelled earlier that month for political reasons (Ma 2011, 2) and became a student of Kang Youwei in Singapore (Jin 2019, 126). As early as 1897 Ma Junwu had received teachings from his future “master” (Ou 1982, 8).

40 The classical meditation on the passage of time and the ruin of dynasties is reactivated by evolutionism, the threat of disappearance, and the reformist insistence on the growing opposition between past and present.

41 *Zhengcun*: “struggle for survival,” in Yan Fu’s “At the Origins of Power” (Yuan qiang 元強, 1895); an imported concept, like *tianyan* (Ibid., 2).

42 *Liyou*: “to meet affliction, pain of erosion,” from Qu Yuan’s “Encountering Sorrow.”

43 *Shanhe posui*: see Du Fu’s “Contemplating Spring” (Chun wang 春望): “Land ravaged; only mountains and rivers remain” (*guopo shanhe zai* 國破山河在). *Muqiu*: the last month of autumn (9th moon, when winter is coming).

44 See Li Bai’s *Si guxiang* 思故鄉 (“I think of [my] native land”). *Nanming*: “Southern Ocean” (*Zhuangzi*) or Singapore (Ma 2016, 2).

The rhyme scheme, also regular (*shiyiyou* 十一尤), carries the meaning of the poem and develops the “sadness” or “worry” seme: the rhyme series *diqu* (globe, l. 2), *liyou* (sadness of distance, l. 4), *muqiu* (last month of autumn, l. 6), *yingtou* (to cover the head, l. 8), links the different referents—human, natural, national, and personal—in the same autumnal feeling. The landscape depicted is a political allegory, juxtaposing classical emotions (estrangement, exile, elderly parents) with the natural scene. The reference to “Encountering Sorrow” summons Qu Yuan: the modern poet assumes this role as part of the spiritual lineage of the exiled and concerned scholar.

This authorial persona that reinscribes a trope from classical poetry coexists with a modernized, reformed style, in particular through the use of language that is sometimes prosaic. The neologisms “evolution” (*tianyan*, l. 1) and “struggle for survival” (*zhengcun*, l. 2) are particularly noteworthy. The poetic landscape bears a vision marked by the importation not so much of science as of social Darwinism and nationalist struggle. However, this importation remains subordinate to classical aesthetics as shown by the commonplace seasonal inscription that allows the fusion of the natural scene, the poet’s emotion, and the country’s situation.

The first distich functions as a natural “evocation” (*xing* 興) that demands a moral, human interpretation. However, unlike the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 詩經) to which the *xing* process is said to return, nature no longer offers the model of an orthodox, pacified, or harmonious *ethos*: the “globe,” space and time, and history are reduced to the survival of the strongest, with the weakest doomed to disappear. “Mountains and rivers,” in the sense of the country as a political body, or even a nation, “are in pieces” (*suipo shanhe*, l. 6); even nature, understood as “political space” (*shanhe*, lit. “mountains and rivers”), is in danger of never being reborn.<sup>45</sup> This evolutionary and linear vision is a source of anguish and crisis. The final mention of white hair, a figure of old age and death, refers both to the parents and to the *shanhe*, the too old land that, already trapped in a “long night” (*changye*, l. 5),<sup>46</sup> threatens

45 Even the line *Guopo shanhe zai* suggests a permanence of the natural order surviving political ruin, thus it is always transient or cyclical. On the reactivation of this motif in contemporary times see Riemenschnitter (2017, 247–48)

46 In this poem, the alternation of level and oblique tones is particularly regular, allowing for possible expressive effects in counterpoint to this theme of darkness: a series of tonal “chiasms” at positions 4 and 5 in lines 7 (○|○) and 8 (●|●) at the caesura, and even “perfectly” at the second distich (●●○|○● / ○○○|●○○), all of which tend to slow and strongly punctuate the diction. Similarly, we note in lines 1 and 5 a repetition of the same figure of tone and cadence, falling on an oblique (○○○|○○●) that is also repeated in each of the lines after the caesura; see “Cities and countryside are lost|in a truly endless night” (l. 5).

to sink permanently into winter. In its classical guise, the landscape teaches the universal law of social Darwinism, while the poet stands downstream of a long history: he looks at the past and the present (l. 1) at a critical moment with an uncertain outcome, a distinctly modern situation.

This topicality of classical poetry, which is not unprecedented in the history of Chinese literature, has a sharpness that is characteristic of the late Qing 清 (1644–1911): the poet stands at the extreme point in the autumn of the epoch's cultural and political history. Thus, in “The Tomb of Yu the Great” (*Yu ling* 禹陵, dated 1903), the legendary founder of the Xia 夏 dynasty is presented as the “Moses” (Moxi 摩西, for Moshe) of the “Spirit Continent” (*Shenzhou* 神州)—China. This intercultural comparison, modern in that it recognizes a counterpart in another culture, emphasizes the antiquity of an endangered Chinese history, whose tomb the poet visits (vs 3–4):

In this ruined country, I look for traces of the past,  
The mosses have finished eating the stele [inscribed under the Ming with  
“Yu’s Tomb”] of Yu’s Tomb.

勝[剩]水殘山尋舊跡，  
苔花蝕盡禹陵碑。  
(Ma 2016, 17)

This also explains the poet’s desire to leave this world in “My Secluded Life in the Lautenthal.”

Ma Junwu repeats this classical landscape construction in a similar style in another poem, “In a Boat on the Li River” (*Lijiang zhou zhong* 灘江舟中), written a few months after the previous one:<sup>47</sup>

An icy wind whistles between the steep cliffs,  
In the distant villages, packs of dogs make their plaintive barking heard.  
In the middle of the night, in my boat, I think about the past,  
The path ahead is obscure: where to go?<sup>48</sup>

47 This poem refers to his departure from Guilin to Canton, the Li being a river in Guangxi, near Guilin (Ma 2011, 436; Ma 2016, 8).

48 *Qianlu*: see Xia Youzhan’s 夏侯湛 (243–291 CE) “Song of Separation” (*Liqin yong* 離親詠): “I sigh with my head down, weary! on the way ahead” (*Fu tan xi qianlu* 俯嘆兮前路), and Tao Yuanming’s “Back home!” (*Guiqulaixi ci* 歸去來兮辭): “I ask a traveller on the way ahead” (*Wen zhengfu yi qianlu* 問徵夫以前路; tr. Davis, in Davis 1983, 192). *He zhi*: see the “Nine declamations, I.” (*Jiu zhang* 九章).

斷岸淒風撲撲吹，  
 遠村群犬吠聲悲。  
 夜深短艇思往事，  
 茫茫前路我何之？

This *gutishi* quatrain shows some characteristics of the *jintishi*.<sup>49</sup> The rhyme scheme is regular and combines the following elements:<sup>50</sup> *chui* (“whistle,” l. 1), *bei* (“complaint, plaintive,” l. 2), *zhi* (“go,” l. 4). The anguish carried by the landscape and the scene makes the poet question which way to go. The poem, like “On the Way Back to Guilin,” is in the lyrical tradition of the *Songs of Chu* in its conventional themes, lexicon, and especially the style of the last line: “The path ahead is obscure: where to go” (*Mangmang qianlu wo hezhi*). Possible classical references to this poem relate to the theme of exile and separation. The poet is trapped between two shores; his solitude and wandering are reinforced by the barking that signals nearby houses and villages, while he is alone on the path, on a river from elsewhere: a metaphor of passage. Even if it does not indicate the season, the landscape again takes on a lyrical and allegorical dimension: the hazardous journey by boat at night expresses the indecision and present uncertainty of the poet, whose fate is identified with that of China.<sup>51</sup>

Ma Junwu’s poems contain explicit themes specific to the discourse of the Chinese revolutionaries. However, in terms of their relationship to classical tradition and the introduction of elements of modern knowledge, his poems are not so far removed from the reformist perspective in their use of the Western scientific and political modernity they encounter. The transformed landscape is geological and “Darwinian” and bears the melancholy mark of the modern scholar concerned about the state of his country at the very end of the empire. However, this claimed scientific vision integrates elements from the Chinese lyrical tradition, especially the *Chuci*. This ancient collection, obviously a symbol of Chinese identity (like the Yellow Emperor or Yu the Great), is reread and presented by Ma as valid for the modern era through the lexicon as well as the figure of political melancholy and elegiac lament, Qu Yuan. Finally, the imaginary of metamorphosis and fire brings back a Chinese mythological substratum. If

49 For example, parallelism in the two distichs. The individual lines respect the tonal counterpoint as in a *jintishi*, but altogether they do not follow any unified pattern. The third line is irregular, the fourth is improperly paired, and there is an expressive effect in the last line.

50 Regular rhyme, even in l. 1.

51 The boat or ship is an allegory for China that is found in late Qing fiction as well as poetry (von Kowallis 2006, 38).

there is any reference to foreign literature, apart from the Romantic poetry mentioned in connection with his translations, it is to history or science fiction. The new imaginaries remain mediated by classical schemes: the so-called Darwinian struggle for survival feeds a classical meditation on the infinitesimal; the modern rocket to Venus echoes the classical desire of the immortals, fed by magic mushrooms, to fly. The model of the lyrical subject remains ancient (*Chuci*).

The revolutionary aesthetic is that of rebirth through a “return to the ancient” (*fugu* 復古), which was advocated by some members of the Southern Society, such as Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1869–1936), or a Lu Xun of the 1900s. Ma’s aesthetic displays an intercultural outlook: the recognition of the existence and equal validity of other cultures and the possibility of comparing different histories, perhaps on the condition of a certain antiquity. This plaintive melancholy and the blending of Chinese and foreign imaginaries have a descendant in later literature: these are essential elements of literary modernity in the late Qing and twentieth-century China.

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## 8. To “World Poetry” and Back: Xutang’s Classicist Lyricism and the Ethnic Digital Bookshelf

Zhiyi Yang

**Abstract:** This chapter explores the trajectory of Duan Xiaosong, whose debut hinted at his potential place in “world poetry.” Instead, he embraced the role of a digital classicist, crafting an avant-garde language that juxtaposes China’s indigenous traditions with Western poetic influences. I analyze the implications of his recent shift back to “new poetry”: without the protective veil of obscurity afforded by his classicist style, his politically subversive verses may face censorship on China’s digital platforms. Duan’s case exemplifies a broader dilemma for poetry on the “ethnic digital bookshelf,” where only untranslatability secures creative freedom. Yet, through this solitary evolution, Duan’s work might represent a new form of “world poetry”—one that “worlds” by rendering the poet’s inner self accessible.

**Keywords:** Duan Xiaosong, world literature, classicist poetry, cyber literature

In a 2003 article, Stephen Owen raised a thought-provoking question: what if what charms us about classical Chinese poetry in the past “is what troubles us about the same poetry continuing in the present?” (Owen 2003, 546). This question was prompted by Owen’s discovery of a revival of modern classical Chinese poetry (hereafter “classicist poetry”; Yang 2015a; Yang 2018; Yang and Ma 2018) on the internet, even though this poetry had never truly died despite its ongoing marginalization by Chinese national literary establishments that followed the “new literature” paradigm established after the 1917 New Culture Movement. Continuing this vein of thought in

his previous, highly controversial attack on the Chinese poet Bei Dao, whose poetry he accused of traveling too well in other languages (Owen 1990), Owen saw in this poetry the continuous reincarnation of autochthonous literary values descending from his beloved Chinese medieval poetry. Thanks to the internet, the reader may encounter the poets directly without the mediation of national literary establishments (Owen 1990, 541). It offers hope for a literary utopia beyond the confines of nation-states or the imposition of rules of an unequal world literature.

Twenty years later, cyber literature in general has undergone profound transformations, at times validating, but too often dashing those optimistic and perhaps naive hopes for a digital world literature that levels the playground for all national literatures. If anything, cyber literature has further consolidated the hegemony of English as the literary lingua franca of the digital age, and capitalist incentives have elevated literature once considered superficial, libidinous, or derivative to mini-classics status, like *Fifty Shades of Grey* and Harry Potter fanfictions. AI-powered translation software has further assisted the translation of popular cyber literature into many languages, in near synchronicity, hereby expanding their reach into less cosmopolitan readers. In 2021, English-language websites like WebNovel.com and WuxiaWorld.com that mainly feature translated Chinese internet novels boasted more than eighty million combined users, and the most popular genres were romance and fantasy (Airui zixun 2021). Low-register novels once considered culture-specific, such as those in the “immortality cultivation” (*xiuzhen* 修真) genre, are finding international fandom.<sup>1</sup> Ironically enough, without the blessing of literary establishments, such entertainment literature might well have become genuine world literature based on their extensive market appeal to readers around the world.

In this digital bazaar of literature, minority-language poetry may be published on platforms that are globally accessible, but in fact are seldom read by non-native readers. Theoretically, every poetry lover can log onto shiku.org 中華詩庫 and use AI translation software to access the entirety of Chinese poetry, classical and modern. In reality, they swap through illustrated Instagram memos of Rupi Kaur. To be elevated into the space of world literature and find intercultural readers, poets still need to first attain a certain level of fame in their respective national literary scene, and their poetry still needs to satisfy a certain expectation to “represent.” It is

1 For instance, on WebNovel.com, an immortality cultivation-erotic fantasy like *Dual Cultivation* boasts 57.7M views as of March 2023; see [https://www.webnovel.com/book/dual-cultivation\\_11793789806524505](https://www.webnovel.com/book/dual-cultivation_11793789806524505).

perhaps not a coincidence that the most notable poets from China in the last decade were migrant worker poets and Yu Xiuhua 余秀华, a peasant woman suffering from cerebral palsy. This is not to say that their poetry is not good; rather, their elevation above peers reflects certain expectations of "Chineseness" engrained in the infrastructure of world poetry. Digital classicist poetry continues to be neglected by international translators and readers alike, despite some limited scholarly attention.<sup>2</sup> It may well be the modern progeny of Li Bai 李白 and Du Fu 杜甫, but it may never enter the highly mobile and polyglottic domain of world poetry that travels across cultural and linguistic borders. Unlike Bei Dao, it is too untranslatable, its aesthetic enjoyment too closely tied to rhymes, prosodies, and intensively allusive dictions. Again, in Owen's words, such poems "will never be presented to the Nobel Prize Committee, who would not know quite what to make of them" (Owen 2003, 546).

World literature as a phenomenon, as David Damrosch (2014, 3) notes, is many centuries older than national literatures, but it was the rise of the modern nation-state that led to the elaboration of world literature as a concept. In its current institutional guise, world literature never means the sum total of the world's literary production. Rather, for most scholars it is taken to mean a world system within which literature is produced and circulates, not unlike like world economy (Beecroft 2008, 87–88). Damrosch further equates world literature to literature with a passport, namely, "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin either in translation or in their original languages. ... [A] work only has an *effective* life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture." (2003, 4) It is precisely this peripatetic nature of world literature that makes Owen compare it unfavorably to a food court in an American mall, where national cuisines are represented by their best-known Americanized dishes.

Inspired by Owen's metaphor and bringing it to the digital age, I'd like to invoke instead the image of a mega food market to describe the situation of our time. In this mega food market, all the digital literary contents of the world share the same cyberspace and are easily accessible to all shoppers—all they need to do is lift their fingers and type in certain URLs. The new world literature is the generic food isle, where you can find noodles, chili sauces, and pickles—the award-winning fictions, the Oprah's choices, the vampires and zombies—popular among shoppers of all ethnicities, lined up on the shelves, sorted by genres and registers.

2 Xiaofei Tian, a pioneer in this field, has examined the poetry of Lizilzilizi; see Tian 2009.

Food items that appeal only to “ethnic” taste buds are tucked into an “ethnic food isle.” This is where you find your stinky tofu and chicken feet. This isle stands theoretically open to all shoppers, but mainstream customers seldom if ever make a wrong turn to skim its offerings. Only when something becomes popular enough to be featured in *The New York Times* (like Laoganma sauce) may it be elevated from the “Chinese food” to the “chili sauce” shelf. Applying this metaphor to Chinese poetry today, classicist poetry may well occupy an “ethnic digital bookshelf” in the world literature mega market, but it hardly stands a chance to become just poetry, without modifiers.

Facing the unlevel playground, how would a poet behave, if all poets ultimately desire to be read? Would any talented poet today, given the chance to enter world poetry, choose a genre doomed for obscurity? As it happens, the internet poet Duan Xiaosong 段小松 (b. 1970) offers an intriguing case study. Though his early works fit very well into the paradigm of a dissident Chinese poet, earning potential candidacy for world literature, with the advent of the digital age he paradoxically chose to become a classicist. In this article, I will first offer a brief overview of his career and a comparison of his new and classicist verses, before discussing issues related to the dynamics of institutional power, media revolution, and linguistic hegemony in Chinese poetry in the increasingly digitized literary world today.

Duan Xiaosong was born in Hefei, a once sleepy provincial capital that has in recent years become an industrial hub churning out electric cars and solar panels at a rapacious speed. A precocious teen who dropped out of high school to live among college-aged poets, he became a local leader of the 1989 student protest. After the final crackdown in early June, Duan went underground by “escaping into Zen” (*taochan* 逃禪), following the ancient example of scholars joining the monastic order to escape from prosecution or from serving a new dynasty. He was tonsured and went to Xiamen to study in Minnan Buddhist College 閩南佛學院. As Xiamen University was located next door, he began recruiting university students to secretive political study cells. Very soon, he was arrested by the National Security Bureau on the charge of anti-revolutionary crimes, a charge that carried a sentence of five to ten years. However, thanks to the connections of his grandfather, a communist revolutionary hero who survived the Long March, he received the lenient sentence of three months. Nonetheless, the prison experience was transformative for him, even more so because his grandfather soon passed away in disappointment. Duan decided to go back to Guangdong to study with Master Dingran 定然 (b. 1915) and was given the precept name Hongmin 弘憫 (“broad compassion”). After

becoming the youngest dean of Lingdong Buddhist Academy (嶺東佛學院), he wrote himself a teacher's training permit to study in the Chinese Literature Department at Peking University.<sup>3</sup>

In Beijing, Duan Xiaosong began to write poetry, primarily sonnets. He claimed that he never submitted any of his poems for publication, but his friends shared some copies of his poems with poetry journal editors. Three of his sonnets were eventually published in the iconic journal *Today* (*Jintian* 今天), under the name Shi Hongmin 釋弘憫 (Duan 1996). Perhaps part of the fascination of his poetry lies in the very fact that he was a tonsured monk writing in a classical Western genre, in a language that is between German mysticism (primarily Rilke) and Zen. Take, for instance, the first of the three sonnets published in *Today*:

Oh, the barrel of time is full of pure water;  
 Petals of the summer float in glistening flickers of light.  
 They knock upon this lonesome vessel,  
 As if the hoop were extending inch by inch.

Hoop me tightly, do endure!  
 Don't shift your weight elsewhere!  
 I look for ripples, and you for your own  
 Fundamental drop of water that briefly manifests.

And the key is: it's not just about objects,  
 But rather about the enduring loneliness of our hearts,  
 That yearns to spill, in the direction of you ...

Is this devotion an illusion?  
 Again I hear, again I see,  
 A holistic picture, within and without.

呵，時間之桶盛滿淨水，  
 夏日的花瓣漂泊而閃光。  
 它們敲打這寂寞的容器，  
 又像是木箍在一分分伸長。

3 The opinions and biographical details of Duan Xiaosong come from our discussions and interviews spanning multiple years. I have been friends with the poet over WeChat for a few years. We met in person in March 2019, in Nanjing, and I conducted an extensive online interview with him on December 5, 2020. All translations of his poems in this article are mine.

箍緊我吧！別失去耐力，  
別將重心向別處轉移！  
我尋找波紋，你找自己  
得以暫現的根本的一滴。

而關鍵在於：不僅是物，  
我們的內心仍在孤獨——  
它渴望著向你濺出……

這樣的奉獻可是虛幻？  
我重又聽到，重又看見  
從裡到外是一整幅畫面。

Unlike a European sonnet, a verse form of fourteen lines consisting of iambic pentameter, a modern Chinese “sonnet” (*shisihangshi* 十四行詩, literally “a fourteen-line verse”) does not typically have a discernible prosodic pattern and is more akin to a modern Chinese free verse. Because Chinese is a monosyllabic language, Chinese lyric prosody is not based on the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. A comparable case of the untranslatability of prosodic prescription for a classical lyric genre would be an English haiku, which normally means a short verse of three lines, without necessarily abiding by the five-seven-five syllabic structure of Japanese haiku poetry. This phenomenon demonstrates how classical lyric genres defined by their prosodic regularity resist transplantation to new linguistic soils.

Duan’s sonnet adopts the end rhyme scheme of *abab acac ddd eee*, which, from a purely technical perspective, is neither perfectly sonnet-like (as a Petrarchan sonnet typically adopts the *abba, abba, cdecde* or *cdcdcd* rhyme scheme), nor entirely free. Notably, classical Chinese rhymes are divided into “level” (*ping* 平) and “oblique” (*ze* 仄) categories, the former roughly corresponding to the first and second tones in modern Mandarin, the latter to the third and the fourth Mandarin tones and including the “checked” (*ru* 入) tone that has disappeared in most Mandarin dialects. Words in the medieval checked tone could be spoken in the second, third, or fourth tone in modern Mandarin. Words in level and oblique tones, even when they share the same vowel, do not rhyme in a classical Chinese poem—but they do in a modern Chinese free verse. Now, in the second stanza, the end rhymes are /lì/, /yí/, /jǐ/, and /dī/. They conform to the rhyming scheme of a sonnet stanza (*abab*) only if the level (/yí/ and /dī/) and oblique (/lì/ and /jǐ/) tones do not rhyme—that is, if this poem follows classical Chinese prosodic rules.

But he has not observed the checked tone (as 滴 /dī/ and 獨 /dú/ would have belonged to the checked tone category). The other two sonnets show a similar hybridity of classical Chinese and imported European rhyme schemes (one adopts, for instance, the *aaba* structure, a typical rhyming feature of classical Chinese poetry).

Such hybridity is part of the charm of Duan's poetry, which transforms typical Buddhist imageries like pure water, a vessel, and wholeness into existentialist symbols. The nine poets who published in the same issue of *Today* include Bei Dao 北島, Yang Lian 楊煉, and Zhai Yongming 翟永明. At twenty-six years of age, Duan was the youngest of the cohort. Had he pursued the road of continuing to write sonnets or free verse, he might have grown into a poet better known among specialists of Chinese poetry in Western academia, thereby becoming at least an eligible candidate for world literature.

Instead, Duan Xiaosong chose another path. Dissatisfied with contemporary institutional Buddhism, he left the order in 1997. Wearing a monk's robe, eating vegetarian food, and even sexual abstinence—to him, these precepts stopped representing the true spirit of Buddhism. He stopped writing poetry too. Since that time, he has been married and divorced twice. To financially support his child, he returned to Hefei in 2000 and became an employee in a major advertising company, where he stayed until 2015. What truly prevented him from returning to the life of a publishing poet, however, was his discovery of the internet and his subsequent transformation into a digital classicist, who publishes classicist poetry exclusively in the digital space.

His first contact with internet literature was after he began to work in the advertising company, a job that provided him with a desktop computer. A young colleague informed him about a literary website called Rongshuxia 榕樹下 (Under the Banyan Tree), where he could try publishing his works. Since it is common to use a sobriquet to publish things online in the Chinese internet, Monk Hongmin hereby became Xutang 嘯堂 (Hall of Ethereal Breath), a term that at the same time alludes to both Zen Buddhism and philosophical Daoism. In a Zhuangzian fable, the sage Nanguo Ziqi 南郭子綦, sitting like a withered tree, heaved his "vital breath" (*qi* 氣) into the ether and formulated his famous theory on the "music of Heaven" (*tianlai* 天籟), a metaphor for the natural process of creation. But the poet also consciously chose this term to indicate his proclivity for argumentation. In the *History of the Later Han*, Kong Zhou 孔宙 (d. 190?), a rather obscure figure, was said to love "pure talks and lofty argument, and had the ability to breathe vitality into the withered" (*qingtan gaolun, xuku chuisheng* 清談高論, 嘯



枯吹生; Wang 1984, 794). This is a derogatory description for people who use their rhetorical skills to distort the truth. Xutang, however, sees it as describing the poet-cum-critic's ability to turn the tide and revive literary genres once considered dead—in this case, the classical poetic tradition. This sobriquet thus encodes the poet's ambition as a poet and as a critic.

At that time, Rongshuxia was edited. The editor in charge of classicist poetry did not appreciate Xutang's unique style, and Xutang was too proud to bend himself to a standard which he perceived to be inferior. But in QQ chatrooms he quickly befriended other classicist poets whose works he admired. He learned of the existence of BBS, where no barrier to publication then existed. Very soon, his classicist poems earned broad admiration for the strength of their language and depth of sentiment. It was thrilling: Xutang had learned to write the classical styles in primary school; now, after two decades of occasional compositions, he found kindred spirits for the first time. A veteran rebel, he found a natural arena in the uncensored internet forums to experiment with new language and new styles that he would call "experiments in the classical Chinese language" (*wenyan shiyan* 文言實驗). The emphasis on the experiment was to distinguish himself from the conservatives who slavishly emulated the canonic poetry of the past. The *wenyan* label, however, emphasized the refinement of the language unlike other avant-garde classicists such as Lizililizi (hereafter Lizi; Tian 2009; Kraushaar 2022) whose language includes a greater variety of registers. In Xutang's scathing words, however, Lizi's language is too "unrefined" (*libai* 俚白) and "crafty" (*nongqiao* 弄巧; Baihuatan 2009). To a certain extent, the difference between Xutang and Lizi echoes a line of division similar to "the intellectual versus the popular" debate in contemporary Chinese mainstream poetry (see e.g., Li 2008).

The search for the pure experience of existence continues to characterize much of Xutang's classicist poetry, which is inspired by the ancient-style (*guti* 古體) verse that is freer in prosody than regulated verse (Yang 2015b). A poem simply titled "Ancient Verse" (Gushi 古詩) written in 2002 (Duan 2002), for instance, limns a mystic encounter with the divine:

秋風深于水	The autumn wind is deeper than water
微瀾夜正瀾	Its infinitesimal ripples suffuse the night
似欲浸高樓	As if to submerge a high-rise underneath
蛩聲亦四起	Songs of crickets rise from all corners
我坐蛩聲中	I sit amidst the songs of crickets
如在生命裏	As if inside life itself
俯身拾芳菲	I bend to pick up blossoms

靜穆之時晷	From a quiet, solemn sundial
晷上一群人	A group of people are on the sundial
皆與我相似	All of them look quite like me
各抱一箜篌	Each carries an ancient harp
往來尋彼此	Walking around, in search of another
相逢徒自悲	Chance encounters bring out vain sadness
相逢徒自喜	Chance encounters bring out vain joy
嗚嗚若有歌	In the throats a song is stuck
斷續曾弗已	Disjointed but never ending
徜徉廊柱間	Wandering among the colonnades
空洞其凝視	Empty and hollow are their gazes
柱影遠且長	The columns cast slender shadows reaching afar
柱身久棄毀	Their bodies long abandoned to ruins
惟餘蔓草紋	Only fine prints of rampant weeds remain
穿行神廟址	Crawling through the site of this divine temple
幽香豈能循	How could I follow the subtle scents
神聖不能倚	Or cling to the divine, the sacred
而有無言者	And there are the speechless ones
大地或城市	Namely the Earth or the Metropolis
存亡兩難求	To be or not to be—neither is a choice
適如我與你	Just like being you or me
我今但漠然	Now I am the indifferent one
你固無終始	And you have no beginning or end
秋水正揚風	Upon the autumn flood a wind rises
其音殊未止	Its music never ceases to howl

In comparison to the 1996 sonnet that similarly treats the topic of time, the language of this poem is much more laconic. The first eight lines are infinitely beautiful: the night is transformed into water, and the cityscape is immersed in a cosmic orchestra. Time is transformed into space and then into sound. "Blossoms" are moments of delight we find in this brief life. The constant search for, despite the inability to connect to, *others* is an existential dilemma that speaks of a universal human condition. The colonnaded "divine temple" may stand for cultural traditions, their once sacred authority now in ruins. The "speechless ones"—the Earth and the modern Metropolis—are both forces threatening to absorb individual existence. The existential dilemma finds no answer aside from, again, the sound of nature, emitting from the wind over the "autumn flood." In *Zhuangzi*, when the autumn flood comes, the God of the Yellow River considers himself the most powerful in the world. He then travels to the North Sea and realizes its infinity. This

parable is about the relativity of our cognitive horizons. The incessant music of nature thus responds to the beginning of the poem, creating a sense of wholeness. While the laconic pentasyllabic and prosodically non-regulated lines serve as a defining feature of the ancient-style verse, the language of the poem hybridizes classical *wenyan* and modern vernacular terms, and the imagery alludes to both Chinese and Western classical traditions. It is where Tao Yuanming meets Rainer Maria Rilke.

Xutang's avant-gardism is manifested not only in his innovative succession of the classical Chinese lyric tradition, but also in the political dimension of his poetry. In another article (Yang 2023), I analyzed a poem that he wrote on June 4, 2003, the anniversary of the Tian'anmen Massacre, titled "Song of Souls" (Lingge 靈歌) (Duan 2017). It ends with a curse of the fatherland:

攥祖國於拳兮	I squeeze the fatherland in my fist, hey
復貫之以長釘	and pierce it with long nails
死者其能復現兮	If the dead can again rise, hey
猶盲者之復明	just like that the blind will again see

This verse adopts a style harking back to the ancient *Songs of the South* (*Chuci* 楚辭), with its most famous piece, "Encountering Sorrow" (Lisao 離騷), traditionally understood as an elegy lamenting the fall of the poet's state. Xutang's poem, in contrast, is dedicated to the victims of the fatherland, a leviathan that devours its own children. In this poem, the fatherland is manifested as a social and ideological predicament in which the lyrical subject fails to find a sense of belonging. Another poem (Duan 2017) written on the same day in 2006 sees insanity as the only escape from memory:

乳為目兮臍為口	Turning its nipples into eyes, its navel mouth
存呼告于烏有	the beheaded giant howls in the Land of Being
	Nowhere
叩上帝於環堵兮	It questions the god-above in its tiny chamber, hey
謁暮春之石偶	and visits the stone idol in its late spring
循斜坡而下瞰兮	Following a slope to cast its glance downward, hey
孰廢宅之可守	how could an abandoned house find a sentinel
噤之。閉之	Hush. Shut up
生人。死友	The man, alive. A friend, dead
視網今已脫落兮	My now detached retina, hey
如空氣之篩斗	is like a sifter through the air
腐草其糾於腦海兮	Rotten grasses tangle in my brain, hey
置瘋人於虛構	placing a madman in his own fiction

嗎啡塗諸白牆	The morphine painted across the white walls
映遲鈍之思想	reflect only my dulled thoughts
草枯。草長。尚饗	The grass withers. The grass grows. Enjoy the offering, spirit
誰與行此一徑兮	Who will walk down the same path with me, hey
令我失聲	and make me lose my voice
誦詩篇者於岩下立	The man chanting this poem stands beneath a rock
召向晚之黃鶯	and summons orioles in the dusk
鶯來。鶯鳴，失重輕	The oriole comes. The oriole sings, in zero gravity

The paratactic language of this poem occasionally appears to be the mumbo jumbo of a madman. The opening lines subtly combine a few classical allusions: in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhaijing* 山海經), the giant Xingtian 刑天 was beheaded after his failed rebellion against the Yellow Emperor, yet he continued to battle by transforming his other orifices into sensory faculties. In *Zhuangzi*, the Land of Being Nowhere (*Wuheyong zhi xiang* 無何有之鄉) is a domain of spiritual freedom where a giant tree of utter uselessness should find home. Multiple short bi- or trisyllabic lines are inserted into a verse that otherwise features the *Chuci*-style. These shorter lines appear to emulate desolate sobbing sounds, making the poem a ritualistic elegiac incantation. Assuming the mantle of madness, the poet in effect accuses the “Yellow Emperor”—the authoritarian power representing absolute justice—of barbarism. In the end, nature seems to empathize with the poet’s plea, but “dusk” and “zero gravity” in contrast suggest a liminal state of utter disorientation. The poem speaks the poetic language of trauma.

One might wonder what made Xutang decide to abandon his promising career as a poet worthy of being printed in *Today* and choose instead an obscure path as a digital classicist. The answer may be simple: Xutang had always had a penchant for classicist poetry, and the internet simply provided him with the means to connect to other like-minded poets. In other words, he found a way to go around the print media dominated by “new poetry,” the influence of which has been institutionalized since the New Culture Movement of 1917. It is therefore equally fascinating to observe that, twenty years later, deep in the COVID pandemic, Xutang suddenly began to write new poetry again, this time published online.

Xutang wrote some twenty vernacular poems between April 2022 and February 2023. He sent them as a collection with a foreword to me upon my request, but its open publication on a WeChat public account (*gongzhonghao* 公眾號) was censored and blocked, perhaps due to the fact that vernacular

poetry is more explicit than classicist poetry and can therefore more easily fall onto unsafe ears. It should be mentioned that WeChat, the dominant social media platform, short-text publication, and payment app in China, is a rather hostile environment to classicist poets, unlike the previous internet forum culture. It is very difficult to obtain a permit to open a public account and its content is constantly subject to censorship (Yang 2023). As he writes in the foreword of this collection, he suddenly felt like writing vernacular poetry again on an April afternoon while lying on a bamboo couch on the balcony.

It was a new bamboo couch with a footrest, its green colour varnished, lying under the sunshine solidly and quietly, like all normal history. So, I began to write, shard by shard, like a stroke patient doing physiotherapy, like a drunk man speaking incomprehensible words. I did not quite care whether they were good or in which genre but was simply talking to myself. Sometimes I spoke to cats, old friends, and dead people too.<sup>4</sup>

So far, all the poems have been posted only in his WeChat Moments feed, visible only to his digital acquaintances. Untitled, these poems are simply referred to by their first lines. The first poem reads:

just cancel the word April  
cancel sunshine, courtyard, garden  
cancel the named and unnamed seeds

cancel the speckled shadow of a tabby cat  
a shadow drawn so long like an elegy  
cancel the sweet stillness of the high noon

cancel all houses, all lands  
cancel those rebellions brewing on dulled sickles and axes  
cancel all those roots

the three springs that have already been cancelled  
those tightly sealed drawers and stairs  
and rotten potatoes and tomatoes

4 The poet cannot publish the full collection of the poems online. With his permission, readers may access it via my Google Drive; see Duan 2023 for the link.

if the voice is too heavy, then just cancel voice  
 if the flesh is too heavy, and soul too bitter  
 then cancel humanity

取消四月這個詞吧  
 取消陽光, 庭軒, 花園  
 取消已命名和未命名的種子

取消狸貓斑駁的影子  
 拉得很長如哀樂的影子  
 取消中午的恬靜

取消房屋吧, 還有土地  
 取消那些遲鈍犁鏵上醞釀的起義  
 取消那些根莖  
 已經取消的三個春天  
 那些緊鎖的抽屜和樓梯  
 腐爛的土豆和番茄

如果聲音太重, 那就取消聲音  
 如果肉身太沉, 靈魂太苦  
 那就取消人

This poem was written in the third spring of the pandemic. The zero-COVID policy resulted in lockdowns, rationed food supply, and delayed springtime farming—in some places farmers needed to acquire a special permit to leave their houses and till their fields, in turn. This time, the poet does not attempt to simulate a sonnet. Rather, his poem has achieved a certain looseness and spontaneity. Nevertheless, many lines end with the rhyme /i/, and a few other end rhymes like /ing/ and /an/ are deployed throughout the poem, creating intensive musicality. It has also a dialogic quality, as if the poet has found no one to talk to but his own thoughts, a land of ghostly monologic murmuring. Such intensive musicality, meditateness, quietly burning anger, and dialogic quality are features found throughout the collection. The poems allude to the absurdist dictatorial restrictions exerted on the tiniest details of everyday life. The last poem in the collection, written at the end of January 2023, reads:

I am together with it  
 they don't see it

so they say that it's no good  
they also say that the sun is not quite bright

but I can see it  
I can see the burning streets  
and the tree leaves extinguished by rain

they say that they don't see it  
but I can't see them  
Those who live in an apple core see no worms

all sentences that nourish growth are growing  
like columns in a divine temple  
soaring up one by one from a dark dim space

long and melodious like the autumn  
like all the women I have loved  
throw the rotten history into the pyre

but they say that they can't see it  
just like how I can't see myself  
growing forth from within the dark dim columns

我和它在一起了  
他們看不見它  
所以說它不好  
他們說太陽不夠明亮

但我看得見啊  
我看得見燃燒的街道  
以及被雨淋滅後的樹葉

他們說看不見它  
但我看不見他們  
在果核深處看不見蟲子

滋助生長的句子都成長  
像廟裡的柱子一樣  
從幽暗的地方一根根拔起來

像秋天一樣悠長  
 像我愛過的女人一樣  
 把腐爛的歷史丟進火裡

但他們說看不見它  
 就像我看不見自己  
 從幽暗的柱子裡長出來

"It" in this poem refers to something that gives the poet insight into otherwise invisible things, or at least things invisible to "them." The tension between "I" and "they" is sustained throughout the poem. The "sentences" growing like columns in a temple may refer to the language of truth, since it nourishes the growth of self-knowledge. Those who cannot or pretend not to see the truth are those living in an apple core and writing a "rotten history," burning in the poet's pyrophilic imagination.

The censorship against these twenty poems by Xutang is an interesting case, since they are not necessarily more provocative than his classicist works, but the latter remain uncensored to date. For instance, he wrote a series of twenty pentasyllabic poems titled "Twelve Cities, or a Spring in Ruins" (Shiercheng, huo chunxu 十二城, 或春墟) in 2020 (Duan 2021), which similarly criticize China's COVID policy in harsh terms, containing couplets like:

靈魂幾夸克    How many quarks does a soul weigh  
 妝點疫情圖    When it decorates a painting of the pandemic situation

抑萎如灌木    As suppressed and withered as wintry shrubs  
 追懷泰坦族    I think about the tribe of Titans of the past

力竭失一椎    My prowess in decline, I have no iron hammer  
 驕然為貯備    Let the indolent me serve my reserve duty

斂席便枉死    Wrapped in a mat, dying a vain death  
 祖國澀如砂    The fatherland has an acerbic taste like sand

These lines, selected from verses 2, 3, 9, and 11, are not too difficult to comprehend for those with basic literary training. Two familiar allusions are used: the Titans, the giants in Greek mythology who fought the Olympian gods, and the "iron hammer," referring to Zhang Liang's 張良 (?-186 BCE) failed assassination attempt on the life of the First Emperor. They remain



the poetry of a rebel. Written in classical Chinese, however, somehow they are less visible to digital censors and have not only been published on a WeChat public account, but the link remains accessible to date, which means that no human readers have tipped off the censor. On the other hand, the esotericism of classicist poetry is perhaps exactly the reason why it remains inaccessible to non-Chinese readers.

Xutang's poetry has so far remained visible solely on an "ethnic digital bookshelf," not only because he has chosen "esoteric writing," but also because of his chosen media of publication. WeChat is a unique ecosystem. Posts in the Moments are visible only to those in the "friends" contact list and cannot be simply forwarded, a feature that aims to limit a post's circulation. Due to this feature, however, censorship exercised on Moments posts is also looser. If one wants to reach a broader readership, one must submit the texts to be published by a public account that can reach all subscribers and can be forwarded, but it is also subject to stricter censorship. In this case, Xutang's vernacular poems can be easily published on his Moments, a semi-private space, but not on a public account. He thus faces an impossible dilemma: although writing in the classicist style is freer in expression, it deprives him of candidacy for world literature; but at the same time, writing in free verse is not free.

Do the institutions of world literature today have a mandate to validate the selections made by national literature, or should it instead rescue those voices suppressed by the latter? The answer is rather complicated. Writers who work with power enjoy much greater domestic institutional support. They win domestic prizes and are recommended to international prizes; their books featured on international book fairs and often receive translation fundings. Exile writers also navigate well the "world literature hall of fame," as they are compelled to master one or more Western languages and have the opportunity to work closely with translators, scholars, event organizers, and prize committee members. But poetry like Xutang's falls through the gap between the prestigious institutions of either national or international literature on one hand, and market-driven digital literature on the other. His poetry thus becomes a solo act in the WeChat universe, a cyberspace with many erected walls.

Xutang quit his job in 2015 and has been living on inheritance and hustling. He had taught writing poetry and bootlegged his own *baijiu* that he branded *Pokong* 破空, or "Breaking the Void." After the COVID pandemic began, he further detached himself from the world. Poetry is the only thing that connects him to the world, like the broken chair that he intensively observed during the lockdown:

it curls up, in shy extension  
it in a strange posture buttresses the shine of twilight

它蜷縮著, 伸展又羞怯  
它用奇怪的姿勢支撐這個黃昏

Can we call this another kind of world poetry, the kind of poetry that “worlds” by making the poet’s subjectivity accessible, as cybernetic data? “World” in the Heideggerian sense, as Emily Apter (2013, 9) remarks, is that which humans (as opposed to animals or stones) richly “have”; in having World—that is to say, in having the capacity for World made possible by language and subjective accessibility—beings become human. In somewhat idealistic terms, perhaps by acknowledging the right of poetry to be untranslatable and stay untranslatable, the “ethnic digital bookshelf” may well be understood as another kind of world literature—not as an institution, but as a path toward linguistic self-realization. Only then, Goethe’s vision of *Weltliteratur* “with the unlimited potential of human interactions” (Pizer 2014, 24) may finally be realized.

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## 9. Nativism Revisited: Paradoxes in Modern Poetry in Taiwan

*Michelle Yeh*

**Abstract:** This chapter offers a reassessment of the nativist turn in the history of modern poetry in Taiwan in the 1970s and 1980s. Reacting against the modernist movement of the 1950s and 1960s, in conjunction with the national crises in diplomacy, the Modern Poetry Debate erupted with a twofold emphasis on returning to the Chinese tradition and embracing Taiwanese society. By relating nativism to what came before and after in modern poetry, the chapter offers a new analysis of its achievements and long-term impact.

**Keywords:** nativism, cultural identity, Modern Poetry Debate, Campus Folksong Movement

### From White Terror to Democracy

It is an indisputable fact that nativism has been the mainstream discourse in contemporary Taiwan, as evident in every aspect of the society. Politically, we have witnessed the historical transition of power, first in 2000, then again in 2016, from the KMT (Kuomintang or Nationalist Party), which took over the rule of Taiwan from Japan in 1945, to the DPP (Democratic Progressive Party), the first major opposition party and native Taiwanese regime.

The peaceful transfer of power did not happen overnight but was hard won. Open criticism of the KMT and calls for democracy and human rights could be traced to the 1950s, coming from both recent émigrés from mainland China and native Taiwanese people. From the 1950s to the 1970s, under the name *Dangwai* 黨外 (“Outside the Party”), dissenting voices found their way into the central and local governments, culminating with the founding of the “Campaign Support Group for Taiwan Dangwai Candidates”

(*Taiwan Dangwai renshi zhuxuantuan* 台灣黨外人士助選團) in 1978. On December 10, 1979, the Dangwai journal *Formosa* (*Meilidao* 美麗島) held a parade in commemoration of the international Human Rights Day in Gaoxiong in southern Taiwan. The KMT cracked down on the gathering and arrested many leaders and participants. The publicized trials in March 1980 won widespread sympathy for the opposition both domestically and abroad. Under pressure, the KMT made some concessions. For example, Shi Mingde 施明德 (b. 1941) received the death penalty originally, but it was commuted to life sentence.

The demand for reform became even louder in the wake of two notorious events that shocked Taiwanese society: the murders of the mother and twin daughters of Lin Yixiong 林義雄 (b. 1941), who had been arrested during the Formosa Incident, on February 28, 1980, and the suspicious death of Chen Wencheng 陳文成 (1950–1981), a Taiwanese-born professor at Carnegie Mellon, whose body was found on the campus of the National Taiwan University on July 3, 1981. Facing mounting pressure, President Chiang Ching-kuo 蔣經國 (1910–1988) allowed more liberalization, culminating in the lifting of martial law in July 1987, thus ending the era of White Terror and paving the way for full-fledged democracy in Taiwan.

All along, nativist sentiments were inseparable from the opposition and democracy movement. In 1988, then-vice president Lee Teng-hui (1923–2020) succeeded Chiang Ching-kuo and became the first native Taiwanese president, and he was reelected in the first general election in 1996. During his twelve-year presidency, Lee started the “Quiet Revolution” (Soong 2020) by launching a series of consequential reforms—constitutional, congressional, legal, and educational—transforming Taiwan in fundamental ways. Into the twenty-first century, the DPP government has continued to expand the nativist agenda, seeking to de-Sinicize Taiwan society and culture, as seen in national policies of language, naming, and education.

## The Modern Poetry Debate and the Nativist Turn

Literature has played a significant role in the democratization of Taiwan and the nativist discourse. Under the martial law, literary works were subject to censorship, sometimes banned or destroyed; writers were under surveillance, at times harassed or even imprisoned. Despite such risks, taboo subjects, including the February 28th Incident and White Terror, were treated in poetry behind the shield of obliqueness and allegoresis. In the following

decades, as Taiwan moved toward liberalization and democracy, literature underwent dramatic development.

In what follows, this chapter focuses on the “nativist turn” in the history of modern poetry in Taiwan in the 1970s and 1980s, relating it to the modernist movement in the 1950s and 1960s on the one hand, and to the so-called postmodern phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s on the other. I propose that whereas nativism arose as a counterreaction to modernism, it did not—could not—sever all ties with the modernist tradition that had been firmly established by the mid-1960s. By the same token, postmodern poetry in Taiwan is indebted to the nativist turn despite important differences. One implication of these observations is that, whether it is modernism or postmodernism, it cannot be approached from a universalist perspective but must be squarely rooted in the indigenous context. Rather than a wholesale borrowing of Western theories of modernism and postmodernism, which many critics have done, I emphasize the unique genealogy and trajectory of modern poetry in Taiwan. Taiwan has its own modernist tradition, which continues to exert an influence to this day. Any study of Taiwan’s postmodern poetry must take into account its relation to the nativist turn that goes beyond the chronological.

The nativist turn in Taiwanese poetry is best represented by the Modern Poetry Debate (*Xiandaishi lunzhan* 現代詩論戰) in 1972–1974. The literary event was inseparable from the geopolitical and social development. In the first few years of the decade Taiwan suffered a series of setbacks in the international arena: the dispute over the sovereignty of the Diaoyutai Island 釣魚台 (Senkaku in Japanese) in 1970, which sparked the Protect Diaoyutai Movement in Taiwan and among overseas Taiwanese and Hong Kong students; the loss of seat on the United Nations Security Council to the People’s Republic of China in 1971, which triggered an identity crisis for the Republic of China as the sole legitimate China; the visit of US President Richard Nixon to China and the severing of diplomatic ties between Japan and the Republic of China in 1972, both events infuriating the people in Taiwan who felt betrayed.

Written in 1971, “Buoy” (Fubiao 浮標) by Li Minyong 李敏勇 (b. 1947) seems to express the collective sense of loss and powerlessness. The first two stanzas read:

I no longer have my nationality—  
This is neither my guilt  
Nor my wish



My scar  
 As deep as the ocean floor  
 Built Upon  
 The darkest sorrows of the world<sup>1</sup>

我的國籍已無一  
 這不是我的罪  
 也不是我的願望

我的傷痕  
 像海溝那樣深  
 累積了  
 世界最暗鬱的悲哀  
 (Li 2001, 28)

As early as January 1971, the Dragon Race Poetry Society (Longzu shishe 龍族詩社) was founded with this manifesto: “We strike our own gongs, beat our own drums, dance our own dragon” (我們敲我們自己的鑼, 打我們自己的鼓, 舞我們自己的龍). Besides taking pride in being Chinese, who are self-proclaimed descendants of the majestic, mythical dragon, the founding poets also emphasized concern for social reality and the contemporary spirit.<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, the names of other new poetry societies established by young poets in the 1970s suggest identification with China and love for the native land, Taiwan: Great Earth (Dadi 大地), Divine Land (Shenzhou 神州), Begonia (Haitang 海棠, the shape of the leaf resembles that of the Chinese mainland), and Grassroots (Caogen 草根).

Although the Modern Poetry Debate was not a direct response to the abovementioned political crises, it both represented and contributed to the critical reflection on Taiwan’s identity among the intellectuals and contributed to the rise of nativist consciousness. In February and September 1972, John Kwan-Terry (Guan Jieming 關傑明), an English professor at the National University of Singapore, published two essays in the literary supplement of the *China Times* (*Zhongguo shibao* 中國時報), a major newspaper in Taiwan. Commenting on two poetry anthologies (one in Chinese and one in English translation) and a collection of critical essays on modern poetry, he voiced the criticism that although those poems claimed to be “Chinese,” they came

1 All translations in the chapter are mine unless otherwise indicated.

2 For an analysis of the historical context of the journal and its role in the Modern Poetry Debate, see Cai 2002.

across as “Western.” Kwan-Terry lamented their loss of Chinese cultural identity and called it “literary colonialism.” More scathing criticism soon came from Tang Wenbiao 唐文標, a Hong Kong native, a poet, a statistics professor in the US, and at the time a visiting professor at the National Taiwan University. From November 1972 through August 1973, he published four essays blasting modern poetry for its incomprehensible language and anemic content as a result of overt Westernization. Words like escapism, decadence, nihilism, pretentiousness, and narcissism were brandished about. Kwan-Terry’s and Tang’s essays shook up the poetry scene like a big earthquake and attracted strong reactions. Overall, there was far more support for their views than disagreement. A number of poets and literary scholars did come to the defense of modern poetry; however, they failed to turn the tide. The debate, which ended in mid-1974, was clearly in favor of Kwan-Terry and Tang, and others who criticized the modernist poetry in the 1960s.<sup>3</sup>

The critics’ main points in the Modern Poetry Debate can be summed up as follows. First, instead of slavish imitation of the West, poets should return to their Chinese roots and regain Chinese cultural identity. Second, rather than escaping from reality into the labyrinth of private desires and existential angst, poets should open their eyes to Taiwanese society where they live and express social conscience in their works. Finally, poets should abandon the obscurantist language of modernism and, instead, embrace clarity and accessibility. Not all of these criticisms were new. In the 1950s and 1960s, modern poetry had already come under attack for its obscurity under Western influence.

Earlier poetry societies, such as Grape Orchard (Putaoyuan 葡萄園, founded in 1962) and Bamboo Hat (Li 笠, f. 1964) had raised similar points. However, in terms of its transcultural reach, intensity, and long-term impact, the Modern Poetry Debate in 1972–1974 was unprecedented. Moreover, in Chinese history, modern poetry has more than once played the role of forerunner or avant-garde, whether it was the enlightenment movement of the May Fourth era, the modernist movement in literature and visual art in postwar Taiwan, or underground literature in Mao’s China. The Modern Poetry Debate preceded the Native Literature Movement (*Xiangtu wenxue yundong* 鄉土文學運動) of 1977–1979, in which poetry was hardly mentioned. Together, they changed the course of Taiwanese literature and were an integral part of development toward democratization and nativization.

3 For the key essays, see Zhao 1978; for English translations of some of the essays, see Chang, Yeh, and Fan 2014. For critical studies of the Debate, see Xi Mi 1998; Li 2015.

## From Nationalism to Nativism: The Rise of Political Poetry

It is important to note the evolving relation between nationalist and nativist sentiments in contemporary Taiwan. Their entanglements from 1945 to the present have run the gamut from the dominance of nationalism to the coexistence of nationalism and nativism, to a reversal of dominance from nationalism to nativism. After 1949, Chinese nationalism was at the core of the official discourse of the KMT. Upholding Taiwan as the only legitimate representative of China in the international arena, the KMT suppressed and dismissed nativism. The name “Taiwan” was accepted only as a geographic designation, the base of “Free China,” but Taiwanese culture was deemed provincial and inferior and was generally excluded from the mainstream.<sup>4</sup> The situation began to change as the Republic of China faced an existential crisis in the early 1970s, which led to a period of intense introspection from the 1970s through the 1980s. If the Modern Poetry Debate advocated both nationalism and nativism as the dual engine head of agency, the scales tilted toward nativism as rapid political changes unfolded. During the Native Literature Movement, the notion of native Taiwanese literature was advocated,<sup>5</sup> and the 1980s and 1990s witnessed debates among intellectuals between “Chinese consciousness” and “Taiwanese consciousness.”<sup>6</sup> By the end of the 1990s, nativism had indisputably become the mainstream discourse.

The nativist turn that started the 1970s led to the thriving of nativist poetry in the following decade. The innovations it inspired may be summed up as the rise of political poetry, rural poetry, and Hokkien and Hakka poetry. Political poetry (*zhengzhi shi* 政治詩) is to be clearly distinguished from the politically correct poetry in mainland China; in fact, it is just the opposite. In Taiwan, political poetry was made possible in the liberalizing atmosphere in the 1980s. Poets were bold enough to critique the KMT regime, uncovering repressed Taiwanese history, and protest against all kinds of

4 For example, Hokkien was banned in public spaces, Taiwanese people and culture were portrayed in a negative light in mass media, and Taiwanese history and literature were by and large excluded from the educational system. An exception was the *Taiwan Literary Art* (*Taiwan wenyi* 台灣文藝) founded by the veteran writer Wu Zhuoliu 吳濁流 (1900–1972) in 1964. He was warned by the authorities not to use the word “Taiwan,” but he persisted and managed to publish the journal.

5 Notably, Ye Shitao 葉石濤 (1977) published “Introduction to the History of Taiwanese Native Literature.” Also see Hsiao 2005.

6 See Shi Minhui 1988. The debate resumed in the 1990s, this time among academics at leading universities. For an overview, see Chen 2001.

inequality and injustice.<sup>7</sup> Granted, most of the political poems tend to be didactic or sentimental, but the best display originality in integrating form and content in an effective language. For example, Liu Kexiang 劉克襄 (b. 1957) wrote about political persecutions and the resistance of Taiwanese people to the ruling regime, whether Japanese or Chinese. Among the numerous political poems at the time, Liu's maintained a rare objectivism and sobering self-examination, as seen in "Young Revolutionary" (Geming qingnian 革命青年), written in 1983:

That day, none of the students from our village  
 who attended the city's Teacher's College returned  
 except for my panic-stricken father  
 If what people say is true, he was the only survivor  
 For years afterward, he was depressed and joyless  
 Later, he married my mother, and I—his naive son—was born  
 When I got older, Grandma said I looked just like him

At the end of the 1970s, I attended the university  
 Perhaps because it was destined by historical determinism  
 By then, I might have been reading Marcuse, and I probably knew  
 something about socialist theory. It was a period of political upheaval  
 and with my fellow students, I circulated underground journals  
 and dissident flyers. The authorities gave me many warnings  
 I gave up the dream of studying abroad. Seeing what's going on  
 around me, I felt I had no right to leave. Father found it hard to understand  
 and we got into heated arguments.

At the end of the 1980s, everything changed—or ended  
 I got married. She ... I can't describe her  
 As for me, I got a job at a transnational corporation,  
 bought my own apartment, and now we have a son  
 I've already saved tens of thousands dollars  
 so someday I can send my son abroad to study

我們村子到城裏讀書的師範生都失蹤了  
 那一天，只有多桑倉皇回來  
 據說他是唯一倖存的，假如我沒聽錯  
 那一年起，他開始變得鬱鬱寡歡

7 For a study of political poetry, see Lin 2008.

最後，娶妻生子，我懵然出世  
長大時，祖母說我很像他

七〇年代末，我進入大學  
也許是必須註定的歷史命運吧  
我好像接觸了馬庫色，也可能認識過  
社會主義，那是十分茫然的年代  
我和同學印地下刊物  
發傳單，屢次被校方約談  
我也放棄出國。一切告訴我們  
沒有權利離開。難以理解的  
多桑一直跟我有著激烈的爭執

八〇年代末，一切彷彿再生，又似乎結束  
我與一名女子結婚  
她，不知道應該如何介紹  
我正在一家跨國公司任職  
有一間公寓，她為我生兒子  
兒子，我已存了一百萬  
他將來可以留學深造  
(Liu 1984, 13-14)

“Any man who is under thirty, and is not a liberal, has no heart; and any man who is over thirty, and is not a conservative, has no brains.” This famous saying, attributed to Winston Churchill, finds an ironic expression in “Young Revolutionary,” which deals with the disillusionment of youthful idealism spanning two generations. The first stanza intimates the April 6 Incident in 1949, during which more than three hundred students—mostly from the Taiwan Normal College (later renamed National Taiwan Normal University) with the rest from the National Taiwan University—were arrested by armed soldiers who stormed into the dormitories in response to student protests against brutal police force in a minor traffic violation on March 20.<sup>8</sup> Treating it as a case of “Communist infiltration,” the KMT also arrested other suspects. The Incident is viewed as the beginning of the White Terror in Taiwan. In the following decades, many more were to be arrested, imprisoned, and even executed for similar offenses. The word “disappearance” in the opening line of Liu’s poem was a euphemism used to cover up the persecutor’s heinous

8 See the official account of the incident posted by the Ministry of Education, <https://nrch.culture.tw/twpedia.aspx?id=2206>, accessed August 10, 2023.

act on the one hand, and the cause of the fear and silence of the victims' families on the other.

A student at the Taiwan Normal College, the narrator's father was the only student who escaped the KMT crackdown and got back to his home village. The brutal reality and the survivor's guilt crushed his idealism and turned him into a silent conformist. Without joy and hope, he accepted the life path that was expected of him by tradition, embodied by the grandmother figure in line 6: getting married and raising a family. Underlying it was a sense of resignation.

As a college student, the narrator in Liu's poem was passionate about making the world a better place. References to Marcuse and socialism suggest that through these forbidden readings he opened his eyes to the ills of the capitalist system and saw himself as a champion of equality and justice. Like the students in the 1949 protest, he engaged in underground activities to advance his cause. In doing so, he went against his father's wish and gave up the opportunity to study abroad. (At the time, the most likely places for Taiwanese students were the United States and Western Europe.) His decision disappointed his father, bringing to the fore the conflict between two generations, between youthful idealism and sobering realism, between persistence and compromise.

To the reader's surprise, the story ends with an anti-climax. The narrator—the “young revolutionary”—gave up his ideals, accepted a job at a transnational corporation, and settled down as a family man. Unlike his father's case, however, no specific cause of the transformation is given. The only hint is the reference to his job. Perhaps, by 1990, transnational corporations had become so powerful around the world that a revolution against capitalism became futile. Perhaps, money can buy anything after all, and to survive in a capitalist society one has no choice but give in. What is clear is that, like his father, there is little joy in his life of conformity. Who would refer to one's wife as “a woman” and have nothing to say about her? The generic description suggests that there is little love in the relationship. For idiomatic purposes, the line is translated as “and now we have a son,” when it says literally: “she bore me a son” or “she gave birth to a son for me,” suggesting that the reason he got married and had a son was fulfilling some duty, again just like what his father had done. As a result, we are not surprised by the ending of the poem: he is saving up so he can send his son abroad to study. The poem has come full circle between the two generations, between idealism and realism.

It is noteworthy that the narrative takes us to the end of the 1980s, even though the poem was written in 1983. Liu Kexiang seems to foresee the

future. Although the 1980s seemed to be the peak of the democracy movement, he was concerned that the passion and optimism would sooner or later give in to reality: the historical reality that every successful revolution ends with grab for power and its concomitant compromise, machination, and corruption. At a time when almost all political poetry was full of moral indignation and self-righteous pathos, “Young Revolutionary” stood out as a sobering voice.

## Rural Poetry

The second innovation that came out of the nativist turn is the rise of rural poetry. In contrast to modernist poetry, which is typically set in an urban or suburban setting, nativist poetry directs its attention to rural Taiwan.

Wu Sheng 吳晟 (b. 1944) made his mark as early as 1972, with the publication of “Vignettes of My Hometown” (Wuxiang yinxiang 吾鄉印象), a sequence of thirteen poems about the poet’s homeland, a village in Zhanghua on the west coast of central Taiwan. The work is one of the best-known nativist poems, both in its subject matter and its language. The latter is characterized by the use of Hokkien words, such as *kóo-tzá* 古早 “a long time ago.” They add to the poem an air of authenticity and musicality that only the Hokkien dialect can. On the other hand, what is rarely noticed is that the lexical pattern harks back to a modernist classic. The second poem in the sequence, “Morning View” (Chenjing 晨景), begins with this line:

Birdsongs that have nothing to do with happiness or unhappiness<sup>9</sup>  
鳥仔無關快樂不快樂的歌聲  
(Ji Xian et al. 1979, 135)

The first line of the second stanza reads:

The old sun that has nothing to do with brilliance or non-brilliance  
無關輝煌不輝煌的老太陽  
(Ji Xian et al. 1979, 135)

And, again, the third stanza:

9 From *Anthology of the 1980s* (Ji Xian et al. 1979). The title of the anthology is confusing since it contains poems from the 1970s. The reason for the dating is because it followed two previous anthologies focusing on the 1950s and the 1960s.

The old men in my hometown, under the eaves  
 Going over and over trivial and dim memories  
 Chasing air that's neither fresh nor not fresh  
 While watching the men in my hometown  
 With leashed oxen, embarking on another endless kind of soldier's journey  
 —A journey they embarked on in bygone days

吾鄉的老人，在屋簷下  
 細數瑣碎而黯淡的回憶  
 打發無關新鮮不新鮮的空氣  
 目送吾鄉的男人  
 牽著牛，踏上永無休止的另一種征途  
 —昔日他們踏過的征途  
 (Ji Xian et al. 1979, 136)

The construction of pairing an adjective (or adverb) and its negative form was made famous by Ya Xian, whose “For Qiao” (Gei Qiao 給橋) contains the lines:

Thinking, living, once a while smiling  
 Neither cheerfully nor uncheerfully  
 There's something flying above your head  
 Or maybe  
 There's never been anything

想著，生活著，偶爾也微笑著  
 既不快活也不不快活  
 有一些甚麼在你頭上飛  
 或許  
 從沒一些甚麼  
 (Ya Xian 1982, 168)

The lexical pattern is Ya Xian's original creation to convey a touch of resignation, boredom, and ennui. Already in the 1960s it was imitated by many of his peers. In the poem, Wu Sheng not only borrows this construction but also uses “old sun,” which came from Ya Xian's “1980” (Yijiubaling nian 一九八〇年), written in 1957:

The old sun spills down the castor bean plant,  
 That will be the year 1980.



老太陽從蓖麻樹上漏下來，  
 那時將是一九八〇年。  
 (Ya Xian 1982, 21)

It is perhaps not a coincidence that Wu's poem sequence was first published in the *Young Lions Literary Art* (*Youshi wenyi* 幼獅文藝), and Ya Xian was the chief editor. Although Ya Xian stopped writing poetry by mid-1965, his work has exerted a lasting influence on later generations.

### Poetry in Hokkien and Hakka

As mentioned above, indigenous Taiwanese culture was by and large dismissed and discriminated against by the KMT from 1945 through the White Terror era. As the nativist discourse gained ascendancy, many were eager to try their hands at writing poetry in Hokkien and Hakka. On May 25, 1991, the Sweet Potato Poetry Society (*Fanshu shishe* 蕃薯詩刊) was founded in Tainan under the initiative of Lin Zongyuan 林宗源 (b. 1935). Other members include Huang Jinlian 黃勁連 (b. 1946), Li Qin'an 李勤岸 (b. 1951), Chen Mingren 陳明仁 (b. 1954), Lin Yangmin 林央敏 (b. 1955), and others. Two of the stated goals are to “promote Hokkien literature and Hakka literature” and to “participate in the creations of indigenous peoples in their mother tongues.”<sup>10</sup> The emphasis on indigeneity accounts for the name of the poetry society: sweet potato is not only a common food in Taiwan, but it also symbolizes the island based on its shape.

Sweet Potato is the first poetry club since 1945 to promote “mother-tongue literature” (*myu wenxue* 母語文學) in Taiwan. However, poetry written in Hokkien boasts a longer history, at least since the early 1970, as another manifestation of the nativist turn. What distinguishes poetry in Hokkien from poems by native Taiwanese poets like Wu Sheng is that the former refers to the entire poem written in the dialect in Taiwan, whereas the latter were primarily in standard Chinese with a sprinkling of Hokkien words.

In comparison, Hakka poetry has a shorter history going back to the 1980s. Huang Hengqiu 黃恆秋 (b. 1955), a member of the Bamboo Hat Poetry Society, published the first book of Hakka poems in 1990. Other representative Hakka poets include Du-Pan Fangge 杜潘芳格 (1927–2016), Ye Risong

10 See the overview provided by National Museum of Taiwan Literature, <https://db.nmtl.gov.tw/site2/dictionary?id=Dictionary00156>, accessed August 10, 2023.

葉日松 (b. 1936), Zeng Guihai 曾貴海 (b. 1946), Li Yufang 李玉芳 (b. 1952), and Zhang Fangci 張芳慈 (b. 1964).

Xiang Yang 向陽 (b. 1955) began his career under the influence of modernism and Chinese lyricism. He went on to become one of the most prolific and influential Hokkien-language poets in Taiwan. In 1976, he published “Papa’s Lunch Box” (Adie de fanbao 阿爹的飯包), which has become a nativist classic that has been widely recited and even set to music:

Every morning when I woke up, it was still dark  
 Papa would pick up his lunch box  
 Get on his iron horse and leave the house  
 To haul rocks and sand for hire by the sandy shore

Every night I wondered  
 “What exactly is in Papa’s lunch box?  
 For breakfast, my older brother and I have buns and soy milk  
 So Papa’s lunch box must have an egg at least  
 Otherwise, how could he haul all those rocks?”

One morning when I got up, it was still dark  
 I snuck into the kitchen and opened  
 Papa’s lunch box: not even half an egg  
 Only three strips of salted veggie and rice mixed with sweet potato

每一日早起時，天猶未光  
 阿爹就帶著飯包  
 騎著舊鐵馬，離開厝  
 出去溪埔替人搬沙石

每一暝阮攏在想  
 阿爹的飯包到底什麼款  
 早頓阮和阿兄食包仔配豆乳  
 阿爹的飯包起碼也有一粒蛋  
 若無安怎替人搬沙石

有一日早起時，天猶黑黑  
 阮偷偷走進去竈腳內，掀開  
 阿爹的飯包：沒半粒蛋  
 三條菜脯，番薯籤餐飯  
 (Xiang Yang 1985, 9–10)

Through a child's eyes, we see the hard life of a working-class family. Even under difficult circumstances, the parents made sure that the narrator and his elder brother get adequate nutrition, while the father ate the cheapest food day in and day out. What makes the poem most touching is the unspoken love and protection that the parents gave their children, which comes through in plain language. There is not a single metaphor or symbol in the poem, nor is there any moral lesson to be learned. Like a minimalist Bildungsroman, the poem depicts the spiritual journey of the young narrator from naiveté to knowledge, from innocence to maturity.

### The Campus Folksong Movement

In 1994, Jian Shangren 簡上仁 set “Papa’s Lunch Box” to music and made it an award-winning song. The collaboration between modern poetry and music is another lasting accomplishment of the nativist turn in Taiwan. If the Dragon Race poets aspired to “strike our own gong, beat our own drum, dance our own dragon,” the return to the Chinese tradition and the embrace of the land of Taiwan did not stop there. There was an equally strong desire to “sing our own song.” Before the 1970s, young people in Taiwan were predominantly fans of Anglo-American pop music and rock-and-roll. Foreign albums were widely pirated and readily sold in record stores. On June 6, 1975, “Original Modern Folksong Concert” (*Xiandai minyao chuanguo yanchanghui* 現代民謠創作演唱會) was held in Taipei, the first ever to feature contemporary folksongs in Chinese. At the concert Yang Xian 楊弦 (b. 1950), then a graduate student at the National Taiwan University, performed nine songs with original music and lyrics based on the poems of Yu Guangzhong 余光中 (1928–2017). On December 3, 1976, at a concert at Tamkang University, Li Shuangze 李雙澤 (1949–1977) performed as a substitute singer. On the stage, this Chinese-Filipino student held a bottle of Coca Cola and questioned the audience: “In America, I drank Coca Cola and sang American songs; in the Philippines, I drank Coca Cola and sang American songs; now in Taiwan we still drink Coca Cola and sing American songs. Why can’t we sing our own songs?”<sup>11</sup> These concerts triggered wide discussions and raised the curtains on the Campus Folksong Movement (*Xiaoyuan mingeyundong* 校園民歌運動), which was going to sweep across Taiwan in the next few years. Some of the original songs that came out of

11 “‘The Coca Cola Incident’ of Li Shuangze” (李雙澤的「可樂瓶事件」), <https://soundtraces.tw/space-performance/李雙澤的「可樂瓶事件」>, accessed August 1, 2023.

the movement have remained popular in Taiwan and mainland China for decades.

Typically, the new folksongs were composed and performed by college students to the accompaniment of guitar. For lyrics, many of them turned to modern poetry, from Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1897–1931) and Yu Guangzhong to Yang Mu (1940–2020) and Jiang Xun 蔣勳 (b. 1947). New singing shows on TV, such as “Golden Melody” (Jinyun 金韻) and “Folksongs” (Minyaofeng 民謠風), further expanded the reach of the movement by attracting many students from all over the island to compete with their original songs. One of the widely circulated songs is Hou Dejian’s 侯德健 (b. 1956) “The Dragon’s Descendants” (Long de chuanren 龍的傳人), which came out in 1980, a year after the United States established diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China. In the midst of anger and anxiety in Taiwanese society, the song reaffirmed the pride of being Chinese, touched on the humiliation of being invaded by foreign powers, and expressed the hope of national rebirth: “Great dragon, great dragon, rub your eyes and wake up, rub your eyes and wake up forever and ever” (巨龍巨龍你擦亮眼, 永永遠遠的擦亮眼).

By the early 1980s, the Campus Folksong Movement had run its course for various reasons, including the relative simplicity and uneven qualities of the songs and increasing commercialization. However, it brought modern poetry into the public view and made poetry more accessible, thus fulfilling the objectives of the nativist discourse. The movement also inspired and nurtured many talented songwriters and singers. In 1982, Luo Dayou 羅大佑 (b. 1954), a doctor of internal medicine and radiologist by training, released his first album “Mumbo Jumbo” (Zhihuzhey 之乎者也). Rightly regarded as a milestone in modern Chinese music, the album is a mix of folksongs and rock-and-roll, with song lyrics adapted from modern poems, including “Four Stanzas of Home Sickness” (Xiangchou siyun 鄉愁四韻) by Yu Guangzhong and “Mistake” (Cuowu 錯誤) by Zheng Chouyu 鄭愁予 (b. 1933), as well as original lyrics expressing nostalgia for childhood, satire against conformity to tradition, and rage against alienation resulting from modernization. They display both lyricism and reality, both love for Chinese culture and concern with Taiwanese society.

The long-term impact of the Campus Folksong Movement on modern poetry is significant. Bringing together poetry and folksongs became popular and frequent in the 1980s. For example, “Night of Poetry and Folksong” (*Shi yu mingge zhi ye* 詩與民歌之夜) was presented in Taipei on June 26, 1982, featuring a dozen or so poets and singers, plus an exhibit of poetry journals. The event drew an audience of more than 500 (Zhang Mo 1983, 345–46).

The movement has also inspired all kinds of multimedia representations of poetry since the 1980s. In addition to music, modern poems have been combined with dance, drama, painting, installation art, action art, and video.

Finally, the union of poetry and music has also paved the way for the dual role of poets as song lyricists. From the 1980s onward, several poets are also prolific song lyricists. Foremost among them are Xia Yu 夏宇 (b. 1956), who usually writes under the penname Li Gedi 李格弟, and has also recorded a CD of her own; Lu Hanxiu 路寒袖 (b. 1958), who writes numerous songs in Hokkien; and Chen Kehua 陳克華 (b. 1961), an ophthalmologist by trade who also writes poetry and songs. Notably, when Chen Shui-bian 陳水扁 (b. 1950) ran for mayor of Taipei in 1994, Lu composed two songs for his campaign: “Taipei, My New Hometown” (Taibei xin guxiang 台北新故鄉) and “Flower Pistils of Spring” (Chuntian de huarui 春天的花蕊). Chen Kehua has written more than a hundred songs for many leading singers and has won many awards. The most famous example is “Taipei Sky” (Taibei de tiankong 台北的天空), written in 1985, which has become the signature song for the capital of Taiwan.

### The Paradox of Modernism and Nativism

In retrospect, the nativist turn in the 1970s and 1980s succeeded in reorienting modern poetry toward the Chinese tradition and Taiwanese society. It has given rise to political poetry, rural poetry, and poetry written in Hokkien and Hakka, and indirectly advanced the union of poetry and music. However, it is misleading to assume a total break with the modernist tradition, as seen in the case of Wu Sheng’s “Vignettes of My Hometown.” The nativist turn did not diminish the influence of the modernist canon. Moreover, enlarging the temple of Taiwan’s modern poetry to some degree, the modernist canon remains firmly in place. This is demonstrated by a survey on “Ten Greatest Poets,” conducted by the young poets of the Bouquet of Sunshine (*Yangguang xiaoji* 陽光小集) Poetry Society in 1982 (Zhang Mo 1983, 11). Here is the result of the survey:

1. Yu Guangzhong
2. Bai Qiu
3. Yang Mu
4. Zheng Chouyu
5. Luo Fu 洛夫
6. Ya Xian

7. Zhou Mengdie
8. Shang Qin 商禽
9. Luo Men 羅門
10. Yang Lingye 羊令野

Without exception, all the poets on the list were associated with the modernist movement in the 1950s and 1960s, represented by the three leading poetry societies: Modernist School 現代派, Blue Stars 藍星, and Epoch 創世紀. Bai Qiu, Zheng Chouyu, Shang Qin, and Yang Lingye were members of the Modernist School, which found inspiration from Western modernism.<sup>12</sup> Yu Guangzhong, Luo Men, and Zhou Mengdie were members of the Blue Stars Poetry Society, which sought to integrate lyricism and modernism. Luo Fu and Ya Xian were members of the Epoch Poetry Society, which was the radical avant-garde among the three poetry groups. Yang Mu was closely associated with all three groups. In relation to the nativist turn in the 1970s and 1980s, Yu Guangzhong, Luo Fu, Zhou Chouyu, and Yang Mu were some of the biggest targets during the Modern Poetry Debate. Yet, their standing did not seem negatively impacted.

As to the organizer of the survey, the Bouquet of Sunshine Poetry Society was founded in November 1979, seven years after the Modern Poetry Debate, and none of the founding poets were associated with the modernist movement of an earlier era.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps seniority and influence played a role in the survey. However, even if these factors were at work, it nevertheless proves the point that the nativist turn did not affect much the reception of modernist poetry. When one reads the list, it is as if the Debate never took place!

## Postmodern Poetry

In the late 1980s, Western postmodern theories began to be introduced into Taiwan, and postmodernism became a hot topic in the 1990s. Some critics were quick to label certain poets and poetry in the 1980s, mainly by identifying characteristic literary devices, such as collage and metonymy (see Xi Mi 1998). As I emphasize in the opening section, this kind of universalist approach or decontextualized appropriation is misleading and unconvincing. To understand postmodernity, we must first understand the two previous

12 Bai Qiu left the Modernist School in 1964 to establish the Bamboo Hat Poetry Society.

13 For a study of poetry societies and poetry journals in the 1970s, see: Yang n.d. For a broader overview, see Xiang Yang 2004, 142–46.

phases of development in modern poetry in Taiwan, that is, modernism and nativism. As I hope to have illustrated above, the relation between modernism and nativism is not as clear-cut as it seems or is claimed to be. Even as nativism vehemently reacted against modernism, it could not escape modernist influence. By the same token, while there are significant differences between nativist poetry and postmodern poetry, there may be some connection in other ways.

To use Xia Yu as an example, she is widely regarded as a leading postmodern poet in Taiwan. She started publishing in the early 1980s, in the midst of the nativist turn. Her poem "Archeology" (Kaoguxue 考古學) appeared in the *Epoch Poetry Journal* in October 1981. When it was anthologized in 1982, the editor comments that the poem "makes fun of the dragon and is 'unusual'" (Zhang Mo 1983, 298).

1.

The dragon degenerated into a man  
 Obviously, it's a man  
 Viviparous  
 Walking, peeing in an upright position  
 Good at analysis  
 Ticklish  
 Foresighted  
 He rarely visits brothels  
 When he did, he made sure he brush his teeth  
 And wash his face  
 Sometimes he uses a fake military ID  
 And puts on stern air  
 Gregarious  
 A picky eater  
 His right ear slightly larger

2.

There is some hidden evidence in the pocket  
 Bits of eggshell  
 Sticky  
 It's early winter  
 The coat has a moldy smell having been put away for a long time  
 I can't help being confused  
 About my genealogical hunt

3.

"I finally believe in gravity!"

He sits in a dim corner

Wearing glasses

His sweater smells of camphor

Because he is sad

Therefore he is proud

"Except for an impressive family lineage,

I have nothing."

Except for all the plights of man:

Ulcer, hemorrhoid, real estate,

"The glory that was Greece, and the grandeur that was Rome"

Nuclear bombs

I examine his spinal cord

Investigate his jaw

And dental structure and fall in love with him:

"It's incredible

Perfect evolution."

"Surely," he says

"It must be an oversight of the Creator."

1.

龍墮落為一個男人

顯然，是一個男人

胎生

直立行走、小便

長於分析

嗜癢

充滿遠見

極少狎妓

否則必刷牙

洗臉

偶爾冒用軍警票

裝出嚴峻的神氣

群居

偏食

右耳稍大



2.

有的證據藏在口袋裏  
 一些蛋殼  
 帶著黏液  
 那是初冬  
 大衣上有久藏的霉味  
 也就不免困惑  
 於前世的追索

3.

「我終於相信地心引力了，」  
 他坐在暗處  
 戴著眼鏡  
 毛衣上有樟腦的氣味  
 因為悲傷  
 所以驕傲：  
 「除了輝煌的家世，  
 我一無所有。」  
 除了男人所有的苦難  
 潰瘍、痔瘡、房地產、  
 「希臘的光榮羅馬的雄壯」、  
 核子炸彈

我研究他的脊椎骨  
 探尋他的下顎  
 牙床，愛上他：  
 「難以置信的  
 完美的演化。」  
 「真是，」他說  
 「造物者一時失察。」  
 (Xia Yu 1984, 90-93)

To the extent that postmodernism is defined as a poetics of decentering and deconstruction of conventional thinking and structures of feeling, “Archeology” clearly displays a postmodern sensibility. First, if the typical scientist or, more broadly speaking, authority figure, is male, in the poem it is the female archaeologist who is conducting scientific research on the male subject. Second, if dragon is the proud symbol of China and Chinese people, the male subject is an inferior descendant; far from majestic and grand, he has quite a few physical, intellectual, and moral shortcomings. Third, the

incongruity between scientific objectivity and subjective emotion—after identifying all of his flaws, the scientist falls in love with the man and calls him “perfect”—creates a rupture in the text, undermines the scientific discourse, and self-deconstructs.

On the other hand, “Archeology” departs from modernist tradition and has an affinity with nativism in several ways as well. Instead of exploring the interior world, the poem portrays the male subject as a social being who acts and reacts in private and public settings (reading, conversation, going to a movie, visiting a brothel, etc.). Second, the mundane details all come from everyday life and function literally. The stark realism does not have carefully wrought metaphors and symbols commonly found in modernist poetry. Finally, the poem is a straightforward narrative in plain language, which aligns it with nativism more than with modernism. Perhaps, the poet’s connection with the nativist discourse is not so surprising given the little-known fact that Xia Yu was a member of the Grassroots Poetry Society in the 1980s.

## Conclusion

What the example of Xia Yu suggests is that literary relations are complex. Even as literary development unfolds in time and inevitably displays a linear trajectory, different phases weave a web of interconnections, which may include opposition, rebellion, conscious and unconscious influence, overlaps, and coexistence. Modern poetry in Taiwan has undergone several important phases since 1949, from modernism in the postwar period to the nativist turn in the 1970s and 1980s, and to postmodernism in the 1990s and 2000s. The discussion above has focused on the second phase, nativism, by touching on its innovations, long-term impact, and connections to what came before and after. I hope that, with more diachronic and synchronic studies, we will achieve a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

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## 10. Processing Strangers as Vital Jouissance in Hsia Yü's *First Person*

*Dean Anthony Brink*

**Abstract:** This chapter explores the interplay of photography and poetry in Hsia Yü's *First Person* (2016), a multimedia project that begins with random encounters with strangers in Paris. It argues that the photography, subtitles, and poetry based on them may be understood as interrogating a sense of insurmountable mutual estrangement that forms the tacit backdrop for any degree of intimacy or entanglement. The resulting conceptual artwork, the product of a procedure stretched over time, is argued to also divide the attention of reader-viewers who confront the work's complicated temporalities as discerned in the multiple forms of media and genres invoked.

**Keywords:** Hsia Yü, *conceptual art*, ekphrastic poetry, experimental poetry, contemporary Taiwanese poetry, bilingual poetry

This chapter explores how Hsia Yü's 夏宇 *First Person* (*Di yi rencheng* 第一人稱) frames interaction between herself as photographer wandering among strangers as a point-of-view first-person and as poet then reflecting in ironic quips on her reactions to the photos through an extended aesthetic process. Such a project constitutes a conceptual art performance, but one producing an experimental book of photos with subtitles that themselves are edited into a small poetry book inlaid in the hardcover of the book. Though the photographing itself suggests a haphazard, aleatory process, the composition of captions for the selected and sometimes cropped photos are themselves arranged and edited by the poet-artist. This investigation of *First Person* examines how the cumulative effect of this implementation of a conceptual art procedure focuses on how we are defined by our ultimate presence as strangers to other strangers. Unknowns are explored through

a process that opens the “first person” poet-artist to disparate contexts, each with site-specific subcultures and expectations captured in the visual framing and brought out by the captions. What is striking is how such a process itself contains, as it were, a controlled aestheticized temporality that engages readers (or visitors to the gallery exhibition version of the book) in a constant intertextual and intratextual (within the long book of photos, and the condensed poetry rendition perhaps secondarily) reaching for senses of what it all means. What it means seems redistributed in the best sense of returning the reader-viewer to the many recurrent forms of relation with strangers and as a stranger.

For instance, commentary on being a stranger may in the poem or caption be read as a first-person perspective on what it feels like to be a stranger in a particular situation, only to have the accompanying photograph suggest it is pure speculation as a third-person party to some interaction caught by the camera. As an example of precisely such a caption and photo, see the photo of a man talking with an apparent sidewalk fortuneteller, with the caption: “Your spiritual therapist asks, how long have you been sleeping with strangers as a way of venting your resentment?” In the poem version, it seems more of a first-person poet’s musings, but it underscores the speculative and somewhat satirical comment on a fortuneteller sensing an impulse of “sleeping with strangers,” which is a recurrent theme suggested on numerous pages. The next page and line in the poem (though not all photographs have captions) frames the headshot (with shoulders) of a man half turned away: “Why, no, this is love, this is clearly a torturous love” (我哪有這明明是愛這明明是千折百迴的愛) (14–15).<sup>1</sup> Here the phrase translated economically as “torturous love” is literally “love with a thousand twists and turns,” suggesting less a necessary suffering but more objectively a path to possible love complicated in its very process. The poem includes lines incorporating terms from medicine (“my peripheral nerve” [我的末梢神經] and “Our mucous membranes” [我們的黏膜]), biology (“self-same microbes longing to feed off one another” [相同的菌種想要互相寄生], suggesting convergence at the scale of a microscopic world), and modern physics (“poetry and quantum physics hang in suspense” [現詩和量子物理的懸念], so that a dramatic sensibility is superpositioned on a quantum physical one). Though producing startling shifts from line

1 The second edition of *First Person* contains page numbers in the smaller poetry book, while the main photobook containing the poetry as captions has no page numbers. Thus, only pages from the poetry book are cited, and readers may find the captions in the same order in the photobook. Since Mandarin appears on the left pages and English translations on the right, two pages are usually cited. For this line, the first edition reads in Mandarin: “我哪有這根本是愛這明明千折百迴的愛,” meaning about the same but lacking the music of the repeated *mingming* in the updated version.

to line, the page of poetry culminates in a powerful, evocative couplet that includes one of the most memorable phrases in the entire book: “Midsummer subway pheromone party” (盛夏地鐵裏的費洛蒙派對), which builds on the lines alluding to science and medicine by combining it with implications of questions of causes for human desire (whether pheromones or other factors that attract one to another). This inference is rewarded by the last line, which extends this sense of blindly following one’s biological drives as they are complicated by other determinants (having a cold that limits sense of smell, including pheromones): “I’m down with a heavy cold and have no sense left but touch” (我重重地感冒只能靠觸覺) (14–15), more literally, “can only rely on the sense of touch.” Moreover, this closure suggests with the character *kao* (靠, “to lean against or on / to stand by the side of / to come near to / to depend on / to trust / to fuck [vulgar]”)<sup>2</sup> approaching with one’s sense of touch, in effect, rendered more physical or subject to spatiotemporal contexts. Thus, one can understand the recurrent allusions to quantum physics and biology to be underscoring an affirmation of our existence as human, but as posthuman humans in the sense of being less bound by the trappings of humanistic self-centered senses of importance, and more interactively mutually engaged (initially at least as strangers) in a more human-animal *modus operandi*. The project in effect in this way renders humans always already blurring subjective and objective phenomena, including each other. Emergence is not reduced to categories of being human and/or animal, but rather simply being somewhat anthropologically (since the focus is on the human) examined with first-person interest projected on persons appearing in the photos taken by the first-person poet-photographer. In a way resembling what I have called a cosmopolitan queerness (Brink 2016), we are implicated in a participation as reader-viewers of this book, submerged within a its multi-discursive and under-determined understanding of being strangers open to each other.

One of the images (figure 10.1) and lines forming a cornerstone of my argument is the full-spread image with the caption, “He who is born human into this world must provide for himself no less than an animal does” (生而為人時時得張羅食物一如動物), followed by the line in the poem version (and later image) with “And like two animals, we never know if we will meet in days to come” (從今而後見面與否也像是動物與動物) (Hsia Yü 2016, 63).

Thus, the encounter is implicitly linked to the human/animal distinction, which is itself often tacitly understood as a difference of living according to

2 “靠,” “MDBG Chinese-English dictionary for macOS.” <https://www.mdbg.net/chinese/dictionary?page=worddict&wdrst=1&wdqb=靠>, accessed February 5, 2023.





Figure 10.1. “He who is born human into this world must provide for himself no less than an animal does.” From Hsia Yü’s *First Person*. Courtesy of Hsia Yü.

conscious desires and needs rather than simply (animal) needs—something challenged in this photopoetry project. Hsia Yü’s lines disrupt this binary assumption, linking human animality with human sociality, and the page includes mention of human intentionality (“What can I do for you? Why not expend spoken language to reveal your intentions?” [我能為你做甚麼呢你何不耗費言語吐露心意]) and suggestions of mutual emotional entanglement (“Your words will find repose in the depths of my heart, so put your mind at ease” [在我心底那片話語棲息之地你可以放心休憩]), along with animal metaphors (“make you lift your head and neigh” [令你仰頭嘶鳴]) (2016, 63).

### Strangers as Potentially More than Strangers

Hsia Yü’s project, by her own account,<sup>3</sup> begins by engaging others with a camera and complicating how, what, and who we see with captions composed for selected photos. Then, these frame titles are gathered together as poems. As a project, the work invokes an other-oriented artistic process that is interactive and responsive rather than representational or impressionistic; it is aesthetic in a disinterested sense of marginalizing the self as first person

3 Personal correspondence.

and placing others and self as mutual others, which is one definition of being strangers. But strangers are not sustainable as strangers over time. Strangers enter a relation of something-not-strangers-in-becoming, so that the stranger status persists only inverse to the number of sustained or recurring encounters with the stranger. Thus, the stranger may become a friend, lover, stalker, acquaintance, to name a few possibilities. To borrow from Félix Guattari's sense of antipsychiatry, with its Bakhtinian transversal inspiration (Guattari 1995), Hsia Yü's stranger-stranger exploration suggests a cosmopolitan openness to others not so as to culminate in any steady-state so much as a sense of constantly displacing and undermining the categorizing of people by their appearance or performance of stereotypes (of class, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or other affiliations). What also matters, ultimately, is whom among others one finds friend or lover material.

Such expectations are challenged as Hsia Yü defamiliarizes Paris enclaves of living in terms of the shaping powers and designs of human spaces. She suggests daily encounters are enriched by the possibilities of connection between and among others as humans seen in our always mutually alienated inter-human distance by the first-person persona of the poet-artist who reflects on the collection of points of contact with others. Engaging multiple intertexts and discourses through creative captions, such poetry sustains an intermedial dynamic in the gaps between genres and generic expectations: photography, cinema (invoked through the use of subtitles), poetry (in the reframing of the captions in a poetry book), and, last but not least, the invocation in the photos and captions/poetry of multifaceted fields of shifting interests, engagements, and implicated paradigms, associated terms, and so forth, including medical and scientific discourse. This use of shifting intertexts and discourses defies any glib fixing of meaning, in ways familiar to readers of John Ashbery (Brink 2021, ch. 8), whom she features in one poem (2016, 43); however, her use of photography and intermediality and the conception of the process itself renders *First Person* a milestone in poetry and photography and I would even say a masterpiece, perhaps her most ambitious and accomplished work. Hsia Yü may be seen as presenting a situational, emergent humanism within a posthuman commons rather than the inverse; that is, her project assumes a visceral mutually engaged posthuman animality in order to explore being human (inspired in part by Derrida's meditations in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008)).<sup>4</sup>

4 Discussing Hsia Yü's own earlier (ca. 2012) Erasurist poem that engages Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, she mentions in an interview how Erasurist poetry—erasing a sample from

Due to its complexity and sheer multifaceted range of allusions, it has the potential to be mistaken for an instance of the postmodern sublime, as if summoning no more than an indulgent malaise of indifference; however, I would argue that it exhibits ethically reflexive participation in algorithm-like choices—which one author blurb called “fuzzy logical”—in discursive threads of attention. They do not amount to logical conclusions, but rather (turning) points in a process, one that provides an overview of stranger-stranger mutual emergences and a test—for herself as photographer-poet—of presentations within this conceptual art process. Shifting line by line, attention places the onus of responsibility for decision-making *in situ* in engaging as reader the *mise-en-scène* of a photo-and-line cinematic frame of a poem, postulating ranges of plausible senses of spontaneous or constructed opportunities, as subjects (poet/persona, reader, strangers, other elements and artifacts evidencing human and nonhuman species cultures) manifest in these participatory configurations of relations. This intermedial dynamic tacitly rejects reading Hsia Yü’s work as random, aleatory pairings of her own photographs and poems; the disjunctions among *media* frames serve to highlight the relata of phenomena as multiple yet a product of a defined aesthetic process that integrates (somewhat in the spirit of John Cage [Brink 2021, ch. 7]) chance encounters among strangers themselves mirrored in surprise intermedial pairings. As an aesthetic relation with readers, the process of situating diverse media and verse book frames (including the inlaid poetry book) not only establishes distinct formal relations among media but continually reshapes aesthetic expectations in the very process of reflexively encountering the work(s) as a reader. This readerly dimension, not typically associated with conceptual art, is not reducible to gallery expectations of an engaging or catchy concept, but, as centered in poetry (after all, what Hsia Yü is best known for), brings poetry to bear on the art world (as a global phenomenon) in a way that transforms both gallery and literary expectations and practices, rendering the assemblage both original poetry and fine art.

### ***First Person* as Posthumanist Procedural Art**

Within a Barthesian reading of the photographic, Yu-Cheng Liao touches on key points that corroborate a posthumanist reading of *First Person*: “Hsia

Derrida’s text in simplified Chinese—“respected the speechlessness of animals and, consequently ... remained speechless” by merely engaging in erasing. She in effect both emulates Derrida and “out-Derrida’s” him by means of actuating his ideal of self-effacing non-violent speech(lessness) using his own text.

Yü's poems are inspired by 'meeting' and 'animals and animals,' implying life (humanity) is inseparable from existence (biological): the human acting as an animal, whether or not a meeting is meaningful or meaningless, it is always difficult to separate from the characteristic gathering of animals" (Liao 2020, 127). Though the emergence of conceptual elements and their relation seems to reflect an organic sense of life as involving beginnings and endings (birth, death, cycles of reproduction, interdependent contingencies involving seasons and weather), the posthuman elements in her poetry, photography, and conceptual art form more helpful methodological frames for clarifying a broader approach to these assemblages. Yu-Cheng Liao also argues that Hsia Yü "disturbs readers' habits of thinking and interpretations" by demoting the "intention of representation" so as "to 'show' her own first-person state" (Liao 2020, 141). Another way of approaching this nexus of presentation and presenting agency of the artist is to note how the random contingencies in visual encounters with strangers itself forms a context foisted upon the artist-poet, who responds by complicating the temporalities of encounters for the reader-viewer. Then, for the reader-viewer, while the photography portion of the process foregrounds the first-person poet-photographer, the articulated captions suggesting relations *among* first persons underscores the first person in stranger-to-stranger relations. These contingencies become relational and vital, so that a sense of passion for life in the project itself feeds on feedback loops with strangers, who no longer can be held at arm's length in categories of difference, but enter a human commons with somewhat diminished differences between others. Relations are displayed for all, presented both sentimentally, cinematically and with these analyses of various modalities of intimacy—various degrees of contact with strangers—intact. Touching analysis by the artist-poet amid her inquisitive encounters mixes with witty barbs presented as poetic reflections.

Although thoroughly passing as humanist as well, Hsia Yü's poetics is arguably posthuman in the sense of objectifying human interaction from the third eye of a stakeholder studying (as dedicated poets tend to) a broad range of social, economic, and biological manifestations of life from the perspective of a human. Her gift for coining lines both original and natural sounding returns in *First Person*, following earlier experimental poetry books, such as *Pink Noise*, which allowed machine translation to write in the vein of uncreative writing. However, *Pink Noise* and *First Person* both partake in an orientation found in conceptual art, which defines the *modus operandi* of galleries and museums today. The posthumanism in *First Person* is manifest, for instance, when the human persona is objectively presented in a somewhat animalized dramatic dissection of the mysteries

of encounters with strangers, as in this closing couplet here: “I experienced with someone else the wonder of mutual manipulation / That night I showed myself infinitely patient with a man I had never met in a situation that was fleeting” (我才和另一人共同體會此把柄被把柄之奇妙交會 / 那夜我不厭其煩那人我素未謀面那情況倏忽即逝) (35). The metaphysics of language itself is undercut by the emphasis on selves isolated in distinct predicaments that each requires some form of signaling and communication loop to extend into each other’s realms as one acts on impulse (inclusive of conscious decisions that still require acting). It is a world of micro-intimacies optimistically overshadowing a world of microaggressions, also palpable in the work, altogether suggesting an objective modeling of encounters as a poetics of observed intimacy, of selves-others and others-selves opening to multi-vectored engagements.

As poetry, this chapter argues that the works in *First Person* focus on objectively presenting selves and others in a dance of social interactions in physical proximity or intimacy manufactured by the cropped, as if close-ups, photograph-framing and blurring, and the play of turnings-away; the drawing closer and the refusals between persons appearing in photos and commented on in captions/verses; and the ignoring or the fantasizing of others, noting turn-ons and turn-offs within fields of the objectively presented subjective (indications mixed with musings). One line in Hsia Yü’s afterword to the second edition is helpful for understanding how she sets up or stages the interaction with strangers and the use of photography as a sort of excuse for engaging strangers. What she calls “a kind of blind” (遮蔽) (Hsia Yü 2016, 88–89) can mean an obstruction that could be a blind or screen, as in a joining in mutual projection onto each other of our screenings of each other. Then she highlights the stranger, which in personal correspondence she underscores as being central to the theme of this work: “As far as strangers go, a kind of regard” (對陌生人來說那是一種致意) or greeting (88–89). Another important element is the irreducibility of the relationship between images and words and the general composition of the books as analogous to “a movie yet to be made / The images, ever dividing ... this infinitely divisible  $\pi$ ” (一部尚未開拍的電影的戲照看待/那隻象不停分裂 ... 不盡的 $\pi$ ) (88–89).

### About *First Person*

Each page in the text-only miniature poetry book component of *First Person* opens to Chinese on the left page and English translation on the right, with

each page formatted into two stanzas of five and two lines, with lines varying widely in length throughout the volume. The stanzaic version appears nested in the thick hardboard back-flap, as an insert mini-book (perfect-bound thin semigloss paper in the first edition, B&W, 8x10 cm, 4 mm thick, 96 pages) within the larger book (color and B&W photos, 14x21 cm, 520 pages) made up of photographs with captions, similar to how they were partially presented in the gallery exhibit in large-scale digital prints. The poem begins by situating people from the point of view of a poet, the second person, and the third person. She uses many declarative sentences that are descriptive but highly nuanced so as to intimate relations between people and how they socialize and how language is used to order our time, place, and the things we do, and how we spend our time together.

Ultimately, Hsia Yü's work attains a formal status, as a sort of welcoming space, a commons at border crossings. The poetry blurs the edges of conceptual art and poetic enunciation, so that one arrives with the poetry to a new situational commons based on the combination of the openness of the merging of materials gathered in the field with pairings of semantic and enunciative content. The objective impressions of intense interest and sometimes longings fuse with the recurring diction borrowed from the hard sciences. Such fusions of discourses—as intertextual metaphors decoupled from anthropocentric scaling to the human (correlational metaphors), instead implicate multiple inter-discursive realms (Brink 2021, 20–22)—ultimately present for aesthetic engagement the relations of the linguistic and photographic images as constructs invoking overwhelming, somewhat unfocused aesthetic responses, due to sheer diversions of attention that ultimately deflate the humanist center (in the broad sense of the Vetruvian Man as a correlative measure of nature) to a posthuman animal status as non-exceptional beings. Hsia Yü's objective-subjective and neutral tone appear innovated with the aspiration of being rendered as already of the animal human (not to be confused with Deleuze's becoming-animal, which is far more dramatic and abstract, of a different age).<sup>5</sup>

The selected, cropped, edited and arranged photographic images were all taken in the field by the poet during an extended stay in Paris. The English subtitles translated by Steven Bradbury appear below the images whereas

5 In the context of an interview centered on Erasurist poetry, Hsia Yü states that she does not “like confessional poetry” and avoids “the language of mass media” that seeps into “short stories, essays or magazine articles,” saying: “I ... strive for the neutral tone that news reporters should have, but the contrast makes it actually look, unbelievably, a little like poetry” (Hsia Yü et al., 2012, n.p.).

the Mandarin originals appear within them, implicating a bilingual or non-native audience for the book itself, but also intentionally emulating the use of subtitling in art house and Hong Kong films (in Taiwan, either Chinese or English is more common). Yet, in Taiwan, there is a plethora of dialogue and voiceovers in Minnan (Taiwanese), Japanese, English, Cantonese, Aboriginal languages, Korean, and Mandarin. While Mandarin is central to the poet's conception, English being peripheral and a translation, the cinematic format itself turns the original language into more of an equal with the globally co-dominant English one (Bradbury's superb translations contribute to this effect). In this respect, by limiting the book(s) almost entirely to Mandarin and English, the filmic form situates the project within a narrow band of languages associated with dominant cultural powers today. Within Taiwan, the language used carries political implications. The order of lines and images within a range and edited to form the poems and establish the order of the images as filmic fragments presumably follows (based on personal correspondence with the poet) what works best within the longer formal poem as presented in the tiny book insert, which thus forms a miniaturized key or legend to the pictorial project. Yet, this accounts only for the creative process. Intratextually, being a book of poetry nested within the book of images subtitled with the lines of that poetry, there are both intratextual relations bound within each book and also between the images and the poetry. When the poetry is presented as a caption to the image, in effect presented as the poet riffing off the images to invent a *mise-en-scène*, this entered textuality is between the poet's photograph and verse, which is further intertextually situated with reference to the form of a subtitled film. Moreover, intertextually, each book presents its own distinct lineation in five- and two-line stanzas in the verse book, and contextualization with images in the larger photo book. No one can perhaps say which book version is more important in terms of the framing of the poetry; each is fully bilingual and has its way of reading/seeing or seeing/reading across distinct—relationally dynamic and ultimately untranslatable, being subject to reader-viewer attention—semiotic webs of languages, photos with framed details as transitions, close-ups, in scenes usually peopled with strangers to the poet.

The inspiration for my reading of the following photographs and captions and poetry derives from my interest in not only Taiwanese poetry but how to read poets of highly sensitive intertextual engagements with the world that are either, like Amiri Baraka, highly politically engaged or, like John Ashbery, aloof and less openly engaged with contestations in everyday life. This work also has engaged issues of cruising in queer cultures. The spirit

of Hsia Yü's work, particularly in its investigation of degrees of intimacy with strangers, dovetails with leading queer theorist Tim Dean and the memoirs of science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany, whose works I have treated in part in terms of an argument for a queer cosmopolitanism, also incorporating how Badiou has written of the encounter as a chance to get to know another or not (Brink 2016, 469). This queer cosmopolitanism is suggested to appear when anyone remains open and sensitive to others in encountering each other, in a spirit of curiosity and "becoming-with others" outside of preconceived states. For Hsia Yü, this conceptual procedure itself enables the presentation of such situations of becoming-with others in an optimistic ethico-aesthetic sense that carries Guattari's transversality into the realm of transcultural interventions (Guattari 1995).

Midway through *First Person*, there is a pairing of images and captions that stand alone as a sort of documentation of how the encounter with a stranger is a matter of testing the waters between people, with openness to drawing closer or pushing each other away, as in the line: "But if you still feel I'm not really into it, that confronting this moment I am prepared to fly off in a flurry // Why not invite me for a ride on a Ferris wheel, for as soon as it begins to turn I will belong to us belong to you completely" (如果仍然覺得我不夠投入面對此刻隨時預備倉皇逃去 // 就邀請我搭摩天輪吧在旋轉時我將完全屬於我們屬於你) (2016, 65). Here the stranger is not the distant other as transcultural object of study borne of difference so much as a human (animal) in Judith Butler's sense, writing, "For Levinas, ... the human is indirectly affirmed in that very disjunction ... conveyed in the impossible representation ... that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give" (2004, 144). Hsia Yü's method engages precisely such complication of representation of the stranger as an impossible task necessarily bound up in contradictory procedures, which she executes with great thought and patience. It is in this shifting that, without often irrupting into overt political grandstanding, the assemblage should be recognized as being more than an object of high European/Taiwanese transcultural and translingual production.

Such a reading of *First Person* in effect historicizes the challenge to naming implicit in poetry and is highlighted when photographs are interpellated in the making (poiesis) of the assemblage. Her poet-stranger affiliations are not flattened to diagrams labeled with names or types but exist in unstable, counter-hegemonic challenges to appearances. For instance, the man with a camera in figure 10.2 would seem to be a father and "family man," yet Hsia Yü appears to capture him capturing her in a playful stepping-out of this role into a flirtatious gesture between them, unbeknownst to the children.





Figure 10.2. From Hsia Yü's *First Person*. Courtesy of Hsia Yü.

## Replaceable Strangers

The paired photos below (figure 10.3) contain the closing couplet for the third poem in the collection: “Like a perfect stranger so easily replaced / so easily replaced by yet another stranger waiting to be replaced and so again they come and go” (完全就是一個陌生人的樣子經易被取代 / 經易被另一個陌生人取代再度揚長而去) (2016, 7). These two photos may be said to rhyme the same scene, a public space, showing different angles, one almost resembling an image detail of the other. The two figures present in both images suggest the narrative of strangers meeting, being destined for each other by luck or circumstance or not (有沒有緣份, a common expression). At the same time, the people seem to be wearing similar dark jackets, underscoring the sense of “replaceable” strangers.

The page begins, “Look at these strangers coming towards us—can this be my Greek chorus?” (就看那些陌生人迎面而來那不就是我的希臘合唱隊) (Hsia Yü 2016, 7) suggests the periphery of stranger-emergence or mutual encounter; single figures are barely discernible in the photo. There is a sense here that even strangers contain a certain commonality or truth like a Greek chorus or common aim, as “Strangers and I prepare once again for the end of the world” (陌生人和我再度為世界末日做好準備) (7). This



Figure 10.3. From Hsia Yü's *First Person*. Courtesy of Hsia Yü.

sense of common destiny as a chorus is underscored in the line “I love to see the way they collectively appear as strangers” (我喜歡看見他們集體做為陌生人的樣子) (7). The same page closes with speculation on how the strangers look like strangers, and how “like a perfect stranger so easily replaced” (完全就是一個陌生人的樣子經易被取代) (7). Thus, in this short page of only eight lines Hsia Yü invokes a highly abstract and philosophical interrogation of what it means to encounter others and does so in a very grounded conversational diction that does not come across as abstract at all, but rather personal and colloquial. There is a drawing of a thin line between the dystopian and the utopian (not simply self-centered romantic) hopes of the perfect encounter that is a sort that is not repeated. Yet to have something that does not repeat, that would be original, implies that there are many encounters that are repetitions of the same. Is she invoking an ennui, tiredness of encountering others that offer no inspiration, or on the contrary are all strangers’ inspirations? Or is she suggesting, which might be more likely, that any sort of expectations of others is futile and that such musings are themselves part of the human condition?

“Went to a museum, heard a lecture, met someone there who opened a new parenthesis and wound up bringing him home, where we really got into it” (參觀博物館聽遇見一個人打開另個括弧我們一起回家一起投入) (2016, 79; figure. 4). The main photo on the right shows no clear face of anyone, only shots of four men from askance angles, but the adjacent photo on the left shows a surreptitious photo taken of a man sitting nearby on the subway which taken together invokes a sense of someone who exemplifies one with whom a hook-up might have occurred as suggested.

In the line, “Who knows if we are endlessly infatuated with the very same ‘he’” (誰知道我們是不是正在無止無休迷戀同一個他) (2016, 75), the word translated as “infatuated” (迷戀) carries a sense of not just personal attachment

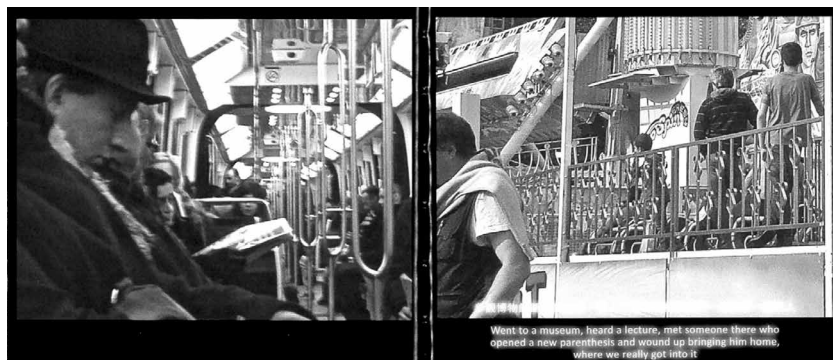


Figure 10.4. From Hsia Yü's *First Person*. Courtesy of Hsia Yü.

but, very much in line with the discourse on the stranger, a sort of predisposition or personal type that one becomes obsessed with or passionate about.

The point is that each of us may feel drawn to different types of people for various reasons that relate to one's own backstories culminating into who one is at any given "now" and as inflections of the times, not only how short hair or miniskirts become fashionable, but also how activists make it possible for others to join cause and express one's bodily emergent being in fresh stagings. The image below (figure 10.5) presents three men, if one counts the advertising poster facing the camera and featuring a man in a suit (a sort of "male" drag image) wagging his finger amid various slogans in French with promises that this card will be the only card you need for investment, housing, and labor law. The other two men look very ordinary by contrast to the authority presented by the man in a suit, but altogether, with the caption/verse, they suggest that the lovers or friends one becomes attracted to at the stage of being strangers range from person to person, with some people being drawn to financial power and others to body types, or mannerisms, speech, or other features. One other point to note in the photo is the contrast between the gesture of the man pointing while walking in front of the camera and the one seen in the poster. Moreover, the way the man in the newspaper kiosk leans on one foot with one arm and hand almost over his crotch (or side bag for collecting payments from customers, it is unclear) during the suggested entanglement with the poet-photographer as he gazes in her direction, further complicates the idea of being drawn to different people. Again, there is a cosmopolitan energy of checking each other out, not necessarily cruising, but letting the electricity flow between humans, which in a normalizing way makes us posthuman and as such embraces our animal social instincts, sniffing out our territories for types that strike a chord in us, them, or any chance convergence.



Figure 10.5. From Hsia Yü's *First Person*. Courtesy of Hsia Yü.

### Experiential Temporalities Beyond Process

As suggested above, Hsia Yü's work engages what may be understood in terms of an interaction between various frames of temporality and their destabilization. Temporality itself is an abstraction; however, how temporalities are invoked may involve scenes as in dramatic performances and in terms of having memorable "times of one's life" as well as mundane times of daily routines. The temporalities of aesthetic production and reception, the time of the inception and execution of photographs and poems and the artwork as book(s) and gallery assemblages have different frames of temporality. It seems to me, following this direction in reading, that the primary temporalities in *First Person*, or I should say the very primacy of temporality in *First Person*'s invocations of problems of temporality, are all directed at a deconstructive analysis or heightened awareness of multiple frames of temporality. More specifically, one could even say that she presents misdirection or the redirection of experience as something itself constructed by and subject to these tacit stranger-oriented temporal frames. Then, under the title of *First Person*, Hsia Yü explodes the myth of

unidirectional temporal unity, the march of time as a march of progress (or dialectics) that folds living minutiae into its coffers. Similarly, one hesitates to call Hsia Yü's work "postmodern," since to invoke this word may suggest a vast reduction to a bland homogeneity, a spatiotemporal blurring predicated on a reduction of images to a fictive frame, when it is arguably excising such human transcendental artifice and refashioning relationality itself as best accessed and explored through not a humanist hermeneutics of being lost in play. Rather, mutual human animality levels a posthuman postanthropocentric field of interaction by which Hsia Yü documents our formations of each other as strangers. Engaging strangers renders a plane of interpersonal relations bereft of categories such as "friend" or "sibling" or "employer" or even "fan" or "audience." Setting competing temporalities into a dynamic embodied complexity—rather than a unidirectional narrative containment (the fiction of a fiction)—seems to be a key component in her posthumanist aestheticization.

Moreover, linking posthuman animality with questions of temporality enables a quasi-deconstructive examination of material objects as *forms of framing* scenes, relations, mediations of relations through active processes such as the holding of a camera among strangers, as well as the preparation of *First Person* as a bound volume, which is itself divided into the visual cinematic scenes with bilingual subtitles and the poems, themselves painstakingly reworked to compose carefully interactively disparate frame in the formal text-only version. This dispersion of attention and interest into various mediums and genres, as well as discourses (including the sciences, discussed earlier) is not for its own sake or reducible to an antique effect once known as the postmodern. However, it can be recognized as a complication that divides without mending or suturing, nor even, as William J. Simmons (2021) writes, "pivoting [from the artwork] to discourse on allegories of marginalization" (36) or any reductive terms from critical theory, but rather reader-viewers might stay close to the complications of the work and its shifting intensities.

The work reflects a process of going back and forth between the various versions in forms of presentation themselves, as well as subsequent presentation in a gallery in addition to the books (one nested within the other). We can understand Hsia Yü as thus forcing the reader to acknowledge multiple temporalities that require the first person to intervene in the engagement, the rendering of the frames in light of the competing poetic presentations: one in standard poetry and the same lines appearing as subtitles to images which inspired the lines themselves.

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# III

## Liquid Boundaries





## 11. “I Sing of Flesh”: The Rhythm of Mu Dan’s Self-translation

*Simona Gallo*

**Abstract:** Almost buried beneath the prominence of Mu Dan’s extraordinary career as a scholar, poet, and translator lie twelve poems, first composed in Chinese during his youth and later rendered into English, by means of which he earns his place among the large ranks of the Sinophone self-translators. Remarkably, in his ambitious tightrope walk between languages and lyrical identities, Mu Dan places poetic rhythmic and melodic dimension in the role of a counterpoise between the body of the poem(s) and that of its author, while keeping balance between translating and rewriting himself. His sound-based poetics of self-translation reveals an attempt to reassert lyricity and authenticity, in the framework of Chinese translanguing and translational modernity.

**Keywords:** Sinophone, self-translation, Mu Dan, rhythm, lyrical modernity

呵，光，影，声，色，都已经赤裸，  
痛苦着，等待伸入新的组合。

Ah, light, shade, sound and colour, all stripped naked,  
Pantingly wait, to merge into a renewed combination.  
(Mu Dan, “Chun” 春 / “Spring”)

### Translating the Self in Modern China: A Tightrope Trope

The prodromes of the heteroglossic, heterogeneous identity of contemporary Sinophone literatures in the “postmonolingual era” (Yildiz 2012) can be traced to the polyphonic, polymorphic ethos of China in the first half of the twentieth century. Such traces are not merely rooted in what Michelle Yeh

has called the “Chinese Renaissance” (2016, 152) but, rather, are entrenched in that eagerly creative atmosphere in which translanguaging practices, in Lydia Liu’s words (1995), underpinned a whole modernization project, since exophonic writing, alongside translation,<sup>1</sup> is itself a political act (Wright 2016, 139). In such a heteroglossic and well-trodden literary milieu inclined toward cultural dynamism and hybridization, self-translation also played a crucial part, countering monolingualism and enhancing a cultural attitude toward difference.

As a phenomenon occurring in every era and area of the world (Hokenson and Munson 2007), self-translation equals cultural dynamism and hybridization: it postulates the metamorphosis of its authors in translating subjects and translated objects at once, as well as the “reinterpretation of the original and the creation of a new original” (Cordingley 2013, 83) that pictures an intimate mediation between the understanding of two languages, cultures, and literary universes. Understood both as a process and a product (Grutman 2020, 514), it represents both the interliminal space of the difference and a movement to transcend that difference (Gallo 2022a, 3), therefore a bridgework—if not a tightrope walk; that is to say, an extravagant wandering between the self and the other(s).

Quite conspicuous in the much-discussed contemporary Sinosphere, in the frame of the modern Chinese literary scene, the phenomenon of self-translation can be regarded as a cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic trope. “Modern Chinese writers have been practicing self-translation almost since the beginning of modern Chinese literature itself,” Dylan K. Wang highlights, “and have formed a century-old tradition with its own particularities and *raison d’être*” (2023, 398). But who are those writers of which modern Chinese literary history abounds? What are the particularities of their self-translating practice? And what is the *raison d’être*?

Despite modern Chinese literary history being a fertile ground for both self-translation studies and Sinophone studies, the body of literature devoted to this practice and its authors, aside from a few eminent figures such as Zhang Ailing 张爱玲 and Lin Yutang 林语堂, still appears ungenerously thin.

This chapter will attempt to tackle this paradox of the conspicuous absence of academic discussions of self-translation in Sinophone literature by exploring the whimsical crossover between words and sounds, shapes and forms, styles, and lyrical identities performed by the modern Chinese poet Mu Dan 穆旦 (1918–1977). As a privileged interpreter of English and Russian

1 The terms “exophony” and “translingualism” (Kellman 2000) relate to writers who write in a language other than their primary one.

Romantic poetry into the modern Chinese lyrical arena, what was Mu Dan relying on in the hermeneutic constitution of his own translational lyrical self? Where did he find solid ground? My answer is: in the rhythmic profile.

As I will attempt to prove through my analysis that in the hazardous process of self-translation, Mu Dan mandated the poetic rhythmic and melodic dimension as the role of a counterpoise between the body of the poem and that of the author, as a pivot to recreate and reassert lyricity—thereby overthrowing the “anti-poetic” tenor, as I will further explore below. At stake—beyond necessary attention to the text and Mu Dan’s *poïesis*—is the self-translating experience in its relationship with translational Chinese modernity.

### Poetic Self-translation, or the Whimsical Crossover

Almost buried beneath the prominence of Mu Dan’s extraordinary career as a scholar, poet, and translator<sup>2</sup> lie twelve poems, first composed in Chinese during his youth and later rendered into English, by means of which he earned his place among the large ranks of what Grutman (2013) defines as “occasional” self-translators. The exceptionality of his experience is advised by at least three aspects, the first and foremost being the miniature dimension of this translational body, composed of a miscellany excerpted from a poetic work consisting of around a hundred compositions. The second relates to the selection made by the poet/self-translator, listed below in chronological order—as they appear in his collected poems, *Mu Dan shiwenji* 穆旦诗文集 (2006):

1. “Wo” 我 (1940) / “Myself”
2. “Chun” 春 (1942) / “Spring”
3. “Shi bashou” 诗八首 (1942) / “Eight Poems”
4. “Shi” 诗 (1942) / “Poems”
5. “Chufa” 出发 (1942) / “Into Battle”
6. “Chengshu” 成熟 (1944) / “Maturity”
7. “Qi” 旗 (1945) / “Flag”

2 Upon his return from the University of Chicago, where he dedicated himself extensively to translation work, he translated twenty-five volumes that now canonize him as a privileged interpreter of Pushkin, as well as Byron, Blake, and Shelley, overshadowing his poetic work consisting of around a hundred compositions that, in their own way, fight against the violence of the contemporary world and the absolute domination of science and the economy (Jin 2004, 6).

8. “Ji’e de Zhongguo” 饥饿的中国 (1947) / “Hungry China”
9. “Yinxian” 隐现 (1947) / “Revelation”
10. “Wo gesong routi” 我歌颂肉体 (1947) / “I Sing of Flesh”
11. “Baoli” 暴力 (1948) / “Violence”
12. “Gandi zhi si” 甘地之死 (1948) / “Upon the Death of [Mahatma] Gandhi”

The nature of this compact anthology itself seems to disclose Mu Dan’s attitude towards his own work, since all twelve self-translated poems were produced in his early career, when the young writer was establishing himself on the Chinese literary scene, and received the greatest recognition in the literary landscape. The first phase of lyrical creation, the most substantial, is also where his most interesting contribution to the modern literary scene can be found. Appearing between 1945 and 1948, Mu Dan’s first three collections of poems were the result of a “venturesome experimentalism” (Jin 2004), imbued with Western modernism and cross-pollinated by convention-defying language that has even been described as “anti-poetic” (Pesaro 2011).

Literary gambling might also define Mu Dan’s poetics of self-translation—and this is where the main feature of his self-translating practice resides. Experimentalism is, of course, an intrinsic facet of the self-translation of poetry, giving it its peculiar status in the domain of self-translation studies, as it incarnates a particularly demanding practice wherein the self-translator must act as a “third” subject interposing himself or herself between writer and reader, as Wanner has put it, “not only to create a poetic text in a non-native idiom, but to reproduce an artistic concept that has already received a concrete shape in the native tongue by re-creating it in a different linguistic medium” (2020, 6; see also Gallo 2022b). The poet/self-translator negotiates with their creative vein and the mimetic function embedded in the ethics of translation while gambling with words, playing a “game of correspondences” (Eco 2003, 83) in which, inescapably, they must concede. As Eco suggested in *Dire quasi la stessa cosa* (Saying Almost the Same Thing):

At best, in translating, one says almost the same thing. The problem of “almost” obviously becomes central in poetic translation, to the point of such ingeniousness that “almost” becomes something absolutely different, another thing that is indebted to the original, I would say, morally.<sup>3</sup> (277)

3 My translation from Italian.

If the imbalance is indeed constitutive of the activity of self-translation, which is charged with psychological and linguistic otherness, a counterbalancing force exists to sustain the author on his tightrope walk. By undertaking a comparative reading of the "first" *en face* of the "second originals,"<sup>4</sup> I will survey how Mu Dan relied on the rhythmic profile of his texts, to (re)create his poems in his other language.

### Textual Analysis: A Few Introductory Words

My survey of Mu Dan's lyrical attitude in his self-translating practice engages in a close reading of the English body of poems compared to their *baihua* 白话 versions, which already reveals a sound-based poetics. Mu Dan's effort to preserve the same number of lines and stanzas is conspicuous, as is his approach toward maintaining the semantic values and the overall aesthetic quality. It is true that self-translation embodies both the most creative expression of translation (Santoyo 2013, 30) and the most effective legitimization of authorial power. As Rainer Grutman and Trish Van Bolderen (2014) remind us,

In addition to being allowed to act on behalf of the original writers who make up their other persona, self-translators are often seen to have much more leeway in the decision-making process of translation. Instead of the mere wiggle room (begrudgingly) granted most modern translators (i.e., since the early twentieth century), self-translators are routinely given poetic license to rewrite "their" originals. (324)

In view of the fact that poetry self-translation (as in all translation) entails loss—first and foremost, metric and prosodic features are inevitably dissolved—and also demands a certain degree of creativity, I steer clear of the fallacious logic of measuring symmetry as a declaration of faithfulness. Likewise, I rebuff the focus on the distance between the two versions as a statement of authorial freedom. On the assumption that rhythm represents

4 A concept considered a traditional claim in Self-translation Studies. "By routinely identifying self-translations as the work of the original authors, without accounting for any of the nuances in terms of personae alluded to above, the author's authority is transferred metonymically to the final product, which thus becomes a *second original*" (Grutman and Van Bolderen 2014, 374, emphasis mine). It should be underlined that, although the theoretical framework of self-translation appears problematic and is still under discussion, it is clear that the concept of the *original* is "far more fluid than in other kinds of translation" (Bassnett 2013, 20).

a core aspect of Mu Dan's poetics of self-translation, I instead try to shed light on a range of strategies adopted by the author in his quest for new rhythmic gist, while keeping balance between translating and rewriting himself.

### *Breaths and Ligatures*

When observing the poems from the angle of their textual distribution, a first remark can be made regarding the author's approach to metric ligatures, which extends in three directions according to varying needs to remold the lines for lyricity. The first is exemplified by "Upon the Death of [Mahatma] Gandhi" (Gandi zhi si 甘地之死):

于是被一颗子弹遗弃了，被<sup>5</sup>  
这充满火药的时代和我们的聪明，

...

Thus, by a single shot deserted, by  
The powder-loaded age and our wit.

...

自然给出而又收回：**但从没有**  
**这样广大的它自己**，容纳这样多人群，  
(Mu Dan 2006, 279)

Nature gives and takes, **but never**  
**So much herself she spread**, providing to such thronging multitudes.  
(Mu Dan 2006, 281)

As evidenced by lines 9–10 and 24–25, quoted above, the poet's skill in weaving words in both languages materializes in an accurate transposition of both semantic and syntactic patterns, as well as the rebound of the emphasis on specific elements that create a hiatus—namely *bei* 被 with “by,” and *dan cong meiyou* 但从没有, paralleled, in turn, with “but never.”

A further direction can be detected in an excerpt from “Poems,” where the self-translator prioritized the pulsation of the composition over full syntactic adherence:

5 Any formatting in the text is not part of the original version and is employed here as a means of emphasizing elements that are functional to my analysis of the poems.

我们没有援助，每人在想着  
他自己的危险，每人在渴求  
荣誉，快乐，爱情的永固，  
而失败永远在我们的身边埋伏，

它发掘真实，这生来的形象  
我们畏惧从不敢显露；  
站在不稳定的点上，各样机缘的  
交错，是我们求来的可怜的

幸福，我们把握而没有勇气  
 (Mu Dan 2006, 94-95)

We are so helpless: each one broods  
His own perils, each one seeks  
Fame, love, and secure happiness,  
 While besetting us in treacherous Failure

Which discloses Reality. A true symbol  
We fear. We strive not to have it revealed.  
 Dancing on a pinpoint, knitting uncertain  
Lines of Chances, this is our pitiful

Though craved Luck. We harbour with love, ...  
 (Mu Dan 2006, 96-97)

Just as in the Chinese version of *Shi* 诗, the first two spaces of breath are anticipated by the repetition of “each one,” and rest on “broods / His own perils” and “seeks / Fame.” As the line proceeds, we read “love, and secure happiness,” instead of “happiness and secure love” (*kuaile, aiqing de yong gu* 快乐, 爱情的永固), an adjustment that enhances sonorousness with the final words of the preceding lines (“broods,” “seeks,” “happiness”). Through closer observation, it can also be inferred that Mu Dan drew inspiration from his own first version, in which the terms *keqiu* 渴求, *yong gu* 永固, and *maifu* 埋伏 assert a rhythmic circularity at the tail of the lines.

More accommodations occur in the distribution of words, still prompted by a melodic rationale. That is the case in “Lines of Chances,” and “Though craved Luck,” relocated at the beginning of the last section of this excerpt, generating symmetry at the head of the lines via the repetition of a three-word phrase, isolated by a caesura and a comma and imitating the proportion



enhanced in the Chinese by the disyllabic terms *jiaocuo* 交错 and *xingfu* 幸福. Also worth noticing is the ingeniousness of the word “Failure”:<sup>6</sup> a novel accent on the concept is conferred not only by the dislocation of the word in final position,<sup>7</sup> but also by its capitalization, an artifice only made possible by the resources of English.

The reinvention of emphasis is, in fact, an attribute of Mu Dan’s self-translating practice, as the first stanza of “Maturity” (Chengshu 成熟) also punctuates:

每一清早这静谧的市街，  
不知道痛苦**它就要来临**，  
每个孩子的啼哭，每个苦力  
他的**无可辩护的沉默**的脚步，  
(Mu Dan 2006, 100)

At break of each day this placid street  
**Awakens**, unconscious of coming agonies,  
For the cry of a child, the silent  
Unarguing steps of a coolie treading, ...  
(Mu Dan 2006, 101)

Encircled by an enjambement and a comma, “Awakens” gains new weight in line 2, thus resulting in a new intonation. Likewise, the prominence of the adjective “silent,” encircled by two *de* 的 in the first original, is reinvigorated by its redeployment in enjambement in the second original.<sup>8</sup> Also effective is the chiasmus in line 33 of “Hungry China,” gained in self-translation because it is absent in “Ji’e de Zhongguo” (饥饿的中国):

为了争取昨天，**痛苦**已经付出去了<sup>9</sup>  
(Mu Dan 2006, 233)

To alleviate **pain**, **pain** has been suffered  
(Mu Dan 2006, 239)

6 In place of *maifu* 埋伏, rendered as “craved.”

7 Previously embedded in the Chinese version, being *shibai* 失败 the second word of the same line.

8 From a semantic point of view, such a shift reverberates distinct images: on the one side, the figure of the “coolie” (*kuli* 苦力), and on the other one, the silence of the “leisurely and resigned steps” (*wuke bianhu* 无可辩护).

9 Literally: “In order to struggle for yesterday, pain has been spent.”

By means of a masterful “reshuffling of cards,” the self-translator therefore re-modulates and reconstructs the *tempo* of reading, while acting on the poetic signified.

### *Steps and Counterpoints*

That rhythm represents a core aspect of Mu Dan's poetics of creation, if not the hallmark of its poetics of self-translation, is confirmed by the frequency of the repetition as a rhetorical figure of order. Repetition, in the form of anaphor, provides a steady foothold in “Violence” (Baoli 暴力), whose pentastich four stanzas based on semantic contrasts create rhythm through the extension and contraction of breath:

从我们今日的梦魇  
到明日的难产的天堂，  
从婴儿的第一声啼哭  
直到他的不甘心的死亡：  
一切遗传你的形象。  
(Mu Dan 2006, 264)

From today's dreadful nightmare  
To the painful descension of Tomorrow,  
From the newborn babe's first cry  
Down to its unconsolated death,  
Everything takes exactly after your image.  
(Mu Dan 2006, 266)

From a microtextual perspective, the architecture of the words dictates the pace of reading, proven by “Wo gesong routi” (我歌颂肉体) and its “double.”<sup>10</sup> From the first few lines:

**我歌颂肉体:** 因为它是岩石  
在我们的不肯定中肯定的岛屿。

10 While composing “I Sing of Flesh,” the poet cannot aim for overlapping solutions, thus here he forgoes the parallelisms easily generated in Chinese through repetition and synthesizes them into different expressions: “the suppressed” and “the downtrodden” in line 3 replace *bei* [yapo] 被[压迫]的 and *bei* [roulin] 被[蹂躏]的, respectively. Additionally, the double *youxie ren* 有些人的 in line 4 is condensed into “by some” and “by others.” In line 5, the author abandons the parallel and contrasting structure of the comparatives he [shen] yiyang [gao] 和[神]一样[高] (as high as) and he [qu] yiyang [di] 和[蛆]一样[低] (as low as), preserving only the antithesis on the semantic level.

我歌颂那被压迫的，和被蹂躏的，  
 有些人的吝啬和有些人的浪费：  
 那和神一样高，和蛆一样低的肉体。

(Mu Dan 2006, 275)

I sing of flesh: because it is the rock,  
 A projection of certainty in a sea of our uncertainties.

I sing of the suppressed, and the downtrodden,  
 Miserably hoarded by some and sadistically spent by others,  
 The lofty as God, and wormy low flesh.

(Mu Dan 2006, 277)

The pace of reading changes all the more so when repetitions serve both lyrical and semantic purposes, such as in the long poem “Revelation” / “Yinxian” (隐现)—a masterful representation of pain and redemption in which the succession of cadenced formulas is meant to evoke a litany:

现在，一天又一天，一夜又一夜，  
 我们来自一段完全失迷的路途上，  
 闪过一下星光或日光，就再也触摸不到了，

…，

一串错综而零乱的，枯干的幻象，  
 使我们哭，使我们笑，使我们忧心

…

给我们有一时候山峰，有一时候草原，  
 有一时候相聚，有一时候离散，  
 有一时候欺人，有一时候被欺，  
 有一时候密雨，有一时候燥风，  
 有一时候拥抱，有一时候厌倦，  
 有一时候开始，有一时候完成，  
 有一时候相信，有一时候绝望。

…

主呵，我们衷心的痛惜失散到哪里去了

每日每夜，我们计算增加一点钱财，  
 每日每夜，我们度量这人或那人对我们的态度，  
 每日每夜，我们创造社会给我们划定的一些前途，

(Mu Dan 2006, 243)

Now, day after day and night after night  
 We come from a section of road completely lost  
 Once flashing **starlight or sunlight**, then out of touch [with us]

...

A series of complicated, dry broken images,  
To make us weep, to make us laugh, to make us worry

...

Give us **a time for** mountains, and **a time for** plains,  
           **a time for** meeting, and **a time for** farewell,  
           **a time for** deceiving and **a time for** being deceived  
           **a time for** rains, and **a time for** winds  
           **a time for** embrace, and **a time for** boredom  
           **a time for** beginning, and **a time for** end  
           **a time for** faith, and **a time for** despair.

...

O Lord, where gone our sincere regret for this?

Day and night, we calculate to accumulate a little more wealth,  
Day and night, we consider the personal opinions of this one or that,  
Day and night, we plot a future that the community has already set for,  
 (Mu Dan 2006, 254–55; 261)

In these lines, the cornerstone of this poem is the chant-like rhythm imbued with religious sentiment. Mu Dan carefully preserves this attribute and strives to recreate it in the English version, primarily through the iteration of “to make us,” “a time for,” and “day and night, we,” generated by the Chinese text in the first place<sup>11</sup>—but also in recourse to other rhetorical figures committed to the reiteration of sounds, such as the alliteration in “starlight or sunlight” (*xingguang huò rìguang* 星光或日光), which I will return to later.

The substance of the rhythmic profile is attested by several other rhetorical devices drawn from the English lyrical tradition, of which the translangual author makes full use to provide more efficacious intonations. In this respect, a noteworthy reflection arises when “Into Battle” is juxtaposed with “Chufa” (出发), a poem that first appeared on May 4, 1942, in the renowned newspaper *Dagong bao* (大公报) as a tribute to W. H. Auden:<sup>12</sup>

11 With *shi women* 使我们, *you yi shihou* 有一时候, and *mei ri mei ye, women* 每日每夜, 我们.

12 As highlighted by Zhang Qiang (2019).

告诉我们和平又必须杀戮，  
 而那可厌的我们先得去欢喜。  
 知道了“人”不够，我们再学习  
 蹂躏它的方法，排成机械的阵式，  
 智力体力蠕动着像一群野兽，

告诉我们这是新的美。因为  
 我们吻过的已经失去了自由；  
 好的日子过去了，可是接近未来，  
**给我们失望和希望，给我们死，**  
 因为那死的制造必需摧毁。  
 (Mu Dan 2006, 85)

Point us to peace and we—a slaughtering go,  
 Order us to love first what we hate the most.  
 For it is not sufficient to adore the Human  
To crush it we learn. In mechanic formation,  
 Let body and mind take beastly motion.

And tell us to appreciate it. Suddenly we know  
 The flower we kissed is ours no more.  
Gone are the old days, but nearer to future;  
**Give us vision and revision, give us death,**  
 To destroy the work of death we venture.  
 (Mu Dan 2006, 86)

Corresponding to the first half of the poem, these two stanzas offer anaphors, internal rhymes, assonance, and the paronomasia of “vision and revision,” inspired by *shiwang he xiwang* 失望和希望 (disappointment and hope, literally). Moreover, “Into Battle” displays the author’s fondness for creative rhythmic solutions that are even more suitable to English, such as the frequent use of anastrophe—as in “To crush it we learn,” “is ours no more,” and “Gone are the old days,” which cannot be accommodated in Chinese. In addition, “to love first what we hate the most,” in the second line of “Into Battle,” recreates the antinomic arrangement, while the consonance of the counterpoint bestows a new sonorous identity—demonstrating yet again that the rhythmic profile stands as a core reference in Mu Dan’s tightrope walking or lyrical gambling with words.

### *Tones and Sounds*

Laying all the cards on the table, the self-translator accepts risks and makes compromises, as the following lines from "Shiba shou" (诗八首)/"Eight Poems" bear witness:

风暴, 远路, 寂寞的**夜晚**, [fengbao, yuanlu, jimo de yewan]  
 丢失, 记忆, 永续的**时间**, [diushi, jiyi, yongxu de shijian]<sup>13</sup>  
 (Mu Dan 2006, 79)

Tempest, long journey, and the lonely **nights**,  
 Non-existence, remembrance, and the never-ending **time**,  
 (Mu Dan 2006, 84)

In the face of a quite obvious and yet almost unavoidable loss, that is, of the dense visual pattern accorded by the Chinese characters, sonic effects operate as a counterbalancing device. For instance, the addition of two "and the" before the third element of each line ("nights" and "time") means losing the asyndeton, but it reinvigorates the cadence. Moreover, a new melodic effect is produced, with the assonance between the sound (*ai*) occurring in the two closing words.

The (counter)strategy of creating chords and correspondences also operates with sound figures at the word level, where the relationship between morphemes and phonemes is carefully crafted. By way of example, the opening line of "Spring" puts forward consonances with an onomatopoeic effect:

In the grass the green flames flicker,  
 (Mu Dan 2006, 76)

While the Chinese poem "Chun" (春) relies on different assonances:

绿色的火焰在草上摇曳,  
 [Lüse de huoyan zai caoshang yaoye]  
 (Mu Dan 2006, 74)

A similar situation is suggested by line 16 of "Poems," where a powerful onomatopoeia is introduced through alliterations and makes the sigh of the wind quite palpable:

13 The transliteration in the poems is always mine.

But **what weary winds whisper** among its pillars!

(Mu Dan 2006, 96)

In “Shi” (诗) however, Mu Dan favors assonance that evokes a melancholy:

在它的栋梁间却吹着疲倦的冷风!

[*Zai ta de dongliang jian que chui zhe pijuan de leng feng!*]

(Mu Dan 2006, 94)

In the “game of correspondences” put forth by self-translation, the author does not surrender the losses imposed by the intrinsic needs of each language, as the close reading of lines 1–2 and 12–13 of “Qi” (旗) and “Flag” brings to light:

我们都在下面，你在高空飘扬， [*Women dou zai xiamian, ni zai gaokong piaoyang,*]

风是你的身体，你和太阳同行， [*feng shi ni de shenti, ni he taiyang tongxing,*]

(Mu Dan 2006, 117)

Underneath are we all, while you flutter in the sky

Stretching the body with the wind, with the sun journeying.

(Mu Dan 2006, 118)

The rhyme in the Chinese text is supplanted by alliteration (*w* in “we,” “while,” “with,” “wind”), assonance (*i* in “underneath,” “we,” and “journeying”), and repetition (“the”), so that a similar paradigm is arranged. When the impossibility of re-proposing a corresponding melodic pattern is acknowledged, different strategies are put in place to re-model the rhythmic profile. This occurs, for instance, with the poem “Myself,” which offers an English version of “Wo” (我), one of his most famous pieces:

从子宫割裂，失去了温暖， [*wennuan*]

是残缺的部分渴望着救援， [*kewang; jiu yuan*]

永远是自己，锁在荒野里， [*yong yuan; ziji, huangye li*]

从静止的梦里离开了群体， [*meng li; qunti*]

痛感到时流，没有什么抓住，

不断的回忆带不回自己， [*huiyi, ziji*]

遇见部分时候在一起哭喊, [yujian]  
 是春恋的狂喜, 想冲出樊篱, [chunlian; kuangxi, fan li]  
 伸出双手来抱住了自己 [ziji]

幻想的形象, 是更深的绝望。 [huanxiang, xingxiang, juewang]  
 永远是自己, 锁在荒野里, [ziji, huangye li]  
 仇恨着母亲给分出了梦境。 [muqin, mengjing]  
 (Mu Dan 2006, 38)

Split from the womb, no more in warmth,  
An incomplete part am I, yearning for help,  
Forever myself, locked in the vast field,

Separated from the body of Many, out of a still dream,  
 I ache in the flow of Time, catching hold of nothing,  
 Incessant recollections do not bring back me.

Meeting a part of me, we cry together,  
 The mad joy of first love, breaking out of prison,  
 I stretch both hands only to embrace

An image in my heart, which is deeper despair,  
Forever myself, locked in the vast field,  
 Hate mother for separating me from the dream.  
 (Mu Dan 2006, 39)

The intrinsic rhythm is first implemented by the lines, often interrupted by a comma cadencing the breath of the reading. Completing the framework are a repetition ("Forever myself, locked in the vast field") and two anastrophes ("an incomplete part am I," "do not bring back me"), and the proximity of sounds in lines 10 and 12. Finally, the enjambement between the third and fourth stanza replaces the reverberation of *ziji* / *huanxiang de xingxian* 自己/ 幻想的形象 with an echo of an action, "to embrace," thus conveying a new glare to the image. Mu Dan reveals his ambition to capture the flavor of the composition, attempting to say "almost the same thing," while shading it in varying tones.



## Conclusion

What emerges from the comparative reading of the twelve first and second originals is a poetics committed to tone, counterpoint, breath, and pace. Facing the “problematic necessity” embedded in self-translation (see Weinberger 2000, 39), Mu Dan does not fall into the trap of simulating the first original, while at the same time he resists the temptation to grant himself the absolute auctorial freedom to rewrite. Rather, in the face of the proverbial “loss” that occurs in translation, he used rhythm as a counterbalancing device, so as to produce self-standing poems—second originals, that is—while preserving a refined and delicate agreement between his two creative sides. His focus on the rhythm, or what Benedetto Croce described as “the soul of poetic expression, and therefore poetic expression itself” (1937, 183), then led to “a reversal, or at least a downplaying, of the hierarchy that normally favors the original over the translation, with neither version taking precedence” (Grutman and Van Bolderen 2013, 324).

To a certain extent, Mu Dan preferred to recreate what his poetry *did*, before what it *said*—to echo Meschonnic (1995), whose ideas about the ethics and politics of translation are grounded on the critique of rhythm (2007) and can be applied to Mu Dan’s poetics self-translation.

Tackling the issue from a broader perspective, though, what is the legacy of Mu Dan’s self-translating practice? In David Der-wei Wang’s words, “to what extent did [Mu Dan’s self-translating experience] contribute to the global circulation of modernities?” (2017, 3).

On the one hand, his concise experience contributed to shaping the poetics of translation in modern China, even its poetics of creation, through transaction. The value of engagement with foreign literatures is reasserted both by means of the first originals—in their “modern” and yet “deferential-to-lyricality” forms—and of the product of self-translation, which does not claim to be derivative, but original itself. The self-translating practice hence represents a product of a cross-cultural translation, bringing to the fore a spectrum of linguistic, cultural, and literary transactions, along with the author’s wish for self-renewal by incorporating otherness(es) into identity. On the other hand, in so doing, Mu Dan himself decided to give the world a taste of modern Chinese poetry, therefore making it a global phenomenon. At the same time, he was stressing the translingual and transcultural nature of Chinese literary modernity—a foretaste of the contemporary Sinophone.

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## 12. Dark Tourism: Leung Ping-kwan's Eastern European Journeys in 1990 and 1991

*Mary Shuk Han WONG*

**Abstract:** The Hong Kong writer Leung Ping-kwan (1949–2013) started his world travels in the 1970s, with visits to mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, and the US. Out of a lifetime of travel, it was his trips to Berlin and other former Eastern Bloc European cities immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall that were of particular importance for him. Leung spoke of these journeys as a way to reflect upon the situation of Hong Kong after 1989 and prior to the city's 1997 handover. This chapter discusses Leung's travel writing related to his European trips within this particular context of Hong Kong history. Furthermore, it inquires into Leung's writings on Eastern Europe from the perspective of dark tourism.

**Keywords:** Hong Kong, Leung Ping Kwan, Dark Tourism, Berlin Wall

After the 1967 riots, Hong Kong's 1970s economy was booming, the city was excavating its first subway, and air transportation became more accessible to ordinary citizens who traveled for leisure more frequently. As a result, a greater number of Hong Kong writers devoted themselves to travel writing, describing their new experiences overseas. Up to the present, however, systematic research on such travel writing by Hong Kong authors has been in short supply. As research in this area has developed, the one whose travel-related writing has received the most attention is probably Leung Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞 (pen name Yesi/Yasi 也斯, 1949–2013).

Leung started his world travels in the 1970s as a young man, with visits to mainland China (1974), Taiwan (1976), and Japan (1978). Shortly thereafter,

he published a spate of essays and poems inspired by these travels.<sup>1</sup> Between 1978 and 1984, he studied in the US. Upon his return to Hong Kong, Leung taught at the University of Hong Kong from 1985 to 1997, and then at Lingnan University from 1997 until his death. Throughout these years as both writer and professor of comparative literature, Leung participated in innumerable cultural exchanges that allowed him to visit many places around the world. During his final trip in 2012, Leung visited Zurich University where he was awarded an honorary doctorate. Out of a lifetime of travel, however, I would like to argue that it was his trips to Berlin and other former Eastern Bloc European cities immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall that were of particular importance for him. These trips in 1990 and 1991 served as a turning point for his writing career in terms of style, marking his shift from the modern to a postmodern voice. The city of Hong Kong, an important theme in his writing, was at that time facing an uncertain situation. The dissolution of the Soviet Union was not merely an important moment in world history, but also a highly significant event for the people of Hong Kong as they prepared for the city's 1997 handover from British to Chinese sovereignty—a situation that could be viewed as a counterexample to the fate of the Eastern Bloc cities. The uncertainty that already existed for Hong Kong people was further exacerbated by the June Fourth Incident of 1989. This chapter will discuss Leung's travel writing related to his two European trips in 1990 and 1991 within this particular context of Hong Kong history. Leung also wrote longer essays about these travels, but for this chapter, I will focus primarily on his poems and the associated photopoetry collaborations he undertook with Hong Kong photographer Lee Ka-sing 李家昇 (b. 1954).

I will look specifically at Leung's travel writing pertaining to his Eastern European trips, discussing these journeys from the perspective of dark tourism. This term can be understood as “a more general umbrella concept for travel to sites, such as battlefields, prisons, slave forts and concentration camps, associated with death and suffering” (Forsdick 2019, 63). Although numerous critics have argued that the phenomenon of visiting places related to death or suffering has in fact long existed, dark tourism is nonetheless a new trend in modern tourism. It is not without controversy, however. Dark tourism has, for example, frequently been criticized for its sensationalism and insensitivity to suffering (Forsdick 2019, 64). It is a postmodern practice that turns suffering into consumption. Yet, while Leung's visits to the concentration

1 Regarding Leung Ping-kwan's 1970s travel writing related to these three trips, please see *The Thunderbolt and the Cicada Song* (雷聲與蟬鳴, 1978) and *Landscape and Portraits* (山水人物, 1981).

camps and politically controlled cities of the former Eastern European Bloc obviously fall into the category of dark tourism, I would like to inquire into the positive aspects that dark tourism might bring with it. I am reminded of Rey Chow's (2002) article on Leung Ping-kwan's food poems in which she poses a particularly thought-provoking question in relation to consumption as "an inevitable relationship with our environment": "Who among us is not a consumer?" Chow argues that "what Leung offers is undoubtedly a politics, indeed an ethics, of how to consume" (Chow, 16). Inspired by her essay, I wish to ask: If tourism remains entangled in an inevitable relationship with our world, could visiting places related to suffering induce greater understanding, sympathy, or reflection in a mutual and democratic way? Here, I will connect the discussion of dark tourism with a key aspect of Leung's style—an emphasis on daily life and ordinary things. In what ways did Leung's poetics of daily life respond to dark tourism's emphasis on the dramatic?

This chapter will borrow from the discussion on dark tourism to argue that Leung's travel writing resists dark tourism as consumption. His poems de-emphasize the dramatic and foreground a poetics of the everyday. The daily life described in these poems is filled with a sense of history. This daily life is likewise folded into Leung and Lee's collaborative works, bringing to the fore the cultural context of tourism for both artists. All of Leung's reflections connected to these trips should be understood in the context of Hong Kong at that time.

### Leung's European Journeys and Travel Writing

Shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Leung made two trips to Europe. In 1990, he received a grant from the Goethe Institute to visit Berlin and other European cities that summer. His main preoccupation was naturally the fall of the Berlin Wall. The second trip took place a year later, when he was awarded a grant from the Asian Cultural Council to conduct research on film and literature for six months in New York. After New York, he again flew to Berlin, where he joined Hong Kong photographers Lee Ka-sing and Holly Lee. The three long-time friends subsequently traveled together to several Eastern European cities.<sup>2</sup> Leung visited Berlin, Prague, Warsaw, Oświęcim (the location of the Hitler regime's concentration camp, Auschwitz), and Krakow—all cities steeped in a dark history that fascinated him.

2 Leung (1995, 127–36) detailed these travels in his essay "Homeless Poetry and Photos" (Wujia de shi yu sheying 無家的詩與攝影) included in the collection *A Poetry of Floating Signs*.



This chapter will examine Leung's poems written about these two trips, published in 1995 as the volume *A Poetry of Floating Signs* (*Youli de shi* 游離的詩). Most of these poems were subsequently translated into English and then published in the collections *Travelling with a Bitter Melon* (2002) and *Amblings: Selected Poems by Leung Ping-kwan* (2010). In addition, this study will examine the photopoetry works of Leung and Lee. Prior to the publication of *A Poetry of Floating Signs*, the poet and the photographer collaborated on a twenty-four-page special issue of the Taiwanese magazine *Unitas* (*Lianhe wenxue* 聯合文學), published in May 1993 under the title "Some Houses in Eastern Europe and Our Journey" (*Dong'ou de yi xie fangzi he women de yi duan lücheng* 東歐的一些房子和我們的一段旅程). The special issue includes twenty-nine of Lee's photos and twelve of Leung's poems as well as several of his essays (Leung and Lee 1993). This is a beautifully designed special issue, an experiment in collage that creates meaning beyond the individual poems and photos. Although the poems included in the issue were later republished in *A Poetry of Floating Signs*, the dialogue between photos, poems, and essays found in the magazine does not extend to the book.

## Dark Tourism and Daily Life

The discussion of dark tourism has occurred mostly in the fields of social sciences and cultural studies. Many books on the subject are based on actual travel experiences. One of these, John Lennon and Malcolm Foley's (2000) *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*, is generally regarded as a pioneering work that helped to popularize the term (Sharpley 2009, 12). The book poses numerous questions on the subject and also discusses a substantial amount of fieldwork conducted on battle sites, in concentration camps, and other such places. This chapter will not go into the social science-related aspects of the larger discussion but will borrow some important arguments from it to aid in the discussion of Leung's travel writings.

One of the main characteristics of dark tourism is its dramaticism, which allows a high degree of commodification and invites voyeurism (Sharpley 2009, 7). I personally experienced this during a 2019 Holocaust tour in Berlin. The light inside the ruined tower we were in was dim, but good enough for my tour group to walk around inside it. While we stood unobserved around a corner, the tour guide secretly asked me (somewhat to my surprise) to press a button when he signaled me to do so. When the time came, I pressed the button, and we were immediately engulfed in total darkness.

The tour guide told us that this effect allowed us to feel a terror similar to that experienced by the people imprisoned there in the past. I now have a complete understanding of what is meant by “the dramatic” in dark tourism, and ironically enough, I assisted in creating it.

Dark tourism is always subject to commercialization by the mass media, or what Lennon and Foley (2000, 16–21) call “global communication technologies.” Due to their wide distribution, mainstream movies help to form our understanding of tragic events. For example, the films *A Night to Remember* (1958) and *Titanic* (1998) have influenced their global audiences’ understanding of the actual 1912 event, while the blockbuster *Schindler’s List* (1993) has in fact attracted more tourists to Krakow, the setting for the events in the film. Interestingly, although places such as concentration camps were not built to last, they have by necessity been repaired and maintained for the sake of tourism (Lennon and Foley 2000, 61–62). Film is undoubtedly one of the most powerful media for making a greater number of people aware of the tragic events that have taken place in various corners of the world, and I regard this greater understanding encouraged by films such as *Titanic* and *Schindler’s List* as being essentially constructive. I am not opposed to mainstream cinema, yet a dramatic form such as this should be thought of as only one of the ways available to narrate these dark stories. Other ways exist and should also be explored. Leung’s poems take a different path from the commercial art of film, permitting a more in-depth understanding of the darkness.

Although Leung’s Eastern European poems have not previously been studied as a specific body of his work, scholars have discussed the main characteristics of his poetry overall. Since the 1970s the inclusion of ordinary things and daily life has generally been regarded as a key element of his style. Hong Kong scholar C. T. Au (2020, 99–135), for example, discusses this use of “everydayness” at great length in her book on Leung. In her discussion of his novels and short stories, Au argues that these examples of Leung’s travel writing do not fall into the traditional travel writing genre that developed in nineteenth-century Europe and is associated with expanding colonization. On the other hand, neither can Leung’s work be considered counter-travel writing that aims to resist the colonial attitude of travel writing. Au (2020, 162–82) argues that Leung transcended this ideological dichotomy, and she has chosen to focus on the sensibility and subjectivity of the traveler while also highlighting diversity across cultures.

How can this discussion about the poet’s use of things related to daily life help us to understand Leung’s Eastern European writings? I assert that it is this appreciation for everydayness in Leung’s poems that resists

the dramaticism of dark tourism. Rey Chow (2002, 15) has suggested that Leung's food poems focus on the "mundane things of daily life, be it an onion, a papaya, a potted plant, a rainy day." The late Esther Cheung (2013, 2), another Hong Kong scholar, observes that Leung's poems "with their casual and often humorous tone, capture the space of everyday life in Hong Kong." The poetics of daily life is undoubtedly a major characteristic of Leung's literary oeuvre. Daily life appears not only in Leung's poems about Hong Kong but also in his poems about foreign places, where it resists the dramaticism and sensationalism of dark tourism. In addition, it allows the poet to engage in a dialogue with local history, a specific city, and that city's residents with a democratic tone that counters voyeurism.

Au (2020, 176) also suggests that the search for a home is a key motif in Leung's travel writing. She uses Leung's Eastern European poems to illustrate her point. For example, she argues that in "A Restaurant in Poland" (Yi suo Bolan canguan 一所波蘭餐館) Leung is not only a tourist searching for good food, but in fact searches for food that feels like home. I would like to contextualize Leung's Eastern European poems based on this concept of home. In 1989, one year before Leung visited Berlin, the June Fourth Incident occurred in mainland China. In response to it, Leung wrote poems using imagery of home. In his poem "In the Great Square," (Guangchang 廣場) written on May 25, 1989, for example, he wrote:

After days of Spring rains we awakened  
 In a shabby parlor jammed with beat-up furniture  
 And no place left for the waking to really live,  
 Between ourselves and the piles of old bedding. (2012, 114–15)

連場春雨後我們一朝醒來  
 忽然發覺家具都老了  
 今日的軀體無處安頓  
 在我們和舊日的床褥之間

Here, Leung has used broken household furniture and homelessness to suggest the political situation in mainland China. This imagery continues in "Broken Home" (Jiapo 家破) and "Refurnishing" (Jiaju 家具). Searching for home, the search for a place where a person can live and develop, was an important theme in Leung's work during this period. I would argue that his trips to Eastern Europe should be seen as a continuation of this concern. Leung has discussed the feelings he associated with both places—home and Eastern Europe. In the epilogue of *A Poetry of Floating Signs*, he wrote the following:

It wasn't until the second half of 1989 that I looked out at the world with mixed feelings, especially on the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the changes in Eastern Europe. I am looking forward to the new situation but also have feelings of sadness.<sup>3</sup>

直到八九年下半年，才又懷著複雜的心情外望。尤其看到圍牆倒塌，東歐變天，更令人在期待之餘，亦復有不少感慨。

The incident in mainland China produced greater uncertainty for Hong Kong's future. Many Hong Kong people immigrated to other places. With this type of instability at home, the poet was looking at the models provided by other places that had also experienced political instability. Leung's Berlin trip ought to be viewed in this context. In the following sections, I will discuss Leung's Eastern European poems in detail, first giving special attention to Leung's ideas about the Berlin Wall. I will then discuss how his references to everyday life resist the consumption patterns brought about by dark tourism. Thirdly, I will discuss Leung's reaction to "global communication technologies." Lastly, I will discuss how daily life is further developed in his photopoetry collaborations with Lee.

## The Wall

In a short article published in 2014 on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, a reporter wrote that the price of a small piece of concrete from the wall had fallen from US\$50 to as little as US\$10.<sup>56</sup> on eBay (Solon 2014). I found this information both interesting and ironic. This news item demonstrates how a political event has been treated as a commodity to be consumed, a point frequently discussed by dark tourism scholars. A small chunk of the wall can be sold with a certificate and wrapped in a nice box like a birthday present, and purchasing a piece can even be considered an investment. According to the news report, although the price for a chunk of the wall has generally dropped, it might still be high if an individual has a piece with graffiti on it. This kind of commercial activity is indeed very ironic.

Leung was among the millions of people to visit the Berlin Wall, yet his poems convey strong criticism of the commercialization that occurred after its fall. *A Poetry of Floating Signs* devotes the section "Europe after the

3 English translation mine. See Leung Ping-kwan's (1995, 137) "Epilogue: Writing on Floating Signs" (Houji: shuxie youli 後記: 書寫游離).

Rain" (Yu hou de Ouzhou 雨後的歐洲) to the poems related to his Eastern European travels in 1990 and 1991. The first two, "Story of the Wall" (Qiang de gushi 牆的故事) and "A Wall Crumbles and Another Wall Comes Up" (Qiang daole you shengchu yi shan qiang 牆倒了又生出一扇牆) can be seen as representative of the poet's general attitude towards these events.

"Story of the Wall" has a balanced, contrastive structure. The two long stanzas of seven lines each juxtapose the Berlin Wall's past ("the guards guarding the wall with police dogs and guns / John and Mary hiding inside the [train] carriage pass the wall / Hans climbed over on the folding ladder" [守衛用警犬和手槍守護牆 / 約翰和馬麗在車廂裡越過牆 / 漢斯用摺梯攀過牆]) with its present ("stalls by the road are selling the wall / key chains made by crushing pieces of the wall / tourists knocked down what was left of the wall with hammers and with anvils" [路旁的攤子在出售牆 / 鑿成碎片作鎖匙扣的是牆 / 遊客們用鎚和鑿去敲剩下的牆]).<sup>4</sup> Both parts of the wall's history are described anecdotally: in the past it was a dangerous place to escape from; in the present it has become a tourist spot to shop. By juxtaposing these two realities, the poet invites his readers to reflect on commercialization in tourism.

"A Wall Crumbles and Another Wall Comes Up" is one of my favorite poems in this collection. It raises a very important question about the reunification of Germany: has the wall really fallen? The poem's title suggests that a physical wall has been torn down, but another wall has immediately gone up to replace it. The poem seems to ask just how easily reunited the East and West will be after nearly thirty years of separation. The physical wall may have been torn down, but what about the wall created by culture, economics, and everyday life? The poem consists of two stanzas written as a single, enjambed sentence, the form amplifying an important message. In the second stanza, Leung writes:

stones grow boundless a wall crumbles and at  
 once over there another wall comes up try as  
 you do to knock down the stones are still in  
 the sky the stones are gathering high we too  
 believe in breaking down barriers and making  
 our lives transcend the past coins clinking (2002, 193)

石在無邊生長牆倒了立即那邊  
 又生出另一扇牆不管你怎樣敲

4 Translation by Kit Kelen et al. For the full poem in English translation, see Leung (2010, 125).

鑿石頭在空中石頭在圍攏我們  
也相信衝破禁錮把我們的生活  
超越過去錢幣叮噹響顧盼生姿

The continuity of the lines suggests that these things are linked together. The problems associated with the previous “wall” will develop into new problems, such as a devalued currency that creates poverty. The poet does not believe that history has made a sharp turn in a deeper sense. In the case of the Berlin Wall, a political wall has been torn down, but a commercial wall has sprung up in its place.

The poem as a whole suggests a sense of uncertainty that contrasts with the political victory. In several key lines, Leung writes:

grey from different directions with hands  
stretched out groping for things still unknown  
cold and hard cold and hard faces soft at first  
turn all too easily into masks cold and hard (2002, 193)

灰色的從不同方向伸出手去想  
摸索未知的事物冷硬的冷硬的  
未來柔和的臉孔輕易變成面具

A gray, cold atmosphere still fills the air. The “hard faces” look soft but turn to hard cold masks. Again, the poet invites the reader to think more deeply about the unification and cultural issues. “Story of the Wall” and “A Wall Crumbles and Another Wall Comes Up” should be read together and understood as Leung’s basic argument against treating the Berlin Wall as a single, dramatic event. As Leung himself puts it in his poem, “it’s with our walls we get past the wall.”

### History as Everyday Life

The use of everyday life and ordinary things to express poetic feelings and even cultural criticism has been Leung Ping-kwan’s signature style since the 1970s. Among Taiwanese critics of that decade, his essays and poems were regarded as a stylistic breakthrough, his simple language demonstrating how the mundane could be made poetic in the post-Cold War Sinophone world (Song 2019, 249–63). C. T. Au (2020, 18–27), who has studied Leung’s poems in connection with home and ordinary things, points out that the

poet turns our focus in the poem “Krakow History Museum” (Kelakefu lishi bowuguan 克拉科夫歷史博物館) from the museum’s military objects, such as “armour and swords” (盔甲和刀劍), to ordinary things, such as “wine bottle labels and wine cups”<sup>5</sup> (酒瓶上的招紙觥籌交錯). Au argues that Leung was on a quest for home in foreign places, although his search may have consisted of little more than a passing feeling. As an extension of Au’s argument, I would add that Leung’s poetics of everyday life in his Eastern European poems focuses not only on the ordinariness of the things but also on their historical entanglements. In this historical sense, the difficulties people face are embedded in their everyday lives and thus may not be easily understood by tourists.

Of all the poems in the collection, “Europe after the Rain” is a particularly successful example of how Leung portrayed the history embedded in everyday life. Leung must have had a particular liking for this poem as well, in that he created a photo to be accompanied by Lee’s artistic fabrication. He himself took the photo. He also hand-wrote the poem’s text. I see this photo as the moment that provided his inspiration for the poem.<sup>6</sup>

“Europe after the Rain” is a prose poem of four stanzas that documents the poet’s visit to a church of no particular interest to tourists. Far from being a historical monument, it is an ordinary church that gives the poet shelter from heavy rain. Leung uses “I” to speak to a statue, creating an immediate sense of time. The poem begins with this stanza:

Caught in the rain I seek shelter in a church, and find in  
its solemnity people deep in meditation, others working. For  
how many years have you been here? How many wars have  
you been through and how many eras of peace? How many  
uprisings and suppressions? Did homeless, travel-wearied  
people receive protection here? Have the supplicants been  
granted favours? Have their wounds been tended? (2002, 205)

暴雨中我躲入教堂，肅穆的氣氛裡有  
人在沉思，有人在工作。你在這裡多少年  
了？經歷了多少戰亂與和平，多少起義與鎮  
壓？流離的民族長旅跋涉可曾在這兒得到庇  
護？乞求的可得到布施？傷口可得到料理？

5 Translation by Martha Cheung. For the full poem in English translation, see Leung (2002, 203).

6 For the photo see: <https://khprojects.substack.com/p/leungpingkwang9704>.

With the help of the photo, we can imagine the poet addressing the questions in this stanza to the statue, the poet shivering in the cold while the stone woman rests comfortably in her long-accustomed place. The poet addresses the statue as a witness to history who has experienced the suffering of recent years. But communication between the two is not so easily carried out. The poem ends as follows: “Are you tired? You don’t answer, perhaps / you don’t hear me. The vacuum-cleaner is too loud. You are / engrossed in your morning cleaning” (你也覺得疲累了? 你沒有回答我, 也許 / 你聽不見, 吸塵機的聲音太響了, 你正忙 / 於每日早晨勤勞的打掃). In the beginning, the poem expresses the difficulty of communication and understanding between a tourist (the poet) and a local resident (the statue). The cleaning lady who also represents a local resident appears at the poem’s end and serves to further obstruct communication. The question at the end could be seen as an imagined conversation among the lyrical “I,” the statue, and the cleaning woman. Nothing can be easily articulated between the local and the tourist, the historical past and the present. The poem elegantly expresses the impossibility of communication and mutual understanding among strangers who met in a place by chance.

In contrast, the poem “The Dilapidated Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church” (Weilian dadi de po jiaotang 威廉大帝的破教堂) conveys a somewhat more positive attitude towards the statue’s—in terms of history and tourism—present dynamic. This church was badly damaged in 1943, and while it was later rebuilt, it nonetheless remains a symbol of the city’s trauma. Unlike the church in “Europe after the Rain,” this building is a tourist spot in Berlin. Leung’s poem (2002, 207–9) opens with a description of tourists inside the church. He then shifts his focus to a statue of Christ:

This beautiful church  
   was bombed by the allied planes during the war  
 in the trendy souvenir shops tourists are gesticulating  
   at the bricks exposed on grain-coloured walls  
 Inside the church a golden statue that has survived the bombs  
   Christ with a square face  
 hanging high up with arms open  
   is looking down wordlessly at the world of mortals  
 not with indifference or sentimentality  
   but with a touch of understanding and total helplessness  
 compassionate but meek  
   hanging on the cross in a bomb-blasted church  
 watching the world change



美麗的教堂  
                   在戰時被盟軍的飛機炸毀了  
 時髦的消費區裡遊客指指點點  
                   稻麥的黃牆上禿露的磚頭  
 在裡面轟炸後倖存的金色雕像  
                   一尊方臉的基督  
 懸在那裡張開雙手  
                   無言地俯視蒼生  
 那不是冷漠也不是善感  
                   有點明白但又無可奈何  
 帶著慈悲但也還是老老實實的  
                   吊在一所炸毀的教堂裡  
 看世界正在變動

There among all the tourists coming and going in the church is a statue of Christ silently hanging above them on the wall. Again, the statue is not described as something extraordinary or sublime; instead, it gives the impression of being an ordinary person who has been there for a long time but is unable to assist in changing the city's fate. The poem's line "with a touch of understanding and total helplessness" (有點明白但又無可奈何) conveys a sense of endearing ordinariness. Although the statue could do nothing physical to stop the war, it is always there to soothe people's hearts. The poem ends with an ordinary worker in the church. Interestingly, this worker has similar characteristics as the Christ statue. The poet writes:

All this time the man on the yellow truck  
                   is beside us, watching all the comings and goings  
 Ah, he too has that same  
                   square face, but he too can do nothing  
 except attend to the street lights  
                   one after another  
 fitting in brighter bulbs  
  
 黃色機車上的漢子一直就在  
                   我們身旁, 看著這一切  
 原來他也有一張那樣的  
                   方形臉孔, 但他也沒有辦法  
 只能一盞一盞地給這兒的路燈  
                   換上一個一個  
 較亮的燈泡

Like the statue of Christ, the worker has a square face and can do nothing about the historical situation. He can, however, provide light for people by changing the light bulbs. His actions make God's comfort a physical thing. Ending the poem by making the grace of God visible through the actions of an ordinary human being is quite touching. If the statue that has been hanging there for such a long while represents historical time, it is the worker who makes that historical time visible and felt in the present.

Dark tourism emphasizes the dramatic and sensational, but Leung's focus is on everyday life. Even so, Leung never states that everyday life will give us a complete understanding of others. In the poem "A Restaurant in Poland" he wrote: "Later in Warsaw / we especially searched for a cafeteria-style milk bar / feeling this way we could experience how everyday people eat / From the simplest sour soup or the most unpretentious / bread—is this how one can understand a place?" (後來在華沙 / 故意尋找大眾食堂一樣的牛奶吧 / 以為這就可以體會一般人怎樣進食 / 從最樸素的酸湯、最不裝腔作勢的 / 麵團, 就可以理解一個地方?) (2002, 197). Leung's poems always contain a kind of self-criticism. He constructed a means of resisting the mainstream ideology yet was always ready to reflect on his way of doing so. In fact, his poetry teaches us that communication is always a process.

## Books and Films

In *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*, Lennon and Foley (2000, 20) argue that "global communication technologies have shaped the perception of what are the significant sites in the political history of the twentieth century." Indeed, commercial movies or television programs have not only identified dark tourism sites for us, but more importantly, they have also greatly shaped our understanding of these places before we actually go there. Lennon and Foley point out the irony of the significant increase in tourism in 1993–1994 that resulted from the success of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. Many tourists even prefer to visit the film sets located near Krakow rather than traveling to the actual camps of Auschwitz I and Birkenau, which are farther away (Lennon and Foley 2000, 64). Once again, Rey Chow's question seems to echo here, although in this case it might be: Who can escape the influence of "global communication technologies" in today's world? Like most people, Leung was undoubtedly influenced by media and books when it came to his understanding of Eastern Europe. But his response to this problem was to supplement the inescapable mainstream media with films and books that were not so global or commercial.

An ardent fan of literature and film since the 1960s (Wong and Liu, 2022), Leung made a point of rereading the travel writings of mainland Chinese poet Feng Zhi 馮至 (1905–1993) before he embarked on his first trip to Europe in 1990. Feng had studied in Germany in the 1930s and returned there twice at later points in his life. Leung wrote in an essay that Feng's three books about his travels in Germany at these three different life stages made him understand that poetry should not be governed by ideology. Feng's *Mountain and Sea* (*Shanshui* 山水; 1943) depicts his life in Germany in the 1930s but deliberately avoids being swept up into the chaotic politics of the times. In contrast, *Notes on Eastern Europe* (*Dong'ou zaji* 東歐雜記, 1950) shows how Feng fully embraced socialist ideology. The third book, *Standing in the Setting Sun* (*Li xieyang ji* 立斜陽集, 1989), describes his return visit to Germany in the last period of his life and reaffirms the influence German modernism had had on Feng (Yesi 1990). In rereading these texts by Feng Zhi, Leung was firmly reminded that to understand a place, culture, or history we must avoid looking at them through an *ideological* lens.

"Re-watching *The Double Life of Veronique* in Warsaw" (Zai Huasha dianyingyuan kan "Liang shenghua" 在華沙電影院看《兩生花》) is a poem that fully exposes Leung's resistance to "global communication technologies." Krzysztof Kieślowski (1941–1996) remains one of Poland's most famous directors. His films for screen and television used the medium of stories about everyday life to criticize political dogma. He is especially well known in Hong Kong's art film circle for his television miniseries *Dekalog* (1989). In 1994, he was invited to the 18th Hong Kong International Film Festival for showings of his two most recent films, *Three Colours: Blue* (1993) and *Three Colours: White* (1994).<sup>7</sup> In "Re-watching *The Double Life of Veronique* in Warsaw," Leung recounts his experience of watching the film the second time. Although he did not like the film much after watching it the first time in New York, his attitude changed in Warsaw. The film is about an encounter between two women (one from Poland, the other from France), with both roles performed by the actress Irène Jacob. Screened in 1991, the year of the unification of East and West Germany and hence a significant year for Europe, the film is generally read as an encounter between the societies of Eastern and Western Europe. The similarities and differences between the two that are highlighted in the film serve as points for reflection. Leung's

7 Kieślowski's influence still continues in Hong Kong to this day. During 2021 and 2022, his retrospective, *Kieślowski: The Serendipity of Life* (*Qisiluofusiji: rensheng oushi* 奇斯洛夫斯基：人生偶拾) was shown in select cinemas. I conducted several post-screening talks, including one for *The Double Life of Veronique*, attended by many young audience members.

poem talks about his connection to the film becoming possible only after he had physically visited the place. As such, his poem may be read as his resistance to an understanding of Eastern Europe based solely on the consumption of mainstream narratives.

## The Everyday in Everyday Life

In this final section, I will discuss the collaboration between Leung and Lee Ka-sing as it pertained to the theme of everyday life. As mentioned earlier, after Leung's first European trip in 1990, he, along with his artist friends Lee Ka-sing and Holly Lee, visited Berlin and several other Eastern European cities that Leung had not previously visited, including Warsaw, Gdansk, and Krakow. The three had known each other since the 1970s. Lee and his wife Holly, both established Hong Kong art and commercial photographers, opened a studio together in Toronto in 1997. In 1988, Lee designed the cover for Leung's short story collection *Three Fish* (*San yu ji* 三魚集). Afterwards, Lee designed many other book covers for Leung. Around the 1997 handover, they began another significant project called "Foodscape" (*Shishi diyuzhi* 食事地域誌), in which they told stories of postcolonial Hong Kong through food.<sup>8</sup> Throughout their history of collaborations, however, their most extensive project was the special issue "Some Houses in Eastern Europe and Our Journey." Because the works included in it have never been published in book form, this special issue has not previously been discussed.

Lee's design for the issue features a dark blue that evokes a sense of heaviness when reading. What makes this special issue particularly interesting, however, is not just the pairing of photos and poems, but also the short essayistic paragraphs collaged at the bottom of each page. The reflective tones of the poems and photographs are similar in nature, but the short essays are quite different. These passages are not about the European cities or the trip per se, but mostly convey how Leung stayed in touch with Hong Kong while traveling. We are shown Leung's everyday life in Hong Kong with the tone of the essays often being humorous and self-critical. I suggest that the short essays can be read as the unfolding of his journey. They reveal how the poet's journey of reflections actually took shape, depicting many

8 The first book they published for this project was a 25 cm × 25 cm book called *Foodscape* (*Shishi diyuzhi* 食事地域誌, 1997), Hong Kong: The Original Photograph Club Limited. The book includes Lee Ka-sing's photos and ten of Leung Ping-kwan's poems printed in Chinese with an English translation by Martha Cheung.

instances of clumsiness, misunderstandings, and encounters not expressed in the photos or the poems. Whereas the poems are concerned with everyday life in the European cities Leung visited, the essays are concerned with the everyday life of the poet; thus, a plurality of voices is present in this special issue.

The special issue opens with Leung's introduction, which tells the reader how his travels began. He tells us about the items packed in his heavy luggage, including a fax machine that he used to send articles back to a Hong Kong newspaper. His introduction and the short essays that follow are in fact like pieces of a short story and include plot development. Initially, the clumsy Leung with his heavy luggage cannot find Lee in the café where they agreed to meet. The poems "Story of the Wall" and "A Wall Crumbles and Another Wall Comes Up" appear on these pages as well. On the left side are three of Lee's photos in juxtaposition, showing a woman and a man from ancient China above and the German writer Goethe below. Lee's photos are never a straightforward response to Leung's poems, but they allow readers to further extend the meanings of the poems. Here, Lee seems to invite the reader to reflect on the distance between people in the period after the fall (or construction?) of the Berlin Wall. The "wall" between various groups of people in the world was already constructed many years earlier.<sup>9</sup>

The paragraphs at the bottom of these two pages read as follows:

He turns his head. It isn't Lee Ka-sing. I apologize and he says it doesn't matter. It turns out he is a photographer from Hungary. I tell him that two of my friends are also photographers but we lost touch in Berlin. We talk for a while, and he wishes me good luck as he leaves. I kneel down to see if there are any traces of the Wall still visible on the road. It is really hard to tell. After a while, the photographer in blue comes back again and taps me on the shoulder. I wonder why he does this. He then moves the camera away from his face, and I realize it is Lee Ka-sing. The person behind him also moves the camera away. It's Holly Wong. Very nice! Very nice! We have finally met on a road that I am unable to identify with certainty as the former site of the Wall. We can go now.

他轉過頭來，原來不是李家昇。我只好道歉，他說不要緊，原來他是一個來自匈牙利的攝影師。我說我的兩位朋友也是攝影師，但我們在柏林失去了連絡。我們談了一會，他臨走時祝我好運。我又蹲下來研究馬路上有沒有圍牆的痕跡。真難弄清真假。過了一會，穿藍衣的

9 For Lee's photo visit: <https://leekasingphoto.substack.com/p/eu-journal-103un>.

攝影師又走回來，還向我走過來，用力拍我的肩膀。我奇怪他要做甚麼。他把攝影機從臉孔前面挪移開，我才發覺原來是李家昇！他背後那人把攝影機挪移開，原來是黃楚喬！真好！真好！大家終於碰頭了，在一條不知是否圍牆舊址的馬路上。我們可以出發了。

Half a page of the story you faxed us last time was blank. Because we are in a rush, I have added a scene for you in which the hero and the heroine are eating in a restaurant. I just borrowed the scene from the Hong Kong Food Guide.<sup>10</sup>

「上次 FAX 來的小說續稿有半頁空白，要趕時間發稿，我替你加了一段男女主角在餐廳進食的場面，就從香港飲食指南那兒借出來的。」

The first paragraph shows Leung's clumsiness in everyday life, expressed in a humorous tone. Leung planned his own trip. He did not have a tour guide. Both his act of searching and what is missing are very important elements in his journey. The incident he describes here also implies that travel abroad creates the possibility for people from different cultures to meet, however briefly. It was this kind of friendship that Leung treasured. In the second paragraph, written from the point of view of a Hong Kong newspaper editor, a paragraph has been tacked on to Leung's story because of a deadline. Ironically, the added scene is taken from a travel guide, which Leung resisted using. Once again, this paragraph is written with a humorous rather than a critical tone. We are shown how a story might be written using a mainstream point of view. In a way, Leung is actually criticizing Hong Kong's newspaper culture, and his reflections on this matter lead us to other stories taking place in the world, including the story of the Berlin Wall.

This special issue contains a variety of such anecdotes. On the page that includes the poem "Re-watching *The Double Life of Veronique* in Warsaw," for example, Leung comments that only very few people attended the screening and that Polish people were rushing to the cinemas to see films from the US. Lee Ka-sing and Holly Lee also made a contribution to these short essays. Beneath the poem "A Restaurant in Poland," they have inserted a note to their daughter about eating *lody* (ice cream) in Poland. Leung likewise writes to his son and daughter, sharing his feelings about the trip. For this reason, the essays could be regarded as letters or travel notes, representing the daily life of a tourist while traveling from place to place. In addition to

10 The translation is mine.

his observations of others' daily lives, Leung embedded his own day-to-day life in the poems, thereby contextualizing his experience as a tourist.

### Conclusion: Feeling in the Dark

For those of us who enjoy traveling, tourism is undeniably an important part of our lives. The question is, however, whether a more humanistic tourism is possible. As tourism once again flourishes post-COVID, have we gained a new perspective for looking at the world after a period of darkness? Leung Ping-kwan traveled to many places during his lifetime. From his first trip in 1974 to his last trip in 2012, travel provided him with a source of inspiration. This was not limited simply to foreign scenery, food, or culture but also embraced the ways in which he received and interacted with other cultures. In a dialogue with his translator Gordon Osing, Leung said that "it is when one reflects upon one's culture by means of another that one eventually develops 'bi-cultural' awareness" (Leung 1992, 162). For Leung, to travel is to communicate with others on equal terms and to gain a better understanding of oneself.

Dark tourism could be regarded as a way for us to understand and empathize with the suffering of others. When Leung visited the European cities of the former Eastern Bloc after reunification, he saw not only the happiness it brought but also the less obvious problems. How could two groups of people come together after years of separation under different regimes? After the celebration ends, how do we deal with daily life? Leung's journeys not only gave him an understanding of Europe, but they were also profound experiences that prompted much reflection on the handover of Hong Kong to mainland China.

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### 13. Hong Kong's Leftist Poetry: Sinophone and/or *Huawen*?

*Chris Song*

**Abstract:** China-centric leftist poetry that subsists on CCP- or PRC-backed institutions took root in Hong Kong in the late 1930s and has undergone ups and downs in different historical episodes. This chapter historicizes Hong Kong's Chinese leftist poetry and emphasizes its convergence with the China-centric conceptualization of *Huawen wenxue* in Hong Kong's post-1997 era. It then circles back to engage its China-centric ideology with the Sinophone's articulation against China-centrism. It illustrates that Sinitic Hong Kong poetry is pulled by the Sinophone and *Huawen wenxue*, two critical categories with opposing ideological frameworks toward China. The chapter ends with voicing an expansive worry about the leftist bloc's increasing threat to Sinophone Hong Kong poetry's institutional livelihood.

**Keywords:** Sinophone, *Huawen wenxue*, Hong Kong poetry, Hong Kong literature, leftism

At a conference on the “Identity, Issues and Development of Hong Kong Literature” held at the Centre for Humanities Research of Lingnan University in 2007, the organizer, Leung Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞 (1949–2013), invited literary scholars from different regions of the Sinosphere to respond to Shu-mei Shih's keynote, “Hong Kong Literature as Sinophone Literature.” Shih's (2008) article in the conference's special issue can be considered the inception of the concept of “Sinophone” in Hong Kong studies, and as such it has provided an inspiring, productive framework for studying many facets of Hong Kong society, including literature, film, religion, gender, and politics. According to Shih (2013), the “polyphonic and multilingual” Sinophone, or *Huayu yuxi* 華語語系, refers to the “literatures of the Sinitic language family”

and “denote[s] the multiplicity of languages within the family” (9) either written in “Sinitic-language communities and cultures outside China” or in “ethnic minority communities and cultures within China where Mandarin is adopted or imposed” (11). “Inherently comparative and transnational” and “attentive to the specificity of time-and-space,” Sinophone studies, *Huayu yuxi yanjiu* 華語語系研究, is “the study of Sinitic-language cultures and communities on the margins of China and Chineseness, [including] Sinophone communities situated outside the geopolitical China proper and found in many parts of the world as a consequence of historical processes of (im)migration and settlement spanning several centuries, as well as those non-Han communities within China” (Shih 2010, 29).

Shih’s concept has been so influential in Hong Kong that the term has traveled well beyond the research context of Sinophone literature theory to denote the Hong Kong literature written in Chinese, although those who use the word “Sinophone” do not always restrict themselves to Shih’s definition. When I, a mainland-born bilingual Hong Kong poet deeply involved in the local Cantonese and English poetry communities, received an invitation from the HKKH: Sinophone Hong Kong Literature Database to be interviewed for its collection, I was surprised by its flexible use of the word, simply denoting works that were “originally written in Chinese” (HKKH 2021). In Hong Kong’s local literary scene today, Hong Kong literature written in any Sinitic language is often positioned in the landscape of Sinophone literature. According to Li Mei-Ting (2020), *Fleurs des lettres* 字花 (2014) featured a special issue (no. 49) that explores Hong Kong as a member of the Sinophone and the idea of a Cantophone literature. In 2023, Wayne C.F. Yeung developed the concept of the “Cantophone” (2023). Furthermore, the Sinophone, with its postcolonial critique of China-centrism, naturally appealed to anti-PRC political organizations in Hong Kong before the National Security Law was passed on June 30, 2020. Shih’s conceptualization was an important theoretical resource for the Hong Kong National Party, known for its anti-China Hong Kong independence agenda that was declared illegal and banned by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government in 2018. The inaugural issue of that party’s official periodical, *Comitium* (*Zhongyi* 眾議) published an article by a member, Kai Kay 啟琪 (2016), in which Shih’s “The Concept of the Sinophone” (2011) is cited as a source that can help them counter China’s linguistic, cultural, and ethnic hegemony and “understand the most evil application of language as a colonial tool ... in China’s hands” (Kai 2016, 19). Case studies of Hong Kong literature and culture have emerged to challenge the Sinophone recently, not so much due to its conceptualization, but because it has raised the question of whether

the framework defined by the Sinophone is sufficient to address certain linguistic, literary, and cultural phenomena in specific present and historical contexts in Hong Kong (see Klein 2018; Wong 2018; Fan 2019; McConaghy 2022).

The present case study focuses on Hong Kong's leftist poetry, in which China-centrism took root in the 1920s, was institutionalized, survived through the twentieth century, and is thriving at the very time of this writing. In this article, "leftist," ([Can.] *zo jik* 左翼 or *zo paai* 左派) as is conventionally used in a narrow and locally situated sense in the Chinese-language scholarship on Hong Kong literature, denotes the self-conscious China-centric tendency of literary practices generally backed by pro-CCP or pro-PRC ideology and/or institutions. Hong Kong's leftist poetry, moreover, like leftist literature in general, has been largely neglected in English-language scholarship and is problematic when studied in the framework of the Sinophone. Its long-lived China-centrism is continuing to develop into a powerful hegemonic threat to the institutional livelihood of Hong Kong's Sinophone literature today. This chapter historicizes Hong Kong's leftist poetry and emphasizes its convergence with the China-centric conception of *Huawen wenxue* 華文文學 in the post-handover era. It then circles back to engage its China-centric ideology with the Sinophone's articulation against China-centrism and illustrates that Sinitic Hong Kong poetry is being pulled in two directions by the Sinophone and *Huawen wenxue*, two critical categories with opposite ideologies in regard to China. The chapter ends voicing a serious concern about the leftist bloc's increasing threat to the institutional livelihood of Hong Kong's Sinophone poetry.

Leftist ideology moved southward from the mainland to Hong Kong, along with the influence of the May Fourth Movement. From the 1920s to the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, Hong Kong's local writers and those who came southward to sojourn in Hong Kong for various reasons (the "southbound writers") were politically well-connected to the literary societies, groups, and magazines in Guangzhou and Shanghai (see Li 2004). These writers of new literature in Hong Kong readily embraced two primary streams of influence through May Fourth periodicals that were available in the city thanks to Hong Kong's status as a transshipment port. One stream came from the "Modern writers" in Shanghai and centered around the influential *Les Contemporains* 現代 edited by Shi Zhecun 施蛰存, who promoted through writing, editing, and translation a simplified version of Anglo-American imagism that he named image-lyrical poetry (*yixiang shuqing shi* 意象抒情詩; Song 2015). The other stream was the *puluo wenxue* (proletarian literature 普羅文學) advocated by the literary groups

that gradually became leftist, such as the Literary Research Association (Wenxue yanjiuhui 文學研究會), the Creation Society (Chuangzaoshe 創造社), the Sun Society (Taiyangshe 太陽社), the Pioneer Society (Tuohuangshe 拓荒社), and the Speech Threads (Yuxipai 語絲派) that consolidated into the League of Chinese Leftist Writers (Zhongguo zuoyi zuojia lianmeng 中國左翼作家聯盟) in 1930 under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Through its establishment, “the adoption of left-wing goals was institutionalized ... as part of the Communist Party’s new policy for bringing literature and arts more closely under Party control” (McDougall and Louie 1997, 159). These two streams of influence were not without quarrels driven by their differences in literary styles and ideologies, but this did not result in the unequivocal fragmentation of the literary scene in Hong Kong at the time. While some poets leaned more toward Shi Zhecun’s quasi-imagism, this was more of a phenomenon of individual literary aspiration, while the other writers’ lean toward leftist proletarian literature seemed a vestige of political institutionalization through the left-leaning literary societies’ branches (*fenhui* 分會) and later the League of Chinese Leftist Writers’ branch (*fenmeng* 分盟) in Guangzhou. Not only did most of the members of the League shuttle between Hong Kong and Guangzhou, but they also shared publication venues such as the branch’s official magazine, *Guangzhou wenyi* 廣州文藝, a left-wing affinity, and, most of all, political beliefs.

The outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 drove many more leftist writers, editors, and artists, along with their literary publications, to move from the mainland south to the British colony. These newly-arrived leftists and the like-minded locals established many literary and art institutions, including the National Resistance Association of Literary and Art Workers (Hong Kong Branch) (Zhonghua quanguo wenyi kangdi xiehui Xianggang fenhui 中華全國文藝抗敵協會香港分會) and the Hong Kong Society of Chinese Art (Xianggang Zhonghua yishu xiejinhui 香港中華藝術協進會; see Lo 1987, 53–107). As part of the CCP’s larger anti-Japanese invasion campaign and national united front campaign in the north, these societies institutionalized their literary practices by publishing anti-war magazines and curating a number of poetry readings to garner monetary and other type of support from the masses in Hong Kong. When Hong Kong fell to Japanese occupation in December 1941, some of these leftist writers moved out to seek safer shelter elsewhere; others remained to operate underground. In fact, the National Resistance Association of Literary and Art Workers (Hong Kong Branch) resurfaced after Shi the Japanese occupation was over. When the Civil War between the CCP and Kuomintang broke out in 1945, another wave of CCP-led leftist writers sojourned in Hong Kong in

order to escape Kuomintang persecution. Again, as tentacles of the CCP's ideological propaganda in literature and art they organized to create literary periodicals, found primary and middle schools, open bookstores, and curate various anti-war activities. Although these literary establishments primarily extended their influence back to the war-ridden mainland (see Chan 2018), they had taken root in Hong Kong during wartime and continued to be a persistent pro-CCP literary force after the war. For example, Joint Publishing (Sanlian shudian 三聯書店), founded as a conglomeration of three leftist bookstores in 1948 in Hong Kong, persevered throughout the Cold War and up to the present as one of the many iconic pro-China cultural institutions. In addition to reprinting books published on the mainland, it also distributed them to Sinophone Southeast Asia through the leftist publishing system.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, most of the leftist sojourners went back north to devote themselves to the construction of New China. Those staying behind were joined by the "cultural workers" (*wenhua gongzuozhe* 文化工作者) who were sent to Hong Kong on the united front (*tongzhan* 統戰) mission to spread pro-PRC, anti-capitalist, anti-imperial, and anti-colonial cultural propaganda. They organized to develop clandestine, structured, and intermixed cultural systems by either inheriting leftist institutions established during wartime or creating new ones, including bookstores-cum-publishers (e.g., Joint Publishing 三聯書店, Wanli Bookstore 萬里書店, Shanghai Bookstore 上海書局); newspapers (*Ta Kung Pao* 大公報, *Wen Wei Po* 文匯報, *New Evening Post* 新晚報); magazines (*Youths' Garden* 青年樂園, *The Young Companion* 良友雜誌, *Hai Guang Literature* 海光文藝); schools (Workers' Children Secondary School 勞工子弟學校, Heung To Middle School 香島中學, Pui Kiu Middle School 培僑中學; and even film companies (Zhonglian Film Company 中聯電影公司, Great Wall Movie Enterprise 長城製片公司, Phoenix Motion Picture 鳳凰影業公司), just to name a few.<sup>1</sup> The leftist network constituted half of Hong Kong's cultural landscape during the Cold War and, though probably suffering from a shortage of funds (see Tay 1996, 31), confronted the other more powerful anti-communist bloc strongly backed by aid from the US. Scholars have pointed out that the failure of the 1967 riots that were incited by the CCP and inspired by the Cultural Revolution significantly weakened

1 I use "clandestine" here because the CCP generally operated underground to control and direct these leftist cultural institutions. Their internal operations were either classified or strategically unrecorded. However, different types of materials keep surfacing that unveil their direct ties to CCP. For example, self-identified underground CCP member Leung Mo-han 梁慕嫻 (b. 1940) has revealed in detail how the underground CCP created and directed *Youths' Garden* as one of its outreach institutions in Hong Kong (2018).

the leftist cultural system in Hong Kong: their newspapers' sales volumes sharply decreased and many of their magazines folded under pressure (see Tay 1996, 31). Entering the 1970s, it bided its time and receded as a force of Chinese nationalism motivated by various discursive forces (see Law 2009, chapters 5–6).

Through its various institutions, the leftist cultural system cultivated an ideological environment in which it nurtured young writers, offered publication venues, and groomed its readership. He Da 何達 (1915–1994) was an unparalleled leftist poet in Hong Kong during and beyond this time. He moved to Hong Kong in 1949 and remained there until his death in 1994. He was an editor of two leftist literary magazines and a prolific contributor to many more, publishing a torrent of realist poetry that consistently celebrated the PRC, depicted working-class struggle, and criticized colonialism and imperialism. In his “From Morning to Morning” (Cong zaochen dao zaochen 從早晨到早晨) published in *Ta Kung Pao* after the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, He Da established a temporal cycle of the daily routine in the new, socialist China. The beginning of the poem depicts the dawn when people start to work and reflected the recently founded PRC where people were devoting themselves to the construction of the New China. This was followed by a typical Chinese socialist metaphor: Mao Zedong 毛澤東 rising above the awestruck masses on Tiananmen Square, representing the rising sun that shines on the country's soil. The poem goes on to describe, during the day, how the sun (Mao) inspires the people to work enthusiastically for the country's efficient recovery from war and how thankful the people are for the feasts that the prosperous socialist system provides; how, from the evening until midnight, they diligently and collectively study politics and current affairs, and how peacefully they sleep. More importantly, in the early hours while the frontier force is guarding the border against the “imperialist aggression” of the US, the writers are bolstering the ideological defenses with their words, which would appear in the newspapers the next morning. The poem finishes with what happens at five o'clock the next day.

That the poem starts at five o'clock on a typical day and finishes at the same time on the following day in New China implies a closed cycle of everyday socialist life that keeps repeating to dull the brains of Chinese political subjects and cement an amorphous ideological wall therein against the American actions in the Korean War. In a system that generates and circulates political messages endlessly, poems participate in a project much greater than the poets themselves insofar as they not only speak from the minds of individuals but also constitute a collective voice that strengthens the system. In the poem, the poets are as much a part of an active ideological

force as they are subjects being acted upon by that same force. The way that poets forsake individuality and identify with the socialist collective of the PRC to raise their political voices in poetry is characteristic of Hong Kong leftist poetry. From this perspective, He Da's "From Morning to Morning" is representative of Hong Kong leftist poetry during the postwar colonial period in the twentieth century both because of its apparent general pro-PRC, anti-American ideology typical of the local leftist system, and also because it demonstrates how poetry participates in the discursive cycle that propagates the PRC's socialist ideology in Hong Kong.

In fact, many leftist institutions overcame the temporary setbacks in the 1970s and the early 1980s and enjoyed a resurgence after the PRC and the UK signed the Joint Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong (Zhong Ying lianhe shengming 中英聯合聲明) in 1984 leading up to the 1997 handover and beyond. For example, the Lufeng yaji 爐峰雅集, a large collective of left-leaning authors that was established in 1959, continued to hold weekly tea-house gatherings and annual galas; they kept publishing their members' literary works throughout the Cold War period and only took action to come out of their unofficial status in 1995. In addition, a handful of pro-PRC literary organizations were established around 1984 and acquired official status in the early 1990s. The reason they did so was probably that official status became necessary in bidding for public funding, primarily from the newly established statutory body, the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (Xianggang yishu fazhanju 香港藝術發展局). The Dragon Incense Literary Society (Longxiang wenxue she 龍香文學社) was established in 1985 to organize exchange activities that connected the authors from both sides of the Shenzhen River. It was established as the Hong Kong Literature Promotion Association (Xianggang wenxue cujin xiehui 香港文學促進協會) in 1991, and has published more than five hundred books of "pure literature" (*chun wenxue* 純文學) written by pro-PRC authors in Hong Kong as well as a long-running literary periodical, the *Hong Kong Literary Newspaper* (*Xianggang Wenxuebao* 香港文學報). In 2021 that association was reported to have "united hundreds of literary and art groups in Hong Kong" (團結了數百個香港文藝社團).<sup>2</sup>

From the late 1980s to the mid-1990s literary organizations also appeared that were founded with an official status, such as the Federation of Hong Kong Writers (Xianggang zuojia lianhui 香港作家聯會) whose management gave the strong impression of being left-leaning and whose executive committee was composed mostly of traditional leftist cultural institutions

2 See <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/ga/2021/12-18/9633036.shtml>.



in Hong Kong. In addition to normal literary activities such as publishing and holding literary competitions, the Federation of Hong Kong Writers also organized various entertainment gatherings in Hong Kong as well as frequent sightseeing trips to the mainland—it even offered discounts in department stores and medical benefits to their members, benefits that were called “resourceful united-front means” (高明的統戰手腕; see Niu 1994 for details). More poetry-focused groups were also started, such as the International Poet’s PEN Club (Guoji shiren bihui 國際詩人筆會), founded in 1993 to promote the writing of *Huawen shige* 華文詩歌 and claimed to have “opened a path for art to connect souls, advanced the great unification and great cooperation among poets, writers, artists, and entrepreneurs around the world, while [it] received ardent support from the party and governmental institutions in many provinces and cities” (溝通心靈的藝術通道, 以促進世界詩人、作家、藝術家、實業家的大團結, 大合作, 同時也得到全國眾多的省市地區黨政機關的熱情支持; Yeman 2010). Like the International Poet’s PEN Club, more than thirty such pro-PRC poetry-related organizations, including the Hong Kong Prose Poetry Association (Xianggang sanwenshi xuehui 香港散文詩學會), Round Table Poetry Society (Yuanzhuo shihui 圓桌詩會), and Hong Kong New Poetry Association (Xianggang xinshi xuehui 香港新詩學會) came under the wing of the Association of Chinese Culture of Hong Kong (Xianggang Zhonghua wenhua zonghui 香港中華文化總會) that was inaugurated in 2000 to bring Hong Kong’s leftist camp in the cultural sector in line with the general cultural strategy of the PRC central government.<sup>3</sup> The emergence of pro-PRC literary institutions and their numerous publications in Hong Kong were not of little significance as they laid the groundwork for cultivating academic discourse that sought to gather Hong Kong’s literature written in any Sinitic language under the umbrella of *shijie Huawen wenxue* (or simply *Huawen wenxue*) as were many such China-centric literary historiographies published around the 1997 handover.<sup>4</sup>

Although Shih’s concept of the Sinophone contours the literatures of ethnic groups within the PRC, the mapping is not unproblematic when it encounters those writers who embrace China-centric ideology, such as some Tibetan writers, such as Yangdon Dhondup (2024), have pointed out. Similarly, there has been a long-lived tradition of leftist writers in Hong Kong who espouse China-centrism out of explicit or implicit political motivation.

Among the numerous leftist groups worthy of attention is the Jinling shi she 金陵詩社 founded by Fu Tianhong 傅天虹 and instituted as the

3 See <http://acchk.org.hk/%e7%b8%bd%e6%9c%83%e7%b0%a1%e4%bb%8b/>.

4 See Shi (1999). For a critique of such China-centric literary historiographies, see Chan (2010).

Contemporary Poetry Association (Dangdai shige xuehui 當代詩歌學會) in Hong Kong. Within this association, in 1987 Fu also founded a long-running poetry magazine, *Contemporary Poetry* (*Dangdai shitan* 當代詩壇), which has produced a great many volumes, often bilingual, of modern and contemporary Chinese poetry. The publications have followed the editor as he has moved around the Pearl River Delta, first to Macao in 1992, and a decade later to Zhuhai, but its publisher, the Milky Way Publishing Company (Yinhe chubanshe 銀河出版社), has remained in Hong Kong. Established with the mission of connecting Chinese poets from around the world,<sup>5</sup> *Contemporary Poetry* also tried to promote Chinese poets through translation by turning the magazine into a Chinese-English bilingual publication in 2001 (issue number 32), and it changed from traditional to simplified characters in 2006 (issue number 45). From the very beginning *Contemporary Poetry* has propagated the concept of new poetry for the masses (*dazhonghua xinshi* 大中華新詩), which has evolved into Chinese new poetry (*Hanyu xinshi* 漢語新詩), covering all modern poetry in *Hanyu* regardless of where or when it is written. According to Fu, *Hanyu xinshi* builds bridges of communication among poets, fractions of poetic styles, writing, and criticism, and connects the poetry of the *liang'an sisi* 兩岸四地 (mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao) and overseas into one unified landscape. In doing so, Fu believes the poetry written in standard modern Chinese in all corners of the world can be detached from local literary frameworks in the host countries or regions for the “substantive conversion” (實質性的皈依) into *Hanyu xinshi* (2010).

When applied to Hong Kong poetry, one of the most problematic assertions in Fu's theorization of *Hanyu xinshi* is that *Hanyu* is basically the equivalent of standard modern Chinese, and he denounces poetry with linguistic hybridity. However, the Sinitic language that mixes Cantonese, Mandarin, and classical Chinese (the so-called [Can.] *Saam kap dai* 三及第) on the phonetic and written levels, and English, as in the works of the prominent local poets such as Quanan 崑南, Choi Yim-pui 蔡炎培, and Yam Gong 飲江, has been one of the most distinctive features of Sinitic Hong Kong poetry.

The Contemporary Poetics Forum (*Dangdai shixue luntan* 當代詩學論壇) conference series, held annually since 2007, has helped disseminate the concept of Fu's *Hanyu xinshi* and further expanded it into *Hanyu xinwenxue* 漢語新文學 echoed by some scholars based in Hong Kong (e.g., Wong 2013) and Macao (e.g., Zhu 2010; 2018). As a concept that primarily originated from outside the PRC, *Hanyu xinwenxue*, including the modern literature within

5 See <http://www.purepoem.com/writeDetail.php?id=11859a39e9b5122d2941afc416464c6d>.

China proper, expresses a China-centric ideology of the Chinese diaspora eventually returning to the motherland, which resonates with the continuous strengthening of the “reunification discourse” (*huigui lunshu* 回歸論述) in the two former colonies. In addition to *Hanyu xinwenxue*'s implication of the Chinese diaspora returning home, which is exactly what Shih's Sinophone is against and what David Der-wei Wang pointed out in his debate with Wong Wai-leung, *Hanyu xinwenxue* shares the same kind of hegemonic Han-centrism within the Sinitic language family as other associated terms such as *Huawen wenxue* and *shijie Huawen wenxue* (Wang 2015, 24–25).

The conceptualization of *Huawen wenxue* as an area of academic inquiry in mainland China had its roots in the studies of *Gang-Ao-Tai wenxue* 港澳台文學 (Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan literatures) when the Research Association of Hong Kong and Taiwan Literatures (Gang-Tai wenxue yanjiuhui 港台文學研究會) was founded in 1980. The label changed to *haiwai Huawen wenxue* 海外華文文學 to cover works written in Chinese overseas and finally culminated in *shijie Huawen wenxue* (*shijie* is sometimes tactfully omitted) at the International Conference on Hong Kong Literature in 1988 (Shi 1999, 63). The series of terms that eventually settled on *shijie Huawen wenxue* were clearly coined from a perceived need to include the literatures based outside mainland China as a new branch of the China-centric research area known as *Zhongguo wenxue* 中國文學 (Chinese literature) in mainland Chinese academia.

*Shijie Huawen wenxue* also counterintuitively implies excluding mainland Chinese literature, which rings analogous to Shu-mei Shih's Sinophone's foregoing the same. That was probably the reason why Shih had to clear the confusion by differentiating between the decentralizing Sinophone studies and the China-centric hegemonic politics behind *Huawen wenxue* and *shijie Huawen wenxue* (2010, 40–41). While the difference is made unequivocal in her theorization, Shih's interlingual renderings of terminologies express an assertive manipulation in translation for the expediency of criticizing “China” or “Chinese” as a hegemonic marker: she translates *Zhongguo wenxue* into either “Chinese literature” or “literature from China”; *Huawen wenxue* into “literature from outside China”; and *shijie Huawen wenxue* into “world literature in Chinese” (40–41). While *Hua* 華 is translated as “Chinese” or “China,” the Sinograph is also the translation of the prefix “Sino-” in “Sinophone” that she adopted from David Der-wei Wang's translation (see Wang 2015, ii).<sup>6</sup> *Hua* still paradoxically denotes “outside China,” “outside

6 The translations have attracted considerable complaints from scholars whose working language is primarily Chinese (e.g., Ng 2018).

mainland China,” or “outside China proper,” depending on the context, and it is at the same time a marker shared by two critical categories with opposite sets of ideologies regarding China. *Hua* could have had the potential to become a relatively open space for negotiation between the head-to-head critical categories, just as Wang attempted to promote his more inclusive version of the Sinophone in mainland China (2015, 13) and his rebranding it using Tee Kim Tong’s translation, *Hua Yi feng* 華夷風 (36).

However, in reality, Shih’s Sinophone and mainland Chinese scholars of *shijie Huawen wenxue* often circumvent each other’s critique after initial skirmishes.<sup>7</sup> Just as Shih allows little room for an alternative interpretation of *Hua* in her warring theorization, mainland Chinese scholars’ reactions to her Sinophone are also often firmly and belligerently non-negotiable on theirs. Despite Wang’s initial attempt, the lack of negotiation resulted in a standoff reminiscent of the Cold War that ironically reinforces both sides’ *Hua* discourse in respective geopolitical chronotopes. Worse, while Sinophone’s political vision appeared to find little sympathy within China proper, the PRC’s export of China-centric cultural hegemony through various classical or modern cultural campaigns has been infiltrating Sinophone communities to varying degrees. Such paradox echoes Lo Kwai-cheung’s response to Shih’s Sinophone at the 2007 conference in Hong Kong, in which he voiced the worry that the (mainland) “Chinese scholars will appropriate the theory of the Sinophone to fortify Chinese cultural hegemony” (2008, 20) not only in China proper but also in Sinophone communities.

Whatever label it is attached to, Hong Kong’s leftist poetry has been subsisting on various CCP- or PRC-backed institutions for nearly a century. No scholar has used it to test the framework of the Sinophone because of the ideological polarity between the Sinophone and *Huawen wenxue* on the issue of China-centrism. Shih’s Sinophone tolerates, to a certain extent, the expression of “a China-centrism if it is the nostalgic kind that forever looks back at China as its cultural motherland or the source of values, nationalist or otherwise; but it is also often where the most powerful articulations against China-centrism are heard” (2010, 40). However, Hong Kong’s Sinitic poetry not only at one time expressed the southbound writers’ nostalgia for their homeland in the north, such as in the works of the so-called right-wing romantics in the early 1950s (see Leung 1992; Song 2019), but its leftist bloc has also exhibited a self-conscious nationalistic conversion to the China-centrism the CCP propagates and even an enhanced patriotic attachment

7 For a thorough summary of mainland Chinese scholars’ reactions to Shih’s and Wang’s respective versions of Sinophone literature, see Kim (2019, 301–32).

to the PRC, through the ups and downs of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including during the 2014 Umbrella and 2019–2020 Anti-ELAB movements.<sup>8</sup>

Outside the leftist camp, many poets who migrated from mainland China to Hong Kong also complicated the manifestation of China-centrism on the local poetry scene. For example, Liu Wai-tong's and Cao Shuying's poems with their allusions to classical Chinese culture, as illustrated by Klein (2018), could be said culturally China-centric, but at the same time they articulate ideological resistance to the cultural hegemony of Chineseness. Huang Canran's 黃燦然 writings about and translations of foreign poetry helped broaden the local Hong Kong Sinitic poets' horizons in the early 2000s. Those poets' cultural capital was invested back to mainland China, as they moved back north to settle in mainland China. Bei Dao 北島, after more than two decades of exile, splits his time between Hong Kong and mainland China. He also expresses, to a certain degree, China-centrism in his writings, while he also contributes significantly to the local poetic scene by organizing an international poetry festival. While most chapters of his long poem "Sidetracks" (Qilu xing 歧路行) are derived from his cultural and political associations with mainland China, he also writes in the concluding chapter (2024, 148–53): "nine tones of Cantonese no longer unfamiliar" (*jiushengdiao de Yueyu buzai mosheng* 九聲調的粵語不再陌生) and "Hong Kong has taken me in" (Wo bei Xianggang shouliu 我被香港收留), although he also admits that "Hong Kong isn't the end of my journey" (*Xianggang bushi wo lücheng de zhongdian* 香港不是我旅程的終點). Does the Sinophone tolerate the non-patriotic China-centrism of varying degrees in the works of such migrant poets originally from mainland China that do not always express nostalgia for the motherland?

Indeed, the Sinophone, as much as *Huawen wenxue*, is also an academic discursive force imposed on Sinitic Hong Kong poetry. It favors local Sinophone articulations against China-centrism with neither regard to its leftist bloc nor sympathy with certain poets' nuanced positionalities in the polarized local poetry scene. This article does not intend to defend Hong Kong's leftist poetry, which has been largely ignored in English-language and under-studied in Chinese-language scholarship, but is written precisely out of the serious concern about the local leftist literary bloc's seizure of control over the institutional resources that will inevitably jeopardize the livelihood of local Sinophone literary groups in the foreseeable post-NSL future. The numerous leftist institutions are becoming a formidable force

8 Anti-ELAB stands for Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill.

in the election of the chair of the literature sector in the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, the statutory body tasked with dispensing grants that have been supporting the livelihood of local Sinophone arts organizations so far. The resources will presumably be poured into the endeavors of publishing patriotic works: for example, on July 1, 2020, one day after the passage of the Hong Kong national security law that ended the Anti-ELAB movement, a poet named Zhao Xiaobo 招小波 (president of yet another leftist group named the Hong Kong Pioneering Poetry Association [Xianggang Xianfeng shige xiehui 香港先鋒詩歌協會]) penned a poem to celebrate the political event and said a “flame-like fervor is boiling the Victoria Harbor / warming its water temperature by one degree” (如火的情懷煮著維港 / 令水溫升高了一度) (Zhao 2020). Such patriotic poems under the wing of the “love the country, love Hong Kong” (*aiguo aigang* 愛國愛港) discourse will soon flood local literary publications.

In the preface to the special issue of the *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese*, “Identity, Issues and Development of Hong Kong Literature,” Leung Ping-kwan writes, “Hong Kong literature is not only [the topic of] academic discussion but also part of our life and culture, and deeply associated with other cultural practices” (香港文學不光是學術上的討論, 也是我們生活文化的一部分, 與其他的文化實踐息息相關; 2008, 9). While the Sinophone may be a promising utopian academic home for Sinitic Hong Kong poetry, we need to be aware that (the necessity of) its painfully recognizing rather than ignoring the leftist bloc in local cultural life could prepare us for, however dystopian, “frustration of frustration,” as Victor Fan (2019) foresaw in Hong Kong’s filmmaking sector even before the anti-ELAB movement. Writing this article is indeed an enunciation of a painful love for Sinitic Hong Kong poetry that comes from the frustration caused by the mode of heroically surviving the various political ideologies that have been imposed throughout history.

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## 14. Poetry and Subalternity: What Are We Looking for?

*Maghiel van Crevel*

**Abstract:** Battler poetry (*dagong shige*), often called migrant worker poetry in English, is writing by precarious workers in postsocialist China that addresses their socioeconomic experience. It speaks to a wide-ranging audience that includes the authors' fellow workers but also cultural officials, middle-class media consumers, labor activists, and scholars and translators, in China and elsewhere. Battler poetry raises questions that lie at the nexus of social experience and aesthetics. As such, it invites interdisciplinary work at the interface of social science and the humanities. Scholarship on battler poetry to date is dominated by paraphrastic and interpretive approaches. To complement these approaches, this chapter proposes an ontological approach that recognizes battler poetry as not just documentation or artifact but as partaking of poetic voice, a fundamental expression of humanity whose manifestations are remarkably diverse.

**Keywords:** Migrant worker literature, Chinese poetry, battler poetry, *dagong* poetry, Mu Cao

### *Shopping Street*

The girl from out of town sweeps the street at dawn  
and early passers-by heave a sigh when they see her  
Such a young girl      What a shame  
The girl from out of town sweeps the street at dusk  
and late-hour loafers heave a sigh when they see her

The middle-aged woman has lost her job  
—She has parents and children to provide for

The middle-aged woman cannot get by  
 The middle-aged woman brings a gift to the Street Office  
 and the girl from out of town is now gone  
 The middle-aged woman starts doing the sweeping  
 The middle-aged woman sweeps  
 and heaves a sigh for herself

The kid in jail has served his time is released  
 and returns to this old street that raised him  
 The people in the neighborhood grow uneasy  
 —Shouldn't let him hang out all day with nothing to do  
 If he can't make a living he might just start robbing us again  
 Come on let's all help out and do something about it

From then on day in day out  
 That big bad kid sweeps the street  
 and the passers-by spit at him full of contempt  
 A police car drives right by his side  
 and the kid ducks away in spite of himself  
 —He steals a sideways glance  
 and sees two women criminals inside the car  
 One is the girl from out of town for prostitution  
 The other is the middle-aged woman for being her pimp

《商城街》

外来妹在清晨打扫大街  
 清晨的路人为她叹息  
 这么年轻的姑娘太可惜了  
 外来妹在黄昏扫大街  
 黄昏的闲人也为她叹息

中年妇女失业了  
 ——上有老下有小啊  
 中年妇女日子不好过  
 中年妇女给街道办事处送礼后  
 外来妹走了  
 中年妇女开始每天扫地  
 中年妇女一边扫地  
 一边为自己叹息

青年坐监服刑释放  
 回到这条生养他的老街  
 周围的人不安起来  
 ——不能让他闲着没活干啊  
 他没饭吃还会再偷盗我们啊  
 大伙相互行动起来

后来的一天天  
 人高马壮的光棍青年扫大街  
 路人向他不屑地吐痰  
 一辆警车擦身而过  
 青年下意识里躲到一边  
 ——他斜了一眼  
 看见车内坐着两名女犯  
 一个是卖淫的外来妹  
 一个是拉皮条的中年妇女  
 (Mu Cao 2009, 162–64)

This is a poem by Mu Cao 墓草 (b. 1974), in my translation. In January 2017, Mu Cao contacted me on email. I had been doing literary ethnography in China for some time and become visible on social media. Mu Cao knew about my interest in China's formidable DIY tradition of unofficial (*minjian* 民间) poetry journals, and I knew Mu Cao could only ever publish unofficially. If you wanted to chalk this up to homophobia, you would not be wrong. Mu Cao is China's first openly gay poet, and this has excluded him from official publication inside the country. But there is more to it, and we need an intersectional perspective such as that taken by Bao Hongwei (2018). Bao writes on Mu Cao in the context of queer studies but begins by noting that Mu Cao is also a migrant worker who sells his labor and works for the boss. The Chinese term for this mode of subsistence is *dagong* 打工.

Mu Cao is one of about three hundred million people who have moved from the Chinese countryside to the cities since the 1980s, to escape from poverty, unemployment, and the strictures of village life amid a socio-economic transformation driven by global and local capitalism. Many do low-status, menial labor on the assembly line, in construction, and in every kind of service industry, from waste-picking and waitressing to courier delivery and sex work. The great majority are faced with social discrimination and fundamental economic insecurity: that the girl from out of town is sweeping the street today does not mean she will get to do so tomorrow. These people constitute the bulk of China's "new workers" (*xin gongren*

新工人) a designation that suggests dignity and hope but also brings to mind Laurent Berlant's notion of cruel optimism, "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (2011, 1). Successors to the socialist proletariat, the new workers are the post-socialist precariat. If the former were dignified political subjects—even if they were often spoken *for* by the authorities—the latter are more or less expendable units in the neoliberal order.

And they write literature. By no means all of them, but enough of them, and effectively enough, for something called *dagong* literature (*dagong wenxue* 打工文学), especially *dagong* poetry (*dagong shige* 打工诗歌), to enter the public eye. The Chinese terms connote a tricky combination of denigration and pride. I translate them as "battler literature" and "battler poetry," after an Australian expression that is similarly ambivalent, in the same colloquial register.<sup>1</sup> I define battler literature as writing by precarious workers in post-socialist China that addresses their socioeconomic experience. This writing contains moments of optimism, cruel and otherwise, but it often speaks of hardship and suffering.<sup>2</sup>

While the voices of its best-known authors are unmistakable, much of this writing is unsophisticated by conventional standards. This is a literature that works toward social identification and the restoration of dignity in the precarious worker as a writing and reading subject, and a literature of testimony and advocacy. As such, it brings its own aesthetics. Several of its authors have said they write to change their destiny, even as they realize this goal is hard to reach. Marginal and contested, battler literature raises questions that lie at the nexus of aesthetics and social experience. It recalls kindred literatures of oppression and emancipation, othered by the specter of the prefix: aboriginal literature, queer literature, prison literature, women's literature, and so on.

Poetry is the most prominent battler genre, and Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼 (b. 1980) is the face of battler poetry. She started out as a factory worker in Dongguan and is now a successful poet in every respect, based in Guangzhou (see Zhou 2021). Especially outside China, if people can name a second battler poet, this is usually Xu Lizhi 许立志 (1990–2014) (see van Crevel 2019). Xu's rise to fame was posthumous, and tragically occasioned by his suicide at age

1 Wikipedia, accessed May 7, 2023. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battler\\_\(underdog\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battler_(underdog)).

2 Not all scholars insist that the author needs to speak from experience. My definition is motivated by a desire to conjoin textual and ethnographic material. This chapter borrows the occasional turn of phrase from recent publications that are part of my ongoing research on battler poetry.

twenty-four. He was an employee of the Foxconn electronics manufacturing plant in Shenzhen, which is notorious for its dehumanizing labor regime.

Notably, battler poetry has regularly crossed over from its unofficial provenance in blogs and unofficial journals into official literary infrastructures, such as publishing houses, libraries, and the China Writers Association. Not so, however, for Mu Cao. And in addition to his sexuality, there may be something else that bars him from publishing through official channels. Not so much his biting satire and the unruliness of his writing, which he shares with many officially published authors; what I mean is a particularly candid portrayal of social injustice.

Mu Cao's own life story contains chilling scenes of social injustice, from a broken home and traumatizing experiences in high school (from which he was expelled) to hair-raising labor conditions in so-called black factories, where there is nothing that remotely resembles labor rights.<sup>3</sup> He does not pull his punches in his writing, which also includes fiction and short prose. Also, he is wont to point out the abuse of power that flows from hierarchy-without-accountability, in the hands of not just factory bosses but also the political authorities, embodied by the police car in "Shopping Street." The poem's closing lines illustrate both points. It doesn't really matter if losing the street-sweeping gig has in fact forced the girl and the woman into prostitution and pimping (social injustice) or they have had these labels slapped on them to justify their arrest (abuse of power). Or both.

But here is the crunch: the candor, irreverence, and acerbic tone of Mu Cao's indictment of social injustice render him invisible not just in officially published literature—but also in what counts as the "mainstream," or the "representative" variety, of the marginal, largely unofficial literature that is battler poetry. While Mu Cao is relatively well known "outside the system" (*tizhi wai* 体制外), in the same space where much of battler poetry resides, he does not appear in your typical list of happening battler poets, whether this list is drawn up close to the cultural apparatus of the state or far away from it. Mu Cao noted this himself in our email exchange and in interviews I did with him later. For the record, he published poetry that explicitly addresses the *dagong* experience as early as the year 2000, when he made his literary debut—and came out as gay—in the unofficial journal *Scrutiny* (*Shenshi* 审视).<sup>4</sup>

3 Interviews conducted during my fieldwork in 2017.

4 One of many such journals that are accessible online at Leiden University Libraries, at <https://digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl/unpo>.



I don't think Mu Cao's demonstrable qualifications as a battler poet are obstructed from view by his status as China's best-known queer poet. Rather, his invisibility in battler poetry confirms an observation made by poets, academics, and editors I interviewed during fieldwork,<sup>5</sup> which highlights the role of censorship. For all the roughness and toughness of certain specimens of battler literature, including regular lament on the suffering of precarious workers, what gets published is to some extent a sanitized body of texts. This has been cleansed of writing that descends too deeply into true horror—of the kind, for instance, that happens in black factories—and of writing that attributes the workers' ordeal to systemic problems which are ultimately brought on by policy decisions. Tellingly, the publication of Zheng Xiaoqiong's *Stories of Women Workers* (*Nü Gongji* 女工记), a landmark book in battler literature, required “the brave—if somewhat risky—decision of a senior editor,” in the words of Sun Wanning (2023, 420), since the local government had advised against publication. And that was 2012. Censorship is much more severe today.

So here we have a poetry that the inherently elite genre of literary criticism variously refers to as “subaltern” or “underclass” or “from below” (*diceng* 底层), which habitually raises the question of whether it can move up in the world to make the cut and count as actual poetry (never mind the gigantic tacit assumptions that are at play here). And, we have a queer migrant worker who questions the legitimacy of this poetry in his turn, but does so ... from below. The episode illustrates the sheer complexity of the force field in which battler poetry operates. In addition to the usual suspects in the literary field, players include various actors in the unofficial poetry circuit, the state as socioeconomic policy maker and as both sponsor and censor of literature, labor activists who promote cultural education, and last but not least news media in China and elsewhere, for battler poetry turns out to be highly mediagenic.

Things like this help explain the rapid growth of scholarly interest in subalternity and cultural production in China, with due attention to discursive positions and power relations, on the one hand, and the entanglement of aesthetics and social experience, on the other.<sup>6</sup> We can loosely map this distinction onto that of social science and the humanities. Groundbreaking contributions in these two realms have been made by Sun Wanning (2014)

5 In light of the sensitivity of the matter, they remain unnamed here.

6 See this thematic bibliography: <https://u.osu.edu/mclc/bibliographies/lit/theme-1/#MWS>. There is a substantial body of Chinese-language scholarship from the PRC, but this is increasingly restricted by censorship.

and Margaret Hillenbrand (2023) respectively, to name but two of many scholars who have contributed.

If we zoom out, this scholarship aligns with the social turn in poetry (e.g., Nowak 2020) and in cultural production at large. This is marked by social engagement with gender-race-class, the environment, and other flashpoints of inequality, by a critique of established affordances of literature and art in society, and by collaborative practices and advocacy. It may not be an exaggeration to say that poetry has exuded a new, intense kind of energy since the late twentieth century worldwide, even though this has played out differently in different places. Poetry will doubtless continue to face periodic declarations of its demise, often helpfully specified as its death—but usually by people who have no clue, so that is fine.

### Have We Struck the Balance?

In my ongoing work, I ask what battler poetry is, what it does, and what it means, according to the various parties to whom it speaks. To this end, I try to conjoin its articulations with its highly divergent representations and the resultant, intense debates. By articulations I mean the poetry itself but also discourse on the experience of battler poethood and subaltern community-building around poetry and poethood. These articulations, representations, and debates take shape in a discursive space where official and unofficial forms meet. After Caroline Levine, I use “form” to refer to organizing principles of not just the aesthetic but also the sociopolitical kind (2015). In this essay, I ask what we are *looking for* in battler poetry. By “we” I mean scholars. This includes translators, who rewrite the source text and produce influential paratexts, but I will not discuss translation here.

So what are we looking for in battler poetry? Specifically, I wonder if we have managed to strike the balance in a way that does this poetry justice. As such, this essay presents the next step in an attempt to tackle an issue I have found myself circling over the last five years or so, in scholarship and in occasional writings for a general audience.

This issue is a desire to approach battler poetry on its own terms. This simple phrase, to which the study of artifacts and communities is irresistibly drawn, is a trap door that will see one plunge to great philosophical and ideological depth and darkness. Let me say that by approaching battler poetry on its own terms, I do not mean a relativist position, much less an exoticist one. Also, I am not primarily referring to something that I do believe is crucial for understanding the emergence of battler poetry as

a cultural practice: that is, the continuing power of poetry as a meme in Chinese cultural tradition (van Crevel 2017). This image has been central to my fieldwork experience since the 1990s, and it can be seen to run through the study of Chinese poetry ever since this became a respectable academic endeavor (you will forgive me, or perhaps applaud me, for smuggling in this claim). But this essay is not about the Chineseness of Chinese poetry.

There are of course different ways to present scholarship on battler poetry to date. In an essay on Zheng Xiaoqiong, I list subalternity, gender and the patriarchy, and late capitalist ecological destruction as three thematic clusters (2023a), with the work of Sun Wanning, Justyna Jaguścik, and Zhou Xiaojing as respective examples.<sup>7</sup> In this essay I propose to take what is essentially a methodological perspective. In a nutshell: we have a wealth of paraphrastic scholarship and a fair amount of interpretive scholarship, but hardly any ontological scholarship. And we need to do something about that.

I should add that in its present form, this essay is a think piece. It sort of locks itself in at the conceptual level, and it is speculative and schematic. At this point, one could float a Chinese adage that an innocent bystander might think was a reference to robbing a jewelry store, but the insiders know better. *Pao zhuan yin yu* 抛砖引玉 means hurling bricks at others in ostensibly unreasonable hopes that they will reciprocate by lobbing beautifully chiseled pieces of jade back at you. The image is preposterous unless we take it as an enthusiastic expression of humility and respect for your interlocutors, but it can also mean you are going out on a limb.

Don't get me wrong: I love paraphrastic scholarship and interpretive scholarship. It is just that I think things could be even better. As for schematicity, I should add that I use "paraphrastic" and "interpretive" as coordinates, not pigeonholes. In practice, the paraphrastic and the interpretive overlap and intersect, within the work of individual authors and between their work. Just like subalternity, gender and the patriarchy, and ecological destruction overlap and intersect within the work of Sun, Jaguścik, and Zhou, and between their work. And just like, for the study of subalternity and cultural production at large, social science and the humanities overlap and intersect.

On paraphrase, before anything else, I dig the position that says a poem is by definition unparaphrasable. But even Cleanth Brooks, who called paraphrasing poetry a heresy, said it was alright, "provided that we know what we are doing" (1968, 160)—never mind how loudly this is begging the question. Paraphrase is perfectly fine, for instance, to make the texts of battler poetry serve as documentary material for the study of migration

7 See note 5.

and/or labor and/or gender and/or state violence, or as testimony to sustain advocacy and activism in relation to these things—all the more so because there is much battler poetry that demonstrably comes under life writing. As in “Yes, this actually happened.” On that note, there is no need to strictly, and artificially, separate scholarship from advocacy and activism. Conversely, there is quite possibly a need to consider how scholarship can contribute to advocacy and activism, in parallel with the social turn in the poetry that it is about.

Paraphrastic scholarship puts battler poetry to instrumental use, in the service of sociopolitical analysis. In varying proportions: there is, for instance, much more poetry in Zhou’s scholarship than in Sun’s, in quantitative terms. Neither the point about instrumental use nor the observation that different scholars cite different amounts of poetry is a value judgment. At the same time, these observations take us to a question that runs through the conversation at every level and that may just be impossible to dispel, judging by similar conversations on other literatures of oppression and emancipation. Is this “actual poetry” that happens to be about migrant labor, or is it migrant labor activism that happens to take the form of poetry?

This is, of course, a serious contender for the False Dichotomy Award. Then again, “false dichotomy” is what an academic might say when you ask them about the weather. But seriously, maybe the question is harmless. And maybe it is legitimate in that it prompts a variety of readers to ask themselves what they want from this poetry, what *they* are looking for, from foreign book reviewers all the way back to source text authors.

Interpretive scholarship comes in (minimally) two kinds, the symptomatic and the philological. Symptomatic interpretation is associated with cultural studies, which I loosely take as the ideologically inflected study of the full breadth of cultural production. Beyond—or, instead of—paraphrasing the poem, the researcher *talks back* to the poem, within a conceptual framework that is consciously informed by a particular worldview and by the desire for scholarship to be anchored in its social context and to influence that context. Symptomatic interpretation sits on the fence between the paraphrastic and the interpretive, but I like to think of interpretive scholarship as its home ground.

For the notion of philological interpretation, I draw on Sheldon Pollock’s definition of philology as “the practice of *making sense of texts*” (2016, 13; emphasis in the original). This is a vision of fundamental and diverse scholarship, and the caricature in which wizened scholars pore over dusty manuscripts inside the ivory tower while the world moves on should be no more than an obnoxious footnote to it. Pollock himself focuses on language

and writing, particularly ancient Sanskrit texts. But if we take the notion of texts broadly, philology is just as important for understanding present-day migrant worker body-building contests, which the Shenzhen municipality organized for the city's new arrivals at one point (Yang 2011, 5). By the philological interpretation of battler poetry, I mean research that is focused on the poem as inviting affective and intellectual engagement at material and immaterial levels of the text, toward a "making sense of the text" that entails the poem's realization as an aesthetic event.

First, this aesthetic event can draw on the sociopolitical. Second, reflection on this aesthetic event can synergize with reflection on the sociopolitical. Third, with reference to the work of Levine, such reflection can go on to explore the interaction of the aesthetic and the sociopolitical as a two-way process. Not coincidentally, these three points are a thumbnail description of Hillenbrand's work on Zheng Xiaoqiong's poetry—in a book on precariousness and cultural forms and practices in China that also extends to film and visual art, human-interest journalism, social media livestreaming, and painfully performative "suicide shows," where precarious workers scale high-rises and tower cranes, and threaten to jump unless they are given their back pay (2023). With text in a transmedial sense, symptomatic and philological interpretation can apply not just to poetry but also to suicide shows and everything in between. And of course symptomatic and philological interpretation can be hand-in-glove, and they can synergize.

## Ontological Scholarship

Now to ontological scholarship, meaning scholarship that seeks to address the nature of poetry or more literally its being, to be guided by *what poetry is*. First, let me note that what I have in mind is different from the notion of ontological criticism in the New Criticism tradition. Also, I am cheerfully aware that poetry defies definitive definition, but I would venture that calling this undefinability a defining feature of the genre can be more than mere cleverness, if we allow ourselves to reconsider what we want from definitions in the humanities.

What can an ontological perspective add to our understanding of battler poetry? First and foremost, an ontological perspective can recover a question that is always there but not always made explicit or given a lot of time: Why poetry? Why does an author turn to this particular genre to say what they say? Could they say this otherwise? Could it be that how they say precedes and determines what they say? How does this affect their listeners and

readers? What are the implications for scholarship? All this will eventually take us to the phenomenon of poetic voice, but we need a detour to get there.

Let us first consider what is perhaps an obvious way of “placing” battler poetry as we try to grasp its nature. If we went by something like family resemblance, we might tick PRC workers’ poetry from the high-socialist era, working-class poetry traditions in the UK and the US, and Dalit poetry in India. One finds workers’ poetries and subaltern poetries throughout the world, but these three have generated a lot of scholarship—just like battler poetry is in the process of doing as we speak.

Battler poetry and its kindred poetries as identified here share important motivations: (1) identification and community-building, (2) social concern and social aspiration, (3) resistance and anti-elitism, and (4) varying relations—but always *some* relation—to political authority. At the same time there are striking differences between battler poetry and the other three (which is not to say the other three are the same thing). For example: PRC workers’ poetry from the high-socialist era shows the worker as a dignified political subject whose discursive position can hardly be called subaltern. And in practice, their writing was frequently done *with* them or indeed *for* them by intellectuals, a term I use here in the social-organizational way of PRC political discourse. Working-class poetries in the UK and the US have often thrived in the context of strong unionization, which remains out of reach for workers in today’s China. And while both Dalit poetry and battler poetry count as subaltern writing, Dalit poetry contains a stronger element of political protest and Dalit as a formally institutionalized category of social-class-through-caste works differently from the atomized social group of precarious workers in the PRC today, migrant or otherwise.

But hold on. This positioning exercise is shaped by sociopolitical context more than by anything else. And one of the reasons I talk a lot about the sociopolitical in matters poetic is that I want to push back against it at the same time as embracing it. So might there be other ways of placing battler poetry?

Let me first note that the ideas developed in this essay are in some sense about letting go, but they may also seem strangely confrontational. By letting go I mean an encouragement to the reader to disable the knee-jerk reflex of pinning poetry to a sociopolitical notice board and to forsake the conversational convenience this can bring. As for the confrontation I have promised to serve up, this is one of battler poetry with the theorization of high literature, specifically of lyric poetry. For this I will be taking some of my cues from the work of Jonathan Culler, both his own theorizing and

his survey of the scholarly tradition of which this is a part (2011; 2015). That this might be a *strange* confrontation is because the texts studied in this tradition appear to be as different from battler poetry as can be, as regards both provenance and register. Culler himself, for instance, mostly studies Euro-American high poetry, from ancient classics to modernism and postmodernism.

So doesn't this fly in the face of the attempt to approach battler poetry on its own terms? First, there is the thorny issue of using theory from one place for studying another place. Suffice it here to note that this can be legitimate as long as the critic makes themselves accountable. Second, what about using theory developed for high literature to study subaltern literature? To complicate matters, we might register that some battler poets would actually welcome this, because they would like to get rid of the prefix and be seen as not battler poets but just poets, full stop. *And* we might register that it is the researcher's prerogative to keep the prefix in place, not in order to essentialize battler poethood but in order to focus. Third, doesn't this operation entail a negative definition of battler poetry, one that describes it as what it is not? Maybe—but maybe not, as I hope to show. At any rate, invoking high theory on high literature is to recognize actual power relations in literature and in the study of literature.

While in disclaimer territory, let me add that I am not suggesting that confronting battler poetry with high-literary theory somehow holds the key to its secret. We can confront battler poetry with any number of other theoretical traditions and positions, depending on—that's right—what we are looking for. So why the tradition of which Culler is a part? As I hope to show below, this is especially because of what this tradition says about poetic voice.

Maybe trying to approach battler poetry on its own terms *and* letting high-literary theory into the room can yield an interesting dynamic. There is, for instance, a lot of battler poetry that does not warrant, or justify, the philologically interpretive work that is habitually done on high poetry, popularly or unpopularly known as close reading. This is not surprising. What matters is that we could rephrase and say instead that there is a lot of battler poetry that does not require, or even better: does not *tolerate* close reading—at least of the kind associated with abstruse writing (which unfortunately tends to obscure the many other things close reading can mean; see Herrnstein-Smith 2016). And this could move us to reconsider the scope of “actual poetry,” rather than concluding that battler poetry falls outside this scope. After all, otherness is no less useful than kinship for positioning cultural forms and practices.

## A Strange Confrontation?

It was counter-intuitive curiosity that led me to reread Culler's work with battler poetry in mind, but the feeling there was something there grew stronger as I went along. I felt immersed in difference, in a stimulating way, even—or, especially—when this involved friction and collision. As it had done in a conversation with poet and scholar Piet Gerbrandy that put me on to the idea.

Let me illustrate this in three steps. First, I asked myself if a high level of abstraction is permissible if it enables some sort of commensurability between high-literary theorizing and battler poetry. When Culler writes that “complications of language ultimately have a communicative purpose” (2011, 28), is it okay, and does it help, to opine that battler poetry does in fact complicate the language that is conventionally expected of poetry? And that it tries to communicate something in the process—say, outrage over social injustice? And does it still help once we remind ourselves that Culler likely intends for the said complications to refer to linguistic experiment, to difficult and perhaps self-referential language, whereas battler poetry does not tend to be difficult in this sense, and tends to refer to the world-out-there rather than the word-in-here? Whichever personal-political position one ends up taking, making battler poetry land on the surface of high-literary theory in this way got me started.

Second, I tried to see from an alternative perspective some of the defining features of the lyric as these are carved out in Culler's work. This is not an attempt to outline Culler's vision of the lyric, or to map battler poetry onto this vision and make it fit, or even to determine whether battler poetry counts as lyric poetry (anyone say totalistic?). Rather, what I do is gingerly lift some key points from Culler's discussion of the lyric and come at them from left field, to read them in a way that will help me think about battler poetry. Not in order to challenge Culler's vision, which I find convincing, but in order to appropriate some of the junctures in this vision as an inspiration for thinking about battler poetry. And, if need be, to disassemble these junctures and rebuild them differently, even if this leaves some nuts and bolts on the table when we are done. To drag these things away from high poetry and repurpose them for subaltern poetry, if you will.

Let me start from Culler's emphasis on what he calls the linguistic patterning of the poem and its memorability. These two things are inseparable and held together by the centrality of rhythm, which triggers the poem as a somatic experience and a source of physical pleasure. Successful linguistic patterning in high poetry requires a subtle arrangement of language at the



material level, with a key role for repetition. This patterning is often seen as producing some sort of organic wholeness or minimally a precision of phrasing, and a structural presence of ambiguity. It takes place through the regulation of meter and rhyme, and equally, if more elusively, in free verse. On memorability, a *locus classicus* is Jacques Derrida's proposal that, simply and incompletely put, a poem is a text that asks you to learn it by heart (1991). Culler cites Derrida on this point and offers this juxtaposition: "With novels, we characteristically recall characters rather than phrases, but to remember a lyric is to remember at least some of its words" (2015, 130 and 139). The more effective the poem's linguistic patterning, the more memorable it becomes.

I would not describe the language in Mu Cao's "Shopping Street" as subtle, and it is easy to identify narrative elements in the poem. If its language is memorable in a somatic way that is triggered by rhythm, this is so because of the mechanical repetitions of "the girl from out of town" and "the middle-aged woman." Together with the speaker's deadpan enumeration of events, these repetitions reduce the protagonists to lifeless puppets in a gruesome social experience—which it is battler poetry's business to portray, among other things. Of course memorability à la Derrida is not just a matter of linguistic patterning, and linguistic patterning can be at its most memorable when poetic form serves to discipline heavy poetic content—and thus, paradoxically, to unleash this content with even greater force. (At the risk of stating the obvious, it is not as if subaltern literature holds the exclusive right to heavy content.)

In trying to establish a connection between battler poetry and high-literary theorizing, I have now taken two of my three steps. I have explored what is perhaps a mischievous level of abstraction and tried to see defining features of the lyric from an alternative perspective. Neither experiment has left me fully satisfied, but at least the exercise allows us to shake things up. More pertinently, I need these two steps before taking a third, which I am confident will be more satisfying. I need them as a courtesy to the richness of the tradition with which I am confronting battler poetry, and to move closer to the central tenet of my plea for more ontology.

For my third step, I draw on Culler's observation that in its enunciation, the lyric poem moves "from the claims of experience to the claims of writing" (2015, 283), and that it strives to "be an event, not a representation of an event" (2015, 137). Central to Culler's discussion is the notion of lyric address (2015, ch. 5), especially the rhetorical figure of apostrophe, which addresses something or someone who is not an actual listener. This can be one's heart, or a god, or a force of nature, but it can also be a "you" who is not the reader.

Also, this “you” can ambivalently refer to both the reader and the addressee of apostrophe within the space of a single poem.

In battler poetry, this recalls Zheng Xiaoqiong’s “Life” (Shenghuo 生活), which opens thus: “You all don’t know but my name is now hidden in a work ID / my hands are now part of the assembly line, my body signed over / to a contract” (2006, 23, my translation). Another example from battler poetry, where the addressee is not the reader, is a poem by Xiao Hai called “Debts” (Zhai 债): “You owe the everyday a happiness / You owe the dusk a dawn / You owe the dream a future / You owe your friend an expectation” (2017, 314–15, my translation). Here “you” might be the speaker themselves, with the reader “overhearing” the poet talking to themselves, in the image coined by John Stuart Mill and elaborated by Northrop Frye, on whose work Culler draws for his discussion of lyric address. As above, I am not trying to establish that apostrophe is as central to battler poetry as it is to the high-lyrical tradition. I am trying to show that it is legitimate and rewarding to shake up the compartmentalization that has befallen subaltern cultural production and bring it into conversation with verse that looks like its ultimate Other.

As an event (rather than the representation of an event) that emerges in lyric address, lyric poetry is an invocation. In Culler’s words, this is “a move by which the speaking voice claims to be not a mere speaker of verse but an embodiment of poetic tradition and the spirit of poetry.” As such its calling is an act of poetic ritual. Culler, again: “Voice calls in order to be calling. It calls in order to dramatize voice: to summon images of its power so as to establish its identity as poetic and prophetic voice” (2011, 78). Crucially, then, on the strength of this summoning alone, poetic voice claims a space from which to speak and to be heard in ways that are fundamentally different from the instrumental use of language. With the poet asking the listener to hear them out, as one might put it. And the listener knowing that something extraordinary is about to happen, in whatever shape or form.

As I continue to draw on otherness for positioning battler poetry, let me build another stark contrast to try and deconstruct, by giving an example of the power of poetic voice that is as different from Mu Cao as can be. Alan Berliner’s documentary film *First Cousin Once Removed* (2012) is a portrayal of American poet Edwin Honig, toward the end of Honig’s life, when he is suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. Fascinatingly, perhaps because he has written poetry for almost a century, Honig retains the ability to string together words elegantly while producing what is effectively nonsense. This appears as an autonomous process that is triggered by the questions posed by the filmmaker/interviewer—who is also his first cousin once removed.

The point here is that Honig gets away with producing nonsense. By this I mean that these moments in the documentary strike me as not only showcasing the ravages wrought on his mind by dementia but also allowing the viewer to marvel at this voice, metaphorical and literal alike—which, not coincidentally, utters not just words and sentences but also bird-like sounds that are not language. This is not just my subjective viewing experience. The filmmaker himself explicitly accepts, and seems to respect, Honig's babblings, and to do so because Honig is a poet. And the film intimates this throughout.

This may strike you as sleight of hand. Doesn't the filmmaker, who is also family, let Honig get away with producing nonsense before Honig has even done so, because the filmmaker knows, and knows that the viewer knows, that Honig is a poet? Not to mention that he loves him? In other words, is it justified to associate Honig's syntactically and prosodically fluent but semantically debilitated speech with poetic voice?

Again, I am trying to shake things up, in this case by smudging the line between poetic voice and nonsense, or *non*-sense. This is not a new idea in the study of poetry. Here, I use it to turn things on their heads once more, by crossing what I have called the space from which to speak and be heard. At the other end of that space, I propose to smudge the line between poetic voice and *sense*. This is sense of a hardcore kind, denoting both meaning and meaningfulness. Say, the sense of protesting against discrimination and advocating for social justice. By writing about who gets to sweep the street, or about twelve-hour shifts on the assembly line, or about left-behind children who see their migrant worker parents once a year.

Smudging the line between poetic voice and that particular kind of sense, and making this line crossable in both directions, is a plea to the scholarly community for approaching battler poetry not just as documentation (paraphrase) or artistic artifact (interpretation). But also, and equally, as partaking of poetic voice, which is a fundamental expression of humanity whose manifestations are remarkably diverse.

Why poetry? For an ontological approach, we could do worse than reminding ourselves consciously of this question at every turn, and to ask what it might mean for what we choose to read and hear, for how we choose to read and hear it, and for how we talk back. This may sound self-evident, but it is in fact a challenge, if only because of the urgent presence of the sociopolitical in this writing. Social injustice can make you feel like you have a deadline. For hearing the poetic voice, you need to take your time.

It helps to realize that not just scholars but also other readers might see battler poetry as partaking of poetic voice, even if they don't use

scholarly jargon to verbalize this. Be they the precarious workers that this poetry is about, middle-class media consumers, various actors in the literary field, or labor activists, in China or elsewhere. And it helps to note that in China, culturally trained alertness to poetic voice can explain battler poetry's development from scattered informality to an established cultural practice.

This practice includes collaborative initiatives such as the Picun Literature Group at the Migrant Workers Home, an NGO working on labor rights through what they call cultural education, situated in the outskirts of Beijing. Xiao Hai wrote that "You owe the everyday a happiness" and "You owe the dusk a dawn": this NGO is where he found salvation, in his own words. After fourteen precarious years on the assembly line, the Migrant Workers Home gave him steady work selling second-hand clothing. And through the Literature Group, he has become a published poet (van Crevel 2023b).

I bring this up to show how stories like this connect poetic voice with the more widely studied phenomenon of social voice, as something afforded by cultural production in a more instrumental perspective. That is, the voice of a social group that speaks discursively through literature, music, video, and so on, typically in the context of oppression and emancipation. Or actually audio-recordable individual voices that speak physically and do so from a discursive position that is decisively shaped by the group's socioeconomic experience.

Connecting poetic voice to social voice is recognizing poetry's ability to be about something else and yet be about itself and draw attention to itself—to its nature and its being. It also reminds us that battler poetry's overdetermination by the social experience of its authors is not inherent, or self-evident, or a feature that magically drops on to this poetry from on high. Someone does the overdetermining, and perhaps they could choose not to do so, or not to do so all the time. That someone includes us.

## In Conclusion

Subaltern cultural production invites interdisciplinary work, because of its entanglement with issues of social justice among other things. Many scholars across a range of orientations in social science and the humanities are contributing, but let me return to the work of Margaret Hillenbrand, whose work on poetry I have cited as an example of the strengths of interpretive scholarship. It takes courage to write about the suicide shows

enacted by precarious workers, to face disturbing questions raised by the delegated performance art that feeds on this tragedy—which is also a cultural practice—and to articulate disturbing conclusions.

To me, Hillenbrand's work suggests that this courage comes from the imagination that enables researchers to consider the aesthetics of what we might call extreme exposure across media and genres of literature and art. This imagination lies at the core of humanities scholarship and its immanent value. It makes the humanities indispensable for addressing fearsome sociopolitical issues that are crowding the headlines, in tandem with other fields.

I say this not to launch yet another instrumentalist argument for protecting the humanities. I say it to undergird the vision that inspires things like a conference on poetry that makes the tightrope its central image, which spawned the present volume. I say it to suggest that humanistic imagination is what enables us to think about poetry with room for its very being, even if—or, precisely because—we cannot define this.

Like someone walking in mid-air. A poet, or a translator, or a scholar, or an activist. In a balancing act, on a tightrope between the word at one end, and the world at the other. Or, between intellectual and creative impulses at one end, and moral impulses at the other. Crossing other tightropes, with other people on them. The walking we do is not just about technical prowess. And it never stops.

How do you do it? To what end? What happens if you fall off?

Says who?

Who gets to say?

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## 15. Wu Xia's Poetics of Affect

*Justyna Jaguścik*

**Abstract:** This chapter discusses poetry by the migrant worker poet Wu Xia. It places close readings within the larger context of the discourse of writing by the lower classes in postsocialist China (*diceng xiezu*). My reading of Wu's poetry steers away from the previously discussed features of Chinese migrant worker poetry, such as realistic description of laboring bodies in pain. Instead, I focus on Wu's poetics of attachment that seeks to restore the dignity of the precarious laborer and inquiry into her intriguing poetic imaginary. I argue that Wu Xia's poetry challenges the current discourse of new working classes' culture through an alliance with the more-than-human universe and her affective renegotiation of the value of factory work.

**Keywords:** Migrant worker literature, Chinese poetry, *dagong* poetry, Wu Xia

The poet and factory worker Wu Xia 鄂霞 was born in 1982 in rural Sichuan. Wu dropped out of school at the age of fourteen and soon after, she joined the large migrant labor force that flocked into the manufacturing hubs in South China after the beginning of economic reforms in the late 1970s. Despite her young age, in 1996, Wu Xia found her first job in a garment factory. The poet worked in Shenzhen's textile industry throughout her adolescence and most of her adult life, supporting herself, her ailing father, and her two daughters through factory work.<sup>1</sup> It was only in the late 2010s that Wu Xia left the factory, but since then she has faced constant setbacks in finding writing-related jobs.

The city of Shenzhen in the Pearl River Delta was among the first special economic zones, which, when they were established in 1980, marked the

1 For more details from Wu Xia's biography, see Moira DeGraef 2019.



beginning of the economic opening to the West in the PRC. Young people from the countryside flocked into the city's factories in the hope of bettering their lives through urban jobs. Not surprisingly, in the light of China's socialist tradition, this new generation of peasants-turned-workers cherished some literary ambitions too. However, in contrast to the state-endorsed proletarian literature of the Mao era (1949–1976), for nearly two decades, the cultural activities of the new post-socialist precariat fell off the radar of increasingly market-oriented publishers (see van Crevel 2017). Thus, even though the industrial South witnessed the rise of so-called migrant workers' literature, or *dagong wenxue* 打工文学, since the 1980s, this distinct literary phenomenon long remained one of limited geographical range. While migrant worker-writers could initially only publish in unofficial and local print publications, the rapid digital inclusion of large segments of Chinese population on the internet turned migrant workers' writing into a widely acknowledged, sometimes viral, social phenomenon after the turn of the twenty-first century (see van Crevel 2017; Iovene and Picerni 2022). In particular, the subgenre of migrant worker poetry, *dagong shige* 打工诗歌, has received much attention from the professional literary field. Since the mid-2000s, original work and discussions thereof by critics and academics have featured in growing numbers in official literary journals. In contemporary China, some texts of the marginalized migrant worker culture have gained a broader visibility. Among them is, for example, the 2015 anthology of migrant workers' poetry published by the poet Qin Xiaoyu 秦晓宇 under the title *My Poetry: A Lexicon of Contemporary Workers' Poetry* (*Wode shipian: dangdai gongren shidian* 我的诗篇：当代工人诗篇).<sup>2</sup> Qin also codirected a documentary dedicated to migrant worker poets and their writings.

Wu Xia is among the authors featured in Qin's "lexicon." She is one of the few female migrant worker poets whose texts have already received a warm welcome from critics and readers.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, Wu's writing often counters expectations that professional and lay readers may have toward what they consider typical migrant workers' poetry. Her voice is unique and, as such, easily distinguishable from those of other members of the writing *dagong* crowd. For example, she does not adhere to the poetics of laboring bodies in pain, which has become the perhaps most widely recognized trope of migrant workers' writing (e.g., Zhou 2021). Instead, many of her poems

2 A selection of poems from the volume and Qin's foreword are available in English. See Qin 2016.

3 On the possible reasons behind the gender imbalance see van Crevel 2017.

invoke the emotions of love and caring. In her texts, the poet cherishes the warm sunlight, and she also frequently uses verbs that describe upward movements, such as raising one's face toward the sun, or of flying birds and insects. Thus, Wu's poetic style brings more diversity to the canon of migrant workers literature, which has mostly been built out of motifs such as human alienation through assembly line work, damaged and sick bodies, or the cold industrial aesthetics of iron. To date, the Western academic reception of Wu has remained scarce in comparison with other *dagong* poets. Maghiel van Crevel is among the few scholars who have critically engaged with her writing. In his discussion of Qin Xiaoyu's anthology, van Crevel (2017) observes that Wu's poetry stands out through her "unimaginable optimism." I will return to the question of "optimism" in the closing part of the essay, but first I turn to the most striking traits, in my opinion, of Wu's poetry—its natural imaginary and her poetics of affective labor.<sup>4</sup>

### Becoming One with the More-than-human

Wu Xia's writing does not bear any traces of nostalgia for her rural childhood.<sup>5</sup> She identifies as a Shenzhen author and her poetry shares its strong local embeddedness with much of other migrant workers' writing.<sup>6</sup> However, since the beginning of economic reforms, policymakers have declined to grant migrant workers access to full residential rights in the cities. In doing so, the authorities tacitly pronounce that they expect that temporary sojourners of rural origin will return to the countryside once retired. Thus, from the authorities' perspective, the strong local identity that some of the migrant workers develop, similar to Wu Xia, after they have spent their entire adult lives in urban manufacturing quarters is an unwelcome political transgression.

With regard to the workers' mental well-being, this discriminatory residential policy generates much psychological suffering. The genre of

4 My discussion of Wu Xia's poetry is based on the twenty-one poems she wrote that feature in Qin and Yang 2019.

5 It shares this feature with female authors of migrant workers' theater. For more, see Jaguścik 2022.

6 For examples from a different geographic context, see the growing body of literature on the Beijing-based labor NGO Migrant Workers Home. The Modern Chinese Literature and Culture (MCLC) website contains a database on academic writing and translated literature, such as essays from members of the Picun Literature Group that was organized by the NGO. <https://u.osu.edu/mclc/bibliographies/lit/theme-1/#MWS>.

migrant workers' writing is abundant with texts that were inspired by their authors' feelings of non-belonging, as well as by the helplessness and uprootedness they experience regardless of their place of stay.

Wu Xia is no different—she likewise processes in writing her conflicted emotions for the urban environment that she shares with many other migrant workers. In poetry,<sup>7</sup> she has turned her convoluted feelings into the theme of forbidden love. Her “Who Can Forbid My Love” (Shei neng jinzhi wo ai 谁能禁止我爱) is a love poem addressed to the city of Shenzhen, where she has lived and worked for her entire adult life. The rhetorical question in the title of the poem makes clear that no authority has the power to tame the emotions from below. Despite her precarious residential situation, the poet feels an organic, sensual bond with the city:

each day I wake up with Shenzhen, and at night we go to sleep together  
I love her vigor and vitality; each season brings another round of flowers  
evergreen trees and grasses  
and I love every inch of her growth. This kind of love seeps  
into the pores, skin, cells, blood, bone  
even though there's no residence permit with my name on it.  
(Qin 2016, 167)<sup>8</sup>

我每天与深圳的清晨一起醒来，与深圳的夜晚同眠。  
我爱她的潮气蓬勃，金色阳光，  
一年四季轮番开放的花朵，  
常青的树和草，  
热爱她的每一寸生长。这种爱参入  
毛孔里、皮肤里、血液里、骨髓里，  
即使这座城市的户口簿上没有我的名字。<sup>9</sup>

In the first of the poem's two stanzas, Shenzhen's picturesque scenery hits the poet, “like a cluster of arrows,” right in the heart. Even though she lives in a “rented room ... locked in a dark place” (Wu 2016, 167) without full residential rights to the city that she regards as her own, only a glimpse of

7 Wu Xia's rich essayistic writing is beyond the scope of this essay. Blog entries and essays that thematize her residential status in Shenzhen not only deliver sober analyses of the shortcomings of the authorities but also candidly revise her uninformed decisions and her lack of engagement that altogether eventually led to the precarious residential situation that she shares with her daughters. For more, see Wu Xia's official WeChat account.

8 Translation by Eleanor Goodman.

9 For all poems by Wu Xia in Chinese, see Qin and Yang, 2019.

the urban beauty that engulfs her is sufficient for the poet to realize that her rural homeland has already become a foreign place (*yixiang* 异乡) to her. Wu depicts Shenzhen, the object of the lyrical "I's" attachment, as a garden city, blooming with lush vegetation, regardless of the seasons. In the light of the strict residential policies in the PRC, the reader could expect the migrant worker's love affair with the city to be destructive or sadly one-sided. However, Wu Xia renders her overwhelming emotions toward the city as nourishing powers that permeate every inch of her body, even to the point in which clear borders between the lyrical "I" and the urban ecosystem disappear. The "pores, skin, cells, blood, bone" in the second last line of the poem could either be the poet's or Shenzhen's; the syntax of the concluding sentence does not differentiate clearly between the two. Thus, forbidden love not only nourishes the lyrical speaker, but also permeates urban tissues, which cannot help but metabolize the migrant worker's forbidden feelings. Even though full residency has been denied to her, she has nevertheless entered the city's DNA. The migrant worker's illicit love affair with Shenzhen has already left its imprints on the city fabric. Some of them may remain forever, even after the worker has returned to her "foreign" hometown.

Love is one of the recurrent themes in Wu Xia's writing. Among other positively connoted feelings and bodily sensations, her poetic repertoire features recurrent descriptions of physical pleasure that the poet experiences at a glimpse of charming sights or when warm sunlight strikes her skin. Significantly, these flashes of delight appear also in texts that depict the dull and exhausting regime of assembly line work. The image of the factory worker-poet as a cog in the capitalist machine is among the most widespread in the canon of migrant workers' poetry. In comparison with the most widely received assembly line poems that focus on alienation, written by, for example, Xu Lizhi 许立志 or Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼,<sup>10</sup> Wu Xia's rendition of this theme is a substantial exception. Instead of pointing to the oppressive character of repetitive factory work, she depicts occasional escapes into the realm of freedom that she is still able to create, even in an exploitative working environment. In contrast to the "ethnographic" (Sun 2023) approach to factory poetry by Zheng Xiaoqiong, Wu Xia engages her talent and imagination for the sake of transgressive flights from the excruciating conditions of factory work. For example, in "Ivy" (Pashanhu 爬山虎) Wu writes:

10 For discussion along these lines of Xu Lizhi and Zheng Xiaoqiong's factory poems, see, for example, Xie 2009, 27–36; Gong 2012, 181–202; Zhang 2020, 33–36; Sòrace, 2020, 130–35; Zhou 2021.

On the assembly line  
 our lowered heads are immersed in work  
 when a glimpse of sunlight from the window  
 crosses my view  
 I will surely raise my head  
 and grow toward the sun  
 I'm the factory's grey wall  
 and the ivy that climbs it<sup>11</sup>

流水线上  
 我们都埋头工作  
 阳光只在窗外窥探一会儿  
 就转移了视线  
 我一定要昂起我的头  
 向着阳光生长  
 我是工厂灰墙  
 也是灰墙上的爬山虎

The short poem “Ivy” demonstrates two typical features of Wu Xia’s writing: the prioritization of sensations, particularly vision and touch, and the use of contrast. The latter serves as the organizing principle of this poem. The juxtaposition of two opposing movements of lowering and raising one’s head structures the texts into two distinctive sections, four lines each. It provides a clear division between the opening lines that describe the mechanic, all-consuming work at the assembly line and the following part, in which the lyrical persona reacts to the glimpse of sunlight. The “I” physically responds to its warmth and grows toward the sun like a plant. The two opening lines of the poem depict the speaking “I,” who works on the assembly line, as if she were one organism with her workmates. Thus, the reader first encounters a poetic representation of anonymous workers, who seem to have grown together into a multitude of lowered heads immersed in tedious work. However, in the third line of the poem, the sun suddenly breaks into the scene. Its warm light engenders the emergence and the growth of an individual lyrical “I.” Paradoxically, the poem describes the factory as a limiting and, simultaneously, necessary condition of the lyrical subjectivity’s personal growth.

Similar to “Who Can Forbid My Love,” “Ivy” also draws on an organic imaginary. In the closing lines of the poem, the factory worker describes herself by referring to a double identity—the concrete factory wall and the

11 If not otherwise mentioned, translations from Chinese are my own.

ivy that climbs it. The author leaves the reader with a powerful concluding image, which is created out of a colorful contrast between the glossy leaves of an evergreen that turns bright crimson in the fall and the massive gray construction. Here, the poem juxtaposes not only colors, but also movements—the climbing and growing of the plant with the stillness of the concrete wall. Furthermore, since the ivy is capable of sticking to structures and surfaces without structurally damaging them, Wu Xia's botanic imaginary inspires reflections that go beyond aesthetics to attachments, caring for others and for the self. The concrete construction is a necessary condition of the plant's growth, and, in return, this living organism seems to acknowledge the support received from the factory wall with a gentle touch that forever binds the two of them. Any damage inflicted on the concrete construction may concurrently endanger the ivy's existence.

In the light of the tragic fate of numerous workers, who paid with their lives for the illusion of the possibility of social upward mobility, Wu Xia's "Ivy" is a significant addition to discussions about the migrant workers' mental health. At least since the wave of factory suicides in 2010,<sup>12</sup> the broader reception of migrant workers' poetry has been overshadowed, but sadly, also engendered, by the deaths of talented authors and also of many anonymous workers. Instead of giving voice to hopelessness and dejection, Wu Xia's "Ivy" rejects self-harm or aggression and, instead, proposes a dialectic of entrapment and escape. Oppression is, in this case, a condition of personal growth that potentially begets the initiative, at least mentally, to throw off the yoke.

In addition, the image of the ivy climbing the wall introduces a future-oriented perspective that incites a vision of the ivy's eventual victory over the factory wall when the plant has finally covered the entire building. This poetic description of lush vegetation that outgrows human creation echoes another distant but iconic verse from classical poetry—in "The View in Spring" (Chun wang 春望) Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) created one of the most famous visions in the Chinese literary canon: "spring in the city, plants and trees grow deep."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in Wu Xia's "Ivy," the persistence of nature is depicted as stronger than the human world. Consequently, the text hints at a strong agency in the nonhuman world. The ivy, or the "tiger climbing the mountain," which is the literal translation of the poem's title and of the plant's name, both stand for untamed power and energy.

12 In 2010 a series of suicides at the Foxconn City industrial park in Shenzhen drew worldwide attention to abusive employment practices in mainland China.

13 Translation by Stephen Owen in Fuller 2017, 235.

## Poetics of Affective Labor

I regard the caring, gentle ivy that does no harm to the wall it is climbing as one of the defining images in Wu Xia's poetics of attachment. Also important in this context are the numerous lines in Wu Xia's poetry that refer to the sensual experience of the soothing touch. Wu, the migrant worker, has been laboring in garment factories for her entire adult life, with sewing and ironing as her main occupations. Wu, the poet, extends the seamstress' warm touch to the entire world. For example, in "I Have a Pair of Hands in Love with Work" (Wo you yi shuang re'ai laodong de shou 我有一双热爱劳动的手), she writes:

I have a pair of hands in love with work  
 I use them to open up the dawn  
 seal the night  
 From countryside to the city  
 my hands work relentlessly  
 smoothing out ups and downs

我有一双热爱劳动的手  
 我用它打开黎明  
 合拢夜色  
 从乡村到城市  
 我的双手不停劳作  
 抹平了沟沟坎坎

In the first stanza of the poem, Wu seems to be placing herself in the lineage of working goddesses who have magical powers over the world. In the Chinese tradition, Nü Wa, who is known for molding humans out of clay and mending the sky with her hands, exemplifies the myriad possibilities inherent to hardworking female hands. The second, and last, stanza, however, brings us back to the modern, mundane world. After the restless creator battled against the five elements, calluses, which she poetically compares to blossoming flowers, have grown all over the goddess's hands. These roughened patches reveal her creative powers and celestial, hardworking nature to the one who would gently hold her hand. As in "Who Can Forbid My Love," so too in "I Have a Pair of Hands in Love with Work" does the author associate love with transformative powers. The lover who touches the migrant worker's hand will discover her secret identity.

Since the emergence of the critical discourse of, about, and by writing members of the lower class (*diceng xiezu* 底层写作) in the PRC at the turn

of the twenty-first century, the topic of labor and its value in the current economic regime of turbocapitalism and mass consumption has remained of utter importance to migrant worker authors. Post-socialist workers have proved well aware of their precarious position in contemporary Chinese society, unable to compare in either social status or political power to the workers of the Mao era. Furthermore, migrant worker authors and cultural activists have actively contributed to the renegotiation of language in which labor relations are spoken about in today's China. The important role that the Beijing-based NGO Migrant Workers Home played in the popularization of the notion of "new workers" as a non-discriminatory designation for the current generation of migrant workers is a telling example.<sup>14</sup> Texts by subaltern authors have already offered invaluable insights into subject positions constructed by the new workers who struggle at the frontline of the increasingly fragmented labor market. Importantly, these texts often question identity narratives officially available to migrant workers and, in doing so, state clearly that in contrast to the Mao era, factory work has entirely lost its potential to engender positive identification with the workplace and to nourish a healthy sense of self-worth. While labor NGOs often see an escape from this situation by enhancing the collective identity of the floating population, which, in many activists and academics' opinions, would strengthen the workers' bargaining power and finally lead to the improvement of working conditions, Wu Xia's poetry proposes a different way out of the crisis. In the two poems discussed in this section, she speaks of labor as individual creation, not anonymous production. Her poetic renegotiation of the value of factory work comes up with conclusions that clearly vary with many better-known texts by migrant workers, which, as a rule, tend to expose the destructive aspects of the view of labor as utterly dispensable in the era of overproduction. The lines that perhaps best summarize the conflicted emotions of someone who engages in useless work come from the poet Xiao Hai 小海, who is a member of the literary group affiliated with the Beijing-based Migrant Workers Home. In the 2018 play *We2s. Labor Exchange Market (Women2s-laodong jiaoliu shichang 我们2s—劳动交流市场)*, which emerged from a collaboration between the Home's members and independent theater facilitators, Xiao Hai played himself. The play drew upon a number of episodes from his career in factories in southern and central China. In the opening scene, the migrant worker-turned-poet pinpointed the misery of assembly line work at a garment

14 The social scientist Lü Tu 吕途 originally proposed the concept in their writing. However, the Migrant Workers Home played an important role as a transmission belt between academic language and migrant workers associated with the NGO.



factory with the following words: “I often thought that the cloth I was making would perhaps fall apart [due to the poor quality of the materials and the expectation that workers will be operating at the fastest possible pace] after someone puts them on a few times. Sometimes, I even couldn’t tell if I was producing value or producing rubbish.”<sup>15</sup>

Alienation from the output of one’s work and the low position of the Chinese worker in the global supply system, an artifact of capitalism that only sees the commodity and not the human being behind it, is a recurrent theme in migrant workers’ poetry, the genre that has an incomparably broader reception than new workers’ theater. For example, Zheng Xiaoqiong’s poetry has been widely read by literary critics and social scientists alike for her sharp critique of the global capitalist networks of social injustice and environmental exploitation, written from the genuine perspective of a Chinese factory worker, who, in her own words, “works hectically in order to put the entire world in order in a single plant” (Zheng in Gong 2012, 151).<sup>16</sup> The irony of this line is not lost on the reader: the Chinese worker, who mainly works to satisfy the demand of the insatiable global market and who, furthermore, guarantees the proper functioning of the global production and delivery chains, has not yet profited from her contribution to the economic system in any meaningful way. She has neither purchase power, since she cannot afford to buy her own products, nor social or political power because the state has failed to ensure legal protection to workers to date. The play *Wezs. Labor Exchange Market* similarly turns to irony when Xiao Hai and other performers discuss the aftermath of their assembly line careers:

Xiao Hai: “People can only communicate with the products.”

Xiao Jing: “I feel as if I’m living with them.”

Fuzhi: “[I’ve] even fallen in love with them.”

Daimo: “At the end, all the products escape to the other shore of the ocean, and I’m lovesick every day.”<sup>17</sup>

In global capitalism, the “lovesick” worker suffers from affective malinvestment. Identification with the product does not cure the emotional void that factory workers experience.

15 I would like to express my gratitude to Paola Iovene for sharing with me the unpublished manuscript of the play, from which the quote originates. See also Iovene (2023) for an analysis of the play.

16 Translation Haomin Gong.

17 Translation Paola Iovene.

Wu Xia's poetry proposes a counterbalance to the discussion of labor alienation. Her poem "Sundress" (Diaodaiqun 吊带裙) depicts the place of the Chinese migrant factory worker in the global production system. However, Wu Xia unfolds her auto-ethnography along very different lines from those chosen by Xiao Hai or Zheng Xiaoqiong's in their similarly autobiographical writing. "Sundress" opens with the image of an exhausted female factory worker who works a long shift late into the night to prepare products for shipment. Nevertheless, the following stanzas propose a different answer to the question of the value of labor to those discussed above. Instead of creating an ironic distance that seeks to rescue the worker's integrity from the inhuman production system, Wu Xia's lyrical "I" falls in love with the consumer in the global North.

### The Sundress at Midnight

In "Sundress," Wu Xia addresses an anonymous young woman who will one day wear the dress the poet describes herself ironing and preparing for dispatch abroad. The packing area of Wu's factory in Shenzhen is flooded with artificial light, so it is impossible to say if it is a day or a night shift. However, symptoms of weariness, such as the worker's sweaty uniform, that come to light in the closing stanza of her text, suggest the end of a long, late shift. The cold light in the workshop contrasts with the warmth of the iron that is gliding over the delicate fabric of the dress:

the iron I'm holding  
collects all the warmth of my hands

I want to press the straps flat  
so they won't dig into your shoulders when you wear it<sup>18</sup>  
(Qin 2016, 165)

我手握电熨斗  
集聚我所有的手温

我要先把吊带熨平  
挂在你肩上不会勒疼你

18 Translation Eleanor Goodman.

Just as in the poems discussed in the previous section, in “Sundress,” Wu Xia prioritizes the smoothing, gentle and warm touch that is the nonverbal expression of caring for the other, here a distant stranger in a remote unknown place. In contrast to the doubts that other migrant workers authors have voiced about the value of their work, Wu Xia describes herself as the behind-the-scenes director of a beautiful story in which, as she plots, the sundress would play a central role.

The lyrical “I” cherishes the idea that the dress, which she is carefully preparing for shipment, will bring about beauty and happiness. She imagines that the future owner of the dress will flourish like a charming flower. Thus, despite the late hour, she works with a great dedication to detail. She does not spare any efforts because she believes that the dress can bestow pleasure, love and beauty on the young woman who will wear it. Against the logic of mass production and consumption, Wu’s poem seeks to restore the singularity of the product and of the customer:

last I'll smooth the dress out  
 to iron the pleats to equal widths  
 so you can sit by a lake or on a grassy lawn  
 and wait for a breeze  
 like a flower  
 ...  
 and the sundress will be packed and shipped  
 to a fashionable store  
 it will wait just for you  
 unknown girl  
 I love you  
 (Qin 2016, 165)

最后把裙子展开  
 我要把每个褶皱的宽度熨得都相等  
 让你在湖边 或者草坪上  
 等待风吹  
 像花儿一样

吊带裙 它将被运出车间  
 走向某个城市 某个时尚的店面  
 在某个下午或者晚上  
 等待唯一的你

陌生的姑娘  
 我爱你

The closing line of the poem conjures another unusual love affair in Wu Xia's repertoire, which contains many examples of interspecies care. Following the pattern of the ivy's gentle attachment to the concrete factory wall and the migrant worker's romance with the inhospitable city, in "Sundress," an exhausted worker from the global South declares her love for the consumer in the North. Significantly, Wu Xia's emotional investment in the effects of her labor allows her to break out of the vicious circle of alienation and self-doubt that is a recurrent theme in different texts by migrant workers. Furthermore, Wu Xia depicts the sundress as if it were a unique creation and a personal gift—even a magical object—that has the power to change the life of its future owner. Finally, the sundress is the palpable, material representation of Wu Xia's love poem, in which the worker addresses the girl who will soon wear her creation. The subtle and romantic lyrical voice accompanies the gentle touch of warm working hands, which transform emotions into a material object. As in "Who Can Forbid My Love," the author does not expect to be loved back in exchange for her emotional engagement, however, she claims that her feelings impact her love objects in a meaningful way.

The episode dedicated to Wu Xia from the documentary film *My Poetry* by Wu Feiyue 吴飞跃 and Qin Xiaoyu shows the poet commenting on her living and writing. The footage faithfully translates Wu Xia's gentle poetic voice into cinematography—it was recorded on a bright sunny day and the poet's appearance is carefully elegant and feminine. When she reads "Sundress," the movie first shows her ironing and folding a red dress, whereas towards the end of this episode, Wu Xia appears on screen wearing the same dress. We hear her saying, "One could say, this girl is someone else and [it's] also me"<sup>19</sup> before the closing verse of the original poem rings out, "unknown girl / I love you."

In the light of this inserted comment by the poet, the "Sundress" is best paired and read together with another short piece entitled "Midnight" (Yeban 夜半). Wu Xia wrote it in the first person and it can be safely read as her personal confession.<sup>20</sup> Like "Sundress," "Midnight" is also a factory poem. Both texts depict the migrant worker late at night, and they likewise steer away from the representative tropes in migrant workers' poetry, such as depictions of exhausting night shifts and the physical symptoms thereof, such as sudden eruptions of the traumatized subconscious in nightmarish

19 "可以说这个姑娘是别人, 也是我" See <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1nL4y1J7iV/>, 03:35, accessed March 27, 2023.

20 Wu Xia recalls the episode that she describes in this poem in the film "Iron Moon." See, [https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1nL4y1J7iV?share\\_source=copy\\_web](https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1nL4y1J7iV?share_source=copy_web), 01:08, accessed April 11, 2023.

screams from sleeping women in factory dorms.<sup>21</sup> “Midnight” begins with a candid account of the lyrical “I” sneaking out of her dorm room, the place that has been described by scholars and poets as the setting of the pathological nocturnal scream. The lyrical “I” leaves the dark scene behind, and already on her way out, she confesses that she changed into a sundress that she had bought during an earlier visit to the night market. Then, she hides herself in a shower stall in the deserted washroom and begins to spin around like a young girl. Joy and excitement fill the scene—the poet’s heart jumps like “unruly sparrows” and the two sashes of the open window seems to be “hugging her silhouette.” She reciprocates its kindness with a smile. Again, like in “The Ivy,” pleasure first enters the scene when the lyrical “I” exits the workers’ collective, either physically or mentally. The factory becomes an individual’s playground that engenders moments of unrestrained joy and sensual pleasure.

Wu Xia’s poetic imaginary challenges the critical *diceng* discourse used in China and elsewhere. Her writing goes against the grain of the common emancipatory narrative that is shared by many labor activists and academics alike who prioritize the workers’ collective over individual voices. Similar ideas pervade the literary discourse of migrant workers literature. Critics expect that even acknowledged authors with distinctly recognizable writing styles will mainly give witness to injustice by documenting the lives of subaltern workers who cannot represent themselves. Maghiel van Crevel (2019, 2021, and his chapter in this volume) has already addressed this overdetermination of *dagong* literature in a series of essays, which inquire into the entanglements of literary analyses and social criticism with academic activism. For example, in his article (2019) entitled “Misfit: Xu Lizhi and Battlers Poetry (Dagong Shige)” van Crevel argues that the most widely received migrant worker-poet internationally, the prematurely deceased Xu Lizhi, can hardly be perceived as the key representative of the genre. Wu Xia’s poetics of affective labor likewise goes against the conventional understanding of *dagong* literature as a textual representation of physical and mental suffering of the post-socialist precariat. From this perspective, she is also a “misfit.” Nevertheless, in contrast to Xu Lizhi, Wu Xia has never been perceived as a figurehead of migrant workers’ poetry. The question that arises at this point is if from the perspective of the genre, the fitting poets are indeed mostly anonymous authors of formulaic verse about emotional homelessness and the workers’ laboring bodies in pain.

21 For more on the scream, see chapter 6 in Pun 2005 and Sun 2023.

The concluding section of this chapter is an exercise in tightrope walking towards the direction explored by van Crevel in his recent work on migrant workers' poetry. For a European, white, middle-class academic, writing about Chinese migrant workers' poetry is always already a balancing act between, in van Crevel's words, "words" and "worlds." These two realms await more attention, because, to date, the poets' precarious "worlds" have received significantly more scrutiny than their "words." Correspondingly, other elements in this conundrum deserve more critical reflection, for example the gulf between academic "wor(l)ds" and the poets' "words."

### The Optimism of the Misfit

Wu Xia's "Sundress" is to date the poem that has attracted most scholarly attention. Li and Rong propose an interpretation of the text from the culture studies perspective in two essays that they coauthored in 2019 and 2021 respectively. The latter text attempts to bridge the gap between "words" and "worlds" in that it proposes a close reading based on detailed linguistic analyses of Wu's poem. Nevertheless, for the same reasons that I have described Wu Xia as a "misfit" in the field of migrant workers' literature, I perceive it as problematic that Li and Rong extrapolate their philological close reading of one poem, "Sundress," to the entire canon of "poetry of contemporary Chinese female migrant workers" to draw general conclusions about the "self-perception and image projection" (2021, 2) in the subgenre. Furthermore, in both essays, Li and Rong read Wu Xia's poetics of attachment (to fantasy, pleasure, and labor) as an expression of a "(mis)identification with a middle-class girl who buys and puts on the dress that she irons" (2021, 1). According to them, this "(mis)identification" with a middle-class image is politically disempowering, because it estranges the new worker from her revolutionary past and, consequently, prevents her from developing a class consciousness (2019, 774–79). In different words, Li and Rong interpret "Sundress" as a symptom of the migrant workers' propensity for "cruel optimism," that exists when "something you desire [i.e., the middle-class status] is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant 2011, 1). According to Li and Rong (2019), the fantasy of "the good life" and "love" (see Berlant 2011), which the party-state and mass media use to sate working class ideas of value and worth, has enough power to bind the exhausted factory worker to the steam press until the early morning hours.

Despite their careful philological scrutiny, Li and Rong's (2019, 2021) analysis brings back doubts pertinent to the different agendas of "words"

and the lived “worlds” of poets and scholars. Van Crevel’s (2021) provocative question—“what is it the researcher wants from this writing?”—should in this case perhaps be answered by enumerating the items Li and Rong report as missing in Wu Xia’s “Sundress.” To name but a few, these items include descriptions of “exploitation in the factory,” “the rage that workers may have,” or of the lyrical subjectivity of the “identity as the working class” (2021, 10).

A reading of “Sundress” that places the poem within the wider corpus of Wu Xia’s writing casts doubt on Li and Rong’s description of the lyrical voice as interpellated by the ideological apparatus of the state-party, which promotes the slogan of the “China Dream” to all citizens regardless of their social standing. My earlier discussion of “Midnight” shows that “the dress” does not simply represent a pleasure and beauty that is available exclusively to the middle class. On the contrary, it can be a source of great enjoyment that is likewise accessible to a factory worker.

“I Did Think about Death” (Wo bu shi mei xiang guo si 我不是没想过死) is another poem by Wu Xia that suspends the “cruel optimism” inherent to the state’s ideology. The three stanzas are written in the first person, whose bold poetic voice counters any claims about the alleged passivity of the daydreaming, “(mis)identifying” migrant worker. If anything, it squarely faces the commonplace choices, suicide among them, available to the precariat in today’s China:

I have already stood on a windowsill on the fifth floor  
 experiencing a yet unknown lightness, only one step necessary  
 and the worries of this world would all disappear.

我曾站上五楼的窗台  
 感觉到从未有过的轻松，只需要迈出去一步  
 这尘世的烦恼尽可消除。

The second stanza of “I Did Think about Death” compares the falling human body to worthless objects, even trash: a plastic bag and a balloon. These comparisons underscore the lyrical “I’s” sense of disillusionment with societal reality, and also her hardy awareness of the low position that bodies like hers occupy in the social hierarchy. Even though the migrant worker seems to be just as uprooted and “floating” as the almost weightless objects carried by the wind, her body will, in contrast to a plastic bag or a balloon, fall to the ground with “a low dull thud” (Wu 2019, 124).

For the sake of her elderly parents, her two daughters and projected future love, Wu Xia eventually decides against suicide. The closing verses

of the poem demonstrate that this choice of life is just as pertinent to the content of her poetry:

Because of all that, I don't want to die, exactly as I don't want to recount  
my sufferings  
I will let them rot in the mud and cultivate flowers of love

因此不愿死去，正如我不愿诉说我的苦难  
就让它们烂在泥土里，培植爱的花朵

Thus, while it is true that since the beginning of the reform era in the late 1970s, the party-state has been fueling migrant expectations of upward social movement with fantasies of a good life, most recently rendered in the “China Dream” that centers around the accessibility of the middle-class lifestyle to hardworking individuals of any social background, it can be assumed that the new workers are less susceptible to such top-down inflicted enchantments.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, Wu Xia's writing does not surrender to a cruelly optimistic (mis)identification with a middle-class dream that has been defined in terms of buying power and consumption level. By contrast, the poet seems to recognize the cruel reality of her actual social position, but nevertheless, she refuses to give in. Despite society's lack of care for her well-being, or of some scholars' expectations that she become jaded and resentful, her “poetics of attachment” belies a different perspective, instead—her care for the beauty of the (non)human nature. Subversion of the current social order in Wu Xia's poetry works accordingly not through active protest or rejection of capitalist ideology, but through the inclusion of the more-than-human in her search for affiliation with the nonhuman. Thus, for example, in “Ivy,” Wu Xia's insubordinate lyrical imagination circumvents the human world of social divisions and hierarchies and seeks to inquire into deep entanglements of natural and intersubjective dependencies. Furthermore, with her poetics of affective labor, the poet undermines the factory regime of serialized mass production with an emphasis on the worker's singular creativity and, in doing so, restores her own dignity at work. Exactly because of the “misfit” originality of her writing, Wu Xia demonstrates that the factory “world” can inspire very different “words.” Consequently, she shows the creative potential inherent to a genre that can go far beyond mimetic re-presentation.

22 For more on the new workers and the precariat, see, the Focus section in *Made in China Journal* 2 (4) (2017) and also Smith and Pun 2018.



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The 1919 May Fourth movement was the breeding ground for experiments by authors inspired by new world literary trends. Under Mao Zedong, folk songs accompanied political campaigns such as the Great Leap Forward. Misty Poetry of the 1980s contributed to the humanistic discourse of the post-Mao reform era. The most recent stage in Chinese poetry resonates with contemporary concerns, such as technological innovation, environmental degradation, socio-political transformations, and the return of geopolitical Cold War divisions. In search of creative responses to the crisis, poets frequently revisit the past while holding on to their poetic language of self-reflection and social critique. This volume identifies three foci in contemporary poetry discourses: formal crossovers, multiple realities, and liquid boundaries. These three themes often intersect within texts from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan discussed in the book.

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