

# Walk on the Wild Side: Snapshots of the Chinese Poetry Scene

*by Maghiel van Crevel*



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## OUT OF HAND

1.

ZHENGZHOU, 11 JUNE 2017.<sup>\*1</sup> It is seven AM when Wuliaoren texts me on WeChat that he is freaking out and coming over from Beijing right now, because word is that Dianqiu Gujiu has died. I am in the middle of organizing yesterday's fieldnotes, in one of several dozen Scandinavian log cabins that are lined up way too neatly for Scandinavian log cabins, in the Yellow River Leisure Gardens. Replete with restaurants, meeting rooms, and dreamy lakes that double as fishing ponds, the resort lies just outside the city. Lang Mao is hosting a poets' conference here, in a display of hospitality and wealth and perhaps to ensure that any overly "poetic" behavior happens in a discreet location. Last night's program included live music, with singer Qin Yong inviting the audience to text him improvised poetry for instant performance. Dianqiu was all over the place, bouncing back and forth between the tables and the stage, drinking like a fish and making merry like there was no tomorrow. Just after midnight, when all but the most hardcore party elements had retired, a WeChat post announced his sudden passing from a cerebral hemorrhage caused by over-excitement and excessive alcohol intake. Guan Dangsheng, the author of the post, bemoaned the shocking loss of a poet and a friend, adding that Dianqiu's family in Guangzhou had been contacted and were on their way to Zhengzhou.



Guan Dangsheng's post.

2.

Wuliaoren, Dianqiu's self-declared disciple in trash poetry 垃圾诗歌,<sup>2</sup> found out about an hour ago. He has since tried and failed to reach Guan and other trashers and trash aficionados who are at the conference (no one is answering their phones) and booked himself onto the first available train to Zhengzhou. Now he's asking me what's going on. Has Dianqiu really died? I do some vicarious, second-order freaking out, text Wuliaoren that I'll get back to him ASAP, and step out of my cabin into a loose procession of poets on their way to breakfast. When I run into Guan, who stands smoking by the wayside and looks his usual unbothered, grinning self, he says not to worry. It was a hoax. Later, we find out that it went off a little too well. In the afternoon, Dianqiu apologizes to those who saw the news online and believed it. Including his wife.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay draws on fieldwork in China throughout, most recently from September 2016 to June 2017 but also in earlier years, including regular event attendance and many personal interviews. Brief accounts of a few of the fieldwork episodes have appeared in van Crevel 2017b. Chinese characters for the names of individuals and institutions—including journals and public WeChat accounts—are given in the index, with the occasional exception where a name is important enough for the original to appear in the main text. Characters for book and film titles are given in the list of works cited. Characters for key concepts appear in the text where they might be relevant to the sinophone reader. Where the text contains enough info for the reader to find the relevant material directly in the list of works cited, no footnotes have been added.

<sup>2</sup> Inwood translates 垃圾 as "rubbish."

3.

I am in the final days of ten months in mainland China. Many things that have struck me about the poetry scene are in evidence in the Leisure Gardens, at what is formally called the Conference on Schools in Chinese Avant-Garde Poetry, four days in length. First of all, this get-together is typical of an activism that defies anything that might resemble keeping up: with texts and platforms (books, journals, websites, blogs, Weibo, WeChat), with events, with individuals and groups, with topics, issues and trends, with projects and research centers, with histories and futures. With who is writing what and hanging out with whom and getting published where, and how it all works and what it all means and to whom. This is true for poetry but also for what I'll call commentary, all the way from hardcore scholarship to the swarms of emoji for praise and blame that careen through the arcades of social media. Which, incidentally, has become a prime channel for publicizing and disseminating hardcore scholarship, not to mention poetry itself. The web and social media have added an entirely new dimension to the poetry scene over the last twenty years,<sup>3</sup> but poetry in print is anything but out. If someone unplugged the internet tomorrow, this breathless dynamism would continue apace in the other forms and media that are available to the genre.



The conference banner.

4.

In all, the poetry scene exudes an almost unimaginable vitality that gives the lie to persistent lament over its “marginalization.” On that note, if we go by numbers only, which we shouldn't, modern poetry is marginal throughout the world. And if we allow the nature of the genre in its modern incarnations to enter our line of vision, it might be only a little controversial to say that such marginality is inherent to it. This is a bigger deal in China than in many other places, because of the continuing, massive presence of classical poetry and the contrast with the roaring 1980s—but the 1980s new poetry surge 新诗潮 was really an anomaly, occasioned by a happy meeting of the public's hunger for cultural liberalization and the poets' activism after the Cultural Revolution, before other distractions had begun to compete. I feel like a highly motivated scratched record when I say all this at every opportunity, as an outside prisoner of what Heather Inwood calls contemporary China's poetry paradox: a representation of poetry as all but dead and a reality of poetry being remarkably alive.<sup>4</sup>



Scratched record. Photograph by Huang Lihai.

5.

As for event culture and poetry as part of the “culture economy” 文化经济 at large, even a seasoned, energetic scholar like Li Runxia, who has published annual chronicles of milestones in poetry since the mid-2000s, calls the sheer frequency of conferences, symposia, workshops, recitals, book launches, award ceremonies, and so on overwhelming.<sup>5</sup> There are hundreds of

3 See, for instance, Day 2008, Inwood 2014: ch 1, Hockx 2015: ch 4, Sun Xiaoya 2016: ch 1.

4 See van Crevel 2008: ch 1, Inwood 2014.

5 E.g. Li Runxia and Xue Yuanyuan 2014. For event culture, the “culture economy,” and an early observation of a renaissance of poetry recitation in the new century, see Crespi 2009: ch 7; see also Inwood 2014: ch 3.

events each year that are big enough in one way or another to get a mention, and the chronicles are nowhere near complete. Of course, all she does is keep a list, since it is physically impossible to attend more than a fraction of what is on offer. Publicity for all these gigs comes in a stream of announcements and invitations, often for activities that will kick off at short notice, whose themes—say, a century of new poetry 新诗, with a handful of subthemes—frequently overlap and will accommodate anything anyone might want to discuss. Whereupon the informal conversations begin. “Are you going? No? But they have your name on the list!” The muchness and the speed of it are out of this world.

6. The conference declares itself to be about “Chinese poetry,” as in 中国诗歌 ‘poetry of China’ rather than 汉语诗歌 or 华语诗歌 ‘poetry in Chinese,’ even though no one is looking, so to speak. Well, I guess in Zhengzhou, yours truly was looking, as the sole representative—the epithet is sadly undeflectable—of scary syndicates such as “the international poetry scene” and “foreign sinologists.” Especially the latter continues to trigger rich, conflicting, and sometimes mind-boggling imageries, from misguided colonial relic to sage arbiter of taste. But many events that do not involve a single non-Chinese person or text also advertise themselves as being on “poetry of China.” The unrelenting identification of modern Chinese poets with a nation, not just externally but among themselves and coupled with permanent, vicious infighting, is food for thought. All the more so in light of the uneasy, intense way *this* nation’s poetry relates to foreign literature and world literature. Just like a century ago, even though in the meantime everything has changed, right up to the ways in which that good old obsession with China among its literati manifests itself.

7. The conference name also stubbornly employs the category of avant-garde poetry 先锋诗歌, although this might now be past its expiry date even in the China-specific sense in which it is used here (more on this later). In a related point, the focus on schools 流派 exemplifies a popular pastime—with a genealogy stretching back to the early twentieth century<sup>6</sup>—of identifying groupings in poetry based on generations, geography, gender, poetics, alma maters, soulmateship, and other anchors for ties of allegiance. A classic example is Xu Jingya’s 1986 “Grand Exhibition of Modernist Poetry Groups,” and the famous big red sourcebook that followed.<sup>7</sup> Not at all coincidentally, Xu is a guest of honor in Zhengzhou. Thirty years on, the erstwhile Young Turk is welcomed back as the grand old man of the Schools. If the frantic Ismism of the 1980s lies far behind us, so does the disavowal of collective identities that characterized the early and mid-1990s poetry scene. Little remains of the disillusionment, soul-searching, and atomization that followed the turn things took in 1989—to stick with a domestically permitted, sanitized word choice for the Tiananmen massacre—and then Deng Xiaoping’s Southern Tour, catalysts of a sea change in the cultural climate. At the time, keywords included commercialization, the rise of entertainment and popular culture, and the marginalization of poetry. But in the new century, there is again plenty of space for grand visions and alliances.



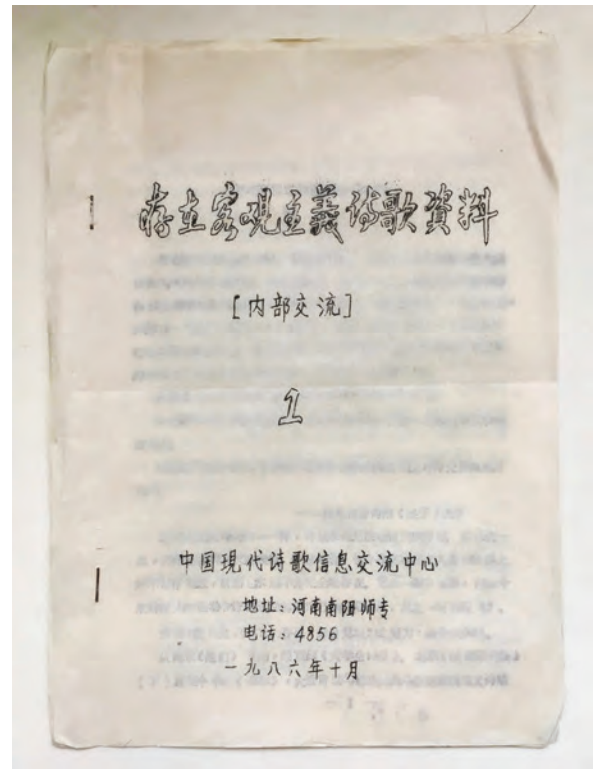
Xu Jingya et al's *Overview of Chinese Modernist Poetry Groups 1986-1988*.

6 See Denton and Hockx 2008, Hockx 2016.

7 See Day 2005b; Xu Jingya et al 1988.



8. As such, it is very much the done thing to aspire to a place in Literary History at the level of groups as well as that of individuals. And that's easier if you team up, banner-wave, and sloganize, and if you have a budget. Back in the day, Lang Mao ran one of the many mid-1980s groups that began to put out the unofficial poetry journals that have shaped the face of Chinese poetry since the Cultural Revolution.<sup>8</sup> He made a journal called *Existential Objectivism Poetry Materials*, out of Wuhan, where he was a student, and by the looks of it he was very much in the middle of things. But then he went on to do other stuff, and existential objectivism didn't stick in the collective memory in the way that other groups, isms, and journals did.



*Existential Objectivism Poetry Materials*  
no. 1 (1986), "for internal exchange."

9. Like many other writers and artists of the 1980s "Golden Age" generation—famous because they were there when it was all happening, infamous for thinking of "their" 1980s as unique and unbeatable for cultural significance—Lang Mao has done well in material terms. Now the CEO of a Zhengzhou-based culture and media company, he has the wherewithal to invite a large group of poets and a handful of scholars for a three-night stay in the Leisure Gardens. There are about forty of us. And, during the closing session, to push through a "Zhengzhou Communique" after dismissing sensible comments from the floor, in true CEO style. His insistence on the original wording doesn't lead to any real debate—don't bite the hand that feeds you?—and the communique appears in various online media the same day, followed a few days later by some juicy PR with lots of pictures on co organizer Feng's blog, covering solemn intellectual activity as well as a fistfight and log cabin architecture. The communique had been included as a discussion paper (yeah, right) in the conference materials, alongside an essay on "the definition of schools in Chinese avant-garde poetry, with case studies." What these documents want to do is re-insert Lang Mao's journal into the narrative of the avant-garde after the fact, alongside long-canonical journals like *Today*, *Them*, *At Sea*, *Not-Not*, and so on.

LITERARY HISTORY IS A JOKE,  
BUT WE'RE SERIOUS ABOUT IT

10. Quite aside from their chances of success, it's not just nostalgic businesspeople resuscitating their one-time poetry mission who want to leave their mark. Dianqiu, he of the sudden passing, is a railway policeman in Guangzhou with something inimitably rock-n-roll about him, even though he ticks all the wrong boxes. He is a cop (of sorts), he is overweight, he wears garish, synthetic shorts and T-shirts and flip-flops and fiercely unfashionable reading

<sup>8</sup> See van Crevel 2007.

glasses, and he appears to find himself even more ridiculous than he finds everyone else. Prior to his death gig, on Saturday, he gives an infectious talk on how he became a trash poet. When Fan Si, also from Guangdong and also in attendance, urged him to join the trash movement, Dianqiu wasn't thrilled, he says—until Fan Si asked him “But wouldn't you like to be part of Literary History?” His delivery of the story is at once clownish and sincere. We are in stitches, but we believe him. Literary history is a joke, but we're serious about it. I don't know how he does it.

11. And the Zhengzhou get-together highlights other features of the poetry scene. Take, for instance, the entanglement of official 官方 and unofficial 民间 institutions. (There are about ten defensible renderings for 民间. In certain contexts it translates well as “unofficial,” but usually “from among the people” is as good as it gets. I'll use this expression from here on, without the ironizing quotation marks it would normally require outside mainland-Chinese discourse.) In this case, the conference organizers include the municipal government, through the Zhengzhou Literature and Art Federation, but also Shizhongren's Archive of Chinese Poetry. The Archive is an outfit from among the people, as we will see below.

12. Or take the unassailable hierarchy of participants, based on age and other status markers—everyone always knows everyone else's year of birth—and visible in things like dinner seatings and the order of presenters and their speaking time in real life, as distinct from the program leaflet. The status markers include transgressive behavior (for poets) as well as establishment credentials (for scholars and officials). And, of course, foreign-guesthood, albeit in unpredictable ways. I regularly get red carpet treatment, but also the odd dose of disdain or good clean xenophobia. Or take the conjunction of national and local identities, usually at the level of the province and sometimes at the level of the city—here, it is Henan rather than Zhengzhou—with local officials, poets, and scholars getting their moment in the sun. Local poet Ya Liu has a liquor factory and supplies the conference, and local existential objectivism lobbyist Li Xia orders me to drink more and faster, because he is local (and because he is older). Having just waded through an insistent liquid welcome by local official Old Guo, I get edgy when a polite No Thank You doesn't work.

13. Or take gender. Why are poetry activities and the discourse about poetry in the broadest sense such deafeningly male-dominated affairs?<sup>9</sup> This is even more of a problem because so many women are writing so much poetry of undisputed quality—which is often called women's poetry 女性诗歌 in a one-on-one relation to its authors' gender and sometimes essentialized and cordoned off as such, an issue to which we will return. Similarly, there are many outstanding women scholars of poetry—Li Runxia, Luo Xiaofeng, Sun Xiaoya, Tang Qiaoqiao, Zhou Zan, and the list goes on—but they are outnumbered heavily by men. In academia, the leaky pipeline does what it's good at, in China as elsewhere.

14. At any rate, all thirty-two listed speakers at the Zhengzhou conference were men—ok, you might have heard of gender imbalance before, but just let that sink in for a moment—with the exception of An Qi, who was billed to mc an evening recital. But she wasn't there. From September 2016 to June 2017, many of the poetry events I attended exclusively or

<sup>9</sup> This has been noted before, e.g. Yeh 1996, Day 2005a, Inwood 2014.

near-exclusively featured male speakers (often including myself). All but one of the two dozen speakers at a battlers poetry 打工诗歌 conference in Hengxi. All nine speakers at a screening of Qin Xiaoyu and Wu Feiyue's documentary *My Poems / Iron Moon* at Peking University (PKU). All eight speakers at a salon on poetry's engagement with reality at Nanjing University. And so on. Especially in university settings, these men were usually addressing a predominantly female audience.



From left to right: Su Feishu, Yang Li, Pu Xiubiao, and Daodao at the Zhengzhou conference. From Feng's conference report. No photographer identified.

15. To be sure, there are counter-examples and there always have been, *Not-Not* being one from the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> And it's not as if gender imbalance and invisible women are unique to the Chinese poetry scene. Two examples close to home: my employer, Leiden University, has serious diversity issues, and I was scoffed at as "politically correct" by a fellow panel member a couple years ago at a literary event in Amsterdam when I asked whether an all-male line-up was a good idea, even if there weren't quite thirty-two of us. I am not trying to tell other people how to live their lives or view their worlds, at least not without being aware that they may feel it's none of my business. All the same, it is shocking how many men and how few women visibly and audibly *get to speak* on the Chinese poetry scene, as in producing and shaping the discourse through editorships, event organization, group formation, access to public and private funding, jury memberships, academic and publishing leverage, and more generally running the show. On that note, this situation inevitably affects research that is curious about the show—such as the present essay. It isn't as if the Bureau of Male Dominance sent me an itinerary in the mail and all I could do was redeem the coupons, and I read and met and spoke with many women poets and scholars while in China, some of whom I have known and worked with for years. Yet, inasmuch as this essay foregrounds the hyperactivity that is such a conspicuous feature of the poetry scene, it potentially reinforces the gender imbalance it calls into question.

16. Notably, on the poetry scene, gender imbalance doesn't seem to be widely perceived as a problem or even something that merits discussion. When I brought it up during the founding meeting of a group called the Seven Masters of Jiangnan 江南七子 in Changshu in October 2016, this was met with blank stares (yes, the Jiangnan Seven are all men, just like their Qing-dynasty predecessors and other sevens in Chinese literary history). One of the other settings in which I asked about it was the closing session of the Zhengzhou conference, noting that there was one woman among the forty or so people seated at the table, who was not on the list of speakers and had not been introduced, and that I had been struck by the low visibility of women in poetry-related activism and discourse. (What I mean here should perhaps really be called *activitism* as it is more organizational than political in nature: in Chinese, the relevant terminology includes 活动家 'organizer, operator' and 行动派 'activist'; and 积极分子 '[politically] active element,' but this is often used ironically.)

<sup>10</sup> Day 2005a: 152.



My comment elicited a rejoinder from poet-singer Hao Haizi, who invoked Freud to explain that this situation is natural. Poet, activist and journal-maker Feng went on to remind me, with not-so-oblique reference to heterosexual intercourse, that men tend to be enterprising and women tend to be receptive, and that's just how things work. Then there was a response from Shizhongren to the effect that women simply aren't interested in running the show. I've heard that one before: at Leiden University, for example. But even if it were the case, and without ruling out the theoretical possibility that male behavior has nothing to do with it (hear me out), this should beg the question: why?

17. Hao Haizi, Feng, and Shizhongren are not alone. Heteronormative sexism, machismo, and misogyny are widespread on the poetry scene, reproducing clichés that reduce women to helplessness and/or seductiveness—to which, by the way, women contribute as well as men, in China as elsewhere—and encouraging questionable types of male bonding. These days, in cosy everyday parlance, all men are hunks (帅哥 ‘handsome brother’) and all women are babes (美女 ‘beautiful woman’). But as is true for other gender stereotypes, these categories aren't helpful when it comes to spreading economic agency, of which the hunks get way more than the babes, with “economic” understood in the original sense, denoting the full gamut of resource transactions and power relations. Poet and editor X concludes my interview of him, which has touched on sex as an object of censorship, by discussing women's physical features in less than respectful terms and inviting me to visit a brothel together. Unbeknownst to his wife, who is calling to ask what he's up to, poet Y switches on the speaker of his phone while making faces to the rest of a mostly middle-aged-male lunch crowd that has been discussing, in the presence of young women, how to pick up young women. Poet Z brings someone he implicitly presents as a trophy woman to a dinner party and thoroughly ignores her throughout. Sorry for the offensive terminology, but here it's part of the point.

18. It is not as if my every encounter with a Chinese poet or even a substantial portion of my many encounters with many Chinese poets have been brimming with sexism, machismo, and misogyny. The gender discussion in Zhengzhou also involved others, who recognized the issue, and my own duly localized reference to Rome and the Romans didn't turn me-the-foreign-guest into an obediently nodding ignoramus receiving instruction. There was a real if somewhat cranky conversation, which predictably went online in real time. And yet. We are forty years after *Today*, the fountainhead of avant-garde poetry, and fifty years after the beginnings of its underground history, and practices and discourses of gender, sexuality, and literature have changed a great deal. Still, one recalls Meng Liansu's analysis, as disturbing as it is convincing, which shows the community around *Today* continuing a decades-long development starting from Guo Moruo in which male poets in modern China construct (hyper-)masculinities that suppress women's contributions to the functioning of the poetry scene as well as their writing, and block them from view. The decades since the Cultural Revolution have seen women's writing become ever more visible—for poetry, think Wang Xiaoni, or Zhai Yongming, or Lan Lan, or Yin Lichuan, or Yu Xiang, or Zheng Xiaoqiong, or Wang Xiaoning, in seven different signature styles, and I could go on. But there has also been a return, not to say regression, to the rule of the male gaze, in literature as in society at large, and this is palpably and painfully true for the poetry scene.

19. Even though poets X, Y, and Z, and others with them, may find my concerns trivial, laughable or incomprehensible (if not a cause for pride), I choose not to identify them by name. If there are those who feel this makes me complicit, I can see why. Let me offer two considerations. First, while I make it known during my fieldwork, as in *I Am Always Taking Notes And You Have Been Forewarned*, that my interests extend beyond the texts to the workings of the poetry scene at large, this doesn't mean that everything anyone says in any given situation is fair game for full exposure. What do you do with things that are said off the record (aside from the fact that they affect your perceptions anyway)? And with things that people likely intended as off the record even though they didn't say so? When faced with this dilemma, familiar to academics and journalists alike, I am not inclined to "expose" individuals. And if the reader will excuse a tendentious choice of words, if someone behaves like an asshole, that's not automatically a reason to betray their trust.

20. Hold on. Trust? Yes, and this takes me to a second point. I am a returning visitor who has benefited for many years from the hospitality and generosity of Chinese poets and scholars, male and female alike, through books, journals, stories, directions, invitations, connections, and conversation. Of course, to them (a strangely amorphous designation), a foreign researcher and translator also presents a channel for outward mobility, meaning foreign recognition—and hence, increased domestic recognition—and translation of their work in various ways. Be that as it may, I would not be able to pursue my interest in contemporary Chinese poetry *and* its milieu very effectively without their help, and I think that most of the time, what drives them to help me is a shared obsession rather than self-interest. Ok, but trust? Yes, in being candid when what they say and what they write could compromise them in the public realm, in donating rare copies of unofficial journals to my university's library, in introducing me to fellow poets and scholars, in giving freely of their time and their mind when we meet. To return to the issue of complicity, the loyalty that is fundamental to fieldwork relations is of an ambiguous kind, especially if the fieldwork involves unpleasant or disturbing situations—which get short shrift in idealizing portrayals of ethnography. To make this explicit is the least we can do, and sometimes the most.<sup>11</sup>

21. What it means to do fieldwork on the Chinese poetry scene is a question that has accompanied me since my doctoral research. Put simply, I had come to a project on Duoduo not out of a terribly sinological motivation, because I wanted to engage with his oeuvre as a representation of Chinese culture or some such thing, but because I was into poetry and foreign languages and translation. It was going to be totally textual research—basically reading a bunch of poems and then writing a book about it—which I could have done at a desk in a library. Except that at the time, libraries outside China had next to nothing by or on Duoduo or on contemporary poetry at large, so I had to go find this stuff. Which is when, in ten weeks in Beijing, Chengdu, Hangzhou, and Shanghai during the summer of 1991, I found that this poetry and its habitat come with lots of material and stories that aren't available through "regular" channels, and quite possibly with more stories than most national poetry scenes—and I got hooked. (One of those who commented on a draft version of this essay, a specialist of Dutch and European literature and culture, called it a poetry industry.) I did read those poems and write about them, but that was part two of a book whose unplanned part one turned out to be about the poetry scene. From then on, for

11 Bähre 2015.

me, it has always been about text *and* context *and* metatext, and their interactions. About, say, the dynamics of publishing and polemicizing or images of poethood as much as about rhythm and metaphor.

22. I had established a tangential connection with the poetry scene when making an anthology of Dutch poetry in Chinese together with Ma Gaoming, during my time as an exchange student at PKU in 1986-1987, and the summer of 1991 was my second time in China and my first foray into fieldwork. I have kept fieldnotes of about twenty visits since then, adding up to over forty months of in-country research throughout China, from Harbin and Hohhot to Kunming and Shenzhen, even though I've spent more time in Beijing than anywhere else. Over the years, I have sampled the landscape around literary studies in the general direction of anthropology and the sociology of culture, and worked my way from intuition and improvisation to a conscious if basic acquaintance with ethnography. The 2016–2017 visit was a trip in every sense, taking me to eighteen cities and a mountain village, from university guesthouses and lecture halls and libraries to cultural venues, bookstores, publishing houses, company and government offices, restaurants, bars, cafés, and private homes, and nearly drowning me in new books and journals.

23. There are plenty of issues swirling around this sort of research, in methodology, ethics, and positionality—meaning, not just where you stand but where you come from, and not just how you think about yourself but how you are viewed and positioned in the social context of your work.<sup>12</sup> What are, for instance, some of the differences between studying people who wonder why they should bother talking to you to begin with and studying people who aspire to be visible in the public realm and whose visibility you may have ways of advancing? Where does this leave you for things like rapport, complicity, collaboration, (co-)dependency, and ethnographic seduction in fieldwork relations?<sup>13</sup> What happens if the researcher/translator is a white, male foreigner affiliated with a university in Western Europe and the people he studies are poets in postsocialist China? By contrast with the proverbial lack-of-access problem, for this case and for similar cases across disciplinary and regional specializations, we might speak of hyper-access, where the researcher is sought out by the people they study as much as the other way around, and sometimes given more access than local researchers—of which the local researchers are keenly aware.

24. When I visit poet Ya Mo in Guiyang in May 2017, the first thing I see when we enter his studio is a whiteboard with six talking points for our conversation. Over two days, I spend about thirteen hours listening as he takes me through a colossal amount of text, photographs, video, and audio on the history of the Guizhou poetry scene that illustrate its significance as he sees it and/or hopes I will see it. It adds up to about 32 GB, as I find out when he gives me the material on a USB stick. (It all sits on a laptop whose screen is mirrored on a large TV, and at one point he pulls up letters I wrote him from Leiden in 1992 and from Sydney in 1998 to thank him for



Ya Mo providing hyper-access. Photograph by Maghiel van Crevel.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Martínez, cited in Hale 2008: 12.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Marcus 1997. Ethnographic seduction means accepting the surface discourse because of your unrecognized immersion in a transferential relationship: see Robben, cited in Bähre 2015: 9. Emerson *et al*/2011 is primarily intended for anthropologists but very useful for specialists of other fields as well.

material he'd sent me from Guiyang. The handwriting that says I would love to visit is definitely mine, and he chides me for having taken twenty-five years to show up.) Of course, even if—or precisely because—the researcher has hyper-access, they run the risk of being manipulated by the people they study. And at any rate, there are always going to be tons of things they don't get to see or know how to see.

## WHAT IF I WERE A WOMAN?

25. And here's another question. How do I negotiate what is to me the dual status of Chinese-language scholarship as (i) a category of commentary on poetry-as-source-material, but also (ii) source material in and of itself, inasmuch as it is part of the poetry *scene* and entertains a symbiotic or perhaps a kinship relation with the poetry? When I talk to the scholars in question, how can I ensure that both points come across without reinstating the invidious distinction of “field” languages and “languages of reflection” that Spivak warns against—an issue further complicated by the power relations that continue to differentiate the (West-based) studiers from the (non-West-based) studied, in their full historical depth?<sup>14</sup>

26. Or, to return to gender and sexism and machismo and misogyny and zoom in on what they mean for fieldwork: what if I were a woman? Research on the mainland poetry scene by female foreign scholars and translators has drawn on fieldwork, with Inwood's work as a stellar example, and male gender doubtless blocks access to certain things just as it provides it to others. Still, all else being equal, which is of course a bizarre way of putting it, how does the gender of the researcher affect this kind of work in this kind of environment? What do women scholars and translators have to put up with? Where are they excluded and what are the assumptions underlying instances of inclusion? Not to mention Chinese women scholars—and, while we're at it, Chinese women poets.

27. A year in China has left me with more questions and stories than I can process in a lifetime, so I'll need to do something about that. Short of more ambitious interventions, one thing that might work is pinning up some of the stuff in my fieldnotes right away, for all to see. Tellingly, what was going to be a brief introductory section (“Yes! Dianqiu's death in the Leisure Gardens is a great way in!”) has now eaten up over four thousand words. But maybe that's OK, in that writing this essay feels like the fieldwork experience it is about, and will hopefully convey as much. Like getting sucked in and letting it happen, but also feeling compelled, and motivated, to *talk back*—which is what the humanities and the social sciences are all about, in the field as at our desks. In any case, why not accept that the intro may have had a reason for getting out of hand, and have my tell-em-what-you're-gonna-tell-em moment after four thousand words instead of one or two hundred?

28. So: in the years to come, I hope to delve into many of the texts and issues I've stumbled on in more regular-scholarly fashion. Strict focus, incisive questions, rigorous analysis, profound theorization, unforgiving footnotes (I know you can't wait). With plenty of attention to individual poems and oeuvres, as well as to the intricacies of the poetry scene. But what I'm doing here is more like surface reporting about where I went and what the storefronts

<sup>14</sup> Spivak 2003: 9, Wade 2010: 160, Abu-Lughod 1991 (as a milestone response to Clifford and Marcus 1986 and, ultimately, Geertz 2005 [1972]).

look like, offering observations and ideas that may be of interest to others in the field: in broad strokes, without much in the way of nuance and probably sometimes off the mark. Snapshots, each suggesting that the image continues outside the frame. Numbered for pace to mirror the breathlessness of the poetry scene, episodic like the experience they mediate, cumulative yet rearrangeable and coherent but messy. Not from inside some Orientalist explorer fantasy, but because as globalized as we may hope or fear to be, physical proximity and distance to the things we study continue to matter. As do the dynamics between lingual and cultural selves and others, duly relativized in cognizance of the diversity and the fluidity of where we come from, what we do, and who we are as scholars.

29.

As I read through my fieldnotes, it struck me that what I should have started calling the DIY tradition in Chinese poetry many years ago might work well as a base camp. Many of the stories start there, even if they play out elsewhere. Below, a chapter on DIY is followed by a chapter on the main “departments” in Chinese poetry today and the noise around and between them, and a chapter on two untranslatables and what they are up to. These things will take us deep into specialist territory where the non-obsessed may experience moments of overkill, so the reader may want to adjust their speed and altitude up or down, depending on what they are here for. I end with a coda on being in and out.

## DO IT YOURSELF

### *The archivist*

30.

So there were presentations in Zhengzhou, and there was a communique, and there were opportunities to eat, drink, and be merry. The Chinese equivalent has recently mutated into “eat, drink, be merry, and buy” 吃喝玩乐购, in the spirit of the age. Not as a joke, but as a serious advertising slogan, found in high-speed train cars among other places. In fact, it would be perfect for the Leisure Gardens. On our third day in Zhengzhou, there was a doubtless expensive, earsplitting wedding party with professional mcs and all manner of technically enhanced frills, inside the dining hall where we were trying to have our serene literati lunch. By a stark contrast that is typical of the metropolitan China experience these days, we had just come from a room full of rare and influential unofficial poetry journals, in print, with no mcs. The exhibition was curated by Shizhongren, who is foremost among a handful of renowned collectors and documentalists of the poetry scene.



The Zhengzhou unofficial journals exhibition curated by Shizhongren.  
From Feng's conference report. No photographer identified.



31. CHANGYANG, FEBRUARY 16, 2017. During this sabbatical-as-road-trip I am a visiting scholar at Beijing Normal University (BNU), and in February, the Beijing subway lines 2, 6, and 7 and the Fangshan light rail take me from there to Shizhongren's hometown Changyang, southwest of the capital, less than two hours away. The final stretch is above-ground, with farmland on the left and a gleaming, newly built extension of the village on the right, whose empty parking lots will soon fill up. Changyang has not moved, but the world around it has. It is now cut in two by a four-lane freeway that is enthusiastically used by truckers who appear oblivious to speed limits and the admittedly faded signs that mark pedestrian crossings. Getting to the other side takes a certain stoicism. Shizhongren, who has come to meet me at the light rail station, can do it while smoking *and* working his phone.

32. Away from the traffic, we walk through unpaved lanes to the house he has recently had built for his Archive of Chinese Poetry 汉语诗歌资料馆, which is really an archive of unofficial/avant-garde poetry. Unofficial and avant-garde aren't the same thing, but they overlap (hence the forward slash). For convenience, let's simplify a little. The notion of the unofficial usually refers to institutional matters, such as publications, events, and groups with varying degrees of organization. Official institutions—publications and events, but also state-run bookstores and media, formal bodies such as the Writers Association, and so on—are sweepingly referred to as the system 体制 that the unofficial circuit lies outside of, minding its own business without hiding itself. The notion of the avant-garde usually refers to a particular aesthetic whose ur-other is the official poetry that adheres to government cultural policy. Historically the unofficial and the avant-garde are inseparable, because the emergence of an avant-garde poetics created a need for the unofficial publication channels of which *Today* remains the ur-example, in a watershed move away from the official: do it yourself.<sup>15</sup>

33. In Changyang, there's no plaque identifying the Archive on the outside. The building is so large, and the lanes are so narrow, that I can't fit it into the lens of my phone. The ground floor is filled with farm tools and machinery—the family own some land, which they let out on lease—and mountains of torn-up snail mail and courier packaging. By now, Shizhongren's reputation would enable him to collect without leaving home, as a steady stream of books and journals comes in on a daily basis and new collectibles are often auctioned online. But he continues to travel, to visit other collectors, private donors and sellers, and to curate exhibitions at poetry events. And, in recent years, to conduct video interviews with poets. It is unlikely that public screenings of the documentaries he plans to make will be tolerated any time soon, but there will be plenty of interest from private audiences. To date, he has filmed no fewer than seventy poets.

34. His first finished documentary is on Ya Mo, he of the whiteboard, whose life story lies at the core of the Guizhou undercurrent 贵州潜流. One of the more politicized local poetry traditions, the Guizhou posse claim an underground history predating that of *Today*, with Huang Xiang, now in exile in the US, as its cultish figurehead.<sup>16</sup> Ya Mo's age may have helped to move him into pole position in Shizhongren's video project. He was born in 1942, which makes him the oldest poet associated with unofficial/avant-garde poetry. The documentary is beautiful, and it's exciting to see an illustrious figure I've long known on paper come alive. When I ask Shizhongren who will be next, he says Zhou Lunyou, without a

<sup>15</sup> Van Crevel 1996: 61–68.

<sup>16</sup> Emerson 2001 is a somewhat partisan account. It is high time for new research on the Guizhou scene.

moment's hesitation. Like Ya Mo, Zhou is a senior, central figure in one of poetry's many local histories, this one the hotbed of writing that is Sichuan province.<sup>17</sup> Shizhongren is systematic in his pursuits. He is a man with a plan. And he works across generations and persuasions, as is apparent when I visit him again a couple months later and we are joined by Du Sishang, a poet who is some sort of inspector in the military and whose chauffeured army jeep, with a license plate that impressively has zeros only, picks me up from the light rail station. If Ya Mo and Zhou Lunyou are *éminences grises*, Du is a novice. But Shizhongren knows them all.

35.

The goods are on the second floor, in four deep, parallel library-like rooms toward the back of the house, with a large sitting area in front. The collection is incredibly rich, containing countless journals, individual collections, multiple-author anthologies, scholarship, and more. Showing me around, Shizhongren locates one gem after another, pulling out items that I haven't seen before and filling up my backpack by giving me several of his doubles. He doesn't read English, but he has printed my MCLC online [bibliography](#) of the Leiden University unofficial journals collection, skimmed the Chinese characters in the essay and the bibliography, and jotted down comments and questions.

The Leiden collection is not something to be sneezed at, and it contains a few items he doesn't have, of which I promise to send him scans, but there is no comparison. Amazingly, the Archive can probably lay claim to a semblance of completeness, meaning that it has most if not all of the journals that have truly mattered in the period from the late 1970s to the present day, and a book collection to match. It is, quite simply, invaluable.



Shizhongren at the Archive of Chinese Poetry.  
Photograph by Maghiel van Crevel.

*I SEE THE SPECTER OF MILDEW, OF A FIRE,  
OF HIGH-CULTURAL BURGLARY*

36.

And I am worried. Shizhongren doesn't have a catalog, at least not one that's accessible to others than himself. He is in the process of digitizing the material, but it is unclear if and when and where the files are going to be accessible. Winter is cold and dry in Changyang, but summer is hot and humid. I see the specter of mildew, of a fire, of high-cultural burglary, for some of the journals are now worth a lot of money. In the late 1970s and the 1980s, the avant-garde poets and the unofficial journals were at the cutting edge of a tectonic shift in literature and art. But even though just about everybody who is anybody in contemporary Chinese poetry has emerged through the unofficial circuit, this was given little space in official literary historiography until around the year 2000, and it continues to be politically sensitive, as is apparent from textbooks among other things.<sup>18</sup>

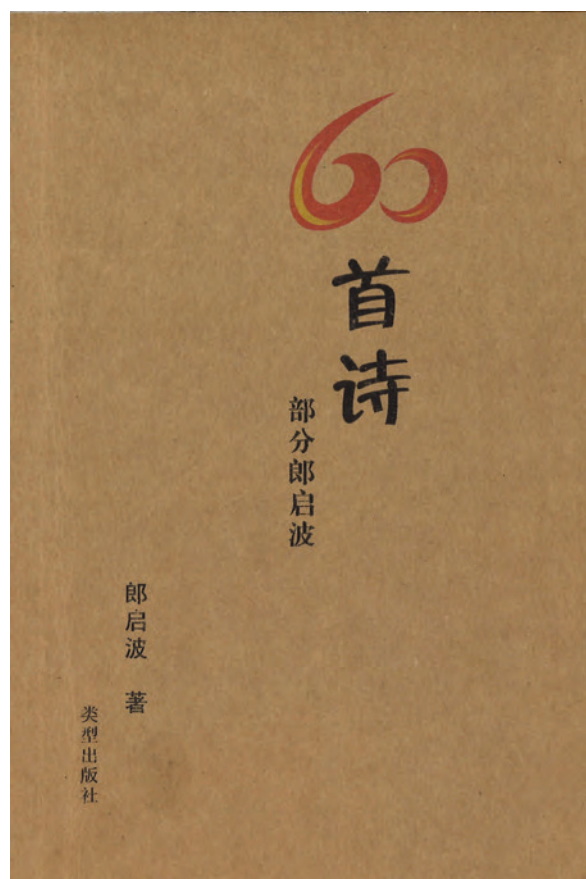
<sup>17</sup> See Day 2005a. <sup>18</sup> E.g. Chen Aizhong 2017.

37.

Shizhongren's own story says it all. Born in 1972 and a fan of avant-garde poetry as a high school student, he started collecting in the early 1990s, "because history was fake." This summary of his motivation points to a discrepancy between official and unofficial realities that is ubiquitous in the human world and can be quite glaring in China, if only because of the levels to which the authorities take the noble art of Putting Things, as in 提法, meaning politically correct usage. These days, some university libraries and the National Library are finally taking an interest, and they need people like Shizhongren. I see dedicated academics walking a tightrope to connect these two worlds—people like Liu Fuchun, Zhang Qinghua, Li Runxia, Fu Yuanfeng, Wang Xuedong, Tang Qiaoqiao—and I wonder what will come of it.

38.

Notably, aside from hunting for journals, Shizhongren also *makes* poetry collections, together with his wife Chen Xia. Poets send him their manuscripts, he does a kind of editorial check to assess if the poetry is "sufficiently avant-garde"—which makes him a powerful gatekeeper—and Chen and he physically print and bind the books with simple equipment. Some of these books list the Archive as their publisher. Many appear in an open-ended series of small volumes called *60 Poems by So-and-So* whose back cover says they are published by a Hong Kong company called the Category Press, whatever this information may mean, or not mean, in practice. The Archive's publications find their readers through the networks of the authors in question and Shizhongren himself. The couple have been doing this since 2001 and claim to have produced a mind-blowing 1,500 volumes, which is roughly one every three to four days on average, if we allow for the occasional holiday or bout of flu. The number is consistent with the "over 1,400" volumes cited in an [interview](#) with Shizhongren conducted in April 2016, I verified it orally and in writing, and I've found him to be accurate in every statement of fact I can check.



An example of the *60 Poems* series, by Lang Qibo.

39.

Shizhongren and Chen Xia undertake this labor of love for poets who can't get their books officially published. This includes both those whose poetry would be censored—books are monitored much more closely than journal contributions—and those without the money to publish. Official publication usually requires financial investment on the part of the author beyond the cost of production and distribution, and prices are steep. Many of the individual authors who publish through the Archive pay for this as well, but less, and the Archive's publications are regularly supported by private sponsorship. That the poets in question want a book even though they can (and do) publish online more or less for free is because print publication of individual collections remains an important status symbol.

40. In sum, Shizhongren is unhappy with political and financial obstacles to poetry entering the public realm on paper, and is using his position to mitigate the situation. In his words, in China, “someone can write for a lifetime and not get published—but here, with me, they exist.” We have a laugh when I note that his role as publisher means that he contributes to the production of the poetry he collects. In the ecosystem of Chinese poetry, this makes perfect sense. But let’s look again. It is not just in China that someone can write for a lifetime and not get published. And of course, varieties of unofficial publishing happen in places other than China as well. So let me be real scientific about this and observe that proportionate to population size, the rate at which the Archive brings out the *60 Poems* volumes would equal roughly one per year in my native Holland. Then what’s the big deal?

41. First, being part of a large population doesn’t give you more hours in a day. The sheer intensity and pace of the Archive’s publishing operation are dizzying. Second, and this is the crux of the matter, this is not just because Shizhongren and Chen Xia are workaholics. Rather, the explanation lies in the power of poetry as a meme in Chinese cultural tradition that remains operational today. China is still a “nation of poetry” 诗国,<sup>19</sup> even if the ways in which this is manifest have changed and it takes considerable interpretive antics to make classical definitions of the genre fit its present incarnations. And in contemporary China, with the last two decades adding on the all-important dimensions of the web and social media, it is not just *possible* for wildly divergent texts and poetics to operate in the same public, almost transcendental discursive space called “poetry”; rather, they are *expected* to do so.

THE POWER OF POETRY AS A MEME  
IN CHINESE CULTURAL TRADITION  
THAT REMAINS OPERATIONAL TODAY

42. Rent from the family land enables Shizhongren to dedicate his life to documenting the avant-garde. If that sounds overblown, it isn’t, and the words come out matter of fact. He is the most professional and influential poetry collector, but by no means the only one. And there are many other people in China who live for poetry in one way or another and turn poetry into a way of life—by writing, by publishing, by activism, by identifying as poets. Some can afford to because they are rich, or because they are sponsored by someone who is rich. Others, because they hold undemanding and/or poetry-related official positions, for instance in the Writers Association. Or because life in China can still be cheap.

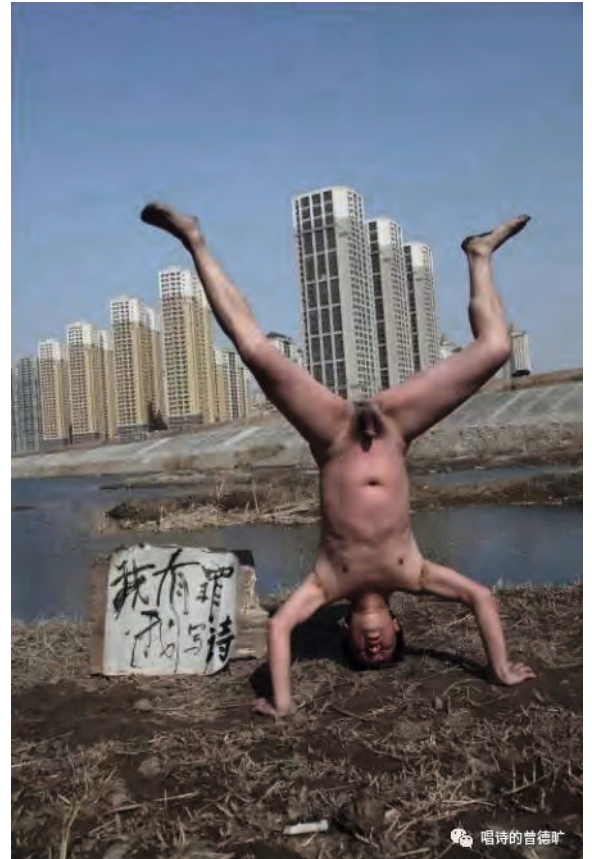
43. Poet-tramps 诗人流浪汉 such as Zeng Dekuang and Fan Si are ready to forego stable material luxury, writing up their travels online and doing something like permanent performance art as fringe celebrities, finding benefactors where they can. Fan Si and his partner Ting Yue have been on a road trip through China called “Poetry Traveling All-under-Heaven” 诗行天下 since 2016, leaving physical traces such as a spray-painted trash movement logo as well as a snowballing online record. The name of the gig doesn’t lend itself to easy

<sup>19</sup> This is a core point in Inwood 2014.





Fan Si leaving traces of trash in all-under-heaven.  
Photograph by Ting Yue.



Zeng Dekuang: "I have sinned / I write poetry."  
Photograph by Hai Hua.

translation. It also means something like "All-under-Heaven by Poetry," as in "Asia by bike" or "Europe by train." The official English caption reads "Walking with Poetry," but large parts of the journey happen in a four-wheel drive. Zeng is the ur-tramp who achieved notoriety before the poetry scene was as compulsively online as it is today. He now posts photographs of himself in various postures and places, with a studiously tattered sign that says "I have sinned / I write poems," and occasionally puts them up for sale. The image is rephraseable as "look, this is me being a poet." Arguably, when it says "look, this is me eating maggots," a famous performance that gave his most recent book its name, this means the same thing.



*Eating Maggots*: the cover of Zeng Dekuang's volume in the Scum Publishing Plan.



## The historian

44. PUGE, MAY 26-28, 2017. Faxing, too, lives for poetry, but he also holds down a daytime job as accountant in a factory in this village in the Daliang mountains of southern Sichuan. The end of the month is when he is busiest, and when he gets off from the morning shift and finds me at the bus station (I have come from Xichang and am waiting outside the gate), he is quite literally running. He grabs my forearm and rarely lets go until we reach his family home, on an uphill alley just off the main street, where three generations live under one roof. A driven, energetic person, he explains that he has been displeased with a slow commute to work on foot, ever since the new party secretary banished motorbikes from the village. I will be staying in a guesthouse down the road, but he informs me in no uncertain terms that I am to have every single one of my meals here, with the family—Faxing and his wife Deng Zhixiu, their two sons and his parents—at the low stone table in the courtyard, from breakfast to evening snacks. And so it goes.

45. Faxing is a figure of some repute, in Sichuan and beyond, to which romantic visions of a Wild Poet in the Distant Mountains contribute, combinable as they are with both ancient Chinese lore and the Western romanticism that has fallen on such fertile ground in China. During my visit he happily reaffirms the image, taking me for walks up the slopes behind the family home—never without a tiny notebook and a pen, and halting every few steps to make a point and grab my forearm again—and theatrically bursting into song once we've scaled the heights and are overlooking the valley. To him poetry is a faith, rooted in its local environment and connected to local traditions but no less compatible for that with cosmopolitan modernities. It is hard to get a word in edgewise, but his warmth and his narrative energy make that mostly unnecessary. And when I do ask questions, he listens and responds.



Faxing. Photograph by Maghiel van Crevel.

46. Faxing was born and bred in Puge and has lived here all his life, except in 1984–1986, when he trained as an accountant in Xichang, where he got into poetry after attending a lecture by Zhou Lunyou at the municipal Culture Palace. And while poetry is a city thing in China, he is not about to leave his native place. I had heard of him for some time, and was finally put on his trail, so to speak, in March of this year during a visit to Chengdu. There, Tao Chun and other poets associated with a journal called *Being* who have stuck together for over twenty years, with the publications to show for it, urge me to get in touch with him. The way they talk about Faxing makes him look like the memory of the Sichuan poetry scene, with a rich collection of journals (which I get to see on the second night of my visit), correspondence and other poetry materials.

47. The journal he runs, *Independence*, has a nationwide scope but privileges his native province, and it is one of the longest-running unofficial publications. Starting from 1998, close to thirty issues have appeared, each the size of a big book. Faxing's sheer drive is illustrated by the publication of a retrospective of *Independence*'s first twenty years—in its

nineteenth year (OK, he calls it a prefinal draft). There have been several other unofficial journals that are book-like, annual publications 年刊, explicitly so or in practice, and produce such sizable specimens, in a mode of production that is often called “a book for a journal” 以书代刊, as a Chinese variety of the mook. Over time, the trend has been toward physically bigger publications. The first issue, for instance, of Zhou Sese’s Beijing-based *Culturism* is huge, aside from being wild and crazy in other ways, exuding a palpable sense of fun in its crossbreeding of socialist-realist aesthetics with impish poetic experiment. And *Independence* is not just huge, it has also steadily kept going for almost twenty years.

48.

The way Faxing speaks of *Independence* echoes his reputation for helping others, and it’s the others that tell me about this, unsolicited. Meng Yifei, whose involvement in an unofficial journal reportedly led to pressure to leave his hometown in the Guizhou mountains many years ago, says that Faxing, who is not rich, sent him money when he was broke. Zheng Xiaoqiong recalls how at some point in the early 2000s, when she was a migrant worker in a Dongguan sweatshop and wanted to turn herself into a writer, she wrote to Faxing after coming across *Independence*—and he sent her a stack of poetry books and journals along with his reply, which she says helped tip the scales toward poetry over fiction as her genre of choice. Today, she is one of China’s most successful poets. Faxing sees *Independence* not as his personal playground but as a platform for supporting poetry, as a channel for passing on knowledge, as part of a tradition in the literal sense. When he talks about “doing journals” 办刊物 as a long-standing subculture in China he stresses the need for perseverance, and a strategy that will make your publication last and keep it from becoming a one-trick pony. He calls his own poetics regional poetry-writing 地域诗歌写作, also encompassing Chinese-language poetry written by members of the Yi people who are indigenous to the Daliang Mountains, of which he (himself an ethnic Han Chinese) is a committed advocate. But he thinks *Independence* wouldn’t survive as a single-issue journal. So as editor, he casts his net wide.



*Independence* no. 22 (2014).



*Culturism* no. 1 (2007), inside cover.

49. There are many ways of doing journals, and partisanship can be a wonderful thing—witness various examples over time, such as the “intellectually” inclined *Tendency*, the women’s poetry journal *Wings*, or the pointedly scandalous *The Lower Body*. By contrast, Faxing’s ecumenical approach reflects something like taking, or sharing, responsibility for the poetry community at large. Yes, it’s the meme thing again, and there’s more coming. There are also obvious interfaces with a desire to *document* that drives Shizhongren too, captured in terms such as “dossier-ness” 档案性 and “materials-ness” or “data-ness” 资料性—meaning, roughly, the quality of having been recorded for posterity. On that note, while Shizhongren has begun to digitize his material and Faxing emails and apps word files of *Independence* to all and sundry, both feel that print journals are the real thing.



*Wings* no. 1 (1998).

50. This is not just because in the smartphone age, in China as elsewhere, the materiality of print is being re-appreciated, and people *like* making print journals, and doing so in “personal” styles that an audience can identify with. In China, online data is notoriously unstable, because of the volatile business environment and because of censorship, with no-go areas conveniently summarizable as PBR 黄下反, meaning “pornography” 黄色, “baseness” 下流 and “reactionary” 反动 ideology, all defined generously and flexibly. The Garden of Delight, for instance, a website hosting literary forums, abruptly closed down in 2010 and untold numbers of individuals and groups lost everything they hadn’t backed up in one way or another.<sup>20</sup> Hence, while Faxing applauds the revival of *The Survivors*, first published in 1988–1989 and now relaunched in Beijing—the original editors Mang Ke, Tang Xiaodu, and Yang Lian are still in post, with younger authors as guest editors—he is concerned that it will be a web-only publication. Overall, after a dip from circa 2000 to circa 2005, when it looked like the web was taking over,<sup>21</sup> unofficial journals continue to appear on paper, and they are thriving.

51. To do their documenting, both Shizhongren and Faxing do more than collecting. Shizhongren publishes the *60 Poems* series. Otherwise, while he is among the most knowledgeable people on the poetry scene and an opinionated person, he does not speak out. He writes no books or articles or columns, and what little publicity there is about the Archive is low-key. Maybe it comes with the territory of doing it all, and not taking sides in tussles and battles on the poetry scene. Different from Shizhongren, Faxing engages in what in Chinese is called “wild” 野 or “outside” 外 literary historiography (sometimes rendered in English as “alternative history”) in that he writes, and commissions, unofficial commentary. Issues 13 and 14 of *Independence*, for instance, from 2006 and 2008, contain a “Concise History,” in two

<sup>20</sup> See Inwood 2014: ch 1. <sup>21</sup> Cf Day 2008.



parts, of “Movements in Contemporary Modern Chinese Poetry from among the People.” It contains detailed factual information coupled with essays by authors throughout China about numerous unofficial journals nationwide, in a variety of styles and from a variety of perspectives. Sichuan is sympathetically over-represented, and I don’t think anyone minds.

52.

Faxing, then, is a poetry historian from among the people. Hu Liang, who holds an administrative post in the Suining district government in Chengdu, calls himself a poetry *scholar* from among the people 民间学者. I meet Hu during my visit to Chengdu, after a talk I give in the White Nights, a bar and cultural hub with close ties to avant-garde poetry and the Chengdu fine arts scene. Run by poet Zhai Yongming, trailblazer of women’s poetry who retains her rock star status to this day and divides her time between Beijing and her native Chengdu, the White Nights has survived for twenty years, an eternity by local standards. It seats several hundred now and is posh in a welcoming way, and hard to picture as the tiny space with a counter, a few tables and chairs, and a couple of bookshelves I remember from when it opened in 1997. Hu gives me several issues of *Meta Writing*, a journal he edits, and an anthology of which he is the executive editor, called *Prelude to Power: 99 Poems by 99 Poets in 99 Years of New Poetry from Sichuan*. When he learns that I’ve written on Haizi, he wants my address because there’s another book he wants to send me.<sup>22</sup> A week later, when I’m back at BNU, a courier delivers his *Immortal Poets: From Haizi to Ma Yan*, an anthology of poetry by authors who died by suicide or whose death has been associated with suicide in the popular imagination, with an extensive introduction. In May, this book is joined on the shelves of my office and in my fieldnotes by an anthology edited by Peng Xianchun, Xu Dong, and Li Longgang, called *Z Poetry 2015*, of poetry by authors arranged by their (Western) zodiac signs.

53.

Poetry historians from among the people, poetry scholars from among the people, poetry anthologies by province, suicide, and zodiac sign... Poetry to advertise glitzy real estate *and* poetry to highlight the hard lot of the migrant workers who build it, poets as heroes and antiheroes in feature films and documentaries, poetry to publicize the visit of a friend, playing cards decorated with poems and photos of poets, the solemnly tongue-in-cheek establishment of the Association of Poor Chinese Poets, poetry written by a robot that learns from a database that contains the oeuvres of 519 modern Chinese poets and is reported in national media as an “artificial intelligence challenge to human emotions”... And I could go on. Is there anything that poetry can’t connect to in China? Meme!

## *Independent publishing*

54.

SHENZHEN, MAY 21, 2017. Exceptionally, Fang Xianhai doesn’t use WeChat, so I send him an SMS, having been given his number by Liu Buwei, who some time ago was the guy who jaw-droppingly talked his way into Hohhot Station through two checkpoints without a ticket, because he wanted to make sure that the zodiac anthology found its way into my poor, overloaded bag before I got on the train. This sort of thing keeps happening—hospitality,

<sup>22</sup> Van Crevel 2008: ch 3.

heroism, hyper-access, whatever, and the ways in which the dots connect by themselves. Where was I? Right. Having just arrived in Shenzhen, I send Fang Xianhai, who teaches painting at the Chinese Academy of Arts in Hangzhou, an sms, to introduce myself and ask about the Black Whistle Poetry Publication Plan, an operation he runs that I learnt about in the fall of 2016 in Beijing, after a screening in a seriously hard-to-find basement bar of *Bridges Burned*, a movie by Wang Shenghua about poet Xiao Zhao, whose Black Whistle poetry collection of the same name is graced by a picture of the poet wearing handcuffs, for which—get this—the publisher has carefully worked two tiny steel snaplinks into the front cover of the book, so the reader can personally choose to leave him dancing in shackles or uncuff him, which feat of formatting may have something to do with the fact that Xiao Zhao killed himself *and* with a particular type of DIY publishing that this paragraph had promised to be about... Ok, I'll start over again. It's just that these stories feel like they are part of something bigger, and the scene is so organically alive and so very intracconnected. There are no full stops.



*Bridges Burned: Poetry by Xiao Zhao.*

## THERE ARE NO FULL STOPS

55.

So, take three: I send Fang Xianhai an sms to ask about Black Whistle, and find out that he is also in Shenzhen, for the Tomorrow music festival. Can't believe my luck, even if I wouldn't have minded revisiting Hangzhou. We meet two hours later. He has directed me to the Old Heaven bookstore in the OCT-LOFT creative space, a former factory district like 798 in Beijing. Old Heaven is a fine specimen of the hip, cosmopolitan bookstores-cum-café that attract MacBook users and coffee connoisseurs and serve as cultural event venues. Librarie Avant-Garde's new-old outlet in Nanjing (a gigantic wooden mansion dismantled somewhere in Jiangxi and reassembled in the touristy old town), the One Way Space, All Sages, and Yanjiyou in Beijing, the All-Time Virtue School in Guiyang, Old Heaven and the Enclave Press in Shenzhen, Fangsuo and Never Closed in Guangzhou, and there must be many more. Never Closed actually never closes. One of its outlets has tiny rooms with a spartan desk and a single bed for rent, with cloth curtains for doors, where people spend pre-deadline nights or maybe just make themselves unfindable.



56. Fang, who is having a beer in the café part of Old Heaven, gets up to greet me and buy me a coffee. He is suave and forthcoming, and so is Lu Tao, whom Fang calls over to join us. Lu does the Black Whistle book designs and is also here for the festival. While Fang answers my questions, Lu takes one of those lift-camera-up-high-without-looking-at-lens, drunken-angle pictures of me scribbling away, and posts it on WeChat. I see the fear that my notes will be legible to whoever takes the trouble to zoom in confirmed and keep quiet about it.



Fang Xianhai and Lu Tao in the Old Heaven bookstore.  
Photograph by Maghiel van Crevel.

They tell me Black Whistle has been making books since 2008. The name was inspired by a bribery scandal involving soccer referees. In the early 2000s, poets in the community around the Wide World of Poetry 诗江湖 website including Shen Haobo, Jin Ke, Yi Sha, and Fang had been bouncing around the idea of unofficially publishing books, as distinct from journals, something that was becoming a modest new trend. Since they didn't quite see eye to eye, Fang eventually decided to go it alone as editor.

57. Black Whistle has published nine poetry collections to date. Seven are by Chinese poets: Fang himself, Jin Ke, Er Ge, Guan Dangsheng, Xiao Zhao (the handcuffs volume), Yang Li (trilingual, with Norwegian and English translations) and Yuan Wei, and two by foreign poets in Chinese translation: Charles Bukowski, translated by Xu Chungang and, hot off the press, Mikami Kan, who is here today for his book launch, and whose work has been translated by Xiao Niao. The books stand out by their exquisite physical appearance. You can't read them without experiencing them as artefacts and works of art in the physical sense. Each volume is clearly a project, meticulously designed and made.

58. Fang says he has two selection criteria. He works only with poetry that cannot be officially published because of (anticipated) censorship, and it must enjoy a certain recognition as *good* poetry. Obviously, the quality issue is going to be, well... somewhat subjective, and perhaps caught up in the force field between rival groups on the poetry scene? Another way of putting it might be that Fang privileges his personal favorites, including himself. But then again, such is the publisher's prerogative—and certainly the independent, bibliophilic publisher's prerogative. Each book goes through a single print run of about a thousand copies and is meant to remain in stock for many years, and the spectacular formatting and a no-reprint principle suggest that Fang and Lu see their books as collectibles from the start. Fang stresses that Black Whistle is not for profit and that it's not just about avoiding censorship but also about opposition to capitalism. While their books are mostly funded through external sponsorship, this must happen on Fang and Lu's terms as regards things like the format and the physical place on/in the book of sponsor info. If authors put in money themselves, they are paid back from the sales, if at all possible.

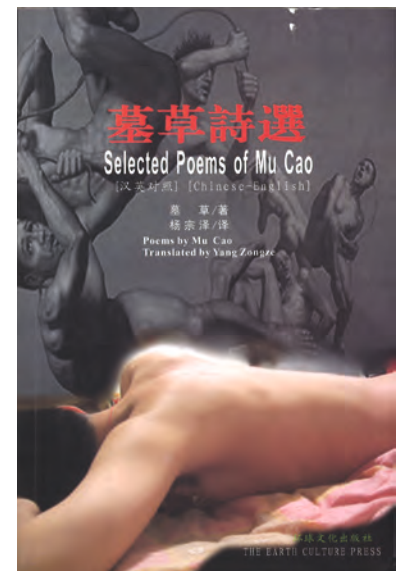
59. Unofficially publishing books, as distinct from journals, would be a decent bare-bones definition of what is now known as independent publishing 独立出版. Until the mid to late 2000s, unofficial publishing mostly meant doing journals (even though over the years, several journals had put out book-like special issues dedicated to the work of individual poets, an early example being Bei Dao's *Strange Shores*, in the *Today Series*; and the boundaries between unofficial books and journals are blurred). The terminology used for unofficial

publishing included 非官方 ‘non-official,’ and didn’t include 独立 ‘independent.’ This was surprising, since “independent” seemed such an obvious candidate for the discourse, and it was being used for film and music. Now, “non-official” has all but disappeared, and “independent” is widely used—but for books, not journals. This is in line with the usage of 出版 ‘come off the press, be published, publish’ in official circuits, where it is not used for journals either.

RESISTANCE TO CENSORSHIP,  
THE DESIRE TO DOCUMENT,  
AND BIBLIOPHILIA

60. Independent publishing is motivated by three things, in various permutations: resistance to censorship, the desire to document, and bibliophilia. This also holds for publishing journals, but bibliophilia is more prominent in the books. Where this is the case, independent publishing is sometimes also called “little publishing” 小出版, signaling the ability to appreciate and enjoy the materiality of the book and distance oneself from socio-political grand narratives, without foregoing the right to make a literary-political statement, with Black Whistle as a shining example.<sup>23</sup> Resistance to censorship usually means circumvention rather than a direct challenge, and is about operating outside the system rather than changing it. Generally, inasmuch as independently published books are sold, this happens through personal networks, with payment typically triggering a thank-you-for-your-support note, and less commonly through (progressive, fringe, elite) bookstores. But the Black Whistle books are also available on [Taobao](#), showing yet again that the distinction of official and unofficial is less than absolute. Black Whistle has an active [Weibo](#) account, and up to a point, independent publishing and the circumvention of censorship can be talked about in public, one upside of “marginality” being that it can offer safe spaces.

61. Zhang Zhi (aka Ye Gui), another independent publisher, runs the International Poetry Translation and Research Center (IPTRC) in Chongqing, with a very active [blog](#). On the whole, the IPTRC’s interest seems to lie mostly in introducing foreign poetry to Chinese readers. I have yet to meet Zhang, but he tells me on WeChat that he has been engaged in independent publishing for twenty years (that’s right, starting long before it was so called) and estimates that he makes about ten books a year, mostly poetry. Zhang’s books are very different from Fang’s. The colophon of the two specimens in my collection cites the IPTRC for “project development” 策划 alongside the names of the respective publishers, which may well be somewhat virtual outfits. Resistance to censorship and the desire to document are clearly in evidence, but bibliophilia is not. One of these two books is *Selected Poems of Mu Cao*, bilingual with English translations by Yang Zongze. It contains graphic male gay sex scenes, interwoven with denunciations of social injustice. The other is the *Century Classic of Poetry: 300 Chinese New Poems*, edited by Zhang and Zhu Likun.



*Selected Poems of Mu Cao.*

<sup>23</sup> “Little” is the preferred translation, in parallel with “little magazines,” which are called 小杂志 in Chinese.

This book sends two signals at once. It celebrates a hundred years of new poetry, with more room for the truly contemporary than most other centennial publications; and it alludes—as several official publications have done in recent decades—to the ancient *Book of Songs* that is the mother of all Chinese poetry anthologies, and, in its wake, to the Tang-dynasty compilation that has acquired unassailably canonical status in modern times. It includes poetry by the Tibetan-Chinese activist Tsering Woenser, whose writing is censored in China.

62.

While everyone who's in the know would say what Zhang Zhi does is independent publishing, both *Selected Poems of Mu Cao* and the *Century Classic* look like official publications in that they have standard colophon information, although this lists foreign publishing houses. But the trained eye sees that they might just have been made—in every sense—in China, and not in Ohio and Vancouver, respectively. More generally, there is a grey area between unambiguously official publications at one end (say, by the People's Literature Press), and unambiguously unofficial publications at the other (say, by Black Whistle). In between, there are books and journals that have had a state-run publisher's label slapped on them by private businesspeople known as book brokers 书商, who buy book numbers from the publishers in question.<sup>24</sup> This could explain, for instance, why Hu Liang's *Meta Writing* had five different publishers for eight issues between 2007 and 2016. Material in this category normally doesn't feature overly sensitive material, since the official publisher will be held accountable if it falls foul of the censor, even if they haven't been seriously involved with the book or journal in question and don't consider it part of their core business.

63.

Then there are books and journals that claim foreign provenance but feel distinctly mainland-Chinese, like *Selected Poems of Mu Cao* and the *Century Classic*, or *Erotic Love Poetry from China*, an anthology edited by Chengdu poet Zhi Fu. Its colophon lists Otherland as its publisher, which is based in Kingsbury, Australia and run by poet Ouyang Yu (online information is sparse, but the [table of contents](#) is available in a 2014 post by Mu Cao on the [Poemlife](#) website, which remains one of the richest online resources because it operates as a kind of clearinghouse, albeit with an avant-garde bias). And there are books and journals whose colophon lists what would almost appear to be a pop-up publisher, where one is hard put to find other products from the same press, such as Eagle Books, whose name appears in several special issues of *Independence*. No place name is provided, but they are located in a certain Sichuan mountain village and the connection with Faxing's work is hard to miss.

64.

Feng's DIY output illustrates that there are no hard lines between books and journals. In the early 1990s he produced the *Chinese Poetry Information Bulletin*, out of Wuhan. The bulletin carried news about publications and events, and, importantly, the contact details of poets and critics. In 1992, when the fourth issue was ready for mailing, the police advised him to cease publication of this phone book of the unofficial/avant-garde scene. Like Lang Mao, Feng had started doing journals in the 1980s and now drifted away from poetry and embarked on a business career. He returned to an



Feng (r) and Min Jian in the mists of history. "We are the real poets, not you."

<sup>24</sup> See Kong 2005: ch 3, van Crevel 2008: 12.

active role on the poetry scene in 2008, as one of the editors of the new journal *Underground*, but left a few years later because of tensions in the editorial board. In fall 2014, now based in Changzhou, he started his own journal, which he runs more or less single-handedly, although sponsors of individual issues get to be called honorary editor in chief. Called *Freebooters*, it is named after a Chinese expression that has been a key descriptor of the poetry scene since the turn of the century and is one of the untranslatables I will do some yelling at later on. By citing famous journals and chronicling poetry events, *Freebooters* also explicitly reflects on the unofficial circuit of which it is a part. By mid-2017, the journal had put out eleven issues, each to the tune of a stunning four hundred pages, and a set of playing cards adorned with photographs of Chinese poets that claims to be the first of its kind. This is sophistry, since a group of people (including Shizhongren) had in fact put out several poetry card sets since 2015—but ok, those carried texts rather than pictures.



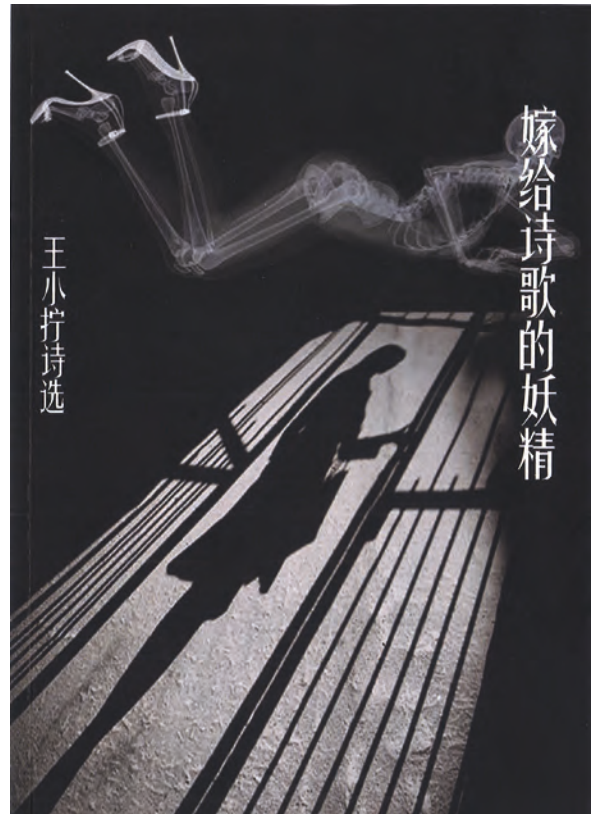
Lin Zhao, Shizhi/Guo Lusheng, Feng, and An Qi, Poem by Dong Dangzi, from a 2016 set edited by Zhou Hongjie, Zhang Kou, and Li Chunxiao, from Feng's 2017 poetry card set.

65. It all goes to show that Feng is another one who lives for poetry. He is also a radical and one of the most ideologically driven, political people on the scene. He rejects any involvement whatsoever with the Writers Association, any material support that can be traced back to the official circuit, and the rules of censorship. This doesn't mean he will print anything and everything, which would amount to journal suicide. But he tests the limits by dedicating issues of *Freebooters* to (literary) dissidents such as Lin Zhao, Huang Xiang, Liu Xiaobo and Liu Xia—this was before Liu Xiaobo died and the censor went into overdrive—Liao Yiwu, Bei Ling, and Meng Lang, by thinly veiled references to June Fourth, and by, shall we say, advocating for the underside of things. One way of putting it is that *within* the avant-garde, Feng takes an anti-establishment position. He makes this explicit in a recent **interview**, disparaging obscure poetry (aka misty poetry) 朦胧诗歌 and third generation poetry 第三代诗歌, the “oldest” and most visibly canonized literary-historical categories within the avant-garde. He says he's basically stopped reading the old guard. In any case, by seeking out young and lesser-known authors, *Freebooters* presents a subversive complement to more canonically inclined publications.



66. More controversial and risky vis-à-vis Party poetics, the journal has published poetry by members of vulnerable groups such as sex workers, ex-inmates, and homosexuals, explicitly identifying the authors as such. “Comrade” 同志 for “homosexual” has to be one of the best discursive appropriations ever, and Mu Cao is the single occupant of a section called “comrade poets,” but *Freebooters* also refers to his one-time online forum called Comrade Poetry Web, which featured many more gay authors. (When I interview Mu Cao in Tongzhou in February 2017, he grumbles a little about being identified as gay before anything else but concedes that the design of his [website](#) might help explain the label. It’s in the colors of the rainbow flag.) The sex workers are called “Fallen Women” in the journal’s [table of contents](#), which is published online on the associated [WeChat](#) account and Feng’s [blog](#) for every issue and is thereby subject to automated surveillance. In conversation, they are called prostitutes. In another example, an entry on “Historical Materials on Chinese Poetry” in the [table of contents](#) turns out to be called “The Whole Story of the Arrest of Six Sichuanese Poets” on the actual page.<sup>25</sup>

67. If Feng wasn’t exactly advocating women’s liberation at the Zhengzhou conference, he has made plenty of space for women’s poetry in *Freebooters*, and—to return to independent publishing and the books-vs-journals distinction—in the books that he has started putting out. From a distance, you could easily mistake these for regular issues of *Freebooters*. They display a conspicuous resistance component, some of the desire to document, and not quite bibliophilia but unmistakable attention to visual appearance, which is a little artsy and a little sci-fi. Book authors to date include Mu Cao, Chen Shazi, and Wang Xiaoning. Wang’s poetry presumably finds favor with Feng because of her extreme directness in writing about sex and sexuality. The cover of her book, *Demon Mistress of Poetry*,<sup>26</sup> has an X-ray of a human skeleton prostrate in a clichéd seductive-woman posture, all the way down to the stiletto heels on her feet, hovering like a ghost over the silhouette of a woman opening a gate. It was designed by Feng, who likes to be in control and do his own thing. He is easily as polemical as some of the other players on the scene, but not at all into romantic, exalted visions of poethood. And he is one of few poetry activists who don’t drink (and don’t tell others to drink). Perhaps it comes with a talent for getting things done and disregard for convention.



*Demon Mistress of Poetry.*

68. In February, when I first meet him in person, we start the interview while we are in line for a cab at a pick-up point underneath Changzhou Central Station and during the ride through a congested city center and we continue in a self-service restaurant, between five and eleven P.M.

<sup>25</sup> The section on sex workers is in *Freebooters* no 6: 53–68. Comrade poets: no 5: 123–138. Mu Cao’s forum: no 4: 457. Sichuan poets: no 3: 325–328.

<sup>26</sup> To highlight the element of seduction, my translation of the title plays on an archaic use of “mistress” as meaning married woman.



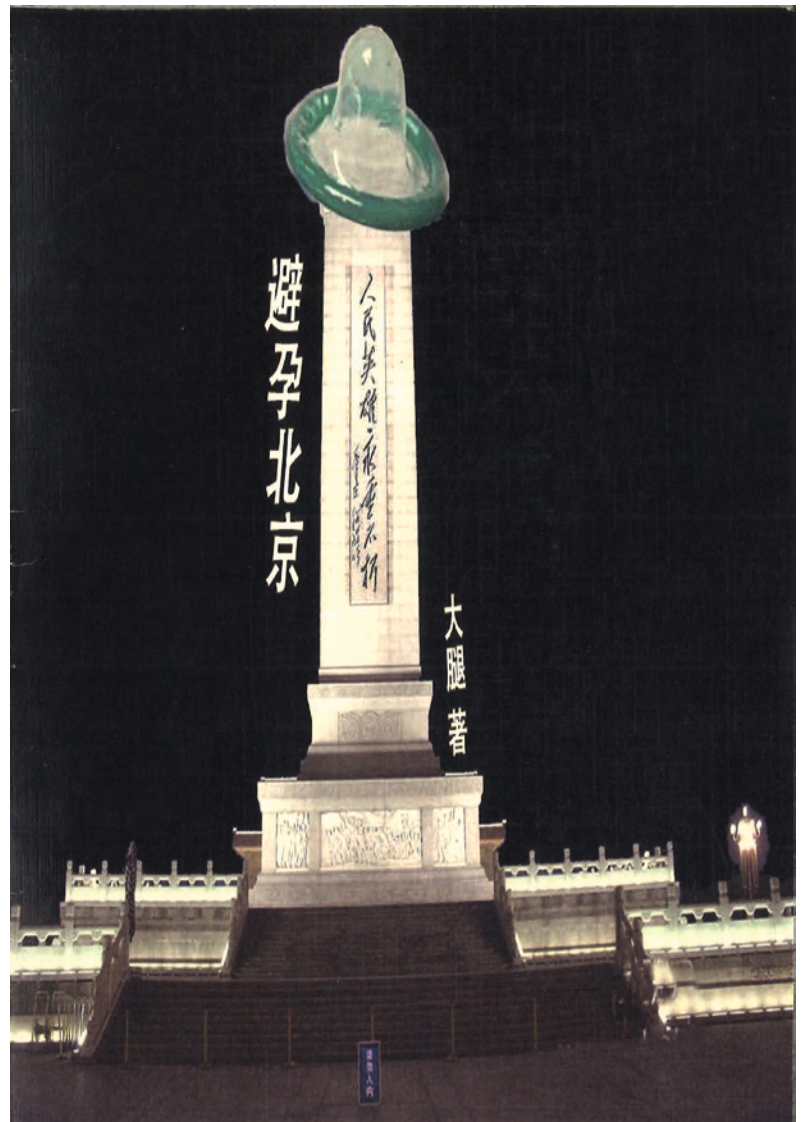
He then takes me to an empty apartment where he takes pictures to post on WeChat, where my travels are duly recorded by various of my interlocutors throughout the year. All issues of *Freebooters* are sitting on the table, in two neat piles, with a bag in case I need it (I don't, because I travel with one that is meant to fill up along the way). We talk past midnight, Feng rolls out the scooter that is parked next to the bed into the hallway to go home for the night and I crash in every piece of clothing I have with me, right up to my winter jacket, because the bedding belongs in a warmer season. He's back at seven for breakfast together in another self-service place down the street, before seeing me off to the high-speed rail station on the outskirts of the city.



Feng and *Freebooters*. Photograph by Maghiel van Crevel.

69.

Less well-resourced than Feng, Wuliaoren, the trash poet who thought he'd lost his master to the Zhengzhou boozefest, is a recent arrival in independent publishing. Originally from rural Zhanjiang in Guangdong and now living in Songzhuang near Beijing, he has undertaken to manually make poetry collections that definitely come under resistance and maybe under bibliophilia, although the bibliophilic component is kind of quick and dirty. Using regular household gear, Wuliaoren makes threadbound books. This is rhetorically clever because of the tension between their transgressive content—they are sexually explicit on the outside as well as the inside, and crudely socially engaged—and the material reference to traditional Chinese literature, which has its sexually explicit moments, but is easily associated with socially conservative high culture.



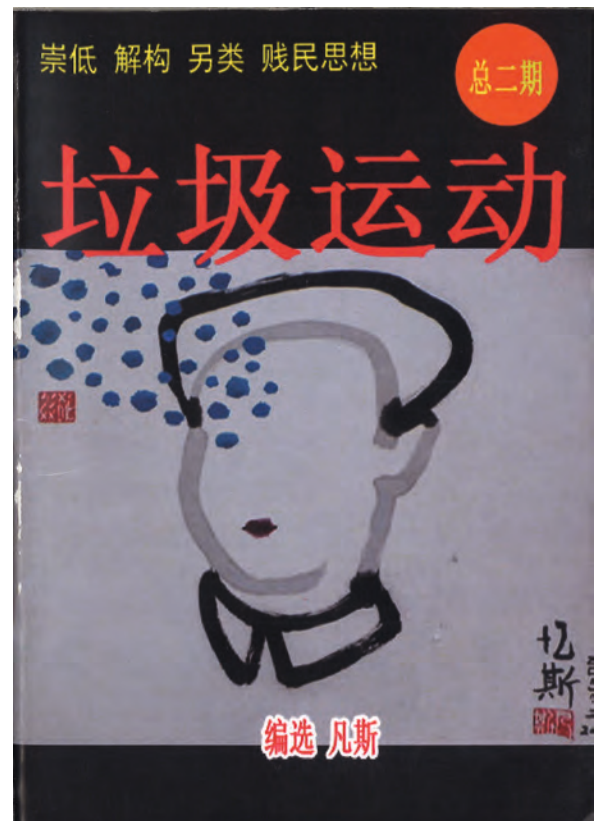
Datui, *Contraception for Beijing*.

70.

Since fall 2016, he has published his own poetry (just like Fang Xianhai at Black Whistle, and I don't have the feeling this is viewed as inappropriate) and that of Datui, Ding Mu, Li Xin, and Zeng Dekuang. Or perhaps we should say he has put them on the menu, since this is a print-and-sew-on-demand operation. He advertises his project as the Scum Publishing Plan and sells the books on WeChat, for outrageous prices, which he justifies by the fact that they are handmade to order. When I visit him in Songzhuang, he shows me how. Fittingly, his T-shirt says ONE OF A KIND, although I don't think that's on purpose. A copy of his own collection, *Not a Pretty Death*, costs five hundred yuan. Wuliaoren's rationale is simple. "Because of censorship, nobody even dares to print our work, much less publish it." He is referring to poets aligned with the trash movement, whose second issue/mook he also print-and-sews on demand, with a faceless Mao Zedong drawn by editor Fan Si on the cover. "So we'll do it ourselves."



Wuliaoren. Photograph by Maghiel van Crevel.



*The Trash Movement* no. 2 (2017).

71.

Back to Shenzhen and Old Heaven. After Fang and Lu have left, I sample the contemporary poetry shelves, and the bookstore lives up to its name. To my amazement, which betrays a prejudice against Shenzhen I trust to have sloughed off by now, there is more here than I've seen anywhere else, with the possible exception of All Sages in Beijing. And Old Heaven holds more fringe stuff than All Sages, including quite a few unofficial publications. The store owner goes by the fantastic name of Jieci 介词 'preposition.' Their sound system blasts rough, recent blues, more like Jon Spencer than like Robert Johnson. Today's poetry-music connection is somehow reaffirmed when Wu Tun shows up, the singer of rockband Tongue, whose poetry is for sale here as *Report from before Losing My Humanity*. And, in the evening, by a noise concert by Fushitsusha in B10, a large music venue a couple blocks away, which Fang has told me I shouldn't miss. Conversations in the line outside indicate that people have traveled from all over China to see this. Fang is there, with his partner, poet Yuan Wei. Fushitsusha is completely overwhelming and sustainably explosive. We've gone comfortably deaf by the time we say goodbye.

## WHO IS HERE?

72. GUANGZHOU, DECEMBER 6, 2016. When Yang Ke learns that I prefer vegetarian food, he insists on crossing town during rush hour to find the right restaurant, despite my protestations that most regular eateries can handle this too. Yang, who is vice-chairman of the Guangdong Writers Association and editor in chief of *Artworks*, has also invited Zheng Xiaoqiong. She has worked at the journal since 2008 and has just been promoted to vice-editor in chief. One of the things we discuss over dinner is how the influential, decidedly official journal that is *Artworks* has steadily made room to introduce *un*-official poetry journals ever since January 2014. That's right. Similarly, in the mid-2000s, the influential, decidedly official journal that is *Shanghai Literature* published a series of articles on *un*-official journals by Zhang Qinghua, a project Zhang later fleshed out in his celebrated *Geography of Contemporary Chinese Poetry from among the People*. And there are countless other examples of the entanglement of official and unofficial cultural institutions and the crossing-over that happens between them.<sup>27</sup> It is tempting to pomp up here and speak of Institutions Official and Unofficial instead, and then abbreviate that to IOU. In an ongoing give-and-take, official institutions borrow from the unofficial circuit as a talent pool and a source of proud inspiration, and unofficial institutions borrow from the official circuit as a source of money and infrastructure.
73. If the anecdotal evidence is anything to go by, the evolving role of the Writers Association in the world of unofficial/avant-garde poetry is a case in point. Yang Ke, for one, is a ranking Association official at the provincial and national levels. When we meet, he has just returned from the quinquennial plenary session in Beijing, readily explaining that the fuss over Mo Yan's description of Xi Jinping as a guiding light in literature and art is really a matter of journalists misreporting. But Yang's status as a government official doesn't affect his status as an avant-garde poet and a poet from among the people. His high-profile work as editor of the annual *Chinese New Poetry Almanac*, ever since the first crackles of the 1998–2000 Panfeng polemic between “popular” and “intellectual” writing, is but one example.<sup>28</sup> Or take Huo Junming and He Tongbin, both young, outspoken scholars who command respect in unofficial/avant-garde circles and have recently joined the Association, Huo in Beijing at the national level, and He in Nanjing in the Jiangsu branch organization.
74. Institutions are made of people, and their entanglements are embodied in individual lives. I have the feeling that while many avant-garde poets and editors are reluctant to publicly identify with the Association, it is no longer something from a different planet. I don't always ask and a **members list** on the Association's web page stops in 2009, but I have the impression that many more unofficial/avant-garde poets, scholars, critics, and publishers are now members than ten or even five years ago, and infinitely more than in the late 1990s, let alone before then. Even larger numbers partake in activities (co)organized or (co)funded by the Association. The radicals say the Association is incorporating the avant-garde. The relativists say it's the other way around. Both positions are defensible, the former from an institutional perspective and the latter from the point of view of aesthetics.

<sup>27</sup> Cf Edmond 2006, van Crevel 2008: ch 1, Crespi 2009: ch 7; <sup>28</sup> See Inwood 2014: ch 3, van Crevel 2008: ch 12. for a parallel with fiction, see Fumian 2009.

75. I have carried on about unofficial publishing, historiography and commentary from among the people, independent publishing, and so on because the DIY tradition is a massively important, distinguishing characteristic of Chinese poetry today, and because its materials and its stories are fascinating and not automatically available to scholars outside China. At the same time, official publishing has changed beyond recognition in the decades since the Cultural Revolution. Especially since the mid and late 1990s, it has put out enormous amounts of poetry and commentary that will hold their own beyond the confines of politically orthodox cultural production. About 95% of the individual books and anthologies in my collection of avant-garde poetry are official publications. This is not to say that the distinction of official and unofficial has lost its relevance. It hasn't. Several of my interlocutors make the simple point that the unofficial circuit ultimately exists because there are firm limits to freedom of expression in China. One says the unofficial journals will disappear "once democracy arrives." But the space I have given to DIY is not meant to imply that official cultural institutions are unworthy or irrelevant, or that the official and the unofficial are worlds apart. They are not, and people, texts, ideas, and resources cross over all the time.

76. So in this bubbly landscape, who is writing and what do they write? If I had two minutes to give a class of students the lay of the land in Chinese poetry today, what would I say? Where would I point first and where next? What are the main departments, so to speak? Beyond some generalizing outlines, this essay is about people rather than texts, but the truism that people and texts are inseparable is, er, true in its own way. And the many conversations I had in China—where, as I should probably confess, I also read a text now and then, and sometimes two or three—may help to make an attempt at a rough sketch of something of this magnitude and complexity slightly less doomed, even for a non-native, slow reader whose vision is a hybrid of bird's eye and worm's eye (and who feels that he toggles between birdworm and wormbird, as two very different animals that are always ready to frustrate *and* comfort one another). But first, let me throw up a hurdle.

### *All the structurally occasional stuff*

77. BEIJING, SEPTEMBER 11, 2016. The editor of a national poetry journal calls to ask if I'm free for dinner the day after tomorrow, on the eve of the mid-Autumn festival. I say yes and ask what's happening. He says we'll be getting together with a few comrades-in-poetry 诗友. This is a wonderfully inclusive category and my attempts to learn more are to no avail. On the day, when I arrive at an upmarket restaurant called Huaigulou, near Hangtianqiao, a waitress in a cheongsam shows me to a spacious private room with separate tea and dinner areas. Once all have arrived and we've moved from tea to dinner, there are fourteen of us, five women and nine men, seated around a huge round table. Five are academics, four are editors, two are businesspeople, one is a doctor, one is in the army, and one works at the railways bureau of a provincial capital. To my knowledge, two or three are fairly well known as poets (one of the editors, the railways official, and maybe one of the businesspeople), although they might not be in the hottest top-tier anthologies at the national level. Minimally seven and possibly more have officially published poetry collections to their name. As usual, people have brought copies of their books for those among the other guests they have not met before, that are signed and exchanged along with name cards and WeChat scans.



We are here at the invitation of one of the businesspeople, who also hands out copies of a lifestyle magazine that is part of her media company, with a special on Guizhou cave tourism.

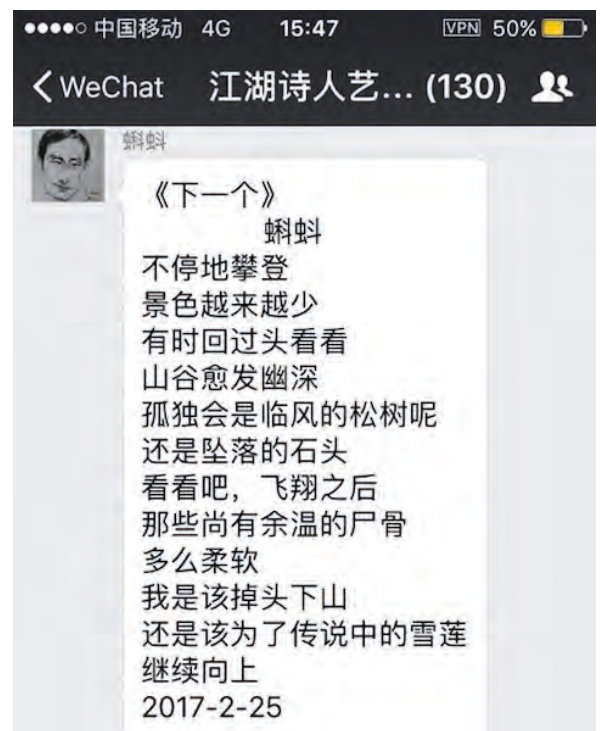
78. The dinner is sumptuous, with our host explaining where the ingredients for the various dishes come from (eel from Henan, kiwis from Hainan, that kind of thing), and enjoyable, with lots of collective and one-on-one toasting and generous drinking, and a mix of solemn speeches with raucous, loyal interruptions. A triangle of identities as poets, professionals—especially the businesspeople—and scholars generates a dynamic between three representational frames, of which a single individual may inhabit more than one. Poethood sits at the top, supported on two sides by the businesspeople’s money and the social leverage it earns them and by the scholars’ erudition and morality. Poethood is key, but this type of get-together is otherwise flexible qua frames and populations in terms of social class and orientation, education, profession, income, age, and so on. The group that has gathered in Huaigulou today is just one possible line-up.

79. It is probably safe to say that this sort of thing happens all over China all the time, as one of many manifestations of a resurgence of the social business of poetry in imperial times (if this was ever really gone to begin with—but by Chinese standards, the Maoist years had less time for it than usual).<sup>29</sup> Here, this means two things. First, poetry as a social practice, in a wide range of situations. To mark a comrade-in-poetry’s arrival, for instance, as Faxing does for those who visit him in Puge, but equally to respond to the news of a comrade-in-poetry’s suicide. WeChat exploded when photographer Ren Hang, also known to write halfway decent poetry, killed himself in February 2017. In a conversation in one of the large, semi-institutionalized poetry group chats, poet Kedou first asked “Who will be the next one?,” in a reference to the sadly expanding list of suicides in contemporary Chinese poetry, and then followed up with a poem called “The next one” a few hours later. But poetry as a social practice can be used to comment on anything at all, from geopolitics and local headlines to your daughter’s high school graduation.

80. Second, and related, the social business of poetry reflects the idea that writing poetry is a worthy pastime for anyone, requiring no explanation and deserving of encouragement and solidarity instead, and that it is a learnable skill as much as a personal, exclusive talent—which, incidentally, helps explain a strikingly prescriptive streak in domestic scholarship and criticism; and that as such, it is absolute-



Kedou: “Who will be the next one?”



Kedou: “The next one.”

<sup>29</sup> See Owen 2011.

ly fine to give it a try, and while you're at it, to make your own book. Together, these two things lead to the production of infinite amounts of verse. This makes many people happy. But there are also those, especially the specialists, who lament what they see as a messy and chaotic situation in which everyone is writing and, more worryingly, everyone is publishing. Of the forest and the trees, then. Where do you start?

81.

One thing that might help is to *begin* by recognizing what we might sum up as all the structurally occasional stuff and its significance as one of the main departments, rather than add it as an afterthought on something we don't know how to place. And, of course, by recognizing that this department will churn out lots of publications because these days lots of people and lots of institutions have lots of money. It also encompasses texts that emphatically want to be part of public discourse such as the disaster poetry 灾难诗歌 / 灾后诗歌 written to fight the 2003 SARS epidemic and to commemorate the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake (I own ten Wenchuan anthologies, and I'm sure there are more), surgeon Zhao Xiaogang's smog poem that shot to nationwide fame in 2016, and so on. Granted, the notion of structurally occasional stuff is not exactly an intellectual breakthrough, but you've got to start somewhere. And yes: it needs more research, probably in the sociology of culture, because (prejudice alert) it seems unlikely that the texts in question will turn out to be rich in literary innovation.



Wenchuan—"May 12" Poetry, edited by Chen Yin.

### *The avant-garde and what it is not*

82.

Secondly, there's avant-garde poetry, and the trouble with avant-garde poetry. As noted, the term usually refers to aesthetic matters rather than institutional ones—and as such, the avant-garde has been a mixed bag of texts ever since it emerged in the late 1970s from underground reading and writing during the Cultural Revolution, because it was supposed to accommodate just about everything that was *un*-like official poetry and, later, *un*-like mainstream poetry. From the solemn, metaphor-laden obscure poetry associated with *Today* to the irreverent, stripped-down nonsense poetry 废话诗歌 championed by Yang Li, from Haizi's grandiose ethno-epics to Taozi's desperate records of depression and self-harm, and so on. Poets and editors don't necessarily call themselves avant-garde all the time, but Yang Li's influential *Rubber* is loud and proud about it. Another mook-like production, it boasts four robust issues since 2012, through official publication as well as explicitly declared independent publishing, and calls itself "Chinese avant-garde literature" (not just poetry, for *Rubber* carries fiction and criticism as well), promising the reader "forty-three avant-garde poets" in the first issue.

83.

Lest we forget, avant-garde poetry took shape as a catchall category after the Cultural Revolution, as a site of resistance to the formidable power of the state-sanctioned literary establishment, and the notion operates in China in a local, specific sense. You should block out whatever you know about the avant-garde as a generic, transnational notion and its

roots in the European interbellum—and, by the way, about avant-garde Chinese theater and fiction, which are different kettles of fish.<sup>30</sup> Even so, for poetry, in light of a diversification of styles that has been ongoing since the mid-1980s, the label now runs the risk of becoming meaningless. Or of becoming not quite absurd but minimally eyebrow-raising, especially if some of that blocked-out business were to make its way back in, as it is wont to do. Luo Zhenya's *Twentieth-Century Chinese Avant-Garde Poetry*, for instance, greatly expands his earlier use of the term for contemporary texts. It covers nine poetry movements, all the way from the 1920s Symbolists 象征派 to post-70 70后 poetry in the early twenty-first century. They loosely hang together because all were “modern,” they made it big and their fame has lasted. In other words, according to this lucid, productive poetry scholar, avant-garde has come to mean something close to... canonized.

84.

Of course, for the post-Cultural Revolution period to which the term should really apply—maybe it's about being called avant-garde in your own time?—there is a history here, and it was good while it lasted. But now it is time to think again. Tang Xiaodu and Zhang Qinghua seem to sense as much, judging by the title and the preface of their *30 Years of Contemporary Avant-Garde Poetry, 1979–2009: Genealogy and Canon*, a huge anthology with unmistakable milestone ambitions. But if the category of the avant-garde is past its expiry date, this begs the question of what the classifiers should do next to handle... right, so what is the avant-garde? Ok, here's my bid: a large, ever more heterogeneous body of innovative poetry, mostly authored by highly educated and well-connected members of a cultural elite, that stands in an equivocal, uneasy relation to earlier traditions in Chinese poetry and is heavily influenced by foreign literature in translation, takes its cue from a personal aesthetic experience rather than government policy or the largest common denominator of taste in Chinese society, and has garnered more foreign recognition than any other type of poetry from mainland China to date. Phew.

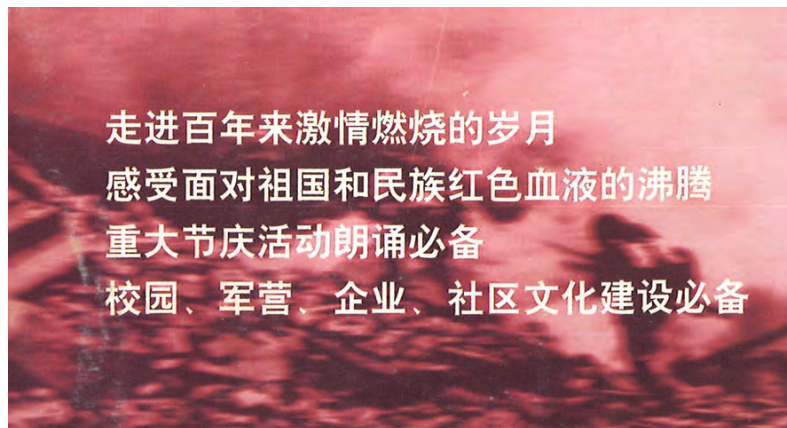
85.

That was an eighty-two-word definition to end a giant thumbnail. As one of its foreign recognizers, I have been partial to the avant-garde, and struggled to define it, for a long time.<sup>31</sup> As for the other departments the birdworm/wormbird would name in those two minutes with its students, I will discuss these mostly with an eye to their relations with the avant-garde, since this is at the core of a project I hope to develop in the next few years. Such avant-garde-centrism may strike the reader as odd for someone who says the category is past its expiry date. At the risk of stating the obvious, I will say that this doesn't mean the *poetry* has gone bad, or that we should rip the label off the poetry for the years in which it made sense, however sweepingly. Also, groups in poetry will still work up a sweat trying to appropriate it in the sense of being cutting-edge—see Yang Li's *Rubber*, above, and Shen Haobo's battlecry “Avant-Garde unto Death!”—and more generally the expression is something lots of people do identify with in various ways. But the body of texts that was born in the underground some fifty years ago continues to grow and diversify, and it is pulsating with heterogeneity. Add to that the profound changes in the world around the texts, and the question is staring us in the face: what does this mean any longer? Again, while I am giving in to the (de)classification impulse, none of this is meant to box in (or box out) texts or people. Crossing over doesn't just happen between official and unofficial institutions but also between all manner of aesthetics and social and cultural positionings.

<sup>30</sup> See Ferrari 2016 (and 2012), <sup>31</sup> See van Crevel 2016. Jones 2016, van Crevel 2016.

86.

One thing my long definition shows is that it is still hard to avoid defining the avant-garde in negative terms. It contains two elements that highlight things the avant-garde is not (or two and a half, if we count its equivocal relation to classical Chinese poetry). The first is cultural policy, which takes us to the next department on the list, that of official poetry. Quite aside from its metamorphosis in practice, the theoretical essence of cultural policy is unchanged and has been reaffirmed—on standby, as it were—by every Communist Party secretary-general since Mao Zedong laid down the law seventy-five years ago, asking that literature and art operate in the service of the nation as envisioned by the Party. A rather loud example of official poetry would be *The Red Canon of Chinese Poetry*, a 2002 anthology to mark the Party's eightieth anniversary. The cover names the collective of the Chinese Poetry Society as its editor, and it is only in the colophon information that an individual editor in chief is quietly



The band around *The Red Canon*.

identified as Jidi Majia. The volume is graced by a loose paper band of the sort used for celebrity endorsements and discount markers that looks like it was cut from a blurry old photograph of a battlefield scene. The blurb speaks of burning passion and the fatherland's and the people's boiling blood, and encourages recital of this poetry in schools, army barracks, enterprises, and community culture construction (an umbrella term for orchestrated collective activities such as synchronized outdoors exercise and song-and-dance). The anthology opens with a 1936 poem by the Chairman himself—whose final two lines in his calligraphy grace its cover—and a 1937 poem by his Premier, and ends with a 2001 poem by Zhong Zhenglin called “World, Hear China's Song,” celebrating the country's entry into the WTO.

87.

The second element in my definition that highlights something the avant-garde is not is the largest common denominator of taste. This is catered to by what I will call the department of mainstream poetry, with Wang Guozhen as its one-time figurehead. Somewhat tragically so, as is captured well in Wang's obituary in the *China Daily* in April 2015. The obit notes his fluctuating popularity and his rejection by the avant-garde “incrowd” 圈子 as well as high-points like the sensational success of his first book in 1990 and Xi Jinping plucking a line from his poetry for a speech in 2013. Wang's poetry proffers lessons in life that are ultra-clichéd, which doesn't mean they can't be effective in playing an age-old role of poetry as subtitling emotionally intense moments in human life. Here are some of his titles: “A Smile Is All I Need,” “When the Leaves Turn Brown,” “If Your Talents Should Go Unrecognized” (the poem cautions against cursing and advises perseverance), “Let Us Cherish One Another,” “When Disaster Strikes, the People Will Come Out Boldly” and the ultra-popular “Love of Life,” which paints life as a journey, etc. This poem probably inspired the *China Daily* lead, which says “Beloved poet hits the road again, this time never to return.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Xing Yi 2015.



88. I offer no Chinese equivalent for “mainstream” here, because the present exercise is not a one-on-one translation of an existing overview. I have seen Chinese poets and scholars use 主流 ‘mainstream’ for this department, but also 大众 ‘the masses.’ At any rate, there is a welcoming interface between mainstream poetry and official poetry. In Chinese, depending on context, 官方 ‘official’ and 主流 ‘mainstream’ can be exchangeable as poetry labels, with plenty of room for politics and morality in both.

89. Put bluntly, many poets, critics, and scholars associated with the avant-garde hold that official poetry and mainstream poetry are irrelevant to the discerning reader. A less arrogant choice of words would be that the appeal of official and mainstream poetry does not reach outside their limited, incrowd audiences. In this view, official poetry’s audience consists of believers in political orthodoxy whose numbers dwindle as their average age continues to rise, and mainstream poetry’s audience consists of unsophisticated, amateur readers. One suspects a self-serving, circular argument, since important aspects of avant-garde identity hinge on its dissociation from official poetry and mainstream poetry to begin with, bristling about the former and shrugging off the latter. Moreover, confinement to an incrowd audience is a charge that can equally be leveled at the avant-garde itself.

#### HAVING FOREIGN READERS

#### SURELY MEANS YOU’VE SOLD OUT

90. In their turn, when countering this counterclaim, avant-garde advocates will invoke two points that are deeply controversial. One is “specialist” 专业 expertise, in poetry and in commentary. This means that the people in question are paid to write and/or do nothing but write, or, in Stephen Owen’s irresistible description of the later Du Fu, that they are “largely idle except for writing poetry” (or commentary).<sup>33</sup> More importantly, for official poetry has specialist authors of this kind as well,<sup>34</sup> it implies that avant-garde specialists possess a superior, progressive literary sensitivity—in other words, that they are hip. The second point is that the avant-garde’s audience includes foreign readers, of various description. Needless to say, in a counter-counter-counterclaim by official and/or mainstream advocates, both points will be quickly turned around as the need arises. Having foreign readers surely means you’ve sold out, and your so-called specialists must be strangers to the real world outside the ivory tower. Here, the image points not only or even primarily to the halls of academe but equally to the “incrowd” that rejected Wang Guozhen. From the outside, this is widely and not unreasonably seen as a bastion of self-importance in which the interests of poets and commentators are inextricably entwined. When examined from the inside, it turns out to contain many sub-incrowds that entertain unending conflict about poetry, poetics, and whatever else is going down, a phenomenon loved by some and loathed by others that is known as “incrowd culture” 圈子文化.

<sup>33</sup> Owen 2015: lxix.

<sup>34</sup> During the Mao years, in its strictest sense, the expression “specialist writers” or “professional writers” 专业作家 referred to an institutional category including those members of the Writers Association who enjoyed the rare privilege of earning a full salary for their creative writing (as distinct from administrative and editorial work). There is a certain overlap with the current usage of “specialist” for authors associated with official poetry. I have not researched this, but it is my impression that while the latter are normally members of the Association, they aren’t necessarily on its payroll. See Kong 2005: 12.

## More ships

91. I have outlined the semantics of this mutual finger-pointing to illustrate that there is no real dialogue between the avant-garde and official and mainstream poetry, at least not of the productive kind. Although less antagonistic and indifferent, the avant-garde's relation to classical-style poetry and minority poetry also brings to mind the image of ships passing in the night. The modern classical-style 旧体 poetry of which floodwaves continue to be written as we speak is rarely considered alongside the various constituencies of new poetry, let alone in interaction with them (even though there are occasional publications on new poetry's relation to premodern classical poetry, now a much more legitimate topic than in the avant-garde's early days). Tian Xiaofei pointed this out quite some time ago, with Lizilizilizi as a particularly captivating example, and her call for action has lost nothing of its urgency.
92. One is reminded of Han Dong's characterization of post-Cultural Revolution authors as literary orphans to whom foreign literature in Chinese translation is an infinitely more pervasive presence than classical Chinese literature, and arguably less foreign. On that note, in light of its huge, continuing impact, it would not be altogether outlandish to grant foreign poetry in Chinese translation department status as well. That said, the uncritical embrace of all things foreign and especially "Western" in the 1980s and 1990s has elicited concern and scorn for some time now, and native traditions are being revalued. When the Jiangnan Seven kicked off in Changshu, for instance, convener Zhang Wei stressed the need for contemporary poetry to reconnect with tradition and the heartland of Chinese culture. At any rate, there is a great deal of distance between the avant-garde and classical-style poetry, premodern and modern alike. And bridging it is not made any easier by the insecurity that contemporary poets feel vis-à-vis their world-renowned forebears.
93. For ethnic "minority" 少数民族 poetry in Chinese (the term remains problematic, but I'll skip the scare quotes from here on), the story told in the afterword to Tang and Zhang's *30 Years of Contemporary Avant-Garde Poetry* is instructive. Upon prepublication in *Foshan Literature and Art*, at a symposium convened by the journal's editor who had also commissioned the book, one of the participants objected that minority poetry had been wrongly left out. An extra section was duly added to the book project, ostentatiously making minority poetry part of the avant-garde while not quite blending it in (the sections are numbered only and otherwise unnamed). But this isn't convincing. Throughout the first seven sections, the order of the poets appears to reflect two criteria: a chronology of fame—meaning, who became famous when—and some attention to gender consciousness in women's poetry. Aside from the question of how they hang together, both appear to have been dropped in section eight, on minority poetry.
94. That section eight was a late addition is not the point. As noted, crossing over happens at many levels and in many directions. Jidi Majia (that's right, the editor of *The Red Canon*), for example, is an exceptionally versatile practitioner, at home in official poetry as well as in minority poetry *and* in the avant-garde. But while avant-garde publications feature minority

poets all the time, advertised as such or not, it comes as no surprise that minority poetry remains a foreign body in Tang and Zhang's book. First, this is in line with a commentarial discourse that accepts as self-evident that the poet's ethnicity should lead to a label on what they write—at least when considered alongside what ethnic Han poets write. Second, most of what one finds under minority poetry in Tang and Zhang and elsewhere is *about* ethnicity or connectable with ethnicity in one way or another: think cultural traditions, ecologies and identities, often in the face of “modernization” and globalization. It is no coincidence that Mark Bender's latest book juxtaposes minority poetry from China (in Chinese and other languages) with borderland poetries from elsewhere in Asia—India, Myanmar, Mongolia—rather than, shall we say, non-minority poetries in Chinese. Simultaneously, representations of minority poetry as a foreign body likely also reflect cultural policy, the strategies of editors and publishers, and their readers' expectations. As long as exoticism doesn't take over, maybe that's OK. It makes more sense than forced attempts at incorporation by the avant-garde.

### *What about the women?*

95. So the avant-garde's relations with official and mainstream poetry are antagonistic and indifferent, and its relations with classical-style poetry and minority poetry are distant, uncertain, and equivocal. (Anyone say apodictic?) Now to women's poetry, briefly mentioned above in the discussion of women's low visibility on the scene in everything but the poetry itself. This issue is not exclusive to China, nor is the debate on the notion of women's poetry. Some of the basics are covered in the preposition game, which is also played in other quarters such as exile literature, queer literature, prison literature, and so on. Is women's poetry necessarily *by* women or *for* women or *about* women or more broadly *of* women—in an identificatory or even a possessive sense, or in that there is such a thing as a feminine voice or feminine language or a feminine text—or is it all or several of the above? And who does the defining, for which audiences, to what end, and to what effect? Moving on from there in schematic fashion, is it helpful to consider women's poetry in today's China as one of the main departments alongside avant-garde, official, mainstream, classical-style, minority, and subaltern poetry (which is coming up next)—or should it be intersectional to them, as a ubiquitous force whose significance is on display in the unending debate it generates?

96. Clearly the latter, as long as this is done not in a dull, square-angle matrixy kind of way but by foregrounding gender as an all-permeating dimension of experience of which we need to ask permanently whether it is being recognized. In practice, as a critical category, women's poetry is often presented as a subset of the avant-garde, alongside other groups and trends such as obscure poetry, third generation poetry, individualized writing 个人化写作, and so on.<sup>35</sup> And of course, on the question of whether an author should even be identified as a woman poet to begin with, opinions vary in China as elsewhere. In Harbin, early in May, after a poetry reading in the eye-popping Grand Theater that sits on the north

<sup>35</sup> For anthologies, Cui Weiping 1993 is an early example, and Tang Xiaodu and Zhang Qinghua 2012 a recent one. For scholarship, the work of authors such as Chen Chao, Cheng Guangwei, Liu Bo, Luo Zhenya (2005), Wang Changzhong and Zhang Qinghua (1997) comes to mind.

shore of the Songhua beckoning to a future that hasn't quite arrived, Feng Yan rants against the women's poetry label for a full half hour while navigating her SUV back into the busier parts of town. She is adamant that the success of her *Selected Poems*, the first contemporary poetry collection published by the Commercial Press and about to be reprinted, not be linked to her gender in any way. But in Beijing, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) scholar and poet Zhou Zan, working with Zhai Yongming and in recent years with theater director and fiction writer Chen Si'an, continues to edit *Wings*, which carries writing by women only—without the texts automatically being for women or about women or of women in other ways. The journal's (unofficial) publisher calls itself Wings Women's Publishing and has a public [WeChat](#) account of the same name.



Zhou Zan, 2014. Courtesy of Zhou Zan. Photograph by Zhang Yilei.

97.

At the end of the day we can separate the issues all we want, but women's poetry and women's low visibility on the scene have a way of clicking back together, like magnets. In June I do an interview in Beijing with Shen Haobo, who is a poet, a hyperactivist, the CEO of the vastly successful Irongrind Publishers (the company calls itself "Xiron" for alphabetical appearances but it's hard to resist translating 磨铁 a little more generously) and by now a very rich man. After we've talked about the incessant poetry competitions and poetry awards and the role he plays in this sort of thing as a recognized mover-and-shaker, I ask who his favorite five poets are, and he needs no time to think. They are Yi Sha, Hou Ma, Han Dong, Tang Xin, and Shen Haobo (and yes, they're all male). All five are aggressive champions of "colloquial writing" 口语写作, so gender isn't the only imbalance. But I'm not sure these things operate at the same level of... life? Anyway, on to the final department on my list. This is especially illustrative of the power of poetry as a meme in Chinese cultural tradition, and I'll spend a little more time on it.



Shen Haobo, mid-2000s. Photograph by Martin de Haan.

### *The subaltern*

98.

DONGGUAN, DECEMBER 10, 2016. The Dongguan Polytechnic of Science and Technology lies in a university district of the kind that have sprung up outside countless cities in China, as the schools make way for real estate development in the city centers. At the entrance to the School of Literature, I ring Liu Dongwu for exact directions. He doesn't take my call, but someone who is not Liu emerges from a large conference room and gestures for me to enter. I thought I was going to meet Liu in his office, but I find him in the middle of chair-



ing a well-attended symposium on children’s literature by local author Xiang Jiexin, as I am directed to an empty seat marked by a place card with my name. Knowing the local rules of conferencing and not knowing the first thing about Xiang, I frantically try to think of something sensible to say for when Liu will inevitably ask me to speak. All ends well when the ongoing conversation shows that the symposium is anchored in a wider-ranging conversation about Dongguan and literature at large. In the wake of Shenzhen, where it all started, Dongguan has battlers literature 打工文学 as its claim to fame, and I can mitigate my ignorance of Xiang’s work by saying something about battlers poetry.<sup>36</sup>

99.

“Battlers poetry” is my current favorite among several English renderings of 打工诗歌, the safest translation being “migrant worker poetry.” The term has also been transliterated as *dagong* poetry. Wikipedia defines “battler” as

an Australian colloquialism referring to “ordinary” or working-class individuals who persevere through their commitment despite adversity. Typically, this adversity comprises the challenges of low pay, family commitments, environmental hardships and lack of personal recognition. It is a term of respect and endearment intended to empower and recognize those who feel as though they exist at the bottom of society.

Perfect. The Chinese term is contested but looks like it is here to stay, and it is the most versatile of various names for the poetry in question. That is, it actually means something to all of the parties involved: practitioners and commentators, cultural officials and general readers, fans and skeptics. Generically, this poetry has been subsumed under subaltern writing 底层写作 or subaltern literature 底层文学, and “subaltern poetry” works well as a department name in that it operates on roughly the same level of abstraction as the others. But I will focus on battlers poetry, since this is clearly the dominant variety.



Liu Dongwu. Photograph by Maghiel van Crevel.

100.

Battlers poetry, then, is writing by members of the new precariat, specifically the underclass of domestic migrants who have flocked from the countryside to the cities in the hundreds of millions since the 1980s. The genre originated in “the workshop of the world” in Shenzhen, Dongguan, and the wider Pearl River Delta in Guangdong province, and has spread to other places in China. The hardships and the social injustice of migrant worker life are among its most prominent themes: dehumanizing labor conditions, feelings of displacement, nostalgia and existential alienation, a vulnerable status as non-citizens in the absence of the coveted urban household registration and steady work, and so on. Since the 2000s, the

<sup>36</sup> The following discussion of battlers poetry draws on Van Crevel 2017a and 2017c. The latter has an extensive discussion of the discursive interactions of battlers poetry and the avant-garde, as well as references to foreign-language scholarship and translations. See also [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battler\\_\(underdog\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battler_(underdog)), accessed 9 December 2017. I am grateful to David Kelly for bringing the Aussie battler to my attention.

web and social media have spurred its development and given it tremendous exposure, with translations, interviews, and articles also starting to appear outside China in recent years.

101.

Two of the best-known poets, both of whom first published on their blogs, are Zheng Xiaoqiong and Xu Lizhi. Zheng is known for her intense descriptions of the body punished by factory work and for her activism on behalf of female workers. Xu's sudden fame came after his suicide in 2014, but the quality of his writing—marked by a fragile, sensitive voice and more sophisticated than most battlers poetry—is undisputed. In commentary, the rise of battlers poetry has raised questions of definition, ownership, and appropriation, according to the rules of the preposition game. An important element of the ownership discussion is the question of whether battler poets lose their legitimacy if they're no longer battlers in socio-economic terms—even if it was battlers poetry that propelled their career advancement. In regard to the overarching question of the genre's position in the literary field, its specialist appraisal is often framed in a crude opposition of social significance (high) and aesthetic value (low) that might just not be the whole story.



Zheng Xiaoqiong, late 2000s. Courtesy of Zheng Xiaoqiong.  
No photographer identified.



Xu Lizhi, early 2010s. Reportedly taken by one of his  
co-workers (Qin Xiaoyu, personal communication).

102.

Once a battler and an early practitioner of battlers poetry himself, Liu Dongwu is among the most prolific of its commentators. He is a self-taught scholar from among the people who has earned his recent affiliation with the Polytechnic through the quality of his writings. After the symposium and lunch with the participants, Liu and I drive across town to the Dongguan Institute for Literature and Art, a unit that comes under the aegis of the municipal Literature and Art Federation, where he runs the Dongguan Battlers Literature Training Center, established in 2007. There, we meet Zheng Xiaoqiong, Xie Xiangnan—who,

like Zheng, likes to think of himself as a poet rather than a battlers poet, but labels tend to stick—and scholar Zhang Deming with some of his students. Zheng lives in Guangzhou, Xie lives in Shenzhen, and Zhang lives in Zhanjiang, but they had an event in Dongguan this morning and have stuck around.

103.

For the rest of the afternoon and over dinner we have a long conversation in which the immediacy of this poetry's context makes itself felt. The story of the migrant workers is both grueling and magnificent, but more grueling than magnificent. The respect Liu enjoys as an expert and an advocate of battlers poetry is palpable throughout. As is the fact that how one department in poetry relates to another—say, avant-garde to battlers—is not just an academic question but seen as affecting the dignity of the people involved. Xie Xiangnan, whose writing exudes a kind of irony that is rare in battlers poetry, is visibly irritated at a (self-)image of the avant-garde as holding a monopoly on the cutting edge. He's a crosser-over himself, with a volume in a prestigious Post-70 poetry book series edited by poet and PKU professor Zang Di, who is identified from head to toe with the avant-garde (and all of its alleged vices, to which we turn next). But to Xie this doesn't mean admittance to one echelon or another. Instead, to him it reaffirms that no single group of poets owns the rights to being avant-garde. Something similar holds for Chen Zhongcun, whose work is also included in Zang Di's series. He is the first battler poet I meet in person, in Shanghai in October 2016, and I realize that I've been thinking in stereotypes when I am shocked to see him drive up in a Landrover he tells me cost RMB 700,000. In the mid-1990s he was unable to add a return address to his journal submissions since he lived hand to mouth with no place of his own. Now, he is a published poet who teaches fine arts at several universities and a successful painter. Rags to riches. Chen has stayed true to his early involvement with battlers poetry and has no ownership qualms.

THE STORY OF THE MIGRANT WORKERS  
IS BOTH GRUELING AND MAGNIFICENT,  
BUT MORE GRUELING THAN MAGNIFICENT

104.

Concretely, while one might have expected battlers poetry to be yet another one of those ships of which we've seen a few above, things have turned out differently because it has become the perfect tool for avant-garde-bashing. In an intermittent, sometimes caustic debate that started in the mid-2000s and still flares up now and then, battlers poetry has been hailed for its authenticity, its role in bearing witness to the colossal social impact of rural-urban migration, and its continuation of a native tradition of poetry from among the people that is said to go back to the *Book of Songs*. As such it has effortlessly claimed the moral high ground, and many commentators have contrasted it with portrayals of avant-garde poetry as elitist and academic word games, divorced from social reality and looking to the West for its models. This is a comfortable riff that many have gone along with, but not all. Qian Wenliang, for instance, warns against "moralization of the art of poetry" and reasserts the right of avant-garde poetry to operate on its own terms. In a recent article called "New Poetry Hijacked by Reality," Luo Xiaofeng manages to stand above the fray. She captures well what amounts to at best a confusion of tongues and at worst a fundamental incompatibility of discourses.



105.

Incidentally, subaltern poetry's relation to official poetry offers just as much if not more food for thought. In a nutshell, both contain many texts that give the laboring masses a voice, but subaltern poetry brings to mind the precariat (say, neon lights to illuminate underpaid overtime for coolies inside a capitalist sweatshop) rather than the proletariat (say, the sun rising over an oil rig operated by well-rested socialist heroes nursing their iron rice bowl). In *My Poems: A Canon of Contemporary Workers Poetry*, editor Qin Xiaoyu has the sleight of hand to combine the two between the covers of a single book. However, the jubilant poetry from the Maoist years by the likes of Li Xue'ao is relegated to an appendix that is stingily named "Workers Poetry 1949–1976," and it is tempting to read this as a fig leaf for the book's enthusiastic focus on the postsocialist period, in which the well-being of the working class has become a bone of contention. Battlers poetry is at the heart of the anthology (in Qin's preferred terms, this is peasant worker or migrant worker poetry 农民工诗歌) and of the larger *My Poems* project, meaning the book + the documentary + lots of spin-off.



Pr for Qin Xiaoyu and Wu Feiyue's documentary *My Poems*. The Chinese edition of the book and the film initially came with an English caption that read "The Verse of Us." The international edition of the film and a recent anthology of battlers poetry in English translation edited by Qin and translated by Eleanor Goodman are both called *Iron Moon*.

But there is more to the issue than a contrast between sweatshop coolies and socialist heroes. Qin also includes poetry by "new workers" 新工人, a term that mostly denotes factory workers in postsocialist China who have found employment in their native place and live less precarious lives than the battlers, even though they have long lost that iron rice bowl.

106.

XINYI, JUNE 5, 2017. Judging by the number of Shengzi's poems in the anthology, he must be one of Qin's favorite new worker poets. Shengzi started writing in the early 2000s, when the overhaul of state-owned enterprises had led to acute poverty for many, including himself, forcing him to sell his books and drive a pedicab in addition to his factory job and wrecking his marriage. In the next few years, working closely with Wu Ji, whom he had met online, he established the Workers Poetry Alliance. They set up an online workers poetry



forum on the Garden of Delight website (the one that went belly-up and took all the data with it in 2010) and brought out an unofficial journal called *Workers Poetry* that published two rich, book-like issues in in 2007 and 2009.

107.

Shengzi's writing is full of technical, concrete detail on factory machinery and unwieldy abstractions marked by an acute class consciousness, in a style that is confidently gauche. This choice of words is inspired by the conversations I have with him, first on WeChat and then face to face in this factory town near Xuzhou. We meet at noon near the shoe store he has run since 2013, when he left his job in a local brewery after twenty-five years. He feels he was forced out by an oppressive monitoring regime that kicked in when he suffered a back injury after a fall and amounted to bullying by the management. Together with his friend and fellow poet Chao Xiao we continue the conversation over lunch in a restaurant and then coffee at a café run by a friend inside a private home in an apartment building. Shengzi embodies the complexities within Qin's broad notion of workers poetry. His writing is a melancholic, sometimes skeptical or angry counteraction to official poetry that sings the praises of factory life. But he also has issues with what he sees as battlers poetry becoming a fad, cozying up to the literary scene—official or avant-garde or both—and betraying its origins. A labor rights activist, he sees workers poetry as a means to help workers find their own voice, and warns against its “literarization” 文学化, something he says he has willfully driven out of his own writing.



*Workers Poetry* no. 2 (2009).

108.

At the Zhengzhou conference, Shengzi speaks on workers poetry to the avant-garde crowd. He talks about the permanent injuries factory work has inflicted on his body and of “specialist” poets’ disparagement of his and Wu Ji’s workers poetry movement, and says that for battlers poetry, battling comes first and poetry second. There is a great deal of sympathy but little connection. So why has this worker poet who keeps literariness at arm’s length been invited? Tokenism, maybe, but I don’t know—and I would chalk it up to the meme thing, which triggers encounters between poets and poetries of various and sometimes incompatible description. Some time before I visit Shengzi in Xinyi I get the first issue of *Workers Poetry* from Xiang Yu, a poet and environmental



Shengzi. Photograph by Maghiel van Crevel.

activist from Henan who edits *Scrutiny*, an unofficial journal whose first issue in 2000 featured Mu Cao's coming out—and when I write to Shengzi to ask if he can help me find a copy of the second issue, he turns out to be friends with Xiang, just like he turns out to know avant-garde poet and scholar Leng Shuang, a PKU graduate who teaches at Minzu University, and Zheng Xiaoqiong, with whom he corresponds about her upcoming book, and he has been in online discussions and shouting matches with a handful of avant-garde poets... Again, no full stops, and intraconnections all over the place, even if they are awkward or conflicted. Of course, intraconnections don't just happen mechanically. They are made by individuals. But on the Chinese poetry scene, they burgeon.

## *The right of entry*

109.

Who is here? We are almost there. No more departments, but I can't wrap this up without saying something about Yu Xiuhua. Perhaps this is mere compulsion, since poetry-related interviews and panel discussions in China often end with "What do you think of Yu Xiuhua?" these days. But then again, that is precisely the point. Yu is a celebrity from left field whose meteoric rise to fame reflects the continuing power of poetry as a meme in Chinese cultural tradition (yes, it's me again). This is manifest in the immense popularity of her work, but also in her matter-of-fact statements on writing poetry as part of a life with which writing poetry might not be automatically associated in all quarters. Yu was living with her parents and her husband (a migrant worker who was usually away) and doing farmwork in a village in the Hubei countryside. She had limited access to literature, no higher education, and no economic leeway. After Liu Nian, editor at the national flagship *Poetry Journal*, "discovered" her through her blog and began plugging her work in 2014, her poetry and her life story went viral. Income from several best-selling books published almost overnight gave her financial independence in addition to fame, and enabled her to leave an unhappy marriage and start a new life. Her ultra-non-pretentiousness and a movement disorder and speech impediment from which she has suffered from childhood have made the story even more of a spectacle in the media, in China and abroad. Yu is the star of Fan Jian's 2016 documentary *Still Tomorrow*, which was screened at IDFA and other international festivals, and she was profiled by the *New York Times* in 2017.



Yu Xiuhua, mid-2010s. Courtesy of Yu Xiuhua.  
Photograph by Lin Donglin.

110.

On the quality of Yu's poetry, opinions differ. By way of an example, cultural critic Shen Rui famously compares her to Emily Dickinson, taking *Poetry Journal* to task for introducing her as "a poet with cerebral palsy," because this reduces Yu to her disability and the term misleadingly suggests cognitive impairment; not quite as famously but close, Shen Haobo calls Yu's poetry fundamentally lacking in quality (while also raking *Poetry Journal* over the coals for the disability label). Shen Rui sees Shen Haobo's and other avant-garde poets and critics' dismissal of Yu's poetry as reflecting male chauvinism. In addition to the gender issue,

the debate illustrates the divide between the avant-garde and mainstream departments, with Yu belonging in the latter. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the Yu Xiuhua “phenomenon” is a source of anxiety in avant-garde eyes. She is a woman who upends conventional images of avant-garde poethood, and her poetry doesn’t just sell: it best-sells. I find the quality of her work uneven, but in her best moments she has a singular, captivating style. Clichés regain their power in the rhythm of her “plain words” 大白话 and alternate with original imagery that is both reflexive and confrontational. Her directness and her readiness to speak of love and sexuality are on display in the poem that made her famous, “Crossing Half of China to Sleep with You.” Yu writes 睡你, literally ‘besleep you,’ passionate and/or aggressive, with the speaker as the agent of intercourse and “you” as the object, and goes on to say that it really doesn’t matter who besleeps whom.

111. While Yu Xiuhua’s career is unique, it also exemplifies the phenomenon of non-specialist writing 非专业写作, which has arguably been on the rise since around the year 2000 but has only started to be called by this name in recent years. In the picture I have presented, non-specialist writing would encompass most mainstream, subaltern, and classical-style poetry and just about all the structurally occasional stuff, including happy mumblings on the changing of the seasons in books made for dinner parties as well as disaster poetry and other texts with a social-activist agenda; and specialist writing would include large parts of official poetry and significant components of avant-garde poetry. One can turn oneself from a non-specialist into a specialist, and Zheng Xiaoqiong and Yu Xiuhua have done just that, by writing poetry that sells and joining the Writers Association.

YU XIUHUA HAS CRASHED THE PARTY  
ALL BY HERSELF

112. Because of the DIY tradition and the complex economy of the poetry scene more broadly—think sponsorship and other ways of affordably living for poetry, discussed above—the distinction of specialist and non-specialist writing is not just an institutional matter, and the boundary between them is anything but absolute. That said, the very notion of non-specialist writing offers a meaningful perspective on poetry in China today. It reflects an ontology I have referred to above, with “poetry” as a public, discursive space that is not just allowed but expected to accommodate wildly divergent texts and poetics. The unofficial/avant-garde tradition has been a well-oiled machine for claiming the right of entry to this space ever since the Cultural Revolution, subaltern poetry has followed suit in the last fifteen years or so, and Yu Xiuhua has crashed the party all by herself.

113. *Poems by Beijing Floaters*, edited by Shi Libin and An Qi, is another example—and one that illustrates the astonishing (and somewhat worrying) speed with which books are made in China. A [call](#) for submissions went out in December 2016, noting the size of the “floating population” of migrant workers in the capital and calling their poetry distinctive and full of life. It listed three criteria: the author must currently live in Beijing, they must not have a Beijing household registration, and their poetry must be of sufficient quality. The book appeared in April 2017—seriously, four months after the call—and it has three hundred and forty-five large pages in small type, without page breaks between authors or poems. I’m trying to say this is a lot of poetry, which was a recurring thought during my time in

China at any rate. The “poems” 诗篇 in the title echo those in Qin Xiaoyu’s *My Poems*. The focus on Beijing, abbreviated as Bei- ‘north,’ stakes a claim vis-à-vis the south as the origin of battlers poetry. This jockeying for position in the public space that is “poetry” becomes explicit when Shi Libin writes that it is time for the Beijing Floaters poetry to be recognized “on the map of Chinese poetry [...] alongside classical poetry, foreign poetry, a century of new poetry, survey collections of famous contemporary poets, and all these other splendid poetry landmarks.”<sup>37</sup> I don’t think they need to rattle the gate. They’re in already.

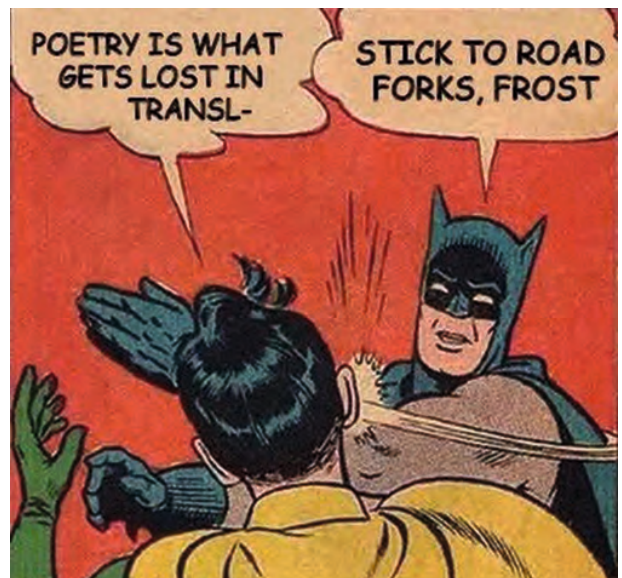
## UNTRANSLATABLES

114. The suspicion that a particular expression is untranslatable is cause for despair and joy. Despair because the search for equivalence is hard to suppress and the universal remains a tantalizing (if totalizing) notion. Joy because we love the particular and nothing beats translating an untranslatable. I have despaired and rejoiced when suspecting that two keywords for understanding the Chinese poetry scene are untranslatable, and this didn’t start with my latest trip. The words in question are *jianghu* 江湖 and *minjian* 民间 (I am adding their transcription because the Chinese words will occur with high frequency here, and we’ll go alphabetic). There is strange consolation in that *jianghu* and *minjian* overlap and sometimes seem to trade places, maybe because this makes the translator’s mission appear that much more heroic. Zheng Yi, in a fine article on *jianghu* in which *minjian* is never far away, wisely just transcribes them. She calls them “crucial concepts and spaces that make up the affective and cultural map of modern Chinese genre fiction” from the Republican period.<sup>38</sup>
115. If we replaced the modern genre fiction in Zheng’s statement with contemporary poetry, this would be a fitting description of how *jianghu* and *minjian* feature in Tang Qiaoqiao’s outstanding *Study of “The Poetry Arena” as a Distinguishing Feature of Chinese Poetry of the Last Twenty Years*. It’s a clunky title but a great book: articulate, incisive, unafraid of broaching politically sensitive topics like the tension between *jianghu* and official discourse, and with plenty of attention to issues that make the avant-garde poets look less than glamorous. Tang sees what she calls their insufficient independence of mind, for instance, as the root cause of the factionalism and the relentless “struggles” on the poetry scene. Similar to Zheng’s essay, while *jianghu* is the central topic of her book, *minjian* provides a key perspective throughout. In contemporary poetry, *jianghu* and *minjian* are significant others of *guanfang* 官方 ‘official’—here, I appropriate significant otherhood to mean everything from accomplice and complement to opposite and adversary—and it doesn’t come as a surprise that Tang published her book in Taiwan. In China, its frank dissection of this delicious snack in the politics of culture would likely be censored.
116. We are now fast approaching a vision of translation as something that moves the goalposts and gets away with it, which might just be part of its core business. Certainly for poetry, where translation can be an end in itself as well as a means to an end, and where it entails choosing time and again which rule you wish to break. For argument’s sake, one could even main-

<sup>37</sup> Shi Libin and An Qi: 1. <sup>38</sup> Zheng Yi 2016: 246.



tain that the degree to which a text is conventionally considered untranslatable and requires rule-breaking is proportional to the potential for poetic translation. Of course, rules being broken is what leads the skeptic to consider the translation of poetry impossible or doomed to failure—never mind that it has been happening for a couple thousand years and shows no signs of abating. And of course, if we really wanted the same thing as the original, we should discard translation altogether and shed the desire to know what gets said in other languages than the ones we speak. These things play out most acutely in poetry but they aren't exclusive to it, and they apply to literary criticism as well (or wedding announcements or the world news, for that matter). *Jianghu* and *minjian* are cases in point. If their translation has to be conspicuously inconsistent and do the opposite of blending in, that's just as well.



On poetry and translation. By Corine Tachtiris, who generously gave permission to reproduce this concise summary of the debate.

117.

The operative expression in the title of Tang's book is *shi jianghu* 诗江湖, conjoining *shi* 'poetry' with the first of our two elusive terms. *Jianghu*, literally 'rivers and lakes,' is an age-old, sentimental term for a world of wanderers and drifters living by their wits and their prowess, outside the realm of law and order: knights-errant, prostitutes, desperadoes etc. Among other things, it signifies rebellion-with-a-grin from the margins of society against state institutions and elite traditions. Since the 1990s, *shi jianghu* has been a popular tag for incrowd culture, rivalry, and conflict "out there" in the avant-garde, which leads me to render it as "the wide world of poetry" (as in the name of the website run by Shen Haobo and company, mentioned above) or indeed "the wild world of poetry." From the late 1990s, however, it has increasingly stood for a Tough Guy attitude on the poetry scene, and we might consider translating it as "the poetry arena" in the hope of conjuring up visions of gladiatorial combat. Mind you, "the poetry arena" is how Heather Inwood translates *shitan* 诗坛, which I translate as "the poetry scene" and which I think Inwood ties too closely to official poetry: that's right, the official poetry of which I've just said that *jianghu* is among its significant others. When *jianghu* occurs by itself as an epithet for the poetry scene, mostly for the avant-garde but spilling over into other departments, I propose to translate it as "the wild side," which inspired the title of this essay (and yes, Lou Reed—well, rebellion with a grin, right?). Oh, but when *Jianghu* occurs by itself as the name of Feng's journal, I have surrendered to the anthropomorphist *Freebooters*, because journals have agency and personalities, and freebooters bring plenty of rebellion plus maritime imagery that works well with those rivers and lakes. If I haven't lost you by now, there's something wrong.

118.

But I haven't translated *jianghu* in three different ways out of mere spite. Or four, if we count an early rendering of *shi jianghu* as "poetry vagabonds." Or five, just in case anyone felt that "poetry roughhouse" works better than "poetry arena" because it still gives us the spatiality of *jianghu* but sits in a less well-behaved linguistic register. That's what happens

when (i) literal and/or consistent translation of an expression in the source language won't work in the target language, (ii) the expression in question is one of the key terms in a language-conscious, dynamic, and often polemical niche discourse and is used and abused creatively and strategically left and right, (iii) depending on context, it overlaps with other key terms, and (iv) you still want to talk about it in another language. This sort of stuff is why nothing beats translating an untranslatable, and the best thing is it never ends.

119.

All this holds for *minjian* too.<sup>39</sup> I've said that there are about ten defensible translations: starting with the more literal ones, these would be "(from) among the people," "of the people," "of the common people," "folk" (as in folklore, folk music, and so on), "popular," "unofficial," "informal," "amateur," "people-to-people," "non-governmental," and "self-organized." Ten years ago, in a discussion of the Panfeng polemic, I needed a full paragraph to justify translating *minjian* as "popular" in "popular writing." I still think this works, if only for want of a better word. But I have come around to the need to translate *minjian* as "from among the people" or "unofficial" when it denotes particular social and institutional settings, also because of the way its usage has evolved since the 2000s. Untranslatability in the conventional sense flares up in the stiltedness and the near-automatic irony in academic English of phrases like "a poet from among the people" and "historiography from among the people." And in a sense, successful conventional translation would be in evidence if the English reader got used to it, just like they've learned not to blink when reading about work units or socialism with Chinese characteristics—or, of course, if someone came up with English phrases that took less getting used to. Mining the above list for alternatives will only help so much. "A poet of the people" and "amateur historiography" sound really good, but they come at the cost of even greater inconsistency.

120.

In contemporary poetry, *minjian* is an old friend. I have previously shown how its status as a significant other of *guanfang* was manipulated and used as a weapon in avant-garde infighting, with matters coming to a head around the turn of the century, during the Panfeng polemic. But things haven't ended there. My fieldwork has left me with the distinct impression that in the new century, *minjian* is an ever bigger presence in poetry-related discourse, in two ways. First, it is becoming (re)politicized. With the Writers Association incorporating the avant-garde—or the other way around—local resistance to this process shows itself in passionate identification with *minjian*, and with "the real *minjian*" in contradistinction to "fake *minjian*" or "pseudo-*minjian*" 伪民间. Here, as before, institutional matters such as funding sources and publication channels are conflated with aesthetic matters such as a much-vaunted and highly debatable opposition of so-called literary 书面 and colloquial 口语 writing styles, Chinese poetry's vexed relation to foreign poetry, and so on. *Freebooters* and the eponymous WeChat account run by Feng and his posse are prime examples of the repoliticization of *minjian*.

121.

For the second point, we need a quick summary of the Panfeng polemic of 1998–2000. This was the eruption of a long-running conflict between what I have called elevated and earthly trends, and eventually camps, within the avant-garde. In the polemic, the earthly camp appropriated *minjian* for the slogan of "popular" writing, and the maniacal productivity

<sup>39</sup> The discussion of *minjian* in this and the next few paragraphs draws on van Crevel 2008, ch 1 and ch 12. Beyond contemporary poetry, *minjian* operates—as does *jianghu*—across different historical settings and social and cultural forms. Zheng Yi usefully outlines its theorization by Chen Sihe. On *minjian* in contemporary poetry, see also Kunze 2012: ch 3 and Inwood 2014: ch 2.

of authors such as Yu Jian, Yi Sha, and Xu Jiang plus their readiness to shout down their “intellectual” adversaries ensured that they came out on top. In terms of sheer discursive decibels, that is, for the polemic had precious little time for actual engagement with the poetry that it was ostensibly about. Back to what *minjian* means in the twenty-first century: the earthly posse has retained and strengthened its discursive dominance, and their desire to dominate shows in well-worn pledges of allegiance to notions such as the colloquial and the post-colloquial 后口语, the quotidian 日常, the anti-lyrical 反抒情, the indigenous 本土, and so on—and, to *minjian*.

122.

Meanwhile, within the scope of the earthly, what I will sweepingly call transgressive discourse continues to thrive. What I mean is rudeness and “misbehavior” of a kind that can really hit home—especially when it bespeaks social concern—but sometimes also appears carefully calculated if not strategic or theatrical. Pitting itself in populist fashion against things such as “high” and “pure” literature and priding itself on “authenticity” instead, it essentially remains an elitist discourse. As a fixture of a particularly loud variety of poethood, it stands in a tradition that goes back over three decades: from movements/journals like *Macho Men* in the 1980s to *The Lower Body*, *The Low Poetry Movement*, *The Trash Movement*, and nonsense poetry in the 2000s (usually first online and then in print), and to social media platforms like the Irongrind Poetry Club, Loose (there’s a single mook-like journal issue of the same name from 2015, fairly sex-obsessed and explicitly patricidal vis-à-vis *The Lower Body*), Bad Poetry Journal, and Freebooters today.

123.

Some of the WeChat accounts extend their use of male gaze clickbait to posts that contain perfectly “respectable” subject matter. On your computer, the Irongrind post hyperlinked above leads to a headline that reads “She brings the ordinary and the great into true balance,” over a portrait of Wisława Szymborska and followed by her poetry in Chinese translation. On your phone, however, which is really where you are supposed to see it, this reverent statement comes with a soft-porn picture of a woman in lingerie—who you could be forgiven for thinking is “She”—and only after tapping it are you taken to the Nobel laureate. “Misbehavior” happens mostly in speech and writing, but also in performance, such as Su Feishu stripping naked for a poetry reading in 2006, Zeng Dekuang doing his iconic maggot-eating pose, and so on.<sup>40</sup> On Su Feishu, I should add that, different from Zeng Dekuang and other rabble-rousers, he is a creative, original performance artist whose work is sometimes transgressive rather than



“She brings the ordinary and the great into true balance.”

<sup>40</sup> See Day 2008, van Crevel 2008: ch 9, Inwood 2014: ch 1 and 161.

a transgressor who has taken to performance. At the Zhengzhou conference, his “talk” consisted of positioning the cursor at the beginning of his 2004 manifesto “From the Thing to the Thing: The End of Poetry,” and pressing DELETE until the text had entirely swallowed itself. Not everyone realized right away what was going on. Su’s teasingly legible erasure of language worked well, because he has the imperturbability you need for good performance art.

MALE GAZE CLICKBAIT FOR PERFECTLY  
RESPECTABLE SUBJECT MATTER

124.

Inasmuch as transgression remains internal to the avant-garde, the elevated camp is the butt of abuse, portrayed as producing “difficult” writing that is alienated and aloof from Chinese society and essentially foreign in nature. (There is a parallel here on the departmental level with the relation between subaltern writing and the avant-garde at large. The earthly camp has cultivated a kind of street cred in its opposition to elevated authors and texts, and one wonders how this would hold up if it were set off against migrant worker poetry in terms of the “China experience” of “the common people.”) Besides earthly-vs-elevated verbal abuse, in poetry and commentary alike, the transgression of social norms also occurs in subject areas such as sexuality (paid sex, explicit language and images), gender (machismo, the mockery of feminism, misogyny at large), and corporeality (defecation, urination, dirt, self-harm)—in other words, against the rules of “common decency,” in the venerable tradition of *épater le bourgeois*. Somewhat tangentially and less loudly, transgression occasionally extends to the political, addressing issues of social justice (inequality, corruption, human rights, June Fourth) and domestic and international politics, especially on social media.

125.

Now and then, social transgression and political transgression connect. An April 2017 Irongrind post opens with Ron English’s portraits of Marilyn Monroe (after Andy Warhol) with Mickey Mouse breasts. The second of the featured poets, Li Long-gang, contributes a poem called “A Sex Worker Called Tiny,” reporting how much the speaker’s encounter with a Linzhou sex worker cost (RMB 600) and how it was somehow also like seeing an old friend, not unlike poet Shu’s brothel forays in Ju Anqi’s cult movie *Poet on a Business Trip*. And the author bio describes Li, who has several journal issues and anthologies to his name as editor, as a nonsense poet, a Post-90-er 90后—and, a political dissident. A June 2017 Loose post (no longer linkable, but see screenshot) has a (cropped) photograph from a series by Fushijiro Meisa of a young woman with her underwear rolled down her thighs, and says: “All revolutionaries are opportunists, every single one of them is just scrambling for the right to copulate,” and “Who has seen true egalitarianism? Where is true freedom?” The generally



“All revolutionaries are opportunists.”



good-humored, somewhat mischievous context of the Irongrind and Loose accounts doesn't exactly encourage the reader to take these political statements seriously, but they illustrate an intriguing mechanism nevertheless. And there are other examples, such as the sixth issue of *Freebooters*, which contains poetry by "Fallen Women" and whose cover alludes to June Fourth. The extension to the political and thereby to a broadly defined notion of resistance enables the transgressor—who is of course going to be *jianghu* and *minjian* to the marrow of their bones—to claim the moral superiority of the underdog vis-à-vis The Rules, never mind whose: of the state, or the market, or the elevated camp, whatever.



*Freebooters* no. 6 (June 2016), showing several well-known, early unofficial journals on its front cover and alluding to June Fourth.

126.

As is true for some of the other ideas I'm floating here, this is no more than an intuition after my recent immersion in the poetry scene, but it draws support from scholarship such as that by Zheng Yi and Tang Qiaoqiao.<sup>41</sup> To return to a core point of this chapter, it adds to a picture in which *jianghu* and *minjian* are deeply entangled, heavyweight notions on the poetry scene—and in which they have basically been hijacked by the earthly camp since the 1990s. To see one of the settings in which this happens, let's take a look at a poetry event that was initiated and controlled by two key players who work tirelessly to cement the dominance of the earthly, to encourage tendentious readings of our two untranslatables, and to fan the flames of transgression: Yi Sha and Shen Haobo.

<sup>41</sup> Day 2008 brings up the "smashing" of political taboos in his early overview of online poetry.

127.

BEIJING, MARCH 11, 2017. BNU graduates about ten years apart, Yi Sha and Shen Haobo have been hand in glove ever since the Panfeng polemic and the breakthrough of Lower Body poetry, with Shen as its driving force and Yi Sha as its patron saint. This afternoon, the Irongrind Poetry Reading Club, run by Shen through its characteristically hyperactive WeChat account, holds a book launch for *The Poetry of Yi Sha*, a collected works in five hardback volumes whose official publication date just about coincides with the author's fiftieth birthday. Advertised as "Avant-Garde for 30 Years," the launch takes place in the Wangjing outlet of the One Way Space, housed on the CASS graduate student campus, with eighty or ninety people in attendance. Yi Sha starts his thank-you speech by thanking himself, and he probably means it. He is no stranger to irony but he is also sincerely and utterly shameless, and he has a unique way of bragging at the same time as doing send-ups of himself.



"Avant-Garde for 30 Years."

128.

Praise is lavished on Yi Sha by Shen, who MCS the event, and by academics Zhang Qinghua, Ren Hongyuan, and Li Yi and poets Xi Wa (the single female speaker), Xu Jiang, and Post-90-er Wu Yulun. Zhang, Ren, and Li are famous professors at BNU, Xu Jiang is another BNU graduate and Panfeng polemicist, and Wu Yulun is Yi Sha's son and now a student at, yes, BNU. That particular universities are part of the genealogy of particular schools in poetry is very much in evidence this afternoon. Between the speeches, Yi Sha does a mix of poetry recital, stand-up comedy, and provocation of poets and critics of other persuasions than his own (who do not appear to be in attendance). He has a sonorous voice that is needlessly amplified to deafening levels, turning his beautiful diction into a blur. Throughout the program, which lasts from two to half past five, Shen and Yi Sha cheerfully attack "intellectual writing" at every turn and carry on about "authentic" poetry, the *minjian* tradition, and so on.



Yi Sha holding forth during the book launch.  
Courtesy of the Irongrind Poetry Reading Club.  
No photographer identified.

129.

Shen has spotted me in the audience, and when the launch is over and people start to leave, he comes up to me and gives me a set of *The Poetry of Yi Sha*, says there's going to be "another event," and asks if I want to come along. (We've known each other since an uproarious Lower Body poetry reading at BNU in 2001 that confused and scandalized large parts of the audience—video footage of which has recently been put online.) I say yes and join a handful of other people who are also going. Outside, Irongrind staff members Li Suo and Li Liuyang



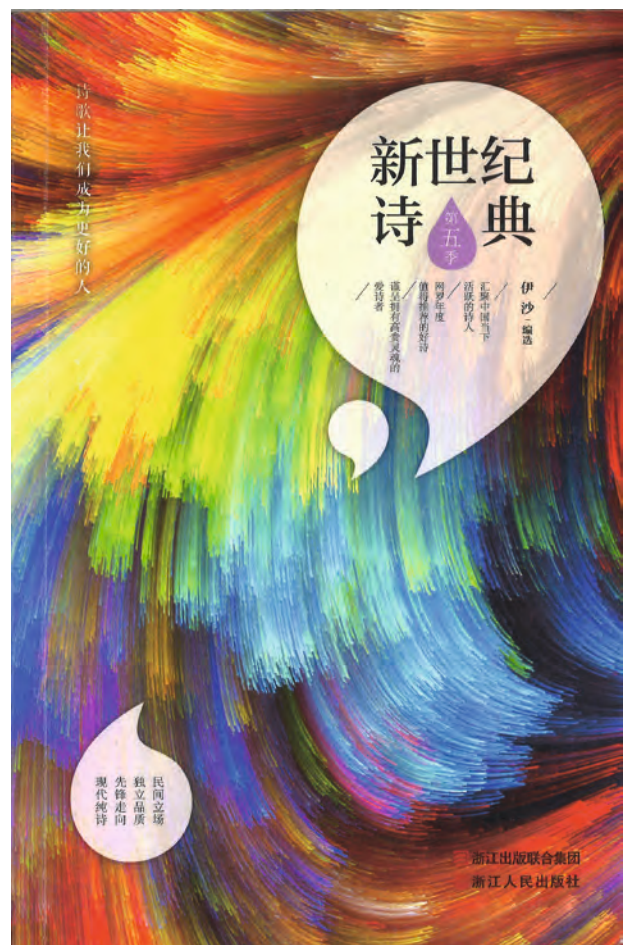
soon have several cabs at the ready and we get from Wangjing to Deshengmen in a little over half an hour, which is quick for Beijing standards. We have been instructed to grab some food on the way so the “event” can kick off on time and I am now very curious. A block north of Irongrind we stop at a self-catering *baozi* parlor, where the launchee leads the way in ordering a cheap dinner. From what I’ve seen, Yi Sha and Shen are less into culinary highs than many other poets, and not at all into drinking.

130.

After we’ve eaten, we walk over to the Deshengmen International Center office tower and take an elevator to the tenth floor. Li Suo, vice-chairperson and event manager of the poetry club and—like Li Liuyang—a poet herself, shows me around the Irongrind office space, with several hundred work stations and a glass-walled corner office for General Manager Shen. She gives me the first set in the *Chinese Laurels Poetry Series*, with beautifully produced volumes by Ouyang Yu, Wang Xiaolong, Wang Xiaoni, Yan Li, and Yao Feng. The series is marketed in mainstream media as a publication project that will systematically cover contemporary poetry, taking into account generational differences (the authors in the first set were all born in the 1950s) as well as poetics, group formation, and so on. From the office space, we walk over to a large conference room that is slowly filling up. Yi Sha has taken a central seat at a long table in the middle of the room. The table is perpendicular to a screen that says we are about to witness the Irongrind Poetry Club’s fifth session, a poetry reading that will feed the next volume of *The Canon of Poetry for the New Century*, edited by Yi Sha and usually abbreviated as the *New Poetry Canon*.

131.

The *Canon* boasts five fat volumes to date. Among other things, it is an explicit, energetic attempt to claim if not to monopolize for the earthly camp the “right to speak” or the “right to discourse” 话语权 on avant-garde poetry. Ongoing processes of canonization receive frequent visits from practitioners who lay competing claims to the legacy of Chinese poethood and make brazen attempts to help write the literary history of which they are a part—and this series of books is an intervention if I’ve ever seen one, with guns blazing and the editorial process just about livestreamed on WeChat and Weibo. Meetings such as the one held at Irongrind this evening are one of the ways Yi Sha collects new material. The amounts of poetry he consumes (and produces) on a daily basis, online and in print, are legendary. The *Canon*’s five volumes have been published in quick succession since 2012, formally by three different well-known publishing houses in Hangzhou and Beijing but in fact by Irongrind, through Shen’s brokerage. (*The Poetry of Yi Sha*, formally a product of the Zhejiang Literature and Art Press, is also really an Irongrind publication.)



*The New Poetry Canon*, vol. 5.

132.

A little after seven, with close to forty people present, about a third of them women, Shen opens the meeting. He sits at the end of the table and close to the screen. In addition to Shen and Yi Sha, the ten or so poets seated at the table include famous authors such as An Qi, Hou Ma, who is introduced with jocular reference to his busy life as an ever higher official in the Beijing Public Security Bureau, Xu Jiang, and Chun Shu (aka Chun Sue), who was also there for the book launch in the afternoon. All are known for being partisan to the earthly side of things. A good two dozen others sit on chairs to both sides. The room is brightly neon-lit and there's a lot of smoking, mostly by men. No alcohol is served, and people drink tea or mineral water. We now enter a long, thorough session in the Chinese tradition of "instructive commentary" 点评, which doubles as a poetry competition 赛诗会. Just like he was during the book launch, and just like he will be tomorrow during an Irongrind award ceremony in the Yanjiyou bookstore-cum-café, Shen Haobo is in charge. He sustains his power by dint of the resources he commands (money, infrastructure, connections, publication channels) as well as his religious commitment to the cause of poetry and his sheer energy, deployed in speech and writing in an assertive style that is doubtless experienced as intimidating by some.

WE NOW ENTER A LONG SESSION

IN THE CHINESE TRADITION OF  
"INSTRUCTIVE COMMENTARY"

133.

Shen proceeds to invite the participants one by one to read two poems they've sent in ahead of time that are projected on the screen. For each poet, he asks one or two people to offer their comments. Xu Jiang is the first to read, and Shen himself and Yi Sha are the last. After the designated commenters have responded to the poet who is in the hot seat, the floor is open for everything from complete dismissal to detailed suggestions for improvement to enthusiastic acclaim. The ultimate reward is meted out by Yi Sha, whenever he decides to "place an order" 订货 for the poem to be included in the next volume of the *Canon*, always taking notes and sometimes stipulating to the author what he wants to see changed. "Orders" are greeted with applause and congratulations to the author in question. The discussion is candid and the assessments can be merciless—"juvenile writing," "this was cool fifteen years ago"—but everyone is exposed, so to speak: there is no one among the original invitees who does not read. In his opening words, Shen says he hopes I will take part as well. I first claim fly-on-the-wall status, but when the response assignment comes my way I can't very well turn it down, nor do I want to, so I end up commenting as well.

134.

There is an atmosphere of camaraderie and solidarity, and a lot of room for young authors, who are encouraged to "study." The phenomenon that undergirds this can perhaps be captured by the notion of symbolic credit, which has stuck in my mind ever since I saw Xiao Zhao traveling through China to ask famous poets to endorse him, in *Bridges Burned*, in that hard-to-find basement bar last fall. You declare yourself a poet, and this declaration in itself suffices to provisionally enter the ranks, as long as you accept the duties that come with the patronage you receive: homage to your seniors, offering instructive commentary as well as receiving it (in *Bridges Burned*, Xiao Zhao is asked to do so at a poets' meeting in Chengdu), and so on. Shen says that new faces have shown up for each of the meetings to date, which are announced on WeChat. In terms of style, many of the poems are short to



very short. Shen's own "Valentine's Day" runs, in its entirety: "New love now dead / I ain't burned no paper money." Almost all of the poetry would likely be called colloquial. There is plenty of irony and humor but there are also indictments of social injustice and misery. And there is quite a bit of what I end up calling international relations in my fieldnotes, meaning the lambasting of foreigners and foreign nations, and of Chinese people who fawn on the foreign. Xi Wa and Chun Shu speak of sinophobia and racism they've encountered in Australia and Germany. Gang Jumu satirizes Chinese academics obsessed with securing a foreign university education for their children, who forget that "Dezhou" can refer to a city in Shandong province as well as to Texas.

135.

Three dozen poets and about seventy poems later it is half past ten, and we are well over three hours into the meeting. Yi Sha announces a break and, taking over from Shen Haobo, reads out the names of sixteen poets he will be inviting for a second round. They are eleven men and five women. After the break, at a brisk pace, each reads a single poem that wasn't part of their original submission and hence isn't shown on screen. Commentary now mostly comes from Yi Sha. Next, he names five poets who will go on to a final, third round. They are Hou Ma, Jian Tianping, Pang Qiongzhen, Shen Haobo, and Xi Wa, the women now in the majority. Each reads another, final poem. Pang's is *about* tonight's event. Yi Sha gives third place to Pang and second place to Xi Wa and declares Hou Ma the winner. All three are given books and calligraphy scrolls as rewards.

SHEN PREACHES A FEVERISH,  
AGGRESSIVE DEDICATION  
TO THE CAUSE

136.

The meeting ends with a brief speech by Shen, part of which is addressed to me, just like in his opening words. He says that while instructive commentary gatherings are part of classical poetry culture, they continue to happen today. (From what I know, the annual Youth Poetry Conferences 青春诗会 organized by the *Poetry Journal* editorial board include modules that would count as highly institutionalized examples and have boosted the careers of many contemporary poets.) He stresses that they're not the prerogative of the official circuit and that what I've just seen is a *minjian* event. Reverting to what I guess is something of a stump speech, also delivered during the book launch in the afternoon, he paints poetry as a high-strung, frenzied undertaking, always on the move, its "legitimacy" forever challenged and changing, and insists that the only way to "stay with it" and not be left behind is to write permanently and never let up, to be part of gigs like today's, and so on. Shen preaches a feverish, aggressive dedication to the cause, proving yet again that what Michelle Yeh identified over twenty years ago as the "cult" of poetry in contemporary China is anything but exclusive to the hifalutin, often "intellectual" poetry with which it was first associated. The cult is equally one of poet-hood, reproduced by earthly authors as much as by their elevated counterparts, and these days in fact more forcefully so. The meeting breaks up around midnight. A crowded elevator ride and many goodbyes later, I start walking back to BNU, straight west, with a backpack full of books for the so-manieth time this year, reeling from the day.

## IN AND OUT

137.

BEIJING, DECEMBER 28, 2016. Winter in northern China ain't what it used to be but today it is suitably freezing. From the PKU east gate near Chengfu Road I walk past the pagoda and Lake Nameless to the gorgeous buildings in the northeast part of the campus where the departments of Chinese, history, and philosophy moved in 2013. Zhang Xiaohong's Chinese translation of my *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money* will be officially launched here today, even though we've already had an event in the Never Closed bookstore in Guangzhou two weeks ago, organized in a handful of phone calls by the unstoppable poet, editor, publisher, and activist Huang Lihai, where the mike broke down and I ended up speaking through a megaphone that was miraculously available from behind the coffee counter, perhaps because of safety regulations. The publisher, Peking University Press, has been working to whip up publicity, and inside the No. 1 Humanities Building I first do an hour-long, live interview with Phoenix Web, together with poets Xi Chuan and Shen Haobo. Zhai Yongming was going to join as well but calls to say that she is running late and won't get there until just before the launch. We are neatly fitted on a couch inside the office of a history professor, and once the interviewer has set up shop three feet away from us with a tiny tripod and a smartphone, we're online and ready to roll. Phoenix counts as general media but they are well prepared and the questions are anything but superficial.

138.

When we enter the conference room, I'm excited to see that there is a full house. On the dais, PKU professor Wu Xiaodong stands behind a lectern to chair the event, flanked to his left by a row of huge office chairs across the full breadth of the room, for the author and the panelists: yours truly, PKU professor Hong Zicheng, retired *Poetry Journal* and Writers Press editor and critic Tang Xiaodu, poets Zhai Yongming, Ouyang Jianghe, and Xi Chuan, BNU professor Zhang Qinghua, and poet and Irongrinder Shen Haobo. Between Zhang and Shen there is a chair for CASS scholar and poet Zhou Zan, but she has canceled because of a bad cold. The order in which the panelists sit and speak is by age, from Hong to Shen. Hong begins by saying it's a pity that we are not looking at a complete translation, and he hopes the part that has



Hong Zicheng, 2017. Photograph by Zhang Yaqiu.

been taken out will appear as a journal article. My book has been duly “repaired” 修理 by the publisher, as the expression goes. In addition to sentence- and word-level adjustments it is now minus the mayhem in the title and minus a chapter about poets in exile and exile in poetry, on Yang Lian, Wang Jiaxin, and Bei Dao.

139.

As is well known among specialists outside China but less so among others, censorship is viewed by the Chinese government as part of its ideological and practical responsibilities vis-à-vis society, and explicitly so presented. Censorship is not a cloak-and-dagger business and requires no deniability, whether for the censoring or for the censored. There are limits to what you can say in the public realm, you are supposed to be aware of these and of the ways to circumvent them, the official appearance of texts (and images, and so on) is beyond the author’s control, and these things are often talked about in a matter-of-fact, non-antagonistic manner. Far be it from me to depoliticize the issue, but the pragmatics of censorship present a more complex picture than that offered by tired Cold War thinking. Authors have more choices than saying yes or saying no and, if that’s a no, declining to publish. In addition, different considerations come into play for translations than for originals, and for individual foreign authors as distinct from their foreign publishers.<sup>42</sup>

CENSORSHIP IS NOT A CLOAK-AND-DAGGER BUSINESS  
AND REQUIRES NO DENIABILITY

140.

In my case, while my book had been pre-emptively repaired by my editor, who managed to do so without gutting my story, it didn’t come as a surprise when the chapter on exile was cut in its entirety. This doesn’t mean it didn’t hit me like a ton of bricks, but I never considered withdrawing my manuscript. I try to partake in Chinese-language scholarly discourse and I was not about to sacrifice the other twelve chapters of the book—whose preface provides a link to a free download of the original English edition. Moreover, professor Hong was right. At this writing, ten months later, the missing chapter has just appeared in *Debates in Literature and Art*. It’s been repaired some more, not only the discussion but also the poems the discussion thought it was about. In one case, a title has been changed, and in another, the crucial last line of the poem has gone missing. I still prefer this damaged publication over complete erasure, but just barely. All occurrences of 流亡 ‘exile’ have been changed to 漂泊 ‘roam’ or ‘float,’ which everyone knows means exile.

141.

Back to the book launch. The publisher’s PR material asks, “An ‘Observer’ from Abroad—How does he see today’s Chinese poetry scene?” and goes on: “He is an internationally renowned sinologist,” and “He knows the Chinese poetry scene like the palm of his hand.” In the run-up to the launch, the publisher has made much of my image as an “outsider” 局外人, to which I have contributed over the years myself, in interviews, public lectures, and the preface to the Chinese edition of my book. (They recently also called me an outlander 老外, as a term of endearment that conveys appreciation for my efforts to understand Chinese poetry, when they mobilized another outlander’s review of the

42 Cf Millward 2017.

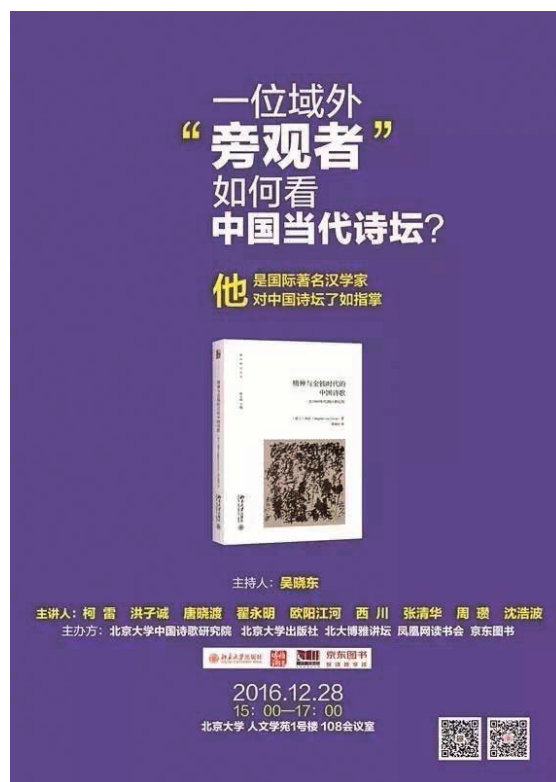
English edition to promote the Chinese edition. The review was translated into Chinese, and of course repaired.) Invoking outsiderhood tacitly or not so tacitly claims the benefit of otherness as critical distance. It is, of course, also a *dis-claimer*, suggesting that I am not necessarily expected to play by the rules, less locally accountable or—put cynically—free to talk nonsense with impunity.

142.

Most of the speeches reaffirm the image of book launch line-ups as mutual admiration societies (no offence intended, and I'm a member). But Ouyang Jianghe takes a different tack. He says there is nothing outside about my book. Criticizing domestic commentary in one fell swoop, he finds it very Chinese in that it pays too much attention to “incidents,” “hot topics,” and the related notion of “phenomena,” meaning people and texts of instant, viral fame. I suppose this refers to my habit of embedding poetry analysis in the sociology of culture. He is disappointed because he feels the book doesn't answer what he calls the only important question: “What is it that we contemporary Chinese poets have been *doing* all these years?” I don't know what that question means, but I do know that I have no way of answering it. At any rate, we have long known that the observer affects what they observe, the knowledge they produce feeds back into the context from which it derives, and the outsider never stands outside.<sup>43</sup> Today, the feedback process is of the visible and orchestrated kind, and someone feels the outsider has done an inside job.

143.

I have said that this essay is motivated by the conviction that physical proximity and distance to the places of the things we study continue to matter, as do the dynamics between lingual and cultural selves and others; and that these selves and others should be duly relativized. Native languages, native cultures, and education-and-research traditions are constitutive of who we are and they affect the ways in which we are in, or out, or in and out, or in between, but we mess with these things and add others as we go along. There's no Chinese-vs-foreign binary here but a multi-dimensional sliding scale, and probably more imaginative geometries than that. Things get even better if we bear in mind that these intersect with boundaries between practitioners and observers—poets, commentators, translators—that are anything but absolute. They interact and shape one another, they overlap, and they may coincide. Still, we all begin from somewhere, and I have not ceased to marvel at this particular elsewhere. And so I have written this up.



“An ‘Observer’ from Abroad.”

43 Wade 2010: 155, Abu-Lughod 1991.



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