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Away from Here: Chinese Poets Outside the PRC

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how Chinese poets who left the People's Republic of China have positioned themselves in relation to a literary space shaped by a home country that is both absent and continually present. It addresses two gaps in existing scholarship: attention has concentrated on a small number of internationally famous poets, and the way poets abroad are discussed has depended heavily on who is speaking and from where, whether in Euro-Anglo-American public discourse or in officially sanctioned criticism within the PRC.

The study is organised in two parts. Part I sets out the broader context. It outlines the development of the reform-era poetry scene and the relationship between poetry and nation, surveys how PRC academic criticism has treated poets who relocated abroad, and presents the theoretical and methodological framework. This section reviews the terminology available for such poets, including exile, diaspora, Sinophone and displacement, and adopts the notion of "away from here" together with the concept of self-fashioning drawn from New Historicism.

Part II consists of four case studies, on Yan Li, Meng Lang, Zhang Zao and Chun Shu, poets who began writing at different times, left China under different circumstances, and have received limited scholarly attention. Each chapter combines biographical research, based on the poets' own statements and existing scholarship, with close readings of selected poems. Each is organised around three levels: the poets' textual practice, their self-presentation outside poetry, and their activity within the literary field, including publishing, editing and networking.

A concluding section draws the case studies together, considers what they share and where they diverge, and identifies directions for further research. By approaching these poets individually rather than through fixed categories, the dissertation offers a wider and more varied account of Chinese poetry written outside the PRC.

Preface

It was 2019 and I was studying at Leiden University when I came to know that Chinese people had not stopped writing poetry altogether with the fall of the empire in 1911. This sounds blunt already, so, in full disclosure, if it weren't for the bits and pieces of Song poetry I had read during my bachelors, I might as well have written 'fall of the Tang dynasty' instead. I owe the pleasure of my epiphany to the poetry of Bei Dao 北岛, whose name I seemed to always find next to those of Yang Lian 杨炼, Duoduo 多多, Gu Cheng 顾城 and a few others. This was no coincidence, as the four of them were what the majority of the 'Western' non-specialist public calls 'exile poets': their reputation as political dissidents seemed to hold as great an importance as their verse in making them the most famous contemporary Chinese poets worldwide. Of course, this last sentence is to be intended in relative terms: these poets' fame was considerable among China specialists and poetry buffs, but rather limited among wider audiences.

As someone who knew close to nothing of Chinese poetry, for a while I felt like I had reinvented the wheel. And, for a while, I did not question the assumption I had automatically made according to which, if these poets wrote good poetry, and they had to leave their country to be able to do so, then it would mean that writing verse that was any good within Chinese borders had to be impossible – and that, therefore, there was no poetry to look for there.

That was until I did some further reading, and found out two things. One, that other people had written monographs about Bei Dao, Yang Lian and Duoduo – see Li Dian's *The Chinese Poetry of Bei Dao, 1978-2000: Resistance and Exile* (2006), Cosima Bruno's *Between the Lines: Yang Lian's Poetry through Translation* (2012), and Maghiel van Crevel's *Language Shattered: Contemporary Chinese Poetry and Duoduo* (1996), for instance. And two, that these poets were only the tip of the iceberg, and in more than one sense: not only there was an entire world behind them, in the form of a vibrant poetry scene within the People's Republic – as the works of van Crevel (2008, 2014, 2017, among others), Yeh (1992, 1993, 2007) and Inwood (2014) beautifully illustrate – but also that they were not the only poets who had left the PRC, and so there was more on that side of things, too.

This was not a line of inquiry I pursued immediately, but my readings did open my eyes to the 'simple' truth that there were many more stories to the abroad branch, so to speak,

of the Chinese poetry scene than I was previously aware of – and to the fact that the role of politics in these stories might not be as clear-cut as I had believed it to be. This thought sat at the back of my mind for a few years, until the time came for me to draft a proposal for my PhD research.

So here I am, with a dissertation that is precisely a study in these matters. Indeed, there were two problems at the root of this project: one was that we knew a whole lot about a few of the poets who left the PRC in the reform era, and very little about the others; and the other was that, even for those few poets, what we knew seemed to be heavily dependent on who did the talking, and from where. This is not an issue per se – I know the critic is rarely absent from their reading, though such presence should not take anything away in terms of coherence and rigour. In this case, however, the practice of pigeonholing by some Chinese literary criticism on one side, and by public discourse in ‘Western’ countries on the other acted as impediments in a double manner. On the one hand, they concurred in producing an overfocus on the few most famous poets, regarded as champions of Chineseness by one side, and as political dissidents by the other – in both cases, with little benefit for a better understanding of their work. On the other hand, the flipside of such overfocus is the comparatively little attention devoted to any other of the PRC poets relocated abroad besides the handful of names I have already mentioned.

In order not to solve these problems, for it would take much more than one book to do so, but to make it possible to minimally address them in research, I came to formulate one core question for this study: how have Chinese poets who left the People’s Republic fashioned themselves vis-à-vis the features of their socio-literary space, so decisively informed by a native country which, for them, is absent, and yet always acutely present? Thus worded, the question explicitly refers to the main theoretical framework for this research: the idea of self-fashioning, as it was introduced to literary studies by the tradition of New Historicism in the 1980s. As such, by ‘self-fashioning’ I mean, with Stephen Greenblatt (1984), the achievement of a peculiar attitude or personality, which translates into a unique way of seeing the world and behaving in it.

The broader conceptual and historical framework for addressing this question is developed in the first of the two parts this dissertation is organised in, titled “Here, There and Everywhere”. It first examines the genesis and development of the domestic poetry scene in

the reform era with a specific focus on the longstanding entanglement between poetry and nation (“here”), before turning to the treatment of poets abroad in official literary criticism from the People’s Republic, which is also informed by issues of nation, culture and identity (“there”). The final section of this part discusses the theoretical and methodological framework of the project (“everywhere”), with considerations on terminology, on the concept of self-fashioning and on the way close reading is performed throughout this study.

The flexibility guaranteed by taking self-fashioning as a guiding principle allows me to accommodate the individual trajectories of my four case studies: Yan Li 严力, Meng Lang 孟浪, Zhang Zao 张枣 and Chun Shu 春树. These four poets share the experience of relocation beyond the PRC, and they also confront a number of common questions: how to position themselves with respect to the Chinese literary field they have left behind, how to negotiate expectations projected onto poets abroad both by Chinese and foreign audiences, and how to articulate forms of cultural and literary identity in a transnational context while continuing to write in Chinese.

They respond to these shared conditions in markedly different ways, as this study will show. As a poet, artist and editor, Yan Li thrives in the global dimension he often actively criticises in his verse; Meng Lang expresses a progressively more hardline position vis-à-vis the political authorities of Mainland China through poetry, cultural activism and literary networking; Zhang Zao’s journey provides him, through a highly self-conscious negotiation with both Chinese and European literary traditions, with the means to write exactly the poetry he had always envisioned; and Chun Shu comes of age, anagraphically as well as poetically, at a time when her relationship to the foreign, to mobility, identity and literary positioning is shaped by historical circumstances significantly different than what came before.

Together, these case studies constitute Part II of this dissertation. I trace the trajectory of each of these poets by looking at their lives, and at three different but invariably interconnected levels: their poetry, what they say outside their poetry, and the way they operated within the literary field. As such, each chapter is intended as an answer to these three sub-questions: 1) How did these poets shape their own distinctive attitude and outlook on the world through textual practice? 2) What kind of persona did they create for themselves through interventions, statements and self-representations in places other than their poetry?

3) What strategies did they put in place when it comes to publishing, institutions, and the literary field?

A final section collects the general findings and the considerations that emerge from the case studies, as well as some potentially interesting avenues for future research.